THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX ABOUT EAST ASIA
Russia, ASEAN and Indonesia in the Regional Context

"New strategic environment and challenges require new ideas produced in the process of thinking outside the box."
Rizal Sukma

To start a paper with an epigraph is not the norm in our prosaic times. Doing it now, I do it mostly for two reasons. First, I need to quickly explain the highly sounding title of this article. Second, I simply want to show how much I agree with Dr. Rizal Sukma’s concluding statement in a revealing essay that appeared in one of the recent issues of Jurnal Luar Negeri. To be frank, the issue, given to me last year in Moscow by Mr. Teiseran Cornelis of Deplu and dedicated to the popular subject of new regional architecture in the Asia Pacific, was a bit of an irritant: its 80 pages did not contain a single reference to Russia. Even in moments, when a passing reference would be fully appropriate, the authors managed to avoid it. One omission by Biren Nanda, Ambassador of India to Indonesia, seemed especially strange: praising the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as “the benchmark of state conduct in the region”, he noted that it “has been signed by all the major countries including India, China, Japan, Australia and New Zealand” – and stopped at this point. No comment, just a quick reminder that Russia signed this treaty in 2004, earlier than two of the “major countries” mentioned by His Excellency.

Not taking Russia into account in discussions about East Asia’s present and future has been a feature of conventional wisdom for the last 20 years. For me, it is a boring sign of traditional, inside the box thinking. An easy way to start thinking outside the box is to dwell on Russia’s fundamental aspirations and on its probable contributions to the region in the process of successfully pursuing them. But how, in the first place, the former superpower managed to become just barely visible in this part of the world?

LOW REGIONAL PROFILES – THEN AND NOW

In the late 1990s Indonesian analysts coined the term *krisis multidimesi* to define the state of the nation after the fall of Suharto’s New Order. This is exactly what Russia had gone through in the first post-Soviet decade – a multidimensional crisis. Since in our case it manifested itself not just in the collapse of the old political structure and repudiation of official values, but in an abrupt and radical overhaul of a socio-economic system, its impact was even more painful than in the case of Indonesia. Reforms through shock therapy produced depressing results: in the popular mind, the notions of market economy and political democracy became associated with disorder, corruption and yarning social gaps. Suspicions that Russia would follow the path of the Soviet Union and disintegrate spread widely in the midst of war in Chechnya. Introspective at the time when globalization was becoming a household world, abandoned by former satellites
and subjected to new geostrategic pressures by the West, Russia looked like a hopeless looser in the post-Cold War world. Rich in natural wealth, but neglected Far Eastern areas of Russia were in a state of disarray. In the East, even more than in its European part, the country seemed to be badly out of tune with economically vibrant neighbors – China, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN, of course. On the threshold of the New Millennium one of the greatest sages of our times proclaimed that Russia would not be a major player in world affairs for another twenty years.

This person is now Doctor Honoris Causa of MGIMO-University where I am based. His huge book of memoirs, translated into Russian and published by the same University, is widely read. Lately, this man has joined the Board of Trustees of Skolkovo – a prestigious business school patronized by Kremlin. For someone as deeply disillusioned in Russia as Lee Kuan Yew – and this is whom we talk about – this measure of involvement in our affairs is quite surprising. There is even a story – probably apocryphal but still suggestive – that two or three years ago, when Vladimir Putin was contemplating his own political future after the expiry of his presidential term, no other than Mr. Lee advised him not to leave the government completely in order to make sure that the country moves in the right direction. Not all the attempts to draw parallels between the two leaders look quite convincing, but they are not fully baseless too.

To say that between 2000 and 2008 President Putin changed the face of Russia beyond recognition would be an exaggeration. But he had certainly done a lot to arrest the trend towards decline and to lay the foundation for reconstruction. During his years in Kremlin, order visibly prevailed over chaos. Improvements in governance went hand in hand with positive economic changes: on the average, annual GDP growth exceeded 6 per cent. Peace in Chechnya has been restored. On the international arena, Putin proved to be a versatile and skilful player. He consistently promoted the interests of Russian oil and gas exporters, paid much attention to building stronger political and economic ties with China and India, looked for compromises on strategic issues with the West, but was never afraid to call a spade a spade (like he had done in his famous Munich speech in February 2007), and succeeded in restoring Russia’s great power status to a sufficient degree.

Although the beginning of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency was marked by Georgia’s armed adventure in South Ossetia with all its well-known consequences and the start of the Global Crisis, these trials had not led to anything catastrophic. Yes, industrial production declined in 2008-09, and declined considerably, but on the whole the situation has been a far cry from that of 1992 or 1998. In fact, the crisis has alerted the authorities to the urgency of modernizing the national economy and increasing its innovative component. The talk of the town is, once again, Skolkovo – not just the home of a prestigious business school, but the future analogue of Silicon Valley that Medvedev intends to grow in this location not far from Moscow. In June 2010, during his trip to the United States, the Russian President stopped for a day in California, visiting a number of globally famous IT companies, briefing Russian expats working there (their total number, by the way, is half a million) about his cherished project and urging them to join it.

