

DISCUSSION PAPER

Competing Visions of Eurasian Integration: The Turkic Alternative to Russia and China

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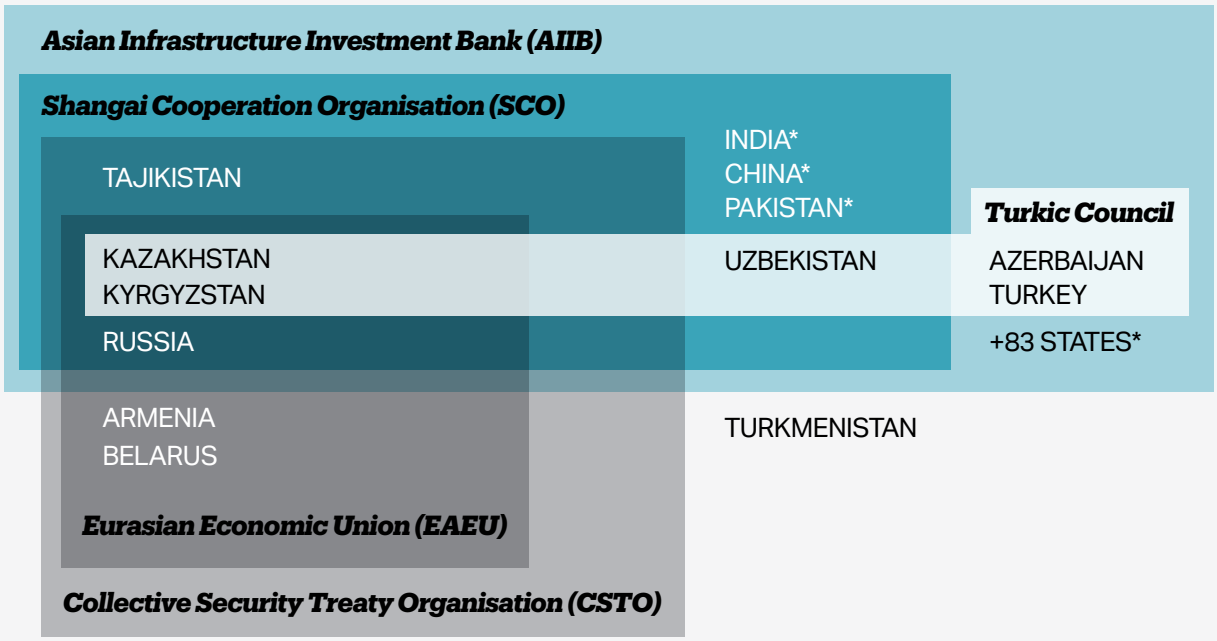
Introduction

Today, the term 'Eurasia' indicates something larger than merely its geographic footprint. Eurasia represents a landmass that includes great powers, regional organisations and alliances, cooperating or competing economies, and diverse cultures. The region is currently witnessing competing and often drastically divergent visions. The Russian vision of Eurasia stands on the former imperial ambitions of Moscow and its consideration of the post-Soviet space as its backyard. As Russia continues to create and support initiatives to keep the region under its control, another significant voice continues to rise from further East. Chinese ambitions also present a new vision for the continent such as reviving the ancient Silk Roads and creating economic harmony empowered by Beijing. Today, China is seeking to put its economic mark on global governance through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Being in the middle of the Russian and Chinese spheres of influence, the Turkic World is also seeking to push forward initiatives that promote institutionalism via cultural and economic cooperation.

