The end of the "New Great Game": China's economic rise in Central Asia and its implications for the U.S. and Russia

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Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in particular after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, scholars began to assert the notion of a competition for influence in Central Asia between Russia, China, and the United States similar to the "Great Game" played between Imperial Russia and Great Britain in the 19th century. This paper explores the "New Great Game" between Russia, China, and the United States and argues that China is the current victor in this game. Unlike the original power plays of the Russian and British empires that centered on imperial zero-sum competition, this competition is economically driven by a search for energy resources and underscores the new mode of competition in our integrated economies. Ultimately, in light of modern globalization trends of economic and political integration, China's new power and investment in Central Asia should be a welcome development, as it will likely stabilize the region and continue to incite favorable economic growth.

Introduction

On May 31, 2014, Chinese officials announced the creation of Line C of the Central Asia-to-China pipeline. Spanning 1,830 kilometers, the Line C conduit transverses central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan en route to the Xinjiang region in northwestern China. With the creation of the third Central Asian-Chinese pipeline since 2009, China is expected to receive 55 billion cubic meters of gas transports from Central Asia each year, making it the largest importer of Central Asian gas in the world.[1] With these new investment projects, the effects of economic integration and globalization are taking root and promoting growth.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars exploring Central Asian political and economic development latched onto the notion of a "New Great Game" playing out in Central Asia.[2] The original "Great Game" that played out between the Russian and British empires in Central Asia during the 19th century was a contest of imperial strength and was guided by Britain's interests in India and Russia's aims to assert their political prestige. Today, scholars argue that the competition between Russia, China, and the United States in the post-Soviet era is similar to the zero-sum competition between the British and Russian empires in the 19th century – a contest of imperial influence that brought some peace as well as political equilibrium to the region.[3] While some assert that a "New Great Game" is still active in the region, China's current economic dominance suggests that China has the upper hand in this game of checks and balances. Nevertheless, despite Chinese dominance, the transnational integration derived from Chinese investment highlight the positive influences of globalism in the region.

This paper explores the "New Great Game" between Russia, China, and the United States as well as the implications of China's rising influence in the Central Asian region. Increased globalization and economic development derived from China's new economic role in Central Asia indicate that this game should not be viewed through a classical realist zero-sum lens; rather, U.S. officials should welcome China's newfound political power in Central Asia as a positive development and should pursue non-zero-sum outcomes in future economic and political agreements. Ultimately, unlike the 19th century "Great Game" of competition, the modern forces of globalism and integration will stabilize the region and promote economic development favorable to China, the United States, and Central Asian states.

A Brief History of Central Asia

The region of Central Asia – a vast land area bordering Russia to the north, China to the east, and the Middle East to the west, which for the purposes of this paper includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – links the East to the West. Because it sits between Europe and Asia, Central Asia is considered a strategic location and has been fought over many times, becoming a source of tension between Western and Eastern powers. When the Silk Road was in use over 1,000 years ago, Central Asia was the economic and geopolitical center of the world, connecting China and India to the Middle East and Europe through vast trade routes.

Even though the economic centers of the world shifted westward toward Europe in the early modern era of history, Central Asia continued to be the subject of imperial hegemonic ambitions and lucrative economic ventures among Western powers.[4] During the height of imperialism in the late 19th century, Russia and Great Britain competed for supremacy in Central Asia in what Captain Arthur Conolly dubbed "the Great Game."[5] While Great Britain was interested in the region because of its proximity to imperial India, Russia simply wanted to acquire more land and people. When the Soviet Union formed in 1917, Central Asia remained under Moscow's banner of socialism.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the geopolitical plates have shifted away from Russian hegemony toward multilateral competition for economic and political influence in Central Asia. Instead of Soviet authority, the multifaceted influences of globalism now play a critical role in Central Asian economics, politics, and society. Central Asia has become a prime focus for leaders in Russia, China, and the United States for a number of reasons: the wealth of

natural resources in the region; the increasing demands for energy in China and throughout the world; the overall aim to diversify energy holdings away from the volatile Middle East; and rising security concerns given the ascent of Islamic extremism, Iranian aggression, and the war in Afghanistan. Together, the interests of Russia, China, and the United States are shifting the economic and political fabric of Central Asia through both military influence and trade.

