

Article

Mapping Eurasia: Contrasting the Public Diplomacies of Russia's 'Greater Eurasia' and China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative

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Abstract

This paper contrasts the public diplomacies behind China and Russia's approaches to Eurasian Order and process-traces the gradual interaction between the two. It argues that Russia's 'Greater Eurasia' vision seeks to create a common space in Eurasia in a concert with other influential powers like China, but with Russia remaining as an indispensable pole. China's 'Belt and Road' rhetoric of Eurasian connectivity suggests that China formulates an ambition to co-shape global order, for which its regional activism serves as leverage. Drawing on available documents and selected interviews, this paper argues that Russia and China's grand narratives ('Greater Eurasia' and BRI, respectively) indicate a principled, albeit still restrained willingness to collaborate in the future mapping of Eurasia's political space. Despite a possible economic competition between the operating modes of the economic land corridors envisioned under the BRI and the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union, a joint interest between Russia and China in countering Western governments in global institutions tempers the effects of regional rivalry.

Keywords

Eurasian Order, Greater Eurasia, Belt and Road Initiative, China, Russia, Public Diplomacy

Introduction

China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative, launched in 2013, aims to expand infrastructure and trade links between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Besides the rhetoric about the promotion of inter-regional connectivity and economic prosperity, China's 'Belt and Road' initiative (BRI), as OBOR has been rebranded three years later, has been analysed as being motivated by the pacification of China's Xinjiang province (Pantucci & Oresman 2018), the internationalisation of the Chinese renminbi and the de-dollarisation of international commerce

(Cooley 2015: 2), and the expansion to new markets for Chinese excess industrial and consumer goods (Ferdinand 2016: 951). The BRI has become China's signature foreign policy vision of this century, on which enormous financial, diplomatic, and economic resources are being spent. But with China's new activism in Eurasia, Beijing becomes more active in a part of the world where Russia has played a more dominant role in previous decades. With the establishment of the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, in addition, Russian regional integration models might bring along tariff, institutional, and normative incompatibilities with the Chinese-promoted economic corridors of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB). This creates the potential for clashes in Eurasian Order conceptions between Russia and China. Against this background, this paper answers the question to what extent Russia and China's public diplomacies on Eurasian integration are indicative of a willingness to coordinate their foreign policies in the wake of China's growing activism in Eurasia. The scope of the article excludes an in-depth analysis of the role of Western governments in influencing these processes. The EU has developed a 'connectivity platform' to enter into a dialogue about regional infrastructure with China, but still lacks a comprehensive response to shifting power dynamics in Eurasia. And the US 'new Silk Road' plans of 2011 silently fizzled out, two years before China's OBOR was launched. Developments in Western-Russian relations, however, have become a factor influencing the Russian public diplomacy on China's role in Eurasia, as the article will discuss.

For the argument developed in this article, the following paragraphs focus on the effects of China and Russia's public diplomacy on Eurasian Order conceptions. As such, the emphasis rests on a discursive level which we need to understand in order to make sense of the politics of space. Regional integration is a complex process in which not only regulatory standards, but also norms and ideas diffuse and potentially clash with others. That is why states use 'strategic narratives' to tell a story about their foreign policy objectives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle 2013). In a Eurasian context, Russian and Chinese continental 'geo-visions' become 'crucial sites of spatial construction,' as Mayer and Balázs put it (2018: 209). China's ambitious 'Belt and Road' initiative is an example of a 'Going out' strategy in which not only money and goods, but also ideas start to travel on a transnational level, and, in the process, engage with and confront normative frameworks favored by Russian elites. It is not only an economic initiative, but becomes a discursive strategy that assembles 'elements of perceived reality [...] to promote a particular interpretation,' as Entman (2007: 164) defines the process of *framing*.

Without employing such 'strategic narratives', economic connectivity projects across multiple countries would not be able to succeed (Gilboa 2008: 67; Cull 2008). Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin note that a '[s]trategic narrative [...]

directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system.' (2014: 74), and it is part and parcel of public diplomacy to channel, amplify and strengthen state resources used to positively influence the international identity of a given country. Against this conceptual background, China's public diplomacy on questions of Eurasian integration will be presented first, before the article proceeds to contrast this with Russia's public diplomacy on Eurasian integration. Doing so, it combines a comparative analysis of public diplomacies (Collier 1993) with a process-tracing of governmental decisions (Beach & Pedersen 2013) – an approach which lends itself to the paper's aim to shed light on Russian-Chinese interaction on questions of Eurasian integration. A third part analyses prospects for the convergence of Chinese and Russian grand narratives for the future of Eurasia (BRI and 'Greater Eurasia', respectively). Such a convergence will depend, the paper argues, on questions of local ownership of the in-between-countries, converging threat perceptions in world politics, and the potential for co-leadership in the mapping of political space. The analysis draws on policy documents, the scholarly literature, and semi-structured interviews with Chinese and Russian current and former officials as well as experts.

