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Nivedita Kapoor

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nivedita Kapoor is a Junior Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the development of Russia’s relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, focusing on the years after 2014. As relations with the West reached a new post-Cold War low, Moscow has intensified its efforts at building stronger ties with the East. The paper deals with the impact of these developments on the state of its political, economic and defense engagement in Southeast Asia, both bilaterally and multilaterally. It will situate the relationship in the specific regional strategic context for an examination of strengths and weaknesses of Russian policies and explore what it means for the position of the former superpower in the region.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, at the launch of East Asia Summit, Russia made its bid for entry into the organisation where it had been invited as guest by the host Malaysia. President Vladimir Putin in his speech lobbied for membership, declaring that Russia was "ready to make a real contribution to resolving the issues currently affecting the region."[1] At that point, its candidature had support from China, Malaysia and the Philippines, and was being opposed by Singapore, Indonesia and Japan. Singapore pointed to the weak economic ties of Russia with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),[2] and therefore, it argued, the ties were not substantial[3] enough to merit its entry.

By 2011, Russia had been invited as a member to the organisation alongside the United States (US), despite no remarkable changes in the ties between Russia and ASEAN. What had changed was the "political will"[4] within ASEAN due to a combination of factors including a changing regional balance of power as well as the emergence of a more stable, stronger Russia both domestically and internationally. The regional states were looking to build a policy that would let them avoid taking sides between China – with whom they were deeply connected economically – and the US – who was their security guarantee against any adventures by the rising power.

It was in the midst of this churn that Russia began making efforts to improve its presence in Asia-Pacific. The region was gaining higher priority within the Kremlin, driven by a desire to have a more balanced foreign policy and the steady shift of global geo-politics and geo-economics to Asia. This was reflected in the much publicised "pivot to the East", which became the focus after the 2008 financial crisis and saw Russia holding an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation

(APEC) summit in 2012 in Vladivostok to announce its intent to be an Asian player.

To be sure, the East is not a newly found direction in Russian foreign policy. Apart from the early 1990s, when Russian policy was characterised by a pro-West tilt, the focus has been to create a multi-vector direction – most visibly reflected in the idea of Eurasianism. Such an idea that Russia is a unique civilisation, which straddles both Asia and Europe, has been invoked since the 1920s to highlight the country's distinct identity, even though historically Russia has interacted more with Europe than with Asia.[5] The concept of Pragmatic Eurasianism holds that the geographical position of Russia in Asia gives it the opportunity and means to build a more balanced foreign policy. This, during the years of foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov (1996-98), meant the idea of a partnership between Russia, India and China for purposes of a multi-vector policy. While it does not mean a complete disengagement with the West, it aims to strike the right balance to avoid overdependence on one entity. Since then, this idea has found expression in Russia's eastern pivot and more recently in the idea of a 'Greater Eurasia'.

The pivot to the East was the result of both domestic and strategic imperatives, wherein Russia wanted to nurture its underdeveloped territories in the Far East and Siberia by integrating them with the rapidly developing economies in Asia. At the same time, Moscow wanted to enhance its presence in the region that was fast becoming the centre of global geopolitics and geoeconomics. The fallout of the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, resulting in a breakdown of relations with the West, has further cemented the need for an enhanced partnership with the East. This was reflected in the announcement of Greater Eurasia in 2016, which has since been described as an integration project encompassing the Atlantic and the Pacific.[6] This would involve cooperation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with SCO, ASEAN[7] and the EU.[8] Russia has sought cooperation with a wide-range of players—including China, India, Europe, South Korea, Pakistan and Iran—for building an extensive partnership.[9]

RUSSIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THEN AND NOW

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's relations with the non-communist states of Southeast Asia—including Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines—were characterised by "discontinuous political involvement" and "nominal economic interests."[10] The US had a strong presence in the region through its network of regional partners;[11] for its part, the Soviet Union's footprint was being influenced by lack of historical linkages, western orientation of a majority of SEA states, weak economic ties, and an inability to match the US and other western powers in helping the region meet its economic aspirations.[12] Russia's closest relationship was with Vietnam, and while for some time Indonesia was a partner, that period came to an end with the coming to power of Suharto in 1967. The Chinese and Soviet support had been instrumental in the victory of the Viet Cong over American troops in the Vietnam War. The USSR and Vietnam became especially close after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1978 and following a sharp downturn in Sino-Vietnam ties owing to the latter's invasion of Cambodia and the Chinese response.

The communist superpower extended its presence in Burma, Laos and Cambodia through political and economic aid as well as through the considerable influence that its treaty ally, Vietnam, exercised in Indo-China. Relations between the Soviet Union and

ASEAN—which was formed in 1967 with the participation of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—remained largely strained especially after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Broadly, the Soviet presence in Southeast Asia exercised "caution" and avoided "undue risks"[13] even as the region does not occupy its central focus. In other words, with the exception of Vietnam, Soviet Union's links to the region were weak[14] throughout the Cold War period.

In the post-Soviet period, when considering the East Asian vector of foreign policy, the 1990s are usually characterised as a decade of "degradation" in Russia's role.[15] But as will be discussed in the latter sections of this paper, the 21st century saw Russia gradually building its bilateral and multilateral ties in the region. By 2010, Russia was already arguing for stronger Russia-ASEAN ties due to "major changes" in the region and the world that had "radically altered the geopolitical landscape."[16]Indeed, Russia looks at "integration processes in Asia-Pacific and Eurasia" as being "complementary" and the aim of this stated policy is to set up a "common, open and non-discriminatory economic partnership and joint development space for ASEAN, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) members."[17]

In reality, Russia's relations with China grew more substantially as compared to those with other regional states. After the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, this partnership witnessed a clear qualitative improvement driven by the necessity of dealing with the impact of Western economic sanctions as well as a strategic need to avoid being isolated. Apart from Beijing, Russia also looked at other avenues to engage with important players in Asia to facilitate domestic growth and push back against western presence in the region.[18] This included the launch of Eastern Economic Forum, expansion of SCO and focus on Eurasian Economic Union.

