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CHINA, RUSSIA, AND POWER TRANSITION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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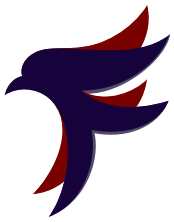

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About the Author

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Table of Contents

Introduction

"It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable." Thucydides, 5th Century BCE

Since the days of Thucydides, scholars have written about—and policymakers have wrestled with—the dangers of power transition, which occurs when a rising power challenges the previously dominant power in a system. In the 5th Century BCE, this dynamic led to decades of war between alliance systems led by Sparta and Athens. Though Sparta eventually defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War, the real winner was the Persian Empire, which snatched up territory from the exhausted states of the Hellenic system after the war ended.

Much scholarship on the so-called Thucydides Trap focuses on the United States and China, asking if the powers two can negotiate the latter's rise without conflict. But there is another, more acute power transition underway: that between Russia and China in Central Asia. In the last decade, and especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, Russia's power and legitimacy in Central Asia has declined in absolute terms.

The erosion of Russian power relative to that of China, however, is more important than the decline in Moscow's absolute power. Power transitions are notoriously hard to navigate and can strain even amicable relationships, turning erstwhile partners into competitors, or worse. The China-Russia partnership is a relatively recent phenomenon after centuries of mostly competitive relations. This means that Beijing and Moscow do not have a reservoir of goodwill built over decades to draw on as they navigate the erosion of Russian power in a region critically important to both.

While this power transition is unlikely to lead to outright war between China and Russia over Central Asia, it is already leading to competition between the two, especially in the economic realm. Competition between Beijing and Moscow is made both more likely and more consequential by several unique features of the region. First, it is geographically contiguous to both. Next, both have high-order political, economic, and security interests at stake there. Finally, the US footprint in the region is light, removing a strong incentive for Chinese-Russian cooperation there. The United States is in many ways the binding agent between China and Russia: Where it is present, their shared resistance to Washington's influence gives them a focal point for cooperation. Where the United States is absent—as it is in Central Asia, at least with respect to China and Russia—that focal point is removed.

Beijing and Moscow do not have a reservoir of goodwill built over decades to draw on as they navigate the erosion of Russian power in a region critically important to both.

This report first analyzes Chinese and Russian influence and interests in Central Asia. It then examines how each pursues its political, military, and economic goals in the region. It concludes with an analysis of how and where their interests are most convergent and divergent and the implications for their overall relationship. If Beijing and Moscow can negotiate their power transition in Central Asia and maintain their overall partnership, this implies that the partnership is deep and durable. But it is Central Asia, more than anywhere else in the world, that will test Chinese-Russian ties.

Chinese and Russian Influence in Central Asia

Beijing and Moscow have high-order political, security, and economic interests in Central Asia. These interests have been directly affected by the end of one war and the start of another. The 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan followed by the rapid Taliban takeover was a double-edged sword for China and Russia. On one hand, both were glad to see the United States depart from the region and reveled in *Schadenfreude* at the US failure there. On the other, the Taliban's return heightened fears of Islamic radicalism emanating from Afghanistan, something that has long been high on the list of security concerns in Beijing and Moscow. The facts that the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan perpetrated the attack on the Krokus City Hall in Moscow and that the attackers had links to Tajikistan, which shares a porous border with Afghanistan, has certainly heightened concerns.

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the other war that has directly affected its interests and influence in Central Asia—it had an indirect but important effect on China's interests, as well.

For Russia, the invasion deeply damaged its reputation and self-appointed role as the sole security manager for the region. Given what the Central Asian governments, especially Kazakhstan, have seen in Ukraine regional states, they view Moscow's motives with deep suspicion and have lost considerable faith in its military capabilities. Moscow's regional influence has suffered in other ways, as well. Temur Umarov, a scholar who studies Central Asia, argues that Russian soft power is also dissipating rapidly there, largely due to the impact of the war in Ukraine. As symptoms of this, Umarov notes a decline in the use of the Russian language, a rise in rhetoric about the need to "decolonize" from Russia, and public demonstrations against the invasion of Ukraine. He concludes, "If the Kremlin doesn't change its approach to foreign policy—and that's not something that will happen under Vladimir Putin—then Russia's influence in the region will wither away."[<?>]

There is a growing feeling in Central Asia that Russia does not view the countries of the region as fully sovereign and does not represent a trustworthy partner for them.

