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SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON CENTRAL ASIA

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Russia and China has been widely debated in contemporary geopolitics, especially after 2014, when the two countries began to strengthen their cooperation in the face of shared challenges. The perception that U.S. primacy poses a threat to their national interests has driven a strategic partnership, consolidated in response to factors such as NATO's eastward expansion toward Russia, tensions in the Indo-Pacific, economic sanctions against Moscow, and trade and technological disputes between Washington and Beijing. In this context, both countries seek alternatives to the Western-dominated international system, reinforcing their autonomy in sectors such as energy, defense, and technology. This dynamic is particularly evident in Central Asia, a region traditionally considered part of Russia's sphere of influence but which has experienced a growing Chinese presence, driven by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Against this backdrop, a central question emerges: do Moscow's and Beijing's strategies constitute a competition for regional hegemony, or do they point toward a potential complementary alignment of interests? This question, which raises fundamental issues about the nature of the relationship between the two powers, opens the way for broader debates about Russia's ability to preserve its influence in the face of China's expansion and the future trajectory of their

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strategic partnership.

Some analysts argue that Russia is no longer the leading actor, having been surpassed by China, whose economic power and strategic investments grant it a dominant position (Higgins 2022; Shetty 2024). Others contend that Russian power is in decline, which may lead to a gradual loss of prominence relative to China's rise (Akromov 2024; de Waal 2024; Dzhuraev and McGlinchey 2022; Kashgarian 2022; Saivetz 2023). Moreover, some interpretations suggest that the war in Ukraine has altered the dynamics between Russia and China, turning them into competitors seeking to expand their influence in the region (Hua 2024). On the other hand, certain analyses assert that despite China's advance, Russia remains an important actor in the region and that the shared interests between the two countries may mitigate potential disputes, leading to a joint management that benefits both powers (Gabuev and Umarov 2023; Lass 2022).

Consequently, this article aims to analyze the dynamics of Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia, examining how the functional division between Russian and Chinese influences is configured in the current geopolitical context. The research is justified by the need to understand the mechanisms that enable the coexistence and, at times, the complementarity between the two powers in a scenario marked by sanctions, power reconfigurations, and transformations in trade and investment flows. From this perspective, the study seeks to offer both a theoretical and empirical contribution to contemporary debates in international relations, highlighting the challenges and opportunities generated by the combined presence of Moscow and Beijing in the region.

To address this question, the article adopts a methodological approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analyses. A critical review of the specialized literature on geopolitics, Sino-Russian relations, and Central Asia is integrated with the interpretation of economic and strategic data from sources such as the World Bank and regional institutes. The temporal focus is on the post-2014 period, marked by key events that redefined regional dynamics: the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (2013), the annexation of Crimea (2014), and the partial withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan. These milestones not only accelerated the reconfiguration of the balance of power in Central Asia but also highlighted Moscow's and Beijing's capacity to adapt their strategies to a context of asymmetric interdependence.

The investigation covers different axes of influence in Central Asia, considering the multiple factors that shape regional dynamics. In the military field, it analyzes Russia's strategic presence, including military bases, security agreements, and the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in regional stability. In the productive sphere, it examines flows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the activities of Russian and Chinese companies in infrastructure and strategic sectors. The financial dimension is explored through the integration of banking systems, migrant worker remittances, and capital flows that sustain the economic presence of Moscow and Beijing. Additionally, technology and education are addressed through the expansion of the Digital Silk Road, technological partnerships, and the presence of Russian educational institutions. Russian cultural influence is also significant, especially through the use of the Russian language as a lingua franca, the dissemination of media content, and the preservation of historical and academic ties with countries in the region. In trade, the analysis focuses on exchanges between Central Asia, Russia, and China, observing patterns of export, import, and re-export. The energy issue also stands out, with emphasis on the transportation and commercialization of oil and natural gas, essential resources for the regional geopolitical configuration.

The analysis argues that, although Russia has ceded economic space to China in the region, its relevance persists through other mechanisms, such as historical ties, collective security agreements, and energy interdependence. At the same time, it is argued that Sino-Russian cooperation is not based on mere tactical convergence, but on a strategic management of complementarities: while China prioritizes investments in infrastructure and connectivity, Russia reinforces its role as guarantor of political and military stability. This functional division, combined with mutual distrust regarding the Western-led international order, creates incentives for maintaining the partnership even in contexts of asymmetry. By integrating military, financial, and cultural dimensions, the study seeks not only to challenge narratives about the inevitability of conflict between the powers but also to demonstrate how Central Asia has become a region for pragmatic coexistence between distinct power projects.

