
RUSSIA'S PIVOT TO ASIA

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RUSSIA'S twin-headed eagle faces east towards Asia as well as west towards Europe. This far-sighted beast is near-as-dammit the heraldic coat-of-arms of Vladimir Putin, who revived the old imperial symbol. So why does the president of a country with half its vast lands lying east of Singapore need to make so much of his pivot to Asia, declared two years ago? That many readers familiar with the much-maligned Asia pivot of Barack Obama will not have heard of Mr Putins hints at a gap between rhetoric and substance. And yet the prevailing view among pundits is that Russia is indeed back in Asia.

Once the Soviet Union and China were a hair-trigger away from war along their long border. Today many see a new strategic convergence or even an alliance in the making between Russia and China, the worlds second- and third-biggest military powers. The two states media paint Mr Putin and Xi Jinping, Chinas president, as strongmen buddies. In 2014 they signed a huge deal to bring Russian gas to China. Recently, Russian sales to China of advanced weapons resumed after being halted a decade ago because of technology cloning.

In September, China and Russia conducted joint naval exercises in the South China Sea, where China has grandiose territorial claims. Russia is officially agnostic about those, but the exercises gave support to Chinas position. In short, the pairs strategic partnership is receiving regular upgrades. This year Mr Putin described the love-in as all-embracing.

Belatedly, Russia has realised that there is more to Asia policy than China. It wants influence elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region. Ties with India have strengthened through civilian nuclear co-operation and weapons sales. Russian ships have returned to Cam Ranh Bay, a port in Vietnam once used by the Soviets.

A first for Russia, Mr Putin hosted a lavish summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), a regional talkfest, in Vladivostok in 2012. Last year Russia launched its own annual powwow in the same Pacific port, the Eastern Economic Forum. In December comes a striking diplomatic gambit □ visit to Japan at the invitation of the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, to discuss not just economic co-operation but also a resolution to a territorial impasse over the four southernmost Kurile islands, which Japan calls its Northern Territories. Stalin grabbed the islands in the closing days of the second world war; seven decades on, the impasse precludes the signing of a peace treaty and has impeded the flow of Japanese money and expertise to the neglected Russian Far East. Mr Abe, though a nationalist, is not in the macho mould of the often bare-torsoed Mr Putin. Nevertheless, he hopes to get the islands back in a naked man-to-man session with the

Russian president in a hot spring in his home prefecture.

Mr Putin may relish the experience. He knows that Japan wants to pull Russia away from China, which Japan views as a grave threat. And Mr Abe has personal reasons to secure a coup over the Northern Territories: foreign policy is an inherited duty among Japans hereditary politicians, and the signing of a peace treaty was the fond wish of his late father, Shintaro Abe, a long-serving foreign minister. So Mr Putin will pocket Mr Abes financial inducements but make a derisory offer over the islands—perhaps the return of the two smallest, barely inhabited ones.

Most of all, Mr Putin will chuckle at appearing to peel away Americas chief Asian ally from the united front of displeasure that Mr Obama assembled after Mr Putins annexation of Crimea and his invasion of eastern Ukraine. Indeed, look closely at the Russian pivot, and it has little to do with engagement in Asia for its own ends. Russias trade policy in the region boils down to selling weapons to anyone who will buy them (including most of the claimants in the South China Sea dispute, thereby fuelling an arms race). Russias trade with Asia accounts for a piddling 1% of the regions total, and Asias economic miracle has scarcely touched the 6.4m Russians in the dilapidated cities of Russias Far East. Many seethe that sprucing up Vladivostok for the APEC summit cost \$20bn, more than the London Olympics and more than Russia will spend developing the region in the years to 2025.

Asia is almost incidental to the strategic imperative of the pivot, which is to bolster Russias standing in its all-consuming confrontation with America and the West. The gas deal with China occurred only after Western sanctions limited Russian options in Europe. Russia resents the terms on which it was struck, and suspects that China will seek to renegotiate if gas prices stay low.

Bobo Lo, a Russia specialist, describes a virtual reality of propaganda which insists that Russia and China, both state-directed economies with concerns about American power, look at the world identically. But mutual distrust runs deep. Russia has been conditioned by its history of expansion into Asia to look down on China as the lesser power, so its current status as a source of commodities for China feels humiliating. Elsewhere, Russia wants to undermine the American-led world order of which it has been the biggest loser. By contrast, says Mr Lo, China has been the chief beneficiary of that order, having adopted wrenching economic reforms to capitalise on it. It knows that its most critical relationship is not with Russia but with America.

Enraptured

What, then, if Russias relations with America were to change? They have certainly been strained, over Crimea, Ukraine and Mr Putins part in the destruction of Syria. But just suppose that Mr Putin and Donald Trump, Americas president-elect, pursue the rapprochement that both men say they want. Suppose America cuts Mr Putin slack in Europe, the region of his real aspirations, and even the Middle East. What would happen to his Asian pivot? Pacific Russians have a sardonic take on Moscows imperial eagle. Its vision may take in both West and East, but *Stoit zadom k Azii* [It stands with its back to Asia].

Russia is reportedly preparing to upgrade its Soviet-era T-80 battle tanks in order to bring them back into service.

Up to 3,000 of the tanks, which entered service in 1976, will be updated to bring their combat power closer to the current T-90 model.

"At present, the preparative works to start the modernisation of the first T-80BV MBTs are at a final stage," a defence industry source told military magazine Jane's Defence Weekly.

The "overhaul and modernisation" of the tanks "will be launched next year" the source added. They said the number of tanks to be upgraded will be determined by the military.

Kaynak/Source: