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TWO OPTIONS AMONG NUMEROUS DIRECTIONS: EURASIANISM ON MOSCOW'S TERMS OR REGIONAL INTEGRATION BETWEEN SOVEREIGN NEIGHBORS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

'Eurasianism' as a concept used among Russian political and intellectual circles refers to the reunion of post-soviet republics under the umbrella of Russia. This vision is welcomed by some Central Asian intellectuals as well. In spite of some insisting attempts for the realization of this vision by the Russian ruling elites, institutional integrative bids from above have become so far quite inefficient. By considering European integration process as an example, attempts for regional integration from below; that is, by the independent initiatives of the regional actors motivated by their own foreign policy objectives and interests might be an effective alternative.

Keywords: Eurasianism, European Integration, Central Asia, Regional Integration, Russian Politics.

Eurasianism as a Russian Vision

Eurasia generally refers to the unified Europe and Asia as the whole continent. However, in relation to 'Eurasianism', it refers only to post-Soviet countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term came to the fore in academic circles as a geopolitical concept which claims that Russia should be situated in a bloc covering former Soviet republics in the post-Soviet space. Eurasianism first came into being in the 1920s and 1930s among some Russian intellectuals. It mainly argued that Russia should be closer to Asia than to Europe. It implies an alternative way that rejects the Western model. It supports multi-polarity against global American hegemony and against a unipolar world order. Eurasianist ideology or neo-Eurasianism has become popular again among the Russian political and intellectual circles in the post-Soviet period.

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In the period of search for a new identity in the transition phase after the loss of past Soviet dignity, Eurasianism proposed a geopolitical solution for the post-Soviet space not only to Russian but some Central Asian (Kazakh, Kyrgyz) elite as well. It supports the idea of 'an organic unity of cultures born in this zone of symbiosis between Russian, Turkic, and Muslim worlds'. It refers to a political integration of autonomous cultures on a common historical space. It implies a unique multicultural civilization, in which Russian culture and language have a privileged status, which would be specific to Eurasia. It also supports the idea of regrouping of the post-Soviet countries around Russia in this old continent. Moreover, it contributes to the idea of great Russian messianic nationalism.¹ The idea of Eurasianism in Central Asian countries is based on certain perceptions which have some nuances in comparison to the discourse in Russia. It refers to a common heritage and an idea of social integration for diverse ethnic groups. It implies a model depending on unique conditions of the region. Central Asian republics, on one side, emphasize their national sovereignty, and on the other, pursue a sensitive balance policy. While establishing pragmatic relationships with different countries and regions and trying to integrate into the international society, they are aware of the fact that Russia is still a great power in the region.² Because of the legacies of centuries-long common history, Russians and Central Asians share a geographical space which is marked by cultural linkages.³

Russian policymakers, who do not hide their ultimate objective to compel Central Asian reintegration with Russia "on Moscow's terms", generally stressed that particularly economic factors make this integration inevitable. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Both Yeltsin and Chernomyrdin noted that economic integration would be followed by military and political union.⁴ On the other hand, after the demise of the Soviet Union, economic and security considerations induced newly independent Central Asian republics to join the Commonwealth of Independent States. Each republic was aware of its lack of economic and military self-sufficiency. The CIS seemed to fill in this vacuum. Indeed, a number of economic factors helped Russia attempt to reintegrate former Soviet republics:

The very high levels of mutual interdependence and republican specialization, the limited economic viability of a majority of the former republics, the poor orientation of all but Russia to external markets, and the common challenges posed by the introduction of market-oriented reforms... In the two years after 1991 all of the former republics registered negative growth rates of GNP. And while this collapse had a variety of causes, a good deal of it could be accounted for by the ongoing breakdown of ties of trade, production, labor and so on.⁵

The following commonalities, which were largely product of the Soviet system and shared by either Russia or former republics, created a ground for the reunion of these countries. First, these states have a tight economic integrative system. Moscow's planners formed centralized plants, many key industrial goods are only produced in one (mostly Slavic) place, trying the old Soviet Union together and making its disintegrate more difficult. Second, all of these countries tend to blame current problems on the post-Soviet transition rather than on the Soviet past, and also fear instability throughout the region. Intense permeability between artificial borders and entrenched

¹Marlene Laruelle (2004). "The Two Faces of Contemporary Eurasianism: An Imperial Version of Russian Nationalism", *Nationalities Papers*, vol.32, no.1, pp.115-117.

