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## What Can the United States Learn from Russia's Relations with ASEAN Countries?

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Neither the current US administration nor US academics recognize Russia as a major Asian power. The 2010 US National Security Strategy invokes Russia as a partner in Eurasia but says nothing about its role in Asia. Indeed, both US and Chinese experts consistently disregard Russia as a significant player in Asia. Russia's role in the on-again, off-again Six-Party Talks regarding North Korea is one example of this disdain. Although Russia faces many obstacles to becoming a credible Asian actor, Moscow is making resolute diplomatic overtures to secure its Asian standing. These activities merit US attention because they enhance understanding of Asian international relations and offset the pronounced ethnocentrism of so much American writing on the subject.

**Stephen Blank**, Research Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Army War College, notes that “Moscow is making gains in Southeast Asia, most notably by selling weapons, hydrocarbons, and nuclear energy infrastructure across the region.”

The United States may not think Russia counts for much in Asia, but ASEAN countries and Russia have reciprocally upgraded their ties. These processes suggest that opportunities for Russia in Asia do exist, that Asian governments see value in engaging with Russia, and the United States would do well to take account of these trends. Moscow is making gains in Southeast Asia, most notably by selling weapons, hydrocarbons, and nuclear energy infrastructure across the region. For instance, according to the Russian press, Vietnam was Russia's largest customer for weapons in 2009. This fact, like ASEAN's decision to admit Russia and the United States into formal participation in its annual East Asian Summit starting in 2011, undoubtedly owes something to Vietnam's and ASEAN's concern over China's rising military power and increasingly aggressive diplomacy. Certainly these trends reflect ASEAN members' hedging diplomacy towards China that seeks to maximize gains from Chinese economic growth while establishing counterweights to its political and military power. Simultaneously, one of Russia's main priorities is to develop cooperation with ASEAN through a mutually beneficial dialogue dealing with topics such as trade, the economy, energy, emergency humanitarian responses, and the fights against terrorism and transnational crime. Naturally these discussions would also inevitably examine regional security issues.

Russian officials state that their country should focus on enhancing preferential trading relations with promising partners like Vietnam, Singapore, and New Zealand. Vietnam has concluded large nuclear energy deals with Russia as well as major arms purchases, and the Russian energy company Zarubezhneft along with a Vietnamese counterpart, Petrovietnam, jointly explore Vietnam's coast for oil. Singapore has recently upgraded its commercial and political ties to Russia, and wants to expand them further. Russia has invited Singapore to participate jointly in building nuclear power plants in third countries. Moscow also clearly wants to use ASEAN countries' “modernization potential” for investments in Siberia and further east because they are potentially economically important in reconstructing Russia's Far East (RFE). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov likewise has solicited ASEAN's support for “an improved



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regional architecture.” This may suggest that Russia seeks a reduction in US power in Asia but not its complete replacement by a Chinese hegemony. President Medvedev emphasized that development of the RFE and its further integration with Asia are priorities and that Russia must exploit its energy assets towards that end. Thus, he advocated yet another comprehensive regional development plan, all previous Russian engagement plans with Asia having failed. This new development plan invokes the positive aspects of working with ASEAN. Medvedev and other Russian officials also insisted upon exploiting Russia’s other growing ties with ASEAN, while simultaneously emphasizing Russia’s membership in APEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to further enhance Russia’s regional standing.

ASEAN members’ receptivity to Russian offers of weapons and joint searches for energy, in conjunction with trade deals, reflects their desire to add another state to Southeast Asian security mechanisms to dilute China’s weight and presence. Their hope is that Russia can make an independent contribution to regional security. Although Russian leaders constantly reiterate the convergence of Russo-Chinese interests, it is unlikely that they want to be China’s younger brother or raw materials appendage forever. Moreover, Russian military leaders, undoubtedly with political support, are expressing mounting anxiety concerning China’s military potential and trajectory.

The larger point is not that ASEAN and Russia each seek to balance China. Apart from these states and organizations’ ongoing search for independence and security, these relationships exemplify the tendency towards hedging around China seen in so many Asian governments’ policies. Beyond this hedging tendency, these relations also signify a larger and increasingly visible Asian process. Given China’s rising economic power and increasingly aggressive diplomacy and military development policy, as expressed in the new stealth J-20 fighter, anti-ship ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, an aircraft carrier building project, claims that the South China Sea is a “core national interest,” and heightened interest in naval power projection, one sees an emerging new trend among other Asian states.

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India, South Korea, Japan, Russia, ASEAN countries, and even Australia—collectively and individually—are forming ever-deeper bilateral and multilateral ties among themselves that involve intensified trade and defense relationships even as they overtly seek increased security vis-à-vis China. Moreover, extra regional powers with interests in Southeast Asia including the United States, South Korea, India, Russia, Australia, and Japan are all forming comparable links with each other and with ASEAN countries. For example, Indo-Japanese and Indo-Australian ties, Indo-American ties, Russo-ASEAN relationships, and India’s Look East policy; all are designed to augment their security and diversify their relationships so that they do not relate to China exclusively on a bilateral basis.

These trends, among which Russo-ASEAN ties must be included, are expanding the sphere of security throughout Asia regarding both the agenda and spatial scope of interstate relationships. These processes represent efforts to buttress Asia’s existing order while preparing a transition to a new equilibrium where a rising China will be an important but not unfettered power free to act as it pleases. A network of interrelationships is coming into being in Asia. Russia’s ties to Southeast Asian states are a part of that relationship, and it is wrongheaded to ignore their significance. These ties might not suffice to give Russia the status it wants in Asia because to achieve that objective it must first launch its own domestic reforms that hitherto it has shunned. Even if Russia fails to reach its goals, its relations with other Asian actors towards that end deserve careful scrutiny.