

# Spheres of influence in Central Asia: a comparative study of China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of spheres of influence, originally established in the 19th century to prevent conflicts among great powers and maintain geopolitical stability, has evolved significantly in the modern era. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia and China have emerged as the primary competitors for influence in Central Asia, each striving to secure strategic interests, foster economic integration, and address regional security challenges. Historically, Russia has regarded Central Asia as its exclusive sphere of influence. However, China's rapid economic growth and expanding political ambitions have increasingly challenged Moscow's traditional regional dominance. This research analyzes the interplay between Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia through the dual lenses of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Drawing from historical contexts and focusing on current dynamics, the study presents a comparative analysis of their respective strategies for economic integration and geopolitical influence. By comparing these initiatives, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the distinct approaches China and Russia adopt to exert power in Central Asia. The findings offer critical insights for Central Asian nations as they navigate the overlapping ambitions of these two powers, highlighting strategies to optimize benefits while safeguarding their sovereignty and independence.

## KEYWORDS

Sphere of influence, Central Asia, China, Russia, BRI, EAEU.

## Orta Asya'da etki alanları: Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi ve Rusya'nın Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği'nin karşılaştırmalı analizi

## ÖZET

Büyük güçler arasındaki çatışmaları önlemek ve jeopolitik istikrarı korumak için 19. yüzyılda kurulan etki alanları kavramı, modern çağda önemli ölçüde evrim geçirmiştir. Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından Rusya ve Çin, Orta Asya'da nüfuz sahibi olmak için birincil rakipler olarak ortaya çıkmıştır ve her biri stratejik çıkarları güvence altına almak, ekonomik entegrasyonu teşvik etmek ve bölgesel güvenlik tehditlerini önlemek için çaba göstermişlerdir. Tarihsel olarak, Rusya Orta Asya'yı kendi münhasır etki alanı olarak görmüştür. Ancak Çin'in hızlı ekonomik büyümesi ve genişleyen siyasi hırsları, Moskova'nın bölgedeki geleneksel hakimiyetine giderek daha fazla meydan okumaktadır. Bu araştırma, Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI) ve Rusya'nın Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği'nin (EAEU) ikili mercekleme aracılığıyla Orta Asya'daki Çin-Rus etkisi arasındaki etkileşimi analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tarihsel bağlamlardan yararlanarak ve güncel dinamiklere odaklanarak, çalışma ekonomik entegrasyon ve jeopolitik etki için ilgili stratejilerinin karşılaştırmalı bir analizini sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, BRI ve EAEU girişimlerini karşılaştırarak, Çin ve Rusya'nın Orta Asya'da güç uygulamak için benimsediği farklı yaklaşımlara ilişkin ayrıntılı bir anlayış sunmaktadır. Bulgular, Orta Asya ülkelerinin bu iki gücün örtüşen hedefleri arasında yol alırken kritik içgörüler sunarak, egemenliklerini ve bağımsızlıklarını korurken faydaları en üst düzeye çıkarma stratejilerini vurgulamaktadır.

## Atıf:

**ANAHTAR KELİMELELER**

Etki alanı, Orta Asya, Çin, Rusya, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği.

## **Introduction: An overview of Central Asia's strategic importance**

Central Asia, consisting of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, occupies a geostrategic position and is rich in natural resources. It has emerged as the focal point of Sino-Russian relations. The dynamics between China and Russia in this region are marked by both collaboration and rivalry (Lukin, 2021; Mirza & Ayub, 2021; Pantucci, 2015), each pursuing distinct yet occasionally overlapping interests. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and China have vied for influence in Central Asia, seeking to safeguard their strategic interests, promote economic integration, and manage regional security challenges (Neafie, 2023, p. 272; Sinitsina, 2012, p. 6). While Russia has historically viewed Central Asia as its sphere of influence, China's growing economic and political clout in the region has posed challenges to Moscow's dominance (Yuan, 2010). This paper aims to elucidate the implications of Sino-Russian influence in the area within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), reflecting on historical contexts, current sphere of influence, and a comparative analysis of their economic integration strategies.

This study examines the intricate and multifaceted relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia, which has become a significant battleground for influence between these two major powers. At the forefront of this inquiry are the strategic initiatives introduced by China and Russia – specifically, China's BRI and Russia's EAEU. The BRI, launched in 2013, represents China's ambitious effort to enhance connectivity and foster economic integration across Asia, Europe, and beyond through extensive infrastructure development (Bitabarova, 2018; K. G. Cai, 2018; P. Cai, 2017; Gelvig, 2020). Meanwhile, the EAEU, established in 2015, aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its member states, thereby reinforcing Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space (Ahunbayev et al., 2022; Chupilkin et al., 2023; Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018).

This paper comparatively analyses how these initiatives reflect the strategic interests of China and Russia and their implications for the Central Asian states. Both initiatives offer significant economic opportunities, such as investment and trade enhancement, but they also present challenges that could jeopardize the region's political stability and independence. The region's rich energy resources, strategic geographic location, and complex ethno-religious composition make it a critical arena of geopolitical competition (Islam, 2012, p. 34). The evolving dynamics of Sino-Russian relations transcend bilateral concerns, forming a pivotal element of the broader international order. Understanding these dynamics requires a comprehensive, multi-faced analysis to illuminate their implications for regional and global stakeholders.

This study seeks to address the following key questions: (1) How do the BRI and EAEU function as instruments for establishing a sphere of influence in Central Asia? (2) What specific tools, mechanisms, and strategies are employed by China and Russia to assert and expand their sphere of influence in Central Asia? To answer these questions, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) to analyze and compare the roles of the BRI and EAEU as instruments of influence in Central Asia, focusing on their underlying strategies, geopolitical impact, and competitive dynamics; (2) to critically examine the tools and methods utilized by China and Russia to establish and sustain their sphere of influence in Central Asia, including economic, political, and cultural mechanisms; (3) To evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of the BRI and EAEU in achieving their respective geopolitical and economic objectives, highlighting their implications for the sovereignty and development of Central Asian states.

## Literature review

Russia and China have significantly intensified their engagement in Central Asia, employing distinct yet occasionally overlapping strategies to exert influence. Russia leverages historical ties, cultural proximity, and geopolitical dominance, viewing the region as a critical sphere of interest. In contrast, China prioritizes economic initiatives, particularly through extensive infrastructure investments associated with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This dynamic interplay is often described as “competitive collaboration”, where both nations cooperate on shared goals but compete when their interests diverge (Mirza & Ayub, 2021). This nuanced relationship has resulted in a *modus vivendi*, enabling China to expand its economic reach with Russia’s tacit approval (Pantucci, 2015). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a pivotal platform for cooperation between the two powers, serving as a mechanism to counter U.S. influence and address regional challenges collectively (Perskaya et al., 2022; Yuan, 2010).

The interactions between Russia and China in Central Asia have been the subject of extensive scholarly research, focusing on the geopolitical, economic, and strategic dimensions of their engagement. For instance, Bitabarova (2018) examines the intersection of China’s BRI with Kazakhstan’s Nuryly Zhol program, highlighting the economic opportunities provided by the BRI but also drawing attention to concerns over sovereignty and China’s treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang (Bitabarova, 2018). Similarly, Cai (2017, 2018) positions the BRI as both an economic and geopolitical strategy, aimed at addressing China’s domestic overcapacity while countering U.S. dominance globally. However, Cai also emphasizes the mixed reactions the BRI has elicited from global actors (K. G. Cai, 2018; P. Cai, 2017).

Gabuev (2016) discusses the integration challenges between China’s BRI and Russia’s EAEU, noting issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and China’s preference for bilateral agreements over multilateral frameworks (Gabuev, 2016). Similarly, Sinitsina (2012) evaluates Russia’s economic cooperation under the EAEU framework, identifying its dominance as both a strategic advantage and a potential challenge, particularly regarding economic asymmetry and debt dependency among Central Asian states (Sinitsina, 2012). Vinokurov (2017) provides a detailed analysis of trade and energy integration within the EAEU, emphasizing Russia’s strategic interest in countering Chinese competition while maintaining influence in the region (Vinokurov, 2017).