This discussion paper analyses various visions for Eurasian cooperation. The Chinese vision is largely built on the Belt and Road Initiative and promotes the Chinese bid for greater economic cooperation in Eurasia. The Russian vision mainly focuses on the protection of the former Soviet areas of influence. The paper also examines the possibility of an alternative to both visions within the context of the projects prepared by the Turkic Council. The Council covers a wide geography that is a site of both cooperation and competition for Russian and Chinese visions of Eurasian integration. The Turkic Vision includes cooperation with all regional powers and institutions to achieve economic development, peace and stability. The following analysis aims to summarise the Chinese and Russian visions in order to show the Turkic World's potential to contribute to Eurasian integration. Compared to Russian and Chinese aims and ambitions, the Turkic vision is limited to a specific geography within Eurasia and prioritises cooperation over competition, offering a potential alternative to the Chinese and Russian visions for the region. This paper thus concentrates on the emerging institutionalisation attempt in the Turkic World, one which advances an alternative pathway for development for the members of the Turkic Council and constructively compares three distinct visions rather than purely focusing on the Sino-Russian rivalry in Eurasia[1].

1 See Uran Kyzy, Aruuke, "The "Great Game": Russia and China in Central Asia", TRT World Research Centre, 2019 for a discussion of the Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia.

International Organisations in Eurasia *(As of March 2020)*



** Non-Eurasian states*
Sources: AIIB, CSTO, Eurasian Economic Comission, SCO

The Chinese Vision

The Chinese vision for Eurasia is largely derived from historical experiences and connections. Unlike the Western and Russian schools of thought, which are largely derived from their respective Cold War experiences, the Chinese vision is at least partially rooted in a deeper historical memory of regional connectivity vis-a-vis the ancient silk road. This shows how, at its core, China perceives its role in the region primarily, although not exclusively, from an economic standpoint, most clearly demonstrated in the Belt and Road Initiative.

The BRI is a Chinese 'grand strategy' that conveys the effort to connect Asia to Europe (Li and Wang, 2015). It includes the promotion of high-speed rail along specific land routes, which can be more advantageous for trade compared to maritime routes. The BRI is also a continuation of the Chinese policies from the early 2000s, which fell under the broad category of 'Go West' (Lim, 2018). Lim also claims that side projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) along with BRI itself are a strong reflection of the global governance vision of Beijing and practically shows how China sees the world. While thinking globally, China has also focused on Central Asia as the Pivot Area of Eurasia. The corridors through Central Asia give China an advantage to keep its reach to the West open without risk of a maritime blockade. Furthermore, Beijing focuses on developing organic economic ties such as creating common industrial areas, forming investment funds, and promoting trade based on natural resources with the regional countries. These priorities are emphasising and characterising the modern Chinese approach to Eurasia.

Chinese initiatives such as the BRI also show that the Chinese vision creates a special blend in foreign policy where the economic targets are politicised in nature

(Qingguo, 2015). Beijing builds commercial ties, makes investments and creates economic bonds with its counterparts, which transforms into political gains in a long run. On the other hand, the growing Chinese economy has created opportunities for developing states, especially those in desperate need of an alternative to the West, to cooperate with Beijing. Therefore, not having the luxury to stop, stagnate or be uncertain about supporting its initiatives to not to lose its partners, China continues to pursue its goals in Eurasia despite economic and health crises, such as the pandemic.

Furthermore, Beijing has developed a mutual understanding of common security threats with regional countries (Qingguo, 2015). At the first glance, these security threats are mainly structured as radicalism and terrorism which can deteriorate domestic security in all regional countries and jeopardise Chinese investments. On the other hand, the Chinese 'grand strategy' may configure to use the countries between itself and the West as a buffer zone, mainly emphasizing Central Asia.

China requires access to natural resources if it is to continue its rise as a major Eurasian and gloabal power. This makes Central Asia an important neighbour for Beijing, which can be considered as either virgin lands or a power vacuum after the collapse of the Soviet regime for the Chinese. In either scenario, Beijing sees itself as a power that can penetrate the lands between its borders and the Caspian Sea to dominate the so-called Middle Corridor (Harutyunyan, 2020). It increases the Chinese role in the region's geopolitics, where China's Sinopec currently is investing in Kazakh natural resources and sending oil and natural gas to Xinjiang province. According to the Chinese, this situation creates a win-win for both countries since it allows Kazakhstan to also break away from its dependence on Russian Gazprom (Abilov, 2012). The example of Chinese investments in Kazakhstan is just one part of a greater vision to promote the China Dream[2] and make the BRI an integral part of Beijing's global governance vision, which envisions a diverse multipolar world as a counter to Western dominance.

