

RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA: THE EURASIAN ORIENTATION OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The famous ‘Eurasian Heartland’ roughly including the present-day Russia, the three South Caucasian and the five Central Asian states viz. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan has been a highly contested region in world politics due to geo-political, cultural and economic reasons. In the post-Cold War era it became the center of euphoric expectations for the regional as well as world powers – expectations that ranged from energy to geo-strategic balances and imbalances, and to the Fukuyama brand of ‘triumph of liberal democracy’ in the region. Shattering of those dreams reduced the region’s profile in international politics. However, recently it has again emerged with a potential of politico-economic development. From the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (2015) to the continuing political and economic instability in the region, all in the backdrop of rise of China as an emerging world power, the rising Russian profile in Central Asia is again being discussed in policy-making circles. In this context, this paper offers an overview of the Eurasian concept(s) with particular reference to the Russo-Central Asian politics and policies that are likely to cause a profound impact on regional and international dynamics in the future. It’s chief argument is that due to Moscow’s growing interest, the historical Eurasian Heartland is likely to play a more decisive role in the coming decades.

Key Words: Eurasian Heartland, Russia, Central Asia, Eurasian Theories, Political Development, Economic Development

Introduction

As early as 1881, the Russian philosopher Feodor M. Dostoevsky underscored the significance of Russian expansion in Asia (which in effect meant Central Asia) when he wrote:

“What for? What future? What is the need of future seizure of Asia? What’s our business there? This is

necessary because Russia is not only in Europe, but also in Asia...; not only that: in our coming destiny, perhaps it is precisely Asia that represents our main way out... ”¹

This line of thought influenced the 19th century Eurasian Movement and the eastward march of the Muscovy. Likewise, Vladimir Putin proclaimed in 2001, “Russia has always felt like a Eurasian state ... most of the Russian territory is in Asia, a benefit which Russia has never used in the right way”.² Presently, the Russian geo-political strategists perceive Eurasia as the region comprising the following states: Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, the Caucasus and the five Central Asian states as shown in the following map:



Eurasia Today as Perceived by Russians (Source: <http://www.mappery.com/map-of/Russia-Northern-China-and-Northern-Asia-Map>)

The regions, which were once under Russian or Soviet hegemony never ceased to be significant for the Russians. Even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian decision makers called it their ‘near abroad’, tied to Russia in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)³. During

¹ Feodor Dostoevsky was the 19th century Russian thinker who strongly advocated a proactive Asia policy. See, F. Dostoevsky, *Geok-Tepe, Chto takoe Aziya dlya nas?* 1881 <https://rus-turk.livejournal.com/6185.html> (translated by Google) accessed 2 March 2018.

² Speech at the Asia Pacific Conference in Brunei, 2001.

³ CIS, also called the Russian Commonwealth, was formed after the breakup of USSR became imminent in 1991 and included all Soviet successor states except the three Baltic

the last few years, a visible reemphasis on the Eurasian policy of Russia has been noted that is likely to carry long-term repercussions for regional as well as international politics. In this context, this paper explores the theoretical and historical background of Russian 'Eurasianism' with particular reference to the five Central Asian states. It tends to understand the significance of spatial perspective in shaping the Russian foreign policy and the policies related to the political and economic development in the post-Soviet Central Asia. It also attempts to analyze the fall-out of Russia's 'Eurasian Orientation' on the region.

The paper is organized in three sections: first focuses on the historical background of the 'Eurasian Orientation of Russia and the response of Central Asian states; the second highlights the major developments in this context during the post-Cold War era; and the third analyzes the impacts on the region.

Eurasian Heartland – History of an idea

Sometimes rather inaccurately, the Eurasian idea is traced to Tsar Peter II (1696-1725) thanks to what is perceived as his 'warm-water policy'. However, Peter was more interested in opening the 'windows to the West' and his coveted ports were rather those opening to the Mediterranean.⁴ In fact, we do not find deliberate conceptualization of so-called Eurasianism before the late 19th century when a group of intellectuals and activists started stressing both the European and the Asian dimensions of the Russian state and society. To them both of these dimensions compliment and enrich each other. Referring back to Dostoevsky's famous dictum one may also point out a unique mixture of Russian inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Western Europe and a noble civilizing mission vis-à-vis the Asia.

this erroneous view of ourselves is unique only to
Europeans, not to Asians (which we never ceased to be) -

States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia that eventually joined the European Union. In 2008, Georgia also left the CIS.

⁴ Peter's naval policy reflected his desire to acquire warm water ports to make up for Russia's historic deficiency which kept her far behind in sea-borne commerce and maritime competence as compared to the West European states. However, throughout his life he remained obsessed with the 'windows to the West' trying to build up relations and influence in Western Europe. The only warm water port he could capture was of Azov. He also initiated a drive to modernize or more appropriately to Westernize the backward Russian society.

this shame and this erroneous view are expensive, very costly to us in these two centuries, and we have paid for him (them), and the loss of our spiritual independence, our unsuccessful European policy, and, finally, money, money, which God knows how much we have to (spend to) prove to Europe that we are only Europeans, not Asians.⁵

Dostoevsky further asserts:

In Europe we are hangers-on and slaves, whereas to Asia we shall go as masters. In Europe we are Asiatics, whereas in Asia we, too, are Europeans. Our civilizing mission in Asia will bribe our spirit and drive us thither. It is only necessary that the movement should start.⁶

