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EAST ASIAN SUMMIT AND RUSSIA: LONG-AWAITED INVITATION

Everyone who follows Russian foreign policy in East Asia (let alone the people actually formulating and implementing that policy) will remember the year 2010 for a long time to come. Russia's diplomatic activity in the region was unprecedented. It culminated at the end of the year, when President Medvedev visited China, Vietnam, South Korea, and India, attended the second Russia-ASEAN summit in Hanoi and the G-20 summit in Seoul, and then met the leaders of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries in Yokohama. Other landmark events included Russia's accession to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the first conference of the defense ministers representing the ASEAN countries and the organization's eight dialogue partners, attended by the chief of the Russian General Staff. Finally, there was the official invitation to join the East Asia Summit (EAS), which Russia received simultaneously with the United States.

The first annual meeting of the EAS was held in 2005. The event is now attended by top officials of the 10 ASEAN countries and their counterparts from China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Russia officially said that it would like to join even before the first annual meeting was held. But its application was declined on the grounds that Russia's links with ASEAN (which determines the agenda and the list of participants at EAS meetings) were not yet "substantive" enough. Moscow was given to understand that it would be offered membership of the EAS only after a greater level of trade and economic cooperation has been achieved between Russia and countries in Southeast Asia. At least, that is how most commentators interpreted ASEAN's position at the time. A similar view, with some reservations, was expressed by Nikolay Maletin, a Professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), who has studied ASEAN since its inception. He detailed his views in an article headlined "Why We Are not a Member of the EAS" (2009).¹ However, looking at the dynamics of Russian-ASEAN relations and the new trends in the regional balance of power, Maletin, a highly reputable expert, predicted that Russia might receive the invitation to join EAS fairly soon. That prediction has now come to pass.

Has Russia's trade with the EAS countries increased in the five years since the organization was set up? It has, but not in any radical way. In terms of investment in the region's economies Russia is still lagging far behind the United States, Japan, China, the EU, and lately even India. The gap is wide and completely unacceptable.

So why, despite all these failings, is Russia still being invited to join the EAS (moreover, invited simultaneously with the Americans, who until recently did not show the slightest inclination for membership)? The answer to that question requires a brief foray into the background. And we are going to have to start with things only indirectly related to Russia.

EAST-ASIAN REGIONALISM: WITH AMERICA, OR WITHOUT?

During the momentous shifts of the late 1980s-early 1990s, countries in East Asia were struggling with the question of what role the United States should play in their common future. Arguments in favor of preserving close ties with Washington included the habit of relying on American military and political security guarantees, and easy access to the U.S. market. These two benefits



C O M M E N T A R Y

underpinned first the Japanese miracle, and then all the other economic miracles in East Asia. But there were also strong arguments against including America in the new integration schemes that were already being drawn up. The most vocal proponent of that second approach was the longstanding prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. He argued that in the new international situation Washington would never make the kind of concessions to its regional partners that were possible in the era of confrontation between the two superpowers. The United States would always see countries in the region as junior partners, forcing its own priorities and values down their throats and preventing East Asia from making the full use of its potential accumulated over the previous decades of successful modernization. The proposed solution was to respond to the competitive challenge posed by the united Europe and North America by creating a separate, purely Asian alliance.

In the end, Mahathir failed in his bid to launch the so-called East Asia Economic Grouping. The winners' euphoria after the end of the Cold War helped the Americans and their closest allies to push through an alternative plan of rapid trade liberalization in the framework of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The prize awarded to the ASEAN countries in return for signing up was the decisive collective vote in any internal APEC debates. That is how ASEAN acquired its central position in APEC and all the subsequent East Asian initiatives. Any attempts to question that central position are now being seen by ASEAN as a direct threat to itself.

