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Sino-Russian rapprochement and Greater Eurasia: From geopolitical pole to international society?

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Abstract

Can international anarchy be stabilized, if not globally, then at least regionally? Those scholars who give a positive answer usually refer to the North Atlantic community which can be categorized as an international society from the viewpoint of the English school. The emergence of such a community outside the West is traditionally considered hardly possible. However, this article argues that it may already be emerging in Eurasia, with Russia and China being the key drivers of this trend. In the past few years, these two powers have put forward a number of major initiatives aimed at developing transport networks and logistics, and deepening economic and institutional ties between different parts of the continent. These include but are not limited to Eurasian Economic Union, supported by Russia, and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Together, Moscow and Beijing began to form a new platform for security and economic cooperation "from Kaliningrad to Shanghai"—the community of Greater Eurasia. Based on the analysis of the geopolitical logic of these initiatives, this article suggests that a new, non-Western international society may be forming in Eurasia among the states with different political systems and cultures, but common geopolitical aims and fears.

Keywords

English school, Greater Eurasia, international security, international society, Russian–Chinese cooperation

Introduction

The past few years have seen a radical shift that could change the entire structure of international relations. In general terms, it is the transition from bipolarity to multipolarity. An important aspect of this process is the formation of alternative system of international governance, especially at the regional level. This allows some scholars to speak about the phenomena of the new, non-Western regionalism, which tends to alter and compete with the Western and Western-like formats of regional integration and institution-building (Kaczmarski, 2017).

Russia and China could be considered as the key drivers of this trend. In the past few years, these two powers have put forward a number of major initiatives for developing transport and logistics, as well as economic and institutional ties between different parts of the continent, including Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative. While some scholars argue that China and Russia have different visions of regionalism and distinct views on how a regional order should be arranged (Kaczmarski, 2017), in the past years these two powers have in fact put a lot of effort into synchronizing their regional projects. In 2015, Russian and Chinese leaders signed a joint declaration on cooperation in coordinating the development of the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB; "Russian-Chinese Talks," 2015), which gave a start to numerous initiatives aiming at strengthening and coordinating regional projects of the two powers.

Probably the most ambitious part of this process might very well be the formation of a Greater Eurasian community.

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This initiative and its ancillary concept call for the formation of a single geo-economic and institutional space, one that would span if not the entire continent, then at least most of its territory (Karaganov, 2017). In Russia's official foreign policy rhetoric, the idea of creating an international community of Greater Eurasia became the Comprehensive Eurasian Partnership initiative that Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward in 2016 ("Putin Called for a Big Eurasian Partnership," 2016). In 2019, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping stressed that China supports the concept of Greater Eurasia and is ready to put effort into developing it ("Press Statements Following Russian-Chinese Talks," 2019).

The geographic contours of this new established political and economic community are very broad. According to theoreticians of Greater Eurasia, "It will encompass East, Southeast and South Asian countries, Central Eurasia, Russia, and apparently the greater part of the European subcontinent, its countries and their organizations to the extent to which they may be able to develop constructive cooperation" (Karaganov, 2017). This constructive cooperation should be based on common institutions, informal cooperation frameworks, and values, which characterize this "geo-economic and geopolitical consolidation" as the formation of a new international community—the Community of Greater Eurasia (Bordachev, 2018; Karaganov, 2017; Karaganov & Bordachev, 2017; Lukin, 2018b). Establishment of a stable international community within this geographic space is bound to solve a number of problems: to smooth out the contradictions between Russia and China, as well as China and other neighboring states; stabilize the international system in the central part of Eurasia; speed up economic growth and ensure security in the region.

Scholars and experts debate the sustainability of such an ambitious initiative and its prospects for development. "Optimists" argue that it is natural for various states and regions of the Eurasian continent to deepen their ties and that Russia and China should coordinate this process (Karaganov & Bordachev, 2017). At its heart lies the growing cooperation between the European Union (EU) and China—Eurasia's two largest centers of economic development—as well as efforts to involve other countries in this dynamic process (Dent, 2001). This has led to a new phenomenon—a trans-regionalism characterized by the linkage and synergy between several regional projects within one larger, common space. According to this view, Eurasia's rise and consolidation is an inevitable historical trend that would have occurred regardless of the external geopolitical factors (Diesen, 2018).

Another, more pessimistic (or realistic) point of view considers the very concept of a Greater Eurasia as an outgrowth of and an attempt to formalize the Russian–Chinese rapprochement with an informal union. Ever since the 1990s, realist evaluations and geopolitical considerations have looked at the possibility of a Russian–Chinese bloc appearing as a counterweight to the United States (Brzezinski, 1997a, p. 29). The concept of a Greater Eurasia and its related initiatives is also seen through the same lens. In this view, Russia seeks to enhance its status through a union with China, while Beijing sees the development of Eurasian initiatives and formats as creating a positive political and conceptual framework that allows it to expand its economic presence over practically the entire continent. It is an "axis of convenience," which could not be a long-term solution (Lo, 2008, 2019).

The authors of this article believe that the phenomenon of a Greater Eurasia is best explained by a combination of these two opinions, which in fact do not contradict each other. On the one hand, despite the deepening of economic ties between the European and Asian extremities of the Eurasian continent, the formulation and development of the initiatives giving shape to Greater Eurasia are driven primarily by political and strategic considerations rather than economic interests. This can be seen by the fact that the formulation of the very concept of a Greater Eurasia, as well as many of the initiatives on which it is based, arose in 2014–2015, with the start of Russia's confrontation with the West and against the backdrop of deepening tensions between Beijing and Washington. On the other hand, this does not mean that the Russian–Chinese partnership is fragile or that the formation of a Greater Eurasian Community is impossible or lacking an economic and political raison d'être.

Based on these considerations, the authors of this article attempt to answer two key questions: (1) Why did the Russian–Chinese rapprochement spawn so many large-scale initiatives? (2) Can Greater Eurasia be transformed from a geopolitical project into a full-scale international society?

The Greater Eurasian community: theoretical interpretations

The scholars who most consistently argue that the consolidation of Greater Eurasia is sustainable usually refer to it as an international community (Bordachev, 2018; Karaganov, 2017). In general terms, they describe a state of international relations that theorists of the English school defined as an international community—that is,

> a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements. (Bull & Watson, 1985, p. 1)

The model and inspiration for this concept was and continues to be the unique relations that have developed in the North Atlantic between the United States and its European allies in which all these criteria—dialogue, common rules, and institutions—are present and play a decisive role in the

development of political relations between states (Buzan, 2004, p. 7). Thus, most researchers who use the English school terminology maintain that in any emerging community the level of relationships and trust among the members should reach the level of the current transatlantic strategic partnership (Buzan, 2004). Although a number of researchers argue that the development of the international system in Eurasia is moving in this direction—referring, for example, to the unprecedented progress in the Russian–Chinese partnership (Bordachev, 2018)—whether this trend will continue remains uncertain and is one of the key questions this article examines.

Traditional theories describing the formation and development of international societies contain a number of assumptions that if not deny the possibility that such entities could emerge outside the Western world, then assume it would hardly be possible (Buzan, 2004, 2018, p. 477; Neumann, 2001). A durable international society can be formed by improving social structures and developing domestic and international institutions. This process may take hundreds of years, as it did in the case of Europe (Watson, 1992). Most of the scholars point out this factor as common culture to be critical for an international society to emerge. Martin Wight (1977) clearly indicated that "We must assume, that a state-system will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members" (p. 33). Finally, following the Kantian idea of "eternal peace" (Buzan, 2004), many scholars argue that democratic political systems are making the modern international society within the North Atlantic region so stable and well-regulated (Mayal, 2000).

