

SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION AS THE BASIS FOR GREATER EURASIA¹

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Abstract: China and Russia are the main driving forces of Eurasian integration. Russia is pursuing its “pivot to Asia,” while China is branching out to the West through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The interests of Russia and China meet in Eurasia and their friendly relations have led to several cooperation projects there. The most important are linkages between the Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative and the plan to create a broader Eurasian Economic Partnership or Greater Eurasia. This article studies the reasons which led the two countries to intensify their cooperation in Eurasia and the current state and prospects of that cooperation.

Keywords: Russia; China; Greater Eurasia; Eurasian Economic Union; Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

Currently, China and Russia are the main driving forces of Eurasian integration. Russia is pursuing its “pivot to Asia” policy out of the clear need to develop its own Asian regions and link up with the new center of the world economy in the Asia Pacific, but also under pressure from relations with the West, which significantly worsened with the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. China is branching out to the West through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This move has been prompted by economic and geopolitical interests: the need to reach Europe’s developing markets and to obtain raw materials from Eurasia, but also because of pressure from the United States, which is trying to limit China’s growth and general influence in the world. This latter policy has become especially obvious during Donald Trump’s presidency and his launch of an open trade war against Beijing. The interests of Russia and China meet in Eurasia and their friendly relations have led to several cooperation projects. The most important are linking the Eurasian Economic Union with the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative and the plan to create a broader Eurasian Economic Partnership or Greater Eurasia. This article studies the reasons which led the two countries to intensify their cooperation in Eurasia and the current state and prospects of that cooperation.

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The geopolitics of Eurasia

For many years, U.S. geopolitical thinking focused primarily on the dangers that would arise if an anti-U.S. alliance, coalition of powers, or an anti-U.S. state were to gain dominance on the Eurasian continent. Such an idea has its roots in the writings of the founders of geopolitics, Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman (Mackinder, 1904; Spykman, 1942). Influenced by these ideas, the next generation of U.S. theorists did everything in their power to ensure that no single power or alliance of powers controlled the Eurasian continent. At the same time, practical geopolitical interests usually held sway over ideology. Despite his right-leaning, anti-communist convictions, U.S. President Richard Nixon followed the recommendation of his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, and agreed to improve relations with communist China. Similarly, U.S. President Jimmy Carter, a champion of human rights, followed the suggestion of his own National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and established diplomatic relations with Beijing. Despite the fact that under Mao Zedong China had a worse human rights record than the Soviet Union had, geopolitical considerations demanded that the weaker communist state be torn away from its stronger ally to prevent them forming a hegemony in Eurasia.

These same geopolitical beliefs have influenced modern strategic and academic thought on questions of U.S. policy in Eurasia. The main imperative in U.S., and, in a broader sense, Western policy was to prevent the emergence of a single state or alliance of states capable of unifying non-European Eurasia against the United States.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was Kissinger and Brzezinski who continued this line in the academic literature.

Potentially, the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an 'anti-hegemonic' coalition united not by ideology but by complementary grievances. It would be reminiscent in scale and scope of the challenge once posed by the Sino-Soviet bloc, though this time China would likely be the leader and Russia the follower. Averting this contingency, however remote it may be, will require a display of U.S. geostrategic skill on the western, eastern, and southern perimeters of Eurasia simultaneously. (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 54)

warned Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1997 Other U.S. authors espousing realist intellectual traditions also wrote that the Sino-Russian rapprochement was harmful to U.S. national interests.

Leading U.S. analysts saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as a unique opportunity for the U.S. to become the hegemon in Eurasia. According to Brzezinski,

For America the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia. For half a millennium, world affairs were dominated by Eurasian powers and peoples who fought with one another for regional domination and reached out for global power. Now a non-Eurasian power is preeminent in Eurasia—and America's global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained. (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 27)

At the same time, U.S. analysts immediately set geopolitical restrictions on Russia's development in the region. It was unacceptable to permit even a friendly Russia (as well as China or, say, Germany) to grow excessively strong in Eurasia: the influence of any power

other than the United States had to be limited. This was stated openly by, for example, Kissinger, who wrote:

Geopolitically, America is an island off the shores of the large landmass of Eurasia, whose resources and population far exceed those of the United States. The domination by a single power of either of Eurasia's two principal spheres—Europe and Asia—remains a good definition of the strategic danger for America. Cold War or no Cold War. For such a grouping would have the capacity to outstrip America economically and, in the end, militarily. That danger would have to be resisted even were the dominant power apparently benevolent, for if the intentions ever changed, America would find itself with a grossly diminished capacity for effective resistance and a growing inability to shape events. (Kissinger, 1994, p. 813)

Thus, it was acknowledged that the danger to the United States was not a particular political regime, but simply all major, independent and influential states.