By offering such an incentive to ASEAN, the Americans clearly hoped that their old partner would remain as docile as before, and toe the American line at APEC. But things turned out rather differently. By the mid-1990s ASEAN and certain other participants had succeeded in turning the APEC forum into a talking shop that did not produce any firm decisions regarding the timing or terms of the hoped-for transition to free trade. But after the joining of the four Indochina countries (the process began in 1995) the organization started to display clear signs of growing confidence. The practical manifestations of that confidence included the creation of the regional ASEAN Regional Forum on Security (ARF) in 1994 and ASEM in 1996. That latter platform was aimed at pursuing dialogue with the EU bypassing the United States. The final stroke was the admission of Burma to ASEAN in 1997, despite all the Western criticisms leveled at the country's military regime.

The chain of events and achievements that were very flattering to the ASEAN countries' ego was broken by the Asian crisis. The financial, economic, political, social, and psychological damage wrought by the upheavals of the late 1990s was compounded by the feeling that in the American establishment the crisis were seen as something the stubborn Asians had brought on themselves. These suspicions were further strengthened by the policies of the International Monetary Fund: the austerity measures the IMF had imposed on the Asian economies in return for loans had only exacerbated the consequences of the crisis rather than ameliorating them. Mahathir's predictions of how America would behave once it had established itself as the unrivalled sole superpower were coming to pass right before our eyes. No wonder then that the Malaysian prime minister's ideas were discussed with renewed interest at the time. In December 1997 ASEAN held its first summit in the ASEAN + 3 format, the three being the economic powerhouses of northeast Asia: China, Japan, and South Korea. Very soon such meetings became a regular occurrence. At the turn of the century the rapprochement between ASEAN and the big Asian three produced the Chiang Mai Initiative (2000) aimed at protecting the Asian economies from the depredations of currency speculators.² There were also discussions on creating a free trade zone in the ASEAN + 3 format. It seemed that the list of participants in the purely East Asian bloc had already been decided, and outsiders need not bother.

CHINA'S RISE AND ITS SIDE EFFECTS

For ASEAN as a whole and especially for countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, the Asian crisis will always be synonymous with tragedy. For China, however, that calamity brought unexpected benefits. Having weathered the financial storm, the country's economy began to grow even more rapidly. China also showed itself willing to help the victims of the crisis, and reinforced its reputation as the engine of the region's economy. Trade between China and its southern neighbors was growing at a break-neck pace. In foreign policy, meanwhile, Beijing was increasingly developing a taste for leadership and multilateral diplomacy, which it had previously lacked. All of that combined produced the impression of China's peaceful offensive

in Southeast Asia, making it the main contender for the role of regional leader, especially as America's standing in that part of the world continued to decline.³

So what was ASEAN's reaction to such a trend? On the one hand, China's unprecedented achievements had won it grudging respect. Many had come to believe that, with China at the helm, the region's place in the sun was secure. But on the other hand, China was breaking so far ahead of the rest of the pack that even the nimblest of the ASEAN economies had trouble keeping up. That fueled concerns that the region's existing economic as well as political balance might very soon be irreversibly disturbed. After only three or four years it became clear that ASEAN's attempts to treat China, Japan, and South Korea as equals, in the hope that in the great multilateral scheme of things the big three will somehow balance each other out, was not really working. China was simply becoming far too powerful for that. The ASEAN + 3 format was increasingly looking like ASEAN + 1, with China outweighing all the other players put together.

And what of America? The neo-cons in George W. Bush's administration were gyrating between the pretence that ASEAN was hardly worth any attention whatsoever and the portrayal of the ASEAN-China tandem as a deadly sin. At the height of the anti-terrorism campaign Washington attempted to take the East-Asian security remit away from the ARF and give it to APEC. Burma was chosen to play the role of the scapegoat within ASEAN (its main transgression being very close ties with China rather than any human rights violations). Annual conferences of ASEAN foreign ministers, their meetings with dialogue partners, ASEAN summits and similar events were accompanied by laments in the Western media that the organization was turning into a talking shop. The concerted nature of that PR effort gave reason to believe that ASEAN was being prodded to make the right choice between America and China, and that woe betide it should it choose wrongly.⁴

