



The Kremlin has been seeking a more active footprint in East Asia, and three recent endeavors have contributed to realizing that goal.

Strategic Vision vol. 7, no. 39 (August, 2018)

Putin's Pivot East

Three moves mark Moscow's attempt to strengthen position in East Asia

David Scott

THREE EVENTS SIGNALLED Russian activism in the East (Vostok) during the autumn of 2018. These were the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), the Vostok-2018 military exercises, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation for Kim Jong Un to visit Russia. They represented geo-economic and geopolitical assertiveness on the part of Moscow, a deliberate strategy of stepping on to the center stage in the region alongside its strategic partner, China, but with its Russia's own agenda

and interests in play.

In mid-September, Russia hosted 6,000 attendees from more than 60 countries at the EEF, including, for the first time, Chinese President Xi Jinping. The largest foreign delegations came from China, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia. The venue was Vladivostok, headquarters of the Russian Pacific Fleet and administrative center of Primorsky Krai, a region in the Far Eastern Federal District.

Formed in 2014, the EEF has since become an im-

Dr. David Scott is a regular presenter on Indo-Pacific geopolitics at the NATO Defense College in Rome and a prolific writer. He can be reached at davidscott366@outlook.com

portant part of Russia's regional diplomacy. Putin's official welcome stressed that the theme of this year's event, 'The Far East: Expanding the Range of Possibilities', reflected Russians' aspirations "to see Russia more closely integrated into the economic network of the huge Asia-Pacific region."

The event had a range of technical and business themes, but Russia's aspiration to position itself in the region in a more active and maritime way by leveraging its huge energy reserves was apparent in the various sessions under the heading of Business Programme Architecture. These included the examination of such issues as seeking a modern integration framework for the Asia-Pacific region, transport corridors in the Russian east, and how the new Asian geopolitics and political economy present opportunities for Russia, among a host of others.

These themes had a geopolitical rationale which emphasized the role of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, Russia itself, and the Russian Far East—Russia's window on the Asia Pacific.

Politically, the significance of the EEF also lay in

the high-level officials taking part. In addition to China's Xi, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, Prime Minister Lee Nak Yeon of South Korea, and President Khaltmaagiin Battulga of Mongolia were in attendance. These four leaders joined Putin on stage for the plenary session.

Regional credentials

The sight of the five leaders standing side by side was a striking visual image. Xi's attendance represented a marked upgrade from the previous relatively junior officials that represented China in years past. Ministers from North Korea (Kim Yong Jae), Vietnam (Nguyen Chi Dung) and India (Suresh Prabhu) also attended the forum. The United States was absent, partly on geographic grounds but also partly on political grounds—its absence enabled Russia to show its regional credentials as an Asian power.

At a time when Putin was again the recipient of strong criticism by the United Nations and Western nations over suspected Russian involvement in the



Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with South Korean President Moon Jae In at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on September 6.

Novichok poison attacks in the United Kingdom, the wide-ranging regional attendance at the EEF was a potent demonstration of Putin's diplomatic respectability in Asia.

Putin's speech at the plenary session was forceful. With regard to Russia's strategic goals and long-term policy, he told the audience that, "It is for the development of the Far Eastern economy that we organized this forum. Developing the Far East is an absolute priority for us in the Asia-Pacific Region, for achieving the strategic goals that we set, for a breakthrough."

The importance of the Russia-China partnership was also reiterated by Putin, as well as by Xi. Putin emphasized that, "the Far East should fully attain its logistic potential" if Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway and the Northern Sea Route around Russia were used, which "would dramatically increase the transport connectivity of the Asia-Pacific region and Europe."

In effect, this was a subtle attempt to show that China's Belt and Road Initiative was not the only suitable vehicle for Asia-Pacific countries. With his eye on the Korean peninsula, Putin also chose to

emphasize trilateral infrastructure projects between Russia, North Korea, and South Korea.

In a dramatic on-stage diplomatic twist (yet one that was obviously rehearsed), Putin turned to Abe and commented, "a simple thought dawned on me right here and now: We have been in talks for 70 years. Shinzo suggested changing approaches, therefore, it has dawned on me that we should sign a peace treaty, not now, but before the year is out, and without any preconditions."

"Xi and Putin are aware that neither Russia nor China will be able to stand up to the Americans alone."

On the surface this appeared to have been a dramatic attempt to sidestep the previous blockage of the Kuril Islands dispute standing in the way of a formal signing of a Peace Treaty between the two countries. Though this suggestion garnered applause from the audience, Abe offered only a smile in response.

It was revealing that Sergey Luzyanin's piece in the



photo: Dean Karalekas

Trains that ply the Trans-Siberian Railway prepare to leave Yekaterinburg for parts farther East.



Putin observes the Vostok-2018 military manoeuvres from the command post while touring the Tsugol training range in the Trans-Baikal Territory.

EEF 2018 Official Magazine titled “Russia and China need each other to create a new world” provided a Russian perspective on the Russia-China relationship. He wrote that their two countries have a common rival in the United States. This is not spoken of out loud, Luzyanin averred, but Xi and Putin are aware that neither Russia nor China will be able to stand up to the Americans alone.

Luzyanin added that Russia is an important supplier for China, especially in energy. In turn, China provides Russia with advanced, high-quality technologies and serves as a potential investor. Despite these positive signs, the relationship remains hampered by the fact that negotiations with China are always extremely difficult, according to Luzyanin, and that Russia has set a high bar in the military sphere that China has not yet reached.