Therefore, most theorists see no other way to form such a community on a global scale other than by steadily expanding the international community that took shape within the framework of the West (Mayal, 2000). As a result, research that referred to the terms and concerns of the English school and similar concepts focused in recent decades on how to expand the Euro-Atlantic institutions as a means for gradually transforming the Euro-Atlantic international community into a global community—rather than looking at how such communities could form in other regions of the world (Gilbert, 2012; Ginsberg, 2010; Zimmerman & Dur, 2012). This largely explains certain skepticism with which scholars view the possibility of forming such international communities outside the confines of the West—and without adopting Western institutions.

However, a more careful analysis of some theoretical assumptions of the English school indicates that a system of non-democratic states may also form an international society. Such a system does not necessarily have to be based on cultural unity, common values, and other non-institutional components. Hedley Bull (1977) argued that

> A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions. (p. 13)

Thus, it is the common interests that play a decisive role in forming an international society, not similarities in political systems, values, or cultural and linguistic affinity.

If we approach the concept of the international society from this perspective, relevant historical examples may prove useful. Adam Watson (1992) also suggests that "in the ancient world a strategic and economic system could reach sophisticated levels of organization even when the leading communities belonged to very different cultures" pp. 120–121). Moreover, most international societies we know—in fact, all of them, except for the European—had actually consisted of states with different political systems, sometimes representing a mix of democratic and non-democratic regimes, as in the case of Ancient Greece.

What are the driving forces behind the emergence of an international society then? Bull emphasizes the role of great powers in providing the international system with certain rules and institutions. The necessity to coexist, he argues, makes hegemons stabilize it in a way that allows them to avoid pointless conflicts which could challenge their higher status in the international hierarchy. To some extent, it formalizes and therefore secures a certain status for minor powers as well:

> In the same way, international society, at least in the perspective of the great powers which see themselves as its guardians, treats the independence of particular states as subordinate to the preservation of the system as a whole when it tolerates or encourages limitation of the sovereignty or independence of small states through such devices as spheres-of-influence agreements, or agreements to create buffer or neutralized states. (Bull, 1977, p. 17)

Therefore, while classical realists remain skeptical about the long-term effects of institution-building (Mearsheimer, 1995), the English school argues that institutions can transform an international system fundamentally, changing the basic patterns of states' behavior and interactions (Buzan & Little, 2000). Institutionalization of the Great Powers' leadership, combined with their will to protect their spheres of influence and the need for coexistence, serves as drivers for the interstate relations to be regulated not just through balance of power mechanisms, but rather through norms and platforms of international cooperation. We also argue that external geopolitical pressure and having a certain hegemonic state/states inside international communities serve as a clear leader are the standard mechanisms of fostering the emergence of an international society.

Many such examples can be observed throughout history. The Macedonian domination over Greek city-states could be considered as the most classical example of this trend: hegemonic rule of king Philip II was strengthened

and structured by the Persian threat (Watson, 1992). The historical formation of the Euro-Atlantic community also occurred not as an isolated phenomenon, but in response to external pressure from the Soviet Union and the increasing role of the United States in Europe. Both of these factors—the Soviet threat and the growing post–World War II dominance of the United States—have played a significant role in the emergence and development of European integration as well as Euro-Atlantic security structures and political cooperation (Kissinger, 1994).

The same logic could be employed to explain the emergence of the international community in Greater Eurasia. Analysis of international relations in non-Western Eurasia was usually conducted from the standpoint of realism and geopolitics. Scholars and experts saw Eurasia as a zone marked by anarchy and significant disagreements between various forces, centers of power, and nations, rather than as a sphere for potential cooperation. This is probably why the representatives of geopolitical thinking made the most frequent use of the term "Eurasia" as a political and geographic designation.

The geopolitical understanding of international processes on the Eurasian continent, and especially those in its non-European part, has its roots in the works of Halford Mackinder (1904) and Nicholas Spykman (1942). Both authors believed that Eurasia could only be united through military and political expansion by one of the continent's major powers. That would have meant the defeat of the West and that power's rise to global domination. In his works, Spykman considered and even recommended that Western powers cooperate with the continental powers (the so-called "Rimland") that were not part of the Heartland to contain the latter, as well as with the Heartland states as a counterweight to the Rimland if those states became too powerful (Gerace, 1991).

These geopolitical constructs influenced modern strategic and academic thinking with regard to U.S. and Western policies in Eurasia. Accordingly, the main imperative of U.S.—and, in a broader sense, Western—policy was to prevent the appearance of a single state or an entire alliance of states that could unite non-European Eurasia against the United States:

> Potentially, the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an "antihegemonic" 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. (Brzezinski, 1997a)

From the realist perspective, even a friendly Eurasian power could not be allowed to gain too much strength in Eurasia: the influence of any major power other than the United States had to be limited. Kissinger (1994) spoke openly about this, writing,

> The domination by a single power of either of Eurasia's two principal spheres—Europe and Asia—remains a good definition of strategic danger for America . . . 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. (p. 813)

Following the same logic, most analysts argue that the two countries are joining forces not so much from a desire to cooperate and advance regional integration as from dissatisfaction with their own place in the world order and a shared opposition to U.S. domination (Bolt, 2014; Brzezinski, 1997b). Much of it adheres to the thesis that the imbalance in Russian–Chinese relations will grow, leading Russia to assume the role of a junior partner and satellite state—and to conflict if Moscow rejects this status.

We argue that the assumption that Moscow and Beijing have deep contradiction is wrong. Although their interests do differ in a number of areas, they are not contradictory overall. Moreover, not only have they achieved a rapprochement in the strategic and foreign policy spheres in recent years, but their values and the character of their political regimes have become more similar as well (Lukin, 2018). This, however, has not prevented the balance of power from clearly shifting toward Beijing. Consider that significant imbalances in political and economic might exist between Western allies as well, but their deep mutual trust and shared basic values prevent this disparity from leading to serious political disagreements that could threaten their unity. This suggests that the Russian–Chinese rapprochement is more durable than commonly suggested—particularly by Western observers.

In a structural sense, the international and political situation in non-European Eurasia today resembles the conditions accompanying the formation of the Euro-Atlantic community in the 1940s–1950s. Just as Europe had to respond to growing U.S. power after World War II, Eurasia must now adapt to a much stronger China. Under ordinary circumstances, such a response could provide a counterweight to the rising power in the region. Western pressure on Eurasia, however, has prompted Russia, China, and other Eurasian powers to search for new ways to link their interests in a more complex political organization. Some analysts contend that this opposition to Western policy has already led to the formation of a Eurasian "bloc" in the confrontation that the United States and its Western allies have with a number of non-Western powers (Karaganov, 2018; Suslov, 2014). If this confrontation continues, and if the institutional environment in Greater Eurasia develops consistently, it could lead to the emergence of a Eurasian community similar to how the Euro-Atlantic community arose out of the Cold War.

