

## Event report:

# China's and Russia's Security Engagement in Central Asia - Suggestions for a European Response

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In cooperation with the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC) the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (MDPD) organized a closed-door, Chatham House rules background talk “China’s and Russia’s Security Engagement in Central Asia – Suggestions for a European Response”. The event was hosted by the EPP Group Coordinator for Foreign Affairs MEP Michael Gahler (DE) and brought together around 35 experts from the institutions of the European Union, NATO, academia, and the think tank sector. Based on the findings of the recent KAS study titles “China’s Security and Military Cooperation in Central Asia and its relevance to Europe”, and in light of the current geopolitical crisis in Ukraine, the participants discussed Central Asia’s rising relevance for Europe.

The study authored by Farkhod Aminjonov argues that the “division of labour”<sup>1</sup> between China and Russia in the region does no longer apply. Russia’s dominance in the political and military sphere is now accompanied by Chinese rising engagement in regional security mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as bilaterally with the Central Asian states. In addition to protecting its economic interests and assets in the region, China provides, among other things, bilateral military support and training, and military technology transfer, as well as installation of surveillance and

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<sup>1</sup> Farkhod Aminjonov, ‘China’s Security and Military Cooperation in Central Asia and Its Relevance to Europe’, 29 June 2022.

facial recognition software in public spaces. Furthermore, Chinese arms deliveries account for up to 20% of some nation's imports, up from around 2 % in 2014. However, although China is engaging on an increasing scale in the region, it does not pose a direct challenge to the Russian dominance. With up to 80% approval rate for the Russian Federation, the Sino-Russian "marriage of convenience" is unlikely to be contested in Central Asia. Further, despite the support of Central Asian governments for Chinese involvement in the region, there is growing discontent within the population about these developments. As the study elaborates, the financial influx China provides only supports the ruling elites and does not benefit the general population, and in addition, the suppression of minorities in Western China does not benefit its image abroad. In light of these developments, Europe could provide a values-driven alternative to both Chinese and Russian engagement with Central Asian countries. As the author states, while *"China [...] offers Central Asian 'authoritarian' leaders what they need to ensure their regime security, [Europe] might offer what Central Asian countries need to establish a resilient society to effectively address existing and emerging security and military threats"*<sup>2</sup>.

Following the findings of the study, the ensuing discussion further elaborated on the implications of China's rising influence in the region for Europe, as well as policy recommendations for the EU. Perceived as a proponent of economic engagement and as a civil society advocate, Europe should especially focus on its values driven agenda in its engagement with the region. Additionally, the EU's approach to Central Asia as a region with cross-border security concerns and the potential for a regional response to these concerns, can be further developed. Europe therewith provides an alternative to Chinese and Russian dominance which helps the Central Asian countries to strengthen their resilience.

In his closing remarks, Janne Leino, Programme Manager Foreign and Security Policy and at KAS MDPD, outlined three areas in which the EU should further strengthen its approach to the region: Firstly, on a strategic level the changes in EU-Russia and EU-China-relations need to be taken into account. The 2019 EU Strategy on Central Asia doesn't name these two countries. Secondly, on a framework and partnership level, the EU should evaluate its regional engagement, which aims to bring the five Central Asian states closer together. Currently, both the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the

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<sup>2</sup> Farkhod Aminjonov, 'China's Security and Military Cooperation in Central Asia and Its Relevance to Europe', 29 June 2022.

Chinese-led SCO are active in the region. This raises the question, through which partners the EU can work in the whole region? The EU could strengthen its regional engagement through organizations like the UN or the OSCE, which have a wide network in the area, as well as look for bilateral engagement options with like-minded partners. Finally, Europe needs to clearly define and communicate its own goals and interests in the region. While these in 2019 were focused on topics like the worsening security situation in Afghanistan and energy transition, the current Russian aggression in Ukraine has put other topics, like energy security, in closer focus both in Central Asia as well as in Europe.

The outcomes of the discussion and the findings of Mr Aminjonov's study will be synthesized in a policy paper and published in autumn.