



GREATER EURASIA

The Emperor's New Clothes
or an Idea whose Time Has Come?

Bobo LO

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Abstract

The Greater Eurasia project has emerged as the poster-child of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, symbolic of a resurgent and self-confident Russia. It is at once a geopolitical enterprise, political slogan, economic aspiration, and ideological construct. It is an attempt to impart dynamism to the Eurasian Economic Union. Most important of all, it seeks to establish a new, post-American order in which Russia plays a pivotal role.

Greater Eurasia is a work in progress. Many of its goals are speculative and the challenges are formidable. To have any chance of success, Moscow must be able to manage the competing interests of other state-actors, in particular China; transcend the limitations of Russian power; and demonstrate sustained political will. There is little evidence so far that it is up to the task. Today, Greater Eurasia is more anti-project than project, an expression of Russian animus toward the liberal international order rather than a serious blueprint for global governance.

Yet nothing is fixed. There is still scope for a positive vision to emerge out of the current confusion. Equally, though, the Greater Eurasia project could suffer the fate of previous major Kremlin undertakings, drifting along with little purpose and diminishing conviction.

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Introduction

Greater Eurasia (*Bolshaia Evraziia*) has emerged as the poster-child of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. It has become symbolic of a resurgent and self-confident Russia, operating in an ever more disorderly world. To its advocates, it captures the *zeitgeist* of the early 21st century, reflecting both a strong sense of tradition and an image of modernity.

Yet there is little consensus on the meaning and purpose of Greater Eurasia. It is a Protean concept—at once a geopolitical enterprise, political slogan, economic aspiration, and ideological construct. This versatility has enhanced its appeal to the Kremlin, appearing to offer abundant opportunity while imposing few obligations. But such flexibility also carries within it the seeds of potential failure: a lack of clarity and focus resulting in abstractions, wavering political enthusiasm, and the indifference or hostility of others.

In this essay, I examine the concept of Greater Eurasia and its place in Putin's foreign policy. Is it an idea whose time has come, a necessary response to the challenges facing not only Russia, but international society in general? Or is it a geopolitical project in all but name, whose overriding purpose is to promote Russia as a global power in a new, post-American order?

I begin by considering the term "Greater Eurasia", and how the concept itself has risen to such prominence. The essay then examines the "meat" of the Greater Eurasia project—its economic, security, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions—and the challenges of implementing its ambitious agenda. Finally, I speculate on what the future may hold. Does Greater Eurasia herald a far-reaching political and normative transformation? Or is it just another "big idea" devoid of real substance, and destined to return to obscurity after a brief period in the limelight?

Defining Greater Eurasia

The Polish scholar Marcin Kaczmarski rightly observes that “Russia lacks a clear vision for ‘Greater Eurasia’, which remains a vague and loosely defined concept.”¹ Attempting to grasp it presents several challenges, the first of which is the sheer variety of possible definitions and understandings. Another, related problem is determining its scope. Is Greater Eurasia primarily a geographical construct and, if so, how far does it extend? Or should we think of it more in functional terms? Is it an economic framework, the basis for a new world order, a geopolitical mechanism, or all of the above? Then there is the difficulty of distinguishing—or disentangling—Greater Eurasia from existing ventures in Russian foreign policy, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Moscow’s “Turn to the East” (*povorot na vostok*).

Regional or global project?

In some respects, Greater Eurasia appears intended as an improved or expanded version of the EEU. President Putin hinted as much when he formally introduced the idea at the 2016 St Petersburg International Economic Forum: “Our partners and we think that the [Eurasian Economic Union] can become one of the centers of a greater emergent integration area ... Now we propose considering the prospects for a more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the [EEU] and countries in which we already have close partnership—China, India, Pakistan and Iran—and certainly our CIS partners...”² Initially, though, the project would be more narrowly focused: “we, along with our Chinese colleagues, are planning to start official talks on the formation of a comprehensive trade and economic partnership in Eurasia with the participation of European Union states and China. I expect that this will become one of the first steps toward the formation of a major Eurasian partnership.”³

1. M. Kaczmarski, “Non-Western Visions of Regionalism: China’s New Silk Road and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union”, *International Affairs* (UK), Vol. 93, No. 6, 2017, p. 1373.

2. “Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum”, 17 June 2016, President of Russia, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

3. *Ibid.*

Putin's launch of the Greater Eurasia enterprise was unsurprisingly short on detail. Subsequent explanations, however, have shed little further light; indeed, they have added to the confusion. Some commentators believe the main purpose of Greater Eurasia is essentially regional: to give new life to a flagging EEU⁴ and position it as "the central unifying structure in the regional Eurasian integration network."⁵ Such views are echoed by Chinese scholars who see Greater Eurasia, and the EEU, as a "logical continuation of Russia's Soviet past", and as an overtly geopolitical initiative aimed at "restoring the leading role of Russia [in Eurasia] as to how it was in [the] time of the USSR."⁶

But for other observers, the remit of Greater Eurasia is more global than regional. Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, writes of "the self-image of a lone, great power in a global world; outreach to Asian partners to create a continental order free from the dominance of the United States; and calculated patience toward Western Europe."⁷

Most critically, the Greater Eurasia concept has become identified with ambitious plans for global governance, as outlined in a 2017 Valdai Club report, "Toward the Great Ocean—5: From The Turn to the East to Greater Eurasia". This report, compiled under the direction of Sergei Karaganov, speaks of "Eurasia's transformation into a world economic and political center", with a prospective membership encompassing "East, Southeast and South Asian countries, central Eurasian countries, Russia, and ... increasingly countries in the European subcontinent and their associations."⁸

The Greater Eurasia project has also become synonymous with Moscow's Turn to the East. Both initiatives are intended to move Russian foreign policy from its traditional Westerncentrism toward a much closer engagement with Asia. Both challenge the primacy of a liberal world order.

4. A. Shevchenko, "The Greater Eurasian Partnership is Getting More and More Popular", Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, 14 April 2017, available at: <https://en.riss.ru>.

5. S. Luzyanin, "Greater Eurasia: The Common Challenges for China and Russia", Valdai Discussion Club, 16 April 2018, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

6. A. Kuznetsova, "Greater Eurasia: Perceptions from Russia, the European Union, and China", Russian International Affairs Council, 1 September 2017, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

7. D. Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 July 2017, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>. Somewhat confusingly, a later publication by Trenin appears to equate Greater Eurasia, "Russia's geopolitical neighborhood", with "those territories that belonged first to the Mongol and then the Russian empires and, finally, to the Soviet Union." See "It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy", Carnegie Moscow Center, 25 April 2019, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

8. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—5: From the Turn to the East to Greater Eurasia", *Report*, Valdai Discussion Club, pp. 24-25, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

Both incorporate the vision of Russia as an independent center of global power. And both projects center on the Sino-Russian partnership.

In principle, the Turn to the East is more oriented toward the Asia-Pacific region, whereas Greater Eurasia is focused in the first instance on the post-Soviet space. But this distinction has become blurred. China's expansion into Eurasia under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); the emphasis in Moscow on the global governance aspects of Greater Eurasia; and the identification of the United States as chief bogey—have meant that the differences between the two concepts are more theoretical than substantive. Indeed, Greater Eurasia is arguably the latest iteration of the Turn to the East, designed to give it new momentum just as it is intended to boost the EEU and Moscow's efforts at post-Soviet integration.

Greater Eurasia, then, is at once a regional, extra-regional, and global project. It is regional in that it is a vehicle for promoting Russian interests and influence throughout the former Soviet Union. It is extra-regional in looking beyond these boundaries toward the Asia-Pacific, South Asia, and Europe. And it is global in that it envisages a recasting of the world order, from one dominated by the United States, to one in which Russia is a pivotal player—literally so since a Greater Eurasia-centered world would turn on the Russian axis.

