

# RUSSIA'S EVOLVING EURASIAN STRATEGY

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While speaking at the second Belt and Road Forum meeting held in Beijing (China) on April 26, 2019, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, emphasized on the "harmonious and sustainable economic development and economic growth of the Eurasian space" and noted how "the Belt and Road Initiative rhymes with Russia's idea to establish a Greater Eurasian Partnership, a project designed to 'integrate integration frameworks' and, therefore, to promote a closer alignment of various bilateral and multilateral integration processes that are currently underway in Eurasia."<sup>1</sup> Similar views were expressed by him in his opening speech, in June 2016, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, where he proposed his vision of establishing a "Great Eurasian Partnership, involving the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), China, India, Pakistan, Iran, CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) members, and other interested countries and associations".<sup>2</sup> He has envisioned the establishment of a network of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements among the members, which would, initially, involve harmonising and easing regulations for scientific and technological cooperation, cooperation for mutual investments, phytosanitary control, customs administration,

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1. "Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation", April 26, 2019; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60378>. Accessed on May 15, 2019.
2. "Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum", June 17, 2016; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>. Accessed on May 15, 2019.

**Continuous focus on multilateral cooperation within the Greater Eurasian Partnership and Eurasian Integration has become an important vector for the advancement of Russian foreign policy thinking in recent times.**

and protection of intellectual property, etc. Later, they could gradually move towards the lowering of tariffs and ultimately establishing a 'Free Trade Zone' with more than 40 countries.<sup>3</sup> The president further proposed that the Greater Eurasian initiative was also open for Europe, and anticipated that it would eventually join.<sup>4</sup> This continuous focus on multilateral cooperation within the Greater Eurasian Partnership and Eurasian Integration has become an important vector

for the advancement of Russian foreign policy thinking in recent times.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, Greater Eurasia demonstrates Moscow's geo-economic strategy, i.e. through economic connectivity (i) it can, reposition itself at the heart of integrated Eurasia; (ii) as an energy and transportation hub, it can elevate its bargaining power; and (iii) connectivity with rising markets in Asia can provide it opportunities for diversification.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it is also perceived as a new geo-political phenomenon, i.e. Eurasia symbolises a common space among Europe, Russia and Asia, therefore, Russia can become a centre of integration between Asia and Europe. Moreover, this could provide Russia with an opportunity to gain a new status of not just being on the European periphery, with possessions in Asia, but an Atlantic-Pacific power committed to the future.<sup>7</sup> Third, Greater Eurasia is also seen as Russia's move to restore its place at the international level, politically, and

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3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Zachary Paikin, "Orders within Orders: A New Paradigm for Greater Eurasia", April 27, 2019; <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2019/04/27/orders-within-orders-a-new-paradigm-for-greater-eurasia/>. Accessed on May 3, 2019.

6. Glenn Diesen, *Russia's Geoeconomic Strategy for a Greater Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

7. Sergei Karaganov, "From East to West, or Greater Eurasia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 25, 2016; <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/From-east-to-west-or-Greater-Eurasia-18440>. Accessed on April 30, 2019.

reestablish influence in its “near abroad”<sup>8</sup> so as to fill the ideological emptiness generated by the demise of the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

Against this background, the present paper will try to examine ‘Eurasia’ in Russia’s foreign policy calculus. It will focus on various possibilities and challenges for Russia to achieve its objectives, specially amidst the profound global changes.

### **BRIEF BACKGROUND**

The evolution of the concept of Eurasia in the Russian discourse should be understood in the context of the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Since then, Russia has undergone significant changes in its foreign policy. In fact, the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the virtual disappearance of the Communist international sub-system left a conceptual void in the foreign policy of the newly independent Russian Federation.<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that it inherited the features of the changed international system, radically different territorial boundaries, deep economic crisis and increased social discontent, a number of questions surfaced regarding the direction its foreign policy should take. Also, with the loss of its ideology’s official standing, the issue of Russia’s national identity came to the forefront. In fact, the question of national identity became more central than national interests,<sup>11</sup> as it was

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8. Lt Col Craig S. Baumgartner, “Russia’s Strategic Window of Opportunity in Eurasia”, Retrieved from [http://inset.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/AWCReport\\_2013\\_Baumgartner\\_Final.pdf](http://inset.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/AWCReport_2013_Baumgartner_Final.pdf). Accessed on June 13, 2019.
  9. Diana Shendrikova, “Going Regional the Russia Way: The Eurasian Economic Union between Instrumentalism and Global Social Appropriateness”, July 3, 2015, [http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/green\\_shendrikova.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/green_shendrikova.pdf). Accessed on July 3, 2019.
  10. Robert H. Donaldson and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia-Changing Systems Enduring Interests* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), pp. 107-111.
  11. Andrei P. Tsygankov, “From International Institutionalism to Revolutionary Expansionism: The Foreign Policy Discourse of Contemporary Russia”, *Mershon International Studies Review*, vol. 41, 1997, p. 248.

noted by analysts that until and unless the question of “what Russia is without the Soviet Union and without the Russian Empire” is dealt with, no military doctrine or national security will endure.<sup>12</sup> However, amidst the chaos and confusion, the leaders of the Russian Federation accepted the premises of the “new thinking” as put forward by Mikhail Gorbachev, and the “liberal ideas based on liberal democracy, the market economy and Western-centred system”, dominated Russian leadership’s foreign policy thinking from 1991-93.<sup>13</sup> Andrei Kozyrev, the then foreign minister, justified this policy by stating that “there were neither potential adversaries nor military threats to Russian interests”, and that “the world was going through a transition from the former global division and confrontation to a system of relations of global cooperation”.<sup>14</sup> Thus, during that time, Russia sought partnerships with the West on the basis of shared values of democracy, free market and human rights. It was claimed that the Western powers were the natural allies of Russia,<sup>15</sup> as the then President Boris Yeltsin clearly articulated in his speech to the UN Security Council in January 1992, “Russia regards the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies ... we reject any subordination of foreign policy to pure ideology or ideological doctrines. Our principles are clear and simple: primacy of democracy, human rights and freedoms, legal and moral standards ...”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, under President Yeltsin’s leadership, joining the West as a major partner of the US and an integral player in Greater Europe, was the chief foreign policy objective. It included radical economic reforms and integration into transatlantic economic and security institutions like the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO),

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12. Ibid. Also see, Eugene B. Rumer, *The Building Blocks of Russia's Future Military Doctrine* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 1994), p. viii; [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR359.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR359.html). Accessed on June 13, 2019.

