



Reflections on new trends in the region

By Evgenii Primakov

By the end of the 20th Century, the Asia-Pacific's economic development and influence over world politics had transformed it into one of the most dynamic regions of the globe.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, the rapid growth of India and China has meant that economic development is uneven. Growth in these two giants has accelerated so much that these two countries are now challenging Japan, South Korea and other "tigers."

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA has definitely become the region's leader. Ten years of sustained development has transformed China from an economically underdeveloped nation into one of the most successful countries in the world. It is sufficient to note that in terms of annual growth of world gross product, China is ahead of the U.S.

On the geopolitical front, the focus of political tension in the region now has shifted from the Indo-Pakistani conflict to the potentially dangerous nuclear weapons program in North Korea.

Russian President Valdimir Putin gave an overall economic evaluation of the region at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Pusan in November 2005: "This region is not just a territory of vigorous economic growth. Here we see one of the positive consequences of globalization – a gradual leveling of social and economic development of different regions of the world. Another characteristic sign of the Asian-Pacific region is the highly dynamic integration process that helps form a new and a more just world."

It is precisely with this notion in mind that Russia is building its policies towards the region. But there is yet one more point that makes Russia's relations with the region especially important. At present, Russia is experiencing a steady reduction in its population that is turning into a demographic crisis. Each year Russia's population diminishes by 700,000 people. The problem is not just that the mortality rate prevails over the birth rate. The crisis also lies in the fact that population density is highly uneven in what is the largest country in the world geographically.

The colossal territory that lies in the Asian part of Russia beyond the Urals is populated by only 18 million of Russia's 145 million people. Yet, it is precisely this vast area that holds the country's richest natural resources and agricultural lands. The development of this region is unthinkable without establishing a social-economic infrastructure similar to the one that exists in the European part of Russia. This is a national challenge. Without it, there will not be significant migration from Western Russia to Eastern, nor a stream of migrants to Siberia and the Far East from the former republics of the Soviet Union. But that is exactly what we are counting on. In order to achieve this goal, we need to tap the economic opportunities of the region and to upgrade the role of multilateral cooperation with countries from Asia and the Pacific. This kind of approach coincides with the multilateral strategy of Russia's foreign policy, dictated by the complexities of an emerging multi-polar world.

With these concerns in mind, it becomes clear what Russia's priorities are towards the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. The main objective is stability. Destabilization, as we all know, leads to military conflict. Thankfully, today there are no large-scale conflicts in the region as tensions between India and Pakistan have decreased considerably. But we should not turn a blind eye to other potential conflicts. Relations have long been sour between the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, where pro-independence feelings have grown. This is unacceptable to China, Russia, and other countries which see Taiwan as part of China.

But the burning question is really the unsolved problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The Six-Party Talks on the matter – which include North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., Russia, China and Japan – have not yet seen light at the end of the tunnel. An agreement, though, could have been reached. North Korea has been offered all the possibilities for developing its nuclear program for peaceful purposes, plus security guarantees. Although no agreement has been found, the negotiations have not been cut off, so there is still hope.

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The Asia-Pacific region, meanwhile, is thankfully not one of the main hubs of international terrorism. Of course, there are branches of Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia, but they have not been able to develop large scale operations. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that the region is by no means immune to the cancer of international terrorism. What really worries Russia is that international terrorist organizations might try to obtain weapons of mass destruction. It is known that Al-Qaeda (now based in the Pushtun tribal areas on the Pakistani-Afghan border) has already tried to obtain them. At present, there is no real threat that terrorist organizations might gain use of Pakistan's nuclear capacity but such a possibility could arise if power in the country were to be taken over by the forces that formed the Taliban (paradoxically, with the help of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency), and which provided Al-Qaeda with a base. I stress again that today such a scenario is unlikely, but should we forget the massive demonstrations in Pakistan protesting the downfall of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan? Or that the Pakistani government cannot extend its control to the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, where Osama Bin Laden is considered to have taken refuge?

Stability in the region, of course, cannot be ensured only by solving internal or regional problems. If we are to talk of stability from a global perspective, then the triangle of Russia-China-India, from my point of view, is taking on growing significance. There are no hints of a military bloc forming among the three powers but continued development of confidential relations among these

three giants may lead to a certain balance against destabilizing tendencies on a global scale.

To some extent, this idea is embodied in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with member states Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Tajikistan and observer states India, Pakistan, and Iran. With each year, the organization gains weight. Its major significance lies, on the one hand, in the gigantic territorial and human resources potential of the participating countries, and, on the other, in the membership of two nuclear powers – Russia and China, united in strategic partnership. Russian-Chinese and Russian-Indian military exercises have not gone unnoticed. Though the SCO is not a military bloc, it enables its members to defend their geopolitical interests. It is not by chance that the communiqué adopted at the SCO summit meeting in 2005 encouraged the U.S., in light of the completion of the active phase of its antiterrorist operations, to set exact dates for ending the use of facilities and the American military presence in SCO countries. Those who hoped to use the antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan to install non-regional military bases on a permanent basis in strategic points of Central Asia will not be able to turn a deaf ear to such requests.

The SCO also plays a big role in developing trade and setting the right climate for investment, technological cooperation and professional training in this important part of Asia. The gigantic project to construct oil pipelines from Eastern Siberia to the Pacific coast, with branches into China, will definitely serve to strengthen economic ties between these countries. There are also other projects to transport oil and gas through the territories of SCO countries and SCO observer states.

There is no doubt that the development of the SCO, including interaction among member states against terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking, will promote a rational international order in the entire Asia-Pacific region.

Some political scientists suggest that the U.S. and China will be the main superpowers of the 21st Century and that the century will pass under the shadow of their stand-off. Personally, I do not agree that the global architecture will return to the model that existed during the Cold War, where the two superpowers were the U.S. and the USSR. To my mind, this kind of structure is no longer feasible. We are already seeing the formation of a multi-polar, rather than a bi-polar, world. Its evolution is not easy, sometimes going in zigzags, overcoming the aspirations of one power for global dominance. But still, we see the emergence of a world structure with several centers. It goes without saying that in the list of major players, there are countries from the Asia-Pacific region – Russia, China, and India. Regional and sub-regional integration has an important role to play in the formation of a multi-polar world. This is confirmed by the successes of APEC, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and now the SCO. The Asia-Pacific region will also be influenced by Latin American countries, where we see tendencies toward national self-assertion being matched at the same time by economic integration within the region.

What about Russia? Russia may become a sort of connecting bridge between Asia-Pacific and Europe. And this bridge is not simply a transport or transit model – though, of course, Russia is the shortest land and air corridor between the two regions. No less important is the notion of bridging the gap between civilizations, especially nowadays. Not long ago, the world was split by ideologies. Today there is a threat of a different divide – religious and cultural. Unchecked, this split will lead humanity to an abyss of no return. Russia, situated on two continents, provides a good example of a united commonwealth of people with different religious beliefs and mutually penetrating cultures.

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