

# Associate Paper

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## China and Russia: Competition in Kyrgyzstan

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### Key Points

- Kyrgyzstan and the wider Central Asian region are important to both China and Russia.
- President Vladimir Putin's regional goal is to rebuild Greater Russia by bringing former Soviet states back under Russian influence and preventing their gravitation towards the West.
- China's primary regional focus is to stabilise the area by increasing its influence through economic initiatives.
- Beijing's efforts to gain influence in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries directly compete with Moscow's own efforts, hence increasing Sino-Russian competition.
- As long as the United States and the West are not present in Central Asia, co-operation between Moscow and Beijing will border on adversarial.

### Summary

The geostrategic importance of Central Asia has prompted both China and Russia to seek greater influence over the region. Their efforts mark Central Asia as grounds for competition between both major powers. The competing nature of their respective plans is evident. Russia wishes to reclaim its international influence in part by regaining control over the former Soviet states and its buffer of Central Asia; in China's view, its economic rise depends on the degree of influence that it can wield over the region that bridges Asia and Europe. Russia requires the co-operation of Central Asian countries for its various regional institutions; China requires that for its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. In addition, both China and Russia have attempted to expand their respective regional influence by investing in the Central Asian energy sector.

That such competition has not yet risen to the fore of Sino-Russian relations is due only to their mutual wariness of the West (the US and its Western allies). The removal of the US as an actor in Central Asia would, in their estimation, lead to an increase in China's and Russia's regional influence. Therein lies the danger. China's encroachment on a region that Russia views as its zone of influence is viewed warily by Moscow. For its part, Beijing has emphasised that, although it seeks peace in, and co-operation with, the region, neither will China relinquish or harm its national interests by not seeking further engagement with – and influence in – the region. It is, therefore, unlikely that China will give up its Central Asian ambitions, even if doing so places it on a collision path with Russia.



### Analysis

As the bridge between Asia and Europe and a means for China to advance its economic ambitions, Central Asia holds great interests for Beijing. For the past decade and more, China has worked to expand its influence over the countries in the region. The leading project in Chinese efforts to realise this goal is the OBOR, in service of which China wishes to construct new railway lines through the region and to restore existing Soviet lines that have fallen into disrepair. In doing so, however, China has inadvertently entered into competition with Russia, for which influence over Central Asia is of significant strategic and national importance.

### ***Importance of Kyrgyzstan***

Despite having no significant economic or strategic resources, Kyrgyzstan's geographic importance stems from the Fergana Valley and its surrounding Tien Shan mountain range, within which a significant number of Kyrgyz and Tajik, and the majority of Uzbek, people live. Kyrgyzstan's control of the surrounding mountains gives it the potential ability to control the valley which, in turn, allows for control of much of Central Asia. Such control is vital to Russia due to Central Asia's ability to serve as a buffer for Russia, and to China in the region's ability to serve as an overland link between Asia and Europe. Thus, control of the region could grant significant political or economic leverage to either China or Russia.

### ***Putin's Greater Russia***

Central Asia serves as a political, military and economic buffer for Russia against the West. Moscow has sought to make inroads into the former Soviet states and considers the reclamation of influence over the Central Asian states to be of great importance. It is through the lens of the Greater Russia policy that Russia's activities in Kyrgyzstan – and the perceived threat posed by China's activities there – can be understood.

Russian involvement in Central Asia is a continuation of Putin's – and more generally Russia's – stance since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Putin seeks to restore Russia's relevance and importance by reclaiming influence over the former Soviet states, even if it requires resisting traditional Russian geopolitical thinking to do so. Apart from the strategic significance of Central Asia, states such as Kyrgyzstan are important to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Indeed, Russia has invested heavily in Kyrgyzstan to speed up its integration into the economic bloc.

Kyrgyzstan's ability to control the Fergana Valley is a crucial step for Russia to expand its influence across all of Central Asia and to reinforce its regional buffers. In Kyrgyzstan, Russia has written off billions of dollars in debt, pledged to supply military equipment, and taken over the country's gas supply network. Moscow has prevented the Central Asian states from selling natural gas on the open market to customers of their choice, or from signing pipeline deals that moved gas or oil [without going through Russia](#). That would increase the dependence of the Central Asian countries on Russia, enhance Moscow's regional influence, especially among European states, and obstruct the ambitions of other regional powers. More than the obvious geopolitical benefits that could be accrued, such policies could lead to the consolidation of domestic power as Moscow uses the material and symbolic benefits gained from Central Asian energy industries to retain power and legitimacy.

Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan could be seen in the removal of Western influence from the region. Under political and economic pressure from Russia, the US airbase at Manas airport – the last that the US had in Central Asia – was closed in [2014](#). That removed a source of competition for Russia in Kyrgyzstan, and Moscow is moving to fill the void. In March 2019, Bishkek allowed for the expansion of Russia's airbase in Kant. The airbase grants Moscow a highly-enhanced degree of control over Central Asian airspace and the ability to deploy airborne assaults against incursions [into the region](#). Similarly, Russia's anti-submarine armaments test facility at Karakol, the fourth-largest city in Kyrgyzstan, was also expanded.

