

From “Greater Europe” to “Greater Eurasia”: Status concerns and the evolution of Russia’s approach to alignment and regional integration

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Abstract

Russia’s approach to alignment and regional integration has evolved dramatically—from a focus on the West and disinterest and neglect of regional integration in the 1990s, to vigorous efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space under Russian leadership in the period between 2009 and 2014, to forming a “Greater Eurasia” that transcends the post-Soviet space and includes China and other non-Western powers (such as Turkey, India, and Iran) today. Status concerns are key to understanding this evolution in policy and vision as a declining Russia struggles to avoid losing great power status. Russia initially eschewed its relationships with post-Soviet states in favor of integration with Europe and the West, which seemed to offer greater status gains. When Russia failed to find a place in the Western liberal order and “Greater Europe” commensurate with its status aspirations, it shifted its attention to regional integration of the post-Soviet space, believing this would make Russia, in the words of President Putin, “one of the poles in a future multipolar world.” However, integrating the post-Soviet space proved to be an arduous task (that failed miserably in Ukraine) and did not yield the status gains Russia hoped for. The scope of Eurasian integration has now shifted to the formation of a “Greater Eurasia,” as Russia looks to gain status through its association with more dynamic rising and emerging powers.

Keywords

Alignment, Eurasia, regional integration, Russia, status

Over the last three decades, Russia’s approach toward regional integration and global alignment has evolved dramatically. Post-Soviet Russia was initially disinterested in Eurasian integration, neglecting its relationships with the former Soviet States in favor of integration into “Greater Europe” and a return to the “common European home.” Then from (roughly) the period of 2009–2014, Russia set upon vigorous efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space under its leadership, with the hopes that this would allow Russia to become, as President Putin declared, one of the “poles in a future multipolar world.” Russia’s vision and efforts shifted again after the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and Russia is now focused on the formation of a “Greater Eurasia” that transcends the post-Soviet space and would include China and other non-Western powers such as India, Iran, and Turkey.

Status concerns are the key to understanding this evolution in policy and vision. Ever since the Soviet collapse,

Russia has struggled with the specter of decline and the prospects of losing its status as one of the world’s great power status. The pursuit of status has been the central pre-occupation of post-Soviet Russia’s foreign policy, and Russia’s approach to alignment and regional integration has largely followed its status concerns. Russia initially eschewed regional integration in favor of the greater status

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gains that Western integration seemed to offer. When Russia was ultimately unable to find a place in the Western order commensurate with its status aspirations, it shifted its attention to regional integration of the post-Soviet states, believing that establishing economic and political hegemony would allow it to maintain its place in the Great Power club as a regional leader in a world made up of multipolar regions. However, integrating the post-Soviet space under Russian leadership proved to be an arduous and thankless task, highlighted by Russia's struggles in Ukraine. As a result, the scope of Eurasian integration has now expanded to the formation of a "Greater Eurasia," where Russia would gain status through its association with more dynamic rising and emerging powers.

Security and economic considerations also shaped these alignment and integration choices (Diesen, 2021; Mankoff, 2009; Matveeva, 2018). However, neither can fully explain why Russia's vision of regional integration and global alignment has undergone such profound transformations over time. Russia's concerns about North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastward expansion and missile defense are often cited as reasons for why Russia turned away from the West and toward solidifying its influence over neighboring states through Eurasian integration (Mearsheimer, 2014). Yet neither of these factors represents an existential security threat for Russia. One could argue that NATO has actually weakened itself as a military alliance by including post-Soviet states that core Western members may not have the political will to defend (Walker, 2015). Even if NATO could develop a working missile defense system, Russia's huge nuclear arsenal and its development of new hypersonic missiles still assure that it has a secure nuclear second-strike capability. Both NATO and missile defense are more of a threat to Russia's status and prestige than to its actual physical security (Krickovic, 2018). Moreover, from a security-focused perspective, Russia's efforts to recruit China into its Greater Eurasian integration ignore the potential threat that could develop from rapidly rising Chinese power (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019).

Explanations that focus on economic incentives also fall short of offering a satisfactory explanation for Russia's fluctuating integration and alignment choices. Narrow Eurasian integration with the smaller post-Soviet economies only offers marginal economic benefits for Russia while diverting trade away from the larger and more lucrative international markets (Busygina, 2021). Economic integration with the rapidly developing economies of Asia makes more sense as it offers considerable future economic benefits, in terms of both the volume of trade and the potential for lessening Russia's dependence on the exports of natural resources (Diesen, 2017). Yet, it comes with considerable economic trade-offs. China has already displaced Russia as the top trading partner of most post-Soviet states. Trade with China also replicates the same qualitative

imbalances, as Russian exports to Asia are still primarily in natural resources. Europe continues to exercise a dramatic pull on the Russian economy. Despite the harsh sanctions regimes in place and even taking into consideration the rapid growth of China–Russia trade, the European Union (EU) still accounts for over 40% of Russia's foreign trade, 70% more than Russia's combined trade with China and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) countries (Firanchuk & Knobel, 2020).

Previous studies have identified status as a main motivating factor behind Russian foreign policy (Clunan, 2009; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Sakwa, 2017) and its regional integration efforts (Lewis, 2018; Mankoff, 2009; Nitoiu, 2017). This study covers new ground by chronicling how status concerns have shaped Russia's integration and alignment choices throughout the entire post-Soviet period and linking these choices to the broader International Relations literature on status and status-seeking (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Paul et al., 2014). Recent scholarship explores how states look to enhance their status by associating with other states, either through regional integration (Paul & Shankar, 2014) or by building "status partnerships" (Larson, 2020). Building on these insights, this study examines the ways Russia has pursued "status by association" through its policies of regional integration and global alignment, identifying some of the difficulties and trade-offs that come with this approach to status-seeking, particularly as they pertain to Russia's efforts to construct a "Greater Eurasia."

Status in International Relations

A growing body of literature demonstrates that states are status-conscious; higher status is an attribute that is highly valued, and maintaining or improving status is a central goal of states' foreign policies. Status can be defined as the collective belief held by states and statesman about a country's ranking in the international hierarchy based on their subjective judgments about the country's possession of valued attributes, such as military power, wealth, cultural attractiveness, sociopolitical organization, or its adherence to principles and values (Paul et al., 2014). Status is important to states both for social-psychological and instrumental reasons. High status enhances individuals' sense of self-esteem and helps foster a sense of identity and social belonging (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). High status also offers more tangible benefits to states, contributing to their power and capabilities by giving states decision-making autonomy and inducing deference to their interests on the part of other states. When a state's status and prestige are recognized by other states, it does not need to use its material capabilities to get its way. There is actually relatively little use of material power in the conduct of diplomacy or negotiations among states, and outcomes are principally determined by the relative status of the states involved (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). "The success or failure of all

international policies, however grandiose or mundane, is crucially dependent on status” (Renshon, 2017, p. 48).