The Evolution of Greater Eurasia

Greater Eurasia is a loose construct within which various ideas flit in and out, depending on circumstances and perspective. It is also an organic phenomenon that has evolved over time in response to various domestic and especially external pressures.

A changing international environment

The most important driver of the Greater Eurasia idea has been the erosion of the US-led liberal order over the past 15 years. America continues to be the pre-eminent military power, but its political authority has been savaged by failed interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and inaction over Syria. The Transatlantic relationship is experiencing a series of seismic shocks. Western-led globalization has been discredited in many parts of the world following the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession. Democratization has suffered severe reputational damage from the failures of the Arab Spring. And in Europe, the continuing problems of the Eurozone, the impact of austerity, widening income inequality, and the failure to address the refugee crisis have encouraged the return of populist nationalism.

These conditions have created space and opportunity for ideas such as Greater Eurasia to grow. The perception of Western decline and fallibility has enhanced the attractions of alternative, non-Western paths of political and economic development.⁹ The spectacular rise of China and Beijing's ability to ride out the Great Recession have confounded the conventional wisdom that the West is "best". They highlight a broader shift in global power from the West to the rest, and have encouraged genuine optimism in Moscow that Russia can play a leading role in a post-American international order.¹⁰

9. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—5", *op. cit.*, p. 13.

10. "... it is necessary to build a constructive alternative to the ruined bipolar world order and the crumbling unipolar one. A partnership or community of Greater Eurasia can and should become one of the key elements of this new world order"—S. Karaganov, "From East to West, or Greater Eurasia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 25 October 2016, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>. See also T. Kastouéva-Jean, "Les perceptions russes de B&R: du risque à l'opportunité", in:

The deterioration of Russia-West relations

The transformation in global politics increasingly evident from the early 2000s helped establish the conditions under which the concept of a Greater Eurasia might gain traction. Initially, other ideas were more appealing to the Kremlin, such as building up Russia's credentials as an Asia-Pacific power and pursuing a diversified foreign policy *tous azimuts*. But the sharp deterioration of Russia-West relations from 2004 led to a change of focus in Moscow. Western support for the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, in particular, fed the conviction that the West was out to "get" Russia.

The Greater Eurasia concept grew out of this sense of insecurity. Putin began to devote increasing effort and resources to relations with the ex-Soviet republics, and to making post-Soviet integration a core theme of his foreign policy. He assigned particular priority to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in the face of grassroots democracy movements. And he sought to counter Western influence in all its guises from democracy promotion to security cooperation. The development of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Customs Union, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was consistent with these goals. The Kremlin also attempted to co-opt multilateral structures, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), in the struggle against Western "subversion".

For much of this period, the Greater Eurasia idea still lay in relative obscurity. Crucially, though, some of the pre-conditions for its emergence were falling into place: the growing priority given to integrationist projects; the heightened emphasis on authoritarian consolidation; and acute suspicions about the West's allegedly hostile intent toward Russia.¹¹ The Kremlin was still unclear as to the most effective way of meeting these challenges, but it was in little doubt about the need to respond actively. The question was no longer "why", but "how".

The Ukraine conflict

Against the background of already worsening Russia-West relations, the 2014 conflict in Ukraine became a catalyst for Moscow's thinking about

La France face aux Nouvelles routes de la soie, A. Ekman (ed.), *Études de l'Ifri*, October 2018, p. 81, available at: www.ifri.org.

11. A. Lukin, "Alternative Scenarios: Positive Scenario I", The Asan Forum, 27 February 2019, available at: www.theasanforum.org.

Greater Eurasia. Russia was shunned by long-time partners such as Germany and France, while the impact of Western sanctions was aggravated by the halving of global oil prices and structural weaknesses in the Russian economy as it fell into recession.

In these straitened circumstances, Putin faced several major tests, not least of international legitimacy. Russia found itself increasingly dependent on China, the only country whose friendship—or at least partnership—could make a difference. The price Beijing exacted in return was high. The Chinese received highly favorable terms in a much-delayed gas supply agreement;¹² obtained access to advanced weapon systems to which they had long been denied;¹³ and secured Russian compliance to their expanding economic activities in Central Asia.

The crisis in relations with the West killed off any serious hopes that Russia might become part of a Greater Europe “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”.¹⁴ Instead, the Kremlin was left with two choices: intensify efforts to push through post-Soviet integration via the EEU; or recast Russia as a Eurasian-Pacific power. Either way, Greater Eurasia held the key, fulfilling the Kremlin’s need for alternative strategic options and a legitimizing set of precepts.

Last concept standing?

Nevertheless, it took some years before Greater Eurasia finally made its grand entrance with Putin’s address at the 2016 St Petersburg Forum. Until then, the Kremlin was still betting on the Eurasian Economic Union as its flagship integrationist project in the post-Soviet space, and vanguard of an independent Russian foreign policy.

But by 2016 such illusions had been largely disabused. Notwithstanding the organization’s institutional development, the EEU had achieved little of substance. Intra-EEU trade was badly hit by the recession in Russia. Other EEU members, such as Kazakhstan and Belarus, were spooked by Putin’s

12. In May 2014, Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) concluded a 30-year supply contract under which Russia would deliver an annual volume of 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas through the planned Power of Siberia pipeline. According to Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller, the pipeline is due to start delivering gas in December 2019, and the supply agreement will enter full operation in 2025—H. Foy, “Gazprom Confident of \$400 bn Chinese Gas Supply”, *Financial Times*, 6 July 2017, available at: www.ft.com.

13. The big ticket items have been the Su-35 multipurpose fighter and the S-400 surface-to-air missile system. See K. Elmer and L. Zhen, “What Russian Weapons Are Being Bought by China”, *South China Morning Post*, 21 September 2018, available at: www.scmp.com.

14. “Putin: Plädoyer für Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft—Von Lissabon bis Wladiwostok” [Putin: Plea for Economic Community—From Lisbon to Vladivostok], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 25 November 2010, available at: www.sueddeutsche.de.

military intervention in Ukraine. This aggravated fears that the EEU might become a vehicle for Russian imperial domination. There was irritation, too, about Moscow's high-handedness in unilaterally imposing EEU counter-sanctions in response to European sanctions over Ukraine.¹⁵ The Kremlin appeared to pay only the faintest of lip-service to collective decision-making. More than ever, Astana and Minsk were keen to retain sovereign choice and flexibility, reaching out both to Western capitals and to Beijing.¹⁶

At the same time, Chinese economic influence expanded rapidly across the former Soviet Union. Moscow had attempted to manage the latter through an agreement in May 2015 between the EEU and China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), part of the latter's BRI. But the "equal" arrangement envisaged under the agreement was belied by realities on the ground, namely an ever more asymmetrical bilateral relationship in Beijing's favor. Russia's past subordination to the West threatened to give way not to strategic independence, but to a quasi-tributary relationship with a buoyant China.

Given these insecurities, the idea of Greater Eurasia acquired particular appeal. Unlike the EEU-SREB agreement with its overtly economic focus, Greater Eurasia was a far broader construct, as we will see. It was sufficiently capacious to accommodate Russia's comparative strengths, such as military power, geopolitical weight, and international profile—all areas where China's abilities were either still developing or were largely untested. As such, it offered a more even basis for cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, as well as the prospect of enhanced strategic leverage through a de facto Sino-Russian condominium in global affairs.

15. Another source of annoyance was Moscow's failure to consult the other EEU member-states over the May 2015 agreement with Beijing linking the EEU and SREB—see A. Bitabarova, "Unpacking Sino-Central Asian Engagement along the New Silk Road: A Case Study of Kazakhstan", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2018, p. 163.

16. R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power", *Research Paper*, Chatham House, May 2017, pp. 11-12, available at: www.chathamhouse.org. See also I. Busygina, "Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union: Lack of Trust Limits the Possible", *Policy Memo* No. 571, PONARS Eurasia, February 2019, p. 3, available at: www.ponarseurasia.org.

