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in the Pacific and
Indian Ocean:
views from Russia
and Thailand'

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'Strategic Situation in the Pacific and Indian Ocean: views from Russia and Thailand'

by Chatvadee Chindawongse, Jittipat Poonkham, Narut Charoensri, Igor Denisov,
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Round-table discussion

'Strategic Situation in the Pacific and Indian Ocean: views from Russia and Thailand'

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Anuson Chinvanno

This round table discussion today, 19 January 2022, is organized as the first activity between the International Studies Center and the ASEAN Centre, MGIMO University, after the two institutes made contact in late 2021. The session illustrates the usefulness of a frank exchanging of views in a closed environment, something not done very often. The excellent exposition by each panelist shows that they have taken much time to develop rich intellectual analyses that will benefit both sides, and for which we owe much appreciation. The ISC looks forward to future exchanging of views on topics of mutual interests, made possible despite “new normal” ways of life through communication technology.

Ekaterina Koldunova

This seminar report is a product of the round table discussion, which was organized jointly by the International Studies Center (Thailand) and ASEAN Centre with the participation of the Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University (Russia), in January 2022 in the online format. In 2022, Thailand and Russia are celebrating the 125th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Discussion on the key regional issues, which present interest for both countries, today looks highly relevant and important. It is not, of course, that we can find solutions to all regional problems, but learning more about each other's logic of analysis of the regional situation will eventually bring us closer to a better mutual understanding. With these considerations in mind, the following summaries present the core aspects of the Round-table discussion.

Chatvadee Chindawongse

“Strategic situation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans in ASEAN context”

Director Chatvadee identified shifting geopolitics as a key element when looking at the strategic situation in ASEAN.

The rise of China and its emergence as a global power has intensified major power competition in the region resulting in a more volatile strategic landscape. Indo-Pacific concepts/strategies have been released by several countries in response to the growing influence of China. COVID-19 has amplified the competitive dynamics and become yet another area of major power rivalry as they sought to capitalise on the pandemic for political gains.

Meanwhile, geoeconomics is fast gaining greater importance as a factor in shaping the strategic landscape, as ASEAN Member States seek enhanced economic engagement with external partners to support post-pandemic recovery.

Given different perspectives and national interests, ASEAN countries respond to the shifting geopolitics and non-ASEAN security initiatives such as AUKUS differently. The Mekong sub-region is poised to become another space for major power competition, but it remains to be seen how discussion on Mekong sub-regional issues will progress in the ASEAN framework. On the other hand, maritime issues, including developments in the South China Sea, have become more complex with the growing involvement of external parties. Naval operations may be seen as provocative actions and give rise to escalating tension and miscalculation.

In light of regional dynamics that may affect the geopolitics, ASEAN has adopted the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific as its vista and guideline to engage with external partners in the ASEAN-led mechanisms. This aims to enhance ASEAN centrality and build a new strategic equilibrium through promoting strategic trust and win-win cooperation in areas such as maritime cooperation, connectivity, SDGs, and economic cooperation and other possible areas. Russia as a key player in this region can contribute to this endeavor through cooperation in the ASEAN-Russia Strategic Partnership, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Jittipat Poonkham

“The Indo-Pacific: A Global Region of Geopolitical Struggle”

The Indo-Pacific is now an increasingly enlarged and expanded global region which highlights the geoeconomic and geostrategic significance of the two oceans and a broader area of full-fledged cooperation. However, it is a site of great power competition where a potential conflict looms large even before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. As a strategic discourse, the Indo-Pacific is essentially contested. Different actors interpret this concept differently. China envisioned it with a skeptic view while the US since 2017 has adopted Japan-initiated free and open Indo-Pacific strategy and expanded its geopolitical focal point. The free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is not value-free or neutral, but inherently political and value-laden. The Indo-

Pacific narrative traverses and replaces the older Asia-Pacific concept. Now, the US has a double strategic goal to maintain its hegemonic power and prestige in the region as well as to constrain China's assertive rise via establishing minilateral security pacts such as the Quad and AUKUS and the value-laden Summit for Democracy.

Being locked in the intensity of geopolitical competition, the US and China have turned the Indo-Pacific region into a cockpit of international rivalry due largely to the struggle for global supremacy. With G2 superpowers, the world enters into an ice age of bipolar system. The main flash-points of this contest can be classified as the "3Ts" – trade, technology and territorial/ maritime disputes. Without a proper balancing act, the likely scenario is that the Sino-US ice age might be driven by a new arms race and a dividing world with two rivaling blocs along different value systems in the near future.

