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The Ambivalent Dimensions of Russo-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Space

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Mgr. Veronika Sušová-Salminen, Ph.D. is a Czech historian and political analyst currently living in Finland. She holds a Ph.D. in historical anthropology from the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University. Her research areas are nineteenth- and twentieth-century Central European and Russian history and politics. She is a regular political commentator in several Czech newspapers. Her book on the politics of Putin's Russia was published in 2015.

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Introduction¹

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, relations between Russia and China have undergone a transformation. The Russian Federation, as a successor state of the USSR, has inherited several past problems that were expected to be a major burden for the future of Russian-Chinese relations. But over the past 25 years, the two countries that have been “natural” rivals for centuries, have been able to find compromise, (although not perfect) ways of coexistence and long-term sustainable cooperation. There is no hard clash, comparable to the one we are now witnessing between Russia and the US and China and the US. Today, the strategic partnership between Russia and China is becoming stronger in various directions, and this is only partly in response to the worsening of both countries’ relations with the US as still the leader of the Western world.

Not only in the Czech environment the misunderstanding of the term “post-Soviet” is very frequent. This term does not mark all the countries of the former Soviet bloc. It is a political-geographic category that includes those countries that were part of the Soviet Union until 1991, i.e. the former Soviet republics. “Post-Soviet” does not, of course, include countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia or Poland, because these countries have never been Soviet republics. Today, the post-Soviet space is also the closest neighbourhood of the Russian Federation in terms of geography (and except for Finland and Mongolia, both not post-Soviet) directly, partly secondary (Armenia or Moldova, both post-Soviet). From the time of Boris Yeltsin, this space is defined as space of “vital interest” to Russia, which is seen as the highest form of “national interest”. In the post-Soviet area, Russia emphasizes security and political issues first and foremost, followed by economic or cultural issues (such as the Russian world). This understanding of the post-Soviet space thus leads to a notion of special importance for Russia, which must be considered as a fundamental precondition of her foreign policy thinking and behaviour.²

The disintegration of the USSR did not only mean the emergence of several new, independent states, but also the de-

facto weakening of the Russian Federation as the successor state of the USSR in terms of foreign policy influence, importance and, of course, economic and social development. From the point of view of geopolitics, the post-Soviet space serves as a “guarantee” of Russian hegemony in the region of northern Eurasia, and hence as the necessary condition for the Russian position as a great power with more global reach. This also means that Russia tries to guard her neighbourhood and reacts sensitively to the competition of other, from her point of view, external rivals. For the post-Soviet space, however, the USSR dissolution meant a **foreign-policy diversification**; alongside Russia, other competing great powers or regional blocs - the European Union, the United States, Turkey, and China - are coming in. This diversification is characterised by not relying on Russia alone but also by often competing foreign political verticals or even by the expulsion of Russia. For example, countries such as the Ukraine or Georgia have a distinctive pro-Western vertical with a relatively strong anti-Russian accent. On the other hand, for example, the Central Asian republics, most notably Kazakhstan, are trying to find a classic balance between Russia, the US and China. The Baltic republics became full members of the European Union and NATO, so they follow not only an anti-Russian foreign policy, but also represent spatial outposts of the West in the post-Soviet space. They host NATO’s military bases at the Russian border, which contributes to military tensions with Russia. Belarus, on the other hand, builds her politics on a pro-Russian vector, even though she is trying to find balanced partners (EU and China) to compensate for her dependency on Russia at least in certain areas. In general, one result of these developments is undoubtedly **the fragmentation** of the post-Soviet space from the point of view of Russia as a regional power, which seeks to preserve the influence and status of the great power in this area. The culmination of this fragmentation was the Ukrainian crisis, which in the post-Soviet space meant the strengthening of conflict dynamics and geopolitical polarization (either - or), or the final paralysis of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) in terms of institutional designs of post-Soviet space.

1 Presented at the seminar “China and Central Europe – Political, Economic and Geopolitical Circumstances. Leftist approach” in Prague, Czech Republic, December 1, 2018.

