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## 2. Russia and Asia: challenges and opportunities for national and international security

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### I. Introduction

Exploring Russia's security relations with Asia is both a fascinating and an ambitious task. Russia's interaction with Asia is poised to become one of the defining elements of world politics at the turn of the century and, at the same time, one of major uncertainties of the international system that has been undergoing fundamental transformation since the end of the cold war.

On Asia's part, two factors substantiate this. First, Asia is steadily gaining prominence in the world arena and this is likely to profoundly reshape the configuration of forces and correlation of power among major players in the international system. Second, the contours of an emerging security landscape in this vast area still remain blurred.

If in Europe the main lines of future international developments seem more or less clear, this is by no means the case in Asia. Spectacular economic growth in some parts of the continent has not been paralleled by the emergence of a stable political environment. Gripped by a high level of uncertainty and instability both domestically and internationally, Asia has substantial potential for sub- and inter-state conflicts while it lacks norms and institutions for channelling disagreements. Most of Asia is characterized by features that encourage instability, such as political fragmentation, uneven distribution of natural resources, uneven levels of economic development, a historical legacy of mistrust, animosities and conflicts, and the failure of attempts at reconciliation. Unsettled as it is, Asia is likely to remain a meeting-ground for competition among the major powers for resources and influence on regional politics.

On Russia's part, the systemic crisis accompanying its transition from the communist system will continue to grip the country at least for some years to come. It will, however, retain considerable influence on security developments along its borders, especially if its current decline is followed by recovery.

Long an active player in the Asian setting, Russia in the post-cold war era has been going through a painful process of redefining its national interests and tailoring the national security strategy to its reduced status and capabilities. Although the policy community in Moscow continues to be preoccupied with Russia's relationship with the West, its interaction with Asia is acquiring increasing importance in its own right. Itself affected by and contributing to the

transformation in Asia, Russia has been steadily bringing the Asian factor to the forefront of its security thinking and foreign policy.

Yet both Russia's thinking about and its policy on Asia are in flux. Russian policy thinkers and decision makers have been slow in adapting and responding to the unprecedented change in the international environment. Intellectual and bureaucratic inertia means that Russia still sees its presence in Asia as mainly designed to affect the balance of its relations with the West—especially in view of the perceived need to counteract NATO's drive eastwards by securing more cordial ties with major Asian powers, such as China.

Assessing Asia as such, rather than as a function of its success or failure in other geopolitical dimensions, remains a formidable task for Russia. This is even more so since thought patterns and concepts developed for the realities of Euro-Atlantic politics are simply inadequate for understanding the intricacies of the Asian landscape and its Russian component. Furthermore, there is a need to look at the foundations of Russia's geopolitical interests and strategy in the region beyond the immediate pressures and responses. Russia's security interaction with Asia has to be viewed from the longer-term perspective, in decades rather than years.

This approach is also essential when discerning patterns in Russia's thinking about and policies towards the major subregions of Asia, such as Central, South and South-West Asia and Asia-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> In each, Russia is facing a plethora of immediate challenges; none of them, however, can be adequately assessed and responded to unless both comparative and global perspectives are taken fully into account. Russia's attitudes towards, role in and interaction with the four major subregions will also have a significant impact on its evolving security agenda in a broader sense—that is, on Russia's overall international standing.

## II. Factors in Russia's Asia policy

A number of general factors will inevitably have a crucial impact on Russia's security interaction with the external environment, in Asia and elsewhere. The most significant endogenous variable will be Russia's success (or failure) in building a viable political system and a functioning market economy. Among exogenous factors, globalization and the revolution in information technologies may in the long run represent the most serious challenge to Russia's role in the world arena.

Some fundamental factors, however, are specific to the Russia-Asia security interaction and differ in substance from those that relate to Russia's policy thinking and policy making concerning Europe or the USA. On the one hand, they arise from Russia's civilizational self-identification and its domestic developments. On the other hand, they are determined by the ongoing transformation of the international environment in Asia and Russia's perception of these changes.

<sup>1</sup> The subregions of Asia are defined on p. xvi.

### **Searching for identity**

At the dawn of a new millennium, the discussion of the identity of Russian civilization seems once again to be developing into one of the important variables of Russia's approach to Asia. For centuries, the debate over whether Russia should connect its destiny with either Europe or Asia or invent its own, 'third' Eurasian path has determined or influenced the ideology and policies of the major actors in the country. Since perestroika, and especially since the collapse of the USSR, the debate has flared up with renewed vigour.

It is by no means only a theoretical debate: on the contrary, the most important aspects of both domestic developments and Russia's external interactions are strongly influenced by the ongoing controversy over its civilizational characteristics. Russia's perception of and attitude towards Asia depend intrinsically on the degree to which its own identity, culture and mission are or are not associated with Asia. More specifically, substantive components of 'Asianness', 'Eurasianness' and 'Europeanness' all have a place in Russia's civilizational self-identification; their peculiar mixture is a special case well worth analysis. The same applies to the relevance of each of these three for and their specific weight in the country's socio-economic and political system.

At the same time, the link between Russia's culture and mentality, its historical legacy and its self-identification, on the one hand, and its national interests and ambitions in the international arena, on the other hand, may be strong but does not necessarily predetermine its attitudes and policies towards the external world. The relationship between 'civilization' and foreign policy does not amount to the former commanding the latter. The non-European characteristics of Russian civilization do not necessarily preclude rapprochement with the West, nor do the Asian components of its identity predetermine an 'Asia first' policy.

### **Domestic politics**

It cannot be denied that Russian culture (in a broad sense) provides some keys to the understanding of today's and tomorrow's interaction between Russia with Asia. The relationship, however, is exercised via specific concepts and theories of Russia's identity that have been brought to the fore of Russia's policy making. Some of them tend to overemphasize Russia's specificity; indeed, pointing up Russia's 'Asia predicament' has become a distinct trend in the recent development of the country's political mentality. To understand why this happens and why it is happening right now, the interplay of foreign policy and domestic politics in Russia has to be considered.