Such an ultimatum was completely unacceptable to ASEAN. In purely pragmatic terms, both the United States and China were indispensable to countries in the region as business partners. Another reason was the deep-seated Asian tradition of looking for a compromise, the middle way between the political extremes. Rather than being scared rigid by the new challenges, ASEAN began an energetic search for a way forward. In the early 2000s it unveiled a plan for the ASEAN Community, a union designed using the EU model but with a clear understanding that simply copying that model would be pointless. There was also a clear realization that a new step was needed towards integration on the scale of the entire East Asia. Such a step would make it more difficult for China to become the sole regional leader—but it would also avoid giving the impression that ASEAN was simply yielding to American pressure, and doing so right at the time when the Bush administration was showing its true colors. Those intentions led to the decision to convene the EAS, portrayed as the beginning of the process that would culminate in the creation of the East Asian Community. The countries already participating in the ASEAN + 3 format were joined by India, Australia, and New Zealand. These three new participants (each having a fairly close relationship with the United States) were brought in thanks largely to the efforts of Japan, despite the distinct lack of enthusiasm in Beijing. However, the ASEAN + 3 format, in which China was playing such a prominent role, was in no way being phased out. Washington, meanwhile, continued to ignore the ASEAN + 3 meetings, making the point that membership of such a club was not a privilege it cared for. What was the purpose of such a display? Was it to demonstrate that any discussion in which America was not included—especially with ASEAN playing the central role—was doomed to failure?

It is not quite clear what exactly Washington had hoped to achieve. Moscow, meanwhile, chose a very different tactic and applied for EAS membership right away. As an official ASEAN dialogue partner and a signatory of the Bali Treaty on friendship and cooperation in Southeast Asia since 2004, Russia met at least two of the three criteria for EAS membership. The third criterion, which required substantive ties with ASEAN, was a bit of a problem. But there was—and still is—no clear definition of “substantive”, so the matter ultimately required only the common political will of the ASEAN members. So why was that political will lacking only five years ago? An honest answer to that question has been given by Rodolfo Severino, who served as ASEAN Secretary General in 1998–2002: “If Russia were to become a full member, that would have only emphasized the absence of the United States to those who believe that Washington should be part of the East Asian process.”⁵



KEVIN RUDD'S AND YUKIO HATUYAMA'S FALSE STARTS

Even before the EAS members had a chance properly to agree their agenda and say something to the world of their intentions, they were facing the same accusations as ASEAN. The new body was written off as a talking shop unable to do anything useful in practice. What is worse, even the participants themselves seemed to be pulling in different directions regarding the formats of future East Asian integration. Some of the most off-beat ideas were aired by two heads of state who would soon lose their jobs in their home countries. Australia's Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd, who served as prime minister in 2007–2010, took the whole region by surprise by calling for the creation of an Asia-Pacific Community that would include all the large players, such as the United States, China, and Russia. Japan's Democratic Party leader Yukio Hatoyama, who led the government in 2009–2010, announced another proposal that seemed quite superfluous. He envisioned a new East Asian Community that would include exactly the same members as the EAS—though he did later add the United States.⁶

Some might think that America's old allies were merely doing their best to please Washington—but that impression is superficial. According to some analysts, Rudd's true purpose was to keep U.S.–Chinese rivalry contained within the new organization, thus preventing it from spiraling out of control and giving Australia the role of an honest broker between the two great powers. Hatoyama, on the other hand, had won the election in 2009 riding the wave of popular discontent over the Liberal Democrats' kowtowing to America. But his proposal was a challenge to China, which wanted the future East Asian Community to retain the ASEAN + 3 format. Hatoyama's calculation was that the participation of India, Australia, and New Zealand would improve Japan's chances of remaining a regional leader.

In clarifying their positions Rudd and Hatoyama both paid lip-service to ASEAN, but their initiatives were not well received in the 10 ASEAN capitals. No matter how hard both of them tried to couch their initiatives in acceptable terms, it was clear that ASEAN would lose its central role in regional projects if either of the two leaders had his way.

