



## ASYALI VE BATILI ÇOK YÖNLÜ DİPLOMASİSİNİN ORTA ASYA'YA BAKIŞ AÇILARININ KARŞILAŞTIRILMASI VE ORTA ASYA'NIN TEPKİSİ

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Research Article

Geliş Tarihi

Received: 8 Kasım 2023

Kabul Tarihi

Accepted: 31 Ocak 2024

### A COMPARISON OF WESTERN AND ASIAN MULTILATERALISM IN THEIR APPROACH TO CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN RESPONSE

**ÖZ** Son 20 yılda Orta Asya'yı Rus etkisinin üssü olarak gören uluslararası ilişkiler söylemine artık meydan okunuyor. Avrupa Birliği ve Çin, sırasıyla Yeni Orta Asya Stratejisi ve Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi aracılığıyla bölgeye olan ilgilerinin arttırmaktadırlar. Her iki plan da bölgeyle ekonomik ve siyasi bağların güçlendirilmesini hedeflemektedir ve bu bölgesel güç dengelerinin değişimine yol açabilir. Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, 2021'den bu yana Afganistan'dan ve görünüşte bölgeden çekilirken, bir kez daha bölgeye müdahil olmak için politikasını yeniden çizme aşamasındadır. Araştırma, Batı ve Asya Çok Yönlü Diplomasisinin Orta Asya'ya yaklaşımını tahlil etmeyi amaçlayacaktır. Batı ve Asya'nın çok yönlü yaklaşımı uzun vadede geliştikçe, Orta Asya üzerinde nüfuz mücadelesi bölgenin kalkınması açısından kritik hale gelecektir. Dünyadaki tüm güçler hakimiyet için yarışırken, Orta Asya devletlerinin tepkisi uzun vadede kritik rol oynayacaktır. Bununla birlikte bu araştırma, Orta Asya'daki Batı ve Asya çok yönlü diplomasisinin, jeopolitik konumu ve çok vektörlü politikası nedeniyle bölgedeki çok taraflılığın pragmatik ve karmaşık mekanizmalarını ortaya çıkardığını ileri sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Orta Asya, Rusya, Çin, Rekabet, Diplomasi, Çok Yönlü Diplomasi

**ABSTRACT** Within the past 20 years, the international relations discourse that conceived Central Asia as a base of Russian influence is now being challenged. The European Union and China have stated their increased engagement in the region through the New Central Asia Strategy and Belt and Road Initiative respectively. Both plans include strengthening economic and political ties to the region, which could result in a shift of power. While the USA has withdrawn from Afghanistan and seemingly from the region since 2021, it has redrawn policy to be once again more involved within the region. The research will aim to deconstruct the approach of Western and Asian Multilateralism to Central Asia. As the approach of Western and Asian multilateralism develops over the long term, the battle for influence over Central Asia will become critical to the development of the region. With all of the world's powers vying for domination, the reaction of the Central Asian states will play a critical role in the long term. Nevertheless, this paper argues that Western and Asian multilateralism in Central Asia exposes the pragmatic and complex mechanisms of multilateralism in the region due to its geopolitical position and multi-vector policy.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Russia, China, Cooperation, Diplomacy, Multilateralism



## INTRODUCTION

As independent Central Asia seeks to assert itself on the world stage, the European Union (EU), United States of America (USA), Russia, and China are vying for power; Central Asia is becoming the new battlegrounds of Western and Asian multilateralism. This paper aims to explore the question of what Western and Asian multilateralism looks like in Central Asia, how it acts, and finally, how Central Asia responds to them. For an independent Central Asia, the Western and Asian states vying for power create a pragmatic, multi-vector Central Asia, which translates to increased agency in foreign policy and relations. As a relatively unexplored area of academic and policy research, this paper aims to bridge the gap of knowledge in academic literature of the ongoing policy in Central Asian scholarship. This is done through the compilation, exploration, and analysis of English, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Central Asian sources and policy documents.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan constitute the landscape of Central Asia. Within the context of this essay, the timeframe of analysis will be between 1991 and 2023. Through utilising the policy papers of the EU, USA, Russia, and China, two distinct understandings of multilateralism and diplomacy emerge. Western Multilateralism, which promotes economic and political cooperation above sovereignty and Asian Multilateralism, which puts sovereignty and stability above all else. This essay will analyse the discourse, mechanisms, and policy applications of Western and Asian Multilateralism through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism theory. The theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism are used in conjunction to provide a broader and in-depth analysis, rather than a combination of two theories. Selecting less than realism, liberalism, and constructivism results in an incomplete analysis and understanding of multilateralism in Central Asian. All three theories in conjunction provide the necessary insight into the multi layer diplomatic processes of Central Asia. Succeeding this analysis, a separate section will outline the consequences of the Central Asian identity crisis of the 1990's, and their consequent reaction towards various multilateralisms, through how they function as competitive vectors. Mentions of Turkey and Iran as a distinct mechanism, when relevant, are also included amongst Western and Asian Multilateralism. As a developing form of diplomacy, multilateralism in Central Asia is expected to gain further traction and create a multivector, economically integrated, and global Central Asia.

## Literature Review

While there has been significant research into international Organisations and multilateralism in academia, there is a distinct lack of research towards its manifestation in Central Asia. (Stone, 2012) Central Asia was labelled and understood as Post-Soviet Space due to the retention of the Soviet power structure. Central Asia was initially reluctant to leave the USSR. The Central Asian states voted overwhelmingly to renew the Union in 1991, demonstrating a clear interest of the elites to maintain the current relations of power. (Montgomery, 2022) Under Yuri Andropov's campaign of anti-corruption in the early 1980's, many elites had been replaced by pro-Moscow officials. In addition to the decades of purges and russification of the region, the Central Asian leadership had become complacent in their place in the Soviet system.(Montgomery, 2022) However, leadership across the region shifted to a paternal autocracy in 1991 to preserve their position in the hierarchy. In essence, the new leadership was just a rebrand of the previous one. Especially in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the leadership

remained practically unchanged.(Montgomery, 2022) This contributed greatly to the understanding that Central Asia was continuing its previous path as a zone of Soviet (currently Russian) influence in the 1990's due to the unchanged ties it had to Moscow. Due to the perceived impermeability of the Post-Soviet Space, many scholars did not recognise the region as an independent entity in the international relations domain. Therefore, many academic works and policy papers during the late 1990's and early 2000's do not separate Central Asia as an independent entity. This caused Central Asian scholarship to be a subsection of Post-Soviet Space scholarship rather than a category of its own, which has caused a lack of academic interest and output. Due to this limitation, there is a smaller pool of available literature regarding multilateralism in Central Asia compared to other regions. In addition, the lack of extensive language skills in Mandarin, Russian, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Tajik have reduced the accessible literature to the author.

İsmayilov (2013) in 21. Yuzyil Rusya Dış Politika Doktrinleri'nde Güney Kafkasya Ve Orta Asya Değerlendirmesi details the historic development of Russian policy towards Central Asia. İsmayilov delves into history and connects it to the present in a deconstruction of Russian domestic and foreign policy objectives. While talking about multilateralism in Central Asia, it is crucial to discuss the effects of Soviet influence across the 20th Century and the legacy that Russia bears in the region. İsmayilov provides great context into the ideology and methodology of the historic progression of Russian foreign policy in Central Asia. This is especially important while considering strategies outlined in policy papers. As outlined in Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding Lewis (2022) points out that the newly formed Central Asian states were thrust in a position where they had to establish and legitimise themselves within the international order. The question of legitimacy was of fundamental importance for the Central Asian states in the 1990's. Even after this transitional period in the 1990's, many still viewed Central Asia as a "Post-Soviet Space". Within this understanding of Central Asia, it is important to analyse the attitudes of other entities towards the Central Asian states to comprehend their approach towards the integration of Central Asia in the international order. This will be very useful in exploring the identity crisis of Central Asia in the 1990's.

Since the 2010's and the colour revolutions across areas of Russian influence, there has been a renewed interest towards Central Asia. This is especially evident in the change of attitude towards Central Asia through four key documents produced by the EU, USA, China, and Russia.

The European Union's shift in attitude towards Central Asia in the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia and the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia is crucial to understanding the prospects of Central Asia as a new strategic region in the 21st Century. The EU's 2007 Central Asia strategy outlines key areas of focus for the allocation of EU development aid and diplomatic engagement in the region. These areas encompass addressing security threats, safeguarding human rights, fostering economic development, facilitating the growth of transport and energy infrastructure, and upholding environmental preservation. In comparison, the 2019 strategy document focuses more on Central Asia as a commercial and industrial partner.(European Parliamentary Research Service , 2019) The shift from development aid to an upcoming major economic partner demonstrates the evolution of the EU-Central Asian partnership to a new level. The key indicator for this shift is Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan being considered upper-middle income countries, which disqualifies them from developmental aid. The strategy's emphasis on the main players of the region as the EU, Russia, and China demonstrate that the EU has acknowledged it has to

compete for future cooperation with the Central Asian states. Dzhuraev and Muratalieva (2020) deconstructed the launch of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia in “The EU Strategy On Central Asia”. The aim of the article is to evaluate and analyse how the implementation of the new Strategy can be beneficial for both Central Asia and the European Union. Dzhuraev and Muratalieva (2020) argue that the new Strategy is a great step forward from the 2007 policy on establishing closer relations and reacting to the changing status quo within the region. Dzhuraev and Muratalieva understood and contextualised the EU’s attitude towards the region in the wake of the US withdrawal of Afghanistan, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and the political ties of Russia throughout the region.

The United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 by the US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (2020) emulates the EU’s Strategy for Central Asia 2019 policy paper, however, with the United States as a key actor in the region. It is a very important document to understand and interpret the scope, context, and methodology the US will pursue within Central Asia. Within the paper, policies are outlined in relatively vague terms, although care is given to promote the importance of American influence within the region. This paper is a key document to understand the US perspective on external and internal actors in the region and to what extent the US is willing to expand its influence within Central Asia. It provides a great starting point into integrating the US approach into multilateralism within Central Asia as the crucial method to prevent Chinese or Russian dominance. Through the EU and US strategy documents, the foundations of Western Multilateralism are established in the context of this essay.