In fact the movement had already started. Since the 18th century, Russian eastward march had culminated in annexation of vast lands of Siberia and parts of Kazakh Steppes while the Russian armies had reached the borders of Afghanistan by late 19th century.⁷ Just as advocated by Dostoevsky, roads and railways were being built to consolidate the empire. This had led to 19th century's famous great game between the expanding Russian Empire in Central Asia and the expanding British Empire in South Asia. On the other hand, the British also were not ignorant of the significance of Eurasia. In 1904, Halford Mackinder in his seminal article gave the theory of 'Eurasian Heartland' proclaiming "... the vast zone of the Continental and Arctic drainage of Central Asia have long been the geographical pivot of history and would remain the pivot of world politics".⁸ The great game though came to a logical end with the signing of Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907; Russians never underestimated their 'Eurasian Heartland' even after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

The Eurasianist idea took the form of an active movement in 1920s initiated by Russian learned diaspora in Europe mostly centered in Sofia,

⁵ Dostoevsky.

⁶ Milan Hauner, *What is Asia to us?* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

⁷ For details see Hina Khan, "Russian Expansionism in Central Asia and the Region's Response", *Pakistan Horizon* (Karachi), 49, No.2 (April 1996): 33-57.

⁸ Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, 23, No. 4 (April, 1904): 421-437, <http://www.jstor.org/> accessed 2 December 2015.

Prague, Berlin and Paris. Intellectuals from various fields like Trubetzkoy (philologist), Vernadsky (historian), Savitsky (geographer), Florovsky (Orthodox pastor), Karsavin (philosopher) and Suvchinsky (artist) with their speeches and writings laid the foundations of Eurasianism.⁹ For instance, the first collective anthology *Exodus to the East – Premonitions and Achievements*, meticulously prepared by Trubetzkoy, Savitsky, Florovsky and Suvchinsky became a textbook of Eurasianism in the early phase.¹⁰ To the proponents Russia figured out as a unique ethno-geographical and cultural entity in the centre (heartland) between the East and the West – Asia and Europe. Hence, they aimed to emphasize Soviet Russia's relative cultural and geo-political independence and uniqueness vis-à-vis both the Eastern and the Western worlds and sought to ensure the stability of its borders with incorporation of ethnically diverse Euro-Asian periphery and domestic populations. Savitsky also was one of the few Russians who responded to Mackinder's Heartland theory from Russian perspective.¹¹

That was the time when the Communist regime in Soviet Union was propagating Marxist-Leninist ideology of Communist Internationalism with a mission of exporting the revolution to the whole world. On the other hand, among the millions of Turkic Muslims, an emerging leadership from Crimea to Bukhara was popularizing the idea of Pan-Turkism.¹² Karsavin even tried to achieve some kind of rapprochement with the Soviet authorities but the efforts proved self-abortive and the movement slowly fizzled out within a decade.

The second phase of the movement commenced in post-Stalin era. Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist and historian in 1960s, after being released from an 11-year detention in labor camps, promoted

⁹ Some of the Russian works, which laid the foundation of Eurasian movement, are V.I. Lamansky, *Three Worlds of the Asian-European Continent* (1892), G. Vernadsky "Against the Sun: Distribution of the Russian state to the East" (1914), and "Exodus to the East" (1921), N. Trubetskoy, *Europe and Mankind* (1920), P. Savitsky, *Europe and Eurasia* (1921), L.P. Karsavin, *The East, the West and the Russian idea* (1922) etc.

¹⁰ See Milan Hauner, 24.

¹¹ P. Savitsky, *The Turn to the East* (1921) <http://www.nevmenandr.net/eurasia/1921-PNS-eur.php> accessed 3 March 2014.

¹² For details see Hina Khan, "Sir Syed and Gasprinsky: A Comparative Study of the two Modernist Civil Society Movements in India and Russia", *Historicus*, The Journal of Pakistan Historical Society; Also see Stephan Wiederkehr, "Eurasianism as a reaction to Pan-Turkism" in Dmitri Shlapentokh (ed.), *Russia Between East and West – Scholarly debates on Eurasianism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 39-59.

Eurasianist ideas in his writings with stark criticism on the bureaucratic oppression and homogenizing role of the Communist regime.¹³ Another writer and a more pronounced Eurasianist was Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov. Though criticized for his pro-Mongol historical vision, Gumilyov viewed Eurasia as a dynamic centre of ethno-genesis, culture and history. To him Russians were a separate ethnos created by blending of the Slavic and the Turkish-Tatar nationalities. Hence, he supported the nationalist movements of Tatars, Kazakhstan and other Turkic and Mongolian peoples.

Central Asian response to Russian Eurasianism

Central Asia forms an important part of Eurasian Heartland. In 19th century, the people of what once called Turkestan were less aware of the geo-political debates but more conscious of their glorious history and proud of their own cultural heritage. The Samarkand and Bukhara of medieval times that were once the hub of religious and secular learning and culture were now witnessing a socio-economic as well as political decline. The Russian expansionist drive had reached a decisive phase with the annexation of the whole Kazakh Steppes and advancing towards Tashkent, Semireche and Geok Teppe.¹⁴ Along with the military conquest, just as suggested by Dostoevsky, Russian railway and telegraph penetrated Central Asia – an effective method of imperial control and exploitation.

