

# Shifting the Sand? Emerging Dynamics of Sino-Russo Relations in Central Asia

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## Abstract

Over the past two decades, Russia and China have maintained an operational partnership, often characterized as an “axis of convenience,” centered on promoting a non-Western regional order in Central Asia (CA). However, recent developments, including United States (U.S.) withdrawal and China’s expanding regional posture, have accelerated shifts in this dynamic. Adopting a bottom-up approach grounded in empirical evidence, this study examines China’s increasing engagement with Central Asian states through the lens of Power Transition Theory (PTT). The paper argues that China’s incremental rise in CA is reshaping the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations in the region, challenging Moscow’s traditional monopoly across multiple domains. The findings suggest a narrowing asymmetry between Moscow and Beijing, with China emerging as a credible challenger to the status quo and increasingly attracting regional states to align with Chinese-led regional initiatives.

## Keywords

China-Russia, Central Asia, Power Transition Theory, Ukraine War, Great Power Competition, New Great Game

## Introduction

Historically, relations between Russia and China have been defined as an “axis of convenience” with the common objective of establishing a non-Western geopolitical order in CA (Lo, 2008, p. 3). This axis started with the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and has been limited by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from CA military bases in 2014, delineating the contours of a shifting geopolitical landscape within the region. In this order, China’s increasing engagement in the region emerged as a pivotal catalyst, instigating a profound realignment in the geopolitical landscape of CA, where traditionally, Russia enjoyed the region’s chief power. China’s gradually increasing engagement through different initiatives, coupled with the geopolitical repercussions of the Ukraine war, has significantly altered Moscow’s role within the regional architecture. Despite their leaders’ pledge to put “no limits” on their cooperation, Beijing has responded to the Russian invasion with cautious reserve. The same has been manifested in its abstention from United Nations resolutions on the matter

and condemning the aggression along with Central Asian states. Concurrently, China has significantly expanded its presence in CA, propelled by its growing economic power and strategic imperatives. This expansion is driven by a combination of security concerns, the pursuit of natural resources, access to emerging markets, and the desire to enhance geopolitical influence across the region (Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011). This gradual encroachment has attracted scholarly attention and generated pedantic debate on their shifting relationship within regional affairs.

Beijing’s growing economic and security footprint has positioned it as a credible regional actor, reinforcing claims

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to strategic parity with Moscow (Kazantsev et al., 2021; Wilson, 2021). The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, exacerbated by Western sanctions, have created a diplomatic and economic void, prompting Central Asian states to reassess their foreign policy alignments. In response, many have gradually distanced themselves from Moscow, opting for deeper engagement with Beijing. This strategic realignment has reshaped regional dynamics, diminished Russia's traditional leverage and opening space for China to advance a Beijing-centered regional order through investment, institutional cooperation, and security partnerships (CRS, 2023; Farhadi et al., 2023, p. 200). Concurrently, Russia's declining profile has transformed its relationship with China from an "axis of convenience" into a nuanced yet intensifying competition for regional primacy.

In this light, the paper seeks to provide an empirical and theoretical analysis of China's expanding role across the economic, political, and security domains, as well as its evolving approach to regional multilateral initiatives. It also examines how the Ukraine war has accelerated this trend, reshaping regional geopolitical alignments. Furthermore, the study aims to determine whether China's growing role in CA undermines Russia's historic position?

This article proceeds in following sections. First, we introduce the study and highlight the changing dynamics of Sino-Russian relations, from an "asymmetric partner" to an intense geopolitical rival. The second section uses a theoretical framework of PTT to explain the current trajectory of their relationship. Next, section analyses China's expanding outreach in CA across multiple domains, followed by an examination of how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has accelerated this trend and contributed to the reshaping of regional geopolitical alignments. The discussion section provides an in-depth analysis of evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian relations in regional affairs and highlights the findings of the study. The article concludes with a reflection on the changing geopolitical landscape of CA, shaped by the shifting strategic choices of regional states in response to emerging power dynamics.

## Shifting Geopolitical Dynamics and Power Transition Theory

Mackinder emphasized CA as the "pivot area" and "Heartland" of the world, which has always been an arena of international competition (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 38). For example, after the post-Cold War era, especially after the 9/11 terror attacks and subsequent War on Terror, being a "pivot area," the Central Asian region (CAR) has always witnessed a sharp contestation between the great and the rising powers (Lo, 2008, p. 93). In this context, Russia and China have prioritized the CAR in their respective foreign and security policies through bilateral and regional

partnerships defined as "axis of convenience" against the U.S.-led security architecture. Although the operational axis between Russia and China has been constrained by the U.S. withdrawal from the region, this shift has reconfigured the dynamics of their bilateral engagements with regional states, reflecting broader transformations in their strategic postures.

In this context, China's ascent as a major power in CA positions Beijing as a potential rival to Russia's long-standing regional dominance. China's strategic engagement in CA is primarily motivated by its pursuit of security and economic interests, notably the secure access to the region's abundant natural resources. Although trade and investment ties were already substantial prior to the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the BRI has accelerated China's expansion across the post-Soviet space, an area traditionally perceived by Moscow as within its backyard. This growing presence has contributed to the emergence of a zone of strategic contention between Beijing and Moscow (Pizzolo & Carteny, 2022). The rationale underpinning China's regional rapprochement reflects a convergence of economic and security imperatives, aimed at consolidating its influence while counterbalancing the presence of competing powers.

The above phenomenon is well understood in the theoretical framework of PTT, given by AFK Organski in his book *World Politics* in 1968. PTT perceives international and regional systems as hierarchical, with different degrees of cooperation and competition. At the top of the hierarchy, a single dominant power, recognized by the world for its superior position, manages regional and global power. It believes in the status quo and manipulates the current situation to benefit itself (Lim, 2015). According to PTT, a nation's power originates from its development. Due to varying development, countries will experience relative fluctuations, and the strength of a nation is changing rapidly. Rising powers are constantly challenging the hegemon and status quo, and the possibility of conflict is always there. If these challenges are successful, that means a huge power transformation from one group to another, resulting in a new international or regional order (Organski, 1968, pp. 339–340; Kim & Gates, 2015).

Scholars such as Lemke and Tammen (2003) and Kim and Gates (2015) have applied the theoretical lens of PTT to elucidate the dynamics of China's ascendancy. In the intricate tapestry of the CA geopolitical landscape, the historical imprint of Russian hegemony, rooted in the Soviet era, looms large. Conversely, China's engagement in the region represents a more contemporary phenomenon, yet one marked by accelerating momentum.

