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Dynamics of Russia-China Relations in Central Asia

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Article Information Received: October 19, 2022 Revised: December 23, 2022 Accepted: January 01, 2023 Available Online: January 15, 2023	Abstract <i>The 9/11 attacks significantly altered the geopolitical landscape, forcing the major nations to reevaluate and revise their foreign policy goals. Numerous causes in the Central Asian region led the big powers to continue their participation. One such result of the Post-Cold War environment is the competition and collaboration between China and Russia. This article outlines the Sino-Russian engagement dynamics that put their relationship to the test. This article examines the causes of the rivalry between these two powers by using Neorealism, as an approach. It investigates their various activities and evaluates the effects of these dynamics on their relationships. The research article's approach relies on secondary sources because the data was acquired from publications including books, articles, newspapers, websites, blogs, etc. It is found that they are supportive of one another when they feel pressure from the West. Their relationships in the international system have improved dynamically despite their asymmetries.</i>
Keywords Relations Rivalry Common threats Cooperation Central Asia	
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1. Introduction

Moscow and Beijing have modified their strategy since the fall of the Soviet Union, transitioning from Cold War rivals to pragmatic allies to restrain the Western-dominated international order. Despite being strategic and opportunistic, their relationship is characterized by steadily harmonizing political, economic, and security objectives. Both adhered to the multi-polar geopolitical paradigm to restrain Western power and hasten what they perceive to be the US's decline. They plan to rewrite at least some of the rules of global governance to move the center of global power from the Euro-Atlantic region to the East, indicating that their collaboration is becoming increasingly strategic. However, the Sino-Russian relationship is complicated and is characterized by mutual mistrust. Notwithstanding the ostentatious declarations of both parties' desire for collaboration, it has been more difficult since 2014 to achieve concrete outcomes.

With the efforts of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, bilateral relations between the two nations have improved. Putin referred to these interactions as "allied relationships" (*soiuznicheskietnoshenie*) (Putin, 2019). However, the Chinese businesses operating in Russia in industries like telecommunications, hydrocarbon exploration, and armament are more technologically advanced and globally competitive. Beijing is the political and economic power in this relationship. Russia believed the post-Soviet region to be "a territory of privileged interest," in the words of then-President Dmitri Medvedev until China introduced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (Wilson L. , 2017). This is the reason China has gotten closer to Central Asia and grown its influence there.

Although there are still certain questions in bilateral ties, both Russia and China respect one another's perspectives in terms of economy and security-related issues. By ignoring the hardships of the "Old Great Game," Russia is resolved to neutralize the threat that America poses in its sphere of influence and believes that friendship with China is a wise course of action. Despite this, Russia is alarmed by the rise of Chinese influence, but due to pressure from the West, it saw Chinese involvement as more advantageous. However, a basic concern is why Moscow allows Beijing to expand its influence into a territory that Russia has designated as its sphere of influence.

Due to Moscow's formal attack on Ukraine and close occupation of the country, the situation has drastically changed since 2014 when relations between the two countries grew strained over Ukraine. Moscow is now compelled to continue its pivot to China. In order to dodge Western sanctions and to find a secure waterway to Europe, Kremlin sought to preserve its initiatives. The fact that China, which has made technological advancements in the global market, would be in direct rivalry with Russia as a result of this change is one drawback, according to Russia. In this connection, China is gaining a political and economic foothold. By acknowledging this imbalance and accommodating Russia's interests in BRI, China, on the other hand, provides assurance to Russia regarding it.

The opinions of researchers on the issue of Chinese and Russian competition and collaboration in Central Asia vary. Some people prefer China's interests to be served by eliminating terrorism-related risks in its regions that border Pakistan and Afghanistan. While

academic Rolland believes that the "China-Russia condominium over Eurasia" is based on shared goals for a future regional order (Rolland, 2019). In contrast, Liselotte Odgaard Odgaard (2017) contends that both major powers are members of a community of common interests, which motivates them to coordinate their Central Asian strategy. Kaczmariski (2016) introduced the most elaborate presumption and compared the functionalist design of the BRI with the interests of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He also praises the foreign policies of these two powerful nations, noting that they deliberately chose collaboration over competition in order to further their greater goals. As a result, both parties have successfully resolved their conflicts in Central Asia, yet long-term contrasts in interests may still exist.