The article is organized into five sections: the present introduction, three main sections, and, finally, the concluding remarks. The second section discusses how Russia employs military, political, and economic mechanisms to preserve its traditional role in the region. The third section explores China's strategy, with emphasis on investments, the expansion of the BRI, and the consolidation of its economic and technological presence. The fourth section, in turn, examines the perspective of Central Asian countries, highlighting their capacity for action, identification of opportunities, and negotiation strategies in the face of the dual influences of Moscow and Beijing. Furthermore, this analysis is related to the broader context of Russia's growing dependence on China, illustrating how this dynamic shapes the maneuvering space of Central

Asian states within the regional geopolitical balance. Finally, the concluding remarks synthesize the debates and point to directions for future research on the challenges and potentialities of this geopolitical dynamic.:

2. The Russian Perspective in Central Asia

In the military sphere, the partial withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014 reduced the sense of security among Central Asian governments. In this vacuum, Russia intensified its regional presence by deploying troops and conducting military exercises with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Collins 2014). Russian strengthening became evident with the closure, also in 2014, of the last U.S. airbase in Central Asia – at Manas Airport, Kyrgyzstan – and with the military rapprochement following the peaceful power transition in 2017, when Sooronbay Jeenbekov expressed interest in establishing a second Russian base and expanding military facilities in Kant and Karakol (Kainazarova 2018; Tan 2020). The signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018 – among Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan (Skalamera 2018) – can also be seen as an expansion of Russian interests in regional security. By establishing rules for the delimitation of internal waters, territorial waters, and exclusive fishing zones, and by declaring the Caspian a zone of peace prohibiting military forces from non-littoral states, the Convention partly responded to the 2010 agreements between Kazakhstan and the United States, reinforcing Russia's effort to restrict foreign military presence (Labardini 2021; Pradhan 2019).

It is important to highlight, however, that even with this intensification, recent events reveal Russian influence to be marked by contradictions. In Kyrgyzstan, in 2020, allegations of electoral fraud triggered intense protests, culminating in Jeenbekov's resignation and the rise of Sadyr Japarov. Although the new government adopted a pro-Russia stance, Moscow remained ambiguous, avoiding direct intervention despite the presence of Russian bases on Kyrgyz territory and the country's participation in the CSTO (Mikovic 2020). In 2021, border conflicts between Kyrgyz and Tajik communities, stemming from disputes over contested areas, escalated into armed confrontations and forced negotiations for the demilitarization of the disputed zones. The swift mediation, encouraged by neighbors such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as well as by Russia, highlighted Moscow's reluctance to act decisively so as not to expose the bloc's vulnerabilities (Pantucci and Soliev 2023; Sullivan 2021).

In contrast, the CSTO intervened more decisively in Kazakhstan in 2022. Violent protests, resulting from rising fuel prices and socioeconomic problems, led President Tokayev to request intervention, citing the threat of terrorist groups trained abroad. The deployment of a contingent of 4,000 soldiers for peacekeeping reaffirmed Russia's role as guarantor of regional security – as well as setting a precedent for military cooperation in Central Asia (Denisov 2022; Santos 2022). However, the operation, predominantly symbolic and short-lived, exposed the limitations of the CSTO and Russian strategy, functioning more as a presence gesture than as a robust intervention – possibly influenced, in part, by Chinese interests in the region (Davidzon, Libman, and Saggar 2023):

The war in Ukraine also had indirect consequences in Central Asia, where countries maintained a traditional stance of neutrality – neither openly supporting the aggression nor condemning it – replicating attitudes observed during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war against Georgia in 2008 (Engvall 2023). Although these positions prevented drastic ruptures, the conflict stimulated tensions and encouraged efforts to diversify partnerships without significantly altering historical relations in the region. The episode that most strained relations between Moscow and the Central Asian states involved Kazakhstan. At the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in 2022, the Kazakh president stated that his country would not recognize Lugansk and Donetsk as independent republics (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2022) and signaled the pursuit of alternative routes for oil exports. In response, Moscow approved – and later reversed – a law that threatened to shut down the CPC, a key pipeline for Kazakhstan, citing environmental concerns. Alarmed, Kazakhstan began diversifying its military partnerships, acquiring U.S. drones, signing a cooperation agreement with the United Kingdom, entering fourteen bilateral agreements with Turkey, and securing the production of Turkish drones on its territory (Fernandes and Grantseva 2023).

Other countries in the region have also sought to diversify their sources of weaponry, driven by doubts about Russia's capacity to maintain security – especially after the redeployment of military resources from bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the Ukrainian conflict (Engvall 2023; Hess 2023). Thus, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan intensified their search for new strategic partners: Uzbekistan strengthened ties with Turkey, signed military cooperation agreements, and contacted the United States for drone acquisitions, while Kyrgyzstan opted for Turkish drones and canceled CSTO military exercises scheduled for 2022 (Fernandes and Grantseva 2023).

However, despite Central Asian countries' efforts to diversify their arms suppliers, Russia's military influence in the region remains significant. This presence is sustained by military bases, subsidized weaponry, and security agreements that limit the approach of other actors (Gabuev and Umarov

2023). Moscow continues to be the main arms supplier for the region, playing a central role in these countries' military imports (Carteny and Pizzolo 2022). Moreover, the CSTO, despite its contradictions and weaknesses – evident in its irregular responses to internal political crises and border conflicts – continues to play a relevant role in regional security. Through the organization, Russia promotes joint exercises that enhance interoperability between its forces and those of Central Asian countries, in addition to maintaining military bases with contingents ready for rapid crisis response, consolidating its strategic influence in the region. Thus, even in the face of challenges and attempts to reduce dependence, the Kremlin remains the main military actor in Central Asia, consolidating its strategic position in regional security.