The divergence in military expenditures between China and Russia indicates their increasingly asymmetrical strategic trajectories. In 2024, China allocated approximately \$314 billion to its defense sector, more than double Russia's expenditure of \$149 billion (SIPRI, 2025). This disparity is further accentuated in the

economic realm, where China's gross domestic product (GDP) reached \$18.74 trillion, vastly surpassing Russia's GDP of \$2.098 trillion (World Bank, 2025). These figures reflect not only a widening gap in material capabilities but also a broader shift in the balance of power, with China emerging as the more dominant actor across both military and economic dimensions.

The asymmetry in military and economic capabilities between China and Russia carries profound implications for geostrategic influence in CA, positioning China as a viable challenger to Russia's longstanding regional hegemony. In this background, the paper does not argue that the regional order in CA has fundamentally changed. Instead, it highlights the evolving dynamics of China-Russia relations, which indicate the potential emergence of a rising China as a challenger to Russia's longstanding dominance in the region.

PTT underscores the likelihood of tension between rising and established powers. However, the potential for direct conflict remains limited in the context of Sino-Russian relations in the region. This is attributable primarily to their longstanding historical ties in the region, the relative decline of Moscow's influence, and the constraints on Russia's foreign partnerships stemming from extensive Western sanctions. Together, these factors reduce the probability of overt competition, fostering a cautious co-existence as each power navigates its strategic interests in CA. In this analytical framework, the PTT offers invaluable insights into the nuanced interplay of power dynamics, providing a theoretical scaffold to comprehend the transformative shifts underway in the region.

In this light, the study has used the parameters of trade, investments, and security linkages and different approaches in regard to regional groupings. Using the theoretical framework of PTT, this article examines China's increasing engagement with CA in various domains and assesses how the Ukraine war accelerates this trend. For the argument, this paper highlights evidence to support the assumptions of PTT in the context of competition between China and Russia in the region, thereby establishing China as a potential challenger to the status quo. The same findings are substantiated with empirical evidence and statistical analysis through figures.

### **China Increasing Engagement and Evolving Sino-Russo Relations in CA**

Following the achievement of their shared goal to expel the U.S. military from the region, Russia and China have consolidated their reciprocal spheres of influence in CA. However, following the geopolitical marginalization of their common rival, the divergent strategic objectives of Russia and China in CA have become increasingly apparent. This divergence has introduced multiple sources of tension and

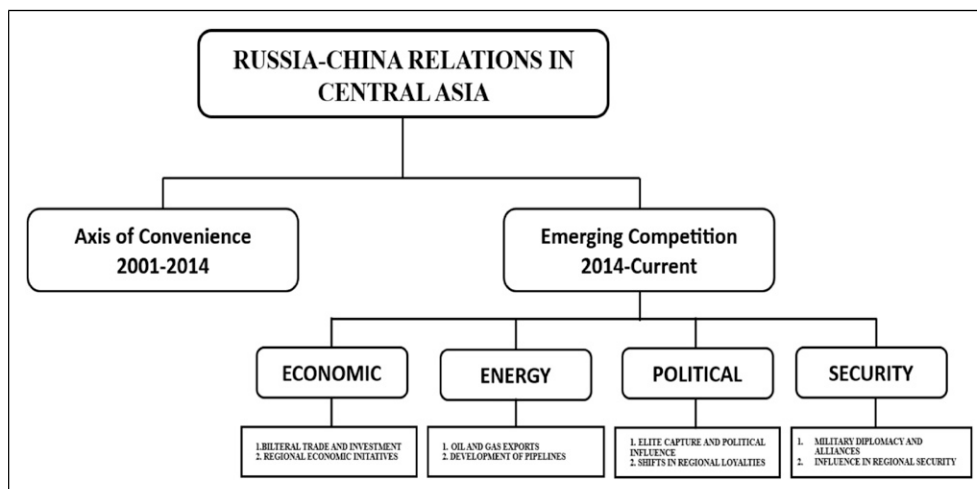
intensified geopolitical competition between the two powers (see Figure 1). This section analyses the evolving dynamics of Sino-Russo relations in CA, particularly emphasizing China's increasing stature in various domains, and strategic reverberations of the Ukraine war on their interactions with regional states.

### **Energy and Infrastructure Development**

In addition to Russia's traditional influence, China's expanding presence is increasingly significant in CA, serving as a pivotal force reshaping the regional dynamics within Greater Eurasia. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia established itself as a principal supplier of oil and gas to Europe, sourcing natural gas from Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and re-exporting it to European markets through strategic energy corridors. This arrangement historically afforded Russia considerable leverage, allowing it to influence oil and gas pricing across the region. Notably, Central Asian suppliers were not remunerated at prevailing European market rates, thereby reinforcing Russia's economic advantage and deepening its asymmetrical control over regional energy flows (Aminjonov, 2018).

The development of CA-China energy pipelines in 2007, specifically the Kazakh-China and China-Turkmenistan routes, marked a significant inflection point in regional energy geopolitics. These projects underscored Beijing's strategic objective of securing direct and diversified energy supplies, thereby reducing its dependence on maritime routes and bypassing traditional Russian-controlled transit corridors (Liao, 2019). These infrastructural advancements underscore the intensifying regional competition for influence between China and Russia. In an effort to reinforce its regional leverage, Russia proposed the Prikaspiiski gas pipeline project, involving Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (Indeo, 1998). Meanwhile, China's energy diplomacy gained significant traction in 2006, when it signed a long-term agreement with Turkmenistan to purchase 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually through 2038. Since then, China has invested over \$15 billion in Turkmenistan's fuel and energy sector, securing control over more than a quarter of the country's gas production and directly challenging Russia's Gazprom, which had previously dominated Turkmen gas imports. In addition, Chinese investments in Uzbekistan's energy sector are estimated at \$2 billion, while Kyrgyzstan has received approximately \$400 million in Chinese investment targeting its oil and gas infrastructure (Paramonov & Strokov, 2015).

