

Central Asian Regionalism and the Roles of Russia and China: Money, Transport, Energy, Ideas

PhD Thesis

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Abstract

International Relations studies of Central Asia tend to revolve around institutions, economics, security or socialization processes. However, due to the uncertain roles of competing regional institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union championed by Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road Initiative championed by China, cooperation among Central Asian states is heavily dependent on the nature of engagement of the two major powers in the region, Russia and China. This thesis evaluates Central Asian regionalism by analyzing the impact placed by Russia and China on physical infrastructure. The findings suggest that the roles of the two countries have become increasingly interchangeable with Russia's situational engagement having a limited or even negative effect on regional cohesion and China's involvement visibly reshaping the region toward greater regional interconnectedness, but in different form. Multiple case studies of various projects in the networked sectors of infrastructure, i.e. transportation, energy and telecommunications, are used to build the argument and demonstrate the ways in which Russia's and China's engagement influence regional connectivity.

The two major powers have had difficulty reaching a consensus about the format of multilateral lenders essential for the development of regional infrastructure, and therefore China-led financial institutions have become the major source of financing of infrastructural projects in Central Asia. The two powers' engagement in the transportation sector partially decreased interdependence among Central Asian states, but Chinese projects aim to reconnect the region, particularly by linking Central Asia with South Asia. The shift toward interchangeability of the roles of Russia and China is most evident in the energy sector, which is characterized by Russia's opportunism and China's steps toward multilateral cooperation. In the telecommunication sector, the two major powers made limited impact on regional connectivity; however China's use of material capabilities to affect information flows is gradually positioning the rising power as an important opinion shaper in the region. The study concludes that China's capacity to build physical infrastructure and facilitate multiple multilateral initiatives with Central Asian states is slowly redirecting the region away from its historical dependency on Russia. Material capabilities, however, are not sufficient for regionalization, and it remains to be seen whether China is able to utilize its economic might to connect the region through shared ideas rather than just roads, pipelines, power lines and telecom cables.

Key words: Central Asia, Russia and China, Infrastructure, Regionalism

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Introduction

Central Asia is commonly associated with two popular concepts – the Silk Road and the Great Game. The first one underlines Central Asia’s link with China and the connecting role between the East and the West. The second represents a great power rivalry, exemplified by competition for the sphere of influence between Russian and British empires. Contemporary studies of Central Asia in various disciplines often rely on these two concepts to draw analogies for modern regional dynamics. However, neither accurately reflects the nature of Central Asia’s position in relation to external actors. The network of routes termed the “Silk Road” withered and ceased to function as a trans-Eurasian link long before the foundation of modern China. Any project labeled as a variation of “new” or “modern” Silk Road usually has little in common with the nature or geography of the ancient caravan routes. Furthermore, present interstate politics in Central Asia hardly provide a parallel for the “Great Game” played out between British and Russian diplomats, officers and explorers in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The nature of contemporary competition is conditioned by very different rules [...]; rather than a collection of city-states surrounded by frontier lands over which imperial domains expand and contract, contemporary Central Eurasia is composed of states pursuing modernist ideals of territorial sovereignty¹

Moreover, if the competition between major powers in Central Asia can be called a ‘game’, it is not ‘great’ because it largely excludes the world’s superpower, the USA.² Yet, the two concepts do provide essential clues for analyzing modern Central Asia. First, after decades of isolation from each other, China and its western neighbors began interacting as independent entities after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Second, the nature of the relationship between Russia and China, the two major powers and main external actors in Central Asia, is incredibly complicated, which implies that regional dynamics do resemble a ‘game’. As Alexander Cooley argues, the “rules of the game” are often defined by the local actors.³ Nevertheless, Sino-Russian relations play an inseparable role, and studying the two major power’s engagement is necessary for understanding international relations in the post-Soviet Central Asia. The following introduction detects the general puzzle in the topic, provides historical background of the dynamics and motivating forces behind the major powers and their respective engagement in the region, and identifies the gap in the existing literature in order to justify the main research question: how does the nature of China’s and Russia’s engagement affect Central Asian regionalism? The final section presents a brief outline of the thesis.

¹ Diener, Alexander, C. “Parsing Mobilities in Central Eurasia: Border Management and New Silk Roads”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2015, 56, 4, (2015), 376-404

² The term ‘major powers’ is purposefully chosen to refer to Russia and China through the whole thesis. Neither qualifies to be called a ‘super power’. The term ‘great power’ may carry political connotation and is therefore avoided. The term ‘regional power’ diminishes the capacity of China and Russia. Both China and Russia can project their influence through different geographic and political spaces. For instance, in addition to its role in Central Asia, Russia also has strong positions in much of the former Soviet space, in sections of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and parts of East Asia. China, can project influence in much of East Asia, South East Asia, sections of South Asia and more recently Africa and Oceania. ‘Regional powers’ such as Nigeria, Indonesia, Australia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Turkey are more likely to exert their influence only in their respective immediate neighborhoods.

³ Cooley, Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

Building organizations not cooperation

After the dissolution of the USSR, five republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – emerged as separate units in the international system and embarked on the new process of nation-building. Their geographic proximity, close ethnicity and languages, similar religion (moderate forms of Islam), shared history, common resources, such as water, and Soviet-era infrastructure provided wide range of grounds for cooperation.⁴ Hence, according to one of the basic definitions of a *region* as “a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence” post-Soviet Central Asia could be viewed as one.⁵

However, in the decades after independence, regional cooperation among these young states frequently stagnated. In numerous instances, pre-existing Soviet ties were severed. Economic interests of the five countries developed outside their immediate neighborhood and trade among Central Asia states did not reflect sharp growth in the trade between neighboring China and Russia.⁶ The movement of people within Central Asia became increasingly restricted. Coordination and information exchange between Central Asian public organizations became very limited resulting in fewer connections in culture, education, sports and youth exchanges. The influence of common Soviet culture and Russian language declined, yielding to new post-independence nation building rhetoric.⁷ Relations between Central Asian states became periodically complicated by the issues of border security and management of shared water resources.⁸ Consequently, the level of interdependence between the former Soviet republics gradually declined.

Despite the relatively poor condition of interstate and transnational cooperation, a number of multilateral initiatives emerged in Central Asia. Some of the programs and initiatives were promoted by the existing international bodies.⁹ Other institutions reflected a common Soviet past or were initiated by Russia. Amongst these are the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).¹⁰ One distinct regional grouping initiated by China is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which also includes Russia and most of the Central Asian states. The EAEU and the SCO are the two more encompassing organizations. Although the groupings are different in nature, their functions are often overlapping. Both emphasize the importance of regional cooperation. Kerr suggests that “whereas in other Asian areas there has been discussion of ‘regions without regionalism’, Central Asia had been closer to ‘regionalism without a region.’”¹¹ Kerr’s assertion implies that regionalism involves

⁴ With the exception of Tajiks, all the titular nations are of Turkic origin

⁵ Joseph Nye as quoted in De Lombaerde, Philippe, Fredrik Soderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove and Francis Baert, “The Problem of Comparison in Comparative Regionalism”, *Review of International Studies*, 36, (2010), 736

⁶ Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports*, No14, November 2012, 9

Cooley, 2012, 150

⁷ Cooley, 2012

⁸ Akiner, Shirin, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World”, *Global Strategy Forum*, June 2010

Starr, Frederick S., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2008

⁹ These include the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), United Nations Social Economic Commission for Asia Pacific (UN-ESCAP), the Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) at Asian Development Bank

¹⁰ Eurasian Economic Community served as a base for the Eurasian Customs Union, which in turn was transformed into Eurasian Economic Union.

institutional cooperation; however this is not necessarily the case.

Regionalism is defined by Acharya as a “purposive interaction, formal and informal, among state and non-state actors of a given area in pursuit of shared external, domestic and transnational goals.”¹² In other words, regionalism involves steps toward cooperation for the shared purpose. Regionalism does not necessarily imply regional integration especially not at each stage of region formation.¹³ Therefore, regionalism does not necessarily revolve around formal multilateral structure. Nevertheless, the disconnect between the deterioration of regional cohesion and active development of international institutions raises a general puzzle: why, despite pre-existing interdependence and geographic proximity, has regional cooperation in Central Asia revolved around overlapping regional organizations rather than bottom-up developments? In other words, why is regional cooperation in Central Asia manifested through institution-building instead of actual cooperation on the ground? This is a general puzzle intended to guide the discussion toward the main research question. A brief historical overview is provided to assess the general nature of Central Asian region.

Railroad – not Silk Road

In 1879, Russian engineering troops began laying rails outside of the Krasnovodsk fort on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea. The construction of the Trans-Caspian rail line was the initial step in the process that eventually transformed the vast and diverse lands between Caspian Sea and China’s western frontiers, into what is now commonly known as Central Asia. The rail line was used by the Russian military to reach the cities scattered throughout the geographic area nearly adjacent to the British-controlled or claimed territories. By 1886, the Trans-Caspian reached Ashkhabad and Merv, the ancient Silk Road hub, and in two years the railway extended to the former powerful centers of Bukhara and Samarkand. A decade later, the rail link reached two more important ancient cities, Tashkent and Andijan. By that time, a permanent bridge over Oxus (Amu Darya) was built connecting the desert populated by Turcoman tribes with the more developed Bukhara oasis. By 1910, a side branch connected Bukhara with Termez on Afghanistan border and Dushanbe in the western foothills of Pamir.¹⁴

While serving the initial goals to allow military access to the new Russian frontiers, the rail thereby connected relatively isolated, and often hostile, commercial and cultural polities. The network of roadways which connected these political units in the past and was used by caravans on their ways between China and Europe and South Asia had long since withered. The ancient Silk Road was no longer there after it had gone through the peaks and troughs of use, over the course of nearly two thousand years. In its heydays during China’s Han, Tang and Yuan dynasties the route system covering the geographic center of the Eurasian continent was supported and secured by economic activities and the military power of the Chinese empire and occasionally by strong regimes emanating from central Eurasia itself. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, due to growing instability within political units, increased warfare, and the changing nature of the world economy, sea routes between Asia and Europe became more strategic than Central Asian overland routes and the role of the Silk Road gradually deteriorated.¹⁵

Modern Central Asia, so commonly associated with the ancient Silk Road, was actually

¹² Acharya, Amitav, “Comparative Regionalism: A field whose time has come?” *The International Spectator*, 47, 1, March 2012, 3

¹³ Acharya, 2012

¹⁴ Barisitz, Stephan, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia* (2017), Cham: Springer International Publishing, 249

¹⁵ Barisitz, 63

defined by infrastructural projects initiated and completed by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Governorate-General of Turkestan included territories of modern day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan.¹⁶ Between 1900 and 1906, almost concurrently with the construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway, another rail link, Trans-Aral Railway connected economic, cultural and political center Tashkent with Orenburg in Urals – in the southern territory of the Russian Empire. During the years of First World War (1914-1918) and Russian Civil War (1918-1921) the development of a rail system in Central Asia was temporarily postponed. However, in the early years of the Soviet Union, between 1926 and 1931 another key rail link, the Turkestan-Siberian Railway, was laid between Tashkent and urban centers of Shemkent, Taraz and Almaty, with a spur heading out to Bishkek.¹⁷ From Almaty the rail extended north through the Kazakh steppe to Novosibirsk in Western Siberia. Altogether, Trans-Caspian, Trans-Aral and Turkestan-Siberian railways linked populated centers of Central Asia and connected them to Russia's established transportation network.

Originally designed to transport the Russian military southward and locally produced cotton up to the north, this rail system became essential for the development of cooperation and connectivity in Central Asia.¹⁸ The rail network led to the transformation of the vast area populated by diverse peoples into several coherent administrative units. Between 1920 and 1936, five Central Asian republics emerged in the present territorial forms, which were retained after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹⁹

The borders that emerged in Central Asia were not drawn at random, even if at times they often seem to defy geographical logic. They were a product of late-Tsarist and early-Soviet census data, ethnographic and orientalist scholarship, and also in part of the process of *rayonirovanie* [creation of *rayons* – administrative units] – identifying supposedly rational and viable economic units, and ensuring that each new state met minimum criteria for becoming a full-blown Soviet Socialist Republic: these included a population of at least a million, and a capital city connected by rail.²⁰

Visibly, rail links built in the beginning of the twentieth century played the key role in defining the shape of modern Central Asia.²¹

Hard infrastructure laid by Russia provided the foundation not only for the movement of people and products, but also for the flow of ideas, which continued to mold regional identities over the next century. Telegraph wires were laid along rail routes connecting cities scattered throughout the area. The central government from Saint Petersburg and later from Moscow introduced printing, and publications produced in urban centers were transported by rail throughout the area. Soviet policies insured that published material was accessible to the masses. In 1920's all local languages adopted the Latin alphabet and by 1942 it was replaced by Cyrillic script. This transition made it easier to learn the Russian language which became a

¹⁶ Morrison, Alexander, "Russia colonial allergy", *Eurasianet*, December 19, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/node/81726>

¹⁷ Barisitz, 249

¹⁸ Newton, Francis, "Soviet Central Asia: Economic progress and problems", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12, 3, 1976, 87-104

¹⁹ Golden, Peter, *Central Asia in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 132

²⁰ Morrison, Alexander, "Stalin's giant pencil: Debunking a myth about Central Asia's borders", *Eurasianet*, February 13, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/node/82376>

²¹ Fuller, Graham E., "The emergence of Central Asia", *Foreign Policy*, 78, Spring 1990, 67

required subject in all schools at approximately the same time.²² As a result of the Soviet policies, nationhood and statehood emerged in Central Asian societies.

Marxism demanded that the culture there should develop or ‘be developed’ toward nationhood, and Soviet authorities devised national frameworks into which they set the still nomadic cultures of the region, attempting to name ‘the stans’ according to what they judged to be the dominant national group.²³

It is worth noting, that the nationhood imposed by the soviet policies, however, did not completely eliminate clan loyalties, which remain strong, but generally effect internal politics of individual Central Asian states. Before Russia’s active engagement in the late 19th century, only the polities in the present day Uzbekistan possessed a form of statehood.²⁴ A century later, after the dissolution of the USSR, five newly independent states emerged with definite borders and, somewhat diluted, but clearly visible state identities. Russia’s position in Central Asia continued to remain strong. However, a new actor, China, previously isolated by the mountains and a diverging ideology, gradually began to carve out its role in the region.

China looking westward

The western reach of the Chinese Empire during the last, Qing, dynasty generally ended at the Pamir, Taishan and Altai mountain chains at the western edges of the modern Xinjiang region. In the nineteenth century, when Russia was consolidating its position in Western Turkestan (present Central Asia), the Qing government periodically lost and then regained control of the western frontier regions. Active people’s movements between Western Turkestan (Central Asia) and Eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang)²⁵ continued well into the early half of the twentieth century.²⁶ In 1916, during the region-wide revolt in Western Turkestan against the Russian imperial army required conscription of local populations, thousands of Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Uzbeks migrated to Eastern Turkestan and remained there. Population movements and other types of cross border interactions between Western and Eastern Turkestan continued during the Russian Civil War and Basmachi anti-Soviet resistant movement in 1920’s and early 1930’s. Throughout the turbulent years of the Republic of China and the Second World War, China and Russia maintained various degrees of involvement and control in the two main parts of Eastern Turkestan – Dzungaria (northern Xinjiang) and the Tarim Basin (southern Xinjiang).²⁷ After the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the new Beijing government consolidated control over the whole of Xinjiang by the mid 1950’s. Following 1956, during the Sino-Soviet ideological rift, the border between the PRC and the USSR was sealed and militarized, which effectively halted any exchanges between the state of China and Soviet Central Asian republics. Sections of the border re-opened in the late 1980’s. Subsequently, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, after decades of isolation Chinese engagement in Central Asia became possible once again.

²² Golden, Peter, *Central Asia in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011

²³ Gleason, Abbot, “Eurasia: What is it? Is it?” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1, (2010), 31

²⁴ Krausse, Alexis, *Russia in Asia. A Record and a Study, 1558-1899*, Leiden: Global Oriental, 2012

Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

²⁵ The terms “Eastern Turkestan”, “Chinese Turkestan” and “Xinjiang” are used interchangeably without intention of any political connotation. Different terms reflect their common usage during particular time periods addressed in the text.

²⁶ Barisitz, 258-264

²⁷ Clarke, Michael and Mackerras, Colin (Eds.), *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, transition and crossborder interaction into the 21st century*, New York: Routledge, 2009

China's interest in Central Asia is often embodied in the popular quote by General Liu Yazhou of the People's Liberation Army (PLA): "Central Asia is the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens."²⁸ The "cake" was commonly viewed to represent Central Asian hydrocarbons and other natural resources, and possibly new emerging market.²⁹ However, in the three decades since the independence of the Central Asian states, the character of Chinese engagement became much more complicated than that defined by the extraction of natural resources and sales of inexpensive consumer goods. China's presence in the region is visible through a wide range of activities, from Chinese restaurants multiplying in cities and Chinese language departments emerging in regional universities, to major infrastructural projects financed by Chinese banks and completed by Chinese companies. China's impact on the development of the physical infrastructure is arguably comparable only to Russian / Soviet efforts to create links between previously unconnected locations.

One critical factor clearly differentiates Chinese and Russian positions in Central Asia. Security positions of the two are incomparable. First, Russia leads the defense alliance Collective Security Treaty Organization which includes three Central Asian states. Additionally, Russia maintains bases and military contingent in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Above all, Central Asian states are all, to varying degrees, reliant on Russian military hardware to equip their armed forces. By contrast, China's security engagement in Central Asia had revolved around military exercises under the auspices of the SCO. These exercises provided limited cooperation and experience sharing between China's military and armed forces of the countries in the region, but did not account for any long term security presence of China in Central Asia.³⁰ Multilateral security mechanisms established between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2016 remained at nascent stages and had limited connection to the post-Soviet Central Asia.³¹ China's contemplations to build a military base in Afghanistan near the border with Tajikistan remained in the discussion state in early 2018.³²

Beijing officials insist that China's engagement in Central Asia does not carry any political interests and is based purely on economic considerations.³³ This rhetoric holds little ground because it is difficult to prove or negate the absence of political interests in view of China's substantial economic position. At the same time, China's engagement in Central Asia is logical when considering Beijing's economic interests and security concerns in China's western regions. According to Chinese political theories, internal and external issues are not separable and need to be approached in one context.³⁴ This is not to say that western international relations theories ignore internal factors. For instance, Putnam's two-level game theory allocates critical importance to internal considerations in the decision-making

²⁸ *China in Central Asia website* (n.d.), <http://chinaincentralasia.com/>, accessed March 2, 2018

²⁹ Pannier, Bruce, "What's China's game in Central Asia?" *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-game-central-asia/25237453.html>

Wong, Edward, "China quietly extends footprints into Central Asia", *The New York Times*, January 2, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/03/world/asia/03china.html>

³⁰ Haas, Marcel de, "War games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Organization: Drill on move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29, 3, 2016, 378-406

³¹ "China joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan in security alliance", *Reuters*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKCN10F1A6>

³² Lemon, Edward J., "China, Russia and security in Central Asia", *Rising Powers in Global Governance project*, February 26, 2018, <http://risingpowersproject.com/china-russia-security-central-asia/>

³³ Author's interview, Beijing, October 28, 2015

³⁴ Ye Zicheng, "The cultural and historical origin of Chinese diplomacy", *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center event: How traditional culture shapes Chinese diplomacy*, December 15, 2015, Beijing

process.³⁵ However, while Western theorists tend to separate domestic and foreign consideration in foreign policy decision-making, according to Chinese theorists, internal and external factors are inseparable and are generally viewed in one context.³⁶

Largely because of this perception, China's engagement in Central Asia is closely connected to Beijing's considerations in Xinjiang which is economically underdeveloped and, to a certain extent, unstable.³⁷ Subsequently, both China's policies in its western regions and its approaches to Central Asia constituted components of the "March West" policy, which implied the name-suggested direction for active engagement.³⁸ However, outside of its borders "China's defense engagement in Central Asia remains secondary to economic engagement as Beijing continues to primarily address its regional security concerns through economic means."³⁹ Overall, comparing the extent of Russia and China's security dimensions adds little to the understanding of the dynamics of their respective engagement in Central Asia. The initial review of broad strands of literature demonstrates several additional dimensions of Sino-Russian engagement in Central Asia explored by authors through various theoretical and methodological approaches. The more detailed review of relevant literature is provided in the first three chapters, so, the following section offers only brief and general overview of studies related to the topic of the thesis.

Toward the main research question

Some of the works directly address major powers interaction in the context of Central Asia. Alexander Cooley's seminal work views this interaction as a contest between Russia, China and the USA, which is heavily influenced by the conditions set by Central Asian governments.⁴⁰ In Cooley's analysis, Russia's involvement in the region has been steadily declining, while China has achieved a stronger position in Central Asia compared with Russia and the USA.⁴¹ Cooley does allocate part of his discussion to the issue of decreasing regional cooperation between Central Asian states, but he does not elaborate on how major powers influence this cooperation beyond the regional organizations. Marketos' analysis of the major powers' engagement is limited to energy geopolitics.⁴² Both Cooley and Marketos attribute an important role in the region to the United States. The edited volume of Laruelle, et al (2011), revolves around strategic engagement of China and India in Central Asia.⁴³ However, the role

³⁵ Putnam, Robert D., "Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games", *International Organizations*, 42, 3, Summer 1988, 427-460

³⁶ Ye Zicheng; Li, Lifang, "The SCO and how Chinese foreign policy works. The global influence of its Central Asia policy", in Michael Fredhold (ed.) *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics. Direction, Perspectives, and Challenges*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2013, 152-161

³⁷ Godehardt, Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 130-135

³⁸ Sheives, Kevin, "China Turns West: Beijing's Contemporary Strategy Towards Central Asia," , 79, 2, (2006), 205-224

Sun, Yun, "March West: China's response to the U.S. Rebalancing", *Brookings*, January 31, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing/>

³⁹ Shea, Dennis C., "China's energy engagement with Central Asia and implications for the United States" Hearing on the "Development of Energy Resource in Central Asia", *United States Congress*, May 21, 2015, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA14/20140521/102248/HHRG-113-FA14-Wstate-SheaD-20140521.pdf>

⁴⁰ Cooley, 2012

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Marketos, Thrassy N., *China's Energy Geopolitics. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia*, London: Routledge, 2009

⁴³ Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Huchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.) *China and India in Central Asia. A new "Great Game"?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

of India in the region is disproportionately minor compared to those of Russia and China, therefore the analysis is insufficient for gaining insight into the effects of the major powers' impact on Central Asian regionalism. Kavalski's 2010 volume on the effects of multiple external actors on regional dynamics offers a wide perspective on the issue, but does not sufficiently analyze interplay of the key actors in Central Asia.⁴⁴ Kavalski's 2012 study on major powers' engagement in Central Asia focuses on normative power of India, China and the European Union.⁴⁵ The volume highlights China's capacity to socialize Central Asian states into setting the rule of engagement for other powers. The work, however, mainly excludes Russia from the analysis and does not focus on the effects of the three powers engagement on regional cooperation within Central Asia. Godehardt's volume offers a detailed overview of Central Asian regionalism and an analysis of Chinese perception of Central Asia, but it also largely excludes Russia from the discussion and downplays the role of material factors which influence define Central Asian region.⁴⁶ Karrar's study on China's engagement in Central Asia revolves around Xinjiang and largely excludes wider dynamic of China's engagement in the region.⁴⁷ A number of more condensed studies focus explicitly on Russia's position in Central Asia.⁴⁸ Similarly, several articles revolve specifically around Chinese engagement in the region.⁴⁹ The analysis of major powers interaction, in addition to Russia and China, generally includes the American factor in Sino-Russian relations.⁵⁰ A number of authors place more emphasis on the domestic and intra-regional security dimensions of regional cooperation.⁵¹ Generally, studies focusing on major powers' relations

⁴⁴ Kavalski, Emilian, (Ed.) *The New Central Asia. The Regional Impact of International Actors*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2010

⁴⁵ Kavalski, Emilian, *Central Asia and the rise of normative powers: Contextualizing the security governance of the European Union, China and India*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012

⁴⁶ "Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

⁴⁷ Karrar, Hasan H., *The new Silk Road Diplomacy. China's Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009

⁴⁸ Kerr, 2010

Lo Bobo, "Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia", *Russia / NIS Center*, 82, January 2015

Spechler, Martin C., Dina R. Spechler, "Is Russia Succeeding in Central Asia," *Orbis*, 54, 4, 2010, 615-629

⁴⁹ MacHaffie, James, "China's Role in Central Asia: Security Implications for Russia and the United States", *Comparative Strategy*, 29, 2010, 368-380
Sheives, 2006

Zhao, Huasheng, "China's View of and expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Asian Survey*, 53, 3, May / June 2013, 436-460

⁵⁰Weitz, Richard, "Why Russia and China have not formed an anti-American alliance", *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2003, 51, 4, 39-61

Wishnick, Elizabeth, "Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the shadow of the Georgian Crisis," *U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute*, February 2009, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

Ziegler, Charles E., "Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and American Foreign Policy. From Indifference to Engagement," *Asian Survey*, 53, 3, (May / June 2013), 484-505

Xu, Zhengyuan, "In the Shadow of Great Powers: A Comparison Study of Various Approaches to Regionalism in Central Asia", *Connections*, 9, 4, (Fall 2010), 37-52

Zabortseva, Yelena Nikolayevna, "From the 'forgotten region' to the 'great game' region: On the development of geopolitics in Central Asia", *Journal Eurasian Studies*, 3, (2012), 168-176

⁵¹ Allison, Roy, "Virtual regionalism, regional structure and regime security in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, 27, 2, 2008, 185-202, 185

Bohr, Annette, "Regionalism in Central Asia: New geopolitics, old regional order", *International Affairs*, 80, 3, May 2004, 485-502

and their interactions in Central Asia regard regional institutions as foreign policy instruments of the major powers.

From a different perspective, several studies analyze Central Asian regional cooperation through the prism of regional organizations and the Eurasian integration initiatives. In one extensive study, Stephen Aris offers a detailed overview of the SCO, in which he builds the narrative around the organization's development, achievements and future prospects, and highlights its appropriateness for fostering regional cooperation in Central Asia.⁵² However, Aris downplays the role of the material interests in the decision making process and explains Central Asian regionalism from the perspective of one organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Similarly, Fredholm's edited volume "The SCO and Eurasian Geopolitics" approaches Central Asian politics purely from the SCO perspective.⁵³ Similarly, the works of Dragneva and Wolczuk, and by Kassenova, focus on legal mechanisms and economic aspects of the Eurasian integration initiatives – the Eurasian Economic Community and the Eurasian Economic Union.⁵⁴ The authors do address the interests of Russia and the Central Asian states for participation in the initiatives.

A number of articles individually address each of the two integration initiatives and their capacities to influence major powers relations and regional cooperation in Central Asia. Some focus specifically on the SCO.⁵⁵ Others offer initial assessment of the potential of the Eurasian integration projects.⁵⁶ Li Xin suggests the possibility that "bilateral cooperation under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization between China and [Central Asian states] will become bilateral relations between China and the Eurasian Union."⁵⁷ Wang LiJiu, optimistically writes that the SCO and Eurasian Union have few ground for conflict and can both benefit from closer cooperation.⁵⁸ One noteworthy study by Gatev and Diesen examines the interactions between the SCO and the Eurasian Economic Union and highlights

Bohr, Annette, "Central Asia: Responding to the Multi-vector Game," in R. Niblett (ed) *America and a Changed World: A Question of Leadership*, Wiley-Blackwell/Chatham House, 2010, pp.109-24

⁵² Aris, Stephen, *Eurasian Regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

⁵³ Fredholm, Michael (ed.), *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Geopolitics: New Directions, Perspectives and Challenges*, Stockholm: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press: 2013

⁵⁴ Dragneva, Rilka and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?" *Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme*, August 2012

Dragneva, Rilka, Kataryna Wolczuk, "The Eurasian Economic Union. Deals, rules, and the exercise of powers", *Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme*, May 2017

Kassenova, 2012

⁵⁵ Akiner, 2010

Naarajarvi, Teemu, "China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Blessing or Curse for New Regionalism in Central Asia?" *Asia Europe Journal*, 10, 2012, 113-126

Wang, Jianwei, "China and SCO: towards a new type of interstate relations" in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds), *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*, London: Routledge, 2007, 104-126

Ziegler, Charles E., "Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and American foreign policy. From indifference to engagement," *Asian Survey*, 53, 3, May / June 2013, 484-505

⁵⁶ Shumylo-Tapiola, Olga, "The Eurasian Customs Union: friend or foe of the EU?" *Carnegie Europe Center*, <http://www.carnegieeurope.eu/2012/10/03/eurasian-customs-union-friend-or-foe-of-eu/dyzm#>, accessed on April 25, 2014

Wang Li Jiu, "Russia's Eurasian Union Strategy and Its Impact on Sino-Russian Relations and SCO", *Contemporary International Relations*, 22, 2, 2012, 86-96

⁵⁷ Li, Xin, "Putin's Dream of Eurasian Union: Background, Objectives and Possibilities," *Contemporary International Relations*, 21, 6, (2011), p.54

⁵⁸ Wang, LiJiu, "Russia's Eurasian Union Strategy and Its Impact on Sino-Russian Relations and SCO," *Contemporary International Relations*, 22, 2 (2011), pp. 86-96

their shared capacity to facilitate regional cooperation through the development of regional infrastructure.⁵⁹

Two volumes co-authored by Vinokurov and Libman view regionalism through the lens of economic activities. The authors address Eurasian regionalism in the former Soviet space from a much wider economic perspective taking the analysis well outside of Central Asia, even in its broader definition.⁶⁰ Similarly, Laruelle and Peyrose (2013) offer broad overview of Central Asia's position in the world and the wider region mainly from the economic standpoint and provide only limited evaluation of the effects of major powers on regional cooperation among the Central Asian states.⁶¹

Overall, examining the intentions and activities of the major powers in Central Asia in the context of multilateral initiatives offers limited explanation of how the former affect cooperation among the Central Asian states. On one end of the spectrum, multilateral regional organizations influence both internal and external economic activities in the region and enable major powers to socialize regional states into comply with the former's norms. However, economic activities may serve both as a cause and an effect of regional cohesion. Furthermore, compliance with the norms generated by external actors may have a twofold effect on regional cooperation. On the other end of the spectrum of the assessment of the effects of multilateral organization on regional cooperation is their function of "protective integration". According to Roy Allison,

A primary motivation for Central Asian leaders' engagement in [Russia and China driven multilateral organizations] is the reinforcement of domestic regime security and the resistance of 'external' agendas of good governance or democracy promotion. These goals are concealed behind a discourse that denigrates the imposition of external 'values' and continues to give pride of place to national sovereignty. This offers little to overcome the underlying fractures between states in Central Asia.⁶²

From one point of view organizations initiated by the major powers may have an unclear or a twofold effect on regional cohesion. From another arguably more radical view, multilateral institutions do little for, or even impede, regional cooperation.

Aside from security considerations, economic arrangements, and socialization by external actors, one additional factor plays crucial role in influencing regional cooperation in Central Asia. The development of a hard infrastructure is essential for facilitating regional connectivity and defining the 'shape' of the region. The initial step in the formation of the Central Asian region was the construction of railroad network during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Russia. Much of the rail and automobile road network, power network, energy channels and lines of communications laid during the Soviet period defined the direction of connectivity within Central Asia. In the post-independence years, China's engagement in Central Asia has been largely characterized by financing and construction of infrastructure projects. This phenomenon is commonly referred to in recent studies on Central

⁵⁹ Gatev, Ivaylo and Glen Diesen, "Eurasian encounters: the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *European Politics and Society*, 17, 2016, 133-150

⁶⁰ Vinokurov, Evgeny and Alexander Libman, *Eurasian Integration. Challenges of Transnational Regionalism*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

Libman, Alexander, Evgeny Vinokurov, *Holding-Together Regionalism: Twenty Years of Post-Soviet Integration*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

⁶¹ Laruelle, Marlene and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2013

⁶² Allison, Roy, "Virtual regionalism, regional structure and regime security in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, 27, 2, 2008, 185-202, 185

Asia. However, there is little understanding of how the contemporary engagement of the two major powers in the infrastructural sector affects regional connectivity and cooperation.

Evaluations of networked sectors in the infrastructure and the positions of the main actors in the infrastructural development remain insufficient. Several of the studies mentioned above address China and Russia's involvement in the networked sectors of the infrastructure. However, their explanatory power in examining the impact of hard infrastructure on regional cooperation is limited for the following reasons. First, the studies which cover multiple sectors⁶³ provide only a narrow investigation of each sector and relatively constrained, if any, analysis of the major powers interactions within each sector. Second, in-depth studies of specific sectors, particularly energy⁶⁴ do not provide an adequately encompassing interpretation of China and Russia's engagement in Central Asia.

Several multidisciplinary studies do examine the role of the hard infrastructure in the facilitation of regional cooperation. Walcott and Johnson's volume does analyze regional connectivity from a transnational infrastructure perspective.⁶⁵ However, the theme of the work only partially addresses post-Soviet Central Asia. Instead, most of the chapters revolve around border areas and inter-regional connections spread through multiple parts of the Eurasian continent. Another noteworthy volume by Overland et al. analyses the role of energy networks on the international and domestic politics in the littoral states of the Caspian Sea, i.e. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.⁶⁶ The breadth of this volume does include discussions on the impact of the major powers on the directions of energy networks. However, the scope of the study takes the analysis outside of Central Asia and largely excludes non-energy abundant Central Asian states. Moreover, the analysis focuses on energy geopolitics rather than the issue of regional cooperation.

Considering these gaps in the literature base, particularly the absence of a study examining the two major powers impact on Central Asian regionalism, this thesis analyses networked sectors of infrastructure with the aim of answering the following question: *How does the nature of China's and Russia's engagement in the infrastructural sectors affect the degree of regional cooperation among the Central Asian states?* In sum, though Russia and the USSR were major engines of regional integration during the Russian imperial and Soviet eras, Russia today is not a major facilitator of intraregional cooperation and in some instances actually impedes cooperation among Central Asian states. China has in fact emerged as the major engine of intraregional cooperation and altered the direction of regional connectivity through increasingly focused development of hard infrastructure and multilateral engagement with Central Asian states.

The thesis aims to make three substantial contributions. First, it is meant to enhance the overall understanding of Central Asian intraregional politics, the role of the great powers therein, and the region's position within the international system. Second, the study is intended to contribute to the understanding of Sino-Russian relations and the general direction of Chinese and Russian foreign policies in the post-Cold War era. Third, this thesis aims to make a contribution to the International Relations discipline by developing an approach for studying regions formed by one pre-existing major power and redefined by another, emerging, major power. The final section of this introduction offers a brief outline of the thesis chapters.

⁶³ Cooley 2012, Laruelle (et al) 2011, Laruelle and Peyrose 2013, Vinokurov and Libman 2012

⁶⁴ Marketos, 2009

⁶⁵ Walcott, Susan M. and Corey Johnson (Eds.), *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection*, New York: Routledge, 2014

⁶⁶ Overland, Indra, Heidi Kjaernet and Andrea Kendall-Taylor (Eds.), *Caspian Energy Politics: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan*, New York: Routledge, 2010

Chapter Outline

Chapter One evaluates the capacity of key multilateral initiatives which operate in Central Asia. The chapter, in line with the original puzzle, aims to explore the capacity of regional institution in fostering regional cooperation. The relative weakness of formal regional structures highlights the key roles that China and Russia play in terms of being facilitators or impediments to regional cooperation. The second half of the chapter evaluates the explanatory power of the theoretical approach closely associated with regional institutions, that is, Neoliberal Institutionalism. The analysis outlines a number of weaknesses of Neoliberal Institutionalism for studying regional cooperation in Central Asia. Based on the discussion of the institutions, the conclusion suggests that Central Asian regionalism revolves around the engagement of two major powers, Russia and China. The focus of the research therefore, revolves around regional engagement of the two major powers. Main research questions are outlined at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Two examines the history of Sino-Russian relations and more contemporary developments in the relations between the two major powers. Drawing on the lessons from the past the discussion concludes that recent warming up in Sino-Russian ties is not sufficient to dismiss the historical distrust and animosity. It is therefore more suitable to access Sino-Russian relations through the power politics of neorealist theories. The overview of Sino-Russian relations through the prism of balance of power theories suggest that their interactions in Central Asia need to be analyzed through a more complicated theoretical framework, one that incorporates power politics, but one that also addresses specific regional dynamics.

Chapter Three examines regional capacity of Central Asia. It highlights the essential characteristics of Central Asia as a region, and outlines a visible declining trend in regional cooperation. The chapter examines International Relations theories of regionalism, and their utility for analyzing Central Asian region. The discussion outlines key concepts and main analytical tools utilized in the thesis. The key elements of the analytical framework include components of realism and social constructivism, which is argued are not self-exclusive. Omnibalancing approach focuses on the balance of power politics from the perspective of Central Asian states. The concept of obdurate infrastructure explains how material capabilities of major powers translate into regional cohesion. The final section of the thesis describes the research methods of the thesis.

Chapter Four evaluates Sino-Russian interactions in the financial sphere. Considering the key role of funds for the completion of large scale infrastructure projects, the chapter examines China's and Russia's position within the existing multilateral institutions and their attitudes toward potential multilateral lenders. Chapters Five, Six and Seven analyze the nature of the two major powers' engagement in the networked infrastructural sectors, which have a capacity to influence regional cooperation and connectivity. The three sectors are transportation, energy and telecommunications. The respective chapters examine Chinese and Russian activities in the regulatory fields of each sector and their involvement in the completion of physical infrastructure projects.

The final chapter draws together the conclusions of the empirical chapters with the aim of explaining how the nature of Chinese and Russian engagement in the infrastructural sector in Central Asia affects the degree of regional cooperation among the Central Asian states. The final chapter also identifies theoretical implications and highlights general contributions of the thesis to the International Relations discipline.

Chapter One

Multilateral organizations as a reflection of regionalism

In Central Asia, despite significant predisposition for cooperation on the ground, the development of regional cooperation has revolved around formal international organizations. The process of developing various cooperative initiatives has been continuous throughout the post-Soviet years. Nevertheless, over the two and a half decades some of the regional organizations became obsolete, others saw their roles decline significantly, yet others evolved into different models with questionable capacity to influence cooperation among the Central Asian states. Overall, despite focused development of formal regional structures, Central Asia did not manage to generate a specific model for multilateral institutional cooperation. The analysis of past and present regional institutions is essential to understand the reasons behind this inability to produce robust regional structures.

This chapter begins by evaluating regional organizations limited to Central Asia and providing initial explanation why groupings not influenced by the adjacent major powers have not succeeded in Central Asia. The following sections compare views on the efficacy of the three distinct organizations: the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Community and its successor the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The next section outlines theoretical approaches associated with regional institutions, namely Neoliberal Institutionalism, and highlight its weaknesses in explaining the nature of regional cooperation in Central Asia. The conclusion highlights the essential role of major powers in all cooperation and integration initiatives in Central Asia. The final section utilizes the analysis of the regional organizations to re-state the key research questions of thesis.

'Home-grown' regional organizations

There are presently few regional organizations in Central Asia which have not been initiated by either Russia or China. These include the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation at Asian Development Bank.¹ They have been initiated by either neighboring "smaller" regional powers or international organizations. It has been suggested that the low impact of these groupings on regionalization is caused by an ineffectiveness "stemmed from the absence of well-educated technical personnel and experts having sufficient information and know-how of a free market economy and the lack of strong and stable political will in all the related countries."²

The only grouping exclusive to Central Asian states, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), was designed in the mid-1990's to address common problems and to strengthen the Central Asian states' position in the former Soviet space.³ Central Asian Union (CAU) consisting of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was established in 1994. Tajikistan was admitted in 1998. Turkmenistan had declined to join. Organization was renamed Central Asian Economic Union (CAEU) in 1998 and Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2001. Initial positive moves towards joint management of resources,

¹ Nezhoglu, Halim, Fatih Mehmet Sayin, "Two Options Among Numerous Directions: Eurasianism on Moscow's Terms or Regional Integration Between Sovereign Neighbors in Central Asia," *The Journal of International Social Research*, 6, 26, Spring 2013

² Ibid, 380

³ Bohr, Annette, "Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order," *International Affairs*, 80, 3 (2004), 486

investment projects and military cooperation showed insignificant progress.⁴ In 2005 the CACO was absorbed by the Eurasian Economic Community. The reasons for CACO's ineffectiveness are generally agreed on by authors and are attributed to legal, political and economic reasons, with varying levels of importance.

Bohr argues that "the CACO, as its predecessor organizations, has failed to develop an effective structure for the coordination of regional economic, trade or security policy."⁵ Facilitating protectionisms in trade, failure to reduce trade barriers, inability to resolve conflicting interests in water demands and the impotence of the joint military unit are cited as the main examples of ineffectiveness. Generally speaking, the organization's ineffectiveness was caused by the "virtual" nature of regionalism under CACO.⁶ In particular, the declaratory nature of CACO's resolutions had no binding force, allowing participating states to pursue their individual interests with little consideration for fellow members.⁷

According to Sakwa and Webber political rivalries between regional leaders, particularly between the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as Central Asian states' strong dependence on Russia "led [the Kazakhstan president] to suggest that moves toward Central Asian integration should not distance the region from either Moscow or from [the Commonwealth of Independent States]."⁸ In fact, Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian country by territory and economy, sees Russia as a part of the region. Rhetoric aside, "the main economic interests of Central Asian states lay outside the region. In 1999, only 3.1% of Kazakhstan's trade turnover was with members of [CACO], and in 2009 – 2.7%."⁹ By 2013 the trade between Central Asian states constituted less than five per cent of total international trade, in both imports and exports.¹⁰ Noticeably, Kazakhstan remains to be the main, if not the only advocate of purely Central Asian organization.¹¹

Consequently, a distinct feature of Central Asian regionalism was the presence of Russia in all the dominant and functional regional organizations. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was formed on the platform of the former Soviet Union with the initial purpose of diminishing negative effects from the disintegration of the Soviet state. The Eurasian Economic Community was originally designed to facilitate regional economic integration between some of the CIS member states. The Eurasian Economic Union replaced the Eurasian Economic Community as a more ambitious attempt of economic integration. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a unique regional initiative in a sense that it was proposed by China and thus took regionalism in Central Asia to a different level. Yet, the organization served Russia's interests, and Russia played a significant role in the grouping.¹²

The CIS – the initial form of post-Soviet regionalism

⁴ Sakwa, Richard, Mark Webber, "The Commonwealth of Independent States, 1991-1998: Stagnation and Survival," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51, 3, 1999, 399

⁵ Bohr, 2004, 486

⁶ Bohr, 2004, 487

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Sakwa, 400

⁹ Kassenova, Nargis, "Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future," *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports* No14, November 2012, 9

¹⁰ Turaeva, M. O., "The transport infrastructure in Central Asia in the conditions of new-age regionalization", *Institute of Economics of Russia Academy of Science*, 2014, Moscow, http://inecon.org/docs/Turaeva_paper_2014.pdf

¹¹ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 111

¹² Facon, Isabelle, "Moscow's Global Foreign and Security Strategy. Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests?" *Asian Survey*, 53, 3, May / June 2013, 461-483

Although the CIS can hardly be called a Central Asian institution, it contains all of the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, and its function provides useful insights for understanding regionalization dynamics in the former Soviet space. While the CIS made modest achievement in maintaining economic cooperation between the newly independent former Soviet republics, its contribution toward regionalization in Eurasia deserves further scrutiny. Scholars tend to agree that the weaknesses of the CIS lay both in the organization's agenda and in its members' attitude toward participation; however, there is little consensus as to whether the organizational structure and its legal mechanisms serve a positive role in the organization's functionality.

According to Libman, the dual nature of the CIS obstructed organizational vision from its founding days.¹³ The CIS's original agenda included both goals which resembled those of numerous regional organizations and goals which would serve the temporary purpose of facilitating a smooth dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ The first set of goals is demonstrated by the "[original founding] agreement [which] required the coordination of foreign policy, common economic space and cooperation in the customs policy, transportation and communication policy, migration policy, organized crime issues and an encompassing system of ecological security."¹⁵ Simultaneously, the same agreement and subsequent declarations addressed "coordination of economic reforms and introduction of national currencies", division of military assets and other issues specific to the dissolution of the USSR as well as emphasizing "sovereignty of [former Soviet Union countries] and restrictions on mutual interventions in the domestic policies."¹⁶ To serve these varying agendas the CIS revolved around the three interrelated processes: continuing negotiations on the USSR dissolution, creating organizational structure and developing tools for cooperation. This often involved "reaction to the disintegration and inability of the CIS countries to maintain the originally proclaimed level of cooperation."¹⁷

The CIS' transformation attempts in the mid-1990's included rhetoric of European style integration and the establishment of priorities through formal treaties, mainly focusing on trade and finance. However these showed few noticeable results because of the failures in implementation.¹⁸ Instead, the CIS continued to serve as a platform for meetings of its governing bodies and heads of member states, which often fulfilled only a symbolic role.¹⁹ Ineffectiveness of the CIS is attributed to contradictions between participating countries, their negative perception of the organization and consensus-based decision making which creates challenges for devising significant reforms in the organization.²⁰ Two decades after its founding, "the CIS [seemed] even to lose the function of the informal leadership forum and [restricted] its attention to specific areas of functional cooperation (electricity, railroads, aviation) and to the humanitarian issues."²¹

Apart from functional cooperation two other trends took place. First, there was a noticeable increase in migration and in educational mobility, which was a visible sign of regionalization. Second, economic convergence in monetary and financial activities took place.²² Although interstate trade "underperformed" in the first decade of the 2000's, it did

¹³ Libman, 2011

¹⁴ Libman, 2011, 5

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid, 6

¹⁸ Ibid, 8

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, 9

²² Libman, Alexander, Evgeny Vinokurov, "Regional Integration and Economic Convergence in the Post-Soviet

not necessarily imply the slowdown of individual states' economic activities,²³ but did suggest that interstate connections developed slower than national economies. Additionally, Vinokurov's and Libman's findings suggest that economic convergence in the former Soviet space took place independent of the degree of integration.²⁴ Although the phenomena might be linked to the activities of other regional organizations, e.g. the EurasEC, the CIS as the oldest and the most encompassing organization in the former Soviet space could be credited with the above mentioned positive trends.

Nevertheless, three problems, outlined by Sakwa and Webber, weakened the CIS' ability to facilitate regionalization of the former Soviet space.²⁵ First, functional cooperation was undermined by relative weakness of certain CIS bodies, particularly when supranational issues and necessity to enforce regulations were involved.²⁶ Second, members' absenteeism and non-participation have slowed down or impeded the organization's progress.²⁷

Finally, the CIS has carried within it the Soviet bureaucratic virus – a tendency toward multiplication of effort, foot-dragging and a triumph of good intentions over constructive adaptation. Its development [in the first decade of existence] has been *ad hoc*, lacking a clear organizational blueprint and without a set of competent, independent administrative personnel able to effect institutional consolidation.²⁸

As a result, the CIS achievements of fostering regionalization in a wider range of issues were limited.

Moreover, its membership eventually diminished. Georgia left the CIS in 2008 and Ukraine followed suite in 2015 by greatly reducing its engagement in the organization.²⁹ Both instances resulted from open conflicts with Russia. Additionally, some of the CIS' original roles became redundant since a number of its functions were taken over by more specialized regional organizations, e.g. the Collective Security Treaty Organization in the field of common defense, and the Eurasian Economic Community and the Eurasian Economic Union in the field of free trade. Even though the CIS served as a platform for similar initiatives, i.e. the CIS Collective Security Treaty and the CIS Customs Union, these failed to take off within its framework and subsequently re-emerged as independent organizations.

Noticeably, maintaining a coherent identity in the territory of the former Soviet Union proved to be an insurmountable task for the CIS. Having been 'Soviet' was, in the case of some members, the only aspect they had in common with each other.³⁰ Tajiks, Armenians and Moldovans, for instance, have very little in common aside from their shared Soviet past. Yet, there is little evidence to demonstrate any existence of the 'CIS identity'. For instance, the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly which brings together delegations from the individual CIS states and operates on the basis of consensus "concentrates on the development of the model acts, which could then be voluntarily implemented by the member countries (but have no

Space: Experience of the decade of Growth," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 50, 1, 2012, 112-128

²³ Ibid, 125

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Sakwa, Richard, Mark Webber, 395

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Technically, because it had not ratified the charter, Ukraine was not a formal member, although it participated in the organization as a full member. In the context of Central Asia, Turkmenistan following a policy of neutrality, formally remained outside of the organization, as it had done with most of the regional organizations in the post-Soviet years.

³⁰ The idea of *Soviet* identity is addressed in more detail in the Chapter on Central Asian regionalism

direct legal power neither have to be implemented on a mandatory basis) and therefore is simply a tool of dissemination of the best practices in the CIS.”³¹ At the same time, while being an “heir” to the USSR, the CIS had tried to distance itself from recreating the Soviet legacy in order to avoid alienating the more sensitive of the states. Yet, fostering regional cooperation among newly independent states overly concerned with their sovereignty was challenging considering the diverse nature of the regimes and varying interests of these states.

Several CIS members formed the regional grouping the GUUAM, designed to counterbalance the influence of the CIS and to foster closer cooperation with the West. The GUUAM, consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan (for a limited period), Azerbaijan and Moldova (with varying levels of interest) made little contribution toward regionalization of the former Soviet space. This can be explained by its composition of geographically distant and culturally diverse countries, the lack of common interests other than balancing against Russia and varying levels of involvement among the participating members. Although GUUAM had little relation to Central Asia since Uzbekistan ended its membership in 2005, the grouping demonstrated the dissatisfaction of a number of former Soviet states with the Russia-dominated regional institutions.³²

According to Dragneva, the nature of the CIS was characterized by weak legal mechanisms and the importance of ‘political belonging’ to the organization.³³ In that regard, the CIS operated within a relatively low number of legally binding rules and a high level of ambiguity, while delegating to non-state actors only limited authority to implement these rules.³⁴ These factors implied ‘soft institutional’ form which “[made] is easier to deal with sovereignty sensitivities and uncertainty, [allowed] for easier compromises between diverse positions, and [proved] to be better for institutional learning and confidence-building.”³⁵ However, ‘hard legalization’ mechanisms appeared to be necessary to foster economic cooperation, which explains the initiation of the Eurasian Economic Community and subsequently the Eurasian Economic Union.³⁶

Additionally, post-Soviet history proved that ‘soft institutionalism’ had prevented serious confrontations between the member states only for a limited time. Russia’s intervention in Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea in 2014 and an alleged involvement in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in south-eastern Ukraine demonstrated that the CIS failed to fulfill the crucial role of preventing military conflicts between its member states. The conflicts made a strong case that ‘soft institutionalism’ cannot serve as a permanent solution for promoting interstate security. Furthermore, they highlighted Russia’s dominant position in the region which cannot be restrained by regional organizations. Additionally, considering the sensitivity of the member states’ sovereignty and its propensity to compromise, the CIS did little to resolve internal conflicts in Central Asia, e.g. the Tajikistan Civil War in the early nineties and Kyrgyzstan unrest in 2010.

Additionally, the CIS did not facilitate security cooperation within a wider region, which opened a window of opportunity for China to initiate the Shanghai Five and subsequently the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Finally, although useful for understanding organizational dynamics between Russia and its smaller neighbors, the CIS,

³¹ Libman, Alexander, “Commonwealth of Independent States and Eurasian Economic Community,” www.internationaldemocracywatch.org, *First International Democracy Report 2011*, 16

³² Buzan, Barry, Ole Weaver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

³³ Dragneva, Rilka, “Is “Soft” Beautiful? Another Perspective on Law, Institutions, and Integration in the CIS”, 29 *Review of Central And East European Law*, 3, 2004, 288

³⁴ Dragneva, 2004

³⁵ *Ibid*, 319

³⁶ *Ibid*

after all, is not a Central Asian organization.

Eurasian Integration: narrowing down the region

The Eurasian Economic Community and the Eurasian Economic Union – toward “harder” regionalism

The Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) differed from the CIS by having a more ambitious institutional structure and legal framework, which arguably served as the drivers of the EurasEC’s progress. In a brief period of time the organization aimed to achieve a relatively high level of economic integration among some of its members by eliminating customs and implementing common tariffs after the creation of the Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus and with the proposed Single Economic Space by 2015.³⁷ Furthermore, the EurasEC aspired toward a much higher level of cooperation with the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, which aimed to be comparable to the European Union in its degree of economic integration.

The critics suggest that the groupings demonstrated the limits of Central Asian regionalism. First of all, despite a more carefully designed legal framework for creating and implementing agreements, Russia continued to hold a dominant position in the decision making process in both the EurasEC and the EAEU. Second, the EurasEC included only three of the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its technical successor, the EAEU did not even include Tajikistan. Moreover, the degree of Central Asian states participation in these initiatives differed significantly. Kazakhstan was a founding member of the Customs Union and the EAEU. Kyrgyzstan became a member of the EAEU in 2015. Tajikistan’s accession to the EAEU remained under consideration for a period of time. This variable level of involvement suggests that the existing format of the Eurasian integration may actually contribute to the deterioration of regional ties within Central Asia because of the tendency to facilitate cooperation only between selected states.

In the 1990’s the initial attempts for more institutionalized regional integration through the EurasEC were short-lived. With the political will of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, the initiative was repeated in 2000. According to Li Xin, the Eurasian integration initiative has served Putin’s ambitions of revive Russia’s ‘greatness’.³⁸ The “reset” came about as a “multi-speed approach to regional cooperation [...] became a seemingly more attractive alternative from the point of view of the main promoters of the cooperation and required a new institutional framework.”³⁹ More focused and less bureaucratic administrative structures, weighted voting mechanism for the decision-making process and an increased number of binding agreements were the factors enabling greater capacity of the EurasEC.⁴⁰ Specific regional cooperation initiatives included the activities of the Eurasian Development Bank, cited as one of the most successful multilateral bodies in the region because of its focus on financing selected infrastructural projects.⁴¹

Arguably, the more significant step toward the integration of the EurasEC was the creation of the Eurasian Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which went into effect in 2010. The main difference from previous integration initiatives,

³⁷Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future”, *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports* No14, November 2012, 12

³⁸ Li, Xin, “Putin’s Dream of Eurasian Union: Background, Objectives and Possibilities,” *Contemporary International Relations*, 21, 6, 2011

³⁹ Libman (2011), 9

⁴⁰ Libman (2011), 21

⁴¹ Libman (2011), 12

specifically the CIS, laid in the EurasEC's institutional establishment.⁴² First, the EurasEC framework aimed "to ensure that [international agreements between members bound] all member states through the practice of 'block' adaptation of agreements and their simultaneous entry into force."⁴³ Second, the decisions of the Customs Union regulatory body became legally binding and effective as domestic laws of participating members. Third, in 2012 the EurasEC established the Eurasian Economic Community Court and the Eurasian Economic Commission – supranational bodies responsible for the regulation of integration processes and the implementation of agreements.⁴⁴ Noticeably, the executive body of the commission consisted of the three countries' representatives with one vote each, which suggested a system of balance against Russia's domination of the decision making process.⁴⁵ At first glance the Eurasian Economic Commission allocated equal votes to the participating states as opposed to its predecessor, the Customs Union Commission, which assigned 57 per cent of votes to Russia and 21.5 per cent of votes to Kazakhstan and Belarus each.⁴⁶ In reality, though, the distribution of quotas for staff and the system of financing of the Commission was skewed in Russia's favor. Over eighty percent of the employment spaces were allocated to Russian citizens and Russia was responsible for nearly ninety percent of financing of the Eurasian Economic Commission.⁴⁷ This allowed Russia to have more control over the decisions. Nevertheless, the smaller states played a critical role in shaping Eurasian integration projects based on their various interests.

*Table One. Distribution of employment financing responsibilities in the Eurasian Economic Commission*⁴⁸

	Russia %	Kazakhstan%	Belarus %
Employment spaces	84	10	6
Financing	87.97	7.33	4.7

Defined by interests, but not always serving them

Initiation of Eurasian integration is often attributed to Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev's, political will.⁴⁹ In fact, the idea of the Eurasian integration was first voiced by Nazarbayev in 1994.⁵⁰ Kazakhstan had clear pragmatic economic, political and geo-political motives for active participation in the EurasEC, the Customs Union and the EUEU. First, the size of the Customs Union market with its 170 million people compared to Kazakhstan's 16 million, was supposed to attract investors, considering Kazakhstan's more favorable investment climate compared to Russia and Belarus.⁵¹ Political reasons reflected Kazakhstan's ruling elite's desire for regime stability, which could be achieved by means of

⁴² Dragneva, Rilka, Kataryna Wolczuk, "Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?" *Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme*, www.chathamhouse.org, (Aug, 2012),

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⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ Shumylo-Tapiola, Olga, "The Eurasian Customs Union: Friend or Foe of the EU?" *Carnegie Europe*, p.7, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/customs_union2.pdf

⁴⁵ Dragneva and Wolczuk, 7

⁴⁶ Kassenova, 25

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

⁴⁸ Kassenova 25, tabulated by the author

⁴⁹ Biryukov, Sergey V., Eurasian Doctrine of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev: "Thinking Space", *Journal of Eurasian Affairs*, www.eurasianaffairs.net, 23 September, 2013

⁵⁰ Eurasian Economic Commission, FAQ, (n.d), http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/Pages/eec_quest.aspx, accessed on July 2016

⁵¹ Kassenova

economic security as well as Russia's support for legitimacy of the incumbent leadership.⁵² Geopolitical reasons behind Eurasian integration “[underlined] the necessity of making a choice among great powers and defining what “civilization” Kazakhstan [belonged] to.”⁵³ Kassenova believes that the multi-vectoring policy pursued by Kazakhstan in the post-independence period had outlived itself and Kazakhstan made a choice to move towards integration under Russian leadership. She also suggests that Kazakhstan's option of developing closer ties with the West at the expense of the relations with Russia was reconsidered after the 2008 economic crisis.⁵⁴ This view places economic factors higher up on the list of considerations for regional integration, but it appears to downplay political reasons. Although Kazakhstan developed strong economic bonds with China, deep integration with China is highly questionable for Kazakhstan, as it is for most of Central Asian states, which appear to be weary of China's increasing influence in the region.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's reasons are similar in nature to those of Kazakhstan, except that these two countries' relatively undeveloped economies provide less flexibility for maneuvering. The two states have similar geopolitical considerations, realizing Russia's dominant security role in the region. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Kyrgyzstan, particularly, joined the EAEU based on security considerations despite clearly predictable negative economic outcomes.

Politically, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan leaderships rely on Russia supporting their regimes. For instance, Russia played a crucial role in ending the Tajik civil war and assisting current president, Emomali Rahmon, to ascend to power. In another example, after the 2009 renewal of the Manas lease agreement between Kyrgyzstan and the USA, the Russian government allegedly “mobilized its instruments of soft power in a concerted effort to weaken the Kyrgyz ruler [President Kurmanbek Bakiyev]”⁵⁵ The subsequent anti-government demonstrations led to the collapse of Bakiyev's regime.

From an economic standpoint, the results of increased integration are twofold. On the one hand, deeper regional integration was supposed to benefit hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz and Tajik migrant laborers working in Russia and in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, joining the EAEU was projected to reduce the benefits Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan derived from trade with China.⁵⁶ Actually, after joining the grouping in 2015 Kyrgyzstan suffered a loss of revenues from re-exporting Chinese goods to other Central Asian countries.⁵⁷ There is little consensus among the scholars as to which factors, political, geopolitical or economic, played the most significant role in each of the three EurasEC Central Asian members' decisions behind integration.

For Uzbekistan, whose membership in the EurasEC was suspended in 2008, the initial decision to join the organization was even less related to economic considerations and revolved around political and geopolitical reasons. Uzbekistan joined the EurasEC in 2006 shortly after the 2005 ‘Andijan event’ – a lethal government crackdown on the demonstration supporting the opposition.⁵⁸ The EurasEC provided support for Karimov's regime by not

⁵² Kassenova, 14

⁵³ Kassenova, 14

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Cooley, 2012, 128

⁵⁶ Muzalevsky, Roman, “Customs Union Doubts Remain,” Asia Times Online, August 3, 2011;

Keene, Eli, “Kyrgyzstan and the Customs Union,” *carnegieendowment.org*, May 1, 2012

⁵⁷ “Kyrgyzstan: Rynochnaya economica v stupor, ili chto sluchilos’ s ‘Dordoyem” [“Kyrgyzstan: Market economy in a stupor, or what happened with ‘Dordoi”], *Fergana News*, November 20, 2015, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8786>

⁵⁸ Not coincidentally Uzbekistan also joined Russia-led CSTO in June 2006, and suspended its membership in 2012

criticizing the way his government handled the situation in Andijan.⁵⁹ Additionally, for Uzbekistan, participation in the grouping offered an alternative to deteriorating relationships with the EU and the USA.⁶⁰ Noticeably, while Uzbekistan left the EurasEC in 2008, shortly after improvements in relations with the EU, it remained a member of the SCO until the present day.⁶¹ This suggests that a combination of the key EurasEC's attributes, i.e. Russia's dominance and more binding legal framework, make it less suitable to facilitate regional cooperation in Central Asia. The reasoning behind the Central Asian leaders' decision toward or against cooperation with major powers and neighboring states is also crucial. For example, according to a former Foreign Minister of one of the Central Asian states, late President Karimov's distrustful personality and condescending demeanor often disrupted pragmatic considerations for multilateral cooperation.⁶²

Russia's motives for promoting multilateral cooperation initiatives in Central Asian states lie in geopolitical reasons and economic considerations.⁶³ According to Shumylo-Tapiola, Russia believes the EAEU may become a significant global player.

Moscow projects its own way of doing business onto the European model, thinking that a country can only be seen as equal to the EU if it controls its own "neighborhood". And even further, Russia believes that Brussels is more likely to entertain the idea of a free trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok that was proposed by Putin, if it is negotiating with another bloc.⁶⁴

Additionally, Russia is concerned with China's growing economic influence in Eurasia. Chinese observers are optimistic about cooperation venues between the China and EAEU.⁶⁵ However, the EAEU can also be seen both as a counterweight to China and as a protective "buffer of friendly countries" at the same time.⁶⁶ The weight of geopolitical considerations may be seen as a guaranteed driving force for Russia's interest in Central Asian regional cooperation.

Furthermore, although economic considerations play a crucial role in Russia's involvement in Central Asia, they primarily revolve around natural and human resources.⁶⁷ Russia does not intend to revitalize the Soviet style level of economic integration, but rather aims "to improve cohesion of its neighborhood, expand its own rules of the game and gain access to neighbors' resources. It is more about wider exchange of commodities than a new economic model."⁶⁸

The importance of the Eurasian integration initiatives for Russia is even more evident considering Moscow's lack of capacity to promote regional cooperation elsewhere in the former Soviet space. The Baltic states joined the EU and NATO. In the South Caucasus, relations with Georgia became strained and Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to have open hostility towards each other since the war in Nagorniy Karabakh. Ukraine and Moldova's

⁵⁹ There is still little agreement among varying sources as to what really happened in Andijan.

⁶⁰ Libman, (2011), 11

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Author's interview, Bishkek, February 16, 2016

⁶³ Shumylo-Tapiola, Olga, "The Eurasian Customs Union: Friend or Foe of the EU?" *Carnegie Europe*, October 2012, p. 3

⁶⁴ Ibid, 4

⁶⁵ Li, Xin, "Putin's Dream of Eurasian Union: Background, Objectives and Possibilities," *Contemporary International Relations*, 21, 6, (2011), p.54

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid, 3

⁶⁸ Ibid

policies toward Russian integration initiatives varied widely depending on governments in power. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan distanced themselves from Russia due to the isolationist attitude and foreign policy focus on neutrality and multi-vectoring. Generally speaking, aside from Belarus and Armenia, the only countries where attitudes toward Russia remain largely benign are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – present or aspiring members of the Eurasian integration project. The EAEU offers Russia the potential to recover cultural influence in the region and raise international profile.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Russia's narrow scope of cooperation may have an adverse impact on the regionalization of Central Asia as a whole.

If Russia is the driving force of regional cooperation, this selective integration may be splitting the region into those who are 'members of the club' and those who are not. In 2013 Cooley and Laruelle argued that Russia's recent foreign policy shifted from

one that emphasized regional mediation and maximizing influence across the whole region to a more focused logic of hierarchy that seeks to support selected states with more focused instruments, take sides in regional disputes, and push for deeper integration within regional security and economic organizations that have narrower membership.⁷⁰

There are three possible outcomes of this trend in Russia's foreign policy. First, "it has the potential to alter the "multivector" equilibrium that has characterized the foreign policy orientation of all the Central Asian states over the last decade."⁷¹ *Multivector equilibrium* can be defined as a stable, non-conflicting condition of intraregional international relations resulting from carefully sought out foreign policies of the smaller states, which enable them to maneuver among major powers with the purpose of maximizing benefits. Second, closer integration with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may increase economic rivalry between Russia and China, which in the recent past revolved mainly around commercial competition around energy resources.⁷² Finally, Russia's new direction is likely to contribute to the regional security dilemma between Uzbekistan and its neighbors.⁷³ The last potential consequence may serve a serious blow to Central Asian regionalization.

Uzbekistan's centrality is not limited to its geographic position. Uzbekistan is the most populous Central Asian country containing close to a half of the region's population. Moreover, ethnic Uzbeks constitute sizable minorities in every other Central Asian state. It is difficult to conceive a functional Central Asian regionalization initiative without Uzbekistan. Being the only country to border all the other states, Uzbekistan played a principal role in connecting the region during the Soviet era. Nevertheless, in the post-independence period the degree of Uzbekistan's relations with Russia fluctuated. Uzbekistan had periods of rapprochement with the United States, suspended memberships at the CSTO and the EurasEC and expressed no desire to participate in the EAEU. While bilateral relations with Uzbekistan remained highly important for Russia⁷⁴, Uzbekistan's independent foreign policy often obstructs its integration into Russian dominated regional organizations.

In that regard, the EAEU may remain just a peripheral organization, rather than an

⁶⁹ Wang, Lijiu, "Russia's Eurasian Union Strategy and Its Impact on Sino-Russian Relations and SCO," *Contemporary International Relations*, 22, 2 (2011), pp. 86-96

⁷⁰ Cooley, Alexander, Marlene Laruelle, "The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia. From Privileged Sphere, to Divide and Rule?", PONARS Eurasia Policy memo No. 261, July 2013, *PONARSEurasia.org*,

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⁷¹ *Ibid*, 5

⁷² *Ibid*, 6

⁷³ *Ibid*

⁷⁴ Author's interview, Beijing, May 26, 2015

institution with a significant role in Central Asian regionalism. According to a Moscow based expert, Russia-led integration initiatives represent “little Eurasia”, while there is a “large Eurasia” – a project led by China.⁷⁵ In that context, the SCO, an organization which includes most of the Central Asian states, represents regionalism of a much different nature.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization: serving various goals

Shanghai Five was initiated by China in 1996 with the original intention of reducing distrust and preventing potential tensions along the former Soviet borders inherited by the Central Asian states and Russia. The forum moved ahead with other security issues, such as the resolution of border disputes and combating “three evils”: separatism, terrorism and extremism. Having started as a summit, the Shanghai Five evolved into a permanent mechanism for wider regional cooperation and eventually developed into an increasingly formal organization with the founding of the SCO in 2001.⁷⁶ Initiated as a mechanism for bilateral cooperation, Shanghai Five’s transformation into a multilateral organization emerged as “an unintended result of practice rather than of design.”⁷⁷ This type of regionalization comes in sharp contrast to the clearly designed legal framework of the EurasEC. The development of the SCO represents a vivid example of Chinese-style policy making. As with the domestic Reform and Opening policy, and with the contemporary initiative of One Belt One Road, Chinese leadership tends to follow Deng Xiaoping’s recommendation of “crossing the river by touching the stones.”⁷⁸ The SCO appears to have followed this approach closely by evolving based on emerging needs, but not necessarily following the initial agenda. China’s key role in the SCO includes formulation of conceptual guideline, driving institutionalization and providing direct support for the SCO members.⁷⁹ For China the SCO carries strategic significance providing platform for confidence building, offering regional structure for combating terrorism, facilitating economic cooperation and development of energy resources in China’s western regions and creating favorable neighborhood for China’s development.⁸⁰ China considers the SCO to be a unique instrument to implement its interests and therefore, China has been the main political agitator of the SCO.⁸¹

The SCO, whose founding members in addition to China are Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is the most inclusive regional organization in Central Asia.⁸² According to Pan Guang, the SCO creates “healthy tendency for swift development of regional cooperation.”⁸³ It is unique in a number of ways. First, it was originally founded around security cooperation and gradually evolved to include a wider range of issues. Second, as a Chinese initiative, it takes Central Asian regionalism to a different level. Finally, memberships of the two major powers add different dynamics to the organization.

⁷⁵ Carnegie-Tsinghua Event, (off the record), Beijing, May 26, 2015

⁷⁶ Wang, Jianwei, “China and SCO: towards a new type of interstate relations” in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds.), *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*, London: Routledge, (2007), 106

⁷⁷ Ibid, 106

⁷⁸ Author’s Interview, Beijing, June 15, 2017

⁷⁹ Pan, Guang, “China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization”, in *China and the New International Order*, Wang Guang Wu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), London: Routledge, 2009, 237-255

⁸⁰ Pan, Guang, 2009

⁸¹ Zhao, Huasheng, “China’s View of and Expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Asian Survey*, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 436-460

⁸² In June 2017 the SCO admitted India and Pakistan as new members

⁸³ Guang, Pan, 2009

'Functionalism upside-down'

Generally, international trade represents evident shared interests of the states and, therefore, may foster development of institutions and, consequently, enhance interstate cooperation. Zhao Huashen argues that “economic cooperation will ensure the long term relevance of the SCO, as current securities threats recede”⁸⁴ However, elimination of trade barriers in Central Asia is not seen as a common interest mainly because of the apprehension of China’s unprecedented growth and its growing economic reach in the region. This also suggests that in the case of China, economic tools may not always be effective in fostering cooperation. Cooley suggests that “Moscow is particularly hesitant to support any broad SCO economic initiative, while the Central Asian states are also nervous that their economies will be overrun by Chinese plans for more trade, greater investment, and even possible internationalization of the Renminbi.”⁸⁵ Economic cooperation was also hampered on a more practical level. In 2003 the SCO members signed an Agreement on Trade and Cooperation; in 2005 they signed a Program on Mechanism for Realization which included over 100 projects in various fields.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, according to a high ranking official from the SCO, the program was soon admitted to be overambitious and unrealistic.⁸⁷ Differences in political and legal systems served as additional hurdles for cooperation. Subsequently, in the framework of the SCO the “potentially divisive issue of free economic trade has been sidelined.”⁸⁸ As a result, the SCO’s development took a different, arguably uncommon, direction in regionalization.

While the ‘spill over’ effect is a commonly expected result of nascent regional cooperation, the order of the events was unusual in the case of the SCO. According to Wang Jianwei,

the evolution of SCO turned functionalism upside down. In other words, SCO started with a security-oriented mandate. It was the function of highly successful cooperation in security areas that eventually spilled-over to other, non-security areas, such as foreign-policy coordination, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges.”⁸⁹

Cooley offers an explanation to this phenomenon.

Common defense or security policies are viewed as the most difficult and final stages in the integration sequence. The Central Asian region follows a quite different pattern: rulers have proven willing to support regional security initiatives that guard their regimes from transnational threats and political opposition, but have proven reluctant to take greater steps to institutionalize the movement of goods, capital, and people that might undermine their control over resources and private revenue streams.⁹⁰

Visibly, the focus on regime stability, crucial for the Central Asia leaders, played a noticeable role in the direction of the SCO’s institutional development.

The establishment of more advanced institutional arrangements essential for cooperation followed the necessity, rather than pre-determined organizational design. Aris

⁸⁴ Zhao, Huasheng, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization at 5: Achievements and challenges,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 105-123

⁸⁵ Cooley, (2011), 166

⁸⁶ Author’s Interview, Bishkek, January 21, 2016

⁸⁷ Author’s Interview, Beijing, June 1, 2016

⁸⁸ Aris, Stephen. *Eurasian Regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 86

⁸⁹ Wang, 106

⁹⁰ Cooley, (2012), 161

outlines three stages in the evolution of the SCO after 2001. The first one was the institutional development which involved creation of formal organizational structures, i.e. the Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure.⁹¹ The second stage included the formation of an agenda for practical cooperation.⁹² The third stage focused on the SCO's functioning and demonstrating noticeable results before moving to the next stage of the development.⁹³ Arguably, with the first enlargement in 2017, the SCO entered into its fourth stage.

In addition to the two permanent structures, there is an established mechanism of meetings on different levels of governments, including the Council of the Heads of States, and several non-governmental bodies.⁹⁴ Still, visibly, the SCO's institutional structures are not nearly as advanced as those of the CIS or the EurasEC.

SCO is strongly interstate in design, with very limited elements of supranationalism [...]. It is also largely elite-focused, with the national leadership controlling agenda. As a result, the organs of the SCO are limited in their capacity to impact on national affairs and in their ability to ensure that their programmes are implemented nationally.⁹⁵

In addition to highlighting major sovereignty concerns, the SCO's structure reflects the evolutionary nature of the organization. Furthermore, the SCO is viewed as a highlight of China's preference for bilateralism. Multiple two-sided agreements took place under the framework of the SCO. Arguably, the organization provides 'added value' to the bilateral agreements.⁹⁶ Finally, the SCO represents a specific style of regionalism with Chinese characteristics.

Chinese style of regionalism

Instead of formal decision making processes and legally binding mechanisms, China, places emphasis on common norms and 'shared practices'.⁹⁷ According to Kavalski, the SCO's rhetoric reflects "Beijing's foreign policy belief that institutional identities intimate socializing processes that affect the norms and behavior of participating countries."⁹⁸ This focus on norms arises from the, so-called, Shanghai Spirit which implies "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development."⁹⁹ The rhetoric demonstrates China's attempts to "socialize" Central Asian states into accepting common values. Aris, who compares the SCO to ASEAN, agrees that "it is possible for institutions to create ties between states and shape their behavior not only via legal treaties and charters, but also through socialization on the basis of common principles and norms of behavior."¹⁰⁰

However, as far as the values are concerned, common principles and norms of

⁹¹ Aris, (2011), 4

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid, 5

⁹⁴ Kavalski, Emilian. *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers: Contextualizing the Security Governance of the European Union, China and India*. London: Bloomsbury, (2012), 118

⁹⁵ Aris, 2011, 53

⁹⁶ Akiner, Shirin, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World*, www.globalstrategyforum.org, (June 2010), 13

⁹⁷ Kavalski, 119

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Kavalski, 117

¹⁰⁰ Aris, 16

behavior may be the only cohesive set of values between China, Russia and Central Asia. The SCO's 'multi-civilizational' rhetoric highlights the differences between the cultural and social values of China and those of the former Soviet states. The differences in language, culture, history, religion, and mentality between China and the others are so wide that it would be nearly impossible to build a narrative of a common past or a shared destiny. Arguably, the main point of cultural connection between China and Central Asia is Xinjiang with its large population of Turkic people, mainly Uighur and Kazakhs, who are ethnically, linguistically and culturally closer to Central Asian Turkic peoples. Paradoxically, China's policy in Xinjiang, which revolves around populating the region with Han Chinese and preventing transnational contacts between Uighur, runs counterproductive to bottom-up regionalization between China and Central Asian states.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, grassroots regionalization may not be one of the SCO's leading members' goals. "The regionalization of Central Asia seems to be tightly in the hands of the state administrations."¹⁰² Subsequently, 'top-down' regionalization may have a negative effect on 'bottom-up' regionalization and the SCO's rhetoric of common values should be viewed skeptically. Yet, the two major powers' attitude toward the SCO partly reflects their general attitude towards the regionalization of Central Asia.

Dynamics defined by the two major powers

One view suggests that the SCO's failures are not being scrutinized by the member states as seriously as they would be in other regional organizations. This is because these failures would not necessarily interfere with the two major powers' ambitions for growth. Both Russia and China have other directions for development and "small drawbacks in regional cooperation in Central Asia can be acceptable."¹⁰³ Zhao Huasheng suggests that the SCO "helped avoid collision between Russian and China".¹⁰⁴ Moreover, on Russia's list of Central Asian regional priorities, the SCO appears to be below the EAEU and arguably less important than numerous bilateral relations with Central Asian states.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, according to Naarajarvi, "for the Chinese, the *idea of the SCO* is more important than the *actions* of it: it is mainly Chinese-led, security-focused international organization with an emphasis on state sovereignty and territorial integrity"¹⁰⁶ Yet, China and Russia are crucial for further development of the SCO.¹⁰⁷

Although Russia and China are the two driving forces of the SCO, without which the organization would not be able to function, the two powers, according to Naarjarvi, actually impede the regionalization of Central Asia. He suggests that even though "the SCO helps in making the Central Asian republics see themselves as subjects instead of objects", it is "...because of China and Russia, the more Central Asian regionalism is seen through the prism of SCO, the less regionalized it is."¹⁰⁸ The statement is not perfectly clear, but it may be suggesting that the original, post-Soviet condition of Central Asia had a greater predisposition for becoming a region compared to the artificial shape of regionalism imposed by the SCO.

