

## RE-CENTRING CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CHINESE ‘NEW GREAT GAME’

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### Abstract

*Central Asia being a heartland of Eurasia has attracted the attention of the Great Powers as it remained an important part of the ‘Great Game’. In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, the Central Asian states gained importance due to their proximity to the Caspian Sea and their abundant resources, such as natural gas, oil, and minerals. China, situated in its close geographical proximity, relies on the Central Asian region to fulfil its increasing energy demands. Simultaneously, Central Asian states have found China a valuable partner for trade and security cooperation. Economic incentives like the One Belt One Road and the String of Pearls strategy of China engage these states with China as their interests converge from security to economy. This synergy has led China to rely on the Central Asian states to manage non-state actors operating in China's Xinjiang region. China and Central Asian states' relations highlight the mutual reliance of all parties and create a win-win situation for each other. The increasing Chinese influence in CARs makes Russia sceptical of China's dominance in the region. This study underscores the collaboration between China and the Central Asian states and also delves into the potential hurdles that could affect this partnership*

**Keywords:** Great Game, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), One Belt One Road (OBOR), Trade, Security, Xinjiang.

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## Introduction

Central Asia is a part of Mackinder's "heartland" and the centre of Zbigniew Brzezinski's equation for the "black hole" of power.<sup>1</sup> CARs have historically attracted great powers and were a part of the 'great game'. China's interest in the CARs appears to be primarily motivated by its efforts to address the world's growing energy supply needs as well as concerns about security along the western frontier and Xinjiang's internal security. China engages with the Central Asian states by providing them with economic opportunities like BRI, and OBOR, and through the 'String of Pearls' strategy, China ensures partnership from security to economy with various states.

Central Asia offers China a reliable route for overland trade between China and Europe, while China offers Central Asia access to the Pacific Ocean. This study intends to investigate China's economic interests in Central Asia under the BRI initiative. For this purpose, China has started using commercial approaches to build the CAR's dependence on China in terms of energy supply as well as cooperation on political and military fronts. Beijing has gained economic and political sway in the Central Asian Republics thanks to their mutual dependency, and to further its interests, China may need to step up its strategic cooperation with the CARs. Moreover, it will explore how Russia sees Chinese engagements in the region and what are the prospects of the Central Asian region.

## Central Asia and Transition from Geo-strategy to Geo-economics

CARs are now more focused on geo-economics rather than geo-strategy.<sup>2</sup> These nations are located on the east and west coasts of the Caspian Sea, which is rich in natural resources including oil and gas.<sup>3</sup> The largest oil reserves are found in the republics of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, which are also among the top oil-exporting nations in the area. Turkmenistan's oil and gas exports have also substantially expanded in recent years. Due to the quick change of power in international politics, the CARs unexpectedly declared their independence. The swift pronouncements of freedom had a noticeable influence on the CARs' diplomatic and domestic policies. To play a suitable part in the shifting perspectives of regional and international politics, these governments have had to take tortuous routes.<sup>4</sup> In the post-

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<sup>1</sup>Rabia Akhtar, Fakhar Hussain, Zubair Hussain, 'China's Economic Interests in Central Asia', *Psychology and Education*, 58 (4), (2021).

<sup>2</sup>Thrassy Marketos, *China's Energy Geopolitics. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Central Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Stephan Blank, "The Strategic Importance of Central Asia: An American View.", *The US Army War Quarterly Parameters*, 38(1), 75-85.

<sup>4</sup>Mohammad Ehsari Ahrari, "The dynamics of the new great game Muslim Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, 13(4), 525-539.

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Cold War era, the subsequent power struggle between the world's most powerful nations in Central Asia is referred to as the "New Great Game."<sup>5</sup> Geographically, the CARs and China hold important strategic positions in the area, placing them in a position to potentially exert immediate influence on global stability and security as well as economic growth. Beijing is very concerned about the economic instability in Central Asia and its impact on political unrest in the region. With the resurgence of the unrest in the late 19th century, Central Asia's geopolitical strategic clock is ticking away and has been affecting regional foreign policy. A new stage has been established for major contending countries of the world to compete for martial supremacy in Central Asia, which was previously a part of the Great Game played in the region between Russia and the British Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>6</sup> China started taking part in the "New Great Game" in the Central Asian region. In the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, China was the first country to acknowledge the CARs' independence and established diplomatic relations with these states in 1992. Central Asia has seen the greatest success with the Chinese Grand Strategy compared to any other part of the world. China's key objectives in Central Asia as they emerge in the economic spheres are unlikely to be limited to viable trade, investment, and energy supply flows.

### **Re-Centering of CARs in Chinese Foreign Policy**

Central Asia is important to Beijing for many reasons in addition to the strategic depth and wealth of natural resources it offers. Since the CARs gained independence in 1991, China has responded to Russia's economic withdrawal from the region by steadily increasing its economic involvement and security engagements with member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the area. China and Russia are working more closely together under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to counterbalance US influence in Central Asia. The CARs would unquestionably keep seeking to preserve cordial relations with China, partially out of a desire to avoid offending China and, also to maintain the balance of power against Russia.