2 See Trenin, Dmitrij, *The End of Eurasia. Russia on the Border between Geopolitics and Globalisation*, Moscow 2001 and Trenin, Dmitrij, *Post-Imperium. A Eurasian Story*, Moscow 2011.

From the point of view of Russian-Chinese relations, I shall focus on the region of Central Asia mostly. The experiences of this region between Russia and China might be considered an important lesson for Central Europe at least in some respects. Besides, the region of Central Asia (and not Central Europe) is a pivotal Eurasian space for both Russia and China. Central Asia consists of five post-Soviet republics located between Russia in the north, Afghanistan and India in the south, China in the east and Iran in the west. Ethnically, religiously and civilizationally, it is a very diversified space that has always been the crossroads of influences, both culturally and politically. After the collapse of the USSR, it was also a space for conflicts (civil war) with potential for inter-ethnic disputes (for borders), for Islamic

extremism, terrorism, and finally for organized crime (drug trafficking). Thus, it was an area with an increased risk of instability and of the looming danger of the conflicts penetrating beyond the region, in comparison, for example, to other areas of the post-Soviet space (the Baltics).

The 2001 War on Terror reinforced the importance of the entire Central Asian region for the US and NATO. For some time, Central Asia even became a place of cooperation between Russia and the US in the “fight against terrorism”. But this process of mutual rapprochement did not last long. Rather, Central Asia has become a space of cooperation between Russia and China.

Russia and China and the Burdens of the Past

Relations between Russia and China have historically never been pink, they were accompanied not just by conflicts, but also by considerable asymmetry. In the course of its expansion, Russia had been penetrating, at least since the 17th century, a space that was Chinese in terms of influence and power, even when it was not always culturally or ethnically Chinese (Han). This was primarily the Russian Far East region (its southern edge) and later Manchuria. At the end of the 17th century, the Nerchinsk agreement (1689) established the border between Russia and the Middle Kingdom and effectively prevented the next Russian expansion (China was a stronger actor, and Russia was emphasizing the Western European vertical at that time). In the second half of the 19th century, the cards turned. Russia became a stronger power, which led to the expansion of its territory and to Chinese concessions. The result of this asymmetry was the controversy between the two countries, as well as certain feelings of injustice and humiliation on the Chinese part, historically accustomed to the role of superior and stronger.³

After the end of the Second World War, the governments of the USSR and the People’s Republic of China had inherited these disputes over the borders from the past. At the end of the 1960s, the relations between both eastern neighbours and ideological relatives were greatly aggravated;

in fact, this deterioration meant strong and political rivalry within the socialist bloc (or the so-called “second world”). Former ideological relatives did not only militarily clash in disputes over a common border (1969), but the Chinese side even adhered to the US, which was then pursuing a new cooperation with a clear goal of weakening the Soviet bloc and the USSR. Although both the USSR and the PRC shared the very same ideology and political philosophy, they, paradoxically, became rivals, not allies. In short, the historical burden of Russian-Chinese relations was considerable at the time of the collapse of the USSR. Many observers feared that the collapse of the USSR would again lead to a strengthening of the negative dynamics between Russia and China. The main problems, without any doubt, were the issue of borders and, then, the classic problem of geopolitical vacuum and how it was to be filled (especially in Central Asia). In addition, the Russian Federation pursued a foreign policy that was built on Western models - including the emphasis on Western universalism, human rights and de-sovereignisation between 1991-95. At the beginning of the 1990s, this caused some confusion in Beijing about how to formulate policy towards pro-Western Yeltsin-Russia. However, the Russian flirt with the West did not last long, Moscow turned to (then foreign minister) Primakov’s more balanced foreign policy with new accents

3 About Russian-Chinese relations see: Lukin, A.V. (ed.). *Rossiya i Kitay. Chetyre vyeka vzaimodyeystviya. Istoriya, sovremennoye sostoyaniye i perspektivy razvityiya*, Moskva 2013

on India and China in Asia. Already in the 1990s, both sides agreed on common border issues, including territorial concessions of Russia to China. This helped to neutralise po-

tential for conflict and, in addition, to stabilize the 4200 km long border between the two countries, which represents one of the most strategic borders on a global scale.