Bellicose rhetoric toward Central Asia from Russian politicians and pundits has deeply undermined trust in Russia in the region. This rhetoric includes "obscene territorial claims" and threatening language regarding the ethnically-Russian majority regions in northern Kazakhstan from Russian politicians and media personalities.[<?>] In a since-deleted social media post, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev referred to Kazakhstan as an "artificial state" whose territory should be returned to Russia.[<?>] This type of rhetoric contributes to a growing feeling in Central Asia that Russia does not view the countries of the region as fully sovereign and does not represent a trustworthy partner for them.

China stands to benefit most from the decline in Russian influence but faces headwinds of its own. Put simply: Many Central Asian countries distrust China and fear being "swallowed" economically and demographically by their giant neighbor to the east. Among the public, there is also a sense that while local elites might benefit from Chinese investment, corruption and

Astana, Kazakhstan. (Natalia Gusakova/Unsplash)

discrimination prevent those benefits from trickling down to the people. A Kazakh expert claims that Chinese-run companies "discriminate [against] locals, their reputation is really bad in Kazakhstan in terms of treating people; that's as simple as that."<?> The lack of transparency of much Chinese investment in Central Asia feeds fears of corruption, also contributing to anti-Chinese popular sentiment.<?>

In some ways, images of Russia and China in Central Asia are mirrors of one another. Russia's long history in the region and the prevalence of the Russian language, media, and entertainment have given it a deep well of popular influence in the region. But its war in Ukraine is rapidly drawing down goodwill toward Moscow among regional republics and has damaged its reputation even more gravely among elites. China, on the other hand, has gained credibility with regional elites, largely though its investment in the region, but it still faces skepticism from regional publics.

Kazakh analyst Aidar Amrebayev provides a vivid metaphor for the way some Central Asian governments view their two great-power neighbors: "China is the element of water for me. Water can be a fertile fluid to grow fields … but water can also be a dangerous element and can destroy everything. So, then this water must be used so that it does not blow you away, but so that it produces fruit." When asked, "If China is water, what is Russia?" Amrebayev replied without missing a beat, "Today it is probably a harmful chemical liquid that penetrates these pores and destroys all life. And here it is necessary to build some kind of dams so that this liquid does not penetrate … because Russia is becoming very toxic. This is a very toxic substance."<?>

Chinese and Russian Interests in Central Asia

Before discussing Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia, it is important to define what we mean by interests and why they matter to states. Strategist Robert J. Art had this in mind when he wrote, "Because of the critical role that national interests play, they must be carefully justified, not merely assumed."[<?>] One way to define an interest is as a goal, the attainment of which will have a positive impact on the overall welfare of the state pursuing it.[<?>] This impact is often understood in terms of improvements in a state's political stability, security, or economic well-being. States use a combination of political/diplomatic, military, and economic/financial instruments to advance or defend these interests. But not all interests are of equal value to a state, so analysts often talk not only of the type of interest (political, security, economic) but also the intensity of interest. Alan G. Stolberg classifies the intensity of interests as follows:

- **Survival**—interests that cannot be compromised. If not attained the costs to the state are catastrophic.
- **Vital**—interests for which only a small amount compromise is possible. Compromise past this point would entail costs that are catastrophic or nearly so.
- **Important**—interests that are significant but not crucial to a state's well-being. Failing to achieve them could cause harm to the state but that harm could be mitigated. Important interests can often be achieved or defended through compromise and negotiation, rather than confrontation.
- **Peripheral**— failing to achieve or defend these interests does not pose a direct and significant threat to the state. Protection of them is desirable but damage to them is manageable.[<?>]

A final general note on interests: States often find that the interests they pursue are in tension with one another. The familiar "guns vs. butter" debate provides an example here: States must often choose between investing their limited resources in security or economic development. Proponents of the first choice argue that the state's primary duty is to protect its citizens. Proponents of the second choice argue that failing to invest in economic development could threaten the state's legitimacy with its people and cause political and social instability. States also often find that their interests are in tension with their values. Another way to understand this is through the lens of material interests and ideational or moral interests. For example, a democratic state may find it in its security interest to partner militarily with a state that has a repressive political regime offensive to the values the democratic state claims to uphold.

Neither China nor Russia has survival interests at stake in Central Asia, but both have interests that are important, if not vital.

