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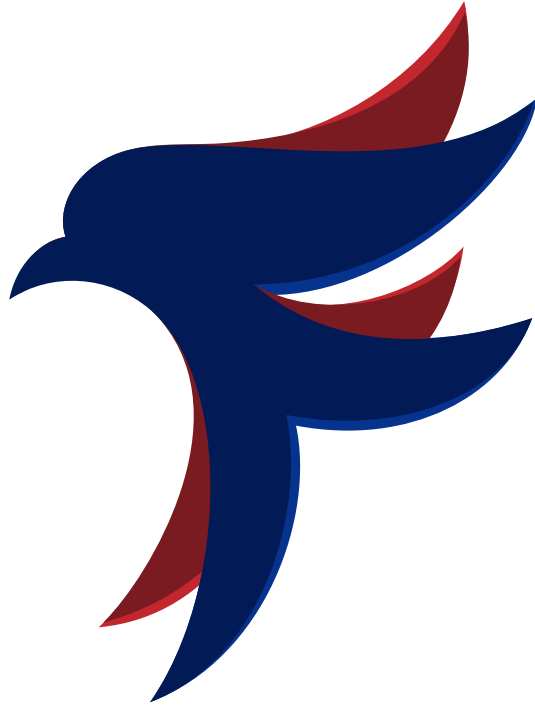


RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS

RUSSIA'S STRUGGLE TO GAIN INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Bennett Murray





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RUSSIA'S STRUGGLE TO GAIN INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the United States and People's Republic of China jostle for influence among member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Russian Federation has also declared the bloc a priority. Southeast Asian nations, in turn, would like third powers to counterbalance Beijing and Washington in the region. However, Russia has not made a huge impression in the bloc since its first summit with ASEAN in 2005. Economic success has been mostly limited to bilateral trade centered around arms sales, while security partnerships have not been forthcoming. Part of the problem is that Russia lacks historic ties in its former Cold War rivals, which are also ASEAN's largest economic powerhouses, to lean on. More crucially, Southeast Asian nations perceive Moscow as deferential to Beijing's geopolitical ambitions in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is once again a key battleground in global great power competition three decades after the end of the Cold War. As the United States and People's Republic of China compete for influence, the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), familiar with great power competition from decades of Cold War wrestling, seek to strike balances. They look favorably upon emerging third powers, which, in turn, see the area as ripe for increased influence. India, whose Look East Policy has evolved into a more dynamic Act East Policy under Narendra Modi in recent years, is increasingly serving that role.¹ Abe Shinzo's Japan, which is quietly reasserting itself as a military power in the Indo-Pacific, has also managed to preserve its influence and interests in Southeast Asia during China's rise while projecting itself as a patron in less developed economies.²

One noticeable omission from the prominent powers making headway in Southeast Asia is Russia. While Moscow once competed with Washington for influence in the region and later competed with Beijing from the 1950s through the end of the Cold War, post-Soviet Russia has been largely absent from the region despite nominally listing engagement with ASEAN as a priority in its pronouncements.³ The only exception is arms sales, an industry in which Russia is still the biggest actor in the region.⁴ The lack of progress stems from two main causes: (1) a lack of interest in Russia's offerings apart from defense sector deals and (2) suspicions in Southeast Asian capitals that the Kremlin is deferential to China.

HISTORY OF ENGAGEMENT

Upon the formation of the Russian Federation in 1992, the Kremlin had no friends within ASEAN. Indonesia, its largest member, was still run by the pro-U.S. strongman Suharto, who rose to power in the 1960s by overthrowing left-leaning President Sukarno and killing hundreds of thousands of accused communists. The Philippines, the primary Cold War ally of the United States in Southeast Asia, had removed the staunchly anti-communist dictator Ferdinand Marcos only six years prior, and, to this day, the government remains at war with the communist New People's Army rebels. Nor was Thailand particularly forthcoming, having contended with a communist insurgency until 1983. Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad and Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew had always been decisively anti-communist.

The silver lining for the new Russia was that the Soviet Union had never poisoned the well in relations with these countries to the extent that the People's Republic of China had. The chief patron of anti-government communist movements in these countries was Beijing, not Moscow. Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Indonesia were established upon the latter state's formation in 1950 and,

1 Jaishankar, Dhruva. "Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific." Brookings Institution, October 24, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/acting-east-india-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

2 Gallagher, Erin. "Japan's Enduring Value to Southeast Asia." Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 31, 2018. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/01/japans-enduring-value-southeast-asia/>.

3 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

4 Wezeman, Pieter D., et al. "Arms Flows to Southeast Asia." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2019. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/1912_arms_flows_to_south_east_asia_wezeman.pdf.



