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Can Russia retrieve Soviet-era influence in Vietnam?

by Yury ondratyev

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Russia's turn to the East is not a plan of action under the sanctions of the West. Russia's most loyal allies are situated in the East - they are Vietnam and India. Pravda.Ru asked candidate of historical sciences and the independent expert Ilya Usov to share his views on how Russia may develop its ties with these countries.

"The foundation for Russia's eastern vector was laid long ago. Russia's current activities in the east are not related to the events in Ukraine. Russia has been moving in this direction since the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. It was written in documents of state importance, in energy policy and in Russia's national strategy in genera. Today, Russia should diversify its foreign policy from the Euro-Atlantic area to the East.

The events in Ukraine have given an incentive to the movement in this direction. Such significant events as the APEC summit and many others have taken place in the East not that long ago.

Southeast Asia has always taken an important place in Russia's foreign policy, along with the relations with China and India. We have traditional partners there, including Vietnam. We have tried and are trying to develop friendly diplomatic and economic relations with those countries. Russia considered numerous economic projects with Indonesia. Thailand and, in fact, all ten ASEAN countries, including sub-regions of Southeast Asia, have always been a priority of Russia's foreign policy."

"Is ASEAN independent on the present-day geopolitical arena?"

"ASEAN actually exists as an economic and geopolitical power. ASEAN was created for integration in economic, political and cultural spheres as a counterbalance to the influence of external forces, such as China and the United States. Now the situation has changed due to the increasing role of China in the region that scares the countries of Southeast Asia. Historically, they have always had complex relationships, and the emergence of a very strong player, of course, raises concerns. China is a partner of ASEAN, but China may behave very aggressively at times. The US tries to carry out the geopolitics of containment towards China, to attract the countries of Southeast Asia. The role of the United States has grown in the region recently. Russia, too, has always eyed the region of Southeast Asia. Against such a background, South-East Asia, torn between the US and China, was trying to find a third force for counterbalance, and they saw Russia as such force.

In 2010, Russia joined the mechanism of East Asian Summit, with the summit of ASEAN countries being the most important one of them. They wanted to use Russia as a third player to their independent policy. For the time being, Russia's role in the region has been weakening, and the role of the United States has been growing stronger. In addition, some countries of Southeast Asia believe that Russia is running a pro-Chinese policy, which is not true to fact."

"Which countries are our most promising partners?"

"The most promising partner is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. We have two strategic partners in the region - China and Vietnam. They are economically and historically close to us. We have very good political relations. And today, we see that Russia's ties with Vietnam have been growing stronger. The elite of Vietnam came from the Soviet school. They remember the Vietnam War, in which the Soviet Union was helping Vietnam very actively. They are favorably disposed towards Russia. In Vietnam, there is a triumvirate of power. This is the president, the prime minister and general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

"Vietnam can not be politically allied with Russia as far as the situation in Ukraine is concerned, because the country is very much dependent on the United States. The US and EU are the two major markets for Vietnamese products in the export-oriented economy.

Vietnam can not support Russia politically because of the political support for the Americans in the dispute with China. Yet, a recent visit of Vietnamese officials to Russia indicates that, in principle, Vietnam is ready and willing to continue cooperation with Russia. Vietnam is ready to continue to partner with Russia, but Vietnam will not join sanctions against Russia."

"Do you think that Russia has to be very cautious in its relations with Russia and China because these two countries remain in very tough opposition to each other?"

"Russia has to be smart about it. We have had great experiences with China - gas contracts, many economic contracts. Russia has significantly improved political relations with China lately and reached a new level. In China, many hoped that Russia would take a pro-Chinese stance towards the South China Sea, where the fundamental conflict of interests between Vietnam and China occurs. Yet, Russia retained its previous policy of neutrality regarding the matter. We have not sided with China, but we have never taken the side of Vietnam either. Perhaps, it would be appropriate for the Russian side to take an initiative to resolve the conflict, for example, to suggest the three-sided development of offshore fields in the South China Sea. At least, it would show the political will of the Russian leadership to somehow help resolve the conflict. This would be a great initiative and a serious step. The Vietnamese always support Russian investments, especially in the energy sector, because Russia is a recognized energy giant. Russian companies already have contracts to supply oil to Vietnam's first oil refinery. Russia already has projects that work well in Vietnam.

"Most interestingly, few people remember that the countries of Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, are exporters of capital, particularly in Russia. There are joint projects to develop oil and gas fields in Russia, as well as Russian-Vietnamese joint oil and gas projects. Vietnamese companies and companies of other ASEAN countries want to work on the Russian food market.

"Most Russians often take Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand as a tourist destination. However, they actively export capital and have high-tech productions."

"What about the agreement on the Cam Ranh base? Does it show the development of military cooperation with Vietnam?"

"In Vietnam, it is firmly believed that there will be no foreign military bases on the territory of Vietnam. Yet, foreign vessels can enter Vietnamese territorial waters. Russia should not take Vietnam as a military foothold. The time of cooperation with the Soviet Union is long gone. We should take Vietnam as a friendly power, for which we have to fight. And not just for Vietnam - Russia should fight for Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, taking into consideration the fact that our military-technical cooperation has been very successful. Not that long ago, Russia built a third submarine for Vietnam. About 80-90 percent of Vietnamese arms are of Soviet and Russian production."