In 2016, President Putin announced the goal of Greater Eurasia comprising the member states of "EAEU, SCO, ASEAN and all other countries of the Eurasian continent, including the European Union (EU) countries."[19]

The declaration of ASEAN as a target group for Greater Eurasia has seen its member countries being "invited to cooperate with the EAEU and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization."[20] The Russia-ASEAN relationship was raised to the level of a strategic partnership in 2018 and the bilateral engagement of Russia in Southeast Asia has also "accelerated."[21] Given that Russia is not a direct participant in any regional conflict, it now has to establish itself as a responsible, involved power in Southeast Asia. By all accounts, Russia remains a middle power in the region and by the admission of its own foreign minister, the relations with ASEAN have long remained "skin deep."[22]

This paper analyses the stated priority of Russian foreign policy towards Asia-Pacific through its relations with Southeast Asia, to weigh the success of such policy. It examines the bilateral and multilateral relations of Russia with Southeast Asia in light of the evolving regional order to understand the space the former superpower occupies in the region.

KEY ISSUES

Political ties

Domestic and international compulsions have driven Russia to look at Southeast Asia more closely. It sees the potential in the region for arms and energy supplies, as well as for attracting potential investment, especially in the Russian Far East.

In building bilateral ties in SEA, Russia has had to deal with a distinct historical disadvantage, as discussed earlier in this paper. Even in the post-Soviet period, this legacy has lingered and is reflected in the state of relations between Russia and SEA states. For instance, Russia has signed declarations of strategic partnership with only Laos and Vietnam, and one with Indonesia is in the pipeline; this alludes to the strength of its regional partnerships.

Table1: Strategic Partnerships of Russia in Southeast Asia

	COUNTRY	DATE	AGREEMENT
1	Brunei	-	-
2	Cambodia	1995	Joint Declaration on the Foundations of Friendly Relations
3	Indonesia	2003	Declaration on the Foundations of Friendly and Partner Relations (Plans to raise it to strategic partnership)
4	Laos	2011	Declaration on Strategic Partnership in the Asia Pacific Region
5	Malaysia	-	-
6	Myanmar	-	-
7	Philippines	-	-
8	Singapore	-	-
9	Thailand	-	-
10	Vietnam	2012	Comprehensive strategic partnership

Source: Compiled from various open sources

Even if one looks at the pattern of bilateral meetings between Russia and SEA states, most of such interactions have taken place on the sidelines of regional multilateral summits like ASEAN, APEC, and East Asia Summit (EAS). In contrast, regular bilateral visits are few and far in between, with most taking place with Vietnam. For instance, in 2015, when PM Dmitry Medvedev went on a visit to Thailand, he became the first Russian prime minister to do so in 25 years. The 2018 visit by President Vladimir Putin to Singapore was his first ever.

Table 2: High-level bilateral meetings

2014	Vietnam	Putin had a conversation on sidelines of APEC summit with President of Vietnam General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong visited Russia.
	Indonesia	Putin met with President Joko Widodo on sidelines of APEC summit
	Malaysia	Putin met PM Najib Razak in Beijing.
	Myanmar	PM Dmitri Medvedev visit for EAS. Also met leaders of Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand.
2015	Vietnam	Putin met President of Vietnam Truong Tan Sang during EAS. PM Medvedev on a visit to Vietnam. President Sang visited Moscow for Victory Day celebrations.
	Cambodia	Medvedev visit to Cambodia.
	Myanmar	Medvedev met President Thein Sein during EAS
	Thailand	Medvedev visits Thailand, first PM in 25 years.
	Laos	Putin met with President Choummaly Sayasone in Beijing. Medvedev met Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong during EAS
	Malaysia	Medvedev met PM Najib Razak during EAS
	Singapore	Medvedev met PM Lee Hsien Loong during EAS.

2016	Vietnam	Medvedev signed agreements (ASEAN) Putin met PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc (ASEAN summit) Putin met President Tran Dai Quang on sidelines of APEC FTA between Vietnam and EAEU comes into force.
	Thailand	PM Medvedev signed agreements. Putin met with Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (ASEAN summit)
	Malaysia	Putin met PM Najib Razak (ASEAN summit)
	Philippines	Putin met Duterte during APEC summit.
	Indonesia	Putin met with President Joko Widodo on an official visit to Russia.
	Brunei	Putin met with the Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah (ASEAN summit)
	Singapore	Putin met PM Lee Hsien Loong (ASEAN summit)
	Cambodia	Putin met with Prime Minister Hun Sen (ASEAN summit)
	Laos	Putin met Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith (ASEAN summit) Medvedev met Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith during EAS.
	Myanmar	Putin met President Htin Kyaw (ASEAN summit)
2017	Vietnam	Putin met President Tran Dai Quang in Moscow. Visit by Putin to Vietnam to attend APEC summit. Met president Quang on the sidelines Medvedev met PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc during EAS
	Philippines	Putin met President Duterte on sidelines of APEC. President Duterte on an official visit to Russia. Medvedev visits Philippines for ASEAN.
	Cambodia	Medvedev met PM Hun Sen on sidelines of ASEAN
	Singapore	Putin met with Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in China during BRICS summit Medvedev met PM Lee Hsien Loong on sidelines of ASEAN.

