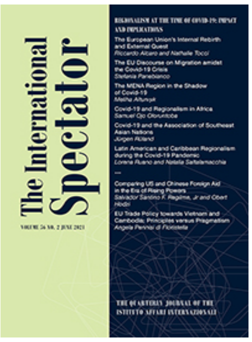

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The "New Great Game" in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?

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ABSTRACT

Situated at the crossroads of the Silk Road, Central Asia has been an arena of international competition for centuries. Today, a "New Great Game" appears to be taking place between Russia, China and, to a lesser extent, the United States and the European Union for regional hegemony. In the last two decades, Russia and China formed an "axis of convenience", both to counter Western influence and to thwart regional challenges; however, this has increasingly turned to rivalry in recent years, with China gradually replacing Russia as the chief power with regard to geo-economic and energy assets in some Central Asian countries. An analysis based on Power Transition Theory points to two possible future scenarios for the rivalry, namely China's predominance or a Chinese-Russian *modus vivendi* based on a 'division of labour'.

KEYWORDS

New Great Game; Central Asia; Power Transition Theory; Russia; China

The five Central Asian former Soviet republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan – have formed the fundamental hub along the historical Silk Road. The term "Silk Road" (*Seidenstraße*) was coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 to describe the transcontinental trade routes that crossed Eurasia and connected China to India, Persia and Europe. The route extended westward from the Chinese city of Xi'an to Kashgar, in Xinjiang, and continued through the lands that today include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and finally reached its terminus in Europe (Toops 2016, 353). Throughout history, the East and the West were connected through Central Asia (CA) and exchanged goods, ideas, religions and technological innovations. Classical geopolitical theory posits that CA – situated in the region that Halford Mackinder (1904; 1919; 1942) considered the Heartland of the Eurasian continent – has always represented an arena of international competition (Pizzolo 2020, 111–41; Kurečić 2010, 22). For example, during the 19th century, with the Russian Empire in possession of much of Turkestan and with the British Empire in control of the Indian subcontinent, CA became the epicentre of a heated strategic competition known as the "Great Game", which ended only with the Anglo-Russian entente of 1907 (Millward 2013) Table 1.

The end of Soviet rule led to the independence of the five Central Asian republics, born with artificial borders and an oft-varied ethnic composition. As a past colonial power, Russia developed a complex relationship with CA, partly based on cohabitation and common sentiment of belonging to the same civilisation, and partly based on an unequal relationship of dependence between coloniser and colonised.

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Today, CA faces several scenarios, including the relative decline of Russian influence; the growing rivalry between Russia, China, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU); competing investments and interest in the area's natural resources – especially oil, gas and precious metals. A "New Great Game" seems to be taking place between the major external actors that exert power in the region. First, Russia's foreign policy in CA is aimed at promoting security and military-technical cooperation, facilitating projects in the energy sector and expanding the membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), of which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are full members, Tajikistan a prospective member (Gusev 2019) and Uzbekistan an observer state. Second, China's strategy vis-à-vis CA is driven by the need for ensuring domestic stability, protecting national unity, suppressing internal unrest in its western regions, increasing influence and thereby limiting the influence of other powers, promoting its economic interests and enhancing energy security (Scobell *et al.* 2014). Third, the current US Strategy for CA is aimed at encouraging connectivity between Central Asian countries and promoting US investment in the region (US Department of State 2020), while Washington feels the need to counter Chinese assertiveness by promoting infrastructure, trade and connectivity throughout Asia, repeatedly invoking an own Silk Road policy (Hillman and Sacks 2021). Finally, the EU is promoting an EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy as a collection of policies designed to improve Europe's economic connectivity to the emerging economies of Central, Southeast and East Asia, which offers an alternative blueprint to Chinese initiatives for a future shared economic prosperity in Eurasia (Holzer 2020).

While during the first years of the 21st century Russia and China merged in an "axis of convenience" to counter Western influence in CA (Lo 2008), in recent years, China seems to be gaining regional supremacy and increasing its competition vis-à-vis Russia. Embracing a theoretical framework based on Power Transition Theory (PTT), this article suggests that the relationship between Moscow and Beijing moved from a convenient Sino-Russian partnership, justified by the common will to counter US regional influence after 2001, to a significant rivalry, especially after China's inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the attempt to link it to Kazakhstan's "Bright Path" strategy and to Uzbekistan's New Strategy of Development. This article argues that the implications of the BRI for Central Asian countries and the increasing Chinese role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which Russia attempted to thwart by backing and pushing through India's membership, offer evidence to illustrate the assumptions of PTT in the case of Sino-Russian rivalry in CA, demonstrating that China can be considered a dissatisfied challenger.

