Parallel Order Building: China's Changing Role in Central Asia's Security

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Introduction

On May 18, 2023, Xi Jinping held a lavish ceremony for five visiting Central Asian presidents who had arrived for the inaugural China–Central Asia summit in the opulent Tang Paradise in Xi'an, the starting point of the ancient Silk Road. Conspicuously, the summit took place at the same time as the G7 meeting of western powers in Hokkaido. Commenting on the two summits, China's *Global Times* claimed that the "G7 speaks the language of an outmoded Cold War mentality" while the Xi'an summit focused on the "promotion of cooperation and inclusiveness."[3] In his welcoming remarks, Xi hailed the summit as signaling "a new era of China-Central Asia relations."[4] He stated that "China is ready to help Central Asian countries strengthen capacity building on law enforcement, security and defense in an effort to safeguard peace in the region."

Rising levels of popular mobilization against the region's regimes, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have transformed Central Asia's power constellations and security situation. Within this context, China is emerging as an increasingly prominent provider of security to its western neighbors. In response to violent protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, for example, China reportedly

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3 "China-Central Asia Summit kicks off; high-level summit demonstrates Central Asia's growing importance on China's diplomatic agenda," *Global Times,* 18 May 2023. https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202305/1290989.shtml.

4 "China's Xi hails 'new era' of ties with Central Asia," *France 24*, 18 May 2023. https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20230518-china-s-xi-hails-new-era-of-ties-with-central-asia.

offered assistance.[5] Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister told journalists "[China] was ready to provide necessary assistance [...] but we do not have a legal basis to accept foreign forces from countries outside the CSTO."[6]

Once scholars talked of a "division of labor" in Central Asia, between Russia, as the primary external security player, and China as the primary economic actor (Larson 2020: Laruelle and Royce 2020; Markey 2020; Bitaborova 2019; Kaczmarski 2015; Bossuyt and Kaczmarski 2021). This was never really accurate. China's early interactions with the Central Asian republics were primarily driven by security concerns over border delimitation and Uyghur separatism. Russia has always been a major economic force in the region. Over five million Central Asians work in Russia, sending money back that is crucial to local household incomes. Russia–Central Asia trade today stands at around $30 billion. If this division ever was true, it certainly is not now.

China's role in Central Asia's security has been evolving over the past decade, with several major developments and trends. First, China is charting an increasingly independent course in Central Asia, showing less deference to Russia, which still considers the region as part of its Near Abroad, or sphere of influence (Toal 2018). In recent years, Beijing has established a complex web of regional frameworks, trade agreements, educational exchanges, and a patchwork of technology transfers and training for local security services. Through these practices, China has built a growing footprint in the region's security sector. China established its first overseas military facility in the region, in Tajikistan, in 2016. China's share of arms imports to Central Asia has increased from 1.5% to 15% since 2010 according to data presented later in this article. Each of these feeds into China's vision of security governance which centers on building a loyal cadre of local leaders who share Beijing's vision with regard to trade, alternatives to Western liberal norms and values, and finding political alignment on China's security interests in Xinjiang and Taiwan (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Kliem 2022; Stuenkel 2016).

Second, Central Asia has also proven to be a testing ground for China to develop its own parallel order-building and experiment with forms of security cooperation, increasingly without the region's traditional external

5 "'Kitay byl gotov predostavit' voyennuyu pomoshch'—glava MID Kazakhstana," [China was ready to provide military assistance—Kazakh Foreign Minister] *TengriNews*, 19 Jan. 2022, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/ kitay-gotov-predostavit-voennuyu-pomosch-glava-mid-459624/.

6 Ibid.

hegemon Russia. The May 2023 China + Central Asia summit was a symbolic example of Beijing's newfound assertiveness and follows on from a trend present since 2016 in which China has established its own ordering frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) to address border security matters (Kucera 2016).

Third, despite growing dependence on China, the Central Asian republics are exercising agency in their relations. The region's regimes have attempted to strengthen their long-standing multivector foreign policies to create a broad range of patrons offering public goods, security assistance, and trade deals to enhance their sovereignty (Vanderhill et al. 2020). Relations with China are no different. Central Asia's governments are not being forced to accept an increased Chinese security role in the region, they are often the ones demanding it as the above example during the Kazakhstan unrest of January 2022 indicates. In October 2021 Dushanbe also announced that China would fund and construct new facilities for a Tajik special rapid response unit in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). Again, the request came from the Tajik side (Standish 2021).

China, we argue, is using security governance as a means to extend its influence and exercise power in Central Asia. It is through hierarchical relations of dependence that local regimes become tied to Beijing and dependent on it to ensure regime security. Yet, as our third argument indicates, although asymmetric, the power relationships between China and Central Asia's governments are not solely influenced by Beijing. Local regimes gain concessions from China, play it off against other patrons, and force it to adapt to local politics.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated these trends, weakening it both materially and reputationally. Russia's reputation as a security guarantor is being undermined by its increasingly neo-colonial policies. In August 2022 former Russian President Dmitri Medvedev called Kazakhstan an "artificial state," echoing a speech by Vladimir Putin in 2014 in which he said Kazakhs had "never known statehood," prior to the Soviet collapse (Sorbello 2022). These threats are acutely felt in Kazakhstan, where 16% of the population are ethnic Russians. In Xi'an, President Xi told his Kazakh counterpart that China supports "ethnic harmony," a subtle critique of Rus-

sia's current discourse.[7] Materially, Russia has reportedly weakened its 201st Military Base which as of 2021 had an estimated 7,000 troops stationed at three facilities in Tajikistan.[8] In April, the Ukrainian army claimed it had destroyed a column of the 4th Battalion Tactical Group from this base.[9] Over 2,000 troops, in addition to over 30 tanks, have been redeployed to Ukraine. In response, Dushanbe has turned to Beijing for increased security assistance, including a new agreement signed in Xi'an to conduct more joint military exercises.[10]

