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**GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN CENTRAL ASIA:  
THE PROBABILITY OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN  
RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE REGION**

by

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December 2020

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**GREAT POWER COMPETITION IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE PROBABILITY OF  
CONFRONTATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE REGION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

According to many researchers, the potential for conflict in the Central Asian region will increase in the future. The authoritarian regimes in this region, beset by chronic domestic problems, are confronted by a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. At the center of this dynamic situation are the great powers Russia and China.

Informed by these circumstances, this thesis employs the theories of neorealism and social constructivism to analyze the likelihood for Sino-Russian conflict in the Central Asian transfer region. These two theories provide contradictory approaches to explain international relations, which makes them especially useful for an accurate and thorough analysis. An examination of the shared experiences and domestic issues of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan shows how those issues shape the states' relationships to each other and individually with the great powers. The thesis also focuses on the roles of Russia and China in the region and the drivers shaping the foreign policy and behavior of these actors.

Past research on the region and on Russia and China has focused primarily on the economic and military areas. This work aims to supplement earlier work by broadening that focus and applying the aforementioned theories to answer the question: What is the probability of confrontation between Russia and China in Central Asia?

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>AIIB</b>	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CCP</b>	Chinese Communist Party
<b>CNPC</b>	China National Petroleum Corporation
<b>CSTO</b>	Collective Security Treaty Organization
<b>EAEU</b>	Eurasian Economic Union
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NDRC</b>	National Development and Reform Commission
<b>OBOR</b>	One Belt, One Road
<b>SCO</b>	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
<b>SOF</b>	Special Operations Forces
<b>SREB</b>	Silk Road Economic Belt
<b>SRF</b>	Silk Road Fund

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

The post-Soviet Central Asian region includes five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, also known as the so-called ‘Stans.’ In the context of its legal, political, cultural, and social development, the region represents a remarkable mixture of components. Characterized by colonial Russian rule and communist ideology in the past, these states proclaimed the establishment of democratic political systems after the fall of the Soviet Union. In reality, however, secular autocratic regimes have developed in the region. One factor contributing to that development is Islam as the predominant religion in the region. Consequently, different legal and social phenomena have developed throughout the area.

The region was the focus of world history during the so-called ‘Great Game’ between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire. At that time, it was primarily about colonial dominance in the region.<sup>1</sup> After almost 150 years, history is repeating itself in an expanded circle of foreign policy actors—in addition to the European Union, which has been acting rather cautiously in recent years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia, the United States, and China play important roles in the geopolitical struggle over that region.<sup>2</sup>

Although the entire region appears to be fairly homogeneous, the following differences among the individual countries should be noted. Concerning political development, the mentioned states have different degrees of authoritarianism, ranging from pseudo-Stalinist power structures in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to semi-dictatorial forms of government in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> Kyrgyzstan can be seen as an

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Blank, *Central Asia after 2014* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ajay Patnaik, “Central Asia: Between Stability and Instability,” *International Studies* 53, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2016): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881717746549>.

exception since its political system represents the most parliamentary approach in the Central Asian region, although its stability remains questionable.<sup>4</sup>

Zbigniew Brzezinski has described Eurasia as the future decisive geopolitical chessboard due to its massive population and geopolitical and economic importance.<sup>5</sup> In 1997, he referred to the Central Asian region as the “Eurasian Balkans” and thus equated the conflict potential of this region with the centuries-long ethnic conflicts and proxy wars of the great powers in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Even though the New Great Game has so far failed to materialize as forecast by Brzezinski, the region remains tense. According to many observers, the potential for conflict will increase in the future because the authoritarian regimes, beset by chronic problems, are being confronted by a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.<sup>7</sup> The great powers Russia and China are at the center of this dynamic situation.

The question about which strategy will be the most beneficial one for the two competitors over that region (China and Russia) is a theoretical one. Author H. Richard Yarger explains in his article “Towards a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykee and the Army War College Strategy Model” why the theory of strategy developed by Art Lykee is the appropriate concept to be applied to clearly articulate and objectively evaluate any strategy.<sup>8</sup> The balance of three factors—ends (objectives), ways (concepts), and means (resources)—through the development of a strategy serves to minimize risk.<sup>9</sup> “Risk explains the gap between what is to be achieved and the concepts and resources available

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<sup>4</sup> Alekseï Vsevolodovich Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence Russia in Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 125–26; Patnaik, “Central Asia,” 179.

<sup>5</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “A Geostrategy for Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*. 76, no. 5 (September 1, 1997): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Helmut Schmidt and Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998): 123, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149289>.

<sup>7</sup> Blank, *Central Asia after 2014*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Harry R. Yarger, “Toward a Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model,” *Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College*, no. 2 (June 2006): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Yarger, 6.

to achieve the objective.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the finding of a balance among ends, ways, and means is necessary to define a valid strategy and the risks involved in it.<sup>11</sup> The remaining question is about which strategy the competitors will pursue and if that choice could lead to conflict between Russia and China over the Central Asian region.

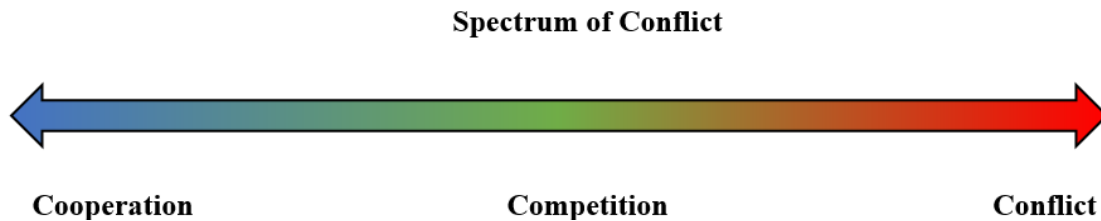


Figure 1. Spectrum of Conflict

China is one of today’s most economically important players and is preparing to further expand this influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. In his 2017 journal article “Movement on the Silk Road. China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders,” author Sebastian Schiek points out: “Russia, the former regional hegemon, is still strongly linked to the region economically, culturally and also in terms of security policy.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Russia’s acute economic recession in 2014 and 2015 lessened Russia’s importance for the Central Asian region. Schiek argues further that the United States was also an important player in the region, especially in the 1990s, but that after 2001 it saw Central Asia mainly in the context of stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> The partial end of the NATO mission in Afghanistan has also reduced U.S. involvement in this region. Additionally,

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<sup>10</sup> Yarger, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Yarger, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Sebastian Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [German Institute for International and Security Affairs], 2017), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Schiek, 10.

during the current administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, no specific Central Asia policy has emerged.<sup>14</sup>

Taking a closer look at the Russian perspective, observers note a change in Russia's overall behavior toward Central Asia and in the importance of the region for Russia. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian leadership shifted away from its non-confrontational foreign policy toward the West, marking a completely new phase for Russian foreign policy. With its approach in Ukraine as well as in Syria, Russia made clear that it is ready to act as an active designer in the international order and to thereby pursue its interests—even while accepting its break with the West.<sup>15</sup>

## **B. RESEARCH QUESTION**

According to many observers, the potential for conflict in the Central Asian region will increase in the future. Aggravating, chronic problems of authoritarian regimes are exacerbated by a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. The great powers Russia and China are the decisive actors in the region.

Against this background, the thesis analyzes the Sino-Russian conflict potential in the Central Asian transit region based on the theories of neorealism and social constructivism. These two theories provide quite contradictory approaches to explain international relations, which makes them especially worthy to consider. Additionally, the main focus of past research on this specific region and the two actors Russia and China has been confined to the economic and military fields. This work tries to close this identified gap by using the aforementioned theories in order to answer the question:

What is the probability of confrontation between Russia and China in Central Asia?

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<sup>14</sup> Schiek, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Volker Perthes, "'Krisenlandschaften.' Konfliktkonstellationen und Problemkomplexe internationaler Politik. Ausblick 2017" ['Crisis landscapes.' Conflict constellations and problem complexes of international politics. Outlook 2017], ed. Volker Perthes, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit*, 1, January 2017, 31–34.

## **C. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH**

To answer the research question and to be able to predict the potential for cooperation or confrontation between Russian and China in the Central Asian region, this thesis consists of six chapters.

The framework employed focuses on the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) as a case study. The framework provided by the two theories of international relations (neorealism and social constructivism) is applied to the case study in order to explain the anticipated foreign policy behavior of Russia and China in relation to the Central Asian region.

The literature review provided in Chapter II offers an overview of the two aforementioned theories of international relations that are applied in this research: neorealism and social constructivism. Those theories and their main authors are compared and critiqued.

The regional case study that follows in Chapter III aims to provide insights into the Central Asian region, its problems, challenges, and its possible potential for (non-) cooperative behavior between Russia and China. Since there is no comprehensive definition of Central Asia, this work focuses on the so-called “Stans”: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Chapter IV focuses on the actors’ (Russia and China) perception of Central Asia. Starting with China’s rise in Central Asia, the thesis evaluates the role and history of this actor. The next section of Chapter IV assesses the Belt and Road Initiative and the resulting influence of China on the region, followed by conclusions about these factors. The second actor, Russia, and its role in Central Asia form the second block that builds the other half of Chapter IV. A closer look at Russia’s foreign policy in context to the region and the conclusions drawn from that examination close that chapter and provide a bridge to Chapter V.

The overall potential for confrontation in the Central Asian region between Russia and China is evaluated in Chapter V. By separating the issue into short- and long-term perspectives, to the thesis aims to generate as complete an insight as possible on the topic.

Finally, Chapter VI provides the analysis and conclusions derived from this research. Furthermore, the final chapter offers recommendations on different approaches the West may pursue to address the issue and suggests possibilities for future research on the topic.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. NEOREALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Neorealist theory in the conceptualization of Kenneth Waltz uses central assumptions to explain the foreign policy behavior of states. The linchpin of neorealist theory is the classical realism assumption that the international political system is shaped by the principle of anarchy, defined as the absence of a higher authority with a monopoly on violence in the national sense.<sup>16</sup> The conceptual development of Waltz compared to classic realistic theories is that he is not trying to explain the foreign policy behavior of states against the background of domestic politics or individual characteristics of policymakers; rather, his view is exclusively based on the anarchic nature and the material structure of the international system.<sup>17</sup> This approach forms the conceptual framework of neorealism, which is enriched with further considerations:

1.) The central interest of states is their survival, which they seek to achieve through rational action based on economic considerations.<sup>18</sup>

2.) The anarchic structure of the international political system, in which states remain permanently fixed in distrusting one another, makes a functional differentiation between the system units common at the national level impossible.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, the international political system is a self-supporting arrangement shaped by the states. It is characterized by a functional homogeneity because each state strives to ensure its survival, namely ensuring internal order and defense against national threats.<sup>20</sup> According to Waltz,

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993): 59–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097>.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 39.

<sup>18</sup> Waltz, 90–91.

<sup>19</sup> Waltz, 93, 113.

<sup>20</sup> Waltz, 102–11.

the key to power distribution lies in internal capabilities (economic capabilities, military strength, strategies) and external (alliances) balancing.<sup>21</sup>

3.) Since all states are functionally equal and have the same interests, namely survival, the only factor determining their distinctness is their power potential, which leads to certain power distributions in the international political system.<sup>22</sup> These power relations can be determined by the resources that are available for a state: “Their rank depends on how they score on all of the following items: the size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability, and competence.”<sup>23</sup> States pursue power politics by counteracting power imbalances that have emerged in the international system in order to create and maintain a stable balance of power. Pursuing these balances of power happens out of pure self-interest because states are existentially threatened by a hegemonic state.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that only state actors play a central role in this theory and that neorealism has a very pessimistic world view. The essence of neorealism is the fundamental safeguarding of one’s own security (preservation of the state and its geographical integrity), which means that means of power are constantly compared and power imbalances, for example in the form of alliances, are prevented.

Waltz and his statements are subject to much criticism. For example, one can criticize the fact that his view does not account for the influence of domestic politics, and thus, essential dynamic developments are not covered by the theory.<sup>25</sup> The fact that according to Waltz’s theory the preferences of states are fixed is another point of

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<sup>21</sup> Waltz, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Waltz, 118–23.

<sup>23</sup> Waltz, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Waltz, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Jack S. Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg, Theodore K. Rabb, and Robert. Gilpin, Studies in Interdisciplinary History (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 79.

criticism.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the author David A. Lake states that Waltz did not implement enough assumptions to fully validate the theory.<sup>27</sup>

## **B. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

There are several theories in the field of international relations that try to explain the emergence and change of states' foreign policy. At the same time, it must be pointed out that there is still no mature theory on the concept of foreign policy change, but different theories compete for the explanatory power of their approaches. The trend since the late 1980s and early 1990s concerning the analysis of states' foreign and security policies has increasingly shifted away from purely materialistic and rationalistic explanatory approaches to theories that take into account additional explanatory factors.<sup>28</sup> This shift was triggered by criticism of the theoretical and methodological instruments of mainstream political science theories—in particular, neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism—which had not predicted the sudden end of the Cold War and the rapid collapse of the bipolar world order.<sup>29</sup> Political scientists working through a social constructivist approach, in particular, criticized the fact that foreign policy and foreign policy change cannot be properly understood through rigid adherence to rationalistic and materialistic premises, the analytical exclusion of the inner life of states and state leadership, and the insistence on the application of a positivist methodology of science.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the salience of issues that are not clearly grounded in rationalist or material considerations and the role of states (or their leaders) may be more decisive factors in explaining the foreign policy behavior of states.

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560130>.

<sup>27</sup> David Lake, "Why 'Isms' Are Evil: Theory, Epistemology, and Academic Sects as Impediments to Understanding and Progress," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2011): 469, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00661.x>.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons, *Handbook of International Relations* (London, SAGE Publications, 2013), 114–15, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446247587>.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations, 67 (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 34–36.

In the historiography of the academic field of international relations, there has of course been a search for an all explaining, unified theory. Yet, social constructivism, like neorealism, cannot be viewed as a unified theory because many different approaches are subsumed under it.<sup>31</sup> The theory admits that a material world exists and that material structures have a causal effect on the behavior of states.<sup>32</sup> Concerning the emergence and change of national interests, preferences, and foreign policy action orientations, in contrast to neorealist theories, social constructivist approaches emphasize the meaning and the influence of social structures composed of collectively shared ideas, norms, and identities.<sup>33</sup> As Thomas Risse and Antje Wiener point out that “collective identities are not simply any type of ideas, but those ideas which define social groups and how they distinguish themselves from one another.”<sup>34</sup> The concept of identity plays a central role in many social constructivist works.<sup>35</sup> This concept originally stemmed from the academic field of social psychology, but then was adopted by social constructivists who applied it to foreign and security policy issues.