Russia's domestic transformation has unleashed forces that have both the will and the power to influence the country's external course through formal and informal channels. There is a growing trend for foreign policy to be used for domestic needs. Russian officials are, however, also quickly discovering that domestic realities, such as the hostility of public opinion and/or of opposition

groups, may significantly curtail the government's room for manoeuvre, change the country's image abroad and send the wrong signals to its partners. As regards Russia's relationship with Asia, two basic sets of domestic factors are at the core of foreign-policy decision making.

First, the larger part of Russia lies in Asia, providing a combination of both security concerns and opportunities to overcome them. The Asian part of Russia is characterized by underdeveloped industry, low population density, dire infrastructure and poor communications which make the country vulnerable in the sense of security risks. At the same time Siberia and the Russian far east, with their enormous natural resources, have the potential for sustained economic growth that can boost the national economy as a whole. Whether and to what extent Russia is able to realize this potential and to build upon it in its policy with respect to Asia is an open question.

Second, the growing role of regional elites in the economic and political development of Russia is one of the most striking aspects of its post-communist transformation. Indeed, the debate on 'federalization' is by no means over. The future of Russia as a single state is at stake in the face of significant centrifugal trends and a wide range of dangerous issues, from distribution of property and control over resources to ethno-territorial conflicts within the country, compounded by mass movements of refugees and migrants. Meanwhile, the ongoing devolution of power in Russia has already produced a considerable redistribution of political influence in favour of regional elites, with provincial leaders taking over some of the authority that was previously the domain of the central government and pursuing their own interests and policies, more often than not with disregard for Moscow's position.

This is especially discernible in the Asian part of Russia, more remote from and less effectively controlled by the 'centre'. Moscow's control is weakest in the territories east of the Urals, where the interplay between the interests of central and regional elites is becoming an increasingly strong factor shaping Russian policy towards Asia, often undermining the country's ability to hammer out a uniform position. In fact, the overall phenomenon of growing interdependence of foreign and domestic affairs in Russia is especially pronounced with respect to Asia, although their impact on each other is still poorly understood. Notably, the regional leaders in Siberia and the Russian far east are voicing increasingly frequent complaints about Russia's fixation on relations with the West. They advance policies that would promote reorientation towards Asia, thus allegedly providing considerable benefit for their regions.

At the same time, there are notorious examples of attempts by regional elites to exploit and dramatize local sensitivities about 'external risks' emanating from the neighbouring Asian countries, as in Primorskiy Krai (the Maritime Province) with respect to China. This may considerably complicate Russia's 'grand strategy' since Moscow, if it is to secure the loyalty of the regional elites, must take into account their perceptions of what Russia's short- and long-term aspirations on the international scene should be, where the focus of

Russian foreign and security policy should lie, and what instruments Russia should employ in pursuit of its national interests.

By and large, while the emerging balance of power between the central government and the regions is becoming one of the strongest factors in the formulation of foreign policy, the Asian dimension of Russian foreign and security policy making will be considerably influenced by the diffusion and redistribution of power within the Russian polity. The 'Asian components' of Russia's domestic development represent both a huge potential asset for Russia's policy with respect to 'outer Asia' and a matter of serious concern.

### **Assessing the situation in Asia**

Among the fundamental factors affecting Russia's current and future stance in Asia, the changes in the global and regional security environments have a prominent place. Russia's relations with Asia will depend to a great extent on its assessment of and adaptation to these changes.

The end of bipolarity allowed Russia to shed the burdensome obligation to maintain and promote its ability to confront the USA across the whole spectrum of international politics in Asia. At the same time, Russia could not ignore the fact that the new realities are also associated with new risks. The gradual erosion of the balance of power that emerged after World War II and accelerated dramatically with the end of the cold war is opening new prospects not only for cooperation between the states but also for their realignment, competition between them and rivalry in the search for a better place in the evolving international system. This cannot but introduce additional elements of instability and uncertainty in international developments and leaves Asia fully exposed to these risks if not even more exposed than other regions.

Besides, the end of the cold war ushered in an era in which the very concepts of power and security are being reviewed. On the one hand, less emphasis is being put on military strength in nations' calculations and the 'non-traditional' dimensions of security are gradually gaining prominence and requiring growing attention. On the other hand, the use of force by states and non-state actors is by no means a thing of the past. To a significant extent Asia represents an opposite trend; in particular, the most complicated nuclear issues are located in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> During the cold war, the major nuclear focus of international developments was clearly located in 2 areas—relations between the 2 superpowers, and Europe. The INF Treaty (Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles) of 1987, START I (the 1991 US–Soviet Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms) and START II (the 1993 US–Russian Treaty on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms), and the US and Russian initiatives on tactical nuclear weapons have radically transformed the situation by marginalizing the importance of the nuclear factor. In Asia, the trend is in the opposite direction. China is the only 'official' nuclear state and is increasing its capabilities in nuclear-weapon ballistic missiles; India and Pakistan have chosen to declare their nuclear capabilities; Israel is the only threshold country remaining; Iraq and North Korea have violated their non-proliferation commitments; Iran is suspected of activities prohibited by the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and a number of states have a latent capability to produce nuclear weapons quickly. Delpech, T., 'Nuclear weapons and the "new world order": early warning from Asia?', *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 4 (winter 1998/99), pp. 57–76.

Thus, the evolving international setting in Asia requires Russia's special attention to evolving constraints, challenges and opportunities, as well as to both traditional and new security risks emanating from the region. Among them are the spillover of ethnic strife across interstate borders, disputes over territory, illegal immigration and flows of refugees amidst growing demographic imbalances in Russia proper, the spread of religious fundamentalism, arms smuggling, trans-border organized crime, drug trafficking and narcotics production, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and means for delivering them, environmental degradation, and so on.

Aggravating Russia's concerns about the prospects of defusing these threats is the inability of major and minor actors alike to move closer to establishing effective regional security forums and codify a framework of rules for both domestic and international conduct. In contrast to Europe, Asia has few institutionalized avenues for dispute resolution and no permanent mechanisms for enhancing mutual confidence and security—a deficiency which is especially worrisome in the light of the region's potential for instability and conflict.

