

RUSSIA AND CHINA'S ENERGY STRATEGIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ANNOTATION

This article examines the distinctive aspects of Russia's and China's energy strategies in Central Asia amidst shifting regional geopolitics and a growing demand for energy security. The study analyzes the key priorities, mechanisms, and policy instruments employed by both states to strengthen their positions in the region's energy sector. It shows that Russia seeks to preserve its traditional influence by controlling transport infrastructure, transit routes, and long-established political and institutional ties. In contrast, China's strategy is focused on diversifying its external energy supplies, expanding investment opportunities, and developing new pipelines and transport corridors to connect Central Asia with Chinese markets. The article posits that the interaction between Russia and China in the region reflects both competition and selective cooperation, as both countries share an interest in maintaining regional stability and accessing energy resources. The conclusion is that Central Asia has become not only a resource base and transit territory but also a strategically important arena where geopolitical interests, geoeconomic aspirations, and the balancing policies of the region's states increasingly intersect.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Russia, China, energy strategy, energy security, geopolitics, geo-economics, pipeline diplomacy, natural gas, oil exports, transit routes, infrastructure connectivity, regional influence, great power competition, Eurasian energy policy.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia holds an important place on Eurasia's modern energy map due to its significant hydrocarbon reserves, favorable transit location, and its growing importance in the foreign strategies of major powers. The region is increasingly becoming a space where energy security, geopolitical influence, and transport connectivity intersect. According to scholars, the development of Central Asia's energy sector is shaped not only by its internal resource potential but also by the

influence of external forces, particularly the extensive geopolitical competition between Russia and China¹.

The relevance of this topic is underscored by the fact that Russia and China, while having partially overlapping interests in the region's energy sector, pursue different goals. Russia traditionally seeks to maintain its long-standing influence through the legacy infrastructure, transit control, and institutional ties established in the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, the diversification of export routes has weakened Moscow's former monopoly over regional energy flows, forcing it to adapt its strategy to new geopolitical and market realities.

China, in contrast, approaches Central Asia primarily as a strategic source of diversified energy supplies and as a key land corridor within its comprehensive continental connectivity program. The construction of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline has significantly strengthened Beijing's energy position in the region and has given rise to new models of interdependence between China and the Central Asian republics². According to the International Energy Agency, the Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan–Kazakhstan–China transnational gas pipeline has become one of the largest projects in the region, considerably expanding the potential for gas transit toward China.

From this perspective, studying the energy strategies of Russia and China in Central Asia holds both theoretical and practical significance. This enables the identification of the key priorities, tools, and strategic mechanisms that both countries are employing to strengthen their positions in the region's energy sector. At the same time, this analysis helps to explain that the relationship between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia can be characterized as neither pure competition nor a full-fledged partnership; rather, it reflects a complex interplay of competition, compromise, and selective cooperation³. Some studies assert that the Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia's energy sector is becoming increasingly important for the broader balance of power in Eurasia and could reshape the long-term structure of regional influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic literature on energy policy in Central Asia typically examines the region as a strategic crossroads of resources, transit geography, and great power

¹ ZHOU Qiang, HE Ze, YANG Yu. Energy geopolitics in Central Asia: China's involvement and responses. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*. J. Geogr. Sci. 2020, 30(11): 1871-1895

² Bakri Mat and Amna Khalid. China's Energy Security Strategy in Central Asia. 2024 World Century Publishing Corporation and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, Vol. 10, No. 2, -P.155–185

³ C. Freeman. "New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2018. –P.49-50.

competition. Researchers assert that Central Asia is significant not only for its oil and gas reserves but also for serving as a corridor connecting producers, transit states, and external markets across Eurasia. In this context, energy strategy is usually analyzed through the concepts of energy security, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and interdependence.

A large body of literature focuses on Russia's energy strategy in Central Asia. These studies emphasize that Moscow's approach has historically been based on maintaining influence through infrastructure, pipeline routes, and institutional mechanisms inherited from the Soviet era, which tied Central Asian producers to Russian transport networks. Aminjonov points out that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to maintain its influence over regional exporters by controlling external access to markets via its pipeline systems and using energy as a tool of broader regional influence⁴. More recent research indicates that Russia's energy power in post-Soviet Eurasia has not disappeared but has transformed, becoming more selective, flexible, and limited due to the growing autonomy of regional states and the rise of alternative partners, particularly China.

Another significant area of research explores China's energy strategy in Central Asia. Scholars generally attribute Beijing's policy to the need to diversify its external energy supplies, reduce vulnerabilities associated with maritime transport routes, and integrate Central Asia into a broader continental connectivity system. Research by Xu and Shaofeng suggests that China's engagement in the region is not limited to simple resource acquisition; it also includes long-term infrastructure construction, financing, diplomatic coordination, and the creation of stable overland supply routes⁵. The Central Asia–China gas pipeline is widely interpreted in the literature as a turning point, as it significantly altered the geography of regional exports and diminished the previous dominance of Russian-controlled transit routes.

