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RIISING CHINA, RESURGENT RUSSIA AND THEIR STRATEGIC CO-OPETITION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Is China rising and whether Russia should worry about its growth at the regional and systemic levels? This study tries to answer these questions while also looking at the specific strategies that they are pursuing to deal with the Central Asian Republics and other great powers therein – the Neo-New Great Game. It specifically looks at why and how has Russia allowed China to enter into its exclusive sphere of influence or interest. The study finds that Russia and China are pursuing a policy of co-opetition in Central Asia – cooperation and competition at the same time. The study also touches upon the United States’ efforts to influence the Central Asian chessboard and the Sino-Russian reaction to these overtures.

Keywords: China, Russia, Central Asia, Neo-New Great Game, Co-opetition, Great Power Politics, Pipeline Politics.

Introduction

The echoes of a neo-new great game in Central Asia started emerging with the rapid economic rise of China and the US entanglement in a global war on terror. With the US busy in fighting the ‘necessary’ and ‘unnecessary’ wars at the regional and systemic levels,¹ China continued its economic rise. By

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¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, February 2003; Jimmy Carter, “An Unnecessary War,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2009, sec. Opinions; Amy Belasco, “Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11,” CRS Report for Congress, RL33110 (Washington D.C.:

taking advantage of the high fungibility of its economic prowess,² it continued its geopolitical and strategic rise in the international system. But there remained one big challenge to its economic rise – the continuous supply of energy resources. It wanted to ensure an uninterrupted supply of energy to its booming economy. Central Asia – having immense energy resources – could help address this mounting challenge.³ But there remained a related problem. This region mostly falls under the Russian sphere of influence. And a re-invigorated Russia under Putin was in no mood to let any other great power intrude into its sphere of influence.⁴ 2008 Russo-Georgia War⁵ and Western sanctions on Russia provided China an opportunity to make cautious inroads in the Central Asian region.⁶ The era of Sino-Russian co-opetition (cooperation and competition at the same time) thus started. Russia reluctantly accepted Chinese inroads in its sphere of influence but only after securing some deals for itself. Crimean crisis and Russian invasion of Ukraine⁷ proved blessings in disguise for China's expanding influence in Central Asia. Russia needed money, weapons, and support and China wanted Russia to look the other way when it comes to its dealing with the Central Asian republics and other neighbouring states. But the question remains whether Russia is comfortable with the increasing Chinese influence in its backyard. What have been the Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia, and what are the co-appetitive strategies they are pursuing to serve those interests? What is the nature of this neo-New Great Game between Russia and China? This

DIANE Publishing, December 8, 2014); Tanisha M. Fazal and Sarah Kreps, "The United States' Perpetual War in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2018.

² Farhan Hanif Siddiqi and Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, *Introducing International Relations: Concepts, Theories, and Practices* (Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://oup.com.pk/introducing-international-relations.html>.

³ Elizabeth Van Wie Davis and Rouben Azizian, *Islam, Oil, And Geopolitics: Central Asia After September 11* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁴ Muhammad Nadeem Mirza and Shaukat Ayub, "Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence," *Trames: Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 4 (November 27, 2021): 437–50.

⁵ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 400–424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310902975539>.

⁶ China has already started taking interest in Central Asia, by the Shanghai Five in 1996 that later transformed into Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

⁷ BBC, "Ukraine Crisis: What's Going on in Crimea?," *BBC News*, August 12, 2016, sec. Europe, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25182823>; Jacob Fromer, "UN Votes to Condemn Russian Invasion of Ukraine, but China Again Stays Silent," *South China Morning Post*, March 3, 2022, sec. News, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3169010/un-votes-condemn-russian-invasion-ukraine-china-again-stays-silent>; Andrew E. Kramer, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Ukraine Blitz Sends Russian Forces Into Retreat," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/11/world/ukraine-russia-war>.

exploratory research, conducted using embedded case study methodology, tries to answer these questions.

