

# Introduction

WATANABE KŌJI

THE genesis of this volume was a conversation in early 1997 between a group of Japanese associated with the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE). This discussion, which occurred at a time of great hope for substantive improvement in Japan-Russia relations, covered the transformation of the Soviet Union into the Russian Federation and the new Russia's role in shaping the post-cold war order in Asia Pacific.

What emerged is this first Japanese initiative to compile Asian views on Russia. All contributors are Asian; none are Russian or non-Asian. Including only Asian perspectives does not reflect any discriminatory intent on the part of JCIE. Rather, it represents a desire first to hear Asian views and then to listen to the responses of others, including those of Russians.

The contributions presented in this volume were submitted to a conference held in Cebu, the Philippines, in May 1998, to which Russian and Asian scholars — from China, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea — were invited. The Russian participants commented on the presented papers and their reactions ensured a lively discussion. This informative discussion is included as an appendix to this volume.

The chapters naturally represent the views of the authors. It was considered neither appropriate nor possible to propose a framework in which authors should phrase or consider their responses to Russia's role in Asia Pacific.

Two assumptions, however, do underlie all contributions — namely,

that Russia has an important role to play in Asia Pacific, and that engaging Russia is good for peace and prosperity in the region.

While no contribution challenges these basic premises, the question of Russia's identification with Asia is raised many times. Ha Yong-Chool notes that Russia has never seriously considered itself Asian even though it has repeatedly sought to increase its influence in Asia Pacific. Yang Mingjie observes that more than two-thirds of Russian territory is in Asia Pacific, so geographically viewed Russia is more Asian than Eurasian. But viewed historically and politically, he adds, Russia is more like a European country than an Asian one. Notwithstanding these misgivings, the late Akino Yutaka suggests in a positive tone for the future that, "We Asians sincerely welcome a new Russia to Asia."

Yet the fact is that the center of gravity of Russian politics and economics exists in and west of the Ural Mountains. This reality constitutes one of the most vexing challenges for the task of engaging Russia in Asia Pacific.

Russia's increased interest in Asia Pacific since the end of the cold war is examined in the context of whether the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has driven Russia to look east. Reflecting what he admits to be official Chinese views, Li Jingjie comments that, "The West under U.S. leadership looks upon Russia as a major potential threat in Europe and has enlarged [NATO] to contain it. Similarly, the West sees China as a major potential threat in Asia and has attempted to strengthen the U.S.-Japan alliance to contain it. The type of policy pursued by the West has actually put Russia and China in similar positions. . . . The West's actions have forced Russia and China to move closer to each other." Bilveer Singh agrees that NATO's enlargement has weakened the pro-West orientation of Russian foreign policy and strengthened nationalistic-conservative tendencies. He quotes former Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev's warning that Moscow would be compelled to find ways to look after its security needs, including developing partnerships in the East, if NATO proceeded with its plans to expand membership.

Akino and Amado M. Mendoza note that the breakup of the Soviet Union, with the resulting curtailed access to the Baltic and Black Seas, means that the only ice-free Russian seaports directly connected to the open sea are those in the Russian Far East, highlighting the importance to Russia of its Asian region. Akino declares that NATO expansion is the equivalent of Moscow's defeat in a second Crimean War. He recalls how

Russia was reintegrated into Europe a couple of decades after the first Crimean War to counterbalance an emergent Germany, but observes how today's new Germany is deeply anchored in the European order and is in fact a driving force in European integration. As there can be no historical repeat of Russia's return to Europe, Russia has to react differently to this second Crimean War—it now has to look east.

Ha argues that Russia perceives Asia and the East only as a crowbar for relations with the West. Singh, too, cautions that Moscow's new interest in Asia Pacific is motivated by the difficulties it is encountering in the West rather than by positive intent, and he imagines that this new interest in Asia Pacific may not endure if Russia resolves its problems vis-à-vis the West.

Russia's heightened recent interest in Asia Pacific cannot only be explained in the context of NATO expansion, however. Authors suggest that this interest should also be understood to reflect other political and economic factors. Yang posits that Russia is keen to show itself to be a great Eurasian power by involving itself in Asia Pacific security affairs. Singh concurs, suggesting that Russia sees its activities in Asia Pacific as having global implications.