Neither Rudd nor Hatoyama had the time to take his initiative forward, and not just because both soon lost their jobs. The overall objective of the two initiatives was to steer the process started by ASEAN in a somewhat different direction. But both proposals were necessarily vague and muddled, i.e. both suffered the same flaws that were excoriated by ASEAN's critics. Such flaws were largely inevitable: Rudd and Hatoyama were forced to keep maneuvering, sometimes coming very close to outright U-turns, because the establishment in their own countries was increasingly being split between pro-American groups and proponents of closer ties with China.⁷

After the two lost their jobs, ASEAN was able to take a short breather from its constant struggle to keep its central role in East Asian affairs. But the problems and challenges that had given rise to Rudd's and Hatoyama's initiatives did not just go away. Meanwhile, at the end of the first decade of the new century the world was in the throes of a global crisis, and the country where that crisis had originated was behaving itself rather differently under its new Democratic president than under his Republican predecessor.

AMERICAN COUNTERATTACK IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Although the Cold War as we knew it in the second half of the twentieth century is now a thing of the past, the military-political instruments and stratagems of that era are still very much in use. The George W. Bush administration had demonstrated that to preserve America's status as the world's sole superpower, that administration was prepared to start as many as three new Cold Wars at once: with the Islamic world, with China, and with Russia. By failing to achieve anything close to a decisive advantage on any of the three fronts, and by presiding over the deepest economic crisis in the United States since the Great Depression, the Republicans had essentially laid the foundations for the Obama phenomenon. The new U.S. president's declarations of a Reset in America's relations with critically important partners, such as the Muslim world, China, and Russia, proved so timely that the Nobel committee gave Obama the Peace Prize without even waiting for him to actually deliver on his promises.

The new administration simply could not lose by proclaiming East Asia's special significance to the United States and indicating its willingness to work towards a mutually acceptable

arrangement with Beijing. Ironically, China's ability to keep its economy in rude health even as some of the developed countries are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy is beginning to work against it in some ways. So, incidentally, is Beijing's ambitious program of bulking up its armed forces. Some of China's neighbors are looking at the rising giant with growing unease. They seem to have already decided that as time goes by China will become increasingly overbearing, because that is how rising giants are always supposed to behave. The slightest hint of such an attitude on the part of Beijing is now being viewed with exaggerated concern by its neighbors, who want to limit the potential troublemaker's ability to do damage. At this moment, the United States is the only power whose active presence in the region can counterbalance China. Hence the enthusiasm with which the region has taken the glad tidings of the Americans' return.

Are the Asians not worried by the prospect of the United States and China teaming up as a G2 to become the undisputed co-rulers of the whole region? From ASEAN's point of view, such a scenario is highly unlikely. Southeast Asians have had plenty of time to study the Americans and the Chinese. They know the limits of any potential rapprochement between the two great powers. To make sure they have a say in their own region's affairs, ASEAN countries need the relations between Washington and Beijing to be somewhere in the middle between hostility and an outright alliance. The preferred model would be based on clear but not unbridgeable differences between the two powers, which the ASEAN nations could exploit for their own benefit without running any serious risks.

That, in fact, is exactly the model of relations Obama has been pursuing with China since 2009. And that is part of the reason why America's foreign-policy counterattack in Southeast Asia has been going relatively well. In a very short period the United States has managed to step up bilateral ties with almost every single ASEAN nation, including even Burma, where new approaches are being sought, but with special emphasis on Indonesia and Vietnam. Washington has also made plenty of gestures to demonstrate its support for ASEAN as a significant regional actor. The practical steps include America's decision to join the Bali Treaty, which, as we have already established, is a necessary step for anyone wishing to join the debate concerning the new regional architecture now underway at the East Asia Summit.⁸

The motives for inviting America to join the EAS are therefore quite clear. But why is Russia being invited as well? Could it be simply because, after half a century of confrontation between the two superpowers, people are used to thinking of Russia whenever they think of America? Or is it just a matter of political correctness, and the Asians' unwillingness to keep us in the waiting room for too long? Such considerations may have played a part—but when the time comes to make decisions, they usually recede into the background.

SO WHY IS RUSSIA BEING INVITED?

Let us proceed from the opposite direction and discuss the conditions under which Russia's participation in the EAS would have been completely impossible.


