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External Great Powers as Drivers for Regional  
Integration and Cooperation: A Comparative Study on  
Central Asia and Southeast Asia

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## Abstract

With their high geopolitical importance and rich natural endowments, both Central Asia and Southeast Asia are inserted in the arena permeable to the influence of external great powers that seek to safeguard their interests and maintain their grip on regional affairs. The lack of incentives for spontaneous integration and the primacy of sovereignty in both regions concedes a greater role for external powers in shaping integration and cooperation conforming to their interests. Drawing upon the theories of neorealism and neoliberalism, this paper attempts to discern how external powers' interests and practices may promote regional integration and cooperation. Through the neorealist prism, the perception of threats reveals the necessity for external powers to ensure their security and maintain their sphere of influence. The convergence of common security interests between Russia and China in countering not only conventional but also unconventional threats has led to the establishment of security regimes that foment collaboration and even integration in Central Asia, while the long prevalence of traditional threats in Southeast Asia has pushed countries to align with US security strategies that by and large have guaranteed regional security and nurtured ideological proximity. From a neoliberal perspective, the asymmetrical interdependence fostered by external powers in an institutional context, notably by China, by virtue of its strong economic power and through the exercise of economic inducements, has attracted secondary states in both regions into its development orbit and has generally won deference from them to those multilateral institutions in which policy coordination and economic cooperation have been cultivated. In sum, exogenous powers have strategically sponsored integration and promoted cooperation in these two regions.

Keywords: Regional integration, cooperation, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, International Relations.

## Introduction

Great powers have come to assume a significant, if not decisive, exogenous role in regional integration and cooperation. Their interests and actions have contributed to different extents towards shaping integration process and fostering cooperation in diverse regions. While the role and influence that great powers have in integration and cooperation processes in Asia has received relatively little attention, nonetheless their engagement with two of the regions on this continent, namely Central Asia and Southeast Asia, is of significance to the study of regionalism. Both regions share many similarities with each other: they are both rich in natural resources and occupy territories with a high geopolitical importance, both of which make them appealing to external powers that aspire to exercise control or influence over them. The process of regionalization in both regions, in contrast to the one in Europe, is mainly characterized as state-driven and intergovernmental and premised on the “universal principles of the Westphalian state system” and sovereignty (Rainford, 2011: 134); both regions are inserted in an arena of external great powers, and the evolving regional balance may have significant implications for future integration processes; more specifically, both regions are contiguous to a rising China and are covered by one of its foreign priorities known as *periphery diplomacy* that has been increasing in significance under President Xi Jinping. Departing from these similarities, a preliminary examination of the role of external powers in the integration of the two regions might shed some light on future regional integration studies on Central Asia and Southeast Asia where the centrality of *sovereignty* in both regions is in the meantime under tangible external influence of great powers.

The five states of Central Asia, specifically Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, endowed with rich energy resources and linking Asia and Europe, have in recent years emerged from the “backwater of global political and economic attention” to the political agenda of their powerful neighbors (Linn, 2012: 96). Whereas Russia attempts to maintain dominance of the region as “part of its historical economic and regional interests” and keep “Central Asian states economically dependent and isolated from potential trading partners”, China is seeking a peaceful backyard and the construction of its

new Silk Road that involves Central Asian states (Rainford, 2011: 96; Schweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper, 2012: 18). In light of the need to support their military operations in Afghanistan, the United States and its NATO allies transited their nonlethal military supplies via Central Asia. Other players, such as Turkey and Iran, are bound by common language and cultural ties with the region (Linn, 2012: 96). As for the European Union, although there is a lack of geopolitical ambition in Central Asia as was expressed by Peter Burian, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, security, stability and sustainable development of the region are still the three overarching pillars of EU engagement with Central Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Southeast Asia, likewise, has long been contested by extra-regional powers. In 1967, five countries within the region – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines - came together and formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which “pointed to the impact of superpowers” as a reaction to the Vietnam War (Stumbaum, 2015: 133). Abundant in hydrocarbon and fishery resources as well as being situated on a fundamental global maritime trade route, this region is faced with an ascending China aspiring for regional leadership and an ambivalent United States attempting to maintain its grip while retreating from various multilateral commitments under the Trump Administration. Furthermore, the necessity for an “underdeveloped and often ethnically disparate” region to deliver “economic growth to ensure regime legitimacy”, as well as the inherent hurdles to intra-regional trade, made its integration processes more susceptible to external power influence.

This working paper aims to analyze the role of external stakeholder great powers as driving forces for integration and cooperation in both regions. More specifically, it seeks to discern to what extent their security concerns and economic interests, when translated into practices, may drive integration and cooperation in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. In a bid to achieve the preliminary findings, the paper will firstly address the inadequacy of solely applying European integration theories to evaluate regionalization in the two subcontinents,

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote speech by Peter Burian, EU Special Representative for Central Asia at the BACES workshop in Bruges, Belgium, on the topic of “EU, China and Central Asia” in June 2018.

and instead it will articulate a theoretical framework comprised of two relevant paradigms, incorporating neorealist and neoliberalist schools. Then, it moves on to a brief review of the background of integration and cooperation in each respective region, followed by a discussion of the role of external stakeholder great powers as exogenous drivers for such processes. This paper will select neither those powerful actors with few interests or involvement in a particular region, as is the case with Russia in Southeast Asia, nor those actors that in spite of geographical nearness, have limited power to influence regional integration and cooperation, as with Turkey and Iran in Central Asia. At the end of the paper, conclusions will be drawn in light of the comparative analysis.

