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# Contending Geopolitical Narratives and Global Tectonic Shifts

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The international system is undergoing a complex transition characterized by geopolitical shifts, as well as the rise of new global threats and risks. These shifts entail geo-economic and geopolitical reconfigurations on a global scale and have a significant impact on global governance and the liberal international order established since the end of the Cold War. There is a complex struggle between different approaches and visions of the globalized world and an emerging international order. Assessments of these approaches are complicated by political, economic, and military elites of established and emerging powers developing new narratives to legitimize shifts and justify their geostrategic objectives in short and long-term contexts. This article analyses the geopolitical narratives of the contemporary world focusing on Atlantic, Asia Pacific, Indo-Pacific, the Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR) and the Greater Eurasia narratives, to conclude that Eurasianism could redesign of the contours of a new global order.*

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While the international economy has shown signs of improvement and growth over the last year, the international system is still undergoing a complex transition. This transition is marked by high levels of uncertainty and accelerated changes characterized by geopolitical tectonic shifts, as well as the rise of new global threats and risks. These shifts, which imply geo-economic and geopolitical reconfigurations on a global scale, have a significant impact on the global governance and the liberal international order that have been prevalent since the end of the Cold War.

The displacement of the center of economic dynamism from the Atlantic Basin to the Asia Pacific region, driven by the rapid economic development of China and other emerging Asian economies over the last three decades, has become one of the most important processes in the current world. Within this framework, China — the second largest world economy by nominal GDP — became the focus of attention as a competitor to the United States. The increased populist, nationalist, and protectionist reactions against globalization and free trade, both in the European Union and in the United States, recently followed this movement towards Asia. The unfolding of the Brexit crisis within the European Union, the stalemate between the EU and the United States regarding the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TIIP), and President Trump's statements and tweets since he took office about "making America great again" are a clear illustration of this trend. Moreover, the U.S. cancelled its participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and started a difficult re-negotiation of NAFTA with Mexico and Canada. In its purest form, the "America First" doctrine has implications for the EU and some of its member states (especially Germany) and, unlike all previous trans-Atlantic disagreements, can affect the existing international system.<sup>1</sup>

Within this context, the announcement of the suspension of the TPP by Trump at the November 2017 APEC summit gave rise to two distinctive reactions by the participating countries (President Trump announced the withdrawal from the TPP after the inauguration). On one hand, Japan, Canada, and some of the Latin American countries that are members of the Pacific Alliance persisted with moving forward with the TPP, with or without the U.S.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Chinese President Xi Jinping's invitation for them to join a Comprehensive Regional Economic Association (RCEP) in the Asia-Pacific and a broader Asia-Pacific Free Trade Agreement (FTAAP) — two initiatives fostered by China without the participation of the U.S. — was met with a reluctant receptivity.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the free trade agreements promoted in the West, these initiatives lower the established standards of global free trade.

The globalization process that developed over the last few decades — with an increasing transnational flow and exchange of goods, services, capital, people, and information across borders — is increasingly challenged, casting doubts about its future development.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of new powers contests the liberal international order established by the West after the Cold War. While the current U.S. administration emphasizes a “great America for the Americans” and challenges the globalization process, new actors proclaim the importance of the continuation of the flow of trade and investments in the world. Chinese President Xi insists that his country is going to continue to adhere to and promote the globalization process, and proclaims China as its champion.<sup>5</sup> As an economy that will most likely surpass the U.S. economy in a decade, China wants to highlight the process and the political model that brought about its own accelerated economic development and introduce radical new rules to the global and regional fronts.<sup>6</sup>

Concurrently, while China reasserts its “Asian dream”<sup>7</sup> stance and its role in both Asia and in the international system — particularly with the strengthening of President Xi’s leadership after the recent 19th Chinese Communist Party congress<sup>8</sup> — other international actors are developing more proactive roles as well. After the Ukrainian crisis and under perceptions of pressure from NATO and the Western powers, the Russian Federation is resuming an energetic and aggressive foreign policy

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in different parts of the world to compete with the West and the United States<sup>9</sup>. It is trying to contain terrorism (as is the case in Syria), and evidence shows it is attempting to influence elections or political processes in the U.S. and other countries. Actors like Iran and Turkey are also looking for a more influential role in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, traditional regional middle powers and U.S. allies, such as Japan and Australia, show their concern regarding the growth of China’s influence in East Asia and the Pacific and the retreat of the United States from the TPP — a key strategic component of the “pivot to Asia” proclamation by the Obama administration to contain China’s influence and hegemonic projection in the region.

