

# China and Russia in Central Asia: Rivalries and Resonance

Finding the balance in the long-term between rivalry and resonance may be difficult for Beijing and Moscow.

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Mindful of the stereotypes (ahem, [Great Game and Silk Road](#)) I'd rather not trot out erroneously, questions regarding what to make of the potential for conflict or cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia remain of serious concern not just to those powers, but the states and peoples of the region, and external actors, like the United States and the European Union.

Both Russia and China have unveiled grand-scale visions to be played out, at least in part, in Central Asia. A new report from the International Crisis Group, [Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries](#), takes a look at China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union.

Both Russia and China have sought to position their separate projects as compatible, but critics dicker with whether the insular EEU and expansive BRI can really connect in anything but rhetoric. Furthermore, as the report notes, both the EEU and BRI have little, if any, focus on issues like rule of law, social welfare, health, education, or environmental protection, which have serious repercussions for not just the security of their investments but the future of the region's states and peoples.

Certainly, Beijing and Moscow share similar worldviews, especially vis-a-vis the United States. But as the report points out, the two regional initiatives have divergent goals because each is designed to benefit the country at its core.

China's Belt and Road Initiative, by fiat of geography, cannot ignore Central Asia on its way to Europe and Central Asia's shared border with China's Xinjiang boosts the economic logic with security rationale. The Belt and Road, which isn't so much a set plan as an opportunistic stitching of relevant projects together, nonetheless brings the heft of actual funding into a region in desperate need of infrastructure development.

The Eurasian Economic Union, on the other hand, is "a customs union among former Soviet states orienting their economies towards Moscow." The customs union aims to promote free trade and movement within the union, and imposes tariffs on external imports. Sharper critics see the [EEU as an attempt to resurrect the Soviet Union](#), while more nuanced observers — such as the authors of a [Chatham House report on the EEU](#), released earlier this year — view the EEU as part of Moscow's effort to "strengthen its own global influence," but that Russia is not "preoccupied with making it work."

Crisis Group's report walks through each initiative, highlighting areas of concerns. Along the Belt and Road, challenges include anti-Chinese sentiment. One of the most clear outpourings of this sentiment were the 2016 spring protests touched off by rumors that new land code laws would allow foreigners (i.e., Chinese) to buy up Kazakh land.

But, elites in Central Asian states want what China is offering meaning public pushback isn't a deal-breaker, though it may be a seething irritant. As one Chinese scholar explained it, "most of the people in Central Asia who have strong negative sentiments against China are not powerful, while those who have power want to work with China."

The report also comments that the Belt and Road model "represents a *de facto* challenge to the economic development model promoted by Western states which emphasises structural and policy reforms and technical assistance in sectors such as education and health, but largely avoids public infrastructure."

Western focus on systems and systematic changes can be tedious as they entail altering the very same systems of corruption which have kept Central Asia's elites at the top. But increasingly, publics in countries like Kyrgyzstan, are paying attention to who wins contracts for projects and how. Former Prime Minister Temir Sariyev, who has thrown his hat in the ring for the Kyrgyz presidency, resigned amid a cloud of corruption allegations linked to a Chinese company and road project.

The countries of Central Asia — most of which have autocratic or semi-autocratic governments — welcome infrastructure investment but are wary of what has been perceived as Western lecturing on democracy and human rights. China, on the other hand, as Shannon Tiezzi has noted, [defines human rights with a focus on economic well-being](#).

Crisis Group describes Russia's Eurasian Economic Union as the product of Moscow's continued primacy in areas of politics and economics in the region, as well as long-established personal and institutional links. Like the Chatham House report referenced above, Crisis Group also sees the EEU as "a platform for Moscow's own Great Power aspirations."

Both Beijing and Moscow have made statements about how well the Belt and Road fits with the EEU, but, as the report comments, the slow diplomatic pace with regard to weaving the two together in anything more than rhetoric, "reflects a process through which Russian strategists have eventually concluded it is more in Russia's interest to shape China's initiative than to resist it."

Notably, China's Belt and Road-branded projects are usually arranged bilaterally, never through the EEU. Chinese scholars who spoke with Crisis Group seemed to be somewhat dismissive of the EEU, especially of its long term prospects. If the EEU is burdened by its members "divergent, centrifugal interests," the Belt and Road is "conceived as an open web of bilateral agreements" in which the economic benefits are "explicit," and the political expectations to support Chinese policies such as the One China Policy and efforts with regard to Xinjiang, are "explicit."

The report's review of the West's place in Central Asia — and its relation to the Chinese and Russian projects — is comparably small. "The EU and the U.S. are influential actors in Central Asia," the report says, "but increasingly marginalised by the rise of China and a re-assertive Russia." As noted above, both Russia and China pay relatively less attention to the rule of law, social welfare, health, education and environmental protection; and here the report comments that the EU and U.S. "may wish to explore ways to engage with both initiatives and use this to push for good governance, as well as environmental and labour standards." In the end, the report concludes that this "should not be done at the cost of adopting an uncritical approach to authoritarian regimes."

A recent paper from the German Marshall Fund's Michal Romanowski focused on developing U.S. policy in the region ([as I wrote earlier this year](#), Central Asia policy is at the end of the list of policies the Trump administration needs to consider and potentially revise). Romanowski's paper recounts U.S. interests and involvement in Central Asia and makes the case for continued long-term commitment. "It is crucial for Washington not to cede this arena to Russia and China," he writes. Most importantly, Romanowski's recommendation in the medium term is concentrating on "areas where tangible change is possible, such as health, education, and the environment" and strategizing on more touchy issues like democracy and human rights with the EU, Japan, and South Korea. Importantly, among Romanowski's long-term recommendation is this plea: "Security should not be the only U.S. priority."

"Washington," he writes "...has a lot to offer in the fields of technology, education, good governance, and civil engagement."

Like the Crisis Group report, which suggests fitting U.S. and EU efforts within existing regional projects, Romanowski recommends that Washington support existing projects rather than pursuing its own initiatives. He does, however, point to the CASA-1000 project as a "good case study of a multi-party cooperation." The jury is still out on that one, but the recommendation — that the United States not strike out on its own in the region — certainly has merit. But fitting U.S. interests within the frameworks provided by Russia and China will be, in many ways, a serious challenge. In the same way, finding the balance in the long-term between rivalry and resonance may be difficult for Beijing and Moscow.