Status concerns have been particularly important to Russia. Great Power status is an integral part of Russian identity for both Russian elites and the public, and maintaining this status is critically important for the regime’s domestic political legitimacy (Clunan, 2009). Moreover, as a former Super Power and historical member of the Great Power club, Russia has inherited a large and diverse patrimony of interests. Given the difficulties of its post-Soviet transition, Russia has often struggled to marshal the necessary material capabilities to project power and has instead been forced to rely on status to defend these interests (Krickovic & Zhang, 2020, pp. 236–237). Thus, for both social-psychological and instrumental reasons, Russia has fought hard to retain its Great Power status.

There are three main strategies that states can use to enhance their status (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). They can adopt a strategy of *social mobility*, moving up the status hierarchy by adopting the values and behavior of the states at the top of the hierarchy. An alternative strategy is one of *social competition*, that is, for states to try and surpass the dominant state or group of states on the attributes on which their higher status is based (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). The focus is not on improving their performance on the relevant dimensions of social comparison per se, but rather on besting those that are above them in the status. The third strategy is one of *social creativity*. States following such a strategy try to redefine the desired attributes by which status is measured to include those attributes in which their state ranks highly and in which they may have a comparative advantage over states that may be ranked higher than them in the existing status hierarchy. Unlike social competition, social creativity does not try to change the existing status ranking by outcompeting the states at the top of the hierarchy, but rather it seeks to achieve preeminence on a different ranking system. It is important to note that states cannot improve their status solely through their own efforts. Status is intersubjective; it depends on the shared beliefs of the community of states. Status gains thus ultimately depend on others’ recognition of a state’s achievements (Renshon, 2017).

States can enhance their status through their relationships and associations with other states (Paul et al., 2014). Status seekers may improve their status by joining regional groupings or other international statutes that include states that are considered to occupy a higher position than them in the international status hierarchy. They thereby demonstrate that they measure up to the criteria for membership in these ‘exclusive clubs’ (Paul et al., 2014). Status seekers that take the lead in pushing regional integration imitative forward (or in creating new international organizations) enhance their status by demonstrating their power and importance in world affairs (Wohlforth et al., 2018). Status seekers may develop symbiotic “status partnerships” with other status-seeking states in which they support each other’s status aspirations and play on each other’s strengths in

different attributes that confer status (Larson, 2020). Status partnerships are useful to states that find themselves on the outside of the established normative order, as they allow them to avoid isolation and challenge the legitimacy of established norms and to begin redefining them. They also help states that hold a lower status position, or whose rise up the status hierarchy is less dynamic, punch above their weight by letting the higher or more dynamic partner’s elevated status rub off on them.

Russia’s global alignment choices and approach to regional integration have closely tracked its status-seeking behavior. Russia initially practiced social mobility. It looked to enhance its status by aligning itself with the West and seeking membership in the high-status club of Western states. When this failed, it shifted to social competition, looking to enhance its global status by forming a balancing coalition with China and Russia against U.S. and Western hegemony. American power proved too strong, and Russia was unable to enlist the support of either country toward balancing. It briefly went back to social mobility through alignment with the West after 9-11, during Putin’s first presidency. Through this time, it sought out the position of an equal and independent partner. Throughout these three initial periods, Russia generally neglected the post-Soviet space, occasionally paying lip service to regional integration but not making the necessary sacrifices or investments in it.

Russia only began to be serious about post-Soviet integration after these efforts at gaining status recognition from the West failed. It began to push for the development of a Russian-led Eurasian Union that would allow Russia to emerge as one of the poles in a future multipolar world order (Putin, 2011). Successful status-seeking ultimately depends on the recognition of other states. Post-Soviet regional integration did not produce the status gains Russia expected because it was never really recognized as a legitimate or worthwhile undertaking by the Western powers at the top of the global status hierarchy. It also proved to be much more costly and difficult than Russia initially expected it would be. Post-Ukraine crisis, Russia has shifted toward alignment with other, more dynamic emerging powers, principally China. It is now looking to build a trans-regional bloc, Greater Eurasia, that would unite the major non-Western world powers and serve as an alternative to the “Greater West” that has shut Russia out. Russia’s approach to regional integration has now shifted to *social creativity*, reconceptualizing geography in a way that gives Russia central importance in an emerging post-Western world (Lewis, 2018).

Russia’s initial approach to Eurasian integration: (not so) benign neglect

Under President Boris Yeltsin and Russia’s first Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev (1991–1996), Russia followed a decisively pro-Western foreign policy course, with the

express goal of fully integrating the country into the Western liberal international order. The liberal Westernizers around Kozyrev and Yeltsin firmly believed in the superiority of Western civilization and that there were no alternatives to pro-Western development. This was a period of “uninformed infatuation,” where the Russian leadership accepted Western political, economic, and social institutions as being worthy of uncritical and wholesale emulation (Lipman, 2016). After decades of opposing the West, Russia finally had an opportunity to become a “normal” country and join the Western community of “civilized” nations (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 58–59).

While the primary emphasis may have been on internal transformation, status considerations were an important motivating factor behind the initial liberal pro-Western foreign policy turn (Clunan, 2009). Russia’s liberal reformers believed Russia’s international status would be judged on its ability to transform itself into a liberal democracy. Once this goal was accomplished, Russia would be accepted by the United States and other leading Western countries as a full partner and accorded equal status as co-custodian of the international order (Lo, 2002, pp. 43–44). In terms of status-seeking, this policy was one of *social mobility*. Russia would enhance its status by association with liberal Western states at the top of the international status hierarchy (the U.S. and its Western European allies) and would adopt the norms and principles that these states espoused and which conferred status within the liberal Western order. They were convinced that the West would recognize the importance of integrating a country of such enormous economic and political potential as Russia into its order and would support Russia’s efforts to reform and modernize its economy with massive infusions of aid, on the scale of the post–World War II (WWII) Marshall plan to Western Europe (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 72). By transforming itself into a “normal” liberal democracy and market economy, Russia would take its proper place in the Western-led liberal order and integrate into an expanded Europe reaching from “Dublin to Vladivostok” (Sakwa, 2017).

