



CENTRAL ASIA  
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# ONE EURASIA OR MANY?

REGIONAL INTERCONNECTIONS  
AND CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS ON THE  
EURASIAN CONTINENT

ALEXANDER LIBMAN & EVGENY VINOKUROV





# **ONE EURASIA OR MANY? Regional Interconnections and Connectivity Projects on the Eurasian Continent**

**Alexander Libman**

Freie Universität Berlin

National Research University Higher School of Economics

East China Normal University

**Evgeny Vinokurov**

Eurasian Development Bank

Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development

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Central Asia Program  
Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies Elliott School of International Affairs  
The George Washington University  
1957 E St, NW, Suite 412, Washington DC 20052, USA

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## List of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ALBA	Bolivarian Alternative for the Latin America
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia–Europe Meeting
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CAREC	Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation
CCAP	Connect Central Asia Policy
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CETA	Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
EAEC	Eurasian Economic Commission
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighborhood Policy
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
GAFTA	Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEP	Greater Eurasian Partnership
GUAM	Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova
INOGATE	Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe
LAIA	Latin American Integration Association
MERCOSUR	<i>Mercado Común del Sur</i> (Common Market of the South)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Association
NDN	Northern Distribution Network
NSRI	New Silk Road Initiative
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PQI	Partnership for Quality Infrastructure
PROSUR	Forum for the Progress and Development of South America
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SEA	South-Eastern Europe
SPECA	Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia
SRF	Silk Road Fund
SRRP	Silk Road Regional Program
TEU	Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
TTIP	Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia
UN	United Nations
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization



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## 1. Introduction

2020-2021 seem an unlikely time to engage in research on global interconnections and integration. The COVID-19 pandemic put globalization processes on hold and, some speculate, may in the long run reverse the current trend toward a more intertwined and integrated world.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, one should be cautious not to succumb to extreme gloom. As of December 2020, the number of Trans-Eurasia Express trains (commercial commodity transportation trains) departing from Urumqi toward Europe and the Middle East had increased compared to 2019—in spite of the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> The Trans-Eurasia Express is but one example of the rise in connections between different parts of the Eurasian continent over the last three decades. Infrastructural projects have been accompanied by the emergence of geo-economic and geopolitical visions of an integrated Greater Eurasia, pursued by numerous power centers in the region, as well as by growing scholarly debate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Historiker: Corona könnte zur ‘epochalen Zäsur’ werden,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 19, 2020, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wissen/geschichte-historiker-corona-koennte-zur-epochalen-zaesur-werden-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-201019-99-994794>, accessed February 19, 2021; “Has Covid-19 Killed Globalisation?” *The Economist*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/05/14/has-covid-19-killed-globalisation>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “Zahl von Trans-Eurasia-Express-Zügen aus internationalem Landhafen in Ürümqi steigt trotz COVID-19,” *German.China.Org.Cn*, December 2, 2020, [http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2020-12/02/content\\_76971338.htm](http://german.china.org.cn/txt/2020-12/02/content_76971338.htm), accessed February 19, 2021. COVID-19 may actually have supported the development of railroad transit across Eurasia—see “Coronakrise lässt Güterverkehr über die Seidenstraße boomen,” *Der Spiegel*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/deutsche-bahn-corona-krise-laesst-gueterverkehr-ueber-die-seidenstrasse-boomen-a-9db9bc23-f8e7-4293-8048-302903348ea2>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The research for this book was funded by the MOE Project of the Key Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences in Universities of China (the Center for Russian Studies of East China Normal University), Project Number: 16JJDGJW004. The authors appreciate the helpful suggestions of Michael Emerson and Anna Abalkina,

The aim of this book is to critically review the processes of integration and region-building in Greater Eurasia. Integration is a broad term that covers any rise in economic and social interconnections, whether driven by top-down state policies (regionalism) or by the bottom-up activities of companies, individuals, and business networks (regionalization). Our main focus is on regionalism, i.e., institutional arrangements and frameworks created by Eurasian countries. Thus, we are interested not in surveying the bottom-up interconnections that are flourishing across Eurasia (i.e., trade networks or pipeline routes), but rather in analyzing the *projects promoted by individual countries (or groups of countries) to foster economic integration in Eurasia*. The book therefore focuses on the *emerging intergovernmental institutional structure of Eurasian connectivity*: it aims to discuss the existing projects, their ideational foundation, and their potential.

For most of the 20th century, the Eurasian continent was split either between protectionist great powers fighting for spheres of influence or between ideological blocs. The situation started to change after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. Over time, the ties between the economies of Eurasia became more and more intensive. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, the fact that more and more voices were talking about Eurasian connectivity and integration in Greater Eurasia did not indicate that competition between power centers in Eurasia was declining. On the contrary, as of the late 2010s, Eurasia was the arena for a struggle over connectivity projects, with multiple countries proposing their own projects to connect the continent, sometimes based on different approaches and principles and sometimes duplicating each other.

This development raises three important questions. First, “Eurasian regionalism” obviously requires some sort of “Eurasian region”—a geographical boundary for the design of

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as well as thanking James Disley for the excellent language editing of the manuscript. All opinions expressed in this book and all mistakes are solely those of the authors.

regionalist projects. These boundaries are not necessarily (and not only) determined by objective economic interconnections; equally important is some sort of common identity, a perception of “belonging” to a region shared by elites and the population. However, does this “belonging” exist in Greater Eurasia? Do scholars’ books and articles emphasizing the idea that the Eurasian continent is an integrated space, either positively or critically (Linn and Tiomkin 2006; Vinokurov and Libman 2012a, 2012b; Walcott and Johnson 2013; Emerson 2014; Frankopan 2018; Macaes 2018a; Pepe 2018; Calder 2019);<sup>4</sup> think tank reports and conferences on this topic;<sup>5</sup> and politicians’ speeches that refer to Eurasia really construct a “Eurasian region” in the minds of the public and decision-makers? Alternatively, does “Eurasia” remain part of the geopolitical imagination, an artificial construct that will be easily forgotten?

Second, how is the competition developing between the multiple concepts of Eurasia that are unfolding today? In addition to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), indisputably the leading project on the “market of Eurasian ideas,” Russia, India, Japan, the European Union (EU), and the United States of America (US) have advanced their own initiatives for the Eurasian continent, each with their own scope and objectives. International organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are also involved in this process. In some cases, projects are relatively similar; in others, they are quite distinct. In some cases, there are complementarities between projects; other projects, however, were designed to compete with each other or were even initiated to counteract other connectivity projects. There are so many projects that one can hardly keep track of the various initiatives, and we are unaware of any

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<sup>4</sup> More importantly, for every half-dozen English language books, there may be hundreds of texts in Russian and Chinese dealing with this topic.

<sup>5</sup> Jurij Kofner, “Connecting Eurasia Dialogue,” IIASA, n.d., [https://iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/researchPrograms/AdvancedSystemsAnalysis/2019-04-29\\_Connecting\\_Eurasia\\_Dialogue\\_final.pdf](https://iiasa.ac.at/web/home/research/researchPrograms/AdvancedSystemsAnalysis/2019-04-29_Connecting_Eurasia_Dialogue_final.pdf), accessed February 19, 2021.

systematic review of them.<sup>6</sup> Should we expect these numerous connectivity projects to produce an integrated Eurasia? Or should we rather expect new boundaries to emerge, maybe across fault lines that did not exist before?<sup>7</sup>

Third, and somewhat more pragmatically, how do interconnections between the individual regions that comprise the Eurasian continent actually work, and which institutional arrangements are feasible or are currently implemented? Greater Eurasian regionalism remains a geopolitical vision, but regionalist projects exist and flourish in different parts of Eurasia. We focus on three regions: Europe (today defined by the key role of the EU); East and Southeast Asia (with multiple more flexible projects and cooperation formats, in particular the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN]); and the post-Soviet space (where since 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union [EAEU] has probably been the most advanced and successful regional initiative).<sup>8</sup> We compare the models of regionalism that exist in these regions (which are in fact quite diverse), as well as looking at how regional connectivity emerges at the boundaries of these regions: Central Asia and post-Soviet Eastern Europe. While Central Asia can in a certain sense serve as a laboratory for Greater Eurasian regionalism (Vinokurov and Libman 2012a), post-Soviet Eastern Europe has become an area of deep divides

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<sup>6</sup> We hope this book will partially fill this gap.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard (2016) talks about “connectivity wars,” but his notion is different from ours. He concentrates on how interconnected economic infrastructure can be exploited by competing actors to extend their power. In Eurasia, we observe how countries compete over what the infrastructure should look like—in a sense ensuring victory in the connectivity wars of the future.

<sup>8</sup> A particular problem for the terminology of this book is that the word “Eurasia” is used to describe two distinct spaces for regionalism: the post-Soviet world (where “Eurasia” emerged, in some sense, by default, out of a lack of other designations and in tribute to the Russian tradition of Eurasianist thinking) and “Greater Eurasia,” i.e., the entire Eurasian continent. Our book focuses on the second notion of Eurasia; to avoid confusion, we therefore refer to the integration of the former Soviet Union republics as “post-Soviet.”

and geopolitical cleavages. Similarly, we look at—and investigate the potential of—those initiatives that attempt to link competing connectivity projects and regional organizations.<sup>9</sup>

Our analysis calls for caution with respect to the discussion of regionalism in Greater Eurasia. While it is possible to construct some sort of “Eurasian idea,” Eurasia is not currently perceived as a “natural space” for region-building by nations and elites (except by some sub-groups in the scholarly community). The frequent references to “Eurasia” in the political rhetoric of some states (such as Russia or Kazakhstan) do not necessarily pertain to regionalism in Greater Eurasia and can even be used to create new cleavages dividing the continent (e.g., by understanding “Eurasia” as the antipode of “Europe”).<sup>10</sup> Enormous differences between the “building blocks” of Eurasian regionalism indicate that any Eurasian regional integration project should be based on a flexible approach, focusing on pragmatic technical cooperation and especially on common infrastructure. Deeper integration formats in Eurasia remain a utopia; Eurasian regionalism will likely develop (if at all) as a set of interconnected overlapping clubs with different memberships crossing the boundaries of individual sub-regions of Eurasia rather than as an encompassing organization of all the Eurasian states. From this point of view, some Eurasian connectivity projects have significant promise, although caution is required given the political conflicts and differences that exist within Eurasia.

The book reviews the state and the perspectives of regionalism in Greater Eurasia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has in many instances affected the prospects of global and regional integration. It remains to be seen to what extent attempts to strengthen Eurasian

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<sup>9</sup> Looking only at the post-Soviet world, the EU, and East and Southeast Asia is certainly a limitation of this book, as it (for example) excludes an important Eurasian power that defines itself as Eurasian and is also involved in some Eurasian connectivity projects: Turkey. However, the limitation is inevitable if the scope of the book is to remain tractable.

<sup>10</sup> As was actually the case in the writing of early Russian Eurasianists in the 1920s, who referred to “Eurasia” not to stress the unity of the continent but to distinguish Russia from both Europe and Asia.

connectivity will be renewed after the end of the global emergency (whenever that occurs). The ongoing scholarly discussion suggests that the pandemic could create new tensions across key actors of Eurasian regionalism (such as China and Russia—see Laruelle et al. 2021), but it also could create the foundations for new forms of cooperation. We will address some of these issues in the conclusion to this book.

The remainder of the book is organized as follows. The next chapter develops the idea of “meso-level” regionalism at the continental level and discusses to what extent Greater Eurasia is a suitable space for it. The following two chapters discuss the “building blocks” of Greater Eurasia—Europe, the post-Soviet space, and East and Southeast Asia—as well as “regions of overlap,” such as Central Asia and post-Soviet Central Europe. Chapter 5 is the central chapter of our book, as it surveys various connectivity projects in Greater Eurasia. Given the enormous scholarly attention the BRI has received, we offer a comparatively brief discussion of this project, though we do compare it to the initiatives promoted by Russia (the Greater Eurasian Partnership [GEP]), Japan (the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure [PQI]), the EU (the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy), and India (the Connect Central Asia Policy [CCAP]). For completeness’ sake, we also discuss the New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) promoted by the US, which seems to have been abandoned. Chapter 6 looks at the existing and potential links between individual Eurasian connectivity projects and regions (including through a discussion of the dialogue between the EAEU and the BRI, the EAEU and the EU, the 17+1 group initiated by China to engage the countries of Central and Eastern Europe [CCE], the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO], and the Asia–Europe Meeting [ASEM]). The final chapter summarizes our main findings.

## **2. The Meso Level of Continental Integration**

### **2.1. Defining the Meso Level of Regionalism**

The multitude of regional integration projects that have emerged in all parts of the world in the last 70 years are implicitly based on at least one common idea: the assumption that cooperation between different countries and societies is more likely within a limited geographical area, colloquially referred to as a “region.” The essentialist view of regionalism suggests that cultural or geographical proximity or intensive economic ties increase the likelihood that the benefits of cooperation will exceed its costs for individual countries and that countries’ preferences will be sufficiently close to one another (Feng and Genna 2003; Alesina and Spolaore 2005), thus making the emergence and success of regional integration projects more likely. Students of regionalism today, however, also stress that “regionness” is socially constructed and created through the practices and ideas of regional integration (Acharya 2007). From this point of view, in the best possible scenario, there is a mutually reinforcing interrelation between emerging region-ness and the development of regional integration initiatives (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000).

In any case, regional integration appears to be a phenomenon capable of supporting cooperation across countries in policy areas or with a scope and depth that would be unfeasible at the global level. The discussion about regionalism’s relationship to multilateral cooperation is complex (Dür 2006; Senti 2014; Herrmann-Pillath 2006; Faude 2020). On the one hand, regionalism can be seen as an extension of or building block for global cooperation, preparing countries for multilateral trade liberalization. On the other hand, a large body of literature considers regionalism to be a barrier to multilateral liberalization and cooperation. First, regionalism and global multilateralism may collide if the rules of regional integration agreements contradict those of the multilateral framework (for empirical and theoretical insight into this issue, see Crawford and Laird 2001; Fink and Molinuevo 2008; Davis 2009; Mavroidis 2011; Allee et al. 2017; Shongwe 2017; Allee and Elsig 2019) and are associated with

protectionist barriers: concerns about “fortress Europe” (Hanson 1998) and the growing role of power asymmetries in the design of regional trade agreements (Brown and Stern 2011; Trommer 2017) are examples of this logic. Second, regional integration might reduce countries’ interest in participating in global multilateral initiatives because they already receive substantial benefits from regional-level integration and further global cooperation is likely to be associated with additional costs (for conflicting points of view on this issue, see Baldwin 1997; Bond et al. 2001; Saggi 2006; Limao 2006, 2007; Bhagwati 2008; Baldwin and Law 2009).

As we have already pointed out, the “region” in regional integration processes is to a large extent socially constructed. Thus, which group of countries (or sub-national units) constitutes a “region” where integration is feasible cannot be stated *ex ante*; for example, if we look at European integration, the definition of what constitutes “Europe” (and thus can, at least potentially, be “admitted” to the EU project) is primarily a social and political question, not a geographical or economic one (Eder 2006). Regions, like nations, are essentially “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006). Yet these processes of social construction are informed by economic and political realities: exchanges between people, trade and migration, cooperation between countries, and cultural commonalities (to the extent that these are not themselves socially constructed), etc. In some cases, the core idea of a region is the result of decades-long political and scholarly debates (as with the concept of “Europe”—see Llobera 2003). From this point of view, the “Greater Eurasian” regionalism we intend to study in this book belongs to a very special class of regionalism processes involving (a) regions without a clear and developed identity<sup>11</sup> that (b) cover an extensive geographic area (and, as a result, are highly heterogeneous in economic, political, social, and cultural terms).

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<sup>11</sup> i.e., a set of normative ideas, perceptions, and interpretations shared by most actors in the region and outside it and stressing the unity of the region and the commonality of its peoples’ interests and cultures.

In most cases, regional arrangements of this sort coexist with smaller regional integration projects covering individual “sub-regions” within these broader regions. In some cases, these smaller projects emerge prior to the larger regional projects, while in others they co-develop over time. From this point of view, we will refer to the sort of projects we study in this book as the “meso level” of regional integration, between regionalism in the narrow sense (covering geographically more compact regions that have a clearer, more developed identity) and multilateralism. Again, we need to refrain from unambiguous claims about what geographical scope is “small enough” or “large enough” for us: for example, European regionalism most likely belongs to the category of “regionalism in the narrow sense” even though it includes multiple countries and geographically encompasses a “continent” (as do some of the meso-level projects we discuss in what follows) because it is rooted in a very strong European idea and is based on the high interdependence of its member countries in economic, social, and cultural terms. Thus, attributing certain regional projects to a “meso level” rather than “regionalism” in the narrow sense is always difficult. Still, some cases fit the “meso level” more clearly than others. In what follows, we provide three examples of the “meso level” of regional integration that will guide our subsequent investigation.

*1. Mega-regional trade agreements and cooperation formats:* the most obvious cases of meso-level regionalism are the so-called mega-regional trade agreements, which have been intensively debated since the late 1980s and are typically characterized by the inclusion of a large number of countries in poorly defined regional spaces (or without defining regional spaces at all). In many cases, these projects have emerged either to speed up the globalization process or to provide substitutes for struggling multinational agreements (eg., World Trade Organization [WTO] negotiations, which have over time become slower and more tedious [Moser and Rose 2012]). A characteristic feature of these projects is an attempt to include one or several major global economic centers in a single organization. Examples of these projects include the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP),

the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), and potential projects of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the most recent agreement (signed in November 2020), also belongs to this group (see also Kheyfets 2019).

APEC received extensive attention in the scholarly literature in the 1990s because of its “open regionalism” approach, which appeared to promise a reconciliation between multilateralism and regionalism, but in time turned out to be unsuccessful because of contradictions between member states and a lack of credible commitments (Elek 1992; Kim 1992; Garnaut 1996; Berger 1999; Kelegama 2000a; Ravenhill 1998, 2001; Park and Lee 2009).<sup>12</sup> TTIP and TPP, labeled “mega-deals,” played an important role in the discussions about the future of the global trade system in the 2000s and the 2010s, when they appeared to be realistic options for developing intensive economic cooperation between the core regions of the world economy: the US, the EU, and the Southeast Asian and East Asian countries (Hamilton 2014; Bull et al. 2015; Hufbauer and Cimino-Isaacs 2015; Velut et al. 2017; Griffith et al. 2017; Eliasson and Garcia-Duran 2017; Griller et al. 2017; Garrett 2019).<sup>13</sup> The discussion about RCEP is ongoing at the time of writing this book; most likely, it will intensify in the years to come.

Unlike APEC, which can be seen as an institutionalized process that will potentially lead to more intensive cooperation, TTIP and TPP were designed as specific encompassing frameworks that should have had the potential to connect key centers of economic activity and, in so doing, to change the environment for the global economy (including countries not involved in the agreements). In a sense, the discussion about TTIP and TPP therefore focuses

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<sup>12</sup> In the 1990s and early 2000s there were discussions regarding the fit of the APEC model for other parts of the world, such as the Indian Ocean (Kelegama 2000b) and the Atlantic (Elek 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Solis and Wilson (2017) link these mega-projects and APEC in a comprehensive piece of analysis.

less on treating them as cases of (potential) *regionalism* and more on interpreting them as attempts by key global actors (especially the US and the EU) to set global rules for the game through negotiations in a smaller club of states. The Trump administration in the US, however, put TTIP on ice and withdrew from TPP, rendering these initiatives less relevant to the current political discussion. The signing of RCEP, meanwhile, made this agreement the most active and important of the mega-projects today. It is also interesting for us because it developed in immediate competition with TPP (Wilson 2015); thus, we observe phenomena similar to those that exist in Eurasia, where multiple connectivity initiatives compete with one another.

2. *Non-regional projects with de facto regional scope*: another group of meso-level projects includes projects that did *not* emerge as regional initiatives, but which ultimately included primarily countries located in geographical proximity to each other, with the result that the agreement could have been used to construct a region. Historically, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) is an excellent example of this sub-group of meso-level regionalist organizations. COMECON was never intended to be a regional integration project for Eastern Europe—rather, the goal was to foster the “Socialist division of labor” across all countries of the political bloc led by the USSR. However, practically all members of COMECON—with the exceptions of Vietnam, Mongolia, and Cuba—were located in Eastern Europe, turning COMECON into a regional integration agreement and making it possible for Cold War-era observers to discuss its interaction with the European Economic Communities, which, unlike COMECON, were from the very beginning constructed as a regional project (Ransom 1971; Kaser 1972; Nicolae 2020). Unlike the mega-deals, which emphasized their link to neoliberal globalization, COMECON saw itself as an alternative to and rejection of the latter and rather as an attempt to create a different set of institutions for the global order. This is, however, not a necessary precondition for the emergence of the class of institutions we discuss here. In some cases, agreements transcend the original *de facto* regional boundaries and turn global—as happened with the OECD, which started as the Organization for European

Economic Cooperation. Some of the Greater Eurasian projects we will look at in this book—particularly the BRI—have similar potential to achieve global rather than regional reach.

*3. Regional projects with extensive geographic coverage:* the third group of projects we look at is probably the most difficult to identify. It includes organizations covering regions for which some sort of regional identity discussion exists, but which are still extremely large and consist of heterogeneous countries. In many cases, these large organizations coexist with smaller regional organizations comprised of only some of their members. The Latin American Integration Association (LAIA), created in 1960, can be seen as one of these cases. The discussion about a Latin American identity can be traced back to the independence wars of the 19th century (Chanady 1994), and there are numerous examples of spillover (cultural, economic, or social) between Latin American countries. Membership of LAIA also does not appear to be excessively large (there are fewer members of LAIA than of the EU). Ultimately, however, differences between countries seem to prevail, with smaller projects (such as *Mercado Común del Sur* [MERCOSUR], or the Common Market of the South) being more successful. The same can be said of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), established in 1997. In this case, the fact that the regional integration project can be seen as a superstructure built upon smaller-scale regionalisms can be uncovered only in the process of the development of regionalism.<sup>14</sup> Another example is the African Union, which we will discuss in greater detail in the next sub-section.

The construction of regions in each of the three projects follows different logics. In the mega-regional deals, the discourse about regionalism highlights the economic weight of the participating countries, the intensity of economic ties across them, and the need to speed up

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<sup>14</sup> Hypothetically, one can imagine a European regionalism built upon a collection of smaller regions, such as the Scandinavian one (which was in fact a viable regional integration project at the early stages of European integration).

multilateralism (which for various reasons underperforms in terms of the expectations of project participants). As a result, the projects rarely point out the cultural similarity of the member states or their common history (although APEC did so to a greater extent than TTIP or TPP). Regional projects with extensive geographic coverage, on the contrary, highlight the cultural proximity of the members and their common history, which are seen as giving them the potential to develop a viable regional integration initiative (economic ties between countries are rather weak in the cases of both LAIA and GAFTA). For the second group of projects, the grounds and the narratives for developing regional identity differ. For COMECON, it was the idea of an “alternative globalization” (Sanches-Sibony 2014; Mark et al. 2020), a different mode of organizing the world economy (which was experimented with in a particular part of the world).<sup>15</sup> Another common feature of at least two of the groups of agreements we look at (the first and the third) is that they have enjoyed only moderate success so far. This could be related to different factors that do not necessarily reflect flaws in institutional design or the idea of the project (for TTIP and TPP, the key problem was Trump’s presidency), yet the trend is easy to see.

