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Ruslan S. Dzarasov

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Correspondence:
Ruslan S. Dzarasov: dzarasovr@gmail.com

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Russian neo-revisionist strategy and the Eurasian Project

Ruslan S. Dzarasov

Department of Political Economy and History of Economic Science, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Abstract

The article is focused on the real meaning of the Eurasian Integration Project for East–West relations. The author departs from Sakwa's treatment of Russian strategy as neo-revisionist. It does not aspire to change the current world order while trying to make the West observe its national interests within the existing framework. This perspective is treated in the article from the standpoint of world-systems analysis. The Eurasian Project is understood as a reaction of the Russian state to the failure of the neoliberal attempt to integrate into the world economy and the international security system. The two great trade mega-unions — the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Trans-Atlantic Partnership — are seen as geoeconomic bolt clamps, which put Russia under enormous pressure. The Russian strategy in the Ukrainian and Syrian crises is designed to find the way out of strategic isolation. The Eurasian Union is expected by the Russian ruling elite to be an important tool to forestall the isolation of the country and secure her economic, military and international security.

Introduction

In the 2010s, East–West relations have been rapidly deteriorating, giving rise to growing concerns on both sides. The suggestive title of the famous book by Edward Lucas, The New Cold War: Putin’s Threat to Russia and the West, assumes that there is only one perpetrator in this case.¹ This represents the conventional understanding of the problem in Western mainstream academic literature — accusations against Russia for failing to embrace liberal values and for reviving its imperialistic foreign policy. Supporters of this view sometimes see great continuity of the Russian foreign policy tradition, allegedly rooted in the proud belief of Russians in a special mission of their country, expressed in ideas of the Third Rome, the pan-Slavic Kingdom, the capital of the Third (Communist) International. Sometimes, it is maintained that obsession with the idea of their special destiny “furnishes Russia’s people and leaders with pride, but it also fuels resentment toward the West for supposedly underappreciating Russia’s uniqueness and importance.”² From such an understanding follows that “Russia’s resentment” is caused only by her imperial pretensions, while she is treated by the West as an equal partner. From this, in turn, follows that Russia attempts to revise the current world order in her favour by any means. And it seems that at least some events — Putin’s famous Munich speech, Russo-Georgian Five-Day War, Russian takeover of Crimea and support of the Donbass rebellion, Russian military involvement in the Syrian Civil War — support this vision. Partisans of this position often view the Eurasian Integration Project as an only another tool of Russian design to conquer and subjugate the “near abroad” to her imperial sphere of interests. However, from the Russian standpoint, this narrow

perspective is limited by the vested interests of the Western elites and ignores the deep and justified concerns of the other side of the conflict.

The main point of this article is that the Russian approach to Eurasian integration is designed to defend its national interests in the framework of the existing system of international relations. The first section argues that the very nature of the semi-peripheral capitalism established in post-Soviet Russia prevents her from challenging Western domination in the modern world. The second section considers the main aspects of Russian foreign policy, which prove that it seeks to change the practice of the current world-system, rather than revising its own foundations. The third section attempts to substantiate that Eurasian integration is a reaction of the Russian ruling elite to what it perceives as an assault on Russian national interests. The fourth section considers the deep interplay between the Eurasian Project and two major international political and military conflicts in which Russia is involved.

**Post-Soviet space through the lens of world-systems analysis**

From the standpoint of the current article, the current exacerbation of international relations in general, and East–West confrontation in particular, can be explained from the perspective of world-systems analysis. In particular, this approach provides key insights to understanding the geo-economic and geopolitical contexts in which Eurasian integration is carried out.

The world-systems approach looks at modern capitalism through the prism of core–periphery relations. The departing point of this theory is distinguishing between the developed capitalist countries (the core of the capitalist world-system) and the underdeveloped nations (the periphery). This approach assumes that, historically, the development of capitalism has always been based on exploitation of the periphery by the core. The principal tool of this exploitation is presented by unequal trade. It happens when the products exported from the periphery to the core — mainly commodities — are underestimated, while goods delivered in the opposite direction — mainly manufactured goods — are overestimated. Andre Gunder Frank suggested his theory of “development of underdevelopment” as an explanation for the phenomenon of backwardness in the modern world. It assumes that the core countries use their control over the periphery to change the latter’s production structure and social relations. The first means that relatively diversified economies of the subjugated countries are simplified and reduced to a few export-oriented industries serving the developed economies. Usually, the dependent economies are converted to supply mineral resources, agricultural products and goods with low degree of processing of raw materials. At the same time, the social structure of such nations also goes through changes. On the one hand, their population is pauperized to create a cheap “reserve army of labour”; on the other hand, comprador bourgeoisie is created from their landlords to provide local support for the capital of the core.

