

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Future of Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia

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Sino-Russian relations in general, and in Central Asia in particular, have been relatively stable since the end of the Cold War due to the convergence of a number of key structural, regional, and domestic factors. These have remained relatively consistent over time, and demonstrate the interplay between “thick” (normative) and “thin” (interests) variables consistent with the concept of an alignment rather than an alliance. However, we argue that Beijing’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is likely to bring to the fore the central dilemmas typical of the “alliance game” of international politics – hedging, accommodation, and entrapment – as China’s trans-Eurasian connectivity agenda fundamentally challenges Russian preferences across the strategic, economic, and normative domain of its interests. The article then explores these dilemmas via the discussion of a number of possible future scenarios for Sino-Russian relations and their implications for regional order in Central Asia.

Keywords: China, Russia, alliance, alignment, BRI



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Introduction

Since President Xi Jinping's announcement of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" portion of China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) during an official visit to Kazakhstan in June 2013, Beijing and Moscow have increased their security, economic and diplomatic relationship. President Xi, during his official state visit to Russia in July 2017, assessed relations to be at their "best time in history" and that China and Russia were each other's "most trustworthy strategic partners."¹

These rhetorical flourishes have prompted some to suggest that enhanced collaboration, perhaps even an alliance, between the two may be afoot. Such a development could be construed as an "axis of authoritarianism" bent on destabilizing the Western-led international order.² Bobo Lo, in contrast, framed Sino-Russian ties as an "axis of convenience" wherein the relationship is essentially "tactical and instrumental" and defined by "expediency and opportunism."³ Here, Moscow and Beijing are happy to leverage their bilateral relationship in the context of their other important regional and global relationships but remain unable to establish a true condominium of interests due to the continued salience of a number of historical, normative, and domestic factors that inhibit the consummation of their "strategic partnership" into a formal alliance.

Yet, Sino-Russian relations in general, and in Central Asia in particular, have defied predictions of each side of this debate. In the immediate post-Cold War years, a "new Great Game" over spheres of influence in the region was envisaged, while the events of 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan were variously described as a "defeat" for Chinese foreign policy in the region, or the death knell for Russian influence amongst the Central Asian republics.⁴ In practice, however, Russian influence in Central Asia remained while Chinese influence followed a

1 Ming, C. (2017) "'Best time in history' for China-Russia relationship: Xi and Putin boost ties", CNBC, 4 July, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/07/04/china-russia-ties-reaffirmed-after-xi-jinping-and-vladimir-putin-meet.html>. The Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" was established in 1996.

2 Harold S. W. and Schwartz, L. (2013) 'A Russia-China Alliance Brewing?', *The Diplomat*, 12 April, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/a-russia-china-alliance-brewing/>; Green, M. J. (2014), 'Should America Fear a New Sino-Russian Alliance?', *Foreign Policy*, 13 August, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/13/should-america-fear-a-new-sino-russian-alliance/>

3 Lo, B. (2008) *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, p. 5.

4 For example, Menon, R. (2003) 'The New Great Game in Central Asia', *Survival*, 45 (2), pp. 187-204.

consistently upward trajectory without inducing overt strategic rivalry between the two.

This begs a number of important questions. First, has the relative stability of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia been simply due to the convergence of “thin,” interest-based calculus, or to the evolution of a “thick” underpinning to the relationship based on a shared understanding or vision for regional order? Second, what will be the effect of China’s ambitious BRI on the bilateral relationship in Central Asia?

With respect to the first question, we argue in the first section of this paper that the relative stability of Sino-Russian relations in the region has been fostered by the convergence of a number of key structural, regional, and domestic factors. These have remained relatively consistent over time, and demonstrate the interplay between “thick” (normative) and “thin” (interests) variables. Sino-Russian ties in this context are consistent with the concept of an alignment rather than an alliance. However, as we explore in the second section of the paper, the relationship is still prone to the central dilemmas typical of the “alliance game” of international politics: hedging, accommodation and entrapment.⁵ We argue, via an exploration of a number of possible scenarios for regional order in Central Asia, that BRI will likely heighten these dilemmas as China’s trans-Eurasian connectivity agenda fundamentally challenges Russian preferences across the strategic, economic, and normative domain of its interests.

Sino-Russian Relations: Alliance or Alignment?

