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Bandwagoning with the Belt and Road: Russia's changing attitude towards the Chinese presence in Central Asia post-Crimea

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Abstract

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has considered the Central Asian states to be a part of its exclusive sphere of influence. In recent years, however, China has also increased its presence in the region, investing heavily in the energy and transportation sectors. This is exemplified by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), specifically its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) component, which was launched in September 2013. As China increased its presence in the region, and Russia launched its own initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), the two powers seemed to be on a collision course. However, relations between the two never deteriorated as predicted. Instead, the opposite has happened. In 2015, Russia found itself internationally isolated due to its controversial actions in Ukraine and embraced China's initiative. This dissertation will seek to explain Russia's increasingly accommodating attitude towards China's growing investment and influence in Central Asia, despite Russia's zealous protection of its exclusive sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and the two powers' diverging interests in the region. Using a case study comparing Russia's stance towards the Chinese presence before and after the annexation of Crimea, this dissertation will examine Russia's shifting stance through the lens of realist balance of power theory. Specifically, it will argue that Russia has engaged in 'soft' bandwagoning behaviour.

Keywords

Russia, China, Central Asia, Belt and Road, Silk Road Economic Belt, Bandwagoning, Balance of Power

Název práce

Konformní pás a cesta: měnící se postoje Ruska k čínské přítomnosti ve Střední Asii.

Abstrakt

Od pádu Sovětského svazu považuje Rusko státy Střední Asie za součást své výlučné sféry vlivu. V posledních letech však Čína zvýšila svou přítomnost v tomto regionu a výrazně investovala především do odvětví energetiky a dopravy. Příkladem těchto aktivit je projekt Nové Hedvábné stezky, známý pod názvem „Belt and Road Initiative“ (BRI), a konkrétně Ekonomický pás hedvábné stezky (Silk Road Economic Belt), který byl vytvořen v září 2013. Mnozí se domnívali, že zvýšená přítomnost Číny v tomto regionu a souběžné vytvoření ruské iniciativy v podobě Eurasijské ekonomické unie (EaEU) znamená střet těchto dvou velmocí. Vztahy mezi oběma velmocemi se však nezhoršily, právě naopak. V roce 2015 se vzhledem ke svým kontroverzním aktivitám na Ukrajině Rusko ocitlo v mezinárodním systému izolované a nečekaně iniciativu Číny pozitivně přijalo. Tato diplomová práce vysvětluje stále vstřícnější postoj Ruska vůči rostoucím investicím a vlivu Číny ve Střední Asii, a to navzdory horlivé ochraně ruské výlučné sféry vlivu v postsovětském prostoru a rozdílným zájmům obou velmocí v regionu. Diplomová práce se zabývá měnícím se postojem Ruska k čínské přítomnosti ve Střední Asii prostřednictvím případové studie porovnávající postoj Ruska k čínským aktivitám před a po anexi Krymu. Z hlediska realistické teorie diplomová práce ukazuje, že Rusko zaujalo postoj tzv. soft bandwagoning, tedy že se v zájmu zachování rovnováhy sil přidalo na stranu nové velmoci ve středoasijském regionu.

Klíčová slova

Rusko, Čína, Střední Asie, Nová Hedvábná stezka, Ekonomický pás hedvábné stezky, „bandwagoning“, rovnováha sil

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to maintain an exclusive sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space. Naturally, it has considered the Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – to be a part of this sphere. These countries have largely agreed to this arrangement, with their governments maintaining close relations with the Kremlin. However, in recent years, China has also increased its presence in the region, investing heavily in energy and transportation. In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched an ambitious new infrastructure project, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which consists of both a land-based ('Silk Road Economic Belt') and sea-based ('21st Century Maritime Silk Road') component. The BRI, with an estimated budget of $1.2-1.3 trillion dollars (Morgan Stanley, 2018), is a massive state-funded initiative to invest in infrastructure projects throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa in hopes of improving connectivity to China, sustaining Chinese economic growth and internal stability, and expanding Chinese soft power. The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), in particular, is focused on the development of overland road, rail, and pipeline projects, as well as the cultivation of closer political and economic ties with numerous Asian and European states.

The SREB's most important partners are the former Soviet Central Asian states to China's west that have long maintained deep ties with Russia. The growing Chinese presence in Central Asia has been a thorn in the side of Sino-Russian relations since the 1990s, and has threatened to jeopardize the strategic cooperation that they have cultivated over the decades. China's growing investment and deepening ties to the region culminated in the announcement of the SREB in September 2013, which was made without consulting Russia. Shortly thereafter, Russia finally launched its own, long-planned, Eurasian integration initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), intended to consolidate Russia's exclusive sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space. The two powers seemed to be on a collision course. However, relations between them never deteriorated as predicted. Instead, the opposite has happened, as Russia found itself internationally isolated due to its aggressive actions in Ukraine. In May 2015, Russia and China signed a cooperation agreement announcing the coordination of the EaEU and SREB. For Russia this was a dramatic reversal of the the EaEU project's original intension. This dissertation will seek to answer the research question of how Russia's increasingly accommodating attitude towards China's growing investment and influence in Central Asia can be explained, despite Russia's zealous protection of its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and the two powers' diverging interests in the region.

This dissertation will address this research question through a case study of specific developments that have shaped Russia's policy towards China's growing presence in Central Asia, epitomized by the BRI/SREB initiative. It will compare the relationship between Russia and China in the region between the launch of the SREB in September 2013 and the May 2015 cooperation agreement between the EaEU and SREB. Within this period, I will compare Russia's stance towards China's presence in the region both before and after sanctions were imposed on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea in spring 2014. I will first examine the pre-Crimea status quo in relations between Russia and China with regard to Central Asia, including pre-existing tensions and Russian balancing behaviour. I will then examine policy changes made by Russia after the sanctions were imposed. Finally, I will interpret Russia's actions through the lens of realist theory.

This dissertation will argue that Russia's shifting stance towards the Chinese presence in Central Asia, can be explained through the realist concept of bandwagoning. In particular, it will argue that Russia's international isolation after the annexation of Crimea forced it to bandwagon with its regional rival, China. Realist theory would predict that two powers coveting the same area, one stagnating and one emerging, should lead to the older power trying to 'balance' against the emerging power. Indeed, Russia had previously tried to 'balance' against China in the region, through its own regional integration initiative. However, if the emerging state becomes too powerful, or the established state becomes too weak, its rival may decide it can no longer balance against it and that it must instead ‘bandwagon’ with the stronger state. Russia’s recent behaviour can be interpreted as a limited or ‘soft’ example of the concept of bandwagoning. In spring 2014, after months of popular pro-European protests overthrew Ukraine’s Russian-backed president, Russia annexed Ukraine’s Russian-speaking Crimean peninsula. This sparked a major international backlash including economic sanctions on Russian companies and individuals that threw an already weak Russian economy into recession. As a lifeline, Russia drew closer to China than ever before and embraced the SREB. This dissertation will argue that Russia has engaged in ‘soft’ bandwagoning after finding itself in a weakened position due to the imposition of punishing economic sanctions by the United States, European Union, and others, in response to its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its continued hostility towards Ukraine and its western supporters.

The rest of this dissertation will be structured as follows. Chapter Two will introduce the theoretical concepts of ‘soft’ bandwagoning, ‘soft’ balancing, and hedging; as well as the case study methodology and why it was chosen. Chapter Three will consist of a three-part literature review. The first part will review the history and development of realism, balance of power theory, and the concepts of bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging; the second part will review how these concepts have been applied to this specific case in previous literature; and the third part will provide a general overview of how scholars have characterized the Sino-Russian relationship. The literature review will also identify gaps in the literature. Chapter Four will provide a brief introduction to the context of the case study, including the strategic importance of Central Asia, the history of the post-Cold War Sino-Russian relationship, and recent Chinese development investment in the region. Chapter Five will consist of the case study itself, examining how Russia’s stance towards the Chinese presence in Central Asia has shifted since the imposition of sanctions in 2014, and assess these changes by applying realist theory. Finally, Chapter Five will summarize this dissertation as well as reflect on the findings, shortcomings and challenges that were encountered over the course of this research.

Chapter 2 – Theory and Methodology

This chapter will explain the theoretical framework used in this dissertation, as well as the choice of the case study methodology.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This dissertation will examine the case from the theoretical standpoint of realism. In particular it will use a modified ('soft') interpretation of the realist concept of 'bandwagoning' to explain Russia's shifting stance towards the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia, a region that Russia has traditionally perceived as part of its exclusive sphere of influence. Specifically, this dissertation will argue that due to its weakened position and increased international isolation following its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's position towards China has shifted from a 'hedging' stance, i.e., attempting to maintain a cordial relationship with China, on the global level while, at the regional level, counteracting (balancing) its Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with its own Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) project; to a 'soft' bandwagoning stance, i.e., for all intents and purposes accepting China as the dominant power in Central Asia and aligning its own Eurasian integration initiative with China's, but maintaining appearances of sovereign agency in the region.

The concepts of bandwagoning and balancing are often thought of as opposite strategies, with 'hedging' used to describe an intermediate position entailing simultaneous cooperation and confrontation. All are closely associated with the broader concept of the 'balance of power', which was developed by structural realist theorists. Balance of power theory stipulates that states in an anarchic system seek to prevent any one state from becoming too powerful and dominating the ecosystem. Therefore, they engage in 'balancing', which typically consists of states forming alliances to increase their combined relative power against a common adversary. According to most structural realists this is the standard behaviour employed by states seeking to preserve the balance of power. (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987)

However, when states simply cannot maintain a balance of power against a powerful adversary, they may engage in 'bandwagoning' behaviour. Bandwagoning refers to when a state (reluctantly) aligns with a stronger power and concedes that in terms of power, though it may benefit in absolute terms, it will fall further behind the more powerful counterpart with which it chooses to align. According to most structural realists (e.g., Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001), this is done by weak states out of a desire for survival. It is seen as surrendering to the more powerful state and is considered the polar opposite of balancing. Others (Schweller, 1994, 1997; Sweeney & Fritz, 2004), however, argue that this does not necessarily entail surrender to an adversary and that states often bandwagon for a variety of reasons and simply may do so out of rational self-interest. More recently, the concept of 'hedging' has been developed to refer to a middle ground between balancing and bandwagoning. This relatively new concept (Korolev, 2016: 375) is used to describe simultaneous engagement and containment (Ibid: 381). Similarly, the 'soft' qualifier has increasingly been used to describe behaviour that does not reach the intensity of traditional hard power definitions of balancing and bandwagoning, but nevertheless serves the same purpose. 'Soft' balancing and 'soft' bandwagoning usually entail leaving a small amount of plausible deniability, or concealing the full extent of a state's commitment through rhetoric or posturing (Grigorescu, 2008; Massie, 2009, 2014; McDonough, 2013).

This dissertation will explain Russia's shifting stance towards the Belt and Road Initiative using the interrelated concepts of balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning. Specifically, it will argue that Russia was previously attempting to 'hedge' against China, by maintaining a friendly 'strategic partnership' at the global/systemic level, while 'soft' balancing against China at the regional level by pushing back against China's increasing regional dominance through its own Eurasian integration initiative as well as trying to steer the Shanghai Cooperation Organization towards its desired direction. However, with China's steady rise in economic and political power and with Russia's international isolation following its controversial intervention in Ukraine, especially its illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia went from trying to balance China's Eurasian project with its own to 'soft' bandwagoning with China, abruptly reversing course and aligning its EaEU initiative with China's BRI in 2015, and fully embracing China's economic and political presence in their shared neighbourhood. This entailed submitting to China, despite it being an increasingly powerful rival that threatens Russia's privileged position in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Though, on the Central Asian level, Sino-Russian cooperation entails Russia bandwagoning with the emerging regional hegemon, China; Russia's bandwagoning behaviour can alternatively be seen as 'balancing' against its primary adversary, the United States, on the global level. Both Russia and China share an interest in undermining the American-led world order and are wary of American influence in their respective regions.

2.2 Methodology

This dissertation employs a qualitative approach to assess Russia's surprisingly conciliatory policy and rhetoric towards China's ambitious infrastructure development projects in Central Asia. Specifically, it seeks to address why Russia has embraced, rather than resisted China's SREB initiative in Central Asia using the case study method. The specific case that will be examined is Russian policy towards Chinese investment in Central Asia leading up to and after the deterioration in Russia's economic and diplomatic ties with the West after its annexation of Crimea. The case study will focus on the period between China's announcement of the BRI's SREB in September 2013, and Russia and China's May 2015 agreement to coordinate their respective Eurasian integration initiatives. I will compare Russia's stance towards the Chinese presence in Central Asia at the beginning and end of this time period and identify key turning points that occurred within this period.

I have chosen the case study method as it allows for a broad, complex topic, such as Sino-Russian relations, to be studied in a narrow, carefully delineated context. Employing the case study method and selecting a case that can be delineated within a specific historical and geographical context makes it easier to isolate complicating variables and draw accurate, specific conclusions. I have chosen to focus on this specific case as it contains a relatively clear beginning (the launch of the SREB) and conclusion (the cooperation agreement between the EaEU and SREB), and also ensures a narrow focus on Sino-Russian relations with regard to Central Asia, rather than a broader look at relations overall.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

This literature review will consist of three parts: a review of the development of the theoretical concepts of bandwagoning, balancing, hedging, and balance of power; a review of previous scholarship applying these concepts to this case; and a review of previous scholarship discussing the general nature of the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia; to what extent the two powers are rivals or partners. This review will also identify gaps in the literature and explain how this dissertation seeks to overcome these gaps.

3.1 Literature Review of Theoretical Concepts

3.1.1 Structural realist balance of power theory

Balance of power theory, and the concepts of balancing and bandwagoning are derived from neorealism, or structural realism. Neorealism is 'neo' because it differs from classical realism which holds that human nature dictates the self-maximizing behaviour of states. Classical realists argue that international and domestic politics are motivated by innate human factors that are a universal, if tragic, facet of life. The classical realist viewpoint dates back to Thucydides in Ancient Greece and has been exemplified by the writings of Claus von Clausewitz and Hans Morgenthau (Lebow, 2007). Neo-realism, or structural realism, by contrast, holds that state behaviour is simply shaped by the structure of the international system; that states are not necessarily motivated by an innate human selfishness but that they are forced by structural incentives to maximize their self-interest in order to survive in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979).

One of the key figures in the development of structural realism was Kenneth Waltz, whose 1979 book, *Theory of International Politics* outlined what he saw as the anarchic international system, as well as his balance of power theory. According to Waltz, international relations occur in an anarchic system in which states are the primary units. In this system, states, particularly smaller and weaker states, seek to balance the power of stronger states to prevent them from dominating the system. According to Waltz, "balance-of-power politics prevail wherever two, and only two requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive" (pg 121). In Waltz's interpretation, states seek to maintain a balance of power for primarily defensive purposes; survival is the key motivator. He argues that, "The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system" (pg 126). In addition to balancing behaviour, Waltz also describes bandwagoning as "sensible behaviour" under certain circumstances, particularly "where gains are possible even for the losers and where losing does not place their security in jeopardy" (pg 126), a situation that is arguably applicable to the selected case.

