

Sino-Russian Convergence on Eurasian Integration: Understanding the Long-Term Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Russia and China surrounding Eurasia, realizing Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory by integrating the Eurasian landmass. Economic, political and strategic complementarities between Russia and China plus geography are the integrative forces compelling both the powers to accommodate each other's interests and provide indispensable benefits to each other in the context of Eurasian integration. By developing both the components of cross border connectivity infrastructure i.e. hardware (Roads, Railways, Pipelines, Ports) as well as software (harmonization and coordination of policies, regulations) the dyad is turning the 21st Century into "Eurasian Century". Historically, with the inventions of maritime (Sea lanes of Communication) transportation, the power shifted to Sea powers(West) as they controlled the main transportation routes. The development and hence control over the transportation routes over Eurasia will result into a power shift from Sea powers to land powers (Russia & China). Therefore the stakes are high for both the continental powers in integrating Eurasia. One is World's largest energy producer while the other is largest energy consumer. All this mean a permanent need for each other and long-term engagement for at least the rest of 21st century. This complementarily between Russia and China is also turning the heartland i.e. landlocked geography of Central Asian Republics into a blessing for these republics as opposed to the landlocked Afghanistan for which its geography turned to be a curse. Both consider Central Asia as their backyard and therefore unanimous on keeping the backyard stable and developed.

Key Words: Russia, China, Eurasian Integration, Eurasian Union & BRI

Introduction

Technological developments and understanding between the two major powers, Russia and China surrounding Eurasia, realizing Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory by integrating Eurasia: the largest continent of the world in terms of landmass, natural resources and population. Eurasian integration refers to the development of economic connectivity; both components of cross-border infrastructure development including hard and soft as opposed to the disconnected and divided states of Eurasian landmass. According to Glenn Diesen this lack of cross-border connectivity infrastructure made Eurasia susceptible to be ruled from

the periphery (Diesen, 2018, p.6). Russia and China Converge on Eurasian integration to turn the 21st century into 'Eurasian Century' by developing both the components of cross border connectivity infrastructure i.e. hardware (Roads, Railways, Pipelines, Ports) as well as software (harmonization and coordination of policies, regulations). It is control over transportation routes that accumulate power and influence for a nation or a country. With the inventions of maritime/ Sea lanes of Communication (SLCs) and its transportation tools, the power shifted to Sea powers as they controlled the main transportation routes. The development and hence control over the transportation routes over Eurasia will result into a power shift from Sea powers to land powers (Diesen, 2018, p.24). Therefore the stakes are high for both the continental powers in integrating Eurasia. For Russia the stakes are high as an integrated Eurasia will enhance its bargaining power vis-à-vis Western Europe and America, can link itself to the rising Asia as energy supplier, can develop its Far East smoothly and can serve as a bridge while positioning itself at the Centre of East and West. China desires to circumvent strategically American controlled maritime supply routes to the West, West Africa, Middle East and Western Europe by developing alternative overland transportation infrastructure over Eurasia. Neither power demonstrates the intentions nor has the capacity to be a hegemon in Eurasia unilaterally and therefore neither can antagonise the other. In this context the paper, by examining economic, political and strategic complementarities, argues that Sino-Russian convergence on Eurasian integration and consequential interdependence guarantees a long-term engagement. Published and unpublished material, online sources and reports have been analyzed to prove the hypothesis and to understand how it is a long-term engagement.

It is important to note that cooperation and partnership is sustainable when it is mutually beneficial and there is an equilibrium/symmetry since it prevents the economic power to be utilized for undue political concessions. Russia and China are indispensable partners for Eurasian integration having convergence of political and economic interests on regional and global level. One is World's largest energy producer while the other is largest energy consumer. Geography compels both to accommodate each other's interests and provide indispensable benefits to each other. China desires to circumvent the heavy United States strategic presence along maritime supply routes to the West, West Africa, Middle East and Western Europe by developing alternative overland transportation infrastructure in Eurasia. China can also be instrumental in the development of Russia's Far East. In addition neither power's regional and global objectives can be achieved if one is antagonized. In this context the paper by examining economic, political and strategic complementarities argues that Sino-Russian convergence on Eurasian integration guarantees a long-term engagement for several decades if not for the entire 21st century.