¹⁰¹ Naarajarvi, Teemu, "China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Blessing or Curse for New Regionalism in Central Asia?" *Asia Europe Journal*, 10, (2012)

¹⁰² Naarajarvi, 122

¹⁰³ Naarajarvi, 119

¹⁰⁴ Zhao, Huasheng, "China's View of and Expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Asian Survey*, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 436-460

¹⁰⁵ Naarajarvi, 116

¹⁰⁶ Naarajarvi, 115

¹⁰⁷ Guang, Pan, 2009, 237-255

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 124

In the same context, Kaukenov sees two levels of systematic contradictions within the SCO: rivalry between Central Asian states and competition between Russia and China.¹⁰⁹ First, political competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan; animosity between Uzbekistan and its smaller neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; competition for natural resources, particularly water; lack of power transfer mechanisms throughout the region; and more notably, “anti-Chinese moods” in most of Central Asia make the “Shanghai spirit of trust [...] not acceptable in practice.”¹¹⁰ With India’s and Pakistan’s ascent to the organization, the degree of tensions among the member states is likely to increase. However, according to Yu Bin,

the SCO’s biggest achievement is its survival [...]; the organization’s continuous existence can be attributed to ‘law of avoidance’, for organization has often avoided confronting the differences among members rather than resolving them. The SCO’s resilience is, ironically, derived from, rather than, compromised by, its internal diversity and operational slowness. ‘Survival of the slowest’ is therefore not an exaggeration for the SCO’s resilience [...].¹¹¹

Subsequently, despite the divergence between the reality and the SCO’s rhetoric, the organization is likely to continue developing at its own pace.

Second, Kaukenov suggests that Central Asia serves as a field for competition between Russia and China in contrast to their general agreement on most of the major international issues.¹¹² One of the reasons for this competition is that both Russia and China have been seeing their bilateral relationships with the USA as more important than with each other, and having used their own friendship as “a bargaining chip for upping their value in Washington’s” eyes.¹¹³ This view is also relatively common among western scholars. The other reason is Russia’s reluctance to promote the SCO’s rapid development.¹¹⁴ In Kaukenov’s critical view “Moscow has always occupied the position of an active pessimist in the SCO, making generous offers, allotting funding, but in the end doing everything to ensure that the SCO does not go beyond the framework of a dialog platform.”¹¹⁵ In that regard, while the SCO serves Russia’s political interests in the international arena, Russia’s priorities with the EAEU and desire to keep China at arm’s length may not contribute toward the regionalization of Central Asia through the SCO. For instance, according to Wishnick, Russia is reluctant to contribute to the SCO development fund because of fear that China would dominate it.¹¹⁶ Chinese observers, on the contrary suggest that the SCO and the EAEU are partners and the progress of either organization should not change that relationship, as China would not stand on the way of the EAEU.¹¹⁷ Paradoxically, as Naarajarvi suggests, the SCO needs Russia and China to function, but their participation prevents development of regional

¹⁰⁹ Kaukenov, Adil, “Internal Contradictions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 14, 3, (2013)

¹¹⁰ Kaukenov

¹¹¹ Yu Bin, “The SCO ten years after. In search of its own identity,” in *China and the New International Order*, Wang Guang Wu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), London: Routledge, 2009, 39

¹¹² Kaukenov

¹¹³ Kaukenov

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Wishnick, Elizabeth, “Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the shadow of the Georgian Crisis,” U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, (February 2009)

¹¹⁷ Zhao, Huasheng, (May / June 2013)

cooperation in Central Asia.¹¹⁸

The Challenge of Neoliberal Institutionalism

The following section reviews international relations in Central Asia from a neoliberal institutionalist perspective. According to Robert Keohane's seminal work on Neoliberal Institutionalism "institutions are necessary [...] in order to achieve state purposes."¹¹⁹ The main advantage of institutions lies in their ability to reduce uncertainty between the states, which is supposed to benefit each state involved, reducing the possibility of the 'zero-sum' game.¹²⁰ Despite ever present common interests, cooperation between states often fails. According to Keohane, cooperation "as compared to harmony, requires active attempts to adjust policies to meet the demand of others" and is best achieved with the help of institutions.¹²¹ Subsequently, "intergovernmental cooperation takes place when the policies actually followed by one government are regarded by its partners as facilitating realization of their own objectives, as the result of a process of policy coordination."¹²²

Presence and certain degree of functionality of several international institutions in Central Asia is consistent with neoliberal institutionalist view about the importance of the institutions and their ability to fulfill the states' objectives. However this key logic of Neoliberal Institutionalism, that is, the institutions capacity to serves the states' objectives, does not hold enough weight or explanatory power in Central Asia. This is demonstrated by the following discussion of nature of states interests in Central Asia.

Mutual interests: Security and regime stability

Each state actor within the region is interested in addressing matters of security and regime stability. Non-traditional security threats, particularly terrorism seem to be the main issue that Central Asia states, Russia and China agree on. Although, threats are not the same for each regional actor, they provide solid ground for cooperation behind common objectives. China is concerned with stability in Xinjiang and is wary of any possible nationalistic tendencies emanating from ethnic Uighurs residing in Central Asia. Russia, which has its own ethnic nationalism issues in the Northern Caucasus, is sympathetic and supportive of China's call to tackle "terrorism, extremism and separatism". Additionally, drug trafficking through Central Asia from Afghanistan is a serious concern for Russia. Central Asian states, to a different degree are also troubled by insurgencies within their territories. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the two which face the greatest threat from Islamist extremism.

With this in mind, the SCO, from a nascent stage, has been functional, although not always the most efficient forum for cooperation on issues of non-traditional security.¹²³ A consistent record of military exercises under the auspices of the SCO demonstrates additional commitment of the member states to cooperate on security. At the same time, developing counter-terrorism capabilities is the most achievable goal of the CSTO. While designed and viewed as a defense alliance in order to balance against external threats, the CSTO has a higher capacity for counter-insurgency with a 15000 strong Collective Rapid Reaction

¹¹⁸ Naarajarvi

¹¹⁹ Keohane, Robert O., *After Hegemony. Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 245

¹²⁰ Keohane, 13

¹²¹ Keohane, 13

¹²² Keohane, 72

¹²³ Wishnick, Elizabeth, "Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the shadow of the Georgian Crisis," *U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute*, February 2009, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

Force.¹²⁴ Yet, grouping facilitates Russia's presence in the region and projects the image of a "NATO style alliance" while providing Central Asian member states the benefit of Russia's tangible support through their military and security services.¹²⁵ Generally though, security, which according to the neo-liberal institutionalist view is the most challenging field for cooperation¹²⁶, also provides the least controversial ground for Central Asian actors to cooperate.

A second major area of concern for each of the regional actors involves preservation of internal regimes. Each of the states discussed, with questionable exception of Kyrgyzstan, is run by an autocratic government. While degrees of autocracy vary, each state leadership is primarily concerned with the regime's survival. Although, this seems like an internal issue, it does provide Central Asian states, Russia and China with common ground both within the region and on the international stage. While regime preservation is positioned as a common interest, multilateral efforts toward regime preservation may contradict one of the most important regional norms – sovereignty. In a vivid example, as a result of strong rhetoric of non-interference into internal affairs, both regional institutions with a security dimension, i.e. the SCO and the CSTO, have failed twice to prevent regime collapses in Kyrgyzstan.

Other set of interests, which is often viewed as mutually beneficial for all the Central Asian actors, is the development of regional infrastructure. The evident rationale is that an enhanced infrastructure embeds regional connectivity and facilitates flow of energy, goods and people. Therefore, developing infrastructure should be viewed as beneficial for all actors engaged across the region; however this is not always so. The final comments of the following section suggest that infrastructural development does not necessarily lead to a 'win-win' scenario.

Diverging interests

Certain interests in Central Asia are more important for some states, but not for the others. These include handling of energy resources, facilitation of trade, and development of infrastructure. While appearing non-conflicting at first glance, the issues of energy, trade and infrastructure may actually result in a zero-sum game.

Trade and economic cooperation

From the neo-liberal perspective trade represents one of the more evident common interests for every state. Therefore, trade should foster institutional development and, consequently, enhance cooperation among state actors. However, elimination of trade barriers across Central Asia is not held as a common interest, primarily because of the apprehension of China's unprecedented growth and its increasing economic reach in the region.

While the EurasEC and the EAEU were intended to facilitate trade and aimed to eventually create common economic space, these ambitions for economic cooperation did not include China. Having become the major or one of the major trading partners of each of the Central Asian state, China became the largest trading partner across the whole region.¹²⁷ Hence, China's role is being viewed with increased suspicion. "Moscow is particularly hesitant to support any broad SCO economic initiative, while the Central Asian states are also

¹²⁴ Cooley, 2011, 57

¹²⁵ Cooley, 59

¹²⁶ Keohane, 2005

¹²⁷ Peyrose, Sebastien in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), *China and India in Central Asia. A New "Great Game"?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 156
Cooley, 86

nervous that their economies will be overrun by Chinese plans for more trade, greater investment, and even the possible internationalization of the Renminbi.”¹²⁸ Under the SCO framework a “potentially divisive issue of free economic trade has been sidelined.”¹²⁹

Arguably, with the jumpstart of a Customs Union, the EurasEC, and subsequently the EAEU, acquired the potential to transform the multilateral landscape in Central Asia and to promote cooperation between states in the region through economic integration. The presence of a functional institutional framework, with specific rules and strategic implementation channels, combined with regulations and compliance to international norms enabled the Customs Union to deepen economic integration in the region and provided the Eurasian economic integration initiatives with additional institutional capacity, essentially facilitating cooperation.¹³⁰ At the same time, institutional power of the revamped Eurasian integration projects retained serious limitations.

First of all, on its initial stages, the Customs Union demonstrated mixed results, especially in Kazakhstan and Belarus.¹³¹ Second, the direction of the EAEU expansion in Central Asia remained stagnant for a considerable amount of time because of a number of requirements Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan needed to meet in order to join. After Kyrgyzstan finally joined the EAEU in 2015, the immediate effects on Kyrgyz economy and on intraregional trade were negative and largely uncertain.¹³² Furthermore, it has been argued by Libman and Vinokurov that economic integration in Central Asia has been largely driven not by institutions and intergovernmental cooperation, but rather by multinational companies and other private actors.¹³³ This thesis does not analyze the status of intraregional trade because of the complexity of this task and lack of sufficient data for the period following development of renewed Eurasian integration initiatives. In turn, the empirical chapters of the thesis focus on the networked sectors which have the potential to facilitate trade among other things. Yet, in the context of economic cooperation, Chapter Four evaluates institutional cooperation in the financial sector, as one of the networked industries, and the potential effects of this cooperation on regional connectivity.

Finally, Customs Union and the EAEU rules were designed in compliance with the WTO, of which Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are all now members.¹³⁴ However, there are concerns about the full agreement between the Eurasian integration initiative and the WTO regulations, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁵ So, on the one hand there is potential discord between these international institutions which are supposed to have similar prerequisite roles. On the other hand, there is weakness of the SCO in promoting economic cooperation. Both factors provide grounds for questioning the utility of Neoliberal Institutionalism for explaining international relations in Central Asia.

¹²⁸ Cooley, 166

¹²⁹ Aris, Stephen, *Eurasian Regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 86

¹³⁰ Dagneva, Rilka, Kataryna Wolczuk, “Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?” *Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme*, www.chathamhouse.org, (Aug. 2012)

¹³¹ Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports* No14, November 2012

¹³² Henry Alff, “Flowing goods, hardening borders? China’s commercial expansion into Kyrgyzstan re-examined”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 57, 3, 2016, pp. 433-456

“Eurasian Union hunts for silver linings”, *eurasianet.org*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79016>

¹³³ Vinokurov, Evgeny, Alexander Libman, *Eurasian Integration. Challenges of Transcontinental Regionalism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 228

¹³⁴ Dagneva, 2012

¹³⁵ Kassenova, 2012, 22; Cooley, 2011, 62.

Energy

At first glance energy exploitation and transit appear to be, a non-conflicting interest among states in the region. The three energy producers, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are all interested in diversifying the routes for gas and oil exports. At the same time, both Russia and China are interested in gaining increased access to Central Asian energy market. Russia was traditionally the major beneficiary of Central Asian oil and gas; however two newly built pipelines, the Central Asia-China Gas pipelines running from Turkmenistan, through Kazakhstan to China and Atyrau-Alashankou oil pipeline from western Kazakhstan to China, bypass Russia and provide alternative markets for Central Asian states.¹³⁶

For Russia, Central Asian oil and gas serve as a re-export product and a significant source of revenue, while for China, Central Asian oil and gas constitute a relatively minor alternative source in China's portfolio of energy sources.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, as argued in Chapter Six, energy security, a seemingly non-conflicting issue in Central Asia, provides grounds for competition and discord. Limited cooperation has been achieved between competing parties and regional institutions. According to Pan Guan energy cooperation will continue to grow despite the lack of enthusiasm from Russia¹³⁸ In the meantime, the SCO, contributed little to cooperation between Russia and China in the field of Central Asian energy. This, again, highlights the drawback of the Neoliberal Institutionalism in explaining international relations in Central Asia.

Infrastructure development

Developing regional infrastructure is often viewed as a shared interest of all the states involved in a particular region. The rationale behind this is that all actors benefit from enhanced connectivity, which, in turn, leads to increased movement of goods and people, as well as more efficient flow of energy and information. Originally, the Soviet-built infrastructure largely defined the shape of Central Asia. China's contemporary "Silk Road" rhetoric implies that greater connectivity serves the best interests of every state actor. However, in reality, building roads and railways, pulling power lines and cables, and laying pipelines through Central Asian states have often been a cause of contention across the region.

In some instances disagreements have arisen among different interest groups within individual states. On other occasions, creating new or altering existing elements of infrastructure has caused controversy among states since infrastructural changes often highlight competition for shared resources and access to alternative markets. Also, the direction of infrastructure has serious effects on the interests of adjoining states in the region. Russia and China's participations in the development of infrastructure in Central Asia have been to a large degree defined by their expanding interests in the region. In that regard, their general rhetoric of cooperation did not always match their actions. The competing nature of Sino-Russian dynamic in the infrastructural sector can be explained with the concept of

¹³⁶ Cooley, 2011, 94

¹³⁷ Cabestan, Jean-Pierre in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), *China and India in Central Asia. A New "Great Game"?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 38

¹³⁸ Pan, Guang, "Bishkek: SCO's success in the hinterland of Eurasia," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 5, 4, 2007, 3-6

obdurate infrastructure introduced by Corey Johnson.¹³⁹ Johnson argues that hard infrastructure can shape and often define decisions of the states. The *obduracy* of the infrastructure lies in its capacity to override political differences and even discord between states.¹⁴⁰ The concept of obdurate infrastructure is actively utilized for subsequent analysis, and is introduced in more detail in the Chapter Three.

To this point, it is visible that material capabilities of the dominant actor, rather than institutionally facilitated cooperation, define relations among states. In the context of Central Asia, Russia's continuous dominant position in the region was strengthened not only through the security, economic and cultural dimension, but to a large extent, by the direction of hard infrastructure. Roads, railways, pipelines and communication cables laid during the Soviet epoch through the region were largely directed toward the European section of Russia. Nevertheless, in the two and a half decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *obduracy* of this infrastructure has been undermined by Chinese engagement. China's material capabilities in the form of unprecedented economic power disrupted Russia's position in Central Asia. In other words, all the *roads* do not lead to Moscow anymore; some of them lead eastward. Consequently, it is not accurate to label infrastructure development as one of the shared interests in Central Asia. The absence of agreement among the states on this important interest further undermines the capacity of Neoliberal Institutionalism to adequately explain international relations in Central Asia.

Three of the empirical chapters, namely Chapters Five, Six and Seven address diverging dynamics of the two major powers in different sectors of hard infrastructure.

Limitations of Neo-liberal Institutionalism

Even though the main logic of institutions facilitating cooperation does exist in Central Asia, Neoliberal Institutionalism is not the most suitable approach for explaining relations between state actors in the region. Institutions in Central Asia are based largely on security and political interests, rather than on economic considerations. Economic cooperation, the focus of Neoliberalism, plays an inferior role in regionalization dynamics within Central Asia. This seriously limits their capacity to foster cooperation between states. Moreover, the balancing nature of regional organization, particularly the view that EurasEC and EAEU were designed by Russia to strengthen its position in relation to China¹⁴¹ exposes Neoliberal Institutionalism to criticism. The capacity of Neoliberal Institutionalism is further diminished by often contradictory functions of multilateral organizations operating in the region and extensive role of security dimension in the institutional design of several of these organizations. Finally, although according to Neoliberal Institutionalism, regional organizations do have the ability to facilitate cooperation, the theory has little capacity to explain how they do it in Central Asia considering the strong intergovernmental nature of organizational design of international institutions in the region. Godehardt suggests that "the contents of different types of regional orders often refer to major debates in IR, such as neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism, emphasizing particularly the question how order can be generally ensured and regulated."¹⁴² The two chapters that follow suggest that among mainstream IR theories, Neorealism and Social constructivism offer better utility for explaining regional dynamics in Central Asia. The final section summarizes the analysis of

¹³⁹ Johnson, Corey, "Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia", in Walcott, Susan and Johnson, Corey (Eds.), *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From the South China to the Caspian Sea*, Routledge, (2014), 110-129

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Facon, 472

¹⁴² Godehardt, 32

the international organizations in Central Asia and re-states the key research questions of the thesis.

Conclusion and main research questions

Central Asian regionalism has a distinct nature. It does not imitate the European model of regional integration dominated by liberalization of trade, enhanced role of non-state actors, supranational institutions and strong legal foundation. Neither does it completely follow the widely discussed in literature ‘Asian style’ of regional cooperation. The latter is subjected to fluid institutional structures and is based on common interests and norms with material factors playing a less important role.¹⁴³ Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the most vivid example of so-called ‘Asian style’ regionalism. However, despite apparent similarities between the SCO and ASEAN¹⁴⁴, there is a distinct difference between the two. Compared to the SCO, ten ASEAN’s members are much more diverse ideologically, culturally and linguistically, which partially explains looser ties among them.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, presence of the two major powers in the SCO sets it apart from other regional organizations.

Generally, Central Asian regionalism in the post-Soviet period has been characterized by continuous, if not necessarily consistent, engagement of Russia and the increasing involvement of China. In the first post-Soviet decade the regionalization process was uneven, but it experienced leaps in the following years to make up for setbacks, particularly in the case of the Eurasian integration projects. Moreover, regional cooperation, which in many cases originated from relatively informal mechanisms, witnessed an increase in institutional legalization. Despite certain optimistic perceptions of the CIS, the future of Central Asian regionalism does not lie with this organization. The CIS is too geographically dispersed, too multifunctional and too complex to focus on Central Asia. The two organizations, which have the capacity to either promote or disrupt regional cooperation in Central Asia, are the EAEU and the SCO.

However the two regional organizations have not sufficiently contributed to the region-formation process in Central Asia. The process of region formation is addressed in more detail in Chapter Three. It is visible however, that Central Asian regional organizations are not as efficient as they are supposed to be. One of the key reasons for this inefficiency is outlined by Roy Allison who argues that the dominant regional organizations

represent a form of ‘virtual regionalism’. [...] For the Central Asian states they offer a new and increasingly important function, that of ‘protective integration’. This takes the form of collective political solidarity or ‘bandwagoning’ with Russia (and China in the SCO) against processes and pressures that are perceived as challenging by incumbent leaders and their political entourage. A primary motivation for Central Asian leaders’ engagement in the EurasEC, CSTO and SCO, therefore, is the reinforcement of domestic regime security and the resistance of ‘external’ agendas of good governance or democracy promotion. These goals are concealed behind a discourse that denigrates the imposition of external ‘values’ and continues to give pride of place to national sovereignty. This offers little to overcome the underlying

¹⁴³ Acharya, Amitav, “Comparative Regionalism: A Field Whole Time has Come?” *The International Spectator*, 47, 1, (March 2012), 3-15

¹⁴⁴ Aris, Stephen, “A new model of Asian regionalism: does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have more potential than ASEAN?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22, 3, (2009), pp.451-457

¹⁴⁵ ASEAN members include Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Brunei, Singapore, The Philippines

fractures between states in Central Asia.¹⁴⁶

Third, considering the presence of the two great powers, political integration, that is, development of common ideology and policy direction, is hardly possible within the SCO. Even the civilizational values supported by the SCO often remain rhetorical: for instance, the highly praised concept of non-interference and territorial integrity has been ignored by Russia more than once, in Georgia and in Ukraine. The SCO, in turn, did not criticize Russia. Theoretically, political integration may take place within the EAEU; however, it is not consistent with the sovereignty concerns of the Central Asian states. Visibly, the functions of the SCO and the EAEU are not complementary, but they are not always conflicting. A rare comparison study of the SCO and the EAEU by Gatev and Diesen highlights the low level of interactions between the two organizations in commercial, institutional and ideological spheres. The authors argue that, instead, the relations between the two organizations tend to revolve around infrastructure projects.¹⁴⁷ Overall, however, presence of shared interests allowed the two organizations to develop at their own pace.

Based on the apparent roles of Russia and China in the regional organization, it is important to note that the direction of pull between Russia and China plays a more crucial role in the facilitation or slowdown of the regional cooperation in Central Asia. This role is arguably more significant than that of formal regional structures. Evaluation of this role is directly connected with the main research question outlined in the introduction: *How does the nature of China's and Russia's engagement in the infrastructural sectors affect the degree of regional cooperation among the Central Asian states?*

The above analysis of the regional organizations enables a way to divide this question into smaller parts. First, the literature suggests that Russia-driven integration initiatives through the EAEU have had an effect on regionalism in the whole of Central Asia. Visibly, Russia may be impeding 'wider' regionalism in the form of the SCO while focusing on 'deeper', though narrower, regionalization within the EAEU. In this regard, one of the ancillary questions is how this 'deep' and 'exclusive' form of integration affects the degree of Russia's engagement in cooperation initiatives and infrastructural projects with the member-states of the EAEU compared to engagements with the non-members?

Second, the literature suggests that China was slow in facilitating regional cooperation. It may be due to China's preference for bilateralisms, which undermined its multilateral initiatives, or because of the weakness of China's civilizational rhetoric. Another possible answer involves geopolitical and political considerations of Central Asian leaderships and the presence of a general distrust of China in the region, which drives the states closer to Russia. Visibly, the use of only economic power is not sufficient to enhance the degree of regionalism. Hence, another secondary question of the thesis is *why economic power alone is not sufficient for China to foster regional cooperation in Central Asia?* To rephrase: what prevents China, which has funds, from completing infrastructural projects and its own cooperation initiatives in Central Asia?

Thirdly, while the literature addresses the nature of the relationship between Russia and China in Central Asia, there is no agreement as to whether Central Asia is an area of cooperation or competition compared to the other dimensions of Sino-Russian relations. Moreover, there is only limited discussion in the literature as to how Sino-Russian general interactions affect the nature of their engagement in Central Asia and subsequent regional

¹⁴⁶ Allison, Roy, "Virtual regionalism, regional structure and regime security in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, 27, 2, (2008), 185-202, 185

¹⁴⁷ Gatev, Ivaylo and Glen Diesen, "Eurasian encounters: the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *European Politics and Society*, 17, 2016, 133-150

cooperation. Therefore, the third question deals with the effects of Sino-Russian relations on regional cooperation in Central Asia. The question is *how do the differences in Chinese and Russian interests translate into their engagement in the infrastructural projects in Central Asia?* In other words, what happens if the two disagree?

Overall, the evaluation of the multilateral organizations confirms the notion that Russia and China play a crucial role in regionalization dynamics in Central Asia. It is, therefore, reasonable to base the analysis of Central Asian regionalism from the perspective of the major powers' engagement. Considering the key roles of China and Russia for the study, it is necessary to evaluate the relationship between the two in order to accurately position how general Sino-Russian relations emulate or differ from their interactions in Central Asian context. The next chapter addressed this step.

Chapter Two

Overcoming complicated legacy: General trends in Sino-Russian Relations

Soon after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states attracted the attention of external state actors. The United States, India and the European Union demonstrated interest in the region, although their engagement could hardly compare with that of Russia and China. The United States was mainly interested in Central Asia as a platform for stabilizing Afghanistan.¹ Washington did not invest sufficient resources for the promotion of its' liberal-democratic norms, made little effort to develop economic ties within the region and "made few attempts to [...] create sustainable multilateral institutions."² India lacked economic weight and had insufficient capability to project either its military strength or normative power on the region separated from the subcontinent both geographically and culturally.³ The EU's economic and political engagement in Central Asia remained limited, and focused on promoting the union's norms which had little impact on regional politics.⁴ The level of engagement of "smaller" regional actors, such as Turkey or Iran, and to a lesser extent Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Japan and South Korea was minimal compared with the major powers.⁵ Overall, Russia and China developed and maintained the most significant influence across Central Asia. Understanding the general relations between the two is, therefore, crucial for understanding their dynamics in Central Asia.

Russia continues to possess strong economic, cultural and historical ties to Central Asia and is still commonly viewed as the main security guarantor in the region. China managed to exert significant economic influence in each of the Central Asian states. Both have long land borders with the region, and both states have a vested interest in securing regional energy resources. As argued in the previous chapter, all the main regional institutions are dominated by one or both of the two major powers, which makes a Sino-Russian lens even more important for understanding international relations in Central Asia.

Yet, there is little consensus among the International Relations scholars whether the nature of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia is characterized by cooperation or by competition. At one end of the spectrum is Central Asia as a unifying element between China and Russia but⁶, at the other, Central Asia is a point of contention.⁷ On the surface, particular

¹ Stoner, Kathryn, "Old Games, New Rules? Great Powers in the New Central Asia," in Laruelle, Marlene, James Sherr, Mamuka Tsereteli, Kathryn Stoner, Andrew C. Kuchins, Erica Marat, S. Enders Wimbush and Alexander A. Cooley, "Book Review Roundtable: Alexander Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*," *Asia Policy*, 16, July 2013, 171

² Stoner, 174

³ Cooley, Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

⁴ Melvin, Neil, "The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy", *EU- Central Asia Monitor*, 28, October 2012, http://www.fride.org/download/PB_28_Eng.pdf

⁵ Laruelle, Marlene and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2013

⁶ Weitz, Richard, "Why Russia and China have not formed an anti-American alliance", *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2003, 51, 4, 39-61

Zhao, Huasheng, "China-Russia relations in Central Asia", *Special Forum*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.theasanforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/>

issues at stake may be able to partly define the character of the relations between Russia and China. Similar positions on the matters of regime stability, non-traditional security and limiting of the influence of the USA in the region provide rich grounds for cooperation. At the same time, the two have visibly different views on energy and economic integration in Central Asia.⁸ However, even these seemingly obvious examples do not demonstrate clear differentiation between cooperation and competition in Sino-Russian relations. For example, elements of distrust occasionally hinder the efficiency of cooperation in non-traditional security.⁹ Shared interests to maintain regime stabilities in Central Asian states are approached differently, with China placing much more emphasis on non-interference than Russia. In the economic sphere, the rhetoric of development emanating from both sides often obscures China's and Russia's ability to properly address the competitive nature of the international trade.¹⁰ On the more divisive issues, such as access to energy resources or the roles of regional organizations, differences in China's and Russia's positions are more complex and hardly provide a definitive characterization of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia. In order to make a step toward understanding Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia, it is necessary to evaluate the general character of their relations. The following chapter examines Sino-Russian relations and selected mainstream theoretical interpretations behind them with the aim of evaluating the context for Russian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia.

The chapter begins with evaluation of Sino-Russian relations pre-dating the dissolution of the Soviet Union and highlighting the legacy of mistrust between the two neighbors. Second part assesses major changes in Sino-Russian relations in the years after the Cold War: the section examines the two actors' approaches toward the key issues of security, energy and trade, followed by evaluation of the nature of their interactions in the adjacent parts of Asia. The final section assesses general Sino-Russian relations through the prism of the mainstream rationalist theories of International Relations.

History of distrust

Unequal treaties and initial exchanges of the spheres of influence

Modern history of interstate interactions between China and its Central Asian neighbors began after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which allowed all the sides to start with, if not clean, slightly less tarnished relationships. In the case of Sino-Russian relations, the two sides inherited the heavy baggage of Sino-Soviet interactions. The Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, in turn, inherited a legacy of distrust from their imperial predecessors. Formal agreements between the Qing Empire and Tsarist / Imperial Russia generally placed one of the

⁷ Spechler, Martin C., Dina R. Spechler, "Is Russia Succeeding in Central Asia," *Orbis*, 54, 4, (2010), 615-629

Spechler, Martin C., Dina R. Spechler, "Russia's lost position in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 4, 1, 2012, 1-7

MacHaffie, James, "China's Role in Central Asia: Security Implications for Russia and the United States", *Comparative Strategy*, 29, (2010), 368-380

⁸ Wishnik, Elizabeth, "Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the shadow of the Georgian Crisis," *U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute*, February 2009, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Zhao, Huasheng, "China-Russia relations in Central Asia", *Special Forum*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.theasanforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/>

parties in a weaker position. In the earlier stages of Sino-Russian interactions, the Treaties of Nerchinsk (1689) and Kiakhta (1727) demarked the border in favor of China and confined Russian trade to a limited area in Russia's Far East.¹¹ The tables began to turn in the mid-nineteenth century as the Qing Empire was losing ground to western colonial powers in the East, and Russia actively expanded its frontier regions through the territories previously controlled by various Turkic and Persian speaking polities in the west.

Due to the weakness of the Qing government the new treaties were generally disadvantageous for China. In Russia's Far East (China's North East), provisions of the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and of the Peking Conference (1860) reversed the outcomes of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, signed nearly two hundred years earlier. As a result, over one million square kilometers north of Amur / Heilongjiang River and east of Ussuri River were transferred to the control of the Russian Empire.¹² In China's western frontiers Russia managed to obtain trading privileges in Qing controlled territories through the Treaty of Kulja in 1851. In addition to trading rights, the treaty allowed Russian businesses extended presence in Qing territory.¹³ The 1864 Treaty of Tarbatagai, in accordance with the Peking Conference of 1860 allotted Russia 440 000 square kilometers of territory in Chinese Xinjiang including the massive Lake Balkhash.¹⁴ Following expansion through the Kazakh steppes, Russian forces occupied additional areas of China-controlled Xinjiang. The expansion was facilitated by the turmoil in Xinjiang in the 1870's caused by the Dungan Revolt (1862-77), a rebellion of Chinese Muslims, also known as Hui. The 1879 Treaty of Livadia was supposed to give part of the conquered territories back to China, but was considered so unfavorable that it was never ratified in China.¹⁵ In 1881, similar terms in the Treaty of St. Petersburg, also known as the Treaty of Ili, required Russia to concede territories in northern Xinjiang which had been occupied by the Russian forces in the preceding years. However, Russia was only returning back part of the territory it had annexed and China had to pay significant monetary compensation. Furthermore, in 1884, protocol to the Treaty of St. Petersburg aimed to demark borders in southern Xinjiang and the Russian controlled areas of Pamir. However, large sections of the borders remained un-demarcated despite China's attempts to renegotiate the agreement in 1894. As a result, Russia managed to expand its influence in the Pamir.¹⁶ Both sides considered the treaties, particularly those in Turkestan, as unjust. However, the outcome was clearly skewed in favor of Russia, because the Russian Empire was on a trajectory of expansion, and any territories it had to bequeath had only recently been conquered. The Qing government, in turn, was aiming to retain territories, which had previously been under its control.¹⁷

The weakening of China at the end of 19th century, the turbulent years of the first half of the 20th century and a complicated relationship between the USSR and the PRC in the time that

¹¹ Karrar, Hasan H., *The new Silk Road Diplomacy. China's Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009, 25-27

¹² Paine, S. C. M., *Imperial Rivals. China, Russia and Their Disputed Frontier*, London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996

¹³ Karrar, 25-27

¹⁴ Lo, Bobo, "China and Russia. Common Interests, contrasting perceptions", *Chatham House, Asia Pacific Strategy*, May 2006, 6-7

¹⁵ Paine, 133-145

¹⁶ Karrar, 25-28

¹⁷ Karrar, 25

followed ensured that the disputes created by the treaties between the two empires remained, at best, a continuous sour point through much of the history of modern Sino-Russian relations. According to Bobo Lo the asymmetric nature of the 19th century treaties initially “strongly favored Russian interests. In the longer term, however, it reinforced extant prejudices and suspicions and ensured that the bilateral relationship would remain dysfunctional for the next century.”¹⁸ In 1919 the new Bolshevik government of Russia renounced ‘unequal’ treaties in the Karakhan Manifesto offering to return previously acquired territories to China with the aim of attracting fractions of disjointed China to align against the Japanese. The offer was withdrawn before China had a chance to act upon it. The hypocrisy of the Karakhan Declaration was demonstrated when in 1921 Soviet troops marched into Outer Mongolia to re-take control from China’s republican government and assist Mongolia to regain its short-lived independence which Mongolia initially acquired after the fall of the Qing dynasty.¹⁹ As a result Mongolia, previously controlled by China for centuries became, under strict Russian patronage, an independent unit in the international system until the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, in 1929, through an assertive military intervention in China’s North East, Russian forces reclaimed control of the Chinese Eastern Railway traversing Manchuria.²⁰

The Soviet Union also became assertive at the western edges of China. In the mid-1930’s, as a result of a weakened central government in the Republic of China, parts of Xinjiang had broken away from China’s control and by 1933 established the First Eastern Turkestan Republic in the south west of Xinjiang.²¹ Considering Soviet economic, military and political dominance, much of the rest of the vast Xinjiang region fell under the Soviet sphere of influence, just short of direct rule, with 90 percent of external regional trade conducted with the USSR.²² Arguably, between 1934 and 1941 Xinjiang could be considered a ‘Soviet satellite’.²³ Following the proclamation of the second Eastern Turkestan Republic in 1944, the forces of the Nationalist government, faced with the task of retaining control over the breakaway areas requested support from the USSR. During the negotiations between the Soviet government and China’s Nationalist government the Soviet Union withdrew support for the independent Turkic state in Xinjiang in exchange for concessions on Manchuria in what was now Russia’s Far East.²⁴ The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between the USSR and the Republic of China, signed in 1945 was, in a certain sense, an exchange in spheres of influence, with the Republic of China having its way in the Western areas and the Soviet Union in the Far East.

Ideological foundation with little material support during the Cold War

Under the 1945 Soviet-Nationalists treaty, the USSR was supposed to withdraw support from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but the Soviet Union continued to aid Chinese communists secretly, reflecting the complicated and distrustful nature of Sino-Soviet relations in

¹⁸ Lo, Bobo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2008, 21

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 24

²⁰ Dittmer, 3-4

²¹ Karrar, 37

²² *Ibid*

²³ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Interwined Actors in International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 119

²⁴ Godehardt, 120

the first half of the 20th century. Politically, Soviet relations with the Nationalist government of the Republic of China and with the growing CCP were complicated and lacked consistency. Mao Zedong, although initially supported by the Soviet government, rose to power without direct help from the Soviet Union.²⁵ Moreover, the Soviet Union ensured that the leader of the Nationalist party, Chiang Kai Shek, remained in power, often sacrificing the interests of the Soviet's ideological allies, the CCP.²⁶ At the same time, while the CCP relied on funding from Moscow and drew legitimacy from the Soviet-sponsored Communist International (Comintern), Chinese communists' leadership went through significant efforts to maintain independence from their Soviet patrons in the decision-making process. These tensions between the two Communist parties continued through the middle of the 20th century, even during the years of increasing ties between China and Russia in the 1950's and up until the split in Sino-Russian relations in the 1960's.²⁷

The People's Republic of China (PRC) founded in 1949 chose to follow the USSR voluntarily despite the Soviet's previous relations with the Nationalist government. The PRC's decision was important to the USSR and added legitimacy to the Soviet regime especially after Stalin's rift with the communist government of Yugoslavia.²⁸ As the relations between the two largest Communist states progressed, they signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in 1950. The agreement contained strong elements of a defense alliance against Japan and its allies, visibly the USA, but also implied economic support from the USSR to the PRC.²⁹ The PRC's full-hearted engagement and enormous sacrifices in the Korean War (1950-1953), alongside the Soviet Union and against the United States, demonstrated the Chinese leadership's initial commitment to choosing one side. The Soviet Union expressed its commitment to the relationship by transferring elements of atomic weapons technology to the new communist state.³⁰ However, the 30 year validity of the agreement, did not prevent a deterioration in the relationship, which culminated with deadly border conflicts between the two in the late 1960's, further suggesting inefficiency of formal agreements between China and Russia.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, Sino-Soviet relations initially improved based on fairer trade agreements, favorable conditions for economic cooperation and expansive technical skills and labor exchanges promoted by the reformist Soviet leader Khrushchev.³¹ However, despite the great prospects for economic cooperation with sixty per cent of the PRC's exports going to the Soviet Union by 1955, the relationship between Mao and Khrushchev was characterized by personal and ideological antipathy.³² This antipathy was further exacerbated after Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress in 1956, denouncing Stalin's

²⁵ Dittmer, 4

²⁶ Lo, 2008, 24

²⁷ Lo, 2008, 24

²⁸ Dittmer, 3

²⁹ "The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, February 1950", *CIA Library*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000300050007-8.pdf>, Accessed January 4, 2019

³⁰ Lo, 2008, 25

³¹ Luthi, Lorenz M., "Historical Background, 1921–1955". *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

³² *Ibid*

legacy, an act viewed by Mao as a potential threat to his own position.³³ The Hungarian revolution later that year, which had to be suppressed by Soviet military force, became a serious concern for the Chinese communist leadership. The events, which were partly triggered by Khrushchev's liberalization rhetoric questioned the political legitimacy of the communist system.³⁴ Furthermore, Khrushchev's attempts at rapprochement with the USA and Mao's disastrous economic policy of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) further widened the ideological rift between the two communist leaders.³⁵ Furthermore, the compromise reached by the USSR and the USA during the Cuban Missile Crisis was seen by Chinese leaders' as the weakness of the Soviet Union when faced with American imperialism.

The PRC's leadership viewed Khrushchev as too soft for not responding to the USA strongly enough, and his focus on economic development and on consumer goods was viewed as 'not communist enough'.³⁶ At the same time, the USSR became deeply concerned with China's assertiveness in its relations with India, which led to the China-India war of 1962, as well as China's pretenses to lead the communist world and the Non-Alignment Movement. The negative rhetoric between Chinese and Soviet leaders escalated as Mao combined accusations of Soviet weakness in relations with the USA and of 'revisionism' of Marxism. This was combined with reminders of the territorial disputes inherited by the two states from the past governments.³⁷ While a disconnect in personal perceptions between the two states' leaders definitely played an important role in the split between the PRC and the USSR, additional key factors contributed to the deterioration of ties. The first factor revolved around Soviet ambitions to lead the socialist camp, including an insistence of China's acknowledgement of this leadership, juxtaposed with China's apprehension to play the subordinate role. The second factor arose from mutual mistrust typical of the two states with a shared border and history of territorial disagreements.³⁸

The changes of Soviet leadership in 1964, after Khrushchev's removal from power, only temporarily alleviated tensions in Sino-Soviet relations, as the territorial disputes continued to dominate the agenda of Sino-Soviet interactions. Between 1964 and 1978 representative of the two countries held ten rounds of negotiations to settle border differences. Both sides took different positions on 19th century treaties and no agreement was reached.³⁹ In the early- mid 1960's minor border clashes occurred along the Soviet border with Xinjiang in western China.⁴⁰ However, the main conflict, which shook Sino-Soviet relations and marked a serious shift in the world's geopolitics, with China eventually emerging as a major player, occurred along the eastern border over the disagreement caused by the Treaties of Aigun and Peking from the mid-19th century. The armed clash over Damansky (Zhenbao) Island on the Ussuri River claimed over fifty Soviet and several hundred Chinese lives in March 1969. Later that year another, smaller scale, armed conflict took place in Tielieketi on the western Sino-Soviet border. The

³³ Lo, 2008, 25

³⁴ Lüthi, Lorenz M., "The Collapse of Socialist Unity, 1956–57", *The Sino–Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008

³⁵ Lo, 2008, 25

³⁶ Mark, Chi-kwan, "Ideological Radicalization and the Sino-Soviet split, 1956–64". *China and the World since 1945. An international History*, London: Routledge, 2012

³⁷ Dittmer, 189

³⁸ Bo, 2008, 26

³⁹ Karrar, 38

⁴⁰ Karrar, 39

border conflicts were eventually frozen, but the Chinese leadership's assertiveness raised the PRC's prestige in the international system and arguably shifted the Cold War from the bi-polar into the tri-polar mode.⁴¹ The tensions de-escalated, partly due to the diplomatic efforts of the American administration of President Nixon, highlighting the important role of the USA in Sino-Soviet dynamics.⁴²

The new major strains on Sino-Soviet relations took place at the end of the 1970's with each party taking a different side in the conflict in Indochina. With China's support of Pol Pot's government in Cambodia and subsequent Soviet Union backing of Vietnam, the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia in South East Asia could be viewed as a proxy war between the USSR and the PRC. The final set of tensions between the two Communist states before the end of the Cold War resulted from Soviet engagement in Afghanistan. The PRC and the USSR supported different political forces in Afghanistan. Decisions made during the Cold War were frequently made for non-ideological reasons and the situation in Afghanistan is an example of one such decision. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the PRC leadership became weary of large concentrations of Soviet troops along its western borders and became concerned with the USSR encircling China from the West; a concern made more acute by the existing Soviet presence in Mongolia, to China's north, and the extensively militarized border in the north-east following the events of 1969.⁴³ Subsequently, China supported the mujahedeen, Islamist fighters, against the Soviet occupation, unaware what risk Islamic radicalization posed for stability in its own Xinjiang.

Following Gorbachev's ascent to leadership in the Soviet Union, he took on a personal interest in normalizing relations with China in the belief that this move would raise the international image of the USSR.⁴⁴ Gorbachev's enthusiasm was matched by Deng Xiaoping's willingness to negotiate and his aspirations to resolve long-standing border conflicts. Between 1987 and 1991 several rounds of negotiations produced the 'Agreement on the Eastern Sections of the Boundary between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' which largely resolved the Far East – North East border disputes emanating from the 19th, century treaties.⁴⁵ However, as the Cold War was drawing near, politically and ideologically the leaderships of the two largest socialist states did not see eye-to-eye. Gorbachev's liberal reforms back home and his lenience toward calls for regime changes in socialist states in Eastern Europe did not sit well with Chinese communist leaders. In return, Soviet elites disapproved of the PRC's government's violent suppression of student demonstrations in Tiananmen square in June 1989. Yet, neither side was especially vocal about their criticism, therefore, a temporary chill in their relations did not ruin the general trend of improvement.⁴⁶ Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the relationship between Russia and China never descended to the animosity experienced during certain periods of the Cold War.

⁴¹ Gazenko, Roman, Andrey Semenov, "Ostrov Damanskiy. 1969 god" ["Damanskiy island. Year 1969"], *Studio Galakon*, 2004, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lel3PmdCng>, accessed on December 22, 2018

⁴² Bo, 27

⁴³ Karrar, 43

⁴⁴ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Interwined Actors in International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 99

⁴⁵ Godehardt, 99

⁴⁶ Dittmer, 248-256

According to Lo, “Even at the height of Sino-Soviet friendship and later during the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese triangularism of the 1970s, its importance to the Kremlin was more auxiliary than independent, a source of leverage in a bipolar world rather than valued in itself”⁴⁷ Dittmer’s study explains the fluctuating nature of the relationship between the two socialist states through the “pattern of economic development, the search of national identity, and the struggle for international power and security”⁴⁸ At the same time Dittmer’s analysis emphasizes the triangular relationships between the USSR, the PRC and the USA, highlighting the essential role of the United States to explaining Sino-Soviet dynamics. Generalized types of the relationships between the three major powers are outlined in *Table 1* below. Following Dittmer’s model it is possible to speculate that in the years after the Cold War, *Menage a Trois* triangle transformed into another *Sino-centric triangle*, and in the second decade of the second millennium a new *Sino-Russian marriage* has been emerging.

*Table 1. Sino-Soviet-USA triangular relationship during the Cold War*⁴⁹

<i>Period</i>	<i>Nature of Relations</i>	<i>USSR and PRC</i>	<i>USA and USSR</i>	<i>USA and PRC</i>
1945-1949	Ménage a trois [Open relationship]	Amity	Amity	Amity
1950-1959	Stable marriage between PRC and USSR	Amity	Enmity	Enmity
1960-1970	Unit-veto [Multipolarity]	Enmity	Enmity	Enmity
1969-1976	Romantic Triangle around USA	Enmity	Amity	Amity
1976-1981	Sino-USA marriage	Enmity	Enmity	Amity
1981-1985	Sino-centric romantic triangle	Amity	Enmity	Amity
1986-1990	Ménage a trois [Open relationship]	Amity	Amity	Amity

The upward trend

During early post-Soviet years, Sino-Russian relations continued to follow an upward trend. From being barely significant, the trade between the two in the second half of the 1990’s

⁴⁷ Lo (2008), 4

⁴⁸ Dittmer, 257

⁴⁹ Dittmer, 147-248, tabulated by the author

was ranging between five and eight billion US dollars.⁵⁰ Politically the two sides expressed support toward each other's individual positions on sensitive sovereignty issues, such as Taiwan and Chechnya, and developed similar positions critical of American dominance and the West's policies in the Middle East and in the Balkans.⁵¹ The importance of individual leaders' perceptions was highlighted by the personal chemistry between extroverted Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, who, having studied in the Soviet Union was proficient in Russian.⁵² In 1996 the two states announced the formation of a 'strategic partnership'. The same year China and Russia, along with the three former Soviet republics bordering China – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – joined the Shanghai Five forum aimed at resolving remaining border disputes along the former Sino-Soviet border in China's west. In June 2001, following the admission of Uzbekistan, the forum transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with more extensive institutional dimensions for dialogue between China and Russia. Shortly after, in July 2001, the two countries signed the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborly Friendship.⁵³ The previous agreement, signed more than half a century earlier, was worded more strongly, but it did not prevent the two parties from engaging in armed conflict and was not-renewed at the end of its thirty year term.⁵⁴ Considering that 1945 and 1950 agreements between the USSR and the Chinese government were upheld only partially, the new 2001 treaty can be viewed as a purely symbolic gesture. More importantly, the 2001 treaty demonstrated a clear shift from the cycles of downward spiral in the Sino-Soviet relations of the Cold War. Although not intended against any particular third-party, in contrast to the 1950 agreement, the new treaty is considered by some observers to contain elements typical of a defense alliance.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, as can be seen from the history of Sino-Russian relations during the second half of the 20th century, formal treaties between the two parties provide only limited guarantee of cooperation.

On the contrary, threat perceptions, ideology and individual leader's attitudes appeared to serve as defining factors in the relations between the two countries during that period of time. According to Bobo Lo

[A number of episodes from the Cold War period] have left a mixed legacy: on the one hand, anxiety, alienation, and mistrust; on the other, accommodation, calculation, and pragmatism. Historical animosities and suspicions have softened, but not disappeared. The outcome of this ambivalent condition is a selective and wary engagement.⁵⁶

Partly shaped by history, the nature of Sino-Russian relations is too complex to enable the two parties to form a proper defense alliance. Furthermore, Weitz suggests that Sino-Russian rapprochement looks "big" because their relations were so bad for so long and the degree of their

⁵⁰ Lo, 2008, 30

⁵¹ Lo, 2008, 29-30

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Carlson, Brian G., "The limits of Sino-Russian strategic partnership in Central Asia", *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 17, Spring 2007

⁵⁴ Godehardt, 98

⁵⁵ Carlson, 168

⁵⁶ Lo, Bobo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2008, 10

cooperation had been so limited.⁵⁷ A number of authors agree that in the first decades of the new millennium Sino-Russian relations are characterized more by tactical and pragmatic considerations rather than long term strategic commitments.⁵⁸ This character of the contemporary Sino-Russian relations is evaluated in the context of the key areas of concern for the two parties, including the sensitive issues of security, energy and trade, followed by the examination of the two states interests in the adjacent regions.

Sino-Russian dynamics in the new millennium

Security, energy and trade

Final demarcation of Sino-Russian northern-eastern borders took place in 2004.⁵⁹ Both parties also took major steps to reduce military presence on their respective sides of the border. The issues of disputed islands on Amur (Heilongjiang) and Ussuri rivers had been resolved, but the bulk of territory which shifted to Russia in the middle of the 19th century remained with Russia. Speculatively, when and if PRC regains control of Taiwan, the hundreds of thousands of kilometers of Russian Far East will become the last territory that the Chinese Empire lost during the century of humiliation. Some observers point out that Russian elites are concerned that, riding the wave of nationalism, China may one day claim this territory back.⁶⁰ Russian anxiety about its largest neighbor is exacerbated by the vulnerability of the Russian Far East. Considerably isolated and neglected during the early post-Soviet years the region contains a number of economic and social problems. At the same time, China's proximity is commonly viewed as a sign of threat rather than a sign of opportunity.⁶¹ While exchanges between the elites of Russia and China have become common in the past two decades, insufficient efforts have been made to facilitate cultural, social and small business interaction between the people of the two nations. Additional constraints are created by the discriminatory economic policies on the local level, which prevent development of the small scale economic relationships between Russia and China.⁶² There is a strong disparity across the extended border between China's North East and Russia's Far East. Arguably certain parts of Russian Far East offer higher standards of living for some Chinese laborers while other Chinese are driven by entrepreneurial opportunities. The number of Chinese migrants in Russia is often exaggerated. However, the population of China's North East is some 15 times larger than that of the Russian Far East; combined with the demographic crisis of a declining population in Russia, a strong anti-Chinese sentiment has become part of Russia's popular opinion.⁶³ Although the trade between Russia's Far East and China's North East has increased, the trade patterns reflect the general character of trade between the two states, and the benefits have been skewed in favor of China, with Russia exporting

⁵⁷ Weitz, Richard, "Why Russia and China have not formed an anti-American alliance", *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2003, 51, 4, 39-61

⁵⁸ Lo, 2008; Weitz, 2003; Brooks, Stephen G., William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security*, 30, 1, 2005

⁵⁹ Lo, Bobo, *China and Russia. Common Interests, contrasting perceptions*, Asia Pacific Strategy, London: Chatham House, May 2006

⁶⁰ Carnegie-Tsinghua Event, (off the record), May 2015

⁶¹ Lo, 2008, 59

⁶² Christoffersen, Gaye, "Russia's Breakthrough into the Asia-Pacific: China's Role", *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 10, 2010, 61-91

⁶³ Weitz, 48

mainly raw materials and serving as a market for inexpensive Chinese consumer goods. The amount of Chinese capital invested in Russian enterprises has not grown proportionally.⁶⁴ Major steps have been taken after 2010 to ease economic transactions in the border region,⁶⁵ but the concerns about unfair trade patterns remain.

China has long since overcome Russia economically, spending more than three times the amount on defense than Russia in 2017⁶⁶, and is, arguably, more capable to harness the nationalism wave in the direction set by the central government. Therefore, China may be less apprehensive of Russia's overland invasion but, the perception of a threat, so common among the states which share a border and a history of hostility, is still present. In the second decade of the millennium China and Russia have made significant steps to overcome their mutual perceptions of threat. Bobo Lo's study of 2008 argues that "the dynamic between Russia and China is one of strategic convenience – an *axis of convenience*." The relationship is tactical, not strategic and serves immediate goals.⁶⁷ More recent developments suggest a shift toward extended commitment toward cooperation, but strategic considerations are limited and situationally convenient bilateral engagements and interactions with other regional actors often prevail.

The exchanges between the government elites have increased, and the mutual amity between the leaders of the two states, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, has been showcased to support cooperative rhetoric emanating from both sides. Both leaders maintain key roles in foreign policy decision making in their respective constituencies⁶⁸ and the chemistry in their relations is essential for positive inter-state relations according to selected analogies drawn from 20th century history. The re-assurance of positive intentions in Sino-Russian relations is supported by more substantial forms of cooperation. Russia has been the key arms supplier of China following the western sanction on arms supplies imposed on the latter after the Tiananmen events of 1989. Sino-Russian cooperation has been slowly progressing from pure military hardware sales to increasingly sophisticated technological exchanges. In 2017 Russia sold fifteen billion US dollars worth of military equipment including combat aircraft, air defense missile systems, all-purpose helicopters and turbofan engines used for the latest generation of stealth fighters and tactical bombers.⁶⁹ Another important trend in the context of security is the growing scope of Sino-Russian military exercises.

⁶⁴ Bo, 2008, 68

⁶⁵ Kurgansky, S. A, Tan Xuefei, "Russian-Chinese Cooperation in the Banking Sector", *Izvestiya (Известия ИГЭА)*, 2, 88, 2013

⁶⁶ "Global military spending remains high at 1.7 trillion", *SIPRI*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2018/global-military-spending-remains-high-17-trillion>

⁶⁷ Lo, Bobo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2008, 3

⁶⁸ Gabuev, Alexander, "Russia's policy towards China: Key players and the decision-making process", March 5, 2015, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/03/05/russia-s-policy-towards-china-key-players-and-decision-making-process-pub-59393>

Xie Tao, "Chinese foreign policy with Xi Jinping characteristics", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 20, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/20/chinese-foreign-policy-with-xi-jinping-characteristics-pub-74765>

⁶⁹ Elmer, Keegan, Liu Zhen, "What Russian weapons are being bought by China?" *South China Morning Post*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2165182/what-weapons-china-buying-russia>

The two held their first military exercises in August 2005 under the framework of the SCO. The timing of the scenario of deploying troops to restore order in a third country destabilized by ethnic unrest was relevant to Central Asia, as it was the year of forceful suppression of anti-government demonstration in Andijan, Uzbekistan. However, location of the exercises in China's north eastern Shandong province demonstrated a compromise between Xinjiang, viewed to be too sensitive by China for Central Asian states, and Zhejiang province, too close to Taiwan, in the view of Russia.⁷⁰ Under the compromised conditions, China was able to send a message to Taiwan, and Russia had the capacity to showcase its military technology.⁷¹ Ten thousand troops took part with Russia contributing 1,800.⁷² In the following years the SCO continued to serve as a platform for Sino-Russian military exercises, gradually increasing their scope and often including troops and equipment from other SCO member states. In September 2018, only thirteen years after the first war game, the Sino-Russian military exercise Vostok-2 took place in Russia's Far East in the Northern Pacific. The location clearly removed Sino-Russian military cooperation outside of the SCO framework and out of Central Asia. The scale of the war games was unprecedented for the post-Cold War era. 300,000 Russian troops (one third of the Russian military) 1,000 Russian aircraft and 36,000 Russian tanks and armored vehicles were joined by 3,200 Chinese troops and 900 Chinese tanks.⁷³ Admittedly, such disproportionate participation suggests varying levels of commitment between China and Russia to project the message of their combined strength. This divergence is important for evaluating the potential of Sino-Russian cooperation evolving into an anti-USA defense alliance, which is discussed in sections below. Nevertheless, aside from the capacity of forces able to be directed against another party, the rapid development and significant and massive scope of Sino-Russian military cooperation clearly demonstrates the progress the two countries have made to reduce the threat perceptions inherited from the Cold War period. Rapid development of the security dimension of Sino-Russian relations is crucial considering that other areas of cooperation essential for mutual interdependence and subsequent reduction of mistrust have only begun to gain significant momentum following Russia's increasing isolation from the West as a result of the continuous Ukrainian crisis which started in 2014.

Trade and energy relations between Russia and China showed significant development. China became Russia's largest trading partner in 2009 and bilateral trade went up to over 84 billion US dollars in 2017 and is expected to exceed 100 billion in 2018.⁷⁴ The number is more significant for Russia than it is for China. China's trade with the USA in 2017 was over 710 billion US dollars.⁷⁵ Russia's trade with the USA during the same period was a mere 27.2 billion

⁷⁰ Wishnick, 20

⁷¹ Carlson, Brian G., "The limits of Sino-Russian strategic partnership in Central Asia", *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, 17, Spring 2007

⁷² Wishnick

⁷³ *The Economist*, "Russia and China hold the biggest military exercises for decades. America should beware," September 6, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/09/06/russia-and-china-hold-the-biggest-military-exercises-for-decades>

⁷⁴ "Spotlight: China-Russia economic cooperation enters new era," Xinhua News Agency, May 24, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/24/c_137204043.htm

⁷⁵ U.S. – China Trade Facts, Office of The United States Trade Representative, (n.d.), <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>, accessed January 5, 2019

US dollars.⁷⁶ Some observer suggest that the Chinese and Russian economies have a limited level of complementarity revolving around natural resources and military products from Russia and consumer goods from China; therefore, the pace of the bilateral trade and economic cooperation between the two have been seriously constrained.⁷⁷ Despite seeming disadvantageous, Russia has few other options than to continue expanding trade with China. In addition to their existing role as the main arms supplier, in 2016 Russia overtook Saudi Arabia as China's main oil supplier.⁷⁸ The Russia-China oil pipeline with a capacity of 15 million ton per year went into operation in 2011 and its capacity was doubled with the commissioning of a parallel pipe in 2018.⁷⁹ China's growing demand for gas as a substitute for coal called for enhanced ties with Russia in the gas sphere. In May 2014 the gas conglomerates of the two countries, Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 30 years gas deal potentially worth 400 billion.⁸⁰ Construction of the gas pipeline from Siberian gas fields into the north east part of China was launched in May 2014 after having been in the discussion stages for two years.⁸¹ The line named 'Power of Siberia' is due to be completed in 2019 and, if actualized, serves as a strong sign of long term Sino-Russian cooperation in the competitive gas sector, eventually reducing trade in Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). However, the path the 'Power of Siberia', discussed in the next section, suggests Russia's apprehension toward complete reliance on China as an energy resource market and serves as just one example of the lack of convergence in Chinese and Russian interests in the wider Asian region.

China and Russia in Asia

The 'Power of Siberia' pipeline follows the Sino-Russian border for an extended section instead of using a more direct path into China. Around Blagoveshchensk / HeiHe border crossing the spur pipe traverses into China, while the main pipe-line continues eastward to the port city of Vladivostok, which contains a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) processing plant.⁸² The final destination of the 'Power of Siberia' suggests Russia's intentions to diversify gas export routes with the potential to sell LNG to Japan and South Korea, the first and the third largest LNG importers, with China being the second.⁸³ Russia's aspiration to diversify export routes highlights the absence of consensus between China and Russia in the Asia Pacific. Both Russia and China have similar interests in the Korean peninsula, that is, avoiding a war, evading

⁷⁶ U.S. – Russia Trade Facts, Office of the United States Trade Representative, (n.d.), <https://ustr.gov/Russia>, <https://ustr.gov/Russia>, accessed January 5, 2019

⁷⁷ Brooks, Stephen G., William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security*, 30, 1, 2005,

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⁷⁸ Lelyveld, Michal, "China, Russia in uneasy energy embrace," *Radio Free Asia*, December 17, 2018, https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy_watch/embrace-12172018103835.html

⁷⁹ "New line of China-Russian oil pipeline begins operation", *Xinhua News Agency*, January 1, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/01/c_136864998.htm

⁸⁰ "China, Russia to fully implement gas deal", *China Daily*, May 22, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-05/22/content_17534790.htm

⁸¹ Foy, Henry, "Russia's \$55bn pipeline gamble on China's demand for gas", *Financial Times*, April 3, 2018, <https://ig.ft.com/gazprom-pipeline-power-of-siberia/>

⁸² Foy

⁸³ "Global LNG demand share", *Reuters*, (n.d.), http://pdf.reuters.com/pdfnews/pdfnews.asp?i=43059c3bf0e37541&u=2017-12-26T025511Z_GFXEDCQ083ZJ4_1_RTRGFXG_BASEIMAGE.PNG

development of nuclear weapons in North Korea and improving ties with South Korea. Yet, the difference in approaches is evident as China continues to support North Korea both in rhetoric and in actions. In contrast, Russia has discontinued most ties with North Korea, did not renew a defense alliance treaty with Pyongyang and has been supplying defensive weapon systems to South Korea.⁸⁴

In relations with Japan, China is genuinely concerned with the developments of the US-Japan alliance and sees it as a threat to its security. Russia, on the other hand limited its discontent with the US-Japan alliance to rhetoric only.⁸⁵ For China, Russia's dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands, presents no serious threat for regional stability, but ensures that the two do not get close enough to undermine China's position.⁸⁶ Russia's hosting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Vladivostok in 2012 demonstrated Russia's growing commitment to the Asia Pacific region and its own Far East.⁸⁷ An inability to resolve the territorial dispute with Japan leads to Russia's over-reliance on China to strengthen the Russian position in the Asia Pacific and the Far East.⁸⁸ Visibly, Chinese and Russian actions in North East Asia are characterized by individual considerations with low degrees of coordination. The degrees of trust and interdependence between all the actors in North East Asia, with the exception of China and North Korea, are insufficient for any bilateral or multilateral relationships to elevate to a significantly higher level. More importantly, the USA's critical role as an ally of Japan and South Korea prevents any serious reconfiguration of alignments in North East Asia.

China and Russia's interactions in South Asia are characterized by even greater divergence in their interactions with the main regional actors. The dividing line between the Cold War alliances, China-Pakistan and Russia-India, still influences the extent of the relationships between all four parties, although not as strongly as it did in the past. Indo-Russian relations are still amicable despite India's growing relations with the United States. The warming up in Indo-American relations did not go unnoticed by Russia and Pakistan. In the second decade of the 2000's, Russia-Pakistan relations showed noticeable progress. Initiated with the weapons' sales in 2014 and increasingly consensual political views, the relations progressed into trade and other forms of economic cooperation.⁸⁹ The fluidity in Russian and Chinese relations with the South Asian actors was highlighted with India and Pakistan's ascent to the SCO in June 2017, placing all four Cold War rivals and allies in one organization. Nevertheless, the border stand-off which took place between Chinese and Indian troops later that month highlighted the challenge of overcoming the legacy of Sino-Indian rivalry, re-asserting the fragility of relationship between the two largest and most populous Asian countries.

After a brief friendship in the post-colonial Asia, relations between China and India quickly deteriorated through the second half of the twentieth century and eventually led to the 1962 border war resulting in China's occupation of a significant part of Indian territory. Relations improved throughout the seventies but once again soured in the eighties due to Chinese

⁸⁴ Weitz, 51

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Christoffersen, 65

⁸⁸ Ibid, 66

⁸⁹ Farwa, Ume, "Pakistan-Russia relations on upward trajectory", *Asia Times*, December 19, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/pakistan-russia-relations-upward-trajectory/>

involvement in the North Eastern provinces of India.⁹⁰ Consequent rapprochement was once again halted by India's nuclear test in 1998, and most importantly India's revealed position that China, not Pakistan, constituted its main threat. The first decade of the 2000's has been characterized by slow improvement in the relationships between the two, often impeded by deep rooted differences. Tensions between China and India has been based on unresolved territorial disputes, China's unshakable political and strong military support of Pakistan, and India's harboring of the Tibetan spiritual leader, considered to be a separatist by China. Geopolitically China and India appear to see each other as competitors for the sphere of influence in Asia. Both India and China are striving for increased involvement in their immediate neighborhoods, South East Asia (e.g. Burma, Singapore, Vietnam), South Asia (Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh) as well as the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Politically, both seemed to have been involved in serious competition in the international system.

China, being the more powerful of the two, has sought to stymie India's rise in a variety of ways, including undermining India's quest for increased status in the international system. For example, Beijing historically blocked India from joining the United Security Council, the nuclear hub, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Group of Eight, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. India has responded through its nuclear tests, asserting its claim to a permanent Security Council seat, seeking to improve relations with America, and strengthening its ties with its South Asian Allies.⁹¹

In Central Asia, India is concerned with the relative decrease of Russia's influence and has been apprehensive of China and Pakistan's encirclement and becoming further cut off from its so called 'strategic hinterland'.⁹²

Seemingly, both China and India are concerned with being encircled by the other but India, being the smaller and weaker of the two, feels more so. Possible full scale Sino-Indian cooperation, under which the two actors realize their shared potential by marginalizing Russia and aligning against the USA,⁹³ has not happened and is unlikely to take place. On the contrary, the Sino-Indian dimension is the weakest link in the Sino-Russia-India strategic triangle initially advocated by former Russian Prime Minister Primakov in 1998.⁹⁴ According to Brooks and Wohlforth "the real core of Russia's relationship with India and China [...] is not diplomatic partnerships but extensive military coproduction arrangements and major arms sales."⁹⁵ Although shifting the power balance to Asia is widely considered to be the main rationale behind the Indo-Sino-Russian triangle, Julie Rahm argues that

⁹⁰ Ambrosio, Thomas, "The Third Side? The Multipolar Strategic Triangle and the Sino-Indian Rapprochement," *Comparative Strategy*, 24, 2005, 403

⁹¹ Ambrosia, 404

⁹² Blank, Stephen, "India and Central Asia: Part of the New Great Game," in Harsh V. Pant (ed.), *Indian Foreign Policy in a Unipolar World*, London, Routledge, 2009, 285

⁹³ Coates, Breena E., "India, Chindia, or an Alternative? Opportunities for American Strategic Interests in Asia," *Comparative Strategy*, 28, 2009, 271-285

⁹⁴ Pant, Harsh V., "Feasibility of the Russia-China-India "Strategic Triangle": Assessment of theoretical and empirical issues", *International Studies*, 43, 1, 2006, 55

⁹⁵ Brooks, Stephen G., William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security*, 30, 1, 2005, pp. 72-108

the progress reached in Russian-Chinese-Indian relations in recent years cannot be attributed purely to their joint opposition to a unipolar, US-dominated world. Such an approach would be simplistic and would underestimate the great potential for complementary ties--military, economic, political, and cultural--among the three neighbors sharing more than 4,000 kilometers of common border.⁹⁶

Yet, considering India's growing cooperation with the United States, the possibility of reviving the strength of the Indo-Russian axis of the Cold War era is comparably as difficult as developing a strong, trustful and functional Sino-Indian axis.

The evaluation of history and recent developments suggests presence of a strong power politics dimension in Sino-Russian relations juxtaposed with emerging economic interdependence and a nascent institutional dimension discussed in the previous chapter. The following section applies mainstream International Relations theories for understanding Sino-Russian relations and evaluates their utility for explaining China and Russia's engagement in Central Asia.

Major power politics and Neorealism

Balancing USA?

From the traditional neo-realist approach, the states are considered self-reliant, rational actors who exercise self-help to protect their interests and maximize their own "relative power position" within the anarchic international system, i.e. a system lacking superior authority.⁹⁷ The balance of power theory, under which "threatened states seriously commit themselves to containing their dangerous opponent,"⁹⁸ is often applied to Russia and China. The two states are *major powers*. Neither qualifies to be labeled a 'super power' while the term 'great power' may carry political connotation. The term 'regional power' diminishes the capacity of China and Russia as both can project their influence through several geographic and political spaces.⁹⁹ Aside from mutual distrust, discussed in more detail below, both Russia and China are also concerned about the USA's dominant position in the world. The structural realism of Kenneth Waltz suggests that each of the two should attempt to balance American global dominance.¹⁰⁰ Above all, in the neo-realist view, China and Russia are uncertain about US intentions in the region. Since Russia does have substantial military presence in Central Asia, this is especially true for China.

⁹⁶ Rahm, Julie M., "Russia, China, India: A New Strategic Triangle for a new Cold War?", *Parameters*, Winter 2001-02, 87-97, 88

⁹⁷ Dunne, Tim, Brian C. Schmidt in Baylis, John, Steve Smith, Patricia Owens (Eds.) *The Globalization of World Politics. An Introduction to International Relations 4th Edition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 96

⁹⁸ Mearsheimer, John, J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, 140

⁹⁹ The term 'major power' is purposefully chosen to refer to Russia and China through the whole thesis. For instance, in addition to its role in Central Asia, Russia also has strong positions in much of the former Soviet space, in sections of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and parts of East Asia. China, can project influence in much of East Asia, South East Asia, sections of South Asia and more recently Africa and Oceania. 'Regional powers' such as Nigeria, Indonesia, Australia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia or Turkey are more likely to exert their influence only in their respective immediate neighborhoods.

¹⁰⁰ Waltz, Kenneth N., *Theory of international politics*. New York: Random House, 1979

After 2001, the United States demonstrated stronger interest in Central Asia due to the region's ability to provide logistical access for NATO's operations in Afghanistan. There is little consensus among regional actors as to the American involvement in the region. Uzbekistan's attitude towards the USA fluctuated between cooperation and discord, which culminated in the eviction of the US troops from K2 base, to contemporary rapprochement and logistical support for the Northern Distribution Network and resumed talks for hosting American facilities. Tajikistan's relationship with the United States revolved around development, counter-terrorism and counter narcotics-cooperation, as well as alternative access to Afghanistan; however, relations were often hampered by Tajikistan's past human rights record and American focus on the promotion of democracy within the country. Kazakhstan's pursuit of a 'multi-vector' policy allowed it to maintain strong working relations with the United States and to provide a favorable investment environment for American firms. Kyrgyzstan maintained a long-lasting, but patchy relationship with the USA revolving around the Air Base / Transit Center leased at Manas airport near Bishkek by the US Air Force. Turkmenistan's isolationism prevented development of ties with the global power.

Initially the two major powers, particularly Russia, welcomed American security involvement in the region. However, within several years the US bases in Uzbekistan and in Kyrgyzstan began to make the two major powers feel uneasy. Both Russia and China are wary of the NATO troops' presence in the vicinity, although neither is ready to take responsibility for the security of the region. Moreover, a wave of "colored revolutions" in the former Soviet republics, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, along with American alleged support of the NGO's involved in each of the movements, made both China and Russia concerned about the USA's potential role in supporting the protests against existing regimes. This anxiety resulted to the eviction of the US military from the K2 base in Uzbekistan in 2005, allegedly instigated by China and Russia. The commotion around the Manas Transit Center, just outside of Bishkek, enabled Kyrgyzstan to extort much higher leasing fees from the US military. In 2015, as a result of Russia's averseness toward an American presence in the region, Kyrgyzstan eventually terminated the leasing agreement.

According to Waltz' structural realism and Walt's balance of threat theory, China and Russia were supposed to balance the USA in Central Asia by either expanding their own military power or by building alliances.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, the two did not form an alliance to counter the USA. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), originally designed to counter NATO, made no efforts to counter NATO in Afghanistan, and instead the CSTO had the potential to develop cooperative relations with NATO during its initial stage of involvement in Afghanistan. However on an international level the CSTO did not evolve past its role to support Russia's foreign and security policies.¹⁰² Noticeably, no players in Central Asia aligned with the United States to improve their power positions in the region.

Instead of hard balancing which involved amassing military power, China and Russia appeared to be involved in *soft balancing*, which as defined by T.V. Paul

involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understanding with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms

¹⁰¹ Waltz, 1979; Walt, Stephen M., *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987

¹⁰² Cooley, 57

buildup, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and powerful state becomes threatening.”¹⁰³

Led by Russia and China, the SCO issued a resolution requesting the USA to provide a timeline for final withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan. Additionally, the organization provided political support for Uzbekistan to counter calls from the West for inquiries into the Andijan incident. To that extent, the institutional ability of the SCO is better explained using a neo-realist need for balancing, hard or soft, rather than the neo-liberal institutionalism need for cooperation. According to Paul, since the end of the Cold War, second-tier major powers such as China, France, Germany, India, and Russia have mostly abandoned traditional “hard balancing primarily because they do not fear losing their sovereignty and existential security to the reigning hegemon, a necessary condition for such balancing to occur.”¹⁰⁴ Instead they “have been pursuing limited, tacit, or indirect balancing strategies largely through coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliance [...] intended to constrain U.S. power [...]”¹⁰⁵

Soft balancing only partially explains the Sino-Russian response to the USA. According to Brooks and Wohlforth, soft balancing provides familiar framework for analyzing relations from the balance of power perspective without considering alternative explanations, such as economic interests, policy disputes or domestic political incentives.¹⁰⁶ The USA's eviction from K2 base in Afghanistan is an example supporting the soft balancing framework. The example with the SCO declaration is a possible solid case for soft balancing. However, the bulk of Sino-Russian interactions in Central Asia and the rest of Asia do not necessarily constitute balancing against the USA. According to Zhao Huasheng, the USA factor has not been important in the development of the SCO. The SCO relations with the USA, however, evolved from ‘cold but not conflicting’, to distrust, to temporary cooperation, to ambivalence.¹⁰⁷ According to Wohlforth, the USA is not always the prime driver of the activities of the major powers, especially if these activities do not demonstrate the clear result of restraining the United States.¹⁰⁸ In the case of the SCO's request to the USA to provide the timeline for the troops withdrawal, the act did not serve any immediate result. In this context, it is worth noting that American presence in Central Asia had questionable results as discussed below.

Assuming, the USA holds the status of the world hegemony, its position in Central Asia has not been significant. Despite its commitments in Afghanistan, the United States has not

¹⁰³ Paul, T. V., “The enduring axioms of balance of power theory,” in Paul, T. V., James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (eds.), *Balance of Power Revisited: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 3

¹⁰⁴ Paul, T. V., “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy,” *International Security*, 30, 1, (2005), pp. 46-79

¹⁰⁵ Paul, 58

¹⁰⁶ Brooks, Stephen G., William C. Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” *International Security*, 30, 1, 2005, 76-79

¹⁰⁷ Zhao, Huasheng, “China's View of and Expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Asian Survey*, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 436-460

¹⁰⁸ Wohlforth, William C., “Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia,” in *Balance of Power Theory and practice in the 21st Century*, T.V. Paul and James J. Wirtz (Eds.), Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 214–238

demonstrated strong interest in Central Asia in the way it has done in other parts of the world. Neil Macfarlane suggests that the USA does not seek to strengthen regional structures in Central Asia, although it has the ability to do so.¹⁰⁹ American engagement in Central Asia had a limited contribution to regional stability. The USA's relations with Uzbekistan, considering the latter's poor relations with most of its neighbors and the closed nature of its regime, diminished potential for cooperation with the neighboring states.¹¹⁰ According to MacFarlane, "hegemonic power may produce cooperation as the dominant state seeks to design regional structure that institutionalize its dominance and as other regional states seek to avoid the cost of non-compliance."¹¹¹ However, after the US arrival in the region and its involvement with Central Asian states, it has put more focus on achieving national interests, such as the use of military bases and the development of energy resources, rather than promoting values, such as democracy and human rights.¹¹² According to Macfarlane, "although US officials stress the need for regional cooperation on issues of [infrastructure], the bilateral emphasis of American assistance provides few incentives for states to move towards regional cooperation."¹¹³ MacFarlane further postulates that contradictory impulses in US policy toward Central Asia and preference for bilateral relationships in the region lead to "weak development of regional structures."¹¹⁴

The USA's position has not been initially undermined because of the seemingly non-conflicting nature of American engagement in Central Asia. According to Ruth Deyermond, until the mid-2000's, Central Asia served as an arena for so-called *multi-level hegemony*, or as she terms the phenomenon *matryoshka hegemony*.¹¹⁵ Deyermond suggests that different levels of hegemon, such as global hegemon, regional hegemon (Uzbekistan), rising hegemon (China) or declining hegemon (Russia) can actually co-exist and accommodate each other peacefully as long as their interests do not conflict with each other.¹¹⁶ The model only works, however, if none of the, so called, hegemons attempt to change the position. Deyermond admits that the *matryoshka hegemony* model, with the presence of global hegemon, worked in Central Asia only until 2005, until the USA took on a more active role in the region by criticizing the Uzbekistan regime for the violent suppression of the anti-government demonstration.¹¹⁷ The model of multiple hegemons in Central Asia could be re-adjusted for the more contemporary Central Asia, either with diminished or with renewed American engagement, with China and Russia occupying different hegemonic levels, and eliminating hegemonic role of Uzbekistan, to avoid conflict with rising economic power Kazakhstan. However, there seems to be little utility in the model which over- utilizes terminology of *hegemony* to explain major powers engagement in Central Asia.

¹⁰⁹ MacFarlane, Neil S., "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, 80, 3, 2004, 447-461

¹¹⁰ Akbarzadeh, Shahram, "Keeping Central Asia Stable", *Third World Quarterly*, 25, 4, (2004), 689-705

¹¹¹ MacFarlane, 448

¹¹² Bohr, Annette, "Central Asia: Responding to the Multi-vector Game," in R Niblett (ed.) *America and a Changed World: A Question of Leadership*. Wiley-Blackwell/Chatham House, 2010, 109-24

¹¹³ MacFarlane, 455

¹¹⁴ MacFarlane, 449

¹¹⁵ Deyermond, Ruth, "Matrioshka hegemony? Multi-levelled hegemonic competition and security in post-Soviet Central Asia", *Review of International Studies*, 35, 2009, 151-173

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 158

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 151-173

Visibly, there is some utility of the approach of balance of power to explain the Sino-Russian response to the USA's engagement in Central Asia. The next section evaluates the capacity of the balance of power approach to explain the relations between China and Russia

Forming alliance or striving for regional dominance?

China and Russia had a history of political rivalry and major territorial disputes during the Cold War. The nature of their relations fluctuated substantially during the second half of the twentieth century, but they have been on the path to normalization and stability after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The conditions of the neo-realist world system, however, call for skepticism of possible harmony, or even long term cooperation, between the two. According to neo-realist assumptions, neither Russia nor China can be certain of one another's intentions.¹¹⁸ This uncertainty is supposed to remain despite the existing rhetoric of cooperation, documented strategic partnership, multilateral initiatives and substantial client-supplier relationships in military hardware and technology. At the same time, both have aspirations for regional dominance which, according to Mearsheimer, is an essential goal of major powers.¹¹⁹ Together with the uncertainty, these aspirations for regional dominance are destined to result in competition between Russia and China in Asia. Due to existing alliances between the USA and Japan and South Korea, neither Russia nor China would be able to substantially balance externally against each other by building alliances in North East Asia. Considering India's dominant position and fluid nature of alignment in South Asia, China and Russia competing with each other in South Asia is also complicated. Subsequently, among all the areas adjacent to both China and Russia, Central Asia remains the only other area adjacent to Russia and China where Sino-Russian competition can take place.

