

## Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship

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In the last several decades, and especially since the Chinese launching of the Belt and Road (BRI) initiative in 2013, the Chinese presence in Central Asia has intensified. Russia and Chinese leaders deny that there is any conflict of interests between them, while the standard narrative has been that the two states adhere to a functional division of tasks in which China concentrates on economic activity while Russia acts as the security guarantor for the region. This article argues that the professed equanimity between the Russian and Chinese leaderships masks the emergence of widening cracks in their relationship with regard to Central Asia. The convenient narrative of a functional division of tasks between the two states is called into question by China's increasingly active presence in the military and security sector in the region, but China's influence is growing throughout the Central Asian economic, political, and social order. China's movement into Central Asia challenges Russia's claim to act as an equal partner of China, as well as its pretensions to regional hegemony. This development reflects the widening disparity between the two states with respect to their power capabilities but it also exposes the interactions between Russia and China in Central Asia as the most vulnerable aspect of their relationship. In Central Asia, a defensive Russia encounters an ascendant China.

**Keywords:** Russia, China, Central Asia, BRI, SCO, EAEU

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## **Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship**

In the last several years, Russian and Chinese officials have emphasized the steady intensification of their relationship. In 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the annual conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, went so far as to refer to the relationship between the two states as an “allied relationship” (*soiuznicheskie otnoshenie*) (Putin 2019). At the same time, the Russian-Chinese relationship is challenged by the rise of China as a great power, a phenomenon that is reflected in a growing asymmetry in power relations between the two. China’s GDP, according to the purchasing power parity (PPP) measures used by the CIA World Fact Book, has surpassed that of the United States and, at an estimated 22.53 trillion dollars, is over six times that of Russia (3.60 trillion dollars) (CIA 2021). With the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has increasingly penetrated throughout the post-Soviet space, considered by Russia to be, in the words of then-President Dmitri Medvedev, “a region of privileged interest” (Medvedev 2008). This has especially been the case in Central Asia where China has dramatically increased its presence and influence over the past twenty years.

Chinese and Russian official statements deny a conflict of interests in Central Asia. As noted by Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in response to a question regarding China’s presence in Central Asia: “we do not see China as a rival... The plans that Russia and China have for the region and Eurasia overall do not contradict each other” (Lavrov 2019). In general, the scholarly literature avoids a depiction of Russian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia as a sort of updated manifestation of the “Great Game” rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in the Nineteenth Century, rather emphasizing the incentives that both sides have to seek accommodation and reconcile differences. There is a recognition that Russia has been compelled to cede some of its legacy of historical influence to China in Central Asia, but the dominant narrative regarding the Russian and Chinese presence in Central Asia is rooted in the underlying premise that the two states adhere to an equitable division of functions in which China concentrates on economic pursuits while Russia acts as the security provider for the region (see Lo 2015, 2019; Cooley 2012; Lukin, Artyom 2020; Bordachev 2016). An underlying question, however, is why Russia acquiesces to a situation in which Chinese influence is expanding into a region, which Russia has specified as a designated sphere of influence.

One explanation points to the existence of shared interests between Russia and China in the maintenance of stability and the elimination of terrorist threats in the region. The Russian Sinologist, Alexander Lukin (2019, 2020) and Zhao Huasheng (2007, 2020), China’s foremost scholar of Central Asia, both consider that Chinese interests in the

region are primarily (but not exclusively) strategic, oriented toward the elimination of threats to instability or terrorism in Xinjiang province. Rolland (2019) asserts that a “China-Russia condominium over Eurasia” rests on consensual objectives regarding a future regional order, while Odgaard (2017) employs the logic of assumptions of the English School in arguing that Russia and China are participants in a community of shared interests in Central Asia that encourages them to coordinate their policies in the region. The most nuanced and developed assessment of Russian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia has been advanced by Kaczmarek (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019) who draws upon assumptions of regionalism in arguing that the spatially organized approach of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) contrasts with the functionalist style of the BRI, a situation that actually mitigates and defuses the potential for Russian-Chinese rivalry in the region. At the same time, Kaczmarek credits the agency of both Russian and Chinese political elites, and Chinese self-restraint in particular, in selecting cooperation over competition as a conscious choice.

For their part, realist-oriented assessments tend to explain cooperative elements of Russian-Chinese interactions in Central Asia with reference to systemic factors at the international level of analysis. Kim and Blank (2013, 774) consider that Russia cannot challenge China because the Kremlin needs Chinese support against the United States. Korolev (2016) argues that Russia and China are united in their joint opposition to the “unipole” at the system level, but engage in hedging behavior, in a mixture of competition and cooperation, at the regional bilateral level, including in Central Asia. Samokhvalov (2018) and Krickovic and Bratersky (2016) similarly reference hedging as a characteristic of Russian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia. Freeman (2018) makes use of the construct of strategic rivalry in arguing that relations between Russia and China in Central Asia are moving from latent to emergent rivalry, reflecting the change in the balance of influence between the two states.

Although much of the literature on Russian-Chinese interactions in Central Asia is not explicitly theoretical, explanations of Russian and Chinese behavior nonetheless rest, either explicitly or implicitly, on theoretical assessments. The literature on cooperation assumes that states cooperate to gain absolute gains whereas classical realism asserts the primacy of interest (Milner 1992; Morgenthau 1973). To a certain extent, however, there is a tendency for assessments across the theoretical spectrum to default to some core tenets of realism with respect to speculation on the future. This is to say that cooperation between Russia and China in the region is widely viewed as a temporal phenomenon that is subject to change given the increasing power disparities between the two states. According to Rolland (2019, 8), “in the long run, Russia will have become a toothless former superpower surrendering the stage for Beijing to fully assert its own influence over Eurasia.” Kaczmarek (2019) asserts that Sino-Russian behavior in Central Asia challenges realist theoretical expectations, but he also acknowledges

that Moscow's image as the regional security provider would be severely challenged by China's establishment of a definitive military presence in Central Asia. For Kim and Blank (2013, 790) the situation is clear cut insofar as China has the goal of reducing Central Asia to tributary status.

This article accepts core premises of realism as a useful means of assessing Russian-Chinese interactions in Central Asia. This is not to deny the role of ideas or the agency of elite actors, but it is to note the significance of structural factors and material conditions and capabilities. For the present, there are few signs of formal dissatisfaction between Russian and Chinese leaders with respect to their interactions in Central Asia, but time is not on Russia's side. First, as previously noted, the asymmetry in power capabilities between Russia and China is steadily increasing. Secondly, Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping has become much more assertive in staking out China's claims to influence. Thirdly, the departure of the United States from Central Asia, as indicated by the closing of the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan in 2014, and the Trump administration's indifference to the region, has removed a powerful incentive for Russia and China to resolve potential differences and cooperate. In other words, an increasingly defensive Russia confronts a rising China, with limited options. There is the theoretical possibility that Russia could choose to align itself more closely with the West, or at least seek to mend fences. This seems unlikely as a practical measure, insofar as it is difficult at this point to imagine Russia relinquishing Crimea or the Ukrainian leadership abandoning its pro-Western orientation and its pursuit of membership in NATO. An alternative prospect is that Russia might adopt a bandwagoning strategy and accept a subordinate status as China's junior partner. This is also a highly unpalatable option for Russia, which challenges not only the premise of Russia and China as sovereign equals but also erodes Russia's claim to great power status, which serves as a foundational cornerstone of Russian national identity.

