

Sino-Russian geopolitical interests in Central Asia: A study in competition and cooperation

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the nature of the geopolitical interests of both China and Russia in Central Asia amid the accelerating geopolitical transformations taking place within the international system. It focuses on analyzing the overlap of the strategic and geopolitical interests of both parties within the region. The study is based on the significance of Central Asia as a pivotal region in the heart of Eurasia, owing to its vast energy resources and strategic geographical position that connects East and West, which has made it an arena for both international competition and cooperation simultaneously.

The study concludes that Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia are characterized by a pattern of “competitive partnership,” whereby both parties cooperate in confronting Western influence and promoting a multipolar international order through institutional frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS group, with the aim of coordinating security and economic policies, while simultaneously competing for economic and strategic influence within the region. The study also indicates that the rise of China’s economic role, alongside the continuation of Russia’s security and military presence, has contributed to reshaping the balance of power in Central Asia within a framework based on pragmatic cooperation and non-confrontational competition.

Keywords: China, Russia, Central Asia, Geopolitical Interests, International System, Competitive Partnership, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Introduction

Since the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Central Asia has entered a new phase of geopolitical transformation. In many respects, the region has returned to a situation reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Great Game, albeit with new actors. Historically, Central Asia has been the focus of attention for various empires and states, and it may be argued that the region has, to a considerable extent, remained subject to a form of great-power competition throughout much of its history.

Several factors account for Central Asia's strategic importance in the contemporary world. Among the most significant of these factors is the abundance of energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region, which possess substantial reserves of both oil and natural gas.

The geopolitical vacuum that emerged in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union,

together with the inability of many of the newly independent states to establish sufficiently capable state structures to defend their national sovereignty, contributed to the intensification of regional and international competition over the region. Energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, consequently became a source of geopolitical competition and conflict. Researchers generally regard these developments as marking the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the region. Nevertheless, the situation has become increasingly complex as a result of the emergence of a new competitive environment characterised by rivalry among states.

Within this context, China and Russia have emerged as the two most significant geopolitical actors in Central Asia. Both seek to strengthen their influence in the region, although they employ different instruments and strategies. While China relies primarily on economic engagement, trade, financing, and infrastructure development within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia relies more heavily on its security and military instruments, the legacy of the Soviet era, cultural and linguistic ties, and defence arrangements within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union.

China's strategy in the region seeks to achieve a set of interrelated objectives, including ensuring energy security through the diversification of supply routes away from vulnerable maritime chokepoints, strengthening regional stability along its sensitive western borders, particularly in the Xinjiang region, and expanding its spheres of economic influence in a manner that supports its rise as a major power.

Russia, on the other hand, views Central Asia as a strategic depth and a vital sphere that cannot be relinquished. This perception is closely linked to a deeply rooted geopolitical doctrine extending throughout both Tsarist and Soviet Russian history.

Despite the convergence of Chinese and Russian positions on several international issues and their shared efforts to challenge American hegemony and promote a multipolar international order, the overlap of their interests in Central Asia raises profound questions regarding the nature of their relationship. Is it a strategic partnership based on coordination and a division of roles? Or does it represent a form of restrained geopolitical competition managed through non-confrontational mechanisms at the present time, while simultaneously containing the seeds of potential long-term conflict?

The significance of this research lies in its attempt to analyse this complex overlap and examine the possible trajectories of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia by tracing the instruments of influence employed by each party and assessing the positions of the Central Asian states themselves. These states have increasingly demonstrated an ability to balance between the two powers without aligning exclusively with either of them.

The study also seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical implications of this overlap for regional security and for the future of the international system, of which Central Asia constitutes one of the most important strategic contact zones.

Accordingly, analysing the interaction between Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia provides an important entry point for understanding the ongoing transformations in the global balance of power. This interaction also reflects the nature of the challenges facing major powers in managing overlapping spheres of influence in a world increasingly moving towards multipolarity.

First: Importance of the Research

The significance of this research stems from its examination of one of the most prominent contemporary geopolitical interactions in one of the most sensitive regions of the international system, namely Central Asia. The region represents a strategic link between East and West and constitutes an important arena of competition for influence among major powers, particularly Russia and China.

Second: Research Problem

Despite the apparent manifestations of alliance between China and Russia in international forums, the overlap between their respective strategies in Central Asia raises questions regarding the sustainability of this cooperation. Economic competition and mutual security concerns may undermine strategic trust between the two sides.

The research problem is therefore centred on the following main question:

To what extent does the overlap of geopolitical interests between China and Russia in Central Asia affect the nature of relations between the two countries? Does this overlap serve as a factor that strengthens their strategic partnership, or does it constitute a source of escalating geopolitical competition?

The following sub-questions emerge from this main question:

1. What is the nature of China's and Russia's geopolitical interests in Central Asia?
2. What are the principal instruments employed by China and Russia to enhance their influence in Central Asia?
3. What are the principal areas of convergence and divergence between the Chinese and Russian strategies in the region?
4. How do Beijing and Moscow manage their bilateral relationship in light of this geopolitical overlap?

Third: Research Objectives

1. To analyse the dimensions of China's and Russia's geopolitical interests in Central Asia and identify the motivations underlying their presence in the region.
2. To examine the nature of the instruments of influence employed by both parties and assess their effectiveness in strengthening their regional presence.
3. To identify areas of convergence and contradiction between the geopolitical strategies of the two

parties and examine their impact on the pattern of bilateral relations.

Based on the nature of the study and its objectives, it was divided into three requirements as follows:

The First Requirement: China's Interests in Central Asia

China was among the first states to recognise the Central Asian countries. The independence of the Central Asian republics at the beginning of the 1990s represented a pivotal turning point in the international system and one of the most significant geopolitical developments that reshaped the interests and strategies of major powers, including China.

Beijing quickly recognised that the collapse of the Soviet Union had created a geopolitical vacuum in a region of exceptional importance. This development required China to adopt a new policy towards the Central Asian republics based on a deep understanding of the transformations affecting the political and security map of the region.

The border between China and three Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—extends for more than 3,000 kilometres. In addition, numerous ethnic groups extend across these borders. Consequently, any form or level of instability or transformation in the internal conditions of these states is likely to have a direct impact on Chinese interests.

This transformation in Chinese policy was driven by a number of interconnected considerations. In addition to its clear economic objectives, China attaches considerable importance to security considerations. The issue of the Muslim Uyghur minority in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, which is rich in energy resources and represents one of China's most sensitive and strategically significant regions, constitutes one of the sensitive dimensions of relations between China and the Central Asian states.

