

# ***Exploring the New Trends in ASEAN-Russia Cooperation under the Background of The Belt and Road Initiative***

**Yunong Tian**

*Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia  
tianbanxian@qq.com*

**Abstract:** Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia's foreign policy has undergone a decisive pivot toward Asia, transitioning from Yeltsin's fragmented engagement to Putin's strategic "eastward turn." This shift, intensified after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions, has driven Moscow to prioritize ASEAN as a critical partner for economic diversification and geopolitical recalibration. Concurrently, ASEAN—strengthened by five decades of regional integration since its 1976 inception—has emerged as a pivotal actor in Eurasia, balancing great-power rivalries while advancing its connectivity agenda under the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 (MPAC 2025). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, now serves as the linchpin bridging these strategic imperatives, aligning Russia's resource-driven outreach with ASEAN's infrastructure and digital modernization goals. While the BRI facilitates Russia's sanction evasion and ASEAN's infrastructure development, it also faces challenges: China's dominance in BRI financing risks marginalizing ASEAN's governance priorities, while Russia's bilateralism clashes with MPAC 2025's multilateral ethos. As the BRI enters its second decade, its capacity to foster equitable growth hinges on reconciling China's scale with ASEAN's sovereignty safeguards and transforming Russia's transactional approaches into sustainable contributions. This study will examine how the BRI influences ASEAN-Russia relations, highlighting both progress and challenges. It will assess current economic cooperation, particularly in trade, energy, and investment, and explore ways for China, Russia, and ASEAN to enhance collaboration and create a stable environment for long-term development.

**Keywords:** Russia, ASEAN, Belt and Road Initiative, Cooperation, New trends

## **1. Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022, Russia's relations with the West have fallen to a low point. The political isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia have seriously harmed Russia's national interests. In order to get out of the predicament and seek new impetus for national development, Russia has begun to increase its efforts to "turn eastward" and carry out comprehensive cooperation with ASEAN countries. At present, Russia's cooperation with ASEAN countries has made a series of progress, but it has also encountered some obstacles. Future development trends are closely related to the strategic needs of both sides and changes in the international environment. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China in 2013 has become an important international cooperation framework aimed at strengthening connectivity and trade in

Asia, Europe and Africa. The initiative has had a wide impact, especially in promoting new trends in cooperation between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Russia. China is a neighboring country with extensive borders between Russia and ASEAN. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia, as the successor state of the Soviet Union, actively developed relations with China. Russia-China relations have experienced an upgrade from being friendly countries to establishing a constructive partnership and then to a strategic cooperative partnership. ASEAN also occupies a pivotal position in China's diplomatic strategy. In the political field, China and ASEAN have frequent high-level visits and established a sound dialogue mechanism; in the economic and trade field, China and ASEAN have taken the lead in building a free trade zone economic cooperation model, and ASEAN has gradually become an important region for China to implement its market diversification strategy and "going out" strategy. This article will employ a three-dimensional analytical framework—integrating institutional constraints (via New Regionalism Theory), practical dynamics (through social practice theory), and discourse construction (using Critical Discourse Analysis)—supported by comparative case studies, cross-validation of multi-source narratives, and visualized process mapping to examine how the BRI catalyzes Russia-ASEAN cooperation across economic, energy, cultural, and military domains amidst Russia's post-2022 strategic "eastward pivot." It analyzes breakthroughs in regional integration against Western sanctions while addressing inherent challenges, framed within the evolution of China's pivotal role as both Russia's strategic partner and ASEAN's leading economic collaborator under the BRI mechanism since 2013.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The status and future development of ASEAN-Russia cooperation

The deepening of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is fundamentally reshaping Eurasia's geo-economic landscape, creating ripple effects that foster unique cross-regional dynamics between Russia and ASEAN. This interaction is rooted in Russia's Greater Eurasia Partnership vision, which seeks to position Moscow as a bridge between Asia and Europe, while navigating structural pressures from global value chain restructuring [1]. As Cau [2] argues, the BRI's geopolitical implications extend beyond infrastructure, acting as a backbone for a new world order that challenges Western-dominated systems. Within this context, Russia's engagement with ASEAN reflects a strategic balancing act—leveraging energy diplomacy and digital security to embed itself in Southeast Asia's economic and technological ecosystems [3]. For instance, Russian energy firms collaborate with ASEAN digital platforms in logistics corridors, while initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) seek alignment with ASEAN's connectivity frameworks [4,5,6]. Such synergies highlight a shift from traditional geopolitics to a hybrid model integrating physical infrastructure and digital networks.

Russia's approach to Southeast Asia exemplifies "strategic ambiguity," as described by Koldunova [3], blending economic pragmatism with geopolitical hedging. By participating in ASEAN-led mechanisms like the Regional Forum (ARF), Moscow intertwines energy exports and cybersecurity cooperation into its regional strategy. This is evident in Russia's push to integrate EAEU technical standards into ASEAN infrastructure projects, such as proposing railway specifications in Thailand and cybersecurity frameworks in Indonesian smart cities [5,7]. However, the limits of this partnership are apparent: Russia-ASEAN trade remains modest, constrained by competing priorities and institutional mismatches [3,8]. Meanwhile, the BRI's expanding footprint in Southeast Asia—particularly in financing ports and digital hubs—introduces both opportunities and tensions, as ASEAN states navigate Sino-Russian economic influence [9, 10].

