В утвержденной в РФ в 2021 г. новой «Стратегии национальной безопасности» ставится задача адаптировать Россию к складывающейся в современном мире сложной геополитической ситуации. Сегодня необходимо общими усилиями остановить подталкиваемый США процесс фрагментации и разобщения государств региона, чтобы избежать возможной войны в этом районе планеты через влияние на эволюцию общей региональной и глобальной ситуации. Совместные целенаправленные действия России и АСЕАН могли бы снизить напряженность в АТР и разрядить здесь взрывоопасную обстановку, нейтрализовать усилия Вашингтона по созданию регионального военно-политического блока.

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Jittipat Poonkham*

RUSSIA-ASEAN FRIENDSHIP IN THE INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: A LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE APPROACH

Abstract. This article argues that international friendship, which has been central to the narrative of Russia-ASEAN partnership, provides a useful theoretical framework for analyzing the development and dynamics of Russia-ASEAN relations in these three decades and beyond. Unlike a military-oriented alliance, international friendship is based on trust-building practices. The article also asserts that a leading from the middle approach – which focuses on a strategy of the combined middle powers and great powers to lead collectively in the middle level of global politics – would be an alternative option to sustainably strengthen mutual interests between Russia and ASEAN and bond their international trust in the intensely competitive Indo-Pacific security architecture. This strategic vision aims at institutional hedging, promoting the rule- or norm-based international order in the region as well as initiating region-wide politico-diplomatic innovations and advocacy. It could transform the world into a more multipolar and polycentric system.

Keywords: Russia, ASEAN, Friendship, Leading from the middle, Indo-Pacific.

"As a Russian saying goes, 'for a friend, seven miles is not too far'"

When Russian President Vladimir Putin first visited Singapore in November 2018 to attend the third ASEAN-Russia Summit and 13th East Asia Summit, Singaporean President Halimah Yacob said that Russia and ASEAN have forged a "long-standing friendship". This also marks a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and

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Russia, which Yacob also stated: "Despite the distance and differences between our two countries, it has been a good 50 years of friendship. We look forward to strengthening this relationship in the next 50 years and beyond"[10].

The narrative of "friendship" has been central to Russia-ASEAN relations throughout their distinctive and remarkable partnership. How to make friend is an option that states make of it. It is based on voluntary and constructive choices that states choose in order to build and develop international friendship. Friendship is unlike alliance. While the latter focuses on deal-making or interest-oriented activities, the former is broader than that. International friendship relates to trust-building or trust-bonding practices.

This article argues that international friendship provides a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing and analyzing the development and dynamics of Russia-ASEAN relations in these three decades and beyond. It also argues that a leading from the middle approach – which focuses on a strategy of the combined middle powers and great powers to lead collectively and alternatively in a highly complex and challenging world – would be an alternative option to strengthen ties and common positions between Russia and ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific region and emerging bipolar international order. This strategy could transform the world toward a more multipolar and multiplex system.

The article is structured into three main parts. The first explores the concept of international friendship and the key characteristics of Russia-ASEAN relations through this theoretical framework. The second part introduces a novel concept of a leading from the middle strategy to illustrate how and the extent to which Russia-ASEAN friendship can be strengthened. Both players can mutually benefit and bond their international trust by adopting a leading from the middle approach in the intensely competitive Indo-Pacific security architecture. The third part concludes by addressing common areas of cooperation that would help bonding the trust between Russia and ASEAN in the near future.

Friendship as a Theoretical Framework

International friendship is often dismissed as an analytical framework in international relations (IR) as it is quite impossible in interstate relations. However, in fact, a conceptual narrative of "friendship" is widely and regularly used in global politics and the relationship between Russia and ASEAN in particular. That said, Russia-ASEAN relations have been framed as a friendship or strategic partnership, instead of military-oriented alliance.

