

## Sino-Russian Geopolitics in Central Asia: A Comparative Analysis from 2000-2021

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### Abstract:

This study explores how China and Russia have reshaped their roles in Central Asia from 2000 to 2021, in response to shifts in the region's security landscape. Using Regional Security Complex Theory, it examines how both countries pursue their strategic goals across security, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. The research relies on qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, policy documents, and official statements. It finds that while Russia once dominated the region, it has transitioned into more of a security guarantor, with its influence now confined mainly to military and political spheres. In contrast, China has steadily expanded its economic footprint, utilising projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative to strengthen its regional presence, thus avoiding direct rivalry. Both powers have adopted a cooperative division of roles, and institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation have helped them align their interests and prevent friction. The paper highlights how Central Asian states are asserting themselves more, employing flexible foreign policies to balance their relations with China, Russia, and other global players. The region exemplifies a model of "managed coexistence," where stability takes precedence over competition, offering a case study in shared influence and evolving geopolitics.

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## **1. Introduction**

Sino-Russian relations have undergone crucial change, especially after the end of the Cold War, where historical rivalry and mistrust have been replaced by a rational collaboration aimed at pooling interests in regional security, economic growth, and counteracting Western presence. Being placed geographically between these two great entities, Central Asia has evolved into a space that increases contention but lacks engagement, wherein China and Russia have attempted to ensure that their strategic objectives are addressed without involving escalation that is open confrontation. Although the two powers insist on a strategic alliance, the increasing unevenness of the Chinese rising influence and the traditional dominance of Russia has changed the manner they relate in this region. The exceptional geostrategic importance of Central Asia is the presence of energy resources, transportation corridors, and being location near the unstable areas like Afghanistan. To Russia, Central Asia is a crucial continuation of its traditional sphere of influence and is pivotal in its security vision and great power reputation. Conversely, the Chinese increasing presence in the region is largely based on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is indicative of its concerns in energy and economic growth and stabilization of its western frontier, including Xinjiang. As China deepens its investments and security activities in the region, the traditional influence of Russia is being ever more challenged, leading to questions of how this shift in relationship will have an impact on the overall regional order. Although the current literature has already examined Sino-Russian interplay and inter-state competition in Central Asia, much of the scholarship has been considered in the binary framework of either strategic partnership or latent rivalry, not commonly taking into consideration the regional inter-state dynamics of security that organize their actions.

This paper fills this gap by using Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to explain the dynamic nature of Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia. To describe the patterns of cooperation, competition, and coexistence, RSCT offers a subtle lens through which the role of security interdependence between neighbouring states, regional security interactions, and collusion of international powers are interpreted. The main questions this paper attempts to answer are the following: Firstly, what is the effect of the developing regional security complex in Central Asia on Chinese and Russian policy? Secondly, what has been the effect of this increasing Chinese influence over Russia, traditionally dominant in the region, without evoking open competition? Thirdly, how do China and Russia leverage regional bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to negotiate and adjust their interests in this complex security environment? This paper contributes to answering that question in the context of China and Russia managing their coexistence rationally, within the regional security complex of Central Asia to maintain peace and stability and contain external influence, despite underlying asymmetries and rivalry.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This study applies Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to analyze the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia. With the evolution of the concept as soon as by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003), RSCT presents a systematic analytical framework to comprehend the concentration or agglomeration of security threats, interactions, and rivalries in particular regions. Instead of approaching international security as primarily a question of global great power competition, RSCT is framed to highlight how security is constructed

especially within specific regional complexes where local actors and the surrounding great powers interrelate in such a way as to drive security interdependence. Buzan and Waever (2003) describe a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as a territorially protected group of states, the main security concerns of which are compiled so directly, such that their security becomes unrealistically uncoupled in security terms. In an RSC, interaction, competition, and cooperation develop in a region through the process of proximate, so the Central Asia region becomes a key area of analyzing the security approach of other powerful great powers.

