



# Understanding Russia and China in Central Asia

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In classic geopolitics or security studies, discussions invariably revolve around the interests of “great powers” as they vie for influence or domination in “contested” regions. Scholars and policymakers often conceptualize Central Asia in this way. When looking at the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, it is easy to resurrect the great game analogies and boil the competition down to two states: Russia and China.

The impulse is natural. After all, other interested parties—among them Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan—lack the capacity to project power as robustly as these two large states. Meanwhile, actors situated outside of Asia, such as the United States and the European Union, are preoccupied with challenges elsewhere, and pay only minimal attention to Central Asia. While the policy statements, strategic plans, and programs of these nations express clear interests in and around Central Asia, in practice they often fall short of the sustained efforts being made there by Russia and China.

However, to assume as a result that the nations of Central Asia are now under the control of Moscow and Beijing would be a mistake. The reality is considerably more complex. One needs to assess the real interests of these large neighbors, as well as understand that the Central Asian countries themselves have the inherent capacity to make choices.

## Resurgent Russian interest

Russia colonized most of Central Asia in the 19th century and incorporated the region into that nation as the Soviet Union in the 20th. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Moscow was forced to engage with these five states as independent actors. In this new environment, Russia’s interests in Central Asia have remained relatively constant. During the 1990s, Russia was barely able to maintain its own stability and sovereignty, and appeared to gravitate toward Western security and economic structures. Consequently, Moscow paid minimal attention to the Central Asian states, at least outside of the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

This focus, however, changed with the ascension of Vladimir Putin, who harbors the desire to “make Russia great again.” Doing so, however, requires Russia maintain a major presence on the international stage, and to push back the influence of the U.S. and Europeans whenever and wherever possible.[1] It also necessitates a clearer understanding of Russia’s relationship with its immediate neighbors. Putting aside the complex relationship with Ukraine, Russia sees itself as an indispensable partner to these countries, which it periodically suggests are “artificial.” Most summaries of Russian priorities in Central Asia reflect four main themes: (1) preserving a preferential economic relationship, (2) serving as the priority security partner, (3) maintaining a “shared cultural environment,” and (4) minimizing the influence of outside powers that might rival Russia’s role.

In the first several years of the post-Cold War era, Russian-Central Asian trade ties indicated that the old Soviet linkages remained in place. Central Asian nations sent raw materials to Russia, and finished goods went in the other direction. Moreover, millions of Central Asians spend time in Russia as “guest workers,” sending remittances home and bolstering the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular. For these two states, remittances make up over 30% of their GDP (some estimates quote even higher figures). Moscow founded the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in January 2015 to capitalize on these connections and further integrate some of the countries with Russia. At present, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the EEU, with Tajikistan on track to join at a future date. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are not, although some pundits believe that Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev has an interest in having his country join.[2]

Russia also has clear security interests in the region. Central Asia remains a “front line” defense from transnational threats emanating from the south, which include narcotics trafficking and violent extremist groups.[3] Russian security forces have worked with their Central Asian counterparts for years, and the shared legacy of the Red Army experience remains in place, even if it is now more than a quarter century old. Russia has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and further military cooperation exists via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was founded in 2002. There is also a concurrent desire, at least on Moscow’s part, to not have the militaries of other states present in the region. The departure of the U.S. from Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan in 2005 and the Manas Transit Center, Kyrgyzstan in 2014 were applauded in Moscow. Indeed, Russian officials are known to have put considerable pressure on the Kyrgyz government for years to force the closure of the U.S. facility.

Finally, Russian officials and security documents refer to a right to protect Russians living abroad. While Russia has not yet exercised this claimed prerogative in Central Asia, given the dearth of ethnic Russians in the states other than Kazakhstan, it still uses it as a reminder of Russia’s preeminence. The emigration of Russians over the past thirty years means that they make up barely 19% of the population in Kazakhstan and single-digit percentages in the other four states. Nevertheless, Moscow believes that Central Asia has an organic connection with Russia that transcends the transactional relationships found with other nations of the world. In this way, Mr. Putin and friends risk taking the region for granted.

## **China's inroads**

China's interests in the region, by contrast, appear to be more pragmatic. While Chinese officials and scholars periodically highlight "historic linkages" between the Middle Kingdom and these countries to the west, the reality is that Chinese engagement with Central Asia is still quite new. Economic interests and the desire to consolidate a safe and secure western border dominated early discussions between the Chinese government and the respective Central Asian states. These priorities were the foundational elements of the permissive shuttle trade that developed in the 1990s and the "Shanghai Forum," which started in 1995 and morphed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001.

