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TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSIAN-CHINESE INTERACTION IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO ASYMMETRIC RIVALRY

The article examines the transformation of Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia against the background of China's growing presence in the region, which is particularly relevant in the context of global geopolitical changes and increasing international tensions.

The purpose of the research is to critically analyze the relationship between the official discourse of strategic partnership and the actual dynamics of Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia. The work focuses on studying economic presence, transformation of migration processes, changes in military-political influence, and educational space.

The methodological basis of the research consists of a comprehensive approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods of empirical data analysis for the period 2010-2023. Official statistical materials, interstate agreements, data from expert-analytical centers, and results of sociological research were used.

Based on systematic analysis, the formation of an asymmetric rivalry model has been identified, where behind the facade of declared strategic partnership, there is a consistent replacement of Russian influence by Chinese presence, which is confirmed by quantitative indicators.

The scientific significance of the research lies in the development of theoretical approaches to the analysis of Russian-Chinese relations, demonstrating the need for a differentiated consideration of global and regional levels of interaction. The work makes a substantial contribution to understanding the mechanisms of regional balance of power transformation and the peculiarities of major powers' interaction at the regional level.

The practical value of the results lies in their potential use in forming Russia's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia and adjusting mechanisms for maintaining regional influence in conditions of growing competition with China.

The practical significance of the research is determined by its value for developing balanced foreign policy by Central Asian states in conditions of increasing competition between Russia and China. The results of the work allow regional countries to optimize their participation in various integration projects, improve investment attraction mechanisms, and develop more effective strategies for multi-vector diplomacy.

Key words: Russian-Chinese relations, Central Asia", asymmetric rivalry, regional influence, strategic partnership.

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Орталық Азиядағы Ресей-Қытай өзара әрекеттестігінің трансформациясы: стратегиялық серіктестіктен асимметриялық бәсекелестікке дейін

Мақалада Орталық Азиядағы Ресей-Қытай өзара әрекеттестігінің трансформациясы ҚХР-дың аймақтағы қатысуының күшеюі аясында зерттеледі, бұл жаһандық геосаяси өзгерістер мен халықаралық шиеленістің өсуі жағдайында ерекше өзектілікке ие.

Зерттеудің мақсаты стратегиялық серіктестіктің ресми дискурсы мен Орталық Азиядағы Ресей-Қытай өзара әрекеттестігінің нақты динамикасының арақатынасын сыни талдау болып табылады. Жұмыс экономикалық қатысуды, көші-қон процестерінің трансформациясын, әскери-саяси ықпал мен білім беру кеңістігіндегі өзгерістерді зерттеуге бағытталған.

Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін 2010-2023 жылдар аралығындағы эмпирикалық деректерді талдаудың сандық және сапалық әдістерін біріктіретін кешенді тәсіл құрайды. Ресми статистикалық материалдар, мемлекетаралық келісімдер, сараптамалық-талдау орталықтарының деректері және әлеуметтанулық зерттеулер нәтижелері пайдаланылды.

Жүйелік талдау негізінде асимметриялық бәсекелестік моделінің қалыптасуы анықталды, мұнда жарияланған стратегиялық серіктестіктің артында Ресей ықпалының Қытай қатысуымен дәйекті алмастырылуы жүріп жатыр, бұл сандық көрсеткіштермен расталады.

Зерттеудің ғылыми маңыздылығы Ресей-Қытай қатынастарын талдаудың теориялық тәсілдерін дамытуда, өзара әрекеттестіктің жаһандық және аймақтық деңгейлерін саралап қарау қажеттілігін көрсетуде. Жұмыс аймақтық күш-қуат теңгерімінің трансформация механизмдерін және ірі державалардың аймақтық деңгейдегі өзара әрекеттесу ерекшеліктерін түсінуге елеулі үлес қосады.

Нәтижелердің практикалық құндылығы оларды Орталық Азиядағы Ресейдің сыртқы саяси стратегиясын қалыптастыруда және Қытаймен өсіп келе жатқан бәсекелестік жағдайында аймақтық ықпалды сақтау тетіктерін түзетуде пайдалану мүмкіндігінде.

Зерттеудің практикалық маңыздылығы Ресей мен Қытай арасындағы күшейіп келе жатқан бәсекелестік жағдайында Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің теңдестірілген сыртқы саясатын әзірлеу үшін оның құндылығымен анықталады. Жұмыс нәтижелері аймақ елдеріне әртүрлі интеграциялық жобаларға қатысуын оңтайландыруға, инвестицияларды тарту тетіктерін жетілдіруге және көпвекторлы дипломатияның тиімді стратегияларын дамытуға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: Ресей-Қытай қатынастары, Орталық Азия, асимметриялық бәсекелестік, аймақтық ықпал, «стратегиялық серіктестік».