Sino-Russian relations are not formally framed as an alliance – which is understood as defined as by “a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states”⁶ – but rather as a “strategic partnership”. Where an alliance is externally-oriented toward a third party adversary or group of adversaries,⁷ a “partnership” is internally-oriented “to reduce uncertainties from unknown intentions between two states” with a “minimal requirement that they will not threaten

5 Snyder, G. H. (1984) ‘The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics’, *World Politics*, 36 (4), p. 461

6 Wolfers, A. (1968) ‘Alliances’, in Sills, David L. (ed), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York: Macmillan, p. 268.

7 Walt, S. (1987) *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

each other.”⁸ Given this distinction some contend that “strategic partnerships” are therefore *not* synonymous with alliances.⁹ However, both alliances and partnerships are manifestations of the broader concept of “alignment” in international relations/politics. “Alignment” between two states implies “a set of mutual expectations ... that they will have each other’s support in disputes or war with particular other states.”¹⁰ Whereas a central value of an alliance is its deterrent value vis-à-vis potential adversaries – usually explicitly codified within the text of a legal treaty – the core value of a partnership (“strategic” or otherwise) lies in a more general (and sometimes ambiguous) expectation or sense of support.¹¹ Snyder suggests that “alignment” is “defined as expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions,”¹² while Michael D. Ward posits that “alignment is not signified by formal treaties, but is delineated by a variety of *behavioural actions*” not solely focused on the military or security dimension of international politics.¹³

Thomas Wilkins, building on Ward’s observation, suggests that “strategic partnership” is best described as a “structured collaboration between states to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges more effectively than could be achieved in isolation.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Wilkins identifies a number of properties that “strategic partnerships” exhibit that demonstrate their differentiation from alliances: They are organized around a “system principle” (e.g., desire for a multipolar world); they are often goal rather than threat driven; and they are informal in nature and “entail low commitment costs” which “permits partners to retain a greater degree of autonomy and flexibility, thus mitigating the ‘entrapment’ dynamic common to orthodox alliances.”¹⁵

8 Feng, H. (2015) *The New Geostrategic Game: Will China and Russia Form an Alliance against the United States?* Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies. p. 12.

9 Wilkins, T. (2008) ‘Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 29 (2), pp. 358-383.

10 Snyder, G. H. (1990), ‘Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 44 (1), p. 105.

11 Kann, R. A. (1976), ‘Alliances versus Ententes’, *World Politics*, 28 (4), p. 612.

12 Snyder, G. H. (1997), *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 6.

13 Ward, M. D. (1982), *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*, Denver: University of Denver, 1982, p. 7. Emphasis added.

14 Wilkins, ‘Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership’, p. 363.

15 Wilkins, T. (2012), ‘Alignment’, not ‘Alliance’ – the Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment’, *Review of International Studies*, 38, p. 68.

A potential problem for both Beijing and Moscow is that the concept of “strategic partnership” as a form of alignment bears close resemblance to the much older diplomatic concept of an *entente*. The principle prerequisite for an *entente* is that there be a shared set of interests that may constitute the basis for cooperation and/or coordination in the future. Sir Eyre Crowe, describing the most famous entente, the so-called *entente cordiale* of 1904 (and 1912) between Great Britain and France, remarked that it was based on “a frame of mind, a view of general policy which is shared by the governments of two countries.” Crowe, however, also cautioned that due to this “general policy,” “[f]or purposes of ultimate emergencies it [i.e. the *entente*] may be found to have no substance at all.”¹⁶

China’s BRI agenda, however, holds the potential to undo the bases of the Sino-Russian shared “frame of mind” in Central Asia. With Xinjiang serving as a central hub, China’s initiative seeks to stimulate trans-Eurasian economic and infrastructure connectivity that will link China, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. This stands in contrast to Russia’s regional integration initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union, which amounts to an effort at “protective integration” within the “post-Soviet space” in order to maintain Russian influence.

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The Bases of Sino-Russian Alignment in Central Asia: Security, Development, and Geopolitics

The Sino-Russian entente in Central Asia can be demonstrated via the overlap of interests in three core areas across much of the post-Cold War period: shared interests in stability, security, and order; complementarity of economic interests; and shared desire/interest in the development of a “multipolar” international order (in both strategic and normative terms).¹⁷ Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China and Russia developed a clear coexistence in the region, with each (generally) recognizing the other’s comparative advantages in each core area. Thus, Moscow

16 Dunn, J. S. (2013) *The Crowe Memorandum: Sir Eyre Crowe and Foreign Office Perceptions of Germany, 1918-1925*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 201-210.

