

PERCEPTION OF CHINA'S "ONE BELT, ONE ROAD" IN RUSSIA: "UNITED EURASIA" DREAM OR "IRON CIRCLE" OF CONTAINMENT?

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Introduction

Since President Xi Jinping's accession to power and following his unprecedented, for a Chinese leader, personal friendship with Vladimir Putin of Russia, it has become almost commonplace in the media discourse to closely associate "Russia and China" and to position this "couple" in opposition to the so-called "West" and/or "the United States and their allies." Arguably, this association largely contributed to the public communication success that the Chinese project of "One Belt One Road" enjoyed globally in the initial months after its' unveiling on March 28, 2015¹.

The Chinese project, that likely got its aspiration from an earlier American concept of the New Silk Road², was immediately described by epithets of "ambitious," "grandiose," "far-reaching," and the like. Whereas the Chinese narrative cautiously stressed the economic infrastructures as well as, more recently, "information"³ aspects, the image of President Xi attending the military parades next to the proven warrior Vladimir Putin added credibility to the Chinese assertiveness. Promptly, it led the bewildered public imagine the

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¹ Government of China. (2015, March 28). 经国务院授权 三部委联合发布推动共建“一带一路”的愿景与行动 (*Jīng guówùyuàn shòuquán sān bùwěi liánhé fābù tuīdòng gòng jiàn "yīdài yīlù" de yuàn-jǐng yǔ xíngdòng*) "One Belt, One Road" official blueprint . http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-03/28/content_2839723.htm

² On the US vision of the New Silk Road, see, for example: McBride, James. Building the New Silk Road. Council on Foreign Relations. <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/building-new-silk-road/p36573>

³ Xu Wei and Mao Weihua, Information Silk Road given lift. China Daily, September 20, 2016.

return of the “Grand Age of Empires” and the possible advent of the finally united Eurasia, a dream that has haunted European history for millennia.

The Chinese discourse¹ is structured around the pledge to provide development instructions without challenging the power leverage of local elites in developing countries. The Chinese government is indeed known for opposing the violent regime changes, especially the bottom-top “color revolutions”². At a point when the Western methods of economic and political reforms came under attack as having led to the unprecedented, in the post-Cold war era, the rise of security-related tensions around the world, it is understandable that the Chinese message, thus presented, has proved appealing³. Being a non-Western country, China managed to absorb the Western development methods while maintaining the liberty to select and adapt them to its own cultural preference.

As it appears clearer now, however, the international popularity of the concept likely surpassed the expectations of the Chinese ideologists of the project. Originally the Chinese policy-makers might have been more preoccupied by domestic policy concerns than by any international ambitions. Among the goals they pursued there was certainly one that diverted the attention from the pressure for political reform by driving their own populations’ conscience towards exaltation and aspirations for the revival of ancient glory⁴.

Be it as it may, once launched, the “One Belt One Road” quickly became a subject of domestic speculations in many countries, especially in the crisis-hit Russia. Based on the analysis of the discussion of “One Belt One Road” in the Russian media, this paper argues that whereas the conceptual launch of the plan was a tremendous success, the Chinese narrative has kept but a limited impact on the content of the Russian debate about it by now. The debates continue to unfold among the Russians who made the Chinese initiative an instrument in

¹ The official information portfolio: Belt and Road Initiative. Xinhua News Agency.
<http://www.xinhuanet.com/silkroad/english/index.htm>

² Ai Jun. Why hasn’t there been a color revolution in China? Global Times, July 17, 2016.
<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/994793.shtml>

³ Russian, Chinese Officials Discuss Color Revolutions.

<https://sputniknews.com/world/201609131045247958-russia-china-color-revolution/>

⁴ On the internal political crisis in China at the start of the Xi Jinping era, see the article: Smirnova, L. Fighting Corruption and Political Reform in China: International Experience and Chinese Model. *International Affairs*, 2014 (8). <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/1119>

the articulation of their own concerns, much similar to those in China, such as their reflections on the international Great Power role of Russia.

Terminology

The term “One Belt, One Road” (Russian: “odin poyas i odin puti”), which is a literal translation of the Chinese official name for the project “一带一路” sounds unnatural in Russian. It is only employed as a “professional jargon” by the Chinese specialists. The journalists and experts targeting wider audience generally refer to the “Silk Road” (Russian: “sholkovy puti”), a historic term that does not carry an explicitly Chinese connotation.