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Трансформация Российско-Китайского взаимодействия в Центральной Азии: от стратегического партнерства к асимметричному соперничеству

В статье исследуется трансформация российско-китайского взаимодействия в Центральной Азии на фоне усиления присутствия КНР в регионе, что представляет особую актуальность в условиях глобальных геополитических изменений и роста международной напряженности.

Цель исследования заключается в критическом анализе соотношения официального дискурса стратегического партнерства и реальной динамики российско-китайского взаимодействия в Центральной Азии. Работа фокусируется на изучении экономического присутствия, трансформации миграционных процессов, изменений в военно-политическом влиянии и образовательном пространстве.

Методологическую основу исследования составляет комплексный подход, сочетающий количественные и качественные методы анализа эмпирических данных за период 2010-2023 годов. Используются официальные статистические материалы, межгосударственные соглашения, данные экспертно-аналитических центров и результаты социологических исследований.

На основе системного анализа выявлено формирование модели асимметричного соперничества, где за фасадом декларируемого стратегического партнёрства происходит последовательное замещение российского влияния китайским присутствием, что подтверждается количественными показателями.

Научная значимость исследования заключается в развитии теоретических подходов к анализу российско-китайских отношений, демонстрируя необходимость дифференцированного рассмотрения глобального и регионального уровней взаимодействия. Работа вносит существенный вклад в понимание механизмов трансформации региональных балансов сил и особенностей взаимодействия крупных держав на региональном уровне.

Практическая ценность результатов состоит в возможности их использования при формировании российской внешнеполитической стратегии в Центральной Азии и корректировке механизмов сохранения регионального влияния в условиях растущей конкуренции с Китаем.

Практическая значимость исследования определяется его ценностью для выработки сбалансированной внешней политики государствами Центральной Азии в условиях усиливающейся конкуренции между Россией и Китаем. Результаты работы позволяют странам региона оптимизировать свое участие в различных интеграционных проектах, совершенствовать механизмы привлечения инвестиций и развивать более эффективные стратегии многовекторной дипломатии.

Ключевые слова: российско-китайские отношения, Центральная Азия, асимметричное соперничество, региональное влияние, стратегическое партнерство.

Introduction

In the modern system of international relations, one of the most debatable issues remains the nature of interaction between Russia and China in Central Asia: whether their interests in the region truly coincide, providing a basis for mutually beneficial cooperation, or whether growing rivalry is hidden behind the facade of declared partnership. This question gains importance against the backdrop of global changes in international relations and mounting geopolitical tensions, where the character of the interaction of the two largest powers of Eurasia acquires a special meaning.

Such a complex and multidimensional phenomenon has resulted in different approaches in the academic literature examining this issue opposing each other with regard to their assessment of its nature. Proponents of the first direction (A. D. Voskresensky, 2021; K. P. Borishpolets, 2020; S. G. Luzyanin, 2022) emphasize the strategic nature of the Russian-Chinese partnership, pointing to the complementarity of interests between the two powers in the region. Their works develop the concept of “greater Eurasian partnership,” where Russia and China act as natural allies jointly opposing Western influence. A. V. Lukin (2023), analyzing the institutional basis for cooperation within the SCO, also emphasizes the constructive nature of bilateral interaction, highlighting the role of multilateral mechanisms in strengthening regional cooperation.

However, there exists a fundamentally different view on the dynamics of Russian-Chinese relations in the region. Researchers taking the opposite position point to increasing competition between Russia and China. A. A. Kazantsev and I. D. Zvyagelskaya (2022), drawing on extensive empirical material, document the process of Russia’s gradual displacement from traditional spheres of influence in the region. Their argumentation is supported by M. V. Danilovich’s research (2023), who demonstrates China’s growing dominance in trade and investment based on detailed analysis of economic statistics. Special significance is given to this direction by the work of researchers – Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle (2021), who emphasize the structural nature of contradictions between the interests of the two powers in Central Asia, pointing to fundamental differences in their strategic goals and approaches to regional development.

