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Central Asia *in* Asia: Charting growing trans-regional linkages

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ABSTRACT

As the so-called 'Asian Century' unfolds, Central Asian countries are increasingly directing their foreign relations eastward. Meanwhile, Asian states are equally turning to Central Asia in their search for energy resources and new markets. This dual dynamic is giving rise to closer and deeper ties in three key areas. As far as infrastructures are concerned, various Asian powers have adopted Silk Road policies that see Central Asia as a fundamental transit route for their long-haul connectivity projects. In the field of trade, Central Asia's exchanges with other Asian countries have been growing steadily since the 1990s, in some cases even coming to rival, in comparative terms, exchanges with the West. Lastly, in terms of multilateralism, Central Asia is increasingly enmeshed in a web of overlapping institutions with a strong Asian identity, coexisting with the region's Western institutional references. The article then problematizes this emerging pattern by sketching out some of the possible ramifications that could stem from the sustainment and consolidation of these trends for the international order and the global balance of power.

Prevailing narratives of Central Asian international politics typically refer to a looming power struggle along an East–West divide. Today, however, we also see accelerating trans-regional ties linking it to diverse Asian sub-regions (East, West, North, South, and Central), much of them bypassing the West altogether. Countries in these sub-regions are gradually taking an increasingly large place in the foreign relations of Central Asian states, across a variety of sectors. In a way, this is a sign of the times: if we speak of an Asian century today, it is because of the demographic weight and economic dynamism of this part of the world. With Asia emerging as an important pole of global economic and political power,[1] it is inevitable for it to gradually draw countries from adjacent (sub)regions as it consolidates this role. At the same time, a number of pull factors are present. Just like for countries in the West, Central Asia's natural resources are an attractive bounty for countries in the East, equally hungry for energy resources. Moreover, for the rising powers and emerging economies of East, South and West Asia, Central Asia represents an obvious hinterland to engage, as they seek to refashion the environment around them or reach out to new markets. India (Das Gupta, 2010; Kavalski, 2009; Moore, 2007; Peyrouse, 2010; Sachdeva, 2006), Iran (Pahlavi & Hojati, 2009), Japan (Dadabaev, 2013, 2014; Hickok, 2000; Rakhimov, 2014), and South Korea (Fumagalli, 2006, 2012) have all displayed similar efforts in this direction, though it is China that has undoubtedly developed the largest footprint, factor that some regard as the main spur for other major Asian players like Japan (Walton, 2009) and India (Kavalski, 2010a, 2010b). More recently, ASEAN countries have also begun to explore ways to connect South-East Asia to Central Asia in a single economic corridor (Jakarta Globe, 2013).

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[1] In 2010, the IMF projected that over 40 percent of global GDP will be generated in Asia by 2030.

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On the other hand, Central Asian states have developed a tradition of foreign and security policy diversification (Contessi, 2015). At a time when Russia, under strain in the Post-Soviet space, has been tightening its grip on its "near abroad", Asian countries represent a further and previously under-explored *vector* to mitigate these new pressures. Meanwhile, this vector can also represent a way to offset the negative externalities that the economic crisis in Russia has inevitably generated for the region. Significantly, the search for these connections has ticked up since 2014. Engaging their broader continent has thus come to represent an opportunity for Central Asian countries, and one that comes with little strings attached.

However, these growing interactions have deep roots. As this paper illustrates, they also have a multidimensional character, encompassing trade, infrastructure connectivity and multilateralism. Together, these ties are gradually re-enmeshing Central Asia with parts of Asia from which it had been isolated for most of its modern history, and this is itself a noteworthy development. But what is the broader picture that the sustainment of this trend could compose in the long run? Even though their true magnitude will be discernible only "once the dust has settled to the ground", the transformations these tendencies portend – which are taking place against the backdrop of the rapid and more profound changes the international system is experiencing – are potentially far-reaching.

