

Sino-Russian Cooperation and Competition in Central Asia

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The Central Asian region with its five post-Soviet republics is geopolitically important for its proximity to Afghanistan, West Asia, China, Russia and the Caucasus. These republics have been wooed by many powers keen to gain access to their rich resources. Russia, the regional hegemon has been slipping in the economic domain, while China's fortunes and national power are on the rise. This article seeks to examine the standing of these two powers that are both cooperating and competing in Central Asia and suggest the way ahead for India.

Keywords: *China, Russia, Competition, Central Asia*

The Central Asian region lies at the very centre of the Eurasian landmass, the heart of Mackinder's World-Island. The importance of the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) is undeniable. Relative to its population and economy, no other region is enmeshed in as many pressing geopolitical issues such as energy, trade, religious extremism, conflict in Afghanistan, an embattled Iran, international drug trade, Russian quest to dominate its "near abroad", ethnic unrest in China's Xinjiang province and China's Belt and Road Initiative.¹ In Central Asia, the result of unspoken division of labour has been that security and political interests are steered by Russia while China dominates the economic aspect. This appears to have worked well so far.

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However, scholars and analysts alike point to the temporary and narrow aims of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation while also highlighting the many contradictions, including historical mistrust, claims of China on the Russian Far East, energy dynamics, the encroachment of Russian strategic space and their respective regional and global ambitions.

Thus, cooperation and competition between China and Russia in Central Asia are but two sides of the same coin. It would be instructive to interpret the intentions of the two regional giants from the past trajectory of their relationship and to discern where the balance might move in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The sudden collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1990 led to unforeseeable changes in geopolitical dynamics. In inner-Asia where there used to be only two countries, that is, Mongolia and Afghanistan, suddenly five new nations were born and the term Central Asia was coined to define the newly independent territories.

The demise of the Soviet Union eliminated a major strategic competitor for China, unleashing her growth, which the United States of America (USA) had anyway been supporting for two decades. Russia was initially weak and in the Yeltsin era lacked a clear grand strategy. However, with Putin's ascent to power and effective monetisation of energy resources, Russia swiftly reacquired global confidence and started recovering her regional footprint.

The common desire of Russia and China to alter the unipolar US-led world order brought them into close cooperation. The bonhomie between the two accelerated rapidly from 2014. This bilateral relationship largely focused on increased military cooperation and an increase in coordination on responses to various issues in international politics.²

The Central Asian region was a key testbed for Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly with regard to their shared aim of closure of two US military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. This objective was achieved through their combined clout and the mechanism of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The last five years have seen the visible component of this relationship grow stronger. However, a study of history reveals deep fissures and fundamental contradictions, which may be managed for a certain period of time but which are nevertheless bound to manifest with changes in the geopolitical equation.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Imperial Russia and China were located at different corners of the Eurasian landmass and hence shared no common borders till the Middle Ages. However, both had to contend with periodic depredations of the steppe nomads. The expansion of Russia into modern-day Kazakhstan and the Amur River Basin in the Russian Far East, around 1640, brought the two empires into contact for the first time.

When Qing China was weakened by the Second Opium War, Russia amassed troops in the Far East and threatened a new front. China agreed to negotiate and *ceded about 910,000 sq km and the port of Vladivostok in the treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1859)*. These are now viewed as *unequal treaties* [emphasis mine] by the Chinese. In Central Asia, the border was established by the Protocol of Tarbagatai (1864).³ Portions bordering the Tajik and Kyrgyz border in the Pamirs and some portions near Lake Zhalanaskol (present-day Kazakhstan) were disputed (Figure 1). These disputes were settled over a period of time, only after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The People's Republic of China was born in 1949 and remained second-fiddle to the Soviets under Stalin. Post Stalin's demise, differences started to arise. By 1961, the Soviet Union and China had developed



Figure 1 Disputed Border—Xinjiang (China) and Tajik SSR (marked by crosses)

Source: Map courtesy US Library of Congress⁴

intractable ideological differences. In 1969, border confrontations took place, including fighting at the Ussuri River, the Zhenbao Island incident and the Tielieketi incident on the Central Asian border. China's rapprochement with the US in 1972 dissipated the American threat, leaving the Soviet Union as the primary national security threat for the Chinese. Historical antipathy for the Chinese⁵ and Cold War tensions, accentuated by Soviet propaganda, ingrained Sinophobia among the general population of former Soviet Central Asia—tendencies that still linger in popular consciousness today.⁶

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 radically changed the power equation between Russia and China. The 1991 Border Agreement between the two countries largely settled the border between them. However, the issue of the 'unequal treaties' pertaining to the Russian Far East/Amur–Ussuri Basin remains a dormant but deeply embedded source of mutual suspicion.

APPROACH OF OUTSIDE POWERS TO THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION, 1991–2020

The Central Asian states were the poorest and least developed in the USSR and had to begin their development almost from scratch in the 1990s. By losing Moscow as the focal point, the states lost crucial subsidies for budgets, enterprises and households, inputs for regional industries, markets for their products, transportation routes and communications with the outside world—much of which had been filtered through the Soviet capital. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had hydrocarbon resources that were not locked into long-term supply agreements. This led to them being courted by many players, most prominently the Western oil companies. These states were keen to establish independent relations with external players and proceeded to do so rapidly. This study will examine the approach of each major player over the time frame from 1991 to 2020.