From the standpoint of this author, the world-systems approach would become a more coherent body of ideas if it was rethought on the basis of Marxian notions of labour value and surplus value. In fact, this was done by Samir Amin in his theoretically important book on the world economy through the prism of the “Law of value.” The essence of the unequal economic relations between the core and the periphery lies in the transfer from the latter to the former of a significant part of labour value, created by the population of the underdeveloped countries. Modern world economy is based on this type of relations. There are a number of tools, through the operation of which this transfer of wealth happens. In particular, global value chains operate in such a way that the bulk of

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value, produced by workers of the periphery, is appropriated by transnational corporations. The value of the dollar as a reserve currency depends on its role as a mechanism that transfers incomes, created by countries with low wages, to the US.

The former Soviet republics underwent just such a transformation of their economies, which was dubbed “development of underdevelopment” by Frank. In the 1990s, the share represented by industry in the overall added value in these countries declined, on average, from 38% to 29%. Their economies shared the same signs of deindustrialization: growth in the share of industrial value added represented by the extractive sectors; systematic trend to lower production and a reduction in the range of products of the manufacturing industry; a major breakdown in technological development; and unbalanced distribution of investments between sectors in favour of extracting industries.

All these features of industrial degeneration assume structural adaptation of the economies of the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to their peripheral status in the world economy. The main trends of development of the foreign trade of these countries confirm this conclusion. For the most part, the exports of CIS countries to the rest of the world consist of raw commodities — mineral resources and some types of products with a low level of processing, such as sawn timber, paper and cellulose products, quarried stone, metals and metal goods. The share in exports represented by products of the manufacturing industry is very low. Meanwhile, if we turn to the structure of imports by the CIS countries from the rest of the world, we see a directly opposite picture. The major portion of these imports consists of products of the manufacturing industry. The facts of mass impoverishment of the population, matched by the rise of powerful criminal oligarchs, are too well known to be documented here.

Among the former Soviet republics, Russia stays somewhat apart, belonging not exactly to classical peripheral capitalism, but rather to a semi-periphery of the capitalist world-system. Its phenomenon is characterized, on the one hand, by its dependency on the core, but on the other — by its ability to challenge domination of the latter in some particular areas. This is the reason why the West has focused its animosity on this country. The prime factor of the semi-peripheral status of Russia is its significant nuclear arsenal still comparable to that of the US. Another manifestation of the semi-peripheral nature of Russian capitalism is the relative independence of its state from powerful oligarchs. After a period of domination of oligarchs over the state in the 1990s, those of them who challenged President Putin were either pushed to exile or jailed. Since then, so-called “manual governance” was established, meaning that big business is forced by the state to finance some particular projects, which the leadership considers to be crucial for the country’s development. Of course, the authoritarian state has become an obstacle for the Russian civil society, including worker and socialist movements, but under the conditions of a degenerated, largely comprador business elite, it prevented the anarchic disintegration of the country.

One of the most important dimensions of the semi-peripheral nature of the modern Russian society is the deep split of the Russian ruling elite. According to some experts, there are two groups of Russian ruling elite. One of them, originating from business circles, comprises the...
“Atlantic integrationists.” They are in favour of integration of Russia into the capitalist world-system on Western conditions. It is comprador elite in a proper sense. The other group is called the “Eurasian integrationists,” because they are in favour of strengthening the independent position of the country in the world economy and international policy. This elite attempts to free Russia from dependency on the West, promote Eurasian integration and strengthen relations with other BRICS countries (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). President Putin tries to accommodate both groupings, securing his position above the scramble. The history of Russian foreign policy in the 2000s is shaped by permanent collisions and compromises between the two groups.

By the very nature of its social system, namely, occupying the middle ground between the core and the periphery, in addition to having a deeply split ruling elite, modern Russia is unable to challenge Western domination in any reasonable sense. Intrinsic contradictions of this society condition its inconsistent and incoherent foreign policy.

Does Russia really seek revising the world order?

It is remarkable how drastically Russian foreign policy has changed since the times of the “Yes” diplomacy of president Yeltsin and Kozyrev (Russian Foreign policy minister of the 1990s, notoriously known for his eagerness to make strategic concessions to the West). As Dmitri Trenin from the Carnegie Foundation (Moscow) put it:

[...] integrationist [i.e. aimed at integration with the West] direction of Russian policy, which dominated the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, ceased to exist. It was succeeded by the great-power, sovereignty direction making the main emphasis on strategic independence of the state and its struggle for its “place under the Sun” in conditions of the multi-polar world.14

There was more than one reason for such a dramatic change in the Russian foreign policy. This shift in itself reflects the ascendancy of the “Eurasian integrationists,” which, in turn, was conditioned by the Western policy towards Russia. For the past two-and-a-half decades, it was witnessing with a growing concern its increasing strategic isolation and marginalization by the West. This included the following: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to the East; a number of “coloured revolutions,” resulting in the coming to power of anti-Russian regimes in some former Soviet republics; NATO involvement in the Balkan Civil War, defeating the Russian historical ally — Serbia; an attempt to establish the Third District of the US Anti-Missile Defense System in Eastern Europe, undermining Russian security; the European Union (EU) “Eastern European Partnership” programmes, designed to tear away Russian neighbours from Russia.