After the Soviet Union had disappeared from the world map, however, the usual geopolitics were no longer honored. The Western elite perceived those events as the triumph of their own ideology, a conviction that led to Francis Fukuyama's exotic theory about "the end of history." Precautions and geopolitical nuances were no longer necessary: Why worry about the reaction of Russia, China, and other countries if the "liberal world order" was on the verge of winning and all countries would soon be lining up in orderly rows to march towards freedom, democracy, and the market economy?

In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not stop the non-Western centers of power from gaining in strength—as experts back in the 1970s and 1980s had predicted would happen—and a unipolar world from emerging as a result. The reluctance of the United States to accept this process led these non-Western powers to establish a counterweight to Washington's efforts to maintain unequivocal domination over the world by forming their own organizations and groups, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The main consequence of Washington's policy, however, was to accelerate what until then had been only a gradual rapprochement between Russia—a country re-establishing its power base—and China—which was already growing rapidly. That relationship has developed into a deep and close strategic partnership, which Moscow Carnegie Center Director Dmitri Trenin suggests should be referred to as "entente"—that is, "a basic agreement about the fundamentals of world order supported by a strong body of common interest" (Trenin, 2015). Thus, the United States is effectively stimulating the very process the dangers of which several generations of U.S. strategists had warned—namely, Washington's loss of control over Eurasia resulting from the deepening rapprochement between the two major Eurasian powers: Russia and China.

The concept of Greater Eurasia

Russian expert circles developed the concept of a "Greater Eurasia" in 2015 after concluding that the deterioration in relations with the West over the Ukrainian crisis was irreversible (Trenin, 2015; Lukin, 2015).

Experts from the Valdai International Discussion Club and Higher School of Economics summarized these ideas in several reports and recommendations they drew up for the

country's leadership. As a result, President Vladimir Putin incorporated the idea into his speech and interview at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016. The Russian president used a more discreet phrasing, referring to the emerging system as a "Eurasian partnership." He attributed the idea to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, with whom Putin had met and discussed it on the eve of the Forum. Putin mentioned that over 40 states and international organizations had expressed the desire to establish a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He then suggested that the EAEU could become one of the centers of a greater emergent integration area. On that basis he would consider "the prospects for more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the EAEU and countries with which we already have close partnership—China, India, Pakistan and Iran—and certainly our CIS partners, and other interested countries and associations" (Putin, 2016).

Putin's idea was incorporated into the Russian-Chinese declaration that the leaders of the two countries signed during the Russian president's visit to China in June 2016. That document stressed the paramount importance that the two sides attached to implementing the Russian-Chinese agreement on linking the formation of the EAEU with the realization of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The document also called for the creation of a "comprehensive Eurasian partnership based on the principles of openness, transparency, and mutual interests, and including the possible involvement of EAEU, SCO, and ASEAN member countries." The governments of the two countries were tasked with developing measures to implement the initiative (Sovmestnoye..., 2016).

During a visit to Russia by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in November 2016, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said that Russia was continuing to work with China on forming a comprehensive Eurasian partnership that would include EAEU and SCO member states. According to Medvedev, Russia and China had conducted a joint study on what should serve as the basis of that partnership. He and Li Keqiang discussed and approved the results of that study during their meeting and instructed experts from the two countries to formulate the economic basis of the project (Medvedev, 2016).

In June 2017, speaking at a Valdai Club session on globalization held as part of the 2017 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Russia's first deputy premier Igor Shuvalov announced that Russia and China were conducting talks with China on Eurasian economic partnership, presumably as a first step towards the Comprehensive Eurasian partnership mentioned by Medvedev (Shuvalov, 2017). According to Shuvalov, Russia believed that this partnership should first be formed by China and EAEU member states before being open to other countries to join.

