

## **Changing Dynamics of Great Power Relations in Central Asia: Prospects of Cooperation, Competition and Conflict**

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### **Abstract**

Geographical norms play a crucial role in state's behavior and various behavioral patterns are caused including cooperation, competition, and conflict. Central Asia, a region with immense resource potential and values, has triggered competition among the great powers after Soviet's dismemberment. This article assesses the evolving nature of 'troika' power interaction and clout in Central Asia, focusing primarily on Sino-Russian ties and their implications for the US in the theatre of Central Asia. This troika, as a novel prism for interpreting drivers in contemporary state-to-state interactions, demonstrates the dynamics of either cooperation or competition at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Within this triad, there are several "push-pull" factors that drive interactions in all domains, but the nature of interaction is determined by the country. This is a qualitative study which utilizes a neoclassical realist approach to argue that geographical, historical, and cultural factors along with Russia's military presence in the region as a 'security provider' favor Russia over China in the short run while Chinese are best positioned to extend their influence in the long run in Central Asia. The US, on the other hand, seems to be losing in this geopolitical theatre of Central Asia.

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## **Introduction**

Almost every geographical location, regardless of its size, has its own value in terms of structural and functional attributes. It offers both opportunities and challenges. These potentials or opportunities along with limitations conceived as values or assets by the individuals and states become highly desirable (Hefeznia, 2006). Central Asia, a region full of energy resources and at the crossroads of trading routes, after the Soviet's dismemberment and power vacuum in the region, has invited great-power competition (Karimi, 2014). The US, Russia and China are contending for influence (political, economic, and strategic) over Central Asia and its energy resources in what has been termed a 21<sup>st</sup> century "Great Game." Among the circumstances drawing these key global players to the Central Asian region are its location at the center of Eurasian landmass and its immense resources of energy. These energy resources, on the one hand, make the region one of the most significant and crucial parts of the world, while on the other hand they pose a threat to the security of the region, considering the competing and rival nature of major powers' interests engaged in Central Asian energy game. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Russian influence over the region was consistently declining throughout the 1990s, only to regain gradually, but the U.S. showed up and filled the vacuum created by the Soviets. Although China entered in this region quite late, it made phenomenal progress within short span of time. All these New Great Game players are driven in almost equal degree by both political and economic consideration (Cooley, 2021). Both Russia and China have followed "neo-mercantilist" strategies for realizing their objectives in Central Asia. Their neo-mercantilist energy strategies contribute to what is

mostly a competitive relationship among the major players of the New Great Game in Central Asia (Sahakyan, 2023). Although the possibility of evolving cooperation, norms, and institution aimed at promoting collective action is not negated by neo-mercantilist practices, they definitely erect alarming barriers. Competition for the energy resources of Central Asia is an undeniable fact which seems to get intense in the years to come. Future prospect of this competition is the balance of power with consistent changes, instability and struggle to seek control of the Central Asian energy resources (Pogacian, 2022).

The struggle for Central Asian energy resources has often been pronounced as “zero-sum” game. Central Asia is a region where all the major players are directly involved in the energy competition (except the US) and their interests are mostly in conflict with each other over there (Muhammadi, Iqbal, & Ali, 2023). Prospects for great power competition seem to be a long-term strategic rivalry as most of these conditions exist in the form of overlapping of great powers’ rival strategic and political interests, the inability of the region to address these conflicting interests and stay as independent as it can (Ziegler, 2014). The competition for the energy resources of Central Asia is an undeniable fact which appears to continue in the future with high intensity. Some gestures of cooperation among the major players have been shown in the past and still Russia and China are quite optimistic about their strategic cooperation over energy and Central Asia is a real test to check the limitations of this strategic partnership between them (Pogacian, 2022). Here we will first analyze different factors working behind the cooperation and competition among the major players of this ‘new great game.’ The next part will elaborate on the different aspects of Sino-Russian energy cooperation and

then explore the limitations and impacts of this strategic partnership for the West, particularly the US.