Regime change attempts undertaken by the West in post-Soviet space were perceived as especially threatening to vital Russian interests:

[...] it became difficult to accept the Western project of building a liberal order as a benign phenomenon when a series of so-called color revolutions in the former Soviet space, cheered on (at the very least) by Washington, undermined governments that had roots in the Soviet era and reasonably good relations with Moscow. [...] The concepts of “democracy promotion” and “transformational diplomacy” pursued by the George W. Bush administration conditioned interstate relations on altering any system of government that did not match Washington’s understanding of democracy.15
These events do not allow brushing aside Russia’s concerns as fueled by mere “underappreciation of her uniqueness and importance.” In fact, they are caused by much more material aggressive steps of the West. Russian suspicions are well grounded taking into account the legacy of the US Eurasian strategy.

Historically, it sought all possible ways to prevent the emergence of a great power that is capable of uniting Eurasian peoples and their resources. Arrival of such a state was considered a threat to preserving US world domination. In our times, the most salient manifestation of such views can be found in one of the most well-known books on the topic — The Grand Chessboard, written by one of the most influential US foreign policy thinkers Zbigniew Brzezinski. The work considers the landmass of Eurasia as the center of global power. Brzezinski believes that it is imperative that no Eurasian nation capable of dominating the continent should emerge because it will also be able to challenge America’s global pre-eminence. Focusing on post-Soviet space, the author calls Central Asia the “Global Balkans” and appeals to Halford J. Mackinder’s theory. This 19th century British geographer and political thinker referred to the Eurasian continent as the “World Island” and singled out the landmasses with central location there as the “Heartland.” The geopolitical subject who dominates Heartland is in a position to eventually dominate the whole planet. “It’s time to recall Mackinder’s dictum about the centrality of Eastern Europe to the distribution of global power,” declares The American Interest. And the NATO is seen as the main tool for maintaining the balance of power in the continent.

According to Dr George Friedman — the head of Stratfor, a think tank close to the US Secret Service, “the final imperative of the dominant power of North America is to ensure that this [arrival of an independent Eurasian superpower] never happens — to keep Eurasia divided among as many different (preferably mutually hostile) powers as possible.” The famous US analyst provides a list of methods necessary to achieve the desired state of the region: (a) the US should grant “benefits to as many states as possible for not joining a system or alliance structure hostile to American power” (from this follows, that any Eurasian alliance, uncontrolled by the US, is considered potentially hostile) and (b) the “direct intervention via the United States’ expeditionary military.”

Thus, what is now dubbed The New Cold War was preconditioned by the systematic alienation of Russia in post-Soviet space. It was only a matter of time before Russia dared to strike back. In 2007, the Russian President Vladimir Putin addressed the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy with a clear warning that the age of the “Yes” diplomacy of the 1990s was over (Munich speech). However, the clear message sent by the Kremlin was not understood. Soon, the West extended an invitation to Russian neighbours Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. This was considered by Russia as an unprovoked attempt to undermine the very foundations of her security. This was the reason why Russia decided to strike back in August 2008 when the pro-American regime of Michael Saakashvili in Georgia launched an offensive in two pro-Russian breakaway republics — South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It was also a message to Ukraine — Russia has efficient military forces and Americans are unable to militarily support their clients so far from their homeland. Another Russian response was reinvigoration of Eurasian integration in the former Soviet Union (see more in the following section).

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17 See analysis of this doctrine in the context of the modern international contest for control of Central Asia in the work: Ismaïl Eldar, Papava Vladimir, Rethinking Central Asia (Washington, DC; Stockholm: A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, 2010).
20 Ibid.
This was obviously a new, more assertive foreign policy on the part of Russia. However, despite the nickname of new Cold War given to this new course by the West, it is a far cry from the Cold War of the Soviet times. And the first reason for this is the very different social system that appeared in this country after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which does not allow a full-scale and systematic confrontation with the West.

The second reason is that the Russian president — Vladimir Putin — is a rather conservative leader following a neoliberal domestic economic course and is not a communist seeking the destruction of capitalism. In fact, as already mentioned, he tries to strengthen his power by negotiating compromises between anti- and pro-Western groups among his coterie. One should note that Putin’s Russia has never challenged the neoliberal international regime or its foundation — US world hegemony.

Richard Sakwa provides a well-balanced and scholarly analysis of Russian foreign policy in this respect. He believes that it is by no means a revisionist one, meaning under this term an attempt by any separate country to change unilaterally the current world order. Sakwa gives a compelling case showing that Mr Putin is defending Russian national interests within the framework of the current world order, rather than trying to challenge it. Thus, it is an attempt to change the practice of Western domination rather than undermine it per se. Sakwa calls such an approach to international relations “neo-revisionist.” Its essence lies in an attempt to change the practice of the current world order, trying to compel the West to recognize Russian vital strategic interests within the existing international framework. According to Dmitry Trenin from Carnegie Foundation (Moscow):

Although Moscow seeks to remain a major player on the international stage, Russian leaders have abandoned Soviet-era ambitions of global domination and retain bad memories of the Cold War-era arms race, which fatally weakened the Soviet Union.

