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Dynamics of Russia
and China in Central Asia

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Abstract

In recent years, Central Asia's geopolitics has undergone notable changes, primarily influenced by the changing roles of Russia and China. Russia's economic clout and political dominance, while still significant, face challenges from China's growing presence in the region. The interplay between Russian and Chinese military engagements in Central Asia reflects a nuanced power struggle, marked by both cooperation and competition. Russia's reliance on extensive historical ties and a substantial military presence contrast with China's strategic use of economic leverage to expand its security footprint. This paper aims to examine the dynamics between Russia and China in the region. It also analyses India's position within this dynamic and how its relationships with Russia and China influence its own sphere of influence.

Key Words: Dynamics, Russia, Economy, China, Engagements, Military

Introduction

Central Asia is crucial to both Russia and China for several reasons. Firstly, its geographical proximity makes it strategically important for both countries. Secondly, both Russia and China have significant security and economic interests in the region. Thirdly, the US presence in Central Asia is relatively less compared to other regions like Eastern Europe or East Asia. This limited US presence provides an opportunity to observe how Russia and China interact in the absence of the unifying influence of shared opposition to the US or the West. Finally, there is an ongoing power transition in the region, with China's influence rising while Russia's power declines. Managing this transition is particularly challenging for Russia and China, given their long history of unfriendly relations.

Military and Diplomatic Engagements

Russia has historically maintained a robust military presence (Hoagland, 2021) in Central Asia, leveraging its legacy ties from the Soviet era to assert its influence. Through the Collective Security

Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia has strategically positioned military bases in countries such as Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which serve as critical nodes for its regional power projection. The Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan and the 201st military base (PACSTO, 2021) in Tajikistan, Russia's largest military installation abroad, epitomise Moscow's commitment to maintaining a strategic foothold. This enduring military engagement underscores Russia's primary security goals: to mitigate perceived threats like narcotics trafficking and Islamic extremism and to prevent the erosion of its influence in favour of China's growing presence. By remaining the principal (Jardine and Lemon, 2020) arms supplier and providing military training to Central Asian personnel, Russia not only reinforces its security dominance but also cultivates dependency among these states, ensuring their alignment with Russian strategic interests.

In contrast, China's military engagement in Central Asia, although less overt, has been increasingly strategic and economically intertwined. Initially leveraging its economic clout through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has gradually expanded (Yousuf, 2024) its military footprint, aiming to protect its investments and counter regional instability. China's military strategy in Central Asia is multifaceted, involving joint military exercises, training programs for police and special forces, and establishing a presence in critical areas like the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in Tajikistan. This presence highlights Beijing's commitment to countering the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. Despite being smaller in scale compared to Russia's conventional forces, China's military aid and growing economic ties signify a strategic pivot towards a more assertive security role. This approach not only safeguards Chinese investments but also positions China as a crucial security actor in the region, challenging Russia's long-standing dominance.

China also has an unconventional presence in Central Asia, primarily through the People's Armed Police and private security contractors. In contrast, Russia maintains (Gleason, 2001) a significant conventional military presence, with thousands of troops stationed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. China is strategically investing in the long-term development of Central Asian military forces by offering military education programs. Specialized training for regional military officers is being provided through Chinese universities, which sets the stage for stronger defense cooperation and future interoperability (Marat, 2021). Although the immediate effects of these educational efforts may not be visible, they serve as a calculated move to bolster China's long-term influence in the