In what were essentially two political and geographic areas, U.S. policy encountered problems that laid the

foundation for the current confrontation. The first is its policy on Eurasia's flanks, in Europe and Asia, where the United States had to build relationships simultaneously with old Cold War–era allies as well as with new partners—Russia and China. The second is Washington's policy in Central Eurasia, where the United States found itself involved in military conflicts that were largely of its own making. Washington's failure on all the three fronts—on Eurasia's flanks and central part—determined the nature of strategic disagreements between the great powers and, ultimately, led to the geopolitical consolidation of Eurasia we see today.

Crisis on the flanks of Eurasia

From a geopolitical standpoint, U.S. policy toward the flanks of Eurasia seems tailored not to containing Russia and China, but to creating optimal conditions for a Russian–Chinese rapprochement. The U.S. policy shifted to a confrontational model with Moscow in the spring of 2014 due to events in Ukraine. This was expressed through Western economic sanctions against Russia that have only increased in severity over time. Relations between the United States and China transformed into confrontation much more smoothly. However, signs emerged as early as 2015–2016 during the second term of Barack Obama and got transformed into a full-scale trade war under the Trump administration. As a result, security situation on the flanks of Eurasia—Europe and Asia—got much worse than in the 1990s. As Stephen Blank (2014) put it, "If the classic purpose of US force deployments in Europe and Asia is to deter and reassure allies, this policy ranks as a stupendous strategic failure".

In practice, Russia and China were in no hurry to form an alliance, even though they shared similar views on many issues and were openly dissatisfied with the unipolar order that emerged after the end of the Cold War. Although continental Eurasia is now a key zone of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, Russia had earlier placed greater importance on the Euro-Atlantic countries and China had focused more on the Pacific region—a fact that is reflected by the priorities enshrined in the two countries' foreign policy documents ("The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation," 2013).

In the 1990s and 2000s, the trade, economic, technological, and political partnerships with Western countries were many times greater than those with Russia and China, forcing the two to strive to develop relations on the "flanks" of the Eurasian continent rather than pursue geopolitical consolidation in its central region. Although many joint Russian–Chinese initiatives today—such as the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the settlement of border disputes, and so on—have become the basis for an unprecedented strategic partnership, in preceding decades, many Western analysts preferred viewing Russian–Chinese rapprochement as an attempt by the two countries to improve their negotiating position with regard to the West (Manuel, 2018). On the whole, the foreign policy priorities of Russia and China during this period corresponded to the liberal understanding of the evolution of the post-bipolar international system: both looked for ways to integrate into the new international order in search of benefits and to augment their political "weight" (Ikenberry, 2002).

The key problem was inability of the United States and its allies to find a way for proper integration of Russia and China into regional security and political orders on the flanks of Eurasia. Washington's policy generally suffered from three problems. First, it underestimated how quickly Russia and China would rise and, accordingly, demand corresponding status in a world that the United States considered strictly unipolar after the end of the Cold War. Second, the institutional legacy of the Cold War and the need to preserve old alliances gave U.S. policy too little flexibility to alter relations with Moscow and Beijing and bring them into line with the new realities. Third, at least until Donald Trump became president, the increasingly ideological nature of U.S. foreign policy identified Russia and China as "insufficiently democratic," creating an obstacle to the further development of mutual relations. These problems have made U.S.–China relations in the Asia-Pacific and U.S.–Russia relations in Europe into a series of under-appreciated mutual semi-concessions by all sides in hopes of establishing a new balance—a goal they have been unable to reach.

China's rise—that is now considered a major challenge to the international order and the U.S. position—was seen as only a distant challenge by the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton and, largely, by the Republican administration of G.W. Bush. China's efforts to begin introducing market reforms and its desire to integrate into the global economy gave rise to high hopes in Washington that the country would manage to integrate into the liberal international order as a "responsible partner" that played by the rules the United States had established (Zoellick, 2005).

Relations with another leading Eurasian power—Russia—also suffered from a strategic underestimation of its growing capabilities and the breadth of its interests—especially as it gradually restored its economic and military potential after making the difficult transition to a market economy (Rivera, 2003). Instead, Russia was seen in the 1990s, and to a lesser extent in the first half of the 2000s, as a very weak international player that had lost its former significance if not forever, then at least for a very long time. As a result, Washington saw the model of relations with Russia as a limited partnership within the framework of special relations with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, while Moscow wanted to become an equal member of the Western community and hoped that its interests would receive full consideration.

This underestimation of Russia's role led to a series of controversial decisions that continue to cause disagreements between Russia and the West. As early as 1993–1994,

the Clinton administration decided to expand NATO to include the former Warsaw Pact countries—a move that official Moscow found very troubling and saw as a threat to Russia's security (Stent, 2015). The issue of European security architecture has been one of the main sources of tension in Russia's relations with the United States and the West as a whole ever since the mid-1990s (NATO, 2020, Trenin, 2018). These tensions intensified the widespread sense of disappointment in Russia after the end of the Cold War: despite the relative democratization of the country following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its rapprochement with the West, Russia did not become a part of the West, either economically or politically (Legvold, 2016; Sakwa, 2017). As one diplomat pointed out in the late 1990s, "If current trends continue, Russia's clout in Eurasia will further dwindle and that of Western powers and Western-dominated international organizations will grow. The United States, however, will be unable to control this process" (Tsepkalo, 1998).

Even from the start, the Obama administration's initiatives to renew relations with rising powers were hindered by the inertia of old alliances and unions inherited from the Cold War. Even the Obama administration's proposed "reset" with Russia never envisioned a basic restructuring of the European security architecture that was still based on old Cold War alliances. For example, the United States rejected a proposal in 2010 by then-President Dmitry Medvedev to sign an agreement on European security (Clinton, 2010; Lomagin, 2011). Washington's fear of devaluing NATO and its desire to retain the opportunity to expand the Alliance into the post-Soviet space contributed to Moscow's deepening disappointment and the gradual erosion of the "reset" (Karaganov & Suslov, 2011). In this context, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 served as the conclusive disappointment for Russia's leaders, who then set out to make a deliberate change in the paradigm of Russian–Western relations (Suslov, 2014).

The web of U.S. alliances in Asia also limited Washington's ability to find a new approach to the Asian giant. As in Europe, the Obama administration was forced to balance between consolidating its network of alliances with the desire to involve China more closely in a U.S.-led global and regional order. In practice, these two objectives turned out to be mutually contradictory. If Washington strengthened ties with its allies, Beijing felt it was being surrounded. And if the United States strengthened its bilateral dialogue with China, the allies became concerned that the two countries would make key regional and global decisions independently of them. These tensions in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) only deepened as China's political and economic weight grew, setting the stage for a confrontation between the two countries.

Thus, by the end of Obama's term, the strategy of involving both major Eurasian powers led to the opposite result on both flanks of the continent—that is, in Europe and Asia. Washington's relations with both Russia and China became a "zero sum game" and these states' involvement in the U.S.-led order was interpreted not as a mutually beneficial process, but as a unilateral victory for Washington—one that some experts suggested was even aimed at achieving regime change in those countries. This paved the way for more radical approaches to external threats.

By the 2016 presidential election race, almost all of the candidates advocated taking a firmer line against Russia and China. The victory of Donald Trump—the candidate least involved politically in the construction of the liberal international order and, accordingly, the least inclined to exercise caution in preserving that fragile design—apparently only accelerated the transformation of U.S. policy and the deepening of the confrontation on Eurasia's flanks.