Social constructivist approaches postulate that state interests and foreign policy action orientations are created based on the identity of a state, more precisely, the political leadership of a state.<sup>36</sup> Author Alexander Wendt has observed, “Identities refer to who or what actors are. They designate social kinds or states of being. Interests refer to what actors want. They designate motivations that help explain behavior.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Risse and Antje Wiener, “‘Something Rotten’ and the Social Construction of Social Constructivism: A Comment on Comments,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 6, no. 5 (January 1999): 776, <https://doi.org/10.1080/135017699343379>.

<sup>32</sup> Risse and Wiener, 778–79.

<sup>33</sup> Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” 401.

<sup>34</sup> Risse and Wiener, “‘Something Rotten’ and the Social Construction of Social Constructivism,” 779.

<sup>35</sup> Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It,” 392.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein, New Directions in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33–75.

<sup>37</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 231.

In his 1994 article “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” he elaborated on this argument by ascribing two identities to state actors, namely corporate and social identity. Corporate identity means the intrinsic, self-organizing quality of a state, which defines its individuality. For governmental organizations, this includes the individuals living in a specific geographic territory, the physically available resources, and the collectively shared values that cause the individuals on a territory to function as a unit. According to Wendt, such corporate identities have four goals: 1) physical safety; 2) ontological security or predictability considering relationships with the outside world; 3) recognition as actors by others; 4) developments to live better lives for individuals.<sup>38</sup> These four goals generate a state’s motivation to act. How states implement these goals, however, depends on how they define themselves in relation to other actors, which is a function of social identity.<sup>39</sup> Wendt describes it as the meaning that a state ascribes to itself and other actors. It is made up of social and cognitive structures of expectation and allows state actors to position themselves in situations or to take on certain roles.<sup>40</sup>

Identity change, and thus, also foreign policy change can take place on both levels: If, for example, the physical security environment of a state changes, this can also affect social identity by the state perceiving new enemies and threats, and one’s own position and role in relation to those enemies or threats is redefined and restructured. On the other hand, changes in social identity can also influence corporate identity, for example, by substituting previously existing patterns of perception regarding the international political environment or role assignments to certain political actors with new perception patterns and role assignments, which in turn changes the corporate identity.<sup>41</sup>

For social constructivists, the collective identities of states or state leadership, the national interests defined and pursued based on these identities, and the foreign policy

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<sup>38</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 385, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711>.

<sup>39</sup> Wendt, 385.

<sup>40</sup> Wendt, 386.

<sup>41</sup> Wendt, 388–91.

action orientations represent three mutually influencing and mutually dependent components of a political unit. Author Peter Katzenstein has written: “Definitions of identity that distinguish between self and other imply definitions of threat and interest that have strong effects on national security policies.”<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, social constructivist approaches interpret significant changes in the foreign policy orientation of a state as a simultaneous change in the collective identity of state leadership and the interests, preferences, and actions based on it.<sup>43</sup> Risse and Wiener have noted: “We do not yet have good propositions about the conditions under which actors perceive external events as ‘critical’ for their collective identities. Identifying critical junctures and making more specific claims about their characteristic impact on politics is thus one issue on the future constructivist research agenda that provides an interesting challenge for further debates on the middle ground.”<sup>44</sup> In my opinion, a holistic approach to that subject is necessary in order to identify the possible factors that have the potential of critical influence on a nation-state and its actors.

Finally, with regard to the explanatory content of social constructivism on the subject of foreign policy, the theory provides a variety of starting points on the theoretical level, to understand and explain foreign policy. At the same time, however, specific hypotheses on this topic hardly exist or have yet to be developed. One reason among others is that social constructivists prefer an open and questioning approach on political science topics and are skeptical about a hypothetical and deductive approach.<sup>45</sup> This lack of available hypotheses can be seen as a weak point of social constructivism; however, that does not diminish the explanatory content of this approach.

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<sup>42</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein, *New Directions in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 18–19.

<sup>43</sup> Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Risse and Wiener, “‘Something Rotten’ and the Social Construction of Social Constructivism,” 780.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, “Beware of Gurus: Structure and Action in International Relations,” *Review of International Studies* 17, no. 4 (1991): 407–10.

In summary, the central question in neorealism is: What are the causes of conflicts between nations and what are the necessary conditions for cooperation and peace between states? One of neorealism's assumptions is that the basic unit in the international system is the nation-state as a rational, autonomous, goal oriented, and uniform actor. Additionally, the insecurity of international anarchy, which describes the absence of a superordinate authority, leads to security as the fundamental interest of states, which contributes to their interest in keeping a favorable position of power that, as a consequence, ensures their survival.

Social constructivist approaches analyze the political impact of shared ideas, values, and norms. They claim that shared attributions—social constructions—provide meaning to social facts and thus develop political effects. Social constructivism is often referred to as a metatheory—a theory about theories—which differs fundamentally from the rational theories of realism. Thus, the social constructivist approach implies that the way in which the world and international relations are shaped depends on the interpretations of human action and interaction, as well as their different ties.

By examining economic data, policy behavior, historic and social ties, the following chapter provides an analysis of the region as well as the different regional actors and their motivations. In addition to this, the neorealist and social constructivist perspectives are applied to the findings in order to provide an answer to the thesis research question.

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### III. REGIONAL CASE STUDY: POTENTIAL REGION OF COMPETITION—EURASIAN BALKANS

#### A. THE EURASIAN BALKANS

The five former Soviet republics combine a growing, multi-ethnic population of 67 million people (see Figure 2). The region is the most landlocked in the world and rich in oil reserves (especially in Kazakhstan) and gas reserves (especially in Turkmenistan) (see Tables 1 and 2). The two smallest, mountainous republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the most underdeveloped and resource-poor countries of the “Stans.”



Figure 2. Ethnic Groups in Central Asia<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> “BBC News in Depth: Guide to Central Asia,” accessed October 9, 2020, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/guides/456900/456938/html/nn2page1.stm>.

Table 1. World Oil Reserves (Thousand million tonnes)<sup>47</sup>

Rank	Country	Reserve	Share of total (in %)
1.	Venezuela	48.0	17.5
2.	Saudi Arabia	40.9	17.2
3.	Canada	27.1	10,0
4.	Iran	21.4	9.0
5.	Iraq	19.9	8.5
6.	Russian Federation	14.6	6.1
12.	Kazakhstan	3.9	1.7
13.	China	3.5	1.5

Table 2. Natural Gas Reserves (Trillion cubic feet)<sup>48</sup>

Rank	Country	Reserve	Share in %
1.	Russia	1375.0	19.8
2.	Iran	1127.7	16.2
3.	Qatar	872.1	12.5
4.	Turkmenistan	688.1	9.9
5.	US	419.8	6.0
7.	China	214.4	3.1
27.	Kazakhstan	35.0	0.5

The countries of Central Asia are regularly in the last third in democratic-related country rankings. In the Freedom House Index, all five countries rank among the lowest with regard to political rights and civil liberties.<sup>49</sup> Despite recent progress, all these countries remain in the bottom third of the world’s most corrupt countries.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, there is a warning for all states but Kazakhstan in the Fragile States Index (see Table 3).

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<sup>47</sup> British Petroleum Company, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, 68th ed. (London: BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2019), 14, <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/business-sites/en/global/corporate/pdfs/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2019-full-report.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> British Petroleum Company, 30.

<sup>49</sup> “Countries and Territories,” Freedom House, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>.

<sup>50</sup> *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019* (Berlin: Transparency International, 2020), [https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019\\_CPI\\_Report\\_EN\\_200331\\_141425.pdf](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_CPI_Report_EN_200331_141425.pdf).

Table 3. Fragile States Index<sup>51</sup>

Country	Year	Rank	Total	C1: Security Apparatus	C2: Fractionalized Elites	C3: Group Grievance	E1: Economy	E2: Economic Inequality	E3: Human Flight and Brain Drain	P1: State Legitimacy	P2: Public Services	P3: Human Rights	S1: Demographic Pressures	S2: Refugees and IDPs	X1: External Intervention	Change from Previous Year
Kazakhstan	2020	117th	59.8	4.3	7.6	8.2	5.3	3.3	3.9	8.5	3.1	6.4	3.6	2.3	3.3	-1.8
Uzbekistan	2020	74th	73.1	6.5	8.8	6.3	5.5	5.9	5.2	9.4	4.1	7.6	4.8	4.7	4.3	-2.6
Tajikistan	2020	66th	75.5	6.0	8.4	6.5	6.4	4.2	5.7	9.0	4.9	8.3	7.0	3.8	5.2	-2.2
Kyrgyz Republic	2020	73rd	73.9	6.5	8.0	8.4	6.1	5.0	6.7	6.8	4.3	6.6	5.0	4.4	6.1	-2.3
Turkmenistan	2020	90th	69.1	5.4	7.8	5.7	5.0	6.1	4.8	9.7	4.7	8.6	4.9	3.2	3.2	-2.3

Despite these conditions, authoritarian regimes have managed to ensure relative political and social stability in the past. Nonetheless, these factors seem to be increasingly in danger. Security risks such as international terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and illegal migration are responsible for this fragility.<sup>52</sup> However, domestic political and socio-economic problems and the lack of interest of the political elites in promoting a regional integration process are even more serious than the aforementioned security risks.<sup>53</sup>

## B. CHRONIC PROBLEMS: THE “STANS”

The countries of Central Asia share a number of common socio-economic problems, albeit to different degrees. Poverty, lack of jobs, and low income have forced a large part of the working population to take jobs in Russia. In 2019, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were number four and five, respectively, of the most reverse transfer-dependent countries in the world.<sup>54</sup> In 2012, up to a third (and probably more considering numbers not tracked by the statistics) of the working population of Kyrgyzstan was

<sup>51</sup> *Fragile States Index - Annual Report 2020* (Washington, DC: The Fund For Peace, 2020), 50–51, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/2020/05/08/fragile-states-index-2020-annual-report/>.

<sup>52</sup> Bulat Sultanow, “Stabilität in Zentralasien - Ein pessimistischer Blick auf Kasachstan” [Stability in Central Asia - A Pessimistic View of Kazakhstan], *Zentralasienanalysen [Central Asia Analysis]*, no. 97 (January 29, 2016): 2.

<sup>53</sup> Sultanow, 2–5.

<sup>54</sup> Dilip Ratha et al., “Data Release: Remittances to Low- and Middle-Income Countries on Track to Reach \$551 Billion in 2019 and \$597 Billion by 2021,” *People Move* (blog), October 16, 2019, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/data-release-remittances-low-and-middle-income-countries-track-reach-551-billion-2019>.

employed in Russia.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the growth figures in Central Asia have been among the highest in the world in the past two decades. As a result of the stagnation of the Russian economy in 2015 and the devaluation of the national currencies in the second half of 2015, a decline in the living standards of the vast majority of the population was observed. Consequently, the growth models reached their limits. Further, the remittances of migrant workers in Tajikistan decreased by a factor of three.<sup>56</sup> In parallel, an increase in the prices of essential goods could be observed in almost all of the “Stans.”

As a result, dissatisfaction among the population has increased in these countries. In Kazakhstan—the model student among the Stans—the willingness of citizens to actively participate in protests was evident among only 18.8% of the population, but that was before the devaluation of the national currency. In a survey carried out in 2015 the factors of unemployment, low wages, pensions, social benefits, rising prices, etc., were mentioned as conceivable reasons for protests.<sup>57</sup> Exacerbating this dissatisfaction is the fact that the governments of these Central Asian countries have only carried out selective reforms rather than meaningful changes to improve people’s lives. A holistic strategy considering reforms would be necessary, but there is a lack of both endogenous and exogenous impulses to undertake such an effort.<sup>58</sup> As a result, all states have experienced impoverishment of the population and increasing polarization of society without any promising and coordinated countermeasures by the leadership.

Therefore, the risk that radical Islamists may take advantage of the situation cannot be neglected. In fact, the risk posed by rising radical Islamic organizations is fueled, on the

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<sup>55</sup> Anna Di Bartolomeo, Shushanik Makaryan, and Agnieszka Weinar, *Regional Migration Report: Russia and Central Asia* (Florence, Italy: Migration Policy Center, European University Institute, 2014), 30.

<sup>56</sup> Sultanow, “Stabilität in Zentralasien - Ein pessimistischer Blick auf Kasachstan” [Stability in Central Asia - A Pessimistic View of Kazakhstan], 4.

<sup>57</sup> Sultanow, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Sebastian Schiek, Franziska Smolnik, and Kirsten Westphal, “‘Krisenlandschaften.’ Konfliktkonstellationen und Problemkomplexe internationaler Politik. Ausblick 2017 [‘Crisis landscapes.’ Conflict Constellations and Problem Complexes of International Politics. Outlook 2017],” ed. Volker Perthes, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit*, 1, January 2017, 35.

one hand, by the circumstances of a poorly developed civil society and the lack of secular opposition, and on the other hand, by the growth of poverty, corruption, and clan structures.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Central Asia is currently not to be considered as a breeding ground of Jihadism. Concerning attacks within their country borders, international terrorism statistics show that Central Asia ranks far behind other world regions, including Russia and countries in the European zone, in this regard (see Figures 3 and 4). Regional experts have discussed at length the issue of how serious warnings of the power and security elites in Central Asia must be taken regarding internal and external Islamist threats, such as the potential for Jihad to spill over from Afghanistan.<sup>60</sup> Separate from the different views on that subject is the consideration of certain risks raised by the possible return of an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 emigrants to Syria and Iraq.

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<sup>59</sup> Sultanow, “Stabilitaet in Zentralasien - Ein pessimistischer Blick auf Kasachstan [Stability in Central Asia - A Pessimistic View of Kazakhstan],” 4.

<sup>60</sup> Blank, *Central Asia after 2014*, 16–17, 28.

