



Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia

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Abstract

Central Asian states are usually considered as passive elements rather than active agents of integration in Greater Eurasia. This article considers the role of these states as active agents shaping integration processes according to their own interests and perspectives. All Central Asian states conduct so-called “multivector” foreign policies balancing relations with the key great powers (Russia, China, and “collective West”) as well as with Middle Eastern and South Asian nations. From their point of view, the ideal formula for Greater Eurasia should include the entire continent. However, the current geopolitical situation in the world turns integration of Central Asian nations with Russia and China into the only available option. Political and military integration with Russia within the CSTO as well as economic integration with Russia within the Eurasian Economic Union are key elements of this. The SCO is also very important as the key structure shaping regional security system. The general framework for the construction of Greater Eurasia including Russia, China, and Central Asian nations in the economic sphere is mostly connected to the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative and to the agreement on cooperation between this initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union. However, between Central Asian nations, on one hand, and Moscow and Beijing, on the other hand, there are still many practical issues that must be solved to push integration forward, and currently there are no indicators that these issues would be solved in the near future.

Keywords

Central Asia, multivector foreign policies of Central Asian states, Russia and China in Central Asia

Central Asian states are usually considered passive elements rather than active agents of integration in Greater Eurasia. This article considers the role of these states as active agents trying to shape integration processes according to their own interests and perspectives. Coronacrisis in the region is transforming the situation; however, the direction in which it pushes Central Asia in terms of relations with China and Russia is still unclear,¹ so in this article, we mostly concentrate on the factors that worked before the crisis.

Along with Russia’s traditional influence, China’s growing influence is strongly felt in Central Asia and constitutes a key factor in shaping the new regional structure of Greater Eurasia. The Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) was established in 1996. In 2001, with the accession of Uzbekistan, it was transformed into the SCO. Russia continues to have a serious influence on Central Asia via the Eurasian economic integration project (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are currently EEU [Eurasian

Economic Union] members, while Uzbekistan and Tajikistan’s potential membership is being discussed) and also via the CSTO, a military and political organization. The latter, in addition to Russia, includes such Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan twice joined the CSTO and its predecessor the CIS CST and then withdrew from membership (its participation in this

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organization is currently suspended). Turkmenistan officially holds a neutral status.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's overall economic influence has become one of the crucial factors shaping the development of Central Asian EEU members. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping enshrined this situation in an agreement "connecting" these two projects in May 2015. It was also enunciated forth in the Joint Statement on Cooperation on the Construction of Joint Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Projects (2015). Certain elements of Russia–China cooperation in Central Asia were also outlined in the EEU–China Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation (2018).

For a long time, Russia and the CSTO played the decisive role as the security guarantors in Central Asia. However, Kyrgyz analyst Nargiza Muratalieva notes that China is also gradually coming to play an important security role (Panchenko, 2019). This development is most clearly manifested in the creation of a mechanism of consultations to jointly combat terrorism and extremism. It was established by China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in summer 2016 in Urumqi (Hrolenko, 2018).

Some prominent Russian international relations experts view the growing interaction between Russia and China and between the integration projects they support, such as the EEU, the SCO, the BRI, and the CSTO, as the emergence of Greater Eurasia (Karaganov et al., 2015). This structure could emerge from the further development of the regional cooperation system in Eurasia. One way to do this would be to create an interconnected network encompassing free trade zones, inter-bloc trade and economic partnerships, and regional integration processes. The specific situation of the New Cold War in Russian–American relations and growing Chinese–American opposition are also important factors promoting the building of Greater Eurasia (Karaganov, 2018; Lukin, 2018, 2019). Works on China's possible "Eurasian century" have also appeared in the West (Rolland, 2017). Their authors also consider possible risks for OBOR (One Belt One Road) in Eurasia (Ferguson, 2018).

There are many scholarly and expert publications that analyze the general characteristics of Russia–China relations in Central Asia (Freeman, 2018; Lukin, 2019; Na-Xi et al., 2019; Odgaars, 2017; Samokhvalov, 2018). There are far fewer works that consider the stances of Central Asian actors (Kirkham, 2016; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012; Lee, 2016; Peyrouse, 2016; Syroyezhkin, 2015; Zhengyuan, 2010). What is entirely absent is a systematic analysis of the interests of Central Asian states involved in the current Russia–China rapprochement that establishes the outlines of Greater Eurasia.

What do Central Asian states themselves want? All Central Asian states conduct so-called "multivector" foreign policies that balance relations with the key great powers (Russia, China, and the "collective West") as well as with Middle Eastern and South Asian nations (Cooley,

2012; Kazantsev, 2008; Nourzhanov, 2012). Expert Dosym Satpayev (2018) (Kazakhstan) defined the essence of the "multivector" foreign policy as follows: "Kazakhstan's interest lies in not following in the wake of some major geopolitical actor; we do not need either Russia or any other state as a 'Big Brother.'" "Multivector" foreign policies can also be regarded as balancing or bandwagoning, the kind of politics that are typical for Central Asia. The balancing theory was developed by the classics of realism and neorealism. The case of Central Asian nations is closest to the studies of balancing by small and medium-sized states that are in contact with more powerful actors (David, 1991; Elman, 1995; Hey, 2003; Sutton, 1987).

The Central Asian states' multivector foreign policies are in no way limited to their interaction with China and Russia. These states are actively developing interaction with Western countries in all possible formats. Given the increasing contradictions between Russia and the West and between China and the United States, this is currently one of the principal means of balancing against the growing influence of Russia and China. Central Asian states have partnership and cooperation agreements with the European Union (EU) and there is special EU's strategy on Central Asia. They are members of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). Central Asian states actively cooperate with NATO within the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and under the Partnership for Peace program. Since 2006, Kazakhstan has even had an individual partnership plan with NATO. Close military and political bilateral interaction was established between the United States and several Central Asian states after the start of the US operation in Afghanistan. A less efficient way of balancing is participation in integration projects with Islamic states through the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Islamic Development Bank, and the Economic Cooperation Organization. India and Pakistan's accession to the SCO institutionalized cooperation between states of Central and South Asia. The superimposition of all the above-listed organizations and bodies creates a chaotic network of mutual commitments that the Asian Development Bank likened to a spaghetti bowl in its report (see Asian Development Bank, 2006); this metaphor was also used and analyzed in more details by the well-known specialists on Eurasian integration E. Vinokurov and A. Libman (2012).

