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Cooperation and competition between Russia and China in
Central Asia. Explaining why and to what extent the
balance of power has been shifting towards Beijing.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of history, Central Asia has witnessed significant external competition, which has made it a battleground for various empires seeking to control and exert their influence over it at different points in time. Foreign engagement in the region can be traced back as early as the 4th century BCE when Alexander the Great's conquests introduced the earliest signs of foreign influence in the region, which indeed came to be known as *Transoxiana*, the "Land beyond the Oxus¹", from the Greek Ὠξος. In the following centuries, foreign empires such as the Arabs, the Mongols and the Timurids have been engaged in the international contention over the region, each leaving behind a legacy that is still observable in the region.

The intense and enduring contention which, to some extent, continues to this day, however, started to emerge in the 19th century. This period marked the beginning of what came to be known as "Great Game", the plain and overt strategic rivalry between Imperial Russia and Britain. As a result of the Great Game, the remaining Khanates of the region eventually became part of the Russian sphere of control, to which they were eventually tied for more than a century under Russian and, later, Soviet rule, only gaining independence in 1991. Nevertheless, perhaps quite obviously, Russian influence in the new independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has persisted and grown since the day of independence, as this study aims to explain.

These sustained efforts and tensions among great powers in relation to the region can be easily understood. First of all, the region has traditionally served as a crucial land bridge, serving as a pivotal trade corridor between Europe and Asia. The ancient, significantly highly traversed Silk Road indeed passed directly through the region, directly contributing to the international contention for it and to its development. To this day, in fact, China's keen interest in the region is mainly attributable to its recognition of the value and relevance of the Central Asian trade routes. China's Belt and Road initiative, which is indeed often referred to as the "New Silk Road", significantly relies on the Central Asian corridors in order to link China with the European and Middle Eastern economies. Additionally, the Central Asian deserts possess abundant hydrocarbon resources, particularly natural gas, making it one of the world's richest regions in this regard, and attracting the eyes of various other international actors including the United States in the past decades. It thus becomes evident, combining these factors of relevance to the significant influence that Russia has traditionally exerted and continues to exert over it, why Central Asia remains to this day a coveted prize for foreign powers and a source of competition.

It is interesting to note from the beginning of this study that the five post-Soviet republics of the region are known for pursuing different foreign policies in relation to the two main powers of the region,

¹ Nowadays known as Amu Darya, serves as natural border between Central Asia and Afghanistan. A key factor in the development and prosperity of influential cities along the Silk Road, such as Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand.

Russia and China. The rest of this study is thus focused on the examination of the established links and relationships between the Central Asian republics and the two regional actors. This thesis explores the reasons why China and Russia are effectively the dominant players of the region and their respective strategies and interests in the region, concentrating on the dynamic interplay between them, in order to respond to the research question of this work, which is as follows: “Why, and to what extent, has the balance of power in the region been shifting towards Beijing?”.

To address the research question, it is essential to establish an accurate and appropriate unit for measuring power. For the remainder of this study, the chosen unit and the resulting theoretical framework employed will revolve around the evaluation of the influence leverages that Russia and China hold over the five Central Asian republics. Such evaluation has the goal of determining which of the two powers effectively functions as the leading hegemonic power in the region. In order to properly evaluate and measure influence, this thesis will primarily utilise the realist lenses of the English School of International Relations and its approach to modern spheres of influence. According to this approach, spheres of influence after the end of the Cold War are to be defined and measured mainly across three domains: the domain of security and military power, the domain of political and normative influence and, lastly, the domain of socio-cultural primacy. These three realms therefore will serve as the theoretical basis for the analysis of the power dynamics between Russia and China in the region.

In relation to the academic literature that forms the foundation of this thesis, the significant contributions of Filippo Costa Buranelli, a leading and esteemed scholar in the field of International Relations with a focus on Central Asia, in his work “*Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*”² are to be mentioned. Moreover, other studies by Buranelli, to which credit as the primary academic source of this thesis must be given, have been instrumental and paramount in the explanation of various crucial aspects of the region, encompassing both domestic issues within the republic themselves and their foreign policy dynamics with Russia and China. Another significant contribution to this work has come from the collaboration of esteemed scholars from leading Russian universities in the field of International Relations, including MGIMO and HSE. Key figures such as Andrei Kazantsev, Svetlana Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk have co-authored “*Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*”³, which has been immensely helpful in the formulation of this project and of the conclusions in relation to the research question.

The structure of this thesis is, therefore, as follows. The first chapter has the goal of establishing essential knowledge about Central Asia and about Russian and Chinese interests in the region. By providing a comprehensive historical and political explanation of the region’s past, it wants to describe

² Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.378-403.

³ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.57-71.

the current domestic and international standing of the Central Asian republics. This introductory chapter sets the foundation for the overall direction of the thesis. The second chapter builds upon the groundwork that was laid down in the first chapter, focusing on the unfolding of a thorough and precise evaluation of the foreign influence flows in the region. Through the realist approach of the English School, the chapter conducts an analysis of the influence scenario for each republic, ultimately forming a coherent picture of the region's overall status. Lastly, the third chapter applies and adapts the influence framework that the previous analysis has uncovered to the current global scenario. It examines how recent events, which have directly impacted the principal actors in the region, have shaken the dynamics of the relative rankings of power within the region as well, in order to finally answer to the research question. Overall, the study also focuses on the duality of the Sino-Russian relationship in the region, especially in relation to their strategic partnership and to the potential causes of friction between them.

CHAPTER 1

This introductory chapter aims at establishing the necessary structural understanding of the overall direction of this thesis. First, it will offer a significant overview of the historical and strategic significance of the Central Asian region. This will involve an examination of both recent and past instances of struggle and competition in relation to the region, as well as an account of its key areas of significance. Furthermore, the chapter will focus on the distinctive identity of the foreign policies that the five republics of the region have traditionally pursued, by exploring the main reasons behind the lack of concrete efforts in establishing their own initiatives of regional integration in the past decades, taking into account socio-cultural factors and internal dynamics within the region. To conclude, the chapter will deliver a preliminary analysis of the differences between the strategies of Russia and China, the two principal foreign actors in the region, in relation to the five post-Soviet republics, evaluating how they interface with the republics and the specific sectors in which they concentrate their efforts.

1.1) The importance of Central Asia in global affairs

“Who controls the Heartland rules the World Island;

Who controls the World Island Rules the World.”

Mackinder, Halford John (1904). *The Geographical Pivot of History. The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421-437.

In contemporary international politics, the locational significance of a region constitutes a crucial aspect in the determination of the strategies that major powers employ in order to expand their sphere of influence⁴. In geopolitical and economic terms, the locational importance of a region is given by its “strategical geographical position and by its possession of primary resources”⁵, which are essential determinants of political power. After this initial consideration, it is already clear how important a region such as Central Asia is, especially in the current context, in which the expansion and promotion of national influence has become a priority for major powers.

There are various definitions to the geographical meaning of Central Asia, reciprocally including or excluding certain regions or countries; the following definition, which is the most widely accepted, will be the one used throughout the entirety of this work: Central Asia is defined as the territory of the former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan⁶. This

⁴ Dar, Shaheen Showkat (2014). Strategic Significance of Central Asia in 21st Century. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 21(1), p.59.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This definition is provided by *Britannica*. Other geographical definitions often include Iran and Afghanistan as well.

vast region stretches longitudinally from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border region of Xinjiang, and latitudinally from the Russian to the Afghan and Iranian borders. The region is therefore landlocked, which brings about an interesting argument, that is, why such a region is contended from major powers, given the geopolitical importance of an access to the open sea.

The international struggle and contention for the region is, as previously mentioned, given by its strategic geopolitical and economic position, which has historically made the region a “battleground for outside competition”⁷: some of the greatest empires in history, since the age of Alexander the Great, have fought in order to control this area, which has traditionally connected Europe and Asia on a commercial level through the Silk Road. These continuous passages from different Empires, ranging from the Mongol Empire to the Soviet Union, passing through Islamisation and Persian rule, have prevented the formation of strong national identities and the development of a proper institutional structure in the area. On the commercial level, the strategic location of the region has been crucial in the development of trade from Europe to the East, and it still is nowadays despite the progresses achieved in transportation in the past centuries.

The geopolitical relevance of Central Asia has been highlighted by various theorists in the realm of International Relations. Notably, Halford John Mackinder has presented the region as the Heartland of Eurasia in his 1904 *Heartland Theory*. To quote his passage, which also served as the incipit to this paragraph: “*Who controls the Heartland rules the World Island; who rules the World Island, rules the World.*”. According to the Heartland Theory, controlling the pivotal area of the Heartland would more easily allow to control the World Island, consisting in the Eurasian and African landmasses⁸, which comprise the majority of the global population and resources. Even if this theory was formulated over one century ago, and both technology, especially in terms of transportation and communication, and IR debates have gone further, it still is a valid theory to some extent, as proven by the recurring competition between major powers towards the region. In fact, other IR theories which have been formulated in the past decades, such as US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *Global Chessboard theory of American Primacy*, include the region of Central Asia as a core area of geopolitical interest, as he identified it as the centre of the Eurasian chessboard⁹.

Other than economic and geopolitical concerns, the region has had a huge tactical and logistic importance in the last century. After having gained the territories from the overthrown Russian Empire, and after resistance from the White Armies in the area, the Soviet Union managed in the 1920s to consolidate its rule over the region, constituting Socialist Republics in the area, whose

⁷ Dar, Shaheen Showkat (2014). Strategic Significance of Central Asia in 21st Century. *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, 21(1), p.60.

⁸ Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The Geographical Pivot of History. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421-437.

⁹ Schmidt, Helmut, & Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1998). The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives. *Foreign Policy*, (110), p.180.

borders still delimitate the territory of the current Republics, which had been an important factor in the difficulties faced by these countries towards integration.

The Soviet Union has deeply exploited the vast deserted areas of the region, both for agricultural and logistic reasons. The Soviet Space program has been mainly based in the Baikonur Cosmodrome, at the time within the territory of the Kazakh SSR, from which the first ever human launch has departed. The Cosmodrome is still operated by Roscosmos and by the Russian Air Force, as its area is leased to the Russian Federation by Kazakhstan. On top of all, military bases in the Central Asian states have been logistically crucial also for the United States during OEF¹⁰ in Afghanistan, most notably the Manas Transit Centre in Kyrgyzstan and the Karshi Air Base in Uzbekistan.

Despite the relatively short but substantial involvement of the United States in the area, military and security issues in the area are in the hands of the Russian military, as security is one of the main concerns of Russia in the region¹¹. The Russian strategy in the region indeed mainly revolves around the Collective Security Treaty Organization, from now on referred to as CSTO, in which three of the five Central Asian countries participate, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Another important factor that explains Russian interest in the region is the high percentage of immigrants coming from these countries and living in Russia, especially from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

According to a report from the ONG Minority Rights, 42% of foreign workers in Russia come from Central Asia. Many of them enter Russia in order to send financial help to their families in the countries of origin¹². These migration flows are able to describe the extent of the leverage that Russia holds over these two countries, which, as will be seen in detail in the course of the work, are the closer to Russia among the new Republics. In fact, nearly one third of the GDPs of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan consists in remittances from citizens that emigrated to Russia¹³, making the two tied up to Moscow both on an economic and on a political level.

To conclude this overview over the importance of the region, in recent years Central Asia has become highly relevant also for the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, mainly for commercial and financial reason, even if some security-related reasons are involved too. The Chinese government has closed important energetic deals with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, through which it secured stakes in important energetic consortiums in the area, from which it had been previously excluded¹⁴. Also, the Chinese government has been investing copiously in infrastructural projects in the area, for instance pipelines and highways, and has planned to invest even more through its extremely ambitious Belt and Road initiative, from now on referred to as BRI¹⁵. The infrastructural project aims at improving the commercial nexus between China, Europe and Africa, and has been defined as the “New Silk Road”.

¹⁰ Operation Enduring Freedom, referring both to the 2001-21 War in Afghanistan and, more generally, to the war on terror.

¹¹ Cooley, Alexander (2015). Russia and China in Central Asia. *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)*.

¹² Report on the situation of minorities in the Russian Federation by Minority Rights International Group.

¹³ Cooley, Alexander (2015). Russia and China in Central Asia. *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The project will generate impressive investment opportunities for the Central Asian countries, and will improve transportation links as to boost economic, social and political ties between China and the involved Countries. With this project, China also plans to resolve its internal problems in the border region of Xinjiang¹⁶: the infrastructures will indeed flow through Xinjiang, and one of the goals of the CCP is to create welfare in the region as to boost cultural and political integration. Central Asian states will also look closely to the developments, as they also face recurring threats of fundamentalist streams from the Afghan border in the south. This issue, however, is currently being tackled by the Russian military, together with the local armies.

The conflicting interests between the two regional powers, therefore, are clear, but there is also room for cooperation between them. The rest of the thesis will thus focus on the dualism between competition and cooperation between these massive powers in the area, while also focusing on the very specific nature of the institutions and, consequently, of the International Relations between the post-Soviet entities in the region.

1.2) The obstacles to regional integration and to multilateralism in Central Asia

In order to properly understand the nature of International Relations in the region, not only towards China and Russia but also on a regional level, it is important to underline the peculiar nature of the society and institutions of the post-Soviet republics.

All five republics gained sudden independence from the Soviet Union after the dissolution of the 20th century giant in 1991; it is therefore evident that independence had come without an effective demand for it by the people, without passing through a common struggle for national liberation, leaving thus the newly formed Central Asian entities with the huge task of state and nation-building. The task is extremely important, as shown by the common failures of post-colonial African countries, which remain vulnerable to fragmentation and internal disintegration because of the absence of such a process of creation and consolidation of rules, identity and institutions¹⁷.

The importance of nation-building has indeed been one of the main determinants of the current nature of International Relations in the area, that is, the trend to employ bilateral talks and relations more often than multilateral ones, as the identity-building processes have been deemed far more important. These processes have produced quite different outcomes, although the strategies employed have been similar in all five republics. Throughout the territory, the process was carried out by the already present “Soviet elites, which suddenly became national elites”¹⁸. Whereas all republics adopted constitutions as the first step of the process, only Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have managed to achieve

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kamrava, Mehran (2019). Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics, and Culture. *The Muslim World*, 110(1), p.9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

a stable transition, while in the other republics the process was more turbulent¹⁹. High degree of credit in this case has to be given to state leaders in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as they have managed to facilitate the acceptance of the new regime as legitimate, a crucial step towards nation-building.

In the Central Asian context, the journey towards nation-building has happened through “complex and intertwined interactions between institutional and political dynamics”²⁰, which, given the authoritarian nature of the newly formed regimes, have often gone together, and importantly sociocultural dynamics as well, especially those related to Islam and to the relations of social patronage, which are endemic to the clan-based Central Asian society.

The main tactic employed by all leaders consisted in efforts undertaken by the State in order to foster the strength of the nation through the promotion of national symbols and identity. The republics, although to different extents, have employed heavy campaigns of ideology promotion, in order to publicise the more-than-ever important concepts of belonging to the nation. A notable example is the case of Kazakhstan, in which a brand-new capital city was founded to represent the building of the new nation in Astana, which is today called Nursultan, in honour of the first president²¹. The republics have also tried to promote themselves to foreign audiences in various ways: Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan from its independence until 2019, has tried and has managed to promote Kazakhstan as a geographic bridge and crossroads between Asia and Europe, both on cultural and commercial grounds. This “Eurasianist strategy”²² has indeed been critical for the definition of the new, modern Kazakh national identity. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, has described itself as a flourishing, cultural gem of Central Asia, managing to increase the touristic influx towards its ancient Silk Road cities.

Importantly, each republic presents, to a different degree of intensity, an authoritarian regime with a neo-patrimonial executive: the republics are therefore based on a clientelist relation between the executive, embodied by the respective President, and the local elites and clans²³. Political elites therefore are not interested in establishing rule of law, since their main concern is the survival of the regime and of the strict control over the local elites²⁴. In this specific context, the political leadership provides important commercial opportunities to these lobbies in exchange for total loyalty to the regime. In order to ensure legitimacy and loyalty, Presidents have placed themselves at the centre of the new national narratives, resulting in widespread personality cults which are perpetrated in the most disparate ways, from monument building to total media control; in this fragment, Turkmenistan represents the clearest example, producing a strong comparison with North Korea regarding population

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ivi, p.22.