How do meso-level agreements interact with lower-level regionalisms? Hypothetically, it should be possible to distinguish three modes of interaction.

- First, agreements can be constructed through the direct interaction of countries without paying attention to lower-level initiatives. This has indeed been the case for quite a few of the projects we have reviewed so far.
- Second, the projects can explicitly involve regional cooperation agreements, building upon them and interacting with them. Among the cases we have looked at, APEC comes relatively close to this idea, with the open regionalism approach suggesting that individual

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<sup>15</sup> More recently, ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Latin America) had similar ambitions (Vinokurov and Libman 2017), but from the very beginning it had a clear geographic focus.

clubs of members select their own speed and focus of integration and decide how to pursue it (the idea of individual action plans and collective action plans). The best example of a regionalist project with continental reach that interacts with the smaller regional projects of its members is, however, the African Union (AU), which we will discuss in the next section.

- Third and finally, the projects could involve lower-level regional integration agreements in different ways depending on the level of their actorness (for the mega-regions, for example, some key actors are states such as the US or Canada, while others are regional organizations like the EU).

Meso-level projects could potentially emerge from institutionalized inter-regionalist projects (i.e., agreements and cooperation between regional integration initiatives), yet there are hardly any examples of these formats with substantial depth of commitment and scope of cooperation (reflecting the lack of actorness of many regional organizations, with the exception of the EU; we will address this issue in the case of Eurasia in subsequent chapters of this book).

The universe of meso-level regional agreements is vast and its boundaries are not clearly defined. Those in Greater Eurasia, on which we focus in this book, have a specific format. In this case, the key element of narratives about constructing a region is neither economic ties between gravity centers of the modern world economy nor cultural similarity. Rather, it is belonging to a single continent (Eurasia). In the next section, we will critically reflect upon this approach to region-building in greater detail.

## **2.2. Continents as Spaces for Regional Integration**

The concept of a continent is primarily a geographic one and is used to describe large landmasses following convention rather than any firm criteria. In a sense, “continents” are also social constructs, often invented by Europeans and uniting very distinct peoples and cultures (such as “Asia”—see Freeman 2001). The actual utility of the concept of “continents” for scientific investigation is debatable (Lewis and Wigen 1997), although it plays

an important role in some narratives about world history (Diamond 2001). While the emergence of a common European identity can be seen as a lengthy process that one could probably trace back to Antiquity, self-identification as “America” (North or South) or “Australia” emerged only with the arrival of European colonists. For “Asia” and “Africa,” the discourse about continents was also “imported” from Europe. The question then emerges of how far the continents are useful spaces for constructing regional integration projects.

As a matter of fact, one regional integration project was based on the concept of a “continent” and ultimately not only succeeded but gave rise to a new nation: Australia (with the formation of the Commonwealth in 1901 following almost half a century of debate about a federation of British colonies). Yet this case is of course very specific and cannot be generalized to other parts of the world. In the US in the nineteenth century, “continentalism” referred to the ideology of territorial expansion of the US across North America (Vevier 1960)—again, a topic very different from that considered in our book. In terms of regional integration, there are two avenues through which discussions of “continental” regionalism started: (a) the emergence of “continental” regional organizations and (b) the structure of the United Nations (UN), including regional commissions.<sup>16</sup> UN commissions have the aim of fostering regional cooperation but have achieved different results in this respect (with the Economic Commission for Latin America probably the most influential for the regional integration debate). Some UN commissions are more influential than others. (Gregg 1966; Jimenez 2012).

The list of projects that treat themselves as “continental” (i.e., that have the aim and the potential to include the countries of an entire continent) is long and somewhat confusing, since it covers initiatives with very different levels of success and importance. Most of these projects

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<sup>16</sup> Although they are not entirely “continental,” there are commissions for Europe, for Latin America and the Caribbean, for Africa, for Asia and the Pacific, and for Western Asia (the latter was created two or three decades after the other commissions).

fall into the category of meso-level regional integration initiatives, as defined in this book (there are some exceptions, however, and we will address these in what follows). Thus, for us, “continental” regionalism is a special form of meso-level regionalism—or possibly a special way to justify the establishment of meso-level regionalist institutions. Continental projects typically fall into the third type of meso-regionalism (extensive geographic coverage), although some continental projects may be closer to the first type (mega-regional trade agreements).

The AU, which succeeded the Organization for African Unity, is the most ambitious continental initiative. Based on the idea of pan-Africanism, the AU pursues a broad economic and security integration agenda. A particularly interesting feature of the AU for the purposes of our analysis is its interaction with the regional economic communities, i.e., the lower-level regional integration organizations in Africa that—while they started as economic institutions—over time took on a more proactive role in terms of security issues (Tavares 2009; Oppong 2009; Akokpari and Ancas 2013; Arthur 2017). The AU developed a systematic approach aimed at complementarity between continental and sub-continental integration initiatives, reflecting the heterogeneity of countries and the diversity of challenges Africa faces.

Other “continental” organizations have more limited agendas, which they pursue with different levels of success. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA; since 2020 the US–Mexico–Canada Agreement) is primarily an economic organization with a very weak institutional structure and a clear focus on opening up the borders between the US, Mexico, and Canada for trade and investment (Morales 2018). The Organization of American States (OAS) has a mainly political agenda with a focus on peacebuilding, human rights, and democracy and does not have a strong economic cooperation agenda (Boniface 2002; Shaw 2004; Herz 2011). The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) has both an economic and a security agenda (modeled after the OAS) (Weiffen et al. 2013) and emphasizes the issues of energy and infrastructure (Flemes and Westermann 2004; Briceno-Ruiz and Ribeiro Hoffmann 2015). Since 2018, the organization has been in deep crisis over the treatment of the Venezuelan

regime, with the majority of members suspending their participation and establishing a new Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (PROSUR). Finally, the Asian Cooperation Dialogue, set up in 2002, is a weak forum for the discussion and exchange of ideas, without a clear integration agenda.

One can see that continental boundaries have played a more important role in Africa and in South America than elsewhere. In both cases, ideologies emphasize the unity of the countries of the continent, although from different perspectives (in Africa, the key element is the idea of liberation from colonialism; in South America, there are competing ideas of rejecting U.S. hegemony and of the unity of democratic countries of the western hemisphere). In America, one should also point to several (unsuccessful) broader economic cooperation initiatives of the 1990s encompassing both North and South America: the U.S. Enterprise for the Americas Initiative under George H.W. Bush (Porter 1990; Gitli and Ryd 1992) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas discussed in the late 1990s (Wrobel 1998). Finally, in the case of North America, the existence of a continental organization is driven primarily by economic factors: strong economic linkages between the US, on the one hand, and Mexico and Canada, on the other hand.<sup>17</sup> From this point of view, the agreement is highly asymmetric, with Mexico and Canada showing a relatively limited level of interdependence. Eurasia and Asia, meanwhile, have not produced a comparable continental regionalism project.

Would a continental format for regional integration make sense? To our knowledge, in the economics literature, the discussion has been particularly pursued within a set of studies starting with Krugman's (1991) work on "natural" and "supernatural" regional integration agreements. The key point of his analysis is transportation costs across continents: as long as they are high enough, continental agreements are welfare-improving and thus "natural,"

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<sup>17</sup> Hayter and Holmes (2002) demonstrate how "continentalism" in Canada-U.S. relations was an "implicit policy" with a strong impact on economic affairs even prior to its formalization within the framework of NAFTA.

whereas agreements across continents are “unnatural” and do not produce extensive welfare gains. Numerous studies have analyzed this argument using empirical evidence on the costs of trade across continents (Frankel et al. 1993, 1995; Wei and Frankel 1998). Gil-Parejo and Llorka-Vivero (2008) discuss the issue of a *continental trade bias*, while Barigozzi et al. (2011) look at whether trade networks cluster along continental borders. The emphasis on the costs of inter-continental trade, however, is difficult to maintain if we focus on Eurasia: Asia and Europe account for more than 60% of global gross domestic product (GDP) and include two of the three main centers of the global economy (Europe and East and Southeast Asia), so the issue of trade costs is unlikely to be the driving factor biasing trade on the Eurasian continent.

In sum, continental regionalism exists functions in very different ways in different parts of the world. North America does not, strictly speaking, fit our definition of meso-level regionalism, as it includes only three countries, with one key hegemon (and strong cultural and economic ties between this country and the other two).<sup>18</sup> African regionalism (with its emphasis on the interaction between the AU and the regional economic communities) and possibly Latin American and trans-American regionalisms (where larger organizations include countries participating in more narrow regional blocs) fit the definition more closely. Eurasia—the part of the world at which our book looks—stands out as a particularly large and heterogeneous landmass. In the last section of this chapter, we will look at the possibility of a “Greater Eurasian regionalism.”

### **2.3. Challenges of Meso-Level Regionalism**

As already mentioned, many of the cases of “meso-regionalism” presented in the first two sections of this chapter produced relatively little impact in terms of regional economic

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<sup>18</sup> However, important sub-regional initiatives have been pursued by individual states in the US and Mexico and provinces in Canada.

integration. This is likely linked to two main challenges encountered by meso-level regionalism: difficulties in constructing regional identity and the heterogeneity of participants. The two challenges are related. Since the “mental maps” (Le Rider 2008) of regions associated with meso-level projects cover very large territories, they by definition include very different countries.<sup>19</sup> If a project aims to bring together countries from a geographical continent or to tie together several key centers of economic activity (e.g., within a trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific “region”), it can hardly avoid including countries that are very different. As more countries join, regional identity (already weak) will become more and more diluted. APEC is one example of this phenomenon. Its membership expanded over time (Gallant and Stubbs 1997) and, as a result, it became increasingly difficult to identify it with a particular region (again, while regions are socially constructed, these constructions are rooted in particular forms of economic, political and social interdependencies—it is not possible to develop a concept of a “region” for an artificial group of countries). These two factors limit the ability of meso-level regionalisms to function as successful regional integration initiatives.

The implications of member heterogeneity are straightforward. The more the interests, development levels, and individual countries participating in a regional project differ, the more difficult it is for them to reach consensus on regional integration (Borrman and Koopmann 1994). This also makes countries less willing to delegate authority to supranational institutions or to sign binding agreements, as it is difficult to provide credible commitments that these institutions will not come at a cost to individual countries. Some meso-level organizations explicitly acknowledge this, either through an “open regionalism” framework (APEC) or by attempting to combine integration within a broader organization and integration within regional communities (AU). Still, the problem remains: what types of issues can be subject to integration at which level, and which smaller “clubs” (Frattiani and Pattison 2001) could feasibly tackle

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<sup>19</sup> The case of North American continental integration is an exception.

which issues? The bureaucratic logic of the secretariats of international organizations and the willingness of politicians to demonstrate to the public the success of the organizations they initiate may lie behind the excessive concentration of issues at the meso-level, a move that ultimately undermines meso-level regionalism.

The issues associated with constructing regional identity are also important (Hettne 2005). From this point of view, very large projects either look artificial (which reduces the interest of elites and the support and attention of the population) or are perceived as part of the globalization process rather than as region-building. For example, fierce public resistance to TTIP or TPP (Bluth 2016) was to some extent driven by the fact that these organizations became part of the same discourse as that on globalization—and, moreover, were seen as a case of “unfair” globalization determined by the political elites of a small number of key countries. The main advantage of meso-level regionalism is that it can, through multilateral trade agreements, achieve for a large group of countries goals that would be unfeasible at the global level—but if the publics in democratic states that are wary of global multilateralism perceive these meso-regional projects as just another example of globalism, this advantage will be lost.

Thus, we should be cautious about comparing meso-level regionalism with regionalism encompassing a smaller group of countries of the type typically at the core of comparative regionalism research. Meso-level regionalism is unlikely to lead to the formation of highly institutionalized and effective regional agreements with a deep and broad integration agenda. Indeed, an attempt at conceiving such an organization would be deadly for meso-regionalism (Ravenhill 2009). It would make it less likely to succeed, since the contradictions between member states would be blown out of all proportion. It would also mean that the traditional sequence of steps of Balassa’s regional integration would be even less applicable to meso-level regionalism than to smaller regional integration projects (for which the utility of Balassa’s

sequence is already questionable).<sup>20</sup> For many regional integration projects at the meso-level, even a free trade area is too ambitious a goal; such projects could, however, serve as forums for the exchange of ideas and the interaction of politicians, to give one example. In many parts of the world, the existence of such forums is not self-evident and providing an institutional framework for exchange could be an important contribution of regionalism (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). This is particularly true in Eurasia, as we will show in what follows. Searching for specific issues on which meso-level regionalism should focus is thus an essential precondition for success. Furthermore, the issue of identity is as relevant for meso-level regionalism as for any other regional integration projects. The question therefore remains how far a regional identity can be constructed (we will address this issue in the next section for the case of Greater Eurasia).

The heterogeneity of the membership of meso-level regional organizations is the key factor explaining the need for the coexistence of multiple regional integration clubs within these structures. Multi-speed regionalism is not specific to meso-level regionalist projects; it also plays an important role in other regionalism contexts (Ohr 2007). The idea in the European integration project of subsidiarity—that is, that decisions should be made at the lowest possible level—is based on precisely these considerations. At the same time, regionalism consisting of multiple “clubs” is not without its disadvantages. First, by allowing some members to create clubs of advanced cooperation, one can effectively discourage other members from participating in the regional integration project altogether. This is because, for countries that are “not ready” for more advanced integration, joining an established “advanced club” in the future would be more expensive and associated with larger concessions than if the negotiations about the advanced integration agenda were to start in the future from scratch (Bordignon and

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<sup>20</sup> Gorbunova and Komarov (2017) discuss this issue specifically in the case of Greater Eurasia.

Brusco 2006).<sup>21</sup> Second, the regional integration project becomes highly complex and non-transparent, not only for countries but also for the public (which will either be disappointed by the insufficient progress of regionalism or concerned that regional organizations are too bureaucratic and ignore public preferences). Third, the issue of the protectionism of smaller clubs (undermining the larger project) becomes important; one ends up having the same “multilateralism vs. regionalism” debate, but within a meso-level regional project.

Still, in spite of these disadvantages, there are few options for advancing meso-level regionalism without relying on smaller communities focusing on different issues. One could hypothesize that the risks of protectionism from these clubs would be smaller if they overlapped, i.e., if individual clubs focused on different functional issues and if individual countries (or regions) participated in multiple overlapping clubs. At the same time, this design is even more sophisticated and sometimes more difficult to implement. In chapter 5 of this book, we will show how complex and heterogeneous instruments of regionalism in Eurasia interact. It is also possible to question whether an “umbrella” organization for meso-level regionalism (similar to structures we reviewed in sections 2.1 and 2.2) is necessary at all. Meso-level regionalism can also emerge as a web of interconnections and agreements between individual countries and regional organizations, if all these organizations are willing to contribute to the overall integration agenda or idea. This is, to some extent, what one seems to observe in Eurasia.

The challenges we discuss in this section should not overshadow the key argument: meso-level regionalism is associated with important advantages. This is not only the case because meso-level regionalism can serve as an “intermediate” solution if multilateral cooperation at the global level is impossible (e.g., if the WTO faces difficulties in its

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<sup>21</sup> In meso-level regionalism, however, it is possible that these “advanced” issues will never become part of the integration agenda due to the heterogeneity of project participants.

development, a meso-level regional organization could still make some progress in trade liberalization). More importantly, there are simply problems and issues that *must* be solved at the meso level or which can *effectively* be solved at this level. One example for Greater Eurasia is landline transportation routes (like pipelines or railroads). If economic actors and political decision-makers intend to use them to connect centers of economic activity in the east and west of the continent, as well as to involve countries in the center of Eurasia, this issue *has* to be considered within a “Greater Eurasian” framework.<sup>22</sup> Transportation corridors that end at the borders of the EU or the EAEU are simply inefficient, given the economic ties between Asia and Europe. Another example involves migration and refugee issues; here, again, ignoring the interconnections within “Greater Eurasia” would make it very difficult to find effective solutions to these problems. The problems of what we in our previous work referred to as “shadow integration” (Vinokurov and Libman 2012a, 2018)—drug trafficking, environmental pollution, or disease transmission—may also develop within large geographic areas, superseding “clubs” of countries in most regional integration projects but still not global in nature. The question remains whether one can identify these issues (at the political level and in the scholarly community); this discussion will play an important role in this book when we study the Eurasian case.

## **2.4. Regionalism in Greater Eurasia?**

Eurasia differs from other continents on account of its heterogeneity and size. While African or South American countries share at least some common historical experiences (e.g., European colonialism, which the two continents “entered” and “exited” at roughly the same time as one

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<sup>22</sup> This should not be understood as a call for a “Greater Eurasian transportation organization,” but it implies that it would be difficult to discuss various transportation corridors if one ignored the interconnections across the continent.

another), it is much more difficult to identify such a historical experience for Eurasia (and if one were to find such an experience, it would likely be a global one that affected other parts of the world as well). There is clearly no common “Eurasian” identity, and any attempt to construct one would face two major problems. First, Eurasian countries have often constructed their respective identities by using other parts of Eurasia as their “discursive Other.” For the European continent, separating itself from Asia<sup>23</sup> has been a key element of identity construction since Ancient Greece, although the specific issues emphasized as distinguishing Europe from Asia have changed over time. Today, Eurasia includes the world’s most active “authoritarian gravity centers,” such as Russia and China (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2020), as well as the EU, one of the key actors in the field of democracy-promotion (Youngs 2010). Democratic and authoritarian actors in Eurasia compete with each other. Second, the notion of “Eurasia” has historically been used by political forces that have emphasized a “split” in the continent rather than its unity. Multiple varieties of “Eurasianism” in Russian political discourse from the 1920s onward saw themselves as separating Russia from Europe (and sometimes from Asia) by highlighting a “non-European” Russian identity (Bassin 2003; Laruelle 2004; Shlapentokh 2007; Bassin et al. 2015; Laruelle 2015a). While there are also alternative notions of Eurasianism (Vinokurov and Libman 2012a, 2012b), one could question whether the word “Eurasia” has not been contaminated through its use by those who see Eurasia as the antithesis of Europe.<sup>24</sup>

In light of all this, it is utopian to imagine a “continental” regional organization in Eurasia, particularly one with a strong common identity and (at least some) common political agenda (along the lines of the OAS, the UNASUR or the AU). This does not mean, however,

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<sup>23</sup> Asia first had to be invented in order to make this separation possible.

<sup>24</sup> Bernhard et al. (2020) discuss whether “Eurasia” is a “weasel word” in their scientific research on post-Communist politics.

that Eurasian meso-level regionalism, such as the one we intend to study in this book, is either irrelevant or entirely impossible. First, there are, as we have already briefly mentioned, issues for which trans-Eurasian cooperation will be important. Second, in terms of identity construction, Greater Eurasia could rely on the history of “Eurasian exchanges” in the past. Unsurprisingly, some Eurasian integration initiatives explicitly revive the notion of the Silk Road, probably the most important rhetorical tool of Greater Eurasian regionalism (even more important than the word “Eurasia” itself—see Diener 2015). Third, some of the meso-level projects we have discussed (specifically, mega-regions such as RCEP, TTIP or TPP) also evolved without strong identity formation, focusing instead on the purely economic benefits of cooperation and highlighting the growing interconnections between the economic centers. While this is an obstacle for (even) meso-level regionalism, it does not necessarily make it impossible; if a different president had been in the White House since 2016, one could imagine that TTIP might have been more successful and TPP might be a functioning agreement—and RCEP was signed amid the COVID-19 crisis. A Eurasian meso-level regionalism must, however, overcome much larger obstacles to its development than trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific agreements, as the differences between countries and parts of Eurasia are much larger.

We start our analysis with the contemporary dimension of Eurasian regionalism. Since the Second World War, Eurasia has been split between its western and eastern parts (Europe and East and Southeast Asia), which are actively involved in the process of globalization, and its central part (Eastern Europe, the USSR, and China), which has attempted to limit its involvement in the capitalist global economy and instead constructed its own system of international exchange. Over time, the integration of socialist countries into the world economy has increased (as with the construction of pipelines from the USSR to Europe or, more importantly, with China’s opening-up to the global trade). However, economic interdependence between eastern and western Eurasia has increased at a much more rapid pace, with post-war reconstruction in Europe, on the one hand, and with Japan and later South Korea, Taiwan, and

Southeast Asia turning into important centers of the global economy, on the other. China has followed suit, becoming the main locus of global manufacturing. Maritime transportation between China and Europe has become one of the main connecting arteries of globalization. Since the collapse of Communist rule, the post-Soviet space has opened up to global trade and investments. However, deep economic crisis and the erection of new national borders have limited the extent of the post-Soviet countries' integration. Central Eurasia's landlocked location became a particularly serious obstacle to its growth (Raballand 2003).

Discussions about regionalism in Greater Eurasia have therefore specifically been associated with overcoming this deficit and with making the post-Soviet region (and Central Asia) part of the web of economic connections. Unsurprisingly, the main focus of this discussion is developing the trans-Eurasian transportation networks connecting the east and west of the continent (as well as the post-Soviet space "in-between"—see Charap et al. 2018). "Connectivity" is, without a doubt, the buzzword for cooperation in Greater Eurasia.<sup>25</sup> The development of the transportation network goes beyond purely engineering tasks or even purely economic issues—it is a topic associated with multiple aspects of international cooperation, including trade regimes, border-crossing regimes, etc. A substantial portion of the discussion about regionalism in Greater Eurasia therefore focuses on infrastructural projects. While some observers see these projects as connecting Eurasia and potentially increasing prosperity (Linn and Tiomkin 2006; Preiherman et al. 2018), others emphasize that the new transportation and pipeline infrastructure could be associated with the emergence of new "rules of the game" promoted by authoritarian Eurasian regimes and incompatible with the liberal world order (Calder 2012). The multiplicity of initiatives and projects related to connectivity promoted by individual countries and country groups (the EU, the US, China, Russia or Japan) has itself

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<sup>25</sup> Attempts to devise connectivity programs on a continental scale have been implemented in other parts of the world (such as South America) but have been relatively unsuccessful (Agostinis and Palestini 2020).

become a topic for conflicts and contradictions in Eurasia, but has also created the potential for further cooperation (Luft 2016; Pascha 2020a; Rana and Xi 2020).

