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Shuper, Vjacheslav A.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shuper, V. A. (2016). Eurasian Future of Russia: Alternating Integration and Disintegration Cycles. *Baltic Region*, 4, 4-12. <https://doi.org/10.5922/2079-8555-2016-4-1>

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GEOPOLITICS



EURASIAN FUTURE OF RUSSIA: ALTERNATING INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION CYCLES

*V. A. Shuper**



Russia needs to fit into the international geopolitical and geo-economic landscape. The formation of this landscape is largely determined by alternating integration and disintegration cycles in the development of the world economy. The second global disintegration cycle that started in 2008 is expected to last 15–20 years. It will be followed by a new integration cycle, largely dependent on China (Pax Sinensis instead of Pax Americana). This change necessitates a number of steps: a significant strengthening of the Eastern vector in the development of Russia, the formation of the Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi triangle (as proposed by Evgeniy Primakov) as well as providing access of energy-intensive and water-intensive goods from East Siberia by railway to the Chinese and Indian markets. Russia should express its interest in the construction of a railway from China to India. The integration in the Silk Road project allows Russia to reduce transportation costs and use a potentially heavy transit traffic for the modernization of the Trans-Siberian railway. These steps could radically change the role of the Baltic exclave of Russia: from being a ‘window to Europe’ the region is to turn into the westernmost point of an infrastructure axis extending from east to west. The creation of such an axis, combined with a sharp fall in transportation costs will facilitate the access of energy-intensive and water-intensive goods from the Urals and Siberia not only to the Asian but to the European markets as well. The Kalinin-grad region is increasingly taking on business facilitating functions, which used to be performed by the Soviet Baltic republics in the past. The region can play a more important role in the formation of Eurasia stretching from Shanghai to St. Petersburg (according to Dmitry Trenin), instead of the Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

* Institute of Geography, RAS
29 Staromonetnyi pereulok, Moscow,
119017, Russia.

* Lomonosov Moscow State University
1 Leninskie Gory, Moscow,
119991 Russia.

Submitted on July 15, 2016.

doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2016-4-1

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Key words: integration and disintegration cycles, Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi triangle, the railway from China to India, transportation costs, Trans-Siberian railway

Introduction: cyclical development of the world economy

Unlike the USSR, Russia is not a superpower. As T.V. Bordachev stresses, the country does not have discretion to choose geopolitical priorities and it has to fit into the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, whose development it no longer controls. The landscape configuration is strongly affected by the alteration of integration and disintegration cycles in the world economy. These cycles were studied since the end of 1970s by B.N. Zimin (1929—1995) and later by L.M. Sintserov [8]. According to Zimin, any integration has a leader at its centre and leaders shape integration to suit their needs. The first global integration cycle — *Pax Britannica* — lasted from the mid-19th century to 1914. It was followed by the first disintegration cycle, which embraced the two world wars and the two decades between them.

The second global integration cycle — *Pax Americana* — began in 1945, when the economy of the USA accounted for half of the world economy. The crisis of 2008 can be considered as its end. It is logical to suppose that two decades of an extremely turbulent ‘multipolar world’ will be followed by the advent of *Pax Sinensis*. The transition will be neither peaceful nor painless — the decline of *Pax Britannica* led to World War I and World War II is considered to be its continuation and conclusion. Today, relations between the current and future leaders of the world development are becoming increasingly strained. There are numerous signs of this process, for instance, the aspirations to replace the WTO — as the position of the US is weakening — with regional economic blocks inspired by American patterns.

Shift to the east: Maergoiz’s and Vardomsky’s concepts

The first block of this kind was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The project of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) can be considered as China’s ambition to refocus economic ties on the West as a response to the pressure from the East. Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential election will most probably result in that the TPP will be abandoned and the efforts to finalise TIPP — an irritating factor for the residents of many EU countries, including the largest ones — suspended. However, one should not expect a dramatic change in the US policy. With China being the major benefactor of globalisation, following the rules imposed by the US, the rules will be changed soon. Moreover, Trump’s incoming administration will have a clearer idea of China as a major geopolitical rival of the US than Obama’s administration did. Thus, one can expect that Russia will be subject to increased pressure aimed at impeding its rapprochement with China. As a result, China and Russia may find themselves sandwiched between various economic partnerships in the East and the West. The anamorphic map (fig. 1) demonstrates enormous differences between the economic masses of the two countries. These differences explain the fact that Russia has stronger dependence on China than China on Russia.