To make these arguments, we draw on data from two main sources. To quantify the density of Russia and China's security networks in Eurasia, we rely on the Central Asia Exercises Database, a comprehensive dataset of 307 joint exercises involving the militaries from the region since 1991, and the Central Asia Arms Tracker, a dataset of arms flows into the region based on figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Initiative, supplemented by figures from the EU, the Military Balance monitoring project, and local media.[11]

Hierarchy and Order in Central Asia

Realist accounts of international relations have long described the international system as anarchic (Waltz 1979; Morgenthau 1954). But this viewpoint has been challenged by those who argue that the international system has usually been characterized by disparities of power—from empires to spheres of influence and patron–client relations—and is therefore better conceptualized as hierarchical (Clark 1989; Cooley 2005; Donnelly 2006; Lake 2009; Hobson 2014; Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). In the broadest sense, hierarchy refers to structures of stratification and organized inequal-

7 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2023. *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he hasakesitan gongheguo lianhe shengming* [Joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan], 17 May 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202305/t20230517_11079124.shtml.

8 "Putin arrives in Tajikistan for first stop on trip to Central Asia," *RFE/RL*, 28 June 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-visits-tajikistan-rahmon-ukraine/31919990.html.

9 "Sukhoputni viys'ka/UA Land Forces," (Telegram Chat Announcement), *Telegram*, 14 April 2022, https://t.me/landforcesofukraine/1237.

10 "Маросими имзои санадҳои нави ҳамкории Тоҷикистону Чин" [Signing ceremony of new cooperation documents between Tajikistan and China], *President.tj,* 18 May 2023, http://president.tj/node/30693.

11 "Central Asia Arms Tracker 2017," *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs,* https://oxussociety.org/viz/arms-flows The Central Asia Exercises Database is unpublished.

ity. Hierarchical systems are differentiated with actors adopting different positions and practicing different roles and obligations. In other words, great powers engage in qualitatively different types of behavior than weaker states.

Horizontally, weaker states can build alternative networks among themselves and vertically they can strengthen networks with alternative patrons in an effort to break free of their dependence on single patrons via hub and spoke networks. Within global politics, scholars have pointed to the way that weaker states can maximize their autonomy and actively resist great powers. A number of studies have developed these arguments with reference to Central Asia. Cooley points to the way Central Asian states are not merely pawns on the "grand chessboard" (Brzezinski 1997) but agents who have developed strategies to play great powers off against one another to maximize their sovereign authority under conditions of inequality (Cooley 2012). Filippo Costa Buranelli (2017) argues that Central Asia's interactions with great powers are part of a pattern of "negotiated hegemony," whereby weaker states use their sovereignty to shape the influence and legitimacy of external powers. One way of achieving this is "balancing regionalism," where weaker states build horizontal ties among themselves and diversify external partnerships as a means of reducing reliance on single patrons (Tskhay and Buranelli, 2020). In doing so, they build off a substantial literature on "multi-vectorism," attempts to maintain ties with multiple external powers, in Central Asia (see Fumagalli 2007; Cooley 2012; Nourzhanov 2012; Contessi 2015; Teles Fazendeiro 2018; Dadabaev 2019; Vanderhill et al. 2020). These vertical relations of hierarchy and horizontal networks of balancing regionalism are present in China's relations with Central Asia.

The Evolution of China's Security Interests in Central Asia

China has long been concerned by security issues emanating from its Western frontier (Ong 2005; Kerr and Swinton 2008). China views the region as a buffer zone between its restive province of Xinjiang and bordering Afghanistan. In the years immediately following Central Asia's political independence, Beijing focused on delimiting its nearly 3,000km border with the region and preventing the new states, with their combined Uyghur diaspora of 300,000 people, from becoming a haven for alleged Xinjiang separatists (Becquelin 2000; Rczka 1998; Clarke 2003). Throughout Afghanistan's instability in the 1990s, and following the NATO-led intervention

in 2001, China grew fixated on the prospect of Afghanistan becoming a base for Uyghur militant groups to attack Xinjiang (Clarke 2013; Dhaka 2014). Driven by these concerns, China launched the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 to combat the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Ambrosio 2008; Aris 2009).

China's security concerns have developed as its economic interests in the region have grown exponentially. China is capitalizing on Central Asia's energy reserves for its growing domestic needs. China sees the region as a key transit hub for the Eurasian continent and a centrifugal point for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative was driven economically by a need to find new outlets for Chinese capital and exports in order to sustain domestic growth (Freymann 2020: 439). Trade between China and Central Asia grew from $3 billion in 2003 to $70 billion in 2022.[12] Ties have increasingly become asymmetrical; by 2020 an estimated 45% and 52% of the external debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively was owed to China (Otorbayev 2022), and the PRC accounts for over 75% of Turkmenistan's exports in the form of gas supplies (Bhutia 2019; Jalilov 2021). In response to this rising dependence, Sinophobia has become relatively widespread in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Burkhanov and Chen 2016; Peyrouse 2016). According to survey data, 30% of Kazakhs and 35% of Kyrgyz have negative views towards China (Laruelle and Joyce 2020). Protests against China's rising role in the region, perceived by some as taking jobs from locals, polluting the environment, and being part of a broader strategy to 'colonize' the region, have been on the rise in Central Asia.[13] According to the Oxus Society's Central Asia Protest Tracker, 241 protests related to China took place in Kazakhstan from January 1, 2018 to June 30, 2021.[14] China's detention of thousands of ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang has also generated protests in Central Asia. Families of those affected have protested in front of the Chinese consulate in Almaty on a daily basis since February 2021 (Moldabekov and Kurmangazinova 2021).

