
ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА

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ATTEMPTS AT RESHAPING THE EURASIAN SPACE

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The article contains an overview of the concepts and political and economic initiatives by Washington, Beijing, Moscow and Tokyo for reshaping of the Eurasian space. Some of them, such as American “New Silk Road” strategy, Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative and Russian “Great Eurasian partnership”, are examined in more detail. The article shows under what particular circumstances these initiatives were brought to life and how they evolved during the first two decades of the 21st century.

Keywords: Eurasian space; integration; strategy “New Silk Road”; initiative “Belt and Road”; concept “Great Eurasian partnership”; political-military alliance; conjugation; convergence; conflict; power; national interest; transportation; Eurasian Economic Union.

ПОПЫТКИ ПЕРЕФОРМАТИРОВАНИЯ ЕВРАЗИЙСКОГО ПРОСТРАНСТВА

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Рассмотрены концепции, политические и экономические инициативы Вашингтона, Пекина, Москвы и Токио по реформированию евразийского пространства. Более подробно рассмотрены американская стратегия «Новый

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шелковый путь», китайская инициатива «Пояс и путь» и российская концепция «Большое евразийское партнерство». Показано, при каких обстоятельствах эти инициативы выдвигались и какую эволюцию претерпели в первые два десятилетия XXI в.

Ключевые слова: евразийское пространство; интеграция; стратегия «Новый шелковый путь»; инициатива «Пояс и путь»; концепция «Большое евразийское партнерство»; политико-военный альянс; сопряжение; конвергенция; конфликт; власть; национальный интерес; транспортировка; Евразийский экономический союз.

Introduction

The history of Eurasia's reshaping is thousands years old. Different historical actors left their imprint on the Eurasian map. At different historic times the Eurasian destiny was determined by the Persians, the Greeks, the Chinese, the Mongols, the Arabs, the Turks, the Russians. In the 20th century two empires – the Soviet Union and Japan – tried to reshape it in accordance with their national interests (as they were perceived at the time). Not much is left from those attempts, and the Soviet and Japanese empires are no longer with us. However, different regional and world powers still continue to promote their visions of the future configuration of Eurasia.

In this article we will examine the latest attempts of such reconfiguration and introduce *the hypothesis* that the Eurasian realities proved to be very resilient and resist these attempts, actually the Eurasian space remains in essence the same as it was after the World War II.

There are a number of Belarusian researchers who examine different aspects of current developments in Eurasian space and specific initiatives aimed at its reshaping. This topic was studied by the scientists from the Belarusian State University [1–4]. In [1] the author looks into historic aspects of Eurasian integration, considers its consequences for the international security. He comes to a conclusion that “unlike European integration the Eurasian integration develops itself not just as multi-national but also as multi-civilizational one. It involves multi-confessional Christian countries

(Belarus), classic Eurasian countries like Kazakhstan (where young moslem leaders entered governmental program “Boshalak”, under which 80 % of them attended universities in the USA and EU states), classic moslem countries with Asian culture like Kyrgystan, countries with Causasian culture with a special sort of Christianity (Armenia), and finally Russia with its endless constellation of different cultures and religions” [1, p. 18]. M. V. Danilovich writes about the implementation of the Chinese reshaping initiative (the economic belt of the Silk Road) in the post-Soviet space, paying special attention to conjugation of this initiative with the Eurasian Economic Union. O. P. Rubo tries to figure out what role this Chinese initiative plays in the development of China – European Union relations.

A lot of Russian experts study different developments in the Eurasian space: a possibility of close partnership between the European and Eurasian integrations, the Chinese foreign and security policy in the Eurasian space, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization role in the process of Eurasian integration [5–7]. Experts from other Eurasian Economic Union states also research different aspects of the Eurasian security and integration [8; 9].

Different political and economic processes in the Eurasian space take place right before our eyes. Major regional and world powers are trying to influence these processes and promote them in a way that better suits their national and geopolitical interests.

Modern initiatives aimed at reshaping of Eurasia

Most attempts at reshaping the Eurasian space at the beginning of the 21st century were associated with the initiatives to resurrect the ancient Silk Road. These initiatives were introduced by the influential Eurasian states (China, Russia, Turkey) as well as the USA and Japan. Each of the initiators tried to use the ancient Silk Road philosophy of connectivity to accommodate its immediate needs.

