



# **Spatial Geo-Economic Strategies of Russia and China in Conflict Zones: Ukraine and Myanmar Compared**

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***CEFIR Working Paper No 5: March 2018***

## Introduction

Throughout 2014-2017, the dominance of the global West was challenged by a series of crises in the United States of America (US), Europe and their periphery. This trend has allowed two Eurasian powers – China and Russia to further claim regional leadership and to further deepen economic and security cooperation in their respective peripheries. In contrast with the evident global power projection of the US and the European Union's (EU) soft power of attraction, Russia and China have preferred inconspicuous methods of assertion. This working paper will investigate critically the interaction between regional integration strategies undertaken by the Euro-Atlantic community, on the one hand, as well as the response of Russia and China, on the other hand. By comparing the examples of Ukraine and Myanmar, the paper will investigate the systemic permeation and regional-shaping projects financed by Russia and China in their respective peripheries.

### I. Theoretical Framework

Regional connectivity is seen as way to explain and overcome the heterogeneity in the economic development of states and entire regions and necessitates modular, respectively comprehensive and place-sensitive policies targeting the development of meso-structures, respectively industries and infrastructure<sup>1</sup>, whereby micro-level corresponds to firm and meso-level to regional connectivity. Infrastructural

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<sup>1</sup> Riccardo CRESCENZI & Simona IAMMARINO, "Global investments and regional development

connectivity has been also acclaimed as one of the main engines of the early stages of economic development. Conversely, especially within emerging economies, the triumph of materialism, infrastructure development for better trade and delivery of consumption goods is all too often seen as a self-sustaining and self-sufficient development path. The same paradigm has become a rationale of regional integration in the international arena. With the institutionalization of regional projects virtually everywhere, the questions of competition and collaboration between them remain vital to unbundle the new setup in international affairs. Although connectivity through physical infrastructure, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) development and socialization is essentially an instrument for economic development, it can also serve for the alignment of preferences of local actors to a neighbouring integration project. In order to investigate the validity of this claim, the paper will look into two cases of crisis-stricken states that happen to be standing at the junction of two major integration projects. The first one is Ukraine, which is located between the European and Eurasian Union. The second is Myanmar, which is positioned at the crossroads between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), on one hand, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), on the other.

### Self-Projection as a Process of Socialization

trajectories: the missing links", Journal: *Regional studies*, Volume 51, Issue 1, 2017.

The EU and its member states have for long attempted to bring its eastern and southern neighbourhood closer through infrastructure and socialization platforms, supported through the financial instruments of Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) and later on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (e.g. Neighbourhood Investment Facility, the European Neighbourhood Instrument, Instrument Contributing to Security and Peace), which focus on neighbourhood-wide challenges (institution-building, education, interregionalism), as well as cross-border priorities (regulatory approximation, improving economic outlook, conflict settlement). According to EU's New Consensus on Development<sup>2</sup>, which is essentially a way for the EU to mainstream the United Nations (UN) post-2015 Development Agenda and its values, EU's institutions (the Commission, its Investment Bank) work towards achieving mutual accountability and coherence with national development agencies. It also prioritizes the domestic ownership over the programming of the aid. However, with only a handful of member states fulfilling their development commitments, it is expected that soon there will be a shift of aid from EU's Neighbourhood towards EU's Development policy, thus leaving more space for national agencies to fill the vacuum. Horizontally, the EU co-funds or cooperates with a number of other development banks or institutions (Asian Development Bank (ADB), African Union

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<sup>2</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, "The New European Consensus On Development 'Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future'", Thursday, 8 June, 2017, [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/euro](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf)

(AU, World Bank (WB)), but also finds itself in competition with other donors (New Development Bank (NBD), Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Facility (AIIF), Islamic Development Bank (IDB)). With regards to the actors that the paper investigates, this competition is most evident in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa and less in South-East Asia and South America.

While undoubtedly EU's development aid is a pathway to projecting EU's leverage through focus on converging reciprocity of trade penetration, diffusing rules and norms, it also entails political components, brought by through socialization platforms (such as joint parliamentary assembly EuroNest, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), twinning practices in governance and numerous advisory visits/missions) resulting in the establishment of common public spheres and facilitation of inclusive domestic meta-regional and interregional governance. This multitude of ties allowed one of the leading analysts of EU foreign policy to speak about hybrid geopolitics<sup>3</sup>, which do not necessarily mirror extrinsic perceptions and actions

These quasi-geopolitical aspirations have triggered a process of learning by the two predominant powers in Eurasia – China and Russia, which are attempting to construct their own forms of neighbouring regions, while camouflaging such hybrid foreign policies through communicating the alleged benevolence of investments in infrastructure with their own state media.

[pean-consensus-on-development-final-20170626\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Richard YOUNGS, *Europe's Eastern Crisis: Geopolitics of Assymetry*, Cambridge: CUP, 2017.

The conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and Myanmar have further availed this structuralist diversion between romanticized and functional aims of materialism, as they have legitimized investment in infrastructure as a just mean of improving the situation and future perspectives of locals. Drawing on the above observation the paper seeks to explore how China and Russia copy and creatively adapt EU's geo-spatial strategies, including as a tool of socialization with their neighbourhoods. It will also consider to what extent these two powers compete against each other in shaping Eurasian space. In order to investigate them the paper will review how economic development, specifically investments in roads, railways, oil and gas pipes and deep sea ports results in competing aims between the EU, Russia and China, as well as how the interests embedded in the conduction of large-scale socialization platforms are related to achieving these aims.

## II. Setting up a Comparative Regionalism Framework – the Maritime Belt Perspective

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<sup>4</sup> Asia-Pacific Research, "China Reluctant About Indian and Pakistani Entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization ?", *Asia-Pacific Research*, July 3, 2016, <https://www.asia-pacificresearch.com/china-reluctant-of-the-entry-of-india-and-pakistan-into-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/5533932>; D. Grossman, "China Will Regret India's Entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2017; <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-will-regret-indias-entry-into-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>

<sup>5</sup> Usama Nizamani, *The China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Shanghai Cooperation Organization*:

After the 2017 enlargement of the Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO) with India and Pakistan that happened largely due to Russia's insistence, China's pre-eminence in this major regional security cooperation scheme will have to rely much more on the pivot to Pakistan to counterbalance India's inclusion <sup>4</sup>. This also holds true, as although on the diplomatic level China supports resolving the Indo-Pakistani conflict, its heavy investment in transport and energy infrastructure in the China-Pakistan economic corridor that includes positioning troops to secure the supply reinforces potential usage of coercive measures and restricts India<sup>5</sup>.

Additionally, Beijing has been concerned about possible escalations related to the independence of Nepal as well as about the India's global rise. As balancing act in the regional setting, China has long been supporting inland rebellious groups in Eastern and semi-detached North-East India <sup>6</sup> and developed strategic economic relations with Pakistan. Moreover, one of major transport corridors created by China from Central Asia to Pakistan port Gwadar seeks to re-direct transport flows from southwards <sup>7</sup>.

Implications for South Asia's Strategic Stability, Islamabad Policy Research Institute, Vol. 2, No. 2 – 2018, p. 79-90

<sup>6</sup> Bibhu PRASAD ROUFRAY and Mantraya, "China's New Game In India's Northeast – Analysis", August 9, 2017, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/09082017-chinas-new-game-in-indias-northeast-analysis/>

<sup>7</sup> Michael TAI, "Gwadar: A case of South-South cooperation", *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 1, 2017.