13. Christian Thorun, *Explaining Change in Russian Foreign Policy—The Role of Ideas in Post-Soviet Russia's Conduct towards the West* (St Antony's Series, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 28-29.

14. Ibid., p. 29.

15. Graham Smith, “The Masks of Proteus: Russia, Geopolitical Shift and the new Eurasianism”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1999, p. 482.

16. “Boris Yeltsin’s Speech to the UN, January 31, 1992”; <http://undocs.org/en/S/PV.3046>. Accessed on June 21, 2019.

World Trade Organisation (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), G-7, etc. This new Westernised orientation shaped the foreign policy concept of 1992-93.<sup>17</sup> Many young liberal economists like Yegor Gaidar promoted radical liberalisation programmes or so-called “shock therapy” in the early 1990s and tried to replace the old system with the new one.<sup>18</sup> They expressed their belief in the private sector’s potential for the restructuring of the country’s ailing economy. However, this could not last long as it faced formidable opposition on the domestic front as was visible in the 1993 and 1995 parliamentary (Duma) elections, in which nationalists and Communists did well, compelling Yeltsin to modify his liberal agenda.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Russia and the Western world (US and Europe) could not achieve that level of mutual trust which is the basis of any partnership. Russia felt a sense of humiliation when the US and its allies set out to expand NATO forces by adding twelve new members, including former parts of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> It became one of the most contentious issues between Russia and the US. Consequently, there was a shift in Russia’s approach towards the West and with the appointment of Evgenii Primakov as the new foreign minister in 1996, the focus shifted more towards a new national identity and civilisational strategy for Russia. Primakov emphasized on the fact that since Russia is both Europe and Asia, therefore, the key priorities of Russian foreign policy should include improving relations with the non-Western countries and integration with the republics of the former Soviet region.<sup>21</sup> Though he never publicly called himself a Eurasianist, Primakov was the one who laid the basis for ‘multipolarism’, and emphasized that Russia

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17. Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea: ‘West’, ‘Eurasia’, and ‘Euro-East’ in Russia’s Foreign Policy”, *Geopolitics*, vol. 12, no. 3, July 2007, p. 383.

18. Kairat Moldashev and Mohamed Aslam, “Russia in the Pursuit of Eurasian Integration: Developmental Regionalism or Identity Project”; [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273756228\\_Russia\\_in\\_the\\_Pursuit\\_of\\_Eurasian\\_Integration\\_Developmental\\_Regionalism\\_or\\_an\\_Identity\\_Project](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273756228_Russia_in_the_Pursuit_of_Eurasian_Integration_Developmental_Regionalism_or_an_Identity_Project). Accessed on June 25, 2019.

19. Ibid.

20. Alexander Lukin, “What the Kremlin is Thinking”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 4, July-August, 2014, pp. 85-86.

21. Tsygankov, n. 17, p. 384.

should follow it in the post-Cold War period.<sup>22</sup> Primakov's multipolarism had five key aspects:<sup>23</sup>

- Russia should continue to pursue an active foreign policy and defend its position as a great power in international politics, despite its weaknesses.
- Russia should follow a multifaceted policy and enhance its relations not only with great powers like the US, European Union (EU), Japan, India and China, but also with regional countries like Iran, Turkey, Syria, Indonesia, etc. This diversification of foreign connections is important for Russia to overcome its difficulties.
- Russia, with its unique geo-political position, permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, membership in the world's nuclear club, and its military-technological advancement, can play its cards smartly in the future and can advance/safeguard its interests.
- Russia should establish closer ties with countries which are equally uneasy about a US dominated world.
- Primakov believed that there are no constant enemies, but there are constant national interests, therefore, Russia should "pursue a 'rational pragmatism' devoid of romanticism and unaffordable sentimentality" and it should "look much farther afield for 'constructive partnerships', especially to China, India, and Japan, as well as Iran, Libya, Iraq, and others."<sup>24</sup>

Through this 'multivector' policy, Primakov aimed at preserving the civilisational uniqueness of Russia and the adoption of a more balanced approach towards the West. Consequently, the National Security Concept of 1997 reflected the formation of some basis for political and societal consensus

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22. Emre Ersen, "Neo-Eurasianism and Putin's Multipolarism in Russian Foreign Policy", *Turkish Review of Eurasian Studies*, Annual no. 4, 2004, p. 144.

23. Alvin Z. Rubinstein, "Russia Adrift: Strategic Anchors for Russia's Foreign Policy", *Harvard International Review*, Winter/Spring 2000, p. 19, as cited from Emre Ersen, "Neo-Eurasianism and Putin's Multipolarism in Russian Foreign Policy", *Turkish Review of Eurasian Studies*, Annual no. 4, 2004.

