

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Central Asia in Regional and Global Policies of Russia and China*

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Abstract

From a realist perspective, there is a power competition between China and Russia and the US-led West. Russian rulers felt that the very existence of Russia was seriously threatened by the advancement of the West in an anarchic system, and they reacted by launching military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine. The efforts of Russian rulers to firmly bind Central Asian countries to Russia through bilateral economic and military relations as well as regional organizations have also been shaped by their struggle to preserve Russian existence against the West. China's efforts to bind regional countries to itself through the SCO and the BRI is a power accumulation reaction given by a state that has emerged as a power pole vis-a-vis the dominant power to the possibility of being prevented from strengthening itself within the system. Russia and China's efforts to act together in regional initiatives have emerged as an effort of balancing the West. Accordingly, China's becoming more influential in the region has been managed by the two states with the same concern and this has served the interests of regional countries. In this study, Russia and China's policies towards regional countries and their approaches in regional organizations have been explained and analyzed from the realist perspective.

Keywords

Russia, China, Central Asian states, regional organizations, balancing the West.

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Rusya ve Çin'in Bölgesel ve Küresel Politikalarında Orta Asya*

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Öz

Realist perspektiften bakıldığında, Çin ve Rusya ile ABD liderliğindeki Batı arasında bir güç rekabeti mevcuttur. Rus yöneticiler, anarşik sistemde Batının ilerlemesinin Rusya'nın varlığını ciddi şekilde tehdit ettiğini hissetmiş ve Gürcistan ve Ukrayna'ya askerî müdahalede bulunarak tepki göstermişlerdir. Rus yöneticilerin Orta Asya ülkelerini ikili ekonomik ve askerî ilişkilerin yanı sıra bölgesel örgütler aracılığıyla Rusya'ya sıkı sıkıya bağlama çabaları da Batıya karşı Rus varlığını koruma mücadelesi tarafından şekillendirilmiştir. Çin'in ŞİÖ ve KYG üzerinden bölge ülkelerini kendine bağlama çabası, başat güç karşısında bir güç kutbu olarak ortaya çıkan bir devletin sistem içinde güçlenmesinin engellenmesi ihtimaline verdiği bir güç biriktirme tepkisidir. Rusya ve Çin'in bölgesel girişimlerde birlikte hareket etme çabaları, Batıyı dengeleme çabası olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Çin'in bölgede daha etkili hâle gelmesi, iki devlet tarafından aynı kaygıyla yönetilmiş ve bu durum bölge ülkelerinin çıkarlarına hizmet etmiştir. Çalışmada Rusya ve Çin'in bölge ülkelerine yönelik politikaları ve bölgesel örgütlerdeki yaklaşımları realist perspektiften açıklanmış ve analiz edilmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler

Rusya, Çin, Orta Asya devletleri, bölgesel örgütler, Batıyı dengeleme.

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Introduction

Classical realism argues that states are the main actors in international relations that act rationally by prioritizing their own interests. According to this approach, the state composed of individuals who desire to be powerful and act selfishly constantly tries to increase its power, acts selfishly and protects its security and interests against others by relying on its power. Kenneth Waltz's neorealism argues that the anarchic system (the absence of supra-state authority) pushes the state towards a self-help system. States that arm themselves to guarantee their security face a security dilemma and therefore inter-state relations are prone to conflict. However, getting too strong will lead to emergence of counter-alliances and hence states are advised to act cautiously. According to offensive realism, since there is no power to prevent the aggression of rival states, states try to become stronger and, if possible, hegemonic power as a means of ensuring their security. In defensive realism, since the security dilemma caused by mutual empowerment is dangerous, states may seek ways to reduce mutual distrust and strengthen their own defenses without threatening others. Neoclassical realism argues that systemic factors influence the behavior of states through internal factors. Although systemic factors are important, the perception of these factors by state leaders can shape states' behavior.

To fully understand how realist schools view inter-state relations, it is necessary to look at some general theories produced by realism. According to the balance of power theory, when one state becomes too powerful compared to others, others try to balance its power through internal (increasing their own capabilities) and external (forming alliances) balancing. As a reaction to the perceived threat from the stronger state, states may also engage in balancing behavior (balance of threat theory). The hegemonic stability theory says that the strong state aims to stabilize the system by imposing the rules and institutions of the system on others. According to the power transition theory, the relative weakening of the system's strong state and the rise to prominence of other states can lead to tensions jeopardizing the system. A state that is weakened to the extent that it has difficulty in maintaining power competition with others may seek compromises or engage in a show of strength in the hope of strengthening its position in the system before it loses its power.

Putin's view of Russia-West relations is entirely in line with great power rivalry¹. His challenge is to protect a state that lost its great power status against an existential threat and, if possible, to make it a great power again. Given that Russia was attacked twice in history by European states, Putin could not rely on constructive Western rhetoric in an anarchic system. The security buffer created during the Cold War, vital in countering Western aggression, was removed with the expansion of the European Union and NATO and was turned into a lever that could be used against Russia. When countries such as Georgia and Ukraine turned against Russia in the wake of Western-backed popular movements, Putin believed that a serious reaction should be given against the West. Accordingly, he militarily intervened in Georgia, annexed Crimea, declared war on Ukraine and annexed the Donbass.