In 2009, Russia abruptly halted its gas imports from Turkmenistan without prior notification, leveraging its market power to pressure Turkmenistan into accepting reduced gas prices. This approach exemplified Russia's strategic use of economic coercion, a tactic it reiterated in 2015 when it substantially decreased its gas purchases from



**Figure 1.** Changing dynamics of Russia-China relations in CA. Source: Prepared by authors

Turkmenistan, leading to a sharp decline in Turkmenistan's average annual gas production, from 40 bcm in 2009 to 11 bcm in 2014, and further down to 4 bcm in 2015 (Putz, 2016). The economic impact of Russia's actions generated significant financial instability in Turkmenistan, creating an opening for China, which intervened by providing critical financial assistance through loans. Further, Russia's economic challenges since 2014 have diminished its influence in the CA, as seen when Kyrgyzstan suspended a major hydropower project in 2016 due to a lack of Russian funding. China swiftly filled this void, rapidly capitalized on emerging infrastructural gaps in Kyrgyzstan, investing an estimated \$2.4 to 3 billion in the Kazarman hydropower project and an additional \$400 million in a solar power facility near Balykchy (The Times of Central Asia, 2024).

Besides Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan presents a compelling case study within CA, given its critical geopolitical position, sharing borders with China and Russia, and acting as a vital corridor between Eurasia and Europe. Since its independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's energy sector has been of strategic importance to Russia, which maintained significant influence over Kazakh energy resources, with all Kazakh gas exports directed exclusively to Russia until the end of 2017 (British Petroleum, 2018; Krapohl & Dienes, 2019). China's rising influence, evident in its import of 31.297 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Kazakhstan between 2019 and 2023, underscores its expanding strategic footprint and the evolving energy dynamics in the region (Nakispekova, 2024). Further, in response to U.S. energy tariffs, a Chinese delegation led by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade visited Kazakhstan in February 2025 to diversify supply chains and reduce reliance on Western markets. These developments exemplify Beijing's strategic intent to reconfigure CA into a pivotal energy corridor linking

China with Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and ultimately Europe (Harris, 2016; RFE/RL, 2023; Meena, 2025).

Moreover, China's intensifying engagement with Kazakhstan's economic landscape, exemplified by its strategic alignment of the BRI with Kazakhstan's national development program, "Bright Path" (Nurly Zhol), serves as a foundational mechanism for sustained economic, logistical, and infrastructural integration (Pizzolo & Carteny, 2022, p. 92). This institutional coupling not only facilitates bilateral connectivity but also embeds China more deeply within Kazakhstan's developmental trajectory. Concurrently, the consistent influx of Chinese energy imports and capital investments has contributed to the diversification of Kazakhstan's export corridors, thereby recalibrating regional power dynamics and amplifying China's geo-economic influence across the region.

These conditions have reinforced China's image as a reliable and credible strategic alternative. Unlike Russia, which has frequently resorted to coercive instruments of statecraft, China has largely abstained from overt military pressure despite its considerable capabilities. Instead, it has cultivated a posture of restraint, positioning itself as a stabilizing actor and thereby advancing the normative appeal of its "peaceful rise" doctrine (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2025; Lee, 2014). The combination of financial weakness and assertive tactics has undermined the mutual trust Russia once commanded and contributed to the perception of Russia as an unreliable partner.

If a macro view of the overall energy supplies is to be seen, in 2022, five CA governments traded about 50% more with China than with Russia, which was their primary commercial partner until 2008. Since 2009, the China-CA Gas Pipeline has delivered approximately 390 bcm of natural gas to Beijing. In 2025, Petro China is expected to resume construction of Line D, contingent upon the finalization of a gas supply agreement with Turkmenistan, which



would further consolidate China's energy ties with the region and raise the pipeline's annual capacity to 65 bcm (Cohen et al., 2022; Meena, 2025). This signifies that China's expanding presence disrupts Russia's historical dominance, redefining CA role as a strategically contested space where both powers now compete for influence over the regional energy nexus. Moreover, China's expanding involvement in the region's clean energy initiatives is poised to intensify future Sino-Russian strategic competition.

Further, the war in Ukraine has helped to accelerate the previous trend and has tilted the power fulcrum toward China. In the near future, it will take a leapfrog approach to the geopolitical vacuum. For example, Kazakhstan has seen numerous developments in 2023, the announcement of the signing of an information-sharing memorandum with the China Media Group (Voice of China), a feasibility study on the expansion of the Kazakh–China gas pipeline to increase the oil exports to China from about 2 million tons annually to 20 million tons; the announcement of a new air cargo route connecting the Chinese city of Chengdu and the Hungarian capital Budapest by the Civil Aviation Authority of Kazakhstan are some of the significant developments that cannot be ignored by the geopolitical experts (Eurasianet, 2023). These developments underscore China's increasing political influence in the region, which is largely facilitated by its economic leverage and strategic partnerships.

Moreover, the supply chain disruptions and subsequent inflationary pressures across Central Asian states following the outbreak of the Ukraine war have further facilitated China's deepening strategic penetration in the region. Thus, these countries attempt to diversify their economic links and build transit routes that avoid Russia (Guenette et al., 2022). In this context, China's \$15 billion investment in constructing the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway project, which commenced in April 2025, is poised to significantly enhance its strategic influence in CA and the South Caucasus. The project is expected to facilitate increased transportation of goods to European markets while simultaneously reducing China's reliance on Russian transit routes, thereby reshaping regional connectivity and trade dynamics (The Times of Central Asia, 2025a). In addition, this project is linked to the trans-Caspian international transport route, known as the Middle Corridor. The primary objective of this route is to establish a connection between China and the European Union via CA, the Caucasus, and Turkey, therefore circumventing Russia (Eldem, 2022).

As a result, Moscow no longer retains its neo-imperial dominance in energy relations with CA. The availability of competitively priced Central Asian gas has enabled Beijing to negotiate more favorable terms in its energy engagements with Russia, thereby undermining the latter's pricing leverage and strategic posture in the sector (Freeman, 2017). This dynamic has diluted Russia's energy diplomacy and served as a conduit for China's growing political influence in the region. By establishing direct energy supply routes from

CA, China has effectively diversified its own energy portfolio while reducing regional states' dependence on Russian transit infrastructure. This structural shift has eroded Russia's regional leverage and contributed to a broader reconfiguration of power dynamics across Eurasia.

### Trade and Investment

China's decision to launch the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013 underscored CA's strategic importance and signaled Beijing's growing autonomy in regional engagement, independent of Russian coordination (Hamilton, 2024). CA's geopolitical relevance stems from its location at the crossroads of major trade routes, substantial energy reserves, and centrality to China's BRI vision. While Russia has historically maintained dominance through post-Soviet institutional frameworks such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), serving as tools of normative and infrastructural integration, the rise of the BRI has introduced a parallel model of economic connectivity. Though not overtly designed to sideline Moscow, this emerging framework increasingly positions China as a principal architect of Eurasian integration, thereby challenging the long-term viability of Russia's regional primacy (Defraigne, 2021).