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE
1	Afghanistan	9.603	↑ 1	28	United Kingdom	5.405	↔	56	Sweden	3.45	↓ 5
2	Iraq	9.241	↓ 1	29	Ethiopia	5.345	↓ 3	57	Algeria	3.409	↓ 3
3	Nigeria	8.597	↔	30	Saudi Arabia	5.238	↓ 1	58	Bolivia	3.387	↑ 80
4	Syria	8.006	↔	31	Bangladesh	5.208	↓ 6	59	Spain	3.354	↓ 9
5	Pakistan	7.889	↔	32	Palestine	5.177	↓ 1	60	Tanzania	3.272	↑ 1
6	Somalia	7.8	↑ 1	33	Burundi	5.102	↓ 1	61	Bahrain	3.201	↓ 8
7	India	7.518	↑ 1	34	Nepal	5.093	↓ 1	62	Paraguay	3.119	↓ 3
8	Yemen	7.259	↔	35	Indonesia	5.07	↑ 7	63	Italy	3.109	↑ 6
9	Philippines	7.137	↑ 1	36	France	5.008	↓ 6	64	Jordan	3.091	↓ 4
10	Democratic Republic of the Congo	7.039	↑ 1	37	Russia	4.9	↓ 3	65	Nicaragua	2.952	↑ 36
11	Egypt	6.794	↓ 2	38	Chad	4.762	↔	66	Rwanda	2.948	↑ 10
12	Libya	6.766	↑ 1	39	Iran	4.717	↑ 5	67	Peru	2.84	↓ 1
13	Mali	6.653	↑ 9	40	Israel	4.525	↑ 1	68	Zimbabwe	2.834	↑ 18
14	Central African Republic	6.622	↑ 1	41	South Africa	4.511	↑ 5	69	Ireland	2.692	↓ 4
15	Cameron	6.62	↑ 1	42	China	4.465	↓ 6	70	Republic of the Congo	2.687	↓ 9
16	Turkey	6.533	↓ 4	43	Lebanon	4.395	↓ 8	71	Australia	2.645	↓ 3
17	South Sudan	6.316	↓ 3	44	Germany	4.254	↓ 5	72	Cote d' Ivoire	2.598	↓ 9
18	Thailand	6.029	↓ 1	45	Greece	4.167	↔	73	Brazil	2.53	↑ 17
19	Colombia	5.912	↑ 8	46	Chile	4.123	↑ 12	74	Malaysia	2.495	↓ 4
20	Sudan	5.807	↓ 2	47	Venezuela	4.101	↑ 8	75	Kuwait	2.487	↓ 11
21	Kenya	5.756	↓ 2	48	Mexico	4.08	↑ 8	76	Ecuador	2.455	↑ 12
22	United States of America	5.691	↓ 2	49	Uganda	3.957	↑ 3	77	Netherlands	2.347	↑ 1
23	Niger	5.596	↔	50	Tajikistan	3.947	↑ 24	78	Japan	2.291	↑ 11
24	Ukraine	5.547	↓ 3	51	Tunisia	3.938	↓ 4	79	Kosovo	2.255	↓ 8
25	Mozambique	5.542	↑ 15	52	Angola	3.784	↓ 9	80	Haiti	2.18	↑ 1
26	Myanmar	5.512	↓ 2	53	Belgium	3.636	↓ 5	81	Finland	2.026	↓ 8
27	Burkina Faso	5.418	↑ 10	54	Canada	3.591	↑ 3	82	Madagascar	1.957	↓ 10
				55	Sri Lanka	3.569	↓ 6				

Figure 3. Global Terrorism Index 2019<sup>61</sup>

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	RANK CHANGE
83	Argentina	1.68	↑ 1	110	Cyprus	0.42	↑ 18	138	Costa Rica	0	↓ 32
84	Austria	1.655	↓ 5	110	Albania	0.42	↑ 13	138	Slovenia	0	↓ 32
85	Kazakhstan	1.566	↓ 10	112	Bulgaria	0.372	↑ 1	138	Togo	0	↓ 30
86	Ghana	1.559	↑ 36	113	Djibouti	0.32	↓ 10	138	Mauritania	0	↔
87	Kyrgyz Republic	1.467	↓ 7	114	Zambia	0.305	↓ 10	138	Portugal	0	↔
88	Bosnia and Herzegovina	1.388	↑ 3	115	Macedonia (FYR)	0.301	↓ 9	138	Croatia	0	↓ 1
89	Papua New Guinea	1.364	↓ 12	116	South Korea	0.296	↓ 2	138	El Salvador	0	↔
90	Georgia	1.335	↓ 1	117	Latvia	0.229	↓ 10	138	eSwatini	0	↔
91	Guatemala	1.331	↑ 29	118	Switzerland	0.191	↑ 6	138	Mongolia	0	↔
92	Morocco	1.215	↑ 40	119	Hungary	0.181	↓ 9	138	Romania	0	↔
93	Senegal	1.186	↑ 3	120	Dominican Republic	0.177	↑ 11	138	Benin	0	↔
94	Armenia	1.173	↓ 11	121	Uruguay	0.172	↓ 10	138	Equatorial Guinea	0	↔
95	Laos	1.033	↓ 10	122	New Zealand	0.143	↓ 8	138	Cambodia	0	↑ 3
96	Taiwan	1.008	↑ 3	123	Estonia	0.115	↓ 7	138	Botswana	0	↔
97	Montenegro	0.999	↑ 35	123	Moldova	0.115	↓ 7	138	Namibia	0	↔
97	Vietnam	0.999	↑ 7	123	Serbia	0.115	↓ 7	138	Cuba	0	↔
99	Honduras	0.992	↓ 18	126	Liberia	0.105	↓ 7	138	Turkmenistan	0	↔
100	Guinea	0.971	↑ 12	127	Lesotho	0.095	↓ 6	138	Mauritius	0	↔
101	Denmark	0.957	↓ 1	128	Norway	0.076	↓ 5	138	Timor-Leste	0	↔
102	Czech Republic	0.866	↓ 15	129	Slovakia	0.057	↓ 3	138	Singapore	0	↔
103	Azerbaijan	0.698	↓ 5	130	United Arab Emirates	0.048	↓ 3	138	Eritrea	0	↔
104	Malawi	0.663	↑ 3	131	Panama	0.038	↓ 3	138	North Korea	0	↔
105	Gabon	0.551	↓ 12	131	Guyana	0.038	↓ 3	138	The Gambia	0	↔
106	Poland	0.477	↓ 4	133	Qatar	0.029	↓ 3	138	Oman	0	↔
107	Jamaica	0.472	↓ 13	133	Iceland	0.029	↓ 3	138	Guinea-Bissau	0	↔
108	Sierra Leone	0.458	↓ 13	135	Trinidad and Tobago	0.019	↓ 10	138	Belarus	0	↔
108	Lithuania	0.458	↑ 30	135	Uzbekistan	0.019	↓ 3				
				137	Bhutan	0.01	↓ 2				

Figure 4. Global Terrorism Index 2019 (Continued)<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019), 8, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, 9.

### C. REGIONAL (NON-)COOPERATION

Despite their historical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic-religious similarities and the aforementioned series of common socio-economic problems, the Stans have repeatedly failed in all their approaches to create regional cooperation or even integration. In the past, Kazakhstan, in particular, has created initiatives to advance such efforts, but it lacked the necessary support from leaders of the other Central Asian countries.<sup>63</sup> This may be seen as evidence that, despite the states' many similarities, the realization of bilateral or multilateral cooperation is difficult due to the diverse actors' more significant differences.

A number of unresolved issues are a serious problem among the countries in the region, and contribute to negative effects on their relations. One of the many problems is ongoing disputes about unresolved border issues.<sup>64</sup> These disputes have resulted in serious incidents. In total, there were 78 clashes and conflicts between 2012 and 2015 along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border.<sup>65</sup> Of all the Central Asian republics, only Turkmenistan has its entire national border approved through agreements with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The border disputes to date, especially among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, remain unresolved. To make matters worse, it is precisely these three states' borders that meet in the Ferghana Valley in which all three of them happen to have exclaves on the territory of their neighbors (see Figure 5).<sup>66</sup> Yet, there may be a positive side in the fact that connecting exclaves could provide solutions for other problematic issues, such as access to water resources or important transport routes.

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<sup>63</sup> Sultanow, "Stabilitaet in Zentralasien - Ein pessimistischer Blick auf Kasachstan [Stability in Central Asia - A Pessimistic View of Kazakhstan]," 4.

<sup>64</sup> Stéphane Lefebvre and Roger N. McDermott, "Russia and the Intelligence Services of Central Asia," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 21, no. 2 (February 13, 2008): 256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850600701648678>.

<sup>65</sup> Sultanow, "Stabilitaet in Zentralasien - Ein pessimistischer Blick auf Kasachstan [Stability in Central Asia - A Pessimistic View of Kazakhstan]," 5.

<sup>66</sup> Raichan Taschemchanowa and Dschanar Medeubajewa, "Ein Ende der 'Kaltzeit'? Positive Tendenzen in den Beziehungen zwischen den Staaten Zentralasiens [An End of the 'Cold Period'? Positive Trends in Relations between Central Asian States]," *Zentralasienanalysen [Central Asia Analysis]*, no. 115 (July 28, 2017): 2.

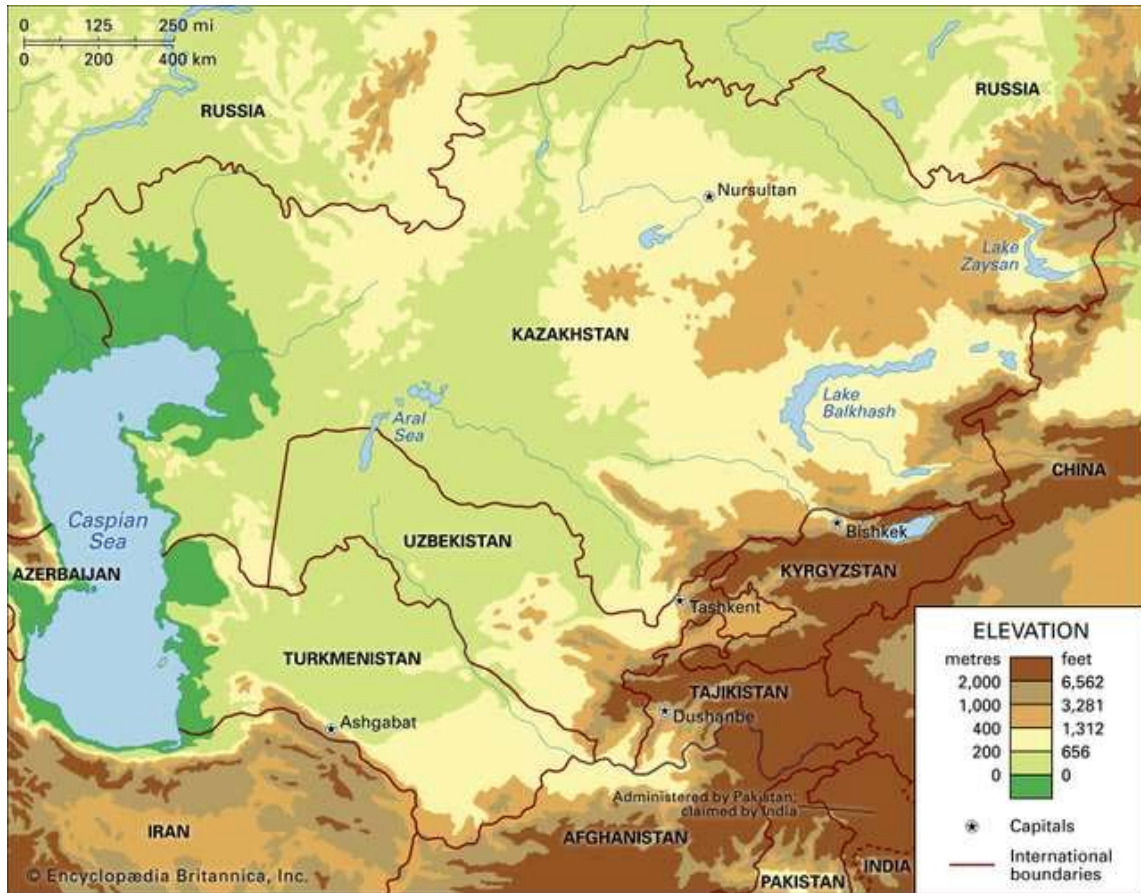


Figure 5. Central Asia<sup>67</sup>

There have already been several conflicts between the energy-rich countries at the lower reaches of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—on the one side and the energy-dependent, water-rich countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on the other side. For example, in the winter of 2000, Uzbekistan stopped delivering gas to Kyrgyzstan while the Kyrgyz side drained water from the Toktogul Reservoir to generate electricity. At the same time, that water was not needed to

<sup>67</sup> “Central Asia,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Central-Asia>.

irrigate the Uzbek cotton fields and caused floods.<sup>68</sup> In response, Uzbekistan massed troops at the border and the conflict almost escalated.

At the economic level, the political elites in these states lack the will to cooperate. The reason can be found in the different investment opportunities in the countries and the lack of effort to find solutions for mutual benefit in the areas of energy, use of water resources, transportation of goods, development of transportation infrastructure, and agricultural production.

All the aforementioned tendencies seem to favor the neorealist approach. Despite a shared history and cultural ties, the individual states strive for power and their survival seems to be the main focus of the different nation-states as unitary actors.

According to many observers, however, there has been some warming in their diplomatic relations in recent years, as evidenced by the significant increase in diplomatic activity at the regional level.<sup>69</sup> Observers also see the course of the new Uzbek President Schavkat Mirziyoyev, who followed former president Islam Karimov in September 2016, as a signal that relations with neighboring countries are now a priority in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. As a consequence, the course of recent negotiations on delimitation and demarcation of the disputed borders is a positive development considering the relations of Central Asian countries.

To see the reason for this development solely as the taking over of power by the new Uzbek president may be too narrow an approach. There were signs of a political climate change in Central Asia even before Karimov's death in 2016. During a visit to Astana in November 2014, the former Uzbek president's statements revealed that the global political events at the time had contributed to this warming.<sup>70</sup> Time will tell to what extent it is a long-term and irreversible warming of the intergovernmental climate in

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<sup>68</sup> Taschtemchanowa and Medeubajewa, "Ein Ende der 'Kaltzeit'? Positive Tendenzen in den Beziehungen zwischen den Staaten Zentralasiens [An End of the 'Cold Period'? Positive Trends in Relations between Central Asian States]," 2.

