

The Geopolitics of Sino-Russian Regionalism in Central Asia: Kazakhstan in Analysis

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Abstract

Central Asia is often seen as Russia's near-abroad. Nonetheless, recent years have shown a more active China in quest for resources, stability, and an attempt to build a Eurasian land axis, to allow a faster connection between East and West within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Interestingly, both China (BRI) and Russia's (Eurasian Economic Union) regionalist projects were launched in Kazakhstan, which shows the centrality of this country in the region. We will focus on the geopolitical impacts for Kazakhstan stemming from the overlapping synergies between both the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). We aim to understand whether this juxtaposition of regional initiatives could be beneficial or cause harm to Kazakhstan's regional interests. In so doing, we aim at filling in a gap in literature, which has failed to provide a comprehensive assessment of the benefits versus handicaps caused by the overlapping generated by the EAEU and the BRI. Drawing on a qualitative methodology which encompasses primary sources (official speeches and news agencies) and secondary sources (the most respected authors on the field), we argue that Kazakhstan stance vis-à-vis the BRI and the EAEU has been proposedly ambiguous in order to maximize its interests. This being said, the conceptual lens that best serves our purposes is social constructivism. According to it, international relations are best explained by a moderate approach in which states cooperate instead of relying either on a search for survival (as realism defends) or on a utopia of liberal kindness (according to liberalism).

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, Russia and China have recognized each other's predominant role in Central Asia. Russia has remained the main security actor, while China has been developing its economic influence in the region (Clarke and Rice, 2020). However, in the face of the growing Sino-Russian competition and the shifting balance between the two countries, Central Asia is seen as Moscow's sphere of influence, even though recent years have seen China increasingly active in seeking resources, stability, as well as attempting to build a Eurasian land axis under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

With that being said, this article aims to answer the following research question: to what extent does Kazakhstan benefit from the coexistence of two integration projects, one Russian and one Chinese, in the region? Indeed, both China and Russia have announced regional projects in Kazakhstan, namely, the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Given that Kazakhstan is crucial for the fulfilment of both Eurasian integration initiatives, we will thus focus on the geopolitical impacts for Nursultan arising from the overlapping synergies between the BRI and the EAEU.

In this regard, we aim to understand whether the juxtaposition of these regional initiatives may be beneficial or, on the contrary, harmful to Kazakhstan's regional interests. In doing so, we aim to fill a gap in the existing literature, which has failed to provide an in-depth analysis of Kazakhstan's importance within the EAEU. On the other hand, despite the existence of a vast literature on the BRI, the latter has failed nonetheless to effectively assess the benefits and/or disadvantages caused by the overlap generated by the EAEU and the BRI in Kazakhstan.

Comprising primary sources, such as Chinese and Kazakh official speeches, news agencies and reports, as well as secondary sources based on the most respected authors on the topic, we argue that Kazakhstan's position vis-à-vis the BRI and the EAEU has been purposefully ambiguous in order to maximise its gains in the face of Sino-Russian interests in the country's riches. In this context, Constructivism is the theory of International Relations (IR) that provides us with a broader view of the situation in Central Asia. According to Walt, "(...) instead of taking the state for granted and assuming that it simply seeks to survive, constructivists regard the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical processes" (1998, p.40).

Therefore, we do not conceive Kazakhstan's foreign policy vis-à-vis China and Russia in a purely realist view that depicts international politics as the stage of rational decision-making by selfish actors who only seek to maximise their interests (Behraves, 2011). According to Hans Morgenthau and Edward H. Carr, necessity drives international politics, so there is no harmony of interests. Moreover, it would be dangerous to think that the competition for power could be mitigated by international law, democratisation or international trade. Also, Kazakhstan's foreign policy towards China and Russia neither reflects the ideals of a Kantian Perpetual Peace as liberalism advocates.