2018	Vietnam	General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong visited Russia. PM Medvedev on visit to Vietnam.
	Malaysia	Putin met PM Mahathir Mohammad in Singapore during EAS/ASEAN summit
	Singapore	Putin met PM Lee Hsien Loong on a state visit to Singapore, also attended EAS. Also met president Halimah Yacob.
	Thailand	Putin met with Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha in Singapore.
	Indonesia	Putin met with President Joko Widodo on sidelines of Russia-ASEAN summit
2019	Vietnam	Visit of PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc to Russia
	Malaysia	EEF – meeting with PM Mahathir Mohammad
	Philippines	Putin met President Rodrigo Duterte on the sidelines of the Valdai International Discussion Club meeting.
	Laos	Medvedev met PM Thongloun Sisoulith during ASEAN summit
	Myanmar	Putin met with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on sidelines of Belt and Road Forum Medvedev met with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi on sidelines of ASEAN
	Cambodia	Medvedev met PM Hun Sen on sidelines of ASEAN.
	Thailand	Medvedev met PM Prayut Chan-o-cha on sidelines of ASEAN
	Brunei	Medvedev met Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah on sidelines of ASEAN

Sources: Compiled from various open sources

Given that Russia is not always represented at the highest level in these multilateral summits, it reduces the possibility of regular engagement with the regional states. A case in point has been the EAS—although Russia was admitted as a member in 2010, President Putin attended a summit only in 2018, which coincided with his first visit to Singapore.

In an attempt to remedy the situation, Russia has in recent years focused on ties with Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar[23] while Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia have also received more attention. Russia's closest economic and defence relationship in the region is with Vietnam. In 2016, Vietnam became the first ASEAN country to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with EAEU. Another critical area of cooperation is the oil and gas sector, with the Soviet-era joint venture oil company Vietsovpetro accounting for around one-third of oil production in Vietnam in 2017. Russia's Rosneft and Gazprom have started working on developing Vietnam's continental shelf, while Vietnam is also working to develop fields in Russia in the Nenets Autonomous Area, on the Yamal Peninsula, and in the Orenburg Region.[24] Given that some of the joint energy projects in Vietnam fall within the disputed nine-dash line in the South China Sea (SCS), Russia's presence in these projects has gained importance, especially when combined with the defence sales which have boosted Vietnam's maritime defence capacities.

It must be noted that while Vietnam has continued to assert its claims in the SCS, it has sought to avoid getting into a confrontation with China, which has claims in those seas. It has sought to improve ties across the board, including with China and even its Cold War-era adversary, the US. Indeed, the US lifted its arms embargo over Vietnam in 2016 and Defence Secretary James Mattis visited the country in 2018, recognising the geostrategic importance of Vietnam in controlling critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Russia has also increased its interactions with other regional countries. The international sanctions on Myanmar have been seen as an opportunity by Russia to sell arms and sign oil and gas exploration deals. The Intergovernmental Committee on Trade and Economic

Cooperation was set up in 2014. A military cooperation agreement was signed in 2016 while the visit of defence minister Sergei Shoigu in 2018 led to a decision on visits by Russian warships to Myanmar that can now take place with simply giving advance information. There have been similarly important developments with other SEA states. In 2017, Indonesia and Russia signed a US$13.8-billion deal to jointly develop an oil refinery in East Java. In 2015, the two signed a defence cooperation agreement, with arms sales at the centre. The military coup in Thailand in 2014 that led to US sanctions was seen as a chance to further arms sales and in 2017 the two sides signed an intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation. The coming to power of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines has given Russia an opening, leading to high-level visits since 2016 and the signing of a defence agreement and a military-technical cooperation agreement in 2017.

These events have been important incremental steps for Russia in building its bilateral ties. If one looks at the policy of Southeast Asian states, the welcoming of increased Russian interest is a well-thought out move as they focus on hedging[a] to deal with the challenges posed by a changing regional order. With the exception of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar – which remain heavily dependent on China and have less developed ties with the Western states – all

a Hedging is 'a purposeful act in which a state seeks to insure its long term interests by placing its policy bets on multiple countering options that are designed to offset risks embedded in the international systems. The objective of hedging is to cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another. In this regard, states will continue to stay in the middle of balancing and bandwagoning.' (Tran, P. et al. (2013), "Vietnam's strategic hedging vis-à-vis China: the roles of the European Union and Russia", Rev. Bras. Polít. Int. 56 (1): 163-182.)

other regional powers have been diversifying their relationships, as explicated in the following paragraphs.

Despite their differences, Thailand has been labelled a major non-NATO ally by the US and the Philippines has revitalised its ties with the US including revival of a mutual defense treaty and beginning of strategic dialogue between the two and 2+2 format for foreign and defense secretaries. Malaysia has engaged in defense cooperation with the US, allowing port calls to American aircraft carriers and conducting joint training exercises of troops while focusing on working with Beijing in the area of non-traditional security threats. Indonesia has displayed signs of the same strategy and developed bilateral ties with both US and China. Singapore, which is not party to any SCS disputes, has cordial relations with both the major powers. It wants ASEAN to assume a central position in resolving any regional disputes. While it is the only ASEAN state to have a free trade agreement with China, Singapore also entered into a Strategic Framework Agreement with US in 2005 and is a vocal supporter of the American pivot to the region. While Russia enjoys a privileged position in Vietnam, the latter is actively engaging in "similar and often more advanced formats of cooperation with other countries."[25]

This has been the strategy of Southeast Asia where the regional states have largely refrained from balancing against the rising power by forming countervailing coalitions or else bandwagoning with the emerging power. Instead, their policy has involved engaging in economic cooperation with China in order to "socialise" it into the "international community" but at the same time using US as a "security hedge" against China because they are not clear as to the implications of this rapid rise.[26] This has also increased the importance of other regional players like Japan, EU, India and Australia.

It is in this regional context that Russia is trying to expand its influence in SEA, which despite its recent moves, has fallen short of being a game-changer for its regional presence. There is no doubt that the attempt by SEA states to bring in as many powers in the region to increase interdependence and thus reduce conflict has opened an opportunity for Russia to become a more active player. It is also a positive sign that Russia does not have antagonistic relations with any regional state.