<sup>69</sup> Taschtemchanowa and Medeubajewa, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Taschtemchanowa and Medeubajewa, 4.

Central Asia or if it is just a short-term thaw.<sup>71</sup> A look at the cause of this development, however, shows how closely the region's socio-economic problems are tied to global geopolitical changes.

From a social constructivist perspective, the warming in relations between the different actors can be explained by their shared identity, cultural ties, and common history. Especially the role of a shared identity contributes to that fact by creating a community that builds a contrast to other actors. As a consequence, altruistic and rational behavior is promoted, which contributes to a stable foundation of cooperation between actors.

#### **D. INTERIM CONCLUSION / ANALYSIS**

Low oil prices, falling government revenues, a weakening economy, and Russia's crises have increased socio-economic problems in the Central Asian countries studied, and likely will have long-term consequences. The state leaders have so far not been able to offer adequate solutions to problems such as rising living costs, decreasing incomes, and falling social transfers, significantly increasing the potential for regional instability. A lack of regional cooperation and the resulting unresolved water and border conflicts exacerbate the increasingly unstable situation. At the same time, the risk of instability evolving into interstate conflicts at any time (even if there has been a relaxation in recent years) has grown. One reason for this can be found in the shifting of the geopolitical landscape, which is examined in the next chapter.

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<sup>71</sup> Taschtemchanowa and Medeubajewa, 5.

#### IV. A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE—THE ACTORS’ PERCEPTION OF THE REGION

In the past, the Central Asian region has repeatedly been at the center of geopolitical disputes. The political and diplomatic struggle between Russia and the British Empire for supremacy in Central Asia in the 19th century entered history books as the “Great Game.”<sup>72</sup> In the 18th century, Russia conquered large parts of the Kazakh steppe, and then in the second half of the 19th century, it acquired Central Asia, which was called Turkestan because, except for the Tajiks, most people there spoke a Turkic language. The British Empire tried to limit Tsarist Russian expansion into Central Asia but, in fact, managed to do so only in Afghanistan.<sup>73</sup> For the impoverished Central Asian countries, today’s Great Power Competition in Central Asia, particularly between China and Russia, offers an opportunity to strengthen their own negotiating positions in various fields. Of course, the idea of a “New Great Game” or imperial ambitions of Russia in Central Asia may be exaggerated. From a Waltzian neorealist perspective, this observation is plausible due to the fact that the different actors prefer to improve their capabilities and pursue a stable balance of power, rather than getting involved in conflicts with highly uncertain outcomes.

Since the end of the Cold War, an awareness has emerged in international relations that a “New Great Game” was beginning to develop in Central Asia; only this time it is played by new actors.<sup>74</sup> The main players in this new game are the United States, Russia, and China, with India, Iran, Turkey, and the European Union joining as additional players.

In recent years, the increasingly dynamic developments in international relations are showing an impact in Central Asia. Comprehensive changes can be observed, particularly concerning the region’s external main actors. Russia’s foreign policy has undergone a fundamental, more assertive change in the course of the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in operations in the information environment aiming to achieve global strategic political goals and to influence

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<sup>72</sup> Kathleen A. Collins and William C. Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying ‘Great Game’ Expectations,” ed. Richard J. Ellings, *Strategic Asia 2003–04* (2003): 293.

<sup>73</sup> Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules : The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, 1–5.

<sup>74</sup> Cooley, 5.

the decision making of other governments.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, China's President Xi Jinping has launched a global project with his vision of a new Silk Road. Currently, the United States is practicing increasing isolationism and showing a decrease of will in taking international responsibility, though that may change again in the future.

The neorealist theory provides an explanation for these foreign policy shifts of different actors towards Central Asian countries through changes in power dynamics. In neorealism, the structure of the system forces nation-states to strive for maximization of their power, and therefore, the everlasting struggle for more power leads to the aforementioned shifts in foreign policy behavior. In the context of these developments, China's and Russia's interests—with a focus on the Central Asian region—are examined in more detail in the following sections.

## **A. CHINA**

The Central Asian region is of major importance to China and the countries in this region share a long history of economic and cultural exchange with China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the most part considers positive and friendly relationships to its neighboring countries as a high priority. Additionally, securing energy supplies, strong economic interests, and security policy are shaping the Chinese approach to the region.

### **1. China's Ascension in the Region**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the countries studied in this research have experienced the expansion of Chinese influence in the Central Asian region. The Central Asian countries, however, have played only a minor role in Beijing's foreign policy strategy. Actual Chinese policy on Central Asia falls into the category of local area policies, which in turn rank second in China's main foreign policy position—after relations with the great powers.<sup>76</sup> China's desire to reshape the regional order by using its influence is evidence for the strategic

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<sup>75</sup> Tim Maurer, *Cyber Mercenaries : The State, Hackers, and Power* (Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2018), 60–61.

<sup>76</sup> Weiqing Song, *China's Approach to Central Asia: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4.

importance that this region has in the Chinese foreign policy.<sup>77</sup> These facts correspond with the neorealist terms this work discussed in Chapter II. Therefore, following that theory, in a cosmos of uncertainty and fear about the risk of becoming too dependent on other actors, China focuses on economic factors in order to maximize its gains.

In terms of energy supplies, China is now the dominant business partner for the Stans (see Tables 4 and 5). In fact, China has expanded to become the main customer of oil and gas purchases from Central Asian countries since the 2000s. As a result of its steadily growing energy needs, China has had to rely on oil imports since 1993 and has been dependent on gas imports from 2006 onwards (see Figure 6).<sup>78</sup> Estimates are that by 2022, two-thirds of the country's oil needs will have to be met by imports,<sup>79</sup> likely deepening Beijing's interests in the region.

Table 4. Foreign Trade Volume of China and Russia with Central Asian Countries<sup>80</sup>

**Table 3. Russia's Foreign Trade with Central Asian Countries, millions of dollars**

Countries	2008			2010			2012			2015		
	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance
Kazakhstan	13,301	6,371	6,930	10,690	4,449	6,241	14,892	9,409	5,483	10,451	4,657	5,794
Kyrgyzstan	1,311	492	819	975	393	582	1,634	196	1,438	1,269	71	1,198
Tajikistan	794	210	584	673	214	459	679	68	611	747	51	696
Turkmenistan	809	100	709	718	148	570	1,211	184	1,027	902	73	829
Uzbekistan	2,067	1,298	769	1,664	1,514	150	2,325	1,391	934	2,161	587	1,573
Region's total	18,282	8,471	9,811	14,720	6,718	8,002	20,741	11,248	9,493	15,530	5,439	10,090

**Table 2. China's Foreign Trade with Central Asian Countries, millions of dollars**

Countries	2008			2010			2012			2015		
	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance	Exports	Imports	Balance
Kazakhstan	9,825	7,728	2,097	9,320	11,109	-1,789	11,001	14,676	-3,675	8,427	5,840	2,587
Kyrgyzstan	9,212	121	9,091	4,128	72	4,056	5,074	89	4,986	4,285	57	4,228
Tajikistan	1,479	20	1,459	1,377	56	1,321	1,748	109	1,639	1,797	50	1,747
Turkmenistan	802	28	774	524	1,005	-481	1,699	8,673	-6,974	817	7,828	-7,011
Uzbekistan	1,278	329	949	1,181	1,301	-120	1,783	1,092	691	2,236	1,266	970
Region's total	22,596	8,226	14,370	16,530	13,543	2,987	21,305	24,639	-3,334	17,562	15,041	2,521

<sup>77</sup> Baohui Zhang, "Chinese Foreign Policy in Transition: Trends and Implications," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261003900202>.

<sup>78</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China's "Belt and Road" Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia's Borders*, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Karen Smith Stegen and Julia Kuszniir, "Outcomes and Strategies in the 'New Great Game': China and the Caspian States Emerge as Winners," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.03.002>.

<sup>80</sup> Source: A. A. Kazancev, *Perspektivy Sotrudnichestva Rossii i Kitaja v Central'noj Azii (Prospects for Russian-Chinese Cooperation in Central Asia)*, *Rabočaja Tetrad'* (Working Paper), No.28/2016 (Moscow: RIAC (Russian International Affairs Council), 2016), 17, 21.

Table 5. Main Export and Import Partners of Central Asian Countries, Russia, and China<sup>81</sup>

Country	Main Export Partners	Main Import Partners
KAZ	Italy 17.9% China 11.9 Netherlands 9.8	Russia 38.9% China 16.1 Germany 5.1%
KYR	Switzerland 59.1% Uzbekistan 9.4% Kazakhstan 5.1%	China 32.6% Russia 24.8% Kazakhstan 16.4%
TAJ	Turkey 27.5% China 17.7% Russia 13.4%	Russia 38% Kazakhstan 19% China 8.7%
TUR	China 83.7% Turkey 5.1%	Turkey 24.2% Algeria 14.4% Germany 9.8%
UZB	Switzerland 38.7% China 15.5% Russia 10.7%	China 23.7% Russia 22.5% Kazakhstan 10.7%
RUS	China 10.9% Netherlands 10.0% Germany 7.1%	China 21.2% Germany 10.7% U.S. 5.6%
CHN	US 19.2% Hong Kong 12.2% Japan 5.9%	South Korea 9.7% Japan 8.6% U.S. 7.3%

<sup>81</sup>*The World Factbook 2019* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2019), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/download/download-2019/index.html>.

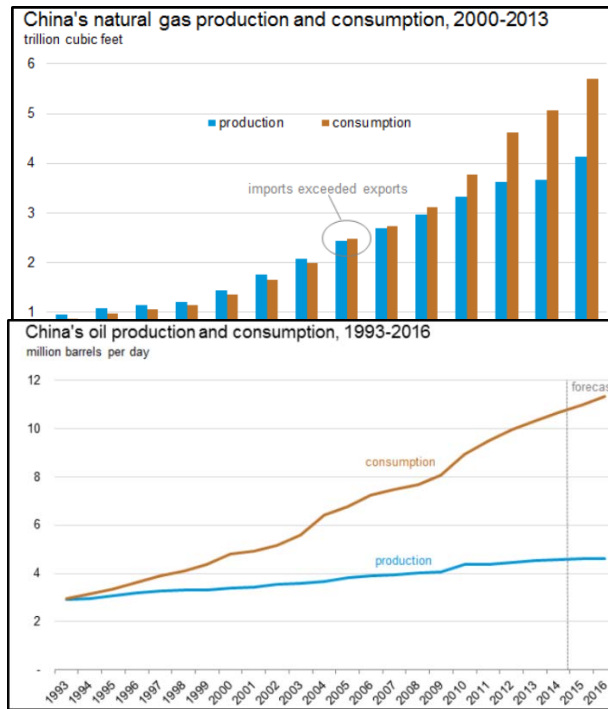


Figure 6. Development of Energy Demand in China<sup>82</sup>

The revenues from oil and gas exports from the region are extremely relevant for the Central Asian countries. For example, Kazakhstan is the main oil supplier for China in Central Asia, and Uzbekistan profits substantially from its gas deliveries to China. From a Chinese perspective, the majority of these exports do not have a vast impact on the country's overall energy mix. An exception is China's gas imports from Turkmenistan, which cover a significant part of its need for this resource (see Table 6). According to experts, the amount of China's gas imports from Turkmenistan may eventually go up in the future; however, these experts are also questioning Turkmenistan's capability to provide the resource at a stable rate.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> *China International Energy Data and Analysis* (Washington, DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2015), 8, 16, [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/China/archive/pdf/china\\_2015.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/China/archive/pdf/china_2015.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Simon Pirani, "Central Asian Gas: Prospects for the 2020s" (Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, December 2019), 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.26889/9781784671525>.

Table 6. Natural Gas: Trade Movements 2018 by Pipeline<sup>84</sup>

Natural gas: Trade movements 2018 by pipeline																									
Billion cubic metres																									
To	Canada	Mexico	US	Bolivia	Other S. & Cent. America	Netherlands	Norway	Other Europe	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Russian Federation	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Iran	Qatar	Other Middle East	Algeria	Libya	Other Africa	Indonesia	Myanmar	Other Asia Pacific	Total imports		
Canada	-	-	21.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21.9	
Mexico	-	-	45.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	45.8	
US	77.2	0.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	77.3	
<b>North America</b>	<b>77.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>67.6</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>145.0</b>	
Argentina	-	-	-	5.7	0.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.9	
Brazil	-	-	-	7.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.6	
Other S. & Cent. America	-	-	-	-	0.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.4	
<b>S. &amp; Cent. America</b>	-	-	-	<b>13.4</b>	<b>0.6</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>14.0</b>	
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	7.0	5.0	7.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19.9	
France	-	-	-	-	-	5.3	19.6	3.0	-	8.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	36.8	
Germany	-	-	-	-	-	15.8	24.7	4.9	-	55.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100.8	
Italy	-	-	-	-	-	1.1	2.3	6.8	-	25.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	56.2	
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	-	-	20.7	7.5	-	7.4	-	-	-	-	-	16.3	4.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	35.6	
Spain	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.6	1.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20.2	
Turkey	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.2	22.8	-	-	-	7.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37.6	
Ukraine	-	-	-	-	-	0.2	-	9.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9.8	
United Kingdom	-	-	-	-	-	2.7	32.6	3.2	-	4.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42.8	
Other EU	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.8	32.6	-	67.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	107.9	
Rest of Europe	-	-	-	-	-	0.3	†	6.6	2.0	2.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11.5	
<b>Europe</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>32.5</b>	<b>114.3</b>	<b>83.1</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>193.8</b>	-	-	-	<b>7.6</b>	-	-	<b>34.2</b>	<b>4.3</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>478.9</b>	
Belarus	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19.0	
Kazakhstan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.2	-	2.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.6	
Russian Federation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	19.9	-	5.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	25.2	
Other CIS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.3	5.9	0.1	-	0.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.7	
<b>CIS</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>20.1</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>7.7</b>	-	<b>0.5</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>57.5</b>	
United Arab Emirates	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.2	
Other Middle East	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	†	-	1.9	-	-	4.1	2.0	0.1	-	-	0.1	-	-	-	-	8.3	
<b>Middle East</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	†	-	<b>1.9</b>	-	-	<b>4.1</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	-	-	<b>0.1</b>	-	-	-	-	<b>26.6</b>	
South Africa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.9	
Other Africa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.7	-	0.8	-	-	-	-	5.5	
<b>Africa</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>4.7</b>	<b>0.8</b>	-	-	-	-	-	<b>9.4</b>	
Australia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.9	5.9	
China	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.4	33.3	6.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.9	-	47.9	
Malaysia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.6	-	0.6	
Singapore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.0	-	8.8	
Thailand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.8	-	7.8	
<b>Asia Pacific</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>5.4</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>6.3</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>7.6</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>74.0</b>
<b>Total exports</b>	<b>77.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>67.6</b>	<b>13.4</b>	<b>0.6</b>	<b>32.5</b>	<b>114.3</b>	<b>83.1</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>25.6</b>	<b>223.0</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>14.0</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>38.9</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>10.7</b>	-	<b>805.4</b>	

Trade between China and the Central Asian region is far from being balanced. About 85% of Chinese imports from Central Asia are unprocessed products such as energy resources and metals. By contrast, the rate of China’s exports to the region is 85% for processed products and consumer goods. For a long time, much of the trade was run through Kyrgyzstan, from which the goods imported from China were resold.<sup>85</sup>

When it comes to investments in Central Asia, China has closed the gap with Russia. This is especially visible in Kazakhstan’s energy sector. All of the 22 Chinese corporations operating in the energy sector are involved in the Kazakh oil business, while

<sup>84</sup> British Petroleum Company, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, 41.