Russian Approach

The Central Asian political elite—mostly ex-Soviet leaders in their respective republics—viewed Russia fraternally and wanted closest links in every way with Russia. However, from 1991 to 1995, during the Yeltsin era Russia's political direction was focussed towards achieving close integration with the Euro-Atlantic region and Central Asia experienced a loss of Russian interest. The Russian indifference was possibly bolstered

by the fact that in the initial years the CARs had no option but to rely on Russia for export of their hydrocarbon resources since all pipelines effectively ran to Russia.

From the mid-1990s, the *Primakov Doctrine* saw Russia implement a new foreign policy at the global level as well as with regard to the post-Soviet space. The main aim of Russia's foreign policy altered to *becoming an independent centre of power*. *Primacy of Russia within its near-abroad* [emphasis mine] also became an important objective. During the late 1990s, Russia began to perceive a threat to her own security from radical Islam emanating through the CARs from West Asia. Moscow's big success during this period was its resolution of the civil war in Tajikistan by diplomatic means and in cooperation with other interested countries (primarily Iran and Uzbekistan).

Vladimir Putin's accession to power in 2000 was a turning point for Russia.⁷ Vigorous measures were taken to realise the objective of a multipolar world, with Russia as one of the poles. Moscow began to pursue the recovery of Russia's positions in Central Asia and other parts of the post-Soviet space as an indispensable step towards strengthening Russia's international status. The CARs were ready to cooperate with Russia, while simultaneously following a multi-vector foreign policy.

Chinese Approach

China was initially diffident about Central Asia. At the time its investible surpluses were certainly not as large as they are today. It was also unsure of how the religious and civilisational links between the CARs and Xinjiang would affect the restive province.

Hence, China used this phase to carry out *border negotiations* with *Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*. In late April 1996, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Shanghai to negotiate demilitarisation of the former Sino-Soviet border. The deal was cemented with a decision to form the Shanghai Five, which with the addition of Uzbekistan five years later became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Through the SCO and bilaterally China pushed for deals in which the three republics lost land that they formerly controlled. China first laid claims to territory that was firmly in Soviet hands prior to the demise of the Union. Then, a narrative was spun that China had settled for only a fraction of her expansive claims—a supposed victory for the republics. China also held out promises of trade and investment.

In return, the three republics had to express unequivocal support for the 'One China' policy and agree to *support China's stance on Xinjiang* as well as not support Uyghur separatist groups. In these shady deals, Kazakhstan reportedly *lost* about 187 sq km, Kyrgyzstan about 1,250 sq km and Tajikistan about 1,122 sq km. China gained land and forestalled threats to her sovereignty over Xinjiang, which could otherwise have arisen from the rise of new political entities in Central Asia.⁸ These deals linger in the consciousness of citizens of these three countries and reinforce historical antipathy for the Chinese.

Having waited and watched, by about 2000 China decided that the environment in the CARs was right for investment, especially in energy. A number of oil blocks were purchased, and a series of pipeline projects were negotiated bilaterally with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and constructed in record time. Resultantly, the CARs gained an alternative for export of their hydrocarbon largesse in a direction other than towards Russia. Russia, which lacked the surpluses required for large investments, quietly acquiesced to the Chinese move.

The announcement of the *launch* of China's ambitious global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from Kazakhstan in 2013 introduced a significant new dynamic into Central Asia. China-oriented pipelines had already commenced operations. Trade with Europe via the land route had commenced in 2012 with the Yuxinou Railway and the Jinghe–Yining–Khorghos railway link being completed. However, the announcement of the BRI made these links part of the official Chinese government policy and ensured their funding and robust support.

The effect of the extensive pipeline infrastructure created by China is quite apparent, especially with regards to natural gas. In 2011, 52 per cent of the region's gas exports went to Russia, while 26 per cent went to China. In 2019, these proportions had reversed with 59 per cent exports going to China, while 37 per cent went to Russia.⁹ Significantly, Turkmenistan, the region's gas giant, no longer exports gas to/via Russia.

COVID-19 Aid

In 2020, China outpaced all other players in the robustness and volume of COVID-19 assistance rendered to Central Asian countries, substantially enhancing China's prestige.

USA/Western Europe

When the Soviet Union broke up, the Baltics, Balkans and the East European post-Soviet space were the strategic priority for USA and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Many of these countries were inducted into the European Union (EU)/NATO, exacerbating Russian security concerns. Not much strategic importance was attached by the West to Central Asia.

Western firms (primarily BP and Chevron) were active and entered into oil/gas exploration agreements with the newly independent states. Initially, these Western oil companies continued to rely upon the old Soviet pipeline system to transport oil for export. However, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, set up in 2001, was the first fresh alignment to be set up by Chevron¹⁰ in collaboration with the Russian Federation and Kazmunaygaz. It now transports more than a third of Kazakhstan's oil exports.

The events of 9/11 led to a period of enhanced strategic engagement by the US and the Western powers. The US planned to invade Afghanistan and Iraq with a coalition of Western allies. It needed bases from which troops and logistics could be moved into the two theatres. Putin on whom the presidency had devolved, intervened positively to prevail on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to provide a base each.¹¹ Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in Uzbekistan became important staging points for men and materiel.