Central Asians were not passive recipients of the changing political scenario. Their first response came in the form of sporadic and ill-planned resistance mostly led by the princes and landed elites who were crushed and dispossessed by the Russian might. Noticeably, chiefs of some Kazakh hordes because of their internal divisions chose to capitulate by entering certain accords with Russian generals that made Russian onslaught easier in the steppes and later the Turkestan region. However, the discriminative conscription policy of Russia during the World War I led to the sporadic but forceful revolts in Kazakh and Turkestan regions, which were also crushed eventually. On the other hand the militant Sufi Movement in the Caucasus was crushed after much difficulty. Another noticeable resistance was put forward by the Turkic *Basmachis* (so-called bandits or outlaws who

¹³ His writings were a breath of fresh air in a suppressed environment and secured a Nobel Prize for him in 1970, and an exile which only ended in the Gorbachev's era.

¹⁴ The last big conquest of Russians in Central Asia was Geok Teppe in present Turkmenistan in 1881. By that time almost all Central Asia was under Russian control except the two Muslim khanates of Bukhara and Kokand which were left with semi-independent status.

executed first and last guerilla warfare against Russians during 1920s and early 1930s. During the World War II German onslaught on Soviet soil led some Muslim Turkic groups in Caucasus and Central Asia to welcome the attackers in the hope of independence from the Russians. They were later severely punished by Stalin by massive deportations to far off places.¹⁵ There was no substantial armed resistance in Central Asia after the Second World War.

Russification was evident in policies ranging from promotion of Russian culture and Orthodox Christianity through Russian schools, sedentarization of nomads, and economic exploitation through excessive cotton production in the region which later caused severe environmental degradation.¹⁶ Influx of thousands of Russians and their settlement in some of the choicest lands and major cities also was a constant irritant leading to prominent anti-Russian feelings among the natives. Failing to halt the Russian onslaught militarily led some groups to look for other options. One such option was that of religious revivalism. Rise of Wahabi and Sufi movements trying to resist the Russification and later Sovietization of Central Asian society through a puritanical approach also could not work. Next and much successful response was modernist reform of Muslim society. 19th century *Jadid* Movement starting in Crimea and later spreading to Central Asia brought modern education and intellectual renaissance through jadid schools and modern press. Result was enlightenment and political awareness in the traditional societies and the rise of educated middle class to lead the later political movements of Pan Turkism and Pan Islamism and localized nationalism. Hence by early 20th century emergence of political parties and groups was a new phenomenon in Central Asian political scenario. These groups even participated in the newly formed Russian Duma between 1906 and 1917. However, after the Bolshevik revolution all such groups were purged, disintegrated or assimilated in the Soviet politico-economic structures.

The Soviet rule (1917-1991) in Central Asia brought more drastic changes – Sovietization in the form of collectivization of land and cattle, suppression of religious education and practice, Communist indoctrination, introduction

¹⁵ See Robert Conquest, *Soviet Deportations of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, 1960).

¹⁶ Cotton crops needs excessive water and continuous Russian emphasis on Cotton cultivation led to grain deficiency as well as severe water shortage in Amu Darya (River), Syr Darya (River), Aral Sea and Caspian Sea regions.

of Cyrillic alphabet, and the demarcation of borders between 1924 and 1936 which eventually abolished the old boundaries and divided Central Asia into five new Soviet Socialist Republics viz. Kazakh SSR, Kirghiz SSR, Tajik SSR, Uzbek SSR and Turkmen SSR. Resistance against collectivization and Russian immigrations was soon suppressed. However, an intellectual movement in the form of writings and political activism, which had actually started in late 19th century, reflects the ambivalence of the prevailing ideas regarding the future of Central Asian Muslims. On one hand, the *Jadid* Movement emanating from the Crimean intelligentsia which had reached Central Asia by early 20th century aimed to develop a modern educated Muslim class able to lead the Central Asians without coming directly into conflict with the Russian colonial administration, whereas, a resistance to the all-embracing Russian and later Soviet policies was also evident from many writings. Hence taking inspirations from the writings of Naseer Kursavi and Ismael Bey Gaspirali (Gasprinsky) of Crimea, intellectuals of Turkestan and Kazakh regions such as Abdul Rauf Fitrat, Khoja Behbudi, Sadruddin Aini of Bukhara and Munawar Qari, Abdul Rashid Khan Ogli of Tashkent, and many others show a desire to inculcate unity among the Turkic peoples and preserve their historical culture and identity while promoting modern education and thought among them to make them able to face the Russian and overall Western challenge. We find no instance of an acceptance or appreciation of the Eurasian idea as promoted by the Russian intellectuals. Hence the Bolshevik Revolution led to a civil war throughout the Muslim regions including Central Asia misinterpreting the Bolshevik Party' claims of the end of Russian Empire and the independence of 'all toiling peoples of the East'.¹⁷ The attempts to declare independence were crushed by the active intervention of the Red Army as all those areas were soon reconquered and brought under the Soviet yoke. Socialism could not gain popularity among the Muslim populations except for a small group of Socialists whose ideas and actions remained marginalized among the mainstream Muslim political leadership.¹⁸ However, within a few years the major Muslim political parties and groups had been incorporated

¹⁷ Stalin never personally visited Central Asia but made frequent speeches to attract the Muslim communities of Central Asia and even India to stand against the imperialist oppressors. For instance, see "Appeal to the Moslems of Russia and the East", (Russian) **Original Source:** Izvestia, No. 232, 7 December 1917, 1-2. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/the-muslim-east/the-muslim-east-texts/appeal-to-the-moslems-of-russia-and-the-east/> accessed 5 April 2018.

