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The New Era of Sino-Russian Security Cooperation in Central Asia:
Prospects, Challenges and a Possible Split



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Introduction

For a long time China and Russia have cooperated in the field of security, and this cooperation has been especially strong in Central Asia – the region in which both states have strategic and economic interests.¹ In 2001 China, Russia and Central Asian states minus Turkmenistan² established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – the structure created with the purpose of promoting multilateral ties, cooperating in the areas of politics, trade, the economy and culture and ensuring peace and security in Eurasia.³ In 2002 the SCO developed a specialised body called the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) for the purpose of combating the ‘three evils’ (Chinese: *San Gu Shili*) – terrorism, extremism and separatism. For that end Russia and China have been conducting joint military exercises in Central Asia and have been exchanging information regarding terrorist activity in the region. Securing Central Asia is of paramount importance for both states since the region is bordering Russia in the south and China – in the north-west, and both states have regions with a Muslim majority which are vulnerable to the penetration of extremist groups.⁴ An important principle guiding the cooperation between China and Russia in Central Asia is that of ‘division of labour’ (Russian: *razdeleniye truda*) which means that Russia is the main security guarantor in the region via the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) while China is focusing on the economic cooperation with Central Asian states.⁵ This principle was discussed by President Putin and President Xi in 2015, which, some believe, signified that Russia had admitted that economically China is surpassing it in Central Asia with the help of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and therefore had sought to prevent the possible China’s domination in the security domain of the region.⁶ Recently Beijing made steps leaving one to wonder whether China is

¹ Elizabeth Wishnik, “Russia, China and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for Great Power Competition and Cooperation in the Shadow of the Georgian Crisis” in *China and Russia: Competition and Partnership* ed. David J. Rogerson, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2010,) 127.

² This paper understands Central Asia as Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

³ “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” The SCO, accessed March 15, 2021, http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/

⁴ Particularly, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan border the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Richard Weitz, “China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion?” in *China and Russia: Competition and Partnership* ed. David J. Rogerson (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2010,) 41.

⁵ Reid Standish, “China’s Central Asian Plans are Unnerving Moscow,” *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/23/china-russia-central-asia-competition/>

“Sino-Russian Division of Labor: Keeping Central Asia Stable?” The Library of the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, November 9, 2016, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://presidentlibrary.kz/en/node/880>

⁶ The establishment of the BRI and the consequential tightening of economic and security cooperation between China and Central Asian states signified Xi’s administration pursuit of the strategy proposed by the Chinese scholar Jisi Wang in 2012 called ‘Marching Westward’ (*Xijin*). Wang argued that China would benefit from this strategy economically if it pursues the construction of a China-led ‘new Silk Road’. Today Central Asia is considered the centre of the BRI due to its location in between Asia and Europe.

Jisi Wang, “‘Marching Westwards’: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy” in *China in the World: A Survey of Chinese Perspectives on International Politics and Economics* ed. Allen Carlson, Binhong Shao (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014,) 132.

indeed willing to leave the security domain of Central Asia solely to Russia, as agreed. These steps have been assessed as an infringement on the ‘labour division’ principle and as a possible challenge to Russia’s political primacy in the region, which is the circumstance that has become the main motivation behind this thesis.

The most widely discussed sign of China’s assertiveness in Central Asia was the recent discovery of China’s armed forces in Tajikistan. Reportedly, three years ago China stationed a Xinjiang military unit at the Tajik border facing the Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan, which makes Tajikistan the second foreign country where the Chinese military is currently located.⁷ CICA analyst Stephen Blank described this as intervention into Tajikistan’s sovereignty and argued that other Central Asian states might face similar fate.⁸ Tajikistan has also become a part of the China-led security mechanism called the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM) which further elevated the concerns about China’s military assertiveness in the region.⁹ It was also noted that China has been increasing its military exports to Central Asia since 2014 as well as its joint military operations with Central Asian states conducted outside of the SCO.¹⁰ While some of the developments started taking place shortly after Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, the developments surrounding Tajikistan in particular occurred during what is called the ‘New Era’ in China. At the 19th National Congress (October 18 – October 24, 2017) Xi Jinping proclaimed the establishment of the New Era and in 2019 the state has published its ‘White Paper on National Defense in the New Era’ spelling out China’s vision of the changing world order and of China’s role in providing regional security. The government’s report following the 19th Party Congress stated that the conclusion that China is entering the New Era was based on the analysis of the international and domestic developments over the past five years.¹¹ It was also stated that Chinese socialism entered the New Era with the enshrining of Xi Jinping’s Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics into the Chinese constitution.¹² The New Era is thus the era of Xi Jinping’s further consolidation of his rule, and

Peter Ferdinand, “Westward ho – the China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi Jinping,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4: 941.

Alexander Gabuev, Vita Spivak, “The Asymmetrical Russia-China Axis: An Overview” in *Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership* ed. Aldo Ferrari, Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019,) 55,56.

⁷ China’s first-ever overseas military base or ‘logistics facility’ is a naval base in Djibouti.

Nadege Rolland, *China’s Vision of the New World Order*, (Washington: The National Bureau of Asia Research, 2020,) 2.

Yau Tsz Yan, “What Drives Chinese Arms Sales in Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, September 11, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/what-drives-chinese-arms-sales-in-central-asia/>

Gerry Smith, “In Central Asia’s Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops,” *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html

⁸ Stephen Blank, “China’s Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does It Mean?” *The CICA Analyst*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13569-chinas-military-base-in-tajikistan-what-does-it-mean?.html>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Edward Lemon, Bradley Jardine, “As U.S. Power Wanes, Russia and China Consolidate Their Influence in Central Asia,” *World Politics Review*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28936/as-u-s-power-wanes-russia-and-china-consolidate-their-influence-in-central-asia>

¹¹ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Full Text of Resolution on CPC Central Committee Report,” accessed May 10, 2021, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/10/24/content_281475919786014.htm

¹² Ibid.

the discourse has a huge domestic importance.¹³ The New Era is also discussed as the era through which the Chinese government established the idea of ‘community of shared destiny’ and ‘shared benefit’ which China can provide to the rest of the world, including through the BRI.¹⁴ As some of the noted Chinese assertiveness in Central Asia has taken place after the 19th Party Congress, this essay takes interest in finding what the establishment of the new discourse meant for China’s engagement with Central Asian states in the field of security and what this means for the long-standing Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region. Thus, in this thesis the following research question is posed: what are the implications of Xi Jinping’s New Era for China’s approach to Central Asian security and consequently for the Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region?

This thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter I explores the existing literature, explains the method used in the research and its limitations. The research question will be answered in the following two chapters. Chapter II will discuss how to understand China’s approach to Central Asia in the New Era using discourse analysis of three Xi-era White Papers. This part aims to develop an understanding of China’s defence thinking specifically in the New Era in order to explain its recent activities in Central Asia and will also serve as a theory against which to assess the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia. Chapter III will analyse how security cooperation in Central Asia progressed in the New Era similarly with the help of discourse analysis. This section will be looking at the SCO joint declarations and individual speeches of the member states’ representatives as well as at China’s participation in exclusively Sino-Central Asian meetings. The aim of the chapter is to analyse the SCO-wide security discourse as well as to compare Russia’s and China’s expectations of the organisation. Following this, the chapter will feature a part discussing the QCCM, which is a China-led security organisation that started its operations in the New Era, and how it compares to the SCO and the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Finally, the concluding section of Chapter III will assess and summarise the findings to establish the prospects of Sino-Russian security cooperation in the New Era. This thesis utilises Chinese government papers and the speeches of the Chinese, Russian and Central Asian officials as a primary source while secondary sources are comprised of Russian and Western academic articles as well as Chinese, Russian and Central Asian (Russian-language) newspaper articles.

To sketch the main argument of this thesis, in the New Era, which for the most part signifies the continuation of the existing assertive Chinese foreign policy and the sharpening or concretising of the existing under Xi Jinping military and defence objectives, China has advanced its struggle against regional terrorism to protect its overseas interests and enhancing the strategic ties with some of its neighbours was a part of this endeavour. This thesis encourages one to acknowledge that geographical circumstances play a role in the current mapping of security ties between China and Central Asian states.

¹³ Xiang Bo, “Backgrounder: Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” *Xinhua*, March 17, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/17/c_137046261.htm

¹⁴ A.D. Voskresenskiy, “19 Syezd KPK: Vneshniye i Vnutrenniye Posledstviya i Perspektivy Reform v Kitaye” [19th CPC Congress: External and Internal Consequences and Prospects of Reform in China], *Sravnitel’naya Politika* 9, no.2 (2018): 141.

