

China's Role in Central Asia

Boyu Xu^{1,*}

¹*Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, Tianjin, 300350, China*

**Corresponding author*

Keywords: Central Asia; China; Russia; Interest; Cooperation

Abstract: After the end of the Cold War, the presence of external powers in Central Asia is receiving more attention and discussion. Among them, China, marked by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is strengthening its security and economic ties with Central Asia through expanding cooperation. Since the rapid rise of China's presence is often compared to the decline of dominating Russia in the region, China is seen as competing for dominance in Central Asia. However, China's interests in Central Asia are limited to maintaining regional stability and economic cooperation, and the way to these goals is equal cooperation. In addition, China's influence and public goods in Central Asia are not as high as Russia's, and the interests of cooperation between the two countries in Central Asia outweigh the competition. This paper will analyse China's interests in Central Asia and the ways in which they are realized, and focus on the areas in which China and Russia may compete in Central Asia to show that China is not becoming the dominant power in Central Asia.

1. Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a power vacuum in Central Asia after the Cold War, China, Russia, the United States and other external actors have been trying to enhance their presence in the region for various interests. Their efforts to reshape the regional order is regarded as a new Great Game since the struggle between Russian and British empires in the 19th century.^[1] Among these actors, China's active and high-profile actions in Central Asia are gaining more attention, especially when its grand BRI since 2013 has been rapidly promoting economic cooperation and high-level interactions with Central Asian countries. This has led to a discussion about China's role and targets in the current changing regional order. From the perspective of realistic power struggle, power competition is a zero-sum game, in which the power gained by one party is based on the loss of the other, especially as China's involvement in the post-Soviet region rises while Russia's influence declines.^[2] Others refer to the power-shift theory that China as a challenger is replacing Russia's hegemony and becoming the dominant power through regional competition.^[3] This paper argues that China's interests in Central Asia are limited to regional stability and economic cooperation and it helps with regional stability and independent development through a combination of bilateral and multilateral methods. Although its role rises in the region, the gap in influence, public goods and the common interests of China and Russia further confirm that China is not being the dominant power in Central Asia.

2. China's Interests in Central Asia

2.1 Security

From the security perspective, as a region adjacent to China, China's activities in Central Asia are aimed at promoting the stability of the surroundings and safeguarding the security interests of a sovereign state. For China, the stability of regimes and security of Central Asian states is conducive to the stability of the neighbouring border provinces of China. In addition, as Central Asia serves as the first stop for China's BRI westward into Eurasia and the hub for connecting the rest of Eurasia, its security situation directly determines the efficiency and even possibility of BRI products and capital to the rest of Eurasia and the wider region. As a major energy consumer, Central Asia is also seen as China's land-based alternative to existing sea routes in the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, in which the United States is extensively involved.^[4] In these regards, China has preliminarily confirmed its border security by delineating borders with neighbouring countries, and has achieved continuous governance of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and extremist organizations in the region through SCO's multilateral mechanism with Central Asian states, so as to realize China's long-term security interests in Central Asia.^[5]

2.2 Economy

From the economy perspective, China's activities in Central Asia are aimed at realizing the economic development potential of it, expanding the economic interests of both sides and promoting the process of regional market and economic integration through the development of bilateral economic relations. Central Asia has abundant resource reserves and large potential markets due to its large population. However, the lacking of transportation connectivity makes it hard to activate existing economic potentials. In this regard, China has strengthened regional connectivity through large-scale investment and construction of roads, railways, pipelines and other infrastructure in Central Asian states under the BRI framework.^[6] On the basis of increasing regional connectivity, China has not only increased its commodity trade with Central Asian states, but also established stable relationships with them for oil and gas energy while promoting the upgrading of their energy industries through technology and direct investment. In addition, under the BRI framework, the free and continuous flow of capital and personnel between China and Central Asian states will contribute to the formation of a regional market and economic integration, providing positive prospects for cooperation between China and Central Asia.^[7]

3. China's Activities in Central Asia

3.1 The Belt and Road Initiative as a Comprehensive Framework

Although the history of China-Central Asia relations has been developing after the independence of Central Asian states, China has achieved rapid development of relations with them through the mutually-promoted multilateral institutions and bilateral methods, gradually relying on the construction of a stable order in Central Asia to realize its security and economic interests. Starting with SCO, China has begun multilateral institutional security ties with Central Asian states. With the rapid development of the BRI in Central Asia, China's economic influence in Central Asia has risen rapidly, and it has upgraded its partnership with states in Central Asia, most of which are members of the SCO. With inclusive economic cooperation as the main means, China tries to convey the concept of independence, cooperation and equality in Central Asia, which is in line with the ideas of Central Asian states.

