

Authors:
Goos Hofstee
Noor Broeders



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Multi-dimensional chess

Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia

Key takeaways

- ▶ Russia and China both see Central Asia as their rightful “backyard”, and both countries strive to maximise their sway over the region, albeit so far mostly in complementary rather than overlapping “spheres of influence”.
- ▶ However, as the power asymmetry between China and Russia grows, China allows itself to be more assertive in the military sphere, which so far has been the prerogative of the Russians.
- ▶ Based on this increasingly assertive behaviour on China’s part, and Moscow’s insistence on being the sole security provider in Central Asia, the military sphere is where we see the biggest risk of escalation in the region.
- ▶ Another consequence of this growing power asymmetry is that Russia increasingly feels like the “junior partner” in the relationship. While Putin has so far accepted this position, changing geopolitical circumstances might induce him to once again look to the West (or elsewhere) to “hedge his bets”.
- ▶ While China and Russia both consider Central Asia as one of the “chessboards” on which to play out their game of competition and cooperation, they are not the only players. Central Asian countries are increasingly asserting their strategic political agency.
- ▶ In view of the above, the EU should look to become a part of the dynamic by investing strongly in the effective implementation of the **2019 Central Asia Strategy**. Through closer relationships with individual Central Asian countries, the EU can become a “player” on the Central Asian chessboard.
- ▶ Rather than trying to influence the Sino-Russian dynamic in Central Asia through direct engagement with either Russia or China, strong diplomatic ties with the Central Asia countries themselves might provide an alternative route to affect the future trajectory.
- ▶ Additionally, the EU should try to tie in the initiatives within the Central Asia strategy with those initiated in the **EU Connectivity Strategy**. Both strategies should work to complement each other in enhancing the EU’s diplomatic leverage in the region, focus on engagement with Central Asian countries and provide them with an alternative to China (and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)).

Introduction

In June 2019, in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and China, Xi Jinping visited Vladimir Putin in Moscow. During the meeting, the two presidents made a 'Joint Statement on the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership for collaboration in the new era', which emphasized their commitment to peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation¹. In September this year, Foreign Ministers Wang and Lavrov publicly stated that as the two countries hold common positions on "all key international issues", Moscow-Beijing foreign policy coordination "plays a special role in upholding global strategic stability"². Wang Yi later even added that "the two countries' friendship is unbreakable, and their strategic cooperation will not change due to the influences of the external environment"³.

These recent diplomatic remarks seem to indicate that Sino-Russian relations have reached an unprecedented high. However, are Sino-Russian relations as robust as they are claimed to be? Is it really a stable 'strategic partnership' or might there also be critical underlying tensions at play that could potentially spell "trouble in paradise"?

Globally, there are currently three prominent regions – East Asia, the Arctic and Central Asia, – where Chinese and Russian geopolitical interests intersect, leading to cooperation and the establishment of 'strategic partnerships' but also creating the potential for competition and conflict. Of those prominent regions, both actors consider Central Asia to be their strategic backyard. It was here that the Sino-Russian partnership was first formed, and Central Asia may well be regarded as a microcosm of the multipolar world, demonstrating how it may unfold globally⁴.

Given the above, it is relevant to assess the different dimensions of their relationship in the region. Looking at Central Asia could potentially tell us something about the trajectory of the Sino-Russian relationship at a global level. This strategic alert will first take a look at the global Sino-Russian relationship in both a historical and contemporary context. The second part consists of a case study, which delves into the political-, economic-, military-

and cultural dimensions of the relationship in Central Asia. Finally, the alert will conclude with an analysis and summary as well as several key takeaways from the case study. In view of the limited scope of this study, and the extensive existing writing on EU policy in Central Asia, this Strategic Alert will not comprehensively address the role of the EU in the region. However, building on the current power-dynamics that we analyse in this paper, we will include three key takeaways with suggestions for optimizing future EU involvement.

Chinese-Russian relations on the global stage

Russian-Chinese interactions span much of the globe, with several areas where both players have significant stakes and intersecting interests. China and Russia "meet", among others, in East Asia, Central Asia, and the Arctic. The way these interactions play out vary by region and are of course subject to change over time. Over the past decades, the Sino-Russian relationship has been characterized as respectively "a robust partnership", "an axis of convenience", "a strategic alliance", "a pragmatic relationship" and even a "troubled marriage".