That is why even using military force as an argument of the last resort, Russia carefully avoids full-scale confrontation with the West. Instead, she prefers fighting its proxies. Another circumstance of great importance is that Russia always leaves open options for a compromise.

In order to evaluate the perspectives of such a strategy, one should consider the question: why is Russia’s “neo-revisionist” policy, based on a quest of compromise, systematically rejected by the West? In order to find the answer, one should realise the impact of the world economic crisis on relations of the West with the periphery and semi-periphery countries. The current crisis of the world economy is itself rooted in the exploitation of the periphery of the capitalist world-system by the core. The great shift of production from the West to the periphery, induced by a large pool of its cheap workforce, had led to industrialization of a group of developing countries. As a result, lots of enterprises have been built all over the world, but the aggregate demand is insufficient to reward these investments. In these conditions, the enormous growth of the BRICS countries, which belong to the semi-periphery of the world-system, encroaches on the pie of the core. Meanwhile, from the core’s perspective, the main reason for the very existence of the semi-periphery is to help the core in controlling the periphery. In particular, the rise of China in the past decades has undermined the capitalist world-system.

The crisis endangers world domination by the West, and the US hegemony in particular. What is the strategic response of the US ruling classes to this mortal threat? To find the answer to this question, crucial for the whole system of world affairs, one should consider a number of facts.

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First, it is important to ask the following: does the US ruling elite try to reform the capitalist system in its current state as it tried in the 1930s? Facts testify to the contrary. In 2008, the year the world crisis started, “Obama mania” marked high expectations of the world public opinion that the new US president will change the system, putting Wall Street under public control, redirect financial resources from speculation to creation of new jobs, stop war conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, boost “Green economy” and the like.\(^{27}\) It is the mass disillusionment with the failure to carry out real changes in the system that gave rise to the “Wisconsin Uprising” and the “Occupy” movement.

On the other hand, in the past few years, the US has undertaken unprecedented efforts in military build-up. To this belong the following:

- modernization of all three components of the US nuclear forces to overcome the “Mutually assured destruction” situation\(^{28}\);
- the doctrine of Prompt Global Strike, designed to enable the US army in a couple of hours to deliver hundreds of strikes using conventional weapons with high precision, making any country unable to resist\(^{29}\);
- trying to deploy the European Interceptor Site of Anti-Missile Defense system\(^{30}\);
- Network Centric Warfare, which would make the efficiency of the US ground troops unattainable for any other country in the world.\(^{31}\)

According to US specialists, “If the United States’ nuclear modernization were [sic] really aimed at rogue states or terrorists, the country’s nuclear force would not need the additional thousand ground-burst warheads [...] The current and future U.S. nuclear force, in other words, seems designed to carry out a preemptive disarming strike against Russia or China (italics are mine — R.D.).”\(^{32}\) They also explain that the European Interceptor Site is necessary to defend the US from retaliation by the Russian nuclear forces weakened by the first strike.\(^{33}\) It looks like Russian concerns appeared not exactly at an empty place.

Considering these facts, one should keep in mind that the military machine undergirds US economic dominance. As US analysts explain, the US military force is profitable for this country in economic terms, because it facilitates the following: “allows trade to flow freely and cheaply (italics are mine — R.D.)” for the US; “lets the United States structure the world economy in ways that serve its particular economic interests”; “also helps keep the U.S. dollar in place as the world’s reserve currency, which confers enormous benefits on the country.”\(^{34}\)

Unprecedented military build-up and a more aggressive foreign policy against the backdrop of reluctance to reform capitalism lead to a hypothesis that the US strategy to preserve its domination assumes not reforms but reliance on military force.

The only way to preserve US hegemony amid the conditions of the current world crisis is to arrest the uncontrolled growth of the semi-periphery. Most probably, this was the main reason behind

\(^{31}\) This concept seeks the ways to secure US military domination of the battlespace through application of information superiority to military power. See more on this in: Alberts David, Gratska John and Stein Frederick, Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority (Washington, DC: Cooperative Research Program, 2000).
\(^{33}\) Ibid, 52.
the US “pivot to Asia” strategy.\textsuperscript{35} It assumes strategic encirclement and isolation of China. The struggle for control of the hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia — the New Great Game unfolding in the very Heartland of Eurasia — is of prime importance for this strategy.\textsuperscript{36} Meanwhile, Russia happened to be in the US’s way to its goal in the region.