Islamabad has switched from being US's most important ally in the fight against Afghani insurgency to recipient of enormous investment packages from China, which are essentially subjecting the energy and transportation sector to strong dependencies. As a result of these policies, SAARC – which was viewed as the major regional cooperation project alternative to China – is becoming entangled in a ring of instability to the North, as well as a network of deep-sea ports with majoritarian ownership by Chinese state-owned enterprises and banks.

Chinese deep-sea port investments and the creation of a network of secure transit routes remain China's main instrument of maritime geopolitical presence and competition with the US. While oftentimes the Belt part of the BRI is presented as an economic belt, one can trace China's increased involvement in securing alternative transport routes via its maritime strategy. As evident from Graphic 1., China has attempted to position itself by shaping two trajectories that can be widely named Central and South Asian ones. The Central Asian route is highly dependent on the ability of the sub-regional subjects within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to counterweight Russia's cultural influence, as well the maintenance of peace in the

South Caucasus. China relies heavily on the pragmatic friendship between Georgia and Azerbaijan, which is counterbalanced by Armenia's good positioning in the EEU's institutional setup. Moscow is thus hoping to subdue Armenian dissatisfaction with arms exports from Russia to Azerbaijan. What makes Armenia even more important to Russia is the fact that both Belarus and Kazakhstan are attempting to position themselves as centres of power within the EEU. On the other hand, Armenia is heavily dependent and controlled by major Russian business interests and depends on the Kremlin in terms of trader and security, which have defined its pathway into the EEU, despite the rising popular opposition. However, seen from the perspective of Central Asian Maritime route, China's heavy investments in the ports of Baku and Anaklia<sup>8</sup>, in logistics zone in Kutaisi<sup>9</sup>, in logistical and railway (Baku-Tbilisi-Kars) infrastructure, as well as real estate show Chinese preference for non-involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh route and its settlement alongside Azeri interests is coupled with growing preferences towards Georgia and Azerbaijan as economic counterparts<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Wade SHEPARD, "Anaklia 'Silk Road' Port Set To Transform Georgia And Enhance China-Europe Trade", September 29, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/09/29/silk-road-anaklia-deep-sea-port-set-to-transform-georgia/#763555b629df>

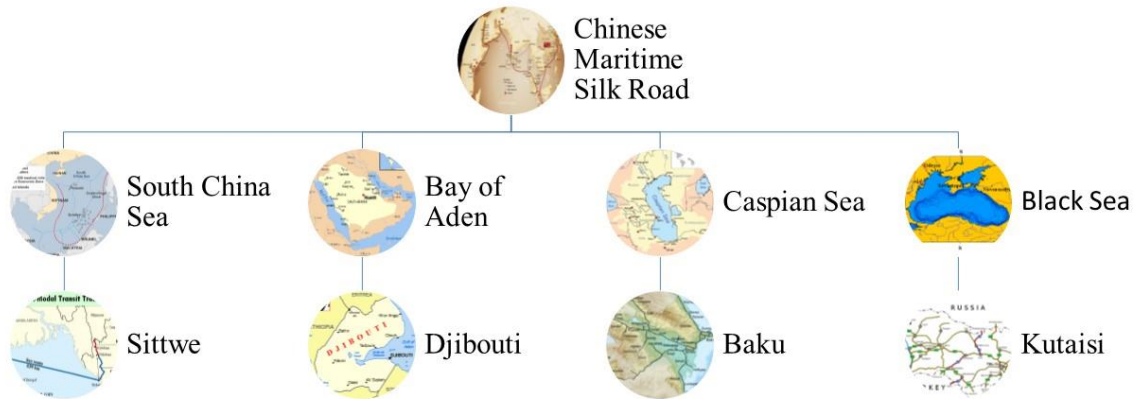
<sup>9</sup> Wade SHEPARD, "Silk Road Impact: Chinese Company Turns Old Soviet Factory Into Free Industrial Zone", *Forbes*, June 30, 2016, [https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/06/30/how-chinas-hualing-group-revived-an-old-](https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/06/30/how-chinas-hualing-group-revived-an-old-soviet-factory-to-help-restore-an-ailing-economy-in-kutaisi-georgia/#6613d6eb1c80)

[soviet-factory-to-help-restore-an-ailing-economy-in-kutaisi-georgia/#6613d6eb1c80](https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/06/30/how-chinas-hualing-group-revived-an-old-soviet-factory-to-help-restore-an-ailing-economy-in-kutaisi-georgia/#6613d6eb1c80)

<sup>10</sup> Although at parity with Georgia as importer of PRC goods, Armenia's integration into the EEU clearly does not transliterate into more exports to PRC or Chinese investments. See Hasmik HOVHANESIAN and Heghine MANASYAN, "South Caucasus–People's Republic of China Bilateral Free Trade Agreements: Why It Matters", *ADB Working Paper Series on Regional Economic Integration*, Asian Development Bank, n° 125, January 2014, pp. 8-13.

## Graphic 1. Chinese Maritime Belt

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The South Asian route's effectuation is deeply dependent on Myanmar becoming a fast route to the underdeveloped Chinese eastern provinces, as well as Djibouti's transformation into a security outpost in the Gulf of Aden. In Burmese Rakhine, which has evidenced an upsurge of anti-Muslim sentiments, especially by Buddhist nationalists, the Chinese pivot to Eurasia makes sure that locals see Beijing as more credible actor than the US' and its criticism towards the difficult transition in the country. What is more, such a move is counterbalancing India's increasingly aggressive competition to get its own firm grasp over Myanmar's rich natural resources (e.g. saffron and gold smuggling)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Khushboo NARAYAN, "246 kg seized in 7 months, Myanmar new top route for gold smugglers", *Indian Express*, March 18, 2017,

### III. Myanmar and Ukraine on the Belt and Road Trajectory

#### Ukraine

Conventional narrative holds that Russian-Ukrainian crisis has been provoked by the NATO expansion, intervention in Kosovo, Western support of the coloured revolutions in the Post-Soviet Space and the launch of EU Eastern Partnership policy with focus on the countries of the Black Sea region. However, it has been an open secret that Russia has been wary of the growing Chinese presence in Central Asia. Also, Chinese migration to Russia's Far Eastern regions was examined in several sittings of Russia's Security Council. This section

<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/246-kg-seized-in-7-months-myanmar-new-top-route-for-gold-smugglers-4574173/>



seeks to show that in addition with and on par with Russia's concerns about Western expansion, Moscow might have serious reasons to consider Chinese growing expansion in the Black Sea region.

Two events related to connectivity are worth mentioning here. Even though the formal launch of Belt-and-Road Initiative and its overland arm – Silk Road Economic Belt took place in 2013, Chinese effort to challenge Russia's monopoly on Eurasian transit took place much earlier in 2006-2007. In 2006, newly-elected Georgian President M. Saakashvili started negotiations and reached agreement on the creation of railway connection between the Azerbaijan port Alyat (Baku), the Georgian capital Tbilisi and the Turkish logistics hub Kars, which is linked to the rail-connections to Greece and further to Europe. Thus, this 826-rail connection would effectively put an end to the Russian monopoly on the transit of Chinese shipments to Europe. Moreover, Georgian President succeeded to convince his Central Asia partners to re-direct significant part of their cargo flows from Russian Trans-Siberian route to the newly developed link Caspian Sea—Caucasus-Turkey-Greece. When the agreement was reached Georgian President called this event a great geopolitical revolution<sup>12</sup>.