Buzan et al. (1998) further outline that regions tend to have security dynamics not dependent upon global structure, and that localized rivalries, past relations, and institutions determine the actions of states in that region. Central Asia meets the criteria of a typical Regional Security Complex. Russia continued to exercise influence in the region after the break-up of the Soviet Union by lending other security and economic partnership, economic ties, and cultural connections, considering Central Asia as part and parcel of its strategic depth and profile as a great power (Dannreuther, 2001). But the strategic development of the economic, security, and energy activities of China, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has rearranged the security layout of the region. The coexistence between Russia and China is now being proactively managed through regional bodies such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which is in itself a platform to address the direct competition and security threats between them (Fazilov & Chen, 2013; Ali & Ullah, 2019; Aslam & Tariq, 2021). The three major dynamics which RSCT describes in this study include:

### **2.1. Interdependence of Security in the Region**

Whether it is security issue of terrorism, separatism or political instability, security related to Central Asia has been seen by Russia and China as having national security implications on their countries and will thus have to be involved strategically (Buzan & Waever, 2003; Hynek, 2020).

### **2.2. Power Structures and Balance**

The influence of Russia with its post-soviet legacies and cooperation in the military is in imperfect contrast with the emerging economic power of China that is changing regional orientation. This moving balance encourages a mixture of competition and negotiated coexistence (Lake & Morgan, 2010).

### **2.3. Utilizing External Influence**

Since both actors are interested in restraining Western involvement in the region, in particular US involvement in the region, they have mutually benefit by supporting each other in creating regional cooperation regimes like the SCO even though they have two different visions of the region (Browning & Christou, 2010).

This study transcends those weaknesses of more traditional neorealism by incorporating conceptions of state behaviour and patterns of interaction and take them beyond merely being about balancing power. Rather, it acknowledges that regional complexes such as Central Asia have their own security logic that limits and influences the behaviour of outside powers (Buzan, 2008). This theory can be used to explain why China and Russia, despite their competing

interests, have tried to maintain stability, cope with their rivalry, and promote regional cooperation. Moreover, RSCT fits well into the role of regionalism and security governance, displays the importance of multilateral arenas, of institutional connections, and of mutual appreciation of interests in the maintenance of peace and stability in the complex world system (Tocci, 2011; Paul, 2012).

### **3. Historical Background: Pre-2000 Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia**

The precincts of strategic relations between China and Russia, when dominating in the Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia prior to the 21st century, set the premises of the strategic schemes that would develop into strategic competition and opportunistic coexistence in the ensuing years. This time is marked by Russian hegemony and the cautious entry into China and is characterized by RSCT and security interdependence in the region alongside power transitions and institutional mechanisms (Buzan & Waeber, 2003; Eder, 2013).

#### **3.1. Soviet Era (1917-1991)**

During the Soviet period, Central Asia was a closed security system that was under strict control of Moscow. Russia (USSR) was all-powerful in political, military, and ideological domains, leaving China in the periphery occupied with its internal troubles and Sino-Soviet friction, preferably the 1969 conflict along the Ussuri River (Radchenko, 2015). This control is highlighted in the TRT World report, that "Russia and China have common grounds of obvious history, post-Soviet culture, geography, socio politics," yet a profound mutual distrust existed owing to historical rivalry. This period can be described in RSCT terms as a regional security complex that had one dominant power with a small extent of outside infiltration.

#### **3.2. The 1990s: The Post-Soviet Decay and the Wary Re-entry of China**

The collapse of USSR in 1991 disintegrated the previously joined complex into a fluid and contentious security environment. Although no longer powerful, Russia maintained its influence through security and cultural-linguistic networks, such as the CSTO, which show RSCTs' understanding of systems in new forms of the persistence of power within regional systems (Dannreuther, 2001; Buzan & Waeaver, 2003; Mustafic & Preljevic, 2017). In the meantime, China re-emerged cautiously in the arena, with Xinjiang frontier issues and the settlement of territorial disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (1994-1999). Trust deficiency on the sides applied jeopardy to a complete strategic affiliation notwithstanding the fitting interests.