The QCCM includes China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan all of which share a border with at least one other member state. Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state in the mechanism because it is the only Central Asian republic sharing a border both with Afghanistan and with China. Tajikistan and China converge on their concerns with the terrorist threat from Afghanistan which is why Tajikistan is interested in receiving security assistance from Beijing, while the latter is interested in providing this assistance whereby securing the Wakhan corridor – a large piece of land in Afghanistan separating Tajikistan and Pakistan and running up to the Chinese western border and the restive Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Given the importance of the defence of ‘overseas interests’ for China, which in the Chinese political discourse means the BRI, the SCO continues to be a mechanism through which it can monitor the security situation in Central Asia, double the attention to the security situation in Afghanistan and advance its ties, economic and strategic, in Eurasia. The QCCM, on the other hand, allows the monitoring of the areas adjacent to Xinjiang and was created with the sole purpose of addressing the terrorist threat which occupies a large space in the Chinese defence discourse. It can hardly be considered the SCO RATS’ rival due to its more limited geographical scope and a narrower set of goals, nor could it be compared to the Russia-led security mechanism the CSTO or NATO for that matter, as it is not a military alliance. Given the geopolitical circumstances which drove both the establishment of the QCCM and the Sino-Tajik strategic ties, it might be too simplistic to extrapolate the situation on the entirety of Central Asia. Therefore, at present these developments do not threaten Russia’s political standing in the region and do not hamper the Sino-Russian cooperation in the region via the SCO which continues to carry significance for China in the New Era.

Chapter I: Methodology and Literature Review

1.1 Methodology

The main method used in this paper is that of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis refers to a ‘systematic study of naturally occurring communication...at the level of meaning’.¹⁵ Discourse is generally understood as ‘a form of language use’ (e.g. speeches, written documents) but can be interpreted more narrowly as ideas or philosophies expressed by individuals and groups of people.¹⁶ The researcher performing discourse analysis is searching for certain patterns which could be traced in people’s speech when they ‘take part in different domains of social life’.¹⁷ Such domains include culture, medicine, economics, politics, to list some of them. Thus, a discourse can be associated with a certain

¹⁵ Bruce Phillips, Christine Kenwood, Janet Beavin Bavelas, “Discourse Analysis” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* ed. Mark L. Knapp, John A. Daly, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2002,) 103.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marianne Jorgensen, Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2011,) 1-3.

topic or activity.¹⁸ Jorgensen and Phillips suggest understanding discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world”, which is the definition of discourse I am applying in this paper.¹⁹ Discourse analysts might be interested in analysing archives, scripts, legal and political discourses, interviews, telephone conversations.²⁰ In this thesis the discourse under analysis is purely political and is manifested in both spoken and written speech: for example, policy and academic papers or news articles, speeches at summits.

The method in this paper was determined by the type of sources available on the topic and what information the author is planning to extract from them. As it is first necessary to develop an understanding of the Chinese governments’ vision of the regional security situation and of the appropriate responses to it in the New Era, the essay will be looking at three White Papers released during Xi’s presidency. The method of discourse analysis will be helpful in analysing how the Chinese government formulates the top security concerns prior and after the launching of the New Era reforms. The next part will be looking at a variety of speeches and documents related to various bilateral and multilateral mechanisms China participates in to address its security needs in Central Asia. Here discourse analysis will allow for the understanding of how different stakeholders, including Central Asian governments, Russia and China, see the security situation in Central Asia and what they expect from each other in terms of maintaining regional stability.

Finally, before proceeding to read this thesis, it is only fair that one is aware of its several limitations. This paper is mostly based on the ‘official’ discourse (i.e. intentions, plans and goals as formulated by various officials) due to the novelty of the discussed events which means that certain trends have only appeared, but it is yet unclear whether these are indeed trends or something altogether different. Language is what allows one to make assumptions about government’s priorities, concerns and goals, but officials do not always act upon their words, or their plans change depending on the circumstances which are sometimes out of their control. Therefore, a truly complete analysis of this topic or a topic related to it would ideally be performed in the years to come when more academic literature has been written and more data is available. This thesis therefore is not claiming to provide a correct or complete overview of the topic since its conclusions are based solely on the analysed data which is presently limited. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that the interpretation of this data can be subjective. This issue can be dealt with by using more academic research, but as discussed before, it is partial, and this will become evident in the literature review. While this constitutes a limit to this research, it also gives an opportunity to develop a new way of discussing the topic by taking into consideration the gaps which exist in the current literature.

¹⁸ Laura Alba-Juez, *Perspectives on Discourse Analysis Theory and Practice* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2009,) 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

1.2 Literature review

Before starting the research, it was important to develop an understanding of the overall characteristics of Xi Jinping's foreign policy and of China's activities in Central Asia as well as to look at the existing debate surrounding the Sino-Russian security cooperation in Central Asia. The literature characterising Xi's foreign policy includes contributions by Yan, Wei, Rolland and Flint and Zhang. The common theme across these works is the increasing assertiveness, decisiveness and proactiveness of China under Xi Jinping signifying its departure from the principle of 'keeping a low profile' (*tao guang yang hui*).²¹ While not necessarily agreeing on the motivations behind this proactivity, the authors share that this development at the very least signals Xi's aspirations to improve China's standing on the global arena as well as China's discontent with the existing international order. Under Xi Jinping China has positioned itself as an aspiring great power and has sought to replace the existing 'system of discourse' set by the US by its own.²² A more proactive strategy, therefore, will allow China as a rising power to acquire 'strategic credibility' and provide security to its neighbours.²³

As the topic of China's more assertive military strategy in Central Asia started gaining prominence only recently, the literature addressing the topic is scarce. The team of researchers at The National Bureau of Asian Research released a number of essays in which they look at the topic from different angles, but all link the development to the BRI. Arguments made by Pantucci, Rolland, Van Der Kley and Arduino were important to consider as these concern the most likely path China will pursue to safeguard its interests abroad. Arduino shows that China has started developing an alternative to the deployment of armed forces abroad, namely a private security industry which would ensure the protection of Chinese overseas companies' operations in far-away locations.²⁴ Chinese private security companies, however, are facing challenges overseas and given this circumstance China has great interest in the SCO as a security actor in Central and South Asia.²⁵ Pantucci, looking at China's recent increasing security engagement with Central Asia manifested in the increased military aid, exports and joint exercises, argues that given the centrality China grants the region in its initiative, it is now seeking to 'play a more important role in

²¹ The strategy was developed by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s and became the defining feature of the Chinese foreign policy for years to come. With KLP Deng advocated cautiousness in engaging with other states as well as self-restraint and peaceful development.

Xuetong Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no.2 (2014): 155, 182, 183.

Colin Flint, Xiaotong Zhang, "Historical-Geopolitical Contexts and the Transformation of Chinese Foreign Policy," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no.3 (2019): 196, 197.

Ling Wei, "Striving for Achievement in a New Era: China Debates its Global Role," *The Pacific Review* 33, no.3 (2020): 430, 431.

Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, 7.

²² Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, 12-15.

²³ Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," 182.

²⁴ Alessandro Arduino, "China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of a New Security Actor" in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative* ed. Nadege Rolland (Washington: The National Bureau of Asia Research, 2019,) 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 94, 98.

the region's security' through, for example, the QCCM and to replace Russia as Central Asia's security guarantor.²⁶ According to Pantucci, China will pursue this kind of strategy along the Belt and Road routes and China's increasing assertiveness in Central Asia could be explained by its dissatisfaction with the progress of the SCO. Along the same lines, Van Der Kley argues that a more assertive behaviour can be spotted in Tajikistan where China is currently increasing its security presence and is seeking to align the state's security interests with its own, which, according to the author, shows that China is not willing to leave Central Asia security solely to Russia.²⁷

Some discussion regarding China's activities in Central Asia and the Sino-Russian cooperation in the New Era has recently taken place in the Russian-language literature. For example, Akmatalieva observes that Central Asia will become a 'testing region' not only for the BRI but also for Sino-Russian relations as it will either be an example of the 'division of labour' or that of China's increasing political influence.²⁸ Discussing the Sino-Russian relations in the 'New Era', Lomanov argues that while the challenge from the US which Russia and China both resist in Eurasia has remained, it is possible that China and Russia will be tackling it individually in their own ways instead of adhering to a 'common system of rules' given the rising economic discrepancy between the two states and how much China has advanced geopolitically.²⁹ Dmitrieva, however, argues, that the largest argument between China and Russia is in the sphere of economic cooperation with Central Asian states, but geostrategically the countries are presently aligned.³⁰

There are also some other works exploring the possibility of cooling Sino-Russian ties. Lanteigne argues that the 'shadow of Crimea' will prevent China from considering an alliance with Russia while prompting it to seek its own ways of securing its strategically important regions.³¹ For example, Lanteigne mentions that some post-Crimean crisis divergences between Russia and China are reflected in what both sides promote within the SCO: while Russia has become a big proponent of advancing and prioritising security cooperation within the SCO, China has been advocating for an SCO-wide free trade zone, and both reacted to each other's propositions coldly.³² However, given China's ambitious plans for Eurasia as it advances the BRI, it still needs to retain Russia as an important strategic partner, according to the

²⁶ Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia" in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative* ed. Nadege Rolland (Washington: The National Bureau of Asia Research, 2019,) 60, 61.

