Russia’s “Turn to the East” Policy: Evolution and Assessment

Abstract: Russia’s “Turn to the East” policy emerged after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, making pro-Eastern and anti-Western orientations integral and interconnected components of Russian foreign policy. This policy has gone through two developmental stages: from March 2014 to February 2022, Russia strengthened its political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries; from February 2022 to the present, Russia has turned comprehensively towards Asia, Africa and Latin America, with an emphasis on China. The implementation of Russia’s “Turn to the East” policy for nearly a decade has had limited effectiveness, mainly reflected in the economic aspect. While the East, in some specific sectors like trade, may be on par with the West, it still cannot replace the West in terms of investments and technology. Furthermore, the policy faces several challenges, including a significant gap between national strength and policy objectives, the need to improve certain internal and external conditions that hinder the development of Russian relations with Eastern countries, and the necessity to enhance Russia’s presence in Eastern nations. Despite its limited efficacy, Russia is likely to continue implementing its pivot to the East in the medium term due to factors such as the prolonged Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia’s ongoing confrontation with the West, and Putin’s expected continuation in power beyond 2024.

Keywords: Russia’s “Turn to the East” policy; Russia-Ukraine conflict; Russia and the West; Russia and Asia-Pacific countries; Russia and the Eastern world

Spanning the continents of both Europe and Asia, Russia has historically exhibited a fundamental characteristic in its foreign policy: namely, being oriented towards Europe while simultaneously engaging in Asian affairs. This dual focus has been a consistent feature across different historical phases, including the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and contemporary Russia. With the rise of the Asia-Pacific region’s economic prominence and increased geopolitical significance, Russia has placed greater emphasis on developing its relations with Asia-Pacific nations. In the three
decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has shifted its policies towards the Asia-Pacific region on three occasions: firstly, driven by geopolitical considerations (1996–2001); secondly, motivated by economic factors (2002–2013); and currently, a combination of both geopolitical and economic dynamics (since 2014), often referred to as the “Turn to the East” (Liu, 2020, p. 90).

The “Turn to the East” (разворот на Восток, or Поворот на Восток) policy is presently a topic of significant interest within the international diplomatic and academic communities. It specifically pertains to Russia’s diplomatic guidelines aimed at strengthening political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries, in response to international sanctions and containment following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. This policy shift gained prominence after the signing of the world’s largest natural gas agreement (valued at $400 billion) with China in May 2014, when journalists and experts began commenting on this new policy in Russian media. However, for a considerable period the Russian government did not officially acknowledge the phrase, “Turn to the East”. They maintained that Russia had always pursued a comprehensive foreign policy or had emphasized its relations with Asia-Pacific countries before Western sanctions came into effect (Латухина, 2018). Nonetheless, explicit theoretical and thematic research on the policy in Russian academia and think tanks eventually gained official recognition and implementation. Among them, the prominent Russian think tank, the Valdai Discussion Club, has made the most significant intellectual contributions. Between 2014 and 2018, they published a series of five research reports under the title, “Towards the Great Ocean” (a reference to the Pacific Ocean). These reports systematically discussed the international and domestic contexts, current conditions, primary objectives, and implementation pathways of the “Turn to the East” policy (Клуб «Валдай», 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Scholars like Sergei Karaganov and Igor Makarov have also provided early and in-depth discussions on the policy, Siberia and the Far East economic development plans, and their implementation (Karaganov & Makarov, 2015).

Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, Russia further intensified this policy. This entailed expanding the geographical scope of the “East” from the Asia-Pacific region to encompass a broader area that includes Africa and Latin America, while also emphasizing the centrality of the China-Russia relationship. With Russia’s prolonged confrontation with the West, this policy is expected to persist long-term and have significant implications for the international landscape. This paper aims to discuss the formation, evolution, and the underlying reasons of the policy, and assess its successes, shortcomings, and future prospects.
1 Strengthening Political and Economic Cooperation With Asia-Pacific Nations (March 2014 – February 2022)

In March 2014, the Putin government initiated the “Turn to the East” policy as a response to international economic sanctions and military-political containment against Russia. This policy aimed to enhance political and economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific nations. In addition to countering Western sanctions through increased collaboration with Asia-Pacific countries, the policy also encompassed the continued development of Russia’s Siberian and Far Eastern regions.