Several scholars have comparative analyses of Russia’s and China’s strategies in Central Asia, shedding light on their distinct approaches. Gabuev (2016) explores the interplay between the BRI and EAEU, noting initial skepticism from Russia regarding the BRI but highlighting subsequent efforts at integration, despite persistent conflicts and coordination challenges (Gabuev, 2016). Kaczmarek (2017) offers a conceptual distinction between Moscow’s “territorial logic”, which prioritizes political objectives and regional dominance, and Beijing’s “functional logic”, which prioritizes economic cooperation and infrastructural connectivity (Kaczmarek, 2017). Lukin (2021) traces the evolution of Sino-Russian relations from the 1990s to the present, documenting their transformation into a quasi-alliance that incorporates both geo-economic and military dimensions (Lukin, 2021).

The research underscores the multifaceted effects of the BRI and EAEU on Central Asia. The BRI has catalyzed significant infrastructure development, trade investment, and economic growth in the region. However, concerns persist over debt dependency, unequal partnerships, and the potential erosion of sovereignty among Central Asian states. The EAEU, on the other hand, promotes regional economic integration under Russian leadership, offering benefits such as harmonized trade policies and reduced barriers. Yet, this framework is also seen as a tool for consolidating Russia’s geopolitical influence, sometimes at the expense of the political autonomy of member states. Public perceptions of China’s growing influence in Central Asia are mixed and influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors. Bitabarova (2018) highlights

these perceptions, noting that while Chinese investments bring economic benefits, they also raise concerns about dependency and potential exploitation (Bitabarova, 2018).

The SCO plays a vital role in fostering regional cooperation and managing Sino-Russian interaction. Ayyildiz et al. (2018) highlight the SCO's contributions to economic, security, and humanitarian partnerships between China and Central Asian states, despite ongoing challenges such as ethnic tensions and conflicting interests (Ayyildiz et al., 2018). Similarly, Kaczmarek (2017) emphasizes the SCO's strategic importance in counterbalancing U.S. influence and facilitating coordination between Russia and China in the region (Kaczmarek, 2017).

Although extensive research exists on China's BRI and Russia's EAEU, there is a notable gap in studies that examine their interactions, conflicts, and complementarities in an integrated manner. Most existing studies analyze these initiatives in isolation, failing to provide a comprehensive assessment of their interconnected impacts on Central Asia. For instance, while the BRI's transformative economic potential has been widely documented, its strategic implications when juxtaposed with the EAEU have received less attention. Similarly, studies on the EAEU often overlook the competitive dynamics it encounters due to China's rising influence.

This study aims to address this gap by providing a comparative analysis of the BRI and EAEU within the context of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia. By exploring their overlapping and divergent strategies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how these initiatives shape the region's geopolitical and economic landscape.

## **Method and materials**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the dynamics of spheres of influence in Central Asia, focusing on a comparative analysis of China's BRI and Russia's EAEU. The conceptual framework of spheres of influence is central to the analysis, providing a lens through which to understand the strategies and mechanisms employed by these two major powers to exert control and expand their influence in the region. A concise review of the historical background of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia was conducted to contextualize their contemporary policies.

Key initiatives under each integration project were examined, including infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and policy coordination. The analysis focuses on the objectives, mechanisms, and outcomes of these initiatives to identify areas of convergence and divergence. Based on this comparative analysis, the study compiles a list of strengths and weaknesses for both the BRI and the EAEU. The findings are interpreted within the broader context of the spheres of influence framework, linking the observed trends to theoretical concepts of power projection and regional dominance.

The research relies on secondary data sources, ensuring a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to the subject matter. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and research reports provided foundational insights into the BRI, the EAEU, and their respective impacts on Central Asia. Studies on the spheres of influence framework and historical Sino-Russian relations informed the theoretical grounding of the research.

Official publications from the Chinese and Russian governments, including policy statements and documents from the EAEU, were analyzed to understand the stated objectives and strategies of these initiatives. Reputable media sources were consulted to track recent developments, such as high-level meetings, agreements, and the on-ground impacts of BRI and EAEU projects. Economic and trade statistics from national statistical agencies were used to quantify the outcomes of the BRI and EAEU initiatives. Additionally, specific projects, such as the Khorgos Gateway under the BRI and the unified customs system of the EAEU, were analyzed in detail to provide concrete examples of their implementation and impact.

This method was chosen for its ability to integrate historical context, providing a nuanced understanding of contemporary developments. The comparative framework allows for a balanced evaluation of the BRI and EAEU. Furthermore, employing the spheres of influence as an analytical lens enhances the theoretical depth of the study.

### Conceptual framework

The recent crises in Ukraine, which have emerged as a critical security challenge for Western nations, illustrate Russia's steadfast belief that the territories bordering its borders fall within its sphere of influence (Costa Buranelli, 2018, p. 379; Ferguson & Hast, 2018, p. 277). Similarly, China's actions in the South China Sea, characterized by strategic military and political maneuvers, reflect Beijing's determination to assert dominance in what it considers its own sphere of influence (Weitz, 2011). These developments highlight the enduring relevance of spheres of influence in contemporary global politics. Against this backdrop, the Central Asian region, situated strategically between Russia and China, can be understood as an area where the spheres of influence of these two great powers overlap and compete. This research aims to explore this dynamic in-depth, focusing on the strategies employed by both states to assert and maintain their dominance in the region.

While this study adopts the classical concept of sphere of influence, it also situates its analysis within the broader framework of contemporary international relations theory. Concepts such as soft power (Nye, 1990), regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001), and the tension between geopolitics and geoeconomics (Luttwak, 1990) provide complementary perspectives on how states project influence. These concepts enable a richer understanding of China's and Russia's divergent strategies in Central Asia – economic development versus military assertiveness, normative appeal versus coercive instruments.

Historically, nations have pursued their strategic interests and extended their influence through various frameworks, including empires, buffer states, exclusion zones (*cordons sanitaires*), and spheres of influence (Hast, 2014). These mechanisms—spanning military, economic, political, and cultural domains—have consistently been tools of power projection. In modern IR, this differentiation aligns with the distinction between hard power (military and coercive instruments) and soft power (normative, cultural, and institutional attraction). China's Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, is often seen as a manifestation of soft power combined with geoeconomic strategy, while Russia's approach leans toward hard power regional hegemony, particularly through the CSTO. Among them, the sphere of influence stands as a defining feature of interstate rivalry, symbolizing the ambition of dominant states to shape both regional and global orders (Jackson, 2020, p. 256). It reflects the ongoing struggle for power and control, where nations seek to exert influence over others without direct territorial conquest, thereby reinforcing their strategic and geopolitical positions (Hast, 2014, p. 8).

This study adopts the concept of spheres of influence to analyze the policies of Russia and China in Central Asia, a region where this concept holds deep historical significance. Central to this analysis is the understanding that a sphere of influence entails the claimed right of a state to exert exclusive or predominant control over another state or group of states (Costa Buranelli, 2018, p. 381). Such influence can reshape domestic and foreign policies, alter the regional balance of power, or dictate relationships with other states, often across key strategic domains. Spheres of influence underscore the competitive nature of international relations, particularly among major powers, and serve as an analytical lens to examine both rivalry and cooperation in global politics (Kaufman, 1976, p. 11).

