

Russia Is “Skeptical” of the US Sponsored’ “Indo-Pacific” Concept

Medvedev at ASEAN Summit

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The interview that Russian Prime Minister Medvedev gave to the Bangkok Post during his recent visit to Thailand to attend the ASEAN Summit there served to remind everyone of Russia’s skepticism towards the US’ “Indo-Pacific” concept, which he believes reduces the bloc’s centrality in regional affairs and also unnecessarily pressures its members to depart from their historic position of non-alignment, though this stance shouldn’t be interpreted as signaling that Russia is against this strategy’s publicly proclaimed goals of free trade and improved regional connectivity.

Keen observers were already aware that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov slammed the US’ “Indo-Pacific” concept as an “[artificially imposed](#)” construct back in February, but so much has happened around the world since then that regular folks are forgiven for either never hearing about this in the first place or promptly forgetting about it shortly thereafter, but Prime Minister Medvedev reminded everyone about this principled position in an interview that he gave over the weekend to the [Bangkok Post](#) during his recent visit to Thailand to attend the ASEAN Summit there. In his words, “it can weaken the Association’s position and strip it of its status as a key player in addressing regional security problems”, as well as being “at odds with ASEAN fundamental principles, such as non-alignment and non-aligned status.” Russia won’t say it too openly out of consideration for its ASEAN and [Indian partners’ differing degrees of coordination with the US](#) through this initiative, but two of its unstated goals are to “[contain](#)” China and exclude Russia from this mega region, neither of which its predecessor concept of the Asia-Pacific had done and the reason why Moscow is opposed to its replacement with the “Indo-Pacific”.

Russia’s representatives must be mindful at all times that the ASEAN and other countries that participate in the “Indo-Pacific” are doing so because they believe that this strategy advances their own interests as they understand them, and none of them would ever openly admit to “containing” China or excluding Russia from this broader region, hence why Medvedev and Lavrov before him didn’t level any direct accusations of this sort against them but only strongly implied as much. Being skeptical of “Indo-Pacific” concept doesn’t mean that Russia isn’t interested in some of its other concepts such as enhancing trade with the many countries of this extended Rimland region, however, since Medvedev elaborated in his interview about the means through which Moscow intends to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. Some of the methods include closer military (and especially naval) cooperation, the possible export of floating nuclear power plant technology, and the clinching of free trade agreements between the Eurasian Union (EAU) and some of ASEAN’s

members such as Brunei, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand in order to expand the regional reach of the existing one that it already has with Vietnam, the last-mentioned approach of which is intended to advance the Greater Eurasian Partnership that Russia envisages replacing the “Indo-Pacific”.

This strategic concept is an all-inclusive one that isn't aimed against any third country and, in Medvedev's words, “is about creating an entire economic and cultural space where people can freely communicate, trade, travel and discover new opportunities for themselves.” In essence, the Greater Eurasian Partnership is supposed to embody the publicly proclaimed principles of the “Indo-Pacific” that are undermined by its de-facto American leader's unstated goals against China and Russia, and the modality through which Russia wants to replace its rival's concept is by tacitly co-opting it with India's help. This is a risky strategy that isn't guaranteed to succeed and could actually backfire if it ends up offsetting the country's delicate “balancing” act between China and India, but it nevertheless presents the most realistic opportunity that Russia has under these circumstances. Despite India's pro-American pivot in recent years, it's still retaining some vestiges of its increasingly outdated “multi-alignment” policy by recently prioritizing the reinvigoration of relations with Russia as seen by Prime Minister Modi's participation in the Eastern Economic Forum back in September as President Putin's guest of honor.

The two countries agreed to take their newfound “[global partnership](#)” to the next level by establishing the [Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor](#) (VCMC), which could in practice actualize the author's 2015 vision of an “[Asian Sea Arc](#)” connecting that Far Eastern port city with ASEAN (and further afield India of course), thereby making Russia a more active player in regional affairs contrary to the US' “Indo-Pacific” wishes. The strategic catch, however, is that Russia will also continue conducting “[military diplomacy](#)” there by [selling more arms to the ASEAN states](#) including the [possible export of Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles](#), all with a view towards “balancing” their capabilities with China's so as to facilitate the political resolution of their territorial disputes in the South China Sea unlike the purpose of American arms shipments that aim instead to disrupt this balance in favor of the US' regional partners. Reinforcing their “neutral non-aligned” status, Russia might even include these countries in the “[new Non-Aligned Movement](#)” (Neo-NAM) that some of its strategists envisage it jointly leading with India, but despite these well-intended efforts at promoting peace and stability in the Southeastern corner of the Eurasian supercontinent, China might understandably perceive everything in a different way since Russia would objectively be improving the ASEAN countries' military capabilities against China in parallel with encouraging them to pool their efforts together in “balancing” between the People's Republic and the US.

It goes without saying that Russia must do everything in its power to clearly communicate its intentions to China and assuage it of any latent suspicions that it's coming under the sway of pro-American India, whether wittingly (which is extremely unlikely) or inadvertently in the sense that New Delhi might be setting Moscow up to fail by tempting it to “balance” too much at China's possibly perceived expense prior to dumping it for Washington once it goes too far, thus leaving the Eurasian Great Power in the strategic lurch of “losing” both China and India all at once. There's nothing wrong with Russia “balancing” in the way that was described in this analysis, and it can even be argued that it's perhaps the most responsible policy that it could pursue considering the prevailing uncertainties associated with the ongoing global systemic transition, but Moscow must always remember the enormous risks involved if Beijing were to believe that these moves are being made at its

expense. That's why it's important to ensure that Russia's de-facto support of the "Indo-Pacific's" publicly proclaimed goals of free trade and regional connectivity don't end up misinterpreted as its de-facto support of its unstated one to "contain" China in its historic region of interest, hence the pivotal role that its diplomats are destined to play in seeing to it that no security dilemma arises throughout the course of their country's 21st-century quest to become the [supreme "balancing" force](#) in Afro-Eurasia.

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