² Hakan Güneş (2004 - 2005). "Orta Asya Ülkeleri Siyasal Kültür ve Dış Politikasında Avrasyacılık", *Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, vol.6, no.23, 2 pp. 220-230.

³ Ajay Patnaik (2005). "Migration, Identity and Integration in Eurasia", submitted in *The 37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology*, Stockholm, Sweden, p.7.

⁴ Stephan Blank (1995). "Energy, Economics and Security in Central Asia: Russia and Its Rivals", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.14, no.3, p.377.

⁵ Richard Sakwa, Mark Weber (1999). "The Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991-1998: Stagnation and Survival", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.51, no.3, pp.385, 386.

links still are going on. In addition, newly independent republics have considerable proportion of Russian-speakers or ethnic Russians, some of whom constitute qualified personnel for the economies of these countries to work.⁶ Russian is the common language of these countries. The absence of communication problems facilitates cooperation. To sum up, geographic proximity, shared traditions, language (Russian) and other common social and economic features among states facilitate the development of a cohesive regional unit.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is the international organization which unites the former Soviet republics. It was founded as a mechanism to enable these republics to conduct relations with one another in an orderly manner on December 1991 in a meeting of the Heads of State of Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus, which took place near Minsk in Belovezhskaya Pushcha (Belarus). Representatives of the member states meet regularly to discuss economic, military, political and social issues of common interest. Cooperation of member-countries of the CIS has developed in many directions and is regulated by multilateral and bilateral treaties and agreements. Some of the agreements are the following: Treaty of Setting up of Economical Union of the CIS; Agreement on Setting up of Inter-state Economic Committee of Economic Union; Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters; Treaty of Collective Security; and so forth. The Russians, who play a leading part in the CIS, do not hide their enthusiasm for the closer integration of the organization. They accept that the key to integration is economic cooperation, and would like the CIS to comprise a "common economic area", a "common security area" and, possibly, a "confederation".⁷

The leaders of Central Asian republics also displayed a positive attitude toward reintegration with Russia without violating their sovereignty. After the collapse of the union, it was certain that the long history of dependence on Moscow was not likely to end overnight, but would continue by newer mechanisms for the near future. Because of the entrenched habits and a degree of mutual interests between the ruling elites on both sides, Russia have appeared to keep its leading place among the foreign policy priorities of the Central Asian republics.⁸ The leaders of the Central Asian republics, who were educated in the Soviet mode, have remained heavily beholden to Russia and looked to Moscow in the transition period.⁹ The first President of the newly independent Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev in January of 1990 said: 'without integration, without a stable and firm federation, these most difficult economic, political, scientific, and technical, social, and ecological issues facing our country cannot be solved'.¹⁰ Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet security umbrella protected Central Asia. This umbrella protected them not only from external threats (from outside of the Union) but also from internal (interethnic) and inter-republic conflicts. Because these republics have not been independent for a long time, when the Soviet Union collapsed they felt orphaned and immediately tried to rejoin Russia.¹¹ However, CIS seems to have failed to integrate the former Soviet republics and to create a common identity as EU does. It has been the forum for several ambitious projects of cooperation on paper, but in reality it has experienced diminishing collaborative activities. Sergei Prikhodko, international relations advisor to Boris Yeltsin, at a meeting of the CIS Council of Heads of State in October 1997, likened the

⁶ Paul A. Goble (1993). "Russia and Its Neighbours", *Foreign Policy*, no.90, pp.81, 82.

⁷ See Fco "Prospects for the CIS", (London, August-1995), pp.1-7; "Business Guide Book of Russia", (Issue.1), (Moscow: Moshneshinform, 1995), pp.31-33.

⁸ Kemal Karpat (1992/94). "The Foreign Policy of the Central Asian States, Turkey and Iran", *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, vol.6, no.1-2, p.101.

⁹ S. Frederick Starr (1994). *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (as the first volume of a ten-volume series, Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot (eds.), *The International Politics of Eurasia*), p.6.