Another connecting factor within Eurasia is the increasing mobility of goods, people, and capital across the continent. We have described Central Asia as relatively decoupled from the global economy, yet Cooley and Heathershaw (2017) provide a detailed analysis of how the involvement of Central Asian states in global networks protects their regimes. China and Russia have emerged as important sources of outbound foreign direct investment (FDI), often localized in other Eurasian countries. An important part of transportation infrastructure development in Eurasia is the growing pipeline network, which reflects a continental imbalance in the availability of natural resources and the demand for energy (Vinokurov 2014a). Unlike trade and FDI, where the post-Second World War world experienced substantial liberalization of cross-border transactions, restrictions on the mobility of people are still very strong (and the COVID-19 pandemic could be associated with the introduction of further barriers to the flow of people across borders). Nevertheless, the last 30 years have witnessed the emergence of spontaneous cross-border mobility that has to some extent overcome these barriers, which can best be conceptualized as “Eurasian.” These flows were triggered by major historical shocks experienced by Eurasia, such as the collapse of the USSR (and the subsequent emigration, which created migrant communities throughout the continent). Migration has been associated with the emergence of informal cross-border trade networks, further facilitating the integration of the continent (Evers and Kaiser 2000; Kaiser 2003; Brown 2005; Matthews et al. 2012; Anderson 2018; Hung and Ngo 2020).<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Linnell et al. (2016) provide an interesting example of how different policy issues in Eurasia interact: fence construction across the continent aimed at limiting the flow of refugees has negatively affected wildlife and efforts at transboundary conservation.

The growing economic ties between parts of Eurasia have triggered the emergence of a set of common problems that the Eurasian countries have had to deal with, which also call for cooperation either at the continental level or in the (overlapping) clubs that differ from the traditional boundaries between the parts of Eurasia where regional integration develops. In our earlier work (Vinokurov and Libman 2018), we discussed several examples of these problems: environmental risks (exacerbated by the development of common infrastructure—see Tracy et al 2017; Ascenso et al. 2018), international water management, and human and arms trafficking. The COVID-19 pandemic is an excellent example, as the disease spread rapidly across Eurasia (although the pandemic also shows the limitations of the interconnections across Eurasian countries; for example, in Russia, which has a common border with China, the key source of the pandemic was Europe, and even the regions of the Far East were primarily affected via Moscow and St. Petersburg rather than through direct contagion from neighboring China). Many of the problems we mention here are global, but many others have emerged in spaces (or across transcontinental routes) that are localized in (parts of) Eurasia but at the same time transcend common regional borders like those of the EU, the post-Soviet space, East and Southeast Asia, etc. (Cornell and Swanström 2006).

Finally, there is a purely economic logic behind landlocked transportation corridors (east–west and north–south), especially those based on railroad connections across countries. We will discuss this issue in section 5.1.2, focusing on the BRI: essentially, even though maritime transportation is cheaper than railroad transportation, the latter can become attractive for firms because of its speed if certain conditions are fulfilled (high quality of physical infrastructure, open borders, low bureaucratic burden, etc.). Some of the success stories behind Greater Eurasian regionalism are about transportation infrastructure and are based on this logic.

All these factors contribute to the emergence of the idea of a Greater Eurasian regionalism. To reiterate, the discussion about Eurasian regionalism necessarily highlights the links to the central part of the continent—the post-Soviet space including Central Asia—rather

than simply links between east and west, both economic (intensive trade between Europe and China) and political (ASEM and similar institutions; we will still review the latter in this book as an example of linkages between international organizations in Eurasia). This focus also fits a historical dimension that is potentially relevant for Eurasian regionalism: Eurasian exchanges. The vast landmass of Eurasia is a factor that has historically connected peoples and civilizations, and has in fact contributed to the emergence of the latter. Diamond (2002) argues that the “east–west” organization of the Eurasian space was much more conducive to the spread of domesticated animals and crops—and thus to the development of civilization—than was the case in continents with a “north–south” organization, such as the Americas or Africa (see also Turchin et al. 2006; Jones et al. 2011; Bovin et al. 2012; Dong et al. 2020). In cultural anthropology, Hann et al. (2016) and Hann (2015) see the Eurasian continent as an appropriate unit of analysis due to the interconnections between diverse cultures that have existed for millennia (for a critical assessment, see Testa 2017). Related to this is a large body of historical literature on “Eurasian exchanges,” i.e., linkages across the continent passing through the Indian Ocean and Central Asia and often (possibly in a simplistic way)<sup>27</sup> described as the “Silk Road(s)” (Abu-Lughod 1989; Gunn 2003; Foltz 2010; Andrea 2014; Galli 2017).

Frankopan’s (2015) narrative of the history of Eurasia, immediately followed by a narrative of the contemporary integration of the continent (Frankopan 2018), is an example of how these historical interconnections can be used to construct a “Eurasian” region today. Whether these narratives are a purely academic exercise or could indeed serve as a basis for the social construction of a “Eurasian” identity is debatable, given the enormous cultural differences between different parts of the continent and the distant past in which Eurasian

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<sup>27</sup> See Rezakhani (2010) on the criticism of the historical concept of the Silk Road. Marsden and Mostowlansky (2019) further highlight that the east–west connections across Eurasia should not be overemphasized as opposed to the north–south connections, which are also of crucial importance for the history of the continent.

exchanges occurred. Even though Central Asia was at one point a hub for trade and migration, over time these connections were severed and Central Asia itself was divided between vast empires (Russia, China and Iran) until very little remained of this past unity. Furthermore, it is possible that, just as the notion of “Eurasia” is now often associated with Russian nationalist discourse, the notion of the “Silk Road” has become associated with particular actors in Eurasia—most notably China—that would make a narrative based on the Silk Road concept less inclusive. However, as has already been mentioned, the last two decades have witnessed repeated attempts to use Eurasian exchanges as a discursive background for new formats of regionalism. According to Chin (2013, p. 194), “we are heirs to two Silk Roads: not the ancient and the modern, but the invented and the reinvented.” Her paper provides a detailed account of how the (socially constructed) concept of a Silk Road serves “as a template for modern international commerce” (p. 194) and from this point of view has a substantial appeal today. Dadabayev (2018) shows how the Silk Road(s) are (re)interpreted in the foreign policy of individual Eurasian powers; we will provide more examples of this sort in chapter 5 of this book.

In sum, there is an economic rationale for looking at the Eurasian continent as a “region” (particularly dealing with infrastructure and energy, but also with multiple common problems faced by Eurasian countries) and a historical narrative that can be used to construct the identity basis for such a project. Both factors put clear limits on Eurasian meso-level regionalism: the economic, social, and political ties relevant to Eurasia (rather than to the world as a whole, or to individual parts of the Eurasian continent) are limited to specific aspects of international and transnational interaction; and the appeal of the historical narrative is limited (at least, as of now; again, one can hardly compare it to the narratives bringing African or South American countries together). However, both factors also emphasize the demand for Eurasian regionalism (for certain policy issues). We will review this topic in the remaining part of the book.



### **3. Building Blocks of Greater Eurasia**

Because for us Eurasian continental regionalism is in many instances associated with the interaction between regional organizations and projects that already exist in individual parts of Eurasia, it is meaningful to briefly discuss the organization of these projects before proceeding to an analysis of the “Eurasian” initiative *sui generis*. These projects are relevant for us from two perspectives. First, they have the potential to become “building blocks” of Greater Eurasia, which might then emerge as network of interconnections and ties between these projects. Second, as chapter 5 will show, some of these projects themselves become centers for initiatives claiming to cover the entirety of Greater Eurasia. The EU or EAEU are examples of initiatives that are (or are treated by their key countries as) potential cores of trans-Eurasian initiatives.

An important problem of Eurasian regionalism is that its building blocks follow a very different organization and structure. Regional organizations in Latin America or in Africa are more similar to each other than regional organizations in Eurasia. This makes any form of cooperation and interaction very difficult (although one should mention that, even in cases when individual projects have been similar, these similarities have sometimes produced more problems than opportunities for integration). To simplify somewhat, Eurasian regionalism develops between two key poles: highly institutionalized state-led European regionalism and flexible project-oriented Asian regionalism. On the one hand, regionalism in the post-Soviet area has, in terms of formal structure, followed the blueprint of European integration for three decades; on the other hand, however, in terms of truly functional aspects of integration, the post-Soviet area was, for the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, closer to the Asian model of regionalism.

The EU hardly deserves any additional discussion within the context of this book. Not only has it become the implicit yardstick in comparative regionalism studies (in spite of immense criticisms regularly expressed by the scholarly community concerning the use of this yardstick), but it is also a unique organization that has become the subject of its own scientific

discipline, EU studies (Keeler 2005). At the moment the EU (or rather its predecessor organizations) emerged, the European model of regionalism was not an accepted normative benchmark (there were two competing alternatives in Europe itself: the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance and the European Free Trade Association), but over time it turned out to be the most successful project, overshadowing other international institutions in Europe (such as the Council of Europe—see Schimmelfennig 2016). The European approach to regionalism can, in a nutshell, be summarized in several key points.

- First, it is a state-led and rule-based design of regional integration: for the EU, the key content of regionalism is creating common *norms and rules* with which economic, social, and political actors must comply. Other elements of possible interconnection (such as common infrastructure) matter, but are subordinated to the creation of the common economic and political order.
- Second, regionalism is implemented by a vast and growing European bureaucracy: the EU's institutional design has paid particular attention to creating supranational (rather than merely intergovernmental) institutions and to forming the *esprit du corps* of European civil servants.
- Third, European regionalism took trade and trade-related issues as a starting point for regionalism, gradually expanding from a free trade area and customs union toward a common market and an economic union with a common currency.
- Fourth, for the European project, the commonality of participants' values is extremely important; this is why the EU has found it so difficult to deal with cases such as Poland or Hungary of late (Szent-Ivanyi and Kugiel 2020). Indeed, the European project has a very strong normative and ideological foundation in the form of the “European idea,” which is embraced by the key participants (especially France and Germany). The EU considers itself an initiative of democracies and market economies rather than a loose alliance of countries based on common interests.

Again, these principles are in many cases perceived as self-evident by many regional organizations around the world; strictly speaking, however, each of them can be debated. Two groups of actors that do *not* seem to debate or question them are the EU bureaucracy and the political class of the EU countries. All the major crises the EU has experienced over the past two decades—the Euro crisis, Brexit, and the current COVID-19 pandemic—have been addressed in a way that adheres to these principles. Most importantly, these principles also matter for the EU’s external relations. Thus, the EU frequently emphasizes trade cooperation (e.g., free trade areas) as the basic element of economic cooperation (and as a tool for transmitting EU institutions and norms); actively “exports” European norms and values abroad (Schimmelfennig 2015), including good governance and democracy (Youngs 2009; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011; Freiburg et al. 2015); cooperates with institutionalized regional organizations worldwide and promotes their institutionalization (Börzel and Risse 2009); and cooperates primarily with similar democratic market economies (or at least claims to do so; whether the EU’s commitment to democracy is stronger than its willingness to support stability in its neighborhood and whether it prevents it from working with authoritarian states is subject to intensive debate—see Seeberg 2009; Börzel et al. 2009; Hatab 2019).

For many decades, East and Southeast Asia embraced a different approach to regional integration. In East Asia, contradictions between key countries (China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), as well as the high value assigned to national sovereignty, made any form of advanced formal regionalism impossible. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN originally emerged as a security organization that over time focused more and more on economic issues and incorporated more East Asian countries through various formats. However, while ASEAN became more institutionalized in the 1990s and in the 2000s, regional integration in Asia remained more market-led than state-led. Formal institutions, norms, and rules play a much smaller role than informal economic connections between countries emerging through trade ties, FDI, and migration (Peng 2000; Das 2005; Katzenstein and Shiraishi 2006; Zhao 2013; Brennan 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the “open regionalism” approach we have discussed in conjunction with APEC has been influenced by the East Asian experience. Furthermore, Asian countries, which are forced by their geographic location to cooperate and to interact with political regimes strikingly different from their own (democratic Japan and authoritarian China being the most prominent examples), have developed a much higher level of tolerance for differing norms and values than their European counterparts. The ASEAN Way (Goh 2000; Cockerham 2010; Yukawa 2018) emphasizes non-interference in the affairs of other nations, as well as the search for political consensus and tolerance of various political systems. Asian regionalism is in no way associated with any form of democracy promotion; even China’s role as a potential center of authoritarian diffusion, which has received a lot of attention recently (Ambrosio 2012; Yilmaz and Yildrim 2020), does not seem to be associated with creating regional integration agreements.<sup>28</sup> As we will show in what follows, differences in the perception of regionalism have played an important role in the ultimately limited effect of ASEM between the EU and Asian countries (at least in comparison to the project’s originally very large ambitions).

The focus on bottom-up approaches and pragmatic economic formats explains why Asia pays particular attention to infrastructure in its regional integration efforts. This focus is also associated with the overall poorer quality of infrastructure in Asia in comparison with Europe; according to De (2006), for most Asian economies, transaction costs are a key barrier to accessing global markets (however, this applies less to the coastal regions of China or to the countries of Southeast Asia, Japan, and South Korea than to Central Asia). Building roads, railroads, and pipelines is much easier to achieve than institutional integration; developing infrastructure is a more tangible objective, with clear payoffs (and also rent-seeking opportunities). As we will show in what follows, China in particular seems to treat infrastructure

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<sup>28</sup> With the possible exception of the SCO, which is in any case a Eurasian and not an East Asian regionalist project.

as a key element of its regional integration strategy. The fact that common infrastructure constitutes a natural foundation for continental projects in Eurasia explains why East Asian countries like China or Japan are much more active in developing connectivity initiatives than the EU, with its rule-based approach.<sup>29</sup>

The post-Soviet space, which by virtue of its geographic location plays an important role in Greater Eurasian projects, in a sense oscillates between the Asian and European models of regionalism. On the one hand, from the very beginning, post-Soviet elites have considered the EU as the only blueprint for regional integration. All Eurasian projects have copied the EU, some more diligently than others. In the case of the EAEU, similarities to the EU are apparent in its scope (a customs union) and institutional design (the Eurasian Economic Commission [EAEC], with its claim to supranationality) (Furman and Libman 2019; Libman 2019). In a sense, this attempt to copy the EU (and the general perception of the EU as the only attractive and feasible model of regionalism) is probably one of the main reasons why post-Soviet regionalism performed so poorly until 2010. EU regionalism implies substantial willingness on the part of countries to delegate authority to supranational bodies and a high level of trust among participants: in the post-Soviet region—where most countries have been engaged in nation-building projects since the early 1990s and authoritarian regimes have consolidated in the majority of states since the early 2000s—mistrust and hostility were commonplace and the preconditions for the EU model of regionalism were clearly absent (low-quality bureaucracy and institutions exacerbated the problems). Unsurprisingly, for some elements of the EU model (such as the customs union) to work in Eurasia, the countries had to become *less* dependent on

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<sup>29</sup> The description of the Asian and European models of regionalism in this chapter is of course massively simplified. Both models have evolved over time and are much more complex entities than this chapter might suggest. However, we are still able to identify the fundamental features of the Asian and the European regional integration models.

each other so that mutual dependence was not perceived as a threat (Libman and Vinokurov 2018).<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, since the early 2000s, the post-Soviet world has become an area of flourishing informal, bottom-up regionalization, which has emerged in spite of a lack of formal regionalism (and sometimes contradicting the policies of individual countries). Russian and Kazakhstani multinationals turned into key actors, acquiring assets throughout former Soviet republics; the same countries also turned into hubs for labor migration from countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Moldova. Common legacies of the Soviet past (culture, language, and divided ethnicities) and still-porous borders (again a Soviet legacy) supported this regionalization process. Unsurprisingly, by 2005–2008, the post-Soviet region looked much more similar to East Asia than to Europe (Libman and Vinokurov 2012b). In fact, in Eurasia, regionalization in the area of labor markets and investments appeared to be more successful than in the area of trade; while trade ties between post-Soviet countries stagnated, the common labor market flourished and labor migration simultaneously became a serious challenge and a development factor for many post-Soviet states (Libman and Vinokurov 2012a). The situation changed in 2010 with the establishment of the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which became the first functioning regional organization in Eurasia. The economic stagnation Russia entered in 2013 and the Crimean crisis of 2014 (followed by international sanctions against Russia) led to the decline of market-based integration in the post-Soviet space: Russia's economic power decreased, making its companies less likely to pursue

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<sup>30</sup> Eurasian regionalism, similarly to its East Asian counterpart, emphasizes the crucial role of non-interference and respect for individual countries' sovereignty. At the same time, there is evidence that at least some Eurasian regional organizations play an important role in the context of mutual support of authoritarian regimes and autocracy promotion (Obydenkova and Libman 2015, 2019). There are, however, important differences between post-Soviet organizations in this respect: some seem to have this "hidden" political component, while others concentrate on the purely economic aspects of cooperation.

an aggressive FDI strategy. At the same time, the EAEU remained a functioning customs union—one of very few in the world.

The institutional design of the EAEU is probably a good example of an important paradox associated with post-Soviet regionalism. While the regional organizations in this part of the world (until recently—we will discuss some changes observed over the last few years in chapter 5) copied the EU, Eurasian elites seem to be much more open to the “project-based” mode of regionalism, where common rules and norms play a subordinate role. This is one of several reasons for the problems of interaction between the EU and the EAEU—in the eyes of Russian political elites, for instance, the EU’s adherence to common frameworks seems unreasonable, whereas the EU feels that flexibility with respect to the implementation of common projects is unproductive (Libman et al. 2016) (this is also an issue in EU–China relations, with the EU expressing concern that Chinese investments in Eastern and Southern Europe will undermine EU regulations). Things are further complicated by the fact that the EU occasionally *does* deviate from its strict adherence to norms and rules, or rather re-interprets those rules and norms in line with current political logic—as the intensive debate about Nord Stream 2 shows.

In conclusion, the building blocks of Greater Eurasia consist of regional integration projects of very different type and structure. They are organized based on different principles, provide different roles to supranational bureaucracy and to national states, use different tools for promoting regional integration, and pursue somewhat different goals. On top of all this, they also consist of countries with very different economic, political, and institutional characteristics. Despite backsliding in some Eastern European states and problems in some candidates for EU accession in the Western Balkans, Europe is primarily populated by advanced and stable democracies. Two other regions—the post-Soviet space and East and Southeast Asia—contain democratic and authoritarian states; while in Eurasia the key actors involved in the regionalism processes (Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) are authoritarian, in East and

Southeast Asia authoritarian powers (especially China and Vietnam) coexist with democratic states (Japan and South Korea). Russia and Kazakhstan are resource-rich countries; the EU states and the industrial states of East Asia are (with some exceptions) importers of natural resources. Different countries in Greater Eurasia also have strikingly different levels of economic development. This heterogeneity obviously makes it difficult to find a format for cooperation that includes individual building blocks.

As the remaining part of this book will show, to date, Eurasian connectivity projects have typically followed the design of Asian regionalism (or have been even more flexible and informal than that) rather than the European institutionalized model. This is not surprising: the factors explaining the design of Asian regionalism are even more pronounced if we look at Eurasia in general. In other words, while the EU is an *actor* in the Eurasian connectivity projects (although, as we will show in what follows, definitely not the most active one) and a frequently mentioned *partner*, it is not a *blueprint* for Eurasian regionalism. The same is true of the EAEU, the only difference being that the EAEU is also not really perceived as a partner of the regional projects in Greater Eurasia—rather, Russia and large post-Soviet countries such as Kazakhstan assume this role (there are, however, exceptions, which we discuss in chapter 6). We will also show that Russian initiatives for Greater Eurasia, however imprecise and vague, are much closer to the Asian model than to the European one. Table 1 offers a short comparison of the regionalism models in different parts of the Eurasian continent.

The difficulties in the interaction of various regional integration models are particularly visible along the boundaries of the macro-regions that constitute the Eurasian space and which are contested by those macro-regions: Central Asia and post-Soviet Eastern Europe. We will discuss these boundary regions in the next section.

**Table 1: Regionalism in Europe, East Asia, and the Post-Soviet Space**

	Europe	East and Southeast Asia	Post-Soviet space
Actors	Governments: top-down regionalism	Companies and networks: bottom-up regionalism	Top-down regionalism in the EAEU; prior to that, primarily bottom-up
Focus	Rules and norms	Infrastructure and specific projects	Rules and norms <i>on paper</i> ; infrastructure <i>as preferred by political elites</i>
International bureaucracy	Supranational	Intergovernmental	Intergovernmental
Importance of common values	High	Low	Low (but autocracy promotion)
Steps in the regionalism sequence	From trade to investments and labor markets	Flexible	From trade to investments and labor markets (although <i>de facto</i> interconnections in the area of labor markets and investments are very high from the beginning)

## **4. Regions of Overlap and Interconnection**

### **4.1. Central Asia**

The boundaries of Eurasian regions are not carved in stone; they are in many cases fluid and subject to changes and shifts, depending on the social discussion and on political and economic realities. This leads in the emergence of territories of “overlap” between the “building blocks.” Their existence is, on the one hand, a factor contributing to the emergence of interconnections in Eurasia (because the economic and political issues of these territories of overlap frequently require the involvement of multiple actors), but also, on the other hand, a factor contributing to tensions (if competition between various actors and blocs over control of these territories emerges). In this chapter, we discuss two territories of overlap that are particularly relevant for us. First, we look at post-Soviet Central Asia. In the Central Asian region, the extent of economic cooperation between countries is very low; at the same time, however, the region hosts a number of integration initiatives that involve post-Soviet countries and other Eurasian states and is also a hub for multiple infrastructural projects. Post-Soviet Eastern Europe evolved into an area of competition between Russia (and thus, indirectly, the EAEU) and the EU.<sup>31</sup>

We start with Central Asia. In political discourse, this region is typically defined as including five post-Soviet countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), although broader concepts of greater Central Asia, Inner Asia, Central Eurasia, and even Central Caucasia exist (Fuller 1990; Papava 2008; Starr 2008). Historically, there has been substantial ambiguity in the usage of the concept of Central Asia (Cowan 2007; van den Bosch 2018; Gorshenina 2019); in the Soviet Union, the four southern republics were typically referred to as Middle Asia, with Kazakhstan treated as something separate. The perception of these five “stans” as a common region, possible with a common integration agenda, is to some

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<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that both territories of overlap are located in the post-Soviet space, reflecting the importance of centrifugal forces for this part of the world.

extent a post-Soviet phenomenon (Qoraboyev 2010a) that emerged in the early 1990s and was soon enough contested by some of the countries—Kazakhstan, for example, considered renaming itself to avoid association with the other “stans.”<sup>32</sup> The contemporary boundaries between Central Asian nations (and sometimes even the definition of these nations) were in many instances the product of the Soviet construction of individual union republics in the 1920s (Abashin 2012), and Central Asia is still undergoing nation-building (Omelicheva 2014). Historically, Central Asia played a crucial role in the system of Silk Roads connecting the east and west of Eurasia (Frank 1992). We have already mentioned that the notion of a “Silk Road” could be the product of a modern reinterpretation of history, but it nevertheless reflects the existence of multiple economic, cultural, and social connections in this part of the territory. The notion of a “Silk Road” is, as already mentioned and as the next chapter will show, central for many projects of trans-Eurasian connectivity, which unsurprisingly attribute a particular importance to Central Asia.