### **Realist Paradigm and Central Asia**

The interaction of great powers in the Central Asian region is dubbed as a “New Great Game,” reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century contest the then empires of Britain and Russia. This competition, though, is more about acquiring energy resources of the region than territorial expansion (Menon, 2003)(Kazantsev, 2013)(Cooley, 2012). To refer regional interactions as “Great Game” helps directing our focus to the competitive nature of great-power relations in Central Asia as “zero-sum” game (Ziegler, 2014). The nature of global order was primarily unipolar after the closure of Cold War, while the environment of Central Asia is multipolar where the Russia, China, and the US are competing for influence. On the contrary, a functional drive is emphasized for the troika powers and intra-regional cooperation by the Liberal Institutionalism in Central Asia. Liberalism contends that self-interest of the states (major powers) should provide them with incentives to forge cooperation not only with each other but also with regional states (CARs) on different fronts including production of energy, political stability, trade and commerce etc. Cooperation, indeed, can be witnessed in Central Asia in the shape of various regional organizations that are operating to address multiple issues faced by the regional states. But a sharp criticism is often levelled against the effectiveness and functionality of these multi-national entities especially by the realists that these entities are manipulated by the troika powers to serve their own interests (Collins, 2009).

### **Neoclassical Realist Paradigm**

To choose between neoclassical realism and neorealism, the later seems less preferable as it falls short of explaining individual state’s foreign

policy behaviors. While neoclassical realism looks well poised to evaluate great-power dynamics in the Central Asian region as it gives preference to structural elements as is the case with neorealism (Waltz, 1979). Yet it incorporates few domestic level variables which are considered imperative for foreign policy theory policy (Lobell, Ripsman, 2009)(Folker, 2009). It directs our focus to the significance of few domestic elements and how do they play under the conditions of global anarchy. It is assumed by neoclassical realists that uncertainties of global anarchy are responded by the states to seek control of, and shape the external environment (Rose, 1998). States always prefer to maximize rather to minimize their influence, regardless of their particular interests. Neoclassical realists support the inclusion of few domestic elements in the analysis of foreign policy, yet this approach is resistant to incorporate “bureaucratic model of decision-making” (Allison, 1971).

Geopolitical factors are also considered by neoclassical realists, including geographical proximity (Mouritzen, 2009). Even in this age of globalization, geographical proximity helps generating awareness regarding challenges and opportunities. The distance, on the other hand, leads primarily to increased complacency. Given the case of newly independent states like Central Asian republics, the former controlling power i.e. Russia in this particular case, maintains a greater interest in the region (Central Asia). States may start viewing the area as an integral part of their “neighborhood,” or crucial to their security objectives, threats originating from “non-state” actors are transforming this perception (Imam et al., 2023).

## **Prospects of Cooperation and Competition: Troika (US, Russia, and China) in Central Asia**

Globally, geostrategic transformations are occurring that these troika powers are forming, competing and taking benefits from. This troika, as a novel prism for interpreting drivers in contemporary state-to-state interactions, demonstrates the dynamics of either cooperation or competition at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Within this triad, there are several “push-pull” factors that drive interactions in all domains, but the nature of interaction is determined by the country. The axes of global security advanced by this troika is a geopolitical structure that is veritably one to “wait, watch and see” as it develops in a new international structure (Thornton, 2021). As the strategic alignments between these troika powers evolve and change in the face of changing circumstances, the increasingly intricate global interdependency would cause tensions among them. Consequently, these increased tensions increase the possibility for conflict, which would probably be in the periphery of troika powers than between the troika powers themselves (Mirza & Ayub, 2022).

The troika construct is explained through various means. For instance, Russia and China engage each other in a cooperative manner in the economic realm in Eurasian space through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), yet they compete in the political realm for influence across Eurasian continent. The US and Russia were expected to “reset” their bilateral ties under Trump administration as they forged cooperation on Syria which seems not to last long, military tensions, however, are on the high side as a result of the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the charges of Russian meddling in the US election. The Washington and Beijing

cooperate in the economic domain as it is in the interest of both countries to avoid trade war, yet recent tariffs placed by the US on Chinese products and the similar response from China besides the growing military tensions in South China Sea between them are stocking competition between the US and China (Cheriegate, 2020). All this is occurring in the face of massive spendings in the military budgets of all these countries.

Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, has been turning into a strategic hotspot because of the divergent nature of interests of troika power. Beijing is making enormous investments in its 21<sup>st</sup> century dream of BRI. It has geopolitical implications besides economic collaboration, especially between China and Russia. According to Mckinsey & Co., enormous economic resources and capital will be brought to the region in the coming years by BRI, which will eventually confer a political clout to Beijing in Central Asia. The projects under BRI, designed to serve Chinese benefits primarily, capitalize on the energy resources of Central Asia to sustain its economic development and enhance the engagement of China with Central Asia, an area Russia conceives to be its “privileged sphere of influence” (Cooley, 2016). China’s ambitions for Eurasia hence boil down to political risks for Russia. Consequently, the current high level of cooperation between them is interpreted as “a marriage of convenience” because of the harmony of interests in various domains.

The converging nature of Chinese and Russian interests brings them benefits, but this partnership is not fairly smooth and without challenges as they both competes with each other in some areas such as Central Asia (Pirro, 2015). The economic expansion schemes of China include constructing its own Greater Eurasia at the expense of Russia and with its cooperation. In terms of trading partner, China is the number one partner of Russia, while Russia is 14<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of China which reflects an asymmetry in their trade

relationship. China is the overwhelming winner in this relationship. On the geo-economic front, in Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, Russia feels threatened to be removed by Chinese. Thus, Russia is not very passionate to invest politically in SCO or China's BRI (Cooley, 2016). China tries to conciliate the unease of Russia by facilitating its economic interests and channeling its activities for ensuring security of Eurasia mainly through SCO.

Considering the Sino-Russian history, the ties of Russia and China remained rather conflicting than conciliatory, but today many regional and extra-regional factors help them converging their interests. For instance, low prices of energy coupled with Western sanctions against Russia have inflicted Russia with substantial economic woes and helped motivating Russia to sell its oil and gas to China, an energy-hungry market, for both economic and political reasons. In addition, the Sino-Russian economic engagement is a "win-win" scenario for both of them. Their economic engagement has somewhat helped them to be politically closer together, for instance on Syria, with China supporting Russian stance 6 times at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) etc. An agreement was signed between them to enhance cooperation in military domain. This is reflected in the remarks of Sergey Shoigu: "We highly appreciate a high level of Russian-Chinese contacts both at the state defense levels. This year we are going to hold more exercises and events than in the past years," and again expressed his thoughts that "here I would like to underscore that we will conduct both ground and naval exercises" (Shoigu, 2016).

For geopolitical reasons, both Russia and the US are in favor of the BRI, but for contrary purposes. Russia takes it as it might help reducing the US clout in Eurasia, while the US supports it to reduce Russian influence there. Paradoxically, for Beijing, it is a route diversification to reduce its dependence



on maritime route for its imports which is vulnerable to piracy and US attacks if the conflict erupts between the US and China. Thus, the heightened competition between the US and China has somewhat helped the Russia and China to forge increased cooperation between them. This reflects the “zero-sum” nature of energy politics among troika power in Central Asia. On the whole, the strength of Sino-Russian ties is closely linked with international dynamics. For instance, The US sanctions against Russia and the trade war between the US and China are the global dynamics which are adding to the strength of Sino-Russian ties.

Strategic alignment is, nonetheless, a key concern for the US as the relations of the U.S. and China are strained at a time when it seeks to better ties between the U.S. and Russia without sacrificing its bilateral cooperation with China (Cooley, 2019). For instance, the military base of Israel in Azerbaijan, located strategically on the northern border of Iran, is one significant case which can be taken as a Challenge by Beijing to its energy security. In spite of this, the ties of the US and China have come a long way since the initiation of their diplomatic relationship in 1972 and over more than 45 years they have tread a conciliatory path successfully. Yet the rise of China has reversed their relationship and made them as competitors on almost all fronts. President Trump, for example, openly expressed his intent for containment of China. The most recent imposition of tariffs by the US on Chinese products and the similar response from China hint deterioration of their trade ties and even go to the extent of trade war. Aggravating bilateral relations further, President Trump threatened to shift the policy of the US towards Taiwan.