The systemic level of their collaboration is shown in another review. It looks at how Russia and China can't compete with one another but instead back one another against the US. Hedging is a phenomenon of a different kind that refers to the development of interstate political issues at the local and regional levels. Although they frequently disagree bilaterally at the regional level, China and Russia are on the same page in this regard and oppose unipolarity. The phenomenon is an alternative to bandwagoning and balancing, both of which involve balancing against the United States but using different strategies. At the system level, both countries are unified in their resistance to the "Unipole" but at the bilateral and regional levels, they engage in hedging behavior that combines rivalry and collaboration (Korolev, 2016).

There are several theoretical presumptions and reasons for the interaction between China and Russia in Central Asia, as was previously established. In this area of the world, their alliance offers a distinctive plan. They created the partnership to further their interests by adhering to the constructive ideology. However, to some extent, the goals of the neo-realist approach are being supported by Russia's current operations and future projections. This means that given the growing strength gaps between the two nations, their collaboration in this region of the world is often regarded as a temporary miracle that might change. Their actions in Central Asia will go against realist theories' predictions (Kaczmariski M. , 2016).

In order to assess Russian-Chinese contacts in Central Asia, this paper accepts fundamental realism. There are several indications of the imbalance in their relationships and suggest that the rule of realism should be followed. Putin is demonstrating influence just like Xi Jinping, as seen by his war on Ukraine. Second, the United States leaving the region opens up greater space for these two, perhaps widening the gap between them. Insofar as the future course of events in Central Asia, where Russia fought the war on Ukraine, is concerned, it is difficult to envisage under the current scenario. On the other hand, China's economy is expanding quickly, which challenges the Russian thesis. The researcher compares Chinese and Russian operations in this article before analyzing the ramifications for the area (Kaczmariski M. , 2019).

2. Research Methodology

This research article uses the mixed method technique to conduct a descriptive and explanatory study. It provides a comprehensive explanation of the chain of causes that resulted in an exceptional and permanent change like the relationship between Russia and China, from one of antagonism to one of collaboration and coordination in the energy-rich region of Central Asia. This study is qualitative and was conducted on a computer using the approach of documentary

analysis. Both primary and secondary sources were used in the investigation. The presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers of both nations' official declarations and speeches, as well as authentic government records relating to China's and Russia's involvement in Central Asia, are considered the main sources.

In addition to the chosen newspaper stories regarding the battle that were published online, this study looked at books, book chapters, journal articles, and published papers as secondary sources. To gather information for the study's description, interpretation, contextualization, and comprehension of the study's issue, a combination of quantitative, primary, and secondary research methodologies was utilized.

3. Theoretical Framework

The tone of Sino-Russian ties in Central Asia is examined using a Neorealist paradigm. The International System, according to Neorealism, is anarchic, which unavoidably results in the logic of self-help and power politics. Because of the international system's anarchic nature, China and Russia are forced to pursue their strategic objectives and extend their political influence. States rapidly realize that this is the best approach to assure their survival in the system (Mearsheimer & Alterman, 2001). The relative power relations between China and Russia cannot be ignored, according to many neorealists. Russia was once a global giant, acting more like China's "big brother" and a strategic ally (Marsh, 2007).

Currently, China is predicted to overtake Russia as the world's leading superpower because of its growing influence on the global stage. Russia has previously held this position. Similar to Russia, China is not just depending on its economic links with Central Asian governments; it also intends to dominate the area rather than working with Russia on mutually beneficial projects. Russia is therefore expected to compete to maintain its dominant position in the area in order to counterbalance China's rising influence in Central Asia. At least in this region, Moscow will never consent to play a supporting role to China. Changes in power dynamics brought on by China's expanding influence in Central Asia will eventually result in open conflict between China and Russia. In short, Sino-Russian relations in central Asia have dynamics that closely match the Neorealist Framework.