In Putin's eyes, what he does is to try to eliminate the threat to Russia's existence. Security is the most vital national interest of a state and states do not hesitate to increase their military power and use military force to protect this interest. If a state believes that its security is threatened by a powerful state or group of states, it will be ready to use any means to stop and balance them. Russia has reached such a point with the recent war in Ukraine. Seeing that Russia is losing ground in the great power competition since the end of the Cold War, Russians have felt that they are not only reacting to this decline, but also protecting their existence. In the eyes of Russian leaders, Ukraine is used by the West to destroy Russia. From now on, every important step Russia will take in the international arena will be about stopping, containing and balancing the West (Charap et al. 153-165). Since the mid-1990s, Russian rulers' approach to Central Asia has focused on strengthening themselves against the West. Accordingly, one of the main hypotheses of this article is that Russia's policies towards Central Asia are influenced by its struggle with the West. The question is whether Russia's Central Asia policies are shaped under the influence of great power competition.

Chinese have endeavored to become a world power through rapid economic development, and by closing their political system to outside influence. While the hegemonic power of the United States in the early 1990s was relatively weakened over time, China emerged as a power pole vis-à-vis

the U.S. Realist theories say that China's strengthening within the system could lead to global tensions and conflicts. International economic and trade tensions and wars can be seen in this context. China is not satisfied with the US dominance in the system and its unilateralist behavior in international relations. The expansion of the EU and NATO also makes China uncomfortable as it increases Western power and influence in the system. Therefore, balancing the West is important for China (Han and Paul). Although there are issues that may cause tensions with Russia, China has established a strategic partnership with this state. This partnership does not require acting together on every issue, but it at least prevents tensions between them and enables them to take joint action against the West.

Although China contributes to initiatives balancing the West, it currently avoids confrontation with it and instead focuses on strengthening itself economically and militarily. On issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea territorial disputes, China has taken tough stances and given the impression that it can challenge the US. In general, however, it seeks to increase its initiatives and influence in different parts of the world by presenting itself as a positive actor. It would be appropriate to evaluate China's Central Asia policies in the context of the power struggle within the system. At this point, the question to be answered is whether China's Central Asian relations are influenced by the goal of becoming a great power and containing the West.

Central Asia normally has the potential to be a source of conflict between China and Russia, given benefits and spheres of influence to be gained. However, the priority of maintaining and strengthening their partnership vis-à-vis the West (Garcia and Modlin 23-26; A. Lukin 375-377; Stronski and Sokoslky; Korkmaz 169-171) leads them to harmonize their policies towards the region or at least prevent them from harming each other (Korkmaz 171-174). The hypothesis of the article is that the two states try to take concerted initiatives in Central Asia and that regional groupings led by them continue to exist as regional states benefit from them.

Russian Approach to Central Asia

Russia has always considered Central Asia as its immediate neighbourhood where it should be influential to have a say in world politics. The main goal

of Vladimir Putin is to reverse the retreat Russia experienced in the 1990s vis-à-vis Western powers. Facing the Western-backed colour revolutions in the neighbourhood from 2005, Putin pursues policies to stop Western advances against Russia. Putin's strategy of containing the West and making Russia a big power again plays an important role in his policy of being effective in Central Asia and keeping Western powers away from the region.

Russia sees itself as the main actor with the right to have a say in Central Asia, which it dominated historically (Good 87). The region is part of the 'Near Abroad', which is rooted in the mind-set of Russian officials and strategists. Through bilateral contacts and multilateral political, economic and security organizations, Russian rulers seek to make their state a powerful actor in the region and globe (Wilson 64; Duarte 78). Those organizations contribute to the emergence of a multipolar structure in the world, keep hostile powers away from Central Asia and legitimize Russia's political, military and economic presence in the region (Dubnov 10; Good 88). Cooperation within the organizations reduces the risk of terrorism, Islamic radicalism, separatism and drug trafficking problems spilling over into Russia (Krapohl 357). In this way, Russia, which is too busy on the western front, does not have to worry much about the eastern front.

While it is in Russia's interest to act together with China in the current conditions, Russian officials may have to deal with China's increasing influence in the region in the long run. In particular, China's influence in the extraction, transportation and marketing of the region's energy resources worry Russian authorities. Dominance and influence over the region's energy resources will always be of great importance for Russia to be strong and influential in regional and world politics (Konopelko 221).

Kazakhstan is Russia's strongest economic and military ally (Krapohl 358). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are open to any influence from Russia due to their limited economic and military capabilities and their dependence on Russia in various fields. Russia faced difficulty in maintaining relations with Uzbekistan and getting its support. However, the change of power in Uzbekistan seems to aid Russia at least to normalize relations with this country. However, Russia's initiatives and preoccupation in Crimea and Ukraine and China's increasing influence in the region have raised the possibility of a change in the position of regional countries vis-à-vis Russia.

What Russia ultimately wants is to protect its military bases in the region, guarantee access to regional markets, establish control over the region's natural resources as well as trade and energy transportation lines, and keep geopolitical rivals away from the region (Talka 47, 49).

