

Towards the Rise of Eurasia

Competing Geopolitical Narratives and Responses



Géza Salamin
Péter Klemensits



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Corvinus Geographia, Geopolitica, Geoeconomia

Department of Geography, Geoeconomy and Sustainable Development
Book Series

Series editors: Márton Péti – Géza Salamin – László Jeney

Géza Salamin – Péter Klemensits (ed.)

**Towards the Rise of Eurasia
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Responses**

Corvinus University of Budapest

Budapest, 2021

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ISBN 978-963-503-888-6
ISBN 978-963-503-889-3 (e-book)
ISSN 2560-1784

DOI 10.14267/978-963-503-889-3

“This book was published according to a cooperation agreement between
Corvinus University of Budapest and The Magyar Nemzeti Bank”



Publisher: Corvinus University of Budapest

Print: CC Printing Kft.

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Geopolitical narratives and strategies of small states in relation to the Eurasian discourse

Máté Szalai¹

Abstract

The article aims at unfolding the perception of the Eurasian geopolitical script according to small states. The author argues that the concept of Eurasia is not inherently present in the geopolitical reasoning of smaller states, which is why they only react to the Russian and Chinese narrative. Despite proclaiming equality and mutual development, the geopolitical script put forward by Moscow and Beijing gives the former a subordinate role in actual implementation. In this situation, small states predominantly accommodate to the rise of Eurasia in one of two ways, depending on their perception of the risks and opportunities associated with the related projects – i.e. risk contingency and profit-seeking. In this way, the concept of Eurasia is not internalized by small states as a geopolitical script, but viewed as a process consisting of both threats and opportunities.

Introduction

Just like geopolitical developments, narratives in international politics are predominantly shaped by great powers. Small states, due to their limited capacities and opportunities, usually lack the ability to impact the discursive sphere of political and economic relations. Ultimately, it is the powerful actors which “*create structures and control agendas*” (Long, p. 5). This observation is true of practical geopolitical reasoning and of our collective knowledge regarding geopolitics, which is not a surprise, given that the discipline itself emerged “*within the capitals of the Great Powers*” (Ó. Tuathail, 1996, p. 12). As Ó Tuathail (2002, p. 617) argues, most public policy issues (and also geopolitical situations) “*are characterized by competing storylines with less popular narratives marginalized politically and culturally*”, and it is easy to see that a narrative of a small state is less likely to overcome that of a great power.

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While it is evident that greater states have more leverage to advocate their own geopolitical narratives, small states are far from helpless in the process. Due to globalization and related developments, the leverage of the smaller and weaker members of the international community has widened in terms of their ability to shape international narratives (Ingebritsen 2016) – they are not forced to completely incorporate discourses and leave them unchanged.

This is true of the evolving Eurasian discourse advocated through the different projects of Russia and China. The two global powers have built up their narratives regarding this vast geopolitical sphere to realize their own interests in a region filled with small states. How the latter react to this endeavour is not self-evident – some might accept it, some might try to shape it according to their own needs, and some might attempt to reject it.

The aim of the article is to investigate the reaction of small states to the Russian and Chinese concept of Eurasia. The main argument outlined here is that most resource-scarce states of Europe and Asia inherently do not construct their environment as “*Eurasia*”; nevertheless, they do not explicitly reject the related projects of Moscow and Beijing but rather accommodate to them and try to capitalise on their evolution as much as possible. To demonstrate this observation, I first look into how small states fit into the Russian and Chinese Eurasian narrative, and then turn to the perception of this narrative by small states. Last, I describe the behavioural patterns that derive from such perceptions. The paper does not aim at presenting the narrative of each Eurasian small state individually, but rather at drawing a general picture of the status, narratives, and behavioural patterns of small states in the region.

In the study of narratives, it is very hard to define tangible definitions for concepts like “*Eurasia*” or “*small states*”, which is why I use them in a broad sense. Since the region has no universal delimitation and its borders vary depending on the narrative, I will try to enlarge my scope to basically all of Asia and Europe (except for the Middle East), while putting more emphasis on the members of the narrower Eurasian region (Central Asia). Nevertheless, the lack of a unified concept for the region hardens the conceptualisation of “*small states*” as well, since the usage of the term often includes a regional component (e.g. delimiting small size according to the regional average). Therefore, instead of a spatial definition, I will use social interactions as the framework for the study in the Eurasian sphere, thus the category of small states will include all states in the region which are not regarded as the primary or secondary powers in the region in material terms.²

² While a more explicit definition would have many merits, it would also cause problems as the narratives included in the study do not share a common conceptual framework either, and often lack proper definitions themselves. Therefore, the application of a strict definition would fail instantly as its applicability would be questionable at each step of the analysis.

