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Paradoxes Abounding
Russia and the South China Sea Issue

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Southeast Asia in general and the South China Sea in particular are not areas where Russia has vital interests justifying military deployments. Yet Moscow persistently seeks a permanent footing there. Russia's standing remains problematic, as Southeast Asia still does not accept it as a fully invested player despite its progress in laying the institutional and legal foundations for playing a bigger role there. Moreover, Russia's performance at the 2015 and 2016 Shangri-La conferences on Asian security showed that it remains detached from Asian security agendas and focused on its own parochial obsessions, such as color revolutions. Furthermore, despite Russian rhetoric about Asia, its bureaucracies and elites still focus on the West. Nevertheless, Moscow steadily professes Southeast Asia's intrinsic importance to Russia and its relevance to Russia's larger Asia policy.

Russia has previously sought to project naval power into the South China Sea—for example, by reopening a logistics base at Cam Ranh Bay. Moscow also still seeks naval bases or anchorages there and in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, the South China Sea is or should be important to Russia for several reasons, not just because it is vital to Moscow's regional interlocutors but also because of its interest in stationing ships there. Furthermore, resolving the disputes over that sea could constitute a precedent for other cases such as that of the Arctic, a vital Russian interest. Conversely, failure to resolve those disputes could trigger either a major conflict or a restructuring of Asian if not general international relations. A major armed conflict

in Asia, especially one involving the United States and China, would greatly harm Russia's vital interests, while constructive Russian participation in resolving maritime issues would improve its regional standing.

Many other reasons explain Southeast Asia's importance to Moscow. Since Russia's Asia policy aims to elicit international recognition of its standing as a great, independent, Asian, and global power, Russia cannot be taken seriously if it stands aloof while the South China Sea issue roils world politics.

Russian commentators also discern in Southeast Asia's multiple security institutions—including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation—a major element in the alleged powerful and ascendant tendency toward multipolarity in Asia and world politics. Therefore, Russia cannot detach itself from these institutions and should credibly contribute to resolving some of the most outstanding and difficult regional issues.

Moscow understands that because Asia is the global economy's dynamic center, Russia must expand its minimal presence in Southeast Asia. Having hitherto failed to achieve its goals in the region, Russia must constantly persuade its audiences that it is an important country so that others will take it seriously and see it as it wants to be seen. Unfortunately, Southeast Asian governments do not share Russia's self-estimate. Meanwhile, Moscow's continuing inability to address regional security issues coherently only intensifies this dichotomy between Russian ambitions and regional realities. This situation leads to a paradox in Russian policy. Russia either seeks to evade discussion of the South China Sea issue or publicly inclines toward Beijing's stance that this question is exclusively one for local powers and thus not the United States. But either of these stances, evasion or exclusion of nonregional players, undermines Russia's claim to be taken seriously as a great Asian power in Southeast Asia. This is one of the abiding paradoxes in Russia's approach to Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Moscow's quest for status, standing, influence, and a lasting voice in Southeast Asian affairs is rife with unresolved (and possibly unresolvable) paradoxes that thwart Russia's realization of its self-imposed goals in Asia. Indeed, Russia finds it difficult to find its footing in Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, Southeast Asia and Russia were marginal to each other's concerns. Despite its economic revival from 1998 to 2007, aggressive great power politics, and pivot to Asia since 2008, Russia still punches below its weight throughout Southeast Asia. Its contradictory policies hobble it in grappling with China's threat in the South China Sea.

Southeast Asian economies offer raw materials and resources that are increasingly valuable in the face of the Western sanctions and Russian retaliation that are curtailing Western imports. Indeed, since sanctions began, Russia has solicited ASEAN members' investment in Russia's energy holdings in Siberia and the Arctic. In 2013, Russia and Vietnam agreed to explore for oil in each other's continental shelf. By September 2015, Vietnamese firms had reportedly invested $ 2.4 billion in eighteen projects in Russia. Recent Russian commentary has argued that Vietnamese elites have been talking about investing in Russia since "dewesternization" became Russia's watchword. And whenever senior Russian officials appear at an Asian conference, they invoke Russia's investment and/ or trade potential. Nevertheless, little investment is occurring.

Moreover, in January 2016, Russian oil producer Gazprom Neft withdrew from negotiations to buy a 49 percent share of the Dung Quat refinery because Hanoi would not give it preferential conditions.

Southeast Asia is also a significant Russian market for arms and energy sales. Moscow must concurrently engage with states possessing energy assets and states that need to buy them. Russia either helps discover energy sources and shares in their proceeds, thereby gaining influence in a country, or else it sells its energy, thus creating another avenue of revenue and influence. Russian arms sales link with energy deals and the quest for military bases as components of Russia's grand strategy to advance its interests.