The interplay between the BRI and Russia's Greater Eurasia vision has spurred institutional innovation. For example, the alignment of the EAEU with ASEAN's Digital Economy Framework

Agreement (FAADE) reflects efforts to harmonize digital trade rules, though progress remains incremental [11]. There was a view that that BRI projects in Southeast Asia, such as the China-Laos railway, have inadvertently created ecological strains, a concern echoed in Russian-led hydropower ventures in the Mekong Basin [12]. These projects underscore the tension between development and sustainability, with transboundary environmental impacts often sidelined in geopolitical calculations. Additionally, Russia's promotion of autonomous digital systems in ASEAN, such as cybersecurity protocols, risks creating new dependencies under the guise of data sovereignty—a dynamic mirrored in China's Digital Silk Road initiatives [13, 14].

A critical gap in existing scholarship lies in analyzing the dual pressures of technological competition and institutional adaptation. While Kapoor [15] highlights challenges to the Greater Eurasia Partnership from shifting power dynamics, the convergence of Russian and Chinese digital agendas in ASEAN—such as competing 5G standards versus collaborative satellite navigation—reveals a complex “coopetition” [16]. Furthermore, emerging linkages between Arctic shipping routes and Southeast Asian ports, facilitated by BRI-funded digital hubs, suggest a reconfiguration of global logistics networks that transcends traditional maritime narratives [17]. Yet these developments demand closer scrutiny of how technological standards, ecological costs, and institutional fragmentation interact.

Future research should adopt a multidimensional “technology-ecology-institution” lens to decode evolving Russia-ASEAN ties. For instance, the integration of Russian quantum communication in ASEAN smart cities and the digital ruble's potential role in cross-border payments warrant analysis [16]. Simultaneously, scholars must interrogate the ecological governance of BRI and EAEU projects, particularly as blockchain and AI tools are deployed to manage carbon footprints and logistics efficiency [8]. Only by putting the materiality of infrastructure and the virtuality of digital networks on the same plane of analysis and bridging infrastructure's materiality with digital networks' virtuality, a deeper understanding of Eurasia's transforming geopolitical DNA can emerge—one where Russia and ASEAN navigate cooperation, competition, and unintended consequences under the BRI's expansive shadow, truly decode the genetic map of Russia-ASEAN cooperation under the Belt and Road framework.

## **2.2. Trade and investment growth**

A key development in enhancing Russia's trade relations with ASEAN countries is the reopening of the Vladivostok-Haiphong-Ho Chi Minh City sea container route by the Russian Far Eastern Shipping Company (FESCO) in May 2022. By June 2023, this route had facilitated the transport of nearly 20,000 standard containers, demonstrating how BRI-related infrastructure improvements in Russia's Far East are boosting trade with ASEAN [18], particularly Vietnam. This trade expansion is particularly evident in sectors such as coal, chemicals, and metallurgy, where Russian natural resource wealth and favorable business conditions have attracted ASEAN investors. The growing Russian tourism influx to destinations like Phuket in Thailand, which saw nearly double the tourist numbers in early 2024 compared to the previous year [19], highlights the increasing economic and social ties between Russia and ASEAN, underscored by BRI initiatives.

## **2.3. Infrastructure connectivity and EAEU-ASEAN agreements**

The BRI's contribution to infrastructure development is another pivotal aspect of ASEAN-Russia cooperation. This study examines case studies such as the agreements between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and ASEAN countries, notably Vietnam and Singapore. The EAEU's free trade agreements with these nations and ongoing negotiations with other ASEAN members have had a positive impact on regional trade dynamics. Between 2015 and 2018, exports from the EAEU to

Malaysia and Vietnam saw significant growth [20]. These agreements, paired with the BRI's infrastructural projects like transportation networks and logistics hubs in regions such as Guangxi Zhuang, further illustrate how the BRI is supporting economic integration and connectivity between Russia and ASEAN countries.

#### **2.4. Regional stability and security cooperation**

The BRI also contributes to regional stability and security in the ASEAN-Russia context. China-Russia-ASEAN relations are an important lens for understanding how these dynamics affect the broader regional environment. Russia's military and technological cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly Vietnam, is a significant factor in this area. Since 2000, Russia has provided Vietnam with advanced military equipment, including fighter jets, frigates, missile systems, and submarines, and has supported the construction of Vietnam's submarine base in Cam Ranh Bay[7]. However, Russia's neutral stance on the South China Sea, especially in contrast to China's more assertive position, has led to tensions with some ASEAN members. Vietnam's cancellation of the Ninh Thuan 1 nuclear power plant project in response to joint Chinese and Russian military exercises in the region highlights Russia's complex role in ASEAN security [15,21].

