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THE SINO-RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS IN EURASIA AND CHINA-USA DISPUTES: ASIA-PACIFIC-GREATER EURASIA VS INDO-PACIFIC

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Introduction

The Eurasian landmass is a key geopolitical zone in the international system. According to Moniz Bandeira (2017, 1-2), Eurasia is the landmass that extends from Europe to Asia, having its Heartland essentially in Central Asia. The control of this "pivot area", as called by Mackinder (1904) in the geopolitical classic *The Geographical Pivot of History*, grants a country the advantage of land power – World Island, in what is known as "the greatest natural fortress on Earth". The agent who dominates the Heartland, in the logic of land power, dominates Eurasia. Therefore, a better geopolitical position in Central Asia is a decisive factor in the current hegemonic disputes, in which important actors, such as the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China are opposed.

From a historical perspective, it is important to emphasize how strategic the Heartland domain is. It is worth remembering the success of the troops of Genghis Khan, in the 13th century, which advanced from Mongolia to Central Europe; of the Turkish-Mongolian troops of Tamerlane, in the 14th century, which came close to the conquests of the former, or even to the Ottoman expansion, in the 15th and 16th centuries, which conquered the Balkans, Egypt and besieged Vienna on two occasions. In the 18th and

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19th centuries, given the reflux of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire, the main disputes for control of the Heartland took place between the British Empire, after consolidating its power in India – The Raj - and the Russian Empire, which had been advancing since the Caucasus to Central Asia and later into territories of the decaying Qing dynasty in China.

Already during the 20th century, the Soviet Union consolidated control over the former areas of the tsarist empire, a fact which persisted until 1991, when its implosion took place. Later, after a decade of instability and decay, Russia's leadership sought to recreate its strategic area of influence, just as new political actors entered the scene, such as the nationalism of the former Soviet republics, the Sunni insurgency, Turkish nationalism, and the US presence in Afghanistan.

Currently, the new political and economic reconfigurations of Eurasia have been a relevant topic in international relations. Regional powers which were subjugated in the past are reemerging, as China and India. Russia's traditional areas of influence are the object of political actions by extra-regional powers such as the United States and the European Union. Russia tries to regain its ground through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); China offers Asian countries (but not only) the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); while the United States seeks to align with India, Japan, and Australia through the Quad, as a tool to curb growing Chinese influence. In this sense, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), led by Russia and China, seeks to organize regional security strategies to deal originally with the Sunni insurgency, but which seeks to increase coordination by incorporating India, Pakistan, and Iran, among others.

To face these transformations which are profoundly altering the direction of world politics and economy, this article aims to analyze the main elements and processes underway in Eurasia, involving more specifically the action of three essential actors: the United States, Russia, and China. In this sense, it is organized into six sections, including this introduction and final considerations. At first, it is emphasized the importance of Eurasia as a space that has historically influenced the hegemonic disputes between Great Powers. Then, due to the region's new economic configurations, Eurasia is analyzed as a space for development cooperation, presenting in general lines the objectives of the Russian initiative - EAEU, as well as the Chinese BRI. Next, it is analyzed more specifically the intersections of Russian and Sino-Russian economic strategies, in BRI and the EAEU. Last, the US approach to China is addressed, specifically the transformation of its Asia-Pacific strategy, formulated during the Barack Obama administration, into articulating the Indo-Pacific approach, which includes India in the Chinese regional containment mechanism, developed by Donald Trump, and continuing under Joe Biden's presidency.

Eurasia as a Space of Hegemonic Disputes

To assess the geopolitical importance of Eurasia, it is important to rescue the ideas of theorists who highlighted the importance of land power in the balance of international politics. As seen, different powers throughout history have attempted to establish hegemony to conquer this part of the world. In his writings on geostrategic developments in Eurasia, former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasized the importance of Eurasian geopolitics for the Great Game in international relations. As one of the main objectives of US foreign policy is the prevention of a rival Eurasian counter-hegemonic partnership, the identification and "trusteeship" of pivot powers in Eurasia has been a constant strategy of the US foreign policy, such as how to break the possibility of alliances between regional powers against Washington. Following the same geopolitical strategy, Brzezinski states that

> Identifying and protecting the main geopolitical pivots of post-Cold War Eurasia, therefore, is also a crucial aspect of America's global geostrategy. [...] Under current global circumstances, at least five important geostrategic actors and five geopolitical axes [...] can be identified on the new geopolitical map of Eurasia. France, Germany, Russia, China, and India are important and active players. [...] Potentially the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an "anti-hegemonic" coalition united not by ideology but by complementary claims (Brzezinski 1998, 41-55, own translation).

In practice, this objective was achieved in 1972, when the governments of China and the United States created an informal alliance to contain the influence of the Soviet Union in Asia, notably in Southeast Asia. It was a very important action, as it managed to separate the two main socialist countries, a fact that made the defeat of the USSR in 1991 feasible. This issue is addressed by one of the architects of this solution, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who explained the logic of the Mao Tse-Tung's government in the "Paper Tiger", as he called the United States, based on Chinese millenary experience - in this case, the logic of allying with a distant enemy to face what is closer (Kissinger 2011).

