

# Why the EU needs to engage Russia on Asian security

**Marlène Laruelle**

**>>** Most of the European Union's main trading partners are now located in Asia. But Asia is also crucial to global security. Although events in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan regularly eclipse Asia in the media, 2010 saw a significant increase in tensions in the region. Key events included the security crisis in the Korean peninsula, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku-Diaoyou islands and growing discord over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Regional stability remains challenging, with potential implications for both the United States and EU interests. The EU's presence in both regional institutions and peacekeeping, and its support for confidence-building measures are already significant; but its political visibility is still limited.

As it is not actively involved in the Asian conflicts, the EU can play a role fostering regionalism and multilateral initiatives. In this effort the EU should involve Russia, which has a Pacific face. Russia legitimately considers itself to be an Asian power and wishes to become actively involved in the region's security mechanisms. Although some disagreements persist, relations between the EU and Russia have improved since 2010. Unlike in the immediate neighbourhood, where Moscow perceives Europe's presence as a threat to its interests, the Russia-Europe partnership could be productive in Asia.

While Dmitri Medvedev's proposal for a new security architecture for Europe has provoked much debate, the Russian position on security matters in Asia remains relatively unknown. This is despite the many common points of view that Moscow and the EU share on this issue. Russian global security interests have substantially changed

## HIGHLIGHTS

- As it is not actively involved in the Asian conflicts, the EU can play a role fostering regionalism and multilateral initiatives in Asia.
- In the future, Moscow is likely drastically to reconsider its relations with the West in the framework of its decline relative to China.
- Engaging Russia alongside Europe in Asia offers several advantages for the EU's visibility in Asia, for Russia's integration into Asia and for Europe-Russia relations.

»»»»» since the end of Cold War and the Kremlin is still weighing up the international scene while struggling to identify its long-term partners and enemies. Some prisms inherited from the Cold War still shape Russian perceptions, but today Moscow takes into account two categories of danger: non-traditional threats and strategic uncertainties. Within this prism, the West is no longer seen as a danger, while Asia is perceived as an area of strategic uncertainty.

### **RUSSIA'S CHINESE UNCERTAINTY**

Tensions inherited from the Soviet and Chinese communist regimes have disappeared, border issues have been resolved and Russo-Chinese cooperation has developed within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China became Russia's biggest commercial partner in early 2009; trade figures clearly show Russia's orientation towards primary resources and China's role as a supplier of finished products. On the military front, cooperation has been strained. In 2009, China's share of Russian arms exports fell by 18 per cent, and it is expected that in the next decade China will break free of its Russian military tutelage, possibly even becoming a rival in the international arms market.

The relationship with China also presents major problems for the internal balance of the Russian Federation, especially in relation to the Far East. The population deficit in Siberia elicits numerous fears concerning the potential disappearance of ethnic identity, threats to territorial integrity and creeping 'Sinicisation'. In 2010, the Vostok military exercises undertaken in the Far East – Russia's most significant exercise since the collapse of the Soviet Union – discreetly simulated an attack from China requiring a riposte by Moscow.

In September 2010, Medvedev commented that relations with China were now 'at their highest point ever'. However, Russia's attitude toward China has to be understood through its silence

on key concerns. The absence of any mention of a security risk in the Far East in the 2009 National Security illustrates the taboo which surrounds the Chinese question in Russian leadership circles. Nonetheless, the anti-Chinese discourses of the Russian elite, hitherto reserved for the private sphere, have recently increased. Many think tanks encourage Russia to associate itself with the West, and even with NATO, in order to be able to confront the challenges ahead in the twenty-first century, primary among which will be China. In 2009, the head of the General Staff General Makarov indicated that NATO and China were Russia's 'most dangerous geopolitical adversaries', and the chief of staff of the Ground Forces, Lieutenant-General Sergei Skokov, admitted that China was Russia's 'potential enemy'.

