

CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA: WILL RUSSIA'S DOMINANCE COME TO AN END?

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore what policies China has followed to enhance its presence over Central Asia from 1991 to 2025 and to inquire whether China is to challenge the longstanding Russian domination in the region. The article suggests that, since the dissolution of the USSR, China has been carrying out political, economic, diplomatic, military, and commercial activities in Central Asia, which has dramatically increased its influence over the region. However, China's objective in these policies is not to challenge the Russian hegemony in Central Asia, but to make a burden-sharing with Russia. It is argued in the article that Russia and China are not in a competition, but in a cooperation as they need each other to prevent any Western influence in Central Asia, to provide security and stability over the region against threats like ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism, and to help the friendly secular regimes to stay in power. Moreover, this Sino-Russian cooperation has not stopped Russia from staying as a strong actor in Central Asia. Though China has enhanced its presence in the region through various tools such as international organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, investments, pipeline projects, and the Belt and Road Initiative; Russia is still a determining power as it enjoys control especially through the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In the light of the information presented, the article concludes that, between China and Russia, no conflict stemming from China's rising power is visible in the near future in Central Asia as the Sino-Russian cooperation has been useful so far for these two countries to attain the aforementioned goals.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Russia, China, Sino-Russian cooperation, Belt and Road Initiative*

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In this article, Ethical Committee Approval is not needed.

ORTAASYA'DAARTAN ÇİN ETKİSİ: RUS HAKİMİYETİ SONA ERECEK Mİ?

ÖZ

Bu makale, 1991-2025 yılları arasında Çin'in Orta Asya'daki etkinliğini artırmak için izlediği politikaları ortaya çıkarmayı ve Çin'in bu çabasının bölgede uzun süredir devam eden Rus hakimiyetine bir meydan okuma olup olmadığını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, SSCB'nin dağılmasından bu yana Çin'in siyasi, ekonomik, diplomatik, askeri ve ticari faaliyetler yoluyla Orta Asya'da etkisini önemli ölçüde artırdığını öne sürmektedir. Bununla birlikte, Çin'in bu politikalarının amacı Orta Asya'daki Rus hegemonyasına meydan okumak değil, Rusya ile bir yük paylaşımı yapmaktır. Makalede, Rusya ve Çin'in bir rekabet içerisinde değil bir işbirliğinde içerisinde oldukları; Orta Asya'da olası bir Batı etkisini önlemek, terörizm, etnik ayrılıkçılık ve dini aşırıcılık gibi tehditlere karşı bölgede güvenlik ve istikrarı sağlamak ve iyi ilişkiler içinde oldukları seküler rejimlerin iktidarda kalmasına yardımcı olmak için birbirlerine ihtiyaç duydukları ileri sürülmektedir. Ayrıca, söz konusu Çin-Rusya dayanışması Rusya'nın Orta Asya'da güçlü bir aktör olarak kalmasını engellemiştir. Çin; Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü gibi uluslararası örgütler, yatırımlar, boru hattı projeleri ve Kuşak Yol İnisiyatifi gibi gibi araçlarla bölgedeki etkinliğini artırmış olsa da Rusya özellikle Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği ve Kolektif Güvenlik Antlaşması Örgütü aracılığıyla Orta Asya'da kontrolünü devam ettirdiği için hala belirleyici bir güçtür. Sunulan bilgilerin ışığında, makale; Çin-Rus işbirliği bu iki ülkenin yukarıda bahsedilen hedeflere ulaşmalarında bugüne dek işe yaradığından, Çin ve Rusya arasında Orta Asya'da yakın gelecekte Çin'in yükselişinden kaynaklanan bir çatışmanın görünmediği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Orta Asya, Rusya, Çin, Çin-Rusya dayanışması, Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi*

INTRODUCTION

Russia has been dominating the Central Asia region for more than 150 years, beginning in the Tsarist era and becoming even stricter in the Soviet era. However, in 1991, all Central Asian states, namely Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, gained their independence from the fragmented Soviet Union. However, independence did not mean total abandonment of Russia. Economic, political, and cultural ties with Russia retained their importance in the post-Soviet period. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been the two states with the strongest ties with Russia, with Tajikistan following them. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, on the other hand, have enjoyed relative autonomy in the international arena (Laruelle 2022: 194-195).