²⁷ Dirk Van Der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan's and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor" in *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative* ed. Nadege Rolland (Washington: The National Bureau of Asia Research, 2019,) 82.

²⁸ Ainura Akmatalieva, "Initsiativa Odin Poyas-Odin Put' v Zentral'noi Azii" [BRI Initiative in Central Asia], *Comparative Politics Russia* 9, no.4 (2018): 141, 140.

²⁹ A.V. Lomanov, "Rossiya i Kitai v 'Novuyu Epokhu': Vizovy i Perspektivy" [Russia and China in the New Era: Challenges and Prospects], *Kitai V Mirovoi i Regional'noi Politike. Istoriya I Sovremennost'* [China in World and Regional Politics. History and Contemporaneity] 25, no. 25 (2020): 40.

³⁰ M.O. Dmitrieva, "Rossiya i Kitai v Zentral'noi Azii: Sotrudnichestvo i Sopernichestvo" [Russia and China in Central Asia: Cooperation and Competition], *Vestnik Moskovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* [Messenger of Moscow State University], no.1 (2019):140.

³¹ Marc Lanteigne, "Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the 'Crimea Effect'" in *Russia's Turn to the East* ed. Helge Blakkisrud, Elana Wilson Rowe (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018,) 128.

³² Ibid.

author.³³ Mustafic and Preljavic, discussing the Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia through different theoretical lenses, note that the Russian reaction towards the Chinese activities in Central Asia depends on China's use of military power in the region because Russia sees China in Central Asia as it sees the EU in the case of Ukraine.³⁴ Presently, however, Russian and Chinese security objectives in the region are 'almost perfectly aligned', according to the authors, as both seek to counter the US' influence and prevent NATO's expansion eastwards.³⁵ This argument suggests that Russia would rather have China in Central Asia than allow the US to expand its influence in the region.

The existing research has shown that securing the BRI is among the priorities for the Chinese government but ensuring this security does not come without challenges. For example, the Chinese private security companies which are supposed to fill in the security vacuum along the BRI are yet too undeveloped to be fit for this task. In these circumstances, China would arguably be interested in the SCO's anti-terrorist activities in Central Asia which is why Beijing would rather 'agree to disagree' with Moscow than debate Moscow's strategic policies in Eurasia. At the same time, as some pointed out, there are signs of China's dissatisfaction with SCO's work in Central Asia which is prompting Beijing to seek a less SCO-dependent approach, for example, by pursuing multilateralism through other structures. One of the arguments also highlighted Xi's bilateral tendency in Central Asia which is so far only reflected in the case of Tajikistan but could provide a 'model' for further Sino-Central Asian security cooperation.

A more assertive Chinese behaviour in Central Asia, particularly in its security sphere, is generally traced back to the beginning of Xi's presidency, with some signs, particularly, tighter security ties with Tajikistan, being documented after the beginning of the New Era. The literature concerning this topic so far represents bits and pieces in that it points at the changes in Xi's approach towards Central Asia but does not provide a framework for the understanding of these changes. As this thesis is looking at the Sino-Central Asian security cooperation in the New Era and its implications for the longstanding Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region, it is important to establish how to understand the New Era thinking in relation to Xi's previous policy goals and what implications this has had or might have for China's approach to Central Asia. Since the recent assertiveness concerns the security domain, the paper will briefly analyse China's defence and military objectives under Xi Jinping, with a special attention paid to the New Era discourse and how it compares to what preceded it. This step is a theoretical contribution to the study of the topic and is important for characterising China's engagement with Central Asia in the New Era. The literature has not provided clear arguments as to why China's approach to Tajikistan is a sign of an emerging trend in China's Central Asia policy, which is another issue this paper seeks to address. On the basis of these findings and the analysis of the SCO-wide cooperation in the New Era, the thesis will discuss what the recent developments mean for the Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region in the New Era. Such an approach will hopefully help develop a more comprehensive

³³ Ibid., 132.

³⁴ Almir Mustafic, Hamza Preljevic, "Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia Since the End of the Cold War: Interaction, Cooperation and Challenges," *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies* 10, no.1 (2017): 62.

³⁵ Ibid., 66.

understanding of China's activities in Central Asia in the New Era and offer a degree of explanation of whether in the long-term they could truly hamper the Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region.

Chapter II. Xi's "New Era": Defence Objectives and Central Asia

The existing literature has determined that China's assertiveness in Central Asia is of military nature which shows that China is becoming increasingly active in Central Asia's security domain. It has also been identified that this assertiveness has started intensifying ever since Xi Jinping has come to power, with novel signs of this intensification coinciding with the establishment of New Era in 2017. The goal of this section is, to conduct the discourse analysis of three China's White Papers to identify the developments in military and defence objectives as well as China's view of the international and regional threats throughout the years of Xi's presidency.³⁶ The papers in question are the 2013 White Paper on the Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, the 2015 White Paper on China's Military Strategy, and the 2019 White Paper on China's National Defense in the New Era.³⁷ This analysis was conducted to establish the link between China's military assertiveness in Central Asia and its defence outlook and military objectives with the coming of 'New Era' declared at the 19th Party Congress. The explanation derived from the findings of this analysis largely coincides with what has already been established regarding China's military assertiveness in Central Asia, so this chapter will not be too extensive. The reason why the White Papers are still important to discuss before moving to the next part of this thesis is because it identifies two notable trends in the Xi administration's defence thinking which are indeed linked to the BRI and China's increasing interest in securing Central Asia.

The first trend concerns the frequency of counter-terrorism mentions across Xi's papers. The 2019 paper is much more extensive on counter-terrorism than the two of its predecessors: the mention of 'counter-terrorism' in the 2019 paper has soared sharply and the issue of terrorism has received an unprecedented amount of attention for Xi-era papers (Figure 1).³⁸ Counter-terrorism was mentioned in the context of

³⁶ The recent work by Ghiselli published at the time of the writing of this thesis served as an inspiration for this section as the author similarly conducts a discourse analysis of White Papers released throughout several past administrations in China and shows the usefulness of applying this method to Chinese policy papers. Ghiselli's findings, however, were not applicable in this analysis which is much narrower in scope and focuses on several topics which potentially might have implications for China's Central Asia policy as opposed to more global trends in China's foreign policy over decades – which is what Ghiselli is interested in.

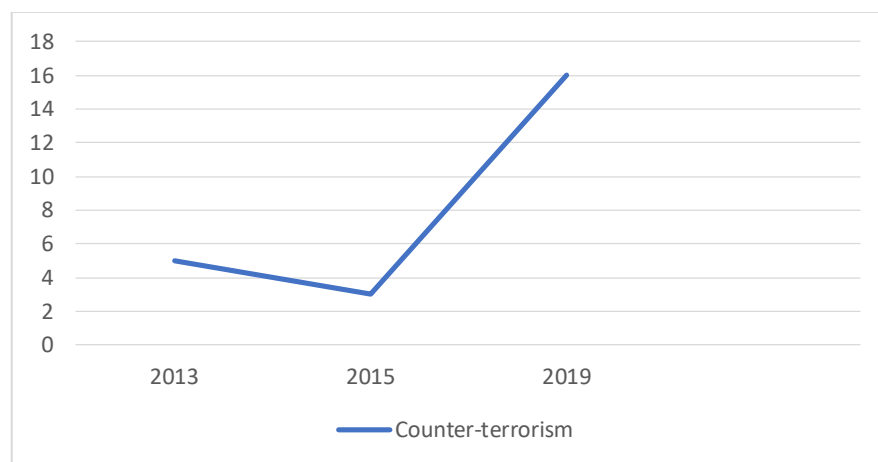
Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2021).

³⁷ These are further referred to as the '2013/2015/2019 paper'.

³⁸ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *White Paper on National Defense in New Era*, (People's Republic of China, 2019).

PAP operations (domestic), bilateral and multilateral mechanisms China participates in and in terms of deepening military partnership with strategically important states. The 2019 paper for the first time specifies the concrete enemy which the Chinese armed forces have to deal with – the East Turkistan group – and states that military measures are to be taken against the proponents of this terrorist and separatist movement which is stated explicitly in the 2019 White Paper as one of the key objectives of the Chinese armed forces for the first time in Xi’s era White Papers. Furthermore, in 2019 the Chinese government released a separate paper dedicated entirely to the threat of terrorism in China called “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang” which addresses the issue of the East Turkistan in more detail, mentioning that the concern of the government is the continuity the East Turkistan is claiming with the West Turkistan in Central Asia.³⁹ The 2019 defence paper also mentions the QCCM as a new mechanism aiding China’s counter-terrorist struggle. The extensive mention of counter-terrorism coupled with the ascension of East Turkistan group to a priority military and defence objective, among other things could be signalling Beijing’s determination to tighten its control over Xinjiang and step up its counter-terrorist struggle overseas in the New Era.