24. Ibid.

on the Russian self-image and a proper role in the world.<sup>25</sup> It identified Russia as an influential European and Asian power and recommended that it should maintain a balance in its relations with the global European and Asian political and economic actors.<sup>26</sup> However, considering the huge gap between this thinking and the actual capability of Russia at that point of time, this new surge of Eurasianism was not taken seriously by the West.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of multipolarism, certainly, gave a direction to the Russian foreign policy under Putin.<sup>28</sup>

The arrival of Putin as the president of Russia in 2000 brought a new dynamism in the Russian foreign policy. Although his foreign policy legacy has changed and evolved on multiple occasions since 2000 and the changes can arguably be termed as contradictory, they display Putin's prowess as a realist, a pragmatist, and a geo-political thinker. The period between December 31, 1999 (first, as an acting president and after March 26, 2000, as the elected president) and September 11, 2001, revealed a mix of Western and Eurasian perspectives in Putin's foreign policy postures. It was speculated that either he was tilting towards a post-Yeltsin direction or was testing the waters with different options. His policies were neither purely pro-West nor anti-West.<sup>29</sup> While he embraced the previously articulated vision of Russia to develop closer cooperation with the Western world, at the same time, he also emphasized on continuing the civilisational role of the Russian nation in Eurasia.<sup>30</sup> Although he challenged the US on various key issues like his opposition to national missile defence and the first phase of NATO's

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25. Alla Kassianova, "Russia: Still Open to the West? Evolution of the State Identity in the Foreign Policy and Security Discourse", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 53, no. 6, 2001, p. 827.

26. Ibid. Also see, Tsygankov, n. 17, p. 384.

27. Aryanta Nugraha, "Neo-Eurasianism in Russian Foreign Policy: Echoes From the Past or Compromise with the Future"; [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/324449324\\_Neo-Eurasianism\\_in\\_Russian\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Echoes\\_from\\_the\\_Past\\_or\\_Compromise\\_with\\_the\\_future](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/324449324_Neo-Eurasianism_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy_Echoes_from_the_Past_or_Compromise_with_the_future). Accessed on March 17, 2019.

28. Vladimir Putin is the president of the Russian Federation since 2012. Previously, he held the same position from 2000-08 and in between his presidential terms (2008-12), he was the prime minister of the country under President Dmitry Medvedev.

29. Donaldson and Nogee, n. 10, p. 340.

30. Tsygankov, n. 17, p. 385.

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expansion<sup>31</sup>, at the same time, he tried to maintain greater integration with the West, with a special focus on its European dimension. He underlined the fact that Russia always had a European identity. In his words, "We are a part of the Western European culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or in the South, we are Europeans."<sup>32</sup> During his visit to Bundestag, Germany, in 2001, not only did he give a speech in German but also proclaimed Russia's European choice.<sup>33</sup> Further, in the early 2000s, Moscow also made active attempts to shape a new vision of Euro-Atlantic Region (EAR) by calling for a new definition of 'Atlanticism' that

was inclusive of Russia. In fact, Russia's construction of EAR is largely based on geo-strategic pragmatism, as they share a continent and long historical relationship. Therefore, Russia's Euro-Atlantic policy was an extension of its European identity.<sup>34</sup> Putin, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 2005, had very categorically said that Russia is moving towards the values of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy like the other European nations and emphasized that "Russia was, is, and will, of course, be a major European power".<sup>35</sup> He further envisioned the creation of a common economic space stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok,

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31. Donaldson and Nogee, n. 10.

32. V. Putin, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President* (New Delhi: Public Affairs, 2000), p. 169, as quoted from Tsygankov, n. 17, p. 398.

33. "Speech in the Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany", September 25, 2001; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21340>. Accessed on November 3, 2019.

34. David Svarin, "The Construction of 'Geopolitical Spaces' in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse Before and After Ukraine Crisis", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, no. 7, 2016, pp. 132-133.

35. "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation", April 25, 2005; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>. Accessed on November 13, 2019.



with a possibility of establishing a free trade zone for greater economic integration and, thus, building a Greater Europe.<sup>36</sup> However, at the same time, he was very clear that Russia would move in the direction of democracy and freedom with the Europeans but at its own pace and with its own conditions. During his annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Putin emphasized on his country's right to decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, Putin also tried to establish warm and closer ties with the United States of America. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the US provided that opportunity to him.

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## **RUSSIA AND THE WEST**

President Putin was one of the first leaders to offer his sympathy and support to the US ahead of the prepared invasion of Afghanistan at the beginning of the "war on terror".<sup>38</sup> His cooperation with the US was considerable, like an unprecedented sharing of intelligence information, permission to US aircraft to fly over Russian territory, support to the establishment of military bases in some of the Central Asian countries and coordination between the US military and the Northern Alliance that Russia was able to facilitate because of its long time support to the anti-Taliban struggle in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> Of course, Russia's support to the US had some deeper motivations, i.e. Russia had been engaged in its own war against religious extremism for years, and it found the US

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36. "Putin Envisions a Russia-EU Free Trade Zone", November 25, 2010; <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/from-lisbon-to-vladivostok-putin-envision-a-russia-eu-free-trade-zone-a-731109.html>. Accessed on November 13, 2019.

37. n. 35

38. Sumantra Maitra, "Understanding Putin's Foreign and Economic Policy Correlation", *The Nottingham Economic Review*, February 20, 2014, p. 28.

39. Donaldson and Noguee, n. 10, pp. 346-348.

a natural and powerful ally against a common enemy. Chechnya was, indeed, its most immediate concern. Besides, during that time, Russia was also grappling with the poor state of the economy. Therefore, American investments and its help for Russia's admission to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) were crucial.<sup>40</sup>

The US-Russian partnership remained steadfast for about a year after the September 11 attacks. However, soon, Russia started realising that many of the expected benefits of the partnership were elusive. For example:

- The US' criticism over Russia's Chechnya policy was slow to materialise. In fact, the statements from the US Department of State spokesperson accusing Russian troops in Chechnya of the "disproportionate use of force against civilian installations" and "ongoing human rights violations" were quite disturbing for Moscow.
- Russia also accused the Western countries of holding double standards over the meetings with official representatives of these countries and representatives of the Chechen President Aslam Maskhadov in early 2000.
- The then US President George Bush's speech, wherein he identified Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an 'axis of evil' and the source of world terrorism was not well received in Russia. Moscow argued that US allies like Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia were also culpable. Also, Putin's concept of an 'arc of instability', a seedbed of ethnic strife along Russia's southern borders, was his bid to legitimise Russia's war in Chechnya.
- The US withdrawal from its steel agreement with Russia and increase in tariffs in early 2002 invited harsh words from Putin against the US and, consequently, Russia retaliated with a ban on chicken legs imported from the US.
- The Bush government's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty emerged as another crucial irritant between the two. Moscow also objected to the US' plans to build a strategic missile defence; the Pentagon's unwillingness to destroy deactivated nuclear

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40. Ibid.

warheads; and America's long-term military plans in the Central Asian region and Georgia.<sup>41</sup>

- Some of the other issues viewed as provocative by the Russian administration included encouraging oil pipelines in the Caucasus region that bypass Russian territory and supporting democratic forces in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that were hostile to Russia.

