

Russia's Accelerated Pivot to East under the Ukraine Crisis and Its Prospects

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Abstract: Following the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, Russia accelerated its so-called pivot to East, using diplomacy, trade, energy, infrastructure logistics, and identity, due to the rapid decoupling from Russia by the United States and the West across all directions. The timing, depth, and significance of this pivot to East are unparalleled, but its implementation continues to face much uncertainty. At present, this turn to East does not entail a permanent turn away from the West on the part of Russia, nor does it mean that Russia will only rely on the East, and still less does it imply any transformation of Russia's national identity. On the contrary, as a center of sovereignty in the world and with its unique national civilization, Russia will continue to rely more on its own strength and shoulder its unique historical mission in the current period of change in the international order.

Keywords: Ukraine crisis, Russia, diplomatic strategy, pivot to East

I. New Trends

After Russia launched its special military operation against Ukraine, the United States and the West quickly imposed an unprecedented level of political isolation, financial blockade, export control, import and service ban, energy price limits, and partial suspension of personnel exchange on Russia to promote its long-term and in-depth isolation, decoupling and breaking the chain with Russia. Against this backdrop, Russia has accelerated its policy of a pivot to the East and taken a series of measures in this direction.

A. The eastward tilt of Russia's diplomatic agenda is accelerating. By

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the end of March 2023, a new version of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as the Concept) arrived, updating the previous version, published only seven years earlier. In the Concept's framework, regional priorities have changed dramatically: Europe and the United States ranked second and third from the bottom and are above only Antarctica. The Eurasian continent and the Asia–Pacific region have become Russia's third and fourth priorities, following its close neighbors and the Arctic.¹ In the 2016 edition of the Concept, Europe and the United States ranked second and third after the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The events of the past year have been Russia's guide to redrawing the global diplomatic map and carrying out its acceleration of its diplomatic pivot to East. In July 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to visit Iran, his first destination outside the CIS after the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. Russia and Iran have had intensive interaction in the diplomatic, security, economic, and military fields, and will soon sign a strategic partnership agreement. Since February 2022, Putin has had five telephone conversations with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Russia and India have strengthened their cooperation in energy, science, space, and pharmaceuticals, and they have deepened the trend of local currency settlement. In March 2023, Putin invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Russia, and the two heads of state held online and offline double meetings, along with three calls over the course of the year to further deepen the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. As executor of the president's foreign policy, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov took two Asian trips in July 2022, visiting Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Indonesia in series. Myanmar's military government came out in support of Russia's special military operation and discussed with Russia means of evading sanctions and bypass trading in US dollars. Russia and Vietnam celebrated the tenth anniversary of their comprehensive strategic partnership, and the two countries declared the continuation of the free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Vietnam to ensure favorable conditions for expanding the cooperation among the enterprises.

¹ Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.

The relationship between Russia and Indonesia was significantly consolidated. In June 2022, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited Russia, in spite of Western pressure. Russia accelerated the negotiation of an agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Indonesia to establish a free trade zone, while Indonesia considered importing cheap Russian crude oil. It is noteworthy that relations between Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have been further enhanced. In July 2022, the DPRK became the fifth country to recognize the independence of the two Donbass republics in eastern Ukraine, and it publicly stated its pro-Russian position with respect to the Ukrainian crisis. In August, Putin sent a congratulatory message to Kim Jong-un on the occasion of the 77th anniversary of Korean national independence, in which he called on the two countries to further establish all-round constructive bilateral relations. Currently, the two sides are discussing the possibility of sending DPRK workers and builders to Donbass.¹

B. Russia is accelerating its pivot to East in terms of trade flows. For centuries, the West has been Russia's main source of money and technology and its most important trading partner. In 2020, the EU was Russia's first trading partner, accounting for 37.3% of the country's total international trade in goods; in all, 36.5% of Russia's imports came from the EU and 37.9% of its exports went to it.² In addition, Russia is the EU's fifth-largest trading partner. The Western sanctions following Russia's special military operation in 2022 completely changed the flow of trade between Russia and the West and strangled the close and stable business relations that had been formed over the course of years, and led to a fundamental restructuring of Russia's foreign trade. The share of "unfriendly countries" for Russian exports fell to 35% in 2022 from 58% in early 2022. Following February 2022, the EU has banned over €43.9 billion in exported goods to Russia and €91.2 billion in imported goods, according to the latest numbers provided by the European Commission. This means that 49% of exports and 58% of imports are sanctioned today,

¹ Если друг оказался Ким, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5513645>.

