



Russia and China in Central Asia

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Abstract: *As far as Central Asia is concerned, both rivalry and collaboration is apparent there between Russia and China. Sharing long borders with the Central Asian states, both have an interest in maintaining regional “stability”. There are also some areas where they disagree, notably when it comes “to China’s economic” goals. Central Asia is home to the second-largest energy reserves in the world, and given that energy resources are one of Russia’s key exports, the country is not opposed to maintaining some leverage over the route taken by Central Asian oil and gas for export. Russia considers Central Asia as its “exclusive zone”. Russia is uneasy about China’s expanding influence in the area. Russia’s requirement for China’s assistance is that the former be recognised as the undeniably dominating (external) factor “in Central Asia”. Russia and China mutually came to an understanding regarding “their respective roles in Central Asia” after the Beijing acknowledged Moscow’s predominant role there.*

Keywords: *Russia, China, Central Asia, Economic Integration, Strategic Partnership.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

As far as Central Asia is concerned, Russia and China are clearly competing there, as well as working together. Presently, Moscow and Beijing have identical “interests” and objectives in Central Asia. Sharing long borders with the Central Asian states, both have an interest in maintaining regional “stability”.¹ Although Russian and Chinese interests are aligned when it comes to challenges that affect Central Asia as a whole, for example, “Islamic extremism, drug trafficking,” terrorism, and the “smuggling” of armaments, there are also other areas where they disagree, notably when it comes “to China’s economic” goals. “In the Russian Far East,” Russia and China have been successful in working together and preventing possible conflicts; in Central Asia, however, such collaboration is difficult notwithstanding the fact that the “stakes are as high for both countries.”

Russia’s economic ties “with the countries of Central Asia (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan)” are far too strong for it to be unconcerned about their potential to prosper. These countries’ economies might collapse, creating a significant refugee problem that Russia would be unable to manage. However, Central Asia is home to the second-largest energy reserves in the world, and given that energy resources are one of Russia’s key exports, the country is not opposed to maintaining some leverage over the route taken by Central Asian oil and gas for export. From a security standpoint, Russia must be particularly worried that “one or more Central Asian” nations may transform “into an extremist Islamic state,” that they may band together “with Turkey” to form an anti-Russian bloc, or that the extensive border between Russia and Kazakhstan may become more permeable to organised crime and drug trafficking. Last but not least, the very fact that there are millions of people of Russian ancestry in these areas makes their wellbeing a crucial political issue in Russian domestic politics.

Russia increased its efforts to reunite “the Central Asian” republics under the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (CIS’s) umbrella “both politically (including the security component) and economically” after the CIS summit in May 1992. But Russia’s frequently oppressive approach to the republics has proven counterproductive, and its attempts to retake power have encountered fierce opposition. With encouragement from the United States and West European countries, Uzbekistan saw nearly every Russian action in Central Asia as interfering with its ambitions to rule the region. Kazakhstan, which traditionally supported many Russian projects due to its ethnic make-up, has been encouraging intra-regional integration in an effort to counteract Russia’s influence. The CIS was actually seen as an



appropriate model of interstate cooperation during the transitional period by the Central Asian leaders.² Russia thought it prudent to adopt an “economically oriented approach” towards the region’s republics.³

2. Chinese Approach

After China had recovered from the ideological blow of “the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)” and the fall of “communist” bloc in East Europe, it gradually advanced into Central Asia. Although China immediately established diplomatic ties with all five Central Asian republics, it was not until 1993 that it fully realised the importance of the region from a geopolitical standpoint. By that time, China’s attempts to find oil in its own Tarim Basin had failed, and it had turned into a net importer of oil. As a result of China’s need for external energy sources, it found the Central Asian region a perfect place to explore.⁴

Chinese concerns about Islamic militancy in Central Asia had, despite some lingering anxiety, mostly subsided by 1993 as a result of the practical initiatives the five Central Asian governments had put in place. By this time it was also clear that “China’s trade with Central Asia” was one of the most important “economic” drivers in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), which gained enormously by becoming a “transportation and distribution hub for China’s Central Asia trade.” XUAR exported to the five republics commodities worth “US\$240.2 million, or 3.5 per cent of Xinjiang’s gross provincial product,” in 1993, accounting for about 50 per cent of the Xinjiang’s “US\$912 million foreign trade.”⁵ These staggering figures, combined with the unrest in the autonomous territory brought on by Uighur separatist activities, convinced China that the optimum scenario for the economic prosperity and stability of the XUAR would be a flourishing and secure Central Asia.