Traditional Russian geopolitical concerns, such as maintaining a geopolitical balance of power by pursuing relations with Western powers or preserving Russia’s sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, were intentionally neglected. These countries were associated with “authoritarianism” and “backwardness” rather than the “democracy” and “prosperity” of the West. Russia’s liberal westernizers felt that its ties with post-Soviet space were a costly and unproductive part of Russia’s imperial and Soviet legacy—“dead weight” to be left behind as rapidly as possible so that Russia could push ahead with domestic reform and integration into the developed and prosperous West (Mankoff, 2009, p. 242). “Russia had been too Asiatic already, and it was now time to move away ‘from its Asian roots of oriental despotism and toward the Western democratic camp’” (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 77). Yeltsin recalled

Russian troops from Nagorno Karabakh and even called for United Nations (UN) and NATO to send peacekeeping forces there and to other parts of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Tsygankov, 2016). In 1993, despite its obligations to coordinate currency policy with CIS, Russia unilaterally withdrew from the Ruble zone, immediately creating currency crises in other CIS countries. Russia also erected high tariffs on imports from CIS countries and continued to protect its market against imports from other CIS countries—even after signing preferential trade agreements with them (Mankoff, 2009).

The unequivocal pro-Western policy and neglect of the post-Soviet space faced sustained opposition within the elite and across the ideological spectrum, from statist and conservative liberals who felt that these policies were neglecting Russia’s traditional interests to communist and nationalist who saw them as outright treasonous (Tsygankov, 2016). Some critics even went so far as to argue that Russia should establish its own version of the U.S. Monroe Doctrine in the post-Soviet space (Migranyan, 1992). Popular support for the pro-Western foreign policy course was also undermined by the failures of the liberals’ domestic economic reform efforts, which impoverished the country, left the choicest bits of the economy in the hands of a few politically connected oligarchs, and made Russia dependent on Western financial aid for its very survival (Tsygankov, 2016).

After the stunning success of nationalist and communist forces in the 1993 Duma elections, Yeltsin and Kozyrev began to backtrack on some of their more pro-Western policies and to articulate Russia’s “Great Power” interests more forcefully to placate these forces. The conduct of foreign policy also began to escape the control of the central government. As the security situation deteriorated in many of the post-Soviet republics, the Russian armed forces, on their own initiative, began to intervene in civil conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan (Mankoff, 2009). While making some tactical adjustments to placate their domestic critics, Kozyrev and the liberal Westernizers tried to continue their pro-Western course. However, they were severely constrained in their ability to do so by crystalizing domestic opposition as well as the general chaos that reigned in the country, making it difficult to follow any kind of concerted foreign policy (Tsygankov, 2016).

Russia changed course more forcefully in January 1996, when Kozyrev was replaced as foreign minister by Yevgeny Primakov, one of the most vocal critics of the pro-Western policy course. Primakov promoted a much more traditional vision of Great Power politics, looking to establish Russia as an independent center of power in world politics (Lo, 2002). In terms of the status-seeking strategies outlined above, Primakov’s approach was one of *social competition*: Russia would enhance its status by embracing the role of global power balancer, actively pursuing the goal of establishing a multipolar global order (Lo, 2002). Primakov did

not abandon Russia's integration into the West but insisted that integration would come on Russia's terms and would be more of a product of convergence than a wholesale adoption of Western values and institutions (Mankoff, 2009, pp. 140–141). Moscow would pursue social competition primarily through peaceful means, employing soft balancing strategies against the United States. Russia used international institutions and international law, and most importantly, its vote in the UN Security Council, to restrain Western power. It worked to hasten the transition to multipolarity by establishing a trilateral balancing coalition with China and India and by reestablishing Soviet-era relationships with Middle Eastern powers such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Tsygankov, 2016).

Integration of the post-Soviet region was a key part of Primakov's strategy for recovering Russia's Great Power status. Russia would reassert its political and economic primacy in the region, preventing outsiders, such as NATO, and Islamic states, such as Iran and Turkey, from filling the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union (Mankoff, 2009). Status was not the only reason for the return to regional integration. The deteriorating security situation in these countries and the danger of non-traditional security threats, such as transnational crime, narcotics trafficking, and terrorism, also were significant sources of worry for Moscow. Domestic political considerations also played an important role. The Russian military and security services were already beginning to get involved in these countries on their own accord to address these concerns. In many ways, the Kremlin was just playing catch-up to assert its authority over foreign policy (Tsygankov, 2016). Moreover, by appearing to address the issue of regional integration, the Kremlin was intent on insulating itself against domestic criticism for its neglect of the former Soviet states (Lo, 2002).

President Yeltsin's decree of September 1995 proclaimed the CIS a top foreign policy priority for Russia, calling for Russia to assume a "leading role" in the CIS as part of its broader quest for "a worthy place in world society" (Yeltsin, 1995). These sentiments were echoed in the Russian government's "Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Concept for Economic Integrational Development," adopted in March 1997:

For the first time since the Soviet breakup, the Kremlin acknowledged the priority significance of the CIS for Russia's national interests and defined Russia as the leading power in the formation of a new system of interstate political and economic relations in the region. (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 118)

The CIS would be the main vehicle of regional integration, which would closely follow the EU's model of voluntary integration based on economic complementarities, shared historical/cultural experience, and continued personal ties (Krickovic, 2014).

At Russia's behest, the CIS adopted thousands of multi-lateral initiatives, including measures in support of free trade, monetary union, and collective defense (Kubicek, 2009). Despite these initiatives and the lofty rhetoric of CIS leaders at countless meetings, very little progress was made toward integration in this period. According to one study, less than 10% of the thousands of documents and resolutions adopted by CIS bodies from 1991 to 2007 were actually ratified by all member countries (Moskvin, 2007). In reality, the tendency was actually toward disintegration. Economic interdependence between the post-Soviet states declined precipitously. Russia's trade with CIS state declined from over 75% of its overall trade in 1990 to less than 28% in 1999 (Lo, 2002). Rather than preserving the economic interdependencies inherited from the Soviet Union, many of the successor states deliberately chose to pursue painful economic reforms that severed inter-republican ties to preserve their sovereignty and interdependence and distance themselves from Russia (Abdelal, 2001). These states pursued economic and security integration with the West, signing association agreements with the EU and NATO, and in the case of the energy-rich republics, such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, invited foreign multinationals to exploit their energy resources (Tsygankov, 2016). They also formed interregional groupings, which deliberately excluded Russia and focused on limiting Russia's regional influence such as GUUAM (which brought together Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Moldova) (Kubicek, 2009).

For its part, Russia lacked a clear and coherent strategy for integration and was unwilling to pay the costs and make the sacrifices to make real regional integration work. There was a fundamental lack of consensus among the policy-making elite on such questions as how far integration should go, which states should be the priority (with many downplaying the importance of Central Asia to Russia), and the means that Russia should employ to make integration a reality (Krickovic, 2014). Most significantly, the costs and benefits of integration, that is, how much of its resources Russia should invest, continued to be the subject of much debate, with many in the elite believing that integration would draw vital resources away from the primary task of Russia's internal development and modernization (Lo, 2002, p. 74).

