

Report on the Conference on ASEAN-Russia: Foundations and Future Prospects

26-27 April 2011, Singapore

The conference was held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) on 26-27 April 2011. The ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS and the Russia Program of ISEAS co-organised the event with the ASEAN Centre at MGIMO University, Moscow. Academics, policy practitioners and experts from think-tanks and universities in ASEAN and Russia, shared their perspectives on the past, present and potential role and capacity of ASEAN-Russia relations, focusing on the evolving needs and interests of both.

2 The conference opened with an overview of ASEAN-Russia relations, presented from the perspectives of both ASEAN (shared by the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for the ASEAN Political and Security Community) and Russia (delivered by the Chairman of the Russian National Committee for the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP)). This, together with the “Experts Panel” that followed, set the overall tone of the conference discussions, and provided several policy suggestions for enhancing the depth and breadth of collaboration between Russia and ASEAN member states.

3 Cooperation – and its benefits – was evident thus far in the fields of energy, science and technology, and human resources development, under the framework of strategic agreements between the leaders of ASEAN and Russia. Panellists suggested broadening the scope of cooperation towards bridging the information gap between ASEAN countries and Russia, through greater people-to-people exchanges, politically, economically, academically and culturally. Creative approaches were necessary, to boost the visibility of ASEAN in Russia and Russia in ASEAN, via enhancing its soft power. Participants acknowledged the importance of Russia’s geopolitical position in linking East Asia and Europe, and its potential for contributing positively to the ASEAN regional architecture.

4 The discussions on geopolitics examined in closer detail Russia’s role in Southeast Asia, military ties between Russia and the ASEAN countries, and its participation in broader regional arrangements such as the East Asia Summit and the Asia Europe Meeting. In the post-Soviet Union decade, ASEAN-Russia relations had been somewhat “anaemic”; however, Russia is now emerging as a partner capable of contributing to and maintaining regional balance. The interest to integrate closer with the East Asian region indicates Russia’s

interest to be part of initiatives for regional peace and development, and its identification with Asia. However, Russia is not yet in ASEAN's top ten trading partners, nor does it rank high in foreign direct investment. In terms of people-to-people connectivity, tourist numbers from Russia to ASEAN countries have grown lately but remain not too high (not to mention from ASEAN countries to Russia). The recommendations that Russia improve economic ties with ASEAN and East Asia are thus aligned with Russia's national interest. The existing military ties between Russia and some countries in ASEAN, essentially in arms trading, can serve as the basis for more substantive relations (e.g. through greater exchanges, trainings, joint exercises).

5 The tripartite role of Russia, India and China in their relations with Southeast Asian nations was also discussed. It seemed that Russia-India-China or RIC cooperation did not really place cooperation with Southeast Asia high on its agenda although individual RIC members were ASEAN Dialogue Partners and also enjoyed substantive bilateral relations with individual ASEAN members. With regard to Russia's position on the South China Sea and the territorial claims by some ASEAN members and China, the perspective from Russia was to dissociate itself from any developments that could provoke tensions, including any interference in territorial disputes/claims. At the same time, Russia's participation in the East Asia Summit could contribute to lessening tensions, particularly in the area of energy security. In terms for future prospects for ASEAN-Russia strategic engagements, suggestions were made to focus on non-traditional security issues, using the ASEAN-Russia multilateral approaches to address issues such as environmental protection and climate change issues. Participants felt that the idea of opening up a new passage for commercial navigation via the Northern sea route in the Arctic merited further discussion.

6 The session on economic cooperation between ASEAN and Russia opened with contributions from Russia's Ambassador to Singapore and from the Executive Director of the Singapore-Russia Business Council. While directives by the leaders of ASEAN and Russia provided the framework for cooperation, implementation requires a more "bottom-up" approach, including information exchange on business opportunities, involvement/participation of the business community, and making more effective use of existing mechanisms. The possibility of a Russia-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was also raised. Core elements of a roadmap for Russia-ASEAN trade and economic cooperation were also shared. The roadmap would guide the implementation of the Comprehensive

Programme of Action (CPA) to promote cooperation between ASEAN and Russia over 2010 to 2015, and would be presented to the ASEAN Economic Ministers.