## 1 Theoretical framework and methodology

Theories about regional integration, highlighting the endogenous factors among countries within a region in shaping the process of their conglomeration, have been somewhat dominated by the European integration project. The neo-functional school proposed by Ernst Haas defines integration as a “process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectation and political activities to a new center whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national state” (1958: 16). The spill-over effect underlined by neo-functionalists hypothesizes that the integration in a particular sector is conditioned or facilitated by further actions taken in other sectors, which in turn leads to a further condition or ultimately a spill-over into other areas (Haas, 1958; Laursen, 2008). Liberal Intergovernmentalism represented by Andrew Moravcsik, by contrast, contends that “states achieve their goals through intergovernmental negotiations and bargaining, rather than through a centralized authority making and enforcing political decisions” (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009: 68). Assuming pooling and delegation is a rational strategy of states, Liberal Institutionalists maintain that EU Member States “are in control of the process of integration” and that integration in Europe involves three stages, namely the formation of national preferences, substantive interstate bargains shaped by asymmetrical interdependence, and institutional choices (Ibid; Laursen, 2008: 9).

Both neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism have large explanatory power in interpreting integration in Europe. Nevertheless, solely relying on such regional integration theories to discern the dynamics behind Central Asia and Southeast Asia may lead to other exogenous factors being overlooked that weigh on the shaping of their integrative motives and policies. These could be better understood through the prism of neorealist and neoliberalist paradigms. This is not to deny that integrational theories also provide certain analytical insights to comprehend the integration in the two regions, but due to “the existence of interstate disputes, the lack of regional identity, and the pervasive influence of external great powers” in both regions and given the fact that integration in them still mainly remains state-driven and intergovernmental, it would be inadequate to merely employ one doctrine (Xu, 2010: 38). Hence, this paper resorts to neorealist and neoliberal perspectives to understand integration and cooperation in both regions.

First of all, several concepts should be clarified. Pundits have distinct definitions of *power*, however in this paper, pursuant to the realist definition, power refers narrowly to the underpinning material capabilities, that is to say, the *base*, including military, economy and technology, and not to the political relationship or other psychological aspects of power. Influence, on the other hand, will be understood as the ability to alter the outcome through exercise of power, whether by coercion, persuasion or inducement. As illustrated above, different regions may be influenced differently by external great powers, and hence in the specific case of Central Asia, only Russia and China, and to a lesser extent, the US, will be discussed in this paper, whereas in Southeast Asia, it is the US and China that can be deemed as real sources of external influence. Other actors, such as the EU, may also contribute to the regional integration and cooperation of these two areas, but they are beyond the scope of discussion of the present paper, because their influence in the regions is much more limited.

Structural realists see the centrality of statehood and the evolving distribution of power in the system as casting significant influence on relations between states, especially in Central Asia and Southeast Asia where the general context corresponds in many ways to what is characterized by structural realists as a “self-help” system. The lack of superior authority

above states implies “the presence of some other, possibly less obvious but surely also more interesting, forms of political structuring” (Modelski, 1978: 216). With an ascending China that attempts to assume a leading role in regional affairs and the *status-quo* dominant powers, namely Russia in Central Asia and the US in Southeast Asia, trying to maintain their decaying influence, both regions are witnessing a fluid power constellation in their spheres. According to pundits of Hegemonic Stability, “as the power of a state increases, it seeks to extend its territorial control, its political influence, and / or its domination of the international economy” (Gilpin, 1981: 106). The *status-quo* power, in order to arrest its relative decline *vis-à-vis* the *revisionist* power, may resort to counterbalancing measures. When it comes to their engagement in a certain region, in a bid to safeguard their strategic, political or economic priorities, great powers may try to institutionalize their influence, leaving options for weaker states to choose whether to counterbalance or bandwagon by taking part in multilateral regimes (Xu, 2010: 39). It then follows that a struggle between great powers for spheres of influence leads to a more determined calculation of interests on the part of secondary states, and could promote regional integration insofar as the institutionalization of influence helps “foster the construction of regional identity”, commensurate with the interests of secondary states, which could in turn “enhance the external power’s legitimacy and decrease its costs of dominance” (Ibid). In trying to actively shape the security environment and create a stable space with like-minded countries, great powers would need to make commitments, establish institutions, seek partnerships, acquire clients, and provide hegemonic leadership (Ikenberry, 2014 :45).

The main motives behind a great powers’ involvement within a certain region are either geopolitical calculations or economic interests, or both. While Andrew Moravcsik posits that in the case of the European integration project economic interests became more important than geopolitical interests during the formation of national preferences, this paper maintains that in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, “the interaction between economics and politics is a fundamental feature” underlying external great powers intentions and their role in both regions (Laursen, 2008: 6; Gilpin, 1981: 67). Due to the highly interdependent world economy, and on account of the great powers’ need for “larger markets, capital outlets, or sources of raw materials” to “expand their political or economic influence”, the prospects



for *survival* are not their only preoccupation (Gilpin, 1981: 70). Instead, both factors compete, or sometimes, reinforce each other in shaping regional integration and cooperation. With regard to geopolitical interests, the shared intention between external powers to maintain peace and stability strengthens security ties and pools security capabilities in the region so as to “aggregate power to counter external threats” (Ikenberry, 2004: 356). In terms of economic considerations, external powers may assume the responsibility of providing “outflow of capital for investment” as well as a “stable international currency supported by discounting (that is, lender of last resort) facilities in times of financial crisis”, thereby facilitating economic interactions and cooperation (Strange, 1987: 563).