As a result, Russia pursued a policy of "regional hegemony on the cheap" (Mankoff, 2009). It focused on narrow issue areas where its immediate interests were at stake (such as security threats from Islamic fundamentalism and NATO expansion, or securing control of energy routes), and its engagement with regional states was often reactive and designed to counter the threat of growing influence of other states. Like many of the foreign policies of these years of Russia's weakness and transitional turmoil, Russia's efforts at integration lacked real substance and were more virtual than real. According to Bobo (Lo, 2002, p. 86),

If success' is measured not by the regime's ability to get things done but by the extent to which it was able to convince others of the sincerity of its rhetoric, then the case of the CIS stands as a monument to the virtues of Potemkinization as well as to humankind's infinite capacity to believe.

When it came to the issue of enhancing status, Russia's attention was focused elsewhere and primarily toward its relations with the West. Russia alternated between pursuing close alignment with the West, with the hopes of forming close partnerships with high-status Western states, in which Russia would be treated as an equal, and "balancing" and pushing back against U.S. and Western hegemony by aligning itself with China and India (Sakwa, 2017, p. 22).

Eurasian integration as a vehicle for Russia's status ambitions

Under Primakov, Russia was still too weak to successfully pursue status through great power balancing. Its efforts to do so, such as the decision to rush Russian paratroopers into Kosovo in advance of NATO peacekeeping forces (only to be reduced to later begging NATO forces for food and other supplies), seemed quixotic and exposed the depth of Russia's weakness (Lo, 2002). Upon coming to office, Putin injected a new pragmatism into Russian foreign policy. He abandoned Primakov's strategy of status-seeking through social competition, settling on a more cautious approach of social mobility that focused on internal modernization and economic development as the key to regaining Russia's status (Leontev, 2006). However, unlike the earlier strategy of social mobility of the initial post-Soviet period, it did not include the wholesale adoption of Western values and norms. Russia would increase its status by proving to the West that it could be a valuable ally in the "global war against terrorism" and a more reliable supplier of energy than the volatile Middle East (Tsygankov, 2016). Rather than seeking acceptance by the West by appealing to shared norms and values, Russia would focus on building its power and capabilities so that the West would recognize the benefits of forming a pragmatic partnership with Russia (Pellicciari, 2018).

Preserving Russia's status as an independent great power and the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity remained important goals. However, Russia would pursue these goals by turning inward and strengthening itself (Lo, 2002). Instead of looking for ways to restrain Western hegemony, as Primakov had done, Putin focused on ways that Russia could develop closer relations with the United States and Europe. Putin seized on the terrorist attacks of 9-11 to try and establish a partnership against terrorism and put forward Russia as a reliable energy partner for the United States that would displace uncertain hydrocarbon imports from the volatile Middle East (Tsygankov, 2016).

Under conditions of U.S. unipolarity and unrestrained American power, establishing Russia as an indispensable ally would be the surest way to elevate its status (Mankoff, 2009). At the same time, Putin continued to pursue integration with Europe. However, this time, integration would be based on converging economic interests, rather than on converging values, and Russian leaders looked to find ways to deepen economic interdependence between Russia and Europe (Lukyanov, 2008).

This pragmatic and inward-looking approach extended to Russia's relations with CIS. Putin was keen to increase Russia's influence and advance the cause of regional integration. However, Russia would do so with a careful eye to the costs and benefits of integration, making sure that its relationships with CIS fell on the positive side of the ledger and did not burden Russia with unwanted responsibilities (Matveeva, 2007). Russia's engagement in the region was motivated more by Russia's pursuit of narrow national interests than by a strong commitment to the broader cause of regional integration. "Thus, the 'near abroad' with its open borders and a sense of historical unity has been transformed into a 'normal abroad' where the former Soviet states are treated as foreign countries" (Matveeva, 2007, p. 45).

In many ways, Russia's regional policy continued to be reactive. Moscow was concerned about the growing influence of outside powers in the region. It used all means, including manipulating the frozen territorial and ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), Transnistria (Moldova), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) to stymie any aspirations these countries had toward NATO membership (Charap & Colton, 2018). Moscow also moved to secure its control over regional energy supplies and transit infrastructure, countering EU and U.S. efforts to establish access to oil and natural gas supplies in Central Asia that bypassed Russia. Outside of promoting these narrow security and economic interests, Russia continued to be wary of taking on the costs necessary to push regional integration forward. To maximize profits from its energy exports, Russia ended many of its energy subsidies to CIS countries (Skalamera, 2013). Gazprom hiked prices for all its downstream customers in the CIS. Price disputes led Russia to cut gas supplies to Ukraine in 2006, 2008, and 2009 and to Belarus (perhaps Russia's closest ally) in 2007. As was the case with its unilateral withdrawal from the Ruble zone in 1993, these policies illustrate Russia's prioritization of its narrow national interests over the greater cause of Eurasian integration (Mankoff, 2009).

Russia also demonstrated a readiness to trade away regional influence to further the goal of improving its international influence and status (Mankoff, 2009). After 9-11, despite strong opposition within the Russian elite, Putin acquiesced to the United States establishing military bases in Central Asia, with the hopes of furthering a broader partnership with the United States against global terror. It tried

to get out of the imbroglio around missile defense by establishing a joint system with the United States, proposing that the United States use its early warning radar system in Gabala, Azerbaijan. Russia was thereby inviting a U.S. presence in the Caucasus, a particularly sensitive region in terms of its own internal security interest. Russia also showed a surprising degree of restraint after the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which brought a potentially hostile and pro-Western regime to power in that country. Unlike the situation 10 years later, Moscow did not intervene to reverse the outcome but worked to constructively engage the new government in Kiev. Putin was willing to endure a deeply humiliating diplomatic defeat in a country it considered vital to its core national interests to preserve good relations with the United States and EU (Trenin, 2011).

Despite some initial successes, the strategy of enhancing Russia's status through "internal concertation" and "pragmatic partnerships" with the West soon reached its limits. The United States was not ready to accept Russia as an equal partner. It began to lose interest in cooperation with Russia on the "Great War on Terror" (GWOT) after Russia made its initial concession in Central Asia, and the shale oil and gas revolutions in the United States made an energy partnership between the two redundant. Russia's efforts to deepen economic interdependence with the EU were stymied by European politicians and regulators, who feared that Russia would use economic interdependence as a tool of geopolitical "blackmail" against the EU (Lukyanov, 2008). Despite its neglect of the region, Russia still saw its dominance in the post-Soviet space as the cornerstone of its global status. This dominance came under increasing threat from the Bush administration's policies. NATO moved forward with (still tentative) enlargement plans for Georgia and Ukraine and began to deploy ABM system close to Russia's borders in Poland and the Czech Republic. Moscow saw a U.S. hand in the "2004-2005 Orange" Revolution in Ukraine, the 2005 "Tulip" revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2005 political protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan (which were brutally put down by the Karimov regime) (Ortmann, 2008). These "Colored Revolutions" weakened Russian regional influence, and Russian leaders feared that Washington's real goal was to engineer regime change in Moscow itself (Duncan, 2012).

