



*KIMEP University  
Department of International Relations and Regional Studies  
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## **Role Competition in Central Asia?**

**Network Analysis, Role Theory and Great Power Regionalism:  
A Framework for Analysis**

– CEERES Master's Thesis –

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*Timon Ostermeier, Almaty, 22.08.2022*

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*Role Competition in Central Asia? Network Analysis, Role Theory and Great Power Regionalism: A Framework for Analysis*

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## **Abstract:**

The present thesis develops an analytical framework that rests on three pillars: 1. Network Analysis; 2. Role Theory; 3. Neorealism. These theoretical and analytical approaches have been hitherto disconnected in IR and FPA, despite their potential for synthesis. Through a critical appreciation of each approach, the author highlights their interoperability and reconceptualizes central themes in international relations such as the agency-structure debate, the concept of power, interdependence and institutions, and the security dilemma. It comes to the conclusion that the analysis of real-world phenomena needs to take into account both material and ideational factors, since ideational and material structures are inextricably interlinked in the conduct of foreign policy.

The second part of the thesis applies this analytical framework to the regional case of Central Asia, and traces how great powers have engaged in role competition between 2007 and 2022. In an interpretative content analysis, it finds 13 roles conceptualized by the United States and Russia respectively; five of them are the most salient ones. In addition, it explores the roles enacted by the European Union and China.

The main finding is that the great powers engage in competitive role-play and reject each other's role conceptions; create conflicting role expectations; and eventually find themselves in ideational security dilemmas that are partially characterized by capacity-identity gaps. Importantly, the case demonstrates the interdependence of regional subsystems through international feedback loops. Role location processes in the Central Asian network cluster contributed to the deterioration of great power relations – and conflictual great power relations shaped the regional context.

**Keywords:** *International Relations (IR) theory; Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA); Role Theory; Network Analysis; Neorealism; Great Power Regionalism; Ideational Security Dilemma; Ontological Security; K.J. Holsti; Analytical Eclecticism; Role Competition; Central Asia*



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## *Preface: Motivation and genesis of the thesis*

The following thesis is the product of a long, interdisciplinary road. Having already completed my undergrad in European Studies, I ventured into another interdisciplinary area studies program, this time with three universities on board and a specialization in Russian and Eurasian Studies. I strongly benefitted from experiencing education at three – four or even five, counting my bachelor's alma mater and a semester abroad – universities. Thereby I learned that your academic worldview can be heavily shaped by the respective departments you are studying at, since each of them is shaped by different scientific approaches and paradigms preferred by their teaching staff.

This intellectual, sometimes contradictory exchange shaped the making of this thesis.

At the University of Tartu, I was introduced to the program with a course on social science methodology that is based on King, Keohane and Verba's ("KKV") 1994 book<sup>1</sup> on social inquiry, a heavily positivist approach to social science that tries to emulate the language of natural sciences. I learned to keep a research design parsimonious, operationalize concepts, and establish validity and reliability for the measurement. Most importantly, I learned to stick to clearly defined independent and dependent variables in what its critics call "simplistic hypothesis testing".<sup>2</sup> The aim, I was taught, is not to study a phenomenon for the sake of studying it, but for filling a research gap or theoretical puzzle.

The challenge I faced then was to reconcile this scientific approach with my primary regional interest in a proper thesis. My practical interest had been clear: I wanted to study how the great powers of today's world engage with Central Asia and how they shape the region. It was clear that I had to push it, following the teachings of KKV, into the scheme of an independent and dependent variable. This was quite straightforward. I formulated great powers' foreign policies as the independent variable and regional political integration as the dependent variable, and thought of several hypotheses and research questions around how great powers may compete with each other over influence, and what kind of tools they would use.

The first feedback from Tartu criticized that I incorporated the three different mainstream international relations (IR) paradigms in my conceptualizations – namely, realism, liberalism and constructivism – despite their different epistemological and ontological footings. Especially the mix of constructivist conceptualization with liberalism and realism spurred confusion. (At the

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<sup>1</sup> King, Keohane, and Verba 1994

<sup>2</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; see also George and Bennett 2005, chap. 1.

same time, a fellow student of mine at another university had been asked by her supervising IR professor to include constructivism with one of the other approaches in her analysis.)

In Glasgow, they deviated from the ‘independent variable causes dependent variable’ scheme and presented us with interpretative approaches such as discourse and content analysis or grounded theory. This was also the time when I got in touch with a rather new concept, “great power regionalism”, which reflected my research interest in how outside great powers shape the region of Central Asia. My supervisors, however, remained critical about me marrying the different IR perspectives, suggesting I should either stick with material approaches (liberalism/realism) or analyze the language of policy documents. So I found myself at the crossroads of material and ideational approaches. But I comprehended constructivist concepts (norms, ideas, identities) and material factors (military, economy, technology) as complementary to each other in order to analyze great power politics in Central Asia in its full capacity: if one power may utilize trade or security arrangements as the content of its relations with Central Asia, another one could use cultural exchange or invigorate identities and norms. Yet I did not understand international relations as speech acts (and did not want to employ a discourse analysis) but as interactions and exchange relationships on both ideational and material levels. Both ideas and material capabilities matter, even if to different degrees.

Luckily, I found out that I am not alone in this view. Earlier, IR scholar Kalevi Holsti provided a seminal framework for the analysis of international politics, which cut through ideational and material dimensions and included the structural and the state-level of analysis.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil promote the idea of Analytical Eclecticism.<sup>4</sup> In their critique, paradigm-bound research is parsimonious but faces boundaries when it tries to explain real-world phenomena and outcomes. Since these paradigms developed in reaction to each other, they are inter-connected. And even *within* the paradigms, one can find ontological or epistemological debates. The boundaries between the paradigms are therefore overstated. Instead of filling gaps or advancing paradigm-bound research, according to Katzenstein and Sil, problem-driven accounts of complex practical phenomena are needed. This would be of use for both academia and policymakers.

At the same time, I encountered another approach that I had not been taught in IR/Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) classrooms: Role Theory. Although role theory does not feature course reading lists, it gained traction in literature over the past two decades. In line with analytical eclecticism,

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<sup>3</sup> Holsti 1972

<sup>4</sup> Sil and Katzenstein 2010; Katzenstein and Sil 2008

it has been recognized for its value in bridging the disciplinary subdivision between FPA and IR, the agency and structure divide, as well as the three major IR paradigms.

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This thought process took place against the broader background of a shifting global order. The economic center of gravity shifted eastwards, expressed in Peter Frankopan's *The New Silk Roads*,<sup>5</sup> Bruna Maçães's *The Dawn of Eurasia*,<sup>6</sup> and Gideon Rachman's *Easternization: War and Peace in the Asian Century*.<sup>7</sup> Dani Rodrik's globalization trilemma assumed that globalization, democracy and national sovereignty cannot be reconciled,<sup>8</sup> and illiberalism and populism seemed to be the answer. Some asked whether the European Union can be saved.<sup>9</sup> Herfried Münkler theorized that military power and territoriality will continue to play a role, but questions of non-territorial control, conflict and world order will be dominated by economic power.<sup>10</sup> Others, well before the pandemic, pointed to the various systemic risks lurking in a complex world, where a crisis in one region can spark into another.<sup>11</sup> The Ukraine conflict between Russia and the EU and the United States, and the rise of China hinted that great power conflicts return to the forefront of international relations. Especially the competition between China and the United States rose questions about peace and war and the so-called 'Thucydides's trap'.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, we would expect that great power rivalries do not spare Central Asia. The sandwich location between China and Russia, and, in a broader sense, the European Union, gives it a specifically interesting angle.

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Since the beginning of my academic studies, I have been interested in holistic approaches that paint a comprehensive picture of the social world.

For one, this is exemplified in the structural approaches explaining what drives inter-state relations beyond domestic politics. Having grown rather unpopular, neorealist John Mearsheimer's offensive realism is regularly criticized as shallow or uncomplex. Having engaged with his major theoretical writings (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* and *The Great Delusion. Liberal Dreams and International Realities*)<sup>13</sup>, I do not share this view. The core argument of his

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<sup>5</sup> Frankopan 2018

<sup>6</sup> Maçães 2019

<sup>7</sup> Rachman 2017

<sup>8</sup> Rodrik 2012

<sup>9</sup> Tsoukalis 2016

<sup>10</sup> Münkler 2015, 278–80

<sup>11</sup> Verkhivker 2015

<sup>12</sup> Allison 2017; Mearsheimer 2001, 360–411

<sup>13</sup> Mearsheimer 2001; 2018

realism revolves around material calculations and the balance of power. Surprisingly, I found many arguments that resonate with ideational-constructivist lines of reasoning. Especially in his second main book, *The Great Delusion*, he undergirds his structural realism by explaining such factors as fear, perception, nationalism, and ideology. Therefore, it is especially the constructivist way of thinking that appears as a proper supplement for realist explanations of contemporary world politics.

Second, even before my closer engagement with IR theory and realism, I grew skeptical of explanations of social events that put a single ‘great person’ at the forefront of the story. For example, other than explaining German totalitarianism and WWII by the personality and psychology of Hitler, it was of more interest to me how a society, turning from polarization into a strong, cohesive hierarchy, carried the totalitarian system.<sup>14</sup> Being a university student and spending a semester abroad in Siberia helped me expand this view on social complexity: Whilst conventional wisdom in Western Europe dates WWII from 1939 to 1945, the war had already started in the Pacific between Japan and China almost two years earlier; and in Russia and Kazakhstan, to my surprise back then, WWII does not have a place as such but is supplemented by remembering and celebrating the “Great Patriotic War” from 1941 to 1945.

The latter insight motivated me to an interpretative study of the Russian collective memory in politics, day-to-day life and public opinion surveys. There, I found that Russian politics and commemoration culture cannot be explained by resorting to one person (Putin). Instead, several civic and political actors shape the collective memory; conflicts over historical representations occur below the level of the Kremlin.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, grappling with social complexity and reductionist attempts of the social sciences, the latest writings of the historian Niall Ferguson caught my attention.<sup>16</sup> He introduces network science – which had matured in the works of sociologists and mathematicians – to the study of historical processes and events. He illustrates that not ‘great persons’ matter – but that history is shaped by emerging network structures that show non-linear patterns, covered by power mechanisms.

I am convinced that IR/FPA benefit from this analytical perspective in many ways. As I was to find out for this thesis, network analysis, just like role theory and analytical eclecticism, are rather unlikely to be heard of in the classroom due to the dominance of the three big paradigms and the sub-disciplines of FPA, security studies, and peace and conflict studies. But there is a growing body of literature in form of handbooks and articles across network scientific publications and public

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<sup>14</sup> Aly 2005; Ferguson 2021, 179

<sup>15</sup> Similar views on the structural limits and vulnerabilities of autocracies can be found in the studies of Levitsky and Way 2002; 2010; or Frye 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson 2018; 2021

policy journals. Yet these are overwhelmingly quantitative studies and have mostly evolved in isolation from the established body of IR/FPA research.

IR/FPA would surely benefit from incorporating the ontology of network analyses in its methodology and theory. Especially the qualitative application – like Ferguson in historical science – is clearly underexplored. Present network scientific approaches in the realm of politics, in turn, would improve from qualitative-interpretative reconsiderations as well. Both role theory and network analysis have fared a niche existence in the literature. And both are complementary to each other, as I hope to explore within the limited space of this thesis.

## 1. Introduction

The present master thesis went through many important changes. Most crucially, it took a remarkable shift from a primarily empirical interest to theory-building. This is largely due to the fact that my program's instructors and supervisors pushed me to make a strong case for theory, research design and methodology. I have given more background information about this intellectual process and my motivation in the preface to this thesis. Here, it shall suffice to say that it made me engage with the questions of *how* we study and *what* we study in International Relations (IR) in a depth I had not expected. As a result, the thesis is for the best part theoretical.

For this reason, I structured this thesis into two parts. Part I is theoretical and consists of three chapters, which discuss the convergence of different IR/Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) approaches. I will describe the theoretical objectives later in this introduction. Part II is problem-focused and applies the analytical framework from Part I to study how great powers (Russia, China, United States and the EU) locate their roles in Central Asia, and whether this creates role competition.

### 1.1 A metatheoretical primer

For a start, I want to clarify my methodological position. I take a decidedly scientific critical realist stance. Critical scientific realists<sup>1</sup> view their objects under study as products of social processes. *But*, contrary to postmodernists, they do not regard them as entirely determined by social constructivism.<sup>2</sup> This means:

- a) Although all knowledge of 'reality' is socially conditioned, we still can access an 'objective' reality by the means of fallible theories. Theories are meant to reflect the real world and improve our interpretations of it.
- b) Neither agency nor structure should be exaggerated or understated. They are interlinked. Structures are understood as *emergent properties*, not fixed ones.

Finally, critical scientific realism refuses the positivistic view on *variables*. Variables cannot be taken as 'facts', they are descriptive means. Correlations between two variables do not reflect causality but describe "effects of underlying casual processes".<sup>3</sup> In IR, the practice of hypothesis-testing has been criticized as a positivistic "triumph of methods over theory".<sup>4</sup> In this spirit, I

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with the IR theory 'realism'.

<sup>2</sup> Cruickshank 2003, 1–4; Della Porta and Keating 2008, 24–25; George and Bennett 2005, 129–31

<sup>3</sup> Cruickshank 2003, 2. George and Bennett 2005, 135–37, 145–147, assume that these causal mechanisms are "ultimately unobservable" and dependent on specific contexts or conditions. For an early critique of the variable-"bias" of social science, see K. J. Holsti 1972, 5.

