



## Sino-Russian Competition: Self-Inflicted Competition in Central Asia?

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# What is NSI Reachback?

The Joint Staff, Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), jointly with other elements in the Joint Staff, Services, and United States Government (USG) Agencies, has established a Reachback capability based on the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) team’s global network of scholars and area experts. It provides Combatant Commands with population-based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations. The Reachback team combines written and interview elicitations with additional research and analyses to provide concise responses to time-sensitive questions.

This report responds to one of a series of questions posed by USCENTCOM about the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Please contact Sarah Canna (scanna@nsiteam.com or sarah.a.canna.ctr@mail.mil) for more details related to SMA’s “Assessment of Strategic Implications of Population Dynamics in the Central Region” study.

## Question of Focus

**[B10]** What are the areas of divergence between Russian and Chinese interests and goals within the USCENTCOM AOR that can be exploited by the USG?

### Sino-Russian Competition: Self-inflicted Competition in Central Asia?<sup>2</sup>

China and Russia support each other's political and economic objectives both globally and in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR) because, in part, of a strong mutual interest in weakening the United States' geopolitical influence and power (Solomentseva, 2014; Lons, 2019). However, despite this cooperation, China and Russia do compete, especially in Central Asia where both have long-standing historical connections, manage competing economic initiatives, and seek to exert influence over regional governments (Laruelle, 2019; Ehteshami, 2019; McGlinchey, 2019; Weitz, 2020). In the future, competition between Beijing and Moscow in the Middle East over natural resources and economic opportunities may increase, as both become more economically involved in the region (Wormuth, 2019). However, both do benefit considerably from cooperation, and have diverse enough strengths to make direct competition costly. Furthermore, particularly in Russia's case, there are no comparable strategic partnerships available to help balance United States and Western regional influence (Weitz, 2020). While there is a wealth of literature discussing how China's and Russia's activities affect the United States' interests in the USCENTCOM AOR, the discussion on what the United States can do to create Sino-Russian competition is sparse and instead mostly focuses on actions to slow either China's or Russia's individual geopolitical growth.

### China and Russia's Global Interests

Globally, China's activities are consistent with a strategy of increasing its global influence through economic means (i.e., outreach, investment, development, trade, exploration), expanding its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and acting as a cooperative partner while remaining politically neutral (Weitz, 2019). Despite China's desire to increase its political influence through the BRI, Beijing is facing increased pressure from analysts working in Chinese think tanks to take more aggressive actions to ensure the security of Chinese economic projects<sup>3</sup> (Lons, 2019). China's economic activity in the USCENTCOM AOR, especially the Middle East, is focused on access to energy deposits it needs to fuel its economy (Heath, 2018; Lelyveld, 2019). China would rather cooperate than compete with Russia, including in Central Asia, where China is avoiding an escalation of Sino-Russian competition over Central Asian political influence (Rolland, 2019). In fact, China goes further and takes steps to include Russian corporations in the energy deals it makes with Central Asian states (Weitz, 2020).

While China's interests are primarily economic, Russia's interests in the USCENTCOM AOR are focused on reclaiming the political influence it lost after the Soviet Union's collapse<sup>4</sup> (Clarke, 2016; Laruelle, 2019), and decreasing its vulnerability to violent extremist organizations (Weitz, 2019). Russia's weak petroleum-based

<sup>2</sup> The following subject matter expert kindly contributed to this analysis: **Dr. Richard Weitz** (Hudson Institute).

<sup>3</sup> This pressure is, in part, a result of attacks from Pakistani separatists who targeted economic projects that are part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Lons, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> How objectives manifest themselves for China and Russia can be found in Appendix I below.

economy limits its economic actions, but Russian arms sales and its military support of the Assad regime in Syria have helped Russia increase its political influence in the USCENTCOM AOR (Laruelle, 2019). For Russia, increased influence over Persian Gulf oil would give Moscow greater influence over global oil prices and bolster its economy (Bloomberg, 2019; Astakhova & El Gamal, 2018). Because Russia's economy is weak and lacks diversification, it cannot compete with China's BRI<sup>5</sup> (Laruelle, 2019). Weitz (2020) argues that Russia has, on a certain level, conceded economic dominance to China, and now seeks only to extract benefit from its investments. Laruelle (2019) argues, however, that Moscow is wary of losing political power in Central Asia to Beijing.