In addition, in the late 1970s, the US strategy against the USSR took shape by stimulating Islamic insurgencies on the fringes of the Soviet Union, forcing this country into an ill-fated invasion of Afghanistan, which threatened the allied government of Moscow and which had the potential to unleash revolts within the country, especially in regions with strong Islamic influence. In this endeavor, the US had the support of Pakistan, which, as is well known, is a traditional ally of the Chinese government. In the post-USSR context, it was these forces that destabilized the regions of Chechnya and Dagestan within the Russian Federation. To make the situation more complex, the United States supported several initiatives to include ex-Soviet bloc countries in its sphere of influence, as occurred in Georgia and, after the beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, through the implementation of military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Le Monde Diplomatique 2003). In response to the cross-border Islamic extremist threat, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was created in 2001 to coordinate security, intelligence, and anti-insurgency actions in Russia, Central Asia, and China.

After the brief period known as the "unipolar moment" (Wohlforth 1999), when the US was virtually unrivaled in the international order during the 1990s and early 2000s, this situation has been questioned due to greater alignment between Russia and China, not only in the SCO but in other forums such as the BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This new configuration, at least in theory, marked by the Greater Eurasia paradigm, aims to establish a Eurasian Economic Partnership, by connecting the borders of the Pacific to the borders of the European Union. Given this new situation, US foreign policy seeks to prevent other emerging powers - especially China and Russia - from establishing an alternative power pole in the region. According to Lukin (2020, 175-176),

> The main US imperative [...] would be to prevent the emergence of a single state or alliance of states capable of unifying non-European Eurasia against the United States. [...] Thus, it was recognized that the danger to the United States would not be a particular political regime, but simply all the major independent and influential states [...] namely, Washington's loss of control over Eurasia resulting from the deepening rapprochement between the two main Eurasian powers: Russia and China (own translation).

The change of course in international politics towards Eurasia gained greater momentum after the 2008 crisis, which boosted the Chinese role in the international arena, and the Ukrainian crisis, which led the Moscow government to incorporate the Crimean region of Russian majority, as well as to the imposition of a series of sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union (EU) and the advance of NATO forces towards the Russian borders

(Laruelle 2017, 156-157). Russia's strong dependence on EU markets for the flow of its gas and oil supply, amid sanctions, triggered a warning signal about the country's economic vulnerabilities, prompting it to prioritize its ties with the East, especially with China, with which it established an agreement (The Guardian 2014), in May 2014, in the amount of US$400 billion, for the sale of gas and construction of gas pipelines for a period of 30 years, the first section of which was inaugurated in 2019 (CNN 2019).

The actions of China and Russia are seen as a strong threat by the US government, a perception that is distant from the Obama administration, especially after the Ukrainian incidents in 2014. Recently, the US government, through the document "Renewing America's Advantages: Interim National Security Strategic Guidances" (2021), reaffirmed concerns about China and Russia present in other prospective studies which seek to support the country's defense strategies. According to the report,

> We must also face the reality that the distribution of power around the world is changing, creating new threats. China, in particular, quickly became more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to launch a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system. Russia remains determined to strengthen its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage. Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts to verify US strengths and prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world (The White House 2021, 7-8) (Own translation).

It is not in the scope of this article to describe all recent movements which are part of the increasing rivalry between the United States, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other; regardless of cyclical fluctuations, the theme of strategic disputes in Eurasia is a structural issue, and as such deserves to be addressed. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the movements of "tectonic plates" which occur in the region and how this will impact the international context. In this aspect, the new economic articulations must be better understood, as they are not just the construction of infrastructures, but of interdependence ties that can support new levels of political articulation.

Eurasia and Cevelopment Cooperation

As described previously, it is necessary to reflect on the logic of strategic competition between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other, to understand how these actors have positioned themselves on Eurasia. In this section, regional actors will be on focus, notably the cooperation mechanisms led by Moscow and Beijing.

From the Russian standpoint, the concept of *Greater Eurasia* assumed a geostrategic priority intending to establish greater autonomy, not seeking a subordinate role in an Atlantic-facing order, nor ignore the Asian eastward rise. Thus, Eurasian integration in a Russian perspective stems from these two factors. On the one hand, due to the failure of its partnership with the European Union and the United States, as the country was expelled from the G8 in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea; also as it has been suffering from trade sanctions and increased military pressure from NATO, which seeks to strategically encircle Russia's western borders, in the Baltic, Ukraine, and Georgia (Flag, op. cit., 61). As a result, Russia sought to integrate itself into the rise of East Asia, led by China, as an escape valve for its oil and gas production in the face of the aforementioned sanctions.