The article is divided into the following sections. It opens with an overview of the literature on the "New Great Game", highlighting the shift from the Sino-Russian axis of convenience to a more open Sino-Russian competition. The second section establishes the article's theoretical framework, namely the key assumptions of PTT in International Relations (IR), and introduces the research questions. In the light of the proposed theoretical frame, the third section describes the evolution of two Chinese-led initiatives potentially reducing Russian influence in CA, that is, the BRI and the SCO. The conclusion looks at possible developments for the region, arguing that two scenarios may occur: either Beijing will replace Moscow, or Beijing and Moscow will find a *modus vivendi* based on a 'division of labour', with the former reinforcing its role as regional economic hegemon and the latter maintaining its position as regional security provider.

The "New Great Game" in Central Asia

Recent scholarly literature stresses how CA has witnessed a "New Great Game" (Cooley 2012; Fingar 2016; Freeman 2018), that consists of a growing political, economic and strategic rivalry between Russia, China and, to a lesser extent, the US and the EU. Today, the Central Asian historical trade route of jade, tea and silk has been replaced with that of oil, gas, weapons and infrastructure. The region is characterised by border disputes, competition over strategic resources and enclaves of rival ethnic minorities (Blank 2012, 148). The rivalry between external actors is especially fuelled by the need to access energy resources and control the military bases in the region. In this context, Russia's aim is to maintain a privileged role by supporting pro-Russian local regimes and excluding or limiting Chinese, EU and US influence on local elites. Some claim (Zhao 2017) that Beijing will limit its interests to infrastructural development and commercial activities, which will leave the role of guarantor of regional security to Moscow, thus creating a sort of partnership, labelled as 'Chinese bank and Russian sheriff'. However, historical reasons related to both China's and Russia's desire to exert hegemony over Central Asia, which resulted in a two-century-long history of friction along the two powers' common frontiers – from Russian Turkestan to Xinjiang and Outer Mongolia –, could point to the fact that the two actors are once again moving towards increasingly heated competition (Freeman 2018, 638).

Sino-Russian competition was not palpable until Russia and China were cooperating to counter the US regional influence. The axis of convenience began in 2001, after the US intervention in Afghanistan, and ended in 2014, with the withdrawal of US troops from Central Asian military bases. The axis had been characterised by thorough Sino-Russian cooperation aimed at marginalising Western presence in CA and confronting fundamentalism and separatism in line with the commitments undertaken by the SCO (Frost 2009, 98). Following the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, the US presence in the region grew significantly. To facilitate military operations, the US needed local logistical support; for example, it used the Uzbek air base of Karshi-Khanabad (K2) from 2001 to 2005 and the Kyrgyz air base of Manas from 2001 to 2014. The Kremlin perceived the use of Central Asian military bases as Washington's attempt to encircle and contain Russia (Kazanstev 2008, 1082).

Although US military is no longer present in former Soviet CA, US economic interest in regional oil and gas fields is thriving. In this sense, the main objectives of the US are ensuring a permanent flow of energy resources from CA to the Caspian Sea and into Europe; investing in the construction of pipelines that bypass Russia and Iran; opening Central Asian energy markets to the global market without Russia's intermediation; marginalising Russian and Chinese influence; and countering terrorism and illicit trafficking. As part of its global strategy, the US intends to maintain a strong influence in the Heartland – aware of Halford Mackinder's famous theory –, and therefore has an interest in keeping a direct or indirect presence in the area (US President 2017).

Since the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005), Russia and China have feared that the West would actively support political reform in the post-Soviet space, including CA. At the same time, the fear of "colour revolutions" reinforced the ties between Moscow and the local political elites, which – moulded within the context of the Soviet Union – willingly oppose Western liberal-progressive initiatives.

However, while Sino-Russian strategies had been substantially convergent during the first decade of the century, since China's launch of the BRI in 2013, the views of Moscow and Beijing regarding CA have gradually shifted from the axis of convenience to an intense regional competition that could evolve into open rivalry (Freeman 2018, 649). Some scholars agree that Moscow fears a possible reduction of its influence in the region and a threat to its interests in favour of China (Blank 2012). Although Russia still considers the area as its "near abroad" and despite being still the only intermediary between CA and Europe for energy transit networks, China is now regarded as the main challenger for regional hegemony (Freeman 2018, 635). The constant increase of Chinese energy demand consolidates the links between China and CA: Beijing's regional strategy is based on the need to ensure an adequate supply of oil and natural gas for the growing internal demand (Swanström 2005, 570). Sharing a long border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as increasingly investing in the region's oil and gas, China is likely to increase its influence in parallel with the decline of Russia's. The question is whether Moscow will accept this power transition voluntarily or will attempt to counteract it – provided that it will find the necessary resources to do so.