The considerations explained here mean that the Russian “neo-revisionist” strategy is confronted at the world arena with the Western, primarily US, strategy of entrenching its domination. Russia tries to change exactly that \textit{practice}, which the West is determined to \textit{strengthen}. This is the essence of the deadlock of the current stage of the East–West confrontation from the standpoint of this article. The Eurasian Integration Project should be seen in the double perspective of geopolitics based on this geoecconomics.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Eurasian Union and geoeconomic bolt clamp}
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The Eurasian Union (EaU), proclaimed on 1 January 2015, dates back to 1994, when only two years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, gave a lecture in Moscow State University and suggested creating this association. The new union should be designed to be able “to meet two major tasks: formation of the common market and developing joined defense policy.”\textsuperscript{37} Unfortunately, this appeal was not heard in the mid-1990s, when post-Soviet elites were too preoccupied with enriching themselves through criminal privatization and other means of redistribution of the national wealth in their favour. However, the idea revived at the end of the 2000s, when Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus decided to move ahead in establishing closer economic cooperation. The governments of these countries, which together with Ukraine are the biggest CIS members, adopted a new agenda aimed at the creation of a Customs Union (CU), then the Common Economic Space (CES) and, eventually, the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). The decision to establish CU as a first step to integration was made as early as 2006. The Union was greatly enhanced in December 2010 by the Declaration on Formation of the CES, signed at the Summit of the EEC by the Presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia.\textsuperscript{38}

New impetus to discussions of integration was given in October 2011, when a paper appeared by the then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, “New Integration Project for Eurasia — The Future which is Being Born Today.”\textsuperscript{39} The paper maintains that the project is not about revival of the Soviet Union, but the EaU is seen as the focus of convergence of all other integration processes in the former Soviet Union. The Russian President suggested to Europeans “to think together about creating harmonious community of economies from Lisbon to Vladivostok [the most remote Russian big city in the Far East], about free trade zone and even about more advanced forms of integration.”\textsuperscript{40}

Mr Putin’s paper prompted a reply on the part of President of the Republic of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, who presented his article “On the Fate of Our Integration.”\textsuperscript{41} He laid particular emphasis on the external factors facilitating the integration process. Lukashenko called the breakdown of the Soviet Union “the deepest, tragic blunder of the XX century” and observed that some parts of the “external centers [of power]” reacted to Putin’s initiative “without enthusiasm.”

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\item Ibid. Quotation translated by the author.
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He asked, “what international player will be gladdened by news about formation of a new powerful united market with a very serious production, resource and intellectual potential — certain aggressive competitor?” Thus, Lukashenko is the only one among the three leaders who openly recognised that Eurasian integration is a move in the competitive struggle with some strong and apparently adverse international players.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev also joined the discussion, putting forth his “New reading of the Eurasian idea in XXI century.” He decidedly rejected any speculations about “restoration” of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under a new guise: “these are only phantoms of the past, wild guesses, speculations. [...] North American integration in frameworks of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] also consists of three nations — USA, Canada and Mexico. However, nobody talks about American imperial ambitions.” The Kazakh leader saw the EaU as a vehicle to modernisation of the member countries: “We cannot be satisfied neither by the narrow perspective to be an assembly of nations developing only along the trajectory of “catch-up modernisation,” nor by the destiny always to remain large periphery exporter of natural resources to the rest of the world.” However, Nazarbayev observed that an important precondition for developing high-tech economies was an active build-up of investment and technological cooperation with USA, EU, China and the countries comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). He suggested developing a common “Programme of Eurasian innovative-technological cooperation”; creation of the common payments system and Eurasian super-national payments unit as a first step to introducing their own regional reserve currency.

Summing up these considerations, one should say that the three leaders of the post-Soviet republics returned to the concept of Eurasian integration, which was seen as a way of mobilising resources of the former Soviet republics for modernization of their countries confronted with strong external challenge. The former was defined in terms of both geopolitics and geoeconomics.

The EaU is formed by the five former USSR republics Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic. Their joint gross domestic product (GDP) amounts to $2.2 trillion, which constitutes 3.2% of the world GDP; industrial production in 2014 was $1.3 trillion (3.7% of the world output); and foreign trade with outside world in 2014 was $877.6 billion (3.7% of the world export and 2.3% of the world import). The world share of EaU economies is not very big. However, it gives a positive impulse to mutually beneficial economic, especially, trade relations.

