

Russia can pivot to the Pacific, too



Vladivostok, Russia's largest city on the Pacific, will host the annual Apec summit this weekend. Russia's Far East abuts the world's most economically dynamic region – East Asia. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WHAT will be Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategic response to the greatest geopolitical challenge rising in the east?

In the United States' policymaking circles, "pivoting" to Asia is all the rage. That is nothing special; virtually every nation does so, including Russia. In fact, if Peter the Great, who ruled from 1682 to 1725 and was one of Russia's greatest modernisers, were alive today, he would almost certainly leave behind the old Russian capital, Moscow, to establish himself somewhere else.

He would not repeat the choice he made 300 years ago, when he opted to head north to the Baltic shore and set up the splendid city of St Petersburg. Rather, Peter would take a big leap eastward, towards the Pacific coast.

This is, after all, where much of the action is. The Pacific has turned into the epicentre of the global economy. This is where most of the great powers of the 21st century converge, led by the two superpowers, the US and China.

This is also where Russia is at its most vulnera-

ble. Out there, the country is endowed with a huge territory and access to vast resources and potentially immeasurable wealth. But it also has to contend with a dwindling population, dilapidated infrastructure and an overall decrepit economy.

If Peter the Great were alive today, he would not have to re-found a new capital on the Pacific. He would simply move his court and his administration to an already built city, Vladivostok.

The city has been around for over a century and a half, since its founding in 1860 as an outpost for the military. Like "St Pete" up north, "Vlad" out east is a port city. Tantalisingly, flying time to several key capitals – Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul – is just 60 to 90 minutes. And places such as Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei are within easy reach.

Out there in Russia's Far East, even the US is a neighbour – across a long stretch of water. Indeed, San Francisco, and its proximity to Silicon Valley, has long served as a model for how things could turn out in Vladivostok.

Anyone who has ever spent enough time in Vladivostok understands the essence of openness, dynamism and competition. These are exactly the qualities Russia will need to acquire if it is to succeed in the century that has just started.

Mr Putin, of course, is no Peter. He is not about to make Vladivostok Russia's new capital. Instead, he is building a New Moscow next to the existing one, adding a huge chunk of countryside to the city to accommodate new government offices. As if that were what Russia needed in order to modernise.

To his credit, Mr Putin insisted that the 2012 Apec Summit, which Russia hosts this weekend, be held in Vladivostok, not St Petersburg or Moscow.

He is also making sure, lest the Chinese laugh at him, that the infrastructure that had to be constructed, from the conference facilities on Russky Island to the sewerage system in Vladivostok itself, is completed in time.

Of course, the real test for Mr Putin will not be the Apec summit itself, but rather what follows it. What will be his strategic response to the greatest geopolitical challenge rising in the east?

In theory, Russia is extremely well-positioned. Its underdeveloped but resource-rich Far Eastern territory physically abuts the world's most economically dynamic region. What could possibly go wrong with such a synergistic set-up?

At the core of that debate ought to be not just the "usual" categories of Russian thinking (that is, oil and gas). Resource exploitation is the old game. But it is no panacea.

The concerns Russia ought to have regarding its pivot to the East are questions such as:

- What is the best model for Russia's development – and what roles will the state, businesses and citizens play in that development?
- How should the Far East and Siberia be integrated into a single market with the rest of the country?
- How should Russia integrate itself, through its Pacific seaboard, with the rest of the Asia-Pacific?
- In foreign policy terms, how will Russia navigate between the two major powers in the Pacific, the US and China?

Moscow wants to retain its strategic independence and not to wind up as a junior partner to either Washington or Beijing. But it has not yet learnt to sail in the Pacific's ever more turbulent waters.

Will the Kremlin appreciate the US role as a balancer in the region? Will it find a formula that would guarantee relations with China are always kept on an even keel? Will it find the will and the courage to transform relations with Tokyo and turn Japan into a partner, as it has done with Germany?

Russia's hosting of the Apec summit has reminded quite a few people in the region that Russia has two-thirds of its territory in Asia, as well as a very long coastline along the North Pacific.

Mrs Hillary Clinton's famous Asian pivot article in Foreign Policy magazine last November mentioned many countries, but it omitted Russia. Discussions of US-China strategy are now routinely held in Washington and elsewhere without any reference to China's northern neighbour.

US President Barack Obama will be absent from the Apec summit, supposedly owing to the pressures of his re-election campaign. In Russia, it is believed that Mr Putin paid him back in kind by skipping the G-8 summit at Camp David last May (a decision made just days after it was announced that Mr Obama would be a no-show in Vladivostok).

This shows just how much Russia has become discounted internationally in the two decades after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Should Moscow's pivot to the Pacific be more than a transient phenomenon, the regional balance – and the US and other countries' calculus – will need to change.

Nevertheless, there are signs that Moscow might forget about Vladivostok immediately after the Apec jamboree is over. The temptation is simply to move on to the next big thing: the Sochi Olympics in 2014, the World Cup in 2018 or indeed the construction of New Moscow.

Yet, when assessing potential future strategies and outcomes, nothing concentrates minds in Moscow as much as the thought of Russia becoming a raw material appendage to China. That spectre rattles Russian national pride no end – and it raises very direct concerns about national security.

For Russia to discover its path to a more balanced and prosperous future, Vladivostok need not become Russia's new formal capital. However, in an increasingly complex world, it could serve the purpose of helping Russia modernise itself.

Vladivostok – founded as a frontier city during imperial expansion (its name literally means "rule the east") – can now become Russia's premier point of contact with its vast Pacific neighbourhood.

For that to happen, much has to change. In its appearance, the composition and mentality of its population, the Vladivostok of today is East European. Only its harbour connects it with Asia.

The stakes are large. What makes Russia special strategically are the expanses and riches of Siberia and the wide access it has to the Pacific. The Russia of today has exploited those advantages poorly, if at all. It must find a pathway to a dynamic future. It must pivot from West to East.

But if things continue as they are, then Russia, far less tantalisingly, essentially de facto stops at the Urals. That would condemn it to be nothing more than a second Ukraine, another part of Europe's farther borderland area.

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As the 2008 winner for the Her World Young Woman Achiever award, she is an inspirational role model to all!

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