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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

FROM MONOPOLY TO DUAL PATRONAGE: THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA (1991-2025)

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This article examines the evolution of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia through the conceptual framework of Patron-Client Relations (PCRs). While Moscow traditionally held the role of regional patron by leveraging a wide spectrum of legacy ties, Beijing's rising economic power and political ambitions have led to speculations about Russia's receding role. To shed light on this dynamic, the article operationalises key PCR properties across political, economic, and security domains. By comparing the 1991-2019 baseline of Russian primacy with the post-2020 era, we show that China has institutionalised its political and economic role, but Russia has retained a resilient patronal standing. Rather than a mere displacement of power, Central Asia is witnessing the transition towards a dual patronage system sustained by a broader Russian-Chinese strategic alignment and navigated by Central Asian clients leveraging their increased agency.

KEYWORDS – Central Asia; Russia; China; patron-client relations; dual patronage; regional agency.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the intensification of tensions between Russia and the West, alongside the escalating rivalry between China and the United States, signalled the return of great power competition on the global scene. The Russia-Ukraine war and heightened attritions in the South China Sea epitomize such trend. Within this context, Russian and Chinese influence over Central Asia has attracted the interest of many researchers, who have scrutinized the comparative influence of Moscow and Beijing over the region to assess which one of them will ultimately consolidate its position as the region's patron or hegemon.

Some observers contend that China is destined for regional primacy, given the steady increase of its economic power and declining Russian re-

sources [Pizzolo & Carteny 2022]. Others, while noting that Moscow's hegemony is challenged by resource constraints, the growing agency of Central Asian states, and the entry of external competitors, claim that Russia is likely to maintain a significant leadership role [Kuhrt 2025, 19 August]. A dominant strain of research sticks to the assessment that over the mid-term Russia and China will abide by a «division of labour» – with the former continuing to act as the main security provider, while China cements itself as the lead economic player [Larson 2020]. Finally, many area specialists approach the issue from a different angle, emphasising the increasing capacity of Central Asian states to pursue independent foreign policies, thereby limiting the influence of both Moscow and Beijing [Anceschi 2022]. While most of this scholarship is empirical, several studies have framed these dynamics conceptually – primarily through a Realist lens [Dursun-Özkanca 2025], but also emphasizing identity, history, and institutions [Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes 2020].

This article contributes to the debate on Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia by advancing a conceptually framed, empirically thick analysis that extends over the long-term. It does so in three ways. First, we examine the shifts in Russian and Chinese regional influence over the span of three decades, then focus on post-2020 dynamics. Differently from mainstream Western assessments, we do not identify the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as the single latest turning point and major cause of regional shift. Instead, and very much like Russian and Chinese commentators, we see it as a symptom of broader global instability that was already unfolding since at least the Covid-19 pandemic – which generated significant economic and political disruptions and prompted regional actors to recalibrate their postures. Second, we frame our analysis within the concept of Patron-Client Relations (PCRs). While the lexicon of «patron» and «client» is used frequently in this debate, its application is superficial at best. Here, instead, we employ the PCR lens as a tool to organize empirical data and guide observations on the relational dynamics between Russia, China, and Central Asian states.¹ Third, we draw on a wealth of Russian and Chinese primary sources to provide original insights and try mitigating Western mirror-imaging; reputable secondary sources and writings by Western and Central Asian analysts are leveraged to contextualize and add nuance to our observations.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the PCR concept and its constitutive properties. Section 3 provides the empirical baseline

1. Readers should note that this article's explicit theoretical orientation is intended to complement Asia Maior's established focus on empirical richness and area-studies research. We are grateful to the editors for granting us this conceptual freedom. Due to space constraints, we have prioritized the substantive analysis of these shifts over an exhaustive methodological debate or a comparative assessment with alternative conceptual frameworks. Still, we welcome further dialogue on these aspects.

by analyzing the roles of China and Russia from 1991 to 2019 through the PCR framework. Section 4 repeats this analytical effort for the period 2020–25, looking closely at three empirical domains that help operationalize PCRs: national interests and strategic narratives; economic presence; security and military cooperation. The conclusion synthesizes our findings to assess the evolving influence of Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia, evolving patterns of competition and cooperation, and the agency of regional actors.

2. Patron-client relations in international politics

The PCR concept originated in the ancient Roman institution of *clientela*, where a *patronus* (protector) provided favours, legal, and material support to a *cliens* (dependent) in exchange for political loyalty. During the Middle Ages, this evolved into ecclesiastical and artistic patronage, while later on, in the 1960s, social scientists revived the concept to describe the hierarchical, informal ties between powerful landowners and peasants in the developing world. Throughout the Cold War, political scientists adapted the PCR framework to analyze the strategic competition between superpowers as they vied for global influence.

In this article, we follow Biermann's [2025, p. 5] most recent conceptualization of a PCR – which he defines as an «asymmetric, enduring partnership of diffuse obligation among a patron and a client, which are engaged in a mutually valued, yet dependency-inducing resource exchange». This relationship is characterized by five constitutive properties.

1. *Cooperative resource exchange*: unlike purely coercive relationships, PCRs are voluntary and reciprocal. Both parties must perceive value in the exchange, whether the resources are tangible (military aid, FDI) or intangible (political legitimacy, prestige).