This sensitivity is particularly significant given the complex ethnic composition of Central Asia. Although Central Asian governments have adopted a cautious public discourse regarding this issue, popular concerns have increased, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, regarding Chinese policies in Xinjiang.

Beijing also fears the spread of manifestations of religious extremism and Islamic fundamentalism across its western borders, which could threaten its internal stability. Based on these concerns, China has adopted a multidimensional approach to its regional policy, centred on strengthening political and economic cooperation with the Central Asian states as a means of ensuring regional stability. (Al-Adhaileh, 2011, p. 97)

Central Asia occupies a geographically central position in various geopolitical theories and constitutes an important arena for a wide range of international and regional strategies. This can be observed in the ideas of the German geopolitical thinker Friedrich Ratzel and his theory of the state as a living organism, which helps explain China's interest in the region.

From this perspective, China seeks to utilise the geopolitical significance of Central Asia and regard

it as a vital sphere through which it can expand and grow while benefiting from the diverse economic resources and capabilities available in the region.

and absorbs its surrounding environment. China, given its geopolitical perceptions, economic strength, growing military capabilities, and large population, requires additional space, or what Ratzel referred to as soil.

Accordingly, the state expands into surrounding territories that it perceives as forming part of its vital sphere. Ratzel's geopolitical conception of Asia revolves around the idea of Lebensraum, or living space.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, what Brzezinski described as a “black hole” emerged. This development made the Asian continent a new arena for major global powers, with Central Asia becoming an important part of this broader geopolitical environment.

The growing interest of international powers in Central Asia can be attributed to two principal considerations. The first is the need to prevent the emergence of a new competing power, while the second concerns the desire to benefit from the economic and developmental capabilities of the region and from the substantial oil reserves possessed by the Central Asian states and the Caspian Sea region in order to meet the growing energy requirements of major powers.

From Ratzel's perspective, Central Asia therefore represents a Lebensraum, or vital space, into which states seek to expand. This is one of the dimensions of China's contemporary approach towards the region.

Within Mackinder's geopolitical theory, Central Asia forms part of the Heartland. Within Spykman's conception, it is associated with the Rimland, while in Brzezinski's geopolitical perspective it represents a central geopolitical space that international and regional powers cannot ignore and over which they continuously seek to exercise influence and control. (Ezz al-Din and Abdelmajid, 2020, p 25)

Central Asia is currently experiencing a significant process of rebalancing among major powers, particularly in light of China's expanding role, which is based on a comprehensive policy of regional connectivity.

China's strategy relies on a form of economic attraction that draws upon the region's natural resources, particularly its energy resources, while simultaneously employing China's substantial financial reserves to finance commercial investments, provide loans, and support infrastructure projects through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and numerous other mechanisms.

Chinese policy towards the Central Asian states is characterised by its relative lack of explicit political conditionality. China does not demand democratic reforms from these states in the same manner as Western powers, nor does it exert the same forms of political pressure associated with Russian influence.

Consequently, the absence of an explicit political agenda—apart from an emphasis on regional stability associated with economic development—constitutes an important source of attraction for local governments, which view China as a strategic partner that does not interfere directly in their domestic affairs. (HYNEK, 2020, p. 9)

Central Asia has historically constituted a pivotal link in the global trade network. The ancient Silk Road passed through the region, transforming cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara—located today within the borders of Uzbekistan—into prosperous commercial centres and hubs of civilisational interaction between East and West.

In the context of its efforts to revive this historical role, China launched the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative as one of its most ambitious geo-economic projects. The initiative aims to strengthen land and maritime connectivity among Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure development and enhanced trade integration. It comprises three principal routes: the Northern Belt, which passes through Kazakhstan and Russia towards Europe; the Central Belt, which traverses Central and Western Asia towards the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea; and the Southern Belt, which connects China with Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Central Asia therefore constitutes the principal land of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

The importance of Central Asia within this project stems from its role as the geographical link between East and West. All the countries of the region, with the exception of Turkmenistan, are members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank¹ (AIIB), which represents one of the principal financing instruments of the project, alongside the Asian Development Bank and other sources of financing. This institutional engagement enhances the integration of the Central Asian states into the project and opens new developmental and commercial opportunities for them.

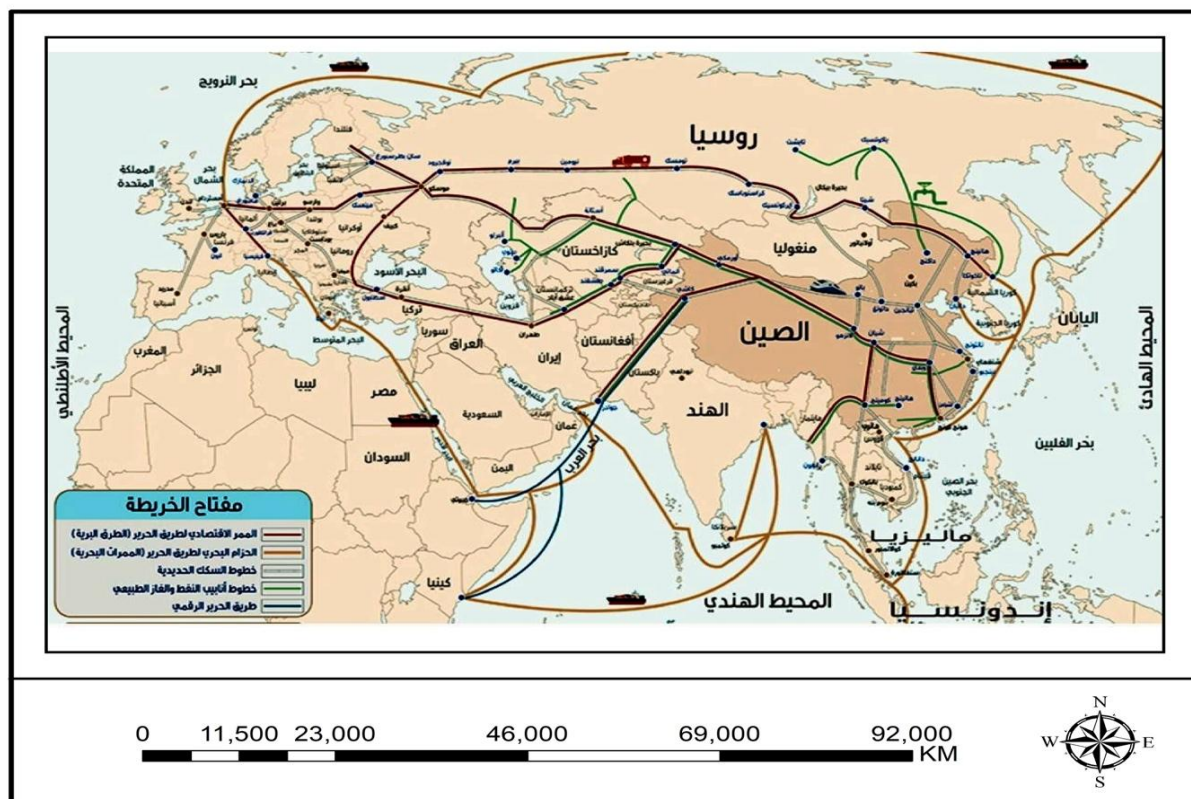
Central Asia constitutes the principal overland axis of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Further underscoring the region’s importance to China, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt for the first time in the Kazakh capital, Astana, in 2013. Together with the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road, it forms the broader Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to promote infrastructure development and economic integration across Asia, Europe, and Africa. (Dabrowski, 2017, p. 304)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) consists of two principal components: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the Silk Road Economic Belt. As illustrated in Map No. (1), the initiative aims to establish an extensive network of land routes, railway lines, oil and natural gas pipelines, and electricity networks in order to strengthen connectivity between China and Europe, including the