Arms sales also help elicit recognition of Russia as it wants to be seen. An independent competitive defense sector not only lowers unit costs and assists indigenous technological innovation but also enables an independent foreign and defense policy. Should Russia lose ground in the military exports field, and implicitly in its military competitiveness and independence, it will encounter increasing pressure to align with either China or the West and yield some if not most of that independence. Thus, an independent defense industry is not only an economic factor for Russia but also an essential element of its ability to conduct an independent foreign policy.

Russian military exports initiate and strengthen relations in regions in which it wants influence, such as Asia and the Middle East. Vice premier Dmitri Rogozin stated, "The FSVTS [Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, the institution responsible for negotiating arms sales] at the moment is, it can be said, the country's second foreign policy agency, a second MID [ministry of foreign affairs], a second Smolensk Square, because it strengthens what the diplomats do today, not just in political terms, but rather authenticated in material, treaty relations, contracts, maintenance services, equipment repair, and its maintenance in a suitable state." Rogozin confirmed this stance when he said, "They [the FSVTS] trade arms only with friends and partners."

President Vladimir Putin himself stated, "We see active military technical cooperation as an effective instrument for advancing our national interests, both political and economic." Russia exports military systems abroad to achieve the following objectives: to uphold its image as a global power, maintain an independent foreign policy, expand its influence in these regions, obtain resource extraction rights, initiate and strengthen defense relations, and secure military basing rights. Therefore, if Russia cannot compete with its rivals in arms sales to Asia, it will lose ground regionally and globally. But these arms sales, especially to Vietnam—its largest customer and partner in Southeast Asia—embody another paradox, because the purpose of those weapons is to defend against Chinese threats and encroachments to Vietnam's territory, energy platforms, and vital interests, even as Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China.

Further paradoxes appear in Russia's military policy toward Southeast Asia. Russian military leaders clearly want a naval base there. Russia previously sought access to Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay and still seeks to continue its temporary right of access, even if not as a base. In 2014, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced progress in talks with eight governments to establish a global network of air bases, including Singapore and the Seychelles, to extend the reach of Russia's long-range maritime and strategic aviation assets and global military presence. Shoigu cited Russia's need for refueling bases near the equator and said that "it is imperative that our navy has the opportunities for replenishment." Clearly, Moscow still desires to project power

into the South China Sea. From the Seychelles and/ or Singapore, a combined force of Su-34s and Tu-22Ms, armed with cruise missiles, could strike throughout the Indian Ocean, West Pacific, and East Africa. A base at Cam Ranh Bay would further enhance that capability. Yet long-term sustainment of the fleet in Southeast Asia is well beyond Russia's capability, and Russia cannot take sides in any maritime conflict in Southeast Asia without jeopardizing its relationship with the other side. Neither is it clear what mission its forces could perform. Once again, Moscow craves the aura of great power status but lacks the means or the reasons to attain it. These three paradoxes are only a few of the many that bedevil Russian foreign policy throughout Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.

The identification of Russia as a great power remains an article of faith and obsession of Russian elites. Ambassador extraordinaire and former deputy foreign minister Nikolai Spassky wrote that "the problem is that the Russians still do not see any other worthy role for their country in the twenty-first century other than the role of a superpower, or a state that realizes itself principally through influence on global processes. Characteristically such sentiments are widespread not only among the elites, but also among the public at large."

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Moscow Center of the Carnegie Endowment, observed that Russian analysts argued in the 1990s that current difficulties were transient but Russia was entitled to this "presidium seat" in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and on global issues. Today, it is no less true that Russia's obsession with great power status continues to dominate elite perceptions. As Nikolai Gvosdev observed in 2006, "Unlike in any of the other established or rising great powers, the question as to whether or not Russia is a great power is seen as an existential matter, that Russia cannot exist apart from being a great power, lest it cease to be Russia." 26 Moreover, Russian analysts still believe that Russian policy in Asia is succeeding. Sergei Karaganov recently wrote that Russia has "turned itself from a peripheral European country into a great Asian-Pacific Eurasian one." 27 Others have stated that although the "Russian Federation's 'critical mass' remains small" in the Asia-Pacific, "the correct choice of a path and the readiness to follow it to the end is a guarantee of ultimate success." 28 But the multiplicity and stridency of such assertions reveal their inherently problematic nature. Postulating this entitlement today actually presupposes that Russia never had, and still does not have, this status, either in its own eyes or those of others. Moreover, few external observers accept this Russian assertion, least of all in Southeast Asia.

Western (especially U.S.) policy analysts omit Russia as a factor in Asian security. Washington refuses to view Russia as an Asian great power. If these analysts are correct, Russia neither is nor can be an independent sovereign power in Asia. Even some prominent Russian experts believe this outcome may ensue. Institute of World Economy and International Relations director Aleksandr Dinkin writes that absent radical reform, Russia by 2030 will be only a middle power, like Turkey.