²¹ Evident example of the extent of personality cults in the area since the republics gained independence; most noticeable in Turkmenistan nowadays.

²² Ivi, p.12.

²³ Lewis, David (2012). Understanding the Authoritarian State: Neopatrimonialism in Central Asia. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 19(1), p.116.

²⁴ Ibid.

control and personality cult. On the other hand, Uzbekistan's former president Islam Karimov has managed, through various writings, which have become highly popular within the country, to justify authoritarian rule under the pretext of ensuring national independence²⁵. Yet another example of the extent of personality cult, as already mentioned before, has been the change of name from Astana to Nursultan of the Kazakh capital city, in honour of the former president.

Apart from these political and institutional dynamics, also social and cultural factors have been crucial in the process of identity and state building in the post-Soviet space, most notably the influence of Islam, of local clans and of ethnic differences throughout the region²⁶. Islam has been a crucial tool for the political leadership in order to shape a brand-new national identity. However, it has needed to be controlled quite strictly because of its double-edged nature, as it could easily become a vector for political mobilisation and perhaps, especially in Uzbekistan, degenerate into fundamentalist groups²⁷. For these reasons, Islam has been utilised and repressed on several occasions by the ruling elites. Similarly, also clans and their typical patronage relations acted both as a special tool to glue the new national identities, but could also potentially degenerate into activist opposition bodies, therefore they have been treated similarly to Islam, sometimes exploited, sometimes manipulated and repressed by the leadership²⁸.

In addition to this already complex situation, the incredibly mixed ethnic background of the region constituted another area of concern in the creation of the new identities of the republics. For example, Uzbeks and Tajiks constitute respectively important minority groups in the respective States, whereas Kazakhstan still has a large Russian ethnic minority²⁹. The five republics of the region can be therefore described as "strong states, with weak and fragmented societies"³⁰.

After this outright but fundamental analysis of the main dynamics of the region, it is possible to analyse the nature of the international networks of the post-Soviet republics, with the main focus on the explanation of an important questions: why regionalism and coordinated action between the republics have so far had very limited success?

The immediate answer to the question is obviously provided by the factors that were analysed before: in order to avoid instability and potential clashes, the regional governments have been more focused on the creation of a national identity instead that on cooperation among them. Other factors mentioned in the previous analysis, such as the neo-patrimonial essence of the Central Asian governments and their resulting interest in regime preservation, have prevented cooperation between the republics in the form

²⁵ Kamrava, Mehran (2019). Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics, and Culture. *The Muslim World*, 110(1), p.15.

²⁶ Ivi, p.21.

²⁷ Ivi, p.16.

²⁸ Ivi, p.23.

²⁹ Ivi, p.21.

³⁰ Ivi, p.23.

of an “integrated economic, political and security system”³¹. Also, it is important to note that the republics differ in factors such as population, size of the economy and nature of it.

In an article published for the *Central Asian Affairs* journal, on which the following analysis of the foreign policy of the republics is based, Filippo Costa Buranelli has proposed a Central Asian order rather than regionalism. He argued that “even if the five republics did decide to embark on a regionalist process [...] the resulting set of platforms was only useful for the republics [...] to navigate the transition from the Soviet life to the open economy”³² after their independence, but has not translated into a cooperative form of regionalism, ratified and formalised by the presence of a supranational body which, indeed, does not exist to this day. In truth, cooperation has alternated itself with hostility between the different republics, resulting in diplomatic relations between them that have consequently been more often bilateral rather than multilateral³³. For this reason, Buranelli has expressed the important concept of order, which according to him is the most pertinent and appropriate in order to analyse international relations within the regional entities³⁴.

In this context, order refers to a “set of relations that makes it possible for the basic goals of a given society to be achieved, by implementing rules and institutions that enable and protect common interests”³⁵. Even if such interests may vary in kind and extent, their achievement in this specific context is only possible through the observance of certain rules. In international relations, these rules can be of constitutional nature, of coexistence and of cooperation³⁶, and are produced and employed through institutions, not necessarily defined as international organisations but rather as established and codified practices.

For regionalism to take off in a certain region, the social order must be developed enough to allow for cooperation in areas of common interest, whereas order is more neutral, and only refers to the basic structure of a social context, including its fundamental norms, principles and rules³⁷. Thus, it can be said that regionalism requires the presence of an established order to take place, while an order can exist without necessarily transform itself into regional cooperation, being thus more adaptive and malleable in nature.

The post-Soviet republics have abided by the institutions necessary to maintain the order, which will be listed and explained later on, thanks to which these new entities have managed to prevent violence outbreaks and ethno-territorial conflicts, thus avoiding situations similar to previous sudden breaks of statal entities, such as those in Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus³⁸. The Central Asian states thus ensured

³¹ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2021). Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections. *Central Asian Affairs*, 8(1), p.4.

³² Ivi, p.10.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ivi, p.11.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ivi, p.12.

³⁷ Ivi, p.14.

³⁸ Ivi, p.16.

that no republic would make territorial claims over another, and that the basic rules of coexistence will be respected by all. On top of all, they all wished, and still wish to this date, to preserve the state as the only political and military authority in the region, thus preventing any attempt of insurgency, especially of Islamic nature.

Another important norm to which all republics abide is to try to balance the engagement of Russia and China in the region, defined as “*multivectorism*”³⁹. As will be analysed later in the project, and which is, in reality, the main purpose of this work, China and Russia have different levels of engagement in the region, and tend to split the operative sectors between one another, as the Russian leadership is more focused on hard power, in reference to political and military matters, whereas the Chinese tend to focus more heavily on soft power, investments and infrastructural developments.

In relation to the aforementioned institutions, crucial to maintain the order in the region, the first one to be mentioned is sovereignty, intended as mutual respect of each other’s sovereignty as the core foundation of this Central Asian order; diplomatic channels constitute another crucial institution, as all republics have embassies and consulates on each other’s territory, and conduct regular meetings at presidential and ministerial level⁴⁰. As previously mentioned, and as the title of the paragraph suggests, the nature of international relations between the five republics is bilateral, as multilateralism is not yet institutionalised, apart for organisations such as the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, from now on referred to as SCO, which however are driven by the major powers of the region.

Uzbekistan has however “embraced multilateralism”⁴¹ recently, launching the idea of an informal dialogue between the five republics on matters of security, economy and politics. However, the practice is still far from being routinised and institutionalised⁴².

Another important and respected institution is international law, especially over matters of security, territory and management of natural resources; authoritarianism too has been progressively institutionalised within the region, as there is a shared understanding from the five republics that instability in one country could directly affect the other four⁴³. Finally, the last institution needed to maintain the order, and perhaps the most important one, is that of great power management, which consists of the set of practices that allows the great powers to take over responsibilities in front of perceived or real threats to the security and order of Central Asia⁴⁴.

To sum up, the described Central Asian order is “very much state-centric”⁴⁵, and depends on the agreements by the political elites of all republics to avoid conflict and competition. Whereas the relations between the post-Soviet entities are merely bilateral, because of the various difficulties faced

³⁹ Ivi, p.17.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ivi, p.18.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ivi, p.19.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p.20.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p.23.

after their independence, which have prevented economic and political integration into a regional structure, the order is institutionally supported on a multilateral level by some formal regional organisation, which are however driven by Russia, such as the CSTO and the Commonwealth of Independent States, from now on referred to as CIS, and by China in the case of the SCO. These organisations, even if they do not provide for a body of supranational integration among the republics, are important because they facilitate the grounds for encounter and dialogue between the Central Asian states.

The concept of order is thus more faithful and descriptive of the current situation of the region⁴⁶, as “integrationist and regionalist impulses have ceded ground to coordination efforts and compromise”⁴⁷. Given the general level of mistrust among the governments of the five republics, the fact that the only multilateral organisations are shared and guided by the neighbouring great powers does not necessarily imply a failure for regionalism to take-off in the region⁴⁸, but rather the attempt to maintain the order of things in the region, without having to run the risk of exacerbating clashes between the republics⁴⁹. To conclude, another important factor that prevents regionalism in Central Asia, and the resulting supranational integration between the five independent states, is the difference in the extent of the relations with Russia and China. The last part of this introductory chapter will thus analyse the strategic differences between China and Russia concerning the region.

1.3) The differences and similarities of Chinese and Russian strategies and interests

The intrinsic and millennial importance of this region for global affairs, especially for trade and security, is evident; for this reason, all major powers on a world scale have tried, to some extent, to expand their influence in the region. This process dates back to the times of the Great Game, in which British India attempted, and failed, an expansion towards the Heartland through Afghanistan, whereas the Russian Empire managed to conquer the local khanates to control the region, which it did first as Empire and later on, up until 1991, as Soviet Union. Given the historical ties with the region, it should not come as a surprise that the newly formed Russian Federation has tried to pursue its interest and had an initial advantage over influence expansion in the region. However, China has emerged and continues to emerge as a highly influential regional player, with a growing power asymmetry between the CCP and the Kremlin.

On top to that, other important global actors have tried to expand within the region and to influence the direction of the five republics. The clearest example is provided by the military presence of the United States in the military bases of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, during the OEF in Afghanistan. During the

⁴⁶ Ivi, p.24.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

entirety of the operation, the US administration has pursued multilateral talks with the Presidents of the five republics, although to a lesser extent compared to Russia and China. Also, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has almost put an end to American interests towards the region, almost totally conceding their share of influence to the two great regional powers of Russia and China.

The two powers have indeed, in the past decade, tried to limit foreign interference in their regional interests, through the creation of an unformalized axis of cooperation. Currently, although sharing some basic interests in the region, and although being coordinated between them on a bilateral level over certain aspects, the strategies of the two powers are much different. On top of that, historical reasons point out the perpetual desire by both countries to exert hegemony over the region; for this reason, a scenario in which the two powers move once again towards increased competition, or even a potential regional rivalry, is not to keep out of the books. The rest of the chapter will therefore analyse the differences between the Russian and the Chinese strategies in the area, highlighting the grounds for possible cooperation and friction between them.

First of all, Russian influence in the region is remarkably high, with three main goals regarding foreign policy: the promotion of security and military cooperation with the armies of the republics, the expansion and facilitation of energetic infrastructural links, and thirdly the strengthening of the integration process of the five republics within the Eurasian Economic Union⁵⁰, from now on referred to as EAEU. The region is crucial to Russian interests also because of the chronic instability of the southern border of the republics with Afghanistan, which constantly threatens to destabilise the region and of which the Kremlin fears a spill-over into its significant Muslim minorities. Russia also maintains a high level of cultural influence over the region through its soft power tools, such as TV, language, literature and mass media⁵¹. Also, the renewed and stronger Russian interest towards the region derived from the power vacuum left from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As for China, the leadership of the Communist Party is managing to exploit the various difficulties faced by the other powers, especially thanks to its previous financial and infrastructural efforts in the region and is starting to emerge as the biggest international player in the area⁵². There have been various reasons and opportunities that have driven China to intensify its level of engagement in Central Asia, both related to economic opportunities and to safety concerns. China has important interests in the energetic and transportation sectors in the area, which come together under the multi-billion-dollar initiative of the BRI, announced by the President of the CCP Xi Jinping in 2013. Interestingly, highlighting the importance of Central Asia within the context of the BRI, the initiative has been officially announced in Astana. The project is likely to be a game-changer in the global balance of

⁵⁰ Gusev, Leonid (2019, October 2). *The Importance of Central Asia for Russia's Foreign Policy*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Jiang, Yang (2022, October 10). *China leading the race for influence in Central Asia*. Danish Institute for International Studies. DIIS.

power, as it will bring about cooperation and innovation in crucial sectors such as infrastructure, connectivity, energy and consequently trade⁵³.

China has been providing its technologies and important funds for the governments of the republics, allowing China to grab a crucial advantage in the dynamics of the region, also thanks to the construction with those funds and technologies of two direct pipelines, which deliver oil and gas directly from Central Asia to China⁵⁴. China has thus been the principal buyer of Central Asian fossil resources in the past decade, especially from Turkmenistan, which almost entirely depends on energy exports to China, and, to a lesser extent, from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. As for security matters, the Chinese domestic dialectic has often revolved on the fight against the so-called *three evils*⁵⁵, namely terrorism, separatism and extremism. The Chinese government too, like Russia, is worried about potential fundamentalist spillovers from Afghanistan in the region, with the added threat of a consequent and potentially more dangerous spill-over in its Xinjiang border region, in which the already critical situation could deteriorate even further. China indeed plans to attempt to stabilise the Xinjiang region through the important infrastructural improvements deriving from the BRI.

After this brief overview of the general practices and interests of the two powers, it is possible to define the current relationship between the two powers in the area as a “cooperative hegemony”⁵⁶, given the unofficial but marked division of labour between the two. Whereas the Chinese are important economic and investment actors, the Russians have traditionally played a key role as security providers and as political guide. The Russian strategy is relatively straightforward, as it consists of a familiar and rehearsed paradigm: turning the smaller and weaker States, in this case Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, into client states⁵⁷, providing investments and security. The same paradigm can be seen in Armenia, where Russia has been providing military and technological support at odds with recurring threats from Azerbaijan, additionally to a high degree of investments in the country. The implementation of this paradigm from Russia in the three states is fostered by the high degree of dependence that the economies of the three former Soviet republics have with Russia, especially in the form of remittances. The three are indeed among the countries with the highest number of worker immigrants in Russia, and their economies rely on the remittances that these workers send home. In fact, the weight of these remittances on the national GDPs of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan touches the staggering figure of 33%⁵⁸. Russia’s engagement strategy does not however only rely on clientelism, as the Kremlin has high degrees of power and influence over each of the five republics, although to different extents and through different strategic measures.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sharifli, Yunis (2023, January 18). *China’s Dominance in Central Asia: Myth or Reality?*Homepage | Royal United Services Institute. RUSI.

⁵⁷ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

⁵⁸ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana., & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.60.

Moscow has tried to declare itself as the main regional hegemon through the installation of new regional organisations⁵⁹, most notably the EAEU and the CSTO, in order to try to lock the member republics into their own backyard for economic and security hegemony. Security indeed, as repeatedly stated in this chapter, is arguably the biggest leverage that Russia holds towards the republic, especially in the context of threats of potential fundamentalist rises. Beyond already having a strong military presence in the area, again especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan -which, as should be clear, are the republics that depend on Moscow to the higher magnitude- the US departure from the area has only increased the degree of military engagement in the area from the Kremlin⁶⁰.

With reference to China, it has drastically intensified its level of commitment in the region, encouraged by highly attracting investment opportunities and by the security concerns which were already mentioned before. The BRI initiative is by far the most important and ambitious incentive to the Chinese interests in the area, acting as a catalyser for other investment projects in a wide range of areas. The Beijing leadership has indeed referred to the project as “the most significant and far-reaching project the nation has ever put forward⁶¹. Among the substantial investments that China has undertaken, the Silk Road Fund is noteworthy. It consists of a figure close to USD 40 billion, provided by the Chinese Central Bank, to build new infrastructures in Central Asia, especially on logistic and transportation grounds. Even greater than the Silk Road Fund in amount is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, in the range of the USD 50 to 100 billion⁶², which was joined by Kazakhstan, Russia and Tajikistan⁶³.

In addition to these regional funds, China has concluded important bilateral agreements in the energy field with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan⁶⁴, providing favourable loans in return for privileged energy stakes from the rich fields of the two republics. Particularly in respect of Turkmenistan, this manoeuvre has made it extremely dependent on energy exports to China. The BRI has both foreign and domestic objectives to be achieved. As for the foreign ones, the Chinese government clearly aims at binding the post-Soviet republics to its economic interests, creating a developed and friendly community in the area⁶⁵, and perhaps most centrally to permanently establish itself as the leaders of global trade through the opening of new commercial corridors towards Europe, the Middle East and Africa. As for the domestic objectives, the aforementioned development and stabilisation of Xinjiang is crucial for the CCP’s agenda, while also the delivery of important contracts and potentially new markets to the Chinese construction companies is a key talking point.

⁵⁹ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Xinhua: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (2021, January 10). *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*.

⁶⁵ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

Corruption issues in the post-Soviet elites may raise some suspicion over whether the considerable Chinese funds will be put to yield, but overall, the success of the Chinese project seems inevitable, with important and potentially permanent repercussions on the global world order.