<sup>85</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders*, 15.

at the same time ten of the companies in Kazakhstan are 100% Chinese owned. As a result, about 40% of the Kazakh oil industry is controlled by Chinese companies.<sup>86</sup>

In addition to diverse economic relations with the individual Central Asian countries, China has two prosperous regional undertakings. The first one being the 1,139 mile long China-Central Asia gas pipeline, which is primarily intended to transport gas from Turkmenistan to China (see Figure 7). The project was made possible through cooperation between China's national oil company China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and companies in the countries through which the pipeline runs. Nevertheless, this cooperation was accomplished not through an overall negotiated approach, but individual agreements between China and the relevant countries.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Smith Stegen and Kuszniir, "Outcomes and Strategies in the 'New Great Game': China and the Caspian States Emerge as Winners," 101.

<sup>87</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China's "Belt and Road" Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia's Borders*, 16.



Figure 7. Transit Network in Central Asia<sup>88</sup>

The second significant regional project is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), originated by China in 2001. Author Sebastian Schiek points out the specific value of this organization: “It is important because it succeeded in establishing a stable multilateral forum in the field of non-traditional security through its choice of suitable bespoke topics and appropriate organizational form.”<sup>89</sup> This was the first time that China was able to test and consolidate a Chinese leadership role in the region while involving Russia in the process at the same time. Nevertheless, the project cannot be considered a complete success. By proposing to set up an SCO free trade area, China attempted to build

<sup>88</sup> James Kynge and Jack Farchy, “Map: Connecting Central Asia,” May 9, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/ee5cf40a-15e5-11e6-9d98-00386a18e39d>.

<sup>89</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders*, 17.

up the economic component with the aim to stabilize and to improve relations among the Central Asian states. Even though opposition to this idea is not as strong as in the past, it has been rejected by these states several times.<sup>90</sup> From a neorealist perspective, the Stans should tend towards a Chinese alignment over a Russian one since it forecasts a more positive effect on their power. But it seems that this is not happening. The possible explanation here can be provided through the lens of social constructivism theory. The social ties between China and Central Asian countries are not as strong as those between the Stans and Russia. Their shared history with Russia as former members of the Soviet Union still has a strong impact, which results in a shared cultural and social identity. Therefore, despite the fact the Stans will probably not be able to maximize their power through a partnership with Russia, these countries seem to see such a partnership as a more attractive option while they try to keep China at arm's length.

Opinions about China's role differ between the residents and political leaders of the respective Central Asian countries. Both Sinophile and Sinophobic tendencies can be observed among the inhabitants. With the expansion of its economic engagement, China has tried to increase its legitimacy in the region. Nevertheless, sections of the population in this region are still suspicious of China,<sup>91</sup> resulting in a negative posture toward Beijing in the last years. For China, the success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is highly dependent on the stability of Central Asian countries and a positive perception of China among the people of these countries. Different reasons are to be found for those factors. First, the positive mutual economic effects of the BRI for the Central Asian countries still have to be proven and are publicly questioned by high ranking Central Asian politicians. Second, there is a high level of distrust concerning the reasons for China's increasing military involvement in the various Central Asian countries. Some officials are concerned that China may use its military to secure local natural resources. Finally, the recent developments in the Xinjiang region (home to ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks) and the Chinese treatment of the local Uyghur population have triggered massive

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<sup>90</sup> Schiek, 17.

<sup>91</sup> Schiek, 17.

protests in certain Central Asian countries.<sup>92</sup> Thus, again arguments of social constructivism can explain the likelihood of the BRI succeeding since due to the ethnic diversity of the region, there is strong evidence of a shared identity with the Uyghurs (see Figure 2). Despite this potential stumbling block, Chinese involvement is largely welcome among the political elites in Central Asia.<sup>93</sup>

## **2. The Belt and Road Initiative and China's Influence**

China's rise in Central Asia is to be seen in the context of one of the most important pillars of Chinese foreign policy—the Silk Road Initiative or BRI, also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR). Under this slogan, new rail routes, pipelines, power lines, telecommunication networks, container terminals, and complete ports are created not only in China's neighboring countries but also in more distant regions like Africa and Europe. The BRI consists of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which is China's land connection to the Eurasian continent, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which includes the sea route to the coasts of South Asia, Africa, and Europe. The vast network is formed by various international economic corridors, each with a range of several thousand kilometers (see Figure 8). The BRI is supported financially by, among others, the Chinese-controlled Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund (SRF), and major Chinese state banks.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part One: Chinese and Regional Perspectives on Security in Central Asia," *Jamestown*, China Brief, 20, no. 12 (July 15, 2020): 33.

<sup>93</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia-pub-53035>.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Clarke, "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?," *Asia Policy*, no. 24 (2017): 71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26403204>.

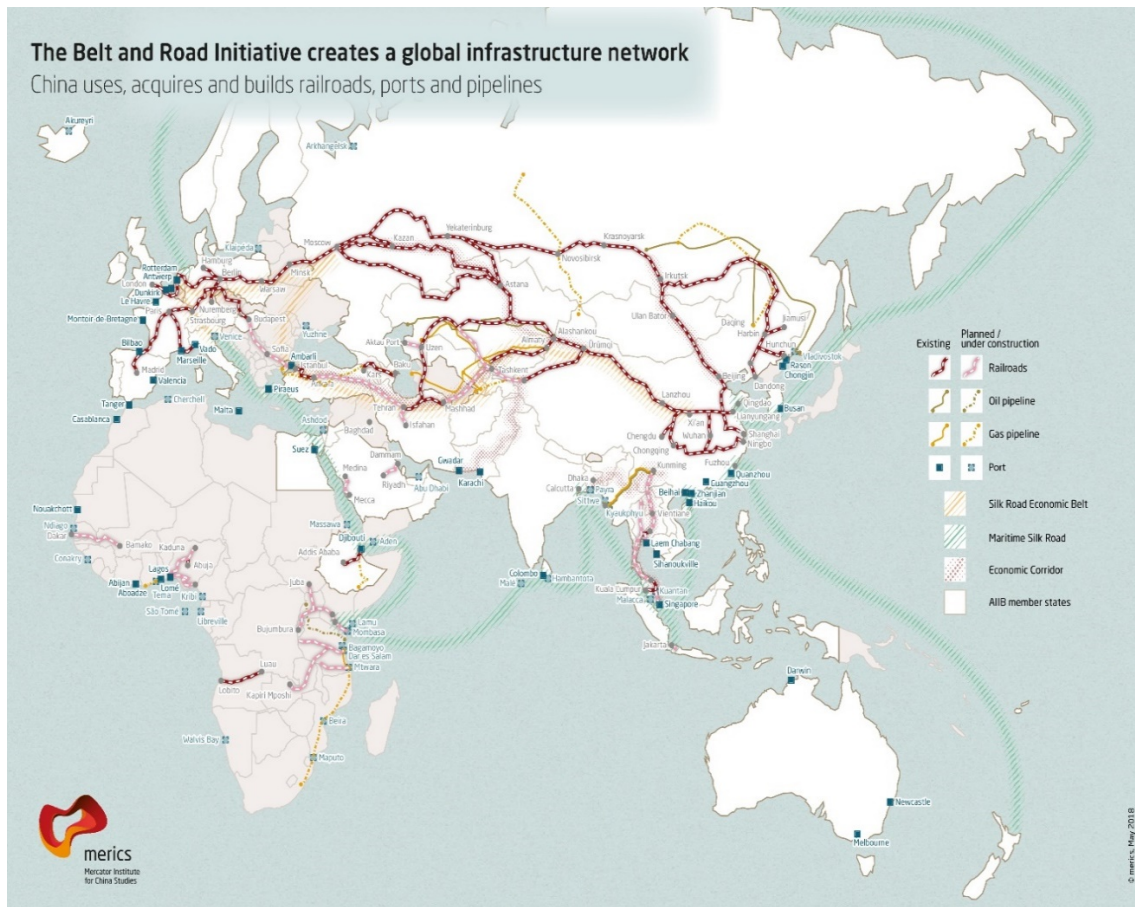


Figure 8. Belt and Road Initiative<sup>95</sup>

In the meantime, the BRI has been assigned more than a thousand projects, and BRI projects worth billions are also underway in Central Asia. In May 2015, Kazakh President Nazarbayev announced the \$ 2.7 billion expansion of the rail line from Korgas on the Chinese border to the port city of Aktau on the Caspian Sea (see Figure 9).

<sup>95</sup> Mercator Institute for China Studies, “Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative: This Is Where We Stand,” June 7, 2018, <https://merics.org/en/analysis/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand>.

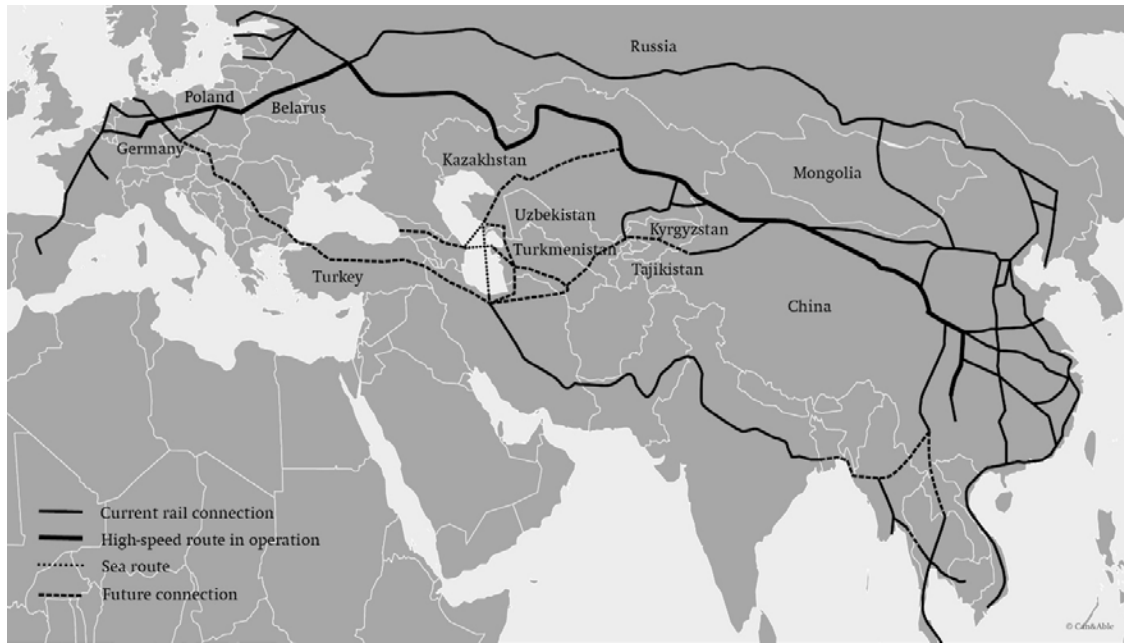


Figure 9. Current and Future High-Speed Connections between China and Europe<sup>96</sup>

China’s motivation behind the initiative is of realist origin. From a neorealist point of view, this behavior is consequent since without acting China’s influence and power would inevitably decrease over time. An economic growth cycle in China that came to an end in 2008 was based on high investments from abroad, cheap labor, and the migration of workforce to the production facilities in the coastal region, resulting in a boom of the export industry. Massive export surpluses led to the accumulation of high foreign exchange reserves. The declining global demand for Chinese products, overcapacity, as well as rising wages slowed the cycle. The first answer to that challenge had been to reinforce the development of the provinces and regions in the west end of the country, which previously had not been profiting from the economic boom. This “Go West” policy was followed by the next logical step: crossing the border. The central element of this strategy is the investment of foreign exchange reserves to open up new regions and foreign markets.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders*, 16.

<sup>97</sup> Clarke, “The Belt and Road Initiative,” 73, 78–79.