The BRI and Chinese bid to reshape Eurasia is not only limited to economic concerns but extends to a challenge to the global establishment and current international order. Chinese led organisations should dominate the new era, according to policymakers in Beijing, where the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) can leave their marks. SCO has extensive membership that covers economic, military and cultural cooperation which initially designed to balance the US power and support multipolarity based on Sino-Russian strategic



As Tehran and Moscow both become major routes for Chinese economic incursion toward the West, the Central Asian region will stand in the middle of the Tehran- Moscow-Beijing axis. Source: TRT World Research Centre

[2] 'China Dream' or 'Chinese Dream' is one of the main slogans of Chinese leader Xi Jinping who describes the dream as a target to make China a fully developed nation by modernising the state and creating a prosperous society. For a detailed discussion see: Xing Li and Wan Wang, "The Silk Road Economic Belt and the China Dream Relationship: A Strategy or Tactics?"

partnership (Burles, 1999). AIIB, another pivotal Chinese initiative driven by Chinese economic power with a vision to use Chinese foreign currency reserves for projects in the developing world, could challenge the primacy of the World Bank and the IMF (Dahir, 2018). Therefore, the Chinese vision for Eurasian integration will come as a package where the BRI will bring a new, Chinese style of institutionalism along Sino-Russian entities such as the SCO to challenge Western-dominated institutions. China already hit the all-time high import number of cheap Iranian oil in March 2021 and with the recent comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries that guarantees cheap Iranian oil supply to Beijing in exchange for Chinese investments, Beijing once again confirmed its plans to secure the corridors and create a 'safe circle' in Central-Western Asia to protect its 'buffer zone'. As Tehran and Moscow both become major routes for Chinese economic incursion toward the West, the Central Asian region will stand in the middle of the Tehran- Moscow-Beijing axis. This situation will create a new reality where Sino-Russian relations will be based on both cooperation and competition. This is heightened by the fact that Russian economic, political and cultural power over Eurasia, especially Central Asia, is already in decline.

The proposed corridors and roads are already projected to make Beijing the largest investor in the region, creating a situation in which all economies will be tied to China regardless of their size (Nourzhanov, 2009). Increasing Chinese dominance will surpass Russia's weight in the region in the mid to long term. Furthermore, the Chinese model of development, in contrast to the Western democratic model, could be a model for regional countries that are already having troubles with underdeveloped political cultures and low living standards. Chinese hunger for hegemony and its vision for global governance will encourage economic initiatives to further assert its penetration into the region. Even though Chinese investments and initiatives are advertised as clear examples of win-win situations, long term implications may create a zero-sum game for Eurasia where China will be the ultimate winner and dominant.

The Russian Vision

The Russian vision for Eurasian integration also finds its roots in historical experiences. Unlike the BRI, Russian initiatives strongly and openly reflect geopolitical objectives. Russia uses economic and trade initiatives to pursue these geopolitical goals, where the primary objective is to maintain influence over the post-Soviet space. The most important tool being used by Russia to achieve this objective is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The EAEU is the developed version of its predecessor, the Customs Union, and currently includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia as full members.

The organisation is well known for its manifesto, which includes common customs territory and tariffs along a common institution governing trade policy, namely the Eurasian Economic Commission (EAEC). By all accounts, the institutionalism of the EAEU project is a reflection of the logic behind Russian power and control. The Russian foreign policy vision with regards to Eurasia is focused on establishing and protecting the post-Soviet space as a Russian influence zone (Balakishi, 2016). Besides Russian economic interests in the region, the vision of the EAEU is reactionary against European cooperation projects such as the Eastern Partnership (Delcour and Kostanyan, 2014). The US also views the Union as part of the trials to effectively revive the Soviet Union by other means (Financial Times, 2012). Looking at the map, it is easy to see Central Asia becoming a buffer zone where Russia continuously tries to maintain its strongholds in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Naturally, the Russians are also trying to balance the power projection from the East, since Beijing also sees the region as a useful corridor for its ambitions. Therefore, the EAEU is becoming more important to Moscow as both an economic and political tool that protects Russian influence against competing powers, including the EU, US, and China.