Military Cooperation and CSTO

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to maintain its military influence, superiority and presence in Central Asia. It has served as almost the sole supplier of military equipment to Central Asian countries, trained their military personnel, conducted joint exercises with them, and paid rent while maintaining military bases and facilities on their territories.

Russia has a 7,000-strong military contingent (201st Motorized Division) in Tajikistan, a military airbase in Kant in Kyrgyzstan, a space base in Kazakhstan, and radar facilities and test sites in the three states. The agreement signed between Russia and Kyrgyzstan in 2012 extended the Russian base in Kant, its weapons testing ground in Karakol, its signal centre in Kara-Balta and its radio-seismic laboratory in Mayly-Suu for 15 years (Wilson 65-66). With the agreement, Kyrgyzstan's \$500 million debt to Russia was cancelled and Russia pledged to spend \$1.1 billion to modernize the Kyrgyz army. In 2012, Russia and Tajikistan signed an agreement extending the Russian military presence for 30 years and Moscow pledged to provide \$200 million to modernize Tajikistan's military. However, as the Russian economy suffered from falling oil prices and EU sanctions between 2015 and 2017, Russia postponed its promised military investments, failed to modernize the Kant airbase, and only partially implemented its military aid to Tajikistan (Indeo 7, 8; Charap et al. 55).

In Uzbekistan, the new Mirziyoyev administration chose to have military cooperation with Russia on bilateral basis. In the eyes of Uzbek rulers, given that NATO and the United States stayed away from the region, Russia has remained the only state to cooperate in dealing with threats emanating from Afghanistan. As a reflection of the new administration's preference, in October 2017, Russia and Uzbekistan held their first joint military exercises since 2005. In April 2017, the two states signed the military-technical cooperation agreement which envisaged Uzbekistan purchasing military equipment from Russia at affordable prices and modernizing its existing equipment (Indeo 8-9).

Military training provided by Russia to Central Asian countries is prominent. Kazakhs account for about a third of all foreign military personnel trained in Russian military academies. More than half of the members of the Kazakh army were at least partially trained in Russia. Interrupted in 2012 by Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO, Russia has recently renewed its training program for Uzbek military personnel. According to Russian sources, more than 1,500 lower-level specialists from Tajikistan are trained in Russian military schools, learning to use new systems deployed in Tajikistan, such as the S-300 missiles. By 2014, 70 percent of Tajikistan's Special Forces had graduated from Russian military training institutions (Jardine and Lemon 8).

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is an important instrument guiding Russia's military relations with regional countries. In 2001, the parties to the Treaty created the Rapid Deployment Force of the Central Asian Region to counter threats emanating from Afghanistan (Rauf and Saud 36-37). With a mandate to counter external aggression and conduct joint counter-terrorism operations, this Force includes military forces from member states and has around 5,000 personnel. In 2007, it was agreed to create a peacekeeping force (deployed in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) to manage conflicts in member states. The force has 3600 personnel, including soldiers, civilians and police. In 2009, member states agreed to establish a Joint Rapid Reaction Force to respond quickly to challenges and threats to their security and natural disasters, repel military attacks, conduct counter-terrorism operations and combat transnational crime and drug trafficking. The force consists of approximately 18,000 personnel (Mayer 219).

The CSTO conducts regular exercises with the aim of ensuring the security of member states. The Rubezh exercise aimed protecting the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, to which the members attach great importance. The Channel exercise is conducted with the participation of the parties' anti-drug units, security forces, customs officials, border guards and financial intelligence units. While the Nelegal exercise aims to prevent irregular migration from non-member states, the Proxy exercise aims to strengthen cooperation in the field of cybersecurity and eliminate websites belonging to extremist groups (Shukuralieva 44; Rauf and Saud 38; Kazantsev et al.

59). The CSTO also conducts military exercises on the territory of member states. In November 2017, the Joint Rapid Reaction Force conducted a military exercise in Tajikistan with the participation of 5000 troops, 60 aircraft and 1500 pieces of weaponry, including the Iskander missile system. According to Dubnov (9-10), this exercise demonstrated Russia's approach to a crisis in a regional country: the anti-terrorism label is a convenient camouflage that can be used to fight against all types of enemies.

Previously, the CSTO's rapid response forces did not intervene in conflicts within member states. In 2010, when conflict broke out in Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and Kyrgyzstan requested assistance, Russia not only did not come to its aid but also opposed the use of the Rapid Reaction Force (Wilson 66; Indeo 6). This incidence showed that the organization would not come to the aid of its members in case of threats. However, the CSTO's intervention in the Kazakh unrest in January 2022 changed this thinking. When Kazakh President Tokayev made a formal request for assistance from the CSTO, Russia sent 3,000 paratroopers in addition to troops from other members.

Russia is far superior militarily in the CSTO compared to the other members. The forces of the organization are largely composed of Russian soldiers. Rather than prioritizing peacekeeping missions, Russia focuses on protecting the regimes in regional states. The organization served as a platform for Russia's bilateral projects with member states, and thus did not acquire a multilateral structure. It has become Russia's foreign policy tool and member states have tried to show that they are satisfied with Russia's foreign policy line and actions (Good 96). Thus, rather than being a truly multilateral regional organization, the organization seemed to be an institutional framework that served Russia's goals in its relations with member states (Lewis 12).