The issue of multivector nature of foreign policy of separate Central Asian states lies beyond the scope of our research. We mostly focus on common interests of the regional states that practically are manifested through different forms of regionalism, Central Asian Group of Five included. Nevertheless, to specify the interests of the regional states toward Russia and China, it is crucial to understand that their multivector politics toward Moscow and Beijing are *different* from each other. Below, we will

give general characteristics of these policies using the results of a series of semistructured interviews with leading Central Asian, Russian, and Chinese experts conducted in 2019–2020.

Kazakhstan: relatively strong (from a regional point of view), but extractive economy, oriented toward exporting natural resources in China and EU; open-door politics toward interaction with all possible partners in global affairs, open-door politics toward foreign investments; initiating a big number of integration projects, active participation in multilateral structures; active cooperation with Russia in her integration projects; active political and economic cooperation with China; interaction with Western powers that partially offsets Russian and Chinese influence; sporadic outbreaks of anti-Chinese mass sentiments (manifested by Zhanaozen riot in 2011, “land riots,” 2016, etc.); potential territorial issues with Russia in the north of the country.

Uzbekistan: central position in the region, vast population and relatively strong army as key instruments of regional influence; traditionally cautious approach toward Russian integration projects; long-lasting preference of bilateral relations over multilateral ones; serious conflicts with a number of neighboring countries, successfully solved by President Mirziyoyev; strengthening regional relations as a key priority; the open-doors economic policy implemented by Mirziyoyev, resulting in intensification of business contacts with key partners—a stark difference with economic isolation during Karimov rule.

Kyrgyzstan: inner instability, territorial divide, weak governmental institutions, vanishing status of the most democratic country of the region open to Western influence; Russian military installation in Kant and special role of Russia in providing national security of the country through CSTO; weak economy, dependent on exporting labor force in Russia and transit trade of Chinese goods; growing role of Chinese investments; solid Russian economic support, participation in Russian integrational projects.

Tajikistan: Russian military base and specific role of Russia in providing the stability of political regime and national security after the civil war; economic dependence on exporting labor force into Russia; growing Chinese economic and political influence; strategic interest of India and Pakistan (as Chinese ally) toward the country (in case of India, it is interested in leasing Ayni Air Base); vast and ill-protected border with Afghanistan and the recurring trans-border threats and necessity to cooperate with Russia or China to defend from this threat; Iranian cultural influence, rising rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the “soft power” domain.

Turkmenistan: position of “positive neutrality” and non-participation in any integration projects; multivector policy in the domain of gas, openness to cooperation with any partner willing to buy natural gas; isolationism in politics and economics; economic dependence on Chinese investors and

consumers of natural gas; vast and ill-protected border with Afghanistan and the recurring trans-border threats; policy of oppression of Russian-speaking minority, which once again became obvious during coronacrisis of 2020 (closing of Russian school in the capital, etc.).

Taking into account all these factors, one can say that Russia’s influence today is very high in Kyrgyzstan, high in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, medium (although, growing) in Uzbekistan, and low in Turkmenistan. Chinese influence is today very high in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan; high in Kazakhstan; and medium to high on different issues in Uzbekistan.

Central Asian states’ cooperation and integration with Russia

Let us now consider Central Asian states’ cooperation with Russia and China within said spaghetti bowl created by multivector foreign policies. Russia is primarily a key security actor that ensures the security of Central Asian states. Here, we have an unofficial division of labor between Russia and China: the former has traditionally been the regional security hegemon, while the latter is increasingly becoming the regional economic hegemon (Kazantsev et al., 2016).

Three of the five regional states are members of the CSTO and enjoy Russia’s security guarantees. Russia played the key role in protecting the borders of Central Asian states (primarily with Afghanistan) in the 1990s and early 2000s and in achieving a peaceful resolution to the civil war in Tajikistan. Russia has an air force base in Kant (Kyrgyzstan) and Tajikistan (Base 201), and there are also Russian military facilities in Kazakhstan. The CSTO regularly holds the *Rubezh* military exercises, which aim to protect the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border, and Operation Channel, which aims to combat drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The CSTO also has special rapid response forces for helping Central Asian states in an emergency.

Russia also maintains a solid standing in the economies of Central Asian states, although its position is becoming weaker compared with China’s each year. In 2014, Russia’s overall trade turnover with the Central Asian countries totaled about USD 29 billion (Table 1). It was never restored after that.

Russia’s trade with the region was earlier characterized by a trade balance. However, the surplus dropped in 2019 compared with 2015 in Russia’s trade with Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because these countries increased their exports to Russia. Trade with Central Asia allows Russia to partially compensate for the negative effect of Western sanctions.

Since 2010, Gazprom has sharply reduced gas purchases in the region: in 2014, it purchased only 29.52 billion cubic meters (bcm), which was 3 times less than in 2008 (“Gazprom in Questions and Answers . . .,” n.d.). Since 2016, Russia has stopped purchasing gas from Turkmenistan,

Table 1. Russia's foreign trade with Central Asian countries, millions of dollars.

States	2015			2018		
	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance
Kazakhstan	10,302	4,275	6,027	9,427	3,612	5,815
Kyrgyzstan	1,289	62	1,227	1,026	171	855
Tajikistan	759	46	713	662	27	635
Turkmenistan	844	71	773	571	331	240
Uzbekistan	2,221	576	1,645	1,965	761	1,204
Region's total	15,415	5,030	10,385	13,651	4,902	8,749

Source: Calculated based on http://www.trademap.org/countrymap/Bilateral_TS.aspx.

its largest regional gas producer (mostly because Gazprom lost the competition with China). In 2018, gas purchases by Russia amounted to about 20 bcm ("Gazprom in 2018 to Buy . . .," 2017). In 2019, however, an increase was seen in purchases of hydrocarbons in the region. In May 2019, KazTransGas resumed the transit of Turkmen gas through Kazakhstan. In April 2017, Gazprom signed a 5-year deal to buy 4 bcm of Uzbek gas annually for 5 years starting from 2018 (Altynbaev, 2018). Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been exporting petrochemicals and fuel and lubricants to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at subsidized prices, which essentially constitutes hidden economic aid. This is the largest Russian item exported to those states.