This complementarity between the dyad is turning the heartland i.e. landlocked geography of Central Asian Republics into a blessing. Central Asian Republics will be connected to global markets in all directions. Russia and China consider Central Asia as their backyard and therefore unanimous on keeping the

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backyard stable and developed. Some of the observers have declared a division of labour between Russia and China as far as Central Asia is concerned. Russia according to its abilities has taken the role of security provider while China in accordance to its capabilities providing financial assistance. Both have recognized their respective roles and likewise respect each other's interests.

From the Presidential level to Ministerial level and from intellectual to area studies experts of both the countries, all have common views on strengthening China-Russia partnership for Eurasian integration (Rolland, 2019). Russia believes that China never humiliated Russia during the 1990s when it was down and always supported Russia's attempts to re-emerge as a world power in contrast to the West (Sangar, 2017). As early as 1997, both Russia and China raised their voice jointly for a multi polar world order. China supported Russia on issue of Chechnya while Russia supported China on Uyghur question. In 2005, Russia and China, under the umbrella of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, demanded evacuation of American military basis from Central Asia. American presence in Afghanistan further pushed both towards each other. In early 2000s, many analysts believed that Russia and China are in fierce competition in Central Asia (Sangar, 2017), however after almost two decades of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, both the states are in ever increasing collaboration in the region. Russia never reacted to the energy pipelines from Central Asia to China in the way it reacted to Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan pipeline in form of secession of Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia and to the Ukraine in form of annexation of Crimea.

There might be differences between Russia and China on the shape of world order and approaches to the United States of America as stated by Bobo Lo. Lo argues that China has tremendous stakes in relations with United States and would prefer a bi-polar world dominated by China and United States while Russia would prefer a multi-polar world having equal status with United States and China (Lo, 2015, p.148). However on the question of Eurasia, there seems no such difference. Eurasia is geographically contiguous to Russia and China and therefore both will desire to play the game away while keeping the backyard stable. Sino-Russian long border makes the energy trade more convenient and therefore China also considers Russia as a 'genuine strategic partner.

Russia's strategies for Eurasian integration

Geographically the core of Eurasia belongs to Russia. Through the economic connectivity, Russia can link itself to the rising Asia as energy supplier as well as can serve as a bridge between East and West. Russia does not have the intentions nor does have the capacity to be a hegemon in Eurasian. Therefore Russia has to accommodate other powers mainly China in the space which historically belonged to Russia (Diesen, 2018). In post Crimea period and in the wake of Western sanctions, Russia has accelerated its march towards East while focusing on

Eurasian integration. It will serve multiple purposes for Russia. Russia can increase its bargaining power vis-à-vis Western Europe by developing and diversifying partnership and connectivity for energy supply in the East, e.g., \$400b, the power of Siberiagas pipeline from Eastern Russia to China. Two third of Russia's territory is located in Asia (Diesen, 2018, p.68) while the Western Russia is poorly connected to its Eastern parts. Thus Russia's Far East can be rapidly developed through Eurasian integration strategy with the collaboration of China.

Russia's Far East has gained added significance in the wake of economically rising Asia-Pacific region. The Far East development and economic connectivity between the two poles within Russia (West and East) will elevate Russia's status from a peripheral state to a Eurasian power (Solovyev, 2004). Economic connectivity in Russia's Far East will efficiently integrate Russia with Northeast Asia also. In 2012, President of Russia Vladimir Putin declared the development of Far East as most important geostrategic goal (Blagov, 2012) and established the Federal Ministry for the Development of Far East. Thus Eurasian integration will integrate European Russia with the Vladivostok in Eastern parts and integrating with Asia Pacific region and North East Asia. Eurasian integration through physical infrastructure will thus realize competitive advantage for Russia derived from its geographical expanse/vastness.

Russia as the world largest oil and gas producer and reserve holder aims to become major energy supplier in Asia also through Eurasian integration. This will reduce Russia's sole reliance on European markets. Buzan argues that Russia then can act as a 'swing power' having the ability and preparedness to shift engagement between regions of Europe and Asia (Buzan, 2005)..oil and gas pipelines make essential part of the energy infrastructure of Eurasian integration. Russia has become the oil supplier to one of the world's fastest growing energy market with inauguration of Easter Siberian-Pacific Ocean pipelines in 2009 and supplies oil to China, Japan and other countries in East Asia (Diesen, 2018, p.70). The main tool to achieve all these objectives through Eurasian integration is the Eurasian Economic Union for Russia. Eurasian Economic Union also aims to develop a regional energy market comprised of electricity which will have considerable impact on Eurasian development and integration (Pastukhova, 2016). Eurasian Union will increase collective bargaining power for member states while for non-members it will improve access to a single market with common tariff and custom control regulations. For China it will also serve as a single transit system towards Europe as explained later in this paper.