Russia may see the CSTO as a means of balancing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and China's growing influence in the region, and as the regional equivalent of NATO (Talka 64). So, Russia wants to talk to NATO as an actor of equal status and power, legitimize its military presence in regional countries, and deter CSTO members from engaging in serious relations with the West (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 9).

Compared to the SCO, the CSTO is not a regionally significant organization. Turkmenistan has not joined it due to its neutrality. Uzbekistan initially joined when the agreement was signed, left when the extension was due, and joined and left after it became an organization, thus raising questions about its strength (Good 96). The CSTO is not structured to respond strongly to crises and lacks a strong internal unity and cohesion. It does not have strong relations with the SCO despite membership similarities.

Some recent Russian initiatives have the potential to negatively affect its relations with Central Asian countries. Russia supports the Westphalian order, the inviolability of sovereignty, the state-centred application of international law and the transformation of the international system into a multipolar one, and opposes humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect, which seem to violate these principles. However, when it comes to Near Abroad, Russia does not see these principles as absolute, tends to water them down, and interprets sovereignty and international law differently. Russia's recent initiatives in Georgia and Ukraine can be seen by regional leaders as evidence of this Russian behaviour. The language used by Russia in explaining its territorial annexations and border changes is not reassuring for regional leaders (Tskhay and Buranelli).

Economic and Trade Cooperation and EAEU

As the Russian economy strengthened in the 2000s, trade with Central Asia increased (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 12; Kazantsev et al. 59). In the 1990s, Kazakhstan's exports to Russia accounted for 50% of its total exports, which later dropped to 21% and even to 10% during the 2008 financial crisis (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 356). Russia is the third largest trading partner of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the fourth largest partner of Uzbekistan, and the largest partner of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan (Tskhay and Buranelli 1043). Considering Russia's historical association with regional countries, the fact that Russia has ceased to be their first trading partner is important, showing its decline in the region.

Russia sees Central Asian countries' trade dependence on itself as an important factor for its influence in the region, affecting its stance against the West. What Russia is trying to do is not only to maintain the size of direct trade with these countries, but also to ensure that they continue to

use the Russian route for their exports. Russia tries to maintain its influence over regional countries through low customs duties, low oil and gas prices, and control over natural gas and oil pipelines (Konopelko 221). Russia also has close contacts with Central Asian countries in uranium, electricity, construction, telecommunications, transportation, transport, railways, banking and agriculture (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 12). Moreover, Russian companies hold significant stakes in the region's oil fields, refineries, hydroelectric power plants, pipelines and uranium enrichment facilities (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 357).

The purpose of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Belarus, (Mankoff 31) is to further integration of members' economies and to increase their competitiveness by modernizing and developing their economies and increasing their trade. The most important actions of the EAEU are the reduction or elimination of trade tariffs between member states and the adoption of common tariffs and customs duties against others. Although bureaucracy has been reduced in trade between member states, standards, technical requirements and non-tariff barriers imposed by the members have prevented them from getting sufficient benefits from their cooperation (Mankoff 32-33). While remaining faithful to their national trade policies, member states have sought to find loopholes in existing rules and procedures to serve their national rather than common interests (e.g. they have used the exemption of more than 3000 goods and services from common external tariffs to their advantage).

Since the common tariffs were high and other external barriers were created, member states' trade with non-members declined. In theory, the decline in trade with non-members was supposed to be compensated by an increase in trade between member states. Although intra-regional trade increased, the increase was not at the expected and compensatory level due to insignificant increase in Russia's GDP. The only country which increased its trade surplus became Russia (Mankoff 31-32, 34). Since the common tariffs made goods of non-regional countries quite expensive, member states were forced to buy Russia's high-priced and low-quality goods (Duarte 78).

Russia's conflict with Ukraine, its exposure to Western sanctions and Russian sanctions against Western states inevitably affected member states.

For example, member states' trade with Ukraine was reduced and the non-tariff barriers imposed by Russia prevented the export of some goods through regional countries (Moldashev and Qoraboyev 91-92; Buyar and Şener 142-144). When the value of the ruble fell and fluctuated due to Western sanctions, the entrepreneurs of member states trading in rubles faced uncertainty. When Russia shifted from dollar to ruble in response to Western sanctions, the rate of use of ruble by member states' entrepreneurs also increased, but this situation exposed entrepreneurs to the risks of exchange rate changes.

The EAEU has a hierarchical structure and its decision-making mechanism has not been made integrative. Although the decisions taken are envisaged to be binding for the members, no resolution and sanction mechanisms have been established, and the rule of unanimity has made future cooperation problematic (Talka 66). In fact, from the beginning, the EAEU has had a dual character as a technical project that liberal economists and business circles desired and a geopolitical project that politicians and strategists preferred to strengthen Russia's influence in the region and ultimately ensure the emergence of a multipolar system (Lewis 12). Accordingly, Russia sees the EAEU as an important tool to strengthen its position against potential rivals (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 349).

Russia has not hesitated to use carrots and sticks to expand and strengthen the organization, promising large amounts of investment and material rewards to attract new members, resorting to political pressure when necessary, and in the case of Kyrgyzstan, using this country's dependence on it for migration and expatriate remittances (Talka 68). The EAEU has evoked political, economic and cultural as well as technical and institutional meanings, and even Russian nationalists have used the concept of 'Eurasia' in the context of creating a separate hegemonic union against the liberal international order (Lewis 13).