The center of Eurasia: from collapse to prominence

By the early 2010s, disagreements between the United States and the two major Eurasian powers—located at the European and East Asian extremes of the Eurasian continent—were smoldering and on the verge of flaring up at any moment. And, although those differences drove Moscow and Beijing toward a rapprochement based on their mutual criticism of the "U.S. hegemony," they did not provide those countries with a concrete agenda for strategic cooperation. With the exception of limited cooperation within the framework of the UN Security Council and such institutions as BRICS and the SCO—that are themselves in search of a concrete agenda for their activities—Russian–Chinese cooperation on the transformation of the international order has largely remained confined to political declarations rather than substantive initiatives.

Had Washington offered a positive agenda for the development of Central Eurasia under U.S. auspices, one that provided for a worthy role by Russia and/or China, it might have neutralized the potential of the Russian–Chinese rapprochement and the subsequent involvement of other countries of the region in that process. U.S. leadership in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia would have deprived the Russian–Chinese rapprochement of a concrete geographic sphere of operations and would have surrounded the Eurasian centers with an international host that would probably not have allowed Moscow and Beijing to consolidate Eurasia on an anti-U.S. basis.

The combat operations by an international coalition of troops in Afghanistan in 2001 initially created a limited, though concrete agenda of cooperation in the region. Because the country is located in the heart of Eurasia, the United States and other countries of the coalition had to establish close contacts with all of the states of the region. However, Washington's decision to shift its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq and to start a military campaign there in March 2003 as part of its global war on terror—as well as

its pressure on Iran—weakened support for U.S. policy in the region and became the subject of constant criticism from Beijing and especially Moscow (Kuchins, 2018).

This U.S. policy in Central Eurasia has had a number of negative consequences, both for Washington's relations with Moscow and Beijing and for its relations with other regional players. The legacy of previous administrations and, particularly, the large-scale military campaigns initiated by George W. Bush put constraints on how much U.S. policy could maneuver on the flanks of the continent and in its central part. During his election campaign, Barack Obama promised to speed up the withdrawal of U.S. troops first from Iraq and then from Afghanistan. In practice, however, it became clear that a rapid withdrawal of the U.S. military presence would prove impossible and could destabilize all of the Greater Middle East (Gates, 2015).

As a result, the Obama administration concentrated on maintaining the infrastructure necessary to achieve a quick military victory and to withdraw from the region. The only major regional economic initiative was the New Silk Road that became a component of the new administration's Afghan strategy. This was connected with the need to create transport and logistics infrastructure for the sale of goods made in Afghanistan. This, in turn, should have spurred the growth of domestic production and ultimately contributed to the long-term political stabilization of the country.

For a number of reasons, this initiative did not gain enough momentum to become a coherent roadmap for regional development or a mega-project by which the United States could strengthen its position in the region: given its budget constraints, Washington did not want to spend significant resources on a "Marshall Plan" for Central Eurasia. The initiative itself was left to the U.S. Armed Forces Central Command (CENTCOM), a body that is clearly more focused on military and strategic questions than economic issues. The project had effectively lost all of its political and financial support by the time the Obama administration announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014 (Rosenberger, 2017). Beijing's larger and more ambitious SREB Project—that was aimed at achieving the same objectives—essentially replaced it in 2013.

The situation deteriorated significantly in 2014, when militant ISIS terrorists gained control over large parts of Iraq and Syria, vividly demonstrating the inability of the United States to build a sustainable system of regional security. Moreover, given the fact that the rise of Islamist movements was largely the result of the "Arab Spring" that had enjoyed U.S. support from the start, many countries, including Russia and China, viewed the growth of extremism and the destabilization of the region as a consequence of Washington's misguided policy. Of course, the history of the events we analyze here is more complex than this. Nevertheless, the "collapse" of Central Eurasia and the difficult condition in which that macro-region found itself in the mid-2010s are connected to the fact that the United States first forced its way unceremoniously into the region, breaking the old political and social structures or throwing them into disrepair. It then, like the legions of the declining Roman Empire, abandoned the now unwanted lands, leaving numerous countries and peoples to face the chaos and rise of extremism alone.

Under these conditions, Washington's strategy for the region could perhaps be more effective if it relied more on regional allies and partners, and particularly China and Russia, by considering their interests or, at least, supporting the acceptable elements of their economic and integration initiatives and cooperating actively with them in such areas as the fight against terrorism and other threats. However, not having formulated an attractive agenda for cooperation in Central Eurasia, the United States remains very skeptical and critical of all efforts by non-U.S. players to promote Eurasian integration.

The Trump administration, with its characteristic economic nationalism and narrow realist approach to solving foreign policy objectives, did even less to ensure that the United States played a leading role in Eurasia rather than the role of an external player conducting a geopolitical chess game. Now, the U.S. confrontation with Russia and China was institutionalized and was given not only a political but even a legal basis. Moreover, the simultaneous pressure on both countries has helped turn what had been two separate confrontations into a single dispute with the Russian–Chinese bloc. Washington's lack of a clear strategy for Iraq and Afghanistan and its undermining of the "nuclear deal" with Iran have contributed to the further destabilization of Central Eurasia. As a result, the trends put in motion by previous U.S. administrations have only become more radical under Trump, contributing to growing confrontation on the flanks of the continent and to the deterioration of the security situation at its center.

This only drives Eurasia to consolidate against the United States and to form a new geopolitical pole. This conglomerate of Eurasian powers is united by common interests that have largely arisen through the negative consequences of U.S. policies: the need to balance the growing geopolitical pressure from the West and to restore political stability and economic viability in the central part of the continent.

Greater Eurasia and the formation of the "Eurasian pole"

The strategic connection between Russia and China is the structural basis of this association and the source of its geopolitical potential. In fact, the Russian–Chinese rapprochement is the fundamental feature of the transformation that the Eurasian international system is now undergoing. Over the past few years, the nature of their

relationship is increasingly described as a strategic partnership, as something close to a union but without the formal mutual defense obligations. It is cast as entente—as a non-formalized but deepening strategic alliance based on the recognition of common threats and the need to coordinate joint actions (Trenin, 2015).

The main political basis for the Russian–Chinese rapprochement is the similarity of their approaches to what they both see as the many defects of the post–Cold War global order, as well as their similar visions of the ideal future (Lukin, 2018c). Gilbert Rozman (2014) points to the similarity of the two countries' political rhetoric and their common criticism of the world order dominated by the United States and the West as the basis for their rapprochement. Jacob Stokes and Sullivan (2015) express a similar opinion.

This common approach was demonstrated as early as the 1990s, when Russia and China signed a "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order" (1997). Subsequently, the two countries repeatedly pointed to the need to reform the existing order and the similarity of their approaches to this issue—for example, in a similar bilateral declaration in 2006 ("Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Order in the XXI Century," 2006).

Not only has this commonality of their views regarding the development of the world order remained in place, it has also strengthened to form the core of their strategic partnership. Thus, the official Russian point of view on global order is based on the idea that "[i]nternational relations are in the process of transition, the essence of which is the creation of a polycentric system of international relations" ("The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation," 2013). Speaking before the UN General Assembly on 28 September 2015, Chinese leader Xi Jinping noted, "The movement toward a multi-polar world, and the rise of emerging markets and developing countries have become an irresistible trend of history" (United Nations, 2015). This common position is enshrined in many bilateral documents, and the two countries' leaders have repeatedly confirmed it in their statements and speeches.