Russia either needed to join a regional coalition or create its own to promote its economic and geopolitical influence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In a way, Russia took lessons from its neighbours and their organisations and projects, such as the EU, NAFTA, and Silk Road Economic Belt to create its own centre of gravity (Leshukov, 2016). According to Russian experts, the Union should become a new power pole in the international order and increase the speed of the post-Soviet integration, while assisting its members to benefit from globalisation and minimise its unprec-



Three members of the Turkic Council are members of the EAEU. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are full members while Uzbekistan joined as an observer state in 2020. (Kremlin Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

edented outcomes (Glinkina, 2015). Therefore, it can be assumed that the EAEU was created to provide an alternative to European and Chinese institutions for Russia and its partners, where Moscow itself can make the rules. Russian experts even argue that the Union is the only way for Eurasia to survive globalisation, which they see as a concept that reflects Western domination over the rest of the world (Fonarev, 2012). However, it can be argued that the organisation was also built to keep the members from joining either the West or China.

There are further questions regarding the organisation's economic vision for Eurasia as well as the Union members' integration. First of all, it is not clear whether the Union is a strong addition to Russian economic power. The economic potential of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia are limited and both nations are dependent on remittances sent by millions of workers in Russia. Additionally, Belarus is also heavily dependent on Russian economic support. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, has a larger economy compared to other mentioned members. However, it is also closely tied to the Russian economy. In exchange, Russia enjoys the benefits of the Customs Union between members, which consists of a resourceful market for Russian goods. However, the populations of member countries are relatively low, which affects market demand, while Chinese influence is also continuing to increase especially in the member states' consumer markets. Russia's advantage comes in the form of long-time established commercial and trade relations between members and a Soviet legacy that is still visible in the consumer behaviours of the Union states. Furthermore, Russia remains the greatest partner between member countries and the West. However, the need for Russia as this middle man is decreasing because of globalisation, which has pushed Russia to define one of the Union's goals as minimising so-called "unprecedented outcomes" of globalisation.

The Russian vision includes the belief that using the EAEU requires costly political and economic integration. There are coordination problems between members, which in turn also increases the costs of sustainability within the Union since members are continuously seeking alternatives in different alliances, some members require extensive Russian economic assistance to develop, and the Russian cultural influence is on the decline. Some experts think that the costly further push for integration may even lead members to rethink their commitment (Libman and Vinokurov, 2012). Besides the problems mentioned above, there is the issue of a decline in the Russian economy. One of the main prospects of the economic integrity of the Union was to use the Russian Rouble in internal transactions and trading operations (Petrovskaia, 2015). However, the Russian currency proved that it can be problematic during times of uncertainty, such as oil price crises and sanctions, which could trigger unionwide inflation and instability. Furthermore, member states showed a clear unwillingness to help each other during the Covid-19 pandemic, which showed that the organisation lacked leadership (Hess, 2020). Moreover, structural weaknesses jeopardise the EAEU's future expansion. Moscow constantly needs to invest and show its leadership in rebuilding economies, such as Kyrgyzstan's, in order to not lose the country to China.