#### **3.3. Constitution of the Shanghai Five (1996-2001): Rise of Regional Institution-Building**

The formation of the Shanghai Five in 1996 (which included China, Russia, and some of the most important states in Central Asia) signalled the beginning of the institutionalization of the regional security complex (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003; Goble, 2021). TRT says this framework was developed due to what they call strategic common interests that benefited a cooperative yet conditional relationship with underpinnings of competition over energy resources and regional influence. This institutional development prefigured the subsequent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (2001), capturing the RSCT idea of formalised interdependence

control. The conditionality and duality of the Sino-Russian relationship can be explained by the fact that they have a historic relationship and shared interests, and yet they are unlikely to achieve true strategic partnership since there is stiff competition in an energy market and in the region of superpower influence.

#### **4. Geographical Competition of Sino-Russia in Central Asia (2000-2021)**

The rivalry between China and Russia in Central Asia can only be discussed within the context of the general trends of history of the post-collapse of the Soviet Union of 1991. Politically and economically, Central Asia was in a solid grip of Moscow as a part of the Soviet Union most of the 20th century. It cemented the sense Russia had of the region as an inevitable part of its sphere of influence, a notion that remains fixed in Russia to the present day.

##### **4.1. Post-Soviet Russia: Claiming Authority amid Decline**

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ability of Russia to remain an influential Imperialist in Central Asia deteriorated significantly. During the 1990s, Moscow was busy with its internal political and economic crisis, and thus its past Central Asian republics were comparatively ignored. Nevertheless, by that temporary vacuum, Russia still used other historical, cultural, and lingual connections to maintain its influence. Moscow used instruments like Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and after the third, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to reestablish its geopolitical presence and to sustain a security and economic presence in the region.

##### **4.2. China's Interests in Central Asia (2000–2021)**

China is implementing an evolving strategy to assert its position in Central Asia since 2000 up to 2021 that is characterized by the concern to support energy security, internal stability (Xinjiang), economic connectivity via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and presence in the region to enhance geopolitical power. These are in line with the logic of regional interdependence and multi-dimensional balances of power by RSCT (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003; Koldunova, 2021). Above and beyond the economic profit, the interests of China are associated with the overall reorganization of the politics and economy of Eurasia.

###### **4.2.1. Energy Security and Resource Strategy**

A major potential of China at engaging in Central Asia has been its objective of securing diversified energy resources. China has invested in oil, gas and pipelines infrastructure, especially those with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to avert risks of using these maritime energy routes (Rolland, 2017; Fazilov, & Chen, 2013). The move can be seen as a security imperative, as well as a need in order to support further growth in China and decrease its dependence on global chokepoints.

###### **4.2.2. Border Security, Xinjiang, and Regional Stability**

Internal security of China, specifically, the issues of Xinjiang and cross-border extremism, continues at the heart of its Central Asia policy. China Perspectives further notes that the process of strong regional involvement by Beijing is fundamentally driven by the urge to secure

its western feet, curb separatist activities and guarantee that the Central Asia region does not get used by terrorist or extremist groups, and Uyghur dissidents (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012; Stratfor, 2013, October 1). This coincides precisely with the claims of the RSCT that interdependence in terms of proximity and security creates the stimulus to change strategy. China has balanced her policy using bilateral arrangements as well as multilateral institutions (SCO) to confront these threats through common counterterrorism drills, exchange of intelligence and policies to counter separatisms.

#### 4.2.3. Economic Connectivity: The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and BRI

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) component, positions Central Asia as a critical transit corridor linking China to Europe. Both *China Perspectives* and Rolland (2017) emphasize that this initiative is not solely about trade—it reflects a long-term geopolitical ambition to reshape regional dependencies, consolidate influence, and project Chinese economic models across Eurasia. China's infrastructure investments—roads, railways, energy pipelines, and logistics hubs—are central to this strategy. As noted by Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012), this infrastructure also serves a political function: embedding China within the institutional and economic architecture of the region, reducing the space for Western or Russian monopoly over future integration pathways.