ASEAN

ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST
ASIAN NATIONS



1. Thailand



2. Myanmar



3. Laos



4. Vietnam



5. Cambodia



6. Malaysia



7. Brunei



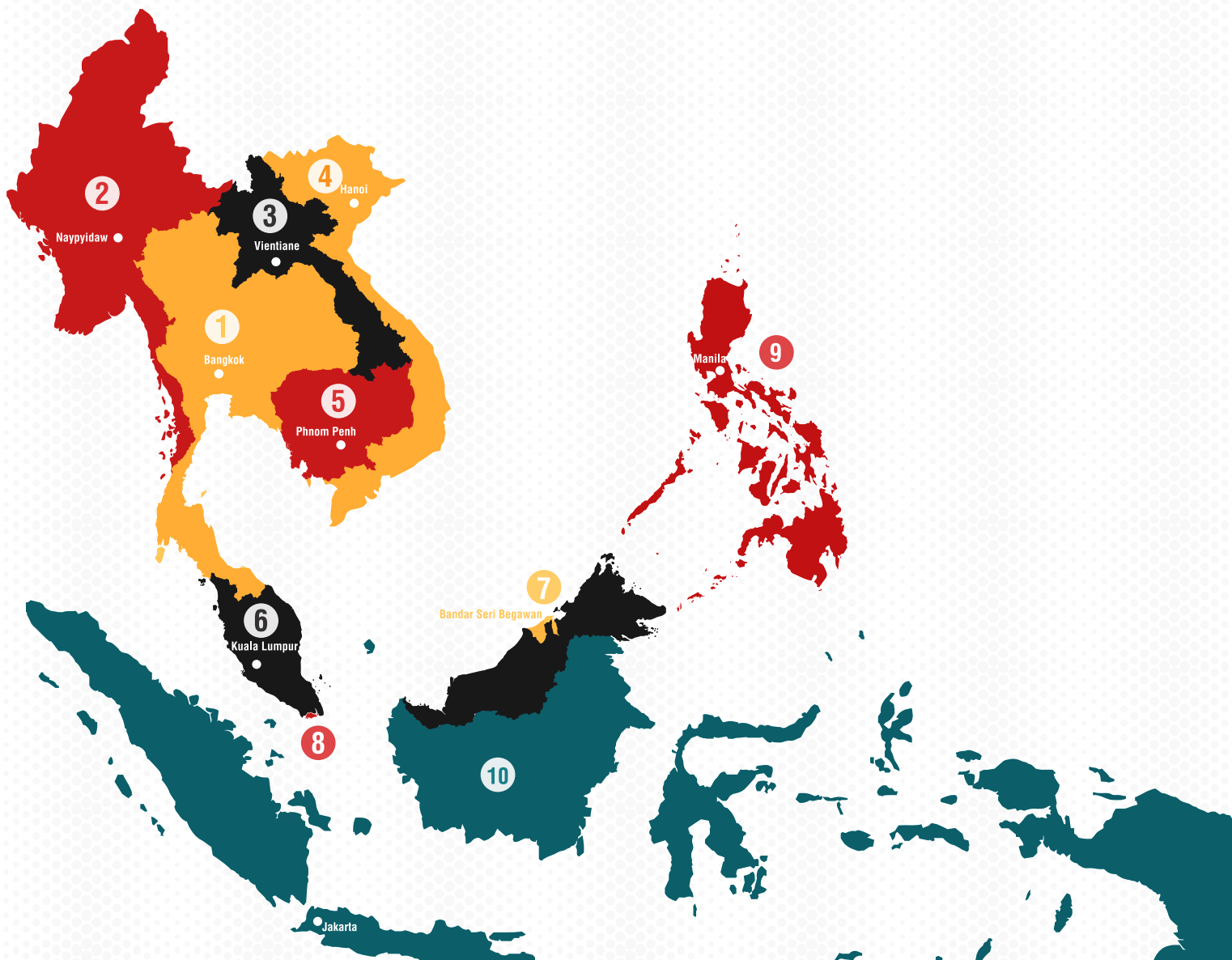
8. Singapore



9. Philippines



10. Indonesia



RUSSIA LACKED THE RESOURCES AND WILL IN THE 1990S TO TEND TO ITS RELATIONSHIPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. AS IT STRUGGLED TO MAINTAIN INFLUENCE EVEN WITHIN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AMID TURBULENCE AT HOME, ASEAN WAS NOT A PRIORITY.

although strained during the Suharto years, were never severed. The situation was similar in Thailand, which had terminated ties in 1917 but recognized the Soviet Union from 1941 onward. Malaysia and Singapore established relations with the USSR in 1967 and 1968, respectively, and the Philippines, the last holdout, formally established ties in 1976. While the Russian Federation encountered institutional mistrust and a lack of Soviet-era diplomatic legwork to build upon, it faced little outright hostility.

Friendly faces for Russia appeared in ASEAN starting in the mid-1990s when former Soviet client states in the region joined the bloc. Vietnam, the Soviet Union's primary ally in Southeast Asia, joined ASEAN in 1995. Given the strong ties between Hanoi and Moscow—

an entire generation of Vietnamese experts and leaders had studied within Warsaw Pact member-states—Vietnam was the closest thing that the new Russia had to an ally in the 1990s outside of the post-Soviet space. Laos, also a single-party communist state, joined the bloc in 1997, as did Cambodia—whose leader Hun Sen was installed by Hanoi during the 1980s Vietnamese occupation—in 1998.

Russia, however, lacked the resources and will in the 1990s to tend to its relationships in Southeast Asia. As it struggled to maintain influence even within the former Soviet Union amid turbulence at home, ASEAN was not a priority. It would not be until 2005 that Russia would hold its first summit with ASEAN as a bloc, and while the event was supposed to take place on an annual basis, the second one did not occur until 2010.⁵ The new decade, however, was supposed to usher in a new era of Russian engagement in Southeast Asia.

THE TURN TO ASIA

To mark the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) summit in Vladivostok, the *Wall Street Journal* published a letter from President Vladimir Putin hailing a new era of Russian engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. “We view this dynamic region as the most important factor for the successful future of the whole country, as well as development of Siberia and the far east,” wrote Putin, adding that Russia was an “intrinsic part of the Asian-Pacific region.”⁶ While Putin included no specific mention of ASEAN in his article, the entire region was put on notice in Vladivostok that Russia aimed to be a full-fledged Pacific power.

⁵ “Joint Statement of the Second ASEAN-Russian Federation Summit.” Association of Southeast Asian Nations, October 30, 2010. https://asean.org/?static_post=joint-statement-of-the-second-asean-russian-federation-summit.

⁶ Putin, Vladimir. “An Asia-Pacific Growth Agenda.” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2012. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443847404577629312716242648>.



President Vladimir Putin (center) with Prime Minister of Lao People's Democratic Republic Thongloun Sisoulith (left) and Sultan of Brunei-Darussalam Hassanal Bolkiah (right) at a working breakfast of heads of delegations taking part in the Russia-ASEAN Summit. (kremlin.ru)

Earlier that year, on the day of his third presidential inauguration, Putin had issued a decree outlining Russia's foreign policy priorities. Under the Asia-Pacific subheading (listed third after the Commonwealth of Independent States and the European Union), the statement included a call for deepening Russia's role in the East Asia Summit (an annual ASEAN-led forum of 18 countries in the Asia-Pacific attached to the bloc's second biannual summit), as well as strengthening the Russia-ASEAN Dialogue. And, true to its historical relationship with Russia, Vietnam (along with India) was singled out as a strategic partner.⁷

The impetus for Russia's pivot east was accelerated by the events of 2014 in Ukraine. Struck by wide-ranging Western sanctions, the Kremlin saw the Asia-Pacific

as a region less beholden to the Western institutions that sought to punish Russia for its annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in the Donbas. While all the countries on Russia's European borders apart from Belarus implemented sanctions, Japan is the only Asian country to have done so. While Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia voted in favor of the March 2014 United Nations General Assembly resolution rejecting the legitimacy of the Crimean independence referendum (the rest abstained or were absent), they did not follow through with support for sanctions. Concern over Ukraine waned over the years; Singapore was the only ASEAN member in December 2019 to approve a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Crimea (the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar voted no, with the rest abstaining).⁸

⁷ "Decree on Measures to Implement Foreign Policy Signed." Office of the President of the Russian Federation, May 7, 2012. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/476>.

⁸ "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine : Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly." United Nations Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767565?ln=en>; and "Problem of the Militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as Well as Parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov : Resolution / Adopted by the General Assembly." United Nations Digital Library, December 9, 2019. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3838477?ln=en>.

But Russia has failed to make a large imprint in Southeast Asia in the years since the 2012 Vladivostok summit. While total trade between ASEAN and China—the bloc’s largest trading partner—amounted to \$587.87 billion in 2018, trade with Russia was a mere \$19.8 billion.⁹ Its security cooperation is minimal, with Russian ambitions to return its navy to Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay rebuffed by Hanoi in 2016.¹⁰ Ambitious plans for military exercises between the Philippines and Russia have also failed to materialize.¹¹

It is also not clear how seriously the Kremlin takes strengthened ties with ASEAN and its member-states. Putin did not personally attend an East Asia Summit or its associated ASEAN summit until 2018, seven years after Russia joined the forum; President Barack Obama, whose country also joined in 2011, appeared five times, and President Donald Trump once.¹² Putin’s grandest engagement with ASEAN leaders was the Third ASEAN-Russia Summit in 2016, which he hosted in Sochi. Where Russia has found success within ASEAN, it has mostly been on a bilateral basis with individual member-states. The form that these bilateral relations take fits broadly into two groups: the formerly Eastern Bloc-aligned countries, most significantly Vietnam, where Russia is attempting to resurrect old alliances, and the historically U.S.-friendly states, where Russian inroads are relatively new.