17 Fels, E. (2017) ‘The Geopolitical Significance of Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia for the Belt and Road Initiative’, in Maximilian Mayer (ed), *Rethinking the Silk Road: China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Emerging Eurasian Relations*, London: Palgrave, p. 249.

retained the role and status of security provider (e.g., through its military presence in Tajikistan) and China became increasingly predominant economically.¹⁸ Throughout the 1990s and 2000s China and Russia developed a clear modus vivendi in the region, with each recognizing the other's comparative advantages with Moscow retaining the role of security provider and China increasingly predominant economically. Indeed, by the close of the 2000s China had overtaken Russia as Central Asia's major trading partner.¹⁹

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Structurally, both Moscow and Beijing have, since the end of the Cold War, sought to leverage their bilateral relationship as a means of combating the perceived detrimental effects of US unipolarity at the global and regional levels. There has thus been significant overlap in Russian and Chinese elite narratives and preferences for a “multipolar” international order, the creation of alternate normative orders to those authored/led by the West, and the protection/reassertion of state sovereignty. Demonstrating the broader condominium of interests in Sino-Russian relations, however, were Moscow and Beijing's clear accommodation of each other's global strategic interests – with, for instance, Russia acceding to China's efforts to construct a “statist multilateralism”²⁰ in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) focused on Beijing's Xinjiang-centric security concerns and China refraining from overt criticism of Russian interventions in the post-Soviet space.²¹

Regionally, both Moscow and Beijing have sought influence in what they perceive to be a potentially unstable region, albeit for different reasons. For Moscow, its discrete and “thin” interests in Central Asia – such as maintaining access to hydrocarbons, combating Islamist terrorism, or protecting ethnic Russians – have been framed by the broader goal of maintaining its self-image as a great power. Beijing, in contrast, instrumentalized its approach to the region in order to, first, secure its long-restive

18 Contessi, N. (2015) ‘Foreign and Security Policy Diversification in Eurasia: Issue Splitting, Co-alignment, and Relational Power’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 62 (5).

19 Swanstrom, N. (2011), *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?*, Washington DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, pp. 48-49

20 Jackson, N. (2014), ‘Trans-Regional Security Organisations and Statist Multilateralism in Eurasia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66 (2), pp. 181-203.

21 Tiezzi, S. (2014) ‘China Backs Russia on Ukraine’, *The Diplomat*, 3 March, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/03/china-backs-russia-on-ukraine/>

province of Xinjiang and, second, to leverage that geopolitical position to pursue broader economic and strategic objectives.

This pattern was largely consistent with Wilkin's conception of an alignment rather than a formal alliance as Sino-Russian relations were organized around a "system principle" (e.g., desire for a multipolar world) and were goal rather than threat driven. Additionally, it entailed low commitment costs that permitted Moscow and Beijing "to retain a greater degree of autonomy and flexibility, thus mitigating the 'entrapment' dynamic common to orthodox alliances."²²

The increasing encroachment of Chinese power and influence into Central Asia, long defined as part of Moscow's "near abroad," fundamentally challenges the balance of regional order. BRI's emphasis on developing trans-Eurasian economic and infrastructure "connectivity" has made Central Asia a vital hub for Beijing's efforts. The relative decline of US and Russian influence since 2012 – in Washington's case due to its "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific and in Moscow's case due to declining oil and gas prices and the conflicts in Ukraine and Syrian territories – has also arguably enhanced the attractiveness of China's "connectivity" agenda.

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Russia's ability to offer attractive "public goods" in security, economic, and normative terms to the Central Asian states has been most affected by these developments. In a security context, while Russia has been independent Central Asia's dominant actor, its war with Georgia in 2008 and more recent crisis with Ukraine have contributed to misgivings in regional capitals regarding Russian commitment to the status quo.²³ Economically, the "Eurasian Economic Union" amounts to a form of "protective integration" that seeks to embed Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space through a restrictive customs union.²⁴ In contrast, the economic and normative underpinnings of BRI are in some important ways complementary to the interests of the Central Asian states. Most immediately, China's focus on greater

22 Wilkins, "'Alignment', not 'Alliance'", p. 68

23 Dolgov, A. (2014) 'Kazakhs Worried after Putin Questions History of Country's Independence', Moscow Times, September 1, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/kazakhs-worried-after-putin-questions-history-of-country-s-independence/506178.html>.