Stephen Walt (1985, 1987) amended Waltz's balance of power theory by arguing that state behaviour in an anarchic international system is determined by more than simply concerns about raw power. While states can bandwagon for both offensive or defensive reasons, defensive concerns – maintaining independence in the face of a potential threat; are more important than offensive concerns – bandwagoning to acquire territory, influence, etc., through assisting the stronger power (Walt, 1985: 8). In other words, the most important determinant of both bandwagoning and balancing behaviour is *threat*. States will either ally with or against the most threatening power. Another important determinant of behaviour is *proximate* power – states will be more concerned with threats that are closer to home. Walt's defensive realism, or balance of *threat* theory, accounts for some of the failures in the predictive power of simple balance of power theory. For example, if powerful states share interests and cultural ties, and do not perceive each other as threats (e.g., the US and UK in the 20th Century), they will not automatically seek to balance each other (Walt, 1987).

Whereas Walt argues that states are motivated by threats (defensive realism), John Mearsheimer (2001) argues that states are primarily concerned with maximizing power (offensive realism). Mearsheimer argues that bandwagoning is a behaviour undertaken by weak states; something that is only done as a last resort in order to ensure survival, but should otherwise be avoided, as it prevents states from being able to pursue their offensive interests. To Mearsheimer, bandwagoning entails conceding power to a rival state – giving up hope of preventing the 'aggressor' from gaining power at a state's own expense. Therefore, according to this interpretation, Russia bandwagoning with China is a serious capitulation.

Over time, however, the neorealist interpretation of balance of power or balance of threat theory has been criticized for being overly rigid and not necessarily accurate in describing real world occurrences. Many scholars have therefore amended and updated it. This section will examine some updated interpretations of bandwagoning and balancing behaviour, in particular, *balance of interests* theory and the concepts of hedging, 'soft' balancing, and 'soft' bandwagoning, as well as a constructivist critique.

3.1.2 Balance of Interests theory

Randall Schweller (1994, 1997) argues that bandwagoning behaviour is determined not by questions of *power* or *threat* but by *interests*. He argues that states primarily bandwagon for reasons other than survival. Even if they do not feel threatened, they often still bandwagon with other states because they share their interests. Schweller is a neoclassical realist; like the classical realists that preceded structural realism he believes that certain innate factors other than structure are relevant to state behaviour. Unlike structural realists, Schweller does not believe bandwagoning is simply the opposite of balancing or is similarly caused by the nature of the anarchic international system. He argues that, while states engage in balancing behaviour for defensive reasons, in the real world, they usually bandwagon for self-interested offensive reasons: "Simply put, balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain. The presence of a significant external threat, while required for effective balancing, is unnecessary for states to bandwagon." (1994, pg 74) According to Schweller's Balance of Interests interpretation, bandwagoning does not mean siding with a state's greatest threat, it simply means siding with "the stronger" (1997: 928). States that feel secure are willing to bandwagon with more powerful states that share their interests. Schweller's Ohio State University colleagues, Sweeney and Fritz (2004), likewise argue that states ally for reasons of interest, not balance of power or balance of threat. They observe that throughout history, bandwagoning has actually been more common among great powers than balancing, despite what most realists would predict. In response to Walt, who argues that threats determine alliances, Sweeney and Fritz argue that state interests determine what states perceive as threats and that states then form alliances with other similarly minded states in response (pg 436).

If we accept Russia and China's rosy rhetoric of friendship and strategic partnership, the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia, that of a weaker state bandwagoning with a more powerful state that does not threaten its regime security, conforms to the balance of interests interpretation. Unlike the US, which the Russian regime sees as an existential threat, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does not threaten its core interests, i.e., maintaining the regime status quo in Russia as well as its 'near abroad', and retaining Russian influence in Europe. Therefore, Russia bandwagons with China in Eurasia. However, this dissertation will argue that, on some level, China does indeed pose a threat to Russia; not necessarily in terms of regime security, but at the very least it threatens Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia and its carefully cultivated self-conception as a 'great power'. Russia's bandwagoning should not be seen as simply opportunistic, profit-seeking behaviour but as a reluctant choice made by a weakened power. Therefore, while balance of interests theorists certainly improve upon or refine the neorealist/structural realist position, and have demonstrated that great powers often do bandwagon (Sweeney & Fritz, 2004); they do not fully capture the nuances of real-world behaviour, such as that which has been undertaken by Russia vis a vis China in response to the Ukraine crisis. Fortunately, scholars have recently developed the concepts of *'hedging'*, *'soft'* balancing, and *'soft'* bandwagoning to reconcile balance of power theory with the nuances of state behaviour in the real world.

3.1.3 'Hedging', 'Soft' Balancing, and 'Soft' Bandwagoning

During the period of US hegemony following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, realist scholars were confounded by the lack of military balancing against the United States. As structural realist theory would predict, other powers should have sought to re-establish a balance of power. However, no such balancing, particularly in a traditional hard power military sense, arose. In response, many realist theorists revised balance of power theory to account for the lack of the predicted balancing that occurred during this era. The concepts of hedging, 'soft' balancing, and 'soft' bandwagoning, were developed.

Hedging is a relatively new concept that refers to simultaneous engagement and containment (Korolev, 2016: 375-381). According to Tessman (2012), hedging can be used to describe a variety of state behaviours that are "simultaneously less confrontational than traditional balancing, less cooperative than bandwagoning, and more proactive than buck-passing[1]" (pg 193). In particular, he uses the term 'strategic hedging' to describe behaviour that is commonly used by "second-tier states like China, Russia, France, and Brazil", who seek to forge their own path in a unipolar world, without drawing the ire of the hegemonic power (in this case, the United States). Tessman argues that hedging behaviour is most prevalent in a unipolar system whose leading power is nevertheless experiencing relative decline. Strategic hedging allows second tier states to avoid a costly conflict with the current hegemon in the short term, but also prepares them better for such a confrontation if it occurs in the future.

While Tessman presents a useful new concept to describe behaviour that cannot be classified as either balancing or bandwagoning, his focus on hedging as a behaviour undertaken by secondary powers vis a vis the hegemon at the broader systemic level is too limited to be useful for the analysis undertaken in this dissertation. Korolev (2016), on the other hand applies hedging to interstate relations at the unit and regional level. He applies the concept to the Sino-

[1] The concept of *buck passing* is not a focus of this dissertation, but it is a component of balance of power theory that describes when states refuse to confront a growing threat themselves, and instead hope or encourage other states to do it for them (Christensen & Snyder, 1990)

Russian relationship, between two powers who see eye to eye on the issue of balancing against American unipolarity, but possess diverging interests in their shared neighbourhood. According to Korolev, "This two-level nature of China–Russia relations—balancing the Unipole while hedging towards one another—suggests that their global strategic behaviour and regional bilateral interactions are subject to different causal forces that push in different directions" (pg 375). Unlike Tessman, Korolev argues that hedging behaviour is usually not the result of the structural pressures of the international system, but rather due to states having different geopolitical concerns and economic interests (pg 393). This is similar to Schweller and Sweeney and Fritz's argument that subjective state interests, rather than systemic constraints, determine bandwagoning behaviour, and can therefore be considered a *neoclassical* realist interpretation.

'Soft' balancing and 'soft' bandwagoning are similar descriptors of self-interested behaviour that does not reach the level of intense hard power confrontation or cooperation described by conventional structural realist definitions of balancing and bandwagoning. Of the two, 'soft' balancing has been the more developed concept and is used to describe diplomatic, and economic ('soft power') efforts to balance against the hegemonic power, without the risk of jeopardizing a peaceful, mutually beneficial status quo. 'Soft' balancing was used to describe practices by states both nominally allied with and adversaries to the United States, to push back against post-Cold War American hegemony. It was particularly prominent when describing events in 2003, in the lead-up to the Iraq war, when states such as France, Germany, and Russia sought to thwart US action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq (Paul, 2004; Pape, 2005). Pape (2005) explained the concept of 'soft' balancing in the context of Bush-era American unilateralism as such:

> *"In the near term, France, Germany, Russia, China, Japan, and other important regional states are unlikely to respond with traditional hard-balancing measures, such as military buildups, war-fighting alliances, and transfers of military technology to U.S.*

opponents... Instead, major powers are likely to adopt what I call "soft-balancing" measures: that is, actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies." (pg 9-10)

'Soft' bandwagoning, on the other hand, is admittedly a less-developed, or at the very least, less frequently used concept but it can be seen as the other side of the coin. It has been used in the same context (of unipolar American power at the turn of the millennium) to describe the largely symbolic but enthusiastic support for American foreign policy, particularly with regard to Iraq, given by newly democratized former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe (Grigorescu, 2008: 283-284). This bandwagoning was likewise 'soft', as it did not entail a significant military or even financial commitment but a vague rhetorical solidarity with a hegemonic power that these states, in particular Yushchenko-era Ukraine and Saakashvili-era Georgia, saw as a valuable protector against a regional *threat* – Russia. According to Grigorescu 'soft' balancing and 'soft' bandwagoning leave states enough leeway and deniability to maintain an officially 'neutral' stance and do not threaten the geopolitical status-quo as acts of 'hard' balancing or bandwagoning would (pg 284).

Drawing an interesting parallel to the topic of this dissertation, the concept of 'soft' bandwagoning has also been used to describe the behaviour of another geographically massive but sparsely populated northern state sharing a continent with a vastly wealthier and more populated southern neighbour. Justin Massie (2009, 2014) and David McDonough (2013) have used the term 'soft' bandwagoning to describe Canada's relationship with the United States. Massie defines soft bandwagoning as "modest or indirect support of a threatening or powerful state in order to optimize its security or profit from it" (2014: 51). Both Massie and McDonough describe 'soft' bandwagoning with the United States as Canada's default strategic doctrine, or 'strategic culture'. The realities of proximity and power imbalance mean that despite its desire to be seen as an independent sovereign agent, on the most fundamental level Canada ultimately has no choice but to bandwagon with its more powerful neighbour (Massie, 2009: 631-633). However, this bandwagoning is considered ‘soft’ because Canada continues to present itself as an independent, multilateralist ‘middle power’ and is not afraid to voice disagreements when they arise (e.g., Canada’s opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq) (McDonough, 2013).

While the ‘soft’ qualifier for the concepts of both bandwagoning and balancing is useful as it adds necessary nuance and better explains the real-world behaviours of states, it has mostly been used to explain the behaviour of smaller states in the context of unipolar US hegemony and US unilateralism, at both the global and regional level. More recently the concept of ‘soft’ balancing has also been applied to the post-Soviet space (Nurgaliyeva, 2016), though, here too it is used to explain the behaviours of smaller states attempting to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy in a region increasingly characterized by great power competition. It is rare that these concepts are applied to these powers itself. However, despite the fact that it is seldom used in this context, it nevertheless can be quite useful.

This therefore reveals a gap in the literature that this dissertation will attempt to fill. The concepts of ‘soft’ bandwagoning and ‘soft’ balancing, developed by scholars such as Grigorescu, Massie, McDonough, Nurgaliyeva, Paul, and Pape in the context of small states’ relationships with major powers, will instead be applied to the relationship between two major powers themselves. The concepts of ‘soft’ bandwagoning and ‘soft’ balancing will be used to answer the research question of why Russia has shown such an increasingly accommodating attitude towards China’s growing presence in Central Asia. The concepts of ‘soft’ balancing and ‘soft’ bandwagoning will be used to explain the interplay between these two massive, nuclear-armed powers, in their common economic and political ‘backyard’: Central Asia.

3.1.4 Alternative: Constructivist approach (Wendt, 1992)

Before moving on, it should be briefly noted that while the theory used in this dissertation is based on realism, it is important to acknowledge critiques of realism, particularly the realist concept of the balance of power. Most prominent is the constructivist critique. Constructivists, led by Alexander Wendt (1992), have also criticized structural realism's conception of the balance of power. In particular, Wendt argues that the anarchic structure of the international system does not necessarily lead to the same outcomes predicted by realist scholars. Rather, states' actions are shaped by their socially constructed identities:

> *"[A] state may have multiple identities as "sovereign," "leader of the free world," "imperial power," and so on. The commitment to and the salience of particular identities vary, but each identity is an inherently social definition of the actor grounded in the theories which actors collectively hold about themselves and one another and which constitute the structure of the social world."* (Wendt, 1992: 398)

However, even if we do not consider ourselves to be realists per se, realist frameworks such as balance of power can still be useful. A state that identifies as a major power and believes in a realist interpretation of the international system will likely act according to realist principles (Wendt· 1992: 398-400). In a way, realism, or state behaviour that conforms to realist prescriptions, becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (pg 410). This is strongly applicable to the case covered in this dissertation. Modern Russia consistently acts according to the principles of realism. Since the 1990s, Russia has seen the world as primarily one of states, great powers, and power politics (Lynch, 2001; Maitra, 2014; Lo, 2018). In addition, the aggressive Russian interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) can be seen as acts of hard balancing vs the perceived US threat (Korolev, 2016: 385), demonstrating that Russia has applied a realist vision when conducting its foreign policy.

3.2 Previous Applications of Realist Concepts to the Selected Case

No previous literature has applied the particular concept of bandwagoning or the more general concept of balance of power theory on an in-depth level to the specific case of Russia's shift towards accommodating China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project. However, many authors have applied them on a more shallow level. In most cases, merely mentioned them when discussing the Sino-Russian relationship, without deeply engaging with the theory, or fully explaining what they mean when using terms such as ‘bandwagoning’, ‘balancing’, or ‘hedging’. This section of the literature review will examine previous scholarship applying balance of power concepts to this case (or closely related cases) in order to assess the extent of the gap in the literature that this dissertation aims to fill.