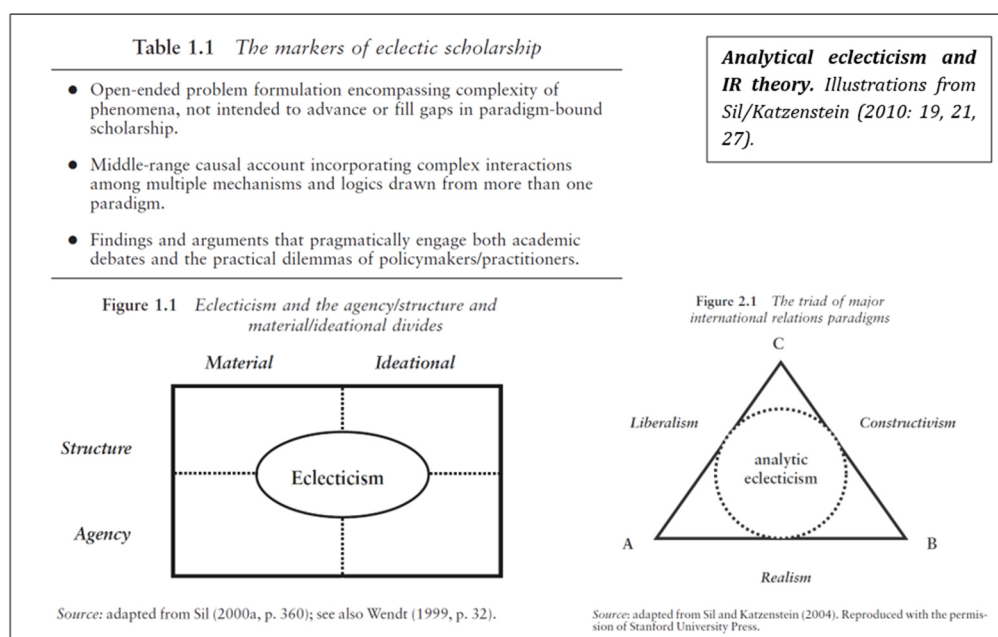
<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 429–30; See also Josep S. Nye 2008; George and Bennett 2005, chap. 1.



modestly hope to contribute to IR theory development, which guides the empirical analysis of social complexity. Theories provide mental maps and causal stories to understand observable and unobservable mechanisms in real-world phenomena.<sup>5</sup> As it will become clear, I assume an interactionist approach and share the interpretivist assumption that it is “impossible to understand historical events or social phenomena without looking at the perceptions individuals have of the world outside”.<sup>6</sup> The primary aim is *understanding* context, not discovering laws. Therefore, cases should be considered holistically as a box of *interdependent* variables.<sup>7</sup> A qualitative case study design is therefore my method of choice.

## 1.2 Theoretical objectives

As I wrote at the start, the biggest part of this thesis is theoretical. It follows the call for *analytical eclecticism* to move beyond paradigms. Analytical eclecticism intends to identify relationships and reveal “hidden connections among elements of *seemingly* incommensurable paradigm-bound theories, with an eye on generating novel insights that bear on policy debates and practical dilemmas”.<sup>8</sup>



Sil/Katzenstein emphasize that analytical eclecticism is a flexible approach that depends on the chosen problem and does not mean theoretical synthesis.<sup>9</sup> It is up to discussion whether the here developed theoretical framework represents a synthesis. My aim is more in line with K.V. Holsti's<sup>10</sup> endeavor to build a framework for the analysis of international politics, incorporating concepts

<sup>5</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 429–34; Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 20–23

<sup>6</sup> Della Porta and Keating 2008, 24–25

<sup>7</sup> Della Porta and Keating 2008, 26–32

<sup>8</sup> Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 2 (emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 17

<sup>10</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972

from different schools of thought. As the following chapters demonstrate, network analysis and role theory are already inherently eclectic. But I will also show where and how they converge – and could be potentially synthesized. Surprisingly, both approaches developed very much in isolation from each other and from mainstream IR/FPA in general. Role theory, nevertheless, has taken off as a research program within FPA over the past decade, including a Routledge book series edited by Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron Thies.

Network science, on the other hand, has fared way less prominently, despite claims that it “revolutionized IR research”.<sup>11</sup> My argument is that it offers invaluable insight into the structure and interactions among states. It forces scholars to think beyond dyadic or triadic relationships, reconceptualize power through network centrality, and take complex systems seriously. This sheds new light on global order and states as interdependent network configurations – networks are a more apt description of multipolar/polyarchic relationships. Network analysis, in turn, would benefit from moving on from positivistic-statistical modulations to qualitative approaches. Role theory, I suggest, could be a good suit to study the tie formation process. In brief, role theory (and IR/FPA in general) can learn from the network ontology, while network analysis would gain from role theory’s qualitative epistemology.

The dialogue with both approaches leads me to the introduction of two new concepts. The first one – *bounded agency* – is inspired by the concept of bounded rationality and the insight that states, as much as individuals, are functions of network structures.<sup>12</sup> The second one is more important for the empirical analysis in the second part of this thesis: *role competition*.

In addition, I wish to highlight another concept that I found at the margins of role theory and which has been widely ignored. Surprisingly so, since it is the identity-based counterpart to the traditional realist security dilemma: the *ideational security dilemma*.

All discussion revolves around the agency-structure problem and the idealism-materialism nexus. I finally inspect the logical soundness of role theoretical accounts, which – although stressing the importance of structure and material factors – seem to privilege ideational factors over material ones, going so far as to argue that ideas of bipolarity produced material bipolarity in the Cold War. I opine that the ideational and material factors should not be treated in opposition to each other but as two dimensions of the same phenomenon. Consequently, this leads to a reconceptualization

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<sup>11</sup> Maoz 2017, 20

<sup>12</sup> As I had to find out, I am not the first one to use the term “bounded agency”. It has also been used by sociologists, see Evans 2007, 98: “Bounded agency is socially situated agency, influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalized frames of reference as well as external actions. By examining bounded agency, the focus moves from structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration.”; see also Berrada 2020; H. J. Kim and Sharman 2014; Seabrooke and Sending 2015. Also, a doctoral dissertation used the term in context of de facto states, see Spanke 2019.

of 'power' and great powers as socializers. Starting with an interactionist definition, I argue that material capabilities rest at the core of what we call power, and ideas encapsulate them like a matryoshka.

At this point, affinities with neorealism have become apparent. I thus highlight the ideational factors with which neorealists underpin their (allegedly) purely materialist theories. (My treatment of neorealism mainly focuses on its most prominent proponent, John Mearsheimer.) Throughout the discussion I pinpoint the links and mutually supporting properties of network analysis, role theory and neorealism. The result is a table of 12 preliminary prepositions for the analysis of international politics. The final theoretical section highlights the importance of studying regions and great power politics.

As I already noted, the objective here is to provide some conceptual innovation by highlighting the congruence between network analysis, role theory and neorealism. This shall cross-fertilize hitherto disconnected approaches. Importantly, this potential conceptual synthesis may offer an analytical framework for problem-focused research on contemporary foreign policy issues. To be policy-relevant, following Joseph Nye, international relations theories need to be plain in language and provide decision-makers with the vocabulary that helps them with "framing, mapping, and raising question even when they do not provide answers".<sup>13</sup> Explaining international relations by the 'roles' states take towards each other offers such a transmission belt. In other words, role theory is an intuitive concept. Whether this all offers the groundwork for a potential synthesis, systemic theory, or eclectic analytical frameworks, remains to the judgment of my reviewers. At least, I hope that it can advance our understanding of the interactions between structures and agents.

I should provide one last explanation on the theoretical part. It appears to show an affinity with neoclassical realism, a sub-school within (neo)realism that emphasizes structure and anarchy but further includes domestic variables. My approach, however, is slightly different. Coming from an interactionist perspective – pronounced with network analysis and role theory – I view agents and structure as a mutually constituting system. I highlight the grounding of 'power' and state behavior in material distributions that are translated through ideational-cognitive structures. In contrast to the neoclassical variation, I take a role theoretical approach for the empirical analysis in which I black-box domestic factors. I do not seek to explain regional great power politics by examining domestic factors; I seek to describe the systemic relationship of those powers in a specific regional context.

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<sup>13</sup> Josep S. Nye 2008, 651, 655, 658–59

### 1.3 Empirical objectives

As Cantir/Kaarbo put it, “national role conceptions say much about a country’s identity, its priorities and policies, and how it relates to other states”.<sup>14</sup> Thus, role theory presents itself as an ideal heuristic tool to understand what roles great powers try to enact, both globally and in a regional context. As Part I illustrates, regional politics have systemic implications for the overall global order. Therefore, this thesis looks at how great power hubs develop ties with the Central Asia network cluster and explores how these respective tie formation processes are interrelated.

In short, I provide a context-specific account of great power politics in Central Asia. Such an analysis is relevant for students – academics and practitioners – of both the region and the global order in the making. In the words of Francis Schortgen, the 21<sup>st</sup> century “ushered in a new era of great power national role contestation”.<sup>15</sup>

The foreign relations of Central Asia have already sparked the interests of journalists, analysts and academics. Often, they rehash the trope of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘great game’, in which Russia and Great Britain had scrambled for political control over the landmass situated between the Russian empire and India. In the ‘new great game’, Russia and China are expected to take center stage, although other actors, like the U.S. and EU, factor in as well.<sup>16</sup> Some call it “soft competition”,<sup>17</sup> “quiet rivalry”,<sup>18</sup> or a sphere of “negotiated hegemony”.<sup>19</sup> Some stress Russia’s continued primacy.<sup>20</sup> Others compared policies in shared neighborhoods<sup>21</sup> and different versions of regionalism.<sup>22</sup> Malle et al., contrastingly, suggest that Central Asia and the Russian idea of Greater Eurasia are deepening linkages between Russia and China.<sup>23</sup> And Kaczmariski notices the absence of a Russo-Chinese rivalry, finding that both powers established a *modus vivendi* to alleviate competition – in spite of potential frictions between their regionalist projects.<sup>24</sup> Building on these works on extra-regional integration efforts, Omonkulov/Baba introduced the concept of *great power regionalism*.<sup>25</sup> Yet, great powers’ regional initiatives have remained understudied,

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<sup>14</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 19

<sup>15</sup> Schortgen 2021, 57

<sup>16</sup> Smith 1996; Menon 2003; Weitz 2006; Cooley 2012; Blank 2012; Kavalski 2010; Fatima and Zafar 2014; Spivak 2016; Lakatos and Kosztur 2017; Orazgaliyev 2017; Uppal 2018; Kainazarov 2019; Xuanli Liao 2019; Teles Fazendeiro 2020; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020; Ohle, Cook, and Han 2020; Dadabaev 2020

<sup>17</sup> Pantucci 2015

<sup>18</sup> Yau 2020

<sup>19</sup> Costa Buranelli 2018

<sup>20</sup> Kaczmariski 2015, chap. 4; Skalamera 2017; Costa Buranelli 2018; Malle, Cooper, and Connolly 2020

<sup>21</sup> Samokhvalov 2018

<sup>22</sup> MacFarlane 2004; Libman and Vinokurov 2018; Wu 2018; Kaczmariski 2017; Makarychev 2018; Karabayeva 2021; Omonkulov and Baba 2019a; Patnaik 2019; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020

<sup>23</sup> Malle, Cooper, and Connolly 2020

<sup>24</sup> Kaczmariski 2019; 2015, chap. 4; 2017

<sup>25</sup> Omonkulov and Baba 2019a

especially comparative research is lacking.<sup>26</sup> I expect that the analysis of great power role conceptions can produce additional insights for this related field.

The research questions are split into two sets:

1. ***What roles do the great powers try to locate in Central Asia, and how? What role expectations do they impose on the region? How do they socialize the region? What are the attributes of the developing ties – material or ideational? Do the great powers engage in bilateral or multilateral role-play?***
2. ***Is there role competition or competitive role-play between the great powers? How do they refer to each other as significant others?***

I already clarified that I do not seek to test hypotheses and variables. Nevertheless, I create a 'background' hypothesis that guides the analysis. Building on neorealist propositions and the concept of role competition, it investigates the regional role location process:

*the more great powers engage in role-play in a region, the more other (regional) great powers will counter this role-play with their own role conceptions and socializing efforts.*

The aim is not to validate or falsify this hypothesis. Simply put, the great powers have different geographical relationships with the region, hence we expect them to enact different roles. Also, the analyzed period is comprehensive yet insufficient, and, importantly, it is an ongoing, open-ended process.

The four great powers studied are Russia, China, the United States and the European Union. They are generally identified as 'great powers' in the above-mentioned literature. The operationalization of the EU as a great power may still need justification. I will do this in the methodological chapter at the beginning of Part II, where I will also explain my chosen method – interpretative content analysis.

The timeframe of analysis is between 2007 and 2021. The year 2007 marks a good starting point because it has been identified as a major turning point in Russia's role relationship with the West, when Moscow became more anti-hegemonic and increasingly promoted a multipolar world order.<sup>27</sup> For many observers this has been epitomized in Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, followed by the Russo-Georgia war in 2008.<sup>28</sup> Around this time, too, China developed from a role-taker – a state that should be socialized into the existing liberal world

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<sup>26</sup> Kaczmarek 2017, 1359

<sup>27</sup> Grossman 2021, 40, 48, 51

<sup>28</sup> I slightly disagree with this interpretation because the complaints Putin brought forward can be found in various earlier Russian statements. Notably, he had uttered many of those complaints in his earlier 2001 speech in the German Bundestag, which was received positively in the West. Nevertheless, the 2007 speech,

order – to an assertive role-maker, demanding a ‘new model of great power relations’ and to be viewed as a “shaper and influencer in its own right”.<sup>29</sup> It is also the year when the EU member states signed a new foundational treaty, the treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force in 2009. The treaty reformed the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), and established the External Action Service (EEAS). Also in 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy on Central Asia.

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The thesis proceeds as follows. Part I consists of three theoretical chapters. Chapter 2 start with a discussion of network analysis in IR, chapter 3 continues with role theory, and chapter 4 finishes off with a discussion of role theory, network analysis and neorealism. Chapter 4 also highlights the importance of regions for the study of great power politics. In Part II, I clarify the methodology and operationalization of my case study in chapter 5. Chapter 6 presents the empirical results. Chapter 7 concludes and suggests future research opportunities.

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NATO’s 2008 Bukarest declaration that Georgia and Ukraine should become alliance members, and the ensuing war in Georgia the same year underline 2007 as a marker.