Spheres of influence can manifest as either formal or informal agreements. Formal spheres of influence are established through treaties or explicit agreements, wherein one state formally acknowledges another's authority over a specific region. Informal spheres of influence, in contrast, emerge through mechanisms such as economic leverage, military presence, or cultural dominance, often reshaping local governance and societal structures without explicit



agreements. Informal spheres can significantly influence subject nations. For instance, elites in subject nations may adopt the dominant state's language, industrial standards, military practices, and cultural norms. Additionally, these nations may prioritize trade with the dominant state and send their youth for education there, further entrenching the dominant state's influence over local systems (Hast, 2014, p. 40; Kaufman, 1976, p. 10; Keal, 1983, pp. 22–23). These dynamics resonate with the notion of soft power, wherein attraction rather than coercion drives influence. In this context, China's educational exchanges, Confucius Institutes, and economic investments reflect a soft power strategy. Russia, by contrast, relies more heavily on shared language, elite networks, and media penetration as instruments of informal political-cultural influence. While both rely on non-military tools, the underlying strategies differ in tone and objective.

The term "sphere of influence" gained prominence during the late 19th century, particularly at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, which divided control over Africa among European powers. Great Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain delineated their zones of dominance on the continent. For example, in 1885, a bilateral agreement between Great Britain and Germany partitioned control over the Gulf of Guinea, with both nations pledging not to interfere in each other's designated territories. Similar agreements followed, such as the 1890 division of East Africa into distinct spheres of influence (Bull, 2002, p. 212; Hast, 2014, p. 39).

The concept resurfaced during World War II when U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt envisioned a post-war world managed by "four policemen" or "four sheriffs," each overseeing peace within its sphere of influence. In this vision, Britain would oversee its empire and Western Europe, the Soviet Union would control Eastern Europe and Central Eurasia, China would dominate East Asia and the Western Pacific, and the United States would manage the Western Hemisphere. Under pressure from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, France was later added to this framework and tasked with overseeing its colonial empire. To some extent, this idea influenced the formation of the United Nations Security Council, where the five permanent members (P5) hold significant sway over distinct regions or groups of nations (Hast, 2014, p. 99; Kimball, 1991, p. 85). However, this model contrasts with the General Assembly's principle of sovereign equality among states.

In contemporary geopolitics, spheres of influence remain central to great power rivalries involving BRIC states: Brazil, Russia, India, China (Jackson, 2020, p. 257; Ortmann, 2018, p. 423), and the United States (Jackson, 2020, p. 257). These rivalries emphasize the importance of understanding the origins, objectives, and strategies behind spheres of influence, which vary significantly depending on context.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Central Asia briefly became a contested space as the United States and European Union sought to assert influence in the region. However, geographical proximity, historical ties, and well-coordinated strategic initiatives enabled Russia and China to quickly outmaneuver Western actors. Today, Russia and China dominate Central Asia's political, economic, and security landscape, leveraging their historical connections and multilateral frameworks.

In this context, Russia and China have effectively delineated their spheres of influence in Central Asia, facilitated by platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO enables both powers to collectively address threats such as terrorism, extremism, separatism, and externally driven "color revolutions" (Perskaya et al., 2022, p. 150; Yuan, 2010, p. 862). Through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia has formalized its position as Central Asia's primary military authority. The CSTO's response to the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan exemplifies Russia's role as the region's "first responder" to security crises. China focuses on economic and infrastructural influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aligning with its non-interference principle under the Westphalian system. Beijing appears to defer to Russia on military matters, as evidenced by its non-opposition to CSTO

interventions (Costa Buranelli, 2018, pp. 340–341). This division of labor underscores a pragmatic Sino-Russian partnership, where Russia prioritizes security issues, and China concentrates on economic development. This cooperative dynamic mitigates competition while respecting each other's spheres of influence. This cooperative division reflects not only bilateral pragmatism but also the broader dynamics of a multipolar international order, where regional powers assert influence without confrontation. Scholars argue that spheres of influence can serve as a stabilizing force in such systems by delineating acceptable boundaries of power (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Yet, the potential for friction remains, especially as China's global ambitions challenge traditional Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space. Therefore, this paper also considers how strategic compromise—implicit or explicit—underpins the current equilibrium in Central Asia.

This study examines the overlapping spheres of influence in Central Asia through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). These initiatives reflect distinct yet occasionally complementary strategies for projecting power and influence in the region. A historical understanding of Sino-Russian relations provides the foundation for a comparative analysis of these two initiatives and their implications for Central Asia's political and economic landscape. Although contemporary IR literature often prefers concepts such as soft balancing, regional order-building, or institutional hegemony, the choice of "spheres of influence" in this study is deliberate. It captures both the historical legacy and the current reality of informal and formal dominance in Central Asia. This framework allows us to interrogate the coexistence of competition and cooperation between Russia and China—phenomena not always easily addressed by other theories.

### **Historical context of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia**

Historically, Central Asia has served as a battleground between major powers, most notably Russia, with its imperial legacy, and China, seeking to expand its economic impact in the region. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal turning point, as the Central Asian republics gained independence, leaving a geopolitical vacuum that both Beijing and Moscow have sought to fill. Gabuev (2016) observes that Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia have evolved significantly from mutual suspicion and rivalry during the Cold War to a more cooperative, albeit competitive, approach in the post-Soviet era (Gabuev, 2016, p. 62).

At the end of the Cold War, few predicted the remarkable transformation of Sino-Russian relations in the 21st century (Mahmood, 2021, p. 1060). Historically, the relationship between the two nations has been fraught with complexity and contention, beginning in the 19th century when Russia's eastward expansion into Siberia compelled China to cede over 1.5 million square kilometers of territory to the Russian Empire. During the 20th century, both nations experienced profound upheavals from wars and revolutions. Although they became allies briefly following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, this partnership soured by the 1960s due to ideological rifts during Nikita Khrushchev's leadership in the USSR. The resulting schism turned the 4,380-kilometer border into a militarized frontier, cementing their status as geopolitical rivals (Stronski and Ng 2018:4-5).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China successfully normalized relations with Russia, ushering in a new era of bilateral cooperation. The resolution of longstanding border disputes and the strengthening of economic ties became foundational pillars of their partnership. By the mid-1990s, this rapprochement had blossomed into a stable "good-neighborly" relationship, culminating in their recognition as strategic allies by 1996 (Pantucci, 2015, p. 273). Initially, during President Boris Yeltsin's tenure, Russia pursued closer ties with the West, seeking support from the United States and Europe for democratic reforms (Larrabee & Karasik, 1997; Vakilova, 2019, p. 39).

In contrast, China pursued an entirely different trajectory. After the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, Beijing eschewed political liberalization and avoided over-reliance on Western

partnerships. Instead, China opened its markets to foreign investment while maintaining strict political control, laying the foundation for rapid economic development (Stronski & Ng, 2018, p. 5). This strategy proved highly successful, enabling China to achieve large-scale urbanization, infrastructure expansion, and sustained economic growth, all while preserving the authority of the Communist Party. Consequently, China emerged as the world's second-largest economy. Meanwhile, Russia's deepening disillusionment with the West and China's expanding global ambitions facilitated the strengthening of their bilateral relations (Vakilova, 2019, p. 40).

In July 2001, the two nations solidified their partnership by signing the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2001). This treaty established a framework for mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic affairs. It also laid the groundwork for increased coordination in international forums such as the United Nations (UN), APEC, G20, and BRICS. As early as 1997, Russia and China signaled their shared opposition to Western dominance by presenting a joint declaration on a "multipolar world" to the UN General Assembly. Their collaboration extended to joint opposition to Western interventions, such as their criticism of the Iraq War in 2003 and NATO's involvement in Libya in 2011 (Feigenbaum, 2016). However, neither nation has taken substantial action to stabilize the broader Middle East, focusing instead on its strategic priorities in other regions.

Central Asia and the Far East have emerged as focal points of Sino-Russian collaboration. In this context, both powers have pursued pragmatic cooperation while prioritizing their respective strategic interests. This approach has enabled Moscow and Beijing to manage their differences and pursue mutual goals, particularly in Central Asia. Their partnership reached a milestone with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. This multilateral platform was designed to address mutual security concerns, foster regional integration, and promote economic development (Yuan, 2010, p. 856). While the SCO has facilitated cooperation, it also highlights the underlying competition between the two powers, as both seek to expand their political influence and economic dominance in the region.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's influence in Central Asia was widely regarded as dominant. In early 2022, just weeks before the invasion, Russia demonstrated its role as the region's primary security guarantor by intervening militarily through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to support Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev during widespread unrest. This intervention reinforced Russia's position as the foremost external actor in the region (Umarov, 2024).