Furthermore, post-Soviet Russia has found itself in a radically changed international environment in Asia. On the one hand, following the break-up of the USSR, a number of strategically located new players have emerged in Russia's immediate Asian vicinity, with no experience of statehood and exposed to external influences. On the other hand, with the end of the East–West rivalries some regional powers, no longer restricted by or benefiting from the cold war bipolarity, have engaged in a realignment drive and are revising their strategies with respect to Russia. Russia may, reasonably, be concerned that this volatility will evolve into a confrontational pattern that would have a seriously destabilizing impact on international developments.

At the same time, Russia views as potential assets the perceived commonality of its interests with those of some of its Asian neighbours and the possibility of forging short- and long-term alliances on specific issues, especially in view of its present weakness and the disappointment of its expectations of rapprochement with the West. Equally attractive for Russian strategists are the unique opportunities offered by Asia's rapid economic growth and explosion of trade, the maturity and capacity of Asia's arms markets, and its technological advances. Similarly, the experience of some countries in Asia offers a model of development embracing modernization without concomitant Westernization—a course that might be seen as preferable by a considerable part of the Russian public. It is indicative that debate continues to rage over the need for Russia to adopt the 'Chinese model'—giving priority to internal stability through economic and political domination by the government over pluralistic democracy, human rights and openness to the world.

How this combination of challenges and opportunities will affect Russia's prospects in Asia is far from clear. Notably, Russia's perceptions of the new international environment in Asia vary across a very broad spectrum, as do assessments of Russia's ability to adapt to them.

One approach tends to dramatize the changes as extremely unfavourable to Russia, which is allegedly doomed to be downgraded to a second-rank country, either marginalized from the mainstream of economic and political developments in Asia or even open to increasing external pressures with no real chance of resisting them. What follows from this scenario is a possibility or even likelihood of a hostile reaction by Russia to developments in Asia which might be viewed as adverse to its interests, thus provoking additional tensions in the continental international system.

The alternative reading of Russia's future in Asia does not underestimate the challenges emanating from the new economic, political and security realities on the continent, which are formidable, but focuses on Russia's potential to become an organic and even vitally important part of them, first as a geopolitical provider of stability from the Eurasian 'Heartland' to the volatile southern edge of Asia, second as the possessor of important natural resources that will be in increasing demand by the dynamic Asian economies, and third as a global 'balancer' mitigating North-South rivalry in the emerging international system and eventually even as a partner of Asia in the process of redistribution of global influence.

In any case, the prevailing trend in Russian thinking seems to assign a salient role to Asia in the country's quest to ensure stability along its periphery and regain its status as a major power capable of projecting influence well outside its borders.

### III. Russia's stakes in Central Asia

Two factors determine the critical importance of Central Asia in Russia's foreign and security policy thinking about Asia. The first is the legacy of Russian imperial and Soviet history: numerous political and psychological complexes persist which are associated with the fact that this area was, until very recently, a constituent part of the USSR. Second, Central Asia, which for several decades was practically non-existent in the global geopolitical landscape, is now open to various external influences and might generate developments that require Russia's most serious attention.

#### **Assets and challenges**

Like other former colonial powers, Russia intends to build its future relations with the region on the assets accumulated during the tsarist and Soviet eras when it dominated the Central Asian space. These assets include: (a) insider knowledge of local politics and bonds to indigenous elites; (b) extensive military engagement, ranging from the total dependence of the newly independent states' military machines on Russian hardware, advice and technical support to the deployment of Russian troops on their territories; (c) the multiple production and trade contacts which remain; (d) the heavy reliance of many Central

Asian industries and government agencies on the technical expertise of Russian specialists; (e) a large, although diminishing, Russian diaspora; and (f) the almost universal command of the Russian language in the region.

Because of these many assets, Russia treats Central Asia as an area of its vital national interest and a stage for reinstating itself as a major power. Apart from that, Central Asia plays a significant role in Russia's security-related calculations. It is both a treasure-trove of important natural resources and a crossroads of many strategic routes via which goods and raw materials can be transported, not least between North and South, and between Europe and Asia. The poorest area in the former USSR, the Central Asian states are desperate to bolster their development by opening up to foreign investment. Obviously, Russia stands to benefit from this if it secures a share in the most lucrative deals and controls the penetration of other major powers into the region, which it tends to consider as its exclusive sphere of influence. The major puzzle is how it will proceed to achieve these goals.

For the time being Russia's policy is driven by the security risks and challenges originating in or coming through Central Asia rather than by the manifold opportunities that the area represents. Among the risks and challenges are: (a) the instability of political regimes based on regional and clan loyalties; (b) a dearth of experience of statehood; (c) disparities in levels of economic development within the region; (d) a complex pattern of ethnic and religious differences, with ample potential for the growth of intolerance; (e) rampant corruption; (f) the heavy dependence of rural households on narcotics production and the involvement of economic and political interests in drug trafficking; (g) the absence of essential infrastructure; and (h) potential susceptibility to Pan-Turkism and the penetration of influences hostile to Russian interests.

### **Incentives and obstacles for involvement**

All these factors are seen as both necessitating and complicating Russia's engagement in Central Asia. Furthermore, to the extent that the costs of its continued entanglement in Central Asia outweigh the benefits, Russia may choose to curtail the scope of its involvement. Some analysts argue that this involvement is driven by inertia rather than by future-oriented strategy, that Central Asia should be viewed as a burden rather than as an asset, and that it diverts Russia's attention from more promising channels of interaction with the external world.

This pattern of thinking was more typical of Russia's initial post-Soviet period than it is of the present. Russia now seems more oriented to expanding its presence in Central Asia. Moreover, it seems to hope that its influence will be relatively unchallenged for years to come and more enduring than was anticipated earlier. Having failed in their attempts to limit Russia's influence in the region, Iran and Turkey, lacking the power and resources to build on their historical and cultural bonds with Central Asia, apparently prefer not to

provoke Russia's hostility; rather, they are now seeking Russia's support for the policies that are high on their strategic agendas. It is also expected that the West, while having a stake in the development of Central Asia's natural resources, will be ready to accept Russia's de facto role of guardian of regional stability.