By 2018, Russia had invested \$12.2 billion in Kazakhstan ("What Countries . . .," 2018). Russia's cumulative investment in Kyrgyzstan, another member state of the EEU, totals more than \$200 million ("Official Visit . . .," 2019). Russian cumulative investment in Uzbekistan in 2018 totaled approximately USD 9 billion (Katkova, 2018). In Tajikistan, Russian cumulative investment totaled USD 1.67 billion ("Tajikistan's Prime Minister . . .," 2019). Energy companies were Russia's main regional investors. Lukoil invested \$7 billion in Kazakhstan ("Kazakhstan," 2019). Gazprom invested more than \$1 billion in Kazakhstan (Dynin & Yurchenko, 2019). Lukoil invested \$8 billion in Uzbekistan ("LUKOIL Plans . . .," 2019). Gazprom invested more than \$400 million in Uzbekistan ("Gazprom Invested \$400m . . .," 2016). There is a diversified network of pipelines connecting Central Asia with Russia: the Atyrau–Samara oil pipeline (15 million tons a year), the Makhachkala–Tikhoretsk–Novorossiysk oil pipeline (2.5 million tons a year), the Tengiz–Novorossiysk Caspian Pipeline Consortium (35 million tons a year), the Central Asia–Center gas pipeline, and the Bukhara–Ural gas pipeline. Russia invested 2.6 billion USD in Kazakhstan's mining sector ("What Countries . . .," 2018). In September 2018, Russia and Uzbekistan signed an intergovernmental agreement to build a nuclear power station designed by Rosatom ("Lavrov: Uzbekistan and Russia Agree . . .," 2019).

Gazprom owns KyrgyzGas and is engaged in geological exploration and the modernization of the country's gas distribution system. This is an unprofitable investment that

can be seen as a form of economic aid (and is related, among other things, to Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU). The Russian–Kyrgyz Development Fund was established in 2014 as another aid factor that aims to advance this country's accession to the EEU. Oil and gas processing in Russia and Kazakhstan has been closely connected since the Soviet era. Gazprom Neft, Rosneft, LUKOIL, and Surgutneftegas actively work in Kazakhstan ("Rosneft Wants . . .," 2013). The KazRosGaz joint venture was established for gas processing. In 2015, Russian investors built an oil refinery in Kyrgyzstan ("Russia–Kyrgyzstan Trade . . .," 2016).

Large flows of labor migrants into Russia are a crucial factor in Russia's economic influence on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Migrants' remittances comprise a significant part of national gross domestic products (GDPs) and have historically accounted for up to 50% of Tajikistan's GDP and to 33% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP (Kazantsev et al., 2016). According to Russia's Ministry of the Interior, foreigners who became officially registered migrants in Russia in 2018 included 683,989 citizens of Kazakhstan, 876,795 citizens of Kyrgyzstan, 2,300,448 citizens of Tajikistan, 98,000 citizens of Turkmenistan, and 4,499,127 citizens of Uzbekistan ("Certain Indicators . . .," 2019). Prior to 2015, labor migrants' remittances from Russia were growing annually. In 2015–2018, the volume of remittances steadily declined. In 2018, it increased once again (Table 2).

EEU membership benefits its members, particularly Kyrgyzstan with its weak economy. The EEU's common labor market made it much easier to seek employment in Russia. In 2015, when Kyrgyzstan had just acceded to the EEU, it sold its Union partners \$410.2 million worth of commodities; in 2018, it sold \$640.7 million worth of commodities. Trade grew by nearly 50% and by USD 230 million in absolute figures (Mendkovich, 2019). Following Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU, manufacturing grew in textile and sewing workshops that export their products to Russia. New jobs are appearing in that sector. The Russian–Kyrgyz Development Fund is the principal investor in these projects.

Integration with Russia is popular in Central Asia. The population of Uzbekistan sees the work of the EEU in a mostly positive light. In 2012–2015, no less than 67% of Uzbekistan's nationals supported the state's hypothetical

Table 2. Labor migrants' remittances from Russia, USD million.

	2010	2013	2014	2016	2017	2018
Kazakhstan	221	377	577	140	127	797
Kyrgyzstan	1,250	2,113	2,062	457	398	2,400
Tajikistan	2,191	3,927	3,854	497	423	2,555
Turkmenistan	24	35	31	2	1	0.5
Uzbekistan	3,834	7,878	5,653	728	620	4,082

Source: Cross-border remittances via money transfer operators broken down by countries of destination // The Central Bank of Russia's official website. <http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/?Prtd=svs>.

accession to the EEU (EDB Integration Barometer, 2017). Even though support for Eurasian integration in Kazakhstan fell after 2014, more than 70% of the country's population still supports EEU membership (EDB Integration Barometer, 2017).

Problems in Central Asian states' integration with Russia

Political and geopolitical differences in the CSTO and EEU

The fact that all EEU members are simultaneously CSTO members means there is interaction between economic, military, and strategic aspects of Russia's interaction with Central Asian states. Nonetheless, one cannot say that Russia and its formal allies in Central Asian states have common views on the Russia–Ukraine and Russia–Georgia conflicts in particular and, in general, on the problems of the Russia–West confrontation in the post-Soviet space.

The absence of serious political support for Russia on the part of CSTO and EEU states is manifested in none of them recognizing Russia's unification with Crimea and Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence from Georgia. People fighting against the Ukrainian authorities in the Donbass are subjected to criminal prosecution in Kazakhstan. The government of Abkhazia expressed its interest in acceding to the EEU, but Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan opposed its accession as they adhere to the principle of Georgia's territorial integrity. In addition, none of the CSTO or EEU states wished to join Russia's counter-sanctions against the states that imposed sanctions on Russia following Moscow's conflict with Kyiv ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019). Central Asian states that are members of the EEU and CSTO did not want to curtail their contacts with NATO, the United States, or the EU, either, after the conflict broke out in the Donbass.

The Central Asian states also have specific points of dissatisfaction with the CSTO. In particular, in June 2010, due to the situation that emerged in Kyrgyzstan after the anti-Uzbek pogroms in Osh that started following the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, Kyrgyzstan's interim president Rosa Otunbayeva appealed to Russian President

Dmitry Medvedev with a request to deploy CSTO troops in the south of Kyrgyzstan. However, Russia and the CSTO denied the request. Subsequently, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko had harsh public criticism for the CSTO, as did the Kyrgyz and other Central Asian elites, although their criticism was less public (Trobanko, 2009).

Contradictions between the EEU's key idea and the national economic strategies of Central Asian states (and the terms and conditions of their accession to the World Trade Organization)

It is common knowledge that the first person to propose the idea of Eurasian integration, which would include both economic and military components, was not Russia's leader, but Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev during his first official visit to Russia on 29 March 1994. Following a series of failed attempts in the 1990s, the implementation of the Eurasian integration project was launched after Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia, first as the Customs Union of the Eurasian Economic Union (since 2010) and then as the Common Economic Space of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (since 2012). That was the foundation for the three post-Soviet states forming on 1 January 2015 the EEU to which Armenia and Kyrgyzstan later acceded. Nonetheless, since the launch of the common market with Russia, Kazakhstan continued to note that the concept of the EEU as an economic space shielded from the rest of the world by high tariffs (the EEU formula stated by President Putin's former economic advisor Sergey Glazyev) contradicts Kazakhstan's national economic strategy. Compared with other EEU states, Kazakhstan has gone the farthest in its economic reforms. It has the highest per capita investment indicator among EEU states and an economy that has been liberalized at a relatively high level.