Small states in the Russian and Chinese Eurasian storyline

The Russian narrative about Eurasia is derived from the imperial tradition of Russian and Soviet foreign policy thinking (Gleason, 2010, p. 28). By demolishing the borders between Europe and Asia, the expansion of the Russian empire – by absorbing territories and smaller nations – had no physical boundaries. Even if the term is used as a synonym for the post-Soviet sphere, it is still constructed in relation to the greatest state in the region, in which small nations and states “*could only be peripheries of some larger and more powerful centre*” (ibid).

Accordingly, in Russian foreign policy thinking small states have always been second-class members of the international community: leaders in Moscow usually base their calculation of the polarity in the international system by focusing on fellow great powers. According to Ian Bond, Russia “in practice divides the world between the great powers whose views matter and the small powers whose views do not” (Bond, 2015, p. 203). This view “*disregards international law or the rights of ‘smaller nations’ since they lack adequate military might and/or what the Kremlin calls ‘sovereignty’*” (Barbashin–Graef, 2019).

In this framework, the Eurasian projects of Russia are used to ensure its dominance over Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The expansion of Russian geopolitical influence is rooted in the idea that in order to be competitive in global politics, Moscow “*must impose Russia’s regional domination over smaller states* – (Mendras, 2015, p. 84). In the framework put forward by Ó Tuathail (2002), this notion plays a part in the geopolitical strategy of Moscow.

Despite considering the post-Soviet sphere to be a traditional zone of influence, the Russian geopolitical script about Eurasia considers the interests of small states as deserving of respect (Libman, 2017). Projects related to the geopolitical concept are usually viewed as voluntary forms of association, whose members’ liberty to choose their own political and economic future is ensured – in contrast to the approach of the European Union’s neighbourhood policy framework. This internal paradox manifests itself only in anxiety regarding the loyalty of participating smaller states toward such common projects (Malle et al., 2020, p. 566).

In general, the Chinese foreign policy discourse on small states (Boon–Ardy, 2017) is based on the principles of equality and mutual respect. These values originate from the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, the normative basis of the foreign policy of the People’s Republic of China since the 1950s, according to which Beijing aims at building partnerships with equals “*regardless of their sizes or levels of development*”. In practice, China wants to build its relations with small states on the basis of shared development which supports both sides. Accordingly, the Chinese-Eurasian project,

the One-Belt-One-Road initiative, envisions bilateral relations as a win-win situation for both parties, despite size differences (Styan, 2020, p. 193).

Besides these proclamations, Chinese foreign policy involves several realist elements built on the inequality of states. First, despite the proclaimed notion of equality, Beijing does differentiate between greater and smaller powers. Chinese diplomats are aware of their power position vis-à-vis smaller states – as former minister of foreign affairs Yang Jiechi stated in 2010, – *China is a big country and other countries are small countries*” (Boon–Ardy, 2017, p. 166). This is why they are not afraid to deal with small states collectively – such as the Central European states in the 16+1 format. While Beijing opposes the “bullying” of small states, a foreign ministry spokesperson also highlighted that they “should not make unreasonable demands” (ibid). Second, they also differentiate between small states of strategic importance like Qatar and Djibouti, and other, less valuable ones, and they focus more specifically on the former. This differentiation means that, from the Chinese perspective, size is not a master variable that determines the power and value of partners, but only one of the key attributes.

The lack of a genuine Eurasian identity among smaller states

From a theoretical perspective, one could easily make the assumption that smaller states dislike the Eurasian geopolitical storyline, and do not define the geopolitical problems they face within the Eurasian framework for two main reasons. First, the Eurasian region is too broad a construction of small states’ own regions. According to the general wisdom of small-state studies, the foreign policy of resource-scarce entities is regionally highly limited for two reasons. On the one hand, as David Vital (1967) – one of the most influential writers of the discipline – argued, the handicaps derived from smallness (including psychological and administrative, economic and defensive ones) lead to the limited number and size of diplomatic missions in larger states. This constraint drives the former to prioritize partners and regions much more sharply, and naturally they prefer countries which are geographically closer than ones further away. On the other hand, but connected to this argument, other writers also argue that it is not just the ability but also the interests of small states which are regionally limited. The smaller a state is, the less likely it is to have a vital stake in a conflict or development taking place in a distant region. Naturally, due to specific spillovers of contemporary conflicts – e.g. migration, the spread of terrorist networks, the proliferation of WMD – this statement is theoretically questionable; nevertheless, one can generally assume that Hungary had more interests in the Yugoslavian crisis or the Ukrainian civil war than in the Kashmir question, or in intra-Korean relations.