In his Istanbul speech on 13 June 2006, the assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia R. A. Baucher declared the following: “General idea – to resurrect the fundamental essentials of the Silk Road. From East to West and from South to North the great world civilizations found ways to move goods in both directions between India and Asia and Middle East and Europe. That was the channel to exchange

ideas and knowledge. We hope that this region will be able again to merge together goods, peoples and ideas of the whole world” [10, p. 406]. Having used the Baucher's vision, the Turkish government introduced its own “Silk Road project” in 2008.

The US democratic administration under B. Obama developed the strategy of a “New Silk Road” that was publicly presented by Secretary of state H. Clinton in her speech in Chennai (India) on 20 July 2011. Director of the Institute of Central Asia and the Caucasus at Hopkins University F. Starr described this strategy to the Uzbek media representatives: “New US strategy... envisions formation of a new system of transportation ways and energy routes along the line of the ancient “Silk Road”” [11]. The Ministers of the countries situated along the Silk Road discussed US “New Silk Road”

strategy at their meeting in New York on 22 September 2011. They planned to use the Asian Development Bank resources to implement that strategy. Director-General of the Asian Development Bank department of Central and Western Asia J. Miranda supported that strategy and indicated that it had to have three main components: trade in energy resources, construction of infrastructure and exchange of ideas [12].

B. Obama administration considered the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an indispensable part of the New Silk Road. The US strategy envisaged an active China's engagement in reshaping the Eurasian space. This US position was based on the assumption expressed by Secretary of State H. Clinton in her famous article "America's Pacific Century" published in November 2011 in "Foreign Policy" journal. She wrote: "The fact is that a thriving America is good for China and a thriving China is good for America. We both have much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict" [13].

The international situation somewhat changed after 2011. In 2012 the PRC tried to aggressively reclaim the Senkaku Islands from Japan. It built its first air force carrier and started building the second. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the PRC got modern submarines and new navy cruise missiles as well as modernized inter-continental DF-41 and intermediate DF-17 missiles. Beijing resumed vigorously pursuing the policy of turning the South China Sea into the China domestic water basin. Using cheap state credits, the Chinese corporations intensified their quest for controlling international markets. They were very successful in Africa, partially successful in Latin America, and even made some strides into the European and US markets.

All of the above caused grave concern in the West and determined rethinking of its strategy towards the PRC. Instead of engagement there was more and more talk about China's containment. At the beginning of 2013 the talks turned into deeds. Negotiations between the USA and the EU started on creating of the most powerful economic mega partnership – Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Then the EU and Japan began joint work on forming a Free Trade Area. In Spring 2013 Washington intensified the negotiations on Trans-Pacific Partnership, which as the previously mentioned two economic mega partnerships excluded the PRC.

Under these circumstances Beijing was forced to invent something on its own, to find its counter play. The Chinese political leadership understood quite well that the PRC even with all its newly acquired economic might is not the match against the combined economic and political forces of the West. Beijing would not be able to block the mega partnerships' initiatives of the Western countries if they proceeded in forming them. Furthermore, it was in the very interests of the growing Chinese economy that was dependent on export

markets to preserve the free world trade. Therefore, in contradiction to the protectionist in essence Western integration initiatives Chinese President Xi Jinping announced in his speech at the Nazarbaev University in Astana on 7 September 2013 the concept of Economic Belt of the Silk Road, aiming at facilitating the international trade. President of the PRC announced his intention to renew the ancient Silk Road by combining the economic potentials of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He said that "member-states and observer-states of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are situated in Eurasia, Southern and Western Asia by strengthening cooperation between SCO and Eurasian Economic Union, we will be able to obtain even larger space for development" [14, p. 390–391]. By introducing this initiative, Xi Jinping wanted to show to the West that there is a possibility of creating a mighty economic alliance in Eurasia, which will be able to successfully develop itself without the Western assistance to become in perspective a fully-fledged competitor to the models of economic integration sponsored by Washington and Brussels.

Since its inception, the Beijing Silk Road initiative was rebranded at least three times. At first, it was called "The Economic Belt of the Silk Road". The second rebranding occurred when the 21st-century Maritime Belt was added to the Economic Belt of the Silk Road (2014). With this addition, the whole initiative was named "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR). It encompassed six land belts and two sea belts. Some foreign experts criticized OBOR brand as being too strict and too prescriptive to integrate different interests of different nations. Therefore, in Joint Declaration of the three Chinese Ministries (2015) the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road were referred to as the Belt and Road initiative – BRI [15, p. 3]. The third brand name – BRI – is mostly used for foreign audiences today. The Development Research Center of the PRC State Council performing the functions of the Secretariat of the Silk Road Think Tank Network promotes the BRI brand at the annual BRI Forums that take place in different countries and include international political, business and academic prominent figures. At the same time the OBOR brand is still used inside China. For example, Xi Jinping referred to *yi dai yi lu* (one belt, one road) in his plenary report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2017).