In spite of their alleged Silk Road past, the Central Asian states have showed very limited ability to develop economic and political integration. While the five states initiated a regional integration project after the fall of the Soviet Union (the Central Asian Union), this was unsuccessful and (after going through several iterations) merged with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community (Qoraboyev 2010b; Rosset and Svarin 2014; Vinokurov and Libman 2017; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2019; Pataccini and Malikov 2020). Cooperation between Central Asian autocracies has been more successful in the area of mutual protection of regimes than in the economic sphere (Allison 2004; Collins 2009). This lack of cooperation has been driven by a variety of factors: mutual mistrust of Central Asian autocrats, contested borders, and conflicts over rents are just a few important determinants thereof. Recent years

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<sup>32</sup> “Kazakhstan mozhet byt’ pereimenovan v ‘Kazakh Eli,’” *RIA Novosti*, February 6, 2014, <https://ria.ru/20140206/993517908.html>, accessed February 19, 2021.

have witnessed a revival of the Central Asian regionalism debate (Moldashev and Qoraboyev 2018; Cornell and Starr 2018), particularly after the death of Islam Karimov (Patnaik 2019). Economically, the Central Asian countries are more connected to Russia and to China than they are to each other (Libman and Vinokurov 2011). Del Sordi and Libman (2021) show that there is no recognized regional leader, yet alone hegemon, among the Central Asian countries that is either able or willing to export its political and economic model. In a region where some of the states are separated by landmine zones (Reeves 2014), one can hardly expect any form of advanced cooperation to emerge.

At the same time, lack of political cooperation does not preclude the emergence of economic ties and informal regionalization among Central Asian countries, although the extent of their participation in this process differs depending on domestic political and economic circumstances (Libman 2009). These informal ties are associated with the activity of private actors (such as informal cross-border trade) (Kaminski and Mitra 2010, 2012). On top of this, Central Asian countries heavily depend upon each other in several important dimensions (although at the intergovernmental level these interdependencies frequently give rise more to conflict than to opportunities for collaboration). The most prominent example is the water-and-energy nexus (Jalilov 2018). The upstream countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) control the substantial water resources needed for irrigation in the downstream countries (such as Uzbekistan); mountain rivers can be used for electricity production, although this would limit the access of downstream countries to water. This extremely sensitive issue can only be ultimately resolved through the cooperation of Central Asian states, which, as described above, is extremely limited.

More importantly, over the last 30 years, Central Asia has witnessed the increasing presence of various Eurasian great powers. In addition to Russia's efforts to protect its traditional influence (Page 1994; Laruelle 2010), Central Asia has experienced the growing economic and political importance of China (Swanström 2005; Sahadeo and Zanca 2007;

O’Neill 2014; Peyrouse 2008; Dave and Kobayashi 2018); at various points, Turkey, the US, India, and the EU have also attempted to increase their influence in the region. The metaphor of the new “Great Game” has repeatedly been applied to Central Asia (Menon 2003; Kleveman 2003). At the same time, Central Asia has not experienced the ruinous levels of competition between global and regional powers that have afflicted post-Soviet Eastern Europe (which we will discuss in the next section). On the contrary, Deyermond (2009) describes Central Asia as a region of coexistence (including both cooperation and competition) between multiple power poles; such a situation might align with the ideas of Central Asian leaders (Karabayeva 2019). In particular, belying the expectations of some observers, Russia and China have so far avoided open confrontation over Central Asia. Chinese economic expansion in the region coexists with continued political ties between the Central Asian states and Russia, and the Central Asian countries participate in the regional labor market of the post-Soviet world (Laruelle 2007). Moreover, in Central Asia, Russia seems to be less concerned about possible external influences undermining its position than it is in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, which is clearly perceived as a contested region by the Russian leadership. While Russia has been concerned about the U.S. military presence in some Central Asian states, it does not seem to have any objections to Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector policy” (Hanks 2009) or to democratic revolution in Kyrgyzstan (Libman and Obydenkova 2018). As a result, integration formats that would not function in post-Soviet Eastern Europe (where regional integration decisions tend to become decisions about identity and affinity for Russia) are possible in Central Asia.

In short, the situation in Central Asia can be described as a combination of three features: (a) a very low level of cooperation among the countries of the region (short of interaction on matters associated with mutual protection of authoritarian regimes) (Tskhay and Costa Buranelli 2020); (b) the presence of multiple external power centers, which nevertheless mostly avoid direct confrontation (with the partial exception of relations between Russia and the US in the 2010s); and (c) the existence of informal economic ties and interdependencies between

Central Asian countries. The last two features make Central Asia more open to trans-Eurasian cooperation initiatives; the first feature, however, is an obstacle. Most importantly, Central Asian countries, due to their landlocked location, are particularly interested in the development of cooperation formats in the Greater Eurasian and trans-Eurasian infrastructure. Their continental location increases their interest in access to transportation routes and pipelines. Furthermore, Central Asian countries (with the exception of Kazakhstan) still exhibit substantial deficits in terms of state capacity and administration quality and are thus interested in receiving external support, which increases their willingness to participate in transcontinental initiatives. As for Kazakhstan, this country sees its “Eurasian” nature (which, in contrast to some of the discussions in Russia, it defines as genuinely combining Europe and Asia) as the core of its identity (Mostafa 2013; Köppen 2013).

In recent decades, Central Asia has witnessed the emergence of a number of cooperation schemes and initiatives connecting it to other parts of Greater Eurasia. We will review some of these projects (which are associated with the main power centers in Eurasia) in the next chapter: for the BRI, the NSRI, the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA), and the CCAP, Central Asian states are among the key foci of attention. In what follows, however, we look at somewhat narrower projects that are not immediately associated with or promoted by major Eurasian power centers—although they are supported by international organizations and donors such as the UN and its agencies, the World Bank and the ADB—which target Central Asia and aim to improve its connectivity to other parts of the Eurasian continent. Most of these projects are not overly ambitious; essentially, their focus is on infrastructural improvement, capacity-building, the improvement of bureaucratic procedures, and trade facilitation. However, these formats are probably the only ones available given the high levels of mistrust among Central Asian leaders. Some of these projects remain on paper, while others have produced limited forms of cooperation.

We will review three initiatives: the Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and the UN Development Program (UNDP) Silk Road Regional Program (SRRP). The CAREC program is probably the most successful of the regional initiatives in Central Asia. It was launched in 2001 as a project of the ADB and now defines itself as a partnership of 11 countries (all five Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, and Mongolia) and six international institutions (the World Bank, the ADB, the Islamic Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the IMF, and the UNDP). According to CAREC's self-description, between 2001 and 2019 it managed to implement 204 projects with an overall investment volume of US\$38 billion.<sup>33</sup> In 2017, CAREC participants approved a new strategic program, CAREC 2030, including five operational clusters: economic and financial stability; trade, tourism and economic corridors; infrastructure and connectivity; agriculture and water; and human development. The lion's share of CAREC projects have so far been in the area of transportation (76% of funding) and energy (22%), with the ADB a major source of funding (37%; other international financial institutions have provided 41% of funds).<sup>34</sup> The focus on energy and infrastructure fits both the interests of Central Asian states (landlocked but possessing substantial energy resources) and the general focus of Greater Eurasian integration as outlined in chapter 2. CAREC has an elaborate institutional infrastructure, including the regular Ministerial Conference, the CAREC Secretariat, and the CAREC Institute.

Linn (2012) describes several important advantages of CAREC. The key benefit of the CAREC approach is its pragmatic orientation: rather than developing grand strategies or

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<sup>33</sup> CAREC, "CAREC 2030 Strategic Framework," [https://www.carecprogram.org/?page\\_id=32](https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=32), accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> CAREC, "CAREC Project Portfolio," [https://www.carecprogram.org/?page\\_id=13630](https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=13630), accessed February 19, 2021.

promising immense success in regional cooperation, which would be unachievable in Central Asia due to the complex relations between countries, it pursues very specific technical goals with clear milestones and objectives set by its participants. Financial support from major international donors, especially the ADB, is yet another factor in CAREC’s success: Murashkin (2019) points out the crucial importance of Japan for the implementation of the program, an importance linked to the significant role of Japanese officials in the ADB. Furthermore, member states take part in the activities of CAREC directly through sectoral ministries; this ensures that CAREC’s goals and programs are clearly adjusted to the specific needs of national bureaucracies. CAREC is a highly transparent organization. At the same time, one should not overestimate CAREC’s success; it is an initiative with a rather limited scope that excludes many issues of vital importance to the Central Asian states (such as the water–energy nexus). Thus, in a sense, CAREC demonstrates the limits of regional cooperation in Central Asia—but it also shows that, even under difficult conditions, some progress is possible.

The UN’s SPECA was established in 1998. It originally included four countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), with three other countries (Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan) joining the program at a later stage. The Tashkent Declaration, which underpinned the creation of the program, emphasized the “communality of economic development interests” of Central Asia and called for greater cooperation on issues such as transportation, pipeline routes, water, and energy. It also highlighted the need to provide economic assistance to Tajikistan, which was then recovering from a devastating civil war.<sup>35</sup> The work of SPECA is supported by two regional UN agencies: the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Unlike CAREC, international financial institutions do not participate, which is obviously a weakness of the program. While CAREC includes China—although it does not

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<sup>35</sup> UNECE, “Tashkent Declaration,” <https://www.unece.org/speca/td.html>, accessed February 19, 2021.

include Russia, which Linn (2012) sees as a problem for the initiative—SPECA remains a purely Central Asian project. The program is directed by a Governing Council consisting of the vice prime ministers of participating states; it organizes annual economic forums dealing with the main problems of Central Asia. SPECA’s areas of work, according to its website, are defined extremely broadly: they cover trade, transport and connectivity, water, energy and environment, gender, innovation and sustainable development, and the improvement of practices in national statistics. SPECA has much less funding than CAREC and mostly focuses on consulting projects, as well as specific small-scale infrastructure projects and capacity-building.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, the UNDP’s SRRP should be mentioned as probably one of the first initiatives to explicitly use the “Silk Road” metaphor. The program started in 2000 and aimed to develop economic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states. The framework of the program was rather broad: it had the goal of promoting trade, investment, and tourism, primarily through information exchange and other similar measures. For example, the cooperation between the UNDP and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) resulted in the publication of the *Investment Guide to the Silk Road* in 2009. We previously (Vinokurov and Libman 2012a) discussed the UNDP SRRP as an example of a project that supports sub-national cooperation and the cooperation of economic actors, including within the framework of the Silk Road Mayors’ Forum and the Silk Road Investment Forum. The geographic scope of the forums was genuinely “Eurasian,” with multiple cities across the continent sending representatives.

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<sup>36</sup> UNECE, “SPECA Work Plan for 2020-2021,” [https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA\\_WORK\\_PLAN\\_FOR\\_2020-2021\\_Russian.pdf](https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/SPECA/documents/gc/session14/SPECA_WORK_PLAN_FOR_2020-2021_Russian.pdf), accessed February 19, 2021.

In short, there are three main lessons to be drawn from the Central Asian case for an analysis of Greater Eurasian integration. First, Central Asia is a region for which transcontinental connectivity would be crucial for improving economic and social development. Second, at the same time, Central Asia finds it extremely difficult to establish robust cooperation between countries. Third, the most successful projects are narrow in scope, non-ideological, and based on the strong support of external donors; there seems to be no evidence of significant regional cooperation where this support and guidance was not available. At the same time, the situation in Central Asia is much better than in another region of overlap, post-Soviet Eastern Europe, where competition between large regional integration projects has created major barriers to Eurasian connectivity.

#### **4.2. Post-Soviet Eastern Europe**

Post-Soviet Eastern Europe is a region that is even more flexible and poorly defined than Central Asia. Originally, one could have described it as a large and diverse group of countries between the former Iron Curtain and the Russian border. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most of these countries joined the EU; the only exceptions were the countries of the Western Balkans, which have a clear EU membership perspective and have strongly linked their future to cooperation with the EU.<sup>37</sup> Today, therefore, post-Soviet Eastern Europe primarily consists of former Soviet republics that are part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP): Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. These countries resemble each other even less than do the Central Asian republics. While in Central Asia only one country (Kyrgyzstan) is an unstable democracy, post-Soviet

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<sup>37</sup> The emergence of China as an important player in the Western Balkans, which has received a lot of attention recently (Pavlicevic 2019), and Serbia's traditional affinity for Russia do not fundamentally change the situation: the elites of the Western Balkans do not question the European perspective of their countries, except in some populist statements, and the EU remains the dominant actor in this region.

Eastern Europe includes all combinations of regimes, from competitive democracies in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova to consolidated autocracies in Azerbaijan and Belarus. A more important feature of post-Soviet Eastern Europe is that, unlike Central Asia, which created its own “mental map” in the early 1990s, these six states located between the EU and Russia do not treat themselves as a unified region. They seem to have very little interest in economic cooperation and there is no evidence of the emergence of a common identity among them—although the EU has to some extent tried to promote one (see Pulisova 2011). Rather, the countries of post-Soviet Eastern Europe have sought closer alliances either with the EU or with Russia, and this has become a constant source of conflict and confrontation.<sup>38</sup>

From the Russian perspective, post-Soviet Eastern Europe is an important—nay, essential—part of the post-Soviet space. Belarus has participated in all regional integration projects led by Russia, including the EAEU. Ensuring Ukraine’s participation in these projects remained a goal of Russian foreign policy until 2014. There are intensive economic and social ties between the countries of post-Soviet Eastern Europe and Russia (although in the case of Ukraine, these have been declining rapidly since 2014). For Russia, therefore, the EU is clearly an “extra-regional” player projecting its influence onto a territory that Russia considers vital to its own security and economic interests. For the EU, meanwhile, post-Soviet Eastern Europe is part of the “European neighborhood”—an area that consists of countries without prospects of EU membership but that have developed strong ties to the EU. The stability, economic prosperity, and democratization of this neighborhood is perceived as an important EU goal; some EU member states (such as Poland) also treat post-Soviet Eastern Europe as a potential

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<sup>38</sup> This does not mean that the countries of post-Soviet Central Europe are entirely unrelated to each other. Their very existence between the power poles of the EU and Russia is a forceful common factor determining the evolution of each of these countries. Political actors (both protest movements and political leadership) in this part of the world occasionally cooperate with each other and learn from one another (Hall 2020). And generally speaking, the countries of Eastern Europe occasionally serve as yardsticks in the eyes of each other.

security belt against Russia. In short, the EU and Russia have conflicting visions of how post-Soviet Eastern Europe should be defined and how it should develop over time.

As a result, unlike Central Asia, where external actors (including Russia) have been willing to support regional cooperation initiatives, there has been limited interest in this in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. Russia has shown no interest in supporting the cooperation of Eastern European countries, and has probably even benefited from existing conflicts, such as those in the South Caucasus. At a certain point in time, the EU attempted to develop economic cooperation within the EaP, but it was much more interested in promoting economic and political cooperation between the EaP and the EU through various instruments, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). In Russia's view, the EU should have consulted with the Russian leadership about its cooperation with Eastern European countries; to the EU, any form of consultation with Russia is unnecessary and even counterproductive, as it would recognize Russia's claim to co-determine the fates of the countries of post-Soviet Eastern Europe, a claim the EU rejects. Neither the EU nor Russia has attempted to find formats of cooperation that would allow Eastern European states to develop ties to both Russia and the EU. On the contrary, both poles have promoted cooperation formats that have *de facto* forced the Eastern European states to choose between a pro-European stance and a pro-Russian one. For Russia, finally, another important factor has to be mentioned: the Russian leadership is concerned that the EU's policy in Eastern Europe might have spillover effects in Russia itself. For instance, democratic revolutions in Eastern European countries could potentially have a demonstration effect in Russia. Libman and Obydenkova (2018) show that Russia is less likely to pressure Eastern European countries to join the EAEU when it is less concerned that these countries might become part of EU-led "alliances."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> At the same time, as we will discuss in chapter 6, while Russia attempted to encourage dialogue between the EU and the EAEU, the EU has showed no interest in this dialogue since at least 2014.

Thus, until 2014, the situation appeared as follows. Russia promoted the Customs Union (which would later become the EAEU). It successfully pressured Armenia to stop negotiations about the DCFTA and to start discussions about joining the Customs Union (Armenia became part of the EAEU in 2015) and unsuccessfully attempted to do the same with Ukraine (President Yanukovych's decision not to sign the DCFTA ultimately touched off the Euromaidan and the subsequent crisis). The Customs Union, due to its institutional design, does not allow its members to sign individual trade treaties or form free-trade areas with external partners like the EU.

At the same time, the EU chose the DCFTA as its main tool for interacting with EaP countries. For the EU, trade integration is not necessarily the main goal: the institutional development of EaP countries and improving their quality of governance can be seen as a more important objective. A trade agreement with the EU would make it impossible for Eastern European countries to become part of the EAEU.

Essentially, the regional integration institutions chosen by the two sides and the regional perceptions held by each made competition between regional projects inevitable (see also Caldier 2014; Delcour 2015; Korosteleva 2016; Delcour and Wolczuk 2016; Kinyakin and Kucheryavia 2019).

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 closed off any opportunity for common region-building in the joint neighborhood of Russia and the EU. Russia's actions in Ukraine made it impossible for the latter to participate in Russia-led projects, as even limited cooperation with Russia would be rejected by a substantial part of the Ukrainian political class and the population. Dialogue between the EU and Russia was frozen; sanctions were introduced and trust was fundamentally lost on both sides. Over time, Russia lost interest in EU–EAEU dialogue (an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in section 6.2). The EU attempted to introduce new instruments of cooperation with the EaP countries, which became part of the EAEU: the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement allowed Armenia to cooperate with the EU at the same time

as upholding its commitments to the EAEU. However, this was the only somewhat successful institutional innovation that followed the 2014 conflict: attempts at trilateral Russia–EU–Ukraine dialogue about the Ukrainian DCFTA failed—and one could have hardly expected any other outcome given the positions of the parties.

At present, Eastern Europe is clearly divided as follows: three EaP countries (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) that have signed a DCFTA with the EU and have shown very little interest in developing their cooperation with Russia; two countries (Belarus and Armenia) that are part of the EAEU; and Azerbaijan, which refrains from both intensive cooperation with Russia and cooperation with the EU. One can hardly imagine the situation changing in the foreseeable future without significant political shifts in Russia or in the Eastern European countries, and even the major turbulence experienced by Belarus and Armenia in 2020—war in Nagorno-Karabakh and public protests in Belarus—did not seem to produce such shifts. In short, Eastern Europe, unlike Central Asia, has not become an arena for new cooperation formats; on the contrary, as we will discuss in what follows, conflicts in Eastern Europe have made any cooperation in Greater Eurasia much more difficult.

The comparison of Eastern Europe with Central Asia gives rise to two important observations. First, the reason that development was much less conflictual in Central Asia was, in some sense, that powerful actors had much less interest in the region. Neither China, Russia, the EU nor the US attempted to reshape and dominate the region. As a result, Russia was much less concerned about the economic expansion of China than it was about the institutional and political cooperation of Eastern European countries with the EU. Most importantly, Russia sees the EU’s cooperation with Eastern European countries and its democracy-promotion agenda as threatening not only its geopolitical interests, but also the internal stability of the Russian regime, which has caused a disproportionate response. For the EU, economic prosperity and democracy in its neighborhood are of paramount importance: the EU could not credibly commit to not supporting democratic change in neighboring countries even if it wanted to, as EU

political elites would be unable to explain to their populations why they failed to support a democratic transition in the event that one started. Our analysis again highlights that, given the extent of the differences and contradictions between Eurasian countries, any form of Greater Eurasian cooperation ought to develop in low-politics technical areas. Second, the comparison shows that initiatives such as a free trade area are clearly beyond the reach of Eurasian regionalism (chapter 6 will show that any attempts to discuss these topics in Central Asia have also failed). One should look at more narrow and pragmatic areas of cooperation, such as transportation and trade facilitation. This issue of connectivity is indeed key for most, if not all, integration projects in Greater Eurasia, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

## **5. One Eurasia or Many? Competing Connectivity Projects**

Having looked at the “areas of overlap” of Eurasian regions, in this chapter we will address projects explicitly designed to “connect” Eurasia as a whole. The idea of Eurasian connectivity has so far been embraced by multiple major powers in Eurasia—indeed, possibly by so many that the competition between connectivity projects and ideas could create new dividing lines for the continent. Many of these connectivity projects reference the “Silk Road” and thus historical Eurasian exchanges, in line with the arguments we presented in chapter 2 (the only actor that explicitly refers to the concept of Eurasia is Russia, which essentially “owns” the concept). Multiple major Eurasian powers have suggested (or are pursuing) their own “Greater Eurasian” vision; most of these projects emphasize the openness of these powers and their willingness to embrace economic ties to multiple partners across the continent, although some initiatives explicitly exclude certain gravity centers in Eurasia or are designed to limit their influence. With the exception of the Russian GEP, these initiatives have a clear focus on infrastructure.

In what follows, we will review six connectivity initiatives, which are associated with five major Eurasian powers (China, Japan, the EU, Russia, and India) as well as with the US. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is clearly the most visible and successful of these, and has received enormous political and scholarly attention. The Russian and Japanese projects can both be seen as reactions to the BRI, but take different tacks: while Japan has pursued a narrow project with specific goals and strong ties to established international institutions, Russia has offered the very broad and unspecific vision of the GEP. The EU has fostered two initiatives: TRACECA (one of the earliest Eurasian connectivity initiatives, it began in the early 1990s, long before Chinese or Russian endeavors in this area) and the more recent EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy. Unlike China or Japan, which support their projects with substantial investments, the EU does not have the capacity or the authority to commit funding, as it is primarily a regulatory power. The final two projects have much narrower scope: the US NSRI,

which focuses primarily on Central Asia, has turned out to be rather unsuccessful, while India's CCAP, which likewise focuses on Central Asia, is in a certain sense a response to the BRI.

## 5.1. China: The BRI

### 5.1.1. *Origins and Perspectives on the BRI*

The BRI has in recent years received enormous academic attention, far exceeding that given to all other Greater Eurasian projects discussed in this book. In many instances, regionalism in Greater Eurasia is perceived through the lens of the BRI. This is also the reason why this book offers a rather short discussion of this project and seeks primarily to position it within the universe of Eurasian connectivity initiatives.<sup>40</sup> This discussion will capture only some of the controversies associated with undoubtedly the most important Eurasian connectivity project, an effort that has heavily influenced all the other initiatives reviewed in this chapter.