China, in turn, has sought to mitigate instability on two borders, as many liabilities with its neighborhood persist: (1) the threat of the Sunni insurgency to the West; (2) the demarcation of borders with India and Pakistan to the Southwest; (3) Taiwanese reunification to the East; (4) the guarantee of its maritime and islet rights in the South China Sea; (5) instability on the Korean Peninsula; and (6) the traditional rivalries with Japan. Considering items 5 and 6, the presence of US troops in these countries must be considered. In this sense, the creation of arrangements, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the work in the BRICS group and the SCO, as well as the creation of the AIIB and the NDB, can be considered actions not only to empower the Chinese economy but also as tools of a diplomatic effort to reverse part of the threats perceived by Beijing.

Therefore, the new configuration of the geopolitical map of Greater Eurasia is based on the complementarity of Chinese trade and its economic interests, together with Russian concerns about security on the western flank, and governance along the entire route which encompasses the EAEU and the BRI led by China (Serbin, op. cit., 41).

The development of Greater Eurasia as an established partnership between Russian and Chinese geostrategies was incorporated into the official joint declarations of Sino-Russian relations. To commemorate the 15th anniversary of the 2001 Friendship, Neighborhood, and Cooperation Treaty, which paved the way for the development of greater cooperation between Russia and China, the two powers established, concerning the EAEU and the BRI:

> The parties emphasize the paramount importance they attach to the implementation of the Russian-Chinese cooperation agreement in conjunction with the construction of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt, as recorded in the relevant Joint Declaration of 8 May 2015. Russia and China are in favor of creating a comprehensive Eurasian partnership based on the principles of openness, transparency, and taking into account mutual interests, including the possible involvement of EAEU, SCO and ASEAN countries. In this regard, the Heads of State instructed the governments of both countries to work with the competent bodies and propose measures for the implementation of the initiative, to contribute to the deepening of integration processes in the region (Совместное 2016, own translation).

Therefore, formed on the basis of EAEU and BRI, the Greater Eurasian partnership is based on the following points: (a) Sino-Russian *rapprochement*, linking BRI and EAEU; (b) Non-Western groupings, especially the SCO, ASEAN, and BRICS; (c) Partnership of non-Western states in the goals of Greater Eurasia; (d) Convergence of political and economic interests to overcome the perception of unipolarity sought by the United States, in a movement similar to the 1955 Bandung Conference; (e) Economic partnerships as platforms for greater cooperation, especially across Central Asia and Europe, with the establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), and the Maritime Silk Road through ASEAN partners, both sectors of BRI; (f) Greater Eurasia is an open partnership, as long as the principles of non-interference and multipolarity are respected; therefore, European countries and other possible partners can be included (Lukin, op. cit., 177-178).

China and Russia are articulating their foreign policy strategies and paradigms based on their projected visions with a focus on Eurasia. Despite having different priorities in their geostrategic orientations, China and Russia have sought complementary interests in Eurasia, especially concerning greater economic integration and the establishment of preferential partnerships. The Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, together with the China-led Belt and Road Initiative - especially the Silk Road Economic Belt - demonstrated synergies towards building a Sino-Russian strategic partnership to influence future developments in Eurasia in a movement of both powers in their geostrategic terms. These two initiatives will be discussed below.

Main Aspects of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), officially launched in 2015, is a crucial international organization in contemporary Russian foreign policy. The Union represents the Russian views on regional trade, integration, and international insertion. Prior to its creation, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was the main regional organization bringing together the post-Soviet republics, especially in the 1990s. The first three member states - Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan - joined Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in creating the EAEU, which came into force that year. Nowadays, the EAEU is a regional organization in Eurasia representing 183 million people, with a combined GDP of US$2.2 trillion and trade of US$900 billion. While the Ukrainian non-participation is worrisome, due to geopolitical disputes in terms of regional and security alliances - especially concerning the EU and NATO - the EAEU is an advancement of current Russian foreign policy in regional and Eurasian affairs (Serbin, op. cit., 79-80).

Currently, the main aspiration of the EAEU is to become a Eurasian organization capable of representing a pole of influence between Europe and Asia-Pacific, especially with regard to the Chinese rise in the world system. It represents a Russian assertive stance in reshaping the configuration of its immediate zone of influence; is a relaunch of a Russian initiative for the post-Soviet space, representing the country's current vision for future developments in Eurasia. A Russian consideration as a great power encompasses its notions of regional integration, trade, and security. The introduction of the free circulation of goods, services, capital, and labor, as well as common agricultural, transport, and energy policies, can contribute to an expansion of the organization in the future, if more successes are demonstrated along its development.

Despite having an abundance of natural resources - such as energy sources, minerals, and the agricultural sector - the EAEU members lack a fully developed financial sector and technological resources which drive innovation (Sergi 2018, 4). There is a complementarity between EAEU resources and Chinese capabilities, as the strengthening of the Union, within a common market framework, drives China to negotiate with EAEU countries as a bloc, increasing its influence in bargaining relations with Beijing. The geopolitical sense in the creation of the Union has turned Eurasia into a region of multipolar relations, as there is a provision for trilateral relations between the EAEU, the EU, and China, as well as other countries in the Asia-Pacific, especially the ASEAN. Therefore, the Union is part of a Russian strategy to reestablish its own geopolitical sphere, which would guarantee greater stability in economic and security terms (Serbin, op. cit., 83).