First, Russia would never have been invited if the Russian political and economic trends were clearly at odds with what is going on in East Asia. We may criticize our own democracy and market economy, but it is important to recognize that we have laid the foundations of both. We may not be happy with our economic growth or government institutions—but it would be unfair to ignore the fact that our economy has been growing steadily since the turn of the century, that the chaos of the first post-Soviet decade is now a thing of the past, and that the country is being governed better than it used to be. Our policy of modernization is far from perfect, but that policy is now at the core of our national strategy. All of this means that Russia is now very much in tune with the rest of the region, unlike 10 years ago.

Second, we would never have been invited to join the East Asian cooperation process had our foreign policy been based on confrontation, hostility, or threats against any of the region's nations. East Asia already has plenty of potential conflicts just waiting to break out; it does not need any more. Russia is welcome in the region precisely because of its obvious interest in maintaining peace. Without peace, East Asia will never be able to keep its economic dynamism that has made countries in the region attractive partners for development projects in Russia's own Far East and indeed for the modernization of the entire Russian economy.



Third, East Asia definitely does not need a new actor whose huge territory, rich resources, and solid military capability are not backed by an independent foreign policy. The explanation is simple. In a situation where the main regional tensions lie along the U.S.–China axis, such an actor would, sooner or later, inevitably succumb to the temptation of throwing its weight behind one of these two great powers in pursuit of short-term gains. Such a turn of events would contribute to regional and possibly even global polarization, because for all its political dependence, that actor would still remain a very significant power in itself.⁹ Are we to understand, then, that the invitation to join the EAS is the East Asian nations' vote of confidence in Russia's independent foreign policy? It appears that Asia has appreciated no less than Europe the difficult but necessary demonstrations of Russia's independence such as the Munich speech or the choice Moscow made in August 2008 in the North Caucasus. East Asia needs another powerful and independent actor on the region's political scene, especially in the crucially important middle part of it run by ASEAN.

If all the above assumptions are correct, the answer to the question of why Russia has been invited to join the EAS is clear. Russia is seen as a nation that is not alien to East Asia and is generally compatible with the rest of the region. It is seen as a country that can add to the region's economic momentum, and a power whose political position will help to preserve the existing balance and peace in East Asia.

There is certainly more to be said about the motives for extending the invitation to join the EAS to Russia. But what we have already said is enough to make the following conclusion. That invitation is not an inconsequential decision made on the spur of the moment. The decision is profoundly logical, because it is based on the compatibility of our own long-term national aspirations with the interests of the region as a whole. 

NOTES

¹ Maletin Nikolay, "Why We Are not a Member of the EAS," *South-East Asia: Topical Problems of Development* (in Russian), No. XIII (SEA 2008–2009), M. (2009), pp. 49–65.

² V.B. Amirov, "History and Evolution of the Chiang Mai Initiative," *International Affairs*, No. 10 (2010), pp. 49–55.

³ Victor Sumsky, "China's Peace Offensive in Southeast Asia and Russia's Regional Imperatives," in *Russia–ASEAN Relations: New Directions* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 53–69.

⁴ Victor Sumsky, "The Art of the Possible in ASEAN's Future," *Global Asia* 3, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 97–100.

⁵ R.C. Severino, *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the Former ASEAN Secretary-General* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 272.

⁶ J. Rathus, "Squaring the Japanese and Australia Proposals for an East Asian and Asia Pacific Community: Is America In or Out?," *East Asia Forum: Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific*, November 4, 2009, <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/11/04/squaring-the-japanese-and-australia-proposals-for-an-east-asian-and-asia-pacific-community-is-america-in-or-out/>>, last accessed February 14, 2011.

⁷ P. Symonds, "WikiLeaks Cables Expose U.S. Hostility to Rudd's Asia Pacific Community Plan," *World Socialist Web Site*, January 31, 2010, <<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/dec2010/rudd-d31.shtml>>, last accessed February 14, 2011.

⁸ "Special Focus: America Re-engages Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, No. 3 (December 2010).

⁹ Victor Sumsky, "Russian Modernization, Geopolitics of Southeast Asia and the ASEAN Factor," *International Affairs* No. 10 (2010), pp. 15–20.