The BRI was announced in 2013 and has changed its name and design several times. Until 2016, the initiative was called “One Belt One Road” and included two components: the land-based “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the sea-based “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” The initiative became the flagship foreign policy initiative of Xi Jinping and, in a sense, a label for many of China’s current foreign policy initiatives. The foundations of the BRI are the so-called “five connectivities”: policy coordination, infrastructure building, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. The list is, as one can see, very broad and includes multiple aspects of possible economic, political, and social interactions. Probably the most important aspect of the BRI, and also the one that has attracted the most attention

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<sup>40</sup> Some recent examples of book-length treatments of the BRI published in the last three to four years include Cheng et al. (2017); Xing (2018); Macaes (2018b); Ge et al. (2018); Shan et al. (2018); Mayer (2018); Fang and Nolan (2019); Garlick (2019b); Carrari et al. (2020); Pomfret (2020); and Lukin (2020). Some publishers have even established specialized book series dealing with this topic (eg., World Scientific).

internationally, is the second connectivity: infrastructure-building. Within this framework, China has initiated numerous major infrastructural projects aimed at improving transportation infrastructure in Eurasia and in Africa. The overall amount of funding provided for these projects is a matter of debate: as Rolland (2019) shows, the frequent estimate of US\$1 trillion is based on mechanically adding up numerous funding lines and initiatives. Yet the fact that the Chinese government has provided substantial financial resources through various sources to support infrastructural development in Eurasia within the BRI is beyond doubt. The BRI does not have a specific set of members or participants and the number of participating countries varies depending on the source: in March 2020, 138 countries signed a memorandum of understanding with China.<sup>41</sup> From this point of view, the BRI is no longer even a “Eurasian connectivity” initiative but rather a global project. Yet Eurasian countries are still at the core of the BRI and the lion’s share of funding continues to be allocated to them.

In the area of connectivity, the activities of the BRI are specifically associated with six overland transportation corridors: the China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor, the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, the China–Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (World Bank 2019). These corridors are rather broad and their specific geography is subject to regular change, depending on the feasibility and implementation of individual projects. In many cases, they follow existing economic ties, which we described in chapter 2 as growing interconnections across the Eurasian continent (Pomfret 2019). Yet they are also associated with numerous new initiatives and projects. In addition, the Maritime Silk Road aims to strengthen infrastructure for sea-based transportation in the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia. Numerous other initiatives, however,

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<sup>41</sup> Green Belt and Road Initiative Center, “Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),” <https://green-bri.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri>, accessed February 19, 2021.

complement the focus on connectivity. For example, the Digital Silk Road aims to strengthen cooperation in the area of digital technologies and to promote the expansion of Chinese companies in this sector. (This project has become even more important during the pandemic—see also Eurasia Group 2020). The Space Silk Road aims to develop the Chinese global navigation system.<sup>42</sup> The Polar Silk Road is linked to China's growing interest in the exploration of resources of the Arctic and, in light of global warming, its transportation potential. The list of individual initiatives associated with the BRI can certainly be extended and will likely increase between the completion and publication of this book.

As an infrastructural initiative, the BRI signifies an important reorientation of Chinese foreign policy toward the Eurasian continental landmass (Zheng 2020). Yet the BRI is more than this: it is not only a regional project (even for as large a region as Greater Eurasia), but also a vision of a global order and of a new social and economic geography pursued by China (Godehardt 2016; Forough 2019) that to some extent challenges and reshapes existing global governance and globalization—at least discursively (Liu et al. 2018). Today, the BRI is frequently used as an umbrella concept encompassing numerous aspects of Chinese foreign economic policy and representing a new, much more assertive role taken by China in the global world. This breadth is often seen as a weakness of the BRI, which can be reinterpreted and redefined in multiple ways (discussions about the BRI, its nature, and its development have become a focus of academic research in China and elsewhere) and does not contain a clear-cut set of goals and objectives.<sup>43</sup> The very fact that the BRI has been rebranded multiple times within its short lifetime points to the initial vagueness of the concept. At the same time,

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<sup>42</sup> Belt and Road Initiative, “China’s Space Silk Road,” <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/space-silk-road/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Aleksandr Gabuev, “Kak Shelkovyi put’ stal rezinovym,” *Vedomosti*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/09/04/779827-shelkovii-put>, accessed February 19, 2021.

regardless of whether one should see all elements of the BRI as a coherent set of strategies and goals, the BRI undoubtedly has a substantive actual impact and the projects within its framework have changed the development of the current world economy.

The BRI is a highly pragmatic project that concentrates on economic cooperation. From this point of view, it is a clear fit for the approaches of Eurasian connectivity we discuss in this book. China does not explicitly promote a specific set of values through the BRI (unlike, for example, the EU, for which commitment to a particular set of rules and values is very important). There are no requirements for participating countries to combat corruption, institute certain governance practices, etc. However, it is precisely this lack of a specific commitment to values that leads the BRI to be perceived as a concern. First, the BRI has the potential to undercut existing economic institutions that currently use conditionality: even countries reluctant to implement economic reforms or to improve the quality of their governance can receive BRI funds if they have an attractive location or important resources. This concern has often been expressed in relation to the international organizations and development banks established within the BRI framework. Second, the way the BRI is implemented could increase individual countries' dependence on external loans. Existing research confirms that at least some countries engage in unreasonable accumulation of public debt while implementing BRI projects (Hurley et al. 2019; Bandiera et al. 2020).<sup>44</sup> This, in turn, could lead to the macroeconomic destabilization of some BRI countries and potentially increase their dependence on China. The problem of debt will most likely be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, as we will discuss in the conclusion to this book.

Indeed, as Flint and Zhu (2019) acknowledge, the economic and political dimensions of the BRI are inseparable. Yet the BRI is not a project based on exclusive cooperation that

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<sup>44</sup> The discussion about the BRI as a possible “debt trap” has become so active that there are already voices calling to go beyond this analytical paradigm (Lai et al. 2020).

explicitly constrains its participants; it is a broad and open initiative. It is in no way comparable to other large projects launched by authoritarian countries, whether Russia's demand of geopolitical loyalty or Venezuela's requirement of lip service to Bolivarian Socialism in exchange for cheap oil (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). Participation in the BRI does not preclude countries from engaging in other projects or organizations; on the contrary, the BRI is seen as encompassing various initiatives in Eurasia. (There are, of course, still the questions of how the BRI changes the *incentives* to participate in other regional integration and connectivity projects and how it changes the *balance of power* within these organizations—we will discuss these issues in relation to the CEE countries in the next chapter). This “desecuritized” narrative boosts China’s soft power (Jakimov 2019) and makes the BRI more attractive to various countries in Eurasia. The BRI is a project of *economic*, not *political*, influence (Beeson 2019), and as such explicitly refrains from zero-sum thinking about international influence.

At the same time, as Balding (2018) argues, the “no-strings approach” of the BRI—providing finance without commitment to reforms or to good governance—can under certain conditions also weaken Chinese soft power. Specifically, the implementation of BRI projects can be associated with corruption and the growing influence of Chinese investors, which could in turn trigger public disapproval of the BRI. There are examples of public protests against growing Chinese influence even in the countries of Central Asia, which very much benefit from improved connectivity in Eurasia.<sup>45</sup> There is also a question of whether infrastructural development *automatically* creates long-term incentives for economic growth in participating countries—that is, whether it creates spillovers to other sectors—and this may depend on the peculiarities of implementation of each infrastructural project. While most connectivity projects

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<sup>45</sup> Viktoria Panfilova, “Kazakhstansy vzbuntovalis’ protiv kitaiskogo vlianiia,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, September 5, 2019, [https://yandex.ru/turbo/ng.ru/s/cis/2019-09-05/1\\_7669\\_kazakhstan.html](https://yandex.ru/turbo/ng.ru/s/cis/2019-09-05/1_7669_kazakhstan.html), accessed February 19, 2021.

in Eurasia are highly flexible, the “no strings attached” approach is much stronger in the BRI than in projects launched by Japan or the EU, which we will review below.

The BRI has an important domestic dimension for China, both politically (He 2019) and economically (Johnston 2019). First, the BRI is a product of the development of Chinese politics and of the enormous changes it has undergone in the last decade, but it has also been an instrument of this change (Jones and Zeng 2019). Second, the BRI is a response by the Chinese economy to several important challenges: the excess industrial capacity accumulated during the decades of economic growth, which is now used to implement the giant infrastructural development initiatives of the BRI, and the need to promote the economic development of Western and Central China (in addition to the already prosperous coastal provinces), for which infrastructural projects connecting China to Central Asia are very important (Mackerras 2015; Gibson and Li 2018; Hayes 2020). In general, the response of sub-national governments is an important dimension of the BRI (Zeng 2019; Summers 2019) and is very important for its practical implementation, as we discuss in what follows. The BRI project is in line with another important development of recent decades: growing outbound FDI by Chinese companies, including state-owned enterprises. This has made China an important center of capital export, with consequences that are again subject to intensive debate (see Buckley et al. 2018).

As has already been mentioned, the BRI has no specific institutions or organizations: it is a foreign policy initiative (or even a label for a foreign policy approach) and an economic project rather than an example of regionalism in the classical sense.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, a

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<sup>46</sup> The BRI’s place in the comparative regionalism literature is discussed, for example, by Qoraboyev (2018) and Grimmel and Yu (2018). Kheyfets (2019) compares the BRI with mega-regional trade agreements such as TPP and RCEP, and positions the BRI within a special group of “hybrid” economic partnerships that advance regional economic cooperation without creating a common set of rules and norms for the entire region.

number of institutions are linked to the BRI. First, several forums connect China to various countries of the world in regions where the BRI is active. We will review the 17+1 initiative in the next chapter; other examples include the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, established in 2000, and the China–Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum for Latin America. Formal dialogue initiatives exist with the countries of the Middle East (the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, founded in 2004, and the China–Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue). More important are the financial institutions associated with the BRI: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF).

The AIIB is a multilateral development finance institution established in 2014 as a tool for financing development projects around the world. As such, it was immediately accused of either providing financing to countries with regimes friendly to China or at the very least of lowering financing standards below the strict requirements of established international institutions such as the World Bank. Nevertheless, after the initial period of uncertainty, most European countries, along with Canada and Australia, joined the AIIB; only the US remained openly skeptical about this institution (Calaghan and Hubbart 2016; Etzioni 2016; Knoerlich and Urdinze 2019). That being said, Wang (2018) shows that authoritarian states and countries underrepresented in the existing international financial system are more likely to join the AIIB (see also a more differentiated discussion in Rodriguez Vieira 2018). Stephen and Skidmore (2019) see the AIIB as a grain of the international order “indifferent to liberalism.” More recently, however, Faude and Parizek (2020) have shown that what they call contested multilateralism leads to cooperation between established and challenger institutions, with the result that the AIIB now works closely with the World Bank. In short, at least to date, the AIIB is not simply a tool for financing China-friendly autocrats, but it remains to be seen whether it will fully adhere to the norms and rules of established international organizations (such as the

World Bank and the ADB) and whether these norms and rules will themselves change in the face of competition from the AIIB.<sup>47</sup>

The SRF is a Chinese governmental development finance institution with four major shareholders: the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, the China Investment Corporation, the Export–Import Bank, and the China Development Bank. The task of the institution is to finance projects related to the BRI. The SRF aims to invest US\$40 billion into various projects. In addition to the SRF, several other regional funding institutions exist in China: the CCE Investment Cooperation Fund, the Russia–China Investment Fund, and the China–Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund. The Russia–China Fund is a joint entity created by Russian and Chinese development finance institutions with an overall capital of US\$2 billion;<sup>48</sup> the China–Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund is a Chinese institution created to provide funding to SCO countries;<sup>49</sup> and the China–CEE Fund is directed at CEE countries and is co-funded by the Chinese and Hungarian Export–Import Banks.<sup>50</sup> The New Development Bank of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) should also probably be mentioned here, although its membership means that this institution is obviously not limited to Greater Eurasia.

All in all, the BRI is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has unsurprisingly provoked intensive debate among scholars, experts, and policymakers. The key question is

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<sup>47</sup> Reisen (2015) discusses the potential shift in lending from established financial institutions to the AIIB and the New Development Bank and the associated power shift, which may lead to changes in the overall structure of global development finance.

<sup>48</sup> Russia-China Investment Fund, “About the Fund,” <http://rcif.com/en/about-more.htm>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> China-Eurasian Economic Cooperation Fund, <http://en.china-eurasian-fund.com/intro/3.html>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> China-CEE Fund, “Introduction of the Fund,” [http://china-ceefund.com/Template/background\\_9.html](http://china-ceefund.com/Template/background_9.html), accessed February 19, 2021.

probably about the relationship between the economic and the political logic in the structure of the BRI; as the brief discussion above has shown, his question cannot be answered unambiguously, and possibly cannot be answered at all given how strongly the economic and the political dimensions are linked in this case. What we can discuss, however, is how far the initiatives of the BRI have a real effect on economic connectivity in Eurasia, even if they begin from a political dimension. Many aspects of the BRI essentially relabel the process of growing Chinese economic influence, which is a natural consequence of the strong economic growth China has experienced in recent decades. The next sub-section, however, will address a specific phenomenon that is strongly linked to the BRI and demonstrates its ability to produce genuine economic effects and “success stories”: the growth of container traffic in Central Eurasia.

### *5.1.2. Trans-Eurasian Container Traffic: From the Political to the Economic Rationale of the BRI*

In this sub-section,<sup>51</sup> we discuss how the political rationale of the BRI transforms into substantial economic benefits by looking at the success story of trans-Eurasian container traffic. Countries in Northern and Central Eurasia—including its largest economies, Russia and Kazakhstan—were among the early believers in the value of the BRI. Over the last few years, they have increasingly embraced various aspects of the BRI, most importantly additional investment and rising volumes of trans-Eurasian traffic. A lucrative business in its own right, this should also eventually lead to better connectivity between the inner Eurasian regions.

Trans-Eurasian land-based transit is primarily a “container story.” Container transport remains virtually the only method of delivery of trans-Eurasian land-based transit cargo. The use of containers guarantees the preservation of cargo, standard dimensions, reduced

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<sup>51</sup> This sub-section is a revised version of Vinokurov (2020a).

packaging costs, accelerated cargo handling, unified shipping documents, and facilitated forwarding. There has been a stellar increase in railway container traffic from the EU to China and back, from 1,300 TEU (Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units) in 2010 to 340,000 TEU at the end of 2018 (Vinokurov 2020a). In this period, traffic grew between 30% and 100% per annum. According to EAEC data, this growth has continued in 2020 in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 1. Major Trans-Eurasian Corridors



Source: Vinokurov et al. (2018)

Virtually all this cargo travels along two routes. The first is the Central Eurasian Corridor, which runs China–Kazakhstan–Russia–Europe, through the territory of Kazakhstan and then on to the transport infrastructure of Russia, then to Belarus and then to Poland. In Kazakhstan, there are two points of entry from China: Dostyk (the principal point of entry) and Khorgos (where volume is low but rising). The overall length of the route is 7000–7500 km, depending

<sup>52</sup> Eurasian Economic Commission, “Growth in Container Traffic Despite COVID-19 Pandemic,” November 20, 2020, [http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/20\\_11\\_2020-6.aspx](http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/20_11_2020-6.aspx), accessed February 19, 2021.

on the specific path. It has a number of advantages over other routes: (1) an ability to use a single transport modality (railway transport); (2) a minimal number of customs clearing points (only two: China–Kazakhstan and Russia/Belarus–EU); (3) the “traditional” use and relative importance of the corridor, as it is already used to carry cargo in both directions; and (4) competitive shipping prices compared with the other Europe–China routes traversing EAEU countries.

The second corridor is the Northern Eurasian one, which runs from northeast China directly to Russia, or indirectly through Mongolia, then traverses the length of Russia along the Trans-Siberian Railroad before entering Belarus and then Poland. This corridor is longer but also commercially attractive as it originates in northeast China, traverses a number of development industrial centers in Russia, and benefits from preferential rates.

The enormous traffic on these two routes indicates that there is an economic rationale behind trans-Eurasian container transit, yet it began with a political decision. Chinese transport subsidies, provided since 2013, were crucial to jumpstarting the process. The doubling of the number of container trains along China–EAEU–EU routes each year between 2013 and 2017 was largely attributable to the Chinese authorities’ subsidization of export-oriented railway freight traffic. A recent paper by Feng et al. (2020) hints at higher levels of subsidies than had previously been assumed: up to US\$6,000 per 40-foot equivalent unit container. It concludes that the optimal subsidy might be in the range of US\$2,000–2,500. In line with the generally strong role of sub-national governments in promoting growth in China (Libman and Rochlitz 2019), Chinese local governments have been an important source of subsidies (Liu and Ke 2018), but this has also led to distortions and even some subsidy competition.<sup>53</sup> An interesting

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<sup>53</sup> RailFreight, “Chinese Subsidies for the New Silk Road on a Decline,” October 1, 2019, <https://www.railfreight.com/specials/2019/10/01/chinese-subsidies-for-the-new-silk-road-on-a-decline/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

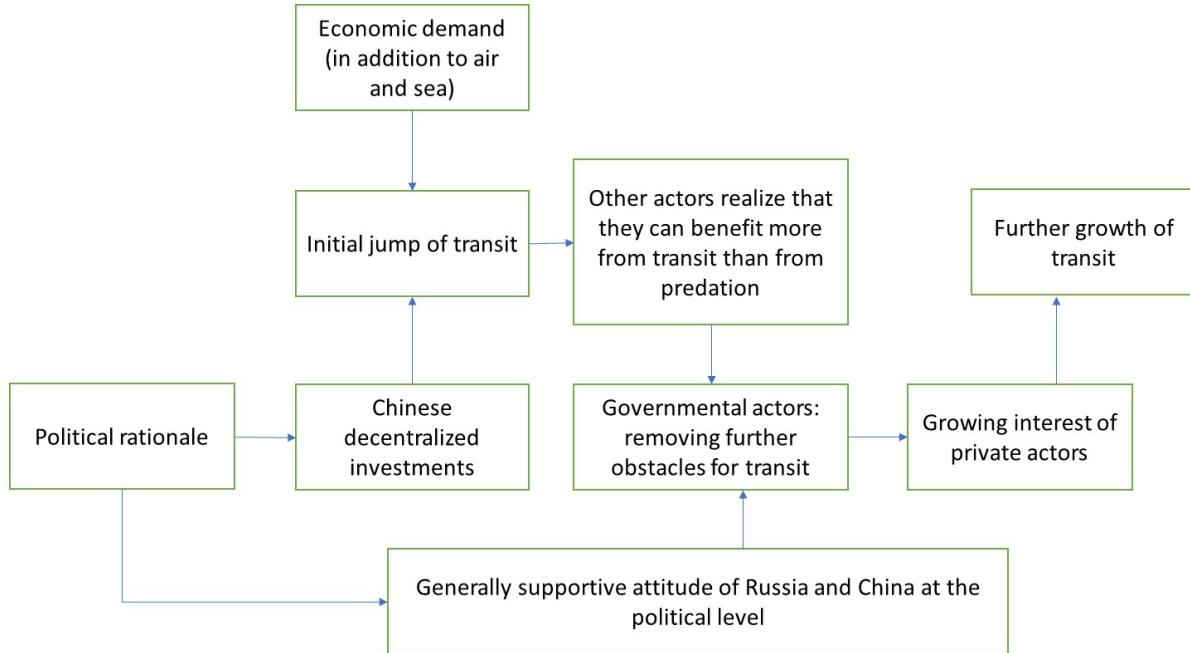
question is why provinces engage in subsidization: it may be driven by pressure from the central government (which would mesh with the overall trend of growing centralization under Xi), willingness to please the center and benefit from the BRI, or genuine interest in benefiting from growing transit. Whatever the case may be, these substantial subsidies became a factor in the initial increase in cargo traffic.

In our opinion, the mechanism that triggered the growth of trans-Eurasian traffic can be summarized as follows (see Figure 2). Chinese decentralized investment triggered the initial jump in transit as a direct effect of subsidies. More important, however, was a change in the expectations of governmental and private actors. Governmental actors (the governments and bureaucracies of the countries along the transit routes) realized that a further increase in traffic could generate substantial benefits, making them more likely to remove barriers to traffic and to invest in improving traffic conditions, as this would have a greater payoff than predation on transit routes. This change was buoyed by the generally positive attitudes of the Russian and Chinese governments toward strengthening continental cargo transit at the political level. The state actors' change in behavior, in turn, increased the interest of private actors. Generally speaking, trans-Eurasian rail traffic has traditionally been less important than maritime transportation from China to Europe. The latter will without a doubt remain the most cost-effective solution; however, if organized properly, transcontinental rail traffic can outperform maritime traffic in terms of speed.<sup>54</sup> With the subsidies from the Chinese government and with improving transportation conditions along the route, private business has expressed growing interest in using railroad transit, resulting in further growth in traffic.

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<sup>54</sup> Air traffic is even more rapid but also substantially more expensive.

Figure 2: Mechanism of Growing Trans-Eurasian Container Traffic



Based on this, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, we expected to see approximately 500,000 TEU transported along the northern and central trans-Eurasian routes in 2020. After this, the growth was expected to slow considerably, as the premium value trade nomenclature would be close to exhaustion. However, if all countries involved were to lower the throughput tariff by US\$1,500 per 40-foot container (from US\$ 5,500–6,000 to US\$ 4,000–4,500), traffic has the potential to grow up to 1–1.3 million TEU. This would demand a higher degree of international economic cooperation than currently exists, as well as investments into (mostly auxiliary) transport infrastructure.

No mega-projects are required to increase the transport capacity of land corridors along the China–EAEU–EU routes and boost their competitiveness vis-à-vis maritime routes. What is needed is not a “second Trans-Siberian Railway” but the selective elimination of transport infrastructure bottlenecks: the construction of additional railways, the electrification of new railway sections, upgraded and modernized locomotives, the acquisition of special rolling stock, the improvement of border-crossing infrastructure, etc. The potential construction of

east–west high-speed rail in Russia would be one notable exception to this hypothesis. This capital-intensive project, aimed primarily at passenger transportation, would theoretically free up the existing infrastructure for freight. However, the economic efficiency of this project requires further assessment.

The efficiency of trans-Eurasian transit also gains a great deal from effective international cooperation, both in terms of physical infrastructure development (railways, border crossings, marshaling capacity, rolling stock, etc.) and the standardization of technical regulations, which will reduce delivery times and costs incurred by carriers. It is not enough for a single country to provide a boost, be it China with its significant subsidies, Russia modernizing its infrastructure (even though Russia accounts for 50% or more of the total length of the route) or Poland, located squarely on the way to the main industrial regions of Europe. The maximum potential of railway container traffic can only be reached when the freight rate is about “deep sea + US\$1,000.” Currently, all the railway routes used to connect China with the EU countries pass through EAEU countries. There is no uniform through-freight rate along their entire length. Each railway company charges its own freight rates and changes in these rates are not synchronized. Thus, no single railway operator can dramatically affect the aggregate amount of the freight rate by changing its own rates without going beyond its profitability range. Thus, “deep sea + US\$1000” is attainable only if all counterparties invest in this project and coordinate their efforts.