The division of labour and interests that had been explained underlines the prospects for cooperation between Russia and China in the area, which may even lead to prospective global hegemony by the two. However, there are some key elements of contraposition between the two, starting from the realm of security. Nonetheless, officials from Moscow and Beijing claim not to harbour any kind of regional rivalry⁶⁶. In addition, the recent developments in global affairs such as the war in Ukraine seem to have increased the willingness from the Russian side to cooperate with proposals from Beijing; it seems therefore that Sino-Russian cooperation will continue to grow, especially on commercial grounds, but it also seems that it will be “increasingly conducted on China’s terms⁶⁷.”

In addition to that, it seems that the Central Asian republics will face even increased difficulties in practicing multi-vector diplomacy, already difficult and not established as explained by the previous subparagraph, due to the exponentially increasing influence exercised by both Moscow and Beijing. As for the bilateral relations between the two powers, ties between them seem to have become personalised, with both presidents Putin and Xi Jinping administrating commissions and sending ministers and officials to develop financial deals in all the areas of cooperation and common interest between the two⁶⁸; these areas include energy sales from Russia to China, Chinese participation in Russian-led energy consortiums, military sales from Russia to China and also transportation infrastructure.

On top of that, the Beijing leadership appears to be recognising the utility to aid Russian interests within the BRI framework, as to bring benefits to Russia from it too, by trying to make the EAEU and the BRI work together as better as possible⁶⁹. Clearly, it is the Chinese who hold the greatest share of power within bilateral relations with the Russian leadership, however offering assurances to them.

The only institutionalised vehicle for multilateral relations which includes all the actors involved in the current described scenario, except for Turkmenistan, is represented by the SCO. It is intended as the Eurasian forum for political, economic and security issues, and on top of China, Russia and the post-Soviet republics, it has expanded as to include India and Pakistan as well. The aim of the organisation, in the view of the two powers leading its operations, is to manage to balance their interests towards the other involved states.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stronsky, Paul & Ng, Nicole (2018). *Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.3.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p.4.

The two powers formally conceive the organisation as “an arena for joint leadership”⁷⁰; however, conflicts of interest and competition have arisen between the two powers, partially leading to a deterioration of their axis within the organisation.

For instance, following the military operations undertaken by Russian forces in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014, some clear elements of contrast appeared between Moscow and the Chinese administration. The predominant reason for these frictions lies within the SCO itself, which counters any form of separatism⁷¹, especially given China’s perpetual fear of secessionist movements in its western provinces. The even fresher events in Ukraine may further exacerbate the divergences of the two within the organization, and even draw a clear line in the balance of power between the two, as Russia has been forced to almost totally rely on Chinese support after the sanctions imposed by the West. With this paradigm in existence, “Russia will never be able to take decisions interfering with the Chinese interests”⁷².

The SCO, nevertheless, remains a fundamental institutional setting for all the countries involved: for China, the SCO is crucial in order to economically tie the Central Asian members to the BRI. Central Asian states, on the other hand, perceive the SCO as a “unique occasion to simultaneously engage with Russia and China”⁷³. As for Russian foreign policy, the Kremlin leadership has often highlighted the need to strengthen the role of the organisation and increasing its economic and political reach. Recent sanctions and the global scenario, however, are likely to force Russia to be more acquiescent to Chinese objectives and deliberation within the organisation, as already mentioned previously.

In point of fact, the genuine objective of this work is to assess to what extent is the balance of power leaning towards Beijing, that is, to what extent Russia has to accommodate Chinese projects and objectives.

In the next chapters, each single republic’s situation will be analysed more closely; in addition to that, even more crucially, the essence of the international relations between Russia and China and the framework of the balance of power will be defined and discussed.

⁷⁰ Christoffersen, Gaye (2022, November 30). *Central Asia over a decade: The Shifting Balance in Central Asia between Russia and China*. The Asan Forum, p.14.

⁷¹ According to the rhetoric of the *three evils* that was previously anticipated.

⁷² Bordachev, Timofei (2017, February 15). *To Russia's Friends in Asia and Beyond*. Valdai Discussion Club.

⁷³ Pizzolo, Paolo, & Carteny, Andrea (2022). *The “New Great Game” in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?* The International Spectator, p.95.

CHAPTER 2

After the essential overview of the regional conditions and dynamics that was provided by the first chapter, this following unit will be committed to undertake an extensive scrutiny of the Russian and Chinese influence flows in relation to each of the five republics of the region, in order to understand how these influence flows come into play in relation to Central Asian as a single entity. More specifically, the first section of this chapter will be devoted to an explanation of the methodology and the tools that will be, later on, employed in order to carry out the crucial analysis that is core to this chapter. Moreover, the chapter will carry out a state-centred analysis in order to understand the respective levers that both Russia and China exert in relation to each Central Asian republic. In detail, the analysis will particularly review the situation of Kazakhstan, which is of particular interest in relation to the power equilibrium between the two regional hegemonies, by examining how it manages to swing between the two and other key international actors. To conclude, after having drawn up the situation of each republic, the chapter will present a comprehensive analysis about the balance of power in the region.

2.1) Explaining the methodology of the state-centred analysis

The exact character and definition of spheres of influence have been extensively debated among scholars in the realm of International Relations. Although being widely rejected and considered to belong to the previous war-battered centuries, spheres of influence are still exercised and constitute a common practice even in current international politics⁷⁴. World politics indeed seems to be labelled by the presence of existing spheres of influence, albeit weaker and more challenged if juxtaposed to the past. The specific nature of these spheres of influence is matter of debate, as there are various definition and approaches in order to analyse them.

Distinguished scholars of the calibre of Edy Kaufman and Paul Keal seemed to agree in defining spheres of influence as “regions within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence and freedom of action of the other political entities within it”⁷⁵. Israeli Amitai Etzioni defined them as “international formations that contain one nation that commands superior power over the others”⁷⁶.

Such understandings of spheres of influence seem to fall within the realist domain of the subject, which was predominant during the Cold War⁷⁷.

⁷⁴ Orakhelashvili, Alexander (2008). *International law and geopolitics: one object, conflicting legitimacies?* Netherlands Yearbook of International Law, 39, p.190.

⁷⁵ Keal, Paul (1983). *Contemporary understanding about spheres of influence*. Review of International Studies, 9(3), p. 155.

⁷⁶ Etzioni, Amitai (2015). *Spheres of Influence: A Reconceptualization*. The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, 39(2), p.119.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Notwithstanding that, as anticipated, spheres of influence have been widely rejected and catalogued as tools of the past, it is important to note that they are still present and important in international affairs nowadays. Spheres of influence intrinsically evolve and reshape themselves according to the social and legal context in which they operate⁷⁸. For this reason, in order to have a better and deeper understanding of the current nature of any sphere of influence, it is needed to analyse how the hegemon, influencer state and the states that are subject of such influence interact, thus “shaping the character of the sphere itself”⁷⁹.

In spite of the discussion over the nature and current applicability of the concept of spheres of influence, two distinctive elements on which most scholars agree are those of hierarchy and hegemony, which are inbuilt within spheres of influence. Within the realm of the English School of International Relations, which will be the interpretative key of this chapter and which will be, from now on, referred to as ES, Adam Watson has formulated a prominent theory about the concept of hegemony.

Watson envisioned a pendular scheme for relation between statal entities, with full independence and empire on the opposite, extreme ends. “Between these two ideal types, since “they are theoretical absolutes, that do not occur in practice”⁸⁰, there are hegemony, suzerainty and dominion”⁸¹.

In Watson’s thinking, hegemony materialises whenever some power within a system is able to stipulate the rules of that system, determining the external relations between states within the system, while leaving their domestic independence untouched⁸². Whereas suzerainty involves a direct political control over the entities composing the system, while dominion even implies the determination of their internal governments, in a hegemonic system the system’s outfits are able to retain control over their internal matters. These categories, just like spheres of influence, are not fixed, but change and evolve over time⁸³.

For instance, in the hierarchical international society of the past centuries, it was not uncommon for state sovereignty to be violated, as the specific configuration of international society at the time “allowed for the implementation of legitimate spheres of influence”⁸⁴ through these means. In the contemporary international environment instead, the principle of sovereign equality is a core institution of the system⁸⁵. For this reason, the blatant creation of a sphere of influence nowadays would go against the founding principles of modern international society, therefore justifications are needed by great powers in order to be cleared by the international community and the regional states

⁷⁸ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.379.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p.382.

⁸⁰ Watson, Adam (1992). *The Evolution of International Society*. Routledge.

⁸¹ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.386.

⁸² Watson, Adam (1992). *The Evolution of International Society*. Routledge.

⁸³ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.384.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*.

⁸⁵ Jackson, Robert (2000). *Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States*. New York: OUP.

that are involved⁸⁶. Differently from the previous century therefore, an element of consent and legitimacy from within and from the external system is now needed in order to “influence” other entities within the system.

For these reasons, Filippo Costa Buranelli formulated the idea of structures of “negotiated hegemony”⁸⁷ to refer to present day spheres of influence. He argues that “a sphere of influence, as conceived in the past two centuries, would be legally and morally unacceptable within the current international setting, given the importance of the principle of sovereign equality among states”⁸⁸.

In order to have it justified, it is thus crucial to negotiate it with the influenced entities, and to justify it before the international communities. Both external and internal consent are therefore needed. The element of negotiation is crucial in the current context and will turn out to be useful in the focused analysis that will happen later on in the chapter, as it implies that influenced states are able to bend the structure of the sphere to their own advantage, thanks to the protection provided by international law and to the degree of domestic independence that they retain.

An even more important aspect of a negotiated hegemony is that smaller states can even resist the hegemon’s attempts to pursue their interests and may decide to enter into another power’s sphere if they find it more coherent with their own national interests. For example, as will be analysed later, a post-Soviet republic may find it more convenient and useful to take cover under Chinese wings instead of pleasing Moscow’s interests.

In order to pursue one of the main goals of this chapter, that is, assessing the specific nature of both Russian and Chinese influence towards the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, the analysis will be based on the theoretical approach delivered by the ES. The ES approach views the domain of international politics as a society, which relies on common norms, such as respect for state’s sovereignty and international law, and common interests and institutions⁸⁹. Such international society is able to “operate both at the global and at the regional level”⁹⁰.

According to the ES approach, hegemony can pertain to three different domains: the military domain, the normative domain and the cultural domain. This basic definition alone is enough to declare the ES approach as the right one in order to pursue the goal of this work, as the interplay between economic, security related and cultural matters between China and Russia in the region has already been stated and inspected in the first chapter.

More specifically, a country can exert hegemony upon others through military means, shaping the security scenario at its pleasure via the provision of warfare and the creation of military alliances⁹¹; it

⁸⁶ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.387.

⁸⁷ Ivi, p.388.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p.385.

⁸⁹ Ivi, p.382.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

can also do so through the promotion of its norms and institutions, making the influenced states conform to them, especially through economic incentives⁹²; lastly, hegemony can be exercised and promoted at a cultural level, particularly in the linguistic and historical domains⁹³.

Each of these matters comes into play when analysing the leverages that China and Russia hold over the Central Asian countries. For this reason, the next sections will be centred on the evaluation of the hegemonic equilibrium between Russia and China in the area, through the lenses of the ES approach and the three domains it consists of.

The military, normative and socio-cultural relations towards the two superpowers will be judged for each of the five republics, in order to provide for a starting consideration about the balance of power between them, and how the Central Asian republics either accept or resist their respective hegemony.

2.2) Evaluating Russian and Chinese involvement in each republic

The previous sections have made clear that the historical Central Asian trade route of tea and silk has been replaced with that of pipelines, highways and weapons. In order to deliver a preliminary answer to the composition of the balance of power in the region, the particular and precise situation for each republic towards both powers needs to be discussed and analysed, which will be done through the lenses of the ES approach that was exposed in the previous section. The findings of this analysis will then be merged with the recent developments in world politics towards the end of this thesis, in order to finally give a definitive answer to the research question.

The rest of this chapter will thus focus on the assessment of the ties that link both Russia and China to each of the five republics in relation to the security, normative and cultural domains of influence.

Tajikistan

A complex and interesting interplay of influence is at stake in this mountainous republic, in view of the fact that Russia and China have similar interests and similar levels of engagement in each of the realms of analysis. The traditional division of labour between Russia and China in the region has had Russia ensuring security and military assistance in the region, whereas China's main role has been the development of infrastructure and the creation of economic opportunities. However, in relation to Beijing's commitment of fighting the *three evils* in 2016, the Xi leadership has increased its military engagement in Central Asia. Nevertheless, Russia still enjoys predominance in the security field, as it is the legitimate guarantor of security in the region. In the instance of Tajikistan, imports of weapons from Russia are on the rise, and the country also hosts a permanent Russian military facility, the 201st military base in Dushanbe⁹⁴. Tajikistan is also a member of the Russian led CSTO; the republic has been widely considered as the most Russian-

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.59.

dependent republic of the region, in view of the fact that it has been engaged in all the international organizations that have been initiated by Russia⁹⁵.

However, despite not even being China's main military partner in the region, Tajikistan is the republic in which Chinese military involvement is most noticeable. The Chinese have indeed built several border outposts and even a permanent military base in the Gorno-Badakhshan region, in the Pamir region, in which joint counterterrorism operations and border patrols take place between the regular Tajik Army and the People's Armed Police of China⁹⁶. Tajikistan is interested in Chinese military presence in the Badakhshan region, as it would help them in maintaining control of the Tajik-Afghan border, especially in reference to the possible activities of terrorist fighters in the area of the Wakhan corridor⁹⁷. Despite the aforementioned Chinese involvement, however, the Kremlin still holds supremacy in relation to military diplomacy in the region.

Nonetheless, without denying Moscow's important role of security provider, Dushanbe is gradually discovering territory for increased political and military cooperation with China⁹⁸. To some extent, Chinese economic influence is progressively becoming more important than Russian military influence⁹⁹; indeed, various attempts of Russian companies to invest into key Tajikistan have not been successful, as opposed to Chinese efforts. Whereas Russia has not been able to translate its military predominance to the economic realm, China is slowly and moderately sliding into the security arena in Tajikistan from its strong economic position. Russia however, despite the important infrastructural and financial Chinese projects under the BRI framework, still controls a major share of the Tajik economy through the remittances that migrant Tajik workers in Russia send back to their home country. These remittances indeed, as mentioned before in the paper, are responsible alone for around one third of Tajikistan's GDP.

In a 2014 letter, which was published on Tajikistan's *Khovar National News Agency*¹⁰⁰, Xi Jinping has advocated for greater combined efforts and partnership between the two countries on all levels of engagement, under the BRI framework. The letter was followed by Xi's first ever State visit to Tajikistan¹⁰¹. In 2015 the two states formally connected the BRI and Tajikistan's development plan, thus aligning their development goals.

Chinese investments and engagement in the country have grown significantly ever since. Chinese banks have funded important energy and transport-related infrastructural projects, which have later been

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Zanini, Andrea (2022, April 26). *China's New Military Posture in Central Asia*. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.66.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Tajikistan's main state-run media outlet.

¹⁰¹ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112), p.511

constructed by Chinese companies, such as thermal power plants in Dushanbe and pipelines, included in the broader central Asian pipeline system, and highways and railways to and from the capital Dushanbe¹⁰².

The increased alignment between Rahmon's and Xi's administrations has been translated into the political and normative area too. For instance, the BRI has helped China in the expansion of political integration with Tajikistan, through the strengthening of bilateral relations, the promotion of policy alignment and the recurrence of legislative exchanges¹⁰³. Proof of increased levels of political trust and cooperation between the two administrations is the bilateral resolution of their border disputes in 2021, which marked a milestone in the history of Chinese-Tajik relations.

Russia, however, has historically had the specific role of providing regime stability and national security since the Tajik civil war, through the distribution of normative and political coordination, mainly through military means¹⁰⁴. It is therefore noticeable that the Chinese economic preponderance is allowing the Chinese administration to ease into fields that have historically been linked to Russian influence.

What requires to be evaluated, therefore, is whether this economic dominion can be a catalytic tool for Chinese dominance in the other fields of action as well, together with whether this Chinese impetus is enough to surpass an historical regional competitor such as Russia in its fields of competence. A valid initial indicator to answer these questions is provided by the third structural realm indicated by the ES approach: the realm of cultural influence. As for cultural influence, the Xi administration has been pushing cultural engagement in the region, promoting the Chinese and Tajik's shared Silk Road past experience, through joint projects by its Embassy in Dushanbe and the Tajik's Ministry of Culture¹⁰⁵.