Many statements by Putin, leading officials, and analysts of Russia's foreign policy demonstrate that much, if not all, of Putin's overall project depends on convincing domestic and foreign audiences that Russia truly is such a great power; otherwise, it risks disintegration. Consequently, much of Russian foreign policy is a determined and obsessive quest for status as Russia strives to make others see and accept it as Moscow wants to see itself and be seen. The quest for bases and Russia's arms sales policy exemplify this desire to be seen as a great power without possessing the means to enforce this claim. Therefore, Russia is at least equally concerned with being able to do something to justify its claims. The real attributes of great

powers are commonly considered to be not only military power but also large-scale economic power, which Russia lacks. Russia regularly solicits China, Japan, South Korea, India, and ASEAN investments to obtain desperately needed capital and technology. While hardly the sign of a great power, such solicitation is a core element in the overall agenda of Russian foreign policy; without it, Russia cannot develop the Russian Asia that is the precondition for any serious daily engagement with Asia.

Consequently, the quest for economic investment and technology transfer is not just to make Russia richer but to also make it a more effective strategic competitor. Russia's quest for multipolarity and recognition by Southeast Asian states and organizations as a self-standing if not self-sufficient pole is a second key objective of Russian policy. Ever since Yevgeny Primakov became foreign minister in 1996, Russian discourse has argued that multipolarity most comports with Asia's international realities. Consequently, ASEAN's multilateral organizations allegedly embody this trend in action and justify vigorous Russian efforts to join those groups and engage individual Southeast Asian governments.

However, in practice, Russia's concept of multipolarity amounts to what Dmitri Trenin calls a "benign oligarchy." Not surprisingly, Russia's concept of multilateral or network diplomacy means "collective leadership of leading states 'who objectively bear responsibility for the state of world affairs.'" This openly advocates an exclusionary great power concert where a few big states decide matters for the small states, which, from Russia's standpoint, are not truly sovereign states anyway. Only the truly sovereign states—Russia, the United States, India, China, and possibly some European states and/ or members of the United Nations Security Council—make the rules for smaller states. Some Russian writers even explicitly invoke the example of the Congress of Vienna or the Yalta system. Putin's 2015 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, which frequently referred to the Yalta summit, shows that this analogy still haunts the official mind of Russian policymaking.

Moreover, each pole should respect each other pole's sovereign democracy in their domain and not intervene in their politics. Russia should not only be a pole but should also be exempt from other powers' scrutiny and criticism. While this concept may accord with China's idea for a multipolar order, it hardly is palatable to the United States, Japan, or Southeast Asian nations. But these expressions also reflect the tension between wish or emotion and reality. For example, the anti-American emotion behind these statements is clear. As Spassky writes, "There is no greater joy for a Russian intellectual than to speculate about a decline of America." He is not alone in that sentiment.

In practice, Russia cannot live up to its own plans for a structure for Asia's overall security. In September 2010, Russia and China jointly proposed a multipolar Asian order. In June 2011, they declared that as the world was steadily evolving toward multipolarity, they would advance their earlier joint proposal and comprehensively deepen their partnership, which was a factor for peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Both governments recognized each other's territorial claims upon Japan and denounced efforts to "undo" the post-1945 territorial status quo. Accordingly, both governments agreed to promote multilateral mechanisms across Asia. Moscow's diplomats immediately began pushing these ideas on Asian audiences. This Sino-Russian proposal is based on "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation." All states would respect each other's sovereignty (that is, no criticism of domestic politics) and integrity (that is, support for Russian and Chinese postures on outstanding territorial issues, the Kuril Islands, the Senkakus, Taiwan, and possibly even China's claims on the Spratly Islands, nonalliance principles, equal

and transparent security frameworks, and equal and indivisible security). Since the vagueness of the proposal benefits only Russia and China, denounces the U.S. alliance system in Asia, and greatly resembles Moscow's European Security Treaty of 2009–2010, it epitomizes Russia's shallow, self-serving concept of Asian, if not global, multipolarity.

Equally important, it shows that Moscow demands equality and inclusion based solely on Russia's assertion of its status as a great Asian and global power irrespective of actual Asian conditions. Moscow demanded an exalted status on the basis of a proposal that disregarded contending claims in Asian security issues. It associated itself with Beijing to present itself as a system-forming power regarding Asian security without doing anything specific to commit to Asia or offer genuine proposals for security there. Moreover, Moscow did so while China increased its aggressive maritime policies vis-à-vis Japan and Southeast Asia, hardly a way to convince them of Russia's power and capability for playing an independent role.