## China and Russia in the USCENTCOM AOR

As part of SMA's 2019 Global Competition project, NSI created two data sets that are designed to provide insight into China's and Russia's global interests and activities.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 (drawn from NSI's Global Indicators dataset) shows the relative leverage and importance each country in the USCENTCOM AOR holds for both Russia and China. As Russia and China's interests and activities in these countries vary considerably by geopolitical region, the data are divided by region as well as country. Overall, the indicators suggest that Central Asia is the more important region to both Russia and China, with the exception of the security importance of Syria and Iran to Russia. For China, the economic importance of most states is equal across three regions, with exception of UAE, KSA, and Kazakhstan which are higher. However, none of the MENA states were assessed to have security importance to China. Both Russia and China also have greater leverage over Central Asia states than those in MENA or South Asia (with the exception again of Russia in Syria and Iran). Across the USCENTCOM AOR as a whole, China has greater economic leverage than Russia.

While the Global Indicators are designed to capture consistent, structural relations between states, NSI's Interests and Activities dataset is designed to provide a more detailed picture of the specific, recent activities both China and Russia are engaging in globally.<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 provides a summary of the number of individual Russian and Chinese activities, coded by general type, across the countries in the USCENTCOM AOR, and suggests that China is engaged in more activities, across more activity types, than Russia. However, China and Russia are most active in the energy activity type. While Russia is most active in the Central Asian states, China is most active in MENA.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Russian think tank, Valdai Club, published a report titled "Towards the Great Ocean" that describes Central Asia as a cooperative region for Russia's EAEU and China's BRI (Rolland, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> NSI's Global Indicators Dataset provides metrics for the security, economic, and diplomatic importance of individual countries to the US, Russia, and China, and the potential leverage each actor has across these dimensions in each country. It enables us to gain a high-level overview of where Russia and China may be motivated to, and capable of challenging US. Or, where US has leverage to challenge Russian or Chinese goals. For more information about this data project, please contact Dr. Belinda Bragg [bbragg@nsiteam.com](mailto:bbragg@nsiteam.com).

<sup>7</sup> NSI's Interests and Activities Dataset provides a consistent and systematic database of Chinese and Russian activities (ongoing or in past two years), and the interests they support. We drew on NSI's Interests, Resolve, Capabilities (I-R-C) work to derive global interests, and associated objectives for Russia and China, then coded specific activities to the objectives and associated interests they were consistent with. For more information about this data project, please contact Dr. Belinda Bragg [bbragg@nsiteam.com](mailto:bbragg@nsiteam.com).

<sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily contradict the indicators analysis represented in Figure 1, because those measures are capturing the long-term value of activities while the count of activities is capturing specific number of current Chinese and Russian activities.