Contextualising the Rise of China as a Great Power: Dissecting the Discourse

Is China rising? Or is it merely a discourse generated to justify the policies adopted to ‘contain’ the ‘rise’ of China? The answer consists of several parts. First, the discourse about China’s rise is about its transition from an impoverished state to one having the status of a great power in the international system. Second, the discourse about China’s rise is not ‘totally’ indigenous. Scholars believe that the United States first started this discourse in the 1990s. In the immediate post-Cold War era, the US was looking for possible future competitors, which might have the potential to challenge the American ascendancy in the structure of the international system. The Defense Planning Guide (DPG) of 1992, prepared by Paul Wolfowitz and other officials working under then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, and which was leaked at the time to the media is also usually given the name of “allow-no-competitors” document.⁸ It notes “Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavour to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia.”⁹ ‘Rising China’ and a ‘resurgent Russia’ remained the main target of this policy. A specific group of the US foreign policy community who called themselves ‘Neoconservatives’ were propounding throughout the 1990s that the US under the Clinton administration was faltering by opening up to its competitors and giving them space.¹⁰ They proposed a different policy prescription, often termed a ‘Hard Wilsonianism’ that the US should pursue through some of their important documents such as: Defense Planning Guide (DPG), Project for New American Century

⁸ Paul Wolfowitz, “Excerpts From Pentagon’s Plan: ‘Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,’” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/excerpts-from-pentagon-s-plan-prevent-the-re-emergence-of-a-new-rival.html>. Paul Wolfowitz, “Memorandum for Secretaries of the Military Departments: FY 94-99 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG)” (Department of Defense, February 18, 1992).

⁹ Wolfowitz, “Excerpts From Pentagon’s Plan.”

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, “The Neoconservative Moment,” *The National Interest* 76, no. 2 (2004): 57–68. Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (Yale University Press, 2007). Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” *The Weekly Standard* 8, no. 47 (2003): 23–27. Adam Wolfson, “Conservatives and Neoconservatives,” in *Neoconservatism*, ed. Irwin Stelzer (Atlantic Books, 2004), 213–32. Irving Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (Free Press, 1995).

(PNAC), *Rebuilding America's Defenses*.¹¹ Their main proponents were soon going to have the dominant positions in the Bush administration after its election in 2000.

Condoleezza Rice, then an advisor to the Presidential candidate George Bush, published an article in *Foreign Affairs*.¹² She maintained that the United States should try to bring internal change in China by developing economic interactions. At the same time, the ultimate objective of the US should remain the containment of the "Chinese power and its security ambitions."¹³ In such a policy of containment, the US should try to develop a strategy to help Japan, South Korea, and most importantly India – which has the potential of becoming a great power in the future. She rejected the Clinton administration's point of view that China is a *strategic partner* and stressed that it is, instead, a *strategic competitor*. "Cooperation should be pursued, but we should never be afraid to confront Beijing when our interests collide."¹⁴ After becoming National Security Advisor in Bush's first term and then Secretary of State in the second term, she ensured that despite having other policy priorities, the US pursued policies with the ultimate objective of limiting the influence of China in the international system.¹⁵

After the incidents of 9/11, when the US attention was diverted towards other pressing issues such as terrorism, China got a chance to mitigate the effects of the negative discourse that was developed against it. It started a discourse of its own, of the "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) with emphasis on the word "peaceful". Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao noted during a speech at Harvard University that this 'Peaceful Rise' offers opportunities, not threats; cooperation and maintenance of the existing world order, not revisionism; prosperity and progression, not instability or regression.¹⁶

¹¹ Donald Rumsfeld et al., "PNAC: Statement of Principles" (Project for the New American Century, June 3, 1997). Thomas Donnelly, Donald Kagan, and Gary Schmitt, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (Project for the New American Century, 2000).

¹² Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 01 (2000).

¹³ Rice, 57.

¹⁴ Rice, 57.

¹⁵ She published another article in 2008 around the end of the Bush administration and noted "My admonition in 2000 that we should seek *to get right* (italics added) the "relationships with the big powers" -- Russia, China, and emerging powers such as India and Brazil -- has consistently guided us." Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (July 1, 2008): 2–26.

¹⁶ "Turning Your Eyes to China" (United States, December 10, 2003), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t56090.htm>. Also see Raviprasad Narayanan, "The Chinese Discourse on the 'Rise of China,'" *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 4 (November 9, 2007): 645–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160701559326>.

This phrase of the ‘Rise’ of China soon was replaced with another discourse. Considering the word “rise” to be inappropriate, foreign, and at times offensive, China coined the phrase of “Peaceful development” (*heping fazhan*).¹⁷ Since then the Chinese have been pursuing and professing that it is not rising *per se*. It is simply pursuing a path of development and that too a “peaceful” one.¹⁸ So, whether it is a “rise” or “development”, one fact remains that China is on its way to becoming one of the great powers of the international system.

