# **Where the unstoppable force meets the immovable object**: *Understanding the Sino-Russian relationship through the lens of China's SREB and Russia's EEU*

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## Preface



## Acknowledgements

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# Abstract

A review of the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship identifies a widening mismatch between expectations and reality. Scholarly expectations highlight the propensity of conflict, based upon traditional security considerations resulting in a definition of the Sino-Russian relationship that is limited, instrumental and asymmetric—an 'axis of convenience' according to mainstream scholars. Tensions are held to be most conspicuous in Russia and China's shared backyard: Central Asia. Since the 2010s, both China and Russia have engaged in efforts to rearrange their regional backyards and consolidate influence over their smaller neighbours. The simultaneous, yet juxtapositional, establishment of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) are widely deemed to reflect the independent foreign policy objectives of each party as well as the traditional security considerations underlying their regional projects. As a result, they have led many analysts to foresee a new Great Game in the region. To date, tensions have not surfaced, *why?* Contributing to critical scholarship, this thesis engages in securitization theory to gain insights into the different identities and security drivers underlying both powers' regional initiatives. Appreciating the normative and ideational underpinnings of Russia's EEU and China's SREB, this research provides a new take upon the question why, and to what extent, the relationship *does* work—instead of why it does not, or will not, work. A poststructuralist discourse analysis has been conducted to examine these discursive representations of identity and security and answer this thesis' main research question: *To what extent do the security discourses of Russia's EEU and China's SREB explain the compatibility of the two initiatives?* The findings of this thesis provide a balanced and contextualized account of both powers' regional initiatives and give greater attention to the forces of convergence shaping the Sino-Russian relationship in the region and beyond.



*Keywords:* Sino-Russian relationship, Central Asia, Eurasian Economic Union, Silk Road Economic Belt, regionalism, Poststructuralist discourse analysis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, revived attention has been given to the Sino-Russian relationship. The Ukraine crisis and the forthcoming deteriorating ties between Russia and the West have led the former to decisively turn Eastwards. Reversely, enfeebling ties between the US and China have set in motion a Chinese reorientation towards its direct neighbours (Jisi et al., 2018; Westcott, 2018). Both developments have highlighted the salience of Sino-Russian relations (Conolly, 2016; Makocki & Popescu, 2016). China and Russia have developed a relationship that, according to both parties, has reached an unprecedented high (Krickovic, 2017, 300). Putin perceives China as Russia's 'indispensable friend' (Cox, 2016, p. 311), while China presents Russia and its leadership with utmost cordiality. The Sino-Russian relationship goes beyond rhetoric and has found expression in economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation and coordination. 2014 heralded a period of strengthened energy ties as China and Russia concluded a vast $400 billion gas deal; in 2015, Xi Jinping and Putin announced the consolidation of regional cooperation through the alignment of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB); in 2016 and 2017, Russia and China intensified their joint military exercises; and, in 2018 Beijing awarded Vladimir Putin the Chinese Order of Friendship.

While most scholars have come to acknowledge the increasing degree of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, the literature on Sino-Russian relations is impressive for its vast variety of assessments of the sustainability of this relationship (Charap et al., 2017; Krickovic, 2017; Watts et al., 2016; Ying, 2016). Amongst the rich diversity of analyses, the discussion tends towards the extremes (Wishnick, 2017). Either the relationship is described as instrumental, strained by regional competition, and therefore unsustainable (Kaplan, 2017); or, it is elevated to a strategic partnership that will likely significantly shape the post-Western geopolitical context (Bratersky, 2016; Bordachev et al., 2016; Makarov & Sokolova, 2016). In the mainstream Western literature, the former view prevails. That is, although ties may have strengthened, there are—and there will always be—limits to the Sino-Russian relationship. These limits are held to be most conspicuous where Beijing and Moscow's 'spheres of influence' meet: Central Asia.

Since the 2010s, both China and Russia have engaged in efforts to rearrange their regional backyards and consolidate influence over their smaller neighbours (Kaczmarski, 2017; Reeves, 2018). The simultaneous, yet juxtapositional, establishment of Russia's EEU and China's SREB—regional processes held to be the inevitable result of 'shifts in material power' (Ikenberry, 2014; Kupchan, 2014; Wright, 2014)—are widely deemed to reflect the independent foreign policy objectives of each party as well as the traditional security considerations underlying their regional

projects. As a result, they have led many analysts to foresee a new Great Game in the region (Kirckovic, 2017; Lo, 2008, 2017; Skalamera, 2017).

To be sure, scholars raise a valid point of concern by indicating the potential of rivalry as a result of *inter alia* power discrepancies (Lo, 2017; Kaplan, 2017; Krickovic, 2017), competing interests, and mutual mistrust (Watts et al., 2016). Indeed, the contemporary friendship between China and Russia is an aberration of their history of antagonism and rivalry. However, mainstream accounts utterly fail to provide a compelling answer to the puzzle *why* and *how* Moscow and Beijing have managed to consolidate their partnership, despite their differences and the alleged propensity for regional competition. While scholars have thoroughly scrutinized China and Russia's areas of divergence, they have put little effort into providing an explanation for Sino-Russian rapprochement that goes beyond assertions of mutual opportunism; such conceptualization no longer fits reality. The aforementioned puzzle is particularly conspicuous in accounts of regional cooperation and rivalry. Russia and China's regular demonstrations of self-restraint and their increasing willingness to actively coordinate activities in their shared neighbourhood—exemplified by the 2015 agreement to integrate the SREB and the EEU—indicates that these simplistic understandings of the relationship fall desperately short of the more complex dynamics characterizing Sino-Russian interactions (Odgaard, 2017; Rozman, 2014).

The resulting ambiguity, this thesis argues, is to a significant extent explained by the predominance of materialist narratives within the literature, expressed by (neo-)realist geopolitical analyses on the Sino-Russian relationship in particular (Rose, 1998; Waltz, 1990; Wu, 2017). These approaches, drawing on traditional concepts of security, offer a narrow picture of what state interactions do or should look like. In the same vein, they maintain a uniform understanding of the driving forces of regional engagement, highlighting the power-political considerations of regional activities and analysing regional projects against the backdrop of an imminent security threat. While these approaches may be apt to foresee and retroactively assess cataclysmic clashes in the region and beyond, it has little value in explaining the *contemporary* Sino-Russian relationship beyond an alliance-enmity or zero-sum continuum.

The objective materialism and normative relativism inherent in today's dominant approaches are therefore incapable of accounting for the complex dynamics governing interactions between China and Russia. Notably, they do not appreciate the heterogeneous nature of China and Russia's influence building initiatives, shaped by different identities, objectives and, importantly, security perceptions. The argument, here, is that these differences not only have important implications for the Sino-Russian relationship at the regional level but also for their relationship at the broader strategic level. In order to gain a fuller recognition and apprehension

of these vital differences, this thesis draws on the Copenhagen School's securitization theory. Representing a bridge between traditional and critical approaches, this lens recognizes the materialist starting point that security is about survival. Apart from this traditional understanding of security, it embraces a more critical conceptualisation of security. The Copenhagen School approach is based upon the contention that an objective understanding of the psychical environment—from which states' security issues would 'naturally' be derived—does not exist. Rather, the *perception* of a security threat is a socially-constructed reality that is shaped by how states interpret the 'physical environment' and their identities and interests within it. Security, in this sense, is a "self-referential practice": an issue becomes a security concern through the man-guided process of 'securitization' (Diskaya, 2013). Securitization theory thus offers powerful insights into the identities, norms and ideas underlying China and Russia's security representations and foreign policy decisions in Central Asia. This allows for the assessment of both 'common grounds and strategic fault lines' (Adler, 1997; Chase et al., 2017; DeBardeleben, 2012; Stronski & Ng, 2017, p.4).

In this thesis, securitization theory furthers a comprehensive view of Russia and China's understanding of their respective regional projects in Central Asia, placing emphasis on the security underpinnings of the SREB and EEU. It argues that poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) discloses Russia and China's different approaches to regional influence-building as a result of different identities and security considerations. At the moment of writing, the EEU and SREB are still in a rudimentary stage of development. Nevertheless, in line with Wilson (2016), this research argues that the EEU and SREB epitomize the most central themes characterizing Sino-Russian interactions. Russia and China's regional projects therefore provide a 'microscopic lense' through which to analyse both powers' discursive representations of their influence-building projects in Central Asia; identify their securitization strategies; and, examine how these differences explain the compatibility of their regional initiatives (Odgaard, 2017; Wilson, 2016, p. 114). On the basis of this examination, it answers the following research question: **To what extent do the security discourses of Russia's EEU and China's SREB explain the compatibility of the two initiatives?** An answer to this question allows us to better understand the Sino-Russian relationship in the region and beyond.

The contributions of this thesis are threefold. First, it adds a post-positivist voice[1] to the dominantly materialist debate on the nature of Sino-Russian relations. The former allows for an apprehension of Sino-Russian ties that goes beyond the zero-sum continuum. It recognizes the

[1] Scholars that *do* include constructive voices or elements in their analyses include Cox, 2016; Rozman, 2014; Wilson, 2015; Wishnick, 2017

fluid nature of security and is therefore more apt to explain regional engagement and co-existence. Second, by placing emphasis upon the EEU and SREB this thesis fosters greater understanding of China and Russia's respective regional influence-building projects as well as of their security underpinnings. Third, this research provides a new take upon the question why, and to what extent, the relationship *does* work—instead of why it does not, or will not, work.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The second chapter, following this introduction, provides a review of the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship and criticizes the dominance of positivism and materialism. By overemphasizing the prospect of conflict these analyses largely neglect the forces of convergence, which are—according to the author of this thesis—to a significant extent explained by shared or compatible identities and visions. Drawing upon the literature review, the final section of this chapter provides the problem formulation and elaborates upon the aims of this research. The third chapter, presents this study's methodology and lays outs the research design, data collection, and data analysis. Subsequently, the fourth chapter presents this thesis' findings and is followed by the fifth chapter, which provides a discussion and the conclusion of this research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The nature of the Sino-Russian relationship

At a time when Russia's ties with the West are growing cold, the comparatively warm relationship between Russia and China has gained revived interest. The literature on the nature and sustainability of the Sino-Russian relationship is impressive for its vast variety of assessments. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, these divergent descriptions have come to be divided into roughly two views. The first view argues that relations between Russia and China are imbalanced, vulnerable, and prone to conflict—a 'marriage of convenience' according to its advocates (Lo, 2015, 2017), who highlight the instrumental nature of Sino-Russian rapprochement and emphasize the latent and explicit tensions between the two powers (Charap et al., 2017; Korolev, 2016). The second view holds that ideological and normative elements form the basis of the ever-strengthening relations between Beijing and Moscow and foresees the establishment of an anti-Western block that will undermine the US-dominated international system (Ying, 2016). Today the former narrative has become the predominant view—the latter primarily finds resonance with the political and intellectual elites of China and Russia. At its core, the former narrative revolves around the idea that albeit Moscow and Beijing have grown closer, forces of antagonism and competition will always have the upper hand (Cox, 2016). This assumption is based upon two interrelated features of the relationship: (1) the opportunistic underpinnings of Sino-Russian

interactions, and (2) the two nations' discrepant power positions and incompatible interests in the region. These elements find expression in two, largely overlapping conflict, scenarios. This literature review sets out the two scenarios that have been identified and, subsequently, provides a critique upon which the remainder of this thesis is built.