The Russian Federation was also trying to contribute to the reconfiguration of the Eurasian space. It created the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia (2009). As soon as the Customs Union began functioning in 2010, V. Putin started to promote the idea of a common economic area from Lisbon and Vladivostok. In his article "New Integration Project for Eurasia" V. Putin wrote: "Economically logical and

balanced system of partnership of Eurasian Union and EU can create real conditions for the changes in geopolitical and geoeconomic configuration of the entire continent and would have undoubtedly positive global effect" [16]. There were even a few supporters of this ambitious idea of "integration of integrations" in the EU leadership. President of the European Commission J. M. Barroso, speaking in Saint Petersburg on 4 June 2012 at V. Putin presence, declared: "Last year, you, President Putin, set out your vision for a free trade zone from Lisbon to Vladivostok. We share that ambition. The first step to achieve it will be precisely your WTO accession, which as you know we actively supported, followed by the conclusion of an ambitious and comprehensive new agreement between the European Union and Russia" [17, p. 16]. Unfortunately, this ambitious concept of integration of integrations did not materialize due to the Russian interference in the Ukrainian affairs in 2013–2014 and the subsequent EU sanctions against Moscow.

In May 2014 under the Russian insistence the Treaty on the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was signed by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In Beijing this treaty was assessed as yet another attempt by the Russian Federation to protect its zone of influence and yet another step on the protectionist road in world trade.

Beijing took advantage of the difficult international situation of Russia that was isolated from Western investments, credits and technologies to effectively open up the EAEU for the PRC economic participation by means of "conjugation" of the EAEU and the BRI (the relevant Joint Statement was signed by V. Putin and Xi Jinping on 8 May 2015 [18]). Russian expert S. Karaganov thinks that by going along with the "conjugation" the Kremlin was trying to apply the BRI economic potential to the EAEU needs, as well as to more closely control the Chinese activities in the post-Soviet space [19].

In the course of time it became more and more evident that the PRC has plentiful resources to be used for the BRI promotion and Russia has rather limited resources to support the EAEU. There was a danger that the "conjugation" might become one sided and the Russian Federation might be left out of the process of the Eurasian reconfiguration. In order not to be left out, Moscow introduced yet another initiative of Greater Eurasia Partnership.

Russian President V. Putin described this initiative in his annual address to the Russian Parliament on 3 December 2015: "I propose, together with the colleagues from the Eurasian Economic Union, to start consultations with the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN, as well as with the states that are joining the SCO on formation of a possible economic partnership... This partnership could, at first, deal with the issues of investments' protection, improving procedures of trans border goods'

transit, joint elaboration of the technical standards for the products of the next technological generation, on reciprocal openness of the market access for services and capitals" [20]. The Chinese participants of the first BRI Summit in Beijing in May 2017 could not believe their ears when they were listening to Putin's speech at the Summit plenary. After a few casual approving phrases about the BRI he devoted his entire speech to explaining the Russian initiative of Greater Eurasian Partnership.

In April 2019 the second BRI Summit took place in Beijing. 37 heads of states and governments and leaders of international organizations took part in it (that was 8 persons more than in the first summit). During the second summit the Chinese side announced that the PRC had already spent more than one trillion of dollars on the BRI projects (independent experts think that in reality Beijing spent a few hundred million [21]). At the summit there was mostly praise towards the BRI and virtually no discussions of its problems.

Nevertheless, by the end of the second decade of the 21st century three major problems that hinder the BRI implementation emerged.

Firstly, there is a debt problem. One would say that China catches its BRI partners in a "debt trap" and then takes their assets in reparation of the debt (this happened, for example, with the sea port in Sri Lanka that ended up in the Chinese hands).

Secondly, there is a transparency problem. The list of the BRI projects is not published yet. The conditions for obtaining Chinese credits are unknown. The negotiations on the projects are conducted, as a rule, behind closed doors, and only under the pressure of the public opinion explosion after the information leaks the agreed terms of projects' realization were renegotiated (as it happened in Malaysia, Myanmar and Pakistan).

