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Russia and China in Central Asia

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Introduction

Between 2001 and 2013, multivectorism in Central Asia was incubated by a competitive external context. After 9/11 the U.S. expanded security partnerships, bases, security assistance, and logistics agreements with the Central Asian states. At the same time, the global financial crisis facilitated China's economic rise and Russia's retrenchment. In addition, Russia promoted a "unite and influence" strategy that aimed to induct Central Asian states into its regional organizations and initiatives. In 2014, a strategic reassessment took place, the trend was away from multivectorism towards a Russia-China condominium arrangement: the U.S. gradually drew down its military presence in Afghanistan and the region; the Crimea "ripple effect" took hold; and China advanced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and "Community of Friendly Neighbors" narrative.

The glue that holds the Russia-China condominium together in Central Asia is the need to demonstrate public solidarity against the U.S.-led liberal world order. This translates regionally into efforts to jointly exclude the U.S. from Central Asian affairs. Both Russia and China seek to confront the EU and NATO from a position of geopolitical and geo-economic strength. Russia accepts China's asymmetric economic power and relates to BRI *as if* it is in Russia's interests. Both states also support post-Western global governance through coordinating contacts among new regional bodies such as Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), BRI, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These alternatives are non-Western, if not wholly yet anti-Western, and seek to promote a changing international order and oppose Western values, media, education, as well as civil society support and engagement. Allied to anti-Westernism is the real shared fear in Moscow and Beijing of political instability or "chaos," civil unrest or regime changes.

Can we assume that a stable condominium is a given, that Russia can act as the sheriff and China as the banker to the region? Or do growing power disparities between the two suggest that as China's reach increases, Russia's diminishes? Will Moscow in fact resist the designated "junior partner" role and seek to hedge against it? Or does Russia's growing anxiety and insecurity push it towards China and Chinese positions, leading to a softening of its own red lines, even as China defers to Russian talking points in public? How might Russia start to view the region in its evolving geopolitical imagination? What is Central Asia's role in the 'Russian World?' What are the views from the Central Asian states themselves and how might they maneuver in this new reality?

Multivector Shocks

Commentators such as Bobo Lo who have viewed the Russia-China partnership as an "axis of convenience" or as a pragmatic coalition have still predicted that Central Asia is an area of the world where rifts between Moscow and Beijing could be exposed. But every time the region faces some sort of crisis or shock, Russia and China seem to support and accommodate each other's unilateral and even destabilizing actions. Nonetheless, the belief that a Russia and China clash in Central Asia is inevitable refuses to die.

We can illustrate this contention that crises in Central Asia promote condominium consolidation rather than culmination by looking back at three regional shocks from the last year. The first shock is the joint reaction to U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the denial of residual basing rights to the U.S. to facilitate this withdrawal. If we compare Chinese and Russian priorities we see some are shared, and, perhaps more importantly, none are incompatible. China's priorities include: pushing for other countries to lift their sanctions against the interim Taliban government and engage; pressuring the Taliban to cooperate on its own border security priorities, making in the process Wakhan "Iron Wall" relocation and possible deportation of Afghanistan's 2000+ Uyghurs; offer humanitarian aid (food and vaccines) and promises of infrastructure investment and BRI expansion to align with Beijing's priorities (most recently post-earthquake); and, demand that the U.S. unblocks Afghan assets. Russian priorities include: continued calls for preparedness and collective security between the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), evidenced by border drills and the provision of weaponry; Russia and CSTO member states have reaffirmed their position to not accept Afghan refugees on their territory or in transit; advocating for pragmatism with the Taliban (including the creation of as *de facto* Taliban embassy in Moscow) and a Russian role in regional solutions, while excluding the United States. In the absence of the United States, Central Asian governments, (except Tajikistan) have adopted a pragmatic approach to the Taliban. They have backed Russian and Chinese regional security and economic initiatives, adopted Russia and CSTO member states position to not accept Afghan refugees on their territory or in transit, and denied U.S. basing access during withdrawal.