Furthermore, Moscow could not even uphold its agreement with China concerning disputed territorial claims. In 2012, when China called its sovereignty in the Senkaku Islands a core interest, Nikolai Patrushev, head of Russia's security council, told Japanese officials that Russia would not take sides in this dispute and that Japan and China had to solve this problem through mutual dialogue. Furthermore, Japan and Russia agreed to "strengthen the bilateral dialogue in a bid to expand cooperation in the fields of security and defense amid the rapidly changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific region." Clearly, Moscow retreated from supporting China's territorial claims. In 2013, as Chinese threats against Japan over these islands mounted, Russia conspicuously began a serious effort to normalize relations with Japan and obtain Japanese investment. Russia had good reasons for doing so, but they hardly substantiated the 2010–11 proposal or Russia's claims to an identity of interests with China or to true great power status in Asia.

At the ASEAN annual foreign ministers' meeting in Brunei in 2013, Russia, undeterred by the illogic of its first proposal, submitted a new collective security proposal for Asia that was drafted with China. This document again aimed to weaken the U.S. position, especially in Southeast Asia:

> The proposal contained not only familiar regional and international security guidelines and codes of conduct, but also offered ambitious ideas that resonated with ASEAN strategists. Since the end of 2011, ASEAN strategists have been searching for ways to deal with the U.S. rebalancing policy and, at same time, preserve the grouping's bargaining power. In other words, ASEAN too is looking for a rebalancing policy. . . . What has brought China and Russia together is their common objective to mitigate what they perceive as U.S. hegemony. Beijing and Moscow also want to ensure that Washington's revitalized security alliances and rebalancing strategy don't weaken their presence and influence in Asia.

The two sides also expected to further their collaboration at the EAS, organized by ASEAN for heads of state in October 2013, and a conference to which Russia has conspicuously failed to send its president in the last four years. In addition:

> Beijing and Moscow have identified the EAS as the most appropriate platform, along with the existing guidelines and codes of conduct in the region, for building a new regional structure. This is a far cry from the past when Russia was used to pushing its version of collective security without considering regional concerns. Today Russia is

> more willing to work with ASEAN and other regional and international groupings. China and Russia—also pivotal dialogue partners of ASEAN—want to be on par with ASEAN in setting the agenda and shaping the future security landscape of the region. And that is a welcome and refreshing change for regional economic development and security.

Unfortunately, demanding weakened U.S. alliances in Asia cannot command regional support in the face of growing Chinese aggressiveness. Neither does it benefit Russia. Weakening the U.S. presence in Asia leaves Moscow face to face with a Beijing that will soon eclipse it in practically every index of usable power and undermines chances for equilibrium in the Asia-Pacific region even if it invokes the narcotic of "equal security." Moreover, Russian officials have occasionally, perhaps without realizing it, essentially admitted that they have no concrete ideas for organizing Asian security in general. At the 2011 Shangri-La conference in Singapore, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said that "Russian-Chinese proposals are aimed at helping the countries of the region to realize that security is indivisible and at abandoning attempts to strengthen one's security at the expense of others. New regional security architecture should be based on the universal principles of international law, non-aligned approaches, confidence and openness, with due regard to the diversity of the [Asia-Pacific region] and an emerging polycentric balance of forces."

Ivanov's suggestion that this proposal simply grow out of ASEAN and the existing EAS mechanism in whatever flexible form the members want (that is, that Russia and China retain a veto power over its ultimate manifestation) underscores this proposal's essential insubstantiality and fundamental lack of seriousness regarding a multilateral or multipolar forum that would exercise real influence on Asian security. A truly serious proposal would spell out critical details of the structure and process involved. Ivanov said:

> We do not suggest—I repeat, we do not suggest—creating a new regional organization. A flexible mechanism of multilateral interaction relying on the existing structures and forums, which could be incorporated into an extended partnership network, is likely to serve the needs of the region better. We call this approach "a network diplomacy." Besides, we consider it reasonable to establish connections not only between organizations and forums, but also between specialized agencies, notably counter-terrorism, anti-drug centers, and disaster relief centers. We would like to see ASEAN as the primus motor of this process and consider the Association to be a core factor of regional policy and integration.

Ultimately, Russia's grandiloquent proposals for Asian security are insubstantial. Before 2014, China's aggressiveness led Russia to back away from its own promises and proposals—hardly a way to inspire confidence in Southeast Asia. And since invading Ukraine, Moscow's previous efforts to balance covertly at the regional level against China (for example, by attempting to adopt a neutral position on the Senkakus and drawing closer to Vietnam) have atrophied as Moscow's dependence upon China for economic and political support against the West and its own economic crisis has grown.

RUSSIA AND ASEAN

The visible contradictions in Moscow's overall program for Asian security manifest themselves just as strongly in regard to its approach to Southeast Asia and the South China Sea

issue. About a decade ago, Russia sought to reengage with ASEAN. Each side saw the other as a partner with common interests that could balance the challenges they discerned from the United States (in Russia's case) and China (in ASEAN's case). Russia and Southeast Asian governments believed that serious bilateral engagement offered economic advantages, trade, arms sales, and, for Moscow, markets and potential investors, especially in the Russian Far East. But Russia's governmental interests and capabilities relating to Southeast Asia were practically invisible, even though Southeast Asia needed as many great powers as possible to engage it and help sustain regional balances and security. Today, Russian commentators admit that Russia's relationship with the region focused on political and security issues at the expense of economic issues, which were lagging behind, and that this owed much to what Vyacheslav Nikonov called "the disdainful attitude" of Russian elites to Asia in general.