Construction of the railway started in 2007

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<sup>12</sup> Rustem Faliakhov, “‘Shelkovy puti’ obiedet Rossiyu po krivoi, *Gazeta.ru*, 8 August 2017 <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2017/08/05/10819363.shtml?updated>

and was scheduled for completion in 2010. Even though Moscow did not officially comment on the project, the situation on the delimitation line between Georgia and Russia-controlled separatist region has suddenly deteriorated. After some rapprochement and breakthrough in conflict-resolution format in South Ossetia in 2006, the amount of hostilities at the delimitation line with separatist regions has started to steadily grow, leading to Russian-Georgian war in 2008. The war and subsequent political change put the project on hold for about five years. Moscow made extra effort to prevent any alternative transit projects and engaged with China to promote Russian route. However, serious delays in negotiations and implementation of the Russian route, prompted Beijing to launch its own global connectivity project Belt-and-Road Initiative and its overland arm Silk Road Economic Belt resuscitated the project. The idea of Trans-Caspian-International Transport-Route (TCITR) was tabled and presented by China and Kazakhstan in 2013. With Georgia and Turkey joining the project Construction works were completed, and rail link became operational in October 2017<sup>13</sup>. To prevent Russia's negative response, Chinese leader Xi Jinping cultivated close relations with Russian President Putin committed to implement a number of other infrastructure projects with Russia. This prevented the two countries from sliding into conflict<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line Officially Launched, *RFERL News*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-line-officially-launched-azerbaijan-georgia-turkey/28824764.html>

<sup>14</sup> For more details V. Samokhvalov, “Russia and its shared neighbourhoods: a comparative analysis of Russia-EU and Russia-China relations in the EU's

The crisis in Ukraine similarly shed some light on the interplay between connectivity projects and the conflict. Even though most of interpretations hold that Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the East took place because of the forthcoming Ukraine integration with the EU under the Association Agreements, this type of interpretation misses several important details. Contrary to conventional narrative allegedly 'pro-Russian' President Viktor Yanukovich made significant effort to diversify Ukraine's dependence on Russian financial resources, markets and energy. In this pursuit of economic self-sufficiency, V. Yanukovich at China to reduce Ukraine's dependency on Russia in terms of market, energy, and connectivity. Soon after taking over presidential office in 2010, V. Yanukovich paid his first official visit to China. Several agreements on economic and infrastructure collaboration between China and Ukraine were signed and credit line for Ukraine was opened by Beijing. Over the next two years several infrastructure projects in Kiev and in the South of Ukraine were agreed.

Most importantly, together with some President V. Yanukovich sought to expand collaboration with Western and Chinese companies in infrastructure invited Chinese energy companies to consider sea-based oil-extraction rig, energy-power and potential gas extraction in Eastern Ukraine. The

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Eastern neighbourhood and Central Asia", *Contemporary Politics*, 24(1), pp.30-45.

<sup>15</sup> Arkadiusz SARNA, "Ukraine's agreement with Shell on shale gas extraction", *OSW*, January 30, 2013, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-01-30/ukraines-agreement-shell-shale-gas-extraction>

production sharing agreement with Yuzgaz <sup>15</sup> signed by the Ukrainian authorities with the prospects of cooperating with Exxon and Shell already before the eruption of the Ukrainian crisis has put Ukraine's energy dependence to Moscow at stake. Even before the war pro-Russian lobby sought to squeeze European companies out of Ukraine by supporting anti-shale extraction campaigns. Trying to get rid of energy dependence on Russia, President Yanukovich and his energy minister Yuriy Boiko have also ordered two sea-based oil-extraction platforms in Singapore <sup>16</sup>, but Russia blocked their transportation through its territorial waters.

When in 2013 Ukraine was cornered between European and Russian integration projects, President Yanukovich sought an escape this dilemma by engaging into a deeper collaboration with China. At the height of the Euro-Maidan revolution in December 2013, President Yanukovich travelled to China and signed 14 agreements, which would intently link Ukraine into Chinese Silk Road project. Only for Crimea, the agreements envisaged construction of a major deep-sea water port in the peninsula with processing capacity 120 mln tonnes per year, development of an extensive network of railways and creation a 20-mln tonnes grain storage facility accompanied by long-term lease of agricultural land. All this would the

<sup>16</sup> "Vizit Yanukovycha v Kitai: podpisano 13 dvustoronnix dokumentov na \$ 4 mlrd", *Korrespondent*, September 2, 2010, <https://korrespondent.net/business/economics/1112496-vizit-yanukovicha-v-kitaj-podpisano-13-dvustoronnih-dokumentov-na-4-mlrd>



peninsula from a Russian-resort into significant hub in the Black Sea region. Even though official Russia kept silence about the project, several of pro-Moscow institutes raised objections saying that Chinese port would destroy local marine diversity and use heavy of fertilizers would poison soil and water in the peninsula<sup>17</sup>. Further Russia's actions suggest that Russia might have been more concerned with potential Chinese expansion in the region.

There are several developments that suggest that Russia is trying to reduce economic attractiveness of the region in the view of potential competition with China. First, Russia's response to the Ukrainian European drive was disproportionately aggressive. Russia annexed Crimea disregarding high economic and political costs for Russia. Secondly, despite the annexation it sought Europe's recognition by inviting numerous delegations and observers from Europe. Also Russia has been trying to bring some other European companies into Crimea, e.g. Moscow tried to entice Siemens to build power plants in Crimea, etc. Despite high level of militarisation of the peninsula, foreign merchant ships are allowed to enter the Crimean ports. If Russia was interested in economic re-integration of the Crimea, it would not miss an opportunity to continue collaboration with China on the projects in the peninsula, in particular those related to the Silk Road Economic Belt. By 'sneaking in' the Crimea into such a major global connectivity framework, Russia would force the West to accept – if not recognize

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<sup>17</sup> 'V Krymu stroit megaport dlia kitaitsev', 13 December 2013, *Utro*, <https://www.segodnya.ua/regions/krym/v-krymu-stroyat-mega-port-dlya-kitaycev-480691.html>

– de facto status-quo in the Crimea. China was happy to continue collaboration with Russia in the Crimea. Beijing had no concerns about the legal status of the peninsula. For example, after Ukraine cut off electricity supply to the Crimea in 2016, it was Chinese company Shanghai Foundation Engineering CO (SFE) that took up the task to quickly lay deep-water cable from the mainland Russia to the peninsula. SFE deployed cable-laying ship and 80 specialists, who completed the project and secured power supply in a shortest term. Some minor projects in the tourism are also implemented by Chinese investors, but all these is nowhere near to the ambitious plans which were agreed with Ukraine<sup>18</sup>. Even though Russia seeks international recognition by the West or at least de facto return of normal economic activities in the Crimea – it pulled the Crimea out of the China-led Silk Road project. Moscow insistence to bring European businesses to the Crimea and its reluctance to use opportunities from collaboration with China suggest that the annexation of Crimea and subsequent policies were an attempt to seal the region from the Chinese expansion.

