

Russian Grand Strategy: Why It Stalls in Relations with India

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Abstract

Grand strategy studies continue to expand as more attempts are being made to bring clarity to its theoretical conceptualization and distinguish it from other, narrower conceptual approaches to policy-making. This article applies some of the theoretical findings from a recent study of Russia's grand strategy to the analysis of the country's policy towards the Asia-Pacific. This conceptualization is then used to explore the India-Russia bilateral relationship in order to define the causes of its current stagnation. The paper argues that the non-implementation of the Russian grand strategy in the Asia-Pacific is one of the reasons for the inertia in Moscow's "special and privileged strategic partnership" with New Delhi.

Keywords: Grand strategy, Russian foreign policy, Asia-Pacific, India-Russia relations, China.

The India-Russia strategic partnership has made an interesting journey in the post-Cold War period. On the one hand, this relationship has been marked by the absence of any direct conflicts over specific issues. This has helped both parties advance their national interests and opened a strategic space for them to maneuver in regional and global affairs. For India, the significance of this strategic partnership has been especially relevant for the supply of sensitive defense technologies, large-scale arms imports, and the benefits of Russia's influence in continental Eurasia (West Asia, Central Asia, and Afghanistan). Moscow, on its part, has welcomed India's emergence as an important power in international affairs as this factor helps avoid its over-dependence on China and provides strength for a multi-vector foreign policy. Both Moscow and New Delhi favor the development of a multipolar world that would enhance their power projection capacities and let them realize their national goals.

On the other hand, these positives have failed to prevent the relationship from stagnation, with the bilateral agenda stalling on issues beyond defense and energy cooperation. Economic ties have been languishing for several years, and bilateral trade is yet to cross the \$10-11 billion mark. There has been a notable advance on this front in 2022 as India has imported record large volumes of Russian oil since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. As a result, Russia's share in India's oil imports has grown from 1% to 21%, which means that within just five months (from April to August) oil supplies soared to \$18 billion. Also, the two countries have renewed their focus on the operationalization of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which, according to the Eurasian Development Bank, may reach 14.6 million tons by 2030 under the baseline scenario (Kommersant, 2022). The participants in the multi-modal connectivity corridor are making great efforts to complete the remaining links in Iran and manage the costs of cargo transportation, but these efforts will take time before concrete trade patterns emerge. Needless to say, if these efforts prove to be fruitful over a period of time, they will have a positive impact on the dynamics of India-Russia economic ties.

The regional multilateral settings where India and Russia play key roles—RIC, BRICS, and the SCO—though valuable in their own right, have displayed complex dynamics due to the presence of other players, and performed with varying degrees of success. As a result, a need is increasingly felt to imbue the India-Russia partnership with a more substantial agenda. Its stagnation has become especially apparent amid the current change of the global order towards a multipolar system, in which India and Russia plan to strengthen their positions.

So, the key question is how to explain the discrepancy in the India-Russia relationship which is beneficial for the two sides but is yet stagnating. The literature on the subject explains this by a variety of reasons, including the partnership's weak economic base, India's closer ties with the United States, rising tensions among major powers, and Russia's increasing closeness to China amid the changing world order (Kapoor, 2019). While these and other specific factors have undoubtedly constrained India-Russia relations, the theoretical conceptualization of the problem has remained incomplete.

This article attempts to look at the problem through the lens of the grand strategy theory. It argues that Russia lacks a grand strategy towards the Asia-Pacific, and the consequent weaknesses of its policy in the region are key to understanding why its “special and privileged strategic partnership” with India has had limited gains. The article does not deny the impact of specific factors on the India-Russia relationship and does not examine all the factors impeding the bilateral engagement; rather, it seeks to contribute to the understanding of this problem by bringing forth its conceptual dimension that has remained underexplored in the context of Russia's relationship with India.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF GRAND STRATEGY AND RUSSIA'S PRESENCE IN THE EAST

The concept of grand strategy, stemming from military strategy, has over the years acquired a broader dimension in international relations. This article will make use of a recent analysis of this concept to deconstruct Russia's grand strategy towards the East.

Nina Silove defines grand strategy as possessing three meanings: as a plan, as an organizing principle, and as a pattern of behavior (Silove, 2018). Each of these meanings adds to the broader view at grand strategy.

As a “deliberate and detailed” plan to utilize the resources available for achieving a state’s goals, grand strategy does not suggest that its fulfilment is mandatory for its existence. Russia’s grand strategy prioritizes its consolidation as a center of influence in a stable system of international relations, pursuance of independent domestic and foreign policies, creation of a favorable external environment for economic development, promotion of mutually beneficial and equal relationships with foreign states, resistance to external pressures, and development of multilateral cooperation.

