



# Sino-centrism in Russia's South China Sea Policy

By Olga Daksueva / *Issue Briefings*, 1 / 2015

**While the Kremlin has been explicit about its policy of economic engagement in the Asia-Pacific region, it has been less vocal about its strategic approach to the South China Sea, which evidence indicates is driven primarily by its relationship to China in the region.**

Over the past decades, the South China Sea (SCS) has become one of the global focal points where great and regional powers are entangled in struggles for sovereignty over small islands within the politically, economically, and geostrategically important sea. Although many scholars only focus on the stances and behaviors of the main participants, such as China, the United States, and Southeast Asian countries, other parties, including India, Japan, and Russia, also play an undoubtedly significant, albeit role in the disputes. This article describes the Russian stance, strategy, and behavior regarding the SCS disputes.



## Russia's 'Return to Asia' Policy

The main goal for contemporary Russian foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific has been to 'return to Asia' and reclaim its lost status as a major player globally. However, until quite recently, this policy had only been staked on China's rise and its support for promoting Russian interests in the region. Thus far, the strategy had not brought the desired results, so now Russia is attempting to change its foreign policy toward diversification and enhancing bilateral relations with its Asian partners. The turning point was when Russia, along with the United States, joined the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2011 and then held the APEC Summit in Vladivostok the following year. The culmination of this was seen in President Putin's visit to two Asian countries, South Korea and Vietnam, in 2013, when the countries decided to enhance economic, energy, and political cooperation. Moscow has displayed its willingness to participate more actively in regional affairs and contribute to maintaining regional peace and stability.

However, there are numerous pitfalls that reveal inconsistency in Russian policy, and one of the most representative is the annual absence of its leaders at EAS summits. As [Oliver Backes](#) points out, Putin's nonattendance, in particular, displays disbalance in a foreign policy that mostly



focuses on economic cooperation while neglecting security aspects in order not to jeopardize its ‘strategic partnership’ with China. It is apparent that Moscow sets as a priority the promotion of economic engagement with the region and attracting of foreign investment in its Far East and Siberia.

Despite some efforts to enhance bilateral trade, during the 2008–2014 period, according to the [RF Federal State Statistics Service](#), its largest trade partner in Asia has been China (40%), followed by Turkey (15%), Japan (15%), South Korea (11%) and ASEAN countries (5%). During that period, trade with Asia increased 34 percent. However, significant growth with its main partners was not observed, with China being the exception. Trade between the two countries showed a steady rise of 59% during these 6 years, and the share of Russia’s Asian trade increased from 34 to 40 percent. From this perspective, it is apparent that China remains crucial to Russia’s economy and diversification did not happen. Indeed, China’s centrality to the health of Russia’s economy has even been reinforced. Moreover, due to Western sanctions, Russia has further strengthened its relations with China by signing energy and infrastructure treaties.

In summary, we can conclude that Russian foreign policy in the region is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, Russia



advocates improving relations with all Asian countries and shifting its focus toward the Asia-Pacific. However, as we can see, Moscow is primarily interested in the economic aspect of developing its relations in the region while paying minimal attention to the security aspects. This is due to China's centrality in its Asia policy. On the other hand, Russia's indirect involvement in the SCS calls in question the previous conclusions regarding security issues in the Asia-Pacific. The next two sections will review the Kremlin's behavior regarding the SCS.

## **Sino-centrism in Russia's SCS Policy**

Due to the fact that Russia is not a claimant in the SCS maritime territorial disputes, the [government's official position](#) is for countries to settle disputes by peaceful diplomatic means according to the UN Charter and UNCLOS regulations. Moscow has declared its neutrality in these disputes. As [Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stressed at a press conference](#) in 2013, Russia has never united with a country against another, and no country should feel discomfort or fear for their own security. In other words, Moscow has no intention of getting involved in the ongoing territorial disputes,



and strengthening its relations with individual countries will not bring any power redistribution in the region.

However, Russia has still attempted to act as a responsible power and thus aimed to take a role in the regional security. Consequently, it held an international forum in 2013 specifically focused on discussing the SCS disputes. [At the conference, Russian diplomat Alexander Tokovinin](#) reiterated the RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs' opinion that "all countries in the region should exercise restraint," and parties should "refrain from the use of force and resolve problems through political and diplomatic means." However, he also emphasized that the "internationalization of disputes is counterproductive." [The same position was announced by Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov](#), when he highlighted that ASEAN countries and China should find an optimal resolution by themselves. Unsurprisingly, this point of view mirrors Chinese policy toward the region in terms of its adamant stance that the disputes should only be dealt with by concerned parties on a bilateral basis.