In the post-Cold War period, China, an actor that had not engaged much in the region for centuries, has intensified its efforts to enhance its influence in Central Asia. Being a figure mostly feared, disliked, and considered an alien force by the Central Asian people for historical reasons, China has taken serious steps to increase its power in the entire region since 1991 (Kassenova 2022: 202-203). Establishing diplomatic relations, increasing commercial ties, making direct investments, and even deploying troops in Central Asia have been China's main methods for asserting power in the region. But what does Russia think of China's increasing power in Central Asia? Is China a threat to the privileged status of Russia in the region? This piece of research closely examines the ways in which China has engaged in Central Asia over the region through three decades. Then, it tries to understand whether China's rise is a challenge to Russia for hegemony in the Central Asia or a component of a process of burden-sharing against common threats.

The article consists of six parts. This introductory part will be followed by a literature review that reveals views on the nature of China-Russia relationship in Central Asia. Then, the article divides the 34-year period encompassing the years between 1991 and 2025 into three parts as the first being between 1991 and 2001, the second being between 2001 and 2013, and the third spanning the period between 2013 and 2025. In each of these parts, China's methods for increasing its power in the region are uncovered while the indicators of its cooperation with Russia are also presented. In the conclusion part, a general comparison between China and Russia will be made, and the findings and the main arguments of the research will be

reasserted. To support its arguments, the article utilizes quantitative data, such as numbers on trade and investment, and qualitative data such as historical background and political developments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the increasing Chinese influence in Central Asia and the relationship between Russia and China in the region has largely been cautious about a possible competition and tension that lies down beneath the overt cooperation between the parties. For example, in 2007, Igor Torbakov argued that even though Russia and China had managed to realize some degree of cooperation in the region, a competition was inevitable in the future as China was determined to reemerge in Central Asia to the extent that Russia would no longer have an influence. Through pipeline projects, railroads, energy firms, population transfer, China was in an assertive position that would eventually push Russia back to a significant degree. Similarly, in 2010, Fabio Indeo acknowledged the convergence between China and Russia in the 1990s but underlined the geopolitical competition that had emerged between them in the late 2000s especially in the security and energy fields. He argued that Russia's influence had waned significantly in the region due to its economic weakness and the discontent spread by its aggressive policies in the post-Soviet countries. Wilhelmsen and Flikke's (2011) approach is not much different either: They think there might be limits for the Sino-Soviet cooperation in the Central Asia and it might be replaced by a competition in the future, as the Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO) and Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) might not always be compatible. They also claim that Russia perceives China's investments, especially those in the energy field, as a challenge. Garret Mitchell (2014) argues that, in case of a Sino-Russian competition in Central Asia, China's rise will not discharge Russia from the region as Russia's bonds with the region in the fields of security, energy, and culture are too strong for China to remove in a near future. Stronski and Nd (2018) emphasize the success of the Sino-Soviet cooperation in Central Asia in stabilizing the region, but note that Russia has little to do against China's economic investments like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, they point out that China increased its military presence in the region as it feared instability from both Central and South Asia. They also claim that China has the upper hand against Russia, and China's real intentions regarding this country is not clear. Jeanne L. Wilson (2021) also questions the cooperation between Russia

and China drawing attention to China's increasing participation in security and military sectors in Central Asia. Similar to Stronsky and Nd, she thinks that China is ascending while Russia is in a defensive position. Therefore, this disparity of powers between them and China's rise in Central Asia will lead to the weakening of the Sino-Soviet cooperation. Finally, Cooley (2022) believes that although a Sino-Russian cooperation against the West, where Russia provides military security and China brings about commerce opportunities and investment, is obvious at surface, there is a deep-down tension between these countries, as China's economic enterprises naturally have political consequences.

CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM 1991 TO 2001

In January 1992, China recognized the independence of the five Central Asian states immediately and launched diplomatic ties with them in January 1992 (Kassenova 2022: 202). About these new states, the most significant issue with which China was preoccupied was security-related problems: China's Xinjiang region was mostly populated by Turkic-speaking Muslims and a neighbor to the Central Asian states in the west. As a result, the Chinese authorities feared that the bonds between the people of Xinjiang and Central Asia might destabilize the region through the rise of ethno-nationalism, pan-Turkism, or radical Islamism. The civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan further fueled such worries of China. Moreover, the power void that took place after the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Central Asia made Chinese authorities think that other powers in the international system might pursue influence in the region (Kellner 2014: 216-217). Another important point was that there had been border disputes and ongoing negotiations for re-establishing contact between China and Soviets by 1991. For securing stability in its western borders, China needed to address these issues (Kassenova 2022: 203). Finally, China had vital economic interests in Central Asia, especially for its need for energy and stability in Xinjiang region. Furthermore, China needed market partners for its opening economy (Guangcheng 2015: 156-157). As a result, China decided to make its economic and political connection stronger with the states in Central Asia (Kellner 2014: 217).

In the 1990s, China took critical steps in terms of diplomacy, security, and trade with all five Central Asian republics. To give an example for diplomatic efforts, Li Peng, China's then prime minister, made a historic tour in 1994 in the region. Then, in 1996, Jiang Zemin, China's then

president, visited Central Asian countries several times. In return, all Central Asian leaders visited Beijing in the 1990s. These diplomatic visits facilitated the strengthening of the bonds between Central Asian countries and China. On security, some critical issues were resolved. In 1992, China began to negotiate with neighboring Central Asian states and Russia for establishing confidence-building measures for military affairs, reduction in arms and troops, and demilitarization of borders (Kellner 2014: 217-218). As a result, in 1996, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, China, and Tajikistan signed the “Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Sphere in the Border Areas” in Shanghai, thus establishing the group known as the Shanghai Five (Kassenova 2022: 203). The formation of the Shanghai Five was an important sign of the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia that emerged in the 1990s. Moreover, Russia signed the Collective Security Treaty in May 1992 with Uzbekistan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to consolidate its military power in Central Asia (Collective Security Treaty Organization 2022).

On the other hand, in solving the territorial disputes, China adopted a benign and compromising manner towards relevant Central Asian states. To resolve its territorial disputes, China signed bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan in 1994 and with Kyrgyzstan in 1996, while the remaining disputed lands were settled in 1999. The dispute with Tajikistan was resolved in 1999 as well. In these agreements, China did not refrain from making concessions as it prioritized security over territorial gains (Kassenova 2022: 203-204). As a result of these steps that China took, the skepticism of Central Asian states of China began to decrease (Swanström 2005: 576). Furthermore, the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan and nontraditional threats that might come from Central Asia brought China, Russia and Central Asian states closer to each other. These states did now have common interests in fighting with, in China's words, the “three evils”: ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. The parties also fought drug trafficking (Kellner 2014: 218-219). Central Asian governments cooperated with China to deal with separatism in Xinjiang by suppressing Uighur activism in their countries and extraditing Uighurs who fled China (Kassenova 2022: 205).

In economic terms, significant developments also took place. For example, in 1992, the trade volume between Central Asian states and China was only \$464 million. While China's exports were \$292 million, its imports were \$172 million. By 2001, total trade between China and Central Asian

