

Russian activities and Australian interests in the Indo-Pacific

ANU Centre for European Studies (ANUCES)

SPG Final Report

Executive Summary

It has been common to characterise Russian foreign and security policy as traditionally Eurocentric, with much of Moscow's focus on Europe, Central Asia, and Russia's immediate neighbourhood. However, over the past decade, and especially since 2022, Russia has made more explicit moves to reorient itself toward Asia more broadly, including in the Indo-Pacific. These activities are set to increase in future. This will bring Russia – a nation frequently (and erroneously) considered as lying outside Australia's arena of strategic geography – more closely into contact, and potential into contest, with Australian interests, as well as those of Australia's friends and partners in the region.

The Putin regime's desire for deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific has been accelerated by its unprovoked and illegal February 2022 war of aggression against Ukraine. Having de facto declared itself as at war with the West, and seeing itself as a bulwark against what it characterises as a morally decrepit Western political culture, the Russian government seeks to project itself as a champion of traditional values and statist norms in the Indo-Pacific. This stance is made all the more hypocritical given its deliberate attempts to fracture the existing order built on respect for international law, using a variety of sub-threshold and grey zone tactics. These include attempts to form new multi-and mini-lateral bodies with the agenda driven by authoritarian states, political warfare, offensive cyber activities, and are increasingly incorporating violent acts of sabotage.¹

This report analyses how these dynamics are playing out, assessing historical legacies, current trajectories, the types of instruments (economic, military, diplomatic) Russia

¹ <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/08/the-scale-of-russian--sabotage-operations--against-europes-critical--infrastructure/>.

uses, and identifies some challenges and prospects. It focuses specifically on Russian relationships with a number of key actors: the PRC, DPRK, ROK, Japan, India, Indonesia, and Australia.

Russian motivations in the Indo-Pacific

As noted above, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its subsequent poisoning of relations with the EU, has lent a new sense of urgency to its attempts to re-orient itself as an Indo-Pacific centre of geopolitical power and gravity. Part of this is heavily influenced by economic necessity. Having pivoted to a war economy to fund its ongoing invasion of Ukraine, the Putin regime managed at least initially to insulate its economy from hefty external sanctions. But with inflation remaining stubbornly high, economic activity declining, and interest rates were recently as high as 21-25%,² the Russian economy is showing dangerous signs of stagflation. It is therefore considered vital by Moscow that Russia is able to unlock new markets and deepen existing partnerships in order to offset Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation. At the same time this preserves and extends transport corridors to existing and anticipated Russian energy markets, which are key to its future economic prosperity.

Part of the logic behind Russian policy is also strategic. Russia has typically exhibited a preference for territorial buffer zones between itself and those it deems hostile to its interests. With two key US allies – in the form of Japan and the ROK – near its extensive but untapped resources in the Far East, Moscow has been keen to deepen its relationship with China and engage in joint interoperability exercises with the PLA, especially in Northeast Asia. This complements the Russian desire to align with those powers that it sees as being able to help counterbalance US influence, and what it argues has been a deliberate attempt by the West to contain it.

Within that general strategic shift, Russia's policy toward various states in the Indo-Pacific is not monolithic. It combines systemic alignment, especially with China, with regional hedging: that is, cultivating ties with countries that are wary of China or

² <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-cuts-interest-rates-again-frictions-government-remain/>.

that pursue non-alignment. Russia wishes to be seen not simply as China's junior partner, but as a power with its own options. This makes its relationships sometimes cooperative, sometimes ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory.

Australia would be ill-advised to consider itself immune to hostile Russian behaviour, nor insulated from it due to its perceived remoteness. First, Russian messaging resonates more strongly than Western narratives amongst some nations in the Asia-Pacific, and it is aggressively courting South-East Asian states, not to mention its efforts in what has been termed the Global South.³ Second, Russian attempts to subvert the national resilience of democracies is a global project, and by no means limited to continental Europe. Third, Russian assistance to rogue regimes, especially with respect to its decision to aid the DPRK in the modernisation of its military, as a quid pro quo for the DPRK's involvement in supplying munitions and manpower to assist Russia's war in Ukraine, now directly affects Australia's regional strategic longitudes. Finally, Moscow's relationship with Beijing continues to deepen, and now exhibits signs of alignment and coordination, rather than simply convergence.