The factors underlying the gradual replacement of Russia as the main actor in the region are several. The first factor is economic. Russia and China are fundamentally economically unequal (Hillman 2020). Despite the EAEU, Russia lags way behind China in terms of GDP, investment, infrastructure and production. The second is demographic. With a declining ethnic Russian population in Central Asian republics, Russia must face the difficulties of exercising influence in regions where it no longer enjoys a significant population share (Manakov 2020). Although this does not necessarily mean that ethnic Chinese will replace ethnic Russians as a minority in CA, it implies greater opportunities for China to spread its local influence. The third is geopolitical, specifically geo-economic. China needs CA's natural resources to satisfy its domestic demand (Xuanli Liao 2021). However, the complete expulsion of Russia from the region is only one possible outcome of this competition. The other is a Russo-Chinese *modus vivendi* based on a shared influence over CA, with Moscow providing security and Beijing promoting trade and infrastructures. The factors that would encourage the latter scenario are likewise several. The first would be a Russo-Chinese joint strategy in the frame of a EAEU-BRI cooperation (Railian *et al.* 2021). This agreement would imply Russian acknowledgement of China as the key economic actor in CA. The second would be China's renunciation to replace Russia as the regional security provider. In this sense, while feeling less threatened by China, Russia could continue to exercise a military role in the region, especially through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This would also imply both greater Sino-Russian cooperation within the SCO and a Chinese alternative strategy refraining from bilateral military agreements with Central Asian republics.

Power Transition Theory as a tool to assess geopolitical shifts

Over time, PTT has become a successful structural theory in IR, representing a dynamic and versatile model for analysing fundamental shifts in global power. Dealing with the frame of changing power relationships, PTT appears useful to describe the rise of China, which could, unless carefully managed, provoke acute displacements in world politics – also affecting CA. As a probabilistic theory, it has proven valuable in forecasting the circumstances of both conflict and cooperation at the global, national and regional levels of analysis and in offering policy-relevant prescriptions. Based on empirically tested schemes backed by large data sets, the theory has evolved over time, spanning over fifty years of scholarly debate (Tammen *et al.* 2017, 1).

Fundamental contributions in the PTT literature are those by A. F. K. Organski (1958), A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler (1980), Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (1996) and Ronald Tammen *et al.* (2000). PTT depicts global and regional politics as a system based on a hierarchy of nations with different degrees of cooperation and competition, which defines how influential countries at the top of that hierarchy attempt to manage global or regional power. The hierarchic international system – both at a global and local level – is conceived as a static entity affected by dynamic factors, such as political and economic performance, demographic growth, level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the status quo, and integration efforts.

International or regional stability is usually altered by dynamics of power shift, which generates potential dissatisfied challengers that seek to confront the existing status quo. Scholarly literature has attempted to quantify the challenger's dissatisfaction. Interestingly, the findings regarding a challenger's dissatisfaction align with China's political strategies. Woosang Kim (1991) and Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner (1996) maintain that dissatisfaction with the status quo is a more important predictor of war than balance of power. In recent years, China's leadership has directed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to improve its combat readiness, while it is increasingly evident that the intensity of the PLA's training and the complexity and scale of its exercises are aimed at military revisionism (US Secretary of Defense 2020). Suzanne Werner and Jacek Kugler (1996) correlate dissatisfaction with extraordinary military augmentations. China's military expenditure, which is estimated to have reached USD 252 billion in 2020, an increase of 1.9 per cent over 2019 and 76 per cent over the decade 2011–2020 (SIPRI 2021), provides a clear example of Werner and Kugler's scheme. Furthermore, Woosang Kim (1992) argues that a strong relationship exists between power parity and dissatisfaction. China perceives itself as a world power that has equalled US power (Wei and Davis 2021). Finally, Douglas Lemke and William Reed (1998) link dissatisfaction to the need of crafting alliances. The creation of the Chinese-led SCO, an organisation that implies political, economic and military cooperation among allies, confirms the use of alliance-crafting as a tool employed by a challenging actor dissatisfied with the status quo.

Particularly, when considering the power dynamics in CA, the application of PTT at the regional level is argued by Lemke (2002), who attempted to demonstrate the relevance of the theory's assumptions to regional hierarchies, highlighting the relations between a regional dominant power and a regional challenger. His meticulous empirical study shows that the same principles that hold at the global level also describe the interactions within regional hierarchies. The core of PTT's regional interpretation hinges on the idea that regional hierarchies exist and function similarly to the overall global hierarchy, though being subordinate to it. Moreover, it argues that global hierarchs can involve themselves in regional and local disputes. Originally conceived with regard to

Latin America, Lemke's scheme applies well to China's regional assertiveness in CA too. In a regional interpretation of power transition in CA, Russia is still the major military and geo-cultural player in the regional power hierarchy, while China has already evolved into the chief economic challenger.