#### 4.2.4. Geopolitical Influence and Multilateral Management

The Belt and Road Initiative by China (BRI), specifically its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) arm is an example that makes Central Asia high value in terms of a transit linkage between China and Europe. As both *China Perspectives* and Rolland (2017) affirm, this endeavour is not just all about trade, but it is also a geopolitical aspiration to redefine regionally interconnected dependencies and define power by establishing an influence and projecting Chinese economic patterns in Eurasia. This strategy is integrated with the Chinese investments on infrastructure that include roads and railways, energy pipelines and logistics centres. According to Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012), this infrastructure has a political purpose, as well: to absorb China into the institutional and economic structure of the region, to minimize the possibility of Western or Russian monopoly in choosing the integration channels in the future.

Table 1: Russia and China's Role in Central Asia (2000–2021)

Period	Russia's Role	China's Role	Key Developments
Early 2000s	Reasserting influence via CSTO, energy	Expanding trade, infrastructure diplomacy	SCO formation; CSTO consolidation
2010–2013	Security focus, managing Western presence	Increasing energy ties, soft power investments	Major energy deals: SCO expanded activities
2013–2021	Maintaining military dominance, CSTO role	BRI launched; dominant investor in infrastructure	BRI corridors; debt diplomacy; informal security links

#### 4.3. Challenges Faced by Russia in Central Asia (till 2021)

Although Russia maintains political, security, and cultural control in the region, the preceding

years and months leading to 2021 show an emerging mass of structural and geopolitical issues that have undermined the unilateral control of Moscow over Central Asia. These challenges are seen as resulting out of changes in global power relations, increased Chinese competition, increased independent agency of states in Central Asia and a vulnerability in the Russian economy itself. This is in response to the change-available in Russia in accordance with The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as a change that involves shifting the hegemonic dominance to a reciprocal, negotiated power in a more multipolar regional security complex (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003; Ismailova, & Papava, 2010).

#### **4.3.1. Economic Decline and Diminished Economic Leverage**

The economic challenges taking place in Russia, most prominently since the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, the Western sanctions, and the oil price shocks in 2020, diminished greatly the economic power projection capabilities that Russia can undertake in Central Asia. Although Russia will continue to be a key trading partner and a remittance destination (in particular, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), it is now in no position to compete with China financially, in terms of investment, or to build infrastructure through the BRI. This constrains Moscow financially in terms of rooting its influence on an economic level, and they are forced to be dependent mainly on military and security relations. The dominance of Russia in the region as the economic power house is undermined by its low economic language and the Central Asian states are forced to diversify to China, Turkey, and the EU in order to escape the line of economic dependency to the mother nation.

#### **4.3.2. Erosion of Exclusive Political Influence**

At the same time, although Russia maintains strong bilateral relations with some of the regimes (e.g., Kazakhstan, Tajikistan), and the Central Asian states have been a multisector foreign policy in a bid not to be overdependent on Moscow in terms of diplomatic relations. Other countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan actively maintain an equilibrium between relations with China, the EU, the U.S., and Turkey, limiting the Russian capacity to exploit its position as the only external power in the region. This process of eliminating unilateral influence is indicative of the RSCT concept that regional states change in reaction to efforts of weaker states as they exercise powers of agency via hopes of balancing. Russia has a more disjointed and competitive political environment in Central Asia making it difficult to influence regional agendas at a single front.

#### **4.3.3. Competition with China's Expanding Economic Influence**

The fast development of China as the main economic player in Central Asia in terms of trade, investment and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) undermines Russia. Whereas Moscow leads the security system with the CSTO, Beijing is now the main economic partner to a number of countries within Central Asia in terms of economic provisions above and beyond Russia. This yields a convenient division of influence (security to Russia, economy to China), yet, simultaneously, in Moscow it causes a worry of long-range penetration by China into the region. The collaboration between Russia and China should be handled with utmost caution so that it does not turn out to be an explicit competition but instead, a condition that makes Russia realize that it has lesser bargaining power to influence economic conditions.

#### 4.3.4. Security Fragility and Over-Reliance on CSTO

Russia is still limited as security guarantor in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO has lacked effectiveness and cohesion, and the military actions of Russia (Ukraine, Syria) use its resources. The increasing menace of terrorists, drug dealing, and Afghanistan-primed strain mean that Russia has to cope with an increased burden of instability alone. The security predominance of Russia is becoming more threatened by internal limitations as well as complex, dynamic threats to the region.