Following an emerging scholarship on international friendship [Berenskotter 2007; Koschut, Oelsner 2014; Rishchin 2006; Oelsner, Vion 2011; Nordin, Smith 2018], friendship is a distinct type of international relationship in global politics. For Felix Berenskoetter, friendship is "a meaningful relation among states" the concept of which provides "a rationale for why it exists, what is characteristics are, and how it structures international politics." [Berenskotter 2007: 648]. The article argues that there are three key features of international friendship, as follows:

First, a search for international friendship is qualitatively different from alliance system building that motivates some great powers. It is not about going out and finding a common enemy or threat. International friendship describes harmonious or non-confrontational interstate relations. In the difficult and challenging times, such as war, friendship is also featured by solidarity or "other-help" – that is, standing for and supporting each other. In this sense, friends provide mutual assistance against an external threat [Pashakhanlou, Berenskotter 2021] According to Alexander Wendt, friends "fight as a team if the security of any one is threatened by a third party." [Wendt 1999].

Second, international friendship does not focus on purely deal-making or interest-oriented activities. Rather, such amity entails a form of shared identity and values, thereby forming

[10] "Despite differences, Singapore and Russia have 'long-standing friendship': President Halimah", *Channel News Asia,* 13 November 2018 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/despite-differences-singapore-and-russia-have-long-standing-friendship-president-halimah-919371>.

a mutually affective or emotional understanding, such as empathy and compassion. Friends trust and care for each other's well-being. Based on this collective interconnectedness, trust-building practices are developed through interpersonal bonds between political leaders and peoples. International friendship illustrates how trust develops in a condition of international anarchy.

Last but not least, international friendship can be an agent of change in global politics in the sense that it has a transformative nature: friendship presents alternative forms of interaction, which might affect their immediate environment. In the long run, international friendship can collectively bring about a new pattern of norms and practices in international and/or regional order.

Accordingly, all these characteristics exemplify Russia-ASEAN relations. Tracing this international friendship in historical development can help us see why international friendship a useful concept is to explicate Russia-ASEAN relations.

(1) Russia-ASEAN relations are based on friendly partnership, rather than forging a military bloc. Russia has participated in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since 1994 and became an ASEAN dialogue partner in 1996, before acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN in 2004. Russia also attended ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) (since October 2010), and Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) (since October 2010). Along with the US, Russia becomes an official member of the East Asian Summit (EAS) since 2011.

Throughout these three decades of cooperation, ASEAN–Russia relations have produced 3 + 1 high-profile summits. The first was in 2005 where the parties adopted the Comprehensive Programme of Action (CPA) 2005–2015. The second ASEAN-Russia summit was in 2010, leading to Russia's membership in the East Asia Summit in 2011.

2016 marked the 20th anniversary of the ASEAN–Russia Dialogue Partnership. Putin hosted this commemorative summit in Sochi where he met top ASEAN leaders. The summit concludes with the signing of the Sochi Declaration and the CPA 2016–2020[11]. The third ASEAN-Russia Summit was in 2018 when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Singapore for the first time to attend the Summit. The Summit elevated the ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership to the strategic level.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis further strengthened Russia-ASEAN international friendship. For example, in June 2020, ASEAN and Russian foreign ministers held a special meeting to address and discuss the common approaches to COVID-19 and their joint management, by utilizing their ASEAN-led existing mechanisms. Within the framework of the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, regional efforts in fighting pandemics include its Experts' Working Group on Military Medicine and the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine, based on Bangkok[12].

On 6 July 2021, Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov co-chaired the virtual Special ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting in view of 30 years of ASEAN-Russia relations and 25 years of the ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership. All parties reaffirmed their commitment to further the ASEAN-Russia Strategic Partnership and "agreed to enhance cooperation in pandemic preparedness and response"[13].

(2) Russia and ASEAN have shared the same value and principle of international society: a pluralistic international society. Both political entities promote and respect the international law based on the UN Charter as well as defend the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Russia as an external great power does not impose its value and political system to countries in the region.

