



President Atambayev (Kyrgyzstan), President Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan), President Putin (Russia), President Lukashenko (Belarus), and President Sargsyan (Armenia) after a meeting of the Eurasian Economic Union in Moscow in 2014. Photograph: Reuters

# Russia's Search for a Greater Eurasia: Origins, Promises, and Prospects

Seçkin Köstem

Vladimir Putin announced the Russian government's desire for a greater Eurasian partnership at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2016. In the opening speech, Putin proposed "considering the prospects for more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the Eurasian Economic Union," in which countries such as China, Pakistan, Iran, and India would also be included.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Putin has consistently promoted the project in his addresses to the Federal Assembly, in meetings with foreign leaders, at subsequent St. Petersburg Economic Forums, and at the Eastern Economic Forums held in Vladivostok.

Russia's geo-economic projects are always linked to its status in international politics, and the search for a Greater Eurasia demonstrates that for the Kremlin, foreign economic strategy and international identity are inherently linked. While Russian leadership is well aware of the shifts in the global economy, it is also entrapped by its great power nationalism in designing and implementing its strategy. With its grand name, the Greater Eurasian Partnership is no exception; the Kremlin acknowledges the strategic importance of Asia but does not have the economic and political means to achieve its goals.

## Origins and Promises of Greater Eurasian Partnership

Russia initially aimed to integrate into Europe as the leader of the post-Soviet space. In Moscow's conceptualization, "Greater Europe" stretched from Lisbon to Vladivostok.<sup>2</sup> Over time, Russia and the West have developed a mutual dissatisfaction, which culminated in Russia's annexation of Crimea, the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine, and the Western sanctions on Russia that followed. At the same time, Moscow had started to pivot to the east in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008–09 with the primary goal of attracting investments to Siberia and the Russian Far East and strengthening its opening to China and the Asia-Pacific.

The idea for the Greater Eurasian Partnership emerged at a time when the Kremlin realized there was no way to avoid isolation from the West. Having lost Ukraine for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014 for good, Russia had to re-orient its integration goals in the post-Soviet space. The Greater Eurasian Partnership has two broad economic goals. First, it aims to connect Russia and the EAEU to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its second, lesser goal is to move beyond China and connect the EAEU with Iran, India, and Southeast Asia. In other words, it is Russia's strategy to keep China in check.

Russia's crisis with the West corresponded to a period in which China started to make inroads to Central Asia with the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative that Xi Jinping announced in Kazakhstan in 2013. A Valdai report published in 2015 cheered the birth of the "Central Eurasian Movement" and argued that "the main driving forces behind the transformation of Central Eurasia into a zone of joint development will be Eurasian economic integration, led by Kazakhstan

and Russia, as well as by Belarus and the Silk Road Economic Belt project."<sup>3</sup> The report put emphasis on the modernizing role of Eurasian integration for the Russian economy. The authors, all respected members of the Russian academic community, expected the EAEU to create conditions for sustainable development and to improve the living standards of its member states.<sup>4</sup> Amid Western sanctions, connectivity with global markets and modernization continue to be two challenges for the Russian economy. That makes the Belt and Road Initiative and the Silk Road Fund, to facilitate infrastructure investments and finance them, attractive to Russia.

Yaroslav Lissovlik, former chief economist of the Eurasian Development Bank, has argued that the BRI and the EAEU together address the problem of connectivity for the landlocked economies of Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the EAEU "performs a crucial role of improving the access of its members—4 out of 5 of which are landlocked—to international markets."<sup>6</sup> Lissovlik goes on to argue that the two projects "complement and reinforce" each other and "it is only through regional economic integration that the landlocked countries of Eurasia can transform a structural weakness (geography) into an advantage." Accordingly, it is through the EAEU that investments and trade can increase in Central Asia, as the region will enhance its competitive capacity in global markets. This argument echoes the above-mentioned report of the Valdai Club, which presented Russian-Chinese cooperation as an opportunity to "turn Central Eurasia into a zone of joint development no less intensive than the one that exists today among the EU member-states."<sup>7</sup> Putin also asserted that the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative "are efficiently complementing each other. Harmonization of these projects can lay the foundation

for establishing a Greater Eurasian Partnership—an economic cooperation space that is as free as possible from all barriers.”<sup>8</sup>