A distinct and influential body of research examines Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia's energy sector. Rather than describing the relationship as purely conflictual or purely cooperative, the literature increasingly characterizes it as a mixed pattern of competition, adaptation, and selective coordination. Eder argues that China's expanding energy presence has gradually challenged Russia's traditional dominance in the region, while Freeman shows that the post-boom period has given rise to more complex patterns of interaction in which the two powers seek to avoid

⁴ F Aminjonov. *Russia's Evolving Energy Interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan*. Bishkek Project. 2017. –P.28.

⁵ Bakri Mat and Amna Khalid. *China's Energy Security Strategy in Central Asia*. 2024 World Century Publishing Corporation and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, Vol. 10, No. 2, -P.155–185

direct confrontation even when their strategic interests diverge⁶. This line of inquiry is important because it shifts focus away from zero-sum interpretations toward a more nuanced understanding of overlapping, yet unequal, regional influence.

The literature also pays considerable attention to pipeline diplomacy and infrastructure policy. Scholars argue that pipelines in Central Asia are not merely economic projects but also instruments of statecraft that shape relationships of dependency, bargaining power, and long-term geopolitical alignment. Official CNPC materials and IEA data confirm that the Central Asia-China gas pipeline system has become one of the most important cross-border energy corridors in Eurasia, while broader research on cross-border pipelines highlights their role in shaping the regional political economy and strategic influence⁷. Consequently, infrastructure is increasingly viewed in the literature not as a neutral technical domain, but as a central mechanism through which both Russia and China project power.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on a qualitative comparative approach to examining the specific aspects of Russia's and China's energy strategies in Central Asia. The research primarily employed document analysis, including scholarly literature, official reports, policy documents, and analytical materials related to energy security, pipeline politics, and regional geopolitics. A comparative analysis was applied to identify key similarities and differences in the strategic objectives, instruments, and regional conduct of both countries. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis was utilized to interpret key concepts such as energy security, diversification, transit control, and infrastructure development.

DISCUSSION

Central Asia holds a key position in Eurasian energy geopolitics, as it combines vast hydrocarbon resources with a strategically vital transit location between major external markets. Kazakhstan is a major exporter of coal, crude oil, and natural gas, while Uzbekistan also possesses considerable hydrocarbon potential and remains one of the leading gas producers in the region. This resource base, coupled with the region's location between Russia, China, and other external actors, has made Central Asia a critical arena where energy security, transport connectivity, and geopolitical influence intersect⁸.

⁶ C. Freeman. "New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2018. –P.47.

⁷ CNPC. Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline and related project pages. // Electron resource: https://www.cnpc.com.cn/en/CentralAsia/CentralAsia_index.shtml

⁸ E. Marat. *Energy Security along the New Silk Road*. Central Asian Energy Security. Cambridge University Press. 2024. –P.36-37.

In academic literature, Central Asia is viewed not merely as a supplier of raw materials, but as a strategic space where the choice of export routes, pipeline networks, and infrastructure shapes broader political alignments. The region's energy significance stems not only from its production volumes but also from the fact that control over routes and transit architecture influences the distribution of power among regional and non-regional actors⁹. Therefore, Russia's and China's energy strategies in Central Asia should be seen not just as economic policies, but as broader instruments of regional influence.

Now, Russia's and China's energy strategies in Central Asia reflect two distinct models of external influence. Russia's approach is largely based on historically established dependencies: it relies on inherited transport networks, long-standing political ties, and its extensive institutional presence in the post-Soviet space¹⁰. China's approach, in contrast, is more heavily based on geo-economic tools, particularly infrastructure financing, long-term supply contracts, and the establishment of transport corridors. This distinction is significant as it shows that the competition between the two states is not only over access to hydrocarbons but also over competing mechanisms for regional influence and order.

Central Asia is one of the most energy-rich regions in the world. The region's energy resources primarily consist of oil and natural gas. Central Asian energy is in demand both within the region and from external buyers such as Russia, China, Europe, and India. However, due to relatively limited production capacities, inefficient energy sectors, and the need to meet domestic needs, Central Asian countries may face difficulties in fully meeting the growing demand of these buyers. The rising cost of energy consumption led to the collapse of the Central Asian energy system in the early 1990s¹¹. After this system was dismantled, countries sought to create an independent national energy system by diversifying their sources and developing domestic electricity and gas infrastructure.

By the 21st century, energy security has become a critical issue at both local and global levels. Furthermore, major countries such as Russia, China, and the USA need even more energy sources to meet their needs. The Persian Gulf region possesses the world's largest energy reserves and is considered the largest supplier of oil and gas.

⁹ Benjamin K. Sovacool. The Routledge handbook of energy security. British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. 2011. –P.49-50.

¹⁰ Доктрина энергетической безопасности Российской Федерации. // Electron resource: <https://minenergo.gov.ru/ministry/energy-security-doctrine>

¹¹ Mubarak Ateeq Sultan Alkuwaiti. The importance of the Central Asian region in energy security at the global level: A review. // Electron resource: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pa.2427>

Central Asia is one of the best alternative sources for major countries such as Russia, China, and the USA¹².