² "EU Trade Relations with Russia: Facts, Figures and Latest Developments," https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/russia_en.

relative to 2021.¹ In 2022, EU exports to Russia fell by 38% (€55.2 billion), reaching their lowest level since 2005. Meanwhile, Russia has fallen to the rank of the EU's ninth largest importer. Russia's already small trade volumes with the United States and the United Kingdom contracted sharply in 2022. Russia is now the 39th among US trading partners, its lowest level since the collapse of the Soviet Union more than 30 years ago. US exports to Russia fell 88%, from \$524 million in November 2021 to \$62.6 million in November 2022. Its imports from Russia fell 78.5%, from \$2.77 billion in November 2021 to \$594 million in November 2022.² The volume of goods traded between Russia and the UK has fallen to an all-time low. Imports of goods from Russia have fell to £18 million in November 2022, a decrease of 98.2% relative to the monthly average from the 12 months leading up to February 2022, and its exports of goods to Russia fell to £57 million, a fall of 77.4%.³ By contrast, the share of neutral and friendly countries in Russia's foreign trade increased from 42% to 65% in 2022.⁴ The accelerated pivot to East in terms of trade is clear. Trade between China and Russia increased 32% year on year to \$117.5 billion. Russia has entered India's top five trading partners for the first time in the history of the two countries, with trade reaching \$38.4 billion.⁵ Trade between Russia and Turkey nearly doubled to nearly \$70 billion. Russia's trade with Iran rose 15% to \$4.6 billion.⁶ Trade between Russia and Indonesia also increased by 50%.⁷

C. Energy exports are accelerating to anchor to the East. Of all trade flows, the West to East reorientation of Russian energy exports is particularly striking. Before the special military operation, the energy relations between Russia and Europe were not fundamentally affected, even after the end of the Cold War

¹ "After 10 Rounds of Sanctions, How Much EU-Russia Trade Is Banned," <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/02/27/after-10-rounds-of-sanctions-how-much-eu-russia-trade-is-banned>.

² "United States (USA) and Russia (RUS) Trade," <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/usa/partner/rus>.

³ "The Impact of Sanctions on UK Trade with Russia: November 2022," <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/balanceofpayments/articles/theimpactofsanctionsonuktradewithrussia/november2022>.

⁴ "The Impact of Sanctions on UK Trade with Russia: November 2022," <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/10/02/2023/63e2411a9a794730042580a5>.

⁵ Товарооборот между Россией и Индией в 2022 году достиг \$38,4 млрд, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17395869?ysclid=lgbnafyescr832477794>.

⁶ Товарооборот между Россией и Ираном в 2022 году составил \$4,6 млрд, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/881814>.

⁷ Торговля между Россией и Индонезией выросла на 50 процентов, https://lprime.ru/state_regulation/20221212/839138341.html.

and the 2014 Ukraine crisis, due to their proximity and complementary needs. In 2021, the EU countries imported 155 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas (about 45% of total gas imports to the EU). Russia is one of the EU's largest suppliers of crude oil (about 108.1 million tons) and petroleum products (91 million tons). Coal imports from Russia account for nearly 50% (51.4 million tons) of the EU's total coal imports. The energy trade is even more important for Russia, accounting for 60% of its exports of oil and petroleum products and more than 70% of its gas exports. Following February 2022, the West decided to reduce Russia's energy export income to weaken Putin's fuel for maintaining the war, which changed the energy trade relationship between Russia and the West and the global energy landscape. The United States and Canada have outright rejected Russian oil, and Britain stopped importing Russian fossil fuels in June 2022. The EU embargo on Russian coal from August 2022 accelerated the shift in Russian coal exports to the Asia–Pacific region. In 2022, China's coal imports from Russia increased by 31%, reaching 69.5 million tons. Russian coal deliveries to India soared 3.5-fold, to 8.4 million tons.¹

In December 2022 and February 2023, the EU, the Group of Seven, and Australia successively imposed export bans on seaborne crude oil and seaborne petroleum products to Russia, and they limited the export price of Russian seaborne crude oil to \$60/barrel, which made financing and logistics for Russian oil supply extremely complex. India and China now account for 57% of Russia's oil exports. At one point, Russian Urals crude oil was supplying India at a rate of about 1.5 million barrels per day, at a discount of nearly 30% to Brent oil. The share of Russian oil in India's imports increased from 2% in February 2022 to more than 30%, making Russia India's largest supplier of crude oil. Russian oil sales to India surged more than 22-fold in 2022 as European buyers turned to other markets following the conflict in Ukraine, according to Russia's deputy prime minister.² The EU vowed to reduce gas imports from Russia by two-thirds within a year. In 2022, Gazprom's gas exports to Europe dropped by 55% (about 80 billion cubic meters). The destruction of part of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline further dimmed the prospects of cooperation between Russia and

¹ "Russia's Coal Exports to Decrease by up to 10% in 2023, Says Expert," <https://tass.com/economy/1569831>.

² "Russia Says Oil Sales to India Soared 22-Fold Last Year," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/28/russia-says-oil-sales-to-india-soared-22-fold-last-year>.

Europe. Putin ordered an increase in the supply of natural gas eastward to 48 billion cubic meters by 2025 and 88 billion by 2030.