24 Kirkham, K. (2016) 'The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How successful is the Russian regional hegemony?', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7 (2), pp. 111-128.

economic interconnectivity through the improvement of critical infrastructure, such as oil and gas pipelines, highways, railways, and telecommunications networks, gels with the long-held desire of Central Asia's energy rich states (e.g., Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) to diversify export routes for their oil and gas.²⁵ Additionally, a number of the Central Asian states have also identified diversification of their economies beyond resource exports as a core priority for their future economic well-being.²⁶ China's commitment of some US \$124 billion to the "Silk Road Fund" to assist in necessary infrastructural development has also been welcomed by Central Asian capitals.²⁷

The Future of Sino-Russian Relations: Alignment Dilemmas in the Era of BRI

How might the relationship between China and Russia play out in the near future? While much of this chapter has thus far focused on convergent interests and cooperation between the two, below we outline four scenarios that may disrupt the Beijing-Moscow entente. Each has been selected on the basis of its potential to drive one party uncomfortably close to the other, or to exacerbate existing problems in the relationship. This could lead either to entrapment dilemmas for each actor, or prompt weakening of the coincidence of interest that has been influential in shaping their evolving strategic partnership. In brief, these scenarios are: heightened Russia-West animosity; a Russian "opt-out" of BRI, with the attempt to construct its own trade corridors; the spread of significant terrorism in Central Asia and/or state failure or collapse in that sub-region.

The first risks Russian entrapment in BRI, which would not only compromise Russian President Vladimir Putin's "Euro-Pacific great power" vision,²⁸ but would effectively turn Russia into a "Chinese vassal state," necessary primarily for its ability to serve as a Eurasian trade conduit rather than a "equal partner" in Xi's

25 Yenikieff, S. M. (2011) 'Energy Interests of the "Great Powers" in Central Asia: Cooperation or Conflict?', *The International Spectator*, 46 (3), pp. 70-72.

26 Hashimova, U. (2018) 'Why Central Asia Is Betting on China's Belt and Road', *The Diplomat*, 13 August, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/why-central-asia-is-betting-on-chinas-belt-and-road/>

27 Deutsche Welle (2018) 'China's 'New Silk Road' - perception and reality', 12 May, <http://www.dw.com/en/chinas-new-silk-road-perception-and-reality/a-38818750>

28 Hill, F. and Lo, B. (2013) 'Putin's Pivot: why Russia is looking East', *Brookings Institution*, 31 July, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/07/31-russia-china-pacific-pivot-hill>

great power relations model. The second would prompt increased Sino-Russian competition, and potentially fracture the alignment between the two nations. The final two scenarios – linked to transnational security concerns associated with conflict spill over and fragility – would impact on Chinese and Russian domestic and regional concerns. Specifically, they would challenge both China’s normative agenda (as reflected in the SCO) as well as its direct security concerns in Xinjiang.

Heightened Russia-West animosity

There is a strong likelihood that Russia’s attempts to challenge the West – utilizing both traditional as well as new security instruments – will result in heightened Western push-back, especially from the US. Already there are signs that this is occurring. In spite of the reticence by the Trump White House to castigate or punish Russia, the US reacted with a heightened sanctions regime against Moscow after two precipitating events.

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The first of these was the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury during March 2018 with the highly specialized nerve agent Novichok, which prompted a coordinated set of diplomatic expulsions (including 60 by the US), with the intention of degrading Russia’s intelligence-gathering networks in the West.²⁹ The second was the significant domestic pressure placed on the Trump administration by Congress and the Senate to take a firmer stance on Russia’s support for Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war, following the gassing of numerous civilians in the rebel-held town of Douma. The new round of sanctions against Russian oligarchs and companies – although subsequently curtailed by Trump – prompted an 11 percent drop on the Russian stock market on April 9, 2018. The value of the aluminium company Rusal, controlled by Oleg Deripaska (known for its close ties to Kremlin), was halved on the Hong Kong stock exchange, and other leading Russian businesses such as Gazprom also experienced losses.³⁰ The rouble lost 2.5 per cent

29 Tankin, E. (2018) ‘Russia promises retaliation after Western expulsions’, Foreign Policy, March 26, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/26/russia-promises-retaliation-after-western-expulsions/>

30 Chapman, B. and Carrol, O. (2018) ‘Russia stock market crashes 11% after US imposes sanctions on oligarchs linked to Kremlin’ The Independent, April 9, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/russia-stock-market-latest-updates-us-sanctions-oligarchs-kremlin-putin-deripaska-a8296536.html>

of its value, which was its largest single-day slide in two years.