¹ The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB): is an international financial institution established by a Chinese initiative in 2015. Based in Beijing, the bank aims to support infrastructure and sustainable development projects in Asia and beyond. It is one of China's most prominent tools for strengthening its economic partnerships, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The bank has more than 100 member countries, including countries from Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America.

Baltic region, through Central Asia and Russia; between China and the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central and Western Asia; and between China and the Indian Ocean through Southeast and South Asia.

The Maritime Silk Road, for its part, seeks to connect Chinese ports with the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and Europe, in addition to strengthening connections between China's coastal ports, the South China Sea, and the South Pacific Ocean. (Yüce, 2018, p 68)



Map No. (1): Explains the geographical dimensions of China's Belt and Road Initiative. (Source: <https://annabaa.org/arabic/economicarticles/31849>)

Since the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has become Central Asia's largest trading partner and investor. According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, trade between China and Central Asia reached \$70 billion in 2022. However, scenarios reported by ²Bloomberg in 2023 indicate that China's GDP growth rate, which slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, will reach approximately 5% until 2025, then decline to 4%, and subsequently to 3.5% by 2030. This

² Bloomberg Magazine, or as it is officially known as Bloomberg Businessweek, is an American economic and financial magazine published on a weekly basis, and is considered one of the most prominent publications specialized in analyzing global markets, economic strategies, and political trends affecting the global economy.

decline is expected to continue until 2050, with the worst-case scenario projecting growth to as low as 1%. Nevertheless, the projected 4% growth until 2035 will still require massive energy consumption, reinforcing the geopolitical importance of Central Asia in China's future strategy. (Alkan, 2024, p5)

Central Asian countries view the Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to develop connectivity infrastructure and a source of technology transfer. They are fully aware of the economic complementarity between them and rapidly growing China, and have benefited greatly from Chinese-origin trade and investment. The gas pipelines between China and Central Asia from Turkmenistan, the oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China, and the highways and railways linking Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to China are just some of the manifestations of the growing mutually beneficial economic relations between China and Central Asia.

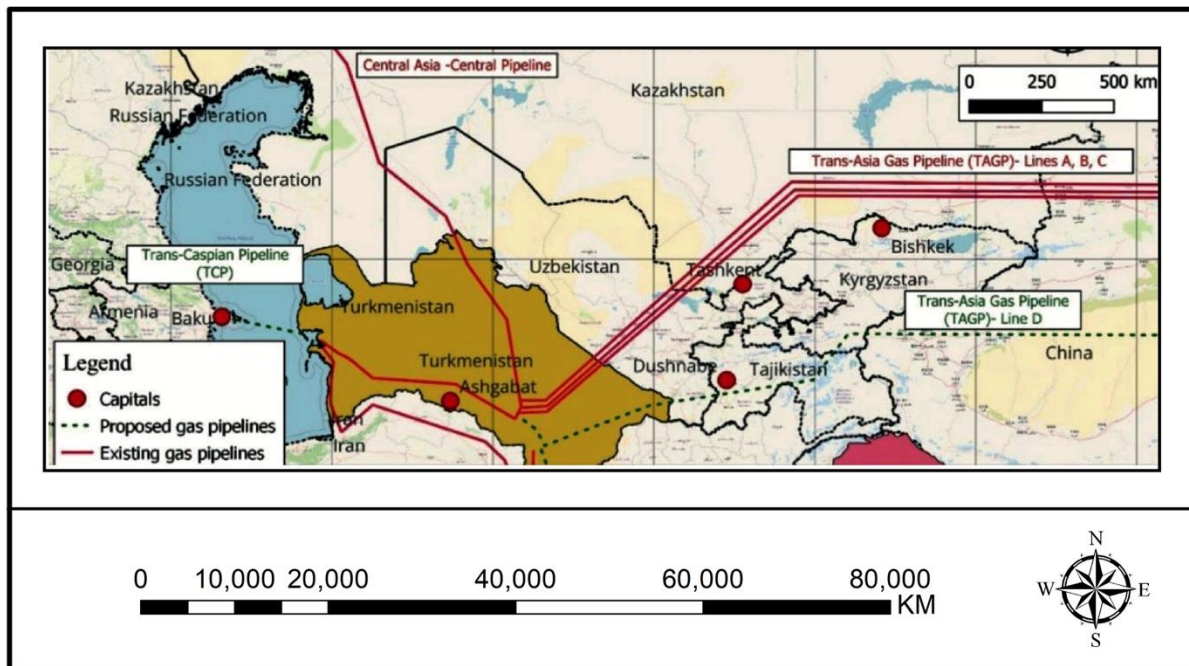
With China's rapid economic growth, and foreign trade now accounting for nearly 50% of its GDP, China is now highly dependent on the global market. However, this close connection has created a significant security dilemma, as most of the global trade on which China relies is carried out by sea, making it vulnerable to potential geoeconomic disruptions. Most Chinese commercial activity is concentrated on the eastern and southern coasts, through which about 80% From imports and exports, and with the continuation of economic expansion, China's energy needs are increasing, especially oil. Despite being the fourth largest oil producer in the world, it only meets half of its needs. China's dependence on foreign oil reached 60% in 2015, and rose to 68% in 2020. China depends on regions with fragile political stability, such as Africa and the Middle East, for 70% of its oil imports Which enhances the fragility of its energy security. (Madani,2021,p 553)