This article contests the dominant narrative of a functional division of labor between Russia and China in Central Asia in which China focuses on economic pursuits while Russia acts as the security guarantor of the region. The most problematic aspect of this interpretation is the increasing incursion of China into the military and security sphere in the region. But this assessment is also rooted in the erroneous assumption that China's economic behavior can be hermetically contained absent a spillover effect into other sectors of Central Asia society. In the last decade, China has not only broadened and deepened its economic interactions and expanded its military and security activities but also forged a series of ties with local elites as well as establishing soft power programs in the region. There is little evidence to indicate that the Russian and Chinese leaderships have collaborated to set a joint regional policy in Central Asia, at least not in formal documents. As Zuenko (2017) notes regarding the expansion of China's security presence in Central Asia: "China nowhere and never declared that it does not have

military-strategic interests.” But it is also the case that the logic of the division of labor narrative, to the extent that it ever existed as an accurate reflection of reality, is being challenged by the rapid acceleration of Chinese influence in Central Asia, especially in the military and security sphere. The goal of this article is threefold. In the first instance, I seek to present an empirical documentation and comparison of Russia and China in Central Asia with respect to their activities in the economic, military and security, and societal sectors. Secondly, I turn to the question of the extent to which formal evidence exists regarding the coordination of Russian and Chinese behavior in Central Asia with a focus on their activities within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the status of efforts to link the EAEU with the BRI. The third section of the article assesses the implications of this situation, both with respect to Russian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia as well as a component of their overall relationship.

## Russia and China in Central Asia

### *Institutional Linkages*

There are numerous structural linkages between Russia and the states of Central Asia (see Table 1).

Table 1. Major Institutional Structures in Central Asia and Their Membership: Russia

CIS	CSTO	EAEU	SCO	5+1
Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova	Russia Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan (Uzbekistan 2006-2012) Belarus, Armenia	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Armenia, (Observer Status) Uzbekistan, Moldova	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China India, Pakistan	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan

Table 1 notes the major institutions that connect Russia to the states in the region and their memberships: these are the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a largely symbolic institution that was established after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that functions as a military alliance; the EAEU, consciously modeled after the European Union as a structure of economic

integration, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an outgrowth of border negotiations between China and the Soviet Union, that is oriented toward the maintenance of regional security and countering terrorism. None of these organizations include all of the states of Central Asia as members, and Turkmenistan, with a policy of avowed neutrality, is not a member of any of them. The only regional mechanism that counts all of the states of Central Asia as members was established by Russia in 2019 and provides for yearly meetings of the foreign ministers of Russia and the states of the region. This 5+1 format is not original to Russia but was first initiated by Japan in 2004, followed by South Korea (2007), the European Union (2007), the United States (2015), and India (2019) (Otorbaev 2021).

Chinese institutional ties to Central Asia are far fewer than those of Russia (see Table 2).

Table 2. Major Institutional Structures and Their Membership in Central Asia: China

SCO	BRI	5+1
China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan

Its major structural linkage to the region is through the SCO. The BRI is not, strictly speaking, an institutional organization, but rather a series of economic initiatives orchestrated by the Chinese government. All of the states of Central Asia, however, have indicated their support for the BRI, while Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have signed memoranda of understanding indicating their official status as members of the BRI. These four states are also members of the Chinese-directed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that finances BRI initiatives. In October 2020, moreover, China held its first meeting with the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states in the 5 + 1 format.

The CSTO, EAEU, and SCO function as institutional indicators to Russia of its presence as the regional hegemon. The CSTO has never actually been involved in any military operation, and Russia has declined to become involved in regional disputes such as ethnic unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2019. In fact, Allison (2008) has labeled the Russian-dominated structures in Central Asia as examples of a “virtual” regionalism, more functional for their symbolic rather than substantive features. The Chinese, for their part, have focused much of their energies in the region on promoting the BRI on a bilateral state to state basis, an activity which Kaczmarek (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019) argues does not directly contest Russia’s stature in the region.

*Russian and Chinese Economic Activity in Central Asia*

During the Soviet era, the economies of the states of Central Asia were highly integrated within a centralized planning apparatus. After the demise of the Soviet Union, many of these linkages in Central Asia collapsed (as they did elsewhere) although Russia continues to exert a substantial economic influence in the region, especially in Kazakhstan, and in sectors of the energy industry, notably in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Hess 2020; Clarke and Rice 2020). In a 2017 article, Lavrov (2017) indicated that over 7,500 Russian businesses and joint ventures operated in Central Asia. It is also the case that the economies of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan, are highly dependent on the remittances received from citizens working in Russia. Although significantly reduced compared to the mid 2010's, labor remittances comprised 28.5 percent of the GDP of Kyrgyzstan, 28.6 percent of the GDP of Tajikistan, and 14.8 percent of the GDP of Uzbekistan in 2019 (World Bank 2020). In comparison, Central Asian labor migration to China is negligible. Complete data is not available but Kazakh statistics report a total of 299 citizens working in China from 2016-2018, while China did not appear as a destination point for any of the other Central Asian states in a 2020 report prepared by the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (Raissova 2020).

Nonetheless, in the past twenty years, China has eclipsed Russia to become the most important economic actor in the region. This can be seen in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Table 3. Chinese and Russian Foreign Direct Investment in Central Asia 2007-2019 (U.S. \$)

	Russia	China
Kazakhstan	6.48b	29.17b
Kyrgyzstan	592,000	4.73b*
Tajikistan	193,000	1.45b
Turkmenistan	165,000	6.8b
Uzbekistan	1.09b	5.79b

\* First recorded year of FDI 2011

Sources: China Global Investment Tracker: American Enterprise Institute, at <https://www.aei.org/China-global-investment-tracker>  
Bank of Russia at [www.cbr.ru/statistics/macro-itm/svs](http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/macro-itm/svs)

Table 3 compares the cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI) of Russia and China in the states of Central Asia from 2007-2019. (Cumulative investment is a more useful reference than selected years since FDI is highly variant ranging from over a billion

dollars in any given year to nothing). The data indicate that China has become a larger investor than Russia for every state in the region, leading to a discrepancy that is most notable in Kazakhstan (29.17 billion dollars compared to 6.483 billion dollars) on the basis of the volume of funds invested. But the disparity between Chinese and Russian investment ranges from a gap of 4.5 to 1 in Kazakhstan to 41 to 1 in Turkmenistan.

In addition to FDI, Beijing relies heavily on forms of concessional lending to states in the region, often in conjunction with the BRI. All of the states in Central Asia are in debt to China but the situation is most serious in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: 45 percent of Bishkek's external borrowing is from China along with 52 percent of Dushanbe's foreign debt (Umarov 2020).