2. *Asymmetric power dependence*: PCRs are inherently unequal. The patron typically commands superior, issue-specific resources that the client requires for survival or stability. This imbalance grants the patron significant bargaining leverage, though this power is contingent on the patron's continued willingness to provide those resources.

3. *Diffuse obligation*: these ties are often informal and flexible rather than strictly contractual. While they lack third-party enforcement, they are sustained by a sense of reciprocal duty and the expectation of long-term continuity.

4. *Durability*: PCRs are not fleeting or one-off transactions but persistent relationships characterized by iterative exchanges over time. This iteration fosters a promise-like bond, where debts and obligations are managed over a long-term horizon.

5. *Specialness*: this property reflects the exclusive nature of the bond. PCRs involve a unique relationship that distinguishes the client from other

actors and prioritizes this connection in the eyes of both patron and client [Biermann, *unpublished manuscript*].

Motives for engaging in PCRs are multifaceted, encompassing instrumental, ideational, and affective factors. *Instrumental motives* are rooted in a «logic of consequences», where actors calculate rationally the (material) costs and benefits of their relations based on self-interest. *Ideational motives* follow a «logic of appropriateness», emphasizing shared norms, legitimacy, and solidarity as drivers of relations. *Affective motives* involve instead emotional ties and personal relationships in upholding relations.

Changes in the PCRs' operating environment («critical junctures») are key to explain variations, such as *erosion* and *termination* of a PCR [Shoemaker & Spanier 1984]. Domestic and international crises may alter the resource base or motives of the parties to a PCR, forcing them to reassess their commitment to the relationship. On the one hand, a patron might signal dissociation from a client if the costs of support become too high or if other interests, beyond the PCR, prevail; a patron may also disapprove of a client's behavior in the crisis context, leading to setbacks in the partnership. On the other hand, the lack of patron commitment can disappoint the client, leading them to search for alternative patrons, if any are available. The client may also want to disengage to avoid becoming fully dependent on a patron, which would ultimately lead to a loss of sovereign autonomy; or, conversely, if the perceived criticality of a patron's support diminishes in the face of changed motives or resources available to the client.

Having clarified the conceptual framework that will guide our research, we now turn to empirics.

3. 1991-2019: setting the background of Russian and Chinese influence

To contextualize the recent shifts in the Russian and Chinese influence over Central Asia, it is useful to first establish the historical baseline of patronage. Assessing this nearly thirty-year period between 1991 and 2019 allows us to identify the relative regional positions of Moscow and Beijing, ahead of the shocks of the 2020s. The following analysis evaluates the regional engagement of Russia and China separately by resorting to PCR terminology.

Our analysis shows that the 1991-2019 period was defined by an enduring, albeit eroding, Russian primacy. Moscow remained Central Asia's patron by virtue of its disproportionate role in regional security, economy, and culture. Meanwhile, China successfully transitioned from a cautious neighbour to an active player. While Beijing did not substitute Moscow as a patron, its provision of massive resources began hollowing out the traditional Russia-Central Asia PCR, setting the stage for the more evident competition that would follow after 2020.

3.1. *Russian primacy*

In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Russia remained the primary political, military, economic and cultural partner of Central Asian states. Indeed, the relationship linking Moscow with the former Soviet peripheries of Central Asia displayed the typical characteristics of a PCR. Underpinning such relationship was a variegated set of *motives*.

For Russia, instrumental motives centred on maintaining direct (military) control over the region as a buffer zone between Western Siberia and the 'Near East' (*blizhnij vostok*) and China, while extracting economic rents and containing rival powers. This was complemented by immaterial motives, since Central Asia served as a primary theatre for validating Russia's self-perceived Great Power status: by maintaining a sphere of influence in its «Near Abroad» (*blizhnee zarubezhe*), Moscow could project itself as a distinct regional pole in a (desired) multipolar world. Since the 1990s, Russian leaders have gone as far as claiming *de facto* ownership of Central Asian borders and recognizing a «blood relationship» between the region and Russia [Costa Buranelli 2018].

Central Asian states were driven to the PCR by the need for regime security and economic survival (instrumental motives). Moscow provided hard security and a backbone of stability for regimes navigating domestic transitions and the spillover risks of Islamist militancy in the Near East. Economically, the Russian labour market acted as a critical outlet for millions of Central Asian migrants, with remittance flows accounting at various points for nearly half of Tajikistan's and a third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP [World Bank-KNOMAD 2020]. On the immaterial side, the relationship with Russia provided Central Asian states a framework for legitimizing their newly won sovereignty. Moreover, Moscow's diplomatic support offered a sense of continuity and a shield against perceived Western democratic encroachment and «color revolutions» [Omeliicheva 2015].

These motives were reinforced by affective bonds rooted in the shared history between Russia and Central Asia. The Soviet-era socialization of leaders fostered a common political language and a personal rapport that facilitated informal deal-making, while the continued dominance of Russian language and media created a shared cultural and information space that bound populations together across borders [Laruelle 2015]. As former Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev epitomized in 2012, «we are entwined with Russia by a common history and destiny. We cannot have a future without Russia» [quoted in Costa Buranelli 2018, p. 380].

