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**COMPETITION AND COOPERATION:  
SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN ASIA IN THE  
ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION**

**Georgiev, Ivan R.**

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL  
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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: SINO-RUSSIAN  
INTERACTIONS IN ASIA IN THE ERA OF GREAT  
POWER COMPETITION**

by

Ivan R. Georgiev

March 2022

Thesis Advisor:  
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Michael A. Glosny  
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**COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN  
ASIA IN THE ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION**

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Lieutenant, United States Navy  
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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(EAST ASIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the great power competition–era, the United States finds itself challenged by two main adversaries: Russia and China. This is especially evident in Asia, where both rival powers seek to retain and expand their traditional political, economic, and military spheres of influence while attempting to put limits on U.S. involvement. This thesis explored the dynamics of competition and cooperation between Russia and China in order to ascertain which are stronger. To achieve this, the thesis examined Sino-Russian interactions in three specific cases: Central Asia, North Korea, and Mongolia. In the case of Central Asia, competition between Russia and China was the strongest of the three cases due to the region’s importance to both great powers. However, shared security concerns and the opposition to U.S. presence push Moscow and Beijing toward cooperation. Regarding North Korea, Russia largely follows China’s lead, recognizing shared concerns about the stability of the DPRK regime and the greater importance of the region to Beijing. Finally, in Mongolia, Moscow and Beijing cooperate for the sake of maintaining a stable and predictable neighbor, avoiding an unnecessary security dilemma. In all three cases, Russia and China were found to prefer cooperation to competition, both to ensure their peripheries’ stability and focus their efforts on the great power competition with the United States.



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION AND MAIN FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>1. General Literature on Sino-Russian Relations .....</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>2. Sino-Russian Relations as Strategic—the Case for Convergence .....</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>3. Sino-Russian Relations as Tactical—the Case for Competition .....</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>4. Sino-Russian Relations in Asia .....</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>5. Sino-Russian Interactions in Central Asia .....</b>	<b>20</b>
	<b>6. Sino-Russian Interactions Concerning North Korea .....</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>7. Sino-Russian Interactions in Mongolia.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>D.</b>	<b>POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>E.</b>	<b>RESEARCH DESIGN.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>F.</b>	<b>THESIS OVERVIEW .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>C.</b>	<b>CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS CENTRAL ASIA.....</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>1. Chinese Interests .....</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>2. Russian Interests .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>D.</b>	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION— COORDINATED APPROACHES TO STABILIZATION.....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>1. Political and Security Cooperation.....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>2. Economic Cooperation .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>E.</b>	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—A NEW “GREAT GAME” .....</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>1. Security Competition .....</b>	<b>46</b>
	<b>2. Economic Competition .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>F.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN NORTH KOREA .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>A.</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>B.</b>	<b>BACKGROUND .....</b>	<b>58</b>

C.	<b>CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS NORTH KOREA</b> .....	66
1.	<b>Chinese Interests</b> .....	66
2.	<b>Russian Interests</b> .....	75
D.	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION—RUSSIA FOLLOWING CHINA’S LEAD</b> .....	82
1.	<b>Political and Diplomatic Cooperation</b> .....	82
2.	<b>Economic Cooperation</b> .....	84
3.	<b>Security Cooperation</b> .....	85
E.	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—RUSSIA ACCEPTING CHINA’S PREDOMINANCE</b> .....	87
F.	<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	90
IV.	<b>SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN MONGOLIA</b> .....	91
A.	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	91
B.	<b>BACKGROUND</b> .....	92
C.	<b>CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS MONGOLIA</b> .....	96
D.	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION—BURGEONING TRADE AND MULTILATERALISM</b> .....	97
1.	<b>Economic Cooperation</b> .....	97
2.	<b>Security Cooperation</b> .....	100
E.	<b>ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—INTERFERENCE AND BALANCING</b> .....	101
1.	<b>Political Competition</b> .....	101
2.	<b>Economic Competition</b> .....	105
F.	<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	107
V.	<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	109
	<b>LIST OF REFERENCES</b> .....	115
	<b>INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST</b> .....	133

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Political Map of Central Asia .....	29
Figure 2.	Map of Central Asia (including terrain and existing infrastructure).....	37
Figure 3.	Arms Sales to Central Asia (in \$M USD).....	49
Figure 4.	Disparity in Trade with Central Asia between the EU, Russia, and China.....	52
Figure 5.	Existing and Proposed Portions of a Russia-DPRK-ROK Gas Pipeline .....	80
Figure 6.	Railroad Links between Russia, China, and Mongolia.....	103

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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Bilateral Trade of Central Asian States with China and Russia (2018 data).....	39
Table 2.	North Korean Trade Balance with Russia and China (2018 data).....	73
Table 3.	Mongolia's Imports, Exports, Trade Balance, and FDI (2018 data) .....	94

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAR(s)	Central Asian Republic(s)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COMECON	Council on Mutual Economic Assistance
CRDF	Collective Rapid Deployment Forces
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
GDP	gross domestic product
GEP	Greater Eurasian Partnership
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
KWP	Korean Workers’ Party
MPR	Mongolian People’s Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEBDA	Northeast Border Defense Army
NPT	non-proliferation treaty
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
RFE	Russian Far East
ROK	Republic of Korea
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WMD	weapon of mass destruction



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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION AND MAIN FINDINGS

The United States currently finds itself in a new geopolitical situation, in which its post–Cold War hegemony is challenged politically, economically, and militarily by its emerging rivals—Russia and China. These powers have increasingly pursued policies designed to limit American involvement and bolster their own power and prestige in their respective regions, if not globally. The leadership in Washington is under no illusion as to the nature of the challenge, with the former Secretary of Defense James Mattis stating that the “great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the Intelligence Community’s Worldwide Threat Assessment asserts that Russia and China’s goals are to “counter U.S. objectives, taking advantage of rising doubts in some places about the liberal democratic model...and [presenting] a counterweight to the United States and other Western countries.”<sup>2</sup> The great power competition is most intense in Asia, where Russia and China seek to expand their traditional spheres of influence and where their abilities to pursue their interests are the strongest. In this new context for the U.S. foreign policy, it is increasingly more important to understand the precise nature of Sino-Russian relations, as well as the extent of their cooperation due to the immense challenge that such cooperation can pose to the U.S. interests abroad.

Sino-Russian relations have been growing increasingly close after the collapse of the Soviet Union and normalization of their bilateral relations. China and Russia signed agreements in 1991 and 1994, resolving most of the territorial disputes and resuming arms trading. In 1996 they announced a new “strategic partnership,” which entailed further intensification of defense cooperation, a pledge of non-aggression, as well as a prohibition

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<sup>1</sup> Idrees Ali, “U.S. Military Puts ‘Great Power Competition’ at heart of strategy: Mattis,” Reuters, last modified 19 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-china-russia/u-s-military-puts-great-power-competition-at-heart-of-strategy-mattis-idUSKBN1F81TR>.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel R. Coats. *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*. Statement for the Record, Washington, DC: Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019, 24.

from entering military alliances targeted at one another.<sup>3</sup> The year 2001 was a landmark year for Sino-Russian relations with the conclusion of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, as well as the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which aimed to significantly increase Sino-Russian defense cooperation in Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> The arms trade that was resumed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union continued to grow with China purchasing on average USD 2 billion worth of military equipment from Russia per year between 1999 and 2005. In 2011, the relationship further evolved into what China's President Xi Jinping called a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination."<sup>5</sup> This new era of China-Russia relations is characterized by a much closer relationship involving direct military cooperation, regular joint exercises, and joint R&D projects. During the 2012 election campaign Vladimir Putin announced a "Pivot to the East," an attempt to reorient Russian foreign policy away from Europe and the United States and toward Asia, compensating for increasingly frigid relations with the West. Through this initiative, Putin is hoping to promote a new vision of Eurasian integration based on cooperation between Moscow and Beijing.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis researches the evolution of Sino-Russian relations and raises the question of possibility of significant strategic cooperation between Russia and China in Asia—a region that is a priority theater of the United States as a Pacific nation.<sup>7</sup> Asia is also of paramount importance to both China and Russia both as their geographic neighborhood and as part of their traditional spheres of influence. The thesis examines

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Schwartz, "Evolution of Sino-Russian Cooperation since the Cold War," The ASAN Forum, last modified June 13, 2014, <https://theasanforum.org/evolution-of-sino-russian-defense-cooperation-since-the-cold-war/>.

<sup>4</sup> Schwartz, "Evolution of Sino-Russian Cooperation."

<sup>5</sup> Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Los Angeles, "Written Interview by H.E. Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China with Mainstream Russian Media Organizations," 5 June 2019, <http://losangeles.china-consulate.org/eng/topnews/t1669855.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> David Lewis, "Strategic Culture and Russia's 'Pivot to the East:' Russia, China, and 'Greater Eurasia,'" George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, last modified July 2019, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/strategic-culture-and-russias-pivot-east-russia-china-and-greater-eurasia-0>.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 1 June 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>, 1.

Sino-Russian interactions since the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s presidency in late 1999 in three cases—Central Asia, North Korea, and Mongolia—and provides an analysis of major factors encouraging either cooperation, competition, or both in each of the cases. More broadly, the thesis answers the question whether there has been more competition or cooperation between Russia and China in Asia and examines what factors encourage each. The thesis also demonstrates how better understanding of Sino-Russian relations will help the U.S. decision-makers conduct a smarter, more effective policy vis-à-vis its competitors in the context of the great power competition.

On the whole, the cases examined by this thesis demonstrate that Russia and China cooperate more than they compete. In Central Asia, the interests of Russia and China clash the most out of the three regions examined and even there Moscow and Beijing largely cooperate and support local regimes in an effort to keep the region stable. In North Korea, Sino-Russian interests align even closer, as their fears of the DPRK regime collapse and its consequences take upstage important concerns about the North Korean nuclear aspirations or economic interactions. Finally, in Mongolia, Moscow and Beijing show a preference in maintaining a stable and prosperous neighbor, leaving their competition there largely muted. At the same time, all three cases involve Russia striving to maintain at least some influence in the face of rising China, choosing to cooperate or to follow China’s lead. As demonstrated by these case studies, Russia and China avoid competing even in regions where their interests do not align, due to their preoccupations in other regions and their common interest in challenging the U.S.-led global order.

## **B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

The importance of the research question is particularly evident when seen through the lens of the U.S. foreign policy towards Asia. Since the announcement of the “Pivot to Asia” in 2012, the United States made a major shift in its foreign policy to Asia and away from Europe and the Middle East. American interest in this region is obvious as Asia contains almost 60 percent of the world’s population and its combined GDP is approaching

almost 50 percent of the global share.<sup>8</sup> The region also contains two of the U.S. most prominent allies, South Korea and Japan, as well as numerous regional partners, with whom United States engage in open trade and security cooperation. American commitment to the region is “to uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules, norms, and principles of fair competition.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the region has been greatly affected by the rise of China, who increasingly seeks more prominent role for itself in the region by expanding and modernizing its military, conducting influence operations, and using coercive tactics to reorder the economic order of the region in its favor. In the view of the United States, China is a revisionist power that “undermines the international system from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously eroding the values and principles of the rules-based order.”<sup>10</sup> Resurgent Russia also proclaimed its own “turn to the East” in an attempt to alleviate the effect of the economic sanctions placed on it by the United States and its allies for its aggressive behavior in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, resulting in its greater engagement with North Korea, China, Mongolia, and Central Asia. Moscow also seeks to re-establish its military presence in the region by conducting bomber and reconnaissance missions in the Sea of Japan, increasing the scope of its naval operations, while also modernizing its conventional and nuclear possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report highlights Sino-Russian collaboration in the diplomatic, economic, and security matters, noting China’s investments in Russia’s energy sector, the sale of Russian weapons systems, such as the Su-35 fighter aircraft and the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, as well as more frequent large-scale joint exercises, such as Vostok-2018. Russia and China have also grown closer to each other economically

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<sup>8</sup> Praneeth Yendamuri and Zara Ingilizian, “In 2020 Asia Will Have the World’s Largest GDP. Here’s What That Means,” World Economic Forum, last modified 20 December 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/asia-economic-growth/>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense, The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, i.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Defense, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Defense, 11.

as a result of the U.S. hardline policies of sanctions and tariffs designed to curb undesirable behaviors of both countries. In 2019 both countries announced that efforts will be made to double their bilateral trade by 2024, specifically in areas of energy, industry and agriculture.<sup>12</sup> This strengthening of economic ties undermines the U.S. efforts to use sanctions and tariffs as a viable tactic in encouraging good behavior and punishing actions that threaten global order, such as Russia's adventurism in its periphery and China's unfair trade practices.

While the United States is, undoubtedly, still the predominant world power, the resurgence of Russia and China on the world stage is a cause for concern even if considered on their own, but especially so if there is significant collaboration aimed at undermining U.S. interests in Asia. Russia still maintains a significant conventional military capability and possesses a nuclear arsenal that rivals that of the United States, although its economic power is a small portion of that of the former Soviet Union. China, on the other hand, is an economic powerhouse that has until recently enjoyed a long period of double-digit GDP growth and is rapidly modernizing its conventional and nuclear forces. Both countries are the founding members of SCO, an organization with a stated security focus, which also saw growth in the recent years, with India and Pakistan joining in 2017. Military exercises involving both countries' forces have been held in the recent years, such as the Vostok-2018 and Tsentr-2019, as well as many smaller-scale events.<sup>13</sup> Such events also involve other Asian players, including Mongolia, Kazakhstan, India, and Pakistan, serving to bolster Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Such military collaboration, which also includes significant technology transfers, poses major concerns for the U.S. foreign policy efforts of maintaining leadership in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia.

Finally, understanding the extent of this collaboration and possibility of competition between Russia and China in some areas will enable the United States policymakers to formulate a smarter approach to managing their own foreign policy.

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<sup>12</sup> Department of Defense, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Holly Ellyatt, "Are Russia and China the Best of Friends Now? It's Complicated, Analysts Say," CNBC, last modified 27 September 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/27/russia-and-chinas-relationship--how-deep-does-it-go.html>.



Countries, where Sino-Russian cooperation is strong, may turn out to be harder regions for the furthering of the U.S. interests, while areas, where the factors encouraging competition between them are stronger, present an opportunity for American foreign policy efforts. Understanding the patterns of cooperation and competition and which factors encourage them can also give the United States the tools needed to influence Russia and China and effectively discourage their cooperation in areas, where the competition is stronger.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to understand the dynamics of Russia and China's cooperation or competition in Asia, it is important to build a broad understanding of their relations as a whole, then to examine the patterns of their interactions in Asia, before moving on to the three cases, namely Mongolia, North Korea, and Central Asia. The following literature review will first examine the general academic literature regarding Sino-Russian relations during the last two decades, then will transition to literature focusing on Sino-Russian interactions in Asia, and then will discuss literature on specific interactions in Central Asia, North Korea, and Mongolia.

#### **1. General Literature on Sino-Russian Relations**

The academic literature on Sino-Russian relations after 2000 can be largely subdivided into two schools of thought, although it may be useful to think of it as existing on a spectrum of the extent of cooperation as seen by the analysts. These two schools of thought see the Sino-Russian cooperation as either strategic, emphasizing their enduring character and unified goals, or tactical, seeing cooperation as temporary with many factors limiting its extent or encouraging competition. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the overall trend in the scholarly opinions, with the scholars being more likely to dismiss likelihood of significant Sino-Russian cooperation as recently as 2014, while more contemporaneous works show that this cooperation shows more signs of maturity, as was the case with Stephen Blank's views of Moscow-Beijing relations.

The first school of thought characterizes Sino-Russian cooperation as strategic and argues that the relations between the two countries have become much closer over time. At the very extreme of this school of thought are authors, such as Schoen and Kaylan, that see

China and Russia as a unified bloc or axis aimed against the U.S.-led world order, an alliance in all but name.<sup>14</sup> This is a minority view as few analysts see the China-Russia relations as having reached this level of closeness. Others, such as Blank and Korolev, highlight the coordination between Russia and China, who are united in their anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiments and are actively working to diminish the role of the United States both within their immediate geographic neighborhoods, as well as globally.<sup>15</sup> This group of analysts and scholars, which further include Gilbert Rozman, Angela Stent, and Elizabeth Wishnick, draws attention to cooperation of Russia and China on the issue of the North Korean nuclear program, involving both using their permanent status on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to derail the U.S. attempts to impose effective sanctions on North Korea, as well as blunting the U.S. efforts to respond to crises in Crime and Syria.<sup>16</sup> They also emphasize the role of regional organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), that include China, Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia (who has observer status), as Sino-Russian instruments of imposing an alternative security regime aimed at balancing against the United States and its allies. Other multinational organizations have also emerged as an alternative to the Western institutions, such as the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), as well as the BRICS association of emerging economies, which includes Russia, China, Brazil, India, and South Africa.

The second body of literature, which encompasses a majority of Sino-Russian relations experts, calls Sino-Russian cooperation as tactical in nature and highlights the pragmatic and largely transactional character of Sino-Russian relations. Such is the position of Bobo Lo, James Dorsey, Alexander Lukin, Dmitry Trenin, Alexander Gabuev,

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas E. Schoen and Melik Kaylan, *The Russia-China Axis: The New Cold War and America's Crisis of Leadership* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), x.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Blank, "China and Russia: a Burgeoning Alliance," *Proceedings*, March 2020, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/march/china-and-russia-burgeoning-alliance>

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "Asia for the Asians: Why Chinese-Russian Friendship Is Here To Stay," *Foreign Affairs*, 29 October 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2014-10-29/asia-asians>.

Gaye Christoffersen, and many others. In this view, the factors, encouraging competition have been much more powerful and, at times, have outweighed those encouraging cooperation. This school of thought acknowledges the easily observed patterns of cooperation, from joint military exercises and arms sales to preferential economic deals and mutually supportive votes in the UN Security Council (UNSC), while also leaving room to showcase and explain diverging interests and mutual anxieties. In the words of Bobo Lo, for instance, “...the greatest obstacle to bilateral cooperation is the widespread perception that the Sino-Russian relationship is not one of equals, but an increasingly asymmetric interaction between a ‘senior partner’ and a ‘junior partner’.”<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Sino-Russian Relations as Strategic—the Case for Convergence

At the very extreme of this school of thought is the idea that Russia and China have been steadily building up their cooperation to the point of acting as a unified bloc or an undeclared alliance. In *The Russia-China Axis*, Schoen and Kaylan argue that Russia and China act as one and “conspire” against the United States in all areas of global competition. They draw attention to the existence of “an unfolding alliance between Russia and China that most observers are only now starting to acknowledge,”<sup>18</sup> further stating that “the signs of Russian and Chinese collaboration are everywhere, and they have been mounting for a decade.”<sup>19</sup> Schoen and Kaylan point to Russian and Chinese support of the regimes in Syria, Iran, and North Korea as the most compelling evidence of their collaboration on the world stage. They also highlight similarities in their tactics, from cyberwarfare to information warfare, as well as military buildup and an increased tempo of joint military exercises as further proof of their malicious collaboration.

Previously skeptical of the possibility of deeper cooperation between Russia and China, Blank suggests that an alliance between the two powers is in the making. He claims that the relationship has moved beyond a strategic partnership and compares it to the

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<sup>17</sup> Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Melbourne: Penguin Specials, 2017), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Schoen and Kaylan, *The Russia-China Axis*, x.

<sup>19</sup> Schoen and Kaylan, *The Russia-China Axis*, x.

alliances of the Tsarist era.<sup>20</sup> The key evidence of this is a “longstanding and extensive series of exercises and intermilitary discussions and conferences; 3,600 Chinese students ... [in] Russian military academies; and a...thriving bilateral arms sales relationship.”<sup>21</sup> He also draws attention to the fact that that Sino-Russian military exercises have also grown in complexity, while the maritime exercises and Russian technological contributions to the Chinese navy have challenged the U.S. maritime order in the Pacific. Blank further states that “While the United States remains the dominant power in the Pacific region, growing Chinese and Russian nautical interaction heralds the beginning of a multipolar or even bipolar Asian maritime order.”<sup>22</sup> Blank also suggests that the relationship can easily morph into a wartime alliance with Russia coming to China’s support should China attempt to seize Taiwan by force.

Korolev shares this concern with Blank, stating that “in the context of deteriorating Russia-US relations after the Ukraine crisis and China’s ‘new assertiveness’ in the South and East China Seas has revived the ‘alliance’ rhetoric in China-Russia bilateral relations,” and quoting Vladimir Putin as calling Russia and China “natural partners and natural allies.”<sup>23</sup> Analyzing Vladimir Putin’s remarks during the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in 2019, Stent notes his usage of words “allies” and “strategic partners,” and the idea of a “greater Eurasia” espoused by some of Russia’s leading scholars.<sup>24</sup> Domestic rhetoric in Russia and China has also shifted in a direction conducive to better relations, with historic revisionism dominating the discussion of Sino-Russian shared history. Episodes like the border skirmishes in 1969 during the Sino-Soviet Split, massacres of ethnic Chinese by Russia’s Cossacks in 1900, and Russia’s takeover of

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Blank, “China and Russia: a Burgeoning Alliance,” *Proceedings*, March 2020, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/march/china-and-russia-burgeoning-alliance>.

<sup>21</sup> Blank, “China and Russia: a Burgeoning Alliance.”

<sup>22</sup> Blank, “China and Russia: a Burgeoning Alliance.”

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Asian Security* 15 no.3 (2019), Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>24</sup> Angela Stent, “Valdai 2019: The Dawn of the East and the World Political Order,” *Russia Matters* (Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs), last modified 11 October 2019, <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/valdai-2019-dawn-east-and-world-political-order>.

large swaths of Chinese territory north of the Amur River are rarely discussed by China and Russia's public figures, if remembered at all.<sup>25</sup>

Wishnick is similarly concerned by the Sino-Russian attempts to create a new international order distinct from one pursued by the United States, based on the five key principles:

1. a preference for a multipolar world in opposition to the U.S. hegemony;
2. a mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, and non-interference in domestic affairs;
3. peaceful resolution of international disputes;
4. a stronger role for the United Nations as a guardian of international order; and,
5. “bilateral partnerships based on equality, trust and mutually beneficial cooperation”<sup>26</sup>

Wishnick also draws attention to the recent 2017 joint statement by Russia and China that calls for political diversity and respect for the rights of all countries to choose own developmental path and a political system—a veiled criticism of the United States' stated interest to spread liberal democratic values and disdain of authoritarian regimes. She also points to the common political worldviews of Russian and Chinese leadership, which negatively views American interference in the domestic affairs of other states, such as the “color revolutions,” and is threatened by the rising influence of the NGOs and the free flow of information from outside their borders.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Russia and China are “partners of consequence,” drawn together due to shared political values.

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Higgins, “On Russia-China Border, Selective Memory of Massacre Works for Both Sides,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/world/europe/russia-china-border.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order,” *Asian Perspective* 42 (2018), 359–360, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/apr.2018.0016>.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, “In Search of the ‘Other’ in Asia: Russia-China Relations Revisited,” *The Pacific Review* 30 (2017), 117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1201129>.

Among the first scholars to warn of the possibility of deep, strategic relations between Russia and China, Rozman observes that the near future holds no prospect for any Sino-Russian fallout, while the incentives for the two countries to cooperate are high.<sup>28</sup> In Rozman's view the closeness of Russia and China is "motivated less by shared material interests than by a common sense of national identity that defines itself in opposition to the West and in support of how each views the legacy of traditional communism."<sup>29</sup> He outlines six reasons why he believes that the Sino-Russian relation is durable:

1. Similar ideologies justifying the rule of both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, centered in pride in the achievements of the socialist era, Russo-centrism and Sino-centrism, and anti-hegemonism;
2. Emphasis on historical differences with the West, emphasizing the period of the Cold War, but also omitting any mention of Sino-Soviet ideological schism;
3. Arguments against the West's political and economic model and its weakness, demonstrated by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008;
4. Mutual emphasis on the importance of the Chinese-Russian bilateral relations and emphasis on communism as either a current ideology or a positive legacy;
5. Successful effort by both states to be on the same side in international disputes, while proclaiming the threat posed by the United States; and,
6. Official narrative promoting national identity and justifying domestic repression.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, Rozman believes that substantial rifts between the two countries are unlikely and sees their mutually supporting rhetoric and actions, such as Russia's support of China's

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "The Sino-Russia-US Strategic Triangle: A View from China," The ASAN Forum, last modified 19 February 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-sino-russia-us-strategic-triangle-a-view-from-china/>.

<sup>29</sup> Rozman, "Asia for Asians: Why Chinese-Russian Friendship Is Here To Stay."

<sup>30</sup> Rozman, "Asia for Asians."

claims in East Asia and China's support of Putin's actions in Ukraine, as "a feature of a new, post-Cold War geopolitical order."<sup>31</sup> Stent also sees China-Russia convergence as a product of domestic factors, with both regimes seeking to stay in power and avoid "color revolutions" that toppled regimes in several post-Soviet states. In this view, Putin does not see Xi as a threat to his regime in Russia, as opposed to how he views the United States and the West, making his cooperation with China less politically costly for him.<sup>32</sup>

### **3. Sino-Russian Relations as Tactical—the Case for Competition**

On the other side of the debate are the scholars that tend to see the Russia-China rapprochement in more tactical than strategic terms draw attention to divergent global and regional interests of the two great powers. In his 2008 *Axis of Convenience*, Lo urges to resist the "temptation to invest the Sino-Russian relationship with earth-shattering importance, to view it as...axis that threatens the West's strategic supremacy and the global leadership of the United States."<sup>33</sup> The more complex reality is one where the Sino-Russian arrangement is opportunistic and expedient, yet rife with numerous limitations, such as the unequal nature of bilateral trade and economic relations, deterioration of conventional military parity in favor of China, and differing designs on the future of Central Asia and other regions, where both states have diverging interests. Writing later in 2017, Lo acknowledges that more significant Sino-Russian rapprochement took place in the recent years; however, he still points out the tactical character of this relationship, outlining important differences in the Chinese and the Russian views of the international system, particular elements of the multipolar system, their relations with the United States, and their visions for the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Dorsey asserts that fears of a "grand coalition" are premature, due to a radical difference between the two countries' outlooks. Quoting Shi Ze, a former Chinese

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<sup>31</sup> Rozman, "Asia for Asians."

<sup>32</sup> Angela Stent, "Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists," *Global China* (Brookings), last modified February 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/russia-and-china-axis-of-revisionists/>.

<sup>33</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Chatham House, 2008), 194.