Moscow began to push back against what it saw as the most dangerous manifestations of U.S. hegemony. The emphasis shifted away from social mobility toward social competition and balancing against U.S. and Western power. Russian officials openly spoke out against what they saw as the dangers of U.S. domineering and unprincipled behavior, most notably in Putin's 2007 Munich Speech (Putin, 2007). Moscow strengthened relations with states that shared these concerns and grievances, including emerging powers such as China and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), as well as more openly anti-American states such as Iran and Venezuela. Russia's invasion of Georgia in

the summer of 2008 was an important turning point. Precisely who was to blame for starting the war is still subject to much debate. Nevertheless, by decisively intervening, Moscow demonstrated for the first time since the Soviet collapse that it was willing to sacrifice its relations with the West to assert its interests in the former Soviet Union (FSU):

The invasion of Georgia and recognition of the breakaway regions reflected a calculation in Moscow that the strategic pause. . . following the collapse of the Soviet Union was over. It was a signal to the rest of the World that Russia continued to regard the CIS as its own sphere of influence, where it would not tolerate having its interests ignored. (Mankoff, 2009, p. 264)

Of all the major developing economies, Russia was hardest hit by the crisis, experiencing 8% contraction in its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2008–2009. It became increasingly clear that the growth model based on the exploitation of its natural resources had exhausted itself, and that Russia would be unable to recover the level of international status it aspired to through its own efforts alone (Denisov & Grivach, 2008). Larger changes in the world economy, particularly the rise of China and rapid economic growth in India, Brazil, and other parts of the developing World, were becoming more and more noticeable. The fact that the emerging economies recovered much more quickly from the crisis seemed to confirm the belief of many in the elite that the days of U.S. and Western dominance were numbered and that the World was moving toward multipolarity (Lukyanov, 2011). With the United States and West in decline, and other powers ascending, building a more robust partnership with the West seemed to offer diminishing returns for Russia's international status.

Eurasian integration offered Russia a way out of the economic dead-end in which it found itself and way to reestablish its international status. By expanding into protected Eurasian markets, Russia would restructure its foreign trade relationships, allowing Russia to modernize its economy and break its dependence on energy and natural resource exports to the West (Diesen, 2017). Taking the lead in establishing Eurasian integration would allow Russia to recover much of the status it had lost as a result of the Soviet collapse, as it emerged as one of the poles in a future multipolar world made up of integrated regional blocs (Krickovic, 2014). This did not, however, mean that Russia was giving up on broader integration with Europe and the world economy in favor of forming a closed regional block. With its larger markets and wealth of natural resources, a common post-Soviet economic space would be a much more attractive potential partner for the EU. Eurasian integration would leverage Russia's bargaining power vis-à-vis Europe and other regional blocs, allowing it to integrate into the world economy from a position of strength and on more favorable terms (Krickovic, 2014).

To push this vision through, Russia gave up on the CIS as a mechanism for regional integration, and instead pursued a more pragmatic and multi-layered approach that included bilateral relations with post-Soviet states as well as smaller multilateral groupings such as the Customs Union (CU), EAEU, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These relationships exclude states such as Georgia and Azerbaijan, which are more interested in integration with outside powers. Instead, Russia chose to focus on building relations with countries such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and the Central Asian states, which were more receptive to integration and less hostile to Russia's influence (Bratersky, 2010). This renewed drive for integration achieved some initial success. Trade among CU member states increased by nearly 70% between 2009 and 2011 (Moskvin, 2007), and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan also joined as the CU was expanded into the EAEU in 2015.

However, the EAEU's ultimate success in achieving Russia's status goals hinged on Russia's ability to attract Ukraine. According to Feodor Lukyanov (2013),

The [Eurasian Integration] project is in fact not focused on Eurasia as a whole but on one particular country that is actually located in Europe—Ukraine. . . if Ukraine, with its large market and potential for a strong and diversified economy, joins, it could become a major force to be reckoned with.

Russia faced stiff competition from the EU, which hoped to integrate Ukraine into its Eastern Partnership Program. Throughout 2012–2013, Russia used sticks (trade sanctions) and carrots (the promise of direct financial aid and discounted energy prices) to woo Ukraine over to its side. However, these efforts proved futile. The competition between the EU and Russia over Ukraine set in motion a series of events that led to a hostile anti-Russian government coming to power in Kiev and Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for rebellion by ethnic separatists in Eastern Ukraine (Sakwa, 2014). Russia's "loss of Ukraine" was a severe blow to Russia's plans for using Eurasian integration as a vehicle for elevating its status. Without Ukraine, Russia would only be integrating with relatively small economies and inconsequential states that would add little to its economic weight or international status. "Kyiv's European aspirations and outright rejection of Russia's integration project spelled the virtual failure of the [EAEU]. It also put in doubt the great power status which Russia assumed it already possessed" (Nitoiu, 2016, p. 10).

Russia mostly adopted a heavy-handed approach to regional integration, primarily leaning on its hard power resources: its military might, the reliance of other regional states on its energy resources, and their dependence on continued access to remittances from their migrants working in Russia (Nitoiu, 2016). Moscow tried to step up its efforts to increase its soft power in the region and to cultivate more diverse relationships with civil societies in the post-Soviet states (Matveeva, 2018). However, Moscow has thus far been

unable to articulate an attractive model of political and economic governance that would serve as a counterweight to the "good life" promise by adopting the norms and values of the EU (Nitoiu, 2016). Nor has it made significant inroads in cultivating relations with broader segments of the local elite beyond the narrow post-Soviet leadership class, something that is glaringly evident as Moscow struggles to respond to the recent upheavals in Belarus and Kirgizstan.

In the end, Eurasian integration failed to deliver the kind of status gains that Russian leaders hoped it would. Status ultimately depends on the recognition of other states. None of the other great powers recognized Eurasian integration as a legitimate or worthwhile project, and the U.S. and Western states treated it as a manifestation of Russia's unhealthy "imperial nostalgia" (Krickovic, 2014). Russia's efforts to get NATO to engage in official dialogue with the CSTO and to begin integration talks between the EAEU and EU were rebuffed by the leading Western powers, principally the United States (Sakwa, 2017). Outside powers no longer recognized Russia as the undisputed regional leader through which they had to build their relations with the region's smaller states (Busygina, 2021). The EU continued to move forward with its Eastern Partnership program, as Russia–EU relations in the region began to take the form of zero-sum competition for status between the two powers, with the EU able to hold its own in this contest, despite its lack of cohesive leadership and hesitance to devote hard power resources to the struggle (Nitoiu, 2016). Perhaps more significantly, China expanded its economic influence into the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), displacing Russia as the leading trade partner for all of the Central Asian states apart from Kazakhstan.