The US cooperation with Central Asia has continued in the field of education, teaching English, popularising American culture, technology and human rights. Defence cooperation has continued through courses for personnel in the US armed forces institutions, UN peacekeeping and exercises. The Arizona National Guard conducts joint training with the Kazakh armed forces.¹² Exercise Steppe Eagle is conducted annually by the US Central Command in a multinational format and includes the US, the UK, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkey.¹³ The US has also pushed projects such as Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) and CASA-1000, which develop linkages in directions other than towards Russia and China.

The economic preponderance of the Western countries in foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan, makes them a strong influence over Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Over the past five years, the major foreign investors in Kazakhstan have been the Netherlands (\$33.8 billion), the United States (\$19.4 billion), Switzerland (\$12.5 billion), China (\$ 6.2

billion) and France (\$ 4.7 billion). As is clear, the combined investment of the West is more than 11 times that of China.¹⁴ The West is important in trade as well, since about 74 per cent of Kazakhstan's oil is exported to European countries.

US Bases and SCO

There was a trust deficit between Russia and China on one hand and the US on the other, which widened following the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, Tulip Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the protests against pro-Russian Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev in March 2005. Russia and China saw the hand of Western NGOs and intelligence agencies in attempting to topple pro-Moscow/pro-Beijing regimes. The final straw was the bloody Andijan revolt of May 2005 in Uzbekistan. In the SCO summit meeting on 5 July 2005 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the bloc called on the US to set a deadline for the removal of its military bases in Central Asia. Karshi-Khanabad was forced to close in 2005, while Manas was allowed to operate until the original lease expired in 2014. No renewal was granted.

From 2015 onwards, US interest was focussed on the drawdown from Iraq and Afghanistan and its engagement with Central Asia was less robust. A visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in February 2020, towards the end of the Trump Administration, excited some interest but led to no tangible outcomes.

The SCO

The SCO includes Russia, China, India, Pakistan and all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, which is not likely to join because of its policy of neutrality. Its primary focus is security and anti-terrorism.

The SCO has been a convenient mechanism for China to gain greater access to the security mechanisms of the Central Asian states and for Russia to keep a check on their depth of engagement. The number of engagements, both under the aegis of the SCO/multilateral formats and bilaterally between Russia and China have grown over the years. Most recently, Exercise Zapad/Interaction 2021, held bilaterally between Russia and China in China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, exhibited a joint command structure and increased complexity in terms of air power, artillery, armour and airborne/special forces participation.

The exercises with SCO countries in particular have contributed to the development of a range of capacities within the People's Liberation Army (PLA):¹⁵

- The PLA and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) have been afforded unique opportunities to practice air-ground combat operations in foreign countries, undertaking a range of operations including long-distance mobilisation, conducting cross-border airstrikes, carrying out air assault operations from foreign airfields, counterterrorism missions, stability maintenance operations and conventional warfare.
- These exercises have drilled the PLA Theatre Commands in conducting expeditionary operations beyond Chinese borders. The PLA Western Theatre Command directed operations during an exercise in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 and the Northern Theatre Command did the same during Russia's Vostok exercise of 2018.
- The SCO's agreement on military exercises provides the essential legal authority for Beijing to deploy troops to Central Asia for military exercises. This can further form the framework for long-term basing agreements.
- Beijing has used the SCO to gain experience in establishing diplomatic relationships and arrangements necessary to support power projection.
- Participation of PLAAF contingents has permitted China to learn the mechanics of negotiating the rights for overflight, the use of foreign airfields, the transit of a third country by land and utilising host country logistics support.
- The People's Liberation Armed Police Force (PLAPF) has participated prominently in almost all SCO exercises. This would permit the PLAPF to deploy in what can be claimed to be a benign role and the PLA can build up on the PLAPF later if required.

India joined the SCO as a full member in 2015 and routinely participates in SCO exercises. India also participates in the SCO's Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS). In addition to this, the SCO also deals with economic and cultural cooperation. India is a trusted partner for the Central Asian countries and has strong relations with Russia. Hence, there is a strong possibility of pushing through certain benign cooperation projects through the SCO.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

In international relations, there are no permanent friends or enemies – only permanent interests!

– *Lord Palmerston*

The interests of Russia and China in Central Asia are as follows:

Russia

- Retain strategic space and maintain primacy in CARs—keeping a cautious eye on the growing Chinese footprint.
- Maintain the Central Asian region as a strategic buffer against Islamic threats emanating from Afghanistan, Iran and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).
- Prevent the region from becoming a conduit for drugs into Russia.
- Counter US influence in the region.
- Economic integration of CARs into the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).
- Realise the long-standing Russian desire for warm-water port access through Central Asian land routes.
- Promote the North–South Corridor as a vehicle for economic integration, but with a view to Russian economic benefit and influence.

China

- Ensure security of Xinjiang region and prevent cross-border support to Uyghur terrorists.
- Prevent export of terror from Afghanistan-based groups via Central Asia into Xinjiang.
- Promote growth of BRI and its prominence as a vehicle of strategic influence.
- Secure Central Asian launch points and strategic BRI conduits for Northern, Central and Southern Eurasian land corridors.
- Enhance influence in Central Asia, especially in the security domain, without antagonising Russia. Herein, seek additional opportunities for weapons exports and possibilities for basing troops beyond Chinese borders.
- Enhance the appeal of Chinese culture and civilisation amongst Central Asian populations.
- Harness Central Asian resources towards energy security of China, especially of lesser connected/ developed Western China (Tibet and Xinjiang).
- Counter US influence in the region.
- Secure access to raw materials.
- Secure Central Asian market for Chinese finished goods.