D. Russia has accelerated the eastward distribution of infrastructure logistics. Russia sees Siberia, the Far East, and the Arctic east of the Ural Mountains as forming a gateway to the East. Following the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, the development and revitalization of these regions and their connectivity with the East determine the effects of Russia's eastward turn, leading the central government of the Russian Federation to attach greater importance to these regions. Putin visited the Russian Far East an unprecedented three times over the course of less than a year. In April 2022, he went to the Amur Region and visited the Oriental Space Launch Site with Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. He inspected Kamchatka Krai and Primorsky Krai and attended the Eastern Economic Forum in September. In March 2023, Putin flew to the Republic of Buryatia to visit the Ulan-Ude Aviation Plant. Prime Minister Mishustin also visited the Russian Far East in mid-August 2022 and signed an order to allocate more than 500 million rubles to construct infrastructure and improve living standards in the Far East.¹

In accordance with several documents, including the Plan for the Development of the Northern Sea Route by 2035, the New Strategy for the Social and Economic Development of the Siberian Federal Region by 2035 and Putin's speeches, the construction of logistics infrastructure in the eastern part of the country, including land, sea, and air, as well as its connectivity with other directions, have become a focus of the Russian government's work. In the east, Russia officially opened the Tongjiang Railway Bridge and the Heihe Highway Bridge, and it launched a 8 million ton/year grain railway transit project in Zabaikalsky Krai. In the future, Russia will further accelerate the modernization of the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur railway trunk line. This plan will increase the carrying capacity of railways 2.9-fold by 2030. In the north, Russia will invest 1.8 trillion rubles to develop the Northern Sea Route by 2035, speeding up the construction of the Murmansk transport hub and the Kamchatka liquefied natural gas transfer project to build

¹ Саммит Совещания по взаимодействию и мерам доверия в Азии (СВМДА), <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69587>.

an important transport and logistics channel for the Northern Route. It is also planned to build 10 icebreakers, 141 ice-class transport and support vessels, 14 ports and docks, and 12 satellites, to be launched into orbit, as well as four emergency rescue centers for the Ministry of Emergency Situations. In the west, the Russian government is promoting the construction of the Moscow–Kazan highway, which will connect St. Petersburg to the Urals Federal District and the Siberian cities of Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, and Tyumen, linking Irkutsk and Vladivostok as well. In the south, Russia is continuing to create a North–South international transport corridor, expanding transportation and logistics infrastructure toward the Caspian Sea and the routes to the Middle East and India.¹

E. Identity recognition is shifting eastward. Although three-quarters of Russia’s vast territory falls within Asia, the core of its industry, economy, and civilization has always centered in its European part. As early as 2014, following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, discussion was renewed in Russia about its Eurasian identity. The Russian political elite gradually abandoned its unrealistic view of the West and now believes that Russia’s traditional European orientation should be more closely aligned with its natural Asian interests. This trend was firmly reinforced in 2022 and is stronger than ever before. Russia is a Eurasian country, and “we have never forgotten that,” Putin declared at the Valdai International Debating Club annual meeting in October 2022.² The well-known Russian scholar Karaganov has pointed out more explicitly that Russia is accelerating away from the rapidly degrading Euro-Atlantic civilization. “It has given so much to Russia, but it is no longer needed in so many ways, not to mention it is increasingly contrary to the history, culture, and values of the Russian nation.”³ Russia is seeking visa-free agreements with countries in Asia and the Middle East, including India and Indonesia. China and Russia have prepared a new agreement regarding visa-free travel for tourist groups. Russia’s invitation to participate in the Asian Games and the Russian Football

¹ Заседание Совета по стратегическому развитию и национальным проектам, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70086>.

² Заседание Международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай», <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>.

³ От не-Запада к Мировому большинству, <https://www.globalaffairs.ru/articles/ot-ne-zapada-k-bolshinstvu/>.

Association's intention to be transferred to the Asian Football Confederation also show perspectives according to which Russia is adjusting its identity and actively carrying out cultural cooperation with the East.

II. Characteristics

The topic of a pivot to the East is not a new one for Russia. In recent decades, due to the influence of the economic take off in the Asia–Pacific region and the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, Russia gradually began the process of looking East. It is clear, however that Russia's accelerated pivot to East in 2022 is its emergency response to the drastic changes occurring in its external environment and the dramatic compression of its diplomatic space, showing the following distinctive features.

This pivot to East has unprecedented urgency and is being undertaken with significant speed. At its first independence, Russian diplomacy was focused on developing relations with the West and restoring its influence in the CIS. It was only in 2007, when Vladivostok was selected as the venue for the 2012 APEC Summit, did Russia begin to pay attention to its Far East and strengthen Asia–Pacific diplomacy, indicating that it should seize the opportunity to take the “oriental economic express.” Over the past 15 years, disputes between Russia and the West have increased the idea of Russia's official “strategic shift to the East,” although its actual shift has been extremely slow. From 2008 to 2013, Russia hosted the APEC Summit and established the Far East Development Department. In his 2013 State of the Union address, Putin for the first time called the rise of Siberia and the Far East “the national priority direction of Russia in the whole 21st century.”¹ The 2013 edition of the Concept also considered the Asia–Pacific region to be the “fastest developing geopolitical zone.”² At this stage, Russia's pivot to East has been more political than practical. Following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the West's political isolation and economic sanctions only helped Russia turn to East. While it actively revitalized its Far East, creating the Advanced Economic and Social Development

¹ Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.