China's infrastructure initiatives in connectivity and energy reshape the de facto trade route and decrease the impact of de jure EAEU preferential trade relations. It generates trade diversion among the EAEU members in favor of China and at Russian expense. If seen from a larger perspective, initiated in 2013, China's BRI has increasingly constituted a significant political challenge for Russia. The BRI transcends conventional political boundaries by substantially advancing geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy. Under the framework of the BRI, China has actively supported the development of the China–Kazakhstan rail corridor, which traverses Alashankou in China's northwestern Xinjiang region and connects to Kazakhstan's Khorgos Gateway, a strategically located dry port (Chinyong et al., 2021, p. 289). These two infrastructures promote Chinese trade with the European Union via the Caspian Sea while carving out an independent geopolitical space for CA, particularly Kazakhstan. Simultaneously, it shapes the integration projects that transcend the Russian EAEU program, connecting Eurasia to Europe and increasing the Chinese geostrategic grip on the CA (Stronski & Ng, 2018). Consequently, the Chinese initiative now directly competes with Russian-led freight routes originating from Vladivostok. Moreover, the China–Kazakhstan route introduces additional competition for Central Asian markets, which are now accessible via both the Trans-Siberian Railway and the route from China.

The response from Moscow has been in the form of a Greater Eurasia Partnership (GEP), which was introduced in 2016. GEP encompasses not only the CA but also South

Asian countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, and India. Interestingly, the Russian approach to include India was to give more geographical coverage to its initiative, given that India is Beijing's arch-rival. Moreover, Russia supported India's inclusion in the GEP and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to diversify its foreign economic links and balance China's growing outreach. Russia's motivations for expanding these platforms have been seen as Russia's desire to dilute China's superiority (Pant, 2023). However, as Lukin (2019) suggests, this support likely serves the underlying goal of countering the BRI's influence rather than pure economic assistance. The GEP ultimately has two primary objectives: first, to connect Russia and the EAEU with the BRI, and second, to establish a network extending beyond China by linking the EAEU with Iran, India, and Southeast Asia. In essence, Russia's GEP operates as a calculated mechanism to contain Beijing's expanding influence in Eurasia (Luzyanin, 2018).

On the other hand, Chinese officials maintain a cautious attitude toward Russia's GEP because they perceive its motives as ambiguous. Consequently, they have lately referred to the GEP as the "Eurasian Economic Partnership Agreement" instead of the "Eurasian Comprehensive Partnership" (Krajczár, 2023). China's inclination toward economic collaboration with the Eurasian countries and a careful stance toward Moscow is evident in this statement (Braga & Hall, 2019). In contrast, Moscow views the BRI as potentially detrimental to Russia's interests in neighboring countries. Moscow is concerned about Beijing's increasing strength and influence. The increasing disparity, particularly notable in CA, poses potential challenges for Russia, potentially undermining its dominant position. Esteemed Chinese strategist, Jiao (2018), and work such as Zemánek (2020), suggest that Russia might perceive BRI as a vehicle to transform China's economic power into political influence, thereby threatening Russia's "great power" status. Moscow has articulated apprehensions regarding the BRI, viewing it as Beijing's strategy to exercise control within the region. Consequently, Russia is increasingly concerned that it may assume a secondary role, as evidenced by its reduced sway in regional geopolitical negotiations and decision-making processes (Krasnopolsky, 2022, p. 82).

Against the backdrop of shifting regional dynamics, China has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure, such as energy projects, pipelines, and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, which bypasses Russia. By 2020, China had surpassed Russia as the top trade partner for most Central Asian states. Over the past decade, Sino–Central Asian economic relations have deepened markedly, underscoring Beijing's strategic ambition to entrench its geo-economic presence across the Eurasian heartland. In 2023, according to Chinese statistics bilateral trade between China and CA surged to \$89.2 billion, a 27% year-on-year increase, propelled by targeted investments, large-scale infrastructure projects, and preferential trade mechanisms

under the BRI (see Table 1). Kazakhstan remains China's foremost economic partner in the region, with trade volumes reaching \$43.8 billion by the end of 2024, reflecting a 9% annual growth rate. Concurrently, Uzbekistan has elevated its bilateral relationship with China to an "all-weather" comprehensive strategic partnership, with stated ambitions to expand trade from US\$14 billion to US\$20 billion (Meena, 2025). These developments signal a recalibration of regional economic alignments, increasingly oriented toward Beijing's developmental model and investment-led diplomacy.

In comparative terms, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin reported that total trade turnover between Russia and CA stood at \$44 billion in 2023, with Kazakhstan accounting for approximately \$25 billion of that figure (Russia Pivot to Asia, 2025). While Russia retains significant economic ties through legacy institutions and energy interdependence, the widening trade asymmetry vis-à-vis China illustrates a gradual erosion of Moscow's economic primacy in the region. The growing disparity in trade volumes reflects not only China's superior economic outreach but also the strategic reorientation of Central Asian states toward diversified partnerships and infrastructural autonomy.

From an investment perspective, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in CA, which notably lagged behind Russia's in the early 2010s, has undergone a marked transformation. Since 2014, China's economic engagement in CA has shifted from infrastructure loans to diversified FDI, including factory construction and connectivity development. According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, cumulative direct Chinese investment in CA had reached \$63.9 billion by the time of the Xi'an Summit in 2023, with \$15 billion invested in 2022 alone. These investments have primarily supported energy, transportation, and manufacturing sectors (Zuenko, 2025). In contrast, Russia's cumulative investment stood at \$23.9 billion, with only \$3.6 billion allocated in 2022 (Eurasian Development Bank, 2023), highlighting a widening asymmetry in regional economic engagement. During the summit, China further pledged 26 billion yuan (approximately \$3.7 billion) to promote sustainable development in CA, although the specific allocation and intended use of these funds remain unspecified.

Nevertheless, China has emerged as a pivotal partner for Central Asian states in the domain of contracted infrastructure and development projects. As of April 2025, the cumulative value of such agreements between China and the region has reached \$120.1 billion, with a completed business turnover amounting to \$75.6 billion, reflecting the scale and depth of China's operational engagement in regional development initiatives (Global Times, 2025).