The attitudes of the Central Asian newly independent states towards Russia appear basically favourable to it and allow the expectation that Russia will be viewed as a strategic partner and eventually an arbiter in the disputes between them. Deriving their legitimacy in part from their long-standing ties to the government in Moscow, the incumbent political regimes often desperately need Russia's support to consolidate the fragile statehood of their countries. Moreover, only Russia seems to be willing and able to play this role. At the same time, the fear of Central Asia's secular elites that by enhancing ties with such countries as Iran they risk paving the way to power for their Islamic political opponents plays into Russia's hand.

Of crucial importance is the fact that the Central Asian states are landlocked. Since the routes passing outside Russia are both insecure and underdeveloped, these states need the Russian territory and infrastructure to export their natural resources, the only possible effective foundation of their eventual economic growth. Equally important for Central Asia's economic development is unhindered access to Russian markets. Similarly, Russia is able to provide the expertise, financial assistance and hardware that would enable the Central Asian states to maintain and upgrade their military capability.

However, shared interests notwithstanding, the prospects of relations between Russia and Central Asia remain in many respects unclear, especially in the long run. Thus, there is a great deal of disagreement between Russia and the Central Asian states over strategically important economic issues, such as the dispute between Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan regarding sovereignty over and exploration of oil reserves in the Caspian Sea. Another problem that has the potential to generate serious tension is that of the Russian diaspora in Central Asia. The impact of Russian minorities on the internal politics of individual Central Asian states, the way Russia and indigenous elites and the wider public view the future place of ethnic Slavs in Central Asia, and their eventual role in the promotion of Russia's national interests can all affect the character of Russia's relations with Central Asia. The issue of the Russians living in Kazakhstan deserves special attention, since it can both tie Kazakhstan into Russia's orbit and provoke crisis.

When dealing with Central Asia, Russia has to assess the stability of the incumbent regimes, the credibility of the opposition in each of these countries and the way in which the major domestic actors view cooperation with Russia. Whatever basic interests they share, there are no guarantees that close ties between Russia and Central Asia will survive the emergence of a new generation of leaders. Some of them at least might be less inclined to treat their northern neighbour as respectfully as their predecessors did. There are also different schools of thought in Russia about the character and extent of Russia's involve-

ment in the domestic politics of Central Asian states. In particular, the question is widely debated whether Russia should seek to support the development of pluralism and the rule of law or should try to preserve the incumbent autocratic regimes, at least as long as they can maintain domestic stability and are loyal to Russia.

Another source of uncertainty for the interaction between Russia and Central Asia is related to the volatility of the political systems in the region. It is by no means a homogeneous entity but is fraught with intra-regional tensions, for instance, between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and may confront outsiders with difficult choices. If any of the Central Asian states were to seek to acquire hegemony, Russia's response might vary between hostility towards an undesirable competitor for influence, on the one hand, and preferential treatment for the strongest regional actor, in the hope that it would respond by demonstrating loyalty to Russia, on the other. Interestingly, it seems that both policy patterns are being seriously considered and even tested with respect to Uzbekistan, the first pretender to the status of a regional great power. There may also be other candidates for special attention from Russia, such as Kazakhstan (because of its proximity and large Russian diaspora) or Tajikistan (often viewed as a vitally important outpost in terms of geopolitical strategy).

There is a striking disparity in the approaches to and interests behind the drive for integration on the part of Russia and the Central Asian states. This disparity is basically related to different speeds of economic reform and levels of national wealth, but also to the broader vision of the substance and goals of eventual integration. In this regard, a litmus test of Russia's future posture in the region will be whether Russia, still gripped by severe economic crisis, is prepared to underwrite the cost of rapprochement with the former Soviet underdeveloped periphery. For the Central Asian states, access to vitally important resources from Russia is at stake and is to be paid for by their involvement in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

However, adjusting to Russia's dominant role in this structure is not necessarily the only available scenario for the newly independent states in Central Asia. Attempts by them to challenge 'big brother' are becoming more frequent. The emerging intra-regional cooperation without Russia's direct involvement is at present only rudimentary, but Russia might become increasingly concerned with what has the potential to evolve into a pattern that develops independently from Russia and competes with a pan-CIS framework.

Meanwhile, most of the Central Asian states have manifested a clear interest in developing cooperation with other major powers. Their motives lie both in the economic and in the political spheres; one of them is certainly related to their desire to become less dependent on Russia and to have broader options on the international arena. Whether, and to what extent, the involvement of 'other outsiders' in Central Asia is compatible with Russia's perceived interests in the region will most probably be a major concern for Russia and might eventually push it to seek the means to prevent or counterbalance such developments.

Russia's prospects in Central Asia will also be significantly affected by developments in neighbouring Afghanistan. These are examined in the next section. The explosive potential of Central Asia and its immediate environment represents a serious challenge to Russia. However, the 'main lines' of Russia's policy are still to be defined and conceptualized. Failure to do this or significant delay in doing so may undermine Russia's future posture in and relationship with Central Asia.

#### IV. Russia's perspectives on South-West Asia

South-West Asia is of special relevance for Russia for at least three reasons: (a) its proximity to the Transcaucasus and Central Asia, both of which are viewed by Russia as critically important zones of its vital interests; (b) its volatility and susceptibility to external influences; and (c) its pivotal role in a broader strategic context, especially with respect to developments in the Middle East. The region is also increasingly important in the eyes of Moscow in the context of the post-cold war dynamic. Facing centuries-old rivals in a drive to fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Russia seeks to forestall a further deterioration of its geo-strategic position by enlisting the support of non-traditional allies and exploiting contradictions between the powers involved.

Russia's interaction with three major countries in South-West Asia—Turkey, Iran and Iraq—is developing along these two mutually complementary lines of thinking. However, each of three cases has its own specific features.

The importance of Afghanistan goes beyond the South-West Asian region.

##### **Turkey**

Relations between Russia and Turkey are one of the keys to future developments in this part of Asia. The end of the East–West confrontation, Russia's loss of world-power status, and the emergence of independent states in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus cleared the way for Turkish activism in the areas where the tsarist and Ottoman empires competed until the very beginning of the 20th century.