China prioritizes specific factors under the Belt and Road Initiative, such as diversification of energy sources, geographical proximity, security of energy transmission, and the possibility of importing it by land from Central Asia. China has succeeded in building a form of interdependence with the Central Asian republics, with oil- and gas-rich countries contributing to addressing China's strategic concerns regarding energy security, while China guarantees these countries permanent outlets for their energy exports, especially natural gas. (Khan, 2023, p200)

China views energy security as a fundamental pillar of Chinese stability, the energy situation in Central Asia is greatly influenced by the complex interplay of geopolitical and security factors, with a particular focus on natural gas and pipeline policies. However, the risks it faces include instability in the Caspian Basin countries, military conflicts, and vital maritime points such as the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, four-fifths of imported oil passes through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca One of China's most prominent trade chokepoints, it is a highly geopolitically sensitive waterway, surrounded to the south and east by regional powers such as India and its Western allies. Given its heavy dependence on it to carry the bulk of its foreign trade through sea lanes, especially energy imports from the Middle East and Africa, in addition to the escalation of tensions with the United States, The possibility of comprehensive economic sanctions or a major maritime dispute that would lead to a sudden paralysis in Chinese economic growth. (KARASU, 2023,p120-121)

To meet these challenges, China needs to establish an alternative land corridor for access to energy sources. This is where the vital role of the SERB economic belt initiative in Central Asia comes into play, as this region provides rich oil and gas resources of high quality and low impurity content. Central Asian countries are currently encouraged to diversify energy export markets, which enhances opportunities for strategic cooperation between them and China. China can reduce its reliance on maritime transport to meet its oil, natural gas, and precious metals needs, enhancing its long-term geo-energy security. China's energy diplomacy in the region focuses on acquiring energy resources, expanding investments, and signing long-term contracts in the production and transportation sectors. These projects are often led by the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). (Alkan, 2024 ,p16-17)

The gas pipeline project extending from Central Asia to China for more than 8,000 km, including 200 km inside Turkmenistan, 500 km via Uzbekistan, and 1,300 km via Kazakhstan, as shown in Map No. (2), is one of the most prominent giant Chinese projects that embody the political will and financial and diplomatic discipline of Beijing in managing the "pipeline policy" in 2021, where nearly 80% came From China's gas imports through these pipelines. (Serikbayeva, 2013, p39)



Map No. (2): Shows natural gas transmission lines from Central Asia to China (Source: (Alkan, 2024,p9))

In light of the increasing geopolitical importance of Central Asia and the diversity of vital Chinese geopolitical interests, the first presidential summit between China and Central Asian countries was held in the Chinese city of “Xi'an” 2023; This was in the presence of Chinese President Xi Jinping, who announced the start of a "new era" in relations between the two parties, based on supporting the

stability and sovereignty of the countries of the region, granting them \$3.7 billion in financial development aid, and proposing the start of cooperation in the defense and security fields; This is a qualitative shift in cooperation between the two parties, which was welcomed by the countries of the region, and confirmed their intention to enhance cooperation with China in various fields, and implement all projects included in the "Belt and Road" initiative. Therefore, the summit inaugurates a new phase of cooperation between the two parties, in addition to enhancing Beijing's influence in the region; which supports its international position and the competition between it and Moscow and Washington to extend influence in the region inaugurates the "Xi'an Summit" Indeed, a new phase of cooperation between Beijing and Central Asia is part of a general strategy put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping in his vision for the world, during his speech at the 20th National Congress of the ruling Communist Party in 2022. He explained that Beijing aims to establish a new pattern of international relations, characterized by mutual respect, fairness and justice, and profitable cooperation for various partners to share the fruits of development, including the countries of Central Asia The volume of trade between China and Central Asia reached \$95 billion in 2023. (Centre, 2025)

The Belt and Road Initiative strategy is the Chinese version of the "American" Marshall Plan, as American loans and investments helped rebuild Europe after World War II. In fact, China's ambition far exceeds that of the Marshall Plan. While the Marshall Plan was limited in scope to the European region, China's new Belt and Road Strategy is globally oriented from a geopolitical perspective It extends across 60 countries along envisioned routes that span Asia, the Middle East, Europe and even Africa, and could generate greater international impact, with Central Asian countries being the pivotal region in that strategy. (Yüce, 2018,P 70)

In a context that reflects the rapid transformations in the geopolitical balances in Central Asia, the Second China-Central Asia Summit, held in the Kazakh capital, Astana, in 2025, represented a qualitative development in the multidimensional relations between China and the five Central Asian countries, after the first summit held in China, which brought together the Chinese President, with all the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, hosted by the Chinese city of Xi'an in 2023 In addition to this summit, which represented the official inauguration of the regional cooperation mechanism, the Astana summit came to consolidate this mechanism through institutional steps and long-term strategic projects, as it was announced during the summit the signing of the «Treaty of Eternal Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation», in addition to China providing a loan worth about 209 million dollars to the Central Asian countries, which play a pivotal role in the Chinese «Belt and Road» initiative, which includes huge infrastructure projects in the region The Xi'an Summit (2023) focused primarily on establishing political trust and formulating a common vision, while the Astana Summit reflects a shift from planning to implementation, and from political coordination to multi-pronged strategic integration, making it a decisive turning point in reshaping China's role in Central Asia in light of the decline of Russian influence and the absence of direct American interaction. (Xinzhou, 2025)

In this context, China is working to strengthen its alliance with Russia with the aim of confronting American influence in Central Asia, through institutional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Thanks to its vital geostrategic location, Central Asia remains the focus of continued attention by the United States and other powers seeking to maintain their influence in the Central Asian republics. However, China's influence appears more prominent due to the expansion of trade and the acquisition of energy resources And its rise as a major power. (Rumer, 2008)

China has adopted a policy of involving Russia in the SERB initiative, as part of Beijing's efforts to neutralize geopolitical tensions with Moscow by involving it in the initiative. This has given Central Asian countries room for diplomatic maneuver without lining up behind a single force in order to contain the risks of geopolitical escalation. The geopolitical transformations after the dissolution of the Soviet Union have revealed a vacuum in regional influence. While Russia has maintained an institutional and economic presence in the Central Asian republics, China has begun to fill this void with soft economic tools, such as loans, infrastructure, and energy projects, and with the relative decline in the effectiveness of the American and Russian roles, Beijing has taken a leading position, supported by direct investments expected to exceed \$2.5 trillion by 2025.