¹⁰ Jonathan Grant (1994). "Decolonization by Default: Independence in Soviet Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.13, no.1, p.54.

¹¹ Mehdi Mozaffari (1997). *Security Policies in the CIS – The Southern Belt*, (New York: MacMillian Press, p.6, p.7 pp. 23-24.

organization to a “drowning man who has reached the bottom and has pushed himself up from it.” It could not create a commonwealth citizenship, standing joint armed forces, and common currency. Whereas in 1991 trade between the current members of the CIS constituted 21% of their combined GDP, this has fallen to around 6% by 1999.¹² All members of the CIS recognize that if the CIS is to survive, it must be thoroughly reformed. However, there is little consensus on how this might be done. One of the former assistant chairs of the Russian Duma’s Committee for CIS Affairs even declared that “Moscow itself does not have its own vision for the future development of the organization”.¹³ Indeed, a hegemonic model of integration was never acceptable to the Central Asian leaders because of the resentment over Russia’s imperial legacy. The CIS was conceived by these leaders as a ‘vehicle that would facilitate the journey toward national independence’ on equal basis in a transition period.¹⁴

Especially, ex-president Putin demonstrated an ambition to make Russia play a leading role in the ‘near abroad’, including Central Asia. Indeed, the protection of Russian vital interests and the maintenance of stability in the near abroad have always occupied an important place in Russian foreign policy.¹⁵ After 2000s, Russia further extended its influence in the region. Foreign policy orientation has a direct relationship with identity formation policies. For instance, Kyrgyzstan’s energy debts were written off in response to its willingness to make Russian the official language of the country. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Putin Administration prioritized bilateral relations with CIS members besides keeping the CIS. Russia tried to show itself as a guarantor of stability in the region. Russia has always been afraid of a rise of Islam or pan-Turkic movements in the region.¹⁶ Putin, in his several speeches, emphasized the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism. This discourse has found a favorable reception among the leaders of Central Asian republics. Central Asian leaders also realize that in the challenge of a real external threat in which direct military support is required, Russia seems to be a much more reliable partner than the West. Together with Russia, the heads of state of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan established Eurasian Economic Community in 2000. In addition, Shanghai Cooperation Organization as the successor of Shanghai Five, was established by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2001 for the purpose of maintaining regional security and stability.¹⁷ During Medvedev period, Russian supremacy in the region seemed to be in continuation. The Kyrgyz government on February 4, 2009, submitted a draft law on closing the American air base at Manas to parliament for debate. The government made the attempt after ex-President Bakiyev signaled his intention to close the US facility, during his visit to Moscow. The announcement of the intention to close the air base came after Russia officially extended a \$2.15 billion aid package to Bishkek.¹⁸ Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev also made an announcement that American airbase – currently known as Transit Center at Manas – should be shut down by 2014, after his visit to Moscow. However, Central Asian leaders are very sensitive about keeping their sovereignty and they do not need a new elder brother.¹⁹

¹² Weber, Sakwa, op.cit. pp.379, 404.

¹³ Paul Kubicek (1999). “End of the Line for the Commonwealth of Independent States”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.46, no.2, p.15.

¹⁴ Gregory Gleason (2011). “Inter-State Cooperation in Central Asia from the CIS to the Shanghai Forum”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.53, no.7, p.1079, p. 1081.

¹⁵ Jonathan Valdez (1995). “The Near Abroad, the West, and National Identity in Russian Foreign Policy”, in Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (eds.), *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, (Newyork: M.E.Sharpe, p.89.

¹⁶ Kamran İnan (1996). “Rusya’nın Kafkasya Politikası”, *Avrasya Dosyası*, vol.1, no.1, (Spring 1994), p.26; Richard F. Staar, “Moscow’s Plans to Restore Its Power”, *Orbis*, vol.40, no.3, p.378.

¹⁷ Gleason, op.cit. p.1091, p. 1092.

¹⁸ Deirdre Tynan (2009) Parliament to Consider Bill Closing American Air Base”, *Eurasia Net Eurasia Insight*, “Kyrgyzstan. <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020409a.shtml>.

¹⁹ Roland Dannreuther (2001). “Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?”, *Security Dialogue*, vol.32, no.2, pp.250-253.