The Sino-Russian relationship: balancing dependence and entrapment

Russia and China have, especially since the 2000s, moved steadily toward greater strategic cooperation. Although the relationship has never been completely free of friction, including over territorial disputes, competition for influence in Central Asia, and concerns about power asymmetries in power, by the 2010s both nations had come to see each other as counterweights to U.S. influence.⁴ The partnership intensified markedly after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and especially after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as Western sanctions hit Russia and China remained one of its few major remaining global partners.

What began as an attempt to mediate what been a fraught and hostile relationship during the Cold War has now become a robust strategic and diplomatic alignment. The

³ <https://ecfr.eu/article/deconstructing-russias-anti-colonial-posturing-in-the-global-south/>.

⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/background/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>.

‘no limits’ strategic partnership declared by Beijing and Moscow in 2022, just days before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, has been augmented by regular visits and interactions, and a strong personal relationship between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.⁵ The two leaders have met more than 45 times, most recently at the prominent parade held in September 2025 to commemorate 80 years since China’s victory over Japan (the fact that it was largely the KMT that was responsible for the victory, and not Mao’s Chinese Community Party, was naturally not emphasised).

Energy remains central to the Sino-Russian economic partnership. Russia exports oil, gas, and raw materials, and in return benefits from Chinese technology, finance, and goods. Trade between the two nations has been steadily increasing, and the growth of infrastructure and transport corridor cooperation as an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative has been significant.⁶

Military cooperation between the two nations has also accelerated. Joint drills, naval patrols, air patrols and other provocative activities – including incursions into Japan’s territorial waters, and both Tokyo’s and Seoul’s ADIZ,⁷ have been characteristic of increased interoperability between the two, as well as increased confidence in joint messaging through military power.⁸ This has been aided by coordination in military-technical cooperation, and China in effect subsidizing Russia’s war effort in Ukraine, not only through energy sales and investment, but in the form of intelligence and the provision of drones, dual-use technologies and semiconductors.⁹

⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/07/09/russia-india-putin-modi-indo-pacific-china-north-korea-geopolitics/>.

⁶ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/setting-the-stage-an-overview-of-chinese-and-russian-interests-and-influence-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁷ <https://news.usni.org/2025/01/30/russian-bomber-mission-prompts-japanese-fighter-scramble>. See also <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-11-29/national/defense/Five-Chinese-six-Russian-aircraft-enter-Kadiz-without-notice/2189369>.

⁸ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russia-and-china-in-the-indo-pacific-chinas-use-of-the-instruments-of-power/>.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/05/ukraine-war-briefing-china-providing-russia-with-intelligence-on-missile-targets-ukrainian-official-claims>.

It is also the case that Russia is concerned about becoming overly dependent on China. Prominent Russian foreign and security policy commentators, such as Sergei Karaganov, have periodically warned against Moscow becoming entrapped by Beijing into the status of a buffer zone and raw materials appendage.¹⁰ Although these views have been given little official endorsement, the fear of entrapment is one reason it has sought to hedge by enhancing its relationship with India,¹¹ as well as (for instance) investing heavily in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) across the Arctic, as a means to break out of reliance on Belt and Road corridors. Indeed, Beijing's own regional ambitions still do not automatically align with Moscow's, especially in Central Asia – but also indirectly in the South China Sea, and in how China seeks to shape regional order. Yet the asymmetrical dynamics of the relationship, driven by China's growing economic and technological heft, make Russian responses often reactive, with the tendency to default to Beijing's preferences.