Understanding the Nature of the Russian Media

The aim of this study is to focus on the media that have influence over the Russian decision-making. Such media as well as their core messages need to be correctly identified among the voluminous information flow. Especially since the worsening of Russia’s relations with the West over Ukraine, everything related to China has received an unprecedented degree of interest and attention. The full coverage of the Silk Road by the Russian media and expert community consequently accounts to dozens of thousands of articles.

The traditional view of the Russian (as well as of the Chinese) media in the West is that, due to the lack of freedom of speech, the information that they confer is unreliable. The Sino-Russian relations have been routinely referred to, in official discourse, as the “most positive throughout their history”¹. It is true that, in the context of positive official relations, both the Russian and Chinese media, to a large degree, avoid negative coverage of each other.

Historical examples reveal that similar things also happened in the West, for example, during the two World Wars era. As John J. Mearsheimer points out in the “Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” “during the late 1930s many Americans saw the Soviet Union as an evil state <...> Nevertheless, when the United States joined forces with the Soviet Union in late 1941 to

¹ Razov, Sergey (former Russian Ambassador to China). 60 years of Russia-China Relations: Some Lessons. People’s Daily (Russian website). September 30, 2009.
<http://russian.people.com.cn/31521/6773845.html>

fight against the Third Reich, the US government began a massive public relations campaign to clean up the image of America's new ally and make it compatible with liberal ideas"¹.

However, the hypothesis is that, unlike sometimes believed, in this atmosphere the real information does not disappear from the media discourse but starts to be conveyed by other means, that is to say in an indirect or disguised manner. Conveying information in an indirect manner is in no case a Russian or a Chinese invention but rather a feature of any repressive, crisis, or unsafe societies.

There is a body of literature, a part but not all of it military, on the use of "cyphers" and "codes". As Helen Fouché Gaines writes in her study on "Cryptanalysis", for the first time published in 1939, "it is true that trained cryptanalysts are not greatly in demand in peacetime. <...> In time of war, the cryptographic service is suddenly expanded to include a large number of new men many of whom know nothing whatever of cryptanalysis"².

Conveying any information in a meaningful manner requires skills, but the set of skills required in free mass media is different from the set of skills required for secret information transmission. The former includes logic, structure, convincing argumentation; the latter includes metaphors, hints, insinuations, Aesop language, and may look, to an unprepared reader, extremely strange, unpersuasive or pseudo-scientific.

Even if most information published in the Russian media, on China or with regard to other subjects, would certainly not amount to a "code", the term "esoteric" seems rather appropriate to describe it. The word "esoteric" is defined by Oxford Dictionary as "intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest".

In his excellent recent book "Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing," Arthur M. Melzer suggests a similar interpretation: "Through a slow act of collective amnesia, a well-known phenomenon

¹ John J. Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London. Updated Kindle Edition, location 663.

² Helen Fouché Gaines. *Cryptanalysis: a study of ciphers and their solution*. Dover Publication. New York, 2014 (first printed in 1939). Kindle edition, location 223.

has quietly been dropping out of awareness: the philosophic practice of esoteric writing. By this is meant the practice of communicating one's unorthodox thoughts primarily "between the lines", hidden behind a veneer of conventional pieties, *for fear of persecution or for other reasons*" (the italics are mine – LS)¹.

Esoterism has even become trendy since Russia's involvement in the wars in Ukraine and Syria. Exercising free speech in Russia has been notoriously dangerous: the violent death of journalists who had the courage to take the risks provide convincing evidence in this regard. Before the recent crises, however, it was accepted on the values level, even if not necessarily achieved, that the objective was to make the Russia's mass media progress towards more freedom and openness as the society evolves towards more safety. Since the society actually failed to become safer, nowadays, the well-foundedness of this principle appears to be questionable in its nature.

Besides deliberately disguising information – a process that can vary from self-censorship through the use of hints and insinuation to actual encoding – people writing under stress or pressure might conceal their true thoughts unintentionally. Looking from the angle of cognitive science, which originated from the writings of Ivan Pavlov, Sigmund Freud and more recently Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker, and combines elements of linguistics with psychology and brain science, humans possess conscious and unconscious mind.