The realization of the trans-Eurasian transport corridors’ fullest potential requires the concerted efforts of countries in Western, Northern, and Central Eurasia—and, naturally, of China as the principal BRI driver. There are several interrelated tasks: first, to increase land-based container traffic; second, to remove bottlenecks in their transport and logistical infrastructure and thereby give an impetus to the development of landlocked Eurasian regions (the Russian Urals and Siberia, Central Asia, and the western provinces of China); and third, to create new export opportunities for these regions and ensure their participation in the global

economy. Hence, there is a need for a set of functional arrangements at various levels and between various actors. For example, more work needs to be done to standardize the normative documents and technical regulations used in Eurasian countries (rules for shipping various types of cargo, rolling stock operating parameters, environmental standards, etc.). To ensure regulatory convergence (CIM/SMGS consignment notes, flawless functioning of border crossings, etc.), international working groups representing the ministries of transport, the national railways, and the leading industry players should suffice.

China does a formidable job of financing BRI-related infrastructure in countries around the world. An interesting feature of trans-Eurasian container transit so far, however, is that countries along the route (Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus) have upgraded their railways using their own financial resources. This is likely to change in future: Chinese financing is generally welcome, in particular for the capital-intensive construction of high-speed railways, and national and multilateral development banks will probably enter the game. Cooperation among these banks and within the BRI is vitally important. They include such international financial institutions as the World Bank, the ADB, the AIIB, the New Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Eurasian Development Bank, and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development, but also—extremely importantly—such national institutions as the Chinese SRF. They can provide long-term financing for the capital-intensive parts of the BRI story. International financial institutions provide project financing based on signed and ratified international treaties that do not depend on local legislation changes, which helps mitigate certain risks. In the context of international financial institutions, we should also stress the importance of the availability of subsidized lending as well as grants for technical feasibility studies. These are necessary on many occasions, in particular in Central Asia. Even if the results of such technical feasibility studies were to be negative, it would still be money well spent.

To sum up, in terms of policy, the key area of common interest for Russia, Central Asian countries, and the BRI is the development of efficient cross-border infrastructure in Greater

Eurasia. This means, in particular, modern railway and automobile road transport corridors (we have not touched on automobile roads in this section, as it has focused on the current state of container transit, where automobile roads have not yet found their place, though this might change in the long term with the development of driverless lorries). If the physical connectivity of Central Asia, Northern Eurasia, and China were to receive a further boost, it would greatly contribute to unlocking the potential of inland regions: Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, and Inner Mongolia for China; the Urals and Siberia for Russia; and all five Central Asian countries. The optimal policy objective is to achieve a substantially higher degree of internal connectivity between the inner Eurasian regions (primarily, but not exclusively, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Urals, and Siberia).

In the first half of the 2010s, China provided the necessary political and financial impetus to the BRI. In the second half of the 2010s, the countries of Northern and Central Eurasia supported it enthusiastically as they realized that the BRI corresponded to their national interests. A distinct success story—the spectacular growth of land-based container transit from China to Europe through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus—has materialized. The political push behind the BRI is on its way to transforming the BRI into a potentially self-sustaining economic mechanism.

## **5.2. Japan: The PQI**

The Japanese PQI initiative is, if one looks at its timing and scope, a response to the BRI and an attempt to strengthen the role of Japan as an actor supporting infrastructural development in Eurasia. The PQI project was announced in 2015 and aims to provide an additional US\$110 billion in funding for the construction of quality infrastructure in Asia. The PQI's concept of “quality infrastructure” includes five elements: the infrastructural projects should be safe; they should be cost-effective; they should show high resilience against natural disasters; they should take into account environmental and social implications; and they should promote local

economy and society. The initiative consists of four pillars: additional assistance through the Japanese International Cooperation Agency; cooperation with the ADB; measures allowing institutions such as the Japanese Bank of International Cooperation to finance projects with a high-risk profile; and the development of common standards for quality infrastructure through cooperation with the Japanese government and multilateral development banks.<sup>55</sup>

The emergence of the PQI initiative was rooted in the attempts of Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's administration to play a more proactive role in global and regional affairs, including by bolstering Japan's ties with the Central Asian countries (Azad 2017) and by continuing to endeavor to improve relations with Russia.<sup>56</sup> As has been mentioned, this was driven by concerns about growing Chinese influence in Asia and worldwide.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the PQI is part of a sequence of initiatives implemented since 2012 that have sought to increase the role of Japanese companies in constructing infrastructure worldwide (Kukuchi and Unzaki 2019). At the same time, the project is substantially narrower than the BRI: Bhagwati (2016) attests to its more "discreet and low-profile" character (p. 5). The project is guided by the specific concept of high-quality infrastructure. The project also concentrates on developing ties to existing international institutions (such as the ADB) and the promotion of common standards in cooperation with key institutions (including the World Bank); thus, whereas the BRI is often seen as an attempt to reshape the regional and global order, the PQI's focus is on strengthening the established institutional framework. In 2016 and in 2019, Japan supported the inclusion of

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<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure," presentation, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000117998.pdf>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> James Brown, "Chto budet so sblizheniem Rossii i Iaponii posle prem'erstva Abe," Carnegie Moscow, August 3, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76965>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Carnegie Moscow, "Chego Putin dobilsia v Tokio," *Meduza*, December 19, 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/12/19/chego-putin-dobilsya-v-tokio>, accessed February 19, 2021.

the idea of “quality infrastructure” investment standards in the declarations of the G7 and the G20 summits (Aizawa 2020).

Pascha (2020b) analyzes the interaction of the PQI and the BRI, arguing that while the latter initially employed a “low-price strategy,” the former sought to develop infrastructure of higher quality and take into account its social and environmental implications. Over time, however, the Chinese government has also embraced the idea of upholding high standards in infrastructural projects within the BRI framework. This can be seen as an interesting case of interaction between two competing “Eurasian connectivity” projects. At the same time, Pavilcevic and Kratz (2017) look at the case of high-speed train connection projects in Southeast Asia and document the intense competition between China and Japan in this area, which is associated with the highest echelons of power of both countries providing substantial financial resources and major political support. They conclude that such intense competition can have negative consequences for the entire region, leading to a sort of “race to the bottom.” Whether these risks will indeed materialize remains to be seen. The PQI interacts with European connectivity initiatives that take a somewhat similar approach, as the remainder of this chapter will show.

### **5.3. Russia: The GEP**

The Russian position within the universe of alternative projects connecting Eurasia is a peculiar one. On the one hand, Russia is a genuinely “Eurasian” state in the sense that at least two key elements of the infrastructure and transportation corridors connecting the east and west of the continent—namely the Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Northern Sea Route—are located in Russia or in territories over which it has exclusive control. For flight connections between Europe and East Asia, the trans-Siberian route is the most economical, and Russia has successfully monetized it in the form of charges paid by major airlines to pass through Russian

airspace.<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, however, its Eurasian location does not necessarily make Russia interested in other projects that aim to increase Eurasian connectivity. On the contrary, they can be perceived as a threat to Russia's transportation infrastructure and routes. It is not unusual for Russia to discuss the projects suggested by other Eurasian actors (especially those of the EU, which will be reviewed in Section 5.5) as attempts to circumvent Russian territory, for example by giving Central Asian energy resources direct access to the European market.

On top of this, over the last 30 years, Russia has invested substantial effort in protecting what it perceives as its natural sphere of influence: the post-Soviet countries. Katzenstein and Weygandt (2017) characterize the Russian worldview as "self-contained and insular." This does not mean that Russia unambiguously rejects linking its regional projects to other Eurasian gravity centers. As late as 2011, in his programmatic article for the Russian newspaper *Izvestiia*, Vladimir Putin explicitly referred to the Eurasian Union as a connection between Europe and the Asia-Pacific and as an "integral part of Bigger Europe united by values, democracy and market laws,"<sup>59</sup> in a sense echoing Gorbachev's idea of the "Common European Home." Russia's Greater Eurasian strategy is conceptualized by Diesen (2017) as a substitute for the unsuccessful Greater Europe strategy that was abandoned after the Ukrainian crisis. Since 2014, Russia has undertaken substantial efforts to link the EAEU with the Belt and Road (a topic we will cover in chapter 6 of this book). At the same time, there is also a certain degree of competition between the Chinese and Russian views on Eurasian connectivity. As for interaction with the EU, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 has prevented significant progress in EU-

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<sup>58</sup> ““Zapret na transsibirskie pereley—eto moshchnoe oruzhie,” *Kommersant*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2539075>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> “Novyi integratsionnyi proekt dlja Evrazii—budushee, kotoroe rozhdaetsia segodnia,” *Evrazia*, October 4, 2011, <http://evrazia.org/article/1801>, accessed February 19, 2021.

EAEU relations (we will discuss the issues facing EU–EAEU dialogue in chapter 6 of this book).

The idea of the GEP was formulated in an address by Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2016 in which he called for making the EAEU “one of the centers of a broader integration contour” involving “China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and, of course, our partners in the CIS and other interested states and unions.”<sup>60</sup> Since then, it has become a regular topic in the narratives of Russian foreign policy experts (Kuznetsova 2017). Two important aspects should be mentioned when considering the concept of the GEP. First, it marks the first time that Russian political elites have abandoned an “EU-centric” approach to the regionalism they have diligently pursued for the past 25 years. Throughout that period, Russian elites focused their regionalism efforts in the post-Soviet space on constructing regional organizations modeled after the EU (somewhat paradoxically, given their frequent criticism of the EU and the deterioration of Russia-EU relations over time—see Neumann 2016). The GEP is clearly envisioned as a much more flexible integration approach.<sup>61</sup> Furman and Libman (2019) explain this change by reference to the fact that the EU is losing its normative appeal for Russian elites. It is worth noting that the EU is not mentioned as part of the “integration contour,” in contrast to Putin’s article five years earlier, which focused on the EU and Greater Europe. This clearly reflects the new geopolitical realities for Russia since the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “Putin prizval sozdat’ bol’shoe Evraziiskoe partnerstvo,” TASS, June 17, 2016, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/3376295>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Novikov (2018) considers it a structure even more flexible than TTIP or TPP, since the GEP does not envision the goal of a free trade area, and sees this flexibility as its main strength, allowing the GEP to act as an “umbrella” organization for other regional integration initiatives and projects.

<sup>62</sup> The idea of the GEP is used in Russian political and expert discourse by both those who advocate a greater opening-up of the Russian economy to the global world (Novikov 2018) and those who see the GEP as a tool for reshaping what they perceive as a neoliberal U.S.-centric world order (see, for example, Glasiev 2019).

Second, and simultaneously, the GEP seems to be a further manifestation of an idea deeply rooted in the minds of Russian elites and that partially explains Russia's continued effort to promote regional integration in the post-Soviet space: that a “global power” in the modern world should have its own “regional integration project” (Libman 2017, 2020). In the world of regionalisms like the EU or ASEAN, the EAEU appears to be an appropriate response, but in a world of trans-Eurasian connectivity projects like the BRI and mega-regions like TTIP and TPP, the Russian leadership seeks to promote an equally large idea, namely the GEP. However, unlike the BRI or the PQI, which have evident economic rationales and are associated with the economic potential of Chinese and Japanese industry, respectively, an economic rationale for the GEP is difficult to identify. Unlike the BRI or the PQI, infrastructure does not play a significant role in Russia's reasoning about the GEP, nor does Russia aspire to create a trade agreement similar to TTIP or TPP.

So far, there has been no practical progress in implementing the GEP. Most positive accounts of the GEP link its core to the interaction between the EAEU and the BRI, which we will discuss later in this book. However, this interaction started prior to the Russian leadership's formulation of the GEP and was framed at that time as linking the EAEU with the Silk Road Economic Belt; its interpretation as part of the GEP thus happened *ex post*. There have been individual high-politics events that fit the idea of the GEP, such as the summit between Russia and ASEAN in 2016.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the EAEU has, in recent years (within the constraints created by the Ukrainian conflict), been actively developing a network of external economic ties to other countries and regional organizations, from memorandums of understanding to free

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<sup>63</sup> Anton Tsvetov, “Rossiiia i ASEAN: poiski ekonomiceskoi sinergii i politicheskogo edinomysliia,” Carnegie Moscow, May 19, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/2016/05/19/ru-pub-63618>, accessed February 19, 2021. On the proposed cooperation between the EAEU and ASEAN, see Korolev and Kalachynin (2019).

trade agreements or trade and cooperation agreements.<sup>64</sup> From the point of view of Russian official rhetoric, signing these treaties is part of the process of establishing the GEP, but the EAEU would most likely pursue these agreements even without such an encompassing Greater Eurasian idea, as part of the business-as-usual operations of a functioning regional international organization, in order to elevate the EAEU's status in the universe of international organizations (Vinokurov 2018). According to the vague statements of Russian leadership, however, the GEP could also include the creation of a more formal structure (i.e., an international organization) at some point.<sup>65</sup> The specific shape and function of this organization remain unclear. In short, the practical aspect of the GEP includes projects that would happen without such a grand idea to push them; on the aspects where the GEP could really be innovative, no actual progress besides integration rhetoric has been observed.

Thus, it is possible to treat the GEP as an example of regionalism based on expressive rather than instrumental logic (Vinokurov and Libman 2017). Whereas for "instrumental" regional integration agreements, achieving specific economic results is the most important goal, the main benefit of an "expressive" project for its promoters and participants is the existence of the project itself. For Russian elites, the GEP initiative implies that Russia remains a "global player" able to formulate and promote its own Eurasian connectivity project.<sup>66</sup> Russia has hardly any specific plans regarding how the initiative should develop, and may not even intend for it to do so. The goal associated with the GEP has already achieved by introducing it as a piece of political rhetoric, especially if it is accepted and reproduced by other countries and

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<sup>64</sup> Yuri Kofner, "Bolshaia Evraziia: geografija I geopolitika Bol'shoi Evrazii," RIAC, May 10, 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/GreaterEurasia/geografiya-i-geopolitika-bolshoy-evrazii/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Anton Tsvetov, "Vmesto poverota: ASEAN i evraziiskii proekt Rossii," Carnegie Moscow, October 17, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/2017/10/17/ru-pub-73368>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> See Litvinova (2018) or Petrovskiy (2017) as examples of this narrative.

international organizations; this provides Russia with the necessary recognition as yet another actor participating in the re-ordering of Eurasia. Because Russian economic actors seem to show little interest in the GEP (and generally suffer from the prolonged economic stagnation the country has been experiencing since 2013), they are also unlikely to foster the development of the initiative.<sup>67</sup>

This implies that the GEP is unlikely to play an important role as a real connectivity project for Greater Eurasia in the years to come, although Russia and the EAEU, due to their geographic location, are of course essential to such connectivity projects (Malle et al. 2020). In chapter 6, we will look at the cooperation projects in Greater Eurasia that involve Russia: the actual cooperation between the EAEU and the BRI and the proposed dialogue between the EU and the EAEU. The EAEU will also further expand the network of its free trade areas and cooperation agreements. However, these separate processes have not yet developed into a consistent strategy aimed at bringing to life the GEP, which will most likely continue to exist in the realm of Russian political rhetoric; for the elites of post-Soviet countries, the BRI attracts much more attention than the GEP (Shakhanova and Garlick 2020). Thus, ironically, the major actor in international relations that is most obviously Eurasian in geographic terms is also the one with the least specific project for connecting Eurasia.

### **5.3. The US: The NSRI**

The US has historically shown little interest in advancing connectivity in Eurasia. On the contrary, its main focus has been on developing trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific relations, as well as of course global governance and promoting global trade liberalization. In the last

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<sup>67</sup> Whereas in the case of the PQI, for example, there is evidence that the project was supported and promoted by the Japanese business lobby, the GEP is primarily the work of Russian intellectuals with a conservative agenda, such as Sergei Karaganov (Li 2018). Lewis (2018) discusses the evolution of the concept of “Greater Eurasia” in Russian foreign policy thinking.

decade, however, the US has also initiated a project with a “Eurasian” focus, although with much more limited reach than China’s or India’s and with less ambition than Russia’s: the NSRI. The NSRI was first suggested in 2011 by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and concentrated on linking Afghanistan and Central Asia to the countries of South Asia, particularly India. It consisted of four components: developing integrated regional energy markets; developing road infrastructure and facilitating the trade liberalization and WTO accession of the countries of the region; improving the quality of customs administration; and supporting “business and people-to-people” contacts, for example trade delegations, student exchanges, etc. At the same time, the NSRI was from the very beginning linked to the existing Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a set of logistical arrangements established by the US to support its forces in Afghanistan via Russia and other post-Soviet countries.

The NSRI is thus characterized by a number of features, partly similar to the projects we have reviewed so far and partly differing from them. First, it has a very clear focus on Afghanistan, reflecting the presence of U.S. troops in that country. Afghanistan has played a marginal role (if any role at all) in the other initiatives we have looked at so far, which is not surprising—a poor, war-torn country is not the best foundation for the development of expensive infrastructural projects. Second, similarly to the BRI and the PQI, the NSRI has a clear focus on infrastructural investments. In her original speech, Clinton described the NSRI as “an international web and network of economic and transit connections. That means building more rail lines, highways, energy infrastructure” (cited in Peyrouse and Raballand 2015, p. 406). Third, an important feature of the NSRI appears to be that it links Central and Southern Asia: it is organized along the north–south axis rather than the east–west one (in addition to its link with the NDN). Third, the list of projects actually associated with the NSRI is relatively small and does not imply exceptionally large investments by the key actor (the US); many of these projects would probably take place regardless of the NSRI’s role in the U.S.’s provision of support to its Central Asian partners. At the same time, as Laruelle (2015b) suggests, the

NSRI at a certain point became a common frame of reference for U.S. officials' rhetoric on Central Asia, although a very vague one.

Laruelle (2015b) and Peyrouse and Raballand (2015) offer detailed critical assessments of the NSRI, showing that the initiative has had little chance of becoming a successful connectivity framework in Eurasia. First, unlike the east–west axis, which actually reflects the growing economic ties between countries, there seems to be much less endemic economic activity across the north–south axis in Central Eurasia, particularly given the inherent political instability and security problems in Afghanistan.<sup>68</sup> Second, while from the point of view of U.S. interests and strategy it may be meaningful to exclude Russia and China from participating in the NSRI, this makes little sense from an economic point of view, given the intensive economic ties between these countries and Central Asia. Third, the concept of the NSRI is extremely vague and unspecific, failing to provide a clear message regarding how the US views the future of the region while simultaneously creating the impression that the US actually *does* have a strategy reflecting major economic and political shifts in Eurasia. According to Laruelle (2015b), since the official documents of the US remained vague, the discussion of the NSRI was to a large extent determined by the speculations of think tanks (in this sense, the NSRI is somewhat similar to the GEP, where the vague official Russian position served as a framework for the ideas of researchers and pundits, as well as to the BRI, for which interpretations of the initiative have also become a major academic enterprise, although the BRI is far more important for China than the NSRI is for the US). The link to the NSN was also a weakness of the NSRI, both because of the problems related to the NSN and because of the inevitable “military footprint” of U.S. activities Central Asia (Kim and Indeo 2013; Lee 2012). Finally, the NSRI

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<sup>68</sup> Collins (2014) justifiably remarks that the very approach of treating Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia as a “natural region” can be questioned.

seems to have suffered from a lack of coordination between various U.S. actors, specifically between military operations in Afghanistan and civilian agencies.<sup>69</sup>

Unsurprisingly, all these problems have caused the NSRI to fail. Over time, the project disappeared from the rhetoric of the U.S. government; a media report from 2017 mentioned the “revival” of the project by the Trump administration, but there seems to be no specific activity associated with the NSRI at present.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the very notion of the Silk Road (originally used by multiple competing powers in Central Asia) is now firmly associated with China’s BRI, and most media reports or scholarly accounts would, if they mentioned the new Silk Road, be referring to the BRI rather than to the U.S. initiative. The Trump administration, generally speaking, showed little interest in promoting new integration and connectivity initiatives or in pursuing a clear strategic vision of any sort in Central Asia and Eurasia (and there are no reasons to expect the Biden administration to behave any differently). From this point of view, the US no longer plays an active role in developing connectivity initiatives for Eurasia. The goal of connecting Central and South Asia is now being pursued by India within its CCAP framework, which we will review in what follows.

## **5.5. The EU: TRACECA and the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy**

The EU’s own Eurasian connectivity project actually preceded projects initiated by other actors. It can be traced back to the early 1990s, when TRACECA was conceived. These early ideas of developing transportation infrastructure and political and economic cooperation across Eurasia

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<sup>69</sup> Leif Rosenberger, “The Rise and Fall of America’s New Silk Road Strategy,” *The Street*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.thestreet.com/economonitor/emerging-markets/the-rise-and-fall-of-america-s-new-silk-road-strategy>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Lalit K. Jha, “US Revives Two Infra Projects in Asia to Counter China’s OBOR,” *Mint*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/QnoMVoPENpnEfjj9VLO7NL/US-revives-two-infra-projects-in-Asia-to-counter-Chinas-OBO.html>, accessed February 17, 2021.

turned out to be unsuccessful, with the EU eventually turning into an observer of the development of new Eurasian projects. In September 2019, the EU formulated its own strategy on “Connecting Europe and Asia” in response to the growing importance of the BRI. In this section, we review both the early and more recent attempts of the EU to develop projects for Greater Eurasia and locate them within the universe of the connectivity initiatives we review in this chapter.

The European initiative of restoring the Silk Road (Gorshkov and Bagaturia 2001; Kaw 2019), labeled TRACECA, was established in 1993 and aimed to develop transportation infrastructure across Eurasia, mostly across the southern post-Soviet republics (Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus), the countries of Southeast Europe, and Turkey. The participants of TRACECA (which has had its own secretariat, located in Baku, since 2001) include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as Iran (which signed the agreement but does not participate in its implementation). Overall, the EU provided about €50 million to finance various TRACECA projects and initiatives.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, the economic effects of TRACECA remained limited. Multiple obstacles (differences in railroad gauges and the need to cross the Caspian and Black Seas; bureaucratic boundaries due to the number of countries participating in the project, which frequently came into conflict with each other) made TRACECA transportation substantially more expensive than that of most of its competitors (Karataeva 2016).<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, TRACECA did not change the geography of goods flows and economic interconnections across the states of Eurasia.

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<sup>71</sup> TRACECA, “Investment Projects,” <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/investments/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> See also ‘Nachalis’ pervye problem s realizatsiei Ukrainoi proekta ‘Shelkovogo puti,’” *Vzgliad*, February 27, 2016, <http://www.vz.ru/economy/2016/2/27/796617.html>, accessed February 19, 2021.

From the very beginning, Russia had a strongly negative attitude toward TRACECA, considering it a project aimed at “surpassing” Russian territory from the south and reducing the links between the post-Soviet states and Russia—and indeed, no effort was made to involve Russia in the project.<sup>73</sup> Importantly, INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe), a sister project of TRACECA that operated between 1996 and 2016, aimed to support international gas and oil pipelines from Central Asia over the Southern Caucasus to the EU. These pipelines would reduce Russia’s role as an energy supplier to the EU, as well as Russia’s leverage as a transit country for Central Asian gas (Russia had observer status in INOGATE). Some of the new pipelines between Europe and Central Asia became reality over time (although Russia remains a major supplier of oil and gas to the EU).