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping first agreed to connect the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative during Xi’s visit to Moscow in May 2015 to attend the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Negotiations between China and the members of the EAEU took a year, from October 2016 until October 2017.<sup>9</sup> In May 2018, in Astana, China and the EAEU signed the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement, which covers areas including customs cooperation and trade facilitation, non-tariff barriers, and intellectual property rights. Little is known, however, about the concrete steps that China and the five members of the organization will take to link it with the Belt and Road Initiative.

Despite the well-entrenched Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, Moscow is keen to keep an eye on China’s growing might in Eurasia. Therefore, it aims to align its interests with those of China “within collective continent-wide institutions,” in Dmitri Trenin’s words, which will allow Russia to constrain Chinese influence.<sup>10</sup> That is the primary reason why Russian officials include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and even Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) within the concept of Greater Eurasia. They emphasize that this new partnership model is open to every state or organization, including the European Union, without elaborating on what openness actually entails.

Russia has been able to broker limited, but important, agreements between the Eurasian Economic Union and several countries in Asia. The most important of them is the trade agreements recently signed with Vietnam and Iran. The EAEU concluded its

first free trade agreement with Vietnam in May 2015, before Putin announced the Greater Eurasian Partnership. The agreement liberalizes 88 percent of trade between the EAEU and Vietnam. However, the volume of trade between EAEU members and Vietnam accounts for less than 1 percent of the EAEU’s total trade, and Russia dominates that trade, which makes the agreement only symbolically important.<sup>11</sup> In May 2018, the EAEU signed a preferential trade agreement with Iran, which is limited in scope, unlike the agreement with Vietnam. Negotiations are underway with Israel, Egypt, India, and Singapore on similar agreements. Most recently, in November 2018, the EAEU and ASEAN signed a memorandum on the establishment of a dialogue platform between the two organizations.<sup>12</sup>

## Greater Eurasia and Russia’s International Identity

Russia’s self-perception as a great power has prepared the context that makes its pivot to China possible.<sup>13</sup> For Russia’s ruling elite, Greater Eurasia is more significant than a project of increased connectivity, trade, and investment. It is impossible to fully understand Russia’s purposes for creating a Greater Eurasia without considering Russia’s vision of its international identity. Similar to the EAEU, this new project strengthens Russia’s self-conception as a great power. As political scientist David Lewis argued, just like “Greater Europe” and the “Russian World,” Greater Eurasia is a “geopolitical imaginary” that enables Russian policy makers to articulate an international identity for Russia.<sup>14</sup> This new idea, however, is an extension of Russia’s vision for a multipolar global order, which has been constant since the mid-1990s.





Chinese President Xi Jinping holds talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Vladivostok, Russia, Sept. 11, 2018. (Xinhua/Xie Huanchi)

Russia's ruling elite fully understand that the shifting center of power in the global economy requires a response. However, Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership is an economic project undertaken mainly in pursuit of Russia's great power aspirations.<sup>15</sup> Russian officials and academics have presented Greater Eurasia as a zone of peace, cooperation, and development across the Eurasian continent. In this self-conception, Russia is a promoter of openness, integration, and connectivity. In addition, Greater Eurasia offers Moscow a new lens with which to read global political developments. The Kremlin and foreign policy experts close to the Kremlin are in constant search for a way of redefining Russia's role and purpose in global politics.