It is therefore plausible that computerized artificial intelligence may be helpful in detecting consciously or unconsciously disguised information, for example, by statistically identifying key words in the documents. One of the methods used for this is SEO (search engine optimization) text analysis.

Hence, the methodology combines qualitative reading and elements of computerized text analysis. I submitted sixteen articles (a total of 116026 words, their full list provided in Addendum 1) to SEO text analysis², a process in which the key words in the text are identified by the computer. These articles come from the following three publications that have influence on Russia's decision-

¹ Arthur M. Melzer. *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*. Chicago University Press. Chicago and London. 2014. Kindle edition, location 59.

² The function is available at: <https://text.ru/>

making and reflect the two extremes of the Russian political spectrum as well as Vladimir Putin's pledge to "unify" or "balance" the two of them:

1. Newspaper "Vedomosti"¹: Russia's pretended version of "Financial Times", printed alike on light salmon pink paper, foreign-launched and focused on quality journalism, circulated in Moscow's busy coffee shops, and popular among the liberal camp. The writing style of the publication is straightforward and easily understandable.
2. Newspaper "Agrumenty nedeli"² (The Weekly Arguments): a tabloid written and widely read by the so-called "siloviki", a composite term for the employees of various security forces. It is roughly an equivalent to China's 《四月网》 (April Web)³, which was formerly known under an explicit title of "Anti-CNN". The writing style is much more "esoteric", characterized by the abundance of symbolic expressions and metaphors that assume a high degree of cultural awareness from the readers and are only fully comprehensible to insiders.
3. Analytics pages of the "Valdai Club"⁴: a favorite think-tank of Vladimir Putin that he personally launched in 2004. The writing style is policy-suggestions oriented.

It can be added that China directly runs a number of Russian-language media that publish official information regarding the "One Belt One Road". The most successful of them is the Russian website of the "People's Daily"⁵. However, due to poor quality of writing and unattractive design, if not necessarily to the nature of the arguments presented, they have little if any convincing power for the general public. Their audience is therefore limited to China specialists who are looking for official news and bureaucratic interpretations of events.

¹ <http://www.vedomosti.ru/>

² <http://www.argumenti.ru/>

³ www.m4.cn/

⁴ ru.valdaiclub.com/

⁵ <http://russian.people.com.cn/>

Main Findings

1. The Russians view a China-led “Silk Road” as a challenge to Russia’s great power status but demonstrate openness to cooperation on the basis of equality

The Chinese plan, that comprises a continental (“One Belt”) and a maritime (“One Road”) parts, was initially intended to only concern Russia to a limited extent. The outline divulged at the Boao Forum on March 28, 2015 described several connection routes between Asia, Europe, and Africa, but only mentioned Russia as part of one of them: “from China through the Central Asia and Russia to Europe (the Baltic Sea).” The maritime part of the plan was supposed to primarily focus on the South East Asian countries with a potential extension deeper into the Pacific Ocean¹.

The Russian strategic thinkers, however, perceived this as an attempt to downgrade Russia to the position of a “regional” rather than “global” power: a position they firmly regard as premature and unacceptable. The first “Weekly Arguments” reaction to the Chinese communiqué of March 28, 2015 was a publication of a brief statement by Vice-premier Igor Shuvalov². The friendly title of the article “Russia is ready to join efforts with China” is followed by an extension in the synopsis that Russia “welcomes the Chinese initiative”, and that the joint work on it should be carried out “in the format of the Eurasian Economic Union” (EEU), a Russian-dominated project.

According to the Russian International Affairs Council, great powers are those countries with “the ability to project the might of the state (*and not always in a destructive way*) anywhere in the world” (italics are mine – LS)³. As Sergey Ryazanov, an author for the “Weekly Arguments” points out, “Many people got nervous about the advancement of the Chinese infrastructural projects <...>. Some people even called the Great Silk Road a blow to the Eurasian Economic Union and “an insult to Putin”, as the Chinese had not solicited his opinion in advance”⁴.

¹ Government of China. Op. Cit.