<sup>34</sup> Lo, *A Wary Embrace*, 61.

diplomat in Moscow, Dorsey states that while Russia believes itself a “victim of the current international system, in which its economy and its society do not develop,” China “benefits from the current international system [and]...wants to improve and modify it, not to break it.”<sup>35</sup> He further cites the Russian elites’ suspicions of China’s rising influence in Russia’s periphery, as well as widespread public sentiment against perceived encroachment by China as evidence that any betterment in bilateral relations is a transient phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> These suspicions and fears are not new; writing in 2000 prior to Russia-China rapprochement, Shuja points out that major risks to Russia in the Asia-Pacific include China’s military growth, as well as “a destabilizing increase in the number of foreign migrants in the Russian Far East”<sup>37</sup>—all major impediments to a true strategic partnership even 20 years since this assessment.

Lukin’s view of Sino-Russian relations also emphasizes their ambivalent nature.<sup>38</sup> He draws attention to Russia’s internal politics, in which the pro-Western forces have been consistently prosecuted, assassinated, and harassed since the end of the 1990s and the rise of Putin. Contributing to this development were unsuccessful liberal reforms and the perceived encroachment of NATO, which has empowered the anti-Western elements within the state to seek greater ties with China.<sup>39</sup> Lukin writes that “pivoting” towards China, especially after 2014, was a practical move for Putin and his government as a way to compensate for the damage done to the Russian economy following the imposition of Western sanctions after the annexation of Crimea,<sup>40</sup> although, as Trenin observes, Russia’s pivot to the East predates the Crimean crisis and was spurred on by Putin’s need for Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> James M. Dorsey, *The Future of the China-Russia Alliance*. BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1151, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2019, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Dorsey, *The Future of the China—Russia Alliance*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Sharif M. Shuja, “Russia’s Northeast Asia Policy: Challenges and Choices for the 21st Century,” *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* no.4, 2000 (159), 11, <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/mscas/vol2000/iss4/1>.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Emerging Greater Eurasia,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russian Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko, (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 75–76.

<sup>39</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Emerging Greater Eurasia,” 83.

<sup>40</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Emerging Greater Eurasia,” 83.



investments in Siberia and the Far East.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the political elite in Russia is weary of ever-growing cooperation. On one hand, they realize that Beijing will not “suddenly save Russia at its own expense if Russia turns out to be in a difficult financial situation.”<sup>42</sup> On the other, the elites understand that “too great dependence on China as a monopoly customer could create problems for itself.”<sup>43</sup> Lukin further notes that “Moscow knows that China needs the West to develop its own economy and that Beijing will not retreat from its relationship with the West for the sake of Moscow.”<sup>44</sup> Seen from Russia, “the rapidly developing and politically very different China [also] poses a challenge for economically stagnating Russia,” while the growing nationalism in China and its more assertive foreign policy gives an additional cause for concern.<sup>45</sup>

Addressing the increase in Sino-Russian military cooperation, Trenin reacts with skepticism to the idea that the cooperation is tending towards integration, quoting the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov as having denied that Moscow and Beijing are posed to form a military alliance and characterizing the increasing frequency of the exercises as the two forces simply becoming more familiar with one another.<sup>46</sup> Trenin and Gabuev agree that the limits to China-Russia military cooperation are substantial, with Trenin characterizing the relationship as one driven by mutual understanding of common interests, while Gabuev emphasizes the role of China’s rapid growth in fomenting insecurities in Russia, despite the strengthening of ties in military, economic, and political

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<sup>41</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente,” Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified 9 April 2015, <https://carnegie.ru/2015/04/09/from-greater-europe-to-greater-asia-sino-russian-entente-pub-59728>.

<sup>42</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Emerging Greater Eurasia,” 84.

<sup>43</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China, and the Emerging Greater Eurasia,” 84.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 91.

<sup>45</sup> Lukin, *China and Russia*, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “How Cozy is Russia and China’s Military Relationship?” Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified 19 November 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/19/how-cozy-is-russia-and-china-s-military-relationship-pub-80363>.

sectors.<sup>47</sup> In another work, Gabuev points out the growing mutual disillusionment in Russia and China, with officials in China becoming alarmed at the unpredictable nature of Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria and worried that "the tensions between Russia and the West would escalate and put greater pressure on China to take sides."<sup>48</sup> Weitz generally agrees with this view stating that "The two countries have essentially agreed to disagree on these issues [regarding Russian support of separatist movements in Georgia and Ukraine and Chinese claims in the South or East China Seas], a stance made easier by the fact that neither sees the other partner's support as critical for achieving its territorial objectives, even in the case of armed aggression."<sup>49</sup>

Providing a point of view from China, Fu Ying similarly acknowledges the close nature of Sino-Russian relations, calling it a "stable strategic partnership [that is] complex, sturdy, and deeply rooted" and refuting the points of view that the relationship is either simply a "marriage of convenience" or that the two powers seek to form an anti-Western alliance. She sees the rapprochement as one that provides a "safe environment for the two big neighbors to achieve their development goals and to support each other through mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>50</sup> This idea is reaffirmed by Ma and Jang, who argue that although Sino-Russian relations are currently strong, few Chinese scholars believe that any form of alliance is in China's interests. Ma and Jang state several key challenges for China-Russia cooperation, such as the trade imbalance, the mismatch of Sino-Russian expectations regarding trade and joint infrastructure projects, lack of coordination between

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Haenle, Dmitry Trenin, Eugene Rumer, and Alexander Gabuev, "Are Russia-China Relations Getting Too Close to Comfort?" Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, last modified 30 October 2019, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/10/30/are-china-russia-relations-getting-too-close-for-comfort-pub-80238>.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis," Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified June 2016, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP\\_CP278\\_Gabuev\\_revised\\_FINAL.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP278_Gabuev_revised_FINAL.pdf), 9.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Weitz, "The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership," Hudson Institute, last modified May 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/15017-the-expanding-china-russia-defense-partnership>.

<sup>50</sup> Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>.

the BRI and the EEU, and, finally, concerns posed by the instability of Sino-U.S. relations.<sup>51</sup>

Also skeptical of the long-term prospects for Sino-Russian economic cooperation, Christoffersen provides a case study of how Russian economic concerns lead to failure of Sino-Russian cooperation in the Far East, stating that the two countries do not share a common vision of the development of border areas. While Russia sought to export industrial goods to China, in the Chinese vision “Russia exports only raw materials to support Chinese industrialization with the result of possibly de-industrializing Russia.”<sup>52</sup> The resulting lack of Russian motivation caused significant delays in the construction of a bridge across the Amur River, as well as scrapping of the regional development program in favor of a less ambitious one.<sup>53</sup> Christoffersen points out that Russia is not satisfied with Beijing’s view that raw material are Russia’s comparative advantage and argues that the disconnect goes further with Russia favoring multilateral economic linkages in the region, while China seeks to strengthen bilateral integration of its border regions with the Russian Far East.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Sino-Russian Relations in Asia

China-Russia interactions in Asia can be characterized as complex, as each power has a different vision of the desired order. Much of the collaboration is driven by their concern over the pressure coming from the U.S. alliance system. As Wishnick argues, the two states have “outlined a series of rules of conduct that they would like to see

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<sup>51</sup> Ma Bin and Zhang Jian, “Present and Future Sino-Russian Cooperation: Chinese Perspectives,” in *Sino-Russian Relations: Perspectives from Russia, China, and Japan*, The National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report #79, May 2019, 29–32.

<sup>52</sup> Gaye Christoffersen, “Chinese Northeast-Russian Far East Regional Cooperation: Old and New Programmes,” University of Nottingham Asia Research Institute, last modified 19 June 2019, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/06/19/chinese-northeast-russian-far-east-regional-cooperation-old-and-new-programmes/>.

<sup>53</sup> Christoffersen, “Northeast China and the Russian Far East Regional Cooperation.”

<sup>54</sup> Gaye Christoffersen and Ivan Zuenko, “Northeast China and the Russian Far East: Positive Scenarios and Negative Scenarios,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 216.

implemented in East Asia, many of which run counter to the U.S. positions.”<sup>55</sup> Driven by their apprehension of the U.S.-led order they have committed to the following policies:

- opposition to the U.S. alliance system and its expansion as well as the deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System), which is seen as disrupting the capabilities of their nuclear deterrents;
- opposition to further nuclear proliferation to non-nuclear states;
- limitation of the roles of outside powers, specifically the United States; and,
- non-interference in the domestic affairs of authoritarian states, with both countries opposing regime change in North Korea, while at the same time increasing the scope of information warfare aimed at democracies.<sup>56</sup>

Russia has also increasingly provided support to China’s ambitions in the South China Sea, manifested in Russian Navy’s participation in the Joint Sea-2016 exercises together with their Chinese counterparts.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the Russian support remained lukewarm due to its determination to keep its ties with Vietnam, although continued Russian-Vietnamese interactions are not seen in China as being aimed against it.<sup>58</sup>

Sino-Russian interactions in other countries in the region can also be seen as both competitive and complementary, as in the case of the Philippines. As a result of Duterte’s election both powers saw an opening to assert their own interests, with China providing a USD 24 billion economic package and a pledge to assist with major infrastructure projects as part of the BRI, while Russia expanded its security cooperation with Manila by agreeing

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<sup>55</sup> Wishnick, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order,” 363.

<sup>56</sup> Wishnick, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order,” 363–367.

<sup>57</sup> Wishnick, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order,” 369.

<sup>58</sup> Wishnick, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order,” 369.

to share intelligence and training to counter local extremists.<sup>59</sup> Wishnick's overall assessment is that Sino-Russian new order in East Asia is that it is "more fluid," as opposed to the U.S.-led order, characterized by formal alliances in a hub-and-spoke system.<sup>60</sup> This can be explained by the limitations of Russia and China's approach to foreign policy, which lacks formal alliances both between them and with other countries in the region. Ultimately, Wishnick sees several major problems with the new order in East Asia pursued by Russia and China. Russia does not wish to see itself become a junior partner to China in the new hierarchy and has so far failed to remake itself into an Asian state that can be accepted by other East Asian states as a cofounder of the new order. Additionally, the role of ASEAN as an enforcer of rules and norms has grown, which can enable it to resist China due to concerns over its territorial and maritime claims and its intentions in regional economic initiatives such as the BRI.<sup>61</sup>

Christoffersen's analysis of Sino-Russian interactions regarding China's BRI (referred to by her as SREB) and Russia's EEU demonstrates significant disagreements over their implementation. One area where this disagreement is particularly evident is the China's Northeast-Russian Far East (RFE) region, which China has attempted to add to its BRI project. So far the attempts to integrate the region have failed due to Russia's failure to implement more than 200 projects, causing economic losses to China.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, Russia is concerned that due to China's exclusive claim to investment in the RFE and its insistence on treating the region as the source of raw materials for its industrialization, the region will fall in the Chinese sphere of influence.<sup>63</sup> Russia's policy in the RFE has consistently been aimed at diversifying the economy in the regions, rather than fostering economic dependence on China.

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<sup>59</sup> Wishnick, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order," 372.

<sup>60</sup> Wishnick, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order," 375.

<sup>61</sup> Wishnick, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order," 379.

<sup>62</sup> Gaye Christoffersen, "Sino-Russian Accommodation and Adaptation in Eurasian Regional Order Formation," *Asian Perspective* 42 no.3, July-September 2018, 440, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2018.0019>.

<sup>63</sup> Christoffersen, "Sino-Russian Accommodation and Adaptation," 444.

The disagreements further widened when Putin proposed to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) in 2016 at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. An ambitious project, GEP would theoretically be open to all countries in the region and would incorporate EEU, BRI, SCO, ASEAN, CIS, and some European countries in an attempt to counterbalance China's BRI.<sup>64</sup> The project was supposed to combine China's BRI and Russia's EEU, which as Kaczmarek argues, produced a clash of two visions of regionalism, China's functional, inclusive one, and Russia's defensive one, designed to shield it from the outside world.<sup>65</sup> The project largely failed, however, due to the weakening economic position of Russia amidst the sanctions and falling oil prices. Chinese response to GEP was also critical and viewed it as a superficial proposal by Russia, unable to fully supplant or circumvent BRI.<sup>66</sup> Trenin and Gabuev add to this that Russia never intended for GEP to compete with BRI, but rather to show to the region that Russia also has its own vision of the future, even if only symbolic.<sup>67</sup> The debate between Russia and China as to how to properly integrate BRI, EEU, and GEP are still ongoing, although, as Christoffersen notes, it follows the path of adaptation and accommodation, rather than breaking off due to disagreements.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), announced in 2001 and formed in 2003, was initially seen as an example of convergence of Russia and China on the issue of security in Central Asia and beyond, eventually becoming focused on preventing separatism and "color revolutions." Yet in the recent years many signs of divergence have been noted, specifically concerning the expansion of the organization, as well as differing visions for the development of the organization with China seeking to expand the role of

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<sup>64</sup> Christoffersen, "Sino-Russian Accommodation and Adaptation," 446–447.

<sup>65</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "Non-Western Visions of Regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union," *International Affairs* 93 no.6 (2017), 1359, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix182>.

<sup>66</sup> Christoffersen, "Sino-Russian Accommodation and Adaptation," 449.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Haenle, Dmitry Trenin, Alexander Gabuev, Tomas Valasek, Darshana M. Baruah, Feng Yujun, and Ma Bin, "How Are Various Countries Responding to China's Belt and Road Initiative," Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, last modified 25 April 2019, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/04/25/how-are-various-countries-responding-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-79002>.

SCO as an economic organization, while Russia sought to maintain its security focus.<sup>68</sup> Further strain was placed on the organization following Russia's exploitation of separatist movements in Georgia in 2008, as well as its annexation of Crimea in 2014—developments that ran counter to SCO's commitment to the idea of territorial integrity and non-interventions and similar foreign interests of China. For this reason, China is wary of SCO becoming a full-fledged alliance, although it continues to participate in SCO events, such as the Peace Mission exercises.<sup>69</sup> China maintains its interest in SCO and the legitimacy given to the organization by Russia's presence in it, yet Russia's post-Crimea behavior showcases significant weaknesses of the organization.

## 5. Sino-Russian Interactions in Central Asia

Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia initially presented the most evident case of competition due to Russia's insistence that this post-Soviet region still falls within its traditional sphere of influence. Kaczmarek asserts that, throughout the 2000s, Sino-Russian relations resembled a "New Great Game," with fierce rivalry taking place despite the cordial rhetoric and the apparent Sino-Russian cooperation in the SCO, with some analysts suggesting that a conflict over influence in Central Asia could trigger a greater breakdown of China-Russia relations.<sup>70</sup> Gabuev notes, however, that the two countries have successfully averted direct collision despite Moscow's initial view of its interactions with China in Central Asia as "largely competitive with very limited opportunities for collaboration."<sup>71</sup>

Improvement in the tone of interactions came largely as a result of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, shared interest in expelling U.S. bases (such as the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan), as well as the souring of Russia's relations with the West. Since its post-

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<sup>68</sup> Marc Lanteigne, "Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the 'Crimea Effect,'" in *Russia's Turn to the East: Domestic Policymaking and Regional Cooperation*, edited by Helge Blakkisrud and Elana Wilson Rowe (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 119.

<sup>69</sup> Lanteigne, "Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," 132.

<sup>70</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "The Asymmetric Partnership? Russia's Turn to China," *International Politics* 53, no.3 (2016), 423, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2016.7>

<sup>71</sup> Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits?" 4.

Crimea “pivot to the East,” Moscow has increasingly allowed China to focus on Central Asia’s economic development, while maintaining its role as the regional security provider. Attempts to coordinate economic policy in the region have not succeeded, largely due to Russia’s relative economic weakness vis-à-vis growing China and the failure of the two countries to integrate BRI and EEU.<sup>72</sup> China is similarly amenable to letting Russia retain its hard power in the region through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).<sup>73</sup> Stronski and Ng further state that China’s goals in Central Asia do not directly clash with those of Russia, as both benefit from the stabilization of the region through economic tools, development of trade and infrastructure, as well as construction of transportation networks through BRI. Concerning BRI, Wishnick argues that China has successfully assuaged Russian initial concerns by including Russia in the project and promising that BRI and EEU will complement each other, rather than compete.<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, while neither side considers the current status quo in Central Asia optimal, it is seen by both as satisfactory enough to avoid major confrontation.

## **6. Sino-Russian Interactions Concerning North Korea**

Perhaps one of the most readily obvious cases (at least to Western observers) of Sino-Russian cooperation is their staunch support of each other’s position vis-à-vis North Korea. Frequently accused of collaborating amongst themselves and with the Kim regime, Russia and China are viewed as having “converged in their positions on key regional strategic issues,” regarding the Korean peninsula.<sup>75</sup> Both use their positions on the UNSC to soften Western sanctions against North Korea, and both have supported the “freeze for freeze”—the freeze of nuclear testing by Pyongyang with concurrent freeze of all U.S.-led military exercises on the peninsula—while also opposing the deployment of Terminal High

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<sup>72</sup> Gabuev, “Friends with Benefits?” 2.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, *Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic*, (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), 28, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP\\_331\\_Stronski\\_Ng\\_Final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_331_Stronski_Ng_Final1.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Wishnick, “In Search for the ‘Other’ in Asia: Russia-China Relations Revisited,” 120–121.

<sup>75</sup> Choo, Jaewoo, Youngjun Kim, Artyom Lukin, and Elizabeth Wishnick, “The China-Russia Entente and the Korean Peninsula,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, NBR Special Report #78, March 2019, v.



Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system by the United States.<sup>76</sup> Although seen as “spoilers” by the United States, Russia and China see themselves as power brokers and “responsible powers,” worried by the American brinkmanship approach or a pre-emptive strike on North Korea that could precipitate a regional security crisis.<sup>77</sup> Both great powers oppose the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula, but favor a soft approach in persuading Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program.

At the same time, Moscow and Beijing differ sharply on the long-term view of the Korean Peninsula. Russia primarily seeks to be seen as a relevant power on the peninsula and, more broadly, in Northeast Asia, while attempting to foster greater economic ties with both Koreas and Japan in order to develop its Far Eastern region—goals that require the settlement of the nuclear crisis and the lifting of the sanctions.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, China is “willing to tolerate a low level of tension on the Korean peninsula...to distract the U.S. from its efforts to constrain China.”<sup>79</sup> Regarding the short-term development of the situation on the Korean peninsula, much of the literature is in agreement that given the currently strained state of Russo-American and Sino-American relations, China and Russia are unlikely to actively pursue their long-term visions in Korea and are likely to pursue policies preserving the status quo.

## 7. Sino-Russian Interactions in Mongolia

Sino-Russian competition in Mongolia offers a challenge to the seemingly robust “strategic partnership,” espoused by the Russian and Chinese leadership. Central to this relationship is Mongolia itself—and its leadership’s deft strategy of balancing its two immediate neighbors as well as its “third neighbor,” the rest of the world. According to Radchenko, each great power perceives Mongolia to be within their sphere of influence: at one time Mongolia comprised one of the frontiers of the Qing Empire, yet eventually came

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<sup>76</sup> Choo et al., “The China-Russia Entente,” 2.

<sup>77</sup> Covell Meyskens, “Chinese Views of the Nuclear Endgame in North Korea,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, 10 October 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2019.1667050>.

<sup>78</sup> Choo et al., “The China-Russia Entente,” 2.

<sup>79</sup> Choo et al., “The China-Russia Entente,” 2.

to be under the control of the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union.<sup>80</sup> Since its democratization, Mongolia has managed to chart a “middle course,” exemplified by the elite consensus that both Russia and China are its domestic concerns and that loyalties to either neighbor have to be secondary to Mongolia’s own interests and its economic development. At the same time, the economic disparity between Russia and China means that China has a huge advantage in the share of Mongolia’s external trade.<sup>81</sup> Russia, on the other hand, has to play a much more active policy, ranging from loan forgiveness to naked pressure, such as the 2005–07 dispute over the ownership of trans-Mongolian railroad and the subsequent 2014–15 disagreement over the building of projected railway<sup>82</sup> from the coal deposit at Tavan Tolgoi to the Chinese border, in which Russia pushed the pro-Russian Mongolian policymakers to adopt its unique 1520 railroad gauge, as opposed to the thinner 1435 gauge used in China.<sup>83</sup> While some of these disputes take place between Mongolia and the two powers, rather than directly between Russia and China, they take place in the context of soft Sino-Russian competition over Mongolia, in which the two countries seek to expand their spheres of influence vis-à-vis each other while avoiding confrontation.

Although Sino-Russian cooperation is not as obvious in Mongolia, the competition is also not entirely overt and is limited to indirect undercutting of the two states’ geopolitical and economic interests, such as during the standoff over the railroad gauge. As Jargalsaikhan notes, “Russia and China want to have their strategic rear [in] Mongolia peaceful and stable while trying to manage tensions elsewhere, to suppress ongoing separatist movements, and to focus on more volatile neighbors in Central Asia.”<sup>84</sup> Mongolia itself seeks to benefit from both of its neighbors, especially when it comes to

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<sup>80</sup> Sergey Radchenko, “Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko, (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 122.

<sup>81</sup> Radchenko, “Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia,” 123.

<sup>82</sup> 1435 gauge is used in most of the world, including China, while the wider 1520 gauge is used in Russia.

<sup>83</sup> Radchenko, “Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia,” 112.

<sup>84</sup> Mendee Jargalsaikhan, “Mongolia’s Dilemma: A Politically Linked, Economically Isolated Small Power,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko, (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 170.

strengthening its economic linkages. Thus, despite some level of competition over Mongolia's raw resources and market share, Russia and China manage to effectively avoid serious confrontation, aided by the Mongolian elites' determination not to commit to bilateral relations with either great power.

Overall, much of academia is in agreement that Sino-Russian relations and their recent improvement showcase the relative strength of factors encouraging cooperation, although some disagreements still occur. Scholars see it either as a sign of deeper understanding or shared values between Moscow and Beijing, or a sign of temporary pragmatism of leaders in Russia and China. However, only a small group of analysts at the extremes of academic opinion posit that an explicitly anti-American alliance is taking shape. The existing evidence suggests that such rapprochement is at times uneasy and may very well not survive for a long time, as growing disparity between Russia and China will fuel Moscow's suspicions of its richer and more powerful neighbor.

#### **D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

The examination of the extent of Sino-Russian competition and cooperation may reveal the following situations: the first, in which the cooperation is stronger than competition; the second, in which the competition is stronger than cooperation; and the third, in which competition and cooperation balance each other out.

The first hypothesis posits that the factors encouraging cooperation are stronger than factors encouraging competition between Russia and China. The particular factors may differ in each case, but one strong potential impetus is likely to be both countries' determination to keep the United States out of their shared spheres of influence and/or to balance against the U.S. influence globally. Additionally, economic cooperation is likely if Russia and China perceive that they are likely to continue to be under pressure from the U.S. sanctions or tariffs.

The second hypothesis involves the factors encouraging competition outweighing those encouraging cooperation. Such strong factors may include mutual distrust that may stem from Russia's resentment of being a "junior partner" to China and the growing dependence on Chinese markets and investments. Cultural differences and popular

sentiments may also tilt the balance of Sino-Russian relations towards competition. Additionally, differing visions of the future of the international system may lead China to distance itself from Russia due to its aggressive and adventurist behavior. It may also find that the Sino-Russian rapprochement is more tactical than strategic with various factors making competition more likely in the future.

Finally, the third hypothesis combines the elements of the previous two and suggests a possibility that the relationship is more nuanced and is balanced between competition and cooperation. In this case, economic cooperation may coexist with military competition, or vice versa. Alternatively, it may find that a given area is largely a non-issue for the central governments, who may choose not to allocate efforts that may be needed elsewhere.

Although the main analysis of the cases will focus on the 2000–2020 timeframe, the follow-on analysis will explore the relations and interests as evolving over time, i.e., while the two countries may find it advantageous to cooperate in the short-term, deeper fissures may exacerbate over time and lead to a divergence of interests in the future. The analysis may also find that in different areas the two states may behave differently; for instance, Sino-Russian cooperation on the question of North Korean nuclear program may not necessarily preclude competition in Mongolia or in Central Asia.

## **E. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis will focus on the last twenty years of Sino-Russian relations as this period corresponds to Vladimir Putin's rule in Russia. Russia's first decade of independence was marked by a tendency to focus on maintaining its territorial integrity and other internal turmoil, with the foreign policy, not receiving much attention, although the beginnings of China-Russia partnership can be traced to this period. While the first few years of Putin's foreign policy were similar to that of Yeltsin and no shift towards strengthening of Sino-Russian relationship occurred until much later in his rule, this time period is chosen due to Vladimir Putin's chosen course towards re-establishing Russia's great power status. The Asian region has been chosen mainly due to its paramount importance to the United States, Russia, and China, while the three cases have been chosen

due to their geographic proximity to both Russia and China and their shared history. Sino-Russian involvement in these regions is the strongest and interaction between Russia and China occurs in each of the chosen cases.

In order to give an answer to the research question the thesis will analyze U.S., Russian, and Chinese policy statements, scholarly sources, as well as primary sources and press reports with a specific goal of identifying evidence of competition and cooperation. For instance, an increase in trade, ramping up of joint military drills, evidence of supporting diplomatic statements, or other joint ventures will be seen as evidence of cooperation. Conversely, clashes of economic interests or statements reflecting major differences in goals and policies will be seen as evidence of competition. It is expected that the evidence of competition is going to be harder to ascertain from official statements or actions; secondary sources, such as scholarly analyses, will be instrumental in establishing cases, where significant competition may take place. Finally, the evidence of both competition and cooperation will be weighed against each other to determine which factors are stronger in each given area.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW**

The thesis will begin with a brief section on the background of Sino-Russian relations with a particular emphasis on the last 20 years. This will be followed by the analysis of the general Sino-Russian relations in the larger context of great power competition, broken up by the analyses of the individual schools of thought. The subsequent sections will focus on the individual areas (Mongolia, North Korea, and Central Asia) and will analyze the evidence for cooperation and competition in each. The last section will provide a summary of the findings and will offer some recommendations for potential approaches to the Sino-Russian relations for the U.S. civilian and military decision-makers.

## II. SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

### A. INTRODUCTION

The five Central Asian Republics (CAR)—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan—constitute an important arena for both Russia and China. Chinese control of the region has intensified and receded together with the power of the China throughout the centuries. During the nineteenth century, Central Asia and its small, independent khanates and tribes fell under Russian rule, which persisted in the region until the Russian October Revolution of 1917. After the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1922 and the defeat of the Basmachi movement by 1934, Central Asia fell firmly under Soviet control, which lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, Central Asia became open for China and its growing influence yet again. As a result, the region has seen a major rebalancing of power between Russia and China, reminiscent of the previous Great Game between the Russian and the British Empires in the nineteenth century.<sup>85</sup>

This chapter analyzes the dynamic of Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia and seeks to discern whether the drivers of cooperation or the drivers of competition are stronger. The analysis of the findings suggests that currently the drivers of cooperation are still stronger than the drivers of competition, with Russia and China both determined to maintain stability in Central Asia and limit the influence of the United States. Russia and China cooperate with each other through multilateral organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and by expressing interest in integrating their regional economic initiatives, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). At the same time, despite the efforts of both countries to manage their competing interests, China's rise and its greater clout in the region may lead to deeper competition and potential future rivalry with Russia, which seeks to maintain its grasp over its "soft underbelly" and aspires to the status of a great power. China has managed to supplant Russia as the most important trade partner of Central Asia and has recently sought to

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<sup>85</sup> Stronski and Ng, *Cooperation and Competition*, 9.

increase its regional military footprint as well, whether through increased weapons sales or through establishment of military outposts. Russia still dominates the security dimension in Central Asia through its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and is similarly building and upgrading its bases there to resist the Chinese encroachment.

