

The Neglected Eurasian Dimension of the 'Indo-Pacific': China, Russia and Central Asia in the Era of BRI

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Much commentary and analysis of the Indo-Pacific concept tends to focus on what can be defined as the maritime dimensions of this geographical construct. The "Indo-Pacific", one prominent view suggests, can be understood as an "expansive definition of a maritime super-region centred on South-East Asia, arising principally from the emergence of China and India as outward-looking trading states and strategic actors".¹ While there are good reasons to question the analytical utility of this regional construct, the key point for policy analysis is that it has become "rooted in political practice" within the strategic and security policies of a range of major powers.² Here, for instance, the Australian, United States and Japanese governments' framing of their strategic policy via the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' label bears the stamp of "practical geopolitical reasoning" that "tends to be of a common-sense type which relies on the narratives and binary distinctions found in societal mythologies".³

Such practical geopolitical reasoning is evident in an October 2018 address by Frances Adamson, Secretary of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), at the Australian National University. Australia, Adamson remarked, has identified the Indo-Pacific "as being of primary importance" due to "the strategic and economic reality that the most important part of the world for Australia is embraced by these two oceans". Furthermore, this strategic and economic reality underpins Australia's core objective: to ensure the "region evolves in a way that does not erode ... the fundamental principles on which the Indo-Pacific's prosperity and cooperative relations are based" including "respect for international law and other norms", "open markets ... and the free flow of trade, capital, technology and ideas" and "a balance in the region" that "supports all states, large and small".⁴

1 Rory Medcalf, 'In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's New Strategic Map', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2014), p. 470.

2 Peter Katzenstein, 'Regionalism and Asia', in Shaun Breslin, Christopher Hughes, Nicola Phillips and Ben Rosamond (eds), *New Regionalism in the Global Political Economy: Theories and Cases* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 105. For a critique of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept see for example, Chengxin Pan, 'The "Indo-Pacific" and Geopolitical Anxieties about China's Rise in the Asian Regional Order', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2014), pp. 453-69.

3 John Agnew and Gerard O'Tuthail, 'Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy', *Political Geography*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1992), p. 194.

4 Frances Adamson, 'Shaping Australia's Role in Indo-Pacific Security in the Next Decade', address to Women in International Security Series, Australian National University, Canberra, 2 October 2018, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <dfat.gov.au/news/speeches/Pages/shaping-australias-role-in-indo-pacific-security-in-the-next-decade.aspx> [Accessed 9 April 2019].

The ‘Indo-Pacific’ in this construction, then, is not simply an objective description of empirical reality but rather — like all such regional constructs — reflects the strategic, political and economic interests and preferences of its author(s). While advocates argue that the concept is not about structuring an “anti-China alliance” or China “containment” strategy,⁵ the ‘Indo-Pacific’ rhetoric is clearly “influenced by the expansion of China in the region rather than the development of the region itself”.⁶ Of particular importance has been China’s growing naval presence in the “Indo-Pacific maritime continuum” of the South China Sea, Western Pacific and Indian Ocean.⁷ The more recent ‘free and open’ label even more transparently seeks to place the concept in contradistinction to China’s own meta-regional construct, the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, which the United States (and many of its allies) have come to perceive as offering “a constricting belt or a one-way road” to indebtedness to Beijing.⁸

Much of this debate neglects appropriate consideration of what one could term the ‘Eurasian continuum’ of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ that is largely coterminous with the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ element of China’s BRI.⁹ Geopolitically, BRI is geared to mitigating the risks stemming from China’s geopolitical hybridity through establishing overland infrastructure and economic linkages across its Eurasian frontiers to connect with South Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe.¹⁰ Achievement of this would provide China with a Eurasian ‘safety valve’ in the event of heightened tension and/or conflict in the ‘maritime continuum’ of the ‘Indo-Pacific’, where US naval power remains preponderant.¹¹ BRI, if successful, could result in:

... an integrated and interconnected Eurasian continent with enduring authoritarian political systems, where China’s influence has grown to the point that it has muted any regional opposition and gained regional acquiescence; a new regional order with its distinctive political and economic institutions, whose rules and norms block the future spread of what the West claims as universal values; and a continental stronghold insulated to some degree from U.S. sea power.¹²

5 Abigail Grace, ‘Beyond Defining a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”’, *The Diplomat*, 6 September 2018, <thediplomat.com/2018/09/beyond-defining-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/> [Accessed 30 March 2019].

6 Jean Loup-Samaan, ‘Confronting the Flaws in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy’, *War on the Rocks*, 11 February 2019, <warontherocks.com/2019/02/confronting-the-flaws-in-americas-indo-pacific-strategy/> [Accessed 3 August 2019].

7 David Scott, ‘Australia’s Embrace of the “Indo-Pacific”: New Term, New Region, New Strategy?’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2013), p. 16.