Additionally, China pursues domestic and geopolitical goals. Currently, a subject of discussion abroad is the question about to what degree and with how much firmness the country is trying to implement these goals through the BRI. China is trying to allay criticism and skepticism in this regard, stressing that the BRI is not a fully prepared strategy, agenda, or program, but rather an honest offer for cooperation. At the China Development Forum in March 2015, Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui stated:

China is a participant, constructor, and contributor of the current international order and system. The One Belt One Road initiative is an economic cooperation proposal, it is not a tool of geopolitics. [...] It is not directed against any specific country or organization, but as a useful complement to the existing international and regional institutions.<sup>98</sup>

The main argument of critics of the BRI is that the project creates an asymmetrical economic dependence in which Chinese investors can exploit the financial needs of the beneficiary countries. This is particularly evident in cases in which China has granted credit to countries whose repayment can by no means be seen as certain. Should the project not deliver the expected outcomes, it may have severe consequences for the whole region.<sup>99</sup> In such cases, China could rely on compensation by access to raw materials or by pushing for political support in international organizations. Additionally, some observers see a gradual change in Chinese security policy and a gradual departure from its traditional non-interference doctrine.<sup>100</sup> For example, the government in Islamabad has been urged to deploy the army to protect the facilities and employees of BRI projects. In Central Asia, too, mechanisms of Chinese influence can currently be observed.<sup>101</sup> No specific conditions for lending and investments have been agreed upon. Nevertheless, the Chinese National

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<sup>98</sup> Patrick Hébrard, *Challenges to Freedom of the Seas and Maritime Rivalry in Asia*, ed. Policy Department Directorate-General For External Policies (European Parliament Think Tank, 2017), 12, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578014/EXPO\\_IDA\(2017\)578014\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578014/EXPO_IDA(2017)578014_EN.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Hillman, “Statement Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: ‘China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later’” (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2018), 10, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/resrep22612>.

<sup>100</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China’s Overseas Interests* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014), 57–58, [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19183](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19183).

<sup>101</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders*, 22–23.

Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) notes, for example, that it would be advisable for the actors in the region to follow along the lines of an economic opening strategy.<sup>102</sup> Good intergovernmental cooperation, including political confidence-building, is also considered necessary if the Silk Road initiative is to be considered a success.<sup>103</sup>

### **3. Interim Conclusions / Analysis**

With its BRI, China has launched a mammoth project whose success can only be assessed in the future. With their geographical location in the SREB, the Central Asian countries are the direct target group of this initiative and therefore of Chinese foreign policy interest, not only because of their neighborhood location. Yet, the importance of Central Asia for the BRI should not be overstated due to the design of this initiative. A look at the map shows that the Central Asian countries have no key role in the BRI. On the contrary, the economic corridors between West China and Pakistan (CPEC), or East China–Mongolia–Russia, appear to be more promising for a variety of reasons: the number of actors involved is lower, the political and bureaucratic framework conditions are more favorable, and the prospective sales market is more profitable. Additionally, the aforementioned social constructivist arguments support the view that the Stans seem to be more comfortable with Russia than with China.

Thus, against this background, Chinese interest in the Central Asian region appears fueled by two drivers, raw material deposits and security policy. China hopes that its “Go West” strategy will stabilize its troubled border provinces like Xinjiang, among other things. Following this logic, the BRI is also suitable to bring stability to the Central Asian countries. Chinese soft mechanisms of influence in the form of demands for economic opening, intergovernmental cooperation, and institutional reforms point in this direction. It is currently difficult to predict whether these interests will be seen as important enough by the Chinese leadership to be pursued by hard mechanisms of influence, if necessary. Any

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<sup>102</sup> Schiek, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Schiek, 19.

form of such influence will necessarily draw the hegemon of this region, Russia, in on the plan.

## **B. RUSSIA**

The relationship between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian countries is largely shaped by history. If Belarus and Ukraine are on the Russian doorstep, then Central Asia is Russia's backyard. Russian influence in the region is particularly unchallenged in terms of security policy. But Russia's power is fading, especially as a result of its eroded economic influence. In the context of a changing Russian foreign policy, this loss of power poses certain risks for the region.

### **1. Russia and Central Asia**

Russia is still a very important player in Central Asia, but its importance is gradually diminishing. On the one hand, other powers are increasingly pushing into the region, and on the other hand, the Central Asian regimes have learned to build relationships with various partners and make them useful for themselves. China, Russia's biggest competitor, overtook Russia as the most important investor and trading partner in Central Asia a few years ago. The geostrategic location of the region and its abundance of natural resources also attract other regional and global actors such as the United States, the European Union, Turkey, Iran, and India, who compete for political influence and access to resources. Due to the aforementioned facts it seems very unlikely for Russia to be the decisive uniting power for the Central Asian region in the future. This realization has led to various bilateral agreements and, as a result, cooperation between Russia and certain Central Asian states, which is happening through an individual approach rather than a holistic one involving the entire region.<sup>104</sup>

Russia is still strongly connected to the Central Asian region not only in terms of the economy and security but also culturally. Additionally, despite economic challenges, Russia has managed to hold an important position in that field: "Although the country lost

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<sup>104</sup> Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence Russia in Central Asia*, 16.

its position as the most important trading partner and investor to China, it still plays a key role in Central Asia.”<sup>105</sup> With only one exception, Russia ranks among the top three of the most important export and import partners in all Central Asian countries. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which emerged from the former customs union and the common economic area in January 2015, is Russia’s regional project. The project members are Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Belarus. However, due to the massive decline of the Russian economy, it was not able to pick up significant speed.<sup>106</sup> The governments in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are still holding onto economic integration with Russia for various reasons.<sup>107</sup>

In the energy sector, there is a largely independent relationship between Russia and the region (see Table 7). As one of the most resource-rich countries in the world, it is not dependent on any energy imports from Central Asia and has sufficient reserves of oil and gas (see Tables 1 and 2). Conversely, the Central Asian countries play no role as export partners—or, as in the case of Kazakhstan, a negligible role—for the Russian Federation. Nonetheless, although Kazakhstan managed to decrease its massive dependence on energy support that took place after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it still relies significantly on the Russian pipeline network for its expensive export services.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, a substantial amount of Kazakh oil is being processed in Russian refineries, despite immense modernization efforts in that field from the Kazakh government to become increasingly independent.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Schiek, *Movement on the Silk Road. China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative as an Incentive for Intergovernmental Cooperation and Reforms at Central Asia’s Borders*, 9.

<sup>106</sup> Schiek, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Sebastian Schiek, “Zentralasien und die Eurasische Wirtschaftsunion: Zustimmung trotz Krise” [Central Asia and the Eurasian Economic Union: Approval despite the Crisis], *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit [German Institute for International and Security Affairs]*, 2016, 4.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Rywkin, “Stability in Central Asia: Engaging Kazakhstan,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 27, no. 5 (October 2005): 445, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920500326068>.

<sup>109</sup> Alla Afanasyeva, “Kazakhstan Poised to Rival Russia over Central Asian Fuel Market,” Reuters, June 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/kazakhstan-russia-oil-idINL5N1T81ZY>.

Table 7. Oil: Inter-area Movements, 2018<sup>110</sup>

Oil: Inter-area movements 2018																
Crude (million tonnes)	To															
	Canada	Mexico	US	S. & Cent. America	Europe	Russia	Other CIS	Middle East	Africa	Australasia	China	India	Japan	Singapore	Other Asia Pacific	Total
Canada	-	-	184.0	0.6	4.5	-	-	†	†	†	1.2	0.5	-	-	0.3	190.9
Mexico	†	-	33.1	0.5	12.0	†	-	0.1	-	-	0.7	8.9	1.8	-	4.6	61.7
US	18.8	0.1	-	5.4	29.2	-	†	1.5	†	0.3	12.3	4.9	2.5	1.1	17.1	93.2
S. & Cent. America	0.3	†	56.9	-	10.2	†	-	-	-	0.3	62.0	22.9	1.9	0.2	1.9	156.7
Europe	1.4	-	5.9	0.8	-	-	†	†	†	0.4	8.6	1.5	†	†	6.5	31.2
Russia	0.2	-	3.6	3.6	153.3	-	18.5	1.4	†	0.3	71.6	2.2	7.0	1.7	12.3	275.9
Other CIS	1.1	-	1.8	0.1	63.2	0.5	-	6.6	0.3	0.1	2.8	1.6	1.5	0.4	5.8	85.9
Iraq	-	-	25.8	0.8	48.7	†	-	3.2	2.3	-	45.0	47.7	2.7	1.3	23.4	200.9
Kuwait	†	-	3.9	-	5.8	-	-	†	4.0	-	23.2	11.4	11.7	7.0	36.0	103.0
Saudi Arabia	5.6	-	43.3	3.4	41.3	-	-	13.7	9.6	0.5	56.7	39.3	57.4	10.7	85.9	367.4
UAE	†	-	0.3	†	0.7	†	-	†	0.8	6.0	12.2	16.0	37.3	10.6	41.9	125.9
Other Middle East	†	-	-	0.1	27.6	-	†	5.7	0.2	0.1	66.0	32.4	21.9	10.5	27.5	192.1
North Africa	0.5	-	7.9	2.1	58.3	-	0.1	1.4	†	2.0	11.3	4.0	0.2	1.2	6.8	95.6
West Africa	1.1	-	16.8	9.5	63.1	†	-	0.5	10.9	2.5	71.9	27.6	0.5	1.3	14.3	219.9
East & S. Africa	-	-	†	-	1.2	†	-	†	†	-	4.4	1.2	0.1	†	0.8	7.7
Australasia	†	-	0.1	†	†	-	-	0.2	†	-	1.3	0.3	0.5	1.3	7.2	10.9
China	†	-	-	†	†	-	-	†	†	-	-	-	1.5	†	1.2	2.7
India	-	-	-	-	†	-	-	†	†	-	-	-	-	†	†	0.1
Japan	-	-	-	-	†	-	-	†	†	-	-	-	-	†	†	†
Singapore	-	-	-	-	0.1	-	-	†	†	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	0.4	0.6
Other Asia Pacific	†	-	3.0	†	†	-	-	0.4	0.1	11.9	13.1	5.2	2.3	4.8	-	40.8
<b>Total imports</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>386.3</b>	<b>27.0</b>	<b>519.2</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>40.8</b>	<b>29.2</b>	<b>23.6</b>	<b>464.5</b>	<b>227.5</b>	<b>150.8</b>	<b>52.2</b>	<b>293.8</b>	<b>2263.1</b>
Product (million tonnes)																
<b>From</b>																
Canada	-	1.5	27.8	0.8	1.6	†	†	†	†	†	0.5	†	0.5	0.1	0.4	33.3
Mexico	0.2	-	2.6	1.4	0.1	†	†	†	0.2	†	0.1	†	0.1	1.0	0.1	5.8
US	27.8	57.8	-	80.7	28.3	†	†	2.9	7.4	1.1	6.2	4.6	11.6	6.9	16.1	251.6
S. & Cent. America	0.2	1.0	11.5	-	5.5	†	†	0.5	2.2	0.1	1.4	†	0.3	4.9	1.1	28.6
Europe	6.7	1.9	22.5	10.1	-	0.4	1.1	15.4	45.0	1.0	2.1	0.8	0.6	19.2	7.2	134.0
Russia	0.6	0.1	14.5	2.1	112.5	-	8.9	1.3	5.2	†	2.3	0.6	2.1	10.5	12.5	173.1
Other CIS	0.4	†	0.8	0.1	9.6	8.8	-	0.1	0.5	†	0.6	0.1	†	†	0.4	21.3
Iraq	-	-	0.1	-	0.1	-	†	0.4	†	-	0.1	†	-	7.1	0.6	8.5
Kuwait	0.1	-	†	0.2	1.5	-	†	3.7	2.2	†	2.4	1.8	1.9	0.7	9.0	23.5
Saudi Arabia	0.1	-	1.5	0.3	16.5	†	†	5.2	7.4	0.2	4.5	6.9	2.3	3.2	8.1	56.2
UAE	†	†	2.5	0.9	6.9	†	†	5.7	8.5	0.4	9.3	5.9	5.2	4.4	26.1	75.8
Other Middle East	0.1	†	1.0	0.3	9.0	†	†	11.7	6.1	0.2	3.8	5.6	6.0	0.8	20.8	64.3
North Africa	0.1	†	5.4	2.9	12.4	†	†	0.2	0.3	†	1.3	0.8	0.4	0.2	3.0	27.1
West Africa	†	†	1.6	0.6	2.3	†	†	†	0.3	†	1.7	†	†	†	0.9	7.5
East & S. Africa	†	†	0.1	0.2	0.3	†	†	1.3	1.1	†	†	†	†	†	0.4	3.4
Australasia	†	†	-	0.1	0.9	†	†	†	0.1	-	0.6	†	0.7	0.4	0.9	3.7
China	0.2	1.2	0.9	4.0	2.8	†	†	2.0	2.2	2.5	-	0.8	0.9	14.9	23.4	55.7
India	0.3	†	3.6	0.2	10.5	†	†	6.6	6.2	1.5	2.4	-	1.4	6.0	14.9	53.4
Japan	0.1	0.3	1.0	0.5	0.1	†	†	†	0.1	4.0	2.6	†	-	2.1	6.8	17.6
Singapore	0.1	0.2	1.2	0.7	0.9	†	†	0.8	2.7	10.5	7.4	1.3	0.9	-	62.9	89.7
Other Asia Pacific	0.2	0.4	5.3	0.9	3.7	0.1	†	1.4	4.1	12.0	32.5	2.1	8.9	33.1	-	104.7
<b>Total imports</b>	<b>37.0</b>	<b>64.4</b>	<b>103.9</b>	<b>106.9</b>	<b>224.7</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>59.3</b>	<b>101.6</b>	<b>33.6</b>	<b>81.9</b>	<b>31.3</b>	<b>43.7</b>	<b>115.5</b>	<b>215.5</b>	<b>1238.8</b>

In terms of security policy, Russia is playing different roles. On the one hand, it provides security for the Central Asian governments and dominates the organization of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the most prominent military alliance in the post-Soviet space.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, the annexation of Crimea has demonstrated the potential repercussions for the Central Asian states if loyalty to the former hegemon is denied.

<sup>110</sup> Source: British Petroleum Company, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, 28.

<sup>111</sup> Schiek, Smolnik, and Westphal, “‘Krisenlandschaften.’ Konfliktkonstellationen und Problemkomplexe internationaler Politik,” *Ausblick 2017* [‘Crisis landscapes.’ Conflict Constellations and Problem Complexes of International Politics, Outlook 2017], 35–36.