Within this framework, the parties engaged in a robust *cooperative resource exchange*. In the security realm, this was institutionalized through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and various bilateral agreements. This exchange included the installation of Russian military bases, the provision of arms at subsidized prices, joint exercises, and the consistent education of Central Asian military personnel in Russian academies [Stein

2021]. Economically, the transition from a common market to the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) in 2015 solidified Russia's position as a primary trading partner, while ensuring the continued flow of labour and capital [Dragneva & Wolczuk 2017].

This relationship was characterized by a profound *asymmetry*. Russia inherited the vast majority of the Soviet empire's military weight, economic power, and the monopoly over critical infrastructure – and this asymmetry was institutionalized within regional bodies. For example, Russian armed forces constituted around 80% of all CSTO armed forces in this period. Moreover, article 17 of the CSTO Charter ensures Russia's preponderant position by tying Secretariat quotas to budget contributions and, since Russia contributes approximately 50% of the organization's total budget, it maintains *de facto* control over it [Costa Buranelli 2018]. Similarly, the Russian economy constituted over 80% of the EaEU's total GDP, and the Union's agenda is largely shaped by Moscow, with external trade agreements often reflecting Russian geopolitical interests rather than the specific economic needs of the Central Asian members [Dragneva-Lewers 2019]. Moscow utilized these dependencies – encompassed by the vulnerability of migrant workers in Russia and leadership in the energy sector – as coercive leverage to ensuring a superior bargaining position and extract political concessions.

The Russia-Central Asia relationship was governed by a logic of *diffuse obligation*, where reciprocity was expected though not formally codified. This was most visible in regard to regime stability, with Moscow providing political legitimacy and protection against «color revolutions» and Islamist insurgencies in exchange for Central Asian support in international fora like the United Nations. In what scholars have described as a «league of authoritarian gentlemen», a mutual expectation formed that Russia would defend the political status quo, while regional clients would prioritize Russian interests and refrain from hosting long-term Western (military) presence [Cooley 2013, 30 January]. However, this obligation was not absolute: the Central Asian refusal to formally support or recognize Russian military operations and territorial claims in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-onwards) signalled a clear limit to their clientelistic deference.

The *durability* of this relationship was ensured by geographic proximity and the century-long historical experience of Central Asian subordination to Moscow; but not only. After the Cold War, the parties jointly built an interlocking system of multilateral organizations, including the CSTO, the EaEU, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Reinforced by regular high level bilateral summits, this system provided a framework for iterative cooperation and policy-convergence. A shared political language, rooted in authoritarian proclivities and the Soviet experience, smoothed communication and ensured that Moscow remained the primary reference point for regional problem-solving.

Finally, the relationship was marked by a distinct *specialness*, anchored in the pervasive role of the Russian language as the region's *lingua franca* and the continued dominance of Russian media. This sustained a «soft power», extricating cognitive and emotional ties that were difficult for any competitor to substitute. From Russia's perspective, Central Asia – and Kazakhstan in particular – consistently featured in strategic documents as a priority area within the «Near Abroad», where Moscow claimed special rights and responsibilities vital to its national security and greatpowerness [MOFA RF 2008, 12 January; MOFA RF 2016, 30 November].

3.2. *Chinese rise*

As noted in the conceptual section, PCRs are sensitive to shifts in the operating environment. Between 1991-2019, four key changes began to empower Russia's clients (Central Asian states) and invite patronal competitors (China).

First, the post-9/11 US intervention in Afghanistan accrued Western interest and military presence in the region, exemplified by the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan (2001-14) [Kim & Indeo 2013]. This gave Central Asian states an opportunity to diversify their sources of security, increasing their leverage vis-à-vis Russia. Second, the 2008-9 global economic crisis exposed the limits of the Russian economy, weakening its patronal resource base (as well as the West's). Third, over the course of the 2000s, Moscow's increasing assertiveness and irredentist rhetoric triggered concerns over the reliability of the patron and its willingness to protect, rather than undermine, Central Asian sovereignty. Finally, and related to the previous points, by the 2000s Central Asian states had stabilized enough to pursue a «multi-vector diplomacy»: by diversifying their external relations, they sought to maximize resource intake while containing the risks of over-reliance on Moscow [Swanström 2014]. Overall, these shifts did not shatter the Russia-Central Asia PCR, but altered the Central Asian perception of this relationship, triggering concerns about sovereignty and over-dependence and opening the door to China.

Cognizant of Russia's post-imperial sensitivities and wary of the expanding US military footprint, China did not immediately take advantage of regional opportunities [*Guangming Daily* 2003, 27 October; Chung 2004]. In fact, at that time, China was still an emerging rather than fully consolidated great power, prioritizing domestic development and cautious diplomacy over expansive geopolitical projection. However, under the presidency of Hu Jintao (2003-13), Beijing's interest in Central Asia acquired substance: it extended to the region its strategy of «peripheral diplomacy» (周边外交) – giving renewed emphasis to neighbouring countries in Chinese foreign policy; and established the principle of «good neighbourliness» (睦邻友好) – intended to promote peaceful, friendly, and prosperous relations with Central Asian countries [MOFA PRC 2006, 15 June].

This policy was driven by instrumental *motives*: promoting security and development in areas adjacent to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) through cross-border initiatives; securing access to the region's vast oil and gas resources, to fuel China's domestic growth; and opening local markets to Chinese infrastructure companies [Pantucci & Petersen 2022]. On the immaterial level, and similarly to Russia, China's engagement offered regional elites a model of «authoritarian modernization» that emphasized development without the liberalizing pressures often attached to Western aid, while simultaneously reinforcing Beijing's nascent self-identification as a great power.

