

## CONNECTIVITY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN EURASIA: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

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The article analyses Eurasian international transport corridors from three perspectives: historical patterns and contemporary geopolitical struggle in Eurasia, post-Soviet political transformations and Eurasian integration. On the one hand, the development of transport infrastructure contributes to the power of Russia as the main continental power. On the other hand, it provides access for players from outside of Eurasia and helps peoples and nations of Eurasia to engage in the world system, thus disrupting the continental power's monopoly on the region's resources. After the dissolution of the USSR Russia's strategic shift to openness resonated with globalization. This gave an impetus to the development of the continental transport system. The West anticipated to underpin political sovereignty of post-Soviet states with their greater economic independence from Russia by trade diversification and avoiding transit through Russia. However, the EU was also interested in creating a transport corridor to Asian states through Russia. Post-soviet states wanted to be integrated into the world trade system, and saw close ties with Russia as an obstacle. Thus, trade system diversification became one of their foreign policy main objectives, they supported both transcontinental and transregional infrastructure projects, viewing themselves as belts, connecting Europe and Asia. The "One belt, One road" initiative was most welcomed in the post-Soviet space as another tool for increased connectivity with the outside world. Although the EAEU and China have a common goal of developing Eurasian transport infrastructure, they may have political differences in the future. The EAEU states act as transit countries, while China is the main client of the infrastructure and will be interested in lower transit fees. Russia is ultimately interested in integrating and consolidating the post-Soviet space as an economic entity. Although connected to the outside world it is also deemed as substantially autonomous in strategic terms. At the same time, other international players, the West and China alike, as well post-Soviet states themselves, are more focused on connecting to the outside as an alternative to Russia's influence in the region.

**Keywords:** Eurasia, Russia, international transport corridors, post-Soviet states, geopolitics, USA, EU, China, EAEU, "One belt, one road".

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Maritime transport remains the basis of transcontinental trade [1]; however, it is believed that continental transit corridors have significant potential [2]. In this context the creation of international transport corridors (ITCs) is perceived as necessarily contributing to the development of countries and regions participating in their formation and operation. This approach has been prevailing for a long time among European, Asian [3], and Russian researchers [4].

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the development of ITCs with Russian participation was deemed a strategic priority in terms of integrating into the world system and increasing the role of Russia in it, and since then, this task has remained unchanged. The discussions of economists and transport experts mainly come down to finding the way of organizing the transit through the Russian territory with the maximum practical benefit [4]. From the interna-

tional perspective ITCs are thought of in terms of winning the competition with projects whose task is to bypass Russia [5, 6].

The article adopts a different approach to the study of international political issues related to ITCs. The authors proceed from the fact that the contemporary international environment differs significantly from that at the end of the 20th century when many ITCs were conceptualized. The research task hereof is to identify, describe, and categorize global and regional aspects of the international environment, which together form the international political dimension of the discussion and implementation of ITCs. Based on a qualitative descriptive method and using content, event, and discourse analysis, three elements of the international political dimension of ITCs are identified, described, and synthesized. These are historical patterns of geopolitical confrontation in Eurasia and their manifestation in the contemporary great power rivalry, post-Soviet political transformations, as well as Eurasian integration.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT: GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGIES AND ITCs

It is hardly possible to profoundly study the existing global issues in all their complexity from the standpoint of a geopolitical approach. It would be an obvious oversimplification to interpret contemporary Eurasia from the perspective of geopolitics in terms of confrontation between continental and maritime powers. At the same time, classical geopolitics has laid down some basic approaches to great power rivalry, to which some modern strategic constructions also go back.

The existing ideas about the post-Soviet space are rooted in the views of geopoliticians on the so-called Heartland (or Pivot Area), which meant the vast continental expanses of Eurasia. Regardless of how its exact boundaries have varied, geopoliticians have traditionally written about the significance of the Heartland for world affairs, and its main characteristics have always been considered richness in natural resources and inaccessibility (limited access to the oceans and a sparse road network).