Where some scholars indeed point towards a growing divergence in interests and potential subsequent cracks in the partnership, others argue that for the foreseeable future, Chinese-Russian strategic interests on the geopolitical stage remain mostly complementary, and that there is therefore little chance of "trouble in paradise". However, in order to be able to thoroughly analyse and explain its current, and possible future trajectory, it is useful to take a brief look at CH-RU relations over the past three decades.

Development of the Russian position

After the Soviet Union's dissolution in December 1991, the Russian government's main goal was survival, and the implementation of Western-style reforms. In pursuit of these goals, in the early 1990s, the Kremlin initially

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sought close relations with the United States and the European Union.⁵ Moscow wanted the West to accept Russia as an equal partner of the “global North” and perceived positive relations with the United States and Europe as the best way to achieve that goal.⁶

As the 1990s went on, Moscow’s strategic objectives shifted to creating a stronger economy and reestablishing Russia as a great power. The Kremlin was disappointed when the West did not welcome Russia into the Western economic and security structures and it allowed NATO to expand significantly in 1999 and 2004 despite earlier indications that it would not.⁷

After the 2008 financial crisis, which affected China less than the West, China emerged as the world’s second-largest economy, and Chinese diplomacy became more assertive. In view of its unsatisfactory relations with the West, as well as Asia’s growing economic importance, the Kremlin realized that it had more to gain with a multipolar world, in which Russia could seek to play a role as a great power. To this end, Moscow started to pursue a multi-vectored foreign policy, in which Sino-Russian relations would feature more prominently.⁸

When, as a result of the Russian annexation of the Crimea, the US imposed far-reaching economic sanctions on Russia, relations with the West deteriorated further. The sanctions induced the Kremlin to strengthen Russia-China relations even more.

Development of the Chinese position

After the Sino-Soviet split⁹ of the Khrushchev era had more or less been “repaired” in the second half of the 1960s, and Mao died in 1976, relations between Beijing and Moscow normalised during the 1980s. The rapprochement between the Soviet Union and China concluded with an official reconciliation in 1989, when Gorbachev visited Beijing and the two countries declared a “peaceful coexistence”¹⁰. However, Chinese-Russian relations had still not improved greatly at that point. Both sides wanted peaceful relations but not much more than that. As the Cold War drew to an end, Russia emerged as looking more to the West, which Yeltsin saw as its “natural” ally.¹¹

These developments, and the end of the Cold War, changed China’s basic perception of world politics and national security. In the Cold War era, it had been in Beijing’s interest to maintain a strategic triangular relationship with the Soviet Union and the United States.¹² When the Soviet Empire collapsed, the old parameters for China’s security strategy disappeared, and Beijing needed to reorient its security strategy on a new strategic axis.

At the same time, Beijing’s economic ambitions started to take shape, as did its efforts to speed up reforms towards a market economy. From these developments emerged an understanding of security politics as intrinsically connected to political, economic and societal factors in international relations. As such, Beijing started to increasingly integrate its traditional military defence strategy with its economic, and public diplomacy agenda.

Current relationship

During the last decade, the Sino-Russian relationship can be best described as a ‘quasi-alliance, a great power entente’¹³, ‘falling short of a formal alliance but having grown much closer than the ‘strategic partnership’ the two countries established in the 1990s’.¹⁴

On the international stage, Russia and China have been engaged in a balancing act of cooperation and competition against the backdrop of a rapidly changing international world order. However, despite their competition in some areas, their shared interests and threat perceptions have created a relatively strong mutual understanding between Moscow and Beijing.

In the current geopolitical landscape, both powers have little to gain from conflict. The current Sino-Russian partnership, based on a combination of reassurance and flexibility, is therefore a product of both systemic evaluations, such as both states’ resistance to US hegemony, and pragmatic considerations.¹⁵

As an example of such pragmatic calculations, the Western sanctions following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 have accelerated Russia’s turn to China, as Russia has sought to reduce its economic depend-

ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE, RUSSIA AND CHINA HAVE BEEN ENGAGED IN A BALANCING ACT OF COOPERATION AND COMPETITION

ence on the West.¹⁶ This acceleration has manifested itself in growing bilateral trade and an expanding energy relationship. At the same time, military and high-tech cooperation between the two countries has grown extensively, as evidenced by the joint military exercises and air patrols, as well as collaborations in the realms of artificial intelligence and biotechnology.¹⁷

Since 2018, when President Donald Trump began imposing tariffs and trade barriers, the trade war between the US and China has pushed China and Russia even closer together. In terms of “worldview”, Russia and China could already be characterised as “revisionist” because of their commitment to establish a “post-West” global order.¹⁸ They have shared a desire to contest American leadership, which inhibits both countries’ aspirations for increased global power. Additionally, Putin and Xi’s autocratic regimes share an interest in limiting any international criticism of their repressive politics. Both leaders therefore support each other’s narrative and message of sovereignty and non-interference.

