

## Russia-China Relations in Central Asia: An Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Russia and China relations with Central Asia are a problematic task. Both countries have become strong believers of multilateral organizations, from regional groupings like the SCO and CSTO to the United Nations on a global scale. These two powers have found their interests coincide strangely well in Central Asia, at least in the short term. Russia and China are now affiliated together beside a hegemonic United States that seeks both to preserve stability and to transform the political landscape of Central Asia. Moscow and Beijing perceive these two goals as contradictory, and have opted to support repressive Central Asian regimes as the best hedge against the new security threats of terrorism and extremism. This paper will clarify Russian and Chinese interests and policy toward Central Asia. I address the various elements in Russian and Chinese relations with the countries of post-Soviet Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), examine the roles of both countries in the SCO and other regional groupings, and assess the implications of Russian and Chinese policies and activities in Central Asia for U.S. national interests. It then examines Russian and Chinese interactions in the realms of economics, security, and Central Asia and considers the implications of the Russian-Chinese partnership for the United States. The paper first considers political and security issues, then turns to the various forms of economic cooperation and challenges in the region, particularly in energy. Finally, I evaluate the important role of spread politics and population issues for Russia, China, and Central Asia.

**Key words:** Political and Security Issues, Energy Issues, Multilateral Organizations

### Introduction

For Central Asia watchers 2009 seemed to mark a watershed for the region, for it was then that the spigots on the long discussed Turkmenistan-China natural gas pipeline were at last opened. The 1833km pipeline, running through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was heralded not only as a precursor to further regional integration and a feat of engineering—being built in just 18 months—but was also accompanied by discussions of the simultaneous ascendancy of China in Central Asia and the end of regional hegemony for Moscow. That China's influence in Central Asia has grown exponentially in the previous decade is undeniable. 2010 saw Beijing establish itself as the region's primary trading partner—negotiating deals worth an estimated €23 billion (\$30 billion), increasing impressively from only \$572 million in 1992. The numbers exceeded the EU's trade figures, but also Russia's, which, alarmingly for Moscow, fell to third place at €17 billion (\$22 billion). A mid the myriad of figures concerning pipelines and trade, it would be prudent to begin by asking what exactly China seeks in Central Asia.

In an area that has seen its importance rise precipitously since the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the attendant dialogue of the region post-2014 falls into speculation of what China's rise means for each country in Central Asia and, indeed, for the Russian Federation. EUCAM's Security and Development project, Sébastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra, and Marlène Laruelle identified China's four main interests in Central Asia, keeping its western neighbourhood stable to decrease the risk of a situation that would necessitate Chinese intervention; 3) gaining access to energy and raw materials; 4) opening up Central Asian markets to Chinese companies and products.

While the first two issues are largely Sino-specific, governments in Central Asia have been keen to exploit Beijing's desire for reliable sources of energy and market share, seeing the burgeoning economic relationship as reciprocally beneficial. For China's Communist Party leadership, energy is critically important in order to maintain stability

and growth. Faced with numerous challenges, including environmental degradation and rampant corruption, keeping the lights on and factories producing are essential elements in controlling public disaffection. As over half of Asia's overall energy imports travel through the narrow three-mile-wide Malacca Straights, a significant maritime dispute in South East Asia carries the potential to reverberate far into the Chinese hinterland.

Thus Beijing's acquisition of Central Asian energy is not merely sound business policy, but an insurance against a serious threat to its foreign energy links in Africa and the Middle East. Thus Beijing's current motivations in Central Asia are quite clear, and follow the similar arrangements established all over the world. The countries comprising Central Asia are strategically located on, or very close to, China's western border. For all of China's progress in Central Asia, it would be premature to believe that it carries enough momentum to dislodge Russia from the traditional position of significance it has maintained with its southern neighbours since the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Platitudes about a new Great Game arising in Central Asia make headlines and panel discussions more sensational, the facts surrounding China's prevalence belie the contemporary narrative of its dominance that seems to focus entirely on Turkmen energy contracts (notoriously difficult for all parties involved) and wider regional trade deals.