#### 4.3.5. Growing Anti-Russian Sentiment and Identity Assertion

Nationalism has increased after the fall of the Soviet Union, in the tie of Central Asia most notably in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan whose governments have encouraged the use of national languages, national culture and history, free of Russian influence. The movements to enforce cultural independence and diminish Russian soft power (e.g. the decrease in educational such as education in Russian) are part of the more general identity-centred alienation of Moscow. The erosion of a cultural power reduces Russia even further in its strategic depth owing to the fact that traditional soft power tools in the region will also be diminished.

#### 4.3.6. External Geopolitical Competition

Although China remains the central issue, the budding cultural and security relationships (through Turkic identity) of Turkey, the economic interests of the EU and the newfound U.S. attention to security alliances after Afghanistan, further complicate matters in the Russian perspective. Russia has to operate in a very cluttered geopolitical landscape where it is no longer the only external power. Greater external competition is watering down of Russian capacity to influence alignment of Central Asia in its sphere of influence.

Table 2: Challenges Faced by Russia in Central Asia

Challenge	Description	Impact on Russia's Influence
Economic Weakness	Inability to compete with China's investments post-2014	Loss of economic leverage
Political Erosion	Multi-vector policies by Central Asian states	Limits unilateral political dominance
China's Economic Competition	China surpassing Russia economically via BRI	Russia reduced to security role
Security Fragility (CSTO limits)	Overextension, regional instability from Afghanistan, CSTO limitations	Limits Russia's capacity to guarantee stability
Cultural & Soft Power Decline	Nationalism, language policies diminishing Russian influence	Erodes soft power
External Competition	Turkey, EU, U.S. increasing roles	Russia no longer the sole external power

#### 4.4. Challenges Faced by China in Central Asia

Although China has been expanding its economic presence and institutional interaction in the Central Asia due to its rising interaction with the region, its ambitions have met with a lot of challenges that constrain its ambitions of interaction and outreach. These difficulties lie in



intersections between regional perceptions, geopolitical factors, domestic weaknesses of the Central Asian states, as well as the boundaries of the Chinese soft power approach. Looked at through the prism of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), these barriers symbolize the limits de facto of any regional system of shared, contested, and locally inflected power, but not just power reified as a matter of material strength (Buzan & Waeaver, 2003).

#### **4.4.1. Negative Public Perception and Soft Power Deficit**

Notwithstanding its investments in infrastructure, energy and trade among other things under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has not gained its wide support by the local people in the Central Asian region. Laruelle & Royce (2020) argue that anti-China sentiment is deeply rooted in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as people fear Chinese economic domination, land grab threats, and debt-trap. A mistrust of local people is also compounded by China when it comes to its governance and the heavy-handed repression in Xinjiang, which have a cultural and ethnic connection with the population in Central Asia. Such constraints on soft power means that China cannot make or break narratives, dominate opinion, or create long term goodwill in the region. This deprives China of translating economic power into political or cultural influence and undermines long term strategic posturing.

#### **4.4.2. Perceptions of Economic Overreach and Neo-Colonialism**

Economic interest in Central Asian societies and political elites is frequently seen with great suspicion, and the BRI initiatives are thusly perceived as much more profitable to Beijing than it is to the local economies. Allegations of transparency deficiencies, unfairness in employing Chinese to work as opposed to locals, and environmental complaints are all grist to the neo-colonial mill. It promotes this fear of integration at a deeper level and provides regional players with the possibility to exploit the existing competition between China and Russia to their advantage. Economic interactions, though being important, do not ensure strategic loyalty, or political alignment.

#### **4.4.3. Managing Relations with Russia**

In spite of the increasing power that is enjoyed by China, it remains part of a regional security system that has traditionally been dominated by Russia. According to Laruelle & Royce (2020), China has been careful not to challenge directly military or security primacy of Russia but rather concentrate on economic diplomacy with the latter continuing to dominate security structure such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This separation is in line with the thrust of RSCT of negotiation coexistence in the shared security complexes. China consistently has to stay on the toes of the Russian sensibilities, and it is not able to consolidate its position on security issues completely.

