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New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom

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ABSTRACT

China and Russia both have interests in bordering Central Asia. China's thirst for energy has seen its footprint expand rapidly in the region relative to that of Russia, Central Asia's historical hegemon. With the two powerful neighbors' history of competition and conflict, the shift in relative influence between them risks a resurgence of bilateral rivalry. Referencing the scholarly literature on strategic rivalry, this article examines how energy relations have helped shaped the trajectory of China–Russian relations in Central Asia, particularly after the shock that came with the collapse of oil and gas prices in 2008–2009.

KEYWORDS China; Russia; Central Asia; energy relations; strategic rivalry; shock

Introduction

Steadily rising demand for energy drives China's growing ties with Central Asia and is a significant dimension of its relationship with Russia, both bilaterally and within the region. Moscow sees Central Asia as its 'near abroad': a region where a history of dependence on, and domination by, Russia places it within the natural sphere of the Kremlin's privileged interests. Russian-controlled pipeline networks still position Moscow as an energy middleman between Central Asia and Europe. However, China shares long borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and has significant and still expanding oil and gas investments in Central Asia that inherently challenge Russia's traditional dominance in the energy arena. The two powers have pursued ways to work together in Central Asia, including by establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a multilateral forum through which they can jointly address common threats and opportunities. However, as scholar Bobo Lo observes, the pragmatic underpinnings of the Sino-Russian relationship within the region – and beyond – make any partnership between the two historical strategic competitors and sometime enemies a 'hostage to fortune,' vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the international environment (Lo, 2008, p. 6). The fall in energy demand and attendant prices associated with the global financial crisis that began late in the last decade in 2008–2009 after their decade of exceptional buoyancy presented such a shock. How did this shock alter the dynamic between China

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and Russia in the region? Has it played a role in intensifying security competition between the two historical rivals or affected the relationship between the two countries in other ways?

A growing body of theoretical work on international strategic rivalries offers valuable guideposts for analyzing how relations between competitors may be affected by an exogenous shock such as the energy price collapse. For one, it helps define the term 'rivalry,' which is often used generically. This has been the case particularly in writing exploring the dynamics between great powers in Central Asia given the region's association with Mackinder's geopolitically pivotal 'Heartland' thesis and the region's history as the locus of competition between Eurasian empires, including the Russo-British 'Great Game' of the nineteenth century. In the literature on rivalry, which is most often concerned with atypically hostile relations between pairs of states, contests between states for strategic advantage may be labeled 'strategic rivalries' as distinct from other forms of rivalry relations. Some scholars use the concept of 'enduring rivalries' to describe rivalry relations between states that engage in repeated cycles of conflict, for example Rasler and Thompson (2006).

Usefully, studies of rivalry have considered how shocks may influence rival states or states prone to rivalry, at times catalyzing conflict and at others leading to cooperation. The impact of the 2008–2009 shock on Russo-Chinese competition in Central Asia offers a compelling application of lessons drawn from these studies. Recent history shows that in pursuit of other common interests both states have sought to mitigate competition with each other and even find areas around which to cooperate within the region. Their shared interests are largely geopolitical – Moscow and Beijing have common concerns about the US strategic agenda. They also share a common interest in regional stability and bilateral energy cooperation is an important dimension of their relationship as Russia 'looks East' for new energy supplies and China seeks to further diversify its oil and gas suppliers towards enhancing its energy security (Lo, 2008). However, as this study shows, since the end of the energy boom, Moscow has increasingly pursued tactics aimed at augmenting its relative stature in Central Asia, which reflects its growing unease with China's expanding role. China has responded to these tactics with efforts aimed at reassurance but not accommodation.

I begin the analysis with a brief overview of the salient literature on strategic rivalry and how it might apply to Sino-Russian relations and the energy price shock. I then examine the history and characteristics of Sino-Russian strategic rivalry in the region. After this background, I examine the role played by energy in the China-Russian relationship in Central Asia, and how the two countries have managed their regional relationship amidst rivalry in the post-cold war period before and during the boom. I then analyze the impact of the shock of the fall in energy prices for the emergence of strategic rivalry between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia and consider the broader implications of my findings.

International rivalry in theoretical perspective

The concept of rivalry is applied quite expansively and inexactly to describe a range of dynamics between states. For example, it may mean extreme competition and hostility, refer to distrust with the expectation that conflict is possible, or indicate latent competitiveness between actors (Dreyer, 2010; Valeriano, 2013). There is general agreement in the literature that *strategic rivalries*, as distinct from rivalries characterized by protracted

conflict between two states, characterize highly competitive relations between two powers that see each other as particularly dangerous threats to each other's national interests (Colaresi, Rasler, & Thompson, 2007). The origins of specific strategic rivalries are heterogeneous and often complex: they can emerge in response to disputes as primordial as those over territory they can stem from a variety of domestic factors, including the 'conditioning' of policy elites to become 'locked' into hostility or threat perceptions towards a historic enemy (this has been described as Russia's so-called 'Mongol complex' vis-à-vis China, for example); and they may be impelled or intensified by 'positional' factors, as is the focus of this study, whereby states compete for relative regional or global influence in pursuit of a broader set of interests (Hensel, 1999; Pardesi, 2017; Valeriano, 2013).