### **Russia Diplomacy in Central Asia**

Historically, the dominant great power in the region has been Russia—all Central Asian states were former Soviet republics. Central Asia continues to be a key Russian sphere of influence and an important part of Moscow's "Near Abroad." One Chinese Central Asian specialist describes the region as "deeply Russified." This status has been underscored by the presence of Russian troops and ethnic Russian inhabitants, as well as strong economic ties and established transportation links to Russia. In addition to military and economic influence, the impact of Russia in Central Asia also includes ethnic and linguistic dimensions. Approximately 10 million ethnic Russians call the five former Soviet Central Asian republics home, and the lingua franca of the region continues to be Russian. The majority of these Russians reside in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Moreover, Russia, unlike China, has a number of military installations in the region in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan staffed by an estimated several thousand military personnel. Russia continues to have a significant geostrategic interest in Central Asia. Since 2002, Moscow has led the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which binds Russia to Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The CSTO, like its Chinese counterpart, the SCO, promotes military cooperation, including joint exercises against terrorism and drug trafficking. Russia, of course, is also a member of the SCO. (The SCO consists of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.) While China is not a member of CSTO, Beijing has maintained good relations with Moscow during both post-Soviet eras. There have been regular summits between Russian and Chinese leaders and cooperation in diplomatic, security and economic spheres, including under SCO auspices. Although Beijing views Moscow as a competitor in Central Asia, Chinese leaders find it useful to avoid confrontation and work cooperatively as much as possible. China does not perceive Russia as a significant threat to Chinese interests in the region. Indeed, many Chinese analysts view Russia as a weak great power that is likely to weaken even further in the future. Moscow in many ways serves as a useful partner for Beijing. For example, both Russia and China have a shared interest in countering U.S. influence in Central Asia and elsewhere.

### **Chinese Diplomacy in Central Asia**

In recent years, China's leaders have been extremely active around the world, traveling far and wide for summits and state visits. But their most frequent stopovers are in Asia. Central Asia and the surrounding countries are important destinations. In June 2011, for example, President Hu Jintao undertook a nine-day trip and "conducted intensive diplomatic activities, visited three countries [Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine] and five cities [Astana, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Yalta], attended two international conferences [the annual SCO heads of state summit and 15th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum], and participated in more than 50 bilateral and multilateral activities."

More recently, in September 2013, Hu's successor, President Xi Jinping, undertook an extended

excursion in Central Asia. In doing so, he became the third consecutive PRC head of state to pay such concerted attention to the region. Xi began his tour with a two-day visit to Turkmenistan, where the focus was on expanded energy cooperation. The Chinese president ceremonially opened a new gas field at Galkynysh and committed to the construction of a new multi-billion dollar liquid natural gas pipeline. Known as “Route D,” this pipeline will become the second route and reaffirm China’s status as the number one customer for Turkmenistan’s gas. From there, Xi flew to Russia, where he attended the G-20 Summit meeting in St. Petersburg.

Following this high-profile meeting, President Xi visited Kazakhstan. There he gave a major speech focusing on PRC policy toward Central Asia at Nazarbayev University. Xi promoted the idea of a “Silk Road economic belt” and announced a number of new Chinese initiatives, including a ten-year program to fund scholarships for 30,000 students from SCO countries and another to pay for 10,000 teachers and students from SCO member state Confucius Institutes to visit China. Xi’s next stop was Uzbekistan, where the Chinese leader signed deals on oil, gas, and gold reportedly worth US\$15 billion. The PRC president’s final stop was in Kyrgyzstan, where he participated in his first annual SCO heads of state summit in Bishkek and signed deals with his Kyrgyz counterpart worth US\$3 billion, including funding for a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China and an oil refinery. Multilaterally, Chinese policy has concentrated on creating a stable condominium-like arrangement that is attentive to Chinese interests and constrains the future growth of Russian power. Meanwhile, Russia has found the SCO to be not just a worthwhile venue for basic Sino-Russian cooperation but also a way for Moscow to mitigate Beijing’s influence in the region. Moreover, China uses the organization to limit the influence of outside powers such as the United States and India. In short, the SCO is a key management mechanism that Beijing uses to demonstrate growing influence in Central Asia.

### **Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership**

In the post-Cold War era, Russia and China have held similar views on a number of strategic issues, though their partnership has been, and remains,

limited (Garnett 2000; Garnett 2001; Anderson 1997; Kuchins 2002; Brzezinski 1997; Trenin 1999). Both countries have expressed concerns about what they view as U.S. hegemony. In 1996, they agreed that NATO should be disbanded rather than expanded (Rozman 2000). Both Russia and China harshly criticized NATO’s 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia because of their opposition to intervention in what they considered a state’s sovereign, internal affairs (Lampton 2001, 228-229). Both resisted the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (Kuchins 2002, 210-211). Russia and China have held similar positions regarding the war on terror, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and international conflict management. Both opposed the war in Iraq.