Despite these initiatives, however, the broader socio-political discussions and the public opinion in Tajikistan are dominated by concerns that China may transform Tajikistan into a client state¹⁰⁶. In fact, Russian cultural influence in the country operates to a much higher extent than its Chinese counterpart. Russia owes its positive image in Tajikistan especially to its numerous Tajik migrant workers, and to the correlated substantial presence of Russian media outlets in the country, which can promote the Kremlin's main foreign interests.

Another important role in the promotion of Russia's soft power in Tajikistan is played by the numerous Russian educational institutions that operate in the country, for example branches of the prestigious Moscow State University that operate in Dushanbe.

After having analysed and explained the size of Russian and Chinese influence in the security, normative and cultural realms described by the ES, it is possible to draw a preliminary picture of the influence patterns of Tajikistan. Whereas the economic incentives generated by the BRI have allowed China to insert itself

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p.512.

¹⁰⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.61.

¹⁰⁵ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.512.

¹⁰⁶ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.64.

into, reasonably, every other relevant sector of the influence mosaic in Tajikistan, overall Russian supremacy in the country must be highlighted, because of the Kremlin's valuable and sizeable primacy over cultural and security-related issues.

Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz republic's recent history has been characterised by internal instability and frequent political turmoil. Valid bases for these frequent unrests lie in the highly fragmented social nexus of the republic, and to its weak governmental institutions. In this sense, Russia has been crucial, through the CSTO, in providing national security and in guaranteeing the stability and survival of the regime¹⁰⁷.

Apart from the salient role of the CSTO, Russian military influence in the republic is made evident by the presence of an operative Russian military base in Kant, just a few kilometres outside of the capital Bishkek, home to a branch of the Russian Air Force. Also, arms transfers from Russia to Kyrgyzstan are on a constant rise, both in absolute and in proportional terms, making up for more than half of Kyrgyzstan's weapons imports¹⁰⁸.

As for China, on the military level, relations within the BRI framework between China and Kyrgyzstan have included, in the most recent years, "coordination of military, border security and police forces"¹⁰⁹ to act against the perpetual three evils that the Xi administration fears, in light of regime preservation and the security of the initiative. However, despite the increased Chinese involvement, Russian primacy in the domain of military influence is evident in Kyrgyzstan.

On economic terms, Kyrgyzstan's weak economy is highly dependent on the export of its labour force to Russia¹¹⁰, equally to Tajikistan. Indeed, the remittances that these migrant workers send back home amount for a consistent slice of the country's GDP, close to one third of the total. Russian economic influence over the country's economy is thus clear. This influence is even more evident in the energy sector: Moscow's Gazprom has taken over KyrgyzGas in 2013¹¹¹, and ever since it has been involved in geological explorations in the country, and in the upgrade of Kyrgyzstan's gas infrastructures¹¹². Such investments by Gazprom have been deemed unprofitable since the beginning, and have been understood as a form of economic aid an incentive for Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EAEU.

On the other hand, a growing role of Chinese investments in the Kyrgyz economy is attributable to the BRI¹¹³: both the Xi and the Atambayev administrations have identified the BRI as a coordination

¹⁰⁷ Ivi, p.59.

¹⁰⁸ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.389.

¹⁰⁹ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.59.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p.60.

¹¹¹ Soldatkin, Vladimir, & Dzyubenko, Olga (2013, July 29). *Gazprom takes over Kyrgyz gas network, vows stable supply*. Reuters.

¹¹² Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.60.

¹¹³ Xinhua: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (2021, January 10). *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*.

mechanism, calling to establish a Silk Road Economic Zone based on bilateral trade, investment and joint construction of infrastructures¹¹⁴. The Chinese leadership has utilised the BRI framework to construct, among the others, a Sino-Kyrgyz-Uzbek railway which has been stressed by the Xi administration as a BRI priority¹¹⁵; several transport projects such as highways, as well as a cross-border economic zone, have also been pushed for by the Chinese. In the energy sector, Chinese firms have built an important oil refinery in Bishkek, and they have linked Kyrgyzstan with the broader Central Asian pipeline system¹¹⁶.

Moreover, Beijing and Bishkek have used the BRI to establish normative policy linkages. Both administrations identified the initiative as a tool for political integration between the two states' respective leadership and legislatures, with the goals of deepening strategic relations, expanding legislative exchange, political alignment and strategic integration¹¹⁷. Former Chinese Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Qi Dayu, has noted that political cooperation and connectivity are a primary goal of the BRI towards Kyrgyzstan. BRI engagement has resulted in policy coordination on foreign and regional affairs at the bilateral level and within multilateral forums, such as the United Nations general assembly¹¹⁸.

Kyrgyz political scholars like Mirsuljan Namazaaly, however, have noted that the Kyrgyz government has had a tendency of almost copying the laws from Russia: as he said, "presidents and members of parliament always look at Russia and do what Russia can approve"¹¹⁹. In fact, as Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev has argued, "we are entwined with Russia by a common history and destiny. We cannot have a future without Russia"¹²⁰.

China has also employed the BRI framework to enrich closer cultural and education linkages with Kyrgyzstan¹²¹: the Chinese embassy in Bishkek has been regularly organizing cultural presentations which emphasised historical Silk Road ties between the Chinese and Kyrgyz people. However, for obvious historical reasons, also in the Kyrgyz Republic Russian media outlets are widespread and portray a good image of the country, contributing to the expansion and propagation of its soft power. Also, Russian remains the common language between the Kyrgyz elites. Moreover, anti-Chinese sentiments and propaganda are widespread in the country¹²²; as for Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz public opinion as well is concerned about China transforming the country into a client state, thus amounting for a patent and indisputable Russian cultural hegemony in the country.

¹¹⁴ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.509.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ott, Stephanie (2014, September 18). *Russia tightens control over Kyrgyzstan*. The Guardian.

¹²⁰ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.380.

¹²¹ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.510.

¹²² Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.64.

To conclude, it is possible to produce a good impression of the influence tissue for the Kyrgyz republic as well; compared to Tajikistan, the influence picture in Kyrgyzstan is far more direct and accentuated towards Russia. Russia is indeed leading the race for influence with China in arguably all the realms involved: whereas Russian primacy is striking in the military and cultural domains, it is less evident but still greater than China's influence in the economic and normative domains. Therefore, according to the ES approach, it is fair to proclaim Russia as the most prominent hegemonic power in relation to Kyrgyzstan, even if there is some room for Chinese leadership. Nevertheless, as will be clearer after the analysis of the three remaining republics, it is as well fair to consider Kyrgyzstan as the republic on which Russia holds the tightest grip.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has the highest population among the five republics of Central Asia, and thus it has a relatively strong army¹²³. These factors, together with its strategic central position within Central Asia, are key reasons for Uzbekistan's regional importance. Notably, the aforementioned relative military strength of the country has made it possible for the Uzbek leadership not to fall under Russian hands in the field of security. In fact, Uzbekistan has repeatedly unveiled a cautious approach towards Russia and towards the integration projects proposed by the Kremlin¹²⁴. Unambiguous examples of this tendency from the Uzbek administration have been the sustained suspicion and distrust towards EAEU membership and, perhaps most importantly, the withdrawal from the CSTO in 2012.

A crucial aspect to contemplate in the determination of military influence in Uzbekistan, after having highlighted Uzbekistan's reluctance to see Russia as a security provider, is that China has concretely overtaken Russia in arms exports to Uzbekistan. Regarding military education instead, Chinese efforts have drastically increased¹²⁵. While Central Asian countries "continue to cultivate the heritage of military education at Russian academies"¹²⁶, China has intensified its institutional and educational links with Uzbekistan. For example, China has hosted officers from Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry to participate in courses on counterterrorism and drug trafficking¹²⁷, and various other ministerial delegations from Uzbekistan have visited Chinese security institutes and academies. In addition to that, various Uzbek military officials have been educated at Chinese universities, and the Chinese People's Armed Police has trained many Uzbek police officers¹²⁸.

Despite the establishment of military influence, a good reason for this intense Chinese military involvement towards Uzbekistan is because the country is, by far, the one which presents the higher risks of fundamentalism among the five republics. To draw some prefatory conclusions about

¹²³ Ivi, p.59.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Zanini, Andrea (2022, April 26). *China's New Military Posture in Central Asia*. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

influence in the military and security domain, it is possible to notice some signs of weakness from the Russian side. In fact, despite the level of military independence that Uzbekistan retains in comparison to its Central Asian counterparts, it is fair to proclaim a Chinese influence superiority in this domain. On the economic level, Uzbekistan presents high levels of engagement with both regional powers. Considering its relationship with Russia, it must be noted that Uzbekistan sends the higher absolute number of migrant workers to Russia¹²⁹, which in turn send remittances back home. Nevertheless, the relative extent of these remittances on Uzbekistan's GDP is inferior compared to that of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, because of the bigger dimensions of the Uzbek economy and population.

Regarding instead Uzbekistan's relationship with China, the XI administration has often labelled Uzbekistan as a crucial BRI partner, "essential for the success of the initiative"¹³⁰. Chinese companies have participated in crucial infrastructural developments in the transport and energetic sectors, for example the construction of the Kamchiq railway tunnel¹³¹ and the linkage of Uzbek pipelines with the broader Sino-Central Asian pipeline system. Also, Chinese firms have driven BRI related investments in the country, contributing to Uzbekistan's development. Indeed, China has overtaken Russia as the major source of foreign investment in Uzbekistan, underlining Chinese primacy also in the economic domain¹³².

On the political and normative level, both under the rule of Karimov and, after his death in 2016, of Mirziyoyev, the republic has maintained an enduring inclination for bilateral relations over multilateral forums, as to try to maximise the pursual of its national interests. After proclaiming commitment to the BRI, however, the Chinese administration has vowed to help Uzbekistan aligning with China's governance experience¹³³, for instance through the deepening of parliamentary relationships and the coordination of their respective foreign policy interests, especially in multilateral organisations such as the SCO and the United Nations¹³⁴.

On the cultural level, the historical and institutional links with Russia pertain. However, especially after Mirziyoyev's settlement, Uzbekistan has been showing a tendency of cultural detachment from Russia. Such a tendency has been highlighted by the process of Latinization of the Uzbek alphabet decided by the government¹³⁵. Despite these recent trends, however, Russian primacy over cultural influence remains undisputed. However, the Chinese administration has started to carry out "people

¹²⁹ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.60.

¹³⁰ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.514.

¹³¹ This staggering infrastructure is 19 kilometers long, making it the longest tunnel in the entirety of the post-Soviet space.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Xinhua: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (2021, January 10). *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*.

¹³⁵ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.395.

diplomacy”¹³⁶ in Uzbekistan, through the establishment of festivals and workshops by the Chinese embassy in Tashkent, which focused on the two countries’ shared Silk Road past¹³⁷. Also, China is undertaking cultural exchanges through its universities and its non-governmental channels, and it has been providing BRI funds to facilitate the teaching of Chinese in Uzbekistan’s secondary schools and universities. However, despite these increased efforts by the Chinese leadership, the domain of cultural influence remains unquestionable as previously mentioned.

After having considered all the relevant domains, it is possible to draw a final influence balance for Uzbekistan, which is able to deliver some interesting findings: while Russia retains its cultural influence over the country, although with some recent elements of resistance, for the first time it is not able to maintain its primacy over the military realm, also because of the relative military strength of Uzbekistan.

In fact, both on the military and the political level, the Uzbek withdrawal from the CSTO clearly demonstrates the possibility for the Central Asian republics to resist hegemony¹³⁸. Also, the fact that Russia could not prevent Uzbekistan from leaving the organisation shows beyond doubt that, in order to form a sphere of influence in the current global scenario, regional powers must respect the constitutional principles of the current world order¹³⁹.

Finally, whereas the extent of economic engagement is similar in relation to both powers, China seems to have more political and normative power over Uzbekistan in comparison to Russia, as shown by Uzbekistan’s suspicion and awareness towards Russian-led organizations, and by the increased level of political cooperation with China after commitment to the BRI. Therefore, after having considered all the relevant realms implied by the approach of the ES, it is apparent that China is the main hegemonic power in relation to Uzbekistan, although Russian influence must not be underestimated. What is important to note, however, is the high relevance of Uzbekistan in comparison to the other republics, except for Kazakhstan, making it a crucial “asset” in order to determine the power equilibrium in the area.

Turkmenistan

Prior to the attempt to define the magnitude and the separation of the foreign sources of influence in the Turkmen context, it is compelling to bear in mind that Turkmenistan is by far the most isolated country among the five post-Soviet republics, as well as arguably one of the most cryptic and secluded on a global scale.

¹³⁶ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.515.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.387.

¹³⁹ Ivi, p.385.

The political direction of the country is characterised by its policy of “positive neutrality”¹⁴⁰, that is, a policy of total non-interference and non-alignment, to which the leadership of the republic has adhered since it gained independence. Also, the country’s direction is generally known also for its strict control over personal freedoms and the flow of information from the outside.

Nonetheless, Turkmenistan has been revising, to some extent, its isolationist policy by strengthening its economic relations and bilateral exchanges with regional partners, most notably Turkey and China¹⁴¹. It is interesting to note that, despite the Soviet past of the Turkmen state, the Russian Federation is currently only the third power in the influence hierarchy in Turkmenistan behind Turkey and China, as it does not hold primacy nor regarding political matters, nor about security related issues. About the economic relationship between China and Turkmenistan, it mainly revolves around the acquisition of gas by China, and thus consequently the energy infrastructure that is needed in order to accommodate the People’s Republic’s increasing demand for hydrocarbons.

Interestingly, Turkmenistan has not officially adhered to any international organization at the regional level, and it has not committed to the BRI; however, Turkmenistan still benefits from its strategic partnership with China. Turkmen engagement in Chinese led initiatives include a five-year plan for economic development coordination and integration¹⁴², which was signed by both Presidents Xi Jinping and Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and which has been based on the linkage of the two states’ energy and transport sectors priorities¹⁴³. To this day, China has been investing heavily in Turkmenistan’s fuel and energy complex and it controls more than one quarter of the gas produced in the republic, directly challenging Gazprom, which had previously been the principal buyer of Turkmenistan’s gas¹⁴⁴.

Following these substantial investments in the energetic sector, various Chinese companies have been involved in the financing and in the construction of non-energy related infrastructural developments¹⁴⁵: for instance, the Xi administration has as well urged for joint rail development with Turkmenistan, under the framework of its BRI interests¹⁴⁶. For example, the linkage of the Chinese-Kazakh rail line with the Kazakh–Turkmen–Iran rail line has turned out to be a crucial BRI infrastructure, as it enables China to reach the Gulf markets by land¹⁴⁷. The energetic and logistic importance of Turkmenistan for the Beijing leadership brings forward a valid rationale for its increased military engagement in Turkmenistan.

¹⁴⁰ Schulz, Dante (2022, March 9). *China-Turkmenistan Bilateral Relations*. Caspian Policy Center.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.512.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.62.

¹⁴⁵ Xinhua: The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. (2021, January 10). *China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era*.

¹⁴⁶ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.513.

¹⁴⁷ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *One Belt, One Road and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities*. In *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena*. Springer Singapore. p.217.

In order to protect its BRI interests in the republic, China has been steadily increasing its exports of weapons, often in exchange for further concessions of hydrocarbons. The Chinese military has also increased the number of its joint exercises with the Turkmen forces and has been imparting them its military education¹⁴⁸. Despite its long-lasting neutrality and isolation being sufficient to ensure internal stability, also because of the impossibility for the development of a true opposition within the country¹⁴⁹, the total absence of external agreements may, with time, lead to unexpected and undesired consequences¹⁵⁰, notably considering the recurring dangers coming from the long border of the country with Afghanistan.

In the past years therefore, China has overtaken Russia to become the second largest supplier of weapons to Turkmenistan behind Turkey. Such a feature, together with Turkmenistan's absence from the CSTO, adds up to the primacy of China over Russia in the domain of military influence, albeit such influence not being abundant on absolute terms. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that the international situation of the Turkmen republic is fairly unconventional, and thus should not be taken as an upfront demonstration of the separation of powers between Russia and China in Central Asia. In spite of that, however, Chinese primacy in the field should not be underestimated.