First, the chapter will briefly discuss the background of the region, its interactions with the Chinese and Russian Empires, its Soviet legacy, the recent history of the fledgling Central Asian regimes, as well as the most important multinational organizations active there, such as the SCO, the CSTO, the BRI and the EEU. The next section will discuss the interests of China and Russia in the region. The two subsequent sections will provide a detailed analysis of the evidence of both cooperation and competition between China and Russia vis-à-vis the CARs.

## **B. BACKGROUND**

The Central Asian region, comprised of the five former Soviet republics, is bordered by the Caspian Sea in the west, Mongolia and China in the east, Russia in the north, and Afghanistan and Iran in the south (see Figure 1). It is home to just under 73 million people, but the inhospitable deserts and the inaccessible mountainous regions ensure that the population is concentrated in urban areas with sufficient water access as well as river valleys, such as the Ferghana Valley, where 14 million Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks currently live. The countries with the highest populations are Kazakhstan (18 million) and Uzbekistan (33 million), making them especially important in the region. Besides the titular ethnicities of the five countries, the population also includes over 7 million ethnic Russians and other Slavs, in addition to significant minorities of Tatars, Koreans, and Germans, who reside in the region as a result of Stalinist-era forced deportation policies. The majority of the population are adherents of Islam (predominantly Sunni), with significant Orthodox Christian and irreligious minorities.



Figure 1. Political Map of Central Asia<sup>86</sup>

Historically, the steppes of Central Asia were populated by various Iranian and Turkic nomadic tribes, which, at various points in their history, established empires, khanates, and emirates, or were themselves conquered by Mongolian, Persian, or Chinese invaders. Islam began to take root in the region in the eighth century and displaced Zoroastrianism and Buddhism as the predominant religion. Prior to Russia’s entry into the region, Central Asia was an important part of the Chinese tributary system.<sup>87</sup> In the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire began to make its first forays into Central Asia, conquering much of modern-day Kazakhstan. By 1830, the Russians encountered the British Empire’s own expansion into modern-day Afghanistan, which signaled a halt to

<sup>86</sup> Source: Nations Online Project, *Small Map of Central Asia*, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/central-asia-map-800px.htm>.

<sup>87</sup> Niklas Swanstrom, “China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no.45 (2007), 569.



their southward expansion and launched a long political and diplomatic confrontation, known as the Great Game. By 1885, much of Central Asia was dominated by Russia.

The Great Game between Russia and the British Empire arose when Russia's quick territorial gains in Central Asia fueled British fears that Russia aimed to continue south until it reached India—Britain's most important possession in South Asia. The British considered protection of India to be of utmost priority to their foreign policy and intended to keep the Russians and other European powers out of their sphere of influence. To this end, they sought to use the Emirate of Afghanistan, the Emirate of Bukhara (in modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), the Emirate of Khiva (in modern-day Uzbekistan), as well as the Ottoman and Persian Empires as the buffer states between India and the Russian Empire. Historians largely agree that the Great Game began with the establishment of a new trade route from India to the Emirate of Bukhara by the British in 1830.<sup>88</sup> This confrontation continued for the remainder of the nineteenth century until 1895 when the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols were signed, defining the border between Afghanistan and the Russian Empire.<sup>89</sup> While the conflict mostly took the form of a political and diplomatic confrontation, it also resulted in a number of wars, such as the First and Second Anglo-Afghan Wars (1838 and 1878), the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845 and 1848), and the Anglo-Persian War (1856-1857).

During the last decades of the Russian Empire (1880-1917) the political situation in Central Asia became increasingly volatile, as various proto-nationalist groups, such as the Young Bukharans, began to appear and quickly gain popularity. The 1916 Central Asian Revolt was sparked by the conscription of Muslim Central Asians into the Russian Army during World War I, as well as by the poor conditions that these recruits experienced performing difficult, non-combat jobs at the frontlines. Brutal reprisals from the Tsarist authorities resulted in the displacement of over 300,000 Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Edward Ingram, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775–1842* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1984), 7–19.

<sup>89</sup> Gerald Morgan, *Anglo-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia: 1810–1895* (London: Routledge, 1981), 231.

<sup>90</sup> Gavin R. G. Hambly, "History of Central Asia," *Britannica*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Central-Asia-102306>.

Concurrent with the Revolution of 1917, the Turkestan Muslim Council declared autonomy of the entire Central Asian region from Russia but was crushed by the Soviet forces soon afterwards. The remaining pro-independence forces, known as Basmachi, fought as guerillas until 1925.<sup>91</sup> Similar movements appeared in Chinese-controlled Xinjiang (also known as East Turkestan), which were at various times either supported by or in conflict with the Soviet Union until their annexation by the People's Republic of China in 1949.

Under the Soviet rule, various political configurations were attempted, first with a Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and the Bukhara and Khiva SSRs, established in 1918. By 1925, the contemporaneous borders of Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen SSRs were established, followed by the Tajik SSR in 1929 and the Kyrgyz SSR in 1936, with the nationality categories being created to replace “previously fluid registers of identification and belonging” reflecting “ethno-national groups that were regarded as most advanced along a supposed evolutionary trajectory towards nationhood.”<sup>92</sup> The borders devised by the Soviet government did not reflect any existing ethnic or linguistic divides and resulted in numerous ethnic enclaves and exclaves, as well as the division of the Ferghana Valley among three states : Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This was done primarily to ensure the region could not unite along pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic lines, while the influence of Turkey and Iran was further diminished by the adoption of Cyrillic script.<sup>93</sup>

Just like other regions of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was adversely affected by Stalin's collectivization policies, which resulted in approximately one million deaths. During the Great Purge and World War II, entire ethnic groups, such as Germans, Koreans, Chechens and others, were deported to Central Asia, resulting in an even greater ethnic diversity. The evacuation of the Soviet industries away from the frontline during World War II resulted in industrialization and urbanization of the region. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev rehabilitated many of these groups, with some returning to

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<sup>91</sup> Hambly, “History of Central Asia.”

<sup>92</sup> Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer, *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>93</sup> Hambly, “History of Central Asia.”

their homelands. Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign, which began in 1954, resulted in further influx of ethnic Slavs, especially Russians and Ukrainians, into the agriculturally rich northern Kazakhstan, resulting in over a quarter of the Kazakh SSR's population being Slavic by the time the USSR dissolved.<sup>94</sup> Many of these ethnic Russians left Central Asia following the dissolution of the USSR, with 1.5 million leaving Kazakhstan alone between 1992 and 2000.<sup>95</sup> Soviet rule also resulted in significant environmental damage to Central Asia, ranging from the consequences of nuclear and biological weapons testing, river diversions, and the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea.<sup>96</sup>

Throughout the Soviet period, there was a widespread practice of installing managers of titular ethnic descent into top leadership posts in each of the SSR, whether it be the top government or smaller managerial positions in individual enterprises.<sup>97</sup> Their nominal second-in-command was, as a rule, a Russian or a Ukrainian, who typically was the de facto leader of any given organization. While this practice was designed to pay lip service to the concept of ethnic autonomy and to potentially satisfy nationalist sentiments, it, nevertheless, had the effect of exposing ethnic leaders to management and leadership practices of the USSR and creating a cadre of local elites. Additionally, the patronage policies, enacted under Leonid Brezhnev, enabled these elites to amass immense wealth from the enterprises under their control and report false figures to Moscow.<sup>98</sup> Under Gorbachev, the scale of corruption in Uzbekistan was revealed in the "Great Cotton

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<sup>94</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 263.

<sup>95</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 60.

<sup>96</sup> Ankit Panda, "How the Soviet Union Created Central Asia's Worst Environmental Disaster," *The Diplomat*, 3 October 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/how-the-soviet-union-created-central-asias-worst-environmental-disaster/>.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>98</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 18.

Scandal” in 1986, although patrimonial corruption remains rampant in the region to this day.<sup>99</sup>

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states were among the last constituent republics to remain in the Union, with multiple referenda held in favor of maintaining ties to Moscow, since during the Soviet period these republics were net recipients of state funding. However, after December 1991, the five Central Asian republics found themselves independent virtually overnight and “abruptly cut loose from the economic and political infrastructure that had sustained them.”<sup>100</sup> As a result, in four of the five republics (excluding Kyrgyzstan) the new national elites were formed by the former Soviet nomenklatura, and former General Secretaries assumed presidential posts. Tajikistan experienced a devastating civil war (1992-1997), which ended in an internationally-negotiated armistice and Emomali Rahmon’s rise to power.<sup>101</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, a series of regimes replaced one another as a result of popular uprisings, such as the 2005 Tulip Revolution that ousted President Askar Akayev, the 2010 Revolution that deposed his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and the most recent 2020 protest that resulted in the resignation of Sooronbay Jeenbekov. The rest of the Central Asian regimes can be characterized as authoritarian and personalistic dictatorships, ranging from Uzbekistan’s brutal Karimov regime, which lasted until 2016, to the reigns of the two Turkmen presidents, built upon patronage and cults of personality. These regimes are considered some of the most corrupt in the world (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan at the 153<sup>rd</sup> position and Turkmenistan at the 165<sup>th</sup> out of 180), plagued by police abuse, poverty, and rise of fundamentalist Islam.<sup>102</sup>

The region, initially relatively obscure to the international community in the first decade since the dissolution of the USSR, garnered increasing attention following the 9/11

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<sup>99</sup> Margarita Lindt, “How Cotton Led to the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” *Russia Beyond*, 2 August 2017, [https://www.rbth.com/arts/history/2017/08/02/how-cotton-led-to-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union\\_815454](https://www.rbth.com/arts/history/2017/08/02/how-cotton-led-to-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union_815454).

<sup>100</sup> Reeves et al., *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Reeves et al., *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Transparency International, 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/results/table>.

attacks and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror.<sup>103</sup> Shortly after the terrorist attacks, the United States negotiated a number of bilateral agreements with the Central Asian states for basing rights, fly-over rights, and refueling logistics.<sup>104</sup> Through such agreements, the United States acquired rights to the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan and the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan, better known as K2. Beijing's reaction to these new American bases in the region was apprehension and skepticism of Washington's plans and long-term strategy, as well as fear of military encirclement and challenge to its regional influence.<sup>105</sup> The U.S. presence in the region "was also contrary to the Chinese principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs."<sup>106</sup> At the same time, the Western forces addressed China's concerns about the influence of Al Qaeda and other religious extremists, leading to the Chinese leaders seeing their presence as a "mixed blessing."<sup>107</sup> Russia, initially supportive of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the fight against international terrorism, changed its attitude towards the U.S. presence in Central Asia due to its promotion of democratic values and support of "color revolutions" on its periphery (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005).<sup>108</sup> In response to these perceived slights, Moscow acquired its own bases in Kyrgyzstan, such as the Kant Air Base (2003) and the Osh Army Base (2009), and pressured the Kyrgyz government to evict the U.S. forces from Manas, which was evacuated in 2014. The K2 base was abandoned much earlier, following the Uzbek governments' brutal crackdown on the protesters in Andijan in May 2005.

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<sup>103</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 20.

<sup>104</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 20.

<sup>105</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 20–21.

<sup>106</sup> Marta Carlsson, Susanne Oxenstierna, and Mikael Weissman, *China and Russia – A Study on Cooperation, Competition and Distrust* (Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), 2015), 68.

<sup>107</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 20–21.

<sup>108</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 20–21.

## C. CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS CENTRAL ASIA

### 1. Chinese Interests

One of China's main interests in Central Asia concerns China's internal security, since the region and its population are culturally and ethnically related to that of Xinjiang, which is sometimes considered a part of a broader Central Asian region and shares a 2,800 km border with the CARs.<sup>109</sup> The predominant part of Xinjiang's population consists of Muslim Uighurs of Turkic origin, who have at various times been impacted by extremist ideologies and separatist sentiments emanating from the Central Asian republics.<sup>110</sup> The processes of national and religious liberation that began in the post-Soviet Central Asian republics after 1991 have led to the intensification of separatist sentiments in Xinjiang and the strengthening of popular support for the re-establishment of an independent East Turkestan.<sup>111</sup> Chinese leaders have, therefore, viewed this security problem through the lens of their struggle against the "three evils"—terrorism, separatism, and extremism.<sup>112</sup> China's political policy towards Central Asia has thus far been defined by the need to ensure its own domestic stability and territorial integrity.<sup>113</sup> To this end, China has been supportive of the secular dictatorships in Central Asia, whose police regimes have so far been effective at minimizing the impact of fundamentalist Islam and various terrorist organizations and has sought to incorporate them into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to ensure that these countries do not support terrorist and extremist groups in Xinjiang, restrict activities of local Uighur diaspora groups, and extradite Uighur activists to China.<sup>114</sup> At the same time, China's avoids involving itself in the Central Asian states' internal politics, and the pressure it exerts on the Central Asian regimes is kept to a

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<sup>109</sup> Carlsson et al., *China and Russia*, 67.

<sup>110</sup> Swanstrom, "China and Central Asia," 571.

<sup>111</sup> Zhao Huasheng, "China's View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Asian Survey* 53 no.3 (May/June 2013), 437.

<sup>112</sup> Carlsson et al., 67.

<sup>113</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*, (Singapore: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, 2009), 12.

<sup>114</sup> Olcott, *Central Asia's Second Chance*, 62–63.

minimum, partially in an effort to manage Russia's concerns over its growing influence in the region.<sup>115</sup>

Economically, the fall of the Soviet Union also provided an important opportunity for Chinese entrepreneurs and investors to enter the Central Asian market that had been unavailable to them for over a century. Such economic activity is especially active in the construction and infrastructure development sectors, as outlined by China's "Go Out" strategy in the 1990s and the "Develop the West" campaign in the 2000s.<sup>116</sup> This also serves to foster domestic stability, as such projects reduce excess capacity within China and provide economic opportunities for Chinese workers outside the country.<sup>117</sup> Investment into Central Asia is additionally seen as a tool to foster stability and prosperity in the region, which would, in turn, keep the situation in Xinjiang under Chinese control.<sup>118</sup> Economic cooperation with China is extremely lucrative to the Central Asian states, since the only conditions for investment include support of the "one China" principle and war against the "three evils."<sup>119</sup>

China is interested in promoting its interests in the energy sector and seeks to establish sufficient infrastructure in the region to facilitate the import of oil and gas to minimize its dependence on possibly vulnerable maritime routes.<sup>120</sup> Central Asia provides China with an opportunity to diversify its energy supply through land routes and limit its dependence on Russian exports to the Chinese northeast. As such, Central Asia is an important component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and specifically its land component, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB),<sup>121</sup> which consists of road, rail, and

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<sup>115</sup> Stronski and Ng, 9.

<sup>116</sup> Susan A. Thornton, "China in Central Asia: Is China Winning the 'New Great Game'?" last modified June 2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP\\_20200615\\_china\\_central\\_asia\\_thornton.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_china_central_asia_thornton.pdf).

<sup>117</sup> Stronski and Ng, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Stronski and Ng, 10.

<sup>119</sup> Temur Umarov, "China Looms Large in Central Asia," Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified 30 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81402>.

<sup>120</sup> Carlsson et al., 67.

<sup>121</sup> The Silk Road Economic Belt was announced by China's Xi Jinping in September 2013 during an official visit to Kazakhstan.

pipeline networks designed to connect China with European, Middle Eastern, and African markets (see Figure 2). For China, the BRI is a long-term investment into the region, and Beijing is not concerned about the short-term financial returns on its activities, expecting to lose up to 30 percent of its investments.<sup>122</sup> What's more important is that the project will improve China's connectivity to Europe while creating friendlier regimes along its path, thus accelerating the transfer of global power from the West to China.<sup>123</sup> The viability of this enormous economic undertaking further rests on the ability of China to ensure political stability of the region through the mechanisms of the SCO.



Figure 2. Map of Central Asia (including terrain and existing infrastructure)<sup>124</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Source: Stronski and Ng, 11.

<sup>123</sup> Stronski and Ng, 11.

<sup>124</sup> Troy Sternberg, Ariell Ahearn, and Fiona McConnell, "Central Asian 'Characteristics' on China's New Silk Road: The Role of Landscape and the Politics of Infrastructure," *Land* 6 no.3 (2017), 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/land6030055>.



## 2. Russian Interests

The main Russian interest in Central Asia is to maintain its status as the leading power in the region it regards as its “privileged sphere of influence,” while limiting the influence of China and, especially, the United States.<sup>125</sup> To this end, Russia promotes its various multilateral initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as the almost defunct Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>126</sup> Like China, Russia is also concerned with various threats emanating from the CARs, such as instability, terrorism, extremism, illegal migration, as well as the narcotics trade that originates in Afghanistan. To safeguard itself from these threats, Russia maintains military bases in the region, attempting to mitigate the issues arising internally and from the porous borders separating Central Asia from Afghanistan.<sup>127</sup> Despite these concerns, Moscow insists on maintaining tight control over the CARs’ military sectors and foreign policy through the mechanism of the CSTO treaty, which allows it to veto potential arms purchases and receipt of foreign military aid by the Central Asian states. Both Russia and China benefit from the presence of autocratic regimes in Central Asia since such regimes ease their access to the political elites and the countries’ markets.

Like China, Russian economic interests in the region largely concern the energy sectors of the CARs.<sup>128</sup> As a net energy producer, Russia is less concerned with providing oil and gas for its own consumption, but instead seeks to expand its control over Central Asian energy resources in order to attain a greater share of the European and Chinese markets. At various points, Russia has attempted to assume control over the major pipelines located in the region, usually with little success, such as during its attempted takeover of

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<sup>125</sup> Karen Smith Stegen and Julia Kuszniir, “Outcomes and Strategies in the ‘New Great Game’: China and the Caspian States Emerge as Winners,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* (2015), 4, ScienceDirect.

<sup>126</sup> Carlsson et al., 65.

<sup>127</sup> Carlsson et al., 65.

<sup>128</sup> Carlsson et al., 65.

Turkmenistan’s gas sector in 2009.<sup>129</sup> Russia also seeks to control the raw mineral and industry sectors in Central Asia, such as the aluminum refining industry of Tajikistan.<sup>130</sup> While Russia has been Central Asia’s main trade partner in the past, its economic ties to the region have severely weakened since the region’s independence, allowing China to take the lead in some of the Central Asian markets (see Table 1).<sup>131</sup> As such, competing with China economically is not the main goal for Russia in the region—instead, Moscow relies on military, security, as well as its significant soft power tools to support autocratic regimes in Central Asia and maintain its sphere of influence.<sup>132</sup>

Table 1. Bilateral Trade of Central Asian States with China and Russia (2018 data)<sup>133</sup>

	China		Russia	
	Total exports to (including %)	Total imports from (including %)	Total exports to (including %)	Total imports from (including %)
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	\$6.41B (10%)	\$8.71B (23.1%)	\$5.28B (8.24%)	\$13B (34.6%)
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	\$66M (2.45%)	\$4.45B (52.5%)	\$387M (14.4%)	\$1.68B (19.4%)
<b>Tajikistan</b>	\$76.5M (6.57%)	\$1.43B (39.2%)	\$43.3M (3.72%)	\$849M (23.4%)
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	\$7.3B (80.2%)	\$317M (13.3%)	\$152M (1.67%)	\$288M (12.1%)
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	\$2.24B (21.3%)	\$3.78B (20.9%)	\$1.64B (15.6%)	\$3.33B (18.3%)

<sup>129</sup> Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, “Same Bed, Different Dreams: China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ and Sino-Russian Rivalry in Central Asia,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no.83 (2013), 784, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>130</sup> Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 89.

<sup>131</sup> Stronski and Ng, 14.

<sup>132</sup> Stronski and Ng, 14.

<sup>133</sup> Adapted from The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/>.

## **D. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION—COORDINATED APPROACHES TO STABILIZATION**

Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia is closely linked to their common interests in maintaining regional stability and limiting Western influence.<sup>134</sup> This strategic convergence of Moscow and Beijing emerged as a result of the growing divergence between Moscow and the West in the wake of the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet republics starting in 2003 and was strengthened even further following Russia’s invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) and the subsequent Western sanctions.<sup>135</sup> While not directly supportive of Russia’s actions in these post-Soviet republics, China was not critical of Russia and did not join the Western sanctions regime, becoming a major source of investment and political support for Russia after 2014. An important characteristic of this cooperative relationship in Central Asia is the “division of labor” between Russia and China in their efforts to promote stability, with Russia enjoying predominance in the military and security sectors, while China exercises its comparative economic and trade advantage.<sup>136</sup> The end result of this convergence is that Moscow and Beijing are likely to remain Central Asia’s principal partners in the foreseeable future in the realms of economy, politics, and security.<sup>137</sup>

### **1. Political and Security Cooperation**

One of the primary ways in which China and Russia cooperate with each other vis-à-vis Central Asia is through their involvement in regional organizations, the most important one being the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Originally known as the Shanghai Five, the group was founded in 1996 in order to promote security and foster friendly relations between China and the former USSR republics and was initially

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<sup>134</sup> Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao, *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 12.

<sup>135</sup> Kim and Blank, “Same Bed, Different Dreams,” 775.

<sup>136</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Russia and China in Central Asia*, (Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) Policy Report, 2015), 5, JSTOR.

<sup>137</sup> Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, Paul Stronski, “U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, last modified 25 January 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/25/u.s.-policy-toward-central-asia-3.0-pub-62556>.

comprised of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>138</sup> Between 2001 and 2017 organization expanded both in membership, growing to having eight member states, four observer states, and six dialogue partners,<sup>139</sup> and in scope, extending its purview to economic cooperation.<sup>140</sup> Notably, the SCO membership does not include Turkmenistan, due to that country's stated strict neutrality policy. The SCO serves to accomplish many of China's long-term strategic goals, such as fostering confidence and building trust between China and its neighbors, combating the "three evils," easing economic cooperation, and building a zone of stability around China to help bring about China's peaceful development.<sup>141</sup>

In terms of security cooperation, terrorism has become one of the most important concerns of the organization, as evidenced by the founding of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Uzbekistan in 2004.<sup>142</sup> Anti-terrorism exercises, called "Peace Mission" drills, have been carried out by the SCO since 2002, with the 2003 drills involving Russia, China, and three central Asian republics and marking the first time China participated in multilateral military maneuvers.<sup>143</sup> Beginning in 2006, the tempo of such drills increased from one exercise a year to two or more, with three such events being held that year.<sup>144</sup> Such cooperation is of particular importance to both Russia and China, as it curbs the influence of separatist and extremist groups, fosters regional stability, and reduces the flow of illicit narcotics trade from Afghanistan. Despite the stated anti-terrorist

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<sup>138</sup> Marcel de Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29 no.3 (2016), 378, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>139</sup> Uzbekistan became a member state in 2001 and in 2017 SCO expanded again to include India and Pakistan. The observer states (in order of joining) are Mongolia (2004), Belarus and Iran (2008), and Afghanistan (2012). The position of a dialogue partner state was created in 2008 and initially included Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Cambodia. The other dialogue partners are Sri Lanka (2009), Turkey (2012), and Nepal (2015).

<sup>140</sup> De Haas, 380.

<sup>141</sup> Pan Guang, "A Chinese Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," in *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, edited by Alyson J. K. Bailes, Pal Dunay, Pan Guang, and Mikhail Troitskiy (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2007), 45–46.

<sup>142</sup> De Haas, 381.

<sup>143</sup> De Haas, 382.

<sup>144</sup> De Haas, 381.

nature of the drills, all involved countries, but especially Russia and China, have made significant contributions of heavy military equipment, such as tanks, artillery, bombers, fighters, and naval ships, to make a strong demonstration of conventional military force aimed towards the West.<sup>145</sup>

Another important aspect of the SCO and its military exercises is to minimize the influence of the United States and other Western powers in Central Asia. As Blank notes, “a...clear purpose of the SCO is to provide a forum for its members’ virtually unanimous opinion that Washington should not interfere in their domestic agreements,” further adding that “all the members support the continuation of the status quo and have united to reject calls [from] externally interested parties like Washington on behalf of democratic norms.”<sup>146</sup> This ideological cover, provided by China and Russia to the CARs, serves not only to minimize the Western influence in the region, but also to strengthen the regimes that both Beijing and Moscow perceive act in their common interest of preserving regional stability.<sup>147</sup> For instance, the 2000 Dushanbe Declaration, signed by the Shanghai Five, gave the Central Asian national governments significant power to repress domestic separatists and other extremist groups.<sup>148</sup> In another example of this, the observers sent by Russia and China to the legislative and presidential elections in Central Asia have always declared them as being conducted honestly and above board, while Western organizations have consistently found major violations and signs of political repression.<sup>149</sup>

## **2. Economic Cooperation**

Just like the security cooperation between China and Russia, the goal of their economic cooperation lies in the stabilization of the Central Asian region, while also

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<sup>145</sup> De Haas, 388.

<sup>146</sup> Stephen Blank, “Whither the New Great Game in Central Asia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 3 (2012), 151, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2012.03.005>.

<sup>147</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, *Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the Shadow of the Georgian Crisis*, (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), iii, JSTOR.

<sup>148</sup> Swanstrom, “China and Central Asia,” 574.

<sup>149</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor*, 27.

benefitting economically from trade. Since the post–Cold War independence of the region, Moscow’s economic influence in the region has stagnated and been overcome by that of Beijing. Despite losing this advantage, Russia understands that China’s goals in Central Asia, specifically its pursuit of regional economic prosperity and development, coincide with its own agenda or at least do not contradict it in the short term.<sup>150</sup> In fact, faced with China’s enormous economic influence, Russia has sought to deepen its economic cooperation with China, exemplified by its decision to support China’s Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>151</sup> Beijing, for its part, is also effective at managing Moscow’s concern and takes care not to highlight its greater geopolitical influence resulting from its economic power.<sup>152</sup> As Stronski and Ng note, “preserving its influence in the South China Sea is far more important to Beijing than showcasing its power in Central Asia.”<sup>153</sup>

An important factor to consider is that the two powers are present in different sectors of the regional economies, with China being the main importer of Central Asian commodities and Russia being the main exporter of goods and a destination for Central Asian laborers.<sup>154</sup> For instance, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, Russia is a major recipient of cotton products, produce, and scrap metal, while China tends to buy Kyrgyz metal ore, coal, and tobacco. In case of imports, Kyrgyzstan is a major purchaser of Chinese-made textile products (53 percent of total imports) and footwear (18 percent), while Russia dominates in the petroleum (45 percent), metal products (12 percent), and food (9 percent) sectors.<sup>155</sup> Similar trends can be seen in other Central Asian countries’ overall trade balance. There is little evidence that shows that this lack of trade competition is a result of deliberate coordination between Russia and China, but the strong presence of both

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<sup>150</sup> Stronski and Ng, 10.