In an article written in November 2017, President Putin again mentioned "our idea to create the Greater Eurasian Partnership," formed on the basis of the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road initiative (Putin, 2017). He characterized it as a "flexible modern project open to other participants."

The media and expert literature all began referring to "Greater Eurasia." According to the authors of the idea, the following are the main features of "Greater Eurasia":

1. "Greater Eurasia," a new international unified entity of sorts, will be formed on the basis of Russian-Chinese rapprochement and efforts to link the EAEU and SREB.

2. Other non-Western organizations and groups—primarily the SCO, ASEAN, and BRICS—will play a major role in this process (Denisov, Kazantsev, Lukyanov, & Safranchuk, 2019).
3. “Greater Eurasia” is not yet a formal organization or even a group. It is a partnership of sorts based on the common interests of non-Western states.
4. The states involved share two types of interests: political and economic. The former are based on the concerns over a unipolar world in which the U.S. and its allies attempt to play a dictatorial role and fail to respect the interests—and, often, the sovereignty—of other states. In this respect, “Greater Eurasia” will develop a fundamentally different approach to world politics, one based on respect for international law as took shape following World War II, the leading role of the United Nations and its Security Council, respect for various cultural traditions and the political systems to which they gave form, and pluralism and democracy not only within countries, but also in international relations. These principles are very similar to the principles of “peaceful coexistence” that developing countries first expressed as far back as the Bandung Conference in 1955, and to the so-called “Shanghai spirit” of the SCO.
5. Economic interests could serve as the basis of a broad partnership. These interests include the linkage of the EAEU with SREB and the strengthening of the economic component of the SCO following accession by India and Pakistan, and possibly Iran. A broad free trade area (FTA) may also be created. It is important to note that Russia and China had already proposed the creation of a bilateral FTA in 2016. In addition, China has created such areas with several ASEANs, and another one has been created within the framework of the EAEU. As a result, all these FTAs could be expanded or even merged, possibly based on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) proposed by China and ASEAN. Another important economic interest is the creation of new transport routes through Central Asia to Europe as part of the linkage with the SREB, and as part of the Maritime Silk Road initiative that will connect Eurasia with ASEAN countries.
6. “Greater Eurasia” will be an open partnership for everyone, including Europe. Individual European countries or the EU as an organization would be most welcome to cooperate with “Greater Eurasia” so long they are willing to uphold its pluralistic principles. The interest that European states have shown toward China’s proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the SREB, and more recently, the EAEU, indicate this is possible. However, the new Eurasian system will not be centered in Europe and nor will it include the condition that all participants have to adopt “European values,” but will be located in Eurasia and operate on the principles of pluralism and multi-polarity.

The concept of a “Greater Eurasia” is still being developed and its exact boundaries remain undefined. Experts from a number of countries, Russia and China foremost among them, are working to flesh it out. They have encountered a number of difficulties on the path to its creation: the destructive policies of the United States, international terrorism, and the differing interests and disagreements between major Eurasian players and organizations. However, global trends favor the creation of a “Greater Eurasia,” indicating that the process is irreversible. Major among them is the geopolitical rapprochement between Russia and

China (Lukin, 2018). Russia and China, as well as Central Asian countries, all have their own reasons for supporting the idea.

Russia: from junior partner of the West to an independent power center

While in the early 1990s, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Russian government was full of hopes of cooperating with the United States and its allies and was ready to join the Western-led “civilized world” even as a junior partner, today transforming Russia into an independent Eurasian center of power and world influence has become the official policy of the Kremlin and the main direction of thought among the majority of Russian experts on foreign policy strategy. Vladimir Putin, who in 2000 had discussed with Bill Clinton the possibility of Russia joining NATO (Sysoev, 2000), declared when taking office as president in May 2012.