In analyses of how exogenous shocks may affect rivalries, shocks are treated as abrupt changes. Diehl and Goertz define a shock as 'a dramatic change in the international system or its subsystem that fundamentally alters the processes, relationships, and expectations that drive states' interactions' (Diehl & Goertz, 2001, p. 221). Studies of rivalry generally focus on conflict dynamics, giving them a heavy emphasis on political shocks and militarized competition. However, a more limited scholarship examines the effects of abrupt *economic* changes on the interactions between rival states. Analyses with this focus have largely explored the effects of domestic, instead of external, shocks and those studies investigating abrupt exogenous changes affecting potential rivalries have generally examined relations between states that were primarily commercial rather than military competitors, for example fourteenth century Venice and Genoa or the late twentieth century US–Japan rivalry (Thompson, 2001; Tir & Diehl, 2000). More useful to this project is research probing rivalries with pronounced economic *and* security dimensions, including the Anglo-Dutch rivalry of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century Anglo-Spanish rivalry, and the Anglo-German rivalry of the nineteenth through twentieth centuries (Levy & Ali, 1998, p. 29; Thompson, 2001; Young & Levy, 2011). These studies suggest that changes to the external environment can intensify rivalries between already competitive states in a variety of ways, generating strategic instability and raising the likelihood of conflict.

Few studies explain the processes by which exogenous shocks give rise to state behaviors that help fuel rivalries. Those available suggest, however, that states exhibit a wider range of competitive behaviors when the sources of competition are positional rather than territorial. In general, studies suggest that it is not the issues but how they are handled between states that have the strongest influence on the emergence of strategic rivalry (Rasler, Thompson, & Ganguly, 2013). For example, one study suggests that states whose leaders are conditioned by *realpolitik* approaches to international politics are more strongly associated with the emergence of strategic rivalries than states that value international institutions as a way to resolve international issues (Valeriano, 2013, p. 35). In a negative example – the Anglo-Spanish case – it was an organized elite opposition with a substantial popular constituency that incited parliament to obstruct government efforts to find a compromise, causing rising hostility between the two countries to escalate into conflict (Young & Levy, 2011, p. 221). In contrast, regional responses to shocks in East Asia, including the end of the cold war and the 1997–1998 financial crisis, illustrate how the institutionalization of regional cooperation resulted from a commitment by states to mitigate the emergence of rivalries and foster stability towards the goal of economic growth (Pempel, 2008).

It is therefore useful to think of a strategic rivalry as the culmination of a process that moves along a path from what might be called *latent rivalry*, in which the conditions for strategic rivalry exist but have not yet been activated, to *emergent rivalry*, in which at least one party has begun engaging in tactical behavior that reflects their growing insecurity, to overt *strategic rivalry* in which at least one state sees the other as an outright threat, to *rivalry* in which relations between the states becomes conflictual. When a shock is involved, how a pair of states that are latent rivals choose to respond determines how their movement along this rivalry spectrum. These lessons from the rivalry literature can be applied in order to locate the relationship between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia along this spectrum and, specifically, to assess if the relationship is becoming one of strategic rivalry whereby the perception of strategic threat is part of the bilateral dynamic.

Historical competition and conflict between China and Russia in Central Asia

There is little agreement about how to characterize the evolving Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia today. A substantial literature on a 'new Great Game' in Central Asia largely focuses on competition for influence between Russia and the United States and regional powers in relation to the conflict in Afghanistan (Contessi, 2013, p. 239). Some assessments see little prospect for the emergence of strategic rivalry between China and Russia in Central Asia. Indeed, some in this category express a measure of geopolitical utopianism that Beijing will limit its regional interests to energy development and commercial activities, leaving regional security to Moscow – the result, a model partnership between the Chinese bank and the Russian sheriff (Zhao, 2017). Studies taking a more historical view, including such book length studies as Lo's *Axis of Convenience* (2008), Cooley's *Great Games, Local Rules* (2012) and Fingar's edited *The New Great Game* (2016), however, assess historical predispositions and competing interests as inclining the two countries towards rivalry in the region.

A shared thread amongst studies that see the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia in strategically competitive terms is the long record of friction along the two powers' common frontiers. At various times, including at the height of the Qing Empire's power in the mid-eighteenth century when China's reach extended westward into the Tarim Basin, China controlled the ancient Silk Road across the Eurasian steppe. The conquest of Xinjiang, or the 'New Frontier,' set China against Tsarist Russia, which had its own designs on the region. A century later, China was a waning power, sapped by the dual onslaught of western imperialism and domestic rebellion. As the dynasty crumbled, the 'unequal treaties' imposed on China forced it to cede territory and permit Russian access to Central Asia. From a new base in occupied Turkestan, Moscow annexed the Ili Valley in 1870-71, transforming Russia into a major regional economic force. After the Qing collapse in 1911, Tsarist and later Bolshevik Russia extended a stronger grip on greater Xinjiang. While China was fractured by war in the 1930s and 40s, then-Soviet leader Josef Stalin pulled Xinjiang into the Soviet sphere. By 1939 Xinjiang could be described as a 'virtual dependency of the Soviet Union, differing scarcely at all from the neighboring Mongolian People's Republic' (Forbes, 1986, p. 152).

Only after the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War was Beijing able to reassert control over the Qing Empire's northern and western borders, purging pro-Soviet leaders and reorganizing Xinjiang as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. However,

even after the shuttering of the last Soviet consulate in 1962, Xinjiang remained the target of Soviet propaganda agitating for China to allow trans-border migration into the Soviet Kazakh Republic. As the Sino-Soviet split intensified, diplomatic posturing and security competition over the two countries' mutual frontiers reignited, reflecting an emergent rivalry. For example, Chinese maps from the period extending Xinjiang's border westward into the Soviet Kazakh Republic, and Beijing's location of its nuclear test site at Lop Nor just 1,300 miles from the Soviet Union's space center, suggested to Moscow that China harbored pernicious intentions (Silde-Karklins, 1975; Dickens, 1990). The disputed border between Xinjiang and the Central Asian Soviet Republics closed and grew increasingly militarized, reflecting intensifying strategic rivalry (Cohen, 2003, p. 210). The struggle over Xinjiang reached an apex during the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, when for seven months around two million Soviet and Chinese troops engaged in border skirmishes so intense that U.S. intelligence agencies believed they had 'explosive potential' (Central Intelligence Agency, 1969, p. 3).