Of course, these events tended to overshadow ongoing concerns by senior US and NATO commanders at the deepening of military competition between Russia and the transatlantic West. Whereas Vladimir Putin had made much in his March 2018 State of the Nation address of a series of new “doomsday” weapons platforms, including a nuclear powered cruise missile and an unmanned submarine that could carry a nuclear payload to Western ports,³¹ Russia has for some time been making both public and private renovations to both its doctrine and force posture with respect to NATO. This included a new nuclear doctrine based on the “escalate to de-escalate” principle,³² which Western leaders widely viewed as a tacit intention to start conventional wars and then threaten the use of nuclear weapons: a gamble that relied on the assumption that NATO would be too fragmented or lack the political will to wage war in the Baltics or Eastern Europe. Russian attempts to prod NATO have also included the permanent deployment of *Iskander* SRBMs in the Kaliningrad enclave, giving it a significant A2AD capacity that covers the Visegrad states and reaches toward Germany,³³ as well as the deployment of new front-line combat divisions assisted by the Russian military modernization process that has been in progress since 2010.

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The risk for Russia is that its increasingly assertive posture towards the West will drive it firmly into the Chinese orbit, an outcome that Kremlin decision-makers have been eager to avoid. For its part, Beijing sees no real problem with Moscow adopting the role of chief antagonizer, since this makes Russia take on the increasing burden of security management towards its Western flank, and distracts NATO and its allies from Beijing’s move into the maritime space in the South China Sea, the Pacific, and the Indian Ocean. The main problem for Beijing concerns the negative optics of being associated with a bellicose Russian regime. Current indications are that China has

31 Lewis, J. (2018) ‘Putin’s nuclear-powered cruise missile is bigger than Trump’s’, *Foreign Policy*, March 1, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/01/putins-nuclear-powered-cruise-missile-is-bigger-than-trumps/>

32 Tertrais, B. (2018) ‘Russia’s nuclear policy: worrying for the wrong reasons’, *Survival*, 60 (2), pp. 37-38.

33 Jones, B. (2018) ‘Russian Duma confirms Iskander-M Kaliningrad deployment’, *Janes Defense Weekly*, February 8, <http://www.janes.com/article/77745/russian-duma-confirms-iskander-m-kaliningrad-deployment>

decided to wear these costs, as reflected in the very public show of Chinese solidarity with Russia by Wang Yi in April 2018.³⁴ Yi's expression of a deepened strategic partnership, and hostility towards a unipolar order, was in sharp contrast to China's prior irritation at the Russian decision to occupy Crimea in 2013, and its ongoing support for Russian separatists in the Donbas region of Ukraine from 2014 onwards. Beijing had privately reacted angrily to Moscow's moves, believing them to undermine the emphasis both nations had placed on the importance of sovereignty and non-interference in international law.

Viewed in this context, the Chinese pivot on its public support for Russia is a significant development underscoring the strength of the relationship. But, as noted above, there are few costs from heightened Russia-West animosity for China. The main risks here will be borne by Moscow. The likelihood of a hard US reset on Russia is increasing, and any challenger to Trump in 2020 – either Republican or Democrat – will have a strong incentive to run on a “get tough on Russia” foreign policy ticket, either to distance themselves from association with Russian meddling in US elections, or from a desire for revenge. If this eventuates, the Kremlin will find itself further starved of access to Western capital and more reliant on Chinese investment. It will also deepen its reliance on BRI as its main trade corridor to Asia as well as Europe, enmeshing it firmly within a China-centric trading order, and with little prospect of seeking out a viable alternative.

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However, while Moscow and Beijing have spoken of the complementarity between BRI and the EAEU, there has been little evidence of this in practice. As Nargis Kassenova has recently noted, “the shallow progress in linking the EAEU and BRI indicates that its function is mostly rhetorical, signaling the intention of Russia and China to accommodate each other's ambitions in Central Asia.”³⁵

34 ‘Wang Yi holds talks with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov of Russia’, press release, Embassy of the PRC in Finland, April 5, 2018. <http://www.chinaembassy-fi.org/eng/zxxx/t1548987.htm>

35 Kassenova, N. (2018) ‘More Politics than Substance: Three Years of Russian and Chinese Economic Cooperation in Central Asia’, Foreign Policy Research Institute Blog, 24 October, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/10/more-politics-than-substance-three-years-of-russian-and-chinese-economic-cooperation-in-central-asia/>

Russian Disengagement from BRI

If increased Russia-West tensions magnify the entrapment risks for Moscow, what of the alternative: a decision by the Kremlin to seek alternatives to BRI? By this, we do not mean a Russian pivot back towards Europe and the West, mainly since the political and diplomatic climate is so poisonous as to make this impossible in the short- to medium-term. Instead, we are referring to the various mechanisms Russia has investigated to create its own energy and trade corridors independently of China. And, while Beijing has been tolerant of such efforts, publicly stating that the Eurasian Union and BRI are complementary parallel tracks for trade regionalism, it would be concerning to China should Russia be even partially successful in creating trade route independence from Beijing.³⁶ Here, three of these Russian attempts are worthy of particular note: Russia's keenness to develop a rail network through the Korean peninsula; its desire to develop a pipeline network to India; and ongoing development of an Arctic trade route.

