Shifting Russia's Economic Activity Eastward

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Abstract
The growing role of the Asia-Pacific region in the global economy, and the reorientation of Russia's foreign trade towards Asian and Global South markets, require that Russia align its foreign economic activity with its inner spatial development. This article analyzes the perspectives for shifting Russia's activity to Siberia and the Far East, a focus on four interrelated tasks: strengthening transport connectivity; tapping Siberia's natural resource, agricultural, and technological potential; creating a network of anchor cities; and developing the urban environment to attract human capital. This project faces high infrastructure costs, demographic inertia, and labor shortages, but will allow Russia to effectively address global geoeconomic challenges. This will require a coordinated government policy focused not on short-term returns, but on long-term benefits from Russia's spatial development as a civilization-state.

Keywords: Russia's East, Siberia, Far East, Arctic, Siberization of Russia, spatial development, Asia-Pacific region, transport infrastructure, resource base, anchor cities, human capital.

Global economic development is currently shifting to the Asia-Pacific region, whose connectivity and resources are increasingly important for long-term competitiveness. For Russia, these developments hold significance not only for its military-strategic and foreign economic interests, but also for its internal development: a turn to these markets requires restructuring spatial organization, reconfiguring transport and logistics links, and streamlining mechanisms for the development of Siberia, the Far East, and the Arctic. Many experts hold that Russia's foreign economic reorientation should be aligned with the spatial development goals set out in the 'Siberization of Russia' concept (Siberization of Russia, 2025).

The key question is whether Russia's geographical center and east can become its new economic center, and what institutional changes such a transition should involve. In this context, four interrelated tasks require consideration: the development of transport connectivity, more efficient use of resources, the formation of a network of anchor cities, and the accumulation of human capital.

FOREIGN POLICY FRAMEWORK

The global economy's shift to the Asia-Pacific region is increasing its importance for Russia. The Asian, Oceanic, and American members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation organization accounted for a fundamental 61% of global GDP and 46% of global trade in 2024 (APEC in Charts, 2025). This calls for Russia to deepen its integration with Asian markets, supply chains, and logistics.

The eastern vector of Russia's foreign economic policy includes not only the Pacific, but all of Eurasia, where integration is progressing with Belarus (within the Union State), the EAEU, and the CIS. It is complemented by the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept calls for transforming Eurasia into a space of peace, stability, and development, and identifies Eurasia as one of Russia's foreign policy priorities (Concept, 2023). Development of Russia's East is becoming especially important given Europe's decline as a global economic power and Russia's proximity to the Asia-Pacific region.

The question is whether Russia's foreign economic pivot to the East can also generate its spatial reorganization, turning Russia's eastern

regions from resource suppliers into a center of domestic economic activity. Foreign economic relations have already been rerouted: in 2024, Russia's trade turnover with China exceeded $244 billion (RF Ministry of Economic Development, 2025), and India ranked among Russia's biggest foreign trading partners (RF Government, 2025b). Trade with ASEAN countries in 2024 set a new record for the second year, hitting $23.2 billion (Russia's Pivot to Asia, 2025) and indicating a steady expansion of Russia's economic cooperation with these countries.

Russia's spatial development has long been based on a Eurocentric model that was adopted at a time when Europe was a global economic and technological leader. Russian territories committed to economic relations with Europe developed intensively, while Siberia and the Arctic primarily served as a strategic rear and resource supplier. Today, as the geostrategic and geoeconomic environment has changed, Russia's spatial configuration should change along with it.

This article uses the term 'Russia's East' to denote the Trans-Ural and Arctic as interconnected regions of spatial development. The term 'Siberia' is also in some cases used to denote the area stretching from the West Siberian Plain to Russia's Pacific coast. Such usage is for the article's convenience, and does not replace the conventional geographical division that was adopted in the late 19th century and subsequently institutionalized in Siberia's administrative division into three federal districts.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY

Political demand for developing Russia's East has been repeatedly articulated at the highest levels, foremost by President Vladimir Putin. In his Address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, he designated the development of Siberia and the Far East a "national priority for the entire 21st century" and noted that "Russia's turn to the Pacific Ocean and the dynamic development of all our eastern territories will not only open new economic opportunities and new horizons for us, but will also give us additional tools for pursuing an active foreign policy" (Address, 2013). At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on 7 June 2024, President Putin proposed a formula for aligning the country's spatial development with the world's new economic structure:

"If we create conditions for development, then the centers of economic activity will automatically shift there" (President, 2024). Yet, despite persistent high-level attention, the practical implementation of the project is stumbling.