Russia is the main driving force behind this integration project. However, there are certain differences in the significance of the union for different countries. Russia’s share in foreign trade of other EaU member-states is quite great. For Armenia, its share in export is 25.7%, while in import 24.3%; for Belarus, the corresponding figures are 45.3% and 53.2%; for Kazakhstan, 8% and 33.4%; for the Kyrgyz Republic, 8.6% and 33.2%. Meanwhile, the share of other EaU member-states in Russia’s foreign trade is quite modest. The share of Belarus in export of Russia is 3.8%, while its share in import is 4%; for Kazakhstan, the corresponding figures are 3.3% and 2.7%. The share of Armenia in Russia’s foreign trade turnover is only 0.2%, while that of the Kyrgyz Republic is 0.3%. Hence, for Russia, the geopolitical aspects of integration are more valuable than its economic importance. However, the EaU is the most important Russian project in the past years in terms of both geopolitics and geoeconomics. It expresses Russia’s desperate attempt to find a new place in the world and to shape her new identity.
The Russian President expressed his hope that the Union will become not only “one of the poles of the modern world,” but besides “will play the role of an effective ‘link’ between Europe and the dynamic Asian-Pacific region.” Just as Mr Putin, Mr Nazarbayev viewed the EaU as a link between the Euro-Atlantic and Pacific regions: “in economic sense we could became the bridge connecting the dynamic economies of the European Union, Eastern, South-Eastern and Southern Asia.” However, from the very beginning, this new integration project met sharp opposition on the part of the West.

In a straightforward manner, it was demonstrated in December 2012 by the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In her speech at the international conference on human rights in Dublin, she condemned Russia for the alleged attempt “to re-Sovietize the region” of a significant part of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. “It’s not going to be called that. It’s going to be called Customs Union, it will be called Eurasian Union and all of that,” she lamented. “But let’s make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it.” The reasons for such hostility of the American elite to Eurasian integration are deeply rooted in the current crisis of the US world hegemony.

East–West confrontation negatively affected the EaU project. In retaliation to Western sanctions, Russia imposed an embargo on the import of some food products from the EU. Such major members of the EaU as Belarus and Kazakhstan did not follow suit. Moscow was compelled to reintroduce border control and restrict cargo transportation. Thus, one of the major pillars of the Union was partially eroded — free market for goods.

Today, the EaU project encounters potentially even greater geopolitical challenges. The US tried to complete the formation of the TPP, which would embrace 12 big economies of the region (with the notorious exception of such colossuses as China, India, South Korea, Indonesia and some others). Together they amount to 36.2% of the world GDP, 11.2% of the world population and 25.6% of the world trade. TPP is a new trade block, which undermines the World Trade Organization, and is about the struggle for domination in the world economy. As the well-informed Financial Times explains:

Often called the “economic backbone” of US President Barack Obama’s “pivot” to Asia, the goal for the US and Japan is to get ahead of China, which is not included in the TPP, and to create an economic zone in the Pacific Rim that might balance Beijing’s economic heft in the region. It is also about writing the rules of the 21st-century global economy for everything from cross-border data flows to how state-owned enterprises are allowed to compete internationally.

At the same time, the US continues to push ahead its project of Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, uniting the US and the EU economies, amounting to 40% of the world GDP. There are growing fears that the agreement, negotiated behind the scenes, will pull down wages
and facilitate privatization. Both the gigantic free trade zones under the domination of the US, surrounding the EaU’s borders both from the West and from the East, provide about 76% of the world GDP. Obviously, they possess much greater economic strength than the EaU. There is no doubt that the US will use this enormous potential to draw into its sphere of influence as many post-Soviet republics as possible, eroding the EaU. One of the first decisions of the new elected US President Donald Trump was to withdraw from the TPP. However, the very idea of such a powerful instrument of economic pressure promoted by the US elite confirmed validity of Russian suspicions. In fact, these two most powerful economic blocks led by the US comprise gigantic geo-economic bolt clamps capable of crushing the EaU. The natural response of the EaU to this double challenge is the deepening of the so-called “internal” integration, creating joint markets of electricity, oil and gas products, as well as a financial mega-regulator. Expansion of the Eurasian Integration Project into new parts of the world could strengthen it greatly.

The growing influence of China in the former Soviet space is another new important factor affecting Eurasian integration, with potentially ambiguous consequences. In 2015, China launched its alternative ambitious integration project “Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.” On the one hand, this creates an alternative for economic ties of Russia to the West. This is especially important for Russia’s energy exports, diversifying her access to world markets and reducing the importance of the EU as an economic partner. On the other hand, in case of success, the Silk Road project will make China the major driving force of economic integration in Eurasia. In effect, escaping from unilateral dependence on Europe, Russia may well find itself at the mercy of a new, not necessarily friendly, dominant partner.

However, as put forth by Dutkiewicz:

[...] despite the international chill created by the absorption of Crimea by the Russian federation and its inevitably negative consequences for involving Ukraine/the European Union (EU) in further integration processes in the short and even medium term — closer economic cooperation in that space is an ongoing process.

Meanwhile, a number of acute international conflicts have created strong obstacles for Eurasian integration. In particular, the Ukrainian and Syrian crises are closely tied with the EaU project.