The decade 2010-19 catalyzed China's regional projection. The ebbing of Western interest and the economic crisis generated a power vacuum and allowed Beijing to leverage its massive foreign exchange reserves [Coolsey 2021, 23 August ; Leksytina 2024]. In September 2013, the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Astana marked a watershed moment [Xi 2013]. By 2019, with over 261 projects valued at \$136 billion, China became a crucial hub for regional infrastructure [CADGAT 2019, p. 15]. Beijing conceived the BRI as a tool to establish itself as the reference actor for the countries of the region, leveraging unprecedented financial power to implicitly challenge Russia's patronage on the *resource* side [Rolland 2017; Deng 2022]. Moreover, Beijing also focused on strengthening its leadership capacity vis-à-vis Central Asian states within multilateral frameworks. A significant example is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a regional organization which Russia is also a member of. While acknowledging – and refraining from openly challenging – Moscow's role within the SCO, China gradually enhanced its ability to shape the organization's agenda and to leave an increasingly visible imprint on its activities [Seiwert 2025].

Precisely because of China's expanding financial and political capacity, its relationships with the Central Asian states became increasingly *asymmetric*. However, the scale of Chinese lending and investment – as well as the proportion of external debt owed to China – varied considerably across the region, making these new patterns of dependence different from case to case. Such heterogeneity complicated any straightforward assessment of whether China's nascent economic leverage translated into *diffuse obligation* at the regional level. Yet, clearly, the long-term nature of BRI projects and institutionalization of the SCO introduced a sense of *durability* in the China-Central Asia relationship, previously absent.

China also sought to confer *specialness* to this emerging relationship, stepping up ideational and affective links with regional elites via intense diplomatic outreach. In 2016 and 2018, for instance, China elevated the status of its relations with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to the level of a «comprehensive strategic partnership» [MOFA PRC 2016, 22 June; MOFA PRC 2018, 7 June]; while in 2019 China concluded a «permanent comprehensive strategic partnership» with Kazakhstan [MOFA PRC 2019, 12 September]. These partnership upgrades resonated strongly among political

and business elites, many of whom have benefited directly from Chinese investments and infrastructure financing. However, this top-down move faced significant bottom-up friction. Unlike the soft power enjoyed by Russia, China's presence triggered local anxieties regarding «debt-trap diplomacy», land ownership, labour practices, and corruption [McGlinchey 2019]. The anti-Chinese protests that erupted in Kazakhstan in 2016 and 2019 are emblematic of this dynamic: while China was becoming an indispensable economic partner, it lacked the cultural-historical «glue» that bound Russia to the region [Umarov 2019, 30 October].

4. 2020-25: changing patterns of Russian and Chinese influence

Having established the PCR baseline, the article now moves on to the post-2020 period – characterized by four critical shifts in the operating environment. First, the Covid-19 pandemic gave Central Asian elites the opportunity to consolidate their autocratic governance; more stable at home, they aimed at exerting greater agency internationally, continuing their «multi-vector diplomacy» [Anceschi 2026]. Second, the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war fuelled the perception that subordination to Russia did not necessarily guarantee security against competing regional powers, such as Turkey, and new ways of war. Third, the 2021 US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban takeover marked the end of Western military influence on nearby Central Asia, while accruing the threat of militant Islamism infiltrating the region. Fourth, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – which, as we will see, generated ambivalent responses across Central Asia. While these changes have accelerated China's political and economic penetration in Central Asia, also at the expense of Russia, the latter has retained a resilient patronal role.

We support such a view by examining three dimensions that substantiate the core relational properties of PCRs: national interests and strategic narratives; economic presence; security and military cooperation. National interests and strategic narratives frame Moscow's and Beijing's understanding of their changing influence on Central Asia over the previous decades; by looking at them, it will be possible to shed light on their shifting *motives*, relational *diffuse obligations*, and the *specialness* of their bonds with regional actors. Economics and security emerged in the preceding analysis as major venues for the extrication of Russian and Chinese patronage and have remained such. These are primary domains for assessing the PCR-relevant properties of *resource exchange*, *asymmetry*, and *durability* – thereby observing shifting patterns of agency and dependence.

4.1. National interests and strategic narratives

Since 2020, Russia's strategic framing of Central Asia has fluctuated between neo-imperialist warnings and fraternal rhetoric. On the one hand,

fringe yet high-profile statements by Duma deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov – claiming Kazakh territory was a «gift from Russia» – and former President Dmitry Medvedev – labelling Kazakhstan an «artificial state» – have reignited sovereign anxieties in Central Asia [Trotsenko 2021, 5 January; Sorbello 2022, 5 August]. These comments, echoing Putin's 2014 remarks, acquired a sharper edge following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, catalyzing a «decolonization discourse» across the region, most notably in the tightening of national language policies in Astana and Bishkek, aimed at reducing the public footprint of the Russian language. Russian-language media still retain an overarching presence across the region [Doverly Vesterbye et al. 2023].