Even though China utilized Russia to engage with Central Asia and has been careful to demonstrate respect of Russian interests there,¹²⁰ within Central Asia, both should view each other as a potential threat. From Russia's perspective, China's growing economic influence, as well as China's increasing achievements in securing energy resources in what was historically considered Russia's "backyard", cannot be left unchecked. Additionally, Russia cannot afford to ignore China's growing military capabilities, despite the latter's continuous rhetoric of a "peaceful rise". At the same time, China is well aware of Russia's cultural and political influence and aspirations for a "privileged role" in Central Asia, particularly Russia's aim for a "more focused influence and integration with [selected Central Asian states, i.e.] Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan."¹²¹

The general balance of power theory suggests that "if survival of a state or a number of weaker states is threatened by a hegemonic state or a coalition of stronger states, they should join forces, establish a formal alliance, and seek to preserve their own independence by checking the

¹¹⁸ Mearsheimer, 31

¹¹⁹ Mearsheimer, 41

¹²⁰ Karrar, Hasan H. *The New Silk Road Diplomacy. China's Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2009, 54-56

¹²¹ Cooley, Alexander, Marlene Laruelle, "The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia. From Privileged Sphere, to Divide and Rule?", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 261, July 2013, PONARSEurasia.org, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/new-policy-memo-changing-logic-russian-strategy-central-asia-privileged-sphere-divide-and>

power of the opposing side.”¹²² Considering this, according to the neo-realism general balance of power framework, China and Russia have three options: to bandwagon with the United States in order to balance against each other, to forge a Sino-Russian alliance in order to balance against the United States, or to balance against each other by forging alliances with smaller states. “Balancing is alignment with the weaker side, bandwagoning – with the stronger.”¹²³

Neither the first nor the second prospective scenario manifested itself within the first two and a half decades after the end of the Cold War. The alleged bandwagoning with the United States, following NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan in 2001, was a short term political response of Russia which lasted less than four years. Primarily, ideological differences that remained between the United States and either of the two major powers do not allow Russia or China to consistently bandwagon with the world’s most powerful country. Furthermore, Russia’s modern predecessor, the Soviet Union, was a world superpower in the not so distant past and China has aspirations to become one in the not so distant future. This mentality does not allow either of the two to accept second position to the world hegemon. Secondly, China-Russia-USA triangular dynamics, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, became such that both Russia and China had a stronger level of interdependence with the United States than with each other. Therefore, forging a Sino-Russian alliance against the hegemon would be impractical for either.¹²⁴ While there have been signs of change in Sino-Russia relations following Russia’s global isolation after the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the Sino-Russian partnership has not nearly approached the status of what could be considered an “alliance”.

The third scenario implies alliances that each of the two major powers would form to balance against one another. Consistent with Mearsheimer’s claim about fluidity in alliances, China and Russia, both being major powers, would “act offensively to amass as much power as [each of them] can because states are almost always better off with more rather than less power.”¹²⁵ While it is nearly impossible to compete with the United States for the world hegemony, according to Mearsheimer, both Russia and China may individually strive for regional dominance.¹²⁶ According to Walt’s framework, China and Russia, both being relatively strong states in world affairs, are more likely to balance against each other and they could do so by forging alliances with the weaker Central Asian states.¹²⁷ In this regard, it is necessary to assess regional organizations capacity to serve as potential alliance placeholders.

Questionable alliances

The most likely candidate for the role of an alliance is The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).¹²⁸ It was initiated in 1992 as the CIS Collective Security Treaty, and evolved into its present form in 2002. First of all, although clearly defined as a security alliance, in its current state the CSTO is too weak to act as an organization capable of hard balancing the United States. Secondly, Russia made continuous attempts to foster cooperation between the

¹²² Dunne, 94

¹²³ Walt, Stephen M., *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, 21

¹²⁴ Weitz, Richard, “Why Russia and China have not formed an anti-American alliance”, *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2003, 51, 4, 39-61

¹²⁵ Mearsheimer, 33, 35

¹²⁶ Mearsheimer, 42

¹²⁷ Walt, 28

¹²⁸ Present members of the CSTO are Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

CSTO and China-led SCO, despite China's reluctance to integrate the two organizations.¹²⁹ Cooperation between the two would be counter-productive to the idea of balancing China if that was the initial goal of the CSTO. Finally, according to Roy Allison, while the CSTO attracts Central Asian states with lucrative arms deals from Russian defense manufacturers, it is unlikely that the states will commit to the organization as a multilateral security mechanism.¹³⁰ It is also worth noting the CSTO's weakness in fulfilling an internal regional security role, which was demonstrated by its impotence during the 2010 violent internal unrest in Kyrgyzstan, which had the potential to spill over into Uzbekistan.

In the context of alliances, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), being a China-driven initiative, could be viewed as an organization designed by China to either keep Russia in-check or to serve as an alliance against the United States. However, the SCO does not seem to fulfill either of the roles assigned, according to the neorealist perspective. First, if China intends to balance Russia through the SCO, Russia could respond accordingly. "In terms of leadership, Russia is still on a relative par with China within the organization, which the two co-founded and co-opted. After all, Russia [remains] a significant player in the economic, security, and strategic fields in [Central Asia]."¹³¹ Second China and Russia have been careful not to present the SCO as an anti-Western or anti-American alliance.¹³² To support the 'not-anti-western' rhetoric, the SCO rejected Iranian membership to avoid complicating relations with the United States.¹³³ It is noticeable, however, that despite the non-confrontational nature, "the SCO's influence in Central Asia is considerable, and its biggest members – China and Russia – have the ability to undercut American initiatives there."¹³⁴ This ability is allegedly conducted through the *soft balancing*, defined above.¹³⁵

Compared to the SCO, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC), which was transformed into Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is a Russian led initiative.¹³⁶ According to the realist view the EAEU would serve Russia's goals to balance China and to re-assert Russia's regional dominance. "Many experts consider that EurasEC has helped Russia limit the extent of China's economic penetration of Central Asian countries through the SCO."¹³⁷ Furthermore, while the EurasEC and the EAEU did not have a security dimension, its members are also members of the CSTO. Therefore, it is possible to envision a certain level of integration between the two organizations. Finally, while focusing on economic integration, the EurasEC and the EAEU can be easily viewed as Russia's attempt to both re-assert itself in the former Soviet space

¹²⁹ Facon, Isabelle, "Moscow's Global Foreign and Security Strategy. Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests?" *Asian Survey*, 53, 3, May / June 2013, 475

¹³⁰ Allison, Roy, "Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia." *International Affairs*, 80, 3, 2004, 473

¹³¹ Facon, 480

¹³² Facon, 475, 479

¹³³ Facon, 479

¹³⁴ Rumer, Eugene B., "China, Russia and the Balance of Power in Central Asia." *Strategic Forum, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University*, No. 23, November 2006, <http://www.ndu.edu/inss>.

¹³⁵ Paul, T. V., "Soft balancing in the age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, 30, 1, (Summer 2005), 46-71, 58

¹³⁶ From the realist perspective, although Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev was one of the main initiators of the Eurasian economic integration, it is still Russia-dominated institution.

¹³⁷ Facon, 472

and to enhance its power position as a regional and global actor.¹³⁸ These variables are consistent with the neo-realist position that Russia should act in accordance with its aim of maximizing its power position. However, the nature of the Russia-driven Eurasian integration is insufficient to label either the EurasEC or the EAEU an ‘alliance’.

Conclusion: *Balance of power and its limitations*

The balance of power between China and Russia has shifted. China’s rise and Russia’s relative decline place them in the positions opposite of where they were through much of their shared history. The role of the ‘older brother’ is now visibly with China, but China avoids reminding Russia about it. China’s respectful rhetoric toward Russia’s position in Central Asia is vivid example of China’s diplomacy. China is willing to compromise with Russia in Central Asia and make concessions. However China is aware that any gain it makes in Central Asia, economic or political, is a real gain, compared to Russia for whom gaining any influence in Central Asia signifies retaining its own sphere of influence and any concession is a clear loss. Similarly, nearly hundred years ago, China was trying to preserve its western frontiers from Russian expansion. The reminder of this history is not going away. The possibility of zero-sum game in Central Asia is real, the elements of mistrust are still present, therefore the neorealist balance of power framework still applies to Sino-Russian relations.

Overall, Mearsheimer’s claim that major powers’ strive to achieve regional dominance has more utility in explaining China and Russia’s behavior in Central Asia than Walt’s nature of the alliances theory. However, with the number of major powers involved, it becomes increasingly complicated to clearly define the direction of balancing between the major actors. The complexity of the relationships between Russia, China and the US makes it even more challenging to assess balancing behavior through any type of alliances. According to Wohlforth, the balance of power theory does not work for explaining the dynamics in Central Asia.

Ultimately, balance of power theory faces major problems when it is applied to restricted domains. [...] If the theory is specified such that it only deals with hegemonic threats [...], then it yields precise predictions only in the rare cases when hegemony is sufficiently probable that it overwhelms other security (and non-security) concerns. For all the states in central Eurasia, either hegemony is not nearly the most important problem in the near to medium term, or, if it is, there is nothing materially that they can do about it.¹³⁹

The term “restricted domain” applies well to Central Asia as it is relatively isolated from the neighboring states, both economically and politically. In this case, the Regional Security Complexes (RSC) theory developed by Buzan and Weaver¹⁴⁰ can be considered for explaining international relations in Central Asia. Under the RSC framework, the balancing behavior of states can be best understood through the prism of each individual region rather than the whole

¹³⁸ Li, Xin, “Putin’s Dream of Eurasian Union: Background, Objectives and Possibilities,” *Contemporary International Relations*, 21, 6, (2011), pp. 42-54

¹³⁹ Wohlforth, William C., "Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia," in *Balance of Power Theory and practice in the 21st Century*, T.V. Paul and James J. Wirtz (Eds.), Stanford University Press, 2004, 234-235

¹⁴⁰ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wever, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003

international system. Under the RSC theory, the region [...] refers to the level where states or other units link together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other.¹⁴¹ The RSC “has constructivist routes because formation and operation of RSC’s hinge on patterns of amity and enmity among the units in the system, which makes regional systems dependent of actions and interpretations of actors, not just mechanical reflection of the distribution of power.”¹⁴²

Under this lens, security arrangements among a group of states in a particular geographic area are so crucial, that they actually define the shape of the region. During the post-Cold War era, Central Asia is identified as a sub-complex of the post-Soviet RSC. The security of most parts of the former USSR, with the exception of the Baltics, is closely tied to Russia. Compared to the other geographic areas of the former Soviet Union, Central Asia, is actually considered to be the most clearly defined and coherent, and therefore, had the most potential to emerge as a distinct RSC, even though still largely defined by Russia as an overlaying power.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, in 2003 Buzan and Wever downplayed the role of China, which actually became a key player in Central Asia in the first decades of the new millennium. Despite Beijing’s continuous claims of non-engagement and distancing from security and political dimensions in Central Asia, China’s enhanced economic role in the region diminishes the explanatory power of the RSC theory in the case of Central Asia. It appears that the region cannot be defined by security dynamics alone. In other words, China’s engagement calls for a more comprehensive approach for understanding the regionalization of Central Asia.

Additionally, although valuable for understanding major powers’ intentions and interests in Central Asia, the balance of power approach and the RSC theory are designed mainly to analyze the behaviors of major powers. In which case, the Central Asian states would be viewed mostly as the objects of analysis. While major powers undoubtedly play a significant role in Central Asia, regional dynamics also need to be addressed from within the region, that is, from the perspective of individual Central Asian states. That is, in order to apply Neorealism to Central Asia, it is necessary to depart from purely structural analysis. The omnibalancing approach serves as a viable alternative to mainstream Neorealism theories because of the emphasis on the role of smaller states’ leaders in decisions regarding alignment and cooperation. In order to understand processes behind the decision making of state elites, the omnibalancing approach can be supplemented with key ideas from Social Constructivism. The latter not only suggests the transformation of states’ interests takes places though the transformation of ideas, but also attributes important role to material capabilities in influencing these ideas. The framework of omnibalancing and its utility for assessing Central Asian politics is outlined in the second half of the following chapter along with other analytical tools employed by the thesis.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 43

¹⁴² Buzan, Barry, Ole Wever, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 40

¹⁴³ Ibid, 423

Chapter Three

Central Asia as a region: key concepts and analytical framework

Regions are generally viewed through the prisms of cooperation, security or identity.¹ According to Joseph Nye, a *region* is signified by “a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence.”² According to Buzan and Wever, a *region* refers to “the level where states or other units link together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other.”³ According to Fawcett, the region is an “imagined community” in which “people [are] held together by common experience and identity, customs and practice.”⁴ Geographic proximity among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is evident with each bordering at least two other states. Mutual interdependence may have decreased, but at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the five states were part of the same economic system and had shared transportation and energy networks. Hence, at least at the time of their independence, post-Soviet Central Asia could be considered a *region*. Furthermore, the security of each state is closely connected to Russia, where three of the states (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) belong to Russia-led defense alliance, and Uzbekistan, with the most powerful military, is practically surrounded by the other four states. Hence, even if the level of ‘mutual interdependence’ among the five states is not sufficient to satisfy Nye’s definition, the security dimension alone qualifies post-Soviet Central Asia as a *region*. According to Fawcett’s definition, Central Asia will remain a *region* until the generation that grew up before the dissolution of the Soviet Union becomes insignificant. The first section of this chapter addresses the scope of Central Asia as a region and the direction of region-formation in Central Asia. The second section aims to define analytical framework used in this thesis to assess the effect of China’s and Russia’s engagement in this region on the degree of cooperation among the five Central Asian states. The final section outlines method used in the study.

Central Asia as a region

Which Region? Central Asia vs. Central Eurasia

The thesis is based on the notion that the five post-Soviet Central Asian states constitute a region. The idea that the Central Asian region is limited by the state boundaries of the five countries rather than a wider geographical space is essential for this analysis which is based upon approaches derived from the mainstream theories of International Relations. State-based definition of the region is more suitable for this study when compared with other social science frameworks which focus on cultural, anthropological, ethnographic or other approaches, which allocate less importance to state borders. Subsequently, this thesis clearly distinguishes the five-

¹ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Interwined Actors in International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 19-20

² De Lombaerde, Philippe, Fredrik Soderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove and Francis Baert, “The Problem of Comparison in Comparative Regionalism,” *Review of International Studies*, 36, 2010, 736

³ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wever, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 43

⁴ Fawcett, Louise, “Exploring Regional Domains: A Comparative History of Regionalism,” *International Affairs*, 8, 3, 2004, 432

state Central Asia⁵ from other commonly used terms such as Greater Central Asia or Central Eurasia. The distinction between the terms *Greater Central Asia* and *Central Eurasia* seems to lie in the debate of whether the “region” constitutes the center or the periphery of the continental international system. Gleason, for instance argues that *Eurasia* in itself is just a term used to study post-Soviet space.⁶ Frederic Starr argues in favor of centrality of *Greater Central Asia* highlighting the key historical role played by the area where multiple land empires met and often clashed.⁷ Godehardt points out that geographical center of the Eurasian landmass has increasingly acquired the significance of the political centrality.⁸ However, to make a clear distinction between Central Asia and the more encompassing geographic area, the term *Central Eurasia* is used here. The centrality of Central Asia itself is addressed in empirical chapters in the context of the main object of this study, infrastructure. Central Eurasia, in addition to the five Central Asian states, incorporates the territory encompassing Mongolia, northern Afghanistan, the South Caucasus, parts of Iran, much of Turkey, parts of southern Russia including Northern Caucasus and Volga regions, and parts of Western China, including Tibet, but more so Xinjiang. However, the five-state Post-Soviet Central Asian region, or Central Asia, is distinct from the Central Eurasia. This distinction begins with geography, an essential element of any definition of a region.

The boundaries of physical geography, however, need to be viewed in juxtaposition with the political boundaries which define international system. It is common to assign specific qualities to Central Eurasia based upon geographic location. However, as Godehardt points out, “geographic regions are not naturally given... [They] rather gain meaning through political action and political articulation, which is why regions are regarded first and foremost, as political entities.”⁹ There are certain clear natural geographic barriers separating Central Asia from the neighboring states and territories. In the west, the Caspian Sea separates Central Asia from the Caucasus and Turkey. In the east Altai, Taishan and Pamir mountain ranges separate Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from China. In particular, the mountain passes between China and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are located at considerably high altitudes. Admittedly, in the south, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have few natural barriers, other than the river Amudarya, to separate them from Afghanistan. However, the Hindu Kush mountain range in central Afghanistan separates Central Asia from South Asia. Considering this, northern Afghanistan, populated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens, can arguably be considered a part of Central Asia. However, Afghanistan has been politically detached from the “Russian-Soviet” Central Asia for over one hundred years, since the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907. This treaty marked the conclusion of the so-called “Great Game”, a term used to define the rivalry for the sphere of influence between the Russian Empire and the United Kingdom and the British Raj. Near-absence of transnational infrastructure to connect Post-Soviet Central Asia with its southern neighbor Afghanistan highlights physical disconnection between these states.

In the north, vast empty arid areas of land provide a natural barrier between southern Kazakhstan, which is commonly viewed as “Central Asian”, from northern Kazakhstan, which has been more closely connected with Russia from the times of the Russian Empire. Even during

⁵ From now on *Central Asia* refers to the five post-soviet states.

⁶ Gleason, Abbot, “Eurasia: What is it? Is it?” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1, (2010), 26-32

⁷ Starr, Frederick S., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2008

⁸ Godehardt, 105

⁹ Godehardt, 48, 49

the Soviet era, northern Kazakhstan had more significant interdependence with Russia, while the infrastructure of southern Kazakhstan was closely linked to its southern Central Asian neighbors. Nevertheless, considering the state-based analysis of regional cooperation, the whole state of Kazakhstan must be included in the Central Asian region. Furthermore, there are natural barriers within Central Asian states, such as the above-mentioned steppes of Kazakhstan, deserts of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and mountain ranges serving as strong internal divides in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, the infrastructure built during the Soviet era enabled states to overcome these natural internal barriers.

In addition to geography, the historic legacy of the continental empires or of trade route networks is also commonly used to assign Central Eurasia a certain degree of unity.¹⁰ Starr further suggests that “divergences among the natural, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic conditions and current realities of Central Asian countries are than balanced by their commonalities. These are sufficiently strong to warrant our considering Greater Central Asia a region with its own dynamic, needs, and possibilities.”¹¹ However, the notion that thousands of years of shared history provide grounds for shared regional identity oversimplifies complex changes undergone by the international system in modern history. Placing Mongolia and Uzbekistan in one region simply because they were part of Mongol Empire some eight hundred years ago is similar to lumping together Tunis in Spain because they both used to belong to the Roman Empire. The diversity of Central Eurasia makes it challenging to clearly define its boundaries. Diversity *within* also makes it challenging to pinpoint a common identity among the alleged elements of Central Eurasia. However, this identity is crucial for Fawcett’s definition of the region, which similar to Anderson’s nation, is an “imagined community” in which “people [are] held together by common experience and identity, customs and practice.”¹²

Geographic and political barriers translate into cultural dissonance. These cultural differences are evident without needing detailed ethnographic research. For instance, it is hardly possible to envision close relations between nomadic or city-dwelling Mongolians, whether Buddhist or secular, to relate to Christian or secular Armenians or to conservative Muslims of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Mongolian is not a Turkic language; neither is Armenian, Georgian, Persian, Tajik or Pashtu. There are no common borders between Mongolia and any of the Central Asian states; subsequently there is very limited transnational movement of people. In the case of Afghanistan, the borders with the three Central Asian states do not imply significant cross-border interactions aside from illicit activities, such as arms and drug trafficking.¹³ Moreover, while connections along ethnic and linguistic lines are strong within Central Asia, they are much more lax with related neighboring groups in adjacent countries. Afghans’ national and ethnic identity, even if they are ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks, is clearly distinct from that of their northern neighbors. A similar situation exists in Iran which hosts sizeable ethnic minorities related to several Central Asian nationalities. Furthermore, the main Turkic peoples of Central Asia (i.e. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Turkmen) are culturally distant from other large Turkic groups outside the region, for instance Turks in Turkey and Uighurs in China. Central Asian ease of association with Azerbaijanis, who are Turkic, is an exception which occurs through shared Soviet identity.

¹⁰ Golden, Peter, *Central Asia in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011

¹¹ Starr, 2008, 8

¹² Fawcett, 432

¹³ Lewington, Richard, “The Challenge of Managing Central Asia’s New Borders,” *Asian Affairs*, 41, 2, 2010, 221-236

Moreover, even the same ethnic groups who reside on different sides of the former Soviet borders have developed divergent identities after years of isolation. For example, Uighurs in Kyrgyzstan use Russian as a native language and are viewed as a Russian-speaking minority; they know little about Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang). Concurrently, Uighur people in China are aware of their Turkic neighbors, but have very limited connection with them since much of the border between the USSR and China was sealed from the 1940's until the early 1990's. As a result, shared ethnic ties between Central Asian people and various peoples outside of the former Soviet space do not easily translate into transnational activities along the ethnic and religious lines. Solidarity of Turkic Muslims of Central Asia with Xinjiang Uighur, or between Tajiks of Tajikistan and Tajiks of Afghanistan is based on higher values, but offers limited cultural and social cohesion. In contrast, an over a century long Russian-Soviet influence defined the degree of connectivity among the five Central Asian republics by reinforcing external boundaries, overcome internal physical barrier and forging shared identity. Soviet influence enabled Central Asia to emerge as a coherent region at the time of independence. The following section evaluates this influence in the quest to determine subsequent direction of Central Asia as a region.

Implications from security, identity, and interdependence on Central Asian region

Aside from geography the key regional dimensions of Central Asia include security, interdependence and identity. Even though this study does not focus on security, it is worth noting the security dimension of Central Asia is addressed by Buzan and Wever in their seminal study on Regional Security Complexes (RSC). According to the authors, Central Asia represents a sub-complex of the "RSC around Russia".¹⁴ The RSC framework states that Central Asia is overlaid by Russia, which is directly responsible for security in the region.¹⁵ Back in 2003, Buzan and Wever did not consider China an actor in Russia-centered RSC. It was not until the second decade of the millennium, where China's security role in its western neighborhood has become noticeable in the context of the SCO, presenting increasingly more assertive involvement. However, the RSC does not explain any possible Sino-Russian security dynamics with regard to Central Asia. In the unlikely scenario of China asserting itself as a main security player in the post-Soviet RSC, the implications may be grave, considering the history of conflict discussed in the chapter on Sino-Russian relations. Nevertheless, China's potential security role in Central Asia sub-complex cannot be ignored. Godehardt provides an approach which enables the assessment of the security dimension across the Central Asian RSC, beyond Buzan and Wever's model. Godehardt suggests that Russia and China are *intertwined* actors in Central Asia. So, instead of acting as *overlays* which take most of security responsibility, or as *insulators*, which separate RSC's from one another, China and Russia have come to act as intertwined actors embedded "in a complex web of relations."¹⁶ In this regard, China and Russia can be viewed as not only part of Central Asian region, but also as substantive parts of other regions with which they border. The notion of intertwined actors goes beyond security and highlights the key role of Chinese and Russian engagement in Central Asia.

By acting as intertwined actors, both China and Russia can alter the direction of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Whether Central Asia is considered central or peripheral, the role of external forces on the shape of the region cannot be underestimated. Kavalski suggests that

¹⁴ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wever, 423

¹⁵ Buzan and Wever, 397-433

¹⁶ Godehardt, 88

regions emerge as a result of external perceptions about them and the “multiplicity of international actors has been involved in packaging and repackaging the geographical and geopolitical ramifications of Central Asia.”¹⁷ Arguably, despite a number of other external state actors present in Central Asia, only Russia and China have the capacity to act as *intertwined* actors. The USA is too far away and it is intertwined in too many other regions to leave an indelible mark. American policy in Central Asia has also been inconsistent and ill defined. Regional powers in proximity of Central Asia have also had a limited degree of engagement. India’s participation in Central Asian affairs has been minimal and visibly disproportional to India’s aspiration for the major (or great) power status, and ambitions in the Indian Ocean rim and in South East Asia. India’s attempts to project its influence in Central Asia has been very limited due to the lack of clear vision and sound foreign policy for the region.¹⁸ Iran’s involvement in Central Asia relies on ethnic and linguistic connectivity with Tajikistan, which facilitates Iranian investments in the impoverished country, and pragmatic cooperation with Turkmenistan, with which Iran shares a lengthy border.¹⁹ Turkey’s engagement in Central Asia was distracted by Turkey’s focus on gaining EU membership, and by the Central Asian states aversion of the Turkish model of democracy and the emergence of “new older brother” under the auspices of pan-Turkism.²⁰ Subsequently, Russia’s and China’s status of *intertwined actors* in Central Asia is uncontested. With the present state of the international system, only China and Russia have the capacity to significantly alter the shape of Central Asian region. Although, the term *intertwined actor* is not utilized in the study, the notion of China and Russia engaging in the regions as more than just outsiders and their capacity to influence perceptions of the region and the direction of regional networks is addressed in the empirical chapters.

Aside from security the other key dimensions of Central Asian region are identity, interdependence and infrastructure. Before Russia’s imperial expansion west of the Caspian, the concept of ‘statehood’ and of ‘nationhood’ was basically non-existent in Central Asia, arguably with the exception of areas in the oasis cities of modern day Uzbekistan.²¹ The Russian Empire initiated nation-building in Central Asia, however, before any coherent ‘Russian’ identity could be projected, the Communist Party came to power. The Soviet Union was established and a ‘Soviet’ identity was promptly imposed on the people of Central Asia through media and educational policies.²² According to Gleason

No people or nation that passed through the crucible of the Soviet experience has escaped its powerful influence. [...] The Muslim peoples of Central Asia were sped through a peculiar and disruptive process of nation-building under Russian-Soviet aegis, and their future trajectory will long show its effects.²³

¹⁷ Kavalsky, Emilian, “Uncovering the “New” Central Asia. The dynamics of external agency in a turbulent region”, in *The New Central Asia. The Regional Impact of International Actors*, Emilian Kavalsky (ed.), Singapore: World, 6

¹⁸ Kavalski, Emilian, “India and Central Asia: The no influence of the “Look North” policy”, in *The New Central Asia. The Regional Impact of International Actors*, Emilian Kavalsky (ed.), Singapore: World Scientific, 2010, 239-260

¹⁹ Godehardt, 113-115

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Krausse, Alexis, *Russia in Asia. A Record and a Study, 1558-1899*, Leiden: Global Oriental, 2012

Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

²² Golden, Peter, *Central Asia in World History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011

²³ Gleason, Abbot, “Eurasia: What is it? Is it?” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1, (2010), 31

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of other former Soviet republics took steps to return to their respected pre-Soviet national identities. However, for the Central Asian states such a move was hardly possible. Independence did not lead to “a return or revival of earlier forms and symbols of independent statehood.”²⁴ As a result states attempted to develop new forms of nationhood. The direction and characteristics of these attempts varied substantially, although arguably the Soviet or Russian-speaking identity remained the only form of identity shared throughout the whole Central Asian region.

Another critical dimension of Central Asia as a region is interdependence. Based on Nye’s definition, along with geography, interdependence can transform neighboring states into a region and when Central Asian states were granted independence from the USSR in 1991, the degree of interdependence between these states was comparatively strong. They had been part of the one country where borders served administrative purposes alone. They were all part of one economic system where transportation, power, energy and telecommunication networks traversed Central Asia unencumbered by administrative boundaries. Intra-regional and intra-republican natural barriers were overcome through the development of hard infrastructure. As such, infrastructure served a key role to facilitate interdependence in Central Asia. In addition to interdependence, infrastructure contributed to the development of shared identity which was discussed in the previous subsection. However, connecting educational and cultural urban centers among states and within peripheral areas carried critical impact the development of common identity.

Education, culture, radio transmissions, print media and other carriers of ideas require mediums, such as electricity, railways and telegraph cables in order to function. The crucial role of hard infrastructure for the Central Asia is visible through a somewhat far-stretching, but relevant example from across the Taishan mountain range. Visibly, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union achieved in Central Asia (Western Turkestan) the stability that neither the Qing Court nor the Republic of China had managed to achieve in Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan). Granted, the turbulent years of Dongguan revolt and two Eastern Turkestan republics in Xinjiang were matched to a degree by the havoc of Basmachi period in Central Asia, but in the end of the first half of the 20th century Central Asia emerged as stable and undisputed, even if a somewhat underdeveloped part of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile across the Taishan range, the People’s Republic of China is still struggling with stability in Xinjiang. Arguably, nation building policies and economic development can only go as far as hard infrastructure can take them.²⁵ In Central Asia more than two decades after the independence, infrastructure continues to play a key role in maintaining interdependence among the Central Asian states, even while levels of interdependence among the Central Asian states gradually declined. Therefore, the focus of this study, i.e. the evaluation of effects of China’s and Russia’s engagement on Central Asian regional cooperation, is conducted through the examination of their involvement in networked sectors of hard infrastructure. Before presenting an analytical model, the following section outlines general constraints which initially prevented cooperation among Central Asian states and subsequently decreased their level of interdependence.

Constraints to regional cooperation

²⁴ Kavalsky, Emilian, “Uncovering the “New” Central Asia

²⁵ Karrar, Hasan H., *The new Silk Road Diplomacy. China’s Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009, 25-27

The sudden nature of Central Asia's emergence as a region resulted in a number of constraints which prevent cooperation and lead to the fragmentation of Central Asia, as a region. Aside from the key Russian role in preventing creation of regional structures which do not include Russia, the character of these constraints generally lies within Central Asian states themselves highlighting the agency of Central Asian states in influencing relations within their own neighborhood. However, they are not always capable of imparting such influence. Godehardt suggests that weak states and political emptiness of the region are the main constraining factors in the development of multilateral cooperation.²⁶ Starr outlines four impediments to regional cooperation in Central Asia. Firstly, developing, and in some cases impoverished countries do not want to invest in common endeavour. Second, too many reforms in various sectors prevent coordination of efforts at a regional level. Third, Central Asian states are wary of each other's intentions. Fourth, newly independent states, as it is common for 'post-colonial' units are pre-occupied with their own sovereignty and development of links to broader world.²⁷

According to Bohr, major constraints to regional cooperation in Central Asia include four slightly different factors: Uzbekistan's regional hegemonic ambitions, Central Asian states' focus on nation building, economic limitations and internal regime types.²⁸ First, Uzbekistan, the only country which borders every country in Central Asia and has the largest population, is perceived as a threat by other states in the region. Conversely, Kazakhstan's aspirations for regional leadership are perhaps more justifiable as it has the largest regional economy. However, Kazakhstan "does not view itself as part of any exclusive Central Asian regional formation; rather, Kazakhstan considers Russia to be an integral part of any region or sub-region to which it belongs."²⁹

Second, after 1991, during a process which was geared away from integration, each state's nation building processes revolved around a majority ethnic group from within the state.³⁰ While placing much emphasis on nation building, Central Asian governments of newly independent states were disregarding sizeable minorities present within each country, which reduced traditional exchanges between populations of neighboring states, further demarcating borders and complicating travel between states with bureaucratic procedures.³¹

Third, the nature of economies, which were more competing rather than complimentary, limited the scope of trade between Central Asian states. One of the notable exceptions was the potential for exchange of hydro-generated power and carbohydrate-generated power among upstream states, abundant with water and downstream states which are comparatively rich in fossil fuels.³² However, the issues of water resources was so heavily politicized in Central Asia that it became one of the major points of contention rather than cooperation. In other industries protectionist policies prevented cooperation. Additionally, small groups of producers accounted for the majority of exports in each country, which gave rise to monopolies, which in turn, often benefited Central Asian leadership. Also, the nature of regional infrastructure, directed toward Russia, rather than being inward-looking, strict transit regulations and widespread corruption

²⁶ Godehardt, 108

²⁷ Starr

²⁸ Bohr, Annette, "Regionalism in Central Asia: New geopolitics, old regional order," , 80, 3, May 2004, 485-502

²⁹ Bohr, 2004, 493

³⁰ Ibid, 495

³¹ Lewington, Richard, "The Challenge of Managing Central Asia's New Borders," *Asian Affairs*, 41, 2, 2010, 221-236

³² Author's interview, Bishkek, January 27, 2016

presented additional impediments to regional economic exchange.³³

Lastly, “internal regime type is particularly important constraint [...] given that regional dynamics are defined by interactions between highly personalist regimes and even individual leaders, rather than between states or societies.”³⁴ According to Roy Allison who positions Central Asia at the “periphery of the international system” as a “Russia-centered regional security complex” there are three major constraints to regionalism.³⁵ The first includes Russia’s remaining dominance within the traditional sphere of influence. The second involves disparate agendas and consequently different outcomes of major powers competing for influence across the region. The third constraint, is in agreement with Bohr, and can be attributed to the strong grip of Central Asian leaders over state sovereignty, in other words, their authoritarian tendencies.³⁶

Due to these constraints, it is not entirely unexpected that no effective regional institutions emerged in Central Asia without the influence from outside actors. The Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO)³⁷ consisting of the four Central Asian states, excluding Turkmenistan, was ineffective due to dominant protectionism policies among the Central Asian states and their incompatible interests on local water use.³⁸ As discussed in previous chapters, the three main regional organizations – the Collective Treaty Security Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union and its predecessor the Eurasian Economic Community, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are driven by either Russia or China. Although international organizations most likely facilitate some sort of cooperation, as discussed in Chapter One, they do not necessarily manage to increase interdependence and develop shared identity for a particular region. While organizations are definitely important in studying regions, they are not sufficient for understanding the drivers of regional cooperation. The next section outlines several key approaches an terms used for studying regions and evaluates their utility for studying Central Asia.

Analyzing Central Asian regionalism

From region to regionalism and regionalization

The term *regionalism* instinctively suggests its connection to *regions*. However, there is little clarity in interpretations of the term. It can mean integration, cooperation, interactions, study of regions, presence of organizations and possibly many other things. Acharya defines *regionalism* as a “purposive interaction, formal and informal, among state and non-state actors of a given area in pursuit of shared external, domestic and transnational goals.”³⁹ This rather inclusive definition indicates ‘regional cooperation for a purpose’. Fawcett suggests that

³³ Bohr (2004), 496

³⁴ Bohr (2004), 498

³⁵ Allison, Roy, “Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia,” *International Affairs*, 80, 3, 2004, 481

³⁶ Allison

³⁷ Established as Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (1991), later named Central Asian Economic Union (1994) and later Central Asian Economic Cooperation (1998). It became Central Asian Cooperation Organization in 2002 and eventually merged with Eurasian Economic Community in 2005, *University of Notre Dame* website, (n.d.) <https://www3.nd.edu/~ggoertz/rei/reidevon.dtBase2/Files.noindex/pdf/3/caco-info.pdf>, accessed on October 30, 2016

³⁸ Bohr, 2004, 487

³⁹ Acharya, Amitav, “Comparative Regionalism: A field whose time has come?” *The International Spectator*, 47, 1, March 2012, 3

regionalism “implies a policy whereby state and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy within a given region” with the purpose of “[pursuing] and [promoting] common goals in one or more issue areas.”⁴⁰ Fawcett’s definition means basically the same. The term *regionalism* does not imply preference for any particular school of thought in International Relations and is used interchangeably with the phrase *regional cooperation*, because regional cooperation almost always happens for a purpose and almost never occurs against shared interests. The notion that state and non-state actors cooperate to serve their individual interest can always be presented through the context of their ‘shared interest’ to maintain amicable relations or simply to avoid conflict.

Earlier studies of regionalism, however, revolved around regional institutions as they were grounded on European integration. The theory of neo-functionalism presented by Ernst Haas aimed to explain the process of European integration through the effects of functional cooperation of member states and the *spillover* effect of functional integration into political integration.⁴¹ Neofunctionalism was criticized by Andrew Moravcsik for the over reliance on national policies, limiting integration to political characteristics of the EU and the lack of empirical substance.⁴² The declining nature of functional cooperation juxtaposed with growing political isolation in the initial years of independence make Central Asia a poor case for neofunctionalism.

Moravcsik’s own theory for studying regionalism, the Liberal Intergovernmentalism, divides European Community decision-making into three stages: foreign and economic policy formation, inter-state bargaining and institutional delegation.⁴³ Three elements are essential for Liberal Intergovernmentalism to explain regionalism: the assumption of rational state behaviour, a liberal theory of national preference formation, and an intergovernmentalism analysis of interstate negotiation.⁴⁴ Visibly, despite intergovernmental nature of international institutions operating in Central Asia, the requirement for liberalism in states foreign or domestic policies dismissed Liberal Intergovernmentalism as an instrument for studying Central Asian regionalism.

The New Regionalism Theory of Hettne and Soderbaum provides more utility for understanding the regional dynamics of Central Asia. The two author’s discussion is based on the concept of *regionalization*. They define regionalization as “the process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographic space.”⁴⁵ *Regionalization* can be characterized as a project aimed at enhancing regional cooperation (i.e. developing regionalism) or as a process different actors go through to

⁴⁰ Fawcett, 2004, 433

⁴¹ Haas, Ernst B. “International integration: the European and the universal process”, *International Organization*, 51, 3, Summer 1961, 366-392

Rosamond, Ben, “The uniting of Europe and the foundation of the EU studies: revisiting the neofunctionalism of Ernst B. Haas”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12, 2, April 2005, 237-254

⁴² Moravcsik, Andrew, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist approach”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31, 4, 1993, 473-524

⁴³ Moravcsik, Andrew, “Liberal Intergovernmentalism and integration: a rejoinder”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 33, 4, 1995, 611-622

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Hettne, Bjorn, Frederick Soderbaum, “Theorizing the Rise of Regionness”, *New Political Economy*, 5, 3, 2000, 4

achieve that aim.⁴⁶ Regionalization facilitates regional cooperation. For studying regionalism (i.e. regional cooperation) in Central Asia, the term *regionalization* is incredibly useful as it allows one to define the nature of activities which influence regional cooperation.

Regionalization is a complex concept which encompasses “patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross national geographic space.”⁴⁷ In order to measure the results of regionalization the authors introduce the concept of regionness. The term *regionness* implies that the region can be “more or less.”⁴⁸ Hettne and Soderbaum design a topology for measuring regionness: geographic proximity, transnational social relations and transactions, formal institutional cooperation, convergence of values through integration and, finally, evolution into a supranational entity.⁴⁹ The more dimensions present and the more developed they are – the more a particular space becomes a *region*. The higher degree of *regionness* implies higher interdependence. The types of regions corresponding to topology are regional space, regional complex, regional society, regional community, region-state.⁵⁰

The New Regionalism terminology is only partially useful for this study and this thesis does not employ the term *regionness* because the focus of the study is activities and the impact these activities have on regional cooperation, but the term *regionness* determines the positioning of a region. Conversely, the term *regionalization* is actively used to measure the capacity to foster regionalism, or regional cooperation. The terms *regional cohesion* and *regional connectivity* are employed in a similar capacity to that of *regionalization*.

Furthermore, based on the analysis of regional institutions operating in Central Asia, the last two dimension of the New Regionalism terminology are practically non-existent. The third dimension (i.e. formal institutional cooperation) is evident but it does not translate into *regional society*, as predicted by the theory. Subsequently, the study of Central Asian regionalism at its present stage revolves around the two lowest degrees of region formation, *geographic proximity*, and *transnational social relations and transactions*, in other words, cross-border trade and people’s movement. Geographic proximity while apparent, does not necessarily translate into connectivity. South Korea and North Korea, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Nepal and China, India and China, Russia and USA across the Bering Strait, are just some examples where geographic proximity does not necessitate cooperation. While, some of the examples provided are driven by political considerations, others manifest through an inability to overcome natural boundaries. The infrastructure, therefore, acquires as key role for traversing natural barriers and reducing distances. It is also crucial for maintaining or developing the second level of region formation, which are transnational social relations and transactions, in other words, movements of goods and people, and people-to-people exchanges.

Before discussing the role of infrastructure in more detail, it is necessary to introduce another term that is useful for understanding regionalism in Central Asia. As noted earlier, Central Asia emerged as a coherent region after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, due to the constraints for cooperation addressed in the previous section the levels of interdependence and cooperation in the region gradually declined. In a sense, Central Asian states followed the path of isolation from one another. Artificial borders reinforced natural

⁴⁶ Fawcett, 2004, 432-433

⁴⁷ Godehardt, 28

⁴⁸ Hettne and Soderbaum, 12

⁴⁹ Ndayi, Zoleka V., “‘Theorizing the rise of Regionness’ by Bjorn Hettne and Frederic Soderbaum. Review Article”, *Politikon*, 33, 1, April 2006, 115

⁵⁰ Hettne and Soderbaum

boundaries. In numerous instances, pre-existing Soviet ties were severed. Economic interests of the five countries developed outside their immediate neighborhood.⁵¹ The movement of people became increasingly restricted. Coordination and information exchange between public organizations became limited resulting in fewer connections in culture, education, sports and youth exchanges. The influence of common Soviet culture and Russian language declined, yielding to new post-independence nation building rhetoric.⁵² Tensions rose based on the issues of border security and management of shared water resources.⁵³ Starr suggests that “fragmentation has been the order of the day in post-independence Central Asia.”⁵⁴ *Fragmentation* implies the process, which is the opposite of *regionalization*. Fragmentation can also be called *de-regionalization* and suggest negative direction in region formation, which lead to decreased regional connectivity and reduced regional cooperation. The terms *fragmentation* and *de-regionalization* can be used interchangeably as they apply a negative trend in regionalization processes.

The concepts of New Regionalism draw from Neoliberal Institutionalism and Social Constructivism schools of thought. New Regionalism Theory presents institutional cooperation and supranational entities as ultimate forms of regionalism. The authors ground the idea of region in Social Constructivism, as “region is perceived as socially constructed as an open process and therefore as constantly being in the making.”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the function of *regionalization* and *regionalism* are not necessarily inconsistent with the neorealist assumptions. Regional cooperation does not necessary need to be institutionalized. Moreover, the terms *regionalism* and *regionalization* can explain the effects of the interstate dynamics, while these dynamics can be explained by the power balancing and other concepts more consistent with neorealism. The next section addresses the role of hard infrastructure and its capacity to influence states decisions. The material capabilities of major powers serve as driving forces of infrastructure development projects. The section after addresses power balance dynamics encountered by the regional actors.

Obdurate infrastructure and technological zones

The concept of *obdurate infrastructure* developed by Corey Johnson suggests that the physical networks which connect countries across vast landmasses tend to continue serving the intended purpose despite geopolitical and political disagreements among members along the route.⁵⁶ Johnson argues that hard infrastructure can shape and often define decisions of the states.

⁵¹ Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports*, No14, November 2012, 9

Cooley, 2012, 150

⁵² Cooley, 2012

⁵³ Akiner, Shirin, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World”, *Global Strategy Forum*, June 2010

Starr, Frederick S., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2008

⁵⁴ Starr, 9

⁵⁵ Godehardt, 37

⁵⁶ Johnson, Corey, “Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia. The Case of Natural Gas” in *Eurasian Corridors on Interconnection: From South China to the Caspian Sea*, Walcott, Susan M. and Corey Johnson (eds.), Routledge, (2014)

The *obduracy* of the infrastructure lies in its capacity to override political differences and even discord between states.⁵⁷ The concept of *obdurate infrastructure* suggests that the physical networks which connect countries across vast landmasses tend to continue serving the intended purpose despite geopolitical and political disagreements among members along the route.⁵⁸ To develop his point Johnson uses the case of continuous operation of gas pipelines running between Russia and Europe. However, the concept of obdurate infrastructure can also be applied to transportation networks. Once built, they do tend to continue serving their original purpose of moving goods and people and sustaining interdependence between the connected states. The functions of physical infrastructure often outweigh political differences. Therefore these networks remain in use and continue facilitating interdependence among the states. In Central Asia, the roads and railway systems inherited from the Soviet Union are supposed to serve as unifying elements. Despite differences between the Central Asian neighboring countries, the existence of the transportation links should logically encourage states to cooperate. However, while *obduracy* of the physical infrastructure may be robust enough to withstand political and economic differences between states along a route, it is not definite whether the existing infrastructure always endure the involvement from external major powers. To serve its own needs an adjacent rising power with, an unprecedented in the region, economic weight may decide to rebuild or alter the direction of a pre-existing infrastructure. In the post-Soviet Central Asia, China has the ability and the motivation to do this; however, the impact of such engagement can have varying effects on regional cooperation. While reinforcing existing networks keeps the region together, construction of new routes often creates alternative venues for cooperation. Subsequently, older routes often fall victims to new networks.

Another set of concepts, which allows evaluating the link between infrastructure and regional cooperation are *technological zones*, defined by Andrew Barry as “[spaces] within which differences between technical practices, procedures, and forms have been reduced, or common standards have been established.”⁵⁹ There are three types of technological zones.

Metrological zones [are] associated with the development of common forms of measurement. Infrastructural zone [are] associated with the creation of common connection standards. Zones of qualifications come into being when objects and practices are assessed according to common standard and criteria.⁶⁰

According to Barry, “the development of technological zones has come to be seen as a strategic imperative.”⁶¹ Barry’s analysis deals mainly with *zones of qualification*, in which “the qualities of objects or practices are assessed in order that they meet more or less common standards or criteria”⁶² However, the role of *infrastructural zones* and *metrological zones* are similarly important for achieving the political goals of various actors. These actors may include regional institutions, multinational corporations and other non-state agencies, but in the case of Central

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Johnson, Corey, “Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia. The Case of Natural Gas” in *Eurasian Corridors on Interconnection: From South China to the Caspian Sea*, Walcott, Susan M. and Corey Johnson (eds.), Routledge, (2014)

⁵⁹ Barry, Andrew, “Technological Zones”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9, 2, 2006, 239-253 (239)

⁶⁰ Barry, 239

⁶¹ Barry (2006), 244

⁶² Barry (2006), 240

Asia, the prerogative of developing technological zones often lies with the adjacent major powers, Russia and China, and often serves their interests. More specifically, telecommunication systems connecting neighboring states can be viewed as *infrastructural zones* “associated with the creation of common connection standards”⁶³, which “make it possible to integrate systems of production and communication, as well as exclude consumers and producers who do not conform to the standard.”⁶⁴ The extent of the commonality of the standards affects the degree of connectivity between non-state actors, which, in turn, influences the level of regional cooperation.

The role of physical infrastructure cannot be underestimated as it is one of the main objects of influence of material capabilities of the two major powers. However, once built, the infrastructure becomes the subject of positive or negative regionalization processes. The main research question of the thesis of how Russia and China influence regional cooperation in Central Asia is addressed by analyzing how each of the two major powers affects the development of regional infrastructure.

Nevertheless, the capacity of the two powers to use their material capabilities to promote their objective in Central Asia is often constrained by the local actors. Chinese and Russian engagement in Central Asia, more often than not, carries political connotation. As mentioned in the previous chapter on Sino-Russian relations, the two major powers are bound to be engaged in some sort of balancing behavior. However, the regional actors have not passively observed the engagement of major powers in their region. They played an active role in defining the nature of this engagement. Their role can be understood through a neorealist framework more applicable to smaller states, *omnibalancing*.

Omnibalancing

The concept of *omnibalancing* was put forward by Steven David and was designed to explain the balancing behavior in the 'Third World'⁶⁵. While the “Third World” is not the most suitable, or the most politically correct term today, the omnibalancing theory, with certain adjustments, can be useful for understanding and explaining the behavior of Central Asian states from the neorealist perspective.

There is no clear definition of what constitutes the “Third World”. David uses the UN categorization of the Third World, which defines it as “all countries except the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the European States and the People’s Republic of China.”⁶⁶ Since the definition used by David in 1991 is outdated and hardly relevant, it is essential to outline certain attributes of the countries included in his analysis to demonstrate that these attributes match most of the characteristics of the Central Asian states.

First, according to David, as ex-colonies, a great majority of Third World states were artificially constructed and this “artificiality [...] has created a situation in which groups owe allegiance to and act for interests other than national interest. Instead of identifying with the state, individuals identify with ethnic, religious, or regional grouping [which prevents] the

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Barry (2006), 240

⁶⁵ David, Steven R., *Choosing Sides. Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991

⁶⁶ David, 11

formation of a national consciousness.”⁶⁷ Second, “legitimacy is likely to be weaker for Third World leaders than for leaders elsewhere. [...] because they lack legitimacy, they face continual threats to their rule.”⁶⁸ Third, “the state in the Third World is distinctive in that it controls a much greater degree of wealth and power than any other group in the society.”⁶⁹ Forth, “Third World states have authoritarian governments. [...] Public opinion often carries little influence, and institutional structures play only a minor role in foreign policy.”⁷⁰ Fifth, in many Third World states, culture dictates that power is concentrated in the hands of one man.⁷¹ Sixth, “The Third World is [...] characterized by an interrelationship between foreign and domestic factors in creating and suppressing threats. Internal threats against leaders often have outside support.”⁷² Finally, Third World states tend to identify themselves as such and “act in at least some ways in terms of their self-identification.”⁷³ According to David, these common features of Third World states explain high frequency of internal threats faced by respective leaders of these states and the leaders’ motivations to seek help elsewhere. Overall, the attributes of the Central Asian states closely match these characteristics of the “Third World”.

According to David, the main weakness of the traditional balance of power theory is that it does not take into consideration internal threats, which are so prevalent in the underdeveloped and unstable countries.⁷⁴ Moreover, departing from structural realism, under which state is the main unit of analysis, David argues that “the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behavior is the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power.”⁷⁵ This view is also consistent with the social constructivism approach discussed in the third section of this chapter. Additionally, the importance of internal factors in the decision making is outlined by Robert Putnam’s ‘two level games’ approach, which explains how domestic politics influence foreign policy decision of the states.⁷⁶ However, the internal factors of decision making in Russia and China are extremely complex and understanding these factors would require a different level of analysis, which falls outside of the scope of this work. Nevertheless, some of the internal factors in the Central Asian states are more possible to assess, and these, region-specific factors, are actually more useful for understanding the nature of the major powers’ engagement in Central Asia and the effect on regional cooperation. To this extent, omnibalancing approach, and its focus on explaining the decision-making of the smaller states, is more appropriate.

Under omnibalancing, “the leaders of the states will appease secondary adversaries to focus their resources on primary adversaries”, which often include domestic actors.⁷⁷ “Omnibalancing incorporates both the need to appease secondary adversaries and the need of leaders to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power.”⁷⁸

⁶⁷ David, 12

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid, 13

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid, 14

⁷³ Ibid, 15

⁷⁴ David, 3

⁷⁵ David, 6

⁷⁶ Putnam, Robert D., “Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games”, *International Organizations*, 42, 3, Summer 1988, 427-460

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid, 7

While it may not explain every aspect of regional dynamics, omnibalancing, offers an insight into behaviors of Central Asian states and, more importantly, contributes to the understanding of the decision-making process among Central Asia leaders. Moreover, omnibalancing provides a framework to analyze the behavior of Central Asian states from the standpoint of the Central Asian states and its leaders, rather than purely from the positions of major powers engaged in the region.

A number of cases are readily available to test the utility of the omnibalancing framework in Central Asia. On the one hand, examples of alignment to serve the survival of regimes would include Tajikistan's reliance on Russia's military to guarantee security after the civil war, Uzbekistan's president's Karimov rapprochement with Russia and China after the Andijan unrest and violent reprisals in 2005, and Kazakhstan's president increased reliance on political support from Russia after major disturbance and subsequent government crackdown in western Kazakhstan in 2011. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan, a country, which at some point was seen as the most pro-western in the region, may demonstrate, by contradiction, the necessity of alignment to guarantee regimes survival. Arguably, both Akayev's and Bakiyev's failure to align firmly with the "right" regional power had left them without outside support when they faced external threats in 2005 and 2010 accordingly. The detailed examination of international relations in Central Asia through the prism of the omnibalancing framework has been conducted and the work clearly demonstrates a correlation between internal threats and changes in alignment decisions by leaders of the Central Asian states.⁷⁹

Omnibalancing also falls in line with the in-depth analysis of the region in Alexander Cooley's 'Great Game, Local Rules', which views Central Asian states not as passive subjects of major power rivalry in the region, but as capable agents that act in their own interests.⁸⁰ According to Cooley, "three important rules have come to characterize Central Asian regimes: the promotion of regime survival; the use of state resources for private gain; and the brokering between external actors and local constituencies."⁸¹ This view provides additional weight to the following two points. First, in order to analyze international relations in Central Asian, it is necessary to consider Central Asian states, as much as major powers, as units of analysis. Second, it is important to take into account internal factors as well as the external ones, and the role each set plays in understanding international relations in Central Asia.

The thesis utilizes omnibalancing approach when explaining decisions of the Central Asian leaders. The omnibalancing approach, however, focuses largely on the security dimension in a particular region. A more encompassing examination of regional cooperation in Central Asia from the neorealism perspective would need to involve the evaluation of other material capabilities, which influence relations among Central Asian states and major powers engagement in the region. Material capabilities of Russia and China play a particularly important role defining their engagement in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, material capabilities alone do not always explain regional dynamics. Omnibalancing approach clearly allocates a key role in decision-making to threat perceptions of the state leaders. The approach, therefore, draws its roots in Neoclassical Realism, which assigns

⁷⁹ Jikia, Bakar, "The Influence of Internal Threats on Foreign Policy in Authoritarian States: Central Asia", *Central European University, Department of Political Science, MA Dissertation*, (2010), Available at http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2010/jikia_bakar.pdf

⁸⁰ Cooley, Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

⁸¹ Cooley, 2012, 16

key roles of interstate dynamics not only to distribution of power, but also to the perceptions of the state leaders. Neoclassical Realism departs from structural realism and allows inclusion of more subjectivity in the analysis of the interstate relations. This notion, in turn, allows creating synthesis between the power politics of Neoclassical Realism and the role of perceptions advocated by Social Constructivism. According to Barkin, the two frameworks complement each other because they enable to combine methodological approaches of both.⁸² Realism provides conceptual framework for understanding how power is used as an instrument of policy.⁸³ Social Constructivism study of perception enables Realism to depart from structural dynamics of the international system.⁸⁴ More importantly for this study is Barkin's argument that the two theories are not self-exclusive, and can be utilized in tandem. Having established this, the final section of the analytical framework summarizes underlining principles of Social Constructivism and evaluates their applicability for studying interstate relations in Central Asia. Under Social Constructivism framework, cooperation can be explained by analyzing how states transform their interests and self-perceptions. According to Wendt, transformation processes are driven "by the institution of sovereignty, by an evolution of cooperation, and by intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities."⁸⁵ Each of these drivers is discussed below in a Central Asian context.

Institution of Sovereignty

The principle of sovereignty is deeply entrenched in the identities of China, Russia and Central Asian states. Compared to the other parts of the world, for instance Europe, where sovereignty is being exchanged for higher degree of integration, in Central Asia mutual recognition of states' sovereignty and non-interference into internal affairs is an essential part of cooperation. States which envision their own sovereignty will exercise respect toward the sovereignty of others.⁸⁶ This mutual respect for each state's right to conduct one's internal affairs has been one of the founding principles and leading values of the SCO.

Although aversion of increased integration may constrain the development of institutions in the region, it does not necessarily prevent cooperation. An example is presented in a relative utility, extended life span and noticeable political weight of another regional institution in Asia, the ASEAN. The organization demonstrates a functional multilateral cooperation initiative consisting of the states, which are unwilling to trade-in their sovereignty for enhanced integration.⁸⁷ To draw a parallel, the SCO can be a functioning, target oriented institution despite its members' explicit aversion to integration. Considering this, among other common characteristics of the internal regimes in China, Russia and Central Asian states, their strong values for state sovereignty can be seen as a potential driving force for institutional development and cooperation under a framework acceptable for the region.⁸⁸

⁸² Barkin, Samuel, J., *Realist Constructivism. Rethinking International Relations Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010

⁸³ Barkin, 169

⁸⁴ Barkin, 172

⁸⁵ Wendt, Alexander, "Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics," *International Organization*, 46, 2, Spring 1992, 395

⁸⁶ Wendt, 414

⁸⁷ Aris, Stephen, "A new model of Asian regionalism: does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have more potential than ASEAN?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22, 3, 2009, pp.451-457

⁸⁸ Ibid

Reconstructing interests

According to Wendt, the ways in which states learn to cooperate through institutions is not based on the desire to minimize costs from creating new partners, but through “reconstructing their interests in terms of shared commitments to social norms.”⁸⁹ This method of spreading one’s social norms is conducive to enhancing cooperation between states. Considering the imbalance in size, economic strength and political weight between the Central Asian states and the two major powers, it is Russia and China, which have the capacity to impose their norms more readily across the region.

Russia has an historical role which derives from imperial times and, more importantly, the period of the Soviet Union. Additionally, high percentages of ethnic Russians residing in Central Asia and hundreds of thousands of Central Asian migrant workers earning their living in Russia, enables Moscow to retain a significant amount of influence in the region.⁹⁰ This provides Russia with an ability to project its norms in Central Asian states. On the other hand, China has to make extra effort to develop a positive self-image, mainly because there is no single perception of China in the region.

The least developed Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan appreciate Chinese cheap goods and infrastructure developments. However at the same time, the two retain stronger ties with Russia, and anti-Chinese expansionism sentiments are a major cause for concern, especially in Kyrgyzstan where public opinions are expressed more openly. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan has been experimenting with western liberal-democratic values which run against China’s view of internal governance.⁹¹ China’s relations with the Kazakhstan government elite are relatively stable, but China does not always have a positive image on the ground. “Kazakhstan society – made up of 30 percent ethnic Russian and 70 percent Turkic, mainly Kazakh ethnic groups – has noticeable cumulative resentment against Chinese commercial aggressiveness as well as Beijing’s policy in Xinjiang.”⁹² Similarly, in Uzbekistan there is a wariness of Chinese economic penetration and little support for China’s actions in Xinjiang among the high percentage of Uzbeks who see themselves as ethnically close to Xinjiang Uyghur. It should be noted that this association of Central Asian Turkic people with the Turkic people of Xinjiang does not imply strong transnational ties between the two groups or noticeable policy implications. In contrast, Central Asian people’s attitude toward Xinjiang Uighur solidarity with fellow Turkic Muslims is comparable, perhaps, to Arab world solidarity with Palestinians, which carries limited consequences on the below-the-state levels of interactions. In Central Asian states the antipathy exists on the ground despite strong basis for cooperation between the two governments in tackling internal security threats and Islamist insurgencies emanating from Afghanistan.⁹³ Finally, China developed strong ties in the energy sector with Turkmenistan and attracted an increasing number of youth from Turkmenistan to study in China. Due to Turkmenistan’s, apparently permanent neutrality status, it is not a member of any of the regional organization, and therefore has little significance in the overall regional perception of China in Central Asia.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Wendt, 417

⁹⁰ Cooley, 2011, 164

⁹¹ Cabestan, 36

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

China has made noticeable efforts in developing a positive image within Central Asia by promoting Chinese language and culture through Confucius institutes, attracting international students to China and even broadcasting Chinese programs, mostly in Russian, in selected Central Asian states,⁹⁵ but these have not been sufficient to eliminate negative perceptions among Central Asian population. Chapter Six evaluates the steps undertaken by China to develop positive perception in Central Asia and analyzes the effects of these activities on regional cooperation. The chapter then emphasizes the importance of China's material capabilities in projecting cultural and trade norms. This connection between material and ideation is consistent with the underlying foundation of the social constructivist approach to analysis.

Concurrently, China's efforts in projecting its norms and values had more success in reaching the elites. As a normative power, China aims to socialize neighboring countries into what it assumes are appropriate behavioral norms in the international system as well as into adopting Chinese norms.⁹⁶ According to Kavalski, China's socializing attempts were not futile, partially because of the consensus between Chinese and Central Asian leaders on principles of non-interference in domestic affairs, maintenance of the status-quo in Central Asian regimes, prioritizing economic development over calls for democratization, resistance to internal regime threats and a desire for a multi-polar international system.⁹⁷ Even though Chinese civilization values have yet to reach broader masses in Central Asia, the norms promoted through the SCO enhanced China's normative power in Central Asia.⁹⁸ Subsequently, China's role in the region has been growing and gradually displacing the normative positions of Western countries, i.e. European Union and the USA.

China's norms and values, however, do not contradict the common principles of governing in Central Asia. In this regard, Wendt's second way of developing institutional cooperation between China and Central Asian states – that is, “reconstructing [states] interests in terms of shared commitments to social norms”⁹⁹ – is consistent with the way the state actors interact in Central Asia. However, it presents only limited support for Social Constructivism. In other words, there was little *reconstructing of social norms* on the elite level that needed to be done by China in Central Asia because of the strong convergence of these norms in the first place.

Voluntary transformation of identities

The third approach suggests that states' interests are reshaped in order to facilitate cooperation which involves the transformation of egoistic identities to collective identities.¹⁰⁰ This voluntary transformation deriving from a state's self-reflection occurs in three stages: “breaking down of consensus about [present] identity commitments”; “critical examination of old ideas about self and others and [...] of the structures of interaction by which the ideas have been sustained”; and changing oneself as well as the “identities and interests of the others that

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Kavalski, Emilian, “Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China's Socialization of Central Asia,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 45, 2, 2010, pp. 133

⁹⁷ Kavalski, Emilian, “Whom to Follow? Central Asia between the EU and China,” *China Report*, 43, 1, 2007, 43-55

⁹⁸ Kavalski, Emilian, *Central Asia and the Rise of Normative Powers. Contextualizing the Security Governance of the European Union, China and India*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, 120

⁹⁹ Wendt, 417

¹⁰⁰ Wendt, 418

help sustain [...] systems of interaction.”¹⁰¹ It is challenging to provide evidence necessary to demonstrate the steps of the process, but recognizing this method of forging cooperation is useful for understanding the development of institutions in Central Asia. Through the process of voluntary re-thinking of a state’s identity, Social Constructivism may provide better explanations than Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism. For instance, transformation of a state’s identity may better explain how development of the EurasEC depended on the political will of the leaders, particularly, Putin and Nazarbayev.¹⁰² It can also provide answers about Uzbekistan’s cyclical shifting between increased loyalty to Russia and rapprochement with the USA. Another example would include explanation of periodic contemplations of Turkmenistan to join the SCO. The concept of rethinking of a state’s identity may also explain Kyrgyzstan’s aspirations for the EAEU membership despite predictions of the potential economic setbacks the country would face after joining the initiative.¹⁰³

Overall, the idea that voluntary transformation of identities takes place among the states’ leaders allows one to understand their decisions when other types of considerations, particularly security and economic, do not easily explain these decisions. To that extent, the social constructivist concept of transformation of identities can complement neorealism omnibalancing approach. The voluntary transformation of identities implies that factors other than internal and external threats can influence decisions of the smaller states’ leaders.

Social Constructivism and material capabilities

Social Constructivism has several limitations. First of all, it minimizes the importance of threats and material power. This limitation can be complemented by the realist approaches, particularly omnibalancing, but also general balance of power theories. Second, Social Constructivism may exaggerate the role that the norms play in interactions between the states. After all, potential material benefits often overcome existing antipathy’s in the interstate relations. Neorealism provides rational explanation why states sometimes act in defiance of their established practices. Finally, considering the closed nature of the internal regimes in Central Asia, it is challenging to provide empirical evidence of the decision making process behind the transformation of interests in Central Asian states. Nevertheless, in combination with one of the rationalism approaches, Social Constructivism has the capacity to explain cooperation drivers in the region.

Applying each of the three social constructivism methods of transformation of interests for institutional cooperation, i.e. notion of sovereignty, evolution of cooperation and change of individualistic identity into collective identity, to individual cases may actually demonstrate the important role of material factors. Under the Social Constructivism approach, ideas and desires interact with material forces and power capabilities.

Moreover, from a social constructivist perspective, material capabilities only come into effect after they interact with ideas, in the form of desires and interests.¹⁰⁴ “Power and interests have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up;” hence Wendt argues “that the meaning of the distribution of power in international politics is constituted in important part by the distribution of interests, and [...] the content of interests are in turn constituted in important

¹⁰¹ Wendt, 420-421

¹⁰² Kassenova, 2012

¹⁰³ Keene, Eli, “Kyrgyzstan and the Customs Union,” *carnegieendowment.org*

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/01/kyrgyzstan-and-customs-union/aleg>

¹⁰⁴ Wendt, Alexander, *Social Theories of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1999), 112

part by ideas.”¹⁰⁵ This capacity to merge “material” with “ideational” enables Social Constructivism to complement Neorealism to provide additional explanatory power for understanding states’ interactions and the rationale behind regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Summary

Analytical framework of the dissertation relies on several key elements. Terminology for studying regional cooperation in Central Asia is borrowed from New Regionalism Theory. Although New Regionalism only partly explains Central Asian regional dynamics, it is a useful tool to assess stages of regional cooperation. The main instrument for explaining Central Asian states’ relations with major powers lies in the realist approach of Omnibalancing. The framework enables to view interactions between Central Asian states and major powers from the perspective of smaller states. Finally, the key object of the study, regional infrastructure, underlines the competitive and balancing nature of interstate relations in Central Asia. The concepts of obdurate infrastructure and of technological zones are borrowed from what appears to be New Materialism school of thought, which emphasizes the critical role of non-human forces in social sciences. However, the concepts are consistent with neorealist theories, in a sense that they highlight the importance of material capabilities in the decision making processes of the states.

The final section of this chapter provides overview of the research methods utilized to collect and analyze data used in empirical chapters.

Methods

This study implements qualitative research method i.e. documentary analysis, media analysis and elite interviews to explore how activities of Russia and China impact regional cooperation among Central Asian states. The study covers the 25 year period since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However the focus is on the last decade of that period, that is, 2005-2015. The first fifteen years of independence are mainly addressed to provide the background of the situation in the region. The main aim of the research was to build a “whole picture” of the nature of the two major powers’ influence on the development of regional connectivity in Central Asia. For this purpose, the thesis utilizes multiple mini-cases for each area of infrastructure addressed in the study. Analyzing these cases provides insight into the general direction of each of the major powers within each sector. The concurrent discussions identify general trends of Russia and China’s engagement in Central Asia, based on trends relevant to each specific sector.

Considering the statist nature of the Neorealism, activities of various Russian and Chinese agencies are viewed as the activities of Russia and China states. In most instances connections between these states and their agencies are explicit and evident, as the main organizations operating in Central Asia are state-owned enterprises, or other entities closely affiliated with states. When a connection between an agency and a state are not so clearly visible, evidence is provided to demonstrate this connection.

Without drawing a significant distinction between engagement of the states and engagement of their agencies, the basic principle of research was to identify Russia and China’s activities in Central Asia and to interpret the effects of these activities on the cooperation among Central Asian states and on the regional connectivity. Direct results of activities were not

¹⁰⁵ Wendt, 1999, 135

measured because of the complexity of the task and insufficient data; instead; direct inferences are made in each case. For example, the construction of a road between two states or an opening of a border crossing is seen to have a positive effect on regional connectivity. It is not necessary to measure the number of people or the volume of goods travelling along this road or through this border. Construction of a road to bypass another state or the closing of a border crossing is seen to have obvious negative effects on regional connectivity. In another example, establishing a functioning multilateral body to monitor a pipeline is seen as a positive step toward inter-state cooperation. Conversely, decommissioning a power line running through several countries in the region is seen to have negative effect. Similarly, lowering tariffs for international calls between states' in discussion is seen as a step enhancing regional connectivity, and raising tariffs for calls is seen as a move toward decreasing regional connectivity, although in neither case is it necessary to actually measure the number of the phone calls between the residents of the two states. In yet another example, failure of the two major powers to agree on establishment of multilateral lender in the region is considered to have negative impact on the financing of intra-regional projects.

When a connection between the activity and regional connectivity is not obvious and apparent, additional evidence provides support of an inference. For example, the indication of decreasing fuel trade between two states in the region is used to demonstrate the impact of the construction of an oil refinery in one of the states. In this manner, the thesis aims to establish the relationship between independent variables – activities of Russia and China, and dependent variable – the degree of cooperation and regional connectivity in Central Asia.

The core of this thesis consists of the four empirical chapters. Each chapter provides evaluation and analysis of China's and Russia's engagement in one of the networked sectors related to hard infrastructure. Chapter Four evaluates China and Russia's engagement in the financial sector. Understanding the two major powers' interaction in the context of existing development banks and their attitude toward initiation of multilateral lending institutions is crucial for evaluating potential for financing of intra-regional infrastructure. Chapter Four also identifies contemporary Sino-Russian power dynamics in the institutional context and the effects of these dynamics on regional cooperation and connectivity. Despite institutional context, the discussion revolves around material capabilities, perceptions and identities, which are consistent with the theoretical approaches of Neorealism and Social Constructivism. In addition to explaining Sino-Russian interaction within the financial sphere, Chapter Four provides additional foundation for understanding why it is more suitable to analyze the engagement of the two major powers from the perspective of involved states, rather than from the perspective of regional organizations in which they participate.

Building on this foundation Chapters Five, Six and Seven evaluate China and Russia's engagement in the specific sectors of infrastructure, namely transport, energy and telecommunications, with the purpose of determining the effects of their engagement on the degree of cooperation and regional connectivity. Each of the "infrastructural chapters" includes a recent historical overview of the conditions of each sector at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This discussion is generally based on the secondary literature on the region and think-tank reports, which address specific sectors of the infrastructure. Additionally, background part of each chapter identifies more specific role that each of the three infrastructural sectors plays in regionalization process. Establishment of these roles is carried out through the analysis of both region-specific secondary literature, as well as wider literature on regionalism.

The main content of each empirical chapter contains a comprehensive analysis of

initiatives carried out or intended to be carried by Russia and China. The documentary analysis aspect of the research identifies projects completed or proposed by individual major powers. Sources include statements and official reports from the websites of relevant government agencies, intergovernmental organizations, state owned enterprises (as well as companies closely connected with the states), multilateral financial institutions, government affiliated research centers and reports issued by government-controlled media outlets. The analysis of these documents offers understanding of the states' intentions and activities. It also allows detecting specific policies affecting various aspects of regional cooperation on the ground e.g. transnational ties, intraregional trade, cross-border exchanges. Additionally, official sources demonstrate rhetorical shifts indicating potential changes in policies towards interaction with neighboring states and the formation or disintegration of regional identities.

The examples of such sources include websites of *Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Ministries of Transportation, Ministries of Energy, Ministries of Industry, Ministries of Commerce, the SCO Secretariat, China Communications Construction Company, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China Railways Construction Corporation, Tebian Electric Apparatus (TBEA), Huawei, Vnesheconombank, Gazprom, KazMunaiGaz, Eurasian Development Bank (Eurasian Bank of Reconstruction), Asian Development Bank, China Export Import Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* among others. The data from these sources is carefully cross-checked with the data from potentially conflicting sources. These could include competing government agencies or government sources from competing or, possibly, rival states. Triangulation at this stage of research is conducted by ensuring that matching information from at least two official sources of different origins matches with information provided by, arguably, independent media outlets or obtained through the interviews, which are discussed in more detail below.

While the progress stages of the infrastructural projects are generally reported in the official sources, the stagnation stages are not always mentioned. However, this information is crucial for the analysis of the two major powers' engagement in the region. Therefore media sources and think tank reports are used extensively to determine the stages of progress, stagnation or even termination of projects and initiatives, which are omitted from the official sources. One group of media sources includes local information agencies, which tend to provide timely factual accounts about the developments on the grounds, even though they can be biased in their assessments of causes and effects of these developments. Information from these sources is crosschecked with the reports from the media outlets of other countries and with official sources. Examples of these are *Turkmenbusiness.org* (Turkmenistan); *Trend News* (Azerbaijan); *Asia Plus Media Group, News.tj, Patriotj.com* (Tajikistan); *Information Agency 24, Inozpress.kg, Akipress.com, Parusk.info, Time.kg, Vecherniy Bishkek* (Kyrgyzstan); *Radio Azattyq, Delovoy Kazakhstan, New Times, Pavlodar Online, Zakon.kz, Zonakz.net* (Kazakhstan); *RBC Group, Russia Today, RIA News, Delovoye.tv, Ritmeurassia.org, Notum.info, Ruskline.ru, Expert.ru, Kommersant, Moskovskiy Komsomolets, Regnum Information Agency, Razumei.ru, Finam.info, Sputniknews, RT.News* (Russia); *Xinhua News Agency, Caixin, China Central Television /CCTV online, China Daily, Global Times, Confucius Institute Headquarters / Hanban* (China).

There is a reason why usage of Russian-language media sources outweighs that of China-based media sources. First, the key purpose of the case studies is to analyze the activities of major power rather than their rhetoric. Local sources, despite their often biased attitude toward engagements of external actors, tend to provide more accurate information and more details about the status of the projects. For instance, accurate geographic names, which are often omitted

in Chinese sources, are more likely to be included in local sources. The time frames of the projects also tend to be more accurate when published by local sources. Furthermore, Russian language reporters based both in Russia and in various Central Asian states are generally more engaged in the events of Central Asia. Russian language media has longer history of involvement in Central Asia. Russian language readership, in Central Asia and in Russia, tends to be more aware of the current regional issues and therefore is more critical of the quality of reporting. Driven by demand, representative of Russian language media tend to have better understanding of the events on the ground.

Another group of source includes international news agencies, think tanks and specialized industry-specific consultancies or information centers, which tend to provide accurate general information, but often lack or omit specific details about the objects of research. Examples of international information sources are *Central Asia Monitor*, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, *Europe Central Asia Monitor*, *PONARSEurasia.org*, *Asia Times*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, *The Jamestown Foundation*, *Asia Plus*, *The Diplomat*, *The Atlantic*, *China Dialogue*, *International Crisis Group*, *Carnegie-Moscow Center*. Examples of industry-focused sources are *Neftegaz.ru*, *IHS.com*, *NaturalgasEurope.com*, *StanRadar.com*, *Kazlogistics.kz*, *RailroadJournal.com*, *Fiber Optic Social Network*, *Network World*, *SPBTV.com*, *GRP.kz (Telecom sector of Kazakhstan)*, *Bison.su (Logistics in CIS)*.

Finally, the research relied heavily on the few region-based independent media outlets, *Fergana News and EurasiaNet*, because of their factual accuracy and seeming impartiality toward each individual state actor. As with official sources, data obtained from each of these types of media sources was cross-checked with data from at least two sources of different types, i.e. media outlets from a different origin, official sources or elite interviews. Most of the written sources, with few exceptions, were available online. Sources were mainly in Russian and in English, with very few translations from Chinese.

In addition to the documentary analysis and media analysis, nearly thirty elite interviews were carried out as part of research. Interviews in Beijing were conducted at different times in 2015 and 2016 during the second and third years of the study. Interviews in Bishkek and Almaty were conducted in January and February of 2016 during the research trip to Central Asia. All the interviews were conducted in semi-structured manner, under which the initial questions generally led to a relatively open-ended discussion. Several interviews were brief and lasted less than half an hour, but most lasted at least an hour, with few going over two hours. No recordings were made; instead, with the permission of the interviewee extensive notes were taken, which were transcribed shortly after the interview. Interviews were conducted in Russian and in English. When the interviews were conducted in Russia, translation was completed during the transcription of the notes.

Beijing respondents included Chinese, Russian and western experts on Central Asia, multilateral institutions, Sino-Russian relations and Russian and Chinese foreign policy. Experts included former government officials, political commentators, analysts and academics. Non-Chinese experts were generally visiting Beijing and were initially approached at the public events organized by one of the research centers or initiatives revolving around Beijing intellectual community of “China observers.” Some respondents were leading figures at influential western policy think tanks. One of the Beijing respondents was contacted through the recommendation was a Deputy Secretary General of the SCO. Among Chinese academics, some were recommended by my supervisor, some introduced by fellow researchers in Beijing, others were contacted cold using contact information from their online profiles.

Chinese respondents were generally faculty members or researchers from influential academic and research institutions affiliated with different branches of Chinese government. The institutions included Foreign Affairs University, China Academy of Social Sciences, China Institute of International Studies, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. The respondents in Beijing provided answers about the general directions of Chinese and Russian involvement in Central Asia. Beijing respondents were most useful in clarifying the reasoning behind the nature of Chinese engagement in Central Asia and China's foreign policy in general. Rarely interviews in Beijing provided clarifications about the status of specific projects. In several instances, Beijing respondents mentioned projects and initiatives which provided additional valuable direction for research.

In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, several respondents were contacted through the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), the institution of affiliation during a field research trip. Most of Bishkek respondents, however, were contacted with the aid of a locally based-reporter of one reputable information agency. Interviewees in Bishkek included several officials from various government and intergovernmental agencies, such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Bank and Eurasian Development Bank, two former ministers, journalists specializing on Central Asia, local political commentators, local experts on regional infrastructure and academics from local institutions. In Almaty respondents were high level representatives of a major energy company.

Central Asian respondents shared valuable information about the activities on the ground and the effects of these activities on regional connectivity and cooperation. In several instances interviewees provided access to specialized documents unavailable on line and not easily accessible to general public. These documents and responses of several interviewees confirmed previous discoveries, but also allowed filling multiple gaps in the findings from the official sources and media outlets. Additionally, Central Asian respondents clarified certain conflicting information, which appeared in the written sources, and dispelled several trends in the official rhetoric. Furthermore, they shared valuable insights on the regional perspective and attitudes toward Russian and Chinese engagement in Central Asia. Similarly to Beijing respondents they offered suggestions for additional research directions. Finally, both Beijing and Central Asian respondents offered memorable quotations which are used in the thesis to deliver certain points more effectively. All the interviews are cited in the writing by their date and location without mentioning the names of the respondents for confidentiality reasons. The list of the respondents and their titles is attached separately as an appendix to the thesis.

The combination of documentary analysis, media analysis and elite interviews is a suitable empirical approach for determining how the nature of major powers' engagement in Central Asia affects the degree of cooperation and connectivity in the region. Used together the techniques enable triangulating data for accuracy. Additionally, the data obtained through the approaches creates wide field for analysis of intentions and activities of the main actors. Furthermore, the selected methodology makes it possible to develop a more complete picture of the relationship between the activities of the major powers and the outcomes of these activities on the ground. Ultimately, the investigative nature of this approach provides an opportunity to develop original insight and to contribute to the understanding of real effects of Russian and Chinese engagement on Central Asian regionalism.

Chapter Four

No loans – no roads: Multilateral financial institutions and their effect on regionalism

On May 8th 2015, during President Xi Jinping's symbolic visit to Moscow to attend the Seventieth Anniversary Victory Day parade, China and Russia signed a landmark cooperation agreement. The leaders of the two countries issued a joint declaration to "Integrate [China's] Silk Road Economic Belt initiative with [Russia's] aspiration under the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) framework."¹ Widely praised by Chinese and Russian media, the announcement was not matched with similar enthusiasm by the elites of the Central Asian states, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) partners of the two major powers. Not being consulted, they felt that the "big brothers" sidelined them in the process of developing regional cooperation in Central Asia, belittling the function of the already existing SCO, of which most Central Asian states were equal members.² The smaller states had reasons to question the change in the direction of China and Russia driven multilateralism. Under the auspices of the SCO, Sino-Russian dynamics did not necessarily provide desired results for the Central Asian states, but at the very least, the grouping gave them voice. While the new declaration appeared promising, the effects it would have on Central Asian regional cooperation were uncertain.