Ukraine, Syria and the EuA

From the very beginning of the Eurasian integration, it was obvious that the future of this project largely depends on whether Ukraine joins it. It is the biggest after Russia, one of the most industrially developed and a once-prosperous former Soviet republic. The union of Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus (all the more with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan) would restore the core of the Soviet economy. Contrary to what Ms Clinton thinks, this does not mean restoration of the Soviet Union. The USSR was a single country unified by a totalitarian rule, while the EaU is an economic block of politically diverse nations. Moreover, the USSR was a state opposing capitalism and Western domination. (In what sense and to what degree it was “socialist” is a highly debatable question.) The EaU is a pragmatic union of capitalist countries seeking economic development. Western opponents of Eurasian integration fail to explain why US-led trade blocks are quite acceptable and good for humanity, while the EaU is endemically evil. The only real, but not openly articulated, reason for Western hostility to the project is that its success would limit control of the West over the former Soviet space.

US foreign policy strategists clearly understood the key role of Ukraine in the possible joint revival of the former Soviet republics. As early as 2000, an American military analyst explained that Ukraine played an enormously significant role in the energy resources transportation to the West. On the other hand, keeping this country away from any alliance with Russia helps to prevent the revival of anything similar to a superpower in the former USSR.57 This realization made Ukraine a battleground of contest between Russia and the West long before the Maidan uprising of 2013–2014.

The so-called Western “soft power” appeared in Ukraine from the very beginning of its independence. In 2013, about a thousand of Western non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were operating in this country, tacitly directing its public organisations, mass media and civil institutions.58 This resulted in much more than $5 billion being spent by the US in the “support of democracy in Ukraine” according to the famous confession of Nuland.59 The main opposition political parties of the country were established under the control and financial support of the West: “Fatherland” of Tymoshenko and Yatsenuk by the US government,60 the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform of Klychko, by Germany,61 and “Freedom” of Tyagnibok with US financial and political support.62 Thus, long before the Maidan events, the West established its control over all the major aspects of Ukrainian society, including powerful oligarchs who keep their capital in the West; the main oppositional political parties; mass media directly through the network of NGOs and indirectly through dependent oligarchs; security agencies and secret services; and militants from right-wing extremist organizations. It is nothing less than an infrastructure of a “colour revolution.” Its significance can be derived from the famous confession made publicly by the US President that “we’ve brokered the deal to transition power in Ukraine.”63

The Maidan uprising started after Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovych postponed signing of the Agreement on association of his country with the EU. In conventional Western thinking, this event is seen as a rejection of European values as a result of Russian pressure. The real meaning of this move was very different. The Agreement is unilaterally favourable to the EU and unfavourable to Ukraine. It was opening access to the European market for Ukrainian producers only formally due to the existence of strong non-tariff barriers. The EU adopted more than 20,000 detailed production standards to which any exporter of goods to the European market should conform.64 According to Ukraine government analysts, the country needed investments amounting to about 160 billion euros in 3 years to move to European standards of production.65 Because it was clear that such money was not coming, it was equally obvious that in fact the European market would remain closed to Ukraine, while her domestic market was opening for the EU.

What is especially important in the context of the current article is that the EU promoted the agreement on association as an alternative to joining the Eurasian integration. In fact, it was an instrument to force Ukraine to disrupt her economic relations with Russia. Meanwhile, the CU was...
the main economic partner of Ukraine. A large proportion (60%) of foreign investments in the Ukrainian economy were coming from Russia. Russian banks were the main creditors of Ukrainian enterprises. By joining CU, the country was gaining $10 billion from improvement of terms of trade: gas price would decline three times, oil would be sold free of customs and free access of agricultural products to the Russian market would be secured. It looks quite natural that in such circumstances, Mr Yanukovych decided to put off signing of the agreement, preferring to obtain $15 billion loan from Russia.

In February 2014, the Maidan uprising — supported and largely guided from behind by the US and the EU — ousted from power the corrupted Yanukovych regime, only to install in Kiev pro-Western, anti-Russian, equally oligarchic and corrupted politicians. The new ultra-nationalistic regime, boasting its legacy inherited from Nazi collaborators (Banderovtsy), openly started marginalizing the Russian population of Ukraine (amounting at least to one-third of the entire population). This provoked a mass uprising in pro-Russian Eastern Ukraine, including Crimea and the Donbass regions. Russia was confronted with a formidable threat to national security — the US fleet was on the way to take over Sevastopol, the main Russian naval base at the Black Sea. Vladimir Putin retaliated by a preemptive strike — takeover of Crimea.

However, when the Kiev regime attempted to suppress the Donbass uprising militarily and hostilities engulfed the region, the Russian president took a much more moderate stance. He supported the pro-Russian Donbass forces by delivering weapons and sending volunteers but avoided direct military involvement. Time and again, he was suggesting compromise to the West on the basis of a few conditions: recognition of Crimea as a part of Russia; recognition of the neutral status of Ukraine in not joining military blocks; abstaining from the usage of force to subjugate Donbass to Kiev power; granting Donbass region with autonomy status within the framework of federalized Ukraine. These conditions are seen by the Kremlin as a decent and honest compromise, as a real way out of the conflict. However, the West systematically rejected it, demanding complete surrender from Russia. To achieve that, the West imposed economic sanctions on Russia and systematically tried to isolate it internationally. In particular, Russia was excluded from the process of Middle East settlement for a long time.