Moscow was also not in complete harmony with Europe. Despite the fact that Russia and Europe shared a common position against the US-led war in Iraq, the European Union and the Council of Europe were critical of Russian human rights violations in Chechnya and its military bases in Moldova and Georgia. Moreover, the second round of NATO's eastward expansion near the Russian borders, wherein Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania and Slovenia joined the alliance, further deteriorated the relationship.<sup>42</sup>

Putin's pro-Western line broke down completely in 2007 with his speech in Munich wherein he challenged the US for trying to establish a unipolar model and not being ready to respect the boundaries of any sovereign state in the world. He stated, "Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.... We are seeing ever increasing disregard for the fundamental principles of international law. Besides, certain norms are coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system and that is, of course, the United States ... have crossed over their national borders in every way ... and this is extremely dangerous"<sup>43</sup> This speech was a watershed moment in the articulation of Putin's world view. He also suggested that because the US was such

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41. For details, see Donaldson and Noguee, n. 10, pp. 339-376. Also see, Angela Stent and Lilia Shevtsova, "America, Russia and Europe: A Realignment?", *Survival*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2002, pp. 121-134.

42. Ibid.

43. "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", February 10, 2007; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>. Accessed on June 24, 2019

a poor steward of the global order, it was time to consider a wholesale overhaul of the global security structure.<sup>44</sup>

This assertiveness was a reflection of both Russia's dissatisfaction with the West and Russia's new domestic confidence. The period of the 2000s saw a remarkable growth in the oil prices that helped Russia to free itself from external financial dependence. The nationalisation of a considerable part of the Russian oil industry in the mid-2000s, created a basis for a coordinated energy policy. The reforms carried out for the armed forces in the first half of the 2010s, provided the country an effective mechanism for its defence and promotion of its interests. Furthermore, the people's wholehearted support for Putin ensured the system's stability and the 'power vertical' provided a mechanism for Putin to exert his political will.<sup>45</sup> By 2008, Russia was back, pursuing an assertive agenda that was visible in Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine. The proposed expansion of NATO to include Georgia and Ukraine, the independence of Kosovo, and missile defence in Europe were the three events in particular that intensified the already existing tensions in Russia's relations with the Western world.

- When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 in defiance of Serbia and Russia, within days, the US and most of the European countries recognised it as a new state. This was considered as a big blow to Russia's prestige. At the same time, the Russian foreign minister warned that "the declaration and recognition of Kosovar independence will make Russia adjust its line toward Abkhazia and South Ossetia".<sup>46</sup>
- The planned deployment of US missile defences in Eastern Europe was a major security concern for Russia. Although the US assured that the missile defence system stationed in Poland and the Czech Republic was not targeted against Russia but against Iran, Russia was convinced that

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44. Ibid.

45. Dmitry Trenin, "20 Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed", August 27, 2019; <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/27/20-years-of-vladimir-putin-how-russian-foreign-policy-has-changed-a67043>. Accessed on November 12, 2019.

46. C. J. Chivers, "Russia Warns It May Back Breakaway Republics in Georgia", February 16, 2008; <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/16/world/europe/16breakaway.html>. Accessed on November 14, 2019.

this could be expanded to negate Russia's nuclear deterrent. Russia opposed the deal, saying that the United States was violating post-Cold-War agreements not to base its troops in the former Soviet bloc states and devising a Trojan Horse system designed to counter Russia's nuclear arsenal, not an attack by Iran or any other adversary. "It is this kind of agreement, not the split between Russia and United States over the problem of South Ossetia, that may have a greater impact on the growth in tensions in Russian-American relations," noted Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the Russian Parliament.<sup>47</sup>

- The inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in the proposed expansion of NATO was another challenging issue for Russia as it would have brought the US in the heart of the Caucasus, with direct access to the oil and pipelines of the Caspian Sea basin. Also, Russia shares a close historical relationship with Ukraine: there is a large Russian population in eastern Ukraine, and the location of Russia's Black Sea fleet is Sevastopol in Crimea.<sup>48</sup> Thus, NATO's expansion sent strong signals to Russia and it reacted, and the five-day short war that Russia fought with Georgia can be seen in this light. The then Russian President Medvedev struck a firm tone acknowledging that Russia's actions there had something to do with keeping NATO out, and said, "If we had faltered in 2008, geopolitical arrangements would be different now and a number of countries ... would probably be in NATO".<sup>49</sup> Though the war was short, Moscow made it very clear to Georgia and Ukraine that any close association with the West would come at a price. Also, Russia was prepared to act forcefully to protect its sphere of influence among the member states of the CIS. Consequently, Georgia and Ukraine were not included in NATO, but Russia was also denied membership of the WTO, and threatened with expulsion from the G-8. On its part, Russia announced its intention not to continue to

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47. Thom Shanker and Nicholas Kulishaug, "U.S. and Poland Set Missile Deal", August 14, 2008; <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/world/europe/15poland.html>. Accessed on November 14, 2019.

48. Donaldson and Noguee, n. 10.

49. As quoted in Karl Roberts, "Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse", *International Journal*, 2017, Sage Publications, pp. 14-15.

