

China's New Military Posture in Central Asia

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Key Points

- China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹ determined a change of its policy in Central Asia from a purely economic to an economic and security policy.
- In recent years, China has increased its military presence in Central Asia by conducting exercises, training military professionals, upping its arms assistance and export, and building up military infrastructure.
- China's military footprint in Central Asia is expanding mainly in the so-called "weaker" nations, while other nations with a relatively stronger economy and security structures are resisting Chinese pressure.
- China's growing military presence in Central Asia impacts not only this region, but also its neighboring countries, especially Russia, India and Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

The US has always faced significant challenges in establishing their presence in Central Asia, which has traditionally been considered as an area of Russian security influence. The Kremlin's strategy to maintain regional hegemony in its neighbourhood includes establishing close ties with local "pro-Russia" regimes, a military presence in Central Asian countries, supporting Russian ethnic minorities and marginalizing Western and Chinese influence. Since 2014, China has become a major trading partner for Central Asian countries and a major investor in the energy sector. Furthermore, in 2015, China and Kazakhstan expressed their common willingness to link the BRI with Kazakhstan's "Nurly Zhol strategy"² as a prelude to long-term economic, logistical, and infrastructural collaboration.

In parallel, Uzbekistan announced its commitment to link its New Development Strategy to the BRI. Although directly involved in the initiative, the Kremlin interpreted the BRI as an attempt to lure Central Asian countries into China's geo-economic orbit, at the expense of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), of which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members. China's access to regional energy resources clearly runs counter to Russia's goal of maintaining a monopoly on control of the energy sector in Central Asia.

¹ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, or B&R), formerly known as One Belt One Road or OBOR for short, is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese Government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations. It is considered a centrepiece of the Chinese leader Xi Jinping's foreign policy.

² *Nurly Zhol* is a US\$9 billion domestic economic stimulus plan to develop and modernize roads, railways, ports, IT infrastructure, and education and civil services in the Republic of Kazakhstan. The *Nurly Zhol* plan was announced by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev in November 2014.

Moreover, at the institutional level, China plays a leading role in initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)³. Established in 2001 for the purpose of fostering political, economic and security cooperation, the SCO now has eight full member states (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, Pakistan).

In 2017, China inaugurated a military base in Djibouti, marking a radical change in China's policy, which has been based on not stationing troops or establishing military bases abroad. In the same year, several reports emerged about the presence of Chinese military personnel in Tajikistan. In the past months, more reports have emerged about Chinese military in Equatorial Guinea⁴, forcing many to call it "China's Military Engagement along the Silk Route". Therefore, if it is legitimate to think about further increasing of China's military presence in Central Asia, then some questions arise spontaneously: Can China's presence to secure its vast BRI network in Central Asia affect the security balance in the region? And can Beijing's military competitiveness in Central Asia lead to a Russia–China divergence in such a *status quo*?

ANALYSIS

China's security outreach in Central Asia is linked to its perceived threats, and the main reason appears to be China's expanding national interests and the need for commensurate security to protect them. As China's interests expand due to geo-politics and geo-economics, the supporting military structure will expand, too. The shift from purely 'economic' to 'economic and security' interests became apparent in 2015, when Xi Jinping asserted the importance of military diplomacy as a foreign policy instrument.⁵ In fact, China's perceived threats in Central Asia are possible attacks to its BRI infrastructure and on Chinese workers involved in the project, as well as potential spread of Islamic terrorism in Xinjiang region.

Although China has been looking at the security of its BRI in a comprehensive approach along with host governments, the 2016 terroristic attack to the Chinese embassy in Bishkek was possibly the turning point of its strategy⁶. Indeed, after an initial phase in which the Chinese investments in Central Asian countries were very welcome, it is no secret that the host countries have progressively begun to show discontent towards Beijing, as China's promises of local employment and revenue generation have not happened at the envisioned scale⁷.

Also, Beijing fears a possible 'fan-out' of radical ideology to Xinjiang through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as the Taliban may not be able to rein in renegade groups of Islamic State (IS) and East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) fighters for a long time. Elsewhere in Central Asia, according to Human Rights Watch, in 2019 Kazakhstan detained 500 alleged members of IS and sentenced 14 citizens for participating in conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. In Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley, many terrorists found their 'jihadi' in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In Turkmenistan, Chinese BRI investments in the China–Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan– Iran railway and the Turkmenbashi International Seaport

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shanghai_Cooperation_Organisation.

