

stars insights: 27 May 2019

Russia's Strategic Moves in Asia: With or Without India?



*Russia, a big European power, is also an Asian power. In fact, Russia is a genuinely Eurasian great power. Due to its conflict with its largest European neighbour, the Ukraine, but also overall tense relations with the EU, Russia finds itself isolated at its European front. Having realised that a greater role in a European context seems unattainable for Russia, it is turning to the East to enhance its political and economic potential in Asia. China and India in particular play key roles in Russia's strategy, writes **Philippe WELTI**, Co-founder of [Share-an-Ambassador/Geopolitical Coaching](#) and Former Swiss Ambassador to Iran and to India.*

The current Russian leadership still considers the disintegration of the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War as a major historic mistake, if not a national tragedy. But overall it has, however, accepted that a resurrection of the national borders of Soviet times is inconceivable. Instead, Russia is building on common ground with former Soviet republics in the framework of multilateral structures. The first organisation created on the debris of the Soviet Union was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which comprised nine out of fifteen former Soviet republics. Then followed multinational security structures binding a number of post-Soviet states. At the center of the following considerations, however, is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), formally established in May 2014 by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and joined in 2015 by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.

Territorially, the EAEU is the largest economic union on the globe reaching from the Baltic Sea (Russian Kaliningrad) to the Bering Sea, North of the Pacific Ocean, and including major parts of Central Asia. But the territorial outreach is by far not matched by the economic realities of the EAEU. The EAEU's primary objective is the creation of a single market similar to the European Union and probably with the intention to achieve a deeper integration of the post-Soviet space under Russian leadership. In a first political design, the Russian-dominated EAEU would have entered into some sort of free trade arrangement with the European Union in view of the idea of a future Greater Europe stretching

from Lisbon to Vladivostok. But with the development of the crisis confronting Russia with its neighbour Ukraine and violating international law and European standards of good behaviour between neighbours, such an idea had to be shelved by the Russian leadership.

The rejection by the EU and at the same time the rise of China's economic power and expansionist ambitions through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) made it necessary for Russia and the EAEU to turn to the East. The dreams of a "Greater Europe" turned into dreams of a "Greater Asia". For this purpose, these are Russia's strategic moves and motivations: a) The initiatives for creating multilateral networks in the post-Soviet area aim at ascertaining Russia's influence in and dependence of former Soviet republics in Asia; b) They should enable Russia to enter into cooperation agreements with other Asian powers from a stronger negotiating position and, thus, support Russia's Asian ambitions; c) These networks should strengthen Russia's ability to counter China's rise as a Asian superpower; d) A successful development of Russia's standing in Asia should improve its political bargaining power with Europe and the West, whose rejection the Russian leadership is still strongly resenting. Actually, by history and culture Russia is and feels European.

The EAEU has been reaching out to Asian partners; the first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) concluded by the EAEU is with Vietnam. This is the expression of a longstanding partnership dating back to old Soviet times, but it is also a signal that the EAEU has given itself a clear Asian objective. Further FTA should come with other Asian partners. The Economic Cooperation Agreement concluded with China, a clearly lesser ambition than a FTA, however indicates that for Russia China is at the center of all. Russia is seeking benefits through cooperation, but at the same time it is attempting to contain rising Chinese influence on the continent. By the way: the only other Asian country, with which such an Economic Cooperation Agreement has been concluded, is Iran.

With the remaining essential Asian big power, India, Russia has also been engaged in talks and negotiations in view of a FTA. These started five years ago but are still not advancing. It is unlikely that India would feel a higher urgency to conclude with Russia than with European partners, who are also waiting for positive signs regarding their stalled FTA talks with India. The supply of military goods remains the only substantial Russian trade with India. And even this has no preferential political quality since, at the same time, Russia is reviving its military cooperation with India's arch enemy Pakistan. On the other hand, India has given, in the military field, overwhelming priority to its relations with the USA, expressed in the number of procurement contracts and a growing number of joint military exercises. As it seems, India is not seen by Russia as a priority within the latter's Asian ambitions. In contrast, India itself is discretely developing its anti-Chinese stance without Russia, in the framework of the Indo-Pacific concept carried forward within the Quadrilateral Cooperation, "Quad", with Japan, the USA and Australia.

While Russia's cooperation - and competition - with China reminds us of the 19th century's Great Game about Central Asia (then between colonialist Tsarist Russia and the British Empire), the Eurasian big power Russia is today, nevertheless, developing with India the "International North-South Transport Corridor" through Iran. This project is designed to establish a new trade route from Asia to Europe outside of the Chinese BRI. So much for the global centrality of the Asian continent as far as Russia is involved. India is present on this theatre, too, but again, not at the height of its potential. But it is developing its potential. Despite all the international focus on China as Asia's centre, development

engine and driving force, India will be part of the competition for dominance on the continent, with or without Russia.

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This article is a slightly edited version of the original article published on 19 April 2019 on [Share-an-Ambassador](#). The views expressed here are solely those of the author and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of the stars Foundation.

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