

Chapter 13

Connecting Eurasia: Is Cooperation Between Russia, China, and the EU in Central Asia Possible?

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ABSTRACT

As China further embarks on implementing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and remains firmly set on pursuing the ambitious goal of connecting China overland with Europe, the European Union (EU) and Russia - as indispensable stakeholders for this continental connection to successfully materialize – have been developing policy responses to China’s initiative that reveal an unexpected willingness to cooperate. In scrutinizing the likelihood of cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China, and Russia in Central Asia, this chapter identifies the common interests between the three sides, and highlights to what extent cooperation between them is possible in Central Asia. In doing so, the chapter points to the main opportunities while outlining the main bottlenecks, which mostly stem from the underlying geopolitical rivalry between these three actors, as well as their diverging beliefs and approaches to connectivity and development.

INTRODUCTION

Given the ongoing tensions between the European Union (EU) and Russia, only few experts (Amighini, 2017; Biscop, 2018; Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019) will give serious thought to the prospect of trilateral cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China and Russia in Central Asia. However, as China further embarks on implementing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and remains firmly set on pursuing the ambitious goal of connecting China overland with Europe, the EU and Russia - as indispensable stakeholders for this continental connection to successfully materialize - have been developing

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Connecting Eurasia

policy responses to China's initiative that reveal an unexpected willingness to cooperate. Although the idea of trilateral cooperation may be too far-fetched for the time being, there is scope for cooperation between the three sides, be it more in the form of bilateral cooperation than trilateral cooperation. The EU even recognizes this formally. In the EU's new strategy for Central Asia, which was released in May 2019, connectivity is identified as one of the areas where possible synergies with other external partners should be established (European Commission and HRVP, 2019). However, it remains to be seen how such synergies will be achieved in concrete terms, especially with Russia.

One thing is clear, China, Russia and the EU have a common interest in advancing connectivity along the transport corridor between China and Europe that passes through Russia, and which is part of the Silk Road Economic Belt of the BRI. This land corridor is known as the New Eurasian Land Bridge, and passes through Central Asia, namely through Kazakhstan.

Substantial investments have already been made by China to make this land bridge a reality. Part of the first leg is already completed, namely the rail line that connects China with Kazakhstan through the border crossing at Khorgos. China, the EU and Russia are increasingly aware that they need each other's support and involvement if this Eurasian transport corridor is to be successfully completed.

There is one more land corridor between China and Europe under the Silk Road Economic Belt that passes through Central Asia, the China-Central Asia corridor. This one, however, bypasses Russia. Also in the construction of this corridor China has already been heavily investing.

The purpose of the chapter is two-fold. The primary goal of the chapter is to scrutinize the likelihood of cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China and Russia in Central Asia, a question that so far remains largely unexplored in the academic literature. Based on data from official documents of the main actors concerned and insights from existing studies, the chapter identifies the common interests between the three sides, and highlights to what extent bilateral cooperation between them is possible in Central Asia. In doing so, the chapter explores the main opportunities while outlining the main bottlenecks, which mostly stem from the underlying geopolitical rivalry between these three actors, as well as their diverging beliefs and approaches to connectivity and development. In addition, by assessing the potential of cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China and Russia at the bilateral level, the chapter seeks to reveal the emerging trilateral dynamics between these three major actors, whilst fostering the logic of a multi-dimensional cost-benefit perspective.

Background

So far, hardly any attention has been paid in the academic literature to the question of possible cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China and Russia in Central Asia. While this is in part due to the continuing stalemate in the bilateral relations between the EU and Russia, this could also be explained by the lack of engagement between Western, Russian and Chinese scholarship, which each tend to operate in a vacuum.

Western scholarship is still very much influenced by the idea of Russia's intention to recreate a single political space in Eurasia based on Russian neo-imperial self-perception (Wallander, 2007; Aslund, 2008, 2012; Herpen, 2014). This is widely reflected in research of different aspects of a common – imperial – legacy of the post-Soviet space (Smith, 2016; Kappeler, 2014) or, in constructivist terms, by introducing the concept of geopolitical identity (Savarine, 2016). In turn, a considerable amount of Russian and - especially - Chinese scholarship remains closely aligned to the official positions of the Russian and Chinese authorities and therefore struggles to highlight fallacies and limitations of the Russian and

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