The Multiple Agendas of Greater Eurasia

The idea of Greater Eurasia is attractive to the Kremlin for several reasons. It holds the promise of greatly expanded trade and investment opportunities in a dynamic Asia. It is central to Russian aspirations to become the leading security actor across a vast area stretching from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. It boosts Russia's international profile and reputation. Most important of all, it is critical to projecting Russia's geopolitical influence in Eurasia and globally.

The economic agenda

At the most concrete level, the Greater Eurasia venture is intended to assist the diversification of Russia's external trade. This entails tapping into Asian markets in areas where Russia possesses comparative advantages—arms, energy supply and infrastructure, nuclear technology, and food and water security. Moscow's logic is straightforward: most of the Asian economies are still developing, and Russia has goods and services they need. Such complementarities are not only mutually advantageous, but also potentially short-lived, given the fast rate of growth of many Asian economies. There are knock-on benefits as well. If Russia can open up new markets, it will be less dependent on its traditional European trading partners, and therefore in a stronger negotiating position with them on a whole range of issues, political as well as economic.¹⁷ Among other benefits, this would reinforce the message that Western sanctions are no longer fit for purpose.¹⁸

Moscow sees Greater Eurasia as a means of positioning Russia at the center, or at least in the mainstream, of expanding trade routes between Europe and Asia.¹⁹ Given how rapidly the BRI is unfolding, it makes sense to hitch Russia on to this bandwagon. Doing so improves the chances of attracting substantial volumes of direct investment for major projects, such

17. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—6: People, History, Ideology, Education. Rediscovering the Identity", *Report*, Valdai Discussion Club, September 2018, p. 9, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

18. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—5", *op. cit.*, p. 35

19. S. Karaganov, "From East to West, or Greater Eurasia", *op. cit.* See also "Russian-Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model", joint report by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and Fudan University, 2018, p. 52, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

as Yamal LNG, in which Beijing's Silk Road Fund has bought a 9.9 percent stake. Moscow is also keen to ensure that the main Eurasian transport routes go through Russia, so that it will not be marginalized as the BRI proliferates.²⁰ Promoting Greater Eurasia is an attempt to seize the initiative rather than remaining a mere spectator of Chinese projects.

All this raises the issue of Greater Eurasia as a geoeconomic “space”, an idea that borrows from the EU's “common spaces”. Although Greater Eurasia is far less prescriptive, it nevertheless subscribes to the EU's core premise that a common, integrated trade area is intrinsically beneficial, with a multiplier effect on the economies of participant-states. Moscow hopes that existing non-Western multilateral structures, such as the SCO, the BRICS, and the EEU can combine within Greater Eurasia to create “one powerful economic “engine”: an organization with a common economic zone ... a powerful economic union without peer in the world.”²¹ Even if this highly optimistic vision does not materialize, Russia would still have the sense of being a leading member of “an emerging geoeconomic community”, one that helps to protect it against the impact of Western-led globalization, as well as enhancing its international respectability.²²

Finally, the Greater Eurasia vision encompasses specific regional economic goals, such as development of the Russian Far East (RFE). Moscow's thinking here has evolved only slightly since the 1990s. Today, as then, it views the leading Asian economies as potential sources of windfall investment, key to the revival of the region. And it continues to place great faith in Special Economic Zones (now called Advanced Special Economic Zones—ASEZs), while laying out ambitious development plans.²³ What has changed, though, is the wider context of Russian foreign policy. The former emphasis on cooperation with the West has given way to the Turn to the East, Greater Eurasia, and the “strategic partnership” with China. Moscow

20. Sergei Luzyanin writes about “creating a network to control transport corridors linking the key subregions of Eurasia into a single whole”—in “Greater Eurasia: The Common Challenges for China and Russia”, *op. cit.* These routes would include Kazakhstan's “Shining Path” (Nurly zhol), Mongolia's Steppe Road, and Vladimir Yakunin's proposal of a Trans-Eurasian Belt Development (TEPR).

21. Speech by First Deputy Minister for Economic Development, A. Likhachev, at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, June 2015.

22. M. Kaczmarek, “Russian-Chinese Relations in Eurasia: Harmonization or Subordination?”, *Briefing Paper*, No. 238, Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) p. 4, April 2018, available at: www.fia.fi.

23. Ambition is one thing, performance quite another. For a revealing account of the failures of regional development plans in the RFE, see I. Zuenko, “A Chinese-Russian Regional Program Ends With a Whimper”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 26 September 2018, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>. A recent Valdai report notes that government investment has declined steadily since 2013, the peak year following the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok—see H. Blakkisrud, E. Wilson Rowe, R. Vakulchuk, “Russia's Far East Initiatives in Troubled Geopolitical Times”, *Valdai Papers*, No. 92, Valdai Discussion Club, August 2018, p. 11, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

believes the prospects of harnessing the economic dynamism of the Asia-Pacific are better now than they have been for decades.²⁴ The annual Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), over which Putin has presided since its inception in 2015, reflects this bullish mood. In proclaiming the RFE and Eastern Siberia open for business, the Forum advertises Moscow's full-throated commitment to heightened cooperation with Asia.²⁵

The security dimension

Although the development of Greater Eurasia as an exercise in security-building has received comparatively little attention, it holds particular importance for Moscow. In part, this arises from concerns about various threats: the potential for regime instability in former Soviet Central Asia, the rise of Islamist extremism, and the regional fall-out from the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Moscow is also preoccupied with issues of informational security, and the latent threat of grassroots democracy movements.

Yet the true significance of the security dimension within the Greater Eurasia project lies less in addressing specific threats than in establishing a more general framework—"rules of the game"—for security-building. The sphere of security is the one area in Russia's relations with China where it is unmistakably the leading player, and likely to remain so for some years yet. This matters not only in its own right, but also in terms of the larger picture of Greater Eurasia and Russian foreign policy.

Assuming the mantle of primary security provider²⁶ enables Russia to position itself as an independent power in no way inferior to China. There is consequently much talk of a "division of labor", whereby China focuses on trade and economic development, while Russia takes care of security both on its own account and through mechanisms such as the CSTO.²⁷ The "division of labor" sends the message that the Sino-Russian partnership is a mutually beneficial relationship between equals, albeit with different strengths, and lends weight to the notion of a "win-win" Greater Eurasia.

24. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—6", *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

25. "Developing the Far East is an absolute priority for us ... We are working hard to create a strong center for international cooperation and integration, business and investment activity, education, science and culture in the dynamically developing Asia-Pacific region"—Vladimir Putin speech at the Eastern Economic Forum, "Eastern Economic Forum Plenary Session", President of Russia, 12 September 2018, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

26. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—5", *op. cit.*, p. 30.

27. T. Kastouéva-Jean, "Les perceptions russes", *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

Moscow has been very active in promoting Russia's security credentials on the ground. It has considerably boosted Russian force capabilities through a comprehensive and sustained program of military modernization.²⁸ The effects of this have been highlighted by the success of Russian armed operations in Ukraine and the Middle East. Moscow, to the shock and dismay of the West, has shown that it is ready and able to use force in pursuit of its objectives. The demonstration effect extends also to Eurasia. As one commentator has put it, "Russia's contributions to the fight against Islamic terrorist networks and the liberation of parts of Syria and Iraq can be regarded as a kind of test for the role of sheriff in a Greater Eurasia."²⁹

Russia's military capabilities have been further advertised by its active participation in various large-scale exercises: the annual "Joint Sea" naval operations with the Chinese; the "Peace Mission" series within the framework of the SCO;³⁰ and, most strikingly, Vostok-2018, the largest Russian exercise in nearly four decades.³¹ Such demonstrations serve several purposes. They feed into the Kremlin's overall narrative of Russia as a resurgent, confident, and resolute global power. They make the West nervous, a reaction Moscow finds gratifying at a time when relations are very difficult. And they remind Russia's neighbors—both large, ambitious powers such as China, and the ex-Soviet republics—that it still bosses Central Eurasia when it comes to military might.