The BRI is not an entirely new idea, which was a mature trade route connecting the Eurasian continent for thousands of years. However, apart from the recognition of ancient routes for trade

and communication, the BRI, which has been given a new connotation by China since 2013, will be a huge geopolitical framework to promote regional investment, cooperation and integration. In an increasingly globalized world, the BRI is regarded as China's latest effort to upgrade its regional economy and a new round of opening-up since the Reform and Opening up.^[8] As the first stop for China to go west with potential, Central Asia has become one of BRI's initial partners and been actively involved.

The BRI promotes connectivity and trade in Central Asia through infrastructure improvement, because the original target of China's project is to reconnect the region by the infrastructure such as railway, highway, pipelines and hubs invested by China.^[9] Due to high maintenance costs and the problems between Central Asian states after the collapse of Soviet Union, it is difficult for the region to withstand the need of more communication with the involvement of a strong external actor in it.^[10] Before the BRI, China has been constructing and investing in Central Asia. As the BRI advances, policy banks and funds are involved to provide adequate financial support, making China to focus on the overall benefits of connections of transportation networks rather than the profits of individual projects, which means changes of existing networks and more cross-border routes for efficiency.^[11] More investment in infrastructure means increased capacity and efficiency in the transportation of goods and lower costs, leading to an increase in bilateral trade between China and Central Asian states. While becoming important trading partners, China and Kazakhstan and other countries have upgraded their partnership as spillover effects of economic growth.^[12]

The BRI also promotes the development and adjustment of Central Asian industries. Most of the Central Asian states emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, whose economies served the overall development of it with single industrial structure and lacked independence. While the BRI is seen as China's action to increase economic security and reduce its dependence on transporting resources through Southeast Asian waters, China is pursuing opportunities for resource investment and industrial upgrading in Central Asia for the benefit of both sides.^[8] On the one hand, China has expanded cooperation channels and promoted stable income for Central Asian states through more industrial cooperation projects and increasing demand of resource. Through cooperation mechanisms such as agricultural processing projects and the construction of agricultural model zones in cooperation with China, Kazakhstan's agricultural products have been able to enter the Chinese market, thus achieving its goal of developing agriculture in the adjustment of its industrial structure.^[13] On the other hand, China supports the diversification and independent development of the energy industry in Central Asian states from raw material export to processing. For example, China has funded the construction of circuits, hydropower stations and oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, freeing them from the long-standing dependence on Kazakhstan and Russia, achieving energy independence.^[10]

3.2 Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an Institutional Platform

Compared with BRI as an open framework, SCO has become China's multilateral institutional platform in Central Asia. Based on the security cooperation organization between China and Central Asian states to ensure border security after the Cold War, SCO was established in 2001 and gradually began to involve more fields such as economy and trade.

The SCO promotes multilateralism cooperation between Central Asian states and China in the areas of security and economy. After the Cold War, non-traditional security issues such as terrorism and drugs, and sovereignty disputes between the new states in the post-Soviet region not only destabilized Central Asia, but also made it a source of harm to neighbouring countries. Out of urgent need and common interest in maintaining stable border security between Russia, Central Asian states and China, SCO was established and has become a multilateral platform for China to negotiate security affairs with Central Asian states. In consultation with the members, entities and security cooperation mechanisms based on mutual trust were identified, including multilateral military exercises and a permanent anti-terrorist centre in Tashkent.^[14] In addition, under the

spillover effect of security cooperation and consensus, the scope of SCO functions has been expanded, including economy and trade. For example, the SCO promotes the institutionalization of economic cooperation among its members through a series of economic and trade cooperation consensus and agreements. With the rapid advancement of the BRI, the advantages of the SCO in economic and trade cooperation consensus and institutionalization have translated into a rapid increase in trade volume between member states.^[15]

The SCO promotes the norms of sovereign equality and multilateralism. Although it is an organization whose main issues are sovereignty and security as the core interests of the state, it faces security governance within the organization rather than common external threats, so the SCO organizational norms are different from traditional international organizations managed by supranational institutions relying on the sovereignty granted by member states. Specifically, in the SCO, the sovereignty, equality and different needs of each member state, regardless of their development and power, need to be respected and valued. Moreover, the resolutions also need to be negotiated by the members to take effect, which also promotes the formation of a multilateral institution based on consensus among partners. As a cross-regional cooperation mechanism, the SCO has become a regional organization that practices the “new type of international relations”, rejecting US unilateralism and promoting cooperation based on heterogeneity and cultural diversity.^[16] With the accession of states in different parts of Eurasia, such as Iran, India and Pakistan, the more power and influence of SCO will also promote its norms in the expanding Eurasian region.