China also perceives terrorism to be a threat to its BRI projects. This stems from two potential sources: Uyghur nationalists historically based in the region and possible spillovers from Afghanistan. Since the 2014 launch

12 International Trade Center, *Trade Map*, https://www.trademap.org/Country_SelProductCountry_TS.aspx.

13 "Kazakhstan's Land Reform Protests Explained," *BBC News*, 28 April 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36163103.

14 "Central Asia Protest Tracker," *The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs*, https://oxussociety.org/projects/protests/.

of the People's War on Terror in China's westernmost province of Xinjiang, Beijing has been taking a more active role in defense in Central Asia, seeing it as a bulwark preventing instability in Afghanistan from pouring across its western borders. The 2019 "Xinjiang Papers" revealed that Xi Jinping has been concerned about Central Asia's stability for the past five years (Ramzy and Buckley 2020). "After the United States pulls out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate Central Asia," he said in a series of secret speeches issued after several violent attacks rocked the country in 2014 (ibid.). In response to this, China has begun to view Tajikistan as an important barrier against potential spillovers entering Xinjiang from Afghanistan.

China's Expanding Security Cooperation in Central Asia

In response to growing security threats China is establishing a variety of hierarchical networks of (inter)dependence with the security apparatuses of the Central Asian republics, positioning itself as a patron for the subordinate regimes of the region (Clark 1989; Cooley 2005; Donnelly 2006; Lake 2009; Hobson 2014; Mattern and Zarakol 2016). Its own security networks have developed rapidly over the past decade. First, China has established a military facility in Tajikistan from which it can project force and protect Xinjiang from potential spillovers from Afghanistan. Second, through joint exercises, training activities, and arms transfers, Central Asian militaries are becoming increasingly dependent on China for technology and training (Jardine and Lemon 2020). The next section will explain how China uses the following levers for exerting influence:

1. Bases and Border Security
2. Security Cooperation, Training, and Capacity Building
3. Arms and Technology Transfers
4. Multilateral Frameworks.

Bases and Border Security

Russia has remained the dominant external security partner for Central Asia since the latter's independence. It maintains military facilities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan. and Tajikistan. These facilities give it a strategic

foothold in the region, which can be leveraged to gain political concessions. They also offer Russia the ability to project military power. For example, in August 2018 a series of airstrikes by Russian forces based in Tajikistan killed six drug traffickers on the Afghan side of the border, its first armed intervention in Afghanistan since the Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1989.[15]

As China has expanded its economic footprint around the world, it faces a growing need to protect its investments and citizens, as well as provide more global public goods (Xue and Zheng 2019). To facilitate these out-of-area operations, China has started to build overseas military installations (Wuthnow 2021; Ghiselli 2020). China established the first such facility, the People's Liberation Army Support Base in Djibouti, in 2016 to protect shipping through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and facilitate anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa (Silverstein 2023). Exaggerated fears of Uyghur militancy spreading into Central Asia from Afghanistan, which shares a short, remote border with China and a longer, more populated border with Tajikistan, have led Beijing to establish an installation codenamed Sitod, on the Tajik–Afghan border (Shih 2019).

The base was established as part of an October 2016 agreement between the governments of Tajikistan and China on the construction of three command centers, five border service outposts, five border service checkpoints, and one training center on the Tajik–Afghan border.[16] In October 2021, Dushanbe also announced that China would fund and construct new facilities for a Tajik special rapid response unit in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) on the border with Afghanistan (Ibragimova 2021). The construction of a special base for combating crime and terrorism financed by China will begin in the village of Langar, in the Ishkashim District of the GBAO. Over 500 people will be based there, as well as several units of light armored vehicles plus drones, which will be provided free of charge by the Chinese government. In November 2022, China and Tajikistan signed an agreement to systematize their joint border patrols and

15 "Airstrike near Tajikistan border kills Taliban, Afghans say," *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/27/world/asia/afghanistan-strike-taliban-tajikistan.html.

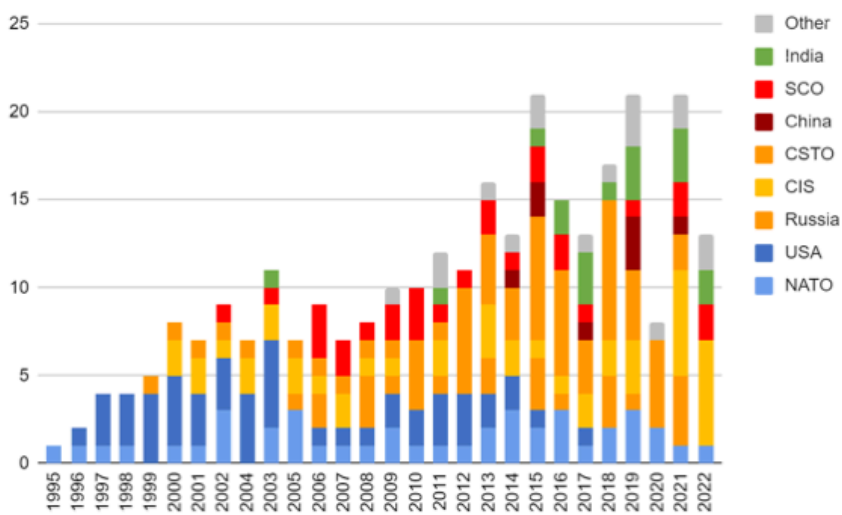
16 "China stepping up military cooperation with Tajikistan" *Eurasianet*, 22 Nov. 2022, https://eurasianet.org/china-stepping-up-military-cooperation-with-tajikistan.

