

# Russia as a Great Power? A Case Study of Southeast Asia

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**Abstract:** The great power concept has been widely used in the study of International Relations. However, its usage has often occurred in foreign policy analyses of a more rhetorical than empirical nature. Several scholars have tried to contribute to defining what a great power is. For the purpose of this study, Andrew Heywood's great power framework provides a critical understanding of the concept of great powers and touches on the contributions made by other scholars as well. Russia has been usually labeled as a great power based on a common nostalgia of the former Soviet Union and the charisma seen from President Putin; however, before attributing the status of great power to Russia, it is important to look into empirical data, not merely rhetoric. Considering that a great power is global in reach, this paper employs Southeast Asia as a case study in analyzing Russia's influence in the sub-region. This study claims that despite common perceptions, Russia has not yet achieved great power status based on the empirical data provided against the backdrop of Heywood's conceptual framework.

**Keywords:** Great power, Russia, Southeast Asia, Andrew Heywood, international relations, Asia-Pacific.

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## Defining a Great Power

International Relations has long been concerned with defining the concept of *great power*. Several scholars have contributed towards providing a detailed understanding or measurement of what a great power is and should be. In this study, we have utilized the great power framework introduced by Andrew Heywood in his 2011 book titled *Global Politics*. We believe that Heywood's explanation encompasses the efforts put in by other scholars in defining the scope of a Great Power. Accordingly, Heywood defines a great power as a "state deemed to rank amongst the most powerful in a hierarchical-state-system."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Heywood provides certain criteria for a state to qualify as a great power: (1) it must be in the first rank of military prowess, having the capacity to maintain its own security and, potentially, to influence other powers, (2) it must be an economically powerful state, (3) it must have a global, and not merely regional spheres of interests, and (4) it must adopt a "forward" foreign policy and have an actual, and not merely a potential, impact on international affairs.<sup>2</sup>

1 Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

2 Ibid., 7

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Several studies and news reports have carelessly labeled Russia as a great power today; however, based on empirical data, this paper argues that Russia has not yet achieved great power status. It is one thing to say that Russia has a global agenda; however, it is another to claim that Russia has achieved great power status by means of that global agenda. Considering how a great power must have global influence, this paper will use Southeast Asia as a case study to test if Russia has indeed an actual impact beyond its immediate geographic neighborhood based on the framework provided by Heywood. It is also in the interest of this paper to provide conceptual clarity on ongoing debates among scholars and practitioners vis-a-vis the usage and application of the term great power.

Gurganus and Rumer explain how Russia may qualify as a great power by arguing that its grand strategy has been to seek recognition of its great power status in the international system so that it could legitimize both its military conquests and geopolitical ambitions in the near abroad.<sup>3</sup> However, looking beyond its military prowess, a self-sustained economy, and geopolitical ambitions, questions still lie on the nature of Russia's forward foreign policy, as well as its actual impact on international affairs.

This paper will investigate the case of Southeast Asia to evaluate Russia's global impact. The next section will explore Russia's involvement and engagement in the sub-region. This section will be followed by an in-depth analysis of Russia's impact on Southeast Asia based on several empirical observations. This will help gauge whether Russia is indeed a great power based on the conceptual framework provided by Heywood.

## Russia in Southeast Asia: A Great Power?

At the end of the Cold War, Russia needed to broaden its legitimacy and offset losses by expanding its foreign relations, particularly in Southeast Asia. Russia began its interaction with Southeast Asian states at the regional level through the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Russia became a consultative partner in 1991 and was elevated to a full-fledged partner in 1996 by becoming a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In 2004, Russia acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, followed by the first ASEAN-Russia partnership dialogue in 2005 where both parties agreed to expand their ties in the security and economic realms through a 10-year plan. In 2011, Russia became a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS). However, it is important to point out that despite these advancements, Russia has not yet been able to effectively maximize its relations with ASEAN.

Russia has been trying to make its presence felt on the global level in accordance with its great power ambitions. In Southeast Asia, Russia has been increasing its presence, particularly through arms sales in countries like Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos,

<sup>3</sup> Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 20, 2019, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/20/russia-s-global-ambitions-in-perspective-pub-78067>.

Myanmar, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Through this initiative, Russia is trying to deepen its defense cooperation with these states. In 2016, Russia hosted the commemorative ASEAN-Russia summit in Sochi, where a declaration was established to deepen the strategic relationship between them.<sup>4</sup> This signaled Russia's intention to invest itself in Southeast Asia. Russia has also embarked on other projects that involve energy, infrastructure, and transportation to make inroads into Southeast Asia's growing export markets. The next section will identify Russia's activities in the sub-region and evaluate whether it truly has the potential to become a global power based on the concept and framework provided by Heywood.

