



Russia's South China Sea Approach and Search for Strategic Autonomy

By Alex Calvo / *Issue Briefings*, 10 / 2015

The publicity surrounding Sino-Russian relations and the Ukrainian crisis have often overshadowed Moscow's continued policy of cooperation with other East Asian countries in line with its goals of avoiding excessive dependence on China and becoming a major Pacific power.

A look at Russian policy towards the South China Sea may begin with the observation that, while all other regional and extra-regional actors seem to suffer from growing geopolitical tensions with China, Moscow appears to be strengthening ties with Beijing at a time of increasing isolation and economic trouble, as clear in areas like energy and the Arctic. However, before we rush to conclusions, it is necessary to examine Russian national interests and actual decisions on the ground, while being aware that Russian sources are most reluctant to deviate from the official narrative of flawless, eternal friendship with China. This reluctance was clear in last year's



new military doctrine, which did not contemplate a possible conflict with Beijing,¹ despite the perception of a military imbalance in the Far East, one of the factors behind the Russian military reforms. Russian military doctrine may not refer to China, but “counter-terrorism” drills in the Far East usually feature the simulated employment of tactical nuclear weapons, hardly the first tool that comes to mind when confronting a terrorist attack. Although Chinese leaders avoid referring to it in public, a significant portion of Russia’s Far East remains an unfairly lost land in their eyes.²

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- 1 A. Calvo, "No Place for China in Russia’s New Military Doctrine?", *China Policy Institute Blog*, University of Nottingham, 30 December 2014, available at <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2014/12/30/no-place-for-china-in-russias-new-military-doctrine/>
 - 2 “Having decided to make a maximum effort against the Tatars, Sophia and Golitsyn suspended all other Russian territorial ambitions. The momentum of the advance to the Pacific was abruptly halted. By the mid-seventeenth century, Russian soldiers, traders, hunters and pioneers had reached and conquered the basin of the Amur River, which makes a vast looping circle around the territory now known as Manchuria. For years, under increasing Chinese pressure, frontier soldiers had been sending desperate appeals to Moscow for reinforcements. But Sophia, reducing her commitments, sent not reinforcements, but a diplomatic mission headed by Fedor. Golovin to work out a peace with the Manchu Dynasty. The negotiations took place in the Russian frontier post of Nerchinsk on the upper Amur River. Golovin was at a disadvantage; not only had Sophia ordered him to make peace, but the Chinese brought up a large fleet of heavily armed junks and surrounded the fort with 17,000 soldiers. In the end, Golovin signed a paper which gave the whole of the Amur basin to China. Subsequently, the Russians claimed that the treaty had been based not on justice, but on the presence of so much menacing Chinese military force. In 1858 and 1860, the tables were turned, and Russia took back 380,000 square miles of territory from an impotent China. Not all Russians approved this claim. After all, the Treaty of Nerchinsk had been honored for 180 years; all this time, the territory had been



Looking East

Even before the current spike in tensions in the Euro-Atlantic Region, Russia had determined to diversify energy exports away from Europe, increasing the share of oil and natural gas exports going to the Asia-Pacific region. While agreements with China have attracted the most media and scholarly attention, Moscow has been working on a wide range of projects, including a possible natural gas pipeline to South Korea through the DPRK³ and civilian nuclear cooperation with Vietnam. Concerning Japan, Moscow was quick to offer support through increased LNG exports in the wake of Fukushima,⁴ and while observers differ on the realistic prospects of a grand bargain, some cautioning that relations with Russia are the most difficult dossier on Prime Minister

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- Chinese. But Tsar Nicholas I approved, proclaiming, 'Where the Russian flag has once been hoisted, it must never be lowered.'", Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), pp. 87-88
- 3 A. Calvo, "Russia and South Korea: the economic and geopolitical rationale for a natural gas pipeline", *China Policy Institute Blog*, University of Nottingham, 4 November 2014, available at <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2014/11/04/russia-and-south-korea-the-economic-and-geopolitical-rationale-for-a-natural-gas-pipeline/>
- 4 A. Calvo, "Can Russia Assist Japan in Fueling Its Energy Future?", *Journal of Energy Security*, July 2012 Issue, 23 July 2012, available at http://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=376:can-russia-assist-japan-in-fueling-its-energy-future&catid=128:issue-content&Itemid=402