President Xi Jinping has thus given the CARs a more significant role in China's foreign and security policies, and there has been a lively discussion on Beijing's plan of "March West."<sup>7</sup> Beijing considers that the future of the

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<sup>5</sup> Qamar Fatima, and Sumera Zafar, "New Great Game: Players, Interests, Strategies and Central Asia", *South Asian Studies*, 29 (2), (2014), 627-655.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Niklas Swanstrom, "The Security Dimension of China-Central Asia Relationship: China's Military Engagement with the Central Asian Countries, *Institute for Security and*

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country depends greatly on the western region of China. China's western region is now almost entirely dependent on the CARs' sustained economic and commercial cooperation, which is reliant on interpersonal interactions. The immediate challenges to Beijing are directly related to the Uighur population's ethnic group. The number of Uighurs living abroad is estimated to be between 300,000 and 1 million, with roughly 10 million of them residing in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. China has always viewed Central Asia as its trade region and as a region that has great affinity with the Chinese culture.<sup>8</sup> The most notable historical trading hubs, such as Jharkhand, Samarkand, and Kokand, were located close to Xinjiang, with Urumqi as its capital, situated on China's western border.

China and the CARs have long prioritized their trade relations as being big and important. China's strategy to placate separatists while stabilizing its western border heavily relies on its economic growth. Chinese rhetoric about "strategic relationships" announces their consideration of Central Asia as a pivotal foreign policy option for trade and energy. By making Xinjiang the entrance to the "Eurasian Land Bridge" by the CARs towards Europe, China hopes to lessen one of the greatest threats to its internal security. The primary motivation for China's involvement in the CARs appears to be an effort to meet rising energy supply demands as well as security concerns along the Western frontier and the internal security of Xinjiang province, both of which depend on the CARs' ability to maintain peace and Beijing's relationship with them.<sup>9</sup> By making significant investments in the economies of CARs, China has improved its relations with these states. China's resource-rich neighbours' border disputes have become a big cause of frustration for the country, and as a result, China has been working fast to resolve these issues and build amicable relations with its neighbours. The region has experienced ebbs and flows of disorder and instability, which are made worse by foreign players like Russia, China, the United States, Japan, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan who have been attempting to control the flow of oil and gas supplies to advance their energy interests.<sup>10</sup>

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*Development Policy*, (March 18, 2015). Available at: [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony\\_3.18.15.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>Rabia Akhtar, Fakhar Hussain, Zubair Hussain, 'China's Economic Interests in Central Asia', *Psychology and Education*, 58(4), (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Fakhar Hussain, Muhammad Khan, Hussain Ikramullah, Sarfraz, Nawaz, Sadaat and Nisar Ahmad, "Dynamics of Regional Geopolitics and challenges to CPEC: The Afghan and Iranian Perspectives", *Elementary Education Online*, 20 (5), 3235-3243, (2021).

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### Chinese Economic Interests in Central Asian Republics

The length of China's shared border with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan is 3300 kilometres, signifying their geographic closeness. For thousands of years, China and the CARs have shared the benefits of prosperity brought about by the "Silk Road."<sup>11</sup> China first communicated with Central Asia 2,000 years ago via the legendary Silk Road, but once the region became a part of the Czarist Russian Empire and subsequently the Soviet Union, direct contacts with the region were severed. For overland trade between China and Europe, Central Asia offers China the potential of a route, and China offers Central Asia a dependable route to the Pacific Ocean. While Central Asia may be useful to China for creating internal linkages with Europe and West Asia, China is the CARs' sea outlet. Central Asia, a landlocked region in the heart of Asia, is notable because it had to serve as a buffer zone for the British and Russian empires in the nineteenth century, and it still does so now, despite the presence of other new powers in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Due to several unresolved political conflicts, Central Asia has not been a tranquil region for the past 30 years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Certain trans-regional and local actors who have been pursuing their interests have contributed to this condition. China was able to fully capitalize on Xinjiang's geopolitical position when the USSR collapsed, increasing its political, economic, and military supremacy in the Central Asian region. Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Beijing has impassively followed pragmatist, focused, and indomitable strategies to establish itself as a significant world player. China has since been a crucial participant in Central Asian geopolitics. It has been regarded as a chance to improve the political and economic system of Central Asia and the Asian Pacific region by promoting the networking of trading outlets, political cooperation, and sociocultural interaction.<sup>13</sup> China sees this as an opportunity to build relationships with the CARs following the fall of the USSR and the consequent reduction of its hegemony in the region. Access to international

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Zimmerman, "The New Silk Roads: China, the US, and the Future of Central Asia", (Centre on International Cooperation). Available at: [https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman\\_new\\_silk\\_road\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf) ( 7 February 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Sarfraz Hussain and Abdul Qudus, 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Cooperate Investment Development and Economic Modernization Encouragement', *Journal of Contemporary Issues on Business and Government*, 27(1), (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Niklas Swanstrom, "The Security Dimension of China-Central Asia Relationship: China's Military Engagement with the Central Asian Countries, *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, (March 18, 2015). Available at: [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony\\_3.18.15.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf)

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economic markets would allow regional governments to diversify their economies so they could export their goods at competitive market rates.