### *2.1.1. The expectation of conflict and the explanation for its absence: Triangular power dynamics*

One scenario that has gained significant advocacy is based upon the two powers' relative positions and respective attitudes within the current American-led world order (Krickovic, 2017; Lo, 2008a; Nye, 2015). Krickovic (2017), for example, holds that Russia, the declining power, is dissatisfied with the order and seeks to undermine the vital structures of global governance in order to reverse its decline and preserve its great-power status (p. 299). On the other hand, China the rising power has profited tremendously from the American-led world order and does not benefit from overthrowing the current world order altogether; rather it seeks to adjust it to its own advantage (Ikenberry, 2017). These divergent approaches, Krickovic argues, cause resentment and mistrust—to Russia, because China's ties with the West feed Moscow's discontent, mistrust and fear (Lo, 2008a, 2015; Shambaugh, 2013), and, to China, because it has to deal with Russia's costly recalcitrance. In his seminal work, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (2015), Lo elaborates upon this view and contends that China will not give up its friendly relationship with the US in favour of strengthening ties with Russia. Subsequently, he highlights the negative consequences of the deteriorating ties between Russia and the West for the Sino-Russian relationship. In congruence with this view, Nye (2015) argues that the rising China will not step up its security commitment with a descending power that finds itself at loggerheads with the West over the limits of Russia's spheres of influence.

While the US thus epitomizes the limits to Sino-Russian relations, at the same time, it also represents the main reason for 'cooperation' between China and Russia. As noted by Bobo Lo, the seemingly amiable interactions between the two powers cannot be valued "on their own merits" (2015, p. 135); rather, they must be assessed against the presence of the US. Watts et al. (2017) note that Sino-Russian alignment only serves the purpose of "balanc[ing] against US-led alliances along a triangular logic" (p. 439). This means that both powers will maintain the 'image of friendship' as long as: (a) Russia's behaviour is not too disruptive, and (b) the US remains a shared security threat for which limited cooperation—or at least the image of cooperation—is vital.

This conflict scenario is subject to various caveats. First, the assumption that China only cooperates with Russia to the extent that it does not affect its ties with the US—and does not want to be drawn, like Russia, into "confrontation with the West" (Watts et al., 2017, p. 441)—has

variously been falsified. While China finds itself on the brink of a trade war with the US (Huang, 2018; Kao et al., 2018; Weilai, 2018), Xi Jinping awarded Putin the Chinese Order of Friendship[2]. A similar dynamic is discernible in the South China Sea, where China's growing assertiveness and its regional encounters with the US stand in direct opposition to assertions that China is particularly protective of its relations with the US (Ikenberry, 2017; Krickovic, 2017; Nye, 2015). Furthermore, in the midst of Sino-American tensions, China has granted Russia the special privilege of continuing drilling activities on disputed maritime territories in the South China Sea (Glaser & Poling, 2018). These gestures bear witness to the fact that the Sino-Russian relationship *can,* in fact, be evaluated on its own merits. According to Kaczmarski (2018), deteriorating US-China ties and the West's changing policies towards China have reduced the asymmetries inherent in the Sino-Russian relationship, stimulating further Sino-Russian consolidation: China's growing alienation from the West has shifted China's focus more towards Russia and brought the powers closer together.

Second, these developments coincide with an increasingly inward-looking US that gradually, yet significantly, reduces its military presence in many parts of the Asian continent. Odgaard (2017) even states that Central Asia is "a region with scant Western engagement and cannot be characterized as a region significantly influenced by Western economic, military, and strategic policies or priorities" (p. 45). Scholars subscribing to this conflict scenario, have predicted that with the US partially or completely withdrawing from the regional stage, differences between China and Russia would surface and thus bring to the fore the inherent tensions in their relationship. However, recent developments indicate closer cooperation—in spite of weakening China-US ties and in spite of the US' gradual withdrawal from Asia. These events thus reveal a reality that stands in direct contrast to scholars' predictions.

### *2.1.2. The expectation of conflict and the explanation for its absence: Regional competition*

Another conflict scenario focuses upon the economic and political developments unfolding in China and Russia's shared strategic regions. Proponents of this view foresee conflict as a result of regional competition.

The regional competition scenario places emphasis upon the various power asymmetries inherent in the Sino-Russian relationship and points to their expressions in the regional arena. Charap et al. (2017) argue that budget imbalances suggest that Russia needs China more than vice versa, causing resentment amongst Russia's leadership. These feelings are exacerbated by the fact that China's trade with other countries—notably, Russia's strategic partners—has risen relatively

[2] On June 8th, Xi Jinping awarded Putin the Chinese Order of Friendship. The trade dispute initiated after

more, which makes China even less dependent upon Russia and heightens Russia's threat perception of the rising superpower (Charap et al., 2017). Scholars have also indicated Russia's weakening position as an arms producer. They argue that China's expanding domestic arms production has significantly hurt Russia's arms exports to China. According to Watts et al (2016): "The image of friendship that both Moscow and Beijing like to promote (…) is constrained by rivalry in high-tech segments of the arms industry" (2016, 427). The same asymmetries are held to apply to the energy relationship between China and Russia. China's economic leverage in Central Asia has gained significant momentum: Its astonishing economic growth and soaring energy needs have resulted in a diversification strategy, which has considerably increased China's energy trade with other countries—most notably, Central Asian states. As a result, the Central Asian energy market has seen a re-orientation from Russia towards the Chinese market. Many Central Asian economies have become highly dependent upon the energy revenues from China as witnessed by the deepening integration of their pipelines with Chinese distribution arteries. Consequently, China's diversification strategy has allowed Beijing to "drive a hard bargain with Moscow over its (…) gas sales" (Skalamera, 2017, p. 133). Various analysts contend that Russia's oil and gas reserves, —-held to be prime tools in counterbalancing China's power—turned out less beneficial to Russia than expected. In a recent study, Xu and Reisinger argue that Russia has experienced underwhelming economic gains from its recent energy deals with China (Xu & Reisinger, 2018). Likewise, Skalamera (2016) expects that the benefits from energy trade will be 'increasingly uneven'—to China's advantage (p. 97). In addition, she adds that the energy trade is not the only sector shaking up Russia's standing in the region. Overall, China has become the largest trade and investment partner for many economies within the region (Skalamera, 2017; 2018). China's rising economic influence, they note, not only fuel Russia's fear of being relegated to the subservient role of China's raw-materials appendage but also aggravate Russia's overall 'China threat' in the region (Economist, 2015).

Most scholars and analysts agree that disruptions to Sino-Russian ties are most likely to emerge in China and Russia's shared neighbourhood, Central Asia. Regional competition is deemed to have become particularly looming now both powers have engaged in regional influence-building activities. Indeed, as China is expanding its 'sphere of influence' Eastwards and Russia seeks to consolidate its influence over its former Soviet space, power dynamics unfolding in Central Asia are widely viewed to illustrate the painful reflections of the limits to Sino-Russian ties (Charap et al., 2017; Lo, 2008a). China's Silk Road Economic Belt and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union are held to embody such limitations.

China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) has sought to streamline and further consolidate economic ties with Central Asian states. The SREB, the 'largest terrestrial component of China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI)', is a highly ambitious multi-billion-dollar programme aimed at enhancing connectivity between Europe and Asia through investments in new transport and trade infrastructures, such as railroads, highways, airports, pipelines, and power plants (Skalamera, 2017, p. 181). Analysts argue that China's economic leverage is increasingly being translated into broader strategic and political presence (Charap et al., 2017; Lo, 2008a) and therefore stands in direct opposition to Russia's own regional initiative: The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Others go even further, interpreting China's SRB as a conscious counter-reaction to Russia's integration initiative (Li & Pantucci, 2013).

Russia's EEU, largely designed according to the tenets and framework of the European Union, comprises various former Soviet member states that operate within an integrated single market which ensures the 'free movement of labour, services, goods, and capital' (ICG, 2017). While its stated objectives are mostly economic, most scholars approach the EEU in light of Russia's aspiration to "claim the post-Soviet space as a [region] of exclusive Russian influence" and keep other regional powers at bay (Zank, 2017, p. 1; see also, Sergi, 2018). Zank, for example, describes the EEU as the embodiment of Russia's 'Monroe Doctrine'. Albeit Russia's Monroe Doctrine was, in its initial form, primarily geared against EU enlargement and its 'European Neighbourhood Policy', Zank argues that it has become equally applicable to other intervening powers, most notably China.

While recognizing the different contours of their regional endeavours, scholars view the establishment of China and Russia's regional projects as part of both powers' 'natural' incentives to dominate their spheres of influence on all aspects. More specifically, they regard—either implicitly or explicitly—China and Russia's drive for regional *hegemony* as an 'inherent' and 'inevitable' outcome of (rising) material power (Horimoto, 2017; Hurrell, 2016; Kupchan, 2014; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2010; Wright, 2015). Hurrell, for example, calls the idea that regional predominance should form an integral part of any claim to major power status "intuitively logical" (2006). In a similar vein, Mearsheimer contends that regional hegemony provides the fundaments for a great power role in global politics (2001). Kupchan (2014) adds that major powers' region-building activities are an inherent feature of the 21st century process of power diffusion: In an increasingly multipolar world order rising powers can be expected to respond to today's power shift by taking a more assertive stance in their respective regions (Kupchan, 2014). These statements are supported by empirical evidence of China and Russia's engagement in their wider neighbourhoods. China has taken on an increasingly assertive stance in its adjacent seas. It has

initiated a 'relentless territory reclamation programme' in the South China Sea and imposes increasing political and military pressure upon Japan over the disputed islands in the East China Sea. Russia, in its turn, annexed Crimea, inciting conflict in Eastern Ukraine and deteriorating ties with the wider West. Regionalism, here, is thus understood as "a mere function of power distribution" (Kaczmarksi, 2017b, p. 1358), the purpose of which is the consolidation of regional dominance. Fundamental to this view is a definition of power which is centred upon the material dispositions of a supposed regional 'threat', including distribution of power, military and economic capabilities, and polarity. According to this line of argument a Sino-Russian collision in Central Asia is therefore unavoidable.

*Why then*—if both powers seek to dominate the Central Asian region and perceive each other's presence as a looming threat—*has conflict not yet taken centre stage*? Just as in the former scenario, scholars have pointed to the presence of the US and argue that Sino-Russian 'cooperation' in Central Asia will decrease when US interference dwindles (Lo, 2008b). This argument is element of the former 'axis of convenience' argument, which holds that both powers will uphold an image of friendship as long as it remains *convenient* for them to do so (Lo, 2008a; 2017). Convenience, in this sense, may refer to a situation in which: (a) Russia's limited power capabilities render overt acceptance of China's rise least damaging to Russia's interests and objectives in Central Asia and beyond (Krickovic, 2017; Putz, 2017; Stronski & Ng, 2018) or (b) Russia's regional activities render overt acceptance of Russia's presence least damaging to China's interests and objectives in Central Asia and beyond (Odgaard, 2017).

This predicted conflict scenario, too, suffers from many deficiencies. Most importantly, both parties have variously shown that that *convenience* is not the main determinant informing the relationship. Both Russia and China have shown to be willing to make *inconvenient,* sometimes costly, concessions in order to further cooperation and coordination (Cox, 2016; Wishnick, 2017). China has actively recognized "Russia's traditional influence and special interests in the region" and has proved willing to adapt its activities accordingly (Stronsky & Sokolsky, 2017; see also Lukin, 2018b)—interestingly, it has not been willing to make equal compromises with other regional powers, such as India and Japan. Likewise, Russia has taken great strides to enable the parallel functioning of the EEU and the SREB, whereas it has demonstrated a higher degree of protectionism in its shared neighbourhood with the European Union. The dominant view cannot explain why Russia would be more acceptant towards the regional presence of China than it is towards Europe and the wider West (Samokhvalov, 2018).

### *2.1.3. A critique to conventional conflict scenarios*

This thesis contends that mainstream approaches beg the question how Russia and China, despite their differences, have managed to advance a partnership that goes beyond the outdated axis of convenience. The advocates of both scenarios have attached little importance to China and Russia's shared ideas, identities, and worldviews. A small but expanding stream of literature has provided more balanced analyses, acknowledging the importance of congruent worldviews and compatible interests for the Sino-Russian relationship (Chase et al., 2017; Clover, 2018; Cox, 2016; Lukin, 2018; Sangar, 2017; Wishnick, 2017).