As a plan, the Russian grand strategy is clearly oriented towards the East in general and India in particular, as this has been stated in Russia’s policy documents, namely, the 2016 Russian Foreign Policy Concept and the 2021 National Security Strategy (NSS).

In addition, at the highest level of government, it has been noted that the center of gravity in international politics has shifted to the Asia-Pacific (Putin, 2021) and it is imperative for Russia to increase its engagement with its partners in this region, above all with India and China. The 2021 NSS also notes that this is important for ensuring regional stability and security in the Asia-Pacific. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept explicitly states that the region is an area of strategic importance, and that Russia seeks to achieve its goals through comprehensive development of bilateral and multilateral engagements with the Asia-Pacific states.

Relations with the non-West have always found a place in Russia’s strategy, but a significant uptick in its interest towards this part of the world became especially evident after Russia’s relations with the West had slid into a long-term crisis (Charap et al., 2021). While all foreign policy concepts up to 2016 (the latest version available) still placed post-Soviet Eurasia and the West above the non-West on Russia’s priority list, the 2021 NSS has no sections concerning cooperation with the U.S., NATO, and the EU that were present in the earlier versions.

Instead, the 2021 NSS stipulates the necessity to build up relations within the CIS, EAEU, CSTO, BRICS, and SCO formats, and separately with India and China, which clearly indicates a shift of the Russian foreign policy vector away from the collective West.

The second meaning of grand strategy—as an organizing principle—suggests looking at it as a “basic strategic view” or as “overarching foreign policy doctrines” that are less detailed than a plan. Russia’s “Turn to the East” can be understood as such an organizing principle as it encompasses its focus on Eurasia, the Asia-Pacific, and India. This is considered important for the fulfilment of other principles laid down in Russia’s strategy: projecting Russia as a power center in international affairs, establishing a multipolar world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016), and advancing Russia’s position as an independent foreign policy actor (The Kremlin, 2021).

The third meaning of grand strategy—as a pattern of behavior—implies a “long-term pattern in a state’s distribution and employment of its military, diplomatic, and economic means towards the ends” (Silove, 2018). It is on this count that the Russian grand strategy towards the East falters the most: the lack of a consistent pattern for allocating requisite means for fulfilling the ends of the stated Russian strategy towards the East has been compounded by the mismatch between its aspirations and capabilities. Over the years, Russian state resources have primarily been directed towards its immediate post-Soviet periphery and the West (Europe and the U.S.), while in the East, specifically in the Asia-Pacific, its efforts have been more piecemeal, with the bulk of Russian resources focused on China. As for the rest of the region, one or more aspects were often missing in the policy of using state resources, which hampered the realization of the Russian grand strategy in the East.

The allocation of means to achieve one’s ends over a sustained period of time is considered the most critical point of a grand strategy that determines the role a state plays in a specific setting either regionally or globally. This is a key challenge for Russian policymakers because the success of translating its strategy into a long-term policy in this most powerful and dynamic region of the non-West, one that will

play a central role in the new world order, will directly impact Russia's own position in it. This argument will be further used to explain the impact of limitations of Russia's current grand strategy towards the East on its bilateral relations with the Asia-Pacific states, which also underlines the stagnation of its partnership with India.

RUSSIA'S PRESENCE IN THE EAST IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

During the immediate post-Soviet period, Russia's efforts were concentrated on establishing a close engagement with the West but failed to bring the desired outcome in terms of the status Russia was seeking to achieve (Krickovic and Pellicciari, 2021). Under Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, Russia sought to establish a more balanced foreign policy framework with the East and the West. In overall terms, Russian foreign policy was aimed at diversifying its relations with the non-West, especially with key power centers in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America (Charap et. al, 2021). These efforts were taken over the past two decades and intensified after the 2014 Ukraine crisis that heralded a breakdown of relations with the West. In the new emerging world order where several powers are making their presence felt, these engagements are not only necessary for maintaining a multi-vector policy but are also critical for Russia's positioning itself as a great power.