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[11] ASEAN, "Overview ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Relations", August 2020 URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Overview-ASEAN-Russia-Dialogue-Relations2.pdf. (Date of access: 15.09.2021).

[12] *Ivanov A.* "COVID-19: Russia-ASEAN Strategic Partnership in Action", *The Jakarta Post,* 27 June 2020 URL: https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/06/27/covid-19-russia-asean-strategic-partnership-in-action.html. (Date of access: 16.10.2021).

[13] See ASEAN, "Co-Chairs' Statement of the Special ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting", July 6, 2021 https://asean.org/co-chairs-statement-of-the-special-asean-russia-foreign-ministers-meeting/ (Date of access: 16.10.2021).

Both ASEAN and Russia have underlined and upheld multilateralism in the turbulent times, such as the pandemic crisis. In the 2020 Special Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Covid-19, Russia and ASEAN unanimously adopted a substantial eight-page joint statement reaffirming their commitment "to maintain a politically peaceful and stable region, where national security cannot be ensured at the expense of others"[14].

(3) in the post-Cold War world, Russia has not coerced or intimidated ASEAN in order to gain an upper hand influence. Therefore, Russia has avoided any direct entanglement or taking sides in any political disputes in the region. Russia's approach to regional disputes is driven by international friendship, rather than a traditional case of balancing, bandwagoning or hedging against China [Dikarev and Alexander Lukin 2021; Korolev 2019][15].

The territorial dispute in the South China Sea is an example. Though Russia is closer to China, it has refrained from support of Chinese territorial claims and still developed ties with other rival claimants, especially Vietnam.

The 2019 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Annual Security Outlook highlighted Russia's broad security position, which upholds the principle of non-intervention, and calls for parties in the South China Sea to resolve the conflicts by using political and diplomatic solutions in conformity with international law and abiding themselves by regional mechanisms, including the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea and the 2011 Guidelines for the Implementation of the DOC[16].

(4) Russia-ASEAN relations are maintained through interpersonal relationship. Although some scholars claimed that President Putin did not regularly attend key regional summits in the past, Putin met with ASEAN leaders at Russia-ASEAN summits and on sidelines of various multilateral international summits. Other Russian leaders are familiar faces in the region. They build interpersonal trust via face-to-face diplomacy and meetings.

In addition, Russia has been far more successful at the bilateral level than the multilateral level. Vietnam is longstanding Russian partner while others have recently recalibrated their approach to Moscow.

For example, Myanmar has increasingly built close ties with Russia, especially military-to-military relations. Ten days before the February 1 coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing received Russian Defense Minister General Sergey Shoigu in Naypyitaw on January 21. He said: "Just like a loyal friend, Russia has always supported Myanmar in difficult moments, especially in the last four years"[17].

Thailand has long considered Russia as "friend" since the late 19th Century. During then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's trip to Bangkok in April 2015, the Thai Prime Minister, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, overwhelmingly praised Russia as a 'good friend' to Thailand. 'When a friend is in trouble', said Prayut, 'moral support from allies is needed. Russia still chooses to be friends with Thailand today, and we will ensure the bond of friendship remains tight"[18].

(5) Russia and ASEAN promote mutual benefits in a wide range of areas. That is, they are cooperating in 3 pillars of ASEAN, namely political-security, economic and socio-cultural.

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[14] ASEAN, "Statement of the Special ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)", June 17, 2020. URL: https://asean.org/speechandstatement/statement-of-the-special-asean-russia-foreign-ministers-meeting-on-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/ (Date of access: 16.10.2021).

[15] *Dikarev A., Lukin A.* "Russia's Approach to South China Sea Territorial Dispute: It's Only Business, Nothing Personal", *The Pacific Review* (2022). Other scholars, such as Alexander Korolev, on the contrary, argue that Russia's approach to South China Sea is a case of regional hedging. See Alexander Korolev, "Russia in the South China Sea: Balancing and Hedging", *Foreign Policy Analysis,* Vol. 15: No. 2 (2019), 263–282.