Marcin Kaczmarski (2015, 2016) has toyed with the concept of bandwagoning in his writings on the Sino-Russian partnership. His 2015 book, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order,* asks: “Why has Russia not hedged against or balanced China’s rise, choosing instead closer co-operation and an even more unequal relationship?” (pg 3). While he does not delve deeply into the concept of ‘bandwagoning’ in this work, the way he describes a weakened Russia’s acceptance of China as the primary power in Eurasia after the 2008 financial crisis, despite the divergence of the two states’ strategic visions and the deep distrust between the Russian and Chinese elite, fits squarely within a broad definition of ‘bandwagoning’. However, unlike the argument made in this dissertation, Kaczmarski argues that Russia’s acceptance of a transfer of geopolitical hegemony to China in Eurasia began well before the Ukraine crisis and was actually a result of the 2008 financial crisis. In a 2016 article, he takes a step further and argues that the 2015 declaration ‘joining’ the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) and BRI, as well as Putin’s vision of “a great Eurasian partnership”, announced at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016 (Interfax, 2016), should be considered an example of ‘bandwagoning’, and explicitly uses that term (Kaczmarski, 2016). He argues that Russia now accepts China’s dominant position and has given up trying to counterbalance its rising power. This notion, that Russia has in some sense surrendered to China coincides with the mainstream realist point of view that bandwagoning should be seen as the action of a weak state and only be considered as a last resort (Mearsheimer, 2001). However, Kaczmarski also points out that Russia has tried to save face by posturing as if it has the upper hand, using the grandiose rhetoric of the "Greater Eurasia Project" to conceal the increasing asymmetry of the Sino-Russian relationship (pg 5).

Bitabarova (2019) has also referred to Russia's push to 'link' the EaEU and BRI as bandwagoning. She argues that "the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West following the annexation of Crimea has left Moscow little choice but to *bandwagon* with the Chinese Eurasian plan" (pg 8). She also describes the Sino-Russian partnership as a 'counterbalance' to US hegemony, therefore using balance of power terminology to describe both regional (bandwagoning) and global (balancing) actions. Like Kaczmarski, Bitabarova does not elaborate on her chosen terminology as the main focus of her article is not the application of realist theory to this case. Nevertheless, by mentioning the concept of bandwagoning when describing the Sino-Russian agreement linking the EaEU and BRI, Kaczmarski's 2016 article and Bitabarova's 2019 article come closest to mirroring the argument made in this dissertation. However, in both cases, the concept is only briefly mentioned and is not fully defined or developed.

Other authors have characterized the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia using balance of power terminology, but have eschewed the concept of bandwagoning. For instance, in describing the Sino-Russian partnership, Michael Cox (2016) alludes to 'balancing' against the West, though he only describes it in a negative sense by saying: "Some of course will still insist that that this does not add up to classic *balancing* behaviour" (pg 319). He also does not define the term or describe it in any detail. Despite that, Cox's characterization of the Sino-Russian relationship as one in which the two powers have seemingly set aside their differences to counter their main geopolitical threat describes classic balancing behaviour. Cox details how Russia and China have attempted to use the SCO as balance against the American military presence in Central Asia after the 9/11 attacks, and promoted closer cooperation among the BRICS countries to counter western dominance of international institutions, such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Bank (326-327). In addition, Cox explains that Russia has supported China by lobbying against the Trans-Pacific Partnership and that, in return, China stood by Russia after its post-Crimea international isolation, signing major gas deals and staging joint military exercises, despite the risk to China's image (pg 327-329).

Perhaps whether or not the Sino-Russian partnership should be considered an example of balancing or hedging behaviour, or bandwagoning depends on whether we are looking at the case from a regional (or continental) perspective or a global perspective. Russia's acceptance of Chinese hegemony in Eurasia can be seen as bandwagoning with a stronger power, or alternatively, as balancing against the United States, which has targeted Russia with economic sanctions since it annexed Crimea and intervened in Ukraine in 2014, and interfered in the US presidential election in 2016.

Alexander Korolev (2016) characterizes the Sino-Russian partnership differently depending on what facet of the relationship is being examined. At the global level, he sees Russia and China coming together to balance against the US. However, at the more localized level, Korolev sees neither bandwagoning nor balancing, but the more ambiguous concept of 'hedging'. According to Korolev, "China–Russia relations form a two-level pattern: a strategic consensus on the global scene coexists with a more complex pattern of interaction involving both common interests and clashes of interests at the regional level" (pg 384). Korolev sees Russia and China's close cooperation at the global level as 'balancing' vs the US. Russia and China have signed economic deals such as the $400 billion gas deal made in 2014 and numerous financial agreements designed to challenge the hegemony of the US dollar, as well as military cooperation, such as joint naval exercises in Peter the Great Bay (2013) and the Mediterranean Sea (2015), and Xi's attendance of the 2015 Victory day parade in Red Square, which was boycotted by Western leaders over the situation in Ukraine (pg 387-388). However, despite Russia and China coming together to balance against the US at the highest level of global geopolitics, Korolev argues that at the regional level tensions between the two remain. Korolev argues that with regard to the issues of South China Sea/Vietnam, the Arctic, and

Central Asia, Russia has been engaged in hedging, rather than 'bandwagoning' behaviour. (pg 391-397) Nevertheless, even Korolev notes the surprising depth of the cooperation between Russia and China that has taken place in Central Asia in recent years, despite China's growing dominance of that region (pg 396-397).

Likewise, Fels (2018) also sees Russia hedging against China in the regional/Asian sphere (but 'soft' balancing vs the US on the global level). However, Fels acknowledges that Russia has drifted closer to China as its relations with the West have crumpled. He notes Russia's willingness to harmonize its EaEU initiative with China's BRI but refrains from arguing that Russia is 'bandwagoning' with China. Instead, he sees Russia's recent behaviour towards China as 'hedging', as Russia has simultaneously drawn closer to China (EaEU-BRI coordination), while also trying to improve its relations with other Asian countries that are unfriendly towards China (Japan, South Korea, Vietnam). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that Russia's current relationship with China extends beyond 'hedging'. With Russia weakened and isolated due to Western sanctions and abruptly agreeing to a cooperation agreement between the EaEU and SREB, despite China's ever increasing strength at the expense of Russia's previously dominant position in Central Asia, a strong argument can be made that Russia is in fact (soft) 'bandwagoning' with the undeniable economic and political strength of China.

Overall, existing literature applying the concept of bandwagoning and the related concepts of balancing and hedging to the case of the Sino-Russian relationship leaves something to be desired. Realist terminology has been applied to this case but the scholarship has not rigorously defined these terms or engaged with the theory from which they originate. The lack of clear definitions also makes it difficult to differentiate 'hedging' from 'soft' balancing and/or 'soft' bandwagoning. It is possible to interpret the exact same behaviour in different ways depending on which definition of 'hedging' or 'soft balancing'/'soft bandwagoning' is being used. This presents a gap in the literature that the case study section of this dissertation aims to address.

3.3 Debate over the Nature of the Sino-Russian Relationship

The final section of this literature review will assess the longstanding argument over the true nature of the relationship between Russia and China in Central Asia. The developing Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia has often been described in one of three ways: as a competitive or even adversarial new "Great Game," analogous to the original "Great Game" between the nineteenth-century British and Russian Empires; as a temporary strategic alliance between two powers that should nevertheless be considered rivals, which Bobo Lo (2008) termed an "Axis of Convenience"; or, lastly an emerging alliance, or at the very least a permanent strategic partnership, that has developed because of steadily converging strategic interests and a shared world view.

3.3.1 New 'Great Game'

The idea of a "New Great Game" in Central Asia deliberately evokes a term popularized in Rudyard Kipling's 1901 novel, *Kim,* which described covert actions between British agents attempting to protect the British empire in India, and Russian agents determined to undermine it. The term thereafter came to be used to describe the geopolitical rivalry between the British and Russian empires over control of Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia, particularly from the perspective of a Britain that feared that the expanding Russian Empire would threaten its position in India. While the original "Great Game" was a historical term from the Tsarist era, the term enjoyed a renaissance after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and then again after the American invasion of 2001. (Becker, 2012) Recently the term 'Great Game', has been used to describe an adversarial competition between major powers – particularly the United States, Russia, and China – over influence in post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Transcaucasus, especially over the issue of energy (Edwards, 2003; Swanstrom, 2007).

In an article published one year before the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative entitled "Whither the New Great Game in Central Asia?" Stephen Blank (2012) takes for granted the idea that this competition is indeed taking place. He outlines the developments that have taken place in the region as well as the states taking part. He sees the new great game as a tripartite competition between Russia, China, and the United States, with each power pursuing its own interests according to a realist conception of interstate anarchy. Blank sees the game between the major powers intensifying, while paradoxically benefiting the Central Asian governments as they obtain greater resources for themselves and improve their state security as the major powers attempt to draw them into their respective spheres of influence. Written in 2012, Blank's article anticipates an impending withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and a broader American retreat from the region.

The planned US withdrawal, which was scheduled for 2014, but in reality never materialized, catalysed much speculation that the ensuing power vacuum, would intensify the rivalry between Russia and China. Blank revisits the idea of a new 'Great Game' in a 2013 article written with Youngkyoo Kim, asserting that the Sino-Russian rivalry over Central Asia was already intensifying. Once again taking for granted the idea that Russia and China are in competition over Central Asia, Blank and Kim argue that China is gaining the upper hand in the region. Interestingly, this argument was being made before the launch of the BRI, though here it is important to note that many of the infrastructure projects that later came to be included in the initiative were already being planned, constructed, or had even been completed during this time. The authors recognize China's influence in the region as, for the time being, overwhelmingly economic rather than security-oriented. However, they argue that China's sheer economic dominance bodes ill for Russia's position in the region. In a different article, Kim and Fabio Indio (2013) use the 'New Great Game' terminology to describe how the impending US withdrawal is intensifying Sino-Russian competition over spheres of influence as well as the intended direction of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); with China seeing it as an opportunity to expand its economic influence and Russia seeing it as primarily a security project (pg 276). The very real disagreements between Russia and China regarding the future direction of the SCO will be further explored in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Talk of a 'New Great Game' has been particularly prevalent when discussing the energy sector, with the idea being that outside great powers – China, Russia, the United States, and the European Union – are competing over a tangible resource in which Central Asia is abundant. Smith-Stegen and Kusznir (2015) use the term to describe "the decades-long struggle for control over oil and natural gas resources, infrastructure and influence in the Caspian region" (pg 91), with the main 'players' being Europe, China, the United States, and Russia. Smith-Stegen and Kusznir argue that due to Russia's heavy-handed approach to its Central Asian neighbours and the US and EU's concerns over human rights abuses and institutional reforms, China is 'winning' the new Great Game. This is because China has been more successful at reaching out to Central Asian elites and reassuring them of its peaceful ambitions. More recently, Carla Freeman (2018) has focused on the energy issue as a sticking point in Sino-Russian relations in the region. Freeman argues that as a growing economic behemoth, China's primary interest in Central Asia has been to gain access to the region's oil and gas reserves, trumping concerns about regional security or interest in developing transcontinental infrastructure. China's goal was facilitated by the 2008 economic crisis, which hit Russia hard and devastated the Russian oil and gas industry. Russian companies had previously dominated the region's resource sector but in the wake of the financial crisis, Chinese firms, which emerged relatively unscathed, took over the leading role in Central Asian oil and gas production, much to the chagrin of their Russian (and Western) competitors.

3.3.2 Axis of Convenience

Overall, subscribers to the notion of a 'New Great Game' consider Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia to be competitive or even adversarial, but within a broader context of multi-directional great power competition over influence and resources in the region. While many scholars have argued that the Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia is fundamentally adversarial, this has been difficult to square with the reality that Russia and China have been incredibly cooperative, and increasingly so; not just on a global level, but in the region itself. This is especially notable if Russia's cordial relations with China in post-Soviet Central Asia are compared with Russia's tense relationship with the US over American influence in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Both China and the US are major world powers with their own national interests, who are playing an increasingly important role in Russia's 'near-abroad'. However, it is only the American presence that has been greeted with any real sort of Russian pushback, despite the fact that China directly neighbours not only Central Asia but Russia itself, whereas the United States sits an ocean away. This has led to a narrative that explains the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia as a temporary partnership of convenience between two powers that nevertheless hold conflicting end goals for the future of Eurasia.

The idea that the 'strategic partnership' between Russia and China is temporary, unsustainable, or doomed to fail has existed for almost as long as the 'strategic partnership' itself (Anderson, 1997). Perhaps most influential, however, has been Australian Russia scholar Bobo Lo's 2008 book, *Axis of Convenience,* which argues that the Sino-Russian 'strategic partnership' is based on shared power interests that happen to coincide at the moment but that beneath the surface Russia fears that China will relegate it to the periphery of international importance. In the second chapter, Lo outlines the deep historical context of the relationship between Russia and China; one that has been marked by centuries of distrust on both sides. For Russia, China is associated with the 'Mongol Yolk' of the middle ages and for China, Russia is associated with the 'unequal treaties', under which European powers, including Russia, humiliated late imperial China (pg 17-37). Furthermore, the importance of Central Asia to Russia is likewise underscored by history. For most of the past two hundred years, Russia has been the dominant power in Central Asia, and its presence in the region has shaped Russia's self-identification as a major world power. In the words of Lo:

> *"Whether under the Tsars or Soviet rule or during the post-Soviet period, Moscow has invariably looked upon Central Asia with a patrimonial eye. Indeed, the idea that Russia has always been an empire, and never a modern nation-state in the Westphalian sense, owes much to the physical reality that the region has always either belonged to the Russian/Soviet Empire or been under its hegemonic sway."* (pg. 91)

However, though Russia may very well have real concerns about maintaining its sphere of influence against increased Chinese influence, Russia's current priority is countering the West. Increased US and EU influence in the post-Soviet space not only threatens Russia's strategic interests but, due to the Western tendency to promote democratization and institutional reform, is also seen as a threat not only to the security of neighbouring regimes, but also to the security of the Russian regime itself. By contrast, China does not seek normative change and is therefore seen as the lesser evil. The Russian frontier with Europe (Belarus excepted) is also the frontier of liberal democracy – accommodating the West means ceding political control; but accommodating China in Central Asia does not entail any major changes to the status quo. This reality means, tensions between Russia and China must be put on the back burner, for now.

In a 2013 article, Lo and Fiona Hill similarly argue that though Russia has gone out of its way to create the impression that it is friendly and accommodating towards China, fundamentally, its long-term strategic interests still put the two in conflict. Though Russia vehemently denies that it is trying to contain China, Lo and Hill conclude that, "over the long term, the economic and political gap between a dynamic China and a non-modernizing Russia will be too wide for Moscow to bridge in the Asia-Pacific. New problems such as the development of Arctic resources and shipping lanes could add more tension to bilateral relations. Ultimately, Russia has no more liking for a hegemonic China than it has for a unilateralist United States, or for any other alignment that could marginalize it…"

Though, in his later work, 2015's *Russia and the New World Disorder,* Lo acknowledges the two powers' increasing closeness since the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014

Ukraine crisis, the idea of an ‘axis of convenience’ has continually been echoed by other scholars. Rozman (2015) examines the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia through the lens of the two states’ economic development initiatives: Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Rozman, like Lo, acknowledges China and Russia’s presently cordial relationship and their shared opposition to US interests but warns that the overlapping nature of their respective initiatives in Central Asia means that the two powers are on a collision course. Precisely, “it is in Central Asia where their two major frameworks for reorganizing Asia have the greatest potential for colliding” (pg 6). Rozman also argues that Russia has been too focused on countering the Western threat and not enough on the Chinese threat, arguing that: “The threat to Russian interests in Europe is greatly exaggerated and that to its interests in Asia is unduly minimized” (pg 8). Yuan (2018) argues from a different perspective but shares the same view that beneath the surface, the Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia should primarily be thought of as a rivalry. Breaking with the consensus that China is undoubtedly the stronger partner, Yuan argues that, in fact, Russia is still the dominant player in Eurasia and that Beijing must appease Moscow, rather than the other way around, in order to pursue its international initiatives. Russia is hesitant to support the BRI not necessarily because it encroaches on Russia’s Central Asian sphere of influence but because its infrastructure projects largely bypass Russia itself. This is similar to Kaczmarski’s (2015) position that the BRI and the EaEU are competing initiatives, despite the surface level cooperation between the two (pg 96-99). However, Kaczmarski’s main argument rejects the notion that the two powers are destined to clash.