China's Public Diplomacy on Eurasian Integration

More than half a millennium after the rise of the seafaring era had put an end to the ancient Silk Roads, China conjures a historic revival. The 'One Belt, One Road' (*yi dai yi lu*) initiative was officially unveiled by the Chinese government during an address at Nazarbayev University in Astana by President Xi Jinping in September 2013.¹ The proposal to build an economic 'belt', stretching from China across Central Asia to Europe, evokes connotations of ancient transcontinental trade connections. A month later, in an address to the Indonesian Parliament, Xi proposed the development of a '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. Together, these are the 'Belt' and 'Road' of China's 'Belt and Road' initiative. A joint action plan in March 2015 by China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce provided the road map for the development of this 'new Silk Road', which revolves around the key ideas of connectivity, policy coordination, investment facilitation, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (also known as the *Wu Tong*, the five openings).²

In the same year, President Xi set up a 'Leading Small Group for Advancing the Belt and Road Initiative'. Four years later, at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing

¹ 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,' NDRC, 28 March 2015, retrieved 21 September 2018, <http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html>. The NDRC is the main body that oversees the BRI, and receives its instructions from the State Council.

² 'Full Video: President Xi Jinping delivers speech at Nazarbayev University', CCTV, 7 September 2013, retrieved 15 July 2017, <<http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20130907/102105.shtml>>.

in May 2017, Xi welcomed twenty-nine national leaders and delegates from 130 countries and expanded on his vision of new global opportunities. 'What we hope to create is a big family of harmonious co-existence,' Xi said, as he announced the release of an additional 100 billion yuan for the Silk Road Fund and an additional 380 billion yuan channeled through the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank in support of Belt and Road projects, raising the total funding available for the Belt and Road initiative to an astonishing US\$ 900 billion.³ These two policy banks already lend more money in Asia than the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) combined (Miller 2017: 12).

China's public diplomacy hurries to stress the co-managed nature of the BRI and seeks to rebut the criticism that the initiative is a unilateral Chinese strategy. But attempts to quantify 'Country Cooperation' (as the NDRC has begun to do in September 2016) and the socio-economic implications for local agency may constitute a contradiction with China's traditional insistence on 'non-interference' (Bai 2016). In particular, the often-repeated assumption that Chinese aid is devoid of political conditionality has to be contrasted with more nuanced financing requirements of Chinese 'investments'. Chinese 'concessional loans' stipulate that Chinese state banks generally do not finance projects without a Chinese component to it, meaning that Chinese banks give out loans to Central Asian governments, which in turn reinvest the money in a Chinese company that carries out a project with Chinese labor. Some experts have estimated that no less than half of the materials, equipment, and services procured under such contracts come from China (Tian 2018: 27). This circular flow of loans makes Chinese aid vulnerable to the criticism that it constitutes 'predatory aid' from which local industries hardly benefit (Jaborov 2018). Some Chinese experts have recognised that this can become an obstacle for the success of the BRI, and that Chinese businesses need to engage more with local communities and adopt more of a corporate social responsibility.⁴

On a governmental level, the BRI narrative taps into a discourse familiar to the ears of Western development aid agencies. Xi announced the construction of railways, energy pipelines, and highways westwards through Central Asia, as well as southwards through Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asia. Xi spoke of the need to 'improve road connectivity' and 'cross-border transportation infrastructure' that would also be linked to 'unimpeded trade' (Xi 2013). Long-distance freight trains link Suzhou to Warsaw, Chongqing to Hamburg, Lianyungang and Chongqing to Duisburg, Yiwu to Madrid and London, and Wuhan to Lyon. The 'Iron Silk Road' has become the metaphor to denote such new railway networks crisscrossing the Eurasian landmass (Duarte 2018: 13). In a next step, new trade opportu-

³ 'Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum', Xinhuanet, 14 May 2017, retrieved 9 August 2018, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm>.

⁴ Author's interview with Wang Xinsong, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 20 June 2018.

nities would then lead to an increased use of the renminbi, China's currency, for transactions throughout the region in what Xi called 'monetary circulation' (Xi 2013).

