



China and Russia's Liberal Neutrality Policy in Central Asia

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Abstract

This paper deals with the China and Russia's Liberal Neutrality Policy in Central Asia. Both countries are running to welding the relationship between China and Russia entered a new "business co-operation". China and Russia signed on the boundary agreement in central Asia. Central Asians face an ascendant power in China and a wanning one in Russia. Their strong links to Moscow mean that they will suffer as the Russian economic shrinks Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are all feeling the pinch of the Russian economic decline. It is increasingly clear that Russia and China have found a palatable Vivendi at the heart of the Eurasian continent.

Keywords: Central Asia, Xinjiang, Uyghur, Beijing, Gazprom, Liberation, Neutrality.

Chinese leadership has been very pragmatic in establishing and strengthening ties with central Asia, making careful calculation of China's short, medium and long term interest in this region. The central Asia region is great strategic importance to Chinese, whose interests in and engagement with have never been stronger.¹ China and Russia have a long history of conflict and competition in Central Asia.

The relationship between china and Russia entered a new "business cooperation". China and Russia signed on the boundary agreement in 2004. It is undeniable that the region has been slipping out of Russia's immediate economic sphere of influence for some time, but china has been making inroads with Russia full acquiescence. For Russia and China, Central Asia is increasingly a region of soft competition where they are very aware of and attentive to each other's interests.

Continue to support each other's refusal to bow to a Western –dominated global order. The real geopolitical losers are likely to be the Central Asians, Slowly slipping from Russian orbit into China's. In the wake of world War II, Central Asia ended up a province of the Soviet Union. Xinjiang came under the formal control of Beijing in 1949, when the peoples, Liberation Army (PLA) swept through the province, defining the western borders of what we know today as modern china. During the Cold War, the border between Central Asia and China was a remote junction of the two communist empires, though there were noticeable differences.

The Chinese government largely left regional responsibility to the Xinjiang production and Construction Corps (XPCC)², a paramilitary entity made up to former PLA cadres who had been demobilized after Beijing conquered the region in 1949.³



Central Asia is the most important region for China's internal western security. More than ninety nine percent of the entire Uyghur population in China lives in Xinjiang. Of this seven percent of the population in Xinjiang is of the Kazakh ethnicity, and one percent is of Kirghiz ethnicity. In addition, two hundred thousand ethnic Uyghur people are currently living in Kazakhstan. About five hundred thousands are Uyghur in Kirghiz. Many Muslims and minorities also live in Xinjiang, such as the Uyghur, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik, who all have strong ethnic and cultural ties with the peoples of Central Asia. More than sixty thousand Uyghur people in Xinjiang went into exile in central Asian countries in 1950s and since then these Uyghur communities in Central Asia have continued to receive exiles from Xinjiang. Consequently, Central Asian nations wield significant influence over Xinjiang.⁴

In addition to its varied ethnic makeup, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region is abundant in energy resources such as coal, oil and natural gas, and in mineral resources such as ironstones, manganese, chromium, nickel, copper and lead. Moreover, the Xinjiang region is 1.65 million square km, which is roughly one sixth of all China. Xinjiang also shares borders with India, Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These borders stretch over 5600 km and represent a quarter of Chinese border land. Xinjiang is strategically a very important area for China's national security.⁵

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the leaders remained mostly the same as they were in Soviet times, through a seamless transformation from vassal states to authoritarian dictatorships. After the Soviet collapse, this initiative became a five-party discussion group including China and Russia alongside newly independent Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan- the countries that shared borders with China.

Five, in 1996 the members signed the treaty on deepening Military Trust in Border Regions.⁶ In 2001, the Shanghai Five became the Shanghai cooperation Organization SCO. Its secretariat was established in Beijing. The members nations saw the benefit of Cooperating in a region that they perceived as beset with security threats.

Chinese delegation visiting Afghanistan in 2000 was shocked to discover a large encampment of Uighurs living under Taliban protection in Jalalabad. Western Jihadists have recalled that Uighurs (or Turkestanis, as they are often called) made up one of the largest contingents at the Al- Qaeda and other foreign run terrorist training camps dotted around the region at the time.⁷

For China Focused on domestic economic growth and its fractious relations with the United States, a peaceful western periphery was a welcome prospect.⁸ Chinese officials were also concerned about security threats emanating from Afghanistan and the connections among Uighur dissidents inside Xinjiang and across Central Asia. The SCO would become a vehicle to advance Chinese interests. As it turned out, this was something of a miscalculation on Russia's part.