deepen their security engagement with new facilities and border reinforcement.[17]

Security Cooperation, Training, and Capacity Building

Russia and Russian-led organizations, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), are the largest conveners of military training exercises in Central Asia, with over 135 exercises undertaken under Russian auspices since 1991 (see Figure 1). The US and NATO collectively account for 90. While high in absolute terms, the numbers of Washington-run drills have declined steadily from a peak of seven per year in 2003, to an average of under two per year after 2018. While China's share has grown from 11% in the first half of the 2010s to 14% in the second half—both bilaterally and under the umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—it significantly lags behind Russia and the US in absolute terms, with just 41 exercises.

Figure 1: Joint Military Exercises in Central Asia by Organizing Country/ Organization

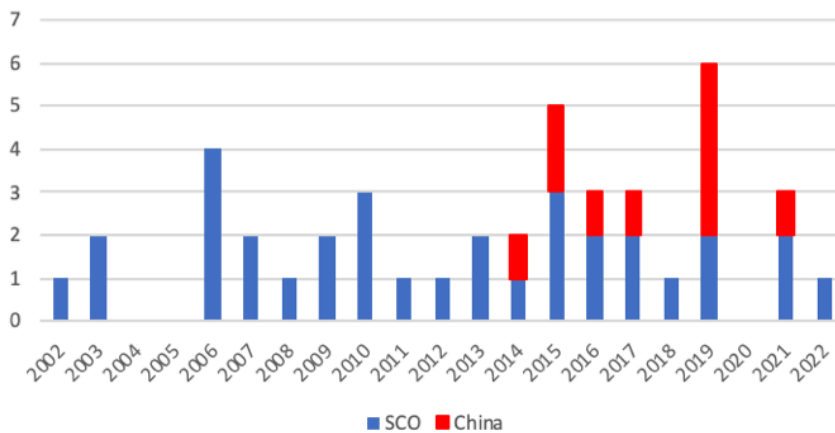


Source: Author data

17 "China stepping up military cooperation with Tajikistan." *Eurasianet*, 22 Nov. 2022.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded by China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in 2001 to facilitate security cooperation, has been the traditional vehicle for Chinese defense diplomacy in the region (Aris 2009). The SCO has organized 31 exercises involving Central Asian militaries since 2002 (see Figure 2). China has been involved in 28 of these (compared to Russia at 22). Uzbekistan has been the most reluctant Central Asian state, participating in just 12 Chinese-led exercises, with Tajikistan involved in 24, Kazakhstan in 25, and Kyrgyzstan in 28.

Figure 2: China-Linked Military Exercises in Central Asia



Source: Author Data

In 2002, China took part in the first known bilateral exercise it had ever held with Kyrgyzstan. The drill, organized by the SCO, involved under one hundred soldiers armed with light weapons, anti-tank missiles, and armored personnel vehicles.[18] The following year, China held its first multilateral exercises in the region in Kazakhstan and Xinjiang, with every SCO member state but Uzbekistan participating.[19] Chinese drills have increased

18 "Zhong ji juxing lianhe fankong junyan, jiefangjun shouci chujing yanxi" [China and Kyrgyzstan hold joint counter-terror exercises, the People's Liberation Army's first outbound exercise], *Sina*, 11 Oct. 2002, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2002-10-11/1036763316.html.

19 "Shanghai hezuo zuzhi chengyuanguo juxing fankong junyan, zhongguo chang zhujiao" [Shanghai Cooperation Organization member states hold counter-terror exercis-

substantially in the decades that followed. Since its inaugural operation in 2005, which was also the first joint Russian and Chinese military exercise, Peace Mission has become the signature joint exercise organized by the SCO every two years. With between 2,000 and 7,000 troops participating, these exercises are larger than other SCO exercises, which have usually involved troops in the low hundreds.[20] SCO exercises peaked at three in 2010, and then plateaued at one or two per year. The reduction in SCO exercises could be explained by India and Pakistan joining the organization, limiting prospects for cooperation. Alternatively, it could derive from China's developing bilateral cooperation with individual countries and developing its own multilateral cooperation mechanisms without Russia. China has organized 10 exercises itself since its first with Kyrgyzstan in 2014. These have eventually grown from only involving just 100 troops to Fox Hunt 2019, which involved 1,200 personnel from China and Kazakhstan.[21]

Figure 3: Composition of Participants in Joint Exercises

China		**United States**		**Russia**	
Security Services	62%	Army	72%	Army	69%
Special Operations Forces	45%	Peacekeeping Units	19%	Air Force	61%
Army	40%	Emergency Services	8%	Special Operations Forces	27%
Police	32%	Special Operations Forces	6%	Security Services	18%
Air Force	25%	National Guard	4%	Police	12%

Some 62% of Chinese-led exercises in the regions involve security services, followed by special operations forces and police units. This security mix differs markedly from other actors in the region who have prioritized collaboration with the military and reflects China's domestically oriented agenda. Since 2014 China has turned to the threat posed by Uyghur milit-

es, China plays leading role], *Sina*, 06 Aug. 2003, https://news.sina.com.cn/w/2003-08-06/1636517474s.shtml.