² <http://argumenti.ru/politics/2015/03/393796>

³ The Russian International Affairs Council. Arctic Players in the Arctic. Working Paper no. 26 of 2016. P. 6. <http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/asia-arctic-report26-en.pdf>

⁴ Terentiev, Denis. Everything goes through Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) railway”. Weekly Arguments No. 30 (521). November 12, 2015. <http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n513/423132>

In light of the above and as I have previously pointed out¹, the Putin-Xi “Declaration on the cooperation between the EEU and the China-initiated Silk Road Economic Belt”, eventually signed on May 8, 2015, should be considered as a significant diplomatic breakthrough. Achieved in the atmosphere of patriotic fervor on the grounds of the Second World War memories, it essentially put the two projects on the grounds of equality as opposed to the earlier treatment of the Chinese plan as an “initiative” within the Russian framework. It is worth an observation, in brackets, that the Declaration was still bilateral and did not solicit the opinion of any other concerned Eurasian countries, an attitude that belongs to a wider debate on the destinies of big and small countries in international politics².

2. The Russians are interested in Chinese investments but have strong security concerns

The Chinese, famous for their materialistic thinking also branded as “practical” or “pragmatic”, stress that their plan will bring economic prosperity. Whereas it sounds like an irrefutable argument that China was successful in tremendously improving the welfare of its population over the three past decades, the assumption beneath proposing it as a recipe to follow by other countries is that other people, too, primarily strive to increase their material comfort. Specifically, the recipe consists in improving accessibility of the geographically insulated regions by infrastructure development with the premise that it will boost local economic activities.

The Chinese model works perfectly in regions with high population density and few natural resources. It correctly assumes that entrepreneurial potential of the people will develop once they have the opportunity, through improved connectivity, to reach out to the outside world. Long before the Chinese economic miracle, this model was sketched by the Hakka merchants of the Southern Chinese provinces. This model, moreover, seems to correlate

¹ Smirnova, L. Three scenarios for Russia-China relations in 2016. Russia Direct. 2015. № 25. http://www.cemi.rssi.ru/publication/e-publishing/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=9261

² Gabuev, A. Peresopriajenie ot uspehov (roughly translates as “Too much tensions over successes”). “Vedomosti” No. 4095 of June 15, 2016.

<http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/06/15/645351-peresopryazhenie-ot-uspehov>

with increased cultural homogeneity as people need to cooperate to maximize their profits.

The Russian and Central Asian economies, however, are based on the exploitation of natural resources and already manage to provide to their populations material life standards that range from tolerable to comfortable, if not opulent, but that are always above the subsistence level. **Figure 1** presents a cloud tag of keywords from sixteen articles in the sample: it clearly demonstrates the weight of natural “resources,” especially of “oil” and “gas,” in the Russian media discourse surrounding the “One Belt One Road.”

The natural resources-based economic model makes the Russians develop a kind of “forbidden city” mindset. Indeed, the Russian business attitudes are often deemed unreliable because of their expectations of huge profit margins. Yet it is far from evident whether improved connectivity would help the Russian businesses maximize profits or, vice versa, only create more competition for the control over resources.

There is a body of literature mostly from the economic field on the so-called “natural resource curse” that identifies the richness in natural resources tends to correlate with a highly factional mentality¹. It was traditionally perceived as a negative trend because it manifests itself in “oligarchy” and constant risks of “ethnic strife.” Looking positively from a recently popular angle of “diversity”², it could also be viewed as one of the sources thereof.

Be it as it may, whereas the whole “Russia’s pivot to the East” concept shows that the Russians are interested in attracting Chinese investors, the “One Belt One Road” is a case when potential profits come with obvious security concerns. The Russian military experts estimate that, taking into account the 10 times differences in population sizes in favor of China, the Chinese-Russian border is not defendable by conventional weapons³. The Chinese penetration into the Central Asia would dramatically increase the length of

¹ Mohammad Reza Farzanegan and Friedrich Schneider. Factionalized democracy, oil and economic growth in Iran: Where is the curse? http://www.econ.jku.at/members/Schneider/files/publications/LatestResearch2010/Factionalism_Iran.pdf

² Mojtaba Mahdavi & W. Andy Knight (editors). *Towards the Dignity of Difference: Neither ‘End of History’ nor ‘Clash of Civilizations’*. Routledge, London & New York, 2016.