The emollient of energy after the Soviet collapse

China's rapprochement with the United States and its indirect clash with Moscow in Afghanistan, where it supported the Mujahedeen's guerilla war against the Soviets, reflected Beijing's intensifying strategic rivalry with Moscow. The Soviet Union's collapse ended what might have otherwise protracted period of conflictual relations between Beijing and its superpower neighbor. Beijing saw opportunities to trade across reopened and demilitarized borders adjacent to many of China's poorest regions. Even before China's economic growth spurred demand for high levels of imported energy and raw materials, Beijing therefore prioritized the development of economic as well as political relations with Central Asia's newly independent states. Boundary settlements demarcating most of the disputed border between China and Russia and between China and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan made new economic cooperation possible, and between 1992 and 1997, China concluded several agreements spanning Russia and states in Central Asia aimed at facilitating trade. Beijing also sponsored other diplomatic initiatives to reduce regional strategic insecurity. In contrast, Russia began the 1990s with ambitions regarding the former Soviet republics largely limited to preventing them from becoming a security challenge during its own post-Soviet transition. In 1992, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin signed a non-aggression declaration with his Chinese counterpart as well as five-party military agreements amongst China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan imposing restrictions on military activities within a certain distance from shared borders (Burles, 1999).

Amidst Russia's economic contraction, Central Asian states turned towards China for investment and trade. To facilitate deeper economic ties, China proposed a free trade zone in Central Asia via the multilateral structure of the 'Shanghai Five' – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Eder, 2014, p. 37). For Beijing, Central Asia presented an opportunity not only to expand Xinjiang's avenues for economic development but to eventually construct transportation and communication networks linking China to Europe and the Middle East. To this end, Beijing held a conference in 1996 on a 'New Silk Road' concept centered on Eurasian transport routes (Peyrouse, 2007).

Energy emerged as a dimension of the China-Central Asian relationship after 1993, the first year that China found itself a net importer of oil products (in 1996 it became a net importer of crude oil). Beijing began to develop a strategy for meeting its energy

needs from its oil and gas-endowed neighbors (Zha, 2006). Prior to 1991, the region's energy resources had been left largely underdeveloped by Moscow, effectively held in reserve for future use. In the mid-1990s, China began to explore how to exploit the region's natural endowments to meet its own growing demand for raw materials and to expand its access to diverse energy supplies via land routes that avoided maritime chokepoints (Karrar, 2009). Beijing was sensible of Moscow's sensitivities towards its growing footprint in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, Russian pundits had begun to posit that a 'new Great Game' over the region would emerge between Russia and China. One nationalist Russian paper reportedly described Li's visit as 'pre-battle reconnaissance' (Burles, 1999). China publicly acknowledged its plan to import oil from Central Asia only in 1996 (Karrar, 2009).

It was not until 1997, however, that China concluded significant energy agreements with states in the region. China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) successfully outbid both Russian and American oil companies to own and operate Kazakhstan's Uzen oil field for 20 years, also concluding other agreements on stakes in Kazakhstan's Aktobemunaygaz Company and oil pipeline construction (Ottaway & Morgan, 1997; Burles, 1999). China reached an agreement with Turkmenistan to import gas via pipeline as well (Karrar, 2009). But breaking ground on projects took time and for nearly a decade Russia retained a virtual monopoly on Central Asian energy exports. Moscow thus could continue to extract substantial 'economic rent' from its erstwhile satellites (Milov & Olcott, 2007). Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan still sold most of their oil and gas production to other Central Asian republics or Russia at discounted prices. Russia used this energy domestically or resold it to customers in Europe at a significant profit – as much as five times the price paid to Central Asian producers (Eder, 2014; Swanström, 2012; Yenikeeff, 2011). Throughout the mid-1990s Moscow employed assertive tactics to defend its role as the middleman for all Central Asian energy sold to Europe, including putting a ceiling on the amount of additional energy that could be exported by Central Asian states, limiting their ability to earn hard currency and reinforcing their dependency on Russia (Smith, 1996, p. 17). In 1994, for example, Russia blocked Turkmenistan's efforts to diversify its exports to more lucrative markets than Ukraine. When Ashgabat later disputed Russian pricing in 1997, Moscow shut down pipelines to Turkmenistan's gas fields, triggering an immediate economic crisis (Grahler, 2006, p. 22).

The volubility of a growing 'Eurasianist' pro-China political and economic bloc in Russia muted Moscow's concerns about Chinese involvement in Central Asia, however. The Russian military-industrial complex, for example, saw China as an export lifeline in an era when the Kremlin's security budget was stagnant or shrinking. Despite fears expressed by some representatives of the Russian Far East about Chinese migration, the Duma was generally optimistic about the gains to be had from deepening ties with China as well (Kazantsev, 2010; Lukin, 2016; Yenikeeff, 2011). The Kremlin's views also began to shift as Russian leaders began to see benefits in strong relations with China not only for Russia's faltering economy but also their broader agenda vis-à-vis the West. By the mid-1990s, Moscow felt threatened and betrayed by US behavior, including the 1994 extension of NATO's 'partnership for peace' program to include five Central Asian states (Hu, 2012, p. 144). Moscow also saw US efforts to tap Caspian-based energy for the global market as a Western attempt to engineer new energy routes bypassing Russia (Committee on International Relations, 1998).

