

# RUSSIA'S RESURGENCE AND NEW ZEALAND: THE ASIA-PACIFIC CONTEXT

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Russia's actions in Syria show that Russian policymakers' aim to re-establish Russia as a major actor on the world stage is being realised. This has implications for New Zealand particularly because Russia is an Asia-Pacific state. New Zealand should respond by cautiously exploring possibilities of developing trade links and integrating Russia into a multilateral framework.

## Key findings

- Russia is a significant power globally and it is seeking to expand its influence.
- The Asia-Pacific is not the priority area of Russian foreign policy but policymakers intend to increase Russian influence there.
- It is in New Zealand's interests to engage with Russia, but cautiously

## Executive summary

How to respond to a resurgent Russia is a pressing question for all Western states. Russia is aggressively defending its interests, challenging the unipolar system and some fundamental principles of international society. Its priority focus is the former Soviet space, wider Europe, and hotspots in the Middle East. But it is also an Asia-Pacific power, and is likely to become more involved there, including in the South Pacific.

New Zealand should engage cautiously with Russia. While acknowledging that Russian priorities lie elsewhere, policymakers should put particular focus on the Asia-Pacific dimension of Russian foreign policy. They should recognise that Russia is an important actor in the region and try to incorporate it into multilateral institutions, engaging constructively with Russia, but without condoning infringements of international law/norms (which are less likely in the Asia-Pacific than in the former Soviet space).

## Analysis

A range of issues associated with Russia's resurgence have emerged over the past decade: breakaway states in Georgia, the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea, Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria and active involvement in the conflict, and recently, accusations of Russian meddling in the United States presidential election. In Ukraine, Russia has not simply asserted its



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power, but has broken international law, resulting in US and EU sanctions. Russia's involvement in Syria has been at the core of the breakdown in relations in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The question of Russia's tacit approval of the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons has also laid it open to accusations of violating fundamental international norms. New Zealand was at the centre of the storm in the UNSC which signified a failure to achieve several of the goals under objective 1 of MFAT's *Strategic Intentions* (p. 12), '[m]aximise the impact of New Zealand's membership of the UNSC', in particular, to '[m]ake a constructive and credible contribution towards the resolution of major issues before the UNSC'.

Tensions between the EU/US and Russia have been focused on the Middle East and the former Soviet space. But Russia is also an Asia-Pacific power. There has been talk of Russia shifting its attention to the Asia-Pacific ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, but it has never really materialised. It is true that Russia's priorities lie elsewhere, yet its current isolation from Europe may lead to a shift in focus to the Asia-Pacific, especially as the Asia-Pacific becomes a key arena in international relations with the rise of China and responses by other powers, especially the United States.

There were signs a few years ago that Russia was serious about an 'Asia-Pacific pivot'. It put immense resources into hosting the APEC summit in Vladivostok in 2012. Russia has also been involved in other regional multilateral fora such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). At the same time, it has developed important bilateral relations with some states, such as the strategic partnerships with Vietnam and China. But Russia also has tensions with other states in the region. For example, the ongoing territorial dispute with Japan over the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories is a major obstacle to improved bilateral relations. And tensions over Ukraine have also spilled over into this region, such as at the G20 summit in Brisbane in 2014.

Associated with its APEC strategy in 2012, Russia increased its activity in the South Pacific. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited the region, presenting Russia as a representative of small island states. The visit was motivated by the desire to be seen as active in all parts of the Asia-Pacific, to develop economic and military ties with willing states, and to play a 'recognition game' with Georgia on the model of China/Taiwan (seeking to persuade Pacific Island states to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia). But Russian diplomats did not follow up on these initiatives, particularly with the onset of other crises nearer to home (Ukraine, Syria). Nevertheless, there was some concern in New Zealand and Australia over the shipment of weapons to Fiji early in 2016, ostensibly for peacekeeping purposes.

Russia's motivations in its wider Asia-Pacific policy are:

- To demonstrate that Russia is an Asia-Pacific power;
- To be involved in an area of increased great power focus;
- To demonstrate that Russia is a global actor;
- To protect and promote its specific interests in the region;
- As elsewhere, to challenge Western hegemony and to seek allies that are suspicious of Western influence;
- But to avoid antagonising other major powers in a region that is not Russia's primary focus (particularly the South Pacific).



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The lessons of its policy are that:

- Russia is willing to compete for influence in the Asia-Pacific;
- But it also aims to be involved cooperatively in multilateral fora;
- It seeks good relations with China, and other states on a bilateral basis where possible;
- It has no direct interest in a stand-off between the US and China, though may regard it as a useful diversion;
- It is unlikely to challenge international law and norms as it has in the former Soviet space, or to directly threaten Western interests.