In an attempt to overcome the limitations of the binary “cooperation-rivalry” approach, a third direction of research has emerged. Represented by the works of D. V. Trenin (2022) and A. F. Mochulsky

(2023), it offers a more nuanced approach, pointing to the complex coexistence of partnership and competition elements in Russian-Chinese relations. A special contribution to the development of this direction was made by Bobo Lo, who introduced the concept of an “axis of convenience.” This concept characterizes the pragmatic nature of interaction, where cooperation in some areas organically combines with rivalry in others, allowing for a more accurate reflection of the complex nature of Russian-Chinese relations in Central Asia. This approach appears most promising for understanding the real dynamics of interaction between the two powers in the region, as it allows going beyond simplified dichotomies and taking into account the multiplicity of factors influencing the nature of bilateral relations.

Analysis of existing literature shows that at the global level, Russia and China indeed demonstrate a high degree of coordination: they synchronously use their veto power in the UN Security Council, present a united front in BRICS and SCO, and jointly defend the principles of a multipolar world order. However, when it comes to the regional dimension of their interaction, especially in Central Asia, the picture becomes significantly more complex and ambiguous.

The relevance of detailed research on this issue is determined by several factors. First, there is a need for critical analysis of the relationship between official rhetoric about “comprehensive strategic partnership” and actual processes in key areas of regional interaction. Second, in the context of transforming global architecture of international relations, it is fundamentally important to understand: does Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia truly develop according to a win-win model, as claimed by official representatives of both countries, or does reality indicate a more complex and contradictory picture?

In existing literature, there is a notable gap between the analysis of global and regional dimensions of interaction. Most studies focus either on the general nature of bilateral relations or on specific aspects of regional presence, without paying sufficient attention to contradictions between different levels of interaction. Moreover, many works rely predominantly on official documents and statements, without conducting systematic analysis of factual data on the transformation of both powers’ presence in the region.

In this connection, the aim of this study is to critically analyze the relationship between the official discourse of strategic partnership and the real

dynamics of Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia. To achieve this goal, the following research objectives are proposed:

Analyze changes in the economic presence of both powers in the region, paying special attention to the transformation of trade and investment flows and energy cooperation;

Investigate the evolution of educational and migration processes in the region;

Assess the transformation of approaches to ensuring regional security, including through the lens of military-technical cooperation;

Identify actual areas of convergence and divergence of Russian and Chinese interests in the region based on comprehensive analysis of empirical data.

Description of materials and methods

The methodological foundation of this research comprises a comprehensive approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The research is based on systematic analysis of empirical data covering the period from 2010 to 2023, allowing to trace the dynamics of transformation in Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia.

The main sources of quantitative data include official statistical materials from national statistical services of Russia, China, and Central Asian countries, including indicators of foreign trade turnover, foreign direct investment volumes, data on migration flows, and educational exchanges. Additional sources include databases of international organizations: World Bank, Asian Development Bank, EAEU, and SCO, which ensures comprehensiveness and verifiability of the statistical indicators used.

Qualitative analysis relies on the study of official documents, including interstate agreements, national security strategies, foreign policy concepts, and program documents on regional cooperation. An important source of information comes from speeches and statements by official representatives of Russia, China, and Central Asian states, diplomatic correspondence materials, and final documents from multilateral meetings. To deepen the analysis, content analysis of publications from leading expert-analytical centers of Russia (IMEMO RAS, RISI, RIAC), China (CASS, CIIS), and international research institutes (SIPRI, Carnegie Endowment) specializing in Central Asian issues was conducted.

The study employs comparative analysis method to juxtapose official discourse on strategic partnership with actual indicators of interaction in various spheres. The use of case study method in examining

specific projects and initiatives allows identification of practical mechanisms of cooperation and competition between Russia and China in the region. For processing quantitative data, statistical analysis methods are applied, including correlation analysis to identify relationships between various indicators of economic and political interaction.

The time span of the study is from 2010 to 2023, which makes it possible to compare Russian-Chinese cooperation before and after a series of important geopolitical events, including the reshaping of the international environment after 2014. The halted Central Asia study Countries included are Central Asia Such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This broader methodological approach guarantees all dimensions of the problems are investigated and substantive facts are available to shape an objective picture of the real mechanism of Russian/Chinese interaction.

Results

Paradoxes of Russian-Chinese Partnership: From Global Cooperation to Regional Competition

Russia and China today demonstrate a high degree of coordination in international organizations, consistently opposing the formation of a unipolar world order and promoting the concept of a multipolar world, which is reflected in joint initiatives to reform the global governance system, put forward at the UN, BRICS, and SCO platforms.