Table 4. Debt Owed to China by Each Central Asian State 2017 (U.S. \$ Billions)

	Amount	Percentage of GDP
Kazakhstan	5.83	3.66%
Kyrgyzstan	2.3	30.55%
Tajikistan	1.15	16.2%
Turkmenistan	5.1	13.4%
Uzbekistan	3.7	7.5%

Source: Horn, Sebastian, Carmen Reinhard, and Christoph Tresbech, "China's Overseas Lending," Working Paper 26050, NBER, May 2020

Table 4 indicates the extent of debt to China of the five states of Central Asia, both numerically and as a percentage of GDP. At 30.5 percent, Kyrgyzstan not only has the highest percentage of debt to GDP of the five states but also is in fifth place in a global comparison (Horn, Reinhart, and Christoph 2019). Comprehensive information is not available to indicate the extent of debt of the Central Asian states to Russia. World Bank data indicates that Uzbekistan had a 23.51 million dollar outstanding debt to Russia in 2019, while Kyrgyzstan registered a 240 million dollar debt in 2017 but no debt in 2019 (World Bank 2021).<sup>1</sup> Russian financial interactions, however, are far from transparent. For members of the CSTO, armaments are available at reduced costs (if not given away), and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan receive financial reimbursements through the Eurasian Stabilization Fund, which is part of the EAEU. Russia has also often written off debts—sometimes dating back to disputes initiated during the Soviet era and its immediate aftermath—as a means as well for increasing

<sup>1</sup> Presumably this difference was a result of a Russian cancellation of Kyrgyz debt in 2017. See Kucera 2017.

its influence in the region. In 2004, for example, Russia wrote off 300 million dollars in loans to Tajikistan in exchange for military basing rights (Anderson 2018). On the one hand, the network of financial ties linking the Central Asian states to Russia is greater than what formal financial channels indicate. On the other hand, the conclusion is nonetheless inescapable that China has assumed the dominant position as the chief financier of the region.

Table 5. China and Russia Exports/Imports and Total Trade Turnover with the States of Central Asia in 2000 (U.S.\$ Thousands)

	Exports		Imports		Total Trade	
	China	Russia	China	Russia	China	Russia
Kazakhstan	598,749	2,247,380	958,209	2,199,983	1,555,958	4,447,363
Kyrgyzstan	110,173	102,907	67,437	88,638	177,610	191,545
Tajikistan	6792	56,918	10,377	237,320	17,169	294,238
Turkmenistan	12,102	130,001	4057	472,320	16,159	602,321
Uzbekistan	39,432	274,418	12,032	663,395	67,623	954,982

Source: World Bank. WITS

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2000/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>;

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/RUS/Year/2000/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>

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Tables 5 and 6 provide additional confirmation of the growth in economic linkages between China and the states of Central Asia. In the year 2000, Russian total trade turnover was greater than that of China with every single state in the region. Only in Kyrgyzstan did Chinese exports exceed those of Russia by a small margin. By 2018, the relationship was reversed; Chinese total trade turnover was greater than that of Russia for every Central Asian state. Only in Kazakhstan did Russian exports exceed those of China, while Russia's imports from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were greater than those of China.

China's economic interests in Central Asia have become increasingly multifaceted. Access to Central Asian energy and raw materials and minerals is an important goal for China, as indicated in the pipelines that transport oil from Kazakhstan, and gas from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. At the same time, Central Asia is viewed as a strategic and vital corridor for the transmission of goods from China to Europe within the BRI, which has led to Chinese interest in a number of infrastructure projects in the region, including construction of roads and railways. It is difficult to calculate the number of BRI projects in Central Asia (or elsewhere) since the Chinese have a tendency to label any bilateral interaction as a sign of BRI-related activity. However, all of the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, are participants in projects funded by the AIIB, with Uzbekistan receiving the most funding (AIIB 2021). Increasingly, moreover, Central Asia has become a destination for Chinese capital. Chinese banks have begun lending directly to Chinese enterprises in the region, bypassing bilateral channels.

With the announcement of the Digital Silk Road in 2014, China's interactions with Central Asia in the technology area have expanded as China has begun transferring its technological knowledge and interpretation of corporate culture to the region (Gabuev, Umarov, and Yau 2020). Recent Chinese initiatives have pushed for digitalization efforts in Central Asia. China's largest telecommunications company, Huawei, is providing assistance to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the introduction of 5G technology, and has assisted in the installation of "Safe Cities" surveillance technology throughout the region.<sup>2</sup> Both Huawei and the Chinese technology company ZTE operate factories in Uzbekistan (Yau 2019, 2020a; Hashimova 2020). In the span of a few years, China has made large strides in extending its digital presence in Central Asia, at a time of pushback in its efforts to expand its services in the West. In this context, Chinese plans in Central Asia transcend contemplating the region simply as a provider of raw materials, but involve linking the region to China not only through material

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<sup>2</sup> Yau (2020b) notes that overcapacity is a factor in China's penetration of technology into Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, for example, did not pay for the installation of its safe cities project in Bishkek.

infrastructure but also digital network connectivity. This is an ambitious venture that far exceeds the financial capabilities of Russia.

*Russian and Chinese Activities in Central Asia in the Military and Security Spheres*

Russia remains indubitably the major security provider in the Central Asian states, but China has notably increased its military and security related activities in the last few years to the point that there are emergent signs of competition between them. Russia and China do not coordinate their military and security undertakings in the region (at least not according to public sources) except through the framework of joint military exercises conducted by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which also involves other member states. Both China and Russia, however, sell arms, conduct military exercises, and train military officers with the states of the region on a bilateral basis. In addition, Russia has two bases in the region, one with over 7,000 troops outside of Dushanbe in Tajikistan, and a military airbase with over 500 troops in Kant in Kyrgyzstan. China, for its part, has established what is sometimes referred to as a military base in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, although it is officially a border guard station. A *Washington Post* report described an outpost of about two dozen buildings, with up to several hundred troops (Shih 2019).

The volume of Russian and Chinese arms transfers to Central Asia is difficult to calculate because both Russia and China provide arms to Central Asian states free of charge (or in the case of China as with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as barter for energy). In a recent publication, Jardine and Lemon (2020) compare Chinese and Russian military activity in the region. They estimate that Russia has supplied over 80 percent of the imported arms to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan between 1991 and 2019 with the volume of arms sales rising over time. Three-quarters of Russian arms exports to the region has been sold since 2010. Chinese arms transfers are also rising albeit from a very low level. Whereas China provided 1.5 percent of Central Asian arms imports between 2010-2014, this figure had increased to 18 percent of the total in the 2015-2018 time period. While Uzbekistan has purchased more arms from China than from Russia during the entire 1991-2018 period, between 2014-2018 both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan bought more arms from China than Russia.<sup>3</sup> China has increasingly come to sell more technologically advanced weapons to Central Asia than

<sup>3</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database, Turkmenistan purchased more arms from Turkey than Russia in the 2001-2019 time period, although China has been the largest suppliers of arms to Turkmenistan between 2016-2019. However, in January 2019, the Chinese placed an embargo on further arms sales to Turkmenistan as a consequence of Turkmenistan's inability to make loan payments on its outstanding debt. See [http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export\\_values.php](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php).

has been the case with Russia, including armed drones, communications technology, and unmanned aerial vehicles.