THE OLD ALLIES: VIETNAM, LAOS, AND CAMBODIA

By the end of 1975, all of former French Indochina was under the control of communist governments. By far the most important was the newly reunified Vietnam, which had a population of almost 50 million and 3,500 kilometers of coastline on the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.¹³ It was Hanoi, whose government had received diplomatic recognition from Moscow during the French Indochinese war in 1950, through which Soviet power emanated in the region. Vientiane fell in line with the Eastern Bloc vis-à-vis Hanoi’s patronage upon the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in December 1975. Pol Pot kept Cambodia in the Chinese camp until January 7, 1979, when Vietnamese forces, retaliating against bloody Khmer Rouge border incursions, seized Phnom Penh and began a decade-long military occupation of the country. For the remainder of the Cold War, all three countries were Soviet client states.

The breakup of the Soviet Union left Moscow suddenly disengaged from the region. While relations with all three pattered on through


9 Huang Xilian. “China and ASEAN Doing Well on Economic, Trade Cooperation.” *Jakarta Post*, January 31, 2019. www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/01/31/china-and-asean-doing-well-on-economic-trade-cooperation.html; and *Overview Russian-ASEAN Dialogue Relations*. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, www.asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-ASEAN-Russia-Dialogue-Relations1.pdf.

10 “Vietnam Rules out Possibility Russian Navy May Return to Cam Ranh Harbor.” *TASS*, October 13, 2016. tass.com/defense/906348.

11 “Russian Warships Visit Philippines; Admiral Suggests Wider Exercises.” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/03/Asia/Russia-Philippines-Exercises-South-China-Sea/Index.html>, January 4, 2017; Robles, Raissa. “After Philippines Scraps U.S. Defence Pact, Rodrigo Duterte Eyes Russian Arms.” *South China Morning Post*, February 12, 2020, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3050323/duterte-eyes-russian-arms-after-scrapping-us-defence-pact; and “Russia, Indonesia Agree upon First Joint Navy Exercises Timeline.” *TASS*, March 13, 2020. tass.com/defense/1129775.

12 “Vladimir Putin Attended the Plenary Session of the 13th East Asia Summit (EAS).” Office of the President of the Russian Federation, November 15, 2018, www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59128.

13 “Vietnam – Population 1975.” *Country Economy*, www.countryeconomy.com/demography/population/vietnam?-year=1975.



THE BREAKUP OF THE SOVIET UNION LEFT MOSCOW SUDDENLY DISENGAGED FROM THE REGION. WHILE RELATIONS WITH ALL THREE PUTTERED ON THROUGH THE 1990S, THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION HAD CHANGED DRASTICALLY BY THE TIME RUSSIA WAS READY TO REASSERT ITSELF IN THE REGION IN THE LATE 2000S.

Press statements following Russian-Vietnamese talks. With General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong. (kremlin.ru)

VIETNAM DOES, HOWEVER, RETAIN IMPORTANT LINKS WITH RUSSIA, WITH THE KREMLIN MORE ENGAGED IN HANOI THAN IN ANY OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN CAPITAL.

the 1990s, the geopolitical situation had changed drastically by the time Russia was ready to reassert itself in the region in the late 2000s. Vietnam, which had simultaneously been a Cold War enemy of China and the United States, had reestablished ties with both nations in 1991 and 1995, respectively. Its relations with Washington continuously warmed as Russian-U.S. ties ebbed and flowed even before the events of 2014. The Russian naval base at Cam Ranh Bay, a legacy of the Cold War, was vacated in 2002 when it was made clear that Vietnam had no interest in renewing the lease, in line with its post-Cold War “three-no” policy: no alliances, no foreign bases, and no conspiring with one country to attack another. This policy

was reiterated in 2016 when, in response to suggestions in Russian media that Moscow was interested in returning to Cam Ranh Bay, a foreign ministry spokesman categorically dismissed the possibility. “We will . . . not allow any other countries to set up a military base in Vietnam,” said spokesman Le Hai Binh when foreign media raised the question of Russia’s return to the base at a press conference in Hanoi.¹⁴

Vietnam does, however, retain important links with Russia, with the Kremlin more engaged in Hanoi than in any other Southeast Asian capital. It has the distinction of being the first country to sign a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015. Russia has also continued to play the role of Vietnam’s primary arms supplier, having supplied 74% of Vietnamese weapons imports from 2015-2019.¹⁵ Deliveries have included six Kilo-class attack submarines (the largest such fleet in ASEAN), four Gepard-class frigates, and eight Tarantul V-class corvettes.¹⁶ Vietnam is also home to a military helicopter engine repair facility operated by the St. Petersburg-based aviation firm UEC-Klimov.¹⁷ In addition, Russia has played a modest, quiet role in Vietnam’s security strategy in the South China Sea, as Vietnam partnered with Rosneft for fossil fuels drilling within Beijing’s nine-dash line in the South China Sea against Chinese wishes (although Hanoi scrapped the drilling with Rosneft in July 2020, evidently under Chinese pressure).¹⁸

14 My, Pham. “Vietnam Says No to Foreign Military Base on Its Soil.” *Reuters*, October 13, 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-russia-military/vietnam-says-no-to-foreign-military-base-on-its-soil-idUSKCN12D15S#:~:text=Russia%2C%20which%20inherits%20a%20long,demise%20of%20the%20Soviet%20Union.

15 Wezeman, Pieter D, et al. “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019.” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf.

16 Chang, Felix K. “Resist and Reward: Vietnam’s Naval Expansion.” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 6, 2019, www.fpri.org/article/2019/11/resist-and-reward-vietnams-naval-expansion/.

17 “Rostec Opens Helicopter Engines Repair Center in Vietnam.” Rostec, April 22, 2019, rostec.ru/en/news/rostec-opens-helicopter-engines-repair-center-in-vietnam/;

18 Murray, Bennett. “Vietnam’s Strange Ally in Its Fight With China.” *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/01/vietnams-strange-ally-in-its-fight-with-china/; and My, Hang. “Rosneft VN canceled the contract with Noble in the East Sea: ‘Pressure from China, but different nature from the Repsol case.’” *BBC Vietnamese Service*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-53426783>.



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 2015. (government.ru)

Russia's long-term dominant status in Vietnamese procurement, however, has been in doubt since the United States lifted its long-standing arms embargo against Vietnam in 2016. Thus far, purchases from the United States have been minimal—among the most prominent sales were six Metal Shark patrol boats to the coast guard.¹⁹ Vietnam also bought the SPYDER air defense system from Israel in 2015, the first purchase of a non-Russian heavy weapons system (Israel now provides 12% of Vietnamese arms imports, the second largest source).²⁰ While Russian imports are unlikely to be supplanted by the United States in the short term, Russia's long-term status is not guaranteed.

Unlike the Kremlin's residual relationship with

Vietnam, ties between Russia and Cambodia became all but irrelevant after 1991. Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in 2015 was the highest-level official from the Kremlin to visit Phnom Penh since Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze made the trip in 1987.²¹ Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has ruled the country since 1985, only made his first trip to Russia in 2016 for the Russian-ASEAN summit in Sochi.²² Phnom Penh's lack of interest is partly attributable to Cambodia's own fixation on China, which has emerged as its principle patron. While other ASEAN countries are wary of China's growing influence, Cambodia under Hun Sen has enthusiastically waded into China's fledgling geopolitical camp and is not particularly interested in balancing power.

19 "United States Transfers Six Patrol Boats to Vietnam Coast Guard Region III ." U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, April 1, 2019, vn.usembassy.gov/pr20190401-united-states-transfers-six-patrol-boats-to-vietnam-coast-guard-region-iii/.

20 "Vietnam Buys Israeli-Made Air Defense Missile System, Radar." *Tuoi Tre*, October 30, 2015, tuoitrenews.vn/politics/31293/vietnam-buys-israelimade-air-defense-missile-system-radar; and Wezeman, Pieter D, et al. "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf.