Amid this backdrop of political and economic competition, Central Asia rose in the post-9/11 world to be the center of a tug-of-war.[6] Political ambitions, economic aspirations, and security concerns collided in this new competition between Russia, the United States, and China, and state-level analysis illuminates the respective political agendas that shaped regional policies and maneuvers.

The "New Great Game" and its players: Defining the "New Great Game"

In the original "Great Game," the Russian Tsar's appetite for the appropriation of large territories across the Caucasus and Central Asian region, posed a threat to Great Britain's northern entry points in India, access to the Indian Ocean, and colonial stability.[7] In response, London generated initiatives to counteract Russian influence by contesting frontier disputes, wooing local leaders, and deploying intelligence agents.[8] There was a zero-sum approach on both sides; any gain by Russia would come at Britain's expense, and vice versa.[9] Aside from defining competition between Russia and Britain for many years, the Great Game also influenced a shift in geopolitics. In 1904, British geographer Harold Mackinder commented that Central Asia was "the pivot region of the world's politics."[10] Oddly, or perhaps predictably, the zero-sum approach from more than a century ago morphed into a permanent default description for international competition in the region.[11] Today, however, the balance of world power has perceptibly altered. The national players are different and their agendas are more arcane and nuanced.

Today, scholars such as Nick Megoran and Matthew Edwards have labeled Central Asia as the "heartland" of geopolitics.[12] Instead of revolving around power struggles between the two original powers, the British and Russian empires, the "New Great Game" features new players –Russia, the United States, and China, and also vital participants such as India, Iran, Turkey, and the European Union. Also, departing from the hard power considerations of the 19th century, today's competition is a vast tapestry of political, economic, and security considerations. Twenty-first century globalization – marked by sovereign nations, transnational organizations, international trade, rising energy concerns, and urbanization – integrates within this modern-day "heartland". The participants are nation-states, not empires, and must respond to challenges with complex considerations that include both state and non-state actors.[13] It remains to be seen how these non-zero-sum solutions will impact the overall global geopolitical power map; however, this game, given its multipolar considerations and opportunities for cooperation, is certainly a far cry from the zero-sum power struggles of the 19th century.

The "New Great Game" and its players: Russia

Russian leadership among the Central Asian republics has a long history. Formal imperial control over the territory began in the early 19th century and endured through the era of revolution and the rise of communism. Unified under the single Soviet domain, the Central Asian territories and Russia shared a common political and economic space throughout the 20th century.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the shared history between Russia and the Central Asian republics ensured a close relationship between the newly independent republics and "mother" Russia. For example, the industrial enterprises that had been closely integrated in the Soviet economic system meant that the Central Asian republics tended to send their gas and oil extracts to Russian refineries.[14] Moreover, ownership of newly privatized oil companies was granted at undervalued rates to Russian nationals, further solidifying Russian control. More Russian overlap with the region came from the sheer number of ethnic Russians residing within the Central Asian states. Ethnic Russians made up almost half of Kazakhstan's population in its early years of independence.[15] Central Asia also depended on Russia for security because of a lack of security technology and trained military personnel.[16]

This is not to suggest that in the post-Soviet political vacuum, the relationship was a one-sided Central Asian dependence on Russian support. Dmitry Trofimov, a leading Russian specialist on Central Asia, described Russian national interests in Central Asia in five points: 1) stability; 2) unconstrained transit across the region in order to maintain partnerships with China, India, and Iran; 3) the maintenance of a common economic space with Central Asia; 4) military use of the region's strategic geography to preserve Russia's world and regional power; and 5) international perception as the regional hegemon.[17] Not only do these objectives demonstrate Russia's desire for favorable ties to the region for economic and political partnerships, but they also convey the Russian impulse to maintain a firm grasp of power in the area and to uphold their old Soviet leadership in the post-Soviet era. Additionally, Moscow became the guarantor for the bankrupt Central Asian states because other world powers such as the United States were too short-sighted to engage in Central Asia's long-term development.

Russia became an economic and political leader in the region and guided the ex-Soviet states—with the exception of the Baltic States—in the development of regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Eurasian Economic Association (EEA).[18] Many scholars assert that these institutions were thinly disguised initiatives to promote Russian economic and political hegemony among its previous constituents.[19] Leszek Buszynski asserts "Russia…pushed Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan into closer security cooperation."[20] After 2000, Vladimir Putin worked to augment influence by redefining the Central Asian states as Russian protectorates.[21] Despite Putin's attempts to promote globalism through transnational economic and political organizations, Russian interests in regional power kept many of the Central Asian states wary of integration under Russia's umbrella.

