



## The Rise of Chinese Eurasianism

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Chinese Eurasianism, which – if the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is successful – will give Beijing new foreign policy tools to use against Washington, could prove more threatening to the US in the long run than the USSR was during the Cold War.**

Many powers throughout history have tried to bring large parts of the Eurasian landmass into their folds. The Achaemenid Empire in antiquity, the Mongols and Tamerlane in the Middle Ages, and many others worked prodigiously to create a unified Eurasian space. After their military successes, though, the invaders could not offer any clear economic or cultural benefit to the various Eurasian peoples. The result was more or less rapid disintegration of their conquests.

The Russians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, on the other hand, embarked on a project wherein they gradually built an empire with a clear philosophical vision of its role in world history. A strong Russian military was backed up by relatively attractive economic incentives for the peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and parts of Eastern Europe.

One of the ideologies underpinning the Russian drive to dominate Eurasia was Eurasianism, a concept that emerged as a philosophical movement in the 1920s. There are multiple definitions of Eurasianism, but the most prominent sees Russia as neither a European nor an Asian culture but as a perfect mixture of the two. The Eurasian doctrine implied a specific geographic and philosophical identity for Russia.

During the Soviet period, Russian Eurasianism was overshadowed by Communist universalism, which encouraged direct Russian influence to spread not just to Eurasia but everywhere around the globe. The current

Russian government wants to reinvigorate the notion of Eurasianism, but has so far largely failed to do so. The new integration project dubbed the “Eurasian Economic Union” is not a powerful entity and cannot compete with Europe or the Asia-Pacific.

Roughly speaking, the Russian long-term integration project for the Eurasian landmass was relatively successful until 2013, when the Chinese government unveiled its new, Eurasia-wide economic and political idea: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Chinese focus on connectivity and integration across Eurasia distinguishes it from Russian Eurasianism insofar as the latter failed to counter Western economic, cultural, and military encroachment into the Russian backyard. The BRI, by contrast, is based on strong economic potential as well as solid institutions. The BRI seeks cross-continental connectivity and integration between China and Europe. Unlike Russian Eurasianism, Chinese Eurasianism would eventually challenge what we may provisionally call Atlanticism: a situation in which the US has built a security umbrella across the entire Eurasian landmass to prevent the emergence of a unified Eurasia.

Chinese Eurasianism will allow Beijing to gain additional foreign policy tools to use against the US, which pressures it in the Asia-Pacific region. China’s pivot to the West goes primarily through Central Asia, a region militarily dominated by Russia. At present, the US has few means of preventing China from increasing its influence in the region and will have to dedicate more economic and military resources to the purpose of countering the Chinese. As of now, Beijing is in a relatively good geopolitical position to bargain with Washington.

Since domination of the oceans is at the heart of US global power, Chinese initiatives to economically restructure the Eurasian landmass are bound to increase Washington’s suspicions of Beijing over the next years and decades.

In the long run, China is more problematic for the US than the USSR was during the Cold War. The Soviets were competing militarily, and did not attempt any large or long-lasting economic projects. It is true that the US had to expend great military and economic resources to stall Soviet influence, but the Soviet threat nevertheless remained solely military. The attractiveness of Communism was nonexistent and the Soviet economy was in a shambles. Taking a long view, it was predictable that the US would win the Cold War.

Today, China, with its powerful economic incentives, represents a much bigger threat to the US-led Eurasian order. China, Iran, and Russia are the pivotal countries in the Eurasian landmass and Washington has largely tense relations

with all of them, which limits American power to prevent an alliance of convenience among anti-American countries.

Overall, the Russian vision of the Eurasian landmass is being gradually overshadowed by the Chinese vision. China as a continental power sees the advantages of moving through Central Asia and the Middle East to Europe, and Moscow does not possess the necessary capabilities to oppose Beijing.

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