Post-communist Russia has been particularly alarmed by Turkey's efforts to reinstate itself as a major actor in what Russia still regards as its special zone of influence. This alarmism seemed well grounded since Turkey was suspected of having good opportunities to play on its historical, linguistic and religious ties to peoples of Turkic origin and/or Muslim faith. Russia's apprehensions about 'cultural imperialism' originating from Turkey have focused especially on its support for the Muslim peoples in Russia proper. The vociferous activity of Caucasian minorities in Turkey during the war in Chechnya was interpreted in Moscow as indicating that they had some influence over Turkey's policy.

Another Russian concern is connected with attempts by Turkey to divert the transport of oil and gas from the Caspian region to routes passing through its

territory, which would seriously undermine Russia's prospects of controlling vitally important supplies to Europe. In addition, Turkey is attempting to restrict the passage of Russian sea traffic through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, ostensibly on safety and environmental grounds. Many Russians see in this not only efforts to support Turkey's economy but also a manifestation of enduring existential rivalry, exemplifying a continuity of conflict in Russian–Turkish relations.

More importantly, Russia sees Turkey's aspirations for a higher geopolitical profile, especially in the post-Soviet geopolitical space, as being encouraged and even orchestrated by the USA and other Western powers. This connection enhances Russia's suspicions that it is being encircled by a coalition of hostile interests.

Russia's concerns, however, seem to be mitigated by a number of factors. Turkey obviously lacks the resources to pursue an ambitious expansionist mission. Estranged from the European Union and under international pressure for its human rights record, it faces serious problems in playing the role of a bridge between Central Asia and the West and an agent of Westernization and 'civilization'. The recent advance of fundamentalist trends in the country has undermined its attractiveness as a social model of 'moderate Islamization', and this is not unimportant for Russia in view of the considerable weight of the Muslim population in Russia.

The weakness of successive governments has undermined Turkey's ability to promote its strategic agenda abroad. This has afforded an opportunity to Russia, among others, to display an array of 'sticks and carrots' to influence Turkey's behaviour. In the first category were rapprochement with Iran, unambiguous (if tacit) encouragement of the Kurdish movement, and the formalization of a Russian military presence in Armenia and Georgia. Among the 'carrots' was Russia's offer to sell military equipment to Turkey, an initiative serving two purposes—to mitigate the decline in Russia's defence industries and to acerbate Turkey's rift with the USA.

Russia and Turkey have seen several ebbs and flows in their relations in recent years. However, the initial phase of their adaptation to post-cold war realities is coming to a close. The pattern of relations between them is somewhat reminiscent of their long-standing rivalry in earlier periods: traditional geopolitical considerations seem likely to endure for many years to come. At the same time, there are considerable incentives and possibilities for positively oriented interaction. The link between the historical legacy and the current and future dynamics in Russian–Turkish relations will be determined by a number of factors: the divergence and convergence of their interests with respect to some contentious issues of regional and international politics; their accommodation in areas of mutual interest; and the symmetry in their relations with external actors influential in the region, such as the United States and the European Union.

## Iran

Iran is another key actor in South-West Asia and the object of the most serious attention on the part of Russia. Defying the patterns of history and geography, it emerged as Russia's potential ally in the post-cold war era for several reasons.

First, in terms of its immediate political concerns, Russia could not but appreciate the fact that Iran has consistently abstained from challenging Russia's interests in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, pursuing a pragmatic policy and not proselytizing for its model of Islamist political organization. This approach has apparently been welcomed in Moscow, especially in the light of apprehensions that Iran's ideological and religious zeal might ignite major unrest throughout Eurasia. Iran's modest attempts to develop ties with the former Soviet republics do not seem to have caused much concern in Russia. Russia considers Iran to be a useful broker in the Tajik civil war, where it has chosen to work in consonance with Russian mediation rather than to seek to exploit its bonds with the Shi'ite Tajik tribes. Similarly, Iran aligned itself with Russia on the burning issue of the delimitation of maritime boundaries and exclusive economic zones in the Caspian Sea, where control over substantial reserves of oil is at stake.

Second, ideological differences notwithstanding, Iran offers Russia a ground for carving out a zone of strategic and economic influence which Russia hopes will outlive the present regime in Iran. Thus, Russia is attempting to develop both economic and military relations with Iran, exemplified by the decision to sell nuclear reactors and military hardware amid international criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Russia judges its links with Iran to be both a counterweight to Turkey and a trump card in its relations with the West. Afghanistan could be another possible focus of Russian–Iranian interaction: both parties are interested in preventing Pakistan from filling the emerging vacuum there. More generally, a strategic connection with Iran might be an important asset for Russia if Iran emerges once more as a powerful regional actor, as seems likely.

Iran's present stand towards Russia stems from its strategically weak position. This is the product of: (a) the USA's policy of containment, imposing extensive sanctions on Iran for its alleged support for international terrorism and involvement in subverting US-backed regimes; (b) the alienation by Iran of most of its neighbours; and (c) Iran's economic difficulties and technological backwardness. Against this background, Russia and its Central Asian partners offer Iran an escape route from hostility and a prospect for upgrading its international status.

It is too early to say whether the Russia–Iran axis will prove to be a tactical expedient or a long-lived phenomenon. There is still a need for a proper assessment of domestic developments in Iran that could identify the influence and sustainability of social and political groups that advocate closer ties with Russia. The relation between Iran's continuing economic crises and its foreign

<sup>3</sup> On this cooperation, see chapters 10, 12 and 14 in this volume.

policy is another unclear variable that might affect the country's relations with Russia. Still more important are the relative weight and dynamics of the US/Western factor with respect to both Russia and Iran; in particular, an eventual rapprochement of Iran with the USA might significantly affect the overall balance of power and interests in the region.

## **Iraq**

Russia's stance towards Iraq is rooted in considerations that are in a way similar to those that feature prominently in its policy on Iran. Widely viewed as a pariah state, Iraq is under UN-imposed sanctions, the object of the US 'double containment' strategy and ruled by a government repulsed by virtually all its neighbours. Desperate to break its isolation and to snub the USA, Iraq offers Russia an opportunity to fill the vacuum with little external competition.