Russia also has a far more established presence in the region with respect to conducting bilateral military exercises, as well as organizing exercises on a multilateral basis with the CIS and CSTO states. China also participates in military exercises in the region through the SCO, as well as holding joint bilateral exercises with the Central Asian states. The cumulative volume of Russian joint military exercises in Central Asia far exceeds that of China, although here too China has increased the frequency of its activity. Jardine and Lemon (2020) report that both Russia and China held 10 bilateral military exercises in Central Asia from 2014 to 2019, but Russia also conducted 26 exercises through the auspices of the CSTO. Similarly, China's officer training programs are not nearly as extensive as that of Russia but they are expanding. The Central Asian militaries continue to maintain linkages with Russia as a consequence of their Soviet heritage and Russia dominates as an external actor in the area of officer training. Comprehensive data is not available but over half of Kazakhstani officers are estimated to have been trained in Russia (Jardin and Lemon 2020). As of 2014, 70 percent of officers in Tajikistan's special operations forces had graduated from Russian military institutes (Gorenburg 2014). Here too China's initiatives to train military and related security officers are far more modest than that of Russia, but they are expanding. China has begun short and longer-term training programs in various venues. This includes the PLA National Defense University that trains military officers, and the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation at the Shanghai University of Politics and Law, which provides various training courses to SCO member border guard and interior ministry forces. In June 2020, the SCO center announced that it planned to train 2000 officers from all SCO countries by June 2021 (Jardine and Lemon 2020; also see Pantucci 2019).

As China has expanded its economic activities in Central Asia, it has also placed increased pressure on regional elites to provide adequate protection to Chinese firms, which are especially vulnerable to xenophobic demonstrations against the Chinese presence. During the demonstrations following the contested parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020, for example, protesters seized two gold mines operated by Chinese companies, expelling the Chinese workers. At the same time, the Chinese leadership has sought to intensify the presence of private security companies (PSCs) in Central Asia. This is by no means a measure distinctive to Central Asia but parallels movements that China has made globally with the expansion of the BRI. Nonetheless, the presence of Chinese PSCs is a sensitive issue for Central Asian leaders, with its consequent implications regarding issues of sovereignty and adherence to local regulations. Kazakhstan prohibits the operation of Chinese PSCs, while Kyrgyzstan provides the most open environment for them to operate. According to research

conducted by Yao and Van Der Kley (2020; also see Van Der Kley 2019, 2020), six Chinese PSCs are operating in Central Asia.

The Chinese military presence is most noticeable in Tajikistan. Here, China's concern appears to be primarily focused on maintaining security and countering terrorist activities in the region, and in particular, preventing the movement of militants from Afghanistan to Xinjiang province. In addition to the alleged military base, China has been building an estimated eleven border stations for the Tajiks. (Umarov 2020; Sukhankin 2020). The Chinese units dispatched in the border area appear to be drawn from the People's Armed Police (PAP) rather than PLA forces. In 2016, 10,000 military personnel from China and Tajikistan took part in counterterrorism exercises. Also in 2016, China founded the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, a multilateral organization composed of China, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, which focuses on security issues in the region. China's motivation to establish this structure appears to have been partly driven by a frustration with its longstanding efforts to prod the SCO, and its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), to implement effective policies to counter a terrorist threat (Pantucci 2019).

There is no doubt that Russia and China share a common interest in the maintenance of regional security in Central Asia, but there also exist signs of emergent tensions between the two, or to put it another way, Russian sensitivities to China's enhanced military and security profile. China is now encroaching on Russia's demarcated domain as the security provider in Central Asia, which serves as the fundamental underpinning to its claim to equal partnership with China in the region. While the Russian leadership maintains its emphasis on the compatibility of Russian and Chinese interests, Russian (and also Central Asian) elite discourse acknowledges the existence of concerns as to the future direction of the relationship between the two states in the military and security sphere. As noted by Igor Savin, the author of a 2019 monograph about Russia and the security of the countries of Central Asia: "In 2013 no one spoke about military-technical cooperation with China [in Central Asia]. Six years have passed and now practically all experts are talking about this" (Savin 2020). In a 2019 interview, Dmitry Zhelobov suggested that Russia faced the threat of China constructing military bases in Central Asia within five years (Kim 2019; Goble 2019). This speculation has been accompanied by reports of increased anxieties in military circles and a general sense that China is challenging Russia in the security realm (Goble 2020; Gabuev, Umarov, and Yau 2020). Although it is not possible to posit a causal relationship, analysts have noted that Russia has increased its security drills and training in Tajikistan, and enlarged its operations at the airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan, possibly as a signal to China (Pogrebniak 2020; Szalkai 2020). Simultaneously, China's increased military presence has led to some efforts to shift the narrative so as to posit that Russia and China now harmoniously share a division of labor in security operations in the region and that China's activities

are actually potentially beneficial to Russia because it is China, not Russia, that is bearing the burden of policing in Tajikistan (Savin 2020; Lo 2020). The cost-saving advantages to Russia are no doubt true, but this also suggests that Russia lacks the capabilities to expand its military operations in the region.

*Soft Power as a Feature of Russian and Chinese Influence in Central Asia*

Thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian influence in Central Asia is much diminished but Russia still remains the dominant reference point of external orientation in the region (Hess 2020; Skalamera 2017). The ties that persist vary among states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan maintain closer linkages to Russia than Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (although Russian-Uzbek ties have warmed with the ascension of Shavkat Miriyoyev to the Uzbek presidency in 2016). The Russian cultural, social, and political presence is indicated in a variety of venues including the continued use of the Russian language, the prevalence of Russian media and news sources, the ties of political and business elites in the region to their Russian counterparts, and the number of students from Central Asia selecting to study in Russia. As previously noted, moreover, Russian ties to the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are further reinforced by the presence of labor migrants and the importance of labor remittances as a component of GDP.

In comparison to Russia, the historical, cultural, and social ties that connect China to Central Asia are far more limited. Both states, however, have developed a program of government activities that seek to promote influence in the region. Russia's stature in the region is less a matter of deliberate policy than a consequence of the Soviet heritage, but the Kremlin has exhibited a commitment to the maintenance of the Russian language and the presence of Russian cultural values in Central Asia (as well as the rest of the post-Soviet space). The National Security Strategy (Strategy, 2015) specifically identifies the "decline in the role of the Russian language in the world" as a national security threat, while the Foreign Policy Concept (Concept 2016) stresses the need to strengthen "Russia's role in international culture" as well as to promote the Russian language and Russian educational institutions abroad. The Russian language, in fact, continues to be a language of educational instruction throughout the region (albeit to a varying extent) in secondary schools, and in affiliates of Russian institutions of higher education (Chankseliani 2020; Leskina and Sabzalieva 2021; Fominykh 2017). In recent years, Russia has expanded the number of branch campuses of Russian institutions of higher education abroad, including in Central Asia.