Nonetheless, even in the context of Moscow's growing isolation from the West, during the 1990s, the emollient effect of Russia's energy deals with China with other factors,

such as the reality that China's energy relations with Central Asia had little impact on Russia's control over the region's energy transit throughout the 1990s, Russian strategists remained wary of China's growing interests in the region. This concern, rarely expressed in Moscow's regional interactions with Beijing, was articulated most clearly at the level of international policy. Although Moscow and China jointly sponsored resolutions at the United Nations on the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, for example, the two countries did not respond in tandem to the 2001 decision by the George W. Bush Administration to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. Indeed, Russian president Vladimir Putin instead made distinctly unilateral statements asserting Moscow's ability to 'respond *on its own* to any changes in the sphere of strategic stability' (author's emphasis). Moreover, although the two countries normalized their relations and concluded a 'Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation' in 2001, the agreement lacked a military component (Weitz, 2003).

Russian caution was especially apparent regarding the development of a Central Asian collective security system. Although there was speculation in the West that China and Russia sought to forge a NATO-style alliance built around the Shanghai Five structure, enlarged to become the SCO in 2003, Russian defense policy specified military cooperation with Central Asian partners that excluded China (Gill, 2001). This included the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), formed in 1992 amongst Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Armenia (Laruelle, 2014). Russian border guards were assigned to patrol the five other states' external borders (Smith, 1996, p. 15). Thus, in the 'pre-boom' period, despite forces impelling Moscow towards cooperation with China, the legacy of historical animosity between the two countries remained a constraint on Moscow's relations with Beijing in the region,

After decades of Soviet pressure on its western borders, China could now look westward and see economic opportunities, including opportunities to meet its growing energy needs. However, the independence of Central Asian states posed its own set of threats to Chinese interests, including instability and the potential for other powers, like the United States, to become players in the region. Above all, it raised the possibility that the ethnic Uighurs in western China could seek to follow the lead of Central Asian states and pursue independence for Xinjiang. While developing ties to the region's new governments to assure their support against Uighur separatists who might base their operations within their borders, Beijing recognized that Moscow's deeper ties to the region, with the stakes to regional stability this brought with it, were to its advantage. Moreover, Beijing appears to have calculated, correctly, that as long as it respected Moscow's dominant role in the security arena, Russia would see its economic engagement in the region as a net benefit (Lo, 2008, p. 97–104).

From energy boom to energy shock

The boom years 2000–2008

During the early 2000s, China's surging demand for energy saw its economic footprint in Central Asia grow dramatically; nonetheless, deliberate Chinese policy kept rivalry from intensifying between the two countries. By 2003, Central Asian trade with China had risen from less than US\$300 million to more than US\$3.3 billion, approaching half of Russian trade with the region (see Chart 1 for Chinese and Russian trade with the region) (Oliphant, 2013; Paramonov, 2005). Just five years later, China had either equaled or

displaced Russia as the region's top trading partner (Peyrouse, 2010). This trade was buttressed by a network of new pipelines that brought oil and gas into Xinjiang to meet domestic needs directly from Central Asian fields. China was also the destination for the bulk of production from other extractive industries. China's accelerating demand for energy went hand in hand with Chinese investment. Loans from China not only flowed towards investment in the infrastructure and energy sectors but towards public investments in Central Asian states (Olimat, 2015, p. 156).

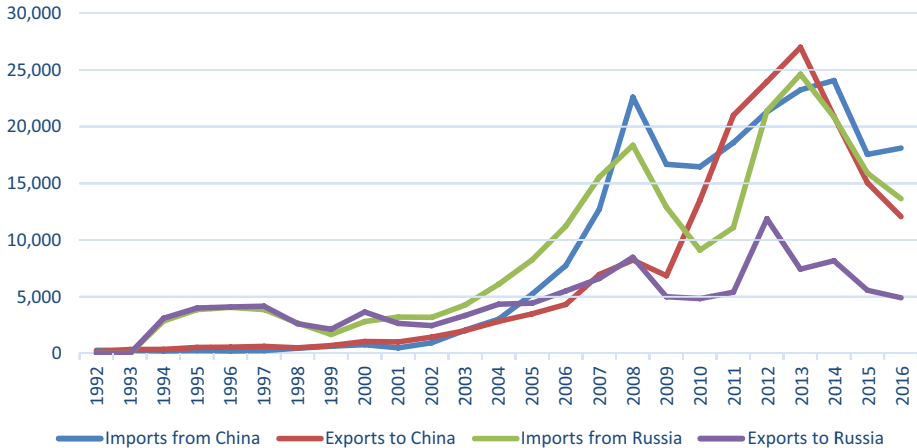


Chart 1. China-Central Asia trade and Russia-Central Asia trade (M\$).
Source for data: Direction of Trade Statistics Database, International Monetary Fund.

As China's economic ties with the region deepened, the security dimension of China's relations with Central Asian states also expanded. Beijing ostensibly focused on providing counterterrorism and assistance against transnational crime on one level, but this also entailed seeking support from Central Asian states on the question of Xinjiang and policies limiting the activities of Uighur separatists based in the region (Peyrouse, 2016, p. 16). China held bilateral exercises with Kyrgyzstan in 2002 and its first multilateral drill with Central Asian states in 2003. China also developed its Lanzhou Military Region – founding the Rapid Reaction Forces (*kuaisu fanying budui*), Special Operations Forces (*tezhong budui*), and Resolving Emerging Mobile Combat Forces (*tufa yingji shijian jie jue jiudong zuozhan budui*) – which had responsibility for both Xinjiang and Central Asia (Swanström, 2015). Finally, China improved counterterror and counter-trafficking coordination with Central Asian militaries, including by hosting military officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Muzalevsky, 2016).