From a productive perspective, significant changes occurred starting in 2022, when the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions imposed new challenges on Russia while simultaneously opening opportunities for a reconfiguration of its economic presence in Central Asia. The sanctions imposed on Moscow led to a large exodus of Russian companies, which relocated to the region to avoid trade barriers and ensure payment in foreign currency (Hugot and Mogilevskii 2023). In Kazakhstan, from March 2022, the number of Russian companies increased significantly, with an addition of 500 to 800 new entities per month and a peak of 1,100 relocations in August 2022. In April of the same year, a total of 15,400 companies with Russian capital was registered, an increase of 4,000 companies compared to January 2022 (Osipova and Vasil'kova 2022). In 2023, approximately half of the foreign companies in the country were of Russian origin, and Russian investments reached a stock of USD 13 billion (Eurasian Development Bank 2023, 6). The relocation movement is not limited to Kazakhstan. In the first eight months of 2022, Kyrgyzstan recorded 546 companies with Russian capital – double the number recorded in the same period the previous year – while in Uzbekistan, of the 14,500 foreign companies, 2,700 were of Russian origin, surpassing the number of Turkish (203) and Chinese (149) company registrations in the first seven months of the same year (Osipova and Vasil'kova 2022).

Overall, more than 24,000 companies with Russian capital operate in Central Asia, representing investments exceeding USD 38 billion. In this new scenario, Russia has sought to develop joint ventures with Central Asian countries for the production of mechanical engineering components, as well as equipment and systems for digitization and automation of production processes (News Central Asia 2024). Thus, this corporate migration reflects a strategic adaptation by Moscow to sanctions and a strengthening of economic ties with Central Asia. The growing productive interdependence between Russia and the region not only mitigates the impact of Western restrictions but also repositions Moscow as an important economic actor in strategic Central Asian sectors. This movement consolidates Russia's presence in the regional economy, reinforcing its influence and ensuring that, despite geopolitical challenges, its participation in Central Asia's productive sphere remains significant.

In the financial sector, there is also an observable interdependence between Moscow and the Central Asian countries, which has been an essential factor for maintaining Russian influence in the region. Following the sanctions imposed in 2014, Russia intensified its initiatives to mitigate economic setbacks, promoting a regional economic union and expanding integration with Central Asian countries to lessen the impact of sanctions, reduce dependence on the dollar, and strengthen economic and political ties (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020; Laitinen 2018). However, this ambiguous strategy, while reinforcing Russian influence, also exposes structural weaknesses in the financial systems of partner countries, a vulnerability exacerbated by the harsher sanctions of 2022 (Ozat 2023; Vaulgrenant 2023; World Bank 2025).

To better understand the impact of this strategy, the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2014 is noteworthy. This initiative, developed by Russia in collaboration with Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020), quickly expanded with the inclusion of Kyrgyzstan, which received promises of investments in its energy sector and guarantees of rights for its workers in Russia (Laitinen 2018). The EEU established a customs union aimed at promoting the free movement of labor, goods, services, and capital. The treaty establishing the Union grants it its own legal identity and the capacity to conduct international activities, focusing on addressing common challenges among member states. This breadth of cooperation is reflected in the creation and expansion of common markets, such as those for medical devices and electricity, and in the anticipation of future financial and energy markets (Belitski and Pomerlyan 2023). However, despite representing a deeper integration effort, the EEU also faces internal tensions, evidenced by conflicts over coordination of monetary policies and criticisms regarding the depreciation of the ruble, which may undermine the competitiveness of some members (Joireman, Tulepbayeva and Vanderhill 2020; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021).

In parallel, the creation of the Financial Messaging Transfer System in 2014 marked Russia's effort to circumvent sanctions, facilitating cross-border payments through the participation of Central Asian banks and partnerships with Russian financial institutions. This integration enabled international transactions via credit and debit cards, as well as electronic funds transfers, aligning the region's financial systems more closely with the Russian model. However, the intensification of this integration has brought challenges, such as the joint fluctuation of local currencies with the ruble, which can increase the cost of dollar-denominated debts and impact inflation in Central Asian countries (Barrios et al. 2023).

These frictions and challenges reveal a complex situation in which interdependence strengthens Russian presence but also generates conflicts and uncertainties in monetary policy management. However, even amid these frictions, Russia's capacity to influence financial changes in Central Asian countries already demonstrates considerable influence in the region, which is further reinforced through mechanisms such as remittance flows sent by Central Asian migrant workers living in Russia to their home countries. The crisis caused by the war in Ukraine prompted migration of Central Asian workers to Russia, raising remittances to record levels in 2022 – with a 50% increase – and contributing significantly to regional GDPs. The importance of remittances for the countries in the region is evident, representing 20% of Uzbekistan's GDP, 26% of Kyrgyzstan's, and 49% of Tajikistan's in 2022 (Ozat 2023; Vaulgrenant 2023; World Bank 2025).