The idea of a Russia–Korea rail corridor, commencing on Russian territory and transiting via the narrow border to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) before terminating at the South Korean port of Pusan, has been proposed several times. Most recently it was linked to a decision in 2013 by then South Korean President Park Geun-Hye to accelerate the pace of Eurasian cooperation, resulting in the signing of 17 cooperation agreements between Russia and South Korea at the St Petersburg G20 meeting.³⁷ They incorporated visa exemptions, technology transfers, shipbuilding contracts, and South Korean cooperation in the Russia–North Korea rail and port project linking Khasan and Rajin, with the aim of potentially opening a transport corridor from East Asia to Europe.³⁸ This would give Russia the potential to pipe gas from the “power of Siberia” network into Asia. An upgrade of Pusan's cargo handling capacity would also permit LNG to be shipped to the region from the main Russian gas development projects on Sakhalin Island. Yet Russia's position here is tenuous. Even ignoring tensions on the Korean peninsula, Russia continually risks being squeezed out

36 Wilson, J. (2016) ‘The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: Implications for Russian-Chinese Relations’, *European Politics and Society*, 17 (1), pp. 120-122.

37 Sussex, M. (2016) ‘Russia's Asian Rebalance’, *Lowy Institute Analysis*, Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, p. 13, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/russia-s-asian-rebalance>

38 *Ibid.*

between Chinese and US lobbying of Seoul for infrastructure development projects. In addition, many of the development efforts on Sakhalin – launched in order to diversify away from pipelines as part of Putin’s own “pivot to Asia” launched in 2013 – have stalled due to lack of Russian access to capital, and pipeline infrastructure development is heavily reliant on Chinese investment, which provides Beijing with significant leverage on priority areas for the Russian energy sector.

A further attempt by Russia to circumvent BRI can be found in its negotiations with India to deepen cooperation in energy and arms sales. Moscow has frequently invited India to become a full member of the SCO, in an echo of the Russia–India–China “strategic triangle” proposal launched (with little success) by former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov during the late 1990s. Russia and India have strong military ties dating back to the Cold War era. Around 70 per cent of Indian military hardware is Russian, and Russia and India have been participating in the Indra biannual military exercises since 2003.³⁹ In addition to exercises there have been joint construction projects, such as the (albeit slow and fraught) development of the Sukhoi/HAL Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft, and a Russian-led initiative to construct about 20 nuclear reactors in India at a cost of US\$43 billion.⁴⁰ Perhaps the most noteworthy of Russia’s efforts here have been proposals for the construction of an oil pipeline and a gas pipeline, which have been mooted since around 2014. However, the routing of the pipeline has run up against Indian strategic concerns, given that Pakistan or Afghanistan (as well as China itself) would be the main transit zones for Russian energy.⁴¹ The proposals have also been outpaced by BRI and activist Chinese trade diplomacy, which by 2018 had effectively captured Pakistan within its network of Beijing’s chief economic partners.

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The final component of Russian efforts to outflank BRI concerns the development of an Arctic trade route. These have been ongoing for at least a decade, and a variety of attempts to engage Russia in multilateral fora to constrain it – such as by the Nordic Council, for

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Russia Today. (2014) ‘Going nuclear: Russia and India agree to build 12 power reactors by 2035’, 11 December, <http://www.rt.com/business/213411-going-nuclear-russia-india/>