<sup>29</sup> Schortgen 2021, 64–66

## **Part I**

### Theory and Analytical Framework

## 2. Network Analysis and IR

This section gives a brief overview of network science and its terminology; how a network analytical approach views the social world; and how this ontology benefits the understanding of international relations. Finally, I will shortly discuss the epistemological problems of quantitative network approaches in IR and suggest that network analysis would benefit from qualitative IR/FPA methods.

### 2.1 What is network science? And what are networks?

Network analysis in the social sciences goes back to the 1930s, when the exploration of sociograms changed the understanding of sociological and political outcomes. In the 1950/60s, behavioral studies researched the relationship between psychological characteristics and the individual's connection to a community. With the dawn of computer sciences in the 1980s, network studies have produced overwhelmingly quantitative models.<sup>30</sup> Yet these approaches have not gained all too much attention in political science. It was only at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, anyway, that sociologists, mathematicians and graph theorists realized that *networks* are a natural phenomenon with comparable patterns across almost all parts of life: biology, physics and social interactions. This includes Pareto-like power-law distributions, which means that the distribution of attributes among a population of individual units is not linear but follows an exponential, fat-tail dynamic.<sup>31</sup> That is, a few nodes (people) have many connections while the majority of nodes (people) have only a low number of connections; or, in simple words, the phenomenon that a few rich own a disproportional share, if not the most, of a population's wealth – the so-called Matthew effect.

In IR, a few network approaches have been used for quantitative data analyses to describe the international structure. Since the turn of the century, the number of publications – which are mostly in journals of public administration or journals on peace and conflict studies – has risen significantly, between 2002 and 2012 alone by 289 percent.<sup>32</sup> These articles focused on different kinds of networks: arms and trade proliferation, trade agreements, alliances, global governance and international organizations, or terrorist networks.<sup>33</sup> Some started putting inter-state relations at the center and tested hypotheses linking attributes (such as democracy or network position) to

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<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, 8–9

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020a, 864; Ferguson 2018, 36–37

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, 20

<sup>33</sup> For comprehensive literature reviews on network analysis in IR, see Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009; Maoz 2011, 3–27; 2012a; 2017; Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018; De Lombaerde et al. 2018; R. E. Kim 2020; Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020a; Kacziba 2021.



international outcomes like peace and conflict. The results challenged well-established axioms, especially for the democratic peace theory: they show that the diffusion of democracies did not increase systemic stability and suggest that peace between democracies is driven by the unifying threat from non-democratic adversaries, rather than by shared political values alone.<sup>34</sup> Another emerging field is the study of middle powers or small states' strategies to improve their network positions in the international arena.<sup>35</sup> However, all these network analytical applications have been rather isolated in IR and did not gain as much traction as they did in sociology, anthropology or economics.<sup>36</sup> World systems theory, with its global network analysis of a socio-economic core, periphery and semi-periphery, has been a disciplinary outsider. The liberalist school operated with network scientific vocabulary such as "interdependence" and "networks", the latter rather vaguely, yet it did not take note of the science of networks as a methodological approach.<sup>37</sup>

However, network analysis brings a new, more complex ontological understanding to the study of social life, including international relations. Network researchers comprehend the world as consisting of units called *nodes* (sometimes also *vertices*) – for example, biological cells or actors such as individuals or nation-states – that create links with each other. These links are termed *ties* or *edges*. The emphasis lies on the dynamic *interactions* in tie formation: agents form a larger, emerging structure that makes them interdependent and act in relation to each other. Emerging network structures take different forms and can be analyzed in their totality as well as their sub-systemic clusters. A node's position in this net is measured by its various indicators of *centrality*; high centrality in a network makes a node a *hub* and describes its relative importance.<sup>38</sup> *Degree centrality* measures the number of relationships linking one actor with all other nodes (a similar indicator sometimes used is *eigenvector centrality* which weights the number of connections of the connected nodes as well). *Closeness centrality* matters in a hypothetical world where information is evenly distributed: it describes a node's average number of steps needed to reach all other nodes and access information. *Betweenness centrality* defines centrality in terms of information reaching and passing through a node: more important than the pure number of relationships is with whom the node interacts.

In this view, political behavior is regarded as a result of dynamic processes, transformations and relationships among actors.<sup>39</sup> Networks are "patterns of ties [...] with varying properties", with social ties being "routine transactions 'to which participants attach shared understandings,

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<sup>34</sup> Maoz 2011, 251–75; Cranmer, Menninga, and Mucha 2015; Campbell, Cranmer, and Desmarais 2018

<sup>35</sup> Baxter, Jordan, and Rubin 2018; Lee and Kim 2022; S. Kim 2022b; Schulz and Rojas-De-Galarreta 2022

<sup>36</sup> Maoz 2011, xi; 2012a, 249

<sup>37</sup> Maoz 2011, 5–6, 16–18

<sup>38</sup> Ferguson 2018, 27–29

<sup>39</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 560–61; Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, 4–7; Padgett 2018, 62–68; Baxter, Jordan, and Rubin 2018, 199

memories, forecasts, and obligations”<sup>40</sup>. In other words, networks are “sets of relations that form structures, which in turn may constrain and enable agents.”<sup>41</sup> Edges between nodes are reflected by “a rule that defines whether, how, and to what extent any two units are tied to each other”.<sup>42</sup> Political actors – be it individuals or states – normally maintain multiple ‘rules’ with each other across different policy fields. Therefore, each rule can be studied as a one-layer network; several layers of ties between nodes, then, accumulate in a *multiplex network*.<sup>43</sup>

The process of network formation seems to be highly influenced by endogenous mechanisms. In empirical studies, emergent social networks – as much as physical or biological ones – have exhibited that they follow certain generalizable patterns of tie-formation.<sup>44</sup> The dyadic level between two nodes can be measured in forms of reciprocity of their relationship or similarities in attributes or network position. Groups can be described in forms of their distinct modularity and the overall network structure by forms density, clustering, polarization or reciprocity.<sup>45</sup>

Networks take different forms. Among others, they can be modular, hierarchical, scale-free, randomized, heterogeneous, and homogenous. But far from being static, they appear as dynamic, complex structures whose emergent patterns are difficult to predict. Hierarchical structures can falter quickly, for example, by revolutions; and random networks can develop into hierarchical structures such as the totalitarian states erected by the revolutionaries.<sup>46</sup> Most real-world networks, as mentioned above, are found to be scale-free networks that follow Pareto-like power-law distributions: They feature hubs with an above-average number of ties and nodes that are rather ‘followers’ of such hubs. There are no identical nodes – but there are similar patterns and certain degrees of hierarchical clustering: “the town is a large family, the city a large town, and the kingdom a large city.”<sup>47</sup>

## 2.2 A network analytical view on history and social processes

It is not the aim of this thesis to operationalize these mathematical conceptualizations in another quantitative model. Instead, it shall adopt it the way the historian Niall Ferguson applies these ontological insights to the study of social processes. “The reality [...] is that history is a process too complex to be modeled, even in [...] informal ways [...]”, he argues.<sup>48</sup> “There is every reason to

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<sup>40</sup> Nexon 2009, 25; See also Maoz 2017, 7; Baxter, Jordan, and Rubin 2018, 199.

<sup>41</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 560

<sup>42</sup> Maoz 2011, 7

<sup>43</sup> Padgett 2018, 59; Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020b, 864–65

<sup>44</sup> Maoz 2012a, 343

<sup>45</sup> Maoz 2017, 5

<sup>46</sup> Ferguson 2018, 40–41

<sup>47</sup> Ferguson 2018, 36–37; R. E. Kim 2020, 913–17

<sup>48</sup> Ferguson 2021, 18

think that man-made economies, societies, and polities share many of the features of complex adaptive systems.”<sup>49</sup> That is, a myriad of variables make social processes nearly unpredictable, and small changes in one variable can have unexpected network effects because most causal relationships are nonlinear (as discovered in Edward Lorenz’s famous ‘butterfly effect’).<sup>50</sup> A good example of the uncontrollability of social complexity is that the International Monetary Fund, between 1988 and 2019, predicted only four out of 469 economic downturns for the same year.<sup>51</sup>

Another lecture from the analysis of complex networks is that, in most cases, history cannot be reduced to a single ‘great man’ (or woman). Instead, one needs to take into account the myriad of interlinked, complex causes. Thus, so the historian, “we must not make a fetish of leadership”,<sup>52</sup> since the power of state leaders is “a function of the complex network of economic, social, and political relations over which they preside.”<sup>53</sup> Quoting Tolstoy: “A king is history’s slave.”<sup>54</sup>

Ferguson concludes six insights from network science that can guide the historical and political analyst as axioms about social dynamics:<sup>55</sup>

1. Individuals are to be understood through their relationships with others and their positions within networks. *Hubs* or *brokers*, defined by their degree or betweenness centrality, are influential connectors (though not necessarily leaders).
2. Social interactions expose the tendency of *homophily*. Human beings cluster around shared status and values: ethnicity, sex, age, education, behavioral patterns, etc. But it is not self-evident which of these causes people to flock together. Thus, it is necessary to establish the qualitative characteristics of the human interactions under analysis: is it based on loose acquaintances, friendships, or genealogy; is it an open (inclusive) or closed (exclusive) network; does the exchange include ideas or material resources?
3. Weak ties between nodes are meaningful because they can link rather homophile, separated clusters with each other. The impact of one node, functioning as a hub between two separate clusters can thus be disproportional (see the power law described by the butterfly effect).
4. The impact of ideas, emotions or interests depends on the structure they penetrate. The spread of an ideology, therefore, depends more on the network structure it hits than on its content. “They are least likely to do so in a hierarchical, top-down network, where horizontal peer-to-peer links are prohibited.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the analyst must not isolate the stimulus from the structure.

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<sup>49</sup> Ferguson 2021, 77

<sup>50</sup> Ferguson 2021, 78

<sup>51</sup> Ferguson 2021, 76

<sup>52</sup> Ferguson 2021, 176

<sup>53</sup> Ferguson 2021, 204

<sup>54</sup> Ferguson 2021, 177

<sup>55</sup> Ferguson 2018, 46–48; 2021, 111–17

<sup>56</sup> Ferguson 2018, 47

5. Networks are complex, adaptive and dynamic – not fixed in time and space. “Very small changes – the addition of just a few edges – can radically alter the network’s behavior.”<sup>57</sup>
6. Thy dynamic interaction between networks enables the transfer of ideas and resources, hence allowing for innovation and disruption. Thereby they can fuse and build novel structures. Another result can be the implosion of one cluster (such as the collapse of empires or a hierarchical state breaking up a corporate market monopoly). When network clusters compete within complex systems, it comes to the respective fragility, adaptability and resilience of each cluster. “[H]ierarchical structures such as states exist principally because, while inferior to distributed networks when it comes to innovation, they are superior when it comes to defense.”<sup>58</sup> “The extent to which the exogenous shock causes a disaster [collapse – T.O.] is generally a function of the social network structure that comes under stress. The point of failure, if it can be located at all, is more likely to be in the middle layer than at the top of the organization chart.”<sup>59</sup>

With these insights, Ferguson concludes,

“the history of mankind looks quite different: not so much ‘one fucking thing after another’ [...] but billions of things linked to one another in myriad ways [...]. Moreover, when set in its proper historical context, the present time appears less unnervingly unprecedented and more familiar. It is [...] the [...] era when superannuated hierarchical institutions have been challenged by novel networks, their impact magnified by new technology. On the basis of historical analogy [...] we should probably expect continued network-driven disruption of hierarchies that cannot reform themselves, but also the potential for some kind of restoration of hierarchical order when it becomes clear that the networks alone cannot avert a descent into anarchy.”<sup>60</sup>

With a reference to a ‘new’ Cold War between the United States and China, he points out that, despite bipolarity, these constellations constitute a three-body problem in which the behavior of nonaligned networks can be decisive.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.3 Networks and the ontology of international relations

At the fringes of IR scholarship, the network approach has led to the reconceptualization of world politics, potentially bridging the domestic and international levels of analysis – and further the separation between FPA and IR. In this view, states have been recognized as being embedded in international network structures,<sup>62</sup> while “containing domestic networks comprised of

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<sup>57</sup> Ferguson 2018, 47

<sup>58</sup> Ferguson 2021, 117

<sup>59</sup> Ferguson 2021, 283

<sup>60</sup> Ferguson 2018, 48

<sup>61</sup> Ferguson 2021, 371

<sup>62</sup> Nexon 2009, 14; Padgett 2018, 59; S. Kim 2022a, 61

interactions among key subnational actors”.<sup>63</sup> Imbalances among these subnational networks have an effect on the relationship with other states, as international ties may be disputed or manipulated for domestic purposes. State leaders, regardless of regime type, need to manage societal relations between subnational groups, such as judicial bodies, opposition, media, elites, and security forces. Structural imbalances between these actors create tensions and *uncertainty*.<sup>64</sup> This includes the foreign policy behavior of a state. To put it in a neorealist perspective: one does not know whether a once-friendly state will turn into a threat due to domestic changes. Another aspect is that governments invite other states to intervene on their side for their own political survival, for instance, Russia in the Syrian civil war and Russia with the CSTO in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Or foreign policy simply becomes a source of legitimacy to gain popular support at home or distract from domestic conflicts. Instabilities in other states can spill over and threaten domestic balances, hence states take responsive or preventive actions.<sup>65</sup> This is in line with Peter Gourevitch’s seminal article, ‘The second image reversed’, in which he theorized that the international system can be a source for domestic politics (and not just the other way around).<sup>66</sup>

The network scientific approach to states as ontological *networks within international networks* opens it up to FPA approaches that scrutinize drivers of foreign policy behavior on the domestic (nodal) level. Here again, the pronunciation of the position of an actor within a social network can be found in mid-range theories that aim to explain the outcomes of decision-making processes. For example, the Bureaucratic Politics Model assumes that policy outcomes are to be explained as results of the positions and influence of ministerial officials who compete for their ideas in a bargaining process.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, network approaches also help to reconceptualize the liberalist understanding of international institutions as one-way ‘constrainers’ directing states. More accurately, the ties within networks give revisionist states tools and resources to reshape an order in its own interest, and by this constrain or change an international institution.<sup>68</sup>