Finally, the EAEU seeks to establish China as its main partner, as its rise has offered greater economic opportunities for the region than the European front, while simultaneously offering greater economic stability and a platform for dialogue with China on an equal footing. Discursively, Russia understands the Greater Eurasia paradigm and its Chinese partnership not as a threat to other powers (US, Japan, India) but as an opportunity to leverage investments and cooperation, especially in transport and infrastructure, as this partnership tends to bring economic development to the Russian Far East, a strategic region for Moscow's aspirations (Lewis 2018, 3-4).

Main Aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially launched during Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan in 2013, is an ambitious economic project, inspired by the ancient Silk Road, capable of integrating East Asia to Western Europe, mainly through Russia and Central Asia, by its land route, and through the Indian Ocean by its maritime route. This project was inspired by the ancient Silk Road, which had great relevance between the 2nd century BC and the 15th century CE (Sang 2019, 13). In total, the initiative encompasses six economic corridors, which cross over 60 countries in total, which account for 60% of the global population and a third of the world's GDP (CBBC 2015).

The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), according to the China-Britain Business Council (CBBC 2015), develops "Eurasian land bridges" in a logistics chain that connects the Chinese coast to the Port of Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, with several economic corridors along the route, connecting China to Mongolia, Russia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This land route is inspired by the ancient connections between the Roman and Chinese Empires, which emerged during the Han Dynasty (3rd century BC – 1st century CE).

Furthermore, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route, runs along the east coast of China, through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, to the European continent, also covering the so-called "Horn of Africa" and the Suez Canal. Its objective is to improve the efficiency of sea routes between major ports in different countries, including the development of a maritime corridor in the Indian Ocean – which would directly depend on agreements beneficial to India, for it to participate in the project. The BRI maritime route looks for historical inspiration in the routes that emerged in the Tang Dynasty (7th century – 10th century), with its peak in the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century, when Admiral Zheng He established trade routes with the African continent, crossing the Indian coast and the Persian Gulf, such as the current Maritime Silk Road (Conti, Mozias 2020, 213).

The initiative, which began operating in 2015, aims to "[...] connect the vibrant Asian economic circle, on the one hand, to the European economic circle, on the other, and align countries with great potential for economic development" (CBBC 2015). This strategy unfolds into several objectives, such as: promoting economic growth in the Chinese countryside; the integration of the infrastructure of countries that are part of the corridor, and intensifying their trade exchanges; political and diplomatic *rapprochement* between the countries of Eurasia, among some of the main ones. Such goals aim to expand Chinese influence, given its rising technological standard in production and its large material accumulation.

Furthermore, Conti and Mozias (op. cit., 213-215) highlight BRI as the result of a Chinese accumulated potential in economic terms of a quantitative scale; Chinese overproduction, manifested as early as 2014 by excessive production capacity in steel and cement sectors, in addition to the huge number of buildings without demand, requiring the export of idle capacity as a solution to this problem, when the investment package launched after the 2008 crisis exhausted its ability to contain the effects of the international crisis. However, it is important to note that China has emerged from the 2008 crisis strengthened, as since 2014 it is already the largest economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), in addition to becoming the largest trader in the world, in exports and imports, and having the largest international foreign exchange reserves, including the Renminbi in the IMF foreign exchange basket in 2015.

In order to finance BRI infrastructure projects, a network of financial sources was created, consisting of the Silk Road Fund (initial capital of US$40 billion); the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB, with Chinese capital of US$100 billion); and the New Development Bank, also known as the BRICS Bank, with US$50 billion. The consequences of this expansion of Chinese projection power are evident in the current China-US disputes.

> [...] the competition between China and the US is also increasing in Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Both powers are interested in raw materials and markets in these regions. This new emerging bipolarity in the world practically determines the context and content of BRI: by offering the so-called developing countries a co-development project, China pulls them to its side (Conti, Mozias, op. cit., 215, own translation).

This large volume of resources has given China a prominent role as a source of financing for development among developing countries, far surpassing loans from multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and its regional counterparts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The beneficiaries of BRI projects will use Chinese technologies and innovations, especially high-speed rail transport, long-distance transmissions and communications - with emphasis on 5G, renewable energy technologies - especially solar, wind power, and civil construction. Seen from developing countries, the BRI and the success of the Chinese economic reforms have become an important advantage for Chinese diplomacy.