Figure 1: Mentions of ‘counter-terrorism’ throughout the three White Papers (excluding appendices), compiled by the author.



The second trend concerns the decline of Military Operations Other Than War doctrine (MOOTW) and the rise of ‘overseas interests’ concept in Xi’s papers (Figure 2), which China’s elevated concern with terrorism in the New Era is directly related to. The topic of ‘overseas interests’ has entered the Chinese national defence discourse ever since Xi came to power in 2013 and made its first appearance in the 2013 White Paper. It has been consistently mentioned in all white papers ever since. MOOTW was first

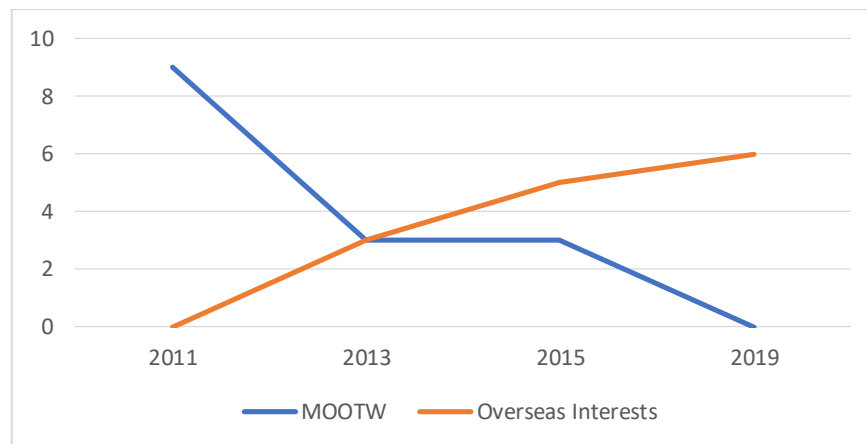
The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, (People’s Republic of China, 2015).

The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*, (People’s Republic of China, 2013).

³⁹ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang*, (People’s Republic of China, 2019).

mentioned in the 2008 defence paper and the groundwork for this doctrine was laid by Hu Jintao and his ‘New Historic Missions’ (*xin de lishi shiming*) for the PLA.⁴⁰ Back then the Chinese discourse around the doctrine did not specify which operations were to be conducted domestically and which – internationally.⁴¹ The international aspect became gradually emphasised in the following years, but was limited to ‘supporting world stability’.⁴² Interestingly, in the 2019 paper the doctrine of MOOTW is never mentioned and, instead, the emphasis is on the defence of ‘overseas interests’. As Ghiselli notes, the appearance of MOOTW in the 2008 defence paper signified its ascension to the status of a critical military task.⁴³ Therefore, its disappearance in the 2019 paper signified a transition from MOOTW, which has remained a guiding principle for domestic tasks, to the ‘defence of overseas interests’, where defence also implies military operations other than war and ‘overseas interests’ – the BRI.⁴⁴

Figure 2. Mentions of ‘MOOTW’ and ‘overseas interests’ in the Xi era papers (with the final 2011 Hu era defence paper for comparison), compiled by the author.



Overall, the discourse analysis helps identify the following: as opposed to a sudden change in strategies or objectives in the New Era, China’s assertiveness in Central Asia is taking place in the context of Xi’s continuous and increasing proactivity abroad. It also confirms that this assertiveness is being shaped by the prominence of the ‘overseas interests’ or the BRI in the Chinese defence discourse and by a more advanced counter-terrorist struggle which is evidently motivated by the necessity of safeguarding China’s ambitious overseas initiative. Finally, while China’s security cooperation with most Central Asian states

⁴⁰ Philip C. Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019,) 91.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴³ Ghiselli, *Protecting China’s Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, 36.

⁴⁴ Senior Colonel Zhou Bo from the Chinese Ministry of National Defence in his interview to CGTN six years ago stated that given its significance, the BRI is essentially synonymous with ‘overseas interests’ for the Chinese government.

CGTN, “PLA Colonel Explains China’s Active Defense Policy,” uploaded May 27, 2015 on YouTube, 16:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q08eJ4s3dt4>

in the New Era continues to take place bilaterally or through the SCO, security ties with Tajikistan have been enhanced through a new China-led structure established in 2016 – the QCCM. Rather than providing an answer to the set question, the analysis shows how the observed trends are reflected in some concrete developments in the official Chinese discourse and points out the issues which require more investigation. Mainly, it is unclear what the geographical limits of China’s assertiveness are or can be, and establishing this will help understand whether China’s assertive behaviour might have consequences for the entire Central Asia and become worrisome from the Russian point of view. The next step is to look at how China, Central Asian republics and Russia have cooperated in the field of security in the New Era, what the role of the SCO⁴⁵ in defending China’s overseas interests is in the New Era and what other mechanisms China is using to address its security needs in the region and how. Particularly, the QCCM will be discussed at length as it is the only other multilateral anti-terrorist mechanism that China is a part of besides the SCO RATS and is by far the most prominent New-Era development in the Central Asian security domain which includes China.

Chapter III: Security Cooperation between and among China, Russia and Central Asian States through Bilateral and Multilateral Mechanisms

Since the beginning of the New Era, China has participated in a multiplicity of summits and meetings together with Central Asian states and Russia. Among these, three SCO meetings in 2018, 2019 and 2020, CICA summit in 2019 and C+C5 summit in 2020. All these meetings and statements have received a wide coverage in Chinese English-language newspapers which together with the SCO website content, Russian and Central Asian media are the main source of information in this chapter. The chapter consists of four subsections: the first two will discuss the main take-aways from these events and how they reflect the existing discrepancy among the SCO members regarding the priority tasks in the organisation. The third one will analyse China’s new counter-terrorist mechanism the QCCM and how it compares to the SCO and the CSTO, and the fourth subsection will reflect on the implications the discussed developments have for the Sino-Russian security cooperation in Central Asia in the New Era.

3.1 Security Cooperation through the SCO: Expectations of Stakeholders

⁴⁵ The SCO is the only organisation in the region through which security cooperation takes place among all the three actors.

The 2018 SCO summit of the Heads-of-state Council took place in Qingdao, China and emphasised the promotion of security cooperation ‘for regional economic cooperation and development’ and against terrorism, separatism and extremism.⁴⁶ The common agenda underlined the regulation of the situation in Afghanistan, Syria, the Middle East and the Korean peninsula.⁴⁷ Xi Jinping in his speech stressed the importance of peace in Afghanistan, the cooperation in the sphere of defence security, information security and advancing the BRI and expressed hope in a more effective cooperation with Afghanistan.⁴⁸ With regard to the ‘priority sphere of interaction’ in the SCO, President Putin asserted that Russia considered the fight against terrorism as such, and he was the only leader to make such a straightforward statement with everyone else preferring to avoid declaring their expectations of the organisation directly.⁴⁹ Tajikistan’s president Emomali Rahmon in his speech expressed concern regarding drug trafficking from Afghanistan and even proposed a development of a separate structure within the SCO which would deal specifically with this issue.⁵⁰ This concern was overall shared by the member states and they reached a resolution to enhance their cooperation with observer states, including Afghanistan. President Rahmon also mentioned the turbulences in the northern part of Afghanistan, specifically on the Afghan-Tajik border, referring to the place where a military outpost was allegedly spotted three years ago. It is now known that Dushanbe rejected the claims about Chinese military personnel located on the Tajik border facing Wakhan, while the Chinese officials did not comment on the matter. Tajik officials, however, did not deny the existence of the outposts which were financed by China and built according to a bilateral agreement with Beijing.⁵¹ The issue so widely discussed in the Western media, received no attention in the Russian news outlets.