As introduced above, external powers need an institutionalized context, since they provide continuity, and repetition (Nabers, 2010). As per Robert Keohane, from a utilitarian viewpoint, institutions produce information that minimizes the *market failure* effect, reduce transaction costs that may incorporate “international organizations that provide forums for meetings and secretariats that can act as catalysts for agreement”, as well as enhance the predictability of future actions from other governments (1984: 90). Jennifer Sterling-Folker argues that “by normalizing rules and procedures, institutions reflect mutually accepted boundaries for behavior and for the achievement of collective goals” (2016: 95). They are essential for the “creation, maintenance and evolution of regional integration projects” and cooperation regimes (Moxon-Browne, 2015: 69). What’s more, a great power’s influence can also be attained by fostering asymmetrical interdependence (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017). Weaker states that are dependent on a strong external power in an institutional context, coupled by “the absence of alternative economic partners”, may choose not to rupture their ties with such power, but instead opt to strategically engage with the power and defer to its regimes in which policy coordination and cooperation can be fomented (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017: 11; Keohane, 1984).

This working paper is in essence a descriptive study, seeking to explain exogenous powers’ role in Central Asian and Southeast Asian integration and cooperation with International Relations theories. A tentative empirical study will be based on observable evidences and the assessment of the role of external great powers will be conducted from both a

geopolitical and economic perspective, drawing upon official statements or press releases from the national governments of these powers and secondary states, as well as upon reports from regional organizations and think-tanks.

## 2 Background of regional integration and cooperation

### 2.1 Central Asia

Located at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, the five Central Asian states are geographically land-locked and historically connected to the USSR. Prospects of regional integration between these states surged following the fragmentation of the Soviet Union in 1991, on account of their proximity, shared material culture, common historical memory and the necessity to find an approach of jointly managing the region's cross-border natural resources (Bohr, 2004: 486). However, a rooted divergence of interests over water resource disputes and other border issues has left their previous ambitious regional blueprints unfulfilled, with the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) and its predecessor entities failing to "harmonize customs, taxation or anti-dumping policies", as well as not being able to create "an interstate system of payments" and any "mechanism for the resolution of disputes" (Bohr, 2004: 487). Concerned with the "hard-won sovereignty", preoccupied with water and energy, and dependent primarily on exports of natural resources that lead to a similar economic model so that "relatively low intraregional trade share" would be expected, Central Asian states generally lack initiatives to deliver concrete regional integration projects, and as a result the spontaneous integration has proven to be arduous (Linn, 2012: 103). On the other hand, rich in mineral and fossil fuel resources particularly in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, this Eurasian heartland attracts foreign powers to develop their own designs and seek to yield economic returns.

Russia, among all the external great powers, has been "exerting [an] overwhelming influence in its southern backyard" since the demise of the USSR, assuming a regional hegemonic role, whether in terms of military or economic (Xu, 2010: 38). Militarily it signed in 1992, with four other newly independent Central Asian states (excluding Turkmenistan) and Armenia, a Collective Security Treaty; economically, it tries to keep them "dependent and isolated from

potential trading partners” and bolster the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC) (Schweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper, 2012: 18). It has regarded the region “as its exclusive province”, controlling their “energy infrastructure and markets” (Kambayashi, 2013). The post-9/11 period has seen the greater involvement of the United States in the region, as it looks to support its war in Afghanistan. This led to the “differing regionalist approaches of the various Central Asian states and the range of practical and political constraints” becoming even more salient, since these states were trying to “maximize strategic benefits” against the backdrop of the renewed Russia-US rivalry (Bohr, 2004: 493). The US and NATO’s interests in the Central Asia waned at the beginning of the 2010s when the Obama Administration announced the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. However, at the same time the new Chinese President, Xi Jinping, launched his grandiose Belt and Road Initiative. China has been growing in strength *vis-à-vis* the US and is dedicated to enhancing the regions connectivity infrastructure so as to boost trade and investment, thus fulfilling the very goal that the CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program) envisioned in 2012 to be comprised of “land-linked economies” as opposed to “land-locked” ones. Combined with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China is resorting to a comprehensive approach in engaging with the region. In sum, “a pattern of ‘great power-sponsored regionalism’ has dominated the development of structures of regional cooperation” (Xu, 2010: 37).

## **2.2 Southeast Asia**

Regional integration in Southeast Asia is led by the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In the face of the threat of expanding communism, originating from the USSR and China, five countries in this subcontinent “strove to avoid being caught into the two superpowers’ [...] confrontations of the Cold War” (Stumbaum, 2015: 133). In other words, the emergence of ASEAN has avoided a sentiment of isolation among the states that “might have led to patron-client relationships with the great powers”, which could in turn reasonably bolster competition among the external great powers in the ASEAN area (Kurus, 1993: 824). In this manner, the external great powers served as “drivers for regional integration efforts among the original ASEAN member states” (Stumbaum, 2015: 133).

As with the Central Asian states *sovereignty* is the bedrock of Southeast Asian regionalization. The overarching principles of non-interference, non-aggression, territorial integrity, sovereignty and the Westphalian values stipulated in the ASEAN Charter highlights this foundation, which brings about what is known as the “ASEAN Way” characterized by a decision-making process of consultation (*musyawarah*) and consensus (*muafakat*). Due to the overriding mutual respect for statehood, coupled with a lack of economic integration initiatives, the incipient mandate of ASEAN was “largely limited to maintaining a dialogue between the members, while attempting to ensure that great power influence was limited in the region” (Rainford, 2011: 133). The aspiration of the founding member-states was to make ASEAN a “Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality” (ZOPFAN), but in reality the “dependence on security guarantees by external parties”, such as the US-Thailand and US-Philippines formal military treaty alliances, as well as the close defense cooperation between Singapore and the US, meant that the efforts to limit external influence was depicted by some as being somewhat “half-hearted” (Ibid).

