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Security as currency

Russia and China are vying for influence in Central Asia, turning alliances and trade into a high-stakes game of power and competition

Over the last few years, Russia and China have both actively sought to strengthen their influence in Central Asia by carefully building alliances and economic partnerships. Now, with the increased engagement of the two powers, the potential of them competing over the status quo is becoming more and more apparent. Security and the control over the regional stability architecture are becoming key indicators of influence, determining new points of convergence as well as friction between Moscow and Beijing.

Traditionally, Russia's main 'export' to the countries of Central Asia since their independence has been security assistance, along with military presence in strategic locations across the region.

Should the Ukraine war turn into a frozen conflict, Moscow's strategic focus will shift towards Central Asia, and China's growing presence there may aggravate Russian elites who fear losing their importance for the region. This is especially true when it comes to control over the sphere of military cooperation and influence over security issues. Indeed, Beijing has already become the main trading partner for the countries of Central Asia, increasing its presence in the majority of sectors across the region – from the economy to the security infrastructure.

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Since 2022, a number of Central Asian countries have been engulfed in mass protests, highlighting the scale of the security threat. In the night of 17 November 2024, for instance, a camp operated by a private Chinese company in the Shamsiddin Shohin district near the Tajik-Afghan border was attacked by armed individuals who had crossed the border from Afghanistan into the Zarbuzi Gorge, part of the Dashti-Jum nature reserve, where the company was engaged in gold extraction.

Clearly, Beijing cannot trust an external actor to protect both its assets and its regional workers, and thus it has become more active in security cooperation with Central Asian countries. This current trend is growing amid the increasing number of Chinese infrastructure projects and the country's commercial presence in the region.

China's strategy in the region

According to analysis of China's military-technical cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, Beijing is actively investing in military infrastructure, border posts, modernisation of security systems and regular military exercises under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). For example, Chinese companies (such as Huawei, Hikvision and SenseTime) are involved in the creation of 'smart cities' in the region, and, in cooperation with Kazakhstan's security firms, Chinese private security companies are helping to protect critical facilities such as the Kazakhstan–China oil and gas pipeline.

Tajik–Chinese cooperation includes anti-terrorist centres and regular joint anti-terrorist exercises.

In Uzbekistan, efforts are focused on collaboration in the area of critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity and staff training.

When it comes to Kyrgyzstan, not only is China conducting joint military exercises in the country but Chinese private security companies are most active there, too. Thus, not only is China expanding its economic presence, but is also gradually building a security network that could become an alternative to Russian influence.

Competing for Afghanistan

One of the arenas where Russia and China are most obviously trying to assert their roles in the security sector is Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban movement has seen the region confronted with an increased threat of extremism and instability. For Moscow, this situation presents an opportunity to emphasise its role as a guarantor of security. Russia is seeking to leverage its influence and connections within organisations such as the CSTO, CIS, the EAEU, as well as the SCO and the CICA to offer Afghanistan not only economic solutions, but also paths to regional integration. According to the Russian Security Council, Moscow is ready to help Kabul integrate into regional blocs and become Afghanistan's 'window' to international recognition.

Although China does not officially recognise the Taliban, Afghanistan is a key element of its Belt and Road Initiative. It is notable that there has been a marked improvement in bilateral relations between China and Afghanistan over the last three years, with Beijing inviting the Taliban to participate in dialogues on regional platforms and actively discussing the situation in the country with foreign ministers from Afghanistan's neighbouring states. In late 2024, Beijing's special envoy for Afghanistan Yue Xiaoyong undertook a diplomatic tour taking in Pakistan and Turkmenistan, and concluding his trip in Kabul. In addition, a number of consultative meetings have been held between law enforcement agencies from Central Asian states and China.

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This reflects a pragmatic approach: China is interested in securing trade and transit corridors and access to resources as well as reducing the risk of extremism spreading to its own territory. To achieve these objectives, it has been using a wide range of tools – from financial aid to cybersecurity projects, from supporting cross-border infrastructure development to engaging private security companies to protect pipelines and strategic facilities in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

At the same time, Iran and Russia have been strengthening their relations with the Taliban, demonstrating their intention to establish a regional consensus on the Afghan issue – especially in light of the expectation that the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency could increase American pressure on the region.

Multilateral structures such as the SCO and meeting formats such as C5+1 have become arenas of 'soft competition'. In a joint statement by Putin and Xi Jinping in May 2024, both sides stressed the important role of the CSTO and the CIS in ensuring regional stability, citing the need to fight terrorism, drug trafficking and transnational crime. In reality, however, Russia and China aim to use this and other institutional settings to strengthen their own positions.

On 1 December 2024, the fifth China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held in Chengdu. The parties agreed to adhere to the principle of common security, protect peace in the region, combat the 'three evil forces' (terrorism, extremism and separatism), oppose external interference in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries, and help Afghanistan achieve peace and reconstruction. In so doing, Beijing is promoting its model of 'common security' in the region, which, while

rhetorically consistent with Moscow's position, can actually build a parallel architecture of influence.

Tensions on the horizon

As of late, experts have increasingly been talking about a possible 'freezing' of the war in Ukraine. Such a development would free up resources and time for Moscow to consolidate its position in Central Asia, where China's presence is growing. Some analysts believe that the more firmly China can establish itself in Central Asia and rely on a stable 'Western flank' in the heart of Eurasia, the greater the likelihood that the situation in Taiwan will escalate.

The CSTO, CIS and SCO are becoming platforms for competition for the hearts and minds of Central Asian elites, while Afghanistan is serving as a litmus test for the effectiveness of various approaches and tools.

Thus, as the intensity of fighting in Ukraine wanes, Central Asia may become a strategic arena where security is a key asset. For China, the region serves as a platform to test its own security system, independent of traditional actors such as Russia and the US. Despite mutual recognition of each other's roles and the rhetoric of 'shared responsibility', reality points to growing structural rivalry. The CSTO, CIS and SCO are becoming platforms for competition for the hearts and minds of Central Asian elites, while Afghanistan is serving as a litmus test for the effectiveness of various approaches and tools.

In this changing environment, security in Central Asia is no longer simply a matter of 'stability'. It has become the 'currency' with which Russia and China acquire regional influence, access to resources and control over logistics channels. Given the extreme complexity of the current political processes in Eurasia, the tactical convergence of Russian and Chinese interests could be replaced by intense rivalry. Over time, this competition may extend beyond the security sphere to encompass wider spheres of influence, testing the adaptability of each nation's strategies. In this context, the countries of Central Asia should adopt a balanced and pragmatic approach, diversifying their partnerships and strengthening their own security capabilities.



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