China has supported Russia’s handling of Chechnya. Russia has reciprocated, supporting Beijing’s position on Taiwan and backing Chinese efforts to suppress separatism in Xinjiang and Tibet (Lo 2004, 296). Russia and China both oppose what they view as U.S. attempts to diminish the role of the United Nations and the Security Council, where both Russia and China hold vetoes (Lukin 2003, 311). Russia and China both have opposed tough sanctions on Iran or North Korea for their nuclear programs. Both Russia and China resent pressure from the West on democracy, market liberalization, freedom of the press, and religious freedom. Russian and Chinese leaders frequently declare their intention to create a multipolar global order (Wishnick 2001, 799). Former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov once called for the formation of a “strategic triangle” of Russia, China, and India to act as a stabilizing force in a multipolar world (Kuchins 2002, 206; Lo 2003, 77). This proved impractical, but Russia and China announced the formation of a “strategic partnership” in 1996, setting in motion a process that culminated in the July 2001 signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation (Wilson 2004, 148-164). In this treaty, the two states pledged to continue developing a “strategic cooperative partnership,” renounced the use or threat of force against each other, and reaffirmed the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity in their mutual relations.

The treaty also called for an increased role for the United Nations in international politics. It specified that “neither party will participate in any alliance or bloc which damages the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other party” or allow a third party to use its territory for such ends, and it provided for immediate mutual consultations in the event of a crisis (Wilson 2004, 163). The treaty did not bind the two countries in a formal military alliance and did not contain a mutual defense clause, but some of its pledges were typical of alliances (Wishnick 2001, 805). The SCO’s declaration on U.S. bases in Central Asia demonstrated Russia and China’s willingness to use this organization to limit U.S. influence in Central Asia (Blank 2006d). The joint military exercises showed the two countries’ increasing unity in opposition to a U.S.-dominated security order (Wishnick 2005). Although the exercises did not signify the creation of a political-military alliance, they demonstrated a deepening strategic partnership and an intensification of military-technical cooperation (Lo 2006, 10, 12).

On the surface, the closer Sino-Russian relationship that these actions represented seemed to signal incipient power balancing against the United States. Structural realism contends that weaker powers will work together to balance the power of stronger states. Kenneth Waltz makes the classic case for balancing: “Secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger state that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking” (Waltz 1979, 127). Although a striking aspect of contemporary international relations is the lack of power balancing (Ikenberry 2002b, 3), Waltz argues that structural realism retains its explanatory power in the post-Cold War era (Waltz 2002, 30). The U.S. position of pre-eminence is indeed a “unipolar moment,” Waltz argues, and from a historical perspective, balancing will come “in the blink of an eye” (Waltz 2002, 54). “One does, however,” Waltz writes, “observe balancing tendencies already taking place” (Waltz 2002, 52). By expanding NATO and criticizing Moscow and Beijing for human rights abuses, Waltz argues, the

United States has pushed Russia and China closer together (Waltz 2002, 46, 63-64).

Indeed, some academic and policy analysts argue that post-Cold War Sino-Russian relations conform closely to structural realist analysis. In this view, Russia and China, both acutely aware of the distribution of power and their own positions in the international system, have sought to challenge the unipolar order by promoting multipolarity (Wilson 2004, 197). Moreover, some analysts have argued that Sino-Russian relations, previously limited by a history of mistrust and divergent interests, may have turned a corner as a result of several factors. Russia is apprehensive about pro-Western governments in the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia, while China worries about growing U.S. ties with India and Japan. Both Russia and China are concerned about the U.S. presence in Central Asia.

In addition, growing Sino-Russian energy ties may further enhance the partnership. Russia, riding a wave of high oil prices, has grown in self-confidence and is questioning the benefits of cooperation with the West (Bremmer 2006). In the view of these analysts, both the international distribution of power and a convergence of interests are pushing Russia and China closer together in opposition to U.S. hegemony.

### **U.S. Interests in Central Asia**

Given the structural limits on the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, both generally and in the context of Central Asia, U.S. foreign policy can prevent the emergence of a Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia that would be damaging to U.S. interests. At the global level, Russia and China each have higher stakes in relations with the United States than with each other, especially in the economic sphere. China is unlikely to risk a sharp break in relations with Washington while it is still building its national power and thus dependent on the U.S.-led economic and security orders. Likewise, Russia recognizes its need for integration with global economic institutions, as seen by its aggressive pursuit of World Trade Organization membership. Therefore, by maintaining at least sound bilateral relations with both Russia and China, the United States can prevent a Sino-Russian counter balancing alliance.

