

Report on the “**The Eurasian Pacific – Geopolitical Moments and Unfulfilled Promise**” Panel

33rd International Geographical Congress, Beijing, China

Chaired by KUBS’s Serghei Golunov (Faculty of Law, Kyushu University);

with papers by Valery Konyshev (St. Petersburg State University);
Aleksander Sergunin (St Petersburg University);
Serghei Golunov;
Varvara Krechetova (independent researcher);
Sophie Hou (Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon);
Edward Boyle (Kyushu University).



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On August 23, members of the KUBS team Serghei Golunov and Edward Boyle took part in the panel “The Eurasian Pacific – Geopolitical Moments and Unfulfilled Promise”, held as part of the 33rd International Geographical Congress held in Beijing, China on August 21-25. Serghei Golunov served as Convener and Chair for this panel.

Valery Konyshev’s (St. Petersburg State University, Russia) presentation “New Silk Road and the Northern Sea Route: is China able to combine them?” considered opportunities and challenges related to Chinese participation in the two projects. On the one hand, Russia supports Chinese participation and makes serious efforts to develop its transportation infrastructure. On the other hand, competing integrationist projects in Eurasia, economic differences between the participants, and political contradictions can pose serious obstacles, especially for the New Silk Road project.

Aleksander Sergunin’s (St Petersburg University, Russia) presentation, entitled “Theorizing Russia’s Policies towards BRICS”, examined the most popular theoretical interpretations of these policies. Adherents of the (neo)realist power transition theory consider the BRICS to be an institution established by reformist states that do not want to radically change the system of international rules and norms but rather to adjust them in a way that would prevent unilateral domination by certain powers. Adherents of the soft power approach argue that BRICS prioritizes this dimension in its agenda while not considering hard security issues. In the light of critical status theories, Russian policies concerning BRICS could be interpreted by examining issues of reputation, status-relativity, and emotional factors rather than through purely rationalist and pragmatic considerations. The presenter argued that these and other theories are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and that a multidisciplinary approach is needed to address the issue of Russian policy towards the BRICS in all its complexity.

Serghei Golunov’s (Kyushu University, Japan) presentation on “Russia’s Cross-Border Cooperation in the Far East: Towards a Distinctive Strategy?” evaluated Russia’s prospects of developing an efficient cross-border cooperation strategy that would serve its recently launched “Turn to the East” policy. The presenter started by highlighting the key features of existing cross-border cooperation patterns that have proved to be the most efficient for the EU, North America, China, and ASEAN. He then proceeded to analyze the applicability of these policies for Russia’s cross-border cooperation with China, Mongolia, North Korea, Japan, and the

USA. The author argued that all of these patterns could only function to a limited extent in Russia, as Moscow remains reluctant to grant regional authorities more power, and has to date singularly failed to reduce corruption and customs fraud in its borderland economic zones. Still, Russia remains very interested in developing more efficient cross-border cooperation with its Asian neighbors and in altering the existing “raw materials for manufactured goods” pattern of its cross-border trade. The presenter concluded that Russia could use some elements of the “Chinese model” of cross-border cooperation while trying to achieve these purposes.

Varvara Krechetova’s (independent researcher, Russia) presentation, “Northeast Asia Institutional Gap: Geographical Analysis”, departed from the common assumptions regarding the discrepancy between the growing economic interdependence of the region and its perennially underdeveloped political cooperation. While the North East Asian Countries’ (Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, North Korean, Russian, and South Korean) potentially form a regional cooperation grouping greater than the ones of the EU, MERCOSUR, and NAFTA in terms of GDP, territory, and population, there is no efficient regional North East Asian organization that would include all six states. This institutional deficit can be explained by several factors, including the complicated political history of the region, territorial disputes, different political systems, and the North Korean nuclear issue. The presenter argued that institutionalized cooperation is still needed to tackle security threats and to manage growing economic interdependence. She expressed the hope that progress on the path towards an institutionalization of North East Asian cooperation could still be possible if all countries in the region would start with flexible, non-binding, region-wide agreements prioritizing economic issues, before addressing political and security agendas further down the road.

Sophie Hou’s (Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, France) presentation on “The Eurasian Pacific: The Unfulfilled Promise of an Energy Pivot?” was focused on the problems and prospects for the re-orientation of Russian exports of mineral resources in the context of Moscow’s “Turn to the East” policy. On the one hand, Russia has a huge supply potential while Asian Pacific demand grows rapidly. However, on the other hand, Russian exports are seriously constrained by the remoteness of most of the deposits, its limited transportation capabilities, and price disagreements with China. The presentation highlighted how difficult it would be for policymakers in Moscow to attempt to square this particular circle.

Finally, Edward Boyle’s (Kyushu University) presentation on “Geopolitical pivots and blue national soil: the difficulties of free-flowing territory” look at sought to contextualize this invocation of pivots through an examination of the transformation in the use of the term between Mackinder’s 1904 article that mapped “The Natural Seats of Power” and Hilary Clinton’s 2011 *Foreign Policy* op-ed that called for the necessity of the US ‘pivoting’ towards ‘new global realities’. Although the term ‘blue national soil’ failed to receive sustained analysis, the paper pointed to the significance of the transformation of pivot itself from noun to verb as indicative of the contemporary understanding of territory as fluid and mutable, as compared the static blocks of Imperial territory atop which Mackinder made his pronouncements. However, questions remain regarding the extent to which this transformation in state understandings of territory find reflection in specific geopolitical practices.

Unfortunately, six presenters meant there was no time to take questions at the end of the panel, but the lively discussion engendered by the papers continued into the subsequent coffee break.