Figure 1: Russian and Chinese importance and leverage for USCENTCOM countries

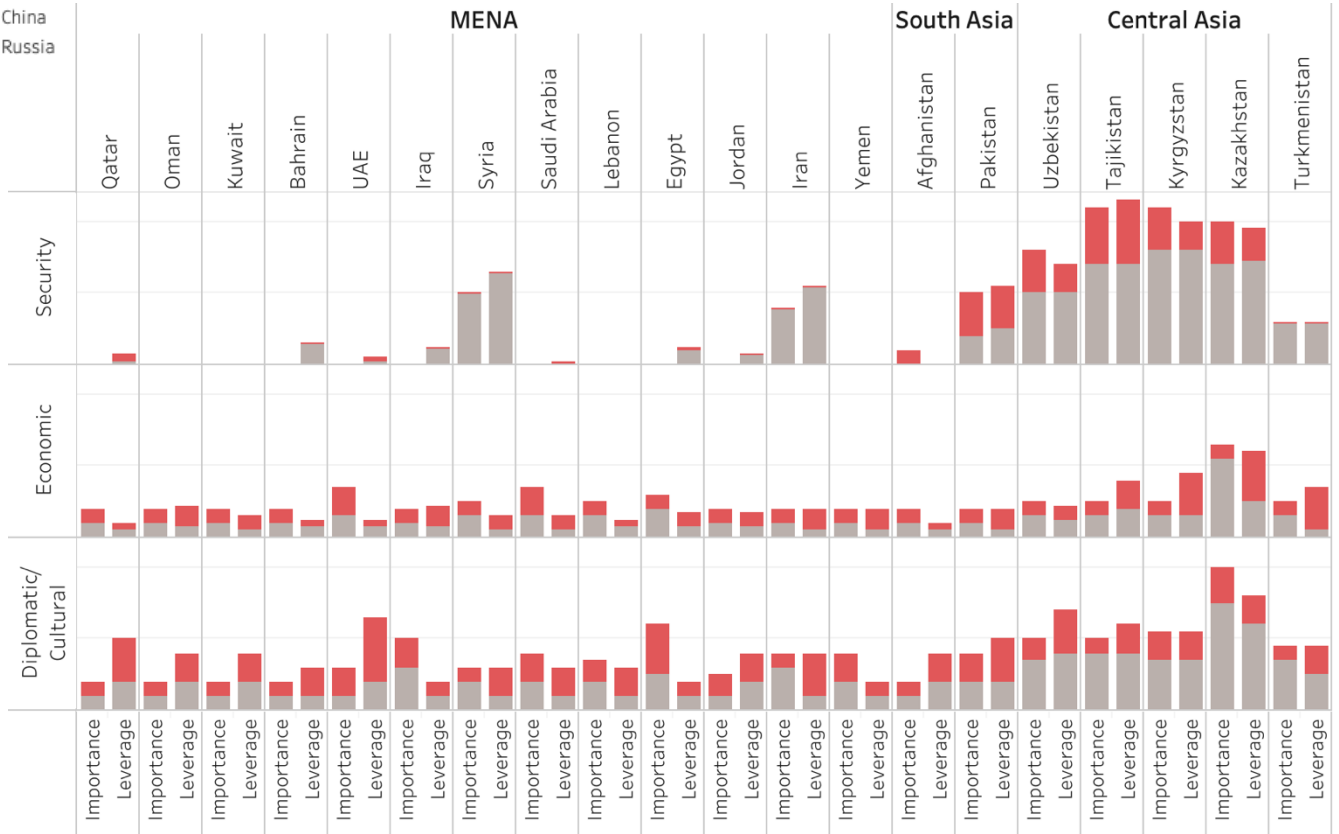
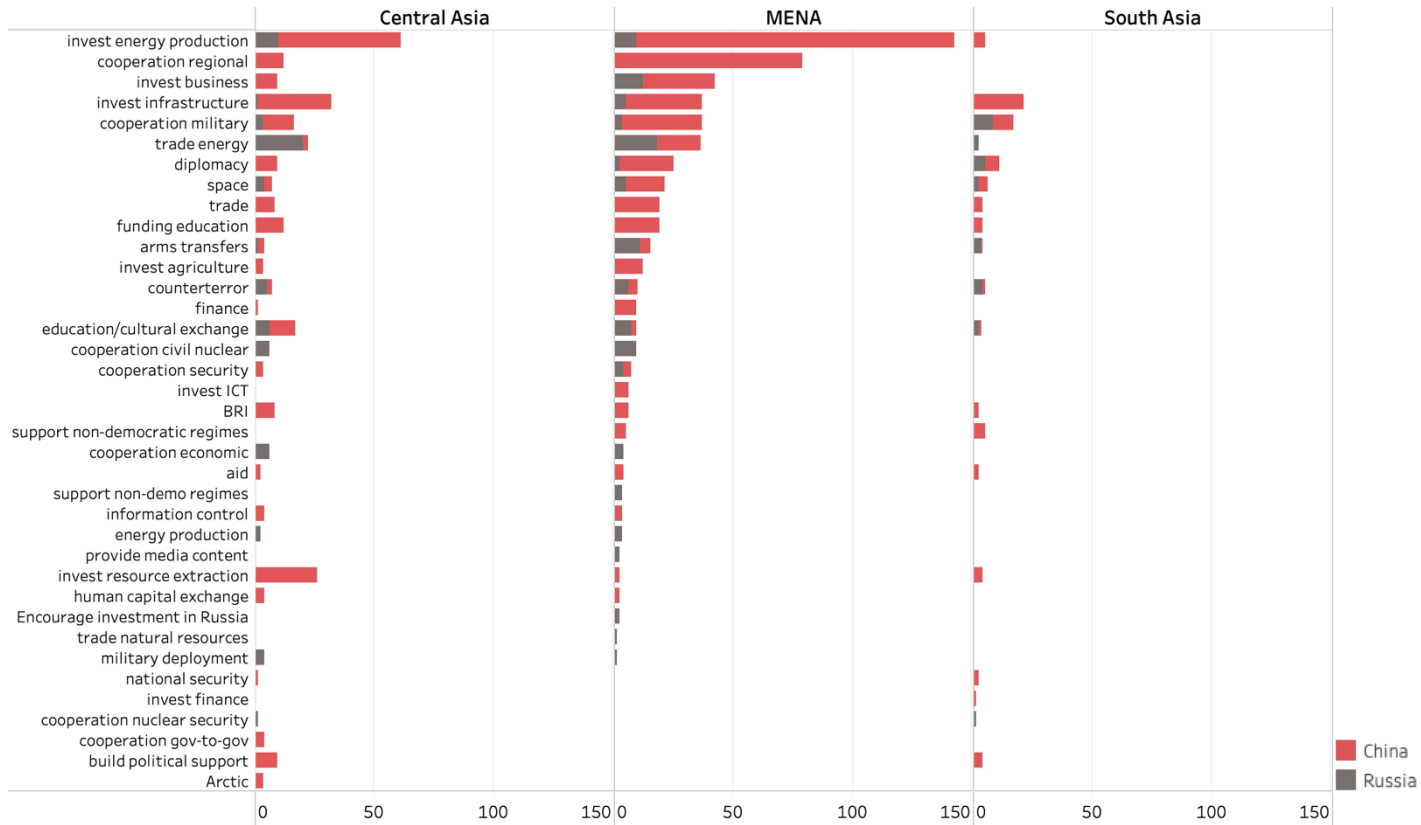