Central Asia has played the role of a "diplomatic bridge" between the two sides, rather than being an arena for direct confrontation. With Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Central Asian countries have become more cautious towards Moscow, especially in light of the presence of Russian minorities within their borders, and Russia's violation of the principle of non-interference through the use of force. Russia is expected to face increasing difficulty in regaining its influence in Central Asia Given its declining economic potential and China's rise as a dominant economic player, in terms of international balance, there is India, which seeks to compete with China and the United States, especially since its intervention in the region following the events of September 11. However, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, and China's development of strategic relations with Pakistan, have made it more capable of excluding Washington and weakening New Delhi's influence, especially with Pakistan's involvement in the SERB initiative and the exploitation of Islamic discourse to isolate India regionally, and so on It can be said that the geopolitical sphere of influence in Central Asia is rapidly and effectively devolving to China. (KARASU, 2023, p123)

The Second Requirement: Russia's Interests in Central Asia

Central Asia constituted, particularly during the period between 1813 and 1907, an arena of intense strategic competition between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. This rivalry became historically known as the "Great Game." It centred on Britain's efforts, particularly through its occupation of Afghanistan, to prevent the expansion of Russian influence towards India, while Russia sought to counter British containment of its influence in the region and continue its expansion towards warm-water outlets through Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became fully aware of the importance of restoring its influence in the region. Central Asia consequently became one of the foremost priorities of Russian strategy because of its geo-strategic location. The region lies within Russia's southern geopolitical environment and shares extensive geographical connections with the Russian Federation, particularly through Kazakhstan, which possesses Russia's longest border with any of the Central Asian republics. Russia also shares the Caspian Sea with Turkmenistan

Central Asia therefore constitutes a strategic depth for Russia, and the region has historically occupied an important position in Russian geopolitical thinking. Consequently, Russia seeks to strengthen its relations with the Central Asian states at both the economic and security levels. (*Saeed, 2022, p. 390*)

Russia's interest in Central Asia is also evident, as it is an extension of Russian culture and civilization, in addition to the presence of a number of Russian minorities residing in various Central Asian republics. Their presence represents a card to enhance Russian influence and could lead to military intervention, under the pretext of protecting Russian minorities. This was clearly evident in the political doctrine of the Russian leadership, and was clearly evident in President Putin's statement before the Russian Parliament (Duma) in March 2014, that "It is extremely important to acknowledge that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.... Tens of millions of our citizens and our countrymen found themselves outside the Russian borders, and this is dangerous talk, of course, given that all countries neighboring Russia have significant percentages of citizens of Russian origin, including the countries of Central Asia. (Al-Omari, 2025, page 145)

Russian geopolitical theorist Alexander Dugin emphasizes "Russia's spiritual uniqueness and distinct cultural-historical essence," which drives it to strive diligently to preserve its unique identity in the face of the intellectual and value challenges of both the West and the East. In this context, Dugin adopts the slogan "Neither East nor West, but Eurasia," which establishes Russia's independence and the uniqueness of its identity. Based on his concept of Russia as a geographical axis of history, its geopolitical interests are closely linked to Eurasian lands of which the Central Asian republics are an integral part, and therefore, extending Russian hegemony over this region is a founding principle and determinant of the geopolitical prospects of the Russian state, and its behavior stems from historically rooted imperial expansionist thought. (*Sufyan, 2017, p. 104*)

As a result of this deep geopolitical challenge, and due to its strategic geographical location, Central Asia has historically been considered, whether in the Tsarist or Soviet era, a vital strategic buffer against external threats. According to the Russian national security doctrine, it represented Russia's southern flank, which must be protected from any external influences and interventions that might constitute an infringement on the sovereignty and security of the Russian state. On this basis, this doctrine determined the choices of Russian decision-makers towards that region Which included exerting political, economic, or military pressure on its republics, with the aim of limiting the impact of foreign interventions, and thus preserving Russian interests and keeping them within the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation. (*Rashid, 2004, p. 229*)

The West has sought to impose a specific geopolitical mission on Russia, aimed at hindering its effective involvement in global political processes and interactions, and undermining its ability to determine its own destiny and future. This trend is confirmed by many Western strategists, especially Americans, such as Brzezinski, Kissinger, and Condoleezza Rice Those who stressed that the only strategic mission of the United States of America is to prevent the emergence of an independent strategic pole or entity on the territory of Eurasia that would challenge the American strategy or operate in isolation from the American administration, based on this demand specifically, Alexander Dugin believes that the essence of the Western proposal to Russia is to play the role of the "regional state"; a state that exceeds the size of the "nation state" but is less than the "global state", and at the geopolitical level, This state is described as a large entity with remarkable dynamism, but its political interests are confined to its geographical areas. It lacks the ability to directly influence the mapping of global geostrategic interactions, as it is directly subject to the basic strategic lines determined by the balance of power of the most powerful empires.

Russian geopolitical experts believe that this description represents falling into the "trap of the regional state", which enjoys a degree of power that allows it to exercise partial influence of a political and economic nature over its neighbors, but this influence cannot conflict with the interests of the great powers.

These experts believe that Russia's position in post-Cold War international relations is determined by its awareness of the strategic damage to the regional state trap that the West is trying to force Russia to embody. This means pushing Russia's geopolitical lines backwards towards geographical, economic and political withdrawal due to external pressures on its vital areas, which is the same strategy that NATO seeks to implement and complete the new containment rings and the strategic blockade of the Russian state. (Dugin, 2017, p. 242)

In order to formulate visions capable of overcoming the trap of the regional state and reviving Russia's global role, in-depth discussions were held between Russian movements and various geopolitical experts, revealing a convergence in the level of awareness of the strategic seriousness of changing global events and Russia's position in this transformation. The starting point for this awareness strategy is the necessity of criticizing the geopolitical mechanisms that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union And drawing lessons and morals to prevent the mistake of repeating them in the changing reality of the new Russia.

This strategy requires formulating a guide to geopolitical emission that starts from awareness of the factors that led to the disappearance of the Russian Empire and the disintegration of the bipolar world through an objective analysis of these reasons, and Alexander Dugin summarizes those factors as follows:

- First: At the ideological level, the communist ideological rigidity regarding issues of identity, ethnicity, ethnicity, and the spiritual and religious values of the Soviet peoples created obstacles to the organic development and actual integration of these peoples on the basis of belonging to

the Soviet Empire, rather than forced subjugation under the yoke of communism.