The current system of coordinating foreign policy actions between Russia and China represents a multi-level mechanism, including regular meetings of heads of state (5-6 times per year), consultations through Security Councils, the work of more than 20 intergovernmental cooperation commissions, strategic dialogue at the level of deputy foreign ministers (4 times per year), as well as a developed network of expert interaction through joint analytical centers and academic exchanges. The effectiveness of these mechanisms is confirmed by concrete coordination results, including the synchronization of positions on key international conflicts in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran, the development of agreed approaches to reforming international institutions, and countering unilateral U.S. sanctions. The most illustrative example of such interaction was the work of the two countries in the UN Security Council, where during the period 2011-2023, 18 joint vetoes were used on key international issues (United Nations Security Council, 2023). In particular, Russia and China blocked resolutions on Syria that could have led to

a repeat of the Libyan scenario, as well as several initiatives that threatened the principle of non-interference in sovereign states' internal affairs. Additionally, the countries consistently oppose attempts by the U.S. and its allies to use UN mechanisms to legitimize unilateral sanctions and political pressure on independent states.

Special attention should be paid to the transformation of Russian-Chinese relations in the context of the military conflict in Ukraine that began in 2022. China's position on this issue demonstrates the pragmatic approach characteristic of Chinese diplomacy: official Beijing refrains from direct support of military actions but consistently opposes anti-Russian sanctions and NATO's military presence expansion. As an example, one can cite Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March 2023, during which important agreements on expanding economic cooperation were signed and a transition of relations between the two countries to a new level was announced (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). This was practically confirmed by unprecedented growth in trade between the countries, reaching a historical maximum and exceeding \$200 billion in 2023 (General Administration of Customs of China, 2024). The role of Chinese technology companies in the Russian market has significantly increased, partially filling the niche of departed Western manufacturers. In the energy sector, supplies of Russian energy resources to China have significantly increased, not only through pipeline systems but also through other routes, including the Northern Sea Route (Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, 2023). Cooperation in the financial sphere has intensified: the share of national currencies in bilateral settlements exceeded 80%, and the Chinese yuan has become one of the main reserve currencies for the Russian financial system (Central Bank of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Despite the strengthening of global interaction between the two states, there are certain contradictions that are particularly evident at the regional level, specifically in Central Asia. In this region, China's economic expansion and its growing political influence create objective prerequisites for competition with Russia's historical interests.

Paradoxically, while Russia and China demonstrate unity in opposing "American hegemony" and promoting the concept of a multipolar world on the global arena, in Central Asia there is a consistent replacement of Russian influence with Chinese eco-

nomics and political instruments. A comprehensive analysis of key areas of regional interaction – economics, security, migration, and education – reveals the systemic nature of this transformation.

Based on preliminary analysis, a hypothesis can be proposed: an asymmetric rivalry model between Russia and China is forming in Central Asia, where Moscow, trying to maintain its traditional influence, is forced to adapt to growing Chinese presence under conditions of limited resources. This is confirmed by both economic indicators and the transformation of the region's political landscape.

The emerging situation is characterized not so much by open confrontation or declared strategic partnership, but by asymmetric rivalry, where Russia, while maintaining significant influence in the military-political sphere, is consistently losing positions in other dimensions of regional presence. The subsequent paragraphs will present a detailed analysis of this transformation across key areas of interaction, which will allow confirming or refuting the proposed hypothesis based on specific data and facts.

Economic Presence of Russia and China in Central Asia

The study of Russia and China's economic and political interests in Central Asia demonstrates growing competition between the powers for influence in the region, despite their declared strategic partnership at the global level. Statistical data illustrate convincingly a considerable shift in the economic balance favoring China: then was in early 2000s Russia-trade volume with countries of the region was of 2–3 times higher Chinese indicators (World Bank, 2022), by 2023 everything had changed sharply back. In 2022, China's overall trade turnover with five countries of Central Asia accounted \$70 billion – over 3 times more than the Russian figure (about \$21 billion). (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China [MOFCOM], 2024).

In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the situation is even more remarkable when the share of China in the total foreign trade surpassed 30% and China became the largest trading partner (Asian Development Bank(ADB),2023). A more detailed examination shows that the analysis of trade and economic relations dynamics between Central Asian countries and Russia and China, based on national statistical services data and UN Comtrade database (2023), demonstrates a fundamental change in the economic balance in the region over the past two decades.