Due to its dimensions, BRI has the potential to push China to the center of the world economy, reinforcing its importance in international trade and its relations with other countries (Conti, Mozias, op. cit., 216-218). It also leverages Eurasia as the great expansion area of Chinese presence, mainly through an active and strategic partnership with Russia. Such political-economic relations are part of a paradigm of international order, often called "common destiny community" diplomacy in Chinese speeches, as has been happening since the meetings of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in 2012, which emphatically mentioned the search for shared development with other developing countries and regions (Sang 2019, 14).

For the analysis of the BRI action plan, it is outlined the following prioritized corridors (Sang, op. cit., 15-16):

1. New Eurasian Land Bridge: China's connecting route to the European Union, integrated to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU);
2. China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor: Route from northeast China to Mongolia and Russian Siberia, through railways, oil, and gas pipelines; there are parallel projects aimed at promoting tourism, agriculture, and science and technology;
3. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: BRI corridor capable of connecting the western province of Xinjiang to the Indian Ocean from the Pakistani port of Gwadar;
4. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor: Route from the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean to southern China, through railways, highways, ports, pipelines, and canals;
5. China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor: Connecting the Southeast Asia peninsula to southern China, through high-speed trains and ports;
6. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor: Runs through Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey, until reaching the European continent.

To conclude this section, the Greater Eurasia paradigm encompasses the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in international politics, which primarily combines Chinese economic perspectives and objectives, together with Russian security concerns and regional integration structure. Therefore, in order to shape future Eurasian interstate relations, both powers are contributing to build their joint capabilities in the region, merging their main geopolitical interests. Even though there are major challenges to the development of this strategy, notably the containment action of the United States and its NATO partners with a view to co-opting or destabilizing the most fragile countries, both powers can mutually benefit from the combination of objectives between the EAEU and BRI as pillars of Greater Eurasia.

The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in BRI and EAEU: Greater Eurasia and Asia-Pacific

As discussed in the previous section, driven by pragmatic foreign policy objectives, Russia and China started a process of *rapprochement* based on a new centrality of Eurasia (Freire 2013). From new guidelines based on the 2001 friendship treaty, Sino-Russian relations have rapidly intensified since then. Several positive results were obtained from a greater mutual understanding, highlighting the following: resolution of remaining border issues; strong intensification of trade relations; important political-economic integration and infrastructure programs. Such factors are preponderant to analyze the Sino-Russian approach as a constituent element of new dynamics in the growing Eurasian integration (Mikhailova 2013).

The convergence between these two powers is demonstrated in the agreements signed for the launch of the BRI infrastructure integration platform. From the Sino-Russian cooperation platform, both the BRI program and the EAEU are in deep cooperation, which encompasses a political-economic alignment corridor capable of integrating Asia-Pacific with Western Europe (Escobar 2017). Such trade corridors, mentioned above, together with financing platforms launched by China, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), this one within the BRICS, have the potential to lead the expansion of its technological standard, in alliance with other emerging powers in cooperation platforms. The concept of strategic partnership, which permeates the Chinese relations with crucial allies for the BRI success – especially Russia, due to its key geographic centrality in Eurasia – is expressed by Kowarski (2013, 108) as a partnership which

> [...] operates at a deeper level: in the exchange of ideas and views on the contours of the international order. This exchange of perspectives, on global issues, in which the Russian and Chinese voices have different intonations from the United States and other Western countries, finds its basis in official documents and the analysis of the comparative performance of both at the UN, as well as influencing the creation of a forum of states like the BRIC and in the trilateral level understandings between China, Russia, and India (own translation).

Therefore, it is from the vision of strategic partnership that it is possible to understand the recent intensification of Sino-Russian relations, and how they are fundamental to BRI's success in a first Eurasian expansion plan. In search of changes in the international order which favor them as emerging countries, China and Russia seek to benefit each other in coordinated actions; which becomes more evident with the analysis of new Chinese trends for the world economy, with a focus on infrastructure and trade, coordinated in joint actions. Serbin (2019, 63-65) highlights how Russia is gradually becoming China's main energy partner, as well as one of the main weapons suppliers.

The complementarities between these two powers result in joint positions which go beyond gas and oil trade, such as economic and security cooperation, as the aforementioned SCO; and cooperation in Central Asia, where both countries understand the strategic interests of the other - such as the Russian interest in keeping the former Soviet republics under its sphere of influence; and the Chinese interest in maintaining the expansion of their trade routes in an area of less competition than Asia-Pacific. This situation results in the current Chinese cooperation agreements with the EAEU.