¹⁸ See Serge A. Zenkowsky, *Pan Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1967).

within the local Communist party apparatus. Most of the Jadids joined the Communist Party forming a class of Muslim Nationalist Communists. Unfortunately, this group could never gain trust of the Russians and by 1930s Stalin's notorious purges got rid of most of this group. While the land, resources and culture of Central Asians were captured once again, the Eurasian idea never gained popularity in this region except for a superficial layer of Communist party *apparatchiks*.¹⁹

The post cold war era– The Eurasian reorientation

The breakup of Soviet Union though ironically designed by the Russian politicians themselves instilled a trauma in the Russian minds.²⁰ Ruling the empire for the last two hundred years and then shedding it as a burden was naturally bitter. On the other hand, the Central Asian Republics were not pleased after being excluded from the initial decision-making process regarding the fate of the Union. To them liberty came as a sudden commotion for which they were not prepared.²¹ Nevertheless, Russian interests in their Asian 'near abroad' were permanent and vital. For the first time in history, Russia had a diaspora of 25 million ethnic Russians living outside its borders. About 9.5 million of them were living in the five Central Asian Republics.²² Their security and wellbeing in increasingly hostile environments in some republics mattered a lot to the new Russian administration. Further, the closely linked economies and infrastructure kept the Soviet successor states dependent on Russia, while the rich hydrocarbon resources of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been exploited by Russia for decades. Last but not the least Russia was too worried about the newly erupted bloody conflicts in Tajikistan (1992-97)

¹⁹ The term used for members of Communist Party apparatus.

²⁰ The major cause of the Soviet breakup being economic implosion, Russian leadership led by Boris Yeltsin was in the forefront of the disintegration process. For details see Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire – The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (London: One World Publications, 2014).

²¹ See Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2.

²² Russian influx to Central Asia actually started in 19th century and continued through 20th century with official approval and planning. For instance, hundreds of thousands were settled in the Kazakh steppes under the 'Virgin Land' program of Khrushchev's era (1953-64). However the trend decreased from 1970s. After the Soviet breakup a large-scale exodus of Russians was visible leaving only less than six million by 2007. See Sebastian Peyrouse, *The Russian Minority in Central Asia – Migration, Politics, Language* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 2008).

and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan which had a spillover effect on Central Asia thus posing security dilemmas for Russia.

On the other hand, Russian worries about the future of Russian Federation in the face of severe economic issues, separatist movement in Chechnya and the loss of superpower status, were substantial. Not yet recovered from the 'bleeding wound' of Afghanistan, and uneasy recipient of thousands of ethnic Russians from the peripheries particularly from Central Asia, the new Russian administrators were looking for a new role for Russia in a new world order. Boris Yeltsin's foreign policy priorities lied in creating a "non-threatening external environment" conducive to Russia's "internal economic and political development". Hence, a foreign policy of "accommodation, retrenchment and risk avoidance" was evident.²³ His foreign minister Kozyrev further elaborated that Russia should aim at an integration process similar to that of European Union (EU), including the former Soviet states, with a guarantee of full sovereignty to each one of them.²⁴ "A democratic Russia will become a natural center of gravity for the other post-Soviet republics...".²⁵ However, most of Russian attention seemed to focus on the western borders of Russia and a pro-liberal disposition following the EU. However, the emergent conflicts in some of the eastern republics drew Russian attention eastwards. The Tajik civil war, the Chechen resurgence and the Armenia-Azerbaijan imbroglio over Nigorno Karabakh region produced shockwaves across the region. Further, the issue of sharing Caspian among the littoral states, political conflicts in Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Uzbekistan, anti-Russian feelings in the regional states particularly in Tajikistan, illegal migrations and drug trafficking and above all the rising influence of Western and Chinese companies leading to the new great game in the resource rich Central Asia and Caucasus were enough to drive back Russian attention to its eastern backyard and a revival of Eurasian thinking among Russian intelligentsia and politicians.

²³ Robert H. Donaldson, "Boris Yeltsin's Foreign Policy Legacy", *Tulsa Journal of Comparative and International Law*, Vol. 7, issue 2, 1999, <http://digitalcommons.law.utulsa.edu/tjci/vol7/iss2/2> accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

²⁴ John Dunlop, "Russia: Confronting a Loss of Empire" in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 54.

²⁵ Kozyrev's article in the *New York Times*, November 25, 1990, p. E11; *ibid*.

A revived emphasis on the geo-politics led to a revived discourse on post-Soviet geography and possible strategies to cope with its challenges. The new foreign minister Primakov gave his famous doctrine in 1996 aiming to build a Eurasian counterbalance to NATO and counter American influence in the Middle East and Eurasia. Primakov saw the peripheral conflicts as a threat to Russian security and interests and insisted that Russia needed to resume its traditional 'stabilizing role' in its backyard. This gave birth to what is now called the Neo-Eurasianism in Russian geopolitical discourse. With Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000 and following the axiom 'Geography as a destiny', the Eurasianist thinking became all the more pervasive asserting Russia as a dominant political factor between Asia and Europe with a particular emphasis on stepping up Russian involvement in Central Asia.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that the Russian geo-political thinking as understood by many, is not a homogenous blueprint of Russian policy towards its Eurasian neighborhood. There have been various schools of thought prevailing simultaneously in Russian political discourse regarding possible overtures towards the East and the West.

