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# Journal of Peace Studies

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# OPINION

## **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Eurasia: A Perspective from Russia**

**Fedor Igorevich Arzhaev\***



Eurasia is a bi-continental expanse, where the geopolitical and geoeconomics interests of the global superpowers meet and where they rival for dominance. The modern architecture of the global political system and the contemporary world order cannot guarantee stability and provide conditions for the economic prosperity of the developing economies— they serve the interests of the developed countries, known as the Western world with the Anglo-Saxon world at its core. The developing economies are forced to depend on their own strength and resources to protect their national interests, as they see it, under this system; one of such instruments is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI is a Chinese project, that was born as a resurrection of the old concept of Silk Route in a modern way, to contribute to infrastructure development and trade partnership in Eurasia. At first it was a mere way to ensure a faster delivery of goods from China to their major consumers; in this form, purely as a conduit for business and commerce, it was warmly welcomed by Russia, which was itself searching for ways to diversify its exports to both Europe and China at lower costs. The high volume of goods transit through the Russian territory via the Northern Route (as it was planned in 2015) added up to the support of the project in Russia.

However, with the growing role of China worldwide and societies

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becoming “increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture”, at the end of history, as argued by Fukuyama<sup>1</sup>, there has been a surge in developing economies trying to find their rightful and fair place in the changing world order even as the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the major superpowers inevitably collide. We are facing this situation especially since 2018, when BRI became a key Chinese geopolitical project. To add up, the recent crises in Eurasia, namely the Ukrainian crisis, the instability in the Caucasus region, the changes in Afghanistan and other numerous shocks are the signs of a new geopolitical reality emerging in the horizon with the possibility of regional powers playing a higher role heretofore. Riding these tectonic changes, the Chinese initiative for connecting Europe and Asia through multiple highly developed transport corridors, including the marine ones, have been changed to suit Chinese ambitions in the global arena and perhaps to survive the ongoing global turbulence.

The current state of BRI differs significantly from how it was initially conceived. Due to the changing contours of Sino-US relations, which put enormous pressure on China–

Europe cooperation, and the crack in global North and South interactions, PRC conceptualized BRI in a manner that it would be an attractive proposition for states seeking development and growth and projected it as a means to build a “community with a shared future for mankind”<sup>2</sup>, first stated as a Chinese foreign policy principle in 1997.

This approach aims at the formation of the new image of China as a leader of the developing countries for the new era. The idea is partially inherited from the former USSR and its ideology of bringing together all non-capitalist states with help of economic preferences. In general, the “community with a shared future for mankind” expresses the idea of globalization in the Chinese way, substituting the Anglo-Saxon domination over the world with Chinese preponderance over Eurasia and building a joint community of the developing countries, which is ready to adapt to the Chinese economic model, its way of living and foreign policy, and to make it short, the members of such a community must be ready to become Chinese satellites. Such geopolitical motivation has been propelled by sustained growth in the Chinese economy which has now superseded the pace of growth on EU and US,

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allowing China to accumulate huge amounts of capital and provided it with the opportunity to establish its dominance in the financial domain in the Eurasian region.

BRI is now being viewed as Chinese “soft power” and has occasioned unprecedented expansion of Chinese influence in Eurasia and Africa. Hence, when speaking of the Initiative today, the first thing to mention is the role of BRI and affiliated structures, such as the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), in spreading the Chinese influence in Asia and Africa even though the official Chinese position on BRI has been that the project is not designed to spread China’s influence.<sup>3</sup> The changes brought about in the project has led to the shift in its instruments – from building infrastructure (massive investments in infrastructure development (the highly awaited high-speed Beijing – Moscow railroad in Russia in 2018, the development of port Piraeus port in Greece etc.) and putting in place new arrangements to fast-track Chinese goods, to telecommunications, energy systems, water facilities, quality of living and urban projects. The diplomacy China had earlier invested to build railroads and ports has given way to investment in many other important developmental sectors in many parts of the world.

The Chinese proposals for the countries, which are in need for foreign investments, are usually grabbed by elites in the hot countries, which is in sharp contrast to the way they have negotiated with the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, as the Chinese investment does not usually come with any conditionalities that would require any far-reaching political or economic changes that the later financial institutions often impose on the debt receiving countries. Nevertheless, the darker side is that the BRI projects are usually implemented with Chinese technologies, equipment, and Chinese labour. Moreover, the conditions for the investments, often non-transparent and kept secret from the people, include the involvement of the Chinese multinational banks in the administration of financial resources, granted for the project, the share of the Chinese employees in all the works, the preferential conditions for the Chinese producers of goods and materials in supplying the construction works and the rate of interest they charge on the loans they advance.

