CHAPTER 5

Russia’s Asia Policy under Vladimir Putin, 2000–5

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Though Asia traditionally was, for Russia, a “secondary” geopolitical direction by and large, its importance has been steadily rising since the 1990s. By the mid-2000s, this rise has acquired a new quality: Russia increasingly acts as a Euro-Pacific nation.1 This has been the result of several factors. Top among them are the opening of Russia in the wake of the fall of communism and the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, and the rise of China. Russia’s biggest problem at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the lack of a functioning model for regional development in East Siberia and the Far East, the sparsely populated but resource-rich part of the country. Unless Russia develops such a model, it is likely to see its eastern provinces become a raw materials appendage of China’s growing economy. If, at the same time, Russia’s western regions continue to perform a similar function for the European Union, the prospect of the country, which once was co-terminus with Eurasia, turning itself into something that can be described as “Euro-China,” a weak land torn apart by the rival forces of attraction, might become a reality. Thus, averting such a scenario is Russia’s premier national interest. Moreover, the dynamism of China and India, especially in contrast to Europe’s sluggishness, makes them, as well as Japan and Korea, highly attractive for Russian business executives. Looming across the Pacific is an alternative point of entry into the United States, as well as opportunities in Canada to the north and Latin America and Australia to the south. The combined power of the Pacific Rim

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economies is such that Russia can no longer afford an Asia–Pacific policy that is second-best to its Euro-Atlantic dimension. Moreover, to be successful and competitive, Russia needs to reverse the traditional approach to foreign policy. Instead of looking at it in terms of projection (of power, influence, etc.), it needs to see it as a means to attract external resources for the benefit of an essentially domestic agenda.

Such an approach is only beginning to take shape, still mostly at the declaratory level. This chapter analyzes the policies of the Putin administration toward the Asia–Pacific, and its underlying principles. The thrust of these policies is still on bilateral relations with the individual Asian nations, but a more general approach to the region is slowly emerging. However, the more traditionalist view, which tends to see foreign policy as a self-contained “field,” has not wholly disappeared. This prevents Moscow from fully using the opportunities that exist and from effectively managing the resources that Russia possesses. Following the pattern of Russia’s still compartmentalized Asian policy, the chapter examines the drivers that shape its bilateral relations with the key players in the region one by one, focusing on the principal challenges, responses, and opportunities. We then proceed to assess the contribution of the “Putin period” for the evolution of Russian strategic thinking about Asia, weighing the “pros” and “cons.” The chapter concludes with an outline for a more enlightened Russian Asia–Pacific strategy, which would seek to maximize the opportunities existing in and reduce the risks coming from the region.

China: Learning to Live with the Rising Dragon

Putin was the first Russian leader to publicly acknowledge the central challenge that a rising China poses for Russia. Ever since Russia and China entered into regular diplomatic relations, which occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, and essentially until the late twentieth century, China was regarded by Russians as a backward and incoherent giant, famously incapable of getting its act together. Whether as an object of colonial expansion under the czars or the Soviet Union’s junior communist ally-turned-rival, it was treated accordingly, that is, as an object of Russian policy, never an equal partner. Even in the immediate post-Soviet period, still-arrogant Russians sometimes viewed China as a tool in their futile attempt to counterbalance the American world hegemony, which they found impossible to stomach in the aftermath of the cold war. Whether the Chinese were likely to subscribe to that idea bothered these people little.