Russian culture is still influential in the society, especially in urban areas. Some habits and norms, internalized by the people, in the native culture reflect Russian cultural habits and norms. Strong contacts with Russia, Russian language, and Russian culture are fostered by some Russian TV channels and radios, widely watched and listened by the native people, and by hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz people working in Russia. There are several schools whose education language is Russian in the country. In addition, Slavonic University is one of the most popular and effective universities in Bishkek. Russian minority is the second largest minority most of whom are highly skilled and progressive and whose out-migration is not pleasant for a weak economy. About half a million Kyrgyz migrant laborers are working in Russia. Russia presents numerous attractions for Kyrgyzstan. Though the ruling elite are ethnic Kyrgyz, they are Russian-speaking who were integrated into a Slavic-dominated Soviet order. Russian Federation still offers training courses in its diplomatic academy for officials from Kyrgyzstan. With a small army, Kyrgyzstan relies on Russia for the security of its borders and territorial integrity.²⁰

Attempts for Regional Integration by Regional Actors: The Case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

While 'Eurasianism' is an integrative attempt from above by the former 'elder brother', Russia, attempts for regional integration on equal terms by the regional actors themselves seem to be an alternative direction. The process of integration within the framework of CIS went slowly, and the bodies of CIS worked inefficiently. In order to invigorate the integration process, Nazarbaev, the President of Kazakhstan, introduced the idea of a 'Eurasian Union' in 1994. Nazarbaev regarded Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Byelorussia as core states in the regional integration as they are close enough to each other in terms of their level of economic transformation and living standards. This nucleus would begin its evolution through the mechanisms of a Customs Union and Central Asian Union. Central Asian Union would be a stage in the wider context of integration. On April 30, 1994, the leaders (Nazarbaev, Karimov, and Akaev) of three Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan) signed the Agreement about Common Economic Space creation in CAU framework. In order to realize the agreement, a number of additional documents were adopted in the fields of migration, military-technical cooperation, banking, etc. As a further step, Russia, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan initiated the formation of a customs union in 1996. In 1998, Common Economic Space was transformed into the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC), and it was joined by Tajikistan. During his official visit to Kazakhstan in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed his support of Eurasian Union initiative, and in the same year the Eurasian Economic Community was established.²¹ In 2002, the four countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan proclaimed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) as the successor to the CAEC. Thus, there have been several initiatives involving Central Asian republics toward establishing an organization for regional cooperation, such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Central Asia Cooperation Organization (CACO), Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), the Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA), GUUAM, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), since the independence.²²

In spite of all these efforts, an effective integration process has suffered from institutional and legal weaknesses up to the present time. This failure, for the most part, stemmed from absence

²⁰ Eugene Huskey (2003). "National Identity from Scratch: Defining Kyrgyzstan's Role in World Affairs", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol.19, no.3, pp. 119-122.

²¹ Fatima Kukeyeva (2004). "The Idea of Eurasian Union and Transatlantic Partnership", *Peabody Center for Education Policy - Occasional Paper Series*, pp. 2-14.

²² Richard Pomfret (2005). *the Central Asian Economies since Independence*, Princeton University Press, pp. 183-195.

of well-educated technical personnel and experts having sufficient formation and know-how of a free market economy and the lack of strong and stable political will in all the related countries. Newly independent republics which had lost their independence under the rule of Moscow have been hesitant to give up part of their sovereignty to a higher mechanism, through which they might be vulnerable to the hegemony of Russia or of each other. In a 1994 comment, President Nazarbaev said: "Since the time of the establishment of CIS, roughly 400 agreements have been adopted. However, as yet there have been no substantive results because individual national governments continue to reject certain provisions and interpret the meaning of the agreements in their own interest."²³

Today Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have the greatest potential for the creation of a Kazakh-Kyrgyz Economic Union. They have very good neighborly relations. They have introduced substantial reforms for economic liberalization. Both countries have the freest market and most liberal economies in Central Asia. Kazakh investment in Kyrgyzstan is substantial and ever-increasing. Kazakhstan today hosts as many Kyrgyz labor migrants as Russia, numbering nearly 200.000, and the number is on the rise. Leadership and societies in both countries are much closer to each other. In the summer season of 2007, about 80 percent of tourists in Issyk-Kul Lake are from Kazakhstan. Kazakh-Kyrgyz economic union as an initial step would play a very important role for further integration of Central Asia.²⁴ However, even such a target should start with small steps, and concentrate on cooperation in specific sectors at the beginning.