Although these developments eroded Russia's dominance over the region's energy resources and security, relations between China and Russia developed without significant tensions during the boom. Chinese demand was substantial enough that it was a primary driver in growing global energy demand and attendant price increases for oil and gas, conditions particularly beneficial to Russia, the world's second largest oil producer and largest producer of gas. The Kremlin had a special interest in bolstering Russia's energy majors, including the state-owned producer Rosneft and pipeline company Transneft, as well as a key player, Russia's gas company, Gazprom, in which the Russian state has a 51 percent stake. By the early 2000s, oil and gas revenues had become a

major component of Russia's GDP (about 20 percent) and accounted for half of the government budget. By 2007, with the price of oil a close to US\$100 p/b and gas prices indexed to oil, Moscow projected a future of budget surpluses through the end of the decade (Russian State Budget, 2017).

Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia in 2000 with plans to harness Russian energy supplies and the China-led boom in global energy demand to restore Russia as a great power. As he later put it, he saw a chance to 'catch the Chinese wind... in the sails of [the Russian] economy' (Torbakov, 2016). In 2001 China and Russia signed a Treaty of Good-Neighborly and Friendly Cooperation, which included a commitment to expanding bilateral cooperation in the energy sector (Aid Data, n.d.).

As Beijing began exploring diverse areas of cooperation with Moscow – cooperation given an added logic by the growing US presence the two countries' respective backyards by way of its Afghanistan occupation – it managed its interests in Central Asia in ways that were careful to demonstrate due regard for Russia's special cultural and security relationship with the region. For example, although during visits to the region, Chinese leaders frequently referenced China's deep historical connection to Central Asia through the Silk Road and Beijing had already begun to pursue what is characterized as a 'soft power campaign' with the establishment of China's first Confucius Institute in Seoul in 2004, China refrained from making cultural diplomacy a key feature of its regional engagement. Instead, it channeled its principal scholarship programs through the SCO. Facilitated by the Customs Union established with Russia in 1996, the region's cultural orientation towards Russia therefore went largely unchallenged. Few Central Asians worked or studied in China and Russian remained the language of the educated; in addition, millions from across the region worked in the construction and services sectors in Russia, returning remittances accounting for substantial shares of the GDPs of a number of Central Asian countries. For example, the approximately one million workers from Tajikistan who worked in Russia accounted for nearly 50 percent of Tajikistan's total GDP (Cooley, 2012, p. 62; Weitz, 2016). Remittances from Russia represented more than 30 percent and 10 percent of the GDPs of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Yun, 2016, p. 1). Cooley observes that the importance of remittances to the region's economies was an additional source of leverage over Central Asian governments for Moscow, which used the threat of forcing workers without proper employment documents home as a negotiating tactic (Cooley, 2012, p. 62).

On the security front, China restricted its engagement with the region to counterterrorism and transnational crime as described above. Its bilateral military aid to the five Central Asian states stayed at modest levels, with China providing primarily technological assistance and equipment (Peyrouse, 2010). In contrast, Moscow's security ties with the region, particularly those with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan where it maintains military facilities and troops, remained strong and Russian remained the lingua franca of the region's militaries (Swanström, 2015). The CSTO's Intergovernmental Committee for Military and Economic Cooperation was established in 2005 to promote cooperation between Russia and the region and encourage the sale of Russian military technology and equipment at domestic prices (Swanström, 2012, p. 105).

Moreover, although Central Asian countries expanded ties with China and pursued various strategies to diversify their energy markets, Russia retained a strong grip as a lead player in energy exports from the region. Transneft and Gazprom continued to control pipelines, and concluded long term contracts, despite persistent price disputes (Eder, 2014). As Ajay Patnaik writes, 'the wave of higher energy prices ... enabled

[Russia] to revive many of the economic complexes linking Russia to Central Asia' (Patnaik, 2007, p. 1). Moscow moved forward on plans to form a 'gas union.' This was characterized by some observers as an effort to establish Gazprom as a 'gas caliphate' in order to secure Russia's regional hegemony (Carlson, 2007, p. 173), see as an element of a strategy by Putin to reinforce Russian dominance in the 'post-Soviet space' as a first front in his broader strategy to restore Russia's international stature. Other signs of this effort by Moscow in the region included its write-off of debts and new investments in energy infrastructure – including some abandoned Soviet-era projects. Moscow also sought to re-establish Russia as a destination for Central Asians aspiring to a better life, including expanding academic partnerships within the region and providing support to Russian state-owned universities in order to recruit more students from Central Asia (Fominykh, 2017, p. 56). Of course, munificence from Moscow carried expectations of a quid pro quo. For example, Moscow forgiveness of US\$242 million in Tajik debt went hand in hand with Dushanbe's agreement to expand an existing Russian military deployment and develop a permanent Russian base (Zhao, 2017).

During the boom, high prices and demand for energy thus facilitated an essentially non-confrontational strengthening of the roles of both China and Russia in the region, a circumstance largely congenial to leaders in Moscow, Beijing, and Central Asian capitals. Moreover, the conclusion after decades of negotiations of Russo-Chinese border demarcation agreements, the US presence in the region, and the 'color revolutions' of 2005–2006 smoothed the way for improved bilateral Sino-Russian security cooperation as well (Eder, 2014). In 2005, the two countries held their first ever joint military exercises through the SCO. Uzbekistan's return to alignment with Russia appeared to affirm both the primacy of Russia's regional influence and China's willingness to accept that influence by generally restricting its bilateral arrangements with Central Asian states to trade and investment, though China did open its first Confucius Institute in the region in Tashkent in May that year (Chen, 2010).

