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RESEARCH ARTICLE



**“Pivot” Toward Asia:  
The Strategic Direction of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept  
in a Changing Balance of Powers**

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**Abstract**

The article examines some reasons of the “Russia’s pivot” toward Asia at the turn of the XX-XXI centuries. The Asian policy of the Russia was starting to change at the second half of the 1990s. Russia conducted its policy at the East Asia in a view of the changed balance of national interests, regardless of the ideological considerations and attached a special importance to the economic cooperation. Developing the external political concept and determining the priority areas for development, Russia has had to reckon with the objective processes, occurring in the world. Russia, as the “Eurasian” power, building relations with the Asia-Pacific countries, was to have a vital task - to raise the political and economic cooperation with the Asia-Pacific region to the level, achieved by Russia in Europe. Gradually, the East Asia has become the priority strategic direction of the Russia positioning in the world. For a long time it was thought that using its geostrategic position, Russia could be an important factor in the global political and economic system, linking Europe and Asia-Pacific markets. Russia Federation supported the East Asia countries in ensuring regional security and stability.

Analysis of the Asia-Pacific regional political situation shows that there are significant changes here and these changes are largely connected with the significant changes in the global balance of powers. In the course of the Ukrainian events (spring 2014) and entering the West economic sanctions against Russia in connection with the accession of the Crimea, Russian “pivot” toward Asia, in particular the East Asia, looks entirely justified and reasonable.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy concept; balance of powers; Russia Federation; East Asia.

**Introduction**

At the present stage, Russia clearly demonstrates the strategic independence of its foreign policy. Values diversities, incompatibility of the political cultures and fundamentally different approaches to assessment of the world events by Russia and the West, largely, have identified this independence. It is vital for Russia to definite the external economic and politic priorities in connection with the Ukrainian crisis (2014) and changing the world balance of powers.

At the turn of the centuries (XX-XXI), in conditions of the multipolar world existing, Russia was supposed to pursue an active policy at both the European and Asian destinations [See: 1]. In practice, the Asian direction of the Russian foreign policy significantly lagged behind the needs and strategic interests of the Russia [2. P. 182]. In many ways, this was due to the passivity of the Russian presence in the region at the beginning of the 1990s because of large-scale size reduction

of the Russian armed forces at the Far East. This greatly reduced the ability of Russia to act as a deterrent force against the United States, defending its leadership, and China. At the same time, there were not any East Asia states fears about Russia's military or force ambitions in the region and a threat to regional peace and stability with its hand. Such approach to Russia meant a profound transformation of the East Asia states attitude [See: 3].

In the course of the displacing the world capacity development to the East, particularly to the Asia-Pacific region, it was necessary to ensure own Asian external policy of Russia [See: 4]. In November 2011 the administration of Barack Obama “announced a rebalancing of its strategic focus away from the wars of the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific” [5]. Russia should do the same. Modern pivot towards Asia is an opportunity of turning Russia into a real force factor with which the world must be considered.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Materials**

The major sources for this article are the Foreign policy concepts of the Russian Federation (2000, 2013) and Asia-Pacific regional summit declarations.

Expert opinions, concerning these issues, were collected on open resources, namely on special websites and journal publications.

### **Methods**

The author of the article uses comparative-historical and problem-chronological methods.

## **Discussion**

The Asian policy of the Russia was starting to change at the second half of the 1990s. Russia conducted its policy at the Asia-Pacific region in a view of the changed balance of national interests, regardless of ideological considerations and attached special importance to the economic cooperation. Developing the external political concept and determining the priority areas for development, Russia has had to reckon with the objective processes, occurring in the world.

The second half of the twentieth century was a new step in the increasingly growing interconnectedness, politically and economically. The world became global. Nevertheless, the end of the twentieth century marked by an increasing competition between the three major economic centers- the United States, Japan and the European Union, especially after the European Economic Community adopted the decision on the establishment of the single market in 1992. This had become a serious challenge to the United States and Japan. The United States had begun to strengthen the regional free trade zone- the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), including the United States, Canada and Mexico. At the same time, the United States took an active role in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and considerably stepped up economic contacts with the Latin American countries. Japan, in its effort to reduce the United States and the EU pressure had developed and launched various projects of the economic integration with the Asia-Pacific countries such as the "Asia-Pacific Economic arc", which would include Japan, Russia, China and the South Korea. There were such projects for the South-East Asian states- the "Pan Asian formula of the coexistence" or currency unity - “Jena’s block”, as a part of the worldwide trend of the currency "regionalism" at the beginning of 1990s. Japan was to become the core of these associations.