Recognizing the importance of the Asia-Pacific as a driver of current global geopolitics and geo-economics, Russia shifted its attention to the region with its "Turn to the East" program, which it officially announced at the APEC Summit in Vladivostok in 2012. The program's aims are both economic (integration of the Russian Far East and Siberia with the economies in the Asia-Pacific) and strategic (enhancing Russia's influence in the region). It was clear that the drivers of the future international order would come from the Asia-Pacific, and Russia understood the importance of having a stronghold in the region. While different regions of the non-West are important for Russia for various reasons, there are some that are indispensable if Russia is to sustain its position as an independent center in the emerging multipolar world. And it is here that the Asia-Pacific reveals

its importance as one of three key regional drivers of global economic growth, along with North America and Europe. Asia's share in world GDP in PPP terms reached 42% in 2017 (from 32% in 2000) and is expected to grow to 52% by 2040. Remarkably, during the same period, the share of Europe and North America decreased (though still remaining large globally) to 22% and 18%, respectively (Tonby et al., 2019).

The success here is also important for Russia as it seeks to become a Eurasian power and benefit from its vast geographical expanse. The vision to do so is rooted in the “multilevel integration model” of Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) proposed in 2015 (Putin, 2016). With the Eurasian Economic Union at its center and members of the SCO, ASEAN, and other Eurasian states stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Lavrov, 2019), the vision clearly requires an effective involvement of the Asia-Pacific to be successful. This is especially critical in the current situation since the inclusion of Europe in the partnership is now ruled out.

To determine the success of its stated grand strategy towards the East, it is important to examine Russia's policy towards the Asia-Pacific in terms of the distribution and use of its military, diplomatic, and economic resources towards the ends.

Russia's Turn to the East was the official declaration of intent to focus on the Asia-Pacific, even though it took efforts to build ties with the region for several years during the post-Soviet period. In terms of the distribution and use of military resources, Russia remains the second largest (after the U.S.) supplier of arms to the region and the largest arms exporter to Southeast Asia, China, and India, which is an important factor for maintaining partnerships. Russia's conventional military capability in Northeast Asia and closer engagement with China secure its formidable presence.

However, Russia's regional defense networks remain weaker as compared to those of other powers (Lowy Institute, 2021). In 2011-2015 and in 2016-2020, overall Russian exports to Asia and Oceania saw a 36% decline, which SIPRI attributed to fewer orders from India and Vietnam that are seeking to diversify their import sources—

something that increased orders from China could not compensate for (Wezeman et. al, 2022). Yet, according to the data analysis, despite the decrease in Russian exports to India, the latter's military dependence on Russian platforms is as high as 85% (Lalwani et al, 2021), which shows the depth of their engagement and the necessity of long-term diversification.

China has been focused on exporting its domestically manufactured weapons and is expected to become a competitor in the Asian market in the near future. Even in the case of India, where Russia engages in joint defense production and shares sensitive technologies not available to its partner elsewhere (making the relationship particularly consequential for New Delhi), the military ties have not been able to prevent the general stagnation of their partnership. In Southeast Asia, Russia's status as the leading arms supplier does not automatically translate into a broader geopolitical influence. This is because the lack of significant economic presence in a region that has been emerging as the world's center of economic gravity since 2002 cannot be compensated for by arms sales or presence in the global decision-making bodies like the UN Security Council. Other regional stakeholders, including Western states, have long-standing defense and military ties with the region. Being closely integrated into economic and investment structures of the Asia-Pacific economies, they have a distinct advantage over Russia, which wants to be recognized as a power in a region crowded with established powers.

In fact, the economic domain remains Russia's weakest point as most of its trade engagement is focused on China (Kapoor, 2022). In 2020, Russia's trade with China reached \$104 billion while that with other partners in the region—Japan, South Korea, India, and ASEAN states—stood at \$16.2, \$19.6, \$9.2, and \$13.6 billion, respectively. Russia's leading trade partners here are China, Japan, and South Korea which account for almost 80% of its total trade in the region, with China outpacing the others in exports and imports dramatically. Remarkably, Russia-China trade engagement is asymmetric as China's share in Russia's trade turnover stands at 18%, while Russia accounts for only 2% of China's trade turnover. Overall, in 2019, East Asia and

the Pacific region accounted for 22% of Russian exports while South Asia's share stood at 2%. By contrast, the share of Europe and Central Asia was 63%. As for imports, the total share of East Asia, the Pacific, and South Asia is 33.2%, and that of Europe and Central Asia, 51% (WITS, 2019).

Both Japan and South Korea have demonstrated interest in economic cooperation with Russia, including in the Far East. Notwithstanding their alliance with the U.S. and Japan's drawn-out territorial dispute with Russia, these two Asian countries continue to be engaged with Russia, leaving the door open for progress. Regrettably, with limited attraction of foreign investments, the development of the Russian Far East has been lagging. Since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, both Japan and South Korea have joined Western sanctions imposed on Russia, which will push any progress back. It will also make Russia further disproportionately dependent on China; in fact, China has already become Russia's central partner thanks to the success of Greater Eurasian Partnership and cooperation in the EAEU-BRI format. Russia's trade with ASEAN states amounts to just over one percent of the latter's trade with the world due to the lack of projects and non-involvement of Russia in regional value chains.