² “The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2013,” <https://www.voltairenet.org/article202037.html>.

Zone and the Vladivostok free port and vigorously attracting investment, the Russian government strengthened its diversified ties with China, India, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, and other Asia–Pacific countries, and it actively participated in the East Asia Summit and in other multilateral platforms. However, the fact that rising political tensions did not restrict business between Russia and the West makes Russia’s desire to turn again to East less urgent. Karaganov frankly indicated that the East was beginning to flourish as early as the beginning of the 21st century, and Russia’s pivot to East was actually 10–15 years late. The most typical example of this is that only one gas pipeline, “Power of Siberia,” was built, while two planned China–Russia border bridges were not completed, even nearly 30 years after the signing of the agreement.¹ However, following the special military operation, relations between Russia and the West in various fields were quickly frozen over a very short time. From February to May of 2022 alone, the number of sanctions imposed by the United States and the West on Russia soared from 2,778 to 10,128.² Russia has overtaken Iran as the largest target of global sanctions. Recently, *Kommersant* once again noted the trend for accelerated Western restrictions on Russia: together with the tightening of secondary sanctions. A total of 864 Russian legal entities were subject to sanctions during the first quarter of 2023, for an increase of nearly 20% compared relative to the fourth quarter of 2022.³ This means that the geo-economic model of the West as Russia’s main trade, investment, and technological partner rapidly and completely changed, and the East has become Russia’s most important buyer of traditional export products, the source of its technological products, and its priority in trade and economic partners. Russia must restructure its relations with the East in a wide range of fields, such as politics, economy, and energy, in the shortest possible time.

This pivot is bound to be longer and more comprehensive in degree. In terms of its passive response, the degree of Russia’s pivot to East has been closely related to the decoupling of the West from Russia. Russia is facing an unprecedentedly firm and united “collective West.” First, the West has

¹ Восточно по расписанию, <https://www.globalaffairs.ru/articles/vostochno-po-raspisaniyu/>.

² Володин подсчитал количество санкций против России, <https://ria.ru/20220508/sanktsii-1787471086.html?ysclid=le493bu0sx23018383>.

³ Санкции набирают ход, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5925887>.

shown resolute will in terms of its policy toward Russia. The United States and the remainder of the West both regard Russia's special military operation as a blatant "invasion" of a sovereign country, and they consider Russia to be the most serious and urgent challenge to the post-war international order. This makes meting out severe punishment on Russia, a so-called destroyer of order, and defending the free rules-based international order into "political correctness" in Western political circles, and there is almost no room for change over the short term. Second, the West shows a coordination of actions in its policies toward Russia. In addition, to the traditional anti-Russian "pioneers"—such as Britain, Poland, and the Baltic States—Germany, France, Italy, and other states of "old Europe" who have had a deep friendship with Russia, have developed a strong feeling of opposition to Russia, and even Ireland, Switzerland, and other neutral European countries have actually joined the anti-Russian alliance. Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have followed suit on the sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe, while Finland and Sweden, who have long pursued military non-alignment, have applied to join NATO. Using the Ukrainian crisis as an opportunity, the United States has integrated its transatlantic allies in an unprecedented way, gathered the strength of the entire West, and achieved unity within it. The success of these actions surprised Russia. Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin pointed out with regret that, for the first time in history, Russia has no Western allies or even interlocutors who can act as intermediaries or "translators"¹ with the West. Third, the West has taken a series of measures of suppression against Russia. The United States and the West's actions in its hybrid war against Russia include political isolation, financial blockade, economic sanctions, technology export controls, and all-round decoupling in various fields, including culture, science, sports, and society, with the intention of accelerating Russia's isolation from the current international system. Russia has nearly lost its usual means of "wedging" and "doing work" in the West, and it has few opportunities for even dialog with the West, which has guided the long-term and comprehensive nature of Russia's pivot to East. Bordachev, the project director of Valdai International Debate

¹ Специальная военная операция на Украине как переломная точка внешней политики современной России, <https://www.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perelomnaya-tochka/>.

Club, bluntly said that the pivot to East is no longer an option but a necessity, forcing the Russian government to take it seriously.¹

This pivot is particularly important for Russia's future development. For thousands of years, the East has had a complex and changeable meaning for Russia has been complex and changeable. From the 13th and 15th centuries, following more than 200 years of Mongol Tatar rule, the East meant conquest, authoritarianism, and despotism. After the 17th century, when Peter the Great began to lead Russia into European civilization, the East was considered a symbol of ignorance and backwardness. From the 19th century, due to the continuous eastward expansion of Tsarist Russia, the East became the arena for Russian geopolitical rivalry with the empires of the United Kingdom, Japan, and others. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was eager to integrate into the West, and the East was largely ignored as a diplomatic vacuum. From the 21st century, the booming East gradually attracted Russia's attention, opening a window of opportunity its economic development. The 2014 Ukraine crisis further prompted Russia to use the East as a bargaining chip and a haven against the West. After 2022, the East has become clearly entrusted with a more important mission, and the outcome of Russia's pivot to the East bears on its future national destiny. Trenin notes that it is not a turning point in the trajectory of the past 30 or 40 years that is happening now, but rather the end of the Petrine Era. The special military operation forms the breaking point for contemporary Russian foreign policy. The 1.0 era of the Russian Federation is over. For Russia's international standing and role, these changes imply a radical change in the external environment, including changes in the goals, tasks, strategies, and tactics of the game. In his view, the pivot to East is not only a drastic adjustment in Russia's foreign policy but also of the degree of its implementation, which has an important bearing on Russia's future national development prospects for the first time in its history.²