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participate in the Russia-NATO Council and raised the stakes even higher by granting recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.<sup>50</sup>

The Georgian conflict in 2008 heralded a new stage in Russo-Western relations, with Russia clearly heading towards a more vigorous pursuit of its interests. President Medvedev laid down five principles of the Russian foreign policy, one of which was Russia's privileged interests with priority regions with which it historically has a special relationship.

Another was that Russia would strive for a multipolar world as "unipolarity is unacceptable and domination is impermissible".<sup>51</sup> Similar aspects were clearly defined in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 as "rethinking of the priorities of the Russian foreign policy with due account for the increased role of the country in international affairs ... the strengthening of the positions of the Russian Federation in international affairs ... best meet the interests of the Russian Federation as one of influential centres in the modern world ... and to create favourable external conditions for the modernisation of Russia."<sup>52</sup> Similar views were expressed by Vladimir Putin in his address to the State Duma in April 2012 when he said that the "post-Soviet period is over", and called for focussing on the "strategic principle meaning and connection with the historical perspective as a nation".<sup>53</sup> He further said that "creation of a common economic space

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50. Donaldson and Nogee, n. 10, pp. 372-376.

51. Paul Reynolds, "New Russian World Order: The Five Principles"; <https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>. Accessed on November 11, 2019.

52. "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", January 12, 2008; <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>. Accessed on June 13, 2019.

53. Ezekiel Pfeifer, "Archived Live Blog: Putin's Address to the State Duma", *The Moscow Times*, April 11, 2012; <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/04/11/archived-live-blog-putins-address-to-state-duma-a13996>. Accessed on November 11, 2019.

is the most important event in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the Soviet Union".<sup>54</sup> Clearly, the beginning of Putin's third term (2012-16) as the president of the Russian Federation marked a departure from the phase of weakness, and declared its resurgence as a prominent regional and international actor with the reconstruction of Russia's past, and its imagined destiny resurfacing in the foreign policy thinking.

#### **RUSSIA'S EURASIAN VISION AND EURASIAN INTEGRATION:**

Russia's ambitions to integrate with its "near abroad" were clearly defined by the then Prime Minister Putin in his article "A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making" published in 2011. He called it the "Eurasian Union", an association of post-Soviet states, which would first intensify economic ties among themselves, followed by greater political integration.<sup>55</sup> While elaborating on his vision, he stated, "The project is, without exaggeration, a milestone not only for the three countries<sup>56</sup> but for all post-Soviet states. ... we propose a powerful supranational alliance capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and playing the role of an effective bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region. ... we propose to set up a harmonised community of economies stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, a free trade zone and even employing more sophisticated integration patterns."<sup>57</sup> He further advocated, "... by opening up our markets to each other, which means that the goods will be

**Close integration of all the post-Soviet republics, politically and economically, was not a new idea. For more than 20 years in the post-Soviet era, the idea had been prevalent to have some sort of single economic space among the newly independent states.**

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54. Ibid.

55. Vladimir Putin, "A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making", Press Release, The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, October 4, 2011; <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/246>. Accessed on March 20, 2019.

56. The three countries are: Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

57. Putin, n. 55.

brought to our markets at cheaper prices, which will, in turn, provide better conditions for starting new joint ventures, will increase the competitiveness of all our economies".<sup>58</sup> Clearly, the third term of Putin as president of the Russian Federation set the tone for institutionalising Russia's relations with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which Russia considered as the "area of its strategic interests".

### HISTORY OF INTEGRATION

Close integration of all the post-Soviet republics, politically and economically, was not a new idea. For more than 20 years in the post-Soviet era, the idea had been prevalent to have some sort of single economic space among the newly independent states. Various attempts were also made to integrate the CIS, established after the disintegration of the USSR on December 8, 1991, and the agreement on the creation of a Free Trade Area (FTA) among some of the republics (that could be considered as a first attempt) was signed in September 1993. The signatories of this agreement were Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz republic.<sup>59</sup> In January 1995, a Customs Union was formed by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus that was joined by the Kyrgyz republic in 1996, and Tajikistan followed suit in 1999. The aim of this Customs Union was to remove the obstacles of free interaction between the economic entities of the parties involved and ensure free trade and fair competition. But these measures could not yield success because of various political and economic factors. Prominent among them were lack of mutual trust, different interpretations of economic integration by the members, huge differences of development levels since most of these were weak economies, therefore, not prepared to face competition; also there was a lack of motivation. Hence, it is believed that the period of the

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58. Ibid.

59. "Free Trade Agreement Between Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, The Russian Federation, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and The Kyrgyz Republic"; <https://wits.worldbank.org/GPTAD/PDF/archive/CIS.pdf>. Accessed on November 18, 2019.



1990s was more one of disintegration than integration.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the process of integration between Russia and some of the post-Soviet countries like Belarus and Kazakhstan picked up in the beginning of the year 2000. Russian President Putin, after coming to power, signed an agreement with the republics of Kazakhstan, Belarus, the Kyrgyz republic and Tajikistan to form the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), with an objective of effectively developing and promoting the formation of a Customs Union and a Single Economic Space (SES). Eventually, in 2003, an agreement was signed among Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine to establish the SES. However, following the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Kyiv did not ratify the agreement and it collapsed in 2006. In the same year, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan announced a proposal to form a new Customs Union and Common Economic Space and to formally launch it in 2010. In 2007, they signed a treaty for the same. The global economic crisis of 2008 emerged as a new economic factor that forced these countries to establish new formats of economic cooperation for sustainable economic growth and to minimise economic risks. It was felt that opening of borders between the important CIS countries would be an important step to achieve it.<sup>61</sup> This further accelerated the process of the “launch” of the Customs Union. Thus, in November 2009, the Customs Union agreement was signed and a common external tariff and customs code was established in 2010. Additionally, it was also stated that the countries would seek to join the WTO simultaneously and form a single economic space in 2012.<sup>62</sup> Thus, for the first time since 1991, the Customs Union was formally launched within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Community, and an inter-

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60. Iwona Wisniewska, “Eurasian Integration-Russia’s Attempt at the Economic Unification of the Post-Soviet Area”, *OSW Studies*, no. 44, Warsaw, July 2013; [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace\\_44\\_eurasian-integration\\_net.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/prace_44_eurasian-integration_net.pdf). Accessed on May 8, 2019.