The shock, 2008–2009

The sharp drop in oil prices by late 2008 to nearly US\$40/barrel from a historic high of over US\$144/barrel in July of that year had almost instantaneous repercussions for the Sino-Russian dynamic in Central Asia. For Russia, the fall in energy prices threatened nothing short of a general economic collapse. Two-thirds of Russia's hard currency and about half of the government budget depended on oil and gas sales: by the end of 2008, Russia's foreign exchange reserves had lost US\$170 billion and the government budget had moved from a surplus to a substantial shortfall (Russian State Budget, 2017). As a result, Moscow curtailed planned investments in Central Asia while simultaneously moving to maintain its monopoly over Central Asian energy transit routes. For example, in 2009, with European energy demand declining, Moscow chose to suspend Gazprom's investments in Turkmenistan amidst tensions over pricing and supply. Some analysts saw Russia's war with Georgia the same year as an effort to prevent pipelines Moscow did not control from being constructed; indeed, Kazakhstan abandoned plans to invest in Georgia, where it had intended to construct a refinery (Cohen & Szaszdi, 2009).

For China, however, a massive fiscal stimulus introduced in response to the global financial crisis kept its economy growing at a robust pace, not far below the double-digit levels it had seen in the previous decade. Chinese investment in energy in Central Asia therefore continued unabated, accelerating the regional economy's pivot towards

China. For example, to prevent an economic contraction in the wake of the crash, Kazakhstan borrowed US\$5 billion from China's Export-Import Bank and Kazmunaigaz, Kazakhstan's state-run gas company, took out a loan of US\$5 billion from CNPC. China lent Turkmenistan US\$4 billion to finish the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline on schedule in 2009 (which now provides China with 30 billion cubic meters of gas per year). In 2009, Chinese president Hu Jintao announced that China would provide SCO member states an additional US\$10 billion in loans (Xinhua 2016). By 2011, Beijing had also concluded bilateral accords with Uzbekistan in sectors like energy and minerals (Kim & Blank, 2013). China's trade with the region stood at US\$40 billion, while Russia's trade with the region stood at just US\$21 billion (Oliphant, 2013, p. 2).

After 2009, China's military support for Central Asian states also rose with regular, if small, tranches of assistance, largely aimed at equipment purchases. It also used the SCO framework to test its ability to conduct expeditionary operations, and in the 2010 SCO 'peace mission' held in Kazakhstan showed that it was prepared to play a more significant role in regional military activities than at any point since the Qing Dynasty. The mission, held in Kazakhstan, involved 1000 Chinese troops and also marked the first cross-border mission of the Chinese air force. Worryingly from Moscow's perspective, outside experts comparing the Chinese and Russian militaries during the exercise observed that the PLA managed to outperform Russian forces in the areas of logistics and coordination with regional partners (McDermott, 2010).

By 2012, China had completed pipelines connecting all five Central Asian states to China. Nearly half of China's total gas demand was supplied by the region (Mariani, 2013). In contrast, Russia supplied very limited amounts of gas to the Chinese market, and would become a major oil supplier after a deal in 2013. These trends cemented China as Central Asia's preeminent trade partner. With the region's increasing importance to China's energy supply, China became willing to expand its cooperation in the region along new vectors. For example, it trumpeted an all-round strategic partnership with Kazakhstan in June 2011 – which Moscow matched in June 2012 – and began to elevate Sino-Turkmenistan relations to that of a strategic partnership in preparation for Chinese president Xi Jinping's September 2013 visit. In 2013, China and Kyrgyzstan made a similarly amicable declaration of strategic partnership. In a 2013 report on China in Central Asia, the *New York Times* commented on the central position occupied by Xi Jinping in the photograph of leaders at the SCO meeting Kyrgystan, where it appeared he had '[pushed] Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to the side' (Perlez & Feng, 2013).

Of all the initiatives pursued by Beijing during this period, however, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most significant. BRI's roots in the global financial crisis have been discussed widely. The initiative, announced in 2013, is in no small part an effort to mitigate the problems associated with China's excess production capacity, which was super-sized by the country's stimulus program (Dollar, 2015). Alongside this push factor, China's plans for hundreds of billions of dollars in investment in trade and transportation links and its vision of a Sino-centric 'greater Eurasia' formed an alluring pull (Wang Tingyi quoted in Ahmad, 2016).

The empire strikes back – Russian maneuvers in the 2010s

Beijing's growing relative influence in Central Asia following the drop in energy prices, alongside the growing stature of other proximate emerging powers like India, Iran, and Turkey, saw concerns rise in Moscow about their implications for Russia's regional role

and geopolitical interests (Blank, 2012). A number of policy initiatives on Moscow's part, including limiting Central Asian states' abilities to diversify their energy export markets, can be read as tactical responses aimed at promoting its interests in the region vis-à-vis China, indicating the activation of Russian competition.

On one level, these efforts sought to buttress bilateral links between Russia and key partner states in the region. For example, amidst longstanding strains in the Uzbek-Russian relationship, Moscow sought to reaffirm the importance of its strategic and economic ties to Tashkent through high level visits. Uzbekistan is an important regional hub for energy production and transportation (the critical Central Asia–Center pipeline passes through Uzbekistan from Turkmenistan to Russia), and its central location also makes it a political pivot for relations with other Central Asian countries. Putin met with Uzbek president Islam Karimov in 2012 and signed a bilateral memorandum of understanding that Uzbekistan would accede to the free trade zone agreed to by most other states in CIS.

Moscow also directed numerous policy initiatives towards Kazakhstan, which remained the most pro-Russian of the Central Asian republics, with the closest economic and political ties to Moscow. In 2010, Kazakhstan agreed to join the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) that had replaced the earlier Customs Union arrangement within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), adopting a common external tariff with Russia and Belarus, which Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev touted as a move towards making Kazakhstan as a regional hub. As part of Putin's efforts to persuade Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to sign on as well, Moscow wrote off substantial Kyrgyz and Tajik debts, also promising subsidized energy as well as financial support for both countries' militaries.