Shinzo Abe's table, a strong rationale remains for closer links between Russia and Japan. This does not mean that this rationale will overcome bilateral obstacles, such as the territorial conflict over the Kuril Islands / Northern Territories and Japan's limited room to maneuver away from American positions in the face of growing tensions with Moscow. At the very least, however, it should constitute a powerful reason to avoid simplistic explanations. Furthermore, while Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's latest visit to the Kuril Islands / Northern Territories in August 2015⁵ has once again prompted criticism in Japan, this has not prevented Medvedev himself from signing into Russian law the extension of the country's continental shelf into the Okhotsk Sea, as agreed with Japan and in line with Moscow's February 2013 application to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.⁶

5 “ロシア首相：北方領土の軍備強化 択捉島で表明”, *Mainichi Shinbun*, 22 August 2015, available at

<http://mainichi.jp/select/news/20150823k0000m030048000c.html?inb=tw>

6 “The More the Merrier: Russia Expands its Territory Further Into Okhotsk Sea”, *Sputnik News*, 22 August 2015, available at

<http://sputniknews.com/russia/20150822/1026071741/russia-okhotsk-sea-medvedev-continental-shelf.html>



Russia may have traditionally looked Westward, from Peter the Great⁷ to Lenin,⁸ but she is indeed a Pacific power, and her diplomacy features a wide range of relations with countries in the region. Faced with the need to develop her Far East, diversify away from Europe, avoid overreliance on China, and generally speaking maximize national power and influence and economic exchanges, we could perhaps talk about Russia's own "Pivot" or "Rebalance" to the Pacific.⁹ According to Stephen Blank, Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council, "Justified emphasis on the current Ukraine crisis should not lead us to make the mistake of overlooking Russia's policies in East Asia". He points out how Russia is using energy and weapons sales in the region, in line with Moscow's traditional diplomatic practice, adding that "like other powers, Russia is pursuing what may be called a

7 Although we have to bear in mind that while looking toward the West in seeking inspiration to reform Russia, Peter the Great devoted great efforts, once peace with his Western foes had been achieved, towards the East and the South. Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), pp. 840-850

8 "He adhered to an ethnic hierarchy in his revolutionary politics. For him, Germans were culturally superior to Britons and French, who in turn were superior to Finns; and, of course, Finns had a distinct edge over the Russians", Robert Service, *Lenin: a Biography*, (London: Pan Books, 2010), p.389

9 A. Calvo, "The other 'pivot': Is Russia also rebalancing towards the Pacific?", *China Policy Institute Blog*, University of Nottingham, 28 January 2015, available at <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/01/28/the-other-pivot-is-russia-also-rebalancing-towards-the-pacific/>



hedging strategy against China in Asia. On the one hand it supports China against the US and on the other works to constrain Chinese power in Asia”. Blank concludes that “Sino-Russian amity, at least in regard to the Asian regional security agenda, is something of a facade”, meaning that “Russo-Chinese ties may not be as dangerous for the US as some have feared, although there is no reason for complacency since the two governments will clearly collude to block numerous American initiatives globally”.¹⁰

Mutually Strategic Ambiguity

Among other areas, Moscow may be seeking greater influence on the Korean Peninsula,¹¹ the participation of Asian powers other than China in the Russian Arctic,¹² greater cooperation with Indonesia, and although regularly denied, rumours about

10 Stephen Blank, “Russia and Vietnam Team Up to Balance China”, *The National Interest*, 7 April 2014, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-vietnam-team-balance-china-10195>