On the other hand, the Kremlin has doubled down on elite-level socialization. In October 2022, Moscow hosted the inaugural Central Asia-Russia Summit in Astana, signaling a shift toward more inclusive, multilateral engagement. Moreover, President Putin and other high level Russian officials have led an intensive agenda of bilateral meetings with their Central Asian counterparts. These efforts are designed to activate pre-existing ideational and affective *motives* and confirm the *specialness* of the relationship, framing it as an exclusive partnership that remains a priority despite global shifts. For instance, Putin [2024, 27 November] defined the relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan as a «genuine alliance», characterized by «bonds of similar cultural, spiritual and moral values ... shared achievements and victories» and «strong good personal relationship» with President Tokayev. Similarly, Rashid Alimov [2024, 21 May], former Secretary General of the SCO, described Russian-Central Asian relations as «granite strong», emphasizing their «privileged nature».

Overall, the Russian approach to Central Asia has shown awareness of the risk of losing its patronal position in the region, in light of international and regional shifts as well as its own domestic constraints. As Niyazi Niyazov [2025, 15 April] suggests, the changing operating environment has increased the «subjectivity» of Central Asian states, allowing them to extract resources on more favourable terms from a distracted patron, such as Russia. This is not believed to structurally compromise Russia's asymmetric advantages, but it does call for caution, so that local problems are not solved «at Russia's expense, without providing anything in return» [Bordachev 2025, 4 August].

In response, Moscow has reconfirmed pre-existing motives for engaging with the region and its top priority in its foreign policy [MOFA RF 2023, 31 March; Trofimov 2025, 16 May], while accepting that direct, exclusive control of Central Asian dynamics is likely not possible anymore [Bordachev 2025, 30 May]. Recognizing conditions for a shift in the regional «balance of power», Russia primarily aims to ensure that Central Asia does not «represent a territorial base for other countries, whose intentions may contravene those of Moscow»; this conservative objective is to be pursued also cooperatively, by aligning with likeminded external players, such as China, and fostering

the region's connectivity with the broader Global South [Bordachev 2020, 30 September; Bordachev 2021, 8 November; Bordachev 2025, 20 May].

Russia's project for a so-called Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) is emblematic of this recalibrated approach. Officially announced a decade ago, this framework was designed to address the material and political deficiencies of the EaEU, helping Moscow to maintain its influence on Central Asia and using it as a springboard for broader influence across a «Greater Eurasia». While the GEP remains characterized by a lack of material substance and a significant gap between strategy and implementation, it serves as a potent ideational umbrella for synergizing political, economic, and security approaches. This loose, flexible policy framework allows Russia to adjust its strategic objectives «on-the-go», positioning itself as an equal to other key regional players – chiefly, China. In fact, rather than subsuming itself into Beijing's BRI, Moscow leverages the GEP narrative to «harmonize» Russian and Chinese projects, thereby signalling continued strategic independence and regional leadership [Silvan & Kaczmarek 2023; Trofimov 2025, 16 May].

If Russia saw policy adaptation as a necessary condition for the preservation of regional patronage, China doubled down on previous efforts. During the 2020-25 period, Beijing has particularly invested in strengthening three PCR dimensions vis-à-vis Central Asian states: *specialness*, *durability*, and *diffuse obligation*.

In addition to playing an even more prominent role within the SCO – as reflected in the Tianjin Declaration adopted in September 2025 [MOFA PRC 2025, 1 September] – and advancing an intensive agenda of bilateral visits [MOFA PRC 2025a, 2 September; MOFA PRC 2025b, 2 September; *Xinhua* 2025, 5 February], China hosted in Xi'an in May 2023 the first summit of a new, exclusively China-led format, the China-Central Asia (C5+China) framework, aimed at institutionalizing and deepening ties with all regional states [Ozat 2023, 22 August]. In 2024, a China-Central Asia permanent Secretariat was created and at the second Summit, held in Astana in June 2025, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev signaled a warming of rhetoric on both sides by referring to Xi Jinping as a «dear brother» [*Xinhua Novosti* 2025, 13 June]. China has also reinforced the prominence of Central Asia within its new foreign policy conceptualizations. For instance, building a «China-Central Asia community with a shared future» (中国-中亚命运共同体) constitutes, alongside Indochina, one of the main regional clusters within the Chinese vision of a «community with a shared future for mankind» (人类命运共同体) [Wei 2025, 7 May]. Overall, these are fundamental steps towards the institutionalization of Beijing's presence, which is moving beyond purely instrumental motives to cultivate a sense of a long-term, diffuse ideational alignment.

Several concepts and principles of Chinese foreign policy have now been incorporated into documents that further elevate the status of bilateral

partnerships [MOFA PRC 2022, 15 September; MOFA PRC 2023, 18 May]. Notably, Beijing has invested significantly in so-called «peripheral communication» (周边传播) – the adoption of targeted communication strategies in neighbouring countries aimed at promoting a positive image of China and its strategic interests, as well as at penetrating the information environments of these states and shaping public opinion [Grant 2025, 13 August]. As observed by Yau with reference to the case of Kyrgyzstan, in recent years China has been able to insert its content effectively into Kyrgyz media, by signing agreements to expand the local presence of its own media outlets (including Xinhua and Weibo) and by increasing the circulation of Russian- and Kyrgyz-language content on its social media platforms [Yau 2022, 2023]. The pervasiveness of Chinese technological infrastructure in the region represents an additional enabling factor for this strategy: companies such as Huawei, Hikvision, and Dahua now dominate large segments of the telecommunications and surveillance technology markets in Central Asia [Dukev et al. 2023, 23 December]. While Russian-language media remain dominant, these developments pose a long-term informational challenge and set the ground for stronger Chinese influence across Central Asian populations.