On a normative and political level instead, the political engagement between China and Turkmenistan has arguably proceeded even more rapidly in comparison to the two states' economic integration¹⁵¹, resulting in a deepening of party and parliamentary exchanges, policy coordination in crucial sectors relevant to the BRI and in the increase of political trust between the two leaderships¹⁵². As for Russia, relations between the two countries have been, since Turkmenistan's independence, "erratic, oscillating between enthusiastic cooperation and almost open hostility"¹⁵³, despite some interparliamentary arrangements for cooperation and policy coordination being recently signed¹⁵⁴.

It is possible to confirm that the total isolationism that Turkmenistan has undertaken for the past 30 years has largely prevented the formation of foreign influence on the political level, although some signals of alignment with China, driven by the massive investments brought by the Beijing administration, are evident. For this reason, in the same way as for the military domain, also in the political and normative fields it is possible to state that Chinese influence is higher compared to that of Russia, although not being very high on absolute terms.

The only domain in which Russia is able to pertain some degree of superiority in comparison to China is the cultural one, despite the presence of not-so-veiled issues pertaining the status of the Russian minorities in Turkmenistan, with respect to the issue of their dual-nationality¹⁵⁵. Nevertheless, as in Kyrgyzstan and

¹⁴⁸ Zanini, Andrea (2022, April 26). *China's New Military Posture in Central Asia*. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies.

¹⁴⁹ Izimov, Ruslan (n.d.). *China and Turkmenistan - A regional dimension*. Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112), p.513.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Costa Buranelli, Filippo & Kuhrt, Natasha (2018). *Russia and the CIS in 2017*. *Asian Survey*, 58(1), p.62.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Tajikistan, the Russian television is the dominant outlet also in Turkmenistan, despite its media market being the least trusted and liberalised in the region¹⁵⁶. Chinese cultural involvement in Turkmenistan, for the moment, has been limited to the introduction of Chinese language courses in schools in various areas of the country.

Taking into account the balance of influence in all the pertaining realms, the snapshot of foreign influence in Turkmenistan is virtually undisputed. In fact, the economic dependence from Chinese energetic investment translates into Chinese primacy over political and military influence, whereas the Turkmen republic seems to be the one in which the extent of Russian influence reaches its absolute lowest point in the region.

Nevertheless, considering the cryptic and unconventional essence of Turkmenistan, the three domains presented by the ES do not seem to be the right fit for an influence assessment, as the precious energetic and logistical value of the country appears to be the main point of interest in this specific context. For this reason, it is conceivable to proclaim China as the principal hegemonic power with reference to Turkmenistan, because of the incredible economic levers that it holds.

Kazakhstan

As previously anticipated, Kazakhstan is perhaps the most relevant republic vis-à-vis the balance of power and influence between Russia and China in the region, as it is arguably the most attractive “asset” to control in the entirety of the post-Soviet space. Prior to the start of the influence analysis relating to the Kazakh Republic, however, some important considerations must be made. Up front, it is necessary to note that the events of 2022, namely the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the previous, and perhaps underemphasized, January mass unrest and riots in most Kazakh cities, with the following CSTO peacekeeping intervention, have been changing and reshaping the foreign influence picture in Kazakhstan, as well as the internal power dynamics.

In addition to that, it is equally important to note that, given the unpredictability and the perpetually changing nature of the developments in Ukraine at the time of writing, also the relationships and the interplay of influence patterns between Russia, China and Kazakhstan are constantly evolving. While this is true, to various extents, for each of the five republics, it is in Kazakhstan that this phenomenon is the most evident, both because of its arguably major importance in comparison to the other republics, but most importantly because of the acute and dreadful internal events that the Republic has experienced just weeks before the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

For these reasons, and provided that the evolution of the influence paradigms due to the most recent international developments will be the main talking point of the last chapter of this thesis, this section will focus on the influence climate as prior to the important developments of 2022. It is also important to note that, practically regarding all the relevant domains, these political developments have only accelerated

¹⁵⁶ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.394.

influence processes that were already in place, given that the main influence structure has roughly remained unchanged.

The domain of military hegemony is arguably the domain which has been affected the most by the 2022 unrest, because of the deployment of CSTO troops in the country for the first time since the foundation of the organization. In any case, Kazakhstan's imports of arms from Russia had been on the rise for over a decade¹⁵⁷ even prior to the unrest. In addition, it is important to consider that Kazakhstan has been the only republic of the post-Soviet space to adhere to every single international organization and initiative proposed by either of the two powers, including the CSTO. Indeed, CSTO membership, at least on the grounds of military influence, underlines the magnitude of the Russian press over the security domain.

In fact, Russia also retains important military and logistical infrastructures in Kazakhstan, most notably the Baikonur cosmodrome and the Sary-Shagan testing range. It is thus evident that the traditional paradigm, in which Russia is portrayed as the security provider in the region, was already in place and was only reinforced by the events of 2022.

Nevertheless, military engagement in Kazakhstan has been happening also from the Chinese side. The Xi administration has indeed utilised the BRI framework to increase military cooperation between China and Kazakhstan¹⁵⁸, especially on the grounds of protection of infrastructures, border control and counterterrorism¹⁵⁹, everlasting points of interest in China's foreign policy. Despite the increased interest in the Kazakh security scenario, however, Russian primacy over matters of security and military force is undeniable. However, an episode of 2011 is worth mentioning, which is able to underline the negotiated nature of Russian hegemony, but most importantly Kazakhstan's long-lasting tendency of multi-vector foreign policy and bandwagoning: in 2011 indeed, Kazakhstan has tried to resist Russian military dominance by proposing the creation of an SCO military force as well¹⁶⁰. The proposal was quickly discarded by Russian officials in order to retain hegemony at least in the military domain¹⁶¹ which, as ought to be at this point, does not seem to be a priority for the Chinese leadership.

Before attempting to understand the extent of Chinese and Russian normative influence over Kazakhstan, the multi-vector and bandwagoning essence of Kazakhstan international relations must be taken into consideration: Kazakh foreign policy has, since its independence, consisted in a "sustained rebalancing between its historical ties with Russia and the huge opportunities presented by China"¹⁶². Late President Nursultan Nazarbayev has been applying this paradigm before, and his successor Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has reaffirmed Kazakhstan's commitment to a pragmatic foreign policy.

¹⁵⁷ Ivi, p.389.

¹⁵⁸ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), p.506.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. Geopolitics, 23(2), p.390.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Christoffersen, Gaye (2022, November 30). *Central Asia over a decade: The Shifting Balance in Central Asia between Russia and China*. The Asan Forum, p.4.

An important element to take into consideration is that Kazakhstan has been voicing concerns about its territorial integrity and possible threats to its sovereignty, after the events of 2014 in Crimea and, to a perhaps major extent, the most recent events in Eastern Ukraine, which as previously mentioned will be more deeply analysed later in the thesis. The Kazakh leadership has precisely been fearing the possibility of Russian territorial claims in the northern part of the country ever since the Russian annexation of Crimea, chiefly because of the presence of a substantial Russian minority in the northern area. In reference to such fears, late President Nazarbayev has made an important declaration, following some controversial claims by Putin in reference to Kazakhstan: “Kazakhstan will not be part of organizations that pose a threat to our independence”¹⁶³. The declaration was mainly directed towards the Russian-led EAEU.

Normative resistance towards Russian hegemony has indeed been highlighted by Kazakhstan’s sustained non-support in international organizations of neither the annexation of Crimea in 2014¹⁶⁴ nor the “Special Military Operation” in 2022. As for China, the Beijing leadership has been exploiting the infrastructural developments and opportunities of the BRI to expand the high economic cooperation between the two countries also on a political and normative level¹⁶⁵; in fact, already under the rule of Nazarbayev, the two leaderships had agreed to increase political coordination and strategic alignment, especially within international organizations. Also, official linkages between the Chinese Congress and the houses of the Kazakh Parliament have been established and exploited for these purposes¹⁶⁶.

As previously mentioned, it is interesting and particular that Kazakhstan is a participant in all Russian-led integration projects, while at the same time retaining a high degree of political and strategic cooperation with China, aided by the enormous developmental opportunities provided by Beijing. This further emphasizes Kazakhstan’s multi-vector tendency in relation to the hegemonic attempts by the regional powers.

In fact, it is not as easy and straightforward to determine the equilibrium of the normative levers of the two powers as it is for the other domains, because of the prevalence of multi-vector foreign policy and strategies of bandwagoning by Kazakhstan. In short, it can be said that Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has traditionally been aimed at swinging between the two powers, by trying to gain the most from every situation of contact with them but without falling into their political and normative dominance, thus retaining a high degree of independence.

This paradigm however does not find confirmation in neither the economic nor the cultural domains. China and Kazakhstan have indeed agreed, in 2015, to align Kazakhstan’s “Path of Light” development strategy interests (*Nurly Zhol*) with those of the BRI, in order to ensure profitable bilateral ties among the two countries¹⁶⁷. The *Nurly Zhol* strategy is aimed at turning Kazakhstan into a crucial transport hub between

¹⁶³ Eckel, Mike (2014, September 7). *Ukraine War, Putin’s Comments Stir Worry in Kazakhstan*. VOA News.

¹⁶⁴ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.393.

¹⁶⁵ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China’s Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112), p.507.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

China and Europe, through the modernisation of its infrastructural network. Kazakhstan is a sort of geo-economic gateway between the West and China and has indeed often been defined as the “buckle”¹⁶⁸ of the BRI due to its strategic geographical location¹⁶⁹.

Whereas the Kazakh elites have been promoting cooperation with China, and have benefitted from it, both on political and economic grounds of action, this has not applied to the entirety of the Kazakh society, especially on a cultural level. In fact, the Kazakh civil society has been characterised for decades by enduring feelings of Sinophobia¹⁷⁰. For instance, several protest and riots against Chinese companies and workers have been taking place at regular intervals within the territory of Kazakhstan, most notably the 2011 Zhanaozen riots which resulted in 15 casualties.

Also, the advent of the BRI has sparked new waves of Sinophobic protests, in relation to the perceived possibility of Chinese expansion¹⁷¹. It is mainly for these widespread Sinophobic feelings among the Kazakh population that it becomes hard to perceive China as a cultural hegemon in the country, a domain over which the monopoly is still retained by the Kremlin. However, the Kazakh leadership has recently decided to shift its national alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin, a move that has created negative political consequences between Russia and Kazakhstan¹⁷², mainly because of the significant number of ethnic Russians within the Kazakh population. Despite Kazakhstan justifying the move in light of facilitating foreign business communication and opportunities, the decision has undeniably undermined Russian soft power and its cultural influence¹⁷³. Despite these recent attempts to detach Kazakhstan from its Russian cultural ties, however, it is evident that the degree of sympathy from the public towards Russia is significantly higher than towards China, and thus also the hegemony over the domain of cultural influence.

To conclude, it must be remembered once again that the influence portrait in Kazakhstan has suffered major consequences after the domestic and foreign events of 2022, a topic which will be more closely analysed in the last stages of this work. In any case, the aforementioned influence portrait seems to be already difficult to assess even prior to these events: whereas Russian military primacy in the country is strong and undeniable, despite recent attempts by Beijing to engage also on the military level, also the enormous economic impact and opportunities of the BRI need to be taken into consideration.

However, utilising the ES approach that has been employed for the analysis of every single republic of Central Asia, the domain of trade and economic weight must be left aside. According to the ES approach therefore it still is Russia that retains the higher degree of hegemony over Kazakhstan, because of its undeniable military and cultural primacy, whereas neither of the two powers seems able to really influence and dictate the normative domain of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy.

¹⁶⁸ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.300.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Christoffersen, Gaye (2022, November 30). *Central Asia over a decade: The Shifting Balance in Central Asia between Russia and China*. The Asan Forum, p.8.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Costa Buranelli, Filippo & Kuhrt, Natasha (2018). *Russia and the CIS in 2017*. Asian Survey, 58(1), p.61.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

On the other hand, on practical terms, the exponential relevance of BRI investments and infrastructural projects cannot be left aside, therefore drawing a conclusion over the influence picture in Kazakhstan becomes a difficult task.

It is possible to conclude that, despite the increased magnitude and relevance of the economic relationship with China, Russia is still able to retain its historical role of leading hegemonic power in relation to Kazakhstan; however, it is important to bear in mind that the Kazakh tendency of practicing multi-vector foreign policy is aimed at maximising its benefits and at minimising the degree of dependence that Kazakhstan has towards a given regional power.

Nonetheless, the ability by China to imperiously assert itself within a country that had traditionally been considered as a Russian stronghold is logical evidence of the driving research question of this thesis, that is, explaining how investments and economic opportunities are allowing the Chinese leadership to sneak into territories that had previously been under strict control of other major powers, in this case-study Russia. For these reasons, despite the still perceivable primacy of Russian influence over Kazakhstan, the inevitable further economic developments that will be provided by China in the future will shift the needle even more towards Beijing's favour, notwithstanding the important political consequences of the events of early 2022.

2.3) Uncovering the dominant influence paradigm in the region

In the wake of the previous evaluation of the situation for each post-Soviet republic, it is convenient to carry out a comprehensive judgement about the overall state of affairs for the region of Central Asia as a whole. Before attempting to do so, however, an important consideration must be made, which will already produce an important acknowledgement in light of the purpose of this project; the aforementioned consideration to be made is that the mere ability of China to firmly infiltrate a scenario like the one of Central Asia in such a short time span is striking evidence of the inevitable, general future shift towards Beijing. It is undeniable that certain socio-cultural paradigms, enforced by periods of historical dominance, are difficult to break apart and to separate; for this reason, it would be undeniable that a century and a half of Russian dominance - imperial after the conquests of the Khanates, and Soviet for almost a century until the Union's dissolution – would leave certain institutional, cultural and social paradigms equally difficult to eradicate, making it very demanding and complicated for another foreign power to easily infiltrate the region. It is thus for these reasons that the ease with which China has been able to burst into Central Asia is a remarkable sign of an inevitable future tendency, and a clear verification of another important aspect, that is, the primacy of economic influence.

Indeed, a further decisive argument to be formulated is that China appears to be able, in the Central Asian environment, to extend its influence over military and political matters from the paramount economic possibilities that it is able to provide thanks to its extensive international initiatives. Russia

instead has not managed, at least not in all five Republics, to retain its economic and political advantage through its military and historical levers. It is therefore possible to state that, for the time being, the economic weight of China is a stronger and faster influence enzyme in comparison to the military, historical and cultural weight of Russia¹⁷⁴.

This paradigm, as made evident by the previous, state-centred analysis, is certainly true in relation to the military and political realms of influence; however, at least on the cultural level, the importance of which should not be underestimated in terms of overall influence, Russia is still able to retain its absolute dominion despite the extent of Chinese investments. As a matter of fact, it appears vastly unlikely that China could, in the close future, even remotely challenge the Russian cultural predominance in the area. The main reasons for that lie in the fact, first and foremost, the cultural realm is by far the one in which traditions and historical roots are most difficult to eradicate, and in which it is most difficult to penetrate for a new challenger.

In addition to that, recurring episodes and widespread elements of Sinophobia throughout the entirety of the Central Asian territory also serve to reinforce the aforementioned pattern of cultural influence. Despite the evident and perceived Russian dominance in this influence domain, however, some elements of resistance¹⁷⁵ from the leaderships of the five republics are visible. Resistance may happen either through the hyper-promotion of their respective national identities or by attempts of detachment from Russia, for instance the de-russification of their respective state apparatus. This process of de-russification may happen either through noticeable and pronounced attempts, such as official amendments to the national alphabets, from Cyrillic to Latin, and processes of removal of Russian names for villages and geographic connotations in favour of national names¹⁷⁶, or through systemic and disguised attempts, such as gradual limitations of Russian media outlets. Nevertheless, such attempts are not widespread and common among all the republics, thus they do not really put in question Russian cultural influence in the region.

In relation to the other realms of foreign influence that are provided by the ES, however, the influence patterns are far more intricate and difficult to excavate. For instance, taking into account the domain of economic influence and bilateral trade relations, the duality and the complexity of the scenario are evident. While it is true that China could be elected as the principal economic actor in the region, thanks to its massive BRI related infrastructural developments and the consequent investment opportunities which involve all Central Asian republics, it is also true that the historical chains that link Russia and Central Asia are not easy to break for the five republics, the only exception being the “crazy variable” of Turkmenistan.