3.3 China's Way to Realize its Interests

In terms of the way of realizing interests, China has adopted a mutually reinforcing bilateral and multilateral means of equal cooperation to promote regional stability and development. This stems on the one hand from China's pursuit of stability of regional interests and China's recognition of the economic and security relationship that sustained economic growth and prosperity will contribute to maintaining regional stability, and on the other hand from the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that China follows in its foreign relations.^[17] On the basis of the security-based SCO, China advocates cooperation and consensus with Central Asian states on issues other than security. In the implementation of the BRI, China has promoted high-level interactions and policy communication through large-scale economic cooperation. On the basis of the continuous advancement of bilateral cooperation, China can further consolidate consensus with Central Asian states and promote the institutionalization of cooperation between China and Central Asia. The latest example is the establishment of China-Central Asia community with a shared future in 2022.

4. Further Denying Factors

Although China has adopted a mutually reinforcing bilateral and multilateral means of equal cooperation to promote its interests, with the rise of China's influence in Central Asia and the weakening of other major powers in the region, China has come to be recognized as the most influential power in Central Asia.^[18] There are also those who analyse the purpose to change order of Chinese policy, such as Mayer argues that BRI is a geopolitical strategy for China to reshape regional norms and order.^[19] However, despite China's rising influence in Central Asia, the following factors provide further evidence that it is not becoming the dominant power in Central Asia.

In terms of influence, China's current regional influence is not comprehensive, but more in economic terms. The rapid development of the BRI in Central Asia has sparked a discussion about China's influence, which exaggerate China's potential influence in Central Asia. China's economic influence in Central Asia is measured more by the growth and contribution of trade volume and the amount of Chinese investment that Central Asian states receive. However, influences are more than statistics. China's short history of engagement with Central Asian states has led them to view China

more as an external great power of increased involvement with a mix of awe and alarm.^[20] In fact, apart from economic influence, China's influence in politics, culture, security and other fields is all currently limited due to different cultural identity and history backgrounds.^[21]

In terms of public goods, China has not become the sole dominant state of public goods in Central Asia. In Central Asia, Russian-dominated regional organizations, that are more integrated, overlap in membership and functions with those advocated by China. China's public goods in Central Asia are mainly open BRI and SCO as an institutional platform. As an open cooperation framework, BRI is more related to the cooperation of bilateral interests between China and Central Asian states, and its contribution to regional integration mainly lies in the construction of infrastructure and connectivity. In contrast, Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been a more institutionalized regional economic organization with more consistent tariff standards to facilitate the free internal flow of capital and personnel and reduce costs, following the EU's approach to integration.^[22] As a security organization, SCO is designed to follow the principles of openness and equal cooperation among sovereign states, while the principles of heterogeneity and consensus of its members have been criticized as lacking consensus and efficiency.^[23] As a member of the organization, Russia supports the participation of cross-regional members as a balancing to China's influence within the organization. In addition, the Russian-led regional security organization Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), based on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in the post-Soviet region, demonstrated its ability with the peacekeeping force to quell the unrest in Kazakhstan in 2022.

In terms of relations between major powers, Sino-Russian relations are the most important one in the region, and the continuation of their joint presence in Central Asia is of the common interest. After the Ukraine crisis, the United States and the Europe imposed sanctions against Russia, leading to the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West and the turn to the East, while the Indo-Pacific strategy implemented by the United States seeking to reshape China's maritime environment forced China to turn to the Eurasian continent. Since both the Greater Eurasia Strategy of Russia and the BRI of China involve cooperation and development in Eurasia, they have a common interest in preventing Western powers in Eurasia and have elevated the level of their partnership. In addition, as a neighbour of both China and Russia, the stability and development of Central Asia is also a common interest of both sides. They also give full play to China's economic advantages and Russia's indispensable role in regional security through the docking of the EAEU and the BRI and cooperation in the SCO, and shape the multilateral order in Central Asia while coordinating interests.

The dynamic role of Central Asian states in shaping regional order cannot be ignored. In analysing the role of power in regional order, the perspective of great powers is often adopted, and small states are ignored because of their weak and passive position. However, in the case of Central Asian states, due to the peculiarities of their location and the wide participation of external powers, they are able to use the hedging mechanism to actively select partners, maximizing their own interests and realizing independent development.