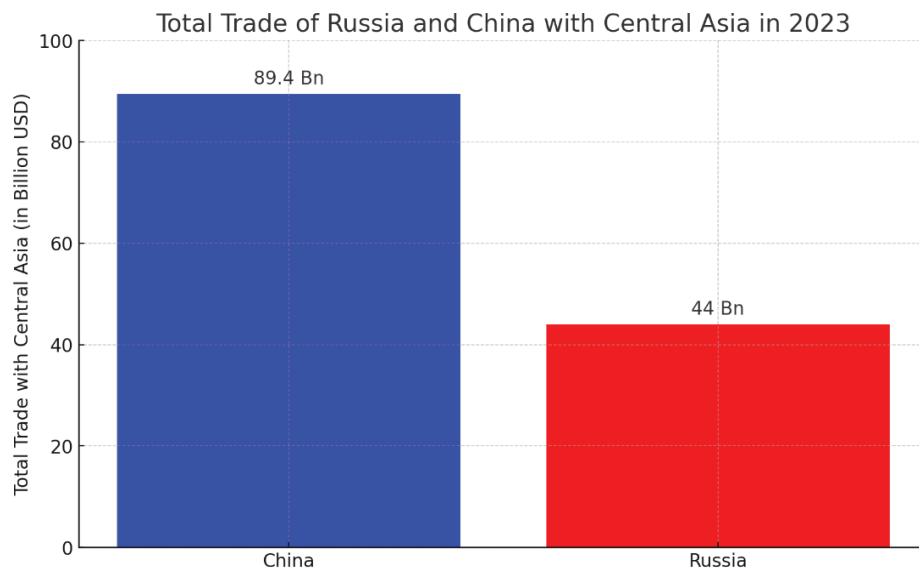
region. Recently, China has expanded its military presence in Central Asia through various approaches, including joint military exercises, training of military personnel, increased arms exports and assistance, and the enhancement of military infrastructure.

The Russian-Ukraine war has significantly damaged (Mallinson, 2024) Russia's reputation as a security provider, eroding confidence in its military capabilities and increasing suspicion of its motives, particularly in Kazakhstan. While China benefits from Russia's decline, it also faces challenges. Many in Central Asia fear economic and demographic domination by China. Russia has accumulated soft power in the region over centuries through the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, but distrust among elites is growing. Conversely, China is gaining influence with elites through investments and development projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, though it still faces public suspicion.

Economic Influence: The Rise of China and the Decline of Russian Dominance

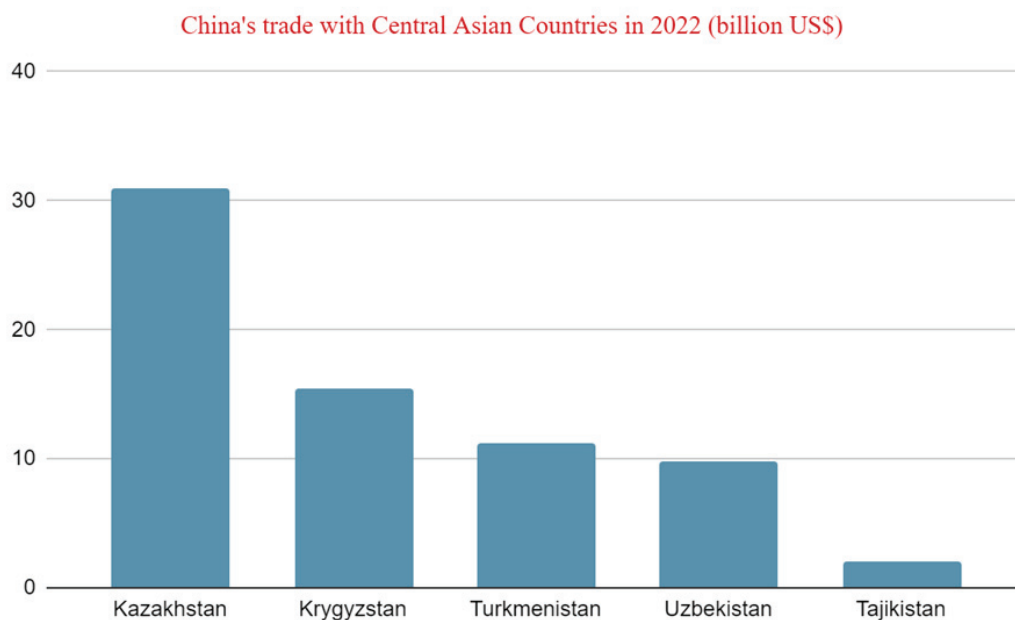
The economic situation in Central Asia has witnessed a significant shift in recent years, with China emerging as a dominant player. In 2023, China surpassed Russia to become (Eurasianet, 2023) the region's largest foreign investor and trade partner, indicating the rapid expansion of its economic presence. Chinese investments, particularly in infrastructure and energy projects, are reshaping the region's economy, beyond the traditional Russian influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided a strategic framework for China's engagement, offering lucrative opportunities for trade and development. China is making significant investments in Central Asia through its BRI. Substantial funding is being directed towards Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to support a diverse range of infrastructure projects.