<sup>151</sup> Varshini Sridhar, “Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation in Central Asia is Not What It Seems to Be,” *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/sino-russian-economic-cooperation-in-central-asia-is-not-what-it-seems-to-be/>.

<sup>152</sup> Stronski and Ng, 10.

<sup>153</sup> Stronski and Ng, 10.

<sup>154</sup> Vassily B. Kashin, “Is the Conflict Inevitable? Not at All,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, last modified July/September 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/is-the-conflict-inevitable-not-at-all/>.

<sup>155</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kgz>.

countries in different sectors demonstrates that the trade environment is considerably less competitive than a simple comparison of China's and Russia's market shares would suggest. Russia's role in the Central Asian economies is further amplified by the dependence of these countries on the remittances from their migrant laborers in Russia—as high as 31.3 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and 32.9 percent in the case of Kyrgyzstan—and there is little to suggest that China seeks to attract Central Asian workers to supplant Russia's influence.<sup>156</sup>

Economic cooperation has materialized in the efforts of Russia and China to coordinate the actions of their multilateral economic projects, namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The Russian initiative has experienced a number of setbacks following its inception in 2015, mainly due to its own economic troubles.<sup>157</sup> For instance, the devaluation of Russian currency has led to a reduction of remittances that Kyrgyzstan receives from its migrant workers, while cheap Russian goods and oil have hampered local producers in Kazakhstan. As a result, the current members of the economic bloc have been generally disappointed with the project, making it unlikely that other Central Asian republics will become members.<sup>158</sup> Given the difficulties of the EEU and the greater role of the BRI in the region, Presidents Putin and Xi have on many occasions proclaimed their readiness to coordinate the two projects. Some scholars within China are hopeful that such Sino-Russian cooperation will accelerate further expansion of the BRI into Eurasia, citing the commonality of their strategic interests to resist the U.S.-led containment.<sup>159</sup> Similar optimism can be seen in the statements of both countries' top leaders, with Putin remarking at China's Belt and Road Forum in 2019

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<sup>156</sup> Sam Bhutia, "Russian Remittances to Central Asia Rise Again," Eurasia.net, last modified 23 May 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-remittances-to-central-asia-rise-again#:~:text=Russia%20offers%20these%20workers%20seasonal,according%20to%20World%20Bank%20data>.

<sup>157</sup> Stronski and Ng, 12.

<sup>158</sup> Stronski and Ng, 12.

<sup>159</sup> Serafettin Yilmaz (Yao Shifan) and Liu Changming, *Remaking Eurasia: the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Russia Strategic Partnership*, Asia Europe Journal Original Paper (Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, 2019), 18, <https://doi-org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1007/s10308-019-00547-1>.

that the BRI is “intended to strengthen the creative cooperation of the states of Eurasia.”<sup>160</sup> Xi similarly voiced his support for “ [fostering] stronger synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative... and the Eurasian Economic Union” in an interview with Russian reporters prior to his 2019 state visit to Russia.<sup>161</sup> As noted by Dmitri Trenin, while “a lot needs to be done to realize the true potential of Sino-Russian economic relations,... the dynamic remains positive.”<sup>162</sup>

#### **E. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—A NEW “GREAT GAME”**

An increasing number of experts argue that the current trend of China’s increasing economic and military power and Russia’s waning influence will have an effect of reorienting Central Asia away from Moscow and towards Beijing, challenging Russia’s primacy in the long term.<sup>163</sup> China’s economic advantage is increasingly difficult for Russia to ignore, especially as Moscow is struggling to invest into the region. China is also catching up to Russia in terms of its military capabilities, and, although it has not taken any major steps to assert its security ambitions in Central Asia so far. Some actions by Beijing, however, such as plans to acquire small military outposts in Central Asia close to the Chinese border, have raised concerns in Moscow.<sup>164</sup> Overall, the trend results in an increasing anxiety in Russia and is likely to trigger greater competition as it likely continues.

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<sup>160</sup> Saibal Dasgupta, “Putin Demands a Role in Eurasian Part of Belt and Road,” Voice of America, last modified 4 May 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/putin-demands-role-eurasian-part-belt-and-road>.

<sup>161</sup> Xinhua, “Xi Says China to Foster Stronger Synergy of Development Initiatives with China,” XINHUANET, last modified 5 June 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/05/c\\_138116833.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/05/c_138116833.htm).

<sup>162</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia, China Are Key and Close Partners,” Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified 5 June 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/06/05/russia-china-are-key-and-close-partners-pub-79262>.

<sup>163</sup> Kim and Blank, 775–776.

<sup>164</sup> Kim and Blank, 776.



## 1. Security Competition

Moscow's most important tool of promoting security in the region is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, but notably excludes China, politically neutral Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which left the organization permanently in 2012. The organization, chartered in 2002, is responsible for defense cooperation, weapons manufacturing and sales, training for the members' military personnel, peacekeeping activities, integrated air defense, as well as anti-terrorism and anti-narcotics activities.<sup>165</sup> The CSTO, like the NATO, includes a provision for mutual military assistance in case of an attack on any of its member states.<sup>166</sup> Under its purview as the leading member of the organization, Russia exercises veto powers over the foreign military assistance received by other members and has full control over the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF), which aims to combat military aggression, terrorism, crime, and drug trafficking.<sup>167</sup> The CSTO conducts considerably more military exercises than the SCO, with 38 CSTO drills being conducted by 2016, compared to SCO's 22.<sup>168</sup> While the CSTO promotes regional stability that is congruent with China's own interests, the cooperation of China with this organization has been limited, with Beijing only going so far as to sign a cooperation agreement with the organization in 2007 and being present at the CSTO drills only as an observer.<sup>169</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse observe that Beijing seems "quite satisfied to leave Moscow in charge of the main security questions, which are difficult and costly, preferring to concentrate on economic development and on stabilizing sensitive domestic zones such as Xinjiang and Tibet."<sup>170</sup>

Despite the overall patterns of regional cooperation in the realm of security, a number of contradictions between China and Russia have become evident within the

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<sup>165</sup> De Haas, 389.

<sup>166</sup> De Haas, 389.

<sup>167</sup> De Haas, 391.

<sup>168</sup> De Haas, 391.

<sup>169</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, 36.

<sup>170</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, 38.

framework of the SCO. Active participation in the SCO is important to Russia as it provides Moscow with an avenue to monitor and contain Chinese activity in Central Asia. Russia has attempted to increase coordination between the SCO and the CSTO and even to subordinate the SCO to the CSTO in security matters. By putting its regional initiatives on par with those of China, Russia seeks to define itself as “the main coordinator of all multilateral activities in Central Asia.”<sup>171</sup> Merging the SCO and the CSTO would strengthen Russia’s position, as it would present Moscow as the representative of all Central Asian states in the dialogue with Beijing and allow Russia to monitor contacts between the CSTO members and China in all security questions.<sup>172</sup>

These efforts by Russia have so far resulted in resistance from China. For instance, China rejected Russia’s initiative to make the Peace Mission 2007 exercise a joint event between the SCO and the CSTO, resulting in the CSTO being only an observer during the event.<sup>173</sup> Despite Russia suggesting the idea of merging the CSTO and the SCO again at the 2014 Dushanbe Summit, no serious attempts have been made after 2007 to conduct joint exercises and no CSTO observers were present in subsequent peace missions. On other occasions, Russia has refused to be involved in exercises in which China was also a participant.<sup>174</sup> In general, Russia has shown a clear preference for the CSTO as opposed to the SCO, as the former has a clear military structure and presents itself as a military defense alliance with a clear Russian dominance, while the latter has not been as successful at organizing multilateral operations.<sup>175</sup> Both countries have been hesitant to share sensitive information about their emerging technologies or, especially, their nuclear capabilities and doctrines.<sup>176</sup> Sino-Russian mistrust is also exemplified by Russia’s

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<sup>171</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, “Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence by Promoting CSTO-SCO Cooperation,” CACI Analyst, last modified 17 October 2007, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11497-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2007-10-17-art-11497.html?tmpl=component&print=1>.

<sup>172</sup> Kaczmarek, “Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence.”

<sup>173</sup> Wishnick, *Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia*, 30.

<sup>174</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, 36.

<sup>175</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, 36.

<sup>176</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, 36.

insistence on the inclusion of India as a member state of the SCO in 2015 in an apparent attempt to dilute Chinese influence within the organization, while China sponsored the membership of Pakistan during the same summit.

Sino-Russian competition has recently expanded into the realm of security cooperation and arms sales. So far, Russia remains the key external security partner to the Central Asian republics and is the largest supplier of arms to them, selling over \$3.8 billion worth since 1991 and supplying over 80 percent of imported weapons to its CSTO partners in the region.<sup>177</sup> China, on the other hand, is establishing itself as a net exporter of weapons and is encroaching on Russia's traditional market (see Figure 3). As it developed its own arms industry, it began to rely less on Russian-manufactured weaponry, buying only \$8 billion worth of weapons in 2010–2020, compared to \$21 billion worth in 2000–2010.<sup>178</sup> Compared to just 1.5 percent of arms imports from China to Central Asia between 2010 and 2014, the figure from 2015 to 2020 has grown to 18 percent.<sup>179</sup> While most of Chinese imports consist of military trucks and transport aircraft, other sales have included QW-2 Vanguard 2 portable surface-to-air missiles, FD-2000 medium-range air-defense systems, as well as the CH-3, CH-4, CH-5, and the Wing Loong drones.<sup>180</sup> While China is still only entering the arms market, the trend suggests that Russia's lead may soon be challenged. It remains to be seen whether Russia, as the lead member of the CSTO, will pressure the Central Asian states to limit their arms purchases from China. Likewise, Russia's predominance as the lead destination for the training of foreign officers has been eroded by China in the recent years, which now enjoys an overwhelming advantage in terms of the number of Uzbek officers studying in its military institutions.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia*, Kennan Cable no.52 (Kennan Institute, 2020), 4, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-52-russias-shadow-chinas-rising-security-presence-central-asia>.

<sup>178</sup> Jardine and Lemon, *In Russia's Shadow*, 2.

<sup>179</sup> Jardine and Lemon, 2.

<sup>180</sup> Jardine and Lemon, 3.

<sup>181</sup> Jardine and Lemon, 8.

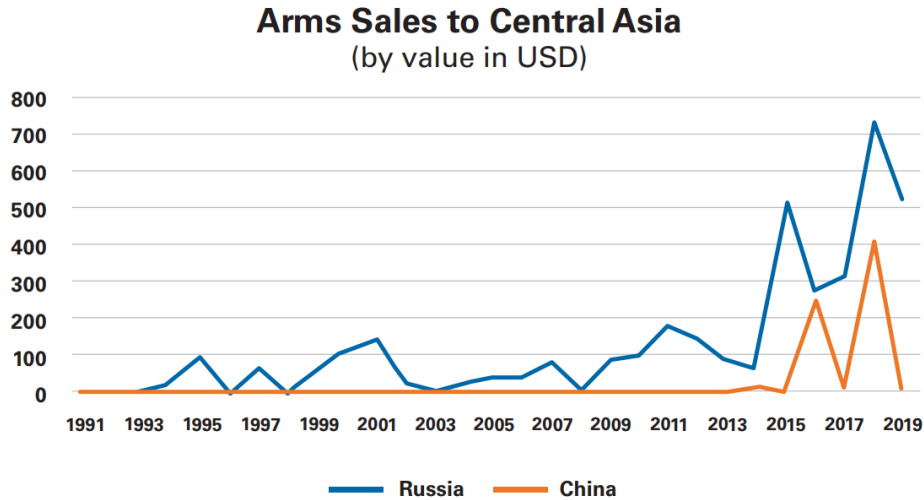


Figure 3. Arms Sales to Central Asia (in \$M USD)<sup>182</sup>

The withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan may also have significant long-term consequences for the future of Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia. The entry of the United States to the region in 2001 and the acquisition of military bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for its Northern Distribution Network became a significant source of concern for Moscow and Beijing and an impetus for their geopolitical convergence. As American efforts in Afghanistan have faltered in recent years, both Russia and China took steps to increase their influence both in Afghanistan and the bordering Central Asian countries. For instance, in 2018 Moscow periodically pressured the Kabul government to authorize Russian airstrikes on Islamic State targets in Jowzjan province. However, these attempts were rebuffed by the U.S. objections and assurances to Kabul that the U.S. presence is sufficient against this threat.<sup>183</sup> Beijing, concerned with the region’s stability after the U.S. eventual exit, acquired several outposts on Tajik-Afghan border in 2015 and 2016 and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been patrolling the sections of the border that China considers most vulnerable, especially in the Wakhan corridor.<sup>184</sup> Both

<sup>182</sup> Source: Jardine and Lemon, 4.

<sup>183</sup> Craig Nelson and Thomas Grove, “Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia as U.S. Plans Afghan Exit,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-china-vie-for-influence-in-central-asia-as-u-s-plans-afghan-exit-11560850203>.

<sup>184</sup> Thornton, “China in Central Asia,” 6.

Russia and China have deepened their political ties with the Taliban as well, helping to secure U.N. travel waivers for Talib officials to participate in the Qatar talks.<sup>185</sup> While cooperating with Beijing on the subject of regional security is an important goal for Moscow, Russia also seeks to showcase to the region the failure of the United States to foster stability and learn from the Soviet Union’s own disastrous foray in the 1980s. Laurel Miller, a former U.S. State Department official and the current director of the International Crisis Group’s Asia program, predicts that future Sino-Russian competition in the region is likely, given the buildup of military capabilities by both Moscow and Beijing that is likely to continue after the Afghan peace deal.<sup>186</sup>

Finally, China recently began signaling the end to its reliance on Russia’s military presence as the most important factor in the regional security stability. China has gradually expanded its security engagements with the Central Asian countries through the SCO framework, conducting exercises, providing military aid, arms sales, and the presence of its PLA and private security companies, causing concerns to Russia.<sup>187</sup> Initially resistant to commit its military forces in the region, in 2016 China established its first military outpost in Tajikistan, close to the Afghan and Chinese borders and staffed by the Chinese People’s Armed Police Force.<sup>188</sup> One Russian expert, Dmitry Zhelobov, estimates that China is “very likely” to further expand its military footprint in the region in the next five years, establishing a network of military bases in order to “ensure that neither Russia nor the United States are able to limit China’s cross-continental trade with Europe.”<sup>189</sup> Such hard power moves and Zhelobov’s dire warning have resulted in Russian responses—the expansion of its Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan and an agreement with Kyrgyzstan enabling

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<sup>185</sup> Nelson and Grove, “Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia.”

<sup>186</sup> Nelson and Grove, “Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia.”

<sup>187</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, “The Dragon’s Cuddle: China’s Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative,” in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China’s Evolving Military Engagement Along Silk Roads*, edited by Nadege Rolland (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report #80, 2019), 59.

<sup>188</sup> Temur Umarov, “China Looms Large in Central Asia.”

<sup>189</sup> Paul Goble, “China Will Have Military Bases in Central Asia Within Five Years, Russian Expert Says,” The Jamestown Foundation, last modified 4 April 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-will-have-military-bases-in-central-asia-within-five-years-russian-expert-says/>.

Russia to deploy UAVs from this base, ratified on June 12, 2020.<sup>190</sup> Moscow's other military base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, also has received a contingent of the S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems.<sup>191</sup> The addition of such military equipment shows that Russia is concerned not only with the threat posed by Islamist groups, but rather with China's military expansion into the region.

## 2. Economic Competition

Central Asia is a region where Russia and China are economic competitors, although so far Moscow has had little choice but to react with acquiescence in response to Beijing's overwhelming economic might despite significant long-term concerns. What makes China an especially attractive economic partner to Central Asia is that, compared to Russia, it does not seek to bind the Central Asian states in restrictive trade policies or to influence political outcomes.<sup>192</sup> As a result, China's economic clout continues to grow in the region, sometimes at Russia's expense. This trend became particularly evident following the implementation of sanctions against Russia in 2014 and its subsequent economic hardship, while at the same time China has continued to experience strong economic growth. For instance, in 2016 the total bilateral trade of Russia and the CARs constituted \$18.6 billion, while that of China amounted to \$30 billion.<sup>193</sup> By 2018, Beijing's lead vis-à-vis Moscow became even more pronounced (see Figure 4). This trend became evident to the Central Asian states as well, with Kyrgyzstan canceling a joint Russo-Kyrgyz project to build hydropower plants due to the inability of the Russian companies to secure funds.<sup>194</sup> Moscow similarly realizes it can do little to curb Beijing's economic influence.

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<sup>190</sup> Kinga Szalkai, "Russia's Recent Military Buildup in Central Asia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified 25 September 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-recent-military-buildup-central-asia>.

<sup>191</sup> Szalkai, "Russia's Recent Military Buildup in Central Asia."

<sup>192</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, last modified 18 September 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/05/after-crimea-will-kazakhstan-be-next-in-putin-s-reintegration-project-pub-54782>.

<sup>193</sup> Stronski and Ng, 14.

<sup>194</sup> Stronski and Ng, 14.

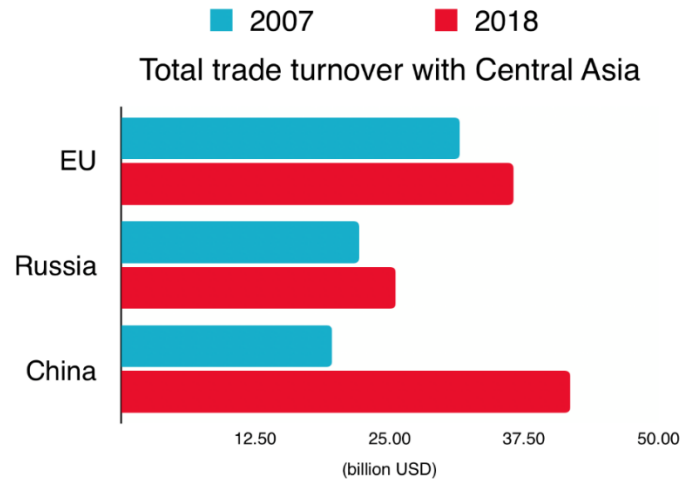


Figure 4. Disparity in Trade with Central Asia between the EU, Russia, and China<sup>195</sup>

Many observers have seen the BRI as an attempt by China to drive Russia out of the region and, while some attempts at coordinating the BRI and the EEU have been proclaimed by Moscow and Beijing, it is only a matter of time before significant disagreements occur.<sup>196</sup> In fact, Chinese officials have acknowledged in private conversations that Russia has been a concern to Beijing since the unveiling of the project in 2013 and was seen as likely to pressure the Central Asian states to not participate in it.<sup>197</sup> While the favorable reaction of the Kremlin to the BRI has surprised the Chinese leadership, this position of Moscow was a result of significant internal discussions and was reached despite significant concerns regarding its security community.<sup>198</sup> Chinese fears vis-à-vis Russia were also assuaged as Moscow did not take any significant steps to limit the participation of the Central Asian states in the Chinese infrastructure initiatives. It

<sup>195</sup> Source: Sam Bhutia, “The EU’s New Central Asia Strategy: What Does It Mean for Trade?” Eurasia.net, last modified 5 June 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/the-eus-new-central-asia-strategy-what-does-it-mean-for-trade>.

<sup>196</sup> Alexander Gabuev, “Eurasian Silk Road Union: Towards a Russia-China Consensus?” Carnegie Moscow Center, last modified 5 June 2015, <https://carnegie.ru/2015/06/05/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-russia-china-consensus-pub-60331>.

<sup>197</sup> Gabuev, “Eurasian Silk Road Union.”

<sup>198</sup> Gabuev, “Eurasian Silk Road Union.”

remains to be seen whether the Russia's security community prevails in its attempts to prevent accommodation of Chinese interests in Russia's "soft underbelly." Russia has further sought to offset its economic troubles within the EEU by inviting India into the organization, seeking to balance out China's economic influence in Central Asia.<sup>199</sup>

The efforts to integrate the BRI with the EEU are unlikely to result in significant successes despite the frequent calls in favor of cooperation. For example, Russia is unlikely to complete the construction of highways and other infrastructure needed for the two projects to work together, which also includes a proposed section connecting the Volga region and Kazakhstan.<sup>200</sup> Other signs of impending failure include the insistence of the Central Asian countries to conclude BRI projects bilaterally with China, with little involvement of Russia, despite the existing EEU stipulations that Moscow has to be consulted.<sup>201</sup> It is also important to note that the visions for the BRI and the EEU are markedly different, with the BRI aiming to connect multiple markets into a common Eurasian trade environment, while the EEU seeks to create a single market with Russian dominance. Putin's efforts to increase Russia's role in the BRI are also unlikely to garner Beijing's sympathies and, as Stephen Blank states, "China will not cede primacy to Russia anywhere in the BRI."<sup>202</sup> The lack of any meaningful progress on linking these projects suggests that Beijing is simply accommodating Russia's regional ambitions and concerns and sees little use in actually integrating the two projects.<sup>203</sup> The notable absence of Russia's foreign minister from a high-level Belt and Road meeting in 2020 sends signals that the Russian leadership has grown wary and disillusioned with this project.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Yuan Jiang, "Russia's Strategy in Central Asia: Inviting India to Balance China," *The Diplomat*, 23 January 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/russias-strategy-in-central-asia-inviting-india-to-balance-china/>.

<sup>200</sup> Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far?" The Jamestown Foundation, last modified 21 June 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/integrating-the-urasian-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road-a-bridge-too-far/>.

<sup>201</sup> Stronski and Ng, 13.

<sup>202</sup> Dasgupta, "Putin Demands a Role in Eurasian Part of the Belt and Road."

<sup>203</sup> Dasgupta, "Putin Demands a Role in Eurasian Part of the Belt and Road."

<sup>204</sup> Ankur Shah, "Russia Loosens Its Belt," *Foreign Policy*, 16 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/16/russia-china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.



One of the most divisive issues in the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia is the energy sector. As a growing energy consumer, China has expanded its energy footprint in Central Asia, severely undercutting Russia's economic and political influence in the region.<sup>205</sup> Chinese investment into the Kazakh economy has grown considerably, leading to its 21 percent stake in Kazakhstan's oil production (surpassing Russia's nine percent) as early as 2010. Similarly, China undermined Russia's efforts to secure Turkmen gas in 2009 by lending its government \$4 billion to construct the Turkmenistan-China pipeline and send 30 bcm of gas annually to China.<sup>206</sup> During the same year, Russia's Gazprom lost significant sums when Turkmenistan refused to go back on the 2008 deal to raise the gas price to European levels following the 2009 gas price collapse, causing Gazprom to buy Turkmen gas at an above-market price. Russia's attempts to coerce Turkmenistan by halting gas imports in April 2009 did not have their desired effect, since the Chinese loan and the completion of the Turkmenistan-China pipeline showed that Ashgabat had alternate gas export routes and was, therefore, less dependent on Russia.<sup>207</sup> Further, the pipeline lessened China's own dependence on Russia's gas exports and allowed Beijing to adopt a superior bargaining position vis-à-vis Moscow despite its growing demand for energy.<sup>208</sup> In other regions, China enjoys expanded rights for gas and oil exploration, while Russia finds itself stagnating in this sector. Concerned about losing its share in the regional energy market, Moscow has been engaged in several rounds of talks with Ashgabat, which resulted in the resumption of natural gas exports from Turkmenistan to Russia in 2019.<sup>209</sup> It is doubtful that this move will drastically improve Russia's position as a supplier to China, since 40 bcm of Turkmen gas (from 70 bcm produced annually) still continues to go east every year.<sup>210</sup> Rather, this move has likely been taken by Moscow to ensure its control

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<sup>205</sup> Kim and Blank, 783.

<sup>206</sup> Kim and Blank, 784.

<sup>207</sup> Thornton, "China in Central Asia," 3.

<sup>208</sup> Thornton, "China in Central Asia," 3.

<sup>209</sup> Reuters Staff, "Turkmen Gas Flows to Russia Again After Three-Year Standoff," Reuters, last modified 15 April 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkmenistan-russia-gas/turkmen-gas-flows-to-russia-again-after-three-year-standoff-idUSKCN1RR1Z0>.

<sup>210</sup> Reuters Staff, "Turkmen Gas Flows to Russia Again."

over the natural gas flowing westward towards the EU, while also slightly decreasing the amount of gas going to China. From Russia's point of view, this should increase the importance of its Siberian pipelines to China, but the actual effects remain to be seen.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

Current Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia show that cooperation between China and Russia is still more robust than their competition, although there are strong initial indicators in the areas of security and economics that Sino-Russian relations may become more competitive, potentially leading to rivalry in the future. Maintaining regional stability, whether through investment, infrastructure development, or through military presence and security initiatives, remains a convergent interest for both Moscow and Beijing, who seek to guard themselves from separatist and extremist threats emanating from the region. Additionally, the presence of Western military forces in Afghanistan and Central Asia has grown to be an irritant for both China and Russia, despite their role in tampering of these threats. The "color revolutions" that occurred in the post-Soviet space starting in 2003, as well as the promotion of democratic values by the West, have spurred further cooperation between Russia, China, and the region's authoritarian regimes, seeking to maintain their influence and their governance models. So far, the pattern of Sino-Russian cooperation has taken the form of both countries playing to their strengths, with Russia acting as the primary security leader and provider under the auspices of the CSTO, while China leveraged its growing economic might to develop the region's economies and infrastructure through organizations like the SCO and the BRI.

The growing disparity between China and Russia and China's increasing appetite for greater influence and control in the region provide the strongest drivers of competition between the two powers. For now, such competition is still relatively muted, but as China's clout continues to grow, so will Russia's concern with its neighbor's growing influence. The SCO and the CSTO have so far been unable to form a cohesive partnership, while the BRI and the EEU have also seen a similar lack of success, whether due to mutual distrust or Russia's inability to finance its portions of mutually agreed upon infrastructure projects. China has also been observed encroaching on Russia's traditional role as the security

provider both through increased arms sales and a burgeoning military footprint in Central Asia. It remains within the realm of possibility that such disagreements will deepen as China grows more disillusioned with Russia as a viable economic partner, but also due to removal of factors encouraging cooperation, as the United States seeks to withdraw from Afghanistan. It is clear that, due to both countries seeking to maintain and grow their influence in the region, the prospects for future Sino-Russian competition in Central Asia are especially strong.