Figure 2: Russian and Chinese activities in USCENTCOM countries by region



## Where is Competition Between Beijing and Moscow Likely?

Rolland (2019) argues that the Sino-Russian relationship is a superficial friendship of convenience; one based on their shared interests of weakening the United States' political influence and power globally, rather than truly compatible long-term interests. Just as China's and Russia's interests vary across the different regions, so does the potential for competition between them. Because of regional security concerns and strong levels of US influence, China and Russia have only recently begun to increase their political and economic influence in the Middle East and Southern Asia (Rumer, 2019). This creates a few points of potential competition in these regions for China and Russia. In fact, Sino-Russian political and economic competition is currently occurring in Central Asia (Clarke, 2016; Laruelle, 2019; Ehteshami, 2019). Even though there is currently no significant Sino-Russian competition in the Middle East, some see the potential for future competition between China and Russia over raw materials and energy resources, as both seek to increase their economic activity in the region (Wormuth, 2019). Conversely, however, Weitz (2020) argues that China and Russia will not compete over one resource or asset in the Middle East because maintaining a positive political relationship is too important for both Beijing and Moscow.

In South Asia, Beijing and Moscow are focused on stopping violent extremists from spreading radical Islam and separatist sentiment to China and Russia<sup>9</sup> (Weitz, 2019). To achieve this objective, Russia has recently begun strengthening its political relationship with Pakistan (Kapoor, 2019), which already has strong political ties to China. A common interest in decreasing the domestic threat of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), gives Beijing and Moscow a mutual objective to focus their cooperation in South Asia (Weitz, 2019).