21 Ramani, Samuel. "Cambodia: Russia's Gateway to ASEAN?" *The Diplomat*, June 24, 2016, thediplomat.com/2016/06/cambodia-russias-gateway-to-asean/.

22 Tsvetkov, Dmitry. "Consolidating Cooperation between Russia and Cambodia." *The Phnom Penh Post*, December 29, 2016, www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/consolidating-cooperation-between-russia-and-cambodia.

**TIES BETWEEN
RUSSIA AND LAOS ARE
SOMEWHERE BETWEEN
THOSE WITH VIETNAM
AND CAMBODIA.
UNLIKE CAMBODIA,
WHICH HAS OPTED FOR
ALMOST COMPLETE
CHINESE PATRONAGE,
LANDLOCKED LAOS HAS
BEEN CAUGHT BETWEEN
CHINA'S RISE AND ITS
HISTORIC RELATIONSHIP
WITH VIETNAM.**

Russia's historical links to Vietnam are also a political liability for Cambodia's ruling party owing to the complicated legacy of the 1980s. With Hun Sen installed by Vietnam amid its military occupation, brutal warfare continued in the countryside against a coalition of insurgents comprised of the Khmer Rouge, royalists, and nationalists. While the Khmer Rouge continued the fight until Pol Pot's death in 1998, the nationalists and royalists entered the political fold following the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. From the 1993 elections until 2018, when Cambodia became a de-facto single party state, the ruling Cambodian

People's Party's main contenders invariably had roots in the old royalist and nationalist factions.

The result of the continuation of the 1980s war in national politics has been a climate in which the opposition, seizing on centuries-old anti-Vietnamese sentiment, vigorously accuse Hun Sen of remaining a puppet of Hanoi. Prior to the 2018 clampdown on the opposition, alleged Vietnamese encroachment on the border and illegal immigration were made central issues in elections by the opposition.²³ Consequently, leaning on historical ties with Moscow derived from the period of Vietnam's occupation carries domestic political baggage that Hun Sen would rather not touch.

Ties between Russia and Laos are somewhere between those with Vietnam and Cambodia. Unlike Cambodia, which has opted for almost complete Chinese patronage, landlocked Laos has been caught between China's rise and its historic relationship with Vietnam. Eager to balance foreign powers, Laos hosted live-fire tank drills with Russia in 2019, the first of their kind in the region involving Russia in decades. While the drill was fairly small, involving some 500 soldiers in total, the event proved to be a successful instance of Russia attempting to exert at least a modicum of prestige in the region.²⁴

23 Wallace, Julia. "Cambodia Protests Unmask Anti-Vietnam Views." *Al Jazeera*, January 24, 2014, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/cambodia-protests-unmask-anti-vietnam-views-2014122101345786547.html.

24 "Troops from Russia, Laos Hold 1st Live-Fire Exercise in Laros 2019 Joint Drills." *TASS*, December 16, 2019, tass.com/defense/1099847.

THE OLD COLD WARRIORS: THE PHILIPPINES, THAILAND, INDONESIA, AND MALAYSIA

Outside of Russia's old sphere of influence, Russia has had some luck in courting traditional U.S. allies who find the Kremlin's hands-off approach to internal affairs refreshing, particularly when it comes to weapons purchases. This has been best encapsulated by the Philippines in the era of President Rodrigo Duterte. The former Davao City mayor inflamed the sensibilities of many in Washington with his wholesale war on drugs that has left thousands dead in extrajudicial killings. The drug war resulted in the State Department halting the sale of 26,000 M4 carbines to the Philippines' national police in 2016, infuriating Duterte.²⁵ He has since expressed interest in purchasing Russian and Chinese arms rather than buying weapons from the United States, which always been Manila's principal supplier.²⁶ The Philippines,

according to Duterte, is also reportedly set to buy 12 MI-171 helicopters.²⁷

However, the Philippines is still dependent on U.S. weaponry with little sign of change. After Russian Ambassador to Manila Igor Khovaev proposed a joint Philippine-Russian small arms plant in the Philippines in 2019, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said curtly: "They are ready but we may not be. . . . Unless we totally change our M16s and M14s to Kalashnikovs, which we are not ready to do, then it is not feasible at the moment."²⁸ The Philippine defense establishment as a whole has generally been a staunch defender of the U.S. alliance throughout the Duterte years, reportedly acting as a force within the government to preserve the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States after Duterte briefly scrapped it in 2020 before reversing course.²⁹

Thailand, historically the second-closest U.S. ally in the region, has also been looking elsewhere for friends in recent years given misgivings in Washington over the military junta. In the initial aftermath of the 2014 coup, a portion of U.S. military assistance to Thailand was cut, and high-level defense exchanges were suspended.³⁰ The United States and Thailand are also generally discordant in their policies toward China, with Bangkok far more accepting of Beijing's influence in Southeast

25 Mogato, Manuel. "China Offers \$14 Million Arms Package to the Philippines: Manila's Defense Minister." *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/Article/Us-Philippines-China-Arms-idUSKBN1490HN>, December 20, 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-arms-idUSKBN1490HN.

26 Mogata, Manuel. "We'll Buy Arms from Russia, Philippines' Duterte Tells Putin." *Reuters*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-apec-summit-philippines-russia/well-buy-arms-from-russia-philippines-duterte-tells-putin-idUSKBN1DA1K7>.

27 Mangosing, Frances. "PH Defense, Military Execs Check Russian Helicopters for Purchase." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 16, 2020, globalnation.inquirer.net/186146/ph-defense-military-execs-check-russian-helicopters-for-purchase.

28 Gotinga, JC. "Russia Eyes Joint Weapons Production with the Philippines – Envoy." *Rappler*, October 22, 2019, www.rappler.com/nation/243170-envoy-says-russia-eyes-joint-weapons-production-philippines; and Robles, Raissa. "Russia Offers Arms Technology to the Philippines with 'No Conditions' as U.S. Ties Falter." *South China Morning Post*, October 24, 2019, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3034460/russia-offers-arms-technology-philippines-no-conditions-us-ties.

29 Gotinga, JC. "Military Members Disagree with VFA Termination – Senior Officers." *Rappler*, February 10, 2020, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/inside-track/senior-officers-say-military-members-disagree-vfa-termination.

30 Parameswaran, Prashanth. "Exclusive: Managing the Strained U.S.-Thailand Alliance." *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2015, thediplomat.com/2015/12/exclusive-managing-the-strained-us-thailand-alliance/.



President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte honors the fallen Soviet soldiers who fought during World War II as he leads the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow, on October 4, 2019. (pcoo.gov.ph)

Asia.³¹ While Thai interest in increased cooperation with Russia, particularly in the realm of arms sales, has been rumored for years, it has amounted to very little.³² The partial void in arms sales left by the United States in 2014 has been filled mostly by China, which received an order from Thailand for three S-26T submarines in 2017 (although two were suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19-related budgetary concerns). Thailand also ordered 48 VT4 main battle tanks between 2016 and 2018, making it the first operator of the tank outside of China.³³ Apart from some small-scale purchases of Kalashnikov rifles, deals have not been forthcoming between

Russia and Thailand.³⁴ Even Ukrainian arms pitches to Thailand have had more success.³⁵

Indonesia—historically friendly to the United States, but not a “major non-NATO ally”—has been more forthcoming with Russian arms purchases. Jakarta, which returned to buying Russian wares in the 1990s agreed to a barter agreement for 11 Sukhoi Su-35s in February 2018 in exchange for goods including rubber, palm oil, coffee, and tea. The deal was put on hold for unspecified reasons, however, likely related to the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the 2017 U.S. law that aims to

31 Abuza, Zachary. “America Should Be Realistic About Its Alliance With Thailand.” *War on the Rocks*, January 2, 2020, www.warontherocks.com/2020/01/america-should-be-realistic-about-its-alliance-with-thailand/.