One regional organization holds a unique position in Russia's "New Great Game" strategy: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This transnational organization, founded in 2001 between Russia, China, and the Central Asian states, began as a way to open trade relations between member states and resist the influence of the United States in the region.[22] The SCO seemed to be a forum for Russia to extend their influence into Central Asia while quelling suspicions about their ulterior motivations. While the SCO appealed to Russia's desire to mitigate American influence, rising Chinese authority, evident particularly through China's economic investments in the region, presented problems for Russian power considerations. Russian Eurasianists wanted Russia to be the dominant power in Eurasia, but Russia's influence was waning with the rise of Chinese politicians and businesses.[23] Nevertheless, Russian membership in the SCO remained an essential foreign policy tactic; withdrawing would potentially lead to a unilateral trade partnership between China and the Central Asian states. Membership in the SCO seems to have derived from pragmatic power considerations, allowing Russian policymakers to maintain some

power in Eurasia.

In the past, Russia attempted to partner with China to generate pipeline projects that would further deepen Russia's control on gas production. China's need for energy and Russia's vast wealth of energy supplies made the two obvious partners; however, relations between the two have been tense due to both states' quest for regional and global prominence. Thus, many times, discussions failed to produce energy agreements, and China turned to Central Asia. In the early 2000s, all of the existing pipelines from Central Asia ran through Russia, thereby giving Russia complete control of Central Asian gas production.[25] Moreover, Central Asia relied on Russia to be a market for its exports.[26] Thus, Russia had significant influence on gas prices for its buyers—mainly European Union states—and placed serious constraints on the Central Asian states' capacity to negotiate and compete in the energy market. China and Russia attempted to collaborate on energy agreements. China was interested in diversifying its gas imports away from the unstable Middle East, while Russia had clear interest in diversifying their export market to include countries outside the EU.[27] Nevertheless, these negotiations produced no results due to divided views on the pricing of the gas. The Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) refused to pay internationally competitive prices for natural gas. They insisted on paying for Gazprom gas at a price comparable to China's low domestic coal prices. Gazprom – Russia's largest gas extractor that is partially owned by the Russian government – wanted the CNPC to pay natural gas prices equal to prices paid by its European clients.[28]

Due to these failures, the Chinese turned to direct bilateral negotiations with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The resultant pipeline projects pose economic and political threat to Russia. For example, the Kremlin fears that energy trade between Turkmenistan and China could undermine Russia's energy pledges to Europe by redirecting gas to China.[29] The expanding energy market both in Central Asia and in other areas around the world support an increasingly competitive energy market, and Europe may turn to other energy options.[30] This would likely encourage deeper economic exchange and further integrate Central Asia into the international market, a situation that would likely incite further investment in the region and modernize their economy. Moreover, as the Central Asian states continue to welcome China's economic presence in the region, Russia's political influence is slowly diminishing.[31] Central Asian leaders have a long-held "hypersensitivity" to any Russian attempts to minimize Central Asian sovereignty and have welcomed Chinese political balances.[32] Thus, bilateral relations between Russia and China, while publicly supported and upheld, are slowly cultivating a relationship of mistrust.

The "New Great Game" and its players: United States

After a period of minimal involvement in the Central Asian region, the United States rapidly increased its participation in and commitment to the region in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. Prior to September 11, 2001, investment in Central Asia remained low. While the Bush 43 and Clinton administrations outwardly stressed the importance of diversifying U.S. energy exports to the Central Asian region, the resulting trade deals were nominal.[33] Moreover, the rhetoric of support for "independence, sovereignty, and stability" in the region was not matched by monetary support or political involvement.[34] Indeed, while Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov concluded a defense cooperation agreement with Washington in October 1995, this agreement did little to link the nations in developmental aid or political collaboration.[35] During this time, the United States was largely indifferent to the development of the Shanghai Five, a regional trade organization.[36] The U.S. focused its Central Asian diplomacy on bilateral agreements, encouraging economic liberalization and democratization.[37] George Bush followed similar diplomatic parameters during the first months of his presidency; however, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the region of Central Asia became an area of serious strategic interest.