The decision of the GATT Uruguay Round and especially the activities of the World Trade Organization (WTO) had significantly raised the level of the international economic relations, established the modern rules of the parties engagement in the new environment. Building links at the sub-regional, regional and global levels, all States should be guided by the principle of open, non-discriminatory policy, based on the rules of the WTO system. The Governments had taken into account the mutual influence of global and regional agreements, both within the framework of the established rights and the obligations with the WTO partners and partners on the regional groups. The Article XXIV of the GATT contained the principle that the regional and sub-regional integration groups and participating countries should be guided in case of the customs unions and free trade areas formations - the European Union, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of the South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Thus, in fact, was the principle of the "open regionalism”.

However, there were not only benefits, but also the negative impact of the global processes, including economic and financial crises. Main "challenges" of the globalization, rarely considered with national specificity of the countries and peoples were:

- various performances of the "alter-globalists" and "anti-globalists";
- emergence of theocratic regimes (such as in Iran), as political governance forms of traditional, conservative societies, trying to resist the massive effects on them of the globalized world;
- regional integration, including the Asia-Pacific regional integration process.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, the integration processes were very important for the Asia-Pacific region. Asia-Pacific regional integration was connected with a process of total globalization and did not contradict the objective development. The Asia-Pacific integration was the phenomenon, able to defend something that sets it apart from the globalization - the desire to collectively develop a common policy and a common political solution, acceptable to all, taking into account the national interests of the parties involved.

It must be borne in mind that Asia was becoming a centre of the world economic and industrial growth. The creation of new technologies occurred, mainly, in the East Asia. At the beginning of 1990s, the growth of Asian NICs GDP rates (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong) was on average 7.7%, and the economy growth rate of the Association of South-East Asian Nations -Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand - 6.6%. China's economic growth in these years was 7% [6. P. 136].

The economic growth of these countries, as the region in whole, continued to remain relatively high. In many ways, this was due to the fact that Russia was, primarily, an exporter of raw materials. However, rising demand for raw materials occurred where there was a growth of the industrial mass production. That was, in the East Asia. The growing interest of Asian and European countries to the natural resource potential of Russia, especially to the Russian east regions energy resources, had grown steadily since the 1990s. It has become increasingly clear that in spite of the fact that the European Union for a long time would be the largest economic partner of Russia, its role would gradually decline. In some period, Germany has been the largest trading partner of Russia, but than China was far ahead [7].

In general, the analysis of the development at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries showed, that Russia had failed to adequately respond to incentives, outgoing from the Asia-Pacific Region. The weakening of Federal Government attention to the Asian vector of economic and political interactions has contributed to the depression of the eastern regions of Russia and the outflow of the population in European part.

Russia, as the "Eurasian" power, building relations with the Asia-Pacific region countries, was to have a vital task - to raise the political and economic cooperation with the Asia-Pacific region to the level, achieved by Russia in Europe. If at the beginning of 1990s Russian national interests more aligned with the interests of the United States and Europe, by the end of the 1990s the unity of interests with India, China and South-East Asia countries and the importance of economic and political relations with Asia became more evident [8. P. 69]. Such changing of the power structure goals was connected with the changing of Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers and other factors.

For a long time it was thought that using its geostrategic position, Russia could be an important factor in the global economic and political system, linking Europe and Asia-Pacific markets. Russia was to be a "bridge" between European and Asian countries, not joining together with either the first or the second. Nevertheless, the practice showed that the idea of a "bridge" between East and West proved to be futile. Russia remained "an independent unit"[9. P. 9].