61. “Eurasian Economic Integration: Facts and Figures”, [http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/Documents/Брошюра%20Цифры%20и%20факты%20ит%20\(Англ\).pdf](http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/Documents/Брошюра%20Цифры%20и%20факты%20ит%20(Англ).pdf). Accessed on November 22, 2019.

62. Irina Tochitskaya, “The Custom Union Between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia: An Overview of Economic Implications for Belarus”, *CASE Network Studies and Analyses*, no. 405, 2010; [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1670130](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1670130). Accessed on November 22, 2019.

state council and the Customs Union Commission (as an executive body) were established to manage its functioning and take decisions on various issues. Not only did this set the first stage of the process of these countries' economic integration but also in a way met their aspirations to formalise and establish a Eurasian Economic Union with other countries, international economic associations and the European Union on the basis of harmonious, complementary and mutually beneficial cooperation.<sup>63</sup>

Vladimir Putin's article on "A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making"<sup>64</sup> in October 2011, was followed by Belarus' President A.G. Lukashenko's article "About the Fate of our Integration"<sup>65</sup> and the then Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's article "Eurasian Union: From Idea to Future History".<sup>66</sup> These gave a new expression and strong foundation to the process of Eurasian integration as the leaders of the three countries projected similar approaches for the creation of a Eurasian Union. For instance, the three of them emphasized on:

- Establishing a globally competitive Eurasian Economic Union based on the principles of equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of each other, respect for sovereignty and inviolability of state borders;
- The Union would act by consensus, keeping in mind the interests of each participating country;
- It would be an open project with a possibility of integration with other countries and other regional/global organisations, and, hence, emphasised on the "integration of integrations" process;
- It should not be seen as a "restoration" or "reincarnation" of the USSR as these were just ghosts of the past.

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63. "Declaration on the Formation of a Single Economic Space", <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/802>, (translated version, original text in Russian). Accessed on November 24, 2019.

64. Putin, n. 55.

65. A.G. Lukashenko, "About the Fate of our Integration", <http://iz.ru/news/504081>. Accessed on November 24, 2019.

66. Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Eurasian Union: From Idea to Future History", <http://izvestia.ru/news/504908>. Accessed on November 24, 2019.

On November 18, 2011, the Presidents of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed the agreement to establish a Single Economic Space (SES) in 2012 and a full Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) by 2015 for deeper integration. The SES began with the primary objective to provide effective functioning of the common market for goods, services, capital and labour. It was also supposed to provide cooperation between Parliaments, business communities and citizens of member states, including spheres such as culture, the formation of effective patterns of inter-regional and cross-border collaboration, and the development of cooperation in foreign policy.<sup>67</sup> Further, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, signed the Eurasian Economic Union Treaty on May 29, 2014. Putin's original "Eurasian Union" formulation was seen as too political, so the term "Economic" was added to define the nature and limits of the agreement. Armenia's accession was agreed to in October 2014, followed by the Kyrgyz republic's in December. The EAEU entered into force on January 1, 2015, among Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, the idea of integration among the CIS countries, that was considered as rhetoric in the past, found new direction in the form of the EAEU, and is quite different from its predecessors. It is not only a deeper stage of integration that promotes a free trade area but it manifests itself in the existence of the common customs territory and common customs tariff, as well as a common institution governing trade policy.<sup>69</sup> It has written rules, regulations, laws and procedures that are essential for the effective running of a union. In line with the European Union (EU), it has developed a number of institutions and essential bodies for the effective operation and implementation of its policies.<sup>70</sup>

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67. Maria Lagutina, "Eurasian Economic Union Foundation: Issues of Global Regionalization"; [http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/BorderStudies/en/publications/review/data/ebr51/V5\\_N1\\_06Lagutina2.pdf](http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/BorderStudies/en/publications/review/data/ebr51/V5_N1_06Lagutina2.pdf). Accessed on November 22, 2019.

68. "The Eurasian Economic Union: Power, Politics and Trade", International Crisis Group, Europe and Central Asia Report N°240, July 20, 2016; <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/240-the-eurasian-economic-union-power-politics-and-trade.pdf>. Accessed on November 12, 2019.

69. Alexander Libman, "Russian Power Politics and the Eurasian Economic Union: The Real and the Imagined", *Rising Power Quarterly*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2017, p. 81.

70. Golam Mostafa and Monowar Mahmood, "Eurasian Economic Union: Evolution, Challenges and Possible Future Directions", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, no. 9, 2018, p. 165.

**Initially, Moscow's primary interest in establishing the EAEU was not solely the economic side of the integration, but the larger geo-political gain. Regional integration became an area of competition between Russia and the EU for influence in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.**

Now, besides the internal motivations to move towards creating the EAEU, global factors like the global financial crisis, geo-political rivalry in the post-Soviet region, intensification of the struggle for influence in that region and preventing its neighbours being absorbed into rival regional blocs, etc. substantially affected that process. For example, NATO membership of the Baltic Republics (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) in 2004, the first oil and gas pipelines bypassing Russian territory, the role of foreign companies, and China's increasing footprints in the Central Asian region can be considered as important developments.<sup>71</sup> Further, the EU's initiative

to adopt a Central Asian Strategy and its Eastern Partnership Programme—which envisaged negotiation of EU Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area Agreements with those eastern partners that had made the most progress in their reform processes—was also seen as a new challenge by Russia.<sup>72</sup> Thus, to a large extent, Russia's decision to advocate economic integration was a reaction to these developments.

