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Russian Perceptions of Central Asia with Respect to Issues Related to China

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Russia sees itself as a global power with a reach and interests that extend to the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and beyond. The region of Central Asiaⁱ is often not specified, as it assumed to be within Russia's "sphere of influence." The narrative from Moscow repeatedly highlights the historic ties it has with these southern neighbors. Indeed, the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept notes that Russia is a "unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific Power."ⁱⁱ Highlighting the role of the People's Republic of China, another global power, in Central Asia can summon images of "great power competition," or a "new great game." Even Western scholarship and policy discussions periodically utilize such a zero-sum framework.ⁱⁱⁱ If China increases its influence and presence in Central Asia, by definition, Russia must be losing out. Usually added into the equation is the role of the US. Can this outside power increase its presence in the region at the expense of these other two so-called strategic powers, and could the US take advantage of any friction between Russia and China in Central Asia in the process?

The current reality is less dramatic. Both Russia and China engage in Central Asia in parallel, more so than in active cooperation. There has been minimal friction to date. What may cause trouble in the future is the fact that their parallel *narratives* are diverging, and the resultant perceptions of each other will continue to challenge decision makers in both countries. After an overview of Russia's perceived relationship with the states of Central Asia, attention will turn to how China's increasing presence in the region may affects it, and where points of tension between the two could arise.

Russia and Central Asia

Russia views Central Asia through a narrative shaped by its imperial and Soviet past. Contemporary interpretations center on the linkages that exist in specific areas such as economic cooperation, security, and political culture, all imbued with a shared history that goes back to the 19th century (*and even earlier for Kazakhstan*). Russian pundits highlight the mutually beneficial quality in this relationship and underscore the naturally dominant role of Russia itself in it.

Interestingly, the narrative of Russia's "special relationship" with Central Asia was developed and reinforced vis-à-vis the West. As the United States and Europe began to engage with the states of the region in the 1990s and early 2000s, Russian officials chirped about the unwelcome encroachment from these outside powers. Increasing Western foreign assistance, especially in the area of civil society education and support, raised an alarm in Moscow. The presence of US and European security forces in Central Asia after the commencement of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the International Stabilization Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2001 created additional friction.^{iv} While Vladimir Putin initially welcomed the Western effort to combat terrorism, the mood soon changed as the war continued and the NATO footprint in Afghanistan expanded. The series of so-called "color revolutions" in the early 2000s, culminating in the 2005 events in the Kyrgyz Republic, accelerated Russian opposition to any Western presence in the region. For the past twenty years, the Russian narrative about Central Asia consistently pits its own natural role against the "foreign" and unnatural role of the West.^v

Consistent over the years, Russia's engagement with Central Asia is through both a series of bilateral agreements with each of the states and regional organizations that have as members several of the Central Asian countries. With respect to the latter, two stand out as key to Russian policy toward the region. The Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) connects Russia with

Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic in the sphere of economic cooperation. In parallel, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) draws Russia closer to Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan ostensibly in the areas of collective defense and security cooperation. In these structures, Russian officials regularly note their “leading role,” which is bolstered by the fact that it has the dominant economy and military force among the member states.^{vi}

That the Central Asian states themselves consistently advocate multivectorism in their foreign policy is lost on Moscow, or perhaps just ignored. Whether one looks at trade data, educational agreements, and participation in a wider array of multinational organizations, countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular, are keen to minimize dependency on any single nation. To experts from the region, the Russian-Central Asian relationship is more complex, with academics re-assessing Imperial Russian and Soviet history – a trend not welcomed in Moscow. While these are important trends to follow, from Russia’s perspective, they carry little weight, especially with respect to other great powers, such as the United States or China.

Enter China

With this in mind, one can ask how important to Russia is cooperation with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) in the geographic space of Central Asia? On one level, this is a question that might cause Russian officials to balk. If Central Asia is considered part of its ‘near abroad,’ China should no different than any other outside power that ought to only work in areas acceptable to Russia. Given that Russia and China themselves have robust ties, “cooperation” in Central Asia is more about deconflicting when their interests overlap. For most of the post-Soviet era, this was relatively simple. In the 1990s, China had minimal engagement with the Central Asian states, except for initiating a border delimitation process under the “Shanghai Five” structure. This confidence-building measure, as well as an increase in cross-border shuttle trade and a Chinese export economy that was taking off set the stage for a more visible and profitable Chinese presence. A critical moment took place in September 2013, when President Xi Jinping announced the One Belt One Road Initiative in a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. In it, Xi highlighted the “historical” relationship between China and Central Asia, underscoring the logic of China as a key economic driver for the region.^{vii}