Xi Jinping’s keynote speech given at the China-Central Asia Summit on the 19th of May 2023 is a clear summary and indicator of how China wants to pursue its strategic objectives in the region. The speech outlines 4 objectives: stability, prosperity, harmony, and interconnectedness in Central Asia.(Jinping, 2023) It further outlines strategies to achieve these priorities, primarily through economic and cultural exchange. The biggest contributor to all of these objectives is the Belt and Road Initiative, launched by Xi Jinping in 2013 in Kazakhstan. Throughout Xi Jinping’s speech, it is clear that there is a difference in attitude towards Central Asia by China when compared to the EU and USA. Stability and peace as an objective is a clear distinction from the EU and USA. Clarke (2017)’s “The Belt and Road Initiative: China’s New Grand Strategy?,” emphasises the BRI as a Chinese attempt at gaining strategic influence and proposing an alternative to US hegemony, while in another view he suggests that the BRI is the manifestation of Beijing’s geopolitical goals to break perceived US influence in Central and South Asia. Similarly to Clarke (2017), Zorbay (2019) in Kuşak-Yol Projesi Ve Türkiye'nin Orta Asya Hedefleri suggests the monumental Belt and Road Initiative proposes a potentially gargantuan economic, cultural, and political shift within the region. This expression of Chinese policy, along with the Russian “Near Abroad” forms the foundations of the methodology of Asian Multilateralism. Clarke (2017), Zorbay (2019), and Jinping (2023)’s speech provide useful context to the development of Chinese interests in Central Asia.

The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, published 31st of March 2023, outlines the modern understanding of the Russian “sphere of influence”. The term “Near Abroad” is used for most of the old Soviet republics, but in essence refers to Belarus, Ukraine, the Caucasian states, and Central Asia. Similarly to China, Russian Federation (2023)’s goals in the Near Abroad are focused on stability, peace-building, integration, and cooperation. The pattern emerging from Chinese and Russian documents is that stability and peace is the priority for all active and developing diplomatic mechanisms in the region. With such close alignment of their goals, Russia and China’s position regarding each other becomes

questionable. Some Scholars have observed that rivalries between rising powers in Asia have introduced an Eastern dimension to the "New Great Game" in Central Asia (Contessi, 2015). Contessi (2015) has argued that the complementarity between the advanced industrial economies and the extractive economies of Eurasia is driving the emergence of a new form of continentalism. While more recent opinions have offered nuanced perspectives on the realism of such a proposition, Contessi (2015) maintains that an expanding Sino-Russian axis could give rise to a "Greater Asia" that challenges the international order. If the trends highlighted in this special issue continue and deepen in the future, they may serve as a corollary to the early assessments mentioned. It is important to note that these assessments are still in their early stages and their future evolution poses considerable challenges. However, this does not mean that the exercise of analysing and anticipating their development should be disregarded. Such assessments present real challenges for analysts and policymakers alike, and therefore, despite being tentative and accompanied by appropriate cautionary notes, they hold both scholarly and policy relevance.(Contessi, 2015)

### **Multilateralism Theory**

Multilateralism is a particularly demanding form of international cooperation. It requires a strong sense of collective identity in addition to shared interests. In the context of the early 21st Century, multilateralism plays a huge role in defining the strategic importance of Central Asia. In exploring the multitude of political and economic interactions surrounding Central Asia, it is important to define what Multilateralism is. According to de Wijk, Thompson, and Chavannes (2020), the Western interpretation of Multilateralism (the dominant understanding in this discourse due to the concept's Western origin) is liberal internationalism. The basis of the definition of Multilateralism rests on G. John Ikenberry who argues that the logic of liberal internationalism is tied to 5 conditions: open trade and exchange, commitment to rule-based order, a form of security cooperation, the idea that power politics can be 'tamed' by building stable relations in pursuit of mutual gains; and finally, that liberal internationalism will foster the spread of liberal democracy(de Wijk, Thompson, & Chavannes, 2020). Furthermore, de Wijk, Thompson, and Chavannes (2020) split multilateral cooperation into 2 categories: "inter-nation" multilateralism based on protecting sovereignty (e.g. NATO, Warsaw Pact, CSTO) and "supranational" multilateralism in which nations relinquish some of their sovereignty in return for additional prosperity and stability (e.g. European Union).

In contrast, Cox (1992) suggests that Multilateralism can only be understood in the context in which it exists, and that context is the historical structure of the world order. He further goes on to say that Multilateralism is also not a passive and dependent activity, and can be seen in cases as an active force shaping the world order(Cox, 1992). Indian scholarship on multilateralism bears resemblance to the ideas of Robert W. Cox and challenges the dominant understanding of multilateralism as liberal internationalism. According to Shahi (2013), Indian scholarship has 4 key tenets:

"Multilateralism is based not on static but on potentially dynamic institutions and rules. Multilateralism is more a function of norms rather than institutions and the normative shifts in multilateralism can be captured through the sociological process of norm localisation which implies the melding of global norms in accordance with the regional culture. Norm localisation is shaped more effectively by regional than global forces. The leadership provided by the actors of new multilateralism goes beyond the structural leadership offered by the global hegemon."(Shahi, 2013)



To define multilateralism in Central Asia, it is essential to synthesize the approach of different scholarships. The combination of Robert W. Cox's and Indian Scholarship's alternative discourse and the Western discourse on multilateralism, a single definition can be created. Therefore, multilateralism, in the context of Central Asia, is a reactive and evolutionary force of global sociological, political, and economic norms localisation. While the methodology differs between the dominant and alternative discourses, the goal of all parties involved in the multilateral axis of Central Asia is to elicit positive reactions of the indigenous governance towards their own norms.

## WESTERN MULTILATERALISM

The broad understanding of multilateralism as a concept generally originates from a Western influenced standpoint. What many consider as multilateralism is the combination of European multilateralism and American multilateralism, under the blanket term Western multilateralism. While American multilateralism can trace its roots to European multilateralism and share common methodology, the unique position of the USA as a superpower has created an exclusive variant of European multilateralism. The EU is classified as a singular foreign policy entity in the context of this essay due to the predominantly economic and social interactions with Central Asia. As a single economic market with centralised regulations on social development, and no direct territorial connection to Central Asia, EU policy towards Central Asia is formulated uniformly. The USA had direct political involvement in the region as recent as 2021, due to the war in Afghanistan, and has had more direct interactions based on counter terrorism and military access with Central Asia. In the 21st Century, Central Asia has gained new importance to the EU and USA, which is reflected in their increased economic and social involvement in the region. This is reflected in the revised strategy documents of the EU (2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia) and the USA (United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025). To understand this shift in attitude, it is imperative to deconstruct the origins of Western multilateralism through analysing the historic institutions contributing to the idea of Western multilateralism. As regional integration is a goal for Central Asia, analysing the origins of the EU could merit a quantifiable methodology on how regional integration organisations develop. As the sole supranational entity in this analysis, the ideas embedded in the foundations of European multilateralism are critical to understanding the policy of the modern EU. Through this analysis, it is possible to discern the practical and policy applications, within the realms of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, of Western multilateralism in the context of Central Asia.

## European Multilateralism Discourse

The European Union did not merely appear as a regional supranational organisation without any precedent. While some consider the Holy Roman Empire (HRE) as a direct predecessor to the European Union, prominent scholars such as Peter Wilson, Len Scales, and Tom Scott recognise that there is more depth to this issue.(Coy et al., 2017) Over its 1000 year history, the HRE developed and adapted to become a supranational authority of a significant part of Europe. Its various institutions and practices evolved to preserve the empire, which is evidenced by its outstanding endurance and durability over the course of millenia. The key connection between the HRE and EU, in the context of this essay, is that multilateralism is a millenia old practice in Europe, in one way or another. The HRE presented many institutions that demonstrated cooperation in judicial, economic, and political matters. The development and acceptance of negotiation institutions for centuries of European political development has ingrained a sense of democracy and multilateralism in the political psyche. Negotiation and compromise is easily

observed across hundreds of treaties and imperial courts that stopped inter-HRE conflict. Even though the HRE has ceased to exist for more than 200 years, its millennial existence is difficult to erase from political thought in Europe. Observing the HRE's legacy on Europe through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism yields a better understanding of its effects on the EU.

For realists, international anarchy and the fragility of security makes international institutions marginal to state politics. John Mearsheimer defines international institutions in *The False Promise of International Institutions* as:

“institutions as a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behaviour, and proscribe unacceptable kinds of behaviour. These rules are negotiated by states, and according to many prominent theorists, they entail the mutual acceptance of higher norms, which are standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations” (Mearsheimer, 8)

Even in the dismissive nature of realism, according to the aforementioned definition, international institutions do have a stake in world politics as propagators of diplomacy. The acceptance of such rules permit a cohesive and beneficial form of multilateral diplomacy for states, especially to smaller states. As states, using these international institutions, permits safer conduct to achieve strategic objectives. In an age where war is both economically, socially, and politically expensive, international institutions aid states to use multilateral diplomacy as a cost effective measure. Even for hardcore realists, this is a substantial alternative to pursue in an anarchical international order. If the HRE is considered a practically powerless and puppet organisation, its capabilities of providing conflict negotiation, political stability, and a platform for diplomacy was desirable. Therefore, a similar institution (EU) is not unexpected to eventually form after its demise. However, the modern manifestation of the institutional platforms of the EU are not sufficiently explained through realism theory.

Liberalism as argued by Robert Jervis and Andrew Moravcsik, is the culmination of societal ideas, interests, and institutions that influence state behaviour by shaping state preferences.(Moravcsik, 1997) This is done through the dissemination of domestic interests aggregated by institutions.(Jervis, 2016) In this context, the various bodies and estates of the HRE represent a liberal viewpoint of domestic interest attempting to shape institutions and policy. The representation of most classes of the population, albeit dominated by monarchy and aristocracy, could be viewed as a proto-liberal code of multilateral conduct.(Whaley, 2006) The various institutions and decision making processes of a binding resolution of the European Union mirror the HRE's approach quite similarly. As a result, the institutional legacy of the HRE and heritage of the EU from a liberal perspective is the adherence to institutional decisionmaking.

In a similar fashion to liberalism and borrowing some themes of realism, constructivism's approach to understanding the HRE's legacy is an amalgamation of history and social understanding. As Jervis (2016) suggests; in the perspective of constructivism, agents and structures do not exist independently, but form, reproduce, and change each other.(Jervis, 2016) The history of supranational institutional development and multilateral negotiation is common social development across the HRE, which, according to constructivism, has evolved into the modern day EU. To interpret the HRE and EU as independent and isolated institutions would be contradictory to constructivism. Therefore, constructivism would argue that the social understanding of supranational identity, combined with the

history of supranational institutions, presents a continuous narrative of the HRE and EU as the spirit of European Multilateralism.