Gradually, the Asia-Pacific region has become the priority strategic direction of Russia's promotion on the world market. By using the powerful potential of the East Asia states, the cooperation with the region countries could give the impetus to the development of the Siberia and the Far East productive forces, allowing the implementation of the investment projects, vital for these regions. The east regions of Russia Federation (Siberia and Far East) played a special role as to the integration possibilities into the regional economic system. It should be taken into account the continuing misbalance between a reach natural recourses and a small population. This misbalance was a vary important obstacle for the foundation of Siberian, especially East Siberian, and Far Eastern markets and own accumulations, which were necessary for modern economy

infrastructure and using of natural resources more perfectly for region's social and economy development. Some Siberian regions were the regions with high level of the social-economy development, but the Far Eastern region was the region with the least well-being conditions. Because of limit Russia federal budget the Siberian growth of industrial production based on own investments, but the external factor was the main development resource for the Far East and, so, the opportunity of integration into the Asia-Pacific region. It should be noted that the real economic cooperation between Russia and the countries of the Asia-Pacific region was not only and not so much at the highest political level, but at the level of the regions with their legislation and certain features of the investment climate [8. P. 69].

The most of these issues, including the strengthening of Russia actions and enhancing its role in the East Asia for the growth of Siberia and the Far East, as well as the foundations of the strategic concept of the Russian Federation at the Asia-Pacific region in the 21 century, were considered at meetings of the Baikal Economic Forum, held in September 2000 and 2002 in Irkutsk and meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and economy of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in October 2003 in Moscow [10, 11, 12].

Taking into account the specificity of the Russian Federation regions, located at the Asian part of Russia, special hopes were pinned on the APEC [13]. As a member of the APEC Russia had a real opportunity to integrate not only into the Asia-Pacific regional economy, but also into the global system of economic relations. At the various meetings levels, including the Ministerial, in the course of negotiations with the WTO, APEC has provided full support to Russia about the Russia's inclusion into the World Trade Organization [14, 15].

For a long time the Asia-Pacific region was the only world region with the domination of the economic regional ties and security issues have been limited to the strengthening of a peace, stability as well as prosperity. Therefore, Japan and the South-East Asia countries were concerned about the security strategies, in which, an economic component began to play a special role. Moreover, if the United States showed more interest in the military-political cooperation, security issues, the "economic diplomacy" mechanism was very imported for China. Faced with the "policy of containment" on the part of the United States and the continued vigilance of the region countries to its economic and military might, China leadership had to operate the "soft influence" principles in the Asia-Pacific region, including the mechanism of "economic diplomacy", investment policy and socio-cultural aspects of the cooperation.

Russia Federation supported the East Asia countries in ensuring regional security and stability [See: 16, 17, 18]. This concerned above all the efforts of the South-East Asia countries, because for several decades the East Asia security strategy was associated with the ASEAN security strategy. At the turn of the centuries, the structure of the East Asia balance of powers could be expressed in the form of such system as "China - Japan - United States" with the center of the Association of the South-East Asia Nations. The appearance of this system marked on the powers balance of the entire regional security concept. Then Russia and India gradually joined this system. In November 2004, the Russia acceded to the fundamental for the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South-East Asia (1976). Under the Treaty, participating countries pledged not to use force in the region. This has contributed to the deepening of ASEAN-Russia dialogue and Russia's participating in regional integration groups, the core of which the Association was.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the threat of nuclear proliferation became especially acutely in the whole of the East Asia, in both the South and the North. Russian leadership supported the efforts of the ASEAN countries to establish the South-East Asia nuclear weapon free zone, as real contribution to strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime and enhancing regional and global security. The implementation of this project became a new stage in the foreign policy thinking of the East Asia countries. However, the States parties failed to significantly advance as to the process of negotiations with the nuclear-weapon countries, including Russia, to sign the special Protocol of the Treaty on the South-East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone. According to the Protocol, the nuclear-weapon States undertook a number of commitments: not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons to member countries of the Treaty on the South-East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone; should declare their intention to contribute to the achievement of general and complete disarmament of the nuclear weapons. The reluctance of the Russia and other nuclear-weapon States to sign the Protocol to the Treaty on the South-East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone was a major limiting factor, reduces the effectiveness of a Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone,

and the entire non-proliferation regime of the nuclear weapons in the region. One of the most logical solutions to this problem was the signing of this Protocol individually by each country of the "nuclear five" with reservations, actual, desired and arranged by all parties concerned.