- Second: On the geopolitical and strategic levels, the Soviet Union was unable to compete for distant areas of influence with the Western Atlantic camp from the perspective of the theory of geopolitical control. The strategic exposure of the Soviet Union was manifested in its inability to control vital global seaports and routes, and its remaining a land empire besieged by the Western Atlantic (Rimland) region, where the United States of America dominated all the coastal (coastal) regions of southern and western Eurasia Responding to the far-reaching theoretical theses of Western geopoliticians such as Mahan and his theory of "naval power" (Sea Power), and Nicholas Speakman and his theory of "the centrality of (Rimland), who is considered the architect of the American geostrategic victory over the Soviet Union". (Wannasi, 2014, p 217)
- Third: The failure of regional integration between the various republics and nationalities that made up the former Soviet Union, as the regional principle was called "self-governing national republics."

In order for Russia to regain its dynamic global role, it must focus on the primacy of geopolitics and be aware of the centrality of geopolitical theories in order to restore the strategic balance with the West that was breached in favor of Atlanticism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Dugin, applying the geopolitical view and believing in it as a destiny will lead to Russia regaining its global position And then influence the paths of interaction in the global political environment, leading to the establishment of a multipolar system as an alternative to the unipolar system of the United States of America.

Based on these geopolitical visions, Russian leaders are working to revive the views of the geopolitical thinker Makander on the geographical axis of history (The Geographical Pivot of History), in which Russia clearly becomes the heart of the new Earth (The new heartland), and is moving towards hegemony and control over the pivotal Earth in the Eurasian continental bloc. In addition, the principle of "common enemy" is introduced as a fundamental element in Russia's new geopolitical environment This, in turn, opens the way for the creation of strategic alliances between regional and global powers that share the same view of the "common enemy," such as China, India, and Iran. The call for a Eurasian alliance, with Russia as its strategic driving core, involves the formation of a geopolitical link that balances and confronts NATO on all strategic, economic, and military levels. This Eurasian alliance is formed by grouping the important geopolitical axes within the following three types:

- Axis I: Russia -China
- Axis II: Russia -India
- The third axis: Russia -Iran (Dugin, 2017, p 261)

The "Russia-Iran axis" constitutes one of the most important axes opposing American and Western orientations in Central Asia. According to the geopolitical visions of the Russian Federation, its bloc

with Iran will achieve it an exit to warm waters via the Arabian Gulf, which is a geopolitical bet that Russian leaders have been striving for for centuries. Dugin points out the importance of the alliance with Iran in order for Russia to achieve this strategic goal that it has not achieved for hundreds of years It is represented by containing and encircling American influence in the region, based on Russia being considered the sole heir to Soviet military power on the lands of these republics. (Hassan, 2022, p.58)

In addition, Russian leaders have realized that cooperation with Iran would help their country achieve its goals and interests in Central Asia. Russian-Iranian rapprochement would also allow it to confront the escalating US-Turkish axis in the region, within the framework of Russia's tendency to adopt the concept of competitive balance, which requires the presence of regional allies who support its competitive strategy with the United States of America over those republics Using Iran as a regional balancer of Turkish ambitions from a Russian perspective could accomplish a strategic function of preventing the extension of American influence into Russian airspace in Central Asia. Therefore, Iran accepted to perform this function based on its fears of potential American threats to its national security. (Sufyan, 2017, pp. 269-270)

In this context, Russia took the initiative, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to restore its regional and international position by strengthening its relations with the Central Asian republics. The Russian strategy towards the region is based on several pivotal motives, the most important of which is the security dimension; as the security of these republics is directly reflected in Russian national security, as Moscow considers Central Asia an integral part of its vital sphere Realizing that these newly established republics still need Russian support, in addition to the goal of filling any potential security vacuum in these countries to prevent the penetration of competing regional and international powers that may threaten Russian strategic interests, as well as protecting bioenergy projects in the region from exploitation by major competing powers, Russia constantly emphasizes the importance of developing its relations with the countries of Central Asia. Despite this mutual interest, However, relations between Russia and the Central Asian republics face a number of challenges due to both objective and subjective factors. However, relations between the two parties are characterized by a great deal of pragmatism, as they include multiple areas of political, economic and military cooperation, in addition to cooperation in educational and cultural aspects. (Rakhimov, 2015, p. 141)

In this context, a number of factors appear that led to the geopolitical location of Central Asia gaining importance from the Russian perspective, the most prominent of which are the following:

- First: Central Asia stands out as a region of importance to Russia, as it is the heart of Eurasia and the center of the world due to its proximity to major geographical blocs. It stands out as a link between major Asian powers, giving it advantages in the commercial and economic fields.
- Second: The Russian desire to fill the strategic and security vacuum in the Central Asian region is evident.

- Third: Central Asia's connection to political borders, with many nations and nationalities with political, economic and military weight on the Asian continent, and it also represents a buffer zone between the various military powers as it plays a central role in the nations of Asia.
- Fourth: Concern about the sources of security threat coming from the Central Asian region, and the possibility of their impact on Russian national security.
- Fifth: Russian awareness of the dangers of NATO expansion in its neighborhood, which leads to its encirclement and isolation. (Al-Omari, 2025, page 144)

On the other hand, Russian efforts to achieve its interests in the Central Asian region depend on several levels, including political, security, economic, and cultural dimensions.

1. Political And Security Level:

Russia, through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), works to protect its interests from potential challenges coming from all directions. This treaty allows for political consultation and limited coordination between the defense and security institutions of member states. Russia exploits this security alliance to strengthen diplomatic solidarity with its allies. (Ahmed, 2005, p. 13)

Russia also seeks to establish formal relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which is seen as recognition of its military and political dominance in the region. Furthermore, Russian military interests in Central Asia require preventing these countries from joining NATO or hosting new US military bases. This motivation is believed to have been one of the main reasons behind the 2008 war on Georgia Which expressed its desire to join NATO.