Due to member states' concerns about possible Russian dominance, the Astana Agreement, which established the union, did not contain elements to implement Russia's vision and emphasized more intergovernmental cooperation in a way that prevented creating truly supranational institutions (Mankoff 31). What was also evident from the outset was that Russia and the other members had different strategic objectives and differing views

on how to distribute short-term costs and benefits (Talka 67). Russia saw the organization more as a political project, while others focused on their economic interests and did not dream of creating a super-state (Duarte 78). For example, Kazakhstan insisted on the inclusion of the word ‘economic’ in the name of the organization, and Kazakh leader Nazarbayev emphasized that the union should be limited to economic issues and that Kazakhstan could withdraw from the organization if its sovereignty was violated (Mankoff 31).

China’s Central Asian Strategy

In its policies towards Central Asian countries, China seems to be acting in line with its comprehensive new regionalism strategy. This strategy entails avoiding unilateral policies, using multilateral mechanisms in accordance with the intentions and interests of the interlocutors, and involving them in the processes rather than intimidating them (Ali et al. 228). Complying with this strategy, China seeks to develop economic relations with regional countries as an element of soft power in line with its economic, political, ideological and cultural goals, and aims to serve the emergence of a multipolar world through regional structures based on respect for the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. China’s new regionalism requires grouping based on mutual trust and benefit, sovereignty, scientific knowledge, transparency, gradualism, common identity, and the common values-interests balance (Kolpakova and Kuchinskaya 109, 111-112). China gives the impression that it avoids classical power politics, balance of power and alliance postures and focuses on ‘win-win’ solutions in a harmonious international environment by adopting an inclusive vision. (Lewis 14). However, Chinese initiatives essentially aim at making China a power centre of the international system and balancing superior Western power.

While trying to develop economic, trade and energy relations and cooperation with Central Asian countries, China seems to be careful not to damage the status quo in the region, not to openly conflict with the interests of other competitors, to cooperate with them when necessary, and to show that it is a neutral actor (Talka 51). However, while increasing its initiatives in the region, it inevitably increases its influence and reduces the influence of its geopolitical rivals (Konopelko 223). Chinese leaders naturally realize that China’s increasing influence in Central Asia will strengthen its position

in world politics and accordingly prefer to be active in the region (Talka 50). While launching initiatives in various fields in the region, Chinese leaders try to challenge the global and regional hegemony of the US and even the international liberal order (Ali et al. 227-228).

Economic and Trade Cooperation and BRI

Central Asia's oil and natural gas resources are of vital importance for China, the world's economic giant whose economy is growing rapidly and therefore in dire need of energy resources (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 358). China attaches great importance to energy resources of Central Asia, which appear to be more stable and secure. In order to diversify its energy import and ensure energy security, China has to turn to the region's resources (Talka 50-51). In Kazakhstan, Chinese companies have more than 40% share in total oil production. In 2006, China signed an agreement with Turkmenistan for the purchase of 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year until 2038. By 2015, China had invested more than \$15 billion in Turkmenistan's fuel and energy facilities and controlled more than 25% of the country's natural gas production. Its investment in Uzbekistan's energy sector in 2015 was estimated at \$2 billion and in Kyrgyzstan's at \$400 million (Kazantsev et al. 64; Amirbek and Hanayi 60-62).

China has built a 1000-kilometre oil pipeline from Kazakhstan's oil fields on the Caspian Sea coast to Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang) (Rakhimov 11; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 357; Ali et al. 230), allowing Kazakhstan's oil exports to China to reach 15% of its total exports. In addition, the 2,000 kilo-meter Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China natural gas pipeline, which includes Lines A, B and C, has made China the main lender of these states during the construction phase and has become an important source meeting China's natural gas need (Krivokhizh and Soboleva 8). China tries to construct highways and railways to have land connection with Europe and open Xinjiang to the outside world, and sees Central Asian countries as a transit corridor (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 13; Duarte 75). In December 2014, China and Kazakhstan signed a formal agreement on the joint construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt. When Kazakh President Nazarbayev visited Beijing in September 2015, he agreed to formally link the Belt with their own large-scale highway project Nurly Zhol (Pieper 463).

China tries to strengthen economic and trade relations with Central Asian countries. From 1996 to 2016, Chinese exports to Turkmenistan increased 42 times and trade with Tajikistan 225 times. In 2017, China and Kazakhstan signed agreements worth \$8 billion in energy, agriculture and infrastructure. In 2018, China became a supporter of the Astana Financial Centre, and the two countries agreed on 11 projects worth \$1.9 billion. By 2018, trade between the two countries approached \$100 billion, with China becoming Kazakhstan's second largest trading partner after the EU (Liao 506; Agayeva 9-10; Amirbek and Hanayi 50-60). China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asian countries has also increased significantly and China has become the region's main source of FDI. The share of Chinese FDI in the energy sectors of Central Asian countries is between 46% and 75% of the total (Wilson 61-62, 63; Agayeva 9).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) envisages the implementation of 900 projects in 60 countries including Central Asian states and a total investment of 890 billion US dollars (Liao 504). According to Chinese officials, the project aims to facilitate and accelerate the movement of goods, services and people, increase trade, connect economies on a strong infrastructure, support economic development, and ultimately ensure security and stability throughout Eurasia (Kolpakova and Kuchinskaya 113).