With established historical institutions of multilateralism, supranationality, and negotiation, there is no surprise that modern discourse of European Multilateralism manifests itself primarily through liberal and constructivist approaches, in the form of economic and political interdependence. According to Amartya Sen (2007), credibility of multilateral engagement accrues from building and nurturing coalitions of interest, taking into account the opinion of others, keeping open lines of communication, and affording respect to different views and values, creates effective and meaningful engagement. The historical legacy and utilisation of multilateralism in Europe makes it a credible and effective style of engagement. However, this is only the case while dealing within the confines of the EU's members. European multilateralism on a global platform represents one aspect of Western Multilateralism. The other aspect being the United States of America and its approach to multilateralism.

### **American Multilateralism Discourse**

As a dominant force in international relations and a part of the common understanding of "Western", the USA has a distinct approach on multilateralism in contrast to the EU. This could be traced back to the liberal internationalism of President Woodrow Wilson. Aptly named as "Wilsonianism", this idea of promoting democracy, defending human rights, and the spread of capitalism, is America's distinctive approach to multilateralism.(Hoffmann, 1995) Stanley Hoffmann (1995) identifies the revival of Wilsonianism in the Clinton Administration's foreign policy as a pragmatic variant of Wilsonianism. This reincarnation of liberal democratic internationalism aims to expand free trade, democracy, and protect human rights through use of force, if necessary.(Hoffmann, 1995) This is evident from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, whose goals were to establish and promote democracy and human rights, according to US narratives. However, the methodology of American liberal internationalism does not necessarily conform to the liberal methodology of international relations. American foreign policy and its approach to multilateralism can be better understood by being broken down into three methodologies. The unique situation of the USA permits a variety of strategies to be used because of the sheer size of the foreign policy apparatus. The hard and soft power utilised in American foreign policy can be categorised under realism, liberalism, and constructivism methodology.

John Mearsheimer (1994) posits that institutions have minimal influence on state behaviour, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability. From the perspective of the US, it is possible to bypass and avoid international institutions and act using its hard power capabilities. The Invasion of Iraq in 2003 after the controversial United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441, demonstrates that the US is willing to manipulate and bypass international institutions to achieve its strategic objectives. While many states and officials protested the legitimacy of the US invasion, none attempted to actively deny US military action. Even in diplomatic exchanges, there are instances where the US opts to avoid negotiating with international institutions and prefers bilateral arrangements. This is clearly observed in US-Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) member states interactions, where the US has adopted bilateral strategies with the relevant countries instead of engaging with the SCO as an organisation. Ziegler suggests that the US's approach is not necessarily aimed at undermining the SCO but rather acknowledges the organisation's limited effectiveness and internal challenges stemming from competition between China and Russia.(Ziegler, 2013) Therefore, from the realist view, American



multilateralism cares little for international institutions, merely using them if it is convenient. Hard power, in the form of a global military network is the true avenue of American multilateralism; the sheer size and scale of America's military permits it to diplomatically engage with confidence and impunity.

On the other hand, the US' encouragement and initiative in creating multilateral organisations such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) demonstrate that there is a desire to create a liberal international order. Hence it would be unfair to assume that the US does not have any elements of liberalism within its foreign policy. If we apply Jervis' and Moravcsik' understanding to the US, it paints a picture of institutional hegemony. Many international institutions being founded or dominated by the US is a clear contribution of US multilateralism to Western multilateralism. This is similar to the EU's approach to multilateral institution building, but for the US, it is backed through military power in addition to economic power. Therefore, the methodology of societal ideas, interests, and institutions influencing state behaviour by shaping state preferences does not exist. In fact, the opposite is true for the US. American multilateralism. Cox, Lynch and Bouchet (2013:13) in *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion* argues that "the prime mover of liberal theory is the ability of democratic peoples and governments to maintain an enduring peace among themselves based on their character as individuals, groups and political units." He further suggests that the other components of liberal theory: economic interdependence, multilateral institutions and American leadership complement democracy as constituent elements of the project, but their contribution is merely secondary in the formulation of US Foreign Policy.(Cox, Lynch and Bouchet, 2013) In the context of liberalism, American multilateralism means the ability to manipulate a web of international institutions to advance America's hegemonic stance.

Constructivism is a great methodology for both US policy practitioners and academics to understand the image America creates for itself. Over the course of the 20th Century, the USA has managed to cultivate an image as the defender of democracy, human rights, and capitalism. Multilateralism is a particularly demanding form of international cooperation. It requires a strong sense of collective identity in addition to shared interests. The collective identity of the US lies in democracy and capitalism. Domestically, this has translated into the social understanding that the US has taken the mantle of world hegemon, police, and caretaker of freedom. Jervis reinforces this understanding through how national leaders and the US thinks of itself in certain ways that mould the perception of the US on the world and how leaders behave. This provides the core of the social understanding of what the US' place is in the world. The United States sees itself as devoted to universal values and willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. While this notion could be easily argued against, Jervis uses the example of Iraq being the latest in a series of behaviours that generates great costs and few benefits.(Jervis, 2016) This attitude to provide service to the "greater good" is arguably the greatest contribution of American multilateralism to the understanding of Western Multilateralism.

The combination of realism, liberalism, and constructivism analysis form the discourse of American multilateralism in Central Asia. Each brings a different approach to the discourse: realism manifests in hard power; liberalism manifests in the maintenance of the liberal international order; constructivism directs American actions with a sense of "greater good". With the American discourse established, with

the combination of the European discourse, it is possible to discern the policy approach of Western multilateralism in Central Asia.

### Western Multilateralism in Practice

The combination of American and European multilateralisms form the interpretation of Western multilateralism as a political force of institution building, rules based international order promoting economic interdependence and democracy through its institutional or military power. To analyse the policy approach of Western multilateralism in Central Asia, the EU and US strategy documents for Central Asia must be placed under scrutiny through the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, to contextualise the effects of the discourse on policy.

The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia revolves around three key pathways, which form the basis of EU-Central Asia cooperation. These are: Partnering for Resilience, Partnering for Prosperity, and Working Better Together.(European Parliamentary Research Service , 2019) The goal of all of these pathways, as outlined by the document, is to “forge a stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership with the countries of Central Asia so that the region develops as a sustainable, more resilient, prosperous, and closely interconnected economic and political space.”(European Parliamentary Research Service , 2019:1) Due to the lack of EU membership in regional multilateral organisations, the EU has adopted to create bilateral agreements called Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs), that aim to establish a framework of engagement with signatory Central Asian states. These are created in a way to not obstruct or be exclusive of other cooperation initiatives such as free trade agreements and custom zones. The emphasis on non-exclusivity represents important political signalling towards Russia and China. EU enlargement towards Eastern Europe and potential partnerships in the South Caucasus region in the 2000’s caused Russian hostility towards the EU for the supposed instigation of Colour Revolutions and encroachment of Russia’s sphere of influence. The EU acknowledges the large influence that Russia and China have over Central Asia via institutional, economic, and political connections, and is actively trying to avoid negative reactions that could close off the entire region.

The United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 has a central focus on using Central Asia as a stabiliser for Afghanistan and economic cooperation through regional stability. The US Strategy paper outlines five key goals that revolve around regional independence, counter terrorism, connectivity, promotion of law and human rights, and US investment in Central Asia.(US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020) The strategy, issued in 2020, exists in the context of increased efforts by the US to contain Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia.(Xianghong, 2020) Policy objectives of the strategy include strengthening Central Asian independence from malign actors, limiting dependency, and advancing US national security interests.(US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020) The USA is very much pushing for the “C5+1” negotiation platform, encompassing Central Asian states with Afghanistan, to promote territorial integrity and engagement of Central Asian states in Afghan stability. In this framework, the US aims to increase its influence in the region through economic investments into Central Asia and attract Central Asian investments into Afghanistan to contribute towards regional stability. The US also aims to counter Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia to confine trade routes to areas the US is capable of projecting power in. Chinese circumvention of the Malacca straits and the South China sea through Central Asia for trade would severely hamper US ability to enforce a naval bottleneck, an outcome truly undesirable for US influence on world trade.



The US and the EU acknowledge that Russia and China are the more dominant players in Central Asia in each of their respective strategies. From a realism perspective, only a conflict or antagonisation of Central Asian states towards Russia and China would allow them to dominate the region. As conflict is too costly and antagonisation of Central Asia is considerably difficult given the existing political, cultural, and economic ties to Russia and China, the EU and the US have to contain and erode their influences passively to be competitive. Following conflict and political agitation, becoming larger trading partners and not provoking Russia and China into retaliatory actions is the most cost effective and long term viable strategy for building Western influence. This is seen in the EU strategy for creating frameworks of trade and the US strategy of improving private sector investment capabilities. In addition, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are of great importance to the US as after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the takeover of the Taliban, border security in Afghanistan became a key objective. Consequently, to prevent terrorism spilling over the border to threaten Central Asian stability, investments are being made into reinforcing border security in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.(US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2022) Overall, from a realism perspective, the EU and US acknowledge the current superiority of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia and the need to contain this influence via offering lucrative cultural, political, and economic alternatives. Compared to the discourse surrounding Western multilateralism, the policy applications in Central Asia are more passive than expected. This is a clear acknowledgement of the potential escalatory(between the West and Russo-Chinese axis) consequences of aggressive policy in Central Asia.

As the representatives of the Western world, the US and EU hold significant power across many multilateral institutions. However, the regional multilateral institutions in Central Asia mostly remain off-limits for the EU and US, which prevent their engagement in the region to the bilateral format. This is a severe obstacle in the face of liberal engagement by Western multilateralism, which does have a reliance on a rules based, inclusive international order within its discourse. However, the non-interventionist and non-exclusionary economic cooperation approach has yielded results, with the EU becoming a large trading partner of Central Asia.(European Parliamentary Research Service , 2019) In addition, the EAEU member states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) have not been forced to choose between EU or Russia, which has eased the permeation of EU influence. The US has a comparatively more cultural approach, with the promotion of Western values and English through academic and social exchange programmes taking the lead. Both the US and EU, however, consider the promotion of democracy, human rights, and independence as a key objective; as a pathway to breaking the ties between Central Asia and the Russo-Chinese axis. In essence, the liberal perspective on Western multilateralism's function in Central Asia is composed of the emphasis on fostering economic partnerships and propagating Western values to break the economic and cultural dominance of China and Russia. This parallels the discourse surrounding Western multilateralism in the sphere of liberalism to the policies of the EU and USA.