When the two big elephants fight, it is the small grass that suffers. The small/middle states can maintain hedging and equidistant strategy, but perhaps need to elevate a leading-from-the-middle strategy that constrains great power competition and binds these powers into region-wide norms and rules. While a multipolar and multiplex world order is an aspiring dream for many players, a bipolar system is now the emerging rule of the game in the twenty-first century great power politics.

Narut Charoensri

“Greater Mekong Sub-Region in the Changing Regional Order”

Mainland Southeast Asia is known in different names; the Mekong sub-region, the Mekong region, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). This area comprises Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) defines the GMS by also including the two southern provinces of China, which are Yunnan and Guangxi.

As the GMS is located at the heart of Southeast Asia, it has been a battlefield of superpowers. China contributes significantly to economic assistance to help the region build high-speed railways and tries to integrate the sub-region into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which creates a comprehensive international production network, whilst initiating the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) to help support regional development. The United States, on the other hand, stepped into the subregion by supporting the environment and social issues. Japan helps the subregional integration by allocating financial assistance bilaterally and multilaterally to help construct economic corridors to deepen and strengthen the economic regionalization process.

The GMS subregion is now confronting a dilemma. Should the GMS countries lean forwards to the United States, China, or Japan? What strategic position and policy should the GMS countries develop to gain benefit from the economic contribution from the superpowers, whilst balancing the changing regional economic and political configuration?

I contend that the GMS countries should not choose a side. The GMS countries can develop balanced diplomatic, economic, political and security relations with the

United States, China, and Japan. The multipolar international system will bring chances to the subregion because it permits more opportunities to cooperate. Moreover, the proliferation and strengthening of physical connectivity, supported by superpowers, will also deepen and widen ASEAN economic regionalization.

Russia can step in to help the GMS subregion. There are many imperative areas of cooperation that Russia could contribute to the subregion, for example, environmental protection, scientific development, and capacity building. The contribution of Russia in the GMS sub-region will also emphasize the idea of ASEAN centrality, which stresses that ASEAN will be at the centre of any cooperation. Accordingly, commencing more cooperation between Russia and the GMS countries will help ASEAN enunciate this principle at the international level again.

Igor Denisov

“The Asia Pacific through the prism of Russian National Security Strategy”

Last year for the first time since 2015, President Vladimir Putin had updated the National Security Strategy (NSS). One of the main conceptual documents sets forth the Russian leadership's views on foreign policy priorities. The second in importance in the strategic planning hierarchy is a somewhat narrower document, the Foreign Policy Concept. Still, it has not been updated since 2016, so it is the Strategy that is very important for understanding the evolution of Russian approaches.

The drafting of the Strategy is a non-public process, but government agencies (mainly from the foreign policy and security bloc) and major state think tanks are involved in the preparation. The coordinating work is carried out by the working group of the Security Council. The determining factor influencing the estimates in the NSS 2021 was the deterioration of Russia's relations with the US and the collective West.

Against the background of the deepening rift with the West, which is increasingly gaining ideological character, Moscow's relations with the two major Asian powers, China and India, are viewed more from pragmatic positions and are designated as one of the priorities of its foreign policy.

Relations with India and China are combined in just one paragraph in the 2021 NSS, while in the 2009 and 2015 versions, they were treated separately, with China preceding India. This suggests that balancing relations with China is becoming increasingly important for the Russian political elite.

As highlighted in the Strategy, the partnership with Beijing and New Delhi is necessary for Moscow to create reliable mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific region to ensure regional stability and security on a non-bloc basis. 2021 NSS consistently mentions the Asia-Pacific region, which suggests that Russia at the highest level rejects the concept of Indo-Pacific (in fact, its US-centered version). Moscow sees the essence of the US strategy in exerting pressure on China and marginalizing Russia in the Asia-Pacific region by strengthening existing alliances and creating new ones.

The inclusion of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) idea in the National

Security Strategy shows its centrality in Russian views of the world order on the Eurasian continent. According to the Strategy, the GEP is aimed at "ensuring the integration of economic systems and the development of multilateral cooperation," which gives ample room for interpretation and enrichment with specific content. However, Moscow sees the strategic rationale in the fact that no national economic system should dominate Eurasia. Although this is not explicitly stated, the GEP is, among other things, an attempt to avoid China's monopoly in Eurasia by creating mechanisms for interaction between the "One Belt, One Road" and various multilateral initiatives.