Russia-DPRK relations: rogue regimes increasingly aligned

The Russia-North Korea relationship has deepened significantly in recent years, with high-level meetings, pacts, and agreements being signed. Having once been a leading participant in the international sanctions regime against the DPRK over its nuclear weapons program, Russia has now become one of the hermit kingdom's strongest allies and champions.

In mid-2024, Moscow and Pyongyang signed a comprehensive strategic partnership, including a defence component; mutual assistance clauses; and increased cooperation in military, technical, and trade spheres.¹² This was accompanied by the deployment of up to 10,000 DPRK military personnel to the Kursk region in Russia, in order to help repel the Ukrainian incursion there.

The most important of these, naturally, is the exchange of arms/military supplies: North Korea provides some 40% of Russian artillery shell expenditure in Ukraine, in exchange

¹⁰ <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/685008>.

¹¹ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-s-indo-pacific-conundrum>.

¹² <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-russia-will-reassess-its-ties-with-north-korea-after-ukraine/>.

for Russian technical, aerospace, and missile technology, as well as other strategic goods.¹³

For Russia, then, the DPRK is a useful source of munitions when many other suppliers have cut ties. The relationship gives it leverage in Northeast Asia, while signalling a counterbalance to US, South Korean, and Japanese influence. It also serves a diplomatic purpose, demonstrating that Russia has friends, and that international isolation can be broken.

From Pyongyang's perspective, Russia is a powerful partner, both politically and materially, especially given DPRK's isolation. And if the relationship extends to the DPRK obtaining a survivable nuclear triad (through the development of SSBNs, for instance), and/or a capacity to deliver low orbit hypersonic payloads, this would upset the deterrence balance in Northeast Asia considerably. The recent letter from King Jong Un to Vladimir Putin assuring him that the Russia-DPRK relationship will continue to grow is a further and worrying marker of Pyongyang's confidence in the overall policy direction.¹⁴

It is also noteworthy that the upgrade in Moscow-Pyongyang ties has not resulted in significant diplomatic disquiet from Beijing. Although the PRC considers itself to have a special relationship with the DPRK, routinely framing it as China's 'little brother', Chinese elites seem to have accepted that closer Russia-DPRK ties do little to upset that conception, and may in fact provide a useful foil that allows Beijing to operate at arms-length from the Kim regime.¹⁵

Russia-ROK relations

¹³ Andrey Kovsky and Dean Ouellette, 'The revitalizing Russia-North Korea relations: towards a new order', *Pacific Review*, September 5, 2025.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09512748.2025.2558913>.

¹⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korean-leader-kim-tells-russias-putin-that-alliance-will-grow-2025-10-06/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-russia-north-korea-alliance-needs-no-name>.

During the Cold War, Soviet interactions with what is now South Korea were minimal. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia gradually normalized relations to a point where the relationship with the ROK was seen as a potential hub of Moscow's power ambitions in North-East Asia. But following Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, and especially since 2022, Russia's activities in Ukraine have strained Russia's standing in many Indo-Pacific countries, including the ROK. Seoul has participated in sanctions, at least indirectly, and condemned Russia's invasion.¹⁶

While Moscow may see in Seoul a potential partner for diversification, the ROK is unlikely to deepen cooperation significantly with Russia given its democratic alignment, Western alliances, and sanctions regime. The strong consensus amongst ROK strategic policy elites is that any cooperation with Russia comes with reputational risks and political costs, both domestically as well as from its allies – especially in the IP4 context.¹⁷

Prior to its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow seemed to be pursuing a limited engagement strategy with respect to the ROK. This took the form of trade and diplomatic dialogue where feasible. Indeed, there remains limited optimism in Moscow about the prospects for the relationship. As Georgiy Zinoviev, Russia's Ambassador to the ROK, recently observed: 'the Republic of Korea is one of the friendliest among the unfriendly states'.¹⁸

The Russia-Japan relationship: meeting low expectations

A major, unresolved issue remains the Kuril Islands (Northern Territories), with no formal peace treaty since WWII. Japan has long had a relatively cautious attitude toward Russia. It has previously sought stable relations and a degree of economic cooperation, but has remained extremely wary of Russia's alignment with China.