[16] *ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook*, 2019, 151-152. URL: https://www.asean2019.go.th/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/a59b97cbdd1aa7252748e00028c051a2.pdf. (Date of access: 16.10.2021).

[17] "From Russia with Love (and More Ammunition) for Myanmar", *The Irrawaddy*, 30 March 2021 URL: https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/russia-love-ammunition-myanmar.html (Date of access: 17.10.2021).

[18] "Prayut Reaches Out to Moscow: Boosting Trade Tops Medvedev's Agendas", *Bangkok Post*, 9 April 2015.

In the first pillar, there are a series of platforms for cooperation, including the Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) +1, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus, and Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crimes (SOMTC) Plus. Russia's proposal for future cooperation includes Joint naval exercise and ASEAN-Russia Dialogue on ICT Security-related issues. During the COVID-19 crisis, both sides hosted the Special ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 17 June 2020.

Secondly, Russia and ASEAN have developed a modest achievement in their economic relationship. Russia has been the 8th largest trading partner of ASEAN. Trade increased from US$500 million in 2005 to US$4.3 billion in 2017 while foreign direct investment reached US$45 million in 2017[19]. Vietnam is Russia's biggest trade partner in ASEAN, followed by Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Russia's desire to integrate into Asia's growing economies is evident at least since its 2012 APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) chairmanship at Vladivostok[20]. Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept emphasized that establishing a long-term dialogue partnership with ASEAN is a priority objective[21].

In a broader Eurasian economic partnership, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has concluded free trade agreements with Vietnam in May 2015 and Singapore in October 2019. ASEAN itself is also studying the potential for an ASEAN-EAEU FTA.

Third, Russia has also tried to engage in cultural diplomacy, including the promotion of tourism, education, and culture through the Russkyi Mir Foundation and ASEAN Centre in MGIMO, which was founded in 2010 with Dr. Victor Sumsky as a first founding director. ASEAN and Russia have hosted the first ASEAN-Russia Youth Summit in 2013, the first ASEAN-Russia University Forum in 2016, and the first Meeting of ASEAN-Russia Working Group on Education in 2018.

(6) Both Russia and ASEAN prefer a better regional and world order. On the one hand, Russia and ASEAN have reiterated the significance of ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific security architecture, which should be built upon ASEAN-led mechanisms and based on shared values, norms and principles of international law, equality and mutual benefit. According to Russian Ambassador to ASEAN, Alexander Ivanov, "Instead of creating new formats, we should focus on efficient use of the existing ones, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS)"[22].

On the other hand, both parties agree upon a world order based on pluralism of power. A world order based on the multiplicity and plurality of power. A world order based on a multipolar and multiplex world. A world order based on a collective leadership, rather than a unipolar hegemony.

All in all, international friendship could offer a better conceptual framework in making sense of this bilateral relations between Russia and ASEAN. Nevertheless, building and maintaining friendship is one thing. Strengthening international friendship is a different and challenging matter.

Russia and ASEAN: Leading from the Middle

Given Southeast Asia's distant location and peripheral position in Russian national interests, Russia was often dubbed as "a minor player in the region, dwarfed by China and the

[19] *Espeña J.B.B.* "Putin's power and Russian foreign policy in ASEAN", *East Asia Forum,* 14 August 2020 <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/08/14/putins-power-and-russian-foreign-policy-in-asean/>.

[20] See *Jittipat Poonkham* "Russia's Pivot to Asia: Visionary or Reactionary?", in *ASEAN Political Outlook 2015,* eds. Michelle Tan, Pongkwan Sawasdipakdi and Jittipat Poonkham (Bangkok: Thammasat University, 2016), 157–175.