China seems to have control at every stage and in every project, and the implementation of the initiative can significantly increase its influence and power in Central Asia (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 13). The prospect of China's political and military dominance raises concerns among rulers and populations of regional states that have previously experienced Russian domination (Wilson 68). Given that economic cooperation and institutionalization works best between states having similar capabilities, and that China's economy is much larger than that of regional countries, it is natural for regional decision-makers to fear exploitation and dependence (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 13). Trade deficits with China and difficulties in repaying debts to China are a harbinger of wider problems to come. Tajikistan agreed to settle its border dispute with China by giving 1 percent of its territory in exchange for forgiveness of its debt (Wilson 63). Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are also expected to have difficulties in paying their debts to China. Local people in the region are concerned about possible Chinese

domination, Chinese migration, and China's lack of respect (Talka 52; Kazantsev et al. 64).

In the eyes of Chinese leaders, economic and trade cooperation with Central Asian countries will not only contribute to their economic and political stability, but also serve the stability of Eastern Turkestan by ensuring its economic development (Peyrouse and Raballand 408; Duarte 75). Cooperation with Central Asian countries will prevent them from supporting the Uyghur Turks in Eastern Turkestan and prevent the strengthening of radical elements (Ali et al. 230). Chinese economic initiatives in the region are aimed at removing possible regional and internal obstacles in front of becoming world power and increasing China's power against Western states (Kenzhetay 8-10).

Military Cooperation and SCO

China's military initiatives vis-à-vis regional countries are related to combating extremism, separatism and terrorism, which it considers important for preventing the strengthening of Islamic groups. The initiatives take the form of creating security structures, selling arms and military equipment, training military personnel, establishing strategic facilities and bases, and holding joint exercises. China conducted joint exercises with Kyrgyzstan in 2002, with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in 2006, and with Tajikistan in 2016. In 2016, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan launched the Quadrilateral Mechanism for Cooperation and Coordination in Combating Terrorism. In the same year, China established a military base in Tajikistan, its first strategic presence in the region (Wilson 66; Bolonina 16; Kazantsev et al. 58; Krivokhizh and Soboleva 6). The base includes a helipad and facilities to house a battalion with armoured vehicles. Chinese officials have trained Kyrgyz and Kazakh military personnel, helped establish a department at Kazakhstan's Defence University, provided anti-drug training to Kazakhs, and partnered with Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry Academy (Jardine and Lemon 8).

China wants to use the SCO to manage security relations with regional countries. The organization emerged as a result of efforts of demarcation, border protection and arms control. Fighting terrorism, extremism, separatism, drug trafficking and transnational crime are seen as the main

tasks and functions of the organization. In the eyes of the Chinese, the SCO's economic cooperation dimension is also closely linked to security (Tskhay and Buranelli 1042; Mayer 219). The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) is perceived as one of its most important organs. It aims to combat terrorism, collect, analyse and share intelligence on terrorism, create a database on terrorist networks, and maintain contact with other security organizations (Talka 69; Bolonina 16).

RATS has significantly increased its effectiveness in the fight against terrorism, preventing around a thousand terrorist attacks, arresting around 650 terrorists and eliminating some extremist organizations (Shukuralieva 45). Since 2007, RATS has been conducting annual counter-terrorism exercises under the name 'Peacekeeping' on the territory of one of the members. Peace Mission 2018 attracted international attention as it was a comprehensive exercise with the participation of all member states, including India and Pakistan (Rauf and Saud 39). To make RATS more effective, China established the China SCO National Institute for International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai under the Ministry of Public Security in 2014. The institute provides training to officials from member states on combating terrorism and transnational crime (Jardine and Lemon 9). China also established a strategic partnership in 2017 with Tajikistan, which has difficulties in securing its border with Afghanistan, to counter the threat posed by Islamic groups operating in Afghanistan (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 12).

Considering the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan as one of the main priorities, SCO members closely follow developments in this country. The departure of the U.S. and NATO from Afghanistan has made it imperative for member states to deal with Afghanistan more closely and directly. Member states made their territory available to the American and coalition forces when they intervened in Afghanistan. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established in 2005 to support joint peace efforts. Although the group suspended its work in 2009, it resumed regular meetings after Pakistan and India were admitted as members (Rauf and Saud 42).

The SCO is an important institutional tool for China to deal with Central Asian affairs, cooperate with Central Asian states in various fields, influence

their geopolitical positions and military postures, manage its relations with Russia and thus strengthen its international posture as a world power (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 11). In general, the SCO contributes to the stability of Central Asia. The SCO has successfully and smoothly brought regional countries together with Russia and China and prevented the emergence of serious tensions and conflicts between them. The SCO has prevented a particular power from dominating Central Asia and contributed to ensuring geopolitical balance and strategic stability in the region. Russia and China, empowered by the SCO, have avoided coming under the influence of the U.S. and NATO. Central Asian countries have used the organization to balance Russia and China against each other and thus have been able to pursue a multidimensional foreign policy in line with their national interests (Argalı). Thanks to the organization, Russia and China have balanced their strategic interests and engaged in constructive cooperation (Bolonina 16; Rauf and Saud 39). The SCO has indeed acted as a buffer in the rivalry between Russia and China, helping them to resolve their disputes peacefully and diplomatically (Nurimbetov and Vasa 32-33).