There are two aspects to the two countries' common approach to the transformation of the international order. On the one hand, they share a kind of common foreign policy ideology of multipolarity whose ideal model of international order is based on what Rozman (2014) called "parallel identities." On the other hand, the interest of Russia and China in the multipolar world is based on their desire to break free from the unipolar system. This is because Moscow and Beijing see no possibility of achieving their political or economic goals in a world dominated by the United States and its Western allies. As major countries with independent views of the international agenda and ambitious strategic goals, Russia and China believe they could work more effectively in a multipolar environment managed by several centers of power that will primarily interact with each other on global issues through the platform of the UN.

At the same time, the similarity of the two countries' views did not take any concrete geopolitical form because Moscow and Beijing, on the one hand, had no incentive toward greater activity and, on the other hand, there was no specific area to which such cooperation could be applied. To a large extent, the foundation of such cooperation became the destabilization and socioeconomic breakdown in the center of Eurasia, where both Russia and China hold common goals and interests, primarily the need to ensure their own security. With the start of the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the SCO—created in 2001 as a regional platform for a general political dialogue with a wide-reaching agenda—made the fight against terrorism and extremism a focus of its activities. At the same time, the SCO agenda for economic development tended to stagnate, in no small part due to concerns from Russia and several other member countries over China's growing economic potential.

By the early 2010s, however, it became clear to both powers that an agenda for regional development was necessary. Russia began actively developing its own integration project in the post-Soviet space, launching its Customs Union in 2010. By 2015, that Union had transformed into the EAEU that now includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. In combination with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and SCO, these organizations provided the institutional basis for ensuring the security and economic development of the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia and a number of other countries in the post-Soviet space. From Moscow's point of view, they also clearly institutionalized Russia's leadership as a source of security and economic growth in the near abroad.

China launched its main geo-economic initiative, the SREB, in 2013. From the very beginning, the initiative included several different dimensions: in addition to the officially declared goals of developing transport and logistical infrastructure along the land and sea routes linking China with Europe and developing western Chinese provinces through which the land component of the SREB passed, this mega-initiative has a number of political objectives. The main such goal is to forge a friendly and safe environment on the continent, a dependable and non-hostile neighborhood—of particular importance given the deepening geopolitical conflict with the United States It seems that the SREB will remain a major economic factor determining the integration process across the vast territory of continental Eurasia (Miller, 2017; Rollande, 2017).

The Russian–Western confrontation that began in 2014 made it necessary to systematize Russian–Chinese cooperation and their existing initiatives in some sort of unified

strategy or concept. Russian foreign policy experts developed the concept of a "Greater Eurasia"—a term that entered the official foreign policy discourse on 17 June 2016 when President Vladimir Putin declared the need to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP; "Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum," 2016).

Russia as a Eurasian power

The path toward turning Russia into an independent Eurasian center of power and world influence has become the official policy of the Kremlin and the primary focus of most Russian foreign policy strategy experts. Upon reassuming the presidency in 2012, Vladimir Putin declared that "Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent center of global development, and not a periphery of Europe or Asia" ("Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," 2013).

The pivot to Eurasia and anti-Westernism—policies that were essentially marginal about 10 years ago—are now part of the mainstream foreign policy thinking in Russia. A decade ago, Vladislav Surkov (2006)—the main intellectual of the presidential administration—said that the need to "remain part of Europe and the West" was an essential element in building Russia. Today, however, he calls for ending the "repeated and fruitless attempts to become part of Western civilization" and predicts that Russia will take an independent path for the next 100–300 years (Surkov, 2018). The former pro-Western scholar Sergei Karaganov (2017) writes that Russia has exhausted its "European storehouse." He has developed an entire intellectual line of thought based on the concept of a "Greater Eurasia"—in which Russia will play a central role.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western policy put Moscow in a no-win situation: either submit completely to the geopolitical goals of the United States and its allies—and thereby abandon its own approach to security—or else reorient itself away from pro-Western policy toward some other course. This contradicted Russia's perception of itself as a world power in global affairs and prompted it to abandon gradually the pro-Western orientation it had pursued in the 1990s in favor of becoming an "independent center of power." As Putin noted in his speech to the Federal Assembly in February 2019, "Without sovereignty, Russia cannot be a state. Some countries can do this, but not Russia" ("Presidential Address to Federal Assembly," 2019).

It remains unclear whether Russia can achieve this. Its military might is mostly consistent with this desire, but its economic development continues to lag behind significantly (Entin & Entina, 2016). To become an independent center of power in Eurasia, Russia's leaders and ruling elite must change their traditional approaches significantly in at least four areas.

First, it is necessary to understand the significance of this region and to think about it strategically, and not to pursue non-Western foreign policy and foreign economic policy on a situational basis—for example, to put pressure on the West by demonstrating alternative approaches. Eurasia's importance to Russia should be self-evident. A major shift occurred along these lines after 2014. It appears that a major portion of the political and economic elite now understand that the breakdown in relations with Europe is both serious and long-term and that it is necessary to reorient and shift at least some of those ties to the non-Western world. Not only do statements by Russian leaders—who increasingly refer to the country as part of Eurasia rather than Europe ("Address to the Federal Assembly," 2012)—bear witness to this, but also the change in the conceptual foundations of foreign policy in recent years ("The Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation," 2013).

Second, it is necessary to formulate and actively pursue an economic policy that accelerates economic growth, thus reinforcing Russia's claim to be a center of global politics. Progress in this area has been not just modest, but practically nonexistent. The Russian government claims to have decisively overcome a serious crisis and bounced back from a recession, achieving an annual growth rate of approximately 2% ("The Effectiveness of the Russian Economy," 2018). The cause of that crisis, however, remains unclear, unless it was the government's own policies. After all, Moscow leaders affirm that the anti-Russian sanctions are having no substantial effect on the economy. Nonetheless, Russia's economic growth indicators are significantly lower than the global average, other countries such as India and China that also claim to be global centers of power, and many of its neighbors in the region.

The question of economic efficiency consists not only of how to develop trade and economic cooperation with European countries under the current difficult circumstances, but also of how to strengthen Russia's relatively weak economic ties with most Asian states—ties that would facilitate more rapid economic growth at home. For the past two decades, Russia has been discussing ways to achieve more balanced cooperation with China. Moscow now pins many of its hopes on the EAEU. That organization cooperates with China as part of the linkage to the SREB. However, individual EAEU member countries also pursue ever-expanding bilateral cooperation with China, while the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation that the EAEU and China signed in 2018 is more of a statement of intentions carrying no clearly defined obligations (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2018).

Third, to become a center of influence independent of China, Moscow must pursue a skillfully balanced policy toward Beijing that neither alienates this critically important partner nor allows Russia to become dependent upon it. Russia's current diplomatic efforts along these lines are appropriate, but they receive insufficient support from the country's economic achievements. Russia continues to

export primarily raw materials to China, prompting some domestic experts to worry that the country could become a raw materials appendage of China—but if Russia has nothing else to export, there is little chance of correcting the problem.