Zapadniki or Westernizers school

This school harbors little interest in Eurasia. According to some scholars like Tsygankov, who views Eurasianism as "an intellectually and politically diverse movement", the first Foreign Minister and the first Finance Minister of Russian Federation after the breakup viz. Andrei Kozyrev and Yegor Gaidar respectively, both belonged to this school of thought, who campaigned for Russia's "strategic retreat from the former Soviet region and the larger Eurasia" to enable a direct integration with the West and its institutions.²⁶ As a result, the early few years seem to be dominated by *Zapadniki* thought. Another assertive proponent is Demitri Trenin, the writer of *End of Eurasia*.²⁷ This school is not in favor of Russia spending too much attention and resources in the Eurasian region. To its proponents, Russia is essentially a European country, and in order to resolve its internal political and economic problems, it must be allied with the West's ideals, values and institutions. In a way this school insists on opening 'windows to

²⁶ A.P. Tsygankov, "Mastering Space in Eurasia: Russia's Geo-political Thinking after the Soviet Breakup", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 36 (2003): 101-127.

²⁷ D. Trenin, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center), 2001.

the West' and advocates for only one role of Russia in Eurasian backyard and that is promoting democracy and liberalism there.²⁸ Trenin views Russia's southern border "not one of potential integration as in the West but rather a civilizational divide" and advocates for a "cultural and humanitarian dialogue across that divide... ." He also insists upon Russia to encourage modernization and help conflict resolution or management process along its southern borders through development of economic and communication links. However, he also admits that this goal cannot be achieved without a "most-needed ... Russian-Western cooperation."²⁹

Geoekonomiki or Geo-economist school

This school sees geo-economics as a new force taking over geo-politics in the post-Cold War era. Unlike the Zapadnikis, geo-economists defend Russia's Eurasianist identity though admit that the world is increasingly becoming "interdependent, but also economically West-centered and culturally pluralist". They insist that the main security challenge to Russia is geo-economic in nature, and can be faced if Russia utilizes its central Eurasian position and achieves economic prosperity and social development through transnational economic projects sponsored by both public and private sectors of Asian and Western countries. Prosperity and the peace will follow suit.³⁰

Proponents of this school include Sergei Rogov, who in his book advocates just as Dostoevsky did in 19th century, an efficient communication system including "ground, air, and electronic transportation routes" connecting the southern, western and eastern borders of Eurasia through Russian territory. By adopting this strategy Rogov hopes to maintain Eurasia as an "open and yet, economically and politically stable region".³¹ Most of the intellectuals and officials, liberal political movements, state-oriented parties and private sector with regional orientation, who generally abstain from blatant pro-Western stance yet possess a liberal political vision for future Russia, belong to this school. They insist on keeping distance from the West while pursuing an active geo-economic approach for the integration of former Soviet partners particularly the Central Asian States. The geo-economists define the Eurasian identity for Russia as a mix of

²⁸ Tsygankov, 107.

²⁹ Trenin, 204.

³⁰ Tsygankov.

³¹ *Ibid*, 108.

cultural and economic linkages across the Central Eurasia which has kept the region integrated throughout history. To them the breaking of those historical geo-economic linkages has jeopardized Russian security and prosperity. Similarly, but in a more assertive manner, Kolosov and Mironenko advocate for a special geo-economic strategy to perpetuate Russian presence in Eurasia after the Soviet breakup.³² Apparently well-versed in the neo-colonial discourse of the West, they understood the geo-economic control of the global production and flow of resources as an effective prevalent policy. To them Russia's position between Europe and Asia itself calls for the 'geopolitics of cooperation' vis-à-vis the West, China and Asia-Pacific region while its economic weakness will continue until the country enables itself "to effectively play the required organizing role in the region", failing which, may lead to disintegration of the Russian Federation.³³ However, the authors do not support the pipeline program from Central Asia to Indian and Pacific Oceans via Afghanistan (and Pakistan).³⁴ Main reason of their opposition was the uncertain conditions in Afghanistan as well as the exclusion of Russia from such projects which may undermine Russian influence in the long run.³⁵

Stabilizatory or Stabilizers school

This school is rather more conservative as compared to the above schools (though less conservative than the expansionist and civilizationist schools mentioned ahead) and views Russia's role as a great power necessary for the stabilization of the turbulent post-Soviet Eurasia, primarily through its 'informal' politico-military and economic controls. Its proponents such as Primakov assert that without Russia, as a 'great power' there will be no stability and peace in Eurasia.³⁶ Further, they insist a 'multi-vector' policy that albeit leaves Russia's role in Eurasia uncompromised.

³² *ibid*, 115-116.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ For instance the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) Gas Pipeline Project that was initiated in 1995.

³⁵ As a substitute the proponents of geo-economics as well as stabilizer school prefer the TRASECA project (signed in 1993) which incorporates Russia along with Europe, Caucasus and Asia for building an international transportation corridor. See Angelica Zwicky, "The Prospects of Traseca Project Development on the Modern Stage", *Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies*, <http://kisi.kz/en/categories/economy-and-energy/posts/the-prospects-of-traseca-project-development-on-the-mod20> accessed 5 April, 2018.

³⁶ Tsygankov, 108.