³ Kashin, V. The sum of all fears. *Russia in Global Affairs*. May 1, 2013. <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Summa-vsekh-strakhov-15961>

that “border” and create a potential threat to Siberia, an unwelcoming region which, being the primary producer of natural resources, is Russia’s main reservoir for export incomes¹.

Figure 1

Key words from sixteen sample articles



3. When reluctant to express their deepest aspirations and concerns openly, the Russians do it through metaphorical language

Even when the strategic directions on top levels reveal flexibility, thinking on the execution levels tends to remain much more inert. The security concerns, openly discussed in the Soviet Union but discarded as a myth in the age of liberal enchantment after its dissolution, are preserved in some of the “esoteric” theories. Often fictional and sometimes sounding like blatantly pseudo-scientific to a Western-educated reader, these theories are no longer viewed irrelevant nowadays and are in fact powerfully influential on the Russian minds.

The narrative of the “Weekly arguments” is particularly abundant in references to these theories. One famous example is the works of Lev Gu-

¹ Where there are a lot of mosquitos there is also a lot of oil. Interview by the “Weekly Arguments” editor-in-chief Andrey Uglanov with Vyacheslav Shtyrov, vice-president of The Sakha (Yakutia) Republic (a federal subject of Russia). December 24, 2015.
<http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n519/428362>

miliov on the so-called “passion” of nations (Russian: *passionarnosti*)¹. Gumiliov’s theory explains the drive for military conquest through the prism of a would-be high psychological energy of nations with abundant young populations living in the areas with constrained resources.

In the esoteric narrative, the figure of Genghis Khan (Temujin)², the notorious Mongolian leader of the Middle Age, is especially symbolic. On the surface, for the collective imagination of the Russians and the Chinese, this character evokes the fear of a foreign conquest. The Mongolian conquest, it is to be noted, was perceived as much more humiliating by the Russians, where it was “cross-racial”, than by the Chinese, who adopted the view of the Mongolian rulers as one of the Chinese dynasties (Yuan dynasty).

On deeper levels, however, Genghis Khan evokes more than anger. Much like Napoleon who, besides his image of a conqueror (though, unlike the Mongolians, defeated), is romanticized by the Russians as a symbol of the most acknowledged ‘European integration’ that Russia experienced throughout its whole history, the figure of Genghis Khan is associated with the achievability of the “Eurasian dream.”

Indeed, the Mongolian empire was the only successful unifier of Europe and Asia that, though for a short while, simultaneously controlled the territories of Russia, China, and India. Moreover, the Western Mongolians who controlled Russia and ended up adopting Islam, are referred to as Tatars. Their descendants are now an influential ethnic group in Russia. This latter detail is particularly important for the understanding of Russia’s historically complex relations with the Muslim world: the futurologists predict, parenthetically, that, due to the high birth rates among the Muslim minorities, the role of Islam in Russia’s politics will keep on increasing in the coming decades³.

¹ Luzhkov Yu. M. “Yellow Dragon” Benefits from the Europe – Russia Dissent, or Geopolitical Risks of the Strategic Alliance between Russia and China. *Weekly Arguments* No. 5 (446) of February 12, 2015. <http://argumenti.ru/politics/n474/388673>

² Terentiev, Denis. The Party of Genghis Khan: Will Russia Preserve its Influence over the Central Asia? “*Weekly Arguments*” No. 30 (521). August 4, 2016. <http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n550/461769>

³ Laruelle, Marlene. How Islam Will Change Russia. September 13, 2016. <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>

4. The Russian thinkers have presented such alternatives to the Chinese projects that consider Russia's security interests

The Russian thinkers further reacted to the Chinese initiative by proposing their alternative plans for the Silk Road. On the surface, it might look like the Russians are not at all paying attention to the content of the Chinese suggestions, but only show interest towards attracting the Chinese funds to support the Russian-designed alternative projects. The argument is that the Russian plans are an attempt to canalize the Chinese investments towards those projects that have been tested by the Russians and are estimated to be safer for them.

For example, between the alternative railway routes that could link China to Europe, the Chinese favor the Central Asian variants and the Russians prefer to stick to the trans-Siberian ones¹. The two Siberian railways (Transsib and BAM) were historically built at a cost of a huge stretch of human and economic resources, and, taking into account harsh climate and low density of population-related factors, their modernization is highly unlikely to pay off economically. However, the successful Chinese test of the train from China to Georgia that travelled to Tbilisi through Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan bypassing Russia in December 2015, much increased the disguised strategic uneasiness in the Sino-Russian relations².