### III. SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN NORTH KOREA

#### A. INTRODUCTION

North Korea occupies the spotlight of international attention due to its regime's aggressive rhetoric, a burgeoning nuclear weapons and missile program, and the failure of the international community to compel its ruling elite to abandon its nuclear aspirations. It is another arena in which competing and complementary Chinese and Russian foreign interests can be viewed.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is a totalitarian one-party regime ruled by the Kim family since its founding on 9 September 1948. Determined to safeguard its regime, DPRK started developing its nuclear weapons capability in the early 1980s, alerting the international community to its ambitions when it began constructing a nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. Its first test of a nuclear-capable missile, Nodong-1, took place in 1993 and its first test of a nuclear device occurred on 9 October 2006. Since then, the DPRK has amassed an arsenal of approximately 30–40 nuclear weapons and conducts frequent tests of increasingly sophisticated nuclear capable medium-range and intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>211</sup>

This chapter examines the dynamic of interactions between China and Russia regarding North Korea, its nuclear weapons, and its economy, as well as Beijing's and Moscow's long-term visions for the peninsula in order to determine whether their cooperation or competition is stronger. The findings suggest that Sino-Russian cooperation is vastly stronger than their competition. This cooperation largely takes form of joint diplomatic resolutions in the United Nations on the subject of economic sanctions, joint military exercises in the region, and covert economic assistance to the North Korean regime that disregards the sanctions imposed on the DPRK by the international community. While the long-term views regarding economic reform and reunification may differ between

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<sup>211</sup> Kelsey Davenport, Kingston Reif, and Daryl G. Kimball, "2020 Estimated Global Nuclear Warhead Inventories," Arms Control Association, last modified August 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>.

Russian and Chinese observers, Russia has largely accepted China's political and economic predominance in the region.

This chapter will first examine the background of North Korean interactions with Russia, both during the Soviet and the modern periods, and with China. Both countries have had much impact over the creation and development of the North Korean state and continue to exert influence on it now. The second section will discuss Russia's and China's main interests in DPRK, their visions of how North Korea should develop, and their respective roles in its future. The last two sections will focus on the cooperative and the competitive aspects of Sino-Russian interactions in North Korea.

## **B. BACKGROUND**

Historically, the Korean state developed under considerable influence from China and was a part of the tribute system created by various Chinese dynasties to control its peripheral regions. This system came under stress with the weakening of the Qing Empire and the strengthening of the Russian and Japanese influences in the region in the late nineteenth century. As a result of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Korea fell under the influence of the Japanese empire and was occupied from 1910 to 1945. During this period, Japanese colonial authorities created much of North Korea's initial industrial capacity, building mines, processing facilities for coal, iron, magnesium, and zinc, as well as fertilizer plants.<sup>212</sup> The Japanese occupiers were expelled from the peninsula by the combined effort of Korean and Chinese guerillas, and the Soviet Union. After the Japanese surrender in 1945 the peninsula was divided between the Soviet and American spheres of influence along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and in 1948 two distinct states emerged. A communist state, called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was created in the Soviet zone of control, while the Republic of Korea (ROK) was established in the American-controlled territory. A North Korean guerilla leader, Kim Il-sung, came to power in the North with significant Soviet support.

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<sup>212</sup> Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 22.

The Korean War (1950-1953) was the first major test of the relatively new Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance (signed on 14 February 1950) since both China and Russia were faced with the prospect of defending the Communist cause in East Asia.<sup>213</sup> The war was initiated by Kim Il-sung's regime for the purpose of reunifying the Korean peninsula under his control. From Mao Zedong's perspective, the decision to support Kim Il-sung served to "define the alliance's utility for China's national security...and [his] revolutionary projects."<sup>214</sup> Stalin, on the other hand, concerned that the conflict could escalate into a global confrontation between the United States and the USSR did not initially endorse Kim's plans. Stalin's attitudes changed somewhat after statements from the U.S. Department of State in January 1950 signaled that South Korea would not be included in the U.S. Western Pacific defense perimeter. Despite this he was still cautious and unwilling to become involved in the conflict directly. Immediately prior to the outbreak of war in June 1950, the USSR provided the DPRK with military aid, but no commitments to deploy Soviet forces in Korea were made. Stalin wanted Mao to take responsibility for the conflict started by a fellow Communist country in Asia.<sup>215</sup> In the end, Mao supported Kim's decision to go to war despite significant concerns that doing so would jeopardize China's plans to liberate Taiwan from the Nationalist Party.<sup>216</sup>

Upon the outbreak of the war the UN forces promptly came to assist South Korea. Mao postponed his plans to invade Taiwan and committed to aiding the DPRK instead. On 13 July, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the Northeast Border Defense Army (NEBDA) and by the end of September over 250,000 PLA troops were ready to conduct military operations on the Korean peninsula.<sup>217</sup> Assured by the increase in Soviet military deliveries and the presence of a Soviet air force division in northeast China, Mao assumed that the USSR would honor the alliance treaty and intervene when China entered

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<sup>213</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>214</sup> Chen, *Mao's China*, 54.

<sup>215</sup> Chen, 54.

<sup>216</sup> Chen, 54.

<sup>217</sup> Chen, 55.

the conflict.<sup>218</sup> However, the landing of the U.S. forces at Inchon on 15 September dissuaded Stalin from entering the Korean War directly. He urged the Chinese leadership to assist the DPRK by dispatching their troops yet proffered only meagre Soviet assistance.<sup>219</sup> As the war went on, Stalin's confidence in the success of the Chinese rose and he provided Mao with ammunition, military equipment, and Soviet air cover for the Chinese troops in Korea. The Soviet Union simultaneously increased its aid towards China's economic reconstruction. Chen concludes that "it would have been impossible for China to have fought the Korean War without the strategic alliance with the Soviet Union."<sup>220</sup> However, Stalin's pragmatism in the early months of the war and his post-war request that China pay for all the Soviet military aid greatly soured Mao's attitude towards the Soviet Union and their military alliance.<sup>221</sup>

The Korean War resulted in a near destruction of North Korean infrastructure and industry. After the end of the war, the Soviet Union provided the DPRK with economic and industrial aid. This allowed the Chinese troops to withdraw in 1958 after the North Korean economy and military were rebuilt.<sup>222</sup> At the same time, both China and the USSR suffered significant setbacks in terms of their influence in post-war North Korea. Seeking to hold unopposed sway over the DPRK and curb the effects of domestic factionalism, Kim Il-sung took measures to decrease his country's political dependence on Moscow and Beijing (although North Korea continued to depend economically on China and the USSR until the early 1990s). Dissatisfied with such policies, both China and the Soviet Union sought to remove Kim from power. A coup, orchestrated by the Soviet and Chinese-backed factions within Korean Workers' Party (KWP) in August 1956 (also known as the August Faction Incident), failed. Both factions were captured and executed.<sup>223</sup> The subsequent

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<sup>218</sup> Chen, 55.

<sup>219</sup> Chen, 56.

<sup>220</sup> Chen, 60.

<sup>221</sup> Chen, 61.

<sup>222</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 26.

<sup>223</sup> Andrei N. Lankov, "Kim Takes Control: The 'Great Purge' in North Korea, 1956–1960," *Korean Studies* 26, no.1 (2002), 90–91, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2002.0010>.

purges of 1956–1960 significantly diminished the ability of both the Soviet Union and China to exert influence on the increasingly independent Kim regime.

The Sino-Soviet split, which became evident in 1960 following Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech and the introduction of his de-Stalinization policies, drastically changed the dynamics of Sino-Soviet interactions in North Korea. Cha observes that this split "had the effect of increasing the strategic value of North Korea to both countries" and allowed Kim to "[benefit] immensely from this competition, alternating loyalties between the two sides while maximizing assistance from each."<sup>224</sup> July 1961 marked the signing of both the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty (which endures to this day) and the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union.<sup>225</sup> The late 1960s saw Kim alternate between the two powers. When Soviet politics were obsessed with the denunciation of Stalin's personality cult, Mao enjoyed greater political clout with Kim. When China faced the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), Kim shifted towards Soviet support until China regained political stability.

North Korean nuclear program began with the Soviet effort to aid the DPRK and promote economic integration in the Far East. An agreement on cooperation in the field of nuclear energy was signed between the USSR and the DPRK in 1959.<sup>226</sup> Soviet specialists, sent to North Korea under this agreement assisted the DPRK with the construction of the Yongbyon Scientific Research Center, which consisted of several laboratories, a K-60,000 cobalt installation, and, most importantly, an IRT-2000 nuclear research reactor, completed by 1965.<sup>227</sup> More than 300 North Korean nuclear specialists trained in various Soviet institutions during this period of cooperation, although the Soviets continued to supervise

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<sup>224</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 29.

<sup>225</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 27–28.

<sup>226</sup> Georgiy Kaurov, "A Technical History of Soviet-North Korean Nuclear Relations," in *The North Korean Nuclear Program, Security, Strategy and New Perspectives from Russia*, edited by James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.

<sup>227</sup> Kaurov, "A Technical History of Soviet-North Korean Nuclear Relations," 25.



their work at Yongbyon.<sup>228</sup> The Soviet-DPRK cooperation expanded further in 1985 following the signing of an “Agreement on Economic Technical Cooperation in the Construction of a Nuclear Power Plant in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”<sup>229</sup> On December 12, 1985, the DPRK also joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970 due to increasing pressure from the international community.

The rapprochement between the United States and the People’s Republic of China, which culminated in the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing in 1979, had profound consequences for the Korean Peninsula. Threatened by this sudden geopolitical change, Kim Il-sung launched the nuclear weapons program in North Korea, although his nuclear ambitions may have started even earlier in the late 1970s.<sup>230</sup> Meanwhile, Park Chung-hee enacted a stricter set of authoritarian measures in South Korea.<sup>231</sup> The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in China in 1978 further solidified relations between the USSR and the DPRK. North Korea remained aligned with the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991.<sup>232</sup>

After his ascension to the post of the general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev focused on boosting the Soviet presence in East Asia, which included a reinvigorated effort to strengthen ties with the DPRK.<sup>233</sup> In December 1985, Moscow signed a bilateral agreement with Pyongyang to increase Soviet-DPRK trade by 1990, resulting in trade between the two countries increasing by 52 percent from \$2.18 billion in 1985 to \$3.5 billion by 1988.<sup>234</sup> The Gorbachev government also agreed to build a new four-block VVER-440 nuclear power plant at Sinpo, although with a precondition that the Kim regime

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<sup>228</sup> Kaurov, “A Technical History,” 26.

<sup>229</sup> Kaurov, “A Technical History,” 27.

<sup>230</sup> Natalya Bazhanova, “North Korea’s Decision to Develop an Independent Nuclear Program,” in *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy and New Perspectives from Russia*, edited by James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov (New York: Routledge, 2011), 136.

<sup>231</sup> Thomas Fingar, “China and Korea: Proximity, Priorities, and Policy Evolution,” in *Uneasy Partnerships*, edited by Thomas Fingar (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 132–133.

<sup>232</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 29–30.

<sup>233</sup> James Clay Moltz, “Russia and the two Koreas: the dilemmas of ‘dual engagement’,” *Demokratizatsiya* (Summer 1998), 382.

<sup>234</sup> Moltz, “Russia and the two Koreas,” 382.

should sign the 1970 NPT. During this period, the Soviet Union also transferred advanced conventional military equipment to the DPRK and continued to provide substantial food subsidies to the North Korean regime.<sup>235</sup>

By 1987, changes in the Gorbachev's political strategy and internal debates within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led to a cooling in Soviet-DPRK relations. Soviet economists began to question command-style socialism and began to praise the Japanese and South Korean economic models for their successes in developing their countries.<sup>236</sup> In regard to the economic development of the Russian Far East, it soon became clear that capitalist Seoul had more to offer Moscow than Stalinist Pyongyang.<sup>237</sup> Gorbachev signaled his intentions to improve relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific region as part of his "New Thinking" strategy outlined in his speeches in Vladivostok (1986) and Krasnoyarsk (1988). South Korea's president, Roh Tae-woo, sought to normalize relations with the USSR and China—North Korea's principal allies—in a foreign policy known as Nordpolitik.<sup>238</sup> Economics influenced Soviet Union's interest in South Korea. The Soviets needed South Korea's financial and technological resources to alleviate their economic downturn. The ROK, in return, needed ever-increasing amounts of natural resources for its own economic development. The 1988 Seoul Olympics, in which the USSR actively participated, served as a catalyst for improved relations between the two.<sup>239</sup> That same year, a trade route was established between Vladivostok and Busan. In another important move, Gorbachev and Roh met as heads of state at a summit in San Francisco in June 1990. After the formal establishment of Soviet-ROK relations in September 1990, South Korea even proffered a \$3 billion loan to the USSR in order to assist their reforms. Meanwhile, economic relations between the USSR and the DPRK began to suffer, with Moscow

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<sup>235</sup> Moltz, 382.

<sup>236</sup> Moltz, 382–283.

<sup>237</sup> Moltz, 383.

<sup>238</sup> Tae Dong Chung, "Korea's Nordpolitik: Achievements and Prospects," *Asian Perspective* 15 no.2 (1991), 149, JSTOR.

<sup>239</sup> Moltz, 383.

forcing Pyongyang to pay more for oil and other contracts and cutting back on food subsidies.<sup>240</sup>

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian state policy towards North Korea shifted dramatically from an ideologically-motivated support to a more transactional attitude. Yeltsin's government ended economic and food assistance to the DPRK and insisted on forming economic relations on a strictly commercial basis. This, together with Pyongyang's economic mismanagement, contributed to North Korean economic crisis and famine from 1994 to 1998.<sup>241</sup> Russia returned its attention to the Korean peninsula and Asia in the late 1990s as Russian elites grew disappointed with interactions with the West. However, Russia prioritized South Korea over North Korea, establishing formal relations with the ROK in 1991.<sup>242</sup> Putin's regime continued to place strategic importance on the Korean peninsula. In May 2000 he declared that the Korean peninsula has always been a part of Russia's geopolitical and national interests.<sup>243</sup> In February 2000 Putin and Kim Jong-il signed the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations, albeit without assurances of mutual defense.<sup>244</sup> Between 2000 and 2001 the first major state visits took place between Russia and the DPRK—a practice that continues to this day.

China's post-Cold War relationship with North Korea underwent significant changes that paralleled those of Russia and North Korea. Amidst Deng's economic reforms a more pragmatic foreign policy developed, in which China sought closer ties with the rapidly developing South Korea.<sup>245</sup> Trade between the two nations increased beginning in the late 1980s. China participated in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and Roh Tae-woo returned the favor by lobbying for other Asian leaders to attend the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Moltz, 383–384.

<sup>241</sup> Alexander Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking Regarding North Korea," in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 269.

<sup>242</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 268–269.

<sup>243</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 269.

<sup>244</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 270.

<sup>245</sup> Fingar, "China and Korea," 136–137.

<sup>246</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 324–325.

China officially adopted a “two-Korea” policy in 1992, recognizing the higher value of South Korea as a trade and investment partner while North Korea was increasingly seen as an economic liability.<sup>247</sup> This had a profound effect on Sino-DPRK relations. China stopped subsidizing food, crude oil, coal, and fertilizer, traded with North Korea and ceased offering interest-free loans to the country. As a result, bilateral trade between the two nations dropped from \$900 million to \$550 million in two years (between 1993 and 1995). China-DPRK bilateral relations quickly soured. The DPRK denounced China for its betrayal and close ties with the ROK; and diplomatic contacts ceased during most of the 1990s.<sup>248</sup> Reconciliation did not occur until Kim Jong-il visited China in 1999. China’s Jiang Zemin reciprocated in 2001 following the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the 1961 Treaty.<sup>249</sup>

Both Russia and China reacted negatively when North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003 and conducted its first nuclear weapons test in 2006. Cha notes that Beijing warned the North Koreans not to conduct the test since it would defy nonproliferation agreements and would broadcast the fact that the DPRK had a functioning weapon. The test also violated China’s interest in preventing conflict and instability on the Korean peninsula.<sup>250</sup> Russia also condemned the test. As a result, both countries along with the international community imposed sanctions in an attempt to compel Pyongyang to suspend its weapons program.<sup>251</sup> Russia and China were active in preparing the initial sanctions (UNSC resolutions 1695 and 1718 in 2006). Both countries remained advocates of strengthening the sanctions in 2009 and 2013 (resolutions 1874 and 2094 respectively).<sup>252</sup> From 2003 to 2009 China and Russia participated in the Six-Party Talks alongside the United States, the ROK, the DPRK, and Japan. The talks did not

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<sup>247</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 326.

<sup>248</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 327.

<sup>249</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 328.

<sup>250</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 329.

<sup>251</sup> Lukin, “Russian Strategic Thinking,” 275.

<sup>252</sup> Lukin, “Russian Strategic Thinking,” 275.

achieve any significant results and on April 14, 2009, North Korea discontinued the talks, expelled all nuclear inspectors and resumed its weapons program.

## C. CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS NORTH KOREA

### 1. Chinese Interests

As noted by Thomas Fingar, throughout their history, relations between China and the Korean peninsula have been governed by three important factors: proximity, security, and economic well-being.<sup>253</sup> The geopolitical proximity and the 880-mile border between North Korea and the northeastern regions of China make the consequences of Korean actions and policies more salient for Chinese decision makers concerned with China's security.<sup>254</sup> Proximity also affects Korea's ability to contribute to China's economic development and, therefore, internal stability and regime legitimacy, albeit to a lesser extent.<sup>255</sup> These three important factors influence the overall policy of Beijing toward North Korea. According to Shambaugh, this policy calculus involves a hierarchy of interrelated interests, which include, most importantly, the DPRK regime survival and reform, but also the establishment of lasting political influence of Beijing on the peninsula, political and economic integration of North and South, as well as more responsible behavior of the North Korean regime on security issues (regarding their nuclear weapons program, development of other WMD and their means of delivery, and the deployments of their conventional forces).<sup>256</sup>

China's most important security concern regarding North Korea is the survival of the DPRK regime.<sup>257</sup> An implosion or collapse of the North Korean regime would mean a humanitarian catastrophe with economic and security ramifications for Beijing. Another failed communist state would also negatively impact the legitimacy of the Chinese

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<sup>253</sup> Fingar, 127–128.

<sup>254</sup> Fingar, 128.

<sup>255</sup> Fingar, 128.

<sup>256</sup> David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term," *The Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2003), 44, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>257</sup> Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula," 45.

Communist Party.<sup>258</sup> In order to support the regime, China extended aid to North Korea in the form of 1 million tons of wheat and rice and 500,000 tons of oil per year since 1994.<sup>259</sup> As Shambaugh states, “China’s aid and trade has been keeping the North Korean economy from total ruin and human calamity.”<sup>260</sup> Before 2001, China even facilitated cross-border migration on a small scale, recognizing it as a social safety valve for the DPRK regime.<sup>261</sup>

Beijing’s desire to prevent the DPRK’s collapse does not mean that China accepts the status quo or that its leaders admire the Kim regime. On the contrary, Chinese officials and academics, especially those in the northeast of China, have at times spoken with disdain and frustration on the subject of the DPRK and their relations.<sup>262</sup> The critics of the North Korean regime are frequently found on the Internet, where they typically disparage Kim Jong-un for being an overweight dictator ruling over a starving population.<sup>263</sup> The Chinese government also showed its discontent in 2017 following an alleged North Korean hydrogen bomb test by endorsing tougher UN sanctions.<sup>264</sup> Generally, Chinese critics of the DPRK cite numerous flaws of the North Korean state, namely the Kim family personality cult, the security state, the state-planned economy, widespread poverty, the autarkic paranoia, unwillingness to comply with international pressure, etc.<sup>265</sup> Since the mid-1990s Beijing also made clear to Pyongyang that it will not defend North Korea should its leadership blunder and come under attack, despite the existence of an alliance.<sup>266</sup> Additionally, many within the Chinese leadership were outraged by the executions of pro-Chinese Kim family members and regime figures by Kim Jong-un shortly upon his rise to

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<sup>258</sup> Shambaugh, 45.

<sup>259</sup> Shambaugh, 46.

<sup>260</sup> Shambaugh, 46.

<sup>261</sup> Shambaugh, 47.

<sup>262</sup> Meyskens, “Chinese Views of the Nuclear Endgame in North Korea,” 8.

<sup>263</sup> Shambaugh, 47.

<sup>264</sup> Shambaugh, 47.

<sup>265</sup> Shambaugh, 45.

<sup>266</sup> Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm’s Length* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004), 19.

power in 2011.<sup>267</sup> This leads many Korea analysts in China to compare North Korean regime to China under Mao and advocate reform in the spirit of Deng Xiaoping as the only viable way to avoid national catastrophe.<sup>268</sup>

Beijing has been an advocate for North Korea's extensive social and economic reform since the early 1990s. Having witnessed the collapse of Communist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe, China attributes its own political survival to carefully managed reform and wants North Korea to follow its lead. In the early 2000s China encouraged multiple state visits from Kim Jong-il, during which the Chinese showcased their technological innovations, industrial centers, and commercial venues in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.<sup>269</sup> Reform-oriented exchanges also took place at lower levels, such as those between China's International Liaison Department and its North Korean counterpart, with as many as two dozen meetings taking place annually.<sup>270</sup> This being said, China's leaders fully understand that reforming North Korea may be a gamble that may result in a collapse akin to that of the USSR; still, extensive but methodical reform is largely seen as the best option for both China and North Korea.

China has been adamant that it does not want the DPRK to be nuclear-capable and persuading the North Korean leaders to abandon their nuclear program is a high priority goal for Beijing. Chung and Choi outline the six areas in which the majority of the CCP leaders saw the DPRK's nuclear program damage China's interest the most:

1. DPRK's nuclear program introduced a new source of instability to the region;
2. Pyongyang set off a military confrontation with the United States, potentially placing Beijing in a dilemma situation;

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<sup>267</sup> Victor Cha, "The Right Way to Play the China Card on North Korea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 6 July 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/right-way-play-china-card-north-korea>.

<sup>268</sup> Shambaugh, 46.

<sup>269</sup> Shambaugh, 48.

<sup>270</sup> Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi, "Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949–2010," *The Pacific Review* 26, no.3 (2013), 248.

3. The nuclear proliferation is giving Tokyo a pretext for military build-up;
4. The program generates a potential for more nuclear proliferation in the region;
5. The program may cause potential environmental hazards to China's Northeast;
6. The program poses a direct security threat to China itself.<sup>271</sup>

Beijing is also concerned with North Korea's conventional military deployments, although not to the same extent as its WMD development and nuclear proliferation.<sup>272</sup> For instance, there were no indicators that China felt that North Korea's short-range missile tests in May 2019 were excessive, although Meyskens contends that China will be more likely to endorse additional sanctions if more long-range missile tests were carried out by North Korea.<sup>273</sup> Overall, the factors previously outlined led China to advocate for North Korea to return to the Agreed Framework of 1994,<sup>274</sup> and later push for Pyongyang's participation in both Four-Party(1997-1998) and Six-Party (2003-2009) Talks.<sup>275</sup>

Beijing's frustration with the DPRK's unwillingness to compromise and the need to demonstrate that China is a responsible power compelled the CCP leadership to support limited international sanctions, as it did in 2006 onwards. This lukewarm approach to sanctions is a result of China's desire to preserve the DPRK regime at all costs.<sup>276</sup> As Shambaugh notes, containing the DPRK's nuclear program is important to China, although Beijing sees the issue through the lens of regime survival and reform.<sup>277</sup> Beijing also

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<sup>271</sup> Chung and Choi, "Uncertain Allies," 258.

<sup>272</sup> Shambaugh, 53.

<sup>273</sup> Meyskens, 18.

<sup>274</sup> The Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (21 October 1994) outlined the freezing of the DPRK's indigenous nuclear power plant program, its replacement with a light water reactor power plant program, as well as normalization of the U.S-DPRK relations.

<sup>275</sup> Shambaugh, 53.

<sup>276</sup> Jones, "China's Interests," 255.

<sup>277</sup> Shambaugh, 53.



avoids pushing Pyongyang hard on either internal reforms or more moderate behavior on the international stage since China's leaders fear losing all influence in the DPRK, potentially making the Kim regime hostile, or making China seem inconsequential if the DPRK ignores its efforts.<sup>278</sup> These observations led Scobell to conclude that the United States should not "count on China to dissuade North Korea from going nuclear."<sup>279</sup> Rozman suggests that for an increasingly Sinocentric and anti-American foreign policy under Xi Jinping keeping North Korea politically and economically stable has become more important than denuclearization as it allows greater political control over the Korean peninsula and boosts China's importance as the foremost powerbroker in the region.<sup>280</sup>

The geopolitical dimension of the U.S.-China relations has had a considerable effect on the Chinese views and interests in North Korea. Since the creation of the two Koreas, Chinese policymakers considered North Korea to be its "strategic buffer zone" between itself and the U.S.-aligned South Korea and Japan.<sup>281</sup> As Scobell notes, "China recalls that Korea was the route by which imperial Japan launched its invasion of the Chinese mainland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>282</sup> Some, but not all, among the Chinese policymakers still see the DPRK as China's closest ally and seek to protect it from the interference from the United States and its regional allies.<sup>283</sup> China also seeks to prevent the strengthening of the U.S. positions on the peninsula (such as through the deployment of THAAD), a direct American intervention against the Kim regime, or a hasty unification

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<sup>278</sup> Scobell, *China and North Korea*, 16.

<sup>279</sup> Scobell, vi.

<sup>280</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "Xi Jinping's Geopolitical Framework for Northeast Asia," in *East Asian Leaders' Geopolitical Frameworks, New National Identity Impact, and Rising Economic Concerns with China*, edited by Gilbert Rozman (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2020), 41–42, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1586846/east-asian-leaders-geopolitical-frameworks-new-national-identity-impact-and-rising-economic-concerns-with-china/2276615/> on 12 Jan 2022. CID: 20.500.12592/npp9wt.

<sup>281</sup> Tianjiao Jiang, "Three Spikes and You Are Out? China-DPRK Relations after the Cold War and the US," The ASAN Forum, last modified 26 June 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/three-spikes-and-you-are-out-china-dprk-relations-after-the-cold-war-and-the-us/>.

<sup>282</sup> Scobell, 3.

<sup>283</sup> Jiang, "Three Spikes and You Are Out?"

under the auspices of South Korea that would help the United States “encircle” China.<sup>284</sup> As noted by Chung, “the more bifurcated the policy space of Asia becomes between the U.S. and China, the less room will be available for middle and smaller powers to utilize for effective hedging.”<sup>285</sup> This, in turn, will serve to strengthen the alliance ties between South Korea and the United States, “thereby making Beijing’s view of the alliance more negative, if not antagonistic.”<sup>286</sup>

China’s economic interests in North Korea are largely driven by the overarching goal to foment economic transformation and reform of its partner’s economy. Reilly observes that since 2005 China’s central leadership, agencies, and local authorities have encouraged private companies to expand trade and investment in North Korea through infrastructure projects, aid, and diplomatic engagement.<sup>287</sup> This led to the skyrocketing of the bilateral trade, with as much as 67% of the DPRK’s overall trade being with China by 2011.<sup>288</sup> Beijing also heavily invested in North Korea’s infrastructure (as much as \$10 billion by 2015), including such projects as the \$150 million bridge across the Yalu River, as well as highways and railways to North Korean iron and copper mines.<sup>289</sup> In 2012, the China Overseas Investment Federation announced a \$470 billion “Fund for Investment into North Korea.”<sup>290</sup>

China’s economic engagement with North Korea has led to only a limited transformative effect so far with Pyongyang being largely hesitant to turn from its command economy to more open market-oriented practices. On the other hand, interactions that do take place do so on a market basis, and each new agreement between China and the DPRK requires Pyongyang to open up further by permitting visits to new areas or easing

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<sup>284</sup> Jiang, “Three Spikes and You Are Out?”