In rich and inaccessible spaces, a power can arise that is not very vulnerable and has significant internal resources. It was in this context that Russia was usually viewed, especially after Peter I. Throughout history, one can see examples of how Russia's rivals tried to isolate it, and, conversely, the attempts to use Russia's temporary weakness in order to gain access to territories within Eurasia, depriving the nation of monopoly on the Heartland.

Accordingly, it can be stated that historically there have been two approaches to Russia as a continental power. One is to contain it, to prevent its expansion, to curb its influence. The other is to deprive it of exclusive access to the resources that lie deep in Eurasia and thereby undermine the basis of its power. In the first approach, the development of transport infrastructure in the depths of Eurasia increases the internal connectivity of the continental power that controls these spaces, which positively affects its internal trade, promotes its economic development, and increases its military capabilities. As part of the second approach, the transport infrastructure facilitates the access of other players to the resources and peoples of Eurasia paving the way for their inclusion in the world system, which deprives the continental power of monopoly access to them, and therefore reduces the opportunities for the development and strengthening of the continental power.

In Russia, a peculiar strategic culture has historically developed [7, 8], part of which is a dual position: it constantly fears both to be isolated from the outside world and to become completely "open", which is perceived as a threat to the independence of the country.

The collapse of the USSR was a time when both the Western desire to "open up" Russia and its own desire to be opened up resonated. The Western geopolitical literature of the post-Soviet period often conceptualized the Caucasus and Central Asia in terms of the opening of the Eurasian spaces, and their involvement in international processes [9, 10]. This coincided with the increasing globalization, greater international interconnectedness and interdependence, and the supposed end of geography. It was during that period and against the background of those sentiments that the basic guidelines were formulated in favor of the maximum development of continental transport routes in Eurasia, within which specific projects have been developed.

#### POST-SOVIET POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND ITCs

After the collapse of the USSR, the United States and Great Britain sought to expand their companies' access to oil projects in the Caspian Sea and create an infrastructure for transporting these resources by-passing Russia [11]. The European Union initiated the TRACECA project for eight Transcaucasian and Central Asian republics of the former USSR, aimed at developing trade and transport without Russian participation. New transport routes without Russian participation were also worked out in international organizations such as UNESCAP, UNECE,

and CAREC [3]. In the second half of the 1990s, theoretical justifications for such projects were formulated. The diversification of transport infrastructure was recognized as necessary in order to reinforce the political sovereignty of the newly independent states making them economically independent from Russia. The USA conceptualized these projects in geopolitical terms [12], which was impossible for international organizations. That is why it became customary for them to say that transport projects should revive the Great Silk Road, which once connected China, Turkey, India, and the Middle East through Central Asia. The disruption of these close ties was attributed to the policy of the Russian Empire, which, having extended its power into the depths of Eurasia, allegedly cut off the ties of the peoples there with the outside world, so that the USSR would close these spaces to an even greater extent [13, pp. 1-2]. Accordingly, the task was set to correct relying on modern technologies the historical aberration associated with Russia and return to the peoples of Eurasia their natural direct ties with the outside world, as well as to establish continental ties between centers of development located in different parts of Eurasia.

However, in addition to this “without Russia” or “bypassing Russia” vector, there was also the opposite one – cooperation with Russia.

The European policy for the development of transport networks gained momentum at the same time when the disintegration of the socialist camp was underway in the late 1980s. Moreover, the involvement of not only Eastern Europe but also Russia in it seemed natural in the new political conditions. As a result, it was decided to extend some of the ITCs that were agreed upon at the Pan-European Conferences on Transport (Prague, 1991; Crete, 1994; Helsinki, 1997) through the territory of Russia to access the Asian countries (China, Japan, Korea). Russia has held three International Eurasian Transport Conferences (St. Petersburg, 1998, 2000, 2003), where two Eurasian corridors have been developed. It was decided to connect the European ITC, starting in Germany and going to Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod, with the Trans-Siberian ITC (the “East-West” ITC). Moreover, it was decided to direct another European corridor, starting in Helsinki and going to the southern regions of Europe (with several ways of access to Odessa or Alexandroupolis) through the Caspian Sea to Iran, whose ports would ensure access to the countries of South Asia (the “North–South” ITC).