## **Evaluating Russia's Great Power Ambitions in Southeast Asia**

### ***Military Capability***

Russia may possess a capable and lethal army; however, it is important not to over-estimate the extent of its military capacity to be recognized as a great power. Russia's military potential to influence Southeast Asian affairs has significantly diminished from that of the Soviet days, which can be seen through its limited power projection capabilities; in fact, much of its Pacific Fleet is rusting in port.<sup>5</sup> According to the 2019 Asia Power Index, Russia lags third behind the US and China in the overall military capability in Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the size of Russia's military and the strength of its strategic nuclear forces, Russia is at most still a regional power with only the capacity to coerce its closest neighbors in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. In terms of its military and defense capabilities, Russia can hardly be considered a formidable great power. In fact, it may not even be considered a great power at all if we rigidly apply the framework presented by Heywood. Furthermore, it is important for a state to have a global reach in terms of military and defense capabilities. However, using the case of Southeast Asia, it is evident that Russia does not have the capability to coerce the states of Southeast Asia the way it can do in its own geographical neighborhood. Additionally, Russia does not possess the capacity to challenge other rising great powers in the sub-region, such as China, in terms of military capability. The expensive weapons and platforms aired during Russia's military parades may seem to be inconsistent with what it employs in its near abroad.

The Russian armed forces seem to be in a deadlock between improving overall capacity and expanding overall capacity.<sup>7</sup> Much of this is due to Russia's enduring problem with

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4 "Sochi Declaration of the ASEAN-Russian Federation Commemorative Summit to Mark the 20th Anniversary of ASEAN-Russian Federation Dialogue Partnership 'Moving Towards a Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit' - ASEAN: One Vision One Identity One Community," ASEAN, May 21, 2016, <https://asean.org/sochi-declaration-of-the-asean-russian-federation-commemorative-summit-to-mark-the-20th-anniversary-of-asean-russian-federation-dialogue-partnership-moving-towards-a-strategic-partnership-for/>.

5 Charles Ziegler, "Russia in the Asia-Pacific: A Major Power or Minor Participant," *Asian Survey* 34, no.6 (1994): 534, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645339>.

6 Hervé Lemahieu and Bonnie Bley, *Asia Power Index 2019*, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2019), 20.

7 Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, and Brian Nichiporuk, *Trends in Russia's Armed Forces*, (California: RAND

sufficiently funding its armed forces. Currently, the Russian weapons systems are mostly invested in defending itself against air attacks from its Western flank in Eastern Europe to protect the Russian Heartland.<sup>8</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2017, Russian military expenditures fell by 17% over the previous year to 3.9 trillion rubles (USD 61 billion); the defense budget declined an additional 5.5% in 2018. Given its immediate interest in defending its military presence in Eastern Europe and the Russian Heartland in addition to its corresponding limited budget, Russia will not be able to effectively project military power in Southeast Asia as a great power.

### ***Economic Capacity***

In 2010, Russia under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin announced that the country would “turn to the East.” Russia was steadfast to bolster its economic, military, and political engagements with countries in Asia. There are two main factors that can be pointed out that served as a catalyst for Russia’s decision to redirect its attention to the East. First, Russia has shown its acceptance of the notion that power is globally shifting to the East; it has shown its willingness to enhance cooperation with rising Asian powers such as China and India. Second, Russia also aims to maximize its engagements and influence, particularly in Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup>

However, in terms of economic engagement with Southeast Asia, Russia is still a minor player. Russia’s main exports to the sub-region consist mainly of natural resources such as oil and gas.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Russia has been trying to boost its exports in the sub-region, particularly in areas in which it excels, such as arms and nuclear technology. In 2012 Russia’s state-owned Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation won a contract to supply Vietnam with two nuclear power plants — the country’s first — to be completed in 2023-24.<sup>11</sup> Russia has also offered to provide Myanmar, Indonesia, and even Cambodia with advanced civilian nuclear technology.<sup>12</sup> However, aside from arms trade and energy resources, Russia-Southeast Asian trade has little room for a significant amount of expansion.