The Sino-Russian 'axis of convenience' therefore lacks a strong values base, and could be tested by a change in either actor's geopolitical outlook. Russian policymakers are increasingly concerned about the speed with which China is narrowing the strategic gap and are totally unprepared to accept China as a top-flight political or cultural power, or to become Beijing's satellite. In the future, Moscow is likely drastically to reconsider its relations with the West in the framework of its decline relative to China.

### **JAPAN AND THE KOREAN ISSUE**

The Russian position on the Korean question has moved closer to that of the West. The North Korean regime is still dependent upon Russia in terms of military material. Moscow also delivers the country's oil and food in accordance with its obligations associated with the Six-Party Talks, and has initiated a few investments in industry. Long protective of the regime, Russia is today concerned about a possible act of aggression by the North against the South, and of the nuclear threat presented by Pyongyang. It did not hesitate to support UN sanctions against North Korea. Moscow tends to preserve the status quo regarding Korea with a neutral position, while

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strengthening comprehensive relationships and economic partnership with South Korea. No longer believing in reunification in the medium term, Russia does not wish to abandon North Korea to China's sole influence. It does not want to be marginalised from international discussions on the Korean question, and asks to remain an alternative partner to the Chinese influence.

While Russia has normalised its relations with the two Koreas, its relationship with Japan is still coloured by the question of the Southern Kuril Islands/Territories of the North. This issue escalated at the end of 2010 when Dmitry Medvedev became the first ever Russian leader to visit the islands. Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan labelled this visit an 'unforgivable outrage'. Both countries are beholden to public opinion in their countries and to nationalist lobbies. Tokyo does not want to appear weak, whereas Moscow cannot question the governorship of a territory

won at the end of the Second World War, so sacred is the image of the victory of 1945. But beyond these tensions, long-limited economic cooperation between

the two countries recently increased considerably. The joint exploitation of Russia's first offshore gas deposit – Sakhalin 2 in the Okhotsk Sea – and the commencement of construction of Russia's first LNG plant less than 200 kilometres off the Japanese coast allows for the export of close to two-thirds of its production to Japan. After the catastrophe of March 2011, Vladimir Putin ordered an acceleration of the Sakhalin-3 LNG project to meet shortfalls in Japan's energy supply. In addition, the nuclear partnership seems to be gathering strength after the events of March 2011. It is therefore likely that the development of economic cooperation in the coming years will enable the two countries to convince their populations to make concessions on the highly symbolic question of the Kuril Islands.

## The Russia–Europe partnership could be productive in Asia

### RUSSIA IN SOUTH ASIA

In South Asia, the Russian position is much weaker, historically less entrenched, and geopolitically less legitimate. But this does not mean that it cannot be usefully associated with European strategies.

Russia's relations with South Asia revolve around the Afghan question. Moscow draws a direct line between the Afghan–Pakistani instability affecting Central Asia and their impact on Russian territory. This link is seen both in terms of drug trafficking (Russia is the highest-ranked country in terms of heroin consumption) and of insecurity linked with Islamism, which adds to domestic tensions connected with the North Caucasus. Moscow has become a key partner of the West in Afghanistan. The Obama administration's 'reset policy', the nuances in international stances introduced by Dmitry Medvedev, and a sharper perception of the dangers emanating from Afghanistan, have brought about a change in the Russian viewpoint. Critical discourses have attenuated in tone and strategies of cooperation with NATO have grown in stature. Russia is an indispensable link in the Northern Distribution Network, it supplies jet fuel for the American base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, can play an important role in the formation of the aviation sector of the Afghan army, and has revived its own networks of influence in Kabul. In addition, despite its domestic and foreign policy weaknesses, Russia can position itself as a European ally in the fight against drug trafficking on a continental scale and help stabilise Central Asia.

In this Russian view on Afghanistan, India is an important partner. The two countries have never experienced episodes of conflict in their bilateral relations and India is not seen as a long-term threat. Moscow has demonstrated understanding on the Indian nuclear issue, and supports New Delhi's candidacy for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation



»»»»» Organisation. Russia has also contained its relations with Pakistan in order to satisfy its Indian ally, despite having tried for several years to initiate a new dialogue with Islamabad, symbolised by the August 2010 quadripartite summit of Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. In contrast to their very modest commercial relations (comprising no more than 1 per cent of their total trade), the Indo-Russian partnership is particularly powerful in the military sector, and aviation and naval orders drive this bilateral military cooperation.