⁴ CSIS, "Is China building a new string of pearls in the Atlantic Ocean?", <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-building-new-string-pearlsatlantic-ocean> (accessed December 21, 2021).

⁵ Chinapower, "How is China bolstering its military diplomatic relations?", <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy> (accessed December 15, 2021).

⁶ South China Morning Post, "The weakest links: Bishkek attack exposes security risks for Chinese projects in Central Asia", <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2011911/weakest-links-bishkek-attack-exposes-security-risks> (accessed December 7, 2021).

⁷ Voices on Central Asia, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact in Central Asia", <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/chinas-belt-androad-initiative-and-its-impact-in-central-asia> (accessed December 5, 2021).

are vulnerable to terrorist attacks. To address these concerns, Beijing is increasing arms exports, military exercises, imparting military education, constructing military bases, and using Private Security Companies (PSCs).

When it comes to arms export in Central Asia, China has provided a significant 18 percent of the region's arms over the past five years (only 1.5 percent in 2010–2014⁸) and has overtaken Russia in arms exports to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In fact, all Central Asian countries have received technologically advanced weapons from China including armed drones, communication equipment and UAVs between 2016 and 2021.

In particular, in 2016 Kazakhstan received Wing Loong-1 drones⁹ (copy of the US Predators) and the Russian modelled Y-8 transport aircraft¹⁰ (copy of the An-12), while in 2019 Tajikistan received Hongqi-9 missile systems (copy of S-300). The most recent Chinese platform acquired by Uzbekistan is the shoulder-fired AD missile system QW-18 in 2019, but Uzbekistan was also the first country to receive Wing Loong-I drones from China in 2014. Moreover, China has overtaken Russia and has become Turkmenistan's second-largest arms supplier after Turkey¹¹.

With regard to military exercises, since 2002, when the first Sino-Kyrgyz counterterrorism exercise was conducted, China has upped the scale of exercises in bilateral and multilateral formats, as well as under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Russia and China conducted 10 bilateral exercises in Central Asia from 2014 to 2019. From 2014 onwards, China has been showcasing its technology and magnitude in exercises in Central Asia. In 2016, an exercise with Tajikistan involved 10,000 personnel in the Gorno-Badakshan region¹². In the same year, China founded the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), a multilateral organisation comprising China, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan that focuses on regional security issues. China's motivation to establish the QCCM appeared to be borne out of its inability to steer the SCO and its Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) to pursue its objectives. In 2019, a three-day military exercise in the GornoBadakshan region led to several military observers commenting that Dushanbe is increasingly outsourcing its security needs to Beijing¹³. From 2019 onwards, China conducted bilateral counterterrorism exercises called 'Cooperation-2019', in which Chinese PAP (People's Armed Police) participated with Kyrgyz National Guards and Uzbek police forces.

Focusing on military education: While the Central Asian countries continue to cultivate the heritage of military education at Russian academies, China's efforts in this field have significantly increased. By the early 2000s, China had trained about 15 Kazakh officers in its academies, and in 2010 that number had risen to 65. In the past five years, about 30 Kyrgyz officers have been trained from China. In 2014, China founded the National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai, which has trained 300 officers from SCO countries in less than four years. In 2016, China helped Kazakhstan in establishing a Chinese Department at the Kazakh University of Defence. Uzbekistan Internal Security Academy and China's People's Security University are official partners since May 2017. China has hosted 213 officers from Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry to courses on counterterrorism and drug trafficking in its training institutes. In 2019, a delegation from the Uzbek Ministry of Defence visited China to study

⁸ Wilson Centre, "In Russia's shadow: China's rising security presence in Central Asia", <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennancable-no-52-russias-shadow-chinas-rising-security-presence-central-asia> (accessed December 11, 2021).

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CAIG_Wing_Loong.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaanxi_Y-8.

¹¹ Eurasianet, "Report: Turkmenistan is Turkey's biggest weapons buyer", <https://eurasianet.org/report-turkmenistan-turkeys-biggestweapons-buyer> (accessed December 12, 2021).

¹² The Jamestown Foundation, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China's (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan", <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-two-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan/> (accessed December 12, 2021).

¹³ Eurasianet, "Tajikistan, China to hold another joint military drill in Pamirs", <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-china-to-hold-anotherjoint-military-drill-in-pamirs> (accessed December 14, 2021).