After decades of a relatively passive attitude toward Eurasian connectivity, the EU again directed its attention toward this issue in the second half of the 2010s, this time as a reaction to the BRI (Biscop 2019). In 2018, the EU adopted a new connectivity strategy aimed at linking Asia and Europe by improving transportation infrastructure and fostering international cooperation. In 2019, the EU organized the first Europa Connectivity Forum, which was held under the theme of “EU–Asia Connectivity,” with Japan as the key partner identified by the European Commission.<sup>74</sup> The strategy was integrated into discussions within the framework of ASEM (to be analyzed in chapter 6) and emphasized sustainability, “proposing that investments should respect labor rights, not create political or financial dependencies, and guarantee a level

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<sup>73</sup> Indeed, while the political and economic organization of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM)—with a clear anti-Russian narrative and agenda—is not part of TRACECA, the list of countries almost entirely fits the routes of TRACECA corridors.

<sup>74</sup> European Commission, “EU Charts New Ground in Global Connectivity—Looks to Boost Strategic Ties with Asia,” September 26, 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_5851](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_5851), accessed February 19, 2021.

playing field for businesses.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike the BRI, the investments were required to be “fiscally viable”—that is, they should not lead to the excessive accumulation of public debt by participating countries, they should have a clear economic rationale, and they should be based on clear rules: the EU emphasizes “international rule-based connectivity,” which fits the European approach to regionalism discussed in chapter 3.<sup>76</sup>

An obvious weakness of the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy is that it is unlikely to mobilize funds or provide subsidies comparable to those available within the BRI framework (Pepe 2020). Indeed, the EU approach is based on attracting private investment and focusing on good governance and norms (Kassenova 2019). The EU itself does not have substantial financial resources (even prior to the pandemic, its share in the overall budget of its member states was very small; the power of the supranational institutions of the EU is based on regulatory competences), while member countries do not act in a coordinated fashion and cannot commit large resources. The focus on good governance is likely to provide a more sustainable mode of cooperation, but at the same time it will be relatively unattractive for the leaderships of many countries compared to investment from China. Furthermore, the EU strategy is in the very early stages of implementation and does not feature any specific projects, in contrast to the BRI, which has already achieved quite significant results (all the justified concerns about increasing the debt level of the participating countries notwithstanding).

According to Pepe (2020),

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<sup>75</sup> Fraser Cameron, “Europe’s Answer to China’s Belt and Road,” *The Diplomat*, September 19, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/europe-s-answer-to-chinas-belt-and-road/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Julian Chan, “Europe’s Challenge to China,” *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/europe-s-challenge-to-china/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

Almost two years after its launch, [...] the strategy still needs to be brought to life.

It is currently more accurate to describe it as a technical document and list of the EU's instruments and potential cooperation partners than a strategic blueprint for action.

After 2020, European countries will likely redirect resources toward developing their own economies rather than supporting Eurasian connectivity. In short, in spite of its significant ambitions, the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy cannot presently be treated as a real competitor or response to the BRI, and it is not clear whether it will become one.

## 5.6. India: The CCAP

In our previous discussion, India played a relatively limited role—indeed, most scholarly and policy discussions of Central Asian connectivity pay much greater attention to China, Russia, and the EU than to India. This is hardly surprising. China is the key country for any “Silk Road” reconstruction due to historical parallels, its current economic power, and the fact that it has successfully monopolized the notion of the Silk Road in the last five years. Russia is a Eurasian country *par excellence* and it is difficult to lead any discussion about Eurasia and Eurasian regionalism without mentioning it (although we will provide an influential example of how this has been done in Section 6.5). In addition, as already mentioned, Russia has been just as successful in monopolizing the notion of “Eurasia” as China has been in monopolizing the notion of the Silk Road. The EU is an inevitable part of any project with genuine Eurasian reach—without the EU, aspirations to cover the entire Eurasian continent are clearly unrealistic. India, on the other hand, is economically less successful than China and has not in the past expressed similar Eurasian ambitions. The South Asian region, while it has its own regional organization (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC]), is politically

fragmented, primarily because of the India–Pakistan conflict, and there is no evidence that the situation will improve in the foreseeable future.

Yet since 2012 India has also pursued its own “connectivity” strategy, albeit with much more limited reach than the BRI, the GEP, or the EU Connectivity Strategy. It focuses in particular on Central Asia. For us, this project is relevant because the transportation corridors it envisions partly interact or overlap with other infrastructural projects we have discussed throughout this chapter. The CCAP points to India’s willingness to enhance cooperation with Central Asia in the political, economic, security, and humanitarian spheres; it emphasizes the need for more intensive interaction with organizations such as the EAEU and the SCO. Furthermore, the CCAP suggests the reactivation of the International North–South Transport Corridor, which was the subject of an agreement signed by India, Iran, and Russia in 2002 and has since substantially increased the number of its participants, including Turkey, Oman, Syria, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan<sup>77</sup> (the long list of partly highly unstable countries and countries with major unresolved conflicts is, however, telling). There is an important security dimension to the project (associated with India’s concerns about radical Islamism), as well as planned cooperation in the area of education (Roy 2013; Kothari 2014).

India’s actions appear to have been strongly influenced by political concerns (although the country prioritizes the economy as the main area of cooperation) and in some sense represent a response to the Chinese BRI. The BRI is also the reason why the CCAP, like several other initiatives pursued by India, explicitly refers to the concept of connectivity (Purushothaman and Unnikrishnan 2019). From this point of view, the CCAP is somewhat similar to the PQI,

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<sup>77</sup> Wikipedia, “International North–South Transport Corridor,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_North%20%80%93South\\_Transport\\_Corridor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_North%20%80%93South_Transport_Corridor), accessed February 19, 2021.

although in the latter case Japan is also able to offer a set of guiding norms and principles different from those pursued by China. Whether India will be able to become an important player in Central Asia, where Russia and China have very strong positions based on decades (if not centuries) of engagement and interaction as well as very strong economic ties, is questionable. Unlike Russia, India is not a major destination for Central Asian migrants, and unlike China it is not the main trade partner for the Central Asian states. It is also not clear how consistent Indian policy will be in the event of major shocks and turbulence. However, nor is the CCAP a purely rhetorical initiative (as the NSRI turned to be or as the GEP appears to be); it remains to be seen what role it will play in the universe of connectivity projects in Eurasia.

## **6. Connecting Regions and Connectivity Projects**

In this chapter, we will discuss initiatives and projects created with the explicit aim of linking the individual regions and major powers of Eurasia and that are not promoted by a singular power center. Some of these projects have existed for several decades; others are very recent initiatives. The projects we will discuss in this chapter are of a very different nature from those considered in the previous chapter: the exchange of ideas and forums for discussion are now more important to us than infrastructural investments and transit corridors.

### **6.1. The BRI and the EAEU**

The “congruence” (*sopryazhenie*) of the BRI and the EAEU is an example of relatively successful cooperation between connectivity projects, while at the same time showing how difficult it is to create these interconnections. The idea of linking the EAEU and the BRI was first formulated in May 2015 in a joint statement by the Russian and Chinese governments. The fact that one of the signatories of the statement was the Russian Federation<sup>78</sup> already calls for attention. While the BRI (the statement still refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt) is an initiative without governing bodies, the EAEU has a well-developed institutional structure, hence one would expect the EAEC to be one of the signatories of the statement. At the same time, Russia not only took the initiative, but its government also conducted the first steps of the negotiations (which were only later taken over by the EAEC). As a result, the EAEU–BRI congruence project was from the very beginning perceived as a primarily political initiative rather than a purely economic project, part of Russia’s pivot to the east, which it declared following the escalation of its conflict with the West and the Crimean crisis (see also Rolland

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<sup>78</sup> President of Russia, “Sovmestnoe zaivlenie Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respublikii o sotrudnichestve po sopriazheniiu stroitel’stva Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soiuza I Ekonomicheskogo poiska Shelkovogo puti,” May 8, 2015, <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4971>, accessed February 19, 2021.

2019). Yet the negotiations ultimately led to a very specific economic outcome: the signing of a trade cooperation agreement between the EAEU and China.

Discussions in this book have already alluded to the differences between the EAEU and the BRI: the former is an EU-like regulatory project with a focus on trade and a common regulatory framework, the latter a loose infrastructural initiative. These differences have an ambiguous impact on the potential for cooperation of these two projects. On the one hand, the EAEU and the BRI complement each other in many respects. Both projects aim to remove barriers to trade and investment—but while the BRI achieves this goal through common infrastructure, the EAEU focuses on removing customs barriers. The latter (not only formal tariffs but also time-consuming customs clearing procedures) are precisely the reason that transcontinental infrastructure in Eurasia remains uncompetitive: customs borders lead to substantial time losses in the transit of goods and services. Thus, economic integration requires both tools to be present, and the EAEU and the BRI have the potential to provide them. On the other hand, precisely because the EAEU and the BRI deal with different topics, it is not entirely clear how the projects can communicate with each other. On top of this, the two sides perceive the projects very differently. In the eyes of the Russian leadership, the BRI is a China-led regional integration project similar to the Russia-led EAEU. For the Chinese leadership, however, the BRI is a flexible structure that *includes* various regional integration agreements and also the EAEU (Czerewacz-Filipowicz 2019). Furthermore, the EAEU is a union with strong protectionist elements; it has been based on the rather high Russian customs tariff from the very beginning.<sup>79</sup> From this point of view, while the EAEU envisions economic integration within the bloc, it (at least potentially) creates obstacles to economic integration between the

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<sup>79</sup> On relations between the EAEU and global economic institutions, see Dragneva and Hartwell (2020), Libman (2020), Libman and Obydenkova (2020), and Vinokurov (2020c).

countries of the bloc and external partners, which does not fit the vision of the BRI.<sup>80</sup> Finally, what matters in many cases is not *objective* competition between regional projects but the *perception* thereof, which could limit the potential for interconnection (particularly in the case of Russia's concerns about excessive dependence on China). We have already pointed out that Russia has accepted Chinese economic expansion into the Central Asian region, but this does not mean that Russia has no concerns about China's increasing strength and the growing dependence of the Russian economy on China (on the interconnection between the BRI and the EAEU see Wilson 2016; Libman 2016; Zank 2017; Sangar 2017; Pieper 2018; the evolution of economic relations between Russia and China within the framework of the BRI–EAEU interaction is discussed by Kheyfets 2020).

The 2018 trade cooperation agreement between the EAEU and China is, in a sense, an outcome of this complicated conundrum. The agreement does not envision the creation of a free trade area or any reduction of customs duties: this would be unacceptable to all the EAEU countries, which are concerned about the proliferation of Chinese consumer goods in their markets.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, the agreement includes a number of important provisions: protection of intellectual property rights, support for the development of e-commerce, cooperation in the area of public procurement, and the simplification of customs clearance procedures (Aliev and Flegontova 2018). While potentially important for Chinese businesses and for companies from EAEU states, the agreement therefore shows the limits of the two

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<sup>80</sup> Kaczmarski (2017a, 2017b) emphasizes the fundamental differences between the Chinese and the Russian approaches to regional integration: whereas Russia's goal is to create a privileged sphere of influence and to consolidate its control over it, China uses the BRI as a flexible tool for increasing economic ties (and to some degree economic control) without defining a specific territory.

<sup>81</sup> “Druzhba na rasstoianin ruki,” *Kommersant*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3984186>, accessed February 19, 2021.

projects' congruence. One can hardly imagine a deeper integration project now or in the foreseeable future.

There is likely greater potential for cooperation in the realm of transportation corridors, where China and the BRI inevitably require the cooperation of the post-Soviet states. Here, too, however, the picture is complicated. As Vinokurov and Tsukarev (2018) suggest, the interests of the EAEU countries and of China in terms of the location and direction of corridors coincide in some instances but differ in others. For instance, for the EAEU countries, it is essential that the development of transportation corridors be accompanied by improved connectivity *within* Eurasia and subsequent economic development, rather than limited to pure transit. The most promising avenue is investments in removing bottlenecks rather than ambitious new projects—even if, from the political point of view, the latter are especially attractive. But what is especially important for us is the fact that the development of these corridors, while requiring the cooperation of the post-Soviet countries and of China, does not necessarily need the institutional framework of the EAEU–China agreement (although there may be some benefits to creating one, including to avoid competition among post-Soviet countries for Chinese investment).

## **6.2. The EU and the EAEU**

While some progress can be observed in cooperation between the EAEU and the BRI, the situation on the “western flank” of Eurasian regionalism—the interaction between the EU and the EAEU—appears to be much gloomier. There are no systematic formats of interaction between the EU and EAEU except on individual low-level technical issues, and there is hardly any chance of future progress in this area.

Unlike the EAEU and the BRI, the EAEU and the EU are, as mentioned above, relatively similar in their institutional structure. Thus, the format of interaction between these organizations appears to be straightforward: it should move from cooperation on technical issues toward institutionalized dialogue, trade, and investment liberalization. The key problem

for this dialogue is political and exists on both the EU side and the side of the post-Soviet space/Russia. First, the “elephant in the room” is clearly the Crimean (or Ukrainian) crisis. Since 2014, any form of institutionalized cooperation with an organization where Russia plays the leading role has become unacceptable to many European countries (especially those in Central Europe) and politicians; on the Russian side, willingness to engage in systematic dialogue without first resolving the sanctions issue is also low. At the same time, the Crimean crisis did not have an unambiguously negative impact on the potential of EU–EAEU dialogue. On the contrary, after sanctions against Russia were introduced in 2014–2015, the EU began to discuss the potential for EU–EAEU dialogue to serve as a platform for trust-building and interaction with Russia (Popescu 2014; Moshes 2014; Krastev and Leonard 2014; Vinokurov 2014b; Libman 2015; Stewart 2015; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015; Vinokurov et al. 2016). No real progress was achieved along these lines, however, partly due to a loss of interest on the part of Russia (discussed in what follows) and partly because of the EU’s attitude.

Major political crisis is not the only reason why the EU–EAEU dialogue has not progressed. From the EU’s perspective, three other factors have played an important role. First, substantial parts of the EU bureaucracy and European epistemic community were (and are) skeptical about the longevity of the EAEU, given the rocky history of post-Soviet regionalism. Indeed, after almost 20 years of attempts to construct a functioning regional integration agreement in the post-Soviet space, there are good reasons to doubt that any progress will be possible in the future. Second, unlike other regional organizations, the EAEU directly includes countries that (according to the EU vision) are part of the EU neighborhood. For many observers in the EU, then, the EAEU is constraining the development of the EaP and ENP policy instruments—making it either a nuisance in the eyes of the Brussels bureaucrats (who would prefer to use their own toolbox to develop ties to Eastern European countries without any restrictions) or even an attempt by Russia to protect its privileged sphere of influence (and to support fellow autocrats in countries like Belarus) in contradiction of the EU’s mission and

agenda. Third, the paradoxical feature of the similarity between the EU and the EAEU is that it makes negotiations between the two organizations in a sense more difficult. These difficulties are associated not only with negotiation topics (the EU and the EAEU cannot leave the “difficult issues” of mutual trade aside and concentrate on, for example, joint infrastructure, as Russia and China can), but also with negotiation formats.<sup>82</sup> Unsurprisingly, the EU remains passive on developing dialogue with the EAEU.

As for the EAEU, it was initially keen to establish dialogue with the EU and was strongly supported in this by Russia, even when the EU showed little interest, in order to ensure international recognition and respect of what was at that time the flagship project of Russian foreign policy. After 2014, however, Russia gradually lost interest in promoting EU–EAEU dialogue. First, Russia lost trust in the EU and became less interested in gaining EU recognition. Second, numerous new arenas emerged (Syria, Ukraine, etc.) where Russia interacted and competed with Western countries, which reduced the importance of EU–EAEU dialogue in the eyes of Russian elites, who preferred to concentrate on strategically more important aspects of relations with the West. Most certainly, Russia did not consider EU–EAEU dialogue sufficiently attractive that it would make concessions in other areas in order to get it, as some proponents of dialogue in the EU seemed to imply.

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<sup>82</sup> For example, both sides have different perceptions of what degree of “technical dialogue below the political level” is acceptable. The European Commissioners are officials at the political level, and their involvement in dialogue with the EAEU would make it political (which is unacceptable given the Ukraine crisis); technical dialogue should therefore be conducted at a lower level, e.g., Directorates-General. In the EAEC, ministers are the formal analogue of the Commissioners of the EU, but at the same time, EAEC ministers *are* the technical level (there is no analogue for Directorates-General). Hence, technical dialogue between the EAEU and the EU would be that of EAEC ministers and of Directorates-General—but this is impossible because the formal equivalents are Commissioners and ministers. Dialogue between the latter is impossible because it would be political (and thus unacceptable to the EU).

As a result, cooperation between the EU and the EAEU remains a remote opportunity. In spite of the substantial potential of the common economic space between the EU and the EAEU (Felbermayr and Gröschl 2017) and the traditional vision of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok that is held in Russia and in some European countries (in which Russia originally embedded the EAEU project)<sup>83</sup> (Erokhin 2019; Avaliani 2019),<sup>84</sup> the current political situation, lack of interest, deep conflicts, and bureaucratic inertia make any form of cooperation unlikely. As discussed in Section 4.2, post-Soviet Eastern Europe remains a weak spot for regionalism in Greater Eurasia, with more divisions than linkages and interconnections.

### **6.3. The SCO**

Of all the institutionalized organizations that exist today, the SCO is probably the closest to Greater Eurasian regionalism as discussed in this book (Aris 2011).<sup>85</sup> The organization was launched in 1996 as the informal Shanghai Five group: Russia, China, and three Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The original objective of the Shanghai Five was a highly pragmatic and specific one, namely resolving disputes and contradictions concerning the former Sino–Soviet border. Disputes about the border escalated into short-term military confrontation between the USSR and China in the 1960s; after the collapse of the

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<sup>83</sup> “Putin Envisions a Russia-EU Free Trade Zone,” *Der Spiegel*, 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 February 19, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> The idea of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok is promoted by an initiative established in 2015 in Germany—see “Lisbon-Vladivostok: A Common Economic Space,” <https://lisbon-vladivostok.pro/contact/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Pradt (2020) describes the SCO as a “prequel” to, or the first step toward, the BRI. On the Chinese side, the SCO was a major institutional innovation—a regional organization (rather than a purely informal economic connection, on which China focused in the Asia-Pacific region).

USSR, improving political relations between the former Soviet republics and China required finding an acceptable solution to the border problem. The Shanghai Five was extremely successful in this respect, leading to the institutionalization in 2001 of the original informal club, which became the SCO. Over time, new members joined: Uzbekistan in 2001, even before the creation of the formal organization; and India and Pakistan in 2017. Thus, from the very beginning, the SCO was the only formal regional organization to include both Russia and China.

Observers' assessments of the SCO diverge sharply depending on whether one focuses on the political–military dimension or the economic one. In the security sphere, the SCO is a successful organization, although most certainly not an anti-Western military alliance, as it is sometimes presented in the literature. The SCO conducts regular war games (De Haas 2016) and addresses non-traditional security risks, such as terrorism (guided in particular by the Chinese concept of “Three Evils”) (Chung 2006; Aris 2009; Yuan 2010). It plays an important role in promoting the values and norms of its key members, Russia and China (Ambrosio 2008; Lewis 2012; Allison 2018; Obydenkova and Libman 2019), although the strategic visions and perceptions of the SCO's various members should not be treated as identical (Dadabaev 2014; Denisov and Safranchuk 2016). In the economic sphere, meanwhile, the SCO has been substantially less successful, due in part to the diverging interests of Russia and China in that area (Song 2014). Disappointment with the inability of the SCO to serve as a tool for achieving Chinese economic goals in the region is probably one of the main reasons why the organization has played a relatively limited role in the design of the BRI. According to Gabuev (2017):

The Silk [Road] Initiative, without form or specific scope, supported by the financial might of the People's Republic of China, turned out to be much more convenient for promoting the geopolitical interests of Beijing than the institutionalized SCO, where all decisions are based on consensus [translated from Russian by the authors].

The fundamental difference in opinion between Russia and China was already discussed in section 6.1, where it was the main limitation on linking the BRI and the EAEU.<sup>86</sup> The ultimate Chinese goal is a free trade area within the SCO that would give Chinese consumer goods access to the Russian and Central Asian markets (Lanteigne 2006). This is, however, unacceptable to Russia, given the low competitiveness of Russian manufacturing, which would be unlikely to survive the expansion of exports from China. Russia's agenda for the SCO instead emphasizes more intensive energy cooperation, e.g., within the framework of an “Energy Club” (Movkebaeva 2013). Yet from the Chinese perspective, an “Energy Club” makes little sense: China is an importer of oil and gas, while Russia is an exporter of hydrocarbons. Disagreement between Russia and China about the allocation of ownership shares and the scope of operations made the creation of an SCO Bank impossible (Gabuev 2015), and this idea became obsolete following the establishment of the international financial institutions associated with the BRI, such as the AIIB.<sup>87</sup>

As we have previously argued (Vinokurov and Libman 2017), in the area of economic relations, the SCO plays the role of a “Talking Club”—a forum for the regular exchange of opinions and positions between member states. This role should not be considered irrelevant, as we pointed out in Chapter 2: in Central Asia (and in Greater Eurasia in general), maintaining regular dialogue between countries is in itself an important achievement that contributes to the development of trust and international cooperation. However, it is also a relatively limited role,

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<sup>86</sup> On the interaction between the EAEU and the SCO, see Gatev and Diesen (2016).

<sup>87</sup> The focus of analysis on Russia and China and their contradictions does not imply that Central Asian states are entirely passive in the process of regional integration. On the contrary, as Heathershaw et al. (2019) show, it would hardly be possible to understand the regionalism process without studying the interaction between these states' actors and actors from Russia and China. Central Asian states face their own concerns and phobias about the rising economic influence of China and their own long-established fears concerning excessive dependence on Russia.

even compared to the objectives of the various connectivity projects we introduced in Chapter 5. Moreover, the expansion of the SCO and the inclusion of India and Pakistan made the organization even less capable of making collective decisions due to the divergent interests of India and China and the inherent conflict between India and Pakistan: in 2019, these two SCO members were engaged in a military standoff, which moved the SCO from the list of successful security organizations and closer to the group of zombie regionalism structures (Gray 2018) with purely formal membership not associated with any form of actual cooperation.

In short, the SCO is yet an example of the limits of Greater Eurasian regionalism. It shows that economic cooperation can only be achieved within well-defined specific projects (e.g., initiatives increasing connectivity, ideally associated with significant funding by national or international donors) or within very broad and flexible formats without strong commitment from individual countries. A high level of institutionalization actually *reduces* the chances of developing successful cooperation—the broad, less institutionalized BRI–EAEU dialogue ultimately led to more tangible results than the formal SCO.<sup>88</sup> In addition, excessively broad membership makes Eurasian regionalist projects less, not more, successful. In spite of political statements and media reports, which eagerly emphasize the share of the global population and GDP covered by a particular regionalist project,<sup>89</sup> these are not proxies for the success of a regionalist project; on the contrary, a smaller set of members might make an integration club more successful.