However, as a result of the sanctions on the Russian economy and the trade war with China, the current de-facto alliance is as much dictated by strategic pragmatism and economic necessity as by a shared vision for a global order. Due to its increasing demand for natural resources, China is to a large extent dependent on Russian supply, which means that an increasingly close Chinese-Russian trade relationship is all but inevitable.¹⁹ Sino-Russian cooperation allows both countries to simultaneously augment their capabilities and offset vulnerabilities in their relations with the US.²⁰

However, while the mutual benefits of the strategic partnership so far seem to outweigh the drawbacks, the relationship is not without its strains. There is a significant asymmetry in various aspects of the relationship, some key elements of the respective strategic agendas are inherently oppositional and mutual mis-

trust remains. A major and ever growing source of frustration on the Russian side is what it considers to be its inferior junior status.²¹

It is indeed certainly a fact that China holds the upper hand in the economic relationship and this

power asymmetry continues to grow at the expense of Russia, despite the latter’s dominance in the nuclear arena. Being Russia’s number one trading partner as well as the second-largest purchaser of Russian military hardware, China is economically more important to Russia than the other way around.²² Because of this undeniable economic asymmetry, Russia so far appears to have grudgingly accepted its relegation to being China’s (economic) junior partner.

Global chessboards

Internationally, there are several “chessboards” on which China and Russia play out their game of competition and cooperation. Chinese and Russian interests intersect in -among others- East Asia, the Arctic and Central Asia. These intersecting interests create a potential for competition and conflict. However, as long as they are managed wisely, overlapping interests and stakes have also proven to generate opportunities for collaboration.²³

East Asia

In most issues of East Asian geopolitics Moscow has tended to support Beijing or displayed friendly neutrality, as it does not regard China as a major threat to its interests in this region.²⁴ China and Russia both wish to reduce American influence in East Asia and strive to undermine the US-centric alliances in the region.²⁵ To this end, China is increasing its military strength with the help of Russian weapon sales. While one could imagine that this might concern Russia, the fact is that Russia has limited military, political or cultural interests in East Asia, and considers other “chessboards” as more important. So far, Russia seems to be prepared to “choose its battles” for the sake of not endangering its strategic relationship with China, and to settle for second-place in East Asia.²⁶

The Arctic

As opposed to East Asia, the Arctic is an area where Russia and China’s competing interests could potentially create real problems. Russia has laid claim to a significant part of the Arctic Ocean and views the region as vital to the country’s security and economic interests.²⁷ China too, has involved itself in the

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region, calling itself a 'Near-Arctic state' and seeking to gain access to the Arctic's resources.²⁸ For a long time Russia did not want China to involve itself in the region, but this has recently changed, with the Kremlin announcing that it wants more collaboration with the Chinese.²⁹ Russia needs Chinese investment to fund the costly extraction of raw materials from the region, and the two countries have signed several agreements on Arctic projects. So far, it seems that the Kremlin believes that it can manage China's rising presence in the Arctic without it undermining Russian dominance.³⁰

Central Asia

East Asia and the Arctic, along with other regions such as the Balkans and the South Caucasus, all serve as theatres for the great balancing act of cooperation and competition between Russia and China. However, no "chessboard" is more relevant – and potentially more problematic – for both players than Central Asia. When it comes to the Sino-Russian relationship, and the politics of mutual accommodation, Central Asia, as the backyard to both Russia and China, deserves a closer look.

Balancing Act: Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia

In this Alert, Central Asia refers to a region that incorporates the countries of Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Kyrgyzstan; Tajikistan; and Turkmenistan. The region is much more than just one bloc within Eurasia; it is of vital strategic importance³¹ Already long before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the territory of Central Asia was the strategic arena for the "Great Game" (1830-1907), an intense imperial rivalry between the British and the Russian Empires. Since then, Central Asia has experienced a turbulent age of annexation, migration, and independence. Nowadays, the region is still central to many complex geopolitical issues such as energy and trade politics; religious extremism and foreign security ambitions. Against an increasingly crowded geopolitical backdrop, the region is caught between resurgent Russian interests and China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the past decade, the geostrategic relevance of the region has prompted both powers to reassert influence and control over Central Asia.