Based on the regionally limited nature of small-state foreign policy thinking, one can assume that small states define their regional environment as narrowly as is reasonably possible. Neither their interests nor their resources encourage them to look substantively beyond their imminent neighbourhood. This is why “*Eurasia*” does not play a role in the construction of space in the geopolitical storyline of events that take place in such neighbourhoods (as described by Ó Tuathail, 2002, pp. 610–611). Naturally, small states can participate in global politics, especially in the framework of international institutions, but these actions are usually intended to facilitate participation in global governance rather than aimed at solving international crises taking place far away from their borders.

Second, small states perceive the influence-seeking motivation behind the Russian and Chinese concept of Eurasia (Malle et al., 2020, p. 566), which they are naturally opposed to. States with limited material capacity are interested in an international system based on law, without the expansion-driven activities of great powers, since geopolitical struggles deriving from the latter phenomenon pose an existential threat to them.

Empirically, one can easily verify that small states of Europe and Asia do not locate themselves in “*Eurasia*” inherently, and do not consider the latter to be a homogeneous spatial sphere. National security documents (NSDs) construct the regional environment and differentiate other regions much more narrowly. When NSDs define the region in which the country is located, they usually frame this in terms of other spatial constructs. Central and Eastern European countries which have already joined Trans-Atlantic and European organizations usually locate themselves in this sphere explicitly, or firmly link their national security either to Europe or to European states and institutions.³

Others define their narrower environment as their primary region. For example, “*Georgia is a part of the Euro- and Euro-Atlantic space*” (National Security Concept of Georgia, 2018, p.3), and Armenia has a place in the “*European family*” (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, 2007, p. 12). Azerbaijan is “*located at the crossroads of the West and the East*” and “*embraced the positive elements of various civilizations*”, but when listing such cultural affiliations, the strategy only mentions “*European values*” and the “*Islamic world*” (National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2007, p. 3). When talking about “*regional countries*”, Mongolian national security concepts refer to “*the Asia-Pacific region and East Asia, including North-East Asia*” (National Security Concept of Mongolia, 2020, p. 3).

Central Asia is also a more convenient and frequently referred to region for self-identification. The National Security Concept of Kyrgyzstan places the country

³ “*The national security of the Republic of Lithuania is part of indivisible security of NATO and the EU (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania, 2017); The Czech Republic’s security is inseparable from security in the Euro-Atlantic area*”.

firmly in the “*Central Asian region*” (Concept of the National Security of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2012). The main NSD of Kazakhstan is not available, but upon approval of the strategy in 2020, the Secretary of the Security Council said that the strategy aims at the “*formation of the constructive and safe environment (...) and (...) the promotion of interests of Kazakhstan in Central Asian region and all over the world*” (Kazakhstan Business Magazine, 2020). The document containing the concept of the foreign policy of Turkmenistan for 2017-2023 is not available either, but after approval, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov summarized the main points of the strategy, which refers to Central Asia many times (and to the Caspian region too) as the country’s regional environment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, 2017). On the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, it is stated that “*The main priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy is the region of Central Asia*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020).

In these documents, the concept of Eurasia is hardly present, except for a few mentions of the Eurasian Economic Union. One exception is the Republic of Tajikistan, whose foreign policy concept – while placing the country in Central Asia – proclaims the construction of an “*atmosphere of confidence throughout the Eurasian space*” as a goal. Nevertheless, Asia in some form (“*Asian sector*”, “*Asian continent*”) is also present in the text with more emphasis than Eurasia (Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2020).

Reactions to the Eurasian geopolitical script

Due to the lack of a genuine Eurasian narrative represented by the small states of Europe and Asia, the Eurasian concept is perceived by the latter as a Russian and a Chinese geopolitical project – the answer to the “*what*” question in the geopolitical script they construct. Consequently, small states react to this external narrative according to the political, economic, and security values and interests they attach to Russia, China, and the intensifying competition between them.