The Russian thinkers also have their alternative plan for the Maritime Silk Road: the Northern Sea Route that runs through the Russian Arctic. Not at all taken into account in the original Chinese plan and recently labelled "Russia's Arctic Obsession" by the Financial Times³, the Russian idea actually has strategic implications. If it is true that a Great Power is a country that is able to project its influence to any part of the Globe at any given time, the Arctic is one region where Russia is more powerful than China and likely exercises more control than the United States.

¹ Terentiev, Denis. Everything goes through Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) railway". Weekly Arguments" No. 30 (521). November 12, 2015. <http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n513/423132>

² Window to Europe: How China Launched the Silk Road Bypassing Russia. Russian Business Consulting (RBC) Daily. December 15, 2015. <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/12/2015/56703a6d9a7947f88a89ae7d>

³ Kathrin Hille. Russia's Arctic Obsession. October 21, 2016. <https://ig.ft.com/russian-arctic/>

The Russian view of the Central Asian part of the Silk Road involves three major components:

1. regional integration within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union;
2. combination of economic and security cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization;
3. military coordination within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a formal though loose military alliance between Russia and five former USSR states.

Among the three, the Russians view the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as the main platform for coordination with China as it is the only one that includes China as a member¹. The SCO was designed as a security organization but, having bumped into the lack of trust and common understanding between the participants, expanded to include other aspects, such as research and development (the so-called SCO University).

Importantly, the Russian experts point out that the security-related incidents in the Central Asia are on the rise. Timofei Bordachev, an analyst influential within the Valdai Club circles, in his report “Russia and China in the Central Asia: a Win-Win Game”, refers to the July 5, 2016 shootings in Ak-tobe city, Kazakhstan, and comments that “the incident incited the external observers to suggest that the situation in Kazakhstan, which had been regarded as a perfect example of stability in the southern part of the post-Soviet space, could tighten significantly”².

In light of this situation, more voices in the security circles advocate that a joint military or peace-keeping force is necessary in the Central Asian region to tackle terrorism and political instability³. The only way that China could take

¹Luzianin S.G., Matveev V.A., Smirnova L.N. (Editor-in-chief Ivanov I.S.) Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Model 2014-2015. Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper No. 21/2015. russiancouncil.ru/en/paper21

²Timofei Bordachev. Russia and China in the Central Asia: the Win-Win Game. Valdai Paper No. 50, June 2016.

<http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/russia-and-china-in-central-asia-the-great-win-win-game/>

³Andrei Uglov. A Chinese elephant in our porcelain shop (a Russian idiom meaning: out of place). “Weekly Arguments” No. 25 (466) of July 9, 2015. <http://argumenti.ru/politics/n495/406728>

part in such a force would be to do it within the SCO framework. Since the SCO military drills have already involved China, it is theoretically plausible that a cooperation format could take a more permanent basis. If that happened, it could become a reasonable scale test of sincerity of peaceful intentions behind the Sino-Russian alliance and a major trust-boosting initiative in the areas of operational cooperation as well as joint research and development.

5. The computerized reading reveals that the Russians aspire to develop a full scale economic union in Eurasia

To further verify the findings, I have submitted sixteen articles (6 from “Vedomosti”, 6 ones from “Weekly arguments”, and 4 ones from “Valdai Club”, a total of 116026 words), all of them dated after the official launch of the “One Belt One Road” initiative on March 28, 2015, to the computerized SEO keyword search. Confirming the hypothesis that the “Vedomosti” and “Valdai Club” articles tend to be more straightforward, in most of the articles that appeared in these publications the computer was able to identify not only key words but entire key phrases. The full results of the computer analysis are presented in **Addendum 1**.