11 A. Calvo, “The Kremlin seeks a greater role on Korean Peninsula”, *China Policy Institute Blog*, University of Nottingham, 18 February 2015, available at <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/02/18/the-kremlin-seeks-a-greater-role-on-korean-peninsula/>

12 Alex Calvo, “Russian perceptions of China in the Arctic”, *Nottingham University Chinese Politics Blog*, 23 March 2015, available at <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/03/23/russian-perceptions-of-china-in-the-arctic-mistrust-feeds-persistent-wish-for-diversification/>



the possible sale of Russian submarines (or transfer of technology) to Taiwan keep surfacing.¹³ One of the most salient aspects of the Russian presence in the Pacific, and in particular the South China Sea, is Moscow's continued support for Hanoi and transfer of advanced weapons, chief among them Kilo-class submarines. Russia is not just an essential lynchpin in Vietnam's asymmetrical warfare strategy, but has avoided publicly supporting China's stance in the region.

This failure to speak out in favor of Beijing is not restricted to the South China Sea, as noted by Mu Chunshan, "Even on the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute between China and Japan, Russia has kept an ambiguous position". As reasons for this, this observer lists four. First of all, "China and Russia are not allies. There is no alliance treaty between them", and thus Moscow is not bound to support Beijing politically or militarily, even less in "The South China Sea", which "is not a place where Russia can expand its interests, nor is it necessary for Russia to interfere in this region absent a formal alliance with China". Second, "Russia enjoys good relations with countries bordering the South China Sea and does not need to offend

13 "Defense Ministry rejects proposal to buy submarines from Russia", *Focus Taiwan*, 18 March 2015, available at <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201503180026.aspx>



Southeast Asia for the sake of China”, and this does not just apply to Vietnam, since for example “Russia also enjoys a good relationship with the Philippines”. Third, Moscow is focused on Europe and the Ukrainian crisis, “Russia has neither the desire nor the ability to confront the U.S. in the South China Sea”. Finally, “the development of China has actually caused some worries within Russia”, with concerns centered on possible encroachment in the Russian Far East. However, according to Mu Chunshan this does not mean that there is a split between Moscow and Beijing, since the two countries know each other well and Russia’s silence on the South China Sea, just like China’s on the Crimea, do not mean they oppose each other. Beijing’s abstention at the UNSC on the Crimea “doesn’t mean that China opposes Russia’s position. By the same logic, Russia’s neutral stance in the South China Sea disputes doesn’t mean that Russia doesn’t support China”. Generally speaking, “China and Russia leave each other ample room for ambiguous policies, which is actually proof of an increasingly deep partnership. This arrangement gives both



China and Russia the maneuvering space they need to maximize their national interests”.¹⁴

Russian-Vietnamese Partnership

Vietnam has not just recently received her third enhanced Kilo-class submarine, HQ 194 Hai Phong,¹⁵ but is building four Tarantul-class or *Molniya* corvettes at Ba Son Shipyards, under license from Russia’s Almaz Central Design Bureau. Two corvettes were already delivered in June 2014.¹⁶ Furthermore, Cam Ranh Bay remains of the utmost importance to the Russian Navy, and in November last year Hanoi and Moscow signed an agreement to facilitate the use of the base by Russian warships.¹⁷ Carl Thayer noted that “According to a Russian Defense Ministry source, in future Russian warships will only have to notify port authorities immediately prior to their

14 Mu Chunshan, “Why Doesn’t Russia Support China in the South China Sea?”, *The Diplomat*, 21 June 2014, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/why-doesnt-russia-support-china-in-the-south-china-sea/>

15 “Vietnam’s third Russian sub to arrive next month”, *Thanh Nien News*, 20 November 2014, available at <http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnams-third-russian-sub-to-arrive-next-month-34230.html>

16 Duy Khanh, “Vietnam to build more Russian missile boats”, *Thanh Nien News*, 19 November 2014, available at <http://www.thanhniennews.com/politics/vietnam-to-build-more-russian-missile-boats-34169.html>