Convergences

The cooperation between Russia and China is a global strategic imperative for both. Their actions in Central Asia and other theatres are fall-outs of the commonalities in their global agenda and strategic interests. The areas of convergence are as follows:

- **Islamic Fundamentalism:** The aim of countering the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is common to the world at large but is especially important to the US and the Euro-Atlantic community. Russia and China too share this aim with the West, but the groups that each view as threatening are quite different.
- **Multipolarity:** Both Russia and China want a multi-polar global political and economic framework and to shift the centre of global power from the Euro-Atlantic space to the East. They are sanguine that achieving this aim needs their coordinated action.
- **Economic Cooperation**¹⁶: The collapse of its relationship with the West over Ukraine particularly stressed the Russian economy. Hence Moscow was forced to pivot towards China. The Chinese hunger for energy and resources has enabled the Kremlin to keep some of its most important state assets going—Rosneft, Gazprom and the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) project—despite Western sanctions.
- **Political Stability in Central Asia:** Russia and China are highly suspicious of Western attempts to foist Western style democratic values or ‘colour revolutions’ in their near-abroad. Regime preservation considerations lead Central Asian governments to echo Russian and Chinese lines.

Divergences

Like the convergences, divergences are rooted in global dynamics and these must be factored to gain the broader picture before considering the factors specific to Central Asia.

- **Civilisational Differences:** Russia and China are both intensely proud of their heritage and civilisations and have implicit belief in their respective destinies to rule the world. Hence, in matters of political primacy, economic linkages, energy security and cultural influence, the two have different visions, but are pursuing them quietly and are avoiding any visible flare-ups of differences.
- **Russian Far East:** Russia fears losing control of its Far East to China because of the latter’s economic and demographic dominance.

Moscow has been sceptical of Beijing's intentions in the Far East, specifically that Chinese economic activities and migration could trigger political influence and eventually territorial claims.¹⁷

Before evaluating the military balance, the soft power balance between the two giants is indicated by digital dominance, cultural appeal and economic and social indicators.

Digital Dominance

By buying stakes in key telecommunication companies and gifting surveillance systems to authoritarian governments, *China has already become the pre-eminent digital technology provider in Central Asia*. Some instances of China's penetration are as follows:

- In 2019, Kazakh President Kassym Jomart-Tokayev visited the offices of Hangzhou Hikvision Digital Technology Company during a trip to China and afterwards spoke glowingly of the company's surveillance capabilities. He especially noted Chinese progress in areas such facial recognition, the usage of biometric and medical data and the collection of employment and credit history, holding up these advances as models for Kazakhstan.¹⁸
- There are already over 2,000 cameras in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, where Huawei has a collaboration with Kazakhtelecom, Kcell, Beeline and Tele2.¹⁹
- In 2008, Huawei modernised the Uzbek national telecommunications network for \$21 million. In 2011, Uzbekistan signed a \$18 million technology purchase deal with Huawei, using loans provided by the China Development Bank. The 883 cameras deployed by Huawei in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, are undergoing further developments to 'digitally manage political affairs'. Huawei's 5G is being incorporated into Uzmobil and Ucel connections.
- Furthering its debt, the Tajik government spent \$22 million to implement Huawei's 'safe cities' system in Dushanbe in 2013. Besides monitoring traffic, over 800 Chinese cameras are watching over public spaces such as monuments and parks. In 2019, it was reported that the system was being upgraded to facilitate artificial intelligence (AI)-based facial recognition. China already owns TK Mobile, one of the five telecommunication providers in Tajikistan.²⁰
- Huawei is the main technology supplier for Kyrgyzstan's top telecommunication providers Sky Mobile and Alfa Telecom,

providing 90 per cent and 70 per cent content respectively. In 2018, Kyrgyzstan selected a Russian company, Vega, for the first phase of a countrywide surveillance project. However, the Kyrgyz government turned back to Shenzhen-based Sunwin Intelligent and Chinese consultants to complete the second phase of the surveillance project set to cover the whole country with cameras and data centres.

Cultural Appeal

The number of Central Asian students studying in Chinese universities—often with hefty stipends from the Chinese government—is on the rise. From 2005 to 2015, the number of Kazakhs studying in China increased from 781 to 13,198. The Chinese government now offers 23 academic scholarships to Kyrgyz citizens wishing to study at Chinese higher education institutions.²¹

The Confucius Institutes are Beijing's chosen vehicle for advancing cultural and civilisational influence overseas. The organisation has 37 branches in Central Asia, which hold out the prospect of higher paying jobs in China for those qualified in Mandarin. Kazakhstan has 14,000 students studying at five Confucius Institutes, while in Uzbekistan 1,500 students per year study at the Confucius Institute within Tashkent State Institute.²²

However, *Beijing still cannot compete with Russia's media presence* in the region, the much wider prevalence of Russian language than of Chinese *or* the fact that *Russian universities remain far more popular than Chinese ones.*

Economic Issues

- **Remittances from Russia:** The scale of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's dependence on Russian remittances is clear when the sums are compared to their overall economy—31.3 per cent of GDP for Tajikistan and 32.9 per cent for Kyrgyzstan.²³
- **Sovereign Debt to China:** About 45 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt (worth \$1.7 billion) and 52 per cent of Tajikistan's (\$1.2 billion) is from China. The debts of both countries are greater than 20 per cent of their GDP. Turkmenistan owes China the equivalent of 16.9 per cent of its GDP, Uzbekistan owes 16 per cent and Kazakhstan owes 6.5 per cent.²⁴
- **EEU vs BRI:** While China is vigorously pushing the BRI, primarily in the fields of physical and digital infrastructure, the EEU with

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as members already exists as a functional customs free zone. It also offers certain protection to Central Asian migrant workers in Russia. The visions of the two economic blocs are divergent. Each aims to orient economic structures within the region of coverage to its own requirement. While Putin and Xi-Jinping have made statements about coordinating the activities of the two economic projects, fundamental contradictions have limited the cooperation.