### **Energy Trade between China and Central Asia**

CARs established trade with China comprising of minerals, fuel, copper, iron, steel, and inorganic chemicals which highlights the fact that Energy trade has been dominant. China may benefit commercially from the CARs in several ways, including trading, building infrastructure, and manipulating mineral resources. The province of Xinjiang in China connects China with the CARs and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, border the Xinjiang province. Eighty-three per cent of all trade between Xinjiang and the CARs and eighty per cent of all trade between China and the CARs passes through Xinjiang<sup>14</sup>. The rapid industrial growth in China has increased the need for energy. From 1985 to 1995, the daily oil requirement fluctuated between 1.7 and 3.4 million barrels, reaching roughly 6.8 million barrels in 2004. 40 per cent of China's oil consumption must be satisfied by outside resources.<sup>15</sup> According to the International Energy Agency, China is expected to drive a nearly 850,000 barrels per day (b/d) increase in global oil demand in 2023, accounting for approximately half of the overall global demand growth.<sup>16</sup> China has become the world's largest buyer of hydrocarbons. As China's economy and population expanded, so did the need for energy supplies.

After the fall of the USSR, China, and the CARs developed a strategic partnership built on mutual trust and economic gains.<sup>17</sup> In the twenty-first century, China's commercial enclaves in Central Asia have grown significantly. China has developed as a major commercial partner for the neighbouring countries, surpassing Russia in 2012 as one of the region's biggest economic traders.<sup>18</sup> China's former President Hu Jintao declared that the Central Asian region is important for the country's economic development, which has increased as a result of changes in the political balance of power in modern world affairs, economic growth, and industrial

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Niklas Swanstrom, "The Security Dimension of China-Central Asia Relationship: China's Military Engagement with the Central Asian Countries, *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, (March 18, 2015). Available at: [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony\\_3.18.15.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Swanstrom%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ben Cahill, Iaria Mazzocco, and Chen Huang, "China Holds the Key to Global Energy Demand." (CSIS). Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-holds-key-global-energy-demand>. Accessed October 12, 2023

<sup>17</sup> Rabia Akhtar, Fakhar Hussain, Zubair Hussain, "China's Economic Interests in Central Asia", *Psychology and Education*, 58(4), (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Xuetang Guo, "The Energy Security in Central Eurasia: the Geopolitical Implications to China's Energy Strategy", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 4(4), 122-144.

advancement<sup>19</sup>. Due to their mutual dependency, Beijing has been able to gain political and economic sway in the Central Asian Republics. Over roughly 30 years, China and the CARs have developed a strategic partnership with extensive cooperation in terms of political, economic, cultural, and security spheres<sup>20</sup>. Since the economies of the CARs and China complement one another, strengthening the development of cooperative economic ties between the CARs and China had to be a relatively easy undertaking. China needed raw materials from the CARs, whereas the Central Asian states needed consumer goods that would encourage China's development and economic expansion<sup>21</sup>. China now has various opportunities in the Central Asian region as a result of the expansion of economic cooperation. Priorities for China in Central Asia include securing its borders, combating radicalization and terrorism, gaining access to reliable energy supplies, as well as emerging international markets and business opportunities<sup>22</sup>.

China's trade with the five Central Asian nations, which include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, surged to \$70.2 billion in 2022, marking a significant rise from the mere \$0.46 billion in 1992, the year China established diplomatic relations with these Central Asian countries.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, Xi Jinping suggested China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" concept in a speech in Kazakhstan and the goal was to increase cooperation, trade ties, and economic prosperity between Europe and Asia<sup>24</sup>. The "Belt & Road Initiative" has grown significantly in the Central Asian region, and it will continue to play a key role in its future success. China's strategy began to take shape by the year 2015, as a result of Beijing's leadership rolling out plans for the "Silk Road Economic Belt" via the Republics of Central Asia. China's trade with the CARs has increased to

<sup>19</sup> Thrassy Marketos, *China's Energy Geopolitics: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Central Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Feng Yujin, 'China's Strategy towards Central Asia: interests, principles and policy tools', *International Relations*, 12(1), 152-162, (2019).

<sup>21</sup> Manzoor Khan Afridi, Musharraf Iqbal, and Sumbal Hassan, "New Great Game in Central Asia: An Analysis of China's Interest", *Global Social Science Review (GSSR)*, 2(1), (2017), 1-17.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress", (RAND Cooperation). <http://www.rand.org/giving/contribute>.

<sup>23</sup> "China's Economic & Trade Cooperation with Central Asia." Silk Road Briefing, (May 18, 2023). Available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/05/18/chinas-economic-trade-cooperation-with-central-asia/>.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Zimmerman, "The New Silk Roads: China, the US, and the Future of Central Asia", (Centre on International Cooperation New York University, 2015). Available at: [https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman\\_new\\_silk\\_road\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf), accessed on February 7, 2023.