The Far Eastern regions also get their share of attention from the authorities: no other part of Russia (with the possible exception of Sochi, the sight of 2014 Winter Olympics) is visited more frequently by former President and now Prime Minister Putin. Oil and gas development on the island of Sakhalin, construction of pipelines from the oil and gas fields of Eastern Siberia to the Pacific Coast and into China, building of new modern shipyards and automobile assembly plants, revival of aircraft construction, creation of a new launching site for spaceships and Earth satellites – many of these and other projects designed to give new life to the Russian Far East have been brought to various stages of implementation. In Vladivostok where APEC Summit is
scheduled for 2012, a whole number of infrastructure projects is under way.

On the whole, the Russia of 2010 is clearly different from the Russia of 1992. Nonetheless, its belonging to East Asia is not something that the bulk of regional pundits would easily and happily confirm. Why so? Presumably, because Russia’s progress is eclipsed by other, more crucial developments and challenges – such as the dramatic rise of China and India; the prospect of U.S. – China and China – India rivalries; the possibility of ASEAN’s marginalization as a result of being unable to manage these dangerous trends, as well problems of domestic and bilateral character.

Although Russia’s trade with the region is consistently growing, it grows much slower than that of China and India. In the meantime, economic situation in the Russian Far East is only starting to improve.

Last but not least, Russia’s image in global media remains predominantly gloomy and unattractive. Apparently, signs of our recovery are not good news to everyone – in the arrogant West as well as in the upwardly mobile East Asia. A few months ago, when Moscow subway became a scene of murderous terrorist attacks, a couple of English language dailies in the region decided to make fun of this tragedy by publishing distasteful cartoons. As Russians often put it in similar cases, God will be their judge.

How about ASEAN’s perception of Russia? The fact that in April 2010 ASEAN spoke in favor of inviting Russia to East Asian Summits seems to be telling in itself. This, by the way, would not be possible without a significant shift in Indonesia’s position: five years ago Jakarta, along with Canberra, openly objected to Russia’s membership in that forum.

In a moment like this, what can we tell our ASEAN partners about the basics of Russia’s regional strategy?

RUSSIA’S EAST ASIAN IMPERATIVE: POLITIK BEBAS AKTIF

Russia’s areas on China’s doorstep, thinly populated and neglected for a long time, are a national security threat of our own making. While modernization is a matter on necessity for the whole country, Siberia and the Far East need this kind of change like no other place.

One way to boost this process is to interact with dynamic East Asian neighbors (including China) in a more consistent way. With this in view, greater cooperation with them is a priority of both domestic and foreign policy.

Integration with East Asia will be a truly rewarding process if only Russia is able to add to the region’s dynamism – and to help in preserving it.

What Russia does not need under any circumstances is regional conflicts – not to speak of a major war or direct involvement in it. Too many of Russia’s late 20th century misfortunes are linked to the terrible losses and damage of two World Wars. Even a distant glimpse of such upheavals can ruin East Asia’s dynamism, seriously diminishing the chances of Russia’s modernization. If such a scenario starts to unfold, a country of Russia’s proportions and resources may be drawn into it even against its own wish. Therefore, Russia’s best strategic option is to try to preempt scenarios of this type and to coordinate activities with players who have similar views and intentions.

A recent document of the Russian Foreign Ministry that was slipped to the media and into the
Web points to the necessity of developing a well-balanced system of bilateral and multilateral partnerships in the Asia Pacific. Excessive dependence on relations with any single partner should be avoided. Among other things, it means that, for the sake of greater freedom of maneuver, progress in relations with one particular partner must be matched by progress in relations with others.

Thus, a summary of Russia’s regional priorities will include

- modernization and growth,
- peace and stability,
- productive balance of forces on a regional scale.

A Russian scholar familiar with Indonesian realities may be tempted to describe a policy based on these prescriptions as bebas aktif – that is, independent and active. As we know, this is the foreign policy ideal of Indonesia since 1945.

RUSSIA – ASEAN – INDONESIA: BASIC COMPATIBILITY?

The general impression is that in political, economic and strategic terms post-Soviet Russia has never been as compatible as it is today with East Asia, ASEAN and Indonesia. More than once Russia has indicated that, in its view, ASEAN is a supporter of multipolarity, balance and justice in regional and global affairs. Hence, ASEAN’s potential marginalization is not in Russia’s interest (just like the prospect of sharpening U.S. – China and China – India rivalries). For Russia with its intention to reintegrate the post-Soviet space on the basis of mutual interests, ASEAN’s weakening would signify a blow to constructive regionalism – and, by implication, a victory of the forces, representing the darker, destructive side of globalization.

But will stronger ASEAN be possible without strong Indonesia? To my ear, this is a typically rhetorical question. To Russia, recent improvements in Indonesia’s economy, governance and international reputation are positive developments not just of national, but of regional and global significance.

CONCLUSION

My final observation will be very brief: once you start thinking outside the box, the ties of Russia and ASEAN – just like those of Russia and Indonesia – will look more important and promising than they do to ‘insiders’. Hopefully, the need to develop both pairs of relations will be equally felt by all the parties.


4. See, for example, Thomas P.M. Barnett, “Putin Positions Himself as Russia’s Lee Kuan Yew”, October 7, 2007

5. “Russia to Build Its Own ‘Silicon Valley’ Near Moscow – Medvedev”, RIA-Novosti, March 18, 2010