The agreement suggested a step toward an increasingly coordinated engagement of the two major powers in Asia and revolved around eight general measures:

- improvement of the conditions for mutual investments
- development of cross-border trade and industrial exchanges
- creation of wide-range logistical connectivity
- enhancement of environment for small and medium businesses
- development of regulations for currency exchange
- enhancement of cooperation through financial institutions
- formulation of common institutional policies
- general expansion of regional and global cooperation.³

Cooperation through the multilateral lenders was allocated a specific role in the agreement, which coincided with the emergence and development of new financial institutions initiated by China. Understanding Sino-Russian interaction in the context of these new banks, compared with the evaluation of the two major powers' participation in previous financial cooperation initiatives, is a crucial step for determining how the nature of China's and Russia's engagement in this sector has affected regional cooperation in Central Asia. The chapter is essential for developing the link between material capabilities of the major powers, i.e. their money, and the infrastructure projects these funds are used to build. The role of multilateral lenders is more

¹ "China, Russia agree to integrate Belt initiative with EAEU construction", *Xinhuanet.com*, May 9, 2015

² Author's interview, Bishkek, January 27, 2016

³ "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiisoi Federazii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki o sotrudnichestve po sopryazheniyu stroitrlstva Evraziiskogo Ekonomicheskogo soyuza i Ekonomicheskogo poyasa Shelkovogo puti" [Joint statement of the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China on cooperation on conjugation of the construction of Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt], *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, March 8, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4971>

important because region-wide projects are more likely to be funded by multilateral bodies, particularly those connected to a particular region.

The effects of multilateral financial institutions on regionalization in Central Asia can be direct – through cooperation in the financial and banking sphere, or indirect – through the financing of the projects which can enhance regional connectivity. Sino-Russian cooperation in the banking industry saw a noticeable increase from the early 2000's. It was driven by enhanced Sino-Russian dealings in the energy sector and attempts to enhance the conditions for trade in the border regions.⁴ This cooperation was characterized by a larger number of partnerships between Russian and Chinese banks and increasing liberalization of currency legislation in both countries, which saw the Ruble and the Yuan being traded in currency markets of the two countries. Additionally, a growing number of areas on both sides of the Sino-Russian border allowed trading without the use of the third country currency. However, this rising trend in bilateral cooperation between Russia and China did not lead to any visible increase in cooperation among financial industries of Central Asian states, or any other general effects of multilateral cooperation in Central Asia.

In contrast, Sino-Russian interaction in the framework of multilateral lenders offers more evident potential for enhancement of regional cooperation and connectivity in Central Asia; therefore, it requires detailed evaluation. The first section of the chapter discusses the background and setting for Sino-Russian cooperation in the financial sphere. The second section evaluates these SCO-driven initiatives of financial cooperation, and demonstrates that they were slow to initiate, and had very limited impact on the enhancement of regional connectivity. The third section examines the relatively 'younger' financial institutions initiated by China – the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), as well as the context under which they were created, the One Belt One Road Initiative or Belt and Road Initiative. This section aims to determine whether these different types of financial initiatives have greater capacity to facilitate regional cooperation among Central Asian states.

The chapter argues that there is continuity in the way Sino-Russia relations diminish the capacity of multilateral financial institutions designated for Central Asia and the wider region. In that context, similarly to the earlier attempts at multilateral financial cooperation initiatives, the 'younger' China-initiated multilateral lenders are likely to serve the interests of major powers, and possibly, individual Central Asian states. They may also enhance 'outward' connectivity between certain Central Asian states and the major powers. However, these 'new', China-initiated, multilateral financial institutions are not designed to serve the function of connecting the region from within and are insufficient to enhance regional cooperation in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Background

In the post-Soviet decades, Russia's and China's institutional engagement in Central Asia was generally driven by different interests. This trend led to divergence of the priorities, which, in turn, produced seemingly competing regional cooperation initiatives. China put emphasis on bilateral engagement with individual Central Asian states⁵ and on the development of the

⁴ Kurgansky, S. A, Tan Xuefei, "Russian-Chinese Cooperation in the Banking Sector", *Izvestiya (Известия ИГЭА)*, 2, 88, 2013

⁵ Allison, Roy, "Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, 80, 3 (2004), 463-483

Akiner, Shirin, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World, *Global*

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia, in turn, focused on security cooperation in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and economic integration through the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC), the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Neither of these included China, but neither appeared to have the capacity to serve as an anti-China alliance. Beijing never officially opposed the creation of Russia-dominant institutions in Central Asia. Moreover, China tended to emphasize the potential for cooperation between the SCO and Russia-led Eurasian integration projects. This prospective seemed logical considering the asymmetric development of various functions of the two initiatives.

The original nature of the SCO as a border resolution mechanism and a basis for multilateral anti-terrorism cooperation enabled its security dimension to develop faster than other potential areas for cooperation. This was demonstrated by a permanent Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) in Tashkent and a track record of multilateral military exercises.⁶ The SCO also served as a useful platform for high level diplomatic exchanges. On the economic side, however, the SCO had not achieved facilitation of free trade in the region. In 2014, “China’s foreign trade with its Central Asian “backyard” admittedly [remained] almost negligible, with China exporting just US\$24.1bn to the region in 2014, or 1 per cent of China’s total exports.”⁷ The Eurasian integration projects arguably had an adverse effect on China’s economic engagement in the region. According to one analyst,

while Kremlin views the SCO as sometimes useful in challenging the legitimacy of Western institutions and policies, it has no interest in seeing it become an effective vehicle for regional integration. For such integration would be on terms decided by others. [...] Consequently, Moscow has blocked Beijing’s efforts to establish an SCO Free Trade Zone.⁸

It was also suggested by Chinese commentators that the EAEU might not be willing or even able to cooperate with the BRI [...] because “the two initiatives are very different: one is a trade and economic corridor initiated by Beijing, while the other is a new economic zone controlled by Moscow.”⁹

In that sense, the nature of the two major powers’ engagement in Central Asia could be characterized by the “pulls” in different directions. However, after 2010 there appeared a policy shift in the two countries’ approach towards regional cooperation. The China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrated the rising power’s enhanced interest in multilateral engagement in Asia. Subsequently, following growing isolation from the West as a consequence of the

Strategy Forum, June 2010, <https://www.globalstrategyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organisation.pdf>

⁶ Weitz, Richard “SCO Military drills strengthen Russian-Chinese regional hegemony”, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 10, 2014, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13054-sco-military-drills-strengthen-russian-chinese-regional-hegemony.html>

⁷ Colquhoun, Andrew, “China’s Silk Road plan is already taking shape”, *Financial Times*, April 15, 2015, <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2015/04/15/chinas-silk-road-plan-is-already-taking-shape/>

⁸ Lo Bobo, “Frontiers New and Old: Russia’s Policy in Central Asia”, *Russia / NIS Center*, 82, January 2015, 16

⁹ Pantucci, Raffaello, Qingzhen Chen in Godement, François, Agatha Kratz (Eds.), “‘One Belt, One Road’: China’s Great Leap Outward”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2015, p. 10, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_analysis_belt_road.pdf

Ukrainian crisis in 2014, Russia became increasingly enthusiastic in participating in China-driven cooperation initiatives. The agreement of May 8th 2015 presented a high point for this shift. Noticeably, “the question of a free trade agreement with China, which is a problem for both Russia and Central Asian states given their high protectionism, was declared a distant goal and effectively put off for the future” at the time of the agreement.¹⁰ Instead, the new approach was characterized by a visible shift toward greater use of multilateral financial institutions.

One year later the EAEU-BRI “coordination agreement” demonstrated no visible signs of progress in the official circles in both Russia and China and was barely mentioned at the EAUE summit in Astana in May 2016.¹¹ The potential effects of EAEU-BRI coordination on regional cooperation in Central Asia appeared even less promising. At a forum designated to establish potential areas for cooperation between the two multilateral initiatives, held by China Academy of Social Sciences, among approximately twenty papers, only one addressed potential projects in Central Asia. It was delivered by the participant from Kazakhstan, the only speaker not from Russia or China. The remainder proposed Sino-Russian bilateral projects in a wide array of sectors, ranging from fishing in the Pacific to cooperation in the aerospace industry.¹²

The focus on a Sino-Russian dimension under the auspices of regional cooperation in a multilateral setting is not a novel phenomenon. According to one Central Asian academic citing a former Secretary General of the SCO, “at the organization’s meetings all the Central Asian leaders are looking at Xi and Putin, and waiting to hear what they have to say.”¹³ While consensus between Russia and China did not necessarily have positive effects on regional cooperation in Central Asia, the discord between the two major powers provided comparably inadequate results. In that context, the direction of the Sino-Russian axis of the SCO had a noticeable influence on the shape and formation of the multilateral financial institutions tied to the region; these are addressed in the second section of the chapter. The new financial institutions initiated by China were designated to assume the role of regional cooperation drivers. Noticeably, there is a visible continuity in the nature of Sino-Russian relations and its impact on the capacity of the new multilateral lenders. The third section discusses how this trend, along with the ambiguity in China’s strategic direction for cooperation appeared to diminish new lenders ability to select and finance projects conducive for regionalization of Central Asia.

SCO-based initiatives

The SCO Interbank Association – slow steps in the cooperative direction

The development of financial institutions in the framework of the SCO was a continuous process from the early years of the organization, but it delivered variable results. The discussion initiated in 2004 regarding the establishment of the SCO Development Fund faced major

¹⁰ Gabuev, Alexander, “Eurasian Silk Road Union: Towards a Russia-China consensus?” *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-a-russia-china-consensus/>

¹¹ Gabuev, Alexander, “Friends with benefits? Russian – Chinese relations after the Ukraine crisis”, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 29, 2016, http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis/j2m2?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWmpFek1UVTBVNEptTXpobCIsInQiOiJKdmRUTDI3OWxnZnNYdWVKTXJ4UG5ya3VGMVEEdXBkeW9nK3NicGtEaDJOS29CR3JCODVTNzBLC3pDYzhMTk5WeEYyVzd2anM3WXdhQlBDSGZaeDBOM0FrR3hUQ25oZkFwVlwwVlRpYmM5KzA9In0%3D

¹² “Connecting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union”, Conference Papers, *China Academy of Social Sciences*, Beijing, November 16, 2016

¹³ Author’s Interview, Bishkek, January 21, 2016

divergence in views of the member states. Therefore, it was agreed that the creation of financial institutions would be conducted in two directions: first, through continuous discussion about the form of the development fund itself, and second, through the establishment of the “banking pool”, which was transformed into the SCO Interbank Association.¹⁴ Launched in 2005, the Association consisted of the major lending institutions of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁵ RSK Bank of Kyrgyzstan joined the following year, and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) became a partner institution from 2008.¹⁶ In 2007, the Association signed a cooperation agreement with the SCO Business Council, a non-governmental forum of business representatives from the SCO member states.¹⁷ The ambitious document proposed the creation of a single database of projects recommended for joint investments, exchange of business proposals, coordination of efforts toward accurate information coverage of the economic interactions between the SCO members, and multilateral cooperation in training economists.¹⁸

The same year the member banks signed a “Protocol on cooperation of Interbank Association SCO member banks on selection, expertise and realization of investment projects.”¹⁹ Officially, this agreement is considered by the SCO and national banks to be an important step in facilitating financing of projects in the territories of the member states.²⁰ The protocol is not publicly available. Several SCO officials admitted to not being familiar with the document, and implied that it played little role in both the way the member banks interacted and in the SCO’s general approach towards regional development.²¹ It was suggested by one Chinese expert that the document had been designed for purely internal reference, and its unobtainability suggests the ambiguous nature of the criteria for selecting the projects.²² Six years later, during the SCO summit in Bishkek, the grouping signed an additional document emphasizing promotion of a multilateral mechanism for the project-selecting process,²³ which highlighted the weakness of the Association’s members’ capacity to act collectively in their decision-making.

¹⁴ “Mezhsbankovskoye ob’yedineniye v ramkah SHOS (Spravochniy material)” [“Interbank association under the framework of the SCO (Reference material)”], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation Website*, October 7thm 2014, http://www.mid.ru/sanhajskaa-organizacia-sotrudnicestva-sos/-/asset_publisher/0vP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/939476

¹⁵ Mezhsbankovskoye Ob’yedineniye SHOS [SCO Interbank Association], *The SCO website*, July 11, 2013, <http://www.sectSCO.org/RU123/show.asp?id=643>, accessed on April 23, 2015

¹⁶ The participating institutions are the following: Bank of Kazakhstan Development JSC, State Development Bank of China (CDB), RSK Bank OJSC, Bank of Development and Foreign Economic Affairs State Corporation (Vnesheconombank), Amonatbank State Savings Bank of the Republic of Tajikistan, and National Bank for Foreign Economic Activity of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

“Coordinators of the SCO Interbank Association Member Banks Discussed Burning Issues”, *Info SCO. Website of the SCO Business Council*, June 5, 2009, <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=4346>

¹⁷ SCO Business Council Website, www.biz.infoshos.ru, accessed on April 23, 2015

¹⁸ Mezhsbankovskoye ob’yedineniye...” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF*

¹⁹ “Mezhsbankovskoye Ob’yedineniye SHOS” [“SCO Interbank Association”], *SCO Business Council Website*, <http://infosco.biz/ru/?pageId=240>, accessed on April 22, 2015

²⁰ “O soveshanii koordinatov bankov-chlenov Mezhsbankovskogo ob’yedineniya v ramkah Shanhaikoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva” [“About the meeting of coordinators member-banks of Interbank Association under the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization”], *Vnesheconombank Website*, July 05, 2007 http://www.veb.ru/press/news/index.php?id_19=3458&filter_year_19=2007&from_19=6

²¹ Author’s interviews: Bishkek, January 22, 2016; Beijing, June 1, 2016

²² Author’s interviews, Beijing, October 28, 2015

²³ “Mezhsbankovskoye ob’yedineniye...” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF*

The lack of clear direction regarding the nature of the projects, as well as the absence of an institutional framework for financing, resulted in investments in a wide array of sectors. However, as of 2015, the projects financed in the framework of the SCO Interbank Association did not cause visible impact on the regional connectivity of Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, for instance, the four projects financed in the framework of the Association were significant for the economy of Kazakhstan and included a chemical plant, a hydro power station, an oil refinery complex, and an expansion of the Caspian Sea port of Aktau.²⁴ Without diminishing the projects' importance for Kazakhstan, they did not directly contribute to the enhanced connectivity between Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors. Although indirect links are possible to be overlooked, there is little evidence that these projects would somehow facilitate cooperation on any level between individuals or organizations of Kazakhstan and those of its Central Asian neighbors. The last project has the potential to provide better access from Kazakhstan to Russia and the South Caucasus, highlighting Kazakhstan's outward looking direction toward regional cooperation. The projects financed under the framework of the Association in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were generally in the agricultural and small-medium business sectors, and played a similarly insignificant role for regional cooperation.²⁵

One noticeable exception was the construction of a section of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway.²⁶ Nevertheless, while listed under the projects financed under the framework of the SCO Interbank Association, the road section was unilaterally funded by the China Development Bank (CDB).²⁷ The CDB also agreed separately with Kyrgyzstan RSK Bank and with Tajikistan GSB Amonotbank to conduct transactions in the Chinese national currency, RMB.²⁸ These steps mirrored China's individual attempts to introduce Chinese Union Pay payment system in Central Asian states.²⁹ According to the Russian MFA, most of the projects selected in the framework of the SCO Interbank Association were realized on a bilateral basis.³⁰ Additionally, the wide ranging character of completed initiatives highlights the absence of shared goals in the Association.

The grouping is often described as a forum of largely consultative nature which offers networking opportunities for major national banks in the pursuit of their interests.³¹ In that regard, under the framework of the Association, in 2010 Chinese and Russian member banks had a productive year. Russian Vneshekonombank staff interned in the China Development Bank, and later that year Vneshekonombank hosted Kyrgyz and Kazakh bankers at an experience sharing conference; and at the end of the year, the CDB held a workshop in Urumqi in western China attended by the Association's member banks.³² This networking trend underlines the key feature of Central Asian regional cooperation: top-down regionalism takes precedence over the

²⁴ Raev, T., "BRK profinansiroval v ramkah vzaimodeistviya stran SHOS proekty na 900 mln dollarov SSHA" ["BRK financed under the framework of interaction of the SCO countries projects for 900 mil USD", *Delovoy Kazakhstan [Business Kazakhstan]*, 33, 430, September 12, 2014, <http://www.afk.kz/index.php/ru/bankovskiy-sektor/11191-2014-09-15-16-35-18>

²⁵ "Mezhsobremennyye ob'yedineniya..." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF*

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Author's interview, Kyrgyzstan National Bank, Bishkek, January 27, 2016

³⁰ "Mezhsobremennyye ob'yedineniya..." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF*

³¹ Author's interviews: Bishkek, January 22, 2016, Beijing, June 1, 2016

³² "Mezhsobremennyye ob'yedineniya..." *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF*

development of bottom-up regionalization. In other words, cooperation among the elites develops more efficiently than the conditions for regional connectivity conducive for interaction of people on the ground.

The Interbank Association is a step towards regional cooperation in two ways. First, it suggests a certain, even though limited, degree of cooperation in the financial field among the SCO member states. Second, it is technically designed to finance infrastructure projects, which are crucial for the enhancement of regional connectivity. However, its uneven pace of development, largely localized nature of the financed projects, and focus on bilateral interactions suggest that it has a limited utility for facilitating regional cooperation, and visibly not as much potential as would be possessed by the SCO Development Bank.

SCO Development Bank – failed compromise

According to a Carnegie-Moscow research center expert on Sino-Russian relations, Alexander Gabuev, “nothing, perhaps, illustrates the differences between Moscow and Beijing better than discussions over the creation of an SCO Development Bank.”³³ The SCO Development Bank, publicly promoted and approved by all the SCO member states, would have the potential to become a strong multilateral lending mechanism within the specific area of operation and would logically contribute towards regionalization of Central Asia. The lending mechanism of the SCO was suggested by China in 2009 after the global financial crisis, and the proposal to create the SCO Development Bank was made public in November 2010.³⁴ The project was promoted by Chen Yuan, at the time the Chairman of China Development Bank (CDB);³⁵ he was also the first Chairman of the SCO Interbank Association. Tellingly, Chen Yuan wished to head the bank after his resignation from the CDB.³⁶ Considering Chen Yuan’s background as a leading Chinese economist and his dominant role at the CDB – China’s, arguably, most powerful economic mechanism in the developing world³⁷ – the promotion of the SCO Development Bank was supported by Beijing. Moreover, Chinese lending in Central Asia lagged behind compared to other parts of the world, such as Africa and South America. For instance, as recently as 2009, China financed only one project in Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian economy. The project accounted for only 100 million US dollars, compared to 13-15 billion China would invest in Kazakhstan by 2015.³⁸ By 2009, however, China had already developed enhanced interest in Central Asia. In summary, China had both the political will and economic and geopolitical motivations to develop a lending mechanism designed specifically for Central Asia and capable to promote China’s engagement there.

The rest of the SCO states initially supported the idea of the common financial institution. Despite the existence of the SCO Interbank Association, all the financial transactions

³³ Gabuev, Alexander, “Taming the Dragon: How Can Russia Benefit from China’s Financial Ambitions in the SCO?” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 19, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/03/19/taming-dragon-how-can-russia-benefit-from-china-s-financial-ambitions-in-sco-pub-59445>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Sanderson, Henry, Michael Forsythe, *China’s Superbank. Debt, Oil and Influence – How China Development Bank Is Rewriting the Rules of Finance* (2013) Singapore: John Wiley and Sons

³⁸ Gabuev, “Taming the dragon”

had to be conducted through the SCO Secretariat in Beijing.³⁹ This meant that all the transactions, such as financing of shared projects and funding of various SCO structures, had to be conducted through China. The support of the SCO Development Bank was expressed by the leadership of other “larger” members of the SCO. Officially, Kazakhstan proposed the development of the SCO development bank or fund in 2011, and Russia voiced its support for such institutions in 2012.⁴⁰ The smaller states were also interested in a multilateral lender which would enable them to borrow on more favorable conditions rather than on the terms directed by Chinese banks, not controlled by any international legal obligations.⁴¹ However, despite shared interest to create the SCO Development Bank, the institution had not materialized as of 2015 because of the divergent visions of Russia and China regarding its structure.

China proposed to start the SCO Development Bank with 10 billion USD capital, where the shares of the contributions from each member state would be proportionate to the sizes of their respective GDP's.⁴² In 2013, considering the size of the Chinese economy (9.24 trillion USD) compared to the economies of the rest of the members (2.4 trillion USD, of which 2 trillion accounted for Russia) Beijing would have 80 percent of votes in the SCO Development Bank under the proposed scheme; plus the bank would be based in China.⁴³ However, Russia did not accept the proposal, which would allow China to maintain most of the decision-making power in the institution.

Instead, Russia suggested transforming the existing Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), with its \$7 billion capital, into the SCO Development Bank.⁴⁴ China was invited to acquire a share in the EDB. The EDB was established in 2006 and dominated by Russia and Kazakhstan with each controlling nearly 66 percent and 33 percent of shares respectively; in 2015 it was chaired by a Russian official and headquartered in Kazakhstan's business capital Almaty.⁴⁵ Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Belarus, which joined EDB later, together held just over one percent of shares. According to Gabuev, Russia's move was based on the following two factors.

First, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the presidential administration, and the government [believed] that in this way they [could] effectively contain China's credit expansion in Central Asia, which [might] otherwise undermine Russia's position. Another important player, the Russian Ministry of Finance, [did not] want to reserve funds for a project which it [considered] political.⁴⁶

In 2014, China rejected the proposal. The rejection was formally based on the fact that

³⁹ “Bank razvitiya SHOS pomozhet reshit' problem finansirovaniya” [“SCO Development Bank will help solve the problem of financing”] *finam.info*, December 05, 2012, accessed April 20, 2015

⁴⁰ “U SHOS poyavit'sya svoy bank rasvitiya” [“SCO will have its own Development Bank”], *RBK News*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.rbc.ru/economics/05/12/2012/570400889a7947fcbd443379>, accessed April 20, 2015

⁴¹ Author's interview, Bishkek, January 21, 2016

⁴² Gabuev, Aleksandr, Konstantinov, Aleksandr, “SHOS poluchit raschet v yuanyah, Kitay ukreplyayet liderstvo v organizatsii” [“SCO will receive payments in yuan, China strengthens its position in the organization”], *Kommersant*, December 16, 2014, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2634265>

⁴³ Gabuev, “Taming the Dragon”

⁴⁴ “Idea of transforming Eurasian Development Bank into SCO Bank stalls”, *Sputniknews*, March 29, 2015, <http://in.sputniknews.com/world/20150329/1013919627.html>

⁴⁵ Bank Profile, *Eurasian Development Bank Website*, <https://eabr.org/en/about/>, accessed on March 2, 2015

⁴⁶ Gabuev, “Taming the Dragon”

the other members of the EDB, Belarus and Armenia were not SCO members.⁴⁷ The decision could be related to the fact that Russia would retain the blocking share of the votes in the organization. However, according to one Chinese expert, Beijing decision makers “just didn’t feel it was worth the effort to jump-start the lending initiative with *only* 10 billion USD capital.”⁴⁸ In the end of 2014, China would establish the Silk Road Fund and a year later the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with respective capital bases of 40 and 50 billion USD. However, as will be argued in the third section of the chapter, the Silk Road Fund and the AIIB are organizations of a different nature, which cannot completely replace the SCO Development Bank. Both have questionable capacity to contribute towards regional connectivity. Generally, failure to generate a region-specific development bank under the auspices of the SCO presented a serious impediment for the regionalization of Central Asia.

Consistent with its multi-vectoring policy, Kazakhstan formally remained neutral to the outcome of Sino-Russian disagreement on the nature of the regional development bank.⁴⁹ However, the head of a Kazakhstan government-affiliated policy think tank was cited saying “‘Chinese and Russian jealousy’ had hindered integration within the SCO space. That energy [...] should be turned toward collaboration.”⁵⁰ Officials from the other Central Asian states voiced quiet discontent over Russia’s reluctance to reach the deal with its largest SCO partner.⁵¹ Evidently, smaller SCO members viewed the establishment of the SCO Development Bank as a necessary step for the enhancement of regional connectivity. This step was halted because of the divergence of Chinese and Russian interests. This trend in Sino-Russian relations in the institutional setting, and its potential effects on regional cooperation in Central Asia are further demonstrated in the context of another SCO initiative, the SCO Finance Banking Association.

The SCO Finance Banking Association – “SCO” only in name

While the Interbank Association was a relatively multilateral project, the SCO Finance Banking Association (SCO FBA) was a Russia-driven project initiated in the fall of 2013. Similar to the SCO Interbank Association, its official aims included facilitating economic cooperation, improving a market for private investment for small and medium size businesses, and financing infrastructure and manufacturing projects in the SCO member states.⁵² Furthermore, the development strategy of the FBA included a number of far-reaching objectives revolving around extensive cooperation in finance and banking, implementation of standardized financial mechanisms and payment system, and achievement of mutual convertibility of the member states’ currencies among other goals.⁵³ Additionally, in contrast to the Interbank Association, which consists of only one major state-affiliated bank from each SCO member, the FBA was more inclusive. It was established by several international organizations and national

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Author’s interview, Beijing, December 30, 2015

⁴⁹ Gabuev, “Taming the Dragon”

⁵⁰ Rickleton, Chris, “Russia and China talk past each other at SCO pow-wow”, *Eurasianet.org*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68756>

⁵¹ Gabuev, Kontstatinov “SCO will receive...”
“Idea of transforming...”

⁵² “Noviye gorizonty” [“New Horizons”], Interview with the Chairman of the Coordination Union of the FBA SCO Alexander Murychev, *FBA SCO Website*, 2014, n.d. <http://www.fbacs.ru/?p=1168>, accessed on April 7, 2015

⁵³ “Sratégiya razvitiya FBA SHOS” [“Strategy of Development of FBA SCO”], *FBA SCO Website*, <http://www.fbacs.com/?p=729>, accessed April 12, 2015

entities, and included more than 40 members and partners such as “banking associations of Russia, CIS, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as banks and commercial enterprises of Uzbekistan, China, Kazakhstan, Slovenia, Romania and Russia.”⁵⁴

This inclusivity resulted in a twofold effect on the functionality of the association. Admittedly, larger participation could imply enhanced potential for cooperation, more resources and greater expertise for sharing. Yet, initiated, under the SCO framework, the association expanded outside of the SCO borders, which took attention away from the SCO member states. By 2015 the FBA SCO had a list of approximately two dozen potential projects. Most of the projects, though, aimed to finance individual enterprises in individual states and involved mainly chemical industry, agriculture and mineral resources development⁵⁵ – the sectors of largely national, rather than regional, importance.

The few international logistical projects with the potential to facilitate the cross-border activities were between Russia and China. One mobile communication project in Kyrgyzstan might have had a positive effect on regional connectivity within Central Asia, but appeared to be largely of national importance.⁵⁶ The international investment project termed “Eurasian Economic Belt of the Silk Road” revolved around the activities of the massive international consortium CHEMICO-group,⁵⁷ which is a multinational corporation operating under regular profit-seeking motives with little indication of focused development of regional connectivity.⁵⁸ The investment project was planned for the period until 2025 and was only vaguely defined by 2015. The pilot projects were supposed to be launched in different industries, but were all located in Russia. Additionally, the several directions of this, so-called, “Eurasian Economic Belt of the Silk Road” defined on the FBA SCO website included connecting Europe with China and South East Asia through Russia and Russian Far East. One of the schemes involving high technology projects projected connecting Europe, Russia, China and South East Asia in Israel.⁵⁹ However, even the more recent and detailed official description of the “Eurasian Economic Belt of the Silk Road” made no mention of Central Asia or any of the Central Asian states.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Berezovskiy, Oleg (General Director of the FBA SCO), “*Đavayte zhit’ horosho v ‘plohiye vremena’*” [“Let’s live well during ‘bad times’”], *InfoSHOS. Information Journal of the SCO*, 8, June 2015, p.30, available at http://www.fbacs.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/SCO_8-4-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0.pdf, accessed March 22, 2015

Founding members of the FBA were the Association of regional banks of Russia, SCO Business Council, Financial Corporation of Congress of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (It includes a number of former Soviet States and states from the former Soviet bloc, as well as China), Association of Banks of Tajikistan, Association of Financiers of Kazakhstan, Association of Banks of Kazakhstan and Finance Banking Council of CIS)

⁵⁵ “Programniye Proekty” [“Program projects”], *FBA SCO Website*, <http://www.fbacs.com/?cat=66>, accessed April 15, 2015

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

⁵⁷ “Programniye Proekty” [“Program projects”], *FBA SCO Website*, <http://www.fbacs.com/?cat=66>, accessed April 15, 2015

⁵⁸ *CHEMICO group website*, http://www.chemico-group.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=103&Itemid=44, accessed April 12, 2015

⁵⁹ “Mezhdunarodniy investitsionniy proekt Yevraziyskiy ekonomicheskii poyas Velikogo Shelkovogo puti’ na period do 2025 goda” [“international investment project ‘Eurasian Economic belt of Great Silk road’ for the period until year 2025”], *FBA SCO Website*, <http://www.fbacs.com/?p=2557>, accessed on April 22, 2015

⁶⁰ “Mezhdunarodniy investitsionniy proekt Yevraziyskiy ekonomicheskii poyas Velikogo Shelkovogo puti’ na period do 2025 goda” [“International investment project ‘Eurasian Economic belt of Great Silk road’ for the period until

Furthermore, despite extensive membership, a disproportionately high number of projects were positioned in Russia. While these could technically involve suppliers and other types of business associates from various Central Asian states, there was no direct evidence of a specific trend that they would. The FBA seemed to be led by Russia, and was closely tied to Russia-dominated organizations, particularly the CIS. The Chairman of the Coordination Council, the executive body of the FBA SCO, Alexander Murychev, was also the chairman of the International Interstate Council of the CIS member states.⁶¹ One of the founding member-organizations was the affiliate of the Congress for Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, the organization which revolved mainly around former Soviet republics and states which had been under the Soviet sphere of influence. The legal basis of the FBA, in addition to the FBA Charter, was the Constitution of the Russian Federation along with several other Russia-based legal codices.⁶² While there were disproportionately high numbers of Russian enterprises in the association, China was only represented in the partner of the FBA SCO – the SCO Business Council.

All this suggests that Russia's concerns would have priority in the organization. If that is the case, far-reaching ambitions of the association may take a long time to come to fruition if they somehow interfere with Russia's interests. Similarly, lack of Chinese engagement would deter Chinese investment through the framework of the FBA. Noticeably, at some point between the summer of 2015, when the research on the FBA SCO was conducted, and fall 2017, the organization changed its name to *Finance-Banking Association of Eurasian Cooperation*.⁶³ The new title, updated on the association's website, more accurately reflected the nature of the initiative launched under the auspices of the SCO, but transformed into one of the mechanisms used by Russia to promote its economic interests in its near-abroad.

Intermediate conclusion

The one financial institution under the framework of the SCO, with the potential to play a significant role for regionalization of Central Asia – the SCO Development Bank – was not launched for almost two decades from the formation of the Shanghai-originated initiative. This delay was caused by the disagreement between the two major powers regarding its nature. Conclusively, Sino-Russian divergence in interests prevented the flow of capital for intraregional projects in Central Asia, which subsequently deferred the regionalization of Central Asia.

Another multilateral financial initiative, the SCO Interbank Association, was slow to develop; once it became functional, the projects funded under its framework contributed little to regional connectivity. The Financial Banking Association created in 2013 was designed to mainly serve the interests of Russian commercial enterprises, rather than fulfill the role of a regional development lender. Moreover, despite the differences in the institutional structure, i.e. exclusivity of the Interbank Association and inclusivity of the FBA SCO, the two organizations may be duplicating their efforts as both, to a large extent, function as consultative forums. While they have capacity to contribute toward industrial and commercial development in the territories of the participating member states, the two had little to account for in terms of enhancing

year 2025"], <http://www.fbacs.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/1.Концепция-«Евразийский-экономический-пояс-Великого-Шелкового-пути»-на-период-до-2025-года.pdf>, accessed November 15, 2017

⁶¹ "Noviye gorizonty" ["New Horizons"]

⁶² "Srategiya razvitiya FBA SHOS" ["Strategy of development of FBA SCO"]

⁶³ "Finanansovo-bankovskata assotsiatsiya EvroAziatskogo sotrudnichestva" [Finance-banking association of Eurasian cooperation"], <http://www.fbacs.ru/>, accessed on November 15, 2017

connectivity between people and commercial organizations in the region and facilitating multilateral cooperation between Central Asian states.

Yet, the SCO seems to be the most suitable mechanism for developing regional cooperation in post-Soviet Central Asia as the unique international institution which was based around that particular region, at least until the planned expansion of the organization in 2016.⁶⁴ According to Naarajarvi, both China and Russia are crucial for the SCO to work and while the two of them have the power to move the SCO forward, they can also limit the capacity of the SCO, which would, in turn, limit the regionalization of Central Asia.⁶⁵ The geographic boundaries of the SCO would provide certain focus for investments originated from the SCO bank and other SCO-bound financial institutions. However, the lack of consensus between the two major powers impedes the creation and functioning of effective multilateral investment bodies.

The distrust between the two largest partners is not necessarily driven by security considerations. Interest-seeking nature of the two major powers engagement in Central Asia is driven by their aspiration to enhance their spheres of influence in their respective neighborhoods. Nevertheless, in the case of the SCO-based financial institutions, it was mainly Russia's efforts to maximize its relative gains in the region that escalated distrust and subsequent dissonance in the process of creating functional multilateral lenders. The Central Asian states, with their desire for a regional development bank, had little say in the matter and were subsequently left disappointed. However, the diplomatic nature of the SCO ensured they were not placed in the position to choose between the two powers. Also noticeably, China's attempt to facilitate regional cooperation in Central Asia through multilateral financial cooperation was halted in this case by Russia's distrust rather than Central Asian states' apprehension of China's expanding sphere of influence. For China, however, it was not a major setback. Failure to launch the SCO Development Bank coincided with the emergence of China's novel approach towards cooperation in a broader region, One Belt One Road Initiative, which intended to include Central Asia. To support this new approach, China initiated new lending institutions, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road fund. Considering the fast pace of their institutionalization and massive influx of capital, which only China could afford, they appeared to be more suitable to promote projects designed to enhance regional connectivity. The following section discusses the potential role of these institutions in the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

New institutions and 'New Silk Road'

China's announcements of the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund occurred within a month of each other at the end of 2014.⁶⁶ The Chinese government pledged 50 billion and 40 billion US dollars respectively for these institutions. From the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund, \$16.3 billion has been allegedly designated for the development of infrastructure in post-Soviet Central Asia; however, the specific projects had not been announced by the end of 2015.⁶⁷ Both financial bodies were intended to support China's

⁶⁴ India and Pakistan actually joined the organization in June 2017

⁶⁵ Naarajarvi, Teemu, "China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Blessing or Curse for New Regionalism in Central Asia?" *Asia Europe Journal*, 10, (2012), 113-126

⁶⁶ "China to establish \$40 billion Silk Road infrastructure fund", *Reuters.com*, November 8, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/08/us-china-diplomacy-idUSKBN0ISOBQ20141108>

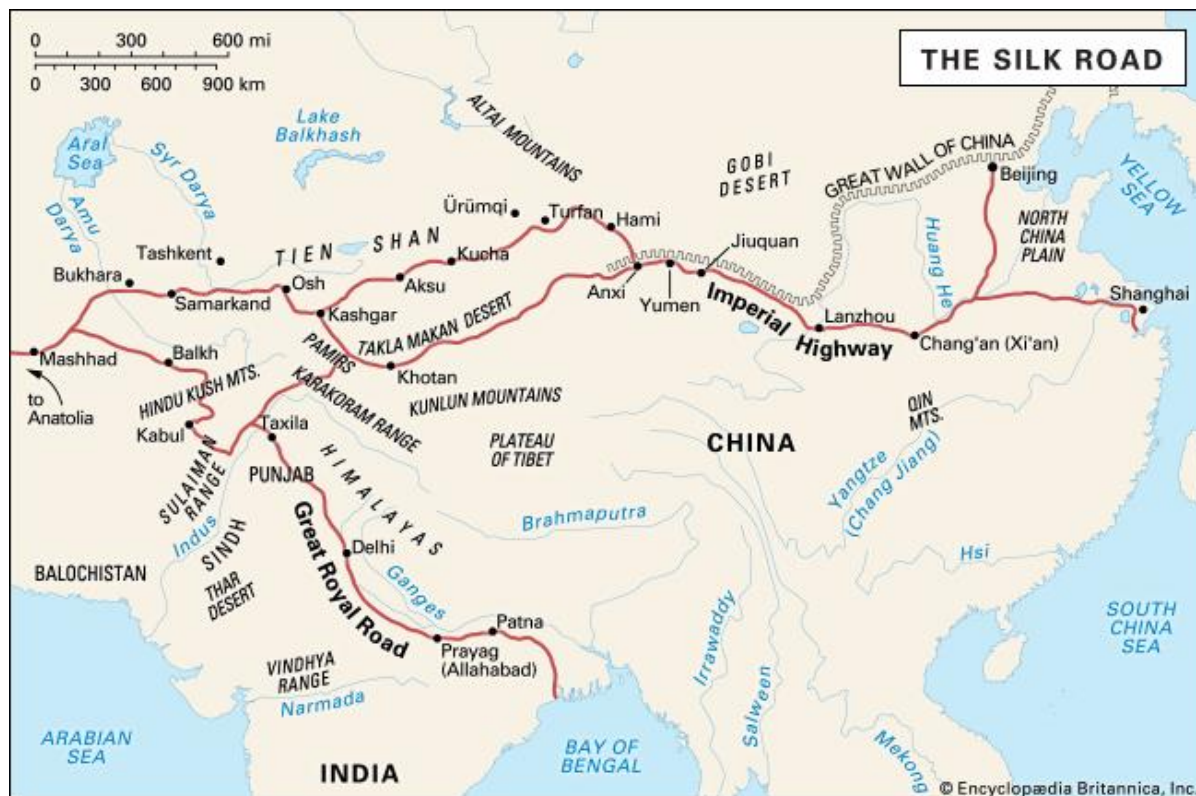
⁶⁷ Michel, Casey, "China Edging Russia out of Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/china-edging-russia-out-of-central-asia/>

as cooperation platforms.⁷⁰

The ‘centrality’ of post-Soviet Central Asia’s role in the whole initiative is partly positioned in the popular mystical perception of the caravans crossing the sand dunes in the mysterious lands lying between ancient China and Europe.

The main network of the ancient “Silk Road” routes ran from central China, split close to the geographic center of Eurasia to bypass the Taklimakan desert north and south, and merged in Kashgar, the westernmost major city of modern China. The set of routes continued westward through ancient the kingdoms of Kokand, Bukhara, Kiva and Merv, all geographically located in what is now post-Soviet Central Asia. Somewhere near Kashgar a branch of the network traversed the Pamir Mountains to reach the Indian subcontinent, while other sections passed through the territory of modern day Afghanistan and re-merged with the “main route” further west, near the ancient city of Mashhad in modern Iran. The network then continued through Persia, Middle East and, eventually, to Europe.

Map 2. Ancient Silk Road⁷¹



Not surprisingly, the perception of the “Silk Road” is closely associated with the concept of “Central Asia”. Therefore, the BRI initiative is often considered to be strongly connected to post-Soviet Central Asia.

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ “Silk Road Trade Route”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silk-Road-trade-route>, accessed November 1, 2017

The potential strength of the Silk Road Economic Belt for the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia is that the direction of the expansion of the economic hubs (Map 1) is projected to traverse *all* the Central Asian states. The outlined course of economic development passes through Fergana Valley, which had been the cultural and economic center of Central Asia for centuries. In the early days of the Soviet Union, the valley was delineated by administrative borders which often did not match ethnic or geographic boundaries. It is commonly believed that such strategy was implemented by Stalin to reduce the sentiments of national identities among ethnic groups of the region. Another logical explanation is that administrative borders between and within the new Soviet republics were drawn with economic considerations in mind. Grouping rural and urban areas together was essential to develop self-sufficiency of the republics and their smaller administrative-geographic units – *oblasti and rayony*.⁷²

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the administrative republican borders became the international ones, thus creating sizeable ethnic minorities in most of the Central Asian countries. Fergana Valley, where several Central Asian states interweave, is the area with, arguably, the greatest potential for transnational cooperation because of the pre-existing Soviet infrastructure and shared ethnic and linguistic identities among the groups now residing on the different sides of the interstate borders. Yet, after independence, the shapes of these borders caused frequent disagreements and even conflicts. The close nature of the borders also contributed toward economic difficulties in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

There are evident challenges faced by China in enhancing connectivity between Central Asian states in Fergana Valley and in other intertwined areas of Central Asia. According to one Chinese commentator “Chinese planners have frequently failed to consider local and regional politics, which has exposed projects to political risk both from local opposition parties and from competing powers.”⁷³ Additionally, according to a different Chinese commentator,

...should the Chinese government take on too much of the project, it would be at risk of repeating on an international scale the errors made in the development of China’s west. Despite massive infrastructure investment in the western regions of the country over the past 20 years, they have made little progress aside from the development driven by natural resource extraction.⁷⁴

Although the observation in the statement may be outdated, it partially demonstrates the initial character of China’s engagement in Central Asia, which, to a certain extent, remained relevant as time went on.

In addition to these apparent challenges, there are three less obvious factors, which suggest that close association of the BRI with the regional connectivity in Central Asia may be misleading. First, BRI is a much broader vision, under which the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia may take a peripheral role in China’s grand strategy of its engagement in Eurasia. Second, Russia’s economic position in Central Asia, and dissonance in Sino-Russian relations complicate matters for China. Third, the direction of the Silk Road

⁷² Morrison, Alexander, “Stalin’s giant pencil: debunking a myth about Central Asian borders”, *Eurasianet.org*, February 13, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/82376>

⁷³ Cohen, David in Godement, Francois, Agatha Kratz (Eds.), “‘One Belt, One Road’: China’s Great Leap Outward”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2015, 4. http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_analysis_belt_road.pdf

⁷⁴ Cohen, 5

Economic Belt under the BRI deviates from China's previous directions in development projects in Central Asia. These are discussed in detail below.

Wide scope and high ambitions

The scope of BRI itself is so far reaching that it may remove the development focus from Central Asia.

The "Renmin University" report says that the Silk Road projects will connect countries that represent 55 percent of world GNP, 70 percent of global population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves. China is to launch five years of strategic planning [in 2016], with implementation expected to begin in 2021. The report estimates that the Silk Road projects will be fully realized in about 35 years, in 2049, the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China.⁷⁵

According to Anbound, the Chinese think tank closely connected to the government, the BRI was extended from the original "New Silk Road" project which only concentrated on the west, and "this expansion is a mistake. [...] The diversification will cause China's (limited) resources to be wastefully dispersed over too large a field."⁷⁶ In the multilateral context, the China-initiated AIIB was designated as a special mechanism to support the BRI initiative. Nevertheless, the over-inclusiveness of the AIIB greatly expanded its areas of operation. By the end of 2017 the bank approved 21 projects in a wide range of sectors in the countries geographically dispersed between South East Asia and Northern Africa. Only two of these projects were in Central Asia – enhancement of a road and rehabilitation of a hydropower plant in Tajikistan.⁷⁷

The BRI is also criticized by Chinese commentators from the economic stand point because infrastructure investments provide low return.⁷⁸ The AIIB is modelled on other multilateral development banks. According to the Chinese government, the "[Silk Road] fund is modelled after the World Bank's investment arm, the International Finance Corporation, and maintains it is a for-profit entity rather than an aid agency."⁷⁹ Yet, since profitability of the BRI projects is in question, considering the pragmatism of the Chinese government, the initiative is designed to provide benefits other than pure economic gains. China's dominant position in the AIIB is clearly visible in its design.

China's voting share at the AIIB (28.7%) is substantially larger than that of the second-largest AIIB member nation, India (8.3%). This is the largest gap between the first-and second-largest shareholders at any existing [multilateral development bank]. The AIIB has a governance structure similar to other [multilateral development banks], with two key differences: (1) it does not have a resident board of executive directors that represents

⁷⁵ Cohen, 4

⁷⁶ Kratz, Agatha in Godement, Francois, Agatha Kratz (Eds.), "'One Belt, One Road': China's Great Leap Outward", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 2015, p. 10

⁷⁷ Approved Projects, *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Website*, (n.d), <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/>, accessed December 5, 2017

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ren, Daniel, "China's Silk Road infrastructure fund explores investment exit strategies", *South China Morning Post*, June 28, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/money-wealth/article/1828161/chinas-silk-road-infrastructure-fund-explores-investment>

member countries' interests on a day-to-day basis; and (2) the AIIB gives more decision-making authority to regional countries and the largest shareholder, China.⁸⁰

In the case of the Silk Road Fund, the type of donors and the percentages of their contributions suggest the political nature of the project. The main portion, 65 percent, was allocated by the State Council from foreign currency reserve. China Investment Corporation (government sovereign wealth fund), Exim Bank of China and China Development Bank (CDB) contributed 15, 15 and 5 percent respectively.⁸¹ The distribution of contributions committed to the Silk Road Fund suggests that the Chinese government intends to play the key role in the decision making process of the fund despite its formally commercial nature.

Until the mid-2010's most of the Chinese infrastructure development loans in Central Asia were distributed through the Exim Bank of China (China Exim).⁸² The China Development Bank (CDB) occupied a relatively minimal position, especially compared to its significant engagement in other parts of the world, particularly in Africa and South America.⁸³ This trend underlined the policy-driving designation of China Exim compared with the more commercial nature of the CDB. Yet, China Exim is still, to a certain extent, defined by the interests of its shareholders.⁸⁴ Therefore, the high percentage of contribution to the Silk Road Fund from China's foreign reserve, which is fully controlled by the government, highlights the Chinese government's intentions to dominate the nature of financial involvement in Asia.

The first project financed by the Silk Road Fund demonstrates the important role the institution plays in China's strategic engagement in the wider region. In April 2015, the Silk Road Fund announced 1.65 billion dollar financing of Karot Hydropower plant in Pakistan. The project is important for the development of a much larger initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a broad network connecting China's Xinjiang with Gwadar port in Pakistan.⁸⁵ However, as outlined by the BRI vision, the CPEC is technically neither a part of the Silk Road Economic Belt, nor of the Maritime Silk Road. An officially-issued document on BRI states that "the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor are closely related to the Belt and Road Initiative, and therefore require closer cooperation and greater progress."⁸⁶ The CPEC is seen as a separate initiative. Choosing the CPEC-related project to be the first one financed by the Silk Road Fund is consistent with China's global strategy of accessing the Indian Ocean, but it does not adhere to the BRI's formal vision. The Silk Road Fund also acquired a 10 percent stake in the Yamal liquid natural gas field

⁸⁰ Weiss, Martin A., "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank", *Congressional Research Service*, February 3, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44754.pdf>

⁸¹ Zhang, Yuzhe, "Gov't Said to Name Three to Silk Road Fund Leadership Team", *Caixin Online*, May 2, 2015, <http://english.caixin.com/2015-02-05/100781902.html>

⁸² Cooley, Alexander, "China's changing role in Central Asia and implications for US policy: From trading partner to collective goods provider", Prepared remarks for "Looking West: China and Central Asia", *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 18, 2015, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Cooley%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf

⁸³ Sanderson, Henry, Michael Forsythe, *China's Superbank. Debt, Oil and Influence – How China Development Bank Is Rewriting the Rules of Finance*, 2013, Singapore: John Wiley and Sons

⁸⁴ Wang, Liwei, "The real reason behind China's Silk Road Fund", *Market Watch*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-real-reason-behind-chinas-silk-road-fund-2014-11-10>

⁸⁵ "Commentary: Silk Road Fund's 1st investment makes China's words into practice", *Xinhua*, April 21, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/21/c_134170737.htm

⁸⁶ "Vision and Actions..."

in Russia's Arctic region and bought ten percent ownership of SIBUR – Russia's largest gas processing group.⁸⁷ Both enterprises are closely connected to the members of the inner circle of President Putin.⁸⁸ Visibly, the initial investment choices of the Silk Road Fund suggest that China's political and geopolitical considerations play a more significant role than the official rhetoric of connecting the region economically.

Sino-Russian dissonance

The BRI's potential in fostering regional cooperation in Central Asia may also be undermined by Russia's significant, even though diminishing, role in the economic sphere of the region. Within the broad focus of the BRI, China actively expressed its commitment to Central Asia, especially to its less developed countries. For instance, the Chinese government pledged 6 billion USD worth of infrastructure investments delivered by 2017 to Tajikistan,⁸⁹ which is in pressing need of proper infrastructure. The amount represented almost 70 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and 40 times its annual foreign direct investments.⁹⁰ Considering that total foreign direct investments in Tajikistan amounted to 209 million dollars in 2013⁹¹, the Chinese pledge would minimize all of them, including investments from Russia. Additionally, the least developed countries in the region Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan already have serious outstanding debt to China, which makes them even more reliant on the relationship with their powerful neighbor. By the end of 2014, Tajikistan owed approximately 880 million dollars, and Kyrgyzstan owed over one billion to Chinese state banks, which represented approximately 40 and 30 percent respectively of each of the two countries' total outstanding foreign debt.⁹²

At the same time, Russia's economic role in the poorer states of Central Asia cannot be underestimated, even though it has been declining following weakening of the Ruble and Russia's economic recession. "While at one point approximately half of Tajikistan's GDP came from remittances of migrant labor in Russia, the number has begun dropping – with officials estimating that the rate has fallen by as much as 20 percent [by the end of 2014]."⁹³ Other sources provide different estimates.⁹⁴ By the end of 2014 money transfers from Russia fell by 7.6 percent to Tajikistan, 5.1 percent to Kyrgyzstan and 15.5 percent to Uzbekistan.⁹⁵ However, the decline in remittances does not mean that Russian economic influence in Central Asia can be

⁸⁷ Chen, Jia, "China's \$40b Silk Road Fund signs MoU with Russian firms", *China Daily*, September 3, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-09/03/content_21785297.htm

"Silk Road Fund successfully closed the acquisition of a 10% stake in SIBUR", *SIBUR Website*, January 25, 2017, http://investors.sibur.com/investor-news/2017/jan/25-01-2017-srf.aspx?sc_lang=en

⁸⁸ Gabuev, Alexander, "Silk Road to nowhere", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 24, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/05/15/689763-shelkovii-put>

⁸⁹ Michel, Casey, "China Edging Russia out of Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/china-edging-russia-out-of-central-asia/>

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ "Tajikistan: Foreign Investment. FDI in Figures", *Santander Trade Portal*,

<https://en.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/tajikistan/investing-3>, accessed April 17, 2015

⁹² Rickleton, Chris, "Are Chinese Investors Ditching Kyrgyzstan for Tajikistan", *Eurasianet.org*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71696>

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ The exact amount of remittances is difficult to calculate because the estimates are often based on the amounts of total bank transfers from Russia to the Central Asian countries.

⁹⁵ Trilling, David, "Central Asia: The drop in remittances from Russia is bad. But how bad?" *Eurasianet.org*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72751>

dismissed. By March 2015 the remittances from Russia still totaled

the equivalent of 32 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, and 42 percent of Tajikistan's, according to the World Bank's [...] calculation. Over a million Tajikistanis, or roughly one-half of working-age males, [labored] in Russia, along with about the same number of Kyrgyzstan's citizens – approximately one-fifth of that country's population.⁹⁶

Russia's economic role in Central Asia may effect Chinese and Russian positions in the region. Kerr states that “the Central Asian reluctance to merge economic space with China is grounded in economic and sovereign interest – but also in awareness that the [EAEU] may be a more promising mechanism.”⁹⁷ One Chinese expert is quoted saying that “the unbalanced trade relations between China and Russia [...] will endanger resentment between the two powers, as well as regional countries stuck between the two.”⁹⁸ Another Chinese expert suggests that “the Russian-led Eurasian Union will divide the relevant countries along the route, leaving them torn between choosing to pursue stronger ties with Russia or with China.”⁹⁹ In that regard, despite Russia's economic difficulties and the rhetoric of shared interests with China in Central Asia, Russian officials continuously highlighted the notion that the economic future of Central Asia lied with Russia rather than China. In one noticeable instance the Russian General Secretary of the SCO, Dmitry Mizentsev, stated, “different forms of economic cooperation bring with them an element of competition. But that competition will be healthy. [...]The Eurasian Economic Union is a regional integration project. The Silk Road Economic Belt, as I understand, is not.”¹⁰⁰ The official head of the SCO, in which Russia and China are billed as equal partners, visibly expressed more faith in a largely exclusive grouping led by Russia rather than in a relatively open initiative led by China.

It is also worth noting that the seemingly competing nature of Russia and China's financial engagement in Central Asia is not always driven by the two major powers' divergent interests or geopolitical objectives in Central Asia. In turn, the lack of multilateral efforts to finance projects of regional significance may result from the absence of robust coordination mechanisms between the two major powers. Russia agreed to join China-initiated AIIB a year after it was invited to participate, and was one of the last among the founding members. This delay provides a vivid example of lack of coordination between the two powers in their dealings in Eurasia. Russia was invited to the AIIB in early 2014, but it only announced the decision to join in March 2015, after the UK and other western countries. One of the reasons for hesitation was Russia's wariness toward new China-lead multilateral initiatives. The BRI was perceived by Russian elites as an alternative, or a competitor, to Moscow-driven Eurasian integration projects.¹⁰¹ Russia's reluctance, however, was caused not only by geopolitical or economic

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Kerr, David, “Central Asian and Russian perspective on China's strategic emergence”, *International Affairs*, 86, 1, (2010), 147

⁹⁸ Pantucci, 13

⁹⁹ Kratz, 12

¹⁰⁰ Rickleton, Chris, “Russia and China talk past each other at the SCO pow-wow”, *Eurasianet.org*, June 25, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68756>

¹⁰¹ Terekhova, Alina, “Moskva distantsiruyetsya ot kutayskogo sholkovogo puti. Rossiya ne uchastvuyet v Aziatskom banke infrastrukturyh investitsiy, kuda voshli yeyo blizhaishiye sosedi” (“Moscow is distancing from Chinese project of new Silk road. Russia is not participating in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which was

considerations, but also by the lack of communication in diplomatic channels between Beijing and Moscow.¹⁰² Chinese officials communicated the offer to Russia to join the AIIB through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which in turn communicated the request to the Ministry of Finance.¹⁰³ Facing falling oil prices and western sanctions the Ministry of Finance refused the offer, unwilling to commit the funds to the Chinese initiative.¹⁰⁴ The question of joining the AIIB reached Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Shuvalov, one of the key people in Putin's administration, through outside sources, particularly Russian diplomats in Europe and Shuvalov's counterpart in Kazakhstan.¹⁰⁵ After realizing the advantages of the AIIB membership for Russia, the issue was presented to President Putin who made the decision to join the initiative.¹⁰⁶ The "nearly missed opportunity" demonstrates lack of communication between relevant agents in Chinese and Russian governing bodies. It also highlights the weakness of the communication function of the SCO, which is often praised for serving as an effective mechanism for exchanges among government elites of the participating member states. Overall, Sino-Russian dissonance, whether it is driven by geopolitical and economic considerations or by bureaucratic malfunctioning, has capacity to diminish the effectiveness of Chinese multilateral regionalization initiatives.

The ambiguous direction and incompatible strategy

A final set of factors suggests uncertainty in BRI's capacity to facilitate regionalization of Central Asia because China's proposals under the new initiative are often inconsistent with its previous commitments to the region. Specifically, the direction of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) outlined under the BRI does not match the directions of transportation routes constructed and enhanced by China in the context of the development of the Eurasian Land Bridge. These routes and their impact on regional connectivity are discussed in detail in the next chapter, but several examples demonstrate the difference between the design of the SREB and completed/ongoing projects that are a part of the Eurasian Land Bridge. For instance, even though the direction of the SREB passes through the heart of Russia, this route does not coincide with the already established Western China-Western Europe highway and China-Europe rail links, which traverse major sections of Kazakhstan. The outlined development path of the SREB covers only a small section of southern Kazakhstan, which is counterintuitive to China's previous designation of Kazakhstan as the main Central Asian transit route to Europe. Additionally, the outline of the SREB does not include the route through southern Kyrgyzstan actively sought by China through the construction of the Kashgar-Osh-Andijan railroad intended to connect Western China with Uzbekistan through southern Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the SREB's logistically illogical detour through Moscow (which was never a hub of the ancient Silk Road) on the way to Europe suggests the importance of including Russia in the initiative. However, the "loop" through Russia, after SREB has already reached Europe, actually makes it easy to jettison Russia from the initiative if it ever becomes necessary.

joined by its closest neighbors", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 20, 2015, http://www.ng.ru/economics/2015-01-20/4_china.html

¹⁰² Gabuev, Alexander, "Why did It take Russia so long to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank?", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 30, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=59554>

¹⁰³ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*

The discrepancy between the BRI vision and the nature of China's previous engagements in Central Asia suggests either a lack of consistency or a shift in China's strategy toward the region. For instance, while BRI's outlined vision suggests more inclusivity for *all* the Central Asian states, economic engagement in Kazakhstan remains a priority which was demonstrated by the signing of 23.6 billion dollars' worth of deals between the two countries in March 2015.¹⁰⁷ Most of these investments are in the industries not directly related to the development of infrastructure, such as "steel, non-ferrous metals, sheet glass, oil refining, hydropower and automobiles."¹⁰⁸ The package was not publicized as a part of the BRI. Furthermore, in May 2015, on his way to sign the agreement to integrate BRI with the EAUE discussed in the beginning of the chapter, Xi Jinping stopped in Astana.¹⁰⁹ The visit suggested the Chinese president's intention to reassure his Kazakhstani counterpart that the agreement to be signed between the two major powers without consulting fellow SCO members would not affect the nature of the relationship between China and Kazakhstan. "The bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and China have assumed an important strategic role with expanding commercial and strategic cooperation between the two countries, which was formalized through the establishment of an all-around strategic partnership in June 2011."¹¹⁰ In 2013, during Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan, a set of contracts worth 30 billion dollars was signed between the two states;¹¹¹ these were related to energy projects which were technically part of the infrastructure, but fit better in the portfolio of China's energy security objectives. Noticeably, a large percentage of the amount, over 30 percent, was designated for the development of modern technologies.¹¹²

On the same 2013 tour, 15 billion dollars' worth of mainly energy related projects were agreed on with Uzbekistan.¹¹³ Half a billion from that amount was allocated for the construction of the railway tunnel, which eventually enabled Uzbekistan railway system to bypass Tajikistan.¹¹⁴ Concurrently, China allocated approximately three billion dollars to be spent on mainly energy related projects in Kyrgyzstan, mostly for its transit function; this amount included 400 million designated for construction of a North-South highway in Kyrgyzstan, an important project for regional cooperation.¹¹⁵ China, apparently, has been diversifying the methods of engagements in its immediate neighborhood. This extensive diversity suggests lack of consistency in China's activities in Central Asia. However, it may also suggest a shift toward a strategy, under which China approaches regionalization of Central Asia in a new and different direction.

¹⁰⁷ Tiezzi, Shannon, "China, Kazakhstan Sign \$23 Billion in Deals", *The Diplomat*, March 28, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-kazakhstan-sign-23-billion-in-deals/>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview, Beijing, June 1, 2016

¹¹⁰ Mariani, Bernardo, "China's role and interests in Central Asia", *Safeworld*, October 2013

¹¹¹ Yakobashvili, Temuri, "A Chinese Marshal Plan for Central Asia?" *CASI Analyst*, October 16, 2013, <http://www.cacinalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12838-a-chinese-marshal-plam-for-central-asia?.html?tmpl=component&print=1>

¹¹² Jarosiewicz, Alexandra, "A Chinese tour de force in Central Asia", *Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich*, September 18, 2013, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-09-18/a-chinese-tour-de-force-central-asia>

¹¹³ Yakibashvili

¹¹⁴ Jarosiewicz

¹¹⁵ Ibid

One of the first projects approved by China-initiated AIIB was enhancement of the road between Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe and the border of Uzbekistan.¹¹⁶ The road would have a direct effect on the enhancement of the regional connectivity within Central Asia. Another project approved by the AIIB on the same day involved construction of a section of a highway connecting northern and southern Pakistan.¹¹⁷ The roadway is designed to facilitate connectivity between Central Asia and the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi.¹¹⁸ In fact, when Tajikistan and Pakistan projects are viewed in one context, they appear to fill some of the missing links in a network of roads connecting Central Asia with South Asia.

In the infrastructural networks (i.e. roads, railways, power lines, pipelines, telecommunication cables) traversing Central Asia and the wider region, Chinese engagement is often visible in directions which did not previously exist, such as the one mentioned – progressing from western China, through southern Central Asia to South Asia. Regional connectivity and the shape of the region depend on roads. China was building roads in Central Asia long before the development of its BRI initiative. Understanding where these roads lead and what functions they serve for Central Asian states is essential for understanding the effects of major powers engagement on Central Asian regionalism.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights the weakness of the SCO in creating a fully functional multilateral financial institution with the focus on Central Asia. The SCO's inability to create robust lending mechanisms resulted from the differences between dominant members China and Russia. The "new" financial institutions, the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund were designated to support the BRI – a broad and not clearly defined initiative, which was not designed to directly facilitate the development of regional cooperation in post-Soviet Central Asia. Despite the rhetoric of cooperation, Sino-Russian relations did not have a distinctly positive effect on the development of the BRI, particularly due to their competing economic interests in Central Asia. In that sense, there is a continuous trend in the way Sino-Russian relations, particularly their competing interests, effect the degree of regionalization of post-Soviet Central Asia.

Distrust between the two major powers and their pursuit of relative gains, highlight the neorealist nature of their engagement in Central Asia. The "personalist" nature of the relationships between Chinese and Russian presidents and among the regional leaders supports the departure from structural realism, and emphasizes the high role of individual decision makers in the interstate relations. The view is consistent with the Omnibalancing approach, which highlights the smaller states' leaders' concerns of choosing between Russia and China in order to attain economic gains essential for their regimes stability. Russia's engagement with the participants and potential members of the Eurasian integration initiative appeared to undercut Chinese regionalization efforts in Central Asia. Chinese material capabilities have not been sufficient to reconstruct interests of the Central Asian states to choose China as the main provider of economic stability.

Additionally, China's overall geopolitical objectives and different levels of commitment

¹¹⁶ Approved Projects, *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Website*, (n.d), <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/>, accessed December 5, 2017

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Pakistan: National motorway M-5 project. Project description. *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Website*, (n.d), <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/approved/2016/pakistan-national-motorway.html>, accessed December 5, 2017

to individual partners in the region drive the focus away from developing regional cooperation within Central Asia. China's policy toward Central Asia does not appear to be clearly defined, which results in China's efforts being spread in different directions. However, this ambiguity in China's engagement in Central Asia can be explained by Chinese approach to strategy development. As explained by one academic closely affiliated to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "in China a leader sets a *vision*, and it is up to the subordinates to find a way to implement this vision. The vague scope of the BRI is an example of just that."¹¹⁹ The BRI in its initial stage was defined no more clearly than the SCO at the early years of the Shanghai Five.¹²⁰ Xi Jinping's approach to the BRI is similar to Deng Xiaoping's approach toward his Reform and Opening Policy – "crossing the river by touching the stones."¹²¹

To exploit this analogy further, China's initial engagement in the post-Soviet Central Asia started by touching and turning the stones, leveling them out, and pouring tar and asphalt over them – that is by building roads. Development of transportation infrastructure is often viewed as the least controversial aspect of engagement of external actors'. Nevertheless, the directions of the transportation channels often carry political meanings, providing connectivity between the states and facilitating or limiting transnational movements. In that sense, transportation infrastructure plays a crucial role in defining the shape of the region and the extent of regional cohesion. As an heir to the Soviet Union, which built most of the modern transportation infrastructure in Central Asia, Russia had played a crucial part in shaping Central Asia as a region. China has now assumed the function of the major road builder in the region in the post-Soviet years. Both played important roles in promoting or limiting multilateral transportation initiatives in Eurasia. Therefore, an evaluation of China's and Russia's engagement in the transportation sector is a crucial step for answering the question of how the nature of their engagement affects regional cooperation in Central Asia. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

¹¹⁹ Author's interview, Beijing, June 15, 2017

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid

Chapter Five

Not all roads lead to Moscow: transportation routes and their twofold effect on regional cooperation in Central Asia

Each of the five Central Asian states borders at least two others. However, sharing borders does not always entail regional cooperation. According to the New Regionalism framework discussed in Chapter Three, after geographic proximity, the second most essential dimension for assessing the degree of regionalism in a particular area is the existence of transnational ties.¹ Aside from Baltic republics that joined the European Union, various parts of the Soviet Union developed different levels of regional connectivity. Before the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, connectivity among Slavic states i.e. Russia, Ukraine and Belarus remained relatively strong. On the opposite end of the spectrum lies the South Caucasus where Armenia and Azerbaijan maintain a sealed and militarized border. Therefore, the South Caucasus are less likely to be labeled a “region” because of practically non-existent economic, social ties between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this context Central Asia represents both extremes. Movements of people between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for instance, remained relatively unrestricted. Uzbekistan, which borders each of the Central Asian states, incrementally introduced different types of travel and trade restrictions for each of the adjoining states. Tajikistan had limited entry and exit requirements for a considerable amount of time following the civil war. Turkmenistan became one of the most isolated countries in the world with a visa regime comparable to that of North Korea.

Nevertheless, Central Asia has a clear presence of transnational connections despite territorial and water sharing disputes, discontent over refugee movements, divergence in foreign and regional policies, personal rivalry between several leaders and considerable economic imbalance among the states. Politically, the existence of transnational ties could be partly attributed to the absence of full scale inter-state conflicts in Central Asia during the post-Soviet period.² On the practical level, the physical infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union can be partly credited with the enablement, if not facilitation, of intraregional movements. Identifying the roles played by Russia and China behind the development of transportation infrastructure and increased mobility in Central Asia would establish a link between the natures of major powers’ engagement and the effects this engagement has on regionalization of Central Asia.

The concept of *obdurate infrastructure* suggests that the physical networks which connect countries across vast landmasses tend to continue serving the intended purpose despite geopolitical and political disagreements among members along the route.³ The concept of obdurate infrastructure can be applied to transportation networks. Once built, they do tend to continue serving their original purpose of moving goods and people and sustaining interdependence between the connected states. The functions of physical infrastructure often outweigh political differences. Therefore these networks remain in use and continue facilitating interdependence among the states. In Central Asia, the roads and railway systems inherited from the Soviet Union are supposed to serve as unifying elements. Despite differences between the Central Asian neighboring countries, the existence of the transportation links should logically encourage states to cooperate. However, while *obduracy*

¹ Hettne, Bjorn, Frederick Soderbaum, “Theorizing the Rise of Regionness,” *New Political Economy*, 5, 3, (2000)

² Tajikistan Civil War did spill over its borders, but was largely contained in Tajikistan

³ Johnson, Corey, “Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia. The Case of Natural Gas” in *Eurasian Corridors on Interconnection: From South China to the Caspian Sea*, Walcott, Susan M. and Corey Johnson (eds.), Routledge, (2014)

of the physical infrastructure may be robust enough to withstand political and economic differences between states along a route, it is not definite whether the existing infrastructure always endure the involvement from external major powers. To serve its own needs an adjacent rising power with, an unprecedented in the region, economic weight may decide to rebuild or alter the direction of a pre-existing infrastructure. In the post-Soviet Central Asia, China has the ability and the motivation to do this; however, the impact of such engagement can have varying effects on regional cooperation.

Weaknesses in the existing infrastructure in post-Soviet Central Asia resulted from a logical tendency, under which Soviet-period transportation routes gave little consideration to the republican borders. Originally, borders were drawn up neither strictly along ethnic lines nor following natural geographic boundaries.⁴ They served largely administrative purposes and posed no impediment during Soviet times. For instance, the main road between the two regional centers, Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital (the most economically developed city in the post-Soviet Central Asia) and Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital (the most populous city and former regional hub) traversed a section of Kyrgyzstan before even reaching the Kazakh-Uzbek border. Not having been an issue during the Soviet times, the road had to cross three national borders after the independence, until the section bypassing Kyrgyzstan was built. The road between Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek and the second largest city, Osh, used to pass through Uzbekistan; lengthy bypass was constructed after relations between the two countries deteriorated and the border was sealed. In another example, after Uzbek-Kyrgyz border was closed, a 90 kilometer, two-hour long trip from major Uzbekistan city Andijan to Kyrgyzstan city Osh began to require a flight northward to Bishkek and a 10 hour ride south to Osh. Throughout the region, new borders complicated movements of goods and people, even with relatively lenient entry and exit requirements.⁵ Moreover, the introduction of new currencies, tariffs and customs duties seriously decreased cross-border trade and other aspects of cooperation.⁶

In addition to non-physical barriers created by the transformation of administrative borders into international ones, the directions and conditions of transportation routes created extra obstacles for transnational exchanges within post-Soviet Central Asia. First, planned economy aimed to connect the periphery of the Soviet Union to the industrial centers in central Russia and other industrialized republics. Hence, the roads built in Central Asia during the Soviet time were designed to connect with major routes that ran in a south-north direction toward the European part of the USSR.⁷ Furthermore, the state of the Soviet-era infrastructure, as well as transportation equipment and facilities, had deteriorated significantly in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union due mainly to a lack of maintenance, and on-going or long term investment. This problem became especially serious in less developed states of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but also remained a concern in countries viewed to be more economically advanced, i.e. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.⁸

Overall, the emergence of non-physical barriers and the purpose and conditions of inherited infrastructure served as obstacles to the movements of goods and people; therefore, they actually impeded regional cooperation rather than serving the intended purpose. Two

⁴ "Central Asia: Border disputes and conflict potential," *International Crisis Group Asia Report*, 33, April 4, 2002, Osh/Brussels

⁵ Turkmenistan requires visas from everybody.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had a reciprocal visa regime as of 2015.

⁶ "Central Asia: Border disputes and conflict potential", 2

⁷ "Central Asia: Decay and Decline", *International Crisis Group Asia Report*, 201, February 3, 2011

⁸ *Ibid*

decades after the dissolution of the USSR, however, the development of physical infrastructure in Central Asia gained attention from various external actors. Particularly, the transportation infrastructure is often cited as the least controversial area of cooperation among Russia, China and Central Asian states. As Akiner suggests, “[...] different interests come together in the construction of a transcontinental system of trade and transport”, and that “the SCO [the most inclusive regional institution] has been instrumental in laying the foundation for this project.”⁹ Major powers and international organizations have been propagating the development of the infrastructure in Central Asia as essential for its revitalization, both as a coherent region and as an instrumental link for connecting opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass.

Moreover, this role of being a link in the “Eurasian Land Bridge” is the one Central Asia is most often associated with. In this study, however, this transit function is only of interest if it somehow enhances connectivity among Central Asian states. Without dismissing the physical ‘centrality’ of the region, this thesis focuses specifically on cooperation *within* Central Asia. Furthermore, enhanced bilateral relations between any outside actors and individual countries in the region are considered here in the context of their utility to contribute toward regionalization of Central Asia.

The chapter argues that during the first two decades after the independence, Russia’s policy and Russia-driven initiatives in Central Asia had limited and often an adverse impact on regional cooperation. During the same period of time, China’s engagement in Central Asian region was largely ambivalent, leading to varying effects on regionalism. Eventually, though, China-led projects in the transportation sector began reconfiguring the region. Finally, the analysis suggests that the divergence of interests between the two major powers tends to diminish regionalization effects of their activities.

The first section of the chapter assesses the roles of Russia and China in the initiatives aimed at the reduction of non-physical barriers to the movements of goods and people in Central Asia. The second section categorizes the nature of the projects related to the physical transport infrastructure promoted by the two major powers and analyses the effects of these projects.

Reducing non-physical barriers through multilateral initiatives

In the two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union various actors with interests in Central Asia introduced a number of initiatives specifically designed to enhance transnational mobility in Central Asia and the adjacent regions. Generally, these schemes were launched under the auspices of the existing multilateral institutions. The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was initiated by West Asian states, which are geographically and culturally close to Central Asia, but which had been disconnected from it during modern history. The Transportation Corridors Europe Caucasus Central Asia (TRACECA) program was initiated by the European Union, an actor not adjacent to the region, but with substantial interest in the area. Other initiatives were driven by encompassing international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Their ambitions to connect a wider geographic space were carried out through the United Nations Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) and the Central Asia Regional Cooperation (CAREC) program. These initiatives provided various effects on regional connectivity in Central Asia. Moreover, the major powers’ level of participation in these programs differed, often reflecting their general roles

⁹ Akiner, Shirin, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World*, *Global Strategy Forum*, June 2010, 25, <https://www.globalstrategyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organisation.pdf>

in the regionalization process. Furthermore, in the context of multilateral efforts in facilitating cross-border mobility, the SCO attempted to develop the framework for reducing non-physical transportation barriers.

The section evaluates the above-mentioned initiatives and the extent to which Russia and China's participated in each of them. The intermediate conclusion suggests that the two major powers have been either ambivalent or reluctant to contribute toward legal and technical frameworks which aimed at reducing non-physical barriers and ease movement of goods and people in Central Asia. However, Russia demonstrated more visible averseness toward initiatives which aimed directly at connecting the region through legal agreements and standardization practices.

The Economic Cooperation Organization – south of the Pamir, west of the Caspian

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) was formed by the non-Arab Muslim states in west Asia Turkey, Pakistan and Iran in 1985 on the basis of the previously existing regional entity, Regional Organization for Development. The ECO admitted former Central Asian Soviet republics soon after their independence in 1992.¹⁰ One of the ECO's key body's, the Directorate for Transport and Communication initiated development of regulatory framework designed to facilitate movement of goods and people across the borders of the member states. During the early post-soviet era the ECO supported the construction of several key transport links in Central Asia, particularly in Tajikistan, and connecting rail and roads of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan with one of the founding members, Iran.¹¹ In subsequent years, however, ECO initiatives stagnated and the organization's effectiveness in promoting regional cooperation became highly questionable.¹² Considering that the organization was founded specifically by Muslim states with regional ambitions, i.e. Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, major powers Russia and China did not participate in the grouping in any form and thus had no effect on the ECO's capacity to influence regional cooperation. Noticeably, in March 2017, Chinese delegation, headed by the Vice-Foreign Minister took part in the ECO's summit in Pakistan.¹³ This gesture provides additional signs that China is comfortable perceiving Central Asia as part of a wider region, extending from east to southwest, and not necessarily connected to Russia. Russia, it appears, paid little attention to the ECO, possibly underestimating the organization's potential or rejecting its' purposefulness as lacking of competitiveness, at least in its original form.

From Europe to Asia bypassing Russia

The Transportation Corridors Europe Caucasus Central Asia (TRACECA) program was designed in 1993 with the specific objective to enhance connectivity between states situated along its route. Participating members included South Caucasus and Central Asian

¹⁰ Javaid, Faisal, Muhammad Arif Khan, "The role of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in Central Asia: An analytical study", *Wifaqiyan (Research Journal of Social Sciences)*, 1, 2, (July – December 2015), pp. 58-67

¹¹ *Euro-Asian Transport Linkages. Paving the way for a more efficient Euro-Asian transport. United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Expert Group Report.* New York and Geneva: United Nations (2012), 486
Petersen, Alexandros, "Implications of Tajikistan's new Chinese-built tunnel", *China in Central Asia*, November 2, 2012, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2012/11/02/implications-of-tajikistans-new-chinese-built-tunnel/>

¹² Javaid and Khan (2015)

Iqbal, Nasir, Saima Nawaz, "Getting regional trade right in Central Asia", *East Asia Forum*, April 18, 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/04/18/getting-regional-trade-right-in-central-asia/>

¹³ Sikander, Sardar, "Regional leadres in Islamabad for ECO summit", *The Express Tribune*, March 1, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1342062/regional-leaders-islamabad-eco-summit/>. Accessed December 21, 2017

states, several Eastern European countries and regional heavy-weights Iran and Turkey.¹⁴ The initiative was supported by the European Union, which spent 180 million Euros on the TRACECA projects by 2013.¹⁵ The program intended to develop a system of transportation corridors, which would connect Europe with South Caucasus and Central Asia. TRACECA-proposed routes, although directed across Eurasia, had potential to provide connectivity between Central Asian states positioned along the way. Originally, the TRACECA intended to rehabilitate roads and construct new transportation corridors. However, available funding was insufficient to construct a new physical infrastructure, so the TRACECA focused on technical assistance projects instead.¹⁶ Between 1996 and 2016, sixty five technical assistance projects were completed by the program.¹⁷ Over seventy percent of these projects involved more than one Central Asian state and were aimed at facilitating various modes of transportation and reducing impediments to interstate mobility. The program was more active in the early years, but became relatively stagnant as time went on. The TRACECA posted no more than two projects per year since 2012, and none at all since January 2016.¹⁸ According to TRACECA's General Secretary, the European Commission discontinued funding to the organization without providing formal reasons for the policy change.¹⁹

The TRACECA's flaws resided in weak and outdated institutional and policy dimensions.²⁰ It was also criticized for allegedly high levels of corruption of local officials responsible for projects and insufficiently justifiable transit potential of the program, more generally.²¹ Dependencies of participating countries on external financing of national transportation systems suggested that the TRACECA program once had favorable prospects for continuous development.²² Although, local governments were less enthusiastic about the TRACECA's technical assistance and standardization initiatives compared to the physical infrastructure projects funded by other actors.²³

Concurrently, the program's "political premise" of diversifying away from Soviet-era Moscow-centered routes²⁴ caused logical disapproval from Russia. A researcher from the Russia Academy of Sciences suggests that TRACECA's efforts were interpreted by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an attempt to develop a transport system to bypass Russia.²⁵ Quoted report of Russia's MFA states that

TRACECA is aimed on actualization of international cargo transportation bypassing Russia's territory. In a political sense the West sees the following project as a real

¹⁴ The members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan

¹⁵ "Central Asia – Transport. International Cooperation and Development," *European Commission Website*, (n.d.), https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/regions/central-asia/eu-support-transport-development-central-asia_en, accessed December 27, 2017

¹⁶ Gatev, Ivaylo. *Informal Communication*, December 12, 2017

¹⁷ "Technical Assistance," *TRACECA Website*, (n.d.), <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/technical-assistance/>, accessed December 12, 2017

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Ciopraga, Mircea, *Email Communication*, January 16, 2018

²⁰ Emerson, Michael, Evgeny Vinokurov, "Optimization of Central Asian and Eurasian Transcontinental Land Transport Corridors," *EUCAM Working Paper*, 7, December 2009, 8

²¹ Turaeva, M. O, "The transport infrastructure in Central Asia in the conditions of new-age regionalization", *Institute of Economics of Russia Academy of Science*, Moscow (2014), 20 http://inecon.org/docs/Turaeva_paper_2014.pdf

²² Turaeva, 21

²³ Gatev, Ivaylo. *Informal Communication*, December 12, 2017

²⁴ Emerson, 7

²⁵ Turaeva, 21

opportunity of a significant reduction of transport dependency of former Soviet republics from Russia, as centrifugal tendency among the CIS countries.²⁶

Russia's indisposition to cooperate with the TRACECA is even more logical considering the unfeasibility of the "shorter" Central Asia – Europe automobile routes across the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus, or through Iran and Turkey. As it happens, the fastest, most cost-efficient, reliable and safe way of getting from Central Asia to Europe is through Russia, despite the route being 1500-2500 kilometers longer than the former two.²⁷ These findings are based on the study conducted through cooperation project between the TRACECA and the New Eurasia Land Transport Initiative (NELTI), organization closely affiliated with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and intended to facilitate transnational mobility through the development of automobile transportation. The NELTI used truck caravans' pilot runs and subsequent analysis to address border crossings delays, unofficial levies and other non-physical barriers along the transportation routes between Central Asia and Europe.

