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Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme

Russia's Asian Policy

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Under Putin, Russia's foreign policy became increasingly concerned with Asia. Against the background of a renewed interest in multilateral organisations, Russia has sought membership in a number of regional structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The guiding principles of Russia's bilateral relations with the East Asian countries are a concern for stability and security as well as development of mutually beneficial economic cooperation, in particular with China, Japan and South Korea.

From a Russian perspective, the SCO is the most promising newly established international organisation which also attracts the interest of the broader international community. Despite the fact that the SCO is not a military alliance, its main area of success lies in confidence building measures in the field of security and military cooperation. Member states exchange sensitive data and regularly conduct military exercises. They have also created the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RAS), based in Tashkent. The SCO plays a major but not decisive role in Afghanistan and cooperation between NATO and the SCO is constantly improving. For instance, NATO representatives took part in the latest SCO conference in Moscow in 2009. The level of cooperation between ASEAN and Russia is not as elaborate as between SCO and Russia, but ASEAN remains a reliable partner and can play an important role in the economic development of Russia's Far East (RFE).

Russia and China share a common approach to international order, based on the idea of global multipolarism. Both are in favour of the current system of international law, the prominent role of the United Nations and its Security Council and they coordinate their positions on international conflicts such as Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues and the crisis in Syria. The strategic partnership between Russia and China, including a cooperation mechanism of mutual consolidation, has been in place since 1997. Enhanced economic cooperation is of high importance to both countries, above all in the field of energy supply. Improved trade and investment structures contribute to the development of China's North-Eastern provinces, as well as Russia's Siberian and Far Eastern regions.

Although Russo-Japanese relations remain difficult on a political level, the bilateral trade volume grows even faster than Russian-Chinese trade. Japan is a major investor in the Russian automobile industry and in the gas production sector in Sakhalin. As a trading partner for Japan, Russia has become as important as Britain and France, overtaking India and Vietnam.

Russia and Japan have some foreign policy interests in common, but a resolution of the Kuril Islands conflict is not likely in the near future.

Russia's relations with South Korea have been developing steadily since the late 1980s, when a system of governmental consultations and regular summits was established. Since the economic downturn of 1998, more favourable economic conditions in both countries have triggered new initiatives in economic cooperation. In contrast, economic relations with North Korea remain stagnant. Major projects such as the Trans-Korean Railway had to be postponed due to political instability. Russia's main concern is a possible nuclearisation of the peninsula. Therefore, it participates actively in the Six-Party Talks and emphasises the importance of compromise and a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Questions and Discussion

The Siberian and Far Eastern periphery is a particular focus of Russia's Asian policy. The region suffers from economic underdevelopment and is becoming increasingly depopulated. Russia seems unable to reverse the negative trend which is rooted in a lack of will rather than lack of resources. Economic cooperation with China can hence give positive impetus to the region's development and presents an opportunity to use China's economic power without harming Russian national interests.

Russia has traditionally close ties with the Central Asian countries. Asked if Russia's engagement in East Asia implies a strategic shift away from Central Asia, the speaker emphasised that the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan in particular, are still important partners for Russia and everything that supports their economic development is in Russia's interest. Russia has to compete with other powers as China for economic influence in the region. However, talk of a political rift between Russia and China relating to Central Asia is exaggerated. Furthermore, China has no political influence in the region yet whereas Russia's Eurasian Customs Union is already bearing fruit. A further development from a customs union towards a political union is desirable but should not be misinterpreted as a sign of Russian imperial re-emergence.

Asked to what extent Russian-Chinese partnership can influence developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the speaker replied that both share a common interest in a stable AfPak region, but China is still reluctant to get involved politically and prefers to pursue economic interests. Hence there is little room for cooperation between Russia and China here. Reflecting on the role of the SCO in Afghanistan after 2014, the speaker argued that due

to the geographical proximity of SCO members to Afghanistan, the SCO is a more appropriate platform for discussing the situation in Afghanistan than NATO. Furthermore, Afghanistan will be given observer status with the SCO next year.

Russo-Japanese relations gained new momentum when Russia participated in the East Asian Summit for the first time in 2011. As the speaker pointed out, this should be understood as sign of the Russian government's political will to play a more active role in international organisations. Russia's participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue follows this pattern and furthermore reflects the geopolitical importance of India in a multipolar world. The trilateral partnership between Russia, China and India mirrors the increasing importance of the BRICS on the international stage and challenges the prevailing unipolar worldview.

A participant questioned whether Russia's policy towards East Asia is actually as serious and substantive as Russia would like it to be perceived. Has Russia the potential and the resources to underpin its engagement in Asia or does it remain a primarily European power? Although most Russian energy pipelines still pass through Western Europe, there is a gradually more identifiable alternative with the proposal of a gas pipeline to North-West China and further cooperation projects in planning. Indeed, Russia's Asian policy is not yet fully-fledged but compared to the 1990s significant progress can be seen.