As for Russia's diplomatic engagement, it enjoys close relationships with both India and China.

In the case of China, the two sides have not only resolved their border issues and contributed vastly to each-other's "peace in the process," their partnership has been officially named as "the best in history." Their current confrontation with the U.S. has also contributed to the strengthening of the ties, and so has the complementary nature of their economies. In the post-2014 period, Russia has abandoned its policy of not supplying China with its latest weaponry and sold Su-35 aircraft and S-400 systems; it has also helped China build a missile defense system. This was both a decision made to avail the window of opportunity for profits and to strengthen its position as an important partner for the rising power. Since 2013, Xi Jinping and Putin have met thirty-eight times, and the joint statement made after their latest

meeting indicated that China approves of Russia's position against NATO's expansion.

India and Russia have held regular annual summits since 2000 (except for 2020 and now in 2022), and in 2010, their relationship was officially raised to the level of a "special and privileged strategic partnership." Close defense and energy cooperation, a long history of cordial engagement and mutual interest in the emergence of a multipolar world have helped them build a trusted relationship. However, their economic ties remain weak, and the relationship has increasingly been seen as stagnating, being buffeted by strong external factors that are difficult to counter. In fact, despite the annual summit meetings and other engagements on the sidelines of other multilateral events, the two countries deemed it necessary to organize an informal summit in Sochi in 2018, where the two leaders called for a concrete outcome from their forthcoming summit (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018), indicating pressing problems that needed to be addressed at the highest level. While no summit was held (in-person or online) in 2020 on account of the COVID-19 pandemic (leading to wide-ranging speculations about the reasons behind this fact), in 2021, Putin did travel to India where the two sides also established a 2+2 mechanism for foreign and defense ministers' meetings. Importantly, India has not condemned Russia's military campaign in Ukraine and has not joined Western sanctions, although at a recent meeting on the sidelines of a SCO summit PM Modi told President Putin that "now is not an era of war."

Russia has also made efforts to establish cordial political ties with Japan and South Korea, despite the ongoing territorial dispute with the former. However, today Russia's relations with them are facing new challenges as both U.S. allies have joined the sanctions on Russia after it had started a special military operation in Ukraine.

As for Russia's engagement with ASEAN, it has seen gaps in summit-level meetings with Russia for several years as President Putin's attendance of the ASEAN/APEC/EAS events has not been regular.

Southeast Asia, given its neutral position, perceives Russia positively, but remains an area of low priority for Moscow, which seems to have reserved most of its attention for traditional partners

like Vietnam and has not shown the capacity to set or influence the regional agenda in the region.

These developments collectively suggest that Russia has gained a mixed bag of results in the Asia-Pacific over the post-Cold War years; its use of military and non-military resources has been uneven in most countries of the region, except for China. Meanwhile, it is the economic importance of the Asia-Pacific that enhances its strategic value manifold, and the increasing focus is now placed on regional security concerns which reverberate across the world (Huang, 2021). Russia's weaknesses described above make it a less influential player in the region engaged in a debate on consequential issues, such as the implications of the U.S.-China rivalry, alignments of key middle powers, regional trade agreements, selective decoupling, and its impact on the future of the fourth industrial revolution. There has been a push towards reimagining the region as the Indo-Pacific as well as towards steady development of partnerships in the Quad and AUKUS frameworks. Russia has voiced its opposition to these recent developments in the regional architecture. Meanwhile, its efforts to realize the Turn to the East have not been successful so far, and its own alternative idea of Greater Eurasian Partnership remains vague as it lacks a clear implementation mechanism (Bordachev, 2019). There has been no steady expansion of FTAs within the EAEU framework, its engagement with BRICS, the SCO, and ASEAN (which themselves have varying agendas and internal divergences) in building GEP remains elusive, with no clarity as to how Russia would make its vision a reality (Krickovic and Pellicciari, 2021).

This combination of factors suggests that, although Russia has revived itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union and extended its influence in various regional geographies as a "good-enough" power (Stoner, 2021), it faces numerous "resource limitations" that "impose structural constraints on Russian behavior" in translating its ambitions into actionable policies (Charap et al, 2021). The changes described above are already framing the future of the regional order in Asia, impacting the shape of the global system and heralding far-reaching consequences for Russia itself in terms of power projection in the

future. For this reason, it is no good that Moscow is struggling to be a rule-maker in a region where multipolarity has not been clearly established and where it faces multiple constraints on its power.