¹⁶ <https://csds.vub.be/publication/the-south-korea-russia-relationship/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seoul-moscow-relations-dangerous-slippery-slope>.

¹⁸ <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/learning-from-the-past-to-shape-a-better-future-what-prospects-for-russia-south-korea-cooperation/>.

Particularly given Russian support for the DPRK, it views Moscow's military intentions as highly destabilising if not outright hostile.

Following a relatively light thaw in the relationship during the early 2010s,¹⁹ the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was met with strong condemnation in Japan, with Tokyo participating in Western-led sanctions regimes in retaliation. Tokyo has also announced the closure of educational and cultural Japan Centres in Russia as a result of the deteriorating bilateral relationship, and is a strong supporter of Kyiv's continued independence.²⁰ Russia, for its part, has responded by cutting off or suspending negotiations over the Kurils peace treaty, and by more openly siding with China in territorial disputes in the East China Sea.²¹

Moscow has often previously regarded the relationship with Tokyo as an important one for Russia to influence Northeast Asia, gain from technological transfers, access Japanese markets and investment, and even use Japan as an interlocutor with other US allies. Yet at the same time the Kremlin has characterised Japan's deepening strategic partnerships with states like Australia, organisations such as the Quad, and the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty (MST) as effectively part of an American-led architecture of containment.

Given the trajectory of the relationship, including external drivers such as ambiguity over the Trump administration's commitment to uphold key security alliances, which has prompted Japan to increasingly seek self-reliant capability options for its security and defence, Russia is unlikely to regain the kind of economic or political closeness it might once have hoped for. And whereas there is potential for limited cooperation in areas such as Arctic shipping and tourism (when political conditions allow), Russia-Japan relations are highly likely to remain mutually suspicious, at least for the foreseeable future.

¹⁹ <https://www.cfr.org/report/major-power-rivalry-east-asia>.

²⁰ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3325229/japan-ends-long-running-russia-outreach-war-western-pressure-and-suspicious-take-toll>.

²¹ <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/partnership-short-of-alliance-military-cooperation-between-russia-and-china/>.

Russia-India relations: the Indo-Pacific wild card

The relationship with India has been one of Russia's (and before that the Soviet Union's) closest and most durable partnerships. Its key features have revolved around military-technical collaboration, and this continue to do so. Russia has been for decades the dominant supplier of capabilities to India, including combat aircraft, submarines and missile systems. In 2025, India remained the largest destination for Russian arms in the region. Despite some efforts by New Delhi to diversify procurement – including from the US, France and Israel – the Indian military remains strongly dependent on Russian heavy systems. The timelines for Indian acquisition often depend on Russian production, spare parts and maintenance. These were initially affected by the war in Ukraine, but have since stabilised.

The two nations have also historically enjoyed a high degree of diplomatic affinity, especially during India's era of 'non-alignment' during the Cold War, and New Delhi's ongoing emphasis on strategic autonomy. After 2022, India has been one of the few major powers that has continued to significantly engage with Russia, despite Western pressure. India has purchased Russian oil (often at discounted rates), and served as a crucial market to help Russia's energy sector navigate sanctions, and provides India with supply diversification. India's willingness to pay up front, either in rupees or alternative mechanisms, has also assisted Russia's war effort in Ukraine by backfilling lost energy revenues as a result of sanctions.²² There have also been discussions about the possibility of joint logistics corridors. These include proposals to connect Russia's maritime Far East to Indian maritime routes. The idea, for instance, of a future Chennai-Vladivostok corridor is just one such example.²³

Russia and India continue to engage in regular joint military exercises – the next scheduled exercise is Indra 2025 in October, which features live fire drills as well as close quarters combat simulations. Following the recent September 2025 Modi-Putin

²² https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/03/08/russia_and_china_in_the_indo-pacific_chinas_use_of_the_instruments_of_power_1096353.html.