¹⁷⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.57.

¹⁷⁵ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.388.

¹⁷⁶ Ivi, p.395.

As a matter of fact, the economies of the other four republics are still tied up, although to different extent, to the Russian economy. Indeed, the economies of the mountainous republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, for instance, are incredibly dependent on the export of labour force to Russia, given that the remittances that these migrant workers send back home amount for almost one third of their national GDPs¹⁷⁷, as already mentioned before. Apart from these remittances, all republics with the exception of Turkmenistan enjoy similar levels of bilateral commercial engagement with Russia and China.

Nevertheless, despite the above-described elements of competition between the two powers within the regional context, an important indicator of cooperation between them is provided by the traditional division of tasks which thoroughly remains in place; Russia indeed is still widely and firmly considered as the legitimate security provider in the region, mainly through the CSTO, especially in light of the recent demonstration of power of the Russian-led organization¹⁷⁸.

Another important reason why the division of labour is still in place is given by the apparent unwillingness of the Chinese leadership to get involved into matters of security more than necessary, thus limiting its security interests to the fight to fundamentalist threats in relation to the domestic situation in Xinjiang and to the protection of its infrastructural projects in the region.

On political and normative grounds instead, the influence portrait is harder to analyse, because of the existence of overlapping interests, levels of engagement and organisations. In fact, with the recurring exception of the isolationist Turkmenistan which, for its own domestic sake, has only adhered to the BRI, the other four republics have participated, each to a different degree of involvement, to every other integrational initiative proposed by either of the two powers.

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan
Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)	x			x	
Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)	x		x	x	
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	x	x	x	x	
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)	x	x	x	x	
China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC) of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	x	x	x	x	x

Tab 2.1

As made clear by the table above, taken from the article “*The “New Great Game” in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?*”, published by Paolo Pizzolo and Andrea Carteny for the *Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have adhered to every single initiative that has been so far proposed, highlighting the Kazakh traditional

¹⁷⁷ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.66.

¹⁷⁸ Hedenskog, Jakob, & von Essen, Hugo (2022, January 14). *Russia’s CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences*. Utrikespolitiska Institutet.

tendency of multi-vector foreign policy and the Kyrgyz bandwagoning foreign policy. Uzbekistan instead shows a particular propensity of caution and suspicion towards Russian-led initiatives¹⁷⁹, with the exception of the Commonwealth of Independent States, whereas it has adhered to both the SCO and the BRI. Tajikistan, to conclude, has curiously adhered to the CSTO without, however, participating in the EAEU: the peculiarity of the Tajik situation underlines the evidence that was described at the beginning of this sub-section, that is, that the Chinese economic weight is more appealing than the historic and military weight of Russia. Indeed, whereas adhering to both the CSTO and the SCO on a military level, Tajikistan has decided to only participate in the BRI on economic grounds.

Therefore, to conclude, it seems that, on a normative and political level, China is leading the influence race, although with a narrow margin as the extent of Russian political influence is, nevertheless, very high. Drawing a final picture of the influence scenario, by compressing the different realms of influence into a single degree of it, the following results are clear.

State	Chinese Influence	Russian Influence
KAZ	HIGH	HIGH
KYR	HIGH	VERY HIGH
TJK	HIGH	VERY HIGH
UZB	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
TUR	VERY HIGH	LOW

Tab 2.2

However, as already mentioned in numerous occasions throughout this chapter, the important developments of early 2022 may challenge the status quo in the near future. The analysis of how these recent developments have affected and will, potentially, further affect the influence picture in the region, and thus the opportunities for cooperation and the possible causes of competition between Russia and China, will therefore be the principal focus of the final chapter of this thesis, in order to deliver a definitive answer to the research question.

¹⁷⁹ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.59.

CHAPTER 3

This concluding chapter will build upon the previously uncovered and described influence framework in relation to the Central Asian scenario. It will contextualise it within the current global context in order to give a definitive answer to the research question, that is, why and to what extent has the balance of power in the region been shifting towards China's favour. The first step towards this objective will be that of examining the impact that the significant events that have involved the key regional actors in the past year has had on the influence paradigms that were previously uncovered. Once this task is accomplished, the thesis will address a crucial inquiry: establishing whether the opportunities for cooperation between Russia and China outweigh the causes of friction and competition between them in relation to the region. In conclusion, after having addressed this precursory argument, the research question will be finally answered, delivering a conclusion to this thesis.

3.1) How did the Kazakh unrest of 2022 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine change the influence pattern

In the first weeks of 2022, two important events closely pertaining the main actors of the Central Asian picture have profoundly shaken the structure of the influence framework that had been uncovered and explored in the previous chapter. The first event was the mass protest and unrest that erupted in Kazakhstan at the beginning of January and that came to be known as "Bloody January"¹⁸⁰, which seemed to have altered the balance of power in a particular direction. The second event, which occurred just a few weeks later, was the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the resulting international developments appeared to have nullified the previous developments generated by the Kazakh unrest. The extent to which the invasion of Ukraine has affected the balance of influence in the region remains matter of ongoing debate among scholars and experts; therefore, the following chapter aims to provide an analytical and reasoned response to that question.

The popular unrest that broke out in Western Kazakhstan in the first days of the year has carried various important political consequences with it; among them, apart from the intensity of the clashes, the number of casualties and the need for internal reforms that has been made evident by the protests, the most significant political consequence has been the request for CSTO assistance by President Tokayev, in order to overcome the threat to his regime's stability. Such request is enshrined with political significance for several reasons, but mainly because it consisted in the first time in which

¹⁸⁰ According to official figures, the protests generated 238 casualties on both sides; the number, however, is likely to be higher. Barbarities included Kazakh police forces shooting on the masses and protesters beating police officers to death.

CSTO's Article 4 has been invoked¹⁸¹ and the first time in which CSTO troops have been concretely deployed¹⁸².

The Russian-led peacekeeping operation has managed, in the following days, to contain and stabilise the threat to security, thus saving the stability and ensuring the survival of Tokayev's regime. The success of the operation indeed has had some important political consequences, especially with regards to the struggle for influence in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia in general. In fact, the success of the operation has provided the CSTO, and Russia in turn, with a positive precedent and a strengthened image as a security provider among the member states of the CSTO and among the other countries of the area, which all face risks of internal instability whenever one of them does¹⁸³.

Prior to the operation in fact, the CSTO had widely been regarded as a sleeping organisation, which could not have any practical significance nor being useful to the development goals of its members¹⁸⁴, as it was only seen as a vehicle for Russian influence which had been inactive for the previous 30 years¹⁸⁵. The Kremlin has therefore exploited the Kazakh domestic situation for several reasons: first, the survival of Tokayev's regime was obviously a key point of interest for Putin and his administration, given the vital importance that Kazakhstan has for Russia because of its military bases in the country, for the volume of trade and for the success of the EAEU.

Indeed, "while if the regime is not Kremlin puppet and sometimes frustrates Russia, it is far-preferable to Moscow than any potential alternative, be it ultra-nationalist, Islamist or semi-democratic"¹⁸⁶. On top of that, it was in Kremlin's best interests to avoid the beginning of a potential chain reaction of riots and political unrests in Central Asia. Also, another main reason why Moscow has been so fast and efficient in sedating the Kazakh protests has been that of delivering a valid proof that it is the only legitimate security provider in the post-Soviet area, not only towards CSTO members, but also to China and to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, neither of which is member of the CSTO¹⁸⁷ and in which Russian military influence is not high enough for the Kremlin's leadership.

It is interesting to note that China has officially supported the intervention of the CSTO in Kazakhstan¹⁸⁸, despite the influence boost that such operation could have had in the security field, in which China is active through the SCO. Chinese support highlights thus the willingness of the Chinese

¹⁸¹ Hedenskog, Jakob, & von Essen, Hugo (2022, January 14). *Russia's CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences*. Utrikespolitiska Institutet.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2021). *Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections*. Central Asian Affairs, 8(1), p.10.

¹⁸⁴ Hedenskog, Jakob, & von Essen, Hugo (2022, January 14). *Russia's CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences*. Utrikespolitiska Institutet.

¹⁸⁵ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.299.

¹⁸⁶ Hedenskog, Jakob, & von Essen, Hugo (2022, January 14). *Russia's CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan: Motives, Risks and Consequences*. Utrikespolitiska Institutet.

¹⁸⁷ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.300.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

leadership to maintain the division of labour and to avoid unnecessary competition. The topic will be better addressed later on in the chapter.

The unrest and the way it was addressed and solved by the CSTO operation reshaped Kazakhstan's international image of a stable and prosperous country¹⁸⁹, as it highlighted the high degree of internal instability that characterizes the countries of the post-Soviet space. Most importantly, the events have significantly shaken the balance of power between China and Russia not only in relation to Kazakhstan but to the entirety of Central Asia in broader terms¹⁹⁰. First of all, the CSTO support has been crucial in keeping Tokayev in power and in ensuring the stability of his regime¹⁹¹; for this reason, the intervention has arguably had the effect to align Kazakhstan's political future to that of Russia¹⁹². Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the events have absolutely reinforced the image of Russia as a powerful military force, capable to ensure regional stability¹⁹³ and to protect the stability of the Central Asian regimes.

To conclude, it is possible to understand the impact that the Kazakh events have had on the overall influence picture in Central Asia: the success and rapidity of the CSTO intervention have certainly shifted the needle of military influence even more towards the Kremlin, especially in relation to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. As for the other 3 republics, already members of the CSTO, Russia's already consolidated position as powerful peacekeeper and as responsible for security has only been reinforced by these events. On political grounds, the event has arguably increased Russian political influence towards Kazakhstan, given the vital help that the Kremlin has provided to Tokayev in order to save the legitimacy of his rule, potentially predicting greater alignment with Russia and a substantial reduction of Kazakhstan's traditional multi-vector foreign policy.

These influence developments that have been outlined, however, did not get a chance to manifest themselves, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, perhaps an even greater event in terms of potential to shake the balance of power, has followed after just a few weeks. The invasion indeed has potentially weakened the overall level of Russian influence in relation to the republics of Central Asia, especially in relation to Kazakhstan¹⁹⁴.

This sudden and substantial variable has the potential to increase internal instability within the region, as Russia faces the risk of seeing its traditional hegemonic role vanish¹⁹⁵. Despite the evident absence of support to the actions of the Kremlin, however, the grip that Russia holds over the republics of the region is too tight and deep for the republics to ignore Russian interests and deliberations, and to detach themselves from its influence. The traditional hegemonic role reserved to Russia in Central

¹⁸⁹ Ivi, p.301.

¹⁹⁰ Ivi, p.300.

¹⁹¹ Ivi, p.299.

¹⁹² Ivi, p.302.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Hess, Maximilian (2023, February 17). *Russia Is Down, But Not Out, in Central Asia*. Foreign Policy Research Institute.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Asia had just been solidified by the suppression of the Kazakh unrest¹⁹⁶, thus the Kremlin could be confident about the extent of its influence towards the region¹⁹⁷.

One year later, however, the situation is totally different, as Russia faces a concrete risk of seeing its overall influence steadily decrease, and thus seeing its traditional hegemonic role definitely fade in favour of China. Beijing indeed is very concerned about the situation in Ukraine, especially in relation to neighbouring Central Asia, crucial for its BRI interests¹⁹⁸. As a matter of fact, the vanishing role of Russia as a consolidated hegemon in the region may spark a wave of regional instability in Central Asia, which could have the potential to create a negative environment for Chinese investments and business interests¹⁹⁹.

Taking Kazakhstan as a clear example of Russia's vanishing influence in Central Asia, it is firstly important to note that Kazakhstan, despite maintaining and increasing its level of bilateral engagement with Russia²⁰⁰, has been distancing itself from Moscow ever since the outbreak of the crisis, and it has been diversifying its foreign policy²⁰¹. The Tokayev administration has indeed reached out to an increased number of international partners, thus increasing the reach and magnitude of its traditional multi-vector foreign policy.

For instance, in the early stages of the crisis, Tokayev has taken distance from Russia by stating that Kazakhstan remained committed to international law, and thus would never recognise the two separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk²⁰², and in addition it has never supported Russian actions in the UN General Assembly²⁰³, especially in order not to fall under the Western-imposed sanctions. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, Kazakhstan has in reality increased its engagement with Russia, mainly because of the international sanctions against the Kremlin.

Russia holds various levers over Kazakhstan which prevent the Central Asian republic from publicly detach itself from the Kremlin's hold: first of all, Kazakhstan is heavily reliant on Russia in order to ensure its energetic exports²⁰⁴, as a substantial percentage of these exports pass through Russian pipelines. In addition to that, Kazakhstan also relies on Russian supplies to ensure the functioning of its domestic machine, mainly supplies of food and of refined oil products²⁰⁵. On top of that, Russia retains strong levers of influence through the presence of numerous ethnic-Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in the country.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Dumoulin, Marie (2023, April 13). *Steppe change: How Russia's war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan*. European Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

The invasion of Ukraine has nevertheless reduced the extent of Russian influence over the country, as the events have given a new dimension to Kazakhstan's traditional multi-vector policy²⁰⁶: the goal of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is not anymore that of attracting foreign investors and promoting the country, rather it presents a new focus of gradually enabling Kazakhstan to reduce its dependency from Russia²⁰⁷. This paradigm is noticeable, although to different extents, in all five republics of Central Asia; overall Russian influence is indeed decreasing in each republic, as made evident by the fact that none of the members of the CSTO has openly supported the Kremlin's actions, nor has joined Russian countersanctions.

After having described the importance of the Kazakh unrest, of the consequent CSTO intervention and of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is plausible to state that the extent of the overall Russian influence in Central Asia has decreased, mainly because of the legitimate fear of Central Asian regimes that they could fall under Western sanctions or, even worse, that Russia could in the future have similar territorial claims over their national territories.

Another important aspect to be highlighted is that the younger populations of the post-Soviet Republics will inevitably change their perception of Russia and of their national identity²⁰⁸. On the other hand, the CSTO handling of the Kazakh unrest has undoubtedly consolidated Russian military influence and its role of security guarantor in the region; economic exchanges between the five republics and Russia have also risen after the beginning of the invasion, but that is only a direct consequence of Western-imposed sanctions and, nonetheless, Chinese primacy over the matter remains undisputed.

To conclude, it is debatable that Russian influence in the political and cultural domains has decreased and will inevitably continue to decrease in the future; nonetheless, Russian military influence has increased, thus underlining the likely continuation and preservation of the division of labour between Russia and China in Central Asia. In fact, Beijing is likely to attempt to fill the gap that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has left behind in terms of influence, although some other important actors like Turkey and the EU²⁰⁹ may attempt to do so as well. In order to prevent these other foreign powers to interfere with their regional interests, it will be crucial for China and Russia to avoid unnecessary competition and to maintain their strategic partnership in the region. The scenarios for competition and cooperation between the two, indeed, will be talked about in the following section of the chapter.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

3.2) Russia and China: between cooperation and competition

The previous sections of this thesis have extensively reiterated the emergence of a notable interplay between the opportunities for cooperation and those for competition that emerges from the framework of Sino-Russian relations. Indeed, the structural duality of their relationship is evident²¹⁰, as instances of friction often arise from their very attempts of closer cooperation. The current magnitude of the strategic partnership between these two highly influential powers in the Central Asian context is primarily made evident by their sustained and effective division of labour in the region²¹¹, despite the presence of certain unclear boundaries in terms of political influence over the five post-Soviet republics. In reality, it is in line with the foreign policy interests of both China and Russia to uphold the traditionally established division of labour as strong and efficient as possible²¹², in order to provide compelling incentives to the republics of Central Asia to refrain from attempting to challenge the status quo.

Indeed, both Russia and China share the interest of preventing the Central Asian states from seeking alternative international partners, which could potentially turn into alternative hegemons, particularly in reference to the United States, although American influence in the area has gradually diminished following their withdrawal from Afghanistan²¹³. Turkey as well represents a potential concern for Moscow and Beijing, as it possesses strong cultural ties with the populations of Central Asia that could potentially be exploited in the future. The SCO serves as the institutional embodiment of the cooperation between the two powers²¹⁴, symbolising their shared aim of limiting the presence of external powers within their closed sphere of interest and influence. The organization solidifies the strategic partnership between Russia and China by safeguarding their regional interests, aimed at fostering a strategic environment in which they can assert their influence and deter other international actors from intruding.