Yet, for all the publicity surrounding the cross-border 'connectivity', it should be noted that none of the ideas behind this initiative are entirely new. Tim Summers (2016) has convincingly analysed how the new Silk Road narrative effectively manages to rebrand previous policy ideas that already date back to the 1980s - like China's 'opening to the west' (*xiangxi kaifang*) or the idea of turning China into a 'bridgehead' (*qiaotoubao*). The 1996 'new security concept' (*xin anquanguan*) had also aimed at achieving regional stability through closer economic development, as had Jiang Zemin's 1999 Great Western Development Campaign (*xibu da kaifa*) (Clarke 2017: 73).⁵ Such policies had partially been promoted already by Chinese provinces like Yunnan and Guangxi (Li 2014).

Giving Chinese trade and infrastructure objectives a new 'spatial fix' by introducing the new Silk Road vocabulary, the Chinese government aims at the 'extension, consolidation and political elevation of pre-existing policy ideas and practice at the sub-national level in China' (Summers 2016: 1634). It is a prime example of the 'mapping' of political territory: The Chinese government creates spatiality by way of a carefully chosen government discourse (Toal 1996) – and it is an exercise in 'framing' China's international identity (Entman 2007: 164). As an act of norm diffusion, the Chinese contribution to a new Eurasian Order has clear international implications. Marlene Laruelle (2018) notes that the BRI offers 'a metadiscourse on the Silk Road and a new manifestation of China's soft power, of its 'peaceful' and 'multilateral' rise (Laruelle 2018: x). Kohlenberg and Godehardt (2018) have therefore written on a new proactive 'connectivity power' that China's foreign policy discourse has embraced. The Chinese government is actively accompanying its financial investments abroad with systematic efforts to occupy new discursive spaces. China's discursive power (*huayuquan*), they find, seeks to provide an ideational framework for China's connectivity initiatives.

Changing the course of world history always starts with powerful ideas. Trade relations will follow, and China has understood how the connectivity vocabulary can become its distinctive contribution to shape globalisation on Chinese terms. China coins new discourses that might compete with and eventually replace the talking points, ideas, and norms about 'globalisation' of Western governments. It is noteworthy that China complements its language on financial investments that taps into a Western infrastructure development discourse and the well-known Chinese emphasis on 'win-win' cooperation with new concepts such as a 'commu-

⁵ And even the NSC has been called a 'warmed-over and repackaged version of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', first articulated at the Bandung Conference in 1955 (Shambaugh 2013: 97).

nity of human destiny' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti linian*).⁶ The term itself appears paradoxical in a Chinese context, as Chinese policy-makers have tended to categorise their engagement with external powers according to the relative importance of foreign governments: Major powers are attributed more importance than states in China's periphery and 'developing states' (Eisenman & Heginbotham 2018: 7; Reeves 2016). This might also explain a reluctance to openly challenge Russia, the other dominant 'power pole' in Eurasia, to which the following section turns its attention.

Russia's Public Diplomacy on Eurasian Integration

Economically, the Eurasian Economic Union has become the landmark project of the Putin administration to promote regional integration on Russian terms. The EAEU has been established as an international economic organisation that comprises a Eurasian Economic Commission, a Council, and a Court. A Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan had already been launched in 2010 within the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), establishing a uniform customs tariff for all three members. A Common Economic Space (CES) came into force on 1 January 2012, further unifying tax, monetary, and customs policies. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) then brought all three predecessors (EurAsEC, CU, CES) together under one umbrella and inherited their legal and contractual edifice. Its founding treaty was signed in May 2014 by Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia, and came into force on 1 January 2015. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan acceded in January and August 2015, respectively. The EAEU represents a combined population of 183 million, a combined GDP of US\$ 2.2 trillion, and a goods turnover of US\$ 900 billion.⁷

Russia is by far the strongest member economically. Whilst being a *de jure* multinational economic union, the EAEU's external agenda and economic development is largely dominated by Russia (Dodonov 2017: 115). Due to the weight of the member states' economies, the staff quota for Russian citizens within the organisation is the highest, as is Russia's financial contribution (Kassenova 2012: 25). This gives Russia much more leverage to shape the EAEU's agenda. Observers have therefore noted the increased role of political factors in the decision-making process of the EAEU at the expense of member states' sovereignty (Dodonov 2017: 119), as well as an uneven economic potential and poor infrastructural preconditions (Inosemtzev 2016). The acceleration of regional integration on Russia's initiative, in addition, is often read in the context of the EU's

⁶ At the Boao Forum in April 2018, China made reference to 'a community with a shared future for mankind'. 'Transcript: President Xi Addresses The 2018 Boao Forum For Asia In Hainan', retrieved 21 September 2018, <<https://www.uscnpm.org/blog/2018/04/11/transcript-president-xi-addresses-2018-boao-forum-asia-hainan/>>.