Table 7. Confucius Institutes (China), Russkiy Mir Centers and Cabinets (Russia) and Centers of Science and Culture (Russia) in Central Asia

	Confucius Institutes	Russkiy Mir Centers	Russkiy Mir Cabinets	Centers of Science and Culture
Kazakhstan	5	2	0	1
Kyrgyzstan	4	3	2	2
Tajikistan	2	4	0	2
Turkmenistan	0	0	0	0
Uzbekistan	2	0	5	1
TOTAL	13	9	7	6

Sources: [http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node\\_10961.htm](http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm);  
<https://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/catalog.phy>;  
<http://rs.gov.ru/en/contacts>

Table 7 notes the number of branch campuses of Russian institutes of higher education in Central Asia, which indicates that Russian higher education institutes have established 21 affiliates in every state of Central Asia except Turkmenistan.

In the last decade and a half, Russia has also established Russkiy Mir Centers and Cabinets as well as Russian Centers of Science and Culture, both of which seek to promote the Russian language and Russian culture. These institutions roughly correspond to the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, which are oriented toward the teaching of the Chinese language and aspects of Chinese cultural activities.

Table 8. Branch Campuses of Russian Institutions of Higher Education in Central Asia

	# of Branch Campuses
Kazakhstan	7
Kyrgyzstan	6
Tajikistan	3
Turkmenistan	0
Uzbekistan	4
Total	20

Source: Maia Chankseliana, "The Politics of Exporting Higher Education: Russian University Branch Campuses in the 'Near Abroad,'" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2020): 26-44. DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2020.1789938

Table 8 compares the number of these institutions in the states of Central Asia. China has 13 Confucius Institutes while Russia maintains 9 Russkiy Mir Centers, 7 Russkiy Mir Cabinets, and 6 Centers of Science and Technology.<sup>4</sup> The Centers of Science and Technology are operated through the auspices of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, which functions as a successor to the Soviet-era Society for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries. The Russkiy Mir Centers and the far more modest Russkiy Mir Cabinets (which might be simply a nook with Russian language materials in the library) tend to be located within universities. The Confucius Institutes also tend to be situated within universities (while the Confucius Classrooms partner with secondary schools). These operate on a much larger scale than the Russkiy Mir Centers. Exact figures are not available but thousands of students—4,000 in the Confucius Institute at Tajik National University alone-- have enrolled in programs administered by Confucius Institutes (Xinhua 2018). According to Kerimbaev. et. al (2020), the number of Confucius Institutes and classes per capita is greater in Central Asia than anywhere else in the world. Both Russia and China are destination points for students from Central Asia.

Table 9. Students from Central Asia Enrolled in Russian or Chinese Institutions of Higher Education (thousands)

	Enrolled in Russian Institutions		Enrolled in Chinese Institutions	
	2000/2001	2017/2018	2000	2017
Kazakhstan	16.7	52.7	105	14224
Kyrgyzstan	1.2	5.5	47	4154
Tajikistan	0.3	14.3	21	3282
Turkmenistan	0.5	20.4	NA	2601
Uzbekistan	3.2	20.3	46	4171

Sources: Rossiiski Statisticheskii Ezhegodnik 2018 (Russian Statistical Yearbook 2018),

<sup>4</sup> The information for Table 8 on the number of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia comes from the Confucius Institute website Hanban ([http://www.hanban.org/confuciusinstitutes/node\\_10961.htm](http://www.hanban.org/confuciusinstitutes/node_10961.htm)) which I accessed on September 20, 2020. Subsequently, this site has been eliminated and administrative duties for the Confucius Institutes have now been delegated to the newly formed Center for Language Education and Cooperation (<http://www.chinese.cn/page/#/pcpage/mainpage>). This webpage no longer provides information on the geographical distribution of Confucius Institutes (and in fact barely refers to their existence). The restructuring apparently is an effort by the Chinese government to defuse criticisms that have identified the Confucius Institutes as tools of Chinese government policy, mostly by Western sources (Peterson 2020).

Moscow, p. 200

China 2000 figures from Kerimbaev, Erzhan, Nabizhan Mukhametkhanuly, Aynur Turgenbay, and Zaura Nabizhankyzy, “Main Factors of China’s Soft Power in Central Asia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, February 1, 2020. [https://www.ca-c.org/online/2020/journal\\_eng/cac-01/02.shtml](https://www.ca-c.org/online/2020/journal_eng/cac-01/02.shtml)

China 2017 figures from China’s Foreign Affairs 2018. Department of Policy Planning. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Beijing: World Press, 2018

Table 9 compares the number of students from Central Asia enrolled in Russian institutes of higher education between the 2000/2001 and the 2017/2018 academic years, and the number of students from Central Asia studying at Chinese educational institutions in 2000 and 2017. Several points can be noted from this data. First, Russia remains an important destination point for students from Central Asia, with the number of enrolled students markedly increasing in this period. At the same time, there has been a huge increase in the number of students selecting China as a source of higher education, rising from negligible levels to number in the thousands. Nonetheless, Russia enrolls about four times more students from Central Asia than does China, with only Kyrgyzstan relatively evenly divided between Russia and China as a destination.

Clearly, Russia retains considerable stature in the Central Asia region through a myriad of interconnecting linkages. Russia is no longer an economic power in Central Asia but it indirectly retains a measure of control over the region, seen in its provision of various forms of subsidy payments through the CSTO and the EAEU, as well as the Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek dependence on labor remittances. The close ties between Russian and Central Asian political elites, and Russian and Central Asian militaries also indicate the maintenance of Russian influence in the region. The legacy of the Silk Road notwithstanding, China is, in contrast to Russia, a relative newcomer to Central Asia. However, the Chinese soft power mission in Central Asia is more purposeful than that of Russia. It is also the case, quite simply, that China has more money to spend than Russia. Russian soft power structures operate on a shoestring budget and support for Russian language educational institutions is similarly constrained (Wilson 2015). In his remarks and replies to questions at the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University in February 2019, Lavrov was compelled to respond to a number of awkward questions about the allocation of funding and the payment of salaries (Lavrov 2019; also see Liakin-Frolov 2020). In comparison, China not only pays for Chinese language teaching within the Confucius Institutes (an offer that is difficult for financially strapped Central Asian universities to decline) but provides stipends—reportedly for 5,000 students from 2010-2017—for students who qualify to attend university in China (Umarov 2020).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is not clear how many students from Central Asia receive stipends to study in Russia. In 2013, the Russian government set a quota—an increase from the past—for a maximum of 15,000 foreign citizens to receive stipends on a yearly basis for education in Russia (Postanovlenie 2013). There is a large discrepancy in

It is not clear, however, how successful China has been in projecting an attractive image in Central Asia. At best, the evidence is mixed. China's economic expansion in the region has been accompanied by a growing Sinophobia, a sentiment that is also fuelled by China's harsh treatment of the Uighurs (as well as other Muslim minorities including Kazakhs and Kyrgyz) in neighboring Xinjiang province (Peyrouse 2016). China's public relations problems are particularly acute in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have seen a number of protests in the last several years (RFE/RL 2020; Umarov 2019). To date, the political leaderships of Central Asia have been highly restrained in their reaction to the reports of massive repression in Xinjiang, and appear to be under considerable pressure by the Chinese government to desist from criticism.