China and Russia both believe they can increase their own political and economic power in the Middle East if what they perceive as a United States withdrawal from the region continues (Rumer, 2019). China and Russia have already cooperated with each other to support anti-US regimes like Assad in Syria (Rumer, 2019). Weitz (2020) argues that if the United States decreases its influence in the region, China and Russia will naturally compete to fill the left-over political void. Additionally, China's and Russia's desire to gain influence over Persian Gulf oil fields could set the stage for future Sino-Russian economic competition<sup>10</sup> (Wormuth, 2019).

Because both China and Russia share a geographic border with Central Asia, they view the region as their own backyard (Clarke, 2016; Laruelle, 2019). China's BRI and Russia's Eurasian Union (EAEU) are two competing economic initiatives that are trying to establish business relationships with the same countries<sup>11</sup> (Laruelle, 2019). Rolland argues that China will win this competition by merely biding its time as Russia's economy weakens and Central Asian countries continue to pivot from Russia to China as a political and economic leader. Laruelle argues that Central Asia's pivot from Russia's economic leadership and toward China's BRI, because of China's greater economic wealth, aggravates Moscow's political insecurities from the loss of Soviet era great power status. While Moscow has been transparent in its desire to remain the dominant political force in Central Asia (CFR, 2018), it likely recognizes that it will not be able to compete with China's economic power (Weitz, 2020). Despite some competition, China and Russia have managed to cooperate and support each other's multi-lateral

<sup>9</sup> The only two countries from Southern Asia that are in the USCENTCOM AOR are Pakistan and Afghanistan.

<sup>10</sup> While China needs the oil to fuel its energy dependent economy (Lelyveld, 2019), Russia wants to increase its influence in Persian Gulf oil reserves to improve its own economic achievement by increasing the price of oil (Bloomberg, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Economic competition between Russia and China is limited because both Beijing and Moscow are trying to increase the BRI's and EAEU's compatibility (Stronski, 2018).

organizations (Rolland, 2019; Weitz, 2020). Moreover, Stronski (2018) argues that Putin's personal relationship with Xi Jinping and the EAEU's dependence on the BRI's success mitigates the potential for Sino-Russian competition.

Cooperation between Moscow and Beijing has not stopped either from using media narratives designed for Central Asia's local populations in an attempt to weaken each other's political image (Ehteshami, 2019). McGlinchey (2019) argues that Central Asia's political atmosphere could be described as "rising China and shrinking Russia." To combat this, Russian media has leveraged existing popular suspicion and dislike of China in the region (Weitz 2020), questioning Chinese business practices and highlighting the trend of Chinese businessmen marrying Central Asian brides. For example, a recent Russian media story reported that 30,000 Chinese businessmen have tried to improve their social standing by marrying Russian women (McGlinchey, 2019). China is less aggressive with its use of media, instead marketing its BRI as a stronger alternative to the EAEU (Ehteshami, 2019). Ultimately, as Ehteshami (2019) argues, China and Russia may experience a level of competition in Central Asia that they do not experience in other regions.

## Potential United States Responses

While there is considerable discussion of Chinese and Russian activities and their impact on the United States' interests, there is little discussion in the literature on what measures the United States might take to counter these activities. Some scholars believe that the alarm caused by China's and Russia's increase in political influence and economic power is exaggerated (Rumer, 2019; Clarke, 2016). Some argue that Russia's weak economy limits how disruptive Moscow can be to the United States' interests (Rumer, 2019). Others note that China's BRI, while growing in momentum, is behind schedule, and that worsening security issues and increasing Taliban influence in Afghanistan may place future security obstacles in China's BRI pathway (Clarke, 2016). However, the Taliban's increasing influence in Afghanistan may not be as daunting an obstacle for Beijing and Moscow as it first appeared. China has hosted delegates from the Taliban to discuss Afghanistan's political and security issues (Kelemen, 2019), and Moscow has hosted talks between officials in Afghanistan's government and leaders in the Taliban<sup>12</sup> (Reevell, 2019).