Nevertheless, the post-2005 engagement on political and security issues touched on political and security ideas, not least of which was the South China Sea. K. S. Nathan observed that for Malaysia, an objective of the bilateral Malaysian-Russian relationship was "reduction of the risk of war, the prevention of militarization of space, the prohibition and destruction of weapons of mass destruction, and ensuring the security of sea lanes of communication." Presumably Malaysia hoped to bring Moscow to support open passage throughout the South China Sea. Of course, not all Southeast Asian observers supported such direct Russian engagement. Christopher Len of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore subsequently argued that Russia should shun direct involvement in the issues of the South China Sea, instead using its membership in regional security institutions such as the EAS and the ASEAN Regional Forum to foster a solution or diplomatic process.

For all of its talk of an East Asian security architecture, Russia was passive on this issue through 2013. Russian analysts could not formulate solutions for what Moscow should do even as it expanded its energy explorations with Vietnam in the South China Sea and its overall ties with Hanoi. All they could recommend was to increase the "overall cooperative potential of the region and to contribute to the search for its new security architecture." However, events in practice were already affecting Russia's posture.

First, by 2007, Russia began its ongoing major Arctic campaign, declaring the Northern Sea Route as part of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Paradoxically, China opposed this posture, leading Moscow to retort by issuing military threats in 2010. In 2009, Hu Zhengyue, Chinese assistant minister of foreign affairs, said, "When determining the delimitation of outer continental shelves, the Arctic states need to not only properly handle relationships among themselves, but must also consider the relationship between the outer continental shelf and the international submarine area that is the common human heritage, to ensure a balance of coastal countries' interests and the common interests of the international community."

Although not then a member of the Arctic Council, China essentially disputed any claims of sovereignty in the Arctic waters beyond littoral countries' twelve-mile limit or EEZ if they signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore, although China lacks an Arctic coast, it stated: "The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world as no nation has sovereignty over it." This statement directly challenged Russia's assertion over Arctic waters beyond its territorial limits and a cornerstone of Russian policy. Moreover, there was clearly some military interest in the Chinese navy as Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo indicated here. He believed a scramble for the Arctic was under way that encroached on China's interests and that China and other nations "should find their own voices" regarding the Arctic. China should

become an indispensable player in Arctic exploration, especially as exploitation of the region "will become a future mission of the navy." While such sentiments have hardly become policy, they are not isolated, as there are notable exponents in China's navy and expert community of an aggressive policy to get foreign bases and to conduct missions beyond China's immediate coasts. Beyond expressing such sentiments, even if China's navy remains unable to compete with the U.S. Navy in projecting power abroad, it is building quite vigorously for a power projection capability well beyond China's shores. And these capabilities do not threaten only U.S. allies and interests, as Russian planners well know.

Arctic problems and issues, as China knows and admits, have hitherto been resolved by peaceful means such as the 2010 Russo-Norwegian treaty, but

> China appears to be particularly wary of Russia's intentions in the Arctic. Chinese observers have made note of Russia's decision in August 2007 to resume long-distance bomber flights over the Arctic and the planting of a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed that same month. Guo Peiqing has said that the disputes in the Arctic are in fact "Russia and some other states' challenge to the international order and international law after the end of the cold war." China and the rest of the world would be at a disadvantage if Russia's claims over the underwater terrain between the Lomonosov and Mendeleev ridges are legitimized because, in that case, Russia alone would have rights to the resources in that area. Even if that claim is unsuccessful, some Chinese Arctic specialists have expressed concern that the commercial advantage of the Arctic routes would substantially decrease if Russia were to unilaterally charge exorbitant service fees for ships passing through its EEZ waters.

In response, in October 2010, Russian navy commander in chief Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky announced the continuing buildup of the Northern and Pacific fleets in the Arctic, along with efforts to build up the coastal reconnaissance surveillance system and the air forces. Likewise, submarine patrols will also continue in the Arctic. And Moscow may also step up Arctic patrol flights by Il-38 and Tu-142 aircraft. But surprisingly, Vysotsky, speaking with authorization from above, singled out China as a threat:

> There are a lot of people who wish to get into the Arctic and Antarctic from an economic point of view. . . . We have already been observing how a number of states, which are not members of the Arctic Council, are setting out their interests quite intensively and in various ways. In particular, China has already signed agreements with Norway to explore the Arctic zone. We know about the economy and infrastructure that exist in China today, which is becoming our serious partner from both positive and problematical sides. . . . Therefore Russia needs to form its rational position and, at the same time, not give up any of its interests. . . . There are not long-standing relationships, overt opponents, or overt allies in the Arctic yet. But I believe the most problematic relations will be with those countries, which are not traditional members of the Arctic Council.