Moscow chose sticks rather than carrots in dealing with Turkmenistan, which had expressed longstanding animosity towards Russian efforts to monopolize energy transit to European markets. After the plunge in energy prices and amidst falling European demand, Ashgabat had refused to renegotiate its contracts with Gazprom and rejected an agreement for Russian-backed construction of a new pipeline to the Caspian. In April 2009, soon after the company announced a dramatic reduction in imports of Turkmen gas, an explosion occurred in a section of Gazprom's pipeline from Turkmenistan to Russia. This was widely interpreted as a Moscow-sanctioned act of sabotage. Later that year Turkmenistan opened a new pipeline to China, beginning the process of becoming Beijing's largest supplier of piped gas.

Russia also launched a new soft power campaign in the region, seeking to improve the regional penetration of Russian-language media (for example, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Russkii Mir*, *Russia Today*, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, and *Voice of Russia*) and fostering new cultural links to Russia via funding for university programs as well as pro-Russian civil society organizations. Russia also welcomed increased migrant labor from those states that were members of the EACU. After Dushanbe resisted joining the EACU in the interest of a more open economic policy, Russia deported hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers from Tajikistan (Azimi, 2016; Trickett, 2017).

Russia increased military assistance to the region as well, much flowing to develop Russian bases in the region under extended basing agreements. Russia today is the only foreign state with 'permanent' bases in Central Asia, including seven bases in Kazakhstan and a base and facility in Tajikistan. Amidst the promise of over US\$1 billion in weapons and other military equipment from Moscow, Bishkek closed the US base at Manas (Ott, 2014); Russia maintains air and submarine testing bases in Kyrgyzstan.

In addition to aggressively pursuing EACU participation and extended basing rights, Moscow pushed forward a number of new energy initiatives. It promoted an Energy Club within the SCO enabling improved coordination of regional energy production and therefore of energy prices, particularly those for gas. In 2013, in exchange for promised investments in Kyrgyzstan's gas infrastructure as well as debt write-offs, Gazprom acquired the country's natural gas network. Russia also expanded its grip on the country's uranium sector. These policies, undertaken at a time when energy prices had rebounded to above 2009 heights (though they would tumble again in 2014), helped reweight Russia's regional position and strengthen the ties between Russia and Central Asian states, particularly with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

However, if these tactics strengthened Russia's posture throughout much of the region, with the notable exception of Turkmenistan, China's regional ties and influence continued to deepen and expand. By 2014, China had become the region's top trading partner. Some estimates indicate that as a result of Chinese investments in oil and gas fields and pipelines, by 2020 half of the region's total energy will flow to China. Atop expanding plans for BRI-related projects in the region, China's launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) effectively circumvented Russian opposition to earlier proposals to establish an infrastructure bank through the SCO. Meanwhile, Russian trade with EACU members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was falling amidst trade barriers and Russia's own economic slowdown, in part due to Western sanctions imposed after the Ukraine crisis. Ashgabat continued to resist joining the EEU, despite the pressures on its migrant workforce in Russia (European Parliament, 2017).

Nearly a decade after the energy boom of the first decade of the twenty-first century had ended, Russia retained its leading role in regional security. However, the contours of its presence had changed significantly, having become concentrated in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent Tajikistan. China had emerged as an important alternative security partner for those countries with which Russia's relations had grown strained. Uzbekistan, for example, declined to join the CSTO, ending Russia's use of the Karshi-Khanabad airbase. China had also become an increasingly significant supplier of advanced military equipment to both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Beijing had also begun to structure multistate security partnerships with regional states outside of the SCO framework that excluded Russia, establishing with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan a 'Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism' to combat terrorism, and holding a joint counter terrorism exercise with Dushanbe involving 10,000 troops near the Afghan border (Muzalevsky, 2016; Kucera, 2016).

Mainstream policy circles in Moscow have noted these developments with alarm, although outright expressions of concern about the threat of China's regional influence are tempered by Putin's own pro-China policy – what Torbakov has labeled the 'myth' of Sino-Russian friendship (Torbakov, 2016, p. 148). However, even Putin's personal authority has not quelled Russian elites' rising anxiety about China's role in Russia's near abroad, nor has the pessimism of those long skeptical of China's strategic intentions been silenced (The Asan Forum, 2017; Kaczmarek, 2013).

China's BRI has catalyzed much of this heightened strategic mistrust. The initiative has lowered the confidence of many Russian analysts that China's influence in the region can be contained (Steppe Dispatches, 2015). Russian analysts understand BRI as an effort to bring states into China's geo-economic orbit; one Russian commentator quoted by an analyst writing on China's growing role in Central Asia described the BRI as Beijing's grand stratagem to 'steal' Central Asia from Moscow, for example (Kelly-

Clark, 2016). Russian commentary on the international Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017 included expressions of displeasure that Russia was not given a central place in the meeting and a view that the terms of Chinese loans for BRI projects will increase China's economic leverage over the heart of Eurasia (The Asan Forum, 2017).

Russian policy elites' reappraisal of Russo-Chinese relations is also reflected in discussions about how new approaches might strengthen Russia's relative influence in Central Asia (Kucera, 2016). Multiple factors underlie Moscow's attempt to establish itself as a leading power broker in Afghanistan. However, there are some who make the case that such engagement could strengthen the Kremlin's relative position in Central Asia by enabling it to address concerns, particularly by Tajikistan, as well as by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – all countries in the region with which Moscow's ties are strained – about the prospect of growing Pashtun influence on Kabul. There is also support for more engagement with New Delhi in the region, seen in the emerging narrative of historical India-Russia friendship and regional cooperation. Russian media has covered in detail India's denunciation of the BRI project as an effort by China to pave the way to hegemony in Asia – reflecting, some suggest, Russia's own misgivings (The Asan Forum, 2017). These are amongst the signs suggesting that Moscow is both unsure that it can preserve its strategic interests in Central Asia and that it views China's growing presence there in increasingly zero-sum terms. The challenge for Russian policymakers is that, even as they recognize that the balance of influence in Central Asia is shifting towards China, their financial constraints and intractable commitments to other geostrategic priorities, including military interventions in both Ukraine and Syria, limit their policy options.