Defence

Based on data from 1999-2019, Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Southeast Asia. Here, Vietnam is its closest partner, being the fourth largest importer of Russian arms in the world. Its cumulative sales in the post-Soviet period are calculated at US$ 7 billion, with almost 61 percent of Russia's deliveries to SEA going to Vietnam.[27]

Table 3: Total Arms Exports by Russia to Southeast Asia (1990-2019)

Country	$ million
Viet Nam	7375
Malaysia	1862
Myanmar	1672
Indonesia	1147
Laos	169
Thailand	50

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database[28]

While China and India constituted 56 percent of all Russian weapons exports from 2000-2016, Vietnam accounted for 5.6 percent, Myanmar 1.4 percent, Malaysia 1.3 percent and Indonesia 1.1 percent. SIPRI data suggests that other SEA arms importers from Russia include Malaysia (13), Myanmar (14), Indonesia (18), Laos (50) and Thailand (66).[29] The other SEA countries of Philippines, Cambodia, and Brunei did not import arms from Russia from 1990-2019 and Singapore only imported arms worth $28 million (1998-99).

Table 4: Russian arms sales to select Southeast Asian countries (2014-19)

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total (1990-2019)
Viet Nam	1062	742	706	467	335	138	7375
Malaysia							1862
Myanmar	28	12		66	75	4	1672
Indonesia	54						1147
Laos					58	18	169
Thailand		14			14		50

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database[30]

SEA has witnessed a 33-percent rise in military spending between 2009 and 2018, which can be attributed to these countries' ongoing SCS disputes with China. Other factors include "perceived threats from neighbouring states,"[31]the need to modernise old defence systems in response to internal conflicts, and also as a dual-purpose use in response to natural disasters. Regionally, the leading arms exporters to SEA have been Russia, the US, France, Germany and China from 1999-2018. Russia accounts for 26 percent of supply of arms to SEA in this period while the figure for US is at 20 percent.

The figures for France, Germany and China stand at 8.6, 7.2 and 6.3 percent, respectively.

Table 5: Arms exports to SEA, 1998-2019. (The figures in brackets are in US$ million)

	Top exporter	2nd largest exporter	3rd largest exporter
Vietnam	Russia (6831)	Israel (428)	Ukraine (223)
Malaysia	Russia (1311)	Germany (1065)	Spain (591)
Myanmar	China (1804)	Russia (1591)	India (166)
Indonesia	South Korea (1221)	Russia (1147)	Netherlands (1079)
Laos	Russia (125)	China (91)	Ukraine (52)
Thailand	USA (780)	China (470)	Sweden (459)
Singapore	USA (6448)	France (2266)	Germany (739)
Philippines	USA (414)	South Korea (315)	Indonesia (180)
Cambodia	China (118)	Ukraine (54)	Serbia (30)
Brunei	Germany (322)	USA (95)	France (45)

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database[32]

Although Russia is the largest supplier of arms to the region, it is not the sole, dominant player. The region maintains a highly diversified portfolio of suppliers driven by a desire to find the best equipment as well as "to underline its non-aligned status and to spread the risk of negative relations with supplier states."[33]

Russia and the Southeast Asian countries have also been improving their defence and security cooperation. In 2014, Vietnam allowed use of the strategically crucial Cam Ranh Bay naval base "on a preferential basis" to the Russian navy and air force. The permission for tanker aircraft at the base allows "Russian bombers to fly long range patrols near the Western Pacific."[34] During the 2018 visit to Vietnam by Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu, they discussed a defence cooperation plan, including regular port visits and joint exercises. In recent years, Russia has also sought to build military technical cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Myanmar. So far, however, such cooperation has been limited to arms sales. Russia prefers not to take sides on the disputes in the South China Sea and to not "exacerbate relations with either party to the confrontation."[35]

At the same time, Russia's arms sales to Vietnam—including of submarines and aircraft—cannot be underestimated: it increases the cost for China in case of any real conflict with Vietnam, even as Russia continues to supply weapons to both sides. This, combined with Russia's investment in oil and gas in the disputed waters of SCS, enhances Russia's influence in the area.[36] In case of any potential crisis between China and Vietnam, Russia can use its resources to keep open lines of communication and prevent the escalation of conflict; arms sales are thus a strategic avenue.[37]