Thus, financial integration between Russia and Central Asian countries can be interpreted as a monetary coordination strategy that, in certain aspects, contributes to regional economic stability. However, this approach – based on maintaining remittance flows, coordinating banking systems, and consolidating mechanisms such as the Eurasian Economic Union – has significant limitations. Russia's inability to comprehensively meet the region's liquidity and credit demands reflects the challenges posed by international sanctions and the structural weaknesses of its own financial system. Nevertheless, monetary interdependence remains a central factor in Central Asia's economic dynamics. Internal changes in the Russian economy, such as ruble fluctuations or financial restrictions resulting from sanctions, continue to directly impact countries in the region, demonstrating that Moscow, despite its weaknesses, maintains a significant financial influence in Central Asia. This persistent link reinforces the resilience of Russia's presence, even amid challenges and an increasing need for adaptation.

In the cultural field, Russia maintains a significant presence in Central Asia, mainly due to the widespread use of the Russian language, which gives it advantages in the media and academic sectors (Laruelle 2014). In the media sector, the Russian government has leveraged this linguistic influence as a soft power tool, promoting the expansion of channels and news agencies such as Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkii Mir, and Russia Today. These initiatives are facilitated by the large audience of Russian journalistic products in Central

Asia, where, due to restrictions on freedom of expression, Russian media are often perceived as more professional and reliable (Freeman 2017; Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski 2019). In the academic sphere, Russia maintains a strong educational presence in the region, with 25 university branches distributed across Kazakhstan (6), Kyrgyzstan (2), Tajikistan (3), and Uzbekistan (14). Furthermore, in 2023, approximately 185,000 Central Asian students were enrolled in Russian institutions, including 60,000 from Kazakhstan, 46,000 from Uzbekistan, 31,000 from Turkmenistan, 30,000 from Tajikistan, and 16,000 from Kyrgyzstan, with around 40% receiving financial support from the Russian government (Russian... 2023).

Given this context, it is evident that Russia continues to play a central role in Central Asia, sustaining its influence through its military presence, economic and financial interdependence, and the maintenance of cultural and educational ties. Despite vulnerabilities such as international sanctions and Central Asian countries seeking other partners, Moscow still preserves strategic elements that provide resilience, including its leadership in the CSTO, its ability to project power in the region through military bases, and its strong involvement in Central Asian productive and financial dynamics. Additionally, the Russian language and the presence of educational and media institutions remain effective soft power instruments, reinforcing the Kremlin's cultural influence. Thus, although its predominance is being challenged, Russia remains a key actor in shaping the political, economic, and security landscape of Central Asia.

3. The Chinese Perspective in Central Asia

Although China has expanded its military presence in Central Asia, its involvement in the region remains predominantly economic. Indeed, there has been growth in security cooperation: countries such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan have increased the acquisition of Chinese weapons, and Tajikistan, in particular, has joined regional mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (Fernandes and Grantseva 2023; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021). Moreover, China's share in the region's military imports rose from 1.5% between 2010 and 2014 to 18% in the period from 2014 to 2019. However, this advance remains limited, especially compared to Russian influence, which accounted for 62% of Central Asia's military imports during the same period (Carteny and Pizzolo 2022).

Thus, although Beijing has expanded its role in the defense sector, its presence in Central Asia continues to be primarily economic. This is evidenced by the announcement of USD 3.7 billion in investments during the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit and the signing of the Xi'an Declaration, which reaffirmed the commitment to regional security and stability without implying the formation of a formal military alliance or directly challenging Russia's dominant position. This development-focused strategy is widely accepted by Moscow, which sees regional stability as essential for maintaining its own influence (Gabuev and Umarov 2023; Nelson 2023). Therefore, while Russia remains the main actor in security matters due to its military presence, China consolidates its leadership in the economic sphere, expanding investments and infrastructure without disrupting Russian influence.

Thus, it is necessary to begin the analysis of productive issues by highlighting the role of Chinese investments, especially because, during the same period in which Beijing expanded its economic presence in the region through the BRI, Moscow significantly reduced its foreign investments. In 2014, these investments reached USD 57.08 billion, but from 2015 onward there was a decline of 61.3%, falling to USD 22.09 billion, with relatively low levels persisting in the following years – USD 22.31 billion in 2016 and USD 36.76 billion in 2017 – and a severe impact in 2020, when they reached only USD 5.85 billion, representing a reduction of 89.7% from the peak (World Bank 2025). During the same period, China consolidated its influence through the launch of the BRI, which not only increased the volume of its investments in the region but also diversified its involvement in sectors such as telecommunications, industry, manufacturing, construction, and services.

Significant projects were implemented in several countries: in Tajikistan, substantial investments in energy, transportation, and agriculture, including the construction of a thermal power plant and infrastructure projects such as the Khojend-Isfara highway and the renovation of hydroelectric plants; in Turkmenistan, the Chinese partnership boosted the development of communications, transportation, and infrastructure, including the construction of a railway connecting the country to China, Kazakhstan, and Iran (Hoh 2019). The Kyrgyz government also turned to China to overcome structural challenges, such as the lack of infrastructure that hinders the exploitation of its vast mineral deposits. In response, Beijing rehabilitated several roads and modernized transportation and power transmission networks to promote national integration and facilitate transport between regions of the country – projects that Kyrgyzstan could not finance on its own (Karikeev and Zhu 2019).