⁷ See EAEU website: <<http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#info>>.

Eastern Partnership programme, designed to enhance the EU's relations with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Robert Legvold calls the EAEU 'Russia's bid [...] to keep up in a world of increasingly powerful regional economic blocs' (Legvold 2016: 113), and Roy Allison likewise writes that Russia understands regionalisation as 'protective integration' that is interested in retaining Russian supremacy in its post-Soviet space (Allison 2008: 190; cf. also Kaczmarek 2017: 1370). Mikhail Molchanov, however, contests such readings of the EAEU as a 'sneaky empire-building ploy' (Molchanov 2018: 411) and argues that the EAEU is best described as 'steering a third way between import substitution strategies and non-discriminatory trade liberalization' (Molchanov 2018: 412).

On a policy level, the talk in some circles in the West of a creeping 're-Sovietization' of the post-Soviet space (pronounced most prominently by then-US State Secretary Hillary Clinton in response to Russia's vision of a Eurasian Union)⁸ has conflated economic integration initiatives with Russia's public diplomacy on 'Eurasianism'. The latter is a complex phenomenon, and different actors advance different theories, visions, and policy agendas. The discursive 'reactivation' of the Eurasian space following the disintegration of the Soviet Union was an iterative development, in which nationalists competed with the Kremlin for public attention (Laruelle 2015: 90; Tsygankov 2016; Clover 2017). The circumstantial instrumentality of Eurasian thought as a legitimizing foreign policy tool complicates the perception of a neo-imperial re-constitution of the 'post-Soviet' space under the cover of the Eurasian Economic Union or transnational compatriot policies (Pieper 2018).

Russia's official positions on Eurasianism are reflected in its updated Foreign Policy Concept of 30 November 2016, which stresses Russia's aim to 'create a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean on the basis of the harmonization of the processes of European and Eurasian integration'.⁹ In 2016, President Putin linked the EAEU to the vision of 'Greater Eurasia' (*Bolsbaya Evrazia*) and proposed that the Eurasian Economic Union should become its center – tellingly, however, without prior consultation of the other EAEU members. As Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has analysed succinctly, the development of the 'Greater Eurasia' vision has predated the Ukraine crisis from late 2013 onwards, but has been accelerated by the quickly downward-spiraling Russian-Western relations. 'In lieu of a

⁸ "Clinton Calls Eurasian Integration An Effort to 'Re-Sovietize'", Radio Free Europe, 7 December 2012, retrieved 24 January 2018, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/clinton-calls-eurasian-integration-effort-to-resovietize/24791921.html>>.

⁹ 'Kontspetsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii' (2016 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 November 2016, retrieved 24 November 2017, <<http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/international/document25/>>.

Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, a Greater Asia from Shanghai to St. Petersburg is in the making', Trenin (2015: 11) writes, and concludes: 'This does not presage a new Sino-Russian bloc, but the epoch of post-communist Russia's integration with the West is over' (1). Glenn Diesen (2017) concurs and writes that 'Russia's geoeconomic strategy for a "Greater Eurasia" aims to utilise economic connectivity to remove Russia from the periphery of Europe and Asia, and reposition it at the heart of an integrated Eurasia' (1).

Russia's multiple overlapping identities are a natural consequence of its vast geography as well. While the majority of its territorial landmass is in Asia, only 20 percent of its population lives east of the Ural Mountains, yet its main cultural and political reference points (even if to challenge norms of global governance) lie in the West (Neumann 2017). Asia remains Russia's 'Other', an observation which remained unaffected by the official discourse on the strategic partnership with China in the first decade of the 2000s (Tsygankov 2009). It is this conundrum that Victor Larin has called Russia's 'East-West dilemma' (Larin 2006), and which explains why most observers have been skeptical about the sustainability of Russia's alleged 'turn to the East' in 2014. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, the sudden pace with which energy deals were sealed with Chinese companies was indicative of Russia's signaling to the US and the EU that Russia had other business partners and is strategically independent in the face of Western sanctions (Kaczmarek 2015; Makocki 2016: 7; Zhao 2016).