That said, Moscow recognizes that playing the role of primary security provider cannot rely on hard power alone, but needs to be supplemented by "softer" means. It has intensified high-level military exchanges with China, boosted arms sales to Asian markets,³² and strengthened its bases in Central Asia.³³ It has also adopted a more flexible approach toward organizations such as the SCO. For a long time, Moscow was ambivalent toward this body:

28. As Julian Cooper has noted, the Russian government's ten-year State Armament Programme for the period of 2010-2020 has ensured that "Russia is back as a credible military power"—J. Cooper, "The Russian State Armament Programme, 2018-2027", NATO Defense College, May 2018, available at: www.ndc.nato.int, p. 15. See also J. Cooper, "The Military Face of 'Militant Russia'", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 February 2016, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

29. D. Yefremenko, "The Birth of a Greater Eurasia. How the Post-Cold War Era Ends", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 February 2017, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

30. For background on these exercises, see P. Schwartz, "The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations", in J. I. Bekkevold and B. Lo (eds), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 94-98.

31. "Russia's Claims of "Biggest-Ever" War Games Seen as Sending a Message to the West", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 September 2018, available at: www.rferl.org.

32. A. Kruglov, "Business Booming for Russia's Arms Traders", *Asia Times*, 22 April 2019, available at: www.asiatimes.com.

33. "Russia Is Strengthening Bases In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan To Counter Militants Based In Afghanistan: Defense Minister", South Front, 30 April 2019, available at: <https://southfront.org>.

on the one hand, hoping that it might become a counter-NATO; on the other hand, worrying that the Chinese would use it as a Trojan horse to expand their influence in Central Asia at Russia's expense.

Lately, however, it has started to focus on how the SCO might be enlisted in the service of the Greater Eurasia project. As one of the latter's architects, Timofei Bordachev, observes, "the SCO ... is being 'reset' as a broad-based Eurasian organization focused on macro-regional development rather than as a narrow regional organization."³⁴ In similar vein, the scholar Dmitry Yefremenko speculates that "[t]he SCO could act as an incubator for a wide range of agreements and initiatives" which, in time, could form the basis of a "community of Greater Eurasia".³⁵ Although such ideas are still nascent, they nevertheless signal a more confident attitude toward security-building in Eurasia, and Russia's role in it. Whether through the projection of hard power, arms sales, defense ties, or regional multilateralism, Greater Eurasia is intended to convey the image of a buoyant and increasingly capable Russia.

The ideological dimension

It is often claimed that Putin's foreign policy is not ideological but "pragmatic". In fact, this assertion is not credible, even to Kremlin-friendly commentators. The 2017 Valdai report, "From the Turn to the East to Greater Eurasia", thus describes Greater Eurasia as a "framework for geopolitical, geoeconomic and geoideological thinking".³⁶ The principal author of that report, Sergei Karaganov, is even more unambiguous elsewhere. In an article triumphantly entitled "Russia's victory, new Concert of Nations", he cites Greater Eurasia in support of his thesis that "authoritarian countries, with their managed incomplete democracies can be better prepared to compete and govern [than developed democracies] in the growingly [*sic.*] volatile world." He goes on to claim that "Russia has ... put itself on the "right side of history" by emphasizing not post-modern, but modern or post-post-modern values: national sovereignty, freedom of political and cultural choice for all countries and peoples, personal and national dignity ...—old human values."³⁷

34. T. Bordachev, "The SCO as the Foundation of Greater Eurasia", Valdai Discussion Club, 3 July 2017, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

35. D. Yefremenko, "The Birth of a Greater Eurasia", *op. cit.*

36. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—5", *op. cit.*, p. 24.

37. S. Karaganov, "Russia's Victory and a New Concert of Nations", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 31 March 2017, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

Seen through this lens, Greater Eurasia embodies a new ideological struggle against Western-led universalism and globalization, standing for what has been described as “positive authoritarianism”.³⁸ Ironically, this view tends to support the fashionable US view of the Sino-Russian partnership as an authoritarian entente aimed at undermining American interests and the liberal world order.³⁹

Much of the ideology surrounding the Greater Eurasia concept is presentational rather than inspirational. It supplies a veneer of cultural-civilizational unity to what is really a jumble of ideas, few of which have been properly thought through. But Karaganov’s comments also reflect deep-seated sentiments among the Putin elite. Many within it see authoritarianism as a better fit than democracy, taking into account Russia’s history and “special” characteristics. They remain ideologically as well as geopolitically opposed to a liberal world order—an opposition that finds a natural home in an idealized vision of Greater Eurasia, with its own norms and values.⁴⁰

That said, this vision is quite distinct from the mystical and often racist neo-Eurasianism propagated by the likes of Lev Gumilev (1912-92) and later Alexander Dugin. Rather than looking back to a mystical (and mythical) Russian past, today’s edition of Greater Eurasia purports to embody an emerging post-Western and post-liberal normative consensus—a 21st century way of thinking for a 21st century world.⁴¹

38. M. Imanaliev, “The SCO and Cooperation between Civilizations”, Valdai Discussion Club, 4 June 2016, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

39. For a recent example of this view, see R. Sutter, “China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and US Policy Options”, *Special Report* No. 73, National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), September 2018, available at: www.nbr.org.

40. For an early but insightful analysis of the normative divide between Russian and EU country perceptions of Europe, see V. Inozemtsev, “Why Should the EU Cooperate with the EEU?”, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 26 January 2015, available at: www.ecfr.eu.

41. It is worth noting, too, that Greater Eurasia in this normative dimension extends far beyond the idea of a “Russian world” (*Russkij mir*). The latter is a construct centered on common historical, linguistic, and civilizational ties among the Russian-speaking peoples (expatriates as well as the ex-Soviet republics).

A Template for Global Governance?

Although the economic, security, and ideological dimensions of Greater Eurasia should not be underestimated, the ultimate attraction of the concept to the Kremlin lies in its geopolitical impact. In effect, this comes down to three interrelated and sometimes contradictory objectives: managing the international balance of power; establishing a new world order; and promoting Russia as a global great power.

Managing the balance of power

The 2017 Valdai report on Greater Eurasia makes no secret of its geopolitical agenda: to change the international balance of power by countering the United States, and Western influence more broadly. It largely dispenses with the pretense of a multipolar world and sees the emergence instead of a new bipolarity between the US and its allies on the one hand, and “Eurasia ... with China at its core”, on the other.⁴² Similarly, former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov argues that “[t]he Euro-Atlantic region and Eurasia are evolving into new centers of global attraction and the relations between them are emerging as the main axis of future world politics.”⁴³

This bipolar view of the world reflects several enduring themes of Russian strategic culture. The most fundamental is the premise that international politics is primarily competitive. Countries can and do cooperate with each other, but they do so on the basis of calculated self-interest. The much-storied liberal world order is essentially a projection of American dominance—one achieved and perpetuated at the expense of others, notably Russia.⁴⁴

42. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, “Toward the Great Ocean—5”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

43. Cited in A. Kuznetsova, “Greater Eurasia: Perceptions from Russia, the European Union, and China”, *op. cit.*

44. Typical of such views is the assertion by Alexander Lukin that “the West ... uses the pretext of “democratization” to camouflage the old idea of superiority over other races, nations, and civilizations.” See “Russia, China and the emerging Greater Eurasia”, ASAN Forum, 18 August 2015, available at: www.theasanforum.org.