Aside from the political dimension, the inherent similarity of the industrial structure among the ASEAN nations, just like that among the Central Asian states, exemplified by the “competing manufacturing profiles and small industrial and tertiary sectors”, has foiled their endeavors to foster intra-regional trade (Goh, 2014: 835). As a result, the existence of another external great economic power may be portrayed as a driver for economic integration insofar as the ASEAN region is subsumed into a regional or even global value chain. The advocacy by the Obama Administration for the establishment of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as part of its *pivot towards Asia-Pacific* policy, as well as the China-led Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership (CREP), are examples of such facilitators of regional economic integration and cooperation.

While aspiring to construct an ASEAN Community envisaged in the ASEAN Vision 2020, which includes the ASEAN Economic Community, the ASEAN Security Community (which came into being in 2015) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, ASEAN also goes to great lengths to interact with other external powers, in the context of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summit (EAS). The ARF, comprised of 27

countries, aims to “facilitate cooperation on political and security issues to contribute to regional confidence-building and preventive diplomacy”, whereas the EAS is an annual, informal meeting between key powers and ASEAN leaders which considers security and prosperity in the region (Albert, 2017).

## 3 External great powers as drivers for regional integration and cooperation

### 3.1 External powers interests in regional integration

#### 3.1.1 Central Asia

First and foremost, the maintenance of security and stability in Central Asia forms the shared interests of external great powers in the region, especially for Russia, China and the EU. In spite of their varying objectives ranging from eradicating terrorism, separatism and extremism to counterbalancing new external powers in the region so as to consolidate their sphere of influence, the common goal of promoting peace and security so as to create a stable outer environment in a *neorealist* self-help system by and large accounts for external powers’ interests in sponsoring the regional integration of this heartland, particularly in the cases of Russia and China.

Being part of its *Near Abroad*, Russia sees Central Asia as being vital to its stability and strives to uphold the Soviet-era influence because of “traditional political and economic ties, a persistent linguistic advantage, and still-strong Russian soft power” (Gordon *et al.*, 2008: 155). Following the 9/11 attacks and given the narcotics trafficking and organized crime in Central Asia, the growth of non-state actors threatened regional peace, and compelled Russia and its neighbors to place more emphasis on regional security cooperation (Achweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper, 2012: 13). As a result, led by Russia, the quasi-obsolete Tashkent Treaty was reinvigorated into a new Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002 which contains a scheme of Collective Rapid Reaction Forces. The CSTO originally included all the Central Asian states minus Turkmenistan on account of its adherence to neutrality, although Uzbekistan suspended its membership in 2012. In addition to these newly arising challenges, conventional security concerns and a

preoccupation with *great power politics* has also drawn Moscow's attention. Depicting Central Asia as its "underbelly", Russia "has focused on the need for a stable buffer zone in the south to provide for its military and political security" (Muzalevsky, 2009: 29). The encroachment of external actors into Central Asia, including the US military presence in Kyrgyzstan, NATO's practice of Partnership for Peace with Central Asian states, the influential "color" revolution, as well as growing Chinese assertiveness in terms of security within the framework of SCO all intensify Moscow's discomfort, and have led to it revitalizing its strategy towards Central Asia focusing on counterbalancing strategies, through "regaining authority in Eurasia and reducing the influence of the United States, EU, and China in CA" (Muzalevsky, 2009: 40). To achieve this end, Russia is trying to cultivate strong economic, cultural and political bonds and foster regional integration in its favor, which will be further elaborated in the next section. It should be noted that as a result of Western sanctions and slumping oil prices after its annexation of Crimea, Moscow is becoming economically and diplomatically more and more dependent on Beijing (Stronski, 2018).

In many ways, China and Russia have shared security interests in Central Asia to the extent that they are both "bound by common resentment towards the overwhelming power of the West" and try to "limit the presence of the West, particularly any Western military activity, in their immediate backyards" (Stronski, 2018). Against the backdrop of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and other pro-democratic movements, China has become highly vigilant of Western encroachment. Another growing security concern is the threat of terrorism. Immediately bordering three Central Asian states, China's western province of Xinjiang has long been a breeding ground for Islamist radicals that have orchestrated several fatal domestic attacks. Analysts have pointed out that "a network of fighters is seeking to train and gain experience abroad to ultimately return and fight in China, to destabilize the country in an attempt to create an independent state" in Xinjiang (Pantucci and Lain, 2017: 23). That these terrorist attacks have not only taken place in China but also against Chinese representations abroad such as in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in 2016 when a car exploded outside the Chinese Embassy, has also placed Beijing's foreign interests in the region at risk. Furthermore, against the backdrop of the Tulip Revolution in the Kyrgyzstan and other pro-democratic movements, China has become highly vigilant about Western encroachment in

its neighborhood and seeks to keep this buffer zone free from such Western influences. In many ways, China and Russia have shared security interests in Central Asia to the extent that they are both “bound by common resentment towards the overwhelming power of the West” and try to “limit the presence of the West, particularly any Western military activity, in their immediate backyards” (Stronski, 2018).

Other powers, including the US, also had transitory security interests in Central Asia, due to the short-term need for sustaining the transcontinental warfare in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the general perception of Central Asia by the US as “a theater where America might counter a revival of Russia or China”, the NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, has reduced the importance of Central Asia on the US agenda (Blank in Xu, 2010: 41). However transient the US’ interest is, its presence in Central Asia has provided options for the land-locked states to diversify their security partners and to gain leverage in relation to Russia (Muzalevsky, 2009: 26). This may in turn further incentivize Russia and China to reinvigorate their commitment to the development of the Central Asian states, invest resources to pool them together into their spheres of influence, and meanwhile, cultivate regional identity and institutionalize schemes in support of their national priorities in the region. In addition to its interests in supporting a far-flung war, it has been reported that recently the US has reinforced steadily its bilateral ties with some Central Asian states, namely Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, during the visits to the White House by the Kazakh and Uzbek Heads of State in 2018 a variety of cooperation documents were signed by both parties, ranging from energy to people-to-people topics. However, whether such renewed interests and bilateral collaboration will boost regional integration and cooperation is yet to be observed.