An important bilateral issue is Iraq's substantial debt to Russia, inherited from the time when Iraq was a Soviet client. Moreover, the cash-starved Russian defence industries would welcome the prospect of renewing cooperation with a state whose military capability is built on Russian standards, as would many other Russian industries, especially in such fields as nuclear energy, oil exploration and machine building.

Russia cannot, however, simply ignore or evade the West's opposition to its contacts with Iraq as it can in the case of Iran. Russia is under legal obligation, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions, to observe the sanctions on Iraq, which can be lifted only with the consent of the USA. Consequently, Russia has pursued two objectives in parallel—to conclude numerous deals with the Iraqi leadership, awaiting their implementation as soon as legally permissible, and to push in the Security Council for the lifting of sanctions.

Admittedly, Russia's access to Saddam Hussein allowed it to play a role in a number of political crises, and this by and large has served to promote Russia's international status. The US–British missile and air strikes on Iraq in December 1998 seriously undermined Russia's ability to play such a role but at the same time created a serious excuse for its eventual rapprochement with Iraq. Still, Russia has to pursue a prudent line in its contacts with the regime of Saddam. First, Russia's being perceived as too heavily involved on his side would ignite strong criticism both inside and outside Russia. Second and more importantly, the basic features of the situation in and around Iraq may change radically in the post-Saddam era. The incumbent regime may one day be toppled under attack from the internal opposition reinforced by external pressures and/or instigation. It remains an open question which political forces might succeed the regime and whether they would lean more towards Russia or towards the United States. In any event, the next administration would be free not to honour the commitments undertaken by the deposed dictator, thus undoing what Russian foreign policy makers claim as successes. Worse, Russia might be deprived of any influence over Iraqi affairs and marginalized for years to come for having supported the regime of Saddam Hussein.

## Afghanistan

Of the South-West Asian countries, Afghanistan is involved in the Russian–Central Asian geopolitical and security connection in many ways.

First, this involvement goes via Tajikistan, where Russia has been a prominent player and mediator in the civil war. Several Tajik opposition groups are based and trained in border areas in Afghanistan, which creates incentives for and risks of Russian political and military engagement in that country.

Second, Afghanistan itself is torn by internecine warfare waged by coalitions of different ethnic and regional groups which are supported in various forms by external powers and interests. Russia's support is sought by some parties to the civil war in Afghanistan, and given the recent successes of the Taleban movement these appeals may fall on fertile ground in the Russian leadership—a prospect that threatens to drag Russia again into the Afghan quagmire, although the form of this involvement may vary.

Third, because Tajik and Uzbek minorities are powerful forces in the Afghan strife, there is a danger of the conflict spilling over into the neighbouring states which have their own serious potential for destabilization. The Central Asian states' covert assistance to their ethnic kin in Afghanistan may provoke retaliation by their opponents across the borders. Both scenarios may confront Russia with a significant security dilemma if there are appeals for military assistance.

Finally, Afghanistan is a major source of narcotics for the whole world. Routes for drug trafficking from Afghanistan go via Central Asia and Russia. Russia has a vital interest in the suppression of drug-related activities, and there seems to be no realistic alternative to its involving itself in the Afghanistan–Central Asia connection.

## V. Russia in South Asia

Central place in Russian foreign and security policy in this part of Asia is traditionally accorded to relations with India.

Following a brief pause after the break-up of the USSR, Russia and India resumed their manifold relationship, building on the assets accumulated over several decades of cooperation. For Russia, India appears both a rare and strong ally and a promising trading partner, given its size, population, geo-strategic location and potential for economic development. India has leaned towards Russia while maintaining a symmetry and displaying pragmatism in the delicate geopolitical quadrangle of the major actors in the region—China, Japan, Russia and the USA. In an era of massive realignment, Russia appreciates India's continuing insistence on its non-aligned status and its caution and restraint in the development of ties with the USA, especially in the area of arms transfers. The poor convertibility of the Indian currency still deters the expansion of trade, as do many factors on the Russian side. Even so, mindful of the unprecedented opportunities for export, Russian arms producers have been aggressively exploring India's procurement programmes.

India's ascendance to the status of a declared nuclear weapon power has produced mixed feelings in Russia. The emergence of a powerful counterbalance to China might seem an attractive prospect to Russia, as well as India's potential to deter Pakistan, which is largely viewed as threatening Russia's interests because of the connection with Afghanistan. However, the very fact of India 'going nuclear' may be seen by Russia as devaluing its own nuclear arsenal, which is almost the sole remaining symbol of its great-power status and an important bargaining chip in the international arena. Furthermore, Russia may worry that the 'nuclearization' of South Asia, as well as India's intransigence about acceding to agreements on nuclear non-proliferation and arms and technology transfer control, will undermine the fragile regional balance of power.

It seems clear, however, that both powers assign each other considerable roles in their respective foreign policy calculations. In particular, their rapprochement is generated by India's search for higher international status and Russia's desire to prevent further erosion of its global role (and, eventually, compensate for the loss of status). A strong partnership between the two could have a considerable impact on their relations with third countries and the security environments in which they operate; in this respect, Russia and India have to advance their security-related cooperation without fostering a sense of insecurity among other actors. The appeal by then Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in December 1998 for a 'strategic triangle' of China, India and Russia to be established (whatever the chances of this pattern being implemented might be) reflected these challenging and contradictory tasks.

## VI. Russia in the Asia-Pacific area

The huge Asian land mass bordering the Pacific and extending to the Indian Ocean is becoming an area of increased strategic significance for Russia. A substantial part of Russia's territory lies in this area, where it faces three principal world powers—China, Japan and the USA. They represent a unique combination in terms of Russia's security interests. China and the USA have nuclear arsenals that can reach Russian territory; Japan and the USA are the largest economies in the world; China is the most populous nation on the planet.

### General constraints

The past 30 years have witnessed a remarkable transformation of the international landscape in the area, with a multitude of countries opening their economies to foreign investment and competition and enjoying a period of robust growth and development. If sustained into the next century, these trends hold the promise of spurring Russia's economic growth and increasing the importance of its energy resources and transport routes.