[21] See *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), December 2016 <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248>.

[22] *Ivanov A.* "COVID-19: Russia-ASEAN Strategic Partnership in Action", *The Jakarta Post,* 27 June 2020 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/06/27/covid-19-russia-asean-strategic-partnership-in-action.html>.

United States" and its influence was relatively minimal[23]. However, I argue that the foundations of ASEAN-Russian friendship are a steppingstone for further enhancement of the partnership.

The question is how to strengthen Russia-ASEAN friendship. This article argues that a leading from the middle strategy might be a sustainable and constructive way[24].

Leading from the middle is a strategy that a middle power or a group of combined middle and great powers adopt their leadership in the middle level of global politics in order to achieve their respective position and status and protect their common interests[25]. It is a strategic vision and position that a middle power or a group of middles powers pursues in order to hedge with the great powers, bind them within the rule- or norm-based international order in the region as well as initiate region-wide politico-diplomatic innovations and advocacy. Leading from the middle aims at seeking to reduce strategic uncertainty amid great power rivalries and geopolitical competition. It also aims to construct an amicable environment that could open a space for a multipolar and polycentric world order.

Therefore, the middle power is middling or leading from the middle. Drawing from the middle power theory and relational approach to power, a leading from the middle strategy emphasizes the roles of the middle powers in three dimensions.

First, the middle powers are seen from their relational status or positionality in the international or regional ranking of power. The middle powers are in between the great powers and the small states. While realists often see middle powers as rule-takers rather than rule-makers[26], I argue that they have resources and capabilities sufficient enough to enable them to be functionally effective and "overriding interest in the development of institutions and practices conducive to peace, tranquility, and orderly adjustment in world politics"[27]. Unlike the great power, the middle powers are able to lead a region or subregion without being suspected of building hegemonic dominance or sphere of influence. The middle powers are playing "middle powermanship" – to quote two Canadian scholars John Holmes' and Robert W. Cox's awkward term – reminiscent of and in contrast to "brinksmanship" and "one-upmanship" of the great powers[28].

In addition, the category of middle powers is not an internal property of state largely based on the mere material attributes but rather a relational position of international status and recognition. Any states are middle powermanship only because other states intersubjectively recognize it as such. As Cox put it, 'the middle-power role is not a fixed universal but something that has to be rethought continually in the context of the changing state of the international system'[29].

The second dimension of the middle power is its leading behavior or practicality in the region. Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott and Kim R. Nossal, for example, suggest a behavioral approach to middle power theory. While seeing middle powers' practices as coalition-

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[23] *Abuza Z.* "The Bear Is Back? Russia's Return to Southeast Asia", *The Diplomat,* 1 July 2021 < https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/the-bear-is-back-russias-return-to-southeast-asia/>.

[24] I coined this term when I had given a public lecture on Thai-Russian Relations at the ASEAN Center of MGIMO University in 2018. I am grateful to Dr. Victor Sumsky, Dr. Ekaterina Kuldonova and staff of ASEAN Center, who have hospitably hosted me since then.

[25] See *Jittipat Poonkham* "Thailand-Australia Relations and Regional Geopolitics: A Thai View", The Center of Gravity Series Paper 53, Strategic and Defence Studies Center, Australian National University, August 2020, 22-24; Jittipat Poonkham, "The Bamboo Breaks: Thailand's Diplomatic Challenge", *Asialink,* 9 September 2021 <https://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/insights/the-bamboo-breaks-thailands-diplomatic-challenge>.

[26] See, for example, *Michael Mastanduno* "System Maker and Privilege Taker: US Power and the International Political Economy", *World Politics,* Vol. 61: No. 1 (2009), 121-154. Thomas Wilkins aptly differentiates realist, liberal and constructivist approaches to middle power, see "Defining Middle Powers through IR Theory: Three Images", in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases*, eds. Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 45-61.

