While East Asia has stood out in recent history for its exceptional 70-year period of peace, it would be wrong to assume that policymakers in the region aren’t worried about, or aren’t gearing up for, future conflict.

Numerous potential flash points exist, from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China Seas, and South Asia. Those worries are fueling Asia’s push to modernize their military forces, thus risking an arms race.
No Longer Neglected: The Asia-Pacific in Russia’s Strategic Thinking
By Andrey Gubin

Given the dynamism of Asia’s economies and Russia’s own pressing interest in developing its Far Eastern regions, Moscow is paying serious attention to the growing strategic value of its relations with Asia. While the China-US rivalry plays a role in Russia’s calculations, it’s not the only reason for the country’s increasing engagement in Asia.

One consequence of that deeper involvement is a notable build-up and modernization of Russia’s military capabilities, including a revival of the previously neglected Russian Pacific Fleet, writes Andrey Gubin.

VIEWED THROUGH the lens of the world’s media, the main agenda of Russian foreign policy is deploying military assets on the western border with NATO and in the Middle East, with little attention paid to Asia. However, this view isn’t accurate. In Russia’s “Foreign Policy Concept 2016,” Moscow declared its full involvement with Asia-Pacific integration processes and outlined two major goals. The first is connected with Russia’s plan for comprehensive development of its vast and economically backward Far Eastern and Siberian territories through economic and technological co-operation with Asia-Pacific countries. Second, Russia is advocating for the formation of a transparent, non-bloc-oriented and equal security architecture for the region.

The priority on the Russian Far East isn’t new, nor is Moscow’s search for new partners in the Asia-Pacific connected with Russia’s fading economic relations with the European Union due to the Ukrainian crisis. But Russia doesn’t possess enough resources to pursue its “Going Eastward” and “Grand Eurasia” plans. Despite the fact that the Far Eastern territories account for 36 percent of Russia’s total landmass and the country has a Pacific coastline of some 30,000km, Moscow has been late in including the Asia-Pacific in its strategic thinking. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union largely ignored this regional agenda, preferring instead to support some socialist nations such as Vietnam, North Korea and Mongolia. After the USSR collapsed, global bipolar confrontation disappeared, which stimulated Russia to revise its old strategy, and identify new challenges and possibilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

In addition, Moscow has been long criticized for shying away from taking positions on key regional problems. Even today, Russia officially specifies only the Korean Peninsula as a main hot spot for international security within the Asia-Pacific region, simultaneously calling for the establishment of a multilateral mechanism capable of keeping the peace in Northeast Asia. Regarding tensions in the East China and South China Seas, Moscow has consistently maintained neutrality and called on all parties to maritime disputes to engage in dialogue aimed at a peaceful resolution.

The Kremlin’s foreign-policy strategy calls for a rebalancing of the world’s power and development capacity, because a larger and larger share of it is shifting toward the Asia-Pacific region. Russia places principal value on building the military-political environment in Asia, where the potential for conflict still exists, arsenals are growing and the danger of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is higher than ever. Russia believes that all disagreements in the region should be resolved by diplomatic means, strictly in line with international law and procedures. Even in its “Military Doctrine 2014,” Moscow cited the containment and prevention of military conflict in Asia through a new model of collective security architecture as a main goal.

Thus, we can see some decisive features of contemporary Russian strategy toward the Asia-Pacific. Moscow is striving to diversify its partnerships, using the potential of regional economies and existing institutions to foster regional integration. With a wide range of interests connected with its Far Eastern territories, the Kremlin is now seeking greater security there and enhancing its military capacity. Moreover, Moscow is entering the Asia-Pacific — or even the Indo-Pacific — more actively, declaring its readiness to get involved in crisis management or supporting key partners such as China and India. Finally, Russia, just as the Soviet Union did, is making its Far East an integral part of its nuclear-deterrence system.

THE CHINA-US RIVALRY
Today, a major threat to Russia’s national-security interests in the Asia-Pacific region is undoubtedly the China-US rivalry, especially in the military sphere. There is no single regional country that can present a clear threat to Russia, but intra-regional dynamics are having an influence on its foreign policy and defense strategy. China isn’t openly confronting the US, although Washington has officially named Beijing as a revisionist state challenging American interests. China also doesn’t have a formal alliance with Russia, having only one military treaty with North Korea. It is probably time for China to make some strategic choices now that most of its major domestic political issues have been resolved. Russia is considered by some analysts such as Aaron Friedberg to be a “strategic rear area” for China, because it can withdraw troops from the northern border, which is calm and safe. If Beijing enhances or even elevates its co-operation with Russia to the level of an alliance, it would become less vulnerable to an “Anaconda strategy,” a geo-economic stranglehold involving a naval blockade of all sea lanes. Sean Mirsky finds Russia to be a “swinging state” — politically, economically and militarily, Moscow can either cement Chinese regional leadership or ruin its ambitions.

Taking into account recent mutual initiatives, such as China joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and Russia’s involvement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing and Moscow could achieve a modus operandi for a Grand East Asia, including Central Asia and Northeast Asia. Russia has impressive military capabilities in Eurasia, so China could save on military aspects...
of security, delegating this mission to its strategic partner and concentrating on economic activities. Indeed, a new format for a so-called Eurasian Entente seems to have emerged on the basis of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization.