The other important issue is that BRI is an initiative with no clear boundaries and definitions— it is difficult to understand, which of the Chinese projects are under BRI and which are not, and whether they pursue some other goals, better

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known to the Chinese! As a result, the effects of BRI are hard to assess and it often leads to polarized discussions over the issue in political sphere, so it is hard to understand whether any of the political forces in the recipient country are pro-Chinese because of their national interests or their own private interests and whether the long-term impact of Chinese involvement in the developmental sectors under BRI is positive and beneficial for the host countries.

The positive and negative impacts of BRI in the recipient countries are obvious – while the recipients get cheaper and politically unconditional financial resources, they have no other option but to negotiate part of their economic sovereignty— The presence of the Chinese companies, the indebtedness of the recipients to China or Chinese-led institutions, flooding of host country's markets with Chinese goods which harms local production weaken their economies to a level that they become totally dependent on China. Those with strong economic foundations may not suffer as much, but they definitely lose part of their domestic markets.

The distinction between the Western and the Chinese approaches, therefore, appears as an

illusion in the long run– while accepting the first, the country risks its political independence and covertly falls into the sphere of influence of developed economies under the narrative that there is a need to build democratic institutions and the democracy in the Western sense; while choosing the Chinese option, the economy becomes dependent on PRC and its investments and gradually the recipient country becomes a satellite of China. This contradicts the official position of China, but to state it bluntly, China does not offer an option which is vastly different from what is offered by the West.

Be that as it may, the Chinese policy driving the BRI, despite the shortcomings described above appears logical and pragmatic from the Chinese perspective. It allows China to develop its own economy under pressure from the USA and its Western allies without any fear of sanctions. PRC pursues its own interests, as any other superpower, and one of them is the promotion and perpetuation of its influence in Eurasia. China can boast of proposing highly effective instruments for the achievement of this goal— BRI and affiliated international institutions, its multinational corporations, multinational banks included, renminbi as a reserve currency etc. It

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somewhat resembles the Bretton-Woods system of institutions and rules of global economy, leading to the rise of the US as the sole policymaker of a unipolar world. The Chinese vision for the future of Eurasia as the community with a shared future for mankind, headed by PRC, looks like just another copy of the American idea. In case China succeeds in its efforts, it will replace the American and Anglo-Saxon world order in many parts of the world and become the new norm-setter in global geo-politics and geo-economy. Whether such China-led world order is fairer than the one it seeks to replace, and whether it puts into focus the interests of economies other than that of China is still doubtful.

The other superpower of Eurasia—Russia—has its own vision for the future of the continent, which does not contradict the Chinese one, but differs quite a lot from it. Russia sticks to the approach that the choice for shaping one's future remains an unconditional and sovereign right for any nation and state. In this regard, the Russian approach encompasses the following points: the new world order should be based on the responsible interactions of the several superpowers, while in Eurasia these superpowers are China, India and Russia, other continents have

different countries in the lead role, for instance, Brazil, South Africa, Germany, USA etc.; there are spheres of interest of every superpower and they are to be balanced at the international level in order to avoid conflict of their interests; the security and sovereignty of any state should not be harmed by the actions of other countries. The diversity of approaches to the national, regional and global developments makes it even more imperative that these approaches do not clash with each other and states should have independence of choice to pursue their interests as per their local needs and interests.

The Russian approach, thus, provides yet another option for the developing economies, gives them higher chances for success and independent development, as it moderates the competition of superpowers and reduces the need for balance between them. Under this doctrine, China can promote and develop BRI to any extent, unless this process directly harms or threatens any other country's sovereignty. At the same time, it is risky, as in case of gradual decline of any of the superpowers, the turmoil and the struggle for the new division of spheres of interests is inevitable.

To protect Russian interests in the face of higher economic power of



China and higher political influence of the Anglo-Saxon countries, the competition between superpowers favours Russia. In such a situation, the idea of alliance between superpowers (often called “balancers” in Eurasia (between Russia and China, Russia and India etc.) is a key principle of the Russian foreign policy. Among the most important of these alliances are Russia-India cooperation, the cooperation between Russia and the friendly CIS countries and the Russia-China partnership. The first two of these are institutionally represented by the North-South multimodal corridor (NSMC) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)–the two highly important geo-economic and geopolitical projects for Russia. The obvious way of Russia-China institutional interaction is BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The interaction between EAEU and BRI demonstrates the current Russian vision which is complementary to the Chinese project, while the interactions between NSMC and BRI represent the Russian alternative to Chinese investment diplomacy in the region.

The key term defining interaction between the EAEU and BRI is “conjugation”<sup>4</sup>. It refers to a process of finding similar positions and

making them the major points of cooperation, while conducting national policies around points of difference with respect to the interests of the other side. The classic demonstration of this attitude is the politics of China and Russia in Central Asia. Both countries have their own separate visions about the role of the regional economies in their foreign policies – Russia treats Central Asia as a region in its sphere of interest and tries to attract Central Asian states to participate in deeper economic and political cooperation, while China pursues the goal of establishing its dominance in Central Asia through the conquest of their markets and massive investments in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; it also promotes the presence of Chinese MNCs in the region.