Each country has a slightly different composition of economic ties with China. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are energy sources for China, as well as import destinations for its consumer goods. Uzbekistan is the largest consumer market for Chinese products, given its sheer size relative to its neighbors, as well as a modest energy exporter to China. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan both see opportunities for infrastructure development. Annual trade turnover between China and Kazakhstan exceeds \$20 billion, while trade between China and Uzbekistan surpasses \$7 billion, and even Chinese-Tajikistan trade is just under \$2 billion. By the end of the last decade, China has solidified its position as the top economic partner with each of the Central Asian countries.[4]

Three distinct features flow from this reality. The first is the importation of Chinese commercial goods into Central Asia. The second is the export of raw materials, especially energy, from Central Asia to China. Finally, there is the development of infrastructure projects that will establish Central Asia as a transit region for Chinese trade with the Middle East, Europe, and beyond.

The "One Belt, One Road" initiative—now known as the "Belt Road Initiative" (BRI)—addresses the final trend. In terms of economic development, the BRI tightens the strings that connect commerce, energy routes, and the economic welfare of the Central Asian states. However, Central Asian governments have raised concerns over the use of Chinese workers in BRI projects, especially in Tajikistan. Likewise, these governments are also wary of debt-trap engagement, something that has already been experienced by other BRI partners.

China's security interests in the region, meanwhile, are increasing, although not to the level of Russia's. There are limited opportunities for the People's Liberation Army to deploy to Central Asia or to conduct exercises there. Even the well-publicized SCO Peace Support exercises are technically "transitional threat/counter-terrorism" exercises that focus on eliminating extremist elements, rather than on the military forces of an opposing nation state. In contrast, CSTO exercises focus on state-on-state operations. Chinese officials, academics, and media repeatedly stress the security concerns China has in the region, from insulating their western province of Xinjiang from "separatism" to protecting valuable economic infrastructure and even personnel located in Central Asia. At present, police and military officers are able to attend training programs in China, and information sharing exists with the states bordering China on individuals and groups suspected of being extremists.[5] Over time, therefore, one should expect to see Chinese security cooperation increase to include more robust weapons sales, professional military training, and cooperative exercises.

For now, Beijing is combining "soft power" engagement strategies with these practical measures. China's well-known "Confucius Institutes" exist in the region, as do educational and media exchanges between China and the Central Asian states, although to varying degrees of cooperation.[6] But because the region is more familiar with Russia, China's soft power campaign nonetheless faces an uphill battle. On a political level, China is working to align the Central Asian states with its key diplomatic positions, as expressed in stated policies on issues such as the Dalai Lama, the South China Sea, and Taiwan.

As China's political equities in Central Asia increase, regional actors will be watching closely for any signs of tension between Beijing and Moscow. Some scholars posit that an "agreement" exists between Russia and China in terms of their respective domains in Central Asia—namely, Russian military dominance and Chinese economic preponderance.[7] Others, however, predict that Russia and China will compete to establish a holistic sphere of influence over Central Asia.[8] In reality, both powers place Central Asia among the broader range of their own domestic and geopolitical priorities. As much as Russia has an interest in Central Asia, Moscow must balance it with a broader set of Europe-Eurasia challenges and global commitments. Likewise, China remains a country looking eastward, with additional security challenges in South and Southeast Asia. A stable Central Asia allows China to focus on these more immediate concerns.

## **Central Asia's balancing act**

Do the Central Asian states accept Russian and Chinese so-called domination of the region's economic, security, and political domains? The answer is complicated. The trade figures noted earlier underscore the importance of these two external actors to the countries of Central Asia. For regional states, the economic benefits of engagement with both Beijing and Moscow are clear. Likewise, if Russia and China can be viable partners in thwarting transnational narcotics trafficking, criminality, terrorism, and extremism, their presence in the region is a net positive not only for Central Asian states, but also for those countries' assorted foreign partners.

Significantly, regional states tend to view Chinese and Russian engagement not as a bar to greater engagement with other nations, but as a compliment to it. This "multi-vectorized" approach, popularized by former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, envisions a system in which a country engages with a multitude of partners and participates in international organizations that are inclusive and expansive, rather than restrictive.[9] To wit, Kazakhstan views the EEU as a foundational organization that does not restrict its ability to trade outside of the immediate members. In principle, this sense of "multi-vectorism" also applies to Kazakhstan's membership in the SCO and the CSTO. Uzbekistan is a member of the first, and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are members of both.