⁴¹ Trickett, N. (2017) ‘Can Russia piggyback on China’s “String of Pearls”?’’, *The Diplomat*, 9 November, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/can-russia-piggyback-on-chinas-string-of-pearls/>

instance – have thus far led to failure. In August 2017, a Russian tanker sailed through the Arctic without an icebreaker for the first time, signifying that the Northern Sea Route (NSR) may well be a viable commercial proposition.⁴² In theory, when the distance between Yokohama and Hamburg by this route is calculated, it is only 7200 nautical miles, or some 37 percent less than the conventional route via the Suez Canal. Considering also that US Geological Survey estimates identify the Arctic region as the likely home for over 70 per cent of the world’s undiscovered natural gas,⁴³ it is not surprising that Russia has been attempting to exert not only sovereignty claims over much of the region, but also proceeding with its own development projects without waiting for the political questions to be resolved. Yet, despite a freer hand in development, which is constrained by political factors beyond Moscow’s control in the cases of North Korean rail and Indian energy proposals, the costs involved to make the NSR viable remain immense. Infrastructure is either weak or non-existent, with the exception of Russian military bases. The route will require a large icebreaker fleet for the foreseeable future. And the low cost of oil – with prices almost halving since 2013 – means that fuel costs now matter much less than during their height around the time of the Iraq War.

The prospects for a Russian “opt out” of BRI appear on current evidence to be either largely constrained, or unworkable. The situation on the Korean peninsula is trending further towards conflict than accommodation, making Russian proposals for trade

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cooperation involving both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and DPRK seem fantastical. The idea of an energy conduit to India, while consistent with past Kremlin desires for strategic triangles in Eurasia, is reliant on significant Sino-Indian rapprochement that has not transpired. And even in the most promising endeavor of the NSR, Russia faces external challenges that it has little ability to impact, as well as a massive development cost to bring it to fruition. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that Chinese trade preferences will continue to shape the agenda for Russia, leaving it in the unenviable position of entrapment in the BRI.

42 Barkham, P. (2017) ‘Russian tanker sails through Arctic without icebreaker for first time’, Guardian, August 24, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/aug/24/russian-tanker-sails-arctic-without-icebreaker-first-time>

43 Hille, K. (2016) ‘Russia’s Arctic Obsession’, Financial Times, October 21, <https://ft.com/russian-arctic/>

Terrorism and/or State Failure or Collapse in Central Asia

A potentially game-changing development for Beijing vis-à-vis BRI and China's diplomacy in Central Asia may stem from either the advent of a major, mass-casualty terrorist attack targeting either Xinjiang or Chinese interests or personnel in Central Asia (including Afghanistan) or a further "colour revolution" or regime collapse in one of the Central Asian capitals. Either of these developments would pose major challenges to Beijing's approach to the region and BRI by forcing it to choose to abide by its normative constructs of "non-intervention" and the "Shanghai Spirit" or pursue means of more directly protecting its core security and economic interests.

After 9/11 Beijing consistently blamed two externally-based militant groups – the "East Turkistan Islamic Movement" (ETIM) and "Turkistan Islamic Party" (TIP) – for this. ETIM had established a marginal presence in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan but was dealt a major blow when its leader was killed by the Pakistani military in Waziristan in October 2003. TIP emerged as a successor organization in 2005, closely aligned with Al Qaeda. ETIM and TIP both, however, appear to have had limited capacity to mount operations beyond the "Af-Pak" frontier in this period.

Within Xinjiang itself, Beijing has intensified its use of a variety of repressive and surveillance instruments of an emergent "security state" – including a militarized police presence, use of facial recognition scanners, regular scanning of electronic devices and social media for "suspect" content, and detention of thousands of Uyghurs in re-education camps.⁴⁴ Such tactics have reinforced long-standing perceptions of marginalization amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang and prompted significant numbers of Uyghurs to migrate abroad, often via insecure and illicit channels. This has created not only a flows of unregulated migration with adverse consequences for the migrants themselves, but also security challenges for both China and transit countries as migrants become targets of people smugglers and/or jihadi recruitment efforts.⁴⁵

After 9/11 Beijing consistently blamed two externally-based militant groups – the "East Turkistan Islamic Movement" (ETIM) and "Turkistan Islamic Party" (TIP) – for this.

44 Chin, J. and Bürge, C. (2017) '12 Days in Xinjiang: How China's Surveillance State Overwhelms Daily Life', The Wall Street Journal, 17 December, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twelve-days-in-xinjiang-how-chinas-surveillance-state-overwhelms-daily-life-1513700355>.