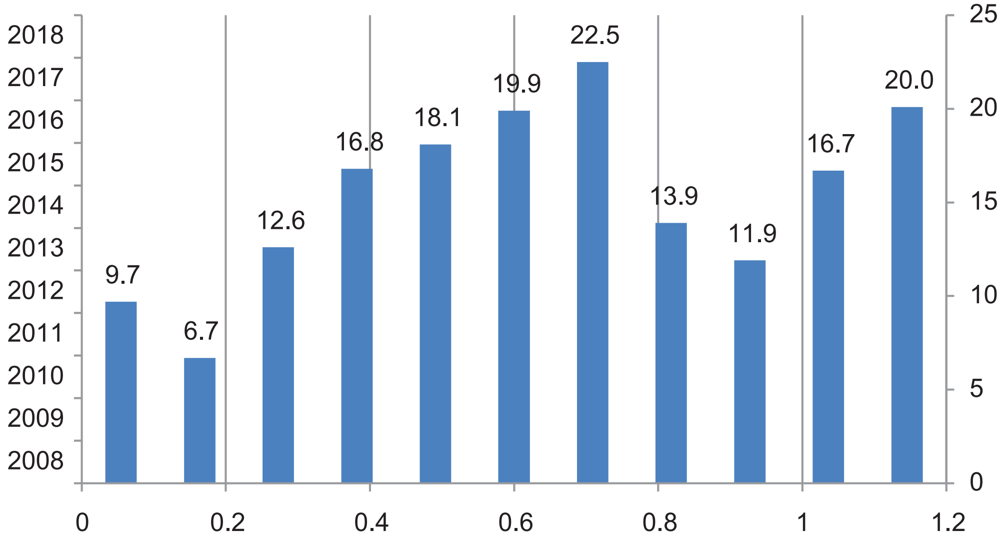
Russia has also sought to conduct joint exercises with different regional states in the past couple of years, including naval exercises with Indonesia in 2020. There are plans to conduct joint military exercises with Thailand; three Philippine navy vessels reached Vladivostok in 2017 to conduct drills with Russia; and a task force of Russia's Pacific Fleet conducted joint drills with Brunei Navy in 2018 and held their first joint exercises for search and rescue operations with Vietnam in 2019. The same year saw the first joint military exercise between Russia and Laos. These developments, resulting from different military and technical cooperation agreements signed with SEA states, signal an increased Russian interest in the region. This is a departure from a period when arms sales were the sole dimension of Russia's defence relations in SEA without any kind of "broad-based cooperative framework."[38] This alone was not enough to build a foundation of strong relations within the region given its "one-dimensional nature" as well as the presence of other suppliers like the US[39] who also have deep defence linkages within the region. This will continue to pose a challenge to Russia, given that its defence ties are still in the nascent stage. Meanwhile, the efforts by other powers to shore up defence relationships will also impact the extent of Russian influence. The US has already increased its military aid to SEA as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, especially in the maritime domain.

The Russian foreign minister has noted that Russia does not "aspire to military superiority" in the region and had "no plans of deploying military bases in the Asia-Pacific, and are not forming closed defence alliances with countries of the region."[40] He declared that the effort to "strengthen cooperation with ASEAN, including the security issues, was not aimed against third countries."[41] However, it remains concerned about the lack of security architecture in the region wherein there still are "no agreed rules to deal with regional tension or with unexpected confrontations of opposing military forces"[42] but lacks significant influence over regional states to be a rule-setter.

Economic Ties

Russia views the Asia-Pacific as important for the achievement of its economic development goals– especially in accelerating growth in the remote Russian Far East and Siberia. The Eastern Economic Forum, launched in 2015, aims to attract foreign investors to the region specifically and promote local development. These goals, however, have had limited success when it comes to Southeast Asia, as Russia's economic ties with regional states continue to be weak, lagging behind their political and defence relationships. ASEAN data shows that Russia-ASEAN trade in 2018 stood at US$ 20 billion.[43] Out of the total trade, US$8.57 billion is constituted by mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation; another US$2 billion comes from iron and steel, and the same amount from electrical machinery and parts thereof.

Figure 1: Russia-ASEAN trade (US $ billion)



Source: UN Comtrade[44]

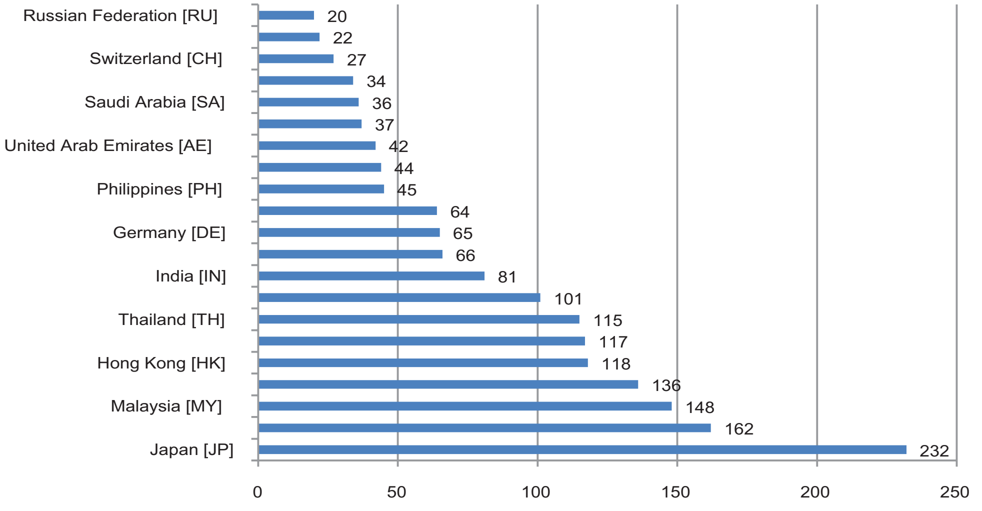
Russia's exports to ASEAN are mainly mineral fuels, mineral oils and products, iron and steel, cereals, and fertilisers. ASEAN's key exports to Russia include electrical machinery, electrical equipment and parts thereof, mechanical appliances, machinery and parts thereof, and animal and vegetable oils. A report on ASEAN-Russia trade relations noted that these categories comprised 55 percent of the former's exports to the latter, indicating the potential that "diversified investments would expand trade between ASEAN and Russia."[45]

In terms of individual countries, Russia's leading trade partners in the region in 2018 included Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand, which recorded US$ 6.3 billion, US$ 4.6 billion, and US$ 3 billion in trade, respectively. This was followed by Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines with US$ 2.6 billion, US$ 1.8 billion, and US$ 1.4 billion, respectively in bilateral trade. In 2019, the second FTA between Singapore and EAEU was signed and the Malaysian PM too expressed interest in an FTA with EAEU during a meeting with President Putin.[46]

Based on statistics, Russia constitutes barely one percent of ASEAN's total trade and the contrast in bilateral economic relations with other trade partners of ASEAN is stark. This has been attributed to the fact that Russia does not form part of "regional integration processes that were based on specialization and cooperation within the production chains established by transnational corporations in Southeast Asia."[47] It is especially a problem given that the intensity of intraregional trade "was higher in Southeast Asia and the Pacific than in other sub-regions, as more than 60 per cent of their trade was with other Asia-Pacific economies ."[48]