It is noted that the Central Asian region possesses 5.5% of the world's hydropower potential. Furthermore, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan account for more than 20% of the world's explored uranium reserves. In terms of explored coal reserves, Kazakhstan is among the top 10 countries in the world. Uzbekistan is among the top ten countries in the world for gas production. Most of the coal and oil reserves explored and extracted in the region are concentrated in Kazakhstan, while the bulk of the hydropower potential is located in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Gas reserves are distributed relatively evenly among Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

One of the central issues of the discussion is the changing pipeline politics in the region. Previous forms of dependency were primarily tied to Russian-controlled export routes, which allowed Moscow to exert systemic leverage over Central Asian producers. However, the launch of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline in December 2009 fundamentally altered the region's energy geography by creating a stable export corridor to the Chinese market that bypasses Russia¹³. From an analytical perspective, this event diminished Russia's relative monopoly and strengthened the negotiating position of energy-producing nations like Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Therefore, this pipeline should be understood not merely as an infrastructure project, but as a factor that strategically reshapes the regional balance of power.

The discussion also reveals that Russia's strategy is becoming increasingly adaptive rather than one of absolute dominance. Recent scholarly research notes that Russia's energy power in post-Soviet Eurasia has been relatively weakened by China's emergence as a major alternative market and by broader shifts in the energy sector that have altered the strategic environment. However, this does not mean that Russian influence has vanished. Moscow still retains significant levers of influence through its transit systems, political-security cooperation, and institutional familiarity across the region¹⁴. Consequently, it is more accurate to interpret Russia's current energy strategy in Central Asia not as a strategy of complete control, but as one of managed influence preservation.

China's strategy, in turn, should be interpreted from the perspective of diversification and strategic risk mitigation. Scholarly debates on China's energy

¹² M. Ahmad, M. Rubab. Great game of great powers in Central Asia: A comparative analysis. *Defence Journal*, 18(11), 2015. –P.31.

¹³ M. Skalamera. "Steppe-ing" Out of Russia's Shadow: Russia's Changing "Energy Power" in Post-Soviet Eurasia. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2022. –P.19.

¹⁴ The "New Great Game" in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy? // Electron resource: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2021.2007611>

security indicate that Beijing's overseas energy pursuits have been driven by a desire to guarantee long-term supply and reduce vulnerabilities associated with reliance on maritime routes and external interference. In Central Asia, this logic is reflected in the preference for onshore pipelines, direct ties with producers, and the phased construction of a continental energy corridor¹⁵. At the same time, academic literature warns that acquiring resources from abroad and expanding pipeline networks does not in itself eliminate instability; rather, it transforms these risks into new geopolitical and commercial forms. This suggests that China's regional strategy is bold, yet not without its own risks.

Another important conclusion is that Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia's energy sector cannot be reduced to simple zero-sum competition. The evidence, on the contrary, points to a model of asymmetric coexistence where, although competition exists, it is generally tempered by broader strategic pragmatism. China's growing role has undoubtedly overshadowed Russia's traditional energy position, but to date, both countries have avoided direct confrontation in the region¹⁶. This relative restraint can be explained by their shared interest in regional stability, the security of energy flows, and limiting the strategic entry of other extra-regional powers. Accordingly, their relationship in Central Asia is best viewed as a combination of competition, compromise, and parallelism in select areas.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis shows that Russia's and China's energy strategies in Central Asia are based on different strategic priorities, instruments, and forms of regional cooperation. Russia's approach is primarily aimed at preserving its traditional influence in the post-Soviet space through inherited infrastructure, transit mechanisms, and long-standing political ties. China's strategy, in contrast, is focused first and foremost on diversifying its energy sources, developing overland transport and pipeline corridors, and strengthening its geoeconomic influence through investment and infrastructure expansion.

The study demonstrates that Central Asia has become a strategically important arena where geopolitical interests, geoeconomic aspirations, and energy security issues are closely intertwined. From this perspective, the relationship between Russia and China should not be understood solely as a rivalry, for here, elements of competition coexist with cooperation in select areas and pragmatic coexistence. At the same time, the increasing diversification of export routes has diminished the

¹⁵ Chen, S. Has China's Foreign Energy Quest Enhanced Its Energy Security? *The China Quarterly*. 2021. // Electron resource: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41305259>

¹⁶ USIP. China's Global Security Initiative Takes Shape: Southeast and Central Asia. 2024. // Electron resource: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/sr534_chinas-global-security-initiative-takes-shape-southeast-central-asia.pdf

absoluteness of Russian influence and expanded China's role as a key energy and infrastructure player in the region.

It is also confirmed that the Central Asian states are not merely passive objects of foreign strategies, but active participants capable of pursuing a multi-vector energy policy to maintain a balance of external powers and maximize their national interests. Therefore, the future energy order of the region will depend on the interplay between Russia's adaptation, the consolidation of China's position, and the strategic activism of the Central Asian republics. Overall, Central Asia is emerging not only as a resource and transit territory but also as an arena for major shifts in Eurasian energy geopolitics.

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