From this point onward, China has become a more important regional player for two key reasons: (1) the PRC’s own economic and trade outreach to Central Asia, and (2) the evolution of multinational organizations that included both Russia and China, specifically the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO facilitates regular meetings among Central Asian and Chinese officials at all levels. Increasingly, engagement takes place in a variety of sectors.^{viii}

PRC-Central Asian economic cooperation ranged from infrastructure projects, energy trade, and construction. Thousands of kilometers of road and rail lines were built that better connected China to the region, and beyond, as well as transit and “dry port” facilities like the one at Khorgos on Kazakhstan-Chinese border. With respect to energy, China financed a network of pipelines and penned agreements that resulted in Turkmenistan exporting 55 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas to China per year. Finally, construction ranges from useful projects like the refurbishment of the Anzob tunnel north of Dushanbe to the more esoteric Kohi Novruz in the city itself, which is labeled as the world’s largest tea house.

With respect to the SCO, an important multinational organization, Russian officials have been consistently supportive of China's engagement with the region *when it is through that organization*. Of note, the Chinese "three evils" mantra of "terrorism, extremism, and separatism" are repeated by other SCO members, to include Russia. Because the focus of the SCO is on transnational threats, engagement through exercises, training, and information sharing, is limited to those priorities. In recent years, especially in light of India, Pakistan, and Iran joining the SCO, the outcomes of summits and events have diminished. From Moscow's vantage, this is not a negative development. Relegating joint security efforts within the SCO to photo-op sessions and set-piece exercises serves a valuable purpose: it continues to foster engagement between Central Asia and China, as well as other nations, in a relatively benign manner.

In the end, it is important for Russia to work with China, especially in areas where their shared interests overlap. From Moscow's perspective, there exists a "balance of power" between Russia and China with respect to Central Asia: Russia dominates the security space while China does the same for economic relations. This means that the political presence of both powers is somewhat uneven compared to each other, given that the region is awash in multilateral organizations that often include one or both of the two larger states.^{ix} For the most part, Russian officials have been either quiet or supportive of Chinese efforts, not considering them threats to their own interests.

Is Russia losing influence in Central Asia to China?

Russian writers periodically note the advantages China has with respect for foreign engagement, especially in the economic sphere. At present, China is the largest investor and economic trade partner of all five Central Asian states. This is true for a variety of sectors of the economy, not just the amount of trade with respect to commercial goods from China and raw materials from Central Asia. There are technical commodities, security equipment, and other more sophisticated items that frame the bilateral economic relationship between China and individual Central Asian states. In 2025, China's regional trade with Central Asia exceeded \$100 billion, well beyond the \$45 billion that Russia has with the same countries.^x

In terms of labor, Central Asian migrant workers still primarily go to Russia, with over \$10 billion in remittances returning to Central Asia each year. These numbers have perhaps peaked, given Central Asian fears over the safety in Russia and concerns over being dragooned to fight in the war against Ukraine.^{xi} While there are increasing opportunities for Central Asians to study and vacation in China, labor opportunities akin to what is available in Russia are limited.

At present, the Russian narrative also emphasizes the close security ties between the Central Asian states and Moscow. This is primarily via state-to-state bilateral security cooperation, which remains an integral part of the CSTO. Beyond that, the CSTO appears to be an organization limited in its ability to address member-state needs. Ironically, the CSTO was called in the past to come to the aid of countries in the region, most notably by Kyrgyzstan in 2010 during ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in that country, but it was never deployed.^{xii} Russian officials noted that the threat in question was not "inter-state" violence, but rather internal. Even

the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan didn't warrant CSTO intervention on behalf of a member-state (Armenia), as it was decided Azerbaijani forces never threatened Armenia's natural borders. CSTO forces only intervened when Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requested assistance during an episode of anti-government violence in January 2022.

Interestingly, Russian officials agreed with the spurious claim that perpetrators were largely "foreign agents" brought in to incite violence, thus supporting the limited intervention. Six weeks later, Russia embarked on its invasion of Ukraine, changing security dynamics in the region, to include those of the CSTO. At present (April 2026), the Central Asian member states of the organization have not come to the aid of their Russian treaty ally, nor have they recognized the Russian claims to territories taken during the war.

To date, China has been neither encouraging nor discouraging of the Central Asian states to comment on the Russia-Ukraine War, let alone actively support Russia. While China itself aids Russia, it appears to keep that as a bilateral dynamic, not inclusive of the Central Asian states.

Russian concerns about Chinese activities and intentions

In public discourse, Russian officials do not negatively comment on Chinese activities in Central Asia. However, there are activities and other elements of China's relations with the states of Central Asia that have received attention from Russia, albeit nothing approaching a level that would have officials openly expressing alarm.

