



MICHEL FOUCHER

Chair of applied Geopolitics at College of World Studies; Former French Ambassador to Latvia; Former Director of the Policy Planning Staff of the French Foreign Ministry

I think it would be useful to recall some basics about geography before sharing any geopolitical thoughts and geo-economic considerations, especially when discussing Eurasia, an extremely vague concept with an extremely variable perimeter, and we don't know exactly what reality this term with multiple meanings can be based on. So for the conference I've prepared a very simple map to situate a certain number of invariables, and then I'll make some comments or, more exactly, I'll offer very different readings of the same reality.

If we take things clockwise starting with Korea, Japan, China, the ASEAN, India, Iran, which is a Middle Eastern country actually fascinated by Asia, future emerging countries, the Arabian peninsula, Turkey, the European Union, Russia and the Union we've just talked about, you see an immense area, the supposedly continuous Eurasian landmass with at least five billion people. It's a polycentric area with seemingly endless stretches, immense distances and 12 to 13 time zones. In 2009, President Medvedev decided to cut the number of time zones in Russia from 11 to 9, and then to 8, as a way of improving administrative efficiency. Otherwise the governor of Vladivostok couldn't find anybody in Moscow to report to or receive instructions from. The spaces, distances, resources — the area is overflowing with resources for geological reasons — harsh climates — it's either too hot or too cold, too dry or too wet — these are fundamental challenges — major population centres, elements of durability. When Emperor Augustus ruled, a quarter of humanity was already living in the plains of eastern China. And Europe and China were already trading partners: Chinese vases have been found in the ashes of Pompeii. So these are ancient centres, poles, accumulation phenomena, solids, voids, centres and peripheries, old borders and recent ones, ancient States and States in formation, flows between poles, roads, obligatory passages, strategic passes, rivers, mountains and wind. Let's have a little poetry in Seoul today with this quote from Wang Shuren (15th-16th c.): You shall wander all together, singing and calling out to one another; you shall have the wind for food and the dew for drink.

The map lends itself to multiple interpretations of subjective geography. It's full of multiple and contradictory geopolitical representations. London 1904. Mackinder considered Eurasia the heartland, the centre where everything would play out: heartland/rimland. The rimland, Mackinder would justify Kennan, the policy of containment after 1945 and today, in the West, NATO, in the East, the Seventh Fleet. As for Mackinder's idea of the pivot at the centre of Eurasia, in the past few years Washington has shifted it to the Pacific coast. This is polemical Eurasia. Mackinder's references were mainland Sparta and thalassocratic Athens. That's an extremely strong image. It's a permanent mental map in Western diplomacy, especially in London and Washington. Eurasia is a concept that returns in Russian emigration to Western Europe from 1920-1930 to move beyond the image of an Orthodox Christian Russia, in other words a European one, and emphasize a Russia that's European and Asian at the same time, a Russia that could have another destiny. The representation of the heartland is adopted, in a way. The geographer Savitsky spoke about the median continent, a continent that brings people together. This idea came back in other forms after '91. There are hundreds of books and specialists on these issues, which for lack of a better term is called neo-Eurasianism. The goal for the Russian elites, of course, is to become a centre of the global system again. This is both a mental map and a project. Let's call it instituted Eurasia. Seen from Astana in Kazakhstan, Eurasia is first and foremost a university—the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Gumilyov was an expert on Eurasia who advocated closer ties between Russia and Turkey, between the Turkish world and the Russian one. President Nazarbayev proposed the idea of a Eurasian union in a speech at Moscow University in 1994. The Kazakh elites are doing some real thinking about Kazakhstan's geopolitical status and that translates into what is now called multi-vector diplomacy, for obvious reasons. Let's call it median Eurasia or intermediary Eurasia. There are other ways of reading the Caucasus and Turkey. I'll spare you the details. You can see that this type of representation has a major drawback. It's made up of chosen pieces. Exit the United States, exit the American continent. This cutting up can be an illusion.

A word about instituted Eurasia. This is an economic union project under Russian leadership that took effect in January 2015. The idea is that there's a force field between the two poles of the Eurasian landmass that must be organised around a centre independent of power, less prosperous, less populated, but with plentiful resources, and that must be put on the same level as the United States and China. This isn't about a return to the Soviet Union. It may be about—but this can be discussed—Moscow asserting its right to meddle in its neighbours' affairs. Geographers in Saint Petersburg have developed the idea of global regionalisation, with a theoretical elaboration as a factor of multipolarity. The reference for the Eurasian economic union is the European Union. It's cut-and-paste in formal and institutional terms. The project obviously has its limits because, first, Central Asia has not been this open to outside influences for centuries; second, some States — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan — are very touchy about their sovereignty; third, the United States is absent from this group while at the same time very present; and fourth, China is going through a transformation of its economic influence and strategic presence. Kazakhstan belongs to the Eurasian economic union but China is its main trading partner. There's another Eurasia, a major Eurasia, a bigger Eurasia in the continental sense, a Eurasian region, a "one belt-one road". President Xi talked about that last year at Nazarbayev University in Astana. You can see there's a kind of continuity and interaction because this isn't really the same Eurasia. Contrary to what people say, I think China's priorities are internal, domestic, and national. China is concentrating on integrating the west, like it integrated the south and the northeast and will, in the future, integrate the southwest. The first goal is to integrate areas outside the 18 provinces. This is a long-term process. China also wants to ensure friendliness or stability in its immediate vicinity. And it's meeting a challenge. Globalisation is maritime: containers on big ships carry 90% of the world's trade. The challenge is the continental form of globalisation. It's more expensive. It's much more complicated. There's a Chinese theory that will be mentioned in a moment. Another challenge is opening up to the world. For example, you can see on the map that Chinese companies are trying to speed up the completion of the port of Gwadar, Pakistan, in order to open up western China. But the Indians are responding 80 kilometres further west, in Chabahar, Iran, with massive investments to offer Afghanistan an alternative to Pakistan as an outlet to the sea.

I will conclude with this: Eurasia as trans-Eurasia, in other words an area of passage, a transit area. When President Xi came to France, he went to Lyon to visit the Mérieux Institute. In Belgium, he gave a speech at the college of Bruges. Then he went to Duisbourg to meet a train that had left a Chinese port 17 days earlier. Every day, four trains from Duisbourg and three from Hamburg set out for China, a total of 14 or 15 trains per week: Deutsche Bahn, the Russian, Polish and Belarusian railways, 14 trains, and 80,000 tonnes a month. It's more expensive but much faster: 10 to 12 days less. Fujitsu Siemens Computers exports its products from China to the West on 50 container trains. So does Hewlett Packard.

The logistical dimension is important in these vast Eurasian stretches. If I had to decide, I'd say the future will be structured by geo-economics, in other words by investments to build infrastructure in this area that will open it up to the world. That's what will have geopolitical effects. The goal is to establish what the Chinese call "widespread connectivity". Europeans would stand to gain by considering — and not just in terms of railways — the strategic and geo-economic challenges in this part of the world. But Europe must make an effort to have this global vision, which is transforming 12 or 13 time zones right before our eyes.