While the SCO has made significant progress in inclusiveness with Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and four Central Asian states as its full members, its identity constitutes a problem. The rhetoric of 'Shanghai spirit' consistently used by the Chinese is associated with identity formation (Konopelko 220-221; Khan and Sultana 4-7). It implies that the parties fulfil their obligations regarding borders and arms control in good faith, abide by basic principles of international law, respect different civilizations, conduct business through loose arrangements, and pay attention to multilateralism in all matters (Krivokhizh and Soboleva 6). However, it is not possible to say that this spirit has created an identity and a homogeneous structure. In fact, heterogeneity is what the spirit envisages and what characterizes the current structure of the organization (Talka 71).

The most striking aspect of the SCO is that it is a coordinating actor. The principles of non-interference in internal affairs and mutual respect, emphasized in the founding treaty of the organization, have facilitated relations between members and have been instrumental in creating mutual trust. Since the Organization has not been conceived as a supranational structure having real authority over its autonomous members, it has remained

a structurally weak organization. It does not have long-term development strategies. It is not an organization with strong internal cohesion to allow for deep integration. Many of its institutional instruments, including dispute settlement mechanisms, have not been created. It has not provided serious assistance to member states facing serious crises and has not cooperated with the CSTO in this regard (Rauf and Saud 43).

Overall, the SCO has become more of a regional forum rather than a traditional security organization. It has not adopted a military structure, has not presented itself as a defence alliance, and has not made efforts to establish multilateral military units (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 11). However, Russia and China are determined to keep the SCO as a tool to strengthen their opposition to the U.S. and prevent this country from encroaching into the region and dominating the world. The two states which manage their relations through the organization want to keep and use it to balance the Western power and initiatives (Aydoğan; A. Lukin 2-8).

Russo-Chinese Relations in the Context of Central Asia

China's large investments in Central Asia's energy resources, undertaking major infrastructure projects in the region, attempting to revive the historic Silk Road, and becoming the top trading partner of regional countries inevitably put China ahead of Russia and create the possibility of a Second Great Game between the two actors (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 353, 359). While Russia dominated the regional economy in the 2000s, the Chinese dominance replaced it in the 2010s (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 14). China's BRI is a challenge to Russia's Eurasian integration project (Mankoff 35). China has not exhibited serious interest and strong support for the EAEU and the CSTO to which Russia attaches great importance. Whether the EAEU and the BRI, which are similar in terms of developing economic and trade union, will hinder or support each other is an important question. It is also wondered how Russia will balance China's influence and maintain its control over the region's natural resources and transportation lines (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 357).

Russia initially ignored the BRI and did not like the idea of a common trade zone between the EAEU and the BRI (Pieper 472). China, on the other hand, presented the BRI as a purely economic project that would revitalize regional

economies by creating transport corridors (Lo and Dutkiewicz 43). Realizing that a confrontation with the West was inevitable due to the Ukrainian crisis, Russian authorities soon changed their stance and gave their approval to the initiative (Wilson 57). They even became one of the main proponents of the BRI, believing that it would provide the infrastructure, capital and technical capacity support for EAEU integration (Peyrouse and Nicharapova 14; Good 92; Yilmaz and Changming). They believed that establishing official connection between the two structures would strengthen the legitimacy of the EAEU in regional and global level, increase its importance among its members and keep it as an international economic actor. Moreover, the merger of the two structures and the creation of a single customs territory would increase intercontinental trade and all states along the routes and lines would benefit. It would be possible even to talk about realizing the dream of a Greater Eurasian Union (Mankoff 35-36).

In May 2015, Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi signed the Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Linking and Cooperation between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the EAEU (Lo and Dutkiewicz 43). The declaration included a commitment to coordinate the planning processes of the two initiatives and to establish a free trade zone that would ultimately integrate the two structures in the long term (Wilson 57). In May 2018, the Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement was signed between EAEU members and China. While the agreement did not eliminate or reduce tariffs between the two sides, it did include arrangements on customs cooperation, trade facilitation, intellectual property rights, government procurement, e-commerce, market competition, and sanitary and phytosanitary standards with the aim of reducing non-tariff barriers (Lo and Dutkiewicz 43-44; Wilson 59).

It is too early to say that the establishment of the EAEU-BRI link represents a significant achievement. Common initiatives have no real content, there is no clear roadmap on how to achieve what is envisaged, and the goal of a common free trade area has been left as a long-term goal with no clear timetable (Rakhimov 7; Soboleva and Krivokhizh 645). Members of the EAEU have been given the flexibility to continue their policy of balancing between the two big powers (Mankoff 35). For the EAEU-BRI connection to succeed, integration within the EAEU should deepen, but states like

Kazakhstan are not yet ready for this (Bossuyt and Bolgova; Shakhanova and Garlick).