1.1 Background

Firstly, as a crucial driving force, Russia has been seeking alternatives for its economic and political relations with neighboring Asia-Pacific nations, following economic sanctions and military-political containment from Western countries after the Ukraine crisis. Economic sanctions by the United States and the European Union targeted Russia’s banking, energy, and military-industrial sectors. Russia responded with countermeasures, resulting in a sanctions war and a significant devaluation of the Russian ruble, coupled with economic recession due to falling international oil prices. In addition, NATO’s response forces in the Baltic States and Poland, and the US troops in Eastern Europe together formed the military-political containment in Eastern Europe, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. The deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West necessitated a shift of its foreign policy towards better economic and trade cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries, to compensate for economic losses in Western markets and to enhance political relations, thereby ameliorating Russia’s international isolation.

Secondly, Russia was committed to developing economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific nations and participating in the region’s integration processes. Historically, Russia had pursued a policy of European integration and involvement in the regionalization of the Asia-Pacific, given its geographic proximity to both Europe and Asia. The Ukraine crisis severely damaged Russia’s relations with Europe, making any plans for common spaces between Russia and the EU unfeasible. Consequently, Russia actively engaged in the Asia-Pacific region’s integration processes, aiming to continue its global involvement through the Asia-Pacific path. The Asia-Pacific region was experiencing robust development, and Russia actively participated in economic integration within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC),
utilizing its strengths in energy, agriculture, and transportation logistics to expand its influence. It also expanded economic cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework and leveraged this organization to build a network of partnerships for Russia in the Asia-Pacific region (Концепция внешней политики, 2013). Russia is strengthening its economic and trade cooperation with China, India, Japan, Vietnam and other countries, and organizations such as ASEAN, to rejuvenate its economy.

Thirdly, Russia continued to develop its Siberian and Far Eastern regions. These regions encompass 75% of Russia’s territorial area and hold abundant natural resources, including 10% of the world’s oil, approximately 25% of natural gas, and 12% of coal (Клуб «Валдай», 2014). However, due to extreme climate conditions and a low population density of only 2.3 people per square kilometer, these regions have lagged in economic development. Among the ten federal subjects with the highest population living below the poverty line in Russia, seven are from these two regions. During the “Medvedev-Putin tandem” era, Russia had already initiated development plans for Siberia and the Far East. In 2012, as Putin began his third presidential term, he designated Eastern development as a strategic direction for the nation’s development, with a focus on harnessing the substantial economic potential of Siberia and the Far East (Президент России, 2012). Additionally, Russia actively sought investment and business opportunities from Asia-Pacific countries to participate in the development of its Eastern regions.

1.2 Policy Implementation

Firstly, Russia strengthened cooperation with China across various domains, enhancing the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations. China maintained a neutral stance during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and Sino-Russian relations withstood the test of this crisis. The solid foundation of the China-Russia relationship, as well as factors such as the United States pursuing containment policies against both China and Russia, encouraged deeper strategic cooperation. Frequent political exchanges between the two countries led to the establishment of a new era of comprehensive strategic partnership in 2019. Due to the impact of Western sanctions on Russia and the decrease in international energy prices, Sino-Russian trade experienced a significant decline in 2015. However, it rebounded in 2016 and continued to grow rapidly, reaching $146.89 billion in 2021. China’s share in Russia’s total foreign trade increased to approximately 18% (Нуриева, 2022). To reduce dependence on European energy markets, Russia actively expanded its energy market presence in China. In 2018, the second branch of the China-Russia crude oil pipeline, the Mohe-Daqing pipeline, became operational; and in 2019, the
Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline commenced operations, solidifying Russia and China’s status as strategic energy partners. Cooperation between China and Russia extended to diplomacy, military security, alignment with the One Belt and One Union\(^1\) Initiative, and collaboration in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, Russia engaged in mutually beneficial cooperation with Japan. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia sought to develop its relations with Japan for two main reasons: to encourage Japan to lift its sanctions against Russia, thereby creating a breach in the Western sanctions front; and to diversify Russia’s Asia-Pacific diplomacy to avoid excessive dependence on China. Japan implemented symbolic sanctions against Russia, leading to a range of responses, including Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s visit to the disputed Kuril Islands. Although Russia and Japan held numerous summit meetings, they made no progress in concluding a peace treaty or resolving the dispute over the Southern Kuril Islands, referred to as the “Northern Territories” in Japan. Even collaborative economic activities on the islands, which the leaders of both countries intended to promote, remained at the negotiation and planning stage. In 2020, Russia’s constitutional amendments, particularly the clause banning the cession of Russian territory, effectively concluded the territorial dispute with Japan unilaterally, leading to a cooling of political relations. In 2013, Russia-Japan trade reached a record $33.2 billion. Japan’s share in Russia’s total foreign trade was about 4%, while Russia’s share in Japan’s total foreign trade was only 1.8% (Иванов, 2012). Between 2014 and 2021, Russia-Japan trade fluctuated between $16 billion and $30.8 billion (Канаев и др., 2022). Mutual investments between the two countries remained limited.

