

By Invitation

Doors are open for Russia to play major role in Asia

But will Moscow seize opportunity presented by changing power dynamics in the region?



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For the Straits Times

In travelling to Singapore to elevate the Russian engagement with Asia, President Vladimir Putin was walking through an open door. Unlike Europe, where the resentment against Russia has been resurgent, and America, where Moscow is trapped in the civil war between the Republicans and Democrats, Asia is more than eager to deepen ties with Moscow.

The reasons are many and varied, but the timing has never been better in a long while. For Singapore and Asean, the hope is that Mr Putin's visit will begin to reduce the gap between the full potential and the reality of the relations between Russia and South-east Asia.

For one thing, there is the prospect of commercial cooperation. Trade between Russia and Asean has grown at a clip in the past couple of years to reach nearly \$49 billion last year. At the summit between Russia and Asean this week, the two sides signed a memorandum of understanding to facilitate trade and investment links between Asean and the Eurasian Economic Union that brings together Russia and the four former Soviet republics (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

Russia has demonstrated significant capabilities in the cyber and digital domains. While Moscow's international impact has been on the security side, there is much room for promoting commercial collaboration in digital connectivity and innovation.

Mr Putin's first state visit to

Singapore is also likely to reinforce Singapore's position as a gateway to Russian investments in Asia. Nearly 700 Russian companies operate in Singapore and 20 from the city-state are in Russia. Singapore's cumulative investments in Russia have reportedly topped \$600 million.

That brings us to the prospects for stronger political ties between Russia and South-east Asia. Can Russia really end its political neglect of Asia? Will the pull of Europe prevail over Mr Putin's desire to strengthen ties with Asia?

The Russian national symbol is a double-headed eagle that looks both east and west. Russia has long seen itself as a power in both Europe and Asia. Yet, there never was any symmetry between the two flanks. Russia's demographic weight was centred on its European wing and its history was shaped by conflict and collaboration with the West.

But if coping with the West has always preoccupied Russia, the allure of the East never disappeared.

Like its Western peers, Russia expanded into Asia in the 19th century. If the West Europeans took the maritime route, Czarist Russia moved east overland to Siberia and the Far East. It also raced south to the Caucasus and Central Asia to compete with the British Raj on the north-western frontiers of the sub-continent.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks saw Asia as an area of huge strategic opportunity. With the expected revolutions failing to materialise in Europe, the Bolsheviks hoped to set the East alight in alliance with the anti-Western national movements of Asia. But Europe drew Russia back into the war against Nazi Germany.

This pattern has repeated itself through the second half of the 20th century. After World War II, Russia gained communist allies in China,



North Korea and Vietnam. Moscow also made friends with non-communist countries such as India and Indonesia.

But soon, things went downhill. Russia found itself in conflict with China, which turned instead towards its arch foe, the United States. The Asian communist movements broke up. Worse still, Russia's misadventure in occupying Afghanistan in the 1980s and its support for Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia produced a fierce backlash among Asian nations.

PUTIN'S ASIA PIVOT

After the Cold War, post-Soviet Russia was welcome in Asia again. As it sought to rebuild its economy, the East Asian connection was quite valuable to Moscow. It joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) in 1998 and attended the first East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005 as a guest. It joined the EAS as a full member in 2011. Mr Putin hosted the Apec summit in 2012 and announced, with some fanfare, a pivot to Asia.

The proclamation of the pivot came amid the consolidation of the Russian economy and the modernisation of its armed forces. As Russia's initial hopes for closer ties with the West vanished by the end of the 1990s, Mr Putin changed tack and set about building an active and independent foreign policy.

The new self-assurance in Moscow is underpinned by a strong partnership with China and a restoration of its traditional

influence in the former Soviet republics. Moscow joined Beijing in fending off American efforts to promote the so-called "colour revolutions" in Central Asia.

Together, they created a non-Western regional framework – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – for Eurasia.

Despite the Western sanctions that followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Mr Putin was able to notch up successes on the foreign front, notably gaining a pivotal position in the Middle East and securing its bastions in Central Asia. Now, he has signalled that he is ready to pick up the threads in Asia.