<sup>285</sup> Jae Ho Chung, “China’s Evolving Views of the Korean-American Alliance, 1953–2012,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no 87 (2014), 440, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>286</sup> Chung, “China’s Evolving Views,” 440.

<sup>287</sup> James Reilly, “China’s Market Influence in North Korea,” *Asian Survey* 54, no.5 (September/October 2014), 894, JSTOR.

<sup>288</sup> Reilly, “China’s Market Influence,” 894.

<sup>289</sup> Reilly, 900.

<sup>290</sup> Reilly, 900.

visa restrictions.<sup>291</sup> More robust engagement also led to an effect that Reilly calls *institutional isomorphism*—establishment of new institutions by the DPRK that mirror their Chinese counterparts either because they ease cooperation with China or because they appear to be effective.<sup>292</sup> Among notable examples are the Taepung International Investment Group (January 2010), the State Development Bank (2011) and the Industrial Development Bank (2011). 2010 also marked the establishment of two joint economic development zones in Hwanggumphyong and Wihwa in close proximity to China’s Dandong City.<sup>293</sup> Attitudes towards market reforms are changing among an increasing number of North Korean officials as they become more exposed to China and its market system, with as many as 1,000 officials from Pyongyang visiting Chinese cities in February 2012.<sup>294</sup> However, despite these developments, economic reform in North Korea remains quite limited. For instance, the visits by lower-ranking North Korean officials have drastically slowed down after 2014, although high-level visits resumed in 2018.<sup>295</sup> Not all economic interactions between the DPRK and China are positive either. According to Cha, 41 percent of Chinese joint ventures in North Korea are in extractive industries, such as the mining of iron ore, coal, copper, and rare earth minerals, prompting him to describe Beijing’s strategy as that of deliberate economic predation.<sup>296</sup>

China’s goals for North Korea also concern the deepening ties between China and South Korea. China-ROK relations have been completely transformed since the end of the Cold War, becoming one of the strongest in East Asia. In 2001, China became South Korea’s most important trade partner, surpassing the United States; since then, the overall trade has grown from \$40 billion to over \$250 billion.<sup>297</sup> While China has virtually

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<sup>291</sup> Reilly, 903.

<sup>292</sup> Reilly, 903.

<sup>293</sup> Reilly, 905.

<sup>294</sup> Reilly, 914.

<sup>295</sup> Didi Tang, “North Korean officials visit China to learn about economic reform,” *The Times*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/north-korean-officials-visit-vanguards-of-chinese-economic-reform-tm99mvpbf>.

<sup>296</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 335–337.

<sup>297</sup> Shambaugh, 48–49.

monopolized the North Korean foreign trade (95% of its imports and 65% of the DPRK export market), its major economic interests on the peninsula lie undoubtedly with South Korea (see Table 2).

Table 2. North Korean Trade Balance with Russia and China (2018 data)<sup>298</sup>

	<b>NK Imports (in \$ mil.)</b>	<b>% of Total Imports to NK</b>	<b>% of Total Exports from Partner</b>	<b>NK Exports (in \$ mil.)</b>	<b>% of Total Exports from NK</b>	<b>% of Total Imports to Partner</b>	<b>SK Imports (in \$ mil.)</b>	<b>SK Exports (in \$ mil.)</b>
<b>China</b>	2,220	95.7%	0.19%	182	62.5%	0.022%	160,000	107,000
<b>Russia</b>	32.1	1.38%	0.02%	1.96	0.67%	0.002%	7,440	17,900

(South Korean figures included for comparison)

South Korea is the one of the largest foreign investors in China and thousands of South Korean companies operate in China, employing hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers.<sup>299</sup> As Shambaugh notes, China is strengthening ties with South Korea not only due to economic motives, but also as a part of a long-term strategic thinking.<sup>300</sup> If Beijing's relations with Seoul are not robust enough, China will not have sufficient leverage in influencing the eventual fate of the entire peninsula in case of either continued conflict or reunification. Strong relations with the ROK also would enable China to offset both the U.S.–ROK alliance and any potential attempts by Japan to increase its clout on the peninsula.<sup>301</sup> Both Beijing and Seoul oppose nuclear weapons development and brinksmanship by Pyongyang, but also do not endorse a stringent sanctions regime against the DPRK. Shambaugh summarizes China's approach to South Korea as being a hedge against possible regime collapse in Pyongyang and potential reunification, a part of a

<sup>298</sup> Adapted from The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/>.

<sup>299</sup> Shambaugh, 49.

<sup>300</sup> Shambaugh, 49.

<sup>301</sup> Shambaugh, 50.

greater strategy to gain influence on the peninsula, as well as a lucrative economic investment.<sup>302</sup>

Regarding the topic of a possible Korean reunification, the opinion among the Chinese elites is divided. The opponents of reunification claim that China benefits from the division on the peninsula, because DPRK serves both as a buffer zone and a counterweight to the U.S. regional strategies. Nevertheless, they admit that as China grows stronger, the geopolitical utility it derives from the existence of the DPRK declines.<sup>303</sup> The opponents also fear the destabilizing effect of a powerful Korean state on China's border and its potentially close ties with the United States, especially if Washington insists on maintaining its presence on the peninsula. On the other hand, the supporters of the reunification emphasize the unsustainable dynamic on the peninsula and favor a gradual and peaceful unification. These pro-unification elites envision that this process will result not only in the dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision, but also the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance and political neutrality of the new unified Korean state.<sup>304</sup> Overall, the stance of the Chinese analysts is that rapid reunification of the peninsula may be as undesirable as total collapse of the North Korean regime, potentially becoming unmanageable and disruptive with a substantial part of its costs falling on China.<sup>305</sup> Instead, Beijing favors gradual integration of the ROK and the DPRK through gradually increasing social and economic exchanges and confidence-building measures that would eventually lead to formal unification.<sup>306</sup>

It should also be noted that China is currently home to approximately 2 million ethnic Koreans, half of which resides in the Jilin Province in China's northeast, specifically

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<sup>302</sup> Shambaugh, 50.

<sup>303</sup> Xiaohu Cheng, "Chinese Strategic Thinking Regarding North Korea," in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 249.

<sup>304</sup> Cheng, "Chinese Strategic Thinking," 249.

<sup>305</sup> Shambaugh, 52.

<sup>306</sup> Shambaugh, 52.

its constituent Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture.<sup>307</sup> Many of these ethnic Koreans, especially the younger generations, have grown to identify themselves as Chinese. The reason for this is twofold, as economic opportunities are more available for those to assimilate and because the Chinese state has largely curtailed opportunities to learn Korean in school in an attempt to enforce homogeneity.<sup>308</sup> South Korean nationals represent the largest single group of foreigners in China, the 2010 Population Census reporting 120,750 persons.<sup>309</sup> The number of North Korean refugees in China is estimated to be in the tens of thousands and defections have drastically decreased since 2014.<sup>310</sup> Some, unable to procure passage to the ROK or other countries, settle in China's northeast, often risking deportation. North Koreans residing in China on a legal basis number only a few thousands due to the difficulties in obtaining visas and passports from DPRK authorities. However, in 2012 Beijing and Pyongyang agreed on 40,000 industrial trainee visas to be granted to North Korean workers per year in order to provide a much-needed cash infusion for the impoverished DPRK regime.<sup>311</sup>

## 2. Russian Interests

While the issues of the Korean Peninsula are not as salient to Russia as they are to China due to an enormous distance between Korea and Russia's heartland, various Russian regimes have tried to assert their dominance there. Section II of this chapter explored the ebb and flow of Russia's interests on the peninsula. As a result of the fall of the Soviet Union, the role of Moscow in the region greatly diminished and South Korea quickly became a preferred partner for Russia just as it has become for China. Yeltsin (1991-1999)

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<sup>307</sup> Steven Denney and Christopher Green, "How Beijing Turned Koreans into Chinese," *The Diplomat*, 9 June 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/how-beijing-turned-koreans-into-chinese/>.

<sup>308</sup> Denney and Green, "How Beijing Turned Koreans into Chinese."

<sup>309</sup> National Bureau of Statistics of China, "Major Figures on Residents from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan and Foreigners Covered by 2010 Population Census," last modified 29 April 2011, [https://web.archive.org/web/20110514214156/http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110429\\_402722638.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20110514214156/http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/newsandcomingevents/t20110429_402722638.htm).

<sup>310</sup> Andrey Lankov, "Why have North Korean defections dropped?" *The Guardian*, 7 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/07/north-korea-defectors-drop>.

<sup>311</sup> Barbara Demick, "China hires tens of thousands of North Korea guest workers," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 July 2012, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2012-jul-01-la-fg-china-workers-20120701-story.html>.

and his government largely distanced themselves from the DPRK and did not view it either as an ally or as a strategic asset, as it was viewed during the Cold War.<sup>312</sup> Many Russian decisionmakers during the early Yeltsin era saw the DPRK as a totalitarian pariah state with no future and supported the absorption of North by the South on the ROK terms, an attitude made even stronger by the fact that the North maintained ties with the staunchly communist opposition to Yeltsin's rule.<sup>313</sup> After feeling marginalized during the first nuclear crisis of 1993, some Russian officials sought to restore Moscow's influence on the Korean peninsula and started to make efforts to balance relations with the DPRK and the ROK.<sup>314</sup>

The move to improve relations with both Koreas began in 1995 but gained significant momentum under the Putin administration, whose first foreign visits as president were to Japan and the DPRK. Putin began to view the Korean peninsula with greater interest as it provided him with an opportunity to reassert Russia as a great power in the region and develop the sparsely populated Siberian and Far Eastern regions.<sup>315</sup> The framework he adopted during his first terms as the president of Russia (2000-2008) sought to rekindle the ties with the DPRK and to continue developing trade with the ROK, while also collaborating with the United States, Japan, and China on the issues of the peninsula.<sup>316</sup> While many perspectives on the Korean War and the continuing confrontation between the two Koreas exist among Russian elites and experts, the broad consensus is that Russia should not repeat the mistakes of the early Yeltsin administration and allow itself to be pushed to the fringes of the political process in Korea.<sup>317</sup> The majority of the Russian elites similarly agree on the importance of ties with the DPRK. The

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<sup>312</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 358.

<sup>313</sup> Artyom Lukin, "Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula: A Post-Ukraine Assessment," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24 no.3 (2015), 78–79, <https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artId=ART002061553>

<sup>314</sup> Evgeny Bazhanov, "The Russian Response: The Nuclear Crisis," in *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis*, edited by Gilbert Rozman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 193.

<sup>315</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 359.

<sup>316</sup> Bazhanov, "The Russian Response," 193.

<sup>317</sup> Bazhanov, 194.

centrists believe that bolstering these ties is a pragmatic choice that enhances Russia's security given the more volatile situation on the peninsula and mirror the views of the Chinese experts that the collapse of the DPRK will only worsen the security risks for Russia. The communists emphasize the past friendship with North Korea, highlighting the role of the Soviet Union in creating Kim Il-sung's regime. Lastly, the nationalists see stronger ties with Pyongyang as a response to the hegemonism of the United States and its strong links with Tokyo and Seoul.<sup>318</sup>

Since its inclusion into the Six-Party Talks in 2003, Russia has taken a position against North Korea's nuclear weapons program. But, the views expressed by the Russians were not dissimilar to those of the Chinese elites in that the denuclearization of the DPRK should not occur at the cost of regime survival. As Cha observes, "at the broadest level, Russian interests converge with those of the United States and others in that Moscow desires a denuclearized North Korea and seeks a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the problem," tying the end of the DPRK nuclear program with the withdrawal of the U.S. ballistic missile defense from the peninsula.<sup>319</sup> Nevertheless, Putin and his closest advisors recognize the reality that Kim's regime is unlikely to abandon its nuclear weapons program and views its nuclear arsenal as its only real security guarantee, since the new Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation signed by Russia and the DPRK in 2000 no longer provides for mutual defense. Moreover, Moscow does not perceive the North Korean weapons program to be a direct threat to its national security and does not believe that these weapons will ever be used against Russian targets.<sup>320</sup>

Russia's support of the sanctions has been, therefore, lukewarm, although it has backed them at the UN level for the sake of political expedience.<sup>321</sup> Russian support for

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<sup>318</sup> Bazhanov, 195.

<sup>319</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 358.

<sup>320</sup> Bobo Lo, "The Return: Russia and the Security Landscape of Northeast Asia," *Russie.Nei.Reports*, no.29 (Paris: Ifri, March 2020), 23, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/russieneireports/return-russia-and-security-landscape-northeast-asia>.

<sup>321</sup> Dmitry Trenin, "Vladimir Putin's Strategic Framework for Northeast Asia," in *East Asian Leaders' Geopolitical Frameworks, New National Identity Impact, and Rising Economic Concerns with China*, edited by Gilbert Rozman (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2020), 59, [http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei\\_jointus-korea\\_2020\\_1\\_3.pdf](http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_jointus-korea_2020_1_3.pdf).



sanctions can also be linked to its desire to keep the proliferation of nuclear weapons to a minimum, as the expansion of the “nuclear club” makes its own membership less exclusive and degrades Moscow’s status as a great power.<sup>322</sup> Like China, Russia is wary of a potential collapse of the DPRK as it is likely to affect its own stability adversely, especially in the regions where there central government’s degree of control is low.<sup>323</sup> Moscow’s preferred approach to this situation has been to help resolve the issue diplomatically through a multilateral arrangement, through the means of arms control and confidence-building measures between the DPRK, the ROK, and the United States.

The majority of Russian observers of North Korea realize the need for extensive economic reform but, at the same time, see the internal situation in the DPRK as unlikely to progress from its current untenable situation.<sup>324</sup> Some cautiously express hope that North Korea’s systematic crisis will be resolved when the regime’s current “experiments” lead to a meaningful reform and eventual democratization.<sup>325</sup> The detractors of the Kim regime go as far as to call it tyrannical and an “enemy of its own people” and the reforms it undertakes as purely cosmetic.<sup>326</sup> The broad consensus among observers is that the prospects of a successful transformation are poor due to the predominance of the Soviet military-industrial model that is less flexible than China’s model of socialism.<sup>327</sup> The Russian political elite largely disregards these opinions and supports Putin’s pragmatic and non-ideological approach. Russia’s state-backed projects currently focus on ambitious infrastructure projects, modernization of numerous Soviet-era enterprises, establishment of new port links, and development of free economic zones along the border.<sup>328</sup>

Russia has a significant economic interest from a lasting rapprochement between the two Koreas, as it will serve to expand its burgeoning trade, investment, and

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<sup>322</sup> Lo, “The Return,” 23.

<sup>323</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 358–359.

<sup>324</sup> Bazhanov, 196.

<sup>325</sup> Bazhanov, 196.

<sup>326</sup> Bazhanov, 197.

<sup>327</sup> Bazhanov, 197.

<sup>328</sup> Bazhanov, 196.

technological links with the ROK. To this end, it has proposed to build an overland gas pipeline from Vladivostok to Seoul, which will require Pyongyang's agreement to build on its territory (see Figure 5).<sup>329</sup> Another project concerns the modernization of the trans-Korean rail link, which would in turn be connected to the Trans-Siberian railway, in effect linking both Koreas to Europe.<sup>330</sup> Concerning these two projects, Russia benefits from some positive goodwill of both Koreas, who do not see it either as a dominating force with hegemonic aspirations as they view China, or as a source of negative historic memories, like Japan.<sup>331</sup> According to the Russian proposals, North Korea could also potentially benefit from an injection of Russian investment into the crumbling North Korean infrastructure, technical expertise, as well as the training of its own personnel.<sup>332</sup> During the Six-Party Talks, Russia has been criticized for blind advocacy of these commercial projects as a potential solution of deadlocks, possibly demonstrating a lack of understanding of the situation by the Russian negotiators.<sup>333</sup> Regardless of the Russian position, the ultimate future of these initiatives depends entirely on the future of the ROK-DPRK relations and, so far, these proposals exist only on paper.

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<sup>329</sup> Trenin, "Vladimir Putin's Strategic Framework," 59.

<sup>330</sup> Trenin, "Vladimir Putin's Strategic Framework," 59.

<sup>331</sup> Trenin, "Vladimir Putin's Strategic Framework," 59.

<sup>332</sup> Georgy Toloraya and Marina Trigubenko, "North Korean Energy Problems and Solutions: A Russian Perspective," *Pacific Focus* XXIII, no.1 (April 2008), 36, <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2008.00003.x>.

<sup>333</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 359.



Figure 5. Existing and Proposed Portions of a Russia-DPRK-ROK Gas Pipeline<sup>334</sup>

Regarding the unification of the peninsula under one Korean state, Russia officially supports the creation of a singular democratic Korea, although it is questionable how seriously Moscow supports this scenario.<sup>335</sup> Among the experts, it is generally agreed upon that the existence of a strong, unified Korea will be beneficial for Russia as a whole. Economically, South Korea is a strong and technologically developed country, so a unified Korea could also become an indispensable trade partner to Russia. Politically, Russia and Korea have no border disputes (unlike Russia and Japan) and there are few concerns about Korean migration to Russia (unlike those that exist about China).<sup>336</sup> In a geopolitical sense, a united Korea can become a counterweight to the rising China and is likely to behave more independently on the world stage since the *raison d'être* for the American troops' presence on the peninsula will disappear with the removal of a hostile regime in the north.<sup>337</sup> A single Korean state would also be preferential as a trade partner over Japan, with which

<sup>334</sup> Source: Forbes.com.

<sup>335</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 277.

<sup>336</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 278.

<sup>337</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 278.

Russia has a long-standing territorial dispute, or China, which possesses less contemporary technology (although the technology gap between China and the ROK is slowly shrinking).<sup>338</sup> A few voices dissent from this view, mainly from the numbers of communist and nationalist experts, who view old USSR-DPRK relations with nostalgia and laud Pyongyang for its resistance against the West. At the same time, most view the situation with from a realistic point of view and see unification as unlikely, due to resistance either from the Kim regime or from China.

Russian political calculus regarding the Korean issues is further complicated by the presence of four distinct groups of Korean minorities within its borders.<sup>339</sup> The first, consisting of Chinese nationals of Korean descent, arrived in the Russian Far East from Northeast China and have so far been singled out and frequently harassed by the RFE authorities.<sup>340</sup> The second group is comprised of 40,000 Koreans of Southern extraction sent to Southern Sakhalin by Japan during World War II as forced laborers. This group was never granted Soviet citizenship, although their children frequently married Russians to become citizens. Their descendants see themselves mainly as “Russian,” although some have benefitted from opportunities to learn their original language and culture.<sup>341</sup> A third group of Koreans in the RFE were originally exiled to the Soviet Central Asia on Stalin’s orders, although approximately 16,000 have returned to the RFE since their rehabilitation in the early 1960s. Although this group has received some assistance from South Korea, financial hurdles largely prevent more of the Central Asian Koreans from returning to what they consider their homeland. Finally, the last group, consisting of approximately 10,000 North Korean laborers have entered Russia under the work contracts operated by the DPRK government in Russia. Firmly under the supervision of their North Korean managers, these guest workers seek employment in local Russian enterprises and logging camps, some working under duress. Some of them also participate in DPRK-sponsored criminal activities, such as drug trafficking and currency counterfeiting, with a portion of their illicit

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<sup>338</sup> Lukin, “Russian Strategic Thinking,” 278.

<sup>339</sup> Moltz, 390.

<sup>340</sup> Moltz, 390.

<sup>341</sup> Moltz, 390.

gains being taken by their managers and the state. Of all four groups, Russian officials and analysts find the last to pose the most concern as these North Korean nationals may serve as an unpredictable fifth column of Pyongyang in the future.<sup>342</sup>

#### **D. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION—RUSSIA FOLLOWING CHINA’S LEAD**

Russia was largely excluded from being involved in both the 1993–94 nuclear crisis or the Four-Party Talks of 1997–98, which included the United States, China, the ROK, and the DPRK. Since Moscow’s inclusion in the Six-Party Talks in 2003, China and Russia have followed a pattern of close cooperation on North Korean issues, with Russia generally seen as following China’s lead. The strongest drivers for this cooperation have been rooted in Beijing’s and Moscow’s similar geopolitical designs on the peninsula, similar concerns about potential negative consequences of an uncontrolled collapse of the DPRK regime, as well as a shared lukewarm opposition to the nuclear status of Pyongyang. As the anti-West and, specifically, anti-U.S. sentiments became stronger among both Russia’s and China’s political elites in the late 2000s and the 2010s, so did their shared identities as bulwarks of anti-Western resistance, which then influenced their similar policies towards North Korea.<sup>343</sup> Most commonly, this cooperation takes the form of common stances against strong sanctions against North Korea and joint statements against coercive measures taken by the United States, although a few cases of security cooperation have also taken place.

##### **1. Political and Diplomatic Cooperation**

Sino-Russian cooperation on the question of North Korean sanctions dates back to 2003, when Russia stopped its efforts to present itself as the principal broker between the international community and the DPRK and began to align closer with China and support its position in the Six-Party Talks, which included Russia.<sup>344</sup> This partnership continued

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<sup>342</sup> Moltz, 390–391.

<sup>343</sup> Stephen Blank, “North Korea’s Place in Sino-Russian Relations and Identities,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 312.

<sup>344</sup> Blank, “North Korea’s Place in Sino-Russian Relations,” 311.

even following the failure of the Six-Party Talks, as evidenced by Russia's and China's support for sanctions against North Korea and their joint collaboration on the United Nations resolutions (1695, 1718, 1874, 2094) passed in 2006, 2009, and 2013 in the aftermath of nuclear and missile tests by the DPRK. In March of 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a "freeze-for-freeze" plan, which stated that Pyongyang would suspend its missile and weapons tests if Washington and Seoul suspended their military exercises.<sup>345</sup> This plan was enthusiastically backed by Russia, which proposed its own "parallel advancement" plan, which, according to them, considered the interests of all parties and rejected the use of force and unilaterally imposed sanctions.<sup>346</sup> The two plans were combined in a joint statement on 4 July 2017, which advocated for a moratorium on the DPRK weapons testing in exchange for the suspension of U.S.-ROK exercises, resuming dialogue, and revising the existing regional security architecture.<sup>347</sup>

In response to the efforts of the Trump administration to initiate a dialogue with Kim Jong-un in 2017 and 2018, Russia, China, and North Korea held a series of trilateral talks in an attempt to converge the positions of the three countries and assist Pyongyang in its negotiations with Washington.<sup>348</sup> More recently, Russia and China proposed partially lifting the sanctions on 16 December 2019, with the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya calling for a reinstatement of the diplomatic process.<sup>349</sup> Preceding this announcement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the Six-Party Talks should resume, although he added that the trilateral initiative is not a substitute for the U.S.-DPRK dialogue.<sup>350</sup> These proposals were supported by China, whose foreign

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<sup>345</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "The Impact of the Sino-Russian Partnership on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis," Special Report #78 (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 3.

<sup>346</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of the Sino-Russian Partnership," 4.

<sup>347</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of the Sino-Russian Partnership," 4.

<sup>348</sup> Julia Masterson, "North Korea, China, Russia Converge Positions," Arms Control Association, last modified January/February 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/north-korea-china-russia-converge-positions>.

<sup>349</sup> Masterson, "North Korea, China, Russia Converge Positions."

<sup>350</sup> Masterson, "North Korea, China, Russia Converge Positions."

ministry officials urged the UNSC to form a consensus on this proposed resolution.<sup>351</sup> Ultimately, this Sino-Russian proposal did not receive the support of the other UNSC members, and the resolution did not pass, due to the increasingly hostile rhetoric of Pyongyang during these events.<sup>352</sup>

## 2. Economic Cooperation

Sino-Russian cooperation on economic issues regarding North Korea is fairly limited, given that China possesses the lion's share of the North Korean trade market. Both countries maintain a degree of economic activity and trade with the DPRK, sometimes restricted by sanctions, going only so far as to keep the Kim regime relatively stable. Russia's current role in the North Korean economy is significantly lower than it was during the Soviet period, and it is unlikely to increase for the following reasons. First, Russia is unwilling to sell goods at subsidized ("friendship") prices to the North Koreans and is not willing to provide the DPRK with preferential long-term loans. In fact, Russia refused to write off the existing debt of \$8.8 billion that North Korea owed to the USSR and that the North demanded it forgive as a gesture of political goodwill.<sup>353</sup> Second, Russian companies are generally deterred from conducting business in North Korea due to heavy international sanctions making money transfers and payment settlements almost impossible. Third, Russian businessmen attempting to do business in the North are experiencing hurdles, similar to those that existed in the Soviet Union, namely corruption, bureaucratic obstacles, opaque decision-making mechanisms, and general problems with communication.<sup>354</sup> In sharp contrast, Chinese companies are generally more nimble, more

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<sup>351</sup> Josh Smith, "U.S.-led Pressure Fractures as China, Russia Push for North Korea Sanctions Relief," Reuters, last modified 17 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-un-china-analysis/u-s-led-pressure-fractures-as-china-russia-push-for-north-korea-sanctions-relief-idUSKBN1YL0OX>.

<sup>352</sup> Michelle Nichols, "Russia, China to Hold More U.N. Talks on Lifting North Korea Sanctions: Diplomats," Reuters, last modified 29 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-un/russia-china-to-hold-more-u-n-talks-on-lifting-north-korea-sanctions-diplomats-idUSKBN1YX0LD>.

<sup>353</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 359.

<sup>354</sup> Artyom Lukin and Liudmila Zakharova, *Russia-North Korea Economic Ties: Is There More Than Meets the Eye*, Foreign Policy Research Institute Report, 20 February 2018 (Elsevier Ltd.), 245–246, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russia-north-korea-economic-ties-meets-eye/>.

knowledgeable of the North Korean bureaucratic machine, and feel much more comfortable with operating in the DPRK.