Thirdly, Russia developed a strategic partnership with India. India maintained a neutral position on the Ukraine crisis and did not participate in Western economic sanctions against Russia. Russia viewed India as a partner in balancing against U.S. hegemony and an important component of diversifying its Asia-Pacific diplomacy. Regular exchanges between the leadership of Russia and India, priority planning in bilateral cooperation, and the continued development of their strategic partnership further enhanced their relations. The two nations deepened their military-technical cooperation, with India being a major importer of Russian weaponry. In 2018, they signed a contract for Russia to supply India with five C-400 air defense missile systems. Additionally, Russia and India cooperated in the joint production of advanced military hardware, such as the Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jet, T-90 tanks, and BrahMos anti-ship missile systems, as well as the joint development of a fifth-generation fighter jet. Cooperation extended to nuclear energy and oil and gas sectors. The trade aspect of the Russia-India relationship has room for improvement and has hovered between $7.59 billion and $13.56 billion from 2014 to 2021 (ФТС России, 2023).

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1 The Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union.
Fourthly, the Russian government elevated its dialogue partnership with ASEAN to a strategic partnership. Developing relations with ASEAN holds significant importance for Russia, including integrating into Asia-Pacific regional cooperation, breaking away from the diplomatic isolation imposed by the West, and constructing an equal and open security structure in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2018, at the Russia-ASEAN summit, both sides declared their dialogue partnership as a strategic partnership. Russia prioritized engagement in activities under mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and engaged in discussions on regional security and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia had closer military-technical and energy cooperation with ASEAN member states, but trade remained relatively limited. The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) established a free trade area with Vietnam, and negotiations to establish a free trade zone between the EAEU and ASEAN were put on the agenda.

It is important to note that in the implementation process of the “Turn to the East” policy, Russia returned to its traditional path of safeguarding its great power status and geopolitical balance. The policy gave rise to the Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative, as proposed by the Putin government in 2016, involving the SCO members, ASEAN member countries, as well as India, Pakistan, Iran, and other nations. Consequently, the Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative became a key element of Russia’s international strategy, guiding the “Turn to the East” policy. The initiative exemplifies the aim of positioning Russia as an independent international power center, neither subordinate to the West nor overly reliant on China (Liu, 2019). In other words, the “Turn to the East” policy is about diversifying Russia’s foreign economic and political relations relative to the West, rather than shifting its foreign relations focus entirely from the West to the Asia-Pacific.

1.3 Outcomes and Challenges

The Russian “Turn to the East” foreign policy has yielded significant results. These include:

(1) Strengthened economic and trade relations: Russia enhanced its economic and trade relationships with Asia-Pacific countries, particularly China, to some extent compensating for its economic losses in Western markets. Russia expanded its exports of energy resources and military technology to the Asia-Pacific region, as well as increased imports of machinery, high-tech products, and other goods from Asia-Pacific nations. As a result, overall trade with Asia-Pacific countries has been on an upward trajectory. In 2013, Russia’s trade with the Asia-Pacific region was valued at $218.4 billion, accounting for 26% of its total foreign trade (ФТС России, 2023). In 2021, this figure had
increased to $261.45 billion, representing 33.3 % of total foreign trade (Рыбин, 2022). By comparison, trade with the European Union in 2013 was $417.6 billion, making up 49.4 % of Russia’s total foreign trade (ФТС России, 2023); and in 2021, this number stood at $282.05 billion, accounting for 35.9 % of total foreign trade (Рыбин, 2022). While the trade share is similar, the trade volume between Russia and the Asia-Pacific region remains significantly lower than it was before the Ukraine crisis with Europe.