Equally important are the economic interests of the external powers. Their eagerness to “capture a greater share of global wealth [...] (through) greater influence and control over the world economy” shape their strategies to nurture asymmetrical interdependence (Ikenberry and Lain, 2017: 4). Both Russia and China are not only interested in the oil and gas reserves beneath Central Asia, but also in “its transportation and energy distribution

systems, water, and uranium reserves used for nuclear weapons production" (Muzalevsky, 2009: 31; see also Bokarev, 2018; Pantucci and Lain, 2017). By virtue of owning the major trade routes, and given that its domination over the "majority petroleum and natural gas pipelines is both an important source of revenues and an essential part of its bargaining power in Europe and Central Asia", Russia's overarching economic strategy towards its "underbelly" has been to maintain its monopoly over the energy sector in the region and keep it "economically dependent and isolated from potential trading partners" (Schweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper, 2012: 18). In turn, because of the lack of connectivity and transport infrastructure, Central Asian states have limited options but to defer to Russia's dominance. Hence, the creation of an economic union and the arrangements by Moscow demonstrate its ambition to build up a *soft hegemony* insofar as the Russia-led economic system can align Central Asian states' policies with its own priorities without meddling with their domestic institutions, which "amplifies Moscow's global reach and enables it to act like a regional 'gatekeeper' for Eurasia" (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017: 7). As for China, since one of Beijing's priorities is to attract foreign and domestic investment into Xinjiang, it posits that "Xinjiang must not only build its own infrastructure and investment climate, but also increase trade with partner countries over the border" (Pantucci and Lain, 2017: 27). Confronting the internal industrial overcapacity and economic slowdown in China, it is imperative for Beijing to find a solution for large state-owned enterprises in the energy, infrastructure and manufacturing industries (SOEs), and the underdevelopment of Central Asia has drawn Beijing's attention (European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, 2016). Aligned with CA's states need, China's interests and practices in the region driven by economic imperatives look set to bring about substantial progress when it comes to regional integration, since the construction of infrastructure within a multilateral regime founded by it will lead to a reduction of transport costs, thus stimulating intra-regional trade and investment. All of these considerations correspond to the *neoliberal* assumption of the utility of institutions and asymmetrical interdependence.



To sum up, Russia and China, the two external great powers of Central Asia, have generally seen their interests in the region, be they political or economic, converging to a great extent. The expanding cooperation between the two powers in an institutional context not only mitigates tensions and creates a platform for political dialogue for themselves, but also incorporates the Central Asian states into groups where regional identity may be fostered through socialization, and where intra-trade and investment may be boosted through upgraded connectivity and economic harmonization.

### *3.1.2 Southeast Asia*

Like Central Asia, the region of Southeast Asia has also been alluring to the external great powers security interests. However, unlike the former in which both non-traditional threats and the traditional ones concomitantly shape their strategies towards the region, in the arena of Southeast Asia, the perception of traditional threats to security has constituted the main motive for engagement, albeit non-conventional threats have been increasing in significance since the 9/11 attacks.

Southeast Asia has always been deemed vital by the US to balance other expansionist powers in the neighborhood craving regional hegemony. Through alliance building, the US managed to ensure in the 1960s that “the Philippines, South Vietnam and Thailand anchored American security policy in Southeast Asia”, and the founding members of ASEAN, the ASEAN Five, were largely depicted as a “corporate embodiment of the ideological orientation of its member states” in favor of the West and against communism (Ganesan, 2000: 260). By virtue of the US presence in the region, notably in Thailand and the Philippines, the ASEAN Five has generally resisted the extension of communist power, and “ASEAN’s anti-communist characters became firmly established from 1975 onwards” following US defeat in Vietnam. However, US influence in Southeast Asia eroded as the end of the Cold War dissolved the primary assumption that expansionist Vietnam was the existential threat to regional security, as well as because of “Thailand’s gravitation towards China for external security and a resurgence of Philippine nationalism culminating in the

American withdrawal from the Clark Airfield and Subic Bay Naval Base in 1991" (Ganesan, 2000: 269). Still, the US wielded substantial interests in buttressing its influence *vis-à-vis* the emerging China as the regional *hegemon*, evidenced by the harsh rhetoric during the early Bush Administration against China following a warplane collision above the South China Sea in April 2001 (Limaye, 2013). Nonetheless, the 9/11 attacks shifted the US interests with regard to Southeast Asia and also impacted upon Sino-US relations in the region. In concentrating on combatting terrorism and given that Southeast Asia was allegedly an area where "Al-Qaeda terrorists had lived, travelled and cooperated with other groups", the US has adopted a more accommodative posture with China in relation to its assertiveness in the South China Sea (Limaye, 2003: 81). Under the Obama Administration, the US reoriented its strategy towards Asia-Pacific and carried out comprehensive measures to safeguard its interests and made efforts to increase its ties, be they economic, diplomatic or security with the Southeast Asian countries. This included promoting free navigation in the South China Sea, another key US priority in the region due to the passing of US trade worth \$1.2 trillion through these waters (White House, 2011). Currently, a coherent strategy towards Southeast Asia under Trump is yet to be discerned, since the economic arm is being downplayed by the US, but scholars have also pointed out that the regional structural imperatives characterized by China's military assertiveness and the check-and-balance of the US bureaucratic system imply "more continuity than breaks from recent policies" (Limaye, 2017: 16). Broadly speaking, the US presence and its interests in balancing the expansion of external powers, namely the Soviet Union in the Cold War era and China nowadays, have generally maintained regional stability and fostered dialogue, political coordination and ideological similarity, without which further regional integration would have been more difficult.