20 The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. "The Central Asia Exercises Database".

21 "The Central Asia Exercises Database," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, *Zhong ha juxing "liehu-2019" fankong lianhe lianxi* [China and Kazakhstan hold the "Fox Hunt-2019" joint counter-terror exercise], 16 Oct. 2019, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jsxd/ly/4853032.html.

ants in Syria and the possibility that Central Asia may act as a conduit for their return to neighboring Xinjiang to destabilize the region (Ramzy and Buckley 2020). This fixation on stabilizing its western borders has led China to launch the "Cooperation 2019" drills aimed at enhancing interoperability between the Communist Party's paramilitary wing the People's Armed Police (PAP) and national guard units in the wider region.[22] Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan all took part in 2019, marking the first instance in which such units took part in counterterrorism drills with China. In addition to the PAP, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security (MPS) conducted its first training exercises overseas in 2015, when MPS forces trained with their Tajik counterparts near Dushanbe.[23]

The use of internal security services rather than conventional armed forces may serve an additional purpose of placating Russia, which sees itself as the premier security actor in the region. China is cautious with its regional initiatives and tends to inform Moscow well in advance of radical developments like its construction of border facilities in Tajikistan. In 2017, for example the Development Research Center, a powerful think tank under China's cabinet, invited a number of Russian researchers to a private seminar to ascertain Moscow's red lines on what is and is not acceptable Chinese regional policy at a time when it was working with Dushanbe to strengthen border posts and the training of counter-terrorism personnel (Shih 2019).

China is also concentrating resources in promoting a common vision of security governance in Central Asia by using its policing and military academies to train officers from the region and influence their norms and values. Over 50% of China's 70 military academies have programs

22 Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. 2019. *Lianhe zhuijiao damo tuji- zhong ji "hezuo-2019" lianhe fankong lian ce ji* [Joint pursuit and elimination desert assault—side notes from the China–Kyrgyzstan "Cooperation 2019" joint counter-terror exercise], Aug. 13. http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jsxd/fk/4848100.html; Chien-yu Shih, "Zhongguo zai zhongya de junshi kuozhan yu juxian" [Chinese military expansion and its limits in Central Asia], *guofang qingshi tekan 18* [Defense Situation Special Edition, 18] (Taipei: caituan faren guofang anquan yanjiuyuan [Institute for National Defense and Security Studies], 28 Aug. 2022, p. 82, https://indsr.org.tw/uploads/indsr/files/202208/1d72b788-1db7-4ddc-a488-0576db5f0403.pdf.

23 Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. 2016. *Zhongguo gong'an tejing canjia zai tajikesitan juxing de fankong yanxi* [China's Public Security Bureau SWAT participate in anti-terrorism drill in Tajikistan], June 6. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-06/06/content_2874566.htm.

for foreign students (van Oudenaren and Fisher 2016). Only a few offer senior-level education. The College of Defense Studies of the PLA National Defense University (PLA NDU) is the highest level of foreign training provided by the Chinese People's Liberation Army and by 2018 it was accepting students from more than 100 partner nations, including Eurasia.[24] Since 2014, China's Criminal Police Academy, the People's Armed Police, the People's Liberation Army, and security services have each offered programs in partnership with their Central Asian counterparts.[25] Institutional partnerships are also being advanced in the region itself. In Kazakhstan, the University of Defense has hosted a new department run by Chinese personnel (van der Kley 2018). Similarly in Uzbekistan, China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) partnered with the Uzbek Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) to run joint academic programming for officers in 2017 (Hashimova 2018). The SCO also acts as an important educational framework under China's auspices. In 2014, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) founded the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai (CNISCO) with the express purpose of training senior SCO officials in counteracting terrorism and organized crime. According to *Xinhua* reporting, as of March 2023 CNISCO had held courses for 2290 students from SCO countries.[26] It is unclear what proportion of those came from Central Asia compared with other SCO members,[27] however, CNISCO has recently branched out

24 "China's National Defense University builds ties with military academies in above 100 countries," China Military Online, 2 Aug. 2018, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-08/02/content_4821607.htm.

25 Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, *Chang wanquan yu hasakesitan guofangbuzhang juxing huitan* [Chang Wanquan holds talks with Kazakhstan's defense minister], 7 June 2016, http://www.mod.gov.cn/leaders/2016-06/07/content_4675251.htm; Criminal Investigation Police University of China, *tajikesitan guo'anwei fankong peixun ban zai wo yuan kaiban* [Tajikistan State Security Commission counter-terrorism training class held in our college] 26 June 2014, http://news.cipuc.edu.cn/info/1030/11255.htm.

26 China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai *Xinhua she baodao zhongguo-shanghe jidi peixun chengguo* [Xinhua News Agency reports on CNISCO training results], 23 March 2023 https://cnisco.shupl.edu.cn/2023/0327/c12a1669/pagem.htm.

27 For instance a December 2021 CNISCO press release references 51 SCO students graduating from a security training course, but does not differentiate between Central Asian nationals and those from Russia and Belarus, China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai, *zhongguo-shanghai he jidi juxing shanghai hezuo zuzhi guojia shehui anquan zhili peixun ban jieye dianli*

into offering bespoke courses with specified Central Asian partner states, for instance a "Belt and Road" security training course established with Kyrgyzstan in 2021 (Rolland 2019).[28] China offers attractive opportunities to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which have less access to Russian military and security academies than other states in the region since neither are members of the CSTO (Marat 2021).