The public smokescreen, however, did not cover over the inadequacy of Russian diversification strategies (economically or otherwise). Its 'Greater Eurasia' vision, in this context, has become a strategic narrative for Russia to reconcile multiple identity narratives while positioning itself as the 'civilisational bridge' between Europe and an assertive China that is 'going out' (Trenin 2016). To understand the direction of causality, however, we need to understand the timing of how and when the 'Greater Eurasia' vision came into being. Russia's 'turn to the East' (*Povorot na Vostok*) was supposed to be a hedging strategy towards different Asian countries. In its China-centred implementation, however, it has sent erratic messages not only about the nature of Sino-Russian cooperation, but about Russia's engagement with multilateralism in Asia at large (Makocki & Popescu 2016; Korolev 2016: 1). Scholars and observers have analysed the broader strategic significance behind Russia's alleged pivot to Asia and have contextualised it both as a part of Russian efforts to balance deteriorating relations with the West, and as a new neighbourhood policy to respond to China's growing economic weight in the region (Rozman 2014a; Hill & Lo 2013; Keck 2014; Makocki & Popescu 2016: 25). The 'pivot' was therefore also intended to embrace other Asian countries, not just China. It is also important to note that Russia announced its 'pivot to Asia' at the APEC summit in 2012, which was hosted that year in Vladivostok. China's

Belt and Road rhetoric as analysed above only took off a year later.

Rather than seeing the 'pivot to Asia' as Russia's answer to China's rise, it would therefore appear more accurate to read the concept of a 'Greater Eurasia' as Russia's response to China's Belt and Road initiative because it dilutes China's economic domination in a pan-continental, and more vague, vision of a 'Greater Eurasian partnership' (Lukin 2018: 394). It serves to occupy a discursive space alongside China's public diplomacy on Eurasian Order. There were thus at least two complementary external driving factors that sped up Russia's 'turn' towards Eurasia in 2014, two years after its turn to 'Asia' had been announced in Vladivostok. One was the pressure from the West that propelled Russia to look for economic alternatives (if only as a signalling effect). The other was the economic activism of China itself, which required an appropriate response because it could no longer be ignored. Institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union may be instrumental in creating a Russian-led economic space as a reaction to the EU's gravitational pull in the post-Soviet space. The EAEU also serves as an alternative to and institutional buffer against Beijing's connectivity initiatives to shape Eurasia on Chinese terms, as the next section will argue. Economic and institutional aspects will be explored first, before a final section brings the analysis back to a conceptual argument about Chinese and Russian public diplomacies.

A Clashing or Joint Mapping of Eurasia?

While the Chinese government has (deliberately) not produced official maps illustrating the envisaged economic corridors of the Silk Road Economic Belt, analysts have had to refer to maps published by Chinese news agencies that were seen to resemble a semi-official representation. One was from May 2014, which seemed to exclude routes through Russian territory, and another from October 2014, which 'featured an elegant but implausible arm swinging from Istanbul back to Moscow and from there continuing to Europe', as Richard Griffiths (2017: 9) notes. The presentation of these branches with different transit countries could be read as a Chinese hedging strategy to plan for two possible scenarios: One in which tensions between Russia and the EU deteriorate to an extent where Chinese trading corridors would have to recur to Russia's Southern neighbors, and one where a thaw in relations allows for the long-term transit through Russian territory (Röhr 2018: 238; Duarte 2018: 13). China recognizes the transit potential of Russia (not least because of the existence of the Trans-Siberian railway), but is wary of the disruptive potential of Russian foreign policy moves (as demonstrated during the Ukraine crisis).

Russia, likewise, had reservations about China's new mega-project, as it signaled the beginning of a potentially dramatic reshuffling of Eurasian power dynamics. It was only at the April 2014 Boao Forum that China began to respond to

Russian concerns, followed by soothing remarks during President Putin's visit to China one month later. A more concrete step came one year later, when in May 2015 on the occasion of Xi's visit to Moscow for the annual Russian Victory Day, Russia and China signed agreements taking measures towards greater cooperation between the EAEU and the SREB.¹⁰ Two economic framework declarations granted Russian companies access to Chinese money in the form of the Silk Road Construction Fund, and granted the Chinese access to Russia as an important transport corridor (Gabuev 2016). In an interview, a former Chinese diplomat told this author: 'To be frank, the docking of the two initiatives was due to political rather than economic considerations, [...] to avoid conflict: Russia does not object to the BRI anymore, China acknowledges Russia's role in Eurasia.'¹¹