(2) Expansion of Far Eastern exports and attraction of investments: Russia’s Far Eastern region has increased exports and imports of goods with Asia-Pacific countries, attracting substantial investments from these countries, promoting economic development in the region. The region expanded its exports of oil, gas, seafood, timber, and other products to China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and other Asia-Pacific countries. Simultaneously, it imported vehicles, machinery, high-value consumer goods, and other products from these countries. As of early 2022, the Russian Far Eastern Federal District attracted a total of $113 billion in foreign investments, with a significant portion coming from Asia-Pacific countries, primarily in the oil and gas sector (Минаков, 2023).

(3) Strengthened political relations: Russia bolstered its political relationships with the majority of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Russia developed strategic partnerships with China, India, and ASEAN. Apart from Japan, Russia’s political relations with most Asian countries experienced varying degrees of development.

However, the implementation of Russia’s “Turn to the East” policy also faces several challenges. (1) Continuing European ties: Russia has struggled to fully disengage from its historical and cultural ties to Europe, both in terms of cultural conception and economic connections. (2) Underdeveloped infrastructure in the Russian Far East: The Russian Far Eastern region lacks advanced transportation infrastructure and has limited connections with elite groups and businesses in Asian countries. These factors constrain the expansion of trade and investment cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries. (3) Geopolitical constraints: Geopolitical factors have also constrained Russia’s policy of strengthening relations with Asia-Pacific countries. Russia’s efforts to promote a multipolar world and resist the bipolar tendencies of China and the United States, its pursuit of a diversified Asia-Pacific foreign policy, and its desire to consolidate its dominant position in the Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative have placed limitations on the “Turn to the East” policy. These challenges have weakened the momentum for eastern engagement. Consequently, Russia is caught in a state of uncertainty between Greater Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and Greater Eurasia, unable to fully harness the potential of the policy.
2 A Full Turn to Asia, Africa and Latin America, With an Emphasis on China (February 2022 to Present)

In February 2022, the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine conflict led Western nations to implement an upgraded version of sanctions and containment measures against Russia while indirectly engaging in conflict in Ukraine. Faced with a situation of full-scale confrontation with the West, Russia found that the “Turn to the East” policy became its sole viable foreign policy option. Consequently, the Putin administration intensified its commitment to this policy, endowing it with a broader perspective, enriched content, and strategic significance in advancing multipolarity.

2.1 A New International Context for Russian Diplomacy Following the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Firstly, Russia is facing indirect conflict with the West. The Russia-Ukraine war led to intensified economic sanctions, military and political containment, and diplomatic isolation by Western countries. The West sought to undermine the Russian economy and force the Putin government into a ceasefire and withdrawal from Ukraine. Western powers escalated sanctions against Russia, targeting critical sectors such as finance, energy, and high technology. These measures included freezing approximately $300 billion of Russia’s gold and foreign exchange reserves, excluding major Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment system, imposing embargoes and price controls on Russian oil exports, among others. Russia retaliated by using tools such as the European Union’s dependence on Russian oil and gas to impose counter-sanctions. The United States and NATO continued to provide economic and military assistance to Ukraine, aiming to support the Ukrainian military against Russia. NATO significantly increased its troops in Eastern Europe, conducting frequent joint land, sea, and air force exercises, including nuclear exercises, and accepted Finland and Sweden as alliance partners, creating a high-pressure containment posture against Russia. While indirectly engaged in conflict with the West over Ukraine, Russia also confronted NATO in the European-Atlantic region, hardening its stance and relying on nuclear weapons for national security. In addition to the economic sanctions, the West pushed for multiple anti-Russia, pro-Ukraine proposals within the United Nations, sought to deprive Russia of its representation rights in international organizations, and expelled a significant number of Russian diplomats. The conflict between Russia and the West was not
limited to the areas mentioned but was comprehensive and serious, making it impossible for Russia to maintain the pragmatic relationship it had with the West in the past.

Secondly, developing countries were often reluctant to get involved in the Ukraine dispute between the West and Russia. Russia’s relations with countries in the East, including Asia, Africa, and Latin America, were thus less influenced by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and they continued to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia. Developing countries did not endorse Western hegemony and power politics, nor the liberal international order. They considered Russia’s stance regarding the establishment of an equal and indivisible European regional security system as reasonable. At the same time, they did not endorse Russia’s use of force to achieve its policy goals in Ukraine. As a result, these developing countries generally adopted a neutral stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Based on shared interests and worldviews, developing countries did not participate in Western international sanctions against Russia and sought to develop mutually beneficial cooperation with Russia. Russia was also willing to develop political and economic cooperation with Eastern countries, gaining economic support and political backing to counter the West.