The image of a post Soviet Central Asia has declined significantly in the 2000's, as a consequence of Central Asia gaining more agency in foreign relations. Since its independence from the USSR, Central Asia has been developing its own identity. Through a constructivist lens, Western multilateralism aims to capitalise on identity and state building, differing from the Soviet legacy, in Central Asia as a metaphorical crowbar to break it free from Russia and China. As Russian is still the regional lingua franca (although it has been steadily declining), efforts are being made by the USA to replace it with English. According to



the US Strategy, millions of Central Asians visit the USA yearly to learn English and thousands of students and academics receive funding from the US.(US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2020) The American University of Central Asia has been a key hub for the propagation of Western values and supplantation of the image of an independent Central Asia. This can be observed in the research published by the university; a significant part of the history research is focused on indigenous identity and struggle against communist modernism.(auca.kg, n.d.) Similarly, the EU has been providing training for Central Asian lawyers and other practitioners, as well as expertise on reforms to the legal system, to promote legal and governance systems analogous to European ones.(European Parliamentary Research Service , 2019) In essence, from a constructivist perspective, Western multilateralism is promoting the permeation of its values and culture, while strengthening indigenous identity to combat the neo Soviet legacy. This is done as an investment into the younger generations, who do not possess the same memory of the Soviet past and can be implemented with the “Western école” over the Russian one. The creation and support of cultural institutions and Western values is mirrored in the Western multilateralism discourse and, as evidenced by the funding granted for such ventures, used by Western multilateralism the most aggressively in Central Asia.

Both expectedly and unexpectedly, Western multilateralism takes a rather passive approach towards Central Asia. While the soft power and liberal, rules-based international order approach is expected; the acknowledgement of Russian and Chinese dominance is unexpected. If the NATO and EU enlargement into Eastern Europe can be used as a comparable case study, Western multilateralism has become more cautious. The aggressive expansion in Eastern Europe did not result in direct confrontation (but met with Russian hostility until the war in Ukraine), but the EU partnership operations in the South Caucasus were met with Russian resistance. As a result, EU operations seem to have adopted a passive approach towards permeating closer into traditionally Russian dominated regions. In addition, the geographical distance between Europe and Central Asia, along with Central Asia’s proximity to core Russian and Chinese territories, presents an additional obstacle to the maintenance of European presence. Therefore, Western multilateralism presents a more mature and cautious attitude while dealing with Central Asia, as the lessons of Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia bring temperance to the thrust of EU expansion. The discourse surrounding Western multilateralism is observable in EU and US policy, as policy is shaped for the purpose of gaining the most on the fronts it acts more confident in (economic alternatives and aid) compared to Russia and China.

## ASIAN MULTILATERALISM

Groupings in the Asian continent are arguably more difficult than in Europe or the Americas as the vast geographical landscape of Asia offers a complex history of political, economic, and social development. Similarly to Western multilateralism, Asian multilateralism could be split into 2 variants: Russian and Chinese. In contrast to Western multilateralism, however, Russian and Chinese multilateralism does not necessarily come together to create one understanding of Asian multilateralism. They are still grouped together as Asian multilateralism in the context of this essay, as they possess very similar conditions towards Central Asia. Both China and Russia have, both in the past and present, been neighbours or held significant territory in Central Asia. The Russian and Chinese collective neocolonial, political, and economic links to Central Asia place them in a different analytical situation compared to the EU and US. Key policy discourses of Russia and China converge on very similar themes, such as stability, security, and

sovereignty as previously established. However, does this necessarily translate the same into their approach to Central Asia? To determine the connection between discourse and actions, it is imperative to analyse what constitutes Russian and Chinese multilateralism within the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

### Chinese Multilateralism Discourse

Understanding how China views itself and the world around it is key to understanding their motives in foreign policy. To understand the Chinese self and world view, it is important to analyse the historical process in which China has come from. This analysis will create a historical narrative which can then be segmented into what constitutes the realist, liberal, and constructivist aspects of Chinese multilateralism and where they come from. Merriden Varrall in *Chinese Worldviews and China's Foreign Policy* indicates that there are three branches of the historical narrative of China that need to be understood in relation to foreign policy.(Varrall, 2015) These are: the Century of Humiliation, the view of cultural characteristics as being inherent and unchanging, and the idea of history as destiny.(Varrall, 2015)

The Century of Humiliation is a conceptual understanding of Chinese historical narrative that splits the timeline into 2. Before the Century of Humiliation, China saw itself akin to a world power, with immense wealth and power. The Century of Humiliation destroys this image of China and, in the words of Jiang Zemin (former CCP General Secretary): “Because of the corruption of feudal rulers, in more than 100 years after the Opium War, Chinese people were subjected to bullying and humiliation under foreign powers.”(Wang, 2012, pp.98–99) While this narrative has been recited for some time, it only became CCP policy to entrench the Century of Humiliation and the overcoming of that era through the efforts of the CCP in the 1990's.(Wang, 2012, pp.98–99) Presently, the position China sees itself is one that has overcome the Century of Humiliation and now is a leading power that can no longer be bullied by foreign powers.

In contrast to overcoming humiliation, the view that history can be interpreted as destiny and that cultural characteristics being inherent and unchanging are not formal narratives, but are nevertheless crucial to understanding China's worldview. President Xi Jinping's 2014 speech in Germany is a perfect example of this understanding:

“The Chinese nation is a peace-loving nation. And the most profound pursuit of a nation has its origin in the national character formed through generations. The Chinese civilisation, with a history of over 5000 years, has always cherished peace. The pursuit of peace, amity and harmony is an integral part of the Chinese character which runs deep in the blood of the Chinese people.” (Varrall, 2015)

This view is also supported by Zhou Fangyin's analysis of Ancient China.(Fangyin, 2023) Fangyin (2023) argues that the existence of a “great unification consciousness” placed Ancient China in a situation in which emphasis was placed much more on the interior than the exterior. It was considered more important to achieve the “cultivation of morality and peace” and maintain harmony, stability, and prosperity in the central part of the country than to annex foreign territory.(Fangyin, 2023) In addition, Ancient Chinese states had established a hierarchical order in East Asia on the premise of tribute, aptly named the Tributary System. The Tributary System, besides detailed rules on rituals and ceremonies, did not have a mechanism for political, economic, and social engagement. Even in this unequal hierarchy of Chinese dominance, China usually did not exercise effective administrative control over its neighbouring

countries, did not collect taxes, did not control their armed forces, and had limited impact on their foreign relations.(Fangyin, 2023) The ideology behind this organisation was the concept of “giving more and getting less.”(Fangyin, 2023) Using this narrative of Ancient China, the CCP is attempting to reconnect to the peaceful, harmonious, and benevolent past it views as its inheritance. The Belt and Road Initiative is perhaps the greatest example in Chinese foreign policy of the concept of giving more and getting less. The Belt and Road Initiative, according to existing infrastructure plans, entails Chinese-led investments in infrastructure and development projects in dozens of countries, worth an estimated 4 trillion dollars – a magnitude unprecedented in the 21st Century, a significant amount based in Central Asia.(Çınar, 2021)(Çelik, 2021) The land-based portion of the BRI is viewed as the Silk Road Economic Belt, a clear reference to the Ancient Silk Road. This grants China tremendous political and economic clout in Central Asia. The use of this clout for political and economic coercion or peaceful development is hotly debated, citing debt trap diplomacy and the opacity of loaning being indications of economic coercion by China.(Gelpern et al., 2021) However, Varrall (2015) accurately remarks that it is not important if China actually is a peaceful state, but to what extent it views itself as peaceful. This self-perception of peacefulness inherently contributes to how China acts abroad. These key themes in China’s self understanding, analysed in the context of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, will form the basis of Chinese multilateralism.

While Xi Jinping and the CCP has promulgated the image of a peace loving China, China has not been afraid of confrontation escalating to conflict. Since the CCP won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, it has fought India, Vietnam, USA, and South Korea among others. Even though China was involved in many conflicts, most of these conflicts were in an attempt to maintain control over the traditional spheres of influence of China. Realism theory would suggest that China had more than ample opportunity to dominate the Indochina region. However, China did not aim to expand its borders after the consolidation of the CCP in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War. The emphasis on sovereignty is the biggest parallel of Chinese multilateralism and realism theory. In all of its diplomatic dealings, China explicitly mentions the need to respect sovereignty and that in all exchanges sovereignty is a permanent condition.(Gungwu, 2007) On the other hand, the lack of expansionist and aggressive conflicts, emphasis on international recognition, and understanding China as the culmination of thousands of years of development means that realism theory is not sufficient to explain Chinese multilateralism. However, what realism theory can say about Chinese multilateralism is that it is not afraid of hard power projection in its perceived area of influence and promotes the development of the Chinese military to be capable of projecting power.

Interpreting Chinese foreign policy through the lens of liberalism yields more tangible results than realism. As Chinese economic power has grown, Chinese foreign policy has shown more liberal tendencies such as Deng Xiaoping’s free market reforms, integration into economic multilateral institutions, (WTO, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, East Asia Summit, BRICS, APEC) and investing into multilateral economic projects (Belt and Road Initiative). Combining the arguments of Gungwu (2007) and Fangyin (2023) with liberalism theory, this could be an indication that China feels that it has established stability, prosperity, and harmony in the interior, its attention has shifted to its direct neighbours and the promotion of those values in them. Therefore, from the perspective of liberalism, Chinese multilateralism manifests liberal tendencies through economic interdependence projects and involvement in economic multilateral organisations.

Arguably, the greatest reliance of the CCP in formulating Chinese foreign policy is constructivism theory. From Xi Jinping's speeches of a Chinese civilization and its manifestation, to the revival of ancient concepts such as the Silk Road, there are many instances where Chinese foreign policy actively aims to imitate the past. China also places great emphasis on the names and titles. The naming of many wars are different in Western and Chinese sources. For example, the naming of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising is more commonly known as the 1959 Tibetan Riots. The Sino-Vietnamese War is named as the Self-defensive war against Vietnam. While these may seem a matter of semantics, the naming of these conflicts is rooted in the desire to promote a China that acts out of the love of peace. In doing so, China is attempting to construct an understanding of how a post-humiliation, powerful China should be. Constructivism theory is very useful for the CCP in cementing its own identity as the legitimate inheritor and representative of the Chinese civilisation. Therefore, in the context of constructivism, Chinese multilateralism can be understood as the continuation of centuries of Chinese diplomacy culture and relies heavily on promoting the image of peace, prosperity, and harmony in its diplomatic relations.

In essence, the main objective of Chinese multilateralism discourse, once analysed through realism, liberalism, and constructivism, is to create the image of China as a superpower. It seeks to do this through establishing its hard power projection capabilities, economically integrating its neighbouring regions, and establishing its image as a stable, harmonious, and prosperous country.

