This course will study the Russian Federation’s policy in Northeast Asia over the last thirty years, from the Gorbachev era through the Putin era. In 1986 in Vladivostok and in 1988 in Krasnoyarsk, Mikhail Gorbachev called for the integration of the Soviet Union into the Asia-Pacific region. He stressed that the Cold War era was ending and the Soviet government should open the Soviet Far East to development in the Asia-Pacific economy. Gorbachev pursued normalized relations with China, Japan and South Korea. In May 1991 a border agreement was concluded between the Soviet Union and China.

Asia was a low priority on the Russian foreign policy agenda during the Yeltsin era; however, the Russian Far East was given the opportunity to directly engage in economic cooperation with neighboring countries. In the beginning of the 1990s, borders were open not only to Russians, but also for Chinese traders. Also, there was opposition to the transfer of land parcels in Primorskiy and Khabarovskiy krays to China according to the terms of the border agreement.

Evgeny Primakov was charged with setting Russia’s foreign policy priorities. As foreign minister, he pursued multipolarity in Russia’s international relations. Russia emerged from marginalization in the 1990s to become a significant actor in the calculations of the other states in Northeast Asia.

The Russian foreign policy agenda during Putin’s presidency was pragmatic and flexible. High energy prices gave the Russian government greater confidence in playing a significant role in Northeast Asian affairs. After the declaration in December 2006 of a new development program for the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia, Putin set the stage for limited integration of these regions into Northeast Asia. However, as Gilbert Rozman writes: “Unlike earlier efforts
to save the Russian Far East from economic crisis or falling under the control of a neighboring country, this time the purpose was to establish Russia as a power second to none in the Asia-Pacific region.”

After a decade of reforms, Russia has increased its economic and security presence in Northeast Asia. In the economic domain, Russia’s presence is greatest in the energy arena, and its security presence has deepened through the evolving multilateral institutions designed to help achieve stability on the Korean peninsula.

Over the last several years, Russia has reasserted its position in Northeast Asia. The current Russian policy in Northeast Asia does not pose any direct threat to the regional countries. China, Japan, and Russia are rising and posing challenges to each other and to other countries in the region. China is rising in its economic and military capabilities. Japan is rising in its demands in Asia and the world to be seen as a “normal power.”

Contemporary relations between Russia and Northeast Asia have become the focus of discussion among many international academics and experts. The leading author is Gilbert Rozman, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University. His research concentrates on China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. His book on regionalism in Northeast Asia covers competing regional strategies over six periods after the end of the Cold War.

We can see the first wave of American researchers’ interest in Russia’s presence in Northeast Asian affairs in several edited volumes published in the 1990s. However, there is a need for a broad approach to studying the Russian Far East, which is located far away from Moscow and near Northeast Asian states.

I argue that the changes in the shape and nature of Russia’s borders are of a qualitative nature. The end of the Soviet empire is the result of a process of self-determination and identification. The current Russia faces new and different challenges along its borders. In October 2004 Vladimir Putin made a visit to China that helped complete many years of
negotiations that led to the final demarcation of the Russian-Chinese border. Japanese researcher Akihiro Iwashita gives a comprehensive overview of Sino-Russian negotiations.\textsuperscript{5}

The way that the Russian government deals with the issue of internal borders will help define the nature of the political regime in the country. Plans integrate the Russian Far East into Asia’s dynamic economy coincided with the boom of intra-Asian trade and investment in the 1990s. Despite the existence of an economic basis for cooperation, the integration of the Russian Far East into the Asian economy has been a problematic process because of inadequate political and economic institutions on the central and regional levels. Regional leaders focused their efforts on expanding trade and joint ventures with China. However, the main source of influence and revenue for the Russian Far East is the export of natural resources. The role of the Russian Far East region in Russia’s Northeast Asia policy is discussed at length in two edited volumes on the Russian Far East, as well as numerous articles\textsuperscript{6}.

Immigration control on the Russian-Chinese border has also been a major focus in many studies, such as Mikhail Alexseev’s research on Chinese migration to the Russian Far East.\textsuperscript{7}

Russia’s increased presence in Northeast Asia, both within the context of regional organizations and on a bilateral basis, presents an opportunity to intensify the Russian Far East’s regional economic integration. The role of the Russian Far East in the energy sector in particular could be quite positive. Local authorities understand that there is no way that the fate of the future of their territories can be fully separated from China. And there is some indication that local authorities are more comfortable trying to manage the relationship with Chinese border territories. But they recognize that China’s potential power seems almost limitless, and the needs of its growing population could overwhelm the Russian Far East.

For now, at least, Russia is behaving responsibly in Northeast Asia, and there is evidence that the federal government will use the Russian Far East as a tool of economic, national, and international integration. The challenge for Far Eastern political authorities is to insure that the
Russian federal government be Euro-Pacific in outlook, and find more effective ways to engage Northeast Asia.