²³ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russia-s-indo-pacific-conundrum>.

talks, joint defence procurement projects and enhanced co-development (for example in missile systems) ventures have been put on the agenda. And whereas many of the frequently grand announcements about the relationship have been either slow to materialise, or have also on occasion disappeared from public view – such as the HAL next-generation fighter, as well as numerous plans to build nuclear reactors in India²⁴ – the upswing in the relationship since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been one of the more unpleasant strategic surprises the world’s democracies have recently encountered.

This does not mean that Russia-India relations are devoid of strategic ambiguity. India’s own domestic politics and foreign policy trajectory trends towards ‘multi-alignment’ rather than non-alignment per se. It is also certainly the case that part of the Modi government’s enthusiasm for deepening India-Russia ties has been its wariness that a closer Moscow-Beijing axis would leave the Kremlin largely unable to advocate for Indian preferences if China’s foreign and security policy choices become strongly inimical to New Delhi’s interests.

There remains some hope, too, amongst Indian elites that the relationship with the US, which has been severely damaged under the Trump Administration, may be gradually resuscitated. But the symbolic image of Modi riding in Putin’s limousine during the September 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit,²⁵ not to mention a partial warming of ties between Beijing and New Delhi, has emboldened Russian commentators who have once again begun to speak about the prospects for an India-Russia-China ‘strategic triangle’.²⁶

Russia-Indonesia relations: poised for enhancement

Indonesia is one of the biggest, most strategically significant states in South-East Asia. It has a policy of non-alignment, and in recent years it has emphasized diversified

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/rosatom-edf-pitch-large-nuclear-reactors-key-india-energy-future-2025-09-02/>.

²⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce3531lgg39o>.

²⁶ <https://theasanforum.org/the-china-russia-india-troika-in-2025-the-view-from-china/>.

partnerships. It is the largest country in ASEAN by population, is increasingly active in the BRICS grouping, and is seeking to improve energy, defense, and infrastructure capacity.

The recent mid-2025 visit by Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto to Russia was especially noteworthy given that he had elected to skip the G-7 Summit, being held at the same time (without Russian participation) in favour of meeting Putin. Importantly, Russia-Indonesia discussions during Prabowo's visit included topics such as deeper cooperation on defence, space cooperation, energy deals, trade, and nuclear power, with the Kremlin even going so far as to propose a 'strategic partnership' between the two.²⁷

Moscow has also expressed interest in helping Indonesia with its plans for nuclear energy, including via involvement by the Russian nuclear power company Rosatom. In 2024, Jakarta and Moscow participated in their first bilateral joint naval exercises, dubbed Orruda Joint Training, in the Java Sea near Surabaya.²⁸

Indonesia is a valuable partner for Russia in South-East Asia. Its strategic maritime position, large population, growing economy and non-aligned posture all facilitate cooperation without forcing difficult alliance choices. Russia is also seeking to enhance its influence in ASEAN, to diversify its partnerships away from being overly dependent on China, and to cultivate sources of energy, investment, and legitimacy in the Global South. And while Indonesia's economic needs and domestic constraints (including its budget, foreign investment capacity and skills base) may limit how much ambitious cooperation can become, there is clear intent on both sides to continue pursuing a deeper relationship.

Russia-Australia relations: unfriendly nations

²⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/putin-meets-indonesias-prabowo-russia-bid-deepen-ties-2025-06-19>.

²⁸ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/joint-naval-exercises-with-russia-undermine-indonesias-commitment-to-international-law/>.