Russia's economic influence in Central Asia has declined in recent years. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated this decline, impacting Russia's ability to maintain its previous economic dominance. Despite this, Russia remains a crucial political actor, outstripping China in certain respects. Notably, Russia's control over key hydrocarbon markets continues to define the region, although this control is becoming more tenuous.



Source: Valdai Discussion Club and Tashkent Times

Potentially, China's emergence as the primary economic partner for many countries in the region, marks a transition from China merely challenging Russia's dominance to potentially displacing it altogether.



Source: Adopted from Manoj Joshi's research titled 'China expanding Central Asian footprint' for the Tribune

Cultural Influence

Cultural influence is another battleground in the competition for Central Asia's allegiance. While Russian language and culture have historically held sway, China's soft power initiatives, including language programs and cultural exchanges, are gaining traction. Historically, Russia has exerted significant cultural influence in Central Asia, a legacy of the Soviet era when Russian language and culture were integral (Beishalieva, 2023) to public life and education systems across the region. Even today, Russian remains a lingua franca in many parts of Central Asia, facilitating communication and cultural exchange across diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. However, there is a noticeable (Baumann, 2018) shift among the younger generations. In Uzbekistan, many young non-Russians, including Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs, struggle with or do not speak Russian. Following independence, the government reduced the emphasis on Russian to promote Uzbek in public life. With globalisation and increased international economic engagement, English has become a popular study option, although fluency remains uncommon.

In response to the diminishing ubiquity of Russian culture and the open cultural field, China has increased its soft power outreach, notably through educational and cultural initiatives. The establishment of institutions (Confucius Institute of Tashkent, 2023; Tashkent Times, 2024) such as the Confucius Institute in Tashkent is part of this strategy. These institutes offer language courses and cultural events that aim to foster a better understanding of Chinese culture and, by extension, to promote a positive view of China's growing presence in the region. However, while these initiatives are expanding, their impact is still developing compared to the deep-rooted influence of Russian culture and the rapidly increasing appeal of Western media. While China is increasingly asserting its influence, its impact in the realm of cinema and language study still trails behind that of Russia and the West.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan shows the clearest signs of economic change in Central Asia, although the political impact and changes in relationships haven't been as significant. Kazakhstan has made efforts to align with, or at least appear to adhere to, US and Western sanctions more than other regional countries. Its trade position is crucial due to its membership in the Russian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

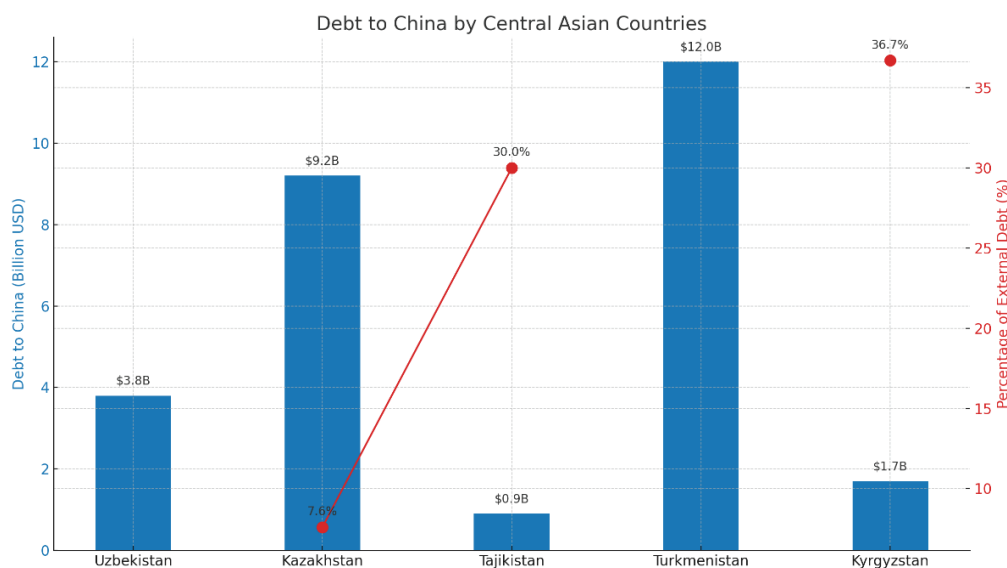
Kazakhstan was highly dependent on Russia before the Russia-Ukraine war broke out in February 2022, particularly during the “January events” (Satubaldina, 2024). These events involved economically driven protests that were allegedly (Laruelle, 2024) hijacked by interests connected to former security service members and relatives of ex-president Nursultan Nazarbayev. Despite these protests, there has not been significant economic change in the traditional elite oligarchic networks between Russia and Kazakhstan, which Russia has relied on for political influence, excluding the immediate Nazarbayev family.