The war in Ukraine and the resulting sanctions have significantly diminished Russia's geopolitical influence, casting uncertainty over its future role in Central Asia. Meanwhile, China has actively capitalized on this shift, solidifying its position as the region's leading external power. Beijing has demonstrated its commitment through vocal support for the territorial sovereignty of Central Asian nations, an uptick in high-level diplomatic initiatives, unprecedented trade and investment activities, and the landmark inaugural China-Central Asia Summit in May 2023 (CGTN, 2023). This summit marked the first in-person meeting of all Central Asian leaders within the China+C5 format, highlighting China's expanding influence. Furthermore, the establishment of a permanent secretariat for the summit in March 2024 reinforces Beijing's long-term strategic focus on the region (mfa.gov.cn, 2024). The summit is now set to occur biennially, with the next gathering scheduled for 2025 in Kazakhstan, cementing China's deepening engagement in Central Asia (Muratbekova, 2023).

### **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

China's foreign economic policy over the past few decades has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness, allowing the nation to expand its influence significantly at both regional and global levels. By adopting a deliberate and calculated strategy to advance its economic interests, China has positioned itself as a dominant power in the international system. This achievement has



elevated the policies of Xi Jinping to a level of historical significance, often compared to the transformative leadership of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China (P. Cai, 2017, p. 831).

A central pillar of China's foreign policy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initially conceptualized as the Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative (SREB). Over time, this initiative has evolved into the globally recognized BRI, a strategic framework that visibly embodies China's global ambitions (Gabuev, 2016, p. 63; Gelvig, 2020, p. 50). The BRI seeks to enhance connectivity, trade, and investment across Eurasia, with Central Asia serving as a vital land bridge connecting China to Europe (P. Cai, 2017, p. 832).

The initiative comprises two main components: the "Belt," which involves countries along the historical Silk Road spanning Central Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe; and the "Road," which extends to include South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Africa (K. G. Cai, 2018) (See Map 1).

**Map 1** The Belt and Road Initiative Map



Source: (Global Initiative Maps, 2024)

Central Asia occupies a pivotal position within China's BRI due to its strategic location between China's western regions and Europe. The unique positioning aligns seamlessly with Beijing's ambitions to transform Central Asia into a vital conduit for international trade and economic development. Beyond its geographic advantages, the BRI resonates with the historical and ideological narratives cultivated by post-Soviet Central Asian governments, which emphasize the region's historical significance and central role in shaping Eurasian civilization.

Initially conceptualized as a network of infrastructure projects, the BRI has evolved into an expansive, multifaceted program encompassing transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure. Key components include roads, railways, energy pipelines, telecommunications systems, power grids, ports, and other strategic facilities. To support this initiative, President Xi Jinping announced the creation of a \$40 billion Silk Road Fund in November 2014, further complemented by the China Development Bank's commitment of over \$890 billion for projects across more than 60 countries. The initiative also includes six strategic corridors, such as the

China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, the New Eurasian Land Bridge, and the China-Central and West Asia corridor. Estimates suggest that the full implementation of the BRI could require an investment of up to \$8 trillion (K. G. Cai, 2018, p. 833). In March 2015, the Chinese government formalized the scope of the BRI by publishing the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Xinhua, 2017). This document expanded the initiative's objectives to include policy coordination, financial integration, trade and investment liberalization, increased use of the Renminbi (RMB) (Zhai, 2018, p. 87) in international transactions, and fostering cultural exchange across Asia, Europe, Oceania, and Africa (P. Cai, 2017).

One of the most transformative impacts of the BRI in Central Asia has been the development of transportation infrastructure. A prime example is the Khorgos Gateway on the Kazakhstan-China border, which has emerged as a critical transit hub connecting China and Europe (Grant, 2020, p. 6). Spanning over 5.28 square kilometers, with 3.43 square kilometers located on the Chinese side and 1.85 square kilometers on the Kazakh side, this tightly managed trade zone has significantly enhanced Kazakhstan's logistical capacity (Hon Kong Trade Development Council, 2016). The facility has positioned Kazakhstan as a central player in the Eurasian trade network.

The Khorgos Gateway has achieved remarkable milestones, with import and export volumes increasing by 115.5%, totaling 1.36 million metric tons (Xinhua, 2023). Similarly, Kazakhstan's rail transit volumes rose by 1.1 million metric tons in 2022, reaching 9.4 million metric tons, while road shipments from China also doubled to 980,600 metric tons (primeminister.kz, 2023). These developments underscore the transformative role of the BRI in Central Asia, positioning the region as a vital artery for international trade. Ongoing commercial projects in Kazakhstan are expected to integrate Central Asia into global supply chains, enhancing the flow of European goods to Chinese consumers.

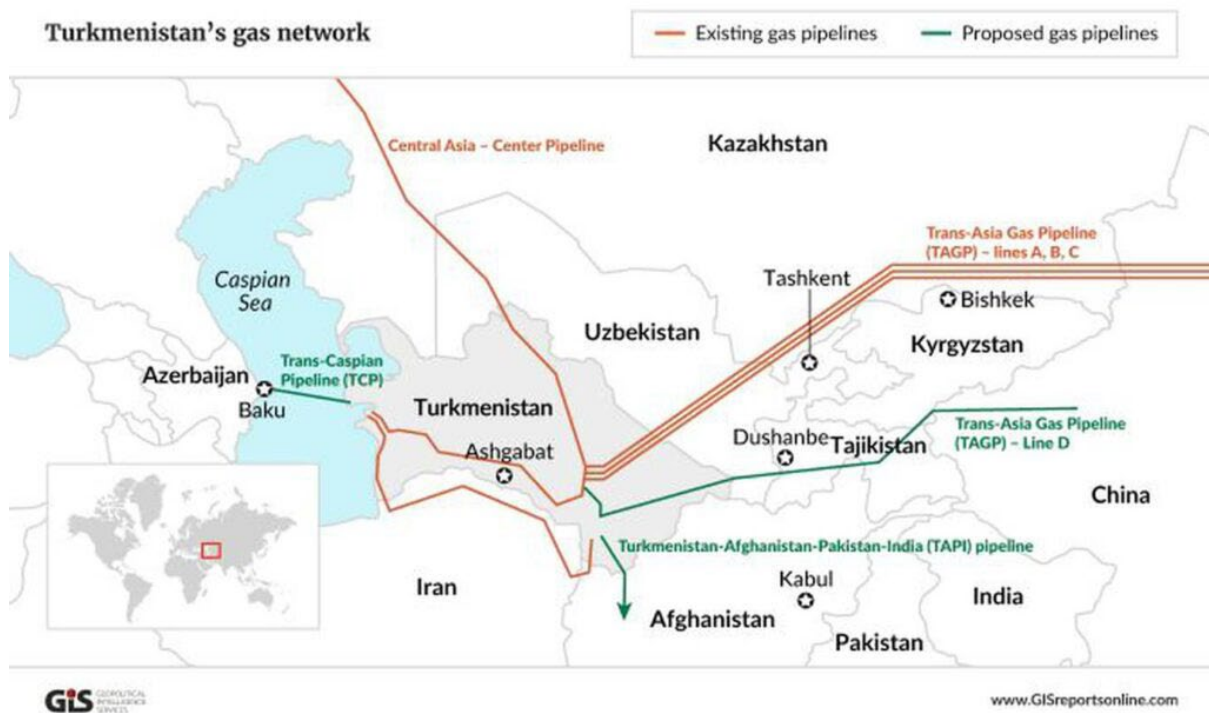
In addition to transportation, the BRI has made significant investments in energy infrastructure, particularly in natural gas pipelines and power facilities. Projects such as the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline (also known as the Turkmenistan-China Gas Pipeline) have bolstered energy security for Central Asian nations while ensuring a stable energy supply for China.