A strand of literature argues that the development of regional integration after a power transition between two satisfied powers improves because the formerly less powerful country has a core interest in both maintaining and institutionalising the arrangements that, in its view, contributed to its rise (Efird and Genna 2002; Efird *et al.* 2003). In the case of CA, which is witnessing different attempts of regional integration, this argument supports the idea of Chinese dissatisfaction, which led it not to integrate with Russia (for example, in the EAEU), but rather to promote unilateral initiatives (such as the BRI).

Following Organski's (1958) original framework, which highlighted the relevance of the economic aspect in power transition analysis, China surpassed Russia as trading partner in some Central Asian countries, while increasing its presence in others. Specifically, as trade statistics show (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020), in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, trade with China slightly exceeded that with Russia in the years 2015-2017, but not in the case of Tajikistan – in which trade with Beijing is increasing nonetheless – and Kazakhstan – for which Moscow is still the second trading partner after the EU. In addition, Turkmenistan's second-largest import partner is Russia, but the largest export partner is China (International Trade Administration 2020).

Moreover, according to the interpretation proposed by Katherine Organski and A. F. K. Organski (1961) and Tadeusz Kugler and Siddharth Swaminathan (2006), which placed population growth at the core of power transition, China represents a demographic giant – with clear consequences in terms of workforce and economic production – confronting a scarcely populated Russia – especially in its Siberian wilderness. However, China is an ageing country with a declining labour force since 2018 (The World Bank Data 2021) and, historically, it has always outnumbered Russia in demographic terms.

Therefore, at least in economic terms, Sino-Russian interactions in CA are witnessing a regional power transition. The gradual transformation of China into the dominant economic actor in several Central Asian countries is mainly the consequence of its commercial and infrastructural development. Recalling the PTT theoretical frame, China appears as a dissatisfied challenger that seeks to redefine power relations in CA, outmatching Russia's past economic dominant role without necessarily questioning Moscow's status as regional security provider – despite Beijing's recent increase in military expenditures.

The Chinese Dragon and the Russian Bear in Central Asia: infrastructural, economic and institutional challenges

The Belt and Road Initiative and its impact

From an infrastructural and economic point of view, the BRI represents the major catalytic power shift in CA from Russian to Chinese influence, providing empirical evidence to the PTT theoretical frame introduced in the previous section.

At the end of 2013, during an official visit to Kazakhstan, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's intention to implement an unparalleled political-economic programme, calling for the realisation of a "New Silk Road" connecting Asia with Europe. As noted by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 (Nurgaliyev 2020), the Central Asian region is a key area for the implementation of this gigantic project. When choosing the Kazakh capital to announce the BRI, the Chinese leadership considered the fundamental role of CA as a trade and infrastructure hub for the entire Eurasian continent. Formerly known until 2016 as "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), the BRI is the most ambitious project that Xi Jinping's China wishes to implement. Its principal objective is to deeply connect China with the outer world and to help it achieve geopolitical goals by binding economically its neighbouring countries; in this direction, the BRI aims to build a vast infrastructural network that connects East Asia with Europe both through the Eurasian land route (the Silk Road Economic Belt, SREB) and through the Indian Ocean maritime route (the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, MSR) (Cai 2017).

In presenting the project, the Chinese leadership committed itself to mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in others' internal affairs, equality amongst nations, and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence (Villafuerte *et al.* 2016, 21). Some link the proposal of the BRI to China's previous visions, such as those of the "harmonious world" and "peaceful development" and of the "Chinese dream" of rejuvenation from national humiliation and the 19th century's break-up of China (Nordin and Weissman 2018, 231). However, the BRI can also be considered a Chinese response to the 2008 global financial crisis, which had shown a contraction of world trade while Chinese GDP continued to grow, although at a slower rate. In response to decelerating GDP and trade growth, China opted for implementing a set of internal and external reforms. Internally, it encouraged dozens of reforms focused on state-owned enterprises, taxation, land and household registration, and financial liberalisation. Externally, it proposed the OBOR initiative, in the hope that it could support a revival of GDP and trade growth in China, as well as in its neighbouring countries (Villafuerte *et al.* 2016, 6). Nonetheless, a part of the literature has highlighted the gap between the official Chinese rhetoric and the actual practice and realistic prospect of BRI implementation, arguing that the initiative is "too vague [. . .] and might just be an example of hollow government rhetoric" (Yu 2017, 355). At the beginning, the initiative was aimed at establishing greater cooperation between CA and China and promoting development and security in Chinese western provinces; however, the SREB evolved into a pan-Eurasian network project. The key thematic areas of focus of the BRI are policy coordination, infrastructural connectivity, trade and investment, and financial integration (Kohli 2018, 4–5).