This succinct assessment of geo-economic and geopolitical shifts does not fully represent the complex struggle between different approaches and visions of the globalized world and an emerging international order. Political, economic, and military elites of established and emerging powers also develop new narratives to legitimize these shifts so that it elicits their geostrategic objectives in short- and long-term contexts. Accordingly, they develop distinct strategies to construct legitimizing geopolitical narratives that serve as a discursive tool that shapes their contemporary identity, values, and geostrategic goals.<sup>11</sup> These are further explained below.

### GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The bipolar narrative during the Cold War attempted to explain the conflict between the U.S., its allies and the Soviet bloc as the struggle between two superpowers competing for zones of influence. After the implosion of the USSR, a unipolar narrative prevailed to explain U.S. hegemony as the most powerful world actor. With the emergence of new powers, a new multipolar narrative was born. It first served as an attempt to explain the rise of new powerful economic actors, and later it aimed to legitimize the increasing influence of an array of political powers and regional blocs contesting the international system established by the West.<sup>12</sup> Within a broader multipolar world narrative,<sup>13</sup> competing geopolitical narratives clarify the interplay among the main powers on the global “grand chessboard”<sup>14</sup> and the conceptual framework they use to foster national interests both on a regional and a global level.

The increasingly multipolar international system affects both global governance and the balance of power among the main global actors. Likewise, it increases concern about the global order to the point that some analysts even contest its existence and assume rather a trend towards global disorder, where unipolar, bipolar and multipolar orders coexist in a permanent flux<sup>15</sup> that shape a “G Zero” world<sup>16</sup> — one without the capacity of developing a global agenda or providing global goods.<sup>17</sup>

During the November 2017 APEC Summit in Da Nang in Vietnam, several competing geopolitical narratives conflicted to explain the current global situation. Presidents Trump, Xi, and Putin attended the summit — one of the few places where the three leaders recently converged. Each leader promoted different understandings for the future of a regionalized globalization and global order and each emphasized different geo-economic and geopolitical visions.<sup>18</sup>

However, as Richard Haas<sup>19</sup> argues, the world can be viewed and understood through several prisms: great power relations, global governance, and the regional prism (for the simple reason that proximity matters and some countries have a much greater impact on their neighbors). In the case of the great powers, the search for power and influence in the international arena explains many of the current geopolitical narratives, particularly within the context of a broader debate on the linkages between globalization and regionalism. From a deconstructive approach of critical geopolitics, such narratives inform geostrategic positioning and practices of the main players in the current international system.

### FROM ATLANTICISM TO THE ASIA PACIFIC NARRATIVE

Within this context, the displacement of economic dynamism from the Atlantic to the Asia Pacific region helped focus world attention on the latter. While the concept of Asia Pacific ignores its heterogeneity as a region, US support and its presence in it since the 1960s and 1970s have been a major factor in establishing the concept. The concept of “Asia Pacific” was eventually broadened to the U.S., Canada, and several Latin American countries who are members of the APEC.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the Asia Pacific narrative allowed for the promotion, among other visions, of the role of China and the narrative of “Asia for the Asians,” notwithstanding the complex array of competing interests and values within the region.<sup>21</sup> The tension between an Atlantic (predominantly North-Atlantic and pro-Western) narrative<sup>22</sup> and an Asia Pacific or an East Asia narrative contributed to the development of emerging powers, according to the interests of the major players — mainly the US and the EU on one side, and China and Japan on the other. However, China’s accelerated growth and regional and global influence translate in its key importance as a major player in Asia and elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

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### THE INDO-PACIFIC NARRATIVE

The increasing assertiveness of China in Asia and the perception of China becoming a threat to some neighboring countries, particularly in

the maritime area of Southeast Asia, has allowed for the reinstatement of a regional narrative born during the Cold War. The U.S. Pacific Command developed the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific when the USSR started to expand its military presence and influence throughout the Indian Ocean. To counter the growing Soviet threat in the region, U.S. Pacific Command came to cover both the Pacific and Indian Oceans in 1972. Since the 1970s, U.S. Pacific Command has regarded the two great oceans as a unified strategic theater and described it as “Indo-Asia-Pacific.”<sup>24</sup>

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an authoritarian China too firmly at its center. During his visit to five Asian countries in November 2017, Trump relaunched the concept, emphasizing the need to support a “free, open and thriving Indo-Pacific.”<sup>25</sup>