The impressive economic development of the region has so far tended to have a stabilizing effect and helped to forestall violent interstate conflicts. However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 has clearly shown the fragility and struc-

tural vulnerability of the economic changes in the region. Furthermore, it is not at all assured that increases in national wealth will not be accompanied by a chain of incremental growth in defence expenditure, military build-up and an arms race, generating instability. Such instability may derive from the ample potential for conflict among and within the regional states, stemming from: (a) the division of nations (China and Korea) and uncertainty over the prospects of their reunification; (b) disputes over territories and maritime zones; (c) historical animosities and distrust; (d) the absence of an institutionalized security architecture; (e) the volatility of internal politics and the significant domestic vulnerabilities of some governments; (f) disparities in economic development among densely populated nations; (g) threats of uncontrolled migration; and (h) deep-rooted ethnic and religious tensions.

Two variables feature prominently in the calculations of all actors throughout the region. One is the emergence of China as a political, economic and military superpower in the next century and uncertainties as to its future international behaviour. The other concerns the USA's military presence and heavy involvement in East Asian affairs, which have proved to be stabilizing factors, deterring armed conflicts, but may change. Both factors indisputably affect Russia's global perspectives, making its engagement in the region imperative. The character and extent of this engagement will depend both on Russia's domestic performance and on its interaction with other actors in the region.

## China

Almost eight years into the new era in relations between China and the USSR/Russia, the balance between the two powers has shifted dramatically away from Russia. First, China has enjoyed a long period of robust economic growth, while Russia's economy has contracted for several years in a row. Second, Russia's territorial space is substantially less than that of the USSR and risks further fragmentation, while China is certain to preserve its integrity and even recover some of the territories it lost during the colonial age. Third, China has consolidated its international position, while Russia has seen its status noticeably reduced. Fourth, China has bolstered its military might, whereas Russia's armed forces have fallen into a state of disarray. Notably, these trends have proved steady in recent years and there is little likelihood that Russia can restore its strength vis-à-vis China at any time soon. Hence Russia finds itself in a strategically weak position with respect to China, and this makes it critical for Russia to review its short- and long-term strategy.

The major issues confronting Russia are: (a) how to consolidate its assets in relations with China at a time when it has to chart a course from a position of weakness; (b) how to expand ties with China without further reinforcing China's military posture by, for instance, the unrestrained sale of weapons, military equipment and technology; (c) how to strengthen the Russian far east and Siberia economically and demographically, thus increasing the capacity of these areas to resist eventual pressure from China; and (d) how and where to

search for allies in the light of China's possible hegemonic inclinations in the future without encouraging those very inclinations.

These objectives, challenging as they are, will be all the more difficult to accomplish given that there is no consensus in Russia on the foundations of policy with respect to China. There is a striking discrepancy between the general optimistic connotation of the official policy line, on the one hand, and confusingly mixed feelings and attitudes below the governmental level.

Officially, the policy of Russia towards China is very positively oriented and relations between them are excellent. However, the reaction across Russia's political elites to China's ascendancy as a regional and potentially global power and their perception of China's ambitions and inclination for constructive or destructive behaviour vary across quite a broad spectrum, from excessive hopes of the 'strategic partnership' between the two countries (which would eventually contribute to Russia's re-establishment as a world power) to dramatic alarmist assessments of China becoming a major external threat to Russia.

The changing configuration of Sino-Russian relations will have considerable implications for certain concrete international problems, such as nuclear non-proliferation, a new arms control agenda, military activities in the Pacific and maritime territorial disputes. At the same time Russia could face the difficult task of taking sides if crisis develops, for instance, if the Chinese missile build-up or other activities threaten Taiwan and the USA backs countermeasures.

## **Japan**

In view of China's rise to prominence in East Asia, it is all the more disturbing for Russia that its relations with Japan remain unsettled. Worse, with a sensitive territorial dispute yet to be resolved and a comprehensive bilateral peace treaty still to be concluded after 50 years of estrangement, there are considerable obstacles to a rapprochement between them. The expansion of ties in all fields is hostage to the issue of sovereignty over the four islands of the Kuril chain, with public opinion in both countries remaining overwhelmingly hostile to a compromise. Moreover, there are few constituencies in either country that advocate a breakthrough.

Apparently, Russia also continues to proceed from certain traditional perceptions. It views Japan as an economic giant while failing to appreciate fully that the country has risen to the status of a global power and one of the central variables in the Asia-Pacific security equation. At the same time Russia remains ambivalent about the USA's military presence in and security guarantees to Japan. Furthermore, as Russia's foreign policy is still largely formulated by the elites in Moscow, it comes as no surprise that the needs and interests of the regions of Russia that are located closer to Tokyo than to Moscow tend to be neglected.

For its part, Japan seems to be the hostage of excessively sceptical assessments of the prospects for and benefits of economic links with Russia. At the same time, close ties with the USA having been the central element of Japan's

security during the whole post-World War II period, its current and future relations with Russia are still quite often assessed through the prism of the alliance with the USA. It is true that both these factors have started to erode, but recent developments have shown that changes require time and will not come easily.

All these factors undermine the prospects of and limit the options for harmonization of their strategic interests—a regrettable situation since, if the Kuril Islands problem is put aside, there are no significant grounds for ‘existential distrust’ and geopolitical antagonism between the two countries. Furthermore, the end of the cold war has brought worrying changes in the world arena to both: to Russia they have brought about significantly eroded status, whereas Japan is facing diminished US interest and the rise of neighbouring China.

Thus, Russian–Japanese rapprochement seems quite possible in the long run, although via gradual and incremental change. For more dynamic development, innovative thinking seems necessary. This may be precipitated by a new generation of leaders and/or some dramatic changes in the international environment. It seems, however, that a breakthrough on the territorial dispute is probably only possible as part of a broader agenda acceptable to both sides.

## **The USA**

Virtually every facet of Russia’s interaction with the actors in Asia–Pacific both influences Russia’s overall relationship with the USA and is affected by it.