In this context, Kamaluddin Ghadzhiyev points out that despite the breakup of USSR, Russia can and must assert its presence in the Eurasian region with the notion of 'geo-political space' along with other spaces such as cultural, economic and informational. As a geo-economist, he rejects the traditional geo-political paradigm but, nevertheless, maintains that the former cannot replace the latter in toto. In effect, he proposes a new version of geo-politics that he deems more favorable for Russia. He sees Russia's role beyond just that of bridging the East and the West through trade and communication lines but for the noble cause of pacifying and stabilizing the whole region. Like the classical realists Ghadzhiyev insists on maintaining a balance of power and a deterrent military power (considering the expansion of NATO in Russian neighborhood as a significant threat) while following the liberal school he is optimist about the 'end of irreconcilable differences between the Cold War rivals and hopes for a constructive partnership with the West as well as China with which Russia has many common concerns. In this regard the ethnic issues in the Caucasus and Central Asia and accommodation of the peripheral Muslim communities are two major concerns. To him the rising religious extremism in Caucasus and Central Asia can be dealt with by extending cooperation with India which will also help countering the increasing influence of Iran and Turkey over the Muslim populations of Azerbaijan and Central Asia. What he visualizes as a grand collective security system includes Russia as a central power, the EU and USA in its west, China, Japan and Koreas in its east, and India, Iran and Turkey in the south.³⁷ However, the author is rather ambivalent on the mechanism to be adopted for Russian control over such a grand project and rather relies on bilateral ties of Russia with each of the possible actor therein.

***Tsivilizatsiya* or Civilizationist school**

Also viewing Russia as an anti-Western independent unit but somewhat tilted towards left, the proponents of this school desire to resurrect the Soviet days' glory and the 'Union' as an empire which they define as an independent and self-sufficient civilization comprised of stable territories and hence not constantly expanding. They rather advocate for a limited politico-economic expansion. To them, Russian goals in Eurasia must be the perpetuation of its "civilizational self-sufficiency and autarchy" as well as the restoration of the superpower status with full economic and nuclear

³⁷ *Ibid*, 118-120.

capabilities.³⁸ They have no desire to integrate with Europe which they see as a separate civilizational entity that cannot be mixed with Russia. Instead they advise closer ties with China, India and the Eurasian states.

The most prominent proponent of Tsivilizatsiya is Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist leader whose book *The Geography of Victory* gives insights into the evolution of geo-political thinking of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) as well as the post-Soviet Communist groups. Ironically, the Communists in Soviet era often rejected geo-politics as “a reactionary discipline” yet they never underestimated the significance of Russia’s geo-political location.³⁹ Typical of the Communists, he views his work not as ‘another ideology’ but as ‘a deeply scientific form of knowledge’.⁴⁰

Ekspansionisty or Expansionist school

Radically conservative in the geo-political spectrum, this school sees Russia as essentially an anti-Western territorial empire which is threatened by the Western capitalism which it calls ‘trade civilization’ or ‘Atlanticism’ led by the USA. To the proponents of this school, Russia can only counter this threat by a continuous expansion of its power and territory as well as alliances that may eventually support Russia against the US. For instance, states like Germany, Iran and Japan may be potential allies in this context. Though often considered as too dangerous, this school has allies in some hard-line military and nationalist circles in Russia such as Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party. The embodiment of Eurasionist expansionism is no doubt Aleksandre Dugin’s *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997) which has been a part of curriculum at the General Staff Academy of Russian Federation’s Armed Forces. Dugin, sometimes referred to as the ‘post-Soviet space occultist’, is the founder and perhaps the most proactive leader of the International Eurasian Movement since 2001.⁴¹ Appreciating Mackinder’s notion of Eurasian Heartland, Dugin advocates for development of a militarily and economically invincible Russia to “establish full and single-handed control of Eurasia”.⁴² He foresees the future world as

³⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

³⁹ See Milan Hauner, 136.

⁴⁰ Tsygankov, 120.

⁴¹ Andreas Umland, "Евразийские" проекты Путина и Дугина – сходства и различия" *Geopolitika (Lithuania)*, 22 June 2012, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20120622/193954633.html> (Translated by Google) accessed 15 April, 2018.

⁴² Tsygankov, 123.

a bi-polar geo-political struggle between the 'sea-powers' i.e the "Atlanticists" led by the US and the 'land-powers' i.e. Eurasianists led by Russia. To him integration of Eurasia with Russia is the only way to guarantee peace and security to the peoples and the states of Eurasia, however, that will not be enough and a lasting peace can be achieved through a constantly expanding Eurasian Empire. Giving examples of the American Manifest Destiny, Monroe Doctrine, the recent aggression against Yugoslavia, as well as Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis, he justifies Russian expansionism with an urgent mobilization of strategic, economic and socio-cultural resources which to him is the only correct response to the blatant Atlanticism. "Such response is necessary for Russia if it does not want to be taken out of history by the iron hand of the builders of the 'New World Order'"'.⁴³

As clear from the above discussion, the different Russian schools of geo-political thinking more or less consider whole post-Soviet region including Central Asia as Russian sphere of influence. Although, during the first few years after the breakup, Russia seemed to deliberately distance itself from its historical backyard, the Neo-Eurasianists view the Muslim states of Central Asia along with Iran as their most important strategic allies. They often assert the utility of a continental Russian-Islamic alliance as the cornerstone of their anti-Atlantic strategy. This idea has also correlates well with Samuel Huntington's clash of civilization theory that identifies a potential Orthodox-Islamic alliance as a threat to Western civilization.