#### **4.4.4. Rising Local Agency and Diversification Strategies**

The states of Central Asia are resorting more and more to the multi-vector foreign policy in order to ensure the balance of interests Chinese, Russian, Western and Turkish. Contrary to being brought within the Chinese orbit, these states are eagerly scouting around in order not to be over reliant. This is an indication of what RSCT indicates as weaker states in a security complex having a great deal of agency via strategy of balancing. The possibility of

consolidating dominance in China is thwarted by the role of central Asian agency, and this makes China engage in continuous power struggles.

#### 4.4.5. Governance Constraints and Corruption Risks

Weaknesses in governance, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiency are some of the challenges that are usually experienced in infrastructure projects in China in the Central Asian states. These problems harm the timeliness and add expenses to the projects besides decreasing the citizen trust in the local governments and the motives of China (Laruelle & Royce, 2020). The outcomes of the Chinese economic policies and strategies in practice are jeopardized by governance failures, which put Beijing at a risk of reputational damage. According to Regional Security Complex Theory, China's challenges demonstrate that regional power projection is constrained by security interdependence, historical structures, and the agency of smaller states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These barriers show why China, despite its economic weight, must adapt to the existing security order (dominated by Russia) and navigate complex regional perceptions and institutional limitations. Thus, China's presence in Central Asia remains economically significant but politically fragile, shaped by negotiated balances rather than unilateral dominance.

Table 3: Challenges faced by China in Central Asia

Challenge	Description	Impact on China's Strategy
Soft Power Deficit	Negative perceptions, ethnic tensions, anti-China protests	Limits cultural & diplomatic influence
Economic Overreach Perceptions	Fear of debt-trap diplomacy, labour exploitation, resource extraction	Generates political resistance, scepticism
Russia's Security Primacy	Necessity to respect Russia's dominance in military/security domains	Constrains unilateral strategic expansion
Local Agency	Central Asian multi-vector foreign policies, balancing other powers	Forces China into ongoing diplomatic competition
Governance and Corruption	Institutional weaknesses, bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption risks	Undermines project efficiency and public trust

## 5. China-Russia Geopolitical Relations in Central Asia: Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1. Emerging Regional Security Situation and Strategies of Russia and China

The changing regional security complex in Central Asia has greatly affected how strategies of both China and Russia have evolved since each has been compelled to respond to the changed balance of forces and regional dynamics. Central Asia new state of security status as a less Russian influential sphere dominated by various circles of power has forced both powers to adjust accordingly, according to Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), it is argued that the closeness between the regions and its connected security and the local agency in its behaviour is a key factor towards security in an area. Although Russian influence in security issues largely remains intact through such mechanisms as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and bilateral agreements with individual states, it has faced a gradual decline in its instances of unilateralism on these issues because of economic shortages and the enhanced authority of Central Asian countries. These states have tried to diversify their international relations in order not to be excessively dependent on Moscow, thereby making

the traditional Russian domination to be complicated. In the interim, China has continued to spread its strategic presence via its economic integration efforts, mostly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by constructing more infrastructure, energy, and connectivity schemes that address its wider imperial motives of overland connectivity and establishing the stability of its western edges, especially Xinjiang province. Nevertheless, the two powers have not engaged themselves in direct competition but rather by agreeing to an unwritten labour: Russia takes the lead in security whereas China is economically dominant. This emerging security complex leads to coexistence model within which both powers deal with their interests using carefully calibrated strategies as against confrontational strategies.

