

Taming the Russian ‘Wild East’: What’s in it for the Asia-Pacific Region?

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For as long as anyone can remember, the reputation of far eastern Russia as a harsh and unforgiving environment has taken precedence over anything else that it might have to offer. Presented in both scientific and artistic depictions alike as the antithesis of a land of opportunity, the Kamchatka Peninsula and its major neighbouring cities of Vladivostok and Khabarovsk have often been neglected in efforts to further multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific despite being located a mere stone’s throw away from regional heavyweights such as Japan and China. With Russia having recently bolstered its political stronghold on the international arena through several displays of diplomatic bravado, the time has clearly arrived for states in the Asia-Pacific region to challenge this stereotype and to investigate the untapped potential of this stigmatised part of the world.

In light of the fact that this significant part of Russia stretches approximately 1,250 kilometres, the question arises of why incorporating this region into Asia-Pacific multilateral frameworks hasn’t occurred earlier. This may be explained through two main ideas which position both Russia and states in the Asia-Pacific as accountable. Firstly, Russia’s reluctance to immerse itself in the region stems from the fact that expanding its foreign policy to heighten its focus on the Asia-Pacific will most likely further complicate its seemingly never-ending identity crisis. Until now, purposefully avoiding multilateral engagement with Asia has allowed Russia to escape the question

of whether or not it can be classified as an Asian country. Dmitry Trenin is one of a growing number of Russian academics who have sought to offer a solution to this political and cultural issue, and in doing so, proposed in 2003 that Russia self-identify as a “Euro-Pacific” nation¹. At a surface level, this idea holds merit. What limits its applicability, however, is Trenin’s secondary claim that Russia must choose between China and Japan as its main regional ally, hinting at the pervasive tendency of states to favour bilateral relations. To illustrate this idea further, Vladimir Putin’s signing of the “Executive Order on Measures to Implement the Russian Federation Foreign Policy”² in May 2012 hinted at a desire to heighten Russia’s involvement in the region, particularly by promoting accelerated socio-economic development between Eastern Siberia and cooperation with China and the far east. These efforts, however, have largely failed to come to fruition, suggesting a deep-seated and perhaps even historical aversion to relinquishing a centralised hold on foreign affairs in favour of regional development. Secondly, the need to establish key regional bodies such as APEC in a complete and thorough manner has overshadowed the need to improve relations between Russia and the Asia-Pacific. What has arguably enabled these regional bodies to succeed has been a focus on identifying shared characteristics among its member states, culminating in an “ideological community”³. Extending an olive branch to Russia has become a lesser priority as this would threaten the culture-oriented framework on which these organisations are based. As such, it appears that in both cases limited engagement between Russia and the Asia-Pacific has been

¹ Efremenko, Dmitry. 'New Russian Government's Foreign Policy Towards East Asia And The Pacific'. *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 26.2 (2015): 77-102. Print.

² Vladimir Putin, Voltaire Network. 'Vladimir Putin's Executive Order On Measures To Implement The Russian Federation Foreign Policy., By Vladimir Putin'. Voltaire Network. N.p., 2012. Web. 11 May 2015.

³ Narine, Shaun. *Explaining ASEAN*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002. Print.

justified based on the fact that it is regarded as equal parts inconvenient and unnecessary.

Although encouraging Russia to deviate from its current approach to foreign policy is no doubt a difficult and complex task, states in the Asia-Pacific region should work together to capitalise on shared global issues of a relatively neutral character in order to ease Russia into multilateral cooperation. Environmental issues stand out as an area of crucial importance that, with the combined support of regional bodies and the willingness of Moscow, could potentially enable Vladivostok and other cities in far eastern Russia to flourish into hubs for scientific research attuned to regional needs. The stereotyped image of the Kamchatka Peninsula as a desolate landscape bereft of natural wonderment can be quickly debunked with the knowledge that the rivers and adjoining seas of this region are populated with over 1.5 million tonnes of water biological resources⁴, giving rise to thriving fisheries and maritime services. The region has also succeeded in the establishment of a binational research station with the United States on the river Kol, which has acted as a vital point for gathering data on water quality in order to breed and protect Pacific salmon. Another area which could catalyse relations between Russia and the Asia-Pacific is volcanic research. The World Heritage Convention, under the auspices of UNESCO, has described the Kamchatka Peninsula as one of the most notable examples of volcanic regions in the world⁵, owing to its vast array of plant and bird species, of which a sizeable amount are endangered elsewhere. Recognising that these species have managed to thrive within these areas, this presents an opportunity for countries with a high concentration

⁴ Kamchatka.gov.ru. 'Government Of Kamchatskiy Kray'. N.p., 2015. Web. 13 May 2015.

⁵UNESCO. 'Volcanoes Of Kamchatka - UNESCO World Heritage Centre'. Whc.unesco.org. N.p., 2007. Web. 15 May 2015.

of volcanic activity, such as Japan and the Philippines, to actively engage with Russia in research and dialogue about protecting and preserving areas in close proximity to volcanoes. In a broader sense, transplanting the basic ideas behind these efforts into initiatives which focus on nuanced regional approaches to conservation and similar issues, could therefore prove an effective gateway to sound diplomatic cooperation between Russia and Asia-Pacific countries, while also giving the Kamchatka Peninsula the opportunity to improve its existing infrastructure and educational facilities.

The Kamchatka Peninsula can serve as the ideal springboard on which to improve multilateral relations between Russia and the Asia-Pacific region. For this to occur, Russia must reconcile its ongoing identity issues in order to reevaluate its political and cultural ties to Asia, while it is the responsibility of Asia-Pacific states to take small but decisive steps in order to foster Russia's participation in existing frameworks. It is by implementing these measures in tandem that this part of Russia will hopefully be able to depart from its reputation and develop into an invaluable location for scientific and educational advancement.