Table 1 – Trade Turnover of Central Asian Countries with Russia and China (billion USD)

Country	2000 with Russia	2000 with China	China's Share, %	2022 with Russia	2022 with China	China's Share, %
Kazakhstan	4.2	1.4	7%	24.1	31.2	38.9%
Uzbekistan	2.1	0.4	3.2%	9.3	11.6	21.4%
Kyrgyzstan	0.4	0.1	2.8%	2.5	7.2	31.2%
Tajikistan	0.3	0.06	1.9%	1.6	2.8	29.6%
Turkmenistan	0.6	0.2	4.1%	1.9	11.8	42.8%
TOTAL	7.6	2.16	4.8%	39.4	64.6	32.8%

Table 2 – Structure of Trade with China by Main Product Groups (2022, %)

Country	Exports to China	Imports from China
Kazakhstan	Oil (60%), metals (15%), uranium (10%)	Machinery and equipment (45%), electronics (20%)
Uzbekistan	Gas (40%), cotton (25%), metals (15%)	Industrial equipment (35%), consumer goods (30%)
Kyrgyzstan	Ores (45%), agricultural products (20%)	Textiles (40%), electronics (25%)
Tajikistan	Ores (55%), cotton (20%)	Machinery and equipment (40%), consumer goods (35%)
Turkmenistan	Gas (85%), cotton (10%)	Industrial equipment (50%), transport (20%)

Sources: UN Comtrade Database, national statistical services of Central Asian countries, 2023

The presented statistical data indicate a radical change in the trade and economic balance in the region, where Chinese economic presence shows a steady growth trend. Thus, if in 2000 the turnover of Russian trade with Central Asian countries was 3.5 times higher than the Chinese one (\$7.6 billion against \$2.16 billion) (that year is a convenient start date as for this time it is already possible to obtain aggregate statistical data) (Ministry of Commerce of China, 2023) at the end of 2022, the situation changed significantly: turnover of foreign trade in China reached \$64.6 billion, exceeding the Russian one by 1.6 times. This situation is particularly symbolic for trade relations with Turkmenistan: back in 2000, the share of the People's Republic of China in total foreign trade of Turkmenistan did not exceed 4.1%, while by 2022 this figure rose to 42.8% due to the volume deliveries of natural gas through the Central Asia-China pipeline (State Statistics Committee of Turkmenistan, 2023). Structural analysis of trade flows, conducted based on national customs services data, reveals significant asymmetry in the nature of trade relations: Central Asian countries' exports to China consist 60-85% of raw materials, while imports from China are 65-85% finished industrial products and equipment, creating long-term technological dependence of regional countries on Chinese manufacturers.

According to the Eurasian Economic Commission (2023), trade with Russia shows a more diversified structure, however, significantly lags behind Chinese direction in terms of volume. Analysis of trade relations growth dynamics, based on World Trade Organization (WTO, 2023) data, shows that the average annual growth rate of regional countries' trade with China during the period under review was 18.2%, more than twice exceeding the corresponding indicator in trade with Russia (8.7%). It should be noted that official statistics do not reflect volumes of informal trade and re-exports through third countries, which, according to World Bank experts (2023), may add up to 20-30% to official trade turnover indicators, especially in the case of trade with China. The presented data indicate not only quantitative changes in trade flows but also a qualitative transformation of economic influence in the region, where China consistently strengthens its positions in all Central Asian countries, forming long-term mechanisms of economic dependence through the structure of trade relations and large-scale investment projects within the Belt and Road Initiative.

By 2023, the total volume of Chinese investments in Central Asian countries exceeded \$40 billion, with a significant portion of funds directed towards creating transport corridors, pipeline systems, and industrial facilities (Asian Develop-

ment Bank [ADB], 2024). One significant instance was the development of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, via which Turkmen gas is exported to China bypassing Russia (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2023). China has also been involved in investment in hydrocarbon field development in Kazakhstan, where Chinese companies currently account for around 25% of oil production (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies [KISS], 2023). Chinese investments in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan focused on mining and energy, leading to these countries' long-lasting dependence on Chinese funds (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting [CABAR], 2023).