Chinese Strategy for the Rise/Development: The Case for Central Asia

The strategy that China is pursuing for its rise/development – specifically towards Central Asian republics – is based upon certain principles. These can also be considered as the major principles of China’s foreign policy.

- Non-intervention in internal affairs of sovereign states especially small and medium – whether it is a democracy, a theocracy, or a dictatorship, China usually does not have anything to do with it. *Chinese business is business.* ‘“A hands-off approach to the domestic issues.”’¹⁹
- Non-confrontational way of thinking: with small or big powers equally. But where necessary showing its military muscle from time to time.
- The democratisation of international relations – no dictation from other great powers.²⁰
- Engage, irrespective of the Ideological or social structure of the state and/or society.
- Cooperation and competition at the same time – Chinese policy of doing business with any state, even if the concerned state has remained a belligerent state towards China. China has always tried to freeze the conflicts at the current stage and pursue cooperative arrangements.
- In the economic sphere, the Chinese policy of targeting the areas which need specific development has given rise to a development model in which

¹⁷ Jing Jing, “Chinese and Western Interpretations of China’s ‘Peaceful Development’ Discourse: A Rule-Oriented Constructivist Perspective,” *Journal of China and International Relations* 2, no. 1 (May 5, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.jcir.v2i1.607>.

¹⁸ Bilal Zubair, “From ‘Rise of China’ to ‘Peaceful Development’: An Analysis of Competing Discourses,” in *Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States*, ed. Bilal Zubair (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 41–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7576-1_3.

¹⁹ Martha Brill Olcott, “China’s Unmatched Influence in Central Asia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 18, 2013.

²⁰ Yun Sun, “BRICS and China’s Aspiration for the New ‘International Order,’” Brookings Institution, March 25, 2013.

not only the Chinese but most of the time host countries' interests are served. But at the same time avoiding entangling alliances.

- Respecting foreign leaders: and avoiding taking sides in domestic political issues.
- China does not demand the Central Asian republics – or any other state with whom it is doing business – to be bound by restrictive trade agreements. It is alleged that this has been the policy of Russia to bind the Central Asian republics in such trade agreements where the manoeuvring by the recipient state usually remains limited.²¹
- China – usually – does not use economic assistance or trade as a tool to affect the domestic political outcomes as is done by the United States²² – which usually attaches political strings like promotion in the human rights situation, democracy promotion, and the like.
- Chinese assistance is usually not sanction-prone – as compared to American assistance.

In such a background, China is expanding its influence in different parts of the world through developing cooperative arrangements. The most important aspect of this Chinese development is the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By the end of 2023, it was assumed that China's BRI had touched around 151 states of the world, thus impacting the lives of around 5.1 billion people.²³ Through BRI, China is expecting to cooperate with the host states in the following areas: 1 Policy Coordination, 2 Infrastructure construction, 3 investment and trade cooperation, 4 financial cooperation, 5 promoting cultural and other exchanges, 6 industrial investment, 7 energy resources, 8 ecological environment and maritime cooperation.²⁴

By developing its own Silk Route through Central Asia, China would like to achieve certain specific goals which can be divided into four broader categories: "streamline foreign trade, ensure stable energy supplies, promote Asian infrastructure development, and consolidate Beijing's regional influence."²⁵ China has invested heavily in the Central Asia republics since the last decade. In 2009, Chinese President Hu Jintao opened the valve of the

²¹ Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia."

²² Olcott.

²³ Jacques Schrag, "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?," *China Power Project*, CSIS, May 8, 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

²⁴ Wang Yanfei, "Forum Will Promote Infrastructure Improvements," *The State Council, People's Republic of China*, May 11, 2017, http://english.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2017/05/11/content_281475651818792.htm.

²⁵ James McBride, "Building the New Silk Road: Backgrounder," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/building-new-silk-road>.

China-Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline Project in Turkmenistan. Uzbek and Kazakh presidents were also present at the occasion. Similarly, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the first phase of developing the second-largest gas field of the world in Turkmenistan.²⁶ It is the first such gas field which is being developed without the help of any major Western oil company. Chinese investment in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has also increased tremendously in the past decades.