Legitimised by the end of the Cold War, the constructivist theory gained momentum with authors such as Alexander Wendt (*Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*), Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (*International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*), and Nicholas Onuf (*World*

of *Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*), who focus on the role of identity, norms, national interests as well as discourses in IR.

Supporters of Constructivism do not deny the importance of certain postulates that draw on realist and neorealist theories, such as anarchy, self-help, and statocentrism. However, these theorists place the emphasis on the meaning that is attributed to the aforementioned concepts, which are historically and socially constructed. As Matos underlines, "(...) even when one is dealing with material, tangible facts, they always mean something that goes beyond their materiality" (2014, p.42). Furthermore, one of the founding fathers of Constructivism, Alexander Wendt, stresses that competition and conflict as well as self-help do not result from the structure of the international system which is anarchic, as Kenneth Waltz (1988, p.619) notes, but rather from the process. According to Wendt, "self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. Anarchy is what states make of it" (1992, p.395). In order to better clarify his claims, Wendt (1992, p.397) adds that:

States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening, and friends are not. Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which is which. US military power has a different significance for Canada than for Cuba, despite their similar "structural" positions, just as British missiles have a different significance for the United States than do Soviet missiles.

In fact, a purely realist approach is not able to provide an explanation to the different stances that each state adopts towards equal concepts. Still according to Wendt (1995), for the US five North Korean nuclear weapons represent a higher threat level than 500 British weapons of the same type. This fact relates to a shared understanding of friendship and enmity: the British are considered friends, while the North Koreans are not.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section we will analyse Chinese and Russian regionalist projects for Central Asia. The second section, in turn, aims to identify the Chinese and Russian interests in Kazakhstan, and to clarify the importance of the country within the BRI and the EAEU. Finally, in the third section we will analyse the implications for Kazakhstan arising from the country's participation simultaneously in the two Sino-Russian *fora*, namely the BRI and the EAEU, seeking to ascertain in the conclusion whether the overlapping of these initiatives translates into advantages or disadvantages for the country.

2 China and Russia's Regionalist Projects

In order to provide the necessary background for the analysis of Kazakhstan's role between the BRI and the EAEU we will now present the outlines of the Chinese and Russian projects for Central Asian regionalism.

2.1 The Chinese project: the Belt and Road

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping officially announced the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative in the former Kazakh capital of Astana (renamed Nursultan from 2019), which would be later called Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese regional initiative encapsulated in the BRI was, however, preceded by another one: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This was indeed the first multilateral project for Central Asia that China mentored in 2001. The underlying tension over the borders between Russia and China, which were not properly established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, intensified in the 1990s, especially with the independence processes taking place in Central Asia (Bailes and Dunay, 2007). In order to reduce this tension, the Shanghai Five was formed in 1996, encompassing China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. With Uzbekistan's entry in 2001, the forum was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Today, observer members of the SCO include India, Belarus, Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

According to Talantbekovna (2021, p.44), "the main goal of the creation of the SCO was to allow Russia and China to increase their engagement in this region without vexing each other", but also to combat the so-called three evils: terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Another objective of the organisation was to contain the influence of the US in the region, in an attempt to prevent the formation of any empire governed by extra-regional powers, thereby ensuring that Asia belongs exclusively to the Asian peoples. Among the official goals of the forum, one should highlight mutual trust-building, the strengthening of neighbourly relations among the members of the organisation, and cooperation in the military, political, economic, commercial, and cultural fields (SCO Establishment Declaration, 2001).

Regarding the Chinese BRI, two main ideas that characterise this project stand out: connectivity and infrastructure development, through the construction of roads, railroads, oil, and gas pipelines. Promoting economic development and diversifying trade and transport routes are some of the flagships of the BRI. The idea behind it is to connect China to the world by land (Silk Road Economic Belt), but also by sea (21st Century Maritime Silk Road) (Rolland, 2019), thus being a hybrid project that has more recently (since 2015) included digital corridors. One of the reasons behind the creation of this initiative is the need to stabilise Xinjiang, a remote province of China. This region is, according to the Chinese government, plagued by the so-called three evils: terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Duarte, 2020). Consequently, Beijing seeks to appease the existing tensions through the development of trade and logistics hubs under the BRI. This is, in fact, one of the purposes that best

coincides with the aforementioned goals of the SCO. The attempt to stabilise Xinjiang is crucial for China as it shares ethnic ties with Kazakhstan, but also because there are Kazakh people living in that western province of China.

