

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Rise of Chinese Eurasianism as a Eurasian Integration Strategy against Atlanticism?

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The geopolitical spaces of the ideology of Eurasianism, such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, form the main framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as destinations for Chinese goods, services, and capital. For this reason, the BRI is, on the one hand, both a cause and effect of the political-economic interests of China; while, on the other hand, it provides a dynamic for the regional integration policies of the Chinese government. When Xi Jinping became China's new leader in 2012, he signalled that he would pursue a "pro-active" foreign policy course. Moreover, his foreign policy understanding has represented, to some extent, the end of the era of Deng Xiaoping's reactive "bide and hide" foreign policy strategy. Nevertheless, it remains necessary to deal with the issue of whether this pro-activeness will transform into a single robust foreign policy perspective that benefits from the ideologies of Eurasianism or Atlanticism. What is known about ideology-driven Atlanticism is that it has been prioritizing the securitization of Eurasia. However, it seems that China's development-oriented approach is more promising for those countries that are in need of reconstruction and development. If China could manage to remodel Atlanticism through an ideology of Eurasianism, the landmass would become a new and competitive ground where the new power can assert its own influence and create streamlined connectivity.

Key words: Eurasianism, China, One Belt One Road, Atlanticism, Central Asia



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Introduction

In Ancient Greece, the earth was divided into three separate pieces of land: Europe, Asia, and Africa. The boundaries were waterways. For instance, the Mediterranean Sea was the boundary between Africa and Europe, and the Nile was the boundary between Africa and Asia.¹ While the boundaries separating Africa from Europe and Asia were clear, there was no certain boundary between Europe and Asia. Whereas this is accepted as one of the geographical divisions of the world, others claim alternative ways of dividing the world. For instance, Herodotus defined Europe in another way. According to him, “Europe has no independent existence, since it is only a part of Eurasia, which has no real internal boundaries of its own.”² Having several perceptions of geographical divisions of the world has led to the production of many inclusions and exclusions in describing the placement of Europe and Asia in the modern world. One of the conclusions of such perceptions is the concept of Eurasianism.

Since it is a purely Russian-originated ideology, it cannot clearly be claimed that the incumbent Chinese government pursues a Eurasianist understanding and foreign policy. Nevertheless, there is a clear overlap between Xi’s proactive foreign policy course that is working to integrate the Eurasian landmass and the primary framework of Eurasianist understanding. That is why this article aims to answer the question, “Does the ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’ represent a Eurasian integration strategy which is based on the ideology of Eurasianism against Atlanticism since it comprises geographic locations, geopolitically significant for the ideology such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe itself?” In so doing, it first delves into the characterization of Russian Eurasianism and then deals with the BRI and its implications for global geography, and thus lays out a better understanding of whether, and how, geography continues to shape geopolitics in the existing, globalized international system.

In this sense, this article aims to answer the question, “Does the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) represent a Eurasian integration strategy which is based on the ideology of Eurasianism against Atlanticism since it comprises geographic locations geopolitically

1 Bassin, M. (1991) ‘Russia between Europe and Asia: The Ideological Construction of Geographical Space’, *Slavic Review*, 50, pp. 1-17 (2).

2 Quoted in Frank, A. G. (1998) *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 2.

significant for the ideology, such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe itself?”

The Birth of Eurasianism and its Characterization

The term “Eurasia” literally means Europe plus Asia. As a geographical term, it was Alexander von Humboldt’s contribution to the literature. Humboldt (1769–1859) was a German naturalist and explorer who explored much of Central and South America. Also, he travelled through Russia and Siberia as far east as the Altai Mountains and south to the Caspian Sea from 12 April to 28 December 1829.³ Whereas Humboldt’s perspective was purely and simply geographical, the Russian Eurasianists approached the term from a different angle. According to them, the most crucial point was the territory of Russia. According to N. S. Trubetskoy, “[t]he territory of Russia ... constitutes a separate continent”⁴ Moreover, this separate continent was a self-contained geographical entity whose boundaries coincided roughly with those of the Russian Empire in 1914.⁵ In this sense, Eurasianism has been regarded as a quasi-political and intellectual movement.⁶ By and large, this movement emphasized the uniqueness of Russian culture which was composed of a mix of Slavic and non-Slavic cultures and, according to them, Russia was a separate, third continent, neither Europe nor Asia.