At the same time, Russia supported the initiative of the South-East Asia countries to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, 1993) and commended the countries efforts to establish the East Asian community (2005). In this respect, the South-East Asia countries had special strategy. They tried to attract the powers outside the South-East Asia (including "great powers") to ASEAN platform in the multilateral regional arrangements.

The East Asian community originally joined the ASEAN countries, South Korea, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and India and was created with a view to strengthening regional peace, stability and economic prosperity [19]. For the first time the idea of the East Asian community was proposed by the Prime Minister of the Malaysia Mahathir Mohamad in the form of creating the "East Asian economic group" (1990) to protect the rapidly developing economies of the South-East Asia states from the influence of the United States in the region and defend the independence of the ASEAN countries. Then Malaysia tried to pull out of the project the Australia and New Zealand. Return to this idea was not by chance because of rapid development of the Asian regional economies (especially the economies of China, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore), as well as the growth of international trade and regional financial cooperation. All this called for closer links between countries in the region and greater integration in the context of the global economic crisis of 2008 [20. P. 37].

At the first Summit of the East Asian community (December 14, 2005, Kuala Lumpur) Russia attended as an observer. Most of the countries, including Malaysia, welcomed the accession of Russia to the East Asian community, but Australia declared that Russia's admission to the East Asian community was a threat to the emerging regional security architecture. Indonesia supported the Australia. It was connected with the fact that Russia was the competitor of the Australia and Indonesia as to supplying of raw materials and energy resources to the Asia-Pacific region, and, above all, the liquefied gas. Besides that, the Australian opposition to the Russia including was caused by the fact that at that time the United States did not the member of this organization. At the second Summit of the Community (January 15, 2007, Cebu), in spite of the fact that the issues of energy security in Asia and in the world were discussed, Russia did not participate, because the East Asian community members-states decided to "stick to the existing format and not to hurry up with the enlargement of the organization" [21]. Russia and the United States officially became full members of the East Asian Community on February 1, 2011 and participated in the Summit of the East Asian community, which was at Bali in November 2011.

During the Summit, countries have attempted to discuss one of the acute problems of the Asia-Pacific region - the territorial dispute between China and the ASEAN member states - Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as Taiwan, in the South China Sea. The greatest fear was connected with declared China's sovereignty over the entire area of the South China Sea. On the eve of the Summit, China's Premier Wen Jiabao said that "Beijing is willing to discuss the establishment of a special road map to solve territorial conflicts". However, it was obviously that, the United States and Japan participation in this issue - China's competitors in the struggle for the regional political leadership- in addition to directly involved participants, was unlikely to cause a positive attitude on the part of the China to discuss the problem in a format of East Asian Community. During the talks, Wen Jiabao said that China does not approve of the involvement of other States in the negotiations around the South China Sea. "The dispute concerns only the countries that are located in this region," said Wen Jiabao [22].

In this respect, Russia took a more cautious approach than the United States, knowing well how sensitive this issue for China and the countries of the South-East Asia were, like the problem of the China-Japan territorial disputes in the East China Sea. On many issues, the position of the United States has long been not a well for Beijing. Since the mid-1990s, the United States had focused in the East Asia on the "constructive engagement" of China [23]. It was connected with the fact that the strengthening of China as a regional centre against the background of the East Asian regionalism development was regarded by the American administrations as the main threat to establish a global hegemony of the United States. The United States were very concerned that China could reduce the United States regional influence, and replace the USA as a regional leader. So the United States policy in the East Asia was determined by the competition with China.

In addition, United States feared China's policy of "soft influence" in the region, including the mechanism of "economic diplomacy" and active investment policy and strengthening its position at the national and regional levels. The United States position concerning the China's territorial disputes with its neighbors in the South China and East China seas remained one of the sharpest problems. From the Beijing point of view, the Barack Obama administration has openly demonstrated its support to Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam and other rivals of China in these disputes. Beijing's relations with the Washington became much more strained and a closer strategic alliance between Russia and China - more real.