In fact, there are more fundamental reasons for Russia and China to cooperate in Central Asia. The main common interest of the two states is to maintain the regional status quo by preventing trends such as democratization and liberalization and to exclude the West from the region (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 358). The need to act together against the West leads the two states to put aside potential regional tensions between them (Lewis 15). They have to coordinate their Central Asian policies for the sake of their more general strategy of balancing and containing the Western power.

Discussion and Conclusion

When Putin became president, he felt that Russia's security was under direct threat from NATO and EU expansion and the color revolutions in former Soviet republics. In his eyes, Russia had to seize every opportunity to stop the advance of the West and balance its power. Tools which could be used by Russia were to intervene militarily in states that could be used by the West, to remind others that Russia had nuclear weapons, and to create a power grouping by strengthening its ties with former Soviet states and China. Putin immediately created an anti-NATO structure by transforming the Collective Security Treaty into an organization. In line with Russia's wishes, the members of the organization agreed to consider an attack on one of its members as an attack on all, not to join any other military alliance, and not to allow military existence of non-member states on their territories. Russia has firmly tied the three countries of Central Asia to itself through this organization. These countries cannot enter into serious military relations with Western states. Russia has military bases, units and structures in these countries, supplies them with weapons, trains their military personnel, and has the ability to engage in military actions in these countries through joint forces of the organization. While Russia opposed military intervention in the unrest in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, when it was not in direct confrontation with the West, it sent troops to intervene in the unrest in Kazakhstan in 2022 when it was in conflict with Western-backed Ukraine. It has recently entered into close military relations with Uzbekistan, which is not a member of the organization. Thus, Russia has tried to use the CSTO as part of its struggle with the West and to keep Central Asian countries around itself.

Russia has also wanted to ensure a certain degree of stability in the region by using the organization and thus to strengthen its position in its power competition with the West by guaranteeing its eastern front.

Although the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is not a unified and strong organization, Russia has tried to use it, which includes four Central Asian republics, to create a grouping around itself. It has done its best to enable the organization to hold its regular meetings and to function its organs, and has aimed to preserve the Soviet-era unity to a certain extent by encouraging the members to respect Russians, the Russian language and old Russian commemorative days in their countries. The EAEU has emerged as Russia's attempt to further integrate with neighboring states. Russia wants to bind Central Asian states tightly to itself through this organization. The fact that regional countries have intensive economic and trade relations with Russia and depend on Russian routes for the transportation of goods including energy has played an important role in Russia's balance of power policy towards the West. In fact, Russian authorities see the EAEU as a political and geopolitical project rather than an economic one. Since special circumstances of regional states have made it impossible to achieve a high level of economic and commercial integration, Russian rulers have displayed flexibility. The use of the regional countries to circumvent Western sanctions imposed because of the Ukraine war in a way to serve their economic and commercial interests has also been seen as a means of strengthening ties with Russia.

As the main power center facing the United States, China emphasizes its soft power aspects. In its initiatives towards Central Asia, it tries to show that it respects the sovereign rights of its interlocutors and aims to enter into relations with them only on the basis of mutual benefit. However, a closer analysis of China's attitudes reveals that all of China's efforts are aimed at accumulating power to balance the United States. The main tool China uses to achieve this goal is the Belt and Road Initiative. As part of this initiative, China has carried out large-scale infrastructure projects (roads, railways and pipelines) in Central Asian countries. China has also established economic and trade relations with regional countries, provided them with loans and tried to use their natural resources, thereby expanding its power base. China has also established close military ties with regional countries. It has

sold arms to them, provided military training, conducted joint military exercises and sought to establish military bases in their territories. Security cooperation within the SCO strengthens China's power base by creating the stability in the region and relieving China from the East Turkestan problem, its soft underbelly in becoming a great state.

For China, the BRI is the main tool for becoming a great state and the SCO is an important tool for balancing the West. It uses the BRI to increase its foreign economic and trade relations, and sees the SCO in the context of anti-Western groupings. The SCO, which has expanded significantly with the accession of Iran, Pakistan and India, is a potential counterweight for China, even though it has not become a very effective organization. By making the organization active in the field of security, the Chinese rulers both want to strengthen stability in Asia and aim to limit the Western influence. The organization stabilizes China's relations with Russia and allows it to manage these relations in a way that does not turn them into a power competition. Russia and China have used the organization as an instrument of their strategic partnership and have maintained their unity vis-à-vis the West. The two states have also sought to link the EAEU with the BRI as another means of addressing a potential mutual distrust that China's overtaking Russia in many areas in Central Asia could cause.

The two states believe that they have to act together in countering the West. Russia struggles with the imminent threat posed by the West. China does not want to face Western obstruction on its way to becoming a great power. Both states have a deep-seated distrust of the West. In their eyes, strengthening against the West and acting together is essential for their national interests. Therefore, even though there are issues that may cause disagreements between them, they try to strengthen and maintain their unity and act together in their initiatives towards Central Asia. Given that the Central Asian states try to benefit from their behavior for their own interests, it is fair to say that the influence of the two states in regional structures will continue and the region will be an element for the two states to rely on in great power competition.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

Notes

1 Geopolitical theories and the idea of Greater Eurasia can also be used to explain Putin's thinking (A. Lukin 8-12; Ageyava 2-3; Erenel; Qamar and Zafar; Krickovic and Pellicciari 94-97).

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