Australia's strong alliance with the US, its partnerships with likeminded democracies, its tough stance on sanctions against Russia following the shoot-down of MH17 in 2014, and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have made Russia-Australia ties unsurprisingly adversarial. Russia has castigated Australian military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine as a symptom of 'Russophobia,' and has launched an energetic campaign in South-East Asia to discredit AUKUS as a dangerously destabilising development, alongside critiques of successive Australian governments as little more than archaic bastions of Western colonialism and racism that are completely in thrall to the United States.²⁹

For its part, Canberra sees Russian assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific as having the potential to cause broader challenges to regional stability and security. The defence and strategic policy community in Australia has become increasingly aware of Russia's increasing cooperation with China and its military posture in the region. Attempts by Russia to access bases or project military capabilities near Australia – such as the suggestion in April 2025 that Jakarta might agree to allow the Russian air force to station long-range reconnaissance and strike aircraft in West Papua – have been met with concern in Canberra.³⁰

Australia is also correct to be increasingly concerned about Russian political warfare and cyber capabilities. Prominent figures such as the self-styled 'Aussie Cossack', Simeon Boikov (who remains in the Russian Consulate in Sydney, which is protecting him from arrest on charges of assaulting an elderly man)³¹ have been active in promoting anti-AUKUS demonstrations, as well as seeking to bring fringe groups on the far Right as well as in the antivaxxer and sovereign citizen movements into a closer network.³²

²⁹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2025/04/19/letter-to-the-editor-russian-ambassador-responds.html>.

³⁰ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/facts-gone-missing-australia-s-debate-about-indonesia-russia-basing-deal>.

³¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-21/pravfond-paid-legal-fees-of-aussie-cossack-simeon-boikov/105297984>.

³² <https://www.smh.com.au/national/anti-voice-rallies-organised-by-pro-putin-conspiracy-theorist-20230919-p5e5zc.html>.

Russia's Indo-Pacific tilt: instruments and implications

Having reviewed the main bilateral relationships driving Russia's pivot to Asia, some patterns emerge in how Russia is pursuing its Indo-Pacific foreign policy more broadly. Hence this paper now turns to an assessment of the key instruments, logics, and the constraints shaping Moscow's behaviour in the region.

Amongst the key enablers of Russian regional strategy, trade in the form of military technical cooperation as well as arms sales are increasingly important. Russia remains one of the top arms exporters in the Indo-Pacific. It uses arms sales both as economic tools and diplomatic levers. Supplying weaponry builds dependencies, gives leverage, and furnishes political goodwill. Countries like India, Vietnam and Myanmar are significant clients. It also uses joint drills and naval/air presence to signal its intentions to deepen strategic relationships, including with important Australian partners such as Indonesia. Meanwhile, the energy sector – incorporating oil, gas, nuclear cooperation, and energy infrastructure – is also central to Russian strategy, while trade in non-energy sectors (technology, mining, infrastructure) is growing, especially as Russia seeks to route trade through Asia to mitigate sanctions.

A second enabler for Russian activities concerns diplomatic signalling and relationship building. It is important for Australian readers to remember that Russia is by no means isolated in Asia. Indeed, within the region there are only six nations (Australia, the US, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore and the ROK) that have placed sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Russia participates in the BRICS group, the SCO, various Asia-Pacific summits, ASEAN dialogues. It emphasizes multipolarity, sovereignty, non-interference as normative frames, often in contrast to what it portrays as U.S./Western hegemony. It also often positions itself as a power that advocates for the Global South.

The recent Russia–DPRK mutual defence pact is one example. Such agreements serve both deterrence/logistics and symbolic purposes. Likewise, its agreements with China are built via joint statements and “special partnership” designations, designed to

convey the impression that Russia is a leading member of the new bloc that will play a commanding role in shaping global politics and the global economy. As Russia's relationships in the West have deteriorated, it has sought legitimacy and support among developing countries, many in the Indo-Pacific. That includes soft power, education, cultural ties, development assistance, and partnership in multilateral institutions.

At the same time, the Kremlin's regional activities demonstrate a desire to preserve sovereign decision-making and avoiding overdependence on China. While alignment with China is valuable, Russia is wary of being disadvantaged by asymmetry.³³ But this has been overshadowed by regional projection and opportunistic security buffering, especially in North-East Asia and the South-East Asian maritime domain, where Russia continues to seek a permanent military presence in order to project power and signal strength.