If Beijing's territorial claim in the South China Sea is problematic for ASEAN internal political cohesion, then its economic motives and associated policies are largely perceived to be a catalyst for regional economic integration. China has long been identifying itself as a developing country, with its central goal premised on sustained economic development, an

imperative also relevant with, and consented by, Southeast Asian countries in which “nation-building in the underdeveloped and often ethnically disparate ASEAN states entailed delivering economic growth to ensure regime legitimacy” (Goh, 2014: 834). Accordingly, “China, as the rising economic powerhouse, lent weight and momentum to translating the shared developmental imperative into economic regionalism” (Ibid). This common goal, compounded by Beijing’s economic inducement, is strategically important for China since it diffuses the already strained political relations with Southeast Asian states.

To a lesser extent, some pundits observed that Beijing’s political interests in Southeast Asian integration ultimately rest upon promoting neutrality by nurturing what *neoliberalists* call asymmetrical interdependence through economic inducements, so that in case of a confrontation between Beijing and Washington, the states in the region would remain neutral (Tata, 2017). This forms one of the motives behind the BRI that involves Southeast Asia, since Beijing seeks to strategically “hedge against the naval dominance of the US” in its “underbelly” by “improving physical connectivity on the landmass” (Leung, 2018: 6, 7).

All in all, US political interests in Southeast Asia, driven by a balancing objective, have compelled it not only to forge alliances but also to engage in comprehensive approaches that may cultivate a common ideology and boost the regional economy. Whereas China’s economic interests in the region may foster more cooperative initiatives, so as to mitigate political tension over maritime disputes. Although India has been reported to also demonstrate interests in Southeast Asia, however, the fact that New Delhi is still struggling to reinforce power in its own region, South Asia, *vis-à-vis* China and Pakistan, limits its scope of influence.

## 3.2 Achievements

### 3.2.1 *Central Asia*

The great powers' security and economic interests in Central Asia have brought about a wide range of ongoing concrete projects aimed at boosting regional integration and cooperation and have thereby delivered actual advancement on integration that the Central Asian states alone might hardly have been able to achieve. In light of their desire to cement influence, both Russia and China have consistently engaged in institution-building and have encouraged the enhancement of economic integration and cooperation. The fact that Russia has little choice but to cooperate with a more assertive China due to Moscow's isolation in a broader international context and that they both conceive western encroachment in the Central Asia as latent threat in effect laid the foundation for their joint efforts and involvement with this heartland. In short, Russia and China's achievements as drivers of integration and cooperation in Central Asia can be discerned from those progressive integration initiatives that they are undertaking, as well as their elevated economic interaction in the region. The development of the SCO led by China and CSTO led by Russia in security terms, on the one hand, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) led by the latter and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) led by the former, on the other hand, are telling examples in this regard.

Derived from the Shanghai Five, the SCO was officially instituted in 2001 with the accession of Uzbekistan. Nowadays, the SCO is comprised of eight member-states, including India and Pakistan. Designed as an intergovernmental scheme, the SCO adopted its charter in 2002, laying emphasis on "the sovereign equality of states and the rejection of hegemony and coercion in international affairs" (Schweickert, Melnykovska and Plamper, 2012: 7). Premised on the China-proposed "Shanghai Spirit" - which refers to "mutual trust, mutual benefits, equality, respect for different civilizational backgrounds and mutual prosperity", the organization pledges to address the common "three evils" that member-states are facing, namely terrorism, extremism and separatism (Kundu, 2017). Institutionally, there are two

permanent entities, with the SCO Secretariat in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent (The SCO, 2017). Heads of states convene every year to outline all the most important issues in the framework of the Heads of State Council (HSC), with the last one concluded in China in June 2018. In addition, there are mechanisms for meetings at different levels, ranging from heads of parliament to cabinet ministers. In a speech delivered by Evgeny Sysoev, Executive Committee Director of the SCO RATS, it was revealed that between 2013 and 2016 the SCO relevant authorities “suppressed over 550 crimes of a terrorist and extremist nature at the preparatory stage, eliminated over 500 terrorist training facilities, prevented criminal activities of more than 1,500 members of foreign terrorist organizations” (2017). Worthy of mention is the role of the RATS in agenda setting, coordinating national agencies, training personnel, facilitating joint military exercises and developing relations with other regional and international institutions. Initiatives such as the Integrated Investigative Registry and Joint Measures on Key Areas of Cooperation enable joint actions to “identify, detain, prosecute and extradite citizens who have been put on international wanted lists on suspicion of committing crimes of terrorist, separatist and extremist nature” (Ibid). Increased contacts with INTERPOL, the ASEAN, the UN and other entities have paved the way for the SCO’s “integration into the global system of international security” (Ibid). As well as focusing on the security field, the scope of cooperation within the SCO has extended to a wide range of other areas such as “trade, energy, education, cultural communication and tourism” (Xu, 2010: 44). The SCO Inter-Bank Association founded in 2005 and the SCO Business Council have been providing loans and technical aid for participant countries, and according to the SCO Secretary-General, a SCO Development Bank is already under preparation (NBD, 2018). All in all, given that China’s interests in regional security largely align with those of Russia and the Central Asian states, integration and cooperation has been pragmatically fostered.