Chinese military media. As Beijing plans to increase the enrolment of foreign students, universities have begun to actively recruit Central Asian military officers for Chinese programs. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have now educated their senior military officials at Chinese universities. The People's Liberation Army National Defence University (PLA NDU) and the Armed Forces Academy of Uzbekistan are cooperating on educational exchange. Students and staff of the Military-Technical Institute of the National Guard of Uzbekistan take Chinese-language classes to build proficiency, in case they have an opportunity to study in China. Recently, the PLA NDU has offered Central Asian students higher salaries and greater exposure to Chinese technological and scientific innovations than the Russians in their NDU.

An interesting growing trend in recent years has been the involvement of China's People's Armed Police (PAP) in training with the local police of the Central Asian countries¹⁴. China has focused on developing relations with Central Asian security services and police forces, compared to Russia, which has focused mainly on military ties. About 66 percent of Russian exercises in Central Asia were conducted by the Russian Army and Air Force, while 59 percent of Chinese exercises has involved the PAP. In 2019, China started the 'Cooperation-2019' exercises series, which allows China to interoperate its PAP with Para Military Forces (PMF) and the police of Central Asian countries. The Chinese PAP has trained local police officers from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in counterterrorism operations using the Cooperation 2019 series.

China's military presence is most noticeable in Tajikistan, where China's main concerns appear to be on security and counterterrorism domains¹⁵. In October 2016, China and Tajikistan agreed to build 11 border outposts and a training centre for border guards¹⁶. Under this agreement, a Chinese outpost was established in the Murghab district of Gorno-Badakhshan. According to satellite images, the outpost houses a helipad, accommodation for 1,000 personnel and ramps for tanks. Lately, Tajikistan has concluded an agreement with China for the construction of another base in Gorno-Badakhshan close to the Wakhan corridor for Tajikistan's special forces. In 2021, China opened an airport near the border with Tajikistan. It is the first of the 30 airports which China plans to construct as part of the modernization of its tourism infrastructure in Xinjiang and Tibet¹⁷. In its 2020 report, the US Department of Defense (DoD) included Tajikistan in the list of sites for future Chinese military activities.

Another sign that China has changed its approach to security in Central Asia is the use of Private Security Companies (PSCs). Beijing has repeatedly spoken about providing traditional and non-traditional forms of security to Chinese industrial sites and transportation networks, especially linked to BRI projects. Non-traditional security refers precisely to the use of PSCs¹⁸. China's paramilitary state organisations such as Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, are in the process of reshaping their remit to include security services for the BRI. The stateowned China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) already has an agreement with the Kyrgyz government on public surveillance to protect its interests in case of anti-Chinese demonstrations. The China Railway Group, which is involved in the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Rail project, relies on the Zhongjun Junhong Security Company for its

¹⁴ The Diplomat, "How China uses the People's Armed Police as agents of diplomacy", <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/how-china-uses-the-peoples-armed-police-as-agents-of-diplomacy/> (accessed December 16, 2021).

¹⁵ The Hindu, "Eye on Afghanistan, China to build a military base in Tajikistan", <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/eye-on-afghanistan-china-to-build-military-base-in-tajikistan/article37221418.ece> (accessed December 14, 2021).

¹⁶ The Diplomat, "China in Central Asia: building border posts in Tajikistan", <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/china-in-central-asiabuilding-border-posts-in-tajikistan/> (accessed December 4, 2021).

¹⁷ Hindustan News Hub, "China is building 30 airports in Xinjiang, Tibet near Indian border, Pok, movement of troops will be faster", <https://hindustannewshub.com/world-news/china-is-building-30-airports-in-xinjiang-tibet-near-indian-border-pok-movement-of-troopswill-be-faster/> (accessed December 14, 2021).

¹⁸ The National Bureau of Asian Research, "Securing the BRI: China's evolving military engagement along the silk roads", https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf (accessed January 4, 2022).

security services¹⁹. Not only Moscow, but also Western countries are concerned, as even a small PSC presence could play a role in shaping the domestic and foreign policies of countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Recalling Xi Jinping's 2015 speech²⁰, he stressed that military diplomacy is a critical element of China's foreign policy. Specifically, Xi highlighted the effectiveness of military diplomacy in "protecting China's sovereignty, safety and developmental interests." Under President Xi Jinping, military diplomatic activities have surged. From 2003-2012, China averaged 151 activities per year. The average from 2013 to 2018 was 20 percent higher, with 179 activities per year.