Resentment and Sinophobia

The assessed Central Asian ethnicities in Xinjiang are 1.5 million Kazakhs, 1,80,000 Kyrgyz, 50,000 Tajiks and 10,000 Uzbeks. The ethnic Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang are clubbed with Uyghurs and persecuted.²⁵ Such Chinese actions against ethnic minorities are highly unpopular in Central Asia, especially so in Kazakhstan where Uyghur and Kazakhs live and have kin on both sides of the border. While Kazakhstan has certainly raised the issue of detained Kazakh citizens through diplomatic channels, it has done so carefully, quietly and to seemingly limited effect.²⁶

In 2016, the Kazakh parliament made amendments to the Land Code, allowing foreigners and legal entities with 50 per cent or more foreign participation to lease agricultural land for up to 25 years.²⁷ In reaction, protests flared up across Kazakhstan and the government was forced to impose a moratorium on the amendment until December 2021.

In 2014, when the Combined Heating and Power Plant at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, required repairs, Kyrgyz officials selected a Chinese firm named TBEA under pressure from the Chinese Government despite its inexperience. After costly repair, the plant failed mid-winter in 2018, leading to massive suffering and public unrest. The then Kyrgyz Prime Minister Sapar Isakov was tried and indicted for fraud. The Chinese earned a bad name amongst the population, but no action was taken against the Chinese firm.

China periodically lays claim to land in Central Asia, especially in the Tajik Pamirs. It does not seem as though Tajikistan, highly impoverished and heavily under debt to China will be able to resist for long. Most likely, disadvantageous deals will be pushed onto the Tajik side in return for writing off some debt.

Beijing-headquartered *Tuotiao.com* in an article argued that Kyrgyzstan was part of the Chinese Empire under the Yuan dynasty but

was later annexed by the Russian empire. Another Chinese company *Sohu.com* in a separate article claimed that “Kazakhstan is located on territories that historically belong to China”.²⁸ Both articles drew sharp diplomatic responses from the concerned countries.

There is an element of Russophobia too, which has been aggravated by the recent Russia–Ukraine war. The strongest trend is in Uzbekistan, with some anti-Russian voices being raised in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well. However, Sinophobia appears to be an opposition based on an ethnic mistrust of Chinese people, whereas Russophobia appears to be a political phenomenon, centered on the dominant stance adopted by the Russian Federation in regional affairs. There is not much hostility to people of Russian ethnicity, who are quite commonly found across the region, with the largest number being in Kazakhstan.

MILITARY OUTREACH BY RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Arms Sales

An analysis of Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data (summarised below) shows that:

- *Russia remains the primary supplier of arms* to the region (Table 1).
- Although the value is small in comparison with that supplied by Russia, China has supplied some niche weapon systems, such as Wing Loong armed UAVs, HQ-9 SAMs, AD radars and missiles for UCAVs to the region. Non-Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) members Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have struck a more balanced import proportion between Russia and China.
- Russia has provided some second-hand weapon systems and China has provided some non-lethal aid gratis to the two poorer republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Table 1 Arms Imports of Central Asian Countries

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Total Imported Arms (million USD)</i> | <i>Percentage Imported from Russia</i> | <i>Percentage Imported from China</i> |
|----------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| Kazakhstan | 2245 | 84% | 1% |
| Uzbekistan | 433 | 29% | 28% |
| Turkmenistan | 1218 | 27% | 19% |
| Kyrgyzstan | 42 | 98% | 2% |
| Tajikistan | 37 | 81% | 11% |
| Central Asia | 3975 | 61% | 10% |

Bases

Russia has the following bases in Central Asia:

- Kant Airbase, Kyrgyzstan—999th Air Base comprising five Su-25 ground attack aircraft, four L-39 training aircraft and two Mi-8 helicopters.²⁹
- 201st Base at Dushanbe, Tajikistan—Motor Rifle Division supported by ground attack aircraft and a rotary wing component.
- Aside from these two combat echelons, there are strategic facilities such as the Sary-Shagan Anti-Missile and Air Defence Testing Range and Baikonur Cosmodrome. In addition, there are numerous testing facilities, early warning radar sites and seismic centres, all manned largely by Russian military personnel.