It requires state policies to create the conditions for the Russian East's more active socio-economic development, including in the demographic, urban, and transport spheres. Importantly, spatial development should not be assessed by individual projects' short-term returns. In countries with a large territory and uneven economic development, infrastructural and institutional investments cannot produce effect immediately; they provide it gradually, changing the economic geography by improving territorial connectivity, expanding markets, increasing the tax base, and reducing the cost of spatial development. Russia's historical experience shows that large-scale projects of this kind were often perceived as excessively costly but ultimately generated greater economic growth. Therefore, in the case of Siberia, we should speak not of quick commercial gains, but of long-term systemic effect: certain measures' potential to reduce infrastructural constraints, encourage investment, strengthen internal connectivity, attract human capital, and create conditions for the formation of new economic centers.

If outstanding Russian thinkers and statesmen like Dmitry Mendeleev, Sergei Witte, Adolf von Hübbenet, and their associates had not succeeded in promoting the Trans-Siberian Railway—including at the highest levels of government—Russia would likely not have survived the 20th century.

TRANSPORT

The delayed expansion of transport infrastructure remains one of the key constraints on the Russian East's development and inclusion into Asia-Pacific supply chains. For example, the Amur asphalt-paved federal highway, from Chita to Khabarovsk, became fully operational only in 2010 (RF Ministry of Transport, 2010). Bottlenecks remain in both railway and border infrastructure.

Although the freight capacity of the Eastern Operating Domain was brought to 180 million tons by the end of 2024 (Russian Railways,

2024), Russian Railways (2025) continues to emphasize limitations in the eastern direction.

The modernization of checkpoints and logistics infrastructure is still underway: 87 priority checkpoints, which handle more than half of the country's cargo traffic, are to be modernized by 2030 (RF Government, 2024), and 15 of the 46 priority vehicle checkpoints are located in the Far Eastern Federal District (RF Ministry of Transport, 2024). By the end of 2027, the Ministry of Transport plans to build another 12 vehicle and 7 railway checkpoints in the Siberian Federal District, as the present 36 checkpoints are insufficient (Parlamentskaya Gazeta, 2025).

The problem is not so much the shortage of individual facilities as the lack of their connectivity and the undeveloped transport infrastructure, which increases internal transaction costs and limits people's mobility and businesses' access to foreign markets, thus ultimately hindering the development of these regions.

It should be a priority to strengthen transport connectivity between anchor cities and industrial centers in Russia's East, and incorporate them into the country's foreign trade. This will require modernizing existing highways and railways, eliminating bottlenecks on the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline, and building access roads to border crossings and seaports. This will simultaneously: (1) reduce internal transaction costs; (2) provide regions with equal access to foreign markets; and (3) create a denser economic environment in Russia's East.

In addition, long-term and capital-intensive projects are needed to radically strengthen land and sea connectivity in Eurasia, with Russia playing a key role. Such projects go beyond the current investment cycle and include the construction of an elevated high-speed railroad parallel to the Trans-Siberian Railway for passengers and containers (leaving other freight traffic to the existing ground route), as well as building—in the long run—an Asia–Siberia–North America transport corridor with railways, highways, pipelines, power cables, and fiber-optic lines.

Such initiatives, which require separate international, financial, and technological justification, should be part of a long-term transport

strategy, while the short- and medium-term focus should be mainly on a North-South transport framework.

RESOURCE BASE AND PRODUCTION

Renewable natural resources, like fresh water, are becoming increasingly important in the present day, affecting economic sustainability, food security, and political stability around the world. For Russia, this increases the importance of Siberia, which has significant reserves of fresh water and related natural resources, including fish.

Water is useful not only for direct consumption, but also for the production of hydropower. Siberia is hospitable to water- and energy-intensive industries like data centers, aluminum smelters, and hydrogen energy (RF Government, 2025, 2026).

There are obvious opportunities for significantly increasing agricultural and water-intensive production in Western and Eastern Siberia. But this will require better transport connectivity with water-deficient Central Asia, northern and central China, and other Asian countries.