4.2. *Economic presence*

Despite shifts in the operating environment, Russia remains an economic anchor for Central Asia and this, in turn, supports the continuation of Russia's patronhood.

Trade turnover has increased consistently, now accounting for roughly one-third of the region's total foreign trade. This expansion is largely driven by «sanction-busting» trade: several reports indicate that a significant portion of EU exports to Central Asia is rerouted to Russia, compensating for the drop in direct EU-Russia trade of sanctioned goods and turning the region into an «economic backdoor» to Russia [Cooley 2025, 16 April]. This represents a novel reconfiguration of the cooperative resource exchange between Russia and regional countries, wherein the latter (the clients) provide Moscow (the patron) with a critical resource – access to global markets – thereby mitigating the relationship's original asymmetry and granting Central Asian more leverage.

Beyond trade, Russia's economic influence in the region has mutated through two shifts in human capital [Cooley 2025, 16 April]. On the one hand, the flow of Russian *relokanty* to Central Asia. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, over 500,000 Russians, including 10% of the country's IT workforce, moved to Central Asia. This influx catalyzed local FDI and banking sectors, with over 4,000 Russian companies registering in Kazakhstan alone by 2022. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Russian programmers have helped establish entire IT sectors, though Russia now competes to «re-loyalty» these expatriates to preserve its own technological base and leverage them as source of human influence [Tkachenko 2024, 15 May].

On the other hand, migratory trends from Central Asia to Russia were not really affected, as the region's socio-economic stability remains tethered to labour remittances. For instance, in Tajikistan remittances accounted for nearly 48% of GDP in 2024, up from just below 27% in 2020 [World Bank 2025]. However, the social underpinnings of this dependency are becoming weaker. The 2024 Crocus City Hall attack sparked a harsh Russia crackdown on Central Asian migrants (of Islamic faith), leading to ethnic profiling, deportations, and stricter regulations for migrant labour. Coupled with reports of migrants being coerced into military service, these events have fuelled regional resentment [Tahir 2025, 20 June].

Russia's role as an energy gatekeeper is being eroded but remains dominant thanks to the control of legacy infrastructure and sector-specific innovations. While Russia is no longer the sole intermediary for energy transit to Europe – partially substituted by the Middle Corridor and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline – it remains the primary outlet for Kazakh oil. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) and the Atyrau-Samara-Druzhba Pipelines still handle more than 90% of Kazakhstan's oil exports via Russian territory [Wong 2025, 11 February]. Simultaneously, Russia has pivoted toward North-South connectivity to bypass Western sanctions, emphasizing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) reaching Iran and the Indian Ocean via Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. In the high-tech sector, Russia is entrenching its influence through nuclear diplomacy: in June 2025 Rosatom was selected (against Chinese, French, and South Korean bids) to build Kazakhstan's first nuclear power plant, alongside ongoing projects for small and large-scale reactors in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan [*The Moscow Times* 2025].

In terms of economic integration, the Russia-led EaEU has yielded mixed results. While it boosted trade, increased the efficiency of resource allocation, and promoted sectoral specialization, it affected negatively employment in low-skill sectors and had limited effects on overall GDP growth [Pomerlyan & Belitski 2024]. Despite holding some comparative advantages over alternative integration projects like China's [Cieřlik & Gurshev 2024], the attractiveness of Russia-led economic integration has decreased over time as Russia, the bloc's biggest economy, remains under heavy sanctions and the diverse economic interests of Central Asian states have made multilateral coordination difficult [Bordachev 2020, 28 December; Ostrowski & Malikov 2025].

The economic leg of Russia's patronage over Central Asia finds in China its main challenge. By 2024, China emerged as the region's leading trading partner, accounting for 33% of the total trade volume (\$94.8 billion); it was followed by the EU with 24% (\$65 billion) and Russia with 16% (\$47 billion) [China's General Administration of Customs 2025]. In the first ten months of 2025 alone, China's trade with Central Asia increased on average by approximately 14% compared to the same period in 2024 – driv-

en disproportionately by Kyrgyzstan (+35.6%) and with Turkmenistan representing the sole exception (-6.7%). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are all in a position of trade deficit vis-à-vis China, which continues to pursue an export-led strategy in the region [China's General Administration of Customs 2025].

With regard to the value of the stock of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asia, Chinese sources already reported a figure of \$63.9 billion in 2023, concentrated primarily in the energy, transport, and manufacturing sectors [National Development and Reform Commission 2023]. The presence of Chinese investments in the region is therefore tangible, as evidenced by projects such as the Astana Light Rail Transit (Kazakhstan), the Dushanbe-Chanak railway (Tajikistan), the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline, and, more recently, the port of Aktau, where the Chinese company Zhongyun International is set to act as a strategic partner [*The Times of Central Asia* 2025, 25 November].