As demonstrated by Irina Busygina (2021) and Andrei Kazantsev's (2021) contributions to this volume, the smaller EAEU states have proved to be difficult for Russia to control and often thumb their nose at Russia's authority, limiting the EAEU's usefulness as a vehicle for displaying Russia's status and influence. According to Busygina (2021), Russia's efforts to use Eurasian integration to boost its global status alienate and threaten the region's smaller states and ultimately reduce Russia's regional influence. Concerned with their own separatist conflicts and wary of alienating themselves from the West, none of the members of the EAEU have recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea or yielded to Russian pressure to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Kazantsev, 2021). Even Belarus, ostensibly Russia's closest ally, openly supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemned the hostilities in South East Ukraine (Matveeva, 2018) EAEU members states resisted Russia's efforts to apply EAEU economic sanctions on Ukraine in the wake of the Ukraine crisis and have in some cases deepened their economic relations with Kiev since the crisis (Busygina, 2021). They also failed to join Russia's counter-sanctions regime against the EU, and in many cases profited from these sanctions by re-exporting banned EU agriculture

products to Russia (thereby undermining the effectiveness of Russia's sanctions) (Kazantsev, 2021). Nor did member states support Russia's efforts to impose sanctions on Turkey in the wake of Turkey's downing of a Russian combat plane in Syria in 2015. Belarus and Kazakhstan have fiercely resisted Russia's efforts to give the EAEU more of a political dimension, insisting that it remain an economic grouping (Busygina, 2021). EAEU member states largely ignore Russia's pleas to negotiate their economic relations with outside powers through the EAEU (Kazantsev, 2021). Belarus and Armenia have moved forward with their own European Partnership Plans (EaP) with the EU, although they remain cautious about antagonizing Russia. Despite the memorandum of understanding between the EAEU and BRI, most EAEU states are negotiating their participation with the BRI project bilaterally with China.

Russia has routinely backed down in its trade disputes with Belarus, fearing that Belarus will move closer to the West (Balmaceda, 2014). Kazakhstan is in a worse geopolitical position than Belarus and has few alternatives to Eurasian integration. Nevertheless, it has successfully pressured Russia to allow it to export gas to Europe using Russia's pipeline infrastructure without paying Russian export duties and restricts exports from Russia to protect its domestic industries—a clear violation of the free trade zone the EEU is supposed to create (Kazantsev, 2021). To keep integration on track, Russia has to continually expend resources to buy off its smaller partner's geopolitical loyalty, receiving very little else (in terms of status or other more tangible benefits) in return.

Eurasian integration also accomplished little to advance Russia's ambitions toward forming a Greater Europe and integrating itself into the Western order on more favorable terms. As Richard Sakwa (2021) argues in his article for this volume, Russian leaders from Gorbachev to Putin have expended considerable effort in trying to integrate Russia with the West. However, they believed that Russia's integration with Europe should be a give-and-take process of mutual transformation. The "Historic West" would have to change to become a "Greater West" with Russia's incorporation. The West rejected this "dialogical" vision and instead insisted on Russia's unilateral transformation so that it could be readily absorbed into the "hermetic and closed Historic West" (Sakwa, 2021). For Russia, this was simply unacceptable, as it would ultimately force it to give up its great power status. The Ukraine crisis slammed the door on the "Greater West." As a result, Russian foreign policy thinkers began to devise a new vision or regional and global alignment that would put Russia at its center.

From Eurasian Union to Greater Eurasia from "Murmansk to Shanghai"

When the EAEU failed to deliver on Russia's status expectations, Moscow expanded the scope of Eurasian integration to include China and other emerging Eurasian powers, such

as India, Turkey, and Iran. Even before developing the Greater Eurasia concept, Russia had already begun to build partnerships with these emerging powers as part of its status-seeking efforts. Russia's partnership with China, in particular, had allowed Russia to reap large status gains. According to Larson (2020), the relationship can be conceived as a "status-enhancing partnership" in which the two countries, which find themselves as "outsiders" in the Western-dominated status hierarchy, have used their relationship to elicit greater respect and recognition from the West. Moreover, the relationship also allows them to play to their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses—Russia benefits by associating itself with China's more dynamic economy. China, which has enhanced its military capabilities in recent years but still lags behind the United States, benefits from its association in the military sphere with Russia, which still possesses considerable residual military capabilities inherited from the USSR. The benefits derived from these associations are more symbolic than tangible, and the nature of the relationship (to what degree the two are willing to support each other) is left intentionally ambiguous (Larson, 2020). Although Chinese military modernization has benefited from the transfer of armaments and technologies from Russia, their security relationship falls short of constituting a formal military alliance, and it remains uncertain to what extent Russia would come to China's aid in any future conflict with the United States. Chinese investment and technology only partially compensate for Russia's estrangement in these areas from the West. But it provides a powerful psychological boost, allowing Russia to demonstrate that it is not isolated and that if the West will not accept it, it has alternatives (Krickovic, 2017).

Russia took the lead in transforming the BRICS from a promotional investment device into a major international forum, using the new international organization to boost its status (Roberts, 2010). BRICS can be thought of as an exercise in social creativity. Russia uses BRICS to identify itself with the most successful economies of the non-Western developing world, which are now finally emerging from Western domination—despite the fact that through much of its history it has been a European and colonial power itself (Davidoff, 2008). Its association with the BRICS also allowed it to interject itself into discussions on topics of global finance and economic governance, despite its relatively small global economic clout (Roberts, 2010). Russia has also collaborated with regional powers such as Turkey in the energy field to compensate for its estranged energy relations with the EU (though the EU still remains Russia's biggest energy consumer) and with Iran in Syria, thereby interjecting itself as a major player in the Middle East (Krickovic & Weber, 2018). These "status-enhancing partnerships" with emerging global and regional powers have allowed it to enhance its status to a much larger degree than its previous (and unsuccessful) efforts at integration with the West or its tortuous efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space.

The idea of Greater Eurasia first emerged in the Moscow think tank and academic community, around the influential Valdai Discussion Club and the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow (Lewis, 2018). After the Ukraine crisis, and facing new challenges to its influence posed by China's BRI, such prominent academic and policy experts as the Dean of the Faculty of World Economy at HSE and occasional confidant of Putin Sergei Karaganov (2015), program director for the Valdai Club Timofei Bordachev (2015), and leading Russian Sinologist Alexander Lukin (2015) began to advocate for the expansion of Russia's vision of Eurasian integration to include China and other regional powers. According to David Lewis (2018), this represented more than just a policy shift but rather a profound shift in Russian elites' understanding of geography and space, creating an imaginary unified geopolitical space from "Murmansk to Shanghai." The Greater Eurasia concept soon gained traction in elite circles in Moscow and became a staple in official speeches and the official foreign policy discourse. At a meeting of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017, Putin himself openly endorsed Greater Eurasia, arguing for a Sino-Russian partnership to integrate the continent: "[Greater Eurasia] should also change the political and economic landscape of the continent. . . . in this regard Greater Eurasia is not an abstract geopolitical scheme, but without any exaggeration, a genuinely civilizational project, directed towards the future" (quoted in Lewis, 2018, p. 7).