Table 1. NELTI Estimated Routes²⁸

Route	Approximate length	Direction	Estimated time	Unofficial levies, % over official costs
South	4000 km	Kyrgyzstan / Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, EU	12-14 days	167 percent
Central	5100 km	Kyrgyzstan / Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan (via Caspian Sea), Georgia, EU (via Black Sea)	14-18 days	58 percent
Northern	6500 km	Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, EU	12-14 days	7 percent

The NELTI was formally endorsed by a number of regional organizations, including; the CIS, EurasEC and SCO.²⁹ Partners and participants of the NELTI mainly included commercial and non-commercial enterprises from countries of the former Soviet Union and adjacent regions.³⁰ Memorandum of Understanding between International Road Union and participating states was designed to

primarily define key areas and methods of cooperation between Parties and set up a legal framework for building up an efficient market for international road transport services, integration of national transport into the world transport system and serving the interests of national governments and road transport operators in the public-private partnership format.³¹

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid 19

²⁸ "New Eurasian Land Bridge Initiative", *International Road Union Website*, (n.d.), http://www.iru-nelti.org/index/en_nelti_index, accessed March 15, 2015

²⁹ "New Eurasian Land Bridge Initiative", *IRU Website*

³⁰ "New Eurasian Land Bridge Initiative. Partners." *International Road Union Website*, (n.d.) http://www.iru-nelti.org/index/en_nelti_partners, accessed March 15, 2015

³¹ Ibid

While signed by the majority of the CIS states, the agreement was not signed by Russia and China.

Map 1. NELTI routes³² (Northern – top blue; Central – orange; Southern – red)



Generally, the IRU attempted to utilize NELTI to mobilize political will in countries situated along the designed routes.³³ The initiative, however, did not resonate strongly in Russia and China. Even though the Northern route, passing through Russia, was proved to be the fastest, safest and most reliable, the route was also deemed the most effected by the local corruption. Based on the data collected from the NELTI testing runs, “the amount of unofficial levies imposed on the transporters, i.e. bribes and extortion on the Northern route exceeded the level of the official rates by 167 percent. Analogous indicators for the Southern and Central routes were 58 and 7 percent respectively.”³⁴ Apparently, Russian bureaucratic apparatus had limited capacity in minimizing corruption within its own territory. At the same time, Russia demonstrated no willingness to promote the other two routes, which would bypass its territory. The reason for such reluctance and even opposition was similar to that which motivated Russia to object to the TRACECA – logical aversion to the minimization of its own transit role in the transcontinental transportation system.³⁵

China’s reluctance to support NELTI during its active period in 2009-2010’s can be explained by China’s delayed accession to the International Road Transport (TIR from French) convention. Initiated by several western European countries soon after the Second World War, the TIR emerged in its most recent form at the 1975 convention as “the only

³² Scherbakov, Dmitriy, “NELTI: Shelkoviy put’ v obhod Ukrainy?” [“NELTI: the Silk Way bypassing Ukraine?”] *Transportniy Business Information Portal*, February 4, 2009, http://tbi.com.ua/articles/nelti_shelkovyi_put_v_obhod_ukrainy.html

³³ IRU’s New Eurasian Land Transport Initiative, *Youtube*, July 8, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cruioI-jgyk>, accessed on December 22, 2017

³⁴ Scherbakov

³⁵ Scherbakov

universal customs transit system for moving goods across international borders.”³⁶ China did not join the TIR convention until July 2016, and the regulations were supposed to go into effect in early 2017.³⁷ Until then China’s interests in promoting cross-border commercial cargo transportation in Eurasia were limited because Chinese trucks were generally not involved in the transportation process outside of China.

Arguably, a lack of support from either of the Eurasian key players was one of the main reasons the IRU-NELTI and the TRACECA achieved only modest results and became largely inactive by mid-2010’s. Both initiatives were promoted by European institutions and were specifically focused on enhancing transit capacity of the Central Asian region. Subsequently, the aims of the two programs had actual potential for the regionalization of the post-Soviet Central Asia. The short-term activity span and limited scope of the achievements of the two initiatives, juxtaposed with China and Russia’s detachment from their development, highlight the weakness of the “outside” actors’ regionalization capacity. It appears that any promising attempt of cooperation in this particular region requires the involvement of at least one of the adjacent major powers.

While Russia expectedly remained averse to promoting transcontinental routes bypassing its territory, the mid-2010’s saw early indicators of China’s intentions to revitalize the EU driven initiatives, although not necessarily in their original shape and form. By the end of 2017 the TRACECA signed a memorandum of understanding with the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce (SRCIC) – an active business forum launched in China two years earlier.³⁸ The SRCIC partnered with the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and China Chamber of International Commerce with the aim of facilitating economic activities under the auspice of the Belt and Road Initiative.³⁹ The MoE between the TRACECA and the SRCIC, as well as amicable meetings between the heads of the two organizations suggested possibilities of new funding influx into the TRACECA.

The end of 2017 also saw new truck caravan pilot runs originated in Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent, the same point of origin as that used in the first NELTI testing runs. However, instead of heading west toward Europe, like the NELTI trucks did nine years earlier, this time the caravan headed east. In two days the nine cargo vehicles with crews from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China travelled through the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan, crossed into the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan, traversed the high altitude Alay Valley and passed Kyrgyzstan-China border before arriving in Kashgar, China’s westernmost major city.⁴⁰ The pilot run, which aimed to uncover and highlight the potential of the shortest and arguably the most feasible route between Uzbekistan and China was coordinated by the relevant trade and

³⁶ “TIR History. Background”, *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe website* (n.d.), <http://www.unece.org/tir/system/history/tir-history.html>, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.unece.org/info/media/presscurrent-press-h/transport/2016/chinas-accession-to-the-united-nations-tir-convention-opens-prospects-for-new-international-trade-routes/doc.html>

³⁷ “China’s accession to the United Nations TIR Convention opens prospects for new international trade routes”, *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe website*, July 26, 2016,

³⁸ “Investment opportunities and development of TRACECA and SRCIC relations”, *TRACECA Website*, December 14, 2017, http://www.traceca-org.org/en/news/single-news/n/investment_opportunities_and_development_of_traceca_and_srcic_relations/ accessed December 22, 2017

³⁹ “Profile”, *Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce website* (n.d.), <http://www.srcic.com/profile/>, accessed January 6, 2018

⁴⁰ “Startoval avtoprogeg ‘Tashkent-Kashgar’” [“Started auto rally ‘Tashkent- Kashgar’”], *Gazeta.uz*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/10/30/rally/>, accessed December 22, 2017

transport ministries of the three states.⁴¹ More importantly, the development of the route was supposedly discussed and agreed upon by heads of state of participating countries, providing a further demonstration for the top-down nature of regionalism in Central Asia.⁴²

The development of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China route was at its nascent stages in 2017, but the event leads to several important observations. First, on the elite level, Chinese leadership may be more capable than institutional actors from “distant” regions in gathering political will to cooperate. Second, the development of the new route was only made possible after the thaw in the Uzbek-Kyrgyz relationship. The rapprochement took place following the death of former Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov and after the changes in foreign policy direction implemented by his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The changes highlight the highly personal nature of the states’ decision-making in Central Asia. Third, during years of tension between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Sino-Uzbek trade had to pass through Kazakhstan. China’s efforts to diversify trading routes, possibly at the expense of its partner, Kazakhstan, suggest a shift from pure pragmatism to a long term approach toward Central Asia as a region. Chinese commitment is more clearly visible in China’s active participation in other Central Asia-focused multilateral initiatives.

From Asia to Europe with Central Asia in the “center”

The Asian Highway initiative introduced by the United Nations Economic Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) became more active after the break down of the Soviet Union and “aimed at enhancing the efficiency and development of the road infrastructure in Asia, supporting the development of Euro-Asia transport linkages and improving connectivity for landlocked countries.”⁴³ Tangible achievements of this initiative were limited to “common design and technical standards” agreed upon by some of the participating states.⁴⁴ The UN ESCAP’s Asian Highway has been a work in progress spread over the entire Eurasian landmass with little or no impact on regional connectivity in Central Asia. Another institutional initiative demonstrated more visible results.

Launched by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2001, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program aimed to enhance the region’s transit potential. Participants in the program include all the Central Asian states and most neighboring countries, with the noticeable exception of Russia.⁴⁵ The partners of the program are major multilateral organizations: the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the Islamic Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank.⁴⁶ The transport initiative of the CAREC involves development and rehabilitation of the six transport corridors connecting South Caucuses, Russia, South Asia and East Asia through a complex network of automobile roads and railways. Most of these corridors pass through sections of Central Asia. In this sense, the CAREC is more encompassing and is designed to connect post-Soviet Central Asia both from within and with the neighboring countries. By the end of

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ergashev, Bahodir, “Avtokolonna ‘Tashkent-Kashgar’ uspešno pribyla v konechniy punkt naznacheniya” [“Motor convoy ‘Tashkent-Kashgar’ successfully arrived to the destination”], *Jahon Information Agency*, November 1, 2017, <http://jahonnews.uz/ru/aktualno/124/40767/>, accessed December 22, 2017

⁴³ “Asian Highway,” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific* (n.d.), <http://www.unescap.org/our-work/transport/asian-highway/about>, accessed March 20, 2015

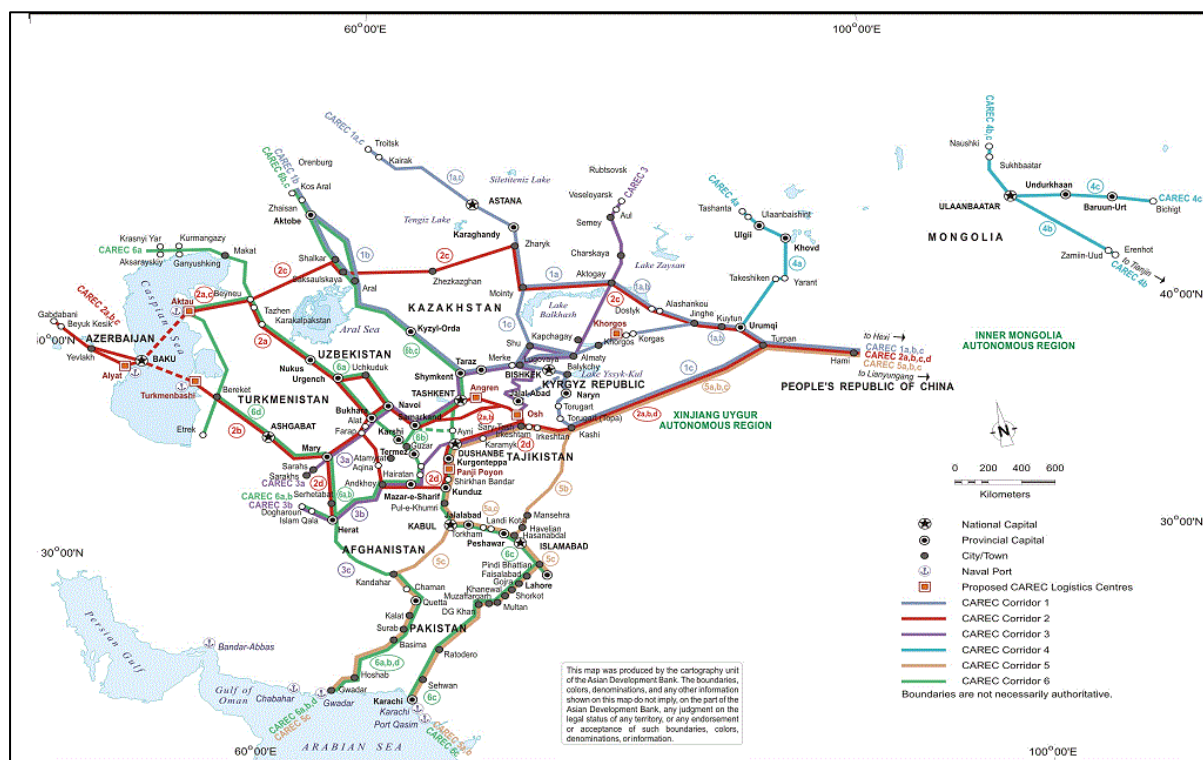
⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ States participating in the CAREC are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

⁴⁶ “CAREC program”, *CAREC Website* (n.d.), <http://www.carecprogram.org/index.php?page=carec-program>, accessed on December 15, 2017

2017, the CAREC had initiated approximately 200 transport-related projects, of which over a half had been completed.⁴⁷ In addition to the Asian Development Bank, which is the main lender, the projects were funded by the multilateral institutions from the wider region and beyond.⁴⁸

Map 2. CAREC transport corridors⁴⁹



Even though four of the CAREC corridors are connected to Russia, the latter does not participate in the program. None of the CAREC projects were financed by Russian or Russia-led financial institutions. Moreover, CAREC's efforts were arguably undermined by the Russia-driven Eurasian integration in the form of the Customs Union and, subsequently, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The Common Transport Space proposed by the EAEU clearly excluded Central Asian states which were not members or, at least, aspiring member of the EAEU.⁵⁰ Furthermore, elimination of the tariffs within the Customs Union (predecessor of the EAEU) led to the emergence of more complicated procedures on the outer borders of the grouping.⁵¹ After the Russia-Kazakhstan-Belarus Customs Union went into

⁴⁷ "CAREC transport projects in detail", CAREC Website (n.d.),

<http://www.carecprogram.org/index.php?page=transport-projects>, accessed on December 15, 2017

⁴⁸ Other CAREC lenders include World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Program, Islamic Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, European Union Technical Aid to Common Wealth of Independent Nations, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries Fund and European Bank of Reconstruction and Development among others.

Ibid

⁴⁹ "Connecting CAREC: A corridor network", CAREC Website (n.d.),

<http://www.carecprogram.org/index.php?page=carec-corridors>, accessed March 28, 2015

⁵⁰ "Perspektivy razvitiya infrastruktury avtomobil'nyh i zheleznyh dorog, vkluchennyh v transportniye marshruty EvraAsEC" ["Perspectives of development of automobile and rail roads, included in transport route of EurAsEc", Eurasian Development Bank, Almaty, (2011)

⁵¹ "Operationalizing economic corridors in Central Asia. A Case study of the Almaty-Bishkek Corridor," Asia

effect in 2010, bringing goods through the border from China to Kazakhstan became more time consuming and costly than via the China–Kyrgyzstan border.⁵² While both routes were originally positioned in the CAREC Corridor One, the China-Kyrgyzstan crossing became the optimal pathway for the movement of goods from China into Central Asia. This, in turn, facilitated increased cooperation in the region from the re-sale of low tariff goods from Kyrgyzstan to its Central Asian neighbors. Arguably, this trend increased bottom-up regional cooperation. However, after Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the EAEU in 2015 the Union’s tariffs moved to the Kyrgyz-China border, making the crossing as costly and as time consuming as the Kazakhstan-China border crossing. The move, in turn, decreased economic activity along the section of the corridor which passed through Kyrgyzstan and contributed toward stagnation of regional cooperation. The negative prospects had actually encouraged the CAREC program to search for alternative ways to increase cooperation by promoting the economic corridor between Bishkek and Almaty, the economic centers of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, within the Eurasian Union.⁵³ In that case, CAREC’s function was to offset the negative effects for regional connectivity caused by the Russia-led Eurasian integration.

In contrast to Russia, China was actively involved in the CAREC program. However, China’s main focus lay in building and rehabilitating physical infrastructure rather than removing non-physical barriers.

China is the most active participant of CAREC projects, and it is motivated more than others in their successful completion. In the analysis of 80 CAREC transport projects of a cost totaling 16 billion US dollars, most of the costs were borne by the PRC. It was the only country in which all the planned projects were completed. The portion of the PRC’s spending was especially high in railroad (49%) and aviation (73%) sectors.⁵⁴

Noticeably, these numbers suggest that facilitation of automobile transport, so essential for bottom-up regionalization, was not a top priority for China’s participation in the CAREC program.

Generally the CAREC’s “progress has been greater in regard to physical infrastructure investments, less so in the “soft” areas of improving the legal, regulatory and administrative aspects of trade [and] transport [...]”⁵⁵ Under the framework of the program the one major Cross Border Transport Agreement (CBTA) was signed only between the two smaller and underdeveloped Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It was later joined by the neighboring Afghanistan.⁵⁶ The agreement was supported by the United States,⁵⁷ which possibly benefited from eased movement of freight out of Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. However, there is no evidence to suggest that either Russia or China

Development Bank, Manila (2014), <http://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/docs/CAREC-Publications/CAREC-ECD-study.pdf>, accessed December 15, 2017

⁵² *Ibid*, 12

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ Turaeva, 38

⁵⁵ Linn, Johannes F., “Central Asian Regional Integration and Cooperation: Reality or Mirage?” *EDB Eurasian Integration Yearbook. The Economics of the Post-Soviet and Eurasian Integration*, 2012, 6, pp. 96-117, 111

⁵⁶ “Afghanistan joins Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic Cross-Border Transport Accord”, *Asian Development Bank*, August 29, 2011, <https://www.adb.org/news/afghanistan-joins-tajikistan-kyrgyz-republic-cross-border-transport-accord>

⁵⁷ “U.S. supports Cross-Border Transport Agreement between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan”, *Asia Plus Media Group*, May 17, 2012, <http://news.tj/en/news/us-supports-cross-border-transport-agreement-between-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-and-afghanistan>

played any role in promoting the agreement.

The weakness of the CAREC program in promoting legal framework for enhancing transnational exchanges can be explained by the program's strong reliance on the institutional partners rather than the governments of the participating states. According to a former consultant of the program, "multilateral institutions do not have the mandate or the clout to generate political consensus on fractious or disinterested regional partners."⁵⁸ In Central Asia, where power elites often play a more important role than state institutions, government relations become a crucial factor. The main regional institution, which is based on elite-level interactions, is the SCO. It is therefore logical to assess the SCO's capacity in reducing non-physical barriers to transportation next.

The SCO and non-physical barriers

Among regional institutions, the SCO has generally received a much more positive appraisal for its role in fostering regional cooperation.⁵⁹ Having been initiated as a mechanism for border disputes resolution, confidence building and cooperation in non-traditional security the SCO has been relatively effective, serving as a dialogue forum for regional elites.⁶⁰ However, due to the exclusive nature of the initially established areas for cooperation, the organization has been lacking dynamism in promoting favorable conditions for transnational exchanges and people's movements in Central Asia. It took the SCO a decade from its initial founding as the Shanghai Five in 1996 to begin addressing transportation as a dimension of regional cooperation. In 2006, the special working group for development of transit potential, under the framework of the Program for Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation curated by the Council of Ministers, approved and instituted monitoring and coordination of the two auto transport projects aimed to enhance regional connectivity in Central Asia.⁶¹ The first one connected southern Russia's Volga region and western Kazakhstan with the far-most western areas of Uzbekistan. The second was intended to run through central Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan into western China.⁶² Notably, both projects were "outward looking", that is, devised to connect peripheries of post-soviet Central Asia with the neighboring major powers rather than to "hold it together" from within.

In 2011, the Council of Ministers initiated the program for coordinated development of auto roads across SCO member states and in accordance with common interests and requirements of trade and economic cooperation.⁶³ The program intended to define main automobile roads connecting the SCO member states and design an action plan for the integration of the road network in the SCO territory. The framework was presented to member states in 2013 and was supposed to be further developed in the following years.⁶⁴ Having a seemingly strong potential, the SCO's steps toward integration of transportation routes was only beginning to gain pace in the second decade of its existence.

⁵⁸ Linn, 113

⁵⁹ Akiner, Shirin, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World*, *Global Strategy Forum*, June 2010

⁶⁰ Aris, Stephen, *Eurasian Regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2011)

⁶¹ "Spravka o Shanhaikou organizatsii sotrudnichestva (SHOS)" ["Reference about Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)", *Ministry of Economic Development of Russian Federation*, (n.d.) <http://economy.gov.ru/minec/resources/a1ca6a82-9b0c-4532-bbbc-947d85660108/справка+о+ШОС.doc>, accessed December 26, 2017

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ "Shanghaikaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva" [Shanghai Cooperation Organization], *Ministry of Transport or Russian Federation*, (n.d), <https://mintrans.ru/activities/69/92>

⁶⁴ Ibid

Possibly the main achievement in this field was the SCO's 'Agreement on development of favorable conditions for auto transport on the territory of the organization's member states' which took eight years to prepare⁶⁵ and was signed during the SCO's summit in Dushanbe in September 2014.⁶⁶ The length of negotiations resulted from divergences among the governments of the member states and allegedly China's assertiveness around the terms of the agreement.⁶⁷

The main purpose of the agreement was "creation of favorable conditions for international automobile transportation through the simplification and harmonization of related documentation, procedures and requirements."⁶⁸ The development of the agreement was supported and promoted by the ADB and the UN ESCAP,⁶⁹ the two institutions, which intended to play an active role in facilitating regional cooperation in Central Asia. Most of the member states ratified the agreement the following year, including the parliament of Kyrgyzstan, the only SCO state where the legislative body is not fully controlled by the executive power.⁷⁰ The agreement includes a number of provisions which aimed to facilitate the movement of goods and people among SCO states; however it is also limited in a number of ways.⁷¹

First, the agreement defines a 'motor vehicle' (*transportnoye sredstvo*) as a bus with more than nine seats, a truck or a tractor-trailer, but excludes passenger vehicles.⁷² This means that the agreement does not extend to facilitate the movements of small peddle traders. The definition clearly highlights the top-down nature of the SCO driven initiation of regional cooperation, under which the priority is given to large scale cooperation rather than enhanced connectivity among common people. Second, the agreement's provisions only refer to vehicles registered in one of the SCO member states and operated by companies and

⁶⁵ Zaharov, Vladimir, "Движение по восточному ШОСсе" ["Riding on the SCO highway"], *Trsntral'niy Internet Portal Shanhaiskoy Organizatsii Cotrudnichestva*, March 26, 2015, <http://infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=13224>

⁶⁶ "12 sentyabrya v Dushanbe v prosutstvii glav gosudarstv-chlenov Shanhaiskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva (SHOS) podpisano Soglashenie mezhdu pravitel'stvami gosudarstv – chlenov Shanhaiskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva o sozdanii blagopriyatnykh usloviy dlya mezhdunarodnykh perevozok." ["12th of December in Dushanbe in the presence of heads of states members of the SCO the agreement was signed between the governments of the SCO member state about the creation of favorable conditions for international transportation."] *Ministry of Transport of Russian Federation*, September 12, 2014, accessed March 15, 2015

⁶⁷ Kley, Dirk van der, "China's SCO Challenges. Despite a strong speech from Li Keqiang, practical cooperation within the organization remains elusive.", December 5, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/chinas-sco-challenges/>

⁶⁸ "Shanghaiskaya organizatsiya sotrudnichestva", *Ministry of Transport or Russian Federation*

⁶⁹ "Na sammite SHOS v Dushanbe budet podpisano soglashenie o sozdanii usloviy mejdunarodnykh avtoperevozok" ["On the SCO summit in Dushanbe the agreement on creation of favorable conditions for international auto-transport will be signed"] *Ritm Evrazii*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.ritm Eurasia.org/news--2014-09-11--na-sammite-shos-v-dushanbe-budet-podpisano-soglashenie-o-sozdanii-usloviy-dlja-mezhdunarodnyh-avtoperevozok-14503>, accessed March 22, 2015

⁷⁰ "Parlament Kyrgyzstana odobril soglasheniye of sozdanii usloviy dlya mezhdunarodnykh avtoperevozok" [The Parliament of Kyrgyzstan approved agreement on creation of condition for international auto transport"], *AvtoTransInfo Sistema Gruzoperevozok*, April 30, 2015, <http://ati.su/Media/News.aspx?ID=62052&HeadingID=1>, accessed August 21, 2015

⁷¹ "Soglashenie mejdu pravitel'stvami gosudarstv-chlenov Shanhaiskoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva o sozdanii blagopriyatnykh usloviy dlya mejdunarodnykh avtomobil'nykh perevozok" ["Agreement among governments of member-states of the SCO about the creation of favorable conditions for international automobile transport"] *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website*, December 9, 2014, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/multilateral_contract/-/storage-viewer/multilateral/page-10/50008

⁷² *Ibid*, 2

individuals registered in these states.⁷³ This limitation suggests that the agreement does little to enhance Central Asia's transit potential. The actors from the third party countries on the edges of the Eurasian landmass (Western Europe, Arabian Peninsula, Indian Sub-continent, North East Asia), which played such a crucial role in the "ancient Silk Road", would not be able to benefit from the agreement.

Third, the companies or individuals registered in one of the countries cannot offer transit service between the two points which are located on the territory of another country.⁷⁴ In addition to clearly visible protectionism, this provision creates further practical problems. Due to the nature of the former Soviet infrastructure, the fastest and shortest ways between parts of some countries are through other countries. This is especially true in the Fergana Valley where territories of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan interweave with little consideration for natural boundaries or ethnic division lines. The nature of these borders had been the cause of tension in the relations of several Central Asian states, and the SCO's transport agreement did little to address or alleviate these embedded tensions.

Fourth, the agreement does not offer any guidance for standardizing the load and size requirements of inter-state transport. The document only specifies that parameters must comply with the requirements of the country, through which the transit takes place.⁷⁵ Although the agreement offers flexibility for transport operators, the lack of standardization for international transportation may lead to practical difficulties for the operators and possible delays at the borders for non-compliance. Placing national standards above the supranational ones is consistent with the sovereignty-enhancing character of the SCO. However, some level of standardization is essential for effective cooperation between member states. While aversion to integration does not necessarily interfere with cooperation, in this case it actually may.

Fifth, the time period allocated for opening designated routes and border crossings is over five years for most cases,⁷⁶ which is a long period of time considering the pace of development in the wider region's economy. The SCO's transport agreement timeframe demonstrates a sharp contrast with the Russia driven Eurasian Economic Union, under which integration initiatives took a much faster pace.⁷⁷ (It is not implied, however, that faster means better; both of the initiatives are at the early stages which make it difficult to measure their results). Finally, the choices for border crossings and the directions of routes suggest that the SCO's initiative is more outward looking from the Central Asian context. (See Table 2 below) Out of the six designated routes, five contain China, four contain Kazakhstan, three contain Russia and four contain at least two of these three states.⁷⁸ Tajikistan is only connected with China through the previously existing crossing. Uzbekistan is connected to Kazakhstan and through Kazakhstan to China. The only "smaller" state connected with Russia, China and Kazakhstan is Kyrgyzstan. Most notably, none of the three smaller states, i.e. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which are geographically adjacent to each other in Fergana Valley, have any connecting routes among them. Disputes and rivalries between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan accounted for major impediments in regional cooperation, and the SCO's transportation agreement did little to bring these states closer. Overall, if not pulling Central Asia apart the initiative seems to be about *stretching* the region, rather than

⁷³ Ibid, 2

⁷⁴ Ibid, 2

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3

⁷⁶ Ibid, 10

⁷⁷ Kassenova, Nargis, "Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future," *Centre Russie/Nei.Reports*, No14, November 2012

⁷⁸ Ibid, 10. The six routes are the following. RF-KAZ-PRC, RF-KAZ-PRC, PRC-TAJ, PRC-KAZ-UZB, KYR-KAZ-RF, KYR-PRC

contracting it to be closer together.

*Table 2. Potential connections under the SCO transport agreement*⁷⁹

<i>Country</i>	China	Russia	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
China	n/a	2	3	1	1	1
Russia	2	n/a	3	None	1	None
Kazakhstan	3	3	n/a	1	1	None
Uzbekistan	1	None	1	n/a	None	None
Kyrgyzstan	1	1	1	None	n/a	None
Tajikistan	1	None	None	None	None	n/a

Intermediate conclusion

Based on the above discussion, China and Russia's participation in removing non-physical barriers in Central Asia has not been sufficient to facilitate regional connectivity. At best, the two had not interfered in creating additional constraints for cooperation among the Central Asia countries. However, two factors minimize China and Russia's role in developing regional cooperation in Central Asia. The first one is the ambivalence of their involvement in and toward multilateral initiatives, particularly those clearly focusing on regional connectivity. The second is the slow pace of promoting the removal of non-physical barriers within the framework of their own multilateral initiatives.

Reduction of non-physical barriers, however, is only one of the factors which can enhance regional cooperation. The development of the physical infrastructure is often more crucial for facilitating the movement of goods and people exchanges, especially in underdeveloped areas, which are plentiful in Central Asia. Both Russia and China have invested in the transportation sector in Central Asia. China, with its economic weight, contributed more toward these initiatives. The following section analyzes the nature of infrastructure projects driven by the two major powers and aims to assess the effects of these initiatives on regional cooperation in the post-Soviet Central Asia.

Financing physical infrastructure: varying engagement – various results

Russia's limited role

For Russia the plans and activities for developing physical infrastructure in Central Asia tend to revolve around Russia-driven multilateral initiatives and clearly exclude the Central Asian states which do not participate in the Russia-driven integration and cooperation projects. One vivid example is a railroad proposed in 2013. It was intended to connect Russia and the Central Asian members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),⁸⁰ the defense alliance between Russia and several former Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The suggested route, well received by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,

⁷⁹ Author's tabulation based on "Soglashenie mejdu pravitel'stvami gosudarstv-chlenov Shanhaikoy organizatsii sotrudnichestva o sozdanii blagopriyatnyh usloviy dlya mejdunarodnyh avtomobil'nyh perevozok" ["Agreement among governments of member-states of the SCO about the creation of favorable conditions for international automobile transport"]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Website, December 9, 2014

⁸⁰ "Strany-uchastniki ODKB gotovy postroit' obschuyu zheleznuyu dorogu" ["Countries-participants of the CSTO are ready to build common railroad"], *notum.info*, May 30, 2013, <http://www.notum.info/news/politika/stranyi-uchastniki-odkb-gotovy-postroit-obshchuyu-zheleznuyu-dorogu>, accessed March 24, 2015

was drafted to bypass Uzbekistan – the most populous and traditionally influential Central Asian republic.⁸¹ Considering physical geography, a railway running north to Russia from the more developed eastern section of Tajikistan, is naturally bound to cross Uzbekistan. Bypassing Uzbekistan would involve a challenging and costly detour through the mountainous Kyrgyzstan. In the post-Soviet time Uzbekistan had generally poor relations with its neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. More importantly, during president Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan was often politically divergent with Russia. Being averse to Russia-driven integration and cooperation projects Tashkent avoided joining and had actually withdrawn from Russia-led institutions, the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC). Uzbekistan's absence from Russia led integration initiatives place additional limitations on the development of transportation links within the region. The Common Transport Space proposed by the EurasEC and subsequently by the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) clearly excluded the Central Asian states which were not members, or at least aspiring members, of the Eurasian Economic Union.⁸²

Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Russia opposed the creation of the SCO Fund and the SCO Development Bank, aiming to retain this role for the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB).⁸³ The EDB, launched in 2006⁸⁴ and strongly affiliated with the Eurasian integration initiatives, is dominated by Russia and Kazakhstan with each holding approximately 66 and 33 per cent of shares respectively. The other Central Asian members of the bank, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan hold less than half a per cent each.⁸⁵ The EDB's method for selection for financing is characterized by the large scale of the projects, which should cost more than 0.01% of the combined GDP of the EDB member states.⁸⁶ According to a high level representative of the EDB, at least two of the member states need to be involved in each project, and the projects are required to be profitable, which is not always easy to achieve in the infrastructural sectors, particularly transportation.⁸⁷

By the end of 2017, the EDB's investment portfolio included 2.420 billion US dollars and 69 projects. However, only a few EDB-financed projects could be even indirectly traced, to the development of Central Asian transportation infrastructure.⁸⁸ These included several railroad sector projects in Kazakhstan and production of railcars and tank containers in

⁸¹ "Na sammite ODKB obsudili proekt stroitel'stva zheleznoy dorogi v obhod Uzbekistana" ["It was discussed on the SCO summit the project of construction of the railroad to bypass Uzbekistan"], *Fergana News*, May 25, 2013, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=20697>, accessed March 26, 2015

⁸² "Perspektivy razvitiya infrastruktury avtomobil'nyh i zheleznyh dorog, vklyuchennyh v transportniye marshruty EvrAzEs" ["Development perspectives of auto and rail road infrastructure, included in the transportation routes of the EurasEC"], *Eurasian Development Bank*, 2011, Almaty, <http://docplayer.ru/27540258-Perspektivy-razvitiya-infrastruktury-avtomobilnyh-i-zheleznyh-dorog-vklyuchennyh-v-transportnye-marshruty.html>

⁸³ Rickleton, Chris, "By opposing SCO Development Bank, is Russia biggest loser?", *Eurasianet*, March 25, 2015, <https://eurasianet.org/node/72701>

Katasonov, Valentin, "Vector sotrudnichestva stran SHOS poka ne ponyaten" ["The vector of cooperation of the SCO countries is still unclear"], *Russkaya narodnaya liniya*, June, 8, 2012, http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2012/06/08/valentin_katasonov_vektor_sotrudnichestva_stran_shos_poka_ne_ponyaten/

Gabuyev, Aleksandr, Konstantinov, Aleksandr, "ШОС получит расчет в юанях, Китай укрепляет лидерство в организации", *Kommersant*, December 16, 2014, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2634265>

⁸⁴ The initial name of the organization was Eurasian Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EABR).

⁸⁵ The other two members of EDB are Belarus and Armenia

⁸⁶ ""Perspektivy razvitiya...", 26

⁸⁷ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 11, 2016

⁸⁸ "Investing in development and integration. Key current projects of the bank," *Eurasian Development Bank* (n.d.), <https://eabr.org/en/>, accessed December 19, 2017

Belarus.⁸⁹ The only EDB-related project with noticeable effect on regional connectivity was funded by the EDB's affiliate, Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (EFSD).⁹⁰ In 2013, the EFSD agreed to co-finance the rehabilitation of Bishkek-Osh road which connected north and south Kyrgyzstan. A year later the plan was revised, and the EFSD, along with the Asian Development Bank and the Exim Bank of China, agreed to co-finance an alternative to the original North-South route in Kyrgyzstan.⁹¹ It is possible that this shift towards Kyrgyzstan's physical infrastructure was related to the announcement of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union in May 2015. In any case, the EFSD's participation in the project was minimal compared with other lenders. It agreed to fund construction of a smaller section connecting the old route with the newly built one and committed approximately ten percent of the total of 600 million US dollar cost of the project.⁹²

Overall, Russia's role in the development of transportation infrastructure in Central Asia has two main characteristics. First, Russia aims to connect the members and the candidates of the EAEU to Russia and to each other, but it deprioritizes ties between the participants and non-participants of the Eurasian integration. Second, in the post-Soviet years, Russia's engagement in the development of transportation system in Central Asia has been very limited. Both of these features come in stark contrast to the nature of China's involvement, which has been relatively inclusive and much more substantial.

Multiple effects of China's engagement

Despite clear differences, Chinese development of the transportation infrastructure often did not facilitate regional cohesion in Central Asia. The next section suggests that in the two and a half decades since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, China's engagement in the transportation sector demonstrated no specific direction. Despite the rhetoric of facilitation of regional cooperation, this engagement led to various outcomes. In some instances, this contributed toward the deterioration of intraregional ties; in others it did nothing to promote regional cooperation; yet in other cases China's involvement enhanced potential regional connectivity in a new way which might serve its long-term strategic goals. Regardless of China's intentions, it was not always able to pursue its agenda in Central Asia.

China's engagement: Build the road – disconnect the neighbors

One of the instances in which Chinese engagement clearly contributed toward reduced connectivity between Central Asian states is the case of Angren-Pap rail line which was laid in eastern Uzbekistan parallel to the Tajikistan border. As has been discussed previously, relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are arguably the worst in the region. Uzbekistan was the first of the Central Asian states to tighten borders with Tajikistan and institute a strict visa regime on Tajik nationals in the late 1990's. This was done with the aim of restricting flow of drugs and illegal crossings of Islamist militants from Tajikistan which

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ EFSD's initial name was EurasEC Anti-Crisis Fund; it was launched in 2009 managed by the EDB

⁹¹ "The Bishkek-Osh road rehabilitation project in Kyrgyz Republic", *Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development*, (n.d.) <https://efsd.eabr.org/en/projects/the-bishkek-osh-road-rehabilitation-project-in-kyrgyz-republic/>, accessed March 25, 2015

"Karta – Finansirovanie stroitel'stva alternativnoy dorogi "Sever – Yug v Kyrgyzstane" ["Map – Financing of construction of alternative road North – South in Kyrgyzstan"], *Stan Radar*, May 26, 2014, <http://www.stanradar.com/news/full/10085-karta-finansirovanie-stroitelstva-alternativnoj-dorogi-severjug-v-kyrgyzstane.html>

⁹² Ibid;

Author's interview, Bishkek, February 11, 2016

had been destabilized by the civil war of 1992-97.⁹³ Disagreements between the two countries deteriorated further because of the unresolved border issues, water and power sharing disputes as well as issues resulting from the presence in each country of the sizeable minority representing the ethnicity of the titular nation of the neighbor. In 2015, aside from Turkmenistan, which required entry visa for every foreigner, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan remained the only two states in Central Asia with a reciprocal visa regime. Matters between the two were complicated further due to the nature of their borders and existing transportation links. The two countries relied on each other for transit in order to connect their centers with the peripheries.

For instance, the only railroad between the two main Tajik cities, Dushanbe and Khudjand, runs through Uzbekistan. Similarly, the shortest and most geographically feasible way between central Uzbekistan and its populous eastern provinces, Fergana, Namangan and Andijan, lies through Tajikistan. The Soviet-built Bekobod-Kanibadam line connected Tashkent with these provinces by traversing northern Tajikistan.⁹⁴ From the 1990's, the quality of the rail road was continuously deteriorating thus seriously limiting both passenger and freight service between sections of Uzbekistan.⁹⁵ The reliability of the railroad became a major strategic problem for Uzbekistan. It was exacerbated by high transit fees charged by Tajikistan on the section of the road running through its territory.⁹⁶ Eventually, Tashkent made the decision to build the alternative rail link.

Constructing the Angren-Pap link, only 123 km long, was expensive and technically challenging because in some areas the railroad had to be laid at over 2000 meters above the sea level. One of the most challenging sections of the Angren-Pap line was the 19.2km Kamchik Tunnel. It was financed largely by China's Exim bank (\$355m out of required \$455m) and was built by the China Railway and Tunnel Group.⁹⁷ After completion in 2016, the new line reduced connectivity between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan by further diminishing the necessity for the two neighboring countries to cooperate. China did not initiate this, but Chinese funding and technical resources played an essential role in the completion of the project. Hence, in this case China inadvertently, but actively, contributed to the reduction of regional connectivity.

The Angren-Pap rail line was not the first example when Uzbekistan separated its railroads from the Soviet-built transportation system. Since 1991, Uzbekistan laid over 1,000 kilometers of new rail to bypass lines to internal destinations which traversed the territory of Turkmenistan.⁹⁸ Some of these lines were independently completed and others were co-financed by the outside actors involved in the region, particularly Japan.⁹⁹ However, little evidence is available regarding China's role in financing these projects. Uzbekistan's

⁹³ "Central Asia: Border disputes and conflict potential", 4 April 2002, *Asia Report, N33, International Crisis Group*, Osh/Brussels, 12

⁹⁴ Barrow, Keith, "World Bank loan for Kamchik Pass railway", *Rail Road Journal*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.railjournal.com/index.php/asia/world-bank-loan-for-kamchik-pass-railway.html>

⁹⁵ Rahimov, Mirzohid, "The Pap-Angren railway and its geoeconomic implication for Central Asia", *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, April 19, 2016, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13354-the-pap-angren-railway-and-its-geoeconomic-implications-for-central-asia.html>

⁹⁶ Parkash, Manmohan, *Connecting Central Asia. A Roadmap for Regional Cooperation*, Manila: Asia Development Bank, 2006, 34

⁹⁷ Rahimov

⁹⁸ Sadykov, Murat, "Uzbekistan: New Ferghana Railway Plan Tweaks Tajikistan," *Eurasianet*, March 14, 2013, <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-new-ferghana-railway-plan-tweaks-tajikistan>

⁹⁹ "V Uzbekistane zaversheno stroitel'stvo pyati mostov na zheleznoy doroge v obkhod Turkmenii" ["In Uzbekistan completed construction of five bridges on the railroad bypassing Turkmenistan"], *Regnum.ru*, July 28, 2009, <https://regnum.ru/news/1190706.html>

intentions to pursue independent policy in its immediate neighborhood and actually achieve the results with or without external sponsors suggests that Central Asian states play an active role in regionalization as well as the *fragmentation* process in their own vicinity.

Map 3. Angren-Pap Railway¹⁰⁰



On its part, in June 2013, Tajikistan began building a road to Turkmenistan. Noticeably, the road was designed to bypass Uzbekistan through Afghanistan, where it will be only 200 km long.¹⁰¹ While the Turkmenistan and Afghanistan sections are to be financed by Turkmenistan, Tajikistan expected to draw a large part of the funding from the ADB, which suggests China's involvement in the project.¹⁰²

China's involvement in financing transportation projects in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan typifies the lack of consistency in China's engagement in Central Asia. Paradoxically, China is assisting Uzbekistan to bypass Tajikistan and Tajikistan to bypass Uzbekistan, thus perhaps indirectly facilitating the two states' isolation from each other. The presence of the Soviet era infrastructure had the potential to serve as a cohesive element for the two rival states. Yet by financing alternatives, China largely diminished the obduracy of pre-existing transport links. However, when viewed in combination with other existing and potential projects (discussed below), the Angren-Pap railway and the North-South road in Tajikistan may actually be filling missing links in the transportation system between China and South and West Asia.

China's engagement: National infrastructure or regional infrastructure

¹⁰⁰ Author's drawing. Base map at d-Maps, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5149&lang=en, accessed October 22, 2017

¹⁰¹ "Tajikistan i Turkmeniyu soyedenit zheleznaya doroga, idushaya v obhod Uzbekistana" ["Tajikistan and Turkmenistan will be connected by the railroad bypassing Uzbekistan"], *Expedito*, February 9, 2014, <http://www.bison.su/novosti-gruzoperevozok/tadzhikistan-i-turkmeniju-soedinit-zheleznaja-doroga-iduschaja-v-obhod-uzbekistana.html>, accessed March 12, 2015

¹⁰² Turaeva, 43

A number of “smaller” transportation projects financed by China often play an internal function for the individual Central Asian states and have had little visible effect on the regionalization process. However, some of these projects, viewed in a wider regional context hold the potential to contribute to China’s access to South Asia and the Middle East. Several newly built roads and tunnels in Tajikistan serve as examples. The Ozodi (a.k.a Shar-Shar) tunnel, financed by a 36 million US dollars grant from China as well as the Khatlon (Chormaghzak) tunnel built by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) went into operation in 2009 and 2013, respectively.¹⁰³ The tunnels are part of the road, which connects the capital Dushanbe with second tier cities in the south of the country. One of the destinations is Kulyab, the hometown of Tajikistan president Rakhmon. The road to Kulyab was not mentioned in the SCO list of projects in the same way other China-funded projects in Tajikistan were. Allegedly, the road was intended as a “kind gesture” presented by the Chinese government to Tajikistan’s president.¹⁰⁴ The route is not intended to connect Tajikistan with other post-soviet Central Asian states and runs roughly in the direction of the Afghanistan’s border. It is plausible that the road may serve China’s interest by providing an additional transit route to and from Afghanistan.

China also financed Shakhristan tunnel on the road between Dushanbe and Tajikistan’s second largest city, Khudjand. Chinese funding of approximately 280 million US dollars and participation in the construction greatly improved the route compared to the previous contribution to Tajikistan’s infrastructure from an outside actor, the Anzob tunnel. The Anzob Tunnel (a.k.a Istiklol Tunnel or Independence Tunnel) was built by Iran and was reported to be completed in 2006. It remained unfinished and extremely unsafe until it was remodeled and re-opened in September 2015.¹⁰⁵ The original rationale behind the new Dushanbe-Khudjand route was to reduce Tajikistan’s dependency on the neighboring Uzbekistan. Previously, the only all-season route between Dushanbe and Khudjand was a railway which ran through the equidistant Uzbekistan city of Samarkand.¹⁰⁶ The all-season auto road and the tunnels, which eliminated time-consuming and dangerous mountain passes, provided better connectivity between the two main cities of Tajikistan. Moreover, the last section of the road continues further north from Khudjand to the town of Chanak, near the border with Uzbekistan.¹⁰⁷ However, the effect on regional connectivity of the route, at the time of its completion, was uncertain. First of all, the route was originally intended to reduce Tajikistan’s dependency on transit through Uzbekistan. Second, considering the complexity of the visa regime between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the road Dushanbe-Khudjand-Chanak

¹⁰³ Yuldoshev, Avaz, “Shar-Shar Tunnel officially opened on Sunday”, *Asia Plus Media Group*, August 31, 2009, Shar-Shar Tunnel officially opened on Sunday

Chorshanbiyev, Payrav, “Chormaghzak Tunnel renamed Khatlon Tunnel and Shar-Shar Tunnel renamed Ozodi Tunnel”, *Asia Plus Media Group*, December 02, 2014, <http://news.tj/en/news/chormaghzak-tunnel-renamed-khatlon-tunnel-and-shar-shar-tunnel-renamed-ozodi-tunnel>

¹⁰⁴ Kessenova, Nargiz, “China as an Emerging Donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,” *Russie.Nei.Visions N36*, Institut Francais des Relations Internationales, January 2009, 14-15,

<https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/china-emerging-donor-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan>

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, Kate, “Inside the Anzob ‘tunnel of death’ in Tajikistan”, *News.com.au*, October 27, 2015, <http://www.news.com.au/travel/travel-ideas/adventure/inside-the-anzob-tunnel-of-death-in-tajikistan/news-story/c3149541743c986b883e0b2ae125639e>

Yuldoshev Avaz, “Istiqlol Tunnel reopened for traffic for all types of vehicles today”, *Asia Plus Media Group*, September 25, 2015, <http://www.news.tj/en/news/istiqlol-tunnel-reopened-traffic-all-types-vehicles-today>

¹⁰⁶ “Iran, Tajikistan sign MoU to complete Anzob tunnel”, *Iran Front Page News*, July 7, 2015,

<http://ifpnews.com/news/business/industries/iran-tajikistan-sign-mou-to-complete-anzob-tunnel/>

¹⁰⁷ Valiev, Bakhtiyor, “Last shortcomings being removed on Dushanbe-Chanak highway in Sughd”, *Asia Plus Media Group*, August 26, 2009, <http://news.tj/en/news/last-shortcomings-being-removed-dushanbe-khujand-chanak-highway-sughd>

had limited effect on regional connectivity.¹⁰⁸

Map 4. Dushanbe-Khudjand-Chanak and Dushanbe-Kulyab¹⁰⁹



Nevertheless, the two roads running north and south from Dushanbe may be viewed as a potential route between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, through Tajikistan. Considering that Uzbekistan has its own border crossings with Afghanistan there is no direct indication that it was designed or would be used for such a purpose. At the same time, it has been suggested that the new roads may enable Tajikistan to participate more actively in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) and consequently draw profit from this participation.¹¹⁰ The NDN is a transportation network utilized by NATO, particularly the USA armed forces, to withdraw military and non-military hardware from Afghanistan. Furthermore, when the need for the NDN disappears, the route may serve as a transit route from Afghanistan, through Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan. The automobile road between the Chinese border in south-eastern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan border in southern Kyrgyzstan have already been built. Several missing links remain to be completed in order to create a feasible automobile route between western China and Afghanistan. This route between East Asia and South Asia would be safer and more accessible compared to the existing one which runs through the eastern mountainous region of Tajikistan, Gorno-Badakhshan. Travelling through the high elevation

¹⁰⁸ Lapshin, Aleksandr, "Granitsa Uzbekistan - Tajikistan, Oybek / Fatekhabad" ["The border Uzbekistan – Tajikistan, Oybek / Fatekhabad"], *Travel.ru*, June 2008,

<http://guide.travel.ru/tadjikistan/formalities/experience/#165655>

"Perviy sneg paralizoval dvizhenie na glavnoy magistrali RT" ["The first snow paralyzed the movement on the main auto-road of the Tajikistan Republic"], *Tsentr-1 [Centre-1]* November 27, 2017,

<https://centre1.com/tajikistan/pervyj-sneg-paralizoval-dvizhenie-na-glavnoj-magistrali-rt/>

¹⁰⁹ Author's drawing. Base map at d-Maps, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5149&lang=en, accessed October 22, 2017

¹¹⁰ Vinson, Mark, "Chinese-Built Tunnel projects in Tajikistan could bolster KKT Route of NATO's NDN", , *Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9, 142, July 26, 2012, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-built-tunnel-projects-in-tajikistan-could-bolster-kkt-route-of-natos-ndn/>

and low speed Pamir Highway in Gorno-Badakhshan is dangerous and time consuming. If China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan route materializes, it would demonstrate that China's strong contribution towards regional cooperation in Central Asia. By constructing new roads and rehabilitating old ones, China is eliminating physical transportation barriers in Central Asia, which was a task local actors could not develop unaided and which outside actors could not properly support. At the same time, China's attempts to link Central Asia with South Asia suggest China's intentions to re-connect Central Asia in a novel way. China's capacity to complete large scale expensive transportation projects and change the direction of road system demonstrates the ability of a major power to alter the obduracy of the infrastructure through superior economic power.

As relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan started to improve after the death of Islam Karimov, the road system connecting north and south of Tajikistan was more likely to develop its intraregional function. The key role of individual leaders in Central Asian politics cannot be underestimated.

China's engagement: New "Silk Road" through Kazakhstan only

During the present decade, China initiated a number of transcontinental rail routes, which are often viewed as flagman Eurasian Land Bridge projects. The train route from Chongqing in south western China to Duisburg in Germany, which went into service in June 2013, is praised for reducing travel time between China and Europe to 16 days, compared with 26 days by sea, and connects destinations in inland China to Western Europe.¹¹¹ Another rail route connects central China's city of Zhengzhou with Hamburg in Germany in just 15 days.¹¹² By 2015, an additional four Chinese cities in the East, South-West and Central parts of China had direct freight train services with various European cities, the furthest being Madrid in Spain.¹¹³ By the end of 2017, a total of 35 Chinese cities were linked with established destinations in Europe.¹¹⁴ Each of these routes follows the same path through most of Eurasia. The trains run through Alashinkou-Dostyk border crossing between China and Kazakhstan. They continue on the rail line which was built during the Soviet time in Kazakhstan in order to connect western China with the Soviet Union railway system.¹¹⁵ Afterward, the trains utilize the Soviet-built railway system to traverse Kazakhstan from south-east to north-west and then continue through Russia and Belarus onto European Union countries. The routes are used by Chinese and European companies to ship specific goods and provide single points of departure and destination as well as providing a single point for customs declaration at both ends.¹¹⁶ These direct-rail freight services facilitate movement of goods between China and Europe, but they do not have a noticeable effect on regional cooperation among Central Asian states. In fact, China placed more emphasis on developing

¹¹¹ Nurshayeva, Raushan, "Kazakhs launch "Silk Road" China-Europe rail route", *Reuters*, June 10, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kazakhstan-railway/kazakhs-launch-silk-road-china-europe-rail-route-idUSBRE9590GH20130610>

¹¹² "CNN – The Gateway, report: TEL's China Train", *Trans Eurasia Logistics*, August 2, 2013, <https://www.trans-eurasia-logistics.com/news/archive/page/5/>, accessed December 15, 2017

¹¹³ Gatev, Ivaylo, "The Silk Road Economic Belt and Its Discontents", *China Policy Institute Blog*, University of Nottingham, June 23, 2015, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/06/23/the-silk-road-economic-belt-and-its-discontents/>

¹¹⁴ "Record number of freight trains link China, Europe", *Xinhua*, November 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/18/c_136762654.htm

¹¹⁵ Garver, John W., "Development of China's Overland Transportation Links with Central, Southwest and South Asia," *The China Quarterly*, 2006, 185, 3

¹¹⁶ Gatev, Ivaylo, *Informal Communication*, June 12, 2015

additional rail links in Kazakhstan.

An additional section of the railroad on Kazakhstan territory was completed by 2012. The new link connects Khorgos, a border crossing located south of Dostyk-Alashinkou, with the main railroad system in Kazakhstan in Zhenkent. The line's economic feasibility and utility was questionable during the construction stages.¹¹⁷ Kazakh commercial entity, ENRC Logistics, was supposed to complete the Khorgos-Zhenkent project. After the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent reduction of transit of goods from China to Kazakhstan, as well as the devaluation of Kazakhstan's currency, the contractor raised its estimate and finally had to abandon the project.¹¹⁸ The solutions came during Chinese president Hu Jintao's visit to Kazakhstan in 2010, when an agreement was reached and financing the railroad was assumed by China.¹¹⁹

In 2008, the Dostyk-Alashinkou crossing was handling just under half of its weight capacity, but with ten times that amount projected increase by 2020.¹²⁰ Considering this, the section Khorgos-Zhenkent was seen as an important additional transit option for shipping Chinese goods into Kazakhstan and further west. In 2015, however, three years after completion, the alternative route's role remained minor. Nevertheless, the high level of engagement from China demonstrated the seriousness with which China viewed Kazakhstan's transition potential. However, as mentioned above, the main rail link between Western China and Russia and Europe runs excluding Central Asian states, other than Kazakhstan. So despite the potential for increased economic activity along the newly built sections, China-Europe rail links contribute little toward facilitating cooperation within the rest of Central Asia.¹²¹

On the way from China to Europe, Central Asia is often sidetracked even in the discussion stages of the projects. The proposed almost quarter trillion dollar high-speed railway between Beijing and Moscow, which would enable passengers to cover 7000km in just two days, was suggested to run only through Kazakhstan.¹²² If the railway ever materializes, it is unlikely to have any serious effect on the movements of people within Central Asia.

The construction of the Western Europe – Western China highway had a similar minimal effect on the regionalization of Central Asia. Kazakhstan sections of the highway started to be commissioned in 2016.¹²³ In Kazakhstan, the road was financed 85 per cent by foreign donors, mainly the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development, as well as the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the Japanese International

¹¹⁷ Tashimov, Tulkan, "Khorgos: uravneniye so mnozhestvom neizvestnyh" ["Khorgos: equation with multiple variables"], *Expert Online*, 2009 (n.d.), <http://expert.ru/kazakhstan/2009/38/transport/>, accessed December 20, 2017

¹¹⁸ Tashimov, Tulkan, "Kitay boyat'sya – dorogu ne stroit'" ["Fear China – do not build the road"], *Expert Online*, July 19, 2010, <http://expert.ru/kazakhstan/2010/28/transport/>

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ "Central Asia: Decay and Decline", International Crisis Group, Asia Report N°201, 3 February 2011, 35

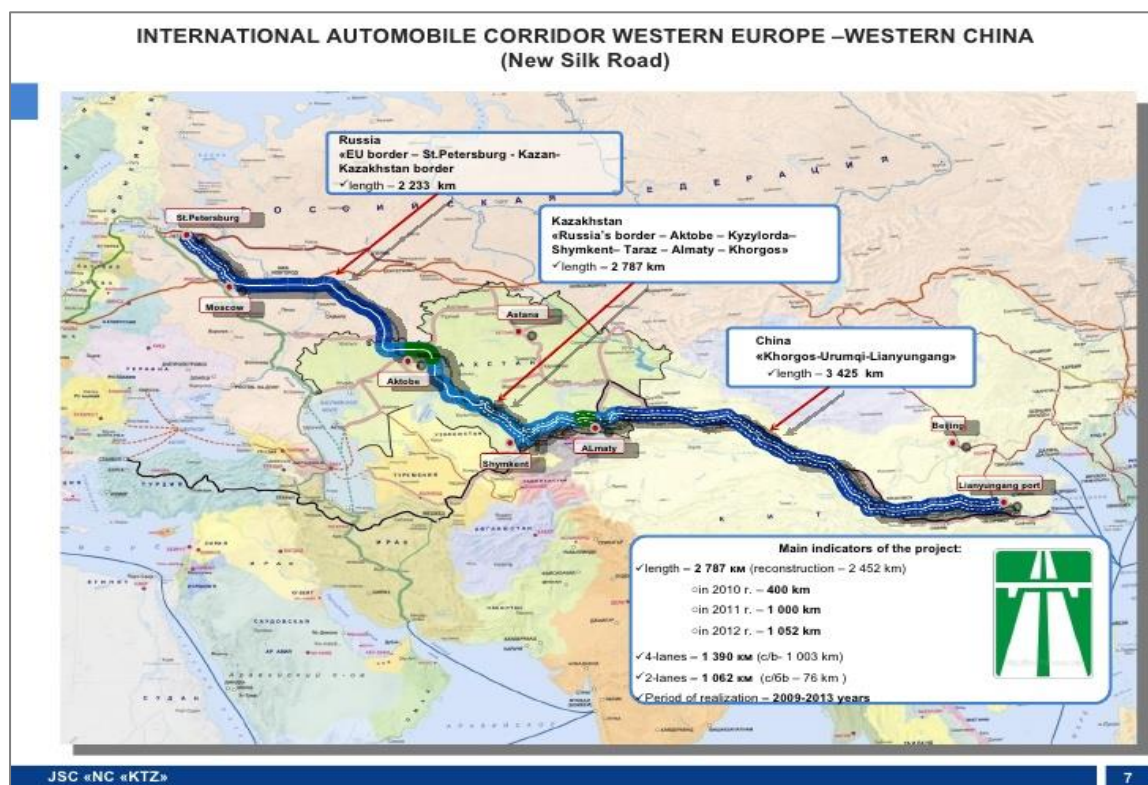
¹²¹ "Stroitel'stvo zheleznoy dorogi Zhetygen – Khorgos podhodit k kontsu" ["Construction of the railroad Zhetygen – Khorgos is approaching the end"], *Horde.me*, June 29, 2012, <http://horde.me/cynical/stroitelstvo-zheleznoy-dorogi-zhetygen--horgos-podhodit-k-koncu.html>

¹²² "Zheleznuyu dorogu iz Pekina v Moskvu budet stroit' perenaselyonniy Kitay. Kitayu razreshili prolozhit' cherez Rossiyu dorogu stoimost' ty 242 mlrd dollarov" [Railroad from Beijing to Moscow will be built by overpopulated China. China was allowed to lay Russia a road worth 242 bil dollars"], *mk.ru*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/world/2015/01/22/zheleznuyu-dorogu-iz-pekina-v-moskvu-budet-stroit-mnogonaselenny-kitay.html>

¹²³ Shepard, Wade, "The Western Europe – Western China highway is coming alive in Kazakhstan", *Forbes*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/08/03/the-western-europe-western-china-highway-is-coming-alive-in-kazakhstan/#58b1e6401f12>

Cooperation Agency.¹²⁴ A wide range of sponsors with no visible opposition from any of the outside actors suggest a non-controversial nature of the project, which was designed to benefit major players in the wider region, i.e. Russia, China and the EU. The highway, however, bypasses Kazakhstan’s southern neighbor, less economically developed Kyrgyzstan.

Map 5. Western Europe – Western China Highway¹²⁵



Hypothetically, it would be sensible to let the trans-continental highway pass through Kyrgyzstan. The potential route could utilize the road south of Taklimakan desert from Lanzhou in Gansu province, where the ancient “Silk Road” used to split, to the border with Kyrgyzstan in western Xinjiang. Then, the route could enter Kyrgyzstan through the already existing Torugart pass, traverse a section of northern Kyrgyzstan and enter Kazakhstan near the city of Taraz. Admittedly, Torugart pass is much higher and less accessible than Khorgos in Kazakhstan. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan’s mountainous terrain would pose a greater challenge for building a high speed road. However, in addition to reducing distance, this route would provide China with reasons and the motivation to advance the underdeveloped southern part of Xinjiang. The transnational scale of the trans-continental highway project, if it were to run through Kyrgyzstan, would require strong commitment from this country, considering the amount of investment that would come from China. However, in the post-independence years a number of planned projects between China and Kyrgyzstan ultimately failed to materialize which may explain China’s apprehension to employ Kyrgyzstan as a transit point for transcontinental routes. In 2002, China and Kyrgyzstan jointly expressed the

¹²⁴ “Transkontinental’niy koridor ‘Zapadnaya Yevropa – Zapadnyy Kitay’ -- Noviy put’ v Yevropu – ot mechty k real’nosti” [“Transcontinental corridor ‘Western Europe - Western China’ – new route to Europe: from dream to reality”, (n.d.), <http://www.europe-china.kz/info/69>, accessed March 10, 2015

¹²⁵ “Kazakhstan to complete construction of ‘Western Europe – Western China in 2016”, *Ak Zhaiyk*, May 21, 2015, <http://azh.kz/en/news/view/6417>, accessed December 21, 2017

intention to open their main border crossing in Torugart to the citizens of the third countries.¹²⁶ In 2003, the two countries agreed to build a route connecting the industrial center of Aksu in Xinjiang with the road circumnavigating the major natural tourist attraction in Kyrgyzstan – Lake Issyk Kul.¹²⁷ Neither of the agreements had materialized as of 2017. The most ambitious joint project, the railroad running from Kashgar in western China through southern Kyrgyzstan and into Uzbekistan, which was proposed in 1996, remained in discussion stages as of 2017. (This project is discussed in the next section). Overall, China’s reluctance to utilize Kyrgyzstan as a transit state in major transcontinental projects can be explained by Kyrgyzstan’s lack of reliability, which is discussed in more detail below.

Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan was also bypassed even on the small portion of the Western Europe – Western China route. The Kazakhstan section of the original, Soviet-period built road, used to pass through Kyrgyzstan. It crossed two Kazakh-Kyrgyz borders on the way from Almaty to Taraz, a Kazakhstan city further west. In the summer of 2010, the Kyrgyz section of the road was closed for safety reasons. The move was justified by violence in Kyrgyzstan. However, it is questionable whether the closure was warranted. The unrest in the north of Kyrgyzstan, near the border with Kazakhstan, lasted less than two weeks, and subsided by the middle of April. The main inter-ethnic violence took place in southern Kyrgyzstan, hundreds of kilometers away. Nevertheless, the Kyrgyzstan section of the road never re-opened, and a lengthy detour was employed on the Kazakhstan’s side. By 2012, a proper bypass was completed thus entirely eliminating Kyrgyzstan from the main transcontinental route. Bypassing Kyrgyzstan permanently appeared irrational considering that the ADB rated Urumqi-Almaty-Bishkek-Tashkent route as the “most important road corridor in Central Asia”.¹²⁸ Aside from the north-south sprout to Tashkent from Kazakhstan, the corridor would correspond to the Western Europe – Western China Highway, if it was not bypassing Kyrgyzstan.

China’s apparent preference in dealing with Kazakhstan, rather than Kyrgyzstan, in the context of transcontinental projects can be explained by several factors. First of all, Kazakhstan is a relatively stable country mainly due to its pragmatic foreign and domestic policy secured by an autocratic regime. This stability comes in contrast with Kyrgyzstan’s often inconsistent political direction. In the past Chinese investors found it frustrating having to re-secure projects in Kyrgyzstan whenever a new government came to power.¹²⁹ Additionally, Kazakhstan’s economy is more robust, and conducting business in Kazakhstan is less susceptible to unexpected corruption compared to an impoverished Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, both states are in the orbit of strong Russian influence, but Kazakhstan managed to cause less insecurity for Russia about leaving its sphere of influence. This cannot be said about Kyrgyzstan, particularly because of Kyrgyzstan’s hosting of the USA military transit center near its capital Bishkek between 2001 and 2014. During the later years of the operation, the Manas “base” caused visible discontent among Russia’s leadership despite Russia’s original approval at the time of American engagement in Afghanistan in 2001. Arguably, Russia is more sensitive about Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, China is more comfortable dealing with a more powerful Kazakhstan than with the smaller and dependent Kyrgyzstan because Russia is less likely to feel that China’s engagement can drive Kazakhstan out of its orbit. This suggests that China, despite its economic power, is not always capable of instituting its agenda in Central Asia because of considerations deriving from its relationship with Russia. Existing and potential transportation projects within

¹²⁶ Garver, 6

¹²⁷ Garver, 5

¹²⁸ Garver, 6

¹²⁹ Author’s Interview, Bishkek, January 21

Kyrgyzstan further demonstrate the importance of the “Russian factor” in China’s engagement in Central.

China’s engagement and the “Russian factor: Crossing Kyrgyzstan: South-North – OK; East-West – NOT

In 2014, the alternative automobile road connecting north and south Kyrgyzstan was agreed to be jointly financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Exim Bank of China and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (EFSD), an affiliate of the Russia-controlled Eurasian Development Bank. The project’s estimated total cost ranged from 670 to 850 million US dollars, depending on sources.¹³⁰ As discussed above in the section on Russian engagement, the EFSD financed approximately 10 per cent of the projects. The Exim Bank of China, arguably one of the main Chinese policy instruments, covered approximately half the costs. The ADB, where China is outranked by the USA and Japan, but where China still holds the third place in subscribed capital and voting rights, covered the remainder. The highway, estimated to be completed by 2018,¹³¹ provides an example in which the interests of Russia and China converged.

Map 6. Kyrgyzstan North-South¹³²



Russia supported the new transport corridor in Kyrgyzstan, at the time an aspiring newest member of the Eurasian Economic Union. The new road, extending north to south, is consistent to with the direction of the Soviet-built infrastructure connecting the periphery with the center. Chinese interests in the new north-south route are not entirely unambiguous. China could be aiming to expand its influence in Kyrgyzstan or its actions could be driven by economic and developmental agenda. Yet, as John Garver suggests, China’s intentions do not

¹³⁰ Ibraimov, Bakyt, “Novaya trassa ‘Sever-Yug’, po ozhidaniyam, usilit ekonomiku” [“New ‘North-South’ highway is expected to strengthen the economy”], *Inozpress*, March 17, 2015, <http://www.inozpress.kg/news/view/id/44570>

“Karta – Finansirovanie stroitel’stva alternativnoy dorogi “Sever – Yug v Kyrgyzstane” [“Map – Financing of construction of alternative road North – South in Kyrgyzstan”], *Stan Radar*, May 26, 2014

¹³¹ Ibraimov, B.

¹³² Author’s drawing. Base map at d-Maps, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5149&lang=en, accessed October 22, 2017

matter because once the new road is complete “Chinese influence will flow along these new transportation lines, regardless of why they were built.”¹³³ For Central Asia, creating additional connectivity between northern Kyrgyzstan, closely connected to Kazakhstan, and southern Kyrgyzstan, interlinked geographically and ethnically with Uzbekistan, is a solid step in the regionalization process.

Another potential transportation project in Kyrgyzstan with high capacity for regionalization of Central Asia is China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. The idea of the railway, which would connect China’s westernmost city Kashgar with Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan through southern Kyrgyzstan, was initiated by the Kyrgyz leadership in 1996, but twenty years later the project was still in the discussion stages.¹³⁴ Building the railroad would require an investment of \$2 billion, and the government of Kyrgyzstan looked for funding from a number of sources, ranging from the European donors to the SCO.¹³⁵ The initial study conducted by the ADB did not justify the funding because of the low level of traffic between China and Uzbekistan.¹³⁶ After rounds of discussions with Kyrgyz leadership, the Chinese government did at some point express the willingness to finance the project in return for a certain degree of access to Kyrgyzstan’s natural resources. However, political opinions in Kyrgyzstan for accepting a Chinese loan were divided.¹³⁷ First, large segments of the population remained apprehensive about Chinese “expansion” in Kyrgyzstan. Second, Kyrgyz elites were weary that the new road would move the politically volatile southern Kyrgyzstan with its large Uzbek ethnic minority closer, under the influence of the neighboring regional rival Uzbekistan. Third, the Kyrgyz leadership considered the rail laid east to west through southern Kyrgyzstan from Irkeshtam border crossing to the border with Uzbekistan would be economically unfeasible. Instead, in 2016, Kyrgyzstan leadership suggested the rail be laid north east to south west, from Torugart border crossing with China to Osh near the border with Uzbekistan.¹³⁸ In this form the route would provide additional connection between northern and southern Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁹

In addition to the direction of the projected railway, the main point of contention between China and Kyrgyzstan about the railroad remained the question of where to switch the track gage, as China uses European gage while all the former Soviet republics use the

¹³³ Garver, 2

¹³⁴ Ibrahimov, Osmanakun, “Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Kitay: zheleznaya doroga v budusheye” [“Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-China: railroad into the future”, *Beliy Parus*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.paruskg.info/2014/08/28/104741>

Bakasheva, Kanykey, “V nachale maya eksperty obsudyat tenicheskiye parametry stroitel’sstva garZhD Kitay-Kyrgyzstan” [“In the beginning of May experts will discuss technical parameters of the construction of railway China-Kyrgyzstan”], *time.kg*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.time.kg/rabochee-vremya/3613-v-nachale-maya-eksperty-obsudyat-tehnicheskie-parametry-stroitelstvo-zhd-kitay-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan.html>

¹³⁵ “Satabaldiev predlozil stranam SHOS uchastvovat’ v finansirovanii stroitel’sstva zh/d Kitay-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan” [“Satabaldiev offered the SCO countries to participate in the financing of the railroad China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan”], *The Kyrgyz Telegraph Agency*, December 5, 2012, https://kyrtag.kg/news/satybaldiev_predlozil_stranam_shos_uchastvovat_v_fansirovanii_stroitelstva_zh_d_kitay_kyrgyzstan/

¹³⁶ Garver, 3

¹³⁷ “Svet i teni proekta stroitel’sstva zheleznoy dorogi ‘Kitay-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan’” [“Light and shadows of the project to construct railway ‘China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan’”, *Inozpress.kg*, April 2, 2012, <https://turonzamin.org/2012/04/05/vash/>, accessed December 28, 2017

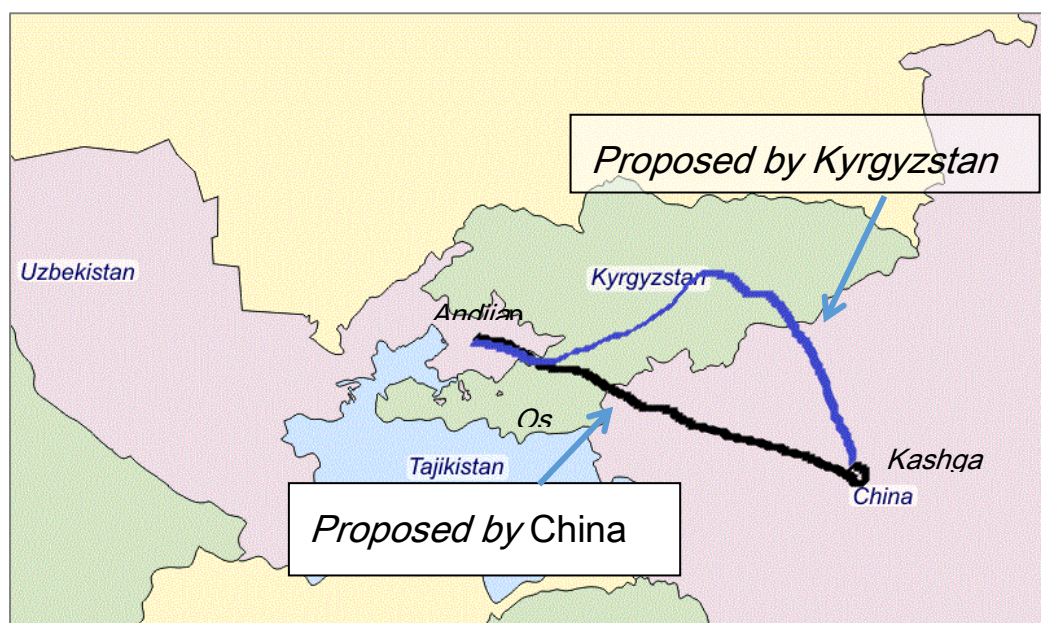
¹³⁸ Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

The complete projected route Turogat-Naryn-Kochkorka-Kazarman-Jambul-Osh

¹³⁹ Kudryashov, Andrei, “Pass of Taldyk: The Great Silky Road today and tomorrow”, *Fergana News Agency*, September 27, 2006, <http://enews.fergananews.com/article.php?id=1606&print=1>

wider, Russian gage tracks.¹⁴⁰ China offered to lay the European gage track across southern Kyrgyzstan which meant that the wheels would need to be changed at the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. This suggestion faced serious objection from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and specifically Russia.¹⁴¹ The proposed design would mean that Chinese trains could gain easy access to the CSTO member state. Kyrgyzstan's side, allegedly encouraged by Russia, suggested that the gage width had to be changed at the Chinese border and only Russian gage track would be laid through the Kyrgyz territory.¹⁴² Arguably, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad is one of the most vivid manifestations of the distrust in Sino-Russian relations despite their rhetoric of cooperation elsewhere. Kyrgyzstan's oscillation between eagerness and reluctance to accept China's participation in the project is explained by the Kyrgyzstan's leaders' considerations of Russia's interests in the region. However, Kyrgyzstan's presidents also had to take into account domestic factors, particularly in the matters regarding China. One of the triggers of the protests, which eventually led to the overthrow of the first Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev in 2005, was his border demarcation agreement with China, which was perceived as unfavorable for the national interests. In regard to China, the case of the railroad demonstrates the set of challenges it faces in Central Asia. Despite its material capabilities, in the form of economic power, China is not always able to promote its agenda in Central Asia. The perception of China by Russia and by the Central Asian states often plays a limiting role for China's capacity to promote projects conducive to regionalization.

Map 7. Proposed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (Kashgar-Osh-Andijan) Rail¹⁴³



For China, however, constructing the railroad across Kyrgyzstan has additional significance that extends beyond regional connectivity in Central Asia. The direction of the

¹⁴⁰ Turaeva, 49

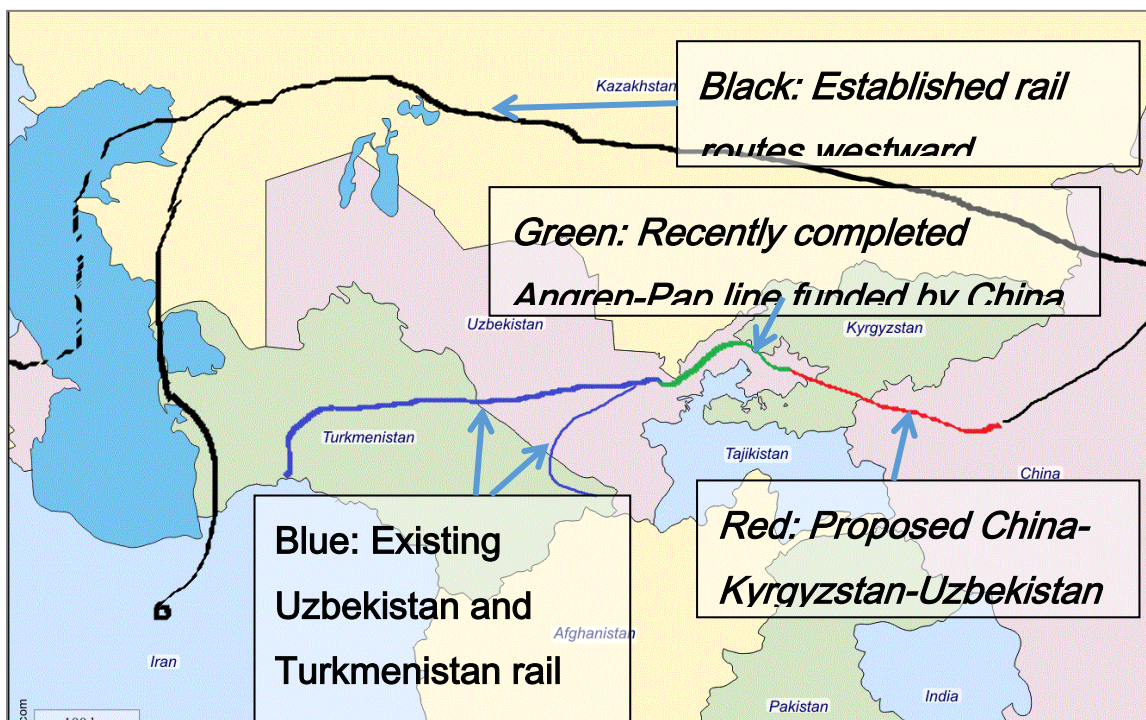
¹⁴¹ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Author's drawing. Base map at d-Maps, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5149&lang=en, accessed October 22, 2017

railway is consistent with China’s apparent designation of Central Asia as a “gateway” to South and West Asia. China’s attempts to reach these destinations have not been successful. A new rail route from China to Iran was opened in May 2016.¹⁴⁴ The train journey from China’s coast to Tehran takes 14 days, approximately the same amount of time as the rail link from the same origin to Western Europe. In order to reach Iran the train needs to traverse the periphery of Central Asia, i.e. the territory of Kazakhstan east to west and the territory of Turkmenistan north to south. Another example is the, so called, “Southern Rail Route” to Europe which is clearly impractical. It runs from Khorgos east Kazakhstan to Aktau in the west, requires a ferry through the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, rail link to Georgia, second ferry through the Black sea and a rail link through Ukraine to Bulgaria in southern Europe.¹⁴⁵ The length and unfeasibility of both routes lies in the fact that China has no access to the Central Asian railroad system, which is grounded in Uzbekistan. If a Chinese railroad system can connect to Uzbekistan railroad system, it would enable it to reach Iran in West Asia and Afghanistan in South Asia and, subsequently, whatever lies beyond them.