In addition, Russia is trying to contain the spread of democratic transformations within the CIS countries and maintain the status quo there. This reservation is, in essence, due to the desire to thwart the attempts of the United States of America to spread its visions and influence in these countries

The most prominent Russian military bases in the region include the Dushanbe base in Tajikistan and the Kyolyab base in Tajikistan. It is one of the advanced sites that gives Russia the ability to intervene quickly in the event of disturbances on the Tajik-Afghan border, and enhances Moscow's influence in Central Asia within the framework of collective security and confronting transnational extremist groups Russia has concluded an agreement with Kyrgyzstan under which it allows Russian warplanes to land at the Kant air base near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, which is considered the first purely Russian air base in the region, and is characterized by a heavy Russian ground and air military presence, in addition to Russian military garrisons in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Russia confirms that the goal of these military bases in Central Asia and the Caucasus is to secure its southern borders and the borders of its neighbors Among the most prominent security arrangements that Central Asian countries have engaged in with Russia, in addition to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, are membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the GUAM group, participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace program, and the Initiative for Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures

in Asia (CICA). It is certain that the national armies of Central Asian countries, which suffer from weak training and armament, will remain in dire need of Russian military support. Due to its dependence on the Russian military arsenal to supply spare parts, aircraft and other logistical assistance. (Al-Hasnawi, 2020, p 9)

2. Economic Level:

Russia, in cooperation with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, established the "Unified Eurasian Space Organization" in 2000, with the aim of consolidating economic ties between member states leading to the establishment of a customs union, however, the customs union that emerged from this organization in 2006 was limited to Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan only, and the reluctance of the governments of Uzbekistan is attributed Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in joining this integration project led by Russia. To fears of relinquishing part of national sovereignty and falling under the influence of Russia, similar to their previous experience with the Soviet Union.

On May 29, 2014, in Astana, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was officially established, and entered into force in January 2015, with the participation of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and later Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. This union came as a continuation of the previous customs union, and aims to achieve deep regional economic integration similar to the European Union, with an emphasis on the free movement of goods, capital, services and labor.

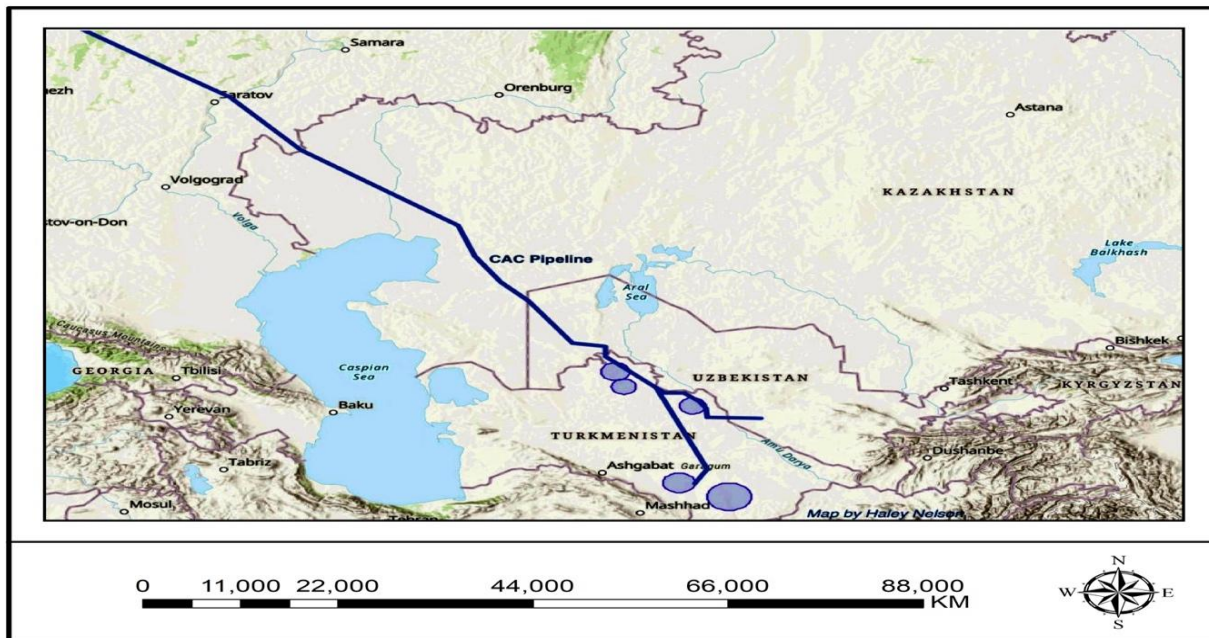
The Union has achieved several strategic accomplishments, including:

- Establishing a single market that ensures trade integration and competitiveness among member states.
- Abolition of internal customs duties and unification of control systems, which led to simplification of trade and the signing of preferential agreements with countries such as Vietnam, Serbia and Singapore.
- Coordinating economic policies, improving resource management, and expanding financial digital cooperation, including reliance on national currencies.
- Developing a single energy market scheduled to be established by 2025, which will enhance Russian energy security and reduce member states' dependence on external sources.
- Expanding the educational and cultural space through cultural and social integration programmes, which enhances the common "Eurasian identity".

The EAEU represents a clear Russian attempt to reshape its former sphere of influence in Eurasia through economic and institutional tools, and to limit the expansion of China's growing influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the large gap between Chinese and Russian financing capabilities, coupled with the heterogeneity of the economies of the EU member states, may make it difficult for Moscow to keep up with Beijing in the medium term, especially in sectors related to infrastructure and energy. (Gaspertou, 2021, pp 93-94)

On the financial and monetary front, the Russian leadership seeks to establish joint banks, as Russia has multiple financial investments with countries in the region. In 2023, the volume of trade exchange between Russia and Central Asian countries reached \$44 billion, representing about 33% of the volume of foreign trade of Central Asian countries. Russia also promotes the idea of adopting the Russian ruble as a currency to preserve financial reserves in the region. (ASIA,2023)

Energy (oil and gas) is a key focus of Russian geopolitical interests in Central Asia, as Moscow seeks to maintain its position as a major corridor for energy exports from the region's countries to global markets. The Central Asia–Center (CAC) gas pipeline is one of the most prominent natural gas export pipelines from Turkmenistan to Russia, via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The pipeline was established during the Soviet era and is still active today, as shown in Map No. (3). This system is managed by a consortium that includes the Russian companies: Gazprom, Turkmen Gas, Uzbekistan Gas, and KazMonay Gas, where these entities share ownership officially and equally. In October 2023, it was agreed to reverse the flows of the Gas Pipeline (CAC). The change begins with the transfer of gas from Russia via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan. This change comes after disruptions in gas supplies in Turkmenistan that caused power outages in Uzbekistan in January 2023. This indicates Russia and the Central Asian countries' dependence on each other to secure needs. Accordingly, the infrastructure turns into a tool for regional connectivity, which intersects with the concept of "Eurasian integration".