Other reasons include a lack of historical experience of dealing with the region, "geographical remoteness, the limited competitiveness of Russian exports, and the presence of significantly more powerful players."[50] Even after Russia turned to the east after 2014, concrete projects in the direction did not materialise. It also lacks financial capacity for large-scale investment into the region or offer large market for products from SEA. As per ASEAN data, FDI from Russia into ASEAN stood at US$55.71 million in 2018.[51]

Figure 2: Trade partners of ASEAN in 2018 (US$ billion)



Source: ASEANstats[49]

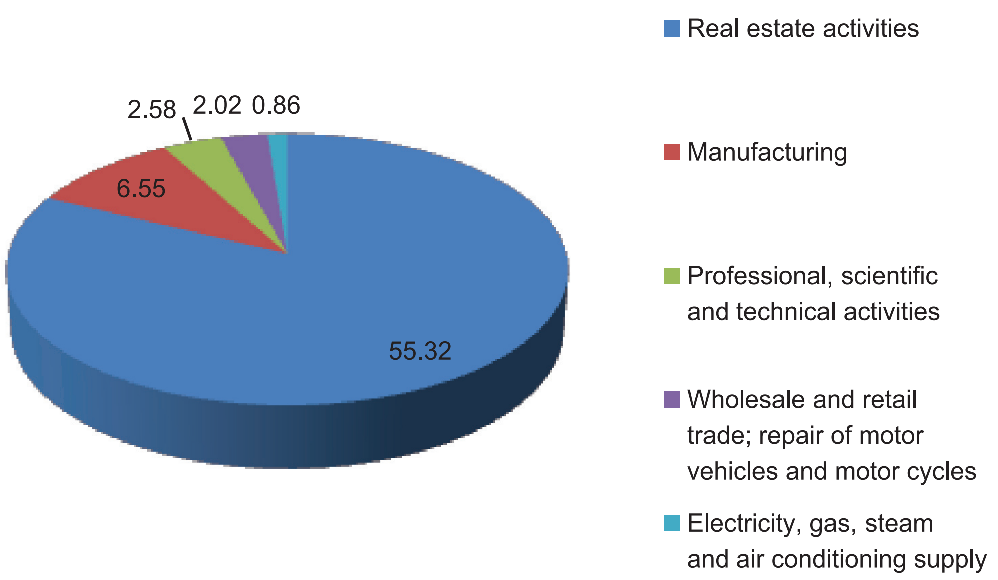
Table 6: Russian FDI into ASEAN in 2018 by country ($ million)

Brunei	0.0
Cambodia	0.0
Indonesia	0.7
Laos	8.0
Malaysia	-0.8
Myanmar	0.0
Philippines	0.0
Singapore	0.0
Thailand	45.2
Vietnam	18.6

Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2019[52]

The FDI that flows from Russia to ASEAN is invested primarily in real estate activities, followed by manufacturing. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3: Sectoral distribution of Russian FDI in ASEAN



Source: ASEANstats[53]

In terms of its overall positioning, Russia occupies 33rd position in the ranking for FDI flows into ASEAN. When compared with FDI from other sources into the region, the weakness of Russia in this particular regard is brought into stark relief, as is evident from Table 7. The top 10 together constitute 67.8 percent of the total FDI into ASEAN with others making up the remaining 32.2 percent.

Reverse FDI also remains a weak link in Russia–ASEAN economic relations, with only Singapore contributing $1,587 million in 2018 as FDI into Russia. Despite Russian efforts to attract investment from ASEAN into the country, particularly the Russian Far East, its efforts have met with little success owing to poor investment climate, weak economic growth, lack of infrastructure, weak rule of law, harsh climate, and difficulty in procuring labour force. To improve the trade situation, Russia believes that an FTA between

Table 7: The top 10 sources of FDI into ASEAN in 2018 ($ million)

ASEAN	23188.4
EU-28	21613.5
Japan	20954.5
Hong Kong	10111.0
China	9940.1
USA	8340.7
ROK	5887.5
India	1516.1
Australia	1215.5
British Virgin Islands	757.3

Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook, 2019[54]

EAEU and ASEAN would be an important step. Studies have indicated that that ASEAN will gain about "0.019 percent of GDP growth ($0.4 billion) in the short term and 0.041 percent ($1.0 billion) in the long term" after entering into this FTA. Russia is expected to be the biggest beneficiary of this FTA with estimates of "0.028 percent of GDP growth in the short term ($0.6 billion) and 0.066 percent ($1.4 billion) in the long term."[55]

Energy

In 2018, Russia was the eighth largest supplier of crude oil to ASEAN with bulk of the supply for the region coming from Saudi Arabia, UAE, ASEAN, Kuwait, Qatar, Australia and Nigeria. In 2015, Russia was fifth, but by 2018 had been taken over by Kuwait, Australia and Nigeria.[56] The fact that the region has diversified sources of energy supply has prevented Russia from becoming a dominant player or using its supplies as an instrument of its foreign policy – greatly constricting its ability to further its regional influence.

Most of Russian oil supply to East Asia is geared towards Northeast Asia – China, Japan and South Korea and only a small amount as yet is bound for Southeast Asia – mainly to Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. The main oil importers in Southeast Asia are Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, in that order. Singapore meets almost 90 percent of its needs through imports from West Asia – via UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Most of its natural gas demand is filled by imports from neighbouring states of Malaysia and Indonesia. The second highest importer of oil in the region is Thailand and despite being a producer, it meets most of its demand through imports, about 62 percent of which comes from the Middle East while the rest is from Asian suppliers. It sources its natural gas primarily from Qatar and Myanmar. Russia supplies both oil and gas to Thailand at a low level.