Network analysis also finds that tie formations depend on the structural incentives – the cost and benefits of creating new connections. Under low costs, tie formations between two states can cascade into developing ties with other, previously unconnected states. Under high costs, it becomes more likely that states create *spillover ties*, which means that two actors extend ties from one established connection to other relationship layers. *Structural entrenchments* from old tie formation create path dependencies.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Kinne and Maoz 2022, 2

<sup>64</sup> Kinne and Maoz 2022, 4–10

<sup>65</sup> Kinne and Maoz 2022, 10–13

<sup>66</sup> Gourevitch 1978

<sup>67</sup> Brummer 2020, 1152

<sup>68</sup> Goddard 2019, 128

<sup>69</sup> Smaldino, D’Souza, and Maoz 2018

Shared interests drive cooperation, but changes in the identity, interests and attributes of a node alter the calculations of actors and, consequently, tie formation. A positive shock in a *triadic* relationship, such as the emergence of a shared enemy, bolsters the shared interests of two states and thus the likelihood of alliance formation (e.g., Britain and the Soviet Union after the German attack in 1941 or the convergence between China and the US after the attacks by Japan).<sup>70</sup> The lapse of a common enemy may constitute a negative shock as the shared interest to cooperate disappears; that's how the anti-German-Japanese axis turned into rivals in the Cold War. Maoz/Joyce show that changes in a state's strategic environment change perceptions of interests and thus the choice of potential allies.<sup>71</sup>

Network effects such as power law distributions, preferential attachments and homophily have also been found in international relations.<sup>72</sup> In global governance, network formation processes reveal the above-discussed nonlinear characteristics and some degree of hierarchical ordering.<sup>73</sup> Maoz finds that the international status of states as major or minor power correlates with their network centrality in alliances and trade networks, displaying power-law distributions that – when new links are formed – give preferential attachments to the already powerful states.<sup>74</sup>

Homophily can also be observed in inter-state networks. States that share common attributes are likely to develop reciprocal ties; increasing homophily leads to sub-systemic clusters and polarization of the global state network.<sup>75</sup> Especially democracies and culturally similar states tend to flock together in security networks.<sup>76</sup> These network observations marry well with theoretical explanations from the grand IR paradigms. In realism, this tendency to form homophile clusters with states who are alike is expressed by the shared interest to balance potential threats. In liberalism, homophily is expressed in the belief in shared liberal-democratic values that increases trust between states. Constructivists express homophily by accentuating shared ideas and identities.<sup>77</sup>

The bottom line is that homophily matters for the formation of alliances, while the principle of preferential attachments is mostly present in trade networks.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, network analysis underlines the neorealist statement that great powers matter in international relations

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<sup>70</sup> Maoz and Joyce 2016, 295

<sup>71</sup> Maoz and Joyce 2016, 306–7

<sup>72</sup> Maoz 2011; 2012b

<sup>73</sup> R. E. Kim 2020, 913–14

<sup>74</sup> Maoz 2012b, 346

<sup>75</sup> Maoz 2012b, 347–52

<sup>76</sup> Maoz and Joyce 2016, 296

<sup>77</sup> Maoz 2012b, 350–51

<sup>78</sup> Maoz 2012b, 363

disproportionally. It may also reflect that small states choose to bandwagon or free-ride in large security alliances that are more likely to ensure their survival.<sup>79</sup>

## 2.4 Epistemological problems in previous network studies: towards a qualitative approach

However, the quantitative network studies in IR, despite their strong merit, have shown their limits. For starters, network analysis uses to elaborate on previous statistical worldviews that treated independent variables and units as atomistic entities.<sup>80</sup> They mostly focus on dyadic relationships between actor A and B and ignored the latent influence of player C on bilateral relationships.<sup>81</sup> The group level – superdyadic structures such as communities and blocs – remains underexplored.<sup>82</sup> And so does the nature of ties and the tie formation process.

There is also a problem of causal reference connected to the homophily phenomenon. The presence of a shared attribute between two units can be due to an external effect. But from a network analytical view, it also stems from the pure logic of the endogenous effect of homophily emanating from structure.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, shared attributes between nodes do not necessarily create stronger ties. Similarities also do not imply similar behavior or cooperation in a deterministic fashion.<sup>84</sup> Quantitative network analyses run risk of repeating the same mistakes statistical methodologies make: inferring from correlations to causation. Scholars may observe a relationship between network structures and outcomes in international relations. But they differ in the explanation of what specific aspect of the network causes the outcome, often lacking evidence.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, it should be necessary to focus on the content of the *ties* that account for influence and resort to IR theories for explanation.

The core limit of contemporary network applications to IR lies in its quantitative modeling, which is prone to replicate previous statistical world views and ‘simplistic hypothesis testing’, incorporating its inherent flaws: misleading measures, applying linear regression models to non-linear processes, poor data, and the lack of explanation.<sup>86</sup> Fundamentally, varying observations in network approaches proved to depend on different mathematical methodologies and conceptual

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<sup>79</sup> Maoz 2012b, 345–46

<sup>80</sup> Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, 4

<sup>81</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 581

<sup>82</sup> Maoz 2017, 19–20

<sup>83</sup> Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020a, 862

<sup>84</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 581

<sup>85</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 583–84

<sup>86</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; It has been noted elsewhere that network science itself is not a theory. It rather offers a methodological perspective and research strategy to the understanding and empirical study of international relations. To unfold its full potential, it needs to be applied in tandem with established IR theories and concepts, see Maoz 2017, 2, 7; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 582.

operationalization.<sup>87</sup> Ideal calculations and programming of network emergence models can differ from real-world processes due to reduced complexity, the conflation of different levels of analysis and bad or incomplete data.<sup>88</sup> For example, recent quantitative studies based on different mathematical models argued over whether the international system has been balanced or imbalanced throughout the past centuries.<sup>89</sup> Another identified problem has been that some network analysts measure international ties by assessing joint memberships in international organizations. This, however, is a static view of international relations and does not account for the complexity of inter-state relations.<sup>90</sup> Overall, the measurement of a state's centrality depends on the selected proxies, which characterize ties, and the chosen mathematical indicator of centrality, e.g. eigenvector or degree centrality.<sup>91</sup>

An illustrative example is the popular analysis of UN general assembly voting behaviors for similar state preferences and network clusters. Unfortunately, this can be a misleading indicator.<sup>92</sup> First of all, UN votings are low in cost, often consist of supermajorities, and represent only one layer of inter-state relations in an international, multilayered network. Second, the case of South Korea shows that similar voting behaviors need to be viewed in a larger, superdyadic context. In 2012, Seoul voted more often with China (70%) and North Korea (63%) than with the United States (50%). However, North Korea has alliance connections with China and Russia, while South Korea is allied with the United States. This is reflected by the fact that South Korea was among the top 15% of countries voting with Washington and – despite voting 70% of the time with China – belonged to the bottom 20% voting with Beijing.<sup>93</sup> Hence we can see that the dyadic voting behavior does not reflect an alliance network per se but needs to be viewed relationally. In the end, measurement depends on the researcher's choices and interpretation. This all shall remind us that quantitative research designs do not yield unambiguous results, nor are they superior to qualitative studies just because of their mathematical language.

The limited success of network analysis in anthropology in the 1960s should be taken as a warning: one of its leading practitioners blamed the “overelaboration of technique and data and an accumulation of trivial results”.<sup>94</sup> The warning from the anthropologist rings through when we

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<sup>87</sup> R. E. Kim 2020, 913, 920

<sup>88</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 579–80, 583–84; Maoz and Joyce 2016, 306–8; Padgett 2018, 25–26; R. E. Kim 2020, 921

<sup>89</sup> Doreian and Mrvar 2015; Estrada 2019, 72, 89; Burghardt and Maoz 2020

<sup>90</sup> Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 579

<sup>91</sup> Baxter, Jordan, and Rubin 2018, 200–201; Schulz and Rojas-De-Galarreta 2022, 319–20, 326; R. E. Kim 2020, 920; Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020b, 867

<sup>92</sup> Gallop and Minhas 2021, 136–40

<sup>93</sup> Gallop and Minhas 2021, 139–40

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 580.



look at a recent study published in the journal “Network Science”.<sup>95</sup> The authors discuss state preference similarities and how they predict state disputes. Their contribution is an improved model for measuring state preferences by marrying the most prominent – yet separately used – indicators: UN voting behavior and alliance memberships. Their findings, however, are not novel to the analyst or policy maker, not to say banal: “states with similar preferences are less likely to be involved in disputes.”<sup>96</sup> They continue suggesting that state preferences should be analyzed not only as a predictor but as an outcome variable as well; and ask whether state preferences change in tandem with leadership change. At this point, they could refer to the existing literature in FPA, but seem rather unaware of it. Therefore, once again, we need to consider the complementary insights and methodologies developed in network science and ‘traditional’ FPA/IR literature to bring the potential of network analysis to fruition in IR.

The conclusion from these epistemological shortcomings is that network analysis provides a nuanced ontology of social networks, including international relations. However, to become a meaningful analytical tool, a closer focus on the process of tie formation and triadic/superdyadic relationships is needed. (One needs to recall that network analysis originally is an interactionist approach.) The latest wave of quantitative studies provides an insightful departure for new, qualitative studies. Qualitative approaches indeed did not gain much attention so far. However, it has been recognized that qualitative or mixed approaches are useful – although underutilized – to explore interaction patterns, explain the emergence of networks, and develop new concepts.<sup>97</sup> They can trace “how people locate themselves in their social networks”.<sup>98</sup> In IR, unlike Ferguson’s interpretative application to history, however, qualitative network approaches have not been realized.<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, this thesis looks at how great power hubs develop ties in Central Asia and explores how these tie formation processes are interrelated. The following chapter suggests that another niche concept in IR/FPA, focusing on tie formation processes and ‘how states locate themselves in international networks’, may fill this qualitative gap in network analysis: role theory.

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<sup>95</sup> Gallop and Minhas 2021

<sup>96</sup> Gallop and Minhas 2021, 149

<sup>97</sup> Jennifer N. Victor and Khwaja 2020a, 858, 860; Hollstein 2011

<sup>98</sup> Hollstein 2011, 407

<sup>99</sup> For a positive exception, see Izumikawa 2020.

### 3. Role Theory

As the previous chapter concluded, qualitative approaches to network analysis in political science have been neglected. The following chapter aims to present role theory as a conceptual tool to fill this gap. Strikingly, previous network analytical works unconsciously made use of role theoretical terminology. In its conclusions, the last chapter cited Hollstein, who argued for the use of qualitative methods to trace “how people *locate* themselves in their social networks”.<sup>100</sup> As the following sections will show, *role location* is a central term describing behavioral interactions between states in role theory.

Role theory has developed within FPA very much in isolation from other approaches and received almost no attention from IR scholars.<sup>101</sup> Most FPA scholars applying role theory kept in their respective methodological traditions, mostly structural-constructivist or cognitive agent-based approaches (the former is mostly associated with European research programs and the latter with American scholarship on decision-making and cognitive leadership approaches).<sup>102</sup> Overall, following previous role theorists, the argument is that role theory combines both material and ideational factors in foreign policy, and bridges the agency-structure debate.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section revisits the origins of role theory within K. J. Holsti’s larger analytical framework. Section 3.2 elaborates on the present state of role theory, including its conceptual apparatus, and illustrates its intersection with current FPA and IR. Section 3.3 then closes the circle by highlighting how the role theoretical epistemology intertwines with the network ontology. Section 3.4 concludes.

Over the course of the discussion, the following concepts will be developed or highlighted: *ideational security dilemma*, *bounded rationality*, *bounded agency*, and, finally, *role competition*.

#### 3.1 Origins: Holsti’s framework for the analysis of international politics

Role theory originated in sociology, especially symbolic interactionism, dating back to the 1930s, and later in organizational research. It developed a rich conceptual framework, understanding social beings as taking different, context- and situation-bound roles, which evolve from the person’s self-conceptualization and from their social position and interactions with others. Social behavior thus takes patterned forms, and identities are shaped through exchanges between – and expectations of – social participants.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Hollstein 2011, 407 (emphasis added)

<sup>101</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 5–6; Thies and Breuning 2012, 1–2

<sup>102</sup> Thies and Breuning 2012, 3

<sup>103</sup> Biddle 1986; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 3

Role theory has been imported into IR scholarship by K. J. Holsti, who included this concept in his broader endeavor of creating a ‘framework for the analysis of international politics’. He did not formulate a theory equal to the three current major paradigms in IR. Instead, he developed several analytical concepts to explain international relations with material and ideational factors that are to be found in today’s IR paradigms. “The analyst is concerned with describing the typical or characteristic behavior of these political units toward each other and explaining major changes in these patterns of interaction.”<sup>104</sup> In Holsti’s analysis, the structure of the international system determines a state’s foreign policy orientation. The general distribution of power benefits the interests of great powers over small powers. In conclusion, “the more cohesive a polar or hierarchical system, the less latitude of choice remains for the weaker members [...]”.<sup>105</sup> The more diffuse the power distribution, the more other factors play into foreign policy behavior, such as threat perceptions, internal needs, and – to a lesser extent – geography. Ideologies and common values can increase cohesion.<sup>106</sup> However, all these factors on their own do not provide *sufficient* conditions for forming alliances; even threat perceptions are ‘only’ a *necessary* condition for that.<sup>107</sup>

#### From Holsti’s analytical perspective

“[...] each international system will be analyzed in terms of the most common forms of interaction among the component units—diplomatic contacts, trade, types of rivalries, and organized violence or warfare. [I]nteractions and processes in most systems are regulated or governed by explicit or implicit rules or customs, the major assumptions or values upon which all relations are based. As regulators of each system, the techniques and institutions used to resolve major conflicts between the political units will also be considered.”<sup>108</sup>

Herein we can find an early research agenda indirectly addressing the tie formation shaping state networks. The multiplexity of network analysis is reflected by Holsti’s identification of subsystems, such as rivalries, policy issues or institutions, and the focus on different patterns, the scope of ties, and spill-overs between subsystems.<sup>109</sup> Although Holsti’s analytical approach emphasizes *interactions*, he still defines international systems as “any collection of independent political entities—tribes, city-states, nations, or empires [...]”.<sup>110</sup> Here, the network ontology helps us to extend this conceptualization to *interdependent* units.