As noted by Wilson (2016): "Russian-Chinese relations have moved beyond a pattern of interactions that Lo (2008a) describe[s] as 'an axis of convenience' to a consensual appreciation of shared ideological values in the foreign policy sphere" (p. 114). To the extent that Sino-Russian ties are influenced by the US, critical scholars have pointed to the normative dimension of rapprochement, as opposed to merely material considerations (Chase et al., 2017; Clover, 2017, 2018; Cox, 2016; Lukin, 2018a,b; Sangar, 2017; Wishnick, 2017). Sangar (2017), for example, states that little attention has been given to the normative implications of Russia and China's frustration of feeling circumscribed by military bases of the US and its NATO allies (Sangar, 2017). According to Sangar (2017), strategic convergence between Moscow and Beijing is not necessarily explained by the US physical presence in the region, but more by the broader reality of its normative pre-eminence in the global and international arena. This is reflected in the dominant ideas on humanitarian intervention, and the US' "role in causing chaos of crises such as those in the Middle East and Ukraine" (Sangar, 2017, p. 7). They feel a strong sense of unease with the 'supremacy' of Western thought, which accommodates the West's 'privilege' to impose external pressure on what the US and its 'apostles' consider 'rebellious states' (Cox, 2016, p. 323). In Sino-Russian eyes, this not only undermines the foundational principles of the UN charter—primarily the principle of sovereignty and non-intervention—it also allows the West to impose reforms "[up]on states with whom the West either happens to disagree or with whom both China and Russia may have significant economic and strategic relations" (Cox, 2016, p. 323). According to Cox, China and Russia view US hegemony not only as inconvenient; in fact, they perceive it as a real threat to their existence. Their greatest fear can be described as follows: If the West is capable of imposing its ideological values and demands on sovereign states and is entitled to subvert dictatorships and other non-democratic regimes, it may also be able to legitimately impose change in Russia, China, or their respective backyards.

This thesis argues that gaining insights into the compatibility of Russia and China's identities, objectives, and threat perceptions is vital to understanding Sino-Russian cooperation

and coordination in the region and beyond. Wishnick (2017) argues that albeit both actors have a vital interest in Central Asia, there is no indication that this necessarily culminates in regional enmity. This conception is congruent with the notion of a role division is Central Asia, which serves as a mechanism through which to ensure stability and regional cooperation (Bordachev et al., 2016; Bratersky, 2016; ICG, 2017; Wilson, 2016). Various scholars contend that Russia has, willingly or unwillingly, accepted China's economic penetration into the Eurasian region, and China has left untouched Russia's role as political stronghold (p. 121) (Boldurukova, 2015; Burkhanov & Chen; 2015; Kanao & Bisenov, 2017; Owen, 2017; Peyrouse, 2017; Sharip, 2018; Snow, 2016). These accounts imply that China and Russia's regional visions are not the result of purely materialist security considerations. Rather, to some extent, they are shaped by varying yet compatible (security) understandings. How these understandings are reflected in both powers' regional initiatives and to what extent these understandings inform Sino-Russian cooperation in the region and beyond has remained unclear.

## 2.2. Problem formulation, aims and theory

### *2.2.1. Problem Formulation*

The literature review identifies a widening mismatch between expectations and reality. Scholarly expectations highlight the propensity of conflict, based upon traditional security considerations resulting in an understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship that is limited, instrumental and asymmetric. This notion finds expression in conflict scenarios that take global dynamics as a starting point as well as in conflict scenarios that focus upon Russia and China's shared neighbourhood. Reality, however, shows that China and Russia face an ever-tightening partnership that no longer meets the three features that have come to describe Sino-Russian ties. Putin and Xi Jinping frequently unite forces on global issues and demonstrate significant tolerance towards one another's presence in their shared neighbourhood (Ambrosio, 2017; Wilson, 2016). Since a 'New Great Game' is expected to unfold in the Central Asian region, the absence of acts of deterrence or direct confrontations is particularly striking at the regional level. This observation is not to dismiss any tensions that may underlie the Sino-Russian relationship. To be sure, the claims made by mainstream scholars may be, to a certain extent, legitimate and justified. However, to the extent that there indeed may exist tensions, policymakers in Beijing and Moscow appear to be cognizant of this potential danger (Kaczmarski, 2017) and seem to have found basis of congruence. The specificities of this basis, however, have been widely neglected in the literature.

Such neglect, this research argues, is the result of the domination of positivist and materialist—notably, realist—narratives in the literature, interpreting state interests and security

foci as 'givens' from states' material position in the international political system and diametrically opposed to the interests of other state, reflecting a zero-sum game in which "the outcome of mutual cooperation does not exist" (Eggers, 2011, p. 193). While these analyses have some explanatory value by indicating the relevance of economic and military capabilities, on their own, they cannot capture the security considerations underlying Russia and China's decisions and activities. This conception has variously[3] been noted by Xi Jinping himself, who indicated that "[t]he Cold War mentality and zero-sum game are increasingly obsolete" (Stevenson, 2018, web). The relationship, this thesis argues, can only be understood if one acknowledges the plural, socially constructed nature of regionalism informed by different identities and security imperatives. In line with the Copenhagen School, this research understands security as a "self-referential practice": an issue becomes a security concern through the man-guided process of 'securitization' (Diskaya, 2013). The questions *what* China and Russia securitize and *to what extent* these securitization strategies are compatible are thus crucial to understanding Sino-Russian rapprochement.

This thesis contributes to the counternarratives in the literature by examining the security considerations of Russia and China's influence-building initiatives in Central Asia: The Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt respectively. Central Asia can be considered a microcosm of the overall condition of the Sino-Russian relationship. The region encompasses China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The EEU and SREB are illustrative examples of how China and Russia cooperate at a broader strategic level. That is, they encapsulate the security considerations that are central in defining the ways through which these two powers enact their foreign policies and interact with one another.

To date, the SREB and EEU have received relatively little critical attention. Yet, the co-existence—and announced conjugation—of China's SREB and Russia's SREB indicates that the Russia and China have found ways to coordinate their security interests (Ambrosio, 2017; Wilson, 2016). To shed more light upon this hypothesis, elements of the Copenhagen School's securitization theory are combined with a poststructuralist discourse analysis of official and semi-official representations of China's SREB and Russia's EEU. On the basis of this examination this thesis seeks to answer the following research question: **To what extent do the security discourses of Russia's EEU and China's SREB explain the compatibility of the two initiatives?**

[3] See also Xi Jinping's speech at the Boao Forum 2018, where he variously rejected the zero-sum game, as well as related beggar-thy-neighbor policies and general power politics.

**Sub-questions:**

**SQ1:** What is the security discourse of China's SREB?

**SQ2:** What is the security discourse of Russia's EEU?

**SQ3:** To what extent are the security discourses of Russia's EEU and China's SREB compatible?

### *2.2.2. Aims*

Relying upon the Foucauldian apprehension that language is, in itself, a practice (Salter & Mutlu, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), this study engages in poststructuralist securitization theory in order to unpack the securitization strategies informing the EEU and the SREB. These examinations allow for an assessment of the compatibility of China and Russia's regional projects. The scholarly contribution of this research endeavour is threefold. First, it adds a post-positivist voice[4] to the largely materialist debate on the nature of Sino-Russian relations. This study allows for a multifaceted comprehension of the relationship, going beyond the alliance-rivalry continuum, providing instead a more nuanced understanding of the relationship. Second, by placing emphasis upon the EEU and SREB this thesis fosters greater understanding of the identities and security bases of China and Russia's respective regional influence-building projects. On a more general note, today's analyses of the SREB and the EEU typically lack theoretical rigor; this study seeks to systematically analyse the content and contours of the respective projects thereby providing solid conceptualisations for future research. Third, this research provides a new take upon the question why, and to what extent, the relationship *does* work—instead of why it does not, or will not, work.

### *2.2.3. Theory*

In order to grasp how, and to what extent, China and Russia's security interests are compatible, this study applies a poststructuralist approach to the Copenhagen School's securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1997)—also known as poststructuralist securitization theory (Song, 2015). This section discusses the relevant elements of the Copenhagen School and links its discursive components to poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA).

At its core, the Copenhagen School holds that security is not an ontological given, whose definition is constant across time and space (Bellamy & McDonald, 2004; Dalby, 2002). Instead, it is a political and social *discursive* construction that is in constant flux. In this sense, China and Russia's definitions of security change considerably over time and are interconnected with their

[4] Scholars that *do* include constructive voices or elements in their analyses include Cox, 2016; Rozman, 2014; Wilson, 2015; Wishnick, 2017

norms, values, objectives and identities. Securitization rests on a discursive, subjective interpretation of security as Wæver (1995) made the very existence of security dependent upon its construction in the discourse. *Yet, what is discourse?* Drawing upon speech-act theory developed by Searle (1969) and Austin (1975), securitization theory examines "the utterances of speech that associate an issue with a security value" (Mutlu & Salter, 2013, p. 266). These issues go beyond realist security concerns of military capacities, but may also include societal, political, economic or environmental security. At the core of securitisation theory is the contention that security should be considered a speech act, where the central question is not whether threats are 'real' or not, but the ways in which a certain topic can be socially constructed as a threat (Van Munster, 2014). The concept of speech acts involves the idea that by saying something, something is done. It is therefore that this theory is closely linked to the poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA). PDA views discourse "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, which brings an object into being" (Parker, 1992, p. 3).

Importantly, the fact that security is a social construct does not mean that all forms of security speech qualify as securitization. In order for an issue to become securitized, a dominant actor needs to engage in illocutionary speech acts, or perform a securitizing move, and "remove and issue from everyday politics and place [it] within the exceptional realm of security politics" (Mutlu & Salter, 2013, p. 266). Securitization, PDA holds, is not enacted through one individual texts. Rather, securitization exist and is enacted in a collection of texts. That is, security discourse lies 'somewhere above' the individual texts that incorporate it and is brought into being through its "regularity" in texts (Neumann, 2008, p. 62).

Furthermore, to locate an issue in the security sphere is to construct an issue as *existential*—that is, as a threat to the Self. Such constructions grant it heightened priority and conveys the message that if the issue is not addressed properly it will have disastrous implications. Security problems have therefore significant political saliency: Not only will they receive more policy attention, they will also be dealt with more favourably when resources are allocated (Buzan et al, 1997). In the words of Wæver, "security should be seen as a negative, as a failure to deal with issues of normal politics" (Wæver, 1995, p. 29). Therefore, equal attention is given to the process of desecuritization, whereby issues cease to be given a security value and are governed within the mundane realm of politics

Securitization theory thus provides us with the theoretical tools to gain greater insights into the compatibility of the EEU and the SREB. More specifically, it allows for an examination of the elements that China and Russia securitize and actively desecuritize. The next section elaborates upon this study's methodology to operationalize this theoretical framework.

# 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter addresses the research methods that are used in the pursuance of the objectives of this thesis. Section one and two provide the rationale for discourse analysis and lay out the research design. Sections three and four address data selection and data analysis respectively. Finally, the fifth section of this chapter identifies this research' limitations.

## 3.1. Poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA)

China historian Duara contends that in order to fully understand and appreciate China's foreign policy behaviour, one must "attend to the politics of narratives—whether these be the rhetorical schemas we deploy for our own understanding or those of historical actors who give us the world" (1997, p. 26). Postpositivist Russia scholars have indicated that this assumption also applies to Russia's foreign policy decisions (Dubrovskaya & Kozhemyakin, 2017; Splidsboel-Hansen, 2002; Troitskiy, 2008; Voltmer, 2000). This thesis echoes this conviction and therefore analyses security through engagement with the Copenhagen School securitization theory. According to the Copenhagen School, "the obvious choice of method is discourse analysis" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 176), because the "the defining criterion of security is textual (…) [and] has to be located in discourse" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 17 via Jensen, 2013, p. 84). Yet, *what is discourse?*

This research draws on poststructuralist discourse analysis. Central to PDA is the Foucauldian understanding that language is a social practice (Faiclough & Wodak, 1997). That is, discourse is not a description of certain actions or events, but it is an action in itself. Securitizing discourses are brought into existence through sets of texts, which in their turn, guide future behaviour. Neumann captures its essence particularly well:

> "Because discourse maintains a degree of regularity in social relations, it produces preconditions for action. It constrains how the stuff that the world consists of is ordered, and so how people categorize and think about the world. It constrains what is thought of at all, what is thought of as possible, and what is thought of as the 'natural thing' to do in a given situation. But discourse cannot determine action completely. There will always be more than one possible outcome. Discourse analysis aims at specifying the bandwidth of possible outcomes". (Neumann, 2008: 62)

The discursive ontology of poststructuralism enables us to examine the securitizing discourses of China's SREB and Russia's EEU and gain insights into the implications of such discourses for the broader strategic Sino-Russian relationship.