8 Remarks by Vice President Pence at the 2018 APEC CEO Summit, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, The White House, 16 November 2018, <www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2018-apec-ceo-summit-port-moresby-papua-new-guinea/> [Accessed 30 March 2019].

9 Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhou, *Silk Road Economic Belt: Considering Security Implications and EU–China Cooperation Prospects* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2017), pp. 18–19.

10 See for example, Michael Clarke, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring Beijing’s Motivations and Challenges for Its New Silk Road’, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2018), pp. 84–102; Nadege Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017); and Yong Wang, ‘Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China’s New Grand Strategy’, *The Pacific Review*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2016), pp. 455–63.

11 This view was most overtly stated in Wang Jisi, ‘Marching West, China’s Geo-strategic Re-balancing’, *Huanqiu Times*, 17 October 2012, <opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-10/3193760.html> [Accessed 13 May 2019].

12 Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century?*, p. 179.

BRI can therefore be seen as a ‘geo-economic’ project that, in Edward Luttwak’s memorable phrase, combines “the logic of war” with “the grammar of commerce” as it seeks to apply economic means of power to realise strategic objectives.¹³ Nowhere is the effect of this more apparent than in Central Asia where BRI looks set to overturn the regional balance between China and Russia in Beijing’s favour. Before exploring this issue it is first necessary to note the bases of Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia since the end of the Cold War.

Sino-Russian Condominium in Central Asia

For the majority of the post-Cold War era Central Asia’s regional order has been shaped by “great games” with “local rules”¹⁴ where the largely authoritarian rulers of the Central Asian states have successfully played-off Russian, Chinese and, post-9/11, American interests against each other through ‘multi-vector’ diplomacy to strengthen their own domestic and international standing.¹⁵ In this environment, Moscow and Beijing established a clear *modus vivendi* driven by a convergence of interests at the structural/global, regional and domestic levels.

Structurally, Moscow and Beijing were united by their perceptions of the malign or constraining effects of continued American primacy across a range of issues. This was reflected in significant overlap in Russian and Chinese elite narratives and preferences for a ‘multipolar’ international order, the creation of alternate normative orders to those led by the West, and the protection and reassertion of state sovereignty.¹⁶ This accommodation of each other’s global strategic interests has been most evident in the regional setting of Central Asia. Here, Russia has acceded to China’s efforts to construct a “statist multilateralism” in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) focused on Beijing’s Xinjiang-centric security concerns,¹⁷ while China has refrained from overt criticism of Russia’s various interventions in the post-Soviet space such as its wars in Chechnya in the 1990s, the 2008 Russo-Georgia War, and its 2014 intervention in Ukraine and Crimea.¹⁸

13 Edward Luttwak, ‘From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce’, *The National Interest*, no. 20 (Summer 1990), pp. 17-23.

14 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

15 See for example, Michael Clarke, ‘Kazakh Responses to the Rise of China: Between Elite Bandwagoning and Societal Ambivalence?’, in Emilian Kavalski and Niv Horesh (eds), *Asian Thought on China’s International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2014); and Avinoam Idan and Brenda Shaffer, ‘The Foreign Policies of Post-Soviet Landlocked States’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2011), pp. 241-68.

16 See Thomas Wilkins, ‘Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2008), pp. 358-83.

17 Nicole Jackson, ‘Trans-Regional Security Organisations and Statist Multilateralism in Eurasia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2014), pp. 181-203.

18 See for instance, Peter Shearman and Matthew Sussex, ‘The Roots of Russian Conduct’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2009), pp. 251-75; Aglaya Snetkov and Marc Lanteigne, “‘The Loud Dissenter and Its Cautious Partner’—Russia, China, Global Governance and Humanitarian Intervention”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2014), pp. 113-46; and Shannon Tiezzi, ‘China Backs Russia on Ukraine’, *The Diplomat*, 4 March 2014, </thedi.com/2014/03/china-backs-russia-on-ukraine/> [Accessed 5 October 2018].

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 material interests in Central Asia — such as maintaining access to hydrocarbons and Russian control over export routes, combating Islamist terrorism or protecting ethnic Russians — have been framed by the broader goal of maintaining its self-image as a great power.¹⁹ Beijing, in contrast, instrumentalised its approach to the region in order to, first, secure its long-restive province of Xinjiang and, second, to leverage that geopolitical position to pursue broader economic and strategic objectives.²⁰

Thus both sought a stable Central Asia via support of its existing largely authoritarian regimes. For Beijing, this was manifested in consistent diplomatic engagement both bilaterally and multilaterally and increased commercial and trade relations. Such was China's success on this latter front that by the close of the 2000s it had overtaken Russia as the region's major trading partner.²¹ Moscow, for its part, focused on upholding its position as a 'security provider' for the region through maintenance of Russian forces in Tajikistan after the end of its civil war in 1997 and various security multilateralisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).²²