In a Central Asian integration process, compared with European integration process, big words have been uttered before action. It missed the reality that actions speak louder than words. Instead of initiating great projects such as a Eurasian Union or a Central Asian Union, it would be more effective and operative if two countries, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, much more closer to each other in terms of geographical proximity, economic interdependence, and cultural affinity, deepen functional cooperation in specific sectors with strong and effective legal and institutional mechanisms. Great integrative attempts at the first step, without completing necessary previous steps, would be slow-moving with an inactive decision-making authority, ineffective coordination and operational capacity due to the wide bureaucratic context. There should be small and precise targets within easy reach, and all necessary steps in terms of institutionalization and operation should be taken to attain concrete results. An institutional framework between the two countries should be operationally focused, in terms of supporting, funding and implementing specific programs and projects designed to support the effective integration of the two national economies on specific sectors. If they become successful in such an effort without violating the reciprocity, equality and sovereignty of each other, they will realize that both sides gain from the process and improve the level of their development. When they widen the zone of effective cooperation in additional sectors, by adoption of the notion of a win-win game and mutual trust, an economic integration step by step will be realized. Economic integration across the regions of two countries will be mutually beneficial because it introduces new goods, enhances specialization, encourages efficient allocation of production factors and a more effective division of labor, increases per capita output, and enhances welfare. As a result of the rising volume of regional trade, the number of people engaged in commercial activity would grow impressively. New linkages across borders would create dynamism in the neighboring economies that would bring new opportunities for investment, commerce, transportation, employment, and profit. Rising extensive scale (through a larger space) in economic activities raises research productivity, leading to an industrial revolution

²³ IBID. p. 185.

²⁴ Nurzhan Zhambekov (2005). "Central Asian Union: Kazakh-Kyrgyz Union as an Initial Step", *NewEurasia*, <http://kazakhstan.neweurasia.net/?p=34> ; Erica Marat, "Nazarbayev Increases Kazakhstan's Engagement in Kyrgyzstan, Eclipsing Russia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 05-02-2007, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4602>

and a true and knowledge-based growth at regional level.²⁵ In further steps, an effective economic cooperation will require the creation of some mechanisms for political integration.

Conclusion

Central Asian economic and political integration as in the example of the European Union might seem to be a challenging project. It is indeed a challenging project if it is thought as a complete formation, in a long process of integration. However, as Confucius said "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". Ernst Haas assumed that integration proceeds as a result of the work of relevant elites in the governmental and private sectors, who support integration for essentially pragmatic reasons, such as the expectation that the removal of trade barriers will increase markets and profits. Elites anticipating that they will gain from activity within a supranational organization framework are likely to seek out similarly minded elites across national frontiers. As a result of a learning process, power-oriented governmental activities can evolve toward welfare-oriented action."²⁶ According to the concept of 'spillover', developed by Haas, or what Mitrany called the concept of 'ramification', successful cooperation in one specific sector will lead states to cooperate in other sectors. As institutional and economic cooperation expand, in the latter stages a certain level of political integration will also be required. The European integration process, which started with the *European Coal and Steel Community* and later reaching the ultimate formation of *European Union*, today seems to be the most successful example of such a journey in human history.

There is the most suitable ground for such a gradual integration between two neighbors, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. If they can create a strong center of attraction with a more institutionalized and highly profitable economic integration, it will magnetize the other Central Asian republics into this formation. Such an integrative formation will also make these countries united and a greater entity in a stronger and more advantageous position vis-à-vis broader integrative attempts toward the region, under the initiatives of the regional economic powers such as China or Russia.

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²⁵ MCDERMOTT, John (2002). "Development Dynamics: Economic Integration and the Demographic Transition", *Journal of Economic Growth*, pp. 371-375.

²⁶ E. DOUGHERTY, James, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff (1997). *Contending Theories of International Relations*, Addison Wesley Longman, pp. 420-424.

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