However, some key changes have occurred. For example, after the January events, Timur Kulibayev, one of Kazakhstan's richest individuals and Nazarbayev's son-in-law, was removed (France24, 2022) from Gazprom's board. Despite this, he and his wife still control several key sectors in the economy. While Kazakh politics is evolving, the actual impact on Russia's relationship with Kazakhstan has not been substantial.

In 2022, Russia tried to pressure Kazakhstan by intermittently toggling (Euractiv, 2022) the Russia-Central Asia pipeline network, affecting Kazakhstan's crude oil exports via Novorossiysk. European sanctions on Russian oil have further complicated this dynamic. Russia now relies on Kazakh crude to replace supplies to Poland and Germany, as the Druzhba pipeline must carry (Strzelecki and Alkousaa, 2024) Kazakh crude instead of Russian due to sanctions.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is also experiencing key changes. The country has been under significant pressure from Russia to join the Eurasian Economic Union and has joined as an observer member. Uzbekistan is leveraging its economic position by purchasing (Tashkent Times, 2023) Russian gas at very low prices. Uzbekistan has faced gas shortages in recent years due to increasing domestic demand from new power plants. Meanwhile, the government continues to sell (Kun.uz, 2024) gas to China, albeit in smaller quantities than before. It appears that Uzbekistan is acquiring Russian gas at prices even lower than what it charges China.



Source: Adopted from Nargiza Muratalieva's research titled 'Chinese Lending Adapts to Central Asia's Realities' for Carnegie.

A visible example of economic changes can be observed in the automotive industry. Historically, Russian and, to a certain extent, Western automotive brands like Chevrolet and Daewoo (under the management of UzAvtosanoat) dominated (Juraboev, 2024) the streets in cities like Tashkent. However, with the ongoing liberalisation of Uzbekistan's economy, there has been a notable increase in the presence of Chinese automobiles. This change is partly due to the decline of Russia's auto sector, exacerbated by international sanctions. China's trade with Uzbekistan totals (Stobdan, 2024) \$12.23 billion, outpacing Russia's \$8.86 billion.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Russia's economic influence, especially regarding remittances (Poghosyan, 2020), remains paramount, leading to fewer headline changes in these countries. Neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan are significant oil and gas producers or transshipment countries, though future developments like the China-Central Asia gas pipeline and the Line D plan (Hayley, 2023) could change this.

Interestingly, President Rahmon of Tajikistan has criticised (RFE, 2020) some of Russia's regional approaches more openly than ever before, despite being a strongman ruler with poor records on democracy, economic practices, and human rights. However, this criticism has not led to a

significant break with Russia. Russia remains crucial for the security of both countries, particularly in managing occasional border disputes.

As Russia's influence wanes, Eurasia becomes an opportunity for China. This is exemplified by the renewed push to build the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKU-R) amid the Ukraine crisis, supply chain disruptions, and the need for alternative routes to bypass Russia. The CKU-R will provide significant strategic and economic benefits for China. This railway will link (Stobdan, 2024) Xinjiang, which borders eight countries including India, with the Fergana Valley, a crucial intersection of Central Asia, Trans-Caspian, South Asia, and West Asia. It will enhance China's influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, improve Europe-bound freight by bypassing the longer Russian route, and turn the region into a business hub.



Map showing proposed routes of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. Source: Third Pole

The proposed Trans-Afghan Railway will bring Chinese trains closer to India. Experts (Stobdan, 2024) see this corridor as essential for integrating Central Asia into global supply chains but warn it could also facilitate smuggling into Russia. While Kyrgyzstan supports the project, it lacks (Stobdan, 2024) the \$4.7 billion needed for its section and struggles to attract investment because of its \$2 billion debt to China, raising concerns about increased debt affecting its sovereignty.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, governed by the highly autocratic Berdimuhamedow family, is one of the most unique countries in the region. Over the past five to six years, it has improved relations with Russia, restarting (Kanapiyanova, 2022) gas exports that had been halted for many years and agreeing to a dual citizenship deal. However, Turkmenistan is unlikely to move any closer to Russia. Russia's economic decline has raised questions about the potential for a gas connector from Turkmenistan to Iran via the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan occasionally hints at such projects to gain minor concessions from the West, but that does not serve any geostrategic purpose.