In this situation the rising tensions with the West have had two distinct impacts on Russia's presence in the Asia-Pacific. Firstly, combined with its already weak economic position, the sanctions have exacerbated the resource constraints experienced by Russia and further limited its capacity as an attractive player in the East. In the longer term, Russia's increasing dependence on China raises questions regarding its hitherto neutral attitude when it comes to regional disputes between China and other regional states (Diesen 2017). This factor has become particularly acute in the light of the stringent Western sanctions imposed on Russia after February 24, 2022, and their impact on the balance of power between Russia and China. At a time when several regional stakeholders are seeking to manage the rise of an aggressive China in their neighborhood, this development will further impede Russia's efforts to position itself as an independent balancer, a role that the Asia-Pacific would have welcomed for the former superpower.

The second factor, directly related to the first one, is the dissonance between Russia's approach to regional developments and the position taken by several of its partners in the Asia-Pacific. Russia views the Indo-Pacific and the Quad through the lens of its anti-West policy brought about by the deterioration of its relations with the West in the European theatre. Over the years, Russia's relations gradually expanded to include an agenda that opposed the Western hegemony across geographies, including the Asia-Pacific. However, Russia ignores the fact that the Asia-Pacific states have pursued a complex strategy to manage the great-power rivalry, especially as some of them are actively engaged in formulating the Indo-Pacific policy to maintain the regional balance of power. Russia's focus on the West highlights its neglect of the impact of the rising tensions with the latter in its relations with the East.

In other words, Russia has been prioritizing the use of its limited available resources on the Western track despite its declared commitment to the East. Historians point to the sense of *déjà vu*

in Russia's current policy in the Asia-Pacific, where it has over the past two centuries repeatedly announced "short-lived" plans to focus on the region (Miller, 2020) only to turn its back on it to deal with pressing domestic or Western foreign policy issues. This is a serious shortcoming of its grand strategy. Furthermore, the provision of the grand strategy theory requiring military and non-military elements to be brought together to promote long-term interests (Lissner, 2018) has been missing in Russia's East policy in general, and in its Asia-Pacific policy in particular. As Gaddis notes, grand strategy is achieved only when a balance is struck between ends and means, linking what is real and what is imagined by a state (Gaddis, 2018).

So, Russia must decide what role it wants to play in the region and commit the resources needed to achieve its aims—something which is essential to grand strategy (Poast, 2021). Also, Russia's legacy and current positioning leads to a situation where its own pursuit of the great-power status in the region is not recognized by all regional states, which makes its position more precarious compared to other regional powers present in the Asia-Pacific. Russia's geographical strength, i.e., its vast landmass stretching across Europe and Asia, does not automatically translate into the ability to act as an influential power across the entirety of Eurasia: such a status is generated by a combination of a state's political, diplomatic, and military power utilized to its maximum capacity over a sustained period of time.

In addition, Russia's persisting "identity crisis" (Lukyanov, 2016), i.e., constant speculation about whether it is a European or a Eurasian power, has over the years led to a situation where its "status in the new world order remains unresolved" (Lukyanov, 2021b). The debate among Westernizers and Slavophiles in the Russian elite about the country's identity has in fact continued for centuries. In the past, Asia largely occupied a secondary place in Russian foreign policy, and, although in the 21st century it has been marked by "fluctuations" (Koldunova, 2015) and now is increasingly tending towards Eurasianism due to the breakdown of relations with the West, the purported shift to the East remains incomplete and the elite's commitment to it has been insufficient (Gabuev, 2016).

Also, the past twenty years have seen an uptick in the influence of Russian security elites over business ones, which has led to the latter's decline and an increase of "informal governance practices" (Petrov and Gelman, 2019). Russian elites have organized themselves within a personalist autocratic regime, which has its own impact on the country's grand strategy. While in the U.S., policymaking is dominated by a narrow combination of elites from economic, political, and military domains (Mills, 1956), in Russia it is marked by the preeminence of elites closest to the leader. As Petrov and Gelman (2019) explain, this means marginalization of the broader elite in favor of an even narrower group made up of top officials and business leaders closest to Putin. As some of the top business elites are heads of state-owned companies, they represent state interests, and have limited autonomy from the government. As a result, they are unable to advance their own business interests that would go beyond the political interests of the country's leadership. Meanwhile, broad private business circles remote from the state power lack levers to have their business/commercial interests represented in national strategies, including the grand strategy. This contributes to the deficiency of Russia's economic ties with India and the Asia-Pacific in general.