Table 10. Public Opinion on Russia and China in Central Asia

	Russia			China		
	Strongly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Total Favorable	Strongly Favorable	Somewhat Favorable	Total Favorable
Kazakhstan	39%	47%	86%	17%	43%	60%
Kyrgyzstan	51%	42%	93%	13%	39%	52%
Uzbekistan	19%	62%	81%	10%	59%	69%
Turkmenistan	73%	21%	94%	54%	30%	84%

Source: Marlene Laurelle and Dylan Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," Kennan Cable, No. 56, Wilson Center, August 2020

Table 10 summarizes the opinion polling reported by Laurelle and Royce (2020) on citizens' attitudes toward Russia and China in Central Asia. On the one hand, China is reasonably well regarded in Central Asia but not nearly as favorably regarded as Russia. In each state surveyed (Tajikistan was not included), China was viewed favorably or mostly favorably by a range of 52 percent to 84 percent of respondents, compared with a range of 81 to 94 percent for Russia. Chinese favorability ratings were lowest in Kyrgyzstan (51 percent) and Kazakhstan (60 percent). This data suggests that the

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information as to the number of scholarships provided to students from Central Asia to study in Russia. For example, in a 2017 speech, Lavrov claimed that over 150,000 students from Central Asia were enrolled in Russian universities (a number that presumably reflected regional affiliates) and that about 46,000 of them received scholarships from the Russian federal budget (Lavrov 2017). This contrasts with information posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry website noting that in the 2018/2019 academic year, 618 students from Tajikistan were given stipends to study in Russia, and 203 state scholarships were allocated to students from Uzbekistan to attend Russian universities (Russian-Tajik Relations 2021; Russian-Uzbek Relations 2021).

historical legacy of Russia in Central Asia remains extensive. At the same time, despite the presence of Sinophobia (which presumably was a factor in China's lower approval ratings in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), China was viewed positively or relatively positively by a majority of its respondents. China also emerged in the survey results—conducted by the Central Asian Barometer and the Integration Barometer survey of the Eurasian Development Bank between 2017-2019—as a more popular actor relative to that of the United States, which overall received the lowest approval ratings in the states surveyed.

The Chinese soft power strategy in Central Asia is not especially concerned with increasing the attractiveness of China in the eyes of rank and file citizens, but is rather specifically targeted toward regional elites of both the present and presumably future generation. Russian diplomatic efforts in Central Asia convey a sort of path dependency in adhering to Soviet-era patterns, with their emphasis not only on the promotion of the Russian language and literature but in the commemoration of Soviet-era events such as remembrance ceremonies recalling the Great Patriotic War. Lavrov is a frequent visitor to Central Asia but his speeches tend to focus on the international achievements of Russian foreign policy, most recently in Syria. In contrast, Chinese diplomatic efforts are far more dynamic and actively seek to promote a positive image of China as a developed and technologically advanced state. Chinese diplomatic efforts in the region include such activities as donating computers to a Kazakh military academy and setting up collaborative efforts in Uzbekistan with the technology firm Huawei (Zhang, X. 2018; Sun 2016). China has also embarked on an ambitious program to provide local officials with all-expense paid trips to China in which they stay in luxurious hotels and are shown China's achievements as a diplomatic powerhouse (Yau 2020b). Under Xi Jinping, China has dropped its previous injunction on presenting China as a model for others to emulate and has consciously come to promote the Chinese Dream of economic development and prosperity as relevant for all humanity. In this sense, China is deliberately targeting the political elites of the region in its quest to enhance its influence, a practice that places it in direct competition with Russia. Russia has the advantage in terms of the historical legacy but China can offer local officials a number of rent-seeking activities through signing on to Chinese economic projects. In one egregious case, which elicited outrage from local citizens, a Chinese-built road in Tajikistan was apparently appropriated by the son-in-law of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon who installed toll booths for his personal enrichment (RFE/RL 2010).

At the present time, Russia's soft power influence in Central Asia far exceeds that of China. Nonetheless, there appears to be an emerging sentiment that the Chinese presence is only likely to intensify in the future and that it provides a number of positive economic benefits to a region that does not attract many investors outside of the natural resource sector (which is also of course an interest of China). China not only offers

infrastructure improvements that give the promise of connecting Central Asia to the global economy, but also possibilities for technology transfer. Chen and Gunther (2018) report that local college students in Central Asia (who will likely be the regions' future political elites) tend to believe that China's influence overall is positive and brings more benefit than harm.

### **Collaboration in the Region?**

There is not much evidence to indicate that Russia and China seek to pursue a coordinated foreign policy approach with matters relevant to Central Asia. It is possible, of course, that modes of consultation exist, but if so, they are not a matter of public proclamation. The Russian-Chinese Joint Statements that are released after the yearly presidential visits provide some insight into matters deemed consensual to both parties (or at least formally presented as largely consensual). Here the 2016 Joint Statement is an anomaly in specifically mentioning Central Asia as a distinct region, and expressing concern about the risks and threats to regional security emanating primarily from Afghanistan (Sovmestnoe Zaiavlenie 2016). This direct reference to Central Asia, however, is not present in preceding or subsequent statements. Russia and China interact within two institutional mechanisms of relevance that also involve other Central Asian states; firstly, as members of the SCO, and secondly, as members of a working committee set up to coordinate joint EAEU-BRI projects.

In the first instance, Russian and Chinese differences have been on display with regard to the organizational functions of the SCO since its establishment in 2002. Although both states concur as to the mission of the SCO in countering terrorist activity, Russia has consistently blocked Chinese efforts to enhance its economic role. During the first decade of its existence, China made repeated attempts to establish a SCO development bank and to develop the SCO as a free trade area. These measures were steadfastly opposed by Russia. For their part, the Central Asian states had no objection to a SCO bank but also opposed a free trade zone area out of a fear that this would intensify Beijing's economic presence in the region as well as flood the area with Chinese goods that would compete with local industry.

Beijing's resulting frustration with its inability to pursue its economic plans was apparently a factor in its decision to launch the BRI (Gabuev 2015a; Lukin 2015). In subsequent years, Chinese attention to the SCO has markedly diminished as it has refocused its attention on implementing the BRI in Central Asia. This is a development that has given Russia a freer hand to shape the organization to its interests, which has included the expansion of the SCO to include India and Pakistan in 2017, a movement that China opposed although not officially. China's recent activities in Tajikistan can

also be seen as a tacit acknowledgment that the SCO is not positioned to deal with the terrorist threat. Here, China has not only established border posts on a bilateral basis with Tajikistan but pointedly excluded the SCO (as well as Russia) as participants in initiating the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism.