Consequently, when it comes to economic policies, Astana prioritizes the country's national interests over EEU principles and, as a result, Kazakhstan radically opposes all the EEU's attempts to create a common industrial policy. Moreover, the EEU's rules contradict Kazakhstan's World Trade Organization (WTO) obligations (it acceded to the WTO simultaneously with the launch of the EEU in 2015). The EEU made concessions to Nur-Sultan and introduced customs exemptions for Kazakhstan on 3,500 commodity items (Zubov, 2016). Later, the same problem of the EEU's principles contradicting WTO's norms became an issue for Kyrgyzstan. Currently, an important point being discussed in connection with Uzbekistan's accession to the EEU is how much it will contradict its accession to the WTO.

The issue of combining economic and political aspects in the EEU

Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev spearheaded Eurasian integration. However, Kazakhstan has always emphasized

that the EEU has purely economic objectives. Political and certainly geopolitical components of the organization's activities should be minimized.

In the EEU bodies, Kazakhstan has always blocked Russia's attempts to put political issues on the agenda. In particular, Nur-Sultan insisted on excluding such matters as common citizenship, coordinating foreign policies, or joint border protection from the organization's activities. Kazakhstan's authorities opposed expanding the powers of the supranational EEU bodies and condemned the idea of creating an EEU parliamentary assembly proposed by Russia in 2012 and 2015 ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019). Kazakhstan has also been vigorously opposed to any form of EEU support for Russia's counter-sanctions imposed on certain Western commodities ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019).

One view that is very popular in Kazakhstan's mass media is that the EEU has a strictly geopolitical nature; its objective is to restore Russia's status as a great power (lost after the collapse of the USSR) by affirming itself as the leader of the post-Soviet space ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019). A small group of experts usually dubbed "Kazakh nationalists" or "national patriots" are particularly harsh in voicing this idea. In particular, Dosym Satpayev, the director of a risk assessment group, claimed that Russia periodically assumes the role of "Big Brother" for other EEU members because Russia views the union as a political one. In his opinion, this is the underlying reason for high-ranking Russian officials' statements that all political initiatives of member states should be coordinated with the Kremlin (Satpayev, 2018). Satpayev believes that for Russia, the EEU and also the CSTO projects are geopolitical, and not economic. The objective of the EEU project is to create a "certain single coordinated political field" in the post-Soviet space (Satpayev, 2018). The expert believes that Russia often presented its EEU partners with *faits accomplis* whose consequences, either directly or indirectly, damage Kazakhstan's economic and political interests (Satpayev, 2018).

Uzbekistan's and Tajikistan's accession discussions feature the same concern that the EEU primarily advances Russia's political interests instead of economic ones. Uzbekistan's debates, in particular, are dominated by the stance that the state authorities are not ready to transfer even a part of the powers to implement customs and tariffs policies, regulate the banking sector, and determine phytosanitary norms, as envisioned by the EEU documents, to the supranational level of the Eurasian Economic Commission. As for Tajikistan, Russian political circles viewed the issue of its EEU membership as a done deal back in 2016. Thus far, however, despite Russia's initial expectations, Dushanbe is in no hurry to negotiate its accession to the EEU. Among the possible risks of EEU integration, Tajik experts cite the partial loss of political sovereignty given Russia's increasing conflict with the West ("Ministry of Foreign Affairs . . .," 2018).

The sanctions, the ruble's devaluation, and the negative economic effect of the increasing Russia–West confrontation spreading to Russia's EEU partners

Western sanctions imposed on Russia after 2014 have introduced problems in the life of the EEU. They certainly have a negative effect on the economic development of all of Russia's EEU partners, including Kazakhstan. The decision the Bank of Russia made in October 2014 to transition to a floating exchange rate for the ruble had a particularly negative effect on relations between EEU member states. It was quite clear for everyone in Central Asia that this decision stemmed not only from falling oil prices but also from the consequences of the anti-Russian Western sanctions. In these circumstances, Russia's currency devalued rapidly: over the fourth quarter of 2014, the ruble shed half of its value. Kazakhstan's government and business community had a highly negative reaction to Russian exported goods becoming cheaper due to the devaluation of the ruble and their competitive edge increasing in the EEU. Kazakhstan accused Russia of violating the agreement to coordinate currency and monetary policies, taking unilateral actions intended to devalue the ruble, and conducting deliberate dumping policies to boost Russia's exports (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, n.d.). The ruble's devaluation in 2014 had a negative impact on the Kyrgyz economy mostly through labor migration. As a third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP consists of remittances by labor migrants from Russia, the Russian ruble's devaluation curtailed the volume of remittances by 30% to 40% in local currency according to various estimates. The state's international reserves fell by 12% in 2015, as inflation rose (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, n.d.).

To protect local manufacturers who suffered losses due to the devaluation of the ruble and other negative consequences of sanctions and counter-sanctions, the executive authorities of EEU member states introduced multiple bans on the import of goods. In particular, the Kazakhstan government decided to prohibit the use of Russian train cars for shipping grain and to restrict the import of Russian petrochemicals. A sharp drop in prices and increased demand for them resulted in local oil refineries being overstocked. Since October 2018, the products of four major Russian meat producers were recalled from Kazakhstan's market ("Kazakhstan Recalls . . .," 2018). Russia, in turn, introduced several moratoriums on Kazakhstan-produced meat ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019).

The situation was exacerbated by political differences surrounding sanctions and counter-sanctions. Moscow had grievances against EEU states and demanded they cease their attempts to bypass Russia's embargo on food imports from the EU and Ukraine. The reason was that Russian counter-sanctions were ineffective given the "common market" with the EEU states, particularly with Belarus, Kazakhstan,

Table 3. China's foreign trade with Central Asian countries, USD millions.

States	2015			2018		
	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance
Kazakhstan	8,427	5,840	2,587	11,327	8,530	2,797
Kyrgyzstan	4,285	57	4,228	5,547	54	55,493
Tajikistan	1,795	52	1,743	11,426	77	11,349
Turkmenistan	816	7,828	-7,012	317	58,119	-7,802
Uzbekistan	2,229	1,267	962	3,042	12,324	718
Region's total	17,562	15,041	2,521	21,659	19,104	2,555

Source: Calculated based on http://www.trademap.org/countrymap/Bilateral_TS.aspx.

and Armenia, as European goods covered by the Russian sanctions were coming into Russia from these states (frequently, with the consent of the authorities of the EEU member states, they are falsely labeled as locally produced goods). Kazakhstan, in turn, accused Russia of imposing a unilateral embargo in violation of the EEU Treaty without prior consultations with partners and claimed that Russia's demands contradict the main principles of the EEU.