[27] *Cox R.W.* "Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order", *International Journal,* Vol. 44: No. 4 (1989), 823.

[28] *Holmes J.* "Is There a Future for "Middlepowermanship"?" in *Canada's Role as a Middlepower*, ed. J.K. Gordon (Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1966); Cox, "Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order".

[29] *Cox* "Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order", 825.

building activities in issue-specific contexts, they defined middle powers by their 'tendency to pursue multilateral solutions to international problems, their tendency to embrace compromise positions in international disputes, and their tendency to embrace notions of "good international citizenship" to guide international diplomacy'[30].

However, I argue that a leading from the middle Strategy is dependent on combined practices of hedging, norm binding and politico-diplomatic initiatives and advocacy at the regional or global level. In other words, middle powers are playing a 'game of skill', rather than a game of power, during the changing politico security architecture[31]. Without such practices, that state could not be a middle power leading from the middle. The middling practices are central to a leading from the middle Strategy.

Third, middle powers should have a 'systemic impact' on the regional security and economic architecture. For Andrew Carr, 'a systemic impact approach defines middle powers through their ability to alter or affect specific elements of the international system in which they find themselves.' That said, it is the outcome, rather than the intentions, of their actions which determines middle powers' practices[32]. In similar vein, Robert Keohane suggests that middle powers are states whose 'leaders consider that it cannot act alone affectively but may be able to have a systemic impact in a small group or through an international institution'[33].

For a leading of the middle strategy to be effective, I argue that the middle power has the ability and potential to systematically affect or influence outcomes both internationally or regionally. By so doing, middle power could either (1) successfully hedge with the great powers in order to alleviate security risks or (2) bind the great powers within the rules and normative structure of the existing regional mechanisms (such as the peaceful settlement of the regional conflicts, the respect of freedom of navigation and so on) or (3) implement its policy advocacy in the institutionalized regional security architecture. In this sense, the middle powers are the middle 'responsibles', who have a responsibility for global and regional politics.

Taken together, leading from the middle is a strategy of the middle power whose relational power positionality allows it to perform its middling practices and to have the systemic effects upon the rule-based regional order. The ultimate aims of such strategy are not only to hedge with the great powers but also to lead by political and diplomatic initiatives (and examples), norm binding and rule-making processes. Nevertheless, the leading from the middle strategy is constrained by the international system, pre-existing alliance commitments, and underperformance of middle powers themselves due to domestic politics and a lack of leadership. The effectiveness of such strategy largely depends on bridging the gap between words and deeds. ASEAN is an exemplar of such 'middle power dilemma'. While, on the one hand, they are 'trying to play a creative role in international diplomacy', the middle power is 'undermined by the actions of more powerful states and the timidity of domestic political elites'.[34]

In this sense, a leading from the middle strategy could reinforce hedging's more positive attributes by strengthening the bargaining leverage for a group of middle powers (such as ASEAN) and Russia to compel the US and China to respect their mutual interests and, in the long term, to avoid succumbing to the temptation of bandwagoning (another traditional and zero-sum strategy if pursued exclusively) with the US or balancing China that could lead to an increasingly tense regional security environment. That is, the world could avoid the potential and pitfalls of the so-

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[30] *Cooper A.F., Higgott R.A., Nossal K.R.* Relocating Middle Powers Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993), 19.

[31] *Beeson M. , Higgott R.* "The Changing Architecture of Politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia's Middle Power Moment?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific,* Vol. 14 (2014), 215-237.

[32] *Carr A.* "Is Australia a Middle Power? A Systemic Impact Approach", *Australian Journal of International Affairs,* Vol.68: No. 1 (2014), 79.

[33] *Keohane R.* "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics", *International Organization,* Vol. 23: No. 2 (1969), 296.

[34] *Beeson M.* "Middle Powers in the International Political Economy", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary International Political Economy,* eds. T.M. Shaw et al. (London: Palgrave, 2019), 202.

called ‘Thucydides’s Trap’, precipitating hegemonic warfare between the rising and declining powers.