The main theme of the next SCO summit which took place in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2019 was that of political confrontation in the Middle East and terrorism. The sides underlined the concerning situation in the Middle East, discussed the ensuring of joint counter-terrorism actions and reiterated their concerns with violence in Afghanistan. President Xi stressed that the complicated international situation demands

⁴⁶ “Informatsionnoye Soobsheniye Po Itogam Soveta Glav Gosudarstv-Chlenov Shanghayskoy Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva (g. Zindao, 9-10 iyulya 2018 goda)” [Information Message Regarding the Outcomes of the Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Council of Heads of the Member States (Qingdao, June 9-10, 2018)], SCO, June 10, 2018, accessed May 30, 2021, <http://rus.sectesco.org/news/20180610/443025.html>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hui Lu, “Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Speech at the 18th SCO Qingdao Summit,” *Xinhua*, June 10, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/10/c_137244587.htm

⁴⁹ Ria Novosti, “Putin Nazval Prioritetnoye Napravleniye Vzaimodeystviya v Ramkah SHOS” [Putin Named the Priority Direction of Cooperation Within the SCO], *Ria Novosti*, June 10, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180610/1522474752.html?in=t>

⁵⁰ “Tajik President Emomali Rahmon Made a Speech at a Large-Scale Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Qingdao in China’s Eastern Shandong Province on Sunday Morning. Rahmon Mentioned the Importance of Developing New Energy Sources to Combat Climate Change and Pollution,” filmed June 10, 2018, CGTN, Qingdao, China, video, 8:06, <https://news.cgtv.com/news/3d3d414f774d444d78457a6333566d54/index.html>

⁵¹ Fergana.News, “Tajikistan Otvetil Na Obvineniye v Razmeschenii Kitayskoy Voyennoy Bazy” [Tajikistan Responded to the Accusations Regarding the Establishment of the Chinese Military Base], *Fergana.News*, February 21, 2019, <https://fergana.agency/news/105366/>

Regnum, “The Washington Post Sputala Kitaiskuyu Bazu s Tadzhijskoy Pogranzastavoy” [The Washington Post Has Mistaken the Tajik Outpost for a Chinese Base], *Regnum*, February 21, 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2577985.html>

‘concerted efforts’ to make the SCO a ‘model mechanism of regional cooperation’.⁵² In the Bishkek Declaration signed at the summit, it was stated that member states agree on the need to cooperatively address the security situation in Afghanistan.⁵³ The member states also signed a ‘roadmap’ guiding further actions within the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group – a special mechanism through which the SCO members conduct dialogue with Afghanistan, but which ‘has yet to reach its desired result’ according to the Chinese side.⁵⁴ At the same time, the work of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was assessed as ‘effective’ in the joint declaration. The Chinese media reported the meeting was held to promote ‘new approach to cooperation’ emphasising security risks and ‘efforts to counter the rising wave of protectionism’.⁵⁵ The same year, Xi Jinping visited Tajikistan to participate in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) where he emphasised ‘dialogue and partnership’ over ‘confrontation and alliances’.⁵⁶ The meeting carried a great symbolic value and afterwards China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted that Xi’s visits showcased ‘the high level of China’s ties’ with Tajikistan. He also noted that this was a step towards stronger bilateral China-Tajikistan ties and the heads of states signed joint statements on deepening strategic partnership.⁵⁷

Finally, the 2020 Heads-of-State meeting took place in Moscow, Russia where President Putin made an opening speech. Putin praised the increased foreign policy and military cooperation within the SCO in relation to which he highlighted the meetings of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the member states and defence ministers of the SCO states who held a meeting for the first time jointly with the CSTO defence ministers that year.⁵⁸ Putin called this a fruitful practice and called for more such meetings among ‘natural partners’ – the CSTO and the SCO.⁵⁹ The Russian ambassador to China in an interview for China Daily that year similarly praised SCO’s expansion of ‘external relations with other organizations’ among which he particularly mentioned the UN, the CSTO and the EAEU.⁶⁰ When expressing concern regarding the security situation in Afghanistan, Putin mentioned that it would be possible to establish a consultation mechanism through Moscow which would include the SCO countries and the US. At present, the Contact Group is operating through Tajikistan.⁶¹ The heads of Central Asian states also gave speeches at the

⁵² China Daily, “Xi’s Central Asia Trip Cements Neighborhood Friendship, Regional Cooperation,” *China Daily*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/16/WS5d064672a3103dbf14328754.html>

⁵³ “Bishkek Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Heads of State Council,” the SCO, June 13, 2019, accessed May 30, 2021, <http://eng.sectesco.org/documents/>

⁵⁴ Hujjatullah Zia, “Twin Central Asian Summit Providing Platform for Cooperation,” *China Daily*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/17/WS5d06dd60a3103dbf143287fc.html>

⁵⁵ Zhuangzhi Sun, “SCO Meeting to Promote New Approach to Cooperation,” *China Daily*, November 2, 2019, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/02/WS5dbcd787a310cf3e35575013.html>

⁵⁶ Participating states are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

⁵⁷ China Daily, “Xi’s Central Asia Trip Cements Neighborhood Friendship, Regional Cooperation.”

⁵⁸ “Vystupleniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii Vladimira Vladimirovicha Putin ana Zasedaniyi Soveta Glav Gosudarstv-Chlenov SHOS 2020” [The Speech of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin at the 2020 Meeting of the Council of the SCO Heads of State], the SCO, November 11, 2020, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://rus.sectesco.org/news/20201111/690764.html>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Cao, Wang, Pan, “Views on Shanghai Cooperation Organization.”

⁶¹ Ibid.

meeting. Particularly, Presidents of Uzbekistan⁶² and Tajikistan expressed their desire to enhance the economic component of the SCO and promote the BRI, stating that the main goal of member states is ‘bringing to life economic ties and industrial cooperation’ via removing barriers and easing customs procedures.⁶³ President Rahmon even proposed a creation of a ‘specialised financial institution’ in the SCO.⁶⁴ The concerns with the security situation in Afghanistan have been reiterated by Tajikistan, Russia, China, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.⁶⁵ President Xi noted that security and stability is the ‘pillar of a country’s development’ and that this is where the ‘fundamental interests’ of all member states are.⁶⁶ Later in 2020 China and Central Asian states held a first-ever C+C5 meeting among Foreign Ministers. The overarching theme of this meeting was the strengthening of Sino-Central Asian strategic ties. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi underlined that ties with Central Asia are crucial for China in terms of the realization of BRI.⁶⁷ He also said that the C+C5 mechanism complements the SCO: within the SCO security cooperation is underlined by Russia while China is evidently interested in the furthering of economic cooperation. C+C5 is a mechanism that allows China to focus on the latter. In line with this

⁶² This position has also been expressed by the Uzbek Prime Minister and the Uzbek ambassador to China. Desheng Cao, Qingyun Wang, Mengqi Pan, “Views on Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *China Daily*, June 9, 2018, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201806/09/WS5b1b2f79a31001b82571f10d_7.html
Sun, “SCO Meeting to Promote New Approach to Cooperation,”

⁶³ “Vystupleniye Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shaikata Mironomovicha Mirziyoyeva Na Zasedanii SOveta Glav Gosudarstv Chlenov SHOS 2020” [The Speech of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mironomonovich Mirziyoyev at the Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States], the SCO, November 11, 2020, accessed June 1, 2021, <http://rus.sectesco.org/news/20201111/690810.html>

⁶⁴ Novosti Tadjikistana 24, “Vystupleniye Emomali Rahmona Na Zasedanii Soveta Glav Gosudarstv Chlenov SHOS, Videokonferentsvyazi” [The Speech of Emomali Rahmon at the Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States via Videocall], uploaded November 10, 2020 on YouTube, 11:05. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TP5Ffz2gq1M>

⁶⁵ “Vystupleniye Prezidenta Respubliki Uzbekistan Shavkata Mirziyoyeva na Sammite Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva” [The Speech of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the SCO Summit], Institut Strategicheskikh i Mezhhregional’nikh Issledovaniy Pri Prezidente Respubliki Uzbekistan [The Institute of Strategic and International Research under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan], November 10, 2020, accessed June 6, 2021, <http://isrs.uz/ru/uzbekiston-yangiliklari/uzbekiston-respublikasi-prezidenti-savkat-mirziyevning-sanhaj-amkorlik-taskiloti-sammitidagi-nutki>

“Vystupleniye Prezidenta Respubliki Tadjikistan Na Zasedaniyi Soveta Glav Gosudarstv Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva v Formate Konferentsvyazi” [The Speech of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan at the SCO Heads-of-State Council’s Meeting Via Videocall], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan, November 12, 2020, accessed June 6, 2021, <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/6626/vystuplenie-prezidenta-respubliki-tadjikistan-na-zasedanii-soveta-glav-gosudarstv-chlenov-shankhaiskoi-organizatsii-sotrudnichestva-v-formate-videokonferentsvyazi>

“Zasedaniye Soveta Glav Gosudarstv-Chlenov SHOS” [The Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States], Kremlin.Ru, November 10, 2020, accessed June 6, 2021. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64385>

“Vystupleniye Prezidenta Kazakhstana Kazym-Zhomarta Tokayeva na Zasedaniyi Soveta Glav Gosudarstv-Chlenov SHOS” [Speech By the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at a Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO Member States], Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, accessed June 6, 2020, https://www.akorda.kz/ru/speeches/external_political_affairs/ext_speeches_and_addresses/vystuplenie-prezidenta-kazakhstan-kasym-zhomarta-tokaeva-na-zasedanii-soveta-glav-gosudarstv-chlenov-shos

⁶⁶ Xinhua Novosti, “Polniy Tekst Vystupleniya Xi Zsinpina Na 20-m Zasedanii Soveta Glav Gosudarstv-Chlenov SHOS” [Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Speech at the 20th Head-of-State SCO Summit], *Russian.News.Cn*, November 10, 2020, http://russian.news.cn/2020-11/10/c_139506870.htm