This strategy was only partially successful. After Russia's failed hybrid war in the East and South of Ukraine, Ukrainian government managed to consolidate its control over the major Black Sea port of Odessa. Former Georgian President M. Saakashvili, who had once opened the Eastern coast of the Black Sea for Chinese expansion, was appointed Governor of

<sup>18</sup> 'Kitai vtsepilsia v Krym', *Utro.ru*, 15 March 2017, <https://utro.ru/articles/2017/03/15/1319653.shtml>

Odessa region and re-engaged with China. China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) started works on turning an auxiliary port of Yuzhny (near Odessa) into a deep water facility. Negotiations on similar projects in major port of Odessa are currently under way<sup>19</sup>. While Russia can no longer directly block Chinese presence in the Black Sea region, it still seeks to maintain some degree on instability. Further militarisation of Crimea and some subversion in the South of Ukraine are among these tactics. Another example of such tactics is Russia's attempt to check Chinese presence in the South of Moldova where Chinese corporation commissioned significant capacities of the major Danube port of Giurgiulesti<sup>20</sup>. Over the years, Moscow have developed a close alliance and economic relations with the local Gagauz Autonomous Republic (which has tense relations with the government of Moldova) and blocks many of pro-European decision of Chisinau. Similarly, Gagauz media expressed their concern about the growing Chinese economic presence<sup>21</sup>.

With the beginning of the conflict, Russia sought to maintain effective control over the region, while prevent other international (economic) actors from entering the area. With the beginning of the conflict, pro-Russian forces stripped Ukraine of its heavy

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<sup>19</sup> « Kitaitsey, uglubliayushchie yuzhnenskiy port, zamatrivayustia na Odesskiy », Timer-Odessa, 14 October 2017, [http://timer-odessa.net/news/kitaytsi\\_uglublyayushchie\\_yujnenskiy\\_port\\_zasmatrivayutsya\\_i\\_na\\_odesskiy\\_516.html](http://timer-odessa.net/news/kitaytsi_uglublyayushchie_yujnenskiy_port_zasmatrivayutsya_i_na_odesskiy_516.html)

<sup>20</sup> In more details Vsevolod Samokhvalov, « The new Eurasia: post-Soviet space between Russia, Europe and China », *European Politics and Society*, vol 17(1sup), pp. 82-96.

metallurgy<sup>22</sup> (train-producing plant in Luhansk, helicopter parts, arms, etc.). Coal-mines and some other metal works were expropriated and nationalized by the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and transport infrastructure, such as the Donetsk airport – demolished. Commodity trade flows are currently redirected towards Russia in order to increase costs of Ukraine's pro-European drive.

What is more, the control over Crimea and the missile launchers that are installed over it provide Moscow with a strategic leverage over the Black Sea region, as well as a countermeasure against the planned southeast expansion of The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) capacities. Although initially expected that Moscow will attempt to integrate Eastern Ukraine politically, it has not recognized the sovereignty of the breakaway Republics. Instead, Russia is focusing on disrupting potential roads and railways from the East to the West, as well as dismantling local industries and transporting them to Russia, thus reducing the transit and investment attractiveness of Ukraine. Sooner or later, in order to overcome international isolation, Russia will have to play the benevolent card and

<sup>21</sup> « Molodva i Kitai gotoviat soglashenie o svobodnoi trgovle. Eto ne anekdot ! Edinaya Gagauzia », 16 May 2017, <http://eleganthome.fi/sobitiya/moldova-i-kitaj-gotovyat-soglashenie-o-svo/>

<sup>22</sup> Michael BIRD, Lina VDOVII, Yana TKACHENKO, « The Great Looting of Donbass », December 10, 2015, <https://euobserver.com/investigations/131428>

return Donbass to Ukraine<sup>23</sup>.

In the meantime, political preferences and monetary support have been allocated to Belarus (with which it forms an Union state), as well as Crimea, which bears strong historical semantics in the Russian mind-set (thus also increasing Putin's popularity and double legitimacy – by force and elections). However, this is not sufficient to legitimize the expensive economic deviation and infrastructure construction, which the economic integration of Crimea necessitates. Rather than counteracting EU's normative and regulatory expansion, Russia might have actually acted in order to feign off the Chinese appetite for the Black Sea region. Similar parallels can be drawn with Central Asia, where Chinese investments are gradually shifting the power balance within the EEU.

### **Myanmar**

Within the region, China has benefited from the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and exploited the negative integration trend in ASEAN, as well as the ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+6 formats that have paved the way towards an Asian Economic Community. The revitalization took the form of a more structured „spaghetti bowl“ of bilateral trade agreements that created the building blocks of the new Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership that includes both the newly acceded members of SCO and a number of high-income economies that

provide leverage (Japan, Korea, Australia, Singapore). Thus, it has reinforced its constructivist projection, the Belt and Road Initiative, with a negative integration component – namely reducing trade barriers that facilitate economic and people-to-people exchanges. In this constellation, the Asia-Europe Meeting plays rather a policy setting role, as albeit meetings take place interchangeably on both continents, its secretariat in Singapore has assumed the role of agenda-setter that collects evidence and expertise both from young professionals and ministers. Had it not been for the norms of non-interference and public consensus<sup>24</sup>, with its complicated setup of pro-Western and communist member states that manifest many possible varieties of capitalism, ASEAN's trade facilitation dossier could have had the potential to trigger a policy-adjustment effort that could have replaced ASEM. The same applies to its member states, as especially in the case of Myanmar, the understaffed and politically controlled bureaucracy struggles to catch up with the regions' pace. The tariff reduction requirements within the region and EU's non-tariff barriers make trade facilitation and exports within the secondary economy extremely burdensome despite the proliferation of free economic zones near Burmese ports.

The inclusion of Myanmar in China's BRI was underpinned by the very same historic importance the country has played in the original Silk Road, as well as by the strategic location the country has

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<sup>23</sup> Potentially, it would seek to trade off such a step for the international recognition of the legitimacy of the referendum carried out in Crimea several days before Russian troops were positioned to protect its new territory.

<sup>24</sup> Kalpakchiev, Teodor; "Competing Regionalism in Europe and Asia", *Diplomacy Journal of the Bulgarian MoFA*, ed. 18/2017, p.101-106/197-202

proven to have during Japanese invasion of China's east coast. Even though insignificant to the central government in Beijing, Myanmar's natural resources provide a significant economic boost the underdeveloped western Chinese territories. The contemporary importance of Myanmar lies also in the fact that it provides a fast-track alternative to the Malacca strait, a transit route for goods shipped to the Burmese coast, which is prone to pirate raids, as well as an abundant supply of gemstones (jade, rubies and sapphire), gold, silver, copper, tin, nickel, coal, limestone, as well as 3.2 billion barrels of oil reserves and 18 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves<sup>25</sup>. Burmese gas fields lie at a convenient distance from its coast in the Bay of Bengal – a factor that has triggered Chinese pressure to obtain a larger stake in the ownership of the Kyauk Pyu deep-sea port (85 % instead of the 50/50 proposed by Myanmar)<sup>26</sup>. The bigger stake has been legitimized also by the popular resistance to the construction of the Myitsone dam<sup>27</sup>, which could have provided further long-

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<sup>25</sup> Natural Resource Governance Institute, Country Strategy Note, Myanmar, June 2016, p. 2, [https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/documents/nrgi\\_myanmar-strategy\\_20160629.pdf](https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/documents/nrgi_myanmar-strategy_20160629.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Hellenic Shipping News, "Five things you should know about China-backed port in Myanmar", May 10, 2017, <http://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/five-things-you-should-know-about-china-backed-port-in-myanmar/>

<sup>27</sup> Increased Chinese ownership is also motivated by the previous attacks on the Myitsone dam and the Thaukyegat hydropower project by anti-governmental forces, which are incremental in exemplifying the divide between the government in Naypyidaw and other states, dominated by insurgencies (Shan State Army, Kahine Defence Army). The relationship between Chinese and Burmese military, which is constitutionally entitled

term revenues from provision of technical support, export of concrete and loan interest.