Russia’s economic presence in Southeast Asia is rather fragmented. Economic relations between Russia and the sub-region are built on a relatively weak foundation. While Russia was still preparing to “turn to the East,” other major players—primarily China and the United States—were already able to gain a strong foothold in Southeast Asia. In a tight

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- Corporation,2019), xiii.
- 8 Ibid., xiii.
- 9 Ian Storey, “What Russia’s “Turn to the East” Means for Southeast Asia,” December 3, 2015, 3, accessed February 15,2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2015\\_67.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2015_67.pdf).
- 10 Ibid., 4.
- 11 AP, “Russian president visits Vietnam to boost ties,” *USA Today*, November 11, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/11/11/putin-hanoi-visit/3502857/>.
- 12 DVB, “Russia and Burma discuss ‘favourable conditions’ for nuclear technology,” *Democratic Voice of Burma*, April 14,2015, <http://images.dvb.no/news/russia-and-burma-discuss-favourable-conditions-for-nuclear-technology-burma-myanmar/49982>.

competition between two formidable players, Russia has no choice but to play catch-up.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Russian investments in the ASEAN markets are not significant. In 2012–2014, the economies of Southeast Asian countries received USD 698 million in Russian investments, or 0.2 percent of the total. Out of this sum, USD 420 million went to Vietnam in a single year.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned above, aside from the insufficient size of its economy, Russia's economic engagements have also been stalled due to the lack of diversification of its economy.<sup>15</sup>

### *Spheres of Interests*

Russia's great power ambitions would require bolstering its presence in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. This involves light military intervention in the Syrian Civil War,<sup>16</sup> diplomatic leverage between competing regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and renewing relations with Turkey and Israel.<sup>17</sup> These actions were interpreted (sometimes with too much rhetoric) as Russia acting as a great power; however, it is critical to note that Russia has been careful not to overcommit and not to exert an active diplomatic strategy.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the sphere of influence may be limited contrary to what many might suspect.

In Eastern Europe, greater insecurity appeared when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. For the Baltic states, diplomacy remains short of Russia's influence while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to debate on the member-states' commitment in their defense contributions. NATO's collective security policy remains an effective deterrent against Russia. As a result, part of Russian strategy has been to employ *gray zone* tactics which include supporting pro-Russian political parties, wedging U.S-led alliances, propaganda and narrative efforts, energy deals, cyber warfare, and unconventional warfare<sup>19</sup> in order to avoid triggering an interstate conflict leading to a possible full-scale war. However, these gray zone tactics have their limits as they destroy Russia's image as a responsible stakeholder in key regional and global issues. In the grander scale of things, Russia's Middle Eastern and Eastern European policies, though legitimate national interests, will likely remain to be regional in nature.

Despite Russia's commitment to securing its influence in ASEAN, the organization

13 Anton Tsvetov, "Russia still seeking a role in ASEAN," *Carnegie*, May 19, 2016, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/63628>.

14 Ibid.

15 Nivedita Kapoor, "Russia and its engagement with Southeast Asia", *Observer Research Foundation*, October 22, 2019, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-and-its-engagement-with-southeast-asia-56902/>.

16 Cesare M. Scartozzi, "Assads Strategic Narrative: The Role of Communication in the Syrian Civil War," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 2, no. 4 (2015): 313–327.

17 Eugene Rumer and Andrew S. Weiss, "A Brief Guide to Russia's Return to the Middle East", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 24, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>.

18 Ibid.

19 Michael Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*, (Pennsylvania: U.S Army War College Press, 2015), 93-94.

remains a relatively low priority as Russia prefers to engage with Southeast Asian states bilaterally. One explanation for this strategy is to avoid straining Russia's strategic partnership with China. For a relatively new player in Southeast Asia like Russia, an image of a "third player" amidst US-China power competition in the sub-region would trigger China to isolate Russia. In order not to offend China, Russia's engagement would likely remain limited. But as the West pushes Russia towards China, Southeast Asian states would likely be on alert for a Beijing-dependent Moscow.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, some Southeast Asian states find an increasing interest to bandwagon with Beijing in aspects that include arms sales and defense networks. This has serious implications regarding Russia's competitive edge.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of Russia's desire to maximize its strategic potential, sensitive geopolitical impediments can occur, such as the possibility of straining relations with China and Southeast Asian states in addition to depleting needed resources to defend its interests in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

### ***Foreign Policy***

President Putin's foreign policy rests on seeking recognition from the international community to view Russia once more as a "great power." Russia's current posture is to sustain its presence in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East; however, its military and diplomatic instruments have been quite limited there. This limitation has serious implications for its foreign policy aspirations in Southeast Asia. According to the 2019 Asia Power Index, Russia is categorized as an underachiever, which means that its resources exceed influence<sup>22</sup>. In other words, Moscow's performance is seen to be mediocre when it comes to using its resources, particularly weapons and military hardware to influence Southeast Asian affairs.