3.3.3 More than just convenient?

Kaczmarski (2015) contrasts Lo’s argument that the post-Cold War Sino-Russian partnership is a fragile, temporary partnership of convenience with the reality that it has held up remarkably, even strengthened over time, despite the growing economic threat China poses to Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia. Kaczmarski does not deny that there are tensions between the two states. He rejects the rosy vision of a 'strategic partnership' that has been optimistically touted by the Russian and Chinese leadership since the mid-1990s and emphasizes their competing visions for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Russia hopes to use as a "vehicle that facilitates the pursuit of the global interests of both these great powers", and which China prefers as merely a framework for cooperation and coordination among its member states (pg 94-96). He also argues that the two states' Eurasian integration initiatives, the EaEU and BRI, are in competition, seeing the EaEU as a primarily strategic initiative, despite its name. Russia knows it cannot compete with China economically and therefore hopes to use the EaEU to strengthen its political ties and keep Central Asia in its strategic fold and that China's BRI, in particular the land-based SREB, should be seen as a response to the EaEU. Of course, the SREB has been tied into the broader BRI and China's visions of increasing its overall power and influence; however, locally, in Central Asia, competition with the EaEU is a major motivating factor. (pg 96-99) Though this dissertation will argue that there has been a recent reconciliation between the two initiatives, Kaczmarski's description of rival initiatives was definitely valid in the early stages of the EaEU and BRI. His main argument, however, is that despite their wariness of each other and their many strategic disagreements, the partnership between the two powers is not destined to fall apart and has instead been strengthening. He argues that the main reason for this strengthening is Russia's weakened position following the 2008 financial crisis, from which China emerged unscathed. According to Kaczmarski the global financial crisis destroyed Russia's ability to dominate Central Asia and has led to a "peaceful transfer of power" to China. With China now the dominant player, Russia has had no choice but to accept closer cooperation and an unequal partnership, though it still seeks to protect certain privileges. Kaczmarski argues that because Lo's *Axis of Convenience* was only published in 2008, before the aftermath of the global financial crisis was clear, it both fails to account for how the Russo-Chinese relationship was reshaped by that calamitous event, and is too pessimistic about the two powers' abilities to avoid a collision course and construct a new status quo.

In his aptly named article titled "Not Just 'Convenient'", Michael Cox (2016) offers a more direct rebuttal to the argument made by Lo and others. According to Cox there is a consensus among western experts that Russia and China fundamentally possess diverging interests and any partnership between them is merely temporary and motivated by short term gains. He argues that this is dangerous because it lulls the West into a false sense of security. While Cox acknowledges that Russia and China do not see eye to eye on everything, he feels that western analysts are not properly acknowledging the depth of their cooperation. Cox's article is as much a critique of analysts who underplay the extent of Sino-Russian cooperation as it is a critique of the lack of scholarly attention that has been paid to the Sino-Russian relationship overall, especially compared with both countries' relationships with the West. From a western perspective he voices his frustrations with the scholarly consensus arguing that "unless we call things by their right name, there is a very real chance that two very illiberal powers who have no interest in supporting the current liberal order could make hay while the democracies keep on reassuring themselves that there is very little to be concerned about, because at the end of the day China and Russia are more likely to be (or become) rivals than partners, more likely to turn into serious competitors and enemies than allies" (pg 317). Cox argues that overall, Russia and China are fundamentally tied together due to their similar outlook versus the West. Looking back on the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, China and Russia have consistently stuck together in the face of hegemonic normative western (i.e. American) liberalism.

Omelicheva and Du (2018) also criticize the numerous scholars who have long predicted a Sino-Russian falling out over geopolitical concerns in Central Asia. Nevertheless, two decades after these predictions were first made, and despite the fact that China has steadily risen in economic and political influence, to the point that it has eclipsed Russia, relations between the two Eurasian powers seem to be closer than ever. Nadege Rolland (2019) likewise argues against Lo's position. She posits that, for the moment, evidence suggests a Sino-Russian condominium in Central Asia and that western commentators have consistently underestimated the level of cooperation between Russia and China, characterizing the conventional wisdom regarding the Sino-Russian relationship as so:

> *"The long list of supposedly irreconcilable contradictions separating Beijing and Moscow includes lingering historical grievances, a glaring demographic imbalance and a growing power asymmetry that exacerbates Russia's insecurities. As its own power declines, Russia is presumed to be bitter and resentful of China's rising economic, political and military capabilities, and its increased presence in areas that Moscow still covets as its exclusive sphere of influence. Surely, a Russia proud of its glorious past must resent being relegated to the role of little brother by a fast-rising China. Material and economic interests may currently be pushing Moscow and Beijing into each other's arms, but other factors such as prestige and a yawning power disparity will eventually pull them apart. The recent closeness in relations between the two powers, evident especially since 2014, is therefore widely assumed to be a marriage of convenience[2], based on fragile common interests, that will not last."* (pg 7)

According to Rolland, the Chinese are aware of Russian concerns about a rising China, as well as Russia's own desire to be respected as a great power. China also knows that Russia has had a longer, deeper presence in Central Asia and needs to be accommodated as it pursues its own goals in the region. China expects that in the long run, Russia will become increasingly less relevant and that it only needs to bide its time. (pg 8) Sino-Russian cooperation is also seen as mutually beneficial, or symbiotic, as it strengthens both of their positions as well as their attractiveness to other powers in the region, such as the EU, Japan, and India. From both the Russian and Chinese perspective, this would draw these other powers away from the US and

[2] A critical reference to Lo's aforementioned 2008 publication.

consolidate a Eurasian community. Partnership could also achieve a critical mass of support for the development of a new, China-led world order that Russia would prefer to the current US-led order. For instance, Russia is viewed with suspicion in European capitals but China's BRI is viewed much more positively. The idea is that it would be easier to get Europe onboard with a Chinese-led Eurasian initiative than a Russian-led one. (pg 18)

However, what if all sides to this debate are, at least to some extent, correct? Or perhaps they once were correct but economic and geopolitical changes have rendered them obsolete? For instance, as Kaczmarski (2015) points out, Lo's 2008 argument, that the Sino-Russian partnership is one of 'convenience', was made before the changes brought by the global financial crisis. It was also made well before tensions between Russia and the West exacerbated following the Ukraine crisis, and before the BRI was launched. It is certainly true that Russia and China possess many interests that fundamentally clash. Even Rolland, Cox, and Kaczmarski, who argue that the Sino-Russian partnership is much deeper than commonly assumed, are quick to remind their readers of this. Russia is indeed very protective of its sphere of influence, and it has engaged in hedging and balancing behaviour to counter China in the past. It is also true that Russia and China's Eurasian integration initiatives were launched as competing visions. In addition, wariness over the rise of China has also been shown to exist at the elite level in Russia (Gabuev, 2016). Nevertheless, despite China's continued rise – arguably, its growing threat to Russia's strategic position in the region – the two powers have continued to draw closer together. In order to offer a feasible explanation for this dilemma, this dissertation argues that the realist concept of bandwagoning can be used to account for the shift in Sino-Russian relations, from an apprehensive strategic rivalry, or a partnership of convenience, to the accommodation that can be seen today.

Chapter 4: Background of Russian and Chinese Interests in Central Asia

This chapter briefly introduces the historical and geographical context in which the case study takes place. It will summarize the continued strategic importance of Central Asia to both Russia and China, the simultaneous partnership and rivalry that has taken place between Russia and China since the Cold War, and Chinese economic and political involvement in the region, epitomized by the Belt and Road Initiative's Silk Road Economic Belt.

4.1 The Continued Relevance of Mackinder's Geographical 'Pivot'

In the eyes of the modern great powers, including Russia and China but also Britain, the United States, and pre-war Germany, Central Asia has always been incredibly strategically important. In fact, one of the founding fathers of the field of geopolitics, British geographer Halford Mackinder, made a name for himself describing Central Asia as the world's 'geographical pivot', the sparsely populated but resource-rich 'heartland' of Eurasia that has shaped history as both the source of consecutive waves of nomadic invasions and a coveted prize fought over by the world's great empires (Megoran, 2004: 347-348). According to Mackinder's argument, originally given as a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, control over the 'pivot' and its natural resources leads to dominance over the 'world island' (the interlinked continents of Eurasia and Africa), and the potential for a global empire (Mackinder, 2014: 35).

For most of the past two centuries, the bulk of Mackinder's Eurasian heartland has been controlled by the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union; and since the end of the Cold War, the now independent states of the region have remained within Russia's sphere of influence. It can be argued that Mackinder was right and that the key to Russian (and Soviet) power has been its control over this region. The rise of Chinese power in the region can also be understood through the lens of Mackinder's theory. The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) can be seen as China's attempt to secure control over the 'pivot'. In fact, as Rolland (2019: 17) has pointed out, Chinese officials have been greatly influenced by Mackinder's idea that control over the Eurasian heartland can lead to world power. Modern China even shares Mackinder's obsession with the railway as the key technology for consolidating control over the vast Eurasian landmass (Mackinder, 2014: 34). The continued influence of Mackinder's geopolitical theory therefore partially explains China's westward push, and its willingness to jeopardize its cordial relationship with Russia by ramping up its presence in Central Asia.

4.2 Post-Cold War Sino-Russian Relations and the SCO

The post-Cold War Sino-Russian relationship has been marked by contrasts; between tensions in some areas, and deep cooperation in others. Despite their rivalry in the Eurasian heartland, Russia and China have made a concerted effort to ensure their relationship appears friendly on the surface. Since 1996, when presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin declared a new era in Sino-Russian relations, both countries have consistently used the term 'strategic partnership' to describe their relationship (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). In the post-Soviet era the two powers have continuously downplayed their disagreements and emphasized their shared interests. As will be shown, they do not see eye to eye on everything, especially in their shared neighbourhood, but tend to agree on many global issues, especially when it comes to countering the hegemony of the United States. At the global level, China and Russia have cooperated extensively, often voting together at the United Nations General Assembly and in the Security Council, where they are both veto-carrying permanent members.

Perhaps the most prominent official institution born of Sino-Russian cooperation is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO is a "permanent intergovernmental international organization" (SCO, 2017) that now consists of eight members. First announced in Shanghai in June 2001 and entering into force in 2003, the SCO grew out of the earlier 'Shanghai Five' grouping (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) plus Uzbekistan. More recently, India and Pakistan have joined the group and several other states have attained observer status. However, the SCO has always been dominated by Russia and China and can be seen as an institutional framework for coordinating their 'strategic partnership' in the region (Gabuev, 2017). Officially, the SCO has an extensive mandate and is conceptualized as a forum for:

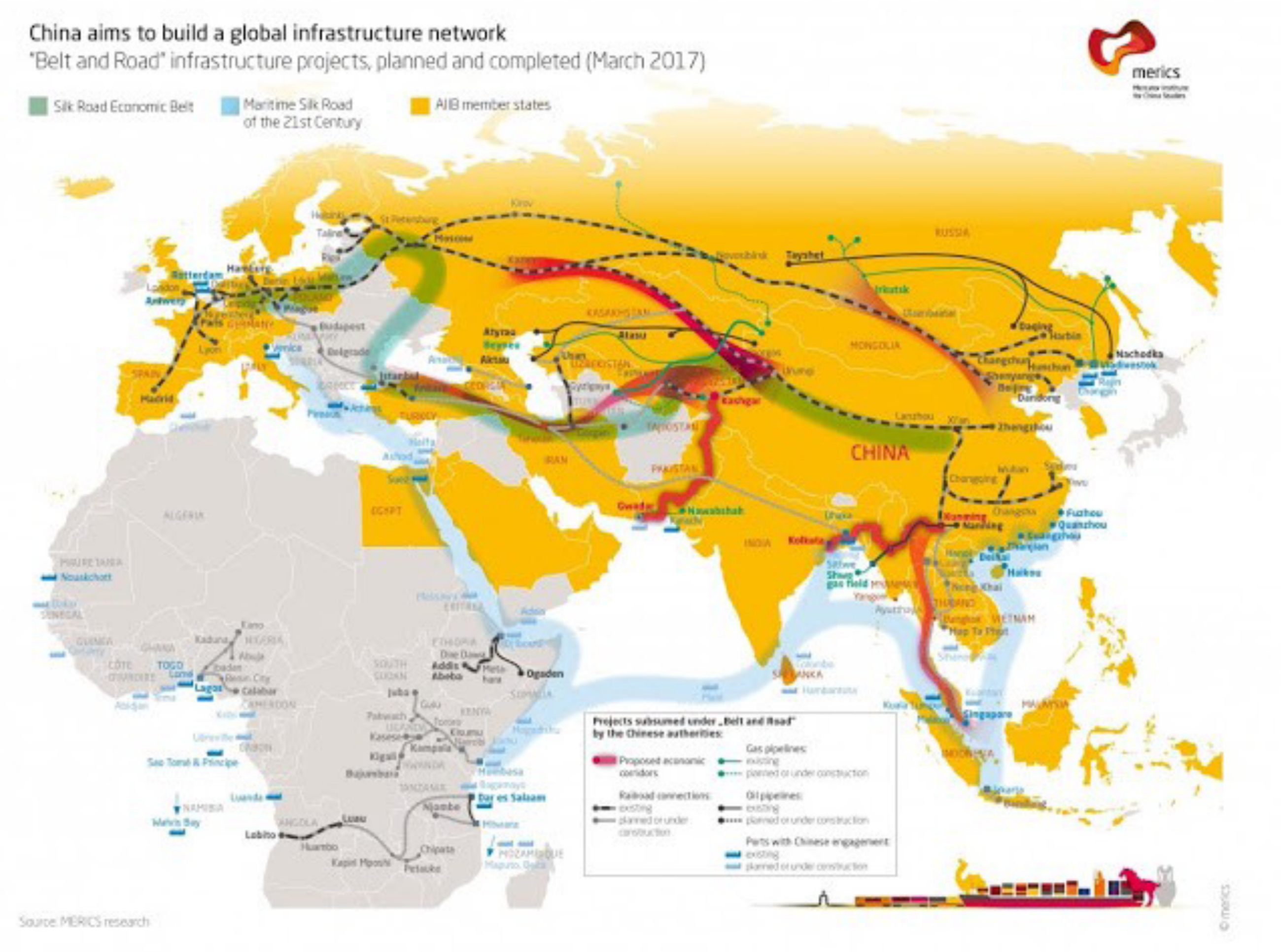
> "[S]trengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order." (SCO, 2017)

In reality, however, the SCO's primary aim is simply to enhance the regime security of its member states (Aris, 2009: 465), protect the authoritarian values of their elites, and fight what its member states deem the 'three evils' of terrorism, extremism, and separatism (Ibid: 477-478). While the SCO has succeeded in its main goal of enhancing regional security, disagreements between Russia and China over its future direction have led it to stagnate as a vehicle for deeper regional integration.

