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Russia and a complex “Indo-Pacific”

On the 25th of February 2019, at the Valdai conference in Ho Chi Minh City, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov analysed the “Indo-Pacific” in this way: *“The Indo-Pacific region is another artificially imposed construct which I just discussed with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Vietnam. The United States, along with Japan and Australia, has begun to promote this within the far-reaching context of containing China. This is a clear attempt to get India involved in military-political and naval processes. This concept undermines the ASEAN-centricity of the formats that have been created in that region”.*

Several points come to mind. Firstly, Russia is now exerting itself in the Indo-Pacific, i.e. the Indian Ocean, South China Sea/Southeast Asia and the Pacific – whether or not it uses the term “Indo-Pacific”. Secondly, there is Russian rejection of other countries’ policies; in this case the US (and Japanese) formulation of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). Thirdly, Russia is trying to pull both Vietnam and India away from security convergence with the US. Fourthly, labelling of US and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy as containment of China is not inaccurate (“constrainment” might be a better term), but gives Russia the opportunity to stand with China; in which Russia-China naval cooperation has been a developing feature across the East China Sea, Western Pacific and South China Sea.

Russia is making its own play for Southeast Asia. In part this is through Russia renewing old Soviet-period links with Vietnam. In part this is through Russia seeking out the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Hence Lavrov’s comments: *“The Indo-Pacific region concept clearly competes with the central role of ASEAN. We do not welcome these kinds of concepts, because we consider it wrong to undermine ASEAN’s proactive role. Today, the Russia-ASEAN strategic cluster has become a key factor in ensuring regional security”.*

This represented an attempt by Lavrov to position Russia alongside ASEAN, while simultaneously stoking distrust from ASEAN towards US/Japanese strategic proposals for the region; even though both the US and Japan continue to reject that their FOIP strategy is in contradiction to ASEAN.

Russian policy in the Indo-Pacific faces three tensions. Firstly, previously close security relations with India are becoming less important for India, as India slowly but surely strengthens its security-defence relationship with the US; explicitly for Indo-Pacific purposes and implicitly for China constraint reasons. Secondly, though Lavrov included praise for the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral format, India-China friction creates difficulties for Russia over who to give support to, at a time when China and India are in perceivably growing competition with each other in the Indo-Pacific. Thirdly, in turn, China is not necessarily very enthusiastic about any growing Russian role in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.

Finally, Russia's overall strategic projection across the Indo-Pacific remains weak, compared to the combined policies and means of the USA and Japan. This is perhaps also why Moscow prefers to separate the Indian and Pacific Oceans in line with her limited capabilities and the diverging dynamics present in Russian relations with India and China.

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