Russian training programs still remain the most widespread and developed in the region. Russia had 5,500 foreign officers training in its military academies in 2019, including 1,500 Tajiks and 500 Kazakhs.[29] The United States also provides substantial specialized officer training programs such as the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany, Foreign Military Financing (FMF), Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP), International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, and Section 1004 Counter-Drug Assistance. While China has fewer programs available than Russia and the US it has specialized courses applying technology in areas that grant it competitive advantage. For example, the People's Liberation Army National Defense University (PLA NDU) offers courses that consider the application of AI technology in the field of combat (Marat 2021).

[China-SCO Base Holds the Closing Ceremony of the SCO National Social Security Governance Training Course], 16 December 2021https://cnisco.shupl.edu.cn/2022/0106/c9a1654/pagem.htm.

28 China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai. 2021. *2021 nian zhong ji gong jian "yidai yilu" anquan baozhang peixun ban jieye dianli zai zhonguo-shanghai jidi juxing* [The closing ceremony of the 2021 China–Kyrgyzstan joint construction of the "Belt and Road" security training course was held at the China-Shanghai Cooperation Base], December 23, 2021. https://cnisco.shupl.edu.cn/2022/0106/c9a1656/pagem.htm.

29 *Russkiy Mir* "More than 5,500 Foreigners Study at Russian Military Universities, November 29, 2019. https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/265925/; Jamestown Foundation "Tajik military increasingly part of the Russian army in all but name," 2019, "https://jamestown.org/program/tajik-military-increasingly-part-of-russian-army-in-all-but-name/; "Военные Программы Профессиональной Подготовки в Казахстане и Соединенные Штаты: Как их Осуществлять и что Мы от Этого Получим? [Military vocational training programs in Kazakhstan and the United States: How to run them and what will we get from it?]" *Connections Quarterly Journal*. http://connections-qj.org/ru/article/voennye-programmy-professionalnoy-podgotovki-v-kazahstane-i-soedinennye-shtaty-kak-ih.

Arms and Technology Transfers

China is also emerging as an arms supplier, though Russia remains dominant in this area. Over the past three decades, Russia has provided just over half of all arms imported by the region since independence . Over 80% of all military transfers to Kazakhstan have come from Moscow, while that number stands at over 90% percent for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, small states which rely on military aid. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, meanwhile, have a diverse assortment of arms suppliers (Jardine and Lemon 2020).

China exported $737 million worth of arms to Central Asia from 2000 to 2021, with 97% being delivered after 2014 (Ramzy and Buckley 2020).[30] The first Chinese delivery to the region we logged was in 2000, when Beijing issued sniper rifles to the Uzbek armed forces.[31] Between 2000 and 2008, Beijing provided some $15 million in military aid to Tajikistan and pledged a further $1.5 million in April 2009. After 2014, at a time of heightened security concerns in Xinjiang, China began to take a more integrated approach to regional diplomacy and arms transfers became a key component of its regional security partnerships. In 2015 Kazakhstan received thirty Jiefang J6 heavy-duty trucks and thirty large-load trailers worth $3.2 million as a gift from China (Umarov 2020). Three years later, Kazakhstan purchased eight large-scale Chinese Y-8 transport aircraft.[32] That same year, Turkmenistan purchased a QW-2 Vanguard 2 portable surface-to-air missile from the Chinese military technology company CATIC (Army Recognition 2018b).[33] Both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan received large shipments of arms over the course of this period too (see Figure 4 below).

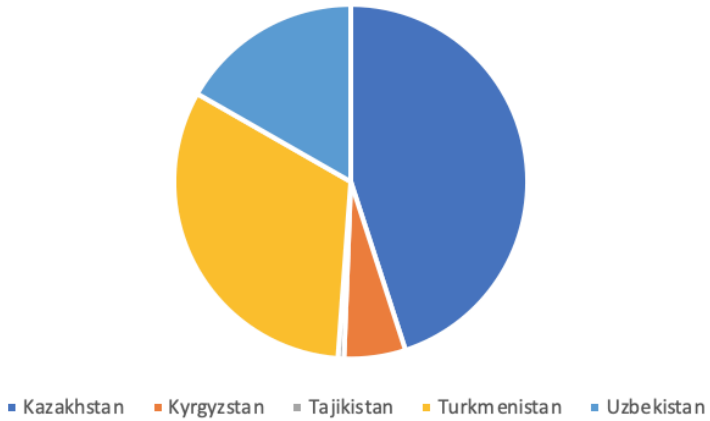
30 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Arms Transfers Database*, https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers.

31 "Uzbekistan profits from Sino-Russian rivalry," *RANE*, 7 September 2000, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/uzbekistan-profits-sino-russian-rivalry.

32 "Zhongguo guochan yunshuji jibai mei e chanpin: chukou zhongya rang waiti fansuan" [Chinese domestic transport aircraft beat US and Russian products in Central Asia: Exports to Central Asia make foreign media gag], *Sina Military*, 11 October 2018, https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/jssd/2018-10-11/doc-ihmhafiq9908390.shtml.

33 "Chinese QW2 MANPADS Missile in Service with Turkmenistan Army," *Army Recognition*, 12 Jan. 2018, https://www.armyrecognition.com/january_2018_global_defense_security_army_news_industry/chinese_qw-2_manpads_missile_in_service_with_turkmenistan_army.html.