The following table chronologically presents the Post-Soviet developments in Eurasian integration process at a glance:

**Table 1- Russia and Central Asia
Post-Soviet Manifestations of Eurasian Ideology**

| Year | Event | States involved |
|-----------|---|---|
| 1991 | Formation of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) | Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and five Central Asian States |
| 1992-1994 | Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) formed | Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Later joined by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus |

⁴³ *Ibid*, 124.

| | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| | with signatures on Tashkent Treaty. Came into effect in 1994 | |
| 1994 | Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev gave the idea of Eurasian Union | The idea was proposed for all Eurasian states including Russia |
| 1996 | Treaty on the Deepening of Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Field “Eurasian equivalent to Maastricht Treaty” (Nazarbayev) | Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Eventually, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan entered into cooperation |
| 1997 | Russian National Security Concept | “Russia as an “influential European and Asian power” |
| 2000 | Official Foreign Policy Concept | Russian Federation as “a great power with a responsibility for maintaining security in the world both at a global and regional level |
| 2000 | Agreement for the establishment of Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) signed into force - > also established Free Trade Area | Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan |
| 2001-2008 | Dugin - creates a huge doctrine, ideological and strategic apparatus of Russia's Eurasian geo-political line and to channel the future of the Eurasian Empire- the International Eurasianist Movement | All post-Soviet states except the Baltic states |

| | | |
|------|---|--|
| 2007 | Decision to create Customs Union (CU) within EAEC | Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan |
| 2010 | Adoption of Customs Code | Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan |
| 2011 | Elimination of border controls between CU states | Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan |
| 2012 | Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin announced their collaboration in the context of Neo-Eurasianism | All Christian and Muslim post-Soviet states |
| 2012 | Eurasian Economic Space launched | |
| 2014 | Treaty for the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) signed | Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan – later to be joined by Armenia and Kirghizstan |
| 2015 | EEU comes into force | Same as above |

Eurasian orientation – The fallout

What the Eurasian project holds for Central Asian future is yet to be discovered. However the developments in this regard, since the beginning of the Eurasian Union can be studied under two subheadings: economic and political.

Economic fallout

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has an integrated single market of 183 million people and a GDP of over 4 trillion U.S. dollars. The EEU introduces the free movement of goods, capital, services and people and provides for common policies in macroeconomic sphere, transport, industry and agriculture, energy, foreign trade and investment, customs, technical regulation, competition and antitrust regulation. Provisions for a single currency and greater integration are envisioned for the future.

However, the progress of the Union has never been as phenomenal as witnessed during the course of European integration.⁴⁴

Unlike the European Economic Community (EEC), the outcome of the Eurasian Community's economic activity was not promising for Central Asia. Russian economic limitations in developing the Eurasian Union into a viable integrative force in Central Asia were obvious since the beginning. Russia's restricted access to financial resources, particularly the imposition of post-Ukraine-crisis sanctions, undermined its ability to support the weak Central Asian economies. Integration of capital markets of the EEU remained low until 2016. Kazakhstan for instance, despite being an enthusiastic initiator of the EEU, remained exceedingly reliant on the investments from European Union (EU) that is about 41% of total as compared to Russian investments of around 17%.⁴⁵ The share of trade between the EU members remained low (6.5% in 2014). In fact about 26% to 30% of EEU's internal trade has been based on hydrocarbons and oil products whose prices kept on fluctuating with the global oil prices. Moreover, the devaluation of Russian Ruble and Kazakh Tenge also affected the trade value that in turn affected the extent and speed of integration in Eurasia.⁴⁶

However, since 2017 some positive indicators emerged in different sectors such as growth in industrial production (3.6%), agricultural production (1.5%) and freight and passenger turnover (7%). Volume of bilateral trade also increased substantially while that of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the EEU almost doubled. Meanwhile exports to EU also escalated to about 50.3% of total exports of EEU. To the satisfaction of expansionist school, 70% of the payments for the exports in the EAEU are made in national currencies with a marked increase in the share of Ruble (56 to 75%) and a clear decrease in the share of Dollar (35 to 19%) in payments.

A recent development is the closer integration with Iran, which is an attractive market for the Eurasian goods particularly after the relaxation of sanctions by the US. Other possible trade partners may be India, Egypt,

⁴⁴ <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>.

⁴⁵ Rosstat, 2014, cited in Ksenia Kirkham, "The Formation of Eurasian Economic Union: How Successful is the Russian Regional Hegemony", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7(2016): 111-128, www.elsevier.com/locate/euras accessed, 20 April, 2018.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 117.

Singapore, Serbia and Israel with whom EAEC has been conducting intensive negotiations. Nonetheless, the China factor cannot be ignored. Though earlier suspected of its hegemonic designs by Central Asian governments and peoples, China has been able to create its mark as an inevitable regional power with great role in the geo-economics of the region.