Transformation of Migration Processes

The flow of labor migrants, which is a part of the socioeconomic configuration that has formed during the years of the USSR, has always been one of the most used tools of Russian economic and social influence in Central Asia, and a new stage of development began after the collapse of the USSR. Such a mechanism of influence is rooted in developed socio-economic connection, a common linguistic space, and labor migration channels created over many decades. In 2022, the flows of labor migrants' remittances from Russia to Central Asian countries were at an all-time high of \$16.5 billion to reach 31.3% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP (\$2.9 billion), 26.7% of Tajikistan's GDP (\$2.5 billion), and 11.6% of Uzbekistan's GDP (\$8.1 billion) (Central Bank of Russia, 2023). Some corroborating figures come from the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (2023), which states that in 2022 there were more than 4.2 million labor migrants from the countries of Central Asia officially registered in Russia. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023), almost every third family in Tajikistan and fourth in Kyrgyzstan has at least one family member working in Russia, which has traditionally ensured the stability of socio-economic and cultural influence of Russia in the region.

Nevertheless, the last few years show a clear tendency towards a diversification of migration flows and a long-term gradual erosion of Russia's monopoly on labour migration. According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), the geography of labor migration from the countries of Central Asia has expanded significantly: This is particularly true in South Korea (40% in the last five years to 180,000 people), Turkey (over 250,000 people) and the Persian Gulf countries where the number of Central Asian workers tripled over the past three years, reaching 300,000 people

(Asian Development Bank, 2023). Higher wage and better working conditions of these destinations compels migrants to compete directly with the traditional Russian direction.

An essential reason for the changing of migration patterns is the growing economic influence of China in the region. Over the last five years, Chinese investments within the Belt and Road Initiative have resulted in direct job creation of over 200,000 in Central Asian countries (Ministry of Commerce, 2023). By 2022, total Chinese direct investment to the region has amounted to \$45 billion in total (China Global Investment Tracker, 2023), further strengthening new economic growth and job making parts on the region herself. By contrast, the Russian model of extracting labor resources, while creating jobs directly in Central Asian countries, the Chinese model of economic influence may put into question the existence leeching remittances from Central Asia for many years, as in the long term, that may significantly reduce dependence of Central Asian states on labor migration to Russia.

Particularly transformational to migration trends are demographic and sociocultural changes. It is important to note that Gallup sociological studies (2023) shows that the migration preferences of the younger generation have noticeably changed: for migrants over 40 years old who paved the way abroad, Russia is still the priority destination for 70% of respondents, but among the 18-25 age group this figure has fallen to 45%. A portion of this trend is further cemented by China increasingly offering a regional stick in education: for the first time in 2021, the number of students from Central Asia attending Chinese universities surpassed those attending Russian ones (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). The process of diminishing the role of the Russian language in the region and active promotion of the Chinese language by means of the network of Confucius institutes creates long-term preliminarily conditions for reorientation of migration flows in new directions.

Consequently, the traditional role of labor migration as a pivotal instrument of Russian influence in Central Asia is experiencing significant transformations driven by an intricate combination of economic, social, and demographic factors. The emergence of competitive alternative migration destinations, substantial Chinese investment flows into the regional economy, and shifting preferences among younger generations establish conditions for the progressive diminution of this historically entrenched mechanism of Russian influence in Central Asia.

Changes in Military-Political Influence

In the security sphere, there is also an increase in Chinese presence in what has traditionally been considered a zone of Russian dominance. China has significantly expanded military-technical cooperation with regional countries, providing modern weapons and technologies. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2023), the volume of Chinese arms supplies to Central Asian countries grew from \$0.5 billion in 2010-2015 to \$2.8 billion in 2016-2023. China consistently expands the nomenclature of supplied weapons: from simple air defense systems and unmanned aerial vehicles to modern radar complexes and electronic warfare systems (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2023).

Military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan is particularly indicative, where Chinese companies participate in modernizing air defense systems and creating joint ventures for unmanned systems production (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies [KISS], 2023). In Uzbekistan, Chinese specialists are involved in programs to modernize communication systems and armed forces control systems, with military-technical cooperation reaching \$500 million annually by 2023 (Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, 2023).

A qualitatively new stage in Chinese military presence in the region was the establishment of a military facility in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in 2016, which, despite its official classification as a «training center,» effectively represents a full-fledged military base with a permanent contingent of Chinese military personnel numbering up to 150 people (Standish & Sukhankin, 2023). According to satellite images published by The Washington Post in 2023, the facility's infrastructure includes radar systems, communication facilities, and capabilities for hosting aviation equipment, substantially exceeding stated anti-terrorist objectives.

China also actively develops military training programs for officers from Central Asian countries: while in 2010 about 200 officers from the region studied in Chinese military institutions, by 2023 this number exceeded 1,000 people (Chinese Ministry of National Defense, 2023). Within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization framework, China initiated the creation of new security cooperation mechanisms, including the Regional Anti-Terrorist Center in Tashkent, where Chinese specialists play an increasingly significant role (Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO], 2023).