Map No. (3): Shows the Central Asia– (CAC) gas pipelin (Source:
https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/ckeditor_media/2023/08/23/a-modern-history-of-oil-and-natural-gas-export-routes.pdf)

In addition, Russia seeks to secure its interests through direct investment in the energy sector in Central Asia, and this is evident in the activities of Gazprom and Lukoil companies in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan in the Karachaganak (Karachaganak) and Tengiz (Tengiz) fields, and Moscow uses energy not only as an economic tool, but as a means to impose political influence and pressure when needed Whether through preferential prices or threats to cut off supplies, and thus, Energy resources and their corridors remain a strategic tool for Russia to ensure its continued influence in the Asian biosphere. (Hoagland, 2023, p 13)

3. Cultural Level:

Despite the increasing status of national languages in the newly independent states of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the spread of English there, the Russian language still enjoys wide influence and spread in the independent Soviet republics. It represents the second language among elites in both the South Caucasus and Central Asian countries. Russian television channels are still available via satellite, and Russian cultural influence is evident in these countries, where Russian television and film productions remain popular, and Russian folk music dominates radio programs in many Central Asian channels. (Dahman, 2016, p. 113)

In general, the orientations of Russian foreign policy towards Central Asia in the post-Cold War period, especially during Putin's rule, are in fact a reflection of the growing awareness and perceptions of Russian geopolitical thought, which is largely identical to the Soviet geopolitical orientation. Both fall within the strategy of expansion across the vital sphere marked by the dynamics of regional expansion, which means extending influence over the immediate neighborhood, allowing Russia to restore its global influence Accordingly, the geopolitics of the Russian Federation, Tsarist Russia, and Soviet Russia are one and the same, and are not linked to the nature of the existing system of government or its ideology in the three historical stages. The only consideration is that Russia, by virtue of its geographical location, is the heart of the earth or the geographical axis of history. Accordingly, its fate is governed by control over its immediate surroundings, regardless of the system of government in it. Despite the post-Cold War contexts and their changes, Strategically, Russia always seeks to reshape a camp under its leadership as a necessity to prove its existence as a pivotal country in international relations. (Sufyan, 2017, p. 112)

During the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow on May 9, 2023, the heads of the five Central Asian countries, during their meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, stressed the defense of multilateralism in the international system, and resistance to unilateralism, hegemony and power politics, which prompted Moscow to accuse Washington of viewing the Central Asian region as a tool within the "containment policy" of Russia and China This represents a challenge for the Central Asian countries, which are now forced to choose one international ally and another hostile one. This exacerbates the state of international polarization in the region, which will have both positive and negative repercussions.

The Third Requirement: Analysis of Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia:

The relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia shows a state of geopolitical interaction that can be described as a "competitive partnership", where their interests converge in a number of areas, especially in institutional tracks such as the Shanghai Organization and the BRICS group, with the aim of coordinating security and economic policies in the face of American influence in Central Asia. They also agree to strengthen a multipolar international system and work to form a more balanced international system that reflects the decline of the unilateral system. Despite their clear partnership, it does not hide the existence of different long-term interests and visions, especially with regard to economic dominance and the distribution of influence within Central Asia.

On the other hand, the manifestations of competition between the two sides are clearly evident in the economic and logistical fields; as China is working to enhance its economic influence in Central Asia through the "Belt and Road" initiative, focusing on developing trans-Caucasus transport corridors that avoid Russian territory, such as the China-Europe railway project via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, which weakens the Russian role as a strategic logistical hub, on the other hand, Moscow seeks to maintain its traditional position in the region by activating mechanisms such as the Collective Security Organization Treaty and the Eurasian Economic Union, and strengthening its security and cultural relations with the countries of Central Asia, based on long-term historical ties and infrastructure that have existed since the Soviet era.

To meet these challenges, China has adopted a pragmatic approach by involving Russia in the Belt and Road Initiative and expanding cooperation channels with it. In this context, the Central Asian region constitutes a diplomatic link between Beijing and Moscow, which has led to containing differences and reaching a degree of balance. However, the transformations of the international system, especially major events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the war on Ukraine since 2022, which contributed to weakening Russia's image as a regional guarantor, and prompted Central Asian countries to diversify their foreign partnerships and open up more widely to China, which has emerged as an economic and investment alternative with increasing momentum.

Here, we can say that the relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia will remain governed by a delicate balance based on a mutual awareness of the nature of the intertwined interests between the two parties, in light of the changing dynamics of the international system, which require both sides to adopt flexible mechanisms for cooperation, while maintaining a margin of strategic competition that reflects long-standing differences in goals.

Conclusion

Central Asia has emerged as a major geopolitical arena in Eurasia due to its strategic geographical location, abundant natural resources, and growing importance as a corridor connecting East and West. The study has demonstrated that both China and Russia consider the region essential to their broader strategic interests. China has increasingly expanded its presence through geo-economic instruments, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative, infrastructure development, trade, investment, energy

cooperation, and regional connectivity. Russia, meanwhile, continues to regard Central Asia as a vital component of its strategic neighbourhood and historical sphere of influence, relying on political, military, economic, cultural, and institutional mechanisms to preserve its regional position.

The study further demonstrates that Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia cannot be understood solely through the concepts of either cooperation or competition. Rather, they are characterised by a complex pattern of competitive strategic partnership, in which converging and diverging interests coexist. Both powers share an interest in maintaining regional stability, limiting Western influence, and supporting a multipolar international order. At the same time, China's expanding economic influence and Russia's efforts to preserve its traditional geopolitical role have generated increasing competition over economic opportunities, infrastructure projects, energy resources, transportation corridors, and the long-term distribution of influence within the region.

In conclusion, the geopolitical environment of Central Asia is undergoing a gradual transformation in the balance and instruments of power. While Russia continues to possess significant advantages in the security, military, historical, and cultural spheres, China has strengthened its regional position primarily through economic capacity and geo-economic connectivity. This transformation does not necessarily imply the replacement of Russian influence by Chinese influence; rather, it reflects the emergence of a more complex and multidimensional geopolitical order. Consequently, Central Asia is likely to remain an important arena of interaction between China and Russia, where strategic cooperation will continue alongside geopolitical competition, reflecting broader transformations in Eurasia and the continuing transition towards a more multipolar international system.

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