Russia-ASEAN Relations: A Way Ahead?

Rory Medcalf, Head of the National Security College (NSC) at the Australian National University, is right to say that the Indo-Pacific is a “global region”, which is defined by “multipolarity and connectivity, the centre of strategic and economic gravity in a globalized world.” It is about “Asia but also more than Asia.” “It is regional and global: the Indo-Pacific is the main highway for commerce and energy between Asia, Africa, Europe, Oceania and the Americas”[35].

International friendship must be aware of and addressing key challenges in the 21st century Indo-Pacific region. Recently, international society has confronted its quadruple challenges:

(1) A power transition that an intense geopolitical competition between the US and China has escalated and a bipolar world is in formation;

(2) A paradigmatic transition or a clash of different and competing values;

(3) A pandemic transition that COVID-19 has contested our forms of life globally;

(4) A structural transition in the scope of cooperation as governments face a series of complex and often interconnected global challenges.

Accordingly, ASEAN and Russia can work together and strengthen global conversations and dialogue between ASEAN and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and within the Greater Eurasian Partnership, which also includes the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The common agenda includes the restoration of macroeconomic and financial stability, connectivity and supply chains, food security, open markets, the digital economy and innovations, and environmental sustainability as well as the ASEAN-Russia work plan on counter terrorism and transnational crime. They should be addressed at the multilateral settings.

I believe that by adopting a leading from the middle strategy, Russia and ASEAN friendship is able to collectively and effectively manage these four horsemen of apocalypse. The key challenge for ASEAN and Russia is how to build a sustainable multipolar and multiplex world order with pluralistic solidarity. For ASEAN, deepening ties with Russia is strategically wise to keep options open, especially as the Sino–US geopolitical competition and transnational challenges, such as pandemic and environmental crisis evolve into the unknown.

In conclusion, Russia-ASEAN relations can be better analyzed through a theoretical framework of international friendship that differentiated Russia-ASEAN partnership as a distinct form of relationship. Rather than building an alliance system or military-oriented minilateralism, it is cultivating a collegial and amicable atmosphere. Both Russia and ASEAN have also shared the convergence of mutual interests and values in wide ranging issues and common agendas in the Indo-Pacific.

However, Russian influence and relevance in Southeast Asia remains relatively modest if not marginal. This can be adjusted by adopting a leading from the middle approach. It requires a much more diplomatic initiative, regional hedging and collective leadership in cherishing a multilateral and multipolar system in the expanding Indo-Pacific regional architecture.

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ASEAN 'LIVING TOGETHER IN HARMONY' WITH RUSSIA — USA — CHINA: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE APSC, ASCC AND SDGS

Abstract. The promises of a "New Asia" collide at the juncture of most if not all kinds of cultural, religious, political, economic discourses, towards the South-East [Pacini, Siow Yue 1997]. ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is primed to be key to inter-regional decision-making. With the recent signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the regional bloc has taken bolder steps towards building its economic powerhouse vis-à-vis the superpowers [Petri, Plumer 2020]. Furthermore, the promise of integration between China's One Belt, One Road initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union do have future implications on the regional bloc. Needless to say, while the COVID-19 pandemic has closed majority of the borders, disrupted tourism and halted trade activities, this side of the world has brought and will still bring the modern triangle: Russia, USA, and China, to the diplomatic tables.

Constantly shaped by geo-politics, the 10 member states, with baskets of socio-economic resources and political capitals, for centuries have been exposed to colonial and trade powers, including former American and European colonizers, and trading partners in nearby East and South Asia. Such experiences have shaped their constructions of diplomatic practice, within and outside the region, in so far as in its first ten years of existence, ASEAN especially the APSC (ASEAN Political Security Community) was preoccupied with internal integration and caution was placed on external relationships [Villanueva, Manalo 2017].

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