The second shock is China accommodating itself and then publicly supporting the Russian-led CSTO intervention during protests in Kazakhstan in January 2021. This demonstrates that both Russia and China view regional security as the defense of autocratic regimes. The SCO supported CSTO actions taken to stabilize the situation. Indeed, President Xi Jinping on the 30th Anniversary of Relations "Joining Hands for a Shared Future" on 25 January 2022 clearly stated: "We firmly oppose attempts by external forces to foment color revolutions in Central Asia, firmly oppose interference in other countries' internal affairs under the pretext of human rights, and firmly oppose any force that tries to disrupt the tranquil life of the people in this region."

The third shock is China's public support for Russia's "international ordering" claims and grievances as they have been used to justify its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is despite a disruptive sanctions regime (which Chinese companies with a global orientation appear to be complying with) and the disruption of the land belt transportation routes that have been a key feature of China's BRI in Eurasia. There is deep concern among post-Soviet states about both Russia's war and subsequent western sanctions, particularly regarding compliance risk and secondary sanctions. None of the post-Soviet EAEU states have joined the sanctions, though members of the EAEU face the shock of integration disruptions. All Central Asian states face declining remittances (20-40% of GDP) from migrant workers in Russia. Energy exporters face difficulties in accessing markets (reduction of Kazakhstani oil in Caspian Pipeline Consortium) and a halt in Trans-Eurasian Integration: over 1 million containers are diverted from Eurasian Rail (BRI land belt) to Maritime Cargo.

Russia and Central Asia: Rhetoric and Structural Realities?

Much of the current discussion of Russia and China in Central Asia suggests that (i) Russia will rapidly lose influence to China and other powers in the aftermath of Ukraine; and (ii) that as China increases its influence in Central Asia, wedges will emerge in the Russia-China relationship, testing the alignment between Beijing and Moscow. Both these conclusions are misleading. Current circumstances provide the opportunity for central Asian states to reassert their authority and by either necessity or choice engage with a range of extra-regional middle powers, including Turkey, Iran, the Gulf states, South Korea, Japan, and India. The U.S. perceives India as a potentially useful counterweight to China in South and Central Asia, but India is hampered by a lack of leverage, ongoing competition with Pakistan, and a hedging policy that demands cooperative relations with Russia. How can we challenge the notion that Russia faces overstretch and in Central Asia is in retreat, ceding influence to China?

First, talk of Russia's imminent 'decolonization' and 'roll-back' of Russia's sphere of influence from Central Asia is much exaggerated. Russian influence may be reduced - but it is far from finished. The biggest hit is in Russian economic influence. Sanctions are already taking a toll on Russian investments and financial ties in Central Asia. The World Bank estimates that remittances sent home by Tajik migrant laborers from Russia might drop by around 40%. Trade has shifted from Russia's Trans-Siberian rail route to the 'Middle Corridor' through Central Asia and the Caspian (volumes are six times as big as last year). A smaller Russian economy (at least 8% smaller by year-end) means a smaller market for Central Asian exports.

But structural realities mean that Russia will still play a key role: the axiom 'geography is destiny' holds true in Central Asia. Geography dictates that traders and migrants have few choices. Migrants are used to financial and political fluctuations and have well-established coping mechanisms and will adjust to the 'new normal.' While sanctions will create headaches for Central Asian companies and traders, they also offer opportunities. Although governments insist that they will comply with U.S. and Western sanctions on Russia, in the grey-zone that is Central Asia, the region is still likely to play a role in sanctions evasion, providing a platform for Russia's continued economic, financial, and technological engagement with the Global South. For example, on 28 June the U.S. Treasury designation of Uzbekistan's *Promkomplektlogistic* company. The US claimed the company was actively supporting sanctioned Russian company *Radioavtomatika* to evade U.S. sanctions on sourcing high-tech foreign components). One hundred thousand Russian IT specialists, as individuals and as employees in companies, can relocate to Tbilisi, Yerevan, Almaty, and Tashkent, emergent technology hubs in post-Soviet space, stretching the meaning of sanctions evasion by utilizing hitherto dormant EUAU enabling legal legislation.