The 2019 Asia Power Index reported that Russia ranked top three out of twenty-five nation-states to demonstrate its strategic ambition in the Asia-Pacific. This can partly be attributed to President Putin's charismatic endeavors. But projecting personal charisma is not enough to explain Russia's great power status, especially in Southeast Asia. In fact, Russian political leadership in foreign policy only ranked nine out of twenty-five despite being in the top five of overall diplomatic influence based on the said Index. One reason can be attributed to Moscow's failure to follow through on its commitments with ASEAN concerning the 10-year action plan which only yielded minimal results. As a response, Russia recommitted to form a five-year plan which contains a roadmap to increase both economic and security ties from 2016 to 2020.<sup>23</sup> As President Putin ends his term on 2024, the future is uncertain with Russian foreign policy.

While ASEAN has yet to provide positive returns for Russia, its propensity for

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20 Nivedita Kapoor, "Russia and its engagement".

21 Ibid.

22 Hervé Lemahieu and Bonnie Bley, *Asia Power Index 2019*, 66-67.

23 "Putin, ASEAN leaders to adopt summit declaration, partnership action plan", *TASS News Agency*, May 20, 2016.

bilateral relations seems promising, particularly in security where Russia is viewed to be a force of stability<sup>24</sup> amidst the U.S-China competition. While that projection exists, Russian foreign policy perceives that arms sales can provide the greatest economic returns.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, Russia gained USD 12 billion for its arms transfer deliveries with four consultation pacts in Southeast Asia as of 2018.<sup>26</sup>

Despite milestones in increasing arms transfers and sales, Moscow is yet to establish a comprehensive defense network in the Asia-Pacific in general, having been ranked top eleven out of twenty-five.<sup>27</sup> This provides problematic implications for its arms sale in Southeast Asia. If Russia sells weapons, it should at least be committed to help the buyer state integrate the weapons, platforms, and materiel to the force configuration of its armed forces. This could help build the prestige of Russia as a responsible defense partner. However, Russia has not yet provided a figure on its foreign deployment in Southeast Asia per the 2019 Asia Power Index.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the current force employment is oriented towards strategic deterrence in Eastern Europe and the defense of the Russian Heartland, which likely explains the deemed absence of foreign deployment in Southeast Asia. Given this case, it is agreed that the sub-region is simply not a high priority for Russia due to its preoccupation in its near abroad.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The concept of a great power has been used time and time again in international relations scholarship. However, its usage has often been used based on rhetoric rather than on empirical evidence. Russia has been frequently labeled as a great power in the international system. This attribution may be a product of what many speculators see as an active Russia trying to play a bigger role in world affairs under the active charismatic leadership of President Putin compounded by a common near-distant nostalgia of the former Soviet Union. However, the concept of a great power goes beyond these mere speculations.

This essay has utilized Andrew Heywood's framework to evaluate whether Russia can be defined as a great power. Considering how a great power must have a global reach, Southeast Asia has been used as a case study to test if Russia has an actual impact outside its neighboring countries. With the empirical observations provided in the study, it can be said that Russia may have certain strengths as a key player in the international scene; however, it has not yet qualified as a great power. On the military level, Russia may possess a remarkable military capability; but it is important not to overestimate its wherewithal

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24 Dmitry Gorenburg and Paul Schwartz, "Russia's Strategy in Southeast Asia," *PONARS Eurasia*, 5, March 2019, [https://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm578\\_Gorenburg-Shwartz\\_March2019.pdf](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm578_Gorenburg-Shwartz_March2019.pdf).

25 Ibid.

26 Hervé Lemahieu and Bonnie Bley, "Asia Power Index 2019", 87.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Gorenburg and Schwartz, "Russia's strategy".

given its force employment towards Eastern Europe and the Russian Heartland. On the economic level, Russia is seen to be staggering due to its internal structural problems and the sanctions imposed by the West.

In Southeast Asia, Russia's economic activity is quite limited and considerably dwarfed by the presence of the United States and China. On its spheres of interest, Russia's involvement in the sub-region will remain limited because of the geopolitical implications it may entail. There are more minuses than pluses for projecting itself as a third player in Southeast Asia given the U.S-China competition there and the risk perception among Southeast Asian states. Also, Russia's propensity to deal bilaterally with Southeast Asian states rather than on the ASEAN level implies its limited influence in the sub-region.

In terms of foreign policy, Russia has not yet maximized its relations with ASEAN given its preoccupation in influencing Eastern Europe and defending the Russian Heartland. Furthermore, its actual impact on the sub-region is considered relatively insignificant compared to that of China and the United States. From the evidence provided, Russia seems only highly capable and influential in its strategic backyard, but beyond that, its impact is significantly marginal.

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