It is also important to take into account that Russia can no longer retain its position as the sole, dominant hegemonic power in the region²¹⁵; this reality has been evident even prior to the 2022 events due to the substantial Chinese investments in the area, and due to the inclination of Central Asian governments readily engage with China, because of the opportunities that these investments bring. Consequently, Russia's ability to maintain its hegemonic role has significantly diminished, particularly in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, as previously explained in depth, these actions have

²¹⁰ Stronsky, Paul & Ng, Nicole (2018). *Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.13.

²¹¹ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

²¹² Sahakyan, Mher (2020, February 6). *Russia, China and Central Asia: Cooperation over Competition*. Asia Global Institute, The University of Hong Kong.

²¹³ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

²¹⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana., & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.58.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

not only damaged Russia's influence and global standing²¹⁶, but they have also exacerbated the extent of its regional influence over Central Asia.

An evident outcome of the declining Russian influence in Central Asia is the likelihood of China to fill the resulting influence gap in the region²¹⁷. Given Beijing's already substantial interests, power and involvement in the region, it is inevitable that its presence will further expand. However, it remains uncertain and matter of debate whether the Chinese overall engagement with the five republics will ultimately surpass that of Russia²¹⁸; nonetheless, the trajectory indicates a growing significance of China's role in the region.

The primary source of competition and friction lies in China's increased and extensive involvement in sectors that were previously considered under strict Russian control. While China's economic dominance within the framework of the BRI is widely acknowledged, its ability to disrupt the traditional economic ties that linked Central Asia with Russia represents a significant accomplishment. Currently, competition arises from China's perceived attempts to undertake a similar path in terms of political influence over the region, and it has started to make slow but yet considerable progresses even in the military domain, which has traditionally been, almost undisputedly, under Russian control²¹⁹. All these factors together contribute to the dynamics of competition between the two powers, as Chinese involvement considerably undermines Russian influence and soft power in Central Asia. An institutional example that illustrates the extent of the frictions between Russia and China, and potentially anticipates the future outcome of their overall competition in the region, is the tacit competition between the Chinese-led BRI and the Russian-led EAEU.

Despite operating in the same geographical area and in the same strategic sectors, the Chinese initiative has been more comprehensive and extensive since its inception. Notably, the ability of the CCP's leadership to impose the BRI over the EAEU in the region by officially linking the two initiatives under BRI terms²²⁰ highlights a noticeable trend that permeates other relevant domains as well. This specific example thus delivers empirical evidence that their strategic partnership in the region is, to this day, inevitably powered and driven by China²²¹.

²¹⁶ Dumoulin, Marie (2023, April 13). *Steppe change: How Russia's war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan*. European Council on Foreign Relations.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

²¹⁹ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana., & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.61.

²²⁰ Stronsky, Paul & Ng, Nicole (2018). *Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.4.

²²¹ Christoffersen, Gaye (2022, November 30). *Central Asia over a decade: The Shifting Balance in Central Asia between Russia and China*. The Asan Forum, p.16.

As explored in the previous chapters, its economic and financial power has furnished China with substantial power and influence even in other fields of action²²². While Chinese infrastructural developments and financial opportunities have propelled the extension of its influence network, Russia has been lacking the sufficient levers needed in order to increase its influence over Central Asia at a pace comparable to that of China²²³. This paradigm is increasingly more evident following the international developments that resulted from the invasion of Ukraine, as these ramifications of events have effectively closed off Western opportunities for Russia, making the Kremlin even more subject to its ties with China.

Another significant institutional manifestation of the competition between the two superpowers is observable in the overlap of interests and responsibilities between the SCO, in which both Russia and China actively participate and jointly exert influence over the other members, and the CSTO. The CSTO specifically embodies the Kremlin's determination to maintain its dominance in the field of military security in relation to the post-Soviet republics²²⁴.

As earlier discussed, the successful deployment of CSTO troops in Kazakhstan has notably strengthened the current standing of the organization²²⁵. It is thus plausible to perceive the CSTO as the representation of Russia's commitment to maintain its military superiority in the future, regardless of any potential engagement made by China in the field. Despite the overall impoverishment of relations between the Central Asian leaders and Vladimir Putin in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, the renewed strength of the CSTO has been recently underlined by the presence of all CSTO leaders as well as, crucially, that of Uzbekistan's Mirziyoyev and Turkmenistan's Berdymukhamedov at the annual Victory Day Parade that was held in Moscow on May 9th of 2023²²⁶.

The participation of the Central Asian leaders is significant, considering their generally unsupportive stances towards Russian actions in Ukraine in the previous months, especially from Tokayev. This crucially underlines the sustained and effective military power of Russia, which remains formidable in relation to the Central Asian states despite its diminishing influence in other domains²²⁷.

On the other hand, just a week after the event, Xi Jinping has chaired the inaugural China-Central Asia summit in the Chinese city of Xi'an²²⁸, in which all Central Asian leaders participated²²⁹. In the speech he delivered, Xi Jinping emphasised the need for a "stable, prosperous, interconnected and harmonious

²²² Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 12(1), p.66.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Gusev, Leonid (2019, October 2). *The Importance of Central Asia for Russia's Foreign Policy*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

²²⁵ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.300.

²²⁶ Aris, Ben (2023, May 9). *Leaders of all five 'Stans plus Armenia in Moscow for May 9 victory parade*. Intellinews.

²²⁷ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.300.

²²⁸ Once a key stop on the Silk Road route, in order to symbolise the deep and ancient linkages between China and Central Asia.

²²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2023, May 19). *President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech*.

Central Asia”²³⁰. These two recent and close-in-time events highlights similar tendencies by the two powers to interface in different multilateral activities with the Central Asian entities. Although some instances of competition may have appeared in the political field, the separation of powers in regards of the military and economic power is, nonetheless, still respected and put in place. In fact, whereas the Victory Day meeting was centred on military cooperation under Russian wings, the Xi’an summit was instead centred on BRI opportunities and deepening of trade.

To conclude, another institutional example provides an answer to the first important question of this research, that is, whether the potential gains from closer cooperation and from sustaining their strategic partnership outweigh those that would derive from competing for hegemony in the post-Soviet space of Central Asia. The absence of an official army or defensive alliance under the direct supervision of the SCO²³¹, despite requests from some Central Asian republics²³², reflects China’s pragmatic approach to foreign policy.

China indeed demonstrates its determination to preserve the traditional division of labour and to allow Russia to retain most of the military power in the region²³³. In fact, China’s recent security-related developments in Central Asia are mostly linked to the protection of its infrastructural projects and businesses. The Beijing leadership is concerned that an overt rivalry for influence with Russia could instead create a power vacuum in the region and reduce Chinese influence, to the benefit of perpetually vigilant actors such as Turkey, India, the United States and the European Union as well²³⁴.

Additionally, the depth and magnitude of Russian influence in the region make it impossible to eradicate in a short time frame. Therefore, China deems the promotion and safeguard of the Central Asian division of labour as the most advantageous path to undertake in order to protect its interests in the region and to increase its influence. On the other hand, the Kremlin is pleased to maintain its military hegemony in the area.

To conclude this section, it appears evident that the benefits that would result for both powers from cooperating and upholding their strategic partnership outweigh any eventual benefit that would result from attempting to surpass each other. Nevertheless, in light of the recent developments, it has become apparent that China has assumed the role of primary driving force behind this strategic partnership²³⁵. The concluding section of the project will therefore aim at evaluating the extent to which China is leading the partnership in the Central Asian context. By revisiting and re-analysing the evidence that

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Costa Buranelli, Filippo (2017). *Spheres of Influence as Negotiated Hegemony – The Case of Central Asia*. *Geopolitics*, 23(2), p.390.

²³² Notably, a proposal from the kazakh government to have an SCO army was blocked by Russia in 2011.

²³³ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

²³⁴ Dumoulin, Marie (2023, April 13). *Steppe change: How Russia’s war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan*. European Council on Foreign Relations.

²³⁵ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China’s Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

was covered thus far, it will also provide a definitive understanding of the reasons behind the current equilibrium.

3.3) Answering to the research question

The previous sections of this thesis have presented empirical findings about the dynamics of Russian and Chinese influence in relation to the republics of Central Asia, also explaining how these dynamics have evolved and changed over time. These findings will play a crucial role in order to answer the driving research question of this thesis, that is, explaining why the balance of power in Central Asia has been increasingly shifting towards the favour of China and to what extent China really holds the upper hand in terms of influence over the region. In other words, the aim will be to determine the actual position of the influence pendulum and to assess whether it significantly leans towards Beijing. The research that was carried out in the second chapter of this thesis, which focused on analysing the overall influence flows in the region through a state-centred approach for each of the five post-Soviet republics, will provide a valid answer to the influence trend that this thesis wants to take under examination. Through that research, it was possible to yield a preliminary conclusion which, after further refinement, will answer to the first part of the research question by defining why the balance of power has concretely been shifting towards China. This conclusion consists in the recognition of economic and financial power in the current global context as a crucial driver for any state in order to further increase its power and influence²³⁶.

In relation to Central Asia, China has been able to effectively employ its substantial investments, capital resources and infrastructural developments to create unmissable opportunities for the involved Central Asian republics, successfully translating its economic power into a crucial catalyser of influence across other socio-political domains²³⁷.

China's ability to establish itself into Central Asia, a strategic region that has historically been ground for contention and that has been tied up to a political giant like Russia for well over a century, serves as evidence of the aforementioned paradigm. Initially, China has made its presence visible through investments, infrastructural developments and promises of economic progress, subsequently expanding its influence in the political domain²³⁸.

China's success in becoming a regional hegemon in Central Asia in all the relevant fields of socio-political life can therefore be primarily attributed to its huge economic leverage²³⁹, which has

²³⁶ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.66.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Reeves, Jeffrey (2018). *China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(112).

²³⁹ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.66.

successfully attracted the Central Asian republics, willing to capitalise on the opportunities provided by the Chinese initiatives. In addition, it is remarkable that China has managed to achieve such an extraordinary accomplishment within a relatively short period of time. This rapid growth and evolution explain why the influence pendulum in Central Asia has shifted from pointing towards Moscow since the independence of the republics in 1991 to increasingly tilting towards Beijing ever since.

In order to successfully answer to the research question, however, and to deliver a comprehensive explanation of the nature of Sino-Russian hegemony in Central Asia, it is fundamental to assess the precise position of the pointer within the pendulum of influence.

Whereas China's rapid and exponential growth in Central Asia highlights an undeniable trend towards eventual primacy and hegemony, it is a difficult task to assess the current state of affairs. By examining the portrait of foreign influence in Central Asia, as in section 2.3 of this thesis, it appeared that Russia, at least prior to its actions in Eastern Ukraine, was nevertheless holding a position of advantage in the landscape of hegemony and influence in Central Asia²⁴⁰. Nonetheless, the mere fact that China had already managed to attain such high levels of power and influence even before the developments deriving from the Russian invasion of Ukraine remains a striking achievement. It underlines, as previously mentioned, an inevitable and undeniable trend: a further increase of Beijing's economic power to its BRI-related development projects, which will eventually lead to the expansion of its political influence in Central Asia and, perhaps, to a slower increase of its socio-cultural influence as well.

Following the events of 2022, however, attempting to assess the balance of power between the two regional hegemonies has become more challenging. Whereas Russian military influence has further expanded²⁴¹, solidifying its hegemonic standing in that particular domain²⁴², its cultural influence, especially among the younger population of the five republics²⁴³, has notably diminished. Moreover, the Kremlin's overall political influence over the Central Asian states has significantly decreased as well²⁴⁴. As a consequence, despite the above-mentioned rise in Russian military influence, the overall extent of Chinese influence has increased in relation to that of Russia and has potentially surpassed it²⁴⁵. Such a shift carries high significance, as it underlines that China has gained momentum in multiple aspects in comparison to Russia²⁴⁶.

Indeed, the real and definitive answer to the second part of the research question lies within the very nature of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. The sanctions imposed by the West as a consequence

²⁴⁰ Ivi, p.59.

²⁴¹ Terzyan, Aram (2022). *Kazakhstan amid unrest and instability: main implications*. Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, Institute for Research and European Studies - Bitola, 8(3), p.300.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Dumoulin, Marie (2023, April 13). *Steppe change: How Russia's war on Ukraine is reshaping Kazakhstan*. European Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁴⁴ Hess, Maximilian (2023, February 17). *Russia Is Down, But Not Out, in Central Asia*. Foreign Policy Research Institute.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

of the invasion have further weakened Russian global standing and power²⁴⁷, accelerating the already existing tendency that was previously identified. Such trend indicates that Moscow will increasingly need to rely on Beijing in the context of their strategic partnership²⁴⁸; the vital significance of the Kremlin's relationship with China makes it inevitable for Russia to accept Chinese primacy within their partnership²⁴⁹.

The future scenarios that could potentially emerge are crucial to evaluate as well. As emphasised before, China does not seek, for the moment, to enhance its military influence and competence over security-related issues at the expense of Russia, underlining China's intention to maintain stability in Central Asia through the effective division of labour between the two powers²⁵⁰.

The stability of Central Asia is crucial for China as it would allow for easier domestic control over Xinjiang²⁵¹, which could potentially follow up to any potential disruption to the order and any destabilisation in the neighbouring Central Asian republics. The stability of Central Asia is important for China also in terms of foreign policy, as to safeguard its infrastructural projects and investments in the region, thereby increasing its power and influence²⁵².

As a consequence, the most likely future scenario entails the continuation and preservation of the traditional division of labour between the two regional hegemonies. However, it must be taken into account that their strategic partnership will increasingly be under Chinese control also in other fields of action²⁵³. Scholars hold various opinions, however, in relation to the future dynamics that will affect Central Asia, which mainly differ on three focal points: firstly, there is uncertainty regarding whether China will, eventually, find it favourable and convenient to expand its involvement also in the military domain at some point in the future, in order to ultimately turn into the sole legitimate hegemon in the region. It also remains uncertain whether Russia will be willing to accept its status of subordinate to China and to accept Beijing's leadership in Central Asia, despite the current circumstances realistically pointing in that direction. Lastly, the possibility of a democratic and national awakening in the republics of the region cannot be completely disregarded.

These uncertainties together highlight key areas of debate among IR scholars, thus reflecting divergent predictions about the future trajectory of the region. While predictions about the future of Central Asia are of paramount importance, the definitive answer to the research question of this thesis delivers compelling evidence about the current state of things.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Cooley, Alexander (2015). *Russia and China in Central Asia*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

²⁵¹ Pizzolo, Paolo, & Carteny, Andrea (2022). *The "New Great Game" in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?* The International Spectator, p.95.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

Over the past decades, China has been able to make significant progress and to insert itself into the Central Asian picture, a region that had prior been traditionally overseen and run by Russia. This has been achieved mainly through its substantial investments and projects of development, highlighting the dominant role that economic factors retain, in the current global context, in shaping regional dynamics²⁵⁴. The balance of power and influence in Central Asia, which would have anyway naturally shifted towards China, has experienced a rapid acceleration in that direction due to widespread international condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Accordingly, Russia has increasingly become reliant on and subject to China. To this day, China undeniably administers the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in the Central Asian context²⁵⁵ and has managed to establish itself as the leading hegemon in the region. However, it is worth noting that Russia still retains a significant amount of influence in Central Asia, despite its inferior position in comparison to China. Nevertheless, as is peculiar to struggles for influence and international competition throughout history, circumstances may drastically change at any point in the future.

²⁵⁴ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.66.

²⁵⁵ Proń, Elzbieta (2022, May 17). *The War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. ISPI.

CONCLUSION

The central focus of this thesis has been to explain the structural nature and the evolving dynamics of the relationship between Russia, China and the republics of Central Asia, both at the bilateral and at the multilateral level. The aim was to understand the complex interplay between the respective relationships of the two regional powers with the regional entities, in order to understand how they contribute to the determination of the balance of power and influence of the region. The final objective was to address the research question, in order to ultimately clarify the reasons underlying Beijing's current status as the leading hegemonic power in the regional context.