Resurgence of Russia

Russia being the dominant power of the region, enjoys immense influence in the Central Asian Republics. A reinvigorated Russia under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin has started re-asserting itself in the international system. The most glaring examples in the past two decades are Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Georgia sharing its border with Russia was on the verge of joining NATO. Letting NATO intervene in its sphere of influence could have cost Russia politically, economically and strategically.²⁷ In 2006 President Sakaashvili accused Putin of supporting separatists in Georgia and arrested four Russian military officers on the charges of spying.²⁸ Tensions between the two grew and Russia started looking for an opportunity to ensure that Georgia remained within its sphere of influence. Clashes between South Ossetian (being considered a part of Georgia) militants and the Georgian army culminated in the Georgian attack. President Sakaashvili ordered its troops to capture South Ossetia.²⁹ Russia responded and attacked Georgian positions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³⁰ Since then the Georgian hopes of joining

²⁶ Marat Gurt, "China Asserts Clout in Central Asia with Huge Turkmen Gas Project," *Reuters*, September 4, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE9830MQ/>.

²⁷ Mirza and Ayub, "Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence."

²⁸ RFERL, "Georgia Accuses Putin Of Supporting Separatists," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 1, 2006, sec. Georgia, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1071720.html>.

²⁹ Michaels notes, "Despite attempts by Georgia to portray the current conflict as Russian aggression, its origins should be traced back to Tbilisi. While both sides share responsibility for the small-scale violence that preceded the full outbreak of hostilities, it was Georgia rather than Russia that escalated the violence. The Georgian military assault on South Ossetia was deliberately timed to coincide with the Olympic Games. Indeed, Georgia's military strategy seems to have relied upon a delayed Russian military response, due to Putin's absence from Moscow, and likely predicated on the belief that President Medvedev would not take any action without Putin being present." Jeffrey H. Michaels, "The August 2008 South Ossetia Conflict: Revising the Status Quo," *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies - RUSI*, August 11, 2008, <https://rusi.orghttps://rusi.org>.

³⁰ Sarah Pruitt, "How a Five-Day War With Georgia Allowed Russia to Reassert Its Military Might," *History.com*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/russia-georgia-war-military-nato>. Sergey Markedonov, "The Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia, Eight Years On," *Russia Direct*, August 8, 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/five-day-war-between-russia-and-georgia-eight-years>. Also see CNN

NATO have been questioned.³¹ Similarly Ukraine, had been trying to join NATO since 2008. But it was the overthrow of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 which ignited the crisis. Russia annexed Crimea and the situation is still tense between the two neighbours.³² Ukraine continued the talks of joining NATO. Russia and Ukraine again went to war in February 2022 which is still ongoing.³³ Now one thing is clear for Ukraine. It is not going to join NATO anytime soon, and Russia has been asserting its sphere of influence. Russia had also taken a lead role in Syria by supporting the government of Bashar al-Assad against the rebels and ISIS.³⁴ After his overthrow, Bashar al-Assad escaped to Russia.

There, thus, is no denying the fact that Russia under Putin is trying to revive its lost status and glory in the international system.

Russian Strategy for Reinvigoration: A Case of Central Asia

The strategy that Russia is pursuing for reinvigoration and asserting its influence – specifically in Central Asia – revolves around following principles. These can also be considered as the main principles of Russian foreign policy.

- No Isolation, and no neutrality: Russia has made it clear that it will take no neutral position and will always take the side of those who are fighting against the imperialists – who are imperialists would be defined by Russia. At the same time, every effort would be made to have good relations with everyone.
- Unification of the Eurasian region under Russian leadership remains a lifelong dream of President Putin. He wishes to revive what is known as a Russian world (*Russkiy mir*).³⁵ Russia has been trying to offer different

Library, “2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts,” *CNN*, March 26, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html>.

Georgi Gobronidze, “The Tragic Roots of the Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia,” *Russia Direct*, August 9, 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/tragic-roots-five-day-war-between-russia-and-georgia>.

³¹ Liz Fuller, “Georgia’s Hopes of NATO Membership Recede,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, April 26, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-hopes-of-nato-membership-recede/27699636.html>.

³² Euan McKirdy, “Russia: ‘We’re Not Returning’ Crimea to Ukraine,” *CNN*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/15/europe/russia-foreign-ministry-crimea-ukraine/index.html>.

³³ BBC, “Ukraine in Maps: Tracking the War with Russia,” *British Broadcasting Corporation News*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506682>.