## 2. Russian Foreign Policy in Context

In the past, Russia's foreign policy had largely been determined by its relationship to the West. With the election of Vladimir Putin as president in 2000, the increase in Russia's great power ambitions, imperial rhetoric, and sometimes unpredictable foreign policy was followed by a phase of rapprochement with the West. This decision was based on the conviction that foreign policy had to create the conditions for modernizing the country, which in turn was seen as the prerequisite for a rise in global political weight. The goal of being able to act like a major power and to be perceived as such has been one of the central goals of Russian foreign policy.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, the aim of a multipolar structured global political system to counter U.S. dominance in world politics became increasingly important.<sup>113</sup> Russia's economization of its foreign policy and the simultaneous demand to be respected and recognized as a major power had repeatedly been met with resistance and disappointment in the years that followed. Putin expressed this disappointment in his highly regarded speech at the 2007 Security Policy Conference in Munich. Russia's responses remained confined to the political level. This was not least due to the strong Russian interest in trying to avoid a diplomatic break with the West. This is a point where one can find evidence for a neorealist course in Russia's foreign policy approach. Neorealism sees states as the actors striving for power as individuals. Thus, the formation of stable and lasting alliances is considered unlikely because of a fundamental distrust between states and the fear of another state becoming more powerful than the own one: "A state worries about a division of possible gains that may favor others more than itself. That is the first way in which the structure of international politics limits the cooperation of states."<sup>114</sup> From a neorealist perspective, this can be seen as the reason for Russia's unilateral confrontational behavior in the case of the annexation of Crimea.

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<sup>112</sup> Pavel K. Baev, "Defying That Sinking Feeling: Russia Seeks to Uphold Its Role in the Multistructural International System in Flux," in *Perspectives on Russian Foreign Policy*, Strategic Studies Institute Monograph (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012), 1.

<sup>113</sup> Rajan Kumar, "Russia's Foreign Policy: An Overview of 25 Years of Transition," ed. Sanjay Kumar Pandey, *International Studies* 53, no. 3-4 (2016): 218-19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020881717745961>.

<sup>114</sup> Colin Elman and Michael Jensen, *The Realism Reader* (Routledge, 2014), 114.

With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian leadership distanced itself from this strategy; Russian foreign policy has entered a new, more assertive phase, in which Russia is willing to use hard power to attain its goals.<sup>115</sup> With its approach in Ukraine as well as in Syria, Russia has made statements that it is ready to be a pro-active actor in international conflicts and thereby serve its interests—even by accepting the costs of a break with the West. According to observers, this policy change is being influenced by three factors.<sup>116</sup>

The first factor is Russia's worldview and self-perception. International relations are deeply imbalanced from Russia's point of view, determined by the claim of the West, led by the United States, to unipolar hegemony. Russia sees this as a failure and strives for a balance between all major powers. Revolutions like those in the Arab world and the Caucasus took place as a result of Western system-change policy and are considered to have served as an excuse for the West to legitimize its claim of dominance. Ultimately, Russia sees itself facing the same risk. The focus of Russian self-perception is thus the defense of Russia and the rest of the world against American interventionism. In this context, Europe continues to lose its autonomy of action and is now considered a mere appendage to the United States. Taking this argument as a foundation, social constructivism theory may contribute to predict Russia's future foreign policy behavior. In his statement "States are people too,"<sup>117</sup> Alexander Wendt points out that attitudes and behaviors of states are similar to those of people because of their capability to learn and adapt. The resulting development of certain characteristics makes states recognizable as individual actors. The mutual influence between structure and actors occurring on the social level results in the interplay of self-perception and the perception of others, and that has significant consequences for the foreign policies of nation-states. In the case of

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<sup>115</sup> Sabine Fischer and Margarete Klein, "Conceivable Surprises: Eleven Possible Turns in Russia's Foreign Policy," Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University, 2016, 5.

<sup>116</sup> Perthes, "'Krisenlandschaften.' Konfliktkonstellationen und Problemkomplexe internationaler Politik." *Ausblick 2017* ['Crisis landscapes.' Conflict constellations and problem complexes of international politics. *Outlook 2017*], 31–34.

<sup>117</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 215.

Russia's approach towards the Central Asian region, social constructivism theory could help to explain and understand the emergence of alliances between the different actors against common enemies due to shared values, as well as the resulting convergence and the formation of collective identities.

A second factor is capabilities. Russia has had its radius of action and its instruments further developed and expanded over the past decade. The reform of its military initiated in 2008 aimed to transform the armed forces from a large, unwieldy apparatus into a flexible instrument of foreign policy. This reform included not only military means but also instruments of Hybrid Warfare.<sup>118</sup>

Finally, the combination and interaction of foreign and domestic policy influences policy change. Foreign policy is an important tool for the Russian leadership to demonstrate national greatness and, as a consequence, win domestic legitimation. This relationship can be seen in particular in surveys measuring popularity ratings of Russian politicians. After a continuous decrease started in 2008, the values for Putin rose to a new record level with the annexation of Crimea.<sup>119</sup> Against the background of domestic policy in Russia, this aspect of Russian foreign policy plays an important role. Russia finds itself in a long-term recession that is structural and can only be overcome through profound economic and political reforms. Without such reforms, socio-economic pressure—comparable to the situation in the Central Asian countries—is likely to continue to rise, which contains the risk that foreign policy will continuously be used to obtain legitimation.

### **3. Interim Conclusions / Analysis**

Russia seeks to expand and secure both its economic and security interests to increase its influence in Central Asia, striving for strong bilateral and multilateral relationships in that region. Overall, Russian influence in Central Asia has declined

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<sup>118</sup> Bettina Renz, "Russian Military Capabilities after 20 Years of Reform," *Survival* 56, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 61–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.920145>.

<sup>119</sup> Leon Aron, "Putinism after Crimea," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2017.0067>.

gradually.<sup>120</sup> As of now, Central Asia is only of limited significance for Russia. Thus, Russia's policy is shaped by pragmatism and the main goals of controlling energy resources and to maintain regional security.<sup>121</sup> Central Asia's main significance for Russia is one of foreign and security policy. In this aspect, it is precisely the perception of threats and Russia's claims to be perceived and treated as a major power that has an impact on Russian foreign policy actions. This fact is enriched by the close connection between interior and foreign policy, and that makes it especially difficult to make a statement about a foreseeable Russian engagement in the region.

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<sup>120</sup> Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence Russia in Central Asia*, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Emilian Kavalski, *The New Central Asia : The Regional Impact of International Actors* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co Pte Ltd, 2010), 161,174, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=731283>.

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## **V. POTENTIAL FOR CONFLICT OVER CENTRAL ASIA**

### **A. SHORT-TERM PERSPECTIVE**

Brzezinski's thesis of the Eurasian Balkans mentioned in the introduction can only be partially accepted considering the results of this work. Despite the undeniable geopolitical and economic importance of the Central Asian region, it seems to be too much to equate the potential for conflict with the centuries-long ethnic conflicts and proxy wars of the great powers in Europe. Nevertheless, regarding the internal situations of the Central Asian countries, a certain escalation risk can be identified—to this point one can follow Brzezinski's thesis. Thus far, the stability of the Stans has been guaranteed by their autocratic leaders. Yet, the economic crisis in Russia and falling raw material prices have worsened the mood in the countries of the region. Against this background, the state leaders are looking for new growth models. The multi-ethnic composition of the region holds further potential for escalation to conflict. Thus, from a neorealist theory perspective, the insecurity related to their existence and position in the system puts the different actors in a situation of mutual rivalry, which may lead to prisoner dilemmas or arms competition. But, that is not what can be observed right now with regard to the Central Asian region.

Concerning the changes in the geopolitical landscape, a New Great Game is not playing out currently. Conflicts between China and Russia cannot be observed for various reasons. In fact, the bilateral relationship between the countries is currently characterized by cooperation and division of labor rather than competition. The explanation for this can be found in the economic as well as in the political area.

In times of low oil prices, Western sanctions, and a volatile currency, Russia needs China's economy to ease its economic problems. This includes Chinese investments, which could flow to a greater extent under the BRI than previously. The Russian population is already benefiting from China's economic power. The lower purchasing power as a result of the sanctions has partially been compensated by Chinese imports. Therefore, at this point, social constructivism theory seems to be the superior approach to explain these occurrences in comparison to neorealism. Due to their similarities of having autocratic

regimes and sharing central values, China and Russia seem to tend towards cooperative behavior. Additionally, the overlapping interests concerning stability in the region and, as a result, the maximization of economic profits can be seen as the driving factors that explain this course of the actors' foreign policy.

As a result of the BRI, China, in turn, benefits from cooperation with Russia in the usage of faster rail connections, enabling it to transport goods to Europe faster by rail via Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus rather than taking a more circuitous land route or shipping goods by sea. Only four national borders have to be crossed and only one economic area—the EAEU—using this method. Additionally, the alternative southern routes are incomplete and the intent of using them would involve considerable additional effort, especially with a view to the political volatilities in countries such as Kyrgyzstan or Turkey.

Politically, Russia's positive stance on the BRI can be explained in two ways. First, Russia has recognized that it would not only be hopeless to compete economically with China but would also jeopardize the loyalty of Russia's neighbors in Central Asia. All Central Asian countries are attracted by Chinese investments. If Russia were to make those countries choose, it might find their traditional bonds with Moscow too fragile. On the other hand, if China develops a significant increase in financial strength in Central Asia through its BRI, this outcome could make Russia obsolete in this area. At the same time, Russia, as part of the BRI, maintains a certain overview of Chinese action in its periphery and, as a consequence, can insist that its interests be taken into account and thus further deepen its political relations with its allies.

Second, both countries share certain fundamental political beliefs and, to some extent, a common worldview. Both share the fear of the color revolutions and both share the view that the West is the acting force behind these regime changes. Therefore, if Russia is not able to control its Eurasian periphery by itself, it may be preferable from a Russian perspective that China fills this gap, not the United States or Europe, whose presence is now perceived as a direct threat to Russia's internal stability. From a social constructivist point of view, the sharing of strategic culture can motivate states to cooperate. Therefore, by taking historical, cultural, and geographical aspects into account, the likelihood of

cooperative foreign policy behavior between China and Russia would seem fit to intensify the mutual benefit of the actors.

For China, cooperation with Russia also has advantages. Despite their openness to Chinese investment, the Central Asian countries are still closely linked to Russia not only politically and institutionally, but also socially and culturally. The mood within Central Asian societies is anything but positive concerning China. If China were to act against Russian interests in Central Asia, Russia could, in turn, use its influence to undermine the success of the BRI in Central Asia, for example, through the largely Russian-language media.

Against this background, some observers have already spoken of a large division of labor in the Eurasian region, in which Beijing takes economic and Moscow military leadership or, in other words, China functions as a bank and Russia a cannon.<sup>122</sup>

## **B. LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE**

In the long-term perspective, possible fault lines can be identified in this work-sharing relationship, and thus, it harbors a certain potential for conflict.

Unsolved border disputes lead to conflict. As discussed in Chapter III, there are numerous unresolved border issues between particular Central Asian countries. In his 1995 article “Why Do Neighbors Fight? Proximity, Interaction or Territoriality,” author John A. Vasquez argues that: “One of the major contributions of the territorial explanation is to make us aware that territorial issues are the single most dangerous issues any state will face.”<sup>123</sup> If one or several of these issues would lead to an aggravating conflict, there may be the need for a Great Power to help manage peace in the region. Both Russia and China could be willing to step up in order to play that role, with the goals of regaining stability

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<sup>122</sup> Cholpon Orozobekova, “Can China’s Ambitious OBOR Mesh With Russian Plans in Eurasia?,” *Diplomat*, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/can-chinas-ambitious-obor-mesh-with-russian-plans-in-eurasia/>; Reid Standish, “China and Russia Lay Foundation for Massive Economic Cooperation,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed May 11, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/10/china-russia-sco-ufa-summit-putin-xi-jinping-eurasian-union-silk-road/>.

<sup>123</sup> John A. Vasquez, “Why Do Neighbors Fight? Proximity, Interaction, or Territoriality,” *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 3 (1995): 289.

and increasing their regional weight and influence. This scenario contains the significant potential for a disagreement between the two state actors.

State collapse in a Central Asian country is also a potential trigger. The situation in all Central Asian countries is tense. With recent advances by radical Islamist groups in northern Afghanistan, observers are increasingly concerned about possible advances by these groups into Tajikistan. This concern is reinforced by the correspondingly high number of potential Islamist returnees from Syria and Iraq. This development carries the risk of causing the order in Tajikistan to collapse. Russia, with its roughly 7,000 soldiers stationed there, would be directly affected by such an event. China, in turn, is interested in a stable Tajikistan both as a neighboring country and as part of its gas transit system from Turkmenistan. With the SCO, the region has a cooperation format through which such challenges can be met. Apart from the not unlikely occurrence of the event of state collapse, though, the potential for escalation in the Sino-Russian relationship seems rather low.

Another potential problem is Kazakhstan's threatened departure from the EAEU. Kazakhstan has previously announced that it would leave the economic union if the EAEU should become a threat to Kazakhstan's independence.<sup>124</sup> Against the background of the Russian annexation of the Crimea, President Putin's statements in 2014 that Kazakhstan never had its own statehood raised fears that after Ukraine, Kazakhstan could be the next target for a Russian annexation policy. The concern is especially valid given that 21% of Kazakh citizens are ethnic Russians. In reaction to Putin's statement, the Kazakh president threatened to leave the EAEU.<sup>125</sup> An additional risk arises from a new, less Russia-friendly or strongly nationalist government. Even if the probability of Kazakhstan's annexation cannot be rated as too high for various reasons, this scenario offers the greatest potential for conflict between China and Russia. In particular, the close connection between Russian foreign and domestic policy could tempt Russia to act in such a case. Additionally, the

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<sup>124</sup> Samantha Brletich, "The Crimea Model: Will Russia Annex the Northern Region of Kazakhstan?," *Geopolitics, History and International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2015): 25.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy under Putin* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 291.

presence of a large Russian minority in Kazakhstan represents a case that shows significant parallels to eastern Ukraine.<sup>126</sup>

Moreover, Russia faces an aggravating economic crisis. The role that Russia sees for itself as a traditional arbiter in Central Asia due to the constellations of power dating back to the era of the Soviet-Union may no longer be sustainable. Severe unresolved issues in its domestic policy and a downward spiral in the economy are amplifying problems for Russia. The scenario presents the possibility for a shift towards an inward-focused Russian policy to secure the state's survival. The consequence of such a shift would be a power vacuum, which often leads to an increased risk of conflict between states.<sup>127</sup> Central Asian countries are well aware of these facts and, as a result, may be attracted by an economically more potent and stable actor and, as a consequence, might pivot towards China. This setting has significant potential to cause friction between the two regional Great Powers. From a neorealist standpoint, conflict, in that case, will be inevitable due to the fact that nation-states are in permanent pursuit of power. The imbalance of power that would be the consequence of the aforementioned scenario is unlikely to be tolerated by Russia, which would be on the losing side in this case. Additionally, the uncertainty about the other actor's behavior and goals, as well as the aim for state survival, are drivers for that argument.