The most important determinants of this process include geopolitical position, history, and economic structure. In a study, Vsevolod Samokhvalov (2016) differentiated between two groups of resource-scarce states based on their attitude toward the Eurasian concept. The “*Eurasian pragmatist*” group, which includes Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, pursue a pro-European policy rhetorically, while trying to build optimal relations with Russia as well. They try to avoid zero-sum interpretations of the European and Eurasian project through balancing or de-politization. The reason why this group seems more anti-Russian currently is only due to growing pressure from Moscow for the former to join integration frameworks. Such small states do not necessarily turn to Europe to balance Russian influence, but to China as well, mostly

in the One-Belt-One-Road framework. This attempt shows that the different Eurasian projects of Russia and China can easily balance each other out.

According to Samarkhvalov, another group of countries from the “*Eurasian periphery*” (or “*non-aligners*”) can be constructed. This includes Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The main difference between the geopolitical environment of this Central Asian group and the former one is that European interests here are much more limited, while cultural proximity to Russia is also questionable. The latter decline to join either camp symbolically or economically due to their fear of being victims of Finlandization. In the last 25 years, they have tried to get away from the post-Soviet sphere and diversify their relations in the broader Eurasian region, which has practically meant approaching China, South Korea, or Turkey. For them, Eurasia represents the opportunity to diversify their political and economic relations.

Capitalizing on Eurasian projects

As the perception of the Russian and Chinese Eurasian project shows, it would be false to argue that smaller states are merely victims of imperial behaviour and cannot form coherent geopolitical strategies. When perceiving the intensification or great power rivalry or the growing interests of larger states in their environment, small states have always tried to manoeuvre among them and to capitalise on the changing status quo. Histography and political science (e.g. Smith, 2000; Armstrong, 2013) have recently explored such tendencies in more depth, especially in relation to the Cold War setting, arguing that “*certain local actors (...) were not merely manipulated objects, but active subjects shaping, exacerbating, prolonging, or helping to terminate the Cold War at the local and even the global levels*” (Armstrong, 2013, p. 4). This mentality did not vanish – one can argue that in the post-unipolar age, it has become increasingly visible.

Smaller states of Eurasia can capitalise on the geopolitical projects of Russia and China easily. First, it is possible for those states which, due to their geopolitical location or economic system, cannot easily obtain benefits from cooperating with the two great powers, to participate and maximise their gains while minimizing the related costs. From this perspective, the Eurasian ambitions of Russia and China raise a question very similar to the concept of the integration dilemma (Haugevik–Rieker, 2017). The usual balancing between the benefits of integration and the high level of sovereignty secured by autonomy affects all states, while the dilemma is much more severe for small ones. While according to general wisdom smaller countries tend to favour integration over autonomy, in the case of the Russian and Chinese Eurasian project the question is more problematic due to the inequality between the members thereof, and the perceived pressure from the two powers to integrate.

In the case of the Eurasian Economic Union, the strategy of small states regarding participation is to secure the most benefit from integration in exchange for accepting the power position of Russia, while limiting the depth of cooperation. According to interviews conducted by Fabienne Bossuyt (2017, p. 3), the leaders of several small states (including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus) perceive their subordinate role, but are willing to accept it in return for a security guarantee and the continuation of labour migration. Nevertheless, they block meaningful reforms or deepening integration – for example, in terms of logistical and communication-related cooperation (Malle et al., 2020, p. 566).

The dilemma is a little bit different when it comes to the Belt-and-Road Initiative. China does not exercise the same political and economic influence in participating countries as Russia seeks to, and its projects so far seem to be benefitting both sides. Central Asian countries, for example, benefit from growing trade relations and infrastructural development. According to Moody's, the initiative "*will predominantly benefit smaller states with relatively low per capita incomes, low investment rates, and financial constraints on their current account positions*" (Toktomushev, 2018, p. 79).

On the other hand, projects related to BRI serve the long-term interest of China more as they expose smaller markets to Chinese exports and investment, diminish local competitiveness, and foster credit and business expansion (Jaborov, 2018, p. 39-40). As these effects will only show their negative effects in the mid or long term, small states may be more willing to participate in the Chinese Eurasia project.