Political fallout

At least on paper, the EAEU model, just like EU, is characterized by a market economy and an institutional arrangement in accordance with democratic principles. Decisions, directives and recommendations of the EAEC Council are taken by consensus, which indicates full equality of the participating countries. On the other hand, political issues are not included in the purview of the EAEU, which is deliberately limited to the economic cooperation.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, the Eurasianists tend to defy the norms of liberal democracy as 'Western imports'. Russia itself after a brief initial honeymoon with liberal democracy has grown more and more autocratic with a clear tilt towards power centralization. Eurasianists often imply the notion of "sovereign democracy" asserting that Eurasians must define their own democracy while protecting themselves against the foreign values imported from the West.⁴⁸ President Putin has shown exceptional authoritarian tendencies in the form of constitutional amendments to increase his own powers; reduction of the powers of the Council of Federation; and brutal suppression of nationalist movements in Chechnya and Tataristan etc. Further, a tendency to dominate the Eurasian countries rather than developing partnership is all too evident and undermines trust in the region. Nevertheless, the historical legacy of Central Asian ruling elite is a major factor that links it with Russia. Authoritarian tendencies have been inherited from the Soviet past that make the region difficult for promotion of liberal democratic norms and market economy. What makes Russia led integration more acceptable to those autocratic rulers is the

⁴⁷ Political matters are discussed at the forums of CIS and CSTO or through bilateral dialogue.

⁴⁸ The concept of 'sovereign democracy' was given by Vladislav Surkov, a key figure in Russian administration since 1999. For details see Tony Mileski, "Identifying the New Eurasian Orientation in Modern Russian Geopolitical Thought", *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 6, issue 2 (December 2015): 177-187.

benefits that their regimes accrue without being pushed for political reforms and observance of human rights.

Russia's staunchest ally in Central Asia, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan is known for his most ambitious vision for Eurasian integration. He is credited (or accused) for "openly tying the future of Kazakhstan to Russia" and constantly advocating for a wider and deeper integration with the inclusion of all Central Asian states in not only the economic but also political and security networks particularly hailing the military and anti-terrorist schemes of Russian led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).⁴⁹ On the contrary, the autocratic regimes of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan pose a challenge to Eurasian integration. Uzbekistan pulled out of CSTO in 2012. However, for all Central Asian regimes Russian partnership is valuable against threats, such as Islamist radicalism, without demanding democratic reforms or other unacceptable requirements unlike Western actors involved in the region.

Conclusion

The above study shows that Eurasianism has always been and likely to be a keystone in Russian foreign policy. Russian orientation towards its Eurasian 'near abroad' is not a new phenomenon but a historical desire to play a central role as the largest and most benevolent power of the region as well as a civilizational center-point between the West and the East, Europe and Asia. Over the decades, Russian Eurasian policy has not been based entirely on any one geo-political school of thought but on some aspects of each school. Though the *Zapadniki* school prevailed during the early post-Soviet years, soon the balance shifted on the side of geo-economic, civilizationist and the more obviously towards the expansionist school. With the commencement of Putin's long tenure, Aleksandre Dugin's expansionist theories, often referred to as Neo-Eurasianism, became more strongly integrated in the foreign policy documents as well as Russian military's mindset.

Formation of the EAEU can bolster Russian influence in the former Soviet space. Nevertheless, in case of Central Asia, despite Nazarbayev's efforts, things are not that rosy for Russia. An obvious trust deficit exists between Russia and some Central Asian States particularly, Uzbekistan and

⁴⁹ Smith, (2012).

Turkmenistan. On the other hand, Kazakhstan, the staunchest proponent of EAEU concept itself has a massive trade involvement with the EU and USA. Further, the silently increasing participation of China in Central Asian economic and financial schemes is yet another factor to reckon with making China indispensable partner to the regional states. In this context, it cannot be expected that the EAEU will ever be the reincarnation of the Soviet Union and will be easily conjured up by the neo-imperialist theories such as those propounded by the expansionist and the civilizationist schools of geopolitics.

For the Central Asian states there can be several alternatives of the EAEU where they could escape Russian hegemony: one is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with a clear Chinese upper hand. There are also talks of China trying to extend SCO framework possibly without Russia; EU is another option that is already doing well in trade partnership. Furthermore, the American proposal of economic integration of the South and Central Asia is particularly encouraging the pipeline agreements via Afghanistan. All of these options suffer from two major flaws: European and American insistence on democratic reforms in the region that do not seem likely in near future; and the unstable Afghanistan which will be a major hurdle in the way of trade and pipeline routes. Further, the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan is likely to decrease American influence in the region. On the contrary, Russia is a giant sitting in the neighborhood that cannot be ignored by the Central Asian states. Longstanding historical links with Russia as well as its tremendous manipulative powers particularly as a political and military stabilizer are likely to keep the region within the Russian sphere of influence.

Nevertheless, the internal contradictions of the Neo-Eurasianist paradigms and the increasingly imperialist disposition of Russia can harm its legitimacy among the Central Asian states. For instance, the Eurasianist claims on the vital role of Islam in Russian society are contradicted by their advocacy for dominant Orthodox Christian values. Moreover, the dominance of the Russian core on Central Asian (and overall Eurasian) periphery is all too obvious which actually undermines the concept of partnership in the future working of Eurasian Union where the partners are expected to follow the leadership of Russia and Putin. Further, the events in the periphery particularly the Russian role in Ukraine conflict and annexation of Crimea, have accentuated the doubts of Central Asians vis-à-vis the Russian

hegemony and effected their thinking on the role and efficacy of Neo-Eurasianism.

Yet, this also must be noted that all Central Asian regimes feel threatened by the growing influence of radical Islamist insurgents in the region particularly after the NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and may prefer Russia as a nearer and more reliable guarantor of regional stability.