#### Chinese Multilateralism in Practice

Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the China-Central Asia on 19 May 2023 represents the application of Chinese multilateralism theory into policy. The speech highlights key goals such as stability, harmony, and prosperity, while detailing the practical methods to achieve these goals. Deconstructing this speech through the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism distinguishes the application of discourse into policy.

Respecting sovereignty is the first and foremost goal of Xi Jinping's goals in Central Asia. This aspect of the speech is the strongest link to realism theory. "No one has the right to sow discord or stoke confrontation in the region" said Xi Jinping, covertly criticising foreign involvement (EU, US). The rationale many scholars suggest for China's emphasis on Central Asian stability is the precarious situation of Xinjiang. The stability of Xinjiang is a central concern surrounding the security of China, and it constitutes one of the primary factors determining China's policy towards Central Asia.(Niquet, 2006) The indigenous population is characterised, ethnically and culturally, by an identification with all of the populations of Central Asia rather than the rest of the Chinese people. For China, the methodology to provide Xinjiang's security is to break down an evident cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious community between Xinjiang and the Central Asian republics in order to construct, in contrast, a community of interests, linked to the nature of the regimes in power.(Niquet, 2006) While reinforcing these strategic links between China and Central Asia, it was necessary for Beijing at the same time to deny or minimise the natural and historical integration of Xinjiang with the whole region of Central Asia.(Niquet, 2006) Therefore, the later phrases of Xi Jinping emphasise that "Ethnic conflicts, religious strife, and cultural estrangement are not the defining feature of the region."(Jinping, 2023) The security concerns surrounding Xinjiang, once combined with the zealous defence of sovereignty and stability in Central Asia, create the necessity for Xi Jinping's insistence on stability. Hence, the discourse of Chinese multilateralism, within the confines of realism, manifests into policy as deterrence via hard power.

Joseph Nye in *Soft Power* famously argues that China or other powers do not possess the necessary soft power to break US hegemony. However, his comments regarding interdependence, in the sphere of liberal theory, provide an excellent deconstruction of how current Chinese multilateralism works in the perspective of liberal theory. Nye suggests that contrary to some rhetorical flourishes, interdependence does not mean harmony. Rather, he continues, it often means unevenly balanced mutual dependence. Further, Nye argues that interdependence is often balanced differently in different spheres such as security, trade, and finance. Therefore, Nye suggests that creating and resisting linkages between issues when a state is either less or more vulnerable than another is the result of a political power play. Political leaders use international institutions to discourage or promote such linkages; they shop for the forum that defines the scope of an issue in the manner best suiting their interests. (Nye, 1990) The BRI and its connections to the AIIB, EAEU, and other regional economic organisations demonstrate the interdependent relationship China is building. The emphasis of mutual assistance, common development, and deepening connectivity by Xi Jinping is the outlined methodology that China wishes to pursue. Combining the sheer scale of BRI investments with Nye's arguments of an unbalanced interdependence existing in the realm of soft power, China is utilising multilateral organisations to develop economic connections with Central Asian states that depend on China. Therefore, it can be argued that through a liberal perspective, Chinese multilateral foreign policy aims to create an economically interdependent order of states where China is in a dominating role

"The China-Central Asia relationship is steeped in history, driven by broad actual needs, and built on solid popular support." said Xi Jinping, reiterating once again how important the projection of a peaceful, harmonious, and prosperous China is to the CCP and the discourse of constructivist theory in Chinese multilateralism. (Jinping, 2023) The narrative of the revival of the Ancient Silk Road is the framing that the BRI takes place in. Varrall's interpretation of the Chinese worldviews of the view of cultural characteristics as being inherent and unchanging, and the idea of history as destiny are particularly prominent in this narrative. China revokes a lot of these historical connections to build the legitimacy of its operations in Central Asia. As the BRI has not been well received in some countries and actively viewed as a Chinese neo-colonial, debt-trap diplomacy by the West, it features this legitimacy building initiative to distance the understanding of China's role in Central Asia away from imperialist stereotypes. This is evidenced by Xi Jinping's phrases of millennia-old friendship and prospects for the future bearing important significance for China. (Jinping, 2023) The Cultural Silk Road project, entailing the establishment of cultural centres, joint-academic exchanges and projects, and strengthening civilizational dialogue through tourism and media exchanges are the policy manifestations of constructivist Chinese multilateralism. (Jinping, 2023) In the policy applications, Chinese multilateralism utilises constructivist theory to build legitimacy for itself and its sponsored institutions in foreign relations.

The approach of Chinese multilateralism towards Central Asia is a long term, cultural, and economic plan to further Chinese interests in the region. As the hard power capabilities of China grow, the gargantuan economic investments into Central Asia aims to implement "win-win" opportunities to entice Central Asian states to cooperate with China. Within the status quo, China is standing out from the competition as it's willing to promote economic connectivity at huge expense, while others do not possess the interest or capabilities to do so.



## Russian Multilateralism Discourse

The dissolution of the USSR ushered in a new era for Russian foreign policy. The Russian Federation's inheritance of the Soviet position (United Nations Security Council seat, nuclear stockpile) created two schools of thought for the future of foreign policy. (İsmayilov, 2013) The Gorbachov era had shown signs of this divide, yet it took the dismantling of the Soviet structure for it to come to fruition. The two schools of thought were the Atlanticists, and the Neo-Slavophiles. (Shevel, 2015) The Atlanticists, spearheaded by the Boris Yeltsin administration and then foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev, propagated a policy of integration and transition into the Western World. Practical policy examples of this were the shift to a market economy, and joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO). (İsmayilov, 2013) Initially, Russian foreign policy was shaped by an idea of Russia as a part of Western civilisation, which aimed at closer integration with Europe and the West. However, over the course of the 1990's, economic collapse, political uncertainty, and the Post-Soviet identity crisis, severely weakened the Atlanticists. In the late 1990's and with the rise of Vladimir Putin, the Neo-Slavophile ideology evolved into what is now understood as Eurasianism. From its 19th Century Slavophile origins, Eurasianism perceives Russia as an exceptional civilisation, one that rejects Europe and Asia but embraces its synthesis. (Smith, 1999) This was the rallying standard that was used domestically and internationally to cement Russia as neither imperial nor Soviet; but as a Eurasian global power. With the entrenchment of Vladimir Putin, the idea of "Eurasianism" and Russia as a unique civilisation has become the current impetus of Russian foreign policy.

With the restructuring of the former USSR into independent states, the former Soviet republics were understood by Russian foreign policy as the "Near Abroad". The term Near Abroad comes from the understanding that these newly independent, formerly Soviet states were not really foreign. They reflected the Russian view that a variety of national minorities had split from the greater Soviet identity. (Shevel, 2015) Therefore as a classification, Russian foreign policy regarded these states as Near Abroad, an indication that Russia aimed to retain a resemblance of dominion over these states. Through this reorientation of foreign policy in the understanding of the "Near Abroad" many of Russia's policies have gained a Eurasian focus.

Since the USSR's dissolution, Russia has established a variety of political, economic, and military alliances to remain as an active player in the regions that constitute the Near Abroad. Particularly concerned with Central Asia and retaining influence over the region, Russia has created multilateral organisations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which many of these former Soviet states have joined. While not all Central Asian states are members of each organisation (most notably Turkmenistan), there is general reciprocation towards Russian-based organisations. This is due to the military, political, and economic power Russia possesses in Central Asia. In addition, the soft power Russia has through language and culture is significant to warrant analysis. The hard power and soft power components of Russian influence and Eurasianism will be analysed through the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism to form the basis of Russian multilateralism and understand the extent of Russian involvement in Central Asia.

The fledgling Russian Federation had no means to support the structure of power projection the USSR had set in place in the early 1990's. Economic stagnation and the devolution of the Soviet military

apparatus amongst the new states had caused a decline in Russia's power projection.(İsmayilov, 2013) This necessitated a reorganisation and strategic retreat to focus on problems in the interior. Once the bureaucratic apparatus had settled into the new post Soviet order and economic conditions were stabilised, Russia once again aimed to reassert itself as a global power. At this stage, Eurasianism became the more attractive and dominant doctrine over Atlanticism. Realism theory would suggest that the Western cooperation era of the early 1990's was to buy time and space for a strategic reorganisation. Once that was accomplished, it was expected that Russia would aim to reassert itself globally, in one way or another. Though this initiative initially started with multilateral institutions(due to the weakness of Russian hard power), Russia's aggressive attitudes towards the Near Abroad (intervention in Georgia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan) demonstrates a resurgence of the Russian desire to project power. Political and security organisations are mere vessels for Russia to pursue its interests and ward off external powers such as the US. From this perspective, Eurasianism is the natural evolution Russia had to take if it preferred to retain a semblance of order it previously had. Therefore, according to realism, Eurasianism is the disguise that resurgent Russian imperialism and neocolonialism takes.

Liberal theory takes a more nuanced approach to Eurasianism than the latest trend of Russian imperialism. The levels of participation and engagement in the CSTO, CIS, and EAEU demonstrate the tangible effects regional organisations have had in increasing economic prosperity and security. The presence of these institutions and Russia have arguably stabilised the transition to statehood for many post Soviet states, most notably in Central Asia. The EAEU in particular has become a multi trillion dollar economic zone that facilitated exports of approximately \$1 trillion in 2021.(Eurasian Economic Union, 2017) The economic development of both Russia and the Near Abroad through the EAEU and its precursors throughout the early 2000's has been remarkable. The CSTO provides a peacekeeping force and a joint military command whose primary goals and actions have been towards countering terrorism and drug trafficking.(Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2023) In essence, the presence of economic, political, and military cooperation demonstrates Russia's fondness of multilateral institutions. Even though the West likes to downplay the actual effectiveness and independence of these organisations to discredit Russia, it is visible that Russian foreign policy utilises multilateral institutions as much as it can. Hence, in the perspective of liberal theory, Russian multilateralism is heavily entrenched in the use of institutions as manifestations of political, economic, and military interdependence.