Central Asia is partially included in EAEU (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic), while all the regional countries are, to a certain extent, involved in BRI corridors; hence, the economies of the region have to “choose a side”. This competition does not make China and Russia rivals, even when speaking of certain projects such as the Beijing-Moscow railroad which was a Chinese initiative considered a threat to the Russian interests. It was thus postponed and transformed into

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Kazan-Moscow high-speed railway, which suits Russian interests and China-Kyrgyz Republic-Uzbekistan railroad that suits Chinese interests. This has a significantly lower impact on the Russian influence in the region. Moreover, when the two superpowers have similar positions, the Central Asian countries tend to follow the same course – for instance, the regional states chose not to express their position on the Russian special operations in Ukraine, after China acted in a neutral manner on the issue.

There are numerous other examples of the flip side of this competition – for instance, one of the initial projects of the BRI included the so-called Northern Corridor, which majorly went through Russia. The change in the Chinese vision of the BRI, described here above, led China pursue its higher interests by working towards inclusion of the Central Asian countries and the Asian developing economies to suck them into its sphere of influence than get fixated on a cheaper and shorter road through Russia – a strong partner with its own interests and readiness to protect them. The other similar example is the reaction of Russia to the Chinese proposal to establish a new financial institution under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – the SCO Bank. Russia blocked this idea as it confronted its

interests in Central Asia and threatened its positions in South Asia.

The conjugation of EAEU and BRI is a simple example of the partnership that focuses on mutual interests, based on both competition and cooperation in their mutual search for finding a better way to promote them in regional economies, considering their interests too. While China promotes its concept of the “community with a shared future for mankind”, Russia has its alternative – the Greater Eurasia project<sup>5</sup>, which competes in its sphere of ideas with the Chinese projects. The interaction between the North-South multimodal corridor (NSMC) and BRI is somewhat different.

The NSMC in its broader connotation rivals a part of the China-Pakistan corridor and goes through several hubs of the Southern corridor of BRI. It has some connection with the Initiative. At the same time NSMC is a rare example of the vertical infrastructure initiatives in Eurasia (an initiative, that involves construction of infrastructure, going in North-South, not East-West direction), which is a joint idea of India, Russia and Iran. The genesis of the idea and the key participants in NSMC makes it an example of a ‘balancer’. The corridor today is underdeveloped, but has significant

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prospects for future use as an alternative of the Maritime Silk Road Belt (MSRB). The development of this alternative, alongside the proposition of higher openness and availability of the Northern Sea Route (another, shorter, but climate dependent option for marine transport to get from Asia to Europe) for foreign vessels demonstrates the willingness of Russia to provide alternatives to the Chinese projects.

The Russian vision of the Eurasian cooperation lies in the field of connectivity, which was the initial idea of BRI, in this regard the Russian and Chinese interests are partially alike. At the same time, Russia sees EAEU, cooperation with India and Iran as a barrier for the Chinese expansion in Eurasia. Hence, it is an eager partner in any such project that can pose as a possible alternative to the Chinese projects. This is meant to balance China and promote deep changes in world order; the idea here is not be the sole leader, a policy being pursued by China.

The Russian vision of BRI as a positive shift in global integration initiatives goes along with some concerns about uncontrolled growth of Chinese influence in Eurasia. Taking this into account, the attitude to BRI in Russia is generally positive, but with a high degree of caution.

While the conjugation of EAEU and BRI seems possible, just as the smooth coexistence of NSMC and BRI, the conjugation of the Russian and the Chinese geopolitical strategies and visions of the Eurasian future is unlikely. The two countries are partners in the projects with mutual interests but in terms of geopolitics, all superpowers are rivals with their separate worldviews, where they deem their interests superior to that of others.

In this regard, Russia supports BRI and active trade with China, just as with any other friendly country, but at the same time, resists Chinese endeavours to suck EAEU countries into its sphere of influence. The changes in the Russian vision of the Eurasian perspectives, including the attitude towards BRI depend heavily on the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict, which in the Russian view is the frontier of the change in the existing world order— the more decisive is the Russian victory, the higher is the extent to which Russia is going to promote its vision of the Eurasian future.

In any case, this vision does not seek to contradict the Chinese one, but Russia is in favour of establishing a new world order without clear hegemony of any superpower, including China, even though it might appear as a better option than the current American-led

world from the Russian point of view. The place of BRI as a component of Russian vision in Eurasia and harbinger of a new world order may change from the point of view of easing the pressures of the sanctions and pursuit of economic growth and diversifying exports through competing logistics infrastructure systems, including NSMC, Northern Sea Route, Trans-Siberian railroad and Baikal-Amur railroad. ■

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