32 Parameswaran, Prashanth. “Russia-Thailand Military Ties in Focus With Helicopter Display.” *The Diplomat*, November 29, 2019, thediplomat.com/2018/11/russia-thailand-military-ties-in-focus-with-helicopter-display/; “Arms Deal With Russia Tipped.” *Bangkok Post*, February 29, 2016, www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/879552/arms-deals-with-russia-tipped; and “Thai Junta Looks to Russia to Fill Arms Needs.” *ASEAN Economist*, February 22, 2016, www.asean-economist.com/thai-junta-looks-to-russia-to-fill-arms-needs/.

33 Zhen, Liu. “Thailand Puts Chinese Submarine Order on Hold to Fund Coronavirus Fight.” *South China Morning Post*, April 23, 2020, www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3081308/thailand-puts-chinese-submarine-order-hold-fund-coronavirus.

34 “Navy procurement record (in Thai).” Supply Online, Royal Thai Navy, May 5, 2020, www.supplyonline.navy.mi.th/pdf2/42556.pdf; and “Russia and Thailand Ink Deal on Deliveries of Kalashnikov Rifles.” TASS, February 6, 2018, tass.com/defense/988595.

35 “Final six of 49 Ukraine battle tanks delivered to Thai army” *Bangkok Post*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1518662/final-six-of-49-ukraine-battle-tanks-delivered-to-thai-army>.

inflict penalties on buyers of Russian military hardware.³⁶ The Russian sides insists the deal has not been cancelled, even after Deputy Defense Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono told the media in March that the F-35 is under consideration.³⁷ Indonesia continues to use the Russian military-industrial complex in other ways—as recently as 2019, it took possession of two upgraded Su-30 aircraft.³⁸

The status of Malaysian interest in Russian armaments is somewhat unclear. Although it possesses 18 Sukhoi Su-30MKM fighters (ordered in 2003), Defense Minister Mat Sabu said in 2018 that only four were still airworthy. There has been discussion of a deal that would include Russia taking back the old planes, which would be hard to sell on the market, in exchange for new ones.³⁹ Further procurement from Russia might also be appealing to Malaysia given its desire to trade palm oil to foreign firms for big ticket items.⁴⁰ While Western firms prefer cash purchases, Russia, which has conducted barter transactions for arms in the past, would be the most likely partner for such a deal.⁴¹

NOT INTERESTED: SINGAPORE AND BRUNEI

Singapore, unlike Washington's other Cold War-era friends in the region, has shown little inclination to waver from U.S. security goals in Southeast Asia. Under a 1990 defense pact, which was renewed in 2019 until 2035, the United States has access to Singaporean bases and logistical support, and the land-starved city-state uses facilities in the American West to train its air force.⁴² Singapore also has a strong preference for NATO weaponry—it is thus far the only buyer of the F-35 in Southeast Asia—and is too rich to be easily swayed by the cost competitiveness of Russian armaments.⁴³ Where Singapore does show interest, it mostly revolves around Singaporean investment and exports to the Russian market.⁴⁴ To that end, Singapore in 2019 signed a free trade agreement with

36 "U.S. Sanction Threat Spurred Indonesia to Drop Russia, China Weapons Deals." *Bloomberg*, March 12, 2020, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-12/trump-threat-spurred-indonesia-to-drop-russia-china-arms-deals.

37 Nirmala, Ronna. "Russia: Deal to Sell Indonesia Sukhoi Fighter Jets Still Stands." *BenarNews*, July 7, 2020, www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/Russian-fighter-jets-07082020162231.html.

38 Parameswaran, Prashanth. "New Upgraded Su-30 Aircraft Delivery Highlights Indonesia Air Force Capabilities." *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/08/new-upgraded-su-30-aircraft-delivery-highlights-indonesia-air-force-capabilities/.

39 Parameswaran, Prashanth. "What's in the Malaysia-Russia Fighter Jet Exchange Deal?" *The Diplomat*, December 3, 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/12/whats-in-the-malaysia-russia-fighter-jet-exchange-deal/.

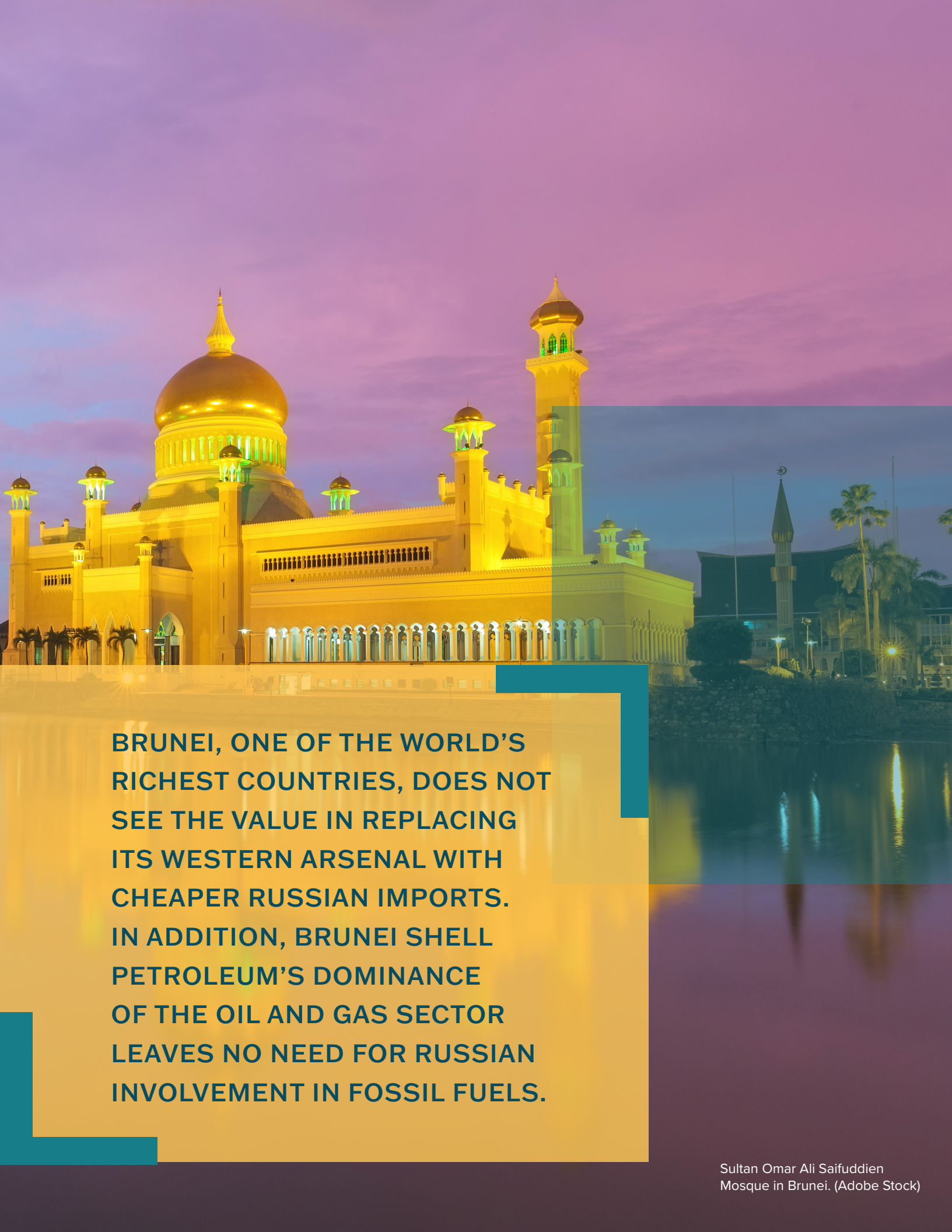
40 Pandey, Ashutosh. "Setback for EU Fighter Jets as Malaysia Bets on Palm Oil Barter." *Deutsche Welle*, May 29, 2019, www.dw.com/en/setback-for-eu-fighter-jets-as-malaysia-bets-on-palm-oil-barter/a-48956269.