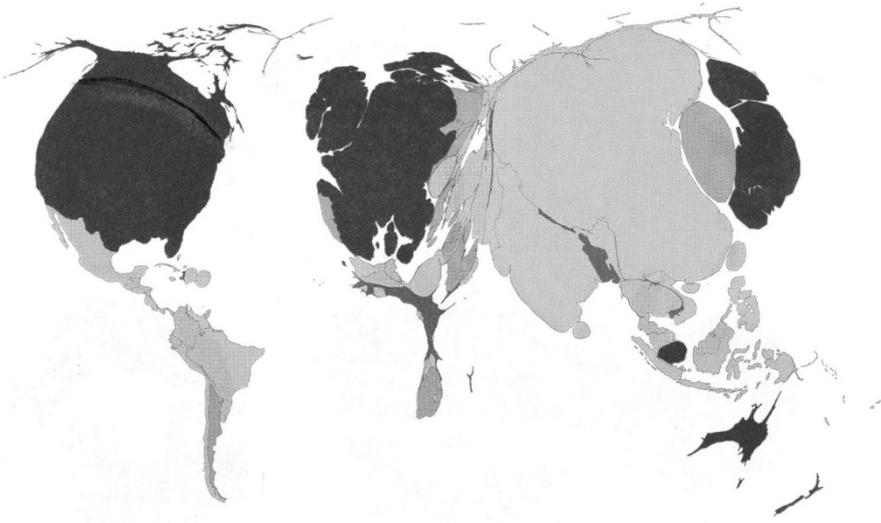


Fig. 1. Anamorphic map showing countries' 2020 GDP [10]

The danger of such unilateral dependence brings to mind the fundamental idea formulated by E. M. Primakov (1929—2015). He emphasised the need to form the Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi triangle. Among other things, the concept for Russia's territorial development should be analysed in the context of such a triangle.

As early as the 1970s, I. M. Maergoiz (1908—1975) — a scholar of phenomenal geographical intuition — put forward the concept of accelerated development of the Soviet Far East based on its unique geographic position [6]. A brilliant scientist, he was decades ahead of his time. He assumed that the axis of world development was moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific macroregion. Moreover, he believed that the accelerated development of the Far East would turn the region into a second development base for Siberia and that this process would be boosted by two powerful surges coming from the West and the East.

Unfortunately, the opportunities for the industrial development of the Soviet Far East were missed, although the economic and demographic situation was much more favourable at the time. However, doubts were voiced as to whether the expensive and poorly qualified workforce of the Russian Far East could compete with the labour pool of East and Southeast Asia. A. N. Pilyasov proposed an audacious concept of post-industrial development of Siberia and the Russian Far East. He abandoned the idea of industrial development that the time had passed and argued that the extractive industry could be innovative in both production and social and environmental aspects [7]. Unfortunately, even the author of the concept does not overestimate its feasibility in the current political situation and he continues to develop the concept as a theoretical possibility.



L. B. Vardomsky — primarily in his oral presentations — emphasises that East Siberia has more favourable conditions for development than the Far East does. He believes that Russia has missed its chance on the rim of the Pacific and the country will be faced with increasing competition in the region. Eastern Siberia is in a more advantageous position, since it can act as a supplier of in-demand resources and their derivatives. Vardomsky often stresses the exceptional importance of strengthening economic ties with India for the development of Russia's eastern regions.