Map 8. China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Rail in a wider context¹⁴⁶



The construction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad has the capacity to fulfil this goal. In the end of the 2017, leaders of participating states expressed a commitment to meet in the summer of 2018 in order to sign a formal agreement on the construction of the railway.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Bozorgmehr, Najmeh, “First freight trains from China arrive to Tehran”, *Financial Times*, May 10, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/e964a78e-0bd8-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>

¹⁴⁵ Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

¹⁴⁶ Author’s drawing. Base map at d-Maps, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5149&lang=en, accessed October 22, 2017

¹⁴⁷ “Uzbekistan, KR I Kitay zaklyuchat dogovor of stroitel’sve zh/d v 2018” [“Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic and China will sign the agreement about the construction of the railway in 2018”], *Sputnik News*, December 07,

More than 20 years after the proposal, the transportation project with, arguably, the highest capacity to influence Central Asia regionalism may actually progress beyond the discussion stage.

Conclusion

An apparent lack of consistency in Russia's and China's activities in the transportation sector in Central Asia appears to limit positive effects of their engagement on regional connectivity. This irregularity toward regionalization is more evident in the two major powers' ambivalence or even reluctance toward the removal of non-physical barriers in Central Asia. Neither China nor Russia participated actively in the multilateral programs and initiatives designed specifically to develop legal and technical foundation for the development of transportation in Central Asia and the wider region. This reluctance to contribute toward institutional frameworks for cooperation is grounded in two factors. First, both Russia and China continue to express distrust toward each other's intentions. Consistent with the theory of alignment, each major power is also weary that the Central Asian states may decide to align with the other major power for balancing purpose. At the same time, the leaders of Central Asian states often tend to consider domestic factors when deciding on the degree of their involvement in the projects intended to reduce non-physical barriers, which is consistent with the omnibalancing approach.

Second, neither Central Asia states, nor Russia and China are inclined to participate in the initiatives designed to promote uniform legal and technical standards for transportation. The reason for that is the general aversion of all the actors in the region to relinquish their sovereignty for the sake of regional cooperation. This focus on sovereignty, at the expense of institutionalization, is in accordance with the neorealist view and contradicts concepts of the Neoliberal Institutionalism logic for interstate cooperation. At the same time, the idea that all the regional state actors are equally disinclined to accept institutionalization of the transnational transportation routes highlights their common high concern for sovereignty. This shared value is in line with the social constructivist approach for understanding international relations in the region.

Successful physical transportation infrastructure projects sponsored by either China or Russia, or both, generally result from the promotion of the two major powers' interests. Connecting the region from within tends to occur when the intraregional transportation projects happen to coincide either with the specific objectives of the major powers or with their activities aiming to expand the sphere of influence in the individual Central Asian states. When projects meet the objectives of both Russia and China, the two cooperate. When they cooperate, noticeable results in the development of transportation infrastructure take place. However, such projects do not necessarily lead to enhanced regional cooperation in Central Asia. The example is Western China – Western Europe International Automobile Corridor which 'conveniently' bypasses the rest of the Central Asia. Occasionally, however, the projects do contribute toward regional cooperation, as in the case of the Kyrgyzstan's new north-south road.

Furthermore, when China and Russia's interest neither converge nor diverge, there seems to be fewer obstacles to transportation infrastructure projects. However, these projects may either do nothing to or actually impede regional cooperation. The examples are the projects in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Finally, and very importantly, when China and Russia's interests diverge, geopolitics may actually overtake considerations for infrastructural development. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan

railway. Visibly, the neorealist concepts of distrust and self-help seem to dominate the nature of Chinese and Russian engagement in the development of the transportation sector in Central Asia. The geopolitics behind transportation infrastructure development seem to be strongly connected to the nature of the Sino-Russian relations.

Noticeably, the positions of the smaller states tend to play an important role in actualizing or limiting the major powers' intentions to pursue transportation projects in the region. The considerations of Central Asian leaders are crucial for the states' attitudes toward the outside powers engagement in infrastructural sectors. Kyrgyzstan's several heads of state had to maneuver between various attitudes of their constituencies toward Russia's and China's engagement in their country. In Tajikistan, a strong clan culture defined commitments of president Rakhmon to specific regions, which partly affected the direction of China-funded roads.¹⁴⁸ In Uzbekistan, distrustful, cautious and patronizing character of the late president Karimov for two decades defined the foreign policy of the country.¹⁴⁹ Because of Uzbekistan's central location as the only one bordering every other Central Asian state, Karimov's attitude remained instrumental for the status of a number of intraregional projects. The logic of omnibalancing, under which the leaders of the small states consider both internal and external factors in their decision-making process, is useful for understanding what drives Central Asian states to facilitate or limit major powers' engagement in the transportation sector.

Nevertheless, analysis of the activities of the major powers is crucial not only for interpretation of the effects of their engagement on Central Asian regionalism, but also for understanding of their intentions in the region and the vicinity. Russia's motives appear to be relatively clear. On the one hand, it aims to prevent the decline of its sphere of influence in Central Asia. On the other, Russia focuses on expanding its reach in the states which participate in the Russia-led Eurasian integration initiatives. Considering the varying nature of China's engagement, analysis of the transportation sector is necessary, but not sufficient for understanding China's intentions in the region. One thing is clear; despite its superior economic power China is not always capable of pursuing its agenda and subsequently fostering Central Asian regionalism. As a rising power, China has to choose its battles and, therefore, often has to follow the path of the least resistance. Garver suggests that China's "west" is like American "west", the land of frontiers, except without an ocean. Therefore, China needs to build roads to 'get out'.¹⁵⁰ It appears that the north part of the region, specifically Kazakhstan, is seen by China as a gateway to Europe. The southern part appears to be designated as a transit route to Afghanistan and further south, to Iran and potentially the Middle East. Central Asian transportation infrastructure no longer leads solely to Russia; instead, it has the potential to connect East Asia with South Asia, West Asia and beyond. In this way China's has been reconnecting the region in a novel way. In addition to this *reconnecting*, China has also been *rewiring* Central Asia. Understanding China's and Russia's engagement in the power and energy sector can further contribute toward understanding of their intentions in the region. This is also an essential step to answer the main question of the thesis of how China and Russia influence regional cooperation in Central Asia. The next chapter deals with this step.

¹⁴⁸ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 12, 2016

¹⁴⁹ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 14, 2016

¹⁵⁰ Garver, John W., "Development of China's Overland Transportation Links with Central, Southwest and South Asia," *The China Quarterly*, 2006, 185, 1-22

Chapter Six

Trading places in Central Asia: The “shift” in the nature of Russian and Chinese engagement and its effects on regional cooperation in the energy field

Transportation and energy infrastructure are often addressed in the same context in the International Relations literature. However, the two infrastructural sectors produce different effects on regional cooperation. Functioning transportation routes and regulations, designed to ease border crossings, have capacity to increase regional cohesion by facilitating intraregional trade and enabling movements of people. Subsequently, the auto-roads and railways tend to serve as catalysts for bottom-up regional cooperation. Even if the roads are commissioned by governments and laid by state-owned enterprises, once built, they are mainly used by actors below the state. In other words, transportation infrastructure is sanctioned by elites during the construction stages, but has greater potential for regular people’s movement once it is complete. In contrast, energy networks provide strong basis for cooperation on the interstate level. Flows of gas and electric power are sensitive areas which are generally curated by related ministries and state-controlled enterprises. Energy and fuels sales and transit are often politicized; therefore agreements on energy and fuels require cooperation between the highest levels of national governments. Additionally, the transit of energy through multiple countries requires practical multilateral efforts in order to maintain the projects which involve an advanced level of technical support. This coordination is not possible without cooperation between technical agencies of the countries which host the networks. Although technical cooperation does not necessarily involve high ranking officials, it is, generally, empowered by the national governments. In that regard, energy cooperation, both political and technical, can be considered as a *continuous* elite driven process. Therefore energy cooperation is more consistent with the top-down nature of Central Asian regionalism. Subsequently, understanding the nature of major powers’ engagement in the energy sector in the region is essential for answering the main question of the thesis – how do Russia and China influence Central Asian regionalism?

In addition to the transnational nature of energy networks, energy development and transit are considered to be profitable. Pipelines and power transmission lines have comparable costs with other elements of physical infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and tunnels. However, they provide faster returns. It is, therefore, logical that both Russia and China took interest in energy related projects in Central Asia. The Russian energy system has been closely connected to Central Asian energy resources, and as of 2014, Russia was “the main investor in Central Asian electricity markets, in terms of both grids and hydropower plants.”¹ China originally engaged in the extraction and transit of hydrocarbons in Central Asia in the mid 2000’s with the aim of diversifying its sources of energy. Both major powers played significant roles in both sectors, but the nature of their engagement had different effects on Central Asian regional cooperation. The chapter argues that there have been two noticeable trends in that regard.

First, neither of the two major powers made significant impact on facilitating cooperation in the electric power sector because it is closely tied to water resources, which remain a serious point of friction in the region. In fact, both Russia and China have contributed towards energy independence of several Central Asian states subsequently reducing the level of interdependence among them.

Second, in the field of hydrocarbons, Russia actively engaged with Central Asian

¹ Laruelle, Marlene, “Russia in Central Asia”, *Europe-Central Asia Monitor*, No. 17, p. 2

states on a bilateral basis, and provided very limited support for multilateral initiatives. Russia's role has been that of a "middle man" rather than a unifying actor. China, in contrast, has been expanding its bilateral energy-securing initiatives to involve all the central Asian States under schemes which require active practical interstate cooperation.

In the first section the chapter provides a brief overview of the power-generating sector in Central Asia and analyzes the effects of Russian and Chinese bilateral and multilateral initiatives on the degree of regional cooperation. The second section provides a discussion of the gas producing and transporting industry in Central Asia and highlights the differences between the two major powers' engagement in the energy sector.

Water and electricity

Regional potential

Physical geography provided logical foundation for the Soviet government to develop an energy network based on the complimentary nature of resource distribution among the republics in Central Asia (see Table 1). The direction of the network was based on the seasonal energy and water needs of the industrial and agricultural areas of the region. Mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provided hydro-generated electric power and water to downstream Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The latter three sent coal- and gas-generated electricity to the upstream countries when the water levels were not sufficient to produce electricity.

Table 1. Distribution of Energy resources in CA²

	Country	Above-ground water resources, % from whole CA	Proportion of water resources received from outside	Hydrocarbon resources, % from whole CA	% of electric power from thermal power stations (gas and coal)	% of electric power from hydro power stations
Water abundant. Upstream.	Tajikistan	45.6%	Insignificant	Less than 3%	Insignificant	92.7%
	Kyrgyzstan	27.2%	Insignificant	Less than 3%	Insignificant	83.5%
Hydrocarbons abundant. Downstream	Kazakhstan	19.3%	42%	77.4%	87.5%	
	Uzbekistan	6.0%	77%	12.7%	85.9%	
	Turkmenistan	1.9%	94%	6.7%	99.9%	

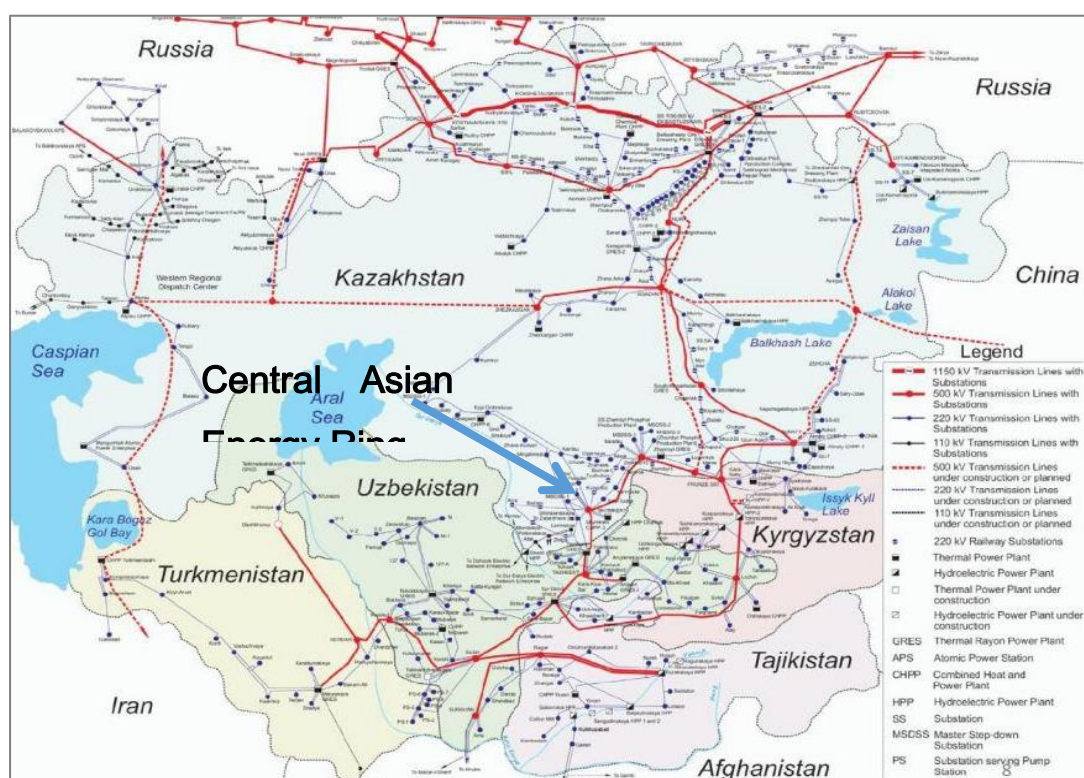
The Central Asian Integrated Power System (IPS) was a sophisticated network which connected power grids of the Soviet republics in the region. Its main circular section which is referred to as Central Asian Energy Ring transported electricity produced by Kyrgyzstan's multiple hydropower stations through the Fergana Valley traversing populous sections of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and southern Kazakhstan before reentering Kyrgyzstan from the north. (Coal rich and industrial northern Kazakhstan was closely connected to Russia's energy system and served both supplying and transit functions). Tajikistan hydropower plants serviced southern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. During winters, upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan stored water and relied on electricity generated by thermal power stations of their

² "Monitoring of positions of Central Asian countries on the issue of usage of trans-border water resources", *National Institute of Strategic Research*, Bishkek, 2013, 6-7

neighbors.³ During the agricultural season the two upstream states would release water for irrigation needs of their neighbors while simultaneously generating electric power.

Considering the interweaving nature of the republics' borders, various internal sub-regions served as energy suppliers for their neighbors and vice versa. For instance, energy abundant southern Tajikistan used to supply electricity to neighboring Uzbekistan, while energy deficient northern Tajikistan received its electricity from other sections of Uzbekistan. Similarly, southern Kyrgyzstan supplied electricity to the Fergana Valley area of Uzbekistan, while northern Kyrgyzstan obtained its electricity from central regions of Uzbekistan using Kazakhstan section of the grid for transit.⁴ The frequency of the electric power flow was

Map 1. Central Asian Integrated Power System⁵



controlled through the Toktogul reservoir in Kyrgyzstan. Due to its upstream location it had the most suitable capacity to store and release water as necessary.⁶ Centrally located Uzbekistan also played a crucial role in the Central Asian IPS. The whole *hydro-energy complex* required a great amount of coordination and was managed by the Central Asian

³ Tomoberg, Igor, "Energetika Tsentral'noy Azii: problem i perspektivy" ("Energy of Central Asia: Problems and Prospectives"), *Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam (Russian International Business Council)*, April 18, 2012, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=324#top-content

⁴ Rakhmetov, Salauat, "Pereday energuyi po krugu" ("Send the energy around the circle"), *Expert Online*, October 20, 2008, <http://expertonline.kz/a4759/>

⁵ Central Asian Integrated Power System, *Kazakhstan Energy Forum* (n.d.), <http://www.kazenergyforum.com/sites/default/files/%D0%A2%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%20%D1%80%D1%83.pdf>, accessed April 20, 2016

⁶ Author's Interview, Bishkek, January 22, 2016

United Dispatch Centre in Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent.⁷ Above all, during the Soviet time the *water-energy balance* was calculated and controlled by the Ministry of Energy in Moscow.⁸

Given its complexity, the energy exchange system designed during the Soviet time required significant inter-state coordination in order to remain functional after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus, the electric power sector provided broad ground for cooperation among the newly independent states. Moreover, power generating and transit complex, and water sharing arrangements are inseparable in Central Asia. Generally, alterations in one system cause noticeable effects in the other. Therefore, they can be addressed in one context.

The hydropower complex can be seen as another vivid example of *obdurate infrastructure*, which, according to Johnson, has the capacity to provide connectivity between the states despite their political friction.⁹ In fact, for a considerable amount of time after independence, the hydropower complex proved to be more *obdurate* than other elements of Soviet-era infrastructure, such as roads and railways. As it turned out, building new roads to bypass neighboring states in post-Soviet Central Asia was more realistic than diverting rivers and dismantling dams. However, the *obduracy* of the hydropower sector in Central Asia did not necessarily enhance regional connectivity, and often actually caused political disagreements, which prevented regional cooperation. Additionally, China and Russia had enough capacity to alter pre-existing infrastructure, thus, minimizing its *obduracy* and subsequently diminishing the degree of interdependence between the formerly inter-reliant states. Initially, both Russia and China had done just that: each of the two promoted and financed certain projects which enabled Central Asian states to become less dependent on their neighboring rivals. However, subsequent effects of major powers' engagement on regional cooperation in Central Asia differed.

Limited impact of regional institutions: Eurasian Development Bank as a weak instrument of Eurasian integration

Multilateral initiatives led by Russia i.e. the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) did little to resolve disagreements in the hydropower sector and instead mainly focused on developing power-generating facilities unconnected to the Central Asian IPS. This trend is visible from the projects financed by the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB). Most of the EDB's energy-related projects in Central Asia are in Kazakhstan, and their capacity lies in producing electric power for Kazakhstan's internal needs, connecting different geographic sectors of Kazakhstan's grid, and producing energy for export to Russia. Northern Kazakhstan - Aktobe Region inter power transmission line (between two distant northern regions in Kazakhstan), co-financed by the EDB and Kazakhstan's lenders, connects energy rich northern areas of Kazakhstan with the energy deficient western part of the country.¹⁰

Upgrade and construction of the additional generating unit at Ekibastuz-2 GRES

⁷ Peyrouse, Sebastien, "The Central Asian Power Grid in Danger?", *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 09, 2009, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/11960-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2009-12-9-art-11960.html>

⁸ Author's Interview, Bishkek, January 22, 2016

⁹ Johnson, Corey, "Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia", in Walcott, Susan and Johnson, Corey (Eds.), *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From the South China to the Caspian Sea*, (2014), Routledge, 110-129 The

¹⁰ "Constructing the Northern Kazakhstan – Aktobe region inter power transmission line", *Eurasian Development Bank* (n.d), http://www.eabr.org/e/projects/edb/index.php?id_4=167, accessed on April 21, 2016

(thermal power station)¹¹ was co-financed by the EDB and Russian Vnesheconom Bank along with Kazakhstan's Halyk bank.¹² The EDB also financed equipment purchase for Bogatyr mine which supplies Ekibastuz-2 with coal.¹³ The enhanced capacity of Ekibastuz-2 enabled it to supply three quarters of its electricity to Russia.¹⁴ Ekibastuz-2 is actually 50 percent owned by Russia's energy conglomerated INTER RAO UES.¹⁵ The conglomerate's major shareholders are Russian state owned companies.¹⁶ Energy security in northern Kazakhstan is crucial for Russia. Energy transit between two crucial Integrated Power Systems – from the Ural IPS to the Siberian IPS – takes place through northern Kazakhstan.¹⁷

Furthermore, northern Kazakhstan has approximately 80 percent of the country's power generation capacity.¹⁸ Importantly, increased output of electric energy in the area made it feasible for Kazakhstan to transfer electricity from the self-sufficient north to the south, which was previously power dependent on its Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The link was built in 2009 in the form of North-South Transmission Line of 500kV, which enabled Kazakhstan to send surplus electricity from the power plants in the north to the southern regions.¹⁹ The move reduced Kazakhstan's dependency on the hydropower generated electricity imported from Kyrgyzstan through the Central Asian Energy Ring.²⁰ The North-South Transmission Line, however, was funded by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),²¹ rather than Russia or China. Hence, in this case Russia-led EDB did not decrease interdependence between the Central Asian states directly by financing an alternative energy transit route, but rather indirectly by financing the source of this energy.

One of the EDB's projects with seeming capacity to facilitate regional cooperation in Central Asia was the loan extended in 2013 to Kyrgyzstan's main power generating company Electric Stations to purchase coal from Kazakhstan to fuel Bishkek Combined Power Heat

¹¹ GRES stands for Russian *Gosudarstvennaya Rayonnaya Elektrostantsiya*, which translates as *State Regional Power Station*. The term has been used to refer to high power electricity-only-producing thermal power stations as opposed to TETs (*TeploElektroTsentral'*) which refers to combined heat and power plants. Thermal Power Stations in Russia and Soviet Union article, *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* cited on Wikipedia, (n.d), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thermal_power_stations_in_Russia_and_Soviet_Union, accessed on May 10, 2016

¹² "Upgrading Ekibastuz GRES-2 and constructing its third generating unit", *Eurasian Development Bank* (n.d), http://www.eabr.org/e/projects/edb/index.php?id_4=230, accessed on April 21

¹³ "Investments financing for Bohatyr Komyr", *Eurasian Development Bank* (n.d), http://www.eabr.org/e/projects/edb/index.php?id_4=263&from_4=2, accessed on April 21

¹⁴ Author's interview, Almaty, January 30, 2016

¹⁵ Absametova, Aigul, "Integration Processes in the Electric Power Sectors of the EDB Member States", *Eurasian Development Bank*, EDB Sector Report No. 15, 2012, Almaty, p.29, http://www.eabr.org/general/upload/CII%20-%20izdania/Yerbook-2012/a_n5_2012_16.pdf

¹⁶ INTER RAO UES stands for Rossiyskoye Aktsionermoye Obshestvo Ob'eyedenenniye Energticheskie Sistemy (Russia United Energy Systems)

¹⁷ Absametova, 25

¹⁸ Nutall, Clare, "Temporary respite for Kazakhstan's electricity generation sector", *Intellinews*, March 18, 2009, <http://www.intellinews.com/temporary-respite-for-kazakhstan-s-electricity-generation-sector-500014515/?archive=bne>

¹⁹ Kazakhstan's population is concentrated in the North and in the South with the central regions being relatively empty. During the Soviet times the 'north' was more integrated with Russia, while the 'south' had been more integrated with its Central Asian neighbors, i.e. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

²⁰ Absametova, 18

²¹ North-South Electricity Transmission Project (Phase III) in Kazakhstan, *Devex*, (n.d), <https://www.devex.com/projects/tenders/north-south-electricity-transmission-project-phase-iii-in-kazakhstan/5167>, accessed on April 22, 2016

(CPH) plant. The supply would enable Bishkek CPH to generate enough electricity for its needs in the winter and to sell the access electricity back to Kazakhstan in the summer.²² “The project had a significant impact on sustainable development and economic integration. Strengthening the country’s energy security underpinned Kyrgyzstan’s economic growth, and contributed to the development of the Central Asian integrated power system.”²³ Moreover, according to a high ranking EDB official, the project could contribute toward normalization of relations with Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan would not need to fulfill its winter heating needs by releasing water downstream to Uzbekistan off-season.²⁴ However, the temporary nature of the project and its short length of only two and a half years, as well the loan’s relatively low amount of 30 million US dollars offers reasons for skepticism about the project’s sustainability and long term impact on regional cooperation. Overall, the EDB, as an agent of the Russia-driven Eurasian integration initiatives, contributed little to regional cooperation in the energy field, if it had not contributed toward isolation of individual states. Even according to the EDB-issued report

the development of electricity generating facilities and power grids infrastructure in energy-deficient regions that depend on electricity imports, as well as the decline in electric power exports and imports, and outages of the interstate electrical grids reinforce electrical independence of the EDB member states and weaken integration of their power sectors.²⁵

Other multilateral initiatives had comparably minimal effect on regionalization of Central Asia through the power and energy sector. These are discussed below.

Limited impact of regional institutions: Sensitivity of energy issues weakens the efforts of the CAREC and the SCO

The challenging nature of resolving hydropower disagreements is highlighted by the observation that the topic of water management was even excluded from the agenda of Central Asian Regional Cooperation Program (CAREC), an initiative with a proven track record of completed projects focused specifically on promoting regional cooperation in Central Asia.²⁶ Under the framework of the CAREC, China and Uzbekistan insisted that water sharing was too sensitive of an issue which was best to be addressed bilaterally.²⁷ Similarly, China-initiated SCO managed to do little to resolve points of contention related to water sharing between upstream and downstream states. “Since the SCO operates on the principles of consensus decision-making and non-interference, it is not in a good position to resolve conflicts among members such as ... regional water management conflicts.”²⁸ The issue of resolving water management had been raised in the SCO meetings by the two most powerful Central Asia leaders, Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but it has not been adequately addressed.²⁹ The sensitivity of energy in Central Asia extended from hydropower to other types of energy resources and stalled multilateral initiatives in the sector.

²² “Financing Fuel Supplies for the Bishkek CPH Plant”, *Eurasian Development Bank*, (n.d), http://eabr.org/e/projects/edb/?id_4=347, accessed April 21, 2016

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 12, 2016

²⁵ Absametova, 21

²⁶ Linn, Johannes. F., “Central Asian Regional Integration and Cooperation: Reality or Mirage?”, *The Economics of the Post-Soviet and Eurasian Integration*, EDB Eurasian Integration Yearbook, 2012, 111

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Linn, 104

²⁹ “Monitoring of positions...”

The idea of the SCO Energy Club was first floated by Russia in 2006, but had remained in discussion stages for a relatively long period of time.³⁰ Uzbekistan was the first to officially propose the formation of the club, and the smaller states seemed to support the initiative because of a chance to resolve water issues.³¹ In 2011, a joint statement from the SCO countries' leaders announced that "an 'energy mechanism' should be 'open to all countries and organizations that agree with the SCO's tenets and tasks'."³² The functions of the entity were not clearly defined. The lack of clarity possibly resulted from the diverging interests of the energy exporting and energy importing Central Asian states.³³ Additionally, the general interests of the two major powers not only differed, but were almost diametrically opposite. "China seeks energy security in the sense of security of supply of energy raw materials to feed its increasing demand. However, Russia feels such a club can bring together the oil producing states to control supply and prices."³⁴ The SCO Energy Club was eventually announced to be formed in 2013, but a memorandum of establishment was not signed by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan this omitting two out of six SCO members. In addition to the remaining SCO member states, the document was signed by several countries only vaguely affiliated with the SCO, i.e. Belarus, Mongolia, India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Sri Lanka.³⁵

This composition of the membership and the nature of the SCO as a "parent organization" led to several evident weaknesses of the Energy Club in its ability to facilitate multilateral cooperation within Central Asia. First, a high level of inclusivity was likely to divert attention from Central Asia and the region-specific issues, such as water sharing. Second, the non-SCO members of the Energy Club represent various distant regions, i.e. Eastern Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and West Asia. These regions contain their own multilateral initiatives. The existence of overlapping memberships in the energy-related schemes presented challenges for maintaining loyalty to one organization and generally made matters confusing and complicated.³⁶ Third, according to one Russian expert, "the relationships in the energy sector have already been established," therefore the bureaucracy of the new supranational structure and the cost of its maintenance would be of little use to the development of cooperation in the energy field.³⁷ Fourth, considering the intergovernmental and consensus-seeking nature of the SCO itself, the Energy Club affiliated with the organization remained a dialogue platform with little, if any, institutional power.³⁸ Finally, lack of accountability allowed Russia and China to either disregard the Club in their energy-

³⁰ Akiner, Shirin, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a networking world", *Global Strategy Forum*, June 2010, <http://www.globalstrategyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Shanghai-Cooperation-Organisation.pdf>

³¹ Kassenova, Nargis, "The Shanghai Cooperation Energy Club: Purpose and prospects", in *Caspian Energy Politics: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan*, Indira Overland, Heidi Kjaernet and Andrea Kendall-Taylor (Eds.), New York: Routledge, 2010, 162-177, 170

³² Culter, Robert M., "SCO energy clubhouse still under construction", *Asia Times*, June 30, 2011, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/MF30Ag01.html

³³ Kassenova (2010), 171

³⁴ Kundu, Nivedita Das, "Russia pushes for strengthening SCO energy club", *Russia and India Report*, August 13, 2013, p.3, https://in.rbth.com/russian_india_experts/2013/08/12/russia_pushes_for_strengthening_scos_energy_club_2836

³⁵ "SCO energy club will not be able to create a counterweight to OPEC", *JSC Institute of Electricity Development and Energy Saving, Ministry of Industry and New Technologies of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, January 17, 2014, <http://kazee.kz/en/news/energoklub-shos-ne-smozhet-sozdat-protivoves-opek/>

³⁶ Kassenova (2010), 173

³⁷ "SCO energy club will not..."

³⁸ Kassenova (2010)

related decisions or utilize it to achieve their individual goals, at times unrelated to the agenda of energy cooperation in Central Asia.

Russia-driven energy projects in Central Asia often stalled under various pretenses.³⁹ Moreover, Russia also placed more efforts in other energy cooperation initiatives, mainly in East Asian and European directions, compared to the minimal efforts allotted to the SCO Energy Club.⁴⁰ Yet, Russia may be able to employ the SCO Energy Club as a mechanism to keep China in check and as a bargaining chip with the West.⁴¹ For China, the Energy Club may contribute toward some of the key purposes of the SCO. That is, strengthen the perception of China-driven institutionalism. “At the same time, to claim for the SCO the credit for every bilateral or even multilateral energy agreement achieved among its member-states (or participants in the undefined "energy mechanism") would further dilute its credibility.”⁴² For instance, China-built power transmission lines in Tajikistan (discussed further) are often listed as the SCO-related projects; however Central Asia expert Kassenova states that “while political experts [in Tajikistan] confidentially listed the loans provided in the SCO framework, officials directly responsible for monitoring these loans were not sure which were SCO loans. They monitored them as normal bilateral credit.”⁴³ (This problem of monitoring multilateral projects is common for regional integration initiatives and cannot be considered an SCO-specific weakness).

Overall, the SCO Energy Club’s capacity was diminished by different perceptions of its role between Russia and China. Generally, multilateral international organizations and initiatives have not only achieved little in addressing energy problems in Central Asia, but also lacked potential to develop cooperation on the basis of energy. Considering this, it is more suitable to evaluate China’s and Russia’s engagement in the region using the second or state to state level of analysis, rather than the level of international institutions. First, however it is important to briefly outline the trend that emerged in the Central Asia’s energy sector during the second decade of independence.

From cooperation to isolation

Water sharing has been referred to as one of the most controversial issues which stand in the way of enhanced regional cooperation in Central Asia.⁴⁴ On the contrary, the issue of transnational bodies of water and hydropower management has been continuously addressed by the Central Asian states.⁴⁵ However, multiple agreements signed in the post-Soviet years did not always satisfy all the parties.⁴⁶ The documents, at times, lacked implementation mechanisms. Some of the declarations were broken or not properly enforced by corresponding national agencies. Yet, because of their weaknesses, these multilateral initiatives continued to “pull” national governments to the negotiating table with their counterparts. Also importantly, these declarations and agreements assumed continuous technical cooperation between corresponding agencies of the neighboring states. That remained the case until Central Asian states began to disconnect their power grids from the

³⁹ Kassenova (2010), 167

⁴⁰ Kassenova (2010), 165, 169

⁴¹ Kassenova (2010)

⁴² Cutler

⁴³ Kassenova, Nargiz, “China as an Emerging Donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,” *Russie.Nei.Visions N36*, IFRI, January 2009, 15

⁴⁴ Cooley, Alexander, *Great game, local rules. The new great power contest in Central Asia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

⁴⁵ “Monitoring of positions of Central Asian countries...”

⁴⁶ Ibid

Integrated Power System (IPS).

Turkmenistan was the first one to detach its electric system from the Central Asian IPS in 2003, but abandoning central dispatch did not cause serious negative effects either in Turkmenistan or region-wide.⁴⁷ Two factors accounted for the relatively smooth withdrawal – Turkmenistan’s abundance of hydrocarbon resources and its peripheral location. The first enabled Turkmenistan to quickly develop energy self-sufficiency. The second factor, which implied already lower levels of interdependence, ensured that disconnection from the IPS did not seriously affect neighboring states, thus avoiding potential discord. Other countries in the region, however, had much closer links.

Until 2009 Tajikistan had seasonal exchange with Uzbekistan, releasing water and supplying hydro-generated power during the agricultural season, while Uzbekistan would return the same amount of electricity to Tajikistan during the winter when the latter was storing water.⁴⁸ Tajikistan also exchanged electric power with Kyrgyzstan during the winter months.⁴⁹ The process suggested continuity of soviet pragmatism, under which logistical feasibility defined the approach to sharing resources between the two states with comparable, non-complimentary energy potentials. Additionally, Tajikistan imported Turkmen energy through Uzbekistan which charged transit fees. The agreement was beneficial for all the three parties and lasted until 2009 when Tajikistan and transit entity Uzbekenergo failed to reach agreement.⁵⁰ Another practice of energy exchange, defined by seasonal needs, took place between Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, in which Uzbekistan, again, served as a transit state.⁵¹

All of these initiatives required coordinated effort and could be viewed as vivid examples of interstate cooperation, both bilateral and multilateral. However, between 2006 and 2010, Central Asian IPS dealt with numerous power outages originated by national power grids. Tajikistan, in particular, in need of power during the cold winters occasionally overloaded the system.⁵² Subsequent disagreements, which ensued between the states, were used as a motivation for Uzbekistan to leave the IPS.⁵³ After Uzbekistan left the system in December 2009, the consequences were significant for several actors. Because Tajikistan’s “section of the ring” lay between the borders with Uzbekistan, the former became disconnected from the Central Asian IPS. Tajikistan could no longer continue exporting energy to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Furthermore, the utility of exchange with Kyrgyzstan remained limited because of non-complimentary needs of the two upstream countries. As a result, Uzbekistan was positioned in control to dictate terms of energy exchanges with Tajikistan.

There is little evidence that either Russia or China financed any of the projects which enabled Uzbekistan to disconnect from the IPS. It appears that the costs for dismantling and upgrading certain sections of the Uzbekistan national grid were incurred by Uzbekistan’s government independently.⁵⁴ However, neither Russia, nor China, nor multilateral institutions

⁴⁷ Aminjonov, Farkhod, “Central Asian countries’ power systems are now isolated, but not everybody is happy!” *Eurasian Research Institute, Akhmet Yazzawi University*, March 14, 2016, <http://eurasian-research.org/en/research/comments/energy/central-asian-countries%E2%80%99-power-systems-are-now-isolated-not-everyone-happy>

⁴⁸ Absametova, 28

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid, 26

⁵² “Tajikistan dreams of regional electricity grid rebirth”, *Eurasianet*, June 27, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/node/84136>

⁵³ “Uzbekistan Withdrawing From Regional Power Grid,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, December 01, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Uzbekistan_Withdrawing_From_Regional_Power_Grid/1892220.html

⁵⁴ “Uzbekistan Withdrawing...”

initiated or dominated by the two major powers (i.e. CIS, EAEC, SCO) acted sufficiently to prevent the disagreements which led to the disintegration of the IPS. More importantly, the timing of Uzbekistan's withdrawal coincided with certain Russian actions and announcements. More specifically, in 2009, Russia issued a 300 million dollar loan to Kyrgyzstan for construction of Kambarata-2 Hydro Electric Power Plant (HEPP), in Kambarata, Kyrgyzstan, which became operational in 2010. At the same time, Russia announced the decision to finance 1.7 billion dollar Kambarata-1 HEPP in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁵ Disconnection from the IPS could be viewed as Uzbekistan's reaction to the dams being built upstream.

Russia's engagement in the power sector

In other cases, the nature of Russia's engagement in the power sector in Central Asia often defined the relationships among the Central Asian states. According to several Central Asia-based politics and economics experts, Russia has used announcements to finance Kambarata dams in Kyrgyzstan and Rogun dam in Tajikistan as points of pressure on Uzbekistan.⁵⁶ Similarly, Russia's periodic expressions of abandonment of support for dam building projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have served as a mechanism for exerting political pressure on these upstream states as well as signaling cyclical improvements of relations with Uzbekistan.⁵⁷ Despite Uzbekistan's reluctance to participate in Russia-driven integration and cooperation initiatives, such as the CSTO, the EAEC and the EAEU, strong bilateral relations with Uzbekistan continued to be a priority in Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia.⁵⁸

For Uzbekistan, Russia remained an important economic partner and main importer of Uzbekistan products, other than gas.⁵⁹ Despite its aversion to multilateralism and, especially, supranational structures, Uzbekistan has been pragmatic in dealing with Russia. In 2011, for example, Uzbekistan welcomed increased Russian investments in the energy sector for a five year term.⁶⁰ However, the move did not prevent Uzbekistan from leaving the CSTO, Russia-led defense alliance, in 2012. At the same time, neither Uzbekistan, nor any of the other Central Asian states, took serious steps to join regional organizations which didn't include Russia.⁶¹ As Allison noted in 2004, if Central Asian states were to use regionalism to balance against Russia, it would cause further deterioration of regional cooperation.⁶²

Considerations of relations with Uzbekistan in Russia's engagement in Central Asia is tellingly demonstrated in Russia's delay of Kambarata-1 HEPP and Upper Naryn Cascade of four smaller HEPPs, the two initiatives worth over 3 billion dollars.⁶³ Possibly not coincidentally Russia's originally declared intention to finance Kambarata-1 HEPP appeared in 2009, shortly before former Kyrgyzstan's president Bakiev's announcement to close down American Manas airbase (a.k.a. transit center) near Bishkek.⁶⁴ In August 2012 formal agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan to construct Kambarata-1 and Upper Naryn

⁵⁵ Absametova, 29

⁵⁶ Author's interview, Bishkek, January 22, 2016

Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Author's interview, Beijing, March 9, 2016

⁵⁹ Author's interview, Beijing, December 30, 2015

⁶⁰ Culter

⁶¹ Uzbekistan was a member of the GUUAM for a brief period of time

⁶² Allison, Roy, "Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, 80, 3 (2004), 463-483

⁶³ Author's Interview, Bishkek, January, 22

⁶⁴ Bakiev did not implement his announcement.

Cascade was signed under new Kyrgyz president Atambaev.⁶⁵ However, in the end of 2015, Atambaev unilaterally denounced the agreement. The official reason for denunciation offered by Kyrgyz government was Russia's inability to finance the projects due to strained financial situation brought down by the economic crisis.⁶⁶ Both projects were stalled by the Russian side, even though Kyrgyzstan admitted delays in allocation of land in the past.⁶⁷ Multiple sources suggest a tendency in Russia's reluctance to fulfill its financial and infrastructure building commitments in Central Asia.⁶⁸ Noticeably though, Russia's delay in the hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan coincided with the improvement of relationship with Uzbekistan in 2013-2015.⁶⁹ This rapprochement culminated in the incredibly strong declaration of mutual friendship, cooperation and strategic partnership during president Putin's official visit to Uzbekistan's president Karimov in April 2016.⁷⁰

During the "colder" stage of Russia-Uzbekistan relations, after Uzbekistan left Russia-initiated EUEC, Russia-financed projects partially enabled Tajikistan to overcome critical dependency on Uzbekistan. Sangtuda HEPP, which cost 720 million dollars to build and which is 75 percent owned by Russian companies was commissioned in July of 2009 and had the capacity to produce 12 percent of Tajikistan electricity.⁷¹ The HEPP was controlled by Inter RAO UES, Russia's largest energy holding company. This way, Russia enabled Tajikistan to generate a sufficient amount of energy for domestic consumption. Moreover, Sangtuda HEPP had the capacity to generate excess electricity for sale to neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷² Noticeably, in 2015, due to Russia-created energy potential, Tajikistan expressed its willingness and ability to reconnect to the Central Asian IPS through Uzbekistan.⁷³ The intention suggested lack of continuity in the effects of Russia's energy activities in Central Asia.

In 2013 Cooley and Laurelle argued:

⁶⁵ Rickleton, Chris, "Kyrgyzstan: Russia Has Made "No Real Progress" on Hydropower Promises", *Eurasianet*, February 16, 2015

⁶⁶ Hashimova, Umida, "Kyrgyzstan Determined to Pursue Its Hydropower Plans With or Without Russia", *The Jamestown Foundation*, January 15, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/regions/centralasia/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44990&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=658&cHash=b9ab195f2029fb9c605ccb0e08de72f1#.Vyd5v3IjInIU

⁶⁷ Rickleton, February 16, 2015

Putz, Catherine, "New Hydropower Project Partners Needed in Kyrgyzstan," *The Diplomat*, December, 28, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/new-hydropower-project-partners-needed-in-kyrgyzstan/>

⁶⁸ Hashimova, January 15, 2016;

Rickleton, February 16, 2015;

Author's interviews: Bishkek, February 12, 2016; Almaty, January 30, 2012

⁶⁹ Sorbello, Paolo, "Yes, Uzbekistan is Putin's Friend", *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2014

<http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/yes-uzbekistan-is-putins-friend/>

Azizov Demir, "Uzbekistan, Russia stress need to develop strategic relations", *Trend News Agency*, December 11, 2014, <http://en.TrendNewsAgency/casia/uzbekistan/2342494.html>

⁷⁰ "Putin i Karimov: 'Otkrovenniy razgovor' o sel'hozproduktah, russkom yazyke i peretekanii nestabil'nosti" ["Putin and Karimov: 'Frank talk' about agriculture, Russian language and fluidity of instability"] *Fergana News Agency*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8952>

⁷¹ Najibullah, Farangis, "Central Asia's Era of Cheap Gas Comes to a Close", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, January 6, 2009,

http://www.rferl.org/content/Central_Asias_Era_Of_Cheap_Gas_Comes_To_A_Close/1367074.html

Kozhevnikov, Roman; Onegina, Anastasia, "Russia Boosts C. Asia Ties, Opens Plant in Tajikistan". *Reuters*, (31 July 2009), <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKLV616217?sp=true>

⁷² "Tajik Power Line to Afghanistan Inaugurated", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 20, 2016,

http://www.rferl.org/content/afghanistan_tajikistan_power_line_inaugurated/24373587.html

⁷³ Chorshanbiev Payrav, "Tajikistan offers restoration of the Central Asian unified power grid", *Asia Plus Media group*, August 7, 2015, <http://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan-offers-restoration-central-asian-unified-power-grid>

recent Russian policy toward Central Asia marks not a decline but a distinct shift in strategic logic—from one that emphasizes regional mediation and maximizing influence across the whole region to a more focused logic of hierarchy that seeks to support selected states with more focused instruments, take sides in regional disputes, and push for deeper integration within regional security and economic organizations that have narrower memberships.⁷⁴

However, the examples from the energy sector suggest lack of consistency and opportunism in the nature of Russia's engagement in Central Asia. The analysis of the energy sector highlights Russia's capacity, yet, reluctance to facilitate regional cooperation. Hence, Russia's involvement in the energy sector had limited long-term effects on the development of interdependency among Central Asian states.

Considering the nature of such position, it appears logical that another powerful actor would act to fill the vacuum created by Russia's inconsistent engagement. Five months after the denunciation of the agreement, under which Russia was to finance and construct the Kambarata-1 HEPP and the Upper Naryn Cascade in Kyrgyzstan, China's Power Investment Corporation expressed willingness to construct the Upper Naryn Cascade.⁷⁵ No agreement was reached as of May 2018, but the discussion is another example of Chinese involvement with the Central Asian electric power sector. The character of China-sponsored projects, discussed in the following sub-sections, differs significantly from the nature of Russia's engagement in the power sector of the region.

Chinese engagement in the power sector: Power lines in Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, China-financed projects enabled transit of power generated by Sangtuda HEPP. The South-North line between Tursunzada in central Tajikistan and Khudjand in the north cost around 270 million dollars; it was financed by China Exim, constructed by Chinese electric company Tebian Electric Apparatus (TBEA) and was commissioned in November 2009.⁷⁶ Another line, Sangtuda-Khatlon-Lolazor, also financed and constructed by Chinese corporations, was put in use by June of 2008.⁷⁷ In combination, the two lines enabled the transfer of energy through central Tajikistan, and more importantly to the northern areas of the country, thus eliminating, or at least decreasing, Tajikistan's dependence on Uzbekistan's supplies.⁷⁸ The second line not coincidentally trespasses the area near President Rahmon's hometown and stronghold, Danghara, instead of running in a more direct route from Sangtuda HEPP.⁷⁹ The direction of the line suggests China's close relationship with

⁷⁴ Cooley, Alexander, Marlene Laruelle, "The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia. From Privileged Sphere, to Divide and Rule?", PONARS Eurasia Policy memo No. 261, July 2013, PONARSEurasia.org, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/new-policy-memo-changing-logic-russian-strategy-central-asia-privileged-sphere-divide-and>

⁷⁵ Lelik, Anna, "Kyrgyzstan: China replaces Russia as hydropower investor", *Eurasianet*, April 7, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/78201>

⁷⁶ "V Tadjikistane zapushena krupneishaya liniya elektroperedachi svyazavshaya yug i sever strany" ["In Tajikistan the largest power transmitting line, connecting south and north of the country has been launched"], *RBK News*, November 30, 2009, <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/20091130121731.shtml>

⁷⁷ "SCO and Development of Energy Sector in Tajikistan," May 30, 2014, http://www.patriotj.com/publ/novosti_sng/novosti_sng/shos_i_razvitie_ehnergetiki_tadjikistana/7-1-0-17505

⁷⁸ "President of Tajikistan Launched High Voltage Power Transmitting Line 'South-North'", *Trend News Agency*, November 30, 2009, <http://www.trend.az/business/energy/1590417.html>

⁷⁹ Author's interview February 19th, 2016

Tajikistan's leadership and the importance of inter-personal relationships in Central Asia. Finally, a third line, Khudjand-Ayuni, financed and built by Chinese agencies was completed in 2011 and provided an additional route for electricity flow from energy abundant south Tajikistan to its energy deficient north.⁸⁰ In addition, TBEA was contracted to build two thermal power stations in Dushanbe. One of them started operating in the beginning of 2014; the second was completed by the end of 2016.⁸¹ The stations were intended to secure power supply to Tajikistan's capital.

It is important to note that even though the power lines financed and built by China have decreased interdependence between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, they have the capacity to build a new integrated regional power system. The increased amount of electricity flowing to Khudjand in northern Tajikistan offers the potential to build a line further north to transfer electricity from Khudjand to Datka in central Kyrgyzstan.⁸² The line, though presently hypothetical, could connect China-built lines in Tajikistan with Chinese electric power projects in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, discussed in the next section.

Chinese engagement in the power sector: substation and transmission line in Kyrgyzstan

A substation in Datka in central Kyrgyzstan and an over 400 km long power transmitting line over mountainous areas from Datka to Kemin in northern Kyrgyzstan was also financed by China Exim bank and constructed by the TBEA.⁸³ Importantly, the line allowed Kyrgyzstan to transport electricity from its main hydropower-generating stations at Toktogul reservoir in Jalalabad region of Kyrgyzstan. Previously, electricity from the main sub-station of 1200 Mg Watts at Toktogul reservoir was transmitted through the Central Asia energy ring. That is, hydropower generated in central Kyrgyzstan would run clockwise to southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh), then eastern Uzbekistan (Andijan), traverse a section of northern Tajikistan, continue through central Uzbekistan (Tashkent), then through southern Kazakhstan (Taraz, Shemkent) and complete roughly three quarters of a full circle before reaching Kyrgyzstan and the capital Bishkek.⁸⁴ Only one low-power transmission line used to run directly from Toktogul to Bishkek.

This meant that Kyrgyzstan largely had to rely on Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to transport power, generated in the center of Kyrgyzstan, to its capital and the rest of its industrial north.⁸⁵ Through the completion of the Datka-Kemin line, China enabled Kyrgyzstan to significantly decrease, if not completely eliminate, energy dependency from Kazakhstan and more importantly, Uzbekistan, with which Kyrgyzstan had more tenuous relations.⁸⁶ That is, similarly with Chinese engagement in the power sector in Tajikistan, Chinese engagement in Kyrgyzstan facilitated decreased interdependence between certain

⁸⁰ "Tajikistan: Power transmitting line Khudjant-Ayini will relieve Zarafshan Valley from energy dependency from Uzbekistan", *Fergana News Agency*, September 26, 2011, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=17346>

⁸¹ Chorshanbiev, Pairav, "'Barki tochik'": TETS 'Dushanbe-2' ne prednaznachena dlya vyrabotki goryachey vody" ["'Barki tochik': TPS 'Dushanbe-2 is not designated to produce hot water'"], *Asia Plus Media group*, April 8, 2015, <http://news.tj/ru/news/barki-tochik-tets-dushanbe-2-ne-prednaznachena-dlya-vyrabotki-goryachei-vody>

"China completes \$350 million power plant in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe", *The Economic Times*, December 9, 2016, <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/power/china-completes-350-million-power-plant-in-tajikistan/55886095>

⁸² "SCO and Development..."

⁸³ Putz, Catherine, "Kyrgyzstan declared energy independence", *The Diplomat*, September 01, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/kyrgyzstan-declares-energy-independence/>

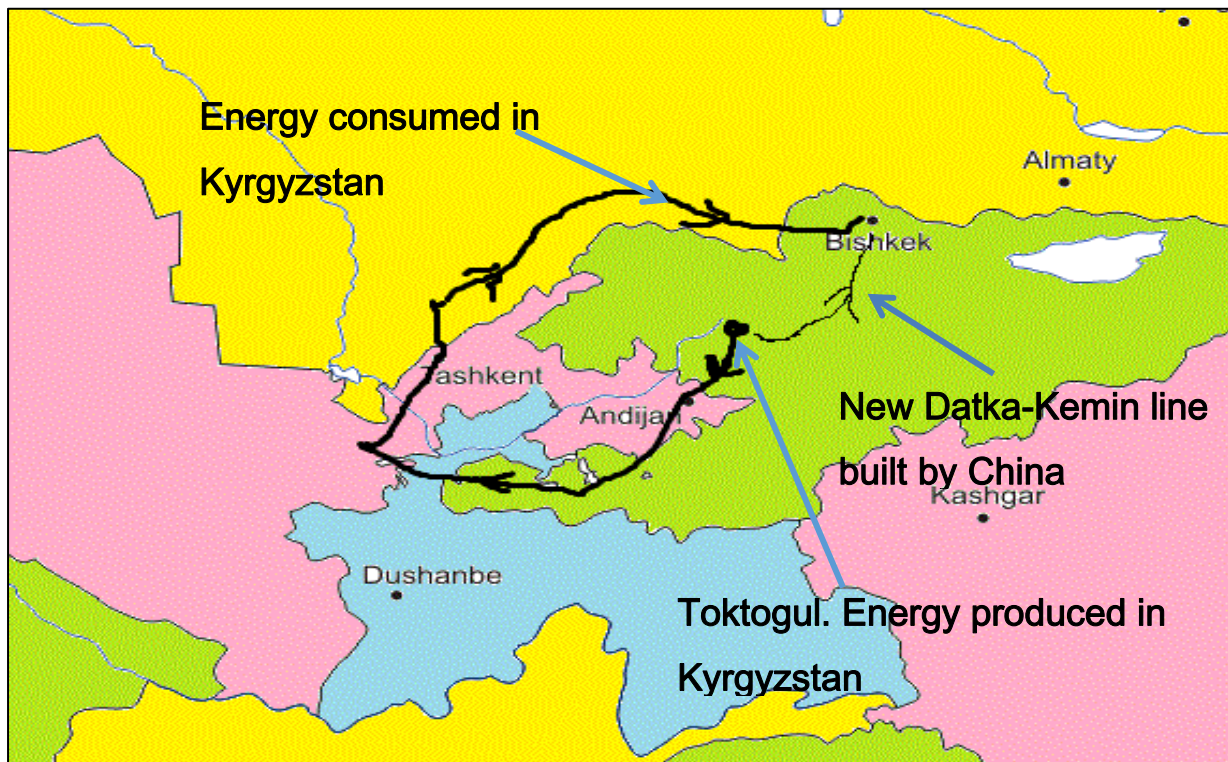
⁸⁴ Author's Interview, Bishkek, January 22, 2016

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Putz, Catherine (2015)

Central Asian states. As with the projects in Tajikistan, which created potential to cooperate in a previously non-existing direction, Datka-Kemin enhanced Kyrgyzstan's capacity to export energy to Kazakhstan. The step added a new level of interdependence between the two countries and therefore contributed toward regional cooperation.

Map 2. Kyrgyzstan's energy flow⁸⁷



Chinese engagement in the power sector: “Reformatting” regional energy flow

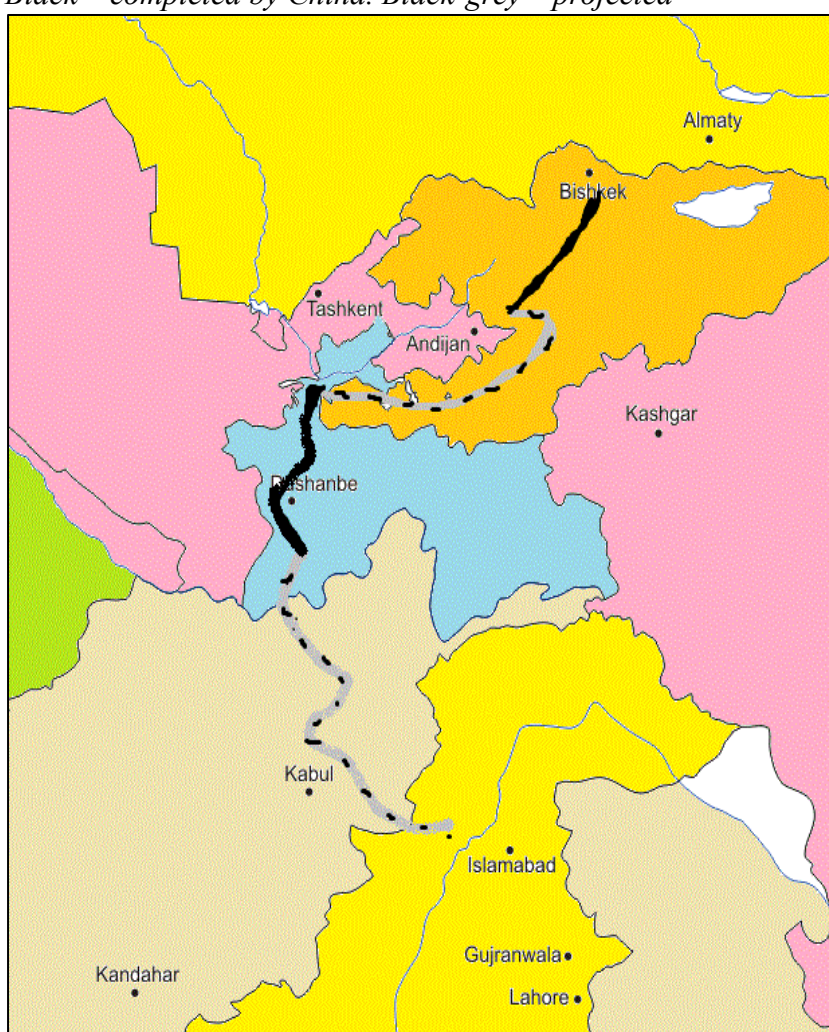
If the two sets of projects discussed above are viewed in one context, they suggest a more encompassing effect of China's engagement on the development of regional connectivity in Central Asia. The Datka-Kemin line in Kyrgyzstan and the transmission lines between south and north of Tajikistan make up one system, which has the potential to transmit power from southern Tajikistan all the way to Kyrgyzstan's northern border with Kazakhstan. If such is the case, then China is not merely financing profitable projects or enhancing its sphere of influence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. On the contrary, the nature of China's engagement suggests deliberate efforts to “rewire” the region in a different way. Under this new scheme the hydropower from the upstream states can be transported north in the direction opposite of the Central Asia IPS, non-reliant on Uzbekistan, and with the possibility to be transported to China. Furthermore, since the direction of power lines can change, the access of electricity generated in the upstream Central Asian states can be transported to the energy deficient sections of South Asia.

In fact, the CASA-1000 initiative (Central Asia South Asia) aims to develop the network which can transport excess power generated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan during the summer to Afghanistan and Pakistan, in order to make up for the deficiency experienced by

⁸⁷ Drawing by the author. Base map at *d-maps.com*, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=28705&lang=en, accessed May 2, 2018

these two states during the hot months.⁸⁸ The CASA-1000 began as a concept in early 2010's and developed into a multilateral initiative by 2016.⁸⁹ The members are the four states involved, and the secretariat, funded by the USAID, is located on neutral territory in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The project is visibly supported by the western institutions, but at the same time is open to external sponsors. Chinese electric power conglomerate TBEA has been one of the bidders for the proposed projects. However, it is more important to note that TBEA and China Exim Bank completed existing sections of the network intended to connect the two hydropower producing Central Asian states, with energy scarce South Asian countries. Along with the US State Department, which placed Central Asian affairs under the South Asian department, China, at least in this case, appears to envision Central Asia and South Asia as parts of one region.

Map 3. Central Asia – South Asia⁹⁰
 Black – completed by China. Black-grey – projected



The potential for interdependency generated through China's engagement in the power sector

⁸⁸ CASA-1000 Home, *CASA-1000 Website*, (n.d), <http://www.casa-1000.org/index.php>, accessed March 3, 2018

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Drawing by author. Base map at *d-maps.com*, http://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=28705&lang=en, accessed May 2, 2018

⁹⁰ Ibid

in Central Asia is consistent with China's contemporary Belt and Road rhetoric of more focused facilitation of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Earlier projects tended to enhance China's sphere of influence in the selected Central Asian states, and to enable these states to develop energy independence from their neighbors. Subsequent projects actually created potential for increasing interdependence in parts of the region.

At the same time, despite its technical and financial capabilities, China is often unable to complete power sector projects in Central Asia. For example, in 2007, China withdrew from a 200 million dollar project of constructing HEPP plant on Zarafshan River in Tajikistan, tellingly because of the pressure from Uzbekistan.⁹¹ Another example includes unofficial doctrine of Kyrgyzstan's government, under which Chinese companies are not permitted to develop energy and other infrastructural projects in the areas adjacent to the Kyrgyzstan-China border for the fear of Chinese "expansion".⁹² Despite these hurdles, though, China's intentions and activities in the energy sector appear to create potential for multilateral cooperation. This is even more visible in the hydrocarbon sector, mainly gas, discussed in the following section.

Hydrocarbons and the pipelines that carry them

Gas transporting networks and their role in regional connectivity

During the Soviet times the energy network was built to transport natural gas produced in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Several pipeline systems were constructed between the 60's and 80's of the twentieth century. All of them were managed and controlled by central government in Moscow. 'Central Asia – Center' pipeline originated in Turkmenistan, traversed scarcely populated western parts of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and continued to central Russia. 'Bukhara – Ural' pipeline was used to transport gas from Gazli field in Uzbekistan to Russia's industrial southern Ural region. 'Bukhara – Tashkent – Almaty – Bishkek' pipeline originated in Gazli as well, but serviced developed areas of central Uzbekistan, Southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan.

Map 4. Soviet built pipelines⁹³

Central Asia-Center – Blue; Bukhara-Ural – Red; Bukhara-Tashkent-Almaty-Bishkek – Green

⁹¹ Kassenova, 17

⁹² Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

⁹³ Drawing by author. Base map available at Central Asia and South Caucasus regions Reference Map - Basic Map, March 31, 2012, *Relief Web*, <https://reliefweb.int/map/armenia/central-asia-and-south-caucasus-regions-reference-map-basic-map-march-2012>



After the dissolution of the USSR the sections of the ‘Bukhara – Tashkent – Almaty – Bishkek’ pipeline were managed by the respective gas transit companies of the states through which it ran. However, ‘Central Asia – Center’ and ‘Bukhara – Ural’ were directed toward Russian pipeline systems, which had the capacity to distribute the gas in Russia or transport it for export abroad. Therefore ‘Central Asia – Center’ and ‘Bukhara – Ural’ continued to be mainly controlled by Russia’s gas monopoly Gazprom, which is closely linked to Russian leadership. Gazprom’s capacity designated Russia a powerful role in the energy affairs of the region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, “energy [figured] prominently as one of the most important elements of what Moscow [could] control because of its ownership of existing pipelines and refinery capabilities. Thus, it [had] the ability to shut off energy in and out of these states if it so [chose].”⁹⁴ On its part, though, Russia’s energy policy in Central Asia lacked consistency and revolved around bilateral ties with Central Asian states. Russia’s reliance on bilateralism in the gas sector differed significantly from Russia’s multilateral initiatives in other sectors, such as Eurasian integration projects in trade or the Collective Security Treaty Organization in the security field.

China entered Central Asia’s gas sector in mid-2000’s with the construction of the Central Asia – China pipeline, built with the purpose of transporting gas from Turkmenistan to China. Within approximately a decade, Chinese involvement in the gas sector developed to include multilateral initiatives. The shift from interest-seeking toward the multilateral nature of Chinese engagement came in contrast to Russia’s bilateral and profit-driven approach to energy development and distribution in Central Asia.

Russia’s “situational” engagement

The interest-seeking nature of Russia’s energy engagement in Central Asia, and its effects on regional cooperation were clearly demonstrated in 2014 after Gazprom acquired and took control over Kyrgyzstan’s gas transporting and distribution system. In response, Uzbekistan stopped sending gas to southern Kyrgyzstan, claiming that the previous agreement did not involve the Russian conglomerate.⁹⁵ Subsequently, the previous deal was

⁹⁴ Blank, Stephen, “Energy, economic and security in Central Asia: Russia and its rivals”, *Central Asian Survey*, 14, 3, (1995), 373-404, 374

⁹⁵ “Power failure. Not all goes smoothly for Russia in its backyard”, *The Economist*, July 26, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21608807-not-all-goes-smoothly-russia-its-backyard-power-failure>

renegotiated, and Uzbekistan managed to drive a hard bargain, viewing Gazprom as capable of paying higher prices.⁹⁶ Southern Kyrgyzstan remained without a gas supply for eight months. Eventually, before the on-set of winter, Gazprom conceded to Uzbekistan's new terms. The decision came as the Kyrgyz public was growing weary of Russia's energy policy in the wake of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union the following year. In the case, Gazprom's moves provided additional pressure on the fragile Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations.

Tangible interests have continuously defined the nature of Russia's energy engagement in Central Asia. Rehabilitation of the Central Asia – Center pipeline projected by Gazprom in 2006 was intended to enable higher volumes of gas to be transported from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan to Russia.⁹⁷ The increased flow of gas through the three Central Asian states to Russia, and further to Europe, could bring substantial revenues to Gazprom, which was responsible for transit.⁹⁸ Concurrently, the enhanced flows through the three states could also increase interdependence and expand grounds for cooperation between these states. Instead, later in 2006, Gazprom designed and implemented an alternative transit system for importing Uzbekistan gas. Instead of sending the gas flow through the large territory of Kazakhstan to its northern border with Russia, Gazprom started transporting Uzbek gas through a much shorter distance from Gazli gas region in central Uzbekistan to the industrial regions of southern Kazakhstan, including Almaty. In exchange, Kazakhstan agreed to supply the same amount of gas from its field in Kapchagan in the north, near the Russian border, to Orenburg gas distribution station in southern Russia.⁹⁹ As a result, Gazprom saved significant amounts of money on transiting gas through Kazakhstan, which was the main motivation for the arrangement.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Gazprom served as a “middle man” between suppliers and consumers of gas in Central Asia. Moreover, the so called “swapping” system was based on bilateral agreements between Gazprom and gas transiting companies of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.¹⁰¹ Consequently, the arrangement reduced interdependence and cooperation between the two Central Asian states.

In September 2008 Gazprom announced an agreement, sponsored by Russian and Uzbekistan leaders, to build a new pipeline through Uzbekistan which would serve to transit Turkmen and Uzbek gas toward Russia.¹⁰² The route was intended to expand the capacity of the existing Central Asia – Center pipeline. However, the agreement never materialized. Uzbekistan left the Russia-lead Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) at the end of 2008, which coincided with the easing of the EU sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan after the 2005 events in Andijan.¹⁰³ Additionally, at the end of 2008, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reached an agreement on water and gas without involvement of Uzbekistan. The latter requested Russia to engage in arbitrating the sensitive water issue.¹⁰⁴ At the time,

⁹⁶ “Gazprom secures gas supplies to southern Kyrgyzstan”, *Gazprom Website*, December 30, 2014, <http://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2014/december/article211713/>

⁹⁷ Sidorov, Oleg, “Sredniaziatskaya igra Gazproma: noviye gorizonty” (Gazprom's Central Asian game: new horizons”), *Inosmi.ru*, January 31, 2006, <http://inosmi.ru/world/20060131/225212.html>

⁹⁸ *Ibid*

⁹⁹ Author's interview, Almaty, January 30, 2016

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*

¹⁰² “Russia Cements Gas Position in Central Asia with Uzbekistan Pipeline Deal”, *IHS Website*, September 3, 2008, <https://www.ihs.com/country-industry-forecasting.html?ID=106596414>

¹⁰³ Shermatova, Sanobar, “Rossiya-Uzbekistan: Medvedev popal v Tashkent ‘ochen’ I ochen’ svoevremenno” (“Russia-Uzbekistan: Medvedev arrived to Tashkent ‘very and very timely’”), *Fergana News*, January 24, 2009, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/6035>

¹⁰⁴ Shermatova

however, Russia did little to ease the tensions between Uzbekistan and its neighbors. On the contrary, continuing construction of the hydropower plants in Tajikistan (Sagtuda HEPP) and Kyrgyzstan (Kambarata 2), and the announcement to build Kambarata-1 (discussed in the previous section) contributed toward decreased interstate cooperation in the energy field.

In the beginning of 2009, Uzbekistan raised gas prices for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan from 145 to 240 US dollars per thousand cubic meters.¹⁰⁵ Concurrently, Russia reached an agreement to import an additional 15 billion cubic meters of gas from Uzbekistan. A partial increase, less than four billion cubic meters/day, was achieved at the expense of reducing Uzbek gas exports to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹⁰⁶ The main increase, however, was intended to be supplied by another Russian energy conglomerate LUKOIL, which owed 90 percent of the Kandym – Khauzak - Shady gas fields in southern Uzbekistan, operational since 2007.¹⁰⁷ Tellingly, the agreement between Russia and Uzbekistan resulted from Russia's reconsideration of investing in hydropower projects in the upstream states, particularly, sensitive Kambarata-1 HEPP in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁸ Russia's actions, in this case appeared to be lacking consistency in the policies toward different Central Asian states. The moves suggested that Russia's energy-related activities in the region were clearly designed to serve Russia's interests. In this particular case, the two Russian energy giants benefited from Uzbekistan gas imports – LUKOIL earned money on development and Gazprom earned money on transit.

Since the pipeline construction agreed on by Russia and Uzbekistan in 2008 did not materialize, the flow of Turkmen gas to Russia through Uzbekistan remained limited. An additional reduction of gas flow was caused by the 2009 explosion on the Central Asia - Center Pipeline, which runs from Central Asia to Moscow. Both Russia and Turkmenistan blamed each other for the explosion citing negligence.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, Gazprom's imports from Turkmenistan, which in the post-Soviet time peaked at 45 billion cubic meters in 2008, declined to ten billion in 2010 and four billion in 2015, before being suspended completely in January 2016.¹¹⁰ Another key reason for such a decline was the construction of the Central Asia – China pipeline, which went into operation in 2009. Chinese engagement in the gas field drastically changed energy dynamics in the region.

The effects of the combined major powers' actions and China's growing role

In 2006 China negotiated separately with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan over the terms of the construction of the new Central Asia - China pipeline. Subsequently, China purchased the rights for extracting gas at a major gas field in southern Turkmenistan.¹¹¹ The first branch of the CA - China pipeline began transporting Turkmen gas to China in the

¹⁰⁵ Najibullah

¹⁰⁶ Shermatova

¹⁰⁷ Shermatova

"Projects. Uzbekistan", *Lukoil Overseas Website*, (n.d.), <http://lukoil-overseas.ru/projects/uzbekistan/81.php>, accessed June 2, 2016

¹⁰⁸ Shermatova

¹⁰⁹ Panniet, Bruce, "Pipeline explosion raise tensions between Turkmenistan, Russia", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 12, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Pipeline_Explosion_Stokes_Tensions_Between_Turkmenistan_Russia/1608633.html

¹¹⁰ "Turkmenistan: Russia suspends gas supplies", *Eurasianet*, January 4, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76676>

¹¹¹ Author's interview, Almaty, January 30, 2016

companies are not involved, is bad news.”¹¹⁸ According to Yu Bin, the launch of the Central Asia – China pipeline demonstrated serious “dissonance” between Beijing and Moscow.¹¹⁹ Having been the main importer, Russia used to be able to control prices of gas from the main Central Asian exporters, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. After the emergence of the Chinese market, however, Russia was not able to do so. Additionally, the combined market for gas in Russia and China is much larger than that of gas importers in Central Asia. Furthermore, the two major powers are generally able to pay higher prices. Consequently, Russia and China affected the decisions of fuel exporting countries to sell the gas to higher paying customers instead of to the neighboring states. Uzbekistan, particularly, justified high prices for gas sold to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan by suggesting that if the prices were low, China and Russia would demand reduced prices as well.¹²⁰ In January 2012, Uzbekistan halted supplies of gas to Tajikistan because the latter refused to accept an additional price increase to 311 dollars per thousand cubic meters, thus further reducing the level of interdependence between the two states.¹²¹

Several months later, in August 2012, Uzbekistan started exporting gas to China through the CA - China pipeline.¹²² Because the quality of Uzbekistan-produced gas is inferior in quality to the Turkmenistan-produced gas, another subsidiary of the CNPC, Petro China, was reluctant to import it in large amounts. However, a system was designed by Petro China to mix Uzbekistan gas with Turkmenistan gas in a proportion essential to maintain the proper quality of gas in the combined flow.¹²³ China also only agreed to pay Uzbekistan for the amounts of gas that would not jeopardize the quality of the combined flow.¹²⁴ In that sense, the nature of Chinese imports of Uzbekistan gas was defined by commercial interests.

Chinese engagement in the sector also partially contributed toward the energy independence of Kazakhstan. The construction of Beineu-Bozoi-Shemkent pipeline (BBSH) was executed through the joint venture of the CNPC and KazTransGaz, Kazakhstan’s national gas transporting company, and launched in November 2015.¹²⁵ BBSH was designed to deliver gas into the CA - China line. Some of the gas volume was intended to be further distributed for Kazakhstan’s domestic needs through the three spurs off the CA - China pipeline laid in 2010 in southern Kazakhstan, near major cities of Shemkent, Taraz and Almaty. The excess amount was projected to be sold to China.¹²⁶ However, the BBSH could not be connected to the CA - China pipeline at the time of its completion because of the large difference in pressure between the two systems. Instead, the BBSH was connected to Bukhara-Tashkent-Almaty-Bishkek line to serve Kazakhstan’s domestic needs, thus contributing toward Kazakhstan’s energy independence.¹²⁷ As the technological issues were being resolved in 2016, the gas from north-western Kazakhstan was projected to start flowing into CA-China

¹¹⁸ Facon, Isabelle, “Moscow’s Global Foreign and Security Strategy. Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests?” *Asian Survey*, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 461-483, 481

¹¹⁹ Yu Bin, “The SCO ten years after. In search of its own identity,” in China and the New International Order, Wang Guang Wu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), London: Routledge, 2009, 31

¹²⁰ “Uzbekistan prekratil postavki gaza v Tajikistan izza Rossii” [“Uzbekistan stopped supplying gas to Tajikistan because of Russia”] *Delovoye TV*, January 4, 2012, http://delovoe.tv/event/Uzbekistan_prekratil_pos/

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Jarosiewicz, Aleksandra, “Uzbekistan starts exports to China”, *Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich*, September 9, 2012, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-09-19/uzbekistan-starts-gas-exports-to-china>

¹²³ Author’s interview, Almaty, January 30, 2016

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ *Beineu-Shemkent* Website, http://bsgp.kz/eng/sections/about_us, accessed June 12, 2016

“Kaztransgas launches new pipeline five months ahead of schedule”, *Natural Gas Europe*, November 24, 2015, <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/jsc-kaztransgaz-connects-west-with-the-south-26652>

¹²⁶ Author’s interview, Almaty

¹²⁷ Ibid

line, but not in significant amounts.¹²⁸

Emerging Chinese multilateralism and changing nature of engagement

Visibly, Chinese activities in the energy field have not always been driven by commercial interests. For instance, from 2011 until 2014 southern Kazakhstan suffered severe gas shortages during the winters. An agreement was reached between China and Kazakhstan, under which China would ‘lend’ gas to Kazakhstan from the CA-China pipeline through one of the existing spurs. Kazakhstan returned the same amounts of gas during the summer, having purchased gas through Gazprom for a previously agreed lower price.¹²⁹ During the four years Petro China did not gain any profit for supplying southern Kazakhstan with gas, but it likely developed a stronger working relationship with its partners in Kazakhstan. Moreover, the “lending-returning” scheme affected operation of the whole CA-China gas network, and was raised and agreed on during one of the meetings of the Coordination Committee of CA-China Pipeline. The Committee is, possibly, the most vivid example of China’s shift towards multilateralism in the energy sector in Central Asia

The Coordination Committee has conducted management of the CA-China line since 2010. The members include gas producing, transporting and trading companies – ‘local’ (i.e. controlled by Central Asian states), Chinese and joint venture companies.¹³⁰ The full list of the participants is extensive, and is dominated by Chinese companies.¹³¹ Importantly, even though the Committee’s meetings take place in different capitals of the four participating countries, one of the permanent members is the Beijing Coordination Centre, a seemingly supranational entity. The Committee deals mainly with technical issues, but it provides a broad ground for cooperation in the energy field. Most importantly, the Committee does not include Russia. Instead, each of the members of the Committee continues to deal with Gazprom on a bilateral basis.¹³² In that sense, the Committee also highlights interchangeable, if not changing, roles of Russia and China in the energy sector in the region. That is, the view that China’s engagement in Central Asia has only been effective on the bilateral basis¹³³ is no longer accurate because the Coordination Committee provides a sound example of China-driven multilateral cooperation.

Another example of the “changeability” of the roles of the two major powers is their engagement in the “smaller” southern states of Central Asia. As mentioned previously, in

¹²⁸ “Ryad stran, zhelayushih eksportirovat’ gaz v Kitai, popolnil Kazakhstan” [“Kazakhstan became another country willing to export gas to China”], *Neftegaz*, March 17, 2016, <http://neftegaz.ru/news/view/147299-Ryady-stran-zhelayuschih-eksportirovat-gaz-v-Kitay-popolnil-Kazahstan>

¹²⁹ Author’s Interview, Almaty, January 30, 2016

¹³⁰ “13-e zasedanie comiteta po ekspluatatsii gazoprovoda iz Turkmenistana v Kitay” [“13th meeting on operation of gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China”], *Turkmen Business*, September 23, 2015, <http://www.turkmenbusiness.org/news/13%E2%80%93e-zasedanie-komiteta-po-ekspluatatsii-gazoprovoda-iz-turkmenistana-v-kitai>

¹³¹ Author’s Interview, Almaty, 2016

All members are: PetroChina International Company Ltd – the Chinese offshore company which imports all the gas from Central Asia; State Concern Turkmengaz – Turkmenistan Gas Producing company; CNPC International (Turkmenistan) – Chinese CNPC’s subsidiary in Turkmenistan responsible for transit; UzbekNefteGaz [UzbekOilGas] – Uzbekistan national gas producing company; Uztransgas – Uzbekistan national gas transporting company; AsiaTransGaz – China-Uzbekistan Joint venture that operates Uzbekistan section of the pipeline; Aziatskiy Gazoprovod [Asian Gas Pipeline] – China-Kazakhstan joint venture which operates Kazakhstan section of the pipeline; TAPLine – CNPC’s subsidiary which deals with Central Asia; Beijing Coordination Center.