Krasnoyarsk could perhaps become a center for water policy and water-intensive industries, as it has sufficient resources, energy, and industry. Since fresh water may become a new key export for Russia, it is worth moving some metropolitan functions to Krasnoyarsk or other anchor city/cities in the East, following the experience of relocating RusHydro's headquarters. Such a city (or cities) should become decision-making centers to position our country in the water market, develop standards for trade in water resources, and plan infrastructure to collect and export water. Federal agencies, responsible for water and other policies, should also potentially be relocated. This would also have military-strategic benefits.

As for non-renewable natural resources, two circumstances should be taken into account. Firstly, demand for some minerals is expected to grow significantly in the coming decades, primarily for critical minerals needed for the energy transition, electronics, and other high-tech industries. The International Energy Agency estimates that, by 2040, demand for lithium may increase manifold, and demand for nickel, graphite, cobalt, rare earths, and copper will keep growing steadily

(International Energy Agency, 2025). Secondly, Siberia's resources remain poorly explored and harbor significant growth potential. Greater Siberia was incorporated into the federal project "Geology: Rebirth of a Legend" as an area of high promise but insufficient exploration (RF Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2023; NEDRAD, 2025).

To accelerate geological prospecting, primarily for strategic and scarce minerals, a more favorable institutional environment is needed in Siberia. Excessive administrative barriers should be reduced, the regulatory regime made more predictable, and exploration more closely linked to extraction and the development of associated industries. Intensified geological exploration can generate a multiplier effect for mechanical engineering, service industries, and infrastructure development.

The distribution of powers in mineral resource management deserves special consideration. The current practice, wherein key decisions are made mainly at the federal level, hinders the alignment of projects with regional and municipal development goals. Therefore, a transfer of some management and regulatory powers, revenue, and decision-making authority to the regional level is needed.

International cooperation in geological exploration and related manufacturing can significantly contribute to the development of Siberia's resources. Intensified cooperation with the Asia-Pacific should be considered—including cooperation with Japan and the Republic of Korea, whose companies are interested in returning to the Russian market, but are still restrained by their governments' sanctions. These include export control and investment restrictions. Japan requires prior approval for new Russia-related investments (Chambers and Partners, 2025a). The Republic of Korea has been enforcing export restrictions and other measures since 2022 (Chambers and Partners, 2025b). Normalization of interstate political relations is possible only if these countries lift economic restrictions and resume technology transfers to Russia.

Siberia's agricultural potential is another element of the Russian East's resource base; it boasts significant land reserves, but needs technological renewal and foreign market access. In early 2025, almost

44 million hectares of agricultural land remained unused in Russia, including about 20 million hectares of arable land (Interfax, 2025a), of which about 4 million are in the Siberian Federal District alone, making Siberia the key to increasing agricultural production (Sorokina and Danilov, 2024).

This is particularly notable because agriculture in Siberia depends not so much on the availability of arable land as on the competences to use 'climatic windows' (areas with unique agriculture-friendly climate) in Southern Siberia, upgrade the mechanization level and renovate the industrial base. Establishing the logistics–processing–marketing chain remains crucial: in 2024, Russian agricultural exports reached $39 billion in comparable prices (Delovoi Profil, 2025), with China as the biggest buyer (AgroSearch, 2026). Agricultural exports from the Siberian Federal District are projected to reach $3.3 billion by 2030, a 27% increase from 2024 (TASS, 2025b). These data indicate the significant potential of the Asian exports for providing long-term commercial benefits.

With a focus on highly productive agro-industrial clusters, Siberia can fully supply Russia with basic livestock products, grain, vegetables, and potatoes, as well as provide significant exports to Asia. Indeed, Siberia can be positioned as 'Eurasia's granary' in the continental supply chains: it accounts for 25% of Russia's cultivated areas, where two-thirds are grain crops. In 2025, Siberia produced a record 19 million tons of grain—about 27% of Russia's total (Interfax, 2025b), about 12% of Russia's milk (TASS, 2025a), and almost 10% of its meat (Rossiiskaya gazeta, 2026).

URBAN ENVIRONMENT, ANCHOR CITIES, AND HUMAN CAPITAL

Establishing an economic center in Siberia will be impossible without improving quality of life and creating a comfortable urban environment.