Fourth and last, for Russia to be a leader of Eurasia, the other states in the region would have to recognize it as such. Russia has some potential in this regard. Most states in Central Asia and the Caucasus hold a clear understanding that Russia is the only guarantor of security in the region. In the case of a serious terrorist attack or attempt by Islamists to seize power, it is unlikely that anyone other than Moscow would extend assistance to the local secular regimes. This is why, for example, such countries as Armenia and Azerbaijan—despite their mutual conflict and their numerous complaints directed at Moscow—vie with each other to cooperate with Russia militarily and strategically. Russia's support in the fight against terrorism is felt even more keenly in Central Asia, where Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the CSTO. Russia's cultural influence in the region remains very strong, having carried over from Soviet and even tsarist times. From an economic standpoint, the fact that China has already become the main trading partner for most of the countries in the region tends to marginalize Russia. Although this in no way poses a threat to Russia's security, it might call its status as a separate economic center of Eurasia into question.

Historically speaking, Russia has little experience in this area. The very idea that Russia had a special path of development arose relatively recently, in the first half of the 19th century as a reaction to revolutionary events in Europe. Prior to the reign of Peter the Great, there was practically no discussion of whether this state with its capital in Moscow was Asian or European. From the time that it accepted Christianity, Rus considered itself part of Christian civilization, and Catherine the Great officially established the European status of the renewed Russia in 1768 with the "Order of the Commission on the Drafting of a New Code," that stated directly that "Russia is a European power" (Tomsinov, 2007). It was only under Nicholas I, who feared the revolutionary influence of Europe, that the triad of "Orthodoxy-autocracy-nationality" was formulated, emphasizing Russia's distinctive social and political structure. In this arrangement, the all-powerful autocrat communicated with the people directly and took care of them based on a fundamentally different spirituality.

Overall, the Bolsheviks' rise to power marked a victory for Westernism: according to Marxism, the world is following the same path and revolutionary Russia should not be an exception. Vladimir Lenin and his successors did not view Soviet society as differing from Western society in the civilizational sense: they only believed that they had pulled ahead on the ladder of social development. In principle, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of the "democratic movement" in Russia did not indicate a departure from its Western orientation or from its belief that Russia was part of a single, worldwide historical process. The difference lay in something else: Russia was now considered not a leading, but a backward country. It was located on a lower rung of global progress than the "civilized world" of the West and was ready to become a subordinate student.

However, the structural situation in the world changed: the political and economic center of the international system began to shift toward the Asia-Pacific region. Many countries began pivoting toward Asia such as the United States, EU states, and Australia. It was only a matter of time before the non-Western world began to embrace the ideas of multipolarity and a diversity of civilizational paths toward world development.

Russia's idea of Eurasia holds a number of advantages. First, the desire to become an independent pole in world politics aligns with Russia's historically based view of its role and status in international affairs. The Russian leadership under Putin has repeatedly stressed that Russia has always been an independent state and never submitted to outside political dictates, even when it considered itself part of Europe.

By focusing on its own region of the world and giving more attention to Asia, Russia might achieve the strategic objectives of developing its Siberian and Far Eastern regions—goals it has repeatedly proclaimed but fallen far short of accomplishing. From the geopolitical standpoint, Russia's transformation into a center for the consolidation and integration of Eurasia would help ensure its security and create a friendly external environment, thus contributing to peaceful political relations and its effective economic development. The further development and possible expansion of the EAEU, its linkage to the SREB, the growing effectiveness of the SCO, and the introduction of the GEP in cooperation with China are destined to play a major role in this process.

The shift toward creating an independent Eurasian pole of world politics is apparently a long-term trend in Russian foreign policy. This does not mean, of course, that Russia should stop up its window into Europe. More likely, Russia is moving toward balancing the two areas of focus, turning from a poor cousin of Europe into an intermediary between Europe and Asia that combines the advantages of both and serves as something of a melding of civilizations and cultures. This process represents a rethinking of Russia's historical role.

China and Greater Eurasia

The above-mentioned rethinking and transformation of Russia's foreign policy strategy coupled with the mistakes the West made in its Eurasia policy laid a firm foundation for Russian–Chinese rapprochement. The task of turning Russia into an independent power center of Eurasia led to the appearance of such initiatives as the EAEU and GEP

and made it necessary for Moscow to intensify its political and economic contacts with the states of the continent—primarily China. It was inevitable that those initiatives would come into either competitive or cooperative interaction with the projects China is implementing as part of its pivot toward Eurasia. Western policy in Eurasia has provided the structural prerequisites for Russia and China to link their initiatives in the region, starting with the EAEU and SREB, and extending to a linkage between the latter and the broader initiative to create a Greater Eurasia.

Similarly to Russia though starting a little later, China has been rethinking its relationship with the West, and primarily with the United States; the trade war Trump unleashed against Beijing was the trigger. Of course, China, unlike Russia, never strove to become part of the Western international system, the so-called "liberal world order" (Rozman, 2014). The idea of including China in that order and the expectation that after implementing reforms it would become a democracy and switch to a market economy system existed only in the ideologized thinking of Western political scientists and experts. Beijing, however, was not opposed to becoming part of the established global governance and economic system and hoped only that China would occupy a place in it that was worthy of its economic might. Chinese leaders felt that the country's economic success would naturally cement the position of the ruling regime, and not undermine it ("Xi Calls for Reforms on Global Governance," 2016). For this reason, Moscow's harsh reaction to Western actions in, for example, Ukraine prompted veiled criticism from Beijing (Fu, 2016).

When events unfolded largely as China had expected—meaning that the country gained in strength but without moving toward the Western model—U.S. leaders concluded that Beijing had deceived them. As U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated in April 2018,

> They (Chinese) have most certainly not embraced democracy. They've actually gotten more autocratic and they have embraced the definition of a world economic order that basically means "we will take all the benefits of global trade and global economics." But we do not intend to live by any of its obligations. ("China Poses Strategic Challenge to US: CIA Director Tells Senators," 2018)

As a result, the United States declared China an enemy and applied economic measures against it not only with the goal of "restoring economic justice," but also of forcing a change in the country's political path. Then-National Security Advisor John Bolton openly said as much in September:

> This is not just an economic issue. This is not just talking about tariffs and the terms of trade. This is a question of power. The intellectual-property theft that you mentioned has a major impact on China's economic capacity, and, therefore, on its military capacity . . . I think all of this goes to what will be the major theme of the 21st century, which is how China and the United States get along. (Friedman, 2018)

This turn of events led Beijing to begin rethinking its policy of coexistence with the United States. Chinese leaders increasingly understand that this confrontation will continue for a long time, that its true cause is not so much economic as geopolitical: the unwillingness of the United States to accept China's independence and the fact that it represents a different and successful model of development. For this reason, Beijing is increasingly preparing for a long-term defense and is building an economy that is less subject to U.S. influence (Sullivan & Brands, 2020). In this situation, China urgently needs partners—primarily Russia, but also other states of Eurasia and the non-Western world. Russia's concept of a Greater Eurasia could not have come at a better time.

Support for the idea of a Greater (or Comprehensive) Eurasian Partnership is enshrined in several official Russian–Chinese documents, including their Joint Declaration of 2016 ("Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China," 2016). During the 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 the 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: Russia Forms the Eurasian Space With China," 2016).

At a meeting with President Putin in Moscow on 25 May 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China welcomed and supported "Mr. President's personal initiative on creating a Eurasian partnership." According to Wang, the Chinese Commerce Ministry and the Russian Economic Development Ministry are currently examining possibilities for developing a Eurasian trade partnership and are preparing a relevant agreement ("Meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi," 2017).