Similarly, Uzbekistan has benefited from railway projects, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which aims to facilitate access to the sea, in addition to investments in economic zones, water conservation, roads, and railway electrification (Hoh 2019). In Kazakhstan, Chinese involvement is manifested through Samruk-Kazyna, a sovereign wealth fund created in 2008 by the Kazakh government, which has raised large loans from China to finance strategic ventures, such as the construction of railway lines connecting the country to China and the Caspian Sea, the expansion of ports like Aktau and Kuryk, and the development of logistics centers. The Khorgos dry port, on the Kazakhstan-China border, has become a key component of the BRI and the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, responsible for 70% of overland product transport between China and Europe (Pieper 2021; Zogg 2019).

As a result of these advances, China has taken the lead in investments in four Central Asian countries, representing 79% of the Foreign Direct Investment stock in Uzbekistan in 2022 (Hall 2024), 60% in Tajikistan in 2023 (Flesch 2024), and 28% in Kyrgyzstan also in 2023 (Kachkinbaeva and Menchaca 2024). In Turkmenistan, China is estimated to have accounted for about 40% of FDI in 2021 (Mukhammadsodik 2023). The only exception is Kazakhstan, where in 2023 the FDI stock was led by the Netherlands and the United States (National Bank of Kazakhstan 2024). These shifts in investment patterns highlight China's growing presence in the region and the relative decline of Russia.

Similarly, China is consolidating itself as an increasingly relevant alternative in the financial sector, offering large-scale investments, more flexible lines of credit, and contributing to the modernization of local financial systems, as well as diversifying sources of financing. This became evident immediately after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, when sanctions reduced the availability of Russian financing for Central Asian banks, increased transaction costs, and decreased the liquidity of local currencies. In Kazakhstan, where three major banks – Sberbank, VTB, and Alfa Bank – are subsidiaries of Russian institutions, problems arose when these institutions were sanctioned, leading two of them to reduce or exit the market. Similar issues occurred in Tajikistan, where the close connection between local and Russian banks hindered international transfers, while in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the restrictions affected card transfers and mobile applications, respectively (Barrios et al. 2023).

These events demonstrate how excessive dependence on Russian financial infrastructure weakens Central Asian economies, prompting countries in the region to seek new sources of financing. The reduction in Russian liquidity and the need to diversify resources created a gap that China has increasingly filled, mainly through BRI-linked loans, leading several countries in the region to allocate considerable resources to debt service. Notably, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, China holds 30% and 41% of public external debt, respectively, while in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, Chinese participation reaches 3%, 7%, and 8%, respectively (World Bank 2023, 159, 115, 167, 112, 170).

More important than the volume of loans is the bargaining power China gains through the conditions imposed on these governments. These financings come with restrictions that limit competition and technology transfer, favor Chinese companies, and deepen the economic and technological dependence of Central Asian countries. By controlling project implementation, Beijing ensures that economic benefits and innovations remain within its territory, and in cases of default, acquires land, local companies, and rights to exploit natural resources such as gold and silver (Galimova et al. 2024; Karrar and Mostowlansky 2020; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021; Otorbaev 2022; Skalamera 2018).

In the technological field, China also takes the lead, both due to sanctions restricting Russia's access to advanced technologies and because of the already established dominance of its national giants. The Chinese strategy is largely realized through the Digital Silk Road, an extension of the BRI that facilitates the entry of companies such as China Mobile, China Telecom, China Unicom, Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu, and Huawei into member countries of the initiative. This allows these national champions to gain competitive advantages and expand their presence in emerging markets, strengthening China's technological position in the region (Boaventura, Conti and Morais 2023; Muzaparaova 2021).

Chinese technological expansion also translates into the development of 5G networks, smart cities, fiber-optic cables, mobile payment systems, telephone communication, and IT platforms for shipment processing, among other solutions. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the Digital Silk Road is evident through the high number of joint projects across various information technology areas, while in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, investments focus on the creation of smart cities and the implementation of next-generation telecommunications networks. In Turkmenistan, the priority has been the construction of a fiber-optic communication cable under the Caspian Sea (Muzaparaova 2021). Beyond the commercial sector, China's technological influence in Central Asia encompasses cooperation initiatives aimed at regional development and poverty reduction through science and technology. These measures include the development of agricultural technologies, water-saving practices exchange, reclamation of arid and saline soils, investments in irrigation, pest control, livestock, veterinary medicine, seismic safety, and the modernization of customs controls with digital solutions (Devonshire-Ellis 2023).

Thus, it is clear that China has consolidated its presence in Central Asia mainly through strategic investments, credit expansion, and technological advancement, taking a central role in modernizing regional infrastructures. The growing dependence of Central Asian countries on Chinese financing and technologies highlights a regional realignment in which Russian presence, though still significant, has been relativized in key areas. This process not only redefines power dynamics in the region but also creates new dynamics and opportunities for Moscow, which must navigate China's rise without compromising its own position.

4. Central Asia between Russia and China

Even with the consolidated presence of Russia and China in Central Asia – partly facilitated by the limited Western engagement in the region – the Central Asian countries should not be seen as mere satellites of these powers. On the contrary, they have been acting as independent actors seeking to balance their international relations and strengthen their autonomy. However, the region's strategic position is shaped not only by its own regional initiatives but also by the balance of power between China and Russia. Thus, understanding how these powers interact and project influence in the region is crucial for assessing the maneuvering space of the Central Asian countries.