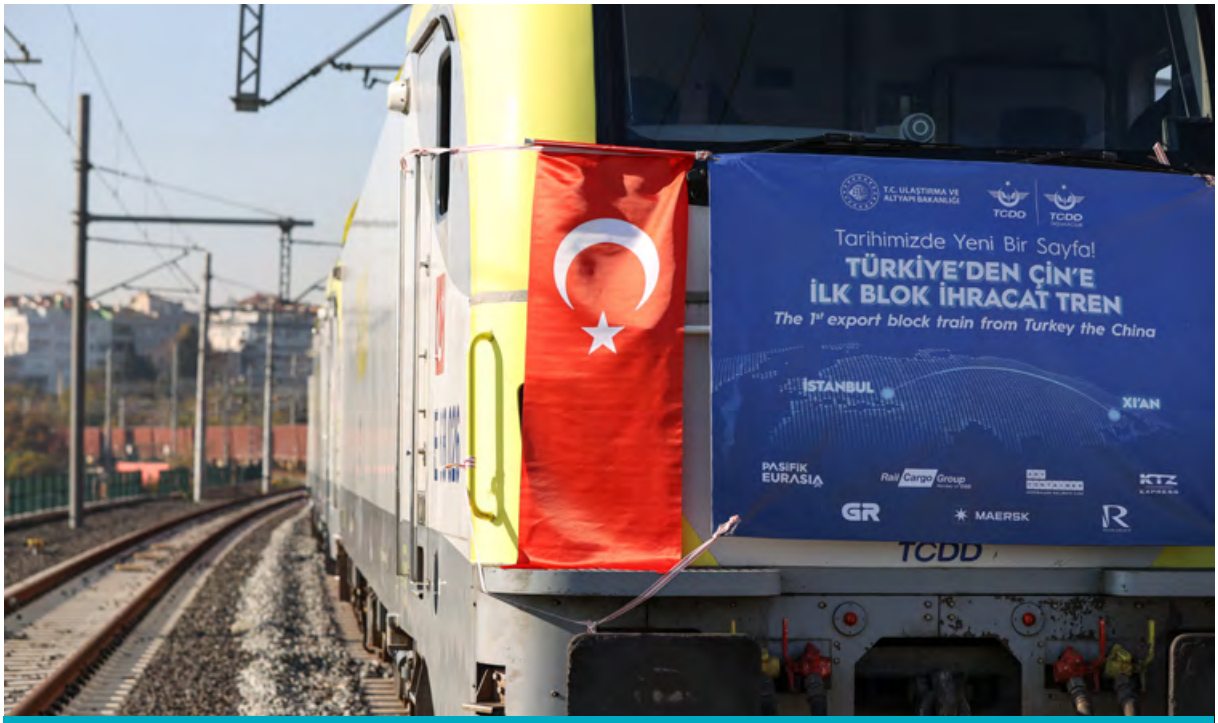
Russia's economic and political plan for Eurasia stands on the vulnerable fundament of the EAEU. The organisation struggles to achieve greater integration and economic cooperation, which would be helpful to extend the membership to achieve successful power projection. Russia's political and economic hardship puts the whole Union in danger. In the modern globalised world and in a Union that has tied its fate to Kremlin, even a stumble on Russia's part could entail disaster for other member states.

An Alternative: The Turkic Vision

Compared to the Russian and Chinese visions, the Turkic vision for integration emphasizes cultural, historical, and ethnic elements. The Turkic Council was founded in 2009 to achieve economic integration and deepen cooperation between Turkic speaking states. Therefore, compared to initiatives such as the BRI and organisations such as the EAEU, the Turkic Council laid its foundation on already existing cultural bonds between its members. The Council focuses on a specific region, the Turkic World, within greater Eurasia and works toward creating long-awaited institutionalism and cooperation. Therefore, compared to the EAEU, which tries to preserve Russian dominance over its former subjects, and the BRI, which paves the way for Chinese ambitions, the Turkic Council is seeking to advance a vision for the region that can support initiatives to empower its member states.