Neither China nor Russia has survival interests at stake in Central Asia, but both have interests that are important, if not vital. Chinese economic interests in the region focus on two factors: economic development and access to raw materials. The reason for the second factor is self-evident: China needs access to affordable raw materials to feed its manufacturing economy. The reason for

Chinese flags on barbed wire wall in Kashgar, Xinjiang. (Adobe Stock)

Beijing's focus on economic development in Central Asia has to do with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's understanding of the relationship between economic development and political and social stability. It has long been a core tenet of CCP policy that economic development is an essential precursor to stability. Given Central Asia's geographic proximity to China, the region's stability matters to Beijing, meaning China believes it has important economic interests there.

Central Asia also looms large in how China defines its security. The region matters for two security issues: as a potential source of insecurity in the form of religious extremism and separatism and as a transmission built for threats emanating from Afghanistan. Xinjiang dominates in CCP thinking about Chinese security interests in Central Asia, given the region's ethnic and religious links with the Uighur population there. Chinese leaders are aware that linkages between Xinjiang and Central Asia have historical meaning.

As Niva Yau notes, ""Xinjiang and the region to its west had been responsible for the rise and fall of many past Chinese dynasties."<?> Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng provide a nice summary of how China believes its economic and security interests are linked in Central Asia. They argue that Beijing hopes to keep "western China pacified, to develop its economic potential, and to link it more closely with the rest of China and the outside world."<?>

Like China, Russia has important economic and security interests in Central Asia. But where Beijing views economic development as leading to stability and security, Moscow prefers to assert its security interests more directly, through military presence and formal security arrangements. The Kremlin has long seen Central Asia as its "soft underbelly." Russia's border with the region is long, sparsely populated, and difficult to monitor.

This has made it a pathway for threats to Russia's security, including the Mongol invasions that subjugated most of what is

now Russia from the mid-13th to the late 15th centuries. Today, Moscow is more worried about the region becoming a transmission belt for religious extremism, terrorism, other threats emanating from Afghanistan. The Krokus City Hall attack, claimed by the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan but perpetrated by terrorists from Tajikistan, will certainly increase Moscow's concerns in this area. Russia has important economic interests in Central Asia and had considerable economic advantages that were vestiges of the Soviet economic system.

Today, Moscow is more worried about the region becoming a transmission belt for religious extremism, terrorism, other threats emanating from Afghanistan.

But these may be eroding in favor of China, and Beijing may be working to quietly accelerate this erosion. Russia benefited from the legacy Soviet energy system, which linked Central Asia's oil and gas fields primarily to Russia. Since it was the primary customer, this allowed Russia to buy Central Asian oil and gas at lower than market prices, then sell its own oil and gas to Europe at higher prices, essentially engaging in energy arbitrage. Russia's advantages began eroding in 2009 with the opening of the first gas pipeline linking Central Asia to China, and this process continues to accelerate. Russia has attempted to protect its security and economic interests in Central Asia through a strategy of what Janko Scepanovic calls "cooperative hegemony." Through institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Moscow hopes to enhance cooperation with regional governments and establish "a softer form of domination over the region."<?>

Leveraging Political, Military, and Economic Instruments

Like all states, China and Russia use political/diplomatic, military/security, and economic instruments to advance their interests. Understanding the types of instruments they use and how they use them provides important insights into how Beijing and Moscow view their interests in the region. In terms of the political/diplomatic instrument, Russia benefits from a long history on the region. Russia's eastward expansion into the region dates to the early 18th, century, and by the late 19th century Central Asia was part of the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union retained control over the region, dividing it into five union republics, the antecedents of today's five Central Asian states. China's diplomatic engagement with the region only began after the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Beijing recognized the independence of the region's states in early January 1992, becoming one of the first states to do so.

The growing pace and intensity of China's diplomatic engagement with the region reflects its importance to Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping's first international trip after the end of the COVID pandemic was a September 2022 visit to Kazakhstan. He then flew to Uzbekistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Although China had long accepted Russia's diplomatic predominance in Central Asia, that is less true today. Beijing is increasingly

willing to engage the countries of the region, both bilaterally and in multilateral formats that exclude Russia. In May 2023, China hosted the first China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin described the summit as having "milestone significance," likely a reference to the fact that it marked the launch of a format that brought China and all five Central Asia states together with no other countries in the room.[<?>]

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The Xi'an Format, which plans to meet biennially, is not the only initiative excluding Russia that China has launched in the region. In 2016, it inaugurated the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), a counterterrorism group where China coordinates security with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. And in 2015 it launched the Lianyungang Forum, which brings together lower-level diplomats from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to discuss cooperation in international law enforcement and security cooperation.