4.3 The Belt and Road Initiative

The 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) is the name of an ambitious economic development campaign that seeks to improve transportation and communications between China and at least 60 partner countries throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America (World Bank, 2018). Morgan Stanley estimates that China will spend $1.2-1.3 trillion on the BRI by 2027 (Morgan Stanley, 2018). The BRI hopes to increase connectivity between China and its investment recipients to find new ways to secure and expand China's sphere of influence, respond to the challenge of the US 'pivot' to Asia, stabilize and develop

China's restive Xinjiang and Tibet regions, and sustain the Chinese economy's high growth rate by offering an outlet for excess domestic industrial capacity (Clarke, 2016; Rolland, 2017; Carter, 2018). The BRI consists of both concrete rail, road, pipeline, and fibre-optic infrastructure projects, as well as new funding mechanisms such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which are tasked with financing these construction projects (Mayer, 2018: 2-3).



Map 1. (Merics, 2018)

Of the BRI's two components, the 'Belt' refers to the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB), and the 'Road' refers to the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road'. The SREB, the overland component of the BRI, was first announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping at a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan on 7 September 2013. A month later, in a speech to the Indonesian parliament, Xi announced the 'Maritime Silk Road', which focuses on developing port infrastructure and improving shipping between China and Southeast Asia, Africa, Australia, and Latin America. The initiative was previously known in English as ‘One Belt, One Road’, and is sometimes referred to as the ‘New Silk Road’ (Chatzky & McBride, 2019), but this dissertation will use the current official name of ‘Belt and Road’ when discussing the initiative as a whole. The many confusing names reflect the fact that the initiative is first and foremost a branding exercise, seeking to tie China’s very real infrastructure investments, not only in Central Asia but in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America, to a romanticized image of the ‘Silk Road’, the network of caravan routes that historically connected China with the Mediterranean.

It is important to be sceptical of China’s use of the term ‘Belt and Road’ as it refers to an extremely broad range of Chinese-led projects, some more concrete than others. The BRI is incredibly vague and China has never released an official list or map of approved projects and participating countries (Mauk, 2019). However, this vagueness also has the advantage of allowing the initiative to mean many things to many people. This is par for the course for China, where previous ‘grand initiatives’ were characterized by the same fluidity, opaqueness, and flexibility (Yu, 2017: 9). In some cases, deals signed with China under the BRI have had enormous, tangible results. In other cases, such as the recent agreements made with Luxembourg (Bloomberg, 2019) and Switzerland (Swissinfo, 2019), international deals announcing ‘cooperation’ with the BRI are little more than symbolic memoranda, which are nevertheless presented as major diplomatic breakthroughs. As a ‘brand name’, the BRI “incorporates under its ever-expanding umbrella virtually all of China’s diplomatic and economic activities,” even numerous projects that were completed well before the initiative was launched (Bitabarova, 2019: 150). Fels (2018) likens this to “old wine in new bottles” (pg 257). However, the BRI also includes many new developments and marks China’s international development push now taking place on a much larger scale – mostly old wine and some new wine in “a significantly bigger bottle” (Fels, 2018: 257). Most importantly, the initiative’s symbolic value cannot be underestimated. It represents a significant change in China's outlook towards the broader world and announces China's interest in being the dominant force shaping the future of Eurasia.

The BRI is the centrepiece of Xi's intended legacy and can best be summarized as an attempt to improve connections between the countries of the Afro-Eurasian landmass and reorient them, both economically and politically, around China (Mayer, 2018: 2-3). The BRI is analogous to post WWII initiatives, such as the Marshall plan, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund, which sought to create a US-aligned world order, and tied the promise of economic development to certain conditions. The difference is that unlike the previous Western model, which required recipients to liberalize, China's development model does not require its partner states to undergo systemic political, economic, or institutional reforms. However, the BRI does use similar language of openness and transparency in promoting a "community of common destiny" and a "Silk Road spirit". The BRI can be described as authoritarian-friendly globalization; offering the same promises of economic development, modernization, and hyperconnectivity, without the baggage of democracy promotion and institutional reform. Therefore, the BRI should be seen as more than just a list of construction projects, it is an effort to undermine the American-led liberal rules-based world order. The ultimate goal of the BRI is to bring in a new Chinese-led world order that will offer a sort of ultimatum: states that support China will flourish, states that do not will miss out. (Rolland, 2017)

4.4 The Chinese Style of Development Funding

While the BRI only came into being in 2013, China began investing in infrastructure abroad much earlier and had already developed a unique pattern or 'style' of development investment. Chinese infrastructure aid in developing regions, including Central Asia but also Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, is first and foremost designed to serve Chinese interests. Chinese loans are also different from those given out by western-dominated institutions, such as the IMF or World Bank. There are typically no normative political or institutional strings attached, making Chinese loans popular with elites in authoritarian countries. However, the agreements usually mandate that Chinese companies manage these projects and construct them using Chinese engineers and labourers. (Cooley, 2012: 88-89) Despite their lopsided terms, China's infrastructure loans are nevertheless marketed as a 'win-win'; but if they are a 'win-win' the winners are more often China itself and corrupt local elites rather than the actual economic and social development of the recipient country. China's willingness to lend money to risky governments, and the stringent terms it places on its development loans have led some commentators to refer to the Chinese-funded development model as a 'debt trap' (Chellaney, 2017; Pomfret, 2018; Parker & Chefitz, 2018). The Chinese development model is characterized by high interest loans and sometimes predatory terms and conditions. According to the *Economist,* "[China's] approach might be called sub-prime globalisation. At best, sub-prime lenders are non-judgmental sources of second chances. At worst, they are see-no-evil profiteers, and vulnerable to backlashes. China is a bit of both." (Economist, 2018) This model was infamously seen in action in Sri Lanka, which was forced to grant China a 99 year lease on a poorly performing but strategically important BRI-funded seaport in December 2017, after it was unable to repay its construction loans (Schultz, 2017).

4.5 What the Belt and Road Initiative means for Central Asia

The SREB, the component of the BRI that is most relevant to Central Asia, Russia, and this dissertation, consists of railways, highways, energy pipelines, fibre-optic cables, and streamlined border crossings pushing westward into the interior of Eurasia, ultimately connecting China with the advanced economies of Europe. The SREB can be seen as "an umbrella for numerous bilateral infrastructure investments" set up by China (Kaczmarski, 2015: 99). Particular projects that are part of the SREB umbrella and are centred on Central Asia include the New Eurasian Land Bridge economic corridor, connecting China and Central

Europe through Kazakhstan and Russia; and the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor, which runs southwest through Central Asia and Iran to Turkey and Southern Europe (Ramasamy, et. Al., 2017). Both ‘corridors’ consist of railway lines and highways designed to facilitate east-west transport of finished goods and raw materials. They are meant to contain both newly constructed lines and major capacity upgrades of existing ones. This transportation infrastructure will be complemented with high-speed fibre-optic cables, which are intended to connect with China’s future 5G network (Rolland, 2015). The new economic corridors envisioned as part of the SREB build upon infrastructure that China either previously completed or whose construction had already begun before the SREB was ever announced. Projects that have also been subsumed under the SREB ‘brand’, despite the fact that they predate its announcement include the Khorgos dry port, a free-trade zone and emerging city on the China-Kazakhstan border, which serves as a major transhipment point for transferring goods between the Chinese and Soviet rail gauges and a trading hub for Chinese and Kazakh merchants (Mauk, 2019); as well as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan’s natural gas fields to China, which was completed in 2009 (Cooley, 2012: 94).

Chinese infrastructure investment promises to have a profound effect on the region, as well as its relationship with its traditional hegemon, Russia. Currently, there is a staggeringly low degree of economic integration between the Central Asian states, despite the fact that they were all previously part of the Soviet Union. In fact, only 6.2 percent of cross-border trade in the region takes place between the Central Asian economies themselves. They are also incredibly dependent on remittances from Russia, which consist of up to a third of GDP in some states. With Russia’s economic decline due to low oil prices and Western sanctions, desperately needed remittance income has declined significantly. (Chatzky & McBride, 2019) This provides China with a golden opportunity to take a leading role in shaping the region’s economic and political future, and marks a significant shift in Central Asia’s orientation, moving from Russia’s sphere of influence to China’s.

Chapter 5 – Case Study

This chapter will contain this dissertation's main contribution to the scholarly literature. It will present a case study comparing Russia's policy towards the Chinese economic and strategic presence in Central Asia, before and after the United States, European Union, and other western countries imposed punishing economic sanctions in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. It will specifically focus on changes in Russia's attitude towards the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project that occurred following Russia's international isolation after the annexation of Crimea. It will begin by examining the status quo ate in Sino-Russian relations, particularly with regards to Central Asia and Russia's reaction to the announcement of the SREB in September 2013. It will then assess the concrete changes in Russian policy that occurred after sanctions were imposed in response to the annexation of Crimea and the proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, culminating in the signing of a cooperation agreement between Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) initiative and China's SREB in May 2015. This chapter will then assess these shifts, interpreting them as an example of 'soft' bandwagoning.

5.1 Pre-existing Tensions

Before the recent shift in Russian policy towards China, Russian relations with China were friendly on the surface, characterized by warm rhetoric and cordial optimism, but decidedly more complicated in terms of policy substance and the pursuit of strategic interests, especially in their shared backyard. The two Eurasian powers have consistently used the term 'strategic partnership' to describe their relationship since the 1990s. This has strengthened perceptions of their united front against American hegemony – in itself a form of 'balancing', albeit on a global scale. However, this has also masked tensions beneath the surface. Chinese officials were (and are) always sure to invoke the 'strategic partnership', as well as publicly acknowledge Russia's privileged position in Central Asia, but in practise China has slowly been working to undermine Russia's control over the Central Asian economy and has refused to concede to Russia "on any matter that compromises its security or economic interests" (Cooley, 2012: 95-96). The Sino-Russian relationship could therefore be characterized as one of hedging in an overall, global context, as it entailed strategic partnership in opposition to the West, contrasted with 'soft' balancing in their shared region.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's influence in Central Asia has slowly but steadily waned and, by virtue of its sheer size and growing economic weight, China's has strengthened. So far, China's growing footprint in the region has been mainly felt in the economic sphere. According to Korolev (2016: 395-397), the growth of Chinese investment in the region occurred in two waves, following the financial crises of 1998 and 2008, when a relatively unscathed China strengthened its position relative to its severely weakened Russian rival. In particular, China has invested heavily in the strategically important energy and mining sectors. The major turning point in determining which power had the upper hand in the region's energy sector was the 2008 financial crisis. Before the crisis, Russia still dominated central Asian gas exports. All Soviet-era pipelines from Central Asia ran through Russia and they monopolized gas transit until 2009. The Chinese were nevertheless building an energy presence – first the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, which opened in 2006, and then the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which begins in Turkmenistan and traverses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – which, as of October 2017, also deposits natural gas into the pipeline (KazTransGas, 2017) – before entering China and linking with its main east-west pipeline to China's heavily populated eastern seaboard. The Central Asia-China pipeline was completed in December 2009 and was the first Central Asian gas pipeline to completely bypass Russian territory. (Cooley, 2012: 94)

China properly took over the regional energy market after the 2008 economic crisis, during which Russian, Central Asian, and western bargaining positions collapsed. After the crisis, China embarked on both pipeline construction and investment in upstream production, while Russia hoped to maintain strategic control. Thereafter, Russia and China seemed to be on a collision course. Low prices and demand, however, made Central Asian energy transit less economical for Russia, which stopped importing Turkmenistan's gas entirely in 2009 and has curtailed its investments in the region (Korolev, 2016: 395). In response to the drop in Russian investment, China filled the void even further and increased its dominance of the market. (Kaczmarski, 2015: 88-89)

Another point of contention that had developed between Russia and China with regard to Central Asia was disagreement over the future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO had not achieved what it was expected to because of disagreements between Russia and China. Its original goal of stabilizing Central Asia has succeeded; but since then, it has failed to develop a coherent strategy and evolve into a more comprehensive institution. There have been numerous disagreements between the organization's two key members. For example, since 2006, Russia has wanted an SCO 'energy club' to create a single energy market within the SCO and to "balance the interests of energy suppliers, transporters, and consumers" (Movkebaeva, 2013: 81). However, despite initial optimism, this idea was rejected by China as it would allow Russia to veto Chinese energy policies in Central Asia. China prefers to deal with energy-rich Central Asian states on a bilateral basis. Meanwhile, China wanted a pan-SCO free trade zone but Russia and the Central Asian states were worried that this would lead to Chinese domination of their economies. China and Russia also failed to come up with a unified response to the 2008 financial crisis through the SCO, preferring instead to prop up their own domestic economies first. Overall, Russia and China cannot agree if the SCO should be "a vehicle that facilitates the pursuit of the global interests of both these great powers or a framework for co-operation in Central Asia that cannot be dominated by any single actor". (Kaczmarski, 2015: 95-96) Moscow prefers the former (as it would help it increase its global clout) and Beijing prefers the latter (as it would limit the SCO's role to merely coordinating regional security cooperation).

5.1.1 The Eurasian Economic Union as Balancing

In response to China's increasing economic domination of Central Asia, an area Russia has long seen as an integral part of its exclusive sphere of influence, Russia sought to develop its own Eurasian integration initiative. The Kremlin hoped to permanently tie its post-Soviet neighbours to Russia both economically and politically. Russia's flagship integration project is the EaEU, which was officially signed in 2014 and implemented on 1 January 2015 as a more comprehensive successor to the earlier Eurasian Economic Community (2000) and Eurasian Customs Union (2010). Officially, the EaEU and its predecessors are supposed to economically integrate the post-Soviet space by creating a single market and standardized regulatory regime. In reality, however, they have always been more of a political or security-oriented project. Russia's Eurasian integration project was primarily intended to consolidate Russia's hegemony over the post-Soviet space, and to keep other powers out of its sphere of influence; in the words of Wolfgang Zank, to "fill its 'Monroe Doctrine'[3] with substance" (Zank, 2017: 67).