Russia's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific has several broader implications. US allies like Australia must now account for Russia as part of the strategic environment, rather than simply fixating on the PRC. As noted above, Russia's cooperation with the DPRK, for example, complicates already complex Korean Peninsula dynamics. Russia's courting of what it sees as potentially ambivalent regional powers also undercuts the influence of those that favour a strong rules-based order, making hedging by regional actors more attractive.³⁴ Russia offers non-Western partnership, alternate arms suppliers, and energy options. It is important in this context for Australia to extol the natural caution of its friends and partners as sound strategic wisdom. For instance, ASEAN preferences for stable norms and strategic stability are ultimately significant in shaping regional dynamics.

This is also true of core principles of international law. Russia's posture challenges laws around territorial integrity and sovereignty. UNCLOS, maritime law,

³³ <https://thediplomat.com/2025/10/china-russia-asymmetry-and-the-power-of-siberia-2-agreement/>.

³⁴ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/06/russias-use-of-the-instruments-of-statecraft-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

non-interference and the need for peaceful resolution of disputes may be under stress, but Russian activities clearly paint it as a rule-breaker rather than a rule-maker.

Finally, what we might call push-pull dynamics are potentially significant here. While Moscow has oriented its arguments in terms of multipolarity and a polycentric world order, this ignores that the trend in the Indo-Pacific is toward alliances and coalitions. Hence, just as Russia's presence may encourage regional nations to diversify their partnerships towards a 'third pole',³⁵ it may also push them toward clearer alignments democratic partners as they seek strategic stability and clear collective security gains.

Conclusions and recommendations

Russia's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific is increasingly consequential. Moscow has adopted a two-track strategy: systemic alignment with China as a counterweight to U.S./Western influence, combined with regional hedging by cultivating strong ties with India, the DPRK, Indonesia, and ASEAN states. This approach gives Russia flexibility, some diplomatic leverage, and the capacity to partially offset its Western isolation. But it also comes with limits: dependency, competition with China, constrained capacity to project power, and reputational risks. Going forward, the trajectory will depend heavily on how the Ukraine war evolves, how U.S. strategy shifts, how China's ambitions and tensions with others play out, and how regional states manage their own strategic autonomy in a period of intensifying great-power competition.

That said, it is clear that Russian activities represent a clear threat to Australian interests in the region, as well as its critical infrastructure and potentially social cohesion as well. In South-East Asia, Russia's aggressive courting of non-aligned or hedging states like Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia is occurring in a virtual narrative vacuum. It is critical that Australian voices in support of a stable rules-based order, and pushing back against baseless Russian accusations of Australian neo-colonialism and strategic disruption, are heard more clearly. One of the key challenges for the global democratic project has been an inability to clearly articulate the many positive benefits

³⁵ <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/failure-launch-russias-stalled-pivot-indo-pacific>.

of open and transparent regions and states, and this is abundantly true also of Australia's own Indo-Pacific region. This would have the additional advantage of being a proactive response that is not locked into an action-reaction spiral dictated by authoritarian regimes.

Second, there is much we can learn from friends and partners in Europe about Russian political warfare, and the types of tools and responses that are most effective in key arenas such as election security, cyber-enabled information operations, and the manipulation of populations through malign information. At the same time, this is a two-way street: Australia has had significant experience of foreign influence and interference that we can (and should) share with European interlocutors. Doing so would be of mutual benefit in helping to shore up national resilience in the world's most stable democracies.

Finally, it is critical that Australia takes steps to enhance its Russia-literacy. Having disinvested in centres of excellence on Russia studies for over 30 years – since the dissolution of the USSR – Australian expertise on Russia is dangerously low. This includes not only academic institutions, but also the Australian government, where Russia has for too long been considered a low priority. And, while there are subtle signs that this thinking is beginning to shift, much more will need to be done to restore a strong basis for understanding and responding to Russian activities in the future.