Three Dimensions of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia

In the region of Central Asia, there did not emerge any expressive great power quarrel between Russia and China. At the end of the 1990s, both countries formed the Shanghai Group, which became **the Shanghai Cooperation Organization** in 2001, the formal grouping of Russia, the Central Asian republics and China, informed mainly by the effort to maintain security and stability in the neighbouring region of both great powers. Today, this organization has expanded significantly to include two other major regional (rivalling) actors - India and Pakistan (the idea was pushed by Russia), thus following a new agenda now. However, SOC continues to be a significant platform for Russian-Chinese cooperation not only in post-Soviet Central Asia but beyond.⁴ As such SCO enlarged its focus on South Asia and in fact it represents a next Eurasian project in this space.

Nevertheless, the organization (SOC) has not been able to avoid certain disagreements or divergent views (and interests) between both countries, although it itself is undoubtedly the result of the common interests of Russia and China. Russia has traditionally put an emphasis on security and political influence, while China, very explicitly from the beginning of the 21st century, emphasizes the problem of pragmatic economic cooperation. Chinese attempts to make SOC a free trade zone have been rejected by Russia, apparently because it is aware of its own economic weakness vis-a-vis China with her dynamic economy. This also meant a certain shift in accent on both the Chinese and Russian sides as well as the emergence of two different dimensions of mutual relations not only in the Central Asian region.

In 2011 Vladimir Putin announced the creation of a new Russian-led **Eurasian integration project** as a pillar of a Greater

Europe, reaching from Lisbon to Vladivostok.⁵ Central Asian Kazakhstan became one of the founding members of the project - with the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev being the original author of the idea of Eurasian integration in 1994. The Eurasian Union was supposed to be complementary to the EU, from which it received a wide range of inspirations. At the same time, it should guarantee Moscow's "attractiveness" as a regional centre in the post-Soviet neighbourhood by imitating and accepting Western instruments to allow Russia to remain a regional power. The West reacted negatively, as the words of then US-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testify. Clinton spoke of "resovietisation". The project was hit hard by the Ukrainian crisis, whose main geopolitical background was the signing of the Association Agreement between the Ukraine and the EU, which essentially meant the end of the possibility of Ukrainian membership in the Russian project. The Association Agreement was, however, not only a European project for post-Soviet space without Russian cooperation - the other one was the Polish-Swedish (sic!) Eastern Partnership initiative announced in 2008 and launched in Prague in 2009.

The Ukrainian crisis and the Russian annexation/unification of Crimea undoubtedly damaged the whole project, not just because the EAEU lost the Ukraine as one of its major pillar members. It also damaged Russia's image - the case of Crimea raised fears of ethnically legitimized territorial expansion among Russia's neighbours. However, the ongoing economic crisis and stagnation of Russia, which was further strengthened by Western sanctions as a corollary of the Ukrainian crisis, were much more effective "brakes" for this project. The rift with the West also led Russia to begin turning its project

4 See Kaczmarek, Marcin, *Russian-Chinese Relations in Eurasia. Harmonisation or Subordination*, FIIA Helsinki, April 2018. Grace, Abigail, *The Lesson China Taught Itself: Why the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Matters*, *China Brief Volume* 18, Issue 11, 2018, online: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-lessons-china-taught-itself-why-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-matters/>, Sidle, Anson, *Why the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Fails*, in *National Interest*, September 2, 2018, online: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/why-shanghai-cooperation-organization-fails-30197>

5 See Putin Vladimir, *Novyj Integracionnyj projekt dlya Evrazii – budushche, kotoroye rozhdetsya segodnya*, in *Izvestiya* October 3, 2011, online: <https://iz.ru/news/502761>

in a different direction than the one aimed at classical cooperation between the West / Europe and Russia, in which the classic model would have been Western technology and modernization know-how for Russian raw materials. Moscow thus began to newly redefine its “turn to the East”.⁶ Furthermore, “Great Eurasia” has become a pivotal project of Russia to counter growing disbalances in her relations to the West now.