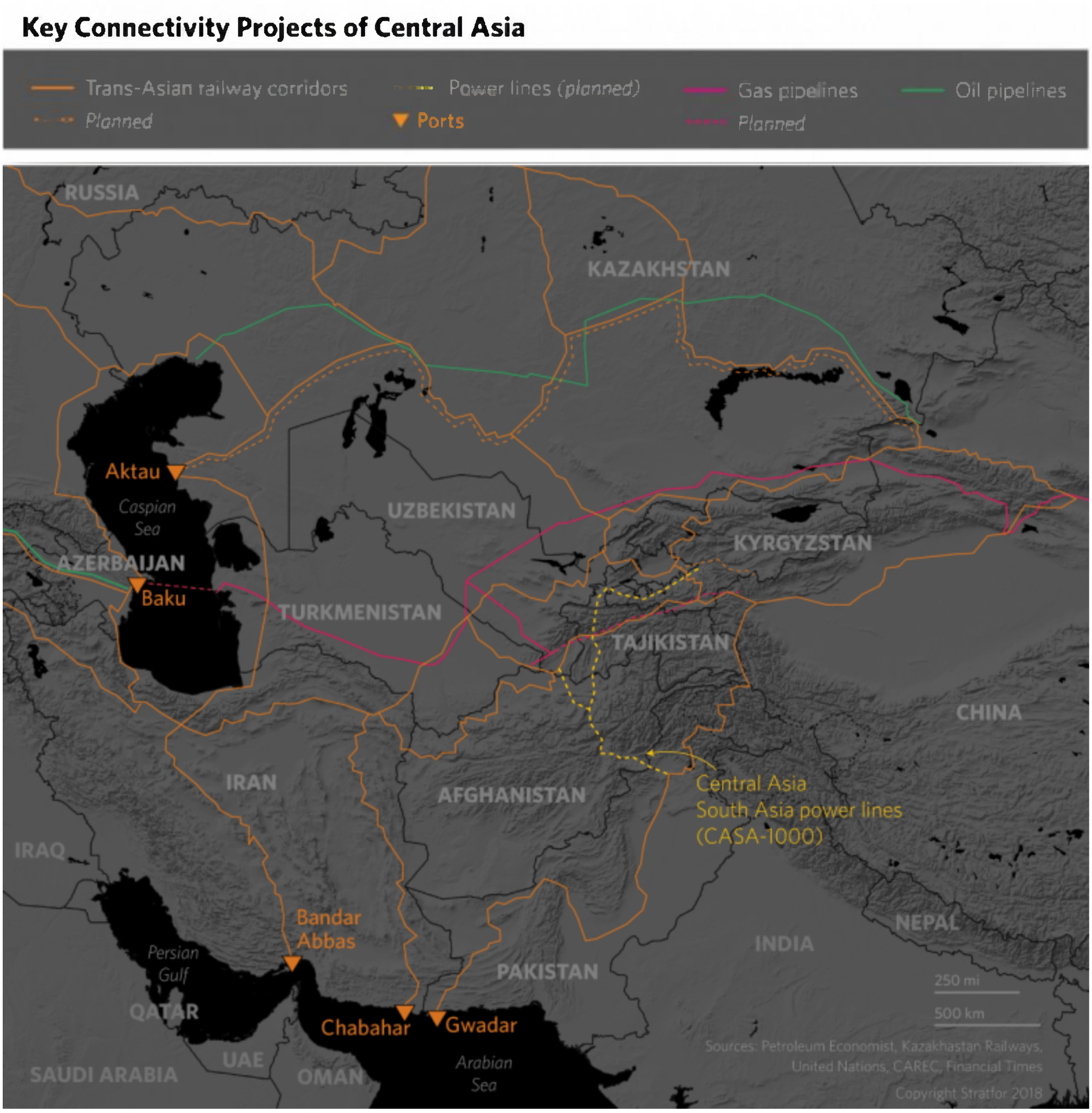
Admittedly, the first priority of the EaEU was to balance against the expansion of EU and NATO influence in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and the regulatory and political reforms that would entail. However, the project was also concerned with balancing against China in Central Asia. In the context of Central Asia, Russia hoped that by creating a unified regulatory regime in the post-Soviet space, the EaEU would be both fearsome and lucrative, as the smaller Central Asian states outside the Union, would find themselves left out of an enormous common market and facing higher tariffs when trading with their wealthier neighbours, EaEU members Russia and Kazakhstan. While this pressure quickly led to Kyrgyzstan joining the EaEU in 2015 (Korolev, 2016: 396-397), it has not succeeded in integrating the rest of Central Asia, with Tajikistan's planned accession put on hold, and

[3] Zank compares Russia's contention that it should have an exclusive sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space with the American 'Monroe Doctrine', which has historically described the United States' contention that it should have an exclusive sphere of influence over the Americas, to the detriment of other foreign powers.

Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous state, so far refusing to join, all while China continues to aggressively invest in the region on a bilateral basis. These setbacks have hindered the EaEU's effectiveness as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region.

5.2 7 September 2013 – Silk Road Economic Belt

Announced in the noteworthy location of Astana, Kazakhstan in September 2013, the SREB, the landward component of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is similarly focused on Central Asia and was unveiled while Russia was negotiating the Eurasian Economic Union and entertaining high hopes for its own Eurasian integration project. The SREB is centred on the former Soviet states of Central Asia, and hopes to facilitate the importation of natural resources from Central Asia to China and improve transportation and communication between China and Europe. Particularly with regard to the energy sector, China's economic rationale for the SREB inevitably clashes with Russia's strategic interests. China has long hoped to secure Central Asian oil and gas as an alternative to relying on shipment through the straits of Malacca, which are vulnerable to potential (US) naval blockade (Cooley, 2012: 91). However, this requires a shift of Central Asia's main energy export market from Russia to China and threatens the close relationship Russia has built with the Central Asian states, and Russia's strong bargaining position as the primary transit provider for Central Asian energy. Initially, the SREB, which, in the context of Central Asia, consolidates and coordinates numerous pre-existing Chinese-built infrastructure projects, was also seen as a rival to the then not-yet finalized EaEU project. Russia had invested a great deal of money and political will into its Eurasian integration project and had already been struggling to convince its post-Soviet counterparts of the project's virtues. Though they employ different strategies, the SREB and the EaEU as originally conceived, would inevitably clash. They are both focused on the same area – Central Asia – and have the same general goal – economic integration with each respective initiative's leading power.



Map 2. SREB Infrastructure Projects in Central Asia (Stratfor, 2018)

Publicly, China has sought to reassure Russia by talking exclusively about the economic aspects of its regional ambitions. It has even paid lip service to the idea of Russia retaining its role as the region's leading security provider and China taking over a leading role in economic development (Kaczmarski, 2015: 96). However, even if China reassures Russia that it is merely focusing on economic, not political or security goals, Russia knows that, over time, economic integration with China will bring Central Asia closer to China politically, much to the detriment of Russia's longstanding security interests. As China's investments in the region grow, it also becomes more concerned with protecting and securing its investments and cannot simply rely on Russia's security guarantee when it does not necessarily share the same strategic goals (Majlis Podcast, 2019[4]). In other words, China's economic interests in the region necessitate that it takes on a security role. (Kastoueva-Jean, 2017: 41-44)

5.2.1 Initial Russian Reaction to the SREB

Initially, Russia saw the SREB as a major escalation in its rivalry with China over influence in Central Asia. It was a major expansion of Chinese soft power into Moscow's sphere of influence, which Russia had been planning to safeguard through its EaEU initiative. It was also a potential trojan horse for an increased Chinese political and security presence. Russia had already been anxious about the increasing Chinese presence in Central Asia and President Xi's trip to the region in September 2013 drew concern among Russian officials even before he announced the initiative at his stop in Astana (Gabuev, 2016, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon": 62-63). The announcement itself, on 7 September came as even more of a shock to Russia, which had not been notified of China's plans beforehand. Russian officials interviewed by Gabuev had a highly negative reaction to the BRI announcement with security officials tending to be more concerned than economic officials. One official was even quoted as saying, "we understand this Chinese initiative as just another attempt to steal Central Asia from us" (Ibid: 65). The initiative seemed to confirm that Russia and China were now in a soft power battle for influence over Central Asia, with China attempting to draw the region away from Russia (Peyrouse, 2017: 96). Russian officials also immediately worried that the SREB would derail Russia's Eurasian integration project (Bitabarova, 2019: 156-157). Overall, the general mood was that the SREB would tie Central Asia and the Caucasus to the economic powerhouse of China, thereby allowing China to usurp Russia's role as the most important

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[4] 24 February 2019. "Majlis Podcast: China's Security Interests in Central Asia". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Rafael Pantucci (guest) speaking at 19:40-20:20. https://www.rferl.org/a/29787882.html

power in the post-Soviet space. Overall, Russian officials repeatedly expressed three major fears: that the SREB would undermine the coherence of the EaEU; that the SREB would outcompete Russia's plans to rejuvenate the Trans-Siberian Railway as a transportation route, with the SREB's transportation corridors perhaps even bypassing Russia; and that increased Chinese investment would crowd out or outcompete Russian investment in Central Asia (Gabuev, 2016, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon": 65-67).

5.3 2014: Ukraine Crisis and Crimea Annexation

The launch of the SREB in September 2013 came as a shock to Russia. It was a major setback to its integration plans in the post-Soviet space. It was already in a relatively weak position compared to China, which had been experiencing unprecedented economic growth and already possessed a population almost ten times that of Russia. Russia's main hope at balancing against China's rise in the post-Soviet region, coming in the form of the planned EaEU was also facing setbacks. Russia was struggling to convince Ukraine to join the EaEU, as joining the Russian-led bloc required Ukraine to abandon a popular association agreement it had negotiated with the European Union. Over the course of 2013, Russia used a stick and carrot approach, increasing economic pressure on Ukraine to abandon the EU agreement and dangling cheap energy and financial aid if it succumbed to its demands. In November 2014, Russia succeeded in convincing Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to drop the EU deal and sign a new economic deal with Russia instead (Donaldson et al. 2014: 176-181), with the assumption that this would lead to future EaEU membership (Chatham House, 2017: 11). However, the decision triggered massive pro-European protests that proved to be Yanukovich's downfall. In the chaotic aftermath of this revolution, Russia annexed Ukraine's Russian-speaking Crimean peninsula and launched a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine, attracting international outrage that isolated Russia and drove it into China's arms. It is ironic that

Russia's desperation to strengthen its Eurasian integration project would eventually lead it to bandwagon with China's Eurasian integration project instead.

The announcement of the SREB set the stage for further escalation of tensions between Russia and China over influence in Central Asia; but by the following spring, Russia found itself facing a more urgent challenge. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 drew such widespread condemnation that even China, which normally supports Russia in the international arena, voiced support for Ukraine's territorial integrity (Tiezzi, 2014). While it provided a much needed boost to President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings (Taylor, 2018), the annexation drew a harsh backlash from the United States, the European Union, and other western-aligned states. The US, EU, Canada, Japan, Australia, and others imposed severe economic sanctions on Russian companies and individuals, beginning almost immediately after the annexation began. A further round of sanctions was imposed in Summer 2014, after Russian-backed rebels in Eastern Ukraine shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, using weaponry provided by Russia, killing all 298 crew and passengers, a majority of which were EU citizens (Dutch Safety Board, 2015: 27). Since 2014, sanctions against Russia have been continually renewed and, with tensions between Russia and the West remaining at a post-Cold War high, additional sanctions have been implemented. (RFE/RL, 2018)

Russia's actions in Ukraine also damaged its relations with the Central Asian states. Russia needed these states to remain on board with its Eurasian project in order to maintain its position of strength in the region, and remain on an equal footing with China. However, Russia's aggressive actions towards Ukraine made Central Asian leaders anxious, increasing China's relative attractiveness as a partner. In the chaos of the 1990s, Russia had already set a precedent of military interference in the affairs of other post-Soviet states by sending 'peacekeepers' into breakaway republics of Georgia and Moldova. This time, Russia took a step further and actually annexed territory. This sent shockwaves through the post-Soviet capitals. Kazakhstan, which is home to a significant ethnic Russian population, was particularly troubled as the protection of Russian 'compatriots' was Russia's stated justification for its intervention in Ukraine. Continued distrust of Russia in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation led Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev, otherwise known for his airtight relations with Putin, to declare in 2015 that Kazakhstan could leave the EaEU if Russia-led integration efforts threatened its independence (Zabortseva, 2016: 2). Russia's actions alienated its Central Asian partners, potentially driving them further into the arms of China.

Going into 2015, Russia found itself internationally isolated and facing a severe economic crisis. The Russian economy went into recession until 2016 and the rouble lost roughly half its value (World Bank, 2017). Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev announced that due to the sanctions: "Our economy, probably, has lost tens of billions of dollars" (Reuters, 2014). In addition to Western sanctions, Russia's already fragile economy suffered from the steep decline in oil prices that took shape over the course of 2014 as cheap American shale oil came onto the market (Vox, 2014), putting a damper on Russia's feeble recovery from the 2008 crisis. Overall, Russia found itself in a significantly weakened position. Such a position is dangerous for a state that styles itself as a formidable great power. In order to return to economic growth, sustain its position as a great power in the eyes of the world, and pivot its economy away from sanctions-imposing Europe, Russia decided to bandwagon with China, particularly with its Eurasian development initiative.

5.4 Russia's Pivot to China

5.4.1 Economic policy changes

Following the Ukraine crisis, Russia could no longer access western loans and certain strategically important technologies and also found itself in a weaker position vis a vis China in Central Asia. Though Russia and China had long cooperated in Central Asia in the interests of maintaining peace and political stability, the two states had previously been unable to cooperate economically (Gabuev, 2016, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon": 67). However, this changed after the imposition of western sanctions, when Russia reoriented its economy towards China. It also finally joined China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which serves as an important financing mechanism for BRI projects, in April 2015 (Korolev, 2016: 397). Then, a month later, it signed the cooperation agreement with the SREB. By pivoting towards China, Russia was forced to accept a junior role in the partnership. However, this was the only option if Russia hoped to break its diplomatic isolation, gain access to Chinese loans and technology, and secure a new export market for its oil, gas, and mineral resources. In order to quickly reorient its economy eastwards, Russia eliminated many informal barriers to Chinese investment, and developed parallel financial infrastructure to allow Chinese banks to invest in Russia without getting caught in the web of western sanctions. (Gabuev, 2016, "Friends with Benefits") A major new energy deal signed in 2014 also signified Russia's pivot towards a closer relationship with China. After ten years of tough negotiations, on 21 May 2014, China and Russia finally signed a long-awaited gas agreement. The 30 year deal, worth $400B, stipulated that 38 billion cubic metres of Russian natural gas be delivered to China annually, beginning in 2018 (Brookings, 2014). The Sino-Russian gas deal came at an opportune moment as Russia's relations with the West were at their lowest point.