This way of thinking is called Classical Eurasianism but, by the 1930s, the loss of all of its ideological forefathers and eminent figures caused this Eurasianism ideology to die down, until Lev N. Gumilev led a revival of similar ideas and a new kind of Eurasian ideology around the 1980s. Hence, this was the milestone that gave rise to this revised approach being named Neo-Eurasianism. Gumilev brought the Eurasianist ideas back into the light and prepared an intellectual background for them.

When it comes to the characterization of Classical Eurasianism,

³ For further information on Alexander von Humboldt, see Rupke, N. A. (2008) *Alexander Von Humboldt: A Metabiography*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Gaines, A. and Collins, M. (1990) *Alexander Von Humboldt: Colossus of Exploration*, New York: Chelsea House.

⁴ Quoted in Wiederkehr, S. (2007a) *Forging a Concept: ‘Eurasia’ in Classical Eurasianism*. Annual Soyuz Symposium at Princeton University, p.1.

⁵ Halperin, C. J (1982) George Vernadsky, Eurasianism, the Mongols, and Russia. *Slavic Review*, 41, 477-493 (481).

⁶ Shlapentokh, D. V. (1997) ‘Eurasianism: Past and Present’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 30, pp. 129-151 (129).

four main principles can be explored.⁷ The first was anti-Westernism. At that time, the West was perceived as Western Europe. In this context, the creators of Eurasianism eschewed Western civilization and sympathized with non-European cultures.⁸ As mentioned before, Eurasia was neither Europe nor Asia. It was a separate continent; however, the Eurasianists perceived themselves closer to Asia than Europe. On this point, Vladimir Bilenkin points out that “they described Western civilisation as a specific ethno-cultural phenomenon and, in fact, a dangerous aberration that relentlessly imposes its imperial domination over other ethnic groups by means of military, economic, and cultural aggression.”⁹ So, the

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Eurasianists who lived in Prague, Paris, and the Balkans anticipated putting an end to the cultural hegemony of the West and instead uplifting Eastern culture. Although the Eurasianists aimed to become closer to Asia, their main goal was to establish a distinctive state that was different from both Europe and Asia. Therefore, it would not be fair to say that it was a purely separatist movement. Contrary to the common understanding, it was not their aim to move Russia away from Europe and towards Asia.

The second principle was the uniqueness of Russia and Russian culture. As mentioned in the first principle, Eurasia was a separate continent and at the same time it was a unique culture. For the Eurasianists, the specification which made it unique was the Turanian effect. Contrary to Slavophiles, the Eurasianists advocated that Turanians had had a huge impact on the genesis of Russian culture.

The third principle was that Eurasianism was a “third way” between capitalism and socialism, liberalism and dictatorship.¹⁰ It was a

7 For further information on the characterization of Eurasianism, see Tufekci, O. (2017) *The Foreign Policy of Modern Turkey: Power and the Ideology of Eurasianism*, I. B.Tauris, Londra; Tufekci O., (2017) “Turkish Eurasianism: Roots and Discourses”, in *Eurasian Politics and Society: Issues and Challenges*, Tufekci O., Tabak H., Akilli E., Eds., Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp.1-35; Tufekci O., (2014) “Ahmet Davutoglu’s Foreign Policy Understanding: A Blend of Westernist and Multiculturalist Eurasianism”, *The Arab World Geographer*, vol.17, no.3, pp.275-289; Tufekci O., (2012) “Another ‘The Last Eurasianist’: Davutoğlu’s Eurasianist Rhetoric”, *Caucasus International*, vol.2, no.3, pp.101-109.

8 Laruelle, M. (2008) *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Washington: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, p. 26.