The pipeline system comprises three primary lines—Line A, Line B, and Line C—that begin at Gedaim on the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border. These pipelines traverse central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan before reaching the Khorgos Compressor Station in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (CNPC, 2024). Spanning 1,837 kilometers, the pipelines connect to China's Second West-East Gas Pipeline, which extends an additional 8,704 kilometers within China to deliver Central Asian gas to various regions (Bitabarova, 2018).

Construction of Lines A and B commenced in July 2008, with Line A becoming operational in December 2009 and Line B in October 2010. Line C was completed in 2014, increasing the system's capacity. Lines A and B each transport 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually, while Line C adds 25 bcm per year. Supplementing this network is the Beineu-Shymkent pipeline, a 1,475-kilometer-long project commissioned in 2013 that delivers 15 bcm annually from western Kazakhstan's gas fields into Line C (Bitabarova, 2018, p. 154) (Map 2).

The extensive pipeline network has enhanced energy connectivity, enabling Central Asian nations to capitalize on their natural gas reserves while meeting China's growing energy demands. This integration not only strengthens energy security for both parties but also reinforces the strategic interdependence between Central Asia and China.

Map 2 Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline

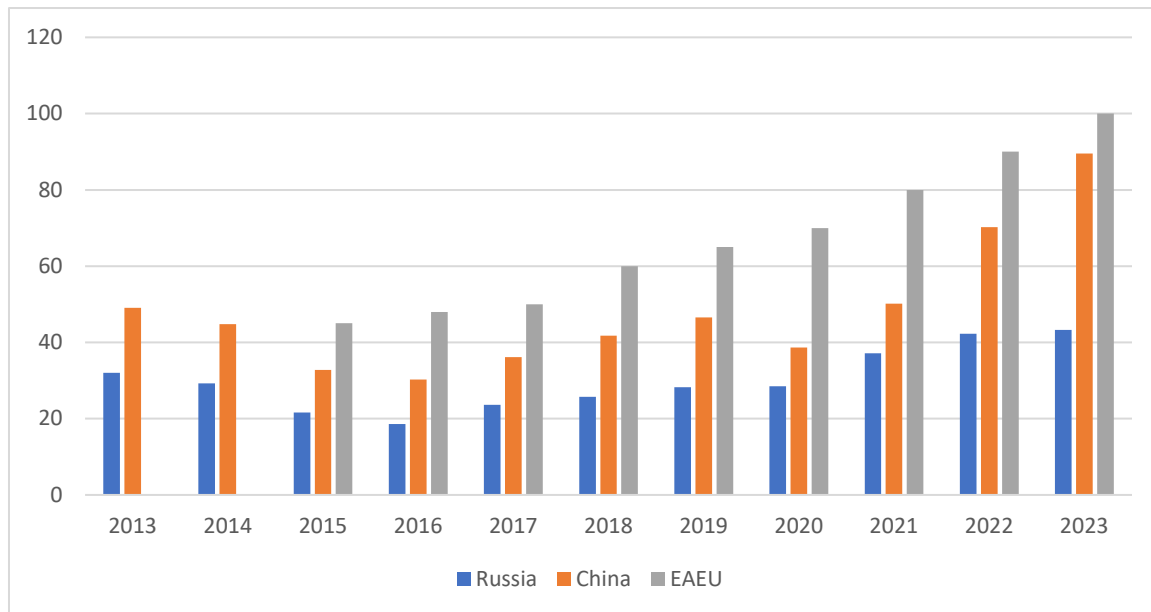


Source: (The People's Map of Global China, 2023)

Since the commissioning of Lines A and B in 2009, the Khorgos Compressor Station has operated continuously for over 5,000 days, facilitating the transport of more than 500 bcm of natural gas from Central Asia to China. In 2022 alone, the station delivered approximately 43 bcm of gas through the pipeline network, meeting 11.8% of China's total annual natural gas consumption (Xinhua, 2024). This extensive pipeline infrastructure is a cornerstone of China's energy system, supplying natural gas to over 500 million residents across 27 provincial-level regions, including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (News Central Asia, 2024). This highlights the critical role of the Khorgos Compressor Station in advancing regional energy cooperation and integration.

Another flagship BRI megaproject is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which aims to establish direct rail connectivity between China, Central Asia, and beyond. This project is designed to reduce transportation costs and transit times significantly, facilitating smoother trade flows (Liao, 2021, p. 491). The railway represents a vital component of the BRI framework, reflecting China's broader strategic goal of enhancing regional connectivity and expanding its influence. Serving as a crucial transport corridor linking China to Central Asia and eventually to Europe, the railway project is expected to accelerate trade, strengthen economic ties, and bolster China's economic dominance by fully integrating Central Asia into its trade networks.

The BRI has also had a transformative impact on trade between China and Central Asia, reinforcing China's position as the region's dominant economic partner. Trade volumes between China and the five Central Asian states increased from \$1.8 billion in 2000 (Stronski & Ng, 2018, pp. 13–14) to over \$30 billion in 2016, reaching approximately \$90 billion by 2023 (statista.com, 2024) (Figure 1). The trade balance is often skewed in favor of China, with many Central Asian nations exporting raw materials while importing manufactured goods, machinery, and consumer products from China (Umarov, 2024).



Source: (CGTN, 2023; Chupilkin et al., 2023; EEC, 2019; statista.com, 2024; stats.gov.cn, 2023; Umarov, 2024, p. 3; Uslu, 2024, p. 15)

**Figure 1** Trade turnover between Russia and China with the countries of Central Asia (2013-2023) and total mutual trade turnover between countries of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (2015-2023) (in billion USD)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the comparative analysis of trade volumes between China with the five Central Asian states (2013-2023) and intra-EAEU trade (2015-2023) reveals a striking disparity. The total trade turnover between China and Central Asia has experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades, underscoring the region's deepening economic interdependence with China. These trends are poised to shape the trajectory of Sino-Central Asian relations, influencing regional economic strategies and power dynamics in the years to come.

Through targeted investments in transportation, energy, and trade infrastructure, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has redefined Central Asia's role as a critical hub for international commerce while solidifying China's economic dominance in the region. By integrating Central Asia into its broader economic and geopolitical framework, Beijing has ensured that the region remains central to China's evolving sphere of influence. The BRI exemplifies China's capacity to align infrastructure development with strategic ambitions, fostering connectivity while expanding its geopolitical reach.

In 2018, China and Russia sought to bolster their cooperation and mitigate potential conflicts of interest in Central Asia by formalizing a trade and economic cooperation agreement between Beijing and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This agreement was built upon their 2015 pledge to coordinate the EAEU with China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), effectively linking the two flagship regional integration initiatives. Although the agreement has delivered limited economic benefits thus far, its significance lies in the diplomatic message it conveys. It reflects a shared commitment by both nations to manage overlapping interests in Central Asia and avoid the perception of direct competition as they pursue their respective integration strategies (Sahakyan, 2020, p. 5).

### Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) represents a cornerstone of economic cooperation between the Central Asian Republics and Russia, embodying Moscow's strategic ambition to consolidate its leadership and maintain its sphere of influence in the region (Mirza & Ayub, 2021, p. 446). By integrating the economies of its member states under Russian leadership, the EAEU serves dual purposes: advancing shared economic objectives and reinforcing Russia's



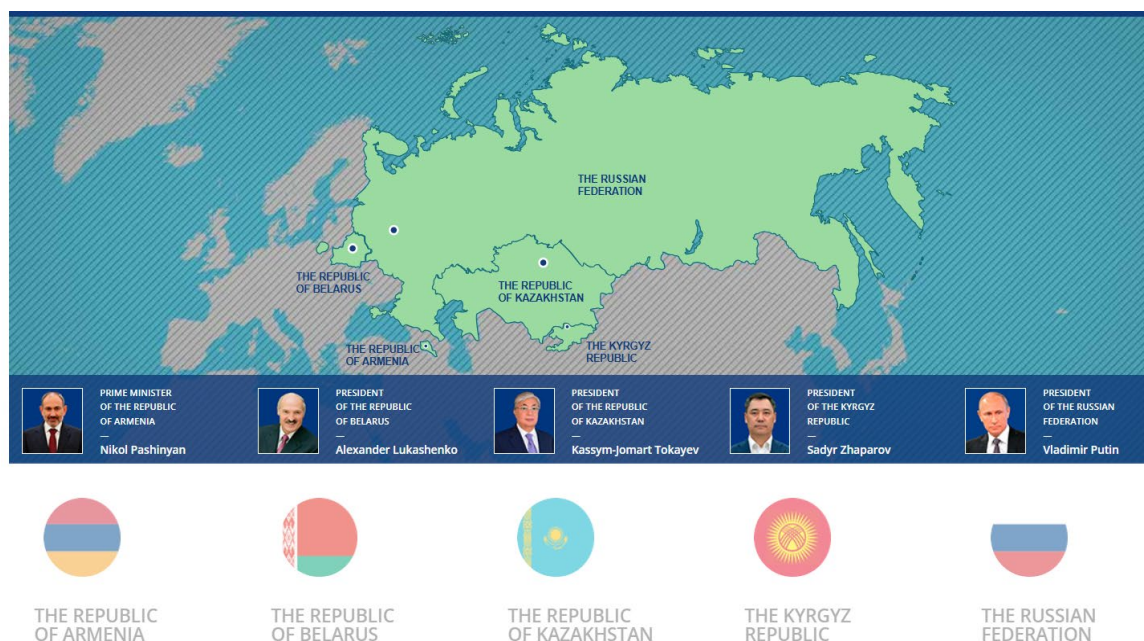
geopolitical position. It functions as a platform to enhance regional connectivity while affirming Moscow's role as a dominant power within the post-Soviet space (Vinokurov, 2017, p. 56).

The EAEU's core objectives include implementing coordinated economic policies and ensuring the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour among its members. Additionally, the union seeks to modernize its member economies, promote industrial cooperation, and improve the competitiveness of national industries in the global market (eaeunion.org, 2024). These aims underscore the EAEU's emphasis on fostering deeper regional integration while advancing economic development (Vinokurov, 2017, p. 57).

Established through the Eurasian Economic Union Treaty, which was signed in 2011 and came into effect on May 29, 2014, the EAEU builds upon earlier regional integration initiatives. The concept of a Eurasian union was first proposed in 1994 by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev during a visit to Moscow. This vision subsequently evolved through the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which laid the groundwork for the formal creation of the EAEU (eaeunion.org, 2024).

Today, the EAEU's full members include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan participating as observers. This composition reflects the union's broader ambition to create a cohesive and integrated economic bloc across the post-Soviet space (Kaczmarek, 2017, p. 1030; Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018, p. 164). By balancing economic integration with geopolitical strategy, the EAEU continues to serve as a key mechanism for advancing Russia's influence while promoting regional economic cooperation.

**Map 3** Eurasian Economic Union's Map and Member states



Source: (eaeunion.org, 2024)

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) represents a unique combination of economic integration and geopolitical strategy, functioning as a pivotal mechanism for Russia to strengthen its influence in Central Asia while advancing shared economic objectives among its member states. Through its comprehensive framework, the EAEU aims to promote regional connectivity and cooperation while ensuring Russia's continued dominance in the post-Soviet space.

One of the EAEU's most notable achievements has been the establishment of a unified customs system and the harmonization of trade policies. These efforts began with the Customs Union, initiated in 2007 by Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus (Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018, p. 167). By 2010, customs tariffs were aligned, and internal customs controls were abolished by 2011,



enabling the Customs Union to become fully operational in 2012(Yeliseyev, 2019, p. 2). Building upon this foundation, the EAEU has streamlined trade processes and deepened economic integration among its members.

On May 8, 2024, the Supreme Council of the EAEU convened in Moscow under the chairmanship of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The expanded-format meeting brought together leaders from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, with observer participation from Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel. The summit concluded with several new agreements and extensions of existing ones, further reinforcing economic and logistical ties within the union (kremlin.ru, 2024).

The III Eurasian Economic Forum (EEF) was held from September 30 to October 1, 2024, in Yerevan, Republic of Armenia. The forum was strategically aligned with the meeting of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, which included the participation of the heads of government from the EAEU member states and observer nations. This year's forum coincided with Armenia's chairmanship of the EAEU in 2024 and marked the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union. Reflecting this milestone, the central theme of the EEF was "10 Years of the EAEU: Prospects and Priorities"(eaeunion.org, 2024). The forum's business program encompassed approximately 30 events, addressing critical and high-priority topics related to the integration processes within the EAEU. The event aimed to facilitate the active participation of key stakeholders, including representatives of large, medium, and small enterprises from member states and third countries, as well as officials and representatives from EAEU governmental bodies. Additionally, the forum attracted heads of state, policymakers from third countries, and representatives from international, academic, and educational institutions interested in fostering collaboration within the framework of the Union. The III Eurasian Economic Forum served as a platform to evaluate the progress of the EAEU over the past decade and to identify future priorities for deepening economic integration, strengthening institutional cooperation, and expanding partnerships both within and beyond the region(eaeunion.org, 2024). By bringing together a diverse array of participants, the forum highlighted the EAEU's ongoing commitment to fostering inclusive economic growth and enhancing its relevance on the global stage.

A key priority of the EAEU is the development of transnational transit corridors to improve logistical efficiency and reduce transportation costs. These efforts include enhancing rail connectivity between Central Asian countries and Russia, facilitating the smooth movement of goods across the region. Such initiatives are crucial for the EAEU's strategy to position itself as a vital link in global trade networks.

Over time, the EAEU has witnessed steady growth in trade volumes among its member states, driven by reduced tariffs, harmonized regulations, and improved logistical frameworks. The EAEU has also actively pursued free trade agreements with non-member countries, including Iran and India, thereby expanding market access for Central Asian states(eaeunion.org, 2024). Key sectors driving EAEU trade include energy (oil and gas)(Bianco et al., 2021), machinery, agricultural products, and consumer goods, with Russia maintaining a dominant role in energy exports. The total trade turnover among EAEU member states grew from approximately \$45 billion in 2013 to an estimated \$100 billion in 2023 (Figure 1)(statista.com, 2024), underscoring the union's resilience and success in fostering regional economic integration amidst geopolitical challenges.

The EAEU has also focused on creating a more attractive investment climate by harmonizing regulations and reducing barriers for foreign investors. This effort is particularly relevant for Central Asian countries, which seek external investments to support infrastructure and development projects. Russia plays a central role in this framework, with its companies heavily engaged in sectors such as energy, agriculture, and manufacturing. These investments not only drive regional economic development but also deepen Moscow's economic ties with Central

Asia, ensuring the continued reliance of member states on Russian support (Kaczmarek, 2017, p. 1029).

Russia's leadership in energy infrastructure is evident in initiatives aimed at securing the flow of Central Asian energy resources. Efforts to modernize pipelines and rail networks align with the broader goals of economic integration and regional competitiveness, further cementing Russia's strategic role within the EAEU (Bianco et al., 2021, p. 2).

Compared to other regional integration initiatives, the EAEU is often positively regarded for its clearly defined objectives and structured policies. Its successes in fostering trade, establishing unified customs regulations, and developing transit corridors underscore its strategic significance in the region (Vinokurov, 2017, p. 55). However, the EAEU also reflects Russia's broader geopolitical strategy. By consolidating its sphere of influence, Russia limits the capacity of member states to align with other global powers, effectively maintaining their economic and security dependence on Moscow.