The BRI terrestrial corridors through CA are two. The first is the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB), a transcontinental railway line beginning in China's Jiangsu province, traversing Xinjiang, stretching through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland, and reaching several coastal ports in Europe. The second is the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWEC), which starts from Xinjiang, goes along the Chinese-Kazakh border, joins the railway networks of the five Central Asian republics, Iran and Turkey, and finally reaches the Mediterranean (Wenwen *et al.* 2019, 3).

Given the substantial impact of the BRI in CA, the project could either be motivated by China's pressing economic concerns or its attempt to gain political leverage over its neighbours. In other words, it can be considered either a geo-economic project focused on implementing Chinese connections and its domestic industrial policy or as a geopolitical and geostrategic plan that China will use to impose its influence throughout Eurasia. Both interpretations are hypotheses, and one does not necessarily exclude the other; however, in either case, China is gradually expanding its presence in CA.

Historically, China's links to CA were interrupted only during the Tsarist and, above all, Soviet rule; however, since the 1990s, Beijing has rediscovered a strong interest in the area, which it has expressed through investment, trade and military cooperation (Melnikovová 2020; Jardine and Lemon 2020). Recently, due to the increasingly important role given to its natural resources and strategic location, CA has even been called China's "living space" (*Dingwei*) (Swanström 2005, 570).

The growing interest in CA within the frame of the BRI is closely linked with China's growing demand for energy. The energy factor first emerged as an important dimension in relations between China and CA in 1993, when China became an importer of petroleum products. Since 1997, China has signed important energy deals with regional players. For example, China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) overtook both US and Russian oil companies by winning contracts and concessions for Kazakh oil. Since the 2000s, with the exponential growth of energy demand, China has launched huge investments in the infrastructure and energy sectors in CA. These investments made it necessary to ensure regional stability, particularly in relation to Uyghur separatism in Xinjiang (Cai 2017).

The inauguration of the OBOR project in 2013, labelled as "New Silk Road", represented an epochal event in the Central Asian regional balance, demonstrating how much China intended to augment its influence, especially in CA. Recently, as previously noted, China has become an increasingly relevant trading partner for some Central Asian countries and, thanks to massive Chinese investment in the energy production sector, it is expected to receive half of the energy produced in the area (Freeman 2018, 647). Moreover, the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in December 2015 interrupted the Russian project of establishing a reference bank for the SCO within the framework of a Sino-Russian co-rule. Also, it is noteworthy that the Russian-led EAEU has so far managed to include only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan among the countries of the region.

In light of the above, China's unilateral strategy to integrate – or at least, build tighter connections – with CA demonstrates Beijing's fundamental dissatisfaction and shows evidence of how the BRI implies a regional power transition consistent with the assumptions of PTT. This is specifically evident in the Chinese desire to engage bilaterally with Central Asian republics, chiefly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, within the frame of the BRI. An analysis of Chinese partnerships with each CA country in the context of the BRI is illustrative of Beijing's growing influence in the region.

Kazakhstan

Evidence of a growing Chinese and a declining Russian impact in the region is the 2015 Sino-Kazakh willingness to link the BRI with Kazakhstan's strategy of the "Bright Path" (*Nurly Zhol*) as a prelude to long-term economic, logistic and infrastructural collaboration. Originally announced by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Bright Path is aimed at turning Kazakhstan into a key Eurasian transport and logistics hub by modernising infrastructures in the context of an enlarged partnership with China. The Kazakh development programme for 2020-2025 falls entirely within the frame of the Bright Path initiative. Former President Nazarbayev repeatedly noted that Kazakhstan is the key country of the SREB, a kind of geo-economic gateway for China to the West. The joint infrastructure projects between *Nurly Zhol* and the BRI include building some transportation corridors connecting Kazakhstan with China, Anatolia, the South Caucasus, Russia and Europe, and the development of logistics terminals in China, Kazakhstan and third countries, including Turkmenistan and Iran. Instead, commercial cooperation addresses the stimulation and optimisation of bilateral trade (Kassenova 2017).