The collective impact of these factors is that, much like in the U.S., where diverging in policymaking is difficult due to the liberal hegemonic views of the American elites (Walt, 2018), disagreement in Russian policymaking is practically impossible due to the "dominance of security priorities" (Yakovlev, 2021). This prevents long-term strategies from stretching towards economic development and expansion of material resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH INDIA

The absence of a clear pattern of behavior in the Russian grand strategy towards the East is also key to understanding the reasons behind the inertia in India-Russia relationship, where necessary means (political, military, economic) have not been allocated to achieve broader Russian ends. In the post-Soviet period, as Russia re-established itself in

several regional situations in post-Soviet states, West Asia and even Afghanistan, it could claim to have returned to the global hot spots through a clever mix of diplomacy and coercion to establish its position as an important power.

This also led to the argument that the idea of dismissing Russia as a great power would be a mistake. Although post-Soviet Russia was no longer a superpower, it continued to occupy an important position as a major power, which made other states avoid miscalculations regarding its capacities. Waltz (1993) argues that the ranking of great powers depends on their performance on a combination of factors: “the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.” In the case of Russia, its military capacity, geographical expanse, nuclear deterrence, and resource endowment worked in its favor. Even though it consistently lagged behind in economic performance and technological development, it used its capacities of power projection in limited yet targeted ways to achieve strategic ends.

Yet Russia’s strengths could not mask the insufficient resource allocation towards the Asia-Pacific. Its major weakness was that military, not economic capability lent strength to its diplomatic initiatives (Lukyanov, 2021a), which predetermined its weak positions in the East. Moreover, now that global geopolitics and geo-economics are shifting to the East, Russia’s status depends considerably on having a central voice in the evolving regional order. Even before the current Ukraine crisis, there was an urgent need for Russia to revamp its policy towards the East in order to secure the role of a global power in the future. And now, given the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Russia has been cut off from Western—especially economic—linkages, while it has not established similar associations in the East.

This means that Russia is now struggling in all the three economically dynamic regions of the world: the Asia-Pacific, Americas, and Europe, which may become a major impediment to its claiming the status of a great power. For a long time, Russia has called for opposing bloc politics in the Asia-Pacific and for establishing a polycentric order, but it has not fulfilled the basic condition for achieving this goal—it

has not built an effective multi-vector position in the region that would supplement the other powers.

In this situation, despite the strengths of the India-Russia relations, the Russian grand strategy, when put within the larger regional context of the Asia-Pacific, reveals its economic deficiency that limits the avenues for further development of the “special and privileged strategic partnership.” Except for intensifying ties with China, which raises concerns in New Delhi, Russia has been unable to significantly scale up its presence in a region that remains crucial for India. New Delhi’s goals—achieving economic growth, settling problems with the twin-challenges of Pakistan and China, maintaining its position as a key regional power in the Asia-Pacific, ensuring regional stability in its neighborhood—all require it to engage with like-minded powers that would help attain these goals (Mukherjee, 2019). This means engaging not only with the collective West but also with regional middle powers to promote its own national interests. Yet New Delhi has had to contend with the fact that its strategic partner Russia is not a militarily or economically decisive power in the Asia-Pacific, and that the U.S. remains an “essential” power while Russia is a “desirable” partner (Menon, 2022). This explains why, despite the benefits gained by both sides from these cordial ties, the relationship has continued to stagnate (Raja Mohan, 2018).

Like other regional stakeholders, India has become increasingly concerned about the rise of China and views the U.S. as a net security provider to the region and a critical party in managing China’s rise (Menon, 2022). In recent years, this has been reflected in its participation in the Quad and the Indo-Pacific, which is also a reflection of the changes underway in the region. As it seeks to manage China, India has viewed a neutral Russia—even if it is not as strong as other powers in the Asia-Pacific—as an asset. India has wanted its strategic partner to play a balancing role to prevent a unipolar or bipolar Asia. This was reflected in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech at Vladivostok in 2019, in which he called for regarding the Russian Far East as a “confluence of the Eurasian Union on one side and the open, free and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the other” (Modi,

2019). However, Russia continues to ignore the agency of the regional states in framing the Indo-Pacific agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022), creating more dividing lines even with friendly powers.

Russia's opposition to the Indo-Pacific format is also dissatisfactory because of the absence of any viable alternative that the former superpower could bring to the table. The success of Russia's efforts to play a role in the establishment of a multipolar region is questionable because of both its weak engagement with the region beyond China and the breakdown of its relations with the West, which remains a key player in the emerging regional order. Russia's idea of establishing a common security architecture in the Asia-Pacific has not been backed by concrete proposals (Kireeva and Kupriyanov, 2020), nor has it received regional support.