³⁴ Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, Hussain Abbas, and Irfan Hasnain Qaisrani, “Anatomising Syrian Crisis: Enumerating Actors, Motivations, and Their Strategies (2011-2019),” *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 5, no. 1 (April 2021): 41–54, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/5.1.4>.

³⁵ Government of Russia, “Russkiy Mir Foundation,” 2024, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/>; Max Bergmann, Tina Dolbaia, and Nick Fenton, “Russia’s Adaptation Game: Deciphering

economic and security alliances in the region to achieve the goal. Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union, Eurasian Customs Union, Eurasian Economic Space, and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are a few examples. The ultimate objective is to have a union of all the states under its sphere of influence like the 'Union State' that consists of Russia and Belarus.³⁶

- Russia believes that the United States intends to establish and promote a unilateral world. Maintaining a multipolar world in the international system, with the total rejection of unipolarity, remains of the paramount principle of the Russia whence we are talking about the international system.
- Protecting the ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking people, and Russian businesses wherever they are. Using this logic, Russia has invaded Ukraine in favour of the rebels fighting against the central government. President Putin has specifically made it clear that he is ready to use military force to protect not only ethnic Russians but also Russian-speaking people anywhere in the world. Interestingly a huge population of Russian-speaking people live in Central Asia republics. Using the pretext of protecting Russians therein, it can launch interventions.
- Re-establishing its Sphere of influence in the regions bordering Russia and also beyond it.³⁷ Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared all the former Soviet territories as Russian "sphere of privileged interests."³⁸ President Putin considers the two great catastrophes of the twentieth century were the collapse of the Russian empire, and the "disintegration of the Soviet Union"³⁹. Russia now wants to regain its lost glory.⁴⁰

the Kremlin's 'Humanitarian Policy,'" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-adaptation-game-deciphering-kremlins-humanitarian-policy>.

³⁶ George Polglase-Korostelev, "The Union State: A Changing Relationship between Belarus and Russia," *Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations*, no. 2 (December 29, 2020): 38–46.

³⁷ Katarzyna Kaczmarek, "Russia's Droit de Regard: Pluralist Norms and the Sphere of Influence," *Global Discourse* 5, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 434–48; Mirza and Ayub, "Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence."

³⁸ John Russell, "Whose 'Near Abroad'? Dilemmas in Russia's Declared Sphere of Privileged Interests," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 109–28, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230390164_6.

³⁹ Leonidas Donskis, *Troubled Identity and the Modern World* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 101.

⁴⁰ Martha Brill Olcott, "After Crimea: Will Kazakhstan Be Next in Putin's Reintegration Project?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 5, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/05/after-crimea-will-kazakhstan-be-next-in-putin-s-reintegration-project-pub-54782>.

- Although defunct yet the idea of pursuing the Brezhnev Doctrine of reserving the right to intervene in its privileged area of influence if the concerned countries either challenge the Russian ascendancy or invite/join some other great powers to the detriment of Russian interests.⁴¹ President Putin's actions talk of the "integration project" that he has launched to bring most of the former territories of the USSR into one union or another with Russia being the undisputed leader.⁴² Putin in a speech in 2013 noted "Our integration project is based on the principles of equality and genuine economic interests. We will consistently promote the Eurasian project, but we will not put it into opposition to other integration projects including, naturally, such a mature integration project as that of the EU."⁴³

These principles clearly depict that Russia is not ready to let any other great power make inroads into its exclusive sphere of influence – of which Central Asia is an important part. Scholars believe that Russia has enormous influence in Kazakhstan whose more than 20 percent population speaks Russian language. Similarly, it also enjoys immense influence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁴⁴ Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the two states which have tried to pursue policies at times that could have attracted Russian ire. But still, they do not try to completely oppose Russian policies in the region.

Russia has tried not to intervene when there are conflicts within and between the Central Asian Republics and often offered its technical assistance to deal with the issues. For example, the clashes in Osh (a city of Kyrgyzstan) between the ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks led to the killing of hundreds in 2010, and also the displacement of thousands of refugees – mostly the Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan.⁴⁵ It had avoided sending its troops in the peacekeeping role to Kyrgyzstan, even neglecting the Kyrgyz requests in 2010. It could have sent the troops under the CSTO arrangement, but it seems

⁴¹ Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁴² Alexander Dugin, *Putin vs Putin: Vladimir Putin Viewed from the Right* (Arktos, 2014), 165.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly" (Government of Russian Federation, December 12, 2013).