## **RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND EAEU**

It is argued that initially, Moscow's primary interest in establishing the EAEU was not solely the economic side of the integration, but the larger geo-political gain. President Putin's statement in one of the Valdai Club's meetings in 2013, made Russia's interests very clear, "Russia needs new strategies to preserve its identity in a rapidly changing world, a world

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71. Jeronim Perovic, "Russia's Turn to Eurasia"; [www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/centre-for-securities-studies/pdfs/pp6-5\\_2018.pdf](http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/centre-for-securities-studies/pdfs/pp6-5_2018.pdf). Accessed on June 7, 2019.

72. Wisniewska, n. 60.

that has become more open, transparent and interdependent ... in the 21st century, the international system is breaking into geopolitical zones ... a version of the idea of a multipolar world and Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia".<sup>73</sup> Further, it was argued by Sergei Glazyev (presidential adviser) that "Russia is confronting clear choices, i.e., either become a powerful ideological and civilizational centre in its own right ... or integrate with one of the existing power centres and lose its identity". In this regard, the EEU is a mechanism for Russia's influence in its "sphere of special interests" in the post-Soviet republics, where Russia opposes Western political or security influence, particularly achieved through the kind of "colour revolutions" experienced in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Russian officials continue to see the West as a destabilising actor in Eurasia, seeking to undermine friendly regimes.<sup>74</sup>

Second, regional integration became an area of competition between Russia and the EU for influence in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. These countries were closely working with Brussels in order to modernise their economies and lessen their dependence on Russia. Therefore, through the EAEU, Russia intended to counteract this move while, at the same time, guaranteeing that Russia maintains its political and economic influence in this area.<sup>75</sup>

**An interesting dynamic is introduced by the fact that many of the states participating in this project are closely linked to Russia, yet appear to be simultaneously hedging against Russia. Thus, while Russia recognises the need to consolidate its influence in a gradual and consensual way within the EAEU, many political realities of the region are working against these efforts.**

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73. "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", September 19, 2013; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>. Accessed on September 10, 2019.

74. n. 68.

75. Wisniewska, n. 60.

Third, the EAEU as a tool of regional integration is also important for Russia as an image-builder. Through its success, Moscow intended to demonstrate that it is still the centre of attraction for the CIS states.<sup>76</sup>

However, while Russia's main aim in establishing the EAEU was to restore its influence on the post-Soviet space, Moscow has struggled to fulfil its ambitious goal of building a more unified version of Eurasia. It is facing a number of challenges within the union.

- An interesting dynamic is introduced by the fact that many of the states participating in this project are closely linked to Russia, yet appear to be simultaneously hedging against Russia. Thus, while Russia recognises the need to consolidate its influence in a gradual and consensual way within the EAEU, many political realities of the region are working against these efforts.<sup>77</sup> There are wider differences among the EAEU members over the Russian foreign policy, particularly in Ukraine. The EAEU members refused public support to Russia in its conflict with Ukraine and maintained cordial relations with Kyiv. On January 1, 2016, Russia suspended its recognition of a CIS Free Trade Agreement with Ukraine and announced an embargo on Ukrainian food imports; and imposed obstacles on Ukrainian goods transiting to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The rest of the EAEU continued normal trade with Ukraine, with Ukraine being one of Kazakhstan's top five importers as of today. To avoid transit difficulties, an alternative route has been opened through Georgia, Azerbaijan and across the Caspian Sea. Besides, other conflicts also make regional integration more difficult and demonstrate a lack of political solidarity. For instance, an outbreak of fighting around Nagorno-Karabakh in April 2016 exposed stark differences between the members of the EAEU. Kazakhstan has closer relations with Azerbaijan than with fellow EAEU member Armenia. An EAEU summit that was scheduled to be held at Yerevan in April had to be shifted to Moscow after Kazakh officials made it clear they would not attend while hostilities continued around Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>78</sup>

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76. Ibid.

77. Brunon S. Sergi, "Putin's and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union: A Hybrid Half-Economics and Half-Political 'Janus Bifrons'", *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 9, 2018, p. 54.

78. n. 68.

- There is a difference of opinion regarding the scope of the EAEU. While Russian officials have not disguised the importance of the EAEU to their vision of Russia as a “Great Power”, Belarusian and Kazakh officials repeatedly stress that the EAEU is an economic initiative, free of overt political commitments. The tension between these views is one of the central challenges faced by the EAEU.<sup>79</sup>
- Further, after the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States, the EU and China increasingly became important players in the post-Soviet space, thus, making the whole environment in the region very competitive. The slowdown in the Russian economy and its involvement in a series of sanctions regimes since 2014 has badly damaged the goal of improving regional trade.

Due to these challenges, the EAEU has not been able to achieve the breakthroughs it has advocated because of the lack of a coherent policy acceptable to all the members. Nevertheless, one cannot dismiss the EAEU as just another failed project of the region, as some critics have done. To overcome its difficulties, another pragmatic approach has been adopted by Russian President Putin, i.e. opening it to the outside world and working towards establishing a Greater Eurasia. It has been realised that the effectiveness of the EAEU can be enhanced by engaging with other regional organisations, countries and global trade regimes, thereby attempting a renewed commitment to regional economic growth and modernisation.