Beyond economics, Russia's security offer for the region remains more or less intact. It is true that China's security presence in "Greater Central Asia" has increased, particularly in Tajikistan. China takes part in the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), established in 2016 as a four-way Anti-Terror Coordinating Structure (with Russia and the U.S. excluded). According to the 2016 Summit declaration, its purpose is: "to coordinate with and support each other in a range of areas, including study and judgment of counter-terrorism situation, confirmation of clues, intelligence sharing, anti-terrorist capability building, joint anti-terrorist training and personnel training." China's influence is also boosted by the role of private security companies (PSCs) as BRI-related companies contract with Chinese PSCs to provide security. "Security" includes both physical dimensions (personal) but also surveillance and new technologies.

If we extrapolate forward, might one implication be a growing power asymmetry with the condominium and Russia being relegated to "junior partner" status? It is true that Russia's military prestige has been undermined by the failures in its war in Ukraine. However, the kind of limited intervention that Russia offers to Central Asia - 2,500 troops intervened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 for example, or 7,000 men at its base in Tajikistan - remain important for Central Asian states. There is no sign that Russia is planning to draw down troops from Tajikistan or elsewhere in the region. Moreover, China's militarization of Xinjiang spillover negatively with publics in Central Asia, if not formally with state elites. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states are placed by China on a 26 "sensitive countries" list: China targets those spending time overseas and divided families. The so-called reeducation camps mobilize civil society and promote transnational campaigns, social media protests, and international press scrutiny, making it increasingly difficult for the Kazakh government to balance Beijing's demands with public opinion. China's 'clamp down' in Xinjiang adds to collective fears about Chinese power and intentions.

Neither China nor any other regional power has the interest or capacity to fulfil Russia's security role. Central Asian states have growing security ties with China, but still buy 80% of their weapons from Russia. That kind of dependence will not shift rapidly - although in a sign of where things might be heading, the Kyrgyz are buying Turkish drones, and the Tajiks Iranian ones. But on security, there is no serious competition. China supported Russia's stabilization mission in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and Russia shows little concern about China's security presence on the Tajik-Kazakh border. Both states have similar views on conflicts in the region. Both, for example, support crackdowns on the kind of unrest seen in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) region in May or in Karakalpakstan (Nukus) in Uzbekistan in early July 2022.

Russia's information dominance and traction in society also remains significant. Polls show Central Asian societies are polarized on the war, although sympathy for Russia remains strong. In Kazakhstan, one poll showed 39% supported Russia and 10% supported Ukraine, while 46% professed neutrality. Though support for Ukraine was much higher among Kazakh-speakers, residual support for Russia is still present across the region. In a 2021 poll by the Central Asia Barometer Group only 4.9 % of respondents in Kazakhstan cited China as the country most able to help address 'economic and other problems.' Even fewer in Uzbekistan (2.6%) thought China would help. Even lower numbers pointed to the United States as a source of aid, although the EU did get some support (5.7% in Uzbekistan and 11.1% in Kazakhstan). Russia, on the other hand, was the country perceived as most likely to provide assistance, by 54.3% of respondents in Kazakhstan and 53.9% in Uzbekistan.

There is no sign that Russia is giving up on its regional dominance - although it may be willing to share with China. Geography and history dictate that Russia is unlikely to retreat willingly from Central Asia. Russia is incapable of defending its 5,000-mile border with Kazakhstan. It is - as so often in its imperial history - forced into forward positions to defend its security - and still views the Tajik-Afghan border as essential to its security. Ceding security dominance of the region to an external power - even a friendly power such as China - is not compatible with current Russian thinking on its security. This perceived threat becomes even more acute if Russian influence is replaced not by China, but by Turkey and Western powers. Indeed, for Russia, the major perceived security threat in the region is probably not from China, but from Turkey. In this sense, China is more of an ally for Russia, than an opponent, hence the alignments.