The end of the Cold War not only shifted states and people, but also caused a post-Soviet identity crisis in Russia. Constructivist theory is essential in understanding the historical timeline and narrative of the post-Soviet identity crisis. This resulted in the Atlanticist and Eurasianist struggle in foreign policy. With the eventual win of Eurasianism, the early 2000's was a critical time in shaping the social understanding of Russia. As a state, it had just managed to contain the chaos of the 1990's and began to look abroad for its position in the world. This period of establishing Eurasianism was critical in projecting the identity of what a post-Soviet Russia would look like. Russia was a state that endured; the memories of the Great Patriotic War are frequently evoked as an instrument of cultural union against a greater enemy. Russia now was a state under "siege"; Russia once again had to remember this historic unity against the Western invaders and imperialists who wished to dismantle Russia. Within this narrative, Russia opted to reject the West and embrace its own ideas of universalism, integration, and scepticism of the West. Throughout the 2000's and 2010's it reinforced these narratives with policies of intervention, integration, and

consolidation (Georgian, Ukrainian, Kazakh interventions, EAEU, Union State, etc.). Consequently, the image of Russia's "backyard" was cemented in the Near Abroad, which was seen as an attempt at countering Western influence and the preservation of Russian civilisation. Therefore, Russian multilateralism, through the perspective of constructivism, heavily utilises the narratives of the uniqueness of the Russian civilisation and the necessity of protecting it against the "Western siege".

The domination of Eurasianism in Russian multilateralism discourse creates an aggressive, hegemonic, and protectionist image of Russia in Central Asia. The historic affiliations of Russia with Central Asia, alongside its desire to consolidate the Near Abroad amidst fears of Western involvement, heavily guides the discourse towards an imperious, expansionist, and defensive route. Consequently, this imbues Russian multilateralism's approach towards Central Asia with similar qualities.

### **Russian Multilateralism in Practice**

The previous analysis of the components of Russian multilateralism shares significant parallels to The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (CFPRF), published 31 March 2023. The CFPRF is a comprehensive outline of Russian foreign policy and provides extensive detail on policy goals in the Near Abroad and the Eurasian space. The policy outlines a concept of Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEPC) which encompasses Central Asia, China, and a variety of other states by combining the potential of these states in a network of partner organisations across Eurasia. Within this concept, regional and multilateral organisations play a critical role. To better understand the policy results of Russian multilateralism, it is crucial to analyse the EAEU as the foundation for the GEPC and how, in the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, it translates the discourse of Russian multilateralism into practice.

According to Kortunov (2020), "The "Greater Eurasian Partnership Concept" first introduced by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin in late 2015 emerges from the premise that the first steps in realising this goal should be taken in the economic architecture of the Eurasian continent, rather than in the political or military spheres." In comparison to political and military interests, economic interests are generally easier to predict, more reliable and less subject to the influence of subjective factors.(Kortunov, 2020) Therefore, in understanding the Greater Eurasian Partnership Concept, it is important to analyse the constituent parts and how they act within the mechanism of Eurasian integration.

The EAEU has become the flagship economic and political institution across Eurasia since its creation in 2014. The EAEU has its roots in a series of Russian-led integration efforts across the post-Soviet landscape spanning more than two decades. In addition to overarching structures like the CIS and the CSTO, Moscow's influence has driven integration attempts in the economic arena. This trajectory includes the initiation of the Customs Union Agreement (1995), succeeded by the Treaty on Increased Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Fields (1996), the Treaty on the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space (1999), and the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (2000). Notably, the Eurasian Customs Union materialised in 2010, followed by the formation of the Eurasian Economic Space and the CIS Free Trade Area in 2012. The overarching objective has been to foster a Russian-dominant trade sphere within Eurasia, promoting the unimpeded flow of goods. These various agreements and entities have progressively laid the foundation for the present-day EAEU, a culmination of these sustained endeavours dating back to the 1990s. Stronski and Sokolsky (2020) contend that the objectives Russia pursues within the EAEU extend beyond mere economic aspects like trade and investment. According to

their analysis, the EAEU serves as a pivotal instrument for advancing Russian security interests. The authors posit that beyond economic considerations, the EAEU also functions as a strategic mechanism for Russia to counteract the influence of potentially hostile states in the Near Abroad and presents an alternative avenue to Western integration schemes (Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020). This can also be seen in the CFPRF, under the goals of creating a multipolar world, there is an explicit statement against US influence. The outlined goal is to “eliminate the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs, create conditions to enable any state to renounce neo-colonial or hegemonic ambitions.”(Russian Federation, 2023) This would suggest that the principle of sovereignty propagated by Russia is aimed at preventing intervention from external actors in regions it deems itself as the hegemon.

While analysing the GEPC and Eurasianism, realism theory’ understanding of Eurasianism as a disguise of resurgent Russian imperialism gains significant traction. Through tightening economic and political integration, Russia is countering potential foreign influences and securing its own interests. If left to their own devices, none of the EAEU states could compete with Russia for exports; as the economies of the member countries of the union are homogeneous, there is competition rather than complementation of exports.(Ziguo, 2019) In a sense, this forces states like Kazakhstan, who are heavily reliant on energy and chemical exports for revenue, to comply with economic pressures. The EAEU has not been operating smoothly either. It encountered obstacles stemming from internal disagreements and a lack of trust among its member states. Additionally, Moscow’s reservations about relinquishing a portion of its independent authority in trade and economic policymaking to supranational EAEU entities have posed challenges. As other member states acknowledge the significance of preserving their individual sovereignty and recognize a shift in their populations’ perception of Moscow from a dominant global hub, they see the EAEU as a framework that can limit Russia through organized structures governed by established rules.(Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020) This analysis by Stronski and Sokolsky posits the EAEU as a platform of restraining Russian aggression. In addition, the scepticism and explicit rejection of Western economic intrusion, arguably indicates that institutions are mere vessels of expressing Russian hegemony over Eurasia and diplomatic battleground of restraining Russian neocolonialism, confirming the overlap of discourse and practice.

The GEPC, according to liberal theory, is seen as a continuation of Russian domestic interest in being the regional hegemon of Central Asia through multilateral organisations. Since the entrenchment of United Russia, Putin’s political party in the Russian parliament (Duma), the idea of “the Russian World ’ (which in practice denotes Near Abroad) and Russia’s responsibility to protect and keep it together through multilateral organisations’ has become an important part of the discourse. As previously mentioned, within the discourse of Russian multilateralism, regional institutions play a crucial role. In policy, they are used much more aggressively than mere manifestations of interdependence and domestic interest. The primary objective of the EAEU is not to facilitate the integration of member states into global economic systems that encourage free trade and fuel the worldwide economy. Instead, it inhibits member states’ individual pursuits of independent free trade initiatives. This effectively confines them within a trade arrangement dominated by Russia and mandates that members establish trade agreements with other nations within the framework of the Russia-dominated trading bloc. These agreements clearly correspond to Russia’s geopolitical objective of enhancing its influence over neighboring nations and expanding a network of affiliations beyond its immediate surroundings.(Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020) The CSTO’s most

recent notable function was to prevent an alleged coup in Kazakhstan in the Bloody January events.(Kazangapov, 2022) The pattern of utilising multilateral organisations as a reflection of domestic interests is explained by liberal theory and translates well from discourse to policy.

Moscow's fondness of historical narrative and emotional connections warrant the use of constructivist theory in understanding the translation of discourse to policy. According to constructivist theory, the central concept that all Russian foreign policy is based upon is the "Russian World". This social and political understanding of the Russian World manifests itself as a geopolitical understanding of the Near Abroad, the GEPC, and on what basis should Russia act in this sphere. According to Laruelle (2015), this association of the Near Abroad "allows Russia to rationalize its perceived entitlement to supervise the developments in the Near Abroad, even endorsing interventionist policies if deemed necessary." Laruelle further continues to suggest that "it also serves as a rationale for re-establishing ties and reconciling with the Russian diaspora, while concurrently functioning as a crucial tool for Russia to establish its identity on the global stage and amplify its influence in international discourse." (Laruelle, 2015) Clear examples of interventionist policies is the Russo-Ukrainian war and use of regional organisations as interventionist platforms (Use of CSTO in Bloody January protests). Even for the EAEU, which represents the economic aspect of the GEPC, the symbolism of uniting the Near Abroad under one economic zone is significant. Most important for Moscow, as Stronski and Sokolsky suggest, is "that the EAEU has demonstrated that Moscow can establish itself at the centre of a regional multilateral organisation and boost its claim to being a pole in a multipolar world. The symbolism of the EAEU is as important to Moscow as the ongoing actual integrative processes, even if they are advancing at a slow pace."(Stronski and Sokolsky, 2020) In essence, under the auspices of Russian multilateralism, Russia sees itself as the guide and mentor who is responsible for Central Asia. Through its integration of these narratives in policy, in the realm of constructivist theory, there is the most direct translation of Russian multilateralism from discourse to policy.

As evidenced above, the Russian multilateralism discourse is greatly imprinted inside the Russian policy approach towards Central Asia. The approach of Russian multilateralism towards Central Asia is geared to bringing the GEPC to fruition. However, the war in Ukraine could besmirch the standing of Russia in the Near Abroad, which is bound to affect its policies' reception in Central Asia.

### THE CENTRAL ASIAN IDENTITY CRISIS

As Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "The End of History", a new history had begun in Central Asia. Decades of foreign rule had come to conclusion and Central Asia had regained independence. However, the days of the Kazakh Khanate, Bukhara, and Kokand Khanates were long gone. The time of the steppe nomads and the Silk Road cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Astana, Tashkent, Bishkek, Ashgabat, and Dushanbe had disappeared into history. As the new Central Asian states gained their independence from the USSR, the question of identity became central to nation building. Although to the external observer Central Asia may seem a homogenous entity, there are significant cultural and linguistic differences. These differences change the outlook of the Central Asian states on nation building practices.

There are two pathways the Central Asian states could have taken in the 1990's as a foundation for their identities: nationalism (primarily Turkic), and religion (Islam). The Soviet inheritance was unanimously discarded by all Central Asian states. Communism was not particularly popular within the region before

the dissolution of the USSR and would be a poor foundation for building legitimacy. Religion and nationalism were preferred over communism. After the post Soviet leadership disassociated themselves from communism, they required an alternate strategy. Kubicek (1997) reflects this understanding of Central Asian leadership in Nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia by establishing the Central Asian need to imbue their states with a distinct national flavour, differentiating themselves from their neighbours and, hopefully, giving birth to a sense of common identity. This requires the revival and re-writing of a national history, myths and symbols, as well as the promotion of regional culture and language. Examples across the region include the reverence of Manas, the legendary warrior and founder of the Kyrgyz people, in Kyrgyzstan, Tamerlane being honoured as a founding father in Uzbekistan, and the branding of Saparmurat Niyazov, first president of Turkmenistan, as “Turkmenbasi”, father of the Turkmen people.(Kubicek, 1997) In comparison, Kazakhstan does not participate to the extent of Central Asian states in the revitalisation of national myths and historic figures. This is potentially due to the larger Russian minority in Kazakhstan, proximity to Russia, and its demographic legacy of steppe nomadism. Kazakh national and religious identity is considerably weaker than the supranational Turkic identity in addition to smaller regional (primarily clan based) identification. While being a more common identity across the region than pan-Turkism, religion presented practical and political challenges as a foundation for nation building. The practical and political challenges can be categorised by two prominent case studies why Islam was not an ideal choice for Central Asian states as nation building tools.