Led by Russia, the CSTO was revitalized from the former CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Collective Security Treaty, also known as the Tashkent Treaty which had been rhetorically ambitious about regional security cooperation with little concrete practice.

Alerted by the lease of an airfield in Kyrgyzstan to the US-led coalition after the 9/11 attacks, Russia started “promoting the organization with particular zeal following the arrival of US-led coalition troops” and reinvented the CSTO in the same year (Bohr, 2004: 489). Bound by the CSTO, member-states “are obliged to assist each other with necessary means (military means included) in cases of aggression” against any other member-state (Xu, 2010: 46). The key scheme which was originally proposed by Russia is the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces (CRRF) that pools “battalions from the national armies of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan” with a joint military command based in Moscow to oversee the CRRF (Bohr, 2004: 489). The arrival of US-led forces in Central Asia enabled states in the region to “balance Russia’s attempts to project its regional dominance”, which “triggered a revitalization of Russia’s policies in the region” (Muzalevsky, 2009: 39). Regarded as the “basis for an effort at competitive regionalism” *vis-à-vis* initiatives by other powers, such as the NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP), the CSTO is another example of Central Asian security integration and cooperation sponsored by external great powers (Allison in Xu, 2010: 46).

Integration and cooperation in the economic realm have been somewhat slower than in the security field, due to overlapping export markets and a lack of willingness for economic integration (Lynn, 2012). Had Russia not strongly pushed for the Eurasian economic integration, the appeal from Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev, recognized as “the ‘godfather’ of the Eurasian project”, would not have materialized (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017: 6). Upgraded from the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) founded in 2000, the EAEU came into being in 2015 based on the accomplishments of the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) established in 2010 which included Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus and was enlarged to incorporate Kyrgyzstan and Armenia (Ibid). Possessing its own legal personality, the EAEU has a prominent “supranational” system, characterized institutionally by the Council of the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Court of the EAEU, but inter-governmentalism still dominates the mode of cooperation of the Union (EAEU, n.d.). Although it lacks meaningful commitment from its Member-States and is often criticized as a political “tool consolidating and strengthening authoritarianism in Eurasia”, the EAEU driven by Russia’s eagerness to maintain its economic influence in the region has developed

into a “functional, rules-based framework and a [...] new cohesive economic entity” (Libman, 2018; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2017: 3). Furthermore, China has signed a Free Trade Agreement with the EAEU which is expected to take effect in 2019 – a sparkling prospect for further regional economic integration as the result of the reduction of non-tariff trade barriers (Xinhua, 2018).

Another economic integration initiative backed by an external great power is China’s BRI. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road that cut across Central Asia, the BRI displays an impetus for regional integration and cooperation. Ideationally, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) under the auspices of the BRI is comprised of six land economic corridors, two of which pass through the landmass of Central Asia. The underlying objectives of the BRI cover “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds”. The Kamchiq Tunnel in Uzbekistan, the gas pipeline between Turkmenistan and China, the Vahdat-Yavan Railway in Tajikistan, the China-Europe Railway Express linking China’s East Coast to Western Europe via Kazakhstan, and other grand projects have not only fulfilled China’s interests, but also helped realize those land-locked countries’ common desire to become “land-linked”. Furthermore, not merely is China seeking to upgrade infrastructure and connectivity by partly filling the infrastructure deficit in Asia estimated by the Asian Development Bank to be as much as \$8 trillion, but also it is endeavoring to facilitate trade by setting up a Free Trade Area (FTA) with leaders from the SCO. Herrero and Xu’s analysis (2016) posits that a reduction in transport costs may positively boost trade in Central Asia. In terms of financial cooperation China has been committed to the funding of infrastructure projects, in partnership with other international or regional financial institutions, through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Silk Road Fund, with the former being “portrayed as facilitating financial development and integration along the BRI” (Pantucci and Lain, 2017: 96). China’s involvement in Central Asia exhibits incentives for states to decrease their dependency on Russia and boost intra-regional and inter-regional trade thanks to an infrastructure amelioration. On the other hand, acknowledging the centrality of sovereignty in the region, China prioritizes the BRI cooperation in its bilateral form and perceives that “broader regional economic trade and cooperative initiatives must come from states themselves” (Lain, 2018:10). As such, leaders

of the region have endorsed the BRI, "hoping it will jumpstart stagnating economies, enhance socioeconomic stability and bring an influx of follow-on investment" (Stronski, 2018).

To summarize, the presence of external powers has created some impetus for regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia, both in the security and economic realms, which could hardly have been fulfilled with the strong emphasis on the preservation of sovereignty and the lack of willingness from the Central Asian states to spontaneously integrate them. However, integration and cooperation in the security domain has been faster than in the economic one, due to the convergence of interests of China, Russia and states in the region in countering external threats, and has since been successful in pooling resources, coordinating intelligence and training personnel, and combating threats; while in economic terms, several initiatives have facilitated trade and investment, but the incipient BRI and the currently stagnated EAEU requires future observation.

### 3.2.2 Southeast Asia

As opposed to in Central Asia, the great powers have seen their interests in Southeast Asia collide with each other in an anarchic context wherein rising and declining *hegemons* compete for influence, thus making their actual influence on regional integration and cooperation harder to dissect. Not forsaking the complexity of relationships in the region, the US' presence has generally provided the Southeast Asian states with security protection and fostered ideological proximity, while intra-regional trade among the ASEAN countries has been promoted as a result of China's economic inducement.