These belligerent remarks and tough-minded policies suggested considerable anxiety about China's economic and military ambitions. Thus, the two states' positions here exactly reverse their stances on the South China Sea. A precedent could be set in one of these disputed areas that would then have immense legal-political significance for the other. Given the strategic priority of these two areas, the fact that both states are militarizing them and seeking to influence precedents affecting their waters should not be a surprise. If Russia intends to be a major energy provider to

Southeast Asia (as it clearly hopes), uninterrupted navigation and exploration in the South China Sea become very important. Moreover, as Russian analysts know, war in Asia threatens not only local economic development but also Russia's vital interests.

But the Arctic parallel was hardly the only relevant one during 2005–14. Moscow's relationship with Hanoi grew steadily as Russia and Vietnam explored for oil and gas off of Vietnam's coast in waters claimed by China. Vietnam became a major buyer of Russian weapons and recently completed negotiations for a free trade agreement with Russia's Eurasian Customs Union. This is on top of Russia's previous overt efforts to attain basing at Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, China criticized these moves that may be seen as representing (along with Moscow's parallel rapprochement with Japan) Russia's response to Xi Jinping's invitation to join China "in guaranteeing security and stability in the Asia-Pacific Region." These moves demonstrated Moscow's quest for total independence and tactical flexibility and its habitual reliance on energy and arms sales to gain leverage on regional security agendas. Moreover, they also demonstrate that Russia pursued a hedging strategy against China in Asia, supporting China against the United States while working to constrain Chinese power in Asia.

The importance of Southeast Asia also steadily grew due to Russia's own pivot to Asia. As early as 2008, leading regional political figures (for example, Singapore senior minister Goh Chok Tong) were urging Russia to deepen its relationship with East Asia in general and Southeast Asian countries in particular. Russian acceptance of Xi Jinping's offer for joint positions on Asian security would be an admission that it has become China's "junior brother" in Asia. Thus, despite the allegedly deepening Sino-Russian friendship, in Southeast Asia Russia through 2014 had quietly but openly resisted Chinese encroachments to forge a deeper military-political relationship with Vietnam.

Beijing repeatedly demanded that Moscow terminate energy exploration in the South China Sea, clearly responding to Russia's visibly enhanced interests in Southeast Asia. In 2012, Russia announced its interest in a naval base at Cam Ranh Bay, a step probably connected to joint Russo-Vietnamese energy projects off Vietnam's coast, and a means of checking China in the South China Sea. Gazprom also signed a deal to explore two licensed blocks in Vietnam's continental shelf in the South China Sea, taking a 49 percent stake in the offshore blocks, which hold an estimated 1.9 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and more than 25 million tons of gas condensate. Those actions precipitated Beijing's demand that Moscow leave the area. However, despite its silence, presumably to avoid antagonizing China, Moscow stayed put and increased support for Vietnam regarding energy exploration in the South China Sea, arms sales, and defense cooperation.

Russia and Vietnam have been "strategic partners" since 2001 and upgraded the relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2012. The most striking and consequential forms of cooperation are military. Vietnam's defense minister, General Phung Quang Thanh, called Russia "Vietnam's primary strategic military partner in the sphere of military and technical cooperation." Beyond its interest in Cam Ranh Bay, Russia is helping Vietnam build a submarine base and repair dockyard to provide maintenance support for the six Kilo-class subs that Vietnam bought from Russia to protect its interests in the South China Sea. More recently, both sides have begun discussing regular Russian port visits to Vietnam for maintenance, rest, and relaxation, although Cam Ranh Bay will not become a Russian base.

Vietnam and Russia announced a third tranche of the sale of twelve new Su-30MK2 fighter aircraft that can target ships and aerial and ground targets. Vietnam has also ordered six new Varshavyanka-class submarines that improve on its existing Kilo-class submarines and can conduct antisubmarine, antiship, general reconnaissance, and patrol missions in relatively shallow waters such as the South China Sea. These sales display Vietnam's defense modernization to ward off threats to its offshore energy interests, defend Vietnamese claims in the South China Sea, and deter growing Chinese aggressiveness.

But perhaps the most striking aspect of these recent arms sales and ministerial talks between both states' defense ministers is Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev's approval of a draft Russo-Vietnamese military cooperation pact to formalize bilateral defense cooperation. Medvedev's approval orders Russia's ministry of defense to discuss the accord with Hanoi and authorizes it to sign the agreement on Russia's behalf. The accord stipulates exchanges of opinions and information, confidence-building measures, cooperation to enhance international security and ensure more effective action against terrorism, and better arms control. Allegedly, nothing in the bilateral relationship aims to target a third country. However, most of these announcements come from Hanoi, which has every reason to show China its ability to garner support for its military buildup and political resistance.