9 Bilenkin, V. (1995) ‘The Ideology of Russia’s Rulers in 1995’, *Monthly Review*, 47, pp. 24-37 (27).

10 Shlapentokh, D. V. (2005) ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy and Eurasianism’, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080205a.shtml> (Accessed 26 October 2018).

theory to build a nation, so it had to be different from the existing movements at that time. It was a product of a normal process. Throughout history, a number of nationalists have put forward several theories to prevent the collapse of their countries or empires. For example, during the late 1800s and the early 1900s, ideologies such as Pan-Turkism, Pan-Turanianism, Pan-Ottomanism, and Pan-Islamism were produced by nationalists living in the Ottoman Empire to transform it into a long-lived empire. These kinds of Pan-isms were rejected definitely by the Eurasianists. From their perspective, “Eurasianism, rather than Pan-Slavism for Russians, Pan-Turanianism for Eurasian Turanians, or Pan-Islamism for Eurasian Moslems, should become predominant.”¹¹

In this sense, the founders totally rejected Western culture, thoughts, traditions, and currents to uphold Russian cultural distinctiveness.¹² Eurasianism was a kind of nationalist idea which rejected Bolshevism, Capitalism, Liberalism, Communism, etc. It was not an aberration, but was a kind of different way of thinking. In addition, in the early stages of the movement, the theoreticians perceived themselves as different from Bolsheviks, Marxists, and Communists, albeit Eurasianism had some similarities to these ideologies. For example, being an oriental-based ideology would be counted as the first similarity as these ideologies did not have any relationship with the West. Another similarity is that, on the one hand, Bolshevism and Eurasianism both rejected the entire culture of the pre-revolution period in Russia. On the other hand, Communism and Eurasianism were totally against the West. Furthermore, Laruelle clarifies these similarities as follows: “Eurasianism adopted Marxism’s dialectic approach, turning the idea of humanity evolving in stages against Communism; Russia would then go from Capitalism as a thesis and Communism as an antithesis to Eurasianism as their synthesis.”¹³

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The fourth and last principle was that Eurasianism had an anti-monarchist vision. As mentioned in the third principle, its proponents were opposed to the monarchy which existed before the Revolution. For that reason, they were interested in a kind of

11 Wiederkehr, S. (2007b) ‘Eurasianism as a reaction to Pan-Turkism’, in *Russia between East and West: Scholarly Debates on Eurasianism*, ed. by D. Shlapentokh Leiden: Brill, p. 52.

12 Laruelle, M. (2008) *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Washington: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, p. 26.

13 Laruelle, M. (2008) *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Washington: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, p. 28.

democracy and a kind of totalitarian system. On the one hand, they did not accept democracy because of its Western roots. They neither gave support to the totalitarian administration system because of the importance they attached to the Eurasian people.

In the light of this knowledge, it can be said that the ideologists of Eurasianism who experienced the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires anticipated a kind of theory in order to prevent the collapse of the Russian Empire. Even if it did collapse, this theory was intended to build a new nation that covered all Eurasian people under a Eurasian state. This state would have a unique culture which reflected the characteristics of all Turanian races. Trubetskoy argued that “Russia’s existence as an empire was a thing of the past. The identifiably Russian element could no longer legitimately claim its traditional hegemonic position within the larger geographical-political realm of Eurasia.”¹⁴

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Neo-Eurasianism is a slightly differentiated version of Classical Eurasianism, popularized during the demise of the Soviet Union. It takes its inspiration from the Classical Eurasianists and assumes that Russia is culturally closer to Asia than to the West (in this version, the West symbolizes the USA). However, Neo-Eurasianism came to prominence due to its geopolitical approach rather than cultural perspective. Classical Eurasianists do not cite any founder of geopolitics (such as Friedrich Ratzel, Halford Mackinder, and so on), although Neo-Eurasianists, especially Dugin, state a geopolitical perspective and emulate not only the founders of geopolitics but also Samuel Huntington and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Russia’s intellectual circles have spent a significant amount of time determining Russia’s place in the world. In particular, these investigations reached their peak during the cataclysmic times of the Russian Revolution, World War I, the collapse of the USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), etc. Both Classical Eurasianism and Neo-Eurasianism emerged in such times as an answer to seeking a historical, geopolitical, and cultural identity along with other nationalist movements. Yet, when it comes to Chinese Eurasianism, it is far from being an ideological approach when compared to Classical or Neo-Eurasianism.