⁶⁷ Jun Zhou, “FM: Central Asian Ties a Key Priority,” *China Daily*, July 18, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202007/18/WS5f123b96a31083481725a654.html>

goal, at the 2020 meeting the Prime Ministers reportedly discussed the ‘synergy’ between the BRI and the development strategies of Central Asian states.⁶⁸

3.2 Analysis

In the New Era the SCO continues to be a platform for both China and Russia to promote their own economic and security interests in the region of Central Asia. While being indifferent towards the creation of a free trade zone within the SCO, Russia is using the organisation to promote the coordination between EAEU, the SCO and the BRI. The Russian officials have not made any novel attempts at suggesting an SCO-wide military alliance, however, Putin’s rhetoric suggests the primacy of the security component of the SCO for the Russian side as well as a further promotion of the SCO-CSTO cooperation China was not previously fond of.⁶⁹ A possible reason why the Russian side is so interested in more cooperation between the CSTO and the SCO is because the two organisations largely overlap in their operations. As noted by some Russian scholars, the CSTO and the SCO frequently conduct trainings at the same sites and around the same time which is a waste of resources for Russia. Therefore, Russia would benefit largely if there was more convergence between the two structures.⁷⁰ The Chinese side, on the other hand, does not give preference to security or economic component, but rather views both as intertwined, and this links back to the protection of the Chinese overseas interests. Arguably, the SCO continues to play a big role in this endeavour for China. As it has been mentioned, the Chinese officials have been vocal about the security situation in Afghanistan and are expecting the Contact Group to prove to be effective in that area, which proves the argument about China’s present dissatisfaction with the progress of the Contact Group. While urging other member states to resolve the security situation in Afghanistan, China also highlights the need for greater economic cooperation within the SCO in order to aid the development of the BRI. As China’s Prime Minister Li Keqiang stressed, the SCO ‘serves as an important platform for Belt and Road Initiative’, once again, showing China’s hopes to advance the BRI in Central Asia by using the SCO as an instrument to enhance economic ties with the SCO states, particularly, Central Asian states linking Asia and Europe.⁷¹ China has also utilised other multilateral mechanisms to approach Central Asia, including CICA and C+C5 where the latter is the mechanism which establishes a dialogue solely between Central Asian states and China and where both sides further discuss their economic cooperation.

The SCO is also a mechanism that helps both Russia and China see how aligned they are and how Central Asian governments respond to their propositions. The security goals which have been mentioned at the

⁶⁸ China Today, “Chinese FM Hosts C+C5 Foreign Ministers Video Meeting,” *China Today*, July 17, 2020, http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/zdtj/202007/t20200717_800214450.html

⁶⁹ Lanteigne, “Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 128.

⁷⁰ Yuliya Nikitina, “ODKB i SHOS Kak Modeli Vzaimodeistviya v Sfere Regional’noy Bezopasnosti” [CSTO and SCO as Models of Interaction in the Sphere of Regional Security] *Indeks Bezopasnosti* [Security Index] 17, no.2: 46.

⁷¹ China Daily, “Chinese Premier Calls for Closer SCO Cooperation, Greater Development Synergy,” *China Daily*, October 13, 2018, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/2018/10/13/WS5bc139bda310eff303282227.html>

meetings include the enhancement of the RATS and counter-terrorism measures, concerted efforts to reach stability in Afghanistan and the establishment of new mechanisms to ensure security in the sphere of information. The representatives of Central Asian states in their speeches have not openly aligned with one side or the other, however, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have supported China's earlier propositions of the SCO-wide 'free trade zone' and have joined China in promoting the BRI through the SCO.

Throughout the past three SCO summits all Central Asian states were equally concerned with the security situation in Afghanistan which was a recurring topic in the speeches of heads of the states. However, as we know, Tajikistan was the only Central Asian state that joined the QCCM which, unlike the SCO, includes Afghanistan and has more to promise with regard to dealing with drug trafficking and terrorist threat in the country. It is now important to look into the QCCM in more detail to answer some of the remaining questions: what is the logic behind the QCCM and is China planning to use this mechanism to complement the operations of the SCO or does it assign a different purpose to the mechanism? The next section will look at the data available on the QCCM as well as at the current discourse surrounding the mechanism.

3.3 The QCCM: Structure and Purpose of the New China-led Anti-Terrorist Mechanism

Shortly after the establishment of the QCCM a concern has been expressed that it might become a NATO-like alliance challenging the Russia-led CSTO through which Moscow shapes its political and military ties in Central Asia.⁷² This makes it important to look at the mechanism in more detail. The QCCM was established in 2016 by China, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan and is strictly a counter-terrorist organisation. The member states agree to share intelligence regarding terrorist activities, build anti-terrorist capability buildings and conduct joint anti-terrorist trainings.⁷³ For comparison, the main twelve functions of the SCO RATS include gathering information regarding terrorist activities through a common 'information bank', conducting anti-terrorist drills, cooperating with international organisations focused on counter-terrorism, conducting conferences, seminars and facilitating the exchanges in experience related to counter-terrorist efforts.⁷⁴ The QCCM and RATS thus largely overlap in objectives, but while the latter includes a variety of goals and operates throughout most Central Asian states, the QCCM poses a limited, more focused set of goals and operates largely outside of Central Asia. Ivetta

⁷² Central Asian Analytical Network, "Kitai i Ego Rol' v Bezopasnosti v Zentral'noy Azii" [China and its Role in Central Asia Security], *CAA Network*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/19621> Standish, "China's Central Asian Plans are Unnerving Moscow."

⁷³ Joshua Kucera, "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Deepen 'Anti-Terror' Ties," *Eurasianet*, August 4, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/afghanistan-china-pakistan-tajikistan-deepen-anti-terror-ties>

⁷⁴ "Soglasheniye Mezhdru Gosudarstvami – Chlenami SHOS o Regional'noy Antiterroristicheskoy Strukture" [Agreement Among Member States of the SCO on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure], the SCO RATS, accessed June 10, 2021, <http://ecrats.org/ru/about/documents/>

Frolova, a senior researcher at the Russian Asia and Asia-Pacific Centre, states that being a participant in a global struggle against terrorism, China needed to establish a mechanism which would meet the state's own interests as well as that of China's immediate neighbours.⁷⁵

The QCCM assumes both multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism, which allows China to coordinate anti-terrorist activities individually with each member state. Bilateral cooperation in the security field has been on the rise in the case of China and Tajikistan and it has been notably limited to the Tajik-Afghan border.⁷⁶ For example, in 2016 the leaders of the two countries signed an agreement on the modernisation of infrastructure in border areas between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Such infrastructure includes five outposts, three commandant's offices and one training centre.⁷⁷ This plan has been executed over the past three years and the border outpost facing Wakhan corridor found by the Pentagon is one of such facilities. China and Tajikistan also participated in several joint military exercises ever since the signing of the agreement. One of such trainings was conducted near the Afghan border and included around 10.000 participants.⁷⁸ Another joint training took place in 2019 and was conducted in the same area near the border with Afghanistan.⁷⁹ As mentioned by Chinese military expert Li Jie, bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan is best at achieving win-win results for China, because to eliminate the threat of terrorism and separatism, the PLA will have to engage with the groups directly and needs guidance in the 'local terrain'.⁸⁰ President Rahmon's rhetoric during the SCO meetings also shows his close attention to the situation in Afghanistan which, given Tajikistan's geographical location, indeed is a matter one would expect to be at the forefront of Tajikistan's political agenda. Just as in the Chinese political discourse, the terms 'terrorism and extremism' often appear in the speeches of President Rahmon⁸¹ and the question of peace and stability of Central Asia the leader explicitly ties to the security situation in Afghanistan.⁸²

⁷⁵ Ivetta Frolova, "Vzaimodeystviye v Ramkakh Chetyrekhstoronnego Mehanizma po Sotrudnichestvu i Koordinatsii s Uchastiyem Kitaya, Afganistana, Pakistana i Tajikistana" [Cooperation Within the Framework of Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism Including China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan], *Problemy Nazional'noy Strategii* 58, no.1 (2020): 39.

⁷⁶ Tajikistan shares a 1300 km border with Afghanistan.

⁷⁷ Fergana.News, "Tajikistan Otvetil na Obviniye v Razmeshenii Kitaiskoy Voyennoi Bazy."