China had no bases in Central Asia. However, in 2016 China appears to have moved toward establishing a more permanent security presence in the region with the establishment of a People's Armed Police outpost in the Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan. It appears to guard approaches to China's Xinjiang province from the Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan. Chinese military patrols have been conducted alongside Tajik and erstwhile Afghan National Army troops. The setting-up of this outpost was reportedly facilitated through the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM)—a counterterrorism forum established between China, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan in 2016.³⁰

Other Chinese attempts to secure military influence in Central Asia are as follows:³¹

- From 2003 to 2016, the Chinese army carried out a total of 39 drills together with the countries of Central Asia. Of those, the most joint exercises were held with Kazakhstan (16), followed by Tajikistan (11) and Kyrgyzstan (10). Since 2016, the PLA has conducted seven exercises with the national armies of Central Asia, two of which were carried out with the participation of the SCO.
- The PLAPF plays a major and ever-greater role in China's military diplomacy in the region. In 2019, China launched a new format of military exercises dubbed 'Cooperation 2019' between the countries' paramilitaries; this format was used in May with Uzbekistan's National Guard in that country's Jizzakh region, and in August with Kyrgyzstan's National Guard in the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang.

- Kyrgyzstan received \$16 million in 2014 to upgrade its weapons and build accommodation for its military personnel, and a further \$14.5 million in 2017.
- Chinese military assistance is most active in Tajikistan. In 2016, Beijing promised to build 11 border posts and one training centre for border guards along the Afghan border. That same year, China gave Dushanbe a grant of \$19 million to build officers' clubs.

Division of Labour in Central Asia

The primary mechanism to prevent Sino-Russian tensions from emerging in Central Asia is division of labour. Russia has traditionally concentrated on political stewardship and security, while China focussed on trade and economic issues. China has been careful not to be seen playing an active role in security or political affairs to avoid raising Russian hackles. The volume at which China is pushing trade with Central Asia inevitably implies growth of Chinese influence, which can only come at the cost of the present hegemon, that is, Russia. However, lacking the economic prowess of China, Russia had to permit the growth of Chinese influence. The alternative of the West gaining ground in the commercial and economic space was considerably more distasteful.

SEMINAL EVENTS IMPACTING CENTRAL ASIA IN 2021–2022

Developments Post Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan precipitated a major crisis with the capitulation of the elected government and renewed concerns about the export of terror through Central Asia into Russia as well as China.

The first response was diplomatic. The Central Asian Republics are most concerned that an economic collapse could send refugees flooding across their borders. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan that border Afghanistan, along with Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan, expressed support for the Afghan people while urging the Taliban to form an inclusive government representing all social and ethnic groups. The Central Asian approach attempts on one hand to agree with UN resolutions calling for an inclusive government and respect for women's rights. On the other hand, these governments are engaging with the Taliban at the ministerial level. The engagement attempts to restart trade, which holds out the hope that the Afghan economy will sustain its populace and that the Taliban may be persuaded to honour

its pronouncements that Afghan territory will not provide sanctuary to groups that aim to spread terror in other countries.³²

Not satisfied with benign engagement, Russia swiftly galvanised the CSTO into action and even incorporated non-CSTO member, Uzbekistan into drills aimed at countering possible spill-over of the situation into Central Asia. Rubezh 2021 was held in Kyrgyzstan in September 2021. 'Interaction-2021', 'Search-2021' and 'Echelon-2021' took place in Tajikistan, 20 km from the Tajik–Afghan border.³³ In August, Russian troops exercised with Uzbek troops near Termez on the Afghan border; they also held a trilateral exercise involving Tajik, Uzbek and Russian troops. Collective Security Treaty Organisation command and control elements were invariably involved in these drills and heavy weaponry including ground attack aircraft, helicopters, artillery and infantry combat vehicles were utilised.³⁴ In November, Kazakh and Uzbek troops participated in an exercise near the Uzbek–Afghan border.

Security Council engagements to evolve a joint response to the threat emanating from Afghanistan also intensified. India hosted a Regional Security Dialogue involving the National Security Advisers of the five Central Asian nations, Russia and Iran in November 2021.³⁵

However, what is notable is the *absence of China in both military drills and multilateral dialogues*. China has struck deals with the Taliban bilaterally but has not been directly involved in security reactions to the takeover. Even more surprisingly, the SCO with its Regional Anti-Terror Structure and pan-regional coverage would be the ideal forum to respond to the Afghan threat has been conspicuously silent. It can only be presumed that Russia has quietly but firmly asserted its right to primacy in managing security affairs in Central Asia, and has chosen to use the CSTO as the vehicle for coordinating regional security response.

There was speculation that the US would attempt to regain bases in Central Asia to target threats emerging in Afghanistan. However, the aversion to US basing since the events of 2005 have proved too strong. Russia had expressed willingness to let the US use her bases for surveillance drones under certain conditions. However, Chinese tensions with the US are too strong for them to give a nod to the return of US military presence in Central Asia. Consequently, the US had to conduct its evacuation operations primarily from existing bases in West Asia.