¹ Поворот России на Восток: между выбором и необходимостью, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/comments/povorot-rossii-na-vostok-mezhdu-vyborom-i-neobkhodimostyu/?ysclid=lgrb52dihu86051149>.

² «Россия как страна здравого смысла – вот это было бы здорово», <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/strana-zdravogo-smysla/>.

III. Prospect

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's resulting great decoupling from the West and its massively accelerated pivot to the East are not only an important epitome for the accelerating evolution of the large changes taking place in the world but also a driving force for the reform and reshaping of the international order. Against this background, the prospects of Russia's pivot to the East is full of many uncertainties. Its effects will depend on whether Russia can make full use of its favorable conditions, overcoming obstacles quickly and managing the relationship between great powers.

Certain favorable conditions and potential cooperation opportunities appear for Russia to take advantage of in accelerating its pivot to the East. First, the East, as a whole, takes a relatively objective view of the Ukraine crisis, which is conducive to Russian unity and its pursuit of a middle ground to break out of its international isolation. In spite of their different relations with Russia, most Eastern countries have developed a pragmatic and balanced stance with respect to the Ukraine crisis in relation to consolidating sovereignty, national interests, and realizing strategic independence, and they have become the most valuable resource in Russia's diplomacy. Over the past year and longer, China has been committed to promoting peace talks and has issued the document *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*. India has called on Russia and Ukraine to return to the path of dialog and diplomacy based on international law, the UN Charter, and respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states. Turkey actively mediated and promoted the agreement on the export of grain to the Black Sea. Iran has argued that the crisis in Ukraine is the result of NATO policy and that efforts should be made to contain the crisis and prevent the spread of fighting. Since February 2022, the DPRK and Syria have voted against all of the UN General Assembly's four special resolutions on the Ukraine crisis, while more than 30 countries, including India, China, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, abstained on several occasions. Following the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, the ASEAN group issued three joint foreign ministers' statements, calling on all parties concerned to exercise maximum restraint and peacefully resolve the conflict, without any direct condemnation of Russia by name. This was not only based on sound

principles of balanced diplomacy but was also in line with the practical interests of Southeast Asian countries, who see Russia and Ukraine as important arms suppliers and exporters of raw materials. As Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Lutenko puts it, Russia's growing ties with Asia are "a nightmare" for the West and its anti-Russian policies.¹

Second, the East is an important field for Russia to shape a future international order. For the more than 30 years following the end of the Cold War, Russia has grown increasingly resentful of the Western-dominated world order. First, Russia could not bear to hear the West regarding itself as the "victor" in the Cold War, and this made it more difficult for Russia to cooperate with it on an equal footing and be an important pole in the world. Second, Russia has become increasingly angry at the United States and the West for unilaterally defining, modifying, and using international law while doing everything possible to obstruct Russia's efforts to safeguard its national interests. Third, Russia believes that it has not been drawn deeply into economic globalization but has gradually become a marginal vassal for raw materials. "In 2014, Russia slammed its fist on the table, and in 2022, it turned the table upside down," Russian scholar Vladimir Timofiev said.² In the new Concept, "Eliminating the dominance of the United States and other unfriendly countries in world affairs and establishing a just and sustainable world order"³ has become the primary focus for Russian diplomacy, and the East is quite suitable for shouldering this important mission. In terms of political order, Russia believes that the Asia-Pacific region has not been divided into blocs or Westernized and that it has the ideological foundation to pursue multi-polarization and a new international order. Further, Eurasia may be able to take the lead in forming a de-dollarization zone. Currently, more than 50% of Sino-Russian trade is already being settled in local currencies. Russia and India have actively promoted a rupee payment mechanism. Some banks in Turkey, Iran and other countries have been connected to Russia's national payment system Mir. Malaysia

¹ Замглавы МИДа Руденко рассказал о провале западных попыток помешать отношениям РФ и Азии, <https://iz.ru/1452268/2023-01-10/zamglavy-mid-rudenko-rasskazal-o-provale-zapadnykh-popytok-pomeshat-otnosheniam-rf-i-azii>.

² 2022 конец конца истории, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/2022-konets-kontsa-istorii/>.

³ Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.

has proposed the establishment of an Asian Monetary Fund, and the BRICS countries have considered the establishment of BRICS currency trading system. These are all regarded by Russia as important measures against the hegemony of the US dollar. Regarding energy, Russia announced that the price of Urals crude oil will be determined by Asia. Russian and Indian oil companies have also recently agreed to use the Asia-focused Dubai price benchmark for their latest oil deliveries.