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<sup>88</sup> Certainly, the success of the BRI–EAEU interaction is also relative, as Section 6.1 shows. Besides, even this success has been achieved under very specific geopolitical circumstances: Western sanctions against Russia and the Ukraine conflict, which have made it much more important for Russia to achieve actual progress in developing ties with China. The discussion about more intensive SCO economic cooperation developed at a time when Russia had better relations with the EU and was thus less interested in successful cooperation with China.

<sup>89</sup> “Summarnyi VVP stran ShOS sostavil 15 trillionov dollarov,” News2, June 13, 2017, <https://news2.ru/story/523110/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

#### **6.4. 17+1 Cooperation between China and the CCE Countries**

Whereas in the previous three sections we looked at links between the post-Soviet area and East Asia/China (the BRI–EAEU interconnection and the SCO) and between the post-Soviet area and the EU (the potential EU–EAEU dialogue), the remaining two sections of this chapter investigate the links between China/East Asia and Europe. We start with a relatively recent initiative that emerged in 2012: the 17+1 group (originally 16+1). This Chinese government initiative includes 17 Eastern European countries that are all either members of the EU or aspire to EU membership: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Greece (which joined the initiative at a later stage, leading to the renaming of the group). The secretariat of the initiative is located in Beijing, and the most important part of the initiative is the annual summits, which take place either in the CEE countries or in China.

The establishment of the 17+1 group predates the declaration of the BRI but is today typically analyzed within the context of the latter. The 17+1 group is a clear-cut example of a “Talking Club” (Vinokurov and Libman 2017)—a structure primarily designed for information exchange and dialogue. The need for such a forum structure to facilitate interactions between China and the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe is even more obvious than for post-Soviet Central Asia: most Eastern European countries have historically had very limited links to China, so an obvious first step in developing a stronger Chinese presence is to engage in systematic institutionalized dialogue. Kaczmarski and Jakóbowski (2015) consider the 17+1 initiative to be a sort of Chinese foreign policy experiment with a “regionalist” approach to cooperation (and it was indeed later replicated in other parts of the world). However, the 17+1 group has become the foundation for more intensive cooperation between China and the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. Within the framework of the group, multiple

multilateral dialogue formats have been established, including on the issues of tourism promotion, banking, agriculture, maritime transport, and logistics, with individual European countries hosting different institutions (Jakóbowski 2018). More importantly, the 17+1 group has provided fertile ground for developing numerous bilateral cooperation formats and investment projects with the participation of China; the importance of these projects has seemed to grow over time (for a detailed overview, see Andrijauskas et al. 2020).<sup>90</sup>

The 17+1 project is a controversial one from the EU perspective (Vangeli 2020). Critics of the 17+1 forum typically emphasize two aspects: the compatibility of Chinese investments with EU law and the political loyalties of the Eastern European countries. Regarding the first aspect, the concern is that Chinese investments will be allocated based on different principles than those envisioned in EU law, which will undermine the normative foundation of European regionalism (which, as discussed in chapter 2, is the key element of European integration). An example is the planned Budapest–Belgrade railroad, which will be constructed using Chinese funding but has raised concerns among EU officials over possible violations of EU tender law.<sup>91</sup> Regarding the second aspect, the EU is now struggling with the issue of democratic backsliding in the CEE (particularly in Poland and Hungary); the concern is that economic and political ties to China and Russia will reduce the EU’s leverage against these countries and, in a worst-case

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<sup>90</sup> The 17+1 initiative is supported by a network of research institutions and think tanks in China—see China-CEEC Think Tanks Network, January 11, 2016, [https://en.17plus1-thinktank.com/article/84.html?source=article\\_link](https://en.17plus1-thinktank.com/article/84.html?source=article_link), accessed February 17, 2021. Türesányi and Qiaoan (2020) discuss the ideological underpinnings and rhetoric of the 17+1, showing how differences in their respective assessments of the Communist past negatively affect interactions between China and Eastern European countries.

<sup>91</sup> “EU Investment Tender Compliance Regulations Hinder China at Budapest CEEC Gathering,” *Silk Road Briefing*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2017/11/28/eu-investment-tender-compliance-regulations-hinder-china-budapest-ceec-gathering/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

scenario, allow them to undermine the unity of EU foreign policy (Jacoby and Korkut 2016).<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, China has specifically singled out part of the EU for its dialogue, cutting against the approach emphasized by the Brussels bureaucracy and by some EU member states that the organization should speak with one voice in international affairs.

Whether the concerns about China creating divisions in the EU are justified remains highly debatable (Pepermans 2018; Song 2019; Garlick 2019a). On the one hand, the growing economic ties between China and the CEE remain indisputable. On the other hand, the language of the declarations issued by the 17+1 group emphasizes compliance with EU norms and values (Andrijauskas et al. 2020). In spite of the populist rhetoric of some Eastern European governments, the EU membership (actual or potential) remains highly attractive for them; the Hungarian model of democratic backsliding is actually based on what Johnson and Barnes (2015) refer to as “financial nationalism,” which is not only compatible with EU membership, but explicitly benefits from it (and to some extent even became possible because of it). Furthermore, domestic causes of democratic backsliding are likely much more important than external ones (Buzogany 2017).

For us, however, it is important to point out a feature of the 17+1 project relevant to the discussion of regionalism in Greater Eurasia in general: a forum for enabling dialogue and communication has become a force of division and a reason for new conflicts and controversies. In Chapter 5, we showed how competition between connectivity projects divides Eurasia. The 17+1 case shows how attempts to connect regions and projects can also seed new divisions. The main reason for this is, without a doubt, the high level of mistrust that still exists in Eurasia,

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<sup>92</sup> A recent example: amid the COVID-19 crisis, the Serbian government emphasized the help it had received from China and claimed that it had not received sufficient support from the EU. See Julija Simic, “Serbia Turns to China due to ‘Lack of EU Solidarity’ on Coronavirus,” EURACTIV, March 18, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news-serbia-turns-to-china-due-to-lack-of-eu-solidarity-on-coronavirus/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

rooted in the significant differences between the political and economic systems of individual countries.

## 6.5. ASEM

ASEM differs from all other institutions and arrangements we discuss in this book in the sense that it is not related to the rise of China or Russia as key new players in Greater Eurasia. Beginning in 1996 with its first summit in Bangkok, it was an initiative by the EU and several Asian countries to provide a stronger institutional format for dialogue. As such, ASEM was yet another example of a “Talking Club,” with an agenda as diffuse and broad as the 17+1 group or the SCO. The main driving force behind ASEM was the growing economic exchange between East Asian countries and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the emergence of similar institutions for Asia-Pacific exchange (APEC). ASEM, like APEC, considered itself part of the ongoing globalization process rather than an alternative to it. ASEM did not have a specific set of goals and objectives it intended to achieve and from the very beginning was heavily influenced by differences in perceptions between its European and Asian members.

Camroux (2006) summarizes the key difficulties ASEM faced as follows. First, for its Asian partners, the main objective of ASEM was to discuss issues of economic cooperation. The EU, on the other hand, included cultural and political aspects in the dialogue. Second, while ASEAN constituted an important part of the dialogue from the very beginning, Japan, China and South Korea—while they became part of it—were for various reasons skeptical about ASEM’s perspective. Third, the list of participants in the summit was a source of constant irritation and discussion—for example, the invitation of some Asian countries (such as Myanmar) was problematic due to human rights violations. Over time, the number of ASEM partners increased, increasing the heterogeneity of dialogue participants (as of 2020, there are 52 countries and two regional organizations—the EU and ASEM—taking part in the dialogue). Fourth, the EU showed little willingness to assist Asian countries in overcoming the

consequences of the global economic crisis, which started in East Asia in 1997–1998. Fifth, ASEM’s multilateral approach was ultimately overshadowed by the bilateral dialogue between individual European and Asian countries. As a result, ASEM had limited practical effects beyond its “Talking Club” function. The only permanent institution within the ASEM framework is the Asia–Europe Foundation, which is funded through voluntary contributions and focuses on the implementation of selected projects in areas such as culture, education, economy, public health, governance, media, and sustainable development. The economic projects of the Foundation in 2017–2020 were limited to organizing the Asia–Europe Economic Forums and a seminar on RCEP;<sup>93</sup> in other words, even limited trade facilitation projects are beyond the scope of the organization.

As a Talking Club, however, ASEM has a specific feature absent in the other forums we discuss in this book (17+1, SCO, etc.) that is perhaps the main reason why the organization has attracted substantial scholarly attention: the strong role played by regional organizations from Europe and from Asia (i.e., the EU and ASEAN) in the dialogue. ASEM provides a very rare example of regional organizations taking over the leading roles. Moreover, ASEM has assisted in the development of Asian regionness: dialogue with Europe and the EU provided ASEAN with additional legitimacy as an “equivalent” of the EU in East Asia (possibly in the ASEAN+3 format) and generally helped to draw the political boundaries of a potential East Asian region that had originally been poorly defined and fragmented. In the case of the EU, ASEM contributed to the formation of a regional identity and to the further development of (institutionalized) regional integration in another part of the world (i.e., it did precisely what had not been possible in the case of post-Soviet Eurasia, where the institutionalization of Russia-centric cooperation was seen instead as a problem for the EU approach). The success of

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<sup>93</sup> ASEF, “ASEF’s Work in Economy,” <https://www.asef.org/projects/themes/economy>, accessed February 19, 2021.

the EU as an actor exporting a regionalism model and supporting regionalism and region-building in another part of the world is, however, subject to intense scholarly debate (see, among others, Park 2004; Yeo 2004; Dent 2004; Gilson 2002, 2005; Roland 2006; Robles 2007; Gaens 2008).

Currently ASEM, like other projects, is considered by the BRI as a possible tool for increasing Eurasian connectivity (Zhou and Esteban 2018), but it appears to play a rather limited role in existing discussions on Greater Eurasia. A search of *Asia–Europe Journal* (a scholarly outlet published by the Asia–Europe Foundation) for the period 2017–2020 reveals 17 articles if one searches for “ASEM,” as opposed to 49 if one searches for “Belt and Road” (and 33 if one searches for “Silk Road”).<sup>94</sup> Still, ASEM, with its broad membership, is now as close as any other organization gets to covering almost the entirety of Greater Eurasia—and also to showing the limits of dialogue in this format.

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<sup>94</sup> The BRI considers ASEM, along with CAREC and ASEAN, to be one of its institutions—see Belt and Road Initiative, “BRI Institutions,” <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/institutions-and-mechanisms/>, accessed February 19, 2021.

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1. Key Findings**

The goal of this book was to review the diverse and complex world of organizations and initiatives that proclaim the goal of developing some sort of regionalism in Greater Eurasia. Over the last decade, the issue of growing economic and social interconnections in Eurasia has received substantial attention from scholars, politicians, experts and businesspersons and has been echoed by numerous regional projects, many of which use buzzwords like “Eurasia,” “connectivity,” or “Silk Road.” These projects often have grand ambitions, comparing themselves with mega-regionalist organizations like RCEP, TPP, and TTIP or even claiming to provide a new format for international relations in Eurasia. Yet the actual success of regionalism in Greater Eurasia should not be overstated.

In somewhat simplified terms, the universe of organizations and initiatives one could consider part of the Greater Eurasia regionalism project currently consists of two groups. On one side are the “Talking Clubs”—forums that allow the regular exchange of opinions among politicians from different parts of Eurasia. Examples of the latter include ASEM, 17+1, and the SCO. Sometimes these forums declare broader and more encompassing agendas (as in the case of the SCO), but they do so without success due to the contradictory goals and interests of member countries. In spite of the discussions about a free trade area encompassing several Eurasian regions (the Lisbon–Vladivostok common economic space or trade cooperation between the EAEU and China), none of these projects appears to have even a slight chance of succeeding as of now.

On the other side are numerous initiatives that focus on increasing connectivity by constructing railroads, roads, and pipelines and improving transportation networks, as well as by implementing trade facilitation measures. Almost all the projects we discussed in Chapter 5 (the BRI, the PQI, NSRI, TRACECA, the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy, and CCAP) belong to this group, but relatively successful regional organizations in Central Asia (SPECA and

CAREC) also emphasize trade facilitation and transportation. The relatively successful projects are backed by a strong international donor (either a country—whether China, Japan, or India—or an international organization like the ADB). A certain exception is the Russian GEP, which is more amorphous and based on expressive rather than instrumental logic. Many (if not all) of these connectivity projects target Central Asia or consider it a key element of the emerging trans-Eurasian infrastructure; this is not the case for forums, which can exist in various formats and partly exclude Central Asian states. There is a certain difference between CCAP and BRI, on the one hand, and the EU–Asia Connectivity Strategy and the PQI, on the other: the latter pays greater attention to sustainability and good governance, while the former takes a more pragmatic approach.<sup>95</sup>

These two types of projects clearly show two avenues for Eurasian regionalism: that of *information exchange or building contacts and trust* and that of *building common infrastructure, removing barriers, and connecting the continent*. None of the initiatives emphasizes the issue of common rules, norms, and standards on which the European model of regionalism was based; such an approach is clearly unfeasible for Greater Eurasia due to the diversity of countries and their emphasis on sovereignty.

A somewhat paradoxical conclusion of this book, as we emphasized throughout the text, is that many connectivity projects actually create new cleavages and divides in Eurasia. This applies to both groups of initiatives: forums and projects of common infrastructure. Regarding infrastructure, one of the key messages of this book is that, at present, the idea of Eurasian connectivity is used by numerous power poles, which—while emphasizing the need to unite and connect Eurasia—frequently do so to increase their own influence in Eurasia or to limit the influence of other power poles. The Chinese BRI is, without a doubt, the most successful project, and has triggered a reaction from Japan (the PQI), Russia (the GEP), and the EU (the

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<sup>95</sup> The approaches of Japan and the EU have explicitly been synchronized since 2019.

Connectivity Strategy). However, the BRI is also a highly disputed and often criticized project. In the same way, forums like the 17+1 group or the SCO are also frequently seen as cause for concern by countries that do not participate in these initiatives. This reflects the substantial mistrust that continues to divide the continent in spite of growing economic interconnections.

The competition between Eurasian connectivity projects is linked to another, more fundamental uncertainty associated with Eurasian regionalism: the process of region-building and the construction of regional identity. As we argued in Chapter 2, regionalism in Greater Eurasia as a “meso-level” regionalism in a way makes sense: it relies on growing ties between countries and reflects the need to develop transcontinental economic ties in addition to trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific ones. However, since the boundaries of Greater Eurasia are vague, this creates an irresistible temptation for key actors to use attractive concepts like “Silk Road,” “Eurasia,” or “connectivity” to engage in the rhetorical construction of the continent. This rhetorical construction happens in a very different way than in Europe or in Africa. While some European countries were more committed to the integration project than others, the EU and European identity were the product of a *joint effort* to construct identity. Even if France and Germany had somewhat different visions of the EU, European regionalism was created by multiple actors *together*. In Greater Eurasia, we observe multiple projects promoted by key actors competing for the attention of other smaller Eurasian countries, but also seeking ways of connecting their projects, adapting, and adjusting to each other (see, for example, Christoffersen 2018).

One can clearly see several gaps in the institutional architecture of Eurasian integration, as some aspects of the interconnections emerging in Eurasia are not covered by the organizations and forums we covered in this book. With the possible exception of the SCO and its very specific notion of Three Evils, the dark side of the growing interconnections in Eurasia—drug and arms trafficking, the spread of disease, and environmental issues—plays a relatively limited role in the existing formats (even if the environment is occasionally addressed

by forums). This is not surprising: security issues require a much higher level of mutual trust and willingness to cooperate than even trade, where, as mentioned, Greater Eurasian regionalism has shown very little progress. Nevertheless, this remains a serious concern for Greater Eurasia: the dark side of growing Eurasian interconnections is important and requires the concerted effort of numerous Eurasian countries to address it. Other aspects of Eurasian interconnections where cooperation is very limited are labor markets and migration. Populations in modern Eurasia are very mobile, yet solutions to this problem are either regional (the EU or EAEU institutional framework for migration) or national and frequently protectionist. This is to be expected given how sensitive the topic is, but again, managing labor markets and migration flows is a substantial issue and an important gap.

The book therefore seems to identify a possible avenue for constructing a Greater Eurasian regionalism somewhat parallel to the one we discussed in our previous work (Vinokurov and Libman 2012a). First, it is hardly possible, nor is it necessary, to create an encompassing organization for the entirety of Greater Eurasia: only ASEM has come close to this, at the cost of a very vague agenda. More effective dialogue can be conducted in specific overlapping clubs dealing with individual issues or providing a platform for information and opinion exchange.<sup>96</sup> Second, any common institutional framework for regionalism in Greater Eurasia is unrealistic—economic cooperation in Greater Eurasia could function only by concentrating on specific projects and initiatives. A free trade area is an extremely ambitious goal, not only for Greater Eurasia in general but even for most of the clubs we discussed; the focus should therefore be on pragmatic cooperation in the area of infrastructure and trade facilitation. Even this flexible and pragmatic design, however, faces limits in modern Eurasia—one can hardly use a regionalism approach based on overlapping clubs in a context of low trust,

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<sup>96</sup> The idea is similar to the project of “functional competitive overlapping jurisdictions” proposed by Bruno Frey and Reiner Eichenberger for European regionalism (see Frey and Eichenberger 1996).

concerns about hegemony, and division and conflict. Individual clubs of Eurasian regionalism are thus not only obliged to provide viable solutions to the problems the continent faces, but also to demonstrate to each other and to various actors (like the EU, Russia, and China) that they do not attempt to seed division or create exclusive spheres of influence—and it is dubious whether they would be able to do so.

## 7.2. Post-COVID-19 Perspectives

While we have repeatedly alluded to the unprecedented situation of the global pandemic, the book in most cases represents the pre-COVID-19 status quo: the development of regionalism in Greater Eurasia prior to the fundamental change experienced by the world economy and society in 2020. It is too early to offer a systematic analysis of what the new normal will look like; we would, however, like to finish the book with several remarks on COVID-19, discussing in particular the BRI, the most advanced and most important Eurasian connectivity initiative.<sup>97</sup>

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has led to an uncertainty and loss of confidence that has not been experienced since 2008 (or probably even earlier). Market volatility has also risen extremely rapidly, to a level unseen over the last decade. Even in this unfavorable environment, there are sectors that have taken a disproportionate hit: tourism, passenger transportation, airlines, hotels, and practically everything that has a built-in cross-border dimension.

Infrastructure, as a rule, is not among the most vulnerable sectors—quite the contrary. It has an inherent long-term dimension. While a cross-border component is important, most basic infrastructure is strictly national. However, the 2020 trends for the BRI might not fit this general pattern. The BRI intends to build basic infrastructure across the globe, with a particular focus on Greater Eurasia to the South, West, and North of China. Under the umbrella of this very large-scale initiative, hundreds of billions of dollars are mobilized and disbursed. A

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<sup>97</sup> This section is a revised version of Vinokurov (2020b).

notable percentage of BRI projects possess an explicit cross-border nature—mostly automobile corridors and railroads, but also electric power generation and distribution projects. The BRI is by nature a cross-border phenomenon, making it vulnerable to the coronavirus-induced economic crisis.

The current crisis might have a number of direct and indirect negative consequences for implementation of the BRI's projects:

- First, cross-border travel and transportation currently face multiple constraints. Since the BRI is, to a large extent, about the expansion of cross-border movement of goods, services, and people, it will take a direct hit through multiple channels, including the contraction of trade, investment, and passenger transportation. The heavy damage currently being done to global value chains adds to the negative impact on the cross-border movement of goods.
- Second, there are reasons to be concerned about recipient countries' debt and fiscal sustainability. Many have low or lower-middle income economies with unstable economic growth. Efforts to control the debt sustainability of recipient countries are overdue, given the fragility of many recipient countries and the sheer volume of BRI-related infrastructure projects. For this reason, China's plans, announced at the Second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in April 2019, to analyze the debt sustainability of each country in cooperation with international financial institutions deserve applause.<sup>98</sup>
- Third, there is a concern that there will be fewer Chinese financial resources available to finance BRI projects. BRI projects are not only capital-intensive but also require concessional financing ("long and cheap money"), in particular in low and lower-middle income economies across Eurasia and the world. Since the People's Republic of China needs much of its financial might to stimulate its own national economy in the short term,

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<sup>98</sup> We also have to mention the possibility of a reduction of BRI funding, although it is unlikely that the current commitments will be subject to revisions.

will financial resources be available for long-term BRI projects? These worries have yet to be addressed.

- Fourth, many BRI projects involve Chinese contractors abroad and, consequently, tens of thousands of Chinese workers working abroad. Such a large external workforce would now face multiple hurdles in terms of their deployment and cross-border movement.
- Fifth, the multilateralization of the BRI only began to unfold in 2019, with the first material results to be expected in 2020 and 2021. Under the multilateralization process, many well-funded international financial institutions were expected to enter the game and share the burden of infrastructure financing with China. International financial institutions provide project financing based on signed and ratified international treaties that do not depend on local legislative changes, which helps mitigate certain risks. Under crisis conditions, international financial organizations deploy both their financial and human resources to fight the crisis, thus drawing much-needed resources away from long-term infrastructure projects.

What are the policy options for dealing with this crisis? First, long-term policy orientation might help. The BRI is a very long-term and truly strategic initiative. In order to build basic infrastructure in a consistent and efficient way, it is necessary to maintain a long-term vision that can weather multiple crises along the way. The Belt and Road has a chance of becoming an initiative of this sort. Second, China, its partner countries, and partnering institutions should pay great attention to the issues of debt and fiscal sustainability. In fact, the current crisis will test the limit of sovereign debt sustainability around the globe. In some BRI partner countries, 40%–45% of their external public debt is accounted for by BRI-related financing (granted, much of this comes on concessional terms, which in most cases alleviates sustainability concerns). In the extreme case, should the COVID-19 crisis prove to be longer and tougher than currently expected, some recipient countries might require debt restructuring. Third, the success story of the trans-Eurasian container traffic discussed in this book has to continue, and from

this point of view the export-related railway subsidies have to be maintained in spite of the current abnormal conditions. In the longer term, the recommendation would be at least to partially retain export subsidies and, importantly, to provide more transparency about their level. In the absence of such guidance, infrastructure, transportation, machine-building producers, and logistics companies will face uncertainty about underlying conditions and thus refrain from investing. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, BRI partner countries would be well advised to contain the expression of negative sentiments. In the face of a crisis, it is very tempting for national governments to revert to protectionist policies and to slash long-term initiatives that have a low margin and will reveal most of their positive effects in the distant future. This recommendation might concern recipient countries more than China itself.

Only time will tell how the world (and Eurasia) will deal with the current crisis. Regionalism in Greater Eurasia (and the entire global economic order) is currently experiencing significant stress—and, from the scholarly perspective, a lot can be learned in the next couple of years about how Eurasian institutions, initiatives, and organizations will deal with it.

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CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM

# ONE EURASIA OR MANY? REGIONAL INTERCONNECTIONS AND CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS ON THE EURASIAN CONTINENT

ALEXANDER LIBMAN & EVGENY VINOKUROV

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