Vietnam's efforts to forge partnerships against Chinese power are unsurprising. But Russia's activities clearly surprised and even dismayed China. They were part of Moscow's overall "pivot" to Asia (which actually preceded Washington's pivot to Asia) and aim to invigorate Moscow's economic-military-political position as an independent major Asian power in its own right. In 2012, China's media called Moscow's policies "unrighteous" and warned Russia that it appears to prefer cooperation with "ill-doers" over cooperation with China, with whom Moscow professes an identity of interests. Chinese media also stressed that Russo-Vietnamese military and energy cooperation allows Vietnam to extend energy exploration into contested area, so in some sense Russia is culpable. China also correctly accused Russia of seeking a return to Cam Ranh Bay. Thus, Russia's "chess moves" suggested that ostensible Sino-Russian amity regarding Asia's regional security agenda was something of a facade. Russia's comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Vietnam amply underscored its refusal to yield to China in Southeast Asia. The announcement in June 2014 that Zarubezhneft may expand its energy exploration operations on Vietnam's shelf signified Moscow's dissent to Chinese probes in the South China Sea. Moscow also acknowledged Vietnam's right to buy arms from anyone it wants, including the United States. The Russo-Vietnamese communiqué of Prime Minister Medvedev's visit in April 2015 opposed China's territorial claims in Asia and showed that Russia has other friends in Asia besides China. According to Hanoi, "The leaders also discussed and agreed that any East Sea disputes should be addressed through peaceful means with respect to international law, including UNCLOS, as well as fully and effectively implement the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea and work towards the formation of a Code of Conduct in the East Sea." During this visit, Russia and Vietnam expanded their trading relationship, which includes energy projects in areas claimed by China.

Since then, however, Russia's policy has evolved differently. As Russian dependence on China grows, this balancing act has become progressively more difficult to sustain. Russia increasingly depends on Chinese loans, investments, and political support in return for supporting Chinese policies in Asia. This manifests first in regard to Sino-Russian relations. Dmitri Rogozin, discussing defense issues, observed that "Russia and China are now becoming

as we wanted, not only neighbors but deeply integrated countries" (emphasis added). 98 Andrei Denisov, Russia's ambassador to China, described bilateral relations as a model for great power relations and twice supported Beijing's demand that Washington desist from involvement in the South China Sea, saying that increased U.S. military power could create a real threat for Russia.

Moreover, Moscow has sought a military-political alliance with China. 100 In October 2014, Putin told Chinese prime minister Li Keqiang, "We do have great plans—we are natural partners, natural allies, we are neighbors." 101 First, we must understand what such an alliance means. As Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov stated in 2014, "If we talk about alliances, not in the old sense of the word, not in the sense of tough bloc discipline when [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] was against the Warsaw Pact and everyone knew that this part of the negotiating table would raise their hands and this part would vote against it. Today such baculine discipline looks humiliating to states that preach democracy, pluralism of thought, and so on. . . . Other types of alliances—flexible network alliances—are much more in demand today."

Moscow has openly solicited an alliance with Beijing, primarily against Washington, but invariably that also entails an alliance against U.S. allies in East Asia. In 2014, Sergei Shoigu said in Beijing that Russia and China confront not only U.S. threats in the Asia-Pacific but also U.S.-orchestrated "color revolutions" and Islamic terrorism. Therefore, "The issue of stepping up this cooperation [between Russia and China] has never been as relevant as it is today." He specifically advocated enhanced Sino-Russian security cooperation (through unspecified means) both bilaterally and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. 104 Shoigu included not only Central Asia but also East Asia, as did his deputy minister Anatoly Antonov. Both men decried U.S. policies that allegedly were engendering color revolutions and support for Islamic terrorism in Southeast and Central Asia. Shoigu further stated that "in the context of an unstable international situation the strengthening of good-neighborly relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond."

This overture to China fundamentally reversed past Russian policy to exclude the People's Liberation Army from Central Asia and retain for Russia alone the option of military intervention there. It signifies Russia's growing dependence on China in Central Asia and elsewhere under mounting Western and economic pressure. This alliance would also reverse Chinese policy that has heretofore shunned military involvement in Central Asia. President Xi Jinping has already called for a new Asian security order, including Russia. And while China abjures a formal alliance, a "network alliance," as Lavrov suggested, might be more palatable to it, especially as it increasingly can exploit Russia's growing economic and political dependence upon Chinese aid, trade, and investment.

Chinese reactions to Shoigu's and Antonov's calls are also interesting. On the one hand, China's ministry of defense spokesman went out of his way to deny that an alliance with Russia existed and said that "I need to emphasize here, though, [that] China and Russia adhere to the principle of no alliance, no confrontation, and not targeting a third party in military cooperation, and therefore it will not constitute threats to any country. It is inappropriate to place normal military cooperation between China and Russia in the same category as [t] he U.S.-Japan military alliance."