In addition to the extraction from the adjacent gas fields, the Sittwe port will act as an unloading point for oil imported from Middle East and Africa and be complemented by a 'gas reserve base and a wharf for oil tankers on an island near Kyaukpyu in Rakhine State', an oil pipeline, as well as a major road towards Kunming in Chinese Yunnan province<sup>28</sup> and further towards Chongqing, where oil will be refined. China has also managed to make best use of Myanmar's trilateral efforts with Japan and Thailand meant to develop the port of Dawei through a special economic zone<sup>29</sup>. In its vicinity, Beijing has managed to conclude a contract for the construction of an oil refinery<sup>30</sup> and is planning to build a canal – yet another alternative to the Malacca strait.

## Rakhine and China

### The clampdown on the Rakhine

to controlling the defence, borders, as well as 25 % of the seats in the parliament.

<sup>28</sup> David STEINBERG and Hongweh FAN, *Modern China-Myanmar relations: Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, Series "Nordic Institute of Asian Studies", n° 121, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2012, pp. 170-171.

<sup>29</sup> Brennan O'CONNOR, "Myanmar: The Dawei Special Economic Zone", *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/myanmar-the-dawei-special-economic-zone/>

<sup>30</sup> Motokazu MATSUI, "Chinese company to build oil refinery near Dawei SEZ in Myanmar", *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 11, 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Chinese-company-to-build-oil-refinery-near-Dawei-SEZ-in-Myanmar?page=1>

Muslims became known to the international community first in 2012 and was recently rekindled (25.08.17) with allegations for ethnic cleansing, as thousands of Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh. Referred to as 'Bengalis' by local population, the Rohingya, according to other sources, are indigenous people influenced by Middle Eastern traders. During the colonial era, the British administration promised them autonomy, which resulted in an attempt to integrate into Bangladesh, which was subsequently denied by the military leadership. In present days, the subduing of the religious group is motivated by a perception of victimhood, exacerbated by fears of further influx of Muslims that can harm the integrity of the central state, as well as a feeling of international intrusion into the domestic affairs of Myanmar. On the other hand, the concern of the latter is that breaches of human rights (such as swapping of identity cards, restrictions on entitlement to citizenship<sup>31</sup>, travel restrictions, forced relocation and labour), largely a result of inadequate implementation mandated to the Rakhine Buddhists and the NaSaKa (a Burma-led, joint state security component)<sup>32</sup>, are justified and that international criticism represents selective justice towards indigenous Burma, which are having numerous difficulties keeping intact their state, torn apart by numerous insurgencies.

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<sup>31</sup> The notion of "foreigner" was created specifically to constrain the Rohingya and still carries a negative connotation.

<sup>32</sup> Alistar D.B. COOK, "The Global and Regional Dynamics of Humanitarian Aid in Rakhine State", in Melissa CROUCH (ed.), *Islam and the State in Myanmar*, New Delhi, India, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 259-265.

Chinese involvement in the conflict is related to the horizontal cooperation between Chinese and Burmese military and motivated by strategic aims, such as fomenting separatist and ethnic conflicts in India, whose limited military capacity allows it to act only in its immediate neighbourhood<sup>33</sup>, fending off Indian appetites for resources, thus constraining its growth, as well as ensuring the security of energy supplies with the help of Burmese military, who are in turn allowed to keep parts of the illicit trade and financial settlements. From an international angle, despite continuing historical ties with India that were established already during British colonial times, in Myanmar, China is viewed as a benevolent, politically and culturally close actor. This is to a large extent true due to the fact that the Burmese economy and life alongside the Mandalay-Naypyidaw-Yangon line has been heavily influenced by People's Republic of China (PRC) as a consequence of the Western sanctions to the country.

Beijing's actions in Myanmar resemble Russian appetite for existing and potential energy sources, whose alignment is solidified with the construction of transit routes (pipelines and highways). In addition to providing an alternative route by circumventing the South China Sea<sup>34</sup> conflict and pirate activity in the Malacca Strait, China is thus reinforcing its "Two

<sup>33</sup> Mark N. KATZ, "Fluid Dynamics: Global Great Powers in the 21st Century", *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, Working paper 100, pp. 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Vietnam has become increasingly opportunistic to Chinese expansion and started its own drilling for oil. Gregory POLING, "South China Sea: Vietnam takes up fight against China", *CNN*, August 15, 2017,

<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/14/opinions/vietnam-south-china-sea-gregory-poling/index.html>

Oceans Strategy”<sup>35</sup>, meant to equalize the stakes in the geopolitical competition with the US, as well as to increase the resilience of its oil supply on the long term<sup>36</sup>. On another note, Myanmar is among the last bastions (together with Laos<sup>37</sup> and Cambodia<sup>38</sup>) of countries nonchalant to US’ policy of encirclement of China.

The construction of these material evidences of external economic interest is only a continuation of the economic suction that the Western sanctions towards have effectuated. As a result of the US and EU backed economic sanctions that remained in force until 2013 (arms embargo persists), China managed to permeate in virtually every aspect of the Burmese economy. The latter is also marked by high levels of illicit transactions in cross-border trade, facilitated by the existence of shadow banking networks. These are owned predominantly by the military and governmental elite and meant to facilitate economic transactions alongside the border with Kachin State. While effectively turning the impoverished, rent seeking-based Burmese economy into an extrapolation of its own, China is also

undertaking steps towards ”silent blurring” of the official border through economic support and endowing arms to local militia and insurgencies. This not only ensures the weak negotiating position of the central government in Naypidaw, but also control over the extraction of gemstones, precious metals and the casino cities such as Maijayang<sup>39</sup>.

Keeping the above-mentioned in mind, one can refer back to Samuel P. Huntington’s<sup>40</sup> claim that conflicts, investments and policy divergences are often linked to and re-enacted through cultural, ideological and civilizational kinship models. On the one hand, Huntingtonian thesis has been repeatedly disproved in studies which have shown that conflict patterns only rarely run along the cultural division line. Others claimed that civilizational divides have given way to economic pragmatism and regulatory competition. At the same time, the case of Russia and China show in the new era of geo-connectivity, major powers may resort to cultural affinities to pursue and legitimize their geo-spatial projects. In the same way China, is supporting separatism

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<sup>35</sup> The acquisition of the deep sea port in Djibouti supports these claims further. See Charlotte GAO, “China Officially Sets Up Its First Overseas Base in Djibouti”, *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-officially-sets-up-its-first-overseas-base-in-djibouti/>

<sup>36</sup> China’s energy security activities rely increasingly on “rogue” and “pariah” states, have been targeted by US sanctions or which are prone to isolation from the international community. David STEINBERG and Hongweh FAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184.

<sup>37</sup> Nandini KRISHNAMOORTHY, “Laos backs China over South China Sea dispute, rejects Hague ruling”, *International Business Times*, June 15, 2016, [http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/laos-backs-china-](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/laos-backs-china-over-south-china-sea-dispute-rejects-hague-ruling-1570737)

[over-south-china-sea-dispute-rejects-hague-ruling-1570737](http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/laos-backs-china-over-south-china-sea-dispute-rejects-hague-ruling-1570737)

<sup>38</sup> Manuel MOGATO, Michael MARTINA, Ben BLANCHARD, “ASEAN deadlocked on South China Sea, Cambodia blocks statement”, July 25, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-ruling-asean/asean-deadlocked-on-south-china-sea-cambodia-blocks-statement-idUSKCN1050F6>

<sup>39</sup> “The dark world of Chinese casinos on Sino-Burma border”, *Kachin News*, January 22, 2009, <http://www.kachinnews.com/articles/feature/707-the-dark-world-of-chinese-casinos-on-sino-burma-border.html>

<sup>40</sup> Samuel P. HUNTINGTON, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 72, n° 3, Summer 1993, pp. 45-49.



in Burmese Kachine and Rakhine, as well as northwest India<sup>41</sup> to thwart the aims of its rivals.