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Kerr, David, “Central Asian and Russian perspective on China’s strategic emergence”, *International Affairs*, 86, 1, (2010), 127-152

2013 Gazprom acquired Kyrgyzstan gas distribution system along with its debts for a symbolic One US Dollar and became responsible for maintaining and operating Kyrgyzstan's gas transportation and distribution network.¹³⁴ Subsequently Gazprom became the "middleman" between Kyrgyzstan and regional gas suppliers, particularly Uzbekistan, thus further reducing interdependence among Central Asian states. In the following years Gazprom was designing a project of a completely new North-South pipeline intended to carry Kazakhstan gas from northern Kyrgyzstan to southern Kyrgyzstan. The latter continued to be dependent on Uzbekistan for gas.¹³⁵ On the one hand the projected North-South pipeline was supposed to reduce Kyrgyzstan interdependence with Uzbekistan. On the other hand, the line could still serve Russia's interests because it would have capacity to transport "Russian" gas from southern Kazakhstan. The Bukhara-Ural pipeline, which used to transport gas from Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan to industrial areas of Russia's Urals during the soviet and post-soviet times, had the direction of its flow reversed in 2015. After the reversal, the gas of Russian origin was able to reach southern regions of Kazakhstan from where it could be exported to Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁶ Yet, the North-South project had not materialized as of 2016, and at the time it was not clear whether the delay had been caused by Russia's weakened economic position, political reasons or technical difficulties. However, Russia's interest seeking intentions are clearly visible in the case.

Chinese engagement in the same geographic area is of a different nature. Line D of the CA-China Pipeline had been in design stages from 2011.¹³⁷ In 2013 Chinese government signed individual agreements with the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the line began to be constructed in 2014.¹³⁸ The line was intended to be an alternative gas transporting route to the established three parallel pipes discussed in the previous section. However, the feasibility of this route seems to lie only in its function of being an alternative to the Lines A, B and C.¹³⁹ The southern route is geographically shorter, but it goes through much rougher mountainous terrain. Moreover, originating in Turkmenistan, the new pipe has to traverse territories of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, before entering China in southern Xinjiang. The three countries, which have interweaving and, in places, disputed borders experienced episodes of tension and even hostilities, and do not represent a stable political environment. Operating a pipeline running through these three states would require a significant amount of coordination on the multilateral level. Additionally, China planned to build spurs of Line D to supply Turkmen gas to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan even though other sources suggested that Turkmen gas was too expensive for the two smaller states.¹⁴⁰ It has been written that "strategically speaking, CNPC has taken a page from Gazprom's

¹³⁴ Travnikov, Aleksandr, "Kyrgyzstan osvobozhdaetsya ot uzbekskoy gazovoy zavisimosti. Yesli yemu ne pomeshayut" ["Kyrgyzstan is freeing up from Uzbek gas dependency. If it is not prevented"], *Fergana News Agency*, October 02, 2015, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8717>

¹³⁵ Travnikov

¹³⁶ Konstantinov, Aleksander, Barsukov, Yuriy, "Kazakhstan nashel exportnyuyu trubu dlya Gazproma" ["Kazakhstan has found an export pipe for Gazprom"], *Obshchestvenno-Politicheskoye Dvizhenie 'Voskhod' [Social-Political Movement 'Sunrise']*, March 24, 2015, <http://opd-voshod.livejournal.com/5683045.html>

¹³⁷ Gupta, Alexander, "China Doubles Down in Central Asia with New Natural Gas Pipeline", *American Security Project*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/china-doubles-down-in-central-asia-with-new-natural-gas-pipeline/>

¹³⁸ "CNPC to build a pipeline with Tajiktangaz", *China Daily*, March 11, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2014-03/11/content_17337601.htm

¹³⁹ Interview, Beijing, December 30, 2015

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

Michel, Casey, "Line D of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline Delayed", *The Diplomat*, May 31, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/line-d-of-the-central-asia-china-gas-pipeline-delayed/>

playbook.”¹⁴¹ However the challenges associated with building and operating Line D and China’s efforts to promote this route highlight China’s visible commitment to facilitation of regional cooperation, even if this cooperation is ultimately intended to serve China’s interests.

The developments of 2016 show that it was not easy for China, with its massive material capabilities, to fulfill this commitment toward multilateralism. Construction of Line D was halted in Uzbekistan in January 2016 and in Kyrgyzstan in May of that year.¹⁴² The reasons for the interruptions were not clearly explained, but they appeared to be emanating from the Central Asian states. The delays highlight the trend that China’s economic power is not sufficient to always effectively enhance regional connectivity and develop multilateral cooperation. However, compared to security and regional stability, which is China’s both long- and short-term objective in Central Asia, energy is a more of a long term goal.¹⁴³ Therefore, the delays in Line D could be considered a normal occurrence at that stage.

More importantly, the nature of Line D, contrasted with the nature of Gazprom’s proposed North-South line, demonstrates the difference in Russia and China’s approaches toward Central Asia. Russian engagement has mainly revolved around bilateral engagements, which tended to be situational and served short term goals and commercial interests. In contrast, Chinese engagement has been shifting from bilateralism to multilateralism, even though China continues to face challenges promoting multilateral projects of regional significance. This shift toward multilateralism and the challenges associated with such a shift are also visible in China’s engagement in the oil sector in Central Asia.

Central Asian oil as an instrument of Chinese multilateralism

Central Asia is not a major oil producing region. Of all the five states, Kazakhstan is the only country with potential for exporting oil. Nevertheless, the way Russia and China dealt with imported Kazakh oil highlights their general differences in the nature of energy engagement in Central Asia. Moreover, these differences were consistent with the two major powers’ approaches toward the energy sectors discussed in the previous sections.

First, as of mid-2010’s, Russia remained the main importer of Kazakhstan oil, which was transported to Russian pipeline networks and refineries through Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) (30 million tons) and Atyrau-Samara Line (15 million tons). Russian company Transneft maintained the largest stake in both lines, and much of the oil from Kazakhstan was re-exported to Europe.¹⁴⁴ Visibly, Russian engagement in the oil sector in Kazakhstan served Russia’s and Kazakhstan’s interests.

Second, China’s engagement in Kazakhstan’s oil sector originally served a similar purpose. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), together with Kazakhstan’s KazMunaiGas, built the pipeline, which went into operation in 2009. By that time, since the late 1990’s, the CNPC had purchased stakes in several of Kazakhstan’s oil fields and in 2005 bought PetroKazakhstan, the country’s major oil producing company.¹⁴⁵ The Kazakhstan-

¹⁴¹Peterson, Alexandros, “Central Asia’s New Energy Giant: China”, *The Atlantic*, June 28, 2013,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/06/central-asias-new-energy-giant-china/277338/>

¹⁴² Michel, Casey, “Can China Really Save Central Asian Economies?”, *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2016,

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/can-china-really-save-central-asian-economies/>

Kudryavseva, Tatyana, “Construction of Kyrgyzstan-China gas pipeline postponed for indefinite period”, *24.kg News Agency*, May 25, 2016, <http://www.eng.24.kg/news-stall/180541-news24.html>

¹⁴³ Sheives, Kevin, “China Turns West: Beijing’s Contemporary Strategy towards Central Asia,” *Pacific Affairs*, 79, 2, (2006), 205-224

¹⁴⁴Guschin, Arthur, “China, Russia and the tussle for influence in Kazakhstan”, *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2015 <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-russia-and-the-tussle-for-influence-in-kazakhstan/>

¹⁴⁵ Lanteigne, Mark, “China, energy security, and Central Asian diplomacy: bilateral and multilateral approaches”, in *Caspian Energy Politics: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan*, Indira Overland, Heidi

China pipeline potential capacity is 20 million tons per year, which constituted approximately seven per cent of China's total oil imports in 2016. In that sense, the Chinese position in Kazakhstan's oil sector served to diversify China's energy resources, while providing Kazakhstan an additional market for its hydrocarbons.

However, in 2016 only 11.8 million tons of oil was transported to China from Kazakhstan.¹⁴⁶ Noticeably, most of this oil, up to 10 million barrels, was actually Russian oil, exported by Rosneft though Kazakhstan as the most optimal route.¹⁴⁷ In this sense, China's and Russia's combined engagement in the Central Asian oil industry utilized Kazakhstan as a transit state, but did little to facilitate regional cooperation among other Central Asian states. This is only logical, considering that Kazakhstan's territory is geographically the most suitable transit route between China and the western part of Russia. Consequently, Sino-Russian shared initiatives in the oil industry have little potential for developing regional cooperation in Central Asia. Nevertheless, China's individual projects involving oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while aiding Chinese interests, provide ground for cooperation among several Central Asian states.

These projects are limited to three oil refineries: two in Kyrgyzstan (in Kara Balta and in Tokmak) and one in Tajikistan (in Danghara). The refineries have the capacity to reduce Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's refined fuel dependency on Russia.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, the plants have the potential to enhance regional cooperation because much of the crude oil for processing was projected to come from Kazakhstan.¹⁴⁹ This is not to say that the refineries do not serve China's purpose. First, the oil from Kazakhstan is supposed to come from the fields owned by Chinese companies. Second, projects of such nature do enable China to expand its sphere of influence in the two neighboring states. For example, China's CNPC was given permission to survey for oil in Tajikistan with the aim of sourcing the refinery.¹⁵⁰ Third, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are crucial states in developing China's connectivity with South Asia. China started producing oil in Afghanistan in 2012, and a portion of this oil was destined for Danghara refinery in Tajikistan.¹⁵¹ The process confirms China's visible efforts to reconnect the direction of infrastructure and potentially re-format the region in a "new" way by connecting Central and South Asian regions. This is also consistent with Chinese projects in the electric power sector.

More importantly, China's apparent commitment to the potentially regionalizing initiatives is demonstrated by the presence of numerous hurdles and a lack of immediate profit in the case of the refineries. Construction of Danghara refinery in the hometown of Tajikistan's president Rakhmon went relatively smoothly due to the strong relationship with the country's leader.¹⁵² However, construction and operation of the two refineries in

Kjaernet and Andrea Kendall-Taylor (Eds.), New York: Rutledge, 2010, 101-115 (108)

¹⁴⁶ "Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline", *KazMunaiGaz*, (n.d.),

http://www.kmg.kz/en/manufacturing/oil/kazakhstan_china/, accessed January 27, 2016

¹⁴⁷ "Rostneft agrees to ship oil to China via Kazakhstan", *Reuters*, November 11, 2013,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-kazakhstan-oil-idUSBRE9AA0PN20131111>

¹⁴⁸ Trilling, David, "Kyrgyzstan suspends work at new Chinese refinery", *Eurasianet*, February 19, 2014,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68061>

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*

¹⁵¹ Shalizi, Hamid, "China's CNPC begins oil production in Afghanistan", *Reuters*, October 21, 2012,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-oil-idUSBRE89K08G20121021>

"Large oil refinery expected to be introduced into operation in Danghara next month", *News.tj*, August 8, 2016, <http://news.tj/en/news/large-oil-refinery-expected-be-introduced-operation-danghara-next-month-dushanbe-august>

¹⁵² Rickleton, Chris, "China's energy footprint in Central Asia", *China Dialogue*, July 25, 2014,

<https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7165-China-s-energy-footprint-in-Central-Asia>

Kyrgyzstan faced numerous delays caused by the local antipathy toward China and by the country's internal politics.¹⁵³ The area near Takmak is populated by Dongguan, also known as Huizu people – a minority group ethnically and culturally related to Chinese Muslims, but who have settled in parts of Central Asia, moving from Xinjiang during one of its turbulent periods of history. Dongguan had assimilated in the Soviet Union, although they retained some of their language and culture. There is much negative sentiment toward Dongguan in Kyrgyzstan. The antipathy is grounded in envy toward Dongguan's affluence due to their entrepreneurial culture. This antagonism may translate into negative associations with China. However, these negative sentiments emanating from titular populations against China are not likely to translate into states' foreign policies toward China. Instead, anti-Chinese sentiments are often utilized to fuel internal rivalries. In Kara-Balta the opposition to the refinery was driven by ecological concerns, which were, tellingly, fueled by the opposition politicians.¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, the combined processing capacity of the three refineries is 2.5 million tons a year, which is not a significant amount compared to China's own energy needs. The amount is also only a fraction of the oil pumped through the Kazakhstan-China pipeline.¹⁵⁵ The three refineries, according to varying sources, cost between 600 million and one billion US dollars to construct; however, months after their completion, the refineries were operating well under their capacity. For instance, Kara Balta plant received only 100 thousand tons of crude from Kazakhstan, which was only one eighth of the plant's processing capacity.¹⁵⁶ Danghara refinery was designed to process half a million tons.¹⁵⁷ However, production of oil in neighboring Afghanistan, which was supposed to be one of the suppliers, amounted to less than 100 thousand tons.¹⁵⁸ Because the present pipeline network does not reach the newly built plants, they have to rely on crude delivered by rail, which is connected mainly to Russian based suppliers. In that sense, the obduracy of Soviet-era infrastructure still maintains, and can only be overridden and actually serve China's interests once China expands its oil pipeline network. Once expanded, though, it would have the potential to enhance regional connectivity. Central Asian expert Chris Rickleton points out that

The fact that the [refineries] will exist largely to satisfy the fairly tiny domestic consumption of the two countries is proof of Beijing's strategic and nuanced approach to regional energy questions. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are both economically challenged and politically fragile states bordering China's Xinjiang region, and will play a growing role in the transit of energy to that region from countries further west. Offering them a helping hand in their own battle for energy security is likely to be mutually advantageous.¹⁵⁹

China's activities aiming to 'reformat' the region appear to be taking a long, but carefully calculated approach.

Visibly, in the oil sector, Russia's engagement remained situational and contributed little toward regional cooperation among the Central Asian states. Furthermore, combined

¹⁵³ Trilling

¹⁵⁴ Author's interview, February 14, 2016

¹⁵⁵ Rickleton, Chris, "China's energy footprint in Central Asia"

¹⁵⁶ Rickleton, Chris, "Kyrgyzstan: Chinese investor struggling without Russian help", *Eurasianet*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71776>

¹⁵⁷ "Large oil refinery expected..."

¹⁵⁸ Shalizi, Hamid, "China's CNPC begins oil production in Afghanistan", *Reuters*, October 21, 2012 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-oil-idUSBRE89K08G20121021>

¹⁵⁹ Rickleton, Chris, "China's energy footprint in Central Asia", *China Dialogue*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7165-China-s-energy-footprint-in-Central-Asia>

Russian and Chinese engagement also did little to facilitate regionalization of Central Asia. However, Chinese involvement has evolved from that which purely served its own interest, to one which has the potential to facilitate regional cooperation among several Central Asian states. As with the other sector, though, China has faced difficulties carrying out initiatives which carried the potential for multilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

Water sharing issues lie at the heart of Central Asian energy dynamics. The chapter suggests that Russia- and China-sponsored projects made limited impact on regional cooperation in the electric power sector because of the sector's close association with the sensitive water resources. Moreover, in various ways, both major powers have contributed toward energy independence of several Central Asian states subsequently reducing the level of interdependence among them. However, China-sponsored projects have the potential to *rewire* regional electric energy flow and thus *reconnect* the region in a new and different way. Noticeably, the new system of the energy flow appears to be directed towards China, but it also has the capacity to enhance regional connectivity in the southern part of Central Asia, and facilitate cooperation between the upstream Central Asian states (i.e. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and South Asia.

The analysis of Central Asia's natural gas sector demonstrates more vividly that China-sponsored projects re-direct the energy flow toward China, away from the Russia-centered post-Soviet network. While serving Chinese interests though, the China-sponsored network also contributes toward cooperation among Central Asian states. China's support of initiatives, which require active practical interstate cooperation among all the participating states, demonstrates a shift in China's policy from largely bilateral engagement toward actively promoted multilateralism. This shift comes in contrast to Russia's continuous situational and bilateral manner of engagement, which has provided very limited support for multilateral initiatives in the energy sector.

If China's engagement in the energy sector is indeed intended to facilitate multilateral cooperation in the neighboring region, China is facing major challenges in fulfilling its objectives. Despite China's material capabilities, it was often unable to complete its intended projects. However, most Chinese projects, which were canceled or delayed, were affected by reasons which originated in the region, and were not impeded by China's intentions or inability. These included Zarafshan River HEPP project in Tajikistan, several smaller hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan, Line D of Central Asia – China pipeline and oil-refineries in Kyrgyzstan. Chinese projects can be contrasted with several Russia-planned projects which have not materialized because of the reasons emanating from Russia, whether economic or political. The examples include the pipeline through Uzbekistan, proposed in 2008, Kambarata-1 HEPP, Upper Naryn Cascade, and North-South gas pipeline in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, China-Kyrgyzstan discussions in 2016-17 about the completion of the projects abandoned by Russia suggested that China is willing to further expand its role in the region.

Neorealist approaches to these phenomena do not seem to explain what has been observed. Chinese and Russian engagement in the energy sector in Central Asia cannot be explained by the dynamics of Sino-Russian major power rivalry. Despite the competitive nature of their relations, both Russia and China managed not to undercut each other's initiatives in Central Asia's energy sector. The two cooperated when their interests converged, and tended to pursue their individual objectives in other instances. Projects completed by China in the gas dimension gradually reduced Russia's sphere of influence in the region. However, the process resembled competition rather than rivalry. The theory of alliances, under which smaller states align with the major powers to balance against the threats, also

does not seem to explain energy dynamics in Central Asia. A number of Central Asian states, especially those bordering China, perceive it as a threat. Nevertheless, all of them chose pragmatic cooperation with China in the energy field. Compared to Russia, China's material capabilities provide faster return on the energy projects, which are so crucial for the development of the national economies of the Central Asian states.

However, consistent with Neorealism, this chapter does find that major powers' engagement in the Central Asian energy sector is best explained by the omnibalancing approach, under which smaller states, more specifically their leaders, are active actors in regional international relations. Considering the autocratic nature of most of the Central Asian states, their presidents often played decisive roles in limiting or promoting China's and Russia's engagement in their national energy sectors. The considerations of the Central Asian leaders lie in both external and internal factors. The directions of electric power lines pulled by China in Tajikistan are closely related to the clan relations of the country's leader. In Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, economic development as a source of stability encouraged leaders to cooperate with China on the gas projects. At the same time, Uzbekistan's inconsistent attitude toward Russia-sponsored energy initiatives was often grounded in Karimov's distrust toward Russia's activities in the neighboring states and regional integration initiatives. Kyrgyzstan president Atambaev, while democratically elected, had to take into account strong national sentiments and clan relations among his constituents when making decisions about the China-built refineries. Additionally, Atambaev had to evaluate dependency on Russia's inconsistent engagement when making the decision about denouncing the agreement on the key hydropower projects. Overall, Central Asian leaders tend to facilitate or limit the engagement of the major powers in the energy sector based on both external and domestic factors.

Despite the largely autocratic rule in most of the Central Asian states, the opinions of the masses remained important for the states' foreign policies, especially since the former could be influenced and utilized by the opposition elites.¹⁶⁰ Throughout the region, a generally positive predisposition toward Russia and antipathy toward China played various roles in different states and during different periods of time. Understanding the importance of public opinion, the two major powers made continuous efforts to influence the flow and access of information in Central Asia. To this end Russia and China employed their material capabilities to develop various telecommunication networks in Central Asia. The Central Asian states responded in different ways. Subsequently, along with the information flow, the networks had different impacts on regional connectivity. The next chapter examines China's and Russia's engagement in the telecommunication sector. Understanding how material capabilities influence the flow of ideas is the next step in evaluating the role of physical infrastructure in the regionalization of Central Asia.

¹⁶⁰ Radnitz, Scott, *Weapons of the wealthy. Predatory regimes and elite-led protests in Central Asia*, Cornell University Press: New York, 2010

Chapter Seven

Laying wires – making friends: Russia’s and China’s engagement in the telecommunication sector and its effects on regional cooperation

Formal political and economic integration and cooperation projects, promoted by Russia and China, had limited effects on interstate regional cooperation in Central Asia. In contrast, the development of networked industries created certain potential to facilitate regional cooperation and contribute towards regional connectivity on the levels below the state. In the region discussed, these networked sectors have been defined by Soviet-era infrastructure, still largely connected to Russia, and by massive new infrastructural projects, financed by China. Through their influence on physical infrastructure, the two major powers affected the degree and character of regional cooperation among Central Asian states. Nevertheless, each networked sector carries a regionalization effect of a different nature. New roads and transportation regulations among the states have the potential to facilitate or limit movement of people and goods. Transnational electric grids provide grounds for practical cooperation on a technical level between related agencies of participating states. Pipelines carrying hydrocarbons have a similar impact because moving gas and oil through the territories of several countries requires technical cooperation, hands-on engagement and coordination involving producing and transporting agencies of different states. In the same context, fiber optic cables and satellite antennas enable individuals and agencies to share information transnationally, while mobile carrier networks allow people to communicate across the borders much more easily.

This chapter examines China and Russia’s combined and individual involvement in the telecommunication sector and subsequent effects on regional cooperation in the post-Soviet Central Asia. As one of the networked sectors, telecommunication systems can enhance regional connectivity, but, compared to other networked industries, telecommunication systems possess three attributes, which allocate them additional roles in the regionalization process.

First, as mentioned, telecommunication systems provide connectivity between people and organizations. Landlines and mobile providers can make communication among individuals and businesses of different countries faster or slower and cheaper or more expensive, which in turn, can influence regional connectivity. For example, the European Commission has addressed high roaming charges within the EU. In a much less integrated North America, the USA subscribers enjoy the same rates for calls to Canada and within Canada as they do within the United States. In contrast, in Central Asia international calling rates apply when calling Kazakhstan from Kyrgyzstan and roaming charges are exorbitant for those using a Kyrgyzstan phone number in Kazakhstan. The last comparison only appears to be far-stretching – Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are both members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) which implies non-tariff trade comparable to the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and a visa free regime comparable to that between the USA and Canada. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan share a lengthy border, and their main economic centers, Bishkek and Almaty lie only 300 km apart. Furthermore, in Central Asia the states outside of the integration structures may be further limited in their communication with their geographic neighbors through even more expensive rates. For example, mobile provider BeeLine in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan offers much cheaper roaming charges to the members of the EAEU, even distant Belarus, than to the neighboring non-members, i.e. Uzbekistan, which borders both of the states.

In a certain sense, telecommunication systems create *technological zones*, defined by Andrew Barry as “[spaces] within which differences between technical practices, procedures,

and forms have been reduced, or common standards have been established.”¹ More specifically, telecommunication systems connecting neighboring states can be viewed as *infrastructural zones* “associated with the creation of common connection standards”², which “make it possible to integrate systems of production and communication, as well as exclude consumers and producers who do not conform to the standard.”³ The extent of the commonality of the standards affects the degree of connectivity between non-state actors, which, in turn, influences the level of regional cooperation.

Major powers, with their influence, or lack of influence, on pre-existing post-Soviet infrastructure, play an important role in the development or prevention of technological zones within Central Asia. In the context of regional connectivity, Corey Johnson’s concept of *obdurate infrastructure* suggests that existing infrastructural projects play an important role in the decision process involved in facilitating interstate cooperation.⁴ In other words, existing infrastructure projects influence states’ decisions in regard to cooperation and other foreign policy related activities with their neighbors. At the same time, considering political sensitivity of communication channels, that is, their ability to transmit information and control its type, it is logical that smaller regional actors want to dominate these channels. This aspiration is actually made possible because of another characteristic of telecommunication and information sector – the comparably low cost.

The second attribute which distinguishes the telecommunication sector from other networked industries is that communication networks are relatively cheaper to build than transportation and energy networks. On the one hand, mobile communication technologies have been complementing and even replacing traditional landlines. In Central Asia, as in other less developed regions of the world, mobile networks have made communication systems cheaper because of their non-reliance on the costly and technologically challenging construction of fixed telephone lines. Moreover, traditional land lines and high-tech fiber-optic networks are still less costly to build than transport and energy networks because the former generally follow pre-existing routes of ‘harder’ infrastructure, i.e. roads, railways, pipelines and power-lines.⁵ In other words, the new telecommunication infrastructure can be imbedded into the old physical infrastructure. As a result, lower costs allow Central Asian states to maintain more control of the development of telecommunication systems. In 2010 telecom companies in each of the Central Asian states were co-owned by their national governments.⁶ The degree of private ownership ranged from 51 percent in Kazakhstan to none in Turkmenistan.⁷ The trend highlighted the relative affordability of the telecommunication sector compared to heavier industries, which often required high percentage of foreign investments.

Noticeably, this trend undermines the concept of ‘obdurate infrastructure’. On the one hand, the obduracy of the pre-existing infrastructural projects explains some of the dynamics among actors involved in Central Asia. On the other hand, the ability of other actors to alter this infrastructure, suggests that the materially-based political decisions can be affected by the

¹ Barry, Andrew, “Technological Zones”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9, 2, 2006, 239-253 (239)

² Ibid

³ Barry (2006), 240

⁴ Johnson, Corey, “Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia”, in Walcott, Susan and Johnson, Corey (Eds.), *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From the South China to the Caspian Sea*, (2014), Routledge, 110-129

⁵ Rolland, Nadege, “A Fiber-Optic Silk Road”, *The Diplomat*, April 02, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/a-fiber-optic-silk-road/>

⁶ “Integration processes in CIS Telecommunications Sector”, *Eurasian Development Bank, Sector Report no 9*, Almaty, 2010, 19

⁷ Ibid

actors which have higher material capabilities. Moreover, since the telecommunication sector requires lower development costs compared to other networked sectors, there are a greater number of actors which can contribute toward changing the direction of connectivity. This gives them the ability to alter the status quo of pre-existing cooperation dynamics. The relatively lower costs, and visibly faster returns on investments, allow foreign actors with lower economic power to engage in the telecommunication sector in Central Asia. While transportation and energy sectors in Central Asia have been mainly influenced by China's state sponsored investments and loans, the mobile communication sector of the region, for instance, has been dominated by Russian companies.⁸ Moreover, while Russia and China are still very much engaged in the telecommunication sector, novelty and comparably low costs allow regional actors to keep major powers' influence in check. This capacity is very important considering the crucial function of media as a propaganda tool.

The third attribute of telecommunication networks is their ability to serve as the channel for spreading 'soft power'. The actors, who control the means of communication and media, have the capacity to influence the type of information spread through these channels. Material capabilities of major powers have had clear effects on regional dynamics in Central Asia. Russia's military power and China's economic power are often mentioned as examples of these material capabilities. Alongside this assertion, Russia is often attributed greater political influence in Central Asia because of Russia's 'traditional soft power' in the region. This is one of the aspects, which China is considered to be particularly lacking. There is little consensus about the geopolitical importance of 'soft power' and its role in the development of regional cooperation. Whatever this role is, however, it is reliant on the channels of communication that it travels through, such as TV transmissions, fiber optic cables and mobile internet providers. Creation, development and maintenance of these is clearly dependent on the material capabilities of the actors involved in these processes.

Furthermore, according to Barry, "the development of technological zones has come to be seen as a strategic imperative."⁹ Barry's analysis deals mainly with *zones of qualification*, in which "the qualities of objects or practices are assessed in order that they meet more or less common standards or criteria"¹⁰ However, the role of *infrastructural zones* is similarly important for achieving the political goals of various actors. These actors may include regional institutions, multinational corporations and other non-state agencies, but in the case of Central Asia, the development of technological zones often serves the interests of the adjacent major powers, Russia and China.

This chapter argues that Sino-Russian combined engagement, as well as their individual involvement in the telecommunication sector, has had a limited effect on promoting regional cooperation in post-Soviet Central Asia to date. However, the focused nature of Chinese engagement developed more potential for regional cooperation compared to situational activities emanating from Russia. The limited effects on regionalization can be attributed to the nature of the telecommunication sector and the differences in the levels of political leverage held by Russia and China in Central Asian countries. The first section of the chapter addresses the broad effects of major powers' engagement on regional connectivity. The second section assesses how the relatively lower costs of the telecommunication sector attract smaller state actors and non-state actors and evaluates the roles of the two major powers in that context. The third section evaluates the political considerations of Russia and China in their approaches in the telecom sector and analyzes the existing and potential effects

⁸ Libman, Alexander, "Regionalisation and Regionalism in the Post-Soviet Space: Current Status and Implications for Institutional Development", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59, 3, (May 2007), 401-430, 408

⁹ Barry (2006), 244

¹⁰ Barry (2006), 240

of these approaches on regional cooperation. A brief conclusion follows.

Transcontinental cables and their questionable effects on regional connectivity

Convergence of sub-sectors, geographical constraints and technological limitations

Different sub-sectors of the telecommunication sector have varying effects on regional connectivity. However, there is, arguably, strong interdependence among these sub-sectors where changes in one initiate changes in the others. This relationship is caused by the technological convergence in the telecommunication industry.

Technological convergence of two distinct types has taken place in communications. The first is the blurring of point-to-point communication and broadcasting; the former traditionally needed wires or cables and the latter included radio and television. The use of radio signals to carry telephone calls and of wires to carry broadcast programming are now commonplace. The second type of convergence—of telecommunications, computing, and entertainment into a common digital form—allows many types of data, whether originating as voice, music, video, or text, to be compressed and to maintain greater end-to-end signal clarity.¹¹

Malecki suggests that both types of convergence have changed the whole industry where different sectors have to compete with each other in providing similar services.¹² This is clearly visible in the triple offers like “landline, mobile, internet” or “voice, data, video”; it is also demonstrated in the case of print media, which has been commonly converted into digital form, and, at times, even replaced by digital media.¹³ Hence, most of the information and telecommunication sub-sectors have become increasingly interconnected. In Central Asia physical geography adds further attributes to the sector.

The regional states, due to their landlocked location, are unable to benefit from direct access to submarine cables which have rapidly developed in the past several decades.¹⁴ Mountainous and desert terrains contribute toward the difficulties in connecting the region with the outside world. Frequently Central Asian states have to utilize costly and relatively slow satellite access. An alternative involves reliance on the neighboring states, particularly Russia and China, and bearing their bandwidth transit and connection costs in addition to the costs of physical infrastructure.¹⁵

In addition to geographic and technical constraints, Central Asian states often face difficulties related to the commercial interests of the operators in the neighboring countries controlling access to the international networks.¹⁶

Due to its architecture, the global information infrastructure based on trunk networks requires permanent connections all over the world. Therefore, the actual geography of data traffic from one subscriber to another is of no importance. [...] The choice of technology is dictated by commercial interconnect contracts between world operators. The main reason of bypassing CIS counties is a lack of technical capability and individual operators’ agreements necessary for transferring data in a particular

¹¹ Malecki, Edward J., Hu, Wei, “A Wired World: The Evolving Geography of Submarine Cables and the Shift to Asia”, *Annals of the Association of American Geographer*, 99, 2 (2009), 360-382, 362

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Unleashing the Potential of the Internet in Central Asia, South Asia, the Caucasus and Beyond, *ADB Consultant Report*, Asia Development Bank, December 2015, 9

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, 9

direction.¹⁷

In this case, lack of cooperation among service providers within Central Asia and the general technological deficiency of the region led to reluctance among the external actors to utilize the region's transit potential and thus contribute to the regionalization process.

Furthermore, it appears that in Central Asia there is little correlation between a country's political system and the level of economic development and the degree of the population's access to certain telecommunication sectors. Visibly, the level of Internet access varies widely among the five states. In 2015 it ranged from 12 percent in Turkmenistan to 55 percent in Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Noticeably the level of Internet access did not correspond with the countries' economic positions and degree of openness. While economically developed Kazakhstan ranked first (55 percent), Turkmenistan, often considered as the second country in the region for economic development, ranked last (12 percent). Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan, the "island of democracy", ranked modestly in the middle (28percent). While at the same time, Uzbekistan, arguably second only to Turkmenistan in the degree of isolation and with a comparably oppressive regime, ranked much higher, with 44 percent of the population having access to the Internet.

Table 1. Little correlation between internet penetration, press freedom, population income¹⁹

Country	Internet Penetration	Press freedom ranking out of 180 countries (180 the lowest)	Income (GDP per capita), USD
Kazakhstan	55%	158	24, 205
Uzbekistan	44%	165	5,576
Kyrgyzstan	28%	98	3, 322
Tajikistan	17%	149	2, 655
Turkmenistan	12%	178	15,474

Subsequently, it can be hypothesized that the level of Internet connectivity may be affected by other factors, particularly the accessibility to the trunk networks which run through or close to in proximity to Central Asia.

Sino-Russian engagement and transcontinental cables bypassing Central Asia

In the early 2000's, fiber-optic cables had become increasingly favored by telecommunication companies over satellites because the cables can be fully owned by the carriers, while satellite capacity is generally leased.²⁰ While both technologies provide long distance communication, they function differently. Satellites, able to transmit to any receiver on the ground, create more widespread networks compared to fiber-optics, which depend on real connections and "are point-to-point in nature."²¹ In Central Asia, this growing attachment to physical infrastructure increased the level of reliance of local telecommunication providers on their counterparts in the neighboring states. Hence, fiber-optic cable could be viewed as instruments of regionalization.

¹⁷ "Integration processes...", 32

¹⁸ Ibid, 12

¹⁹ "Integration processes...", 12

Data of press freedom ranking 2018, *Reporters Without Borders* (n.d.), https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table?sort=desc&order=Ranking, accessed May 7, 2018

²⁰ Malecki, 364

²¹ Ibid

According to Johnson, physical infrastructure has the capacity to influence the political decisions of states.²² In that sense, the state actors tend to consider large existing infrastructural projects when making decisions regarding cooperation. In the case of telecommunication, one of the vivid examples of obduracy is Russia's refusal to engage in the construction and development of the Trans-Asia-Europe Fiber Optic Communication Line (TAE FOCL). In the mid-1990's Russia chose to focus on rehabilitating and building on top of its existing telecommunication lines which ran in east-west directions and only had spurs to Central Asia.²³ It was a rational decision on Russia's part to avoid participation in the TAE FOCL project because laying new communication lines, regardless of their technology, is done most efficiently on top of the existing infrastructure.²⁴

Without Russia's involvement, the TAE FOCL, which was expensive to build, was put into operation in 1998. It was designed to connect Shanghai in China with Frankfurt in Germany and was commonly cited, not quite accurately, as the link which followed the ancient Silk Road.²⁵ The TAE FOCL was laid through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and continued through Iran, Turkey and several eastern European countries before reaching Germany. In Central Asia the TAE FOCL effectively bypassed the two less developed countries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the original design the line was intended to pass through Kyrgyzstan, but Kyrgyzstan could not agree with Kazakhstan on the terms of transit.²⁶ Instead, Kyrgyzstan connected to the TAE FOCL near Almaty, but the country reportedly received no Internet access through the spurs.²⁷ The TAE FOCL had low capacity and was missing trans-Caspian links until 2015.²⁸ Logically, it was not utilized throughout its whole length.²⁹ Additionally, several local operators did not possess the required capacity to meet international standards. Subsequently, the line was not able to fulfill the needs of some of the potential consumers. Delayed terms of commercial agreements for establishing channels between the trunk line and the operators further contributed to the inefficiency of the TAE FOCL.³⁰ Partially the difficulties were attributed to the high number of countries involved in the project, which complicated the coordination of traffic and led to higher costs.³¹ Another potential weakness was that the Asian section of the TAE FOCL did not have

²² Johnson, Corey, "Geographies of Obdurate Infrastructure in Eurasia", in Walcott, Susan and Johnson, Corey (Eds.), *Eurasian Corridors of Interconnection: From the South China to the Caspian Sea*, (2014), Routledge, 110-129

²³ Yesaulenko, Aleksey, "Tranzitniy 'pirog' na dvoih" ["Transit 'pie' for two"], *Network World*, 9, June 20, 2006, <http://www.osp.ru/nets/2006/09/2054863/>

²⁴ "Integration processes...", 32

²⁵ Rolland, Nadege, "A Fiber-Optic Silk Road", *The Diplomat*, April 02, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/a-fiber-optic-silk-road/>

²⁶ "Kyrgyzstan ne poluchayet Internet cherez TAE, - rukovodstvo OAO 'Kyrgyztelecom'" ["Kyrgyzstan does not receive Internet through TAE (Trans Asia-Europe line) – management of OAO 'Kyrgyztelecom'"], *Grazhdanskaya Initsiativa Internet Politici [Civil Initiative of Internet Politics]*, June 27, 2011, <http://www.gipi.kg/kyrgyzstan-ne-poluchaet-internet-cherez-tae-trans-aziatsko-evropejskaya-magistral-rukovodstvo-oao-kyrgyztelekom/>

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Vinokurov, Oleg, "Informatsionniye magistrali sovremenosti" ["Information highways of the modernity"], *Turkmenistan Zolotoy Vek [Turkmenistan Goldne Age]*, March 24, 2015, <http://www.turkmenistan.gov.tm/?id=8447>

²⁹ "Kyrgyzstan ne poluchayet..."

³⁰ "V Alma-Ate obsudyat problemy trans-aziatsko-yevropeiskoy VOLS" ["The problems of Trans-Asia-Europe Fiber Optic Cable System will be discussed in Almaty"], *ComNews*, March 30, 2005, <http://www.comnews.ru/node/45822>

³¹ "Integration processes...", 33

a parallel line which could be utilized in case of emergencies.³² This factor made the line vulnerable because of the comparatively low level technological environment in Central Asian states. For instance, during an accident in the section of the TAE FOCL on the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the whole country, Uzbekistan, was left without access to Internet sites outside of Uzbekistan.³³

Evidently, the TAE FOCL, which had considerable potential to contribute toward the regionalization of Central Asia by bringing the states into a common technological zone of infrastructure, did not serve such a purpose. Russia's refusal to participate in the TAE FOCL project was logical because it was more cost efficient for Russian companies to expand transit potential between Europe and East Asia by utilizing pre-existing, obdurate infrastructure on its own territory. For China, it appears, expanding telecommunication network through Central Asia proved to be too challenging. At the same time, despite Sino-Russian cooperation in the telecommunication sector being substantial, this cooperation happened to bypass Central Asia. In fact, China-Russia telecommunication projects designed to connect Asia with Europe mirrored China-Russia transportation projects connecting Asia with Europe.

The Western Europe – Western China auto-road and Eurasian Land Bridge rail link, which connects cities in China with European destinations, bypass most of Central Asia by running from China to Russia through Kazakhstan. Similarly, the two main telecommunication lines between China and Russia, i.e. Trans-Siberian Communication Line (TSCL) and Europe-Russia-Mongolia-China line (ERMC), bypass Central Asia altogether. Two more lines, Europe-Kazakhstan-Asia and Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway (TASIM) traverse sections of Kazakhstan, but not any other Central Asian country.

The TSCL was developed and has been operated by the main Russian telecommunication company Rostelecom in partnership with its Chinese state owned counterpart, China Telecom.³⁴ The line crosses the border from China's North East region into Russia's Far East in three places and continues through the whole territory of Russia towards Europe.³⁵ The ERMC line, in turn, was initiated by the second largest Russian telecom company, Transtelecom, and was developed in partnership with another Chinese state owned company China Unicom, together with the main Mongolian enterprise Ulaanbaatar Railways.³⁶ Subsequently, the EMRC traverses Mongolia on the way from China to Russia. Notably, in the case of these two projects, Russia and China's cooperation did little to contribute toward regionalization of Central Asia.

The Europe-Kazakhstan-Asia line passes through Kazakhstan.³⁷ China Unicom partnered with Kazakhstan's largest provider, Kazakhtelecom. Kazakhtelecom, in turn, partnered with Golden Telecom, an American company operating in Russia, to lay the fiber-optic cable from China through Kazakhstan, through Russia and on to Europe. The Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway (TASIM) was proposed by the government of Azerbaijan and it was intended to connect Asia with Europe through the Caspian Sea and the

³² Ibid

³³ "Uzbekistan: Avariya na volokonno-opticheskoy linii lishila stranu Interneta na 4 chasa" [Accident on the fiber-optic line left the country without Internet for 4 hours] *Fergana News*, June 03, 2009, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=12345>

³⁴ Yesaulenko

³⁵ Yesaulenko

"Kyrgyzstan ne poluchayet..."

³⁶ "Yesaulenko

³⁷ Ruddy, Michael, "Expanding Regional Connectivity in Asia and the Pacific", *Terabit Consulting*, <http://www.terabitconsulting.com/downloads/expanding-regional-connectivity-in-asia-and-the-pacific.pdf>, accessed September 22, 2016

Southern Caucasus.³⁸ The Russian and Chinese main players in the industry, Rostelecom and China Telecom, were both engaged in the project. However, as in the Europe-Kazakhstan-Asia initiative, Kazakhstan was the only post-Soviet Central Asian state involved in the TASIM.³⁹ While, Kazakhstan, especially its southern area, is considered to be a part of Central Asia, it is difficult to envision how this project would contribute toward enhanced regional connectivity without additional spurs to other Central Asian states. It appears that, on par with roads and railways, Chinese and Russian actors find it more convenient to rely on just one country in Central Asia for transit through Eurasia.

Overall, Sino-Russian cooperation projects in the field of fiber optic cables do not seem to bring Central Asian states into the common infrastructural zone. Therefore, these projects contribute little to the technological aspect of regionalization in the telecommunication sector. Moreover, Russia's engagement with fiber-optics in Central Asia has been minimal, especially considering Russia's interest in other branches of the telecommunication industry. The activities of the Chinese companies, however, have been more visible. Admittedly, China still relies on the so called 'northern route' through Russia and Kazakhstan to connect to Europe. However, Chinese fiber-optic projects in other parts of the region could be viewed as ends in themselves. That is, China has been laying fiber-optic capable in order to enhance its position in certain states, particularly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Moreover, viewed together, these projects suggest that China intends to rewire the region in a different way, as in the cases of electric power lines and gas pipelines. Above all, similarly to the 'harder' infrastructural sectors, China is frequently prevented from achieving its objectives.

Re-wiring regional lines of communication

It appears that China's information security would not be threatened by enhanced connectivity with its Central Asian neighbors. China's material and technological capacity greatly exceeds that of its western neighbors, and any information emanating through newly developed channels and perceived to be threatening can be easily filtered by the so called 'great firewall', the system which filters the content of non-Chinese web sources. However, Chinese efforts to develop telecommunication connectivity between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were not successful. At the end of 2008, China Telecom and the Tajikistan provider, Tajik Telecom, agreed to lay fiber optic cable line (FOCL) between China and Tajikistan.⁴⁰ By October 2009, the Chinese side had laid the FOCL across the border with Kyrgyzstan, through the southern pass to the Kyrgyz border city of Irkeshtam.⁴¹ This was seen as an initial step of connecting China, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with one FOCL. Soon afterwards Kyrgyz Telecom Company obtained 17 million US dollars credit from China Development Bank to complete the Irkeshtam-Osh FOCL between Irkeshtam, near the Chinese border to Osh, and the southern Batken region, which borders Tajikistan.⁴² The credit

³⁸ Pashayev, Fikret, "Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway (TASIM) project, and Eurasian Connectivity Alliance (EURACA) Initiative, *Round Table on Telecommunications Connectivity in Central Asia, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 3, 2014*, <http://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Mr%20Fikret%20pashayev.pdf>

³⁹ "Integration Process...", 35

⁴⁰ Chorshabiyev, Payrav, "Optical-fiber communication line will link Tajikistan and China", *Asia Plus Media Group / Tajikistan*, December 4, 2008, <http://news.tj/en/news/optical-fiber-communication-line-will-link-tajikistan-and-china>

⁴¹ "First fiber optic cable from China to Kyrgyzstan built", *Aki Press*, October 19, 2009, <http://akipress.com/news:103811/>

⁴² Ibi

amount was 34 million according to another source.⁴³ In March 2013, more than a year before the construction was due to be completed, the Chinese side announced that the line did not meet technical criteria for modern FOCL technology and was not satisfactory for use.⁴⁴ Because Kyrgyztelecom did not fulfill its contractual obligation, the issues arose about how it was to repay its debt to the China Development Bank. Allegations suggested that Huawei, the guarantor of the debt, was to take over Kyrgyztelecom, because the amount of debt exceeded the assets of the latter. Finally, the line was announced completed in October 2014, but was not utilized by Chinese parties. Coincidentally, another FOCL line, of allegedly better quality, was completed in September 2014. It was constructed by the privately owned Kyrgyz company Alkat, and it extended from northern Kyrgyzstan, close to the border with Kazakhstan, to Osh, in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is relatively close to Tajikistan border.⁴⁵ Tellingly, the line could serve as a viable alternative for Chinese companies, considering that they already had access to Kazakhstan. However, eventually Chinese companies were not able to utilize either of the lines.

Since Huawei served as a guarantor for Kyrgyztelecom to obtain credit for the construction of the Osh-Irkeshtam line, it had the responsibility to lay unfinished sections of the line.⁴⁶ Soon after project completion, Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies raised fraud allegations against both Huawei and Kyrgyztelecom.⁴⁷ In November 2015 the Huawei branch in Kyrgyzstan was being investigated for charging the Kyrgyz government three million US dollars, when it allegedly spent only 300 thousand US dollars to complete the job.⁴⁸ Little public information is available about the results of the investigation, but the scandal eventually de-escalated. In 2018 Huawei was selected as the main contractor for infrastructural modernization of the Kyrgyzstan capital.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the line extending from western China to Tajikistan, through Kyrgyzstan, which was intended to connect the two Central Asian countries with China and provide additional grounds for cooperation within Central Asia, was not properly utilized.

China's hurdles in the telecom sector resemble the challenges in promoting the Kashgar-Osh railroad in Kyrgyzstan. The problems are also similar to those faced by Chinese-built oil refineries, which were resisted based on the calls from local opposition groups. The telecom problems also mirror the obstacles faced by the Chinese side with Line

⁴³ Kulikovskiy, Aleksey, "Krupnaya telekommunikatsionnaya kompaniya Kirgizii mozhet byt' privatizirovana Kitayem" ["Large Kyrgyz telecommunication company may be privatized by China"], *News-Asia*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.news-asia.ru/view/ks/4491>

⁴⁴ "Kitay otkazalsya ot optovolokonnoy linii Tajikistan – Kitay" ["China refused from fiber optic line Tajikistan-China"], *Profit.kz*, March 5, 2013, <http://profit.kz/news/9508/Kitaj-otkazalsya-ot-optovolokonnoj-linii-Tadzhikistan-Kitaj/>

⁴⁵ "Internet-magistrali sever-yug ili nezamechennaya revolyutsiya" ["Internet-lines north-south, or, unnoticed revolution"], *Kyrgyz Telegraph Agency*, December 22, 2014, <http://kyrtag.kg/standpoint/internet-magistrali-sever-i-yug-ili-nezamechennaya-revoljutsiya->

⁴⁶ Kulikovskiy

⁴⁷ Kudryavtseva, Tatyana, "Iz-za stroitel'stva volokonno-opticheskoy linii svyazi 'Osh-Irkeshtam' gosudarstvu nanesen uzherb v 188 millionov somov" ["The state has incurred 188 million som worth of damages from the construction of FOCL 'Osh-Irkeshtam'"], *Information Agency 24kg*, June 30, 2015, http://24kg.org/kriminal/15337_iz-za_stroitelstva_volokonno-opticheskoy_linii_svyazi_osh_-_irkeshtam_gosudarstvu_nanesen_uscherb_v_118_millionov_somov_obnovleno/

⁴⁸ "Na imishestvo Huawei v Bishkeke nalozhen arest" ["Huawei assets in Bishkek have been arrested"], *Sputnik News*, November 15, 2015, <http://ru.sputnik.kg/incidents/20151127/1020455913.html>

⁴⁹ "Chto izvestno o kompanii Huawei, kotoraya realizuyet proekt umniy gorod" ["What is known about the company Huawei, which will realize the project 'Smart city'"], *Kaktus Media*, January 14, 2018, https://kaktus.media/doc/368666_chto_izvestno_o_kompanii_huawei_kotoraia_realizuyet_proekt_ymnyy_gorod.html

D of Central Asia - China pipeline, whose construction has stalled since 2015. Evidently, some of the impediments arise from the Kyrgyzstan political landscape where opposition parties use anti-Chinese sentiments to put pressure on the government.⁵⁰ It is worth noting that in August 2015, Kyrgyzstan joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. So the timing of the difficulties faced by various Chinese actors in Kyrgyzstan could be also influenced by the Kyrgyzstan leadership's considerations of Russia's interests in Central Asia.⁵¹

Another explanation for failures of certain Chinese initiatives in Central Asia could be the nature of China's priorities in the region. They may not be as high as they are considered. Instead, China's strategic interests may be elsewhere, and infrastructural development of Central Asia as part of the Belt and Road Initiative is only one of the means to reach these strategic goals. For instance, as discussed in previous chapters, Russia provides a more viable transit route between China and Europe than Central Asia. Similarly, if China's goal is to develop connectivity with South Asia, there may be more feasible alternatives than connecting through Central Asian states. In the case of the telecommunication sector, China-Pakistan fiber-optic cable runs from Xingjian in western China to central Pakistan, completely bypassing post-Soviet Central Asia. The cable is designated to support communication along the China-Pakistani Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁵² Intended to be completed by the end of 2018, the project suggests that China has more suitable alternatives than dealing with multiple Central Asian states if its' priorities lay in developing cooperation with South Asia.⁵³

Yet, China's potential contribution towards regional connectivity is still visible. Despite the setbacks in Central Asia, China gradually emerged as an agent responsible for the foundation of the infrastructural zones. This role, which was traditionally attributed to Russia, enabled China to affect the direction of regional cooperation, and possibly 'reformat' the region in a new way. One vivid example in the telecommunication sector is a project involving the construction of the fiber optic line between Central Asia and South Asia.

In May 2016 Tajikistan agreed with Pakistan to build a fiber optic line passing through Afghanistan, which would follow the CASA-1000 (Central Asia South Asia) power transmission project.⁵⁴ The cable would serve as a more viable connection alternative between Tajikistan and Pakistan. At the time of the agreement the two countries were connected through an unreasonably long Russia-Europe-Middle Eastern route, susceptible to all the possible technical delays along the way.⁵⁵ The proposed new section was a part of the more expansive 'Digital CASA' project which envisioned high technology communication systems, including fiber optics, connecting Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁶ Moreover, the project could eventually include Kazakhstan.⁵⁷ Laying the new

⁵⁰ There has been no recorded instances of any significant anti-Chinese riots in Kyrgyzstan or any other country in the region

⁵¹ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 14, 2016

⁵² Yusufzai, Amin, "Ground Breaking of \$44 Million Pak-China Fiber Optic Cable Today", *Propakistani*, May 19, 2016, <https://propakistani.pk/2016/05/19/ground-breaking-of-44-million-pak-china-fiber-optic-cable-today/>

⁵³ Amin, Tahir, "Pak-China Optical Fiber Cable project to be completed by year-end", *Business Recorder*, February 9, 2018, <https://fp.brecorder.com/2018/02/20180209342383/>

⁵⁴ "Pakistan and Tajikistan agree to build fiber optic network", *Fiber Optic Social Network*, May 20, 2016, <http://www.fomsn.com/fiber-optic-news/fiber/pakistan-and-tajikistan-agree-to-build-fiber-optic-network/>

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ "Forging a Shared Vision for Digital Transformation in Central and South Asia", *World Bank*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2016/02/17/forging-a-shared-vision-for-digital-transformation-in-central-and-south-asia>

⁵⁷ Ibid

line was supposed to be completed through the efforts of the participating countries. The project is supported by the World Bank, and China's potential involvement is barely mentioned. Yet, it is critical to note that the foundation of CASA-1000 power transmission projects has been financed by China Exim bank and constructed by Chinese electric company TBEA.⁵⁸ Laying fiber optic cable along the existing power transmission line is significantly less costly than laying it across rough terrain. In this sense, China had provided the 'obdurate' infrastructural foundation for further development of regional cooperation along the direction of this foundation. It is in this way that China developed the potential to 'rewire' the region in a new way and, subsequently, contribute toward cooperation among Central Asian states. Above all, the case confirms emerging interchangeability between the roles of the two major powers: China has been taking over Russia's function of laying the groundwork and defining the direction for infrastructural development in the region, while Russia's engagement has been largely profit driven.

China's capacity to 'rewire' the region lies in the degree of consistency in the nature of Chinese companies engagement in Central Asia, which is closely coordinated with Beijing's apparent foreign policy objectives. In contrast, multiple Russian telecom companies operating in Central Asia tend to operate on a competing basis, which can be counterproductive for promoting regional cooperation and connectivity. The presence of multiple players and its effects on the regionalization process are addressed in the following section.

Lower cost – more players – less clear vision of a single region

Lower costs of engagement attract numerous non-state actors which logically pursue their profit-driven goals. Mobile phone carriers are able to lease network capacity from network operators without engaging in risky and costly infrastructural projects.⁵⁹ Furthermore, investment costs for leasing network capacity decreased dramatically from the 1980's to 2000's.⁶⁰ Furthermore, considering the nature of market competition, the activities of players in the mobile communication industry are generally un-coordinated. Therefore, their efforts are often duplicated, which diminishes their ability to contribute toward enhanced regional connectivity. The activities of Chinese companies operating in Central Asia appear to be more synchronized. In contrast, Russian telecom companies tend to act more independently. Therefore, their activities often cause adverse effects on regional cooperation, even without deliberate intent to do so.

The three Russian major fixed-line network providers maintained varying degrees of presence in Central Asia. Rostelecom, which emerged as an heir of the Soviet telecommunication agency, had a presence in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and from 2008 was aiming to lay a line across the Caspian Sea, connecting Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with Azerbaijan.⁶¹ Another company, Transtelecom, emerged from the enterprise, which provided telecommunication systems for Russian railroads. Transtelecom

⁵⁸ Putz, Catherine, "Kyrgyzstan Declared Energy Independence", *The Diplomat*, September 01, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/kyrgyzstan-declares-energy-independence/>

"In Tajikistan the Largest Power Transmitting Line, Connecting South and North" Has Been Launched", *RBK News*, November 30, 2009, <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/20091130121731.shtml>

"SCO and Development of Energy Sector in Tajikistan," *Patriottj News*, May 30, 2014, http://www.patriottj.com/publ/novosti_sng/novosti_sng/shos_i_razvitie_ehnergetiki_tadzhikistana/7-1-0-17505

⁵⁹ Malecki, 66

⁶⁰ Malecki, 67

⁶¹ "Integration Processes...", 33-34
Yesaulenko

had a limited presence in Central Asia and serviced only northern Kazakhstan.⁶² Rostelecom and Transtelecom were involved in the development of the Trans-Siberian Communication Line (TSCL) and the Europe-Russia-Mongolia-China (ERMC) communication line respectively, as discussed in the previous section. Neither of the two lines involved Central Asia. The regional presence of the third major Russian network provider, Sinterra Group, was limited to Kazakhstan. In 2010 Sinterra was planning to construct the so called Caspian Ring which was intended to connect Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Iran.⁶³ Essentially, Sinterra's project appeared to be very similar to the Rostelecom project. This similarity suggested duplication of efforts in order to pursue initiatives that were potentially profitable, while disregarding the sub-regions which appeared less rewarding or carried greater political risks. In any case, the projects remained in the discussion stages as of 2017.

The mobile sector of the telecommunication industry in Central Asia has been dominated by Russia.⁶⁴ According to Libman,

this is probably the most remarkable part of the Russian investment expansion in the CIS [particularly in Central Asia]: unlike gas pipelines or power utilities, mobile phone service represent a definitively new sector, which appeared only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and therefore the companies do not seem to be biased by the soviet past in their investment decisions.⁶⁵

Libman suggests that companies promote regionalization in the post-Soviet space more effectively than institutionalized cooperation and integration initiatives.⁶⁶ However, in the case of the mobile communication sector, competition between Russian providers does not always have positive effects on regional connectivity.

The impediments to the enhancement of connectivity among people from neighboring Central Asian states include roaming charges and fees for calls between different providers.⁶⁷ All of the three main Russian providers, Beeline (a.k.a. VypelCom), MTS (Mobile TeleSystems) and Megafon maintain a presence in Central Asia to different degrees. Beeline is the most dominant, and has large subscriber bases in each country with the exception of Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan hosts only MTS in addition to only one local provider. However, MTS's only other presence in Central Asia is in Uzbekistan. The third provider, Megafon, is officially only present in Tajikistan, but tellingly operates under a different name, Megacom, in Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁸ Each provider offers favorable rates for communicating within its network and higher rates for calls outside of the network. Subsequently, only Beeline would offers cheaper rates for calls between all the states aside from Turkmenistan. Furthermore, considering that Russian operators generally partner up with local networks, roaming charges usually go into effect for those subscribers who cross borders. The nature of the mobile communication sector also leads to competition between local providers and Russian companies, and among each other.

Considering the large number of players, competition among companies from different countries often turns into a political issue. In the late 2000's companies from Russia

⁶² "Integration Processes..." 34

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Libman, 408

⁶⁵ Libman, 408

⁶⁶ Libman, 409

⁶⁷ "Integration Processes..." 17-19

⁶⁸ "Press: Russia's Megafon to start operation in Kyrgyzstan in Feb", *PrePaidGSM.net Forum*, January 23, 2006, <http://www.prepaidgsm.net/forum/showthread.php?t=780>

and Kazakhstan engaged in competition to invest in the Kyrgyz provider Bi-tel.⁶⁹ In another example, two consortiums of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan companies competed with each other for a stake in Kyrgyztelecom.⁷⁰ There were also cases of competition between Kyrgyzstan companies and Russian companies in Kyrgyzstan.⁷¹ Uzbekistan tends to attract Russian investors as an offset to investors from its regional rival Kazakhstan.⁷² In Turkmenistan, competition between Russian MTS and local provider TM Cell led to a lengthy disruption of services for MTS customers in 2011-2012, which coincided with a sharp decrease in the purchase of Turkmenistan gas by Russia.⁷³

In contrast to Russia, China does not have mobile service carriers operating in Central Asia. However, China's two main actors in the region, ZTE (Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment) and Huawei have been actively engaged in fixed line and mobile communication sectors in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan since the early 2000's.⁷⁴ The activities of both revolve around providing communication equipment and upgrading fixed-line and cellular networks. Their projects are generally financed by China Exim Bank and China Development Bank.⁷⁵ Both of these banks are closely connected to the Chinese government. China Exim Bank, until the creating of new financial institutions, such as the Silk Road fund, was considered to be a key instrument of Beijing's foreign policy.⁷⁶ Subsequently, the activities of Chinese telecom firms in Central Asia are more closely coordinated, which prevents duplication of their efforts. Arguably, since China's engagement in the telecommunication sector has been more structured, it can offer more potential for regionalization of Central Asia.

Noticeably, it has been suggested that China's increasing influence in the telecom sector may actually decrease digital connectivity between Central Asian states and the rest of the world. The argument is that regional leaders' preference to deal with Chinese companies allows Central Asian states to decrease dependency on global networks largely dominated by Western actors. Subsequently the Central Asian states expose themselves to the possibility of surveillance by Beijing and become reliant on Chinese companies for maintaining functioning communication networks on their territories.⁷⁷ Furthermore, it has been argued that "the emergence of alternative networks could eventually increase the digital balkanization of some parts of the world."⁷⁸ The term 'balkanization' is used in a negative connotation here and it is not accurate. The trend does not necessarily have a negative impact on Central Asian regionalism and being connected to Chinese networks instead of European

⁶⁹ Libman, 409

⁷⁰ "Integration Processes...", 35

⁷¹ "Internet-magistrali sever-yug ili nezamechennaya revolyutsiya" ["Internet-lines north-south, or, unnoticed revolution"], *Kyrtag*, December 22, 2014, <http://kyrtag.kg/standpoint/internet-magistrali-sever-i-yug-ili-nezamechennaya-revolyutsiya->

⁷² Libman, 409

⁷³ "MTS vozobnovlyayet rabotu v Turkmenistane!" ["MTS resumes operation in Turkmenistan"], *MTS Website*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.mts.ru/news/2012-08-30-1764038/>

"Turkmenistan: Russia suspends gaz supplies", *Eurasianet*, January 4, 2016

⁷⁴ Tynan, Deirdre, "Central Asian: Are Chinese Telecoms Acting as the Ears of Central Asian Authoritarians?" *Eurasianet*, February 15, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65008>

⁷⁵ Tynan

⁷⁶ Cooley, Alexander, "China's changing role in Central Asia and implications for US policy: From trading partner to collective goods provider", Prepared remarks for "Looking West: China and Central Asia", *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 18, 2015, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Cooley%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Rolland, Nadege, "A Fiber-Optic Silk Road", *The Diplomat*, April 02, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/a-fiber-optic-silk-road/>

networks does not necessarily lead to fragmentation of the region, assuming that is what ‘balkanization’ implies. The notion that Central Asia would be connected to China more than it would be connected to Europe actually confirms the hypothesis that China took steps to “rewire” the region in a new, China-oriented way.

Reconnecting or rewiring the region by means of telecommunication networks extends beyond physical connectivity. Just like roads, railways, pipelines and power lines, telecommunication networks physically connect people and organizations across the borders. However, they also enable the spread of information and ideas. The reaction of the regional states to this external informational influence tends to differ, and political considerations often take place on both sides of the networks. The next section examines political considerations in the telecommunication sector and evaluates the impact of these considerations on the regionalization process.

Soft Power, language and the regionalization process

Compared to other networked sectors of infrastructure, the telecommunication sector is unique in its capacity to serve as a means of transferring and spreading information. Depending on its nature, information may act as a soft-power. According to Joseph Nye, “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants [it] might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants”⁷⁹ Actors possessing soft power have a stronger political position in a particular country or region. In a certain sense, the telecommunication sector serves as a link between one’s ‘hard power’, i.e. material capabilities, and one’s *soft power*, defined as a normative ability to socialize other actors into agreement. So, in this case, material capabilities, such as money and technology, are used to develop channels for spreading information.

Considerations for expanding soft power often defined China’s and Russia’s activities in certain Central Asian states. Promotion of Russian or Chinese TV and radio channels is one example; internet, censored by one or the other party, is another example; control of mobile telephone lines and satellites is yet another one. In repeated instances Russia and China’s political concerns for engaging in the telecommunication sector subordinated considerations regarding regional cooperation and focused largely on the expansion of their respective spheres of influence. In parallel, regional states often opposed major powers’ engagement in certain sectors of telecommunication, wary of their political sensitivity and potential for undermining sovereignty. The presence of these two diverging sets of dynamics reduced the regionalizing potential of the telecommunication sector. This section examines the instances of China and Russia’s interests in telecom sectors in several Central Asian countries. The analysis suggests that political dimensions in the telecom sector had varying effects on cooperation within the region.

The role of Russian language

Soft power is gained by the spreading of messages containing information and ideas, and these messages are inseparable from the language used to encode their meaning. The role of the Russian language in Central Asia has been largely defined by the Soviet period and cannot be underestimated. Ethnic Russians still constitute significant minorities in most of the states in the region, with the exception of Tajikistan, ranging from five per cent in Uzbekistan to nearly a quarter in Kazakhstan. Russian serves as an official language in Kyrgyzstan and semi-official in Kazakhstan. Bishkek and Almaty, major economic and cultural centers of the two states, along with a number of other cities in the region, remain predominantly Russian-speaking. Regional elites educated during the Soviet times speak Russian. Nevertheless, the

⁷⁹ Nye, Joseph, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, 1990, New York: Basic Books

position of the Russian language has declined dramatically in the post-Soviet years.

The intensive practice of de-russification took place in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The first two initiated the process soon after their independence in the mid 90's using nation building as a sovereignty enhancing measure. By 2004 only 20 per cent of the Uzbek population had significant command of the Russian language.⁸⁰ The Tajikistan government eliminated Russian's status of the language of "interethnic communication" in 2009 and placed the requirement that education and official matters were conducted in Tajik.⁸¹ Even though the use of Cyrillic script, adopted during Soviet times, is still in place in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it had been officially replaced by the Latin alphabet in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, symbolically dissociating titular languages from Russian influence. Informal de-russification was also on the way in the 'Russia-oriented' states. In Kazakhstan the process of implementation of the Latin alphabet was initiated in 2016. In Kyrgyzstan, the use of the Russian language gradually declined in the decades after independence. Between 1999 and 2009 the percentage of native Russian speakers in the total adult population decreased from 15 per cent to 9 per cent. The proportion of those using Russian as a second language declined from three quarters to a mere half. The downward trend continued and in 2009 the numbers for native and second language Russian speakers among children under the age of 15 were correspondingly 5 per cent and 25 per cent.⁸²

Central Asian governments' steps to decrease the use of the Russian language appeared to be limiting the economic opportunities of local populations. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which pioneered de-russification, heavily relied on Russia economically despite their reluctance to participate in Russia-led regional integration projects. Uzbekistan, for instance, attracted 12 per cent of Russia's total foreign direct investments in 2005, more than any other Central Asian country.⁸³ For Turkmenistan, with its gas based economy, Russia remained the main gas importer until 2008 and continued to import smaller amounts until suspending the relationship in early 2016. For Tajikistan, heavy reliance on Russia lies in Tajik migrants' remittances, which constituted at times up to a half of the impoverished country's GDP.

Nevertheless, these countries' de-russification policies arise from their logical apprehension of Russia's ability to influence local politics. Libman suggests that "Russia is too powerful to be perceived as a threat by the post-Soviet countries (especially because of the difficult history of their relations), but not powerful enough to effectively influence their decisions."⁸⁴ Nevertheless, even Kazakhstan, which arguably had the most liberal attitude toward the use of Russian language in the post-independence years, took major steps to keep Russian influence in check. One of the motives to relocate the nation's capital in 1997 from Almaty to the northern city of Akmola (later Astana) was to position the center of power closer to the mainly Russian-speaking northern regions in order to be able to assert control if necessary.⁸⁵ It was Kyrgyzstan, however, the only country in Central Asia where Russian had the status of the official language, which experienced the full extent of Russia's soft-power in

⁸⁰ Van Horn, Rachen, "Central Asia: Russian language experiencing rapid decline", *Eurasianet*, December 15, 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64711>

⁸¹ "Tajikistan drops Russian as official language", *Radion Free Europe Radio Liberty*, October 7, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/a/Tajikistan_Drops_Russian_As_Official_Language/1846118.html

⁸² Van Horn (2011)

⁸³ Libman, Alexander, "Regionalization and Regionalism in the Post-Soviet Space: Current Status and Implications for Institutional Development", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59, 3, (May 2007), 406

⁸⁴ Libman (2007), 411

⁸⁵ Another reason is that Astana, located in the steppe, is considerably more isolated than Almaty, which serves as a center of metropolis. In the case of internal unrest the rural dwellers would not be able to march on Astana like they could on Almaty.

2010. During Kyrgyzstan's internal crisis of 2010, Russia-controlled media sources actively aired information about the corruption of the ruling family, which exacerbated public discontent with the government and ultimately contributed toward the overthrow of president Bakiev's regime.⁸⁶

The role of the Russian language in Central Asia is closely tied to the position of Russia. The language itself, however, plays a twofold role in the regionalization process. On the one hand, Russian has remained the lingua franca of the regional political, academic and business elites. All the main regional organizations use it as the official language. Even though the use of Russian language among the native populations has declined, it is still essential for communication among Central Asian government officials. In that sense, the role played by Russian is consistent with the top-down nature of Central Asian regionalism. On the other hand, the powerful role of the language has fueled apprehension among Central Asian leaders. Even though motivation to promote national languages was generally driven by the young states' nation-building ambitions, the attitude toward the role of Russian language was often defined by the Central Asian leaders' perceptions of Russian power. These perceptions were shaped by the nature of Russia's linguistic, cultural and informational engagement in Central Asia. Moreover, China's growing presence in the region seriously affected Central Asian states capacities to respond to Russia's activities in the region, particularly in the media sector. Arguably, a combination of the perception of Russian influence and the increased material support from China motivated Central Asian states to take steps to diminish the position of the Russian language in their constituencies. This, in turn, decreased the potential of sustaining the use of one common language throughout the whole of the post-Soviet Central Asia. The political nature of the telecommunication sector is visible through the subsequent analysis of Russia and China's engagement in the media sector in Central Asia.

The next section evaluates the major powers engagement in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – the three states that made active moves to displace the Russian language. The section which follows examines major powers' external media engagement in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – the state where Russian language retained comparably more privileged status.

Russia's displacement and China's absence in the media sector in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian language TV programming continued to maintain a high level of popularity in Central Asia. Even in the states, which had undergone the process of de-russification, local populations went through additional efforts to retain access to Russian media. In Turkmenistan, the most isolated state in the region, Russian TV channels continued to be available through satellite antennas after they were blocked from free-to-air transmission. In 2015, though, a government campaign to ban private satellites for, supposedly, aesthetic reasons placed access to foreign channels under the auspices of state-owned satellites and cable networks and hence under stricter government control.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the future of accessibility of Russian TV channels remained uncertain. In March 2017 Turkmenistan's Ministry of Communication announced that the

⁸⁶ Cooley, Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

Shishkin, Philip, *Restless Valley: Revolution, Murder, and Intrigue in the Heart of Central Asia*, New York: Yale University Press, 2014

⁸⁷ "Turkmenistan: war on satellite dishes. Government campaign a blow to independent information", *Human Rights Watch*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/24/turkmenistan-war-satellite-dishes>

broadcasting of national TV channels switched from the satellite owned by the Russian operator Gazprom Space Systems to a Turkmenistan state-owned satellite.⁸⁸ This effectively paved the way for continuous, if not complete, disconnection of the Turkmenistan population from the influence of Russian-sponsored media. Noticeably, Turkmenistan's steps to limit access to Russian media correlated with the deterioration of the energy trade relations between the two countries. In 2009 Turkmenistan started exporting gas to China. Since then the quantities of gas sent to Russia, the traditional buyer, sharply decreased and were eventually discontinued in 2016.

In Uzbekistan, another relatively isolated Central Asian state, the position of Russian media also declined. With its central geographic location and a large population, accounting for nearly half of the region, Uzbekistan occupies an important role on the list of Russia's foreign policy objectives and economic goals. Consequently, the country attracted greater attention from Russian media providers despite Uzbekistan's efforts to limit access to them. Free-to-air transmission of the main Russian channels was halted in Uzbekistan in the mid-1990's under the pretense of being a temporary measure. Later transmission resumed through satellite and cable networks, but only for a limited number of mainly entertainment-oriented channels.⁸⁹

Uzbekistan's government continuously maintained strong control and censorship over the information channels operating in the country. In 2002 the transmission rights of Russia-based Ren-TV was transferred to be under the control of an Uzbek pro-government media tycoon, thus controlling the general population's access to the channel.⁹⁰ In the end of 2003 Uzbekistan's broadcasting authorities limited transmission of one of Russia's main channels, RTR, to four hours a day. A year later, in October 2004, the country's cable networks terminated transmission of the Moscow-based TVC channel.⁹¹ At the end of May 2005, a new regulation instructed private cable television studios to broadcast only the channels provided by the company Uzbekistan Kabel Sistemalari. At the time the provider was 80 per cent owned by the holding company Terra group, controlled by Gulnara Karimova, eldest daughter of the late Uzbekistan president, and a powerful person in the country at the time.⁹² The regulation, which introduced much stricter censorship of Uzbekistan's information media, came about shortly after the Andijan events, which saw violent suppression of opposition demonstrations by the government security forces on May 13th. The regulation of 2005 came into force at the time of uncertainty in Uzbek-Russian relations. Initially Russia refrained from getting involved in the crisis. It took until July for the joint SCO statement to express support for Uzbekistan's government and define opposition protesters as terrorists.⁹³ Noticeably, Russian media's weakening position in Uzbekistan's market in the first half of the 2000's coincided with Uzbekistan's growing partnership with the USA after the American engagement in Afghanistan. After this partnership deteriorated, because of the West's criticism of Uzbekistan's government actions in Andijan, Russia's relationship with Uzbekistan improved.

⁸⁸ Forrester, Chris, "Turkmenistan switches from Russian satellite", *Advanced-Television*, March 28, 2017, <http://advanced-television.com/2017/03/28/turkmenistan-switches-from-russian-satellite/>

⁸⁹ "Two more Russian TV channels – TNT and DTV – are not allowed to broadcast in Uzbekistan", *Fergana News Agency*, February 10, 2011, <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=2014>

⁹⁰ Aripov, Kh., "What is happening to cable and private networks in Uzbekistan", *Fergana News Agency*, November 12, 2004, <http://enews.fergananews.com/article.php?id=671>

⁹¹ Aripov, 2004

⁹² Aripov, Kh., "Cable TV censorship is introduced in Uzbekistan", *Fergana News Agency*, May 31, 2005, <http://enews.fergananews.com/article.php?id=966>

⁹³ Albert, Eleonor, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>

Subsequently Russian media found its way back to Uzbekistan's market. In 2007 Russian CTC Media partnered with Uzbekistan Terra Group (owned by Gulnara Karimova) to start broadcasting new programming in Russian.⁹⁴ The new channel, along with an acquisition in Kazakhstan, was projected to generate over \$400 million in revenues a year. In addition to profit considerations, Russian media engagement in Uzbekistan signaled renewed efforts to expand Russia's informational influence, if only in the form of an entertainment channel. The year 2007 also marked China's increased cooperation with Uzbekistan, with multiple agreements signed between the two sides. These included China Exim bank's commitment to multiple infrastructural and industrial projects in Uzbekistan and the joint announcements of the construction of the Uzbekistan section of the Central Asia – China pipeline by the China National Petroleum Corporation.⁹⁵ Visibly, in Uzbekistan media presence remained one of the few areas in which Russia could effectively compete with China. This partially explains continuous efforts by Russian companies to maintain their influence in Uzbekistan.

In this sense, the competitive side of Sino-Russian relations motivated Russia to engage further in the media sector in Central Asia, in this case, in Uzbekistan. Paradoxically though, the enhanced presence of Russian media fueled apprehension of Russia's growing influence, and provoked counter measures. In 2009 Russian RBK TV channel was reprimanded for allegedly misrepresenting Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan relations. In 2010 several Russian TV channel web-sites were blocked for airing a feature about Uzbek activists because their view diverged from Uzbekistan's official position. In 2011 two Russian entertainment channels, TNT and DTV, were banned in Uzbekistan on the grounds of the questionable morality of their content.⁹⁶ In the end of 2014, Uzbekistan media companies stopped broadcasting the CIS sponsored Russian language channel MIR TV, which had been aired in most of the former Soviet republics.⁹⁷

In addition to a visible apprehension toward Russia's influence, Uzbekistan's fluctuating attitude towards the Russian media presence was a reflection of Russian relations with Uzbekistan's regional rivals and Russian driven integration initiatives in the region. In 2009 Russia announced its commitment to construct Kambarata-1 Hydroelectric Power Plant (HEPP) in neighboring Kyrgyzstan. The project was strongly opposed by downstream Uzbekistan. The construction never materialized and the agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan was denounced in late 2016, but Russia's original intention spoiled Uzbek-Russian relations for several years. Furthermore, from 2009 Kyrgyzstan continuously expressed its intention to join Russia led integration initiatives – the Customs Union and, later, the Eurasian Economic Union.⁹⁸ Kyrgyzstan became a member of the latter in 2015. These developments were reflected in a dip in Uzbek-Russia relations. In 2008 Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the Eurasian Economic Community, one of the earlier integration projects in the post-Soviet space. In 2012 Uzbekistan left the Russia-led defense alliance, the CSTO, for the second time after it had re-joined it in 2006. Uzbekistan's

⁹⁴ Saidazimova, Gulnoza, "Central Asia: Russian group storms onto Kazakh, Uzbek TV Scenes", *Eurasianet*, December 19, 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp122007.shtml>

⁹⁵ Ahmadov, Erkin, "Sino-Uzbek relations and the energy politics of Central Asia", *The Central Asia – Caucasus Institute*, November 14, 2007, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/11517-field-reports-caci-analyst-2007-11-14-art-11517.html?tmpl=component&print=1>

⁹⁶ "Two more Russian TV channels – TNT and DTV – are not allowed to broadcast in Uzbekistan", *Fergana News Agency*, February 10, 2011, <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=2014>

⁹⁷ "Uzbekistan: CIS-wide TV channel broadcast stopped in Tashkent", *Fergana News Agency*, (n.d.), <http://www.fergana.mobi/en/news/2858>, accessed on April 6, 2017

⁹⁸ Rehm, Sophia, "Kyrgyzstan prepares to join the Eurasian Economic Union", *Vestnik, The Journal of Russian and Asian Studies*, April 20, 2015, http://www.sras.org/kyrgyzstan_prepare_eurasian_union

concurrent efforts to limit Russia's informational influence on its territory can be seen as a reaction to Russia's attempts to expand its political power in the region. Uzbekistan, however, is not the only state that took major measures to limit Russia's informational influence.

By 2009 Tajikistan blocked free-to-air transmission of all the remaining Russian channels – Perviy Kanal, NTV, TNT and RTR-Planeta.⁹⁹ To justify discontinuation of the last Russian language channel, RTR Planeta, Tajikistan's State TV Broadcasting Committee cited financial disputes.¹⁰⁰ However, the ban of the channel could be seen as a political retaliation after an unrewarding visit to Moscow by the Tajikistan president at the beginning of 2009.¹⁰¹ President Rahmon's talks with Russian leadership followed former Kyrgyzstan's president Bakiev's visit to Moscow. In exchange for Bakiev's promise to shut down Manas, an American air base in Kyrgyzstan, Russia offered approximately 1.7 billion US dollars in the form of an aid package, part of which included the pledge to construct the above-mentioned HEPP Kambarata-1.¹⁰² On the other hand, Rahmon's meetings with Russian counterparts did not lead to any significant commitments from Moscow. Political retaliation from Tajikistan went even further when, at the end of 2009, Tajikistan's leadership stated its intentions to prohibit the use of the Russian language by all government bodies.¹⁰³ The proposal did not actually materialize.

