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Issue Brief

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Russia in the 50th ASEAN Summit

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Seeking to build on its Permanent Mission to ASEAN and further strengthen its interaction with ASEAN, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov attended the 50th ASEAN Summit held on



August 6, 2017 in Manila, Philippines.¹ According to Mr. Sergey Lavrov, “The opening of our Permanent Mission once again confirms the priority of our interaction with ASEAN within the framework of our foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR), as well as our commitment to further deepen the Dialogue Partnership with this Association, and to give it a strategic character.”²

The earliest dialogue between Russia and the ASEAN members dates back to early 1990s, just after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. Russia gained the status of a full-fledged dialogue partner in 1996 from ASEAN member countries.³ The Russia-ASEAN summit held in Sochi in 2016 improved the relations even more between Russia and ASEAN countries.

At the same time, ASEAN member states have warmly welcomed the close dialogue with Russia, which will be very beneficial to all stakeholders involved. The document released after the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting read, “We welcomed Russia’s ongoing efforts to establish its dedicated diplomatic mission to ASEAN with a dedicated Ambassador to ASEAN this year, which demonstrates its desire to elevate Russia’s engagement with ASEAN to greater heights.”⁴

According to Mr. Lavrov, this cooperation will lead on 20 Russian-ASEAN initiatives in the fields such as information and navigation technologies, food security, energy, education, transport and medicine.⁵ The

¹ http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2832775

² Ibid.

³ http://en.russia-asean20.ru/russia_asean/20160309/9413.html

⁴ <http://asean.org/storage/2017/08/Statement-of-ASEAN-and-Russia-Ministers-of-Foreign-Affairs-on-Joint-Eff....pdf>

⁵ http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2832775

ASEAN countries, along with these initiatives, plan to fight against terrorism and counter violent extremism with the help of cooperation between themselves and Russia. Like other regions of the world, Southeast Asia has also been a victim of terrorism. Attacks from terrorist outfits such as Jemaah Islamiyah (linked with Al Qaeda) were very common after 9/11. However, Southeast Asian countries have been very successful in countering terrorism as of late, and there have not been many other major incidents apart from the ISIS attacks in Jakarta in 2016.⁶

Along with meetings the ASEAN leaders, Mr. Lavrov also met with the Foreign Ministers of China, Turkey and the US Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson.⁷

Providing a recap of the meetings, Mr. Lavrov said, “With the Turkish colleague M. Chavushoglu, we discussed the implementation of the agreements within the framework of the Astana process, and preparation for the next meeting of the representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey, which will be held in Tehran in August.”⁸ The trio is expected to continue talks on strengthening the regime of de-escalation zones in southern Syria.

Talks between China and Russian Foreign Ministers revolved around important matters like the problem on the Korean Peninsula. The Russia-China alignment was confirmed over this issue, raising a few eyebrows. The two countries had, earlier, issued a joint statement regarding a mutual freeze on Pyongyang’s nuclear program and US-South Korean military manoeuvres in the region in July 2017.⁹ The two ministers also conversed about the preparations of the upcoming BRICS summit, which is to be held in China, in early September 2017. “In addition to this Chinese concept, our joint statement supports the Russian proposal to develop a roadmap for the gradual restoration of confidence and the creation of conditions for the resumption of the six party talks. We agreed to promote this concept in practical activities, including in the UN.” said Mr Lavrov.¹⁰

The meeting between US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson and Mr Lavrov took place in the background of rising tensions between the two countries. Relations between the US and Russia reached a potential breaking point recently after the expulsion of US diplomats ordered by the Russian President

⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/isis-in-the-pacific-assessing-terrorism-in-southeast-asia-and-the-threat-to-the-homeland/>

⁷ http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2832775

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/341050-china-russia-alignment-on-north-korea-raises-eyebrows>

¹⁰ http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2832775

Vladimir Putin and the sanctions imposed on Russia, Iran and North Korea by the US government. This situation was briefly discussed, which according to Lavrov, was the priority of the discussion for Mr. Tillerson.¹¹ The international matters, such as the conflict in Ukraine, Syria and the situation on the Korean Peninsula were also brought to the table, and talks on these issues are expected to continue between Russia and the US. Mr Lavrov confirmed this by saying, “The talks (on Afghan, Syrian, and the Ukrainian conflicts) never ceased (despite the fact that there was friction, bilaterally).”¹²

These developments do not look too promising for the US. Russia is making its return to the global picture in an emphatic way. Mr. Putin’s administration is handling the diplomatic affairs extremely well which can be seen in Russia’s alignment policy with China on the Korean Peninsula situation. Russia also plans to carry forward the strengthening of the de-escalation zones in southern Syria with the help of Iran and Turkey, and all these developments are a clear indication of Russia’s increasing prowess in dealing with global affairs as a super power. This extends to their handling of the economic affairs as well, as they have also managed to tie the interests of Western Europe by agreeing on many energy deals with the European Union (EU). This can prove to be another challenge for the United States to address as the EU was not entirely in favour of the US sanctions on Russia. Russia’s potential partnership with ASEAN member states and the mutual understanding to merge China’s OBOR and Russia’s Eurasian projects show that the US has more than just one challenge in the Asian region.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.