Thus, by the beginning of the 21st century, there had been two directions for the development of transport infrastructure in Eurasia, around which various political combinations were built. The United

States and the EU shared a common approach to diversification – reduction of the dependence of the post-Soviet states on Russia, which coincided with the interests of many countries, for example, Turkey, Iran, Japan, China, and India, which sought to expand their access (primarily economic, but some also had ambitions to spread cultural, historical, and political influence) to the post-Soviet space; this approach involved the creation of a transport infrastructure independent of Russia, bypassing it. However, at the same time, the EU was interested in the development of transit corridors through Russia in the direction of the Asia-Pacific and worked on them together with Russia. Such projects also met the interests of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, and Iran, while the United States treated them without enthusiasm.

Complex transformation occurred in the countries of the post-Soviet space [14, 15, 16], but their elites relied on integration into the world system. Globalization is thought to have contributed to such a mindset. A predominant infrastructural connection with Russia, which was in a deep economic crisis, was perceived as an obstacle. This has formed such a strong opinion for the diversification of transport infrastructure that it can be characterized as part of the former Soviet republics’ “foreign policy DNA”.

In the post-Soviet space, almost everyone intended to be the “bridge” between Russia and Europe or between Europe and Asia and considered this their foreign policy and economic resource. It was considered a foreign policy resource because foreign partners were believed to be interested in these “bridges”, and an economic resource, because the “connecting function” implied receiving transit rent. Ukraine and Belarus saw themselves as bridges between the enlarged EU and Russia. The Caucasus was supposed to connect the EU with the Caspian. Moreover, projects with various directions in mind were envisaged with the participation of Central Asian states. Some connected them with the Caucasus, Turkey, and the EU, among those the TRACECA projects and the Lazurite Corridor along the route Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghanistan. Others brought them through Afghanistan to South Asia and the ports of the Indian Ocean (“Greater Central Asia”). There were also projects in the direction of the Persian Gulf countries: the connection of the railways of Uzbekistan and Iran through the northern and western provinces of Afghanistan, the coupling of the railways of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, as well as the creation of a transit transport corridor along the route Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman-Qatar.



It was assumed that various infrastructure projects would collectively create a dense transport network that would allow land routes to connect the EU, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and China. The post-Soviet countries expected not only to gain access to the world independent of Russia through the development of transport infrastructure but also to become its competitor in providing transit between East and West, North and South.

Projects bypassing Russia, as a rule, faced objective difficulties. Latitudinal routes ended either in Iran (cooperation with which was problematic due to the United States) or in the Caspian Sea (the crossing made the routes more expensive and longer in time, reducing their competitiveness). Due to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, only the route through Georgia remained in the Caucasus (either by land to Turkey or by the sea in the direction of Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania), which included geopolitical and purely military risks [17, 18]. Meridian routes did not work out either in Iran or in unstable Afghanistan [19, 20, 21]. As a result, some projects are chronically delayed (projects on the territory of Afghanistan, as well as the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman-Qatar corridor), some have been formally implemented, but are not actually functioning (connection of the railways of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran), others are functioning, but in a limited mode, without actually developing (Lapis Lazuli Corridor). Ultimately, it was not possible to implement large-scale projects of connecting Central Asia with Turkey and the EU through the Caucasus, nor to divert the post-Soviet space to the south as part of the Greater Central Asia project. Russia interacted with the EU and expanded cooperation with Kazakhstan and Belarus, as if pulling them over to its side in the formally transit and transport, but in fact in the geopolitical competition in Eurasia. As a result, now it is the railways of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus that form the infrastructure basis for transit between East and West<sup>1</sup>.