states had reached \$1,5 billion, China's exports being \$491 million, and its imports totaling \$1,01 billion. The largest share in this trade volume belonged to Kazakhstan (Wu and Chen 2004: 1066). Central Asian countries were generally selling raw materials such as iron, coal, cotton, steel, leather to China and bought manufactured goods from China (Kassenova 2022: 207). On the other hand, Chinese direct investments in Central Asia significantly increased in the 1990s. Investments mainly included sectors like light industry, petroleum and natural gas (especially in Kazakhstan), electronics manufactory, agricultural production, and construction (Wu and Chen 2004: 1074). Moreover, in 1992, the railway between Urumqi and Almaty was completed and the border post in Dostyk-Alatau was opened for trade between Central Asia and Xinjiang. Similarly, in the late 1990s, Torugart and Irkeshtam border crossings between Kyrgyzstan and China were opened (Kassenova 2022: 207). However, it is necessary to note that this trade and investment activity stalled for a few years following the bombing attacks in Xinjiang by separatists in 1992, though it continued to rise in the rest of the 1990s (Sheives 2006: 208). On the other hand, in 2000, Russia founded the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) with Tajikistan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, which shows that Russia was continuing to be an active and assertive actor in economic terms in the region despite China's rise (Chatham House 2022).

Apart from all these, the most important development in the economic-infrastructure field was the agreement on the building of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline. In June 1997, the parties agreed on the project of a pipeline that would run from western Kazakhstan to Xinjiang, and on the purchasing of a 60% stake of the Kazakh Aktyubinsk oil company by the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). However, the pipeline project needed to wait until the 2000s for completion due to disagreements between the parties on the construction costs (Sheives 2006: 215-216).

CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM 2001 TO 2013

Between 2001 and 2013, China continued to expand its influence over Central Asia. The most striking development that took place in that period was the emergence of the SCO. In June 2001, the rapprochement between Russia, China, and Central Asian countries that started in the 1990s against the common threats and the "three evils" culminated in the establishment of this new organization, which superseded the Shanghai Five with the inclusion of Uzbekistan. The SCO was a much broader and stronger

organization dealing with security, economic, political issues with little emphasis on border issues (Sheives 2006: 210). The organization is also remarkable for its rejection of unilateral military solutions and interference in domestic affairs, and for its staunch support for the principle of sovereignty (Cooley 2012: 77-78). While some regarded the SCO as a mechanism of cooperation between countries that had not been on good terms for long, others claimed that the organization was a new anti-Western alliance between Russia, China, and four of the Central Asian countries, or even as the expression of the hegemony of China and Russia in broader Asia (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2015: 32). The CSO is a critical organization signifying the burden-sharing and alliance between China and Russia, and an important mechanism for these two states to exert their strength in Central Asia.

After the emergence of SCO, China began to rely more strongly on regional multilateralism in Central Asia (Kellner 2014: 221). 9/11 and the following war in Afghanistan provided the SCO, which is driven by Russia and China, with the chance of strengthening its hold in the region, especially on regional stability and counterterrorism. During the US' "war on terror" campaign, the SCO members issued a joint statement emphasizing the organization's willingness to preserve regional security and stability as well as combatting the "three evils". In the meantime, in October 2002, Russia, Tajikistan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan established the CSTO based on the treaty signed in Uzbekistan in May 1992, as a Russian initiative in the military area (Collective Security Treaty Organization 2022). The SCO performed its first joint and multilateral exercise against terrorism in Chinese territories in August 2003. In June 2004, the organization set up the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent (Sheives 2006: 213). Mongolia, Iran, and Pakistan joined the SCO with observer status in 2004 and 2005 (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2015: 32). On the other hand, even though the interests of China and the US had overlapped in their fight against terrorism in the first years of the global "war on terror", in 2005, the SCO requested a deadline from the US for removing the military bases it established in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for its war in Afghanistan, as a result of the fears of instability and regime change caused by Andijan events in Uzbekistan and Color Revolutions in post-Soviet states (Cooley 2012: 82; Parfitt 2005). This stance of the SCO against the American bases indicates that China and Russia were united against any influence of the West in the Central Asian region.