They may do so not in a vocal way or pro-actively, but thus rally and legitimize the support of their actions, or groups acting in favour of them. In a vow of resistance to the universalizing European drive for regulated markets that has reached Eurasia, Russia has employed the conception of a subjective vision of Orthodox civilization as framework of commonness and has relies on its religious elites in Ukraine to spread these messages or instigate anxiety. The antagonism of the Burma government towards the Rohingya Muslims was met with international criticism (especially by Muslim countries or regions, such as Turkey and Chechnya), human rights organizations and unofficially condemned as genocide<sup>42</sup>. Nevertheless, China has been vocal in supporting the stability of Burmese development in UN and has offered aid to refugees in Bangladesh.

Therefore, one can conclude that the civilizations do not exist as unique independent actors but arise when major power promote their own geo-economic projects and rely on culture as another mobilizing or legitimizing factor. For example, Russia's evokes the concept of a unique Orthodox civilization to balance against the power of attraction of the 'European civilization project'. Civilizational politics may re-emerge when weaker powers (such as Burma) seek to rally support on the basis of communities larger than nation states (e.g. linguistic,

religious, cultural) and more research is needed to see how this fits into geo-economic strategies elsewhere.

#### **IV. Parallels Between the Two Cases**

Parallels that can be drawn on the two cases begin with the long-term inadequacy of the intended imperative behind economic sanctions used by the transatlantic community towards Myanmar and later towards Russia. In Myanmar, they were aimed at accelerating the political transition of the country, but have resulted in the international isolation of the country and import substitution for goods from the West, which have been capitalized on by China (including Japan and Korea). In the case of Russia, they were an attempt to force Russia to relinquish its aspirations to legitimize the forced annexation of Crimea, as well as its support to the pro-Russian insurgencies in Eastern Ukraine, but have only managed to trigger a reciprocal reflex. As a result of the sanctions the Ukrainian economy was realigned westwards.

In both cases we can also trace the existence of illicit financial flows and substitutive effects cemented by investments in transport and energy infrastructure routes, which ensure the energy and resource resilience of China (through resource imports from Myanmar) and increase the economic prospects of Russia in Crimea. As a consequence, one can deduct that the economic sanctions

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<sup>41</sup> Nava THAKURIA, "Way behind schedule", *The Statesman*, April 15, 2017, <http://www.thestatesman.com/features/way-behind-schedule-1494833716.html>

<sup>42</sup> Nick CUMMING-BRUCE, « Myanmar's Rohingya Actions May Be Genocide, U.N. Official Says », *The New York Times*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/world/asia/myanmar-rohingya-genocide-un.html>

programming has largely malfunctioned.

A further parallel is that the process of strengthening the material presence through large scale transport and energy<sup>43</sup> infrastructure projects evident in both cases is meant to avoid leakage of natural resources and critical infrastructure from Ukraine and Myanmar into the EU and India, respectively, intertwined with wider geopolitical goals of and curtails the supply vulnerability<sup>44</sup> of Russia and China. Last, but not least, in both cases the lucre of the incoming investment has triggered popular unrest and asymmetric reactions in both cases, such as the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine and the contrasting coverage of the clampdown over Rohingya on behalf of the Burmese government and international media.

While in Crimea international reactions have focused predominantly on the exclusion of Tatars and the indigenous population from the deflected economic activity, in Burmese Rakhine the Muslim minority has been subjected to repressive acts and exclusion from the political process, e.g. through stripping them off their citizenship, thus also entitlement to participation in the corporate social responsibility program of Chinese state owned enterprises, which takes the form of constructing new mini-cities for the resettled due to construction activities in Sittwe, Rakhine and Dawei, Tanintharyi. Likewise, their actions have triggered some unintended consequences, such as the rebuff of the south-western flank of NATO, as well as the international backwash

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<sup>43</sup> Shale gas explorations in Donbass and gas pipeline near Sittwe in Rakhine.

<sup>44</sup> By fending off Rohingya and Kachin insurgencies, which are against the central Burma

towards the policies of the Burmese government. However, while in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine the main trigger of the events has been the control or the demolishing of critical infrastructure, in Burmese Rakhine it has been the wish of the Central government in Burma to retain its full control over the land over which heavy energy and transport infrastructure is constructed with Chinese capital.

### **Infrastructure Development and International Summits as Socialization Tools**

The construction of the bridge between Russia and Crimea, as well as the planned transportation routes (e.g. deep river or highway) between Burmese port of Sittwe (gas pipeline is already completed) and Chinese Yunnan province should not be viewed only from the isolated prism of geo-economics. These large scale sites require engineering expertise, provided by Russia and China, thus creating workplaces, as well as new forms of geo-spatial socialization with locals in Crimea and Rakhine.

While the legitimization of these efforts is often dependent on the outreach of state-controlled media, a further effort in this direction is the organization of large scale forums with youth meant to multiply domestic discourses, such as the 19th World Festival of Youth and Students in Russia that hosted 40 000 people, regular youth conferences in and visit by international delegations to Crimea<sup>45</sup> as well as the lavish

state in Naypyidaw, as well as pro-Ukrainian sentiments in Crimea.

<sup>45</sup> Religioznyi Krim, V Sakakh sostoitsya syezd pravoslavnoy molodezhi, September 6, 2017, <https://religion-crimea.kudalibo.ru/news/v-sakakh->

Chinese scholarships to international experts and academia. These could potentially serve to counteract EU sponsored quasi- and interregional horizontal socialization platforms, such as the Eastern Partnership Summit, Civil Society and Think Tank fora, as well as the co-sponsored Asia-Europe Meetings (the 13<sup>th</sup> Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers' Meeting took place in Yangon and Naypyidaw in mid-November 2017 <sup>46</sup> ). Thus, these expert-related socialization, intergenerational and interregional summits could play a role in improving the future acceptance of any of the events described above.

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[sostoitsya-sezd-pravoslavnoy-molodezhi/](https://imolod.ru/news/4988); Evgeniy Nestorov, V Krime Proshla 4-taya Molodezhnaya Konferencia «Na Favore 2017», <https://imolod.ru/news/4988>

<sup>46</sup> Although the main topic of the vertical coordination with youth delegates is globalisation and trade, the clampdown over Rohingya, as well as the crisis in Crimea will be part of the discussions.

**Table 1. Typology of Regional Economic Governance**

(Authors' Work)

	Institutionalization	Centralization	Frequency
Association of Southeast Asian Nations	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>
Organization for Islamic Cooperation	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>
African Union	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Medium</b>
European Union	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
Eurasian Union	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>High</b>

**Table 2. Typology of regional security governance and interregional platforms**

(Authors' Work)

	Institutionalization	Centralization	Frequency
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
Collective Security Treaty Organization	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	<b>High</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Medium</b>
Shanghai Cooperation Organization	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>
Asia-Europe Meeting	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>

## V. Spatial Geo-Economics

Regional integration has accelerated exponentially partially due to EU's self-projection through conditionality and its co-funding of World Bank's support to regionalization (for an overview of regional integration projects refer to Table 1. and Table 2.) as an answer to inequalities created by economic liberalism and potentially platforms for diffusion of regulation of international trade or approaches to fragility. Today there is hardly any country that does not take part in a form of social, economic or security regional integration. As a result, foreign policy has imploded into hybridity so as to incorporate traditionally internal policies and development cooperation rationales.