Regarding the agency of Central Asian countries, the accession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the presidency of Uzbekistan in 2016 marked a significant shift in regional policy, promoting greater cooperation with neighbors to resolve border disputes, improve connectivity, and facilitate infrastructure projects. This new approach strengthened ties among regional countries, reflected in trade agreements, joint military maneuvers, and initiatives addressing water and energy issues. Kazakhstan also played a key role in this process, proposing regular meetings between the security councils of Central Asian countries and encouraging summits among heads of state to discuss common challenges such as security, trade, and the environment (Dadabaev 2018; Matveeva 2023; Patnaik 2019; Sitenko 2023; Yuyan 2020).

In parallel with the strengthening of intraregional cooperation, Central Asia has expanded its presence on the international stage. In recent years, countries in the region have begun negotiating collectively with leaders from various nations, including India, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. These meetings have addressed topics such as regional security, energy independence, and economic diversification, reflecting an effort to reduce dependence on China and Russia. The war in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions have reinforced the importance of Central Asia, which has become a key player for global energy security, especially due to its reserves of critical materials for renewable energy and uranium. Although full integration among Central Asian countries has not yet been achieved, joint initiatives demonstrate a strategic movement toward closer ties and mutual cooperation (Helf 2023; Matveeva 2023; Temnycky 2023).

However, despite advances in regional and external coordination, Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia remains predominant and is structured on complementary bases. Moscow maintains its primacy in security, financial integration, and strategic productive sectors, while Beijing stands out in infrastructure investment, technology, and credit provision. This complementarity became even more pronounced after 2014, when Western sanctions and Moscow's isolation increased Russian dependence on Chinese economic support, driving an even closer partnership in the region. In other words, the weakening of Russia's ties with the West made cooperation with China indispensable, reinforcing strategic coordination between the two in Central Asia.

On the other hand, Central Asian countries have been using this dynamic to their advantage, balancing external influences to obtain favorable economic and political concessions (Sitenko 2023). This maneuvering capacity is particularly evident in commercial and energy dynamics, where regional states act as intermediaries in Sino-Russian trade and as key logistical nodes for the transport of goods and hydrocarbons. Strengthening these connections highlights not only the growing interdependence among Central Asian, Russian, and Chinese economies, but also the space these countries find to expand their autonomy within this scenario of competition and cooperation.

Trade between Russia and Central Asia, especially after the imposition of international sanctions, highlights how financial integration has played a strategic role in maintaining and expanding Russian influence in the region. The use of the Financial Messaging System for payments in rubles allowed Russia to mitigate the impact of sanctions, reducing dependence on the dollar and other Western currencies. At the same time, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been key in creating an alternative trade network, enabling sanctioned products to reach Russia through re-exports by member countries (Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021).

Simultaneously, China has leveraged Central Asia as a platform to re-export goods to Russia, circumventing direct restrictions. This strategy allows Beijing to move merchandise, strengthen commercial ties, offer an alternative for Russia, and expand its influence in the local economic dynamics. Trade flows between Central Asia and its partners have registered substantial growth since the Ukraine invasion. For instance, Uzbek exports to Russia rose 52% in 2022 compared to 2021, while Chinese exports to the same country increased by 30% (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022). In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese imports jumped 266% between 2021 and 2023, and exports to Russia rose 80%. Similarly, Tajik exports to Russia grew 85%, and imports from China increased by 75%, while Kazakhstan recorded a 39% increase in exports to Russia and a 103% rise in imports from China (International Trade Centre 2025).

These figures reflect a significant shift in trade flows, positioning China as the largest partner for most countries in the region. In 2022, China accounted for 19.7% of Uzbekistan's trade, surpassing Russia at 17.52%; in 2023, China led Kyrgyzstan's trade with a 35% share, while Russia represented 18%. In Turkmenistan, China concentrated nearly 59% of all trade, with 67% of exports directed to Beijing, and in Kazakhstan, China's share reached 22.5% in 2023, exceeding Russia's 18.5%. The only country where Russia remained the main trade partner was Tajikistan, with 24.5% compared to China's 21.4% (International Trade Centre 2025). This dynamic, coupled with U.S. and EU sanctions against some Central Asian firms for re-exporting sanctioned goods to Russia (Putz 2024; Standish 2023), shows that Central Asian countries are increasingly acting as intermediaries in Sino-Russian trade, reflecting a strategic complementarity between the Central Asian, Russian, and Chinese economies (Webster 2023).

A similar pattern is observed in the transportation and commercialization of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas), key resources for the region. For much of the period analyzed, Russia positioned itself as a transit corridor for Central Asian hydrocarbon exports. Its influence in Kazakhstan remained particularly high, as more than 80% of Kazakh oil is transported via pipelines crossing Russian territory (Ernst & Young 2023). This situation enabled Moscow to exert pressure, including threats to close the CPC pipeline, as occurred in 2022 after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Fernandes and Grantseva 2023), highlighting Russia's substantial control over regional energy routes. Concurrently, Russia intensified agreements to purchase gas from Central Asian countries, aiming to compete with China in this strategic sector. In 2017, Gazprom signed a five-year agreement to buy Uzbek gas, and a similar initiative was adopted in 2019 with Turkmenistan, reestablishing previously interrupted flows (British Petroleum 2022, 37; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021; Skalamera 2023).