Previously, Tokyo has emphasized the Indo-Pacific as being a geostrategic notion of the 21st Century, notably in Prime Minister Abe’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy that dates to August 2007. It was then that he proposed that Japan and India, as compatible maritime democracies, should endorse freedom and prosperity

in “broader Asia.” This “broader Asia” would be connected to the United States, Australia and other Pacific nations, generating a vast network that would permit the free flow of people, goods, capital and knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Australia has also been using the Indo-Pacific notion and has a security interest in ensuring stability in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. As Australia’s 2013 and 2017 foreign policy white papers describe, although Canberra’s alliance with the U.S. remains central to national security, it is expanding partnerships with other regional actors, particularly Japan.<sup>27</sup>

Central to Indo-Pacific strategy is a “quad” among Japan, India, Australia and the U.S., or the “democratic security diamond.” Abe and his Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, seem to have arrived at a consensus to pursue interaction between Japan’s Indo-Pacific strategy and India’s “Act East” policy. For example, both countries recently launched the initiative of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor as a counterbalance measure to China’s

One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (discussed further below).<sup>28</sup> The strategy seeks to combine the dynamism of Asia and Africa, envisaging a greater regional integration along the coasts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans by promoting high-standard infrastructure and enhanced connectivity and serving as a geopolitical counterbalance to China's growing influence in Eurasia and Africa under President Xi Jinping's OBOR initiative.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Indo-Pacific strategy predates OBOR as it explains US Strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific since the 1960s and has only recently been developed as an OBOR countermeasure.

The US joined Japan, India and Australia in underscoring a free and open Indo-Pacific, albeit with a remarkably different tone. Trump's national security strategy brusquely referred to China as a "strategic competitor" politically, economically, and militarily but also a "revisionist power" attempting to "shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests."<sup>30</sup>

As a security concept at the confluence of Pacific and Indian Oceans, the Indo-Pacific narrative acknowledges that both regions are indivisibly connected. However, the concept appears to be far more ambiguous today. This has to do with the individual interests of the four key actors and the emergence of the parallel

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and now-indivisible concept of the Quad partnership mentioned above. While maritime safety alone was a common concern in the region, the Indo-Pacific partnership goes far beyond the initial idea. The concept now includes regional security, connectivity infrastructure, development in Southeast Asia and Africa, as well as a zone of shared values. This combination unmask the initiative as a counter-project to China's Maritime Silk Road, but also to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN's) Security Community.<sup>31</sup>

## THE OBOR NARRATIVE

Meanwhile, China reasserts its Asian influence not only with the creation of RCEP and the preparation of a FTAAP, but also with the launching of OBOR — the "silk route" driven in the Eurasian area — to link through trade and connectivity the westernmost region of its territory

with Russia, Central Asia and eventually, Europe. In the financial sphere, these initiatives are complemented by the creation of new international financial institutions, such as the BRICS Bank and the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). China has also begun a process of rapprochement with Africa and Latin America, in the latter case through direct investment, loans, bilateral agreements and the CELAC-China Forum.<sup>32</sup>

Announced in 2013, China's OBOR initiative drives across the Eurasian landmass in two grand sweeps: the ocean-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt. The initiative is becoming "the centerpiece of Beijing's indirect strategy for regaining regional predominance against the backdrop of an intensified contest for supremacy with the United States."<sup>33</sup>

#### THE HETEROGENEOUS REACH OF A KEY STRATEGIC CONCEPT: THE GREATER EURASIA

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In recent years, Russia and China have both embarked on ambitious projects to integrate the Eurasian landmass. Russia originally established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in hopes of creating a Russian-dominated geopolitical block, as a way of preserving its "near abroad" (ближнее зарубежье) after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>34</sup> In a different approach, China has promoted OBOR, which aims to use Chinese financial power to physically and economically integrate Eurasia, with China at its core.<sup>35</sup> In May 2015, Russia and China made a joint statement on a massive Sino-Russian political project, linking the EEU and OBOR.<sup>36</sup> Per the Russian International Affairs Council, "This declaration was a result of a reasonable compromise — Moscow accepted China's active role in Eurasia, and Beijing agreed to treat the EEU as an equal negotiating party."<sup>37</sup> If Russia and China are able to harmonize the EEU with the Chinese OBOR program, they can form a very strong pole, and they will irreversibly change the unipolar world order.<sup>38</sup>



So far, sixty-five countries, spread over four distinct regions — Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, have signed up to take part in the OBOR.<sup>39</sup> If the harmonization between EEU and OBOR is successfully implemented, OBOR will reinforce this trend and contribute to the emergence of a vast belt of economic, political, and military power stretching from East Asia to Western Europe and from Russia to South Asia and some parts of Africa.