All contributors describe Russia's economic interest in Asia Pacific. They note that Russia is keen to expand trade with and attract foreign investment from Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Economic interaction between Russia and East Asian countries is presently of limited significance. Trade volumes with China, Japan, and South Korea are each around several billion dollars—small amounts considering these countries' overall trade volumes. K. S. Nathan suggests that East and Southeast Asia's dynamic economic performance serves as the essential "pull-factor" for Russian interest. He cites a Russian who describes Russia's belief that its own economic future lies in "the gradual integration of [its] economy into the already formed economic structure of East Asia." Mendoza notes that as the world's largest and richest country in natural resources with a vast need to reconfigure production, Russia presents unrivaled opportunities for foreign direct investment. But the prospects for expanded investment from and trade with all countries, including those in Asia Pacific, critically depends on Russia's own internal situation. Until some stability and certainty emerges about Russia's direction, economic relations with others will probably improve only marginally.

A remarkable feature—conspicuous by its absence—of the contributions in this volume is the lack of images of Russia threatening regional peace and stability. The significance of this omission cannot be overemphasized, and it alone symbolizes the end of the cold war and the transformation of Russia. Yet it remains true that Russia is one of two major nuclear powers and its strong conventional military capabilities, though in flux, remain a factor to be reckoned with. Li notes, “Russia’s nuclear capability is the most obvious source of its strategic significance and will ensure Russia’s status as a formidable military power well into the next century.” Mendoza comments that Russia’s arms-producing capability did not vanish with the Soviet Union’s collapse and Russia continues to be a major arms exporter in world markets. Singh observes that Russia’s need for hard currency motivates arms sales today, while Mendoza notes that China is the primary East Asia importer of Russian weapons.

In post-cold war Asia Pacific, relations between the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and ASEAN have transposed the strategic triangle of the United States, the former Soviet Union, and China. Yang offers that a “strategic equilibrium is emerging between them which gives shape to the security structure of Asia Pacific. None of them can handle regional security affairs alone.” The relative balance and interdependence between them enhances regional stability and security, so engaging Russia in Asia Pacific and involving it successfully in Asia Pacific’s security architecture is definitely for mutual benefit. Regardless of its internal situation, Russia must be constructively engaged in the region if regional security is not to be adversely affected.

Perceptions of Russia’s current and future roles do differ, though, between Southeast and Northeast Asia. This is of course because the views of countries in these regions are predicated on respective histories, geography, and the degree and nature of Russian involvement.

ASEAN countries tend to see post-cold war Russia as a somewhat remote but big power with which they want to have relations of “equidistance.” This strategy is rooted in the notion that the more big players are involved with and engaged in the region, the more stable the resulting balance of power will be. Nathan notes that existing bilateral and regional security structures were not created for post-cold war circumstances, hence the many ASEAN attempts to involve important regional actors such as Russia and China in various mechanisms. ASEAN countries

have encouraged Russian participation in and successfully pushed for its membership of various regional forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN's dialogue partner program, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

The outlook is different in Northeast Asia where Russia has real strategic interests and challenges, with the latter including the Northern Territories dispute with Japan and the Korean peninsula quandary.

For China, Russia is its biggest and strongest neighbor—they share a 4,300-kilometer-long border. They also have a history of prolonged military confrontation, disputes, and rivalry. A positive trend in bilateral relations began with the normalization of relations in 1989. It continued with the mutual recognition of being “friendly countries” to the development of a “constructive partnership” and now a “strategic partnership for cooperation.” Li comments that, for the first time in more than one hundred fifty years, “the Chinese feel that Russia views China as an equal . . . while the Russians, who have been cornered, appreciate the sympathy and support shown by the Chinese.” Li also says that the strategic partnership constitutes an essential part of a “good-neighbor zone,” since “the chronic instability of Russia's other border areas has heightened the necessity for Russia of maintaining good relations with China.” He suggests that the Chinese share this Russian interest in having a peaceful and stable environment along their mutual border.