The scope of the BRI has been progressively expanding to different regions. Although the initiative has Central Asia as its primary region, it has been gradually embracing other areas of the world. In doing so, it took different logistical names, such as the so-called String of Pearls if we consider the Indian Ocean, or the Polar Silk Road if we refer to the Arctic. Note that while China is relatively assertive on its eastern flank, namely with the Senkaku Islands (disputed with Japan) or the South China Sea (where it has been building artificial islands), the Chinese are, however, relatively cautious in their advances within the post-Soviet space as they recognize that this is Russia's sphere of influence (Fulton, 2020).

According to Ying (2016), "the western-centred world order dominated by the US has made great contributions to human progress and economic growth. But those contributions lie in the past. The US world order is a suit that no longer fits". China's exponential economic growth is well known, for example leading the main economic indicators, but also increasing its degree of influence in the international system, as one can see through a rising globalisation with Chinese characteristics. Notwithstanding, the idea that the BRI and other Chinese multilateral *fora* can contribute to mitigate US hegemony is not consensual among IR experts, such as Kim (2021). Indeed, for this author, the logistics and infrastructure associated with the BRI do not necessarily mean that China has known an outstanding development, which is indeed a condition so that the Chinese economy can match the American economy (*ibidem*).

Having analysed the contours of Chinese multilateralism in Central Asia, the next section looks at Russia's integration project for the region.

2.2 The Russian project: the Eurasian Economic Union

In the face of China's advances in Central Asia, and in order to limit its influence in the region, Russia itself launched an initiative in 2015: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Building on what had been a previous failure of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the founding treaty of the EAEU was concluded in then Kazakhstan's capital of Astana on May 29, 2014, between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, and welcomed Armenia and Kyrgyzstan in the following year.

One of the primary goals for Vladimir Putin underlying the creation of the EAEU was building closer trade ties between its members. This goal would be pursued along with the modernisation of the economies and an environment conducive to increasing the economic competitiveness of the EAEU. By way of illustration, the construction of a common market for oil and gas (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017), and a customs union, inspired by the EU's model, provides the drivers for the aforementioned Russian purposes. According to Tatiana Valovaya, minister of the Eurasian Economic Commission, "the history of Eurasian integration is actually an attempt to build something similar to the European Union [(EU)]" (*apud* Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017, p.5).

Putin has sought to preserve the vast cultural heritage of the Soviet Union in the recent Central Asian republics, such as the language that unites the members of the EAEU (Kaczmarek, 2017). For Russia, the EAEU is further seen as a means to pursue its aspirations (Dragneva, 2018) that translate into the consolidation of its regional hegemony, marked by a revival of its attention in Eurasia. Therefore, through the reintegration of the region, which the collapse of the Soviet Union had compromised, Moscow aims to achieve a major position in the restructuring of the international system (Talantbekovna, 2021). Indeed, Russia recognizes that the projection of its influence in the global sphere requires, in the first place, having a power effectively consolidated at the regional level. According to Allison, "[the] regional structures in Central Asia have come to offer the role of 'protective integration' – a form of collective political solidarity with Russia against international political processes or agendas that are interpreted as challenging politically incumbent regimes and their leaders [in the region]" (2007, p.185). Ultimately, Moscow's goals must be understood in light of its revisionist and expansionist foreign policy, which seeks to build a new security architecture and control its neighbourhood, using the EAEU for that purpose (Foxall, 2019).

