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Sino–Russian Recalibration in Central Asia?

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Abstract

The article examines Sino–Russian relations in Central Asia against the background of the deepening partnership between Moscow and Beijing. We have yet to see any substantial Sino–Russian cooperation in Central Asia, even though Xi and Putin pledged at their March 2023 summit meeting to expand such cooperation. China’s Central Asian diplomacy has been more active of late, but this has not necessarily come at the expense of Russian influence. While some Chinese experts see Russia’s distraction with the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to advance the PRC’s economic interests in the region, others point to China’s soft-power deficit as an obstacle to further gains. Despite China’s growing economic clout, Russia retains considerable negative hegemony and has sought to check Chinese plans for energy connectivity to maintain its own role as a regional energy supplier. Though the two countries share an interest in preventing the expansion of Western influence, Russian and Chinese actions have in fact led the Central Asian countries to seek partners outside the region.

China and Russia are in greater alignment than ever before on the threats they perceive to their respective interests from Western alliances—but are they in agreement on security and economic governance in their immediate neighborhood in Central Asia? Previously, experts believed that there existed a division of labor between Russia and China in Central Asia, according to which Russia provided security in a region it has always considered its sphere of influence while China became increasingly involved in trade and investment in the region. Has the deepening partnership between Moscow and Beijing led to new Sino–Russian harmony in Central Asia? Or is a war-weakened Russia now obliged to cede ground to China in Central Asia?

One of the surprising features of the statement Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed at their March 20–22, 2023, summit meeting was their agreement to cooperate in Central Asia, long considered a region where the two countries had competing interests. Not long after the summit, the Russian leader summoned all of the Central Asian leaders to Moscow to celebrate Victory Day on May 9, although originally only the Kyrgyzstani leader had indicated he would attend (Umarov 2023b). Within a couple of weeks, the five Central Asian leaders got on a plane once again, this time heading for China’s Central Asian summit in Xian. Although the summit was billed as C5+1, involving the five Central Asian states plus China, a Kyrgyzstani official explained that it was actually C5+2—with Russia in absentia (Panfilova 2023).

China + 5: A Realignment?

Chinese officials hailed the summit as a “milestone” in regional cooperation, as it was the first in-person sum-

mit meeting between China and all five Central Asian leaders. Although the meeting had an aura of multilateralism (Freeman, Helf, and McFarland 2023), state visits coincided with it, giving the appearance of a succession of bilateral events, complete with a photo of each leader with Xi. The next C5+1 summit will be held in 2025 in Kazakhstan, though there are more immediate plans to deepen economic cooperation and create a permanent secretariat to oversee the cooperative agenda. While over-promising a new blueprint for relations between China and Central Asia, the Xian summit produced no new major economic or security agreements (Bogusz and Popławski 2023). The event did, however, provide an opportunity for Xi to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative and to highlight the relevance of his latest foreign policy concepts in an appeal for common development, universal security, and harmonious interactions in the Central Asian region.

Russian commentators were quick to point out that Putin had a six-month lead on Xi: Russia held a summit with Central Asian leaders in October 2022. (Of course, other countries—including the US, Japan, and South Korea—have also held C5+1 meetings with the Central Asian leaders.) And some Russian observers noted that Russia and China were on the same page regarding the need to limit Western influence in Central Asia and maintain regime stability. Then there was Kremlin spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who warned that “In the Central Asian capitals, it is well understood that neither the West nor anyone else will be able or willing to compensate for the damage from the artificial restriction of ties with Russia” (Postnikova 2023).

Overlapping (or Rival?) Integration Frameworks

While mostly intended for Central Asian leaders fearful of secondary sanctions, Zakharova's warning could well have been directed at the PRC, in case Chinese officials might be contemplating taking advantage of the war in Ukraine to expand the PRC's influence in Central Asia. Although Chinese experts have long complained that Russia has sought to slow-walk, if not impede, China's economic ties to Central Asian states, the two countries have avoided open competition (Kaczmarek 2019). Behind the scenes, however, Russia for many years resisted Chinese proposals to create a regional free trade zone in Central Asia and, more generally, to use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a vehicle for regional economic integration (Yau 2020).

By 2014, Russia and China had created overlapping, if not rival, integration frameworks. The Belt and Road Initiative has invested in infrastructure to transit Central Asia en route to Europe, while the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has sought to create a free trade zone in Eurasia. For China, this has involved being mindful of Russian sensitivities and talking up the synergies between the two frameworks, despite the considerable limitations of the EAEU compared to the BRI (Christoffersen 2020). The EAEU has enabled Russia to avoid the indignity of signing an individual bilateral agreement with China on cooperation with the BRI, instead linking the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt as organizations (Denisov and Lukin 2021, 544). Russia has thus sought both to avoid being excluded from the BRI and to maintain its own sphere of influence in Central Asia.

In 2016, in response to Russia's deepening isolation from the West, Putin proposed a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" to open up membership beyond the EAEU to other multilateral organizations, including the SCO, ASEAN, and potentially even the EU down the road. This was Russia's rejoinder to Xi's vision of a China-centered trade and transit network, though it requires Chinese investment within the framework of the BRI. China, for its part, needs Russia's tacit agreement to, if not its cooperation with, Beijing's economic (and political) agenda for Eurasia (Köstem 2020).

