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Russia & Southeast Asia: What Lavrov's July Visits Mean

By Christopher Cheang

SYNOPSIS

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's visits to Indonesia and Laos in early July 2021 were a goodwill trip to keep bilateral relations warm. His comments on ASEAN highlighted the need for an open and inclusive Southeast Asia to maintain a peaceful and stable region as envisioned by ASEAN's strategic outlook.

COMMENTARY

SERGEI LAVROV, Russia's foreign minister, met President Joko Widodo and held talks with his counterpart, Retno Marsudi, during a goodwill visit to Indonesia on 5-7 July 2021. Following this, he travelled to Laos where he met President Thongloun Sisoulith, Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith.

While Lavrov's visits to Indonesia and Laos were meant to serve bilateral objectives, his attendance, via a videoconference, at a Special ASEAN-Russia Ministerial Meeting on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership, also signalled Russia's keen interest in maintaining the momentum of Russia-ASEAN relations.

Russian-Indonesian Relations

In his statement at a joint press conference with Marsudi in Jakarta, Lavrov described Indonesia as one of Russia's key partners, especially in the Asia-Pacific. He also stated that both countries' leaders planned to meet and sign a declaration on strategic partnership.

In the economic field, Lavrov pointed out that trade with Indonesia had risen almost

25% in the first four months of 2021 and that both sides would diversify trade through the expansion of cooperation in high-tech products.

Both countries were ready to convene the 13th meeting of the Russian-Indonesian Joint Commission on Trade, Economic and Technical Cooperation and to start negotiations between Indonesia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) on a free trade agreement (FTA). (The EEU is led by Russia and comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

On efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, Lavrov disclosed that Russia was ready “to closely cooperate with Indonesia, including the possibility not only of supplying vaccines but also to discuss localisation of their production on Indonesian soil”. Both countries said they “were convinced that vaccines must be accessible to the entire international community”.

Russian-Laotian Relations

In Vientiane, during a joint press conference with his Lao counterpart on 7 July, Lavrov highlighted the strength of their bilateral relationship. This was on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Russian-Lao Declaration on Strategic Partnership in the Asia Pacific Region.

Both countries pledged to expand the parameters of their trade and economic ties and would hold a meeting of the Russian-Lao Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation before the end of 2021. The commission was to address how the two sides could “considerably expand our economic and investment cooperation”.

Russian-Lao ties in the military and military-technical cooperation were also highlighted by Lavrov, including “the planned deliveries of additional military equipment and materiel to Laos”.

Russia would also be delivering the Sputnik V vaccine to Laos, and review a Laotian request that “in addition to commercial deliveries, a part of the vaccines be shipped as humanitarian relief”.

Russia-ASEAN Relations

During his joint press conference with Marsudi in Jakarta, Lavrov pointed out that “there was no alternative to the principles of ASEAN centrality”. He pledged Russia’s commitment to “consistently defend the positions taken by ASEAN,” and declared that “all extra-regional countries should respect the traditions of this region supported by ASEAN’s central role”.

In an interview with Rakyat Merdeka, an Indonesian newspaper, which was posted on the Russian foreign ministry website on 6 July, Lavrov noted the decades of Russia-ASEAN relations which were raised to the level of strategic partnership in 2018.

Lavrov was candid, however, in observing that “unfortunately, the potential of economic cooperation is far from fully realised,” while noting that a “growth trend has

reappeared this year". The promotion of cooperation with the EEU would make this trend "more dynamic", pointing out the EEU's FTAs with Vietnam and Singapore, with Indonesia working on this as well.

Although over two million Russian tourists had visited Southeast Asia before the COVID-19 pandemic, Lavrov lamented that "we still do not know enough about each other".

The development of humanitarian ties was designed to fill in this gap, citing the establishment of the ASEAN Centre in Moscow as well as a network of Russia-ASEAN research centres. Russia-ASEAN youth summits were also held in this context while the Russia-ASEAN Business Council facilitated the expansion of contacts between entrepreneurs of both sides.

On Myanmar, Lavrov stressed that "in our contacts with the Myanmar military leaders, we promote the position of ASEAN which, in our view, should be considered as a basis for resolving this crisis and bringing the situation back to normalcy". He also said he "briefed our Indonesian friends about our messages which we send to Naypyidaw in line with the principles developed by ASEAN".

Assessing Lavrov's Three Objectives

Lavrov's July trip to Southeast Asia served three inter-related objectives: *first*, to show-the-flag and remind ASEAN that Russia is serious about maintaining and strengthening relations; *second*, to lend credibility to Russia's oft-declared interest in ASEAN; and *third*, to impress upon Southeast Asia that Russia's foreign policy interest in the Asia-Pacific, which has been very China-focussed, was diversified, tangible and pertinent.

These objectives have largely been met despite the limited media coverage of Lavrov's visit to Indonesia and Laos.

The reality is that by virtue of their stronger economic links and long-standing political interactions with Southeast Asia, China and the United States would continue to loom large in ASEAN's consciousness and concrete cooperation, when compared to Russia.

In assessing Lavrov's visits, a keen Russian observer of Southeast Asia, Dmitry Mosyakov, the head of the Southeast Asia Department at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for Oriental Studies, said Russia could act as some kind of "an independent arbitrator" that supports Southeast Asian countries' vision of the future of the Asia-Pacific region.

In his view, the ASEAN countries' traditional balancing policy between the US and China was becoming difficult to pursue, amid rising tensions between the two powers. However, Mosyakov may be too optimistic.

It is unlikely that Russia could play such a role, even if it sought to do so. This is not only due to its comparatively weak (vis-à-vis China and the US) economic and other links with ASEAN. It is also because Russia's close ties with China and estranged

relations with the US would inhibit Moscow from being able to function as an independent and effective arbitrator.

Since Russia-ASEAN economic ties have yet to assume their full potential, the task ahead for both sides would be to continue striving towards establishing a more meaningful economic relationship, which would then make for an even stronger political linkage.

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