Due to its proximity to Afghanistan, Central Asia received significant attention from the United States and became the location of strategic military bases and security partnerships for more than a decade after the 9/11 attacks. During this decade, concerns over the war in Afghanistan dominated U.S. policy regarding Central Asian states. American officials negotiated the creation of two military bases in the region before the end of 2001: the Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan and the Karshi-Khanabad military base in Uzbekistan.[38] The United States also supported the creation of a new oil pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan to Ceyhan, Turkey, highlighting the American desire to diversify Europe's gas resources and diminish the Russian stranglehold.[39] While the War on Terror was the impetus for U.S. involvement in Central Asia, economic concerns regarding energy resources continue to shape Washington's policy in the region.

These policies contradicted the United States' professed support for liberty, free markets, human rights, and democratization. American policies during the past decade have followed a pragmatic cooperation effort intended to maintain favorable conditions for troops in the area.[40] The U.S. has been criticized for its policies that have enabled the continuation of oppressive regimes and corruption and for ignoring its professed values of human rights, liberty, and democracy for the sake of its military agenda. [41] Even though the United States withdrew from Karshi-Khanabad in 2005, the U.S. has not pushed for reforms due to its underlying need for allies in the area amidst instability in the Middle East. Jeffrey Mankoff, a scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, argues, "Washington's willingness [to cooperate with corruption] made the US complicit in the corruption that threatens Central Asia from within, while making clear that Central Asia's governments have significant leverage over US actions in the region."[42] By complying with the regional regime dynamics, the United States guaranteed favorable short-term outcomes; however, the long-term effects of these policies threaten to further upset the region's stability.

With increased American on-the-ground presence in Central Asia, Russian and Chinese officials gradually became less supportive and more suspicious. Initially, the War on Terror united the US, Central Asia, Russia, and China because of their shared interest in combating terrorist organizations influenced by radical Islam.[43] As the US initiatives expanded to include economic initiatives, particularly in the energy market, the SCO constituents began to perceive political and economic threats.[44] The Russian government felt threatened, took measures to counteract the effects of American commitments, and began to search for military bases in the region.[45] Despite outward signs of support for American military objectives in the war against Al-Qaeda, Russia sought to limit American influence in Central Asia by manipulating the SCO – encouraging constituents to call upon the US to remove its military bases – and fueling Central Asian leaders' discomfort with the intensifying US presence.[46] Similarly, China considered the American military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan an attempt to augment American influence in the region at the expense of Russia, Iran, and China itself.[47] While they subscribed to the American desire to fight terrorism and promote stability, they felt threatened by the US's presence in the region and worked to balance their geopolitical and geo-economic

interests in the area.[48]

Today, aside from the obvious political interests in the region, Washington vies to maintain its economic interests in the regions energy supplies. Due to the developing partnership between India and the United States – an alliance that US strategists argue is meant to balance China – Washington is an advocate for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline and other trade relations.[49] The TAPI pipeline will connect Afghanistan and Central Asia to South Asia through trade relations and energy pipelines. This pipeline is an integral component in U.S. Central Asian strategy, as it has the capacity to limit Iranian gas exports, boost Afghanistan's economy, and increase Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India's energy security. The US views the project as a major harbinger of stability.[50] This initiative, along with other economic initiatives such as infrastructure investments and business development investments, is meant to reestablish economic solvency in the greater Central Asian region, promote stability in the region and in places such as Afghanistan, and bolster US influence on the Asian continent.[51] The US has a marked interest in maintaining favorable trade relationships in the region as a means of bolstering political alliances in Asia, securing energy interests, and maintaining political stability.

Currently, leaders from within and without Central Asia are anticipating President Barack Obama's drawdown in the Middle East. Central Asian elites fear the US departure from the region will result in increased security threats and diminished national sovereignty vis-à-vis China and Russia.[52] Many scholars and leaders fear that the combination of Central Asia's Islamic extremists, energy insecurity due to the precarious situation in the Middle East, and corrupt government and trade practices within the area will further destabilize the region and threaten US security. For example, poor governance and failed development policies could lead to the empowerment of the same jihadist ideologies that the US fought in Afghanistan.[53] Moreover, the greater geopolitical competition between China and Russia for economic and political influence could blind policymakers to the fragility of the interstate political and economic circumstances and thereby launch the region into further chaos.[54] This political destabilization would threaten American security against Islamic extremists and could also add to energy market insecurity. Given this potential threat, increased globalization of the Central Asian energy market due to China's investment should be seen by the United States as a positive development.