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<sup>104</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 29

<sup>105</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 354, 94

<sup>106</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 354, see also 103, 112–113, 121–122.

<sup>107</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 111–13

<sup>108</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 30–31

<sup>109</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 30, 113–16

<sup>110</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 29

Under these structural circumstances, following Holsti, policymakers develop national role conceptions (NRCs) guiding their conduct of external relations. Role conceptions define tasks and functions of a country internationally or regionally, and may lay out an explanation for why the state should perform a certain role. There are three types of sources factoring into Holsti's NRCs: a) external conditions, b) national attributes and c) ideological or attitudinal attributes.<sup>111</sup> The underlying assumption is that a state's patterned behavior is expressed by and – most of the time – in accordance with its role conceptions.<sup>112</sup> Holsti postulated that role conceptions can thus be treated both as independent (in systemic studies) and dependent variables (in FPA).<sup>113</sup> (Notably, subsequent scholars defined roles as intervening or perceptual variables resulting from a complex interplay of variable clusters,<sup>114</sup> or as mediating variables.<sup>115</sup>)

Interestingly, and less quoted, Holsti emphasized the behavioral dimension of roles and social positions in distinction to (and as a dynamic aspect of) *status* that is expressed in conventional, material IR terms such as great power and middle power.<sup>116</sup> (Contemporary role theorists tend to equate role and social position.)<sup>117</sup> “Thus far, we have four concepts that will help us analyze foreign policy: (1) *role performance*, which encompasses the attitudes, decisions, and actions governments take to implement (2) their self-defined *national role conceptions* or (3) the *role prescriptions* emanating, under varying circumstances, from the alter or external environment. Action always takes place within (4) a *position*, that is, a system of role prescriptions.”<sup>118</sup> “National role conceptions are, in short, an important aspect of the total intellectual setting in which day-to-day decisions on foreign policy are made.”<sup>119</sup> He concludes,

“[t]he international system can be conceived analytically not only as patterns of interaction, but also as a particular distribution of various national role conceptions at any given time.”<sup>120</sup>

Shifts in role conceptions, therefore, represent an avenue for describing and explaining changes in the international system.<sup>121</sup> Roles, therefore, serve the analyst as an analytical lens for describing and explaining both a state's foreign policy behavior and the emergence of structure – an assumption that has been picked up by contemporary role theorists: “Lastly, it is plausible to

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<sup>111</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 355–57

<sup>112</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 126–27

<sup>113</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 236, 307

<sup>114</sup> Jönsson 1984, 17, 28–31

<sup>115</sup> Chafetz, Abramson, and Grillot 1996, 728

<sup>116</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 238–39, 242

<sup>117</sup> See for example Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011b, 8; Wehner and Thies 2014, 411

<sup>118</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 240 (emphasis in original)

<sup>119</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 246

<sup>120</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 247

<sup>121</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 309

assert that national role conceptions do reflect the social order(s) a state is living in and that the social stratification of world politics is reflected in the tensions within those role conceptions”.<sup>122</sup>

It shall be noted that this intersubjective understanding of international politics preceded the constructivist paradigm in IR by almost two decades. In Holsti’s theory, nevertheless, role conceptions are still overwhelmingly ego-centric and take precedent over role expectations by others. He considers the principle of sovereignty as the root driver for national role conceptions: “the fact of sovereignty implies that foreign policy decisions and actions (role performances) derive *primarily* from policymakers’ role conceptions, domestic needs and demands, and critical events or trends in the external environment. [...] When incompatibility exists between highly valued national interests and the norms of behavior established through treaties and the like, the latter normally give way to the former.”<sup>123</sup> Note that this appears to fit squarely into common-sense realism.

In his trailblazing study of speeches, statements and interviews, Holsti inductively derived 17 roles invoked by 72 analyzed governments between 1965 and 1967.<sup>124</sup> The average number of roles per state identified was 4.6.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, it highlighted the salience of regional role conceptions. Many of these observed roles still find replication in more recent studies. Especially roles such as *regional leader*, *regional protector*, *regional sub-system collaborator*, *mediator-integrator*, *bridge*, *developer*, or *faithful ally* may still appear to be intuitive categories to the 21<sup>st</sup> century IR analyst.

### 3.2 The latest wave in role theory: state of the art

#### 3.2.1 Role theory – neither theory nor method?

At this point, it should be mentioned that the name *role theory* is, strictly speaking, a misnomer. As others noted, “role theory is not a theory” but a conceptual framework.<sup>126</sup> It rather started as an analogy (heuristics) with inductive logic, hence needs to find its inner deductive logic to become an empirical theory – and to produce testable hypotheses on its own.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, some have classified it as a middle-range theory.<sup>128</sup> And as it may become clear in the remainder of this section, progress has been made in this direction. As described above, Holsti already theorized the (testable) primacy of ego-role conceptualizations over others’ expectations. Over

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<sup>122</sup> Harnisch 2011, 15

<sup>123</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 243 (emphasis in original)

<sup>124</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 255–73

<sup>125</sup> K. Holsti 1970, 277

<sup>126</sup> Searing 1991, 1243; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 19

<sup>127</sup> Walker 2017

<sup>128</sup> Wehner and Thies 2014, 412

the past five to ten years, it has become visible that the at times conflictual relationship between roles presents a departure for causal hypothesis.

Due to its niche existence and rather recent revival, role theory is rarely taught in IR university programs. Even though it demonstrates descriptive, organizational, and explanatory value: it brings a rich conceptual framework to the table, bridging different levels of analysis and offering interoperability among various theoretical approaches.<sup>129</sup> Role theorists highlight the potential for solving the agency-structure problem and integrating the mostly separated FPA and IR research programs.<sup>130</sup> It has already been noted that role theory preceded IR constructivism in emphasizing ideational factors, perceptions and ‘logics of appropriateness’.<sup>131</sup> At the same time, congruences with the English School and a traditional affinity with realism proved obvious.<sup>132</sup>

However, its limited reach in IR and FPA may be due to the fact that it did not keep pace with the science’s trend of ‘professionalization’. Role theorists themselves called role theory “conceptually rich but methodologically poor”,<sup>133</sup> stating that “role theorists have yet to produce a handbook on methodology for the analysis of NRCs [...]”.<sup>134</sup> Although (interpretative) case studies, process tracing, narrative analysis and content analysis are prominently used, no methodological script or coding system has been established yet.<sup>135</sup>

Yet, is this really necessary? One may well argue that the use of a wide range of methodological tools adds empirical richness and cumulative strength to the project. Still, its main purpose is conceptual, not methodological. Other IR theories, too, have pet methods – i.e., discourse analysis for constructivists – but no unified methodology. In the end, its merit is in the theoretical-analytical realm. Therefore, as with network analysis in the previous chapter, I argue that theory development should be at the forefront, and not the debatable professionalization in quantitative methodology.<sup>136</sup> To be policy-relevant, according to Joseph Nye., international relations theories need to be plain in language and provide decision-makers with the vocabulary which helps them with “framing, mapping, and raising question even when they do not provide answers”.<sup>137</sup> The ‘role’ is an intuitive concept and, despite academic jargon, it can be easily transported in plain language. The following section gives an overview and explanation of its conceptual apparatus.

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<sup>129</sup> Thies 2012a, 3; Wehner and Thies 2014, 412; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 3; Wehner 2016, 67; Thies 2017, 663

<sup>130</sup> Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011b, 1–2; Walker 2017, 4. Wehner and Thies 2014, 432, are more skeptical that role theory will eventually “resolve” the agency-structure debate.

<sup>131</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 4; Breuning 2019, 3

<sup>132</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 4; Breuning 2011, 24; Thies 2013

<sup>133</sup> Walker 2017, 3

<sup>134</sup> Thies 2017, 670; Breuning 2011, 33–34

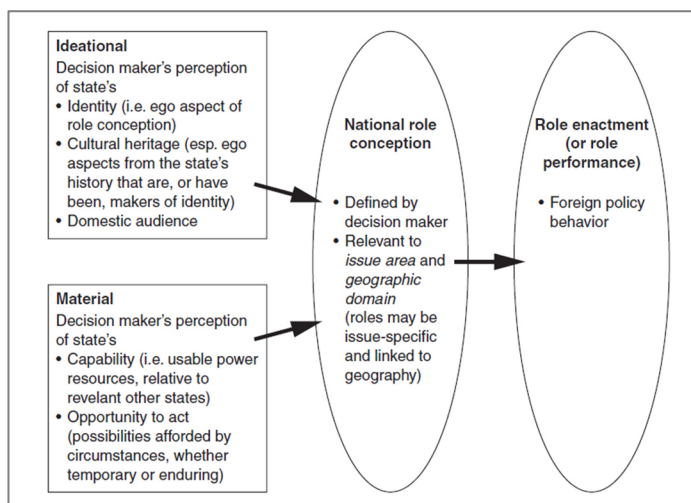
<sup>135</sup> Breuning 2019, 13–15; Wehner 2020, 360

<sup>136</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013

<sup>137</sup> Josep S. Nye 2008, 651, 655, 658–59; See also Mearsheimer and Walt 2013.

### 3.2.2 Role theory – the core concepts

Role theory continues where the conceptualization of previous quantitative network approaches in IR stopped: the tie formation process between nodes. In the network statistical view, these ties become congealed facts based on a single or limited number of selected indicators. Role theory, on the contrary, illustrates the interactive tie formation process between states. The critical question of whether the role concept can be transferred from the individual to the state-level can be answered by the fact that identities and role conceptions are inherently social phenomena, ideas shared by collectives. Despite possible domestic heterogeneity in role conceptions – they are translated by decision-makers and institutional actors on the helmet of a state.<sup>138</sup> In the past decade or two, the conceptual apparatus has been extended beyond Holsti's pioneering work on role conception, expectation and performance. The contemporary role theoretical framework is as follows.<sup>139</sup>



**Figure 1.1.** Role theory as a cognitive model of the agency-structure relationship. (Illustration from Breuning 2011: 25.)

Following Holsti, contemporary role theorists stress that states often develop multiple roles, which can be at times at odds with each other. Since Holsti's initial inception of the concept, however, recent role theory emphasizes the role expectations and demands of others – 'role prescriptions' in Holsti's words – more prominently: "*Role conceptions* refer to an actor's perception of his or her position vis-à-vis others (the ego part of a role) and the perceptions of the role expectations

of others (the alter part of a role) [...]".<sup>140</sup> Further, it acknowledges that *role performance* (also termed *role enactment* or *role-play*), the actual behavior, is not always in coherence with role conceptions and expectations.<sup>141</sup> Figure 1.1 illustrates national role conceptions in a simplified model without the alter part's expectations, which is close to Holsti's conceptualization. Figure 1.2 exemplifies the ego-alter interaction in the role and identity formation process.

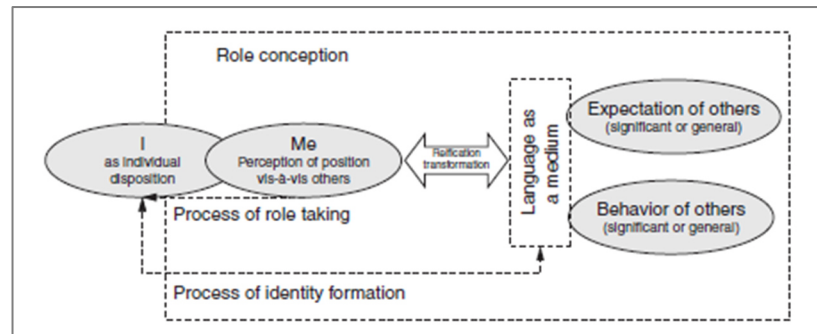
<sup>138</sup> Chafetz, Abramson, and Grillot 1996, 733, 748; Breuning 2011, 24; Brummer and Thies 2015, 277

<sup>139</sup> For authoritative literature reviews in the field, see Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011c; Walker 2011a; 2011c; Thies and Breuning 2012; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Walker 2017; Breuning 2019.

<sup>140</sup> Harnisch 2011, 8

<sup>141</sup> Harnisch 2011, 9

**Figure 1.2.** Role conception and identity formation process in interactionist role theory. (Illustration from Harnisch 2011: 11)



The influence of others' demands on the ego's role conceptualization is expressed in the term *role-taking*, whereas *role-making* stresses the ego's agency. Of course, not all states are equally important for each other's role conception; there are *significant others* who are key to reaffirming or rejecting a state's self-conception. They thus represent constant background variables.<sup>142</sup> Here, it shall be assumed that great powers are each other's significant others due to their structural similarity and material position in international relations.

This dynamic model produces systemic prepositions describing foreign policy behavior. When role conceptions and expectations match and role performances show to be compatible, cooperation between two role players takes place.<sup>143</sup> Mismatches between role expectations and role performances, in turn, create mistrust and spoil potential cooperation.<sup>144</sup> Role performances between states, so to speak, create role networks. When one state abandons its role, a structural vacuum may surface. For example, the American withdrawal from the Paris Agreement created a leadership vacuum. This presented a critical juncture for the cooperation between China and the EU, in which Brussels and Beijing readjusted their mutual role play in international climate governance.<sup>145</sup> In the role theoretical perspective, agency and structure are bound in a feedback loop in which role changes on the agent-level induce changes in the structure – and structural changes create *role adjustment pressures* on its inhabitant states.<sup>146</sup>

*Role learning* occurs when role conceptions change due to new information and experience (the cognitive dimension) and new roles and identities are acquired through interactions with others (social dimension).<sup>147</sup> Beliefs and skills change in response to changes in the environment or one's own experiences and interests.<sup>148</sup> Through role learning, actors create ego-roles for themselves and influence the counter-roles of the alters (called *altercasting*). This does not only reflect foreign

<sup>142</sup> Song and Fürst 2022, 6–8; Harnisch 2011, 11–12; Le Prestre 1997, 5; Thies and Wehner 2021, 5; Wehner 2016, 67

<sup>143</sup> Gurol and Starkmann 2021, 522

<sup>144</sup> Esteban and Armanini 2022

<sup>145</sup> Gurol and Starkmann 2021

<sup>146</sup> Grossman, Schortgen, and Friedrichs 2021a, 4–5

<sup>147</sup> Harnisch 2011, 12

<sup>148</sup> Harnisch 2011, 10



policy behavior in which states make and take roles they think others will accept (and thus influence their behavior) but also behavior that is expected to be seen as socially unacceptable or irrational by others.<sup>149</sup> Take the pariah state, for example, that tries to change the other's foreign policy in its own interest by coercion.