5.4.2 Security policy changes

Nevertheless, for all the economic benefits Russia accrued in pivoting to China, it no longer had the option of treating China as a strategic rival in Eurasia, and it could no longer afford to prevent China from investing in sensitive sectors of its economy; it had to bandwagon in the security sphere as well. This entailed making strategically significant concessions to its erstwhile rival. Concessions included exporting advanced weapons systems to China; opening up strategically important sectors of the Russian economy to Chinese investment, in particular, allowing Chinese companies to operate in the energy sector as co-owners of deposits; and indirectly supporting China in the South China Sea dispute. (Kaczmarski, 2016: 3-4) It also opened up Russian arms sales to China, in particular, selling its S-400 air defence systems and Su-35 fighter jets (which China could use to its advantage in the Pacific), a major concession in the bilateral relationship. Russia was previously apprehensive about arms sales to China as China had once been caught stealing the designs for Russian-made Su-27 jets in the early 2000s (Gabuev, 2018).

Most importantly from a geopolitical standpoint, Russia reassessed its opposition to China's security presence in Central Asia. Russia had no choice but to accept that China would come to play an increasingly important security role in the region, and that it can no longer afford to balance or hedge against its more powerful neighbour. (Gabuev, 2016, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon": 68-69) In October 2015, talks between the Chinese and Kazakh defence ministers were held, discussing defence policy in Central Asia and expanded military cooperation. For the time being, this cooperation has merely focused on thwarting a possible Islamist terrorist insurgency, a fear equally shared by Russia, China, and the Central Asian states themselves. While Russia is not hugely concerned as Kazakhstan's military is still much more integrated with Russia's in terms of equipment and doctrine (Ramani, 2015), China may choose to expand the scope of its mission in the future, threatening Russia's military hegemony in the region. The Chinese military is also now present in the highlands of Tajikistan, likewise for the expressed purposes of counterterrorism (Shih, 2019). An increased Chinese military presence in Central Asia does not necessarily threaten Russian interests and may even be welcome, but it marks a significant shift in China's role in the region.

Developments in China's security relationship with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan show that China is expanding into Russia's strategic territory, despite an expressed 'division of labour', which sees Russia as the region's security guarantor and China in charge of spearheading economic development (Bitabarova, 2019: 154). Russia's acceptance of this development is another example of its increasingly accommodating behaviour towards China in a region that it has historically considered to be a part of its exclusive sphere of influence.

Time will tell whether the significance of China's military presence in Central Asia will escalate beyond a counterterrorism role, and whether Russia will react.

5.4.3 April 2015 – Valdai Club Report

The intellectual underpinnings of Russia's agreement to sign a cooperation and coordination agreement between the EaEU and BRI can be found in a report recommending a bold new strategy to combine the Russian and Chinese Eurasian development initiatives. In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, a group of Russian intellectuals known as the Valdai Discussion Club, led by Sergei Karaganov and Timofey Bordashev, began developing a new strategy for Russia; to go above and beyond the EaEU in hopes of salvaging Russia's economic development and international political influence. Their report, *Toward the Great Ocean* (2015) argued that Russia should combine its EaEU project with the Chinese SREB, creating a Greater Eurasian initiative. The report can be seen as a blueprint for Russia's pivot towards bandwagoning with, rather than balancing against, China's push to integrate Central Asia into its Belt and Road Initiative. It advocates for Central Eurasia to be turned into 'zone of joint development', led by both China and Russia, in which confrontation between the two powers would be avoided. Eventually, Karaganov and Bordashev's ambitious project came to be referred to by Putin as the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership', and hopes to include China and Russia as well as the entire Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), India, Pakistan, and Iran (Rolland, 2019: 9).

The grandiose rhetoric of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) is designed to conceal the fact that China has the upper hand in the relationship and that it, rather than Russia, is in fact initiating the new Eurasian economic order. Of course, in reality, this process has been entirely dominated by China. However, Russia's new rhetorical stance of compatibility between the EaEU and the BRI/SREB hopes to sustain a narrative that Russia is still the dominant player in the region, and to conceal the fact that it has essentially given up trying to push back against Chinese economic hegemony over Central Asia. (Kaczmarski, 2016: 5)

5.4.4 8 May 2015 – BRI-EaEU Cooperation Agreement

Shortly after the release of the Valdai report and concurrently with the development of the GEP idea, on 8 May 2015 Presidents Xi and Putin signed the “Russo-Chinese Joint Statement on Cooperation on the Construction of Joint Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Projects”. Putin announced that "The EEU and Silk Road projects can harmoniously supplement each other" (TASS, 2015). The text of the agreement itself focuses on economic benefits, listing its top priorities as: expanding and optimizing trade and investment cooperation and increasing growth and employment; forming joint investments including joint industrial parks and cross-border zones of economic cooperation; improving transportation, logistics, and communications infrastructure; streamlining regulations to facilitate trade with the ultimate goal of a free trade zone between the EaEU and China; creating a favourable environment for small and medium-sized companies; financial cooperation; and promoting global development and interconnectivity (Kremlin, 2015: Part II). The agreement also promises a future free trade agreement between China and the EaEU (Kremlin, 2015: Part I). At a June 2015 meeting of a joint working group of Russian and Chinese officials a further list of long term priorities were identified including developing the high-tech, medical, educational, and research sector (Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, 2015). While the agreement lists numerous goals for the cooperation between the EaEU and BRI, it does not include any concrete details on specific policies that will be implemented to reach these goals.

The cooperation between the SREB and the EaEU has been presented as a sort of division of labour, with the EaEU creating an institutional framework for cooperation between its post-Soviet member states, and the SREB providing investment for infrastructure projects.

(Makarov & Sokolova, 2016) Once again, this allows Russia to save face, and continue to present the cooperation between the two initiatives as the coming together of two equal partners, each offering something unique and valuable. In reality, however, China is firmly in the drivers' seat of this joint initiative. It is also ironic that this agreement was made only a few months after the EaEU finally came into force on 1 January 2015. The Russian-led Eurasian integration project was many years in the making, and despite its nominally economic focus, was originally born out of a desire to consolidate Russia's the post-Soviet space as an exclusive area of Russian influence. (Zank, 2017: 67) The May 2015 agreement to join forces with China's rival Eurasian initiative was a complete departure from the EaEU's original geopolitical/strategic intention.

5.4.5 Deepening Cooperation Since the 2015 Agreement:

Since the 2015 agreement, cooperation between Russia and China on their joint initiatives has deepened, though progress has been slow. In June 2016, Putin and Xi met in Beijing and renewed their commitment to align their Eurasian integration visions, announcing a "comprehensive Eurasian partnership on the basis of openness, transparency and the consideration of other's benefits" (PRC Ministry of Commerce, 2017). In July 2017, the Russian and Chinese governments also established a task force charged with studying comprehensive economic integration. Besides presidential meetings and formal joint declarations, Russia and China have established a mechanism for regular meetings between officials at all levels, from high-level ministers to lower-level bureaucrats. Academics in both countries have also been brought on board to provide policy expertise to help implement the integration of the Russian and Chinese Eurasian initiatives. The Russian GEP has been developed with support from the Russian International Affairs Council, while the Chinese government has funded its own research into the "docking" of the BRI and GEP. (Rolland, 2019: 11)

5.5 Assessment of Russia's Bandwagoning

As an example of 'soft' bandwagoning, Russia's alignment with China, culminating in the May 2015 cooperation agreement between the EaEU and the BRI is limited in scope. Russia's pivot does not mean Russia and China have entered into a full-scale military alliance. Neither is China in such a position that it can force Russia to do its bidding. Rather, 'soft' bandwagoning allows Russia to continue posturing as an independent actor with its own agency. It leaves room for Russia to pursue some its own interests as long as it does not come into conflict with China by pursuing any concrete actions that threaten the actual power relationship (Massie, 2014: 51). Russia may also continue to present itself as leading the push for Eurasian integration, despite the fact that it holds a much weaker hand than China. Russia's continued rhetorical assertion that it is in charge of its own destiny, exemplified by the grandiose language describing the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership' conforms to the idea of 'soft' bandwagoning. As Massie (2009, 2014) and McDonough (2013) have shown regarding Canada's relations with the United States, 'soft' bandwagoning states often posture as independent sovereign agents, despite the fact that, in reality, they have resigned themselves to a limited, junior role.

Bandwagoning behaviour can also be recognized in Russia's pivot towards China in Central Asia from both a neoclassical and structural realist point of view. Russia's behaviour towards China since the Ukraine crisis can be seen as submitting to a powerful threat to its long term economic and strategic interests; bandwagoning as a last resort, as Russia realizes that it can no longer compete with China in the region. This conforms to the defensive interpretation of bandwagoning as exemplified by Stephen Walt (1987). Alternatively, from a neoclassical realist point of view, Russia's bandwagoning can be seen as opportunistic, profit seeking behaviour. Russia indeed shares some of China's interests as they are both aligned against the United States, and hope to see the end of the unipolar, American-led international order. They also want to prevent regime change (colour revolutions) in their shared neighbourhood.

However, by bandwagoning, Russia is submitting to China, which, despite their shared interests, and longstanding ‘strategic partnership’, should first and foremost be seen as a rival, not a natural ally. Though they are both aligned against the United States and have an interest in dismantling the unipolar post-Cold War world order, they do not have a shared cultural or civilizational worldview and have fundamentally competing interests in their shared neighbourhood of Central Asia. Russia’s recent embrace of China’s Eurasian development push therefore should not be seen as the formation of a voluntary alliance between like-minded powers. Russia is not engaging in what Schweller (1994) would describe as ‘bandwagoning for profit’, but rather is a weakened power that is bandwagoning with a much stronger rival out of desperation (Mearsheimer, 2001).

5.6 Key Findings

5.6.1 Bandwagoning out of weakness

Despite its formidable nuclear arsenal and superpower legacy, Russia’s future prospects as a great power are weak. In terms of its economic influence in the region, China has left Russia far behind. Russia’s Eurasian integration project is significantly weaker than China’s SREB. Russia cannot compete in terms of what it can afford to spend and neither does it offer as lucrative of a deal for Central Asian elites. China’s bilateral loans and less heavy-handed approach to institutional integration are more attractive to the Central Asian states. Because of its reluctance to get involved in international conflicts, China is also seen as an attractive partner for states that may be wary of Russian influence. States feel that partnering with Russia economically entails picking a side in the revamped rivalry between East and West, but partnering with China, despite its escalating rivalry with the United States, does not require them to change their geopolitical orientation; at least not yet. For example, states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, who have strained relations with Russia and have refused to go along with the EaEU are instead choosing China as a free-trade partner. In fact, they hope that China's close relations with Russia will buy them some respite from Russian hostility. According to Eder (2018): "All regional governments actively seek out China as a partner that might help to hedge against Russia, or whose engagement in the region, due to Beijing's close relations with Moscow, might even provide some implicit deterrence" (pg 20). China's soft power advantage therefore allows it to cultivate close ties with Russia's enemies as well as its allies, giving it much greater influence and providing a much stronger foundation for extending its influence in Eurasia in the future.

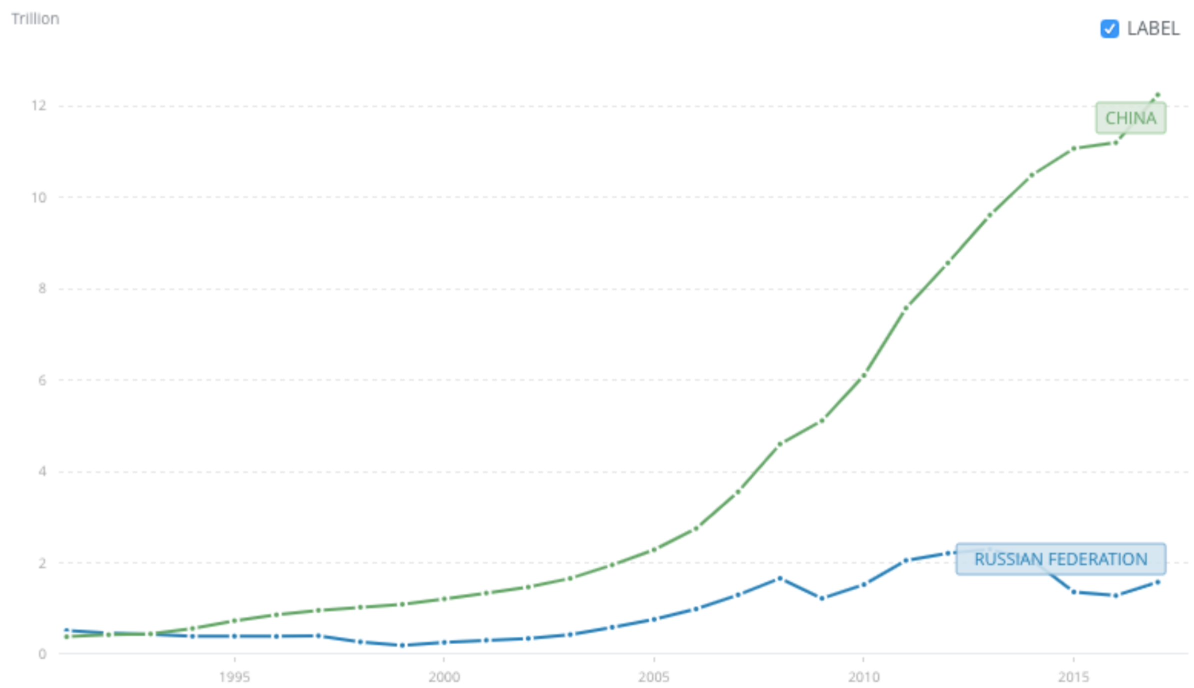

Figure 1: China vs Russia nominal GDP (2017 US$) 1991-2017 (World Bank, 2017)

In terms of concrete economic strength, Russia is already dwarfed by China, and continues to fall behind fast. After three decades of unprecedented economic growth, in 2017, China's overall GDP had grown to $12.238 trillion, while Russia's had stagnated, sitting at $1.578 trillion (World Bank, 2017) [See Figure 1 above]. With the Chinese economy continuing to grow at high rates, and Russia's economy floundering due to harsh western sanctions and its reliance on volatile commodity prices, China's GDP may soon be ten times as high as Russia's; and, even after adjusting for its enormous population, Chinese citizens may soon be as rich as their Russian neighbours.