Third, the East shows a greater need and potential for deeper cooperation with Russia. In general, against the backdrop of a sluggish world economy and the accelerating decline of the West, the East has the most economic vitality and potential worldwide. In the field of energy and resources, the Asia-Pacific countries are the main force driving up global energy demand. Oil and gas consumption continued to rebound after China improved its pandemic prevention policies. India is expected to be the largest contributor to future increases in global energy demand.¹ Its demand for natural gas is expected to grow by 500%, and its share of global oil demand will rise from 5% to 11%. Over the next three years, more than 70% of the growth in global electricity demand is expected to come from China, India, and Southeast Asia combined. By 2025, for the first time in history, Asia will account for half of the world's electricity consumption, according to a new report from the International Energy Agency.² This raises a prospect for Russia's eastward exports of oil, gas, coal, and electricity. Russia has supplied India with more than \$13 billion in weapons over the past five years. India has announced the supply of spare parts for aviation, automobile, and railway equipment to Russia. The two countries are expected to establish a high-tech alliance encompassing IT, cyber security, industry, and manufacturing. Iran has provided Russia with hundreds of attack drones for using striking military and civilian targets in Ukraine during the crisis. The two countries also plan to build an Iranian drone factory in Russia and launch joint international technology and entrepreneurship center. In agriculture, the gradual Westernization of Southeast Asian eating habits has led to a surge in demand for Russian wheat, pig and cattle feed, and chicken.

¹ "India's Energy 'Appetite' Is Growing: Demand for Natural Gas Is Expected to Jump 500%, and the Share of Crude Oil Demand Will Double," <https://xnews.jin10.com/details/106299>.

² *Electricity Market Report 2023*, IEA, February 2023, 7.

Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines will be huge markets for Russian agricultural exports. Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are the top three buyers of Russian beans.¹ The trade turnover between Russia and China in the agricultural sector exceeds \$5 billion and represents a growth of 30%.² China is preparing to increase its purchase of Russian vegetable oil. Even in the direction of the Arctic, where Russia has previously insisted on exclusive cooperation, due to the exclusion and isolation of several other Arctic countries, Russia is faced with increasing military security threats in the Arctic and difficulties in resource development and scientific research, due to which it is increasingly attaching importance to the role of Asian countries. Because China and India, as observer states of the Arctic Council, are interested in Arctic resources and transport routes, Russia has begun to actively promote ties with these countries in the fields of climate change, green development, and scientific research.

It should also be noted that Russia's accelerated pivot to the East will be restricted by multiple internal and external factors. For a long time, the interaction between Russia and the East has been subject to objective defects that cannot be ignored: limitations of historical experience, deficient geography, weak economic ties, and lack of Asian identity, coupled with the presence of China, the United States, India, and other major powers in the region, which prevented Russia from growing into an influential power in the East. Crucially, Russia has never been able to make the East into a real priority in its national strategy. Since 2022, when Russia finally began a serious pivot to East in response to changing circumstances, it has faced a series of formidable obstacles.

From the inside, the backwardness of the Russian Far East and the arduousness of its development tasks have been Russia's Achilles' heel in relation to the East. The region's vigorous development since 2014 has not fundamentally changed its basic appearance of backward social and economic development. Under the influence of the pandemic and sanctions, the problems of lack of money, roads, and people in the Far East have become more urgent. The development

¹ Российский агроэкспорт переориентируют в Азию, <https://rg.ru/2022/03/29/rossijskij-agroekspord-pereorientiruiut-v-aziiu.html>.

² "Russia's Agricultural Trade with China Up 30% in 2022," <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-s-agricultural-trade-with-china-up-30-in-2022.html/>.

achievements of the Far East are largely the result of support and subsidies from the federal central government, and various forms of state involvement, with some foreign participation (mainly from China, Japan, and South Korea), which was already modest and has become more cautious after 2022. At least 11 to 12 trillion rubles will be needed to further revitalize the Far East.¹ Due to the influence of Western sanctions and oil price caps, and energy export revenue, the main source of Russian Treasury revenue has fallen sharply, but the cost of the battlefield in Russia and Ukraine and the construction of four new areas in Russia is high. Data show that in the first quarter of 2023, Russian budget revenue decreased by 21% relative to the same period of last year, and spending increased by 34%. At 2.4 trillion rubles, the current deficit already accounts for nearly 82.7% of the planned annual deficit.² In this context, the Russian government openly admits that the budget that it allocated for high-quality infrastructure development in the Far East is insufficient.

The infrastructure in eastern Russia was mainly built during the Soviet era, and its multimodal transport efficiency is low, completely failing to meet the current demand of Asian countries for Russian trade. Vostochny Port is the only port in the Far East that meets the requirements for modern container terminals. The Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baia Trunk Line have a freight deficit of 134 million tons, resulting in a loss of revenue of more than 1.5 trillion rubles, due to their insufficient capacity. The vast eastern and northern inland waterways have shallow water levels and poor connectivity with Russia's European territory. Many Russian border crossings on the China–Russia land border are in disrepair and are inefficient in customs clearance. The Siberian 2 pipeline, which runs from Mongolia to China, will not be completed until 2029. As noted by Russian Minister for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic Alexei Chekunkov noted, these problems have put the brakes on the macroeconomic development of the country as a whole.³

The Russian Far East has lost more than 10% of its population since 2000 due to natural decline and continued migration out of the region. Experts say

¹ На Дальнем Востоке не развернуться к Азии, https://www.ng.ru/economics/2022-07-06/4_8479_east.html.