This trend has been further accelerated by the Ukraine war, particularly in light of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union on Moscow, as well as Russia's

**Table 1.** China-Russia Total Trade with Central Asian Countries in 2023 (Value in US Billion)

|              | Chinese Statistics           |                                        | Central Asian Statistics      |                                |
|--------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|              | Trade with China USD Billion | Trade with China, % Increase from 2022 | Trade with China, USD Billion | Trade with Russia, USD Billion |
| Kazakhstan   | 41.0                         | 30.0                                   | 31.0                          | 26.9                           |
| Kyrgyzstan   | 19.8                         | 28.8                                   | 5.4                           | 10.5                           |
| Tajikistan   | 3.9                          | 54.0                                   | 1.3                           | 1.8                            |
| Uzbekistan   | 14.0                         | 42.0                                   | 13.7                          | 9.8                            |
| Turkmenistan | 10.5                         | −5.2                                   | 10.6                          | 1.8                            |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>89.2</b>                  | <b>27.0</b>                            | <b>62.0</b>                   | <b>50.8</b>                    |

Source: Table made by authors with the source of [Zuenko \(2025\)](#).

own countersanctions. These measures have had spillover effects on the economies of other EAEU member states, diminishing the perceived benefits of EAEU membership while increasing economic burdens. Public opinion polls across CA (70% in Kyrgyzstan, 55% in Kazakhstan, and 30% in Uzbekistan) indicate that a significant portion of the population attributes current economic hardships to Moscow's actions, reflecting a notable erosion of Russia's soft power in the region ([Hamilton, 2024](#); [Sharifi, 2023](#)).

Equally significant is the evolving political posture of Central Asian states after the Ukraine war. Kazakhstan's initial neutrality on the war shifted decisively in favor of China's regional leverage. In addition to refusing recognition of the Donbas republics, Kazakhstan rejected Putin's demand to expel the Ukrainian ambassador and sent 28 tons of medical aid to Ukraine, aligning partially with Western sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, Central Asian governments formally endorsed China's 12-point peace initiative, which emphasized cessation of hostilities and diplomatic resolution ([Nakispekova, 2024](#)). These developments reflect the growing influence of regional elites whose interests increasingly converge with Beijing, positioning them as key proponents of pro-China policy orientations.

The preceding analysis underscores China's incremental acquisition of strategic leverage over Russia within the economic and diplomatic domains of CA. Regional elites have exhibited consistent skepticism toward Russia's GEP, while expressing more favorable dispositions, often marked by approbation, toward China's BRI, largely due to the material benefits derived from Chinese investments ([Chi, 2022](#)). China has already supplanted Russia as the region's principal economic actor, emerging as its largest trade and investment partner and gradually converting its economic primacy into geopolitical influence ([Hess, 2023](#)).

Concurrently, Russia's strategic agency has been constrained by its increasing dependence on China, a condition exacerbated by Western sanctions and limited policy alternatives. These structural asymmetries, both economic and geopolitical, have curtailed Moscow's capacity to contest Beijing's expanding regional role, resulting in a discernible

shift in the balance of power toward China ([Essen, 2023](#)). As noted by Russian analyst Arkady Dubnov, Moscow has been compelled to acknowledge China's dominant position in Central Asian trade and investment, even as Beijing nominally commits to accommodating Russian interests ([Asiryan & He, 2020](#)). Despite mutual rhetorical endorsement of each other's regional initiatives, both actors remain strategically vigilant, subtly navigating a competitive undercurrent beneath the veneer of cooperation.

### *Approaches Toward Regional Multilateral Initiatives*

China's strategy toward the region illustrates an emerging divergence in approaches between China and Russia, highlighting a new area of competition. Central to China's engagement are three guiding principles: non-interference in the internal affairs of regional states, economic cooperation, and enhancing its reputation among Central Asian countries. Furthermore, China's collaboration is framed within the context of a "war against the three evils," terrorism, extremism, and separatism, where the SCO plays a pivotal role. Beijing has positioned the SCO as crucial for addressing these security concerns, thereby reaffirming its strategic interest in CA ([Peyrouse, 2016](#)). In contrast, Russia's approach focuses on security collaboration through the CSTO and economic integration via the EAEU due to its influential role in both organizations. This divergence reflects a fundamental shift in regional dynamics as Russia seeks to consolidate its influence through established mechanisms. At the same time, China aims to assert its presence and counter perceived threats through the SCO.

On the contrary, Russia is more determined to transform the SCO into a geopolitical option that rivals the dominance of the West ([Li et al., 2020](#)). In addition, establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has diluted the SCO regional focus and undermined Russia's role in the region. While Moscow possesses the third largest vote stake in the AIIB, China is dominant and significantly influences the outcomes of essential matters in the AIIB ([Kembayev, 2017](#); [Raju, 2021](#), p. 63). China's strategic endeavors in CA indicate its intention to expand its economic presence in an

area formerly under Moscow's influence while also seeking to avoid conflicts with Russia (Noesselt, 2022).

This distinction in strategic orientations signals the emergence of a competitive landscape in CA, where both powers vie for influence. As China pursues its regional stability and economic collaboration agenda through multilateral frameworks, Russia's reliance on traditional security alliances may lead to increased friction and rivalry. Consequently, the interplay between these divergent approaches will likely shape CA's future geopolitical landscape.

### China Increasing Security Footprints

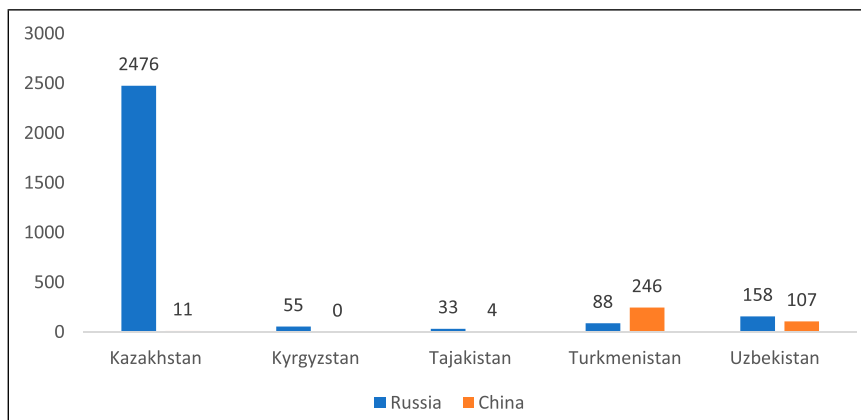
The evolution of China's regional posture from a predominantly economic focus to a dual emphasis on economic and security objectives became increasingly discernible in 2013. This strategic shift is marked by President Xi Jinping's visit to CA in September of that year, resulting in high-level economic agreements and notable arms transfers to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Kaura, 2019). By 2015, Xi had formally articulated military diplomacy as a key instrument of China's foreign policy, thereby institutionalizing its security engagement with the region (China Power, 2020). Although Russia has traditionally maintained dominance over CA's security architecture through mechanisms such as the CSTO, China's expanding economic and political influence has increasingly enabled it to shape regional security dynamics, signaling a gradual recalibration of strategic hierarchies.