Post 'Tragic January' in Kazakhstan

On 2 January 2022, protests were held in Zhanaozen in Western Kazakhstan against the hike in price of LPG from 50 to 120 Kazakh

Tenge per litre. The protests spread to Aktau and thence to Almaty, the largest and most populous city of Kazakhstan, as also its economic capital. Dismissal of the government and a cap on LPG prices did not quell the protests, which were by this time taken over by hooligans and arsonists, resulting in mayhem. Almaty International airport was taken over by the miscreants on 5 January and recovered by government forces on the following day. Across the country, there was a coordinated pattern of attack against Akimats (regional governorates),³⁶ police stations and government offices.³⁷ In Almaty, banks and seven armourers' shops were looted and several Magnum stores ransacked. This build-up of public tension and the accumulation of armed miscreants with anti-state intent had not been reported by the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan (KNB), which in addition to commanding the Border Guard Service is responsible for external and internal security. The Almaty armoury of the KNB was attacked and reportedly surrendered without a fight.³⁸ The head of the KNB, Karim Massimov was arrested for 'high treason' on 6 January 2022.³⁹ The National Security Council of Kazakhstan continued to be headed by ex-President Nazarbayev even after relinquishing the presidency. This hobbled the powers of the incumbent president. Embattled but by no means defeated, President Tokayev, who had hitherto remained in ex-President Nazarbayev's shadow, declared himself as head of the National Security Council and called in CSTO peacekeepers on 5 January itself. Russia reacted with alacrity and deployed the first Spetsnaz troops by 6 January. A CSTO contingent of 2,300 troops—mostly Russian—but including 500 Belarusian, 200 Tajik, 150 Kyrgyz and 70 Armenian troops was deployed by 9 January, providing relief to the Kazakh armed forces and police. Analysts now ascribe the mayhem to a behind-the-scenes power struggle between President Tokayev and ex-President Nazarbayev.⁴⁰ By 11 January, President Tokayev declared his new Cabinet and declared that the CSTO mission would withdraw. The tangible end-result of the episode was consolidation of all powers of the state in President Tokayev, end of the behind-the-scenes rule of ex-President Nazarbayev and the emphatic stamping of Russia's dominance over regional security affairs of Central Asia. It also confirmed China's readiness to respect the division-of-labour principle in Central Asia.

India's Outreach

India has always enjoyed a high degree of trust with all the Central Asian states and in turn has been looked up to for its rich culture. The caravan

cities of Samarkand and Bukhara were key Silk Road stopovers, and the Mughal dynasty had its origins there. There has also been a fondness for Indian movies, right from Soviet times.

India was one of the first countries to recognise the independence of the Central Asian Republics with diplomatic relations being established in 1992. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme has been an excellent avenue for scholars from the region to carry out their higher studies in varied disciplines in Indian universities.

Defence and security ties also formed an important part of the relationship from the beginning. Officers and troops from the region have regularly attended courses of instruction in Indian defence establishments. The Kyrgyz–India Mountain Biomedical Research Centre is a valuable research collaboration between the two countries.

Indian strategists attributed the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997) to forces supported by the Pakistan-backed Afghan Mujahideen. Hence, India's strongest defence outreach was to Tajikistan, from where considerable material support was extended to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance.⁴¹ In 2002, India and Tajikistan signed a bilateral defence agreement, as part of which India refurbished the Gissar Military Aerodrome near Ayni. It has been referred to in some circles as India's first overseas base.⁴² India's strong defence outreach to Tajikistan has also manifested in a Border Roads Organisation Project⁴³ and a field hospital.⁴⁴ Supply of six Il-78 in-flight refuelling aircraft to India by Uzbekistan in 2005 gave further depth to defence ties with the region. We have even had a Kazakh Infantry company form part of an Indian Battalion Group to serve in the United Nations' Mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL).⁴⁵ This is a unique symbol of mutual trust between two militaries that are not part of a formal alliance.

India's Connect Central Asia Policy was introduced in 2012. Prime Minister Modi visited all five republics in 2015. The setting up of the India–Kazakhstan Centre for Excellence in Information and Communication Technologies was an excellence first step towards sharing India's strengths in the technical domain with the region.⁴⁶ Under two contracts signed in 2009 and 2015, Kazakhstan supplied 7,100 MT of Uranium to India,⁴⁷ while another 1,100 MT was supplied by Uzbekistan, making Central Asia India's leading supplier of Uranium (60 per cent of imported supplies).

The most significant energy tie-up with the region is undoubtedly the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline.

After a long gestation, in 2013, the governments of Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Turkmenistan directed their respective state gas entities to develop and invest in the TAPI pipeline. The TAPI Investment Agreement with an initial budget of over \$200 million was signed on 7 April 2016. Construction of the pipeline in Turkmenistan began in 2015 and was completed by mid-2019. Although the work in Afghanistan started in February 2018, it was again suspended due to the fighting between the Afghan government and the Taliban.⁴⁸ As of January 2022, the Taliban government of Afghanistan has re-emphasised its commitment to re-start the TAPI project soon.⁴⁹

While there is immense mutual goodwill on the part of the CARs and India, the lack of physical connectivity manifests in below-potential trade relations, which in turn leads to a lack of momentum in the relationship. Further, while China has established itself as a vigorous implementer of projects of magnitude, India's hesitant approach has led to dampening of enthusiasm to pursue joint projects on the part of the CARs.

Overall, India's outreach to Central Asia is multi-dimensional, but figures after Russia, China, the US, the EU and Turkey in terms of regional influence.

Effect of Relations with Major Players on Indian Outreach to Central Asia

With regard to Central Asia, it is safe to assume that both Russia and the US will facilitate India's entry and outreach to Central Asia. The latent rivalry between Russia and China may be leveraged to obtain greater Russian backing for Indian initiatives. China may be expected to ignore small overtures (since the gap between Chinese and Indian outreach is substantially large at present, low impact overtures may not be contested) but may attempt to block larger projects that have significant geopolitical impact.