From Kazakhstan's point of view, active participation in the BRI is natural and logical since it is perceived as beneficial to the country's modernisation of transport and transit facilities. Unlike Russia, Kazakhstan is enthusiastic about serving as a transit area for trade between Europe and Asia (Zuenko 2017). However, some studies (Burkhanov and Chen 2016) revealed that Kazakh views of the rising Chinese neighbour are divided between the official discourse centred on further engagement with China and negative stereotypes of China and the Chinese, as well as Sinophobia, in private Kazakh discourse.

Uzbekistan

As for Uzbekistan, the BRI overlaps with the Uzbek New Strategy of Development, a project that spans the years 2017-2021 aimed at inclusive development and substantial reforms in priority areas like public construction, economic development and liberalisation, rule of law and national security. Uzbekistan is a crucial actor for the implementation of the CCAWEC of the BRI. Both Uzbekistan and China would benefit from cooperation since China cannot implement the CCAWEC without Uzbekistan, and the BRI could help connecting Uzbekistan to the Persian Gulf, enabling market expansion (Costa Buranelli 2018). China's presentation of the BRI as a framework for realising investments and infrastructure resonates well with Uzbekistan's agenda of economic and industrial modernisation and foreign policy objectives.

Tajikistan

In relation to Tajikistan, the BRI would serve as a political technology for domestic purposes (Karrar and Mostowlansky 2020). Currently, some 45 per cent of Tajikistan's imports are from China, and China holds 53 per cent of Tajikistan's debt (Uran Kyzy 2019). Even before the launch of the BRI, Chinese investments in Tajikistan entangled with existing power structures. In fact, the Tajik ruling elite actively employs political technologies, that is, the implementation of investment strategies for consolidating existing authority structures (Karrar and Mostowlansky 2020). The bilateral friendship (*dusti*) between China and Tajikistan, which has increased since the early 2000s (Mostowlansky 2017), has now become an integral part of the BRI. Notwithstanding, Tajikistan is still discussing also the possibility of acceding to the EAEU (Schulz 2020).

Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, in recent years, China has supported the implementation of major infrastructure projects directly connected to the BRI. These include the rehabilitation of the Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam, the Osh-Batken-Isfana and the Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart roads, the modernisation of electricity transmission lines in the southern regions and of heat and power plants in the capital, the creation of the alternative Kazarman-Jalal-Abad and Balykchy-Aral roads, the creation of a Sino-Kyrgyz gas pipeline and the development of the street network in Bishkek (Mogilevskii 2019).

Turkmenistan

Finally, despite its isolationism, Turkmenistan would also play an important role in the frame of the BRI. Specifically, in the context of the "Lapis Lazuli" transit corridor opened in 2018, railways and highways will connect the Herat province in Afghanistan and the Turkmenbashi port in Turkmenistan via Ashgabat. From Turkmenbashi, goods will then travel by sea to Baku to then be carried westward to Europe across the South Caucasus and Anatolia via the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (Chan 2018).

Russia's reaction to BRI initiatives in CA

Despite Russia's acknowledgement of some potentially positive implications of the BRI for creating a "Greater Eurasia" (Vinokurov 2019, 39), its participation in BRI's China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) and the NELB, and Moscow's desire to cooperate with China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016), CA plays a primary role in the Sino-Russian growing rivalry over resources and infrastructure. Indeed, Russia has interpreted the BRI as an attempt to attract Central Asian countries into the Chinese geo-economic orbit, although, due to its lesser economic projection, it had no other choice than to accept the initiative and bandwagon on some of its projects. Still, Moscow has an interest in creating alternative trade routes to Iran and India, to keep its grip on Central Asian countries and to project itself as a bridge between Europe and Asia for strategic transport networks.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: a partnership that conceals contrasts

As already seen, a part of the literature on PTT (Lemke and Reed 1998) links dissatisfaction to the need of crafting alliances. The formation of the Chinese-led SCO, which is an organisation that implies political, economic and military cooperation among its members, provides further empirical evidence that, as a revisionist challenger, China forges alliances to challenge the status quo. Formally presented as an association that fosters Sino-Russian cooperation, the SCO could in fact represent the institutional framework within which Chinese primacy may be ensured in CA, and beyond.

Founded in 2001, today the SCO consists of eight member states – China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan –, as well as observer states.[1] Since its formation, the organisation has often been considered as a joint Russo-Chinese attempt to counteract Western geopolitical initiatives in the Eurasian continent; however,

[1]As of 2021, Iran is an acceding member, while Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar are upcoming dialogue partners.

this narrative may appear too simplistic and biased when, in fact, the SCO was conceived mainly as a hub for the coordination of specific security and – to a lesser extent – economic policy aspects and a relevant actor for shaping regional politics and security in Eurasia. Member states agreed in engaging in a common struggle against the perceived “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism and separatism (Bailes *et al.* 2007, 5).