Maxim A. Suchkov

“Russia's assessments of the US's role in the region”

For most of the 20th century, the U.S. strategy focused on reshaping Europe. To achieve this goal, the U.S. formulated a big idea of the "transatlantic community" and established an institution that was supposed to cement and frame this idea – the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). As a result of the effort the U.S. has secured its military presence near one of the most important geopolitical adversaries and ensured political influence over a group of most developed nations.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 at the dawn of the 21st century triggered a similar attempt on part of the U.S. to remake the Middle East. The idea to construct a "Greater Middle East" from Morocco to Afghanistan failed at its implementation, so did numerous attempts to create some “Arab NATO”. The ultimate consequences of the political experiment turned out to be catastrophic for the region and still haunt U.S. policy-making.

The rapid growth of China, with a simultaneous weakening of international positions of the U.S. and deepening of America's internal crises, prompted America to preemptively counter “the China threat”. As the U.S. did before, the process of "renovation" of South and East Asia is taking shape within the framework of a new big idea – the construction of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Region – and is accompanied by the creation of institutions that should promote and defend the idea – the QUAD, and, recently the AUKUS.

America's "playbook" for countering China is largely derived from the strategy and tactics used to contain the Soviet Union, since the U.S. has no other experience of great-power confrontation. In a similar fashion, the U.S. singles out key allies whose economic and technological potential as well as political weight and loyalty to Washington make them "agents of forward containment" of the main enemy.

During the Cold War, to contain the USSR, the U.S. relied on Germany in the West, Japan in the East, and Turkey in the South. Today, it is India, Japan and Australia (partly South Korea) that are critical for America in its confrontation with China. This new rivalry also requires the U.S. to concentrate more resources on its China policy, which, in turn, demands that America should retrench from some of the regions that devour too many of this resources and attention.

Ekaterina Koldunova

“Russia and ASEAN in the situation of new strategic ambiguity”

Speaking about Russia and ASEAN in the situation of new strategic ambiguity one should take into account several important aspects of macro-regional situation. They include the changing role of China in the region and beyond, a visible shift in the American foreign policy in the region from political-economy strategy to a military-strategic one and the failure of the U.S. policy of China's engagement.

This context amplifies the complexities of dealing with the key regional pain spots, which include, among others, the problem of Taiwan, South China Sea disputes, ongoing political crisis in Myanmar and border conflict between China and India. At the institutional level of regional organization ASEAN-centered institutions have been facing a challenge of a growing number of minilateral frameworks like Quad, Quad+ and AUKUS. The prospect of Five Eyes alliance expansion beyond its original members (the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada and New Zealand) just adds more nuances to this rising regional fragmentation.

Taking into account the mentioned above aspects the negative scenario for Russia and ASEAN relations include India's drift to the U.S. orbit, growing military-technical cooperation within the minilateral frameworks and de facto rising dysfunctionality in ASEAN's ability to organize inclusive platforms for the discussion of regional security problems. A more positive scenario implies Russia's and ASEAN's ability to maintain at least limited abilities to influence the situation while the regional main pain spots will remain in the “managed” condition.

Victor Sumsky

“The New Cold War is a Trilateral Affair (not unlike the Old one)”

In the midst of dramatic changes in Asia the majority of local pundits sometimes referred to as the local *commentariat* seem to assume that

- The Indo-Pacific framework of regional interactions with all its geopolitical (read – anti-Chinese) underpinnings is still a continuation of the Asia-Pacific one, and therefore the positive geoeconomic dynamics of the latter can be restored and sustained in post-COVID 19 times;
- While the *New Cold War*, whatever this formula means, may be 'looming', it is not imminent due to the enormous economic interdependence of the major powers confronting each other;
- The present geopolitical competition is basically a US-China *bilateral affair*.

However, as time passes each of these assumptions looks more and more dubious. The US Indo-Pacific strategy represented by a set of *minilateral* initiatives such as QUAD and AUKUS is hardly conducive to harmonious and inclusive regional cooperation. If anything, it's a tool for regional disintegration, with the unhappy consequences for ASEAN and its Centrality in the (former) Asia-Pacific setting. By

early 2022 the tensions between the (truly) major powers are becoming strikingly polarizing. Washington's strategic blunder of simultaneously confronting China and Russia only helps to transform the New Cold War – not unlike the Old one – into a *trilateral affair*.

So far, the bipartisan assumptions on which the Obama, Trump and now Biden administrations have built their strategies of containing China and Russia – namely, that Russia is in a state of hopeless decline and, due to fundamental mutual contradictions, will never be able to make it with China – have proven wrong. Still worse, it is *highly unlikely* that the domestic political dynamics would allow either the Democrats or the Republicans to redefine their positions vis-à-vis any of these two opponents anytime soon.

All available evidence suggests that the China-Russia summit scheduled in Beijing for February 4, 2022, prior to the opening of the Winter Olympics, will add new momentum to the coordination of both powers' activities in Asia and the world.