We must all understand that the life of our future generations and our prospects as a country and nation depend on us today and... on our determination in developing our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become a leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia” (Putin, 2012). In September 2013, during a conference of the Valdai international discussion club, he remarked that “Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet expanse to become an independent center of global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia. (Meeting..., 2013)

Vladislav Surkov, the former chief intellectual of the presidential administration, just a decade ago, spoke of the need not “to fall out of Europe, to hold on to the West” as an essential element in building Russia (Surkov, 2009). Today, he calls for the “repeated and invariably abortive attempts to become part and parcel of the Western civilization” to stop and predicts a hundred or, perhaps, 300 years of loneliness (Surkov, 2018). The former Westernist Sergey Karaganov claims that Russia has “used up the European treasure trove” and has grounded his entire intellectual direction on working out the concept of “Greater Eurasia,” in which Russia occupies central place (Karaganov, 2018).

Such an evolution testifies to the disappointment over Russia’s European choice, and to its new Eurasian orientation having emerged as the result of a long and painful process, in reaction to the international situation, and not as a consequence of the inherent anti-European attitude of Putin or of the Russian elite as a whole. The West’s policy after the fall of the USSR in fact put Moscow in an untenable situation, obliging it to wrestle with a choice: to fully subordinate itself to the geopolitical aims of the United States and its allies, rejecting its own approaches to security, or to reorient itself away from a pro-West attitude in some other direction. As Putin remarked in his report to the Federal Assembly in February 2019, “Without sovereignty, Russia cannot be a state. Some countries can do this, but not Russia” (Putin, 2019). And Russia chose to create its own center of power in Eurasia.

Will this work out? The answer is still unclear. Russia’s military fully capable of meeting this proposal, but economic development still falls noticeably short. Furthermore Russia does not have substantial historical experience in this area. For it to become an autonomous pole in the newly forming region of Eurasia requires at least four things. First, it demands a commitment from Russia to prioritize the region and to think strategically

about its place within it. Second, it depends on Russia pursuing a domestic strategy for economic development, one befitting a country capable of becoming an autonomous pole. Third, to become such a pole alongside China, which is clearly consolidating its position requires the skillful management of bilateral relations, such as in setting out the division of labor between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt or, more broadly, the Greater Eurasian project and the Belt and Road. Finally, becoming a pole will have implications for Russia's relations with other countries in Eurasia, which will need to recognize Russia's new status. These last two themes will be addressed in the second half of this article.

The historical path to Russia's emergence as a Eurasian pole

The idea of Russia pursuing a special path of development arose in Russia not so very long ago, in the first half of the 19th century as a response to the revolutionary events in Europe. Until Peter I there had been no specific discussion of whether the state with its capital in Moscow was an Asian or a European country. From the time it adopted Christianity from Constantinople in the 10th century, Russia considered itself a part of Christian civilization, regardless of whether that civilization was located in Europe or partly in Asia. Peter I strove, according to Pushkin's apt expression, "in Europe to cut open a window," to do what was needed to make Russia a leading player in world politics, which were then concentrated in Europe. Peter's European choice was driven not by the desire to subordinate Russia to a more advanced Europe, but, on the contrary, to make her a great power. Rejuvenated Russia's European status was officially announced in 1767 by Catherine the Great in her *Instruction to the Legislative Commission*, which clearly stated "Russia is a European power" (Nakaz, 1767). Only under Nicholas I, who was afraid of Europe's revolutionary influence, was the ideological triad "Eastern Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality" formulated, underscoring Russia's independent social and political structure, in which unrestrained autocracy interacted with the nation without intermediaries and looked after it on the basis of a principally different spirit. This concept was based on the idea that society was divided into different, antagonistic social groups and that representative organs were required to defend the interests of these groups before the higher authority. In particular, the non-European character of Russia was reinforced by other directions represented in its thinking, including groups that were unofficial and even openly opposed: Slavophiles, Pan-Slavists, Narodniki, and, emerging from them, Socialist-Revolutionaries, and so on. Distancing Russia from Europe was the starting point for conjuring up an image of Asia or a mixture of Europe and Asia to find a new place for Russia.