In a realist world, countries must fight for their interests, since nothing will be given to them freely. Power matters absolutely, and only by exercising it can Russia hope to achieve its goals. This entails developing its own capabilities—political, economic, military, technological, and cultural. But it also means challenging the hegemonic power, the United States. Greater Eurasia speaks to this purpose. It provides an umbrella under which those countries dissatisfied with US global leadership and the dominance of the West may join forces. It seeks to level the playing-field by developing non-Western structures and concepts. And it exploits Transatlantic tensions, while leaving open the possibility of cooperation with Europe.⁴⁵

The importance of balancing is not limited to Russia's relations with the United States. Greater Eurasia also serves as a means of managing—or diluting—the rise of Chinese power. Accordingly, Moscow has sought to maximize its options by depicting Russia as a good Eurasian citizen, whose relations with all the other major regional players are better than their relations with each other.⁴⁶ The 2017 Valdai report, “Toward the Great Ocean”, claims that “[i]n East and Southeast Asia, Russia is seen as a necessary balancer and a neutral player with regard to the central regional conflict between the United States and China and equally complicated relations between China and its neighbors ...”.⁴⁷

The line here between mediation and containment is blurred. What is clear, however, is Moscow's unchanging belief that Russia has a critical role to play in balancing hegemonic power from *whatever* source. Today that is the United States, but over time it may increasingly mean China. The most recent (2018) report in the “Toward the Great Ocean” series thus speaks of wrapping China, “the inevitable regional leader, in a web of ties, institutions and balances that excludes a possibility of even a soft hegemony that would be unacceptable to its major neighbors.”⁴⁸

A new world order

To some Russian commentators, Greater Eurasia represents “the cradle of a new, fairer and more stable world order that would replace the crumbling

45. S. Karaganov, “Russia's Victory and a New Concert of Nations”, *op. cit.*; also “Toward the Great Ocean—6”, *op. cit.*, p. 17

46. T. Bordachev, “Main Results of 2017: Energetic Russia and the Greater Eurasia Community”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 29 December 2017, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>. See also S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, “Toward the Great Ocean—5”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 29

48. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, “Toward the Great Ocean—6”, *op. cit.*, p. 42. The report warns that China may find it “difficult to resist the millennia-old inertia of the Middle Kingdom quietly rolling over its neighbors.”

old one.”⁴⁹ This raises the question as to why the Kremlin would go down this route rather than rely on the BRICS framework which has existed for more than a decade, and which Russia has done more than any other party to develop.

Moscow’s partiality toward Greater Eurasia is less surprising than it seems. For one thing, the emphasis on Greater Eurasia does not imply abandonment of the BRICS. The more non-Western structures and mechanisms there are, the better the chances of building a post-American world order. Greater Eurasia is just one of many components in a multidimensional approach toward global governance.

Second, the narrower ambit of Greater Eurasia is conducive to a more focused and unified approach on questions of global order. The BRICS is a geographically and politically disparate body, a factor that has severely limited its effectiveness, much to Moscow’s disappointment. The presence of India, for example, has prevented agreement on “informational security” and regulation of the internet, while China’s support of Pakistan has ensured that there is no substantive consensus on counter-terrorism.⁵⁰ More generally, Sino-Indian strategic tensions, and New Delhi’s close ties with Washington, have meant that the BRICS is no nearer to becoming the basis of an alternative world order, as Moscow had originally hoped.

Greater Eurasia is largely free from such limitations. Centered on the Sino-Russian partnership, it conveys a more convincing impression of common purpose. Consequently, it appears to have better prospects than a body whose members have very different perspectives and priorities. There can be no “geoideological” community within the BRICS as currently constituted, whereas an evolving Greater Eurasia offers at least a sporting chance of some sort of authoritarian consensus.

Global Russia

Over the past five years, Moscow has played up the contrast between the dynamic, rising non-Western powers—Russia and China at the forefront—and a decadent, declining West. This is reflected in the shift in rhetoric from Greater Europe to Greater Eurasia. As Karaganov put it in October 2016, Russia “has a chance to gain a new status, not that of a European periphery with possessions in Asia, but as an Atlantic-Pacific power committed to the future, as one of the centers in a rising Greater Eurasia.”⁵¹ In much the same

49. S. Karaganov, “From East to West, or Greater Eurasia”, *op. cit.*

50. B. Lo, “New Order for Old Triangles? The Russia-China-India Matrix”, *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 100, Ifri, April 2017, p. 21, available at: www.ifri.org.

51. S. Karaganov, “From East to West, or Greater Eurasia”, *op. cit.*

spirit, Trenin writes of a “360-degree vision, where Moscow serves as the central element of a new geopolitical construct: Eurasia writ large.”⁵²

Despite appearances, the thinking behind the Greater Eurasia enterprise is quite old-fashioned. It is based on the twin premises that Russia’s natural station is as a global great power, and that the ideal world order is one where “the three truly sovereign and global powers”—Russia, China, and the United States—operate as a “new Concert of Nations.”⁵³

This is in part a reiteration of Yalta 1945—Russia acting as one of the three game-makers in world affairs, whose strategic equilibrium helps maintain the peace.⁵⁴ The difference, though, is that this time it is doing so not just on its own account, but as the (self-appointed) representative of a larger collective entity. Greater Eurasia places Putin’s Russia at “the vanguard of the non-Western world which is ... asserting itself on the global stage.” As such, it imbues Russian self-interest with a “higher” moral purpose—useful in an era when many countries distrust both American and Chinese intentions. This nexus is exemplified by Karaganov’s claim that over the past 10-15 years Russia has acted as the midwife of the rising non-Western powers, especially in Asia.⁵⁵

52. D. Trenin, “Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?”, *op. cit.*

53. S. Karaganov, “Russia’s Victory and a New Concert of Nations”, *op. cit.*

54. Putin regularly cites Yalta and the 1815 Congress of Vienna as examples of effective great power cooperation—see his speech to the International Valdai Discussion Club, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club”, President of Russia, 19 September 2013, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

55. S. Karaganov, “How to Win a Cold War”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 September 2018, available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru>.

Challenges

The Greater Eurasia project is self-evidently a long-term work in progress. There is an aspirational quality to the Kremlin's goals, and many of them will not be achieved, either because they are too ambitious and therefore unrealistic, or because circumstances will intervene to frustrate them. To achieve tangible progress, Moscow will need to address three major challenges: (i) the competing agendas of key regional players; (ii) the limitations of Russian power; and (iii) the question of political will.

Competing agendas

The most significant obstacle to the success of Moscow's grand project arises from the different and often competing interests of other state-actors. Although the Kremlin speaks of convergence, Greater Eurasia is more disaggregated than ever. It is increasingly susceptible to geopolitical conflicts; there is little shared purpose on the practicalities of multilateral cooperation; and the notion of common norms and values remains a chimera.

China: The Sino-Russian partnership is closer and more substantial than it has ever been. Nevertheless, there are areas where the two sides diverge substantially. One such is in their understandings of the concept of Greater Eurasia, and how it should be implemented. It is easy enough to agree that Eurasian cooperation is desirable; it is far more difficult to establish the basis on which this might be realized.

The Chinese view Greater Eurasia principally as a means of enhancing economic connectivity,⁵⁶ part of their larger commitment to globalization on Chinese terms. Beijing's approach reflects an ambitious and self-confident world-view. The Eurasian continent is "open" territory, ready to be developed by any party with the means and the commitment to accomplish the task. In practice, that means a dominant role for China as the leading economic power in Eurasia.

The Kremlin's agenda differs markedly from Beijing's. Moscow has no interest in opening up Eurasia to other major actors, except on very narrow

56. M. Kaczmarek, "Non-Western Visions of Regionalism", *op. cit.*, pp. 1363-64. See also A. Bitabarova, "Unpacking Sino-Central Asian Engagement along the New Silk Road", *op. cit.*, p. 157.

and privileged terms (for example, foreign direct investment into Russia). It has been hard enough to stomach Chinese economic expansion and constrain the sovereign aspirations of the ex-Soviet republics. But the emergence of a more fluid and competitive strategic environment in Eurasia is anathema to the Kremlin. Its priority instead is to manage Greater Eurasia in such a way that this becomes, if not Russia's exclusive space, then at least led and co-managed by Russia and China.⁵⁷ This is why the "division of labor" mentioned earlier is so important. Under such an arrangement, Moscow can rationalize away China's economic superiority by pretending that this is compensated for by Russia's primacy in regional political and security affairs. Such an illusion, however, is scarcely sustainable if Greater Eurasia, however defined, becomes a free-for-all.