However, Russia's strategy underwent significant reconfigurations from 2022 onward due to two main factors: the loss of the European gas market and an energy crisis in Central Asia. This crisis, characterized by power cuts, gas rationing, and interruptions in residential heating in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was exacerbated by technical issues that disrupted Turkmenistan's gas exports to both Uzbekistan and China. In response to these energy challenges, Russia proposed in 2022 a natural gas union involving Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The proposal envisaged Gazprom taking over the transport networks of these countries in exchange for the right to re-export part of Russian gas to China. Initially rejected, the offer gained momentum after the winter crisis, culminating in the signing of bilateral agreements in January 2023 that established cooperation roadmaps for the gas industry and committed both countries to importing 10 bcm of Russian gas annually, of which 4–6 bcm could be destined for China (Losz and Mitrova 2023).

Additionally, Turkmenistan began facing strong competition from Russia following the redirection of Russian gas exports to Asia at competitive prices. In this context, Russia's interest in integrating the TAPI pipeline (traversing Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) emerged as a strategy to reroute its energy exports and establish a partnership with Turkmenistan, turning it into a key transit country for Russian energy to other parts of Central Asia and South Asia. The implementation of TAPI would be important to diversify Turkmenistan's revenue sources and reduce its dependence on China, which since 2010 has been the main destination for Turkmen exports, absorbing between 70% and 80% of its gas between 2021 and 2023 (British Petroleum 2022, 37; Energy Institute 2023, 38; Energy Institute 2024, 45; Fazl-e-Haider 2023).

This complementarity suggests that in recent years, the competition between China and Russia for access to Central Asian resources has diminished considerably. Russia, which previously sought to secure Central Asian gas for the European market, now redirects its strategy to sell gas to Asia, including China. This shift reduces the potential for direct competition between the two countries. Moreover, Central Asia is not Russia's primary source of energy; most of the country's energy comes from Siberia and the Arctic, where China is investing in various projects that offer a higher potential return than projects in Central Asia (Skalamera 2018).

The analysis highlights a dynamic of rapprochement and complementarity between Russia and China in Central Asia, in which Moscow consolidates its influence through security centrality and historical and cultural ties, while Beijing advances primarily in the economic sphere, driven by investments and modernization initiatives. This implicit interdependence sustains a regional balance, but it does not entirely dispel uncertainty about whether the Sino-Russian relationship is fundamentally cooperative or competitive. To further explore this issue and fully understand the positioning of the Central Asian countries, it is necessary to address the second point of this section: Russia's growing dependence on China and the resulting alignment of mutual convenience, guided both by the containment of Western influence and the guarantee of stability in Central Asia under conditions favorable to both powers.

In this context, recent shifts in the international landscape, intensified after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have prompted a strategic realignment in Sino-Russian relations. In response to the war, the West drastically expanded sanctions against Russia, including blocking Russian banks from the SWIFT system, freezing international reserves, and imposing strict restrictions on the import of strategic resources such as oil and gas, as well as limiting access to sensitive technologies (Duggal and Panda 2024; Schott 2023; Timofeev 2022). These measures profoundly affected Russia's productive and technological capacities, forcing Moscow to seek alternatives to mitigate their impact. At the same time, China also faced coordinated Western restrictions. In the security sphere, the United States increased pressure through alliances such as QUAD and AUKUS to contain Beijing's military expansion (Casarini 2022; Huang and Sutter 2020; Zhao 2021). Economically, the West implemented tariffs and investment restrictions to reduce dependence on China's strategic supply chains—particularly in renewable energy, rare metals, and high-tech sectors—alongside targeted sanctions that blocked companies like Huawei from accessing advanced equipment and semiconductors (Ahmad 2021; Fang 2024; Hennessy 2023; Merino 2023).

Amid these international pressures and restrictions, Russia's need to offset the effects of sanctions converged with a closer alignment with Beijing. This deepening bilateral cooperation manifests across multiple sectors. In security, for instance, Russia has supplied advanced military systems—such as Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 missiles—and collaborated on the development of anti-ballistic missile defenses, conducting joint exercises in critical regions like the East China Sea, the Arctic, and areas near North America (Ahmad 2021; Bertrand and Liebermann 2024; Delaney 2024; Gorenburg et al. 2023). In energy, the intensification of bilateral trade has made China the largest destination for Russian oil and one of the main buyers of natural gas (Energy Institute 2024; Skalamera 2023). Moreover, Russia has become heavily dependent on China to meet its industrial and technological needs, particularly after Western sanctions restricted access to critical components. Beijing has emerged as one of the few available sources for semiconductors and essential industrial equipment (Bank of Russia 2023; International Trade

Centre 2025; Mulder 2023; Trudolyubov 2024).

