

Russian Military Policy in Asia: A Study in Paradox

Stephen Blank

Russian military policy in Asia is a study in paradox if not paradoxes. Though few Western analysts view Russia as a serious player in Asia, Russia's defense posture and arms sales materially affect Asian security in important ways. But even the way in which Russian defense policy manifests itself is paradoxical. Thus Russia professes an identity of interests with China yet visibly hedges against it militarily. Even as it is now planning to sell China more advanced weapons, it is also selling large amounts of weapons to India and Vietnam, China's rivals. Simultaneously Russia sees Vietnam as a strategic partner even though the weapons it sells Vietnam are intended primarily for use against China. Although Russia underperforms politically and economically in East Asia, its relations with China, India and the US, its participation in the Six-party Talks on North Korea and its membership in key Asian security institutions ensure that its voice is heard there. Thus Russia is striving for an important Asian role, possesses a voice on Asian security issues, and endeavors to affect them through its Asian policies. Yet it shows no interest, will, or apparent ability to resolve these paradoxes generated by its policies.

Russian defense relations with China are a case in point. In 2007–10 its arms sales to China plummeted for many reasons, among them anger over Chinese pirating of Russian designs, ensuing competition with Russia in third-party markets in Asia and Africa, and the dawning realization that China's military could now threaten Russia and other Asian states. In 2009–10 China disputed Russian claims in the Arctic, leading to Russian reminders of its Navy's readiness to defend those claims. China's 2009 Giant Stride exercises, where its land forces deployed to China's borders, led to Russia's 2010 Vostok exercises that culminated with a simulated nuclear strike on People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces. That outcome strongly suggests a threat perception even if nobody dare say openly that China constitutes a potential or real threat.

Yet since 2010 defense ties have improved. Russia and China have conducted joint naval and land forces exercises in 2012 and 2013, the latter also being under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Both sides profess a growing identity of interests, directed especially against the US and its allies on

global issues outside East Asia, and arms sales have revived. One sure reason for this is the US policy of rebalancing to East Asia that has enhanced Russia's military and political value to China and underscored China's inability to compete with the US in certain key sectors, such as aircraft engines. China has also given assurances regarding intellectual property that evidently mollified Moscow as President Putin talks of catching the Chinese wind in Russia's sails, and has expressly denied that China is a threat even though Russia's arms sellers still complain about Chinese practices that continue to show signs of the pirating of Russian intellectual property. Moreover, newly announced future sales include the SU-35 fighter aircraft and Amur-class submarines, while there is talk of China buying the S-400 air defense system. Those new sales, if consummated, would reverse Russia's earlier practices of not selling China systems superior to what it sells to India. Naturally this prospect alarms Indian observers and India's government. But it also threatens Japan, Taiwan and Southeast Asian states because of China's increasingly assertive (some would say aggressive) behavior towards Japan and ASEAN members since 2010, and the unending threat to Taiwan.

These sales suggest heightened Sino-Russian military cooperation that enhances Chinese military capability. Consequently these sales aggravate regional security tensions, increase the chances of an arms race in Asia, heighten India's strategic dilemmas, and are driving ASEAN members – if not India as well – closer to Washington as a potential defender and seller of arms. Moreover, these sales enhance China's capability against Russia. Nevertheless formally and publicly Putin and the top leadership see China as more of an opportunity than a threat, or so these sales would seemingly indicate.

However, much evidence indicates Russia's continuing wariness about China. On arms control, commentary about leaving the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty due to the rising threat of Asian powers, particularly China, which are building medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) capable of targeting Russia, has again emerged. Furthermore and second, Moscow insists that any future arms control negotiation must be multilateral, that is, it must include China, the UK and



France. Without Chinese participation Russia will not reduce the tactical or strategic weapons that remain its only true deterrent against Chinese threats to Russian Asia. Third, despite major energy deals with China in the Arctic, and the Arctic Council's acceptance of China as a permanent observer, Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev publicly reminded Beijing that only Arctic Council members should determine the rules regarding Arctic development because "This is natural, this is our region, we live here. This is our native land."

Fourth, despite previous agreements with China supporting its claim against Japan to the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands and Chinese support for Russia's position on the Kurile Islands, Moscow now wants both sides to resolve this dispute peacefully and has publicly adopted a neutral position on it. While Russia has many reasons for adopting this stance, it hardly displays solid support for China's claims. Fifth, Russia launched new major combined arms Asian exercises, airlifting massive numbers of forces to the Russian Far East immediately after its joint exercises with China. Though officially described as a test of Russia's reformed command and control system, this airlift and combined arms operations capability signaled Russian capability and resolve to China as well as Japan and the US. Sixth, Moscow has not only rejected Chinese requests that it abandon energy exploration in the South China Sea with Vietnam – it has expanded those projects, albeit quietly.

Lastly, Russo-Vietnamese defense cooperation clearly has as one of its many aspects the strengthening of both Vietnam's capacity to resist China in the South China Sea and Russia's drive for independent relations with ASEAN members like Vietnam. Indeed, Russia is actually increasing that cooperation. Russia upgraded the relationship with Vietnam to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2012. Vietnam's defense minister, General Phung Quang Thanh, called Russia 'Vietnam's primary strategic military partner in the sphere of military and technical cooperation'. Apart from publicly expressed interest in using Cam Ranh Bay, Russia is helping Vietnam build a submarine base and repair a dockyard to provide maintenance support for other naval platforms. The submarine base will host the Kilo-class submarines that Vietnam has bought from Russia and that will almost certainly be deployed to protect Vietnamese interests in the South China Sea against China. More recently both sides have begun discussing regular Russian port visits to Vietnam for maintenance, rest and relaxation, although Cam Ranh Bay will not become a Russian base.

Vietnam and Russia also announced a third tranche of the sale of 12 new SU-30MK2 fighter aircraft that can target ships and aerial and ground targets. Moreover, Vietnam has ordered six Varshavyanka-class submarines that improve upon its existing Kilo-class submarines and can conduct anti-submarine, anti-ship, general reconnaissance, and patrol missions in the South China Sea. But perhaps the most striking aspect of Russian military policy here is Medvedev's approval of a draft Russo-Vietnamese military cooperation pact to formalize mutual defense cooperation. Medvedev ordered the Ministry of Defense to discuss the planned accord with the Vietnamese government and authorized the ministry to sign the agreement on behalf of the Russian government. The planned accord stipulates exchanges of opinions and information, confidence-building measures, and cooperation to enhance international security, ensure more effective anti-terrorist action, and ensure better arms control. Clearly this relationship aims, in part, at curbing what some perceive as aggressive behavior by China in the South China Sea. Notably, most of these announcements come from Vietnam, which has every reason to show China its ability to garner support for its military buildup and political resistance to Chinese claims.

Many have tried to explain this paradox of professing identity with Chinese interests while arming China's potential adversaries and supporting them politically. Some see it as a Russian hedging strategy against China, combining support with visible but discreet resistance to excessive Chinese claims in the South and East China seas. Others may see Russian support for China as being directed mainly against US pressure on China and on global issues like Syria and in return for Chinese investment in Russia, since other investment is lagging. But on Asian regional issues, despite friendly words, Russia is pushing back, clearly but again not loudly. Other analyses may also help explain this paradox. But what remains clear is that Russia shows no desire to resolve it anytime soon.

Stephen Blank is Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, Washington, D.C., www.afpc.org

The views expressed in this briefing are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of the FOI.

Please visit www.foi.se/russia to find out more about FOI's Russia Project