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What’s Driving Beijing’s ‘Pivot to the West’
China’s New Silk Roads

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The New Silk Road and Russia’s Pivot to Asia
By Dmitri Trenin

China’s New Silk Road initiative is above all a concerted move westward, through Central Asia and Africa to Europe, to stimulate economic development and extend Beijing’s geopolitical influence along the way.

Meanwhile, Russia, the world’s great Eurasian power, is pivoting east, toward Asia — at a time when the annexation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine have strained relations with the West. This has important implications for relations between Russia and China, writes Dmitri Trenin.

RUSSIA has traditionally viewed itself as a quintessential Eurasian power, occupying a master position in the very center of the continent, which allowed it to overlook both Europe and Asia. At the high point of its geopolitical dominance, the Russian sphere of influence stretched from the middle of Germany to China. To defend and expand its reach, Russia engaged in a 100-year Great Game with the British Empire in the 19th century, and in a 40-year-long Cold War against the United States in the 20th. The 21st century, however, looks very different.

The Ukraine crisis that erupted in 2014 has effectively put an end both to Russia’s ambition to become part of the West on its own terms and to its desire to reassemble the former imperial borderlands and build an independent Moscow-led power center in Eurasia. Its plans A and B thus abruptly thwarted, Moscow was left with no plan except for a pivot to Asia, which had predated its renewed confrontation with Washington. Originally, Russia’s pivot, promoted by President Vladimir Putin since the 2000s, was designed to reduce the vulnerability of its eastern flank and to make use of the markets, technologies and financial resources which have become available to it in Asia.

Even as Russia’s premier international relationship with the European Union sharply deteriorated, the opening to Asia, mostly to China, took on new importance. China, in the post-Crimea world of Moscow’s foreign policy, is the only major economy that is not following the US/EU-led sanctions policy against Russia. China is a neighbor, a market and a partner. There is an inevitable underside to the relationship, but so far, the upside reigns. The Sino-Russian rapprochement, which began immediately after the normalization of relations in 1989 and then steadily strengthened through the following quarter-century, is now a central feature of Russia’s global repositioning.

Russia’s move to the east, if it holds, can shift the geopolitical axis of Eurasia. The country that used to be the “east of the West,” a vast if peripheral European land whose frontier was pushing all the way to the Pacific, is in the process of redesigning itself as the “west of the East,” aligning itself more closely with Asian powers, above all, China. There is a historical precedent for this. For a quarter of a millennium, between the 13th and 15th centuries, Russia was indeed part of political Asia, de facto isolated from Europe. The Mongol empire, to which
The obvious asymmetry between China and Russia has also led a number of observers, many of them within Russia, to fear a Chinese ‘takeover’ of Russia: economic, demographic and eventually political. Yet, there are no signs of this happening in the foreseeable future. The Chinese, so far, have not jumped at the opportunity of a lonely Russia in need of investment, technology, money and political support. Chinese investors, unless prodded or ordered by their government, look at their northern neighbor with a wary eye.

The Russian medieval princes paid tribute, then had its capital in Dadu, known as Beijing today. Even more important, Russia’s move to the east is accompanied by China’s march to the west. Its continued focus on the domestic development notwithstanding, Beijing is expanding its economic and political engagements in its continental neighborhood. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are designed not only to keep China’s infrastructure development capacity busy, but also to enlarge China’s international influence as the world’s second-largest economy and Asia’s pre-eminent power. Eurasia is becoming the center stage for China’s geopolitical rise, as it has long been for Russia’s.

Quite a few observers in the United States and Europe have long taken for granted that China and Russia, despite their mutual resentment of US domination and Washington’s interventionist policies, would increasingly turn into geopolitical competitors as China encroached on Russia’s waning sphere of influence, particularly in Central Asia. Even though Central Asian countries remained Moscow’s nominal allies within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, economically, they were being drawn to China, and the pull of Beijing only increased while the old links to Moscow progressively atrophied.