Figure 4: Chinese Arms Transfers to Central Asia



China's arms exports to the region have expanded greatly as noted above, but the numbers indicate important patterns in their relationship. China's share has increased from 1.5% between 2010 and 2015 to 15% between 2016 and 2021. This increase came at the expense of Russia, which saw its share of the market decrease from 65% to 52% and Ukraine which saw sales fall from 8% to almost zero. China is also dominating in sectors where Russian technology remains underdeveloped (Axe 2020). In recent years Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have all received armed drones from China, a strategic global market once the preserve of the US and Israel (Paulsson 2018). The most well-known and used Chinese drones are the CH-3, CH-4, CH-5, and the Wing Loong (Brimelow 2017). Kazakhstan (2015) and Uzbekistan (2014) have purchased a number of Wing Loongs, and Turkmenistan (2016) operates the CH-3. This type of technology can impact the balance of power in the region and increase dependency on China as a strategic supplier, though Turkey and Iran are also active competitors.[34] In the midst of border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both countries have been increasing their supplies of armed drones (Imanaliyeva 2023; Rubin 2023).

Finally, Beijing is creating information nodes in Central Asia known as "smart cities," a catch-all term for cities with advanced data-processing

34 "Turkey continues exporting drones to Central Asia," *Novastan*, 21 April 2023, https://novastan.org/en/kyrgyzstan/turkey-continues-exporting-drones-to-central-asia/.

capabilities. These projects also feature a security dimension. For example, Kyrgyzstan recently opened a new police command center in its capital Bishkek, which makes use of facial recognition software supplied by the China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (Bowdler 2019). In neighboring Uzbekistan, Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei closed a $1 billion deal to build a traffic monitoring system involving some 883 cameras.[35] Meanwhile Hikvision, a Chinese company that advertises its ability to spot members of China's Uyghur minority in crowds, supplies major urban centers across Kazakhstan, including Almaty and Shymkent. Chinese companies are also expanding their information asymmetry vis-à-vis Central Asia through expansion into the region's digital infrastructure. In 2019 Uzbekistan's telecommunications operators began using soft loans from Chinese partners to introduce Huawei's 5G technology to the country. Huawei also connects eight in every ten Kyrgyz residents to the outside world and owns nearly 90% of neighboring Tajikistan's telecommunications infrastructure. Huawei is also working closely with Kazakhstan's top telecommunications companies Kazakhtelecom, Kcell, Beeline, and Tele2 (Jardine 2019).

Multilateral Frameworks

Russia has the densest security networks with Central Asia of any great power. China has shown deference to Russia on such matters in the past and tends to inform Moscow well in advance of its policies (Shih 2019). China and Russia recently proclaimed a "no limits" partnership in February 2022 and pledged to work together to prevent "attempts to import 'color revolutions' and external interference in the affairs" of Central Asia.[36] But since 2012 China has increasingly developed networks in the

35 "V Tashkente mogut vnedrit' sistemu raspoznavaniya lits" [Facial recognition system may be introduced in Tashkent], *Sputnik*, 17 July, 2019, https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20190717/V-Tashkente-mogut-vnedrit-sistemu-raspoznavaniya-lits-12021304.html.

36 Tony Munroe, Andrew Osborn, and Humeyra Pamuk "China, Russia partner up against West at Olympics summit," *Reuters*, 5 Feb. 2022. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-tell-nato-stop-expansion-moscow-backs-beijing-taiwan-2022-02-04/; President of Russia 2023. "Sovmestnoye zayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki ob uglublenii otnosheniy vseob"yemlyushchego partnorstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeystviya, vstupayushchikh v novuyu epokhu" [Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on deepening comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation in a new era], March

region without Russia. Bilaterally, as described above, it has organized its own joint exercises, created training programs, provided military aid, established a military facility in Tajikistan and provided arms to the region. Multilaterally, it has established its own platforms for security and political cooperation.

Outside the SCO, China established a new security mechanism in 2016 called the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) made up of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The organization is tasked with jointly combatting terrorism and further advancing security cooperation between these states (Kucera 2016). The chiefs of general staffs of the four military forces met in Ürümchi to announce QCCM, stating it would coordinate efforts on the "study and judgment of the counterterrorism situation, confirmation of clues, intelligence sharing, anti-terrorist capability building, joint anti-terrorist training, and personnel training" (quoted in Kucera 2016).

In July 2020, China launched a new initiative China + Central Asia (C+C5). Copying a format used by Japan (Central Asia plus Japan) since 2004, South Korea (Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum) since 2007 and the United States (C5+1) since 2015, the forum brings together foreign ministers from the five republics and China. The platform focuses on coordinating cooperation on BRI transit projects, boosting cultural exchanges and discussing joint security concerns. But there is also a political dimension to the grouping, helping bolster the region's authoritarian regimes and counter the influence of external democratization efforts. At the initial meeting, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a thinly veiled reference to the EU and United States, declared "We oppose foreign forces undertaking color revolutions and engaging in zero-sum political games in Central Asia, and also oppose the use of human rights as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of regional countries."[37]

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21. http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5920; "China's Xi Says 'Color Revolutions' Must Be Prevented," *VOA News*, 16 Sept. 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/china-xi-says-color-revolutions-must-be-prevented/6750450.html.

37 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Xieshou yingdui tiaozhan, gongmou fazhan fanrong- wang yi guofuweiyuan jian waizhang zai 'zhongguo+zhongya wu guo' waizhang shipin huiyi shang de jianghua* [Collaborate in response to challenges, jointly plan prosperity- State Council Member and Foreign Minister's Speech at the C+C5 Foreign Minister's Video Meeting], 16 July 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyhd_673091/202007/t20200716_747307 1.shtml.

There are also other PRC-led multilateral mechanisms involving Central Asia states. In 2015, the Lianyungang Forum was founded to coordinate law enforcement agencies in the region and enhance cooperation and information-sharing. All Central Asian countries with the exception of Turkmenistan participate in this forum. Unlike the SCO and C+C5, which focus on high-level officials, the Lianyungang Forum is specifically in place for purposes of socialization and normative agreement between security practitioners such as Deputy Ministers of Internal Affairs, Directors of Anti-Terrorism Centers, Ambassadors, and police academies (Yau 2022: 15).