The fact that the geopolitical significance of Southeast Asia invites great power involvement makes it hard for states in the region to be devoted to their proclaimed *neutrality*. By and large, it is the "state of US-China relations, and how each power conducts itself in the region, that will determine how much strategic room ASEAN has to operate" (Nguyen, 2016). As demonstrated previously, US security interests in the region mainly grow out of concerns over conventional threats, which have led to formal military alliances with Thailand and the



Philippines, while “Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have robust defense relationships with the US encompassing military exchanges, joint training and exercises, and defense trade” (Searight, 2017: 3). However, the long-standing tight military partnership inherited from the Cold War era between the US and several Southeast Asian states remains of strategic importance in the 21st Century, since it plays a stabilizing role in managing conflicts, be it in the Korean Peninsula or surrounding the South China Sea (Nham, 2013). Even shortly after the disintegration of the USSR when the US’ interests and influence in the region are understood to have been greatly diminished given the dissolution of external soviet threats, the US still wielded influence on regional integration issues, evidenced by the fact that not until the US had lifted its diplomatic embargo did ASEAN enlarge itself to include Vietnam in 1995 (Ganesan, 2000). From the perspective of ASEAN, the common perception among member states that the US would not intervene militarily allows them to push for integration and cooperation through multilateral institutions-building (Nham, 2013). Although one of the pillars of Obama’s *pivot* to the Asia-Pacific strategy, the TPP, which aimed to contain China’s economic influence and maintain its leadership was annulled by the Trump Administration fueling fears that US may merely focus on security and military dimension rather than a comprehensive approach still, during its first-year, the Trump administration “sought to maintain the pivot’s momentum” (Searight, 2018). The concept of navigation operations (FONOPs) which were first proposed under Trump’s predecessor have been upheld by the current US government, with the last operation being held in 2017 (Panda, 2017). Furthermore, the “Indo-Pacific” notion adopted by the incumbent White House does not deviate from Obama’s *pivot*, and would “impact the foreign policies of regional states due to the need for greater policy coordination and collective response to common threats” (Rabena, 2018). However, as many scholars have indicated, to boost regional integration and cooperation necessitates other economic and diplomatic efforts that are underestimated in current US policy (Searight, 2017).

In contrast, Beijing appears to have a more coherent approach, centered on the economy, in coping with its southeastern neighbors, with the goal of cultivating asymmetrical interdependence by economic inducements. It pushes the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) and the BRI and contributes to the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

initiative. The lack of results of the ASEAN states' 30-year-long attempt to achieve intra-regional trade gave way to Beijing which has driven the huge demand for Southeast Asian products, and the ACFTA permits China to "galvanize the economic integration project toward a broader regionalism" (Goh, 2014: 835). China-ASEAN bilateral trade reached \$514.8 billion in 2017, a surge from the \$232 billion in 2010 when the FTA came into force (Xinhua, 2018; Goh, 2014). The increasing economic interdependence between China and ASEAN which caters for China's interests by drawing ASEAN into its economic orbit may significantly "increase the costs of any regional opposition to China in the future" (Goh, 2014: 834). Moreover, the GMS which consists of China and five other continental Southeast Asian countries is an initiative of the Asian Development Bank which aims to attract foreign investments in high-priority sub-regional projects, such as agriculture, energy, infrastructure, urban development, etc. When partnered with the BRI, which is mentioned by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and given that five GMS countries have already signed a BRI cooperation agreement with Beijing, this may further connect these countries to the huge Chinese market because of the amelioration of railway connectivity and upgrading of international ports. Trade may also be bolstered due to the facilitation caused by other economic cooperation schemes, e.g. the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Zone, the Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor, and to a broader extent, the Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership (CREP) (Hong, 2015).

## 4 Concluding remarks

After the examination of the external great powers' search for influence in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, both of which underscore the notion of *sovereignty* and remain cautious about integration, several preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, interpreted through the *neorealist* prism, external great powers have strong interests in pursuing and consolidating their external sphere of influence, and have institutionalized their influence in both regions, whether by creating a security coalition or establishing multilateral economic regimes. The pooling and coordination of national resources and personnel in the security dimension, as well as the grand economic initiatives that consolidate its regional influence, both contribute to regional integration and cooperation which would have hardly appeared

had the external parties not pushed for it. Secondly, although integration and cooperation are mainly sponsored by external great powers in both regions, differences in terms of the field of integration and cooperation can be observed. While in Central Asia the convergence of security interests between Russia and China out of *realist* concerns leads to a developed mechanism of regional integration and cooperation. The fact that Russia needs China in a broader context makes Russia endorse Chinese-led initiatives, notably the BRI, which may greatly stimulate regional integration in economic terms. Nevertheless, in Southeast Asia the divergence of interests between the US and China produces almost no - except the loose and informal ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit - cooperation scheme that is brings together both powers, with each of them pursuing distinct strategies and attempting to check and balance each other's power. Still, in Southeast Asia security collaboration and ideological proximity has been fostered largely by the US, whereas regional economic integration has been pushed by China in recent years. Thirdly, countries in both regions strategically navigate between, and engage with, external great powers so as to gain leverage. From a neoliberal perspective, Beijing has been focusing more and more on nurturing asymmetrical interdependence within institutional framework in these two regions, potentially eroding the *status quo* *hegemons'* influence while winning deference from weaker states which take part in multilateral regimes where policy coordination and economic cooperation are fomented. Further study is required to comprehensively investigate the role of exogenous forces in shaping regional integration and cooperation, which may encompass the influence of middle powers, the perception of ruling elites, the domestic circumstances, the role of institutions as well as the limited role of external powers in driving such processes.

## Abbreviations

ACFTA	ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CACO	Central Asian Cooperation Organization
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CREP	Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership
CRRF	Collective Rapid Reaction Forces
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EACU	Eurasian Customs Union
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAS	East Asia Summit
EU	European Union
EURASEC	Eurasian Economic Community
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PfP	Partnership for Peace
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

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