Authors have noted that rivalries between Asian rising powers were adding an Eastern dimension to the so-called New Great Game in Central Asia (Contessi, 2013, 237; Cooley, 2014). Calder (2012) argued that complementarities between the advanced industrial and the extractive economies of Eurasia are driving the emergence of a new form of continentalism. Lastly, though more recent opinions have nuanced the realism of such a proposition (Umland, 2015), Trenin (2015) has argued that an expanding Sino-Russian axis would bring about the emergence of a "Greater Asia" that will challenge the international order. If the trends portrayed in this special issue stay the course and further deepen in the future, they could come to offer a corollary to some of those early assessments. To be sure, the latter are still largely embryonic and open-ended, and anticipating their future evolution presents undisputable difficulties. Yet, this does not mean the exercise should not be attempted, as they pose real challenges for analysts and policymakers alike.[2] Therefore, the exercise pursued herein, if still tentative (and with due caveats), has both scholarly and policy relevance.

This article begins by canvassing the broad trends that are giving rise to this pattern, and successively debates various scenarios in a first cut endeavor to anticipate implications. Sections one, two and three survey such deepening interactions in the areas of trade, infrastructure connectivity and multilateralism respectively (and by way of the latter, security and finance). Section four then takes a step further and considers the possible ramifications of these trends. It develops a four-pronged definition of international regions and contemplates the possibility that the long-term sustainment of trans-regional ties around Central Asia may foreshadow regional consolidation along continental lines. Acknowledging certain caveats to which I return in the conclusion – the still nascent nature of these ties, Central Asia's continued links to the West, and Asia's overall heterogeneity – three different scenarios are put forward based on different forms of governance that may emerge in this hypothetical macro-region.

1. Trade

Statistics highlight a pattern of growth in commercial exchanges between countries of Central Asia and those of other subregions of Asia, even amidst diminishing trends between individual dyads.

Unsurprisingly, the lion's share goes to 'usual suspects' like China, Japan, and South Korea which, in 2013, ranked among the top ten trading partners for several Central Asian states. China was the first trading partner for Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and the second for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; Japan was Kyrgyzstan's fifth, Tajikistan's third and Uzbekistan's tenth trading partner; South Korea was Uzbekistan's fourth, and Turkey was the ninth partner for Kazakhstan, the fifth for Kyrgyzstan, the third for Tajikistan, the second for Turkmenistan and the fifth for Uzbekistan (International Trade Center, 2014).

However, the interesting and less recognized part of the story is that countries of West, South and – though volumes remain negligible – even Southeast Asia are taking increasingly prominent positions among Central Asian states' trading partners.

East Asian countries are clearly the leading Asian partners for Central Asian states (see: Peyrouse and Fumagalli, this issue, for analyses on China and South Korea respectively). In 2013, China had total trade of \$22.5 billion with Kazakhstan, about \$1.5 with Kyrgyzstan, about \$2.1 with Tajikistan, \$9.3 with Turkmenistan, and \$4.5 with Uzbekistan. In the same year, Japan's total trade with Kazakhstan amounted to some \$1.7 billion (\$ 2.051 in 2012), \$258 million with Kyrgyzstan, some \$2.5 million with Tajikistan, \$61.6 with Turkmenistan and \$225.12 with Uzbekistan. South Korea's trade with Kazakhstan amounted to some \$1.4 billion, \$114 million with Kyrgyzstan, \$44.5 with Tajikistan, \$155.4 million with Turkmenistan, and \$2.2 billion with Uzbekistan.

In the South and West Asian context, the leading trading partner is Turkey, with close to \$3 billion traded with Kazakhstan in 2013, \$290 million with Kyrgyzstan, \$655 million with Tajikistan, \$2.75 billion with Turkmenistan, and \$1.360 with Uzbekistan.

The same year, Iran's exchanges with Kazakhstan reached \$620.6 million, \$22 with Kyrgyzstan, \$283 with Tajikistan, \$535 with Turkmenistan and 136 with Uzbekistan, while India's trade with Kazakhstan amounted to \$677 million, with Kyrgyzstan to \$26.7 million, with Tajikistan \$48 million,

[2] At various times, R scholars have observed the need to devote more efforts to anticipating international change (for instance, see: Gaddis, 1992; Holsti, 1998; Vincent, 1983; see also: Deutsch, 1966).