The third problem is a low level of the organization of the BRI implementation. The BRI has not become an international institution with open standards and rules of work with partners. J. Crabtree, a fellow of Asia Pacific Research Program (based in Singapore), wrote in the British paper that in order to secure the BRI successful implementation, it would be necessary to apply Chinese-style central planning methods along with greater transparency, "without it, the oddly chaotic and decentralized model pioneered in the BRI's first five years is unlikely to help the project thrive over the next five" [21]. J. Crabtree is certain that the Chinese Government will not do that, because "ending BRI's reliance on loose bilateral deals would limit Beijing's room for geopolitical manoeuvre" [21].

Big propaganda noise about the possibility for the BRI to become an alternative to the sea transportation routes between the East and the West of Eurasia is abating. The PRC experiences more and more difficulties in countering the Western strategy of containment. In addition, new circumstances emerged that made the BRI implementation even more question-

able. Firstly, after several trains railroded from China to the European Union under the BRI flag, it was discovered that there are not many goods waiting in Europe to be moved to China. And the trains on their way back to China were virtually empty. Secondly, new sea container carriers that can ship at once 18 thousand standard 40-foot containers were built. This made sea transportation, which was two times less expensive than railroad transportation through Eurasia, even cheaper. Thirdly, some advantage in time span that railroad transportation had over sea routes going over Africa could be soon eliminated with the beginning of the regular use of the Arctic Sea Route. Due to global warming it is almost clean from ice during summer months and does not require now the obligatory ice breakers for accompanying the trade vessels. Beijing was following the last circumstance with great attention and made sure to receive an observer status at the Nordic Council.

Tokyo very jealously looks upon Beijing's efforts to reshape Eurasian space according to its needs. One

could dispute whether Japan is a Eurasian country; most probably it is a classical sea brim nation. Nevertheless, country of the rising sun interest in reconfiguration of Eurasia was sharpened at the end of the 2010s. Japan introduced its own "Vision of the Indo-Pacific region" ("Vision"). The Asian Development Bank with its Tokyo headquarters had to provide the financial toolkit for the "Vision" infrastructure projects in the region. Beijing immediately recognized the "Vision" as a Japanese plot to create in Asia a new military alliance under the US umbrella.

It seems that by introducing its "Vision" Japanese strategists did not play in the hands of Washington; they were trying to propose a new order in the region based on internationally recognized rules. These rules could contain extremist one-sided actions either by the PRC or by the USA. Herewith, the "Vision" envisaged that the new order should be based on respect for the democratic rules and procedures, and the latter did not go well with the Beijing autocracy.

Status of the reconfiguration initiatives at the end of the 2010s

What is the state of the main initiatives to reshape Eurasia at the end of the second decade of the 21st century?

Washington does not come back to the concept of "New Silk Road". According to the new National Security Strategy adopted under D. Trump, the main threats to world peace and security emanate not from Afghanistan and international terrorism, but from Russia, North Korea and China (from the Chinese export policies and the Beijing's policy of South China Sea incorporation, in particular). The republican administration of D. Trump, unlike democratic administration of B. Obama, thinks that not cooperation but conflict could bring America more dividends in dealing with the PRC. Opening the trade war with China, Washington planned to achieve quick success. The US administration very cleverly struck its blows. The main blow was directed against the growth points of the Chinese economy (ZTE and Huawei corporations, for example). America managed to persuade Beijing to adopt a law that prohibits the administrative pressure on the foreign companies in China forcing them to transfer their technologies to their Chinese counterparts. Washington even extracted a promise from Beijing to strictly obey the rules on preserving the rights of intellectual property.

At the same time, the US pressure failed to change the Chinese industrial and export policies. Beijing continues to provide various kinds of state credits and other governmental assistance to the Chinese corporations abroad. Washington failed to stop the global Chinese economic offensive by the market methods (by open competition). Today it looks like the USA is ready to get involved in a protracted economic confrontation with the PRC, and it would like to get the other power centers of the West on its side. Under these circum-

stances, Washington might not be ready to play an active role in the disputes on the Eurasian space reconfiguration.

