

By Invitation

Moscow holds the key to better Asean ties

Russia can leverage its strengths in the arts and culture but there is more it can do to strengthen links in trade and investment



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The Russian Federation succeeded the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. The heart of the Russian Federation is Russia. The mediaeval state of "Rus" rose in the ninth century. It adopted orthodox Christianity as its religion in the 10th century. In the 13th century, Rus was overrun by the Mongols and the Golden Horde.

Subsequently, the Grand Duchy of Moscow gradually expanded its territory by conquest, annexation and exploration. By the 18th century, the Russian Empire had become the third largest empire in history, stretching from Poland, in the West, to Alaska, in the East.

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Russia became the dominant component of USSR. The USSR existed from 1922 to 1991.

In its heyday, it was a superpower, the equal of the United States of America in both military and economic power. During the Cold War, Asean and the USSR had polite but low-level relations. This changed in 1996, when Russia was admitted as a full dialogue partner of Asean.

AGREAT POWER

Even without its empire, Asean recognises Russia as a great power and has given it a seat at all the top tables, including the East Asia Summit.

Geographically, Russia is the biggest country in the world occupying 11 time zones and one-eighth of the land surface of the earth. By population, at 144 million, it is the ninth largest country in the world. Its economy is the 12th largest in the world last year as ranked by the International Monetary Fund.

Russia has the world's largest resources of minerals and energy, and is one of the world's largest producers of oil and gas.

It is a nuclear weapon state with the world's largest stockpile of nuclear weapons and is a

permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It has a high-culture civilisation and a talented population. It has world-class scientists, technologists, engineers, mathematicians, athletes, writers, artists, dancers and musicians. It is not an accident that the concert master of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra is a Russian, as was his predecessor.

HISTORY OF TIES

In 1996, Russia became a full dialogue partner of Asean. In 2004, Russia acceded to the Asean Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In the same year, the two sides adopted a Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism.

The first Asean-Russia Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005. The leaders adopted a joint declaration and adopted a plan of action to achieve the goals set out in

the joint declaration by 2015. They also adopted an agreement to cooperate in economic development.

The second Asean-Russia Summit was held in Hanoi in 2010. The third Asean-Russia Summit was held in Sochi in 2016. In August last year, Russia appointed its first dedicated ambassador to Asean. Russia has established embassies in all the 10 Asean countries.

ECONOMIC LINKS

Economically, the relationship between Asean and Russia is sub-optimal. Last year, the two-way trade was about US\$18 billion (\$24.5 billion). Russia's total investment in Asean amounted to US\$800 million.

In comparison, South Korea is the world's 11th largest economy, but last year, the two-way trade between Asean and South Korea amounted to US\$118 billion.

Tourism is a major sector of all

the Asean economies. The number of Russians visiting Asean has been increasing. In 2016, 1.83 million Russians visited Asean. Last year, the number exceeded two million. Last year, 80,000 Russians visited Singapore alone.

We don't have the statistics on the number of Asean citizens visiting Russia. I am sure the number for this year would be substantial because of the Fifa World Cup. Incidentally, Russia had done a superb job as the host country and the Russian people have earned much goodwill for their country.

OTHER AREAS OF COOPERATION

Apart from trade, investment and tourism, the two sides also cooperate in many other areas. Let me give some examples.

First, in combating international terrorism. Russia has organised annually a number of workshops to enhance Asean's capacity to

counter terrorism.

Second, the two sides have agreed to deepen their cooperation in new areas such as e-commerce and the digital economy.

Third, Asean and Russia are examining the feasibility of concluding a free trade agreement between Asean and the five member Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The five members of EAEU are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The EAEU has already signed an FTA with Vietnam and is negotiating one with Singapore.

Fourth, Asean and Russia are cooperating in the field of energy. This is an area in which Russia has both resources and expertise.

Asean and Russia have adopted a work plan that aims to enhance energy security and sustainability for the two sides through implementing projects and initiatives in (a) oil and gas; (b) electricity; (c) civilian nuclear energy; and (d) renewable energy.

Fifth, Asean has a lot to learn from Russia in the field of culture. The culture ministers of the two sides met in Sochi in 2016 and signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance cultural exchanges.

I hope that the great museum Hermitage, in St Petersburg, will send some of its collections to exhibit at Asean's museums. I also hope that Russia's museums will accept to host exhibitions from the Asean countries. Art, music, dance and theatre can connect the hearts and minds of the two peoples.

Cultural exchanges will also help Russia to grow its mindshare among Asean citizens.

SOCHI AND BEYOND

President Vladimir Putin hosted the 10 leaders of Asean at the third summit in Sochi in 2016. The Sochi Declaration was entitled "Moving Forward: A Strategic Partnership For Mutual Benefit". A year later, the foreign ministers of Asean and Russia adopted the report of the Asean-Russia Group of Eminent Persons.

The report recommended 18 concrete measures. Two years later, the senior officials of the two sides met in Moscow to review the state of implementation of the 18 measures. The Asean Secretariat reported progress on 15 of the measures. This is a good omen for the future. We need more action and less talk and fewer empty promises.

What is the future of the Asean-Russia relationship? The key to the future is in Moscow and not in Asean.

Geographically, the larger part of Russia's territory is in Asia. However, the larger part of Russia's population is in Europe.

Historically, the Russians have always looked to the West, to Europe and America. More recently, Russia has been paying more attention to the East.

We hope that this trend will be sustained. If Moscow can give equal attention to the East and the West, then the Asean-Russian relationship will have a bright future.

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