Even in the SCO, a longtime forum for close China-Russia cooperation, the preferences of China and the Central Asian states are diverging from Russia's. A Kazakh analyst noted that Kazakh President Tokayev believes the "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) should play the role of balancing the interests of East and West" instead of being a "non-Western or even counter-Western organization," as Russia prefers. He continued, "China supports this point of view of Kazakhstan. It is Kazakhstan's point of view that the SCO cannot be an instrument that opposes the West."[<?>]

Russia's long presence in Central Asia and the fact that its current countries were once part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union gave Moscow a considerable head start in establishing political influence in the region. The fact that many of the region's elites speak Russian and were educated in Russia confers advantages as well. But Russia's history in the region is a double-edged sword, as it has often taken a paternalistic attitude toward Central Asia and exhibited scant regard for the sovereignty of its countries. Russia intervened on the 1992 to 1997 civil war in Tajikistan and it controlled the Tajik-Afghan border until 2005. Moscow has also played kingmaker in political power struggles, especially in Kyrgyzstan.

This paternalistic attitude increasingly rankles elites in Central Asia, and some are looking to China as a political counterweigh to Russia. Retired Kazakh diplomat Talgat Kaliyev says, "China shows more respect for the sovereignty of Kazakhstan than Russia. And China has repeatedly declared respect for sovereignty, that it will be ready to act as a guarantor of the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan."[<?>] Amrebayev, a political scientist, adds, "I think that in the conditions when Russia becomes a real threat to our sovereignty, to political sovereignty, of course, the presence of China's strong political will is a counterbalance."[<?>]

In what is likely a bid to shore up its political and diplomatic influence in Central Asia, the pace of Russian activity there has increased markedly since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Between then and the end of 2022, Putin visited every Central Asia country and held more than fifty meetings with its leaders, making it the most active period in memory. Despite China's more active stance in the region, Russia still retains a diplomatic heavyweight there. Russia is a member—and often the de facto leader—of several

Chinese President XI Jinping with President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Astana, September 2019. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan)

international institutions that exclude China but include some or all the Central Asian countries. These include the Commonwealth of Independent States, CSTO, and the EAEU. China and Russia both have important security interests in Central Asia but pursue them in different ways. Russia's security presence in the region is long-standing and conventional—China's is much more recent and less conventional. Both Beijing and Moscow use a combination of military aid, equipment sales, exercises and exchanges, and military basing to advance their security interests in Central Asia. It is difficult to separate aid from arms sales because instead of offering direct aid, both China and Russia often offer military equipment at deep discounts and with generous payment terms.

Russia has long dominated in providing military equipment to the region, but China has been gaining fast and, in some areas, has overtaken Russia. Between 2010 and 2014, Chinese military exports to Central Asia comprised a mere 1.5 percent of the regional total. Between 2015 and 2019 that figure had risen to 18 percent.<?> China is the leading arms supplier to Uzbekistan and comes second in Turkmenistan, trailing only Turkey.<?>

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) puts total Chinese exports to Central Asia since 2000 at $444 million, with 97 percent of that since 2014. Other research indicates the SIPRI figure lacks transfers that if included would push the total over $717 million.<?> Russia accounted for 62 percent of arms sales in Central Asia from 2015 to 2020.<?> Russia's lead in arms transfers to CSTO members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan is considerable: Russian weapons account for 80 percent of imports in those three countries. Russia educates more military officers from the region than China does. The prevalence of the Russian language in the region may help it preserve that advantage. A full one-third of all foreign officers in Russian military schools come

from Kazakhstan, and over half of the Kazakh military has been trained in Russia.[<?>]

Exercises and exchanges with Central Asian militaries is another area that Russia long dominated, but its lead is slipped here, too. China's exercises have risen markedly since 2014, and where Beijing once preferred to exercise with Central Asian militaries exclusively under the auspices of the SCO, it is now conducting more bilateral exercises: It has conducted ten of these since 2014. Beijing prefers to exercise with CSTO members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and the drills have focused on counterterrorism. To this point, China's more active exercise program with Russia's military allies has not provoked friction between the two. Russia also focuses its military exercises on CSTO members, holding drills at least annually. After a hiatus of several years, in 2018 Moscow announced that it would resume exercises with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, neither of which is a CSTO member.[<?>] In what is perhaps a sign that that Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has damaged its military credibility, Kyrgyzstan, one of Russia's most reliable allies, unilaterally canceled CSTO exercises scheduled to be held on its soil in October 2022.[<?>]