The "New Great Game" and its players: China

China's shared border with Central Asia has long placed it in trade partnerships and social interactions with Turkmens, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and other regional tribes. These relationships began over 2,000 years ago.[55] China began exploring Central Asia around 130 BCE during the rule of the Han Dynasty. After the defeat of Xiongu, the Chinese army established itself in Central Asia and extended the Silk Road trade route. The Silk Road facilitated communication, trade, and political and cultural recognition across China, Europe, Central Asia, India, and the Middle East. Overall, the extension of the Silk Road enabled the spread of ideas, technologies, and goods across empires.

Despite its longtime historical and cultural relationship with Central Asia, China's involvement in the region was curtailed when Tsarist Russia absorbed Central Asia into its empire.[56] During the time of the Soviet Union, China was both a competitor and a comrade to the Soviets. Initially the two communist empires were united in their socialist ideologies. As the Soviet Union drew farther and farther away from original Marxist tenets, Chinese leadership became an estranged neighbor of the Soviet Union. This strained relationship further distanced Beijing from its Western neighbors and limited trade.

While modern trade routes are far different from the original routes extending from China to the Mediterranean, China has reemerged as a critical partner in Central Asian trade. Moreover, tides of globalization and modernization have ensured integration across vast geological and political terrains through technological and economic networks. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China pursued largely bilateral relations with the newly independent states. During this period, China was mostly engaged in negotiations regarding common boundaries with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.[57] It was not until 1996 that China was able to hold a conference with these four countries that brought together their shared interests in multilateral discussions. At this first "Shanghai Five" meeting, representatives discussed the creation of a mechanism to promote regional security, and they reached an agreement on notification protocol between the constituents.[58] Concerns about security continued to dominate the discussions in the early years of the organization. Representatives from Uzbekistan began to attend the conferences when Uzbekistan began to mistrust Russian authority.[59] The Shanghai Five officially transformed into the aforementioned Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) when on June 15, 2001, Uzbekistan became a full member.[60] Uzbekistan's suspicions about Russian political muscle-flexing were quelled by China's powerful presence in the organization.[61] Thus, contradicting the espoused pretense of multilateralism and collaboration, the SCO was created through the self-interest of member states hoping to balance against other regional powers.

Many Western critics of the SCO have called the organization a "club of authoritarians."[62] This criticism is not unfounded considering that the central goal of these six nations has been to contain potential uprisings and limit Western democratization efforts.[63] Moreover, China and Russia seemed to value political expediency over ideology; China and Russia each pursued a pragmatic, self-interested agenda to magnify their respective national interests with little regard for their common ideology. Russia envisioned the SCO as a security and military organization, a vision that underscores Russia's political ambitions in Central Asia and desire to uphold existing power structures in the region.[64] In contrast, China desired to use the SCO as a platform for trade and economic cooperation.[65] This economic platform was clearly intended to extend Chinese influence, bolster Chinese power in the area through economic means, and secure resources to preserve Chinese security. The divergence of China and Russia's objectives within the SCO highlights the early stages of competition between the two powers, underscoring the reality that China and Russia's outward demonstration of unity was, in reality, a façade to mask strained power dynamics.

While the SCO was certainly an early indicator of Chinese interest and investment in Central Asia, the emergence of China as a global economic superpower had a significant impact on the "New Great Game." Central Asia, originally a region under Moscow's heavy hand, is now a region dominated by Chinese investment. While several political and economic realities influence Chinese trade patterns, China's primary motivation is access to raw materials. In a presentation on the potential "New Silk Road" reconnecting Central Asia to global markets, former National Security Advisor Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft asserted that "what is really driving this [rise in involvement in Central Asia]…for the Chinese it is raw materials."[66] In the past, China derived the majority of its energy from domestic coal production. Nevertheless, the 10 percent per year growth rate, along with accelerated industrialization and shifting urban demographics, gave rise to massive increases in energy demands. This increase compelled

China to obtain energy from overseas. In November 2010, the International Energy Agency (IEA) reported that Chinese oil demand surpassed 10 million barrels a day and required the importation of 4.8 million barrels a day of crude energy."[67]