In reality, without Central Asia, Russia is no longer a Great Power - so it is not surprising that Putin's first international visit after the start of the war was to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Russia's spatial vision of the 'Russian World' attracts headlines because it appears to drive much of the thinking on Ukraine. But in geopolitical terms, it is Eurasia that has been the most productive spatial imaginary for Russia. It serves as the platform for Russia's claim to be a global power - a pole in a multipolar world. A vision of Russia at the center of Greater Eurasia allows Moscow to dream of an important geopolitical role in a swathe of geography from Northern Europe to South Asia ("from Murmansk to Mumbai"). Without a leading role in Central Asia, this idea of a Greater Eurasia - and Moscow's role in the world - looks even more fantastical.

The biggest challenge for Russia is not economic or military but ideological. President Toqaev's apparent on-stage trolling of President Putin at the St Petersburg Economic Forum (SPIEF) in June 2022 was widely publicized as a rift. But in reality, Central Asian leaders agree with Putin on plenty. Like Putin, they run authoritarian political systems, are unforgiving towards opposition or liberal values, and see the West as a threat to stability. But they will find it very difficult to manage a Russia in which the ideology is not authoritarian modernization but imperial nationalism. Despite the fact that Putin's regime legitimizes itself through continuous reference to the Soviet Victory in the Great Patriotic War, Putin, who was in fact a real "red" Soviet colonel in the late Soviet period, behaves as an imaginary "white" tsarist general in the Russian Civil War. His actions in Ukraine (asserting that Ukraine is not a state and Ukrainians are not a people) are not so much post-Soviet as anti-Soviet. Russian anti-Ukraine rhetoric is too Slavic, too Orthodox, too Russian imperial, and too belligerent to gain traction. Indeed, Russian exterminationist rhetoric repels.

Russian nationalists have reacted badly to decisions by Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan not to hold 9 May victory parades and bans on the symbols ‘Z’ and ‘V.’ In April the Russian newspaper *MK* claimed that Kyrgyz-Russian relations were threatened by U.S. official visits to Bishkek and claimed that Moscow was preparing ‘severe’ measures against any potential ‘stab in the back.’ There is no sign - yet - that such ideological paranoia is driving Kremlin thinking on Central Asia. But a further Russian turn to violent neo-imperialist thinking might also start to imperil the peaceful coexistence of Russia and China in Central Asia.

Conclusions

- Almost uniquely among Great Powers, Russia and China define Central Asia as a “common adjacent region” one in which they can coordinate and cooperate to manage disputes ultimately through Xi-Putin dialogue. Crises in Central Asia promote the consolidation of the condominium rather than its culmination.
- Despite Western predictions of drift, Moscow and Beijing are aligned on Central Asian crisis situations: Afghanistan; Kazakhstan’s protests; and Ukraine and Western sanctions. Such alignment is more than an axis (non-aggression pact) but less than an alliance. This alignment acknowledges that Russia remains the region’s core security provider.
- Central Asian states retain a strong preference for multivectorism. While their proximity to Russia and China creates challenges, current circumstances provide them with the opportunity to reassert their authority and engage with a range of extra-regional middle powers, including Turkey, Iran, the Gulf states, South Korea, Japan, and India.
- The political West needs to articulate not only what it seeks to prevent, but what it is for in dealing with Central Asian partners. The West should avoid forcing governments to “pick sides.” It should acknowledge its “hidden power” which is based on human capital – education, training, professional standards, technocratic networks, and a more attractive modernization paradigm when set against Russia’s return to imperial history or the “Chinese Dream.”

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