When the enacted set of roles changes, role theorists speak of *role change* or *role transition*. They distinguish between *role differentiation* (the number of enacted roles increases) and *role evolution* or *role adaption* (new roles replace old ones or the strategies in performing the role change).<sup>150</sup> Role changes often happen in face of *role conflicts*. These are tensions between incompatible roles held by an actor (*inter-role conflict*) or within a single role (*intra-role conflict*, e.g., between ego and alter expectations or domestically about the shape and content of a role). They can unfold systemic relevance when powerful revisionist states clash with status quo powers.<sup>151</sup> The current conflict triad U.S./EU vs. Russia and U.S. vs. China illustrates this assumption. Role conflict, as Oppermann et al note, has been understudied despite its centrality to the whole conceptual framework.<sup>152</sup>

Role conflicts can result from *role strain* or *role dissonance*. *Role strain* describes the level of effort or difficulty to perform multiple roles and fulfill the role demands imposed by others.<sup>153</sup> States regularly have different role conceptions that can be at odds with each other. Auxiliary roles, which may be reduced to single policy areas, are 'molded' in the master role, and depend on the master role's material and social context.<sup>154</sup> In the case that the auxiliary role undermines or is not consistent with the master role, we speak of *role dissonance*. This auxiliary role can persist if it is of low salience; if it is of high salience, it will spur acute *inter-role conflict*. In such a clash, states are expected to give up or modify the auxiliary role in order to enact the master role.<sup>155</sup> This may transcend across role sets with different states. For example, as one study theorizes, Spain's role within the EU and as an ally of the United States contributed to changes in its bilateral relationship with China to more critical role expectations.<sup>156</sup>

We may also take the Russia-Ukraine war as a very recent example. From a role theoretical perspective, the European Union experienced role dissonance between taking the role as an energy importer of Russian gas (auxiliary role) and its role-making as a value-based competitor

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<sup>149</sup> Harnisch 2011, 12–13; Klose 2020, 853

<sup>150</sup> Walker 2017, 6; Harnisch 2011, 10

<sup>151</sup> Brummer and Thies 2015, 279; Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011a, 256; Harnisch 2011, 8

<sup>152</sup> Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020, 136

<sup>153</sup> Walker 2017, 5; Wehner 2016, 65

<sup>154</sup> Thies 2012b, 33–34; Wehner 2015, 439

<sup>155</sup> Breuning and Pechenina 2020, 22, 24–26; Thies 2013, 46

<sup>156</sup> Esteban and Armanini 2022, 2

vis-à-vis Moscow (master role). With Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, it scrambled to abandon its role as an energy importer since the two roles became fully irreconcilable.

Over the past years, a part of the leading role theory community invested efforts into scrutinizing the domestic sources of role conceptions.<sup>157</sup> The analysis of *role contestations* at home helps to understand the change or inconsistency of role conceptualizations and role enactments of states. It also explains events that are not easily explained by structural variables, for example, why states take different roles in a particular policy issue – why did Spain participate in the Iraq war in 2003 but Germany did not?<sup>158</sup>

The explanations circle around the mass-elite nexus. Roles can be contested *vertically* (differences in conceptions between elites and public opinion) and *horizontally* (differences between elite groups, coalition parties or bureaucratic agencies within a country). Although FPA research shows that there are causal mechanisms at play – i.e., elites and decision-makers are very cautious about public opinion and coalition politics affect a state's behavior – results have been mixed and inconclusive about direction, degree and generalizability of effects from domestic factors on foreign policy behavior.<sup>159</sup> Therefore, it appears that the inquiry of domestic factors is rather idiosyncratic and helps to explain changes and explore why states take new or different roles. The relevant question probably is: what does domestic role contestation tell us about the past and future relationship between state A and B and the overall international structure? For the analysis of international relations and larger patterns of foreign policy behavior, it appears useful to treat states as unitary actors and refine the analysis with domestic variables when needed.

Finally, the overall bargaining and learning process in which states place their roles in international relations is called *role location*. Following Walker,

“Role location refers to the process of exchanging cues (verbal or physical signals) between members of a role set who are associated with different roles and communicating what roles each member of the dyad or larger ensemble of actors expects from, and attributes to, one another.”<sup>160</sup>

### 3.2.3 Identity and the ideational security dilemma

A concept that has been briefly mentioned at the margins of recent role theoretical work has not gained much traction: the '*ideational security dilemma*'.<sup>161</sup> However, it shall find its appreciation

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<sup>157</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Brummer and Thies 2015; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b; 2016a; Wehner and Thies 2021a. Others connected domestic role contestation with role socialization through the concept of sovereignty: Beasley and Kaarbo 2018; Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021.

<sup>158</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2012

<sup>159</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 12, 15; 2016b

<sup>160</sup> Walker 2017, 5

<sup>161</sup> Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011a, 255, 258

here, as it appears to a) provide an analytical lens for great power conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and b) bridges role theory with identity-based constructivism and traditional realist prepositions.

Crucially, the problem of *uncertainty* is expressed in role theory by actors – in face of changes in material distributions and national role conceptions – who do not know which roles will be enacted by others in the future, and what the costs or benefits of one's own possible role conceptions are.<sup>162</sup> Role conflict among states creates distrust and negative perceptions.<sup>163</sup> These conflicts can result from power-identity gaps in which the role conceptions and expectations between two states do not match ideationally and materially; the result may be that the states' role conceptions are irreconcilable and turn into an *ideational security dilemma*. This has been identified by role theorists in the Franco-American relationship since WWII.<sup>164</sup>

In another example, the United States sought to present itself as a defender of democracy and human rights and China as a failed modernizer in the light of the Tianmen protests. This clashed with China's self-conceptualization as a great power and was met with anti-American nationalism and a recasting of Washington as a hostile hegemon.<sup>165</sup> A more severe case of such an ideational security dilemma being translated into a classic security dilemma may be the current Russia-Ukraine war with the involvement of the US, EU and NATO. In the ideational security dilemma narrative, Russia had not been treated according to its claim to be a great power and its claims to a sphere of influence had been denied by the actions of the others. Therefore, Russia and its significant others learned and enacted hostile roles. Following Klose, Russia also contested the EU's neighborhood policy in another regional subsystem, the MENA region, partly due to the EU's previous attempt to altercast post-Soviet states into liberal democracies, which ran counter to Russia's self-image and established role as a regional veto power.<sup>166</sup>

This problem has been raised by Klose, who introduced the 'ontological security' concept to role theory. States seek to realize their ontological security – a stable self-image – through role-play in the role location process vis-à-vis the significant others.<sup>167</sup> In an *ideational security dilemma*, similar to the traditional security dilemma,

“actions taken by a state to guarantee its ideational security (i.e., the security of its identity) make an Other's identity less secure, prompting it reciprocate [sic] by reinforcing its own identity and thereby potentially undermining the identity that the first state had sought to maintain. [S]uch an ideational security dilemma could produce an escalation as each party seeks to safeguard its own

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<sup>162</sup> Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011a, 256–58

<sup>163</sup> Esteban and Armanini 2022, 2

<sup>164</sup> Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011a, 255, 258

<sup>165</sup> Brittingham 2007, 161

<sup>166</sup> Klose 2020, 864–65

<sup>167</sup> Klose 2020, 852, 856–58

identity at the other's expense. This could lead to increasing distrust, and potentially to violent conflict."<sup>168</sup>

Support for this assumption can be found in network analysis. Maoz established a positive relationship between status inconsistency and states engaging in conflict and militarized interstate disputes.<sup>169</sup>

Roles, however, are not to be conflated with identity per se. Although the latter also needs a relational 'other', roles are interactionist concepts; they describe and prescribe a state's attitudes and actions vis-à-vis other states.<sup>170</sup> Roles describe "what we (should) do" whereas identity asks "who we are".<sup>171</sup> Thus, identities inform a role conception and role conceptions become part of a state's identity, yet they are not the same. In this view, roles are "a means to link identity and action".<sup>172</sup> At the same time, through social interaction, enacted roles modify a state's identity.<sup>173</sup> Accordingly, it is a state's overarching objective to have its national role conceptions accepted by others.<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, the conceptual distinction and overlay remain an empirical challenge to role theory.<sup>175</sup>

Concluding, identity and roles are at the heart of security dilemmas. The evident parallels with realism will be explored in chapter 4, which builds up to the analysis of regional great power politics. In the remainder of this chapter, I will come back to the fit between network analysis and role theory.

#### 3.2.4 National roles in complex adaptive systems

At the point of connecting role theory with network analysis, a specific research program that stands out within role theory needs to be mentioned. Stephen Walker (and collaborators) developed the so far only formal model of role theory, dubbed 'binary role theory'.<sup>176</sup>

In this cognitive-behavioral approach, he extends his earlier quantitative research agenda to role theory; role conceptions and the role location process are analyzed through the prism of the Operational Code Approach (OCA) and game theory. Roles are not operationalized upon their ideational or material *content* or policy issues at play but as general behavioral attitudes (mostly of individual leaders). These attitudes are reduced to a binary variable: conflictual or cooperative.

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<sup>168</sup> Brittingham 2007, 153–54

<sup>169</sup> Maoz 2011, 236–42

<sup>170</sup> Hansel and Möller 2015, 81

<sup>171</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 18; Breuning 2011, 25

<sup>172</sup> Wehner 2016, 66

<sup>173</sup> Breuning and Pechenina 2020, 23

<sup>174</sup> Le Prestre 1997, 5

<sup>175</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo 2016b, 19

<sup>176</sup> Walker 2011a; 2011c; 2011b; Walker, Malici, and Schafer 2011; Walker 2013; Marfleet and Walker 2021; Walker, He, and Feng 2021; Schafer and Walker 2021; Walker 2011a

The main part of this research is driven by computer algorithms modeling large data of leaders' statements. However, again, the game-theoretical results depend on the researchers' chosen mathematical modulation.<sup>177</sup> The methodology is complex, but so are the results: 576 possible outcomes in one calculation of 'subjective games' from ego and alter part interactions.<sup>178</sup>

Although it may attract skepticism from interpretivists and critics of the 'triumph of methods over theory'<sup>179</sup> – the problems of quantitative methods have already been discussed in chapter 2 – Walker's endeavor comes pretty close to the network approach (and theoretical spirit of this thesis). Strikingly, he views role theory as a 'general systems theory' by inspecting the psychological processes of individual decision-makers and the social processes within international structures.<sup>180</sup> In particular, he also refers to the science of complex adaptive systems,<sup>181</sup> concluding:

"Role theory is simultaneously a theory of uncertainty and a theory of complexity in which the analytical goal is to reduce uncertainty and thereby introduce complexity, i.e., replace random variety with ordered selection in a complex adaptive social system through the process of role location."<sup>182</sup>

In his conceptualization, international order is a

"set of emergent properties from the interactions among agents (state and non-state actors) about issues across multiple dimensions, e.g., military, economic, and diplomatic, which may vary in number and variety over time and make international order a dynamic construct entailing order transition as a process that varies spatially across regions and temporally over time."<sup>183</sup>

In this system, norm-based (cultural ideas), power-based (material capabilities) and rule-based (social institutions) features emerge as ordering principles.<sup>184</sup> States learn to act with and against each other in particular sub-systems, making their rules and taking roles that are based on ideational and material power resources.<sup>185</sup> "Whose ideas are most influential is mediated by power relations and socialization processes [...]."<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Marfleet and Walker 2021, 289

<sup>178</sup> Walker 2011a, 257

<sup>179</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 429

<sup>180</sup> Walker 2011b, 4–6; 2017, 12–13

<sup>181</sup> Walker 2011a, 258–61; 2011c, 270–71

<sup>182</sup> Walker 2011a, 261

<sup>183</sup> Walker, He, and Feng 2021, 246–47

<sup>184</sup> Walker, He, and Feng 2021, 246, 252

<sup>185</sup> Walker, He, and Feng 2021, 254

<sup>186</sup> Walker, He, and Feng 2021, 255

Interestingly, he recognizes that the analysis on the level of individual leaders allows for a higher level of detail and dynamic observations; but at the same time, it increases complexity and hence indeterminacy.<sup>187</sup> Consequently, so Walker,

“This existence of the uncertainty paradox makes it likely that the analysis of monad (single agent), dyads (two agents), and triads (three agents) may demarcate the interface for integrating Foreign Policy Analysis as an agent-centered subfield and International Relations as a structure-oriented field of world politics.”<sup>188</sup>

This is a huge step in the direction of the network approach. Most role theoretical work has been done on monadic role conceptions or dyadic role location. Only recently, role studies directly or indirectly employed triadic frameworks, including significant others, and reconsidered systemic relationships, emphasizing the influence of role sets between actors and role dynamics on other – *supposedly* separated – role relationships.<sup>189</sup>

### 3.3 Roles, role competition and the network ontology: bounded rationality, bounded agency

So far – apart from Walker’s system-theoretical advances – role theory has not mirrored network analytical concepts. Only Wehner/Thies analyzed Chile’s ‘bridge-builder’ role.<sup>190</sup> Instead, as mentioned at the beginning, it is rather the role-theoretical vocabulary that can be discovered in the network scientific literature.