On 4 July 2017, during Xi Jinping's visit to Russia, Chinese Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan and Russian Minister of Economic Development Maksim Oreshkin signed the Joint Declaration of Feasible Study on Eurasian Economic Partnership Agreement. According to an official Chinese comment, the signing of the declaration

> is a significant trade and economic achievement of President Xi Jinping's visit to Russia, showing the steadfast determination of China and Russia to deepen their mutual beneficial cooperation and promote trade liberalization and regional economic integration. It also shows the common willingness for a comprehensive and high-level trade and investment

> liberalization arrangement which opens to other economics in the future. It will inject new strength for the comprehensive strategic partnership of the two countries. ("China and Russia Sign the Joint Declaration of Feasible Study on Eurasian Economic Partnership Agreement," 2017)

Most Chinese experts are also 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 implementation of the idea of a "Comprehensive Eurasian Partnership" proposed by President Putin "has great strategic importance for the reconstruction of world structures, harmony on the Eurasian continent, as well as for China to enter more deeply into the world economy" (Zhang, 2018). Executive Vice President of the China Institute of International Studies, a Chinese Foreign Ministry think tank, Ruan Zongze, commented,

> 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.

According to Ruan, 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 and Russian President Putin Formulated Partnerships in Greater Eurasia During Negotiations," 2016)

Recognizing that the process of linking the Greater Eurasia project with the Chinese SREB initiative, Chinese Association for East European, Russian and Central Asian Studies Chairman Li Yongquan 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 also is confident that Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be part of the new entity. He believes 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, 2018).

An influential Chinese expert on Russia and Central Asia Zhao Huasheng in an 2018 article is a bit more cautious about the Russian initiative as such because he 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 more recent article, Zhao (2019) is more positive, arguing that in Greater Eurasia, China is a participant and a driving force and there is no question of a political choice (p. 44). He makes the following recommendation:

> China and Russia must translate the process of linking the *One belt, One road* initiative. at the stage of its practical implementation, think seriously about the start of negotiations on a free trade zone between China and the EAEU, practically advance regional economic integration within the SCO, implement projects of practical cooperation, and respond jointly to regional economic and development issues. China, Russia and India have extremely important special interests with regard to the process of creating a Greater Eurasia. (Zhao, 2019, p. 40)

Thus, it is now possible to state with full confidence that Beijing supports the Russian idea of closer cooperation on a Greater Eurasia, has committed officially to the GEP project, and is considering various ways to implement it. Therefore, it is not so much a Russian as it is a Russian–Chinese project.

Other Eurasian partners

The other countries of the region view the project very positively, but not all have taken an official position on it and some still need more information. Kazakhstan—primarily in the person of its first president Nursultan Nazarbayev—is one of the originators and active proponents of the idea. Naturally, Kazakhstan takes a specific approach to the project, focuses more on the question of its economic effectiveness and benefits, and opposes any attempt to politicize Eurasian programs.

In an interview with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* on 2 April 2019, the new President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, noted,

> We believe that the idea of a Greater Eurasia—in the broad sense of that term—opens new horizons for activating economic ties between Asia and Europe and has become a foundation for forming a new system of international relations in the Eurasian space. In my view, the processes taking place on our mega-continent form a new geopolitical reality . . . . (Dolgopolov & Fronin, 2019)

The fact that the new leader spoke positively of a Greater Eurasia indicates that Kazakhstan will carry on its policy

and is ready to become one of the important partners in this process.

Speaking about Central Asia, Tokaev noted, "The close cooperation of the countries of the region, connected with Russia by ties of strategic partnership, are a serious factor for ensuring peace, stability, and security in Eurasia. In other words, achieving these goals is impossible without Russia." He concluded,

> The idea of a Greater Eurasia opens horizons for activating economic ties with Asia and Europe and could become the foundation for forming a new system of international relations on the Eurasian continent . . . On the whole, the main element in the future architecture of cooperation should become the unfolding of the integration potential of our countries and associations within the framework of forming a Greater Eurasia that we would like to see as a unified Eurasian space of security and prosperity. (Dolgopolov & Fronin, 2019)

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan—as a member of the EAEU—is naturally part of the process of creating a Greater Eurasia through the mechanism of linking the EAEU and SREB. Tajikistan will also participate as a member of the SCO and an active partner of the SREB. The same is true of other SCO and EAEU members and partners to the SREB. Uzbekistan has recently become more actively open to the outside world and broad international integration initiatives. In a recent article, former high-ranking Uzbek diplomats Abdusamat Khaydarov and Surat Mirkasymov refer to the idea of a Greater Eurasia proposed by Russian experts as well as the idea of a GEP—that they, for some reason, attribute to China—as the basic concepts for Eurasia's development. The authors point out that Uzbekistan has always been central to the development of this region (Khaydarov & Mirkasymov, 2019, p. 95). Despite certain political contradictions, all these countries, being a part of what one historian called "inner Eurasia" (Christian, 1994), share very similar historic experience and strategic culture, which simplify their involvement in the construction of Greater Eurasia.

India, as one of the larger countries in the region, has yet to formulate an official position concerning the GEP. Indian experts, however, hold a generally positive attitude toward the idea of actively cooperating with Russia in Eurasia—not least for the sake of counterbalancing China's growing influence.

Thus, Raj Kumar from Indira Gandhi National Open University, just like his Chinese colleagues, accepts that the "Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) 'signifies Russia's disillusion with its efforts to integrate with Europe and prompting Moscow's pivot to East.'" He argues,

> Since the Chinese economic resources could influence the region more than the Russians, there is ample scope for Russia to cooperate with India at regional level in order to avoid too much dependence on China . . . The two countries could cooperate in areas like Central Asia, South East Asia, Afghanistan, Russia's Far East and Arctic to further boost their relationship under the Greater Eurasia partnership initiative. (Kumar, 2018)

One of the key reasons why a number of countries in the region either support or at least look positively at the Greater Eurasia concept is its "umbrella-like" character that leaves it open for discussion without making it a tool for imposing a regional hegemony. On the contrary, Russian and Chinese experts and promoters of the initiative suggest that small and medium-sized powers of the continent might see consolidation around such an "umbrella-like" initiative as a "soft" means of counterbalancing a rising China and for "dissipating" its growing might into the regional community of nations—into the Greater Eurasian Community.

The Greater Eurasia Project today

The idea of a Greater Eurasia has developed further, taken on a substantial agenda, and gradually become part of the narratives of Russia and China. The concept was confirmed in a Russian–Chinese declaration that the leaders of both countries signed during a visit to China by the Russian president in June 2016 ("Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China," 2016). Speaking at a meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia and ASEAN on 2 August 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said,

> The Greater Eurasia Partnership is not something that you join . . . It is not a previously prepared project that is coordinated by a narrow circle of original participants who tell others that there are terms on which we will interact with you.

He confirmed that the idea "is based on the fact that the EAEU and SCO, that partially overlap the EAEU and ASEAN, are already present in that region." The foreign minister emphasized the role of the SCO, ASEAN, and China and called on all countries situated in that enormous geopolitical space to pool their resources and find a way to achieve such a partnership ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at the News Conference Following the Russia-ASEAN Foreign Ministers," 2018).