However, over the last several years, rather than adopt a strategy for the Russian Far East based on foreign investment and globalization, the Russian government has exerted state control using debatable means to oblige international oil and gas companies to renegotiate the terms of their investments in the Sakhalin projects.

The Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline has been a crucial issue in Russia’s Northeast Asian affairs. Failing to give essential guarantees to Japanese and other potential foreign investors for the construction of the pipeline, Russia accepted China’s offer to extend the pipeline from Skovorodino in Amurskaya Oblast to Daqing rather than the market diversification option of lengthening it to reach all the way to the Pacific coast.

China is interested in developing a strategic partnership with Russia. After completing the demarcation the border, the Chinese are now worried that Russia’s state-centered expansion will slow the growth of economic ties between the two countries.

Russia’s growing presence in Northeast Asia is expressed largely through bilateral relationships. The most important affairs for Russia in Northeast Asia are its relations with China. The Russia-China partnership is giving Russia a chance to maintain its influence in Northeast Asia. Dmitri Medvedev’s visit to China in May 2008 was his first foreign visit outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as president.

The revival of China’s leadership role, Russia’s attempt to secure its presence in the region, and the impact of Sino-Russian relations were major issues in the Cold War era. The different aspects of their relations are discussed by American and Russian authors in a volume published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Sino-Soviet-Russian regional relations were analyzed by Elizabeth Wishnick. In the coming years the substance of Sino-Russian relations will be also significant.
Threats to bilateral relations between Russia and China center on three important issues. First, the development in Russian-Chinese relations still lags behind the internal development of each country. Second, both Russia and China need to improve their capacity for effectively managing relations. For example, criminal activities in trade need to be curbed. Third, insufficient cultural exchange is still a hindrance to building mutual trust.

While Russo-Chinese relations have been steadily improving since the end of the Cold War, Russo-Japan relations have been characterized by ups and downs. Relations peaked during the late 1990s; however, in 1998 Boris Yeltsin was forced to cancel his visit to Japan in the face of strong domestic opposition. Subsequently there were discussions about Japanese investments to build the oil pipeline Eastern Siberia – Pacific Ocean. During Vladimir Putin’s visit to Japan in November 2005, 12 agreements were signed to strengthen bilateral cooperation. But the most crucial issue in Russo-Japanese relations – the fate of four Kuril Islands – was not solved. As Alexander Panov points out, “The main problem persists: how to realize the historical opportunity to build truly friendly Russo-Japanese relations and to take action for resolving the concrete questions of bilateral interaction and cooperation.”

South Korea is mainly interested in Russia’s role in possible reunification with North Korea. South Korea is eager for some sort of multilateralism balancing various powers in the region, and it is also prepared to include Russia in any engagement of North Korea. Russia’s policy has focused on economic cooperation with South Korea and on political and security cooperation with North Korea. Putin’s diplomacy has helped Russia to recover its geopolitical position on the Korean peninsula. Dmitry Trenin argues that the “consensus in Moscow is in favor of the continuation of the status quo.” He also adds a number of interesting possibilities. “One is that a united … Korea, wedged between China and Japan, might be well disposed toward Russia, its only other neighbor. Second, the process of reintegration could offer some opportunities for Korean labor imports to Russia, and for Russian business activities in northern
Korea. Third, the view of South Korea as America’s cold war satellite and, thus, Moscow’s nominal adversary, is, mildly speaking, out dated.”

Leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea had high hopes for Moscow in the late 1980s, turned to it again at some point in the 1990s for more limited goals, and are rethinking their strategies in light of recent events. Moscow’s unilateral pursuit of security, total control over energy resources, and renewed influence in Central Asia and North Korea has prompted wariness in all three Northeastern Asian capitals. Actors in these states have reason to take a new look at how Moscow serves their interests: Beijing through partnership, Tokyo through balancing, and Seoul through reassurance to Pyongyang.

Challenges do not necessarily worsen into threats or conflicts. Rather, they are the issues that we need to pay attention to in order to find ways to manage relations. We are living in a globalized, integrated, and interdependent world. Therefore, countries in Northeast Asia need to work together to manage the challenges facing them. Communication, consultation, compromise, and cooperation are the only ways to manage the challenges and serve the interests of all of the countries.

The region’s existing avenues for bilateral and multilateral engagement and cooperation among China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the United States are not enough. More serious and comprehensive efforts are needed to improve trust, reduce conflict, and build sustainable and solid relationships among them.

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5 Iwashita Akihiro. A 4,000 kilometer Journey along the Sino-Russian Border. Sapporo: Slavic research Center, Hokkaido University, 2004.