Fearful that a failure to satisfy the energy demands of the nation will lead to civil unrest, China has wholeheartedly entered the Central Asian market, using its economic clout to generate favorable pipeline projects and energy deals. The majority of China's interest in Central Asia's energy supply is focused on both hydrocarbons and electricity generation.[68] They have invested heavily in creating pipelines that directly supply China with gas from the region. Chinese analyst Qiang Xiaoyun views the SCO as a crucial contributor to the multilateral pipeline agreements. Moreover, he asserts that the gas pipeline is a mutually beneficial solution in which Central Asian economies benefit and China can meet rising energy demands."[69] In the middle of the economic recession, Beijing demonstrated its long-term interests in Central Asia by extending large official loans to the Central Asian states. Ultimately, these favorable aid partnerships secured China's future access to hydrocarbon exports from the region.[70] In December 2009, the first of the three Central-Asia-China gas pipelines was completed, making it the first major gas pipeline completed since the collapse of the Soviet Union to completely bypass Russian territory and the Gazprom-Transneft network – the state-owned pipeline network that is the largest energy transport company in the world. While Russian officials received this partnership with a calculated air of nonchalance, there is a burgeoning tension as China's enters into an arena previously dominated by Russia.[71]

China's investment is likely driven by natural resource demands, but there are other significant political considerations. Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, asserted that China is beginning to look westward to extend its political influence on the Asian continent. Today, despite China's increased claims over the South China Sea, the United States' mutual protection promises are a significant deterrent from extension. Power moves eastward are difficult given the close friendships between the United States and Pacific states such as Japan and South Korea. Thus, Chinese political power is best directed toward its Western neighbors.[72] Overall, the Chinese propulsion to assert dominance on the Asian continent is a signal of Beijing's increasing urge to become not only an economic superpower, but also a political superpower. Chinese investment in Central Asia utilizes economic muscle in order to gain both economic and political benefits.

China's Rise in Central Asia

While Russia and the United States certainly continue to have economic, political, and security stakes in Central Asia, the "New Great Game" is effectively over in light of rising Chinese involvement and the tides of globalization. In recent years, Central Asian trade with China has grown at more than 20 percent per year, and is now the region's largest trade and investment partner.[73] Rather than bolster regional connections to Russian and American partners in South Asia and the EU, Central Asia is pursuing ambitious infrastructure projects with Beijing, including plans for railroad, highway, and electrical infrastructure.[74] In 2009, China loaned $10 billion to Kazakhstan and invested hundreds of millions of dollars in various construction projects in Ashgabat and Bishkek.[75] China has regularly conducted military exercises in the region, to enhance regional security and assert its commitment to the region. Such initiatives and investment strategies promote four key Chinese objectives: 1) access to energy resources; 2) diversification and reduction of dependency on hydrocarbon from volatile areas; 3) the creation of a new market for Chinese goods; and 4) heightened political and military presence on the Asian continent.

China's willingness to invest in Central Asia highlights an overall strategy for augmenting political and economic clout throughout Asia. China's interests have expanded from natural resources to include energy security, border security, geopolitics, and combatting extremist, terrorist, and other separatist forces.[76] The bilateral relationship between Kazakhstan and China holds the largest trade value among all of China's partnerships in the region, totaling $25 billion in 2012.[77] China has obtained a leading role in cultivating and developing the Kazakh energy industry, and this influence has not only secured China's leadership in the country, but has also drastically increased the economic solvency of Kazakhstan.

Similar patterns of Chinese investment promoting domestic economic development occurred in Turkmenistan (2012 trade totaling $10.4 billion), Kyrgyzstan (2012 trade totaling $5.2 billion), Uzbekistan (2012 trade totaling $2.9 billion), and Tajikistan (2012 trade totaling $1.9 billion).[78] In Turkmenistan, China has extended its influence beyond the economy and has worked to develop political initiatives as well. In August 2009, Chinese and Turkmen officials established the Intergovernmental Cooperation Committee with subcommittees that focus on economy, trade, energy, humanities, and security.[79] In Kyrgyzstan, Chinese investment ranges from railway initiatives to power lines.[80] Similarly, an Intergovernmental Cooperation Commission between China and Uzbekistan was signed into existence in October 2011.[81] Tajikistan shares a border with the Xinjiang region of China and signed an agreement on May 20, 2013 to improve bilateral cooperation.[82] Tajikistan also received