Beijing's connectivity agenda could, under certain circumstances, favor Russian interests. After all, there is a long tradition of Russia promoting itself as the economic and civilizational bridge between Europe and Asia. But in reality matters are not so straightforward. Crucially, there is no single "Silk Road", but multiple routes—of which the one passing through Russia (the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor) is by no means the most important. The danger is that, as the Belt and Road Initiative unfolds, Russia could find itself increasingly marginalized, a B-road along China's super-highway to the West. It is also doubtful that it would be content to be a mere transit country.⁵⁸ More generally, is Moscow ready for an "open liberal trade environment" in Eurasia, as envisaged by the 2017 Valdai report? That, too, seems improbable. Such an outcome would be a boon to Chinese manufacturing exporters, but would risk a domestic backlash from Russian producers struggling to withstand foreign competition.

Then there is a gulf between Russian and Chinese perceptions of Greater Eurasia's place in global governance. The Kremlin sees Greater Eurasia as the basis for an alternative, post-Western international order. Beijing, however, seeks to preserve the existing international system in some form, even in the face of escalating political, security, and trade tensions with Washington.⁵⁹ Russian policy-makers and thinkers emphasize Greater

57. The RIAC-Fudan joint report, "Russian-Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model" (*op. cit.*), emphasizes Russia's keenness to "shift the focus from its involvement in the Silk Road Economic Belt to the initiative's equitable alignment with the [Eurasian Economic Union]"—pp. 53-54.

58. A point noted by D. Yefremenko in "The birth of a Greater Eurasia", *op. cit.* See also S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Toward the Great Ocean—6", *op. cit.*, p. 33.

59. The Chinese scholar and former diplomat Shi Ze notes that "China and Russia have different attitudes. Russia wants to break the current international order ... But China benefits from the current international system. We want to improve and modify it, not break it"—cited in J. Dorsey, "Eurasia's Great Game and the Future of the China-Russia Alliance", *Countercurrents.org*, 15 April 2019, available at: <https://countercurrents.org>. Yan Xuetong argues that "at the top of Beijing's priorities is a liberal economic order built on free trade." China's reliance on "a global network of

Eurasia's role in terms of global geopolitical shifts, whereas their Chinese counterparts assign far greater importance to the predominantly economic goals of connectivity and infrastructural development.

Such differences directly affect Sino-Russian cooperation in Eurasia. For example, the much-publicized May 2015 agreement between the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) has achieved very little, with the Chinese rejecting a series of project proposals from the EEU on the grounds of commercial unviability.⁶⁰ The one signal success, the Silk Road Fund's purchase of a 9.9 percent stake in the Yamal LNG project, had little to do with Greater Eurasia as such. It was an investment intended to strengthen China's positions in the Russian energy sector and the Arctic, and to curry favor with Putin by supporting his closest associates. In other words, it was a bilateral, even personalized deal, rather than the product of a shared transcontinental vision.⁶¹

True, Moscow and Beijing have not allowed the differences in their approaches to Greater Eurasia to spoil their relationship. As Kaczmarek has noted, the Chinese have exercised "strategic self-restraint", demonstrated "respect" for the Kremlin's Greater Eurasia idea, and paid lip-service to the fiction that the Sino-Russian partnership is equal.⁶² But for how long can the two sides suspend disbelief over the erosion of the "division of labor"? It is delusional to imagine a continuing neat demarcation between economic dominance and geopolitical primacy, or a future where Beijing is preoccupied only with making money and not with the wider ramifications of its economic heft.⁶³ So far, Moscow has reacted calmly to China's growing political and security presence in Eurasia, a notable example of which is the latter's Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism with

trade ties" means that it is especially anxious to avoid direct confrontation with the United States—X. Yan, "The Age of Uneasy Peace", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, p. 42, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

60. In the two years following the EEU-SREB agreement of May 2015, Beijing rejected 40 EEU project proposals to enhance transport connectivity between Western China and Europe—see A. Gabuev, "Belt and Road to Where?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 8 December 2017, available at: <http://carnegie.ru>. The situation has scarcely improved since (author's private conversation with a senior Russian government official, 2019).

61. A. Gabuev notes Beijing's use of the Silk Road Fund as a "political purse ... [to] finance politically controversial projects ... owned by members of Putin's entourage"—see "Belt and Road to Where?", *op. cit.*

62. M. Kaczmarek, "Russian-Chinese Relations in Eurasia", *op. cit.*, p. 7

63. A 2017 report notes that "China's current security projection along the New Silk Road is limited, but growing," and that it is increasingly relying on itself rather than others in order to develop a "favorable security environment"—*A Road to Riches or a Road to Ruin? The Geo-Economic Implications of China's New Silk Road*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017, p. 22. More recently, the Russian scholar Dmitry Zhelobov has predicted that China will have military bases in Central Asia in the next five years—see "Voennyye bazy Kitaia poiaviatsia v Turkestane v techenie piati let" [Chinese military bases will appear in Turkestan within five years], interview in Regnum, 28 March 2019, available at: <https://regnum.ru>.

Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. But what happens when China moves from these modest beginnings to playing a more ambitious and multi-dimensional role in Eurasian affairs?⁶⁴ Would Moscow adopt an attitude of passive acceptance? Unlikely.

It is indicative that, amidst the public warmth of the Sino-Russian partnership, establishment figures in Moscow nevertheless worry about the future. Karaganov warns of the consequences of a loss of momentum in “the Greater Eurasian project”: “Beijing is moving towards creating a Sinocentric system in Asia. We risk remaining on the periphery, albeit friendly, unless we propose our own ideas.”⁶⁵ Interestingly, he places several caveats when referring to the Sino-Russian partnership itself: “... if China does not embark on a path of hegemony, inherently built into the Middle Kingdom concept, but becomes first among equals in Greater Eurasia and immerses itself into its institutions, and remains committed to maintaining the state of equilibrium, [Russia and China] will keep up a close relationship...”⁶⁶ This highly conditional sentence reflects a sentiment, expressed rather more clearly two years earlier, that Russia should act as “a friendly and constructive counterbalance to China to make sure it does not become ‘too strong’ or turn into a potential hegemon scaring its neighbors.”⁶⁷

Other regional powers: China’s growing capabilities and ambitions represent the biggest challenge to the Kremlin’s Greater Eurasia vision. However, the task that Moscow faces is not limited to getting China onside; other players will also play influential roles, in particular regional powers such as India, Japan, and the European Union.

India presents a peculiar problem in that there is no direct bone of contention between Moscow and New Delhi. If the fate of Greater Eurasia depended solely on the state of Russia-India relations, then the Kremlin would have good reason for optimism. The difficulty, however, is that New Delhi has set itself firmly against the BRI, which it regards as an instrument of China’s strategic domination of Eurasia, and a threat to India’s primary security interests in South Asia.⁶⁸ In particular, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), if fully implemented, could transform the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the sub-region.⁶⁹

64. In 2016, Beijing also concluded a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement and a military cooperation agreement with Tehran. See *A Road to Riches or a Road to Ruin?*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

65. S. Karaganov, “How to Win a Cold War”, *op. cit.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. S. Karaganov, “From East to West, or Greater Eurasia”, *op. cit.*

68. D. Baruah, “India’s Answer to the Belt and Road: A Road Map for South Asia”, *Working Paper*, Carnegie India, August 2018, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>, pp. 13-14.