It is pertinent to mention that Russia views Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS also important for Eurasian Integration. President of Russia stated at the occasion of Eurasian Economic Union--Shanghai Cooperation Organization—BRICS Summit in Ufa, 2015 "For us this (Eurasian landmass) is not a chessboard, it is not a geographical field- this is our home and all of us together want our home to be calm and affluent, for it is not a place of extremism or for attempts to protect one's interests at the expense of others....we are united to achieve our aims by acting collectively and by acknowledging each other's'

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interests” (Sakwa, 2018). One can observe that Russia’s pivot to east for Eurasian integration is irreversible which necessitates long term engagement with China. Russia is accommodating partners by realizing its limitations. Similarly Asia is more willing to accommodate Russia as opposite to Europe where it has been consistently marginalized even in the post-cold war period.

China’s strategy for Eurasian integration

During the days of old Silk Road, China contributed 30 percent to the World’s Gross Productivity. The old Silk Road lost its significance in the early 16th Century to the discovery and development of maritime/Sea Lanes of Communication (SLCs). Subsequently the transportation corridors came under the control of sea powers (Western powers). In the 21st Century, China has started shaking the foundations of western centric Britton Wood based World system by initiating world’s largest connectivity infrastructure projects. It has also laid the foundation of alternative financial institutions like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Road Fund (SRF). China is also active participant of other financial institutions in Asia like the Development Bank of BRICS and is most active protagonist in Asia for Eurasian Integration. It is believed that with the development of Eurasian connectivity infrastructure, the global commerce would shift from SLCs to Eurasian landmass consequently reducing the importance of United States’ naval supremacy (Rolland, 2015). China has already developed oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. All the three Central Asian republics feed gas to lines A, B and C. China also plans to construct line D via Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic.

China has also been developing roads, highways and railways to interconnect Central Asia with China on one side and Iran on the other. High-speed rail takes 14 days to reach Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan while oil tankers from Eastern Chinese ports of Shanghai and Beijing takes 45 days to reach Iran via South China Sea, Strait of Malacca and Indian Ocean. China’s Eurasian Corridor enabling Central Asia region to integrate with Asia, Africa and European markets reciprocally linking all these markets to China for energy imports and consumer goods exports. Inter-regional connectivity will translate the geographical and energy potential of Central Asia into inclusive development of the region. The Northern and Central Eurasian corridors via Russia and Central Asia from China to Europe will revolutionize the entire Eurasia in terms of economic activities. Thus China envisions the transfer of commerce to trans-continental trade corridors with high tech communication infrastructure to diversify foreign trade routes and drastically reduce reliance on heavily controlled maritime routes by USA.

Towards South China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been initiated by China and Pakistan to connect Kashghar with Gwadar Sea port strategically located at the mouth of Strait of Hormuz. For Pakistan it will bypass instable

Afghanistan in access to Central Asia. CPEC includes the development of roads, rails and pipeline projects besides energy projects in Pakistan. In the North, China is indispensable partner of Russia to develop connectivity infrastructure from East to West. Russia has been providing oil to China through ESPO and gas through Power of Siberia \$400b pipeline. That is why Glenn Diesen concludes that these developments in the realm of Eurasian integration will result in a power shift from maritime powers to land powers (Diesen, 2018). The control over transportation corridors resulted in power accumulation in the past in form of controlling SLCs and it will yield the same result in case of control over transportation corridors over Eurasian landmass.

Convergence on Eurasian integration guarantees long-term engagement

Both the powers have realized that co-leadership and collective autonomy and influence in Eurasia is possible through cooperation rather indulging in a zero-sum game for hegemony. It seems that neither power could establish and maintain hegemony nor the regional states would be comfortable with a hegemonic tendency of either. The energy cooperation, between one of the world's largest-supplier and one of world's largest consumer entails increased inter-dependence which guarantees a long-term engagement. China respects and acknowledges Russia's historical/traditional role in former Soviet space in contrast to the West. Russia has also been accommodating China and not reacted to the energy pipelines from Central Asia to China as it had done in case of Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan Pipeline and Ukraine.