The rise of the Bolsheviks to power was, on the whole, down to the victory of Western thought: indeed, according to Marxism the whole world was heading in one direction, and revolutionary Russia should not be an exception to the rule. In their civilizational plans, the Communists did not regard Soviet society as separate from the West; they merely considered it to be higher up the ladder of social development. Moreover, all ideas about Russian society being distinct from the West, especially the conception of "Eurasia" that had arisen among émigrés in the 1920s, or the Marxist theory of the "Asiatic mode of production," were forbidden in the USSR or, at least, were not encouraged. While the Communists denounced

the US-led West and contrasted the Moscow-led bloc with the capitalist bloc, this was part of a universal mission, not the embracement of a regionally situated civilization in pursuit of a different destiny from the one criticized in the West.

The collapse of the USSR and the victory of the “democratic movement” in Russia did not in principle signify a change in its Western orientation and belief that Russia was part of a unilinear historical progress worldwide. What was new was that Russia was no longer considered an advanced country, but a backward one situated on the bottom rung of progress within the Western “civilized world,” and ready to become a subordinate student. This position was a reaction to the failure of the Soviet experiment but it was not a key shift to another ideological paradigm. Besides, it clearly contradicted previous Russian Western-oriented and liberal thought, which had always been aimed not at subordinating Russia to Western powers, but at using Western achievements to transform Russia into a power, capable of standing alongside them, at the same level.

Policies premised on ideological subordination could not endure. The scale of Russia and her history and political culture demanded a high level of autonomy. Objective security interests, ignored by the West, drew her to a more active set of policies. The changing geopolitical situation in the world—the center of world politics and economics began to shift to the Asia-Pacific region—led many countries, including the United States, EU countries, and Australia, to turn to Asia. Accepting this shift in global dynamics, Russia searched for a place in the upcoming region.

Russia grew more concerned about security, at least around her borders. In declarations by the West that nobody had the right to establish a sphere of influence, Moscow saw a Washington tendency to include the entire world in its own sphere, under cover of the ideas of universalism and unilinear progress. The concept of multipolarity, the idea of multiple civilizational paths of development reflected Russia’s interests, as well as those of other major states dissatisfied with Western dictates: China, India, Brazil, and so on.

In the 1990s in Russia the theory of Eurasianism was dropped, especially the very controversial notion that ethnic Russians are distinct from Europeans, including other Slavs, because they had mixed with the mythical “Turaniens” from the steppes and forged a distinct civilization on that basis. It also gained popularity in some countries of the former Soviet Central Asia, not in no small measure because it elevated the steppe tribes to the level of a distinct civilization and was associated with classical Eurasianists, especially Lev Gumilev, who became a cultish figure Kazakhstan (in whose honor the L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University is named and who is often cited by the First President Nazarbaev). Eurasianism became popular in Russia later, to the extent that relations with the West worsened. This was largely because the economic ideal of classical Eurasianism of the 1920s was not a full Western-style market economy, but top-down state regulation and toleration of private initiatives in agriculture and small-scale industry. This model fitted both Putin’s economic policy of establishing huge state corporations and the models of most Central Asian states. While in the 1990s the concept of Eurasianism was mainly used by the anti-Western opposition thinkers, it later spread quickly as an purely intellectual trend, but it took longer to work out how a resurgent Russia would fit into an emerging region.

The Eurasian idea provides Russia with a number of advantages. First, becoming an independent pole in world politics corresponds to Russia’s historical role. Even when

Russia considered herself part of Europe, it was always as an autonomous state and not in subordination to political dictates from outside. The Soviet experience also meant that Russians had become accustomed to being a great power. Second, Russia's economic system is very close to the Eurasian ideal. All transformative historical reforms were done with the help of the state, which played the most active role in the economy. Third, the turn to concentrating on its own region and on Asia more enables Russia to resolve a strategic problem—developing its Siberian and Far Eastern regions—a problem that is often articulated and still far from realization. Turning itself into a center of consolidation and integration in Eurasia also has security benefits, as it involves forging a friendly external environment for peaceful political and economic development. It is expected that the further development and possible expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union will play a big role here, with its linkages to China's Silk Road Economic Belt, and boost the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and cooperation with China over the Greater Eurasian Partnership.