U.S. policy should seek to ensure that Beijing and Moscow each retain higher economic stakes with Washington than with each other, prevent U.S. relations with each country from deteriorating simultaneously, and demonstrate that Russia and China each pose a greater long-term threat to the other than the United States does to either (Lampton 2001, 232). From the perspective of U.S.-Chinese bilateral relations, as long as the United States remains economically engaged with China and adheres to the one-China policy, it is unlikely to push China into enhanced strategic cooperation with Russia (Burles 1999, 41). Russia's wariness about China as a potential long-term threat is likely to limit its own willingness to pursue an alliance with Beijing. In the international sphere, the standoff over Iran's nuclear program is the current crisis most likely to affect Sino-Russian relations. If the United States takes military action against Iran in response to Tehran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, this would probably push Russia and China closer together. However, given the logic circumscribing the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, such action would be unlikely to raise Sino-Russian relations to a qualitatively higher level such as an anti-American alliance.

The United States should maintain its commitment to Central Asia. The Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks starkly demonstrated the direct security threat to which instability in Central Asia can give rise. The most important U.S. objective in Central Asia should be to promote stability and prevent this region from posing a threat to vital U.S. interests, especially to homeland security (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 93). In order to achieve the goal of stability in Central Asia, U.S. policy should seek to prevent regional conflicts that could invite great-power intervention and to prevent outside powers, especially a single hegemonic power, from gaining dominance in the region (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 97). One possible strategy for reducing the likelihood of great-power conflict in Central Asia, which also would help forestall the possibility of a Sino-Russian condominium, would be to establish a regional concert. Under a concert, both the small countries in the region and the major outside powers would exercise restraint and place the interests of stability over unilateral interests they might be tempted to pursue

through a more aggressive posture (Fairbanks et al. 2001, 101, 104-105). This is a worthy policy goal, and the United States should pursue it.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles stand in the way of achieving a concert. In the years after the Napoleonic wars, the Concert of Europe functioned on the basis of shared support among the major powers for conservative, monarchical values (Kissinger 1957; Kissinger 1994). By contrast, Moscow and Beijing hold different values from those of Washington. Politically, the United States seeks to promote democracy; an objective Russia and China do not share. In economic terms, the primary obstacle is likely to come from Russia, which ruled over Central Asia during the tsarist and Soviet periods and now seeks to revive its influence in the region. China's influence in the region is growing, but its strategic orientation is still to-ward the east and southeast. Whereas the United States seeks to nurture free-market principles, Russia harbours ambitions of economic hegemony over the region, especially in the energy sector.

The United States recognizes that Russia has legitimate interests in the region but objects to the strong-arm tactics it uses to increase its influence there. Russia, on the other hand, does not recognize that the United States has a long-term role in the region beyond fighting terrorism. If a concert is not fully achievable, the United States should seek to expand consultation with Russia, China, and other outside powers as much as possible. The U.S. strategy should begin from the recognition that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing share a number of common interests in Central Asia, beginning with the vital interest of eliminating the threats from terrorism and Islamic radicalism (Gill and Oresman 2003, 32; Allison 2001, 237). Robert Cooper has suggested that when confronting a difficult problem, it is often helpful to enlarge the context (Cooper 2003). In Central Asia, enlarging the regional context highlights further areas of common interest among the United States, Russia, and China. It is helpful to conceptualize the region not simply as the five former Soviet Central Asian states, but as "Inner Asia," encompassing, in addition, southern and eastern Russia; China's frontier regions of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet; and Afghanistan (Legvold 2003a, 70; Allison 2001,

263-264). Viewed in this context, conflict resolution becomes an issue of pressing concern, one that requires consultation among the great powers. An explosion of violence in the Ferghana Valley, instability in Xinjiang, or conflict resulting from separatist sentiments among ethnic Russians in northern Kazakhstan would create a crisis for the international system and threaten to attract great-power intervention. None of these potential crises is likely to explode soon, but if any of them did, the consequences would be profound. The United States has a strong interest in preventing these conflicts from erupting, an interest it shares with Russia and China. It should consult with Russia and China far in advance to discuss ways to ensure that a potential outbreak of violence in any of these regions would not lead to great-power conflict (Legvold 2003, 71-73).

### **Energy and Economic control**

In the energy field, the success of regional attempts has been limited. Despite some serious Russian efforts to coordinate energy relations, the Central Asian states have vigorously resisted, often with the tacit support of China and Iran. Nevertheless, Russia has been important in the energy sector, largely due to its earlier monopoly over oil and gas transit routes. However, Russia's monopoly in the energy sector has ended and today the situation is much more diverse in terms of buyers, sellers, and transport than it has ever been. Russian trade with Central Asia has significantly decreased relative to other actors over time. This has especially been the case since 2007 when the trade decline accelerated as financial crisis hit the international community.