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the point where Beijing has become one of the region's key economic partners, particularly with Kazakhstan<sup>25</sup>.

- **China-Kazakhstan:**

Kazakhstan majorly imports medicines, planes, and aircraft equipment from China and imports mineral fuels, crude petroleum, distillation products, bituminous substances, and rare earth metals. UN Comtrade Database suggested that after 2019, China became Kazakhstan's second-largest trading partner, and trade expanded at an annual rate of 16 per cent. The mutual trade between China and Kazakhstan reached US \$31.2 billion in 2023 and if remains persistent, it can increase up to US \$35 billion by the year 2030.<sup>26</sup>

- **China-Uzbekistan:**

Chinese companies invest in the energy sector of Uzbekistan mostly in the automobile industries and green energy sectors. Hybrid cars from China are increasingly replacing Russian companies from the region. Chinese investment is also in photovoltaic cells and solar plants in Uzbekistan whereas, China imports yarn, cotton, and gold from Uzbekistan along with crude oil. Uzbekistani President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, promoted the establishment of Chinese companies to fortify energy trade with China which resulted in the production of energy from renewable energy resources in 2023<sup>27</sup>.

- **China-Kyrgyzstan:**

China-Kyrgyzstan trade reached its peak in the year 2022 with a bilateral trade turnover of US \$9 billion. China for its energy trade, after the China-Central Asia Summit, agreed to build a Solar project in Issyk-Kul to complete 1000 megawatts that would provide 17 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's electricity generation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress", (RAND Cooperation). Available at: <http://www.rand.org/giving/contribute>.

<sup>26</sup>Emil Avdaliani, "China's 2023 Trade and Investment with Kazakhstan: Development Trends", (Silk Road Briefing). Available at <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/02/20/chinas-2023-trade-and-investment-with-kazakhstan-development-trends/> (accessed on August 8 2023)

<sup>27</sup>"China's Role In Uzbekistan's Green Energy Boom", (The Jamestown Foundation, August 2023). Available at: <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Chinas-Role-In-Uzbekistans-Green-Energy-Boom.html>

<sup>28</sup>Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan Declares an Energy Emergency and Looks to China for Support", *The Diplomat*, (August 03, 2023). Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/kyrgyzstan-declares-an-energy-emergency-and-looks-to-china-for-support/> (accessed on August 10, 2023)



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- **China-Tajikistan:**

Tajikistan became the fastest-growing energy trade partner of China as the energy trade increased rapidly. China benefits from raw aluminium, gold, zinc, and other ores from Tajikistan and after the third China+Central Asia (C+C5) foreign minister's meeting in Nur-Sultan in Kazakhstan, China agreed to boost its energy trade partnership with Tajikistan by establishing green energy sectors and green technology for power generation.

- **China-Turkmenistan:**

Turkmenistan is the largest supplier of natural gas to China. Their energy trade partnership is in terms of providing gas to China and consequently, China invests in the developmental programs by building infrastructure and energy pipelines in Turkmenistan. Chinese company, CNPC invested in building new wells to export natural gas to China.

Both China and Central Asian states benefit from the energy trade partnership which clearly shows the sharp leap from geo-strategy to geo-economics.

### **OBOR and China's Silk Road Fund in Central Asia**

In 2014, China agreed to invest \$40 billion which was to serve as the initial investment for projects under the OBOR program, with up to \$16 billion going towards projects in Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> China depends on Central Asia because of its cheap raw materials and high demand for finished goods<sup>30</sup>. Because it is situated in the middle of the continent of Eurasia, which is still a component of the historic "Silk Route" as a trading route between the East and the West, the region of Central Asia has tremendous economic potential for the Northwestern parts of China. The North-western landlocked regions of China may benefit from the reinstatement of this traditional trading route.<sup>31</sup> Chinese officials and scholars have publicly compared their suggestions of OBOR to the Marshall Plan put forth by the United States following World War II which asserts that it has no "hegemonic"

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Zimmerman, "The New Silk Roads: China, the US, and the Future of Central Asia", (Centre on International Cooperation New York University, 2015). Available at: [https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman\\_new\\_silk\\_road\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf), accessed on February 7, 2023

<sup>30</sup> Manzoor Khan Afridi, Musharraf Iqbal, and Sumbal Hassan, "New Great Game in Central Asia: An Analysis of China's Interest", *Global Social Science Review (GSSR)*, 2(1), (2017), 1-17

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

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objectives<sup>32</sup>. Beijing's decision-makers have portrayed OBOR as a vehicle to promote serenity and peace in the region by strengthening China's relations with its neighbours. The CARs have been viewed as more likely to succeed in achieving the status of the emerging market, which calls for a rapid expansion of the economy, manufacturing growth, and suitable organizations.<sup>33</sup>