While the EAEU is a regional integration project with supranational institutions, the SREB remains a relatively abstract Chinese vision for closer Eurasian cooperation, which, on the face of it, is open to any interested participants. Marcin Kaczmarek (2017) has juxtaposed these two diverging non-western visions of regionalism, and notes that 'the Chinese elite seems to understand regionalism in functional rather than spatially bound terms' (1366), while 'Russia's vision of regionalism is exclusionary, closed and defensive' (1372). This begs the question how compatible these two initiatives of 'mapping' Eurasian space can be. Prospects for greater convergence between the SREB and the EAEU were also on the agenda of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) summit in July of the same year. Talks to establish an SCO 'free trade zone' - something that then-Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao had already proposed in 2003 - have been stalling for years. This was a prospect unattractive to Russia, as the abolition of trade barriers would naturally favor the most powerful economy in the region, i.e. China. There have also been long-standing disagreements over the role of the SCO in Asia. Founded as an anti-terror organisation initially, the SCO has become more of an economic dialogue platform, mostly at the initiative of China. However, neither has China been able to completely use the SCO as a vehicle for its Central Asia policies due to Russian efforts to dilute China's influence by welcoming the admission of new members (Gabuev 2017), nor has Russia been able to contain China's economic rise.

These different views on the organisation notwithstanding, the SCO summit in 2015 helped to institutionalise a level of interaction between the Russian-dominated EAEU and China's SREB. According to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, China's ministry of commerce and the Russian economic development minis-

¹⁰ Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki o sotrudnichestve po sopriazheniiu stroitel'stva Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soiuz a i Ekonomicheskogo poiasa Shelkovogo puti, Kremlin, 8 May 2015, retrieved 10 August 2018, <<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4971>>.

¹¹ Author's interview with former First Secretary of the Chinese embassy to Russia, China Institute of International Studies, Beijing, 21 June 2018.

try are in the process of examining ways to create a Eurasian trade partnership.¹² This development led some Russian commentators like Sergei Karaganov to even proclaim a 'macro-bloc' in 'Greater Eurasia' between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Iran, with China 'likely to act as a leader, but not as a hegemon' (Karaganov 2015). Chinese analysts like Ruan Zongze, vice president of the China Institute of International Studies, similarly argue that 'Greater Eurasia' arises from efforts to link the EAEU and the SREB.¹³

A group of Chinese experts led by Li Xin has provided a 'road map' for such a goal that includes the unification of infrastructure, the coordination of trade flows, and the creation of an FTA between China and the EAEU as an interim step towards the creation of an eventual Continental Economic Partnership.¹⁴ Russia, however, is not interested in the prospect of an FTA between the EAEU and China. Its vision of a 'Greater Eurasian partnership' might fit with the end goal of a Continental Economic Partnership, but the means of getting there should be different, in Russia's view. The issue was discussed during a meeting between Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev and his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang in St. Petersburg in November 2016, where Russia proposed a broad Eurasian partnership which could embrace EAEU states as well as India, China, Pakistan, and other potentially interested countries (Lukin 2018: 166). As with the enlargement of the SCO, the Russian extension of an invitation to other countries beyond the EAEU serves as a way to dilute China's influence and makes sure that the discussion does not really progress.

Eurasian Political Space in the Context of Global Paradigm Changes

With its narrative of a 'Greater Eurasia', Russia's economic orientation towards Europe becomes discursively linked to a supposed multi-vector policy that includes increased cooperation with China besides a range of other actors and organisations. For Russia, it has also become a discourse to frame its reaction to China's economic prowess. The Chinese government takes up the theme of cooperation in a greater Eurasian concert but prioritises bilateral negotiations with the governments along the Silk Road Economic Belt.

¹² "Meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi," 25 May 2017, retrieved 10 May 2018, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54576>>.

¹³ "Xi Jinping yu Eluosi zongtong Pujing juxing huitan dazao Daouya huobanguanxi" [Xi Jinping conducted talks with the Russian President Putin on establishing relations of Greater Eurasian partnership], Ifeng, June 27, 2016, retrieved 2 August 2018, <http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160627/49247845_0.shtml>. Other Chinese Russia scholars like Xing Guangcheng, director of the Research Centre for Chinese Borderland History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, are unsure about Russia's definition of 'Greater Eurasia' and find the inclusion of such a diverse set of institutional and geographical sub-categories confusing. Author's interview, Beijing, 15 June 2018.