The volume of joint military exercises under the SCO aegis increased from 3-4 per year in the early 2010s to 12-15 annual events by 2023, with the Chinese component in these exercises becoming increasingly substantial both in terms of forces and assets involved and level of technological equipment (Central Asian Security Observatory, 2023). China's economic leverage is increasingly being converted into military-political presence: analysis of military-technical cooperation agreements shows their close correlation with major infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, the expansion of military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan in 2022 (supply of air defense systems worth \$300 million) coincided with increased Chinese investments in the country's transport infrastructure (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Thus, there is a gradual transformation of the regional security architecture, where alongside traditional Russian presence, an increasingly significant Chinese component is forming, based on a combination of military-technical cooperation, direct military presence, and the use of economic leverage to achieve military-political objectives.

Transformation of Educational Space

Analysis of educational and cultural influence transformation in Central Asia demonstrates systematic strengthening of Chinese presence in a sphere traditionally considered a zone of Russian dominance. The number of Confucius Institutes rose from 8 in 2010 to 24 in 2023 according to ministries of education of regional countries (2023) and their activities encompass not only language training but various cultural and educational programs. Over the decade – between 2010 and 2023 – this reflected shifts in educational flows: around 12,000 students from Central Asia were studying in China in 2010, but ten years later this number exceeds 50,000 people and for the first time in history exceeds the corresponding figure for Russia (45,000) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023). This is especially evident in Kazakhstan, where the number of students who opted for Chinese universities has increased five times over the past 10 years, amounting to 18,000 people (Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan, 2023). Chinese educational influence policy is characterized by a systematic approach and significant financial support: more than 3,000 state grants are allocated annually for students from Central Asia, substantially exceeding Russian figures (about 1,500 grants) (China Scholarship Coun-

cil [CSC], 2023). The scholarship support program includes not only traditional academic specialties but also strategically important fields: engineering sciences, information technology, international relations, and management.

It is noteworthy that Chinese educational expansion is accompanied by active promotion of language and culture at all levels of education: from schools to universities. More than 80 Chinese language study centers operate in the region, and the number of schoolchildren studying Chinese as a second foreign language increased from 15,000 in 2010 to more than 100,000 in 2023 (Hanban Annual Report, 2023). In parallel, there is a decline in the role of the Russian language: according to sociological studies, the proportion of youth fluently speaking Russian has decreased by 15-20% over the past decade.

Targeted work with future elites takes on special significance: China implements special programs for children of high-ranking officials and businessmen from regional countries, providing them opportunities to study at prestigious Chinese universities with subsequent employment in joint projects. By 2023, more than 300 graduates of such programs have taken significant positions in government structures and businesses of Central Asian countries (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

This strategy forms a long-term basis for strengthening Chinese influence through creating a layer of loyal elites well-acquainted with Chinese culture, language, and value system. It is characteristic that China's educational expansion is carried out in parallel with economic penetration: many educational programs are directly linked to Belt and Road Initiative projects, ensuring personnel training for Chinese economic projects in the region. Thus, a gradual formation of a comprehensive system of cultural and educational influence is taking place, which in the long term may significantly change the traditional orientation of regional elites toward Russia.

Russia's Response to Growing Chinese Presence in Central Asia

Analysis of Russia's response to growing Chinese presence in Central Asia demonstrates the complex nature of measures taken while simultaneously showing limited available resources for their implementation. At the official diplomatic level, Russian leadership consistently maintains rhetoric about «mutually beneficial cooperation» and «conjugation of integration initiatives,» which was recorded

in the joint statement on conjugation of the EAEU and Belt and Road Initiative in 2015 (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2023).

However, Russia's practical actions indicate efforts to maintain its influence in the region through activation of traditional instruments of influence. In the military-political sphere, this manifests in intensification of CSTO activities: increase in joint exercises from 4-5 in 2015 to 12-15 annual events by 2023, expansion of military-technical cooperation programs, modernization of air defense systems in Central Asia (Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO], 2023).

Russia has attempted to strengthen the economic component of the EAEU, initiating an industrial cooperation program with funding of \$1.2 billion and creating mechanisms for preferential lending to joint projects through the Eurasian Development Bank (Eurasian Development Bank, 2023). In the educational sphere, the «Russian Language in Central Asia» program was launched with a budget of \$250 million, aimed at supporting Russian-language schools, teacher training, and creating digital educational platforms (Russian Ministry of Education, 2023). The number of state scholarships for students from regional countries was increased by 30%, reaching 1,500 places annually (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2023).