Throughout its millenary history, the territory of Central Asia, encompassing the current republican entities, has never been a fertile ground for democratic development and for proper internal administration and growth, attributable to its inherent strategic significance and desirability for major international actors, which have historically been struggling for control over the important trade routes and resources of the region. As a consequence, the newly formed republics have continuously struggled to achieve full sovereignty and concrete independence, despite being able to reach official independence. Instead, their primary focus has been to embark in overemphasised and artificial processes of state building and creation of national identities, as thoroughly explained in the first chapter of this study. These domestic dynamics have not only facilitated the perpetuation of the historic Russian influence and hegemony over the once Soviet territory but have also created favourable condition for China's entrance into the regional landscape.

Undoubtedly, the very expansion of China within the otherwise Russian-dominated context of Central Asia is remarkable and decisive in the response to the research question, as its extensiveness and rapid pace are undeniable indicators of a perceivable trend towards China within the dynamics of regional power. Whereas it is debatable whether, at least until 2021, such a shift is absolute on overall terms, it is for sure representative of a faster trajectory towards Beijing rather than the pace of Moscow's influence flows. Over time, such a trend will inevitably result in China surpassing Moscow in overall influence in the region, especially considering Russia's overall weakening position in the past two years. In fact, as the third chapter of this thesis has argued, it is plausible that the recent international developments have accelerated such process and made it underway.

The first chapter of this thesis has extensively argued about the unique and distinctive features of the Central Asian region, on historical, political and socio-cultural grounds. It also elucidated the factors that have crucially contributed to its observable lack of cooperation among its regional entities, in addition to the reasons that lie behind the current international competition over the territory. Lastly, it has importantly laid down the basic knowledge necessary for the rest of the dissertation by exploring the different and intertwining interests of China and Russia in relation to the region.

The second chapter, on the other hand, was pivotal as it conducted a meticulous analysis of the current dynamics of regional hegemony from both Chinese and Russian perspectives. The influence assessment analysis was grounded in the realist approach of the English School of International Relations, which analyses influence flows on the grounds of military, normative and cultural influence. The analysis concluded that the Kremlin, at least until February 2022, was able to retain the role of leading hegemonic power on absolute terms, as it revealed that, whereas both powers wielded substantial influence across the entirety of the region, Russia retained primacy over Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan due to its extremely high military and economic leverages, whereas China indisputably held the leading position only in Turkmenistan, the importance of which is hard to assess because of its mysterious and abnormal domestic situation. Interestingly and crucially, in the two main republics in terms of population and international weight, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the influence race between the two republics has appeared to be close, without providing for a conclusive outcome.

The last chapter, to conclude, has crucially provided a recent contextualisation of the revealed influence paradigm within the current, ever-changing events. Through socio-political and economic lenses, the chapter concluded that the Russian “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine has accelerated the inevitable process of Chinese primacy within the strategic partnership between the two powers in the Central Asian region. This is primarily due to Russia’s obliged acceptance of Chinese terms within their strategic relationship in addition to its reduced levels of trust from the Central Asian republics. However, it is noteworthy that Russia has, nonetheless, experienced substantial levels of growth in military influence thanks to its successful deployment of CSTO troops in Kazakhstan a few weeks prior to the beginning of its invasion of Ukraine.

The most significant conclusion provided by this work, which is effectively able to answer the first part of the research question, by specifically addressing the “why” aspect of it, is attributable to the important work conducted by leading Russian scholars Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk²⁵⁶, which deserve a considerable recognition. This thesis has interpreted their findings as evidence that Chinese economic preponderance has surpassed, in importance, Russian historical, political and military power in the region. China, indeed, has successfully translated its economic strength into influence in every other relevant domain of action, despite the military one due to its interests in maintaining the strategic partnership with Russia working, whereas Russia has been unable to reach the same level of progress in the opposite direction, or at least not at a pace comparable to that of Beijing.

The contextualising analysis that was conducted in the third chapter, on the other hand, has effectively answered to the second part of the research question, pertaining the extent of Chinese leadership within the strategic partnership and the overall weakening of the Kremlin’s standing. The scrutiny has

²⁵⁶ Kazantsev, Andrei, Medvedeva, Svetlana, & Safranchuk, Ivan (2021). *Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), p.57–71.

concluded that the recent international developments have significantly bolstered China's relative position in Central Asia because they have significantly exacerbated Russia's overall position. However, despite this dynamic which is internal to their strategic partnership, such partnership and division of labour between them has been strengthened by the situation. In fact, this thesis has explored the recurring theme of the duality of Sino-Russian relationship, swinging between instances of cooperation and of competition. The recent events, however, may have potentially resolved this duality, as the evidently most advantageous path for the two powers to undertake appears to be a further increase of the extent of their cooperative engagement, particularly concerning Central Asia and, perhaps, in relation of other areas of interest such as the Arctic and the Far East²⁵⁷. These increased terms of partnership could, therefore, potentially consolidate their joint hegemony in Central Asia and limit the possibilities for the republics to seek alternative international partners, with the notable exception of, perhaps, Kazakhstan. As a result, the regional republics face limitations in their pursuit of full national sovereignty and democratic processes. Given the region's intrinsic importance and the recurring competing interests of international actors within its landscape, it is plausible that it will be extremely difficult for Central Asia to embark in a process of national, sovereign and democratic development, remaining at the mercy of the regional superpowers.

²⁵⁷ Stronsky, Paul & Ng, Nicole (2018). *Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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SUMMARY

Nel corso dei secoli, la regione dell'Asia Centrale è stata continuamente teatro di competizione esterna, diventando campo di battaglia per i più disparati imperi che hanno desiderato controllarla ed esercitarne influenza in diversi momenti storici. Il coinvolgimento straniero in questa regione, almeno adottando una prospettiva europea, può essere fatto risalire fino ai tempi del IV secolo a.C., periodo in cui le sostanziali conquiste di Alessandro Magno hanno introdotto i primi segni di influenza in quella regione che divenne difatti nota come *Transoxiana*, fondando altresì importanti città di stampo ellenistico come Alessandria Arachosia²⁵⁸, Alessandria Ariana²⁵⁹, Alessandria sull'Oxus²⁶⁰ e le più importanti Alessandria in Margiana²⁶¹ e, infine, Alessandria Eschate²⁶², dal greco Ἐσχάτη, ultima, ad indicare la sua essenza di base più remota sia a settentrione che a meridione dell'impero macedone. Nei secoli a venire, gloriosi imperi stranieri come gli Arabi, i Mongoli e le dinastie Timuridi diedero vita a lunghe e sanguinose contese sul controllo della regione, lasciando ognuno di essi, alle sue spalle, una eredità tuttora osservabile in molti ambiti della società centroasiatica.

Tuttavia, nonostante tanto antiche e importanti occasioni di scontro nella regione, la duratura e intensa competizione che, in qualche misura, continua tuttora, ha cominciato ad emergere nel XIX secolo, periodo che ha segnato l'inizio del cosiddetto "Great Game", ovvero la palese e dichiarata rivalità geostrategica tra la Russia Zarista e l'Impero britannico. Come conseguenza di questo gioco politico, i Khanati rimanenti nella regione divennero parte della sfera di influenza dapprima del Palazzo d'Inverno e, successivamente, del Cremlino sovietico, dal quale ottennero l'indipendenza solamente nel 1991, sotto forma di repubbliche del Kazakistan, Kirghizistan, Tagikistan, Turkmenistan e Uzbekistan. Tuttavia, come abbastanza evidente e prevedibile, l'influenza del moderno Cremlino federale è persistita e addirittura aumentata sin dal giorno dell'indipendenza di queste entità, come questo lavoro di ricerca si propone di spiegare.

I continui e duraturi sforzi per il controllo della regione sono facilmente spiegabili: innanzitutto, la regione ha un ruolo storico di corridoio commerciale tra Europa e Asia. Difatti, la storica Via della Seta si delineava attraverso la regione centroasiatica, contribuendo in maniera sostanziale al suo sviluppo e allo sviluppo delle contese internazionali su di essa. Tuttora, difatti, l'interesse cinese verso la regione è principalmente attribuibile alla sua importanza commerciale; non a caso, il principale veicolo di sviluppo internazionale cinese, ovvero l'iniziativa della BRI, si è spesso proposto ed è stato colloquialmente definito da molti come "Nuova Via della Seta". In aggiunta a ciò, i vasti deserti della regione possiedono abbondanti risorse di idrocarburi, prevalentemente in relazione al gas naturale, attirando l'attenzione dei più disparati attori internazionali. Diventa dunque evidente, unendo questi fattori di rilevanza con l'importante influenza che la

²⁵⁸ La moderna Kandahar in Afghanistan.

²⁵⁹ La moderna Herat, sempre in Afghanistan.

²⁶⁰ Oggi sito archeologico di Ay-Khanum, al confine tra Afghanistan e Uzbekistan, sul fiume Amu Darya, l'antico Oxus.

²⁶¹ La moderna Merv, o Mary, in Turkmenistan.

²⁶² La moderna Khujand, in Tajikistan.

Russia ha esercitato e continua ad esercitare sulla regione, il motivo per il quale l'Asia Centrale rimanga, al giorno d'oggi, un ambito premio per le potenze straniere e una fonte di competizione tra di loro.

La tesi dunque si prefigge l'obiettivo di analizzare concretamente i legami esistenti tra le 5 repubbliche post-sovietiche e le principali potenze della regione, ovvero la Russia e la Cina, esplorando le ragioni dietro al loro così importante coinvolgimento, le loro differenti strategie e interessi e infine le loro dinamiche interazioni, con l'obiettivo di dare una risposta alla domanda di ricerca di questo elaborato: "Per quali motivazioni, e in che misura, il baricentro del potere in Asia Centrale si sta spostando sempre di più verso Pechino?".

Per affrontare correttamente la domanda di ricerca, l'influenza delle due superpotenze è stata misurata tramite le lenti realistiche della English School delle Relazioni Internazionali e il suo approccio nei confronti delle moderne sfere di influenza. L'analisi che è stata condotta si è posta l'obiettivo di comprendere quale effettivamente, tra Russia e Cina, sia la potenza egemonica più rilevante all'interno del quadro centroasiatico. L'approccio inglese, nel valutare l'influenza egemonica di una nazione nei confronti di un'altra, tiene conto di fattori militari, normativi e culturali, ambiti che sono serviti come base teorica nell'analisi, condotta in questo progetto, delle dinamiche di potere tra Russia e Cina nella regione.

La struttura della tesi è la seguente.

Il primo capitolo ha l'obiettivo di fornire le conoscenze preliminari sull'Asia Centrale e sul coinvolgimento Russo e cinese nella regione, necessarie per poter comprendere appieno la direzione dei capitoli successivi. Attraverso una spiegazione storico politica, la situazione domestica e internazionale delle varie repubbliche centroasiatiche è stata descritta accuratamente.

Il secondo capitolo, invece, si è basato sul lavoro svolto nel primo, concentrandosi su una profonda analisi dei flussi di influenza russi e cinesi nella regione. Attraverso l'approccio realista della English School, il capitolo ha analizzato i flussi di influenza per ogni singola repubblica, stabilendo quali flussi, tra quelli provenienti da Nord o da Est, fossero quelli predominanti, in modo da poter, in conclusione, formare un quadro coerente dello status complessivo della regione intesa come un'unica entità politica.

Il terzo capitolo, infine, ha applicato e adattato il quadro di influenza precedentemente descritto alla situazione globale attuale, esaminando come gli eventi internazionali degli ultimi due anni abbiano scosso le dinamiche di potere all'interno della regione, al fine di rispondere appropriatamente alla domanda di ricerca. Indubbiamente, l'espansione della Cina all'interno di un contesto come quello dell'Asia Centrale, con la presenza di un'altra potenza estremamente influente e affermata, è notevole di per sé. Inoltre, è indicativa di una tendenza che, da sola, risponde alla domanda di ricerca, visto che la rapidità e la vastità della suddetta espansione sono indicatori innegabili di una tendenza orientata verso la Cina all'interno delle dinamiche di potere Sino-Russe. Sebbene possa essere dibattibile che, almeno fino a fine 2021, tale spostamento non fosse vero in termini assoluti, sicuramente era tuttavia indicativo di una tendenza inevitabile, ovvero di una traiettoria più rapida verso Pechino rispetto ai flussi di influenza del Cremlino.

La valutazione dei flussi di influenza in Asia Centrale si è basata, come anticipato, sull'approccio della English School, e ha concluso che, prima dell'inizio della "Operazione Militare Speciale" la Russia fosse ancora in grado di mantenere il ruolo di potenza egemonica dominante nel contesto centroasiatico, nonostante entrambe le potenze esercitassero livelli di influenza non indifferenti su tutte le repubbliche della regione. Infatti, il Cremlino era in grado di mantenere la supremazia su Kirghizistan e Tagikistan grazie alle sue importanti leve economiche e militari, mentre la Cina era in grado di reclamare indiscutibilmente una posizione di supremazia nei confronti del Turkmenistan, la cui importanza, tuttavia, è sempre difficile da valutare, nonostante le sue importanti riserve energetiche, in considerazione della sua situazione domestica misteriosa e anomala. In conclusione, è estremamente interessante e particolare notare come, nelle due repubbliche di maggior rilievo, ovvero Kazakistan e Uzbekistan, la corsa per l'influenza tra le due superpotenze sia estremamente equilibrata, e non sia in grado di fornire un risultato netto come nelle altre tre repubbliche della regione.

Nonostante ciò, l'invasione dell'Ucraina perpetrata dall'esercito Russo e le conseguenze politiche da essa derivanti non hanno fatto altro che accelerare l'inevitabile processo di supremazia cinese all'interno della cooperazione strategica tra le due nel contesto dell'Asia Centrale. Ciò è principalmente causato dall'obbligo da parte della Russia di accettare sempre di più le condizioni cinesi all'interno della loro relazione strategica, oltre alla ridotta fiducia da parte dei governi della regione, impauriti dalle azioni revisioniste del Cremlino e temendo possibili conseguenze, specialmente in riferimento al Kazakistan. Tuttavia, è importante menzionare il notevole aumento dell'influenza militare della Russia nella regione, dovuto alla mobilitazione perfettamente riuscita delle truppe CSTO in Kazakistan, la quale ha a tutti gli effetti salvato il regime del Presidente Tokayev, solo poche settimane prima dell'inizio del conflitto in Ucraina orientale.

In risposta alla prima parte della domanda di ricerca, ovvero come mai il baricentro del potere si sia e si stia sempre più spostando verso la Cina, è evidente che l'impeto economico proveniente dalla Cina abbia sorpassato, in efficienza ed importanza, la preponderanza storica, politica e militare della Russia nella regione. Infatti, è direttamente osservabile come il potere economico cinese abbia creato, negli ultimi anni, i presupposti per una crescita anche negli altri settori della vita sociopolitica dell'Asia Centrale, mentre la Russia non sembra essere riuscita a ottenere lo stesso risultato nel senso opposto, o perlomeno che non sia riuscita a procedere a una velocità neanche paragonabile a quella della Cina.

Gli sviluppi internazionali del 2022 hanno notevolmente rafforzato la posizione Cinese in Asia Centrale, specialmente in luce dell'indebolimento generale della posizione della Russia. Nonostante ciò, sebbene questa dinamica sia osservabile anche all'interno della loro relazione, la loro informale alleanza strategica nella regione sembra essersi invece rafforzata. Infatti, questa tesi ha esplorato il tema del ricorrente dualismo all'interno delle relazioni Sino-Russe, il quale oscilla tra aperta cooperazione e chiari motivi di attrito e competizione tra le due potenze. Gli ultimissimi sviluppi tuttavia potrebbero aver risolto questo dualismo, in quanto il percorso più conveniente e vantaggioso per entrambe sembra essere la continuazione della loro relazione strategica, e il mantenimento, nonché rafforzamento, della tradizionale divisione dei compiti nella

regione, in cui il Cremlino, specialmente tramite la CSTO, mantiene un ruolo predominante nella risoluzione dei problemi relativi alla sicurezza della regione e alla sopravvivenza dei regimi, mentre alla Cina spetta il compito di catalizzatore di investimenti, infrastrutture e opportunità di crescita economica. Per quanto riguarda l'influenza in ambito politico e sociale, la situazione rimane aperta, ed è proprio in questi campi che le future possibilità di attrito e competizione tra le due potenze sono più evidenti e probabili.