«The carrots and sticks policy could be the beginning of joint Sino-Russian rule where Central Asian countries would not have a voice in decision-making processes that concern them or their future development» – researcher Nina Miholjcic, mentioned in her article written specifically for CABAR.asia.

While China and Russia have been subtly competing in the region for almost three decades leaving their smaller neighbors with at least a tactical leverage in deciding on whose rule to embrace and projects to support, a new reinforced alignment of Sino-Russian relations might bring different set of strategic concerns for Central Asian countries. Although it would be daring to claim that the China-Russia relationship is without serious contradictions and that interests of these two regional influencers are completely aligned against the U.S.,[1] still the Beijing-Moscow cooperation which has experienced a considerable enhancement recently makes smaller nations in between justifiably wary.

Central Asia has become an important strategic point where Sino-Russian interests collide and coalesce concurrently. Two competing organizations in the region, Chinese-led Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) and Russia managed Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), expose this rivalry side of the Beijing-Moscow relationship.[2] However, common interests such as the aspiration to contest Western-dominated international system,[3] as well as mutual economic and political interest in stable and secure Central Asia are important enough to overshadow any significant differences and reinforce Sino-Russian partnership.

China has been interested in satisfying its amplified energy demand but also in increasing its presence in Central Asia for the purposes of accomplishing Xi’s ambitious BRI project. This hydrocarbon-rich region is in need of big economic investments that gives China a lot of possibilities for establishing strong regional economic and political ties.

On the other hand, Russia has been trying to maintain its dominance over its “near abroad” especially through bilateral instruments concerning energy relations, debt agreements, and the status of migrants.[4] Even though Russian presence is still considerable and threads cultural, political and economic relations in the region, Central Asian countries are slowly
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liberating themselves from the Russian rule while concurrently embracing Chinese presence and projects. Russia’s deteriorating power may be at the matching point with China’s booming presence in Central Asia which paradoxically brings these two countries closer together, possibly at the expense of their less developed and in need of investment neighbors.

Current configuration of the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle is not in favor of the U.S. As the Putin-Xi tandem shows no signs of slowing down, Washington should be concerned especially since the Sino-Russian relations have set more assertive foreign policy not only toward the U.S. but also toward neighboring countries. Washington strongly opposes Xi’s Sinocentric regional ambitions and Putin’s restoration of a Eurasian (Soviet) sphere of influence. Such opposition brings China and Russia closer together as the U.S. has taken a role of common adversary. Additionally, both China and Russia have geostrategic advantage over the U.S. in Central Asia. Geo-cultural proximity and similar foreign policy goals give the Sino-Russian agenda more leverage in the region where aloof West with its emphasized democratic political program fails to attract broader audience.

**Chinese carrots and Russian sticks**

The symmetry of Sino-Russian interest is perceptible in the strong desire of both China and Russia to preserve the political status quo and prevent the spread of radical extremism in Central Asia. However, their methods for achieving such stability differ greatly. Russia is well-known by its coercive diplomacy especially toward surrounding former Soviet states. With the intention of maintaining its dominance and control in a regional sphere of influence, Russia does not hesitate to use hard power tools such as cyber, energy, and maritime claims. The ‘sticks’ strategy is in the core of Russia’s regional diplomacy that counterparts Chinese ‘rewarding’ foreign policy of generous economic investments. China uses ‘carrots’ in form of substantial development programs to please political elites in Central Asia in order to popularize Chinese presence, as well as to divert attention from the increased abuse of Muslims in the Xinjiang province.

One could argue that China’s ambitious initiative is an effective way to buy influence in the region in order to alleviate local security risks in Xinjiang province by establishing tight economic relations with its Muslim neighbors. As Xi’s initiative improves regional transport, communication, energy and trade networks, the Central Asian states embrace this new friendship based on lavish economic investments. The carrots and sticks policy could be the beginning of joint Sino-Russian rule where Central Asian countries would not have a voice in decision-making processes that concern them or their future development.

Although attractive and well-responsive to the current poor economic situation in the
region, Chinese investments might bring some undesirable consequences, such as predatory lending, debt spirals and a lack of corporate social responsibility.[9]

Kazakhstan was the first country to express strong interest in Chinese initiative by incorporating its five-year (2015–19) state infrastructure development program Nurly Zhol (Bright Path) into BRI.[10] While China relies on Kazakh energy imports and considers its closest western neighbor as an important link in the realization of the Belt and Road project, Kazakhstan`s economy depends heavily on Chinese investment and trade agreements. In 2017, Sino-Kazakh bilateral trade recorded $11.07 billion making China Kazakhstan’s second biggest trade partner (after Russia).[11]

The most populous country in Central Asia, Uzbekistan has maintained productive economic relations with China through massive Chinese investments especially in the energy and digital sectors. The Uzbek government recently signed a billion-dollar agreement with China dedicated to development of the country`s digital infrastructure.