China's Energy Surge

1. Chinese policy towards the Central Asian region is composed of the following four energy resource strategies.



2. China's efforts to work as a core member in helping to construct a multilateral energy network.⁹
3. A strategically important foothold near the Caspian sea.
4. Diversifying the sources of its oil imports and the routes that oil is transported to China.
5. The third strategy revolves around restraining the influence and presence of the U.S.¹⁰
6. Relations between Iran and the U.S., China may be able to use the "Iran card" to negotiate with the U.S.¹¹

At the time of the establishment of the SCO in 2001, China was already becoming a more important player in Central Asia. Back in 1997, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) had made one of its first large foreign investments in Kazakhstan.¹² CNPC also agreed to build a pipeline to get the hydrocarbons back to China.¹³ By 2005 the pipeline had been completed linking the Aktobe field to Alashankou in Xinjiang. On a visit in 2007, Chinese president Hu Jintao announced a plan to extend the pipeline to other Kazakh fields.

As early as 2000 Chinese companies were exploring the feasibility of building pipelines from Turkmenistan to China. Chinese companies (with subcontractors from the Russian gas giant Gazprom) got immediately to work, establishing joint venture companies in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and laying the pipeline in record time. By December 2009 the entire project was complete and pumping gas to China. On April 9, 2009, a mysterious explosion ruptured the main pipeline carrying Turkmen gas to Russia: Ashgabat and Moscow immediately blamed each other.¹⁴ The Turkmen side accused Gazprom of reducing the amount of gas it was taking through the pipeline and of being responsible for destroying the link. The Russian side expressed dismay at Turkmen behavior and claimed that high level meetings were not being followed up with action. Whatever the case, the pipeline was not repaired. Relations had always been somewhat tense; the Turkmen resented the fact that Gazprom was essentially undertaking an intercontinental form of arbitrage—buying gas from Turkmenistan at cheap prices to supply its domestic requirements while selling Russian gas to European customers at much higher prices. Lacking alternative pipelines, Turkmenistan was unable to do much about this other than neighbors like Afghanistan and Iran were too poor, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan had ample domestic supplies. Further afield, American firms were keen on gaining access to Turkmen fields, but were hamstrung by regional security considerations. And European political support to open routes across the Caspian. The arrival of China changed this picture, and Ashgabat Calculus.

The biggest loser in this shifting geopolitical energy situation was Russia, both in terms of being able to arbitrage Turkmen gas and in its direct energy relationship with China.¹⁵

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

China's regional energy strategy is far more sophisticated than mere oil and gas extraction. One of the most fascinating developments of recent years is the growing presence of Chinese firms in an ever-expanding range of Central Asian industries and



markets. Nowhere is this more clearly on display than in China's increasing role in building and rehabilitating regional energy infrastructure.

In Uzbekistan, Chinese firms have entered into deals to help rehabilitate hydropower plants in Andijan and Fergana, as well as engaging in bilateral cooperation on solar energy projects. In August 2011, the Xinjiang Garson sun wind power Technology company opened an office in Uzbekistan, while the Holley Group agreed to work with local partners to upgrade the Uzbek metering system. One joint venture company, Electron Xisoblagich, started with a focus on electricity meters in Uzbekistan and has rapidly become a regional supplier. All this Chinese activity is in addition to energy deals signed with the Uzbek government to extend pipelines from Turkmenistan across its territory and to send Uzbek gas down the same link to supply China.

Chinese power and pipeline Companies are a growing presence in Dushanbe, planning ambitious links to sell excess Tajik electricity to Xinjiang and developing routes from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to China. Between government relations and energy projects at every level, both the construction of the pipeline through Tajikistan and the second phase of the thermal plant began when Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Tajikistan September 2014 for the year's SCO summit.

That same year, the construction of a refinery was announced in Dangahra, a city near Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's hometown, by Chinese firm Dongying Heli investment and development, further weakening Russia's dominance over the country. Previously, Tajikistan had relied on purchasing Russian refined hydrocarbons for its domestic market. In Kyrgyzstan, an almost identical pattern is visible: Chinese firms are building refineries, refurbishing power plants and seeking to reconstruct decaying energy infrastructure like power lines.

While Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack the energy wealth of their larger neighbors, Chinese companies have nonetheless made exploratory forays, most prominently in a joint venture with France's total and British-Canadian Company Telthys petroleum to explore a potentially massive gas find near Dushanbe. China's role as the major energy player in central Asia was definitively confirmed in September 2013, when CNPC announced that it was buying an 8.3 percent stake in the giant Kazakh Caspian field Kashagan from Kaz Munaigas (KMG) for \$5 billion. CNPC tried to buy into the field in 2003 when Britain's BG group decided to sell its stake, but the purchase was blocked by KMG.

A decade later, the Chinese relationship with Kazakhstan had developed considerably. This time, when ConocoPhillips decided to sell its Kashagan Stake, it initially appeared to strike an agreement with India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation. However, KMG stepped in to scotch this deal, turning instead to its reliable long term partner CNPC. Grouped with a series of high-profile contracts valued publicly at \$30 billion, the deal was signed when Xi visited Kazakhstan and gave a speech inaugurating the 'Silk Road' Economic Belt.¹⁶ The entry of China into Central Asia's largest energy project underscored Beijing's emergence as the dominant regional player. As for the announcement of the Belt, it was a strategic affirmation of what China had been doing



in the region for some time already. Xi's speech enunciated a vision of creating an economic and trade corridor reaching from western chain through Central Asia and ultimately to Europe, reconnecting the Eurasian landmass.

This dominance extends far beyond energy. Go to any Central Asian market and you will find Chinese goods and traders. From the giant Barakholka bazaar outside Almaty near the Kazakh-Chinese border to the markets at Avaza on Turkmenistan's Caspian coast, China is clearly the leading presence. Russian chocolates are still on display, and Turkish goods are still cherished for their quality, but increasingly Chinese for their quality, but increasingly Chinese household appliances are the market leaders. In agriculture, Chinese firms have pursued land deals in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, These have caused some friction with locals worried about the implicit loss of national territory, but given a lack of domestic capability and the offers of ready cash, government are willing to make deals with Chinese firms

China has also begun to assert itself culturally. There is increasing evidence that most of the Central Asian elites. Children are being sent to Chinese universities Scholarships, language courses, and Confucius Institutes drive this burgeoning relationship slowly cultivating a generation of young Central Asians with an affinity for China.¹⁷ In this realm, too the era of Russian dominance in the region has waned.

Security Support

The one area in which Russia remains the regional leader in security. Before the collapse of Bakiyev's government, a delegation from Kyrgyzstan had visited Beijing in hopes of signing transmission line deals to improve the country energy infrastructure. The Kyrgyz unrest highlighted the different regional roles played by thightlighted the different regional roles played by the two powers: Russia continued to be the main provider of security and political support across central Asia, While China's influence was largely economic.

But even this picture is starting to change. With China increasingly stepping in to play a supportive role in regional security. In 2010 rioting in Kyrgyzstan took place close to china's borders; in its wake there has been a noticeable increase in Chinese joint training missions with kyrgyz border units and china is providing equipment such as vehicles, uniforms, barracks, and communications technology.

In Tajikistan, a long-standing Russian security presence was given a 30 years lifeline when the Tajik parliament extended the mandate of at least 7,000 Russian Soldiers at the Gatchina military base on the border with Afghanistan. Supported by air power from the Kant base in Kyrgyzstan, this remains the most substantial regional military force, able to defend Tajikistan (and Russia itself) from any threats that might spill over the border from Afghanistan. Increasingly, however, this Russian presence is being supplemented with Chinese support. Under the auspices of the SCO, China holds joint training exercises with Tajik security forces and provides them with equipment and aid Even in secretive Turkmenistan, China's security presence is beginning to be felt. China is making efforts to support the Turkmen units responsible for security the border with Afghanistan there were also reports in early 2015 that China was selling missile system



to Turkmenistan. The biggest loser in this shifting geo-political energy situation was Russia.

Conclusion

Central Asians face an ascendant power in China and a waning one in Russia. Their strong links to Moscow mean that they will suffer as the Russian economic shrinks. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are all feeling the pinch of the Russian economic decline. It is increasingly clear that Russia and China have found a palatable modus Vivendi at the heart of the Eurasian continent.

The central Asians, squeezed between two giants that they depend on for funding and access to international markets. Have the most to lose. To be fair, China so far has not proved an overbearing regional player and Xi's repeated visits are a demonstration of respect that is appreciated in Asian cultures. Central Asian countries may well profit from infrastructure development and other opportunities that China's presence could open to them. But in the new regional geopolitical game, it is abundantly clear that China is the main player and Russia an increasingly kept supported. So, it is clear that China and Russia are playing a role of liberal neutrality in central Asia.

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