"Greater Eurasia" transcends regional economic integration and is world-historical in scope and ambition. As noted by Glenn Diesen (2021) in his contribution to this volume, the ultimate geoeconomic goal is to shift the world economy's geographic center of gravity away from the Western-dominated Atlantic and Pacific toward the Eurasian "heartland" that lies between Russia and China. Many advocates of the concept link Greater Eurasia to broader geopolitical and historical trends, namely, the decline of U.S. and Western hegemony and the consequent division of the World into new regional blocks (Karaganov, 2015). Greater Eurasia also plays an important role in the new Cold War that many Russian observers believe has broken out (or will soon break out between the United States and its closest allies, on one side, and Russia, China, and the states of Greater Eurasia, on the other (Karaganov, 2018; Suslov, 2018). According to Karaganov (2018),

the current state of international relations can be characterized as a new Cold War with Eurasia emerging as its major battlefield and at the same time as a second, non-Western pole The reason for it is that the United States and some European countries are trying to reverse the decline of their dominance, which they have enjoyed over the past five hundred years.

The consolidation of Greater Eurasia would allow the international system to overcome American unipolar dominance

and allow for the construction of a more equitable, just, and representative international order based on the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and the right of each society to choose its own social system and path of development (Lewis, 2018)

According to Lukin and Novikov's (2021) article in this volume, Russia now believes that inviting China and other emerging powers into what has previously been its backyard actually serves its economic interest. It will help in developing the Russian Far East and give Russia access to Asian markets where it can sell its agricultural and manufacturing goods, helping the Russian economy diversify away from its current dependence on natural resource exports. (Karaganov, 2015; Lukin & Yakunin, 2018). Moreover, Russians seem to have resigned themselves to the fact that rising Chinese global and regional influence is a historical inevitability that Russia cannot hope to directly oppose (Yefremenko, 2016). By bringing in other regional powers and establishing a multilateral format for discussion and decision-making, Greater Eurasia becomes a tool for managing China's growing regional and global dominance. (Bordachev, 2015).

Although the concept is confident in declaring its geopolitical ambitions and historical significance, it is short on practical details. It is often unclear what political/institutional form Greater Eurasia should take or even about where the boundaries of this super-regional entity should end. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is identified as the primary institutional mechanism through which Greater Eurasia is supposed to function (Karaganov, 2018). Nevertheless, the details about how the organization will be transformed to take on this new role remain murky. Some versions of Greater Eurasia exclude Europe entirely and focus on the developing world and the possible incorporation of the Middle East, South East Asia, and even parts of Africa into the super-region (Yefremenko, 2016). Others see Europe eventually integrating itself into the pluralistic Greater Eurasian space once it frees itself of American hegemony and gives up its naïve and dangerous crusading liberal universalistic liberalism (Karaganov, 2018). Lewis (2018) sees the concept's lack of clarity on these issues as part of its appeal as it allows it to avoid contentious details and appeal to different actors. What's more, the "blurred nature" of the project also speaks to the status motivations that underlie it. In the China–Russia relationship, the details are left vague so as to avoid the thorny practical considerations and potential conflicts of interests that might get in the way of status gains.

Greater Eurasia enhances Russia's status in several important ways. As mentioned above, it associates Russia closely with more dynamic rising powers of the developing world, such as China and India, bringing them together in a historically significant project where Russia plays a central and leading role. This allows Russia to paper over some of its weaknesses (in economic strength, technological dynamism, and soft power) and play to its strengths (its military

power and its seasoned diplomatic activism). Proponents of Greater Eurasia see Russia playing a significant role in the project, as the primary military guarantor of regional stability, that is, the “regional sheriff” (Yefremenko, 2016), as the main counterweight against the danger of Chinese dominance within the Greater Eurasian coalition of nations, and as the architect and mover behind the project itself (Karaganov, 2018). These are roles that the other rising powers have neither the capability, willingness, nor experience to play effectively, and Russia’s ability to take on these responsibilities in such a critically important geopolitical project enhances Russia’s status. Russia’s critical role in the construction of this super-region contrasts with the relatively minor role that it has played in the process of globalization and the formation of “liberal international order” due to its lack of economic clout and its difficulties in adhering to liberal principles in its domestic politics.

Greater Eurasia is ultimately an exercise in social creativity, where the status seeker looks to enhance their status by defining the parameters along which status should be measured. Russia uses the concept to reimagine the world and redefine its place in it in ways that enhance its status. Greater Eurasia positions Russia into the limelight of world politics. Although Russia has historically dominated the Eurasian region, it has always found itself to be an outsider in the geopolitical spaces that have mattered most and conferred the most status—Europe and the broader Trans-Atlantic world. “From being the periphery of Europe, we have turned into the center of Greater Eurasia” (Karaganov quoted in Lewis, 2018, p. 9). Russia has expanded the concept of Eurasia, a region where Russia has historically been the dominant power, to include Asia proper, the world’s most economically dynamic region and one which seems to be eclipsing the traditional West in importance. The idea that Europe will eventually join Greater Eurasia (what Karaganov (2018) calls the “Eurasian exit from the European crisis”) turns Russia’s previous relationship with Europe on its head. Russia goes from a supplicant and subordinate, that must integrate into Europe by accepting its rules and norms, into the leader and rule-maker that defines the terms of integration to a supplicant Europe. “Russia is reconceptualized from a peripheral European power, always on the edge of the European club, to becoming a central player in a new Eurasia, the geography of which is discursively constructed by Russia itself” (Lewis, 2018, p. 9).

Status is ultimately based on the subjective judgments of other states. The success or failure of Greater Eurasia as a status-enhancing project will thus depend on whether or not it gains traction among the high-status states in the international system. The EAEU failed to enhance Russia’s status because it was largely ignored by the West, which refused to engage with its institutions—even when developing its relations with the post-Soviet space. Greater Eurasia is still in its infancy, and it is too early to make definitive judgments about its success or failure. However, the initial signs

are not promising. Unlike China’s BRI, most policymakers in the high-status countries of the West are oblivious to Greater Eurasia, and the few Western experts who are aware of the project express profound skepticism about its prospects (Lo, 2019).