5. Conclusions

As China's role in Central Asia has increased relative to other powers in the region, discussions have arisen about China's attempts to become a regional dominant. However, China's interests in Central Asia are limited to regional stability and economic cooperation, and it achieves these goals through a combination of bilateral and multilateral methods. From the perspective of the regional design of China's activities in Central Asia, BRI aims to promote regional trade and independent development of Central Asian states through infrastructure construction and industrial upgrading, while SCO promotes institutionalized cooperation and norms of sovereign equality through multilateral platforms. While these designs have increased China's economic influence, they have drawn alarm among Central Asian states, and China currently lacks influence in other areas.

Although China's regional design is inclusive, there are more institutionalized and capable regional organizations by Russia in the region, and the joint presence of China and Russia in Central Asia is of the interests of the both. In addition, Central Asian states have relied on hedging strategies to dynamically shape the order. Therefore, China has helped regional stability and independent development based on multilateral equal cooperation, while the gap in influence, the gap in public goods and the common interests of the major powers further confirm that China is not being the dominant power in Central Asia.

References

- [1] Levine, I. (2019). *US policies in central Asia: Democracy, energy and the war on terror*. Routledge.
- [2] Freeman, C. P. (2018). *New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom*. *The Pacific Review*, 31(5), 635–654.
- [3] Pizzolo, P., & Carteny, A. (2022). *The “new great game” in central Asia: From a sino-Russian axis of convenience to Chinese primacy? The International Spectator: A Quarterly Journal of the Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 57(2), 85–102.
- [4] Ip, A. W. H., & Lam, L. K. W. (Eds.). (2023). *Management and sustainability in the belt and road*. Taylor & Francis.
- [5] Alimov, R. (2018). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9(2), 114–124.
- [6] Pieper, M. (2021). *The making of Eurasia the making of Eurasia: Competition and cooperation between china's belt and road initiative and Russia*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- [7] Otorbaev, D. (2023). *Central Asia's economic rebirth in the shadow of the new great game*. Taylor & Francis.
- [8] Cai, K. G. (2018). *The one belt one road and the Asian infrastructure investment bank: Beijing's new strategy of geoeconomics and geopolitics*. *Dang Dai Zhongguo [The Journal of Contemporary China]*, 27(114), 831–847.
- [9] Pradt, T. (2021). *The prequel to china's new silk road the prequel to china's new silk road: Preparing the ground in central Asia (1st ed.)*. Springer.
- [10] Krasnopolsky, P. (2022). *China, Russia and central Asian infrastructure: Fragmenting or reformatting the region? (1st ed.)*. Springer.
- [11] van Noort, C. (2023). *China's communication of the belt and road initiative: Silk road and infrastructure narratives*. Taylor & Francis.
- [12] Gerstl, A., & Wallenboeck, U. (Eds.). (2020). *China's belt and road initiative: Strategic and economic impacts on central Asia, southeast Asia, and central eastern Europe*. Routledge.
- [13] Xuanli Liao, J. (2021). *China's energy diplomacy towards Central Asia and the implications on its “belt and road initiative.” The Pacific Review*, 34(3), 490–522.
- [14] Gatev, I., & Diesen, G. (2016). *Eurasian encounters: The Eurasian economic union and the shanghai cooperation organisation*. *European Politics and Society*, 17(sup1), 133–150.
- [15] Rab, A., & Zhilong, H. (2019). *China and shanghai cooperation organization (SCO): Belt and road initiative (BRI) perspectives*. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 9(2).
- [16] Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in central Asia*. Oxford University Press.
- [17] Wang, G. (2018). *Silk roads and the centrality of Old World Eurasia*. In *Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative* (pp. 3–16). Routledge.
- [18] Pataccini, L., & Malikov, N. (2020). *Transition and regional cooperation in central Asia: What can they tell us about the (post-)liberal world order? Polity*, 52(2), 288–303.
- [19] Mayer, M. (2018). *China's rise as Eurasian power: The revival of the silk road and its consequences*. In *Rethinking the Silk Road* (pp. 1–42). Springer Singapore.
- [20] Pieper, M. (2021a). *The linchpin of Eurasia: Kazakhstan and the Eurasian economic union between Russia's defensive regionalism and China's new Silk Roads*. *International Politics*, 58(3), 462–482.
- [21] Krapohl, S., & Vasileva-Dienes, A. (2020). *The region that isn't: China, Russia and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia*. *Asia Europe Journal*, 18(3), 347–366.
- [22] Sergi, B. S. (2018). *Putin's and Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union: A hybrid half-economics and half-political “Janus Bifrons.” Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9(1), 52–60.
- [23] Alimov, R. (2018). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Its role and place in the development of Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9(2), 114–124.