7 Russia's close relations with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) present a good opportunity for Russia's contribution to ASEAN integration by assisting the CLMV countries to build capacities to participate in and integrate further into ASEAN. Past examples of such assistance can be seen in a variety of Russia's cooperation programmes in Cambodia. There was also great potential for Russia to develop (or deepen) cooperation between Russia and ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Vietnam, in the field of oil and gas production. Russia is also seeking to develop greater economic ties with the East Asia region through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process, particularly with the hosting of the 2012 APEC Summit in Vladivostok. Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), possibly also in 2012, would further strengthen economic and political links, and promote business opportunities in Russia.

8 The Russian side expressed its appreciation of and support for the steps taken by Myanmar towards political change. The process, in Russia's view, should be supported rather than treated with the scepticism that some countries in the West were adopting towards Myanmar. The Russian side also held the opinion that the international community should work towards removal of sanctions on the country, to enable Myanmar to integrate fully into regional and international processes.

9 Finally, the conference looked at the cultural aspect of future projects between ASEAN and Russia, focusing on creative ways to promote greater awareness of ASEAN in Russia and of Russia in the ASEAN member states. Discussions touched on the use of art, food, and various media to communities in Russia and ASEAN.

10 A group of 10 Russian artists plans to travel through the ten ASEAN countries from late 2011 to 2013, spending two to four weeks in each country, with an aim to create an artistic image of Southeast Asia. A series of exhibitions to present their works is proposed to follow both in the region and in Russia. Conference participants suggested that local artists should also be invited to participate in each stage of the visit.

11 As literature has a traditional role in promoting awareness, a proposal was put forward for preparing a literary guide of translated Russian works in each ASEAN member country (and vice versa), and to publish in each SEA country a book of Russian fairy tales (the same would be done in Russia with small booklets of tales from each ASEAN member). The conference also acknowledged the contribution of bilingual magazines such as “103rd Meridian East”, which shared contemporary topics to communities in Southeast Asia and Russia.

12 Academic links are another way of bridging the cultural/information chasm. Cultural and academic linkages, however, are essentially soft power tools. Examples were shared of how Britain and France extend their soft power influence through centres as the British Council and Alliance Française, and through their respective news/media services. While Russia does not have the global institutional tools of Britain and France, it does have soft power. It is interesting that Chatham House has stated (in 2011) that “conventional wisdom holds that Russia has no soft power”. The issue is more of Russia applying its soft power more effectively. Russia needs to reassert itself on the world stage through an effective and consistent use of soft power.

13 The conference noted the efforts of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and MGIMO University. The Russkiy Mir Foundation has established 73 centres in countries across the globe, providing some 300 grants annually for programmes and projects that promote greater awareness of Russia (including language training, scholarships, training opportunities). The Foundation also has an existing programme of translation for Russian works. Academic linkages have been encouraged by MGIMO University, which has produced many Southeast Asian graduates over the past decades. With the establishment of the ASEAN Centre at MGIMO University, there are greater opportunities for more academic linkages with Southeast Asian universities. Still, scholarship quotas provided for each of the ASEAN countries have not been fully taken up by ASEAN member states, except Cambodia.

14 In the concluding session, the co-organisers expressed their hope for continued discussions on the topic at a follow-up conference, possibly at alternate venues in Russia and ASEAN countries. The present conference had taken an additional step forward in confirming that awareness of Russia and her presence in the region is growing and becoming more multidimensional. Complex nuances in ASEAN-Russia relations had been raised by

conference discussions which served as a timely stock-take of existing and potential initiatives and collaborative activities. Recommendations emanating from the conference would be a useful input for furthering ASEAN-Russia cooperation beyond 2011, its 15th anniversary year. All participants agreed that the foundations for ASEAN-Russia cooperation are maturing, widening the scope for future collaboration, especially in ASEAN's move for closer regional integration. Institutions have been established to promote greater awareness and exchanges, and should be used more optimally in future.

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