In this sense, it is necessary to look into the characteristics of two important projects involving China and Russia within the scope of BRI - the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor routes. The first is intended to become the main logistical gateway between Europe and Asia in the coming decades. The route is faster than the currently existing maritime route, with the potential to reduce the logistical cost with intensive use in scale, and cheaper than air transport (Bradsher 2013). By crossing seven Chinese provinces, all of Kazakhstan, Western Russia, and all of Belarus, until finally reaching the European Union, the route demonstrates the cohesion for the cooperation currently existing between the Chinese government and the Eurasian Economic Union, represented by the last three countries aforementioned. In addition to the integration between the existing railway systems in these countries, another strategy adopted for the due success of the economic corridor is the facilitation of customs clearance along the way, with the adoption of trade agreements with Poland, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

The second route, called China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, involves two high-speed lines: Beijing/Tianjin/Hebei-Russia, via Inner Mongolia, and from Dalian. Based on pre-existing routes, there are joint projects to expand their use between these countries. The northern passage was built to connect the Bohai Bay Economic Circle (Beijing, Dalian, and Tianjin) to Western Europe, integrating BRI with Russian and Mongolian infrastructure initiatives: the Transcontinental Rail Plan and the Steppe Route, respectively. In this context, it is important to add the strategy of using the Renminbi as an international currency, since such financing was made in Chinese currency, in May 2015, valued at US$25 billion.

The strategy of mutual accommodation of interests has proven to be positive, in which the Chinese government adopts the position of establishing agreements with EAEU member countries as a block, and not separately, which maintains the structure of regional integration led by Russia (Gabuev 2015). Thus, both countries accommodate their main interests in the region; the Chinese economic and commercial expansion, which needs new markets for its products, and the maintenance of the post-Soviet Russian influence zone, focused mainly in terms of security and energy. The Sino-Russian partnership, together with the integration of their respective economic projects, represents a geostrategic competition against the positions defended by the United States in Eurasia.

The China-US Disputes in Eurasia: Asia-Pacific vs Indo-Pacific

The intensification of trade and technological disputes between the United States and China impacted political-economic relations in Eurasia. Chinese advancements in production, finance, and technology have changed the scenario of the dispute. The Asian country has a great capacity for action, given its huge foreign exchange reserves, which reach around US$3 trillion; a large import capacity that rivals the US volume; a strategy to support productive and infrastructure investments around the world through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and, recently, technological advances in the information technology sector, such as creating a competitive base for 5G Internet and artificial intelligence systems which also rival the US. All these factors make the PRC a strong competitor to Washington, whose policy of containing China intensified since 2011, when the strategy of a "pivot to Asia" was launched, also known as the strategy of "An American century in the Asia-Pacific".

This strategy was announced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011, in Hawaii, on the eve of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. It is an initiative to gather support among its allies, guarantee the US hegemony in the region, and also create embarrassments for the Chinese rise, which at the time postulated its strategy of "peaceful development" (Pires; Lacerda Mattos 2016). In the words of Clinton:

> But today, there is a need for a more dynamic and durable transpacific system, a more mature security and economic architecture that will promote security, prosperity, and universal values, resolve differences among nations, foster trust and accountability, and encourage effective cooperation on the scale that today's challenges demand. And just as the United States played a central role in shaping that architecture across the Atlantic – to ensure that it worked, for us and for everyone else – we are now doing the same across the Pacific. The 21st century will be America's Pacific century, a period of unprecedented outreach and partnership in this dynamic, complex, and consequential region (Clinton 2011).

As part of this strategy, there are, since 2010, greater efforts by the United States in this region, not only to increase its military presence, but also to strengthen ties with allies to curb the Chinese rise. In this regard, it is important to mention initiatives in trade to isolate China, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) and the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The rise of Donald Trump, despite the United States withdrawing from both agreements, in the first days of his term in office, has not altered the course of containment on China. The approach became more direct, with the imposition of heavy taxes on the import of Chinese products (trade war), as well as starting a series of sanctions against technology companies, such as the case of Huawei and ZTE, the technological war (Paulino, Pires 2021).

The so-called trade war, still in progress, and the mutual imposition of tariffs, which started in 2018, are imbricated in the fierce technological dispute for the vanguard in the so-called Industry 4.0, especially the worldwide establishment of 5G as a new telecommunications standard. An attempt is underway by the US to isolate the Chinese 5G as a standard, suggesting its banishment to its closest allies in the European Union, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Pires, Nascimento, op. cit., 11). As established by the National Defense Strategy of 2018,

> The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions (Department of Defense 2018, 2).

Currently, there has been a very significant change in the US strategy to contain China. What used to include only "Asia-Pacific" has been extended to the Indian Ocean basin, in a clear attempt to involve India, a neighbor with whom China has controversies over the delimitation of their borders. This new position is represented by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – USA, Japan, Australia, and India – and by the geostrategic vision of containment, the Indo-Pacific. This geopolitical narrative of Eurasia seeks to counterbalance the gradual Chinese preponderance in the Asia-Pacific region. The US Pacific Command – renamed on May 30 2018, as Indo-Pacific Command (Usindopacom) – (Uspacom 2018) has promoted this vision for Eurasia since the Cold War, when Soviet influence became more present towards the Indian shores. The update of this regional narrative follows the security concerns, above all, of Australia, India, and Japan, who fear the establishment of a sinocentric alignment in the so-called Asia-Pacific, putting the Indo-Pacific as a competing vision of containment (Serbin, op. cit., 30).