² Дефицит бюджета РФ в I квартале составил 2,4 трлн рублей, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/894964>.

³ Транспортная пробка лишила бюджет 1,5 триллиона рублей, https://www.ng.ru/economics/2022-12-21/1_8621_budget.html.

that it could lose another 8% over the next ten years.¹ The lack of population attraction in the Far East is rooted in the lack of modern quality infrastructure and the soft urban environment. The self-sufficiency rates for vegetables, meat, and milk in the region are 38%, 32%, and 54%, respectively, and the total housing area per capita is the second-lowest across Russia. In recognition of the importance of a comfortable living environment, the government is spending more than 100 billion rubles to focus on building in 25 city clusters, but this has not been a success thus far. Because the development of its Far East has a long way to go, Russia lacks the necessary premise and foundation for a further turn to the East. As Russian experts have pointed out, “In most cases, the limit of new engagement [with the East] is not even Western pressure on third countries, but our own unpreparedness to grasp so many opportunities that crop up.”²

From the outside, Russia’s strategic perception of the East is also undergoing profound and complex changes. In terms of geographical environment, the Asia–Pacific concept, based on openness, cooperation, and mutual benefit, as recognized by Russia (and China) has been strongly impacted in recent years. The United States continues to play up security risks in the region, gather allies, and force the narrative, accelerating its Indo–Pacific strategy. It has not only elevated the QUAD of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia to the level of heads of state and government but has also established a trilateral security partnership of the United States, Britain, and Australia (AUKUS).

The protracted crisis in Ukraine is also increasingly shaping the political and security landscape in the Asia–Pacific region. The risk of formation of blocs in the Asia–Pacific region continues to rise, and many countries in the region are forced to face the dilemma of choosing political and military sides, which, to a certain extent, is impacting Russia’s geopolitical, economic, and security interests. However, as Russia is only a second-tier player in the Asia–Pacific region, it does not have sufficient resources to influence and reverse the situation in many cases. Regarding bilateral relations, since 2022,

¹ Близкая даль: в 2023 году объем инвестиций в ДФО составит 2,4 трлн рублей, <https://iz.ru/1459606/dmitrii-alekseev/neprostoi-makroregion-v-2023-godu-obem-investitsii-v-dfo-sostavit-24-trln-rublei>.

² Как России строить отношения с дружественными странами, <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/stroit-otnosheniya-s-druzhestvennymi-stranami/>.

Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have changed their post-2014 dissociative policy and have joined the anti-Russian front without hesitation, following the sanctions imposed by the United States, significantly worsening their relations with Russia. Japan has become more assertive in its territorial disputes with Russia, imposing additional export bans on Russia and continuing to provide large amounts of financial aid to Ukraine. South Korea has indirectly supplied weapons to Ukraine through Poland, Canada, and other third parties, triggering a warning from Russia of severing its diplomatic ties. Singapore not only strongly condemned Russia's "aggression" but also took the rare step of itself imposing unilateral sanctions, tightening export controls and blocking certain financial transactions with Russian banks and financial institutions. These countries had been important sources of money and technology for Russia in the East, and Russia's circle of friends in the East has apparently shrunk further. Even within the East, certain countries who cooperate with Russia have come under increasing pressure and restrictions from the United States and the West. As the special military operation in Ukraine has prolonged, the West realized that the effects of sanctions against Russia depend not only on the intensity of sanctions, but also on the quality of sanctions, so that the focus has gradually shifted to plugging loopholes against third parties. Under pressure from the United States and Europe, Turkey was forced to ban the transfer of goods subject to Western sanctions and export controls to Russia from March 1, 2023, prompting Russia to seek alternative suppliers from countries such as Kazakhstan.

More importantly, Russia is concerned that the pivot to the East risks imbalance. Although India continues to expand its oil imports from Russia under the pretext of "taking care of the needs of its own people" for resisting pressure, Russia's bargaining power is also significantly reduced, and the Western oil price cap have given India more bargaining chips. The cost of transporting oil farther afield has further eroded margins. Russia's growing reliance on China is even more troubling. Moscow has been pursuing a diversified foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region for years to prevent over-dependence on China. However, the current situation is clearly worse for Russia. Russian experts candidly point out that the specific economic and diplomatic risks to the pivot to East include a clear tilt toward China, especially in the energy sector. "Moscow needs to export oil and gas to China more than

Beijing does. The energy situation highlights the asymmetry in the bilateral economic relationship. Hydrocarbon supplies alone cannot provide a solid basis for bilateral cooperation.”¹ All of this inevitably constrains Russia’s pivot to the East.