However, sentiments in favor of diversification and the search for ways to the world bypassing Russia are deeply rooted, as already mentioned, in the foreign policy consciousness of the elites of the post-Soviet states. It is in this context that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative put forward by China in 2013 was perceived both by the post-Soviet countries themselves and by non-regional players. In March 2015, Deputy Secretary of State E. Blinken called the poli-

<sup>1</sup> In 2008, Russia and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on the construction of the highway “Western Europe – Western China”, and in 2014, the railway companies of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus created the “United Transport and Logistics Company” (UTLC ERA), which is the most important operator of transit traffic on the continental route of the EU-KNR.

cies of China and the United States in Central Asia fully complementary, while at the same time criticizing Russian policy in the region [22]. At that time, the US invited China to discuss practical cooperation in Eurasia. However, China preferred cooperation with Russia, and in May 2015, a declaration was signed at the highest level in Moscow on linking the Chinese initiative with EAEU projects.

Thus, China avoided accepting an anti-Russian geopolitical burden on its projects. Russia and China have staked on harmonizing their strategic interests in Eurasia. However, China, within the framework of the continental part of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, is also developing transport projects without the participation of Russia – in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region, positioning them as being “free from politics/geopolitics”.

The most promising non-Chinese project, aimed at diversifying the transport links of the post-Soviet space with the outside world, is currently associated with the Iranian port of Chabahar, which India is developing (its work in Chabahar receives exemptions from US sanctions against Iran). Initially, it was thought that this port would give India access through Iran to the southern provinces of Afghanistan, where India has economic interests. This route bypasses Pakistan, which traditionally limits transport links between Afghanistan and India through its territory. However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in India to use Chabahar not only for access to the southern provinces of Afghanistan but also to connect its western and northern provinces to Uzbekistan and further to all of Central Asia, considering this route as another “North-South” corridor option.

#### EURASIAN INTEGRATION AND ITCs

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has adopted a positive view on the development of ITCs. It is believed that the geographical and geo-economic position of the countries of the Union determines its significant transit potential on the Europe-Asia route. The focus is on the development of rail container transportation (about 80% of cargo between Europe and Asia is transported in containers). Recognizing that maritime transport will continue to dominate in the future, EAEU experts see the prospect of increasing the share of continental routes in trade between the West and the East (most importantly, between China and the EU) by 10 times: from the current 0.5–1% to 5–10% (the calculation is made based on the fact that the niche of continental transportation can grow even with stagnation or a decrease in the total volume of world trade) [23, p. 3, 5, 10, 23]. Thus, the EAEU is

aimed at extracting significant transit rent through the joint work of the union members on the development of the ITC.

From an economic standpoint, according to the experts in the field of transport, the approach of the EAEU in relation to ITCs is justified. However, in a broader political context, it does not look so unambiguous.

The key partner for the development of the EAEU ITC is China, which is ready not only to use the existing transit opportunities but also to invest in their development (especially after the “One Belt, One Road” project was initiated and the relations with the United States deteriorated [24, 25]). The EAEU and China are interested in creating an infrastructure that can compete with global “logistics monopolies” on sea routes. However, this common interest includes essentially different considerations. The transiters bear rent in mind, while China thinks of maintaining its exports by diversifying the routes of its involvement in global trade.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that China, as the main client of the infrastructure and an important partner (investor) in its creation/development, will count on having a say about what kind of rent the transit nations earn and under what economic and political conditions the transit functions. This may create a basis for arguments in the future.

However, the main problem is not how much the large-scale continental transit through Eurasia will be in demand and whether the expectations of obtaining a significant rent associated with it will be justified, but how much it fits into the prospect of deepening Eurasian integration.