During the first forum of the Chinese OBOR project, held in May 2017 in Beijing, a new global geostrategic referent emerged, announcing more than just the emergence and primacy of Asia Pacific, but the reactivation of Eurasia as a potential factor of economic dynamism and a key geopolitical pivot in the international system. While China's maritime strategic presence and influence grows in the Pacific and particularly in the South China Sea, raising increasing security concerns both for the United States and China's neighboring countries, this initiative is more ambitious and complex in its mainland projection reaching different regions, including Europe.

The OBOR initiative is being promulgated in a spirit of inclusivity and is accompanied by a discourse of connectivity. However, deep asymmetries are involved, given the weight of China. Yet, the effects of this far-reaching geopolitical realignment and its impact are still uncertain in terms of its costs, and, potentially, the conflicting interests it may provoke or exacerbate, particularly among the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the general direction and actions assumed by other players and organizations in the region, the distinct traits of the governance that arise from it will play a key role in reshaping institutions, norms, and practices throughout Eurasia and beyond.<sup>41</sup>

The convergence between the OBOR (resisted by India for the connections it establishes between China and Pakistan), the EEU established between Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was initially articulated in terms of regional security between Russia, China and the Central Asian republics,<sup>42</sup> shapes a new geopolitical space not only in territorial terms but also in significant economic, geopolitical, and demographic dimensions.

The new Russian vision for Eurasia articulated around these three initiatives gives rise to an alliance that has been expressed in terms of security and more recently in commercial terms, through the SCO. This is evidenced by a meeting held in September in November 2016 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which aimed to integrate the productive chains of the Eurasian region. Additionally, the SCO explicitly poses a link with the RCEP.

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has been simultaneously forced to re-conceptualize the notion of Eurasia based on a greater link to Asia and China.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, the latter has begun a process of increasing projection and expansion towards the West in search of developing its Western territories, achieving greater access to Central Asian and European markets, and promoting a necessary security strategy to prevent the terrorist threat of some fundamentalist movements. Russia and China have succeeded in forming close political cooperation.

As a result, Moscow and Beijing try to act as partners during negotiations on the resolution of the Iranian and DPRK nuclear issues, as well as the problem of the South China Sea and the Syrian crisis. In this regard, it is interesting that Putin does not see OBOR as a threat. On the contrary, he believes that the EEU and OBOR must be combined.<sup>44</sup>

Within this framework, both Russia and China converge in the construction of a space that excludes the United States and that weakens its ability to influence the region. They are meanwhile consolidating a new core through Greater Eurasia, a potential center of economic dynamism and political cooperation that will undoubtedly affect the future of global dynamics and the space “where the most serious geopolitical action is going to take place in the world as we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” as Graham Fuller recently argued.<sup>45</sup>

Within the context of this complex interrelationship between various initiatives promoted by China and the Russian Federation, the idea of a Greater Eurasia also brought together Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and several other actors from the region. They each brought different nuances to the idea while sharing a distrust of US military aspirations and previous Western historical efforts to dominate the region.

The term “Eurasia” is rooted in the classical theories and concepts of geopolitics, particularly through the concepts of “pivot” and later “heartland,” defined and developed by British geographer Sir Hartford

Mackinder. In 1904, Mackinder identified the huge landmass east of the Urals as the “pivot,” and claimed that whoever controlled this vast territory would control global politics. Eurasia is a highly debated, contested, and illusive term with different meanings and perceptions in time and space. The term “Eurasianism” is more of a politico-ideological and philosophical concept and understanding. Its multidimensional features and aspects emerged and reemerged in various historical stages through philosophers, historians, nationalists, communists, and individual groups and leaders. The Russian geopolitical concept of Eurasianism, with all its changes and modifications, is still very powerful, dominant and alive in historic-cultural, academic, national, political, and ideological debates and discourse. Turkish Eurasianism is mainly an idea and a vision of creating a commonwealth of Turkish states inhabited by Turkish peoples, including parts of Russia and Central Asia, with different emphases and nuances.<sup>46</sup> Kazakhstan’s vision of Eurasianism and creation of the Eurasian Union is an official ideology developed and launched by President Nursultan Nazarbayev. It fundamentally differs from that of Russia, Turkey, and others in terms of underlying goals, objectives, methods, and directions and mechanisms of implementation.<sup>47</sup>

## CONTENDING GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES

Despite their differences, these ideals, including China’s Eurasian aspirations, converge in nurturing the narrative of a Greater Eurasia, clearly differentiated from the dominant narratives of Asia Pacific and Indo-Pacific that prevailed in recent years.