China's popularity, in the political sphere, continued to increase among Central Asian states thanks to its position in the face of new developments in the international arena. For example, in 2008, China's refusal to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia due to the principle of non-interference without disrupting its strategic partnership with Russia, and its pro-status quo positing during the Arab Spring of 2011 were appreciated by the authoritarian states of the region. Between China and Central Asia, diplomatic relations also continued with a growing intensity, which included top-level diplomatic visits, and bilateral friendship and cooperation agreements (Kellner 2014: 221-222). Finally, China also increased its soft power in Central Asia in that period by accepting Central Asian students in Chinese universities, broadcasting in Central Asian states in Russian, opening Confucius Institutes in the region (Kellner 2014: 234-235).

In economic terms, China continued to strengthen its presence in Central Asia through trade and investment. Apart from the completion of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, the new Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which brought Turkmen gas to China through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was completed in 2009, three years after the parties signed the deal in 2006. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline is critical in the sense that it brought an end to Russia's gas monopoly in Central Asia (Cooley 2012: 94). The trade volume between Central Asian states and China skyrocketed in the 2000s. While the trade volume was \$1,4-5 billion in 2001, it reached \$45.944 billion in 2012, which meant an increase of thirty-one times (Kellner 2014: 227; Wu and Chen 2004: 1066). Therefore, by 2012, China overtook the European Union in total trade with all Central Asian states except Kazakhstan (Kellner 2014: 227-228). Kazakhstan retained its position of being the largest trade partner of China. Hydrocarbons (oil from Kazakhstan and gas from Turkmenistan) and uranium (from Kazakhstan) are crucial for Chinese interests in Central Asia. China also gave loans to Central Asian states. For example, in 2004, China announced that a loan of \$900 million would be given to Central Asian countries, where Kyrgyzstan had the largest share. Similarly, in 2009 and 2012, China gave a credit of \$10 billion to Kazakhstan (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2015: 36-38).

Chinese investments in Central Asia also intensified in the 2000s. In that period, as well as pipelines, China constructed highways, railways, and airports in Central Asia (Cooley 2012: 88-90). Kazakhstan is by far the

leading state among the Central Asian recipients of Chinese investments: By early 2010, China's investments in the Kazakh economy had reached \$23.6 billion (Kellner 2014: 230). One of the most important investments was China's allocation of \$5 billion for the CNPC to purchase a 50% stake in KazMunaiGas, Kazakhstan's largest state-owned oil company. It is also important that, in 2005, to coordinate regional investment by the national development banks of the member states, the SCO established "the Business Council and an Interbank Association" (Cooley 2012: 88-92).

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND CENTRAL ASIA: FROM 2013 TO PRESENT

In the fall of 2013, in Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, China's president Xi Jinping introduced the BRI, which would promote China's connection with Europe, Russia, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East through trade and investments, especially by pipelines, railways, roads, and industrial and economic zones. Regarded a new Silk Road, the BRI would include more than one hundred infrastructural projects, as well as large-scale investments by Chinese institutions and companies. Besides, China would deliver aid to the countries that would take part in the BRI. The BRI was a massive project which encompassed almost half of the world's total population and 40% of the total GDP with six landbridges and maritime routes (Hoh 2019: 241-242; Indeo 2018: 135-136; Vakulchuk and Overland 2019: 115). By March 2022, under the BRI, 147 states had already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China (Green Finance & Development Center 2022). The BRI is viewed differently by different people. Some argue that the BRI is Chinese colonialism while some others characterize it as the "Chinese Marshall Plan" or the "twenty-first century mercantilism". China, on the other hand, claims that the BRI is the materialization of cooperation, peace, mutual benefit, and development (Hoh 2019: 241). However, the fact remains that it is the most assertive foreign policy step that China has taken in the contemporary era (Liao 2021: 504).