The Indo-Pacific strategy seeks alternatives to counterbalance the strong presence of China in the trade of the main allies of the United States in the region, such as Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan. In this sense, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in November 2020, is worth mentioning, which appears as a trade agreement to replace the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an initiative led by the United States and frustrated by the isolationist views of the Trump government (Pires and Nascimento 2020, 9-10).

The RCEP was consolidated in 2020 as a trade agreement between 15 Asia-Pacific countries - 10 ASEAN members and 5 of its largest trading partners - being: Australia; Brunei; Cambodia; China; South Korea; Philippines; Indonesia; Japan; Laos; Malaysia; Myanmar; New Zealand; Singapore; Thailand, and Vietnam; 9 of these, members of the frustrated TPP, which did not obtain sufficient ratifications to enter into office, and had to be reshaped without the United States – thus losing most of its economic relevance. This brings together in a single trade agreement - the largest in history – one-third of the world population and economy without the presence of the US (Wong; Zhou 2020), which leaves the PRC at an advantage for a global economic recovery in a post-pandemic Covid-19 scenario. The absence of India, which participated in the negotiations and abandoned the agreement when it was signed, is noteworthy.

Due to the overlapping agreements, and the potential success of the RCEP, a Chinese preponderance amid economic and geopolitical disputes with the US in Eurasia must be considered – as well as the growing interest of more members in the supercontinent to join the BRI. Currently, the Chinese initiative has 138 members, 65 of these in the supercontinent and in Asia-Pacific

(Green BRI 2020). In this way, a fierce dispute for spaces of influence and economic integration is configured, with a recent Chinese relative advantage in the success of its geostrategic projects.

China is in a privileged position in trade agreements for access to Asia-Pacific markets, especially Southeast Asia, through ASEAN. The Indian absence from concluding the RCEP agreements is a reflection of mutual mistrust in Sino-Indian relations and also Washington's pressure on the right-wing government of Narendra Modi. The "Holy Geoeconomic and Geopolitical Alliance of the USA, India, Japan, and Australia" (El Horizonte 2017 *apud* Serbin, op. cit., 31) is an ongoing opposition to the RCEP - despite the absence of an established trade agreement in this view of the Indo-Pacific. In this context, concerns for India's regional security are mainly expressed by the construction of the Maritime Silk Road, in which the Indian Ocean is crucial for its development, but also by what India sees as a threat to its security in the face of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

In this sense, from the perspective of the United States and its allies, in addition to BRI as a Chinese proposal for Eurasia – mainly from the exposed Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – the RCEP is perceived as a threat and as it is able to bring the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) even closer to China as the new center of gravity of the world economy.

In contrast, the Quad claims to seek a "free and open Indo-Pacific, [...] inclusive, healthy, anchored in democratic values, and free from coercion" (White House 2021). The US State Department, in 2019, in a document called "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision", openly cites the People's Republic of China (PRC) as an adversary and contrary to the values advocated by the Quad partnership. In the mentions made to Beijing, the PRC is accused of brutally repressing ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, interfering in Tibet province, and preventing Hong Kong's autonomy; moreover, in defining criteria for maritime security, Washington urges Beijing to resolve disputes in the South China Sea "without coercion", defining Chinese claims as "provocations" that would be preventing ASEAN members from accessing US$2.5 trillion in revenues from energy resources; finally, the Quad would be responding to such aggressions through joint military exercises (Department of State 2019, 21-23). Therefore, the rhetoric aimed at the PRC focuses on military strategy and is antagonistic, establishing Chinese initiatives and interests as a threat to the quadrilateral and ASEAN countries.

In China-US strategic competition, the US containment in the face of Chinese advance is the keynote of the dispute for geostrategic partnerships in Eurasia; China from its economic preponderance in the region, and the US using its greater military power, despite losses of leadership in economic power. In these competing strategies, the bargaining power of countries like India, Indonesia, and Australia increases, as they are included in the agreements established by Beijing and Washington. India's marginal position in the Asia-Pacific plan may reinforce its predilection for the US plan, despite the lack of a better structured economic plan compared to the Chinese one. Its geographic position becomes strategic and better privileged in the Indo-Pacific configuration. Serbin highlights that

> The most obvious winner is India, a regional power that has a growing global impact and a greater role in the globalization process, both because of its rapid economic growth and its demographic weight. On the other hand, its privileged geographic location between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific – where 90 percent of global trade flows – 'places India at the forefront of world geopolitics'. The concept of Indo-Pacific gives it a central position in the face of the geographical marginalization which it is left in the usual conception of Asia-Pacific, and, in turn, constituted a stimulus to develop its Navy and become a naval power. Precisely, the Maritime Security Strategy that the Indian Navy elaborated in 2015 already mentions the Indo-Pacific [...] among the areas of primary maritime interest, it includes the bottlenecks between the two oceans: the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok (Serbin, op. cit., 33, own translation).