In Central Asia, China will protect itself from threats to its national interests but is likely to avoid a direct involvement in the short term. It will rather involve the local governments and possibly influence them in countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. By supplying sophisticated technologies, China is establishing a strategic foothold in areas where Russia is lagging technologically. With regards to exercises and training, China has balanced its multilateral exercises with bilateral exercises. Multilateral exercises allow China to promote its military inventory for future sales and develop inter-operability capabilities, whereas bilateral exercises allow China to project itself as a contender like Russia. Sponsoring military courses for Central Asia pays off to China, as the graduates have a similar understanding of security issues, not to mention camaraderie and old friendships. Central Asia has already middle and senior-level officials who have been educated in Chinese universities. In the coming years, Chinese military education will have a significant impact on the composition of military leadership in Central Asia. Staying away from PLA and locating PAP in Tajikistan appears to be a thought-out Chinese strategy, to keep itself within Russia's red lines, of not involving the army. However, should such a need arise, it will not take much time for China to turn over or reinforce these posts with PLA.

The presence of Chinese troops near Wakhan (which is about 200 km from Gilgit Baltistan) has implications for both Russia and India. In fact, any Chinese Electronic Warfare monitoring facility located there can be used to track Russian and Indian military activities in the region. Chinese proposed airports close to Tajikistan's borders could be a part of China's larger strategic design. PSCs can assume roles as consultants and security providers, but their main role could be surveillance of the local governments and influence governance and policies. Kazakhstan, which remains a "Russian stronghold", prohibits Chinese PSCs, but Kyrgyzstan is open to them. China might put pressure on the weaker countries to legally allow PSCs in their sovereign territories.

There are commonalities of interest between China and Russia in Afghanistan, the role of the US in the region, and support to incumbent regimes in Central Asia. Both are members of SCO and regularly participate in joint and bilateral military exercises. Russia has provided China with sophisticated military equipment in the last decade, while China has emerged as one of the most prominent buyers of Russian oil. In 2019 at a BRI forum, President Putin mentioned that China's BRI matches perfectly with the gears of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. In the short term, China may continue to defer to Russia on the security front in the region. In Central Asia, Russia's share of arms imports has remained constant at around 60 percent in the last 10 years, while China has replaced the market share of Turkey, Ukraine, Spain, France and other countries. Thus, China could eat into Russia's share of the armament market, but instead began to develop its domestic armaments industry and search for new export markets in the region. On the long-term, this could cause friction and their relationship could see testing times ahead.

¹⁹ The Diplomat, "Chinese private security moves into Central Asia", <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/chinese-private-security-moves-into-central-asia/> (accessed December 16, 2021).

²⁰ Chinapower, "How is China bolstering its military diplomatic relations?", <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-military-diplomacy/> (accessed December 15, 2021).

China's role in construction activities for the Tajik military may be acceptable to Russia, but the certainty that China will not use the infrastructure for military purposes in the future is questionable. This is because China has concerns about radicalism in the Pamir. There are tensions between Tajikistan and the Taliban, and China still has unresolved claims to Tajikistan's territory. In 2011, Tajikistan handed over 1,000 square kilometres of territory to China in the Pamir region in lieu of a loan. In the long term, China's attempts to slice a portion of the strategically important Wakhan corridor as a justification to stem vulnerabilities in Afghanistan might cause serious consternation to Russia.

The popular narrative in Central Asia was that Russia is the dominant security partner, while China takes the lead in economic matters: "Russia Protects – China Invests". If we were to dilate this, does it mean that China will let this narrative remain forever? Will it continue to play a subordinate role to Russia in the security domain, even if its economic interests are growing at such high pace? This is very unlikely to happen.

China views its expansion into Central Asia through the lens of sourcing resources and seeking new markets for Chinese goods. India, too, considers the region essential to nurture and expand its strategic potential. Natural competitiveness prevails, and China will therefore continue to use every opportunity at its disposal to prevent India's rise to become a Central Asian power. India's unresolved border with China, the construction of a highway through Indian territory in Aksai Chin and enabling Pakistan to construct the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir has affected India's outreach to the region. Recent violations of the LAC (Line of Actual Control) and the construction of a string of villages by China in Tibet have caused a trust deficit, and any Chinese military presence in Central Asia would probably widen the already existing cracks between the two countries. Another reason for Indian concern is China's encirclement strategy and its attempts to limit India's role in the region through the Pakistan proxy. Pakistan is seeking a road link to Uzbekistan and to Kazakhstan, and India wants to counter Pakistan's influence in Central Asia. However, China's close ties with Pakistan and its resurgent role in Central Asia can affect India's strategies.