The Central Asian countries occupy a significant place in the scope of the BRI as they are located on "New Eurasian Landbridge" and "China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor", as well as the other reasons that shaped Chinese policies in the post-Cold War era such as security in Xinjiang and China's accession to the natural resources (Hoh 2019: 243-244). When

the BRI project was first announced in 2013, all the Central Asian states were enthusiastic about and interested in the project. Kazakhstan's search for increased connectivity and alternative routes for trade and transport, Kyrgyzstan's intention of strengthening its practical cooperation with China and thus safeguarding regional peace and security, Tajikistan's desire of being a bridge between China and other countries through infrastructural projects, Turkmenistan's belief that the BRI would support trade, economic support, and infrastructure in the region, and Uzbekistan's search for reaching the Persian Gulf and expanding commercial and trade routes are their reasons for getting involved in the BRI (Buranelli 2018: 214-218). Most importantly, Russia supported China's BRI. Realizing the necessity of Chinese investments for security, and economic stability and development in the region, Russia has been supportive of the BRI rather than opposing it. As a result, the parties have found a meeting ground for the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which is led by Russia, and the two projects are now complementary (Kapoor 2021: 121-126). The Russian support to the BRI is one of the clearest evidences that shows Russia and China are not in a competition but in a strong cooperation.

With the contribution of the BRI, investments by China in Central Asia and trade between Central Asia and China continued. While 2020 was coming to an end, China's aggregate investments in Central Asia amounted to \$40 billion, half of which belonged to Kazakhstan. Similarly, by the end of 2021, the number of Chinese firms operating in the region was 7.700 (China Briefing 2021; Khitakhunov 2022). The Kashgar-Dushanbe railroad that would connect China, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, the Zhezkazgan-Beineu Railway connecting western and central Kazakhstan, Nurek Hydropower Rehabilitation Project, Kemin electricity substation in Kyrgyzstan, the Bukhara Region Water Supply and Sewerage, Dushanbe-2 power station, and a new Caspian Sea ferry port are some of the Chinese investments in Central Asia made in the scope of the BRI (Hoh 2019: 246-249; Liao 2021: 504-505). In addition to infrastructure, China has also made investments in manufacturing such as bus factories, agricultural projects, green energy projects, or cement plants. Chinese loans to Central Asian states also continued after 2013. For example, 45% of Kyrgyzstan's, as well as 52% of Tajikistan's foreign debt is now to China, and these countries have difficulties with paying their debt back and this results in Chinese companies getting concessions. Likewise, 16.9% of Turkmenistan's GDP, 16% of Uzbekistan's, and 6% of

Kazakhstan's comprise the amount of their debts to China (Khitakhunov 2022).

In the first 11 months of 2021, the aggregate trade between Central Asian states and China was worth \$44.6 billion, where Kazakhstan continued to enjoy the largest share (Zhihua 2022). A global fall in oil prices was arguably a factor that prevented the total trade volume from increasing after 2013. On the other hand, in 2014, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus established the abovementioned EAEU, while Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joined in the following years. The EAEU is not only an international economic union but also a free trade zone that superseded the EEC, (Investopedia 2021). Moreover, energy pipelines tying Russia and Central Asian states, remittances going from Russia to Central Asia, Russian investments in Central Asian states, and strong commercial linkages are the other sources of the current Russian economic influence in the region (Kapoor 2021: 191-121). All of these imply that Russia is still an economically important and efficient actor in Central Asia, as part of the current burden-sharing with China.

China's post-2013 agenda has a security dimension as well. As well as its new active foreign policy agenda, the US' withdrawal from Afghanistan and fears of instability made China think of strengthening its military engagement in Central Asia. In that period after 2013, China has become a strategic partner of all five Central Asian states to provide security (Pradhan 2018: 15). In that period, China has increased its arms sales to Central Asia. Between 2015 and 2020, 18% of the arms in Central Asian states was provided by China while between 2010 and 2014 it was only 1.5% (Jardine and Lemon 2020). China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan set up the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism for discussing issues about counterterrorism and border security in 2016 (Kassenova 2022: 211). In 2016 again, China constructed its first facilities for military purposes in Central Asia within the territories of Tajikistan. Moreover, since 2014, China has performed military exercises in Central Asia apart from the SCO (Jardine and Lemon 2020). In the meantime, in 2017, India and Pakistan accessed the full membership of the SCO (Dave and Kobayashi 2018: 273). Another important development in the security area was that China launched "Operation 2019" with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan where the national police forces of these states trained together for counterterrorism (Jardine and Lemon 2020).

