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# Slowly but Surely: Russia's Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia

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One of the most important current questions faced by Russia with regards to Southeast Asia is how Moscow can become involved in relations within the region. Russia could keep its current policy of practical, neutral position, slowly but surely becoming more influential in the Southeast Asia's landscape due to trade and diplomacy. The best strategy would be to engage in "deep dialogue" with Southeast Asia's countries. Thus, in turn, would undoubtedly increase Russia's dynamics of cooperation with multilateral institutions and a broad range of regional countries.



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Southeast Asia would welcome Russia playing a greater security role, especially in counter-terrorism against Islamic militants, and in soft-balancing against China and the United States. However, Russia has already fulfilled this expectation by participating in various Southeast Asia multilateral mechanisms. For instance, 2018 has been a meaningful year for Russian foreign policy in Southeast Asia. On November 13–15, 2018, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin made a state visit to Singapore and attended the [13th East Asia Summit \(EAS\)](#) [🔗](#), which was the first visit since Russia became a member to the summit in 2010. At the same time, President Putin took a part in the [3rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\) – Russian Federation Summit on Strategic Partnership](#) [🔗](#).

Southeast Asian states show interest in joining the Greater Eurasian Partnership which promotes [growing economic connectedness](#) [🔗](#) in the Eurasian continent. The Greater Eurasian Partnership could be considered as a countermeasure to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly concerning geopolitics and security. These facts show that Russia becomes a more significant player in Southeast Asia and its relations with the region have been gradually improving.

## Southeast Asia — Pawn in a Geopolitical Clash?

Southeast Asia finds itself in a geopolitical clash between the two superpowers, regionally dominating China and the United States., it also stands as one of the key areas where China's power can be countered.

China is highly involved in regional affairs, with the United States thwarting its ambitions. Southeast Asian countries are conscious that China could utilize its regional economic power as a form of political leverage. The small nations are anxious to balance Chinese influence, and looking for potential alternatives allowing them to flirt with other global players — Russia or the United States. Such a situation made Russia, both in Southeast Asia and worldwide, a potential 'third force' of power in the region, serving as a counterbalance to China and the United States.

Russia cannot be considered as the 'third force' since Moscow has its traditional products and services in important sectors such as oil and gas exploration, nuclear energy, military hardware, all of which are already

widely available in the region. The countries in the Indo-Pacific [currently account](#) for a third of Russia's foreign trade, for none of these countries does Russia itself exceed 3 percent.



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The region will slowly transform into a world-stage clash between the United States and China which will pose a challenge for Russia's foreign policy but will also entail an opportunity. In the current political situation, it seems that the best strategy for Moscow would be to increase cooperation with regional countries within the existing multilateral structures while also setting up new-ones, instead of witnessing China exerting its influence on Southeast Asia.

## What Russia Brings: Weapon and Energy

Russia's key objectives include promoting economic cooperation. Russia will use its economic strengths — oil and gas, military hardware, nuclear energy — to carve out a niche for itself in the region. [Over half of ASEAN's members](#) have bought military equipment from Russia's defense industry and sought its expertise in the energy sector. Moscow is quite pragmatic, showing that economic considerations play a crucial role in defining Moscow's aims in Southeast Asia, which is mainly considered as a marketplace for Russian weapons.

Russia has increased its weapons sales since the end of the Cold War, with many of the old restrictions have disappeared. It is a major supplier of advanced military equipment for the region. Southeast Asia accounted for 12.2% of Russia's arms exports destinations between 2013 and 2017, according to the [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) [↗](#).

Among examples showing the popularity of Russian military hardware, we can mention the fact that Vietnam imports the majority of its military equipment from Russia, including submarines, frigates, fighter jets, and missile defense systems. Russia is selling assault rifles to the Philippines and several other countries. Selling weapons and obtaining new contracts offer new ways for Russia to project power in Asia.