China has long been the dominant (Goble, 2022) economic player in Turkmenistan, with almost all of Turkmenistan's exports going to China. Besides China, only a few French and US (U.S. Department of State, 2020) companies in engineering and agriculture and the Emirati company (Emirates News Agency, 2023) Dragon Oil have a presence in Turkmenistan. Despite these interactions, Turkmenistan's economy remains highly closed. Understanding the dynamics between Russia and China in Turkmenistan is crucial, as China is generally content to let Russia maintain its limited economic interests while it continues to dominate the economic landscape.

The Interplay Between Russia, China, and India

The concept of an “unlimited partnership” between China and Russia, though slightly different from the metaphor of an “all-weather” relationship, presents intriguing possibilities for speculation. Russia's long-standing relationship with India, rooted in historical ties and geopolitical dynamics, offers another dimension (Kappoor & Madan, 2024) to consider. India, as a non-aligned state, has traditionally maintained strong ties with both Russia and, previously, the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, China and India grapple with their own bilateral issues, allowing Russia to act as a friend to both sides and extract benefits. However, in Central Asia, Russia perceives itself as having a historical entitlement to cultural and political dominance, while China seeks an open playing field to assert its economic influence. Despite signs of Russia's cultural influence waning, its assertive actions, as seen in Ukraine, serve as a reminder of its enduring geopolitical weight. The situation in Kazakhstan further highlights the complexities, with Russia's assistance in quelling unrest contrasting with Kazakhstan's reluctance (Mallinson, 2024) to fully align with Russian interests.

Regional stability and security is another area which attains priority among regional powers for stability within their borders and neighbouring regions. However, the pursuit of stability can sometimes diverge, particularly in areas where interests intersect or conflict. For example, Russia and China may find more common ground in their approaches to stability in Central Asia compared to how China views stability in South Asia or how India approaches stability in its own region. These differences highlight the complex dynamics at play, where one country's pursuit of stability may be perceived as a threat by another. Given the alignment between China and Russia in certain areas, they may exhibit greater synergy in their approaches compared to India's relationship with either of them.

India views its Central Asian strategy through the prism of its broader regional security concerns, including its competition with China and the need to secure energy resources and trade routes. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been a key platform for India to engage with Central Asian states, alongside Russia and China.

Conclusion:

The interplay between Russian and Chinese military engagements in Central Asia reflects a nuanced power struggle, marked by both cooperation and competition. Russia's reliance on extensive historical ties and a substantial military presence contrast with China's strategic use of economic leverage to expand its security footprint. Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan navigate this complex landscape by balancing their relationships with both powers, thereby avoiding over-reliance on either. This balancing act involves participation in both the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), along with bilateral military agreements with China. As China's economic and security influence continues to grow, Russia faces significant challenges in maintaining its traditional dominance. This evolving dynamic suggests that while Russia seeks to preserve its strategic supremacy through conventional military might, China's approach of intertwining economic and security interests represents a formidable challenge to the status quo, signalling a potential shift in the regional power balance.

Russia views Central Asia as its soft underbelly due to historical invasion routes and a long, sparsely populated border. It asserts its security interests through a military presence rather than economic development. Diplomatic engagement from China has increased, with China now

engaging Central Asian states bilaterally and multilaterally, often bypassing Russia. Russia, with its Soviet linkages, has seen its diplomatic influence erode due to the Ukraine war.

India's footprint is increasing steadily. India's connectivity efforts via the Chabahar port in Iran face challenges that hinder its viability. Despite initial enthusiasm, logistical and geopolitical obstacles have impeded the full realisation of its potential. Therefore, India must explore alternative routes, such as a direct road connectivity to Central Asia.

India's economic growth and sizable population have positioned it as an emerging player in the region. Government-to-government interactions between India and Uzbekistan, for example, have increased, albeit gradually. Yet, it is important to note that Indian influence in Central Asia still has ways to go before it becomes profound. While the SCO remains a significant platform for regional engagement, the evolving dynamics with India suggest a broader spectrum of actors shaping the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

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