If Mr Putin's decision to show up at the EAS underlined Moscow's renewed interest in Asia, what does he bring to the political table in the East?

THE THIRD POLE

One big idea is that Russia could be the "third pole" in Asia, at a time when the Sino-US confrontation has thrown the region into a tailspin. While that might be too ambitious a goal, Russia can certainly help expand the political options for many Asian actors. In Europe, Russia is seen as the problem. In Asia, it could be a part of the solution.

For the US, East Asia offers a potentially different framework for engaging Russia. Unlike in Europe, Russia is not a threat to America in Asia. America's ire is now directed against China. A small minority in the US establishment, including probably President Donald Trump,

might recognise that any strategy to balance China in Asia would need Russian neutrality, if not a measure of cooperation.

While US-Russia tensions in Europe limit the prospects for near-term collaboration between Washington and Moscow in Asia, the door might open in the not too distant future. China, in turn, would want to prevent such an outcome in Asia.

Until the recent escalation of tensions between the US and China, Moscow seemed destined to play second fiddle to Beijing in Asia. While Moscow does not want to create distance between itself and Beijing in the region, it has an opportunity to come out of China's shadow.

In the case of Japan, Russia could help ease Tokyo's dilemma as it copes with the unfolding confrontation between China and the US. For Japan, the US alliance remains the cornerstone of its international relations. That alliance has become even more important as China asserts itself. Yet, Japan is conscious of Mr Trump's lack of enthusiasm for US alliances in Europe and Asia and fears potential American retrenchment.

Normalising relations with Moscow, therefore, has become a major priority for Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Russia, on its part, has fewer reasons than China to see Japan as a threat. A productive relationship with Tokyo will also open up an additional source (beyond China) for the

development of Russian Far Eastern regions and improve its political options in North-east Asia.

What stands in the way is a legacy from World War II – a territorial dispute over islands north of Hokkaido that has held up the conclusion of a peace treaty. After his talks with Mr Putin in Singapore, Mr Abe affirmed his determination to press on with the treaty talks.

In the Korean peninsula too, Russia has interesting possibilities to reclaim a role. As the rigid post-war framework breaks down as a result of Mr Trump's outreach to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, South Korean President Moon Jae-in's quest to reconcile with the North, and Mr Kim's bid for some autonomy from China, Russia could turn out to be a valuable partner to both the Korean states.

For India too, a stronger Russian role in Asia is welcome. In recent years, the sharpening tensions between Moscow and Washington and India's growing strategic warmth towards the US have cast a shadow over India-Russia relations. The tightening embrace between Moscow and Beijing has also irked Delhi.

South-east Asia offers additional space for cooperation between India and Russia. In the past, Delhi and Moscow coordinated their support for Vietnam and Cambodia. India also offered support services for those buying Russian defence equipment.

WHAT MOSCOW NEEDS TO AVOID

Having Russia inside the Asian tent is certainly in the interests of Asean, which seeks to ensure a regional balance of power and to mitigate great power conflict. It is Russia that has found it hard to devote high-level attention to the region.

As Russia refocuses on South-east Asia, its longstanding partnership with Vietnam is a special asset. Russia has been selling arms to a number of South-east Asian countries, including Vietnam and Malaysia. Many more are interested. To be sure, there are complaints from some of the buyers about quality and maintenance issues; and there is also the danger of drawing US sanctions on major new weapons purchases from Moscow.

But, overall, the economic and political opportunities for Russia in Asia are real; so is the region's strategic interest in building stronger ties with Moscow.

Translating that objective convergence into tangible outcomes, however, will need much hard work on Moscow's part.

Looking ahead, one potential danger is Russia's temptation to let its problems with the US and the West, or its close ties with China, impinge on its engagement with South-east Asia.

The key to Russia's successful future in the region lies in pursuing an independent Asian policy and avoid being seen as a spoiler.

Equally important, Russia needs to temper its rough and ready diplomatic style that the world has seen in Europe and the Middle East. In other words, it must adapt to the "Asean way".

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