However, the implementation of several Chinese projects has encountered difficulties. Beijing has increasingly made clear its willingness to invest in infrastructure primarily through interest-bearing loans and with extensive reliance on Chinese contractors and technologies. Central Asian states have begun to perceive these conditions as unfavourable, showing a growing inclination to wait for what they consider more advantageous offers. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is an emblematic case, as its implementation was postponed for many years and only approved in late 2024 [Kazinform International News Agency 2024, 21 December]. Particularly significant is the issue of debt, which for some states is becoming increasingly constraining. China holds, in fact, approximately 41% of Kyrgyzstan's external debt. In other countries, however, such as Kazakhstan, this percentage drops to 5.9%.

Another relevant aspect to consider in assessing Chinese penetration is the growing number of Chinese enterprises operating in Central Asia. Although consolidated statistical data are not available yet, China's Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Du Dewen, stated in 2023 that nearly 700 Chinese-owned companies or joint ventures were operating in the country, spanning sectors such as mineral resource extraction, oil and gas processing, transport infrastructure construction, and energy [China BRI Network 2023, 22 September]. More recently, Kazakhstan's Prime Minister stated that nearly 5,000 Chinese enterprises are currently active in the country [*The Astana Times* 2024, 23 December].

As the data and developments outlined above illustrate, China not only sustained but further intensified its *exchange of resources* (investments, loans, and FDI) with the Central Asian states during the 2020-25 period. However, the increase in material exchanges did not automatically or consistently translate into greater prestige or a blind sense of *obligation* vis-à-vis China, from a Central Asian perspective.

4.3. *Security and military cooperation*

The security dimension remains the most resilient pillar of the Russia-Central Asia PCR. To begin with, the August 2021 US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan offered Russia an early occasion to meet its clients' enduring concerns about militant Islamism and regime stability, reasserting itself as the main regional security provider. As Charles E. Ziegler [2024] put it, «Central Asia's authoritarian regimes fear the destabilizing potential of radical forces based in Afghanistan and expect Moscow to provide security for the region». Coherently, the reinforcement of the Russian contingent in Dushambe and joint Russia-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan drills near the Afghan border immediately followed the Taliban takeover.

Kazakhstan's «Bloody January» in 2022 was similarly exploited by Moscow to reconfirm its patronal commitments. Marking the first time the CSTO ever activated its collective defence provisions, Russia sent approximately 2,500 troops to help stabilize President Toakiev's government amidst civil unrest. In so doing, Moscow proved its continued willingness to act as the guarantor of its clients' regimes – disputed in light of Russia's restraint during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. While Moscow later refused to intervene in the border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in September 2022 – fuelling considerable but short-lived resentment from Bishkek – on this occasion there was no existential threat to be fought by Russia. Moreover, the Russian refusal to intervene is coherent with both the *diffuse* nature of the security obligations between Russia and Central Asian states, and the Kremlin's decision to re-size its direct control over regional dynamics (discussed above).

Russia continues enjoying an asymmetric military position in Central Asia, thanks to the disproportionate number and quality of its forces vis-à-vis those of regional states, the retention of basing rights, and the coordination of security initiatives, such as regular military exercises and joint operations, through the CSTO. Russia's military position has faced relative setbacks only in terms of arms sales. Russian overall arms exports fell by 64% between 2020-24 compared to the previous five-year period – yet it remains the main arms provider in Central Asia, with Kazakhstan alone receiving 11% of Russia's total arms exports [George et al. 2025]. While China successfully gained market share during the 2010s by selling advanced technologies, such as drones, Russia is now retooling its offer, leveraging innovative platforms developed during the war with Ukraine – on top of traditional weapons systems.

Notably, from the standpoint of internal security, Central Asian security services remain deeply entwined with Moscow. A June 2023 agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan established a comprehensive personal data-sharing framework. This allows the Russian and local intelligence agencies to exchange information on residence status, criminal records, and identity documents, effectively closing the «escape hatch» for

Russian *relokanty* and activists. Kyrgyzstan launched a facial recognition system in Bishkek with Russian technical support: while officially for criminal apprehension, it was immediately utilized to identify, detain, and extradite Russian anti-war dissidents. Overall, between 2022 and 2024, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan consistently complied with Russian extradition requests for «extremism» and «discrediting the military», illustrating a shared interest in suppressing popular dissent [VOA News 2024, 22 October].

Security remains the least prominent dimension of the Chinese penetration in Central Asia – though Beijing has started expanding its footprint. Importantly, it has neither rolled out a vast spectrum of initiatives – as it did, for example, in the economic domain – nor sought to establish deep, institutionalized military-to-military links via the People's Liberation Army. Instead, China has focused on internal security, tasking its own security and paramilitary forces – such as the Ministry of Public Security and the People's Armed Police Force – and regime-affiliated private security companies (e.g., Zhongjun Junhong Security Group) to develop cooperation programmes with their Central Asian counterparts.

More specifically, Beijing has progressively expanded its engagement in the military domain through joint exercises, limited defence-industrial cooperation, and growing intelligence-sharing practices. This evolution can be understood as a strengthening of *resource exchange* dynamics, whereby China provides targeted security capabilities, training, and surveillance tools in return for enhanced stability, regime support, and the protection of its strategic and economic interests in the region. At the same time, China has fostered a degree of *specialness* also in this domain by developing differentiated and privileged bilateral security ties with different Central Asian countries.