14 Bassin, M. (2003) ‘Classical Eurasianism and the Geopolitics of Russian Identity’, *Ab Imperio*, 2, pp. 257-267 (p. 3).

The Belt and Road Initiative as a China's Eurasian Integration Strategy: Reproducing Atlanticism

Deng Xiaoping's motto, "*keep cool-headed to observe, be composed to make reactions, stand firmly, hide our capabilities and bide our time, never try to take the lead, and be able to accomplish something,*" seems to have been set aside by the President Xi Jinping, perhaps the most powerful Chinese leader after Mao Zedong.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his book *The Grand Chessboard – American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, characterizes China's geopolitical transformation as "cycles of reunification and expansion, followed by decay and fragmentation."¹⁵ Following this long-period cycle, China is now on the verge of another period of expansion in order to adapt to a new view of geopolitics. In this sense, according to John Agnew, "from a critical geopolitical perspective, China is not just the 'next' hegemonic power in the escalator image of Great Powers moving up and down the global state hierarchy. It, rather, brings its own contribution to the game."¹⁶

In this context, China's first geopolitical perspective is to consolidate its regional influence by blocking American hegemony and power politics in the Asia-Pacific. In doing so, China eschews a clear confrontation with Russia since it aims to solve the existing controversial issues with India and Japan. Not only does China embrace avoiding direct confrontation with regional powers, it is also developing close-woven relationships with neighboring countries. Through this new proactive foreign policy understanding, Xi Jinping wants China to become pre-eminent in Asia with the help of peripheral diplomacy. In this goal, China first aims to deepen economic cooperation with neighboring countries, then build closer security ties in Asia.¹⁷ China's new foreign policy course is shaped by deepening connectivity on the base of Xi Jinping's perspective of expanding cooperation to include "shared

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15 Brzezinski, Z. (1997) *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geopolitical imperatives*, New York: Collins, p. 13.

16 Agnew, J. (2010) 'Emerging China and Critical Geopolitics: Between World Politics and Chinese Particularity', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 51(5), 569-582, p. 579, DOI: 10.2747/1539-7216.51.5.569

17 Callahan, W. A. (2016) 'China's Belt and Road Initiative and the New Eurasian Order', *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, 22, Available at: https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/id/438924/NUPI_Policy_Brief_22-16_William_Callahan.pdf, (Accessed 12 November 2018).

beliefs and norms of conduct for the whole region.”¹⁸

Related to this perspective, China’s multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an infrastructure development project reviving the old Silk Road with Europe, is a manifestation of China’s growing geopolitical ambitions and Xi’s most important foreign policy, which aims to make Eurasia an economic and trading area. The project was announced in 2013 and includes 71 countries that collectively account for over 30 percent of global GDP, 62 percent of population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves. The BRI consists primarily of the Silk Road Economic Belt, linking China to Central and South Asia and onward to Europe, and the New Maritime Silk Road, linking China to the nations of South East Asia, the Gulf Countries, North Africa, and on to Europe. Six other economic corridors have been identified to link other countries to the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁹

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What China wants to perform through the BRI is an assertive step in order to integrate the Eurasian landmass through consolidating shared beliefs and norms of conduct for the whole region.

shared beliefs and norms of conduct for the whole region. To some extent, it resembles to what the United States of America did in order to get the upper hand in Europe following the World War II through Atlanticism.

In a broad sense, Atlanticism can be defined as the “common heritage and a shared destiny” of all the states bordering the North Atlantic.²⁰ In this sense, Atlanticism was simply American commitment to Europe through mechanisms such as Bretton Woods, the Marshall Plan, and NATO. Following World War II, America aimed to reshape Europe against the threat of the Soviet Union. Since the Soviet Union is involved in the conceptualization of Atlanticism, it is widely believed that the concept is all about military alliances between America and European countries. Instead, in conception it was based on broader cooperation, shared values, and to some extent integration between Europe and America.

While the Atlantic charter, the declaration of certain common principles for a better future for the world, was the founding document, the North Atlantic Treaty, a monetary system –

18 Jinping, X. (2014) On the Governance of China, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 325-29, p. 327.

19 Freund, C. and Ruta, M. (2018) “Belt and Road Initiative”, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>, (Accessed 12 November 2018).