The attempts to assemble an economic organization from the post-Soviet countries were made several times after the collapse of the USSR. However, in the 1990s and 2000s, they did not produce significant results. The opposition of Western states played a certain role in this situation. On the one hand, the post-Soviet countries, being in a deep socio-economic crisis, were interested in maintaining their former economic and humanitarian ties. On the other hand, they competed with each other to participate most actively in the processes of globalization, since it was the cooperation with external partners, especially with the developed countries, that was considered the key to their own successful development. Deep regional integration and globalization were assumed as contradictory, while globalization was favored.

In the post-Soviet space, the ideas of Russian economists about the need for regional integration, precisely in connection with integration into the world economic system, were hardly perceived in order to

reduce the risks of deindustrialization [26], which may require some protectionist measures. Such considerations were developed further following the results of the global financial and economic crisis of 2007–2009, when the trend of globalization was in crisis and Russia began to rely on the creation of a powerful supranational association. Moscow at the highest level voiced estimates that in the post-crisis world the modality of globalization will change, namely: the world economy will be made up of regional integration “bricks” (EU, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN, etc.), and the Eurasian integration association was seen as one of them [27, 28].

A powerful regional association, being one of the world’s manufacturing and technology centers actively cooperating with other regional associations, is interested in infrastructural connectivity with external partners. However, primarily, this is the connection with the outside world of the regional association itself, rather than the fulfillment by it of a transit function for others. Transit routes that connect the most efficient production and trade locations in the West and East do not necessarily contribute to the development of the spaces that are located between them. Ultimately, this is the issue of conjugation of the EAEU and the “One Belt, One Road”. China is interested in delivering products with added value created on its territory to consumers (this is a task tied to the problems of China’s internal development [29]) and is ready to invest in transport infrastructure that contributes to this, and not in filling transport capacities with foreign products.

The transit corridors of the EAEU do not necessarily contradict the interests of the internal development of the regional association, but they do not automatically contribute to it either. Ideally, EAEU members can pursue an active industrial policy and create production facilities whose products will be exported to foreign markets. So far, continental corridors are considered precisely as transit corridors, generating the corresponding rent. In order to deepen Eurasian integration, in which Russia expresses its interest, the focus in the development of continental transport infrastructure should shift from a transit destination.

However, Russia’s partners in the EAEU remain committed to the task of obtaining transit rents, and their interests at the stage of creating the ITC infrastructure align better with Chinese than Russian interests. If the EAEU fails to shift priorities in the development of transport infrastructure from obtaining transit rent to servicing internal industrial and technological development, then the transit nature of continental ITCs will largely contradict the interest of deepening Eurasian integration.

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The concept of large-scale transport projects in the post-Soviet space conceptually took shape in the unique period of the end of the 20th century, when there were hopes that, along with the disappearance of the ideological confrontation, which played a significant role during the Cold War, elements of the traditional rivalry of the great powers would also become a thing of the past. The prevailing view in political and scientific circles was that the powerful trend of globalization was making great power rivalry and the associated geopolitical aspects irrelevant. However, by now it can be concluded that the Western states have largely shifted to their historically traditional geopolitical positions in relation to Russia as a continental power. They balance between isolating Russia “as it is” (that is, “locking” it in the depths of the continent) and stimulating internal liberal changes in its development (namely, “opening up” the internal spaces of Eurasia, depriving Russia of a monopoly on their use for its own purposes). At the same time, it is considered necessary to limit Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.

Historically, traditional elements are also manifested in modern strategic thinking in Russia – it can neither fully open itself to the outside world, seeing this as a threat to its sovereignty, nor close itself too much from it, as this can have negative consequences for socio-economic development and modernization. As a result, Russia is seeking a balance between these two extremes. For continental transport projects in Eurasia, this means the following.

Projects focused on bypassing Russia in order to give the post-Soviet countries independent access to the outside world work to “open up” the internal spaces of Eurasia and remove them from Russian influence. Transit projects also partly contribute to the “opening up” of the internal spaces of Eurasia. However, being under Russian sovereignty, they also contribute to the internal transport connectivity of Russia and therefore, from the point of view of Western interests, can be interpreted ambiguously. As a result, the EU, which is guided by economic interests, treats them more positively than the US, in whose politics, geopolitical considerations are more pronounced.