Although Russia advocates decreasing the use of hard power in international relations and strengthening regional stability, Moscow has a [great share](#) of the world arms market, and its [main customers](#) in the Asia-Pacific (66% of Russia's



total sales) are India, China, and Vietnam, the latter two of which are directly involved in the SCS disputes. Despite Western sanctions, Russia is likely to expand its arms exports, especially in “such promising markets as Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and Caribbean regions,” as President Putin has [announced](#). In this regard, Vietnam, Indonesia, and other ASEAN members are important consumers of Russian arms in their efforts to enhance their defense capabilities and balance China’s activities in the region. It is particularly evident in Russia’s relations with Vietnam, when recently both sides boosted their comprehensive cooperation, particularly in the defense and energy sectors. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that Russia is pursuing a [hedging strategy](#) toward China in the region. Despite similarities in their views of the global order and U.S. unilateralism, Moscow finds itself in tacit competition with China’s growing power in Central Asia and other regions, so relations with such countries like Vietnam can increase its leverage vis-à-vis Beijing.

Even if this is true, the Kremlin will not jeopardize its [‘soft alliance’](#) with Beijing, since the latter seems to be a natural ‘ally.’ To a large extent, this has imbued it with a Sino-centrism that has come to influence Russia’s Asia policy as a whole. Its economic dependency stipulates neutrality and, to some



degree, that can be seen in its stance toward regional security issues. This tendency toward further commercializing relations with Asian countries does not impede the Sino-Russo strategic partnership, and Beijing does not criticize Russian activities in the region, even if it regards it as having close defense cooperation with Hanoi.

## **Russia's Return to the South China Sea?**

Since the Ukrainian crisis and subsequent Western sanctions, the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry has expressed no state position on recent developments in the SCS, including China's oil rig, Vietnam's anti-Chinese protests, island-building, and the Philippines' arbitration case. Many [Russian experts](#) deem it wise to refrain from being vocal, as taking a stance may aggravate its Asian partners, especially now that Moscow and Beijing have signed oil and gas contracts and their strategic partnership is often regarded as a 'soft alliance.'

Moscow's latest activity related to the SCS – flights of Russian planes in the Western Pacific – let us imagine the possibility of a shift toward more engagement in the region. Even more so, it has returned to having access to Vietnam's military facilities in the Cam Ranh Bay.



The Cam Ranh Bay base has recently become a stumbling block in relations between great powers, Russia and the United States, and Vietnam. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union enjoyed access to the base, which was an important Cold War naval base for the Soviet Pacific Fleet and the largest one outside the Soviet Union. Through numerous political dialogues at every level, since 2012, Russian warships have gained access to the base, and this step is an important part of Russia's 'return to Asia' strategy. Due to the Ukrainian crisis, the strategy has become more politicized and revealed a new wave of Russia–U.S. rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. The U.S. accused Russia of conducting “provocative” flights in the region, including around the U.S. Pacific Ocean territory of Guam, a major American air base and [requested](#) that Vietnam “ensure that Russia is not able to use its access to Cam Ranh Bay to conduct activities that could raise tensions in the region,” since the former uses it to refuel nuclear-capable bombers engaged in these flights.

In this regard, Moscow has pursued a pragmatic strategy of keeping an eye on the region and preventing all great powers from enhancing their geopolitical influence and, as a result, maintaining the balance of power in the region. Along with China, the Kremlin is attempting to protect own interests by



constraining American influence in the region. Nhina Le and Koh Swee Lean Collin [argue](#) that “the Chinese do not yet have the requisite force projection capabilities to venture this far out into the Western Pacific,” so Russian “Bear” flights circling Guam may be well received by Beijing. Likely due to its potential counterbalancing effect on the increase in U.S. military activities in the region, including P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol flights in the SCS, the PRC has not expressed any concern regarding Russia’s use of facilities in the Cam Ranh Base.

## **Conclusion**

As Russia moves forward with its ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy, the economic aspects of which aim at diversifying economic relations and achieving closer cooperation with the most dynamic region in the world, it can be observed that the Russian strategy toward the region is China-centered in both the economic and political context. Moscow participates in multilateral institutions to maintain peace, prosperity, and stability in the region, but at the same time neither gets involved directly in the territorial disputes nor contributes in any substantial way to the progress of negotiations. This position is explained by the Kremlin’s strong interest in



developing economic relations with the region rather than focusing on security. Yet another even more significant aspect of its policy toward the Asia-Pacific region is the fact that, under the circumstances created by the international system, China has become a natural ‘ally.’ This has turned Russia’s Asia policy into a Sino-centric one, and the country’s economic dependency further encourages support for China’s stance on regional security issues. Further worsening relations with the Western nations brings Russia even closer to China and has stimulated the creation of a ‘soft alliance,’ so much so that even its close relationship with Vietnam, the use of Cam Ranh Bay naval base, and arms sales to regional countries have not caused any anxiety in Beijing and may even further buttress the latter’s claims to the region.

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