For Pan Guang, a leading PRC expert on Central Asia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine provided strategic space for China to seize opportunities for greater cooperation with Central Asian states. He cited the economic impact of the war on Central Asian states as providing an opening for increasing economic ties and reducing barriers to trade (Pan Guang 2023).

Until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the assumption was that Russia would guarantee regional security in Central Asia, although China has been bol-

stering neighboring states against perceived threats from Afghanistan since at least 2016 (Dunay 2020). This support has included regular border exercises as well as the establishment of two border outposts in Tajikistan (Eurasianet 2022). China has, however, stayed on the sidelines of most conflicts within Central Asia—and Russia has been content to keep it that way thus far.

Since 2022, Chinese scholars have addressed the security implications of the war in Ukraine for China's interests in Central Asia. Russia's distraction by the war has been raised to justify the PRC's greater involvement in Central Asian affairs—with the aim of forestalling Western countries from taking advantage of a vacuum (Xiao Bin 2023). Some PRC observers see the US as seizing an opportunity to use Central Asia to "squeeze China's strategic space" and further destabilize the region (Zeng Xianghong and Pang Weihua 2023). The two countries' longstanding shared interest in checking Western influence in the region has served to attenuate some of Russia's concern about China's increased role in Central Asian security in recent years, according to a Kazakhstani China expert (Kaukenov 2021).

Russia's Negative Hegemony in Central Asia

If Russia has been tolerating China's more energetic involvement in Central Asia of late, this is only partly due to the deepening Sino-Russian partnership. Despite the many negative impacts of the war on the Russian economy and the country's global standing, Russia maintains considerable negative hegemony in Central Asia: Moscow has the power to obstruct energy relations between Central Asian states and China and to limit the flow of migrants from Central Asia, an important source of remittance income in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular (Putz 2023).

Xi and Putin appear to be at odds over proposals for an additional gas pipeline—as much as Sino-Russian relations are deepening in a number of areas, China remains committed to diversifying its suppliers and reducing supply risks (Wishnick 2023). Putin backs the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, which would transit Mongolia to help Yamal gas previously destined for Europe to find a new market. However, Xi Jinping has been more enthusiastic about a fourth pipeline from Turkmenistan, line D, which would support Central Asia's economic integration with China and its domestic gasification plans (Webster 2023). Given Xi's lukewarm approach to Power of Siberia 2, Putin seems to have developed a plan B—shipping Russian gas to Kazakhstan and then to China through a new pipeline connecting Russia to China via northern Kazakhstan (Reuters 2023). This is part of a broader Russian plan to create a Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan gas union, which would export Russian gas to the Central Asian states, enabling them

to avoid repeating this year's domestic shortages while meeting export obligations to China. In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were wary of a formal gas union with Russia when Putin first proposed it in November 2022, but growing domestic demand and protests over shortages led the two countries to sign bilateral agreements with Russia in 2023 for additional gas. This will enable Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to buy cheaper gas from Russia and then sell it at a higher price to China. (Umarov 2023a).

Continued Russian economic leverage over Central Asia is not the only obstacle China faces in expanding its role in the region. Chinese scholars acknowledge the Sinophobia in the region and the persistence of "China threat" views that complicate China's relations with Central Asian states. One recent PRC analysis points to the fundamental lack of cultural commonality between China and Central Asia and greater receptivity in the region to Western soft power (Lu Gang 2023) as key obstacles to China's engagement with Central Asia.

Russian and Chinese Parallel Engagement with Central Asia

Despite both men's claims that they seek cooperation in Central Asia, we have yet to see Xi and Putin take

concrete steps in this direction. We have seen Russian acquiescence to Chinese efforts to improve regional connectivity, but no real joint efforts to date. On the contrary, we have seen parallel if not competitive agendas in the energy sector and a tendency by Russia and China alike to engage separately with the Central Asian states.

Central Asian states also engage separately with Russia and China and are mindful of the risks involved in each partnership. As Kazakhstani analyst Dosym Satpayev colorfully explained, "one of the foundations of the security of the countries of Central Asia should be the support and preservation of the geopolitical balance of power in the region both in relation to Russia and in relation to China, which, like a big boa constrictor, can digest our region for a long time and slowly." In Satpayev's view, greater integration with Turkic countries provides an alternative to getting pulled into the orbit of the region's two great powers (Satpayev 2023). We have also seen the US and the EU activate their Central Asia diplomacy of late, developing new areas for engagement beyond fossil fuels and counter-terrorism.

About the Author

Elizabeth Wishnick is a Senior Research Scientist at CNA, on leave from her position as Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University, and a Senior Research Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University.

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Selected Natural Gas Pipelines (Operating, under Construction, Proposed) in Russia, China and Central Asia



KG: Kyrgyzstan; TJ: Tajikistan; TU: Turkmenistan; UZ: Uzbekistan

Map data: Openstreetmap contributors; Global Gas Infrastructure Tracker, Global Energy Monitor, December 2022 release