4. Comparison of Russia-China Relations

At the beginning of the Cold War, Russia and China had strong ties, but by 1960, they had become rivals and were at odds ever since. However, the circumstances that led to this rupture no longer exist in Sino-Russian ties today. But both powers were astonished by the abrupt demise of the Soviet Union. Both Russia and China realized that there was no one nation strong enough to balance the US. They began to develop the concept of a multipolar world order during this time as a counterbalance to the unipolar system that the US supports. They were primarily worried about the state of their economies, though.

However, Beijing and Moscow both began to shape their relations and address the problems that had soured them following the collapse of the Soviet Union. On their eastern and western borders, they found a solution to their border problems. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established by both governments to handle border-related concerns. As

a result of the 9/11 attack, they formed a strategic relationship by 2000, which brought them closer together. As a response, America strengthened its efforts to expand NATO into its sphere of influence.

The institutional ties between China and Russia may be seen in many different contexts. Almost all of the Central Asian governments are members of Russian-sponsored groups including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Additionally, it formed 5+1 in 2019 to hold annual meetings at the level of foreign ministers. China has fewer institutional ties to these countries than Russia has through the SCO, BRI, and 5+1.

Through its supported institutions, Russia develops its regional hegemony, which is condemned and referred to as "virtual regionalism" (Allison, 2008). China, on the other hand, focuses its emphasis on the BRI by encouraging its connections with other countries more on a bilateral basis and away from a direct conflict with Russia. Russian connections from the time of Soviet authority have disintegrated, but it still views Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as its backyard (Hess M. , 2020). In 2019, the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR), an analytical platform, conducted interviews with Central Asian specialists and discovered that fewer individuals are employed in China than in Russia.

China outpaced Russia in terms of investment in Central Asia over the past 20 years. The largest investment is in Kazakhstan, where China has invested 29.17 billion dollars, compared to Russia's 6.483 billion dollars (iea.org/data and statistics, no date). Kyrgyzstan has the biggest debt to China, in a similar vein. While Kyrgyzstan had a 240-million-dollar debt in 2017, it had none in 2019, according to the World Bank Report 2021, Uzbekistan owed Russia 23.51 million dollars in 2019 (World Bank Group, 2021). In a similar vein, Russia transfers money through the CSTO and forgives debts owed by these republics. By forgiving their debts, it also acquired military installations in Tajikistan, demonstrating Russia's strategic shift toward Asia. Similar to this, there are significant differences in import and export quantities, with China vastly outpacing Russia in 2018 after being ahead in 2000. China has launched several projects as part of the BRI, which is credited with its recent economic growth. By announcing its Digital Silk Road program in 2014, it began to digitalize the area (Hashimova, 2020). With the start of this initiative, it has become more connected both physically and digitally.

4.1 Military and security dimensions

The message that the Chinese-Russian defense partnership sends to the world, and especially to Washington, is more significant than the actual financial benefits it will generate. The military drills they carried out in parallel rather than together did not entail tactical or operative management to improve the nation's ability to fight together in a conflict. Due to favorable relations with Russia, China was able to strengthen its defense sector and is now a rival of Russia in the global weapons trade. Russia's defense sector has been looking to China as an alternate source of advancement because sanctions have blocked access to Western technologies. This trend is expected to continue as Russia's reliance on Chinese technology for weapon development increases. It has been noted that China has benefited much more from its defense cooperation than Russia. Moscow is likely to become increasingly reliant on Beijing over time as

long as its stalemate with NATO persists. The alliance with China is anticipated to continue to be important for Russia, though, as Moscow works to uphold its stature as a major player in the world and develops its military and internal security apparatus.

China maintains a facility at Gorno, a part of Tajikistan, where Russia has bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Central Asian republics have received weaponry transfers from both powers. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database shows that Turkmenistan bought more weapons from Turkey than Russia between 2001 and 2019; nonetheless, from 2016 and 2019, China was Turkmenistan's top supplier of weapons. However, Turkmenistan's inability to make loan payments on its existing debt led the Chinese to impose a ban on additional arms shipments to Turkmenistan in January 2019 (Wilson J. L., 2021).