Along with its economic expansion, China is becoming increasingly dependent on foreign energy. China may seek to ensure Beijing receives Central Asia's energy supplies to gain from energy resources. China anticipates that in ten years, its annual trade with the affected nations may exceed \$2.5 trillion. China's commerce with the CARs expanded significantly from \$1 billion in 2000 to over \$50 billion in 2013.<sup>34</sup> China's economic volume as a percentage of FDI in the area has been increasing dramatically. By increasing economic cooperation with the CARs, China hopes to promote the development and opening of Xinjiang's economy in the context of globalization. With the launch of the "Belt & Road Initiative," Beijing's standing in the Central Asian region in terms of business ties has improved. Instead of attempting to increase its political authority in the region, China describes its actions as an effort to support the economic and political unification of Eurasia. China has the most important economic hand in the Central Asian regional system centred on shared advantages and equality for all. China and the CARs have complementing advantages in economies that enable extensive collaboration. The consistent imports of energy, metals, leather goods, and other items, as well as the raw materials and Central Asian markets, are very important for China.

The CARs find China's marketplaces for consumer goods, industry, and agriculture to be particularly appealing. China may need to increase its level of strategic cooperation with the CARs to boost support in the economic and energy sectors and create a win-win situation where both parties benefit.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Fakhar Hussain, Muhammad Khan, Hussain Ikramullah, Nawaz Sarfraz, Sadaat and Nisar Ahmad, "Dynamics of Regional Geopolitics and challenges to CPEC: The Afghan and Iranian Perspectives", *Elementary Education Online*, 20 (5), (2021), 3235-3243

<sup>33</sup> Karen Smith Stegen, "Understanding China's Global Energy Strategy", *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 10 (3), (2015), 18-22

<sup>34</sup>Thomas Zimmerman, "*The New Silk Roads: China, the US, and the Future of Central Asia*", (Centre on International Cooperation Newyork University, 2015). Available at: [https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman\\_new\\_silk\\_road\\_final\\_2.pdf](https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/1662/65/zimmerman_new_silk_road_final_2.pdf), accessed on February 7, 2023

<sup>35</sup>Rabia Akhtar, Fakhar Hussain, Zubair Hussain, "China's Economic Interests in Central Asia", *Psychology and Education*, 58(4), (2021).

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## **Security Concerns and Challenges to the Central Asian Republics:**

Central Asian Republics, much like the other states, are facing both traditional and nontraditional security challenges.

- **Non-traditional challenges to Central Asia.**

The non-traditional challenges in the region are associated with migration and refugee issues, deeper inequality in income, high levels of unemployment, drug trafficking from the borders of Afghanistan, and confrontations between various ethnic groups. The internal threats to the CARs are multi-dimensional. Among youth, it is observed that the tendency to promote extremism has increased as the CARs are continuously facing the problems of unemployment. Central Asian people are involved in smuggling drugs from Afghanistan, Russia, and the EU. Kyrgyzstan became a hotspot for various criminal groups involved in promoting extremism. There are numerous regional challenges as well and the CARs are opposing fellow states related to the issues of building hydro-power projects. Building the hydro-power projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was opposed initially by Uzbekistan as, in summer, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan don't have enough water in the reservoirs to irrigate the land. Additionally, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have always attempted to compete for the place of regional leader.

- **Major Traditional Security Challenge to Central Asia.**

Alongside the non-traditional challenges faced by CARs, the traditional challenges are equally alarming. The most serious of the threats include the growth of Islamic extremism in the region, the spread of non-state actors with fundamentalist ideologies, coupled with the growth of the transboundary crime rate and drug trafficking. The changing security dynamics of the region are directly related to the evolving situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Right after the fall of Kabul and the rise of the Taliban post-US withdrawal, the Taliban are again in power. Taliban of Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda are closely linked with various non-state organizations operating in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. The extremist groups that are aligned with the Afghan Taliban are the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, operating in states like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir-Islami, Harkat al-Khwan al Muslimeen which are promoting Islamic extremism. Central Asian Republics are seeking to have security and trade assistance from China whereas China on the other hand is dependent upon the CARs to

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limit the interaction of Islamic extremist groups with the Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region.<sup>36</sup>

### **Taliban 2.0 and Security Challenge to Central Asia:**

The rise of the Taliban and the fall of the Kabul government was a surprise for all Central Asian States. The rapid victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan was a warning for the Central Asian Republics as they feared the increase in extremism and regional terrorism.<sup>37</sup> Central Asia relied on China and Russia for security during 2001 when Taliban-led non-state groups were active in Afghanistan and the neighbouring regions. During the rule of the Taliban in the region, The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used Afghan territory. IMU allied with Al-Qaeda and ISIS along with the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). ISKP and IMU along with the Taliban in Afghanistan were focusing on replacing the secular governments in Central Asia with Pan-Islamic ideologies and promoting the Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia.<sup>38</sup> Afghans, Chechens, Arabs, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uighurs, Syrians, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and other Eurasian ethnicities are interested in promoting the Islamic Caliphate. Combat units in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have also expressed their interests as these fighters resort to seeking haven in Afghanistan.