2.2 Policy Changes After the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Firstly, in terms of policy scope, Russia expanded its focus from the Asia-Pacific region to encompass a broader region referred to as the Greater East, which includes a wide range of Asian, African, and Latin American countries. The Putin government believed that the main contemporary global contradictions revolved around the struggle between U.S. unipolar dominance and multipolarity, as well as the dynamics of neo-colonialism and anti-colonial movements. Russia positioned itself as a standard-bearer against dominance and colonialism, and many nations began to reject blind adherence to Western hegemony and sanctions against Russia, instead opting for practical cooperation with Russia (Президент России, 2022). In March 2023, President Putin approved the “Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, which outlined Russia’s strategic goals in the face of evolving geopolitical circumstances. The central objectives of Russia’s foreign policy now revolve around consolidating its position as a global power and advocating for a multipolar international system. To achieve these goals, Russia pledged to form alliances with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, collectively countering U.S. hegemony and Western neo-colonialism (Концепция внешней политики, 2023). Russia’s commitment to advancing political and economic cooperation with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. as well as its active participation in regional organizations such as the EAEU, the SCO, and the BRICS, have somewhat strengthened Russia’s position in the Eastern hemisphere.
Secondly, at the level of target countries, Russia placed a particular emphasis on China. In the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Japan aligned with the United States, strengthening sanctions against Russia. While balancing between Russia and the United States, India limited the maneuverability of Russia’s diversified Asia-Pacific diplomatic strategy. The intensified Western sanctions and containment of Russia further pushed Russia to enhance its relations with China, which entailed strengthening its strategic cooperation with China without unilateral dependence, while also fostering relations with other partner countries. This was manifested through:

1. **Accelerated growth in Sino-Russian trade:** In 2022, the bilateral trade volume between China and Russia reached an unprecedented high of $190.27 billion, marking a remarkable year-on-year growth of 29.3%. China retained its status as Russia’s largest trading partner. Notably, the composition of traded goods underwent continuous optimization. China’s exports of machinery, electronics, and high-tech products to Russia increased significantly, reflecting a shift towards higher-value, technology-intensive trade. Simultaneously, Russia witnessed substantial growth in its exports of agricultural products to China.

2. **Robust advancement in Sino-Russian energy cooperation:** A prominent facet of Sino-Russian cooperation lies in the energy sector, primarily in the realm of oil and natural gas. In 2022, China imported 86.248 million tons of crude oil from Russia, registering an impressive year-on-year growth of 8.3% (Customs of China, 2023). Russia solidified its position as China’s second-largest source of oil imports. Additionally, the energy partnership expanded with notable achievements. Russia supplied China with 155 billion cubic meters of natural gas through the China-Russia Eastern Gas Pipeline in 2022, marking a remarkable year-on-year growth of 49% (Sputnik News, 2023). Russia remained China’s second-largest supplier of pipeline natural gas. Of particular significance, the two nations signed a government-level agreement in January 2023, aimed at constructing the cross-border segment of the Russia-China Far East Gas Pipeline. Upon completion, this pipeline, in conjunction with the China-Russia Eastern Gas Pipeline, will secure an annual gas supply of 480 billion cubic meters from Russia to China.

3. **Strengthened Sino-Russian diplomatic collaboration:** China and Russia not only bolstered economic ties but also solidified their collaboration in international and regional affairs. This strategic diplomatic partnership extended to mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict, further underscoring their commitment to global stability and their role in the resolution of regional crises. The depth and comprehensiveness of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership have not only served to bolster Russia’s economic resilience but have also contributed to enhancing its international standing.
Thirdly, Russia excluded Japan from the list of target countries in its “Turn to the East” policy. Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Japan intensified sanctions against Russia, aligning itself with the United States and leading Russia to categorize Japan as an “unfriendly country” in March 2022. Consequently, Russia suspended negotiations on the Russia-Japan peace treaty and withdrew from the joint economic activities dialogue regarding the Southern Kuril Islands. The already strained Russia-Japan relations took a nosedive. The Japanese government, led by Fumio Kishida, maintained a tough stance on territorial disputes with Russia, provided military aid to Ukraine, and encouraged NATO’s involvement in Asia-Pacific affairs to contain both China and Russia. The 2023 edition of Russia’s Foreign Policy mentions Japan only in the context of militarism (Концепция внешней политики, 2023), with no mention of Japan-Russia relations, signifying a lack of optimism in the future of Russo-Japanese relations.