‘Greater Eurasia’

Russia’s strategy for a ‘Greater Eurasia’, formulated by Vladimir Putin in 2016, is a replacement of its former ‘Greater Europe initiative’, “a harmonious economic community stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok”. ‘Greater Eurasia’ is more significant than a technocratic project of increased connectivity, trade, and investment as it entails a “geopolitical imaginary” that enables Russian policy makers to articulate an international identity for Russia and extends its constant vision for a multipolar global order. Its main objective is “to remove Russia from the dual periphery of Europe and East Asia and reposition itself within the center of a broader Eurasian geo-economic constellation”.³²

‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’

Proceeding from the premise that the first steps towards a ‘Greater Eurasia’ should be taken in the economic architecture of the Eurasian continent, Russia aspires to create a ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’. This ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’ envisions the formation of a multi-level network of free trade areas and integration initiatives throughout the vast Eurasian space (with the participation of the EAEU and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, in addition to China, India, Pakistan and Iran). The partnership’s primary objective is aligning the EAEU with the BRI, which can collectively create “a gravitational pull that allows them to capture the geo-economic levers of power by creating an alternative to the Western-centric model”. Russia has stated that this new partnership model is open to every state or organization (including the EU) yet, in reality, it tends to dominantly pivot to the East.³³

For Russia, as part of its quest to internationally reclaim its status as a global power, the post-Soviet sphere of influence represents an obvious playing field. Firstly, with an eye on retaining and strengthening Russia’s economic power, the logistical Soviet legacy throughout Central Asia’s oil and gas infrastructure is very valuable.³⁴ Secondly, Russia’s political-cultural heritage in the region is crucial in its aim to consolidate its political power.³⁵ In 2015, the ‘Valdai club’, an influential Russian think-tank, even spoke of a “Central Eurasian Moment” as a unique momentum of international political and economic circumstances that called for the resurgent Russian potential for regional cooperation and joint development. These ideas contributed to Putin’s subsequent “Greater Eurasia” project in 2016³⁶.

For China, it is the lack of common political and economic unity among the Central Asian countries that makes the region of special interest, since this makes it fertile ground for the successful implementation of its BRI. Moreover, the region’s abundance of natural resources, its strategic position as a critical transportation hub, as well as the threats to Chinese national security that emanate from the region make it of key strategic importance

to Chinese foreign interests³⁷. Given the above, Central Asia currently represents an important region for both Russia and China. Since Russian and Chinese interests seem to overlap but, to some extent, also diverge, one might expect rivalry and friction between the two external powers in Central Asia. However, so far this seems to be limited. Putin seeks to minimize the influence of other external powers on the region, in order to protect Russia’s deep-rooted position in the region.³⁸

For his part, Xi is careful not to interfere in Russia’s regional cultural relations and mostly limits Chinese aspirations to the economic sphere, without becoming too much involved in the region’s political affairs³⁹. At the same time, it is important to note that Central Asia is not just a playing field. Instead, Central Asian countries are becoming increasingly assertive, and certainly have agency in their own foreign policy with regard to the two external powers. Through shared commitments within, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and mutual promises regarding future economic alignment, the main focus of the

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Chinese-Russian “strategic partnership” is on trade in natural resources, which is where Chinese and Russian interests most strongly overlap⁴⁰. This pragmatic approach so far seems to ensure that the frictions within the Sino-Russian relationship remain latent and managed⁴¹. Nevertheless, given the underlying power asymmetries described earlier, it begs the question whether this Sino-Russian

THE QUESTION IS WHETHER THIS SINO-RUSSIAN “DIVISION OF LABOR” WILL REMAIN UNPROBLEMATIC AND SUSTAINABLE

“division of labor” will remain unproblematic and sustainable. Are there any growing trends or developments that could upset the Central Asian equilibrium? Could a “New Great Game” be in the making?⁴² In order to assess if, how and where frictions could emerge, we need to take a deeper look at the political-, economic-, military- and cultural dimensions of the Chinese-Russian relationship in Central Asia.

Politics

In Central Asia, diplomatic relations between Russia and China are rooted in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). When the SCO was established in 2001, both Russia and China planned for a mutually beneficial partnership that excluded the West, in which Russia would preserve a stable political climate and keep an eye on regional military affairs, while China would provide regional economic investment and prosperity.⁴³ This organic entente was possible due to the different regional priorities of both powers: Russia wanted to consolidate itself as the cultural ally and regional security provider, and sought to keep out the West as much as possible; China was looking to maximize its strategic flexibility, by independently managing affairs with Russia and circumventing any US interference on the geopolitical stage.⁴⁴ In recent years, however, historical grievances and growing power asymmetries have fueled increasing mistrust between Moscow and Beijing. China has started to expand its regional influence outside the economic sphere, and Russia is concerned that this could potentially weaken its own political clout in Central Asia⁴⁵. This mistrust has hampered the regional advancement of the Kremlin’s agenda for a “Greater Eurasia”, a ‘non-Western’ multipolarity with Russian political leadership and, in this case, the economic guidance of the Chinese. Therefore, Russia decided to welcome India into the

SCO as a “balancing force” against China in 2017⁴⁶. As a direct response, Beijing decided to strategically bring in Pakistan as a member in order to counter this new ‘front’.



Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

A permanent multilateral political, economic and security alliance that was established in 2001 between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. With the exclusion of Uzbekistan, it built further on the Shanghai Five arrangement of 1996. In 2017, India and Pakistan joined as full members. The SCO counts four observer states: Mongolia, Iran, Belarus and Afghanistan. The organization’s main objectives are “to ensure security and maintain stability across the vast Eurasian region, join forces to counteract emerging challenges and threats, and enhance trade, as well as cultural and humanitarian cooperation”.⁴⁷

On the surface, this symbolic ‘balancing act’ seems to have re-stabilised Sino-Russian political dynamics in Central Asia. However, while Vladimir Putin continues to stress the “unprecedentedly high level of trust and cooperation [throughout its] multifaceted strategic partnership [with Xi Jinping]”⁴⁸, he is very aware of Russia’s growing regional economic reliance on China, which forces it to be increasingly mindful of China’s aspirations. Meanwhile, the tensions in the relationship with Moscow do not allow China to be reckless, as it realizes that it is moving in a hostile environment and needs Russia’s deep-rooted political relations with the Central Asian countries to further advance the BRI.⁴⁹ China is therefore currently careful not to cross any Russian ‘political’ boundaries and seems to

avoid (openly) including a political agenda within its Central Asian strategy.⁵⁰ For now, as long as both powers continue to recognise the economic- and security benefits of their careful ‘relationship of convenience’, the strategic management of sensitivities could restore any “opening cracks in the Russia-China relationship”⁵¹, and probably prevent any escalation of political friction between Beijing and Moscow.

Economics

As is often emphasised by both Putin and Xi, the Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia “puts economics at its center”.⁵² At first glance, the economic visions that are pro-

THE SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA “PUTS ECONOMICS AT ITS CENTER

jected in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia might appear complementary in, for example, their aim to promote the development of a Eurasian transportation corridor, leading to greater integration via infrastructure and trade⁵³. In fact, the mutual promise of regionally aligning the EAEU and the BRI was officially announced in a joint declaration by the two leaders in 2015. Nevertheless, in reality, this ‘economic alliance’ turns out to be far less straightforward. For Russia, its goal of the alignment (*sopryazhenie*) between the BRI and the EAEU fits well with its aspirations for creating a Greater Eurasian Partnership which, at a deeper level, reflects Russia’s desire for a “Greater Eurasia” that inherently links its foreign geo-economic strategy to its political quest for international status. Connecting the EAEU to the BRI would place Russia at the heart of the BRI, which would in turn generate the funds for Russia’s infrastructure investment objectives (e.g. an Eurasian transportation corridor) in the region⁵⁴. Another important advantage of the Partnership would be that it would enable Russia to have a little more “grip” on China, and the BRI, in order to counterbalance China’s increasing economic influence in Central Asia.⁵⁵ The Russian idea of a regional economic partnership with China is therefore based on a positive-sum consideration, strategically preferring cooperation over (asymmetrical) competition.⁵⁶ In contrast, for China, which through its BRI seeks to maximally expand its regional power and connectivity across a whole range of industries that do not necessarily rely on Russia (such

as arms, mining and energy supply, technology and infrastructure), the alignment of the BRI and the EAEU seems less crucial⁵⁷. While Russia’s repeated suggestions for a unified EAEU trade bloc, which would prohibit its member states from having third-party agreements, have sparked strong opposition among Central Asian governments⁵⁸, China has strategically anticipated this resistance by offering the countries bilateral trade deals. Moreover, Beijing is sceptical about the development potential of the protectionist EAEU. Therefore, it regards multilateral regional economic cooperation through the SCO as more beneficial than connecting the BRI and the EAEU as part of a Greater Eurasian Partnership.



Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

An international organization of regional economic integration, established in 2015, which brings together Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It takes the EU as its model and aims to fully implement the free movement of goods, capital, services, and labor within its boundaries and develop deeper economic integration between its members. Despite multiple enlargement efforts, so far, no other states have begun the path of obtaining full membership. The EAEU does not share a common currency.⁵⁹

This ambivalence might also explain why, over the last five years, practical economic cooperation through integration projects or joint investments have not materialised. After a close look, it appears that Russia and China’s ambitions in Central Asia diverge as a result of their unequal economic capacity. Over the last decade, China has become an essential trade and investment partner for Turkmenistan⁶⁰, Tajikistan⁶¹, Uzbekistan⁶² and Kyrgyzstan⁶³. With respect to Kazakhstan, which is Central Asia’s main land corridor and

a keystone of China's BRI, bilateral billion-dollar trade and investment projects between the two countries are still rapidly increasing⁶⁴. On the contrary, apart from Russia's growing economic influence over Kyrgyzstan's gas supply network and its renewed economic closeness with 'multi-vector' Kazakhstan in the fuel- and energy sector, recent regional Russian investment and trade pales in comparison to Chinese economic engagement in Central Asia. Given Russia's current economic internal- and external weaknesses, this inequality leaves the country with no other option than to pivot to the economically dominant Chinese.⁶⁵ At the time of writing, there are, however, careful indications that as Russia's junior status could become more of a liability, Russian officials could be incentivised to reduce the risk of greater reliance on China and could eventually compel Russia to look again to the West, where most of its trade remains despite its growing ties with China⁶⁶. At the same time, even as the balance of regional economic power currently appears to be in China's favor, the economic Sino- Russian dynamics are expected to be increasingly shaped by the regional governments, the growing voice of the Central Asian public and the growing economic ambitions of other powerful actors (e.g. the EU).⁶⁷

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

A transcontinental policy and investment strategy, formerly known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), adopted by the Chinese government in 2013, which aims at infrastructure development, efficient allocation of resources and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the proposed Belt and Road routes. The BRI comprises multiple different (land-based (belt) and maritime (road)) initiatives yet within this alert it refers to the overland Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which entails a long-term vision for the infrastructural development, connectivity and economic cooperation of Eurasia along six main economic corridors that link China with the Eurasian continent, Africa and the Middle East. In 2013, the BRI was officially launched by Xi Jinping in Astana, Kazakhstan.⁶⁸

Military

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia, as the primary 'security provider' of the region, wanted to retain a leading role in the region's security affairs, aside from its influence in the political and cultural sphere. In order to maintain its hegemonic military position within the region, Russia established a regional intergovernmental military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in 2002. Although the CSTO was initially mostly dormant, since 2012 it has become more active and has increasingly been organising cooperative military exercises throughout the region. Still, even now the Moscow-dominated CSTO mostly remains a symbolic network of military bases and radar installations across Central Asia, and does not automatically contribute to regional stability.⁶⁹ This is not necessarily problematic for Russia, since the status-quo of low- level instability does guarantee a lasting demand for Russian- provided regional security and thereby strategically allows Russia to strengthen its military- political influence over the Central Asian countries⁷⁰. However, as the CSTO, compared to the SCO, imposes more military restrictions on its members whilst many Central Asian states increasingly aim to pursue their own national military interests, Uzbekistan, for example, refuses to participate in the Russian-controlled CSTO organization⁷¹.

Given Moscow's role as a 'security guarantor' within the Sino-Russian 'division of labour' in the region, it would be expected that Beijing's regional policy would not interfere in the pre-existing military dynamics. Throughout the first years of the SCO, the Chinese authorities indeed seemed to accept Russia's 'special role' in the region, and Chinese security engagement remained largely complementary to- or at times even cooperative with, Russian activities. Clear examples of these conflating interests are their extensive military cooperation in combating the 'three evils' (terrorism; separatism; extremism) and their common desire of limiting U.S. military influence in Central Asia.⁷² These days, as Russia and China regularly conduct joint exercises and even engage in shared military educational projects, bilateral security cooperation between the two powers in the region seems to increase further. This increased exchange

and collaboration might on the surface start to look like a proto military alliance, whereby regional religious terrorism is the common threat that brings the two parties together.⁷³ However, beneath that surface, Sino-Russian military dynamics are more complicated. In recent years, there have been multiple examples of Chinese military activities without (in) direct Russian participation.⁷⁴ These activities range from China's significantly increased regional arms trade since 2014⁷⁵, to the construction of its own military basis in Tajikistan and the projection of its operational military capabilities across the region⁷⁶. Putin's recent public statements regarding Sino-Russian military cooperation could indicate that he