Although the Taliban swiftly controlled the 1500-mile border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan along with key border posts with Iran and Pakistan, they have also engaged in diplomatic interactions with Moscow, Ashgabat, and Tehran. Taliban have also assured China that they will refrain from interfering in Xinjiang with a demand for China to support rebuilding in Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup> Central Asian states were also keen to support the US-led peace process in Afghanistan, but the flow of refugees after the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan is alarming for the neighbouring Central Asian states as they have already experienced a strain on State capacities following the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with the increase in poverty, unemployment, and the potential rise of extremism right after the rise of the Taliban, Central Asian states fear that after the US and NATO withdrawal from the region, the power vacuum will result in a power struggle among various non-state groups. Although Russia reasserted its strong military support for the Central Asian states as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) promises

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<sup>36</sup> Konstantin Syroezkhin, "China in Central Asia: from Trade to Strategic Partnership", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No.3, (2007), 40-51

<sup>37</sup> Richard Weltz, "Central Asia's Taliban Surprise", (Middle East Institute, September 16, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Gavin Helf, Barmak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover", (United States Institute for Peace, July 20, 2021).

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China through the platform of SCO, it also reasserts its support to the Central Asian Republics. Still, CARs are fearful of the rise of Taliban in the neighbourhood and are consistently reliant on Russia and China for security.

### **Sino-Russian Efforts to Manage Security in Central Asia:**

Security management refers to the efforts of addressing particular security concerns to maintain stability and to provide necessary training and equipment for security. Both Russia and China have engaged themselves to promote security management in Central Asia which indicates an effort by both states to maintain influence in Central Asia. China constantly engages itself with the Central Asian States from 1993 and even now to discuss topics related to security ranging from the Uyghur political movements to controlling anti-Chinese sentiments in Central Asia. The rise of anti-Chinese sentiments in Xinjiang and the security concerns have been a foundational drive for China to deepen her relations with Central Asia and to promote economic incentives for Central Asia<sup>40</sup>. Chinese efforts to manage security in Central Asia came as a response to increasing separatist movements in Xinjiang. The Committee for Eastern Turkistan and the United National Revolutionary Front of Turkistan operate in Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the Xinjiang Liberation Organisation has established its stronghold. Similarly, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan sends explicit messages in which they demand a separate East Turkestan. To mitigate the threat posed by non-state groups in Central Asia that could harm China, China initiated operations aimed at eliminating the leaders of these groups. Many Uyghur leaders were targeted and killed; the list includes Hashir Vahidi and Samsakovain Kazakhstan, Bosakup in Kyrgyzstan, and Eminjan Osmanov in Uzbekistan. Due to Chinese pressure, Central Asia labelled these organizations as terrorist organizations. Beijing and Central Asian states reached a regional consensus to combat terrorism and extremism to promote economic development in the region. To promote a peaceful and stable environment, China promotes law enforcement cooperation, combating transnational crimes, controlling drug trafficking, and providing training to armies of Central Asian states<sup>41</sup>. China also engaged in various multilateral processes under Xi Jinping. China led various multilateral security dialogue forums like the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers Mechanism (C+C5) since the year 2020. This is an effort to promote communication at the regional level and to combat cyber and transnational crimes and threats posed by non-state groups.

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<sup>40</sup> Niva Yau, "China's Security Management Towards Central Asia", (Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2022)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

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Russia on the other hand also ensures the Central Asian state's safety and security. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation is a part of Russian efforts to provide Central Asia with security. Following the rise of the Taliban again in Afghanistan, Vladimir Putin expressed his concerns for stability in Central Asia and engaged CSTO to effectively neutralize the threats. In Tajikistan, more than 7000 Russian troops are present at Tajik Military Base, and their lease runs until at least 2042.<sup>42</sup> Since Tajikistan borders Afghanistan, Russia actively engages in the security of the region after the rise of the Taliban. Similarly, the Russian Defence Minister visited Tashkent and announced a five-year strategic partnership program from 2021 to 2025. Russia provides the members of CSTO with military equipment and training to combat extremist activities. Therefore, some Chinese scholars worry that due to the security situation in Afghanistan, Central Asian states will rely more on the Russian Federation.<sup>43</sup>

### **Chinese-Russian Jostling for Influence in Central Asia:**

Since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, China has juggled a precarious balance in Central Asia. Scholars argue that China gave more priority to its relationship with the newly established Russian Federation than it did with the other 14 republics. Russia, out of all the states was prominent for China as it not only had the dominant position in the international system but also, was the permanent member of the UN Security Council.<sup>44</sup> Russia had the bulk of natural resources armed with nuclear weapons. The other states were also of importance to China as the Central Asian states, three of them, had border issues with China. Secondly, just like Russia, these Central Asian states were a source of commercial importance for China as they had huge reserves of natural resources and served as a potential for the Chinese markets<sup>45</sup>. Thirdly, China faced some of the serious domestic issues from the Uyghur Muslims living in the Xinjiang region. They were in contact with the jihadist organizations of the Central Asian states, so China had to manage the volatile border security issues. Thus, the basis of China's Central Asian strategy was to preserve its interests while appeasing Moscow's goals and formally respecting its "special relationship" with the countries of the region.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Weltz, "Central Asia's Taliban Surprise", (Middle East Institute, September 16, 2021).