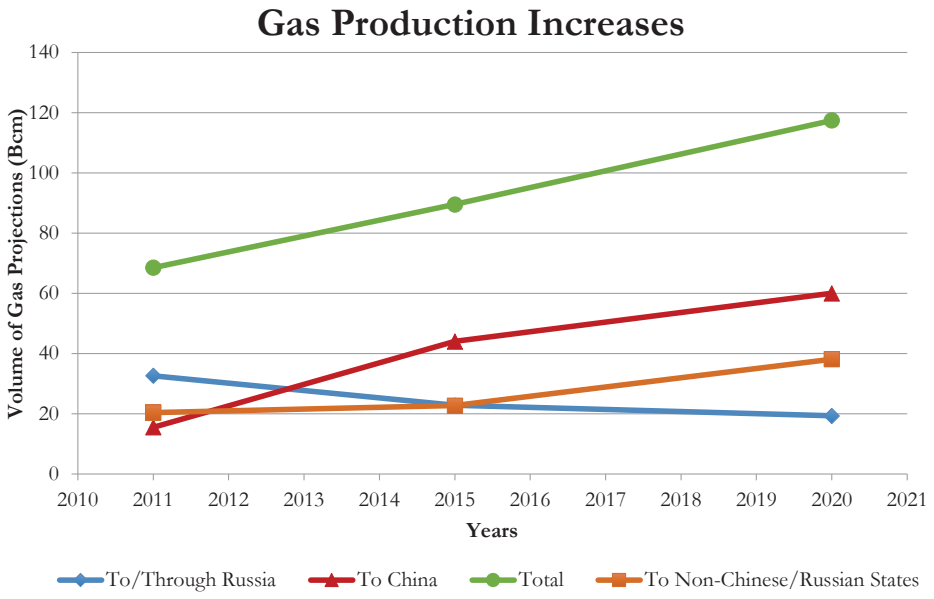

Figure 1. Predictions through 2020 of Central Asia's total gas production volumes and their destinations (adapted) [84]

approximately $1 billion from China in June 2012.[83] The long-term impact of Chinese-Central Asian political and economic coordination underscores the reality that China has the upper hand in regional diplomatic and financial spheres.

As Figure 1 indicates, Simon Pirani projects that Central Asia's total gas production will to steadily increase from 68.5 billion cubic meters (Bcm) in 2011 to 117.4 Bcm in 2020. Similarly, the volume of gas exchanged with China is projected the leap from 15.5 Bcm in 2011 to 60 Bcm by 2020. Meanwhile, the volumes of exchange directed toward Russia will likely decrease from 32.6 Bcm in 2011 to 19.3 Bcm over the same period. Although the United States does not benefit significantly from Central Asia's natural gas exports, it is invested in the region for its strategic purposes and to ensure energy access for its allies in South Asia, East Asia, and Europe. As the projected gas trade volumes suggests, the Russian energy monopoly in Central Asia is quickly waning. The increases in gas production, while mostly directed toward China, are also positively impacting energy markets in non-Russian or Chinese regions (in particular, the EU, Turkey, and India). Figure 1 shows a steady increase in volumes of Central Asian energy funneling toward these regions, suggesting that Chinese energy production projects will have a positive impact on the diversification of energy resources for American allies.

As more and more Central Asian gas is directed toward China, Central Asian states will earn income and attract investments that will help modernize the region's infrastructure. Jeffrey Mankoff argues that "these roads, railways, and pipelines all underpin China's growing economic and cultural presence in the region, and they are likely to have a more enduring impact on Central Asia's long-term development than either the war in Afghanistan or Russia's push for regional integration."[85] Meanwhile, Russia is scrambling to reassert its political dominance in the region. Putin is attempting to contain the region in a way similar to the Soviet past.[86] For example, Putin's propensity to create economic unions demonstrates the impulse to reassert Russia's regional hegemony.[87] Nevertheless, the pipeline and other economic development initiatives have provided Central Asian states with non-Russian export routes, boosting their power in both natural gas price negotiations and general political discussions with Russia.[88] With China's strong bilateral relationships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Russia's economic and political agendas are becoming less attainable goals.