The member states of the Council are located in a highly important geostrategic location in the middle of trade routes, economic, and social interactions between East and West. The Central Asian members, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are located in the middle of the previously mentioned Tehran-Moscow-Beijing axis and can be an important alternative route for the BRI. Another member, Azerbaijan, holds a significant status in its ability to provide European energy security and location in the middle of the North-South transport corridor. Azerbaijan also plays the role of a transit country between Central Asia and Turkey via the Transcaspian route. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ankara has played the valuable role of bridging the gap between the newly independent Turkic states and the West. Therefore, Turkey continues its mission in the Turkic Council as well as in being a reliable partner in trade and wider Turkic integration. Finally, the Council could use the potential of its observer state, Hungary, in creating connectivity with the EU and other Western institutions.

The Council covers an area with not only geostrategic importance, but also major untapped economic potential and natural resources. The population of the member states exceeds 140 million people, with a total GDP of almost $2 trillion. Member states' commitment to the potential of the Council shows that they are seeking



A farewell ceremony for the first export train carrying export products to China which will travel 8,693 kilometers, held at Kazlicesme Station in Istanbul, Turkey on December 04, 2020. (Muhammed Enes Yildirim - Anadolu Agency)

alternatives to Russian-led EAEU, the Chinese BRI, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the EU (in the context of Turkey and Hungary). The Council can be considered as young and still developing compared to the other institutions, but members know that there is a chance to assert an independent path. This is a possibility that they do not obtain in the other organisations.

As mentioned, one of the Council's ultimate goals is to achieve economic integration among the Turkic states. The organisation plans to reform itself with a Five-Year Strategic Plan - "Turkic Vision 2025" to further boost the development goals among members. It includes vital parts of the Turkic economic integration: a Turkic Investment Fund with an initial $500 million value and a Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry (TCCI). The funds are currently insufficient considering the $8-10 billion trade value among the member states. However, the officials argue that these are only initial steps of economic cooperation. The figures in trade are also expected to increase in upcoming years. The necessity for the Free Trade Agreement and possible Customs Union still stands among the Turkic Council, which can be featured in the next steps of the economic integration.

The Turkic Vision for economic integration can provide an alternative path to Russian or Chinese projects, but it is too early to claim that fair competition is possible. Therefore, it is necessary to work with initiatives such as the BRI, since the member states can also economically benefit from it. For example, the newly built Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad connects London and Beijing non-stop by train for the first time. Furthermore, transport projects such as the Sister Ports Process helps countries to develop their trade and customs infrastructure which can, in turn, enable more effective international trade between the Caspian and the Black Seas. The creation of Free Trade Zones in the member states' ports will increase the potential of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, which can be part of the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt.

The Turkic Council carries significant potential for development and offers alternative economic integration with the possibility of more independent decision making. In the end, the Council is a union that not only share temporary interests but cultural, historic, and social bonds. The organisation favours the Turkic vision of economic cooperation and proposes various projects to support its ideals. However, there is a still a long way to go. Member countries in Central Asia still have an attachment to either Russian or Chinese led investments, attachments that are often already integrated into their systems. Turkey also has commitments to the EU and its economic and customs system. Therefore, the Turkic Council has a great but difficult responsibility to bring these different systems together to offer value-added alternatives to its members.

Conclusion

Eurasia continues to draw increased attention from both regional and international powers. Chinese and Russian ambitions in the region are well-established. Each of these states has its respective agenda and derive their power from historic, economic and political aims. The nations that live within the geography continue to form cultural and political alliances among themselves. The Turkic Council is just one of the products of this dynamic, one that holds a promising potential to create sustainable cooperation and peace standing on a shared history and common cultural values. Compared to Chinese and Russian visions, the Turkic vision is not a product of a single country but a common vision of Turkic speaking states striving to become regional players and understand the need for a regional alliance to promote common ideals. The members of the Turkic Council are also members of the other aforementioned initiatives, having strong relations with Sino-Russian entities. Initiatives such as the BRI can also serve to meet the ambitions of the Turkic vision, namely, the creation of strong regional economic and transport links. Through the Turkish 'Middle Corridor' vision, members of the Turkic Council hold the potential to contribute not just to the integration of the Turkic World and the surrounding region but also to bring greater stability and prosperity to Eurasia as a whole.

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