The economic feature of Chinese engagement in Central Asia that could challenge Russia is the so-called "Middle Corridor." This project, technically called the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), is the current manifestation of an east-west trade corridor ambition that has been discussed for nearly thirty years. Ultimately, this modern "silk road" is a means by which the Central Asian states can trade with each other and across the Caspian Sea to the South Caucasus and onward to the European market. To the largest extent, it can be a multi-directional effort that includes a range of near neighbors and even distant investors and participants. The "Middle Corridor's" primary Central Asian state is Kazakhstan, with Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic having key roles depending upon the project's expansion possibilities. In 2025, the European Union earmarked 10 billion Euros to upgrade and complete specific facilities as well as rail and road sections of the route. Russia's ongoing war effort against Ukraine has bolstered the value of a trade route that bypasses this heavily sanctioned country.

The Middle Corridor, of course, also brings in the Chinese Belt of Road Initiative. As transit times and costs continue to drop, this route will become more appealing to the participating countries.^{xiii} Absent in most discussions of the Middle Corridor is Russia. Whether one sees it as an alternative to the *Northern Corridor* that runs through Russia, or a replacement of anything Russian-supported in regional trade, such as the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), it is easy to see how Russian officials voice skepticism of the route overall. While not cast as a Russia versus China matter, the success of the Middle Corridor would have an impact on Russia's broader engagement within Central Asia.

Concerns about Chinese "intentions" remain largely expressed by Russian nationalists, who have warned of Chinese encroachments in the Far East for some time, with similar concerns raised about Chinese long-term goals in Central Asia. Such remarks focus on the increasing economic

influence of China in the region, as well as concerns that the PRC will establish a more robust security footprint in the region: a potential point of disagreement were it to mature.

Central Asian states are cooperating bilaterally with China in the areas of policing and *internal* security assistance. Two areas are worth highlighting: artificial intelligence or “smart technology,” and nuclear technology. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have increased their ties with Chinese firms in the area of cyber security and AI-based security networks. When this surpasses Russia’s technical presence in the region, one could see Moscow unsettled. Likewise, both Russia and China are engaging Kazakhstan on the issue of nuclear power technology and resources that are in the country. Seen through a zero-sum lens, this could cause a rift between Moscow and Beijing.^{xiv} It is important to underscore that Beijing’s security concerns in Central Asia are partly driven by the situation in Xinjiang, and a desire to have a reliable western border where transnational threats can be minimized. At present, direct *military-to-military* engagement between China and Central Asia remains limited. Chinese units are based in southeast Tajikistan, along the Wakhan corridor region of Afghanistan, but the role remains focused on Afghanistan – a concern for both countries given the security situation in that country. Whether this Chinese approach to cooperation is to be extended to other Central Asian countries is not at all certain.

Russia’s strategic imperative: China or Central Asia?

At present, Russian officials consider working with China and working with Central Asia as two separate engagement efforts that can minimally affect each other. As noted earlier, Russia-Central Asia relations are framed as “fraternal” and part of a defined “sphere of influence.” Practically speaking, Russia will continue to engage with the Central Asian countries via the mechanisms it already has in place.

To an extent, this current situation sits reasonably well with Russia. The sorts of goods that China trade, or development projects that it conducts benefit Russia and – are ones that Russia, or Russian companies, might not spearhead. When Russia and China are in competition, the “winner” can vary. Recently, ROSATOM was given the contract for designing and developing a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan. In this strategically important sector, Russia remains a critical player in Central Asia.

As the PRC enhances its role in Central Asia, it appears that Moscow still finds it convenient to address any impact through multinational organizations. Tensions can be diffused or managed via the SCO and even the BRICS+ structures as Russia and China are members of both. The SCO, in particular, brings in a range of areas: economic, social, financial, and of course, security. Moscow most likely sees the EaeU and the CSTO as more important with respect to its own engagement with the Central Asian countries. After all, in both, Russia is the dominant actor and tends to set the terms for discussion, action, and policy within each, and no other major power is a member.

Conclusion: Potential Problems?

The Russia-China-Central Asia triad is an evolving dynamic. To date, it appears that all parties are managing their own roles and responsibilities, and give the appearance of cooperation. Any immediate friction points can be addressed bilaterally or through existing regional structures. It is worth highlighting three external factors that could have an impact on Russian-Chinese engagement with Central Asia – each with a specific challenge to this “triad.”