The first and practical challenge Islam faced in Central Asian state building was the Tajik Civil War and Uzbek origin Islamic fundamentalism. From 1992-1997 Tajikistan suffered a five-year civil war which took an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 lives, and displaced almost 700,000 people.(Tunçer-Kilavuz, 2011) The civil war was fought between the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was an umbrella organisation consisting of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), Rastokhez (Popular Revival Movement), the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT), Lali Badakhshan (Pamiri “Rubies of Badakhshan” party), and the former communist elite.(Tunçer-Kilavuz, 2011) Besides the Islamic opposition in the Tajik Civil War, the late 1990’s and early 2000’s saw Islamic movements such as Hizb-ut Tahrir al-Islami and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan gain strength. Well armed and financed, highly motivated, and with extensive support from the wider world of Islamic radicalism and drug smuggling mafias based in Afghanistan, these were pan-Islamic and pan-Central Asian movements.(Rashid, 2001) The negative associations with the ongoing War on Terror and close links to Afghanistan were not popular with states who aimed at international recognition and stability. International cooperation with the War on Terror and tensions regarding the possibility of Islamic dissent was more than enough to dissuade Central Asian states to use Islam as a primary nation building tool.

The second and political challenge Islam faced in Central Asian state building was an external concern of a growing Islamic community that could threaten the stability of itself and neighbouring regions. Charles E. Ziegler outlines the status quo in the aftermath of the September 11 Attacks in Central Asia in Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and American Foreign Policy as follows:

“The realist security discourses of the United States, Central Asia, Russia, and China converged during the War on Terror, as all these countries were confronted with national security threats from terrorist organisations influenced by radical Islam. Russia, in particular, could effectively argue that Chechen separatists were aligned with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Similarly, China recognized the connections



between al-Qaeda, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Uighur separatists in Xinjiang. Central Asian leaders saw an opportunity to strengthen their position against Muslim fundamentalists, who posed a significant opposition to their authoritarian regimes. In this context, the governments of Central Asian countries understood that a U.S. primarily focused on combating terrorists and willing to enact strict measures like the USA Patriot Act would be less inclined to scrutinise human rights abuses committed by its allies. This realisation provided these governments with a degree of latitude to address internal security concerns, even if it involved suppressing dissent and curtailing civil liberties.”(Ziegler, 2013)

The fight against terrorism and the concessions gained by cooperation with the USA, Russia, and China provided sufficient room for Central Asian states to consolidate their regimes via nationalism (rooted in paternal autocracy) over religion. For the USA, Russia, and China, the best outcome was the consolidation of regimes to prevent instability that could spill over to similar demographics located in Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and Siberia.

As a consequence of the aforementioned fears of Islamic extremism in Central Asia, additional measures were taken by all external actors in the Central Asian search for identity. The First Gulf War, First Chechen War, and the Urumqi bombings in Xinjiang made the USA, Russia, and China very cautious about militant Islam. Central Asia could become a renewed source of Islamic terrorism which needed to be contained through strong central leadership. This resulted in diplomatic engagement and encouragement towards state-building policies which aimed at decreasing social instability in the process of transition from the old Soviet order. While there is no common agreement on combating terrorism within Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation presents the most comprehensive and effective mechanisms towards counter terrorism and drug trafficking than the CSTO or other organisations. This primarily resonates from the Chinese aims to contain and pacify Xinjiang through political and economic cooperation. According to Huasheng (2013), there are two discourses within Chinese academia of China’s interests in the SCO. One emphasises the need for security, while suggesting that the direct contribution of the SCO to the Chinese economy to be minimal. On the other hand, the second school of thought disagrees, stating that the economic benefits to the region and China is the most desirable for China, as economic cooperation creates the necessary preconditions to tackle poverty, which is one of the major sources of terrorism and extremism in the region. Huasheng (2013) combines both, stating that they are not mutually exclusive and should constitute the key areas of engagement. Therefore, amidst the fears of resurgent and widespread Islamic extremism and militancy, efforts in economic integration, political cooperation, and the encouragement of paternal autocracy were implemented as a countermeasure to potential threats. These broadly encompass the realist and liberal discourses in Chinese and Western multilateralism.

Following the developments against the Soviet legacy and Islam, the only viable alternative Central Asian states could turn towards as a nation-building tool was nationalism. The immediate embracing of a Turkic identity by Central Asia is seen as soon as 1992, merely months after independence from the Soviet Union. The Summit of the Heads of Turkic Speaking States held in Ankara, Turkey in 1992 was the first step towards the cultivation of “Turkic Diplomacy” by Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. For the next 20 years, summits were held regularly which eventually resulted in the formation of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021. Over these two decades, reliance on religion and Soviet inheritance have declined and as evidenced by the political investment into the OTS, a

clearer Turkic identity was embraced by the majority of the Central Asian states. Tajikistan is an exception to these efforts, as Nourzhanov and Bleuer (2013) in *Forging Tajik Identity: Ethnic Origins, National-Territorial Delimitation and Nationalism* argue that the contemporary understanding of “Tajik” is the historically sedentary, Persian-speaking Sunni Muslims in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Tajikistan is a major source of contention between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with border clashes and disagreements over identity, the legacy of Soviet administrative zones which have been unresolved for decades. While the formation of the Tajik national consciousness is recent, it has not resulted in a homogenous understanding of belonging. The significant Uzbek minority, along with the division of Shia Farsiwans and Sunni Tajiks, only result in social cleavages and tensions to increase. (Nourzhanov and Bleuer, 2013) Atkin (1993) argues that the broadest traditional social classifications of identity and belonging in Central Asia originate in the divide of nomadic and sedentary populations. As a sedentary population, Tajiks not only considered themselves from the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, but also from the fellow Persian speakers who were Imami Shi'ite. From these deep social divides that still persist in contemporary Tajik society despite the growth of national consciousness, a clear agenda of identity and nation building remains challenging in Tajikistan, hence they are excluded from the understanding of a Turkic Central Asia. (Atkin, 1993) Therefore, Tajikistan is not included in pan-Turkic platforms and diplomacy. Plagued by its internal divisions, Tajikistan remains in relative isolation and struggles with connecting to a supranational identity.

As Central Asian states continue to develop and expand their national identities and consciousness, coupled with the passing of the Soviet old guard, the appeal of the Russian école is in existential threat. While Tajikistan will struggle with finding its cultural place within Central Asia, the Turkic states of Central Asia's paternal autocracy is embracing the supranational Turkic identity over Islam. As the understanding of a Turkic Central Asia becomes entrenched, the constructivist discourse of Chinese multilateralism will receive more traction. Between Russia and China, Central Asia is reciprocating more towards China's liberal and constructivist policies, and Russian cultural and political influence is dwindling in the wake of the war in Ukraine and awakening of Central Asian identity.

## CENTRAL ASIAN REACTIONS TO MULTILATERALISMS

### Multilateral Engagement in Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have significant overlap in membership to multilateral organisations, but there is no unanimous membership to all organisations present in the region. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are the least participatory of regional mechanisms, both for differing reasons. As outlined above, Tajikistan's identity crises and political instability have relatively caused exclusion from pan-Turkic diplomatic engagement but is present in the CIS and SCO. In 1995, Turkmenistan adopted a policy of neutrality and was formally approved by the UN General Assembly by resolution 50/80 A. (UN General Assembly, 1995) Through this policy, Turkmenistan has pursued a policy of non-intervention and peace while committing to its obligations under the UN Charter. (UN General Assembly, 1995) Due to this foreign policy stance, which has remained unchanged and reaffirmed through an additional resolution (69/285) in 2015, Turkmenistan only participates in multilateral economic organisations, while strictly not engaging in multilateral defence organisations. (UN General Assembly, 2015) Consequently, Turkmenistan is only a full member of the Asian Development Bank and Economic Cooperation Organisation, and an observer or associate member to the OTS and CIS.



Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have the most participation in multilateral organisations amongst the region. The scale of participation and the extent that Central Asian states actually believe in these regional mechanisms is arguably a recent phenomenon. Collins (2009) argues that the initial drive of economic and security regionalism in the 1990's and 2000's was driven by patrimonial-authoritarian leaders' urge to survive. She argues that the Central Asian leaders that remained in power after the dissolution of the USSR engaged with regional mechanisms to maintain personal control and cater to the informal vested interests (elite cliques who informally hold power) that surround them and bolster their regime. (Collins, 2009) Therefore, the extent of cooperation lies in how multilateralism effected leadership and vested interests. Since the 2010's, the situation has somewhat changed, with the Soviet old guard relaxing its tight grip due to age, coups, or retirement.

Before analysing the Central Asian reactions to Western and Asian Multilateralisms, it is important to acknowledge the role of Iranian and Turkish efforts in the region for multilateral cooperation. While they are not as strong as any of the 4 powers, (politically and economically) Turkey and Iran possess strong cultural links towards the region which provide them a distinct soft power angle in comparison to Russia, China, USA, and EU. The Economic Cooperation Organisation, comprising Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan is the only organisation with full Central Asian participation. It represents the economic cooperation initiatives of Turkey and Iran in the region, predating to 1985 and inclusive of Central Asia since 2003. (Economic Cooperation Organisation, 2003) Arguably the Ashgabat Agreement, a multimodal transport agreement for the formation of an international transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, is the most prominent contribution towards economic cooperation within the organisation. However, ECO does not possess significant financial resources to fund infrastructure and connectivity investments, which has hampered its effectiveness in the region. However, the BRI, if successful in building its infrastructure projects, would revitalise the ECO and Turkey and Iran as actors in the region. As participants of the BRI, Turkey and Iran's connections to Central Asia would be stronger than ever and add a new dynamic to the region. (Zorbay, 2019) Increased connectivity could pave the way for new initiatives in the region, although in the current stage of the BRI, this is not certain. Therefore, it shall be noted that while Turkey and Iran do not possess the capital and political power to be dominant in Central Asia, they do possess significant soft power and the sole organisation with full regional participation in the region, which makes them minor actors with potentially larger roles in the future. Depending on their bilateral relations, this could put Russia in contention with Turkey and Iran. Similarly, the spread of Iranian influence can receive enmity from Western multilateralism, if bilateral relations between the US and Iran remain hostile.