Although regionalism (including Chinese BRI) has largely been perceived as a modern advent of geopolitics, it oftentimes transcends geographic constructs through, for example expansion of regulatory spaces, erection of grand infrastructure or socio-political alignment of countries falling in-between regions (meso-regions). The two cases reviewed in this working paper present a novelty approach that goes beyond traditional (negative) economic integration and the promotion of value chain integration by presenting an argument for infrastructure (and socialization) as a mean towards achieving goals related to geo-spatial alignment of adjacent countries.

EU's quasi-integration of its neighbourhood employs a number of

strategies similar to this approach. With regards to infrastructure development and connectivity the EU included its Eastern Neighbours into an Energy Community that is compliant with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and potentially 4<sup>th</sup> Energy Package, into its Trans-European Network corridors (TEN-T) <sup>47</sup> and has multiplied the socialization efforts, which now include civil society, parliamentarian (EuroNEST), expert (Twinning) and people-to-people (visa liberalization, educational exchanges) components.

Ukraine's loss has been fundamental to the devolution of the Eurasian Economic integration. It has transformed Russia into a much more malevolent actor, who does not hesitate to employ non-traditional warfare, cyber security measures and disseminate alternative discourses. Its actions incorporate a form of geospatial positioning cemented through investment in large-scale transport and energy infrastructure projects (in Crimea) that cement the way to rebuff military capacities and reducing the economic potential of competitors.

Albeit China is positioning itself as a more benevolent actor, e.g. through focusing on the gullibility of its partners along the BRI and the dissemination of discourses of global governance, environmental responsibility and importance of connectivity, its real concerns are rather inward-looking and related to its economic resilience that will be achieved through security of supply of raw materials and continuous collection of interest rates from loans, the provision of work for its numerous engineers and

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<sup>47</sup> High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Eastern Partnership – Focusing on key priorities and deliverables", *SWD(2016) 467 final*, December 15,

2017, pp. 26-30, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near-eas\\_joint\\_sw\\_d\\_2016467\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near-eas_joint_sw_d_2016467_0.pdf)

concrete producing state-owned enterprises, the promotion of state capitalism and ensuring the wider diplomatic alignment of its counterparts. With specific regards to the network of deep-sea ports, transport and energy infrastructure projects, China is also ensuring the increased presence of its citizens in critical infrastructure spots over Eurasia and potentially Eastern Europe, thus entering Russia's cultural space.

## VI. The Competition Between China and Russia

As the two cases already suggest, China and Russia are pursuing contrasting aims, whose competition has become noticeable along the BRI. What has definitely brought international attention to the Chinese grand development strategy is the fact that it has embedded the principles of “ownership” and “alignment”<sup>48</sup> into the coordination of the plans for infrastructure development in each country standing on the BRI, thus reinforcing claims for initiating a process of transformative global governance countering the premises of the Washington consensus. Within the Black Sea Region, China views the BRI as an instrument of common identity building

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<sup>48</sup> Stemming from the the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness from 2005, see <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Statement by Prof. Liu ZUOKUI, Director of the 16+1 Think-Tanks Networks Secretariat Office at the Chinese Academy for Social Sciences during the the “Black Sea Regional Dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative” conference organized by the Diplomatic Institute to the Bulgarian MFA in Sofia.

<sup>50</sup> Interview at the “Black Sea Regional Dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative” conference organized in Sofia.

that can overcome the fragmentation of having a separate regional entity (Black Sea Economic Cooperation, BSEC) and the competition between the EU and the EEU<sup>49</sup>. China and the China Energy Engineering Corporation (CEEC) Think Tanks Network<sup>50</sup> support the indivisibility of the Ukrainian sovereignty and the solution of the frozen conflicts in the Eastern Neighbourhood in exchange for Ukraine's backing of the “One China Policy”<sup>51</sup>. Beyond the diplomatic realm, a transit route through Ukraine could provide a more nuanced transfer of goods along the BRI that could also avert the accumulation of security forces along the Brest line between Belarus and Poland. Yet, that is largely impossible, as the Sevastopol port provides Russia with stronger control over the Black Sea, as well as the adjacent resources lying on the sea floor.

As the frozen conflicts in the EU-EEU shared neighbourhood decrease the prospects for manoeuvre to promote the BRI, China also supports the convergence of interests through lending support to cross-border projects, conducting bilateral talks with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries, especially in the 16+1 format, as well as directly with sub-regional organizations, such as the BSEC<sup>52</sup>. Chinese

<sup>51</sup> Embassy of Ukraine to PRC, “Political relations between Ukraine and China”, <http://china.mfa.gov.ua/en/ukraine-cn/diplomacy>

<sup>52</sup> “Press Release On The Meeting Of The BSEC Permis Secretary General With Representatives Of The Bank Of China”, March 25, 2017, <http://www.bsec-organization.org/bsecnews/PressReleases/PressReleases/20160325%20Visit%20of%20the%20Representative%20of%20the%20Bank%20of%20China.pdf>



engagement with these two regional formats can rather be viewed as complementary, as China also participates in EU's Investment Plan for Europe, but can also lead to Germany-CEE's distancing from Western Europe<sup>53</sup>. In 2017, when Poland announced its Three Seas Initiative, aimed at discarding further Russo-German energy cooperation through the import of US shale gas, China responded with the organization of a 16+1 Summit<sup>54</sup>, thus revealing that the timing of these summits attempts to provide an alternative for potential developments (in this case, dilute the US energy component in the Three Seas Initiative). As far as Ukraine is concerned, Chinese interest follows that Ukraine provides a route bypassing Russia through the Ilichivsk-Batumi and Alat-Aktau maritime routes<sup>55</sup>. With these actions China has positioned its initiatives as alternative both to Russian and US involvement in CEE, while retaining a balanced relationship with EU.

In the South Caucasus, the natural extension of the EU-EEU shared neighbourhood, Armenia's dissatisfaction with Russia's policies has led to reinvigoration of the dialogue with Azerbaijan, possibly in hopes to attract

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<sup>53</sup> Jacopo MARIA PEPE, "China's Inroads into Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe", *DGAP Analyse*, n° 3, March 2017, pp. 8-10,

<sup>54</sup> William F. ENGDAHL, "The Geopolitics of Poland's Three Seas Initiative", *New Eastern Outlook*, December 6, 2017

<https://journal-neo.org/2017/12/06/the-geopolitics-of-poland-s-three-seas-initiative/>

<sup>55</sup> Olena MYKAL, "Why is China interested in Ukraine?", *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/why-china-is-interested-in-ukraine/>

<sup>56</sup> Rachael REVESZ, "Chechen Muslims take to the streets in solidarity with Burma's Rohingyas", *The*

much needed capital by joining the Baku-Kutaisi Central BRI route, which constitutes a loss of Russian influence. Furthermore, the extraneous Buddhist nationalism and Chinese preoccupation with security of supply in Rakhine, Myanmar is threatening to disrupt the Russian "Muslim pivot", as stark critique has emerged not only internally in North Caucasus<sup>56</sup> and in the EEU (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan<sup>57</sup>), but also in Turkey<sup>58</sup>, one of its strategic allies.