Russia fully or partially owns numerous firms in Kyrgyzstan, including state-owned firms and several of its largest corporations. In short, not only is Kyrgyzstan heavily dependent upon Russia for its economic security and defence, but Moscow's military influence over the country is growing.

### ***The China Factor***

Beijing has now stepped into this decades-long Russian attempt at establishing regional control. Central Asia's proximity and economic and cultural ties to China have led Beijing to view Central Asian policy and security as supplementary to, and even an extension of, China's domestic security agenda. Beijing's interests in Central Asia lie in five areas. Politically and economically, the region has significant energy importance and serves as a bridge between Europe and Asia. It also serves Chairman Xi's ambitions to reconstruct the Silk Road, stabilise China's western provinces through the direct and indirect economic benefits provided by the OBOR, and develop co-operation or convince China's neighbours that there is greater benefit to be had by aligning with, rather than opposing, Beijing.

To that end, China has invested in Kyrgyzstan's modest oil industry, attempting in a similar manner to Russia to create a dependence upon Beijing and to increase China's influence in the country. There are, too, more immediate concerns. Central Asia could be crucial to China's energy security due to the inability of others to interdict shipments from the region [except at the supply source](#). The importance to China's national security can be seen in Beijing's projects in Central Asia, including its use of the Confucius Institutes and so-called "debt traps" in Kyrgyzstan, both common tools of Beijing's influence operations.

### ***Sino-Russian Competition***

Beijing's plans in Central Asia bear marked similarities to those of Moscow, and it is here that competition between the two is likely. Publicly, Russia and China emphasise that their projects are not in competition. The OBOR is, nevertheless, viewed with a certain degree of concern within Russia. Despite China's claim that OBOR is beneficial to all, the project's ambiguity and its role as a catch-all term for projects that may heavily favour China, coupled with the immense benefits that China stands to gain, creates suspicion as to whom it is really supposed to benefit. Similarly, the close alignment of interests between Moscow and Beijing is prompted primarily by mutual wariness of the US – and, in Russia's case, a view that US activities leave it with [no choice](#) but to co-operate with China – rather than co-operation to achieve interests beyond that common threat. The question thus arises as to when such Sino-Russian co-operation might end. In addition to competition between the EEU and the OBOR, China's railway lines run counter to Moscow's efforts to position Russia as the bridge between Asia and Europe and will diminish Moscow's regional influence.

Russia and China are also both scrambling to secure Central Asian energy markets, which would strengthen their respective political positions and grant Russia and China leverage in their bilateral trade deals. Though Russia and China's interests in Central Asian energy industries are best understood as a means rather than an end, the fact that their policies are quintessentially monopolistic in nature makes competition between Moscow and Beijing even more likely.

Such competition will only deepen as Beijing seeks to fulfil its objectives. Though energy may be acquired through low-profile actions, China's broader objectives in the region – shaping regional development, limiting outside influence in China's restive western provinces, and balancing Russia's influence in Central Asia – cannot be achieved while maintaining that low profile. If China has to choose between keeping its regional activities low-profile and advancing its broader regional goals, Beijing appears willing to sacrifice the [former for the latter](#).

Co-operation between Russia and China has been prevented from breaking down thus far only by their mutual opposition to the US. Although Beijing and Moscow are both keen to reduce US influence in Central Asia, achieving that goal could actually deepen the competition between them. As Russia's relations with the Central Asian countries took a turn for the better when US relations with those states soured, so, too, does China's relationship with Central Asia fluctuate inversely to US relations with the region. A lack of US presence in the region, therefore, could potentially increase the competition for regional influence with a geographically-closer rival power – an intolerable prospect for Moscow, given Russian views on the region and its efforts to wrest back control over it. Hence, rather than a wariness of US activities in the region, Russia's attention would turn towards Beijing, and vice versa.

Sino-Russian co-operation is based largely on perceived US unilateralism, interventionism and attempts to constrain Moscow's and Beijing's regional aspirations. Without that unifying factor, the only other driver of co-operation is the benefit to each country's economic goals in the region. Yet each country's overlapping ambitions for regional power, which the economic initiatives help to strengthen, inhibit that co-operation. When the US does not serve as a common foil to unite China and Russia, their co-operation grows tenuous. Outside of specific projects that benefit both Beijing and Moscow, any policies that advance the interests of one will infringe upon the sphere of influence of the other, thus turning the situation into a zero-sum game. Even in areas such as economic advances, co-operation is likely to dissolve as soon as one party judges further co-operation to be harmful to its interests. Thus, though President Putin may be inclined to leave the possibility of cordiality with China open and vice-versa, it is a stance that does not entirely preclude competition and suspicion between the two.

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