## **5.2. China's Growing Presence in Central Asia and Challenges to Russia's Dominance**

The increasing Chinese involvement in Central Asia has certainly threatened the conventional Russian hegemony especially with the economic implications. In the last twenty years, China has replaced Russia as the primary economic partnership of many Central Asian nations and has integrated into infrastructure and trade circles of the region via the BRI. This change has further diminished the prior economic power of Russia, which was undermined in the first place by its economic decline in the face of post-2014 sanctions and by that of the relative stagnation of its Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as compared with the active investment policies of China. This challenge notwithstanding, China has been keen not to generate open competition with Russia. The two powers realize that they have a common interest in keeping the military influence of the west out of the region, and ensuring stability in the region, which would be destroyed with open competition. China has gone out of its way to avoid brush off on Russian security space, allowing them to maintain military controls but instead focusing their attention on economic strength. Also, Russia has accepted the economic rise of China because it continues to achieve its fundamental interests by means of security agreements and their connections linked to cultural use. This self-restraint has been supported by the argument advanced by RSCT that the development of regional security complexes is a negotiated adjustment process than confrontation and what the two states share in common is their overarching strategy of opposing the influence of the West in the world arena.

## **5.3. Reliance on SCO for Managing China and Russia's Competing Interests in Central Asia**

These two states China and Russia have employed regional mechanisms including Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in promoting their interests in the web of security challenges in the Central Asian region. The SCO is the means of institutionalizing cooperation, establishing a level of tension, and legitimizing the position of each power in the region without direct conflict. The SCO will enable China to have a multilateral system to deal with issues pertaining to its security, such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism, along with its concerns on stability of Xinjiang. It as well provides China with a means to facilitate economic projects, although its most notable economic activities continue to be bilateral and not SCO-based. In the case of Russia, the SCO fortifies its role as a leader in matters of regional security by situating its endeavours in a larger collective, Eurasian framework, thereby deterring China when he tries expanding into the military sector. These interests of both powers in controlling their influence without the involvement of external western parties in the region are consistent with the SCO principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and consensus. Finally, the SCO is also a strategic management tool, enabling China and Russia to manoeuvre about their common

interests on the basis of dialogue and coordination, thus reflecting RSCT understanding of institutions as being able to stabilize interdependent security relationships rather than drive outright rivalry among competitor regional powers.

### **5.3. Main Findings**

The analysis shows that regional geopolitics has undergone significant transformations to the dynamics of regional security in the persuasion of Central Asia that has caused both China and Russia to fundamentally alter their strategic courses of action to one of practical coexistence instead of active competitive competition. Although Russia traditionally controlled not only the political, military, but also the security system of the region, after 2000 it became clear that the monopoly of influence of Moscow gradually dispersed, as a result of a strengthening economic presence of China and the growing independence of the Central Asian nations. Russia has retained the priority over its security dominance by way of institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), military bases as well as cultural-historical connections. Nevertheless, it has to endure continuous pressure, such as economic weakening, loss of soft power, and diversification initiatives of the governments of Central Asian countries. The role of Russia is increasingly becoming compartmentalized, with its historic role narrowing down to provider of security guarantees.

The increasing influence of China, mainly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has changed the economic situation of the region. China has taken the position of the major trade partner, investor and builder of infrastructures, now providing an alternative to the Russian-led integration initiatives. However, China has tactically failed to engage in direct military, or political incursion, acknowledging the long-term security role of Russia. Notwithstanding this change, the rise of China has not brought about explicit competition of Russia. These two countries have embraced a pragmatic division of labour where Russia takes the lead in matters of security whereas China holds the economic front. This convergence can be seen to denote joint interests in maintaining stability in the region and a counterbalance against the influence of the west and a mutual realization of the danger associated with disrupting an unstable regional order. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become a very important institutional process in which both powers reconcile their overlapping interests. Although the SCO strengthens the security priorities of Russia and the security sensitive issues of China that surround the province of Xinjiang, it also becomes an arena where not only competition does not degenerate into an open conflict. SCO helps both states to advance their strategic interests of promoting norms of sovereignty, non-intervention and consensus. The dynamics of regional security complexes through the prism of RSCT depict how regional security complexes can negotiate their way as opposed to unilateral hegemony and confrontation. Agency of states of the region of Central Asia, external influences balance, and institutional mechanisms together constitute the coexistence model that could be observed between China and Russia.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study concludes that the Central Asian regional security complex between the year 2000-2021 shifted through the Russian hegemony state into a mutual yet unequal co-existence of Russia and China. Although Russia has retained its historic position as the security guarantor of this region, China has transformed into the leading economic power and thus fundamentally the geopolitical environment of the region has changed. This shift, however, has not led to overt