BEIJING'S GROWING MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE REGION COULD POTENTIALLY LEAD TO ESCALATING TENSIONS

might -for now- have tacitly agreed to Beijing's growing military presence in the region.⁷⁷ Yet, even though diplomacy can, in the short-term, possibly prevent escalating tensions, the increased Chinese regional military engagement could in the long term upset the Sino-Russian regional equilibrium of the last couple of decades.⁷⁸ This increased engagement is made possible by rapid technological advances in military technology, which China, much more than Russia, is able to take advantage of. This growing technological asymmetry between Russia and China might also mean that in the long run Russia's regional military dominance-which so far has been more or less undisputed, will be challenged by the Chinese.⁷⁹

Moreover, the regional security interests and -strategies of the two powers could in the long run prove to be incompatible. With an eye on its economic aspirations, Beijing is striving for regional (authoritarian) stability, while Moscow, aiming to maintain its hegemonic military position in the region, benefits from 'controlled instability', as it prefers security issues not to be definitively 'solved' but continuously 'managed'⁸⁰. These developments indicate that the military dimension could over time become 'the most dynamic source of great power competition for regional influence'.⁸¹



Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

A Eurasian multilateral military alliance, established in 2002, which extended the regional security integration of its predecessor: the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST) of 1992, after the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan. In 2002, six of nine CST members: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, agreed to create the CSTO. The military alliance was temporarily (re)joined by Uzbekistan from 2006 to 2012, while in 2013 Serbia and Afghanistan joined the organization as observer States. Its main objectives are the collective defense against common threats, both external and internal, in particular the joint cooperation and coordination against "international terrorism and extremism, illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons, organized transnational crime, illegal migration and other menaces to safety of the Member States". Art. 4 of the CSTO treaty includes provisions for a joint military command that would act to defend its members from external aggression, yet this command structure has, so far, not been activated.⁸²

Culture

Over the years, both Russia and China seem to have realized that in order to wield influence in either of the aforementioned spheres, positive public perceptions across the Central Asian countries can be of great importance. When examining Moscow's as well as Bei-

jing's cultural weight in the region, it is relevant to mention that Central Asian societies are not passive pawns with regard to the external pressures of both powers, and that their voices and agency have influence on the policies of the two great powers.⁸³ Across the different Central Asian countries, public opinion concerning the Russian and Chinese regional presence vary, depending on the country's geographical proximity and individual connections to either state. Moreover, official ties through political, economic or military institutions (e.g. resulting in freedom of movement between countries), also tend to influence public opinion regarding Russia and China⁸⁴.

Historically, Russia's soft power over the countries in its periphery has been significant and, in later stages has been amplified by its language politics and widespread labor migration streams⁸⁵. Today, Russia is culturally

ALTHOUGH NATIONALIST SENTIMENTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SOCIETIES ARE GROWING, RUSSIA STILL HAS SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC SUPPORT IN CENTRAL ASIA

most closely linked with the former Soviet states of Kazakhstan (CSTO; EAEU); Kyrgyzstan (CSTO; EAEU) and Tajikistan (CSTO) and to a slightly lesser extent with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan⁸⁶. Even though nationalist sentiments in these maturing post-Soviet societies are growing, a recent Wilson Centre survey demonstrates that due to the extensive bilateral people-to-people relationships and Russia's overwhelming media presence in the region, Russia still has significant public support in Central Asia.⁸⁷

For China, on the other hand, public support in the region is a completely different story. Despite its prominence in other spheres of influence, for most Central Asians China remains poorly understood. In certain countries it even faces a serious lack of public trust⁸⁸. Especially in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concerns regarding national sovereignty, overwhelming economic influence, corruption and revelations about Xinjiang's massive Muslim re-education camps contribute to ethnic tensions and negative public perceptions.⁸⁹ This negative public opinion has triggered mass protests and, in some cases, even lead to Sinophobia. Especially the ethnic tensions and the human rights issues might in the future prove to become an increasing source of strife between China



and the Central Asian states. It remains to be seen whether these issues might subsequently significantly alter the relationship and the power dynamics between these players. Recent Chinese attempts to counter these anti-Chinese sentiments with public diplomacy and soft power campaigns do not so far seem to have been able to prevent negative public perceptions, especially regarding the closer economic relations with Beijing.⁹⁰ The Wilson Centre survey demonstrates that, only in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, two countries that incidentally do not happen to share borders with China, does Beijing's presence enjoy a relatively positive domestic opinion⁹¹.