In January 2016, Kyrgyzstan abrogated its agreement with Russia on the building of the Kambarata-2 Hydro-Power Plant and Upper Naryn hydroelectric power chain that was under construction between 2013 and 2015. Kyrgyzstan attributed its decision to the crisis in Russia and Russia's shortage of funds. The Kyrgyz authorities declared they had found other investors and were drafting a new agreement with them ("Eurasian Economic Union . . .," 2019). Kyrgyzstan has also actively expressed its displeasure with the restrictions Russia imposed on labor migrants' remittances, which Bishkek believes violate EEU provisions (Panfilova, 2019).

The development of relations in the Russia–Kazakhstan–China–EU quad

At present, connecting the EEU project spearheaded by Russia and China's BRI is a key issue in Eurasian integration, further developing in the format of the "integration of integrations" or "Greater Eurasia." Unfortunately, the process is advancing very slowly, as evidenced by the sad story of the Western China–Western Europe highway (it is being built in China and Kazakhstan, but not in Russia in violation of Russia's previous commitments).

One of the key political problems Central Asian experts focus on is that China's Belt and Road project aims to gain access to European markets via Central Asia. Russia, on the contrary, due to the conflict with the EU and NATO, is attempting to re-orient many of its projects toward the East (Satpayev, 2018). Consequently, problems that remain unresolved in Russian–European relations are standing in the way of the implementation of Belt and Road projects in Central Asia, as was the case with the Western China–Western Europe highway.

Central Asian states' cooperation and integration with China

Starting in the 1990s, Central Asia was important for China in terms of preserving political stability in Xinjiang (Syroyezhkin, 2015). To achieve this, China is implementing the second stage (2011–2030) of the Great Western Development Strategy, which is planned to run through 2050. Particular attention is being paid to infrastructural projects in special economic zones, such as Khorgas (on the border with Kazakhstan). The strategic nature of China's cooperation with Central Asian states was further bolstered when China launched its BRI.

In 1991, Central Asian states did not have trade connections with China, while in 2014, trade volume exceeded \$45 billion. However, due to falling global prices for key goods exported from Central Asia (fossil fuels and metals), decreasing consumption by China, and the growing prices of Chinese goods, in 2015, trade volume began to shrink, and by 2019 had not reached the level of 2014 (Table 3):

Trade is dominated by finished goods in China's exports as well as fuel, metals, and agricultural raw materials in Chinese imports. In 2008–2014, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan's shares in their trade with China increased significantly due to the Central Asia–China pipeline having come into operation. Since 2010, when the Customs Union was established, the flow of China's textiles and shoes was largely redirected from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan. By 2015, its share in Kazakhstan's imports had quadrupled.

Beijing is actively advancing the idea of trading in its national currency, the yuan. In 2011, China's Central Bank authorized 15 banks in the Xinjian-Uyghur Autonomous Region to service yuan-denominated trade and investment transactions with Central Asia. In late 2014, yuan–tenge trade started at the Kazakhstan Exchange and the regional market of China's Interbank Foreign Exchange Center (Urumqi). China concluded currency swap agreements with Uzbekistan ("China and Uzbekistan Signed . . .," 2011) and Tajikistan ("China and Tajikistan Signed . . .," 2015). According to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), China's cumulative investment in Kazakhstan stood at \$32.63 billion in 2005–2018, \$4.73 billion in Kyrgyzstan,

\$1.61 billion in Tajikistan, \$6.8 billion in Turkmenistan, and \$5.44 billion in Uzbekistan (China Global Investment Tracker, 2019).

The Central Asian fuel and energy sector is China's main priority for cooperation. In Kazakhstan, KazMunayGas analysts estimate the share of Chinese companies in overall oil production at more than 40% ("The Share of China's Companies . . .," 2013). Active cooperation with Turkmenistan started in 2006 with the signing of an agreement on the purchase of 30 bcm of gas annually until 2038. China invested more than \$15 billion in Turkmenistan's fuel and energy complex (Paramonov & Stokov, 2015), and it controls more than one quarter of the gas produced in the republic. China challenged Russia's Gazprom, which had been the principal buyer of Turkmenistan's gas. Chinese investment in Uzbekistan's fuel and energy is estimated at \$2 billion (Paramonov & Stokov, 2015). Chinese investment in the Kyrgyz oil and gas sector is estimated at about \$400 million (Paramonov & Stokov, 2015).

To produce and transport large volumes of oil and gas, China built the Central Asia–China gas pipeline system. Starting in late 2015, the pipeline's overall capacity reached 55 bcm, which accounts for more than one fifth of China's consumer demand for natural gas. In 2018, the PRC imported 46.9 bcm of natural gas via the pipeline (Martsinkevich, 2018). Two oil pipelines, Atasu–Alashankou and Kenkiyak–Kumkol, with a total capacity of 20 million tons of oil annually, connect Kazakhstan and China. In transportation, a railway and highway project is being implemented as part of the Western China–Western Europe international corridor. China participated in building a rail line to Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The traditional "division of labor" between China and Russia had Russia ensuring the region's security and China developing infrastructure (Kazantsev et al., 2016). However, as China combated the threat of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism in Xinjiang, Beijing focused more on Central Asia. China's Anti-Terrorism Act that took effect on 1 January 2016 includes numerous new restrictions. The implementation of the new anti-terrorism policy in Xinjiang also includes numerous restrictive measures directed against Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups (Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, etc.). Some experts in neighboring countries also believe that China has abandoned its traditional policy of avoiding the use of its army abroad on counter-terrorism grounds (the Anti-Terrorism Act permits this) (Hrolenko, 2018).

According to unofficial sources, China is also slated to build its first military base in Afghanistan for 500 troops who will carry out counter-terrorism training missions (this base will officially belong to the Afghan army). If this is true, this will be China's second foreign military base after the one that opened in Djibouti in Africa (Farmer, 2018). Chinese troops will probably use the territory of Tajikistan to supply the military base in Afghanistan's Badakhshan

(Hrolenko, 2018). Tajikistan is interested in a Chinese military presence in Badakhshan because it will help control the activities of terrorist fighters on the Tajik–Afghan border. China also signed an agreement with Tajikistan in autumn 2016 on assistance in fortifying the Tajik–Afghan border. In summer 2016, the heads of the general staffs of the armies of China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan and the commander of the ground forces of Pakistan held a meeting in *Urumqi*. They formed a mechanism for consultations on the common fight against terrorism and extremism (Hrolenko, 2018). This organization could be a potential rival to the CSTO.