This thesis examines securitization by linking identity and security. The relationship between identity and foreign policy is at the core of PDA: Foreign policy draws on representations of identity, but, at the same time, it is through the construction of foreign policy that identities are formed and (re-)produced. Poststructuralists therefore hold that policy and identity are ontologically interdependent. Importantly, discourse is not synonymous to 'ideas'; rather the latter is part of the former. More specifically, poststructuralism holds that foreign policy discourses "articulate and intertwine material factors and ideas" to such a degree that one cannot disentangle the ideational from the material. This does not mean that materiality does not matter or does not exist. Instead of disregarding material reality, poststructuralists shift focus to the question how material facts are produced and prioritized and how neither the material nor the ideational have meaningful presence in isolation.

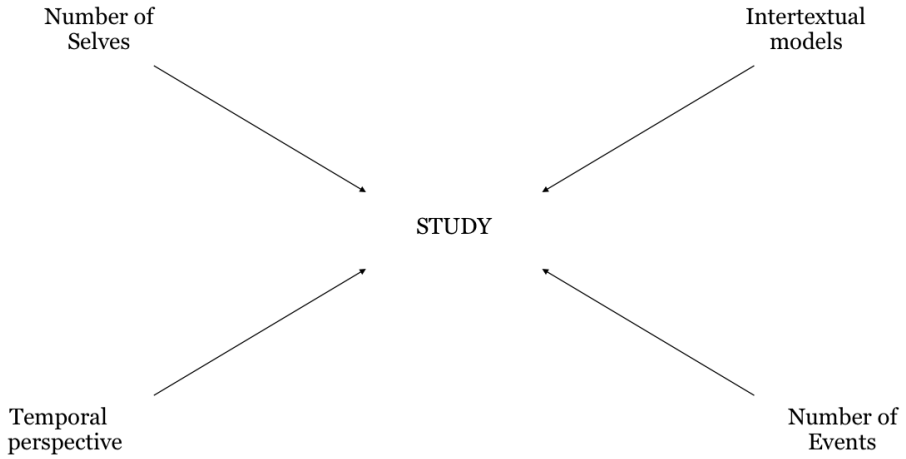
The poststructuralist approach is linked to a conceptualisation of identity that is, in the words of Hansen (2006), "discursive, political, relational and social" (p. 5). To hold that identity is *discursive* and *political* is to contend that representations of identity position foreign policy concerns within a specific 'interpretative optic', one with implications for what the foreign policy agenda—notably security agenda—will look like. It circumscribes the range of adequate foreign policy decisions, yet these boundaries are constantly evolving. To say that identity is *relational* is to argue that identity can only be *identified* by referring to something it is not. Of critical importance here is a rejection of Campbell's identification of 'radical Others' (1992) and an acknowledgement of degrees of Otherness. That is, "identity construction involves not a single Self-Other dichotomy but a series of related yet slightly different juxtapositions that can be theorized as constituting processes of linking and differentiation" (Hansen, 2006, p. 34). Others may thus be articulated as inferior, equal or superior. It might involve the construction of a threat perception, but it might also be constituted as a newcomer, a stranger, an ally, or a victim. Finally, to view identity as *social* is to place it within a set of collectively articulated, shared, codes, not to conceptualize it as an individual conviction or psychological condition. In addition, it holds that such discourses are inherently social because through discourse political actors address political opposition and the broader public realm and seek to institutionalize their identity representations and policy decisions.

Because identity and foreign policy are interlinked, identity and security (policies) are interconnected as well. This does not mean that they are the same; it means that a state's identity provides the boundaries of what can and cannot be securitized. To say that something is securitized means that something has been identified as a threat to the Self. Yet, for certain themes or objects to become security issues, they need to be identified, and defined accordingly. This is not to argue that security is not of critical importance, but to emphasize the discursive and historic specificity

of security objects. The 'national security' construct, for example, is based upon a specific form of identity construction—one tightly linked to the sovereign state and expressing a rather radical sense of identity—and a particular discursive and rhetorical force which assigns power and authority as well as responsibility on those acting on behalf of it.

## 3.2. Research Design

Having introduced the fundaments of PDA, this section elaborates upon the more concrete methodological issues associated with developing an adequate research design to answer the research question. In line with Hansen (2006), this thesis' research design is based upon four critical considerations: (1) the intertextual research model chosen; (2) the number of selves; (3) the temporal perspective, and (4) the number of events. These considerations shape the data collection process.




### *3.2.1. Intertextual research model*

In line with PDA, this thesis holds that texts are unique and at the same time united (Mutlu & Salter, 2013). Each text introduces a certain representation of identity, develops configurations of juxtapositions and differentiations, and links them to a spatially, temporally, and normatively situated security issues. However, each individual text is should always be evaluated against the backdrop of the broader (con)textual space to which they, either implicitly or explicitly, refer. That is, texts should be viewed as both individual pieces and pillars or mediators of existing discursive representations. A reading's meaning and purpose is thus never fully provided by the reading in isolation but is rather the product of—as well as building block for—other texts and representations. As such, foreign policy discourse—and security representations in particular—is

revealed through analysis of a web of interrelated texts and discursive representations. This dynamic has come to be termed 'intertextuality', which is "the connection of texts and meanings through reference to other texts" (Mutlu & Salter, 2013, p. 265). More concretely this implies that "references to other texts are [also] documented and analysed" (Hansen, 2006, p. 11).

In order to make sense of real-life phenomena it is important to identify what specific discourse structured around security discourse will be analysed. Hansen (2006) has developed three intertextual models, each placing emphasis upon different loci for political debate, different actors, and different issues of inquiry. This thesis focuses upon official and semi-offical discourse and the intertextual references made within it. The 'data selection' section elaborates upon the rationale for drawing upon official discursive representations.

### *3.2.2. Number of selves*

The number of selves refer to the number of states, communities, or other security policy subjects one analyses. This thesis engages in the analysis of two Selves, namely those of identified in Russia's and China's discourses on the EEU and the SREB respectively. Scrutiny of two selves allows for a ***comparative study*** of Russia and China's security considerations in the establishments of their regional influence building projects. This, in turn, allows for an assessment for the degree to which China and Russia's regional initiatives are compatible.

### *3.2.3. Temporal perspective*

The temporal perspective involves the decision to examine events "either at one particular moment or through longer historical analysis" (Hansen, 2006, p. 69). This thesis focuses upon a rather small timeframe. The texts analysed date from the period 2011 to 2018 and thus reflect the development trajectory of the EEU, the SREB and the (preliminary) process of integration. This timeframe may allow for the identification of relatively small changes during the process, but mainly serves the purpose to assess today's compatibility of China and Russia's regional influence-building projects from a security perspective. This decision follows Hansen's (2006) recommendation to focus on narrow moments in history when the topic is subject of "intense political concern" (p. 70).

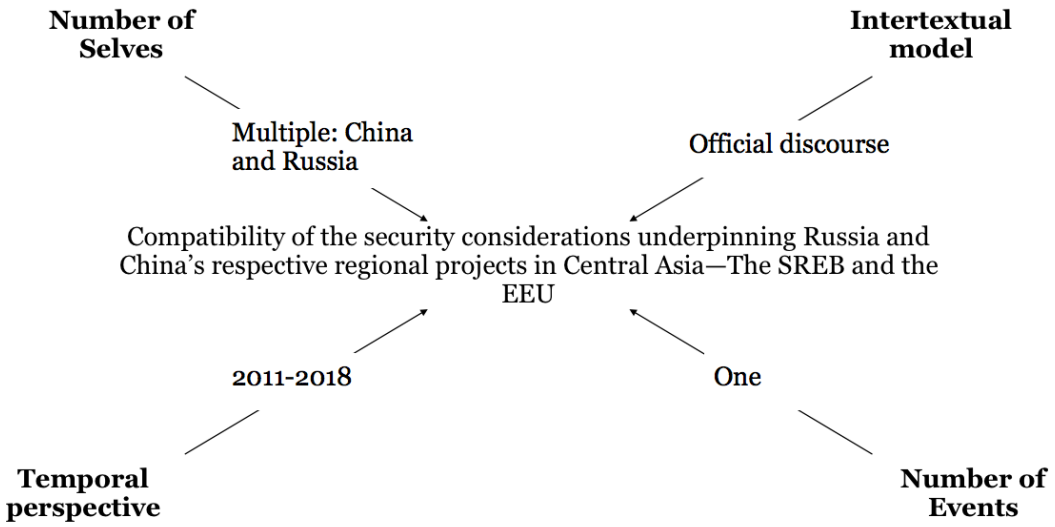
### *3.2.4. Number of events*

The fourth dimension of the poststructuralist research design refers to the number of events, in which the term 'event' may range from a concrete event to a broader issue or theme. Importantly, events are often examined through 'events within events'. Applying this to this thesis, the security

discourse of China and Russia's respective regional projects is defined as a single event for the purpose of developing a research design but the actual analysis of this event will itself trace the discursive representation of 'sub-events' such as the SCO summit, or the Belt and Road Summit.

### *3.2.5. Overview*

The four elements of poststructuralist research design are outlined in figure 3.2., which shows the features of each element. The specific configuration of dimensions set the boundaries for the data collection process.




## 3.3. Data Collection

The previous section has set out the research focus by expanding on the dimensions of (a) intertextuality, (b) Selves, (c) time, and (d) events. This section sets out the data selection procedure. This thesis principally draws upon primary sources, but because methodology is prioritized over ontology this thesis corroborates analysis and findings through reliance on secondary sources as well (Yin, 2013).

### *3.3.1. Primary Sources*

Poststructuralist discourse analysis has an epistemological and methodological focus on primary texts—notably official texts, policy documents, speeches, reports, and other documents. Accordingly, this thesis primarily draws on (semi-)official discourse—i.e. "discursive practices produced by high-ranked officials" (Libman, 2017, p. 83). (Semi-)official discourse includes both formal statements and statements made by prominent politicians in a non-official context. To be

sure, it would be wrong to assume that all members of Russia or China's ruling elite share the same discourse on the EEU and the SREB respectively, but, given the authoritarian nature of the Chinese and Russian states, the coherence and consistency is much higher than one typically encounters in more democratic contexts.

The decision to focus on (semi-)official documents is based upon various considerations. First, it rests on the assumption that (semi-)official discourse is most likely to shape foreign policy decisions and, at the same time, be affected by them. This particularly holds in authoritarian contexts. Authoritarian leaders, such as Xi Jinping and Putin, enjoy considerable autonomy in the pursuance of their decisions as their decisions are significantly less limited by oppositional forces. Their actual decisions and actions may thus follow their narratives more closely, than in more democratic settings where leaders have to make greater concessions to dissenting voices. Second, analysing other discourses (e.g. mass media) is considerably less relevant in the context of this study. The SREB and the EEU are relatively technical and specific topics for which the general public's attention is limited.