To China and Russia, a perceived decrease in US military and political commitment throughout the USCENTCOM AOR is also an opportunity to increase their levels of activity (Laruelle, 2019). However, Spalding (2019) suggests that the United States can slow the growth of Chinese and Russian influence by informing regional governments of the potential negative consequences of greater economic dependence on China and Russia by using the experiences of other states in the region. Simultaneously, increasing political outreach to countries that already harbor anti-Chinese or anti-Russian sentiment could build regional capacity and willingness to resist further political influence from either power (Spalding, 2019). Clarke (2016) argues that highlighting corrupt Chinese and Russian business or political practices can stifle China's and Russia's individual economic growth but not create Sino-Russian competition.<sup>13</sup> Wormuth (2019) suggests that the United States may allow Sino-Russian competition to occur naturally by simply doing nothing (see also Weitz, 2020). Over time, China and Russia will likely compete with each other for natural resources, especially Persian Gulf oil. Even under this scenario,

<sup>12</sup> Talks hosted in Moscow between officials of Afghanistan's government and the Taliban, occurred at the protest of Afghanistan's central government (Reevell, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Already existing suspicion of Russian political intentions and Chinese business activities in Kazakhstan could be emphasized and leveraged to weaken joint Sino-Russian influence in the pivotal Central Asian country of Kazakhstan (Clarke, 2016).



significant Sino-Russian competition seems unlikely, as both value their alliance on shared interests and lack viable alternative partners (Weitz, 2020).

## Conclusion

As China and Russia increase their economic activities in the Middle East and South Asia, similar interests regarding natural resources and economic opportunities could create the conditions for competition between Beijing and Moscow. The United States could proactively confront both sides by emphasizing corrupt Chinese and Russian business practices. Such messaging would need to be designed for both the leaders and local populations of Central Asian states. However, such activity could backfire on the United States, as it is possible that United States countermeasures could strengthen Sino-Russian relations by reinforcing the belief that the United States seeks to undermine both Chinese and Russia power (Weitz, 2020).

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## Appendix I: China-Russia Shared Objectives

**Identified Sino-Russian objectives:** These objectives are shared by both China and Russia. However, although the objectives are shared, it does not mean that Sino-Russian competition does not occur or that China's and Russia's specific interests and tactics for achieving the objective are the same. An objective may also be interpreted by Russia and China differently.

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- **Increase regional security:** For China and Russia, increasing regional security means ensuring the safety of economic assets (Weitz, 2019), maintaining friendly regime security (Katz, 2019 & Laruelle, 2019), and decreasing the influence of radical Islam or separatist groups (Luft, 2016).
  - **Increase political influence:** Beijing and Moscow want to increase positive political relationships with heads of state to build greater influence over regional politics (Katz, 2019). China and Russia want to build political relationships with both US allies and adversaries but prefer to support autocratic regimes (Laruelle, 2019).
  - **Increase cultural influence:** China and Russia believe that spreading their political and economic culture will aid them in achieving their objectives. For Russia, Central Asia is a symbolically and politically important region because of the prestige it would lose if former Soviet states were to lessen their political connection to Moscow (Clarke, 2016). In contrast, China is more concerned about spreading its business culture to ensure the success of its BRI (Ehteshami, 2019; McGlinchey, 2019).
  - **Increase domestic economic resilience:** By successfully pursuing economic initiatives in the region, both China and Russia can increase their domestic economic prospects (Weitz, 2019; Rolland, 2019).
  - **Increase domestic security:** China and Russia believe they can secure their own domestic borders and protect their respective regimes by limiting influence from separatist and Islamic terrorist groups (Luft, 2016; Katz, 2019).
  - **Support joint Sino-Russian objectives:** China's and Russia's strongest mutual goal is weakening the United States' political influence (Katz, 2019). Secondly, China and Russia want to support Central Asia's economy (Weitz, 2019 & Rolland, 2019), and quell civil unrest that could cross into their domestic borders (Luft, 2016; Katz, 2019).
  - **Weaken US Influence:** China's and Russia's mutual goal of weakening United States hegemony and reconstructing a new multi-polar world order is the accumulation of many other objectives. What China and Russia can individually contribute to weakening US political influence is different, as China and Russia have different strengths and weaknesses (Katz, 2019). Despite these differences, their actions are often complimentary to one another (Rolland, 2019), and usually rely on supporting a narrative of countering US expansionism (Lons, 2019).