China’s more comprehensive Central Asian policy began with Premier Li Peng’s 1994 visit to the region.⁶ To promote trade with Central Asian States, China opened more border outposts and passageways and promoted the revival of the Silk Road. On the one hand, the energy pipelines in the Central Asian region are something that Russia wants to keep “exclusive”. China, on the other hand, is constructing “pipelines” of its own, connecting Central Asia with “its own provinces.”⁷ Actually, “a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Xingjiang” has already been constructed.⁸ China obtained “a contract to explore two of Kazakhstan’s most valuable oilfields” in 1997 after outbidding Western oil companies. “A 3,000 km pipeline from Kazakhstan to China’s northeast coast” was to be constructed by China as part of the agreement. The project became a representation of China’s geopolitical advance into Central Asia.⁹ About half of “China’s gas” is imported “from Central Asia”.¹⁰ Additionally, China has purchased “gas and oil fields in Uzbekistan.”¹¹

Nevertheless, China places a lot more priority on its ties with Russia despite China’s rising interest in Central Asia. Li Peng made every effort to refute claims that China was attempting to usurp Russia’s position of dominance during his 1994 trip to Central Asia. China seriously considered Russian concerns when formulating its Central Asia policy. For example, China agreed to construct a section of the Turkmenistan-to-China gas pipeline that would run from Irkutsk in Russia to northeastern China. It was observed “that China did not even get” involved in “the pipeline” dispute “until” the role of “Western” countries “in the region” became evident, and it was clear that Russia could not maintain its former position in the area.¹² China wants to support economic development “in Central Asia” while minimising its “political” influence there and accepting Russia’s hegemonic position “in the region”. China does not want to compromise the Sino-Russian “strategic” relationship by taking too many ambitious initiatives “in Central Asia”.

In the meanwhile, China is engaged in developing “the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway,” which will provide China accessibility to “the Persian Gulf and the Middle East via Turkmenistan and Iran.” It is one of Beijing’s most important transportation projects. These initiatives would boost “China’s influence in the region” by integrating “Central Asia” into its economic system.¹³ The economies of some Central Asian countries, particularly “Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan”, are progressively becoming more reliant on China. Tajikistan owes “the Chinese Export-Import Bank as much as 40%” of its “\$2.1 billion foreign debt,” and this amount could rise “to 70% if recent agreements are taken into consideration.”¹⁴

3. Russian Response

The truth is that, Russia has not demonstrated much enthusiasm for working with China to integrate their economies. There are several justifications that can be given for Russia’s lukewarm response. One is the continued perception by Russia of Central Asia as a “exclusive zone”. Secondly, “economic integration in the former Soviet Union” with an outsider continues to be frowned upon in Moscow.¹⁵ Additionally, working together with China in the “strategic” relationship does not inevitably result in collaboration in other fields. Hence, Russia is uneasy about China’s expanding influence in the area. However, it favours Chinese involvement in Central Asia over Western involvement because contrary to the Western countries China does not pose a “threat” to the regional governments friendly to Russia.¹⁶ Additionally, China carefully adheres to its policy of not meddling “in the internal affairs of other countries” by staying out of “Central Asian politics”.¹⁷



A somewhat more plausible rationale for Russian policy may be that, should Russia choose China as its collaborator in fostering “economic integration in Central Asia,” Russia cannot reasonably expect any real reciprocation from China. According to Hans J. Morgenthau, no country will grant another country “political advantages” without expecting to receive comparable “advantages in return”.¹⁸ Russia has little to gain from collaborating on economic integration in the region because China already promised the former everything it could when the latter committed to the “strategic” relationship, including accepting Central Asia as “Russia’s zone of influence.” Russia would actually be risking something in this situation, specifically its “political” hegemony “in Central Asia.” The benefits it could receive would not materialise until after unification, and since they would be reciprocal, Russia would still end up losing something.

China, on the other hand, does have a reliability problem. In order to make a strong argument for participating in regional economic integration, China must first strengthen its commercial footprint in Central Asia. However, Moscow is likely to see such actions with considerable anxiety and regard them as detrimental to its regional interests. In effect, China is unable to assure Russia of its positive motives in Central Asia.

Another reasonable explanation for Russia’s actions is that joining forces with China to integrate the economies of Central Asia is “an all-or-nothing” proposition “for Russia” since, when “China’s economic” foothold in the region becomes established, it is unlikely to be removed. In view of this, it is argued that Russia does not see a long-term benefit from its partnership with China in Central Asia. Such an argument is flawed because China’s influence in Central Asia has already been established and there is little prospect of it being removed. From Russia’s perspective, accepting the situation and dealing with it would be preferable to refusing to acknowledge it. Additionally, accepting China as a participant in advancing economic integration would formalise Russian-Chinese partnership in the area, and China is likely to honour such a deal.