41 Palm oil is also considered suspect in the EU owing to deforestation concerns, with the bloc intending to phase out its use in biofuels by 2030. It is extremely unlikely that European defense firms would be interested in accepting the commodity.

42 Yong, Charissa. "PM Lee, Trump Renew Key Defence Pact on U.S. Use of Singapore Air, Naval Bases." *Straits Times*, September 24, 2019, www.straitstimes.com/world/pm-lee-trump-renew-key-defence-pact-on-us-use-of-singapore-air-naval-bases.

43 Yi, Wong Kai. "Singapore's F-35 Jet Purchase Part of Longstanding Bilateral Relationship: U.S. Official." *Straits Times*, February 10, 2020, www.straitstimes.com/politics/purchase-of-f-35-jets-part-of-long-standing-relationship-with-singapore-us-officials.

44 Lee, U-Wen. "Russian Sovereign Wealth Fund Courts More Singapore Investors." *Business Times*, November 16, 2018, www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/russian-sovereign-wealth-fund-courts-more-singapore-investors.



BRUNEI, ONE OF THE WORLD'S RICHEST COUNTRIES, DOES NOT SEE THE VALUE IN REPLACING ITS WESTERN ARSENAL WITH CHEAPER RUSSIAN IMPORTS. IN ADDITION, BRUNEI SHELL PETROLEUM'S DOMINANCE OF THE OIL AND GAS SECTOR LEAVES NO NEED FOR RUSSIAN INVOLVEMENT IN FOSSIL FUELS.

the EAEU in Yerevan that slashed tariffs on 90 percent of exports to the bloc.⁴⁵ But apart from market access, Russia has little with which to tempt Singapore.

Brunei, which only gained full independence from the United Kingdom in 1984, is the nation in Southeast Asia that is the most aloof from Russia's foreign affairs. Wealthy but tiny, the Bornean petro-state has kept its foreign policy entrenched in the anglophone sphere. The United Kingdom maintains a Gurkha infantry battalion in Brunei, and Singapore, which maintains a currency interchangeability agreement with the Sultanate, also maintains military training facilities in the country.⁴⁶ As is the case with Singapore, Brunei, one of the world's richest countries, does not see the value in replacing its Western arsenal with cheaper Russian imports. In addition, Brunei Shell Petroleum's dominance of the oil and gas sector leaves no need for Russian involvement in fossil fuels.⁴⁷

A SPECIAL CASE: MYANMAR

Myanmar, which generally took a hands-off approach to the Cold War and tended to avoid Soviet patronage, has been receptive to Russian overtures since the 1990s. With the Clinton administration banning all new investment in the country in 1997, Myanmar was rendered a pariah in search of partners in the international arena.⁴⁸ While Myanmar began to shed its isolation after implementing political reforms from 2011 to 2015, which culminated in the election of the National League for Democracy in November 2015, the renewed crackdown against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State saw the partial return of sanctions and an International Criminal Court investigation into alleged state-sponsored genocide.⁴⁹ Despite the relative lack of Soviet-era legwork on the ground in Myanmar, the Kremlin naturally sympathizes with Myanmar and has consistently blocked United Nations action against Naypyidaw since 2007.⁵⁰

Russia has not, however, fully capitalized on

45 "Singapore and the Eurasian Economic Union Deepen Economic Relations through a Free Trade Agreement." Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, October 3, 2019, www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2019/09/Press-release-on-EAEUSFTA-signing.pdf.

46 "The British Army in Brunei." Ministry of Defence UK, www.army.mod.uk/deployments/brunei/; and "MFA Press Statement: Visit by Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman to Negara Brunei Darussalam, 7-10 Jul." Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, July 6, 2016, www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2016/07/MFA-Press-Statement-Visit-by-Senior-Minister-of-State-Ministry-of-Defence_20160706.

47 "Welcome to Brunei Shell Petroleum." Brunei Shell Petroleum, www.bsp.com.bn/main; and "MFA Press Statement: Visit by Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman to Negara Brunei Darussalam, 7-10 Jul." Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, July 6, 2016, www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2016/07/MFA-Press-Statement-Visit-by-Senior-Minister-of-State-Ministry-of-Defence_20160706.

48 Erlanger, Steven. "Clinton Approves New U.S. Sanctions Against Burmese." *New York Times*, April 22, 1997, www.nytimes.com/1997/04/22/world/clinton-approves-new-us-sanctions-against-burmese.html.

49 Psalidakis, Daphne, and Simon Lewis. "U.S. Slaps Sanctions on Myanmar Military Chief over Rohingya Atrocities." *Reuters*, December 10, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-myanmar-sanctions/us-slaps-sanctions-on-myanmar-military-chief-over-rohingya-atrocities-idUSKBN1YE1XU; and "ICC Judges Authorise Opening of an Investigation into the Situation in Bangladesh/Myanmar." International Criminal Court, November 14, 2019, www.icc-cpi.int/Pages/item.aspx?name=pr1495.

50 Lutz-Auras, Ludmila. "Russia and Myanmar – Friends in Need?" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, July 11, 2015, p. 174, www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/186810341503400207.

LIKE ELSEWHERE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, RUSSIA'S PRIMARY STRENGTH IN MYANMAR IS WEAPONS SALES, INCLUDING A 2018 DEAL TO PURCHASE SIX SU- 30 FIGHTERS JETS FOR \$200 MILLION.

its potential for ties with Myanmar. Despite the countries signing agreements to build a nuclear research center in 2001 and a reactor in 2006, no visible progress has been made.⁵¹ The problems, initially, stemmed from Western fears that the country was developing a clandestine nuclear weapons program. As the military junta began transitioning toward democracy in order to escape its pariah status, President Thein Sein announced in 2011 the abandonment of its nuclear program.⁵² While Myanmar again signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia for peaceful nuclear development in

2015, the political winds in Naypyidaw shifted dramatically later that year when the National League for Democracy won November's landmark election in a landslide. Apart from a 2016 working group meeting in Naypyidaw between Rosatom and the local Department of Atomic Energy, there is no indication that developing nuclear power is a priority for the current government.⁵³

In the oil and gas sphere, Russian-linked firms have a limited footprint. The Ufa-based Rosneft subsidiary Bashneft, which won its tender in 2013, stated in its annual report in the same year that the block is not of "strategic or of material significance for the company" and is instead intended "to develop its skillset for implementing international projects."⁵⁴ The other Russian-linked concession, won in 2012, is murky. While CIS Nobel Oil Company is listed on the Ministry of Electricity and Energy as a Russian firm with concessions in Myanmar, it is unclear who owns the company or where it is based.⁵⁵ It also unclear if it even operates its fields in Myanmar. The remote Hukaung Basin, where Nobel received a concession in 2008, has never been commercially tapped. Nor has exploratory drilling yielded results.⁵⁶ As the basin is a site of both a nature reserve and a long-running civil war between the Myanmar army and Kachin rebels, it is unclear if drilling would even be legally or politically feasible. Total S.A., in contrast, meets around half of

51 Kilner, James. "Russia to Build Nuclear Reactor in Myanmar." *Reuters*, May 5, 2007, www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-myanmar-nuclear/russia-to-build-nuclear-reactor-in-myanmar-idUSL1565024820070515.