Building on its evolving strategic posture, China's expanding security footprint in CA reflects a deliberate and multifaceted approach to consolidating influence beyond the economic domain. A key milestone in this trajectory was the 2016 Urumqi meeting, where senior military officials from China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan established a consultative framework aimed at enhancing cooperation on counterterrorism and anti-extremism initiatives (Aliyev,

2022; Kazantsev et al., 2021). This initiative was subsequently reinforced through a bilateral agreement with Tajikistan to strengthen border security, alongside reports of a Chinese military facility in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region, an indication of strategic ambitions that extend beyond publicly articulated counterterrorism objectives (Nikolov, 2025). Furthermore, unconfirmed reports of Chinese presence at Afghanistan's Bagram air base, if validated, would represent a significant escalation in Beijing's regional military posture (The Hindu, 2025). Collectively, these developments underscore China's deepening foothold in CA and point to the gradual emergence of a parallel security architecture that may challenge the dominance of Russia-led mechanisms such as the CSTO.

Aligned with China's expanding strategic engagement in CA, the 2022 visit of Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan represented a significant advancement in bilateral defense cooperation. The meetings focused on strengthening military exchanges, particularly in the area of equipment technology, and included discussions on regional security concerns, notably the evolving situations in Ukraine and Afghanistan (CRS, 2023). In parallel, Central Asian states have increasingly turned to Chinese arms procurement, acquiring unmanned aerial vehicles in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, armored vehicles in Tajikistan, anti-aircraft missile systems and artillery shells in Uzbekistan, and transport aircraft in Kazakhstan. Among these, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have emerged as notable partners in military-technical cooperation, with Chinese-origin weaponry accounting for over 20% of their total arms imports (see Figure 2).

China currently ranks as the second-largest arms supplier to CA, following Russia. While Russian weaponry continues to dominate within CSTO member states, reflected in ratios of 85:1 in Kazakhstan, 53:1 in Kyrgyzstan, and 27:1 in Tajikistan, this pattern is notably less pronounced in non-CSTO states such as Uzbekistan (6:4) and Turkmenistan (54:46) (Zholdas, 2021). Since 2022, Russian arms exports



**Figure 2.** China-Russia arms trade with CA 2015–2024 (value in US million). Source: Graph generated by authors with the source of SIPRI (2025)



to the region have declined significantly, with a reported 52% drop in overall volume by 2023 (Zuenko, 2025). Over the past 5 years, China has overtaken Russia as the leading arms supplier to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, suggesting a growing shift in regional procurement preferences. Recent reports indicate that Uzbekistan is actively considering the acquisition of Chinese-manufactured fighter aircraft, potentially involving the JF-17 Thunder, a multi-role platform jointly developed by China and Pakistan (Eurasianet, 2025). This prospective deal, alongside broader efforts to modernize Uzbekistan's air force and replace aging Russian systems, underscores the deepening trajectory of China–CA military-technical cooperation (Nikolov, 2025).

Moreover, China has increasingly positioned itself as a defender of regional sovereignty, particularly in relation to Kazakhstan, following President Putin's characterization of the country as an "artificial state." In a symbolic gesture, Xi Jinping's first foreign visit after the COVID-19 pandemic, and immediately preceding the SCO summit, was to Kazakhstan, where both sides pledged "mutual support on matters of sovereignty, national security, and territorial integrity" (Arduino, 2022).

Simultaneously, China has actively engaged in joint military exercises with CSTO member states through the SCO framework and bilateral channels, participating in 45 military exercises between 2003 and 2020 (see Figure 3). It has also launched initiatives to assist and equip Central Asian states' armed forces, offering military technological support to strengthen regional security cooperation (Wani, 2023). China has further institutionalized its regional security role through bilateral agreements with Central Asian states, including a strategic partnership with Kazakhstan and a security cooperation accord with Tajikistan (Stronski & Ng, 2018). A key distinction between Chinese and Russian regional strategies lies in their respective approaches to identity and engagement. While Moscow continues to treat

the Central Asian republics as a collective entity, often through Soviet-era mechanisms such as the CSTO, Beijing has adopted a more adaptive model of "multilateral bilateralism," allowing for tailored engagement with individual states. This approach was reaffirmed at the second China + CA (C + C5) Summit in Astana, where China formalized its commitment by signing the Treaty of "Permanent Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation," an institutional milestone that reflects its deepening regional presence and ambition to foster a stable and cooperative Eurasian order (CGTN, 2025).

To further consolidate its regional security role, China launched the Global Security Initiative in 2022, emphasizing sovereignty, non-interference, and counterterrorism principles resonant with the domestic stability concerns of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Complementing military ties, Beijing has expanded law enforcement cooperation through intelligence-sharing, police training, and cybersecurity initiatives, advancing its strategic objective of safeguarding regional stability and economic interests (Meena, 2025). Against this backdrop, Beijing's stature as a regional security provider has notably increased. Meanwhile, Moscow's capacity to address emerging security challenges and maintain its traditional role has experienced a marked decline. According to Alexander Gabuev, Moscow's traditional strategic advantage in the region is diminishing, and if current trends persist, Moscow's dominance may be compromised (Jiang, 2021) (Figure 4).