In order to obtain a complete and comprehensive understanding of China and Russia's regional projects, the documents were chosen through a purposeful sampling strategy (Yin, 2013). This strategy followed two steps. The first step was to identify the most important texts that are frequently quoted (Wilson, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2017a, 2017b; Sangar, 2017). These *key texts*, which are set out in the appendix of this thesis and served as "nodes within the intertextual web of debate" (Hansen, 2006, p. 74). Second, these documents were complemented by a broader array of *general materials*, which mainly consisted of similar texts and documentations of related and recent events—i.e. Boao Forum, SCO Summit, and Belt and Road Forum—that have, given their relative novelty, not yet received considerable scholarly attention. These additions also allowed for a more robust and quantitative identification of China and Russia's respective discourses. It is important to note that due to intertextuality this thesis also draws upon various documents under the Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO) and, to a lesser extent, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The former is an increasingly important economic and security platform, bringing together China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and India. The SCO has been held to be the main platform through which to consolidate the EEU and the SREB. Together with the latter, the CSTO—a Russia-led Central Asian security alliance—these initiatives are aimed to combine into the 'Broader Eurasian Partnership'. While the SCO and the CSTO are thus regional initiatives in themselves, their discourse and direction are interdependent with the EEU and the SREB.

### *3.3.2. Secondary Sources*

The fact that PDA places epistemological and methodological emphasis upon primary sources does not imply that secondary sources are not given attention within PDA. Solid and rigorous analyses of primary texts require profound knowledge on the Central Asian region, Russia, China, their shared and individual histories. Secondary sources play a significant role in the accumulation process of such knowledge (Hansen, 2006, p. 74) and provide the fundaments for further analysis by aiding the identification of dominant discourses.

This thesis draws extensively on scholarly works of native and foreign China and Russia scholars. This also includes articles on China and Russia's respective initiatives authored by what Callahan calls "citizen intellectuals" (Callahan, 2014). Citizen intellectuals comprise prominent 'independent' domestic analysts and differ from more liberal societies' 'public intellectuals' in that they do not oppose or undermine state authorities; rather they make strategic use of domestic political developments by deciding when to collaborate with state institutions and when to operate individually, "probing the boundaries of what is allowed (and not allowed)" in their societies (Callahan, 2014, p. 146). This thesis contends that this combination of primary and secondary sources allows for a deeper understanding of Russia's and China's interpretation of their respective roles and identities in the region and enables a comparison of the central elements of the two regional projects (Kaczmarski, 2017; Tsygankov, 2016).

## 3.4. Data analysis

While there is no single set of guidelines on how to operationalize successful PDA, one can discern some similarities in the ways in which data analysis is conducted (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017; Wodak & Myer, 2001). Based upon existing methods and approaches (Mutlu & Salter, 2013; Yin, 2013), this thesis develops an analytical framework that is most apt to address the purpose of identifying the discursive representations of China and Russia's security considerations and assessing the compatibility of their respective visions. This strategy followed three steps.

**Step 1: What are Russia and China's identities under the EEU and the SREB respectively?**

If one were to decide a priori that a certain way of identity construction would be the only way to construct identity within foreign policy discourse—and security discourse in specific—such a decision would cause an avoidable empirical and theoretical limitation and obstruct thorough analysis of vital elements of foreign policy. It would result in a fixed conceptualisation of foreign policy and security discourse—one immune to change and isolated from discursive practices. Maintaining a conceptualisation of identity whose ontological fluidity acknowledges identity

pluralism, the first step in this thesis was to identify the Russian and Chinese 'Selves' under the EEU and SREB respectively. The coding programme Atlas.ti has been used to systematically analyse the relevant documents and find recurrent patterns that pinpoint China and Russia's regional visions and respective identities. The identification of both powers' identities enabled an examination of the elements that have desecuritized and securitized vis-à-vis China and Russia's Selves.

**Step 2: What is the security discourse of China's SREB and Russia's EEU?**

Step two built on the findings of step one and sought to identify the vital components of Russia and China's security discourse. This step not only focused on the elements that are either securitized or desecuritized; it also examined the suggested policy remedies. That is, how do China and Russia suggest to govern their perceived threats? Security discourse analysis was conducted by, first, detecting the explicit security elements of their policies. This includes the practice of linking certain parts of texts to explicit security utterances such as 'national interests', 'security', 'sovereignty', and 'strategic interests' (Hansen, 2006). Second, explicit security considerations are complemented by implicit security utterances. It did so by analysing the nomination and predication strategies used in the texts. Here, nomination strategies refer to the ways in which actors, objects, events, and other important developments are addressed linguistically; predication strategies involve the characteristics, traits, and qualities that are attributed to these components of perceived reality (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017, p. 94). Like step one, step two conducted discourse analysis with the coding programme Atlas.ti. In line with Yin (2013) step one and two involved the creation of a database in which all documents were bundled and organized. Subsequently, within this database recurrent patterns and constructs were divided into different codes and sub-codes. For example, the code 'security', included the sub-codes, 'economic security' and 'energy security'. Next, the codes were arranged, analysed, and interpreted against the backdrop of the broader literature.

**Step 3: Evaluating the compatibility of China's SREB and Russia's EEU**

Step one and two are repeated under SQ1 and SQ2. Step three reconciles SQ1 and SQ2 by conducting a comparative analysis of the findings under SQ1 and SQ2.

### 3.5. Limitations

The task of unpacking and analysing China and Russia's representations and visions of regional influence and security is subject to challenges inherent to any engagement with political discourse

as a vehicle for deconstructing meaning. One stems from the ambiguity and internal inconsistencies of political visions and identities which are usually derived from "contestation within a given polity" (Kaczmarski, 2017, p. 1361). When advancing a doctrine or concept, state leaders typically limit their contribution to the formulation and introduction of a general idea, which is subsequently given depth and meaning by different, competing political coalitions (Kaczmarski, 2017). The resulting internal incoherence of political visions makes it difficult to distinguish between those elements of the concept that receive wide support and those that reflect the parochial convictions of a limited number of political actors. A related limitation, which is specific to this thesis' focus upon official discourse is the limited ability to cover discourses that oppose and challenge official policy discourse. As a result, it is beyond the scope of this study to fully evaluate the degree of stability official discourse enjoys within the broader political and public realm. This study's intertextual model has therefore important ramifications for what can be said about discursive stability (Hansen, 2006, p. 66).

A second limitation of this research is its reliance upon English sources. This thesis does not directly draw on original Russian or Chinese texts. As a result, it may not capture vital details or misinterpret utterances of speech due to the fact that the full meaning got lost in translation.

In order to address internal incoherence and linguistic limitations, this thesis does not rely on one text, but draws on a variety of texts from 2011-2018 in order to find patterns of consistency and evolution. In addition, it pays due attention to the incentives guiding specific articulations. Furthermore, it relies on a vast array of secondary sources that guide and inform the conclusions of this thesis.

# 4. A PDA OF CHINA AND RUSSIA'S REGIONAL PROJECTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

## 4.1. What is the security discourse of China's SREB?

In late 2013, Xi Jinping introduced the idea of a New Silk Road (NSR) into its foreign policy discourse (1.1.). The NSR concept was developed with the aim to revamp and revive the ancient Silk Road, whose name is derived from the lucrative silk trade during *inter alia* the Han dynasty. The Silk Road, which flourished for approximately two millennia, comprised a series of transnational trade routes which linked the civilisations and economies of South, East and West Asia to Europe and North- and East Africa. Covering circa 8000 km, the Silk Road arteries facilitated a plethora of cross-border exchanges and were of cultural, social, and economic importance. Products such as porcelain, spices and silk, but also philosophies, peoples, religions, and technologies were traded, exchanged or shared (Dadabaev, 2018a; Dadabaev, 2018b; Duarte,

2018; Forough, 2018). During his trip to Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping proposed the establishment of the SREB (the 'belt'), a set of infrastructure projects that would revive the Silk Road's land corridors linking China to Europe and bring *peace, stability, and development* to the Central Asian region. During his visit to Indonesia, the SREB was complemented by the maritime Silk Road (the 'road) and bundled into the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative (1.1.).

At its core, China's discursive representation of the SREB is a regional cooperation structure that primarily revolves around transnational infrastructure projects to enhance regional connectivity and interdependence—and to ultimately foster regional development and stability. This vision underlies an understanding that economic stagnation or decay is the root cause of instability, which, in turn, further aggravates economic distress and has dangerous spill-over effects for neighbouring countries and the wider region. As a consequence, it is in all states' interests to ensure "win-win" cooperation and "common development". Against this backdrop, Beijing understands the SREB in functional terms, as a 'community' of common interests'. The scope of the SREB is not limited to a certain geographic space but is open to all states that want to participate in the "practical cooperation in all fields" (1.4.).

While the early documents under scrutiny outline vague and broad conceptualisations of the SREB, later documents gave the concept increasing substance and meaning. It should be noted that the SREB is, by its very nature, a broad and informal regional project favouring bilateral cooperation and lacking institutionalized norms and principles. Nevertheless, 2015, the vision had evolved into a relatively coherent[5] set of foreign policies, whose 'official line' allows for the identification of the Chinese 'Self' and its securitization discourse.

### *4.1.1. China's identity*

The juxtaposition of two narratives by the Chinese leadership as well as by China's citizen intellectuals bears witness to the dual identity that China seeks to promote under the SREB. Xi Jinping described the economic belt and the maritime road as "the two wings of China", the great eagle, the development of which helps China fly "higher and farther"[6]. At the same time, Xi has contended that "China's opening drive is not a one-man show. (....) It is a pursuit not to establish China's own sphere of influence, but to support the common development of all countries. It is meant to build not China's own backyard garden, but a garden shared by all countries" (1.6.). Likewise, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called the Belt and Road project a "sunshine initiative,

[5] Importantly, the SREB vision and purpose is still subject to adaptations and adjustments.

[6] "Zhe yidai yilu, jiushi yaowei women zhezhi dapeng chashang liangzhi chibang, jianshe haole, dapeng jiu keyi feide genggao gengyuan" (Quoted in Ye, 2015).

in which everyone and "everything will operate in the sunshine; [in which] there is no domination by one party; and, [in which] there is no winner takes all (…) [but rather] win-win mutual benefit"[7]. This thesis describes China's identities as: (1) China as a great power, and (2) China as a benevolent rising power.

*Identity 1: China as a great power*

The former aspect of China's identity—its role as a Global Power—is considerably less explicit throughout the documents than the latter. Nevertheless, China's discursive representations of the SREB reveal the ambition to consolidate, if not reaffirm, its position in the international arena. This ambition is expressed by the gradual departure from the three-decade logic of 'hiding your strength and biding your time' to the strategic ambition to 'restore greatness' (Xu & Du, 2015). The New Silk Road is represented as one way to overcome the "century of humiliation" (1.8.). According to Zhao, such articulations indicate a "gradual change in the historical consciousness of Chinese leaders as they have become more willing to celebrate the glories of imperial China to boost national pride and redefine China's [(re)emerging] position in the world" (Zhao, 2015 via Woon, 2018, p. 68).

China's discourse about Great Power status is strongly linked to the evolving nature of one-party rule. Over the past thirty years, the CCP has sought to maintain regime legitimacy by—amongst others—portraying itself as the only ruling entity that can achieve the country's objectives of national rejuvenation (Zeng & Breslin, 2017). That is, only under the ruling party has China managed to regain the great power status it enjoyed before the West brought the country into the century of humiliation. According to Sibal, the ancient Silk Road not only evokes "China's historical role in world trade" but also "China's economic superiority long ago" (2014, para. 7), which the country wants to recover under the SREB. The SREB, as part of the OBOR, constitutes one of the mechanisms through which the ruling party safeguards legitimacy and furthers this de-politicized objective of restoring its natural Great power position.

Notably, China's Self as a Global Power is relational as it is identified by making reference to the West, and the US in specific. While China has not yet thoroughly elaborated upon the specificities of the SREB, it has been very clear about what it *is not*. It is not the type of regionalism as envisaged by the West, which allows for interference in domestic affairs and which is prone to "power struggles, conflict and zero-sum game[s]" (Zeng & Breslin, 2017, p. 780). China explicitly

[7] Retrieved from: https://af.reuters.com/article/africaTech/idAFL4N1QQ29P (last access: 2018, July 20).

coined its regional initiative "non-Western", to emphasize its distinct take[8] on matters of regional and global governance as well as to *securitize*, what it deems, the destabilizing and disruptive normative hegemony of the West and US interference in specific.