<sup>43</sup> NivaYau, "China's Security Management Towards Central Asia", (Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 5(2), (2016), 61-78. Available at: DOI.80/24761028.2016.11869097

<sup>45</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen, Geir Flikke, "Chinese-Russian Convergence and Central Asia", *Geopolitics*, 16(4), (2011), 865-901. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2010.505119>.

Despite Beijing's efforts to calm Moscow's concerns over the Chinese economic colonization of Central Asia, Russian concerns about the expanding Chinese presence in the region intensified. The Kremlin viewed Xi Jinping's visit to Central Asia in September 2013 and his introduction of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) during a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana as a challenge rather than an opportunity<sup>46</sup>. Only after the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sectoral sanctions against the Russian economy, did Moscow's leadership review its China policy and conclude that greater cooperation with the enormous neighbour is required. This includes SREB, which later became a component of the even larger One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Russia's flagship project for post-Soviet Eurasia integration, and SREB were later connected, and both capitals undertook the difficult task of linking the two projects together as well as developing a division of labour formula for their cooperation in Central Asia<sup>47</sup>. These developments provide insight into how the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia decide on their respective foreign policies.

On September 4, 2013, Xi Jinping announced the launch of SREB during a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana. The idea presented by Xi featured five main components: promotion of financial cooperation, including trading in local currencies; political collaboration between the countries along the future Silk Road; improvement of physical infrastructure across the Eurasian landmass; and people-to-people interaction.<sup>48</sup> International academics continue to disagree about the definition of OBOR. Whether OBOR is a coherent strategy or merely a collection of haphazard projects and priorities is one of the most debated aspects of various approaches to it. Another concern of scholars is to look at the geo-strategic dimensions of OBOR whether China is pursuing this strategy to manage the tensions in the South China Sea or to rebalance the US influence in Asia. Another dimension of OBOR is related to the security concerns of Beijing, the development of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and, the development of infrastructure. This would be another dimension of studying China's strategy for OBOR, but the prime concern is to focus on the Russian

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<sup>46</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 5(2), (2016), 61-78. Available at DOI: 80/24761028.2016.11869097

<sup>47</sup> Carla P. Freeman, "New Strategies for an old rivalry? China-Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom", *The Pacific Review*, 31(5), (2017), 635-654

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley, "China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress", (RAND Cooperation). Available at: <http://www.rand.org/giving/contribute>

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reaction to OBOR. A senior Russian official stated that OBOR is an attempt by China to steal Central Asia from us.<sup>49</sup>

### **Moscow's Concerns Regarding Central Asia**

The Russian concerns were based on three facts. Firstly, Russia considered the Chinese OBOR initiative as an attempt to undermine the Eurasian Economic Union in Central Asia. The Customs Union, which allowed Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia (Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joined later), to eliminate customs on the union's internal borders and boost tariffs, has been the main and most effective aspect of the EEU thus far. China was the nation hardest hit as new tariffs added further obstacles to Chinese imports.

To strengthen its position in other members' markets and enhance internal trade within the EEU, Russia sought to do both. These ambitions would be in jeopardy if SREB included a free trade zone. Interviews with Kazakhstani government representatives further highlight Astana's concerns about the likelihood that SREB would serve as a vehicle for Chinese firms to increase their market presence at the expense of local producers. Secondly, Moscow was worried that SREB would replace the Trans-Siberian Railway as the primary land-based transportation route from Asia to Europe (TSR). To compete with the established water route via the Suez Canal, Moscow has made significant investments in the TSR and Baikal-Amur Railway upgrades as of September 2013. The Russian government committed to investing up to \$20 billion by 2018 in these two railways. Even though these expectations were largely unfounded, Moscow experienced genuine concern. Increased competition for corporate initiatives, notably for raw material access and infrastructure contracts in Central Asia, was the third concern mentioned by officials in the interviews. Following the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, Russia's share of regional trade and investment began to progressively decline, while China's presence became increasingly apparent, particularly in Kazakhstan. Up to 20% of Kazakhstan's oil and gas production is reportedly under the hands of Chinese corporations, and many local businesses are heavily indebted to Beijing. According to Moscow's reasoning, SREB's proposals for low-cost loans and currency swaps would give China yet another platform to strengthen its position in the Central Asian economies at Russia's expense.

Moscow has always considered Central Asia to be an integral component of its sphere of influence, which is crucial for both security and the prestige of being a great power given the region's long and porous border with southern

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 5(2), (2016), 61-78



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Russia. As the U.S. presence in the region has significantly risen since the start of the Afghanistan campaign (the Pentagon has established facilities in Uzbekistan and an airbase in Kyrgyz Manas), Russia was interested in China's cooperation during the period 2000–2013. This Russian-Chinese cooperation was basically to pull out the US presence from the region. The most important one was the Astana Declaration of 2005 calling the US government to pull out her troops from the region as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the multinational economic cooperation was never a success. For instance, Russia has consistently thwarted Beijing's efforts to launch the SCO development bank and free trade zone. Moscow was worried that these institutions would raise the economic profile of China in the area. The same reasoning was initially used with SREB.