China joined the SCO in those joint exercises as Russia displayed its dominance through the CIS and SCTO platforms. According to reports, both countries had 10 bilateral drills between 2014 and 2019, but Russia alone held 26 under the SCTO. The legacy of the Soviet era has a positive aspect that favors Russia, which Central Asians favored in training. In contrast, China also started its training initiatives for SCO members. For instance, the SCO center declared in June 2020 that it would educate 2000 officers from all SCO nations by June 2021 (Jardine & Lemon, 2010).

Even though they both share an interest in Central Asia, there are still some signs of conflict between them. China is now interfering with Russia's claim to be the region's security provider, which gives Russia cause for concern. Moscow, on the other hand, emphasizes the convergence of regional interests. In a 2019 interview, Dmitry Zhelobov proposed that within five years, Russia will face the danger posed by China's construction of military outposts in Central Asia (Goble, 2019; Wilson J. L., 2021). China's military development helped Russia, as seen by its invasion on Ukraine, to improve its capabilities. Furthermore, maintaining the deterrent would be more difficult for China, which might harm its economic plans.

Even if there is not much historical precedent for it, the growing partnership between Russia and China seeks to be long-lasting. This also applies to China and Russia's growing economic connections. In addition to a growth in commerce during the 2000s, the two countries have recently intensified their cooperative development collaboration. The creation of the commercial CRAIC CR929 plane by United Aircraft Cooperation and COMAC in China is the greatest illustration. Similarly to this, Russia is assisting China in the development of its nuclear early warning system in the field of military technology. The exchange of weaponry is now bidirectional. Due to its isolation from Europe, Russia is becoming more and more interested in buying battleships from China. Russia and China are gradually reducing their reliance on the US currency in their bilateral commerce.

4.2 Cooperative dimension

Russia and China's coordinated operations in the area demonstrate their shared objectives. The combined comments released by both governments serve as evidence of the significance of the area and their concerted efforts. Through SCO and all of its programs, they created the institutional structure to include the local states (mentioned above). These procedures were undoubtedly developed by both countries, although there are still some questions about their cooperation. For instance, Russia has consistently prevented China from establishing an SCO

development bank and expanding the SCO as a free trade area since 2002. The Central Asian republics were not against the bank but they were against making the region a free trade area because they believed that doing so would allow Chinese goods to dominate the local market. Russia shared similar concerns about the region's trade deficit and a global market collapse.

The PRC appears to be putting its most wanted project, BRI, before SCO. That is why Russia backed the SCO membership of Pakistan and India. By adopting a realistic approach to relations, Russia sought to simultaneously reduce the influence of both China and the USA. In the SCO meeting, China favored bilateralism. Although Russia performs far better, it is unable to halt China's BRI, which appears to tip the scales in China's favor. China's decision to launch the BRI in 2013 from Kazakhstan shows that it has a solid foundation. As a result, China invited Russia to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Later, however, Putin approved the BRI initiative and published a joint declaration in 2015 (Wilson L. , 2017). A trade and economic cooperation agreement was reached between China and the EAEU in May 2018, and it became effective in October 2019 (Wilson J. L., 2021). However, there has been little progress made in the EAEU-BRI coordination efforts, and both China and Russia have opposed the BRI.

5. Implications of the Russian-Chinese Association

The direction of Russian-Chinese ties has a significant impact on the security and economic growth of Central Asia. It also contributes to the BRI's implementation, which aims to improve connectivity and regional collaboration. Likewise, the strain of the five republics' growing economic reliance on Beijing and the Russian-Chinese duopoly, in particular, is felt by them. This argument connects to the Major Game story, which centers on a regional rivalry between great powers. However, one should not overstate the region's reliance on China and Russia. Several factors cast doubt on the notion that Central Asian nations are only pawns in this conflict.

Chinese and Russian calculations of how the international system functions and their shared opposition to Western hegemony are converging. Their relationship is more than just a marriage of convenience since it is based on shared ideologies and a practical commitment to the importance of cordial bilateral ties in all spheres of life, not just politics. There are certain places where they appear to be going in opposite directions and are not in agreement with one another. China supports US capitalist policy by favoring globalization for its benefits to commerce. In this way, Russia is directly challenged by its fly-in economic zone. However, while there are some indications of cooperation, this coordination is not a means by which they forego their advantages. Russia and China are more independent players in this regard than they are coordinated allies. However, China appears to adopt a self-serving approach.