Russia's ability to block China within the SCO was a short-term success that nonetheless left the Kremlin faced with an even greater economic and political challenge in the form of the BRI, which explicitly targeted the entire post-Soviet region. The very magnitude of the project, in which Chinese officials evoked BRI investments in terms of trillions of dollars, has left the Kremlin on the defensive. Xi's selection of Nazarbaev University in Kazakhstan in the fall of 2013 as the location for announcing the BRI, moreover, was a deliberate decision that explicitly identified Central Asia as a key element of Chinese foreign policy strategy. As with the United States, the initial Russian reaction was simply to ignore the BRI, and to refrain from public comment. The Kremlin, moreover, initially turned down the Chinese invitation to join the AIIB.<sup>6</sup> It did not take Russian political elites long, however, to realize that they needed to make the best of an undesirable situation, a decision that required reinterpreting the BRI as an initiative that conformed to their own interests. First Deputy Minister Igor Shuvalov was apparently the decisive figure, aided by a small group of advisers close to Putin, in convincing Putin to endorse the BRI as well as to reverse the decision not to join the AIIB. Subsequently, at the March 2015 Boao Forum in Beijing, Shuvalov announced that Russia was willing to cooperate with the BRI. At the May 2015 meeting of the Russian and Chinese presidents in Moscow, the two sides released a joint statement (Zhong E 2015) as well as a specific joint declaration (Zhong E Lianbang 2015) that noted the Russian and Chinese commitment to coordinating the planning processes of the BRI and the EAEU (Wilson 2016).

The Russian decision to coordinate the EAEU with the BRI was made independently of consultation with any of its other members, a situation that highlights Russian attitudes toward the structure, and lays to rest any notions of the sovereign equality of its membership. Nonetheless, after the 2015 declaration, a working group was formed between China and the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) that identified 40 projects for consideration (Sopriazhenu 2017; Zubkov 2016). The list of these projects has not been made public, but 39 of them have been identified as concentrating on infrastructure, with mandated linkages between at least two countries. The Moscow-Kazan High-Speed railway (which does not transverse two states) and the construction of a highway linking Western Europe to China have been widely identified for inclusion on this list. In May 2018, China and the EAEU signed an economic

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<sup>6</sup> Gabuev (2015b), however, claims that the Kremlin's unwillingness to endorse the AIIB was largely a consequence of bureaucratic politics and the lack of coordinating mechanisms in government ministries.

and trade cooperation agreement, which came into effect in October 2019 (Zhang, P. 2018; Renmin Ribao 2019). The agreement, contrary to Chinese preferences, makes no arrangement for the operation of a free trade area or preferential trade arrangements between states, but reaffirms World Trade Organization (WTO) commitments by the states and establishes procedures for trade facilitation. However, despite these efforts, very little has been achieved with respect to EAEU-BRI coordination efforts. All of the projects submitted by the EAEU to China for consideration have reportedly been rejected, with the Chinese expressing concern over issues of project design and economic feasibility (Gabuev 2017a, 2017b). The 2019 Russia-China Joint Statement (Sovmestnoe Zaiavlenie 2019) continues to affirm that the two states are working to intensify efforts to pair the formation of the EAEU and the BRI. Nonetheless, there are signs that Russian experts have become increasingly disappointed with the BRI as beneficial to Russia (Gabuev and Zuenko 2019). Another possible indication of Russian official disenchantment with the BRI can be seen in the decision of Sergei Lavrov to opt out of the 2020 virtual BRI conference, appointing a subordinate to attend in his place (Shah 2020).

### **Implications of the Russian-Chinese Relationship in Central Asia**

There is no doubt that Russia and China share a largely convergent assessment of the operation of the international system and a joint opposition to Western hegemony and the norms and values promoted by the liberal international political order. The Russian-Chinese relationship cannot be viewed simply as a marriage of convenience inasmuch as it rests on shared ideological values as well as a pragmatic appreciation of the importance of cordial bilateral relations not only in the political, but also in the economic, military, and security spheres. At the same time, the growing divergence in power capabilities between the two states coincides with the increasingly assertive stance of Chinese foreign policy. The Chinese leadership, moreover, is a far more fervent advocate of globalization and the benefits of free trade than Russia (or for that matter many other actors including the United States). China's expanding economic role in Central Asia is exemplified in the reorientation of the region to China in the economic realm, a situation that poses a direct challenge to Russia. There are few overt signs of disagreement between the two with respect to their activities in the region. But there are also few tangible signs of coordination of policy. To be sure, policy coordination is not a prerequisite for the maintenance of cordial ties between the two states. But it is typically considered as a fundamental characteristic of cooperation (Milner 1992). In this context, Russia and China appear to act more as autonomous actors in Central Asia than as cooperative partners. In particular, there is a lack of evidence that China seeks

to defer to Russian interests in the region but rather adopts a policy of self-interested pursuit of its own goals. As Rozman (2020) notes, China has begun to ignore Russia in Central Asia, while showing Russia less respect.

In this context, Xi Jinping's decision to announce the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013 can be viewed as a clear indication of China's lack of concern over its expanding presence in an area considered by Russia as a key geographical component of its sphere of influence. Similarly, China is willing to acquiesce to Russian initiatives, such as the conjoining of the EAEU with the BRI, but these are low-cost actions that do not involve any sacrifice for China and leave it free to pursue its own goals. The failure of the EAEU-BRI agreement to result in even one joint project provides ample evidence of China's deep-seated proclivity to subordinate political friendship to the realization of economic objectives. The Chinese decision to establish the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in 2016 as well as its bilateral interactions with Tajikistan on border operations signals the actions of an autonomous actor that is not too worried about overstepping implicit boundaries in the region. The Chinese military and security presence is most notable in Tajikistan but China has also expanded the range of its military and security related activities in Central Asia in the past few years, as seen in an increase in arms sales, the organization of bilateral military exercises, the training of Central Asian military officers, and the placement of PSCs in the region. These actions strain the credibility of the narrative of the division of labor between Russia and China that allots Russia a predominance in the security sphere. Nor is there any reason to think that China's security and military activities in Central Asia will not continue to intensify in the future. The expansion of Chinese economic activity will likely be accompanied by the growth in PSCs to protect Chinese businesses and personnel, while the planned American withdrawal from Afghanistan further threatens the maintenance of stability in Central Asia. To be sure, an intensification of Chinese involvement in suppressing terrorist actions in Central Asia would be potentially beneficial to all of the states of the region including Russia. But it would also further underscore an emerging role for China as a regional security provider.

Although China continuously promotes the cooperative aims of the BRI, with an emphasis on win-win outcomes, there is no denying the geopolitical dimensions of the project. Chinese foreign policy under Xi, despite its global aspirations, has been highly focused on determining its relationship with neighboring states as a key priority. In October 2013, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held a work forum on Chinese diplomacy toward the periphery, considered as land and maritime areas adjacent to China. This was the first major meeting on foreign policy since 2006 as well as the first meeting dedicated specifically to periphery diplomacy since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The importance of the meeting was underscored by the presence of the entire membership of the Standing Committee of the Politburo as well

as other leading officials (Swaine 2014). At the meeting Xi also introduced his concept of the “Community of Common Destiny” (*minyun gongtongti*). The construct, although vague, has a Confucian lineage in positing China as the Sinocentric locus of a community that integrates states into a network of economic, political, and security relations (Callahan 2016; Rolland 2017).<sup>7</sup> The Community of Common Destiny can be envisioned as a series of concentric circles that places Central Asia in its first ring. In this sense, it appears that China, as well as Russia, is viewing the Central Asian region as constituting a sphere of influence.