When Russia opened the EEF it was from a position of economic weakness vis-à-vis China; desperately trying to position the Russian Far East within the booming Asia-Pacific economic stimulus and cross-continental connectivity projects. However, the first day of the forum coincided with the beginning of the Vostok-2018 exercises, where the Russian armed forces illustrated Moscow’s position of military

strength in its relationship with China, and indeed with the region.

As soon as the EEF drew to a close, Putin flew immediately from Vladivostok to view the massed forces in action. Previous Vostok exercises were held in 2010 and 2014. The land exercises took place around Tsugol, close to Russia’s frontier with Mongolia and Manchuria, and involved Russia’s Central Army and Eastern Army. Further ground maneuvers took place from Vladivostok up to the border with Manchuria. Naval exercises took place in the north-west Pacific, in waters off the Kamchatka Peninsula, and involved units from Russia’s Northern Fleet and Pacific Fleet.

Increasing participation

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that 300,000 troops, 36,000 military vehicles, 1,000 aircraft and 80 warships would be taking part in the Vostok-2018 exercises. Vostok-2018 marked a ramping up of Russian military power on show and represented the largest Russian exercise held since 1981, involving around one-third of its military strength. Previously, Vostok-2014 involved around 100,000 troops, 120 aircraft and 70 warships; while



An F-35 conducts in-flight refueling with a KC-130 during Exercise Valiant Shield.

Vostok-2010 saw the participation of just 20,000 troops, 70 warplanes and 30 warships.

China's participation in Vostok-2018 consisted of around 3,200 elite forces from the Northern Theatre Command, as well as 30 aircraft and 900 pieces of military hardware. This included the Type 99, a third-generation main battle tank—China's most advanced tank, which has rarely been deployed abroad.

Speaking at the Tsugol site, Putin argued that, "Russia is a peaceful state, we do not have and cannot have any aggressive plans," and he congratulated the forces on a job well done, saying, "you demonstrated the military prowess, showed your capability to successfully counter potential military threats." The key question of course was where, for Putin, was the perceived threat coming from? Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov painted a picture of a hostile international environment, arguing that, "the country's ability to defend itself in the current international situation, which is often aggressive and unfriendly towards our country, means it is justified" in holding Vostok-2018.

A 31 August Pravda article by Lyuba Lulko titled Russia to share its Syrian experience with China during Vostok 2018 war games, offered a hint as to the geopolitical importance of the exercises. Lulko wrote

that, "for Russia, it is important to show that China is an economic component of the new world, whereas Russia is the military one. Mongolia's participation in the drills is a real breakthrough that opens the doors to inner and eastern Asia for Russia."

As to the nature of the exercises, Lulko pulled no punches, "these are not just common maneuvers, but large-scale exercises with offensive goals."

The purpose of the exercise was two-fold: In part, it was explicitly to test assets and command-and-control capabilities; but also it was to send messages. The first and most basic message was to Russia and to the world: Russia continues to be an effective, strong Great Power, a military power of the first order. Moreover, as Russian naval units converged from the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Arctic Ocean into the Bering Sea—waters which face the US state of Alaska—the naval exercises sent a message to the United States.

Messages were also being sent to China. Speculation has arisen that China was invited precisely because the location of the land maneuvers looks, at first glance, China-related. Indeed, there has been some speculation that the Vostok exercises had China in mind as the envisaged potential enemy in the East.

Russia's invitation for China to attend the Vostok-2018 exercise may well have been that it would have looked too obvious not to have invited Beijing, and would have damaged their political strategic partnership which seeks to resist US-led pressure.

The large scale of the Vostok-2018 land exercise can be seen as a way for Moscow to maintain Russian credibility in the face of a rising China, and to avoid asymmetric power disadvantages in their relationship. Moscow may also be using the Vostok-2018 exercises to showcase its continuing strength in weapons technology, and thereby head-off cuts in Chinese purchases of Russian defense equipment.

Chairwoman of the Federation Council Valentina Matviyenko personally delivered a letter from Putin to Kim Jong Un during her 7-10 September official visit to North Korea. The letter included an invitation for Kim to visit Russia. This would complement the summit between Putin and South Korea's president, held in June 2018. Certainly, Putin has the opportunity to present Russia as perhaps a more equal partner in economic ventures with South Korea and North Korea, which in different ways may have mixed feel-

ings about becoming economically dependent on a strong China.

Putin's push for a summit meeting with Kim Jong Un is an explicit message to the United States that Russia should not be ignored in the affairs on the Korean peninsula. Just as importantly, it is an implicit message to China that Russia shares a land frontier with North Korea, and should not be ignored in Beijing's overt push for a privileged relationship with Pyongyang. It was announced that Kim was ready to make the visit to Russia, to be arranged before the end of the year. Observers will wait with interest to see the results of this new element in regional diplomacy.

In the meantime, Moscow hosted bilateral talks on 9-10 October between Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov and North Korea's Vice-Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui. The two were then joined by China's Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou for further Russia-led trilateral discussion on the Korean peninsula. The dispatch of a Russian Foreign Ministry team to North Korea on 23 October maintained this newly established trend of a more active Russian diplomatic involvement in Korean affairs. ■



photo: Kremlin.ru

Russian, Chinese, and Mongolian military forces participate in Exercise Vostok-2018.