In addition to Tajikistan's apparent discontent with Russia's support for Kyrgyzstan, a growing relationship with China may have provided Tajikistan with confidence to conduct a more assertive policy toward Russia. In the mid-2000's the amount of development assistance and concessional loans provided by China to Tajikistan underwent a dramatic increase.¹⁰⁴ From 2006 Chinese firms financed and initiated construction of several massive infrastructural projects including roads, tunnels and power-lines of national significance. For instance, Lolazor-Khotlon and North-South power lines covered most of the country's heavily populated areas, and the Dushanbe-Khudjand highway dramatically enhanced connectivity between the two largest cities. China spent over half a billion US dollars on these projects and they were either operational or nearing completion by 2009, when Tajikistan banned the last Russian TV channel.¹⁰⁵

Two factors impacted Russia's capacity to maintain and enhance its information presence in those states that chose active de-russification, i.e. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The first factor involved Russia's own activities toward the states, which had had adversary relationship with the states in question. That is, whenever Russian foreign policy favored their regional competitors, the states tended to retaliate by closing down information transmission channels, effectively limiting Russia's ability to project its soft power. Additionally, these moves decreased the use of Russian language among local populations, which, in turn, contributed toward a decrease in regional connectivity. Even though the moves to limit Russian information mediums originated from the Central Asian states, Russia

⁹⁹ "Russian paper shuttered over Tajikistan slur", *Eurasianet.org*, July 21, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79796>

¹⁰⁰ Parshin, Konstantin, "Tajikistan: Dushanbe presses mute button on Russian TV", *Eurasianet*, April 6, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav040709a.shtml>

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Trilling, David, Tynan, Deirdre, "Kyrgyzstan: President Bakiev wants to close US military base outside Bishkek", *Eurasianet*, February 2, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020309b.shtml>

¹⁰³ "Tajikistan considers Russian language ban", *Voice of America*, November 2, 2009, <http://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-07-28-voa19-68804312/412319.html>

¹⁰⁴ Kessenova, Nargiz, "China as an Emerging Donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," *Russie.Nei.Visions N36*, IFRI, January 2009, 14

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

played an indirect role in decreasing its own capacity to deliver information in the Russian language. Russia's situational engagement in Central Asian states underlines a lack of consistency in Russia's policy towards the region. Changes in preferences toward favoring some states limited Russia's ability to project its influence in others. Therefore, inconsistency of Russian policy toward Central Asian states indirectly contributed towards the decrease of the use of Russian language there.

The second factor, which arguably allowed Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to decrease the influence of Russian language information media in their territories, was the growing Chinese economic involvement in these countries. That is, Chinese investments, loans and agreements to import natural resources provided Central Asian states with greater bargaining power in their relations with Russia.

Chinese hesitancy in penetrating the information media market in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is juxtaposed with China's growing cooperation with these states in other spheres. For example, China Central Television (CCTV), the main Chinese state-controlled information provider, initiated discussions with Uzbek counterparts about joining efforts to broadcast in Uzbekistan as recently as 2016.¹⁰⁶ As of 2017 these talks have led to few results. Neither have there been known attempts from CCTV to participate in the information media of Tajikistan or Turkmenistan, even though CCTV has a Russian language service, which is addressed in more detail in the next section.

China's unwillingness to develop its media presence in the three states is logically explained by the wide gap between the Chinese mainstream culture and the cultures of most Central Asian societies. However, another plausible explanation is that China is reluctant to become involved in the information sphere in these states because China does not have a strategic necessity to do so. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are all run by authoritarian governments, which maintain strong control of the media through heavy censorship. Considering nearly complete absence of China's informational reach during Soviet times and in early post-Soviet years, China would find it incredibly challenging to present its favorable image or even its own positions without the full consent of the host countries' governments. Subsequently, China has to rely on these governments to project positive images of China in these states. Economic benefits derived from China by the governments of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan ensure that the media channels in these countries do not portray China in an unfavorable way.

China's concerns about being negatively perceived in Central Asia are not unfounded. Critical sentiments against Chinese engagement in the region are based on the fear of China's growing economic influence, public disapproval of several territorial disputes resolved in favor of China and a general perception that China extracts natural resources at the expense of local populations. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the population blamed Chinese growing gas imports for gas shortages faced by Uzbeks during the cold winters.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where large sectors of populations practice more conservative forms of Islam, regard Chinese as "alien on a religious level".¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Uzbeks are closely related to Uighurs ethnically and linguistically. Subsequently, many Uzbeks, out of solidarity to their "brotherly nation" strongly oppose China's controversial policies in Xinjiang, which tend to suppress cultural and religious expression among Uighurs. Yet,

¹⁰⁶ "CCTV-Russkiy nameren razvivat' sotrudnichestvo s uzbekskim TV" ["CCTV-Russian intends to develop cooperation with Uzbek TV"], *Sputnik News*, June 25, 2016, <http://ru.sputniknews-uz.com/society/20160725/3432747.html>

¹⁰⁷ "Uzbekistan & China: Friends in a time of need", *Eurasianet*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79381>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

compared to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which witnessed numerous instances of anti-Chinese sentiments, in Uzbekistan “the strength of public attitudes toward China have been heavily attenuated” due to the government’s strict control of the media.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, “public discussion about the potential excess of Chinese economic influence over Tajikistan has been largely sidelined, relegated to hushed grumbling and the objections of marginal opposition elements.”¹¹⁰

Visibly, the perception of China in the more autocratic Central Asian states largely depends on China’s image projected by the governments of these states and is generally not controlled by China itself. This scenario is different in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which have more relaxed censorship regulations that allowed China to initiate steps toward projecting its own image. Nevertheless, the populations of the two states, both bordering China, are more apprehensive of possible Chinese expansion. Moreover, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan maintained much stronger cultural and linguistic attachment to Russia. As a result, the dynamics of the two major powers engagement in the telecommunication sector in the two states take a different form, which is analyzed in the following section.

Russia’s media engagement in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Despite a relative decline in its use, the position of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet period remained strong compared to their Central Asian neighbors. Despite substantial emigration of ethnic Russians, the two states retained sizeable Russian minorities, over 20 per cent in Kazakhstan and approximately 6 per cent in Kyrgyzstan. More importantly, Russian is recognized as the official language in Kyrgyzstan and enjoys constitutional protection as an official language on a par with Kazakh in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, despite a noticeable decrease in the number of native speakers, Russian language is still incredibly popular in both countries. In 2010 in Kazakhstan almost 90 per cent of the whole population had command of the Russian language compared to only 60 per cent who had command of Kazakh.¹¹¹ In 2016 in Kyrgyzstan, over half of the population used Russian.¹¹² Furthermore, even though Kazakh and Kyrgyz are arguably two of the most closely related, i.e. mutually intelligible, languages in Central Asia, communication between the nationals of the two states is generally carried out in Russian, both between the elites and among the general population. The states are also the only two in Central Asia which belong to Russia’s most recent and most ambitious regional integration initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In 2010 Kazakhstan, together with Russia and Belarus, became a founding member of the Customs Union, the predecessor of the EAEU. Kyrgyzstan joined the grouping in 2015. The goal of the EAEU is economic integration. Paradoxically, the institutionalization of the Eurasian integration was juxtaposed with the reduction of Russian information media presence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia where at the moment of independence the titular nationality, i.e. Kazakhs, were not a majority. In addition to ethnic Russians, Kazakhstan hosted sizeable minorities of Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Tatars, Koreans and Germans, among others, who mainly used the Russian language for communication. It is logical that the attachment to Russian remained strong despite various attempts by the government to limit its

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ “Tajikistan, Turkmenistan submit to Chinese capture”, *Eurasianet*, June 24, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79401>

¹¹¹ “K 2020 godu chislo kazakhstantsev vladeyushik gosudarstvennym yazykom sostavit 95% - Kul-Muhammed” [“By 2020 the number of Kazakhstanis with command of state language will be 95% -- Kul-Muhammed”], *Zakon.kz*, July 26, 2010, <http://www.zakon.kz/179426-k-2020-godu-chislo-kazakhstancsev.html>

¹¹² Van Horn (2011)

use. In 2004, during the earlier days of nation-building, Kazakhstan's government banned direct free-to-air re-transmission of foreign, mostly Russian, television channels. It also implemented a regulation that at least 50 per cent of programming was conducted in the Kazakh language.¹¹³ The change effectively moved foreign channels to the realm of cable and satellite package providers. In 2010 the government implemented regulation requiring certification of satellite-receiving equipment. Justified with technical reasons, the regulation was seen as a step toward increased media censorship.¹¹⁴ The move coincided with the year when Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus created the Customs Union, and the initial, often unfavorable, effects of non-tariff trade became visible in Kazakhstan.

Still, the reach of Russian television remained strong. According to different sources 70 to 75 per cent of Kazakhstan's population watched predominantly Russian programming, and in the top ten most popular cable channels only one was a Kazakh channel.¹¹⁵ From January 2016 the new law "About Tele-broadcasting" prohibited cable operators from broadcasting advertisements on foreign channels, which essentially implied a ban on any foreign channels which contained commercials. Subsequently, "such channels could meet the law's requirement by editing out all advertising. But doing so would mean that the owners would lose some or all of their profits and would need subsidies from Moscow to continue."¹¹⁶ Furthermore, another regulation, which went into effect in the beginning of 2017, required foreign broadcasters to open their own representative offices in Kazakhstan. Moreover, foreign state-owned channels and those somehow affiliated with foreign states, would not be able to own more than 20 per cent of the shares in their representative offices in Kazakhstan and would be required to hire Kazakhstan citizens for senior management positions.¹¹⁷ Some of the costs were predicted to be absorbed by advertisers and local cable providers.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, considering the condition of the Russian economy following western sanctions and lower oil prices, the two regulations placed substantial financial burdens on the Russian government to sustain a continuous flow of media to Kazakhstan.

¹¹³ "Rossiyskiye telekanaly v Kazakhstane: nuzhno lik ogranicit' vliyaniye?" ["Russian TV channels in Kazakhstan: is it necessary to limit their influence?"], *Pavon.kz*, December 2, 2014, <http://pavon.kz/post/view/38447?page=1>

¹¹⁴ Akkuly, Sultan-Khan, "V Kazakhstane namereny ogranichit' dustup k sputnikovomu televidiniyu" ["In Kazakhstan it is intended to limit access to satellite TV"], *Radio Azattyq*, August 17, 2010, <http://pavon.kz/post/view/38447?page=1>

¹¹⁵ Khanin, Vitaliy, "Rossiyskie telekanaly mogut uyti iz Kazakhstana" ["Russian channels may leave Kazakhstan"], *ren.tv* December 17, 2015, http://ren.tv/novosti/2015-12-17/rossiyskie-telekanaly-mogut-uyti-iz-kazakhstana?utm_referrer=http%3a%2f%2fwww.google.com%2furl%3f%3a%3d%26rct%3d%26q%3d%26e%3d%26source%3dweb%26cd%3d%26cad%3drja%26uact%3d%26ved%3d0ahUKEwieiJit877TAhUmIpoKHdzSDJOQFggmMAA%26url%3dhttp%253A%252F%252Fren.tv%252Fnovosti%252F2015-12-17%252Frossiyskie-telekanaly-mogut-uyti-iz-kazakhstana%26usq%3dAFQjCNEpbjLfaQnoIrW6L84Hxy5t-bi6A%26sig2%3dDhR0IlgPORmDifHNO5VuaTg&fa821dba_ipp_uid2=8l6FvX161X2g6U6v%2fabrU8S%2fbr%2bMLpHFwJDS0mw%3d%3d&fa821dba_ipp_uid1=1493099062571&fa821dba_ipp_key=1493099062572%2FIPDPWUxSrWNf%2bFRQeYWb9A%3d%3d

¹¹⁶ Goble, Paul, "Nazarbayev blocks Russian TV in Kazakhstan", *Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 13, 2, January 5, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/nazarbayev-blocks-russian-tv-in-kazakhstan/>

¹¹⁷ "Rossiyskomu televideniyu zapreshayut kazakhstaskuyu reklamu" ["Russian television is prohibited from Kazakhstan's advertising"], *grp.kz*, December 18, 2015, <http://grp.kz/russian-tv-ad-ban-in-kz/>

¹¹⁸ Khe, Denis, "Zapret na reklamu v kabel'nyh telekanalah: kak izmenitsya reklamnyy rynek Kazakhstana" ["The ban on advertisement on cable TV channels: how will advertisement market of Kazakhstan change?"], *grp.kz*, November 19, 2015 <http://grp.kz/zapret-na-reklamu-v-kabelnyih-telekanalah-kak-izmenitsya-reklamnyiy-ryinok-kazakhstana/>

"Kabel'noye televidenie pod ugrozoy ischeznoveniya v Kazakhstane" ["Cable TV is under threat of extinction in Kazakhstan"], *nur.ks*, November 2015, <https://www.nur.kz/968141-kabelnoe-televidenie-pod-ugrozoy.html>

Kazakhstan's initiatives to limit the reach of Russian language media does, of course, emanate from Kazakhstan itself. However, it can be argued that the limitations placed on Russian media in Kazakhstan constitute a logical response to the nature of Russia's actions and policies in the post-Soviet space. First, Russian led Eurasian integration has had questionable effects on Kazakhstan's economy. For instance, in 2016, despite major currency devaluation, Kazakhstan's trade with the other members of the EAEU dropped by almost a quarter from the previous year.¹¹⁹ Many types of Kazakhstan's exports were seriously affected by non-tariff trade barriers imposed in the Moscow-dominated regional grouping.¹²⁰ The ability to limit the reach of Russian channels was one of the few bargaining chips that Kazakhstan had over Russia. Second, Kazakhstan's leadership, as well as the leaders of other Central Asian states, is wary of any possible political integration initiatives that may originate from Russia along with the economic integration processes. Therefore, limiting the spread of Russia-based information is one of the techniques to minimize the spread of Russian 'soft power'. Thirdly, Kazakhstan's government is inclined to consider popular sentiments in the decision making process. In contrast to the other authoritarian states in Central Asia (i.e. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan), Kazakhstan's form of so-called 'soft authoritarianism' allows a relatively open public debate about the impact of Russia's influence in the country.¹²¹ For instance, the discussions about the content of the Russian channels intensified through the course of the Ukrainian crisis because of the way it was portrayed by Russian media in Kazakhstan. The concepts of annexing 'traditional Russian' territories or 'protecting' the Russian population in other countries are sensitive topics in Kazakhstan considering that its northern regions border Russia and are populated predominantly by ethnic Russians. Limiting Russia's influence in the country, therefore, seems like a logical step. Central Asian states want to be less dependent on Russia and want to have their people less swayed by Russian narratives. The notion that Russia's policies and actions derive the responses that ultimately decrease the use of the Russian language within Central Asia is further demonstrated in the reduction of information originating from Russia in the neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian state where Russian is an official state language. Compared to the other countries in the region, the reach of Russian media in Kyrgyzstan remained substantial. Nevertheless, the attitude toward the extent of this media reach varied during the post-Soviet period and was generally tied to the Kyrgyzstan elite's perception of Russia at the time. During the rule of the first president Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan set out to develop relations with numerous actors in the international system. However the multi-vectoring foreign policy was still skewed toward Russia. Russia, however, took little interest in the relations with the former Soviet republic in the early nineties and instead focused on forging relationships with the Western actors. Russia's interest in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, increased in the mid-2000's. This growing attention was partly caused by the

¹¹⁹ Rysaliev, Aktan, "Kazakhstan: another year, more misery from Eurasian Union", *Eurasianet*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83016>

¹²⁰ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

¹²¹ "Rossiyskiye telekanaly v Kazakhstane: nuzhno li ogranichit' vliyanie?" [Russian TV channels in Kazakhstan: is it necessary to limit their influence?], *Pavon.kz*, December 2, 2014, <http://pavon.kz/post/view/38447?page=1>

"Zapretit' rossiyskoye televidenie trebuyut v Kazakhstane" ["To ban Russian TV is demanded in Kazakhstan"], *New Times*, March 21, 2015, <http://newtimes.kz/obshchestvo/item/12713-zapretit-rossijskoe-televidenie-trebuyut-v-kazakhstane>

Baikhozha, Zhenis, "Kto hochet zapretit' veshanie rossiyskogo TV v Kazakhstane?" ["Who wants to ban broadcasting of Russian TV in Kazakhstan?"], *Central Asian Monitor*, July 16, 2014, <https://camonitor.kz/12180-kto-hochet-zapretit-veshanie-rossiyskogo-tv-v-kazakhstane.html>

positioning of NATO transit centers in bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan following American engagement in Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks in September 2001. After the first Kyrgyzstan president, Askar Akaev, was deposed by popular unrest in 2005, the second president, Kurmanbek Bakiev, continued the policy of generally positive relations with Russia.¹²² Moreover, cooperation with Russia actually intensified under the second president. Oddly, Bakiev was wary of the role of Western influences, which contributed to the movement which had ousted his predecessor and placed Bakiev in power.¹²³ Russia, it seemed, was focusing on promoting regime stability.

Noticeable progress in Kyrgyz-Russian relations was often mirrored by expanded Russian media reach in Kyrgyzstan. For example, in 2008 Kyrgyzstan became the first foreign country to allow Russian news television channel Vesti to be broadcast on a free-to-air basis.¹²⁴ The move coincided with Russia's then President Medvedev's visit to Kyrgyzstan, which resulted in a series of important agreements in the energy field between the two governments and with Gazprom.¹²⁵ Ironically, Russian media reach turned against Bakiev when he failed to keep his promise to close down an American airbase in Manas in exchange for a package worth over two billion US dollars which was offered to him by Russia in 2009. Instead, Bakiev raised the price of the rent for the US military to continue operating the base. The media and local experts often refer to Bakiev's actions as "double-crossing".

Moscow's reaction became the most vivid example of Russia's soft power in use in post-Soviet Central Asia. More precisely, Russia used its soft-power in combination with its material capabilities to undermine Bakiev's regime. In April 2010 Russia raised the tariffs on gasoline and diesel fuels eliminating previously existing preferential terms for Kyrgyzstan. The move led to an almost 30 per cent increase in fuel prices. It was met with strong anxiety of possible inflation and the subsequent discontent of the Kyrgyzstan population with Bakiev's government.¹²⁶ The impact of Russia's soft power came in the form of reports exposing corruption in Bakiev's regime, aired by Russian, mainly state owned, channels.¹²⁷ The "smear campaign" was the most vivid example of the power of Russian media in Central Asia, and it served as a lesson for Kyrgyzstan, as well as its Central Asian neighbors.

The post-Bakiev interim leadership maintained positive relations with Russia. Nevertheless, it was still cautious of Russian media influence. In February 2011 the main Russian state channel, ORT, was removed from its regular frequencies, which affected its quality of broadcasting.¹²⁸ The ORT's original broadcasting frequency was transferred to one of the main national Kyrgyz channels. The step was justified as a necessity to improve the efficiency of national channels. However, the action could be viewed as an initial move to

¹²² Sari, Yasar, "Foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev", *Perceptions*, Autumn 2012, 17, 3, 131-150, http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/yasar_sari.pdf

¹²³ Marat, Erica, "Bakiev relies on Russia in domestic affairs", *Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3, 138, July 18, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/bakiyev-relies-on-russia-in-domestic-affairs/>

¹²⁴ Kozlov, Vladimir, "Russian TV ups Central Asia presence", *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 10, 2008, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/russian-tv-ups-central-asian-120850>

¹²⁵ Bugubaev, Kubanzazy, "Kyrgyzstan – Russia relations", *Strategic Outlook*, May 2013, http://strategicoutlook.org/publications/Kyrgyzstan_Russia_Relations.pdf

¹²⁶ Trilling, David, Umetov, Chinghiz, "Kyrgyzstan: is Putin punishing Bakiev", *Eurasianet.org*, April 5, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040610a.shtml>

¹²⁷ Trilling, David, "Kyrgyzstan: Press bashing Bakiev", *Eurasianet.org*, April 5, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav040610a.shtml>

¹²⁸ Marat, Erica, "Major Russian TV channel sidelined in Kyrgyzstan", *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 8, 29, February 10, 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/major-russian-tv-channel-sidelined-in-kyrgyzstan/>

control information emanating from Russian sources in the run-up to Kyrgyzstan's presidential elections scheduled for October 2011. In September 2011 Kyrgyzstan banned real-time broadcasts of foreign, mainly Russian, channels allowing them to be broadcast only on delayed feed and thus enabling censorship in case of any potential smear campaign.¹²⁹

The overall reach of Russian media in Kyrgyzstan, however, remained strong. In 2013 the main Russian TV channel, ORT was watched by nearly 65 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's population, second only to the main Kyrgyzstan state channel OTRK (75 per cent). Two other Russian state channels, RTR and NTV, were watched respectively by 29 and 13 per cent of the Kyrgyzstan population.¹³⁰ Overall, in 2013, approximately half of all the television content of Kyrgyzstan was broadcasted in the Russian language. This amount was actually greater than that of Kyrgyz language programming considering the presence of other language channels, particularly Uzbek and Turkish. As a result, Kyrgyzstan's public generally maintained a high degree of approval for Russian policies in the region, even though this approval was susceptible to certain fluctuations.¹³¹

Because of the nature of Kyrgyzstan's political system, its relatively open media and presence of a functional political opposition, these fluctuations in attitudes toward Russia were often driven not by the changes in inter-state relations, but rather by public responses to Russia's activities in the country, the surrounding region and wider post-Soviet space. In 2013 allegations of corrupt acts by the state-controlled provider Kyrgyztelecom in the process of re-transmitting Russian state-owned ORT programming led to a parliamentary discussion about halting rebroadcasting of the ORT in Kyrgyzstan.¹³² In 2014, in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and in the prelude to Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), certain segments of the population voiced concerns about the role of the Russian channels and their content.¹³³ The one-sided portrayal of the Ukrainian crisis was not so much of an issue as it was in Kazakhstan. However, the prospect of joining the EAEU, on conditions which were not so favorable to Kyrgyzstan, was met with distinct opposition. Russian language media was criticized for its propagandist role in the portrayal of the integration project. According to the Bishkek based journalist Rickleton, "funding sources for Kyrgyz media outlets are notoriously difficult to trace, prompting speculation that Russia is funneling money to local periodicals and broadcasters."¹³⁴

At the end of 2015, Kyrgyzstan and Russia were drafting an agreement which was intended to give Russian federal TV stations special status in Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁵ Under the agreement Kyrgyzstan was supposed to exempt the two main Russian channels, ORT and RTR, from the requirement to broadcast a certain proportion of local content. The

¹²⁹ "Russian TV banned in Kyrgyzstan", *Rt.com*, September 12, 2011, <https://www.rt.com/politics/kyrgyzstan-tv-ban-elections-345/>

¹³⁰ "Media Research 2013", presentation by M-Vector Research Company, 2013, Bishkek. Author's Interview April 7, 2016

¹³¹ "Tsentral'no Aziatskiy barometr" (Central Asia barometer. Survey of public opinion in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), *Presentation by M-Vector Research Company*, 2012, Author's Interview April 7, 2016

¹³² "Kyrgyzstan may stop rebroadcasting Russian TV", *Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty*, March 28, 2013, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-russia-tv-rebroadcasting/24941747.html>

¹³³ Rickleton, Chris, "Kyrgyzstan: Russian 'Information Wars' heating up", *Eurasianet*, April 16, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68280>

¹³⁴ *Ibid*

¹³⁵ "Soglashenie mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Kyrgyzsatkoj Respubliki I Pravitel'stvom Rossiysky Federatsii of sotrudnichestve v oblasti massovyh kommunikatsiy" ["Agreement between the government of Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of Russian Federation about cooperation in the field of mass communication"], *Ministry of Culture Information and Tourism of Kyrgyz Republic*, (n.d.), available at http://www.fergananews.com/archive/2016/proect_ros_tv.doc, accessed on April 23, 2016

requirement had previously been imposed on all the foreign channels. This time public debate about the potential arrangement was fueled by two factors. First, Kyrgyzstan's economy had initially endured negative consequences from joining the EAEU. Second, the Russian side gradually backed away from building Kambarata-1 Hydro Electric Power Plant (HEPP).¹³⁶ The construction of the HEPP was designed to contribute toward Kyrgyzstan's energy independence, but faced continuous delays from Russian companies.¹³⁷ The hesitation, as mentioned in the previous section, was arguably caused by Russia's shift toward normalization of relations with Kyrgyzstan's regional rival, Uzbekistan. As a result, Kyrgyzstan withdrew from the deal with Russia and started looking for new sponsors for the crucial project. Eventually, because of the unfulfilled promises on the part of Russia, Kyrgyzstan refused to provide special status to Russian federal TV stations.¹³⁸

Visibly the inconsistent and situational nature of Russia's engagement in the region tends to draw reactions that further contribute toward the reduction of the use of the Russian language in Central Asia. The process happens even in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the two states where the language initially maintained a comparatively high status. Consequently, the decrease in the use of the Russian language can be indirectly traced to Russia's activities in the region, particularly unfulfilled commitments to several regional states demonstrated through periodically broke promises to finance major infrastructure projects. Furthermore, due to its politicized nature, the telecommunication sector, particularly television media, serves as a link between Russian activities and the deteriorating position of the Russian language in Central Asia. Oddly, not only Russia, but also China utilizes the role of Russian language to project its positive image and possibly soft power in Central Asia.

China's "public relations" approach in Central Asia

In much of modern history, even pre-dating the Soviet era, China and Central Asia, or as it was known earlier, Western Turkistan, were isolated from each other despite close geographic proximity. Chinese is not spoken in Central Asia. Despite growing numbers of Central Asian students obtaining an education in Chinese universities, the Middle Kingdom's culture is still largely alien in the region. In 2016 over 13 thousand Kazakhstan students studied in China.¹³⁹ Kazakhstanis represented the highest number of Central Asian students in China, but that number was lower than half a percent of the college age population of Kazakhstan.¹⁴⁰ Another potential source for the promotion of Chinese language and culture derives from Confucius institutes. By 2017 there were five Confucius institutes in Kazakhstan, four – in Kyrgyzstan and two each in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁴¹ However, as in the case of students studying in China, by 2018 Confucius institutes had only a narrow impact on the promotion of Chinese language and culture. This impact was limited to selected, mainly well off, young elites. Generally, Chinese language and culture have not

¹³⁶ Kislov, Daniil, "Rossiya-Kyrgyzstan: Net elektrichestva – net telekanalov c 'osobym statusom'" ["Russia – Kyrgyzstan: No electricity – no TV channels with the "special status"], *Fergana News Agency*, December 01, 2016, <http://www.fergananews.com/articles/8827>

¹³⁷ The case is addressed in detail in the "Energy Chapter"

¹³⁸ Kudryavtseva, Tatyana, "V Kyrgyzstane federal'nie rossiyskiye kanaly ne budut obladat' osobym statusom" ["In Kyrgyzstan federal Russian channels will not possess special status"], *24.kg News Agency*, November 11, 2016, <http://www.24.kg/eaes/25835/>

¹³⁹ "China releases report on foreign students for 2015", *Ministry of Education of the PRC*, April 20, 2016, http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201604/t20160420_239196.html

¹⁴⁰ Kazakhstan Fact Sheet, US Department of State, (n.d.), <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5487.htm> Accessed May 17, 2017

¹⁴¹ "About Confucius Institute / Classroom", *Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban)*, (n.d.), http://english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm. Accessed May 16, 2017

served as a strong instrument for Chinese soft power in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Arguably, the main cultural connection between China and Central Asian states could be grounded in the presence of large Turkic minorities living in China's western Xinjiang region (a.k.a Eastern Turkestan), which borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The main minority Uighurs are ethnically and linguistically close to Uzbeks. Xinjiang is also home to a sizeable population of ethnic Kazakhs and smaller populations of ethnic Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Nevertheless, despite the predisposition for cultural connection between Turkic people of China and their ethnic counterparts in Central Asia, the Chinese government, to a different degree, opposed relations between corresponding ethnic groups on opposite sides of the borders. China's attitude toward transnational movements of Kazakhs, the second largest Turkic minority in Xinjiang, has been rather lenient, which benefitted economic development in the areas where south-eastern Kazakhstan borders northern Xinjiang.¹⁴² However, the Chinese government has been apprehensive over any organized relationships between the Uighurs of Xinjiang and the Uighurs of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The attitude is based on Beijing's anxiety over Chinese Uighurs' desire for self-determination and the perception that Central Asian Uighurs may be playing a supporting role in this aspiration. As a result, China has opposed pan-Turkic ideology, which has a varying degree of popularity within Central Asia. Instead, China made minimal use of local language media, but mainly relied on the Russian language to promote its image in the region.

Creating a new image was crucial because of the incredibly negative attitudes toward China in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The two states have extensive borders with China and media censorship there has been considerably more relaxed than in the other three states. The fear of Chinese expansion was occasionally utilized by opposition factions to undermine the legitimacy of the government. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a border delineation agreement signed between China and Kyrgyzstan in 2002 caused serious social unrest. It empowered opposition movements, which eventually led to the overthrow of the republic's first president, Askar Akayev in 2005.¹⁴³ The portion of territory which Kyrgyzstan conceded to China, was located high in the mountains and played an unimportant role in terms of economics and security for Kyrgyzstan. However, the general population was led to believe that it contained glaciers which were strategically crucial for the country, even though the water from these glaciers actually flowed down to China to begin with.¹⁴⁴ The role of uncensored media was evident in comparison to a similar territorial dispute between China and Tajikistan. The issue was resolved in 2002 by transferring one thousand square kilometers of disputed territory to China, but the solution resulted to no visible discontent in Tajikistan.¹⁴⁵

In Kazakhstan, the general public voiced continuous concerns about Chinese expansionism. This apprehension was partly based on the understanding that Chinese companies were allowed to engage in a long term leasing of Kazakhstan's lands according to a regulation about the rent of land to foreign entities. However, the main beneficiary of the controversial regulation was Russia, which was leasing over 10 thousand hectares of Kazakhstan land, compared to China, which was leasing 283 hectares and was ranked only

¹⁴² Author's interviews, Bishkek, February 12, 2016

¹⁴³ Radnitz, Scott, *Weapons of the Wealthy: Predatory Regimes and Elite-Led Protests in Central Asia*, 2010, New York: Cornell University Press

¹⁴⁴ Author's interview, Bishkek, January 22, 2016

¹⁴⁵ Miao, Yu, "Tajikistan ratifies border agreement with China", *Global Times*, January 14, 2011, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/612563.shtml>

the sixth on the list of foreign renters in 2016.¹⁴⁶

In Kazakhstan, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, politicized and often biased attitude toward China is reflected in the popular perception about the two major powers engagement in the region. According to the findings of a Central Asian based research center, the largest section of the population, approximately 30 per cent, viewed China as the greatest threat for Kazakhstan. In Kyrgyzstan, China was considered to be the main threat by over 20 per cent of the population, following Afghanistan, the USA, Uzbekistan and Iran.¹⁴⁷ The percentage of the population who viewed Russia as a major threat was insignificant – less the three per cent in both. At the same time, absolute majorities in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, 65 and 95 per cent respectively, considered cooperation with Russia to be the main priority. Only approximately one fifth of the population in each state supported cooperation with China.¹⁴⁸ Populations of both countries viewed Russia's role in security, stability and economic development more positively than China's role in the region. However, China's engagement was still viewed more favorably than that of the western powers, the USA and the EU. The perception of China was, to some extent, more favorable in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan. In 2012, 43 per cent viewed China positively in Kyrgyzstan verses 28 per cent in Kazakhstan; even though 24 per cent of Kyrgyzstanis viewed China negatively verses 19 per cent of Kazakhstanis.¹⁴⁹ Noticeably, public opinion about the role of the USA in both countries was generally low. In the two Central Asian countries, where public opinions are relatively openly expressed and media is not so severely censored, China managed to develop a degree of positive perception. Certainly, China's material capabilities, which contributed towards infrastructural development, played a positive role in the Central Asian states' popular perceptions of their eastern neighbor.

*Table 2. Perceptions of China and Russia in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*¹⁵⁰

<i>Perceptions of major powers</i>		In Kazakhstan	In Kyrgyzstan
Greatest threat	Russia	2%	less than 1%
	China	31%	21%
Priority for cooperation	Russia	65%	95%
	China	17%	22%
Generally negative	Russia	1%	3%
	China	19%	24%
Generally favorable	Russia	74%	90%
	China	28%	43%

Moreover, it was China's material capabilities, which allowed China to engage in the telecommunication sector in Kazakhstan, and more so in Kyrgyzstan, and to start projecting its positive image in the Central Asian region. In 2005 Chinese multi-language TV channels operating in Xingjian were authorized to create programs catering to the audiences across the

¹⁴⁶ Garin, Grigoriy, "Kitay i Rossiya v bor'be za kazakhstanskiye zemli: Kazakhstan za nedelyu" ["China and Russia in struggle for Kazakhstan's lands: Kazakhstan in a week"], *regnum.ru*, February 7, 2017, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2235641.html>

¹⁴⁷ "Tsentral'no Aziatskiy barometr" (Central Asia barometer. Survey of public opinion in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), *Presentation by M-Vector Research Company*, 2012, Author's Interview April 7, 2016

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, Tabulated by the Author

border. As a result, the population of Kyrgyzstan and, by 2006, Kazakhstan gained access through satellite dishes to China-originated broadcasts in the Kyrgyz and Kazakh languages.¹⁵¹ Allegedly, by 2016, Chinese providers broadcasting from Xingjian had the capacity to reach 63 per cent of the Kyrgyzstan population.¹⁵² In the beginning of September 2009, China Central Television (CCTV) launched a Russian service with the aim of broadcasting to Russia and other CIS countries.¹⁵³

While CCTV's reach remained highly limited in much of Central Asia because it was technically only available through satellites, Chinese programming in the Russian language made a relatively rapid entrance to Kyrgyzstan. By the end of September 2009, CCTV started to broadcast an open-to-air programming in Bishkek and northern Kyrgyzstan, even reaching audiences of southern Kazakhstan.¹⁵⁴ China obtained access to Kyrgyzstan audiences through a trade-off.¹⁵⁵ Southern Kyrgyzstan is separated from northern Kyrgyzstan by a mountain range, and transmission signals from most national television centers broadcasting from Bishkek could not reach some of the areas of southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly Batken region. Therefore, in the post-Soviet years, the population of southern Kyrgyzstan, with its large Uzbek minority and multiple Uzbek speakers among the native Kyrgyz, had largely relied on the television programming from Uzbekistan for information and entertainment. Chinese companies agreed to provide free digital receivers (equipment essential for receiving Kyrgyzstan television channels) in Batken region. China also agreed to provide free printing equipment for the Batken region, which enabled Kyrgyzstan's national print media outlets to print newspapers locally instead of transporting them from the north to the south in a process that faced frequent delays during winter months.¹⁵⁶ In exchange China obtained permission to broadcast the CCTV programming in northern Kyrgyzstan, with the possibility of spreading the transmission to the south of the country. Chinese engagement, in this case, reduced Kyrgyzstan's information and entertainment dependency on its southern neighbor. In this case, as in the multiple cases in the other networked industries, China simultaneously decreased connectivity between the "smaller" Central Asian states.

China's relatively rapid media expansion in parts of Central Asia can be partly explained by the absence of competing dynamics with Russia in this particular sector. Compared to Chinese engagement in the transportation and energy sectors, which appears to undermine Russia's security and economic interests, expansion of Chinese media is unlikely to be viewed by Russia as competition. On the one hand, since Chinese media uses Russian language to reach Central Asian audiences, it is in some sense continues to serve the purpose of maintaining the use of the Russian language in the region. On the other hand, Chinese media is rarely critical of Russian policies. Despite numerous diverging interests between

¹⁵¹ Kamzieva, Gul'mira, "Vsled za Kyrgyzstanom kitayskoe televideniye poyavilos' I v Kazakhstane" ["Following Kyrgyzstan Chinese television has appeared in Kazakhstan"], *Radio Azattyq*, June 10, 2006, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/1180654.html>

¹⁵² "Kitayskoye televidenie zavoyevalo Kyrgyzstan" ["Chinese television conquered Kyrgyzstan"], *Rus.kg*, July 8, 2014, http://rus.kg/news_rus/obshetvo_rus/24865-kitayskoe-televidenie-zavoevalo-kyrgyzstan.html

¹⁵³ "CCTV to launch Russian channel", *China Central Television Website*, September 3, 2009, <http://english.cctv.com/program/newshour/20090903/108306.shtml>

¹⁵⁴ "V Bishkeke nachinayet veshaniye russkoyazychniy kanal Tsentral'nogo televidiniya Kitaya" ["China Central Television channel in Russian language begins broadcast in Bishkek"], *Fergana News Agency*, September 25, 2009, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=13064>
 Author's Interview, Bishkek, February 14, 2016

¹⁵⁵ Author's Interview, Bishkek, February 14, 2016

¹⁵⁶ "Kitay pytayet'sya v obmen na tehniku zapoluchit' dva kirguzskikh telekanala" ["China attempts two obtain two Kyrgyzstan TV channels in exchange for equipment"], *Internews*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.internews.kz/newsitem/22-10-2008/5241>

Russian and China, the official rhetoric is that of cooperation, and the presence of strong censorship in Chinese information sources ensures that Russia is portrayed positively in the media. This ability to cooperate with Russia allowed China to diversify the way it extended its China-based information reach. In 2013 a leading Russian based on-line TV platform, SPB TV, started broadcasting China-based content on line; in 2016, SPB TV and the largest Chinese media conglomerate, Shanghai Media Group, created a joint initiative aimed at delivering China-based content to wider range of on line audiences.¹⁵⁷ As a result of cooperation, an on-line TV site, *beltandroad.tv*, provides a live feed of 26 channels, almost a third of which are designed for Russian speaking audiences.¹⁵⁸ At the policy-making level, China has a clear understanding of the crucial role of the Russian language for promoting its image and agenda in the post-Soviet space.

Paradoxically, the use of the Russian language by China-based media in Central Asia does not seem to cause serious aversion among the regional elites in the same way that the use of the Russian language raises distrust of Russia's intentions. China's strong commitment not to politicize the content of their channels abroad appears to play a pacifying role on the decision makers in Central Asia. In contrast, politicization of Russia-based content causes a counter-reaction from the Central Asian regimes, which, in turn, leads to the reduction of the use of the Russian language in the region. The decrease in the use of Russian does not seem to generate immediate negative effects on regional connectivity. However, a closer analysis suggests that this trend can produce damaging consequences for bottom up regionalization in the long term. As homogeneous as Central Asia may appear, the linguistic diversity varies throughout the region. For instance, Tajik, being a Persian language, is not related to the rest of the official languages spoken in Central Asia, even though it is still spoken widely in the major urban centers of Uzbekistan. More importantly, mutual intelligibility of Turkic languages is often exaggerated.¹⁵⁹ While Kazakh and Kyrgyz, which belong to the Kipchak group, are 90 per cent mutually intelligible, Uzbek is not mutually intelligible with either of them. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, arguably the two most influential states in the region, have only a fraction of their population using mutually intelligible dialects. Uzbek, in turn, is much more closely related to Uighur as both belong to the Karluk group.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, Turkmen, which belongs to Oghuz, is much closer to Turkish or Azeri, than to the languages spoken in the neighboring Central Asian states.¹⁶¹ Considering these differences, the absence of one common language, would seriously reduce communicability among Central Asian people.

Conclusion

The interweaving character of Chinese and Russian engagement in the telecommunication sector in Central Asia is more complicated than the nature of their engagement in other networked sectors of infrastructure. This complexity is attributed to the variety of sub-sectors, the large number of non-state actors involved, and the wide divergence among Central Asian states in their acceptance of major powers' engagement in their information spheres. Nevertheless, the above discussion suggests that China and Russia's participation in the telecommunication sphere partly reflects the nature of their involvement in other networked sectors of the infrastructure.

First, the digital connectivity between Russia and China is more direct without the

¹⁵⁷ "SPB TV and Shanghai Media Group to distribute more Chinese content worldwide", *SPBTV*, May 30, 2016, <http://spb.tv.com/press/press-releases/SPB-TV-and-Shanghai-Media-Group.html>

¹⁵⁸ Belt and Road TV, *Beltandroad.tv*, (n.d), <http://beltandroad.tv/> Accessed May 20, 2017

¹⁵⁹ Lindsay, Robert, "Mutual intelligibility among the Turkic languages", *Beyond Highbrow*, January 4, 2010, <https://robertlindsay.wordpress.com/2010/01/04/mutual-intelligibility-among-the-turkic-languages/>

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Ibid

involvement of Central Asia. More importantly, neither of the major powers seems to utilize Central Asia for transit between East Asia and Europe. As in the transportation sector, Kazakhstan is a notable exception employed by the surrounding major powers for transit. However, this function of Kazakhstan has little effect on other Central Asian states. Overall, Sino-Russian cooperation in the fiber-optic and other fixed-line communication systems does not contribute to the regionalization of Central Asia.

Second, China's individual involvement in the telecommunication sector demonstrates, once again, initial steps to *re-wire*, or *re-connect*, Central Asia in a new and different direction. The attempts to utilize southern Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as transit actors between China's western regions and South Asia reflect China's activities in the transportation and the energy sectors. Noticeably, similar to the other sectors, China has experienced difficulties developing the new direction of regional connectivity in Central Asia. In the telecommunication sector the obstacles to China's intentions emanated from within the region.

Third, the analysis of the telecommunication sector confirms the visible trend of growing interchangeability in the natures of the two major powers' engagement in Central Asia. China has been increasingly consistent in developing regional connectivity compared to Russia's increasingly situational engagement on the bilateral basis. The trend is also visible through the character of the actors participating in the region from each side – state owned and closely affiliated with the Chinese government entities verses profit-driven commercial enterprises from Russia. Moreover, China has been gradually filling Russia's role of maintaining cultural cohesion in Central Asia by attempting to broadcast the same content in the same language throughout the region. Compared to the “harder” sectors of the infrastructure, the development of the telecommunication sector requires less material capabilities for participation. However, the sector's capacity to project soft power enables Neorealism to explain international relations in the context of the telecommunication sector. Similarly with the other sectors of the infrastructure, states' security considerations and distrust of their neighbors often drives their decision for engagement in telecommunications. Nevertheless, considering the nature of the internal concerns faced by the leaders of the smaller Central Asian states, the omnibalancing approach within Neorealism is still more suitable for understanding international relations in the region. In the case of the telecommunication industry, Russian informational influence is often viewed as a threat for the existing regimes. Therefore, Central Asian leaders tend to curb Russia's media reach in their constituencies. However, for Russia the reach of media is important not only to project its own ideas, but also to spread ‘spiritual values’ essential for the development of Russia's key regional initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁶² For China, developing ‘harder’ elements of the telecommunication infrastructure have at times been prevented by internal rivalries within the Central Asian states. However, China has been relatively effective in promoting its informational reach in some of the Central Asian states because China's informational influence has not been perceived as a threat in the region.

In addition to Neorealism, social constructivism approaches are useful for understanding the engagement of major powers in the telecommunication sector in Central Asia. First of all, the telecommunication sector is arguably the clearest example of how material capabilities of the major powers transfer into their ability to project their normative power and socialize smaller states into cooperation. In that sense, the strength of social

¹⁶² Salin, Pavel, “Spiritual values to cement the Eurasian Union,” *Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/spiritual-values-to-cement-the-eurasian-union-16163>, accessed on April 25, 2014

constructivism approach in joining the material and ideational in explaining states' interactions is clearly visible in the case of Russia and China's engagement in the telecommunication sector. Furthermore, one of the approaches within Social Constructivism, namely Societal Constructivism, provides a logical explanation as to why China and Russia make significant efforts to socialize the general public of the Central Asian states. According to Hopf, states' elites tend to view other states through the prism of the collective identity of their own populations.¹⁶³ Subsequently, the ways Central Asian states deal with Russia and China depend on how the general public in these states views each of these actors.

Overall, the telecommunication sector provides a more encompassing view on the role of infrastructure in Central Asia. Telecommunication networks provide unifying context for the ideas and political influence of the major powers and the physical infrastructure utilized to spread these ideas and political influence. The chapter completes the analysis of the networked sectors of the infrastructure and their roles in the regionalization of Central Asia. The final conclusions and the answers to the questions posed in the beginning of the thesis are provided in the following concluding chapter.

¹⁶³ Hopf, Ted, *Reconstructing the Cold War*, (2012), New York: Oxford University Press, 16-17

Conclusion

In the end of 2016 a group of political commentators from Central Asian states met in Xi'an in western China. Two leading pundits from Kyrgyzstan were invited directly by Chinese government. Six more commentators, two each from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were selected by their national official organs on the request from China. Turkmenistan government declined the invitation to send the delegates. The group of Central Asian experts spent two weeks travelling around famous Chinese landmarks associated with the ancient Silk Road. They were accompanied by the representative from the International Department of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China – an organ originally designed to maintain positive relations with Communist parties of other countries. The group used Russian language to communicate. In the first few days Tajikistan and Uzbekistan participants made efforts to avoid sitting next to each other on the bus. By the end of the trip the dynamic of the whole group became friendly and easy going. The trip was well organized and the Central Asian guests were left with a pleasant experience and favorable impression of their Chinese hosts.¹ It is safe to say that this positive impression toward China affected their commentaries read and watched by large portions of the local populations.

The trip represented a vivid example in the evolution of China's approach toward Central Asia. In the "battle" for hearts and minds of the region, China seemed to have made noticeable progress with the minds and now set out to win the hearts. The trip was also significant because no representatives from Russia were present even though Russian language was used for communication between Chinese hosts and Central Asian guests, and amongst the guests themselves. According to one of the participants, "if Russians were there, everybody would be tense, and it would lead to whole different dynamics".² The character of the trip organized by Chinese government highlights the nature of China and Russia's engagement in Central Asia, and the effects of this engagement on cooperation among the states in the region. This situation, i.e. China engaging with the Central Asian states without Russia being present and the Central Asian states being more comfortable with it that way, is consistent with the findings of the four empirical chapters of the thesis. The two major powers have difficulty reaching consensus about the format of multilateral lenders essential for the development of regional infrastructure, and therefore China-led financial institutions have become the major source of financing of infrastructural projects. The two powers' engagement in the transportation sector partially decreased interdependence among Central Asian states, but Chinese projects aim to reconnect the region, particularly by linking Central Asia with South Asia. In the energy sector interchangeability of the roles of the two major powers is characterized by Russia's opportunism and China's steps toward multilateral cooperation. In the telecommunication sector, the two major powers made a limited impact on regional connectivity; however China's use of material capabilities to affect information flows is gradually positioning the rising power as an opinion shaper in the region. Based on these findings, it is possible to provide the answer to the main question posed in the thesis.

In short, Russia's engagement in the infrastructural sector has done little to encourage the regionalization of Central Asia, and has actually contributed toward the fragmentation of the region. Concurrently, China-built infrastructure seems to be reshaping the region. However, in addition to building infrastructure, China seem to utilize multilateral initiatives, which do not involve Russia, in order to define not only physical shape of the region, but also the region's imagined, that is, its ideational boundaries.

The conclusion answers in greater detail the central research question of this study,

¹ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

² Ibid

how the nature of the two major powers' engagement influences Central Asian regionalism. First section evaluates the impact of the individual Central Asian states on the regionalization processes of the major powers. The second section summarizes the Russian impact on Central Asian regionalism. The third section highlights the nature of China's engagement in the region and its own version of regionalism. The final section identifies the role played by Sino-Russian relations in Central Asian regionalism. The analysis of each section incorporates relevant findings and conclusions of the empirical chapters.

'Ideology of survival': Central Asian states' reaction to major powers' engagement

The findings of the thesis confirm the hypothesis that the two major powers play an essential role in defining the degree of regional cooperation in Central Asia. However, the five Central Asian states often influence the nature of the major powers' engagement in the region. They do not necessarily set the rules of engagement for external actors, but rather participate in the process of the major powers' engagement at various times and to various extents. Their actions are often based on logical interests; however, the *ideology of survival*, a phrase used by one leading Central Asian expert, may serve as a more encompassing term for describing the rationale of the Central Asian states in their dealings with the major powers.³

An old Kyrgyz saying, which could also be attributed to other nations in the region goes "When talking to a Russian, hold an ax behind your back."⁴ The distrust of Russia is logical considering often brutal tactics, used by both Tsarist Russia and by the Soviet Forces to assert control of the various Central Asian polities and peoples. However, considering variable, not always negative shared history, Central Asian perception of Russia is not the most hostile. Another regional saying goes: "When dark-haired Chinese comes, even the red-bearded Russian will become dearer than your own father".⁵ There is a serious disconnect in the two sayings, considering that last time China had significant presence in Central Asia was in the 14th century when the two were forcefully integrated under the Mongol Empire.⁶ Meanwhile, Russian and Soviet military forces and administrations conducted various atrocities in the region during much recent period of history. The examples include actions ranging from massacres of Turcoman (Turkmen) tribes in 1870-1880's during Russia's initial occupation of the areas east of the Caspian Sea, violent suppression of the 1916 revolt against military conscription in areas of modern Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, forceful responses of Red Army to anti-Communist Basmachi movements (1918-1934) often targeting civilians, to collectivization which led to famine and massive loss of life in Kazakhstan in 1930's and agricultural policies which led to major environmental disaster of Aral Sea, massive public health problems and economic depravities of the whole communities.

Considering these and many other detriments inflicted on the people of Central Asia during Russian control, it is somewhat unexpected that 'red-bearded Russian' is still considered to be a lesser evil than 'black haired Chinese'. The latter has been largely isolated from the region for hundreds of years and only recently started to make 'his' way back. The analysis of this puzzle would require extensive sociological research that falls outside of the range of this thesis. However, the initial answer lies in a Russian saying popularized by the hero of the Soviet action film *'The white sun of the desert'*. The low ranked, but savvy and cool-headed Red Army soldier maneuvers around the desert and Caspian coast to protect the lives of the local warlord's multiple wives during the turbulent Civil War period. The hero

³ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Author's interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

⁶ Barisitz, Stephan, *Central Asia and the Silk Road. Economic Rise and Decline over Several Millennia* (2017), Cham: Springer International Publishing, 69

continuously repeats to his young deputy: “The East is an intricate matter”.

The intricacy of Central Asia was learned by several hard and fatal lessons Russia encountered during its initial expansion in the region.⁷ Through the years of control the sensitivity of the region was occasionally ignored, but Russian and Soviet leadership often adhered to certain principles of engagement in Central Asia, which differed from Russia’s policies in its other frontier regions. The techniques varied, from early alliances with the khans against common enemies to unprecedented autonomy given to local communist leaders by the central Soviet government. Infrastructural and economic development, along with education and powerful state propaganda machine ensured that Central Asian republics did not view themselves as colonies or vassal states, but rather equal members of the same country – the Soviet Union. The independence in 1991 led to nation building and gradual disentanglement from Russia, but neither of the Central Asian states insisted on a sudden severance of ties.

Instead, the complexity of Central Asia and its leaders’ actions began to involve interactions with additional external actors. By focusing on Russia and China, this thesis excludes the analysis of Central Asian states interactions with less significant actors. In addition to major powers, i.e. the EU, the USA and India, a number of regional powers became engaged in the regions. These included distant actors such as Japan and Korea, as well as much closer neighbors with strong linguistic and cultural ties to the region, particularly Turkey and Iran. All of these and several others maintained various levels of economic and cultural engagement in Central Asian countries and all had to experience the intricacy of the region. However, none of these had capabilities matching Russia’s historical, political and cultural presence in Central Asia, and China’s economic might and geographic proximity. Subsequently, it was up to China to re-discover the intricacy of the region. Post-Soviet Central Asia became the scene where ‘East met East’. Considering the extent of its contemporary engagement in the region, it appears China has managed to navigate through the intricacy of Central Asia with a relative degree of success. However, just as Russian position in the region has been gradually squeezed out, China’s engagement in Central Asia faced obstacles derived from the complexity of Central Asian politics.

The difficulties positioned by Central Asian states for continuous engagement of the two major powers generally result from the ‘ideology of survival’ mindsets dominating regional elites. The mindset is consistent with the omnibalancing approach of explaining international relations in a particular region. The complexity of Central Asia is driven by the tendency of the Central Asian states leaders to balance against both internal and external threats. The ‘ideology of survival’, however, does not only revolve around threats, but also focuses on the maximization of gains for the state. The usurpation of power and enrichment of regimes does take place in Central Asia as well, but the sensitive balance is generally maintained to ensure that the gains are spread to other interests groups to secure regime’s survival. The exceptions proving the rule are the two revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, which demonstrated what happens when this balance is not achieved.

‘Survival’ and infrastructure

In the context of the major powers engagement in Central Asia, the multidimensional nature of balancing behavior of the local states carried various outcomes. The type of infrastructure projects completed or funded by the major powers defined the level of sensitivity within the region, which, in turn, defined the reaction toward the projects with regionalization capacity. With the exception of Kazakhstan, Central Asian states generally

⁷ Krausse, Alexis, *Russia in Asia. A Record and a Study, 1558-1899*, Leiden: Global Oriental, 2012
Author’s interview, Bishkek, February 15, 2016

had little impact on the shape and activities of the multilateral lenders designed to support infrastructural projects serving regional interests. However, due to disproportionately minor economic positions compared to those of the two major powers, the Central Asian states were not able to create new or shape existing financial institutions in the forms favorable for the development of regional infrastructure. Subsequently, most of the infrastructural projects, which carried regionalization capacity were proposed, initiated and funded by the major powers. Nevertheless, Central Asian states reaction often defined the degrees of success of these projects.

Transportation projects in individual states, which enabled Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to develop isolation from each other, were motivated by the mutual threat perception between the two. At the same time, the directions of the auto-roads and railways within Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were justified by connecting parts of the countries and securing control of the territory consistent with internal considerations. These projects faced no opposition and were completed without any political challenges. However, the internal factors in Kyrgyzstan, particularly the strong north-south clan divide, delayed the construction of trans-country automobile road, and largely redefined the direction of the route. The continuous delays of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway were caused by a combination of the similar internal considerations in addition to fear of China's expansionism and of Uzbekistan's regional dominance. Continuous distrust between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan partially prevented development of legal mechanisms, which would facilitate movements of goods and people in Fergana Valley, the most interweaved area of Central Asia.

The transcontinental transportation routes through Kazakhstan, which were developed without major delays and which bypassed the rest of Central Asia, highlight the multidimensional nature of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Kazakhstan arguably views both Russia and China as potential threats. At the same time Kazakhstan's leadership needs to consider the interests of the various segments of the populations, such as pro-Russian groups, nationalist blocs and anti-Chinese factions. By satisfying its powerful neighbors' transit requirements, Kazakhstan's leadership appears to thread a careful line between the external actors and the internal interest groups. For Kazakhstan, connectivity to its Central Asian neighbors plays a less sensitive role because of its own dominant economic position and geographic location, which implies extensive borders with powerful neighbors, easier access to transcontinental transportation routes and subsequent possibility to enter larger markets. Generally, compared to other Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has a more distinct position. Despite high level of economic integration between southern Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states during the Soviet time, the term 'Central Asia and Kazakhstan' used by Soviet official media clearly differentiated Kazakhstan from its southern neighbors. This 'special' position of Kazakhstan, as being 'not-quite' Central Asian is visible through its more equal position in dealing with Russia and China. Seeing itself as more equal to the major powers, and often being treated as such, is possibly the reason why Kazakhstan has been less apprehensive in developing trans-borders transportation links with Russia and China. However, as argued in the transportation chapter, these links did little to develop regional connectivity within Central Asia.

The approval of trans-regional transportation system and elimination of non-physical barriers for cross-border movements, in the context of the projects and initiatives promoted by Russia and China, often affected strategic interests of the Central Asian states. Evidently, the development of trans-regional transportation network remains a highly sensitive issue for Central Asian states because enhanced physical access is seen as a threat simply because it provides possibility of an overland invasion. Compared to the roads and railways, trans-border power lines and pipelines, do not seem to be viewed as threatening despite their key roles in providing energy security for the states.

The Central Asian states' less adversarial attitude toward China and Russia sponsored energy projects lies in the profitable nature of energy production and the necessity of power generation. Energy producing states benefit from the alternative energy market created by China. In hydrocarbon producing states, the sales of energy resources contribute toward enrichment of the state and ruling elites and toward appeasement of other interest groups that may otherwise represent internal threats to the regimes in power. Moreover, the main hydrocarbon exporters in the region, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan do not have direct borders with China and therefore are less apprehensive of Chinese expansionism. In the hydrocarbons deficient states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, access to electric power is crucial for internal stability. These states generally welcome major powers to invest into hydropower and electric grid projects and actually appear to compete for investments. At the same time, the main threat perception in the context of energy sector lies in Uzbekistan's aversion of any hydropower plants constructed in the upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Subsequently the trilateral dynamics among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan often affect the decisions of major powers to engage in the energy sectors in one of these three states. The controversies and the resulting delays around Rogun and Kambarata-1 hydropower plants in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are vivid example how the threats between the states define the nature of major powers' engagement in the energy sector.

Compared to the 'harder' sector of infrastructure, the telecommunication sector is most prone to extensive control by the regional states. Generally, outside state actors view the capacity to transmit their content as a possibility to expand the sphere of influence by developing positive image in the host country. The media reach in foreign countries also provides additional sources of revenue from advertising and potential market expansions. However, from the perspective of the host countries, information from uncontrolled external sources can undermine regimes' credibility. In other words, foreign propaganda is a potential threat to authoritarian governments. At the same time, though, information flow is a non-essential item compared to necessities such as functional roads and heating in the winter time. Therefore, regimes are not risking being subjected to popular discontent by restricting the flow of information to the public. As a result, the telecommunications sectors are tightly controlled by the national governments in Central Asia.

The omnibalancing framework within Neorealism explains consideration of the Central Asian states and allows understanding why and how infrastructural engagement by the external actors is kept in check by the regional states. Consistent with the framework, the leaders of the Central Asian states appease secondary adversaries to balance against primary adversaries, which often include domestic actors.⁸ The cases discussed above demonstrate the utility of the omnibalancing framework. The approach also allocates the importance to the roles of individuals, especially in more authoritarian states. For instance, the change of leadership in Uzbekistan after the death of Islam Karimov, brought rapprochement with the neighboring states. Karimov's distrustful personality was often cited as the reason for Uzbekistan's foreign and domestic policy. The sudden change in Uzbekistan's policy under the new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev confirms the importance of personality in foreign policy decisions in Central Asia. Further research and analysis is needed to fully understand the transformation in the decision making process when leadership changes occur in the Central Asian states.

The reaction of Central Asian states to China and Russia sponsored infrastructural projects is critical, although not a definitive factor for understanding the nature of the two major powers' engagement in Central Asia. The next two sections answer how the nature of

⁸ David, Steven R., *Choosing Sides. Alignment and Realignment in the Third World*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991

each of the major powers affects regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Russia's situational engagement

The initial hypothesis suggested that Russia's focus on selective integration through the Eurasian integration project excluded non-participants, particularly Uzbekistan, and therefore carried negative effects on the cooperation within the whole region.⁹ The findings suggest that the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has caused only limited positive effect on regional cooperation between its Central Asian members (and candidates) Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The evidence also demonstrated that certain policies carried out in the process of the Eurasian economic integration indirectly decreased connectivity between members and non-members of the EAEU in Central Asia.¹⁰ However, the reason for the negative effect on regional cooperation is not the exclusivity in the nature of the engagement.

Instead, Russia's engagement in Central Asia has lacked consistency. In the transportation sector Russia had minimal involvement. The projects funded by Russia-dominated Eurasian Development bank did little to enhance regional connectivity. Furthermore, Russia provided little support to the reduction of non-physical barriers through several institutional initiatives. Moreover, Russia visibly endorsed transportation initiatives which enhanced its own transit potential at the expense of alternative projects, which bypassed Russia, but had greater potential for increasing Central Asian regional connectivity. The analysis of the energy sector highlights Russia's reluctance to act on the capacity to facilitate regional cooperation. Russia's continuous situational and bilateral manner of engagement provided limited support for multilateral initiatives in the energy sector. Therefore, Russia's involvement in the energy sector had limited long-term effects on the development of interdependence among Central Asian states. In the telecommunication sector, competition among multiple Russian firms demonstrates lack of consistency's in the country's overall strategy toward the development of regional cooperation. Additionally, Russia's assertive steps to gain information influence in most of the Central Asian states resulted into counter-reaction from the states' governments. This type of response diminished the sense of common identity inherited from the Soviet times and subsequently decreased capacity for interaction among people and institutions across the region. Visibly, the nature of Russia's engagement contributed to the 'fragmentation' of Central Asia.

This fragmentation, though, is caused by Russia's inconsistent, situational and opportunistic engagement with individual states rather than by the exclusive nature of Russia's integration initiatives. More importantly, Russia's situational engagement in Central Asia is not consistent with 'deep' and 'exclusive' Eurasian integration. For instance, Russia's cyclical rapprochement with Uzbekistan, which is not a member of the initiative, comes at the expense of Russia's institutional partner Kyrgyzstan. Evidently, in Central Asia, Russia's geopolitical interests supersede Russia's institution-building ambitions. The decision making process behind Russia's priorities and policy directions in Central Asia is not so evident and can be a potential topic for future research.

Another important characteristic of Russia's engagement in Central Asia is increasing focus on bilateral ties. This trend contradicts a common view that Russia, as an heir to the Soviet Union, maintains 'special' status in Central Asia and has specific strategy toward the whole region. Instead, based on the conclusions of the empirical chapters and according to

⁹ The hypothesis is based on Cooley, Alexander, Marlene Laruelle, "The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia. From Privileged Sphere, to Divide and Rule?", PONARS Eurasia Policy memo No. 261, July 2013, PONARSEurasia.org, 1

¹⁰ The EAEU is a relatively new institutions and more time is needed to determine its actual effects.

regional experts, Russia has used different approaches toward different regional states.¹¹ The asymmetric nature of the individual relations between Russia and the Central Asian states serves as a clear challenge to the existence of one ‘regional’ policy from Russia. The findings demonstrate that Russia’s position in Central Asia is increasingly defined by bilateral relations with individual states, rather than the coherent ‘regional’ policy. The variable nature of these bilateral relations diminishes Russia’s role in Central Asian regionalism. Elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, Russia appears to pursue similar approaches revolving around bilateral ties. In South Caucasus, Russia maintains strong relations with Azerbaijan often at the expense of Azerbaijan’s rival and Russia’s institutional partner Armenia. In the European section of the former Soviet Union, Russia often prioritized relations with Ukraine, which was reluctant to join Russia-led Eurasian integration. Noticeably, in Central Asia, increasing reliance on bilateralism on the part of Russia comes in contrast to China’s growing support of multilateral initiatives in Central Asia. This apparent shift in China’s approach toward the region, and visible interchangeability in the roles of the two major powers is discussed in the following section.

China’s engagement: toward multilateralism and a new ‘shape’ of the region

China has not replaced Russia in Central Asia, and is unlikely to do so in the near future. However, China’s role in the region has become more similar to the ‘paternal’ role previously fulfilled by Russia. As Russia’s engagement became increasingly interest-seeking, Chinese approach shifted from opportunism and enhancement of spheres of influence in the individual states toward more stable, more encompassing and mutually beneficial initiatives. The view that China’s engagement in Central Asia has only been effective on the bilateral basis¹² is no longer accurate. The ‘shift’ to multilateralism in Central Asia, however, cannot be simplistically defined as the one ‘from bilateralism to multilateralism’. According to a Chinese expert affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, multilateral initiatives do not undermine China’s existing bilateral ties. Apparently, China pursues dual track nature of engagement where bilateral ties and multilateral initiatives are equally important.¹³ China’s increased commitment to multilateralism is made possible by growing availability of technical, financial and human resources, which were not available in the past. As the availability of these resources increased, China has greater capacity to utilize them to pursue additional directions of the foreign policy, particularly costly, uncertain and often unprofitable multilateral initiatives.

As its position in the world has been strengthening, China recognizes that regional scale initiatives are necessary to actualize potential of an emerging world power.¹⁴ The projects of regional significance in Central Asia carry more benefits for China than the projects of national scale. In order to complete the former China needs a coherent region. According to one Chinese academic cited by Godehardt, “China is already very strong”, so it does not need Central Asia purely for energy resources; China has a long term goal in mind with Central Asia.¹⁵

The SCO, which is a heavily publicized institution, is one of the instruments of Chinese multilateralism in Central Asia; however, Russia’s equal position in the organization

¹¹ Author’s interview, Bishkek, January 25, 2016

¹² Kerr, David, “Central Asian and Russian perspective on China’s strategic emergence”, *International Affairs*, 86, 1, (2010), 127-152

¹³ Author’ interview, June 15, 2017

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 167

often prevented China from pursuing its policies through the framework of the SCO.¹⁶ Arguably in response, China promoted a number of specialized and technical multilateral initiatives that did not include Russia or any other major external actor. These initiatives enabled China to develop multilateral cooperation and use it to its advantage in the spheres, in which the SCO could not establish properly functioning instruments for functional cooperation. The SCO failed to develop multilateral lending mechanism; the SCO's Transportation Agreement was relatively weak; the SCO's Energy Club shifted the focus out of Central Asia. Having capacity to do so, China designed its own lending mechanisms. In the transportation sector cooperation mechanisms including China and selected Central Asian states began to gain momentum relatively recently. In the energy sector the Coordination Committee for managing Central Asian – China pipeline system has served as an example for practical multilateral cooperation for several years.

Acknowledging this relatively new characteristic of China's engagement is useful for understanding China's emerging approach to international relations. In Europe, China created a mechanism, '16-plus-1', which brings together Eastern and Central European countries, both members and non-members of the EU. The grouping has no institutional connection to the EU and does not include European 'heavy weights'. The forum provides platform for cooperation among the 'smaller' European states, which benefit China. The initiative includes a number of countries that lie along the direction of China's BRI initiative.¹⁷ In South America, Chinese initiatives facilitate cooperation among 'smaller' regional states and operate independently from the regional organization Mercosur, dominated by the regional powers Brazil and Argentina. Chinese projects demonstrate "clear shift to redirect South American production to the Pacific", which would be beneficial for China.¹⁸ In South East Asia, Lancang-Mekong River cooperation mechanism initiated by China includes also Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The grouping is not, however, affiliated with the ASEAN, of which the five Southeast Asian countries are the members.¹⁹ The issues in various regions are somewhat similar to those China faces in Central Asia. For instance, South East Asian states are also apprehensive of Chinese expansionism. However, some of this anxiety is driven not by China's geographic proximity, but rather by significant presence of ethnic Chinese in several South East Asian states. In South America there is less fear of Chinese dominance, but there is a presence of major regional powers with established spheres of influence. A comparative study of China-driven cooperation initiatives in various regions could provide further understanding of how an emerging power utilizes multilateral cooperation to achieve in strategic objectives. In all the geographic areas, though, China appears to redefine the direction of regional infrastructure to fulfill its goals.

In Central Asia, China's efforts to 'reformat' the region are clearly visible on the background of the pre-existing Soviet infrastructure. The analysis of the empirical chapters suggests that China-sponsored projects do change the direction of regional infrastructure away from the Russia-centered post-Soviet network. The new directions developed by China do not always have positive effects on regional connectivity. For instance, development of

¹⁶ Noticeably, India's accession to the organization may further diminish SCO's capacity as a mechanism of Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia. At the 2018 SCO's Summit in Qingdao, the common declaration on the support of the Belt and Road Initiative was unprecedentedly not so 'common' anymore because it was not signed by India.

¹⁷ Brown, Kerry, "China's geopolitical aims: the curious case of the 16-plus-1", *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/chinas-geopolitical-aims-the-curious-case-of-the-16-plus-1/>

¹⁸ Guimaraes, Bruno Gomes, and Diogo Ives, "China, South America and regional integration", *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/china-south-america-and-regional-integration/>

¹⁹ "Five features of Lancang-Mekong River cooperation", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 17, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1349239.shtml

East-West auto and rail routes through Kazakhstan enhances China's connectivity with Europe, but the transportation network bypasses other Central Asian states, and therefore contributes little for connectivity within Central Asia. However, China's role in promoting regional cooperation is apparent in the southern Central Asian states, i.e. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It appears that China aims to utilize them as a 'bridge' between China and Afghanistan and Pakistan. By enhancing connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, China brings the two previously isolated regions together. The process of connecting Central Asia with South Asia does have positive effect on regional connectivity within Central Asia itself. The optimal routes between China and Afghanistan are bound to pass through Fergana Valley or its proximity, the geographic area where the borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan interweave. In order for infrastructural projects to work, China needs to ensure cooperation among the three states, which have troubled relations with one another. China-initiated projects in energy, electric power, transportation and indirectly telecommunications have partially done that. As Godehardt suggests, "China's rise is moving Asia", changing common perceptions of various geographic spaces in Asia, and Central Asia is not immune to these changes.²⁰

China's potential to project influence in South and Central Asia is even more crucial considering that area is positioned in the, so called, Modern Activity Gap and Arch of Instability (MAGAI).²¹ MAGAI lies between Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia, the area which is underdeveloped economically and contains numerous security challenges. The MAGAI construct suggests that Afghanistan is located in the gap of transcontinental transportation routes. The Eurasian infrastructural network, particularly key energy and rail links, end in the areas bordering Afghanistan. British, Soviet and American efforts to stabilize Afghanistan generally resulted into failures because of the country's isolation. In a short term, this seclusion created major challenges for establishing security. In a long term isolation prevented economic development essential for stability. China's ability to expand overland infrastructure can connect MAGAI to transcontinental infrastructural networks. If accomplished, the act would demonstrate an achievement which in the modern history eluded maritime powers.

Treating South Asia and Central Asia as one region is not exclusive to China. In 2006 the US State Department transferred the matters of Central Asian states from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to the Bureau of South Asian affairs, which subsequently became known as Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.²² Unofficially, Russia was not enthusiastic about the move, but the aversion was not expressed strongly, as Russia and the USA were allies in the war on terror. Similarly, China's visible perception of Central and South Asia as one region is unlikely to draw vocal opposition from Russia, considering the strong cooperative rhetoric emanating from the official sources of the two major powers. In this context, Russia had a relatively muffled response to the new multilateral security initiative led by China. The quadrilateral anti-terrorism cooperation mechanism established

²⁰ Godehardt, Nadine, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia. Regions and Interwined Actors in International Relations*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 88

²¹ Benson, Stephen, "The MAGAI Construct and the Northern Distribution Network", *A Report of the CSIS Project on the Northern Distribution Network for Afghanistan*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2009, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/magai%E2%84%A2-construct-and-northern-distribution-network>

²² "South Asia", *US Department of State* (n.d.), <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/maps/64378.htm>, accessed June 2, 2018

between China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan is significant in two ways.²³ First, the body provides institutional dimension to the South Asia – Central Asia vector. Second, the mechanism seems to undermine Russia, which has noticeable military presence in Tajikistan and is commonly viewed as a security guarantor in the region. Studying Russian responses to China-driven initiatives in Central Asia would provide wide ground for future research.

China's initiatives in Central Asia are not openly questioned by Russia. However, China has faced numerous challenges promoting its projects in Central Asia, particularly major transnational projects involving several states, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and Central Asia – China Pipeline Line D traversing four of the Central Asian States. Much of the challenges emanated from the Central Asian states themselves. Because of apparently less than favorable perception of China in Central Asia, China's material and technological capabilities are not sufficient to draw consistent acceptance of its multilateral projects in the region. This perception, though, is closely connected to Russia's position in Central Asia. The role of Sino-Russian relations in regionalization of Central Asia is discussed in the final section.

Sino-Russian relations and Central Asian regionalism

There is no apparent correlation between the changes in Sino-Russian relations and regionalization of Central Asia. Continuous improvement in the relations of the two major powers in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union did not project on the continuous development of regional cooperation in Central Asia. On the contrary, any improvement and consensus in Sino-Russian relations often comes at the expense of Central Asian states. The 2015, the China-Russia agreement on cooperation between Eurasian Economic Union and Belt and Road Initiative is just one of the instances when China and Russia excluded their institutional partners. Maintaining consensus between the two major powers within the SCO prevented development of the only region-focused lending institution, the SCO Development Bank. Transportation projects co-sponsored by Russia and China created little regionalization potential. China and Russia did not see eye-to-eye on the transportation projects with high potential for regional connectivity within Central Asia. Sino-Russian energy cooperation rarely includes Central Asian states. Moreover, Sino-Russian energy agreement on the import of energy from Russia's Far East may, in the long run, decrease Central Asian energy flows, and subsequently decrease technical cooperation among the regional states. Sino-Russian shared initiatives in the oil industry in Central Asia have little potential for developing regional cooperation. Despite the competitive nature of their relations, the two cooperated when their interests converged, and tended to pursue their individual objectives in other instances. China and Russia joint initiatives in the development of telecommunication infrastructure had minimal impact on regional connectivity. In fact, trans-Eurasian fiber optic cable lines co-sponsored by the two states bypassed most of Central Asia.

Arguably, cooperation between China and Russia in Central Asia is largely superficial. Russia appears to lack resources and political will to follow through with common infrastructural projects of regional scale. Institutionally, positive rhetoric between the two states often lacks practical cooperation to back it up. Moreover, competition between the two is submerged under this rhetoric of cooperation. According to several Chinese academics, China goes to great lengths to reassure Russia that China's engagement in Central

²³ "China joins Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan in security alliance", *Reuters*, August 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKCN10F1A6>

Asia is not political and is purely economic.²⁴ However, it is rather obvious that such high level of economic engagement is bound to have political implications, to come with some degree of political power for China. Yet, China's political position in Central Asia cannot match that of Russia. The strength of Russian influence in Central Asia greatly overshadows China's economic position, and prevents China from fully pursuing its objectives in the region. China seems to be aware of its weakness.

Therefore, the real shift in the nature of China's engagement in Central Asia is not from bilateralism to multilateralism. The latter only complements broader Chinese policy toward the region. According to one Chinese expert, multilateralism is a useful way to lead, by "reducing distrust and minimizing perception of dominance".²⁵ The real emerging shift in China's engagement is from acting as a road builder and business facilitator, to becoming an opinion maker. This is where Chinese material capabilities create capacity to enhance perceptions of China both among elites and among general population. Physical infrastructure can act as a means of reconstructing the interests of the Central Asian states, directly by creating communication channels, and indirectly, by bringing the Central Asian states and China logistically closer together. The future of Central Asian regionalism now seems to have moved beyond Russia's control. According to one Moscow based expert, "Russia is too small to integrate the space around it, but it is too big to be integrated into other structures."²⁶ Nevertheless, in order to create a coherent region beyond the western borders, China needs to persuade Central Asian states of its benign ambitions. Concurrently, in order to pursue its own independent policy in the region, China needs to reduce interdependence between Central Asia and Russia, and do so in such a way that neither the Russians nor the Central Asians would notice. Multilateralism without Russia might just be the way to do it. The 'game' analogy adopted by contemporary authors' on major power competition in Central Asia from Peter Hopkirk²⁷ might still be relevant after all.

²⁴ Author's interview, Beijing, October 28, 2015

Author's interview, Beijing, December 30, 2015

²⁵ Author's interview, Beijing, June 15, 2017

²⁶ Trenin, Dmitriy, "Are warming Chinese-Russian relations made to last?" *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center event*, March 7, 2016, Beijing

²⁷ Hopkirk, Peter, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1992

Cooley, Alexander, *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012

Cabestan, Jean-Pierre in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), *China and India in Central Asia. A New "Great Game"?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Fingar, Thomas (ed), *The new great game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016

Appendix One

Abbreviations

ADB	Asia Development Bank
CACO	Central Asia Cooperation Organization
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CASA 1000	Central Asia South Asia power transmission initiative
CDB	China Development Bank
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent State
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
CRBC	China Road and Bridge Corporation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EBRD	European Bank of Reconstruction and Development
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
EDB	Eurasian Development Bank
EFSD	Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development
EurasEC	Eurasian Economic Community
GRES	Gosudarstvennaya Rayonnaya Elektrostantsiya (Rus)
HEPP	Hydro Electric Power Plant
IRU	International Road Union
LNG	Liquid Natural Gas
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NELTI	New Eurasian Land Transportation Initiative
NTV	N Televidiniye (Brand name)
ORT	Obshchestvennoye Rossiyskoye Televidinie (Perviy Kanal)
RTR	Rossiyskoye Televidiniye i Radio
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
TBEA	Tebian Electric Apparatus
TIR	Transports Internationaux Routiers (French)
TRACECA	Transportation Corridors Europe-Caucasus-Asia

Appendix Two: List of Interviewees

Name	Organization	Posituion	Interview Location
Akeneev, Zhumakadyr	Oil Traders Association of Kyrgyzstan	Head; Former Minister of Agriculture of the Kyrgyz Republic, Former Chairman of Statistics Bureau	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Ciopraga, Mircea	TRACECA	General Secretary	Email
Dzyubenko, Olga	Reuters	Kyrgyzstan Correspondent	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Gabuev, Aleksander	Carnegie Moscow Center	Chair of Russia in Asia Pacific program	Beijing, China
Galdini Marco	American University of Central Asia. Tian Shan Policy Center. Migration and Social Protection	Program Manager	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Gilman, Aleksandr	KazTransGaz	Director	Almaty, Kazakhstan
Hardin, Valeriy	American University of Central Asia, Division of Politics and International Studies	Assistant Professor	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Ibraimov, Osmanakun	Manas University, Department of Foreign Languages	Department Head, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Imandosov, Sabyr Aidarbekovich	General Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization	Deputy General Secretary	Beijing, China
Kaliev, Meder	Regional Environmental Center	Representative	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Li Fujian	China Foreign Affairs University	Assistant Professor	Beijing, China
Li Zi Guo	China Institute of International Studies, Department of the SCO Studies	Deputy Director	Beijing, China

Mohan, C Raja	Carnegie Delhi Center	Director	Beijing, China
Nicharapova, Jildiz	American University of Central Asia. Office of Vice President for Research	Research Analyst	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Nuzov, Ilya	Federation of Human Rights. East Europe Central Asia Desk	Director	New York, USA
Omurzakov, Akylanbek	National Institute of Strategic Research	Vice Director	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Orobaeva, Irina	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan	Special Assignment Ambassador. Advisor for Minister of Foreign Affairs on the Matters of the SCO	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Primbetov, Serik Dostanovich	Eurasian Development Bank	Head of Mission in Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Rickleton, Chris	Eurasianet News Portal	Journalist	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Sariev, Mars	Non-Affiliated	Political Analyst	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Sultanov, Aibek	National Bank of Kyrgyzstan, Department of Payment Systems	The Chief of Analysis of the Payment Systems	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
Sultanov, Talan	National Institute of Strategic Research	Director	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
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