Since 2001, Russia and China have been the two main poles within the SCO; however, the 2017 enlargement to India and Pakistan contributed to altering this. Originally, the Russo-Chinese axis represented the cornerstone of the organisation, but recent conflicts of interest and competition between the two powers are leading to its deterioration (Lo 2008). For instance, following the military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, frictions emerged between Moscow and Beijing within the SCO, because the organisation counters all forms of separatism, and China is always fearful of internal secessionist claims. Since those major events, the interests of Russia and China have diverged regarding the issue of trade and influence in CA. Russia desires to limit China’s free-trade agenda, preferring to maintain economic and political cooperation within regional frameworks like the EAEU and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), from which China is excluded. In contrast, as argued above, China intends to tie Central Asian SCO members to the BRI. Moreover, despite the SCO, Russian-led organisations such as the EAEU, the CIS and the CSTO could expand, while others could end up being marginalised, or one could be absorbed by another (Kuznetsova 2017, 191).

Although Russia considers the SCO a tool to establish an ‘arc of stability’ in northern Eurasia in contrast with the southern ‘arc of instability’ stretching from the Near East through Iraq and Afghanistan to Pakistan and Kashmir, the SCO’s strategic significance for China is undeniable. First, the SCO helped China to build and increase trust with the former Soviet neighbouring countries, assuring the security and peace of its extensive western and northern border areas, and thus allowing to concentrate military forces on the country’s eastern and south-eastern Pacific coasts. Second, the SCO helps China contrast its internal separatist movements, primarily in Xinjiang. Third, the economic cooperation that the SCO aims at is beneficial to Beijing’s programme of development for China’s western regions. Finally, the creation of a zone of stability and development from CA outward to South Asia, Eurasia and the Middle East will create a favourable environment for China’s implementation of the BRI. Through the SCO, China is managing to build a new approach to neighbourhood security and trust that could lead to future peaceful solutions of border issues, such as those with India, and of the disputed islands in the South China Sea and East China Sea – for example, the Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

From the perspective of the Central Asian republics, the SCO represents a unique forum that enables them to engage with Russia and China simultaneously, thus counterbalancing an excessive influence from either power. These republics have more opportunities to pursue their interests within the SCO than negotiating separately with Russia or China, as the organisation guarantees that the agenda will not be dominated by a single external sponsor. Specifically, studies aimed at examining the balance in the geopolitics of CA through the SCO have underlined that the organisation’s institutional mechanisms represent the most suitable and comprehensive model of balance in the context of the complex geopolitics of CA (Vignjević 2020).

The 2017 inclusion of India in the organisation was functional for Russia to counterbalance Chinese supremacy, thus proving evidence of Moscow's fear of power shift and marginalisation. Furthermore, India's membership in the SCO could also somewhat weaken the BRI. However, the Chinese-backed inclusion of Pakistan played the role of rebalancing the Russo-Indian axis. It is noteworthy that the inclusion of India and Pakistan in the organisation has fomented the fear of paralysis within the organisation (Kupriyanov 2020), giving credit to the early 2000s argument that the SCO could be a paper tiger (Turner 2005; Oldberg 2007).

Finally, in terms of security, Russia also created a collective security system in CA that included as many former Soviet republics as possible and excluded China. In fact, in 1992 it launched the CSTO, which included all the republics of CA – except for Turkmenistan. Unlike the SCO, which is a much broader initiative, the CSTO's aim and scope is to strengthen peace and protect regional security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of former Soviet states. However, through the SCO, China is projecting itself as a real alternative leader to Russia for the security of the region, especially considering the partial weakening of the CSTO since Uzbekistan's withdrawal in 2012, preventing Russia from using the Karshi-Khanabad air base. China has even begun to structure multilateral security partnerships outside the SCO framework with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, excluding Russia.

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept highlights the importance of "further strengthening the SCO's role in regional and global affairs and expanding its membership, [...] increasing the SCO's political and economic potential, and implementing practical measures within its framework to consolidate mutual trust and partnership in Central Asia". At the same time, Russia considers it a top priority "developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with members of the CIS and further strengthening integration structures" within the organisation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). Russia's effort to further unleash the CIS potential and to strengthen its ties may be interpreted in an anti-Chinese spirit as a move to avoid that CIS member states in CA shift away from Moscow's influence in favour of Beijing.