Essentially, Moscow and Beijing played to their comparative advantages.²³ However, it must be stressed that the relative success of Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia was also due to the fact that such an arrangement served the domestic interests of the Central Asian states.²⁴ The Sino-Russian focus, for instance, on embedding principles of sovereignty and non-interference into the SCO played to the domestic security priorities of the region's authoritarian leaders. Economically, meanwhile, increasing engagement with China was also viewed as a useful hedge against dependence on Russia by providing an export market for the region's hydrocarbon resources and an alternative source of investment and capital.²⁵

19 See Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2005), pp. 132-58; and Stina Torjesen, 'Russia as a Military Great Power: The Uses of the CSTO and the SCO in Central Asia', in Elana Wilson Rowe and Stina Torjesen (eds), *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 195-206.

20 Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia — A History* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 158-168.

21 Niklas Swanstrom, *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2011), pp. 44-45.

22 Kirill Nourzhanov, 'Central Asia's Domestic Stability in Official Russian Security Thinking under Yeltsin and Putin: From Hegemony to Multilateral Pragmatism', in Michael Clarke and Colin Mackerras (eds), *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia: History, Transition and Crossborder Interaction into the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 203

23 See Nicola Contessi, 'Foreign and Security Policy Diversification in Eurasia: Issue Splitting, Co-alignment, and Relational Power', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 62, no. 5 (2015), pp. 299-311.

24 Sally N. Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2013).

25 Sebastien Peyrouse, 'Chinese Economic Presence in Kazakhstan: China's Resolve and Central Asia's Apprehension', *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (2008), pp. 34-49; and Sadykzhan Ibrahimov, 'China-Central Asia Trade Relations: Economic and Social Patterns', *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2009), pp. 47-59.

China, Russia and Central Asia under BRI: Geo-economics in Action?

The increasing encroachment of Chinese power and influence into Central Asia under BRI however, fundamentally challenges this balance. In a strategic context, two dynamics have benefited China's Eurasian push. Russia's influence has been weakened through the economic consequences of declining oil and gas prices and the self-inflicted diplomatic and strategic costs of its interventions in Ukraine, Crimea and Syria. Additionally, the relative decline of US influence in the region as a result of the Obama administration's reorientation of its strategic posture away from the Middle East and Afghanistan toward the 'Indo-Pacific' under the "pivot/rebalance" to Asia has also been of net benefit to Beijing.²⁶

Regionally, Russia's ability to offer attractive 'public goods' in security, economic and normative terms to the Central Asian states has declined due to its economic downturn and the costs of its strategic activism elsewhere. Its war with Georgia in 2008 and more recent actions in Ukraine and Crimea have served to heighten long-standing misgivings in regional capitals regarding Russian commitments to the status quo.²⁷ Economically, Putin's own regional integration project, the 'Eurasian Economic Union' (EAEU) — comprising Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia — amounts to a form of "protective integration" that seeks to embed Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space through a restrictive customs union.²⁸

In contrast, the economic and normative underpinnings of BRI are in some respects complementary to the interests of the Central Asian states. Most immediately, China's focus on greater 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 to diversify export routes for their oil and gas and need for infrastructure investment.²⁹ 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. Kazakhstan, for example, sees BRI as "an opportunity to acquire new capital inflows and new technologies which are now urgently needed to carry out the country's developmental reforms and programs" under its domestic *Nury Zohl* (Bright Path) development plan.³⁰ In a normative setting, China's focus on 'development' via BRI also positively counterposes it to recent Russian heavy-handedness.

However, the dilemma for Central Asia is that it may swap structural dependence on Russia for that of China. This may be especially true for weaker states such as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Gas-rich Turkmenistan's dependency on China, for example, encompasses two dimensions. As a result of a variety of disputes over pipeline routes with key neighbours

26 Stephen Blank, 'Whither the New Great Game in Central Asia?', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2012), pp. 147-60.

27 Slavomir Horák, 'Russia's Intervention in Ukraine Reverberates in Central Asia', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 19 March 2014, pp. 9-12.

28 Ksenia Kirkham, 'The Formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How Successful is the Russian Regional Hegemony?', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2016), pp. 111-28.

29 Carla P. Freeman, 'New Strategies for an Old Rivalry? China–Russia Relations in Central Asia after the Energy Boom', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 31, no. 5 (2018), pp. 635-54.