The most important task for Russia is increasing internal transport connectivity. Its scale and cost, given the limited domestic market, naturally lead to the idea that the corresponding infrastructure should not only serve domestic needs but also work for export, that is, provide transit services (and the transport sector becomes a lobbyist for expanding this function). At the same time, projects bypassing Russia cannot be viewed positively, since they compete with Russian

infrastructure in the economic sphere and undermine Russian influence in the political scene.

Thus, an unconditionally positive strategic view of ITCs in Eurasia was formed at a time when the trend of globalization prevailed in the world, and Russia set the task of maximum participation in it, integration into the world system. Today, with the intensification of international competition and the return of great power rivalry, one cannot but take into account that the above-mentioned geopolitical dilemma, the historical patterns of relations between the West and Russia, constitute the background of the political struggle around ITCs. China is actually acting on a parallel course with the Western states in the matter of “opening up” the internal spaces of Eurasia while creating a new transport infrastructure. Therefore, its projects in the post-Soviet space were perceived favorably in the West, as well as by international organizations. However, China carefully avoids applying to its projects the strategic context that is characteristic of Western countries and which they also rely on when thinking of the Chinese projects.

China’s main interest in the implementation of transport projects is not to reduce the influence of Russia, but to maintain its involvement in globalization, in world trade, and to support its exports. At the same time, for the sake of its solution, Beijing is ready to make its transport projects as acceptable as possible for those with whom it must reckon with in their implementation. In practice, this means presenting these projects as being “outside of geopolitics”, aimed only at solving economic problems. Such positioning is related to tactical considerations, which helps the implementation of projects, but does not mean that China cannot, in principle, attach geopolitical significance to its projects, especially in the future, at the stage of transport infrastructure operation. The current Chinese position is as close as possible to the strategic considerations of the post-Soviet elites, whose “foreign policy DNA” includes ideas of diversification. Their “strategic dream” of large-scale access to the outside world independent of Russia remains at the highest political level and is fueled mainly by Chinese transport projects.

However, the consequences of changes in American foreign policy may also become a new impetus for such sentiments. For example, if one day the United States significantly reconsiders their course towards Iran, which will result in the removal of political restrictions on the development of cooperation with it, then projects through this country can provide serious opportunities for a real diversification of transport routes from Eurasia without Russia’s participation. At the same time, the desire of the post-Soviet elites to maximize access to the outside world



independently of Russia is in itself the antithesis of regional integration under Russian leadership, since the first means a decrease in dependence on Russia, while the second is perceived, on the contrary, as an increase in such.

Russia is interested in the development of transport routes both on its territory and in the post-Soviet space as a whole; however, being unable to do

so completely on its own, it must take into account the interests of those who are its partners. For them, the transit modality of infrastructure development is most desirable, which in the end may conflict with both the interests of Russia's internal development and the desire to deepen Eurasian integration, as well as expand the number of its full-fledged participants.

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## ТРАНСПОРТНАЯ СВЯЗАННОСТЬ И МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ В ЕВРАЗИИ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ И ПРОТИВОРЕЧИЯ

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В настоящей статье синтезированы три элемента международно-политического измерения международных транспортных коридоров: исторические модели геополитического противоборства в Евразии и их проявление в современном соперничестве великих держав, развитие и трансформация постсовет-



ских процессов в Евразии, а также евразийская интеграция. Выявляются противоречия между тремя этими элементами и связанные с ними политические дилеммы, которые во многом определяют позиции России, постсоветских государств, Китая, ЕС, США и других внерегиональных игроков по проблематике международных транспортных коридоров.

**Ключевые слова:** Евразия, Россия, международные транспортные коридоры, постсоветские страны, геополитика, США, ЕС, Китай, ЕАЭС, “Один пояс, один путь”.

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