The EAEU exemplifies Russia's dual approach to regional integration, blending economic cooperation with geopolitical imperatives. By fostering economic interdependence among member states while preserving its dominant position, the EAEU solidifies Russia's influence in Central Asia and safeguards its strategic interests. This balance ensures that the EAEU functions not only as an economic bloc but also as a mechanism for projecting Russian power in the post-Soviet space.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has significantly impacted Eurasian economic integration, highlighting the complex interplay between external geopolitical events and internal union dynamics. The crisis, which began in November 2013 when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), marked a turning point (Roberts & Moshes, 2016). Ukraine's decision to forgo closer ties with the EU and the subsequent upheaval underscored the strategic importance of Ukraine as a trading partner for the EAEU's founding states. Ukraine's inclusion in the EAEU was a central objective from the outset, but the crisis disrupted this vision and exposed underlying challenges within the union (Yeliseyev, 2019).

External shocks, such as the Ukraine crisis and global economic volatility, have revealed tensions among EAEU member states and an apparent inability—or unwillingness—to coordinate policy effectively. For example, in February 2014, Kazakhstan unilaterally announced a surprise 19% devaluation of its national currency, the tenge, in response to a weakening Russian Ruble. This decision raised fears of a potential currency war and the onset of a disruptive “beggar-thy-neighbor” cycle of competitive devaluation, as each EAEU member state sought to gain an advantage for domestic producers. Such fears were further validated in January 2015, when Belarus implemented a 7% currency devaluation—the second major devaluation within a week—in response to the continued depreciation of the Russian Ruble (Roberts & Moshes, 2016, p. 15).

These developments highlight the structural challenges within the EAEU, particularly the difficulties in harmonizing monetary policies among member states. While the union has made strides in trade integration, its inability to mitigate the economic ripple effects of external shocks reflects broader vulnerabilities. Moving forward, the EAEU's success will depend on its capacity to enhance policy coordination, address internal tensions, and adapt to evolving geopolitical and economic landscapes.

### **Comparative analysis of China's BRI and Russia's EAEU**

This section of the study provides a comparative analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) within the framework of the sphere of influence concept. By examining the tools and strategies identified in the theoretical framework,

the analysis evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of both initiatives and assesses their effectiveness in establishing and expanding spheres of influence.

### **China's BRI: Strengths**

The BRI is unparalleled in its financial backing and infrastructural investments. Through extensive projects, such as railways, pipelines, and highways in Central Asia, China has solidified its economic influence and extended its sphere of influence across the region.

The BRI's non-institutionalized and project-based framework allows China to engage bilaterally, reducing the constraints of rigid legal agreements. This adaptability facilitates tailored partnerships with diverse political and economic systems.

Central Asia's strategic location as a land bridge between China and Europe makes it a core region for the BRI. The initiative enhances connectivity and trade routes, reinforcing China's role as a global trade hub.

Beyond economic investments, the BRI fosters cultural exchanges and promotes a "win-win" narrative, enhancing China's soft power and global influence.

### **Russia's EAEU: Strengths**

The EAEU's structured and legally binding framework formalizes Russia's influence over member states. Mechanisms for trade liberalization, economic integration, and collective decision-making reinforce Russia's leadership role.

Russia's historical connections with Central Asia provide a natural advantage in maintaining influence. Shared language, religion, and cultural heritage bolster Russia's soft power in the region.

The EAEU acts as a counterweight to Western encroachment, offering member states an alternative to Western-centric economic systems. This positions Russia as a guardian of regional sovereignty.

Central Asia's reliance on Russian energy infrastructure and markets strengthens economic interdependence, ensuring a steady flow of resources and influence.

### **China's BRI: Weaknesses**

Central Asian states increasingly voice concerns about the debt burdens associated with Chinese infrastructure projects. These dependencies can erode sovereignty and provoke resistance to China's influence.

Disproportionate benefits accruing to China have led to suspicions of neo-colonialism, fuelling mistrust among local populations and governments.

The BRI's expansive scope demands vast resources and sustained economic growth. Overextension risks undermining China's ability to maintain consistent influence, particularly in regions like Central Asia.

### **Russia's EAEU: Weaknesses**

Unlike the BRI, the EAEU lacks substantial financial resources to drive transformative infrastructure or development projects, reducing its economic appeal compared to China's initiative.

Russia's dominance within the EAEU often generates resentment among member states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, who fear losing sovereignty under this institutionalized framework.

The EAEU's focus on post-Soviet states limits its global reach and reduces its capacity to counterbalance large-scale initiatives like the BRI.

Tensions among member states regarding economic policies and unequal benefits threaten the cohesion and effectiveness of the EAEU.

The findings underscore that while both the BRI and EAEU are effective in expanding their respective spheres of influence, they operate through distinct mechanisms and scales of ambition. The BRI reflects China's ambition to position itself as a global leader by integrating Central Asia into a broader Eurasian trade network. In contrast, the EAEU consolidates Russia's regional dominance but struggles to compete with the worldwide scope of China's initiative. Despite overlapping interests, competition between the BRI and EAEU is evident in their efforts to shape Central Asia's geopolitical alignment. For instance, China's growing influence increasingly challenges Russia's traditional dominance, creating friction in their shared buffer zones. Central Asian states face both opportunities and challenges as they navigate between these initiatives. While the BRI offers significant economic benefits, it also raises concerns about sovereignty and debt dependency. The EAEU provides institutional stability but lacks the financial clout to drive transformative growth.

Both the BRI and EAEU demonstrate differing economic strategies for projecting influence in Central Asia. However, spheres of influence are rarely shaped by economic tools alone. To capture the full spectrum of power projection, it is essential to examine the military and political dimensions that underpin each initiative.

### **Military-political dimensions of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia**

While economic tools remain central to the expansion of China's and Russia's influence in Central Asia, military and political strategies constitute a critical, yet often underexamined, dimension of their respective approaches. The concept of a sphere of influence inherently presupposes not only economic leverage but also the ability to assert political will and, when necessary, ensure security and regime stability. This section explores the military-political dynamics that underpin the Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union, revealing distinct strategic visions and operational modalities.

#### **Russia's military footprint and security strategy**

Russia's approach to Central Asia is deeply rooted in its perception of the region as part of its traditional "near abroad" and an essential buffer zone for its national security (Suslov, 2018). Through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia has institutionalized its role as the region's primary security guarantor. This commitment was most visibly reaffirmed in January 2022, when Russia-led CSTO forces intervened in Kazakhstan to quell mass unrest at the invitation of President Tokayev – an act interpreted by many analysts as a clear assertion of Russia's dominant security role (Scott & Askerov, 2024).

In addition to institutional mechanisms, Russia maintains permanent military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, conducts regular joint exercises, and has provided military training and arms transfers to its Central Asian allies. These actions are indicative of what Mearsheimer (2001) defines as regional hegemony, wherein a state seeks to dominate its immediate geopolitical neighborhood to deter external influence and maintain strategic depth.

Russia's security influence is also shaped by its hybrid warfare capabilities, especially in the wake of the Ukraine conflict. Cyber influence, intelligence cooperation, and elite co-optation strategies have been observed across the region, underscoring a broader strategy of informal coercive control (Laruelle & Royce, 2020; Racz, 2015). This hard power orientation reinforces Russia's identity as a traditional security actor in Central Asia.

#### **China's political-military caution and strategic restraint**

In contrast, China has adopted a cautious military posture in Central Asia, refraining from establishing military bases and emphasizing the principle of non-interference. While Beijing has

significantly expanded its economic and cultural footprint, it has been careful not to project overt military power, thereby avoiding direct confrontation with Russia in the security domain.

China's main institutional platform in the region, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), promotes security cooperation on transitional threats such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism. However, the SCO remains largely political and symbolic in its security dimension, lacking the operational capacity of alliances like the CSTO (Yuan, 2010). Moreover, China's participation in the SCO counterterrorism drills, such as the Peace Mission exercises, serves more as a signal of strategic interest than a functional projection of military dominance.