India has a small presence in Tajikistan with a military training team and an India–Tajik friendship hospital at Bokhtar (Kurgun Teppa). It spent about US\$ 70 million from 2002 to 2010 on the renovation of the disused Ayni airbase in Tajikistan²¹, which is still closed. India wants to engage with Russia for restarting the facility, especially after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and China's growing footprints in Tajikistan and Gilgit Baltistan. India has recently conducted bilateral/multilateral military exercises under the aegis of the SCO and carried out exercises with all Central Asian countries during last year. Its current strategy clearly aims to stay in business by exporting defence platforms in areas such as Artificial Intelligence, software, and space to provide Central Asian countries alternatives to China. India's membership of the SCO in 2017 - ostensibly on Russia's bidding to balance China in the region - has surely given India a stage in Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

With the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the new focus on the Indo-Pacific, Washington's already limited role in the region is likely to diminish further. Moreover, the prospects of a return of U.S. troops after the withdrawal met with limited interest on the part of Central Asian governments. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, as the United States launched operations in Afghanistan, it used Central Asia as a logistics hub and opened bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan until 2014, when both bases were closed. The Northern Distribution Network, a series of supply lines to Afghanistan via Russia and Central Asia launched in 2009, was shuttered in 2015 due to rising tensions between Washington and Moscow.

²¹ The Eurasian Times, "Will Ayni airbase in Tajikistan become India's 1st overseas military base?", <https://eurasianimes.com/india-ayniairbase-in-tajikistan-russian/> (accessed January 18, 2022).

Although the U.S. government has pledged to build new facilities on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, security assistance has dropped from a high of \$450 million a decade ago to just \$11 million in 2020. The United States and NATO together have contributed 85 of the 269 joint exercises with Central Asian militaries since 1991²². But their frequency has also declined from a peak of seven in 2003 to an average of only two since 2018, without any recent drilling after the collapse of the Afghan government. China is clearly aiming at filling this void, and its BRI fits perfectly to this strategy.

In the complex game of balance between the major powers in Central Asia, China can also count on the fact that Pakistan - another key player - has recently shifted its interests in the area from geo-political to geo-economic. Furthermore, following the takeover of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan, if on the one hand ties between Pakistan and the U.S. have progressively deteriorated, on the other hand there has been a constant growth in strategic relations between Pakistan and China. At present, Beijing's military presence in Central Asia still seems to be calibrated to keep Russia's sensitivities in mind, but in the future China may not defer any longer to Russia and simply develop its own initiatives ignoring Moscow.

Beijing's decision to establish the QCCM in 2016, to operate border posts in Tajikistan, and to open China plus Central Asia²³ in 2020 (a multi-lateral mechanism launched outside SCO), indicates China is not worried about crossing red lines in the future. Moscow's concerns remain understated, given its growing tensions with the US and the likely bad consequences of the war with Ukraine. Nevertheless, the shift in the balance of dominance and China's nonchalance to Russia in Central Asia is growing. It has the potential to vex the complex chessboard in Central Asia, which Russia considers its sphere of influence.

The last few years have seen excellent relations between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, but the balance of power in Central Asia is gradually changing, and this could lead to no longer peaceful coexistence between the "bear and the dragon" in the region.

Recommendations for the US/USCENTCOM

- Promote high-level military visits and exchanges with the armed forces of Central Asian countries to increase international presence of US officers and to balance China's efforts in this regard.
- Pursue US foreign policy objectives in Central Asia through military assistance programs and the development of professional relationships with the Central Asian countries. The expansion of overseas travel for US officers enables the US to better observe and study foreign military command structures, unit formations and operational training, and to develop approaches to common security concerns.
- Further expand US participation in bilateral and multilateral military initiatives/exercises in Central Asia with the aim of building mutual trust and interoperability, and to monitor/observe the Chinese level of commitment.
- Strengthen military ties with Kazakhstan, which is currently the only strategic partner in Central Asia with a real interest in a US presence, and whose decisions aren't constantly changing in pursuit of short-term advantages.

²² The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, "Central Asia Military Exercises Database", <https://oxussociety.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/09/Central-Asia-Military-Exercises-Database.xlsx> (accessed January 18, 2022).

²³ The Diplomat, "China launches 5+1 format meetings with Central Asia", <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-launches-51-formatmeetings-with-central-asia/> (accessed January 15, 2021).