At the same time, while Beijing is deepening its role in Central Asia's economy and security, it has been able to take advantage of a host of extra regional and transnational issues to strengthen its bilateral ties with Russia. Beijing shares Moscow's frustration over the US approach to stabilizing Afghanistan, enabling Sino-Russian cooperation on talks towards Afghan national reconciliation. US- and European-led sanctions imposed on Russia after the Ukraine crisis were opposed by China, which is not part of the sanctions regime, reinforcing Russia's need for Chinese trade and investment. China for its part, increasingly uncomfortable with the vulnerability of its dependence on Middle East energy, has welcomed the opportunity to cooperate with Russia to improve regional stability, including by brokering a political solution in Syria and combatting Islamic extremism. China shares in Russia's opposition of the West's prioritization of human rights and critiques of authoritarian political systems.

Beijing has sought to reassure Moscow that it 'has no intention of trying to impede Russia' (Zhao, 2017, p. 184) in Central Asia. It has even reframed Russian regional initiatives that appear as counterbalances to Chinese influence as shared opportunities. For example, China has taken the position that the EEU, with its common tariff on all goods entering the region, converges with its own efforts to boost regional connectivity through the BRI, and can be integrated into both a regional free trade agreement as well as BRI projects. But it is energy relations that Beijing sees as the vital vector for 'lowering the cost of its presence in Central Asia and increasing the yields for Russia' (Olimat, 2015, p. 61). Through a high-level China-Russia Investment Cooperation Committee amongst other diplomatic vehicles, Beijing has backed its energy companies' efforts to conclude contracts for new energy investments and supply agreements. Construction has begun on the largest cooperative Sino-Russia energy project in history, the China-Russia East Route Natural Gas Pipeline – a joint venture between China National

Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Gazprom to deliver Siberian gas to China for 30 years (Olimat, 2015, p. 61). Other pipeline projects are under negotiation, and China is exploring large upstream energy investments in Russia. Indeed, at the time of writing it appears that Russia has displaced Saudi Arabia as the largest supplier of oil to China.

Conclusion: strategic rivalry restrained but emergent

Nonetheless, despite the choreography by Moscow and Beijing to mitigate the potential for tensions over Central Asia, since the collapse in energy prices a decade ago, relations between the two countries in the region have been on a trajectory towards intensifying competition from latent to emergent rivalry. China has proven willing to protect its expanding energy and trade ties with a receptive Central Asia by forging bilateral security mechanisms. Beijing has seen fertile ground amongst Central Asian states to plant its BRI vision for Eurasian connectivity. Massive Chinese investments under the BRI's banner are already accelerating the region's economic and political orientation towards Beijing. Moscow continues to seek to strengthen ties in the region through reinforcing economic, military, and cultural connections to Russia. However, Russia's post-boom economic malaise along with its expanding security activities in other regions impede its ability to reengineer its relationships with states across the region, which have every incentive to encourage, and extend, competitive Sino-Russian regional largesse.

This study therefore concludes that the shocking fall and sustained depression in energy prices after 2008–2009 has been a catalyst for the accelerated expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia relative to Russia. This development in and of itself is not a condition for strategic rivalry between Russia and China in Central Asia. Mutual concerns about extremism and terrorism to energy to other broader geostrategic issues will remain areas for bilateral cooperation between China and Russia both in the region and beyond from for some time. However, several other issues have arisen that increase the prospects for the emergent rivalry between China and Russia in the region to become more strategic in character. Foremost amongst these is that the Russian elite increasingly see Russia as losing irrecoverable ground in the region to Chinese influence. Chinese assurances have been palatable to Russia because of the economic and political logic of its energy relationship and overarching international partnership with Beijing. However, with the expected growth of China's ties to the region with the implementation of BRI and related projects and the rise in China's international prestige amidst US dysfunction, this is likely to change. Indeed, as prospect theory would suggest, Russia is likely to engage in more risky strategies to prevent further losses in its position, introducing new tensions into its relationship with China. As China's confidence and stakes in playing a leadership role in the region increase, its willingness to reassure and accommodate will diminish, making it prone to oppose Russian efforts to modify an environment it sees as advantageous to its interests (McDermott, 2001).

Other sources of potential tension and competition between the two countries in the region are already visible. For example, although this paper gives only limited attention to the agency of the states in the region, efforts by individual Central Asian states to maximize their own interests by encouraging competition for political loyalty or resources may exacerbate rivalry between Moscow and Beijing. Signs of this dynamic are already evident in Ashgabat's efforts to reengage Moscow amidst a growing dependency on China (Stronksi, 2017). In addition, as the BRI moves forward, the diverse energy linkages and economic corridors across Central Asia and the Eurasian continent it creates may reduce the

relative role of energy in regional economies. This will alter a key driver of both Chinese and Russian engagement with Central Asia with uncertain strategic implications. Finally, the growing role of outside powers – including India, Iran, and Turkey – in this strategically important region could bring China and Russia together against the actions of these powers in their shared neighborhood. However, it could also fuel Sino-Russian competition for relative influence with these powers and regional actors as Beijing and Moscow pursue other ‘great games.’ The China–Russia dynamic in Central Asia has no precise parallels in historical relations between states that have moved along the trajectory from competition to strategic rivalry (and eventually to conflict), such as the Anglo-Dutch rivalry of the 1650s and the Anglo-Spanish relationship of the 1740s. In both of these historical examples, established patterns of cooperation were abandoned when national interests were determined by one or both parties to be irreconcilably at risk.

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