The relations of China and Russia on the issues of Central Asia are ambiguous as both cooperate and compete simultaneously.<sup>50</sup> Russia linked her EEU project with OBOR, but the findings are mixed. To accommodate their shared interests in Central Asia, Russia and China have demonstrated their capacity to create intellectual and administrative frameworks, including concepts for "linking up" the OBOR with the EEU. OBOR has given Beijing a framework that has allowed Moscow to regard China's expanding influence in the region more favourably. On the other side, the ambiguity of OBOR has prevented the cooperation from producing feasible results after two years. Both Russia and China are trying to promote their respective projects, but the uncertainty between the relations of both states can serve as a ground for the revival of tensions between the two great powers of the region.<sup>51</sup>

### **New Dynamics and the Changing Perspectives in Central Asia**

The war between Russia and Ukraine changed the dynamics of the region. Before the war, the Western concept regarding the region was that Central Asia was ruled based on the 'Division of Labour' where China assisted the CARs in terms of providing economic incentives and building or upgrading the existing infrastructure and Russia assisted the region by providing security. Since Russia was under Western sanctions after the war, the whole scenario of the region changed as China had to look for alternative routes to transport goods as the northern routes especially to Germany and Poland were blocked. Kazakhstan, from the Central Asian states, had to look for alternative routes to transport oil and gas to the European states as Russia

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<sup>50</sup> Carla P. Freeman, "New Strategies for an old rivalry? China-Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom", *The Pacific Review*, 31(5), (2017), 635-654

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 5(2), (2016), 61-78

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was not providing oil and gas to the Western states after the US sanctions. BRICS, in the recent summit of 2023 agreed to admit other new members like Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Argentina. Therefore, Central Asian states also expressed their desire to be a part of BRICS.

Due to increasing Chinese influence in Central Asia, close cooperation between China and Central Asia can become a tangible reality. However, Russia and China jointly manage the region as the Russian influence regarding culture, history, and language is still very prominent and China is also one of the biggest investors in various economic sectors of the Central Asian states. Along with the Russian and Chinese involvement in the region, CARs have a multi-vector foreign policy which means that they engage other regions as well for a mutual win-win. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the US lost its foothold in the region as Kabul fell in control of the anti-US regime. EU is also one of the biggest investors in the CARs along with India. So, right after the war, the dynamics of the region changed as the Russian influence decreased as compared to China, but along with China, other actors like the US, EU, and India are engaged in the region as well.

## Conclusion

Central Asia enjoys the status of being a vital region for great power politics. Being Russia's area of influence, Russia has provided Central Asia with a net security umbrella, whereas China plays the role of regional economic integrator<sup>52</sup>. Chinese and Central Asian relations shaped itself from cooperation in terms of geo-strategy to geo-economics as China's energy trade with Central Asian states expanded. Moreover, China along with the Central Asian states are collaborating to keep stability and security in the region right after the rise of Kabul and the Ukrainian war with Russia. The Russians and Chinese jostling for influence in Central Asia continues as both states are in collaborative competition shaping a new 'great game' in the region. Russia has historically maintained an immense influence in CARs due to cultural, historical, and economic ties. The war between Russia and Ukraine has harmed the geopolitics and geo-economics of nearby regions. Economic instability resulted in a sudden increase in prices of food items and fuel<sup>53</sup>. Central Asian states generally have negative views about the Russian invasion of Ukraine as it affects the purchasing power of common

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<sup>52</sup> Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, Shaukat Ayub, Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence. (Trames). "*Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*," 25 (4), (2021), 437-50. Available at DOI:3176/tr.2021.4.04. halshs-03452696

<sup>53</sup> Bermet Derbishova, Chia-Lin Kao and Yunis Sharifli, "Russia's War in Ukraine and its Impacts in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, (October 24, 2022). Available at: [Russia's War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Central Asia - The Diplomat](#)

people in Central Asia and various other regions. The sanctions on Russia are linked with unexpected economic risks for the Central Asian states<sup>54</sup>. Apart from major power involvements including China, the USA and Russia, India recently manifested herself as a robust state by successfully arranging the G20 summit. The first India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022 was a clear indication that India and the countries of Central Asia have engaged in strategic consolidation. Based on mutual trust, they share a common vision of security and progress for their respective peoples.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the foreign policy of Central Asian states is multi-dimensional as it seeks to incorporate cordial relations with major powers as well as it also successfully balance to maintain their sovereignty.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Debasis Bhattacharya, "India-Central Asia Summit: Shaping geopolitics in the extended neighbourhood", (Observer Research Foundation, February 18, 2022). Available at [India-CentralAsiaSummit:Shapinggeopoliticsintheextendedneighbourhood/ORF\(orfonline.org\)](https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-central-asia-summit-shaping-geopolitics-in-the-extended-neighbourhood/)

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