*Identity 2: China as a benevolent rising power*

China's identity as a Great Power appears to be tempered by its identity as a *benevolent* and *rising* power. China's identity as a developing power, rather than a great power, reveals a facilitative role, rather than a leading role, under the SREB. According to China's citizen intellectuals (Zhang, 2016; Zhou, 2016), this image seems to be a combination of: (1) The reality that in per capita terms China is still a relatively poor country, unable to take on full responsibility in the international arena and still in the process development, and; (2) China's concern with eliminating the 'China threat' and furthering its image of a 'peaceful power'. The latter allows it to pursue its national interests in a non-confrontational manner. Various narratives bear witness to this identity.

First, China fervently advocates the narrative that the SREB brings "win-win cooperation", "common development", "equality", and "mutual benefits", indicating that everyone stands to win from cooperation. These outcomes are to be achieved through the alignment of (economic) objectives. In order to underline China's benevolent identity, China's leadership has also sought to 'globalize' the Chinese Dream by reframing it into the 'Global Dream'[9]. By portraying the SREB as co-managed China seeks to *desecuritize* its presence towards other powers and further its ambitions in a non-threatening way.

China's facilitative identity is further depoliticized through frequent reference to historical accounts. China describes its regional initiative as the modern embodiment of the ancient Silk Road; that is, a revival of "friendly interactions" (1.5.), regional cooperation and "mutual learning between different civilizations" (1.4.). The latter "enhances mutual recognition, mutual understanding and mutual respect between peoples along the routes and lay a solid popular basis for the building of the Belt and Road and world peace and development" (1.4.). Beijing calls this spirit of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" the 'Silk Road Spirit' (1.7.). It has further added the UN charter's five principles of peaceful

[8] "China has no geopolitical calculations, seeks no exclusionary blocs and imposes no business deals on others, the president said. "It must be pointed out that as the BRI is a new initiative, it is perfectly natural for there to be different views in cooperation" (1.9.). And "We should respect each other's choice of development paths and accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns. We should enhance mutual understanding by putting ourselves in others' positions and boost harmony and unity by **seeking common ground and setting aside differences**" (1.10. Emphasis added).

[9] "[The SREB] will align China's development with that of the countries along the routes and combine the Chinese Dream and the dream of their peoples" (1.5.).

coexistence—i.e. "mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence" (1.4). China's political elites depict these values as 'timeless'; not the result of China's regional hegemony, but rather the product of *peaceful,* bottom-up cooperation.

China's prioritization of economic cooperation foregoes the identification of a Radical Other. The ever-broadening scope of the SREB necessitates an identity that is welcoming of other powers and thus a Self that is benevolent, malleable and *desecuritizes* the presence of other powers, including Russia. The other, in this sense, is seen as 'equal' and comprises all potential participants to the initiative—i.e. all actors that are willing to act in accordance with the Silk Road Spirit.

### *4.1.2. Threats to the Self*

China's identities are first and foremost defined in economic terms. It is therefore no surprise that China's National Development and Reform Commission—the country's prime economic planning agency—is also the main body coordinating the OBOR and has incorporated the regional initiative in its national economic development strategy (1.4.). Yet, its identities serve different purposes and therefore reflect different but interdependent security considerations. China's identity as a superpower rests on sustained economic growth and the development of all its provinces. This Sino-centric identity is dependent upon the consolidation of the state of China. As a result, threats to the Self are mostly defined in terms of *domestic* security challenges. China's identity as a benevolent rising power, on the other hand, indicates Beijing's believe that China's identities cannot be maintained absent close cooperation and coordination with the outside world. Regional development and stability are crucial for China's process of 'rejuvenation' and future position. Threats to the latter identity are therefore mainly expressed in terms of *regional* security. Hence, while both Selves primarily rest on development and therefore securitize development challenges, the former identity links security mainly to challenges of domestic development and the latter perceives regional development challenges as threats to the Self. As will be discussed, these security components are interlinked and reflect hybrid security perceptions.

#### *China's securitization of national development issues*

To China's leadership, national development is of critical importance to the legitimacy of the ruling party and considered the most potent cure to instability. As a consequence, China's discursive security representations of its regional initiative place great emphasis upon China's development challenges. Three securitizing economic narratives can be identified: (1) The problem of uneven development in China and the wider region; (2) the middle-income trap; and (3) energy security.

First, the regional development aspect of the SREB is perhaps one of China's most critical economic policy challenges. China's official discourse heavily securitizes the problem of uneven development in China and emphasizes the need to close the gap between the underdeveloped inland regions and the flourishing eastern provinces (Cai, 2017). The SREB has been said to "fully leverage the comparative advantages of its various regions, adopt a proactive strategy of further opening-up, [and to] strengthen interaction and cooperation among the eastern, western and central regions" (1.4.). As will be discussed, the underperforming inland provinces also present significant challenges in terms of traditional security (Jiang, 2018). Past attempts to address inter-regional inequality, through fiscal injections and preferential policies have had little results. The SREB has been presented as the alternative solution. Cai (2017) describes China's economic rationale is as follows: Rather than pumping more government-resources into these provincial economies, China's leadership seeks to leverage regional economic activities and integrate lagging provinces into regional economies. Importantly, the problem of unequal development does not only concern intra-national differences but also intra-regional differences. That is, economically unstable neighbors are also considered (potential) security threats as their spill-over effects may undermine China's economic performance.

A second objective that China seeks to pursue under the SREB is to "develop [its] high added-value industry[ies]" (1.5.). This objective is associated with the securitization of the 'middle income trap' (Ito, 2016). While the formal discourse only implicitly touches upon this issue, China scholars widely agree that China's discursive representation of the SREB reveals China's ambition to make the country's manufacturing industry more innovation-driven, efficient and competitive. Economic cooperation and integration enhance market competition and stimulate Chinese exports of higher-end goods. The ruling party believes that only through economic upgrading the Chinese economy will experience sufficient growth to secure its identity as a Great Power. Importantly, China's 'upgrading' issue is highly intertwined with the need for China to deal with its excess capacity in many industrial sectors[10], mainly its construction and infrastructure sectors. While upgrading is one way of securing economic growth, expanding its strategic manufacturing industries constitutes another means to solidify the country's economic bases.

Finally, at the core of any of China's economic activities is access to sufficient energy and raw materials. In order to realize sustained economic growth, China needs to secure its energy

[10] "On the one hand, we should gradually migrate our low-end manufacturing to other countries and take pressure off industries that suffer from an excess capacity problem. At the same time, we should support competitive industries such as construction, engineering, high-speed rail, electricity generation, machinery and telecommunications moving abroad" (Huaibang, 2016).

supplies. Energy shortages constitute one of the greatest threats to the Chinese Self. This is demonstrated by China's SREB articulations, which consistently and explicitly make mention of energy security. A prime motivation underlying the SREB is China's aspiration to increase sources of Chinese energy supplies. China's discourse variously refers to its ambition to "set up [an] energy club and establish [a] stable supply-demand relationship to ensure energy security".

*China's securitization of regional development issues*

The securitization of China's domestic economic challenges is interlinked with the securitization of threats to regional development. Importantly, this interlinkage is not explained by China's interest in international development as such. Rather, China's securitization of regional development is based upon the deep-grounded conviction that there is a strong and direct relationship between inequality and poverty and instability[11]. Phenomena associated with underdevelopment and inequality have therefore become security topics in which traditional conceptions of security intersect with economic ones. Such issues may both be regional as well as domestic. However, since instability has come to be increasingly related to the rise and spread of non-state actors, solutions typically need regional approaches rather than domestic ones.

Inequality between China's inland and coastal provinces is perceived as an enormous threat to the ruling party. The underperforming Xinjiang province provides an interesting example. Xinjiang has a vast Turkic-speaking Muslim population which is exerting increasing resistance towards the ruling party. The establishment of an independent state has been looming large and instability is fueled by the proliferation of radical Islamism and other terrorist organizations (Cai, 2017). China's ruling elite considers Xinjiang's separatist movements and terrorist groups as an existential threat to the state. Interestingly, China does not frame its solution in strategic terms. Rather, it holds that integration into the wider regional economy will stimulate development in the landlocked province and will gradually eliminate terrorist threats. In this way, the "three evils of "terrorism, extremism, and separatism as well as well as drug trafficking and transnational crime" (1.2) are hybrid security concerns as they comprise the traditional security concerns of stability, territorial integrity and state sovereignty but are being linked to non-military—i.e. economic—solutions. Xi Jinping clearly captured the inseparability of stability and development at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference:

[11] "Development is a major issue facing the world. The shadow of the international financial crisis is not far behind, and the world economic recovery lacks momentum. To avert risks and boost recovery, countries must cooperate in good faith to build up synergy" (1.5.).

> "Maintaining stability in China's neighborhood is the key objective of peripheral diplomacy. We must encourage and participate in the process of regional economic integration, speed up the process of building up infrastructure and connectivity. We must build the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st century maritime silk road, creating a new regional economic order"[12]

Beijing views China's economic resources as a key tool to further its strategic interest of regional stability and assert China's leadership in the region. This approach is complemented by conflict resolution through diplomatic means, which is institutionalized under the SCO, the multilateral body coordinating security activities in the region.

*Traditional security*

China's increasingly activist policy has reinforced the realist notion that China's regional project is principally driven by geostrategic objectives. As such, mainstream scholars have mainly focused upon the traditional security underpinnings of the SREB. To be sure, some discursive features of the SREB appear to be congruent with such assumption. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor provides an interesting example in which geostrategic and geo-economic (security) interests intersect. The corridor is planned to link Kashgar in the underdeveloped Xinjiang province with the Port of Gwadar in Pakistan (1.5). Apart from functioning as a commercial port, Gwadar is also sufficiently deep to harbor aircraft carriers and submarines (Cai, 2017). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor may thus be interpreted as a means to counter Western influence in the region. In fact, this perception is congruent with China's non-Western identity, which only exists in relation to the US as a defining Other. Likewise, its vision of the SREB as an explicitly 'non-Western' project is also indicative of the securitization of the West as it has, in the eyes of the Chinese elites, regularly undermined the vital principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. Yet, one should not overestimate the geostrategic drivers of China's regional initiative. China's discursive representations of the SREB reveal that the key drivers behind the SREB are related to China's pressing economic challenges. Its main security considerations are therefore geo-economic, rather than geo-political.

[12] Xi Jinping's Important Speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (2013, Oktober 30). Retrieved from: http://www.cciced.net/cciceden/NEWSCENTER/LatestEnvironmentalandDevelopmentNews/201310/t20131030_82626.html (last access: 2018, July 29).

## 4.2. What is the security discourse of Russia's EEU?

The Eurasian Union in its current form is the product of a rather haphazard evolution trajectory. The idea of a Eurasian Union was first coined in a 2011 report that was issued in furtherance of the presidential election campaign. It was given new impetus when Kazakhstan and Belarus convinced Russia to limit the project's scope to economic integration and cooperation, and refrain from political integration (Kaczmarski, 2017a; 2017b). The creation of the E**E**U (Eurasian **Economic** Union) in 2014 reflects this economic focus and roughly coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent economic sanctions. In 2016, Putin introduced his idea of a 'Greater Eurasia' of which the EEU would form a central component

### *4.2.1. Russia's identity*

An examination of the formal discourse of the EEU between 2011 and 2018 reveals a dynamic evolutionary path. A particularly striking feature of Russia's vision of the EEU is its embeddedness in the shared post-Soviet identity. Putin has frequently described the EEU as the most important post-Soviet initiative and a "truly historical milestone that [has] open[ed] up broad prospects for the development of [the participating] economies and improving the well-being of [the] countries' citizens" (p. 2.4.). However, Russia remains ambiguous about the specific relationship between the EEU and the post-soviet *space* and *history*. Two somewhat contradicting identity discourses underpin Russia's vision of the EEU. On the one hand, Russia portrays the EEU as a means to defend the Post-Soviet heritage. These articulations reveal Russia's identity as a regional hegemon and defender of the post-Soviet space. At the same time, however, Putin contends that Russia's vision of the EEU transcends the post-Soviet space and should be seen as part of a new cooperative regional order that is open to the wider region and integrated into other regional structures. This narrative illustrates Russia's identity as a non-Western power in a multipolar world order.

