

Central Asia is China's Backyard, Not Russia's

By [Casey Michel](#)

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Late last month, as Ukraine descended further into chaos and Georgia's NATO dreams seemed to slip further yet, President Vladimir Putin twirled a pair of geopolitical maneuvers that looked, once more, to both outwit and outpace a stumbling West.

Firstly, after a decade of rancorous debate, Putin managed to finalize a gas deal with China, seemingly mitigating a potential shut-off in Europe. Secondly, Putin met with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Belarussian President Aleksander Lukashenko to finalize the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, or EEU.

"[Putin] got the most important things he wanted and just about everything he could reasonably expect: a Sino-Russian partnership; a new union to bolster post-Soviet hegemony; a solidification of Russia's return to geopolitical preeminence," said Stephen Walt, one of the doyens of the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

But if you scratch the surface, and move beyond the flash bulbs and forced smiles, it becomes

rapidly apparent that the Kremlin's maneuverings have achieved little. Not only has the hegemony Russia desires failed to materialize, but Moscow, by dint of its own mismanagement, has begun ceding the regional weight it once maintained. Unfortunately, it appears that Walt, who claimed the deal would seal Gazprom a "tidy profit," has bought a bit too much into Russian spin.

Take the Chinese gas deal, for instance. While the fact that a deal came through was, indeed, something Putin could claim as achievement, the details that have emerged since paint a picture weighted heavily in China's favor.

Not only will the gas Gazprom plans to transit to China, at 38 billion cubic meters annually, represent only about one-quarter of the amount the Kremlin currently transits to Europe, but the reasoning behind the deal looks like it could enervate an already sagging Russian economy.

The deal's presentation as an equitable partnership between Russia and China is simply false. Even if the infrastructure and supply match the current agreement — and new details could very well emerge showing the reality even further in China's favor — Russia's flow represents barely half of what Beijing will be set to receive from Turkmenistan.

Indeed, China's investments in Central Asia will only continue to undercut the hopes Russia has at reclaiming the geopolitical significance it so sorely desires. For while Russian influence continues to merely falter in Eastern Europe and through the bulk of the southern Caucasus, it has, quietly but quickly, ceded economic hegemony in Central Asia.

If the EEU is not something of a blinkered, last-gasp effort at retaining the salience and status Russia once enjoyed in Central Asia, it certainly seems close.

The issues of the Eurasian Union have been pored over multiple times. Kazakhstan expended significant effort stymieing Russian attempts at expanding the EEU's political capacities, blocking moves at common currency and unified parliament, while Belarus took it only on the conditions of substantial subsidies from Moscow. And while the union will likely expand to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, its weight is effectively nullified by Ukraine's non-participation.

But it is not simply that the EEU will almost certainly fail to live up to its potential, or hang as another milquetoast post-Soviet grouping.

Rather, it is China's economic and infrastructure surge in Central Asia that should pull the region that much further into Beijing's orbit. And if, as Carnegie's Martha Brill Olcott observed, President Xi Jinping's 2013 Central Asian swing represented a "victory lap," China has only accelerated its clip — while pocketing the lopsided Russian gas pact alongside.

Just examine the deals China managed to find at last month's Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, held in Shanghai. Not only did China manage to continue its gas expansion with Turkmenistan, but Beijing, which had already surpassed Russia in trade volume in Central Asia, also extended security, water and economic arrangements with Kazakhstan.

And only a few after CICA's conclusion, a new pipeline in the Chinese–Central Asia network came online, set to nearly double the current gas transit rate by next year — all while Central Asia's transit to and through Russia continues to plunge. China has managed to outflank Russia in the one region that would seem to require Moscow's presence most.

To be sure, there are certain barriers remaining within China's continued expansion in the region. Sinophobia remains rampant on the ground. And interestingly, the one thing the EEU may be able to accomplish, at least in the short-term, is a slight slowing of Beijing's economic swell in the region, centered namely on Kyrgyzstan's resale business from China. But the union will likely fail to stymie Beijing's continued economic dominance of the region.

China's position will likely become even stronger with time, all the more so as Russia slides toward recession with Crimea hanging as one more fiscal millstone around its neck. The economic divergence of Moscow and Beijing is all but inevitable — and the Sino–Russian gas deal sums it as well as anything.

No matter how many photo ops or calls on Eurasianist identity and shared history Putin makes, it is Chinese clout, not Russian neo-imperialism, which will dictate Central Asia's direction moving forward.

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