Just over a year after Putin’s announcement of Eurasian economic integration, Beijing also introduced a new economic project. President Xi Jinping presented his project in Kazakhstan’s capital Astana as **the new Silk Road**, later called **the One Belt, One Road (OBOR)**.⁷ Post-Soviet Central Asia is the primary focus of this now global, not just Eurasian project initiated by China. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, it is a region in which Central Asia represents the natural gateway to the west, as evidenced by history. The original Silk Road led through this area. Furthermore, it is the mineral resources of the region, which is rich, among other things, in coal and uranium, but also in natural gas and oil, both strategic raw materials important for the further development of China. The development of the north-western Xinjiang region in the Central Asian neighbourhood, i.e. Ta-

jikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, is the next reason. Xinjiang represents a region with a distinct non-Chinese majority – composed of Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other ethnic groups, alongside Hans (the majority Chinese ethnicity). It is also a region in which 58 % of the citizens are Muslim. This internal constellation inevitably leads Beijing to ensure the stability of Central Asia because any instability or increase of religious extremism in Central Asia would touch this not too peaceful province of China with experience of separatism. Regarding Central Asia, the very same goes for Russia.

But the Chinese project also indicated Beijing’s determination to develop economic cooperation with the Central Asian region, regardless of Moscow. Many observers did not miss this detail when they highlighted the conflict potential of the Chinese project entering post-Soviet Central Asia. However, it once again turned out that conflict between the two great powers could be held at bay. Recently, both countries have even talked about the complementarity of the One Belt, One Road Initiative and Eurasian Economic Integration while developing other joint projects of strategic importance, such as the North Sea Route.

Russo-Chinese for (Relative) Success?

There are, of course, many causes of this development. It is worth mentioning at least three. The first is undoubtedly the fact that after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 **China did not (attempt to) exploit the general weakness of Russia**. China did not follow a policy that would exclude Russia from the post-Soviet Central Asian region by building a sino-centric international organization without the partici-

pation of Russia. Beijing also did not try to install Chinese military bases in Central Asia to solidify its security interests there. Both countries tried to build relatively friendly relations that have moved from a good neighbourhood to a strategic partnership (while, on the contrary, the European Union and Russia have gone in exactly the opposite direction in recent decades). Their relationships are certainly

6 More about EAEU: Dragneva, Rilka-Wolczuk, Kataryna, *The Eurasian Economic Union. Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power*, Chatham House, London 2017, online: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-05-02-eurasian-economic-union-dragneva-wolczuk.pdf>, Klimov, A.A.-Leksin, V.N., Shvetsov, A.N. (eds), *Evrozijjskaya Integratsiya v XXI.veke*, Moscow 2012.

7 See Dutkiewicz, Piotr, Eurasia’s Great Projects: Assets and Liabilities, in: Expert Opinions, Valdai Club, October 8, 2018, online: http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/eurasian-great-projects-eaeu-obor-assets/?sphrase_id=509918, Sarker, Md.- Hossin, Md. - Yin, Xiaohua - Kamruzzaman Sarkar, Md. (2018). One Belt One Road Initiative of China: Implication for Future of Global Development. *Modern Economy*. 09. 623-638. 10.4236/me.2018.94040, Cai Peter, *Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, April 2017, online: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/documents/Understanding%20China’s%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative_WEB_1.pdf.

8 As an example of critical approach see Friedman, George, The Illusion of Russia-China Alliance, in *Global Futures*, November 7, 2018, online: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/illusion-russia-china-alliance/>

far away from a formal alliance⁸, because both countries appreciate some flexibility and space for manoeuvring in their foreign policy. It must not be forgotten that, despite what was mentioned above, there are a lot of asymmetries between the two countries in favour of China and to the detriment of Russia. This should not be missed because it is certainly not missed in Russia. In the Russian context, China is seen by many as a pragmatic partner, but still there are voices seeing China as a threat.

Secondly, a relatively **conscious policy of balancing by local governments in Central Asia**, which have been skilfully manoeuvring between Russia, China and the West (EU / USA) in the past, contributed to this process. In general, the local governments were not building their foreign policy on the idea of pushing Russia out as an actor due to her undoubted weakening after the collapse of the USSR.