Ultimately, China could derive political influence from its economic influence in Central Asia in the long term and thus end the division of labor, even if such a development would currently oppose the Chinese strategy for the BRI. China has, however, sought to export its world views and influence other nations on a strategic level, for example through digital means. The Great Firewall and the Great Cannon are exemplary censorship and offensive mechanisms that are put to use serving China's interests.<sup>128</sup> Russia, however, has come to rely on a close partnership with China, particularly as Russia's relationship

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<sup>126</sup> Brletich, "The Crimea Model: Will Russia Annex the Northern Region of Kazakhstan?," 13.

<sup>127</sup> Reinhard Wolf, "How Partners Become Rivals: Testing Neorealist and Liberal Hypotheses," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (December 1, 2002): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0963-640291906780>.

<sup>128</sup> Arif Sari, Zakria Abdul Qayyum, and Onder Onursal, "The Dark Side of the China: The Government, Society and the Great Cannon," *Transactions on Networks and Communications* 5, no. 6 (December 31, 2017): 57, <https://doi.org/10.14738/tnc.56.4062>.

with the West has dramatically deteriorated. If China is ready to take this step, Russia's dependence on China will by then surely have reached a level that prohibits Russia from engaging in a confrontation with China. This specific scenario is an example that shows how the different theories of neorealism and social constructivism can be intertwined with each other to a certain degree. The aforementioned division of labor and cooperation is following the logic of social constructivist arguments. With the omission of that argument, one would expect the way to be clear for a neorealist approach that would point out how inevitable conflict would be. But due to the high degree of Russia's dependency on China that seems not likely to happen. The neorealism perspective provides an answer to that seeming dilemma: While an imbalance of power potentially leads to conflict, the need for a nation-state to survive dominates its decision making. Therefore, given the aforementioned assumption of Russia's high level of dependency on China, the costs of conflict with China may be too high for Russia and, as a result, threaten its existence.

All three of the outlined scenarios are possible. Their escalation potential, however, is equally low. There are three main reasons for this in the long term. First, China's BRI project, and here especially the aspect of including all partners in different formats, prevents conflicts from escalating. Should tensions arise within the project, there are various international formats in addition to the possibility of bilateral conflict resolution, which offer the opportunity for negotiations to resolve those tensions. Nevertheless, it is to be seen whether both actors will be able to complement and benefit from each other rather than focusing on goals defined by self-interests.

Second, the Russian-Chinese relationship is far less emotionally charged than the relationship between Russia and the West. Almost the opposite is the case if one takes a look at the fundamental, political beliefs or their respective world views.

Third, Russia and China are in a relationship of mutual dependency related to energy policy. Russia, as a major energy power, is highly dependent on corresponding revenues for its modernization of the economy. China's demand for energy will likely continue to grow over the next few decades. In addition to the resources that Russia has, its geographical proximity will make it one of China's closest partners in this area.

Against this background, both actors will be interested in a coherent, low-conflict coexistence. Despite the fact that Russia needs China more than vice versa, potential conflicts can already be identified today that appear to have the potential to drive a wedge between the bank and its cannon.

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## **VI. CONCLUSION AND ANALYSIS**

What is the probability of confrontation between Russia and China in Central Asia? Which theory in international relations performs best in answering this specific question? What are the possible courses of action for Western actors regarding the exploitation of the actual situation in Central Asia? This thesis has looked at five specific countries in Central Asia, the so-called Stans, as a case study with the aim to better understand the different dynamics of the great powers, Russia and China, at play in that region. This chapter applies two theories of international relations, the neorealist and social constructivist theories, to selected arguments and provides an overview of possible future developments between the actors. Additionally, the chapter concludes with implications for a Western foreign policy approach to the Central Asian region.

### **A. NEOREALIST PERSPECTIVE**

In Chapter II, this work stated that the central interest of states in their own survival is achieved through rational behavior with a fundament of economic considerations, which is one of the main pillars of neorealism.

The case study of Central Asia in this work underlined the significant impact of economic factors on Russia's and China's respective policy decision making as well as on their bilateral relations. The BRI, as one of China's most important projects, builds a significant example. Besides its decisive economic weight, it can also be seen as a tool of foreign policy that the CCP will likely use to influence and shape the policies of Russia, as well as those of Central Asian countries, to its advantage. This observation is of course an unfavorable one from Russia's perspective and may lead to an increase of distrust or even conflict between the two states. Additionally, the Central Asian states that see a chance of having a share of possible positive economic revenues from the BRI project may, as a result, tend to pivot in China's direction. As a consequence, Russia may see itself forced to react to such a threat to its influence in its backyard.

A second important part of neorealism theory is the anarchic structure of the international system. Both Russia and China shape the international system to ensure their

survival as nation-states. In the recent past, Russia has chosen a confrontational approach to the West, which resulted in severe tensions in international relations. Therefore, cooperation and alliances became even more important in Russian foreign policy. Its influence on Central Asian countries is one part of Russia's effort to secure its position as a regional power. In order to secure this influence, a cooperative approach with China is inevitable. As a result, from a neorealist point of view, Russia is much more dependent on China than vice versa. China, on the other hand, has a profound interest in a stable Central Asian region as a prerequisite for a successful outcome of its BRI project and thus will try to maximize its influence on Central Asian governments. Concerning Russian involvement, China seems to be comfortable with a division of labor that lets Russia provide a certain level of stability through necessary military strength in the area, while the Chinese focus stays in the economic field. All these facts point to the prediction of realist behavior by China and Russia for power balancing through internal and external balancing as referred to in Chapter II. Nevertheless, there is a certain risk that if China sees its vital and substantial economic investments endangered by Russian diplomatic or military interventions it may not recoil from getting into a confrontation with Russia.

The third pillar of neorealism theory this work elaborated on in the literature review is the one of power distribution and potential. The observation that states are in a permanent struggle to rebalance and compensate power imbalances leads to an alarming conclusion from the Western perspective. Since both Russia and China are trying to revise the current world order dominated by a U.S. hegemonic position, this could result in an increased cooperation between the two states in order to achieve this goal. If the Central Asian region proves to be a successful experiment of cooperation in various areas of national importance to both actors, it may result in a stable and balanced alliance due to the aforementioned division of labor and fields of interest. The creation of such an alliance could be considered a significant counterweight to Western alliances with uncertain outcomes.

## **B. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE**

As elaborated on in Chapter III, the social constructivist theory shifts away from materialistic and rationalistic explanatory approaches. While it accepts the realist argument

of anarchy in the international system, it assesses the inner lives of states, their leaderships, and their social interaction as decisive factors when it comes to predicting the foreign policy behavior of states.

In the case of Russia, one can make the case that the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the last decades triggered a perceived threat to the physical security environment of the state. Therefore, social constructivists would argue that not only Russian foreign policy has changed, but also Russia's social identity due to that state's new and redefined role that pits Russia against the West as the enemy. (The fact that this situation was quite the same in the past during the time of the Soviet Union probably helped in making the change even easier.) The results can be seen in the Russia's motivation to change its role from a regional power back to being perceived as a great power in the international system, as well as in its pivot to China, and thus to increased cooperation and partnering between the two states.

From a Chinese perspective, stability as a contributor to physical security is also weighted heavily. Former U.S. diplomat and author Susan A. Thornton states: "China sees Central Asia as integral to the stability and development of its volatile western regions."<sup>129</sup> The additional factors of important resources, significant economic investments, and the means that have been put into the ambitious BRI project (see Chapter V) add credibility to Chinese interests in the region. Instability in Central Asian countries would thus endanger China's very own security interests. The criticism from citizens of some of the key players in the region about how China handles some of its domestic issues, like the example of the Uyghur population in the Xinjiang region, forces the CCP to adopt a more diplomatic approach to Central Asia. These facts, and China's rapid rise in the last decades to the rank of the only actual great power with the ambition to be a serious U.S. adversary, make it clear that China follows a long-term strategy. While Russia takes a more provocative and increasingly aggressive stance towards the West, China tries to maximize its influence in the international system and organizations.

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<sup>129</sup> Susan A. Thornton, "China in Central Asia: Is China Winning the 'New Great Game'?", *Global China*, June 2020, 2.

According to the social constructivist theory, the sharing of strategic culture can motivate states to cooperate. Author David R. Jones argues that strategic culture originates from “a macro-environmental level consisting of geography, ethnocultural characteristics, and history; a societal level consisting of social, economic, and political structures of a society; and a micro level consisting of military institutions and characteristics of civil-military relations.”<sup>130</sup> In our case, Russia and China are, to a certain degree, connected by all of these factors and, as a result, find themselves sharing significant parts of their world views (see Chapter V). Both actors have a common interpretation and understanding of sovereignty and democracy, which results in a confrontational course against the West on these issues. Nevertheless, these two powers differ in their willingness and chosen level of intensity to engage in confrontation with the West. Therefore, based on the assumption that this construct will not dramatically change in the near future, Central Asia may be an exemplary case where this could result in a cooperative foreign policy strategy between the two actors.

### **C. THE “BETTER” THEORY?**

Both international relations theories contribute to a holistic comprehension of states’ foreign policy behavior. Of course, neither neorealism nor social constructivism is flawless, even if the latter appears to be superior in the presented case study. Nevertheless, the assumption that both approaches contain contradictory statements seems to be inadequate. Rather, they share several premises, which are accented differently. Therefore, this work has shown that a “fusion” of both approaches and a further constructive discussion may be the most favorable option and a possible solution for analyzing and making successful, resilient predictions on developments in international relations.

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<sup>130</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “Thinking about Strategic Culture,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (1995): 37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119>.

#### **D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE SUBJECT**

The question about how to deal with Russia's and China's involvement and cooperation in Central Asia and about the potential for the United States and Europe to exploit that cooperation is a challenging one.

Russia's willingness to pursue an increasingly confrontational course against the West engenders both risk and chance. While the risk of escalating confrontation is quite obvious since it may lead to hard conflicts, the chances of profiting from this approach deserve deeper analysis. Since China may not follow its partner into an escalating conflict with the West due to Beijing's interests and strategy, Russia could be isolated and without a realistic chance of achieving its desired outcomes. This scenario would lead to a possible dissolution of the partnership between the two powers and even has the potential for conflict between them. For the West, provoking Russia into following that course, for example through a further NATO eastward expansion, could be a way to achieve that possible outcome.

From a Chinese perspective, its motivation to play a more significant and influential role in the international system may be a solid base to build on. For the West, the Central Asian region may be the prospective ground on which to engage China in a more cooperative role on the international stage. By decreasing Russia's importance in contributing to security and stability while providing more attractive options for China, the West may be able to separate the partners from each other.

Adding up the individual perspectives of the two powers, the existing mutual distrust they have of one another's intentions and their real future plans in the region, the West can build on this foundation to exploit the actual situation. On the one hand, Russia is concerned about Chinese plans on its eastern borders, and increased Chinese activity adds up to Russian citizens moving out of that area. Additionally, Russia is well aware that it plays a smaller role in the partnership with China in almost every important discipline, which creates concerns of being left behind if China finds other and better possibilities that may serve its strategic goals. On the other hand, China is keen to use its energy sources and transport corridors, for energy as well as for goods, to diversify and not to give Russia

a dominant role in that sector. Additionally, China has generally (although not very vocally) been critical of Russia's foreign policy adventures and has not officially recognized Russia's annexation of the Crimea due to the fact that the CCP admits to the sovereignty of countries and the territorial invincibility of borders.

Another factor that has to be considered is the diplomatic impact of the completely divergent approaches of the West and China regarding the understanding of democracy and overall values. This impact cannot be underestimated. Additionally, the CCP's vision of total control over the Chinese people includes a massive future potential for conflict not only in China's domestic arena, but in international negotiations. Central Asian states will carefully watch the processes and means that China will choose since these could be an indicator of what to expect in their future negotiations with Beijing.

In the current situation, the United States and Europe must ask themselves whether it is a valid course of action to risk driving Russia further into the arms of China by imposing new sanctions. From a Western perspective, a growing and strengthening Russian-Chinese partnership is not a favorable one. Besides the different approaches to foreign and domestic policy among the West, Russia, and China, there are hidden potential opportunities in these complex fields. One opportunity could be to open up a diplomatic discourse on topics concerning Central Asian issues, which could create transparency about each state's political aims and strategy. In order to achieve this, mechanisms of a multilateral dialogue on these topics should be initiated. Through such an approach in Central Asia, there exists a real theoretical potential to overcome some of the existing ideological and institutional differences among the different actors. Additionally, the willingness of Central Asian countries to take an active part in the process should be high, given their potential to realize various expected positive effects. This course of action could lead not only to negotiations between nation-states about their individual approach to the Central Asian region but in other areas of actual and potential crises. Ultimately, this approach should be preferred over the costs of falling back into a Cold War scenario.

Future research on this topic should focus on two lines of effort. First, possibilities and strategies in order to increase Western influence in the Central Asian region should be developed. For this, it is necessary not only to focus on the economic and realist facets of

the problem but also to take the field of social constructivism, diplomacy, and policy into account in a “cross-theory” approach. Therefore, ways and means to avoid becoming trapped in narrow-minded views on the adversary have to be found, as author Graham T. Allison has stated on the example of the United States and China: “The problem remains psychological projection: even seasoned State Department officials too often mistakenly assume China’s vital interests mirror America’s own.”<sup>131</sup>

Second, future research may look at the ways and means by which the (willing part) of the Western international community could exploit the actual situation between Russia and China in Central Asia, which this paper tried to illustrate, as a chance of establishing a common set of rules, norms, and mechanisms of control related to the international system. Therefore, a suggested research focus could be on NATO Special Operations Forces and their capabilities to undertake actions well below the threshold of armed conflict while at the same time shaping the framework for the desired results and outcomes for the Western community.

In any case, the involved international actors should take careful measures to keep the threat of a Great Power Competition from turning into a Great Power Confrontation in Central Asia, as well as elsewhere in the world.

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<sup>131</sup> Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 236.

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