#### **2.5. China-Russia-ASEAN diplomatic dynamics**

The alignment of China's diplomatic efforts with Russia's cooperation with ASEAN is crucial in shaping the region's stability. China's active participation in initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and its influence in ASEAN-related security frameworks complement Russia's broader strategy of strengthening ties with ASEAN. This diplomatic synergy fosters regional stability, benefiting BRI initiatives by creating a conducive environment for economic and political cooperation.

#### **2.6. Competitive dynamics between the BRI and Russia's southeast Asia strategy**

While the BRI has enhanced trade and investment in the region, it has also created competitive dynamics with Russia's Southeast Asia strategy. Scholars in Russia argue that the EAEU faces challenges in competing with China's well-established trade and investment models in ASEAN countries. However, Russia has been actively seeking to integrate the EAEU with China's BRI and other regional frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The 2018 agreement between China and Russia on an economic partnership between the EAEU, SCO, and ASEAN marks an important step toward future trade liberalization and regional cooperation.

### **3. Discussion**

The results reveal that the Chinese factor plays a crucial role in shaping Russia-ASEAN relations. Russia's military and technological support to ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam, serves as a strategic counterbalance to China's influence in the region [22]. This support includes significant arms sales and military cooperation, which have altered the balance of power in the South China Sea. The neutrality of Russia on the South China Sea issue, while aligned with its strategic interests, has sometimes strained its relations with ASEAN nations, as evidenced by Vietnam's response to joint military exercises with China.

The "Belt and Road" initiative has introduced both opportunities and challenges for Russia. On one hand, the BRI aligns with ASEAN's infrastructure goals, potentially fostering deeper cooperation between Russia, the EEU, and ASEAN. The initiative supports connectivity projects that could integrate Eurasian and Pacific regions, presenting a significant opportunity for Russia to enhance its

regional influence. On the other hand, the competitive dynamics between the BRI and Russia's Southeast Asia strategy highlight challenges in competing with China's advanced trade and investment models. Despite these challenges, the partnership frameworks established through the June 2018 agreement indicate a collaborative approach that could mitigate competitive tensions.

However, the effectiveness of Russia's strategy is limited by several factors. The complexity of balancing relations with both China and ASEAN, coupled with the competitive pressures from the BRI, poses ongoing challenges. Additionally, the strategic decisions of ASEAN countries, influenced by their relationships with both China and Russia, further complicate the landscape. Future cooperation will require careful navigation of these dynamics to ensure mutual benefits and stability.

In summary, while the Chinese factor significantly influences Russia-ASEAN relations, creating both opportunities and challenges, the evolving partnership frameworks and strategic alignments reflect a nuanced approach to regional diplomacy. The continued development of cooperative agreements and strategic partnerships will be essential in addressing these complexities and fostering long-term stability in the region.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly influenced the dynamics of cooperation between ASEAN and Russia, shaping their bilateral and multilateral engagements in the region. As both Russia and ASEAN countries seek to enhance their strategic and economic positions, the BRI has emerged as a crucial factor in facilitating and redefining their collaboration.

The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development, connectivity, and economic integration aligns closely with ASEAN's vision for regional connectivity and development under the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 (MPAC 2025). This synergy presents Russia with an opportunity to deepen its engagement with ASEAN, leveraging the BRI framework to enhance its economic ties and infrastructure projects in the region. The joint interests in improving transportation networks and boosting regional trade create a solid foundation for cooperative ventures, such as the Kyaukpyu Port oil transportation project in Myanmar, which exemplifies the potential benefits of integrating Russian and ASEAN efforts within the BRI's scope.

This partnership, however, operates within a paradox: while the BRI framework enables Russia to circumvent Western sanctions through ASEAN markets, it simultaneously entrenches China's centrality in shaping regional trade norms and investment flows, compelling Moscow to recalibrate its EAEU-ASEAN convergence strategies. Meanwhile, the BRI's infrastructural dominance risks overshadowing MPAC 2025's emphasis on ASEAN-centric governance, compelling member states to recalibrate their balancing acts between Chinese capital, Russian resources, and indigenous connectivity priorities.

Despite these challenges, the BRI serves as a catalyst for expanding Russia's footprint in Southeast Asia. By aligning its strategic interests with the BRI's objectives, Russia can bolster its economic and diplomatic presence in ASEAN, potentially enhancing its role in the broader Asia-Pacific region. The collaborative potential of the BRI offers Russia and ASEAN a platform to address shared economic and infrastructural goals while navigating the intricate power dynamics involving major global players.

As the BRI enters its second decade, its capacity to sustain this reconfiguration will depend on resolving critical tensions: balancing China's infrastructural dominance with Russia's security-focused regionalism, and transforming ASEAN's hedging tactics into durable coalition-building. Ultimately, the BRI has irrevocably shifted ASEAN-Russia relations from peripheral economic exchanges to a geostrategic triad with China at its apex—a trend poised to redefine Asia's power architecture through 2030.



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