45 Clarke, M. (2017) 'Xinjiang and the Transnationalization of Uyghur Terrorism: Cracks in the New Silk Road?', The ASAN Forum, 10 February, <http://www.theasanforum.org/xinjiang-and-the-trans-nationalization-of-uyghur-terrorism-cracks-in-the-new-silk-road/>

Despite these efforts, the threat posed by Uyghur terrorism has arguably increased. It is clear that TIP now has a significant presence in Syria where it fights alongside al Qaeda's affiliates Jabhat al Nusra and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.⁴⁶ The group has also enhanced its capabilities to mount operations beyond this geographic base, and was implicated in the suicide attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on August 30, 2016 and the 2016 New Year's Eve Istanbul nightclub attack.⁴⁷

There is thus a self-fulfilling prophecy between Beijing's instrumentalization of the threat of terrorism within its domestic governance of Xinjiang and its foreign policy. It is possible that the pervasiveness of the "security state" in Xinjiang and the dynamics of the Syrian crisis have converged to provide the

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necessary conditions for the consolidation of such trans-national links between Uyghur militants and like-minded groups beyond Xinjiang.⁴⁸

This should give pause to Beijing on a number of fronts. The instruments of the "security state" have arguably reinforced long-standing perceptions of marginalization amongst Uyghurs in Xinjiang, increasing the potential for the radicalization that Beijing has long feared. Meanwhile, BRI's focus on enhancing trans-Eurasian connectivity promises to make China's foreign policy interests truly global in scope. It will do so by enmeshing it in regions and security dilemmas – such as those in the Middle East and South Asia – in which it has historically had both a limited role and a limited capability to influence events.

Regime change or another "colour revolution" in Central Asia would also challenge China's approach. Beijing's response to the overthrow of the Akayev government in Kyrgyzstan and Andijan Incident in Uzbekistan in 2005 was instructive of its status quo-oriented preferences vis-à-vis the forms of government throughout the region. This position has remained firm throughout more recent crises. China, we have also noted,

46 Clarke, M. (2016) 'Uyghur Militants in Syria: The Turkish Connection', *Terrorism Monitor*, 14 (3) (4 February), <https://jamestown.org/program/uyghur-militants-in-syria-the-turkish-connection/#.VrRpdLrKUK>

47 Clarke, M. (2016) 'China's Terrorism Problem Goes Global', *The Diplomat*, 7 September, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinas-terrorist-problem-goes-global/>

48 Clarke (2017) 'Xinjiang and the Transnationalization of Uyghur Terrorism'.

refused to provide either its or the SCO's imprimatur to Russia's military interventions in Georgia in 2008 or Ukraine and the Crimea in 2013/14. Yet neither of these incidents of regime change or Russian intervention has impinged directly on either China's economic or strategic interests in Central Asia or its Xinjiang-focused security concerns.

A potential scenario that could alter this would be system transition and/or failure in Kazakhstan. Much of the stability engendered in Kazakhstan has been largely down to Nazarbayev's leadership. But in 2018 he celebrated his 78th birthday, and his continued leadership cannot be relied upon in the long-term. Whereas both Putin and Xi doubtless prefer stability over change in Kazakhstan, how they propose to achieve this is a reminder of their divergent preferences. Russia has long embarked an interest in protection of ethnic Russians in the north of the country to secure its interests in ensuring that Kazakhstan remains closely tied to the Eurasian Union in economic terms and to the CSTO in security affairs. For China, on the other hand, the goal has been to ensure that economic growth – underwritten in the energy and infrastructure sectors by Beijing – will give China not only significant leverage over Kazakhstan, but also act as a stabilizing factor on its society.

Conclusion

While China and Russia both confront potential challenges to their own discrete interests in Central Asia in the short- to medium-term, it appears that Russia faces the most pressing choices in the context of Sino-Russian relations. Despite official claims of complementarity, Chinese and Russian interests across the security/strategic, economic, and normative domains are pregnant with latent tensions. The most pressing of these concerns each party's competing integration efforts, the EEU, and BRI. Moscow's effort in this regard is of minimal attractiveness to many of the post-Soviet states, based as it is on clear and familiar geopolitical gambit to ensure Russian pre-eminence in its "near abroad."

In this regard, Moscow has already "more or less accepted the defection of the Baltic states" to the Western orbit, but is

challenged by BRI elsewhere along its Eurasian periphery.⁴⁹ BRI, in contrast to Russia's "protective integration," offers a trans-Eurasian or even trans-continental vision of economic and infrastructure connectivity, without an overt geopolitical agenda. Arguably, thus far, Russia has accommodated itself to China's BRI agenda. Yet, the question remains as to whether this is sustainable for Russia in the medium- to long-term, given the trends of its economic decline and conflictual relations with the US and much of Europe. In this context, then, continued accommodation of China in Central Asia risks sliding inevitably into entrapment.

49 Wilson (2016) 'The Eurasian Economic Union', p. 123.