In light of these developments, the geopolitical fallout from the Ukraine war has significantly accelerated the reassessment of Russia's role in CA, prompting regional states to reconsider their strategic alignments. Russia's coercive posture and exposed military vulnerabilities have eroded its credibility as a reliable partner (Jones, 2023; Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2025), while the conflict has further illuminated the limitations of Moscow's foreign policy toward its "near

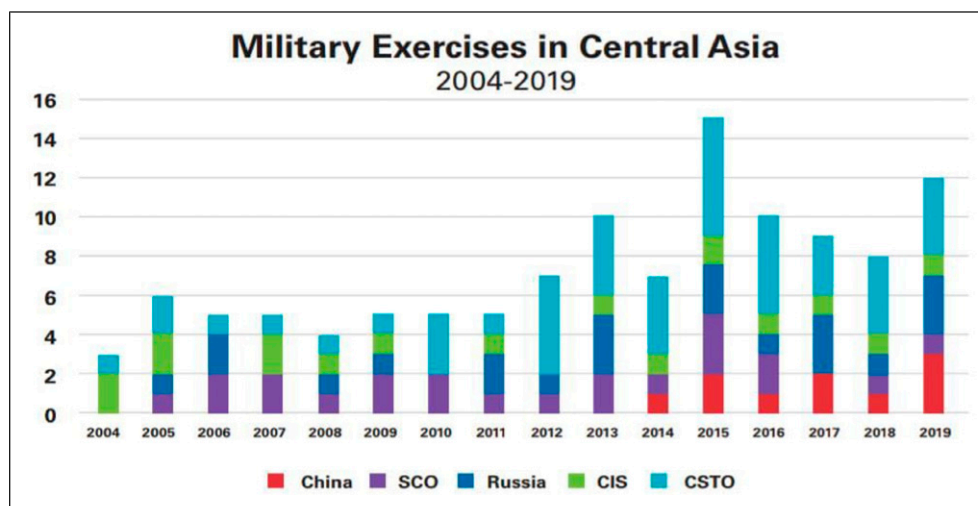


Figure 3. Military exercises in CA. Source: Jardine and Lemon (2020)

|                                                                                                | Kazakhstan | Uzbekistan | Tajikistan | Kyrgyzstan | Turkmenistan |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)                                                                 | x          |            |            | x          |              |
| Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)                                                 | x          |            | x          | x          |              |
| Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)                                                       | x          | x          | x          | x          |              |
| Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)                                                        | x          | x          | x          | x          |              |
| China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC) of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) | x          | x          | x          | x          | x            |

**Figure 4.** Participation of five Central Asian Republics in regional integration initiatives. Source: Pizzolo and Carteny (2022)

abroad.” Despite efforts to consolidate influence, Russia has struggled to maintain regional order, which is evident in the CSTO’s failure to prevent border clashes between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan and Armenia. Internal instability, such as the Prigozhin mutiny, has compounded perceptions of Russia’s weakening grip. As a result, Russia’s neo-imperial approach appears increasingly untenable, creating strategic openings for alternative actors (Doolotkeldieva, 2022).

In the current geopolitical environment, regional states have adopted a strategy of “right distance” from Moscow with the aim of balancing their respective relations with other powers. Also, the factors of the international community and domestic political developments (Anceschi, 2022, p. 3) have led the CA states to tilt favorably toward China. At the same time, work such as Shakhanova (2024) highlighted that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian elites portrayed China in a more positive manner. Recent developments illustrate a discernible pattern of Central Asian states distancing themselves from Russia’s strategic orbit. In 2022, Kyrgyzstan revoked Moscow-led CSTO military exercises scheduled on its territory, signaling discomfort with Russian-led security arrangements. In December 2024, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev postponed his visit to Bishkek, thereby avoiding a direct meeting with President Vladimir Putin (Arynov & Umirbekov, 2025). This diplomatic maneuver coincided with broader efforts to recalibrate Uzbekistan’s foreign policy posture. Similarly, Kazakhstan has increasingly emphasized its multi-vector foreign policy, with President Tokayev publicly rejecting the notion of a “Soviet revival” and refusing to recognize the independence of Russian-backed separatist regions in Ukraine, a step followed by the other remaining republics (Kazantsev et al., 2021; *The Times of Central Asia*, 2025).

On the other hand, several Central Asian leaders have openly challenged President Putin’s regional posture. During a high-level meeting in Kazakhstan in October 2022, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon publicly demanded greater respect from Russia, stating pointedly, “Nothing else, respect,” and voiced dissatisfaction with Moscow’s treatment of Tajikistan and the broader region as a

geopolitical backyard (Farhadi et al., 2023, p. 201). Furthermore, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United Nations adopted a resolution on February 23, 2023, calling for Moscow’s withdrawal. Notably, all Central Asian states, except Turkmenistan, which abstained, and China, refrained from voting (United Nations, 2023). This collective abstention raises questions about whether the decision aligned with Beijing’s preference to preserve its regional partners’ multi-vector foreign policy frameworks. The episode is particularly significant given President Putin’s visit to Kazakhstan in October 2022, during which he reportedly sought Astana’s support for Russia’s position on Ukraine (Bugajski, 2022; Kazantsev et al., 2021). In this context, the impact of the Ukraine war on Sino-Russian relations in CA is best understood as a derivative of China’s expanding strategic presence and Russia’s diminishing influence, rather than as a standalone driver.

Further, these developments, highlighted by Bruce Pannier, a U.S. journalist with extensive experience in the region, contended that the CSTO’s role as a regional security guarantor has waned in the wake of the Ukraine war, suggesting it “seems to be dying” amid the absence of new member states. Within this conflict-ridden context, Central Asian states are increasingly recalibrating their security dependencies, viewing Moscow as a source of instability rather than assurance (Pannier, 2022, p. 1). Further, study such as Umarov (2022) argue that Russia’s soft power in CA is waning due to the Ukraine war, evidenced by declining Russian language use, rising decolonization rhetoric, and anti-war protests. He asserts that without a policy shift, Russia’s influence will further diminish. This growing sense of insecurity presents a strategic opening for China to deepen its engagement with regional nations.

As Russia’s war in Ukraine continues, China will likely intensify its efforts to safeguard economic interests in CA by offering security assurances (Jones, 2023, p. 103). Additionally, growing instability in Afghanistan and China’s deepening engagement with the Taliban present further opportunities for Beijing to expand its security cooperation with regional actors, enhancing its strategic outreach in the region (Arduino, 2022).

Considering the above analysis, the current study asserts that China's grand strategy aims to construct a complex web of influence in CA, resulting in rapid strategic encroachments and a corresponding contraction of Moscow's geopolitical space. This trajectory points toward the emergence of a China-centered regional order.