30 Assel G. Bitabarova, 'Unpacking Sino-Central Asian Engagement along the New Silk Road: A Case Study of Kazakhstan', *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2018), p. 162.

and Russia since the late 2000s, China has emerged as the country's only reliable customer via a deal signed between Ashgabat and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for the supply of 30 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year for thirty years. However, Beijing:

... only paid for half the quantity in cash, and took the other half as repayment of Turkmen debt. Ashgabat received an \$8bn loan from the China Development Bank, in 2009 and 2011, for the South Yolotan-Osman gas deposit (now Galknush gas field), and its gas transportation network.³¹

China is also resource-poor Tajikistan's largest external creditor, with Dushanbe owing over US\$1 billion to China's Export-Import Bank as of 2016. Much of this borrowing has been spent on infrastructure development and hydroelectric power generation, often also involving Chinese companies.³² Such indebtedness has been a source of controversy in the country after reports in 2011 that, in return for debt relief, Dushanbe agreed to cede territory in the strategic Wakhan corridor to China.³³

Ultimately, the asymmetric nature of these economic relationships suggests the potential for "consequences that are not necessarily limited to the economy" such as Beijing's implicit expectations of positive "diplomatic stances regarding China's core interests" on behalf of the region's states.³⁴ In the realm of security provision, the one area where arguably Russian influence has retained its position, China has also increased its efforts, albeit consistently concentrated on its Xinjiang-focused security concerns. In the SCO context, Beijing has pressed for continued regular joint military and counter-terrorism exercises, judicial cooperation on the extradition of suspected 'terrorists', and information sharing.³⁵ Outside of the SCO setting it has sought a greater security role than in previous years for instance concluding a "four country mechanism" for intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation between China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan in August 2016.³⁶ Most eye-catchingly for some observers in this respect has been China's establishment of a 'modest' military outpost — manned by PLA soldiers bearing the insignia of Xinjiang-based units — at Shaymak, Tajikistan, abutting that country's frontier with Afghanistan.³⁷

31 Georgiana Marin, 'Turkmenistan's Gas Hurdles: No End in Sight', Energy Policy Group, April 2017, <www.enpg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/EPG_2017-04-26_Marin-Georgiana_Turkmenistans-gas-hurdles.pdf> [Accessed 19 April 2019].

32 Danny Andersen, 'Risky Business: A Case Study of PRC Investment in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan', *China Brief*, vol. 18, no. 14 (2018), <jamestown.org/program/risky-business-a-case-study-of-prc-investment-in-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan/> [Accessed 21 August 2019].

33 'Tajikistan, Turkmenistan Submit to Chinese Capture', *Eurasianet*, 24 June 2016, <eurasianet.org/tajikistan-turkmenistan-submit-chinese-capture> [Accessed 15 March 2019].

34 Julien Vercueil, 'Taming the Bear while Riding the Dragon? Central Asia Confronts Russian and Chinese Economic Influences', *Revue de la Regulation*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2018), <journals.openedition.org/regulation/13626?lang=en> [Accessed 18 March 2019].

35 See Richad Weitz, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A New Force in Asian Security?', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2011), p. 133; and Mariya Y. Omelicheva, 'Eurasia's CSTO and SCO: A Failure to Address the Trafficking/Terrorism Nexus', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 455, January 2017.

36 'China Joins Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan in Security Alliance', *Reuters*, 4 August 2016, <in.reuters.com/article/china-security/china-joins-afghanistan-pakistan-tajikistan-in-security-alliance-idINKCN10F1FN> [Accessed 9 February 2019].

37 Gerry Shih, 'In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, A Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops', *Washington Post*, 18 February 2019, <www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html> [Accessed 17 May 2019].

In Central Asia, then, China has taken significant strides towards becoming, if not the predominant, then certainly the most powerful external actor next only to Russia. And it has done so in a manner consistent with the logic of 'geo-economics'. As Russian analyst Igor Torbakov notes, Beijing:

... has become Central Asia's leading trading partner (having pushed Russia out of this position); deeply penetrated the region's commodities sector as dozens of Chinese businesses cut lucrative deals with local companies; made regional states dependent on China by providing large scale credits to local governments; played a key role in the major overhaul of the region's infrastructure, seeking to enhance interdependency between ex-Soviet Central Asia and Chinese Central Asia [i.e. Xinjiang]; and last but not least, tapped into the region's rich hydrocarbon resources by constructing two major energy pipelines — the ones that for the first time in many decades do not traverse Russian territory.³⁸

This shifting balance suggests that China may achieve its objective of predominance along the 'Eurasian continuum' of the Indo-Pacific. This would provide it not only with a 'logistical power base' for overland trade, communication and energy/resource access to Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East but potentially a means of mitigating the effects of the further deterioration of great power relations in the maritime dimension of the Indo-Pacific.

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³⁸ Igor Torbakov, 'Managing Imperial Peripheries: Russia and China in Central Asia', in Thomas Fingar (ed.), *The New Great Game: China and South and Central Asia in the Era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 259.