Another Russia's essential export — energy - has garnered regional [interest](#) [↗](#).

Russia is seeking to diversify its energy strategy in Asia to include a better relationship with Southeast Asian states. The Asia Pacific will account for [the majority of growth in terms of future energy demand](#) [↗](#), so, naturally, Moscow will be interested in this energy demand, helping to get comprehensive energy rebalance towards Asia. Southeast Asia's economic links with Russia could be further enhanced in the future, with a possible role for liquid natural gas (LNG) as well as nuclear energy.

## Russian Way to Success in Southeast Asia



Anton Tsvetov:

[Russia and Multilateral Diplomacy in East Asia](#)

Southeast Asia has a special role in Russia's foreign policy, which should be maintained and improved. Southeast Asia has never been Russia's foreign-policy priority, unlike the relations with European countries or the military and diplomatic involvement in the Middle East. Improving cooperation with Southeast Asia will facilitate the development of Russia's Far East, which is considered as one of the foreign policy goals.

Russia has had the most success in its strategic relationship with Vietnam, and it has done well to expand its ties with Myanmar while also establishing solid security ties with Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Russia has opted for building its relations with Southeast Asian nations in a new way that is unlike anything seen before. Moscow grows its political influence in the region. There are several reasons explaining the tone in Russia's relations with Southeast Asia.

It is worthy to pay attention to a great asset of Russia's foreign policy, which is - neutral position when it comes to internal affairs of Southeast Asia's countries. Based on this fact, it is crucial to building an exclusive relationship without taking part in an "open battle" of competing powers (the U.S. versus China) that inevitably regard this region as an arena for their struggle. Russia is a country that supports the regional order: not interested in being a real security actor in the Asia-Pacific, but rather a trade partner trying to keep neutrality. Russia avoids making antagonizing rhetoric — an example is the South China Sea issue, where Russia has been deftly silent due to that its two most important partners in Asia-Pacific, China, and Vietnam, are involved.

Another pathway to Russia's potential success in the Southeast Asia area is constituted by a wise approach toward existing institutional opportunities offered by ASEAN. This association has become one of the most successful examples of inclusive development. ASEAN, as an international organization, provides various perspectives for foreign policy, e.g., creating a permanent Russia-ASEAN format promoting mutual collaboration. As Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) wrote: "We have everything it takes — political will, old traditions of friendship, a solid foundation of cooperation and mutual interest of all sides. We, therefore, look into the future of Russia-ASEAN interaction with optimism". Moscow needs to enhance efforts to promote trade and improve multiple intergovernmental dialogues.

However, Southeast Asia's countries should be treated by Moscow more inclusively in order to provide better insights into particular national interests, and the way they can be coordinated through international cooperation that would give new impetus.

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The lure of economic integration makes Southeast Asia one of the most promising markets for foreign expansion in terms of both - consumer markets and production sites. Southeast Asia is often regarded as a motor of growth and investment for Asia. Economic considerations play a crucial role in defining Moscow's geopolitical postures drawing closer to Southeast Asia's countries. Russia's asset is having no territorial claims in Southeast Asia, and avoiding taking sides in the Asian Pacific regional disputes. Due to this



condition, Southeast Asia's countries have tended to see Russia as a counterweight to both China and the United States.

Russia's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia should be maintained and improved, and objective prerequisites are in place to make this happen. Stepping up multilateral diplomacy cooperation with this region is expected to facilitate the development of Russia's aims in Southeast Asia. It acts practically, upgrading the Southeast Asia-Russia relationship into a strategic partnership, particularly with reference to the existing ASEAN format.

Russia's policy toward Southeast Asia is a project that is closely linked to its internal development and Russia's position in the world. Moscow needs to build a developed, practical partnership network in the region, more than holding new summits and high-level meetings. Russia needs to enhance its efforts to build a stronger relationship with states as well as organizations across Southeast Asia to be more present and show them the potential mutual benefits coming from collaboration.

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