### Why does this matter to New Zealand?

Russia is not mentioned in MFAT's *Strategic Intentions 2016-2020*. It is mentioned twice in the 2016 Defence White Paper, in relation to:

- 'Challenges to European Security' (p. 32). This states: 'New Zealand shares Europe's concerns about Russia's intervention in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, and the challenges this represents to the rules-based order which supports European peace and security';
- 'Support peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region' (p. 39). Referring to the New Zealand Defence Force's and Ministry of Defence's participation in regional security mechanisms, in particular, ASEAN, it notes that a 'range of countries beyond South East Asia, including China, the United States, India and Russia are members of the ASEAN Regional Forum', which has been further strengthened with the establishment of the ASEAN Ministers' Meeting Plus.

Hence, Russia is seen as most significant for New Zealand foreign policy in terms of the European context, but Russia is also seen as a member of a key multilateral defence forum. Overall, though, Russia is not seen as a priority for New Zealand.

Yet, Russia directly impacts on several of the strategic objectives outlined in *Strategic Intentions 2016-2020*. As stated above, it had a negative impact on the first objective. But specifically relating to the Asia-Pacific, Russia is significant for three further objectives (p. 8):

- 3. 'Embed New Zealand as an integral and trusted partner in the Asia-Pacific'. Russia has an impact on New Zealand's ability to meet this objective. Russia is itself a potential partner for New Zealand in the Asia-Pacific, but it also has an impact on other Asia-Pacific states' relations with New Zealand.
- 4. 'Maximise the impact of New Zealand's engagement in improving the prosperity, stability and resilience of the Pacific Islands region and its people'. New Zealand policymakers are sceptical about Russia's involvement in the Pacific Islands – for example, its potential to undermine the good governance agenda and to orientate states away from New Zealand, by playing to 'look north' policies.
- 5. 'Promote sound international solutions on climate change, natural resources and environmental protection'. The *Strategic Intentions 2016-2020* document explicitly relates this objective the Southern Ocean and Antarctica and states that success will be constituted by New Zealand being 'equipped to operate effectively in Antarctica, including with key partners' as well as having 'an opportunity to offer leadership and expertise' (p. 16). As one of the original parties to the Antarctic Treaty system, Russia is significant for New Zealand in



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pursuing its objectives in Antarctica, and its importance as a partner but its potential to thwart New Zealand's aims was demonstrated by the protracted negotiations over the Ross Sea Marine Protected Area.

### What should New Zealand do?

New Zealand should:

- Recognise the importance of a resurgent Russia in meeting its objectives in the Asia-Pacific.
- Focus more on the Asia-Pacific dimension of its relations with Russia, and not solely on the European and wider international context.
- Seek to engage constructively in Russia and to incorporate it where possible into multilateral arenas in the region. The lesson from Europe is that Russian policymakers want Russia to be recognised as an important actor, and resent being excluded from effective international institutions dealing with regions that Russia has interests in. They also resent being treated as normatively inferior. These mistakes should not be repeated in the Asia-Pacific.
- Russia is unlikely to challenge existing international law and norms in the Asia-Pacific, and is in agreement with most states in the region in upholding traditional notions of sovereignty and resisting potential new norms such as Responsibility to Protect. New Zealand should therefore be able to engage with Russia and welcome its involvement in international institutions in the region.
- At the same time, New Zealand should stand firm on its principles and be wary of any potential infringements of international norms by Russia in the Asia-Pacific.
- In particular, New Zealand should keep the draft FTA with Russia on hold while Western sanctions remain in place and the Ukraine conflict remains unresolved.
- But New Zealand should be willing to cooperate with Russia on areas of common concern and use these to engage positively with Russia, just as France and Germany are beginning to do.
- In the longer-term (post-Putin?), New Zealand should think seriously about the potential for mutual trade and investment with Russia.

### Conclusion

Russia is curiously absent from the *Strategic Intentions 2016-2020* document. Events over the past two years, coinciding with New Zealand's membership of the UNSC, show that a resurgent Russia cannot be ignored as New Zealand seeks to pursue its strategic objectives. Russia is likely to become more involved in the Asia-Pacific, and New Zealand will need to develop policies towards it in that context. By engaging constructively with Russia, New Zealand can help to embed it in the evolving international institutions in the region and prevent the outbreak of tensions that have occurred elsewhere with Russia, and have the potential to occur in the Asia-Pacific with China.



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