The foreign policy interests of the two countries share other similarities. First, both China and Russia affirm the principle of noninterference in domestic affairs. Russia's position on Taiwan being part of China is a *sine qua non* condition for China, while Russia previously defended its actions in Chechnya as being an internal matter. Second, both countries emphasize the multipolar nature of the present global situation, as opposed to the world being unipolar and dominated by the United States. Yang observes that neither China, Russia, Japan, nor ASEAN wants the United States to “dominate the security affairs of the region, but they have to admit that their respective bilateral relations with the United States are the most important of their foreign relations.”

Yet there are also problems in the relationship. First, Russians in the Russian Far East fear massive inflows from people-abundant China. When China and Russia first opened the border, chaos resulted, with many Chinese crowding in to do business in Russia. While this may have been spontaneous behavior that had nothing to do with Chinese

government policy, it elicited negative reactions in Russia. It underscored real concern about the economic circumstances of the Russian Far East and Siberia in the mid to long term and the urgent need to improve the economy there. The economic and demographic gap between the Russian Far East and northeastern China is ominous. The population of the former is less than eight million and decreasing, while that of the latter is eighty million and increasing.

Second, the task of engaging Russia in Asia Pacific might become complicated if the Chinese world outlook shifts from its present benign disposition to a more confrontational one. This could result from deteriorating relations between China and the United States, or from different perspectives on situations such as that of Kosovo in spring 1999. China presently defines the main trend in Asia Pacific as being that of "peace and development." The question is whether Russia would also revise its regional and global perspectives if China were to do so. This basic issue could profoundly affect the region's political landscape—and that of the world.

While Russia's most notable success in engaging Asia Pacific is its evolving relationship with China, its biggest challenge is definitely vis-à-vis Japan.

For Japan, Russia is a neighbor across the sea to the north with which it shares an inconclusive end to World War II and a negative cold war legacy, both on account of the dispute about the Northern Territories. Japan recognizes the potential for Japan-Russia economic ties, but it has declined to develop this potential while the Northern Territories issue remains unresolved.

After being stalemated for years during the cold war, the outlook for Japan-Russia relations was positively bright midway through 1998. The new momentum in relations was largely due to the personal dynamics that developed between Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The two held two "no-necktie" summits, in Krasnoyarsk, Russia, in November 1997 and Kawana, Japan, in April 1998, where they were able to push relations forward. In Krasnoyarsk, the two leaders announced they would do their best to agree to a peace treaty by the year 2000 that would accord with the Tokyo Declaration of October 1993, a commitment that was confirmed in Kawana. This agreement to begin negotiating a peace treaty was, for the Japanese side, the much-anticipated breakthrough in Japan-Russia relations and something for which Hashimoto will always be credited.

The hopeful tenor in relations in mid-1998 was profoundly dampened by the financial crisis that afflicted Russia late in the summer. Coupled with Hashimoto's resignation as prime minister, as well as ongoing political uncertainty in Russia and the influence of nationalistic-conservative elements there, the possibility of agreement on a peace treaty by 2000 now seems problematical.

Yet, for relations to improve, resolving the Northern Territories issue is crucial—normalized Japan-Russia relations imply the conclusion of a peace treaty and the settlement of the territorial dispute. Mendoza suggests that the controversy may not “progress meaningfully until both sides retreat from previous positions and internal Russian opposition to a hand-over weakens.”

Sugano Tetsuo suggests that Japan-Russia economic relations should not be held hostage to the Northern Territories dispute, but that Japan should reassess its current economic relationship with Russia and consider providing judicious, but desperately needed, financing for specific projects in the strategic, energy-rich Russian Far East and Baikal regions. He suggests that Asia Pacific countries, including Japan, might even establish their own special financial mechanisms to assist Russia in funding the down payments on projects financed by foreign governments. Supplying such financing would allow critically needed projects to go forward and would facilitate Russia's economic engagement in the Asia Pacific economy.

Russia in fact pursued a relationship with South Korea in lieu of being able to make headway in furthering relations with Japan. Ha comments that Russia's interest in South Korea is motivated by short-term economic goals, rather than long-term strategic considerations, and that it looks to relations with South Korea to satisfy economic needs. Establishing official ties with South Korea in 1990 was a significant step for Russia—especially considering the opposition to this step from one of its closest communist allies, North Korea.