China has also intensified the military aids it makes to Central Asian countries, especially by supplying uniforms, and equipment for border monitoring and communication. For example, in 2014, China agreed to grant a military assistance of \$6.5 million to Kyrgyzstan, as well as promising aid to Tajikistan for training and uniforms (Pradhan 2018: 20). In 2021, Tajikistan gave permission for the building of a second Chinese military base within its territories near the Afghanistan frontier (RFE/RL 2021). In January 2022, during the anti-government protests in Kazakhstan, China offered security support to this country, which signifies China's grown presence in the region and ties with Kazakhstan strengthened over the years. (Reuters 2022). However, similar to the case in the economic realm, China's power gain in the military sphere has not wiped-out Russia's military strength in Central Asia, as what is between China and Russia is a cooperation, not an alteration of power. Russia is the leading member of the CSTO, a regional security organization where Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are among the member states. Russia also has military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, Russia is the main arms supplier to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Kapoor 2021: 121-122). These factors indicate that Russia is still a critical component in Central Asia's security issues.

Lastly, in that period, China has taken steps in the field of diplomacy to enhance its influence in Central Asia. Unwilling to continue to accept its diplomatically secondary position after Russia, especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China has been conducting more intense diplomatic activities with Central Asian countries. However, in the field of diplomacy, China now takes Central Asia region as a whole rather than engaging with the five states separately. Especially after the China-Central Asia Summit that took place in China in May 2023, China's engagement in the region shifted from bilateral ties and other activities under the SCO to a more holistic approach towards the region. For Central Asian states, China's diplomatic engagement in the region is a positive development as they want to counterbalance the influence of Russia over their sovereignty. Nevertheless, Russia's diplomatic engagement with Central Asia continues in a powerful way, which has even been intensified after Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Hamilton, 2024: 66-68).

CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s, China has enhanced its effectiveness dramatically in

Central Asia in various ways. In order to provide stability and security in Central Asia, between 1991 and 2001, China established diplomatic relations, settled its border disputes, increased its trade and investments, signed pipeline agreements, and established the Shanghai Five with Central Asian states. Between 2001 and 2013, the Shanghai Five turned into the SCO, while commercial activities and investments between China and Central Asian states intensified. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline was completed, the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline was constructed, and China gave loans to Central Asian states. From 2013 to present, China has introduced the BRI and made significant infrastructural investments in Central Asia, in addition to increasing its military strength in the region. Having explored China's increasing influence in Central Asia in recent decades, comparing Chinese and Russian influence in the region today would be helpful to obtain a more complete picture in the final part of this article. In military terms, Russia, the leading figure of the CSTO, is still the top actor in terms of arms sales and aids to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The military educations given by Russian officers are also very popular among Central Asian soldiers. Russia often conducts military exercises especially with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Moreover, Russia still holds the upper hand in terms of conventional military presence in the region. However, it is necessary to note that in recent years Russia's military prestige has decreased among Central Asian states due to a couple of reasons such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the CSTO's non-involvement policy in the conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the failure of both Russia and the CSTO to prevent the clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are members of the CSTO, in September 2022. China, on the other hand, seems to have accepted Russia's leadership in military terms so far in Central Asia. However, it continues to increase its military presence in the region and already has a significant influence. It is the number one supplier of arms to Uzbekistan, and number two to Turkmenistan, after Turkey. China also sends mostly non-lethal military aid to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while it chooses not to deploy any conventional forces in Central Asia in order not to antagonize Russia and not to break its policy of non-intervention. Whether Russia will accept falling behind China in military terms in the region will be an important point for the future of their cooperation and burden-sharing (Hamilton, 2024: 72-78).