In this context it is relevant to note that, these public opinions at times seem to stand in stark contrast to the officially proclaimed foreign policies of Central Asian governments on the presence of the two external powers in their countries. Especially with regard to China, public and official opinions seem to diverge, as all Central Asian governments tend to welcome Beijing as an important regional partner; support the Chinese BRI project; condemn US pressure on human rights; and (almost) never speak ill of China.⁹² This official attitude fits within the governments' overarching strategy to choose economic prosperity over public concerns. Growing societal Sinophobia is therefore unlikely to jeopardize China's strong regional economic relations anytime soon.⁹³ Yet, as public opinion

could still increasingly shape official government opinion regarding the two powers in the long run, the Sino-Russian quest for a positive public image will remain essential in their competition for regional influence in Central Asia⁹⁴.

Conclusion

In Central Asia, Russia and China, as the two major power players, are pushed together by the most elementary law of international politics: that of the balance of power. From the perspective of this balancing act, the Chinese-Russian rapprochement is unsurprising;

IT IS THIS QUEST TO EXCLUDE THE COMMON FOE, ALONGSIDE COMPLEMENTARY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS, THAT MOST DRAWS MOSCOW AND BEIJING TOGETHER IN THE REGION

in order to be able to offset the influence of what they perceive as the dominant player, the US, the two “lesser powers” join forces. In the current geopolitical climate, this dynamic is unlikely to change very soon. The fierce trade war with the US means that Beijing, even though it is the dominant player in the Sino-Russian relationship, will need Russia economically more than before. Meanwhile, Moscow, plagued by economic sanctions, estimates that China, and its continued demand for Russian energy and commodities, continues to be Russia’s best economic bet. The Central Asian case study reveals that it is this quest to exclude the common foe, alongside complementary political and economic interests, that most draws Moscow and Beijing together in the region.

In addition to these systemic balance-of-power considerations, both Moscow and Beijing see the US (and the West in general), as an existential threat to their autocratic regimes. The nature of their political rule, and the struggle for regime survival inherent in undemocratic regimes means that it is in both countries’ interest to counter outside interference. Moscow and Beijing therefore support each other’s public narrative of sovereignty and non-interference.

However, despite all the rhetoric of an unbreakable partnership and cooperation, both countries certainly also have their own individual agendas, which they pursue, sometimes to the detriment of the relationship. As the behav-

our of both states in the Central Asian arena illustrates, so far China and Russia remain careful not to push the envelope too far. While it continues to slowly expand its influence and activities in the region, China realises very well that it cannot afford to antagonise Moscow too much. Beijing therefore walks a fine line, constantly reassuring Putin about its ambitions, but at the same time exploiting Russia’s isolated position on the world stage and its need for China as a strategic partner.

This current balance of power in the region is therefore fragile, since it is based on the premise that, in one way or another, both parties need each other to more or less the same degree. While this is so far the case, the increasing power asymmetry within the relationship has proven to embolden China, which has resulted in it violating the unofficial “division of labour”, by getting itself more involved in Central Asian security (and political) affairs. As Russia is more and more relegated to the status of junior partner, this changing dynamic might induce Putin to reconsider his options, or China to overpower Russian concerns and force its own way.

The risk of China overpowering Russia is becoming more realistic as the economic power-asymmetry between the two countries keeps growing. While Russia is currently still the dominant military power, the technological advances in China could change this dynamic in the long run. It is therefore the military relationship in the region that is the most contested part of the “division of labour”, and that presents the greatest risk of escalation.

However, even though there is a risk that China’s increasing military assertiveness might irk Moscow into reacting in a similar manner, it is more likely that Putin will eventually cut his losses and accept the new status quo. Both countries still have more to gain from cooperation than from competition, or worse- conflict. The geopolitical balancing act and the common American adversary, the shared resistance to outside interference in their sovereign politics, and the benefits of the “organic division of labour so far continue to dictate the Sino-Russian partnership. As long as nothing changes in that delicate web of interests and rivalry, it seems unlikely that the strategic Sino-Russian axis will disappear from the region any time soon.

BOTH COUNTRIES STILL HAVE MORE TO GAIN FROM COOPERATION THAN FROM COMPETITION, OR WORSE- CONFLICT

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Website: www.clingendael.org

About the authors

Goos Hofstee is a Research Fellow at the Security Unit of the Clingendael Institute. Her work focuses on Strategic Foresight and (inter)national security, with a special interest in Middle East politics and security.

Noor Broeders is a Research Intern at the Security Unit of the Clingendael Institute. Her internship is focused on Strategic Foresight and international security.

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