⁷⁸ RadioFreeEurope, "Tajikistan Starts Joing Antiterror Drills With China Near Afghan Border," *RadioFreeEurope*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-starts-joint-antiterror-drills-china-near-afghan-border/28066638.html>

⁷⁹ Jiayao Li, "China and Tajikistan Kicks Off Joint Counter-Terrorism Exercise," *China Military Online*, August 12, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-08/12/content_9587478.htm

⁸⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China's (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," *The Jamestown Foundation*, August 12, 2020, accessed June 13, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-two-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan/>

⁸¹ For example,

Interfax, "Rahmon: Terrorizm v Mire Suschestvuyet Iz-za Raznizy Urovnya Zhizni v Razvitykh Derzhavakh I Bednyh Stranah" [Rahmon: Terrorism in the World Exists Because of the Differences in Living Standards Between Developed and Poor Countries], *Interfax*, June 25, 2011, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/196384>

TGMU (Tajik State Medical University), "Sovremenniy Mir i Terrorizm" [Contemporary World and Terrorism], accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.tajmedun.tj/ru/vzglyad-na/borba-s-terrorizmom-i-ekstremizmom-i-korruptsiev/sovremennyy-mir-i-terrorizm/>

The presence of Tajikistan in the QCCM can be explained from the perspectives of both China and Tajikistan. China's strategic relations with Tajikistan have in large part been predetermined by its security concerns arising from the geographical location of these states. Some even dubbed Tajikistan China's 'anti-terrorist stronghold' occupying a buffer region important for China.⁸³ Tajikistan is neighbouring both Xinjiang and the Wakhan corridor stretching next to the southern border of Tajikistan and reaching China's western border (Appendix 1). This corridor has been mentioned in this paper in the context of the outposts jointly built by Tajikistan and China where the Chinese military is allegedly located. Whether or not this is true, the securing of Wakhan corridor seems to be a logical imperative for China as this is the corridor through which terrorist groups in Xinjiang and Afghanistan could potentially communicate and cooperate and which is an unsecured piece of land allegedly used by drug traffickers.⁸⁴ These threats which are officially stated by the Chinese government are also discussed in the American analysis of China's longstanding interests in the Wakhan corridor ever since the 1980s: first, the corridor was a matter of a territorial dispute with the Soviet Tajikistan and later became the matter of China's border security concerns arising from the terrorist threat from Afghanistan.⁸⁵ As discussed previously, today these concerns are also shared by the Tajik authorities which means that they would benefit from Beijing's willingness to finance the establishment of proper security measures on the Tajik border with Afghanistan. This is the kind of win-win cooperation discussed by Li Jie and one can see that the geopolitical circumstances contribute to its possibility.⁸⁶ As also shown by the Moscow-based American analyst Andrew Korybko, the geographical limitations of the operations of the CSTO and the SCO did not allow Tajikistan to address its border security concerns with Afghanistan and made it prone to seeking stronger security cooperation with China, which explains why Tajikistan became a part of the China-led QCCM.⁸⁷

RadioOzodi, "Emomali Rahmon: Terrorist Nikogda Ne Mozhet Byt' 'Umerennym' ili 'Neumerennym' [Emomali Rahmon: Terrorist Can Never Be 'Moderate' or 'Immoderate']", *RadioOzodi*, May 4, 2018, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/29207933.html>

⁸² Mir24, "Bor'ba s Terrorizmom: Emomali Rahmon Podderzhal Mirniye Prozesy v Afganistane," [The Fight Against Terrorism: Emomali Rahmon Supported Peace Processes in Afghanistan] *Mir24*, December 22, 2020, <https://mir24.tv/news/16440714/borba-s-terrorizmom-emomali-rahmon-podderzhal-mirnye-processy-v-afganistane>

⁸³ Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two."

⁸⁴ Michael Lambert, "The American Analysis of Military and Security Development in the Wakhan Corridor (1980-2021)," (Bishkek: OSCE Academy in Bishkek, 2021,) 3, 4.

Michael Lambert, "The Wakhan Corridor and Chinese Counterterrorism in Central Asia," *Centrum Strategické Analyzy* January 26, 2021, <https://cestan.cz/clanky/the-wakhan-corridor-and-chinese-counterterrorism-in-central-asia/>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ The importance of geopolitics in decision-making and foreign policies of states has been discussed vastly in academia. The key argument proposed by geopoliticians is that geography has a great impact in shaping not only national but also foreign policies: a state's geographical location prompts it to act so as to ensure its own survival and therefore shapes its behaviour towards other states. Geopolitics thus can explain international relations.

Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics* (Elliott&Thompson,2015,) 6.

Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007,) 115-144.

⁸⁷ Andrew Korybko, "China, Pakistan can Help Afghanistan, Tajikistan Thwart Terrorism," *CGTN*, November 10, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-11-10/China-Pakistan-can-help-Afghanistan-Tajikistan-thwart-terrorism-Lu3M5ls1sA/index.html>

When it comes to the comparison between the QCCM and NATO, it is lacking grounds to be truly persuasive so far. The mechanism allows for a dialogue and intelligence-sharing but is not making any promises regarding military assistance in case the signatory states become attacked by other states. The CSTO, on the contrary, does make such a promise, which makes it more akin to NATO.⁸⁸ Besides Russia the CSTO also includes three Central Asian states as well as Armenia and Belarus (with Afghanistan and Serbia as observer states) which makes its territory of responsibility way larger than that of the QCCM which besides China includes three other states only one of which is Central Asian.⁸⁹ As shown earlier, in terms of the goals the QCCM mostly resembles the SCO RATS, however this is not enough to argue that with establishment of the mechanism the SCO's significance for China will gradually wither. Unlike the QCCM which is limited to a specific set of goals shared among China and its three immediate neighbours, the SCO allows China to address both its economic and the accompanying security concerns, that is, to promote BRI, its biggest economic initiative, see the reactions of other states to its initiatives, and to observe and discuss the security situation across the entirety of Central Asia, which in the New Era makes the organisation an important mechanism for the realisation of China's foreign policy interests.

3.4 Sino-Russian Security Cooperation in Central Asia in the New Era

This final section of the chapter is reflecting on the previous findings to formulate an understanding of what implications Xi's current approach to Central Asian security might have for Sino-Russian security cooperation in the region. As discussed in Chapter I, the importance of overseas interests has been soaring in the Chinese discourse and this is related to the BRI. In this context, the region of Central Asia – a channel into Europe and the Middle East – has become tremendously important for China. In the Chinese political discourse the main security concern highlighted with regard to its overseas interests is terrorism which is the main driver of security cooperation between China and Russia as well as China and Central Asian states.

In the earlier part of this essay one of the assumptions was that China is seeking to create a less-SCO-dependent approach to Central Asian states. The SCO has clearly continued to carry significance for China as it helps keep Russia in check and promote the BRI. With regard to security cooperation, the Chinese officials expressed their dissatisfaction with the tangible results of it as these are minimal. This concerns the effectiveness of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact group. Thus, in the New Era China still needs the SCO for dialogue with Russian and Central Asian states in the sphere of economy and security as well as a platform for BRI, but it has resorted to more effective measures to address the security concerns pertaining to its borders. This is where the QCCM becomes important. The mechanism is in no way an

⁸⁸ Nikitina, "ODKB i SHOS Kak Modeli Vzaimodeistviya v Sfere Regional'noy Bezopasnosti," 49.

⁸⁹ "Ot Dogovora k Organizatsii" [From an Agreement to an Organisation], Organizatsiya Dogovora o Kollektivnoy Bezopasnosti [Collective Security Treaty Organization], accessed May 5, 2021, <https://odkb-csto.org/25years/>

alternative to the SCO and could hardly be considered an equivalent of the Russian-led CSTO. It is a mechanism whose sole aim is to establish and structure a more coordinated and geographically focused cooperation targeting terrorism and extremism with the states with shared interests.

Importantly, the presence of Tajikistan in the QCCM suggests that it is not China that is imposing its security agenda on Dushanbe but the geopolitical circumstances of Tajikistan that push it towards a tighter security cooperation with China. The Tajik authorities have been inclined to cooperate with the Chinese government in the security field given the shared concern regarding the security situation in Afghanistan and more specifically the shared interest in securing the Wakhan corridor. This cooperation so far has been more tangible than the Tajik cooperation with the Afghan authorities with both sides only claiming to ‘seek tighter cooperation’.⁹⁰ As mentioned previously, the CSTO and the SCO have not been fitted to address the security issues in Afghanistan as the state is not a part of either of these structures which made cooperating with China even more attractive. However, as one very recent development shows, China is not the only actor capable of offering a helping hand to Tajikistan in addressing its border-related security concerns. On May 8th of 2021 President Rahmon and President Putin held a meeting which was subsequently widely discussed in the Russian media.⁹¹ At the meeting Putin expressed his commitment to offering protection to Tajikistan and strengthening both the Russian forces in Tajikistan and the local Tajik military in the near future. Russia and Tajikistan also decided on jointly developing anti-aircraft warfare in Tajikistan the official purpose of which is to protect the Tajik border with Afghanistan.⁹² Russia’s Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu also reported that Russia is planning to increase the number of Tajik soldiers studying at military institutions in Russia.⁹³ It is hard to give proper assessment of these developments now, but at the very least they signal that Russia is interested in offering long-term support to Tajikistan (which the latter is willing to accept) whereby demonstrating its military presence in the region and in the country itself. Being a part of the QCCM or cooperating with China bilaterally does not prevent Tajikistan from seeking and enjoying security assistance from Russia which still has a lot to offer in the security sphere. Considering the circumstances of Sino-Tajik security