With respect to the former identity, Russia has regularly referred to the EEU as a means to safeguard the 'Soviet heritage' (2.1.), which includes socio-cultural, as well as political and economic ties. Furthermore, geographic proximity and shared Russophone traditions have been noted to lay the fundaments for 'natural' regional cooperation and integration. The EEU would thus be based upon a shared post-Soviet Identity. Russia's leaders have variously addressed the purpose of the EEU in terms of "its role in the post-Soviet space" (2.1.; 2.3.). Not only has the EEU been portrayed as a means to defend its cultural heritage, the official discourse also addresses economic issues in defensive terms (Putin, via Osborn, 2011). Russia's ruling elite contends that the EEU was first and foremost a response to the global economic recession as it was established

with the aim to protect its member states from the relentless forces of global capital. Such articulations illustrate the deep-grounded conviction amongst Russia's leaders that an integrated post-Soviet geographical space should be protected from certain external influences.

At the same time, Russia's vision of the EEU also discloses the ambition to use the EEU as a way to connect its regional activities with Asia and Europe. This reflects Russia's identity as a non-Western power in a multipolar world order. In 2011, Putin stated that 'Eurasianism' was the modern incarnation of the Soviet heritage and extended to the wider region (Putin, via Kaczmarski, 2017a). 'Eurasianism' features prominently in the name of the project and reflects this trans-Soviet inspiration[13].

Russia's dual identity under the EEU has surfaced as international circumstances and opportunities changed. Initially, the EEU was designed as a counterpart of the European Union and the future 'Greater Europe', which was envisioned to start off as a "harmonious community of economies from Lisbon to Vladivostok, [turn into] a zone of free trade and, [eventually, take on] even more advanced forms of integration (2.1.). 'Greater Europe' would comprise the EU in Western and Central Europe and the EEU, led by Russia, in Eastern Europe. In anticipation to such profound cooperation, the EEU has been organized along the same highly-institutionalized structures as the EU. The initiative is embedded in an international legal framework, notably the Treaty of the EEU and various supplementary agreements (Molchanov, 2015). These structures were expected to allow Russia to closely cooperate with the EU whilst maintaining hegemony over the former Soviet space. Importantly, both the set-up and the discourse of the EEU reveal that Russia views its post-Soviet identity in relation to the EU. Hence, the EU is the defining Other against whom Russia seeks to defend the post-Soviet sphere.

Worsening ties between Russia and the West led Moscow to revise its regional vision and shift focus from Europe to Eurasia, changing the inspiration of a 'Greater Europe' into a 'Greater Eurasia'. Initially it sought to entice Asian leaders of its 'Greater Eurasia' initiative by applying the same approach to regionalism as it did with Europe. Russia's leaders continued to build upon the principles underpinning the EU; Putin described Greater Eurasia as the heart of a broader integration structure and invited key Asian players to participate in the EEU through the establishment of a nebulous sphere of close economic cooperation following "universal principles of integration" (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2015). The purpose of this initiative would be to institutionalize economic interactions and bring obstacles to trade to a minimum. However,

[13] "First, we are not talking about that in one form or another to recreate the Soviet Union. It would be naive to attempt to restore or copy what already in past, but close integration on a new axiological, political, and economic basis is the imperative of our time" (2.1.).

since the end of 2015, one can discern a gradual departure from the 'European' conceptualisation of regionalism towards a Chinese understanding of regional structures. This shift coincided with the consolidation of Russia's identity as a non-Westen power vis-à-vis its identity as a post-Soviet one. As noted by Russia scholars, Moscow initially appeared undecided on how to respond to China's regional initiative (Korolev, 2018; Lukin, 2018). However, a combination of international and domestic factors led Russia's ruling elite to somewhat accommodate its vision to Chinese thinking. Moscow began to adapt its imagination of the EEU as a closed, regional economic bloc and increasingly embraced the notion of the EEU as an open regional structure integrated in the "open global economy" (2.8.). Such articulations significantly echo China's discursive representations of the SREB. As noted by Kaczmarski (2017), Greater Eurasia indicates Russian leaders' acknowledgement of certain deficiencies of the EEU and may be viewed as an attempt to resolve them. In addition, Russia's willingness to accommodate to China's regional vision and open up its regional project may also be understood as an acknowledgement that it cannot deny nor challenge China's economic supremacy. In fact, it suggests that Putin may actually recognize that Russia and the wider region benefit from China's economic activities.

While Russia has sought to adjust its regional vision to new global circumstances, the interpretation of its position vis-à-vis international politics has remained largely unchanged throughout the development of the EEU. Russia's discursive representation of international order envisions an increasingly multipolar system, in which every great power exerts influence over its own backyard (Makarychev, 2017). Influence is described as the result of material and soft, symbolic power. Accordingly, the EEU would serve as a means to safeguard Russia's identity as regional pole by securing influence over its neighbourhood and maintain strategic leverage over the post-Soviet sphere (2.3.). This interpretation reveals what many Russia scholars argue to be Russia's ultimate objective: To change the Eurasian *Economic* Union into a *political* Union.

In sum, Russia's vision of the EEU is underpinned by two juxtapositional identities. On the one hand, its vision of the EEU is exclusionary, spatially bound, and defensive. The very set-up of the EEU suggests exclusivity and a reluctance to compromise with other powers. Russia's ruling elite frequently refers to members' "common strategic national interests" (2.1.) within the "Post-soviet space", indicating the (post-)soviet commonalities of the participating member states and highlighting Russia's strategic and defensive motivations. This geographically and historically demarcated identity 'others' those that do not share the post-Soviet identity, notably Europe and, to a lesser extent, the US. Indeed, Putin has strongly criticized the European continent, and pointed to the dangers of US regional leadership that undermines the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. At the same time, the closed nature of the EEU is incongruent with Russia's

conceptualisation of a 'Greater Europe', or a 'Greater Eurasia', which signify Russia's ambitions to transcend post-Soviet boundaries. Russia's willingness to transform the EEU into a bridge between Europe and Asia necessitates some form of coordination. However, while Russia's vision of the EEU is well accounted for, it greatly lacks an equally comprehensive vision for 'Greater Eurasia', which remains a nebulous concept.

### *4.2.2. Threats to the Self*

Given Central Asian states' embeddedness in Russian institutions, threats to Russia's identity can best be understood against the wider backdrop of Russian politics and foreign policy. Intertextual analysis illustrates that Russia's identity as a defender of the post-Soviet space is pre-eminent throughout its security discourse on Central Asia. Since the EEU's establishment, Putin's articulations on security have primarily revolved around protecting member states' "common strategic national interests" (2.1.). In addition, Russia's discursive representation of the region implies one in which Central Asia is Russia's exclusive sphere of cultural and political influence and Moscow is the sole "provider of stability" (2.2.). However, since 2015, one can discern a change in the discourse, which involves the active desecuritization of China and demonstrates Russia's willingness to accommodate its regional vision to China's presence in the region. Indeed, Russia has provided China with significant leeway to consolidate its economic ties within the Central Asian region, but Russia's articulations indicate that its security considerations mainly revolve around strategic and political influence.

Since EEU's inception, Russia's identity has been described as the natural leader of the post-Soviet space. Importantly, this identity—as well as the threats to its identity—have primarily been framed in relation to the European and Western identities. Russia frequently relies upon the dichotomies *post-Soviet* vs. European and *non-Western* vs. Western. Both reveal Russia's interpretation of the EEU as a means to defend its exclusive sphere of influence against imminent threats coming from the West. This observation is congruent with the widespread argument that prime rationale for the establishment of the EEU was to counter the West's influence in Eastern Europe (Sakwa, 2015). Until recently, Russia regularly reiterated its role as the provider of political stability in the region. While Moscow's most recent discourse has become more implicit on this matter, it still expresses this role through *inter alia* the securitization of the expansion of the new 'isms' of "terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism" (2.8) in Central Asia, which are sustained through transnational organized crime and instilled by "so-called humanitarian interventions by the USA and Western states" (2.3.).

While Russia's largely traditional security discourse and institutional structures of the EEU bear witness to the closed nature of the EEU, Russia's more recent articulations show that it has attenuated its political discourse[14] and has been increasingly willing to open up its regional activities to other Eastern powers[15]. This discursive change coincided with the consolidation of Russia's identity as a non-Western power in a multipolar world order, which embraced a trans-soviet vision of the region and existed in juxtaposition to Western identities. Under this identity, Moscow's perception of China has been one of an (Eastern) 'partner', rather than a (Western) defining other. This development is particularly evident in the economic realm where Russia has sought to coordinate "the activity of the Eurasian Economic Union with the Chinese initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt" (2.8.). Putin has noted that "the initiative of the Chinese leader deserves the closest attention and will be supported by Russia in every possible way" (3.3). Likewise, it has increasingly absorbed China's rhetoric of mutually beneficial cooperation, stability, and development. Throughout the discourse one can thus discern the active desecuritization of China.

> "Whatever the changes in the international situation, our determination and confidence in developing and deepening our strategic partnership remains unwavering. We will further view our bilateral relations as a priority in our foreign policy and further provide mutual support on issues related to the vital interests of our countries, actively promote multifaceted cooperation to make our relations, which are developing at a high level, become an engine for the development and revival of our countries and a cornerstone for preserving global peace and stability".

Putin's articulations imply that Russia acknowledges China's legitimate interests in the region as well as the important role China plays in brining development and economic growth to Russia and the wider region. Even in the strategic realm Russia has been welcoming of China's presence. The establishment of the SCO offered the Kremlin the opportunity to establish a measure of shared responsibility with China in pursuance of the maintenance of peace, stability, and security in Central Asia. Russia's acceptance of China in the strategic realm may suggest that its security focus remains targeted towards Europe and the wider West. These security foci may very well need the

[14] "Let us not forget about those threats that stem from regional conflicts. Areas of smouldering disagreements still exist across Eurasia. In order to eliminate those conflicts, first of all, we need to abandon hostile rhetoric, mutual accusations and rebukes that only aggravate the situation. Altogether, none of the old approaches to conflict resolution should be used to solve modern problems. We need fresh and stereotype-free ideas" (2.7).

[15] "We are continuing this [military] work to build up our potential and will keep doing so, not in order to threaten anyone, but so as to be able to feel safe, ensure our security and be able to carry out our economic and social development plans".

support of China. Like China, Russia has variously indicated the dangers of Western interference and the prime importance of state sovereignty and stability. These articulations suggest that, also in strategic terms, China and Russia are roughly on the same line.

Importantly, this does not preclude a sense of unease towards China's strategic or political presence. However, the discourse suggests that China's presence in the political realm has not proceeded to such an extent that it requires Russia to re-focus security perceptions. Russia's security discourse should thus be seen as a balancing act between defending its sphere of influence under the EEU and opening up to the wider world under its ambitions of a 'Greater Eurasia'.[16]

### 4.3. Assessing the compatibility of China's SREB and Russia's EEU

A PDA of official and semi-official documents of China's SREB and Russia's EEU reveals that common identities and regional visions allow Russia and China to share a number of security interests.