Instead, China's military influence is channelled through dual-use infrastructure, surveillance technologies, and the export of security equipment. The Digital Silk Road initiative introduces new forms of influence via facial recognition systems and cybersecurity cooperation, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Taylor, 2022). While less visible than Russia's military bases, these tools extend China's influence into the political realm, particularly in internal security.

### **Comparative implications**

The asymmetry in military engagement between the two powers reflects their broader strategic philosophies. Russia prioritizes geopolitical control through security dominance, while China pursues geoeconomic primacy coupled with technological penetration. As Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue, such differentiation aligns with a multipolar regional order in which power projection is sectoral rather than uniform.

This division of labor creates both coordination and competition. On the one hand, China's economic leadership complements Russia's military dominance, reducing the risk of direct conflict. On the other hand, as China expands its digital, infrastructural, and political influence, the boundaries of mutual tolerance may blur. Central Asian states, meanwhile, are not passive: the strategic balance between the two powers, leveraging one against the other to extract economic or security benefits (Allan et al., 2021).

The recent international developments illuminate the evolving dynamics of Russian and Chinese power in the region. First, the Ukraine war has strained Russia's resources and international legitimacy, potentially weakened its influence, and created openings for China to assert more diplomatic or economic leadership in Central Asia. Second, Russia's intervention role in Syria stands in stark contrast to China's persistent avoidance of overseas military entanglements, reinforcing the hard-soft power divide.

The comparative analysis highlights the distinct strengths, weaknesses, and strategies of the BRI and EAEU in shaping their spheres of influence. Economically, China leverages financial might and global connectivity ambitions, while Russia emphasizes institutional integration and historical ties. Politically and militarily, Russia acts as the region's primary security actor, whereas China exercises restraint, relying instead on surveillance tools, soft power, and infrastructure diplomacy. This duality reveals a complex interplay of cooperation and competition, which Central Asian states must navigate as they balance between two distinct yet overlapping power centers.

## **Conclusion**

China's growing economic clout and its capacity to provide substantial infrastructure investments and trade opportunities have increasingly challenged Russia's historical dominance in Central Asia (Singh, 2021, pp. 98–99). Despite this competition, both powers have recognized the potential benefits of aligning their efforts in the region, resulting in areas of pragmatic cooperation (Lukin, 2021, p. 373). The comparative analysis of China's Belt and Road



Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) reveals nuanced dynamics, where competition is tempered by mutual interests.

China's BRI and Russia's EAEU share common goals of promoting regional integration and economic development in Central Asia, but they differ significantly in their approaches and areas of emphasis. The BRI focuses on creating a vast network of infrastructure projects—roads, railways, pipelines, telecommunications, electricity grids, and ports—designed to enhance connectivity along the historic Silk Road across Eurasia and the Middle East (P. Cai, 2017, p. 833). In contrast, the EAEU prioritizes economic integration, emphasizing policy harmonization and the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among its member states (Mostafa & Mahmood, 2018, p. 165; Vinokurov, 2017, p. 58).

However, economic influence alone does not define spheres of influence in international relations. This study demonstrates that China and Russia also pursue distinctive military and political strategies to reinforce their regional positions. Russia acts as the principal security guarantor through the CSTO and maintains permanent military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, projecting hard power and ensuring rapid response capabilities during crises (Scott & Askerov, 2024). Conversely, China adheres to a non-interventionist approach, leveraging soft power and emerging geoeconomic tools, such as surveillance technology and digital infrastructure, while avoiding direct military entanglements (Taylor, 2022).

The conceptual framework of spheres of influence—once rooted in historical empire-building—proves analytically relevant for understanding the current competition between China and Russia. As the region remains largely insulated from direct Western involvement, China and Russia have de facto delineated their influence: Russia leads the security and political domain, while China dominates economically, with growing technological penetration. These overlapping zones of influence are not purely adversarial; they are underpinned by strategic compromise, consistent with theories of multipolarity and regional hegemony (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Mearsheimer, 2001).

The comparative analysis of BRI and EAEU within the framework of the sphere of influence concept reveals distinct but intersecting domains of influence established by China and Russia. The findings highlight five key dimensions of Chinese and Russian influence in Central Asia: the first, cultural and historical legacies continue to position Russia as a linguistic and educational hub, reinforcing its soft power. The second, through institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia asserts its primacy in regional security, particularly in response to threats like terrorism and political instability. The third, the SCO, symbolizes a cooperative platform for security dialogue and political legitimacy, though with limited military enforcement. Fourth, the lack of strong Western involvement in the region has enabled both powers to fill the strategic vacuum without significant external interference. And the last, the BRI represents China's economic dominance, marked by large-scale investment and infrastructure-led integration, reshaping the regional orientation toward Beijing.

The analysis underscores the interplay of competition and cooperation between China and Russia in Central Asia. Acknowledging its limited capacity to compete with Beijing's economic presence, Moscow pragmatically focuses on leveraging its strengths in security and political influence. By doing so, Russia avoids direct confrontation with China while reinforcing its role as a regional stabilizer. With its extensive financial resources and infrastructure initiatives, China has successfully expanded its sphere of influence, positioning itself as an indispensable economic player in Central Asia.

Despite their differing strategies, these spheres of influence are not entirely adversarial. Collaborative mechanisms, such as the SCO, demonstrate the potential for cooperation when their interests align, particularly in countering shared threats like terrorism (Ayyildiz et al., 2018, p. 111). However, the growing asymmetry in economic power between China and Russia may

exacerbate tensions in the future, particularly as Beijing's ambitions continue to reshape the regional balance.

The spheres of influence established by China and Russia in Central Asia reflect a complex interplay of cooperation and competition. While China dominates the economic sphere through the BRI, Russia retains significant political and military influence through the EAEU, CSTO, and its cultural ties. Central Asia thus serves as a geopolitical crossroads where the interests of these two powers converge and collide.

The overlapping spheres of influence highlight the strategic importance of Central Asia as a region where global powers test their ability to project influence and secure partnerships. Moving forward, the evolving dynamics between China and Russia will continue to shape the region's geopolitical and economic landscape, with Central Asian states navigating carefully to balance their relationships with both powers.

This research makes several important contributions to the field of international relations and regional studies. It enriches the understanding of the sphere of influence concept by applying it to the modern geopolitical strategies of China and Russia in Central Asia. By juxtaposing the BRI and EAEU, the study offers a nuanced perspective on China and Russia's differing approaches and strategies to project power. The findings provide valuable insights for Central Asian states, enabling them to navigate their relationships with these two powers strategically while maintaining sovereignty.

The study is subject to several limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on the post-Soviet Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, limiting the applicability of its findings to other regions where BRI and EAEU are active. Second, the analysis centers on the BRI and EAEU as representative initiatives, excluding other Chinese and Russian projects that may influence the region. Furthermore, the research employs the concept of "sphere of influence" as its primary lens. This framework provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the geopolitical and economic interactions between major powers and smaller states. It is particularly suited to examine the dynamics in Central Asia, where historical legacies and contemporary power rivalries converge to shape regional relationships. The sphere of influence framework illuminates the underlying strategies, tools, and impacts of major power initiatives like the BRI and EAEU. This makes it an effective tool for understanding the complexity of power projection and regional control in Central Asia.

To gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics explored in this study, future research could investigate how Central Asian states perceive and respond to China's and Russia's overlapping spheres of influence, analyze Kazakhstan's role as a key state in Central Asia, or analyze the role of other Central Asian states in balancing China's and Russia's competing interests. Another suggestion for future research could be conducting longitudinal studies to track how the relationship between BRI and EAEU evolves and its impact on regional stability.

The strategic importance of Central Asia as a testing ground for great power influence underscores the need for continued analysis of the region's evolving dynamics. As China and Russia navigate their overlapping spheres of influence, the balance of cooperation and competition will continue to shape the geopolitical and economic landscape of Central Asia, influencing not only regional stability but also the broader global order.

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