Beijing, having spent serious money on the BRI promotion and propaganda, begins to cool out towards this initiative. The BRI main tangible result is the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investments Bank, which at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century is becoming an important instrument of the Chinese influence in Asia. Having been involved in the trade war with the USA, Beijing pays less attention to the current Eurasian problems. It views Russian Greater Eurasian Partnership initiative skeptically. At the same time being under the US pressure, the PRC accepts with much greater desire the cooperation with the Russian Federation on economic, technological and military issues. Some Russian experts (A. Migryan) even started schooling the West by implicating that the short sighted D. Trump's policy towards China and Russia could lead to the latter's consolidation and forming their political-military alliance. In fact, several objective circumstances (complementarity of their national economies, being both targets of the Western containment policies, etc.) do favor closer convergence of the two countries. Nevertheless, it is today too early to speak about the creation of a political even less so military block, because Moscow and Beijing both consider themselves as the main center of such hypothetical creation.

The prominent Russian political scientist V. Nikonov considers that Russian Federation is a Euro-Pacific country, the country is the center of Eurasia and the center of the Euro-Pacific region. And director of the International Relations and World Economy Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences F. Voitlovsky

underlines that Block China–Russia is a myth. The countries are partners, not a military-political alliance.

Moscow was not able to persuade the national leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan to turn the EAEU into a political alliance. Four years of playing with the idea of the EAEU–BRI conjugation have not brought any tangible results. The Greater Eurasian Partnership remains an empty phrase, because neither the ASEAN countries nor the SCO countries showed any desire to become a party to this Russian design. At present, Moscow is trying to use the Russian Federation convergence with China, firstly, to resolve the Russian economic problems, including specific problems of the Russian Far East; secondly, to scare the West with the Moscow–Beijing axis unless the Western states come to their senses

and cancel the anti-Russian sanctions. To demonstrate this threat, in 2019, Moscow started unprecedented joint air force patrolling over the waters of the Japan Sea and East China Sea and over the Western part of the Indian Ocean. Russian and Chinese navies began joint maneuvers in the Far East as well as in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas. The PLA elite battle groups became constant participants in almost all Russian military exercises and military contests. At the same time, there is a constant concern in the Kremlin corridors that a too greater convergence might lead to Russia's losing its economic and, as a consequence, political agency. Therefore, in the 2010s, Moscow lobbied India's joining the SCO and tried to use different means to reanimate the China–Russia–India consultative triangle.

Conclusion

The initiatives, projects and efforts of different actors of world politics to reshape Eurasia introduced at the beginning of the 21st century have led to virtually nothing. The Eurasian space remains a part of the Globe, which is home to in many ways incompatible China and the European Union, a place where the interests of great powers meet but not necessarily connect.

China stands out as the most powerful Eurasian nation that abandoned its timid behavior and started to more actively use its economic, political and military strength for protecting and promoting the national interests. President Xi Jinping openly proclaimed the goal of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and is not going to be intimidated by trade wars or military maneuvers at the Chinese borders. One shall expect more robust and innovative initiatives aimed at Eurasia reshaping on the Beijing's part.

Being part of Eurasia, so far the European Union has played a rather passive role in its reconfiguration. Brussels was mostly preoccupied with dealing with the consequences of the current crises, be it in Yugoslavia, Iran, Syria, Georgia, Ukraine or Britain. Now, having the external service at its disposal, the EU will be able to formulate a more cohesive position vis-à-vis the Chinese and Russian initiatives and develop a proactive elaborate strategy for countering the threats and challenges emanated from the Eurasian space. Establishment of the EU–Japan FTA that entered into force in 2019 gives Brussels additional levers to influence the Eurasian situation.

The Russian Federation remains one of the most important and active players in Eurasian affairs. Unlike China and EU that can rely on their economic might while dealing with the Eurasian problems, Moscow invokes its impressive military capabilities and its influence over the post-Soviet space (which has recently become eroded because of the Ukrainian tilt to the West). It looks like Russia could not generate great following for its own reconfiguration initiatives while it still can strongly influence the state of affairs in Eurasia by joining sides either with China or the European Union. Which side it will take depends on the policies of Brussels and Beijing towards Russia.

There will be no return to the New Silk Road strategy of B. Obama administration that envisaged China involvement. The policy of the PRC containment enjoys bipartisan support in the US Congress. Therefore, even under democratic administration there will be a continuation of trade wars with China as well as other forms of Sino-American confrontation. A democratic President might conduct this policy with more consultations and reliance on the US allies and with fewer expectations of immediate positive results for the US national economy. It will be more long-term oriented. A democratic president might even revive negotiations on the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and renovate the US participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership – two economic mega partnerships that could reshape the opposite sides of the Eurasian space.

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