This would be the second largest Chinese investment in Uzbekistan after a $2 billion gas project that has been transporting Turkmen and Uzbek natural gas to China ever since 2012.[12] With extensive hydrocarbon reserves, Turkmenistan is a very important energy partner to China which remains the largest gas buyer of the country.[13] Turkmenistan`s gas exports to Russia dropped dramatically from around 40 bcm in 2008 to zero by 2017, while rising almost eight times to China reaching nearly 30 bcm in 2017.[14]

China also invests heavily in Kyrgyzstan and remains country`s biggest creditor by owning nearly half of Kyrgyzstan`s foreign debt ($1.7 billion of the $3.8 billion total in 2018).[15] Tajikistan has not stayed immune to the Beijing`s grand project.

Although there are serious security issues especially in the remote, mountainous areas of the country, China still invests considerably in Tajikistan`s economy. In 2017, China’s direct investment in Tajikistan reached $95 million.[16] Undoubtedly, China has become the largest trading partner in the region overtaking economically Russia`s former area of influence.
Russia might have lost a strong foothold in Central Asia particularly in trade and energy sectors but it still plays an important security role in the region. Russian regional influence should not be dismissed that quickly especially with a new heightened relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Kremlin exercises very conservative regional foreign policy where Central Asia is still considered Russia’s backyard succumbed to its hard power. Russian presence remains strong in cultural, linguistic and political circles of Central Asia.[17] Moreover, Russia employs a considerable number of Central Asian migrant workers and the region depends on these substantial remittance flows that reached almost $10.5 billion in 2018.[18]

Even though Russia emphasizes military and security aspects of its foreign policy, Russian soft power is very much present in the region. Russian is still the common language in all five Central Asian states and many regional media outlets spread Russian propaganda praising Russia’s positive role in Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts.[19] Although there are concerns that China might extend its influence to military and security areas in the region, it already holds an unofficial military base in Tajikistan, Russia is still stronger regarding the martial impact with its military bases located in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russian 201st military base in Tajikistan, the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan and seven large military bases in Kazakhstan demonstrate Russian military dominance in Central Asia.[20] Additionally, Russia remains leading arms supplier in the region.[21] The lessons from the Russo-Georgian war (2008) and Russia’s actions in Ukraine are warnings for
Central Asia that aggressive Russia`s foreign policy punishes `disobedient` neighbors. Kremlin has shown many times willingness to use force in order to maintain its control in the region.

**Vulnerability of Central Asia**

Being at the intersection of global and regional powers Central Asia should not be marginalized in the international arena. However, Central Asian states have been perceived merely as Russia`s and recently China`s sphere of influence or potential base for the promotion of Western values, even though Western campaign has not yielded successful results in the region so far. Lack of internal connectivity, physical barriers, regulatory obstacles, political repression and overall poor economic performance[22] make Central Asian countries vulnerable to foreign coercion, manipulation, or inducement. The region suffers from poor connectivity due to several geopolitical and historical reasons. First of all, it is a landlocked region with a harsh climate, extremely rugged terrain and inherited obsolete Soviet infrastructure. Additionally, the region is marked by political repression and authoritarian regimes that intensify regional isolation and detachment.[23]

Considered traditionally as Russia`s backyard, Central Asia has entered a new phase of strategic positioning where Sino-Russian amplified cooperation might dictate the future economic and political course of the region. China offers economic development as a way of securing the region from the `three evils` – terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.[24] Beijing is afraid of the escalation of terrorism and political violence in Central Asia that could easily destabilize China`s west and ruin BRI`s realization. Boosting economic development and connectivity through investment in transportation, digital and energy infrastructure might produce positive overall economic outcomes. However, entering into agreement with China carries potential risks such as infinitive debt and Chinese dominance.

Tajikistan, as the poorest of the Central Asian countries, has welcomed Chinese extensive investments but at the same time has become heavily indebted country.[25] Russia and China, although the latter still unofficially, are military present in Tajikistan which makes this already economically dependent country additionally deprived from security and military independence. Uzbekistan suffers from the same problems as other countries in the region. Undeveloped infrastructure, widespread corruption, political repression and poor economic conditions have left the country hungry for foreign investments. The Chinese telecom giant, Huawei has modernized Uzbekistan`s digital infrastructure but at the same time such investment has raised privacy concerns and the question of political and strategic
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implications of China’s dominance in this sector.[26]

The most open country among Central Asian five, Kyrgyzstan is heavily indebted to China and too fragile economically to respond effectively to potential predatory lending situation. The Kyrgyz government has trouble in silencing local opposing voices that demand deportation of Chinese illegal immigrants and inspections of companies that employ Chinese labor. [27] Kyrgyzstan chooses to turn a blind eye to China`s discriminatory policy toward Uighur minority and not so transparent rules regarding loan policy due to financial dependency and fear of retaliation.

Kazakhstan`s authorities are trying to hush activists who dare to raise voices against China`s reeducation camps in the Xinjian province. A detained activist from Kazakhstan expressed concerns that “China`s soft power and money is turning Kazakh authorities and intellectuals into Beijing`s agents of influence.”[28]

The least open country in the region, Turkmenistan is currently tied to China through vital energy projects. Due to weak domestic institutional system and dependence on the gas&oil exports, Turkmenistan`s government has to be cautious not to provoke or oppose its largest energy partner.