Although the two countries appear to get along well, there is still some room for doubt about each side’s long-term allegiance to the current “strategic partnership”. The Russian government had been aware of the attempts by Chinese government to gain “influence in Central Asia”; therefore, if Moscow feels Beijing is actively undermining its standing there, it is highly doubtful that Russia will cooperate with China. Russia’s requirement for China’s assistance is that the former be recognised as the undeniably dominating (external) factor “in Central Asia”.

4. Regional Organisations

Regarding the “role of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)” in Central Asia, Russia and China hold opposing viewpoints. China views the SCO as a means of integrating “the region”. Russia has always felt uneasy about the idea due to China’s overwhelming “economic” strength, despite the fact that China has been particularly interested towards enhancing the economic component “of the SCO”. Russia worries that “China’s economic” heft may gradually undermine its own power in the area by opening the door “for political influence.”¹⁹

In terms of “security”, Russia intends to establish “the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),” a different group that excludes China, as the main “multilateral security institution in Central Asia.”²⁰

According to Dmitri Trenin, Russia’s proposal “for a Eurasian Union,” which would include “Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia” (they established “a Customs Union in 2009”), is meant to be a signal to Beijing that Moscow cannot not be a fence sitter and let the Central Asian countries integrate with the European Union (EU) and China, and that Moscow intends to engage by leveraging the problems within the EU and China’s poor relationships with a number of neighboring countries as well as the United States.²¹

5. Economic Integration and Its Rationale

In order to advance Central Asian economic integration, Russia and China must work together. First, the two countries have a significant stake in the region’s economic prosperity as its closest neighbours and trading partners. All the countries in the region would benefit from growth brought on by economic unification. Second, such integration might strengthen the Sino-Russian relationship and assist prevent future “disputes between the two in this region.” And last, by fostering “economic” relations, Russia and China might help ease Central Asian republics’ concerns that one of them could come to dominate the region²²; a collaborative effort like this would increase the likelihood of integration compared to each country acting independently.

Notably, there is already a strong framework in place for integrating the economies of “China and Russia in Central Asia.” It takes the shape of the yearly meetings between “the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.” The first security-focused conference was held in Shanghai in 1996, and attendees there signed a covenant to strengthen border security. The summits have given the leaders of these countries a regular forum for dialogue. The five-state summit was created to exclusively discuss issues of mutual interest. As a result, it has a higher



possibility of developing “into a” real “regional economic cooperation regime that is open to” any “regional” country that decides “to join”.

Instead of concentrating just on security-related concerns, a push has already been made for the summit to cover more economic topics. In 1997, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan took action in this manner. Russia and China offered lip service to his plan. Their stances appeared to be unchanging: Russia opposed increased “Chinese presence in the region,” however, China was unwilling to take any action there “without Russian” cooperation or at the very least consent. It might be assumed that China is sympathetic to “Central Asia’s economic integration,” in so far as Russia is on board. The economy of the XUAR is becoming more and more “dependent on trade with Central Asia” and economic growth is a key factor in determining stability in Xinjiang. Therefore, it is essentially up to Russia to decide whether such integration should take place.

6. CONCLUSION :

Given that the two major powers bordering Central Asia are Russia and China, it is only logical that their mutual relations will have a significant impact on the area. Only when they successfully manage their strategic relationship, they will be able to act constructively and cooperatively in Central Asia for the benefit of the region. In contrast, a conflict would force Central Asian republics to try to achieve “a balance between them”. However, considering that Central Asia is only one of several issues that the Sino-Russian relationship must deal with, the degree to which Russia and China can work together in Central Asia “will not have a” significant influence “on their bilateral relationship” as a whole.²³ Nevertheless, if one or both parties behave inappropriately in the region, Central Asian issues could have a significant impact on the relationship’s sustainability. It is also true that Russia and China would be less likely to break apart over regional conflicts of interest if a cooperative economic integration system is to be established in Central Asia that includes both countries. Additionally, a system like this would encourage political stability and regional progress. The “economic integration” may have a promising future “in Central Asia” because there are so many common interests.

Notwithstanding their many disagreements, Russia and China have been able to live side by side in the region without any visible hostility. This is partly due to China’s caution in recognising Russia’s interests in the area and avoiding upsetting Moscow’s feelings thus far. So, Russia and China mutually came to an understanding regarding “their respective roles in Central Asia” after the Beijing acknowledged Moscow’s predominant role there.²⁴ However, confrontations between Russia and China cannot be discounted out as China’s strength and influence in the region rise. While Russia will strive to keep its hegemonic role in Central Asia, China will try to balance off Russia’s dominance in order to pursue its own objectives.²⁵

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