Yet, the reality is turning out to be more complex. At their meeting in Moscow in May 2015, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping agreed to “harmonize” the Silk Road Economic Belt with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The political formula of harmonization is only being developed, but some of its key elements are already in evidence. One is that Russia will not seek to constrain China’s economic expansion into Central Asia. Another, that China will “let” Russia continue as the principal security guarantor of the Central Asian regimes. Finally, Sino-Russian infrastructure projects will be subsumed within the EEU-Silk Road co-operation.

This arrangement, for now, can satisfy all sides. The Chinese will be able to continue to do business without much hindrance within the newly established Eurasian Economic Union. The Russians will get China’s recognition of their primary political role in Central Asia. And the Central Asians themselves will go on benefiting from the largely co-operative relationship between their two giant neighbors, each of which has something to offer to the countries of the region. The Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) can be used as an instrument to manage the Silk Road-EEU connection. The SCO, however, stands for more today than merely “China in Central Asia,” its sobriquet since 2001, when it was formally established. At a summit in Ufa last summer, the SCO opened itself to India and Pakistan. When the accession of the two countries is complete, the organization will have made a big step toward including all the major nuclear powers in Asia. Within the expanded SCO, Russia will be able to use its long-standing India connection to offset the growing gap in capabilities with China. “RIC,” for Russia-India-China, a triangle formula put forth in 1998 by the late Yevgeny Primakov as Russia’s foreign minister, might be needed to complement the increasingly asymmetrical bilateral relationship.

The obvious asymmetry between China and Russia has also led a number of observers, many of them within Russia, to fear a Chinese “takeover” of Russia: economic, demographic and eventually political. Yet, there are no signs of this happening in the foreseeable future. The Chinese, so far, have not jumped at the opportunity of a lonely Russia in need of investment, technology, money and political support. Chinese investors, unless prodded or ordered by their government, look at their northern neighbor with a wary eye. The Russians, for their part, still prefer Western technology. Money for them, however, is not much more available in China than in Europe. Hong Kong, not to speak of Shanghai, has not replaced London for Russia’s big businesses.

As for political support, China and Russia stand together, co-operate or co-ordinate more closely in a number of important areas. Putin’s and Xi’s views of the US are very close. China has widened access for Moscow to its energy resources and has agreed to sell it more sophisticated military technology. Moscow’s and Beijing’s Second World War victory parades were both shunned by the Americans and the Europeans, which allowed Xi and Putin to shine at each other’s events. Yet, a formal political alliance, not to speak of a military one, is not in the offing. Each country sees itself as a great power, and values highly the independence of its own decision-making; neither wants to be a senior or a junior partner in a coalition; and each dreams its own dreams.

What China and Russia have learned is how to manage their differences without detriment to the wider relationship. Beijing has not recognized Moscow’s annexation of Crimea, or the earlier independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Moscow takes a neutral stance on the maritime issues in the East and South China Seas. China has no intention of damaging its all-important relationship with the US on account of Russia; Moscow has a similar feeling with regard to its own close ties to Hanoi, Delhi, to which it sells arms, or even Tokyo. A Sino-Russian military alliance under these circumstances is a very, very long shot.

Yet, the shift in Eurasia’s center of gravity is becoming palpable — China’s continued, if slower, rise and its move west of its borders, and Russia’s move east to enhance the importance of non-Western countries in the Eurasian context. The US is no longer the master of the game on the grand Eurasian chessboard, to use Zbigniew Brzezinski’s expression. Putin’s 2010 formula of Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, which he used in an attempt to woo the German business community, is being replaced by the reality of a Greater Asia from Shanghai to St. Petersburg.

Nothing is linear here, of course. Like Sino-Russian co-operation, Russian-Western confrontation will have its limits. Moscow’s pivot to Asia is more of an act of rebalancing than one of reincarnation. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that Eurasia — from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean — is becoming more intertwined economically, logistically, and politically. Not only China and Russia, but also India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and others are stepping forward as regional or continental players. On the western edge of Eurasia, Germany is rising through its leadership and management of various EU crises. Ultimately, Beijing’s New Silk Road leads to Berlin. The journey might well define the future of an emerging political space.

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