Moreover, it is unclear that any of the other major non-Western players Russia hopes to enlist in the project share Russia’s grand vision. China has become more interested in expanding its presence to the West into Eurasia, as demonstrated by the tremendous resources it is pouring into the BRI. However, its regional ambitions serve concrete political and economic objectives: maintaining stability on its Western periphery (which could spill over into China’s Western provinces such as Xinjiang), the economic development of these less developed western provinces, the productive use of its excess capital and construction capacity, and securing new trade routes and sources of natural resources so that it is less reliant on international shipping lanes (which the U.S. Navy could cut off from in any future conflict) (Ferdinand, 2016). The Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation that China signed with the EAEU in 2018 is more of a statement of intentions and stops short of establishing any clearly defined obligations from the Chinese side (Lukin & Novikov, 2021). China shies away from the anti-Western tendencies that are inherent in Russian visions of the project. It is also skeptical about Russia’s previous track record on regional integration, which has delivered only modest results. “Chinese experts tend to see a Russian gigantomania, produced to hide the decline of its economic model and the inefficiency of its bureaucracy” (Lewis, 2018, p. 17).

While they may occasionally pay lip service to the project, India, Iran, and Turkey seem even less interested than China. None of them has taken concrete steps toward regional integration, and all of them have simmering regional rivalries that are potential obstacles to integration. India has serious conflicts with China and Pakistan. It has refused to participate in the BRI, whereas its arch-nemesis Pakistan is quite active in the project, which further strengthens a Sino-Pakistani partnership that is a threat to India. Iran and Turkey are rivals for regional leadership in the Middle East and (potentially) for influence in Central Asia. They currently find themselves deeply engaged on opposite sides of the bitter Syrian conflict. The smaller member states of the EAEU show their disinterest in Greater Eurasia by continuing to buck Russian leadership. While Russia insists that EAEU member states engage China’s BRI initiative collectively through the EAEU, they continue to negotiate their deals with China bilaterally, bypassing the organization. Andrei Kazantsev (2021) shows that these smaller states are wary of being absorbed into a Greater Eurasian community that ultimately serves Russia’s and other larger power’s interests. Instead, they stick to a “multi-vector” approach to regional integration, using it to maintain their independence and play regional powers off against one another to secure greater resources from them.

The project also faces serious obstacles in terms of its practical implementation. Greater Eurasia focuses on world-historical “meta-narratives” and downplays or ignores the real-world problems and issues that the region faces (Lewis, 2018). How will Greater Eurasia move toward regional free trade while preserving less developed states’ ability to develop their economies? To what extent will it pool its member states sovereignty, and what kind of political institutions will it build? How will the project address the intense geopolitical rivalries that exist between its bigger states and the complex and intractable conflicts that plague relations between the smaller states?¹ Steps that have been taken to push the project forward threaten to undo some of the progresses that have been made toward regional integration. The SCO has been one of the region’s most successful organizations, addressing such difficult issues as demarcating China’s borders with the post-Soviet states, regional non-traditional security threats, and managing Sino-Russian relations to avoid conflict and rivalry (Aris, 2009). Expanding the SCO to include India and Pakistan (two intense and bitter rivals) could ruin the organization’s internal cohesion and hamper its ability to continue to play these important regional roles.

There are already signs that the Russian foreign policy community may be reconsidering their commitment to Greater Eurasia and Russia’s approach toward global alignment. A recent HSE report coauthored by two prominent proponents of Greater Eurasia, Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov (2020), entitled “Protecting Peace, Earth, and Freedom of Choice for All Countries. New Ideas for Russia’s Foreign Policy” considers the future of international relations post-COVID-19 crisis. The report paints a picture of a world where countries are increasingly turning inward to deal with their own domestic problems. At the same time, “centers of global power” (a veiled reference to China as well as the United States) are trying to limit smaller states’ sovereignty and freedom of action and draw them into their own competing orbits. As a result, the international community is unable to address pressing global problems (future pandemics, environmental degradation), while growing confrontation between the great powers increases the threat of a nuclear war.

Russia can offer a way out of this dangerous situation by emerging as the guarantor of a new non-aligned movement that would help countries maintain their sovereignty and freedom of action and preserve cultural, political, and economic pluralism in an increasingly bipolar world. Russia is ideally positioned to play this role. It is strong enough to stand up to the United States and China, but at the same time does not have the capability to dominate smaller countries:

One of the most important instruments that can be used for strengthening the image and role of Russia as a defender of the freedom of countries to choose development models, of their

sovereignty and diversity is its positioning as a guarantor of a “new non-alignment,” a power center which would save many countries the trouble of having to make the “either-or” choice and thus enabling them to maintain internal and external autonomy. (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020, p. 64)

At the same time, drawing on the strength of its diplomacy and its vast environmental resources, Russia can also take a leading role in getting states to address the pressing global problems that are currently being ignored” (Karaganov & Suslov, 2020, pp. 11–12). Greater Eurasia is mentioned only in passing in the 80-page report and does not appear in the report’s executive summary. This is a dramatic departure from the Greater Eurasian vision. Instead of positioning itself as a leader of one of the two highly integrated blocs in a future bipolar world, Russia plays the role of balancer and protector of sovereignty and global diversity in a fragmented and pluralistic world.

Conclusion

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has struggled to find a place in the post-Cold War world that is in line with its lofty status aspirations. Russia’s regional and global alignment choices have undergone profound transformations over time. At first, Russia looked to integrate itself with Europe and align with the West, neglecting the post-Soviet space. These efforts failed because it could not integrate into the West on terms that were in line with its status aspirations. Russia then shifted its attention to reintegrating the post-Soviet space, believing this would allow it to integrate with the West on more favorable terms. These efforts also failed to enhance its status because other great powers never recognized their significance or their legitimacy, and because the region’s smaller states equivocated in their acceptance of Russian leadership. As a result, Russia has turned toward building a Greater Eurasia that will bring together the emerging power of the non-Western world. Greater Eurasia enhances Russia’s status by putting it at the center of an ambitious, world-historical project that promises to transform the international order.

Greater Eurasia still faces many difficult obstacles ahead, and it is unclear that Russia will be able to turn its vision into a reality. Moreover, the world is undergoing radical transformations post COVID-19. States are turning inward to deal with their own domestic problems, and the confrontation between China and the United States is intensifying (Walt et al., 2020). These circumstances could complicate Russia’s efforts to build Greater Eurasia and present new opportunities for Russia to elevate its status. If Greater Eurasia fails to live up to Russia’s status expectations, as was the case with its previous alignment and integration strategies, Russia may again reconsider its alignment and regional integration strategies, abandoning Greater Eurasia and seeking status elsewhere.

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Note

1. Central Asia in one of the least globalized regions in the world with some of the most militarized and impermeable national borders. Some examples of “hot” regional issues include the territorial and ethnic conflicts between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the conflict between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over water rights and hydroelectric development (Allison, 2008).

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