While Trump’s “America First” vision — which inspires the Indo-Pacific narrative — raised concerns about the end of an “Asia First” foreign policy, his administration’s challenge will lie less in how Trump makes the case for a free and open Indo-Pacific and more in how it will align that regional vision with broader domestic and global considerations in the coming months with respect to three pillars: security, economics, and democracy and human rights.<sup>48</sup>

The challenge is further complicated with regard to the priority given to security in South Asia and the Pacific and its potential to manage economic challenges in the U.S.’s favor rather than to advance opportunities for mutual gain. Meanwhile, China and Russia converge on the new narrative of a Greater Eurasia, seeking their broader interests. Before the November 2017 APEC Summit in Vietnam, Putin mentioned the idea of creating a Greater Eurasia Association, led by Russia on the basis of the EEU and OBOR. Russia consequently has reaffirmed its role as a major global player

in alliance with China. Meanwhile, China adheres to clear economic goals as the flagship of its foreign policy and its aspiration to become a global player that can contribute both to global governance and globalization, strengthening its influence beyond the Asia Pacific towards the construction of a Greater Eurasia. In this regard, Chinese-Russian relations, in addition to political and economic cooperation, are particularly important in terms of energy and military cooperation. Within the patchwork of different alliances within Eurasia, the broad and sometimes contradictory narrative serves as a useful discursive tool to guide a counterbalance strategy to the Atlantic powers. Both main actors benefit equally with the support of a large and powerful partner, which is essential for this project at the initial stage. It creates an alternative vision to international liberal order and globalization as imposed by the West.

As a result, Eurasianism, which extends throughout East Asia to Europe, and from North to South, as well as its external links, could end the dominant structure of the Pacific Basin and the existing Atlanticist cultural, economic and military structure in Eurasia. However, it is also becoming a narrative that could inspire the redesign of the contours of a new global order.*f*

#### ENDNOTES

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- 32 Andrés Serbin "China y América Latina y el Caribe frente a un cambio de ciclo: narrativas y estrategias," in Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas and Hubert Gehring (eds.), *La proyección de China en América Latina y el Caribe* (Bogotá: Editorial Javeriana-Konrad Adenauer Schiftung, 2017), 73–98.
- 33 Nadège Roland, "China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative," *The National Bureau of Asian Research* (2017): 178. As the author adds "...the implications would be certainly far-reaching: an integrated and interconnected Eurasian continent with enduring authoritarian political systems, where China's influence has grown to the point that it has muted any regional opposition and gained regional acquiescence, a new regional order with its distinctive political and economic institutions, whose norms and rules block the future spread of what the west claims as universal values, and a continent stronghold insulated to some degree from U.S. sea power."
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- 38 Mher Sahakyan, “Rethinking Russia’s Return to Global Big Policy,” *Modern Diplomacy*, December 18, 2017 <<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2017/12/18/rethinking-russia-s-return-to-global-big-policy/>> (Accessed March 12, 2018).
- 39 Adriana Erthal Abdenur and Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, *Trans-Regional Cooperation in a Multipolar World: How is the Belt and Road Initiative Relevant to Latin America?* London School of Economics and Political Science/Global South Unit Working Paper No.1, 2018, 14.
- 40 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- 41 Abdenur, 15.
- 42 It has more recently become an economic agreement that includes India and Pakistan and could potentially include Turkey and Iran. Some steps had been taken recently in this regard. On one hand the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey around Syria; the adherence in December 2017 of Iran to the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Sochi Summit the same between the three nations, shows their convergence around an axis that contests Western powers, and ‘drags behind them, sometimes with certain reluctance, other Central Asian countries.
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- 44 Sahakyan.
- 45 Graham Fuller, “What is Eurasianism?” *Eurasian Studies: Scientific-Analytical Media of the Eurasian Sector, CCEIS, HSE*, September 18, 2016 <<https://lobelog.com/what-is-eurasianism>> (Accessed March 12, 2018).
- 46 Current Turkish Eurasianism has four distinct variants and emphasis: a Pro-Russian Eurasianism oriented towards cooperation and an alliance with the Russian Federation, shrugging off the NATO tutelage; a Pan-Turkic Eurasianism, which rejects alliances both with Russia and the West and appeals to common Turkic roots in Central Asia; a Islamist Eurasianism, pointing to Turkey’s Ottoman and Islamic legacy; and a Erdoganist Eurasianism, where Erdogan’s charismatic leadership will assert Turkey on a global stage, threatening US and European interests in a rebellion against the West-centered global order. Metin Gurcan, “The rise of the Eurasianist Vision in Turkey,” *Al-Monitor*, May 17 2017 <<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-rise-of-euroasianist-vision.html>>.
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