52 Albright, David, and Andrea Stricker. "Myanmar Says Halted Nuclear Research Program: Verification Critical." Institute for Science and International Security, June 3, 2011, www.isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/myanmar-says-halted-nuclear-research-program-verification-critical/33.

53 "The Russian-Myanmar Joint Working Group on Nuclear Energy Holds Its First Meeting." *Rosatom*, October 28, 2016.

54 "Annual Report JSOC «Bashneft» 2013." *Bashneft*, www.bashneft.com/files/iblock/20140715_en/files/assets/basic-html/page28.html.

55 Boot, William. "Burma's Frontier Appeal Lures Shadowy Oil Firms." *Irrawaddy*, May 9, 2015, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmas-frontier-appeal-lures-shadowy-oil-firms.html; and "Blocks Map." The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Electricity and Energy, www.moe.gov.mm/en/ignite/page/145.

56 "Hukaung Valley Wildlife Sanctuary." UNESCO, whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5875/; and Ridd, M, and Andrew Racey. Chapter 5 Frontier Onshore Petroleum Basins of Myanmar. Geological Society London Memoirs, January 2015.

Myanmar's domestic gas needs through its offshore operations.⁵⁷

Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Russia's primary strength in Myanmar is weapons sales, including a 2018 deal to purchase six Su-30 fighters jets for \$200 million. China, however, remains its main supplier. From 2015-2019, Myanmar purchased 49% of its arms from China, while Russia's share was a mere 16 percent.⁵⁸

RUSSIA'S CHINA PROBLEM

While most ASEAN member-states are happy to increase military technical cooperation with Russia, broader security cooperation with the Kremlin is mostly a non-starter in the region. In a region where balancing greater external powers is key to foreign policy, there is too much overlap between Russian and Chinese interests for Moscow to provide much help.

On the sidelines of the 2016 G20 summit in Hangzhou two months after the Hague ruled that China's nine-dash line had no basis in international law, Putin effectively deferred to the Chinese position on the South China Sea dispute. "We have our own opinion regarding this: first of all, we are staying away because we believe that interference of any non-regional power in the dispute will be bad for the settlement of this problem," said Putin, in a thinly veiled rebuttal toward U.S. policy before offering support for Beijing's rejection of the Hague's ruling.

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The telegraphed message was clear: while Russia was not going to formally take a side in the dispute, the Kremlin had no appetite for standing in the way of Chinese geopolitical ambitions in the South China Sea. While Russia has not been entirely consistent in light of the aforementioned submarine sales to Vietnam and Rosneft drilling within the nine-dash line, it generally holds that Southeast Asia is within China's security sphere in modern great power politics.

Southeast Asian governments, while reluctant to air their grievances publicly, have taken notice. Anton Tsvetov, who was formerly a scholar at the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Research, succinctly expressed the Kremlin's dilemma in an article discussing a possible Russian-initiated security and cooperation framework for the region first proposed by the Kremlin in 2010: "In private conversations, ASEAN diplomats have in recent years expressed skepticism

⁵⁷ "Total in Myanmar." Total, October 7, 2019, www.total.com/myanmar.

⁵⁸ Wezeman, Pieter D, et al. "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019." Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf.



TERRITORIAL CLAIMS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Source: VOA/Wikimedia Commons

about Russia's ideological leadership in this initiative: they say that it is not Russia's place to talk about the indivisibility of security and then conduct joint military exercises with China, which the smaller countries in Southeast Asia evidently fear.”⁵⁹

With Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei holding overlapping claims with China in the South China Sea and Indonesia contesting Chinese claims in the Natuna Sea, half of ASEAN's members dispute China's dubious claims of maritime sovereignty in the region. Standoffs with Chinese forces at sea have become commonplace; in April 2020, the Chinese coast guard accompanied the oil and gas survey ship *Haiyang Dizhi 8* to the vicinity of a drillship chartered by Petronas,

Malaysia's state-owned energy company, off the coast of Borneo. Malaysia scrambled its own coast guard and navy to the scene, while the nearby *USS America* amphibious assault ship, its two escorting vessels, the Australian *HMAS Parramatta* frigate, a Vietnamese vessel, and Chinese naval reinforcements joined the fray in a standoff that lasted several days.⁶⁰ At the beginning of the year, Indonesia deployed five warships and four F-16s in a separate two-week standoff with the Chinese coastguard in the Natuna Sea.⁶¹ The previous year, a standoff between Vietnam and China lasted three months at a drill site operated

⁵⁹ Tsvetov, Anton. “Russia and Multilateral Diplomacy in East Asia.” Russian International Affairs Council, September 27, 2018, russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/russia-and-multilateral-diplomacy-in-east-asia/?sphrase_id=34090236.

⁶⁰ Graham, Euan. “U.S. Naval Standoff With China Fails to Reassure Regional Allies.” *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2020, www.foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/04/malaysia-south-china-sea-us-navy-drillship-standoff/.

⁶¹ Mandhana, Niharika. “In South China Sea Confrontation, Indonesia Resists China—Cautiously.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/in-south-china-sea-confrontation-indonesia-resists-chinacautiously-11579257004.

AS LONG AS RUSSIA DOES NOT FEEL THAT IT IS ITS PLACE TO CHALLENGE CHINESE AMBITIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, IT IS NOT MUCH USE AS A SECURITY PARTNER BEYOND PEACETIME WEAPONS SALES.

by the partnership between state-owned PetroVietnam and Rosneft.⁶² Vietnam also regularly accuses China of sinking its fishing boats near the contested Spratly and Paracel islands, most recently in April 2020.⁶³

While Southeast Asian nations entangled in these incidents play a delicate diplomatic game with Beijing in the aftermath of these confrontations, it is well understood that China is a threat as well as a partner. As former Malaysian President Mahathir Mohamad put

it in a 2019 interview: “The Malay states have existed near China for the past 2,000 years. We have survived because we know how to conduct ourselves. We don’t go around trying to be aggressive when we don’t have the capacity, so we use other means.”⁶⁴

As long as Russia does not feel that it is its place to challenge Chinese ambitions in Southeast Asia, it is not much use as a security partner beyond peacetime weapons sales. Even as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who once described Putin as his “idol,” publicly embraces Russia while shunning the U.S. alliance, the relationship between the Philippine and U.S. armed forces remains strong.⁶⁵ Turning to Russia as a security partner would alienate the United States without actually providing protection from China.