¹⁴ Li Xin, Liu Zongyi, Qian Zongqi and Wang Yuzhu. 2016. *Sichouzhilu jingjidai duijie Ouya jingji lianmeng gongjian Ouya gongtong jingji kongjian* (The SREB docking to the EAEU: co-creating a common Eurasian Economic Area), Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), March 2016.

To concretise areas of cooperation between the EAEU and the SREB, a BRI-EAEU working group exists that brings together Russian and Chinese officials (where Russia speaks on behalf of the Union) before policy discussions are taken to an enlarged format that comprises all five EAEU members. The workings on the coordination between the EAEU and the SREB in these working groups serve to keep the spirit of a Sino-Russian condominium alive. Yet, it also serves to bolster the impression on the part of the other EAEU members that Russia tends to politicise the organisation.¹⁵ A '5+1' format then adds the Chinese counterparts, 'but always on the basis of the initial Russian-Chinese discussions', as Russia's ambassador for the Asia-Pacific explained this author in an interview.¹⁶ The Russian focus on multilateralism becomes a policy to retain an institutional leverage over Chinese investments which would otherwise be considered Chinese outward direct investments as part of China's external trade policy with partner countries on a bilateral level (putting Russia at a disadvantage economically and tying its hands politically). During remarks at the Belt and Road international forum in Beijing in May 2017, President Putin thus emphasised the 'multilateral cooperation' not only between the countries of the EAEU and China, but between the EAEU, the SCO, as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in pursuit of a 'greater Eurasian partnership'. This collective Eurasian effort, he noted with an implicit reference to the idea of a common space from Vancouver to Vladivostok proposed during the Medvedev presidency, would 'enable us to create a common economic space from the Atlantic to the Pacific'.¹⁷

For Russia, strengthening Russia's role as a first among regional equals has a positive correlation with its international standing. It is this approach that helps explain Russian behavior in multinational organisations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the EAEU (Chatterje-Doody 2015). Rather than multilateralising Russian state actions and acting as a constraint on its foreign policy, such organisations are seen as instrumental in consolidating Russian influence. Bobo Lo (2015) writes in this context of Russia's preference for 'managed forms of multilateralism' (159) that serve to bolster its regional influence and international standing, while the Kremlin has shown little interest in genuine multilateral engagement (in APEC, ASEAN, EAS, or other Asian bodies in which it could play a more proactive role).

For China, the necessity to work on its vision of closer Eurasian integration stems from politico-economic reasons explored above and their link to Xi's 'China Dream' (*Zhongguo meng*) which seeks to put China's 'century of national humili-

¹⁵ Author's interview with Kazakh official, London, 28 February 2018.

¹⁶ Author's interview with Russia's plenipotentiary ambassador for the Asia-Pacific, Moscow, 31 August 2017.

¹⁷ Speech by President Putin at the Belt and Road international forum 2017, 14 May, retrieved 25 September 2018, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54491>>.

ation' behind and restore its place as a world power. This is the essence of Xi's reference to 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', for which he has set a target date of 2049 – the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was not without irony that Chinese President Xi presented himself as the champion of a globalised international economy at the 2017 Davos Economic Forum at a time when the election of Donald Trump had cast doubts over the continuing US commitment to international economic interdependencies (Elliott & Wearden 2017). A year later, President Xi spoke of 'unhindered trade' and the need to combat economic protectionism at the SCO summit in the Eastern Chinese port city of Qingdao, while US President Trump almost simultaneously withdrew his support for the G7 communiqué after he had left the summit in Canada early to meet North Korea's Kim-Jong Un in Singapore. China's Belt and Road initiative is seen as a Chinese claim to become a 'rule-shaper in the global arena' (Yu 2017: 357), to assume a position to co-formulate the rules of the game instead of having to simply accept them.

Ultimately, the process of a Sino-Russian joint mapping of Eurasia may be facilitated by a convergence of positions on the global level. At the UN level, their partnership often translates into a joint positioning in the Security Council. The nature of the Sino-Russian relationship has been the subject of much scholarly reflection, and continues to inspire analyses especially in light of Russia's closer alignment with China post-2014. Gilbert Rozman writes of 'parallel identities' that tie Chinese and Russian interests in global affairs closer together (Rozman 2014b), Elisabeth Wishnick argues that a joint perception of external pressure from the West draws China and Russia closer together on a normative level (Wishnick 2016), and Alexander Lukin (2018) holds that a shared dissatisfaction with the current World Order explains a convergence of international interests between Russia and China.