competition between these two powers. Rather, these two powers have been seeking to accommodate the realities highly encountered in the region, employing the pragmatic approaches to cooperation, stability, and Dunces of influence by mutual respect. The SCO is a good example of such management strategy, providing both states with a place to discuss common issues, and coordinate their efforts in a multilateral framework. The results once again confirm the use of Regional Security Complex Theory when unravelling these dynamics. The focus of the theory on regional interdependence, nearness, and historical legacies and the role of institutions assist to explain why the rivalry between big powers in Central Asia has not increased but instead been standard. Central Asia has been a conflicted zone, but it is in this contested field that a confrontation, but not accommodation, characterizes the Sino-Russian dealings. Moving forward, the coexistence has a high probability of surviving as a long-term trend as long as the competing powers do not treat regional stability as a secondary factor in their relationships with each other and as long as the Central Asian states have an agency to maintain the balance of influences. Nevertheless, the underlying asymmetry, the waning of Russian influence and the burgeoning of Chinese power may prove in the fullness of time to add new pressures that will have to be addressed continuously through existing or modified institutional structures.

## **7. Recommendations**

### **7.1. For Russia**

Russia ought to appreciate that its long-term advantage into Central Asia cannot be self-sustaining on military and security factors, including the CSTO. In a bid to ensure survival in the face of a rising Chinese economic power, Russia must:

- Boost its economic presence through investing in the infrastructural, energy, and technology industries in Central Asia and offer physical options to Chinese-led projects.
- Restructure its regional approach to include additional economic collaboration and soft power diplomacy, instead of focusing on the historical links and security-dependence.
- Modernization and livening of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in order to make it more enticing and rivalrous to China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

### **7.2. For China**

Although the economic role of China is well established, its sustainability would also require some consideration of growing suspicions and Sinophobia among people in the Central Asian region. In order to overcome such challenges, China ought:

- Expenditure in activities to know more about each other through public diplomacy and cultural and education exchange programs to enhance mutual understanding and eliminate negative perception.
- Make it a priority to ensure transparency, priorities on environmental norms and the participation of locals to embark projects under BRI to avoid the claim of neo-colonialism.

- Strive to preserve traditional Russian role of guarantees of security to avoid unleashing of geopolitical tensions or destabilizing elements in regions.

### **7.3. For Central Asian States**

Central Asian states should continue leveraging multi-vector foreign policies to avoid overdependence on any single external actor. They should:

- Strengthen regional cooperation frameworks to amplify their collective bargaining power with both China and Russia.
- Diversify partnerships with other external actors such as the European Union, Turkey, and South Korea to enhance economic and security options.
- Prioritize infrastructure and energy projects that serve national development goals, ensuring that external investments align with domestic interests and sovereignty protections.

### **7.4. For Regional Institutions: Enhance the Role of the SCO**

The SCO should evolve from a platform primarily focused on counterterrorism to one that more effectively balances economic, security, and diplomatic coordination among its members. Specifically:

- Strengthen economic cooperation mechanisms within the SCO to bridge the gap between China's BRI and Russia's EAEU, reducing friction and enhancing mutual benefits.
- Expand its role in conflict prevention, border management, and soft security cooperation, acknowledging new risks such as cyber threats, drug trafficking, and environmental security.
- Encourage more inclusive dialogue involving Central Asian voices to ensure the organization reflects regional interests, not just Sino-Russian agendas.

### **7.5. For the International Community: Support Regional Stability without Provoking Rivalry**

External actors such as the EU, the US, and international financial institutions should engage Central Asia through development, governance reforms, and security cooperation without framing their actions as containment strategies against China or Russia. Instead, efforts should:

- Focus on capacity building, rule of law, education, and economic diversification to strengthen state resilience.
- Promote transparent and inclusive regional cooperation frameworks that enhance stability rather than escalate competition.

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