⁴⁴ Javokhir Ruzikulov, "Competition of the West and Russia in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan" (Warsaw, University of Warsaw, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31361.47209>. Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Boris Rumer, "The Search for Stability in Central Asia," in *Central Asia* (Routledge, 2002).

⁴⁵ Michael Schwartz, "Ethnic Rioting Ravages Kyrgyzstan," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2010, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/14/world/asia/14kyrgyz.html>.

that the decision was delayed deliberately in the hope that the issue would be resolved by itself.⁴⁶

The Russian government has since reshaped its regional strategy to some extent, that is, while pursuing the holistic approach of looking towards the region as a whole, it also launched efforts to deal with the states of the region on an individual basis. The role of Russia in not taking sides in the intra-regional conflicts, for example, it did not support any single party in the Kyrgyz-Tajik border skirmishes in 2011.⁴⁷ Similarly, Putin again urged the two states to seek a resolution of the border clash in 2022 between the two – that resulted in around 100 deaths – “exclusively by peaceful, political and diplomatic means as soon as possible.”⁴⁸ But at the same time Russian government also detached the clashes from individually dealing with each state. It, for example, committed to supplying military hardware worth billions to Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁹ At the same time it is the biggest supplier of weapons to Tajikistan. Moreover, thousands of Russian troops are stationed in Tajikistan.⁵⁰

This strategic shift of pursuing the ‘country-specific’ policy by Russia⁵¹ is also evident from the fact that its relations with Uzbekistan deteriorated because of Uzbek policies in 2009-12 – in 2009, Uzbekistan resumed security cooperation with the United States and NATO by becoming the hub for the opening of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a northern transportation network designed to supply NATO forces in Afghanistan – and ultimately its withdrawal from CSTO in 2012.⁵² In 2015 the US announced

⁴⁶ Alexey Malashenko, “Russia and the Crisis in Osh” (Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 15, 2010), <https://carnegieendowment.org/undefined?lang=en>.

⁴⁷ Alisher Khamidov, “Closed Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border Ratcheting Up Tensions,” ReliefWeb (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, April 9, 2011), <https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/closed-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-border-ratcheting-tensions>.

⁴⁸ Reuters, “Putin Calls for De-Escalation as Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Conflict Death Toll Nears 100,” *CNN*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/18/asia/kyrgystan-tajikistan-border-conflict-putin-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁴⁹ Joshua Kucera, “With Massive Russian Military Aid, Is Kyrgyzstan Becoming A Client State?,” *EurasiaNet*, July 11, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67239>.

⁵⁰ Staff, “Russia to Reinforce Its Tajikistan Base with New Tanks,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-reinforce-its-tajikistan-base-with-new-tanks-2021-09-10/>.

⁵¹ Colley and Laruelle consider this policy to be “divide and rule.” Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle, “The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia: From Privileged Sphere to Divide and Rule?,” Policy Memo 261 (PONARS Eurasia, July 9, 2013), <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/changing-logic-russian-strategy-central-asia-privileged-sphere-divide-and-rule>.

⁵² Zabikhulla S. Saipov, “Factors That Influenced Uzbekistan’s Decision to Pull out of the CSTO: The View from Tashkent,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 18, 2012,

one of the biggest military hardware transfers to any of the Central Asian states – Uzbekistan – i.e. more than 300 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, along with support vehicles.⁵³ After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its importance being downgraded in the Western discourse, Uzbekistan is re-weighing its options and trying to re-calibrate its foreign policy.

Another pressing logic of this strategic shift in the Russian policy – of adopting a ‘country-specific’ approach – can be the diminishing supply of natural resources to Europe by/through Russia. Russia now needs to diversify its options and move the trade southward – instead of only moving westward. Russia is expecting to export the energy to South Asia – specifically to India which offers a booming economy with an increased need for oil and gas. Russia also wants to build an offshore gas pipeline that will pass through the Pakistani port of Gwadar to export the gas to India. For this purpose, in 2017 it offered Pakistan to join the project through which the gas can also be exported to Pakistan.⁵⁴ Since then, the project has not moved forward.