China's overseas investments also continue to grow, while Russia's stagnate. Russia has been eclipsed by China as Central Asia's main trading partner. In the 1990s, total annual trade between China and the Central Asian states was less than $1 billion. However, by 2017, this had ballooned to $30 billion, almost doubling the region's $18.6 billion in total trade with Russia. China has become the main trading partner of all the Central Asian states, save EaEU founding member Kazakhstan. This too may soon change as China seeks to make that country the centrepiece of its SREB. In the most extreme case, Turkmenistan, China accounts for 44% of total external trade, with Russia making up just 7%, a far cry from the recent past. (Stratfor, 2018)

Russia's decision to bandwagon with China may have been triggered by the shock of economic sanctions imposed by the US, EU and others in the aftermath of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea (Kastoueva-Jean, 2017: 42; Bitabarova, 2019: 156-157). However, the pain of sanctions was simply the straw that broke the camel's back. In the competition for influence in Central Asia, it was already becoming clear that, going forward, Russia simply would not be able to compete with China in terms of both economic and political power. Before the sanctions were imposed, Russia attempted to counteract its weaker position compared with China through regional 'soft' balancing. It hoped to do so by integrating the post-Soviet economies into the EaEU initiative, and leaning into the deep cultural, political, and economic ties between Russia and the Central Asian states that had been forged through their shared historical experience. If it had succeeded, the EaEU's common Eurasian market and shared regulatory regime, in addition to Russia's already extensive security ties, could have been effective in balancing China's increasing bilateral presence in Central Asia, without escalating into a full-scale diplomatic dispute (hence, 'soft' balancing). Instead, Russia soon found itself in an even weaker position and had no choice but to bandwagon with the region's newly dominant power.

5.6.2 What Russia gains from bandwagoning

Bandwagoning with China benefits Russia as it both strengthens its strategic position and increases its attractiveness in the eyes of the European Union and its individual member states. As a rejuvenated Russia becomes a recipient of Chinese investment, and a major corridor for Chinese-built transportation and communications infrastructure, Europe may be tempted to normalize its economic and political relations with Russia. Furthermore, a powerful Chinese-led Eurasian project, including Russia, could potentially draw Europe away from the US and consolidate a new Eurasian world order. Because of its aggressive actions in recent years, Russia is viewed with suspicion in Europe. It may be easier to get Europe on board with a Chinese-led Eurasian initiative than a Russian-led one. European governments may be more willing to cultivate close ties with China than Russia, because of China's impressive economic track record and the fact that it does not (yet) have the same reputation for political interference. Perhaps Russia sees the China-led Silk Road project as its best hope for reorienting the world's centre of political power away from the United States and has therefore pivoted from promoting a "'Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok', to promoting 'Greater Asia from Shanghai to St Petersburg'" (Fels, 2018: 258). Despite its strategic insecurity about ceding influence to China in Central Asia, Russia prefers a China-led world order to the current US-led order. Finally, by joining forces, the Russian and Chinese Eurasian integration initiatives will perhaps complement each other and accelerate Europe and Asia's drift away from the United States. Without the same foothold of influence in Eurasia, the United States may well "have no choice but to 'seek coexistence'" if it wants to protect its remaining interests in the old world (Rolland, 2019: 18).

Russia bandwagoning with China by embracing the SREB can be an economic lifeline for an increasingly isolated country with no alternative partner to turn to. Russia obviously would have preferred to maintain its previous privileged position in Central Asia, but by hitching its wagon to China's growth engine, it sees the potential for major absolute gains. In the long term, the Chinese economy is destined to overtake both the United States and the European Union as the world's largest. China's willingness to invest in infrastructure abroad, including in Russia, could also provide the impetus for Russia to diversify away from the resource sector. Finally, a close relationship with China is not accompanied with the same normative strings that often come attached to deals with the European Union or the United States. China will not let internal politics or concerns about corruption or human rights get into the way of business.

Russia is also content to bandwagon with China because its interests are closer to Russia's than the alternative, though this is not Russia's primary reason for bandwagoning. The US, NATO, and the EU are still Russia's main geopolitical adversaries as they promote democracy and institutional reform, both in Russia and in its 'near abroad'. China, on the other hand, does not (Kaczmarski, 2016: 4). China does not want to upset the political status-quo and it shares Russia's fear of 'colour revolutions'. It has also shown its willingness to make some compromises in Central Asia, reassuring Russia that it will maintain a privileged position in the region's security, at least for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 6: Summary and Conclusion

This chapter will begin by summarizing the dissertation and reiterating the key findings from my analysis of the case study. It will then briefly reflect on the challenges I encountered in my research and the shortcomings of this dissertation, before offering a final conclusion.

6.1 Summary of Dissertation

The launch of China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) in September 2013 came as a shock to Russia, which had been hoping to consolidate its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space through its own long-planned Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU). With both powers launching competing development initiatives centred on Central Asia, Russia and China seemed destined to collide. On the contrary, the opposite occurred and in May 2015 Russia signed an agreement with China announcing the cooperation and coordination of their respective initiatives. This dissertation has sought to explain why Russia has accommodated China even though it has come to dominate a region that it has long considered to be part of its sphere of influence. This dissertation examined Russia's changing policy through a case study covering the consequential events that took place between the announcement of the SREB and the Sino-Russian SREB-EaEU cooperation agreement, signed less than two years later. Drawing from realist theory, its has argued that Russia's pivot is an example of 'soft' bandwagoning behaviour, which Russia had no choice but to engage in after the imposition of harsh western sanctions in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in Spring 2014.

After the introductory chapter, the key concept of 'soft' bandwagoning and the secondary concepts of 'soft' balancing and hedging were introduced in Chapter Two. This chapter summarized the theoretical and methodological framework of my dissertation. Most importantly, it introduced the realist concepts of balance of power and traditional definitions of balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging behaviour. However, this dissertation posited that traditional hard power notions of bandwagoning and balancing are too extreme to describe

Russia's behaviour towards China in Central Asia before and after the imposition of sanctions in spring 2014. Instead, a limited, qualified version of these concepts is appropriate to describe Russia's behaviour both before ('soft' balancing) and after ('soft' bandwagoning) with the more neutral concept of hedging being an accurate descriptor of Russia's overall relationship with China (on a global level) prior to the Ukraine crisis.

The third chapter of this dissertation, the literature review, was divided into three parts. The first two dealt with theory and how theory has been applied to the case of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia. Here I have identified two major gaps in the literature that I have attempted to fill through my own research. The first gap pertains to the concepts of 'soft' bandwagoning and 'soft' balancing. So far, 'soft' bandwagoning and 'soft' balancing have mostly been applied to relations between small states and major powers (almost always the United States), there has been a lack of literature applying these modified concepts to relations between the great powers themselves. As the world becomes both more interconnected and less unipolar, applying these concepts to relations between great powers will become more useful as great power rivals re-emerge, but are apprehensive about committing to hard military alliances. There is also a lack of literature rigorously applying the concepts of bandwagoning and balancing, in any form, to this specific case. Where they have been applied, authors have not engaged heavily with the terms and have only mentioned them briefly without explicitly defining them.

The final part of the literature review summarized the scholarly debate over the true nature of the Sino-Russian relationship. It concluded by asserting that whether Russia and China are fierce adversaries engaged in a new 'Great Game', natural rivals who nevertheless find themselves in a temporary partnership of convenience, or natural allies engaging in a deeper partnership does not necessarily need to have a clear answer. All of these assertions can be true, or at the very least could have been true when they were written. On the one hand, Russia's bandwagoning can mean that it is truly moving closer to China because bandwagoning entails a deepening partnership. On the other hand, it is still compatible with the idea that China and Russia are, or at least were, fierce rivals; states often bandwagon with stronger states that pose a threat.

Chapter Four summarized the context in which the events of the case study took place. It described the immense strategic significance of Central Asia, first emphasized by early 20th century geographer Halford Mackinder, and how Mackinder's argument about the importance of Central Asia remains relevant to both Russia and China today. It also assessed the post-Cold War history of relations between China and Russia; their 'strategic partnership', and their joint leadership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Finally, it described China's intensifying economic and political involvement in the region. In particular, it introduced the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically the Silk Road Economic Belt, and what effect it may have on the states of Central Asia and Russia's privileged position in the region.

Finally, the case study itself was presented in Chapter Five. The case study examined Russia's stance towards the growing Chinese presence in Central Asia before and after the imposition of economic sanctions in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea. The case study focused on the period between China's September 2013 announcement of the BRI/SREB and the May 2015 cooperation agreement between Russia and China's rival Eurasian integration initiatives. It began by outlining the tensions that already existed at the time of the SREB announcement, Russia's attempt to 'soft' balance against the increasing Chinese presence in Central Asia through its EaEU project, and Russian officials' initial panic after the SREB was announced. The chapter then outlined the sanctions imposed on Russia after the Crimea annexation, their impact on Russia's stature in Central Asia, and Russia's subsequent 'pivot' towards embracing China and its regional development initiative. Russia opened up its economy to Chinese investment, including in strategically vulnerable sectors such as technology and energy. It also allowed China to purchase Russian weapons systems and fighter jets, and increased its military cooperation in the region. Finally, in the May 2015 cooperation agreement, Russia aligned its Eurasian integration initiative with China's, a stunning reversal of Russia's original plan for its EaEU to be a counterbalance against China's Eurasian integration efforts. The rest of Chapter Five assessed Russia's shift in strategy through the lens of balance of power theory and presented key findings from the case study.

6.1.2 Summary of key findings

The first key finding was that Russia bandwagoned out of weakness. Though Russia's shift from balancing to bandwagoning was ultimately triggered by the imposition of sanctions in 2014, Russia was already in a weakened position compared with China and was struggling to maintain a balance of power in their shared neighbourhood. Russia was no match for China's much larger population and economy and its explosive economic growth rate. In the competition for influence in Central Asia, Russia simply did not have the resources to compete with China. In other words, bandwagoning would have been very difficult to avoid regardless; the Crimea sanctions were simply the straw that broke the camel's back.

The second key finding was that, though Russia has sacrificed its claim to being the driver of Central Asian economic integration, it nevertheless benefits greatly in absolute terms. Embracing the SREB may provide an economic lifeline to Russia. Bandwagoning with China also makes it more likely that relations with Europe will be normalized. Europe may be willing to forget about Crimea if Russia is flush with Chinese investment and serving as a major transcontinental corridor for transportation and communications infrastructure. Bandwagoning with China also furthers Russia's goal of splitting up the Atlantic alliance between Europe and the United States. Russia had previously attempted to draw Europe away from the US and integrate it into its own Eurasian project, by increasing its economic and energy ties. This push was summarized by Russia's ambitious slogan calling for an integrated economic space stretching from "Lisbon to Vladivostok". However, after Russia became isolated from the West after the Ukraine crisis, it was no longer able to achieve this goal on its own. China's Belt and

Road Initiative, on the other hand, similarly hopes to integrate Europe and draw it away from the American sphere of influence and arguably has a much greater chance of succeeding.

6.2 Shortcomings

The primary challenge I encountered over the course of my research was the fact that, due to the opaque, authoritarian nature of the Russian and Chinese regimes, as well as those of their Central Asian partners, and the lack of a free press in the region, it is extremely difficult to separate rhetoric and propaganda from actual concrete developments when discussing grandiose projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, Silk Road Economic Belt, Eurasian Economic Union, or the more recent Greater Eurasian Partnership. When I began this research, I set out to examine Russia's relationship with a specific Chinese policy initiative, the BRI's SREB, in hopes that this would narrow down an ambitious topic and delineate the parameters of my case study. However, over time it became clear that focusing on the initiative itself obfuscated, rather than facilitated my task. It was impossible to fully isolate the BRI from previous Chinese investment in the region. It was also incredibly difficult to find detailed, publicly available information on the BRI from official sources, as China has never published any official maps, budgets, or lists of projects. I was also disappointed by the lack of concrete details in official announcements, including the May 2015 announcement that is a major focus of this dissertation.

The true effects of announced policy changes must be determined indirectly, making it incredibly difficult to parse the exact nature of Russian bandwagoning in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. Official statements are also problematic because the Chinese and Russian governments routinely say one thing and do the other. Because of the immense challenge of determining concrete policy changes from official statements, this dissertation has primarily relied on secondary sources, who possess greater insights into the minds of the decision-makers in the Kremlin and in Zhongnanhai. Unfortunately, this brings up the problem of bias, both in the source material, and in this dissertation itself.

The fact that the theoretical concept of 'soft' bandwagoning, which is the main concept applied in this research, is so underdeveloped is another potential shortcoming of this dissertation. As mentioned in the literature review, the term has so far mostly been used in only one specific context – to describe the actions of small states in relation to the hegemonic power that is/was the post-Cold War United States. As the world transitions from a unipolar to a multipolar system, the concept of 'soft' bandwagoning will perhaps find broader use. In previous literature 'soft' bandwagoning, as well as the related terms, 'soft' balancing, and hedging have also not been rigorously defined, which could lead to potential confusion. Because 'soft' bandwagoning, 'soft' balancing, and hedging have not yet found a consensus definition, and are very similar, there is also some confusion over what certain state behaviours should be classified as. For example, some authors cited in the literature review (e.g., Korolev, 2016; Fels, 2018) have used 'hedging' to describe Russian actions that I would describe as 'soft' bandwagoning. I do not disagree with how they characterize these actions, I simply disagree with how they should be defined. The use of relatively undeveloped terminology will hopefully be rectified as it finds greater use in future research and a consensus definition emerges.

6.3 Conclusion

This dissertation has presented Russia's recent embrace of China's Belt and Road Initiative, specifically its overland Silk Road Economic Belt, as an example of 'soft' bandwagoning. Russia has bandwagoned with, rather than balanced against the Chinese presence in Central Asia, a region that it had long considered part of its exclusive sphere of influence. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has taken drastic measures to counter what it perceives as foreign interference in the post-Soviet space, as seen in its recent actions in post-revolution Ukraine. However, China’s sheer size, unprecedented economic growth, and increasing dominance of the Central Asian energy sector; as well as its launch of the SREB in 2013 and its cultivation of closer economic, political, and security ties with regimes in the region, have completely overwhelmed Russia.

With the imposition, in Spring 2014, of punishing economic sanctions in response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula, Russia lost all capacity to resist China’s growing presence in Central Asia, and elected to succumb to its regional rival instead. Russia’s main attempt at balancing against China in the region, its long-planned Eurasian Economic Union has instead been subordinated to China’s more powerful investment initiative. Russia certainly benefits from bandwagoning with China; the SREB may give its economy a much-needed boost, and a stronger pan-Eurasian partnership will go a long way in countering Russia and China’s common adversary, the United States. In addition, by ‘soft’ bandwagoning, Russia is still able to pursue its own interests, in a narrow sense, and continue to posture as a major power with its own sovereign agency. However, in reality, by bandwagoning with China’s BRI, Russia has forfeited its position as the leading power in Central Asia and has further weakened its grip over the post-Soviet space.

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