The existing transport corridor opens opportunities for European Russia to secure land connections with India but there are no such opportunities for Eastern Siberia. In 2014, a railway link was built to connect Uzen (Kazakhstan), Bereket (Turkmenistan), and Gorgan (Iran). Before that, cargo would be delivered via Sarakhs (Iran), making a huge detour. From Gorgan, trains can reach Iran's southwestern city of Zahedan, which is historically linked with the Pakistani railway network and serves as the starting point for the Pakistani gauge. Further, trains can run to India, if this is not impeded by the complicated relations between the countries. Cargo is carried from Gorgan to Bandar Abbas — a rapidly developing port with reliable logistics approximately 1100 nautical miles away from Bombay. A more convenient link via Azerbaijan will be built in the near future. A two-track electrified railway from Astara to Resht will be finished in the next few years and the Resht-Qazvin link will be inaugurated at the end of 2016.

'Continental curse' of Siberia: ways of overcoming

Even the authors of the Valdai club report who do not specialise in geography, and most notably S. A. Karaganov, insist on the development of submeridional thoroughfares — railways and motorways running from Siberia to overcome the region's 'continental curse' [3]. This goal assumes particular significance with the need for stronger economic ties with India. There is a project for the construction of a railway to link China and India, although it is still at its initial stage.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway (Golmud-Lhasa, 1143 km) was inaugurated in 2006. In 2014, it was extended to reach Shigatse. This is 253 additional kilometres, half of which are bridges and tunnels. An extension to Kathmandu is being discussed alongside a connection to India's railway network via Sikkim (fig. 2) — the distance from Shigatse to Darjeeling being approximately 400 km. Stretching to Kathmandu, such a railway will have both tourist and strategic significance rather than a purely economic one. The Qinghai-Tibet railway — the most elevated railway in the world (it is located higher than the Tanggula Pass, 5072 m above sea level) — is an impressive feat of engineering. It rests on embankments and driven-pile foundations, which excludes single-level intersections with motorways and rural roads. Thus, the construction of a second track required for large-scale cargo traffic will involve the erection of a similar structure. This is next to impossible over the most challenging section between Lhasa and Shigatse.



Fig. 2. The Qinghai-Tibet railway and its possible extensions

Another obstacle to heavy-duty traffic is that locomotives have to operate in the conditions of extremely thin air. Even passenger trains are hauled by three *General Electric* locomotives from Golmud to Lhasa and by two in the opposite direction (the pressure and oxygen content in the cars is maintained at the level that prevent passengers from developing mountain sickness). Electrification can solve this problem but it will also bring new issues relating to power generation. Obviously, large exports of energy and water-intensive produce from Eastern Siberia to India require constructing a railway of a larger capacity.

When searching for a possible route, it is important to address the recent history, in particular, the famous Stilwell or Ledo Road — a grandiose structure dating back to the times of World War II. Until 1942, supplies were delivered to the Chinese army, then fighting against the Japanese, via Rangoon. Further, cargo was carried by railway to Lashio in Burma's North-East and by motor vehicles to Kunming along the so-called Burma Road. After the fall of Rangoon and occupation of Lower Burma, supplies could be delivered only by air. Cargo was transported from Calcutta and even Karachi to Ledo in India's North-East (where the railway used to terminate and an airfield system was created) and further by cargo aircraft to Kunming.

The decision to construct a motorway to connect India and China was also made in 1942. The first convoy consisting of 113 vehicles travelled the 1736 km road (fig. 3) only in January-February 1945, which took three weeks. The gigantic structure included not only the road itself but also a petrol pipe for supplying Chinese allies and fuelling passing convoys. The capacity of the Stilwell road did not increase until the end of the war. Nevertheless, even limited operation of the road made it possible to transfer hundreds of lorries to the Kuomintang.



Fig. 3. The Ledo (Stilwell) road (a wartime map)

Plans to construct a railway from India to Burma were first conceived of as early as the end of 19th century. Naturally, the more recent case of the Stilwell road should contribute to their implementation. Russia's leadership must develop a strategic vision and use friendly relations with its Chinese partners to develop transport corridors that will open up the way to India for Siberian goods. This will require mechanisms for interest reconciliation, which are being developed in the framework of a large-scale SREB project.