Convergence and Divergence of Sino-Russian Interests in Central Asia

Since 2008/09, Russia either has remained silent, or provided tacit approval, and even at times becoming a part of the economic projects linking the Central Asian republics to other parts of the world. It specifically has collaborated with China to not only explore the regional oil and gas reserves but also to develop the infrastructure for exporting the resources to the rest of the world. But the question remains as to why Russia – considering Central Asia to be its privileged sphere of influence of interest – has let China make inroads in the region.⁵⁵ This question can be answered by looking into Chinese President Xi’s 2013 speech which he made in Kazakhstan. While announcing the re-

<https://jamestown.org/program/factors-that-influenced-uzbekistans-decision-to-pull-out-of-the-csto-the-view-from-tashkent/>. There had been pressure on Uzbekistan from Russian side to re-join CSTO, but it had refrained from joining back. Kanat Altynbayev, “Uzbekistan Steadfast against Rejoining Russian-Led Military Bloc,” *Central Asia News*, July 29, 2021, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2021/07/29/feature-01.

⁵³ Joshua Kucera, “No Longer Under Sanctions, Uzbekistan Gets 300 Armored Vehicles From U.S.,” *EurasiaNet*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71746>.

⁵⁴ Zafar Bhutta, “Russia, India Eyeing to Tap Pakistan Gas Market,” *The Express Tribune*, April 27, 2017.

⁵⁵ Muhammad Nadeem Mirza and Shaukat Ayub, “Heartland, Rimland, and the Grand Chessboard: Deciphering the Great Power Politics in Central Asia,” *UW Journal of Social Sciences (2521-8905)* 5, no. 1 (June 2022): 187–204; Mirza and Ayub, “Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence.” Some scholars question this assertion that Central Asia is still a Russian area of influence. They support their argument by giving the example of American inroads into Central Asia – most importantly its influence in Uzbekistan.

establishment of the ancient Silk Route in Kazakhstan – *before leaving for Moscow* – Xi highlighted the following Chinese strategies for dealing with the Central Asia Republics (CAR):⁵⁶

- We respect ... domestic and foreign policies chosen independently by the people of every country
- We will in no circumstances interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries.
- We do not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence.
- We stand ready to enhance communication and coordination with Russia and all Central Asian countries to strive to build a region of harmony.
- We need to vigorously enhance practical cooperation and be good partners of win-win cooperation

President Xi clearly stated in his speech that Russia will be taken on board in future projects involving Central Asia, while at the same time challenging the widely-held belief that China is now going to intrude into the Russian sphere of influence and going to establish its own. At the same time, China's insistence on pursuing a win-win strategy to take the path of development was also a welcome sign for Russia which itself needed the investment in its own country. China has moved in to buy 20 percent shares of the Russian-independent Novatek liquefied gas project at Yamal.⁵⁷ Russia also intends to sell East Siberian gas to China. China, thus, is not threatening Russian influence in Central Asia. It mostly is pursuing projects where the chances of having a cooperative arrangement are much higher. Resultantly, Central Asian resources are now flowing to the east, instead of only to the north and west. Turkmenistan, for example, now is the biggest gas supplier of China and exported more to it than to Russia.⁵⁸

Conclusion

There exist two versions which predict the possible nature of the Russo-Chinese relations in general and in Central Asia specifically. First, although at the moment there exists a congruence among the Russian and Chinese interest in Central Asia, yet the chances of their relations taking a U-turn for

⁵⁶ Xi Jinping, "Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future: President Xi's Speech at Nazarbayev University, Astana Kazakhstan" (People's Republic of China, September 8, 2013), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebel/eng/zxxx/t1078088.htm>.

⁵⁷ Stephen Bierman and Ilya Arkhipov, "CNPC Buys Stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG Project in Russian Arctic," *Bloomberg*, September 5, 2013, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-09-05/cnpc-buys-stake-in-novatek-s-yamal-lng-project-in-russian-arctic>.

⁵⁸ Navbahor Imamova, "Central Asia Balances Domestic Demand with Foreign Exports," *Voice of America*, December 16, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6879769.html>.

the worse do exist. The reasons are: First, Russia still considers Central Asia to be its exclusive sphere of influence. It enjoys highly cordial relations with Kazakhstan and very close relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Though Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have tried to pursue relatively independent policies, yet Russian influence in those countries has remained quite extensive specifically when they face the Western backlash about the democracy indicators. So, Russia presents these states as the final hope when all other hopes fade or die down. Second, there exists huge ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking populations in these states. Although the exodus of the Russian-speaking people in recent years has been observed, yet Russia under Putin has made it clear that it is ready to intervene – and even use force – to protect the ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking people, and/or Russian businesses. Russian support for the Russian-speaking people in Eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea on the logic of protecting the majority ethnic Russians was a clear warning sign to other former Soviet states. Russia intervened in Ukraine on the same pretext in 2022. Third, Russia may adopt – and according to some scholars has already adopted – the policy of divide and rule. It may support the stance of upper riparian states Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan against Uzbekistan – which had left CSTO and joined hands with the US. It has started supplying military hardware to Kyrgyzstan – on the contrary, the US has started providing military hardware to Uzbekistan. By pursuing this policy of divide and rule, Russia may twist the arms of the Central Asian Republics to achieve certain political objectives.