For example, Kim unconsciously applies role terminology for analyzing the ‘roles’ a middle power can take. In order to identify a certain role performed by a state, one needs to determine its position in the network: “It is not an actor’s attributes or interest but its positions that enable an actor’s agency.”<sup>191</sup> However, this statement – taken by itself alone – seems to be oversimplified as it again divides attributes, interests, position, and agency into separated units of analysis. One may even argue that this assumption is even more structuralist than neorealism. Having revisited role theory, we should again underline that position is defined by other actors’ attributes and interactions. Hence each actor’s position is also partly conditioned by its own (constrained) agency and interests and how it matches with other actors.

Goddard, in comparison to Kim, gets closer to interactionist role theory:

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<sup>187</sup> Walker 2011a, 264–65

<sup>188</sup> Walker 2011a, 266

<sup>189</sup> Esteban and Armanini 2022; Song and Fürst 2022; Michalski and Pan 2017; Klose 2020; Gurol and Starkmann 2021; Grossman, Schortgen, and Friedrichs 2021b

<sup>190</sup> Wehner and Thies 2014, 422–27

<sup>191</sup> S. Kim 2022b, 34

“Generalized *social roles* comprise categorical identities, or categories. The relationship between categories and networks give rise to varying collective mobilization dynamics. Conceptualizing relational structures in this way provides important insight into the relationship between actors, structures, and collective action in international politics.”<sup>192</sup>

As described above with the example of the United States, China and the EU regarding the Paris agreement, structural vacuums open up when a state abandons a certain role. Network analysis acknowledges that a state can capitalize on its position when identifying demands and opportunities arising from structural holes.<sup>193</sup> Notably, network analysis extends the existing role terminology with the concepts of *structural equivalence* and *role equivalence*. Structural equivalence means that two states (A and B) have the same relationship with the same set of third states (X, Y, Z and Q). Role equivalence describes comparable role relationships: two states enact similar roles in their relationships with different states (i.e., state A with X and Y, and state B with Q and Z).<sup>194</sup>

As this discussion has shown, both role theory and network analysis raise awareness of feedback mechanisms between multiple network layers and roles.<sup>195</sup> Individuals are embedded in social role relationships, hence “political behavior is a result of an interaction between individual decision-making processes and the social processes that flow on networks”.<sup>196</sup> Padgett, as well, uses role concepts when illustrating that political actors take different roles on different network layers: “Properly speaking, individuals don’t have goals; roles have goals. At the social psychological level, different ways of nesting various roles in a single person can induce role strain [...]”.<sup>197</sup>

In reality, foreign policy decisions by leaders or states are characterized by *bounded rationality*. Through social interactions, actors adapt to the situational context; that is, the structural constraints and the internal/personal capabilities.<sup>198</sup> Belief systems and political actions shape each other – ideas influence behavior; actions have learning effects on beliefs.<sup>199</sup> Or, as Breuning put it, actors are bounded by their ‘ideational baggage’.<sup>200</sup> Leaders can therefore be seen as an intermediate variable epitomizing domestic and external structures.<sup>201</sup> Since leaders are a function of complex systems and networks, I suggest that the analysis of individual leaders is only

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<sup>192</sup> Nexon 2009, 40 (emphasis added)

<sup>193</sup> S. Kim 2022b, 29, 42

<sup>194</sup> Maoz 2011, 56–60

<sup>195</sup> Grossman, Schortgen, and Friedrichs 2021a, 4–5; Padgett 2018, 61–63

<sup>196</sup> Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Montgomery, and Lubell 2018, 4, 6–7

<sup>197</sup> Padgett 2018, 63

<sup>198</sup> Walker 2011b, 13–15

<sup>199</sup> Walker 2011b, 15–16

<sup>200</sup> Breuning 2011, 27–28

<sup>201</sup> Breuning 1995, 236–37; 2011, 23–25

explanatory strong in combination with structural changes (material, ideational and behavioral) and with domestic structural variables (public opinion, elites, material capabilities). On the state level, bounded rationality could be translated into *bounded agency*.

Institutions make a good case for bounded agency. Network ontology has broken up their one-way-conceptualization as ‘constrainers’ (see chapter 2). In role theory, institutions consist of informal and formal rules and prescribe certain behavior and role expectations to states, which govern their relationship patterns. The stability of an institution is a function of the conformity of state behavior and role expectations.<sup>202</sup> The participation in different integration processes with differing identities, interests, and consequent role demands may breed potential role conflict for a state – and cause, especially when political sovereignty is a factor under question, potential instability in a regional or global system.<sup>203</sup>

As this chapter explored, the role location process is often conflictual; states try to locate their roles through altercasting, role-making and role-taking in role learning processes, in which significant others guide ego-role conceptions. In the worst case, role conflicts trigger ideational security dilemmas.

With this in mind, plus the incorporation of the network analytical concepts of structural equivalence and role equivalence, I suggest another, complementary concept: *role competition*. Role competition defines a situation, in which two states – who are each other’s significant others – try to locate structurally equal roles in a state network. These roles, however, conflict because they cannot be enacted simultaneously. The roles are a) structurally incompatible and mutually exclusive (e.g., the integration projects of the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union) and/or b) they claim a similar position but the significant other’s role conceptions and expectations do not match. Through *competitive role-play*,<sup>204</sup> states try to remake their environment according to their interests.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Although increasingly complex, the ‘role’ terminology offers a transmission belt between academic theory and policy making. In fact, role theory is not just academic jargon but an intuitive concept. Taken together with other grand and middle-range theories, we can understand and tentatively predict which roles specific states will try to perform. Knowing role conceptions and expectations of others is key to the conduct of foreign policy.

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<sup>202</sup> Barnett 1993, 272–73

<sup>203</sup> Barnett 1993, 273, 290; Klose 2020; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021

<sup>204</sup> Michalski and Pan 2017, 612, 616, 625



Overall, it should have become clear that role theory and network analysis offer a stark potential for cross-fertilization. Role theory brings the conceptual apparatus for the analysis of tie formation; network analysis brings ontological complexity of structure to the table. Both theories converge in their intersection with the paradigmatic divisions of ideational and material approaches, agency and structure, and foreign policy analysis and international relations scholarship. Furthermore, they offer the opportunity to reconceptualize regions. Network analysis considers regions as sub-systems or network clusters within a complex international system. In role theory, regional role conceptions have been a feature from the very beginning. Furthermore, role enactment patterns in regional security complexes have been identified as a future path of inquiry.<sup>205</sup>

Therefore, the analysis of the Central Asian cluster/sub-system through role theory shall provide us with a description of its network structure, which builds the basis for future policy changes and stimuli penetrating the region and great powers. The emphasis on role competition and role enactments follows the call for more action-focused role research on the role location process.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Schafer and Walker 2021, 382

<sup>206</sup> Walker 2017, 21

## 4. Analyzing International Relations: Network Analysis, Role Theory and the Framing of Regional Great Power Politics

This chapter builds the foundation for the role-theoretical analysis of great power politics. In the first section, we consider a concept that received only indirect attention in chapter three: *socialization* is a trope familiar to IR constructivists and has been equated by role theorists with the *role location* process. As it shall become visible, socializing others lies at the heart of self-interested foreign policy, above all, great powers. Additionally, recent role-theoretical treatments of socialization, viewing roles as independent variables, expose an ambivalent appreciation of material structures. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes the interdependence of material and ideational factors and that material resources constitute the core of what is called 'power'. Although most role theorists consciously take a middle ground between material and ideational approaches, they recently appear to have a stronger inclination toward constructivist teachings. This chapter thus aims to reconcile role theory with neorealism as a grounding theory. The final section highlights the regional dimension of great power politics and leads up to the empirical application of this thesis.

### 4.1 Socializing others: why role location depends on material resources

#### 4.1.1 Does role theory's focus on socialization processes turn a blind eye to materialism?

In IR constructivism and role theory, *socialization* often is conceptually distinguished from role learning in that it means that an actor internalizes norms created by others, probably more powerful actors.<sup>207</sup> But the point of internalization has been questioned.<sup>208</sup> Thies, instead, equates this IR constructivist concept with the *role location process*, in which states learn and bargain for their roles in response to other states in a role relationship.<sup>209</sup> These role relationships are often asymmetric; great powers and regional powers are seen as the dominant socializers and new states are often the ones exposed to socialization pressure (although they can exert some influence themselves as well).<sup>210</sup> With the 1823 Monroe Doctrine – “the Americas for the Americans” – the United States, as a hegemonic power, started to enact a regional socializer role, seeking to influence and bind the Latin American republics politically and economically.<sup>211</sup>

Socialization may lead to a certain behavior expected from a state. This, nevertheless, does not necessarily mean that the supposedly 'socialized' state has internalized certain norms – the state may just comply temporarily with the other's expectations to realize its various self-interested

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<sup>207</sup> Harnisch 2011, 13–14

<sup>208</sup> Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 10–12; Thies 2012b

<sup>209</sup> Thies 2012b, 25–29; 2013, 35

<sup>210</sup> Thies 2012b, 28

<sup>211</sup> Wehner and Thies 2021b, 324–25

objectives.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, *competitive role-play* between two states may be a form of socializing the other into one's own identity and norms (role conception), i.e., achieving status recognition from a significant other (see chapter three).<sup>213</sup> On the global level, it is the enactment of its master role that matters most for a state – it therefore needs to actively shape its surrounding environment in the role location process in order to realize its role conceptions and foreign policy objectives.<sup>214</sup>

In his construction of 'socialization games', Thies constructs a taxonomy of four master roles for states that are mostly based on material capabilities: novices or emerging states, small states, major states or regional powers, and great powers. The stronger a state's capabilities, the more roles it will take and the more socializing influence it will exert.<sup>215</sup> Material capabilities, Thies maintains, are not the only source of master roles – the success or failure in the socialization game, in turn, influences a state's material capabilities.<sup>216</sup> Nevertheless, following positive changes in a state's relative material capabilities within the international system, a state's role-play may develop from a rather passive *role-taking* (from others' expectations) to proactive *role-making* (based on ego-directed role conceptions).<sup>217</sup> Shifts in material master roles, for example, China's leap from a developing state to a great power, induce different foreign policy behavior and can lead to mismatches with previous role expectations, finally generating role conflict with other states.<sup>218</sup> China, which could not be socialized into the liberal status quo order, progressed from a role-taker to a role-maker who intends to actively change the order in its own interest; instead of being socialized, China set out to become a socializer itself.<sup>219</sup> Likewise, increasing material autonomy enabled Russia to enact increasingly ego-based roles – with the conception of its master role as a great power clashing with Western role expectations towards Moscow.<sup>220</sup>

Although Thies acknowledges that material and ideational structures are interdependent,<sup>221</sup> conceding the "inevitability of structures for role theorizing and the process of foreign-policymaking [sic]",<sup>222</sup> he criticizes: "The state's location in an interstate social structure is [...] typically seen as dependent on the material capability of a state to locate itself according to a master role – defined as the most salient attribute of an actor."<sup>223</sup> (Ironically, he developed the

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<sup>212</sup> Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 10–11; Grossman 2021, 41

<sup>213</sup> Michalski and Pan 2017, 612, 616, 625

<sup>214</sup> Michalski and Pan 2017, 613–14

<sup>215</sup> Thies 2012b, 33; 2013, 44–47; Wehner 2015, 437–38

<sup>216</sup> Thies 2012b, 34

<sup>217</sup> Song and Fürst 2022, 6–7; Grossman, Schortgen, and Friedrichs 2021a

<sup>218</sup> Esteban and Armanini 2022

<sup>219</sup> Schortgen 2021

<sup>220</sup> Grossman 2021

<sup>221</sup> Thies 2012a, 6

<sup>222</sup> Wehner and Thies 2014, 415

<sup>223</sup> Wehner and Thies 2014, 414

material-based master roles first.) His analysis of Cold War bipolarity, accordingly, privileges ideas and agency over material power distributions. Thies theorizes:

“This is what neorealism would expect – that roles, as ideas, simply reflect the underlying distribution of power. But, if Wendt’s version of constructivism is correct, then we should see the ideas expressed in roles serving to constitute the identities of states, and the interstate culture. *Further, if Wendt is correct that material capabilities are only given meaning through ideas, then ideas should precede shifts in material capabilities.*”<sup>224</sup>

Yet, Thies considers that this juxtaposition indeed is problematic:

“An empirical test pitting neorealism against constructivism suffers from a potentially serious flaw. Neorealism is interested in *causality*, while constructivism is primarily interested in *constitutive effects*.”<sup>225</sup>

But he goes on to test how well these paradigms explain role conceptions, assuming: “If the roles serve to constitute state identity, then precede and “cause” changes in state behavior, then constructivism may better explain their adoption.”<sup>226</sup> Thies consequently argues that American ideas of bipolarity preceded material bipolarity – and even “provided impetus to the development of the bipolar distribution of capabilities”.<sup>227</sup>

I want to take this flaw of ‘pitting neorealism against constructivism’ seriously and take the position that neorealist and constructivist ‘sources’ ought to be thought of as two dimensions of the same phenomena. First, as Thies noted, material capabilities define the limits and opportunities for states to enact certain roles.<sup>228</sup> Second, the observation that ideas constituted the Cold War rivalry is not at odds with neorealism and does not make constructivism the better explanatory theory. On the contrary, it is very much in line with neorealism: the US as a rational actor paid close attention to relative power capabilities, and the fear of a potential rival great power made it adopt an antagonistic, bipolar role conception well before the material structure reflected ‘perfect’ bipolarity. In short, the idea of bipolarity originated from structural material changes, not the other way around. Eventually, as constructivists argue, the very idea of bipolarity constituted and manifested material bipolarity.

Thus, Thies’s analysis may be considered theoretically and methodologically problematic. He interprets the second Johnson Doctrine – which declared to intervene in any communist revolution in the Western Hemisphere – as a result of American identity and role conception as

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<sup>224</sup> Thies 2012a, 4 (emphasis added)

<sup>225</sup> Thies 2012a, 4 (emphasis added)

<sup>226</sup> Thies 2012a, 5

<sup>227</sup> Thies 2012a, 7

<sup>228</sup> Thies 2012b, 33

‘regional protector’, ‘defender of faith’ and ‘national liberator’, and not as being determined by power distribution.<sup>229</sup> Problematically, this conclusion stems from an inductive approach that takes the wording of the American security doctrine at face value. But was the rhetoric of a ‘protector against communism’ the cause of American foreign policy – or an intervening variable? Was this role anchored in domestic ideology – or did Washington declare to intervene in communist revolutions in its neighborhood because, otherwise, the material balance would have shifted towards the Soviet Union? In accordance with neorealism, I would suggest the latter. The question then rather is how Washington translated the bipolar structure into role conceptions and how it enacted these roles. How did its master role as a great power and adversary of the Soviet Union translate into its role conceptions and expectations vis-à-vis its regional neighbors?

