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## **A CASE FOR JAPAN-US-RUSSIA TRILATERAL COOPERATION**

***Hideki Asari***

### **Russia Looks to the East**

APEC Vladivostok, which is just a few days away, is symbolic of Russia's engagement in the Asia-Pacific. Traditionally, Russia has regarded itself as a European rather than an Asia-Pacific power, with a high concentration of its population and major cities in its European part and with its higher strategic interests and closer economic ties with Europe. President Vladimir Putin, who assumed office in 2000 and then again in 2012, has a different perspective. Russia under Putin has paid more attention than ever to the Asia-Pacific, both for "positive" and "defensive" interests.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

Russia saw a vast opportunity in the expanding economies and markets of the Asia-Pacific, often dubbed an “economic powerhouse of the world.” At the same time, the rise of giant China just next door has made Russian leaders wary of China’s increasing influence, both in terms of immigration and economy, over the Russian Far East, and convinced them of the need to have a coherent development strategy for its Far Eastern region to make sure that it remains a part of Russia *de facto* as well as *de jure*.

For its part, Russia has not been on the radar screen of the Asia-Pacific for a long while since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the birth of the Russian Federation. Nearly a decade of domestic turmoil in the 1990s effectively deprived Russia of bold foreign policy initiatives, and its priorities remained on Europe. The revival of Russia’s economy and power, partly facilitated by the energy boom of the 2000s, also revived Russia’s initiatives and, with President Putin’s attention on the Asia-Pacific, Russia decided to participate in the East Asia Summit (EAS) and to host the APEC Leaders Meeting in Vladivostok (a name that means “ruler of the East” in Russian). Now Russia is on the stage anew.

There are at least two merits to Russia’s engagement in the Asia-Pacific. First, Russia has the capacity to contribute to the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific. With all the difficulties Russia is facing, it is nonetheless a major power to be reckoned with. It has the capacity and assets, put to good use, to protect sea lanes, prevent trade in weapons of mass destruction and other illicit goods, and conduct rescue operations during disasters. It has diplomatic influence over such countries as North Korea. The Asia-Pacific will be better off if it can have Russia contributing its capabilities and influence.

Second, Russia’s vast reservoirs of energy resources can contribute not only to the growth and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific, but also to the stability of regional security. The Asia-Pacific is where most of the increase in energy demand is expected. One estimate shows that Asia’s energy consumption is forecast to double from 3.9 billion tons in 2009 to 7.6 billion tons in 2035 (oil equivalent), while its share of total world consumption is anticipated to rise from about 35% in 2009 to about 44% in 2035. The quest for energy could have a

destabilizing effect on regional security, as illustrated by the recent behavior of China in the South China Sea. While the disputes over maritime areas are not solely derived from the quest for energy, as other motives such as area control may be involved, a multilateral cooperative framework or consortium for stable energy supply could alleviate one of the causes for tension, and this is where Russia can play a part.

These merits of Russia's engagement in the Asia-Pacific are not "one-way." Russia will gain as much as the Asia-Pacific will gain. A more stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific means more opportunities for Russia, and the development of the Russian Far East would yield not only economic but also geopolitical benefits.

### **Japan-US-Russia Trilateral Cooperation**

The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA), together with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in the United States and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) in Russia, have conducted a series of trilateral Track 2 dialogues among experts from the three countries since 2010, and produced policy recommendations for the three governments in June this year ([http://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/pdf/policy\\_report/20120621e-JA-RUS-US.pdf](http://www2.jiia.or.jp/en/pdf/policy_report/20120621e-JA-RUS-US.pdf)). The recommendations emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation for the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific, laid out a menu of possible areas of cooperation ranging from maritime security to energy, and proposed the initiation of Track 1.5 dialogues by formally involving government officials of the three countries.

The combination of Japan, the US and Russia may be rather unique, and this initiative is a reflection of Russia's re-emergence in the Asia-Pacific and growing recognition on the part of Japan and the US of the importance of cooperating with re-emerging Russia. While Japan and the US are important stabilizers in the Asia-Pacific that ensure much needed security through their alliance and actively support liberal economic regimes as the largest and third-largest economies in the world, Russia, a major power newly looking east, can join and contribute to such endeavors. From Russia's viewpoint, trilateral cooperation can also provide useful opportunities to strengthen relations with


two major powers in the Asia Pacific, reducing risks of having only its giant neighbor to cooperate with.

At the same time, Russia seems to be careful not to give its neighbor an impression that Russia completely identifies itself with Japan and the US. Furthermore, Japan and the US on one hand and Russia on the other may not necessarily see eye-to-eye on every issue. Russia's liberal democracy is still in its nascent stage where there are incidents involving human rights and freedom of expression, and it is taking rather different positions on such issues as Syria and Iran.

This, however, does not diminish the value of trilateral cooperation. It would be in our interest to involve Russia in the Asia-Pacific architecture while encouraging it to support a liberal order. On the bilateral Japan-Russia front, there is the long-standing issue of the Northern Territories awaiting a solution based on "law and justice" as the two countries agreed. As Japan and Russia share many interests, their bilateral relations would be much better off with an expeditious solution of this territorial issue.

Last but not least, it may be worthwhile to touch upon the oft-asked question: if this trilateral cooperation is intended to "contain" China. The simple answer is no. No sensible policy makers have ever attempted to contain China, and Japan welcomes a China that is stable, prosperous and responsible.

### **In Conclusion**

It is said that President Putin selected Vladivostok as a venue for this year's APEC, overriding some of his advisors' views to the contrary. While this is symbolic of the strategic emphasis on the Asia-Pacific by Russia under Putin, geopolitical and economic necessity would continue to warrant Russia's deeper engagement in this region. Trilateral cooperation among Japan, the US and Russia would provide an appropriate platform for engaging Russia in a way conducive to the stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific. 

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