These ideas took shape as the Russian–Chinese initiative for the linkage of the EAEU and SREB, the Comprehensive Economic Agreement between the EAEU and China, and the generally unprecedented intensification and institutionalization of Russia's economic relations with China. They also find expression in the creation of a Eurasian community, the expansion of the SCO to include India and Pakistan, as well as the granting of observer status to Iran. Many other countries besides Russia and China also put forward projects for the development of infrastructure and trade on the Eurasian continent. These include Japan, South Korea, India, and the EU. The primary objective now is to formulate relations between all of these regional players that would prevent competition between the various geo-economic projects and formulate rules and norms of economic and political interaction in this space. This contradicts the strategic goals of the United States. For

this reason, many scholars interpret the formation of a Greater Eurasia as a process of forming the Eurasian pole of a new Cold War—that would, on the one hand, provide a counterweight to the U.S.-led Western pole and, on the other, seek a development model independent of Western institutions and resources (Karaganov, 2018).

The building of a Eurasian community, however, is still at an early stage. It is a long and laborious process to develop the institutional architecture for a Greater Eurasia out of the numerous existing initiatives that often overlap and, at times, conflict. In particular, Russia and the EAEU are not yet a part of most Asiatic institutional platforms. Although it is interested in creating a favorable external environment in which to develop, apart from its own integrative initiatives, Russia remains only minimally involved in multilateral economic formats, and it has yet to realize the full potential of the EAEU as a means for becoming involved in those processes. Because the EAEU is largely focused on its own members, it has only a limited ability to become one of the institutional bases of a Greater Eurasia—just as it limits Moscow's chances for promoting trade and investment norms and standards that would benefit Russia.

Two main factors influence the dynamics of the integrative processes in Greater Eurasia: (1) economic—the regionalization of trade, investment, and logistical ties around new points of growth and the integrative initiatives that sprout up around them, and (2) political—growing competition between various institutional formats, spurring the development of old projects and the emergence of new ones.

The result of the rapid institution-building associated with various integration tracks and interstate organizations has been the emergence in Eurasia of the so-called "bowl of noodles" phenomenon: a conglomeration of interconnected and intersecting projects. The abundance of such institutional formats—without a unifying logic—diminishes their effectiveness, potential for further development, and political significance.

Given this situation, it becomes especially important to develop a unified logic of institutional development within the framework of the GEP and other multilateral initiatives. The initiative to form a Greater Eurasia as a geopolitical and geo-economic reality is not intended to create a unified institution for regulation and cooperation—after all, every attempt to create such an institution in the APR based on APEC and other initiatives has failed. Instead, it is designed to form a unified logic of coexistence and development for existing and possible new formats, making it possible to raise the efficiency and sustainability of the institutional architecture of Greater Eurasia. Russia should play a significant, if not leading, role in this process.

Russian–Chinese cooperation and the process of forming a Greater Eurasia are complex and challenging. It is difficult not to agree that geopolitical pressure by the West has been a key motivating factor behind the consolidation of a number of non-Western powers in Greater Eurasia and their decision to put forward numerous economic initiatives. This does not mean, however, that if such pressure disappeared, the phenomena it caused would also quickly vanish. In the same way that the Cold War led to the formation of a stable international community in the Euro-Atlantic region, the West's current policies are largely creating the political conditions for a somewhat similar security space and economic cooperation in Greater Eurasia.

Conclusion: from a Eurasian pole to a Eurasian community?

Can the concept of a Greater Eurasia be viewed as a roadmap for the sustainable development of non-Western Eurasia—and perhaps, one day, of the whole continent? And, can the Russian and Chinese initiatives in the region really serve as the basis for a stable Eurasian international society that would ensure economic prosperity and peace for its residents in the same way that the Euro-Atlantic community has for those countries? There is probably no simple answer to these questions: it is too early to talk about long-term consequences considering that the Greater Eurasia project and its component initiatives have existed for only a few years.

Criticism of the fragility of the Russian–Chinese partnership and the initiatives it has engendered is out of place. As this analysis has shown, there are a number of counterarguments to the notion that the geopolitical nature of Russian–Chinese rapprochement and the development of a Greater Eurasia necessarily make that process unsustainable and fragile. First, the geopolitical pressure that the United States is exerting on Russia and China cannot disappear overnight: it is advancing according to its own logic and has acquired an obvious inertia. Overcoming it will require considerable and sustained effort from all parties involved. Considering that the Trump administration and Congress are labeling Russia and China as the country's main strategic opponents, it would take a major act of political willpower to overcome this—something that seems very unlikely in the near future. For Beijing and Moscow, the main problem will be overcoming the distrust and outright anti-U.S. sentiment embedded in their foreign policies. This stems from the extremely critical view of U.S. policy that Eurasia has held for the past two decades.

It remains unlikely, however, that the United States will fully abandon any attempt to dominate the global international system. In addition, even if the policies of the United States, as well as those of Russia and China were to change simultaneously, it apparently would not put an end to the idea of a Eurasian community and the initiatives that are bringing it into being. These projects address the basic need for security, political stability, and economic growth in the central part of the Eurasian continent. Given that they were born out of adverse geopolitical circumstances, it seems that such mega-projects will continue to arise in the future.

At the same time, the need to overcome the confrontation between the nominal poles of this new confrontation could lead European countries and the United States to become more actively involved. Eurasia's current geopolitical and geo-economic consolidation on an anti-U.S. or

even anti-Western basis and the formation of "Eurasian" and "Western" poles could give way to a convergence of the "poles" and their joint development.

Many present the example of European integration and the building of the Euro-Atlantic community—that inspires so many integration theorists—as a unique case and proof that a similar undertaking somewhere else would not produce the same result. Having survived two World Wars and the loss of countless lives and treasure, the countries of Europe resolved to avoid a new conflict. They sought to unify around a common development agenda and to establish a collective defense against outside threats that, for the first time in history, outweighed their internal disagreements. European intellectuals had dreamed for centuries of unifying Europe, and its ultimate realization was based on deep cultural, historic, and political commonality among its peoples as well as their obvious economic interdependence.

At the same time, the example of the Euro-Atlantic community provides grounds for guarded optimism that a similar community could arise in Eurasia. The structural conditions for the formation of the Euro-Atlantic community and the planned community of Greater Eurasia are, to some extent, similar. The Euro-Atlantic community also developed under conditions of geopolitical pressure—from the Soviet Union and the socialist camp that was emerging at that time. This created a need for the geopolitical and geo-economic consolidation of the West and found expression in the formation of a large-scale system of security (NATO) and the emergence of a number of integration initiatives that led to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Another important challenge that the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions faced was the need to diffuse the enormous might of the United States throughout the international community and to avoid any association driven by fear and the desire to counterbalance U.S. hegemony. Such coalitions repeatedly led to wars in Europe—including the two world wars that arose over fears of Germany.

The formation of a Eurasian community is a mega-trend that might solve similar structural challenges in Eurasia. The Eurasian continent, so full of disagreements and smoldering conflicts—many of which arose from the destabilization of the central part of the continent in the 2000s—stands in need of a similar shared agenda and a common idea of development like the one that served as the basis of European integration. The geopolitical confrontation between the United States and two key Eurasian powers is the political driving force behind this idea. However, in the same way that European integration acquired its own raison d'être and continues after the end of the Cold War, the Eurasian community—if it takes shape and acquires a substantive agenda—has a chance to become a new, self-sustaining reality. It could contribute to the security of a vast part of the Eurasian continent and improve the lives of billions of people who live there.

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