First, the ultimate outcome of the Russia-Ukraine War will affect Russia’s ability to project credible power in Central Asia. If Russia can claim “victory,” or if Ukraine is pressured into accepting an outcome that is favorable to Russia, then it can lessen troop and materiel commitments to that front. As a result, Russia could more robustly re-engage with Central Asia. If the war drags on indefinitely, Russian security cooperation with Central Asia will continue to be compromised, opening opportunities for the PRC to engage with these states more proactively in terms of security. The modest efforts noted earlier will most likely expand.

Second, if the PRC decides, or is forced, to fully engage in the South China Seas or with the country of Taiwan, it will devote less time, effort, and resources to Central Asia. Admittedly, Central Asia has been an area of modest activity for the PRC, as compared to other regions of the world. Any future conflict to the east will underscore this reality. In such a case, officials in Moscow would be able to breathe more easily, as China will most likely limit engagement to economic matters and do so via existing institutions and agreements.

Third, if the previously noted Middle Corridor takes off as a credible and profitable route for economic activity, it would lessen the opportunity costs for China to remain engaged in the region in a manner that bypasses Russia. Looking east-west, a true expansion of the Middle Corridor will solidify China’s role as the primary player in the realm of economic engagement and economic security. Russia would find itself as a clearly defined “junior partner” to China in Central Asia, with little recourse to alter the dynamic.

None of these three scenarios are premised on an adversarial tension or conflict between Russia and the PRC. Indeed, their bilateral relationship would continue to develop due to a host of other factors *not involving Central Asia*. Given that there is flexibility in how they both engage with Central Asia, and that they have shown it is possible to work parallel with each other, it is unlikely that the region itself will cause problems in the near and intermediate terms.

ⁱ For the purposes of this analysis, ‘Central Asia’ refers to the states of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

ⁱⁱ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” (March 31, 2023), https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012). This is a well-written analysis of how external actors present their relationship with the states of Central Asia. Cooley highlights that the regional powers to have their own agency, albeit adjusted to work within this ‘great power competition.’

^{iv} Increasingly, Russian criticisms against the US and NATO missions in Afghanistan were influenced by their own re-interpretation of the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989. Numerous works focus on these campaigns, more recently Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

^v Andrei Kazantsev, “Russian Policy in Central Asia and in the Caspian Region, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.60, no.6 (August 2008), pp.1073-1088 is an early example of how this contrast is presented in Russian scholarship.

^{vi} Russia has over 80% of the collective GDP of EaEU member states and over 70% of defense spending and force composition in the CSTO. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian security focus has been on Ukraine, lessening its presence and contribution to the CSTO structure.

^{vii} See Janet Xuanli Liao. “China’s Energy Diplomacy Towards Central Asia and the Implications on its ‘Belt and Road Initiative,’” *The Pacific Review*, vol.34/3 (2021), pp.490-522.

^{viii} To understand the evolution of China’s relationship with the Central Asian states, see Liselotte Odgaard, Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China’s Relations with Russia in Central Asia,” *Asian Security*, vol.13/1 (February 2017), pp.41-58, and Nargis Kassenova, “China-Central Asia Relations,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, edited by Rico Isaacs and Erica Marat (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), pp.202-217.

^{ix} See Andrei Kazantsev, Svetlana Medvedeva, and Ivan Safranchuk. “Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol.12/1 (2021), pp.51-71 for a study of how this dynamic.

^x China’s assistance is more than building economic projects. See Rahman Nurdun. “Unravelling China’s Aid Strategy Towards Central Asian Countries: The Case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” *Insan & Tophum, The Journal of Humanity and Society*, Vol.14/No.4 (September 2024), pp.171-191. Assistance efforts help foster a “soft power” role for China, as well.

^{xi} Central Bank of Russia’s website: <http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?Prtd=svs>. Also note the scholarship of Rustamjon Urinboyev on the evolution of Central Asian labor migration to Russia. See: Eraliev, Sherzod and Rustamjon Urinboyev. “‘What Have You Done, Brother Putin?:’ Everyday Geopolitics and Central Asian Labour Migration to Russia,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.43/2 (2024), pp.215-234.

^{xii} The so-called Osh violence took place in June 2010, shortly after the ouster of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In the broader region of Osh and Jalalabad, violence erupted between groups of armed Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, with over one hundred thousand of the latter being forced to flee across the border to Uzbekistan to safety. There were nearly 500 deaths, mostly Uzbek. While the immediate violence ended in less than a week, the resultant tensions reverberated for some time.

^{xiii} See Yunus Sharifli, “From Disinterest to Strategic Priority: China’s Changing Approach to the Middle Corridor,” *Trends* (November 24, 2024).

^{xiv} As noted by other papers in this project, the bilateral relationship between Russia and China in the areas of energy and technology are fraught with problems, especially as the latter is surpassing Russia in numerous sectors and has the research and development capability to widen the gap.