The European Union, given the Eurasian character of the Indo-Pacific geostrategy defended by the USA, is also included by the latter in a plan to contain Chinese influence in the supercontinent. Based on regional security partnerships established mainly within the scope of NATO, the great powers of Europe - such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom - are included in the US security interests and containment in Eurasia from the west, against Russia and the EAEU.

Nevertheless, when considering the perspective of the European Union, the competing character of the Indo-Pacific and the Quad in regard to the BRI, especially in terms of regional security, may face internal resistance in their institutions, especially from countries that are members of the BRI and seek Chinese investments in infrastructure and trade, such as Portugal, Italy, and the countries of the Visegrad Group – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. This situation is even more complex when it is observed that the United States has adopted extremely tough strategies to avoid the completion of the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream II, strongly contradicting Berlin's interests.

The European market, with approximately 450 million inhabitants (the

EU-27 group), and a GDP per capita above 30 thousand euros, is extremely important due to its demand capacity - which, as well as the Chinese market, encourages Sino-European economic cooperation. European investments in China, as well as the European common market, are advantageous under the Chinese economic and commercial paradigm, as the European Union is a frequent consumer of Chinese products, in addition to providing sources of foreign direct investment. Likewise, Chinese investment in infrastructure, technology, and acquisitions in Europe, as well as the negotiation since 2014 of a trade treaty, demonstrates the indispensable character of the Union as a Chinese partner (Szczudlik; Kulesa 2020, 12-13) – being an important hub of BRI and of essential geostrategic relevance in Eurasia.

However, the opportunity for economic cooperation is counterbalanced by geopolitical and security concerns, given the similarity of EU and NATO members – and therefore of the forerunners of the Indo-Pacific contention geostrategy. Overall, the European Union's great challenge is to accommodate competing and diverging interests of different partners and their conflicting geostrategic plans (Kuo 2018); in this case, the competition between the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific configurations, and the different plans for the inclusion of the European Union in both strategies: the first plan points to a deepening cooperation in economic and infrastructure plans, while the second emphasizes a security structure and containment of a growing Chinese influence.

Final Remarks

As discussed throughout this research, the political movements carried out by the United States, Russia, and China are a key variable for understanding the direction of international politics in the coming decades. There are three positions that stand out in this process: the United States, when it seeks to create the means to curb the advance of its competitors with a view to extending its hegemonic position; Russia, which seeks to re-establish its status as a great power by rebuilding its influence in Eurasia, as it had been in the period of the USSR; and China, which seeks to guarantee the means to achieve its internal strengthening, the modernization of its economy, and reach the condition of a fully developed country in 2049.

Specifically regarding disputes between China and the United States, it is important to consider China's increased influence in Asia-Pacific, and the US containment strategies on the European front, against Russia, and on the newly named Indo-Pacific, against China. Different perceptions are observed in the performance of these actors: on the one hand, a Chinese cooperative position;

on the other, the US position is defensive and aggressive, based on a logic of security and containment. Instead of offering economic cooperation plans parallel to the Chinese in Eurasia, of the same magnitude, the United States does not offer economic alternatives, on the contrary: since the beginning of the Trump government, and now in the Biden government, there is increasing protectionism, and initiatives to rebuild, in the US, nowadays Asia-based production chains, especially after the episodes of shortages seen after the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic.

In contrast, there are incentives for Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia and closer ties with ASEAN and other countries in the Pacific Ocean basin. Therefore, from the Sino-Russian convergence of economic integration initiatives in Eurasia, the EAEU, BRI, and RCEP together form the Sino-Russian scheme for cooperation in Asia-Pacific; while the US organizes a strategy to contain this coordinated advance, based on the Indo-Pacific geostrategy, centered on the Quad, in order to dispute preponderance mainly in ASEAN.

Despite the strong pressure exerted by the United States and its allies, seeking to contain the rise of China and a new status for the Russian Federation, reality has shown that the advances made so far by the two Eurasian powers will be difficult to reverse. The United States' strategy of rivaling both powers creates a scenario that the country's foreign policymakers do not want, namely, to avoid cooperation between two giants, such as China and Russia. This puts the US in a defensive position, as both countries are members of the UN Security Council, have strategic weapons, and, more specifically in relation to China, possess an economic weight that the extinct USSR never projected. The path of History is always open, but simultaneously constraining two great powers seems to be a strategic error of the hegemonic power.

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the main elements and processes underway in Eurasia, involving three essential actors: the United States, Russia, and China. At first, it is emphasized the importance of Eurasia as a space that has historically influenced the hegemonic disputes between Great Powers. Then, Eurasia is analyzed as a space for development cooperation, presenting the intersections of the Chinese BRI and the Russian EAEU. Last, the US approach to China is addressed, specifically the Indo-Pacific strategy. We conclude that, despite the intense pressure to contain the rise of China and Russia in Eurasia, rivaling both powers is not feasible. In the current path, it will boost the cooperation between two giants, China and Russia.

KEYWORDS

China; Russia; United States.

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