20 Hodge, C. C. (2004) Atlanticism for a New Century. The Rise, Triumph and Decline of Nato, Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall. p. 2.

Bretton Woods – and eventually the Marshall Plan established, to some extent, the post-war liberal world order. Among these, the Marshall Plan was the cornerstone of Atlanticism. In this context, the resemblance between the BRI and the Marshall Plan is remarkable. The Marshall Plan, officially known as the European Recovery Program (1948–1951), was sponsored by the United States of America to rehabilitate the economies of 17 European countries in order to create stable conditions in which democratic institutions could survive. While the countries in the Marshall Plan received nearly \$15bn, China is planning to invest around \$200bn in Europe through the BRI. In addition, the Belt and Road Initiative is expected to cost more than \$1tn, while China has already invested more than \$210bn, the majority in Asia and, to date, Chinese companies have secured more than \$340bn in construction contracts along the Belt and Road.²¹ It is believed that, when the BRI is completed, it could cover over 4.4 billion people and generate a Gross Domestic Product of over \$21tn.²²

Following the collapse of the USSR, despite the efforts of the Russian Federation to rejuvenate the ideology of Eurasianism, it gradually lost its attraction. However, Atlanticism still has influence since it is provided with a robust economic aspect, based on the Marshall Plan, to create a liberal world order. Apart from the collapse of the USSR, to some extent Eurasianism was destined to fade away since it failed to provide a viable economic model to attract Eurasian countries. Herein, through the BRI, China has an opportunity to offer what Russian Eurasianism failed (and kept failing) to offer.

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Once, politicians and intellectuals imagined and built a new system centered on the Atlantic in order to bring together America and Europe as mutually complementary factors. Now, China has a similar opportunity by providing a new global governance vision based on continental and maritime-based infrastructure building, interconnectivity, and development, in order to promote common prosperity, shared interests, and cooperation.

If this development-oriented policy directed by China towards

21 Kuo, L. and Kommenda, N. (2018) “What is China’s *Belt and Road* Initiative?”, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer>, (Accessed 12 November 2018).

22 Lo, V. H. S. (2016) “Executive Summary from the Inaugural Belt and Road Summit”, China Trade Research, http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/resources/MI_Portal/Article/obor/2016/08/475605/1470281195872_2016BnRSummit.pdf, p. 3, (Accessed 12 November 2018).

the Eurasian continent is embraced, China could be expected to benefit in three ways. Firstly, China would counter American influence, in particular by increasing its influence in Central Asia, the pivot point of Eurasia and the South Asian Rimland area. Secondly, China would combine its economic growth miracle with a solid foreign policy understanding which is based on “*pragmatic pro-activity*” to reshape its own perception in the international community. Thirdly, deepening bilateral relations among the countries in Eurasia through the BRI would facilitate mobilization of Chinese goods and enable China to further its connectivity with the rest of the world so that China would become integrated with the international system, politically and economically.

Final Remarks

Following the end of the Cold War era, the Eurasian landmass was opened up for new actors. While the US was playing a new version of its Atlanticism card, China was relatively neutral, and Russia was struggling to manage its transformation from the USSR to the Russian Federation. Since the geostrategic and geopolitical environment had changed in Eurasia, NATO, one of the significant tools of Atlanticism, was also looking for a *raison d'être* in both realms; political and military.

Whereas ideology-driven Atlanticism has been prioritizing the securitization of Eurasia, China's development-oriented approach has been more promising for those countries in need of reconstruction and development. Comparing US and EU aid to the countries in Eurasia with Chinese investment under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative clearly demonstrates that China has the upper hand in Eurasia despite the wariness of several countries regarding becoming ensnared in China's debt trap.

It is unquestionable that geopolitical competition in Eurasia is rising. It seems that China has taken an assertive step in the right direction – and that step has implications for the established powers and regional rising powers. If China can manage to reproduce Atlanticism through the ideology of Eurasianism, the landmass could become a new and competitive ground for the new power to assert its own influence and to create streamlined connectivity. It seems that the BRI would facilitate asserting that influence, as long as China plays the right cards, in the right order, at the right time.