Many analysts have, in length, discussed the nature of Sino-Russian relations by quoting two schools of thoughts. First includes the Bobo Lo and Trenin who have termed this Sino-Russian Cooperation as Axis of Convenience and Marriage of Convenience who suggest that this relationship of cooperation is driven by expediency and opportunism (Bobo, 2008). This school of thought explains that there is main difference in the approaches of the two Powers to contemporary US dominated world. China is a main beneficiary of the current world order in terms of trade and commerce expansion and would prefer to transform it in bipolarity on Chinese terms having United States of America as a main power along with China. On the other hand Russia desires total turn down of the world order to change it into a multipolar world order having equal status with America and China (Sangar, 2017). Second school of thought including some renowned Russian and Chinese experts like Iurii M. Galenovich and Mikhail L. Titarenk declare this relationship as strategic partnership driven by and based on strong economic and political dividends for both.

Main focus of China's Belt is to develop roads and railway as part of New Eurasian Land Bridge to access European markets via Russia and Kazakhstan (Sangar, 2017). China's initiatives for Eurasian integration enhance inter-dependence between Russia and China which will be an economic addition to their

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common stance on regional and global issues vis-à-vis the West. China's financial ability realizing the development of connectivity infrastructure and its Silk Road Economic Belt (overland connectivity infrastructure via Central Asia and Russia) is based on the principles of open regionalism. Open regionalism is bilateral, trilateral or multilateral activity/project specific cooperation without any supra-national institutions involved in contrast to close regionalism. Close regionalism adopts protectionist measures as a custom union and single economic space as an economic union with a common currency at final stage. This makes the Chinese Economic Belt project different from the Russia's Eurasian Union in nature. In May 2015, Presidents of Russia and China in joint statement declared coordination of Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road Economic Belt (Sangar, 2017). Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, members of EEU, border China and therefore EEU will serve as a single transit system for China in case of trade transportation over Eurasian corridors towards Europe.

China fully recognizes and respect Russia's political and security influence in Central Asia and rest of former Soviet States. Western observers have been citing the growing asymmetry between Russia and China which relegates Russia to a junior partner and term it a source of concern for many in Moscow. However, it might be an effort to cast a wedge and create difference between the two to keep the Eurasian countries divided. The growing interdependence and trust has proved all such observations baseless. China has been describing relations with Russia as a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination (Chase, 2017). So the relationship is based on several key drivers expanding trade and economic ties, growing energy partnership, policy coordination and renewed military cooperation. Joint military exercises and particularly naval exercises of Russia and China in South China Sea and Baltics demonstrate their willingness to support each other in disputes with the West.

Russia has been developing Greater Eurasian Partnership which President Putin talked about while addressing the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum's plenary session in 2016 involving China, Pakistan Iran and India (Lukin, 2018, July). Trans Eurasian Belt Development (TERP) Project for Eurasian integration which include high speed railways and motorways was approved by the Presidium of Russian Academy of Sciences in 2014 (Lukin, 2018, July). Though Russia is weak in comparison to USA, EU and Japan but its strategic importance to China remains high due to a number of facts. First China's views on the International order are closest to that of Russia as both have been declared by the US President as strategic rivals and have been pressurized by USA for political gains. Both share more than 4200 km border, complement each other in terms of trade, energy, security and military hardware. The energy pipelines from Russia to China and development of other cross border infrastructure will have spillover effects on increased cooperation in agriculture, mineral resources, finance, tourism and manufacturing sector. Both desire to keep their backyard Central Asia stable

and developed. China needs Russia's support to mitigate American influence in Asia-Pacific and beyond. Both worries about US dual containment. As EU-US alliance has worried Russia in Eastern Europe, US-Japan alliance is a source of concern for China in East and Northeast Asia. It is also important to mention that Alexander Gubuev has declared the perceived Chinese demographic threat to the Russia's Far East as a myth, Chinese people working on projects in Russia's Far East return back to China in orderly manner and therefore this should not be a hurdle in deepening bilateral relations (Gabuev, 2019, p.56).

The Presidents of Russia and China jointly expressed concern in 2016 over the deployment of missile systems in Europe and Northeast Asia (Xinhua, 2016). Stability in Central Asia is vital for both Russia and China and therefore both the powers are in close cooperation in the region. US presence in Afghanistan further pushed these powers to work together while US withdrawal is also undermining Sino-Russia security cooperation in the region. Chinese President has assured Putin that BRI is not for dominance in the region (Zhao, 2014). Mingjiang Li and Angela Poh have correctly concluded that this Sino-Russian relationship is much deeper, driven by some concrete material gains as well as political interests for both the powers and therefore has gone beyond mere the Axis of convenience (Li, 2019, p.33).

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in_the_age_of_grand_Eurasian_projects_Prospects_for_integration_between
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