Increased arms sales, military drills, and military officer training are all examples of how China is expanding its military and security activities in Central Asia. These actions indicate that bilateral ties between China and Russia are under strain. The fact that China's economy is expanding there as well has been a source of stress since the US withdrew from Afghanistan, especially for Russia. Now, the Russian war on Ukraine demonstrates Russia's power play, which it uses to signal its intention to assume a hegemonic position in the region. There is realism in the pursuit of national interests and the self-help principle by the states. In this situation, Russia will never stop serving as the region's security supplier

Russia and China pursue different goals in Central Asia. Russia through by EAEU, CIS and SCTO have a grip on Central Asian affairs to promote its political power by this collective will whereas on the other side China by the concept of a “Community of Common Destiny” does the same chiefly through its BRI. The Chinese initiation of this concept is much stronger and integrates regional states into a network of economic, political, and security relations (Callahan, 2016). The context of BRI–EAEU synchronization is multifaceted. It has been proposed that Russia is an ‘absent partner’ in the BRI, while the EAEU “seems to be the loser in this arrangement”. Though the EAEU is Russia’s economic integration procedure, it is chiefly used as a political instrument. China also recognizes Moscow’s role in the realization of the BRI, whereas Russia’s cultural authority is dying, it maintains its influence on Central Asian affairs.

On many occasions, it has been observed that there’s a silence explicitly but a kind of Cold War in their implicit behavior. Russian narrative to claim its dominant position in regional affairs is challenged by the inroads of China in many areas ranging from economics to security. The war in Ukraine is a real test of Russian power and it can influence their bilateral relations. The summit in early February between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics highlighted a desire to deepen cooperation. China supports Russia’s stance against NATO enlargement and the US missile defense system.

6. Conclusion

In Central Asia, Russia and China share a variety of objectives, including a shared commitment to the fight against terrorism, the maintenance of political stability, support for certain governments, and antipathy toward Western influence, particularly that of the United States. This dedication was at its strongest during the US invasion of Afghanistan, but it now appears frail in the wake of the country's withdrawal and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. We can detect a difference in their shared interests from this timeline.

US sanctions against Russia as a result of its conflict with Ukraine and commercial dispute with China have disrupted the present trajectory of Russia-China ties in several ways. This collaboration has advanced and becomes more mature. As a sign of its great power position in Eurasia and in response to the necessity to develop its eastern borders and the challenging sociopolitical dynamics of the post-Soviet identity establishment, Russia turned to Asia. Now, Moscow is being forced to look increasingly eastward, while Beijing is being forced to look west since it is necessary to find a replacement for Western markets to fund and uphold economic activity.

The ties between China and Russia have some restrictions. Although it seems unlikely that their relationship would end, it won't grow into an alliance. Geographical restrictions are the cause; for instance, China and Russia are primarily East Asian and European powers, respectively. They will thus concentrate on that area. Similar to this, their military resources are mostly focused on protecting their environment rather than expanding into other parts of the globe. Although the Chinese military could find it difficult to intimidate the US in East Asia, it is incapable of shifting the balance of power. Beyond its nuclear weapons, Russia's capacity to project power in the Far East is also constrained.

The expansion of intraregional cooperation in this area suggests that the border and energy-related problems between these republics are close to being resolved. These nations have increased their participation over the past three decades by pursuing a multi-vector foreign strategy. The repercussions of their uneven power relations with Russia and China will be mitigated by their intraregional cooperation. The continued economic integration of this region worries several regional and international entities. It would make it possible to carry out regional projects like BRI effectively. In this sense, maintaining their alliance in Central Asia and refraining from using it as a platform for influence is in the best interests of both regional governments. Instantaneous pressure from the West causes Moscow and Beijing to react more positively towards one another. However, this doesn't go far enough to make the partnership more official. Despite their disparities, relations between Russia and China are actively improving. This cooperation is built on equally positive political, military, and economic objectives in a growing multipolar framework of international relations and is not deprived of limits.

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