One economic area in which China and Russia cooperate significantly is the supply of oil and petroleum products to North Korea. Lukin and Zakharova suggest that there is evidence that much of the Russian-originated petroleum products go undetected by official customs reports and are channeled mainly through China, accounting for up to one third of China's exports to North Korea.<sup>355</sup> China's annual estimated deliveries to North Korea constitute about 500,000 metric tons of crude oil and 270,000 tons of other oil products, while Russia exports up to 300,000 tons of gasoline and diesel fuel, frequently using Singaporean brokers as intermediaries.<sup>356</sup> This covert trade by Russia is designed to avoid international sanctions, such as those placed by the U.S. Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control on two Vladivostok-based oil companies in 2017.<sup>357</sup> In 2018, both Russia and China jointly delayed the U.S. request to the United Nations sanctions committee to stop deliveries of oil products to North Korea in excess of 500,000 barrels per year—a quota allowed under the current U.N. sanctions.<sup>358</sup>

### **3. Security Cooperation**

Chinese and Russian positions similarly converged on the question of the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, which began to be discussed in 2013 and saw initial delivery in 2017. Both see its deployment as counterproductive not only to stability on the peninsula, but to their own security interests as well.<sup>359</sup> China in this case has reacted more strongly due to concerns over the impact of the THAAD system on their second-strike capability, prompting them to levy economic sanctions against the ROK, which is one of China's top trade partners.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Lukin and Zakharova, *Russia-North Korea Economic Ties*, 247.

<sup>356</sup> Lukin and Zakharova, 247.

<sup>357</sup> Lukin and Zakharova, 247.

<sup>358</sup> Asian News Monitor, "Russia, China Delay U.S. Push for Halt of Refined Petroleum to North Korea," 23 July 2018, ProQuest.

<sup>359</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of Sino-Russian Partnership," 4.

<sup>360</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of Sino-Russian Partnership," 4.



Although Russia's second-strike capability is not strongly affected by the presence of THAAD on the peninsula, Russia supported the Chinese opposition to the system's deployment. The two sides issued a joint statement at the Xiangshan forum in Beijing in October 2016 protesting the unilateral deployment of missile defense systems by the United States worldwide.<sup>361</sup> This issue was discussed again during a Putin-Xi meeting in July 2017, where both leaders criticized the deployment of the system and stated that instability on the Korean peninsula should not be used by the United States as a pretext for boosting its military capabilities in the ROK.<sup>362</sup> Rozman posits that due to increasingly antagonistic relations between the United States and both Russia and China, the emergence of a "Northern Triangle," composed of Russia and China and the DPRK and opposed to the U.S.-Japan and the U.S.-ROK alliances, has become a distinct possibility.<sup>363</sup> The idea of a "Northern Triangle" remains latent due to the Kim's regime preference to act autonomously and avoids trilateral commitments. However, Rozman warns that the powerful geopolitical forces that are driving Russia and China may soon override any clashes in interests and identities between them, leading to their joint support of Pyongyang in future conflicts.<sup>364</sup>

Sino-Russian cooperation in the region also frequently takes the form of conducting joint military exercises, even while urging the United States and the ROK to cease conducting their own. At the same time, no joint Russia-China-DPRK trilateral exercise has taken place to this date. In May 2016, the two militaries held their first set of computer-simulated exercises in Moscow, centered on combating ballistic missile threats and practicing missile defense.<sup>365</sup> In December 2017 a similar exercise was held in Beijing. A series of Sino-Russian naval exercises, some of them linked to Korean peninsula issues,

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<sup>361</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems," last modified 4 July 2017, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662).

<sup>362</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of Sino-Russian Partnership," 5.

<sup>363</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "North Korea's Place in Sino-Russian Relations and Identities," in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman and Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 313.

<sup>364</sup> Rozman, "North Korea's Place in Sino-Russian Relations and Identities," 313.

<sup>365</sup> Wishnick, "The Impact of Sino-Russian Partnership," 5.

began to take place as early as 2005. In 2017, several joint China-Russia naval drills were held near the Russian port of Vladivostok, situated close to the Russia-North Korea border, coinciding with a period of heightened tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>366</sup>

#### **E. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—RUSSIA ACCEPTING CHINA’S PREDOMINANCE**

Overall, Sino-Russian competition in North Korea has so far been extremely weak. Moscow and Beijing have formed a strong consensus on North Korean issues, which has grown ever stronger due to Russia’s post-Ukraine estrangement with the West and Putin’s “pivot to the East.” This cooperation is driven by their shared struggle against the U.S.-led world order and the alliance-centric security approach in the region, with the expulsion of the U.S. forces from the peninsula being one of the primary goals for both Russia and China.<sup>367</sup> Some South Korean experts have theorized that one of the reasons why Russia increased its cooperation with the DPRK in the recent years is to provide a counterweight to China’s growing influence there, although Lukin refutes this, claiming that there’s little evidence to corroborate this hypothesis.<sup>368</sup> North Koreans themselves see Russia as a potential counterweight to China and have welcomed the inclusion of Russia in the Six-Party Talks in 2003, due to seeing Russia as a “more honest broker” than China.<sup>369</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Pyongyang will be as successful at playing off Moscow and Beijing against each other as it was during the Cold War, primarily due to a massive influence differential between Russia and China. This being said, even if Moscow began to actively compete with Beijing over North Korea, this would not hamper the Chinese leaders in the slightest, as Russia is unlikely to outperform China economically due to its relatively limited financial resources.<sup>370</sup> Lukin goes so far as to say that China might even welcome Russia’s increased economic presence in the North, since more trade and investment

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<sup>366</sup> Asia News Monitor, “China, Russia Begin Joint Drills Near North Korea,” 19 September 2017, ProQuest.

<sup>367</sup> Jaewoo Choo, *China’s Strategic Cooperation with Russia and the Neutralization of the Korean Peninsula*, Special Report #78 (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 32.

<sup>368</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula,” 89.

<sup>369</sup> Cha, *The Impossible State*, 363.

<sup>370</sup> Lukin, “Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula,” 89.

engagements with other countries might push the DPRK towards a more liberal and open economic model.<sup>371</sup> Rozman observes that Russia is aware of China's basic interests in the DPRK and avoids making any steps that would upset its strategic partner.<sup>372</sup>

While the Korean peninsula and the Asian-Pacific region in general is important to Russia and its great power aspirations, its importance pales in comparison to Russia's interests in Ukraine, Belarus, and other post-Soviet regions, where Moscow has been willing to commit its military to defend them. China, on the other hand, views the Korean peninsula as an area of its fundamental interests and is much less interested in Eastern Europe, where Russia's ambitions are the strongest.<sup>373</sup> Moreover, Chinese rising influence in the Asia-Pacific region may even benefit Russia as it serves as a distraction for the United States from Moscow's European ambitions.<sup>374</sup> For this reason Russia largely prefers to follow China's lead on the Korean issues, while China tacitly supports Russia in Ukraine and, most recently, in the Middle East.<sup>375</sup>

At the same time, Sino-Russian interests in North Korea are not identical, despite running in parallel for the time being. Putin sees both Koreas as an economic opportunity and a way to increase Russia's prestige in the region if he plays an active role as an "honest broker" in solving the nuclear crisis.<sup>376</sup> This would explain his own initiatives in bilateral Russia-North Korea diplomacy, such as his 2019 summit with Kim Jong-un in

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<sup>371</sup> Lukin, "Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula," 89–90.

<sup>372</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "The China-Russia-North Korea Triangle after Kim Jong-un's Turn to Diplomacy," Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies Report (Korea Economic Institute of America, 2019), 5–6, <https://keia.org/publication/the-china-russia-north-korea-triangle-after-kim-jong-uns-turn-to-diplomacy/>.

<sup>373</sup> Lukin, "Russia, China and the Korean Peninsula," 90.

<sup>374</sup> Artyom Lukin, *Russia's Game on the Korean Peninsula: Accepting China's Rise to Regional Hegemony*, Special Report #78 (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019), 22.

<sup>375</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, "With North Korea, Russia Knows It Can Only Play Second Fiddle to China and U.S.," Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, last modified 25 April 2019, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/north-korea-russia-knows-it-can-only-play-second-fiddle-china-and-us>.

<sup>376</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis," *The Asia Dialogue*, last modified 21 June 2019, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/06/21/the-sino-russian-partnership-and-the-north-korean-nuclear-crisis/>.

Vladivostok.<sup>377</sup> China, on the other hand, is content to have the crisis continue for the time being as it serves to increase its clout in the region and vis-à-vis the United States.<sup>378</sup> Beijing's primary focus is on maintaining stability and preventing the United States from taking hostile action against the DPRK, while halting the missile and weapons tests is only a secondary priority.<sup>379</sup> Both Russia and China have diverging visions of the unification of the Korean peninsula, however unlikely at this time. There is hope in Moscow that a unified Korea will become a powerful player in the region and will be able to conduct foreign policy independent of both Washington and Beijing.<sup>380</sup> This vision is unlikely to materialize because the United States is unlikely to abandon its position in Korea even in the event of reunification, and China is similarly unlikely to allow events on the peninsula to proceed against its interests.

Some aspects of future competition can be seen now as Russia's and China's views on multipolarity are beginning to slowly diverge. Rozman notes that if only a decade earlier both Moscow and Beijing were speaking in unison about the future of multipolarity as a counterweight to the U.S.-led global order, Sinocentrism and Russocentrism have become central to China's and Russia's official discourses.<sup>381</sup> China increasingly sees the world as bipolar, with China as the United States as the two competing poles, and Russia relegated to the role of China's partner and a resource base, although China still pays lip service to Russia's status as a great power.<sup>382</sup> The disparity between the influence of Beijing and Moscow on the DPRK is growing and is becoming evident to all involved parties. How this will affect the dynamic of Sino-Russian collaboration on Korean peninsula issues and

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<sup>377</sup> Niall Gray, "Did Kim's Vladivostok Visit Reshape Russia-North Korea Relations," *The Diplomat*, 1 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/did-kims-vladivostok-visit-reshape-russia-north-korea-relations/>.

<sup>378</sup> Gray, "Did Kim's Vladivostok Visit Reshape Russia-North Korea Relations."

<sup>379</sup> Editorial Staff (with the assistance of Dong Jiaxin), "Country Report: China," The ASAN Forum, last modified December 2021, <http://www.theasanforum.org/9890-2/>.

<sup>380</sup> Lukin, "Russian Strategic Thinking," 278.

<sup>381</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "Frameworks from Asia's Northern Tier on the Post-Pandemic Sino-US Rivalry. Multipolarity vs Sinocentrism: Chinese and Russian Worldviews and Relations" (forthcoming), 7–8.

<sup>382</sup> Rozman, "Frameworks from Asia's Northern Tier," 16.

whether it will lead to competition in the future is difficult to say, but it calls the future of cooperation into question.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

As the evidence shows, Russia and China's cooperation on North Korean issues is far stronger than their competition. Moscow and Beijing are united in their opposition to the United States and its presence in the region and object to the strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance in response to the North Korean threat. At the same time, they oppose the nuclearization of the DPRK regime in principle, as it may lead to greater instability, a regional arms race, or a nuclear accident, although both see de-nuclearization as an unlikely scenario. Both Moscow and Beijing are interested in a stable North Korean regime, and, to this end, they work jointly through the United Nations to ease economic sanctions, to protest the increase of U.S. military capabilities in the region, and to focus on diplomatic solutions to the nuclear crisis, instead of forceful and coercive measures. Moreover, they seek to ensure this stability through overt and covert economic assistance to Pyongyang and joint military exercises in the region to show their resolve.

Little to no competition between Russia and China occurs currently in regard to North Korea. Russia realizes that China has a predominant economic role in the DPRK, and that the Korean peninsula presents a much higher interest to China than it does to Russia. Russia's focus is much stronger in Europe, so there is little direct competition over Korea. China welcomes at best and ignores at worst what little economic involvement Russia has in the DPRK and does not impede its infrastructure initiatives involving the ROK, however unlikely they are to take shape. Global geostrategic concerns of another confrontation with the United States also push Moscow's and Beijing's interests ever closer together, which may override whatever concerns Russia may have about rising China and its overwhelming influence on the Korean peninsula.

## IV. SINO-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN MONGOLIA

### A. INTRODUCTION

A burgeoning democracy in Northeast Asia, Mongolia finds itself both isolated from other democratic states and yet greatly dependent on its two neighbors, Russia and China. Mongolia's dependence on its neighbors is exacerbated by the weakness of its institutions, corruption, a small and export-oriented economy, as well as a comparatively small population of 3.2 million (compared to Russia's 144.5 million and China's 1.4 billion). This dependence makes Mongolia extremely susceptible to attempts by both countries to exert influence within its borders. These attempts, however, are complicated by the Mongolian leadership's policy of emphasizing their country's relations with the "Third Neighbor," as well as an active foreign policy that ensures Mongolia's agency.<sup>383</sup>

This chapter examines the character of Sino-Russian interactions in Mongolia and analyzes both their cooperative and competitive aspects. The findings suggest that overall, cooperation between Russia and China in Mongolia is stronger than their competition. For China and Russia, Mongolia is a relatively low priority, but rather a territory in which stability is important for both. Mutually beneficial trade, infrastructure projects, and military exercises, involving all three countries, serve as ample evidence of strong Russia-China cooperation. Although latent competition, especially in economic and political spheres, exists, its effects are mitigated by the imperative to maintain stability in the region, relative unimportance of Mongolia to both Russia and China, as well as the efforts of the Mongolian leadership, which seeks to benefit from both of its neighbors.

The first part of the chapter will examine historical background of the China-Russia-Mongolia relationship. This background information is important due to its impact on present-day interactions, as well as the fears and perceptions of the Mongolian leadership. The following section will discuss the interests that both Russia and China have

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<sup>383</sup> The "Third Neighbor" policy refers to Mongolia's relationships with countries other than Russia or China, most importantly the United States, Japan, and the European Union. While these countries do not share a common border with Mongolia, they may nevertheless be important economic and security partners.

vis-à-vis Mongolia. The subsequent two sections will analyze evidence of both cooperation and competition of Russia and China in Mongolia.

## **B. BACKGROUND**

Mongolia, surrounded by Russia to the north and China to the south, has historically been the object of geopolitical competition between the two great powers. Once a part of the Chinese Qing Empire, Mongolia (known to the Qing as Outer Mongolia) asserted its independence from its former master in 1911 upon the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. In response to Chinese efforts to re-incorporate it as part of the Republic of China in 1911–12, Mongolian authorities initiated contact with Russia in order to secure support for their independence. Russia initially only supported Outer Mongolian autonomy, but not full independence, instead seeking to turn Mongolia into a buffer region between itself and China.<sup>384</sup> After Mongolia briefly fell back under Chinese control, a new Marxist regime proclaimed an independent Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR) in 1924 with Soviet support. During the following two decades, Soviet-Mongolian relations kept improving. Most notably, Mongolian forces supported the Soviet Red Army’s defeat of the Imperial Japanese invasion in the battle of Khalkhin Gol (1939). Mongolian *de jure* independence (although the country was *de facto* dependent on the USSR) was further affirmed at the Yalta Conference (February 1945) and was recognized by the Chinese Nationalists as part of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance (August 1945).<sup>385</sup>

Soviet influence in Mongolia continued to grow as Beijing, now under CCP control, made strong efforts to influence Mongolia and urged the Soviet Union in 1950 and again in 1954 to reconsider the status of Outer Mongolia and recognize China’s sovereignty over its territory.<sup>386</sup> This influence only increased as Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated during the Sino-Soviet split, with Mongolia joining the Council on Mutual Economic Assistance

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<sup>384</sup> Eric Her, “The ‘Great Game:’ Mongolia Between Russia and China,” *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 4 (1997), 63–65, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v4i0.421>.

<sup>385</sup> Her, “The ‘Great Game,’” 66.

<sup>386</sup> Her, 66.

(COMECON) as a full member in 1962.<sup>387</sup> Sino-Mongolian relations continued to worsen when the Mongolian leader at the time, Yumjaagin Tsedenbal, refused to side with China and rebuke India in regards to the 1962 Sino-Indian War and instead fostered positive relations with the Dalai Lama.<sup>388</sup> Mongolia once again turned to the Soviet Union for protection, resulting in the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic being signed at Ulan Bator in 1966, which included a provision for "mutual assistance in ensuring the defense potential of both countries."<sup>389</sup> This treaty allowed the Soviet Union to conduct a major build-up of their armed forces in Mongolia for possible use against China. Notably, this included not only conventional forces, but also 120 short-range nuclear-capable Scaleboard (SS-12) missiles, deployed there in 1967.<sup>390</sup> As a result of the treaty, Soviet forces were permanently stationed in Mongolia until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.<sup>391</sup>

In the late 1980s Mongolia improved its relations with China and the West, following Gorbachev's example. In 1989 the MPR and the USSR finalized their plan for the Soviet troop withdrawal from Mongolia.<sup>392</sup> The early 1990s also marked a period of political transition in Mongolia, as the collapse of the USSR and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre convinced the political elites to open up the nation to democracy.<sup>393</sup> In 1991 Soviet forces withdrew, resulting in the waning of Russian influence in Mongolia. Trade with the new Russian state virtually collapsed, as "...the import of petroleum products in early 1992 was reduced to only 21% of needed supplies, resulting in great

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<sup>387</sup> Her, 67.

<sup>388</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "How to Stand Up to China? Mongolia's Got a Playbook," *Foreign Policy*, 5 December 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/05/how-to-stand-up-to-china-mongolias-got-a-playbook/>.

<sup>389</sup> "Mongolia and USSR: Friendship Treaty," *International Legal Materials* 5, no.2 (March 1966), 342, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020782900047070>.

<sup>390</sup> Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, ASCO 2010 027 (Arlington: CNA, 2010), 16, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/d0022974.a2.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/d0022974.a2.pdf)

<sup>391</sup> Her, 67.

<sup>392</sup> Mendee Jargalsaikhan, "Mongolia's Dilemma," 165.

<sup>393</sup> Alicia Campi, "Mongolia in Northeast Asia – The New Realities," *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 12 (2005), 47, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v0i12.94>.



hardship that winter for the Mongolian people.”<sup>394</sup> Although some attempts were made to re-orient Mongolia towards its “Third Neighbor,” which included strengthening economic ties with Japan, South Korea, and the United States, China quickly filled the economic vacuum, accounting for 82.5 percent of Mongolia’s exports by 2018 (see Table 3).<sup>395</sup> Mongolian elites similarly saw China as their country’s only chance to stay afloat economically, reorienting their exports, mostly coal and animal products, primarily towards China.<sup>396</sup>

Table 3. Mongolia’s Imports, Exports, Trade Balance, and FDI (2018 data)<sup>397</sup>

	Imports (USD)	Percentage of Mongolia’s overall imports	Percentage of partner’s overall exports	Exports (USD)	Percentage of Mongolia’s overall exports	Percentage of partner’s overall imports	Foreign Direct Investment by Partner
<b>Russia</b>	<b>\$1.62B</b>	<b>28.2%</b>	<b>0.38%</b>	<b>\$84.9M</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>0.037%</b>	<b>\$31.8B</b>
<b>China</b>	<b>\$1.86B</b>	<b>32.3%</b>	<b>0.072%</b>	<b>\$6.3B</b>	<b>82.5%</b>	<b>0.39%</b>	<b>\$155.8B</b>

Since the early 2000s, however, Russia has made a vigorous attempt to bring Mongolia back to its sphere of influence, starting with Vladimir Putin’s visit in November 2000, during which he signed the “Ulaanbaatar Declaration,” designed to strengthen Russian-Mongolian bilateral ties.<sup>398</sup> In the last two decades, this partnership has considerably expanded, especially in the areas of energy and transportation infrastructure, some of the projects being jointly owned and operated by Russian and Mongolian

<sup>394</sup> Alicia Campi, “Mongolia in Northeast Asia,” 47.

<sup>395</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Mongolia (MNG) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners,” *OECD*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/asmng>.

<sup>396</sup> Nomin Lhagvasuren, “Russia Seeks to Restore Position in Mongolia as Most Favored Neighbor,” *Eurasianet.org*, last modified 16 November 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170831220150/http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111700.shtml>.

<sup>397</sup> Adapted from The Observatory of Economic Complexity, “Mongolia (MNG) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners.”

<sup>398</sup> Sharad K. Soni, “Russian Policy towards Northeast Asia: The Mongolia Factor,” *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs* 19 (2014), 41, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5564/mjia.v19i0.403>.

enterprises.<sup>399</sup> Strengthening Sino-Russian bilateral ties since 2000, especially after Russia’s “turn to the east” in 2014, have also spurred Mongolia to become more active in the trilateral China-Mongolia-Russia relationship and seek a greater share in Russia’s oil and gas pipeline projects, as well as China’s (BRI) framework. This trilateral cooperation has recently been given form in the “China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor,” announced during the 2014 Dushanbe SCO Summit.<sup>400</sup>

Shared history with Mongolia thus plays an important part of the patterns of Sino-Russian interactions in this country. Russia has a strong political standing in Mongolia largely due to its role in the country’s creation and MPR’s prior dependence on the USSR. Economically, Russia is now at a disadvantage, given its “lost decade” of economic relations in the 1990s and the near monopolization of the Mongolian export market by China. Mongolian leaders are particularly amenable to strengthening relations with Russia due to concern over China’s rise and the increasing Chinese influence over Mongolia’s economy, politics, and security. Fears of Chinese rising nationalism and irredentism—a set of revisionist ideas with a goal of returning former Qing territories to Chinese control—have a considerable impact on Sino-Mongolian relations, with significant concerns arising from the Chinese Ministry of State Security-issued statements that “the Mongolian region has since ancient times been Chinese territory” in 1992.<sup>401</sup> While such statements have not been repeated recently, other political issues complicate Sino-Mongolian relations, such as the large Chinese population in the regions bordering Mongolia and the treatment of minorities, including Mongols, by Chinese authorities.<sup>402</sup> Other issues that affect Sino-Russian interactions in Mongolia are its democratic politics (compared to authoritarian

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<sup>399</sup> Alicia Campi, *Mongolian Participation in an Upgraded Eurasian Energy and Transport Grid*, Asia-Pacific Bulletin No. 296 (Washington: East West Center, 2014), 1, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb296.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=34880>.

<sup>400</sup> Alicia Campi, “Transforming Mongolia-Russia-China Relations: The Dushanbe Trilateral Summit,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12, no. 45 (2014), 4, <https://apjjf.org/2014/12/45/Alicia-Campi/4210.html>.

<sup>401</sup> Her, 69.

<sup>402</sup> Reuters Staff, “Mongolians Protest Visit of China Diplomat as Language Dispute Simmers,” Reuters, last modified 15 September 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mongolia-china-protests/mongolians-protest-visit-of-china-diplomat-as-language-dispute-simmers-idUSKBN2661SO>.

regimes in Russia and China), the ability of the Mongolian leaders to balance their neighbors and occasionally play them against each other, and its relations with the “Third Neighbor.”<sup>403</sup>

### C. CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS VIS-À-VIS MONGOLIA

The most hawkish nationalists in China certainly view Mongolia as China’s lost territory to be eventually returned to China together with Taiwan, the Senkakus, as well as the disputed features in the South China Sea. Currently, the strengthening of economic ties has been at the forefront of China’s policy towards Mongolia. Although imports from Mongolia to China have overall slowed down since 2013 due to decreased demand in China, the Chinese economy continues to benefit from Mongolian raw materials, such as zinc, copper, iron, coal, as well as animal products.<sup>404</sup> Additionally, Chinese dominance of Mongolia’s economy further translates into structural power and control for Beijing—both through control of key strategic industries by Chinese SOEs and through a large number of Chinese migrant laborers, whose annual number reached 25,000 by 2012.<sup>405</sup> Its influence is bolstered by the high value of China’s FDI into the Mongolian economy—\$155.8 billion by 2018. China also seeks to develop ties with the country’s political elite, who are predominantly wealthy businessmen, in order to further solidify Mongolia’s place in its sphere of influence.

Russia’s goals in Mongolia have not changed considerably from those of the Imperial and the Soviet periods. These goals are security, great power prestige, and economic interests, although the role of the first two goals has somewhat subsided, partially due to the normalization of Sino-Russian relations since 1989 and the fact that the brunt of Russia’s foreign policy efforts has been directed towards the former USSR republics.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Sergey Radchenko, “Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia,” in *International Relations and Asia’s Northern Tier: Sino-Russian Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman, & Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 111–112.

<sup>404</sup> Jeffrey Reeves, *Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States: Asymmetrical Economic Power and Insecurity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 189.

<sup>405</sup> Reeves, *Chinese Foreign Relations with Weak Peripheral States*, 191.

<sup>406</sup> Radchenko, “Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia,” 115.

Due to its decreasing share of Mongolia's external trade and the predominance of China, Russia has elected to focus on Mongolia's natural resources as the main vector of maintaining and growing its influence. Of particular interest to Moscow are Mongolia's copper, gold, and coal mines, which were heavily invested in during the Soviet period.<sup>407</sup> At the same time, Russia is mostly concerned with maintaining what little influence it still has, such as its 49 percent share in Mongolia's Erdenet Mining Corporation, although in many cases these efforts have become increasingly costly and difficult.<sup>408</sup> What little successes Russia has seen in Mongolia have occurred largely due the determination of the Mongolian elite to balance the growing influence of China in its economy and politics. Both states are also interested in the overall stability of Mongolia, while they are occupied by more important policy matters elsewhere.

#### **D. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION—BURGEONING TRADE AND MULTILATERALISM**

This section will examine the evidence for Sino-Russian cooperation in Mongolia, first noting its economic and infrastructure aspects, followed by its security dimension. Russia and China already have sizable bilateral trade that has become increasingly important to both in the recent decades and cooperating with Mongolia has provided both great powers with additional avenues to broaden this cooperation. Both Moscow and Beijing are also interested in keeping the region stable in order to focus their attention on other more important regions, thus significant cooperation also takes place in the realm of security.

##### **1. Economic Cooperation**

Overall, Sino-Russian economic cooperation in Mongolia has been strengthened during the last two decades, especially as both countries have experienced setbacks in other areas. China's clashes with its neighbors and the United States over its territorial claims in the South China and East China Seas and the crippling Western economic sanctions on

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<sup>407</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 116.

<sup>408</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 116.

Russia for its 2014 invasion of Ukraine have spurred both states to embrace greater economic cooperation. Mongolia, situated between the two, has also realized that its economic future largely depends on its neighbors and their support in connecting Mongolia to other Eurasian markets. Mongolia's increased interest in the Sino-Russian bilateral deals and efforts to expand these projects to include Mongolia on a trilateral basis under the tenure of its President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj (2009-2017) were attributed to its desire to not be left out of the regional development, as well as to maximize potential benefits from the Sino-Russian rapprochement.<sup>409</sup>

The announcement of the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor in 2014 has thus built on the converging interests of all three states and has attempted to integrate other regional projects, such as China's BRI, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and Mongolia's "Steppe Way" project.<sup>410</sup> This project aims to serve the development of Russia's Siberian regions and the Far East, China's Inner Mongolia and northern provinces, as well as to link Mongolia to Europe, Central Asia, and East Asia via Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway and China's rail and highway networks.<sup>411</sup> Experts in Russia, China, and Mongolia see the project as a great way to exploit complementarity of their countries' economies: Mongolia stands to benefit from its resource endowment (coal, uranium, and animal products), Russia will find an increased outlet for its raw resources, heavy industry, and technology, while China will use its comparative advantage in light industry, labor-intensive products, and its emerging high technology sector.<sup>412</sup>

The corridor also provides an opportunity for both Russia and China to invest in Mongolia's transportation networks, with the bulk of financing coming from the Asian

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<sup>409</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 1.

