

Is the new 'Great Game' a China-Russia duel over Central Asia?

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Originally published by TRTWorld, 9th August 2018

The Chinese One Belt One Road initiative is running through a chunk of Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia. It will inevitably pit Russia and China against each other.

Since the collapse of Russia's relationship with the West over the diplomatic crisis and US sanctions, Moscow has [emphasised](#) the shift of its political and economic priorities to Asia. The growing isolation from the West has made the Sino-Russian strategic partnership a growing reality.

Russia sees China as a potential balance and this relationship could have potential benefits for both. For China, a new area to explore resource markets, while for Russia it has become a 'return ticket' to the post-Soviet space by gaining more authority after Georgian and Ukrainian wars.

However, it is imperative to bear in mind that both sides compete for influence over the region with their respective regional integration projects and there is ongoing rivalry to retain political and economic power in the Central Asian sphere. The Chinese-Russian relationship is complicated, with lingering mistrust on both sides.

Central Asia

Central Asia contains relatively weak states with small populations, but significant energy reserves and strategically located between China and Russia. Their shared interest in regional stability and in keeping US influence out of the area has led the two countries to develop a largely cooperative attitude towards one another. Both China and Russia have economic and security interests in the region, which might challenge US interests and its increasingly unilateral power order.

Since its invasion of Crimea in 2014, Russia has proved to be one of the most influential game-changers in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin's main focus to regain security influence in the post-Soviet space changed after the Ukrainian and Georgian wars. Russia was mainly a security provider, but by increasing bilateral offers of military assistance, it stepped up its focus on Central Asia as a region of strategic security importance. This requisite to hold security influence in Central Asia, gradually turned into Russia's assertiveness toward the West, as concerns about the successful implementation of the EU's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area drifted Ukraine into the EU's orbit.

Russian concerns about China's plans in Central Asia were similar to its worries about Ukraine, spurred mainly by the announcement of the One Belt One Road Initiative.

The Chinese President, Xi Jinping, announced the launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt at Nazarbayev University in Astana during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. The fact that Xi gave his Silk Road speech in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, made Moscow even more uncomfortable, as Kazakhstan is the most prominent and most prosperous country in Central Asia, which shares a long border with Russia and is viewed by Moscow as a key ally.

The Chinese initiative would encompass 70 percent of the world's population and has been promptly placed among the top priorities of Beijing's foreign policy. Moscow initially reacted with alarm and apprehension. Its immediate response has been the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), an integration project with Russia at the centre and covering a large part of the post-Soviet space.

Silent battle

These two projects spring from very different motives: EEU is Russia's most significant attempt to convene former Soviet states around itself through economic leverage. China's OBOR encourages Chinese economic development in the West of the country and links China to Europe—both economically and politically—while removing investment and trade barriers.

However, holding similar strategic goals to impose their economic integration and market expansion over Central Asia, some Russians quietly express concern about Beijing's growing geo-economic and geopolitical ambitions in the region.

Russia is pursuing a strategic partnership with China right now, but different interests occasionally arouse suspicion. The larger Chinese goal is most likely to dominate Eurasia, which means relegating Russia to second-tier status. This will inevitably lead to a clash of the EEU and the OBOR initiative at some point.

Parallel points between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Union will gradually challenge Russia's incumbent position in a number of ways. Through supranational institutions, such as the [Eurasian Economic Community](#), [Single Economic Space](#) and [Eurasian Economic Union Treaty](#), Russia tries to implement a single market for goods and services among members.

Russia, is trying to become the primary transit country for energy resources from Central Asia and dominate the region's natural gas industry while China, on the other hand, aims to tap into Central Asia's vast resources and is thereby challenging Russia's effective energy monopoly in the region.

Despite the current agreeable state of relations between the two countries, China's rising power and its overwhelming economic capabilities in comparison with Russia creates a growing power imbalance.

The Russian factor is unavoidable in the post-Soviet sphere, so all countries will inevitably be involved in some form of economic integration with Russia. However, President Putin understands that Moscow's main game is geopolitical, not economic. The Kremlin is aware that Russia's position in Eurasia is weaker than China's potential.

Russia offers military prowess, while China offers a mercantilist variant, which is growing increasingly dominant. China's growing energy engagement in the region is perceived as a challenge by Russia and has triggered counter-moves to secure Russian political control in this area, rather than cooperation.

This new pattern reflects Putin's foreign policy of using energy as a weapon to secure Russia's national interest. All this taken into consideration, the foundations of the Sino-Russian partnership may not be stable in the long term.

Is Central Asia the stage for a new "Great Game" between a waning Russia and a resurgent China?

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