17 “Russia, Vietnam agree on simplified Cam Ranh port entry for Russian warships”, *TASS*, 27 November 2014, available at <http://en.itar-tass.com/world/763988>



arrival”, the agreement privileging the Russian Navy and giving it “special access due to Russia’s status as a comprehensive strategic partner and assistance in standing up Vietnam’s submarine fleet”. Hanoi and Moscow are now negotiating “an agreement on a logistics center in Cam Ranh Bay for the Russian Navy”.¹⁸ Russia is also a nuclear energy partner for Hanoi, and has ignored Chinese injunctions to abandon offshore oil cooperation with Vietnam in the South China Sea.¹⁹

Speaking to the Vietnamese media in advance of his official trip in April 2015, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev confirmed plans for “a free trade area agreement. It will likely

18 Carl Thayer, “Vietnam’s Navy Crosses the Line”, *The Diplomat*, 2 December 2014, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/vietnams-navy-crosses-the-line/>

19 “Beijing has repeatedly demanded that Moscow terminate energy explorations in the South China Sea, clearly responding to Russia’s visibly enhanced interests in Southeast Asia. In 2012 Russia announced its interest in regaining 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 twenty-five 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. Russia has subsequently increased support for Vietnam regarding energy exploration in the South China Sea and, perhaps more ominously from China’s standpoint, in arms sales and defense cooperation”. Stephen Blank, “Russia and Vietnam Team Up to Balance China”, *The National Interest*, 7 April 2014, available at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-vietnam-team-balance-china-10195>



be the first such agreement to be signed between the Eurasian Economic Union and an individual country”, while identifying Vietnamese tourism in Russia and trade settlement in their respective national currencies as areas for further work.²⁰ While defense links with Russia are a cornerstone of Vietnam’s multi-vector diplomacy, they go hand in hand with growing links with the United States. As often happens with countries engaging a wide range of powers which may otherwise be at odds, such balancing act is not always easy and may result in pressure by one partner to restrict cooperation with the other. Earlier this year, the use of Cam Ranh Bay air facilities by Russian Il-78 Midas tanker planes refueling Tu-95 “Bear” strategic bombers, involved among others in sorties to Guam, prompted a request by Washington to Hanoi to terminate such access.²¹

Conclusions: Does Moscow’s search for strategic autonomy offer an opening to maritime democracies?

We can thus conclude that Moscow is determined not to become too dependent on Beijing and that, despite many

20 “Dmitry Medvedev’s interview with Vietnamese media”, website of the Russian Government, 5 April 2015, available at <http://government.ru/en/news/17527/>

21 Nhina Le and Koh Swee Lean Collin, “Vietnam and Great Power Rivalries”, *The Diplomat*, 31 March 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/vietnam-and-great-power-rivalries/>



domestic and bilateral obstacles, she wishes to become a major Pacific power. This may offer some opportunities to the United States in the event of a turn for the worse in Sino-American relations, but in addition to the many challenges it would pose, right now this appears as an unlikely scenario given the deep mistrust of Russia in Western quarters.²² Together with the absence of any mention of sanctions when discussing policy options in the South China Sea, and the apparent disconnect between the US “rebalance” and the country’s nuclear posture, this deep schism between Russia and the West constitutes a triad of factors objectively enhancing China’s position when dealing with her neighbours. Unlike Moscow, Beijing seems to be succeeding in preventing a limited regional territorial conflict from having a major impact on bilateral relations with Washington. At the same time, while at least a measure of coordination with Russia in the South China Sea would make sense to maritime democracies, this policy option does not seem to be on the table for the time being.

22 For a warning on the dangers of pushing Russia to cooperate with China in the South China Sea, see Harry J. Kazianis, “Russia Could Make South China Sea a Chinese Lake”, *The National Interest*, 26 February 2015, available at http://russia-insider.com/en/china_politics_business_opinion/2015/02/25/3872



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