69. CPEC extends from Kashgar in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region through Gilgit in northern Pakistan to the port city of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea. When it was officially launched in

While Russia has no direct stake in the CPEC, the latter's primary importance within the BRI has obvious implications for a Greater Eurasia centered on the Sino-Russian partnership. The Kremlin may hope to convince other parties that it will not further Beijing's ambitions at their expense. But there is no clear way of demonstrating this given the assertiveness of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, enduring strategic tensions between New Delhi and Beijing, and the warmth of US-India ties.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, India and Pakistan's accession to the SCO will complicate efforts to use this body as a coordinating mechanism for multilateral cooperation under the Greater Eurasia label.⁷¹

Like India, **Japan** identifies a geopolitical interest in countering or containing the expansion of Chinese influence in Eurasia. Indeed, one of the main drivers of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to reach a rapprochement with the Kremlin in recent years has been to wean Russia away from China. The Greater Eurasia venture, however, is intended to do just the opposite—to strengthen Sino-Russian partnership. Abe's October 2018 visit to China, the first by a Japanese Prime Minister in seven years, suggests that relations between Tokyo and Beijing may be improving.⁷² But even if this positive trend continues—an uncertain prospect at best—it will not obviate the larger logic of Japan's security alliance with the United States, Tokyo's suspicion of Chinese long-term intentions, and its discomfort with the closeness of Sino-Russian engagement.

The ongoing crisis in Russia's relations with **Europe** means there is little support for Greater Eurasia in key countries such as France and

April 2015, the total anticipated level of investment was USD 46 billion. This figure has since been progressively revised upward to its present level of USD 62 billion—S. Siddiqui, "CPEC Investment Pushed from \$55b to \$62b", *The Express Tribune*, 12 April 2017, available at: <https://tribune.com.pk>. It is claimed that Chinese investment in CPEC will exceed USD 100 billion by 2030—"Chinese Investment in CPEC Will Cross \$ 100 Billion", CPEC, 10 February 2018, available at: www.cpecinfo.com.

70. The Indian foreword to a 2017 joint report between RIAC and the Vivekananda International Foundation highlights the problem: "China's Belt and Road Initiative is seen very differently by India and Russia. For India, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor constitutes a violation of our sovereignty, China's policies in our neighbourhood are seen as undermining our interests and its projects for the Indian Ocean are viewed as a security threat. Russia is not affected by these aspects of Chinese policies and can therefore have a different thinking on China's projects and plans"—"70th Anniversary of Russia-India Relations: New Horizons of Privileged Partnership", I. Ivanov (ed.), Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Vivekananda International Foundation, 2017, pp. 9-10, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

71. Dmitri Trenin noted in 2017 that Moscow would find it increasingly difficult to make the SCO and the RIC (Russia-India-China trilateral format) work, "given the conflicts of interest among the members"—see D. Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?", *op. cit.* See also A. Gabuev, "Bigger, Not Better: Russia Makes the SCO a Useless Club", Carnegie Moscow Center, 23 June 2017, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

72. J. Kobara, "Abe and Xi to Accelerate Mutual Visits as Ties Improve", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 1 December 2018, available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

Germany. Moscow's erstwhile proposal of connecting two integrationist projects, the EEU and the EU, has elicited little positive response in Europe or even in Russia. In 2015, the liberal commentator Vladislav Inozemtsev observed caustically that "there is the EU with its order and there is the Eurasian New-Asia with its own. Only people with a vivid imagination could expect amazing results from a combination of order and chaos, the original and the forgery."⁷³ Conversely, if the EU should start to fall apart in coming years, as some doomsayers are predicting, Moscow would scarcely find EEU-EU integration appealing.

It may be true that "Russia's grand Eurasia strategy would not be complete without the eventual rehabilitation of relations with Europe",⁷⁴ but such a "rehabilitation" appears more distant than ever, given the widening divide between Russia and the West. Once again, the China factor comes into play. Growing European concerns about the implications of the BRI for good governance translate into considerable skepticism toward a Greater Eurasia based, in many people's eyes, on authoritarian norms and practices.

Ex-Soviet Republics: Opposition to Moscow's interpretation of Greater Eurasia is likewise evident among the ex-Soviet republics. Putin claims a common purpose with leaders such as Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev, noting especially that the latter came up with the original idea of Eurasian integration back in 1994.⁷⁵ Yet there is a gulf between Nazarbaev's vision of post-Soviet integration and the Kremlin's Greater Eurasia project. The first is driven by a largely economic agenda: to preserve existing trade ties with Russia (and other former Soviet republics), but also to significantly expand cooperation with China, leading Asian economies, and Europe. By contrast, Putin is much more interested in *political* integration—understood here not as imperial occupation, but tight policy coordination.⁷⁶ If commercial ties benefit, so much the better. But that is not the Kremlin's main purpose, which is to reassert Russian domination over the post-Soviet strategic space⁷⁷—a prospect others view with some alarm.⁷⁸

73. V. Inozemtsev, "Why Should the EU Cooperate with the EEU?", *op. cit.*

74. D. Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work?", *op. cit.*

75. Putin's speech at the 2016 St Petersburg Forum. See "Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum", *op. cit.*

76. B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Chatham House and Brookings, 2015, p. 105.

77. As James Sherr observes, "The concepts of buffer zones, spheres of influence and the limited sovereignty of neighbors became central to Russian geopolitical thinking in imperial times, and these building blocks of security have retained their place in the post-Soviet era. Russia's military establishment defines threat in terms of proximity; security is equated with control of space." See J. Sherr, "Geopolitics and Security" in "The Struggle for Ukraine", *Report*, Chatham House, October 2017, available at: www.chathamhouse.org, p. 18.

78. See R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk, "The Eurasian Economic Union", *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7. Also I. Busygina, "Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

The differences between the Kremlin's agenda and that of Nazarbaev highlight a more general problem. Moscow is attempting to sell an idealized image of Greater Eurasia, based on the premise that what is good for Russia is good for its post-Soviet neighbors. Unsurprisingly, this view has little traction. Contrary to Kremlin claims, the lack of enthusiasm for Moscow-led integration is not the product of Western meddling or ill-will.⁷⁹ The real issue is that *all* states, even the weakest, are resistant to an order being imposed on them, or to a larger power presuming to speak for their interests. And Greater Eurasia, when stripped of its rhetoric, is ultimately about instituting a new order on terms determined by the Kremlin.

The problem of (in)capacity

Another obstacle, no less serious, to the realization of a Greater Eurasia is Russia's lack of capacity. It has re-emerged as a formidable military power, and possesses natural resources and goods (such as weapons) that other countries desire. However, it remains a weak power in other respects. It has exploited the self-inflicted weaknesses of the US-led world order, but it has yet to show that it can be a reliable provider of global goods in its place. How is Russia to compete with China and the EU in delivering trade and financial incentives?⁸⁰ What can it do to make its Greater Eurasia project attractive to others?⁸¹ Merely talking it up in public cannot compensate for a lack of substance, especially when Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative is proliferating in multiple directions.

The troubles of the EEU, a far more modest endeavor, illustrate the difficulties. Despite Russia's domination of the organization and the historical ties between its member-states, intra-EEU trade is modest and fragile—for example, the EEU accounts for barely 8 percent of Russia's total trade volume.⁸² Kazakhstan, the most significant EEU member after Russia, trades more than twice as much with the EU as it does with Russia,⁸³ while Western countries dominate its inward investment flows.⁸⁴ The stagnation

79. See, for example, Putin's address to the Federal Assembly, "Address by President of the Russian Federation", President of Russia, 18 March 2014, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

80. Tellingly, Chinese scholars believe that Russia lacks the economic capacity to be a driver within the EEU, let alone Greater Eurasia—Li Jianmin cited in A. Kuznetsova, "Greater Eurasia: Perceptions from Russia, the European Union, and China", *op. cit.*

81. "See P. Baev, "Putin Pivots From Western Pressure, but Finds Scant Solace in the East", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 125, 10 September 2018.

82. "European Union, trade in goods with Russia", European Commission, 2019, available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu> [accessed 26 June 2019].

83. "European Union, trade in goods with Kazakhstan", European Commission, 2019, available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu> [accessed 26 June 2019].