Problems in Central Asian states' relations with China

Despite the positive dynamics in Central Asian states' relations with China, the region nonetheless is rather wary of China making the newly independent states heavily dependent on itself. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's concerns in this regard are particularly strong. These states have a common border with China. The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, as peoples of the Great Steppe, have a long and not entirely positive experience of relations with China. The works of the Russian historian Lev Gumilyov (1974), one of the founders of the modern Eurasian ideology (incidentally, he is a favorite author of Kazakhstan's leader Nursultan Nazarbayev), offer the best description of this negative experience. Anti-Chinese propaganda in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan today often refers to such historical precedents as the Qin Empire's war against the Dzungar people, which resulted in the latter's annihilation (the remaining Dzungar people merged with the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz). The predicament of Uyghurs under Mao Zedong is also frequently cited, when Uyghurs migrated to the USSR (particularly to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) in large numbers. The motif of the Uyghurs' predicament was regularly used in the Soviet Union's anti-China propaganda following Nikita Khrushchev's conflict with Mao Zedong. Today, these historical precedents are once again coming to the fore ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018) in connection with the tightening security measures in Xinjiang, among other things.

Kemel Toktomushev (University of Central Asia, Bishkek) points out that sociopolitical discussions in the region are dominated by concerns that China may transform Central Asian countries into client states. He believes that consequently public opinion often views Beijing's initiatives in Central Asia as "part of a plan to establish its regional and global hegemony" ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018). Many members of Central Asian elites believe that China's BRI has a large number of positive aspects and is consistent with the pressing needs of Central Asian states (Moldashev, 2019). However, there is also a contrary and very influential perspective. Marek Johec (Nazarbayev University, Astana) and Jenny Jenish Kyzy (J-Invest-Consulting, Bishkek)

surveyed approximately 300 people in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and members of the two states' young and educated elite; 96% of the respondents fully or partially agree that foreign investment is good for their state. However, about 80% of the respondents agree that Chinese investment creates a risk of an uncontrolled influx of Chinese immigrants; 70% believe that it may result in environmental damage; more than 50% believe there is a risk of increased corruption. About 59% of respondents in Kazakhstan and 44% in Kyrgyzstan claim that Chinese investment threatens their country's independence (Moldashev, 2019).

From time to time, the hidden fears of the "Chinese threat" break through. One of the first mass protests in Kazakhstan with an anti-Chinese element stemmed from the labor conflict that started in 2010 at the Karazhanbasmunai oil enterprise with Chinese capital and certain Chinese managers. This conflict was one of the reasons for a mass strike by oil workers in 2011 that translated into major unrest in Zhanaozen on 16 December 2011. The unrest was suppressed with 15 people left dead and hundreds wounded and arrested. Although this conflict may be classified as a classic clash between workers and business, some observers see a certain anti-Chinese subtext there. The next instance of mass unrest with an anti-Chinese aspect took place in March 2016. It was caused by the authorities announcing amendments to the Land Code, which made it possible to sell and rent agricultural land to foreign nationals. It generated mass rumors that such land would be "bought up by the Chinese." Ultimately, a wave of anti-government rallies swept through Kazakhstan. The largest rallies were held in Atyrau, Aktobe, and Semey (Abdurasulov, 2016). In the end, the problematic articles in the Land Code had to be abolished (Kulintsev, 2019).

In 2017–2018, the Kazakh public was highly concerned about the predicament of ethnic Kazakhs in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Many of the people placed in "labor re-education camps" have relatives in Kazakhstan (Kulintsev, 2019). Ethnic Kazakhs actively migrate from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan. A wave of anti-Chinese protests hit in early September 2019, right before new Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's first state visit to China. These protests were aimed against the intergovernmental agreement on the establishment of 55 agricultural and industrial enterprises with Chinese capital in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's population is concerned China may be transferring its "dirty manufacturing" to Kazakhstan. The protests were held in Zhanaozen, Aktobe, Shymkent, Almaty, Uralsk, Aktau, and the capital city of Nur-Sultan (Kulintsev, 2019).

Tajikistan's population is concerned with the country's growing financial and economic dependence on China (Kulintsev, 2019). Safovudin Dzhaborov (Tajik National University, Dushanbe) uses the term "loan-sharking," which he believes applies to "a bilateral loan transaction between two states that, in addition to paying back the loan principal and interest, prompts the borrowing country to

make statements containing certain promises and/or make economic/political concessions favoring the lender country or its agent/company/representative" ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018). He also compares the system of relations that has been established between China and Central Asian states with the Soviet policies when the region was used as a source of raw materials and a market for selling finished products. The Tajik public was unhappy with the agreement transferring 1,100 km² of disputed territory in the Pamir Mountains to China. Tajikistan was full of persistent rumors that Dushanbe had given these lands to Beijing to pay off debt, although officially the agreement pertained to demarcating the disputed border ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018).

The Kyrgyz population entertains similar concerns about China. In the course of settling border disputes in the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan also transferred part of disputed territory to China ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018). Alexander Walters (OSCE Academy in Bishkek) notes that, in his opinion, China is proceeding toward indisputable economic and political hegemony in Central Asia ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018). Walters, however, notes that the possibility of holding open debates on Chinese investment and Kyrgyzstan's integration in the EEU has significantly weakened the potential political influence of Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan compared with Tajikistan. Kyrgyz analyst Nargiza Muratalieva believes that Central Asian countries are in China's debt trap: debt to China accounts for 40% of Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt and 48% of Tajikistan's foreign debt (Panchenko, 2019).

Transparency International surveyed more than 3,000 managers around the world and found that Russian and Chinese companies are perceived as most prone to giving bribes when doing business abroad ("Bribe Payers Index 2011," 2011). Kemel Toktomushev (University of Central Asia, Bishkek) notes that the implementation of the Belt and Road project in Central Asia in conjunction with Chinese companies actively using the "guanxi" practices (building informal influence networks similar to the "*blat*" networks widespread in the USSR [Ledeneva, 1998]) exacerbates the problems of corruption and bad governance in Central Asia ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018). Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan had anti-Chinese rallies that were accompanied by violence. The first conflict related to China's influence took place in Kyrgyzstan in 2010–2011 and stemmed from a conflict surrounding China's Zhong Ji Mining gold mining company. People in the village of Emgekchil rallied against it (Erkebayeva & Myachina, 2019).

