

# IMESS DISSERTATION



Note: Please email the completed mark sheet to Year 2 coordinator  
(cc Chiara Amini [chiara.amini@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:chiara.amini@ucl.ac.uk) and [fiona.rushworth@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:fiona.rushworth@ucl.ac.uk))

Please note that IMESS students are not required to use a particular set of methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, or comparative) in their dissertation.

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Student:</b>            | Bill Simon  |
| <b>Dissertation title:</b> | <i>Bandwagoning with the Belt and Road: Russia's changing attitude towards the Chinese presence in Central Asia post-Crimea</i> |

|   | 70+ | 69-65 | 60-61 | 59-55 | 54-50 | <50 |
|---|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|
|   | A   | B     | C     | D     | E     | F   |
| <b>Knowledge</b><br><i>Knowledge of problems involved, e.g. historical and social context, specialist literature on the topic. Evidence of capacity to gather information through a wide and appropriate range of reading, and to digest and process knowledge.</i>   | 80  |       |       |       |       |     |
| <b>Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b><br><i>Demonstrates a clear grasp of concepts. Application of appropriate methodology and understanding; willingness to apply an independent approach or interpretation recognition of alternative interpretations; Use of precise terminology and avoidance of ambiguity; avoidance of excessive generalisations or gross oversimplifications.</i> | 75  |       |       |       |       |     |
| <b>Structure &amp; Argument</b><br><i>Demonstrates ability to structure work with clarity, relevance and coherence. Ability to argue a case; clear evidence of analysis and logical thought; recognition of an argument's limitation or alternative views; Ability to use other evidence to support arguments and structure appropriately.</i>  | 80  |       |       |       |       |     |
| <b>Presentation &amp; Documentation</b><br><i>Accurate and consistently presented footnotes and bibliographic references; accuracy of grammar and spelling; correct and clear presentation of charts/graphs/tables or other data. Appropriate and correct referencing throughout. Correct and contextually correct handling of quotations.</i>  | 75  |       |       |       |       |     |
| <b>Methodology</b><br><i>Understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.</i>  | 75  |       |       |       |       |     |

|   |   |                  |    |                |                |
|---|---|------------------|----|----------------|----------------|
| <b>ECTS Mark:</b>                           | A | <b>UCL Mark:</b> | 77 | <b>Marker:</b> | Slavomir Horak |
| <i>Deducted for late submission:</i>        |   |                  | -  | <b>Signed:</b> | Slavomir Horak |
| <i>Deducted for inadequate referencing:</i> |   |                  | -  | <b>Date:</b>   | June 8, 2019   |

## MARKING GUIDELIN

**A (UCL mark 70+) = A (Charles mark- excellent):** Note: marks of over 80 are given rarely and only for truly exceptional pieces of work. Distinctively sophisticated and focused analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.

**B (UCL mark 69-65) = B (Charles mark – very good)**

**C (UCL mark 64-60) = C (Charles mark – good):** A high level of analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Good understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research. 65 or over equates to a B grade.

**D (UCL mark 59-55) = D (Charles mark – satisfactory)**

**E (UCL mark 54-50) = E (Charles mark – sufficient):**

Demonstration of a critical use of sources and ability to engage in systematic inquiry. An ability to engage in sustained research work, demonstrating methodological awareness. 55 or over equates to a D grade.

**F (UCL mark less than 50) = F (Charles mark - insufficient):**

Demonstrates failure to use sources and an inadequate ability to engage in systematic inquiry. Inadequate evidence of ability to engage in sustained research work and poor understanding of appropriate research techniques.

## Please provide substantive and detailed feedback!

### Comments, explaining strengths and weaknesses (*at least 300 words*):

Russia's position in Central Asia remains frequently discussed issue in political science, geopolitical and Central Asian studies as well as among political practitioners and think tanks. The author approached the problem from realistic perspective and with solid analytical fundament. Along with some other authors, he does not see relations in Russia-China-Central Asia triangle as "zero-sum-game", but as continuous interaction of *ad hoc* interests.

The author found appropriate theoretical tools to practical analysis. Although "bandwagoning" or "soft bandwagoning" approach to the great powers interaction is relatively new in the research of Russian-China relations (Kaczmarek 2015), the author proved that it might be the way how to analyze the problem, not only in case of Central Asia. In this regard, I have to appreciate that author was able to combine the theoretical framework with the practical policy-making and theory is not artificially applied to the selected case study.

Analysis of Russian Foreign policy within BRI (chapter 5) could be considered as the most valuable section of the text. I completely agree that bandwagoning of Russia to the project have significantly increased after the Ukraine events. From this point of view, the author's main thesis is unchallengeable and correct. However, some partial arguments could be challenged throughout the chapter to achieve more broader view of some facts. It seems to many Western scholars that Russian influence in Central Asia slowly diminished at the expense of other powers, particularly to China. Decreasing gas export and construction of alternative gas pipelines are among the most common arguments and proves of this fact (p. 40-42). In fact, Russian gas purchases in Central Asia were directed (apart of its political component) also by economic necessity, which sharply decreased after the 2008 crisis.

The attempt to keep Central Asia in Russian orbit also did not start with so called Eurasian Economic Union, but much earlier.<sup>1</sup> Since 1990s there has been several attempts to establish create integration institutions in this axis (p. 2). However, Central Asian space was merely one of three vectors of Russian policy in CIS apart of West (Belarus and particularly Ukraine) and South (Caucasus). In this regard, Eurasian Economic Union (p. 43-44) need not to be considered merely as Russian response to balance increasing Chinese involvement in Central Asia. Even if this factor played some role, economic integration with at least some of former Soviet republics was long-term project of Russia to cement this space together.

Russian reaction to SREB was also much more complex than it is presented in the text. Cautious and even suspicious approach was inevitable a part of Russian reaction. At the same time, Chinese initiative was understood in a broader sense than just in Central Asia. Discussing the issue with Russian counterparts in 2015-2017 I remember that most of them acknowledged the role of China in Central Asia as unavoidable (albeit not favorable) step for Russia which cannot counterbalance it. Looking at the Chinese move forward, Russia also understand global (at least Eurasian) scale of the initiative and tries to keep as much advantages for itself as possible. Therefore, Sino-Russian "condominium" over Central Asian region is not the matter of post-Crimea period and the reaction to sanctions against Russia, although it apparently stimulated Russian deeper involvement in the region. Although Central Asian vector of Russian foreign policy was quite important, the most important interests lied in other parts of post-Soviet area (Ukraine in particular).

One small remark about return to MacKinder (p. 32-33). Scholarly articles often refers to his concept, but historical context was different even in his crucial articles (1904, 1919, 1943). From this point of view, selective and even inflationary usage of his term "pivot" for Central Asia could be problematized.

All in all, I have to point out that my remarks mentioned above do not absolutely challenge the very nature of author's thesis. The text presented to defense belongs to the best student outputs at this level

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, the author was not fully consistent in using single abbreviation (EaEU and EEU). The reader acquainted with the problem can understand it, while for others it could be confusing.

**Specific questions you would like addressing at the oral defence (*at least 2 questions*):**

- How would the author analyse acceptance of other countries under SCO umbrella - full members (Pakistan, India), observers (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, Mongolia) or dialogue partners (Sri Lanka, Armenia, Azerbaijan etc.) - within his methodological framework?
- China declares the transport as one of the main push factors of BRI (Eurasian Land Bridge). Could the author shortly and realistically evaluate the main corridors, their strong and weak sides and Russian position?