In May 2017 at the Belt and Road International Forum in Beijing, Putin argued that "the greater Eurasia is not an abstract geopolitical arrangement but, without

exaggeration, a truly civilization-wide project looking toward the future."<sup>16</sup> According to Sergei Karaganov, an influential Russian academic with close ties to the Kremlin, the new "Greater Eurasia is a movement toward a new geostrategic community—i.e., a pan-Eurasian space of development, cooperation, peace, and security."<sup>17</sup> A recent Valdai report argued that "the turn to the east is a project designed to assist Russia in building its own political and civilizational identity that would be in step with the new world."<sup>18</sup> Russia, therefore, is "going back home" to its true civilizational roots in Asia, which is the only way for it to become "a center of the future Eurasian concert of powers" as opposed to "being an observer in someone else's space."<sup>19</sup> In Lavrov's words, in the long run, the Greater Eurasian Partnership "could become the foundation for a reformed architecture of the continent's security, corresponding to the realities of the 21st century."<sup>20</sup>

## Prospects of Greater Eurasian Partnership

Russia may be the architect of the Greater Eurasian Partnership, but China will decide its fate. So far, Beijing has chosen to accommodate Moscow's great power ambitions. For example, Russia and China have avoided clashing over Central Asia, a region within the traditional Russian sphere of influence.<sup>21</sup> Some even think that the strategic partnership between Russia and China is already transforming into a "soft alliance."<sup>22</sup>

For Beijing, closer cooperation with Moscow works as insurance for strategic stability in Eurasia. More importantly, as noted by a Chinese scholar, "Greater Eurasia is an important area for the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt."<sup>23</sup> China needs Russia to access the European markets, as unimpeded trade and infrastructure connectivity are two goals that Xi Jinping wants to have in Eurasia.<sup>24</sup> Three of the four economic corridors that are part of the Silk Road Economic Belt go through the EAEU: the New Eurasian Land Bridge that goes through Kazakhstan and Russia, the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, and the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor. The most efficient among these three is the first; it takes a train 14 days to reach Europe from China through Kazakhstan and Russia.<sup>25</sup> The Eurasian Development Bank estimates that railway container traffic between China and Europe will have almost doubled from 2017 to 2020.<sup>26</sup> The EAEU's unified customs mechanism is therefore highly significant for China. On the other hand, improvements in railway transportation in Eurasia are unlikely to challenge the primacy of maritime and air trade, which account for more than 90 percent of the volume of trade between China and the EU.

Russia is vital as an energy supplier for China's ever-increasing demand. For example, the Yamal LNG

plant will deliver an increasing amount of Russian natural gas to the Chinese market through the Northern Sea Route in the decade to come. China currently controls a 29.9 percent stake in the Yamal LNG project, with the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation and the Silk Road Fund owning 20 percent and 9.9 percent of the shares, respectively.<sup>27</sup> Chinese participation in Russian energy projects is crucial at a time when Russia's leading role in gas production is challenged and Russian energy firms are under Western sanctions. China's growing presence in the Yamal LNG project has strengthened Moscow's rationale for its acceptance of China's Polar Silk Road.<sup>28</sup> China's Silk Road Fund, which invests in Belt and Road projects, bought a 10 percent stake in Russia's largest petrochemicals company, SIBUR, in 2016. China's Sinopec also holds a 10 percent stake in SIBUR.

Beyond these two projects, Russia has not benefited from the BRI as much as it had hoped. For example, construction of the much-awaited Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway has not started. Due to Russia's financial problems, there has been slow progress in the construction of the Amur railway bridge that will connect Nizhneleninskoye in Russia with Tongjiang in China.

While China was not an important economic actor in Central Asia at the turn of the millennium, it has recently become a top trading partner. In 2017, China's trade with Central Asia reached \$30 billion, while Russia's trade with the region stood at \$18 billion. Moscow can do little to balance Chinese growing economic influence in Central Asia. Both countries need each other in their joint effort to adjust the rules of the Western-led international order to their advantage.<sup>29</sup> But Beijing does not need Moscow's intermediary role in order to intensify its trade and investment with post-Soviet states. Long-term political

and economic prospects for Russia in Central Asia are not good, as the BRI and China's economic power could push Russia out of the economic competition in that region. However, as Russian scholar Artyom Lukin pointed out, amid increasing Chinese economic influence in the region, Central Asian leaders might eventually need Russia to balance China's regional aspirations.<sup>30</sup>