On the other hand, the SCO is not the only vehicle through which China seeks to increase its military presence in CA. Recently, this has also been achieved bilaterally through specific agreements with CA countries. Since 2014, China has substantially increased arms transfers to the region, providing 18 per cent of the region's arms imports between 2015 and 2019, compared to 1.5 per cent between 2010 and 2014. Moreover, in 2016, China built its first military facilities in Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains. Notwithstanding, Moscow remains the chief security guarantor in CA, accounting for 62 per cent of the regional arms market between 2015 and 2019 and maintaining military

Table 1. Participation of the five Central Asian republics in regional integration initiatives

	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 (CCAWEC) of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	x	x	x	x	x

infrastructure in three out of five of the republics (Jardine and Lemon 2020), specifically the bases of Baikonur, Sary-Shagan and Balkhash in Kazakhstan, the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan and the military base at Dushanbe in Tajikistan.

Conclusion

This article attempted to highlight how the Sino-Russian hegemonic competition in CA seems to be increasing more and more in favour of China and to the detriment of Russia. Moscow now must deal with the increasingly active presence of China in the race for the region's energy resources and infrastructural assets.

Through the lenses of PTT, the main results of the article posit that, between 2001 and 2014, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing passed from a partnership based on mutual convenience – specifically to counter the US' and NATO presence in CA following the intervention in Afghanistan – to relations more open to competition. Sino-Russian frictions arose soon after China's inauguration of the BRI and the project to link it to Kazakhstan's Bright Path strategy and after Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for Eastern Ukraine separatist forces, which fuelled Chinese fears regarding its secessionist challenges in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and so on. The impact of the BRI on Central Asian republics, China's growing role in the SCO – partially thwarted by Russia by backing India's inclusion in the institution, which was in turn countered by China's backing of Pakistan's membership – as well as Beijing's arms sales to and increasing military presence in CA empirically validate the assumptions of PTT for Sino-Russian competition in the region. Specifically, in relation to CA, China matches the description provided by PTT literature on regional dissatisfied challengers for two main reasons: first, it refused to engage in regional integration processes along with Russia, preferring to promote an independent and unilateral strategy (the BRI); second, in order to challenge the status quo, it encouraged the formation of an alliance that sees Beijing as leader (the SCO).

Undoubtedly, Russia can still rely on important cultural and military ties in the region. On the one hand, the Russian ethnic minorities – whose presence is significant, for example, in Kazakhstan – symbolise a collective identity linked to Moscow that is recognised by the organs of the Russian Federation in charge of supporting diaspora networks in the "near abroad" (King and Melvin 2000; Peyrouse 2007, 487). On the other hand, from a military point of view, Russia still plays an important role of deterrence within the region; specifically, as mentioned above, it still possesses military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In this sense, unless the SCO overtakes and replaces the CSTO, even if China becomes the unmatched economic power in the region, Russia could maintain its role as the predominant provider of security. Furthermore, the Sino-Russian security apparatus based on the SCO will probably impede the West from gaining a primary military role in the region, although not necessarily undermining Western economic initiatives. In addition, geographical distance makes Western strategies for CA more problematic to implement, while China and Russia have the advantage of geographic proximity and historical interconnection with the countries in the region. Geographic proximity could also be one of the reasons for China not to question Russia's primacy in the field of security.

Moreover, the BRI and other Chinese-led projects are hampered by the EAEU, which, as seen, not only already includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but could also incorporate Tajikistan in the future – and perhaps even Uzbekistan, which has recently become an observer state. The EAEU is a single market that promotes a high degree of economic integration which, for instance, similarly to the EU, prevents members from adopting an independent external trade policy. On the contrary, the BRI does not envision such deep institutionalised integration. However, despite the existence of the EAEU, China's economic pressure in the region is undeniable.

The likely future scenarios regarding Sino-Russian interaction in CA are thus essentially two: Russia may gradually be replaced by China as the main actor in the region, or Russia and China may find a way to share their influence – the former providing security and the latter promoting trade and infrastructures. As for Central Asian countries, it appears that they have no other real choice than remaining in the Russian orbit, falling under Chinese influence, or a combination of both: the lack of a US' and EU's decisive role in the region – despite the EU Connectivity Strategy, Kazakhstan's intense trade with EU countries and the US Strategy for CA – seems to confirm this scenario.

Available evidence suggests that in the coming years, CA will be strongly integrated within the BRI project – specifically within the two corridors, the NELB and the CCAWEC – and that, in economic terms, China will clearly outperform Russia. In this sense, whether Moscow will accept the power shift or somehow contrast it represents a question that could direct further research on Sino-Russian relations in CA. A wise strategy for Moscow would be to acknowledge China's economic primacy while continuing to play a relevant role in the security field. An even wiser strategy would be to find a constructive *modus vivendi* that does not exclude the possibility of merging Chinese-led initiatives (BRI, SCO) with Russian-led institutions (EAEU, CSTO, CIS).

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