The idea of the Ural-Kuznetsk plant in the twenty-first century

L. A. Bezrukov stresses in his recent article [1] the need to develop the Trans-Siberian railway in the framework of the SREB to reduce cargo transportation costs to the level of sea transport. He argues that it is important to draw on the unprecedented experience of the Ural-Kuznetsk Plant (UKP) construction, when materials were shipped by land that earlier had been transported over comparable distances (2000 km) only by sea [5]. By the mid-1930s, 2 million tons of iron ore were transported from Ural deposits to the Kuznetsk Iron and Steel Plant and over 5 million tons of coal were carried from the Kuznetsk basin to the Ural region annually [9]. Heavy cargo traffic was a result of organising counter traffic and reconstructing the Trans-Siberian railway. Today, we should not only honour the memory of N. N. Kolosovsky (1891—1954) — the man behind the UKP construction, Trans-Siberian railway reconstruction, and the creation of the Angarsk industrial park — but also make a considerable reduction in the cost of cargo traffic along the Trans-Siberian railway and alternate routes a top national priority.

Russian reformers proclaimed the end of the railway historical mission much too early. For instance, V. L. Inozemtsev believes that the development of the Siberian economy requires developing air rather than railway transport [2]. While supporting the reconstruction of the existing Siberian airports and the construction of new ones, one could not but admit that the population of Siberia is too small for creating large airline hubs to significantly reduce transportation costs. Meanwhile the transit cargo traffic from China, Japan, and South Korea creates necessary preconditions for the construction of super-railways with heavy cargo traffic and unprecedentedly low land transportation costs.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway is not only a great victory in engineering and technology won by a great people but it is also a manifestation of the Chinese genius and exceptional endurance of their national character. However, it should not be considered an exceptional achievement, a record that is not to be beaten. Since 2013, a 1200 km railway from Kashgar (its previous name is Kashi), the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, to Gwadar — a Pakistani port located 70 km away from the Iranian border — has been underway. To grasp the true scale of this massive project, one should take into account that the construction of a railway will be accompanied by upgrading the Karakoram Highway, which runs through the Khunjerab Pass at an altitude of 4693 m (some sources claim that the height of the pass is over 4800 m), and constructing an oil pipeline.

Conclusion: expands or contracts the space?

Perhaps it is premature to interpret economic space contraction as a long-term trend. Expansion and contraction cycles alternate and they may turn out to be shorter than expected due to the acceleration of historical processes. Moreover, these processes can have different directions at different scales. Ongoing contraction in many — although not all — regions of the Federation can occur amid country-wide expansion with economic potential is gradually migrating eastward. Solving problems faced by a country that strives to secure or improve its global standing requires not only structural reforms but also massive infrastructure projects spanning a territory from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. While the Chinese astound the world with their triumphs over the highest mountain systems, the major challenge for Russia is its enormous territory. The struggle against its resistance has lasted for centuries and it has become part of the national identity. These traditions should not be uprooted and ridiculed as an outdated conquest ideology chaining the country to a path of extensively development. On the contrary, they should be used to the benefit of the country. If the country is not ready to relinquish control over its territory, it should actively seek for ways to effective use of its vast space.

An American political scientist, who does not express tremendous admiration for Russia, could not understand how a nation that colonised such a vast territory east of the Urals can have an inferiority complex when facing the West instead of being proud of its achievements [4]. The railway imperialism (accelerated railway construction in Siberia, in the Far East, and Central Asia), which astonished Europeans in the late 19th — early 20th century was a significant contribution to the global civilisation, comparable to the discovery of the Antarctic. A reconstruction of the country is impossible without a reconstruction of national character based on enlightened patriotism bequeathed by the great ancestors. Not only do the Russians need to know their territory but also they need to have a correct idea of its role in the country's development. One cannot overestimate the scale of the challenge faced by the geographical science in this context.

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About the author

Prof. Vjacheslav A. Shuper, Leading Research Associate, the Institute of Geography RAS, professor of the Department of Economic and Social Geography of Russia, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia.

E-mail: vshuper@yandex.ru

To cite this article:

Shuper, V. A. 2016, Eurasian Future of Russia: Alternating Integration and Disintegration Cycles, *Balt. reg.*, Vol. 8, no. 4, p. 4—12. doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2016-4-1.