Far from quiet on the US vs Russia-China front

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> Let's start in mid-May, when Nur-Sultan, formerly Astana, hosted the third Russia-Kazakhstan Expert Forum, jointly organized by premier think tank Valdai Club and the Kazakhstan Council on International Relations.

The ongoing, laborious and crucial interconnection of the New Silk Roads, or Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasia Economic Union was at the center of the debates. Kazakhstan is a pivotal member of both the BRI and EAEU.

As Valdai Club top analyst Yaroslav Lissovolik told me, there was much discussion "on the state of play in emerging markets in light of the developments associated with the US-China trade stand-off." What emerged was the necessity of embracing "open regionalism" as a factor to neutralize "the negative protectionist trends in the global economy."

This translates as regional blocks along a vast South-South axis harnessing their huge potential "to counter protections pressures", with "different forms of economic integration other than trade liberalization" having preeminence. Enter "connectivity" – BRI's premier focus.

The EAEU, celebrating its fifth anniversary this year, is fully into the open regionalism paradigm, according to Lissovolik, with memoranda of understanding signed with Mercosur, ASEAN, and more free-trade agreements coming up later this year, including Serbia and Singapore.

Sessions at the Russia-Kazakhstan forum produced wonderful insights on the triangular Russia-China-Central Asia relationship and further South-South collaboration. Special attention should focus on the concept of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 2.0. If a new bipolarity is emerging, pitting the US against China, NAM 2.0 rules that vast sectors of the Global South should profit by remaining neutral.

On the complex Russia-China strategic partnership, featuring myriad layers, by now it's established that Beijing considers Moscow a sort of strategic rearguard in its ascent to superpower status. Yet doubts persist across sectors of "pivot to the East" Moscow elites on how to handle Beijing.

It's fascinating to watch how neutral Kazakh analysts see it. They tend to interpret negative perceptions about a possible "Chinese threat" as impressed upon Russia, including Russia media, by its notorious Western "partners" – and "from there proceed to Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet countries."

Kazakhs stress that the development of the EAEU is always under tremendous pressure by the West, and are very worried that the US-China trade war will have serious consequences for the development of Eurasian integration. They dread the possibility of another front of the US-China fight opening in strategically positioned Kazakhstan. Still, they hope the EAEU will expand, mostly because of Russia.

Andrei Sushentsov, program director of the Valdai Discussion Club, had a more lenient explanation.

He reads the current chaos not as a Cold War, but rather a “Phony Cold War” – with no pronounced aggressor, no ideological component in the confrontation, and even “a desire to relieve tension.”
NAM 2.0 or Eurasia integration?

In a crucial speech to the Valdai Club, President Putin made it clear, once again, that the BRI-EAEU interconnection is an absolute priority. And the only road map ahead is for Eurasian integration.

That interlinks with the advance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, whose annual summit is next month, in Kyrgyzstan. One of the key goals of the SCO, since it was founded in 2001, is to create an evolving Russia-China-Central Asia synergy.

It’s not far-fetched to consider that what happens next may include a clash between the inbuilt logic of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) 2.0 and the massive Eurasian integration drive. Moscow, for instance, would be in an intractable position if it came to either align with Beijing or NAM 2.0.

Putin has had a crack on how to solve the problem. “Historical experience shows that the Soviet Union had quite trust-based and constructive relations with many countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. It is also clear that if pursued in a too radical and uncompromising way, the logic of the ‘new non-aligned movement’ can become a challenge to the consolidation and unity of Eurasia, which is the top priority for the SCO and other projects.”

Putin has arguably dedicated a lot of thought to “the case of a new rupture in Russia-China relations, toward which many are pushing us.” He recognizes that “quite a large part of Russian society will receive it as a quite natural and even positive development. Therefore, to avoid this scenario (to reiterate, consolidation and unity of Greater Eurasia is the key value of the SCO and the EAEU-BRI association), not only diplomatic work outside of Russia is required… but also a lot of work inside the country. In this case, the work needs to be done less with elites by way of expert papers, than directly with the people in entirely different media formats (which, by the way, not all traditional experts can do).”

The ultimate target though remains set in stone – to “achieve the purported goal of consolidating Greater Eurasia.”
The US three-war front

Maximum pressure from ‘Exceptionalistan’ won’t relent. For instance, CAATSA – the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act – now in overdrive after the adoption of a European Recapitalization Incentive Program, will continue to economically punish nations that purchase Russian and Chinese weapons.

The logic of this extreme “military diplomacy” is stark; if you don’t weaponize the American way, you will suffer. Key targets feature, among others, India and Turkey, two still theoretical poles of Eurasian integration.

In parallel, from US Think Tankland, comes the latest RAND Corporation report on – what else – how to wage Cold War 2.0 against Russia, complete with scores of strategic bombers and new intermediate-range nuclear missiles stationed in Europe to counter “Russian aggression”. Santa Monica’s RAND arguably qualifies as the top Deep State think tank.

So, it’s no wonder the road ahead is fraught with Desperation Row scenarios. The US economic war on China – at least for now – is not as hardcore as the US economic war on Russia, which is not as hardcore as the US economic siege or blockade of Iran. Yet all three wars carry the potential to degenerate in a flash. And we're not even counting the strong possibility of an extra Trump administration economic war on the EU.

It's no accident that the current economic wars target the three key nodes of Eurasian integration. The war against the EU may not happen because the main beneficiaries would be the Russia-China-Iran triumvirate.

Obviously, no illusions remain in Beijing, Moscow and Tehran's corridors of power. Frantic diplomacy prevails. After the BRI forum in Beijing, Presidents Putin and Xi meet again in early June at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum – where discussion of BRI-EAEU interconnection will be paramount, alongside containment of the US in Central Asia.

Then Russia and China meet again at the SCO summit in Bishkek. The head of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, went on the record stating that as many as 5,000 ISIS/Daesh-linked jihadis fresh from their "moderate rebel" Syrian stint are now massed in Afghanistan bordering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with the possibility of crossing to Pakistan and China.

That's a major security threat to all SCO members – and it will be discussed in detail in Bishkek, alongside the necessity of including Iran as a new permanent member.

Chinese Vice-President Wang Qishan is visiting Pakistan, which is a key BRI member with the CPEC corridor, and after will visit the Netherlands and Germany. Beijing wants to diversify its complex global investment strategy.

Meanwhile, from Istanbul to Vladivostok, the key question remains: how to make NAM 2.0 work to the benefit of Eurasian integration.

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