The inertia of Westernism was so strong that Russia did not begin forming its own independent, Eurasian pole in world politics until the first decade of the 21st century, prompted by the crises in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. During this period, Europe and the United States, lost their role as leaders in ideas as well as technology. China began pressurizing them, as did other non-Western states. Therefore, it is entirely conceivable that had Peter I lived today, he would have cut out a window not onto Europe, but onto Asia, as acting decisively was his style. This does not, of course, signal the need to close the window onto Europe. Rather, both directions should have equal standing, so Russia ceases to be a poor relative of Europe to become an intermediary between Europe and Asia, taking advantage of both, and becoming a sort of juncture between civilizations. This is the intellectual product of the rethinking under way in Russia.

Russia's capacity to be an independent pole

Is Russia capable of playing such a role? There is no answer as yet. The United States and Europe still maintain their status as the primary world centers of new technology. Will they permit Russia to both pursue an autonomous course and use these technologies? Or will it suffocate it with sanctions? For the time being, it is necessary to find some kind of balance, but what will ensue if sanctions are imposed against the main sectors of Russia's economy? Could China compensate for that? Or would it be willing to do so, given the economic and political losses of worsening relations with the West, and would that not lead to a one-sided dependence on China? Finally, would Russians be able to reorient themselves psychologically, identifying not just as Europeans with a difference, but as Eurasians who are neither Asian nor European (or, who are both)? The trends in international development are favorable for Russia to resolve its problems, but this requires Russians themselves to take the right decisions, along with the country's leaders, and above all it requires an adequate response from the elite.

Of course, how we judge the success of a policy depends on our understanding of its objectives, and this may vary depending on the point of view. The majority of Russians, according to many public opinion surveys, want to see their country become a great and

independent power, but they also want an economically effective state that has friendly relations with its neighbors. Successes have already been achieved regarding independence and state power, and this will continue. But this is not yet the case with economic effectiveness. Foreign policy plays only a small role here. The government's economic course is of greater importance. Turning Russia into an independent Eurasian center would partly be achieved by developing economic cooperation with Asian economies—China, Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN states—while preserving ties with Europe at least at the existing level (economic relations with the United States have always been insignificant).

Relations with countries in the West cannot be called friendly, but that is the price of independence. Yet, the question of economic effectiveness focuses attention not only on how trade with European states can be boosted in inauspicious circumstances, but also on how closer economic ties can be forged in Asia to the benefit of Russia's accelerated development. Balanced ties with China's economy have been debated in Russia since the 2000s. Recently, one focus has been whether the Eurasian Economic Union will provide a foundation for Russia to strengthen its economic standing or whether it will lose ground to the much more economically substantial, China-led, Silk Road Economic Belt. So far, on the basis of its political and military prowess, Russia is having partial success in being recognized as an autonomous pole in Eurasia, but economically the future is uncertain.

China and Greater Eurasia

China both officially and on the expert level is expressing interest in developing a Greater Eurasian partnership. It is no coincidence that this interest grew after the trade war with the United States intensified. Just as Russia had after 2014, China realized that it would be difficult to deal with the West as it had before, since under Trump the United States is determined to limit China's growth and prevent it from challenging Western dominance.

Most Chinese experts are supportive of the project or at least the idea of closer cooperation with Russia in Eurasia. An article on the website of China's State Information Center argues that the "practical realization of the idea of an 'Comprehensive Eurasian Partnership' " advanced by the Russian president Putin, "has great strategic significance for the reconstruction of the world structure," for agreement on the Eurasian continent, and also for China's deep entry into the world economy (Zhang, 2018). The executive deputy president of the China Institute of International Studies (a foreign ministry think tank) Ruan Rongze wrote that

Promotion of the 'One belt, one road' initiative has had a significant impact on Russia. In Russia, they are also thinking about how to achieve linkage. There is some overlap between the 'One belt, one road' and Putin's recent proposal to establish a partnership in Greater Eurasia. In effect, they create an opportunity for cooperation between China and Russia on the Eurasian mainland region, to expand the reach of Sino-Russian cooperation. Accordingly, the concept of a "Greater Eurasian partnership," "is the result of the ongoing Russian effort to improve its strategic environment by constantly adjusting its general strategy—a course that at various times has led it to promote such projects as the 'North-South transport corridor' and the Eurasian Economic Union. (Xi Jinping, 2016)