84. In 2017, the Netherlands (44 percent), the United States (17 percent), and France (9 percent) accounted for more than 70 percent of foreign direct investment into Kazakhstan. China was the

of the Russian economy from 2013, on top of Moscow's annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in southeast Ukraine, has badly undermined the economic as well as political credibility of Kremlin-inspired integration projects. More than ever, the other EEU members—Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia—are looking elsewhere for trade, investment, and even political support.

In these circumstances, Moscow has limited possibilities. The usual methods of political pressure, cultivating trans-elite interests, scaremongering about Western liberal influences or Chinese domination are unlikely to work in the more challenging context of a Greater Eurasia. If Moscow cannot corral even weak ex-Soviet republics, it will not be able to recruit states which enjoy much greater sovereign choice. After all, the EEU's failure to deliver real benefits to Kazakhstan (in particular) is hardly a compelling advertisement for the virtues of a Moscow-led Greater Eurasia.

Nor will a putative Sino-Russian condominium prove much help. It is only a matter of time before China's economic footprint translates into a significant strategic presence in Eurasia. If any power is capable of consummating the vision of a Greater Eurasia in the face of immense obstacles, it will not be Russia, but China with its multidimensional and growing capacities. Far from being a co-equal, Russia would then be just one of many partners in Beijing's grand vision.

Political will—and its opposite

It is uncertain how committed the Kremlin is to pursuing its Greater Eurasia project. This may turn out to be just the latest in a long line of quasi-multilateral enterprises—the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Customs Union, the EEU—whose overriding purpose has been to promote Russia as the dominant power in Eurasia. Such mechanisms are valued only for as long as they serve that purpose, and then discarded. For example, early during his first presidential term, Putin recognized that the CIS had outlived its usefulness; it was soon marginalized, even while it remained formally in existence. Subsequently, the Customs Union became the flagship of Eurasian integration, but it too lost momentum, and so was subsumed within the EEU, which could in turn face a similar fate in relation to Greater Eurasia.

Whether the Greater Eurasia enterprise can prosper will depend on the Kremlin's perseverance in the face of the sometimes conflicting interests of other players, the limitations of Russian power, and the historical

largest non-Western investor, with a 6 percent share. See "Kazakhstan: 2018 Investment Climate Statement", US Department of State, available at: www.state.gov (accessed 17 November 2018).

Westerncentrism of the Russian elite. There is room for considerable doubt on all these counts. Given the difficulties, Moscow may be tempted instead to manage the Greater Eurasia project in much the same way as it has handled the BRICS, namely, as a general framework within which the true focus is on managing key bilateral relationships, and balancing against the West.⁸⁵

Continued Kremlin support for the Greater Eurasia project will be contingent on many factors, from the level of interest shown by other Eurasian actors to the state of Russia's relations with the West, in particular Europe. Much will also depend on concrete developments, such as the flow—or lack—of Asian investment into the Russian Far East.

Whatever happens, the need for greater specificity is already apparent, even to the most ardent cheerleaders of a Greater Eurasia. Karaganov has warned that it could “end up in much the same way as many of our other undertakings have, such as the initiatives to turn the OSCE into a pan-European security system and sign a European security treaty.”⁸⁶ This reflects real concern that simply going through the motions could lead to Russia's marginalization in the actual, as opposed to Kremlin-imagined, Eurasian world.⁸⁷

85. According to Andrei Kortunov, “the only realistic path for a Russian return to Europe today is via Asia ... it may only be through the creation, jointly with China, India and other Asia partners, of a ‘Greater Eurasia’ that Russia can acquire the expanded negotiating positions and potential it would need for its eventual dialogue with Brussels.” See A. Kortunov, “Will Russia return to Europe?”, Russian International Affairs Council, 6 November 2018, available at: <http://russiancouncil.ru>.

86. S. Karaganov, “How to Win a Cold War”, *op. cit.* In similar vein, Timofei Bordachev observes that Eurasian integration “is now at risk of falling into a state of stagnation, a kind of ‘sclerosis ...’”; see T. Bordachev, “EAEU: Integration Junction”, Valdai Discussion Club, 26 October 2018, available at: <http://valdaiclub.com>.

87. This fear is a common motif in recent Russian commentaries. Kortunov notes, for example, that “the long-term possibility of Russia being pushed to the margins of many of the “system-forming” integration projects in Eurasia remains very real.” See A. Kortunov, “Will Russia Return to Europe?”, *op. cit.*

Outlook

It is tempting to dismiss the prospects of a Greater Eurasia out of hand. The obstacles appear so formidable, Moscow's vision so vague, and Russia's capacities so limited, that it is difficult to conceive how it might become a practical reality. Today, it is more anti-project than project—an expression of the Kremlin's animus toward US global leadership and the liberal international order. Viewed from this perspective, it matters little whether a Greater Eurasia is “realistic” or what its content is. The Kremlin is more concerned to find a basis, any basis, for a new non-Western consensus than to obsess about details and modalities.

Such an approach would appear to offer very little. Yet the fact that Greater Eurasia is scarcely more than a blank canvas means that many paths are still open to the Kremlin.⁸⁸ A “road-map” can always be adapted to circumstances, and rationalized after the event.⁸⁹ This has occurred with Beijing's New Silk Road, which has undergone several iterations on the way to its latest guise, the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI purports to present a grand strategic vision, yet many Chinese infrastructural projects pre-dated the BRI/One Belt One Road (OBOR)/New Silk Road. Beijing has co-opted these projects under the broad umbrella of the BRI, thereby giving a misleading impression of unity and clarity of purpose, and scale.⁹⁰

Moscow could follow the same template: slap the Greater Eurasia label onto existing (and future) Russian policies and initiatives, and declare progress. It could also emphasize, justifiably, that Greater Eurasia is necessarily a long-term enterprise, lasting several decades at least, and that it is premature to write it off. If Greater Eurasia unfolds as the Kremlin hopes, then the transformation of the international order would be momentous, something one could hardly expect to happen overnight. There

88. As Kortunov observes, “[t]he rules of the game have not yet been set firmly, procedures not made permanent, and strict bureaucratic mechanisms not yet established”—in “Will Russia Return to Europe?”, *op. cit.*

89. The 2017 Valdai report, “Toward a Great Ocean—5”, *op. cit.*, puts forward a number of proposals, including: “a coordinated transport strategy”; “establishing a system of rating agencies”; supporting the activities of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); “increasing the use of national currencies”; and “creating a comprehensive news and analysis mega agency ... to acquire greater intellectual and political independence and counter the politicization of information flows”—p. 28. All this rehashes ideas Moscow has been putting out for many years.

90. A recent report describes the BRI as “the most successful overseas public relations campaign China has ever carried out”—“Prospects for the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019-23”, *Daily Brief*, Oxford Analytica, 7 December 2018, available at: <https://dailybrief.oxan.com>.

is even scope over time for a genuinely positive vision to emerge, in which Greater Eurasia, like the Asia-Pacific, becomes a region of dynamic cooperation.

Conversely, the Kremlin's Greater Eurasia project could drift along without much purpose. It would remain formally in existence, but become increasingly devoid of substance and drive.⁹¹ Putin could tire of it, as other, shinier projects absorb his attention, or domestic and international events force a re-think. It is possible, too, that a principal rationale for Greater Eurasia, expediting the demise of the liberal international order, may no longer apply in a few years' time. Donald Trump's re-election for a second US presidential term in 2020 could seal the fate of liberal internationalism and Transatlantic unity for a generation. In such an event, the Kremlin might wish to concentrate more directly on Russia's great power relations with the United States and China, either individually or in a quasi-Yalta arrangement. Greater Eurasia could still have its uses—supplying a normative veneer to a realpolitik foreign policy—but any pretensions as a blueprint for global governance would be well and truly over.

91. R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk observe that, in the case of the EEU, “[t]he divergent interests of member states have hollowed out the union from the inside”—in “The Eurasian Economic Union”, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

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