3 Kazakhstan as a Pivotal State

Given the two competing projects described above for regionalism in Central Asia, it seems interesting to understand how the model state at the economic level in the region - Kazakhstan - can benefit or, on the contrary, be harmed by its simultaneous membership to China and Russia's competing projects. Therefore, in the next lines we will analyse China's interests in Kazakhstan.

3.1 China's interests in Kazakhstan

According to Louthan (2022), a significant importance is attributed to the BRI as a strategy of Chinese competition with the US, relegating, however, the role of the states that integrate it to the backstage. Nonetheless, the analysis of the centrality of countries like Kazakhstan is imperative since this state is the cornerstone of the Chinese initiative. Indeed, its energy resources, minerals, and transportation infrastructure make Kazakhstan the

key player in the stability and dynamism of the periphery, which matters to China, therefore (Sajjanhar, 2021). As such, it is not surprising that Xi Jinping chose Kazakhstan to officially launch the BRI. Thus, as the Chinese president noted, "a close neighbour is better than a distant relative" (China Daily, 2013). Xi Jinping described the relations between China and Central Asia as facing "a unique opportunity", and expressed his desire to "strengthen trust, friendship, and promote common development and prosperity for the benefit of all our peoples" (Fulton, 2020, p.2).

Considering the above, Kazakhstan not only matters for China in terms of market expansion, but also of Eurasian integration (Thornton, 2020). It should be noted, however, that while the Russian integration project focuses on Central Asia, the Chinese initiative, in turn, starts in this region despite seeing it as a gateway to access other markets, such as the EU.

In view of the growing Chinese demography, which requires proportionally a greater supply of hydrocarbons, as well as Kazakh ores, these resources allow China to reduce its dependence on the Middle East. In this way, Kazakhstan contributes to the strengthening of Beijing's energy security, crucial to its concern over the so-called "Malacca dilemma". The Straits of Malacca is the most important maritime communication line for China, since more than 70% of China's hydrocarbon imports and 60% of its exports transit by this route. China's heavy dependence on the strait and the omnipresent fear of a naval blockade, which so far has never materialised, has led the Chinese government to diversify its sources of hydrocarbons, and thus turning to Central Asian in the process.

China is an important source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for Kazakhstan, in capital, technology and infrastructures, which are central to the Kazakh energy sector (Fulton 2020). Interestingly, it was the Chinese who broke the oil and gas pipeline monopoly held until recently by the Russians. Indeed, by way of illustration, at the end of 2016, Chinese investment in Kazakhstan amounted to \$960 million (Kubayeva, 2021). However, Chinese investments in the country also involve the construction of transport infrastructure that enables a connection to the Middle East and Europe, in order to "(...) ensure a vast flow of Chinese products to foreign markets" (Vugs, 2018, p.33). In this sense, Kazakhstan asserts itself as an important land corridor for Chinese exports, promoting the connection between China, Europe, and the Middle East.

3.2 Russia's interests in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan and Russia share a Soviet legacy characterised by strong historical, cultural and linguistic ties. Despite the huge exodus of Russian population from Kazakhstan, the figures reflecting the presence of Russian minorities in the country are considerable. On the other hand, the post-Soviet Central Asian space has been a priority of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin's presidency due to the above-mentioned legacy. In that sense, this region has become a sphere of vital geopolitical and geoeconomic interests for Moscow (Satpajew, 2014).

The inspiration for the creation of the EAEU is often attributed to the former Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, considered the founding father of this integration project, who, in 1991, in a speech at Moscow State University put forward the idea of a "Eurasian Union" (Clarke and Rice, 2020). In this way, Nazarbayev viewed the establishment of the EAEU as a personal triumph. In his view, the supranational institutions of the Union could contain Russia's influence. It should be noted that Moscow has been focusing on securing its influence in Central Asia by controlling infrastructure and transferring economic and customs policy functions to supranational institutions such as the EAEU. However, Kazakhstan views these Russian pretensions with suspicion, which is ultimately reflected in the country's willingness to distance the EAEU from any political agenda, given that the conclusion of the Eurasian Economic Union Treaty took place in a context marked by the Russian annexation of Crimea (Yuneman, 2020).

Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country with which Russia shares an extensive part of its border, in addition to being Russia's largest trading partner in the region. Kazakhstan's geographical location, on the other hand, was central to the integration of the other Central Asian states, as it served as a connecting point between Russia and the members that would join the EAEU. Furthermore, given that the EAEU was initially planned by three states (Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan), without Kazakhstan's participation, the Union would have been more of another alliance between Russia and Belarus (Yuneman, 2020). Therefore, Kazakhstan can neither be seen as a mere satellite, as was the case during the Soviet Union, nor neglected by Moscow. It should instead be seen as a pivotal state both to fulfil the EAEU and to connect Russia with China, as well as with the other Central Asian countries (Carrère d'Encausse, 2017).

In the security sphere, the region is crucial for Russia, which "(...) does not believe in the ability of the Central Asian countries to manage the growing threats in the region without [Moscow's] support" (Lo, 2015, p.8-9). Even economic integration through the EAEU is strongly related to military security guarantees (Abisheva, 2021), as it allows to strengthen the Russian presence and, consequently, to confirm Moscow's importance as the main regional security actor.

4 The Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Implications of Regional Cooperation in Kazakhstan

After presenting the main interests of the two powers, China and Russia, in Kazakhstan, we will now assess the advantages and disadvantages of the country's membership in the Chinese BRI and the EAEU.

Kazakhstan has pursued a multi-vectorial foreign policy, seeking to diversify its diplomatic, economic, and political ties mainly with Russia and China, and to a lesser extent with the EU and the US. Kazakhstan's response to Russia's annexation of Ukraine can be seen as an example of this policy, since despite Kazakhstan being one of Moscow's biggest allies, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated that his country had no intention of breaking Western sanctions: "We cannot violate them, especially because we receive warnings about possible so-called secondary sanctions against our economy from the West" (GIS, 2022).

According to Thornton (2020, p.2) "(...) Central Asian states are experienced practitioners of major power balancing and are quick to exploit the advantages presented by being the object of multiple powerful suitors". Even though the BRI and the EAEU serve different purposes, the ambitious plans that China has been pursuing may collide with the Russian strategy, given that Russia views Central Asia as its sphere of influence. Although the BRI is not an integration project in the strict sense, its main goal is to create favourable conditions for the flowing of Chinese goods to the markets of Central Asia, Russia, Europe, and Middle Eastern countries, which coincides with the interests of the EAEU (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019). According to World Bank data (2020), "BRI infrastructure improvements reduce shipping time for Kazakh goods by more than 8% and trade costs by 4%".

When in 2013, Xi Jinping officially launched the BRI in Kazakhstan, former President Nazarbayev quickly showed his support for the initiative, since he saw it as a means to mitigate his landlocked country status and promote economic integration in Central Asia (Pieper, 2020). The same is true about the integration in the EAEU, which allows for the development of Kazakhstan's role in international trade.

Since Kazakhstan is a large landlocked country, its integration within international markets is highly dependent on the quality of transport networks. However, through the BRI, the country has benefited from improvements in its network, as three of the initiative's six overland routes cross Kazakhstan. As Pieper (2020) notes, "Kazakhstan did not need to lobby for the use of any specific route. Indeed, geography and logistics play in its favour due to the country's central location in the heart of Eurasia". According to constructivism, Kazakhstan's condition of landlocked country, as well as the quality of its transport routes, can be perceived as material dimensions, although these do not define the behaviour of Kazakhstan. Thus, the more cooperative stance that Kazakhstan pursues toward China is neither dependent on its landlocked condition, nor on the insufficiency of its transport network, but instead on the perception that Kazakh agents have built of Beijing. This is actually reflected by Constructivist tenets, which tend to see reality as self-constructed.