In such a situation, China has been trying to convince Russia that it does not want to establish its sphere of influence in Central Asia and is there only to pursue cooperative arrangements in the *economic sphere*. This is the second version of the debate about the possible future of the Russo-Chinese relations in Central Asia. In such Chinese endeavours, Russians are usually made a part so as to create a sort of win-win situation for all the parties concerned. But at the same time, one fact remains that the share of Chinese investment in Central Asia has increased tremendously and Russians may get infuriated by that fact. Turkmenistan is now supplying more gas to China as compared to Russia. Although the Chinese claim that it is not a threat to other players in the region, yet it is clear that the Chinese actions in the region specifically the development of AIIB, have strengthened the economies of the Central Asian Republics, and helped them overcome their dependence on Russia. Making the CAR independent of the Russian influence is also one of the main goals of the US. So, it seems that, in this context, the Chinese interests in the region and those of the US coincide with each other vis-à-vis Russia.

At the moment, the second discourse is that a rising China and a resurgent Russia will continue to cooperate and will act as collaborators with each other in the Central Asian region – until and unless their cooperation will keep the Americans out of the region. One example is their agreement to connect the

Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with the Chinese-conceived BRI economic project.

But in the same tone, ‘bringing any power in’ or ‘keeping it out’ has become quite difficult in the contemporary environment. That may be considered one of the reasons that – according to some scholars – Russia has now accepted the reality that Central Asia is a region where it may not maintain its exclusive monopoly. Russia, now, is ready to accept the multilateral nature of the great power interactions in Central Asia. Central Asian Republics are, also, moving towards relative autonomy. Sensing the change, Russia has come out of the ‘Afghan Trauma’ and has started taking an interest in solving the Afghan problem along with other powers of the region.

But at the same time, the power competition is also a reality in the region. In 2013, China and Kazakhstan signed the \$5 billion deal through which Chinese National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) bought an 8.33 percent share of Kashagan Oilfield from US company, ConocoPhillips. ConocoPhillips intended to sell its shares to the Indian National Oil Company (INOC), but China moved quickly and Kazakhstan using its exclusive prerogative in the deal ensured that India remained out. Indian interests in the region remained the containment of Pakistan, pursuing access to the natural resources in the region. India being an important part of the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India pipeline (TAPI) has already started making inroads in the region.

The US interest in the region revolves around six major themes – war on terrorism, democracy promotion, ensuring energy supply, containment of China, bringing stability in Afghanistan, and a continuous struggle to prevent the expansion of Russia in the former Soviet territories. To achieve the objectives the US also became a part of this Neo-New Great. It launched its own version of the Silk Route in 2011 with the specific objective of integrating Central Asia with South Asia for greater political stability, economic prosperity, and enhanced connectivity⁵⁹ – projects like TAPI, and CASA-1000 (Central Asia-South Asia) are only few of such initiatives.⁶⁰ The objective is to connect the resource-rich Central Asia with resource-hungry South Asia. If connected, the chances of developing trade and linking the two regions would be beneficial for not only the countries of the two regions but would also provide the chance to export the natural resources to the rest of the world. But to pursue these objectives, one *must* is the stability in Afghanistan. But at the same time, the importance given to the Central Asian Republics by

⁵⁹ McBride, “Building the New Silk Road: Backgrounder.”

⁶⁰ Two biggest projects supported by the United States are 1,735 km (1,085-mile) TAPI – Turkmenistan Afghanistan, Pakistan, India gas pipeline project; and CASA-1000 connecting Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to South Asia for the supply of electricity by developing the hydropower projects in those countries.

the United States is evident from the fact that since 2011, no US president has visited Central Asia. On the contrary, the visits by Chinese high-ranking officials and those of the Russians have been rampant.

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