Li Ziguo, the head of the Department of Eurasia at the same institute, explains Russia's motives and basically agrees with the mainstream Russian view. Li shows that ever since 1960 leaders of the Soviet Union and Russia have envisaged fostering a "greater European family." As late as in 2010, the then president Dmitry Medvedev put forward a draft of a new European Security Treaty and prime minister Vladimir Putin proposed a new European economic system "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" as moves towards realizing the Greater Europe ideal. But

Western countries perceive themselves to be the victors of the Cold War and have constantly imposed strategic pressures on Russia, forcing it to accept its total defeat in the geopolitical confrontation with the West. Russia eventually realized that it would be impossible to integrate into the Western world. (Li Ziguo, 2017)

This became the reason for Russia to turn to Eurasia. According to Li Ziguo,

The Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) is an initiative by Russia for pan-regional economic cooperation in the context of a new economic situation. The initiative, while mainly focusing on promoting the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and with certain geopolitical flavor, takes China as an important partner by way of synergy with the China-proposed Silk Road Economic Belt. The GEP may, to a certain extent, overlap with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but its concept of openness, inclusiveness and coordinated development is in line with the spirit of the BRI. Therefore, the GEP could go hand-in-hand with the Chinese initiative and ensure development and stability in the Eurasian region while also serving as a lever for reshaping future global order. (Li Ziguo, 2017)

The chairman of the Chinese Association for East European, Russian, and Central Asian Studies, Li Yongquan, recognizing the complexity involved in docking the GEP with the Chinese initiative of BRI, nevertheless believes that linking the Russian and Chinese development strategies "is crucial not only to building the Eurasian Economic Partnership, but also, in some ways, to that organization's future prospects." He is also confident that ASEAN can be part of the new entity, adding that "In the future, aligning the development strategies of China and the Russian-led EAEU will drive the construction of the Eurasian Economic Partnership" (Li Yongquan, 2018, pp. 97-98).

In a 2018 article, Zhao Huasheng is a bit more cautious about the Russian initiative, stating it "is not clear whether the Greater Eurasian Partnership will be a long-term strategy or merely a transitional policy for Russia." He is also doubtful "that Russia has strong enough power to advance the Greater Eurasian Partnership, therefore it remains unclear just how far the Greater Eurasian Partnership can go." However, according to Zhao, "rationality and necessity still exist in advancing the economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation in the greater Eurasian region." He concludes, "Greater Eurasian cooperation coincides with China's national interests, especially in that it is conducive to the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. China should, together with Russia and other countries concerned, push forward greater Eurasian cooperation" (Zhao, 2018, p. 84).

In a recent article, Zhao is more positive, arguing that, in Greater Eurasia, China is a participant in a moving force; here, before us, there is no question of making a political choice (Zhao, 2019, p. 44). He makes the following recommendation:

China and Russia should bring the process of docking BRI to the stage of practical realization, seriously think about the start of negotiations on a free trade zone between China and the EAEU, practically advance regional economic integration within the framework of the SCO, realize in practice their corresponding agreements in projects of cooperation, and jointly respond to problems of the regional economy and development. In the process of forging Greater Eurasia for China, Russia and India have the most important special interests. China should even more creatively use the mechanism of CRI (China, Russia, India) to widen its scope of contents, lessen Sino-Indian contradictions, strengthen confidence, and intensify cooperation among China, Russia, and India on regional questions. (Zhao, 2019, p. 40)

Today, one can say with full confidence that Beijing supports the Russian idea of closer cooperation in Greater Eurasia on an official level and has become involved in its realization and in examining variants thereof. The project, in its entirety, should be referred to as a Russo-Chinese project not a Russian one.

Other Eurasian partners

In other countries in the region, attitudes toward the project are positive, but some countries have yet to adopt an official position, and in some places, there is simply not enough information. Kazakhstan, through the person of its first president Nazarbayev, was one of the initiators and an active exponent of the idea. Naturally, it has some specific ideas. It pays more attention to economic effectiveness than other aspects and has come out against the politicization of any of the Eurasian programs.