Nonetheless, despite China's huge investments in Kazakhstan, the country lacks a specific strategy to develop fields such as agriculture and industry, i.e., non-energy sectors (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019) whose potential has not been yet sufficiently explored. This situation contributes to a scarce diversification of the Kazakh economy, which translates into a strong deindustrialization, exacerbated also by its membership in the EAEU. In fact, the importation of Russian goods at lower prices harms the competitiveness of domestic production (Yuneman, 2020). However, the development of these sectors is, in turn, also dependent on reforms that the Kazakh government has failed so far to pursue.

Chinese control over the flow of goods, services, capital, and people in/to Kazakhstan, as well as the strengthening of its presence and investments in the country has increased the Kazakh population's suspicion of China (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019), although the country's political elite welcomes Chinese investment. As Kazakhstan is a recent state resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalist sentiments and protection of its sovereignty are ultimately exacerbated, given its history of subjugation to Moscow over more than half of the 20th century. Thus, any attempt of Chinese influence that may lead to a loss of sovereignty is viewed with suspicion by the Kazakh population. The same applies to Russian foreign policy. In this regard, the Kazakh government has been stating that despite maintaining good relations with Russia, it does not want to rejoin its sphere of influence as implicit in Vladimir Putin's aspirations (Sanchez, 2020). In fact, initially the creation of the EAEU was viewed with some concern by the population, with the opposition even proposing a referendum on the country's membership in the EAEU (Satpaev, 2015). In order to secure its independence, Kazakhstan has explored a multivectorial and smart foreign policy. As Carrère d'Encausse (2017) claims, Nursultan's relations with Moscow (based on the EAEU) are important since Russia is currently China's main competitor in Central Asia, limiting its influence in the region.

Still, the population also recognizes the importance of the infrastructures built by China as these have been improving their quality of life. Paradoxically, despite the surplus of Kazakh labour, these constructions are done by Chinese companies whose employers are mainly Chinese, something that does not contribute to generating local labour (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019).

The policy that China has conducted in its remote province of Xinjiang has not played in its favour either. Reports of Kazakhs who have lived in the concentration camps built by China (which Beijing calls "re-education camps") highlight the existence of torture and forced labor (Sajjanhar, 2021; Pieper, 2020). This has led in turn to several protests on Kazakh soil against the Chinese presence in the country. Thus, the high Chinese economic investments in Kazakhstan are not necessarily accompanied by an increase of China's acceptance rate in the country. Thus, despite Xi Jinping's introductory speech on the BRI attested that "we do not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Belgium, 2013), there is widespread anxiety among the local population regarding Beijing's aspirations in Kazakhstan (Dave, 2018).

Despite the several scholarships that China has been awarding to Kazakh students, in addition to the promotion of the Confucius Institutes, Chinese soft power in Kazakhstan remains low. Besides the reasons already stressed by us, the historical cultural relations between Central Asia and Russia and the stereotypes associated with the Chinese are some of the factors that most influence the Kazakhs' view towards China. For instance, the older population that feels nostalgic for the golden days of the Soviet Union in which the system was functional.

Regarding the EAEU, Kazakhstan's membership in the Union has not always benefited the country. Western sanctions applied against Russia in the context of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 were eventually reflected in a sharp devaluation of the Kazakh currency, highlighting the inherent disadvantages of participating in Russia's multilateralism for Central Asia. Over the years, the dream of economic integration advocated by Nazarbayev has gradually been fading. In fact, the former Kazakh President refused to transfer state competencies in trade policy to the Eurasian Commission, and strongly criticised politicisation as well as attempts to encompass the areas of security and defence in the Union (Pieper, 2020). The tariff harmonisation envisaged by the EAEU, forced Kazakhstan to increase its tariffs, sometimes by almost 50%, harming traders with income losses and decreasing wages. In addition, the non-tariff barriers that became frequent practice within the EAEU made it difficult for goods to enter the country and thus, market access was not reciprocal in practice (Pieper, 2020). In fact, when the EAEU was launched, it was expected that the organisation would enable an increase in FDI from member states in Kazakhstan. However, this did not happen, unlike Chinese investment which increased significantly (Kubayeva, 2015).