These are the key ideas identified by the computer:

- G20 is currently the world’s most important organization
- A comparatively long peaceful period inside the Central Asian region in the absence of serious conflicts opens opportunities for the development of new technologies
- The USSR completely exhausted the main resource of industrialization – countryside youth
- Russia is still not making use of opportunities for economic integration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization
- In 2015, the total Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries amounted to 27 bln USD; of this sum 23.6 bln went to Kazakhstan
- The leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union countries started direct dialogue with Beijing, which was evaluated in Moscow almost like a betrayal

After noting down these and other computer-identified keywords, I have resubmitted the entire keyword list to another round of SEO analysis. The squeezed result is presented in **Figure 2**. Rearranged into a sentence, it reads optimistically: *“in the rich in oil and gas region of Central Asia, the co-ordination between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should lead to a full economic union”*.

Figure 2

Results of SEO analysis of sixteen sample articles

+ belt eurasian economic union silk road economic	3
+ silk road economic belt	3
+ eurasian economic union	3
+ road economic belt	3
+ shanghai cooperation organization	3
+ silk road economic	3
+ a lot of	2
+ oil and gas	2
+ silk road	6
+ central asia	4
+ of the	4
+ cooperation organization	3
+ economic belt	3
+ economic union	3
+ eurasian economic	3

Certainly, the representativeness of this computerized reading is limited, first of all, because this sample is too small. So said, taking into account the relatively small number of the Russian experts who write on Chinese affairs, the opinions expressed in other publications largely overlap with those in the selection. Therefore, the sample should be encompassing enough to correctly reflect the mainstream debates. An even deeper understanding could be obtained if Big Data technology is applied to analyze a more extensive sample of articles from a greater variety of publication sources.

6. If the coordination plans fail, an increasingly unsafe Central Asian region might turn into an impassable buffer zone between Russia and China

So, what if the Eurasian dream fails? The lack of trust in the Central Asia is based on serious grounds. Besides the Central Asia being regarded as a military bridge-head to Eastern Russia, it is to be noted that Russia's interests and the interests of the Central Asian countries do not necessarily coincide but often contradict with each other. First, the Central Asian countries are, like Russia, exporters of natural resources, especially gas, to China, and therefore Russia's direct competitors. Second, following the abundance of historic ties, the Russian companies have large stakes in the Central Asian natural resources exports¹.

Another often disregarded but important factor is competition for the human resources. The Central Asian population is the main source of low-skilled labor in Russia. It is true that, as some Russian experts present it², remittances from migration are currently a significant revenue income for the Central Asian countries. However, the Central Asian migrants became the most discriminated group in Russia where they are referred to by the German term "gastarbeiter" that sounds denigrating in the Russian language. The economic development of Central Asia would put them into a much stronger position vis-à-vis their Russian employers or lift the necessity to work abroad altogether.

Overall, the nature of the differences between Russia, China, and the Central Asian nations are somewhat comparable to the situation in the former French colonies in Africa: the arrival of the Chinese companies has the advantage of boosting the confidence of the locals by challenging the excesses of the old monopolies. Yet, at the same time, it is feared as potentially leading to a new form of imperialism.

At this point, the argument between domestic and international politics again becomes circular, and the "Great Game", as the regional politics used to

¹ Terentiev, Denis. The Party of Genghis Khan: Will Russia Preserve its Influence over the Central Asia? "Weekly Arguments" No. 30 (521). August 4, 2016.

<http://argumenti.ru/toptheme/n550/461769>

² Ryazantsev, Sergey. Labor Migration from the Central Asia to Russia in the Context of Economic Crisis. Valdai Papers, No. 55, August 2016.

<http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-55-labour-migration-from-central-asia/>

be called in colonial times, turns into a tripartite exercise between Russia, China, and the “West”. With regard to the West, it is certainly true that an earlier argument that democracies can evolve beyond geopolitical interference in the affairs of others has by now lost much of its credibility. Many regimes in Central Asia, looking for a balancer to the Russians and being non-democratic in nature, might initially find the Chinese more empathic to their internal constraints than the Americans. Still, in the long term, the perception of the Chinese domestic politics as repressive and not enlightened, could either again tip the scale in favor of the West or, even likelier, in an ultimate move of desperation, in favor of Islamic extremism.