At the 2015 Shangri-La conference, Moscow announced that it would be launching joint naval exercises in the South China Sea with its Asian partners, first Brunei and China, in

2016.108 Although Russia may have subtly registered its concern at the mounting U.S.-China tensions and simultaneously signaled to China that Russia too has other partners and has interests in this sea that it will defend, it was also clear from this conference that Moscow will not criticize China or raise a coherent agenda that addresses the questions that interest Southeast Asian governments.

The September 2016 exercises with China in the South China Sea also suggest a retreat from Russia's previous somewhat exposed position in Southeast Asia. At the 2015 Shangri-La conference, deputy defense minister Anatoly Antonov criticized Washington for missile defenses in Asia that allegedly threaten Russia and China. He also attacked U.S. policies as representing a "systematic containment" of both Russia and China. And he even attacked Washington for its pressure on Vietnam to prevent Russia from basing the long-range Russian aircraft there that fly provocative missions against the United States and Japan. 109 And in October and November 2015, when the U.S. military openly defied Chinese claims of sovereignty of its artificial island bases in that sea, Antonov denounced these moves as inflammatory efforts to intervene and form militarized blocs and provocations in Southeast Asia. In July, Vladimir Petrovsky had written that China had called for negotiations leading to "spheres of influence" in the South China Sea and welcomed the possibility that the Barack Obama administration might have to accept this concept and thus Moscow's claim for a sphere of influence in Ukraine—a telling indicator of Russia's real priorities, increasing subordination to China, and skewed perspectives on this and other Asian issues.

Apart from a common anti-American alliance, these remarks simply dismissed the concerns of Southeast Asian states and displayed Russia's alarm that Washington could successfully pressure Vietnam to remove Moscow's long-range aircraft, even though Vietnam is its main partner in ASEAN. Some Western scholars believe that Vietnam may well have discounted Russia's willingness and ability to help it in anything more than a limited way because of its growing dependence on China. Therefore, talk of Vietnam and the United States being natural partners and of future defense sales and cooperation all suggests a Vietnamese reorientation toward cooperation with Washington at Moscow's expense.

It is becoming impossible for Russia to deal candidly with Chinese power. Russia now verbally and physically supports China's position on the South China Sea issue. By September 2016, Moscow conducted joint patrols there that included "island seizing" while studiously refraining from any challenge to China's claims despite China's recent aggressive policies.

CONCLUSION

Moscow's evolving postures on Southeast Asian security and the South China Sea highlight the many paradoxes that it has failed to resolve. The first is the disparity between its grandiose objectives and pronunciamentos concerning Asian security and the reality of its seriously underdeveloped material and cognitive capabilities for active participation in Asia. It has also failed to make best use of ASEAN's idea to have Russia serve as a balancer in Asia. Instead, consumed by a Western orientation and obsession with a mythical U.S. enmity, Russia has excessively pursued China while trying covertly to balance against it with insufficient means in the regional security process. Ultimately, this gambit backfired, and it has reached a point where Moscow cannot and will not say anything consequential about the South China Sea lest it offend China. Analysts such as Sergei Karaganov who once openly sounded the alarm about Russia

becoming a raw materials appendage to China now talk glowingly about Chinese and Eurasian vistas of cooperation. Such cooperation can only generate greater Russian dependence on China and corresponding loss of influence throughout Asia despite Moscow's well-founded suspicions of Chinese goals in Asia and the Arctic. Therefore, Russia has utterly failed to garner the benefits that closer engagement with ASEAN could offer it and Southeast Asia. Even Vietnam threw in with the United States' Trans-Pacific Partnership trade group that excludes China and Russia (but was terminated by President Donald Trump in 2017). 116 Nonetheless, Vietnam continues to pursue a revived version of the Trans-Pacific Partnership by hosting a conference dedicated to that purpose.

These unresolved paradoxes have consequences. For regional actors, they mean that Russia cannot balance China for the foreseeable future—hence, the turn to Washington and to cooperation with New Delhi, Tokyo, and Canberra. But Russia stands to lose much more. It has essentially deprived itself of a voice and standing on a major issue of contemporary security that could cause it harm but where it has no leverage over the participants. On a grander scale, Moscow's absenteeism on the South China Sea issue underscores the decisive failure of its own pivot to Asia since 2008. As Russian dependence upon Chinese support grows, and as that support is given only in return for lasting material concessions, it becomes clear that Moscow has failed to engage Asia or be recognized as a great Asian power. By the reckoning of Russia's own experts, this failure presages a further diminution of Russia's effective capacity in Asia, where absence and impotent equivocation are not the desired states for any self-respecting great power.