It is here that the importance of a grand strategy towards the East and the necessity for directing diplomatic, economic, and military resources towards the Asia-Pacific become completely evident. Meanwhile, other players, such as the U.S. and France, seem to fully realize this importance as they attach heightened attention to India in their policies, seeking to broaden their relations with it to embrace political, economic, and defense fields. Also, these countries have offered a vision of the Asia-Pacific where India has a significant place, and their active engagement in the region may help it address crucial national security challenges. By contrast, Russia's position has been less active, and now, following the events in Ukraine, its focus is on dealing with the crisis in its own neighborhood, which is likely to become long-lasting. Also, the repercussions from Russia's military campaign have narrowed the space for India's geopolitical maneuvering.

Even though Russia's partnership with powers like India has helped it avoid complete isolation on the world stage, it has done nothing to remove the key causes of its underwhelming engagement with the East. The economic impact of Western sanctions could derail even the modest trade relations between the two strategic partners, and prompt India to rethink its high dependence on Russian arms imports. While India's defense diversification is expected to take longer given the high level of this dependence, the concerns about any disruption in supplies

and the threat of secondary sanctions heighten New Delhi's worries amid its own long-drawn standoff on the border with China.

The rationale of not pushing Russia and China into each other's embrace continues to have a value for India as does the need to manage its continental Eurasian space with a friendly Russia at its side. The "logic of geopolitics" till now has favored the development of the India-Russia relationship (Jaishankar, 2021) as New Delhi highly values Russia's ability to exercise influence in various geographical settings and have an impact on the world order. Yet Russia has not become a key partner for India in the Asia-Pacific and has aligned more with China on its anti-Western track. Furthermore, it has failed to assess the damage that the conflict with the West may inflict on its engagement with the East.

Already, many developments in the Asia-Pacific have taken place without involvement of Russia as a rule-setter. Now Moscow's attempts to embrace the East once again while dealing with the diplomatic-economic-military impact of the war in Ukraine and wide-ranging Western sanctions will be a difficult undertaking. The weak regional economic and political linkages will increasingly be difficult to improve, especially as some Asian countries—Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Australia—have joined Western sanctions against Russia. Other middle powers, which have not joined the sanctions and helped Russia avoid international isolation, do not, however, extend their stance to active support of Russia's war efforts or opposition to the West.

Today, Russia is facing a situation where it is simultaneously critical for it to engage with the Asia-Pacific as a future powerhouse in world affairs and more difficult than ever in the post-Soviet period to achieve this aim. In effect, Russia broke off its relations with the West neglecting the East, which means that despite "acting as a great power" it was not addressing its "underlying weaknesses" amid the rise of several new powers (Buzan, 2021).

This is a situation which India has been keen to avoid, being aware that an increase of Russia-West tensions would be detrimental to its own Asia-Pacific policy and prompt a closer Sino-Russian partnership. Till now, despite the asymmetric relations with China, Russia has been

able to maintain neutrality in China's territorial disputes with other states in the region. Despite its weak economic presence in the region, Russia enjoyed cordial relations with several states and was seen as an independent player. Now, in the wake of the military campaign in Ukraine, its status is being reassessed as its dependence on China is increasing. Experts expect that the Sino-Russian relationship will become closer and influence Moscow's diversification plans in Asia (Kashin, 2022). Support from China will not come immediately as it will wait to assess the outcome of secondary sanctions imposed on Russia and look for favorable conditions before entering the Russian market. It is likely that in the absence of other alternatives China will become Russia's leading trade and political partner with which it will share ideas about ways to counter U.S. dominance.

There is no doubt that Moscow will continue to enjoy cordial diplomatic relations with various states, including India. At the same time, the latter sees China as a direct threat and will be concerned about the impact of Russia's diminished capacities on its own diplomatic flexibility (Buzan, 2021). Also, under the current sanctions, Russia will find it difficult to take significant economic moves in the East immediately; its anti-West agenda will hardly find support among regional powers which, while not sanctioning Russia, remain closely aligned with the West in order to maintain a favorable balance of power vis-a-vis China. Apart from the wide-ranging socio-economic impact of the sanctions, Russia's power projection capacity in the near to mid-term will also be negatively affected, raising questions about its role in the future Asian regional balance of power.