The interests of other members of the Eurasian Economic Union will also matter for the future of the Greater Eurasian Partnership. Despite the growing formalization and institutionalization within the organization, the integration mechanism has so far offered little economic benefit to Russia and members states.<sup>31</sup> According to Rilka Dragneva, members of the organization have acquiesced to Russia's unilateral actions in return for cheap energy or enhanced security.<sup>32</sup> However, Russia has failed to convince EAEU members Kazakhstan and Belarus to join in with its economic sanctions against the EU, Ukraine, and Turkey. It is also unclear, for example, whether Kazakhstan will want to use the EAEU to pursue increased connectivity, or will it instead prefer to forge bilateral engagements with China, India, and others. Kazakhstan's cooperation with China on railway transport predates Xi Jinping's announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana in 2013, and Kazakhstan already developed its own connectivity project, Nurlı Zhol (Bright Path), in November 2014.<sup>33</sup>

## The Rocky Road Ahead

Russia no longer fears isolation from the West, at least for the moment, thanks to China's support. However, it is unclear how much longer Russia will tolerate China's rising capabilities and influence in its own perceived sphere of influence. In addition, the Kremlin will most likely not be happy with only a symbolic accommodation of its Greater Eurasia Partnership, and instead ask for a more substantial role in China's connectivity projects. As Marcin Kaczmarek has argued, the different logic of the two makes it unlikely; while the EAEU is an economic integration mechanism that aims to protect Russian-led Eurasia from outside competition, the Belt and Road Initiative is designed to benefit from economic globalization through connectivity.<sup>34</sup> In the age of global connectivity, other members of the EAEU will find little economic benefit from a Russia that is in search of import substitution.

Russia will continue to face the daunting challenge of keeping Eurasian integration on the Kremlin's terms relevant. The Greater Eurasian Partnership might serve Moscow's great power aspirations on symbolic terms, but the chances that it will successfully produce substantial economic benefits are rather dim.

---

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

## Endnotes





1. President of Russia (website), "Plenary Session of St. Petersburg International Economic Forum," June 17, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>.
2. Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will it Work?" Carnegie Moscow Center, July 20, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/2017/07/20/russia-s-evolving-grand-eurasia-strategy-will-it-work-pub-71588>.
3. *Toward the Great Ocean—3: Creating Central Eurasia* (Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, June 2015), 8.
4. *Toward the Great Ocean—3*, 13.
5. Yaroslav Lissovlik, "A Geographical Case for the 'One Belt, One Road' and the Eurasian Economic Union," Valdai Discussion Club, May 25, 2017, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/a-geographical-case-for-the-one-belt-one-road/>.
6. Lissovlik, "A Geographical Case."
7. *Toward the Great Ocean—3*, 23.
8. President of Russia (website), "Meeting of Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Russia," July 19, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58037>.
9. Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China (website), "China and Eurasian Economic Union Officially Sign Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement," May 18, 2018, <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/newsrelease/significantnews/201805/20180502746079.shtml>.
10. Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy."
11. Rilka Dragneva, *The Eurasian Economic Union: Putin's Geopolitical Project* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2018), 15, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/rpe-6-dragneva-final2.pdf>.
12. Yevraziyskaya Ekonomicheskaya Kommissiya, "YEAES i ASEAN Uglublyayut Torgovo-ekonomicheskoye i Investitsionnoye Sotrudnichestvo," November 14, 2018, <http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/nae/news/Pages/14-11-2018-1.aspx>.
13. For a detailed analysis, see Jeanne Wilson, "Russia's Relationship with China: The Role of Domestic and Ideational Factors," *International Politics* (April 2018): 1–17.
14. For a detailed discussion, see David G. Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia,'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1612–1637, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2018.1515348>.
15. On Russia's response to the global financial crisis, see Juliet Johnson and Seçkin Köstem, "Frustrated Leadership: Russia's Economic Alternative to the West," *Global Policy* 7, no. 2 (2016): 207–216.
16. President of Russia (website), "Belt and Road International Forum," May 14, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/speeches/54491>.
17. Sergei Karaganov, "From Eastward Pivot to Greater Eurasia," *International Affairs* 63, no. 4 (2017), 6.
18. *Toward the Great Ocean—6: People, History, Ideology, Education: Rediscovering the Identity* (Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, September 2018), 22, <http://valdaiclub.com/files/19357/>.
19. *Toward the Great Ocean—6*, 24.

20. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (website), "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly." September 28, 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3359296](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3359296).
21. For a detailed analysis, see Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, *Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, Russian Far East, and the Arctic* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2018).
22. Alexander Gabuev, A 'Soft Alliance?' *Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis* (London, UK: European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2015).
23. Zhao Huasheng, Greater Eurasian Partnership: China's Perspective," *China International Studies* (January/February 2018): 68–84, 68.
24. Nadège Rolland, "Eurasian Integration 'a la Chinese': Deciphering Beijing's Vision for the Region as a 'Community of Common Destiny,'" *The Asan Forum*, June 5, 2017, <http://www.theasanforum.org/eurasian-integration-a-la-chinese-deciphering-beijings-vision-for-the-region-as-a-community-of-common-destiny/>
25. Robert Daly and Matthew Rojansky, "China's Global Dreams Give its Neighbors Nightmares," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/chinas-global-dreams-are-giving-its-neighbors-nightmares/>.
26. Eurasian Development Bank (website), "Silk Road Transport Corridors: Assessment of Trans-EAEU Freight Traffic Growth Potential," April 12, 2018, [https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/0a8/EDB-Centre\\_2018\\_Report-49\\_Transport-Corridors\\_ENG.pdf](https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/0a8/EDB-Centre_2018_Report-49_Transport-Corridors_ENG.pdf).
27. Nadezhda Filimonova and Svetlana Krivokhizh, "China's Stakes in the Russian Arctic," *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-stakes-in-the-russian-arctic/>.
28. Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russian-Chinese Relations in Eurasia: Harmonization or Subordination?* Briefing Paper 238 (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, April 2018), 6.
29. Stronski and Ng, *Cooperation and Competition*, 2.
30. Artyom Lukin, "Putin's Silk Road Gamble," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2018.
31. Alexander Libman, "Russian Power Politics and the Eurasian Economic Union: The Real and the Imagined," *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (February 2017): 81–103.
32. Rilka Dragneva, *The Eurasian Economic Union*, 8.
33. Nicola P. Contessi, "Foreign Policy Diversification and Intercontinental Transport Corridors: The Case of Kazakhstan's Railway Diplomacy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70, no. 5 (2018): 759–790, 768.
34. Marcin Kaczmarski, "Non-Western Visions of Regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union," *International Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2017): 1357–1376.





Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

## The Wilson Center

 [wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)  
 [facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter](https://facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter)  
 [@TheWilsonCenter](https://twitter.com/TheWilsonCenter)  
 202.691.4000

## The Kennan Institute

 [wilsoncenter.org/kennan](http://wilsoncenter.org/kennan)  
 [kennan@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:kennan@wilsoncenter.org)  
 [facebook.com/Kennan.Institute](https://facebook.com/Kennan.Institute)  
 [@kennaninstitute](https://twitter.com/@kennaninstitute)  
 202.691.4100



**Seçkin Köstem** is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara. He is currently a short-term fellow at New York University's Jordan Center. He was a George F. Kennan Fellow at the Kennan Institute from October to December 2018.

He received his PhD from McGill University in 2016. He has been a visiting researcher at King's College London's Russia Institute and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). Köstem's research focuses on Russian and Turkish foreign economic policies, regional and rising powers, and Turkish-Russian relations. His articles have been published in journals such as *Review of International Political Economy*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Global Policy and Perceptions*, *Journal of International Affairs*.