China was uncomfortable with Russia's annexation of Crimea (and abstained on a vote in the UN condemning Russia), but agreed with Russian views of the underlying root causes of the crisis engulfing not only Ukraine, but also Russian-Western relations at large. A joint perception of 'humiliation' at the hands of Western powers is what unites Russian and Chinese strategic narratives on a global plane. The Chinese ardently remember the 'century of humiliation' when territorial concessions granted to Western governments (and Japan) during the 19th century ceded Chinese sovereignty, Russia remembers the Western self-congratulatory praise about the alleged 'end of history' after the Cold War, which translated into a disregard for Russian ideas about security governance. Russia and China share the assessment of the necessity of promoting 'multi-polarity' in hitherto Western-dominated international organisations. Their positioning in the Libyan and Syrian crises and on other issue areas has driven home that mes-

sage. In questions of Eurasian integration, however, the analysis above has shown how an increased Chinese economic and institutional presence in this part of the world has not been wholeheartedly welcomed by Moscow.

Conclusion

With its Belt and Road initiative (BRI), China employs a vocabulary to embed its external economic policies in a benevolent narrative of reviving the ancient Silk Roads to re-connect Eurasian trade flows. It is also a counter-narrative to alarmist accounts of the dangers of China's 'rise' and its supposedly revisionist agenda on a global level. China's Silk Road Economic Belt has also been interpreted as China's response to Russia's economic initiatives in Central Asia in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (Peyrouse 2017: 97). It is an attempt, in this reading, to reclaim a political and economic space that had been filled by other powers, including Russia, at the expense of Chinese interests. Russia entertains a vision of 'Greater Eurasia' as a reflection of gradually deteriorating Russian-Western relations, but also as an effort to reclaim the grand narrative over questions of Order in Eurasia in the context of China's BRI diplomacy.

Russia's response to China's BRI was therefore expected with much suspense, as it was seen as a parameter not only for the future of Sino-Russian economic cooperation, but also for Russian notions of co-leadership in the re-definition of regional order. Russia's grudging embrace of China's connectivity initiatives is indicative of its interpretation of what the BRI is: A Chinese strategy to bind Eurasia closer to China. Beneath the 'win-win' rhetoric, Chinese financing practices can serve to tie other Asian nations closer to China's national economy in a way that can make them politically subservient to Beijing. In this process, Russia risks being sidelined as an actor with veto power over integration dynamics in the 'post-Soviet space', despite Russia's predominant role in the security sector.

Russia's response has therefore been to multilateralise, where possible, China's engagement with Central Asia, by stressing Russia's own discourse of a 'Greater Eurasian partnership'. The latter dilutes China's influence into a broader, pan-continental vision of a dialogue between multinational organisations and platforms. Russia's embrace of China after 2014, in addition, has been accelerated by the twin push factors of economic pressure and political isolation on the part of Western governments in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Despite the economic competition between the operating modes of the EAEU and the SREB, a convergence of interests between Russia and China to 'de-Westernise' international governance institutions might temper the effects of regional rivalry. Russia and China's grand inter-regional narratives ('Greater Eurasia' and BRI, respectively) indicate a principled, albeit still restrained willingness to cooperate in the collaborative mapping of Eurasia's political space.

An important subject for future research is whether China's stance on security governance is undergoing changes to accompany its economic influence. Foreign observers have noted that Chinese private security companies are emerging out of a realisation that growing Chinese outbound investments in areas of insecurity might require precautions (Arduino 2018). In December 2015, China even adopted an anti-terrorism law that allows the People's Liberation Army to operate abroad (Duarte 2018: 15). Were China to become more active here, the much-repeated 'division of labor' in Central Asia between Russia and China has an in-built expiration date. Russia, in this scenario, could be strategically displaced by an assertive China and relegated to the periphery of regional decision-making.

In the mid-term, however, the Chinese-Russian cooperation in Eurasia might become an illustration of a compartmentalised cooperation, where tensions over tariffs, customs, and labor dynamics need not rule out arrangements where security governance in Central Asia is recognised to be a Russian prerogative while China is acknowledged as the region's banker – pending leadership changes in Central Asia. The continuing utility of Russia would then lie in regional security governance and the convergence of certain interests in global affairs. Russia is by far the most vocal critic of Western normative dominance in international affairs, and a division of labor is possible whereby China becomes the economic powerhouse of Eurasia while Russia continues to be responsible for international 'megaphone diplomacy' (Makocki & Popescu 2016: 11). In any event, the days of China's stated non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and policies of strategic restraint are gone.

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