

Russia, China, the Belt & Road Initiative and A New World Order

By Vladislav Belov



*Dr. Vladislav Belov,
Research Director at
the Institute of Europe
of the Russian Academy
of Sciences, Moscow*

At the end of 2019 we can see signs of obvious failures of global economics and policy: a return to international protectionism, the economic wars, Brexit, the Eurozone and migration crises, the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the transatlantic fault/split, comparable economic dominance by China, the Arab Spring with its tragic consequences, Syria, the Middle East, the deepening disagreements between the great powers (the Russian-American and Chinese-American relations), a serious ongoing conflict in and around Ukraine, and the crises of arms control mechanisms. Any attempts to reform the United Nations invariably fall flat. The fragmentation of the international system, the gradual disintegration of the existing world order, and reduced manageability at the global and regional levels continue to affect every area of intergovernmental relations.

The world is close to the point of bifurcation, which will be followed either by the restoration of global governance at a new level, or by the accelerating slide of the world toward anarchy and chaos. The leading states

and group of states are trying to promote various integration mechanisms and to create a platform for the shaping of the future world order, but they remain unable to reach any kind of common agreement on its restructuring. For a number of reasons, the traditional centers of world politics are unable to play a leading role in shaping the new world order.

The United States is in a situation of deep internal political division, and a long-term, balanced, and consistent foreign policy strategy cannot be expected from Washington in the near future. The European Union is grappling with a fundamental internal crisis and with a whole set of structural, financial, economic, and political crises. The EU is preoccupied by its many internal problems, rather than by the new world order. There are also difficulties with other leading players of world politics, objectively preventing them from taking on major responsibility for the formation of new rules of the game in the modern world.

One exception could be the most ambitious project in the world: “The Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). China put it forward in 2013, when the international system had entered a period of instability. For six years now, the project has been one of the most important integration initiatives in the world.

The BRI is not only a huge economic initiative; it could also be considered an alternative approach to reformatting the world order “from below” – through the implementation of regional and continental projects envisaging the diverse and flexible formats for getting potential participants involved. The new China is not trying to build a closed club of states that do not like American leadership. This is a process of openness, inclusiveness, and joint development, not a closed bloc or a specific “Chinese club.” The initiative does not divide the world by ideology and does not seek to play with zero sums. Any country can join the initiative if they wish to do so – the BRI is flexible and open for all participants, does not encroach on the fundamental principles of the liberal world order, and commits to continuing the process of globalization and beginning the process of reformatting the entire world order.

The BRI is in tune with Russia’s integration efforts in the Eurasian space within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The pairing of these projects suggests that Moscow and Beijing are building new forms of world order, more effective than similar approaches in the West.

Not by accident, the United States, leading countries in the EU, India, and some other states are very critical and skeptical of the BRI, sensing a threat to their interests and their positions in the world, and have no constructive response to the implementation of the project.

Participating in the BRI gives countries a chance to develop their own projects and in this way to have an opportunity to lay down new rules of international cooperation together with China. Moscow understands that the changes to the world order through the BRI are just one example of the possible formats of building “from the bottom up” and of the creation of regional and continental coalitions of states that share common approaches to international interactions. From the Russian point of view, the BRI offers an opportunity to complement other entities. It was one of the reasons why Russian president Vladimir Putin welcomed the Initiative, noting that “combining the potentials of such integration formats as the EAEU, the BRI, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could become the basis for a greater Eurasian partnership.”¹

In this sense, Russia and China currently have significant advantages over other global power centers. They promote the idea of a “multipolar world” as the most sustainable, reliable, and fair design of a new type of international relations, which should be based on principles of mutual respect, justice, and mutually beneficial cooperation and build a community of one humanity, based on the equal participation of all countries in global governance, respect for international law, equal and indivisible security, mutual respect and consideration of each other’s interests, non-confrontation, and contribution to a more just and rational polycentric world order.²



1 Igor Ivanov. The Belt and Road Initiative: Towards a New World Order. 05.06.2019. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-belt-and-road-initiative-towards-a-new-world-order/>

2 Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the development of comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation entering a new era (in Russian). 05.06.2019. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5413>



Therefore, Moscow and Beijing offer an alternative to the current world order, which is in a deep crisis. Of course, it's reasonable that this alternative can only be implemented in cooperation with other countries. The main advantage of the Russian-Chinese approach is that it is open to all participants, including the EU and the United States, in building a new configuration.

The multilateral mechanisms developed over the past two decades with the active participation of Russia and China (SCO, BRICS, EAEU) may eventually become separate components and elements of the future international structure. This structure should include the restoration of global governance, reform of the UN and other international institutions, a renewal of international law, and a new understanding of globalization and interdependence.

Russia is now defining its own long-term priorities and interests within the BRI project, taking into account its possibilities and limitations, and is ready to implement it as an indirect member of the project together with China and the other participants. The involved countries could find it easier to protect their own interests as part of flexible and fluid coalitions dealing with specific issues. Such a group of states may later form the coalitions needed to overcome the current crisis and form the future world order. Some expectations relate to the resurgent Russia-China-India triangle and new formats of EU interaction with Asian countries (the concept of transcontinental "connectivity").

The United States has no interest in forming a strategic partnership between the EU, China, India, other Asian partners, and Russia. Most likely, American policy will try to prevent it in every possible way.

The Eurasian projects of Russia (especially with China) have some advantages over its project with EU. The majority of Asian countries do not have many historical problems with Russia and negative stereotypes of Russia are less intense, with the Russian state not being seen as an existential threat – it is instead perceived as an attractive opportunity for economic expansion. The Eurasian project is still just beginning and the rules of the game/bureaucratic mechanisms have not yet been established. Russia can ensconce itself far more easily and simply in Eurasian processes on an equal-to-equal basis, and in certain areas even as a leader.³ The project will involve different formats of Russian participation.

"Introducing" Russia into complex Eurasian transcontinental projects will require a high level of diplomatic skill, political flexibility, and readiness in many cases to play a "second role" to the leading roles of China, India, or ASEAN. Of course, justifying Moscow's meaningful participation in such projects will require a transformation of the Russian economy. The next five years will show how much the Kremlin will be able to solve this difficult problem.

³ Andrey Kortunov. Will Russia Return to Europe? 06.11.2018. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/will-russia-return-to-europe/>