Conclusion

Its geographical position as straddling Europe and Asia has given Russia a dual identity and fostered enduring myths about its identity. Since Peter the Great, the “two-headed eagle” has been facing the West, yearning for the West, and relying on the West. At present, the long-term trend from the Ukraine crisis and its profound influence on the international order and regional patterns have forced Russia to stand at the crossroads of history once again. The logic behind Russia’s dramatic pivot to the East is particularly noteworthy.

Its turn to the East does not mean Russia will permanently “turn away from the West.” Rather, it is a readjustment of Russia’s priorities in the fields of politics, economy, energy, and diplomacy, which have largely changed Russia’s 300-year tradition and history of taking the West as the main source for external funds and technologies. Objectively speaking, this large-scale adjustment forms the natural consequence of the West’s determination to push for complete decoupling from Russia, continuing to keep Russia weak and relegating Russia to the role of an international pariah. It is an emergency response that Russia is forced to face and reluctantly accept. However, this does not mean that Russia will take the initiative to close the door of its relations with the West, let alone that it will completely transform its national identity and civilization. As relations between Russia and West have reached an all-time low, the 2023 edition of the Concept is still very carefully worded on relations with the United States and Europe, sending relatively friendly signals. The document lays out Russia’s “Three Nos” principle for dealing with the West: “Russia is not an enemy of the West, does not seek isolation and has no intention of provoking hostility.” Specifically, with respect to Europe, Russia still emphasizes that

¹ Российская политика поворота на Восток: проблемы и риски, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/comments/rossiyskaya-politika-povorota-na-vostok-problemy-i-riski/?sphrase_id=97696191_

the two sides “are geographically close and historically share deep cultural, human and economic ties.” For the United States, the Concept points out that Russia is “interested in maintaining strategic balance and peaceful coexistence with the United States, and establishing a balance of interests between Russia and the United States.” In diplomatic practice, although Russia is increasingly relying on Asian (especially Chinese) markets, its major security and diplomatic concerns and its military and political influence are still mainly concentrated in the western Eurasian continent.

Russia has its own unique definition and understanding of the East. Over the course of thousands of years of history and due to the uncertainty of its own geographical coordinates, Russia’s definition of the East has often been generalized and vague. The newly conquered territories of Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia were commonly referred to as the East. Well-known British scholar Orlando Figes mentioned his own confusion regarding the geographical concept of the East in *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*. “This ‘East’ cannot be found on any map. It is in the South, in the Caucasus and Crimea, but also in the East. South and East on the compass were merged here into the imaginary East—the exotic subcivilization in the Russian mind—which was invented as a hodgepodge of different cultural elements.”¹ Similarly, in the current context of Russian diplomacy, the East continues to be a broad concept. The pivot to the East appears to be not just a pivot to Asia but also one to a broader non-West, encompassing the Middle East, the Arctic, Africa, and Latin America. In fact, after the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, Russia has actively explored and created a series of concepts. Russian officials have dichotomized the world into “friendly” and “unfriendly” countries. Putin has repeatedly used the terms “collective West” and “non-Western” in his speeches. The Russian academic circle created the concepts of the “Great East,” the “Collective East,” and the “world majority,” aiming to shape a new international pattern in the period of transformation in the world order. It is quite interesting that the word East does not appear in the new Concept. Russia’s diplomatic vision of the East has been divided into Eurasia and the

¹ Orlando Figes, trans. Guo Danjie and Zeng Xiaochu, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 2018), 450.

Asia–Pacific. Its relations with China, India, and other countries have been placed within the framework of Eurasia. This also means that Russia’s Eastern strategy will be based on a Eurasian perspective, led by a “Greater Eurasian partnership.”

Nor does the pivot to the East mean that Russia will be relying only on the East. On the one hand, the East is not the most important of Russia’s diplomatic priorities, as its near neighbors and the “post-Soviet space” are still the top priorities of its diplomacy. The new Concept places more emphasis on ensuring security and stability in Russia’s neighborhood, strengthening political, economic, and military cooperation with its allies and the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as building a “Russian world” community. On the other hand, Russia has also realized that while relations with the non-West are important, the East is not the key to unlocking its strategic dilemma. Russia must rely on its own strength to solve the key tasks of national development, the need to have strong sovereignty, and the necessary self-sufficiency. Many scholars have noted that Russia cannot simply “swerve from one direction to another.” Moreover, “there is no reason to expect other countries, including friendly ones, to take significant risks in supporting Russia in actions that make no sense to anyone other than Russia.”¹

In its new Concept, Russia has defined itself as “one of the sovereign centers” of the world and a “unique national civilization” that has a unique historical mission.² This means that at a time in which the world is undergoing profound changes and the external environment is becoming increasingly stark, Russia is increasingly emphasizing its independence and uniqueness, as well as its key role in the construction of a new international order. From these considerations, it will be of great significance for both China and the rest of the world to observe how Russia further constructs the East, founds its strategic planning on the East, and turns to the East.

¹ Поможет ли России Восток? <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/pomozhet-li-rossii-vostok/>.

² Указ об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.