⁹⁰ Muso Bobohadzhiev, “Tadzhikistan i Afghanistan Sozdadut Sovmestnyu Kommissiyu po Bezopasnosti” [Tajikistan and Afghanistan Will Create a Joint Security Commission], *Asia-Plus*, September 18, 2020, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20200918/tadzhikistan-i-afganistan-sozdadut-sovmestnyu-kommissiyu-po-bezopasnosti>

⁹¹ RIA Novosti, “Putin Zayavil o Podderzhke Tadzhikistana v Svyazi s Sobytyami v Afghanistane,” *RIA Novosti*, May 8, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210508/tadzhikistan-1731506623.html>

Danila Titorenko, “Putin Zayavil o Podderzhke Tadzhikistana v Svyazi s Obostreniyem v Afghanistane” [Putin Declared his Support for Tajikistan in Light of the Escalation in Afghanistan], *Gazeta.Ru*, May 8, 2021, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2021/05/08/n_15954776.shtml

Tass, “Putin Na Vstreche s Rahmonom Otmetil Prozess Ukrepleniya Rossiyskoy Basi v Tadzhikistane” [Putin Noted the Process of Strengthening the Russian Base in Tajikistan at the Meeting with Rahmon], *Tass*, May 8, 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11328301>

Evgeniy Reshetnev, “Migratsiya i Modernizatsiya Vooruzhennikh Sil: O Chem Pogovorili Putin i Rahmon” [Migration and Modernisation of Armed Forces: What Putin and Rahmon Discussed at the Meeting], *Vesti.Ru*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2559839>

⁹² Vitaliy Volkov, “Dlya Chego Rossiya Sozdayot Sistemu PVO v Tadzhikistane,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/ru/dlja-chego-rossija-sozdaet-sistemu-pvo-v-tadzhikistane/a-57391868>

⁹³ Interfax, “Rossiya i Tadzhikistan Sozdayut Yedinuyu Sozdadut Yedinuyu Sistemu PVO,” *Interfax*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/763447>

cooperation, it is too simplistic to extrapolate this onto the entirety of Central Asia to argue that China will pursue a similar approach with other Central Asian states to safeguard the BRI on its own. Instead, the recent developments on the Tajik border should be understood not as a part of an emerging trend challenging Russia's political interests in the region, but as a successful case of mutually beneficial security cooperation between Tajikistan and China which at present neither hampers the Russo-Tajik security ties nor threatens Russia's longstanding strategic relations with other Central Asian states.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has aimed at analysing and assessing the Sino-Central Asian security cooperation in the New Era and its implications for the longstanding Sino-Russian cooperation in the region of Central Asia. The second chapter analysed three government papers related to China's foreign policy and defence objectives. This part served as a theory against which to conduct investigation into China's security cooperation with Russia and Central Asian states. The analysis of three White Papers released under Xi Jinping allowed for the establishment of an understanding of what China's activities in Central Asia constitute in the context of the New Era. The third chapter was dedicated to the analysis of the SCO-wide cooperation and how it proceeded in the New Era as well as to the newly established China-led QCCM and how it compares to the SCO and the CSTO. The aim of this part was to see how aligned Central Asian states, China and Russia are in terms of their expectations of the SCO and what purpose the QCCM serves in China's view as well as what the logic behind the membership in this organisation is.

Although for the most part this essay has looked at the Sino-Central Asian and Sino-Russian cooperation from the Chinese perspective, it also included Central Asian and Russian responses to China's activities in the region. The discussion on the Tajik internal security discourse was important for the understanding of Tajikistan's security interests compared to China's. What is remarkable about the Russian official discourse regarding China's strategic ties with Central Asian governments is its current absence, which is why the paper could not feature any direct comments on China's activities in Central Asia by Russian officials. The emerging Russian literature did not make any concrete assessments of the situation, while the extremely limited literature addressing the advances in the Sino-Tajik security ties has been quite understanding of China's own security concerns and approached the new developments from this perspective. So far, more attention in the Russian literature is paid to the Sino-Russian economic cooperation rather than security and this topic is far more actively and openly debated among Russian

experts.⁹⁴ For example, it is even being discussed at well-known political programmes in Russia where China is being harshly criticised for ‘pushing Russia out’ of Central Asian markets.⁹⁵ No such debates can be observed in the case of the Sino-Russian security cooperation or China’s activities in Central Asia’s security domain thus far.

The findings in this thesis have shown that China sees its security and economic needs as intertwined and in the New Era has acted accordingly. The economic needs refer to the establishment of China’s most ambitious overseas project so far – the BRI having multiple routes and stretching through the entirety of Eurasia. With this come the security concerns which China is addressing using various means. In the New Era the most prominent concern in the Chinese defence discourse is regional terrorism and extremism. Through the SCO Beijing has called for a more effective utilisation of the existing mechanisms to cooperate with Afghanistan and on its own it has worked on advancing security cooperation with the states neighbouring Xinjiang – Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan all of which are a part of the QCCM. The latter two became the focus of this paper as they are more important for the discussion regarding Central Asia’s security domain. As discussed, the QCCM is a mechanism which could be helpful for China to address both its internal and external security concerns pertaining to its borders by exercising more control over the Wakhan corridor which could be used by drug traffickers and extremist elements from Afghanistan and Central Asia.

It is hard to establish whether China is giving priority to bilateralism over multilateralism in the New Era as the government is utilising both ways of cooperating with the states it considers important as far as security is concerned. The SCO is a multilateral mechanism which could be considered both a strong and a weak point: the SCO includes a large number of regional actors and allows for a wide dialogue, but it appears that on some issues the states do not fully agree or ‘agree to disagree’ which hampers the progress within the organisation. The QCCM, to the contrary, is designed to allow for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation which shows that China prefers more flexibility to be able to switch to a bilateral dialogue when needed. In the New Era Chinese officials made it abundantly clear that they are seeking to enhance strategic ties with Central Asian states at CICA and C+C5 summits. Particularly, Tajikistan appears to be an important actor in regional security for China as Beijing has been working hard to enhance security ties with Dushanbe both bilaterally and by welcoming Tajikistan in the QCCM. This essay has shown that given Tajikistan’s geographical location, its security interests are largely aligned with those of China. Terrorism, specifically that in Afghanistan, appears to occupy a significant place in Tajikistan’s security discourse, and these concerns are also shared by the neighbouring China interested in securing the Wakhan corridor connecting Afghanistan with Xinjiang.

⁹⁴ The thesis only made use of the literature concerning security cooperation which is discussed in the literature review and used throughout the paper, but the many works on Sino-Russian economic competition in Central Asia in the Russian literature include those by S.G. Luzyanin, R. Matyushkin and O.N. Pryazhnikova.

⁹⁵ Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyevym [Evening with Vladimir Solovyev], “Bagdasarov: Kitai Vytesnyayet Rossiya iz Sredney Azii! Vecher s Vladimirom Solovyevym ot 26.04.18” [Bagdasarov: China is Kicking Russia Out of Central Asia. Evening with Vladimir Solovyev from 26.04.18], uploaded April 27, 2016 on YouTube, 11:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTHOo1zaHhA>

When it comes to the principle of security/economic labour division between China and Russia, it has been argued that it can hardly be considered relevant today since China has been attempting to independently engage with Central Asian states where security is concerned. While China has been conducting military exercises with Central Asian states on a bilateral basis and has increased its military aid to the states, China's security concerns have concentrated in the Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Xinjiang triangle which is where Beijing's assertive actions can truly be spotted. This geographic area includes only one Central Asian state - Tajikistan. The question persists whether Beijing will seek tighter cooperation with the rest of Central Asia outside of the SCO by, for example, including more Central Asian states in the QCCM whereby infringing quite seriously on Russia's status in the region. Thus far, however, China's 'assertive' activities have been limited to its own borders which can be explained by its own security concerns which happen to be shared by Tajikistan, and this is the result of the proximity of both states to each other and to Afghanistan and its unsecured Wakhan corridor – the circumstance which served as a prerequisite for the mutually beneficial security cooperation in the case of the two states and is absent in the cases of other Central Asian states. This cooperation also does not hamper Russo-Tajik security cooperation per se, and Tajikistan and Russia continue to cooperate closely in the security domain. At the moment, it is virtually impossible to ascertain whether China will be able and willing to build up security cooperation with other Central Asian states to the extent it is currently cooperating with the neighbouring Tajikistan even if the BRI serves as a strong enough motivator to do so. And just as in the case of Tajikistan, it is not merely the matter of China's intentions, but is also that of the plans of the Central Asian states in question and to what extent they will be willing (and consider it necessary) to substantially enhance security ties with China in the future, especially at the expense of their long-standing security ties with Moscow.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: The Wakhan Corridor (source: *The Times*)