This growing Russian dependence on China has not only led Moscow to enhance strategic coordination with Beijing in multilateral forums and regional initiatives but also resulted in increasing concessions to Chinese interests. However, these concessions are not merely a response to the growing power asymmetry between the two countries; they also reflect a strategic convergence aligned with Russia's interests in its disputes with the West. Moscow, which previously viewed initiatives like the BRI, the EAEU, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with suspicion, has come to accept their coordination as part of a new regional equilibrium in which China's economic presence has become unavoidable. This is partly because the stability of Central Asia—reinforced by China's presence—is essential for maintaining Russia's historical influence and for containing dynamics that could undermine its position in the region. At the same time, Beijing benefits from Russia's continued role as an interlocutor, facilitating the implementation of its BRI projects and reducing risks associated with separatist movements in Xinjiang. Furthermore, China's greater economic and strategic involvement serves a shared interest: limiting Western penetration in Central Asia and preventing U.S. and EU influence from gaining traction in the immediate vicinity of both countries (Ahmad 2021; Debone and Schutte 2020; Gan 2024; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk 2021; Lukin 2019; Lukin 2020; Meng-Fang, Na-Xi and Shan-Bing 2019; Skaricic 2023).

Thus, the growing Sino-Russian interdependence not only shapes global geopolitical dynamics but also redefines the role of Central Asia in the new Eurasian balance. Far from being passive recipients of this configuration, the Central Asian states have leveraged the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing and their tensions with the West to secure strategic concessions and reinforce their position as essential intermediaries. This new arrangement reaffirms Central Asia as a space of accommodation between Russian and Chinese interests. The retreat of U.S. presence and increasing Western pressures have created an environment in which Beijing expands its economic influence without openly challenging Russia's primacy in security and politics, while Moscow views these advances as a means to preserve its regional relevance. This dynamic equilibrium supports pragmatic cooperation, keeping potential disputes under control and consolidating a regional status quo based on a functional division of influence and the logic of a Sino-Russian condominium (Lass 2022).

The data reveal a complex web of interactions between the influence mechanisms of the two countries: Russia excels in security and the maintenance of historical and cultural ties, while China strengthens its presence through large-scale investments and infrastructure expansion. At first glance, this functional division might suggest competition; however, in practice, it demonstrates strategic coordination aimed at minimizing conflict and fostering mutual interdependence. Thus, Sino-Russian cooperation in the region is multifaceted and embedded within a context of global geopolitical realignments, where both countries seek to safeguard their interests amid Western pressures.

5. Conclusion

The analysis throughout this study shows that the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia is structured around a functional division of spheres of influence: Russia maintains its centrality in regional security, while China consolidates itself as the main economic investor. This arrangement emerged after 2014, when Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the annexation of Crimea and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan reshaped the regional balance of power. At the same time, the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative strengthened China's presence in infrastructure, energy, and trade sectors, allowing Beijing to expand its influence without directly challenging Russia's security primacy. Far from open antagonism, the actions of the two powers in Central Asia reflect a dynamic of strategic coordination, in which each reinforces its position through distinct means, minimizing conflict and avoiding an overt struggle for hegemony.

In the military sphere, Russia maintains a consolidated presence with bases in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, in addition to leading the CSTO. Moscow also leverages energy interdependence, remittances from Central Asian migrants, and financial integration promoted by the EEU as instruments of influence. China, while intensifying security cooperation with Central Asian countries through the provision of military equipment and joint exercises, adopts a more cautious approach so as not to directly challenge Russia's role as the primary guarantor of regional stability. China's role is more prominent in the economic realm: its investment model, combined with loans and the construction of strategic infrastructure, has made China the largest economic partner for most countries in the region.

Thus, the Sino-Russian rapprochement reveals a coexistence of influences in the region, where Moscow's projection of military, cultural, and political power combines with China's economic, industrial, and technological advances. In this scenario, Asian integration allows Russia to leverage China's growth to boost its own development and that of its neighbors, in a strategy aimed at regional stability that aligns with Beijing's interests. This partnership does not imply a conflict of interests but rather a shared management of the region, with both countries respecting and balancing their roles to ensure stability and avoid disputes. Moreover, this cooperation serves as a response to Western pressures, underscoring the strategic importance of Central Asia for both countries' geopolitical objectives. Consequently, China's growing influence complements and strengthens Russian interests, and this rapprochement is part of broader plans to challenge the West, reflecting Moscow's and Beijing's global ambitions and consolidating their joint and enduring influence in the region.

Despite the depth of this analysis, the study presents limitations primarily related to the inherent complexity of geopolitical interactions in a rapidly changing context. Variability in regional contexts and the dynamic nature of actor relationships hinder the generalization of results, indicating the need for more specific future investigations. Suggested research directions include analyzing the potential impact of changes in U.S. foreign policy following Donald Trump's return to the presidency and a possible ceasefire in Ukraine, which could provide new insights into the redefinition of strategic alliances and cooperation mechanisms between Russia and China.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia, examining China's growing economic presence and the reconfiguration of Russian influence in the region. Since 2014, Western sanctions and geopolitical tensions have led Moscow and Beijing to deepen their partnership. While China expands investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia maintains its central role in regional security and financial influence. The study argues that despite China's rise, Central Asia has become a space for strategic accommodation, where both powers avoid direct conflicts and consolidate their global presence.

KEYWORDS

Geopolitics, Russia, China, Central Asia

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