The USA in the post-cold war period has shifted the focus of its strategy in the region from countering the Soviet military threat and preparing for a possible confrontation to coping with regional instability. No longer a trouble-maker in the eyes of Washington, Russia might play a role by committing itself to non-proliferation, the peaceful settlement of disputes, military restraint and cooperation in the war against drugs. Overall stabilization of Russia’s relations with China and Japan would also contribute to stability in the region. The expansion of trade and cooperation between Russia and East Asia will hardly disturb the USA, which does not consider Russia a formidable competitor. On the contrary, this might strengthen Russia’s position vis-à-vis China, thus counterbalancing the forthcoming rise of the latter, which could eventually become a matter of serious concern for the USA (despite its recent attempts to build what is increasingly viewed as a kind of special relationship with China).

As for Russia, the post-confrontation logic should move it towards a grudging recognition that the USA is an important stabilizing factor in the Asia–Pacific area. Like most other actors in the region, Russia has reason to be concerned that a US withdrawal may lead to a reconfiguration of forces and a remaking of the regional balance of power at a time when Russia stands only to lose, not to benefit, from such a transformation. It still resents the USA’s dominant role in the region. Worse, the growing negativism with respect to the USA (even if it is more apparent in the general political atmosphere in Russia than officially expressed by the government) may affect the prospects for Russian–US inter-

action in Asia–Pacific. The challenge lies in steering the course of Russian–US relations between the reefs of Russia’s suspicion and overblown ambitions and the USA’s propensity for unilateralism and temptation to keep Russia permanently weak.

By and large, the Asia–Pacific dimension of the Russian–US relationship is evolving as a result of the ongoing shifts in domestic, regional and global politics. The issue of nuclear and ballistic missile non-proliferation might become the major unifying element in the US–Russian relationship with respect to Asia. The two countries seem, however, to diverge in their assessments of its importance and in defining practical ways of achieving non-proliferation. At the same time the air strikes against Iraq in December 1998 provoked a strong reaction in Moscow as a manifestation of the USA’s orientation towards non-cooperative behaviour, both regionally and globally.

### **The Korean Peninsula**

In developments on the Korean Peninsula the Russian factor is significantly less important than it was, although it is there. It is highly doubtful that Russia can realistically expect to restore and build on its erstwhile ties with North Korea; however, it will certainly try to prevent being further sidelined, as it was in the negotiation of the 1994 deal to supply nuclear reactors to North Korea in return for the scrapping of its nuclear programme.<sup>4</sup>

Russia can also count on the growth of its ties with South Korea, which it considers economically beneficial and politically advantageous. At the same time, rapprochement with South Korea might be also articulated as a signal to Japan pointing to a possible alternative to Japan’s role as an investor—a stragem which, however, does not appear to be working. In similar vein, Russia’s efforts to penetrate the South Korean arms market have achieved limited success largely owing to the USA’s almost exclusive role as foreign supplier to the South Korean armed forces.

While it remains to be seen whether Russia will gain from the reunification of North and South Korea, it definitely has a stake in a peaceful, gradual and controlled merger of the two countries if this materializes. It is also interested in a broader dialogue and in participating in it, rather than being excluded from the four-party negotiations for a peace treaty between the two Koreas, the USA and China.<sup>5</sup> At the same time the alleged development of the North Korean nuclear potential and the August 1998 missile test, combined with possible counter-measures, could move the whole problem into a broader international context with seriously destabilizing results. This could be an additional reason for considering the involvement of Russia expedient.

<sup>4</sup> Goodby, J. E., Kile, S. and Müller, H., ‘Nuclear arms control’, *SIPRI Yearbook 1995: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995), pp. 654–55.

<sup>5</sup> On the negotiations for a peace treaty to succeed the ceasefire agreement that ended the Korean War, see chapter 22, section V, in this volume.

### South-East Asia

In South-East Asia Russia has relatively modest immediate stakes and even more limited means of engagement. However, they do exist and, given the regional states' ongoing enhancement and modernization of their military capabilities, Russia manifests a strong interest in promoting its arms sales to the region.<sup>6</sup> In the longer run, it may consider as attractive the possibility of establishing and consolidating its presence in the area, which has growing strategic significance and at the same time remains volatile and open to external influences and competitions.

South-East Asia has shown both impressive economic results and vulnerability; alongside examples of relatively successful conflict management (as in Cambodia) there have been political 'earthquakes' (as in Indonesia). Friction over territorial issues has tended to be suppressed rather than resolved; political regimes based on traditional loyalties and authoritarianism are fragile; the forces of protectionism remain potent and the establishment of a free-trade zone is continuously delayed; the rise of China and the disquiet among regional actors over its ultimate ambitions undermine mutual trust and transparency; and there are complex ethnic and religious tensions, coupled with extremes of wealth and poverty. All these are formidable factors for instability in South-East Asia.

On the other hand, the region is making efforts to institute cooperative regional security structures, particularly through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF),<sup>7</sup> which involves almost all the states in the region as well as significant external powers. This is an opportunity for Russia to become more involved in regional developments than would have been possible a decade ago. Since Russia is not seen as potentially assertive in the region, it might be perceived by local actors as an attractive counterbalance to other external influences. It may also build on some assets inherited from the Soviet era such as the large naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay in Viet Nam.

## VII. Conclusions

The Russian factor is by no means insignificant in the ongoing transformation of the Asian security landscape. With all their differences, the four subregions of Asia all provide considerable possibilities for Russia's involvement. Russia is to play a role in Asia both in the process of realignment and in efforts to establish security patterns on the continent.

Russia's involvement, however, cannot be considered in isolation from the changing configuration of actors and interests in Asia. The speed and substance of its adjustment to novel realities in Asia will have profound and long-term implications both for its future posture and for the evolving regional and inter-

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Sergounin, A. A. and Subbotin, S. V., *Russian Arms Transfers to East Asia*, SIPRI Research Report no. 15 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> On the membership of the ARF, see appendix 1 in this volume.

national balances. In turn, depending on the process and outcome of Russia's domestic transformation, Asia can either benefit from or be adversely affected by Russia's revival or demise. Interests that Russia will strive to protect and instruments to be employed in their pursuit will be determined in this process.

Russia's policy in Asia will have an impact on broader developments in the world arena. This impact is discernible even now, when Russia remains weak, Asia is volatile and the implications of globalization and multipolarity for the emerging international system are unclear. In the long run, the influence of Russian–Asian interaction over international security at large has every chance of increasing.