## **RUSSIA AND GREATER EURASIA**

The idea of Greater Eurasia was first voiced by Russian President Putin at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in 2016 where he declared that over 40 states and international organisations have expressed their desire to establish a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union. Therefore, he declared that “our partners and we think that the EAEU can become

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79. Ibid.

one of the centres of a greater emergent integration area. Therefore, we propose considering the prospects for more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the EAEU and countries with which we already have close partnerships—China, India, Pakistan and Iran—and certainly our CIS partners, and other interested countries and associations”.<sup>80</sup> Russia’s shift from the creation of ‘Greater Europe’ to creating ‘Greater Eurasia’ was a practical move because it realised that it had no way to avoid isolation from the West. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine and the Western sanctions, relations between Russia and the West had reached a very critical level. Amidst these circumstances, connectivity with global markets and modernisation emerged as the biggest challenges for the Russian economy. However, Russia’s crisis with the West corresponded to a period in which China started making inroads into the Central Asian region with its One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI) that Xi Jinping announced in Kazakhstan in 2013. That made the BRI and the Silk Road Fund to facilitate infrastructure investments and finance them, attractive to Russia. Therefore, the Greater Eurasian Partnership has two broad economic goals. First, it aims to connect Russia and the EAEU to China’s BRI. In other words, it is Russia’s strategy to keep China in check. Second, it aims to move beyond China and connect the EAEU with Iran, India and Southeast Asia<sup>81</sup> because this venture also intends to assist the diversification of Russia’s external trade. This entails tapping into Asian markets, in areas where Moscow possesses comparative advantages, viz. arms, energy supplies, infrastructure, nuclear technology, food and water security, etc. This will also provide Russia diversification of markets from its traditional European partners.<sup>82</sup>

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80. “Plenary Session of St Petersburg International Economic Forum”, June 17, 2016; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178>. Accessed on February 18, 2019.

81. Seçkin Köstem, “Russia’s Search for a Greater Eurasia: Origins, Promises and Prospects”; [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/kennan\\_cable\\_no\\_40.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/kennan_cable_no_40.pdf). Accessed on July 18, 2019.

82. Bobo Lo, “Greater Eurasia: The Emperor’s New Clothes or an Idea Whose Time Has Come”; [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/bobo\\_lo\\_greater\\_eurasia\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/bobo_lo_greater_eurasia_2019.pdf). Accessed on July 19, 2019.



Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping first agreed to connect the EAEU with the BRI during Xi's visit to Moscow in May 2015 to attend the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Negotiations between China and the members of the EAEU took a year, from October 2016 until October 2017. In May 2018, in Astana, China and the EAEU signed the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement, which covers areas including customs cooperation and trade facilitation, non-tariff barriers, and intellectual property rights.<sup>83</sup> Collaboration between the EAEU and BRI will help in positioning Russia at the centre of the expanding routes between Europe and Asia. Also, promoting Greater Eurasia is an attempt to seize the initiative rather than remaining a mere spectator of the Chinese projects. On the other hand, for Beijing, closer cooperation with Moscow works as insurance for strategic stability in Eurasia. More importantly, Greater Eurasia is an important area for the construction of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, as three of the four economic corridors that are part of this initiative go through the EAEU: the New Eurasian Land Bridge, that goes through Kazakhstan and Russia, the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, and the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, Moscow has suggested EAEU collaboration with other regional organisations also, like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Within ASEAN, Moscow looks to enhance its partnership with Vietnam—with which Russia had signed a strategic partnership as early as 2001 and had elevated this relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2012—as it would provide a gateway to the region. The EAEU has already signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Vietnam in 2015. In November 2018, the EAEU and ASEAN signed a memorandum on the establishment of a dialogue platform between the two organisations. China and Serbia are the other countries that have signed an FTA with the EAEU; a similar deal with Singapore is at the final stages, and negotiation with India, Israel and Egypt are ongoing for the same. A preferential trade agreement has been

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83. Köstem, n. 81.

84. Lo, n. 82..

signed between Iran and the EAEU. Moscow also hopes that other non-Western organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and EAEU can be combined within Greater Eurasia; this will make Greater Eurasia more of a 'geo-economic' space.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, the Greater Eurasia vision encompasses specific regional goals, i.e., attracting investments to Siberia and the Russian Far East and strengthening its opening to China and the Asia-Pacific. With a rising Asia, Moscow feels that leading Asian economies are potential sources of windfall investments, and are key to the revival of the region.<sup>86</sup>

It is impossible to fully understand Russia's purposes for creating a Greater Eurasia without considering Russia's vision of its international identity. Similar to the EAEU, this new project strengthens Russia's self-conception as a great power. This new idea is also an extension of Russia's vision for a multipolar global order, which has been constant since the mid-1990s. Russia's ruling elite fully understands that the shifting centre of power in the global economy requires a response. However, Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership is an economic project undertaken mainly in pursuit of Russia's great power aspirations.<sup>87</sup>

Russia presents a highly ambitious vision through its Greater Eurasia project. However, it is still at its infancy stage. Russia's role as a centre for integration between Europe and Asia demands a great deal of efforts from it. Because it has to traverse through the competitive and conflicting interests of various major stakeholders of the region; it has to take into account their unsettled disputes and internal problems; it has also to come out of its own economic difficulties. In short, a bumpy road lies ahead for Russia to fulfil its dream of establishing a Greater Eurasia. Having said that, one also needs to analyse the future discourse of Eurasian integration after Putin. Ever

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85. Timofei Bordachev et al., "Eurasian Economic Integration: Between Absolute and Relative Benefits", <https://www.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/eurasian-economic-integration-report/>. Accessed on May 14, 2019.

86. Lo, n. 82.

87. Köstem, n. 81.

since coming to power in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin has used every opportunity to proclaim his intention of re-establishing Russia as a great power. He has quietly and carefully chosen his tactics to achieve it. Events like the invasion of Georgia, armed seizure of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, or tackling the colour revolution in Kyrgyzstan are testimony of his determination and how far he can go in pursuit of his goal. Realising his country's weaknesses, his turn towards Asia and glorifying its Eurasian identity through civilisational and ideological linkages, shows his pragmatism. Although Putin and the other Russian proponents have denied that through Eurasian integration they are trying to recreate the Soviet Union—which, of course, is not feasible in the present context—at the same time, the intent to establish Russia as a Great Power in a multilateral international order and seeking a Eurasian civilisation under Moscow's leadership, is quite visible. Seemingly, that is how it intends to avenge the “greatest geo-political catastrophe of the 20th century”—the demise of the USSR. However, once Putin's regime ends, the fate of his flagship project—“Greater Eurasia”—will demand a deeper analysis.