As the Burmese would hardly renounce their anti-Muslim stance, and due to the fact that British-built and Indian dominated Yangon is Myanmar's economic centre, the Burmese would be against Pakistan's accelerating reforms and growth achieved through Chinese-led investments and World Bank-led facilitation of financial services penetration and thus allies of Iran, Japan and India.

However, China has circumvented Iran from its BRI plans due to, potentially, its strong connections to Russia. Additionally, Chinese reluctance towards the recent inclusion of India and Pakistan into the SCO is motivated by the fact that although conflict resolution between India and China could be beneficial for Russian

*Independent*, July 4, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/chen-muslims-street-protest-burma-rohingya-minority-massacre-persecution-russia-myanmar-a7928891.html>

<sup>57</sup> Farangis NAJIBULLAH, "In Central Asia, Sympathy And Solidarity For Rohingya", *Radio Free Europe*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/rohingya-central-asia-social-media-sympathy/28722498.html>

<sup>58</sup> "Iran, Turkey to send aid to Myanmar's Muslims", *Al Monitor*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/iran-turkey-myanmar-rohingya-muslims-aid-refugees.html>

oil transits northwards, it disrupts Chinese strategy for keeping India occupied with solving conflicts along its external borders. With regards to Chinese Maritime Economic Belt, the control over the Gwadar port, the entry point of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, reveals another point of mistrust of Russia, as although Gwadar could be used by Moscow, it has instead acquired the Gujarati port of Vadinar<sup>59</sup>. While the decision might have been motivated by the fact that Pakistan blocks goods heading towards Iran, it is also a result of the fact that even if Tajikistan joins the EEU and enables a land routes, the security of supply will be hindered by the activity of Afghani tribal insurgencies.

## Conclusions

Observations that follow from the analysis above should start with the fact that EU's neighbourhood policy has lived through an evolution from a substitute to the Enlargement of the EU to a comprehensive region-building strategy that incorporates the majority of the internal developments and benefits of being a member.

As Russia, as the centre of gravity of the EEU, is constrained in enlarging its integration project with new members, it seeks novel approaches towards alignment of the post-Soviet countries, as well as its partners. These include the negotiation of trade agreements on behalf of all the members of the EEU, in a similar manner to EU's external trade regime that has been supranationalized. However, due to the complicated relationship between the two,

their potentially contrasting preferences, as well as EU's accelerated advancement in trade negotiations, Moscow has switched to building infrastructure-enabled connectivity with the neighbours it claims ownership over (e.g. Ukrainian Crimea), as well as aligning future international stakeholders to its alternative discourses through forums. This resembles largely to EU's focus on cross-border projects (land and sea) on its external borders that has been complemented with the expansion of the TEN-T transport corridors, the organization of a range of horizontal socialization forums of civil society, parliamentarians, etc., and expert exchanges enabled through twinning or secondments. Thus, without resorting to the multiplication of strategies and differentiation of actors, Moscow has borrowed the lessons from the ENP's programming and has focused on creating a material evidence of its spatial projection that also creates a sense of inevitability of region-building.

Due to its state form, China resorts to regionalism-building without necessarily resorting to regional integration. Instead it focuses on complementing its leadership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – an ASEAN+6 trading block with materializing the Belt and Road transport route that is meant to bridge it with the rest of Eurasia. Despite geographical overlaps, infrastructure development remains the main and most visible elaboration of state ownership that goes hand in hand with Chinese state capitalism. The resemblance to EU's

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<sup>59</sup> Nicholas TRICKETT and Oliver THOMAS, "China, Russia, Iran: Ports and Power Along the Belt and Road", March 23, 2017,

<https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/china-russia-iran-ports-and-power-along-the-belt-and-road/>

approach towards its neighbourhood, where market-induced development is accompanied by aiding financially the construction of transport corridors, is thus only complementary. In contrast to Chinese state-owned enterprises that find new vocation alongside the BRI and would rather absorb or indebt local SMEs through loan-based schemes, the EU prefers to technically support locally driven SME development and thus pave the way towards economic convergence in Europe. Russian and Chinese investments in heavy infrastructure are reminiscent of EU's energy infrastructure and regional (such as the Black Sea) and interregional (EU-ASEAN, Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)) strategies. China also does not rely on programming its socialization efforts through funds or particular platforms, but rather on providing work for its engineering force. Hence, its efforts in the "neighbourhood" are rather focusing on finding formulas for win-win situations that make sure that the invested capital returns in the form of interest rate or non-intermediate benefits. As the case of Myanmar exhibits, the integration of the economies of the two countries precedes and provides leverage in the negotiations for constructing transport and energy infrastructures.

Hence, while Russia has employed a deductionist and reductionist approach to learning from ENP's that serves its geopolitical goals, China's pragmatism has expanded and diluted the common trade space in order to reap the various benefits of its construction works. Yet, although the EU relies on socialization per se for its region building, Russia and China are focusing on complementarity to transport and energy infrastructure projects. Thus,

without necessarily labelling these efforts, they are still engaging in a strategy of creating geo-spatial constructs in their vicinity that are hidden behind grand ideas serving to attract the interest of the international community. The overlapping trajectories of the EEU and the BRI are resulting in the inability of Moscow to constrain Central Asia in its protectionist efforts, also due to the fact that the EEU members can potentially be circumvented. China's priority in owning, constructing or servicing railways, seaports and energy corridors in the EU-Russia shared neighbourhood has also triggered Russia's adverse reactions that have been instead masked as counter reaction to ENP's so as not to disrupt its relationship with China. As the support to the Burmese government, respectively its actions, is threatening to disrupt the Russian Muslim pivot if their pragmatic cooperation in Central Asia continues, China has also lent help to Bangladeshi refugee camps. While their approaches might bear similarities in the chosen cases, on macro scale Russia is attempting to diffuse grand strategies for Eurasian economic and security integration, China's BRI is a pragmatic way to ensure the economic expansionism without triggering the political repercussions of regional integration.

Bearing the two cases in mind, one can conclude that geography and natural endowments have experienced a comeback in international relations, as their control may alter the future economic strength of an actor. The connectivity projects that have been launched by Russia and China in their respective spaces (EEU, BRI) make sure that they are identified as the managers of and security providers for these specific territories. In contrast with the EU, which

relies largely on the diffusion of different policies and the externalization of regulations that are amendable, China is using transport and energy infrastructure projects to cement its influence through countries in Eurasia, especially if they are isolated or have a complicated relationship with the West. This economic integration makes sure that they are gradually embedded into an alternative economic and political order. In contrast with the EU, China and Russia manifest how centralized hybrid state regimes can mobilize resources that serve their foreign policies much faster and on a larger scale. This can only show that unless the EU manages to blend in private capital in its efforts towards reforming its neighbourhood, other actors could step in much more efficiently, should they decide to do so.

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## Interviewees

Chan Myae, Government Technology University Mandalay, Vice-Director of Noble Partners Forex Brokerage, Yangon, Myanmar.

Karen Pimentel Simbulan, Legal Adviser, International Commission of Jurists.

Theinmyint Wai, Trade Training Institute, Ministry of Commerce of Myanmar.

Nu Nu Wai, Head of Finance, Max Energy.

**Appendix 1: Map of Burmese regions.**





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#### **How to reference this paper:**

Vsevolod Samokhvalov and Teodor Kalpakchiev, « Spatial Geo-Economic Strategies of Russia and China in Conflict Zones: Ukraine and Myanmar Compared », *CEFIR Working Paper*, N° 5, March 2018, pp. 1-30.