Finally, **Russia and China are united by some conceptual questions** - firstly, by an attempt on both sides to counter a unipolar (American) international order through the concept of multipolarity as a fairer arrangement of international relations (or order), the further emphasis on the Westphalian model of sovereignty, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and the rejection of foreign policy ruled by ideological considerations (neither Russia nor China embraces the policy of "exporting" their own / universal models to other countries à la "promoting democracy"). In short, both countries are involved in the emergence of the post-western world that is characterised by multipolarity. To be sure, each interpretation of this process is different, because Russia and China each still have their own historical and cultural traditions that shape their thinking. It must be said, however, that multipolarity is not an unrealistic assessment of the future due to the obvious structural and multiple crisis of the West, which was revealed during the Great Recession and after. Russia and China have indeed very different disputes with today's West. In the case of Russia, it is a geopolitical dispute over Russia's position in wider Eastern Europe and in the Balkans in the context of the continued eastern expansion of the NATO (the major factor of US-influence in Europe) and the European Union (and European powers such as Germany and France). In the case of China, it is a trade dispute or war

with the US aimed at revising US-China relations in favour of the US, but also containment of China's technological development and status on a global scale. But I think we can in fact speak of a Chinese-US-American struggle for a new form of globalization, too. Moreover, this spirit of competition (or at least suspicion) is becoming more and more explicit in the case of the European Union's policy towards China regarding, for example, the OBOR initiative or Chinese investments in the EU. Quite telling are also Western European "concerns" about Central and Eastern Europe and the still weakly-articulated attempts on behalf of CEE countries to find in China a new partner for development to counter the overall peripheralization of the region. Peripheralization has become a concomitant phenomenon of its integration into the West contrary to the originally spoken or unspoken promises and as such represents a growing burden for the region, including the quality of democracy there.

There is no doubt that, not only in the post-Soviet space, the future and the sustainability of the relations between Russia and China will be determined by the global agenda, the relative (but gradual and steady) decline of the West, specifically of the United States as a world hegemon, and by the pursuit of a post-Western multipolarity within the framework of the Shanghai Organization of Cooperation, RIC (Russia, India and China of the former BRICS) and the UN. The management of the growing power asymmetry between Russia and China in the sense of "soft balancing" will be the next determining factor.⁹ This mastery, among other things, will become another test for China's practical ability as a rising power **to overcome the limits and the seductive simplicity of classic Eurocentric geopolitics**, in which merely the stronger wins over the weaker.

9 About this see more: Dizen, Glenn (Diesen Glenn), Kak ustranit assymetriyu, in *Rossiya v globalnoi politike*, N. 2/ 2017, online <https://globalaffairs.ru/number/Kak-ustranit-asimmetriyu-18665>

Appendix

Appendix 1: Dimensions of Asymmetries between Russia and China¹⁰

| | Russia | China |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| GDP, nominal, in mil. \$ | 1,527,469 | 12,014,610 |
| GDP PPP/ % world (2018) | 3.09 % | 18.72 % |
| GDP per capita (2018), in \$ | 10.95 thousand | 9.63 thousand |
| Human development Index (HDI) (2018) | 0.816 | 0.752 |
| Growth in % (2018) | 1.7 % | 6.6 % |
| Structure of GDP in % | Year 2016 | Year 2014 |
| industry | 27.6 % | 29.5 % |
| services | 63 % | 40.6 % |
| agriculture | 9.4 % | 29.5 % |
| Foreign reserves in \$ (2018) | 453 billion | 3.16 trillion |
| Inflation | 2.5 % (2017) | 2.1 % (2018) |
| Military expenditure (2017), in \$ | 66.3 billion | 228 billion |
| | 3.5 % GDP | 1,9 % GDP |
| Population | 144,526,636 (estimate 2018) | 1,403,500,365 (estimate 2016) |
| Area | 17,098,246 km ² (without Crimea) | 9,596,961 km ² |