Both Moscow and Beijing identify themselves as 'poles' in a multipolar world order and view their regional initiatives as a way to take responsibility for global and regional issues. They share the aim to achieve development and maintain stability in the Central Asian region. Given their common communist-authoritarian heritage, the Kremlin and Beijing associate stability with authoritarian control rather than the Western values of good governance or democratic participation (Odgaard, 2017). An authoritarian approach is also reflected in economic cooperation and coordination, which should be a state-led endeavour rather than a grassroots process (Wilson, 2016). This conception is tightly linked to the shared conviction that absolute sovereignty should remain a core principle of global and regional order. Consequently, they securitize those forces, actors, and phenomena that undermine their sovereignty. This includes the prime security threats derived from the 'three evil forces' (terrorism, extremism, and separatism), drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, which are held to be a by-product of the social unrest instilled by Western 'humanitarian interventions'. Further to this, one of the most important commonalities between Beijing and the Kremlin is their non-Western identity. Both powers view the US as a defining other and securitize the normative pre-eminence of Western thought. Their regional

[16] "[We deploy military forces] for peaceful purposes. (…) We are doing this also because we need to ensure safe shipping and keep trade routes secure, and not because we plan to fight a war with anyone or seek conflict. Many view our activeness with caution and concern. We have said on numerous occasions that we will act solely within the framework of international law. We have always acted this way and will continue to do so. Other countries also have many interests there. We will take these interests into account and seek acceptable compromises, at the same time defending our own interests of course" (2.3.).

initiatives provide alternatives to traditional Western institutions and free trade arrangements and seek to keep Western influences at bay.

At the same time, Russia and China's regional initiatives are also informed by different identities and, as a result, different securitizing discourses. Beijing's SREB is defined in functional terms and is flexible and inclusive. It is characterized by the absence of a clear set of norms and regulations and a preference for bilateralism to accommodate its projects to country-specific needs. This conceptualisation of regionalism is underpinned by China's identity as a Great Power as well as by its identity as a benevolent and rising power. While its former identity rests upon China's core national interest of stability through development, the latter indicates the indispensability of regional stability and development in order to realize these objectives. China's regional development initiative is coupled to regime security and the protection of national interest. As a result, it has an introspective, interest-based view on regional development and therefore abstains from political conditionalities. As witnessed by the recurring principle of "seeking common ground while shelving differences", China's leadership emphasizes the preservation—rather than the replacement—of exiting regional institutional structures.

Russia's regional initiative, on the other hand, is building upon exactly these existing Post-soviet relations and institutions. Moscow depicts its regionalist vision first and foremost in a spatially bound way. Unlike China, it prefers multilateralism, and institutionalized and universal norms which leave little room for interpretation and allow Russia to set the rules. In line with the circumscribed, institutional composition of its regional initiative, its traditional identity has been one that is deeply embedded in post-Soviet time and space and therefore 'defensive' against external—i.e. Western—influences. Russia's exclusive identity indicates that its regional initiative is first and foremost shaped by geopolitical considerations and a power-political security imperatives. However, weakening ties with the West and the rise of China have set in motion a reorientation towards the East. As a result, Russia's *exclusive* identity of a regional hegemon has increasingly made place for a more *inclusive* one that transcends the post-Soviet sphere and appears increasingly tolerant towards the presence of non-Western powers, notably China.

Hence, while both initiatives are held to be economic projects that aim to establish development and stability, China and Russia's regionalist identities lead to widely divergent security interests: *While China does (traditional) security from an economics perspective, Russia does economics from a (traditional) security perspective.* That is, China views its security interests in the region mainly—but not only—in (geo-)economic terms, whereas Russia views its interests in the region mainly—but not only—in (geo-political) terms, which is the maintenance of political and strategic influence. As a result, this thesis argues that the EEU and the SREB are not fully compatible. That is, Russia's

and China's security interests may be too different to realize full-fledged integration. While both powers share the view that regional initiatives are crucial to secure (regime) stability, address counterterrorism, and safeguard trade, their discursive visions indicate the presence of vastly different identities and (security) interests.

Further to this, at first sight, Russia's security discourse suggests that China's presence is more threatening to Russia than vice versa: While the presence of another power in the region may further China's economic objectives, China's strengthening economic ties may be translated into consolidated strategic influence thereby undermining Russia's interests. Crucially, however, there exists no doubt that China's SREB is also guided by some geostrategic considerations. Reversely, it cannot be said that Russia's interests in the region are *only* based upon power-political calculi and conventional security understandings. These internal ambiguities may turn out be difficult to reconcile in the integration process of the SREB and the EEU.

However, the discourse reveals complementarity, tolerance and even adaptation on both sides. Russia has been revising its role and identity in the region and engages in the active desecuritization of China's presence. This is reflected in explicit articulations—such as Russia's recognition of China's legitimate interest in the region—as well in implicit acts, such as Russia's adoption of the Chinese rhetoric of development and cooperation. Likewise, China has shown willing to not touch Russia's political role in the region. Hence, this thesis argues that Sino-Russian relations focus on those areas where their identities and (security) interests are compatible. Both powers are willing to make short-term concessions to ensure that the relationship functions. While this may not render full integration likely, it *does* allow for close cooperation and coordination on shared issues. At the same time, such interactions allow China and Russia to focus on their main security foci—geo-economics and geo-politics respectively—and prevent operating at cross purposes.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The absence of conflict and explicit tensions between Russia and China in Central Asia has left many realists dazzled. Drawing upon securitization theory, this thesis has conducted a PDA in order to engage with the ideational and normative underpinnings of China and Russia's regional initiatives and to provide an answer to the main research question:

*To what extent do the security discourses of Russia's EEU and China's SREB explain the degree of compatibility of the two initiatives?*

PDA embraces the Foucauldian understanding that language is a social practice. This means that security discourse is not a description of certain actions or events, but an action in itself; which, in turn, shapes future actions. From the perspective of securitization theory, such discursive action provides us with insights into states' understandings of identity and security and sets boundaries for states' securitizing discourses. A PDA of official and semi-official discourses on both powers' regional initiatives reveals that the two initiatives reflect shared norms, identities, and security considerations as well as vast differences.

Both powers share the view that regional initiatives are crucial to secure (regime) stability, address counterterrorism, and safeguard trade. Furthermore, they see their regional initiatives as critical means to counter Western (normative) influence. Yet, Russia defines its identity mostly in geo-political terms, whereas China understands its identity first and foremost in geo-economic terms. To the extent that their identities and security interests are complementary, Russia and China's regional initiatives will likely allow for a role division in the region. To the extent that their interest may be competing, China and Russia have appeared willing make concessions or set aside differences. This is reflected by both powers' efforts to desecuritize the Other as well as by their increasingly congruent narratives. The Kremlin and Beijing's concern to coordinate the SREB and the EEU in the same geographical and functional sphere suggests that their commonalities outweigh their differences. That is, it reflects a common Sino-Russian concern to prevent enmity and competition, and place emphasis upon stability and coexistence in their shared backyard. Yet, this thesis holds that China and Russia's contemporary identities and security understandings are too different to make regional integration a viable option in the foreseeable future. China and Russia's activities in the region can be captured as two people that sit in a room (Central Asia) but do not speak the same language. However, these two people do make an effort to understand one another, and in the process find that their languages have some linguistic commonalities. While linguistic barriers prevent full apprehension, their shared semantic bases in combination with active efforts to understand allow for functional interactions and cooperation—and will likely increasingly do so. Applying this to the case of the SREB and the EEU, the identities and security perceptions underlying their regional initiatives may thus not support full integration, nevertheless they are 'compatible' in that they *do* allow for close cooperation and coordination on shared issues—the extent which this will continue to happen is dependent upon both powers' willingness to translate and communicate differences and commonalities.

The findings of thesis support the main critique introduced in the first chapters of this thesis. China and Russia's regional initiatives cannot be understood according to realists' objective and materialist security logics. It does not make sense to explain regionalist activities as a 'natural

incentive for domination' or an 'inevitable drive for regional hegemony' (Horimoto, 2017; Hurrell, 2016; Kupchan, 2014; Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2010; Wright, 2015). Instead, China's and Russia's regional visions are different, based upon distinct identities and (security) interests. By engaging with the ideational and normative underpinnings of China and Russia's regional projects, this thesis has contributed to critical scholarship and offered a nuanced, comprehensive, and contextualized account of the SREB, the EEU, and their compatibility. The latter has vital implications for the relationship at the broader strategic level.

Hence, on the broader strategic level, China and Russia's relationship transcends the 'axis of convenience' argument. While Sino-Russian cooperation may be partially explained by Western opposition, it is not only defined by mutual negative interests but also by shared norms and identities. This includes their vested interests upholding the principles of absolute sovereignty and non-intervention, as well as their shared identities as new (authoritarian) poles in a multipolar world order. To the extent that China and Russia's worldviews compete, there exists a high degree of tolerance and respect towards those differences. This helps both parties to support one another on shared issues of global governance. At the same time, it also gives both powers the freedom to pursue their different international agendas and priorities. This is reflected by China's activities in the South China Sea, and Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support to Syria and the Assad regime. As such, the relationship can neither be described as an insincere portrayal of friendship nor as a strategic partnership that will significantly shape the post-Western geopolitical context. The relationship is multifaceted: Future research may further disentangle China and Russia's common grounds and strategic fault lines through rigorous and systematic research.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix I: Discursive sources

| DOC # | ACTOR | DATE yymmdd | TITLE | SOURCE |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.1. | China | 2013-09-07 | "President Xi Jinping delivers Important Speech and proposes to Build a SREB with Central Asian countries" (NSR announcement in Kazakhstan) | http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml |
| 1.2. | China | 2013-09-13 | Xi Jinping delivers speech at SCO summit and raises four point proposal | |
| 1.3. | China | 2014-02-06 | "Xi Jinping meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin" | http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/sqdah/t1127299.shtml |
| 1.4. | China | 2015-03-28 | "Visions and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st century Maritime Silk Road" | http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2807662 |
| 1.5 | China | 2016-05-18 | Zhang Dejiang's keynote at Belt and Road Summit | http://www.thestandard.com.hk/breaking-news.php?id=74885 |
| 1.6. | China | 2016-09-03 | Keynote speech at opening ceremony of the B20 summit | http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/XJPCXBZCESGJTLDRDSYCFHJCXYGHD/t1395086.shtml |
| 1.7. | China | 2017-05-14 | Keynote speech given by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation | http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1046925.shtml |
| 1.8. | China | 2017-10-18 | China's political report for the 19th party congress | http://news.dwnews.com/china/news/2017-10-18/60018047.html |
| 1.9. | China | 2018-04-10 | "Xi Jinping delivers speech at the Boao Forum Asia 2018" | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiKP8kdLChQ |
| 1.10. | China | 2018-06-09 | Xi Jinping delivers opening speech at the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oMfvACr7b4 |
| 2.1. | Russia | 2011-10-03 | The new integration project for Eurasia | https://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/246 |
| 2.2. | Russia | 2014-05-29 | Press statements following the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/45790 |
| 2.3. | Russia | 2014-08-29 | Putin Speech at Seliger National Youth Forum | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507 |
| 2.4. | Russia | 2015-03 | Igor Shuvalov speech during Boao Forum Beijing | https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russia-joins-the-aiib-finally-45354 |
| 2.5. | Russia | 2015-06-21 | Igor Shuvalov defends joint initiative with China | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLVlBoHnErI&t=5s |
| 2.6. | Russia | 2016 | | |
| 2.7. | Russia | 2017-05-14 | Putin's speech at the opening of the belt and road international forum | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54491 |
| 2.8. | Russia | 2017-07-04 | Putin's press statement following Russian-Chinese talks | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54979 |
| 2.9. | Russia | 2018-01-01 | Message from President of Russia to heads of Economic Union member states | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56663 |
| 2.10. | Russia | 2018-06-10 | Putin at SCO Summit | https://www.efe.com/efe/english/portada/putin-praises-syria-iran-focuses-on-fight-against-terrorism-at-sco-summit/50000260-3644264 |
| 3.1. | Joint | 2015-05-09 | Joint statement by China and Russia on the Silk Road Economic Belt | http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/zywz/2015-05/09/c_1115228503.htm<br>and<br>http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49433 |
| 3.2. | Joint | 2018-06-08/10 | State visit to China. SCO summit | http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/57722 |
| 3.3. | Joint | 2018-06-08 | Press statement following Russian-Chinese talks | http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/351/events/57699 |
| 3.4. | Joint | 2018-06-08 | Vladimir Putin awarded the Chinese Order of Friendship | http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/351/events/57701 |

# Appendix II: Coding example