For South Korea, the most important aspect about Russia is its policy toward North Korea. Ha notes that, in contrast with Russia's policy toward the Korean peninsula, South Korea's approach toward the Soviet Union and Russia has had very clear political and diplomatic goals, and it attempted to meet these with economic means. The key short-term aim has been to use relations with Russia to pressure North Korea for high-level dialogue. But this approach was based on an overestimation of Russian influence on North Korea, an inadequate understanding of

the character of their relations, and a face-value acceptance of Russian "new thinking." The South Korean-Russian relationship that emerged after a brief honeymoon was less than happy.

The one crucial exception to lessening tension and increasing stability in Asia Pacific is the Korean peninsula. The cold war continues on the Korean peninsula and, as one of the major military and nuclear powers, Russia definitely has a role to play there in easing the strains and promoting peace. Resolving the tensions on the Korean peninsula is obviously critical to Asia's security, so a role for Russia in expanded Four-Party Talks must be considered. Ha observes that Russia supports the principle that the parties most directly involved should prevail within the Four-Party Talks (namely, the two Koreas, China, and the United States), but it also hopes for a role in the discussions. Considering that the talks are directly related to a new security system on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia, they should be expanded to Six-Party Talks to include Russia and Japan. Acknowledging their interests and involving them in diplomatic efforts to secure new multilateral security arrangements enhances regional security.

For Russia to strengthen its political and strategic position in Northeast Asia, it must also encourage the economic opening-up and development of the Russian Far East. There is a consensus among the contributors to this volume that internationalizing and developing the Russian Far East could be the linchpin to engaging Russia successfully in Asia Pacific. The outcome could determine Russia's place in Asia Pacific.

Russia's potential as a supplier of energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, is well recognized. The energy resources in the Russian Far East and Siberia are potentially of such a magnitude that they could alleviate Asia Pacific's excessive dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Sugano notes that Russia has insufficient capital to develop these energy reserves, especially with its current financial difficulties, so foreign investment is crucial. He adds that the inhospitable climate and the lack of technology and equipment also make foreign oil and gas companies essential to developing these resources. In addition, the relatively small Russian domestic markets for these products make it unlikely that Russia would develop these reserves for its own needs. Proposals to link these sites with pipelines to oil-deficient neighboring countries such as China, Japan, Mongolia, and South Korea are critical for the viability of the plans.

The late Akino Yutaka suggests that the "age of Asian-led 'Asia-Eurasia'"

may be about to begin” and that this new period “will be inaugurated by the rich, untapped energy resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the possibility that the east-west corridor connecting Asia and Europe that transports these resources will be located farther south in Eurasia than before. The old corridor of the Trans-Siberian Railway runs between fifty and sixty degrees latitude, while the new corridor, tracing the ancient Silk Road, will run between forty and fifty degrees latitude.”

In Asia Pacific, there is a clear sense that—together with China, South Korea, Japan, and the United States—Russia is a potential major player. Yet that role is not defined, either by countries in the region or by Russia itself. There are many uncertainties surrounding the role that Russia could and should play in Asia Pacific in general and Northeast Asia in particular. Three points should be highlighted.

First, the situation in Russia itself is very unclear and unstable. Russia is caught up in a prolonged process of transformation, the outcome of which is by no means certain. Russia’s engagement with Asia Pacific will only really proceed toward its potential once Russia’s circumstances have stabilized and questions about its chosen path are clarified.

Second, Russia itself has not defined its role in Asia Pacific—other than by securing bilateral relations with neighboring countries, most significantly with China.

Third, that Russia has ceased to be considered a threatening factor in the region is remarkable. As it feels safe from military threats in Asia Pacific, it recognizes that the primary threats to its security come from within.

The usual disclaimer associated with publishing material on evolving current affairs should be noted. Most contributions were written in the summer of 1998 and an unexpected delay in publication means that radical changes in and around Russia in the recent past are not reflected in the chapters. The collapse of the Russian financial system in August 1998 and the bombing in Kosovo in spring 1999 may affect the perspectives presented in this volume. With this qualification in mind, the insights and scholarship put forward here are worthy contributions to the debate on Russia’s current and future role in Asia Pacific.