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Over the years, several factors have contributed to the strengthening of India-Russia bilateral engagement. India regarded the defense and energy ties with Russia and engagement with it in Eurasia, above all in Central Asia, West Asia, and Afghanistan, as significant. It has also been keen on preventing Russia from becoming completely dependent on China. It has been argued that Russia prefers to avoid a situation where it loses the autonomy it enjoys in relations with China,

wherein partnership with India is valuable. Russia benefits from this partnership while dealing with its asymmetric relations with China, and India benefits from an independent Russia that could contribute to promoting a multipolar balance of power. This provision of space for strategic maneuvering to each other has always been considered a key benefit of the India-Russia strategic partnership. The two sides have continued to build on the fact that they do not have fundamental issues for conflict and their core interests do not “collide” (Raghavan, 2021). These arguments continue to be relevant in making the case for a stronger India-Russia relationship and have been reflected in India’s response to the war in Ukraine.

Nonetheless, apart from defense and energy sectors, the India-Russia bilateral partnership has over the years been marked by stagnation. The stability of ties has not translated into a flourishing economic partnership or as an engagement that would help address the fundamental challenges facing the two countries. The fact that India has not joined Western sanctions against Russia and has increased energy imports has been interpreted in Russia as a sign of a strong relationship. However, this means missing the wood for the trees as India grapples with the prospect of Moscow’s overdependence on Beijing as a consequence of Russia’s military campaign in Ukraine. China was already Russia’s most important external partner in the East, and the breakdown of relations with the West will further enhance the importance of this strategic partnership, while at the same time decreasing Russian leverage across the board. In a situation where New Delhi is keen to manage rising China by improving relations with the U.S. and other like-minded regional partners, this development will raise questions about the continued ability to provide a strategic space to Russia vis-a-vis China, as well as its viability.

For India, the Asia-Pacific remains the top priority, and any further power projection depends fundamentally on how it builds its capacity in its neighborhood while dealing with the rise of China in the same geography. Thus, regardless of the arguments for a strong India-Russia relationship, the issue of the future of Russia’s positioning in the East will figure prominently in furthering the

strategic partnership. In order to prevent further stagnation in the relationship, which has worsened on account of divergences in a region that is central to India's future, Russia will have to revamp the allocation of its resources (diplomatic, military, and economic) to the Asia-Pacific, which would also call for a reorientation of the economy. If Russia wants to reposition itself in the coming years in a region that is being reordered, it will have to present a significant economic rationale for its reliability as a key partner and also demonstrate a sufficiently diversified set of engagements with the regional states. Sole reliance on military means and resource exports has already proven to be of limited value in this part of the world, failing to secure the implementation of Russia's grand strategy.

However, the ongoing war makes this much-needed redirection of Russian policy extremely difficult due to its past and current weaknesses, exacerbated manifold by Western sanctions. Moscow has created a situation where its ability to implement the stated grand strategy towards the East has become limited. To alleviate this situation, Russia will need to demonstrate clearly where New Delhi fits into the Russian grand strategy towards the East and how Moscow aims to implement its grand strategy towards the broader Asia-Pacific.

Naturally, this line of argument can be critiqued in that a grand strategy is designed to prioritize policymakers' decisions. It can be argued that Russia's focus on the West and limited resource allocation to the East are not a bug but indeed a feature of its grand strategy, wherein it has decided to focus its available strengths in that direction instead of the East. While this would be inconsistent with Russia's stated positions, it is possible to argue that this pattern of behavior suggests that the East has till now remained a lower priority for Moscow based on its understanding of threats and its key national interests.

It may also be argued that the assessment of grand strategy is possible only as a long-term development, and that post-Soviet Russia has existed in its present form only for thirty years, so this limited time framework may be insufficient for an analysis of its actions to correctly identify a pattern. However, as Silove (2018) explains, for a plan or

principle of grand strategy, it is the “scope” that determines “longevity” and not the length of the time of its operation.

Yet the timeline argument is important when a grand strategy is analyzed in terms of the “pattern of behavior,” and it is possible to argue that thirty years is not a long enough period to make conclusions regarding this extensive concept.

However, thirty years of post-Soviet Russia is the timeframe we have to contend with at this moment. More importantly, the current war in Ukraine will clearly not only have profound consequences for Russia’s positioning in Europe, it is also expected to determine its future status in the East. New Delhi would hate to see a situation where Moscow is unable to play a balancing role in the Asia-Pacific. However, the Asian balance of power is evolving rapidly and if Russia fails to establish itself as an independent player apart from China, powers like India might begin to reconsider elements of their engagement with Russia as a long-standing partner. Combined with Russia’s diminished capacity due to the war in Ukraine, such a development may lead to continued stagnation of the India-Russia relationship. So, the future of Russia’s foreign policy towards India also largely depends on how the war ends.

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