Fourthly, Russia attached significant importance to developing a privileged strategic partnership with India. India maintained a neutral position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia. In response, Russia offered discounted oil sales to India, expanded its exports of fertilizers and food products, leading to a rapid development of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries, with bilateral trade reaching close to $30 billion in 2022. Furthermore, Russia and India maintained close military-technical cooperation, including upgrades to India’s previously acquired Su-30MKI fighter jets and India’s order of the first 11356R-class frigate, the Tushil, from Russia. While Russia and India have a strong political relationship and deep-rooted military-technical collaboration, their economic and trade cooperation remained relatively weak. Russia aimed to draw India closer in order to jointly counterbalance U.S. hegemony. On the other hand, the United States sought to engage India through its Indo-Pacific strategy, which led to India intensifying its trade, investment, and defense cooperation with the United States while simultaneously purchasing significant quantities of Russian oil.

In comparison to the previous phase, this stage of Russia’s policy expanded its role beyond diversification of foreign economic and political relations. It was assigned the task of serving Russia’s military and political goals in Ukraine, safeguarding national security and great power status, and constructing a multipolar world. In essence, strengthening ties with Eastern nations and uniting with more Eastern countries to counter Western containment and the liberal international order became the primary objectives of “Turn to the East” policy since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
2.3 The Efficacy of, and Challenges for Russia’s “Turn to the East” Following the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Russia’s “Turn to the East” has had limited success. (1) Russia has secured the friendship of many Eastern countries and their neutrality toward Russia in the Ukraine conflict, but it has not been able to bring them to Russia’s side in support of Russia’s military action against Ukraine and its struggle against the West. With the exception of a handful of countries, such as Belarus, Syria and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which explicitly supported Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the UN vote on related issues, many Eastern countries adopted a policy of neutrality, which manifested itself in abstentions. Russia wants to make political friends in the East with whom it can work together politically and diplomatically against the Western hegemonic system and power politics, and most Eastern countries do not want to be involved in the confrontation between Russia and the West. For the Eastern countries, it is not easy for them to resist the pressure from the U.S. and the West and not to participate in the Western sanctions against Russia, not to mention providing political support and even military assistance to Russia. (2) Russia’s economic and trade cooperation with the East has indeed helped Russia to stabilize its domestic economy in order to confront the West. In the case of the West’s efforts to sanction Russia, the Eastern countries (especially China and India) not only increase the purchase of bulk commodities such as oil and natural gas from Russia, but also timely export to Russia automobiles, machinery and electronics, which Western countries stopped to provide. Thus, Eastern countries efforts greatly satisfy Russia’s urgent needs. It should be noted that for the East the development of economic and trade cooperation between Eastern countries and Russia is motivated by the promotion of their own national interests, not by any concern to support Russia in its confrontation with the West.

On the other hand, it also faces the following challenges. Russia does not have enough strength to fight against the West on a global scale, and can only resist U.S. and Western containment in Eastern Europe, Eurasia and Northeast Asia, and wrestle with the U.S. and the West in Syria and other distant countries. The existing land cross-border transportation facilities between Russia and Asian countries cannot satisfy Russia’s growing demand for import and export goods logistics, and Russia has yet to build new infrastructure or modernize existing facilities. Eastern countries are always worried about being subject to U.S. secondary sanctions when carrying out economic and trade cooperation with Russia, which restricts their motivation to cooperate with Russia. Russian enterprises are not able to meet the growing demand for import and export goods logistics. Russia has yet to build new
infrastructure or modernize existing facilities; Eastern countries are concerned about secondary sanctions imposed by the United States when engaging in economic and trade cooperation with Russia, which restricts their incentives to cooperate with Russia; and Russian enterprises lack understanding of the current market situation, business environment, business culture and even languages of Asia-Pacific and other Eastern countries, and these obstacles cannot be overcome in the short term.