A controversy surrounding the unsuccessful modernization of a Bishkek combined heat and power plant by TBEA, a contractor from China, gained worldwide notoriety (Higgins, 2019). The Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan put pressure on Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Energy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the stage when bids were considered. The Embassy sent letters recommending China's TBEA as

the sole contractor for the project. The letters tied the contractor's selection to the prospect of China issuing a loan to Kyrgyzstan (Hadzhich, 2019). Consequently, a more experienced contractor, Russia's Inter RAO, was passed over (as was another Chinese contractor, China Machinery Engineering Corporation). However, the unsuccessful modernization implemented by TBEA resulted in a breakdown in January 2018 that left a large part of the Kyrgyz capital without heating and electricity during bitterly cold weather (Hadzhich, 2019).

In both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, there is some displeasure with China's security policies in Xinjiang, as many of the persons placed in "labor re-education" camps have relatives in Kyrgyzstan (Moldashev, 2019). Kyrgyzstan's nationals are also concerned that the security practices being implemented in Xinjiang will be used across the border. In particular, the Safe City initiative China proposed for Bishkek entails video surveillance using facial recognition.

Kyrgyzstan became a stage for the activities of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), an Uyghur terrorist organization (that has been banned in Kyrgyzstan since 2003) ("Terrorism in Central Asia," 2019). The TIP's goal is to create an independent state in China's XUAR. On 25 May 2000, TIP terrorists attacked three Chinese officials in Kyrgyzstan, killing one and wounding two. On 29 June 2002, TIP militants shot and killed a Chinese diplomat serving at China's Embassy in Bishkek. They also killed the leader of the local Uyghur diaspora when he refused to cooperate with them (Panarin & Kazantsev, 2017). On 30 August 2016, the TIP carried out a terror attack in Bishkek: a suicide bomber driving a car full of explosives rammed the gates of the Chinese embassy. More than 10 Kyrgyz law enforcement members were later detained on suspicion of the illegal sale of weapons used in the terror attack ("14 Servicepersons . . .," 2016).

Turkmenistan has a debt crisis in its relations with China. Ashkhabad's debt to Beijing totals about \$12 billion (Ivanov, 2019). In August 2007, construction started on the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China trans-Asian gas pipeline. Following its launch, China accounted for more than 90% of Turkmenistan's total gas exports already in 2017. However, a significant part of the revenue from the sale of Turkmenistan's gas goes toward paying off China's loans. Ashkhabad took these loans to develop oil and gas deposits and to construct gas pipelines to export gas to China. However, Chinese companies turned out to be the contractors building and servicing the gas infrastructure.

Interplay between different dimensions of Russian and Chinese influence in the region

Interplay between different dimensions of Russian and Chinese influence in the region, especially, between, military and economic influence, is a complex issue. There is no universally accepted theoretical model of this interplay

that could be applied to this case. Fortunately, there is one case in Central Asia that can provide the answer to this question.

As it is well known, Russia played a major role in ending the civil war and consolidating the regime of Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan. Remittances of labor migrants working in Russia constituted half of Tajikistan's GDP. Also Moscow provided Dushanbe with arms, subsidized fuel, and credits. Taking this into account, Tajikistan was considered practically the most Russia-dependent country of the region. So it comes as no surprise that this nation participated in all international post-Soviet organizations, initiated by Russia. For instance, Dushanbe participated in CSTO and Eurasian Economic Community (2001–2014)—predecessor of EEU. However, Tajikistan was the only member-nation of Eurasian Economic Community at the moment of its dissolution that did not join EEU. *De jure*, this issue is still being considered in Dushanbe. However, many Central Asian and Russian experts (whom we interviewed) believe that growing Chinese influence is a key factor for Tajikistan government. Dushanbe does not wish to give EEU the control over strengthening economic ties between Tajikistan and China.

At the same time, still tremendous Russian role in security domain (Russian military base on the territory of Tajikistan, Tajikistan membership in CSTO) does not influence the position of Dushanbe. What is more important, without denying role of Moscow, Dushanbe is slowly creating the mechanism for potential political and military cooperation with China (for instance, we should mention Tajik–Chinese–Pakistan–Afghan security consultations).

In this case, we can say that economic influence of China is becoming more important than military influence of Russia. We would define this case as an interplay between economic and military influence, where economic influence prevails. Moreover, attempts of Russian major companies to invest into key Tajikistan's hydrogenation projects were mostly unsuccessful as opposed to Chinese investments into this country. Many experts we questioned believe that Russian companies were not favored by Tajik government—compared with Chinese companies. So, in this case, Russia was not able to transfer its military influence into economic one (even though it still controls major share of Tajikistan's economy through labor migrants' remittances), while China is in the process of successful transfer of economic influence into the influence in security sphere (through the mentioned mechanism of security consultations).

As opposed to this, we can talk of different case, where military influence of Russia was transformed into economic influence (this was in South Caucasus). It happened in the case of Armenia. Armenia originally was reluctant to enter EEU (and it has never been the member of predecessor organization—Eurasian Economic Community). This reluctance had two major reasons. First of all, because of transit blockade initiated by Azerbaijan and Turkey and because of

Russian–Georgian conflict, Armenia had no inland ways to trade with countries of European Economic Community. Armenia could contact them only through Iranian territory. Second, Armenia considered signing the treaty with EU which was quite similar to the treaty between Ukraine and EU (the rejection of this treaty led to collapse of Yanukovich regime and 2013–2014 crisis in general).

However, Russia made it clear to Armenia that it would be impossible to sign the treaty with EU and to maintain a military alliance with Russia (both in terms of CSTO and bilateral relations) at the same time. So Armenia chose Russia, became a member of EEU in 2015, and canceled talks about treaty with EU. What is more important, Russian investors were very successful in Armenia and had zero problems with the local government.

So, in the case of Armenia, Russian military influence led to joining EEU, that is, there was very successful conversion of military power into economic power. However, in the case of Tajikistan, this interplay did not happen (while China could convert its economic influence into security one). We can presume that the Chinese factor played a major role for Russia in Tajikistan. Also we should note that Russia is reluctant to directly compete with China in the light of strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing.

China is still not an economic hegemon in Central Asia, although its economic role in the region is growing. Russia still has solid standing in Central Asian economies and migrants' remittances, there is also still important role of EU (e.g., EU buys significant part of Kazakh oil). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also have their own effective economic development programs. So, these factors still offset Chinese influence. Diminishing Russia's relative economic might due to low growth rates last decade and Western sanctions enhanced Central Asian states' interest in cooperation with China. At the same time, these countries are not interested in complete Chinese economic hegemony. So they maintain multivector foreign policies. Many experts from Central Asia believe that Russia, despite its strategic rapprochement with China, is still considered as an offset toward Beijing's influence in the region.