Indonesia sources oil from Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Malaysia, UAE and Brunei while being a net exporter of natural gas—a status that is expected to change in the coming years. Malaysia is a net exporter of both oil and gas, importing some oil for its refineries from mainly the Middle East. The Philippines depends heavily on oil imports to meet its needs, with the top three sources being from West Asia, i.e. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE. It also imports from Malaysia, South Korea, Qatar and Russia, in that order, with Moscow supplying about two percent of the Philippines' needs. While Vietnam is meeting its demand currently from domestic sources, as the need for oil increases in the country, it is expected to see an increase in its imports.

While its oil and gas exports to SEA remain limited, Russian state companies have been striking deals with regional states to develop their oil and gas fields as well as refineries with an eye on the future. This would entail developing its Far Eastern and Eastern Siberia fields down the line, to cater to the SEA market.

Russia's oil exports to other parts of Asia (excluding China, Japan and South Korea) remain at a very low level. Out of the total crude oil and condensate export of 1373 thousand barrels per day (bpd) to Asia and Oceania in 2016, only 102 thousand bpd reached other parts of Asia, including Southeast Asia. In contrast, China, Japan and South Korea collectively accounted for 1270 thousand bpd of imports from Russia.[57]

A similar situation is evident in the case of natural gas exports, with most of the supplies going to either China or Japan. Russia's presence in the oil and gas exploration sector in Southeast Asia is also limited, with the exception of Vietnam.

In the case of Vietnam, the cooperation dates back to the Soviet period and the joint venture Vietsovpetro. Given that the investments made by the venture are in the disputed South China Sea and contributes to over a fourth of Vietnam's state income, it is both an economic and strategic arena for Vietnam, through Russian assistance. Rosneft too has become involved with gas projects in Vietnam, which even attracted displeasure of Beijing due to exploration activities in the disputed waters. However, the gas exploration has continued, with China refraining from issuing an ultimatum to the Russian company. This is in contrast to the case of Spanish energy firm Repsol that was forced to suspend its project with PetroVietnam in South China Sea due to Chinese pressure.[58] This has been attributed to the close Russia-China ties as well as the neutral stance that Russia has previously taken in the case of SCS.

While it continues operations in the disputed waters, Russia has hedged its bets, walking a fine line between the ASEAN and Chinese positions. As a result, it has called for a peaceful resolution of the disputes through following principles ascertained by UNCLOS and Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) while also getting behind China in opposing third party involvement and internationalising the issue. The Philippines President Duterte has also indicated his desire to see Rosneft invest in his country in an area that is in contested waters. This at a time when China too is in the process of negotiating exploration projects with Philippines.[59]

The multilateral organisations of Southeast Asia revolve around ASEAN and its related bodies – ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and East Asia Summit. Russia from the very beginning took steps to ensure that it acceded to all regional multilateral institutions. It has been a member of ARF since its establishment in 1993 and joined APEC in 1998. In 2010, Russia joined the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and in 2011 the newly established EAS. Russia acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2004. The first ASEAN-Russia summit was held in 2005 and the second one in 2010. There was a gap of six years between the next high-level summit in 2016 hosted by Moscow, which was to mark the 20th anniversary of establishment of dialogue relations.

ASEAN generally holds "top level meetings with its dialogue partners annually,"[60] which has not been the case with Russia. But the latter did signal its intent to improve ties with the organisation in its foreign policy concept of 2016, wherein it stated that Moscow was looking to "achieve a strategic partnership,"[61] which will be supported by interactions in other ASEAN-related multilateral organisations. In 2018, the third Russia-ASEAN summit was held that elevated the relationship to one of a strategic partnership. An MOU was signed between ASEAN and Eurasian Economic Commission on economic cooperation. In 2017, Russia's permanent mission to ASEAN established in Jakarta while an ambassador has been accredited to the organisation since 2009.[62]

The weak economic linkage of Russia with ASEAN countries is a major impediment to the qualitative improvement in ties. The organisation of APEC summit in 2012 in Vladivostok with much fanfare, projecting the Russian Far East as the window to the East, did not result in tangible results. Its attempts to make the Far East attractive to investors post-2014 has not found much traction with ASEAN either. Russia is not a major player in the multilateral setting of ASEAN and its related organisations, wherein navigating between the US, China, India, Japan among others is a challenging task. The lack of regular meetings and inadequate representation from the top in Russia at the summit meetings is another challenge in the development of ties.[63] Russia’s primary engagement with the region still happens “bilaterally via trade missions and summits, and on the sidelines of various multilateral forums.”[64] Even its diplomatic core is not strong enough to cope with the demands of numerous meetings of regional multilateral organisations.[65]

To be sure, efforts have been made in recent years to increase its engagement, coming at a time of increased tensions in the region[66] – driven by the US and China and a split in ASEAN unity on contentious issues like the South China Sea. This opens a window of opportunity, even as it complicates matters for Russia as it seeks to avoid being seen as a junior partner of China. This emerges from the fact that ASEAN is looking to enmesh various powers in the region with a view to hedge against both the established and rising power. Also, Russia has the potential to be viewed as a "useful counterweight to both China and the United States."[67] Russia has wanted to position itself as a balancer and a neutral mediator which does not have adversarial relations with any regional power and is not seen as a threat by the ASEAN states. In other words, a change in the regional balance of power has the potential to bring about the need for Russia's more vigorous participation as a "balancer."[68]

The two sides have also signed a Comprehensive Economic Plan (2016-20) and decided to hold meetings between defence ministers of Russia and ASEAN countries. The areas of cyber security, food security, terrorism, military medicine and emergency response are being discussed and a business forum is being organised. The attendance by Putin in EAS summit in 2018 for the first time was seen as an indication of Russia finally "taking multilateral diplomacy in Asia seriously."[69] If this continues, it will give an indication of how serious Russia will be towards multilateral mechanisms in the region even though this would mean "coming to terms with a more modest, less influential Russian role for some time"[70] where it is not in a position to set the agenda. It has been noted that Russia needs to find concrete projects with ASEAN if it is to secure a foothold within the body or risk its relations becoming "purely declarative in nature."[71]

Strategic Situation

It is clear that Russia is seeking to further its strategic presence in SEA at a time of regional flux and entering an already crowded region populated by established powers. The regional balance has been altered by China's assertive stance and the strong US response to it. At this time, the deepening of Russia's relations with China and deterioration of ties with the US – which is a major security provider for SEA – has made the tightrope walk even more difficult for Russia. The regional states do not want confrontation in the region while remaining wary of an increasingly assertive China.