Russia may perform a significant role. During the presidency of Obama, US-Russia ties went to their lowest ebb and Trump sought to repair ties with Russia in his campaign. The sympathies of President Trump were

seen with suspicion and consequently relations between Russia and the US further deteriorated over election meddling charges and conflict over Syria (Cooley, 2019). In short, Russia will compete with the interests of the US in a “zero-sum” way. However, this competition, coupled with its strategic relationship with Beijing, is liable to affect the attempts of the US to forge a substantially more collaborative relationship with Russia.

## **Conclusion**

Concluding this discussion, all three powers have plenty of areas to forge cooperation and equally so many fronts to compete on. The kind of collaboration between ‘triad’ is deeply instructive. Sino-Russian strategic partnership, indeed, represents a challenge for the alliance of the West, particularly the US, conceived to be distracted by challenges wrestling with. However, under specific circumstances where competition gets intense, the specific construct may give rise to conflict. As far as the possibility of ‘peaceful troika’ is concerned, its possible when balanced? However, power in troika is not symmetrical as it is found in different realms. Depending on the nature of the circumstances, military strength of the US may be deterministic or the political clout of Russia may be more effective. For instance, if its Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, military option as a solution is improbable so as Russia or China with its enormous economic strength may prevail as victorious. As it has been mentioned earlier, the consequences of this troika construct are to “wait, watch and see.”

Since the Soviet disintegration, Russia and China have adjusted their ties from being adversaries of Cold War to pragmatic partners with a shared objective of pushing back at the global system dominated by the West. Their relationship is neither very smooth nor free from challenges. Though it is tactical and opportunist, it is marked by highly compatible political, economic,

and security interests. Holding consensus over the multipolar view of the world, they both have shown desires to limit the influence of the West (the US). With a shared desire to change the center of world power from the Euro-Atlantic space to the East, they both desire to change some, if not all, of the rules of world governance, indicating that their relationship is going to be highly strategic. Sino-Russian relationship is yet very intricate, often shadowed by mistrust from both sides. In spite of voicing grand designs for cooperation from the leadership of both sides, achieving substantive outcomes mostly eludes them, especially in the Arctic and Far East of Russia. Consequently, two countries' bilateral ties have become increasingly personalized with Putin and Xi directing their government commissions, on-job officials, and state corporation's heads to evolve financial and trade contracts. The balancing scale of competition and cooperation is highly prominent in Central Asia. Russian and Chinese engagement in the theatre of Central Asia has tested their capabilities to manage their differences and translate the partnership's rhetoric into material gains.

For the US, this transformation in Sino-Russian relationship has grave implications for Western oil companies' competitiveness as Chinese NOCs gain market share in the energy industry of Russia and Central Asia. By working in Russian market, Chinese NOCs may get advanced technology in manufacturing, hydrocarbon exploration, drilling and weaponry. Yet this shift has some negative implications for Russians. In Sino-Russian bilateral relationship, China has upper hand because of its political and economic clout. This power is increasingly being exercised by China to its own benefit, but assurances are given to Russia by China to manage the concerns of Russia over the imbalance in their relationship, especially when Russia attempts to shore up its standing in the Asia-Pacific region. China, for instance, acknowledges

the need to manage the interests and sensitivities of Russia to make sure that its vision for the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”, which is solidifying the economic dominance of China in Central Asian region, will bring advantages to Russia as well. It offers undefined pledges to manage and coordinate “Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)” with BRI. However, this deference to Russia has led China to cede Eurasian security issues to Russia, although the growing concerns of China regarding Central Asian and Afghanistan’s instability have increased the interests of China to assume the role of a regional security provider – a move that could deteriorate or even end their strategic relationship over time. Thus far, their differences in the strategic partnership have successfully been managed by them in Central Asia, the Arctic and the Far East of Russia, but potentially rival interests still remain to be addressed. Some Russians have now quietly started expressing concerns about the growing geo-economic and geo-political ambitions of China in the region of Asia-Pacific and beyond.

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