Negotiating Hegemony: Central Asia's Multi-Vector Defense Diplomacy

As the international system grows more multipolar, regional actors in places like Central Asia are working to balance great power patrons and establish a wider range of strategic partners, in a policy called "multivectorism" (Vanderhill et al. 2020). Leaders in Central Asia have been quietly embedding their defense sectors within diffuse new networks of arms suppliers, instructors, and partnerships across Europe, Asia, and North America (Tskhay and Coasta Buranelli 2020; Cooley 2012). Although China's security networks are asymmetrical, Central Asia's governments do have agency and the power derived from their network positions to negotiate China's hegemonic ambitions. On the one hand China's growing role in Central Asian security is being welcomed by the ruling regimes. First, China's overtures allow the governments of the region to reduce reliance on Russia, a country many regimes have grown increasingly skeptical of in the wake of its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Second, it fills a vacuum, coming at a time when the US has largely exited the region, with military assistance falling 98% between 2012 and 2020 (Jardine and Lemon 2020). Third, Chinese assistance, which comes with no human rights conditionalities, provides opportunities to strengthen the repressive capacity of the region's authoritarian regimes.

But, at the same time, the region's governments have to placate citizens who are wary of China's role in the region, as well as avoid becoming too dependent on Beijing. Central Asian states are utilizing their network positions to maintain their sovereignty in two ways. First, *vertically*, they are pursuing multivector foreign policies by building network ties with multiple different external powers. Although Russia accounted for 52% of

the arms imports to the region over the past five years and China 15%, they have managed to diversify weapon's suppliers to Italy (11%), France (7%) and Turkey (6%) according to our data. In terms of military exercises, Russia, either bilaterally or through the Commonwealth of Independent States or Collective Security Treaty Organization, has organized 136 drills with Central Asian militaries, NATO and the U have organized 91, and India has organized 19. Ultimately, Russia continues to be the node with the strongest security networks in the region, both in terms of the density and frequency of its institutionalized relations.

Central Asia has also worked *horizontally* to establish regional networks to improve collective security. In recent years, we have seen the states of the region pursue a strategy of "balancing regionalism" (Tskhay and Costa Buranelli 2020). This involves both bolstering regional cooperation within Central Asia and developing ties with multiple actors as part of multivector foreign policies to insulate themselves from the establishment of an exclusive Russian or Chinese sphere of influence in their region. For many years following independence, Central Asia was one of the least integrated parts of the world with low levels of trade, undelimited borders, and tensions between neighboring states. Regionalism was often exogenously enforced by external powers pursuing their own agendas. But, since the death of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan in 2016 and the rise of his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev, this has started to change. Mirziyoyev has made improving ties with his neighbors the centerpiece of his foreign policy (Anceschi 2019). As a result, security cooperation has developed with 12 joint exercises between Central Asian militaries since 2011. The first joint exercise between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was a small, largely symbolic affair involving around 30 troops.[38] This was followed by a second in 2015. A first exercise, Sapper's Friendship, took place between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2017 (Bogatik 2017). In a move that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, when tensions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were at their peak, the two countries held their first bilateral exercise, in the south of Tajikistan in 2018 (Hashimova 2020). The next year Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation, envisaging bilateral exercises and joint production of military equipment. Under the new agreement, the two countries have held three further exercises, all involving special opera-

38 The Central Asia Exercises Database.

tions forces.[39] Rising regionalism also allows the governments to address regional issues, such as border delimitation, collective security, and trade without external mediation from Russia, the United States, or China, potentially decreasing their influence in these areas in the future. For example, when Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan engaged in the bloodiest conflict on their border since independence in April 2021 and again in January–September 2022, regional organizations and external powers were apathetic in their response, while the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan took the lead in mediation (Antonov et al. 2023).

Conclusion

China has become increasingly independent in its approach to foreign policy and has begun to articulate a clear vision of great power politics in a multipolar world order. In Central Asia, China has experimented with a dense network of overlapping multilateral frameworks, cooperation agreements, technology transfers, and training programs designed to advance a "China model" for security governance. In recent years, China's fora such as the QCCM and C+Central Asia operate without Russia, showing China's growing international confidence. As these ties develop, they could start to undermine and weaken the density of Russia's security networks in the region.

Developments in Central Asia have profound implications for other parts of the world where China is active. First, as China's trade has expanded it has become more closely pulled into the political and security dynamics in regions where it is active—in much the same way as other major great powers before it. While rhetoric for engagement remains "win-win," local realities show how certain domestic and international actors make gains, often at the expense of others. This fragmented reality creates constituencies that fall into crudely defined Sinophobic and Sinophilic camps, resulting in greater demands from Chinese expats for protection. Second, China has carefully navigated local concerns and the needs of great power politics. We have seen this calculated diplomacy unfold in Eurasia, where China must advance its critical security interests while maintaining its strong partnership with Russia. As this chapter has argued, China has dealt with

39 "Tajikistan, Uzbekistan intend to establish joint production of military equipment," *AzerNews*, 6 March 2019, https://www.azernews.az/region/146868.html.

this potentially fraught dynamic by providing assurances and symbolic commitments to Russia, promoting policies that also advance Moscow's interests, and building elites that share a common ideological interest with both nations. This careful balancing is something China will be forced to navigate in other hierarchical regions where small powers fall under the influence of larger states. Finally, trends in Central Asia also reveal the extent to which local actors shape relationship dynamics with their former and emergent patrons, playing them off against one another to gain concessions (Cooley 2012).

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