One practical military side of Sino-Russian cooperation can be found in joint efforts to counter the American ballistic-missile defense system. Russia has several times expressed concern about the deployment of the US Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system in South Korea and the possible deployment of the Aegis Ashore system in Japan. These developments aren’t very dangerous for Russia itself, because its nuclear deterrence is still effective, especially in light of the new systems that were recently presented by President Vladimir Putin. However, China’s strategic capabilities aren’t so impressive and suffer a lot from American efforts. So, a military alliance with Russia would have one very important component — positive guarantees of assistance in the case of a nuclear attack.

ARMY AND AIR FORCE MODERNIZATION

Thinking geopolitically, there is no direct threat to Russian security from any continental nation in Northeast Asia. Unlike in the period from 1960 to the 1980s, the peril of a massive Chinese invasion is no longer relevant, therefore the deployment of huge resources along the border with China is no longer needed. Contemporary Russian military doctrine totally excludes any conflict with China and rejects the fears of some alarm-minded analysts who call for large groupings of forces in the Far East.

However, Russia is modernizing its weapons systems in the Eastern Military District — from Baikal Lake to the Kuril Islands — to make units more mobile and capable. Land forces in its Far East include four armies, all with conventional munitions such as tanks, howitzers and multiple rocket launchers. Some artillery, such as the 8-inch Pion, can be loaded with nuclear shells. Brigades of SS-26 Stone short-range ballistic missiles are also an important part of the military’s strike potential, because they are aimed at hitting anti-missile and anti-aircraft batteries of rivals. Russia’s Army Corps are located on the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands and have a specific role in anti-landing defense. There are also two airborne brigades, some special forces, and numerous communications, logistics, support, repair and training units within the Eastern Military District.

Air Defense consists of three divisions armed with SA-10D Grumble, SA-20B Gargoyle and SA-17 Grizzly missile systems. In addition, the newly obtained SA-21 Growler complexes possess terminal anti-ballistic-missile capabilities.

Air forces in the Far East have a diverse range of equipment. The newest Su-35 Flanker-E fighter has entered service, as well as the Ka-52 Hokum B assault helicopters. Notably, the MIG-31 Foxhound interceptors are able not only to hit enemy aircraft at a great distance, but also to launch X-47 air-ballistic rockets. The fifth-generation stealth fighter Su-57 is being produced in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, and is actively being tested for future operations.

When discussing the Russian Air Force, it’s impossible to omit the Tu-95 Bear strategic bombers, which serve as the backbone of the air component of Russia’s nuclear deterrence. Up to 30 are based in Amur Oblast, and often we can see the bombers in the media being shadowed by Japanese, US or Canadian fighters.

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BLUE-WATER NAVY OR COASTAL DEFENSE?

Contemporary East Asia has gradually become a venue for possible naval confrontation as key players aren’t crowded onto a continent but separated by vast seas. The main disputes within the region are also linked with the sea: disputed islands, rocks and shelf areas. Pacific nations actively use the sea for economic purposes, including almost all trade. We should note that large-scale conflict on a continent will lead to severe losses in terms of people and materiel, while sea battles are less bloody and costly, so the temptation to use force at sea is stronger and the political threshold to start a naval campaign lower.

In July 2010, the flagship of the Russian Northern Fleet, the nuclear-powered cruiser Peter the Great and the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, the missile cruiser Moscow, arrived in the Sea of Japan to participate in the Vostok-2010 naval drill. Former President Dmitry Medvedev pointed out that on one side, Russia has developed co-operation with Asia-Pacific economies, however, from another side, Russia should be ready to maintain security in the face of any emerging problems as it develops its Far East. According to Medvedev, such naval training exercises have a role in demonstrating Moscow’s ability to complete any military task in the Pacific region. This claim shows that Russia is still more interested in guarding its existing positions than in conquering new ones and doesn’t intend to compete with any nation at sea. Russia’s Pacific Fleet is more oriented to
nuclear deterrence and guarding strategically important straits and coastal waters. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a real catastrophe for the Pacific Fleet. Two Kiev-class aircraft carriers, three Kara-class frigates, three Ivan Rogov-class amphibious ships, and several Sovremenny-class destroyers were scrapped from 1990 to the 2000s. The nuclear-powered Kirov-class cruiser Admiral Lazarev, three Sovremenny-class destroyers and some other ships were decommissioned and prepared for other uses — while the fate of the abandoned ships anchored in the naval base at Primorye is still unclear. The unique nuclear-powered Kapusta-class reconnaissance ship Ural was dispatched for scrapping in August 2016 because rebuilding it appeared to be too expensive. Actually, from 1991 until 2003, the Russian Pacific Fleet didn’t commission any new combat ships and faced shortages of fuel, parts and qualified crew members. A lot of auxiliary ships and vessels such as tankers and tugs were lent or sold to commercial firms. Only at the end of the 2000s did the building of new units and modernization of existing ones begin, as the comprehensive development of the Far East was prioritized and the importance of the military role in this emerged as essential.