Much of this was due to the fact that announcing in November 2011 the "rebalancing" its policies from wars in the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, the United States assumed, first of all, "delaying the belt" around China. This new strategic "rebalancing", or "pivot", included an integrated mix of diplomatic, economic, budgetary and security-related initiatives [5]. The confrontation at the Korean peninsula in the spring of 2013 showed that North Korea's threats of nuclear attack on the United States and the Republic of Korea were the pretext for the concentration of the American military power and presence of the intelligence assets not so far from the Northeast China and the Russian Far East. Therefore, the purpose of such "Asian belt" was not only to counter the North Korean threat and maintain the American bases, but also to surround the main geo-strategic enemy of the United States - China, which together with Russia was a member of the Central Asian alliance against the American hegemony- the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [24].

On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014 B. Obama ended a four-Asia countries (Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines) tour in Manila. This trip was intended as the latest affirmation of America's "pivot" to Asia. But it seems that "his hosts-in Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines-took rather more from the visiting American president than they offered up to him" [25]. All four Asian governments were looking for the United States military and diplomatic support, because they were afraid of raising China. The threat from North Korea could be added to this in the case of South Korea and Japan. Japan and the Philippines were in direct confrontation with China as to the disputed islands and shoals, respectively, the East China Sea and the South China Sea and felt most threatened by China.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of the international political situation at the Asia-Pacific region shows that there are significant changes here and these changes are largely connected with significant changes in the global balance of powers. In the course of the Ukrainian events (spring 2014) and entering the West economic sanctions against Russia in connection with the accession of the Crimea, Russian "pivot" toward Asia, in particular in East Asia, looks entirely justified and reasonable.

For the administration of the United States seemed insufficient to "surround" and "tighten the belt" around China, it began a sharp turn towards Europe for the "tightening the belt" around Russia and the elimination of a buffer between Russia and network of NATO bases on the territories, that previously were the part of the Soviet Union. All this inadvertently leads to strategic rapprochement between Russia and China and developing the most effective mechanisms for the multilateral system of international security, not only in the Asia-Pacific region, but throughout the world, incorporating the principles, which would suitable for all parties, but not just American or European. Will there be a movement to the new cold war with Russia, announced by the White House in April 2014(almost a quarter of a century after the collapse of the Soviet Union) and will the entire world be sunk in this new cold war and the inevitably more powerful arms race depends on the alliance between Russia and China.

Nevertheless, in this strategic alliance it is necessary for Russia to be very cautious and come, primarily, from its own national interests. Russia's orientation to the Chinese market is very significant, but at the same time, developing the relations with China, Russia should not forget the other areas - the Republic of Korea, Japan (despite the deterrent power of these countries unions with the United States), India and the South-East Asia states.

The Chinese leadership clearly seeks to modify the existing international system in their strategic interests with helping of the developing countries and Russia. It traces in the course of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization activities and the BRIC meetings, devoting to the creation of common New Development Bank as a counterweight to the IMF, fully controlled by Washington.

As to China, it is necessary to be very careful. Of course, the Shanghai Agreement on the supply of the Russian gas to China (21 may, 2014) will allow Russia to gain a foothold in one of the most important and perspective markets of the world. This Agreement, certainly, is a geopolitical and economic success of Russia, but, at the same time, it is difficult to quantify the real economic benefits of this project for Russia.

The Chinese leadership does not consider Russia an equal partner. Despite the fact, that Beijing criticizes the West over the irony of what is happening in Russia and her apparent undervaluation, but, often, the China treats Russia the same way. Such irony can be seen in many China's media. As to the world wide policy the Chinese leadership understands that the United States play a key role and China itself has no real potential to reduce the influence of the United States, which is determined not only by a military presence, but also the state of the United States economy [26. P. 58-59]. However, Beijing puts China on the same level as the United States, and due to the economic rising, sees itself as the "number one" leader in the region. At such China's position, Moscow will never agree to the role of the "junior partner" of Beijing in East Asia. Despite the fact that Chinese leadership notes that Russia challenges the ideological hegemony of the West, when criticizing the desire of the West to impose its standards everywhere in the field of democracy, human rights and the free market, the Beijing officials, however, realize that the current rules of the modern global system established by the West. It is this system has enabled China to grow over the past two decades and become the second economic power in the world. In addition, China will continue to enjoy such favorable conditions, but Russia, for now, has not done it yet.

However, in circumstances, where "the language of ultimatums and sanctions is increasingly in the world", and "The unwanted regimes, countries, that adopt independent policies or stand in the way of someone's interests, are destabilized"[27], strategic partnerships with such states is explainable and justified.

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