To date, Tajikistan represents the only country in the region to host a Chinese military presence: since 2016, Beijing has operated a secretive security facility in the Gorno-Badakhshan province [*The Washington Post* 2019, 18 February]. In addition, since 2021 a Chinese company has been busy in the construction of a base in the Ishkoshim district, intended for use by Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs [Dodikhudo 2023]. This cooperation has deep roots dating back to the early 2000s: between 2002 and 2023, Tajikistan participated in 19 of the 36 joint military exercises conducted by China with Central Asian states, both bilaterally and within the framework of the SCO. Since 2015, moreover, China's Ministry of Public Security has provided professional training programmes for officials from Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and border forces, accompanied by regular high-level meetings between the respective internal security agencies [Lemon & Norov 2025, 20 March].

In addition to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan – which borders Xinjiang – is one of the main recipients of Chinese security assistance. During a 2019 joint exercise, for the first time China deployed the People's Armed Police Force

outside national borders [*Xinhua* 2019]. Similarly, bilateral exercises have also been conducted with Kazakhstan, including the one held in Ōskemen in 2019 [*China Military* 2019]. In parallel, China's role as a supplier of weapons systems in Central Asia has increased: Kazakhstan, for example, has long procured advanced military equipment from China, including Wing Loong-1 strike drones and Y-8F-200 military transport aircraft [*Voyennoye Obozreniye* 2018, 18 June]. More recently, in 2024, Beijing reportedly supplied drones to Kazakhstan and sold anti-aircraft systems to Uzbekistan [*Azimzhanova* 2024, 16 August; *Malyasov* 2025, 25 February].

From Beijing's perspective, Central Asia represents a testing ground for the security initiative launched in 2022 by President Xi Jinping, namely the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议). In this context, in September 2024 Beijing hosted the first meeting of ministers of Public Security and Interior with the Central Asian states [*Xinhua* 2025, 9 October].

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the shifting dynamics of Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia at the turning point of 2020, utilizing the PCR framework to assess whether a fundamental displacement of patronage is underway. Our findings suggest that, over the course of three decades, China's rise has consistently eroded Russia's patronage: the latter transitioned from being an undisputed patron in the 1990s and early 2000s to accepting a «division of labour» with China by the 2010s. After 2020, telluric changes in the PCR's operating environment have empowered Central Asian agency and given China increasing room for regional penetration. However, perhaps counterintuitively, Russia has demonstrated a considerable «staying power», rooted in a sober assessment of its capabilities, the careful administration of scarce resources, and military and diplomatic activism.

Central Asia's asymmetric dependence on Moscow remains evident in the continued reliance on Russia's labour market, the latter's control of legacy infrastructure, and its status as the ultimate guarantor of security and regime stability – the most important resources for local elites. This notwithstanding, the specialness of the Russian bond, once anchored in a shared cultural and linguistic space, is increasingly strained by the Kremlin's neo-imperialist rhetoric, prompting Central Asian clients to accelerate decolonization efforts. Conversely, China has transitioned from a cautious neighbour into a credible alternative patron. Through a vast array of incremental initiatives, Beijing has institutionalized a durable regional presence, moving beyond purely instrumental motives toward a more ideational and affective relationship with regional elites. China's superior resource base in the economic and technological sectors is particularly challenging for Russia, whilst proving less of an adversary in military on overall political terms.

Besides individual motives and resources, the evolving patronal positions of Russia and China are also shaped by two more conditions. First, as shown throughout the analysis, the increased agency of Central Asian states. Far from being passive dependents, these clients are actively leveraging the competing resource bases and differing patronal styles of Moscow and Beijing to navigate flexibly global shifts. The result is a regional order where the asymmetry inherent to patronage is mitigated by the clients' multi-vector diplomacy, ensuring that neither Russia nor China can claim an absolute monopoly over Central Asian dynamics.

Second, Russia's and China's engagement with the region does not occur in isolation but is shaped by their broader strategic alignment [Papageorgiou & Feklyunina 2025]. The absence of major tensions between Moscow and Beijing – despite shifts in their relative positions – has been facilitated by their shared pursuit of «a new model of international relations» – a multipolar system freed from Western/US hegemony and prioritizing post-liberal norms. Moreover, both Russia and China are interested in ensuring the stability of their neighbourhoods via some degree of direct control and the cultivation of friendly regimes; this holds true in Central Asia, too. While Beijing has vastly increased its regional influence, it recognizes Russia as a key enabler of the stability of Central Asian regimes. Conversely, for the time being Moscow views the influx of Chinese capital and infrastructure as a means to sustain regional development (also to Russia's own advantage) without the political conditionality inherent in Western aid.

This is not to suggest that Russian and Chinese interests are perfectly congruent [Wilson 2021] – but they are sufficiently convergent to preclude the securitization of bilateral relations [Berloto & Fasola 2025]. As noted by one reputable Russian scholar during a Stimson Center event in February 2026, the Russia-China relationship is not regulated by the logic of deterrence – unlike their respective relations with the West. The consolidation of opposing blocs in the European and the Pacific theatres following the Ukraine war has further reduced the chances of Moscow and Beijing drifting or being pulled apart [McFaul & Medeiros 2025, 4 April]. Within this context, it is unlikely that they will allow (potential) regional or local divergencies of interest to undermine their global partnership.

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