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The greater Eurasian partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the two be linked?

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ABSTRACT

Responding to changes in the world, Russia has proposed the Greater Eurasian Partnership for the international cooperation agenda. At the same time, the possibility of linking that partnership with the Belt and Road Initiative for international cooperation is one of the key factors in implementing this agenda. Alignment between the development strategies of Russia and China in the field of global, regional, and bilateral relations lays the foundation of successful cooperation between a number of countries, regions, and organizations. For the Eurasian Partnership to succeed, it must strictly adhere to WTO rules and take a tolerant attitude toward the diverse mechanisms for cooperation that various countries and regions have developed.

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1. Introduction

We are all witnesses to the radical changes taking place in the world today and to the difficult process of ordering relations between the great powers. We are not only witnesses, but also participants in the shaping of a new world order. These changes are the result of the United States' shaky position as a global superpower, Russia's revival, China's rise, the exhaustion of the West's outdated liberal development model (Allison, 2018; Kortunov, 2016), the deadlock on global development issues, and the fight against terrorism – in a word, all of the issues resulting from the world's unbalanced and unequal development.

The global economic crisis continues unabated, trade protectionism is rampant, especially in several developed countries (Xu, 2017), and the globalization process is slowing and even blocked at times. Still, it would be wrong to say

that the United States and developed countries oppose globalization for the reason that international capital cannot exist in isolation from globalization. The previous world economic order can no longer meet the needs of the developed countries: they increasingly require new rules more suited to their interests. However, the developed countries cannot monopolize the rules as they did before. The participants in globalization processes demand a more fair and equitable system of trade and want to play an active role in developing the new global economic order. Developments such as the so-called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are therefore extremely inauspicious. Also, while the existing world order remains unadapted to new circumstances and a new world order has not fully formed, every country and region, without exception, should present their own visions for that new world order. In this context, Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership and China's Belt and Road are promising initiatives for international cooperation that provide a fitting response to the changing international economic environment (Lukin, 2016a, pp. 91–112).

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1.1. *The Belt and Road Initiative: The Chinese concept of international cooperation*

Chinese President Xi Jinping first proposed the One Belt, One Road initiative (or Belt and Road Initiative, BRI) for international cooperation in September and October of 2013. In 2017 an ever-growing number of countries and organizations are giving their acknowledgement and support to the project.

The BRI has different ramifications in the domestic Chinese context than in the context of international cooperation and partnership.

First, in the domestic Chinese context, the BRI serves as a development strategy and marks China's entry into a new stage of the great cause of promoting reform and political openness. The stimulation of social and economic development calls for new approaches and measures and the coordination of economic, political, cultural, social, and eco-civilizational development. The BRI strategy perfectly embodies this more open approach to the socio-economic development of China and its regions, and the approach for resolving socio-economic issues connected with the world economy that arise at the state and local levels. Second, as a result of pursuing a policy for reform and greater openness, the Chinese economy has largely connected already to the global economy and kept pace with the development of the regional economy. Such coordinated development should continue to serve as its fundamental principle.

In the context of the international community, the BRI is an initiative for international cooperation. It focuses primarily on stimulating regional economic development. It creates opportunities and conditions for China and its business partners to develop by strengthening cooperation on the construction of infrastructure in contiguous countries and regions, cooperation on energy, and the simplification of trade procedures. Mutual benefit, joint development, and mutual prosperity serve as the main principles of cooperation. The main principles for implementing that cooperation are joint consultation, construction, and use. To achieve that, the governments involved must align their political approaches and deepen the close contacts between the peoples of their respective countries. It is worth noting that, in proposing the BRI, the Chinese government did not set out to simply maximize its own profits, but gave serious thought to the question of how China's business partners would also gain and promoted the idea of mutual benefit. China does not intend to use the BRI unilaterally by imposing its goods and manufacturing might on its partners. The win-win approach put forward by Xi Jinping is the only way to develop the BRI since it requires increasing connectivity and the synergy of participating countries' development strategies (Chen, 2017). No, China is proposing a two-way road – namely, it is promoting Chinese goods, technologies, and investment abroad while also welcoming foreign investment, technologies, goods, and services, and is creating conditions to attract them. At the Belt and Road International Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced to the many senior officials of other countries present that China would hold a permanent international exposition of import goods starting in 2018.

The Belt and Road Initiative contains a completely new concept of cooperation. Speaking at the Forum, Xi stressed: "China will enhance friendship and cooperation with all countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. We are ready to share practices of development with other countries, but we have no intention to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others. In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we will not resort to outdated geopolitical maneuvering. What we hope to achieve is a new model of win-win cooperation. We have no intention to form a small group detrimental to stability, what we hope to create is a big family of harmonious co-existence." (Speech by Comrade Xi Jinping at Opening of Belt and Road Forum, 2017)

This is why a growing number of countries understand, accept, support, and choose to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative.

1.2. *The greater Eurasian partnership: Russia's reaction to changes in the world*

The year 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. The October Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union were among the world's most significant events of the 20th century. The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered fundamental geopolitical changes and made it extremely difficult for Russia to advance and develop. As an independent state, Russia's relations with the West underwent a number of changes and were generally unstable and variable. Ultimately, Russia realized that its own revival was the only solution. Only then could it win universal respect and become a wealthy and powerful country. However, as Russia grew stronger, the West stepped up its pressure in an effort to thwart that revival.

A prerequisite to Russia's revival is the integration of the post-Soviet space, and the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is nothing less than the concrete result of that integration (Lukin, 2014a, pp.43–60). The development of Russia and the EAEU are inseparable from the development of the global economy. The developed countries ignored Russia and lobbied for the establishment of new global trade rules that worked to their advantage. Even though the TTP and TTIP would have only a negligible effect on Russia and the EAEU, as a great power and, until recently, a superpower, Russia cannot accept a reality in which it is excluded from the process of developing the rules of global trade.

In such a situation, Russia is trying to find its own development strategy. Various models of cooperation have been proposed and attempted. For example, the Gorbachev era saw the idea of transforming Russia into a single "pan-European home." There were hopes for a "honeymoon" in Russian–U.S. relations during the initial period of Boris Yeltsin's presidency, and under Dmitry Medvedev, those relations underwent a "reset." All such geopolitical agendas dealt, in one way or another, with the development of Russia's relations with the U.S. and the West. However, the Ukrainian crisis led to a serious deterioration on these relations. In addition, the situation appears especially bleak

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