In economic terms, China unequivocally overrides Russia. Between 2005 and 2023, China's investment and construction activities in Central Asian countries amounted to around \$70 billion, almost half of it going to Kazakhstan. The BRI made a tremendous contribution for the strengthening of China's hold in the region, even leading to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's economic dependence on China. Aids have also been a valuable tool of economic penetration for China. In 2023, China announced a new developmental aid program for Central Asia amounting to a sum of \$3.6 billion. When it comes to trade, China is now the top trade partner of four countries out of five in Central Asia, Kazakhstan being the exception. Gas, agricultural outputs, and metals are the leading products among Chinese exports to the region. Gas exports have also begun to create dependencies: Turkmenistan is now nearly totally dependent on China for hydrocarbon. As for Russia, there has been a decline of influence in economic terms in Central Asia. Russia leads the EAEU, but this organization has failed to bore the outcomes expected: It has not attracted any FDI's, nor led to a growth in the GDP of member states. Sanctions imposed after the war with Ukraine in 2014 and invasion that started in 2022 also weakened Russia's economic ties with Central Asia. Russian aids to the region are almost at the level of China's, but unlike China, Russia does not give generous loans. In 2020, the European Union overtook Russia in terms of trade relations with Central Asia. Remittances, on the other hand, is one of the biggest sources of income for Russia, behind which China lags significantly (Hamilton, 2024: 79-87). In the light of the data provided, it is safe to say that China has replaced Russia as the economic master of Central Asia. Nevertheless, though behind China now, Russia is still a strong actor economically in Central Asia thanks to energy pipelines, remittances, investments, commercial ties (Kapoor 2021: 191-121).

In diplomatic and political terms, China still has a mountain to climb to catch up with Russia. Decades of domination, patronage in the post-Soviet era and international institutions make Russia a vital actor in the region still in 2025. Besides, even though it has decreased in recent years, the long-standing Sinophobia among the Central Asian people lessens the possibility of a complete Chinese domination over the region (Hamilton, 2024: 57, 68).

China's increasing influence over Central Asia will not shake Russia's domination as these two states are not in a competition over the region

but in a cooperation against common threats such as the West, terrorism, Islamism, and separatism. As Russia is not a superpower anymore, it needs China to reach its objectives in the region. Both states (Russia and China) seek to ensure security and stability in Central Asia, which creates a multidimensional and strong cooperation between them. The SCO led by China and Russia, Russia's support to China's BRI, or Russia's continuing military influence over Central Asia are among the most important evidences of the burden-sharing between China and Russia. This cooperation has proved to be mutually beneficial for Russia and China. In limiting the Western influence in the region, securing the continuity of the incumbent regimes, and preventing the "three evils", the Sino-Russian cooperation has worked. As a result, neither Russia nor China has any reason to disrupt it in the near future. Both parties gain from the cooperation and neither has anything to gain from breaking it. Russia might have lost its privileged position economically, but this can be interpreted as "China taking more responsibility in the Sino-Russian cooperation" instead of seeing Russia "defeated economically". As long as the parties regard ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism as common threats and aim to prevent any Western influence, China's rise will not wipe out Russian influence in Central Asia.

Finally, this cooperation between China and Russia in Central Asia tells something about International Relations theories. Although the term "cooperation" sounds liberal, what takes place in Central Asia is closer to the realist view of international politics, because the Sino-Russian cooperation does serve realist purposes, and its components are mostly realist ones. In accordance with neorealist theory, in an anarchical international system, both China and Russia strive for security and power, and Central Asia is a critical region for them to attain these goals. Their perceptions of threat revolve around terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism; all of which are topics of high politics. Their way of providing security relies on both military power and economic power, which is a balanced position between neorealism and neoliberalism. Organizations like the CSCO and the SCO, arms sales, and military aid to the countries in the region are examples of the military means they use. Economic initiatives and organizations, especially the BRI, are also vital for the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia. Lastly, the Sino-Russian cooperation is highly state-centric and non-state actors do not play a significant role in the affairs of those states in Central Asia, in line with neorealist premises. China

and Russia, both being authoritarian states, strictly hold the reins in their international relations.

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