China has been able to offer commodities of equal or better quality at a substantially lower price compared to those produced in Russia. Today the volume of Chinese trade even taking weapons sales and the energy sector into account is roughly 10 to 15 percent larger than the Russian volume of trade, according to various and greatly differing estimates. The same trend is apparent when considering loans to the Central Asian states. Foreign governments have promised a great deal to the Central Asian governments from foreign states, but relatively few loans have been implemented. This is a product of both a lack of engagement and the failure of the Central Asian governments to fulfil the terms of the agreements. China has also emerged in this capacity as the

primary actor and over time it has become apparent that Russia simply does not have the economic strength to back its promises. Russia has been eager to continue to controlling exports from the Central Asian states not because Moscow needs the extra oil and gas imports but rather because it wants to re-export the petroleum for a profit. The Central Asian energy market has in fact sustained the Russian market with low-cost energy while sales to Europe are made at much higher prices. For example, Russia imports gas from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan at prices as low as \$100 per 1,000 cubic meters, but Russia sells gas of the same quality for as much as \$250 per 1,000 cubic meters in the West.

This is a trend that has neither benefitted the producers nor consumers. As a result, Central Asian governments have chafed at this policy, as these governments have realized the potential benefit of avoiding Russia as a transit route. Increasingly, Chinese, European, and Central Asian governments are interested in developing alternatives to today's most-used energy infrastructure and security agreements, which are controlled by Russia. The control over the pipeline system and the energy trade, in general, reinforces the Russian desire to reconnect with the region politically and militarily, even if at a more modest level than in the past. The reasoning behind this lies in the fact that the region is an important source of income for Russia. The substantial mark-up on energy product resale to Europe imported from Central Asia is one of the driving factors for Russian interest in the region today. A primary motive for the Russian strategy in Central Asia has been to prevent any attempts to circumvent Russia's control over Central Asian energy sales, such as the Trans-Caspian, Nabucco, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, and Trans-Anatolian pipelines.

Moscow has applied significant pressure to prevent circumvention. As a result, Turkmenistan has temporarily turned its back on the Southern Corridor Energy Projects even though China, Iran and Europe have pushed for a more diversified energy network that would avoid Russia to a significant degree. Russia's strategies to control energy have decreased internal trade among the Central Asian states such that today there is very low intraregional energy trade. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are now primarily

exporting their energy products out of the CIS and EEC area (apart from Russia). In turn, Russia provides energy for the states—Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—that lack energy. Moreover, consumer trade between the Central Asian states is notably low because they are competing against rather than complementing each other due to the lack of economic diversification in Central Asia. This intraregional drawback has propelled Russia and China into the region's the primary trading partners. If the Central Asian states are serious about decreasing their dependency on Russia and China, intraregional trade must increase and the infrastructure will need to be improved. However, it would seem to be unrealistic to expect this in the short term due to the reluctance of Russia and China to allow new actors into the region, problematic government structures, and an investment climate that is far from secure.

### Conclusion

China's influence in Central Asia has grown significantly in the past decade in diplomatic, economic, and even military spheres, albeit starting from a very low level in each case. The Central Asian states will likely continue to work to maintain good relations with China, in part out of a desire to avoid antagonizing Beijing and in part out of an interest in balancing against Moscow. Just as important are the economic opportunities that China provides. Nevertheless, Central Asian countries continue to look to Russia to balance against the prospect of Chinese domination in the realms of the economy, diplomacy, and defense. Central Asian capitals appear to see Moscow as a more reliable partner and less of a threat to their sovereignty than Beijing. Nevertheless, China's management of its relations with neighbours to the west in the 21st century has been quite impressive. Beijing's response to the daunting problems it confronts in Central Asia and western China has been to skilfully project an image of great strength and outward confidence to mask extreme weakness and inner insecurity: an Empty Fortress strategy. Through deft use of high-profile diplomacy and modest military exercises, combined with growing economic clout, Beijing has promoted the image of a powerful and benevolent China. This is in spite of a defense posture in the west that is Spartan and stretched: The Lanzhou MR is vast, and major military units

are deployed well away from its borders with Central Asia.

In Central Asia, energy, economics, and security are often mentioned as three disparate issues with a common denominator. We return again to Sino-Turkmen energy cooperation to see what that relationship has meant for Russia in the wider framework of its regional energy interests. Following an agreement signed in June 2012 between Turkmenistan's national gas company and the CNPC, future Turkmen gas deliveries are slated to eventually reach 2.3 trillion cubic feet/year. This development, coupled with the thirty five year production sharing agreement between Turkmenistan and China which confers on the CNPC the status of 'the only foreign company with direct access to an onshore development' in Turkmenistan, is indicative of Ashgabat's outlier status among its neighbours concerning energy relations with China.

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