“China and Russia are on the same side when it comes to the U.S.,” said military historian and former government advisor Jose Antonio Custodio in 2019. “Russia will also not lift a finger to work on our behalf on the West Philippine Sea and our problems with China,” he added, using the local name for the South China Sea.⁶⁶ Thus far, the pro-U.S. defense establishment in the country has gotten its way over Duterte’s preference for Moscow, as the alliance remains intact.⁶⁷

62 Vu, Khanh. “Chinese Ship Leaves Vietnam’s Waters after Disputed South China Sea Surveys.” *Reuters*, October 24, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-southchinasea/chinese-ship-leaves-vietnams-waters-after-disputed-south-china-sea-surveys-idUSKBN1X30EK.

63 Khanh, Vu. “Vietnam Protests Beijing’s Sinking of South China Sea Boat.” *Reuters*, April 4, 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-vietnam-china-southchinasea/vietnam-protests-beijings-sinking-of-south-china-sea-boat-idUSKBN21M072.

64 Beddall, Kate, and Nani Yusof. “In Interview, Malaysian PM Speaks on China, Regional Balance of Power, Race Politics.” *BenarNews*, September 27, 2019, www.benarnews.org/english/news/malaysian/question-answer-09272019150003.html.

65 Heydarian, Richard. “How Tighter Philippines-U.S. Defence Ties Contradict Rodrigo Duterte’s Beijing-Friendly Foreign Policy.” *South China Morning Post*, October 22, 2019, www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3033268/how-tighter-philippines-us-defence-ties-contradict-rodrigo.

66 Robles, Raissa. “Rodrigo Duterte Eyes Russian Arms After VFA’s Termination.” *South China Morning Post*, February 12, 2020, www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3050323/duterte-eyes-russian-arms-after-scrapping-us-defence-pact.

67 Pitlo III, Lucio Blanco. “Duterte’s u-Turn on VFA Termination Isn’t All about China.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 11, 2020, www.amti.csis.org/dutertes-u-turn-on-vfa-termination-isnt-all-about-china/.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of their diverse 20th-century histories with Moscow, ASEAN member-states are not particularly impressed by Russia. While those who found themselves on the other side of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War are in a comparatively warm place in their relations with Moscow, only arms deals have generated substantial interest. Even for Russia's old ally Vietnam, maintaining good relations with Russia takes a backseat to stoking its budding security partnership with the United States.

The reasons for Russia's lack of success in the region are multifold. Relations with NATO members, even in bad times, tend to monopolize the Kremlin's attention. Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria has also, in practice, upgraded the Middle East in its foreign policy priorities. Southeast Asia, consequently, "appears to be at best secondary to China" within the scope of the Kremlin's East Asia policy.⁶⁸ While ASEAN nations welcome third forces to temper both U.S. and Chinese influence, they are understandably doubtful that Russia behaves independently in their region due to Russia and China's closely aligned foreign policy priorities in their respective great power competitions with the United States, combined with Beijing's vastly superior position in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN itself suffers from incoherency in its policies toward external nations. The bloc, for years, has failed to remain on the same page with regard to the South China Sea conflict, with Vietnam steadfastly opposing Chinese ambitions, while others are more inclined

hold their fire in criticizing Beijing. It was only for the first time in 2020 that ASEAN, with Vietnam holding the annual chairman position, issued a joint statement declaring that the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea should form the basis of dispute resolution.⁶⁹ Nor has ASEAN fully matured as a unified trading bloc in the international arena akin to the EU, with member-states often negotiating bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, with non-members outside of the ASEAN framework. While the bloc as a whole is a signatory to some free trade agreements with external countries, such as China and South Korea, the practice of member-states pursuing deals independently, although common, is contradictory to the spirit of ASEAN economic integration. Discord within ASEAN has long been part of its DNA: its bloc of only 10 nations includes both some of the world's richest and poorest countries, alongside a combination of relatively robust democracies and single-party states. Among world powers, Russia is not alone in its difficulty in dealing with ASEAN as a unified entity.

The silver lining for the Kremlin is that none of its relations with Southeast Asian states are particularly bad, nor is anti-Russian sentiment particularly common in the region. A Pew Research survey in spring 2019 showed a 56% favorability for Russia in the Philippines.⁷⁰ While Indonesia had only 39% favorability, another 34% reported not knowing or refused to answer the question. Only 27% felt unfavorable toward Russia, suggesting most Indonesians are open-minded about having

68 Tsvetov, Anton. "Russia Still Seeking a Role in ASEAN." Carnegie Moscow Center, May 19, 2016, www.carnegie.ru/commentary/63628.

69 Gomez, Jim. "ASEAN Takes Position vs China's Vast Historical Sea Claims." *The Diplomat*, June 29, 2020, www.thediplomat.com/2020/06/asean-takes-position-vs-chinas-vast-historical-sea-claims/.

70 "Views of Russia." Pew Research, February 27, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Views-of-Russia-Topline-for-Release_UPDATED.pdf.

RUSSIA'S BIGGEST STUMBLING BLOCK IS THAT, FOR THE TIME BEING, IT HAS LITTLE TO OFFER ASEAN MEMBER-STATES, APART FROM WEAPONS.

stronger ties.⁷¹ A 2019 YouGov poll gave even higher marks to Russia in Indonesia, with a positive rating of 58% versus a negative of 18%. While Russia's popularity in Thailand was lower, it still enjoyed a relatively favorable 47% positive versus 23% negative.⁷²

Russian state media is pushing for higher favorability in the region as it increases its footprint. *Sputnik* news agency has signed agreements on content-sharing with Southeast Asian state media, including Malaysia's *Bernama* and Indonesia's *Radio Republik Indonesia* in 2017 and the *Philippine News Agency* in 2018.⁷³ *Sputnik* also operates its own Vietnamese-language news site. It has maintained a partnership with the *Voice of Vietnam* national radio broadcaster since 2017 and opened an editorial center in Hanoi in 2020.⁷⁴ How far these media operations can contribute to boosting Russia's regional reputation remains to be seen.

Russia's biggest stumbling block is that, for the time being, it has little to offer ASEAN member-states, apart from weapons. The bloc, for now, is a net exporter of fossil fuels.⁷⁵ Nuclear power exports have failed to substantially take off. In the security realm, Russia is not trusted as a counterbalance to Beijing or Washington as the Kremlin remains focused on partnering with the former to oppose the latter. The good news for Russia is that the door remains open for an increased presence in Southeast Asia as leaders in ASEAN capitals from Jakarta to Bangkok hunger for third forces to temper the regional fallout from what is expected to be a long-term feud between Washington and Beijing with no upper-limit for escalation. The great power politics of the moment, however, preclude the Kremlin from taking on that role.



71 "Views of Russia." Pew Research, February 27, 2020, www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Views-of-Russia-Topline-for-Release_UPDATED.pdf.

72 "Multi-Country Tab." *YouGov*, 2019, www.d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/iqsvihsq0t/Globalism2019_Superpowers_and_Country_Reputations.pdf

73 Bugayova, Natalya, and George Barros. "The Kremlin's Expanding Media Conglomerate." Institute for the Study of War, January 15, 2020, www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-expanding-media-conglomerate.

74 "Sputnik Editorial Center Opens In Vietnam." *RIA Novosti*, May 15, 2020, ria.ru/20200515/1571482810.html.

75 Samanta, Koustav, and Florence Tan. "South-East Asia May Become Net Fossil Fuel Importer in Coming Years: IEA." *Reuters*, October 29, 2019, www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-energy-iea/south-east-asia-may-become-net-fossil-fuel-importer-in-coming-years-iea-idUSKBN1X9004.

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