In an interview, Kassym-Jomart Tokaev, the new president of Kazakhstan, remarked,

We consider that the idea of Greater Eurasia—in a broad understanding of this term—opens horizons for activation of the economic ties of Asia and Europe, and it can become a fundamental formation of a new system of international relations on the Eurasian space. The processes occurring on our mega-continent, in my opinion, form a new geopolitical reality... (Tokaev, 2019)

Speaking of Central Asia, Tokaev noted,

Close cooperation of the countries of the region, linked to the bonds with the strategic partner Russia, are a serious factor, supporting peace, stability, and security in Eurasia. In other words, realization of this goal is impossible without Russia.” He concluded that we would like to see Greater Eurasia as a “united Eurasian space of security and prosperity. (Tokaev, 2019)

Kyrgyzstan is a member of the EAEU and so is naturally involved in the formation of Greater Eurasia, through the mechanism of docking the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt. Tajikistan will also participate as a member of the SCO and active SREB partner, as will other members of these groupings. Of late, Uzbekistan has begun to open up more to the outside world and to broad international integrationist initiatives (Denisov & Safranchuk, 2016). In a recent article, two of its former, high-ranked diplomats mention the idea of Greater Eurasia, as advanced by Russian experts, and the idea of a Greater Eurasian Partnership, which they call a Chinese project, for some reason, and remind readers that Uzbekistan has always occupied a central place in the region’s development (Khaydarov &

Mirkasimov, 2019, p. 95). As for major countries such as India, none has an official position on the Greater Eurasian Partnership yet. Nevertheless, on the whole, Indian experts are reacting positively to the idea of active cooperation with Russia in Eurasia, not least of all in light of the need to balance the growing influence of China.

Thus, Raj Kumar, just like his Chinese colleagues, accepts that the GEP “signifies Russia’s disillusionment with its efforts to integrate with Europe prompting Moscow’s pivot to the East.” He argues,

Since Chinese economic resources could influence the region more than the Russians, there is ample scope for Russia to cooperate with India at a regional level in order to avoid too much dependence on China. This will also strengthen India-Russia economic ties, which have been weak ever since the Soviet Union disintegrated. The two countries could cooperate in areas like Central Asia, South East Asia, Afghanistan, Russia’s Far East and the Arctic to further boost their relationship under the GEP initiative. A weakened Russia is not in India’s favour and New Delhi must help its strategic partner’s initiative to find feet in the region at a time when India has been a vocal critic of China’s BRI. (Sharma, 2018)

Nandan Unnikrishnan and Uma Purushothaman even suggest that India should join the EEU since this “will allow India to use and contribute to the internal rail and road networks, which link the members of the EEU give access to its goods to an entire geographic space through a single tariff. Joining it would also.” (Unnikrishnan & Purushothaman, 2019, p. 81).

Geopolitics of Greater Eurasia and Russia

The emergence and development of the Greater Eurasia community is not an exclusively Russian plan or aspiration. It is a natural process in response to basic geopolitical tendencies in the world. Its foundation is Russo-Chinese closeness, propelled by the rise of China, the collapse of the USSR and the strengthening of a new Russia. It is prompted by attempts by the United States and its allies to contain the development of both states within the rubric of the international system under Western domination. Other states in the region have their own interests, which also drive them to ever more active participation in the establishment of a new Eurasian system, free from the interference of forces from outside the region.

To some degree, Greater Eurasia fills a vacuum that arose after the collapse of the USSR, that led in the 1990s to the illusion of unipolarity for a certain time. Yet most Eurasian countries felt uncomfortable in a unipolar world, feeling undefended from all the ever-growing demands of the United States and its allies. Demands for a multi-polar world grew and then became reality. Greater Eurasia became part of this emerging multipolar world.

Whether Russia can become an autonomous center in this world depends, first of all, on how successful is its domestic development. As for the external conditions for this scenario, it is now clear that the only possibility is active participation in Eurasian integration, in the establishment of Greater Eurasia, and in the deepening of cooperation with China, India, and the countries of Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Moscow’s attempts to play an autonomous role in the establishment of Greater Europe were decisively rejected by the West, apparently forever. Greater Eurasia is premised on the idea of plurality of civilizations, non-interference in the internal affairs of others, and mutual respect for the values and

approaches to domestic development which creates more favorable conditions for Russia. Whether Russia will be able to use this to establish an independent power center or will fall under the influence of another, owing to its own weakness, depends solely on itself.

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