Even though China has become a leading economic partner in the region, Russia is still an important trade hub for the Central Asian states. In 2018, Russia`s total trade turnover with Central Asia was around $25 bn.[29] Despite the fact that Beijing`s influence is getting stronger in Central Asia, Russia`s soft power is still widespread in the region through media presence, language usage and in education area where Russian universities are more popular among Central Asian students compared to Chinese high education institutions.[30] Moreover, many families in the region depend on remittances sent from Russia. However, the most worrying is Russian coercive diplomacy that does not hesitate to use any available means to maintain its dominance in the region. Russia`s direct military intervention in Georgia, hybrid aggression in Ukraine, as well as Russia`s pressure to adjust or even dismiss some energy projects in the region, make the Central Asian states very vulnerable and exposed to Russian influence. Being economically dependent on China and still under Russian influence, Central Asia might have lost strategic independence where it is more likely that the Sino-Russian partnership will have enough interest and power to establish the joint rule over the region.

**Shifting power**

The shifting of power within the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle followed recent
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enhancement of Putin-Xi cooperation and growing U.S. aggression toward China and Russia. Such change of balance has reflected on the Central Asian strategic position as well. Sino-Russian presence will more likely continue to reduce independence of the “Stans” and Western influence in the region. Geo-cultural proximity, similar views on the nature of international order and mutual aversion toward the West’s endorsement of human rights and democratic values[31] have brought China and Russia closer together especially at the regional policy level where both countries are interested in preserving stable and secure Central Asia.

Due to failure of Trump administration to invest more in reconciliation of geostrategic, economic, and national identity differences within the triangle, U.S. ties to Russia and China have grown more hostile.[32] Moreover, the West’s presence continues to deteriorate in Central Asia. Possibly the biggest obstacle in building stronger U.S.-Central Asia relations is the visible absence of the rule of law in all five “Stans” which makes Western corporation reluctant to invest in the region since the business environment is too corrupt and difficult to navigate.[33] Even though the United States established tighter relations with some of Central Asian states immediately after 9/11 in order to tackle the rise of extreme radicalism and terrorism in Afghanistan and prevent the spillover of violent extremism into the region, the War in Afghanistan has lost its appeal to America and with it America`s interest in the Central Asian security and military issues has decreased considerably.[34] Additionally, U.S. power was seriously undermined in the post-Soviet region as the West failed to respond effectively to Russia`s aggressive foreign policy in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea.[35] Central Asia has stayed on the periphery of the U.S. interests while China and Russia have incorporated this region in their foreign policy projects and continue to increase their regional presence and influence.

Both China and Russia are united in combating U.S. unilateralism and Western dominated democratic discourse that emphasizes the protection of human rights and democratic values.[36] The Sino-Russian union is not without contradictions and implicit rivalry, however, this partnership of appropriateness manages to accommodate its inner differences and cautiously share authority in the close neighborhood. It should not be expected that Russia will question, at least not officially, China`s further expansion in Central Asia since it is already weakened by Western sanctions.

Russia has started to perceive the BRI as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Moreover, Russia has started to perceive the BRI as an opportunity rather than a threat.[37] In 2018, China-Russia trade exceeded $100 billion while several planned landmark projects such as the China-Russia east route natural gas pipeline, Tongjiang Railway Bridge and a
cross-border highway bridge will further enhance Sino-Russian economic collaboration. Some might argue that Chinese military entrance in Tajikistan might seriously provoke Russia and become a friction point in the Sino-Russian partnership. However, Chinese military presence in Tajikistan, although an unfortunate circumstance for Russia, will not seriously damage already heightened Sino-Russian cooperation. Russia is aware that Tajikistan`s violence-prone border areas are difficult and costly to control and in this case the presence of Chinese troops might be beneficial to Russia since China will bear the majority of security costs and risks. Central Asia will remain in the Sino-Russian influence zone where regional shared authority will increase on the expense of “Stans” independence and weakening Western influence in the region.

**Concluding remarks**

China and Russia have realized that both could benefit more from cooperation than rivalry especially in Central Asia. The five states of Central Asian region are important geostrategic influence zone where Sino-Russian rapprochement of interests has questioned Western strength as well as independence of “Stans”. China wants to establish good economic ties with Central Asia for the purposes of accomplishing its aspiring BRI project while Russia desires to maintain its dominance in the region as primarily security and military influencer. Both could accomplish these goals if they are ready to share authority over the region which could leave Central Asia without actual leverage to make independent local decisions.

Labeled as either Russia’s backyard or China`s periphery Central Asia has a problem of defining its own course without foreign interference and pressure. Juggling between three major regional influencers, China, Russia, and the West, although the U.S. seems to lag behind in the regional race that favors Sino-Russian partnership of convenience, the states of Central Asia might be left with no choice but to succumb to the Sino-Russian shared rule. West has not been very helpful since its ties to the region have stayed merely at the diplomatic level. While the Sino-Russian cooperation is expected to continue growing, the “Stans” elites will probably remain docile unless some considerable change from within manages to transform current weak institutional systems into more responsible and accountable political establishments in all five Central Asian states.

*The opinions expressed in the article do not reflect the position of the editorial or donor.*
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