The EU is a key economic partner and may be expected to maintain a positive stance on India's attempts to connect with Central Asia. Turkey is very influential due to commonality of language (all national languages less Tajik belong to the Turkic family of languages), extensive trade links and strong presence in the construction sector. Although Turkey is historically close to Pakistan, it may also be expected to remain neutral to Indian overtures.

Iran does not enjoy much traction in Central Asia. Religious fundamentalism is anyway strongly discouraged, and Shia Iran holds

no allure for any wannabe fundamentalists in Central Asia who are mostly Salafi Sunni. Ethnically too only the Tajiks are from Persianate ethnicity, while the other majority groups are Turkic. However, for India, Iran is the missing connective link. Whether it is Indian goods reaching Central Asia or Turkmen gas reaching India, Iran offers the most viable geopolitical alignment. Routes that traverse multiple national sovereignties get embroiled in a multitude of issues. However, where there is a single major intermediary transit country, investing political and diplomatic capital can usually overcome hurdles. In case of using the Iran route, there will be some US concerns to manage, but the potential outcomes are well worth the investment.

Assessment and Prognosis

While there are several factors that point to the strategic aims of Russia and China differing at the global level with regard to the Central Asian region, the visible picture is only one of cooperation and accommodation. For the moment, Russia and China continue to focus on their larger aims of fostering a multipolar politico-economic framework and of shifting the global power centre to the East. Though the factors that point to an inevitable rivalry and eventual falling out are real, but are within the realms of strategic management by both sides.

The Russians have had to accept that they lack the economic muscle to do anything substantial in the economic realm. Hence, in energy, trade volumes, transportation infrastructure and digital networks they have accepted China's lead in Central Asia as a means of limiting Western participation. China, in turn, has been extremely cautious about stepping into the security and political domain and takes care to publicly acknowledge Russia's leadership in these domains. In the field of soft power, Russia still leads by a long margin.

In the foreseeable future, it is likely that Russia and China will continue to coordinate their global positions on various issues of common interest, but their interaction is not likely to graduate into a formal alliance. In Central Asia, the established division of Russia taking the lead in security and political issues and China in economy, digital and infrastructure is likely to continue. In the face of the threat of terror from Afghanistan, Russia will attempt to contain it in coordination with CSTO allies. China's role is likely to remain on the side-line, as regards deployment of hard power. However, in terms of diplomatic engagement, Russia and China will work in very close coordination.

In Afghanistan, India was following the US lead. However, in Central Asia the US' ability is limited to securing only her core interests. Hence, India will need to engage deftly, bilaterally and multilaterally with the CARs as well as through Russia and the SCO.

Way Forward for India

India must be alive to the latent mistrust, temporarily suppressed territorial disputes, variances in interpretation and end-objectives of the two countries. The key contradictions that may be highlighted are as follows:

- The idea of destiny—that if China is permitted to grow unchecked, she will rob Russia of her destiny to rule the world.
- That the Russian Far East is under threat from China, first demographically and economically and eventually this may develop into a military threat.
- That Russia has had to majorly cede market space in Central Asia to the Chinese.
- That the BRI will make the EEU irrelevant, and that if the full scope of BRI infrastructure comes up China will re-route commercial traffic, entirely bypassing Russia.
- That Chinese economic largesse if permitted to flow freely into Central Asia will alter the current preference of the elite as well as the populace towards China and rob Russia of her current pre-eminence.
- That Chinese interest in Badakhshan region between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is not benign or limited solely to countering terrorists.
- That Chinese soft-power initiatives such as digital medicine, Confucius Institutes and scholarships threaten Russia's hold over tomorrow's generation.
- That once China achieves digital dominance, physical dominance will inevitably follow.

Messages for Central Asian countries:

- Chinese largesse is self-serving. Accepting attractive loans and aid will lead them into debt traps such as has happened to Sri Lanka.
- Chinese technology comes with loss of control over data.
- Despite border settlements in which China gained land, she has not given up her expansionist claims on their land.
- The persecution of Central Asian ethnic groups alongside the Uyghurs continues unabated.
- The Chinese will push through non-transparent deals that only benefit a few and may lead to the CARs losing land and resources.

However, it is well understood that without physical connectivity, our link to Central Asia remains tenuous. We have already lost more than a decade, by viewing our initiative in Chabahar through the narrow prism of connecting to Afghanistan. Connecting to Afghanistan was in itself an outcome of the self-limiting strategic objective of outdoing Pakistan in Afghanistan. Instead, it is time to view Chabahar and Iran as direct connectivity to Central Asia, where we already enjoy huge goodwill and where we can, in conjunction with Russian and European partners, set up trade conduits that connect Europe and Central Asia to Southeast Asia through India. It is only through such ambitious, but realisable objectives that we can realise our national potential.

CONCLUSION

China's tentative entry into Central Asia was initially welcomed and facilitated by Russia. Her involvement has now grown to such an extent that it has edged Russia out of the lead spot in trade/commerce, infrastructure and digitisation. However, in pursuit of its goal to weaken the US and Euro-Atlantic, Russia continues her tactical alliance with China.

So far both sides have worked towards accentuating their convergences. China has refrained from entering the security domain in a big way, while Russia has tacitly accepted Chinese investment in Central Asia as a better alternative than Western investment.

However, diplomatic opportunities must be exploited towards accentuating the fundamental differences between the two sides to create a more favourable space for Indian policy objectives.

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