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Putin's Pivot: Why Russia is Looking East

By: [Fiona Hill](#) and [Bobo Lo](#)

In June of this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, put forth his intentions to take a page from the United States' book and pivot east. He announced ambitious plans to boost Russia's economic growth by looking to the Asia-Pacific region rather than to its traditional markets in Europe. He proposed massive investments in infrastructure, including upgrading the trans-Siberian railway to better link his country to the Pacific. And he praised the state oil company Rosneft for concluding a major export deal with China. The speech came less than a year after Putin hosted the annual meeting of the leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in Vladivostok, an event billed as Russia's official coming out party -- or coming back out party -- after decades of strategic and economic neglect of its own Far East.

The shift in economic focus might sound very much like the U.S. pivot to Asia, and Russia has indeed begun to reassert its military presence in the Asia-Pacific like the United States and other regional powers. What is different, however, is that Moscow has taken great pains to emphasize that its primary goal is to cooperate, not compete, with Beijing. Russia denies that there is even the slightest element of trying to contain China in its regional policy. Indeed, during a meeting with international journalists and analysts in the Russian Black Sea resort city of Sochi in September 2010, Putin accused "foreign experts" of "always trying to frighten us with China." He retorted, "We're not frightened. China does not worry us . . . China and Russia will cooperate on many questions." Putin pronounced himself delighted with the state of relations, and Beijing seems to have taken a similar line. Chinese President Xi Jinping chose to make his first official visit as president to Russia in March. And in July, Beijing and Moscow solidified their cooperation with joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan.

Russia's motivations are relatively transparent. Like the United States and many others, Russia subscribes to the fashionable notion that a global shift in power to the East is under way. Russia also shares the current understanding that the rise of China comes at the expense of the United States and the West. But unlike those of other European countries, Russia's pivot is driven as much by its anxiety about the vulnerability of its sparsely populated eastern flank as by its desire to project influence. Russia simultaneously seeks to protect its landmass, boost its presence in the Pacific, bridge the yawning gap between its own policies toward Asia and Europe, and

figure out a way to work with China and other regional players.

Unfortunately for Putin, Moscow has limited capacity to make its pivot dreams a reality. Hosting the APEC summit was more an Olympic moment than a paradigm shift. In spite of the recent flurry of activity, Asia remains a sideshow in Russian foreign and security policy. For all its posturing about turning Russia into a hub of intra-Asian trade and cooperation, Moscow's strategic focus is still stuck on the West -- its population is mostly in the West, its economic ties are mostly to the West, and its official military doctrine remains fixated on the United States and NATO. That will remain true for the foreseeable future. Old patterns are hard to break, and even the most promising of the new efforts are proving difficult to sustain.

Take energy, for example: Over the past two decades, Russia has developed considerable oil and gas resources on Sakhalin Island to respond to the growing energy demands of its neighbors in Northeast Asia. It has completed the construction of a major oil export pipeline across Siberia to the Pacific coast that also links to China. Most recently, it agreed to export 365 million tons of oil to China over the next 25 years. But Russia's 20 million tons in 2011 accounted for only around six percent of Chinese oil imports, well behind Saudi Arabia and Angola. Even if the latest deal goes through, it is difficult to see how Russia's market share will grow significantly given the general increase in Chinese oil exports. Gas exports to China have proved even more difficult for Russia to pull off. Between 2004 and June 2013, the two countries concluded no less than six agreements for gas trade but have yet to reach a deal on actual deliveries.

Overall, Russia's economic footprint in the Asia-Pacific is extremely modest. It accounts for only one percent of total regional trade and just over two percent of China's external trade. Putin might speak of boosting those figures but the increasingly neo-colonial character of Moscow's trade relationship with Beijing is a sore point. Most of Russia's trade with China comprises natural resource exports in exchange for Chinese manufacturing and consumer imports. Beijing has shown little interest in Russian industrial products except for arms, and even that demand has stalled in recent years. (There have been no major arms contracts since 2006, although this may be about to change if China goes through with the purchase of 24 SU-35s and four Lada-class submarines.) China is frustrated, too: Moscow has consistently refused to allow Chinese companies to acquire substantial equity in Russian energy projects. In fact, the Kremlin often appears to regard Beijing as the investor of last resort — the “partner” it turns to only when all other possibilities have been exhausted.