In this context, the strategic value of Russia and Southeast Asian states to each other can hardly be denied. As has been noted earlier, the policy of hedging lends itself to an increased importance of external powers with a view of preventing dominance by a single player. This web of bilateral and multilateral networks is an attempt to make the region multipolar while reducing risks of uncertain behaviour.[72] Both sides agree on the need to create a multipolar world. They also agree on non-interference in internal affairs and respect for sovereignty.[73] They also have common grounds on several non-traditional security issues. Russia wants to develop Siberia and the Far East through economic cooperation with Asia-Pacific and build diversified relations across the ASEAN. When it comes to SEA, Russia neither has any territorial disputes with regional states nor has it been engaged in a rivalry with them as a post-Soviet state. This puts it in a unique position of being an independent player that can act as a negotiator in case a need arises.

To fulfil this role, Russia will need to build partnerships to strengthen its regional presence, which will also be welcomed by regional states. An additional benefit of this move would be to reduce apprehensions of an overdependence on China among SEA states. It would benefit both Russia and ASEAN if they are able to maintain their "neutrality" and "strategic coherence and unity",[74] respectively.

However, based on this analysis, it is clear that as of now, Russia remains a power with low level of economic presence and lacking significant power projection capabilities[75] in Southeast Asia. There is also a sense that SEA does not occupy top priority in Russian foreign policy at the moment, despite the economic and geopolitical importance of the region.[76] As a result, the Russian presence does not alter the balance of power in SEA[77] at the moment.

The vague iteration of Greater Eurasia[78] as well as Moscow's opposition to Indo-Pacific—a concept that has gradually found acceptance in ASEAN—has added to the confusion about its vision for the region. The increasing tilt of Russian foreign policy towards China, if not addressed through a sustained effort to build simultaneous ties with other powers, also has the potential to impact its positioning as a neutral player in the region. Given that the regional states have preferred a hedging policy, such a perception will only hurt Russian ambitions. Moreover, if the problems with the US spilled over to SEA, it would negatively impact the Russian standing in the region. This will be especially problematic at a time when reduction of its dependence on China has proven to be difficult given the state of relations with the West. As noted earlier, the lack of "economic, political, and military clout[79]" that can help Russia play a greater security role in the region is also a major hindrance to enhanced strategic heft in SEA.

CONCLUSION

Russia has followed a "pragmatic, strategic and conciliatory"[80] policy in the region, seeking to build up its base on arms and energy sales. This is being done to help build its reputation as an actor which is "non-aggressive, responsible and eager to strengthen the cooperative paradigm between regional actors."[81] This is in line with the regional situation where close inter-dependency among various powers has led to the adoption of a policy of hedging.

While Russia is valued as a non-threatening power in SEA, it is the US and China that are the major powers in the region. Russia does not have deep historical or civilisational links to the region and is a middle power. It has maintained a broadly neutral attitude, a strategy that will need to be continued if it is to be seen as an independent player in SEA.

The asymmetries in power between Russia and China in SEA cannot be denied but the latter values Russian support as a permanent UNSC member and a nuclear power that lends strength to its position at the multilateral level. Both remain concerned over US hegemony and since the announcement of the US pivot to Asia and the Indo-Pacific, they have been concerned about its implications. While China believes the American policy seeks to contain it, Russia remains concerned about a further shrinking of space available to it for increasing regional influence.

Yet, Russia will need to build cordial relations with the US in the region to successfully implement its hedging strategy in SEA given that the American presence has maintained regional stability and limited Chinese hegemonic behaviour. Russia is not in direct conflict with US on any issue in this region. Even the position of "stabiliser"[82] that Russia aims for can be accomplished only through steadfastly improving ties across the board.

Despite its efforts since 2014, the former superpower still does not enjoy a "fully-fledged partnership"[83] with all the regional states. In the midst of other powerful regional powers, the scale of Russian projects remains limited. Thus, it is a combination of strategic neutrality and improved relations with all regional stakeholders that will benefit Russia in Southeast Asia. This is going to be a difficult in a region that has not been Russia's top priority in Asia, with its focus on Northeast Asia.[84] The deteriorating ties with the US also hinder a positive engagement, narrowing Russian options in a region where the superpower and its treaty allies occupy a critical role.

These challenges will only become more acute as the global recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic hits the already slowing Russian economy, hurting Moscow's capacity to implement its foreign policy goals. Given that trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia were already weak, a recession does not bode well for the relationship at present. Similarly, other levers of Russia's policy – arms sales and energy – will also face budget cuts and declining demand, respectively, in the short term. The current challenges that have been highlighted throughout this paper for Russia's policy towards Southeast Asia will only be exacerbated in the near term.

Given its position in the region, Russia recognises that its ability to shape the future regional order remains limited and it understands the necessity to deepen its relations. It would take strengthening of relationships at the political, economic and strategic level to make Moscow a power to reckon with. In the short to medium term, Russia needs to deal with its shortcomings and work towards improving its status in multilateral organisations. Meanwhile, Russia's search for influence in Southeast Asia continues.

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Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org