The macroeconomic development of Russia's East requires not only investing in infrastructure and resource development but also creating a network of anchor cities that will concentrate people, capabilities, and new types of economic activity. This means building cities with various profile—scientific, industrial, logistical, touristic, administrative, etc.

Anchor cities should be supported by tax incentives, by the transfer of some governmental and corporate functions, by special housing and transport programs, and by the concentration of university clusters, R&D, and service infrastructure. The quality of the urban environment is not a secondary social issue, but one of the basic determinants of Siberia's development.

Anchor cities should be viewed as a network of spatially interconnected nodes connecting the state to various fields: science, education, management, manufacturing, resource production, logistics, maritime services, and tourism.

Paying tribute to the historical heritage of the Russian state, which foreign travelers and researchers described as "a country of towns" (Garðaríki) as early as the 9th century, a national project of "Siberian Gardarika" is called for, to form an urbanized region of Greater Siberia through programs accelerating anchor cities' development in their chosen fields of specialization.

Besides relocating the headquarters and branches of regionally connected state and private corporations, and registering companies in Siberia in order to redistribute tax revenues, tourism and major international events should also be considered to increase anchor cities' attractiveness. Greater Sochi's hospitality infrastructure development might be studied with an eye to its replication in Altai, Kuzbass, Khakassia, and Tuva. The APEC summit in Vladivostok (2012), FISU Summer World University Games in Kazan (2013), Winter Olympic Games in Sochi (2014), FIFA World Cup (2018), and FISU Winter World University Games in Krasnoyarsk (2019) should be systematically studied with a view to replicating them in major Siberian cities. In particular, Russia should host another APEC summit in Magadan, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Khabarovsk, or even Irkutsk or Krasnoyarsk.

The development of anchor cities and urban environment must be accompanied by measures to build up and preserve human capital. Its shortage is a major constraint on Siberia's development. There is a general shortage of people, and especially of specialists, businessmen, engineers, and scientists (Grigorichev, 2026).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has made human capital highly mobile. This means that most educated and skilled people will soon

choose the country and macroregion with better conditions for self-realization, private life and career. Macroregional and national competition for human capital will intensify.

Therefore, Russia's East should be considered not just a territory of economic development, but a competitor for mobile, educated, and economically active people (Ibid). A comfortable environment should be created in its anchor cities, including through the construction of affordable low-rise housing for families with three and more children. A broad public consensus is needed on the image of Russia's future and its long-term spatial development, in which Siberia is positioned as a 'land of promise' with guaranteed energy and food security, fresh water, clean air, and a comfortable social environment that would ensure personal development, family-building, and creative labor.

A new wave of settlement in Siberia is hardly possible without an organized influx of immigrants. Besides the EAEU and the CIS, it seems feasible to attract people from Europe, most of whom are highly capable of cultural-civilizational integration into Russian society, and who see in Russia the prospects that their own homelands have lost. Labor may also be attracted from southern Eurasia (especially India), where it is in surplus. Indeed, the number of Russian work permits issued to Indians increased from 8,000 in 2022 to 36,200 in 2024 (MySeldon, 2025).

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Russia's developmental turn eastward and its Siberization are a necessary response to the geoeconomic and geopolitical changes in the modern world. As Asia grows in importance, and resources and territorial connectivity become increasingly essential for Russia's sovereignty and economic growth, Siberia becomes increasingly significant for its long-term development. Russia's eastward foreign-economic shift should be aligned with a consistent policy of its inner space restructuring.

This policy will not automatically lead to the East's economic rise. Naturally, its implementation will face high infrastructure costs, demographic inertia, and labor shortages. There is also a risk that the country's foreign economic shift to Eastern markets will be divorced from its inner space restructuring.

A set of measures are deemed necessary to achieve the goal: developing Russia's East's transport infrastructure; strengthening its transport connectivity (primarily along the North-South axis) with Asia Pacific markets; building a network of anchor profile cities to unlock Siberia's resource, industrial and technological potential; transferring a portion of metropolitan functions to Siberian cities (starting with Krasnoyarsk); and building an attractive image of Siberia in public consciousness.

Laying the groundwork for shifting Russia's (macro)economic center eastward requires coordinated federal policies regarding foreign economic activity and internal spatial development, based not on short-term returns, but on the long-term interests of Russia as a civilization-state amid the global military-strategic and geoeconomic transformation.

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