Region-wide, moreover, Russia has no discernible influence on security decision-making. That remains largely the purview of China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Notwithstanding the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Russia in April 2013 — the first by a Japanese prime minister in a decade -- relations with Japan remain strained. During a recent massive Russian military exercise in the Russian Far East, Japan and the United States were the putative invading enemy forces. Moscow and Tokyo have still not signed a formal peace treaty under World War II, and their territorial dispute over the Southern Kuriles (known as the Northern Territories in Japan) seems as intractable as ever.

On the Korean peninsula, Russia is the least influential player in the so-called six-party talks in North Korea. Indeed, its contribution has been described in the past as “more nuisance than value” by regional diplomats. Russia is almost entirely peripheral to attempts to resolve the impasse between North and South. Moscow was never able to convert North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's well-documented fondness for lengthy Russian train trips into influence over North Korean policy; and Kim Jong Un does not seem to have inherited his father's predilection for Russian landscapes.

In short, Russia's pivot is not so much policy as talk. The country has been slow to diversify relations in Asia, and Asian elites — including those in China — regard Russia as neither Asian nor a credible player in the region. They believe Russia is still rooted in Europe, or at best, partly in Central Asia, and that it has little to contribute in the East beyond natural resources and weapons. Compounding the problem, Putin has taken a particularly top-heavy approach to foreign policy, in which he and his highest officials deal personally with leaders of other countries. That kind of operation is difficult to pull off in Asia, since Putin and his inner circle have few close contacts and little expertise there. Unlike the United States, Russia does not have the presence, the capabilities, or even the degree of interest to make its pivot a strategic and economic reality.

In recent years, Russia's bilateral relationship with China has brought significant dividends. The Cold War tensions and armed conflicts along the Sino-Soviet border are in the past, and the prospect of an overly powerful China is still somewhat speculative. Further, a generally well-disposed China has contributed to the security of the Russian Far East, and thus the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. China has been supportive of Russia in the United Nations Security Council. And the two countries' association has allowed Moscow to bask in Beijing's reflected glory. Their ties have also boosted the international legitimacy of the Putin regime, as Moscow promotes the (old) idea of Russia serving as the geopolitical balancer or civilizational bridge between East and West. As one of Russia's leading commentators, Vyacheslav Nikonov, pronounced when Moscow first tested out the idea of a Pacific pivot in September 2010: Given Russia's historical eastward expansion, its unique "Eurasian" geography and fusion of cultures, and the inescapable demographic and economic rise of the Asia-Pacific, the only future for Russia is as a "Euro-Pacific" power.

And that prospective future would make Putin happy. His goal for the time being is to stake an early claim for Russia in a new world order, where the concert of great powers is presumed to be more Asian and less European. But over the long term, the economic and political gap between a dynamic China and a non-modernizing Russia will be too wide for Moscow to bridge in the Asia-Pacific. New problems such as the development of Arctic resources and shipping lanes could add more tension to bilateral relations. Ultimately, Russia has no more liking for a hegemonic China than it has for a unilateralist United States, or for any other alignment that could marginalize it -- including the "new pattern of great power relations" Xi spoke of when he visited U.S. President Barack Obama in June. Looking beyond Russia's current pivotal moment, it is more likely than not to find itself disillusioned once more, caught between an East to which it does not belong and a West in which it does not easily fit.



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Russia's economy is indeed surviving, and Putin's popularity remains high. Neither of these conditions, however, is sustainable for the long term unless Russia reconciles with its major trading partners. They may never like him, but they do need Russia. And at some point, Putin will be forced to care. --Editors: Marc Champion, Michael Newman. To contact the senior editor responsible for Bloomberg View's editorials: David Shipley at davidshipley@bloomberg.net . The reason why we should see this difference clearly is that Russia's new Asia policy is also more of a rebalance than a pivot. It is difficult to argue that worsened relations with Europe sped up Russia's eastward push. Political differences spilled over to trade and investment. Among the impressive manifestations of Russia's successes in Asia are mutual attendance by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping of last year's World War II Victory parades in Moscow and Beijing, as well as a declaration on the convergence of Russia and China's geo-economic super-initiatives - the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. Putin's Pivot to Asia. Russia is anxious about China too, and this could offer the U.S. an opportunity. By Michael Auslin. Sept. 10, 2012 12:34 pm ET. Vladimir Putin put up a brave face during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit held last week in Vladivostok. Writing in these pages last week, the Russian President outlined an Asia-Pacific "growth agenda" but really ended up betraying his fears that Moscow was losing control of its resource-rich Pacific territory. These fears may change Russia's role in Asia and could come to Washington's advantage. Mr. Putin s