5 Conclusion

Having reached this stage, we conclude that there are no noticeable disadvantages arising from Kazakhstan's simultaneous participation in the BRI and the EAEU. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has failed to fully grasp the potential arising from its overlapping membership to both China and Russia's multilateral initiatives. We agree with Clarke and Rice (2020), according to whom "(...) despite the interviews, speeches, press releases, and memorandums extolling the benefits of Sino-Russian partnership, virtually no concrete cooperation projects exist between the EAEU and BRI in Kazakhstan". This being said, given the absence of coordination among the EAEU and the BRI, Kazakhstan is, therefore, forced to choose between two different regionalist projects for Central Asia, one Chinese, and the other Russian. Although the country's foreign policy has been smart and pragmatic in playing each actors' interests against the other, Kazakhstan may need nonetheless, in the medium to long term, to adopt a more assertive stance to best promote its own interests amidst Sino-Russian regionalist projects for Central Asia.

As a second major finding, while the BRI's dynamic is more focused on the economic and infrastructure development in Central Asia, the EAEU in turn seems to be born under the same geopolitical goals of former EurAsEC, whose efficiency had failed. This might have been caused by the fact that EurAsEC's real goals for Central Asia were mostly geopolitical instead of promoting geoeconomic integration. In the end, Russia's hidden objectives to create a kind of common currency and regional parliament inspired by the EU's model did not convince Central Asian states which remain reluctant in providing Moscow with significant influence over the region. That also explains why these regional countries (in which Kazakhstan is included) prefer to have more than one power competing for the resources of Central Asia. Likewise, this also enables us to understand Kazakhstan's multivectorial policy since its independence, which allows the country to benefit at the same time from China's and Russia's regional projects for Central Asia. This does not mean however that in the coming decades – in the face of Russian declining economy and China's promising economic development – Kazakhstan may be tempted to leave Russia's EAEU to fully grasp the potential arising from the BRI.

The current war in Ukraine contributes to better unveiling the "marriage of convenience" between China and Russia in the framework of their regional projects. On the one hand, there is a mutual suspicion between Russians and Chinese, as evidenced, for example, by the absence of China's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is used by Russia as a privileged military instrument in its relations with Central Asian countries. On the other hand, one is witnessing a union of synergies between the two powers when it comes to preventing an emerging extra regional influence of foreign powers in Central Asia. In other words, China and Russia share the assumption that Asia belongs only to Asian people and states, and are committed to struggle the so-called "three evils" – extremism, separatism and terrorism.

In line with the constructivist postulates, which claim that perceptions can change over time, one can easily understand Russia-Kazakhstan mutual shifting perceptions as a result of Tokayev's ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine. As seen throughout this article, Russians and Kazakhs share a long historical legacy as well as economic, security, geographic and cultural ties. However, their relationship is facing a tense moment. In practice, Kazakhstan's abstention in the vote on the ES 11/1 resolution that condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, besides joining Western sanctions against Russia, as well as Tokayev's non-recognition of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum marked a turning point in the relations between the two countries. A reality quite unlikely predictable in January 2022, when Kazakhstan requested the CSTO intervention in its territory - the first in the organisation's history - in the context of the violent protests that broke out across the country. Therefore, Kazakhstan has been trying to skillfully explore its multivectorial policy, thus seeking to benefit from its cooperation with different actors.

Another advantage in using Constructivism is that despite their divergent interests and priorities in Central Asia, more than ever Russia and China need to cooperate in the region (a fact exacerbated by the war in Ukraine) to bandwagon the US-led international system. The 22nd SCO Summit as well as President Xi Jinping's first meeting outside China since the beginning of the pandemic, with Vladimir Putin, both in Uzbekistan, clearly demonstrate that China's international priorities are regional.

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