Syria has been a strategic partner and ally of Russia for a long period, since the times of the Soviet Union. The Russian navy has an important strategic base in this country, allowing its operation in the Mediterranean. The bloody civil war ignited here in 2011 by the Arab Spring threatened not only to overthrow the pro-Russian Assad regime but also to undermine Russian presence in this strategically very significant region. However, Russian direct involvement in this conflict followed only in four years of bloodshed, when the Assad regime found itself on the brink of a complete debacle. To comprehend that, one should realise that Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War was a desperate attempt to overcome the deadlock of the current East–West confrontation.

The Syrian conflict was seen by the Kremlin in this light. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, a terrorist organization prohibited in Russia) is an American creation and, in its initial stages, it was clandestinely supported by the US in the hope of using it as a tool for undermining the Assad regime. When the ISIS turned against both sides, attacking Iraq, the Americans tried to establish and promote a pro-Western anti-Assad and anti-ISIS coalition. Largely, it proved to be a failure because the members of this “opposition” included terrorist groups very much similar to the ISIS itself. Nevertheless, the Americans — after their failure to establish Western-style democracies in
Iraq and Afghanistan — are reluctant to be directly involved in hostilities on the ground and prefer ill-planned air strikes of the big but inefficient “coalition forces” led by them.

Russia, for a long time, was working behind the scenes to facilitate the alliance of Iran, Hezbollah and Syria in support of the Assad regime. When catastrophe in Syria looked already imminent, Putin saw the American indecisive and ambiguous position as his “window of opportunity” to change the tide of events and overcome the impasse of the frozen Ukraine conflict. Saving Assad from destruction and turning back the course of the civil war, he tried to compel the West to recognize Russia as an indispensable player at the international arena whose interests should not be neglected. Thus, Russian forces surged in Syria and the air strike campaign started in late September 2015. The end of civil war in Syria could greatly affect the perspectives of the Eurasian integration.

One should note that the Syrian Civil War poses a great threat to the Eurasian integration process. Currently, Islamists from all EaU countries fight in the ranks of ISIS and other terrorist groups. Their triumph over the secular government in this country would immediately invigorate Islamists along the perimeter of the Union and inside the member-states. Afghanistan has a common border with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, embracing all EaU members and some other former USSR republics. Russia has military commitments to them. The end of the Syrian Civil War would significantly alleviate this strategic threat.

From this standpoint, the interest on the part of such Middle East countries as Iran and Syria to join the free trade zone with this trade block is of prime importance. In particular, in 2012, the Syrian government officially declared its desire to join the EaU. This could be beneficial to the EaU members for a number of reasons. First, Syria has big natural oil reserves and needs the corresponding equipment, foreign investments and access to markets. EaU countries can provide all this and profit from development of this industry in Syria. Second, this country can become the EaU gate to the Mediterranean. Third, for the trade block, it can be a vehicle to reach the Arab world. Fourth, EaU firms will obtain access to Syrian market. All these prospects can materialize only after the successful ending of the Syrian Civil War, with a government being in power that is friendly to Russia and other EaU members. Thus, the end of the Syrian Civil War in terms of decent domestic and external compromise of all anti-terrorist sides would be very beneficial to Eurasian integration both in geopolitical and economic terms.

In sum, in both the Ukraine crisis and the Syrian Civil War, Russia seeks accommodation with the West on the basis of mutual recognition of the national interests of the two sides. It is definitely not an imperialistic approach.

Conclusion

It follows from the discussion presented herein that the Eurasian Integration Project should be seen not only from the perspective of pure economic advantages of cooperation, but through the lens of the geo-economic and geopolitical East–West contest. In the Russian grand strategy, the EaU plays an important role of an instrument of neo-revisionist policy. It is designed to strengthen the position of the country in the world economy and in its international relations within the existing framework of the given world order. This does not fit the vision of Russian strategy as an imperialistic one neither in the right nor in the left versions of this thesis.

Whether such a neo-revisionist option is a real one for Russia is open to discussion. The discussion herein suggests that the thwarting of Eurasian integration, in particular, through fanning the Ukraine crisis, has played an important role in subjugating Russia to Western interests. This, in turn, is a part of the strategy to shift the burden of the world crisis to the periphery. The success of

the Western strategy of preserving US hegemony in the world, taken in the round, hinges on its ability to control Eurasia. Hence, there are very strong objective motives for the US to oppose Eurasian integration, as well as for the EU to support its ally at all costs, even damaging European security and prosperity, because the very domination of the West over the world is at stake. On the other hand, the limitations imposed on Russia by semi-peripheral capitalism hardly allow her to withstand a full-scale confrontation with the West. This means that by increasing external pressure on Russia, the Western ruling classes take risks of encountering sudden anti-Western and anti-capitalist changes in this society. But discussing that topic is beyond the scope of this article.

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