<sup>410</sup> Z. Dondokov, "The Economic Corridor 'China-Mongolia-Russia: Problems and Development Prospects,'" *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (IOP Science, 2018), 1, <https://iopscience-iop-org.libproxy.nps.edu/article/10.1088/1755-1315/190/1/012052>.

<sup>411</sup> N.N. Bulatova, "Regional Development Prospects During the Formation of the Russia-China-Mongolia Economic Corridor," *St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University Journal. Economics*, 10, no. 1 (2017), 92, ProQuest.

<sup>412</sup> Lulu Lin, "The Construction of China-Russia-Mongolia Free Trade Area under 'the Belt and Road'—Studies Based on SWOT Analysis," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (Atlantis Press, 2017), 72, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2991/sser-17.2018.15>.

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), headquartered in Beijing, China.<sup>413</sup> In its initial stages, the project faced serious difficulties due to underdeveloped infrastructure (in all three countries) and the overall small scale of the border trade (refer to Table 3).<sup>414</sup> Since 2014, the corridor has resulted in increased rail traffic from China to Europe, with 900 freight trains passing through Mongolia in 2018 compared to only ten in 2014.<sup>415</sup> Other transportation initiatives include the construction of a new high-speed passenger rail that will substantially reduce the amount of time it takes to travel from Moscow to Beijing, while Mongolia's Ulaanbaatar Railway will be utilized for commercial freight traffic, although these projects may not be completed in the near future and will remain in the planning phase.<sup>416</sup> Despite the expressed interest of the three governments in these projects, the corridor and the new transportation infrastructure will have significant competitive disadvantages. Dondokov notes that the delivery of cargo by land will be significantly more expensive than by the existing maritime routes and that the impact of the corridor on the development of the region will be small due to low population density and economic potential of Mongolia and the neighboring Siberian regions of Russia.<sup>417</sup> This would suggest that Beijing has little interest in funding such links to Moscow.

Russia and China also cooperate with each other in regard to oil and gas sales, and Mongolia has sometimes, but not always, been the vector for energy transfer between the two states. Prior to 2014, Russia's sales of oil and gas to China were relatively low, due to higher commodity prices in Europe, but, since 2014, the momentum for Sino-Russian pipeline projects has been revived, due to economic sanctions that were placed on Russia.<sup>418</sup> Mongolian leaders sought to benefit from this situation, as shown by President

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<sup>413</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 2.

<sup>414</sup> Lin, "The Construction of China-Russia-Mongolia Free Trade Area under 'the Belt and Road,'" 72.

<sup>415</sup> Antonio Graceffo, "Mongolia and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Prospects for the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor," The Jamestown Foundation, last modified 15 July 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/mongolia-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative-the-prospects-for-the-china-mongolia-russia-economic-corridor/>.

<sup>416</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 2.

<sup>417</sup> Dondokov, "The Economic Corridor 'China-Mongolia-Russia,'" 2.

<sup>418</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 1–2.

Elbegdorj's campaign for the "Power of Siberia" pipeline to be built through Mongolian territory. Elbegdorj cited the opportunity to cut costs due to a shorter route; however, Russia and China resolved to bypass Mongolia.<sup>419</sup> In regard to another major energy project, the Altai pipeline, envisioned to supply gas to China's Xinjiang region, Sino-Russian cooperation was slow at first, due to the fact that China's western regions were already amply supplied with gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and that its energy needs were mostly not met in the east. Since then, Russia has become more open to China's investment in its oil operations in Siberia, while China has reduced its forecast of domestic shale gas production by 2020.<sup>420</sup> As a result, the Altai pipeline has gained favor as a potential infrastructure project between China and Russia, with Mongolia capitalizing on this development and obtaining an agreement to consider shifting the western part of the pipeline to cross Mongolia and to reduce costs.

## 2. Security Cooperation

Russia and China's burgeoning security cooperation has similarly included Mongolia, albeit to a lesser extent. One of the major obstacles to greater cooperation of the three states in the realm of security is Mongolia's defense ties with the West, particularly the United States (as evident by the biannual Khaan Quest exercises and Mongolia's involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan), at least as seen by Chinese policymakers.<sup>421</sup> This, however, has not precluded some degree of security cooperation, with Mongolia seeking and receiving observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the 2004 Tashkent Summit. In 2018, Mongolia, alongside China, participated in Russia's Vostok-18 military exercise, indicating a growing strategic relationship between Moscow, Beijing, and Ulaanbaatar.<sup>422</sup> During the 2018 SCO summit in Qingdao, President Battulga further expressed interest in upgrading Mongolia's observer status to a full-fledged

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<sup>419</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 1–2.

<sup>420</sup> Campi, *Mongolian Participation*, 1–2.

<sup>421</sup> Bochen Han, "The China-Russia-Mongolia Trilateral Gains Steam," *The Diplomat*, 6 November 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/the-china-russia-mongolia-trilateral-gains-steam/>.

<sup>422</sup> Tommy Chai, "Pivot to Russia? Mongolia's Participation in Vostok-18," *Foreign Brief*, 10 October 2018, <https://www.foreignbrief.com/asia-pacific/china/pivot-to-russia-mongolias-participation-in-vostok-18/>.

membership.<sup>423</sup> In 2019, during the SCO summit held in Bishkek, leaders of the three states vowed to expand cooperation and coordination within the SCO framework further, including facilitating a better customs regime.<sup>424</sup> Mongolia has also expressed interest in cooperating with both Russia and China in the realm of cybersecurity, likely under the terms of the 2015 SCO draft cybersecurity framework, despite several cyberattacks on various Mongolian digital databases carried out by individuals and groups operating from within Russia and China.<sup>425</sup>

## **E. ANALYSIS OF SINO-RUSSIAN COMPETITION—INTERFERENCE AND BALANCING**

This section will examine the patterns of Sino-Russian competition in Mongolia, focusing on the political and economic aspects of this competition. Overall, the competition can be described as muted, largely due to Mongolia's relative unimportance to either of the two players, whose concerns are more acute in other regions, as well as the shared interest of both Russia and China to maintain the status quo of Mongolia as a stable and conflict-free border region. Moreover, while Russia "[has] to pursue an active policy, bestow gifts (in the form of loan forgiveness), and apply naked pressure, just to stay in the game, China has not had to do much of anything, certain as it is that it will ultimately win," resulting in Moscow being less interested in actively competing with the superior economic might of Beijing.<sup>426</sup> Mongolian involvement and balancing between the two neighbors has also served to increase the costs of competition for both Russia and China.

### **1. Political Competition**

There is evidence of competition between Russia and China in the area of Mongolia's domestic politics, as both states have interfered in Mongolia's internal matters

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<sup>423</sup> Chao Li, "Why Mongolia is Showing Interest in SCO," *Global Times*, 26 June 2018, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1108418.shtml>.

<sup>424</sup> Xinhua, "China, Russia, Mongolia Vow to Strengthen Trilateral Cooperation," XINHUANET, last modified 15 June 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/15/c\\_138144422.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/15/c_138144422.htm).

<sup>425</sup> Galbaatar Lkhagvasuren, "Mongolia's Cybersecurity Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, 7 June 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/mongolias-cybersecurity-cooperation/>.

<sup>426</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 123.



and have backed different factions. Russia previously miscalculated in Mongolia by supporting President Nambaryn Enkhbayar, who was ousted from power and prosecuted for corruption at the end of his term.<sup>427</sup> Under his successor, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, relations between Russia and Mongolia were considerably cooler, especially due to Russia's support of the People's Party (the successor to the Soviet-era Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party) as opposed to the Democratic Party, to which Elbegdorj belonged.<sup>428</sup> In 2017, however, Russia backed the Democratic Party candidate, Khaltmaagiin Battulga, who won the election. His opponent, People's Party's Miyegombo Enkhbold, had significant connections with China and, during his tenure as the Prime Minister, worked to strengthen Sino-Mongolian ties and attract Chinese investment.<sup>429</sup>

One of the areas in which Russian and Chinese interests clashed directly is the issue of Mongolia's railway gauge. The Russian gauge, used throughout Russia and in most of Mongolia's older railways, is the broader 1520 millimeter gauge, while China uses the standard 1435 millimeter gauge (see Figure 6).<sup>430</sup> This has been a major obstacle in Sino-Mongolian trade, since the wheels of the trains have to be changed at the border, which is a time-consuming procedure. The issue of whether to rebuild the existing railroads or build new ones in either the Russian or the Chinese gauge has had a polarizing effect on domestic Mongolian politics. Some of the most ardent opponents of building the railroads using the standard gauge included President Battulga. In 2014, he produced a documentary aired on Mongolian national television, which equated the support of the 1435 gauge with complacency in the face of a potential Chinese invasion. The documentary showed footage of tanks being transported using the railways, as well as maps showing Chinese forces moving towards Mongolia using the projected transportation lines. Moreover, Battulga used the documentary to discredit other politicians, like the former Prime Minister

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<sup>427</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 118.

<sup>428</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 118.

<sup>429</sup> Xinhua. "Mongolia's New Government Seeks Stronger Relations with China," Beijing Review, last modified 14 July 2016, [http://www.bjreview.com/Latest\\_Headlines/201607/t20160715\\_800062494.html](http://www.bjreview.com/Latest_Headlines/201607/t20160715_800062494.html).

<sup>430</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 137.

Enkhsaikhan, as traitors due to their pro-Chinese policies.<sup>431</sup> His agenda was tied to the long-standing Russian interests in gaining access to coal from Mongolia's various deposits. In the end, however, the pro-Russian elites lost with the Great Khural (Mongolia's Parliament) voting to adopt the standard gauge for its newest railway sections taking the coal to the Chinese border.



Figure 6. Railroad Links between Russia, China, and Mongolia.<sup>432</sup>

After his accession to the presidency in 2017, Battulga's pro-Russian and anti-Chinese stance has significantly strengthened Russia's influence in Mongolia, lowering Russia's costs to compete. Observers point to his decision to have Mongolian troops participate in Russia's Vostok-18 military exercise as major evidence of this new trend.<sup>433</sup> Some of the underlying reasons for this shift include Mongolia's desire to benefit from Russia's isolation from the West and the need to improve its own economy, which has been

<sup>431</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 137.

<sup>432</sup> Source: Campi, "Transforming Mongolia-Russia-China Relations," 1.

<sup>433</sup> Chai, "Pivot to Russia? Mongolia's Participation in Vostok-18."

shrinking since 2011, while also balancing against growing Chinese economic influence.<sup>434</sup> At the same time, Mongolian policymakers have been careful not to damage their relations with Beijing by getting too close to Russia. They are wary of China's record of imposing sanctions on its neighbors that have ignored China's foreign interests, as was the case when China sanctioned South Korea over the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system by the United States. Mongolia itself came close to incurring China's wrath when it hosted Dalai Lama in 2016.<sup>435</sup> Perhaps feeling overwhelmed by political pressures from both Russia and China, Mongolia's policymakers have been consistently calling for "neutrality" in its foreign affairs, citing examples of Switzerland and Turkmenistan as states they want to emulate in this regard.<sup>436</sup>

Overt competition between Russia and China in Mongolian domestic affairs also takes its latent character from the fact that heavy handed attempts to exert influence by either great power result in pushback from the local elites and attempts at balancing. Compared to other neighbors of Russia, Mongolia did not react overtly negatively to Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, largely due to low threat perception of Russia by Mongolian policymakers. Some politicians in the Great Khural even voiced support for Russia's actions, most notably among them, Battulga.<sup>437</sup> The political mainstream remained cautious, however, due to the fact that China has consistently been opposed to separatist movements and resulting political instability, and also due to fears that Russia's seizure of Crimea may encourage Chinese irredentism.<sup>438</sup>

Beijing's attempts to exert influence have also backfired and led to the elites and the public opinion imposing greater costs to do so in the future, thus lowering the general

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<sup>434</sup> Jeffrey Reeves, "Mongolia's Place in China's Periphery Diplomacy," in *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, edited by Gilbert Rozman, & Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 185.

<sup>435</sup> Chai, "Pivot to Russia? Mongolia's Participation in Vostok-18."

<sup>436</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 136.

<sup>437</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance: Political Choices and Economic Realities in a State Bounded by China and Russia," in *International Relations and Asia*, by Gilbert Rozman, & Sergey Radchenko (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2018), 128–129.

<sup>438</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 130.

impetus for competition. Like Russia with its conflict in Ukraine, China has also pressured Mongolia to back its position in its disputes with Japan over the Senkaku Islands and in the South China Sea with its other maritime neighbors.<sup>439</sup> Perceptions that China is hostile and intends to return Mongolia into its sphere of influence occasionally flare up in Mongolia's political discourse and the press. One such event involved China's Xi Jinping erroneously implying that Mongolia was his ancestral homeland when reciting a Mongolian nationalist poem during a state visit, requiring an assurance from China's foreign ministry that it will always respect Mongolia's independence and sovereignty.<sup>440</sup> Mongolia's fears of China have been noticed by China as well, which sees this "China threat theory" as well as the perceived instability in Mongolia's political environment as a major obstacle to its economic projects.<sup>441</sup>

## **2. Economic Competition**

Economic competition between Russia and China in Mongolia has certainly taken place, but it has not led to any considerable escalation due to China's preponderance in the Mongolian economy. So far, Russia has mainly attempted to boost its economic influence in Mongolia through its existing assets (i.e., the railways), which were jointly built during the Soviet period and are now jointly owned by the two states. China, on the other hand, mainly uses the advantage of its considerably stronger economy and its economic ties with Mongolia. According to Sergey Radchenko, "although [Russia and China] have been careful not to step on each other's toes, their economic interests are basically at odds," with the competition being "mainly commercial and only implicitly geopolitical."<sup>442</sup> Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" policy also seems to alleviate some aspects of Sino-Russian competition, ensuring that it is not seen by either as a zero-sum contest.

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<sup>439</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 136.

<sup>440</sup> Radchenko, "Mongolia Hangs in the Balance," 134–135.

<sup>441</sup> Lin, "The Construction of China-Russia-Mongolia Free Trade Area under 'the Belt and Road,'" 73.

<sup>442</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 112.

The following is an example of Sino-Russian economic competition taking place in the mining sector, resulting in Beijing winning out over Moscow. In this case Russia was thwarted in its attempts to secure access to Mongolia's mining enterprises, such as the Oyu Tolgoi in South Gobi Desert, in which it had been heavily involved during the Soviet period. Russia had proposed building a railway connecting this deposit with the main trans-Mongolian line and was assured that it would be given access to its copper and gold by President Enkhbayar. However, his successor, Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj, awarded the mining contract to the Canadian Ivanhoe Mines in 2009 and, instead of Russia, the copper ore was transported to China via trucks.<sup>443</sup> The next year Russia has expressed interest in gaining access to a coal deposit at Tavan Tolgoi and was assured by Mongolian policymakers that access would be given in exchange for the writing off of 97.8 percent of Mongolia's recent debt. Russia's bid to build a railway to the Tavan Tolgoi, however, was rejected once again and the contract given to another company, South Korea's Lotte Group, and the next year Mongolia announced that the rights to Tavan Tolgoi would be given not only to the Russian Railroads, but to its Chinese and American competitors as well, much to Russia's frustration. Russia was further disappointed by Mongolia's decision to build the railway from Tavan Tolgoi to the Chinese border in 2013.<sup>444</sup> While this example showcases the importance of Mongolia's "Third Neighbor," it also demonstrates Russia's inability to out-compete China economically.

Like Russia, China's efforts to exert influence in Mongolia have also suffered some significant setbacks, thus reducing the strength of its ability to compete. One of these disputes once again involved the Tavan Tolgoi coal deposit, with China's aluminum conglomerate Chalco attempting to gain ownership of the resources by buying the assets from the Canadian Ivanhoe Mines' subsidiary, South Gobi Resources. The deal was concluded without any input from Ulaanbaatar and, when it was announced, resulted in both public and official outrage. As a result, the Mongolian parliament passed laws requiring the state's approval for such transfers and South Gobi Resources lost its mining

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<sup>443</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 116–117.

<sup>444</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 117–118.

permits. In another episode, Mongolia also succeeded in pressuring Chalco to pay a greater price for the coal imported to China, long perceived by Mongolians to be much lower than that on the global markets.<sup>445</sup>

## F. CONCLUSION

The overall pattern of Sino-Russian interactions in Mongolia has shown that both states are willing to cooperate on projects that mutually enhance their regional prestige and offer prospects of economic growth. Their cooperation with each other's regional projects, such as Russia's EEU and China's BRI, although occasionally fraught with difficulties, testifies to this effect. In Mongolia, both states have found a willing partner who could stand to gain from regional cooperation and who actively pursues avenues to foment cooperation between its neighbors for its own benefit. Russia and China's interests are not misaligned in Mongolia, with both benefitting from having a stable and conflict-free neighbor, while their attention is focused on regions more vital to their security and national prestige. Both Moscow and Beijing benefit from incorporating Mongolia into the SCO, as it ensures regional stability. Russia and China can also benefit from infrastructure projects that involve Mongolia, although it may take considerable time for these benefits to be seen.

Sino-Russian competition in Mongolia has so far remained largely muted. Most importantly, most of Russia's and China's foreign policy efforts are being spent elsewhere, Mongolia being a relatively unimportant region to both states. China's efforts to gain influence in Mongolia have also been more efficient than those of Russia, simply due to China's greater economic weight, although not all of China's investments have panned out so far. From this point of view, it is questionable how much utility Russia perceives in its interactions with Mongolia compared to their high costs, especially after its active policy has not resulted in its desired outcome of obtaining access to raw materials. At the same time, Mongolia's domestic politics have not favored China in the recent years, with a strong anti-Chinese sentiment complicating China's goal of translating its economic might into a political advantage. On the other hand, Sino-Russian competition has been, to some degree,

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<sup>445</sup> Radchenko, "Sino-Russian Competition in Mongolia," 119–120.

influenced by Mongolian policymakers, whose imperatives have remained largely torn between their desire to attract China's investments, but also to limit its growing influence by using Russia as a political counterweight. As a result, Mongolia's two powerful neighbors have become content with the current status quo that encourages a degree of parity and stability without triggering a security dilemma for either of them.

## V. CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the interactions between Russia and China in Asia to determine whether cooperation or competition between them was stronger. It analyzed Moscow's and Beijing's behavior in Central Asia, North Korea, and Mongolia—three regions that border Russia and China and in which both great powers seek to increase their influence. For each region, the thesis explored the history of its interaction with Russian and Chinese regimes, outlined the current interests of Russia and China there now, and, finally, analyzed the evidence of both countries' cooperation and competition there.

Central Asia presents the best case of competition between Russia and China of the three regions examined, although even here cooperation is overall stronger. Mutual concerns about potential instability emanating from the Central Asian republics motivate both Russia and China to support the existing regimes by playing to their strengths. Moscow continues to play the role of the regional security provider through organizations like CSTO, while Beijing flexes its financial muscle (BRI, AIIB, etc.) to invest into the CARs' developing economies and infrastructure. Russia and China cooperate on economic issues rather than compete, exemplified by their intentions to merge their regional economic projects (EEU and BRI), the viability of Russia's dubious economic initiatives notwithstanding. There are, however, many indicators that the interactions between Russia and China are going to become more competitive in the future, given the higher stakes in this region for both Moscow and Beijing. There are already noteworthy disputes in the energy sector, in which China has undermined Russia and sought to obtain oil and gas directly from the Central Asian republics, resulting in losses for the Russian energy companies. This, coupled with increasing Chinese arms sales to the region and the building of military outposts in the CARs, showcases China's infringement on Russia's traditional roles of an energy supplier and a security provider. If the opposition to the presence of the United States in the region and its alleged support of the "color revolutions" has previously been a unifying force for Moscow and Beijing, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to further exacerbate the disagreements between Russia and China in the future.



In North Korea, the interests of Russia and China closely align, resulting in overall cooperative interactions in the region. Both Moscow and Beijing are concerned with ensuring the survival of the Kim regime due to the enormous risks that a full-blown regime collapse in DPRK might pose for their security. Russia and China also share an interest in compelling North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program, although it is a secondary goal for both. The end result of this is Moscow's and Beijing's lukewarm support for sanctions following DPRK nuclear weapons tests, followed by later calls to remove the economic sanctions, deemed too damaging to the North Korean economy, and actions taken to supply North Korea in circumvention of the sanctions. Both Russia and China negatively view U.S. presence on the Korean peninsula and have been staunch opponents of the United States installing THAAD missile systems in South Korea, decrying this action as destabilizing to the region. This united opposition results in even closer security cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, demonstrated by their joint naval exercises in the vicinity of North Korea in 2016 and 2017. Very little competition takes place in the economic sector as well. China is very concerned with the lack of meaningful reform in the DPRK and attempts to entice North Korean elites to follow the Chinese model by initiating market-based interactions with North Korean enterprises and sponsoring trips for important officials to witness China's successes. While unable to meaningfully compete with China economically, Russia could benefit from the success of China's initiatives, since the normalization of the DPRK economy could improve the ability of Russian businesses to access North Korean markets and may potentially even lead to normalization of relations with South Korea, enabling the use of the DPRK as a transit hub to the ROK. Overall, Russia understands that the North Korean issues are much more salient to China due to Pyongyang's physical proximity to Beijing and a longer geographical border. So far, it follows China's lead on the most important issues of the region. The increasing involvement of the United States in the issues of Northeast Asia in response to China's rise is only likely to further solidify Sino-Russian partnership there.

The third case examined by this thesis concerns the interactions of Russia and China in Mongolia. Largely insignificant in the grander designs of both Moscow and Beijing, Mongolia is a region where the two largely cooperate in the interests of maintaining

stability, encouraging prosperity, and avoiding a security dilemma that would take away their attention from more important regions, such as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Arctic for Russia, and Taiwan and the Western Pacific for China. Lacking any meaningful economic advantages over China in Mongolia, Russia opts to cooperate with China and has proposed to merge their regional economic projects, albeit with little follow-through. China's economic might virtually ensures that its political and security interests are cemented in these regions, hindering Russia from gaining a significant economic foothold. However, it is China's heavy-handedness that, at the same time, provides Russia with a political advantage, as Mongolian policy-makers frequently turn to Moscow as a potential counterweight. As China's clout grows and Russia's wanes, however, it is unlikely that their cooperation will be meaningful or that there will be more competition—rather, Mongolia will likely find itself firmly within China's sphere of influence.

The findings in the three cases demonstrate that, on the whole, Russia and China choose to cooperate, rather than compete, on many issues. The region with the most overt competition is Central Asia and even there Moscow and Beijing are involved in mostly distinct sectors with Russia being the predominant security provider and China being the primary economic benefactor of the region for the purpose of gaining Central Asian energy resources. In all three cases, Russia and China's greatest concerns are with maintaining stability and encouraging prosperity in each region in order to focus on larger national objectives in other regions which do not conflict with each other. Maintaining or increasing their own clout in each examined region is an important goal for both great powers, albeit secondary. Another factor encouraging cooperation is the power disparity between Russia and China, leading Russia to follow China's economic lead or to propose the merging of their efforts so as to avoid competition that Russia cannot sustain. Finally, both the global concerns that Moscow and Beijing have regarding their confrontations with the United States and direct U.S. involvement in the examined regions, such as Central Asia and Korea, are a powerful force that pushes Russia and China toward cooperation.

As China continues to grow and Russia's power decreases, it is unlikely that their cooperation is going to benefit Moscow in the way some Russian elites hope. Already many analysts and observers point out the subservient nature of Moscow's behavior toward

Beijing and deride Russia as China's "junior partner." While Russia maintains its nuclear status and a moderately capable conventional military, Beijing will continue to pay Moscow lip service, recognizing them as an equal partner and another great power. In reality, however, Russian interests are already being threatened in its traditional sphere of influence, while its attention is diverted to military adventures in Eastern Europe and the Middle East and perceived threats from NATO and the European Union. China, on the other hand, is only likely to benefit further from Russia's cooperation as it stands poised to challenge the United States' global dominance.

Since Sino-Russian cooperation largely benefits China, it largely goes against the global and regional interests of the United States. Of the three cases examined by this thesis, the alignment of Moscow and Beijing is most concerning in the case of North Korea. Joint declarations decrying the U.S. attempts to bolster the defensive capabilities of its regional allies and partners, calls to ease the sanctions placed on the DPRK regime, circumvention of the UN sanctions, and joint naval exercises by the Russian and Chinese navies in the vicinity of the Korean peninsula are only likely to prolong the standoff over the North Korean nuclear program. Given how little influence both Moscow and Beijing have on Pyongyang's decision-making, a strategy of diplomatic outreach directly to the DPRK leadership and confidence-building measures may bring better results for Washington than confrontation and the imposition of ineffective sanctions. In the other two cases, cooperation between Russia and China may also result in negative consequences for the United States as it largely results in Chinese influence growing unimpeded in these regions. In light of these findings, it is crucial that the United States increases its engagement in Central Asia and Mongolia, providing these countries with a viable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative that Russia is simply unable to provide. Finally, it would be beneficial for the U.S. interests to engage the public opinion in Russia and to demonstrate that Russia's aspirations for great power status will not be fulfilled by allying themselves with China, whose leaders hardly see Russia as such. Doing so could possibly drive a wedge between Russia and China and ensure that China will encounter additional obstacles to its rise.

Just like for the United States as whole, the implications of Sino-Russian cooperation are negative for the United States Navy as well. Joint naval exercises between Russia and China in support of their interests in Korea are the most evident indicator of the threats that the Japan-based Seventh Fleet is likely to face in the near future. Both adversaries have also engaged in various forms of asymmetrical warfare, such as cyber and propaganda attacks on U.S. forces, as well as on U.S. allies and partners. While they may be not expressly coordinated, such attacks advance both Russia's and China's interests in weakening U.S. forces' capabilities and instilling doubt in U.S. abilities to protect its allies. For now, the U.S. Navy's best strategy is to maintain and grow its presence in the region, demonstrating its commitment to defend its allies, as well as the global freedom of navigation and commerce. It is also important to provide an alternative source of security for regions that are landlocked and normally have little interaction with the United States Navy, such as Mongolia and Central Asia. This can take many forms, from direct presence of U.S. Forces there to providing military aid as well as education and training opportunities for the local militaries. Overall, contemporary great power competition won't go away quickly, short of direct military confrontation. Defending U.S. global interests will require not only the capabilities of the U.S. military, but also the coordinated application of its entire government and civilian resources.

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Naval Postgraduate School  
Monterey, California