### **Pragmatic Multi Vectorism in Central Asia**

While there are deviations in strategic policy concepts (or similar documents) between the Central Asian states, the key theme present in all is pragmatism. Pragmatism and multi-vector diplomacy are the key phrases used across the region, which demonstrate the openness of Central Asian states to cooperation in especially the economic sphere. To understand how this pragmatism and multi-vector diplomacy works in practice, it is imperative to analyse policy through the perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

From the perspective of realism, a multi-vector policy and pragmatic foreign policy grants the most agency to Central Asia. Keeping its options open and cooperating in a wide network, grants the space and



power for Central Asia to play powers against each other. The investments in Russian multilateralism (CIS, EAEU, CSTO) might seem to ward off Western cooperation, but the non-exclusivity concession from the EU and US has allowed for flexibility in this area. Russia is also more confident that it can retain more influence than the West over the region, better than Eastern Europe (geographic proximity and historic affinity being the primary reasons) which puts Russian policy at ease. Hence, this allows for Central Asia to reap the economic benefits of both the West and Russia while not causing additional conflict. However, this does not rule out potential Russian interventions in calamitous situations. The CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 (Bloody January) is the most recent example of Russian interventions in Central Asia. The common denominator of Russia, China, EU, and US is Central Asian stability and security. All parties possess political and economic investments in the region that require security to prosper. China's approach to promoting stability is mainly via economic integration. Western multilateralism shifts the focus towards the containment of Afghanistan. The Russian prerogative manifests much more aggressively, as there is a concern of declining Russian influence in the Near Abroad after the war in Ukraine. The case study of the War on Terror and its consequences in Central Asia allow for more in-depth analysis on deconstructing the reactions of Central Asia to the security dilemma.

The outlook of the West on Central Asia changed dramatically on September 11 2001. With the USA going to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Central Asia became critical for the war effort in Afghanistan. Following the attacks, there was consensus amongst the Central Asian states to cooperate in the War on Terror. Military access to airports in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan followed shortly after negotiations with the USA. Cooperation was widespread and strategic interests of all parties were aligned to combat the threat of Islamic extremism, as not only the USA but Russia and China would be severely affected by Islamic extremism spreading to their border provinces. However, this came to a halt after the SCO suspected US involvement in the uprisings in Andijan, Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Tulip revolution. This perceived violation of Central Asian sovereignty by the US stoked anti-US sentiment and was responded with demands that the USA vacate military bases and logistic hubs in 6 months. (Wright and Tyson, 2005) The short lived US-Uzbek cooperation between 2001-2005 demonstrates the strength of Russian influence in addition to the importance of respecting sovereignty. The liberalist approach of the US caused the breakdown of trust from Central Asia, strengthening Central Asian reciprocity towards the realist approaches of Russia and China.

Since the events of 2005, US-Tajik and US-Uzbek relations continue through the security concerns over Afghanistan. As both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan share the northern border of Afghanistan, after the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover, the US was concerned with the possibility of Islamic terror spillover from Afghanistan into Central Asia. As the events of 2005 became history and the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, cooperation reemerged in the previously strained US-Uzbek relations. The US has been investing in the border security of both countries, outlined in foreign policy papers, reflecting the realist approach of the US towards Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. (US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, 2022) Reciprocally, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan both state their desire and interest to pursue relations with the US, especially regarding border security with Afghanistan. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Tajikistan, 2020) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023) As the common denominator, the stability and security of Afghanistan does not receive backlash from Russia or China, as it is a mutually beneficial investment. Therefore, the US invests freely in border security in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

even though both countries were members of the CSTO(Uzbekistan withdrew in 2012). In essence, pragmatism and opportunity superseded the violation of Uzbek sovereignty and demonstrates the separation of ideology and practicality in Central Asian attitudes. Through this case study surrounding the situation in Afghanistan, it can be observed that Western multilateralism can offer little long term engagement in Central Asian security besides the containment of Afghanistan. The answer lies in Russian and Chinese efforts in the region, primarily through economic initiatives. Therefore, from a realist perspective, Central Asia is in a position where they can only interact with the West through the external security concern of Afghanistan. The geographical distance of Central Asia to the West, in addition to the multilateral bonds of Russia and China impede Western multilateralism.

Aligned with a more liberal approach, Chinese multilateralism's restructuring of links between Xinjiang and the rest of Central Asia from community to economic links has proven critical in enhancing Chinese influence and security in the region. Practically, Central Asia is a much poorer and detached economic region compared to its neighbours. Creating wealth for the region not only benefits the states themselves but also China, as not only are regimes that provide wealth to its citizens more popular, but citizens who are wealthier and more connected are less inclined to act against the supply of wealth. As long as the BRI does not interfere in Russia's economic stance in the region, Chinese multilateralism is perhaps the best proponent of regional stability that Central Asian states can capitalise on. The effects are already discernible; the Nuryl Zhol in Kazakhstan, Central Asia Regional Economic Corridor(CAREC) infrastructure projects funded by the ADB, Vahdat-Yavan railway in Tajikistan are among the multitude of investments that Central Asia has started to update their logistical capabilities for the BRI. If such projects continue as expected, the pragmatic solution to the security dilemma in Central Asia might be in the hands of China. Central Asia has been responding actively and enthusiastically to overcome geographic isolation and align themselves closer to China over doubt of the Russian security apparatus following the war in Ukraine. Economic ties through institutions and bilateral relations, have done much more for the promotion of security than political efforts. As Central Asia becomes economically more connected, there is less incentive to destabilise these efforts for political gain. While the West frequently describes the BRI as debt-trap diplomacy and Chinese neo imperialism, there is much to gain for the West through BRI investments. Increasing BRI investments for Central Asia breaks the economic hegemony of Russia and levels the playing field for the West. As a compromise, China is willing to concede Russia the mantle of "security provider", acknowledging their role in the region. In essence, adhering to multilateral institutions and respecting sovereignty grants Central Asia the agency to prevent a regional hegemon emerging and gaining leverage over other competitors

For Central Asia, multi-vectorism is the key in shaping the social and political understanding of Central Asia globally. According to constructivism theory, shaping its own identity is the most desirable path for Central Asia to take. Breaking monopolies, engaging in multilateral institutions, and creating a sense of belonging are the mechanisms of forging an independent Central Asia. It is no surprise for constructivism theory that Central Asia is very receptive to Chinese narratives, as these narratives identify Central Asia along civilizational lines parallel to those in Central Asia and respect Central Asian states as sovereign entities. Western multilateralism' attempts to instil Western values and ways of governance has gained limited traction and the Russian view of the Russian World is under threat by Central Asian cultural awakening. Members of the OTS participate in a variety of pan-Turkic cultural organisations such as the

International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY). The nation building processes have been eroding the prevalence of Russian language and culture in Central Asia. In 1989, roughly 80% of the population spoke Russian according to the Soviet census of the same year.(Bekmurzaev, 2019) Thirty years later, in 2019, the Russian language has declined to under 50% in Central Asia.(Bekmurzaev, 2019) By 2025, Kazakhstan will become the third country in the region to switch to the latin alphabet from the cyrillic alphabet following Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Since gaining independence, the narratives of Tsarist and Soviet rule in Central Asia are gaining a colonial and orientalist quality. (Kandiyoti, 2002) As this understanding permeates into Central Asian identity, Russian cultural power can be expected to decline. With narratives of the revival of the Silk Road, decline of Russian cultural influence, and exaltation of Turkic identity, Central Asia has been shaping its own identity. As the region grows in economic and political power, a cultural renaissance in defiance of Russian and Western cultural promotion could be a reality, although much more work needs to be done.

Currently, Asian multilateralism is gaining more traction in Central Asia compared to Western multilateralism, primarily due to the extensive multilateral institutions and economic investments in place. With a growing economic presence, Chinese multilateralism is increasingly gaining momentum. The decline of Russian multilateralism offers Western Multilateralism the opportunity to permeate deeper and expel the vestiges of Russian dominance. By engaging in a long term strategy of economic cooperation and promotion of Western values, Western multilateralism can become a challenger to the status quo. The success of the BRI could catapult trade with the EU and solidify ties with Central Asia. As the situation with Afghanistan remains unresolved, further measures regarding Afghan stability could also be expected of the USA. Russia will surely aim to retain its influence in the face of these challenges. Russia is still the only vector to hold significant political and military ties in Central Asia, which is still decisive in maintaining its presence in the region. The path that Russian multilateralism will take is uncertain in the wake of the war in Ukraine. A conclusion to the war in Ukraine could provide an evolutionary stimulus to decaying Russian influence in the Near Abroad. Through the use of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, it is evident that multilateralism in Central Asia is a complex, growing, and multifaceted concept. In the end, the choice may be up to the Central Asian states themselves. As their capabilities grow and investments in the OTS and ECO yield more over time, Central Asian states could navigate their own pathways with more confidence.

## CONCLUSION

As Central Asia continues to grow, it is evident that the region will continue to attract the interest of the West and Asia. In addition, the growing perception of a multi-vector and independent Central Asia will contribute greatly to garnering academic attention. There is a clear distinction between the approach of Western and Asian multilateralism towards Central Asia. It is not surprising that Central Asia reacts differently towards these variations. Western multilateralism, although established globally, is still establishing itself within Central Asia. However, it is not only dependent on the reciprocity of Central Asia but the ground it can cover under the auspices of Russia and China. The realist Western multilateralism discourse is at an impasse with the US withdrawal of Afghanistan, and the liberal and constructivist discourses are hindered with the lack of development in Central Asia. The various Russian multilateral discourses on all fronts is experiencing a struggle against Chinese policy, however it still functions well to dissuade Western multilateralism. As the global and regional norms of multilateralism become

increasingly integrated within Central Asian development, it is easier to see a clearer outline of the current situation. Essentially, Western multilateralism is approaching Central Asia as a “partnership in development”; Russian multilateralism is approaching Central Asia as the continuation of the “partnership of yesterday”; While Chinese multilateralism is approaching Central Asia as the “inevitable partnership of the future”. The promises of all multilateral axes are realistic enough to be pursued but not overwhelmingly greater than of each other, which has created an equilibrium of its own. Reactively, the investments into the OTS and ECO grow as Central Asia gains confidence in its own foreign policy investments. Yet, the situation is still unclear as to which will become the dominant multilateral practice between Western and Asian multilateralism. While as of now the future is unpredictable, there is one thing certain for the future of Central Asia; the battle between Western and Asian multilateralism has yet to reach its crescendo and it will continue to grow in competitiveness and scale. When it has reached its apex, it heavily depends on the agencies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to determine the outcome, not only for Central Asia, but for the struggle of Western multilateralism against Asian multilateralism.

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