## Discussion

The strategic interplay between China and Russia in CA reflects overlapping military and economic engagements, underpinned by divergent interests and asymmetrical ambitions. In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the region, both powers are navigating a recalibrated geopolitical environment that has enabled Beijing to assertively expand its influence through infrastructure investment, security cooperation, and diplomatic outreach. Despite their nominal partnership, enduring mutual mistrust and latent geopolitical rivalry have produced divergent strategic objectives, as neither actor is inclined to tolerate the emergence of a dominant neighbor within its perceived sphere of influence. President Vladimir Putin expresses his concerns: "When such a potentially powerful country as China begins to demonstrate rapid growth rates, it becomes a real competitor in world politics," underscores the strategic anxieties underpinning Russia's posture (Yu & Sui, 2024). This concern has manifested in Moscow's efforts to deepen military cooperation with states such as India, often in defiance of Beijing's preferences. Conversely, China's intensifying engagement with CA, including former Soviet republics, reflects its broader ambition to consolidate regional influence and counterbalance Russia's historical dominance.

China's interest in the region is not solely economic; it also reflects security considerations, especially regarding its western provinces and access to stable energy routes. Recent analyses suggest that Beijing's rationale includes security alignments, expanding trade networks, and fostering diplomatic ties, reinforcing its image as a stabilizing force. This strategic outreach has come at a time when Russia's focus is divided, primarily due to its conflict in Ukraine, which may strain its ability to project influence effectively in the region. Thus, while Moscow retains significant influence in the region, the growing asymmetry in economic investments, such as China's extensive infrastructure and energy projects and increasing security footprints, points to a gradual realignment. China's ascent introduces a credible counterbalance to Russia's historical dominance, signaling a potential reconfiguration of power that challenges traditional structures and may redefine regional geopolitical orientation.

Against this backdrop, CA nations are looking for a stable security partner but are cautious enough to choose one that is not geopolitically hostile to Moscow. Further, the CA nations' primary aim is to keep the U.S. out of the region,

strengthen authoritarian regimes, and provide security against local rebellions (Palmer, 2023). Additionally, the absence of political-military influence exerted by China, in contrast to Russia, renders China a desirable ally for numerous CA nations. The role of Chinese soft power cannot be ignored, as there is a sharp increase in Central Asian students, particularly from Kazakhstan, pursuing their degrees in China. This makes China a more enticing option and allows Beijing to acquire a tighter grip on the region's affairs (Krapohl & Dienes, 2019; Vanderhill et al., 2025). This paper argues that China's gradually expanding footprint in the economic, political, and security domains serves as the primary driver shaping the dynamics of Russo-Sino relations in CA, while the Ukraine war functions as a catalytic context that has accelerated regional realignments toward a preferable order.

Our findings reveal that Russia remains entrenched in its political-military posture and does not hesitate to employ its arm-twisting approach toward Central Asian states to preserve its strategic influence in the region. On the other hand, China has taken a pragmatic approach and is successfully presenting itself as a long-term partner capable of helping the Central Asian nations in their overall development program. Thus, in contrast to Russia, China "uses a broad-spectrum approach that leverages a broad set of economic and diplomatic instruments (with the potential to increase its capacity for arms transfers substantially and increase its security footprint) at a high level of bandwidth with nearly all potential partner countries" (Meisel et al., 2023, p. 43). China's engagement through multilateral frameworks reflects its strategic interest in CA and growing regional geopolitical influence. Through consistent diplomatic efforts, China has cultivated a favorable environment and earned the trust in post-Soviet place. This evident manifestation illustrates China's deliberate inclination to gradually redirect Central Asian states away from Moscow, endeavoring to foster a regional interdependency. For the foreseeable future, the transition in the regional order is expected to unfold over several decades, during which China and Russia will continue to advance competing visions of governance and stability within the evolving regional architecture.

Further, China's role in CA becomes even more vital in the absence of a traditional security guarantor, following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Consequently, Beijing now faces both a strategic necessity and a unique opportunity to deepen its influence in the region, particularly as regional states seek a reliable security partner amid shifting geopolitical tides. China is laying the groundwork for a Pax Sinica in the region by securing influence across crucial fields, including economic, defense, and military domains, positioning Russia as, at most, a junior partner. Beijing's willingness to adopt an active and stabilizing role signals its intent to shape a new regional order. As Russia remains preoccupied with the conflict in Ukraine, China is

leveraging this strategic power vacuum to gradually supplant Russian influence and solidify its presence in CA.

Consequently, China's growing status as a dominant power and the Central Asian states' decreasing engagement with Russia have changed the regional strategic dynamics from an axis of convenience to an axis of asymmetry. This context reflects an asymmetrical power dynamic, wherein the axis between two states is uneven based on their capabilities, resulting in a discernible tilt of power toward one relatively strong actor. This imbalance confers a strategic advantage to the dominant power, influencing the regional or bilateral interactions based on this differential in capabilities and influence. The shift has undoubtedly elevated Beijing's role as an economic and political leader in the region. Thus, the shifting regional dynamics are increasingly apparent in several fields, indicating that China's influence in CA is poised for substantial growth in the coming years.

## Conclusion

Through the lens of PTT, it is conclusive from the above analyses that China extended strategic involvement through multiple initiatives, and increasing security footholds established Beijing as a potential challenger to Russia's hegemony in the region. On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has directly affected Russia's relations with Central Asian states. The war, characterized by Russia's overt use of hard and technological power, has not been appreciated in CA. Thus, regional states have adopted a delicate balancing strategy, maintaining a right distance from Russia by gradually reducing their strategic dependencies on Moscow. Consequently, China benefits from the geopolitical vacuum in CA and has found more acceptance in its policies and initiatives. China's strategic alignment and increasing footprint reshape the regional security architecture currently observable in the CA. The region's geostrategic environment resembles an interregnum in the Gramscian idea: "the old is dying, but the new cannot yet be born" (Heiduk, 2023). Beijing's approach goes beyond economic ties, employing a soft diplomatic approach and a combination of respectful conduct, i.e., a hands-off approach to internal affairs. Favorable terms of trade and finance have taken the lead. This approach starkly contrasts with Russia's history of imposing restrictive trade policies and covert political interference.

Consequently, Central Asian states have gravitated toward China's overtures, viewing them as less intrusive and conducive to preserving their sovereignty in the current environment. This multifaceted diplomatic endeavor has notably bolstered China's geopolitical standing. This study does not contend that China faces no challenges in the region; however, by capitalizing on current geopolitical shifts, Beijing has potentially catalyzed a significant transformation in regional dynamics, thereby narrowing the

strategic power gap between itself and Russia. As the Ukraine war persists and Russia's financial and strategic dependence on China deepens, Moscow is increasingly constrained from openly opposing Beijing's regional initiatives or strategic posture, which can be defined as cooperative competition. In this light, further research delves deeper into how regional states consider these dynamics and whether it will allow them to play external powers off against one another or will they be forced to choose sides.

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