Finally, in terms of conventional military presence in Central Asia, Russia significantly overshadows China. Moscow maintains a contingent of 7000 soldiers in Tajikistan, the largest peacetime presence outside Russian borders. Its contingent in Kyrgyzstan is comparatively small at 500, but the Kant airbase there is an important air power projection platform. Finally, Russia operates the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, the center of its space program, as well as the Sary Shagan anti-ballistic missile testing range, and a site that tests anti-missile and anti-aircraft weapons. China operates a single base in the region, in the remote Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan, along the border with Afghanistan. The base opened in 2016 and hosts a contingent of People's Armed Police forces—after years of denying its existence, the Chinese and Tajik governments acknowledged it in 2021. They also announced that the base would be transferred fully to Chinese control in exchange for increased aid to Tajikistan, and that they planned to open another Chinese base in the region.[<?>]

The difference in the number of conventional military forces does not tell the entire story of how Russia and China deploy the military instrument of power in Central Asia.

The difference in the number of conventional military forces does not tell the entire story of how Russia and China deploy the military instrument of power in Central Asia. First, the Chinese base in Tajikistan, though minor compared to the Russian presence in the region, is only the second base China has opened outside its borders (the first was in Djibouti). Next, China prefers to protect its interests in Central Asia with Private Military and Security Contractors (PMSCs) not conventional military forces. The Chinese PMSC presence in Central Asia is significant. Their mission revolves around protecting China's considerable economic interests in the region. At least 574 Chinese companies operate there, and some have had their facilities attacked by groups of locals angry at what they see as discrimination against them in hiring practices.[<?>] Some Chinese PMSCs in Central Asia are run by retired Chinese military officers and carry weapons, making them virtually indistinguishable from conventional military forces.[<?>]

Arrival of Russian units of the CSTO peacekeeping force deployed in Kazakhstan, 2022. (Odkb-Csto.org)

China's advantage over Russia is most apparent in the economic realm. Russia began with significant advantages here, due to the legacy of the Soviet economic system that tied Central Asian economies to Russia's, especially in the energy sector. Russia has also enjoyed a boost in trade with Central Asia and China due to Western sanctions that force Moscow to seek alternative markets for its exports and alternative sources for imports. But the long-term trends in Central Asia are strongly in Beijing's favor and the increased trade between China and Russia has a colonial character, with China importing raw materials from Russia and exporting finished goods to it.

China uses BRI loans, aid, trade, and investment to advance its economic interests in Central Asia, and the weight of these instruments is gradually pulling the region into Beijing's economic orbit and away from Russia's. China's vehicle for its lending to the region is the BRI, and the role of the BRI in Central Asia makes apparent the region's centrality to Beijing's economic interests. Indeed, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013.

But the announcement of the BRI merely put a label on, and gave an organizing theme to, economic activity in the region that had been underway for years. Between 2005 and 2023, China has invested some $70 billion in Central Asia. Of this, at least $37.4 billion went to Kazakhstan.[<?>] Kazakhstan's importance to the BRI is largely due to its energy resources and potential as a transport corridor, and these areas are where Chinese investment has focused. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline and the China-Kazakhstan rail connection are two of the BRI's signature projects in Kazakhstan. They have had major effects: The population of Alashankou, the

Chinese terminus of the rail line, tripled in the first five years after it opened, and the Kazakh terminus at the Khorgos Gateway did not exist until 2010 but now handles sixty-five trains per month.[<?>]

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China's economic aid to Central Asia focuses on tangible things like roads and buildings and is most apparent in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, countries less developed and more insecure than their regional neighbors. Given the CCP's belief that development is a prerequisite for stability and the fact that these countries border Xinjiang, this makes sense. In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese aid has funded road construction and the provision of potable water to remote areas. In Bishkek alone, China built forty-nine roads, six bridges, and one overpass through 2022. Also in Kyrgyzstan, Beijing funded a large hospital and provided equipment and training for its medical staff.[<?>] China also provided loans to fund the construction of the new Congress Hall and guest houses when Kyrgyzstan hosted the 2007 SCO summit.[<?>]

In Tajikistan, China has funded road projects and public buildings, including a new parliament building and a new city hall in Dushanbe. Aside from the belief that development leads to stability, the CCP gives aid to Central Asia to build links with political elites there. Nargis Kassenova notes that although China frames its aid as a gift to the people, it has "favored particular locales and constituencies namely, those close to the local ruling circle." The focus on building ties with elites is a less visible but still important way that China uses the economic instrument in ways that erode Russia's regional influence.[<?>]

China's role as a trade partner for Central Asia has increased markedly, and often at Russia's expense. In January 2022, China's Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao noted that China's trade with the region had "grown by more than 100 times in the past thirty years," and Xi Jinping set a goal of increasing trade turnover to $70 billion by 2030.[<?>] Remarkably, by the end of the year China has already surpassed the $70 billion mark for trade turnover, meeting Xi's target eight years early and increasing trade with the region by some 152 times over the 1992 figure of $459 million.[<?>] China is now the top trading partner for every Central Asian country except Kazakhstan, and it will almost certainly surpass Russia there soon as well.[<?>]

Russian lending, aid, and trade cannot match China's and the gap between them is likely to expand, especially given the long-term impact of Western sanctions.