Here again, the Russian position is not far from that of the West. As the departure of ISAF troops begins, the West needs to delegate part of its influence in the Afghan zone to neighbouring powers. With China wanting to maintain a limited involvement in Afghanistan, Iran having been undercut in its status as a regional power by its nuclear banishment and Pakistan being part of the problem, Europe and the US need to rely more heavily on Russia, the Central Asian states and India.

### **WHY THE EU NEEDS TO ENGAGE RUSSIA IN ASIA**

Russia's involvement in Asia will not change the Asian status quo and Moscow will remain a second-tier actor compared with the heavyweights of China, Japan, and the United States, and potentially also India. However, engaging Russia alongside Europe in Asia offers several advantages for the EU's visibility in Asia, for Russia's integration into Asia and for Europe-Russia relations.

If the EU wants to promote regionalism and multilateralism in Asia, it would be beneficial to form alliances between Europe and Russia in order to show that their disagreements are decreasing and that their shared perceptions have become more notable. Despite tensions with Japan and Russian ambiguities toward North Korea, Moscow, Brussels and European capitals all want to avoid conflicts in Northeast

Asia. They are aiming to build confidence mechanisms, to find peaceful solutions for the Korean peninsula and for China-Japan and cross-strait relations, and to help China to manage its 'peaceful rise' in Asia. The case is similar for issues surrounding Afghanistan and the stability of Pakistan. Although the EU obviously has to maintain direct relations with all the Asian players, associating Russia as a link between the European continent and the Pacific would be beneficial. It is also in the EU's interests to support Moscow's bid to host the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and endorse Russian ambitions to be more involved in Asia's political and economic life.

In the coming decades, Russia will be profoundly transformed, economically, strategically and culturally, by Asia's rise to power. Russia-Europe tensions will lose importance in the face of the new challenges – which are not necessarily threats – arising from the overall rebalancing in favour of Asia. Russia will need to be supported during this rebalancing, both internationally and domestically. The growing disequilibrium between Russia and its Chinese neighbour will probably have important repercussions in terms of threat perceptions, and Europe has every interest in avoiding growing feelings of territorial insecurity in Russia, as these would also have repercussions on its relationship with its Western neighbors. The Russian economy is bound partly to re-orient itself toward Asia, and, once again, Europe has an interest in helping Moscow to manage this integration well, as it will result in increased stability for Russia and development of its relationship with the Far East. If both actors are able to diversify their exchanges with other partners, this evolution may permit a less tense energy relationship between Russia and Europe.

Europe needs to engage Russia in cooperative dynamics. It is natural that relations in a 'shared neighborhood' are the most plagued with tension. In Asia, there is greater leeway for action and the differences of interpretation between Europe and Russia are smaller. Moscow views the world through a prism of fear of being confined to the

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periphery of international decision-making. That is why it is important to point out Russia's position 'straddling two continents', its competence in academic knowledge and policy expertise on the Asian world, its good neighborhood strategies in Asia, as well as to promote a 'pan-European' voice in Asia.

The values issue naturally imposes limitations. Russia will not support the EU position on human rights in negotiations with China and endorses non-interference in internal affairs. But Moscow would support European initiatives concerning multilateralism, Europe-Asia discussion forums, mechanisms for economic cooperation, conflict mediation and people-to-people relations.

This presupposes, of course, that the Russian authorities also wish for a cooperative relationship with Europe on Asian Affairs. But should this not be the case, at least Europe would have put forward some proposals and opened up prospects for the future. Above all else, it would empower those Russian elites who endorse a strengthening of cooperation and want their country to be better integrated into a kind of 'three-branched Western community' incorporating the US, Europe and Russia.

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