Under Xi’s leadership, China has become more assertive as well as more self-confident. Chinese foreign policy has largely dropped its previous injunction of “keeping a low profile and biding one’s time” (*taoguang yanghui*), a directive allegedly set out by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990’s, to embrace a more assertive and nationalistic foreign policy that lauds China’s status as a great power. According to Xi (2019): “if we are such a big country we should have ambitions.” Chinese behavior in Central Asia indicates a confidence that reflects its growing power capabilities in the region that is especially visible with regard to Chinese interactions with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are increasingly dependent on China. In a 2015 interview, for example, Fan Xianrong, the Chinese ambassador to Tajikistan, steadfastly defended the inflow of Chinese into Tajikistan as a positive benefit to the Tajik economy and denied the validity of criticisms that Tajikistan was becoming dependent on China, noting “if I were a Tajik, I would hope that this so-called dependency increases many times over” (Fan 2015).<sup>8</sup>

The Kyrgyz leadership has apparently come under considerable pressure to support Chinese policy in Xinjiang province. Notably, the 2019 Joint Statement between China and Kyrgyzstan contains a clause stating that “Kyrgyzstan highly affirms the efforts made by the government of the People’s Republic of China in protecting the cultural diversity and freedom of religious belief of all ethnic groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and supports China’s measures to safeguard Xinjiang’s security, stability, and development” (Zhong Ji 2019). The hesitance to criticize China among the local elites is apparently partly a consequence of the part that China has come to play in their personal enrichment. But there are also reports that China is moving to take a more active role in supporting pro-Chinese politicians. In this context, it is possible that China assisted Sadyr Japarov (whose family has close ties to China) in coming to power in the political tumult that swept Kyrgyzstan in 2020 (Umarov 2021). Such behavior, of course, is nothing new and has long been characteristic of the actions of Russia and

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, the concept of the Community of Common Destiny did not originate with Xi. Its origins can be traced to Taiwan in the 1990’s. Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao also used the term on occasion, but its usage was restricted to improving relations between Taiwan and the mainland (Callahan 2016; Mardell 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this sentence is missing from the interview published in the Tajik newspaper (Ulmasov 2015) but appears in the translation provided on the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (Fan 2015).

the United States, both in Central Asia and elsewhere. But it appears to indicate a new stage in the evolution of Chinese interactions with political leaders in the region, which bespeaks a greater investment in political outcomes.

The question is, however, what does this mean for Russia? As Gabuev notes: “the balance of power in Central Asia between Russia and China is shifting to China’s advantage” (Gabuev, Umarov, and Yau 2020). The foreign policy orientation of the Xi leadership now openly identifies China as a great power, but it is not clear if this means a restructuring of understandings in the Russian-Chinese relationship, whether explicit or implicit. For their part, the Chinese leadership seems unlikely to demand any formal recognition of Russia’s increasingly subordinate status, but they seem equally unlikely to accommodate themselves to Russian preferences if they have alternative plans. The “loss” of Ukraine to the West has served to increase the importance of Central Asia to Russia as a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space at the same time that the position of Russia there is being eroded by China. In fact, the Russian claim to hegemony has already been replaced by the premise of an equal partnership of Russia and China in the region, but it is also unclear how far this interpretation can be stretched or reworked to accommodate both actors. For the time being, the legacy of the Tsarist and Soviet periods affords Russia predominance in the social and cultural realm, but it is questionable if this is sufficient to satisfy Russian narratives that have historically rested on claims to military pre-eminence.

## **Conclusion**

Russia and China undeniably have convergent interests in Central Asia. These include a joint concern over the threat of terrorism, a commitment to the maintenance of political stability, a preference for authoritarian governments, and a hostility to Western attempts at democracy promotion that could result in regime change. This is also to say that both leaderships seek to minimize the extension of Western influence in the region (although this commitment has been complicated by a grudging acknowledgment of Western participation in opposition to Islamic militants in Afghanistan). In the first decade of the 2000s, notably after the events of September 11, 2001, the Russian and Chinese motivation to cooperate in Central Asia was reinforced by their concerns that the West, notably the United States, gain a toehold in the region. The US withdrawal from its base in Manas in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 signified a sharp reduction in the Western security presence in Central Asia, a situation that was followed by the Trump administration’s apathy toward the region. The departure of the United States, however, not only removed a strategic competitor but has also served to highlight the increasing divergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the region.

The future evolution of Russian-Chinese interactions in Central Asia will be affected by a number of interrelated factors, operating at both the international and the regional level. The Central Asian leaderships possess their own agency, albeit under conditions of constraint, with a tendency to seek to maximize their own positions by playing Russia and China off against each other. It does not look likely that the United States or its Western allies will return to Central Asia, at least in the short run, but the United States, in particular, has its own interests in driving a wedge between Russia and China. For the United States, China poses a considerably more serious threat to its perceived interests than Russia, despite the dismal state of relations with both actors. This is a goal that occupies the policy community in Washington, and is a quest that has been given new life under the Biden administration (see Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021).<sup>9</sup>

A central problem for Russia is that it needs China more than China needs Russia. Russian commentary is enthusiastic on Russia's pivot to the East but does not dwell on the fact that this movement was not entirely a deliberate choice but also a consequence of the political and economic fallout of the Ukrainian events, with the West imposing economic sanctions and Russia expelled from the G-8 states. After 2014, Russia turned to China as a source of investment in energy projects and loosened restrictions on technology transfer in the sale of armaments. Chinese support for Russia has also served to bolster Russia's sense of its continued importance as a great power in the face of Western disapproval. Nonetheless, the Russian-Chinese relationship is at its most vulnerable with regard to their competing agendas in Central Asia. Central Asia is a region of strategic importance to both Russia and China with each side seeking to establish a sphere of influence. But the growing power asymmetry between the two states leaves Russia struggling to devise a response to the Chinese challenge.

In this situation, core assumptions of realism are relevant in assessing the dynamics of the Russian-Chinese relationship. Russia does not possess the material capabilities to contest China in Central Asia. Russia is also dependant on the Chinese leadership's willingness to maintain the fiction that the two interact as equal partners. For the near future, absent a substantive improvement of relations between Russia and the West, Russia seems likely to adopt a policy of de facto but unacknowledged bandwagoning toward China in Central Asia. This implies some sort of reframing of Russia's narrative toward the region that nonetheless retains a claim to predominance, at least in the virtual sphere. An increasingly self-assured China does not seem likely to seek any sort of public acknowledgment of Russia as the subordinate in the relationship but it also seems disinclined to accommodate Russian interests if they diverge from Chinese goals.

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