3 Overall Assessment of Russia’s “Turn to the East” Policy

Russia’s “Turn to the East” has been in place for nearly a decade, evolving from “turning to the Asia-Pacific” to “turning to the Eastern world”, characterized by three main features. (1) Geopolitics plays a dominant role. The 2014 Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions against Russia prompted the Putin government to pursue a “Turn to the Asia-Pacific”. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict and the escalation of Western containment led to Russia’s “turn to the world’s East”. (2) Economic cooperation is the primary focus. Given Russia’s confrontation with the West and the reluctance of Eastern countries to get involved in Russia-West disputes, economic and trade cooperation became the most feasible area of collaboration for Russia, first with Asia-Pacific countries and later with African and Latin American nations. (3) China is a key target country. Sino-Russian strategic cooperation, both in breadth and depth, as well as in international influence, is unparalleled when compared with Russia’s partnerships with other countries. Russia certainly does not want to depend on China, just as it does not want to depend on the West; it aims to maintain its status as an independent great power.

The effectiveness of Russia’s “Turn to the East” has been limited to economic effects. (1) First, it has yielded minimal results in foreign policy. Only a handful of Eastern countries have supported Russia in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and they are more anti-American and anti-Western than pro-Russian. Even Russia’s allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization have mostly remained neutral, let alone other Eastern countries. When it comes to supporting Russia against the West, most Eastern countries lack the will and motivation. The main reasons for this are that while Russia’s military actions in Ukraine may have had some justification, their compliance with international law is disputed. In today’s world, the emphasis is on peace and development, with Eastern countries focusing on their domestic economic and social development rather than East-West competition. Russia lacks the kind of strength and appeal that the Soviet Union had, which is insufficient to lead Eastern countries in opposition to Western “neo-colonialism”. (2) But in terms of its economic
impact, the policy has achieved some success. Strengthening economic cooperation with China, India, and other Eastern countries, promoting economic integration within the EAEU framework, participating in multilateral cooperation within Eastern international organizations like the SCO and the BRICS, undoubtedly helps Russia resist Western sanctions, stabilize its economy, and continue participating in globalization through Eastern channels. However, for Russia’s economy and modernization, the East, while competitive with the West in certain areas like trade, still cannot replace the West in terms of investment and technology.

Overall, Russia’s “Turn to the East” is facing multiple challenges. (1) There is a significant gap between national strength and policy objectives. Russia’s chances of defeating the West and the Ukrainian military in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and achieving its goals (e.g., making Ukraine neutral) are slim given its military and economic capabilities, and the limited economic assistance it receives from some Eastern countries through its “Turn to the East”. Moreover, the prospect of altering the unfavorable European security structure that has evolved since the end of the Cold War and of rebuilding the international order is beyond Russia’s capabilities. (2) Russia needs to improve certain internal and external conditions that hinder the development of its relations with Eastern countries. These primarily include building new infrastructure or modernizing existing facilities in Russia’s Far East, reducing regulatory barriers in transportation and logistics to facilitate land-based logistics between Russia and Asian countries, gaining a deeper understanding of the market conditions and business environments in Eastern countries, cultivating business professionals fluent in Eastern languages, overcoming the ingrained Western-centric mindset, and actively developing cooperation with Eastern countries in various fields. Establishing an international payment system with Eastern partners to circumvent U.S. secondary sanctions is also necessary. (3) Russia must also: enhance communication and cooperation with Eastern countries; gain a better understanding of how Eastern countries perceive, and what they require from Russia; increase Russia’s presence in Eastern countries; and foster a sense of identification with Russia’s presence in those countries and regions.

Despite its limited efficacy, Russia is likely to continue implementing the policy in the short to medium term due to four main factors. (1) The conditions for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine are vastly different, making it unlikely that the conflict can be resolved through negotiations. Therefore, the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and Russia’s confrontation with the West are likely to persist, as is the policy pivot. (2) The U.S. and the West are keen on using Ukraine to deplete Russia’s military and economic strength, transforming it into a middle-ranking power that no longer poses a threat to the Western liberal international order. This is irreconcilable with Russia’s goal of maintaining its status as an independent great power. So long as the contradictions between Russia and the
West persist, Russia will continue turning to the East. (3) The European Union has significantly reduced its dependence on Russian oil and gas, and Western connections with Russia in various economic, trade, and cultural fields have been curtailed. These factors will encourage Russia to persist in the pivot. (4) Although President Putin has to date not announced his candidacy for the 2024 Russian presidential election, it is highly likely that he will run for and win the presidential election, continuing to promote the “Turn to the East” policy.

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