Analysts point out that even in 2010, the Pacific Fleet focused on tasks in inner seas, and escort and anti-pirate missions, being too weak for strategic operations on the high seas. Today, the Pacific Fleet is still not as large or capable as the Northern Fleet, but the move to strengthen it is obvious. The core of the Pacific Fleet is the Slava-class missile cruiser Varyag — the flagship of the Fleet — one Sovremenny-class destroyer, three Udaloy-class frigates, four amphibious ships and 30+ smaller ships such as corvettes, missile boats and mine-sweepers. The newest surface ship, the missile corvette Sovshenny, entered service in July 2017. Under the National Armament Program to 2020, the Pacific Fleet is set to acquire several surface combat ships including two new frigates and five corvettes. The currently mothballed nuclear-powered cruiser Admiral Lazarev can be upgraded and returned to service, while its sister ship, Admiral Ushakov, will be removed from the Northern Fleet. One Udaloy is docked for repair and seems to be armed with new missiles and other new capabilities.

Unfortunately, due to the deterioration of relations with the EU since 2014, the French government canceled the Russian Navy’s order for two large Mistral-class landing ships. The Vladivostok, meanwhile, was primarily assigned to the Pacific Fleet, but today she is to be sold to Egypt.

The strategic parts of the Pacific Fleet — Delta III-class nuclear-powered submarines with ballistic missiles — became obsolete in the 2000s; the youngest one, the Ryzan, arrived for service at Kamchatka in distant 1982. As for today, the naval component of Russia’s nuclear deterrence is met by two brand-new Borei-class and three upgraded Delta-III-class submarines. Current plans presume the total substitution of Delta and Boreis, so three additional submarines are to come into service in the next five to seven years. Notably, new submarines are armed with 16 Bulava (SS-N-30) missiles each, capable of carrying up to six nuclear warheads each. In the case of having to deal with overpassing American ballistic missile defenses, the Bulava can be equipped with 10 individually targeted blocks on a “school bus” cluster principle, with extremely high precision. Arms experts remark that the solid-fueled SS-N-30 are unlikely to be hit by the THAAD missile-defense system. The SM-3 on Aegis ships has some potential to intercept them in the initial stage of flight after launch, but operationally, this is very problematic.

Russia’s substantive strike potential is linked also to the Oscar-II nuclear submarines. There are three on duty and another three under repair and modernization. This class is known to be armed with SS-N-19 Shipwreck super-sonic cruise missiles — 24 on each submarine. However, after upgrading in 2020, the Oscars may be armed with several options — 72 SS-N-27 Sizzler or SS-N-26 Strobile cruise missiles. Potentially the hypersonic Zircon can be loaded onto these submarines, when tested and ready. During Putin’s Address to the Federal Assembly in March 2018, he noted that it was an Oscar submarine equipped with underwater combat drones that was able to deliver a nuclear payload stealthily at high speed. Around 2020, the Pacific Fleet could also obtain three more new attack submarines of the Yasen or Graney class to complement the Oscars.

Attack submarines today are represented by only one Akula-class submarine, while three additional ones are being modernized. In addition to nuclear submarines, there are eight quite capable conventional Kilo-class submarines, and some new ones are expected to enhance coastal defenses.

The integral parts of the Russian Navy in the coastal areas are anti-ship missile units. New systems, the SSC-6 Sennight and SSC-5 Stooge, have been deployed in Primorye, in the Sakhalin and Kurils, protecting strategically important waters and straits as well as navy bases and critical infrastructure. Anti-submarine warfare capabilities are being enhanced by modernized patrol aircraft, while the anti-ship capabilities of tactical aviation are also in the focus. The most impressive are the Tu-22m3 Backfire bombers.

Since 2010, ships of the Pacific Fleet have been taking part in international training and anti-piracy missions, and conducting distance visits of friendship and exchange. Interestingly, during an international training exercise in 2017, the Russian Pacific Fleet was awarded the first prize for military preparedness. This fact is testimony to the high priority being given to the build-up of Russia’s regional naval forces after a long period of neglect.

CONCLUSION
Based on all of the above, one can conclude that today Russia is quite capable conventionally and in nuclear terms in its Far East. Ships are sailing around the region as envoys of peace or for joint drills, while bombers and patrol aircraft are flying and observing possible threats, just as they did during the Soviet era, but in a far less aggressive and scary way. It is obvious that the better Russia develops its Far East, the more military capacity it will have.

However, there are no states in the Pacific confronting Russia. Even Japan, which has claims on the Southern Kurils (their so-called Northern Territories), prefers to forget about its alliance with the US and is trying to negotiate peacefully with Russia, using mostly carrots not sticks, such as financial and technological assistance for development. The only rival — and one with fading influence — is the US, and if China turns anti-American in the same manner as Washington has become a “dragon killer,” nobody knows how long peace can be sustained. China is serious about assembling its “string of pearls” strategy to control the Indo-Pacific region. Russia expressed informal support for the idea in 2016, dispatching ships to the South China Sea for joint naval drills, in which the scenario simulated an attack on a “small island,” much like the numerous disputed small islands in East Asia.

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