However, if one projects the trends that existed before COVID-19 crisis, one can predict that China will be able to become economic hegemon one day or another; moreover, China is starting to transfer its economic influence into security influence.

At the same time, Russian role of a key security provider in the region changes. Many country-specific factors affect this process. For instance, Kazakhstan in the light of Georgian and Ukrainian crises is concerned about its northern territories. This situation is highlighted by discussion, ignited by Vyacheslav Nikonov's statements at the end of year 2020. President Mirziyoyev's successful resolution of series of conflicts between Uzbekistan and neighboring states leads to rapprochement of the regional countries and diminishes the demand for Russia providing security at least for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in their relations with Uzbekistan. Also we see new formats of political and

military cooperation with China, especially, for Tajikistan. However, in the context of strategic rapprochement of Moscow and Beijing, Kremlin is generally unconcerned by this situation. The series of interviews (carried by the authors) with the experts show that for current Russian leadership, the real threat would be the growth of cooperation of Central Asian states with the United States and NATO in general, but not with China.

Conclusion: Central Asian states' relations with Russia and China and the building of Greater Eurasia

Russia and China play an enormous role in the economic and political life of Central Asian states. Their combined weight can significantly promote stability and development in the region. Russia–China rapprochement creates an exceedingly powerful vector of influence in favor of Central Asian states' participation in geopolitical and integration Eurasian projects backed by Russia and China. However, given the many differences we have just analyzed between the interests of Moscow and Beijing on one hand and the interests of Central Asian states on the other, Russia and China should play their trump cards wisely.

Russia and China's exceedingly strong pressure on Central Asian states may prompt a reverse reaction. They will more actively balance against Russian and Chinese influence by utilizing the development of relations with Western states, the countries of the Islamic world, and South Asia to this end. Finally, the internal Central Asian integration is a promising format; this integration was resumed as part of the work of the "Central Asian Five" after Shavkat Mirziyoyev became President of Uzbekistan.

Russia will be able to interact more efficiently with Central Asian states provided it realizes that they are not ready to follow Moscow's geopolitical interests to the detriment of their own interests (which is particularly relevant in the context of the Russia–West confrontation). This is clearly evidenced by the stance of Kazakhstan, which has always emphasized the purely economic nature of the Eurasian integration project and has opposed any attempts to resolve political issues via EEU mechanisms. Central Asian states are also not ready to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia and the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, or join Russia's counter-sanctions against Western countries. Without achieving stable agreements with the EU, Russia will not be able to fully realize the potential of its cooperation with China and Central Asian states (as can be seen from the example of the Western China–Western Europe transport corridor). An important element is making sure that the key notion of the EEU as a space protected from the world around it by high customs tariffs is harmonized with the interests of Central Asian states in developing trade and investment not only with Russia, but also with other foreign partners.

For China, convincing the peoples of Central Asia that their historical fears are unfounded is becoming a key factor in its relations with Central Asian states. European examples (for instance, overcoming the mutual hostility between France and Germany) demonstrate that this is quite feasible. Respect for the rights of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang will be an important point that determines Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's popular attitude to China. Preventing elements of corruption in regional investment projects is also important, as is clearly evidenced by the controversy surrounding the modernization of the Bishkek combined heat and power system. In 2011, China amended its Penal Code to make officials liable for using corrupt practices abroad. China is also implementing several other important anti-corruption measures. However, for many foreign observers (Fry, 2013), including Central Asian ones ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018), these steps appear to be insufficient thus far. It is also essential for China to take steps to become more socially and environmentally responsible in implementing its investment projects and to develop cooperation with the region's public organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at every stage of each investment project ("Belt and Road Initiative . . .," 2018).

As for today, there is no trend of solving the recurring problems between Moscow and Beijing, on one hand, and Central Asian countries, on another hand. Unfortunately, the majority of economic problems listed above are growing more severe (accumulated debt, negative trade balance with Russia and China, etc.). Also there is growing discord in security sphere. For instance, at the end of 2020, there was a harsh debate between Russian and Kazakh experts and public figures about the rhetoric of popular Russian politician (State Duma deputy and a head of a state-supported fund *Russkiy Mir*) V. Nikonov regarding Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, his rhetoric was interpreted as Russia's territorial claims to Kazakhstan (which is not 100% correct because his rhetoric has not been officially supported).

Generally, current forms of dialogue still do not create a solid trend toward solving the majority of listed above issues. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Russia and China are *completely* ignoring interests of Central Asian states. There are some forms of dialogue between these actors. For instance, China supports the projects within the framework of BRI only after discussion with these countries (however, there are separate cases of political pressure, like the case of Bishkek CHP in Kyrgyzstan). Russia from time to time accommodates toward her partners in EAEU. Also after a long period of Russian representative leading CSTO, there was installed a sequential regime and the representatives of all member states are now able to become General Secretary of CSTO.

Having said that, we should not forget that Central Asia is a region, consisting of five countries, and there is a specific dynamics in relations with each of them both for

Russia and China. For instance, if there is no positive dynamics with the majority of the countries, relations between Moscow and Tashkent are improving last years. We can point out the growth of sales turnover between Russia and Uzbekistan lately after Mirziyoyev ascending to power (in 2019 it grew 16%). Also in 2020, Uzbekistan became an observer-state in EAEU after long period of negativity toward this international organization.

Currently, there are three scenarios of development of situation in the region from the point of view of dynamic of combined Russian and Chinese influence. Scenario 1: Russia and China continue their rapprochement and manage to solve the majority of the listed problems in dialogue with the nations of the region. In this case, their combined influence in the region becomes prevalent as compared with the other vectors of multivector foreign policies of the states of this region. Scenario 2: Russia and China, while they continue their rapprochement do not solve the issues with Central Asian states. So, these nations start investing more efforts into other vectors of international cooperation to neutralize the negative aspects of Russian and Chinese influence. Scenario 3: Discord between Russia and China grows. In this case, Central Asia nations would continue their multivector foreign policy using the disagreements between Russia and China as a factor neutralizing negative for them aspects of the influence of Beijing and Moscow.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research of Andrei Kazantsev for this article was supported by the grant of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of HSE University "Influence of Turkey and Iran on Transformations of the Middle East and Post-Soviet States." The research of Ivan Safranchuk for this article was supported by the grant of the Institute of International Studies of MGIMO No. 1921-01-02 "Chinese Project Belt and Road: Becoming of Regional Structures in Asia and Regional Economic and Political Transformations."

Note

1. For example, during the coronacrisis in 2020, China minimized financing some important projects in Central Asia; however, it is still unclear how the situation would be in 2021 and 2022.

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