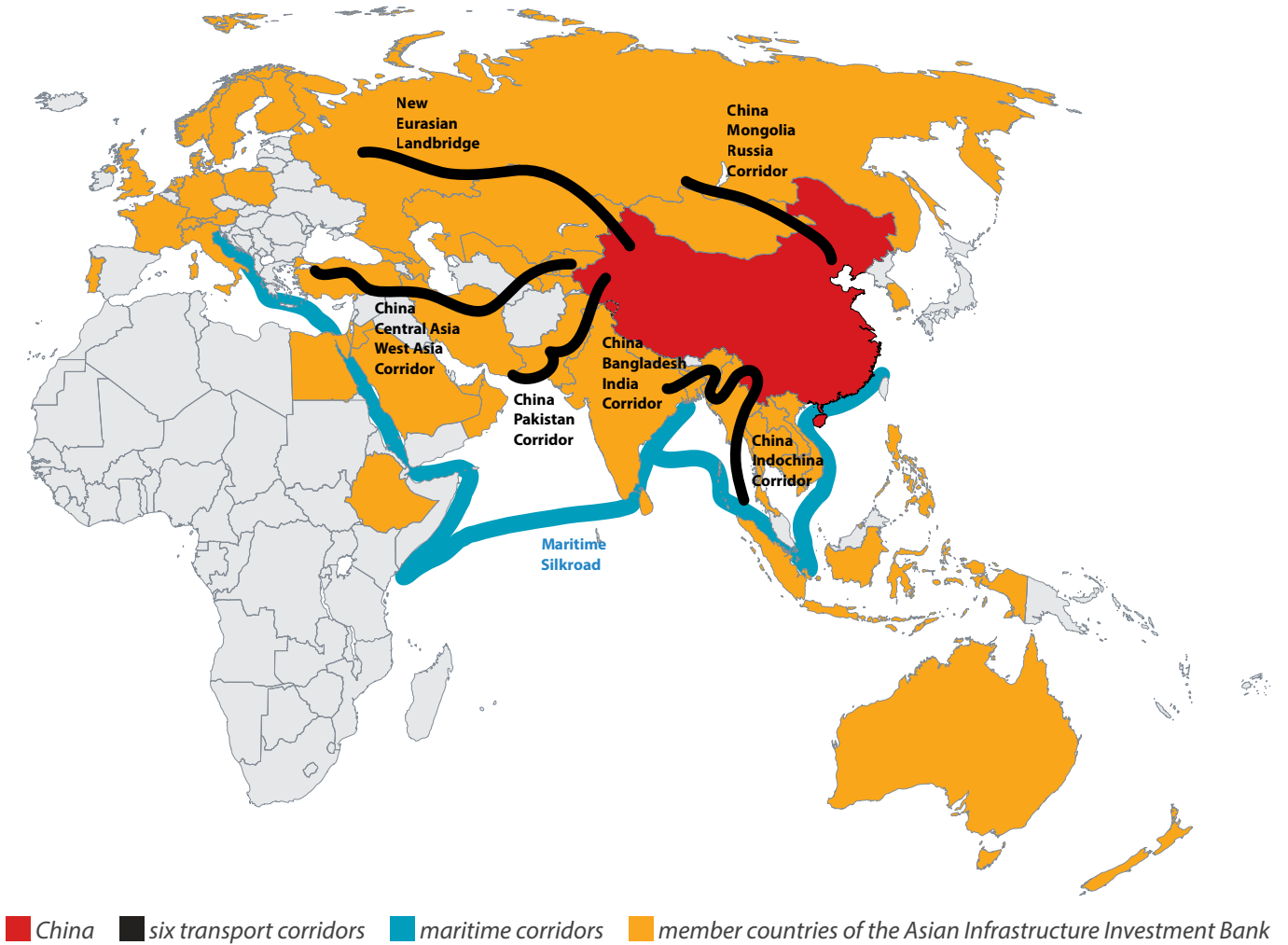
Appendix 2: Map of Central Asia¹¹



10 Source: Wikipedia, World Bank

11 Resource see: <https://d-maps.com>

Appendix 3: One Belt, One Road¹²



12 Author: Lommes, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=58884083>



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