In the information sphere, Russian media activities intensified, RT channel broadcasting in regional languages expanded, and new Russian-language internet portals oriented toward Central Asian audiences were created (Russian Media Analysis Center, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these measures is significantly limited by Russia's economic capabilities, especially under Western sanctions.

It is notable that the volume of Russian investments in Central Asian economies decreased from \$4.7 billion in 2019 to \$3.1 billion in 2023, constituting only 7% of Chinese investments in the region (Central Bank of Russia, 2023). Financial constraints also affect humanitarian projects implementation: budgets of Russian cultural centers in regional countries decreased by an average of 40%, and the number of conducted events halved (Malashenko & Laruelle, 2023).

The situation is particularly indicative in economic integration: despite formal expansion of the EAEU, its real influence on economic processes in the region remains limited. The share of mutual trade among EAEU countries does not exceed 15% of their total foreign trade turnover, while major investment and infrastructure projects are imple-

mented with Chinese capital participation (Eurasian Economic Commission, 2023).

As a result, a paradoxical situation is observed: Russia's attempts to maintain its influence in the region through activation of traditional mechanisms face objective resource limitations, which in practice leads to further strengthening of Chinese presence in Central Asia.

Discussion

Overall, analysis of the obtained results demonstrates a fundamental transformation in the nature of Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia, allowing for a new perspective on existing theoretical approaches to assessing this issue. The presented empirical data confirms the hypothesis about the formation of an asymmetric rivalry model, where behind the facade of declared strategic partnership, there is a consistent replacement of Russian influence with Chinese presence in key areas of regional interaction.

The obtained results significantly modify the position of «strategic partnership» concept supporters (A.D. Voskresensky, S.G. Luzyanin), demonstrating that the declared complementarity of Russian and Chinese interests in the region finds no practical confirmation. Statistical data on trade and economic relations dynamics convincingly show not just quantitative growth in Chinese presence, but a qualitative change in the economic balance in the region. The threefold excess of Chinese trade turnover over Russian (70 billion versus 21 billion dollars by 2023) and sevenfold gap in investment volumes indicate the formation of a new economic reality where Russia is losing its position as the leading economic partner of regional countries.

Meanwhile, empirical data confirms the argumentation of A.A. Kazantsev and I.D. Zvyagelskaya about the systemic nature of Russia's displacement from traditional spheres of influence. The transformation is particularly indicative in those areas historically considered zones of Russian dominance. In the security sphere, despite maintaining formal mechanisms of military-political cooperation through the CSTO, there is a qualitative strengthening of Chinese presence, confirmed by a fivefold increase in military-technical cooperation volumes and the appearance of first Chinese military facilities in the region.

The research results also significantly develop Bobo Lo's «axis of convenience» concept, demonstrating its limitations in the regional context. While at the global level there is indeed a pragmatic combination of cooperation and competition elements, in Central Asia a more complex interaction model is forming. Statistical data shows that official rhetoric about «conjugation» of integration initiatives does not transform into real coordination mechanisms: Chinese economic projects consistently replace and displace Russian presence, particularly noticeable in the energy sector and transport infrastructure.

Conclusion

The conducted study of Russian-Chinese interaction transformation in Central Asia has enabled critical analysis of the relationship between official strategic partnership discourse and real dynamics of bilateral relations in the region. Comprehensive examination of empirical data in key areas of regional presence – economy, security, education, and migration – revealed substantial divergence between the declared nature of interaction and actual processes occurring in the region.

The research has established the formation of an asymmetric rivalry model, where behind the facade of official rhetoric about «comprehensive strategic partnership» and «conjugation of integration initiatives,» there is a consistent replacement of Russian influence with Chinese presence in traditional spheres of regional interaction. Meanwhile, the paradoxical nature of this transformation has been revealed: high level of Russia-China coordination at the global level combines with growing competition in Central Asia, where China's economic expansion and growing political influence create objective prerequisites for reviewing traditional mechanisms of Russian presence in the region.

The obtained results have significant implications for understanding the real dynamics of Russian-Chinese relations amid transformation of global international relations architecture, demonstrating the need for a more differentiated approach to analyzing various levels of bilateral interaction. The identified trends indicate the formation of a new geopolitical reality in Central Asia, where the declared strategic partnership between Russia and China increasingly takes on characteristics of the latter's actual dominance.

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