Russian lending, aid, and trade cannot match China's and the gap between them is likely to expand, especially given the long-term impact of Western sanctions. Russia focuses less on direct lending to the region and more on debt forgiveness. The difference with China here is that Chinese loans build tangible infrastructure, while Russia's debt forgiveness merely lessens the burden of already accumulated debt. In 2017, to mark the 25th anniversary of the establishment of Russia's

Termez, Uzbekistan. (Adobe Stock)

diplomatic relations with Central Asia, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Moscow would forgive debts of $488 million in Kyrgyz and $865 million in Uzbek debts. In the same announcement, Lavrov noted that Russia had contributed more than $6 billion in bilateral and multilateral aid to the region in the previous decade.<?>

Russia's trade relations with Central Asia are complex. In the first two decades after the region gained independence Moscow benefited from the legacies of Soviet economic integration. It hoped to cement this advantage through the EAEU, a closed customs union centered on Russia. This was part of what Scepanovic called Russia's strategy of cooperative hegemony in the region. Moscow's attempts have been mostly unsuccessful, in large part due to China's economic weight. China's BRI is an attempt to create an open, global trade system with itself at the center—a goal antithetical to that of the EAEU. Given the choice, Central Asian countries are likely to choose the BRI. Russia's lack of success in attempts to preserve its privileged economic position in the region—symbolized by the EAEU—allowed other external powers to overtake it as trade partners for Central Asian countries. By 2020, both China and the EU had surpassed Russia in trade turnover with the region.<?>

Conclusion

Central Asia matters greatly to China and Russia. Both have security interests there that can be classified as vital and political and economic interests that can be classified as important. To this point, their security interests have largely been aligned. They seek to combat what they both call the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism, and in doing so to protect their own vulnerable regions: Xinjiang for China and a long, sparsely populated border with Kazakhstan for Russia. But the war in Ukraine has damaged Russia's reputation as a security provider, and experts from the region openly discuss partnering with other countries, including China, in security matters.<?> China's security presence in the region has been increasing, both in the form of formal security presence in Tajikistan, and PMSC presence elsewhere. As this trend accelerates, it may become a source of friction with Russia.

The war in Ukraine has damaged Russia's reputation as a security provider, and experts from the region openly discuss partnering with other countries, including China, in security matters.

In the political realm, Chinese and Russian interests are also largely convergent. Both seek to preserve the stability of regional governments and to prevent popular uprisings that seek to overthrow them. Both Beijing and Moscow fixate on these "color revolutions," arguing that they are inspired—and even directed—by the West. But Beijing's diplomacy in the region is becoming increasingly assertive, is occurring increasingly without Russia, as the Xi'an, QCCM, and Lianyungang formats demonstrate.

It is in the economic realm where Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia diverge. Despite the bump in Russian trade with the region since the start of the war in Ukraine, the long-term trends for Moscow are negative, and its interaction with Beijing in the region is zero sum. Through energy and transportation networks, China is gradually pulling Central Asia out of Russia's economic orbit and into its own. China and Russia also have incompatible economic vision for the region. Russia's EAEU seeks to build a single, closed, Russian-dominated market, while the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Central Asian branch of China's BRI, seeks to connect multiple markets.

On its own, the divergence in economic interests might not lead to outright competition, but context matters, and the context is a transition in power from Russia to China in a region where both have important to vital interests at stake. The light regional footprint of the United States is likely to accelerate the trend toward Chinese-Russian competition by removing their incentive to cooperate in resisting what each sees as its primary competitor. If these trends continue over the long term, the prospects for competition between China and Russia in Central Asia outweigh the prospects for cooperation.

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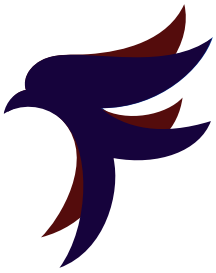

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