The most pessimistic scenario would be that an increasingly unsafe Central Asia follows the destiny of the Ukraine by becoming an impassable buffer zone between Russia and China. Sergey Tsypliaev of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration points out in the “Vedomosti” that, if the Russia-China cooperation fails, the “Silk Road risks to become a ‘iron circle’ for Russia.”¹ Taking into account that the awareness of the Chinese cultural and literary references among the Russian writers is swiftly improving, the “iron circle” here could be a deliberate metaphor for the “containment of Russia”. A similar reference is made in the Chinese classic novel “The Journey to the West” where a band was placed on the head of the rebellious main character the Monkey King by the Buddhist divinity Guanyin. The Russian thinking, it is known, tends to be rather extreme.

March, 2017

¹ Tsypliaev, Sergey. West or East: Where Should Russia Pivot? Vedomosti No. 4037 of March 21, 2016. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/03/21/634337-zapad-vostok>

Addendum 1

*Computer-identified key words in a sample of 16 articles (116026 words)
published in three Russian publications*

Date	Title	Tags (if any)	SEO keywords
Daily Newspaper "Vedomosti"			
January 15, 2016	China prefers Kazakhstan		In 2015, the total Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Commonwealth of independent states (CIS) countries amounted to 27 bln USD; of this sum 23.6 bln went to Kazakhstan
February 19, 2016	Eurasian Economic Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: in search of growth resources		Russia is still not making use of opportunities for economic integration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization
March 20, 2016	West or East: Where should Russia pivot?		Industrialization; equipment; internal factors of development; USSR completely exhausted the main resource of industrialization – countryside youth
June 15, 2016	Peresopriajenie ot uspekhov (roughly: Too much tensions over successes)		The leaders of the Eurasian Economic Union countries started direct dialogue with Beijing, which was evaluated in Moscow almost like a betrayal

Date	Title	Tags (if any)	SEO keywords
Daily Newspaper “Vedomosti”			
June 21, 2016	Syria could become an important international trade center		Silk road economic belt; great powers; oil and gas; Syria war; international trade; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Iraq
September 2, 2016	G20 is more important than G8		G20 is currently the world's most important organization
Weekly newspaper “Weekly Arguments”			
July 9, 2015	A Chinese elephant in our porcelain shop (a Russian idiom meaning: out of place)	SCO; BRICS; summit; Ufa	USA; India; former USSR; interstate alliances
September 10, 2015	Attending a Chinese business class	Beijing; China, forum	The Gate of Heavenly Peace (TianAnMen); military parade; penetrate their system; chairman Xi
November 12, 2015	Everything goes through Baikal–Amur Mainline (BAM) railway	Kremlin, Baikal–Amur Mainline and Trans-Siberian railway reconstruction	Trans-Siberian railways reconstruction; channel capacity; (natural resources) fields; tariffs; Soviet
December 24, 2015	There is a lot of oil at the place where there are a lot of mosquitos	Yakutia; senator; interview	Diamonds; gold; local population; permanent frost; federal budget subsidies
April 28, 2016	Dao of “no-love” (here means: the Silk Road that brings discord)	Pivot to the East; The Power of Siberia (a gas pipeline); failure	Gas exports to China; Chinese investments; oil suppliers; borders; reduce the quota of the Chinese farmers

Date	Title	Tags (if any)	SEO keywords
Weekly newspaper “Weekly Arguments”			
August 4, 2016	The Genghis Khan party: will Russia preserve its influence in the Central Asia?	Central Asia; Russia; politics	Gas (three times more; Turkmen gas; visa regime; “father of the nation”
Think Tank “Valdai Club”			
December 2, 2015	Eurasian Modernization Model for Russia	Russia; Europe; Asia; ASEAN; Silk Road; World Trade Organization (WTO); oil; economy	Oil and gas resources; industrial development model; economic regulatory system; financial stability; deepening economic cooperation
March 23, 2016	Flow of the Future	Eurasian integration; Russia; China; Europe	A comparatively long peaceful period inside the Central Asian region in the absence of serious conflicts opens opportunities for the development of new technologies
March 24, 2016	Russia and China: Asymmetry or Harmonization of Relations?	China; Russia; coordination; conference; Asia Pacific Region, Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Silk Road; Economic Belt Eurasian Economic Union	Silk Road Economic Belt; Russia, Central Asia; China; building high speed railways; Moscow – Beijing (transport) corridor
June 24, 2016	More China	Russia; China; coordination; USA; Eurasia; Central Asia; Silk Road	Great powers; international systems; foreign policy; internal politics