Besides maximizing the benefits of participation, small states can also benefit from Russian and Chinese Eurasian projects through hedging behaviour. For weaker states, the two traditional alignment strategies of bandwagoning or balancing against Moscow or Beijing are neither feasible nor rational – thus the former must choose an approach between the two extremes. This is behaviour which can be called hedging. Nevertheless, as Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2016, p. 502) points out in an investigation of weaker ASEAS states' alignment with China, hedging can take different forms (e.g. military, political, or economic hedging) – some of which is closer to bandwagoning, and some to balancing. According to Kuik, small states tend to choose between the two hedging options:

- *the returns-maximizing option*, which is closer to bandwagoning in relation to the rising power. In this case, the small state aims at maximizing profits related to the opportunities created by the rise or the dominance of the great power.
- *the risk-contingency option*, which is more similar to balancing against the rising power. In this case, the small state fears the rise of the new power and tries to decrease the risks and threats posed by the rising or dominant power without coming out as fully in opposition to its influence.

Jakub J. Grygiel and Mitchell Wess (2016, p. 112) observe similar behavioural patterns. According to these authors, several states in Asia and Europe (including Bulgaria, Thailand, Hungary, Malaysia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Taiwan, Romania, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea) conduct some form of mixed strategy which includes various degrees of resistance to and cooperation with Russia and China. Among them, Bulgaria, Thailand, Hungary, and Malaysia see the most opportunities in relation to the growing influence of Moscow and Beijing – the latter can typically be located in the group of countries that have chosen the returns-maximizing option.

The narrative and action of the Hungarian government mirror this idea clearly. When talking about Eurasia (Hungarian Government, 2018), Prime Minister Viktor Orbán does not mean a new identity or the rise of a new region, but rather the new geopolitical constellation marked by the rise of China and the opportunities connected to it. In his words, Eurasia “*should be built*” by connecting Central Europe, the Balkans, and China. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, also emphasized the importance of creating a – *Eurasian free trade region*”, in which European countries and members of the BRI can trade freely among each other (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019).

Supporting interregional cooperation for the purpose of creating economic benefits has been part of the small state foreign policy toolkit for decades (Hanggi, 1998), especially on the Eurasian continent. In 1994, it was Singapore which proposed an interregional dialogue between East Asia and Europe, and while the idea was supported by the EU and ASEAN as well, the main advocates were small states such as New Zealand, Switzerland, Norway, and the Central European countries. Naturally, when proposed by one of their own, small states are less suspicious of such initiatives, but the profit-seeking behavioural logic remains the same if they do not feel threatened by the rising power.

Conclusion

Even if they are not the primary subjects of study, small states play a huge role in the implementation of the geopolitical script of Russia and China, framed in the Eurasia narrative. The success of the latter endeavours naturally depends on great power competition but also on the policies and strategies conducted by small states. This is why their behaviour needs to be more thoroughly analysed in the future.

As a result of the investigation of the role of small states in the Eurasian projects of Russia and China, and the latter's reactions to them, one can arrive at three interlinked conclusions. First, Eurasia is not genuinely present in the construction of small states' security-environment and problem-definition processes, therefore they only react to the

concept promoted by the greater powers. Second, while nominally small states play an equal role in the Russian and Chinese narrative according to their activities, their status is subordinate from the perspective of both powers. Third, the geopolitical strategy born as a reaction of small states to the Eurasian narrative depends on their geopolitical position, historical tendencies, and economic structure. They perceive the influence-seeking motivations of Moscow and Beijing, and participation in the projects raises the question of the integration dilemma. Fourth, behavioural patterns vary to some extent, as most resource-scarce states choose neither balancing nor bandwagoning, but rather a form of hedging. The two main options for them include risk-contingency and return-maximization, depending on the potential profits and threats attached to the rise of Russia and China. All of this means that leaders of small states will probably not internalize the concept of Eurasia as a cornerstone of their security environment, but rather as a development associated with both risks and opportunities.

While it was not within the scope of the investigation, one might assume that the Chinese Eurasia project is more competitive and more compatible with the geopolitical script of small states than the Russian one. As Russian dominance has been a historical phenomenon in the region, especially in Central Asia, growing Chinese influence is more profitable both in terms of risk-contingency and return-maximizing behaviour. That being said, the negative effects of the Chinese endeavour are yet to fully materialize, thus the balancing act regarding the evaluation of Russian and Chinese geopolitical scripts by small states is subject to change in the future.

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