Support for Russia and China in Central Asia is far from unanimous, however. Over time, citizens of all the Central Asian countries have expressed mixed views of these outside powers. While Russian media is pervasive throughout the region, accessible alternative sources reinforce the perception that Russian influence is not always positive. Likewise, while there is an appreciation of Chinese commercial goods and investment in the region, there is a shared view that China may seek to dominate the Central Asian states. When rumors of Chinese efforts to purchase land, or alter common borders, arise, demonstrations against such actions are not uncommon. Simply put, Sinophobia exists in Central Asia, and government officials and experts alike acknowledge it.[10] This represents a conundrum for local governments, as they would like to maintain positive relations with their large neighbor to the east, but also to avoid appearing as vassal states in the eyes of their populations. So far, however, the hope that the benefits of the Belt & Road Initiative will ameliorate such negative views remains unfulfilled.

Finally, it's necessary to note that Russia and China are operating in an increasingly crowded geopolitical sphere. While other powers may not have the direct impact that Moscow or Beijing does in Central Asia, the security and economic influence of India and the GCC states are on track to increase in the coming years. Likewise, the United States and European Union countries will continue to boast a significant regional presence, with perhaps a renewed interest becoming visible in Washington and European capitals in seeing the Central Asian states further establish rule of law, accede to international norms, and maximize their economic and security capacity.

In short, the Central Asian states will continue to explore their own "agency" and seek multiple opportunities for engagement. Russia and China are key actors, but hardly the only ones—and fall far short of exercising the influence necessary to dictate the actions and political priorities of Central Asia's five increasingly prosperous and independent states.

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#### ENDNOTES

[1] Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95/3 (May-June 2016), 30-37.

[2] Early suggestions of Uzbekistan joining Russian-centered regional organizations following the election of President Mirziyoyev include "Uzbekistan and Russia: Chilly weather, warm relations," Eurasianet, October 17, 2018. More recently, this is been clarified as wanting to "work with" the EEU, among others. See Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan Will 'Cooperate' with the Eurasian Economic Union," *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2020.

[3] Ivan Safranchuk, "Russian Policy in Central Asia, Strategic Context," *Observatoire Franco-Russe* no. 8, November 2014.

[4] Bhavna Dave and Yuka Kobayashi, "China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications," *Asia Eurasia Journal* no.16 (2018), 267-281.

[5] Lisolette Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China's Relations with Russia in Central Asia," *Asian Security* 13, no. 1 (2017), 41-58, which also raises the concerns of protecting vital transregional infrastructure.

[6] Nurlan Aliyev, "China's Soft Power in Central Asia," *CACI Analyst*, December 19, 2019. There is greater cultural and educational engagement with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although efforts with the other three countries are being developed.

[7] See "Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries, Europe and Central Asia," *International Crisis Group Report* no. 245, July 27, 2017, 20-22; Xiaoquin Chen, "Central Asian Factors in Energy Relations between China and Russia," *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 7, June 2012, 33-39; see also Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – the Case of Central Asia," *Geopolitics* 23, no.2 (2018), 378-403.

[8] See Dhananjay Sahai, "Russian Far East and Central Asia: Impediments to Sino-Russian Partnership," *ORF Issue Brief* no. 280, February 2019, 2, 11-12; see also Carla P. Freeman, "New Strategies for an Old Rivalry? China-Russia Relations in Central Asia After the Energy Boom," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 5 (2018), 635-654.

[9] An earlier assessment of "Kazakhstan's regional strategy can be found in Murat Laumulin and Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: A Race for Leadership?" *Security Index* 2 (91), vol. 16 (2010), 43-60; A more recent overview is provided by Mariya Y. Omelicheva and Ruoxi Du, "Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations," *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4, Fall 2018, 95-110.

[10] This is a difficult sentiment to quantify as one relies on anecdotal evidence and few surveys. Recent pieces in popular media suggest anti-Chinese feelings in the region, such as Jacob Mardell, "Fear of the Middle Kingdom in Central Asia," *Berlin Policy Journal*, January 16, 2020. An explanation of differing issues and some survey work can be found in Eric McGlinchey, "Questioning Sinophobia in Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 630, December 2019.