The United States, in contrast with Russia, welcomes the Kazakh-Chinese oil ventures and the creation of the pipelines; however, officials have certain long-term concerns about accessibility to the energy markets. The pipeline projects are consistent with the US energy strategy to expand global energy supply and promote the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states.[89] Indeed, the expansion of the global energy market is good for the United States in that it increases market competition, drives prices down, and promises diversified energy suppliers outside of the volatile Middle East region.[90] Despite the overall benefits of China's investment in the region, there are some analysts who attribute negative consequences to China's rapid rise. For example, given the high demand for Turkmen gas in the East, supplies for the Trans-Caspian projects, such as the long-proposed Nabucco pipeline to Europe, will be limited.[91] Further concerns arise when policymakers consider America's support for the new TAPI pipeline. China may react to the initiative with competitive resentment rather than complementary support.[92] China has drastically altered the energy map of the Asian region, and these changes have given rise to new geopolitical and economic concerns in Washington.

The current push for financial and diplomatic influence in Central Asia is fundamental to the overall American strategy to sustain leadership abroad and counterbalance China's rise. Washington is working to maintain and strengthen alliances around the world. Indeed, the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" was an indication of these objectives. American and Chinese relations are often tense and cautious, built on careful statecraft and negotiations. Despite the tension, Central Asian economic and political ventures appear to produce mutually beneficial outcomes for both China and the United States.

As Central Asian energy projects continue to move forward, the US will also support Chinese ventures and advocate for TAPI pipelines. As the US encourages China, Pakistan, and India to develop alternative energy transit routes, the world's energy supply will continue to diversify, diminishing Russia's monopoly on Central Asian gas.[93] This remains a major concern, given the fragility of Russian-Western relations and volatile oil prices. Keeping a foothold in the region and supporting China's funding and infrastructure initiatives will strengthen America's diplomatic efforts to promote democracy and market ideals in the area.[94]

Conclusion

The original zero-sum competition between the Russian and British empires was built on a foundation of power considerations, primarily demonstrated by military might and imperial stretch. Today, power in the region is derived from a much different source. Although regional military authority is still a viable commodity, China's upward trajectory past Russia's political power and the United States' military power suggests that economic power is a far more influential commodity in a region desperately seeking development. Moreover, given the transnational implications of trade, China's economic rise in Central Asia exemplifies the overarching forces of globalization that are linking nations together and integrating previously isolated states into codependent networks. Unlike political power ploys, economic power can strengthen the influence of more than one country by increasing markets, impacting trade, and encouraging development.

China's new position in Central Asia supports four key economic and political developments: 1) it introduces new technologies and infrastructure to the region that can foster future partnerships; 2) it brokers stability in a strategic and potentially threatening region; 3) it diversifies the world energy market and promotes energy security; and 4) it opens the potential for future energy ventures that will secure Washington's foothold in Asia. These projects present opportunities to broker future energy and economic deals in the area and support America's overall presence on the continent.

While there are multiple points of tangency, there are also some significant emerging regional and global issues that warrant further research. Dilemmas that require more study are the effect of the current Ukraine crisis and the effect of current energy price drops on Russia's relations with the US, China, and Central Asia. Russia's volatile relations with the West due to the Ukraine crisis led to economic sanctions and current rapid-fire inflation may result in a rotation eastward and foster further Russian-Chinese collaboration. Moreover, if the US and Russian governments become increasingly estranged, future projects may stall or remain uncompleted. A second consideration is the current plummeting of energy prices. As global oil and gas prices continue to drop at a rapid pace, further energy extraction projects may be stalled. Finally, a third consideration is the recent slow-down of the Chinese economy. While the impact of this slowdown on investment in Central Asia is still unclear, Chinese economic policies and sociopolitical plans may change. Nevertheless, despite these emerging trends in global politics, one fact remains clear: Central Asia has benefited from Chinese investment and the tides of

globalism, and is a testament to the mechanisms of international integration.

The future of Central Asian power-plays is still being determined as the centers of global power continue to shift eastward and the United States asserts its influence on a macro scale. As economic exchange and political integration continues to expand, Central Asia will develop into a hub of trade and political transnationalism that will ultimately stabilize the area. The "New Great Game" demonstrates the modernizing effects of global integration and the emergence of non-zero sum political and economic relationships. In our increasingly globalized world, Central Asia will continue to integrate with the international community, thereby promoting political dialogue, regional stability, economic development.

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