Possibly, the auxiliary role conceptions as ‘defender of faith’, ‘liberator’ and ‘regional protector’ did serve as an ideational hinge justifying material considerations. (As Holsti argued, ideologies increase social coherence.) This does not mean that ideas of anti-communism did not unfold their own power. Material security concerns go hand in hand with ‘ontological’ security – recall the ‘ideational security dilemma’ (chapter three). But anti-communism was only meaningful because the significant other – communist Russia – had the material capabilities to be a material and ideational security threat.

As we see, the constructivist application of role conceptions as an independent variable can be misleading. In line with the argument that the Cold War was the product of role conceptions, Thies finds that the Cold War ended due to changes in Soviet ideas.<sup>230</sup> Why Soviet ideas changed, however, is not explained. (Critically, Thies’s interpretation is based on the examination of *American* foreign policy doctrines, not authentic Soviet sources, which raises questions about validity.) Yet the root causes can be traced to two ‘realist’ factors, one material, the other ideational: a) Soviet inertia which forced the state to reform and open up to western technology, and b) the unfolding force of nationalism undermining the Soviet state from within.<sup>231</sup>

This discussion demonstrates that role theorists – at times – still have difficulties grasping the relationship between ideas and material factors. When giving the former primacy over the latter, it appears that they turn a blind eye to material causes. Yet at the same time, they repeatedly stress the importance of material structures. In another study, Wehner/Thies describe how structural changes in the global economy triggered new role conceptions on the agent level of the states, with domestic groups competing over differing role conceptions for their country.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Thies 2012a, 11

<sup>230</sup> Thies 2012a

<sup>231</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 75, 202

<sup>232</sup> Wehner and Thies 2014

Another study on Cold War bipolarity, written in 1984, demonstrates the underlying importance of material factors. Jönsson found that the Soviet Union and the United States had similar conceptions of superpower roles, while the Soviet Union tried to emulate Washington as a 'role referent' to achieve equal superpower status. The rivalry shaped both powers' identities and objectives. Similarities were also found in the interplay of ideological, historical and bureaucratic factors at home. An asymmetry in material power capabilities, however, accounted for dissimilarities in foreign policy behavior (and therefore hints at the decisiveness of material capabilities for role conception and foreign policy behavior).<sup>233</sup> Moscow's economic weakness made for its loss of influence it once held by exploiting the ideational factor of 'anti-Western sentiment' in the global south and military strength.<sup>234</sup> Notably, triadic relationships increasingly mattered: the rivalry made both powers dependent on third actors. "Bargaining and compromise rather than supremacy and dictates have come to characterize the relations between the superpowers and the rest of the world."<sup>235</sup>

In conclusion, a state wishing to enact a role such as 'regional power', 'security provider' or 'developer' needs to fall back on relevant resources: military, technology, money, etc. Without those, endeavors to socialize others lack credibility. Especially if there is another state with the ambition or ability to take the same role. At the same time, existing capabilities and positions in the international state network will be interpreted by governments. A military powerhouse will inadvertently be regarded as such by its neighbors, and role expectations such as 'threat' or 'protector' emerge in the role location process. And so an economically strong country – is it a reliable partner, a market competitor? Thus, material distributions translate into ideas. And ideas guide further role conceptions and behavior. A state seeking to achieve leadership in a certain area – which it does not have at the time of developing this role – will use its present capabilities and interact with other states accordingly to realize the role. A state seeking technological leadership will invest in this field, cooperate and/or compete with other states. Indeed, if it succeeds – which depends on its domestic structures and interactions with other states – the very idea steers state behavior and translates into material outcomes.

Nevertheless, neither ideational nor material factors are precise and deterministic indicators for all future state behavior. Ideas and material factors are deeply intertwined in the role location process. When material and ideational structures match each other, predictability increases; changes in material and ideational constellations, in turn, affect each other.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Jönsson 1984

<sup>234</sup> Jönsson 1984, 223–24

<sup>235</sup> Jönsson 1984, 223

<sup>236</sup> Thies 2012a, 17

#### 4.1.2 What is power? Opening the matryoshka

The discussion about the influence of ideas and material capabilities in socialization processes raises the question of what is 'power'. Walker defines "the rational exercise of power among the various actors" as the "substantive core of world politics".<sup>237</sup> *Rationality* means behavior that is considered appropriate to achieve goals in a specific situational context. (As we established in chapter 3, rationality is bounded.) *Power*, from an interactionist perspective, "refers to the exercise of positive and negative sanctions by one actor to control the actions of another actor in a social system".<sup>238</sup> These exchanges create patterns and actors are cognizant of the other's behaviors and cues signaling role expectations. Therefore, the role location and enactment process is the conceptual lens through which one can research how and why power is exercised by states.<sup>239</sup>

Taking into account the influence of ideas, we can supplement this definition by Joseph Nye's famous coinage of *soft power* – the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments", which is based on cultural attributes, political values and the perception of legitimacy.<sup>240</sup> In accordance with the previous section on socialization, we can derive an interactionist working definition of *major powers* (*great powers* and *regional powers*): they are defined by a state's potential and actual ability to be a role-maker (as opposed to being a role-taker) and socialize others. Great powers have the material and ideational capabilities to project their role conceptions and role expectations on a global scale. *Great power politics*, then, is competitive role-play or role competition in which states locate and enforce their self-conceptualizations and role expectations towards others.

However, these action-based definitions of power as the 'exercise of sanctions' for 'control' or 'ability to socialize others' do not satisfy the ontological question of *what constitutes power*.<sup>241</sup> What are the sources? This makes 'power' pend on the 'material and ideational capabilities' to potentially achieve an outcome (control, socialization, role enactment, etc.).

From sociology, role theory, network analysis, and neorealism we know that these categories are relative and relational. In the network analytical approach, it is the social centrality of states in the international system that makes them powerful. Structural positions give a state the opportunity to reach others and exercise influence, what is described as "social capital", "social power",

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<sup>237</sup> Walker 2017, 6

<sup>238</sup> Walker 2017, 6

<sup>239</sup> Walker 2017, 6–7

<sup>240</sup> Joseph S. Nye 2004, x, 5–15

<sup>241</sup> It should be noted that outcome-based conceptualizations of power take a prominent place in political and sociological thought, for example, Dahl 1957, 202–3: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."; Weber 1947, 152: "'Power' (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."

“brokerage power”, “positional power”, or “network power”.<sup>242</sup> But centrality depends on the network structure – the character of the ties connecting states, which we seek to analyze through role theory. As discussed above, material factors set the natural boundaries for the enactment of roles, especially for a socializer. From an interactionist, action-focused power definition, thus, we eventually fall back onto the material core of power, as it is laid bare by neorealism. Material power, then, is translated through ideas; hence, ideational capabilities enclose material power like a matryoshka. As we have seen in network analysis, the impact and success of ideas depend on the structures they penetrate. Finally, ideas become powerful as a function of structure and expression of identity. Material power is hardwired into these ideas and structures – and in the ‘moment of truth’, it comes down to a state’s material capabilities.

Finding that material capabilities constitute the core of power, we can import material definitions from neorealism. John Mearsheimer distinguishes between potential and actual power. *Potential (latent) power* is defined by economic wealth, population size and technological development. Potential power is important because it is the basic ingredient for *actual (military) power*, defined by offensive military power projection capabilities, especially conventional land power. The distinction between potential (latent) and actual power is based on the premise that military force is the *ultima ratio* in international relations. Notably, the distribution of these capabilities regulates the level of fear between states.<sup>243</sup> “To qualify as a great power”, so Mearsheimer, “a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state.”<sup>244</sup>

In short, material power conceptualizations and neorealism are rough indicators for international relations. The fine-grained analysis of actual social processes, however, needs to take into account ideas the way role theory does. The *exercise* of power is context-dependent.<sup>245</sup> Network analysis lends another lens to see an increasingly multipolar system in more detail. Logically, we will turn to the bridge between idealism and neorealism in the next section.

## 4.2 Bridging paradigms: idealism, neorealism and the analytical ladder

As it should have become clear, the cognitive-ideational and material dimensions of foreign policy are inextricably linked to each other. Although they focus exclusively on ideas, constructivists such as Adler and Wendt recognized that a complete theory of international politics needs to take into

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<sup>242</sup> S. Kim 2022b, 38; Baxter, Jordan, and Rubin 2018, 198–200; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009, 568–74

<sup>243</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 42–46, 55–82. Others argue that economic power (and the balance thereof) has taken the primacy over military power in the 21st century, see Allison 2017, 20–24; Münkler 2015, 278–80.

<sup>244</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 5

<sup>245</sup> Joseph S. Nye 2004, 2



account both material and ideational factors.<sup>246</sup> Neorealists, on the other side, have been criticized for their materialist balance-of-power worldview. Yet, neorealists such as Mearsheimer, too, (in)directly realize the impact of ideas.

First of all, we find several points in their core academic writings, which emphasize cognitive-ideational factors. Fear, as an emotional driver under uncertainty, features prominently in the security dilemma; it induces a power-maximizing behavior in which states pursue risky policies and pay close attention to the potential and actual power of other actors.<sup>247</sup> Stephen Walt, therefore, reformulated the classic balance-of-power paradigm into a ‘balance of threat’ theory: “Threats [...] are a function of power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions.”<sup>248</sup> Mearsheimer appreciates that ideology contributed to the lack of a British-Soviet alliance against Hitler before 1941, that nationalism let the European empires implode, and that revisionist ideas continued from Weimar elites to the Nazis’ foreign policy.<sup>249</sup>

Mearsheimer also recognizes that social learning processes and miscalculations in decision-making under imperfect information represent permanent features of the international system.<sup>250</sup> Despite the critique that neorealists put conflict at the center of their analysis, they do not disregard cooperation: states pursue economic wealth for their latent power, which incentivizes cooperative behavior – but eventually, national security and political objectives trump all other considerations.<sup>251</sup> Anarchy does not mean that states necessarily compete in every realm across space and time though. Especially under multipolarity, competition urges states to cooperate and forces them into at least some degree of socialization and thus interdependences. If they would follow a strict autonomic strategy, they would find themselves outperformed by other alliances.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Thies 2012a, 2; Wendt, nevertheless, limited his own theory only to ideational structures.

<sup>247</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 30–36, 42–46, 147–52, 211–13, 217–19. Others, although no neorealists in the strict sense but adherent to classic realist thought, add to the factor “fear”, following Thucydides, the concept of “honor”, see Allison 2017, 34–40.

<sup>248</sup> Walt 1987, 6. Note that Holsti acknowledged threat perceptions as underlying drivers of alliance formation: “Common perceptions of threat and widespread attitudes of insecurity are probably the most frequent sources of alliance strategies. [M]utual fear is the only solid basis upon which to organize an alliance. Nevertheless, because in the face of common threats governments have also chosen neutrality [...], we cannot say that this factor is a sufficient condition [...]; we cannot predict that if two states [...] commonly perceive C as an enemy, they will form an alliance. It is probably, however, a necessary condition: the chance that A and B would form a military alliance if they did not commonly perceive C as a threat would be very slight. Nor are other factors, such as internal stability in the allies, ideological affinity, and common economic values, while all significant in helping alliances cohere, sufficient in themselves to create or maintain the coalitions. States thus construct economic blocs, defensive alliances, or temporary diplomatic coalitions usually to act as deterrents against those that are making demands against their interests or posing immediate military threats.”, see K. J. Holsti 1972, 112–13.

<sup>249</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 189, 249

<sup>250</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 38, 140, 165–67, 184, 211–13, 217–19, 343–44

<sup>251</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 46–53; 2018, 204–16

<sup>252</sup> Posen 2022, 2; Mearsheimer 2001, 46, 52–53; Walt 1987

Secondly, John Mearsheimer, probably the most prominent and debated neorealist, devoted a whole book to ideational factors in order to substantiate his great-power-focused neorealism. First, in his criticism of American foreign policy, he blames the predominance of political liberalism for creating instability and conflict abroad. As he goes on, he describes how these ideas misguide foreign policy behavior – whilst realist principles prevail. Strikingly, liberal rhetoric notwithstanding, states often do not act in strict coherence with their own values but pursue *realpolitik*.<sup>253</sup> Second, in an explanation for why democratization and liberalism do not work as foreign policy goals, he acknowledges the facts of agency, emotions and socialization.<sup>254</sup> Human beings are social beings who survive in groups, and culture is the glue for social cohesion.<sup>255</sup> Building on Benedict Anderson's treatment of nations as 'imagined communities', a seminal constructivist contribution, he describes nationalism as a powerful ideology laying the foundation for nation-building and the creation of governmental institutions. National identity is the most powerful identity in international politics; yet, importantly, cultures are not fixed but socially constructed.<sup>256</sup> Additionally, there is no general reason, just instrumental rationality: people disagree over ordering principles and so-called universal norms; they disagree over how the world is and should be. They eventually organize and defend their ideas and ideologies through the creation of political institutions – states.<sup>257</sup> Therefore, the drive for self-determination and sovereignty lies at the heart of international relations.<sup>258</sup>

This brings us back to role theory. In the eyes of role theorists, sovereignty is not just a status or capacity that enables states to enact agency and roles – instead, it can be treated like a role. Sovereignty is the bargaining results from social interaction and contestation.<sup>259</sup> For example, decolonization extended sovereignty norms to former colonies, and the EU integration process put the sovereign state system into question.<sup>260</sup> The case of BREXIT has shown that an EU member state reconsidered the value of national sovereign power, entailing further 'sovereignty skirmishes', i.e., in Scotland and in the remaining EU.<sup>261</sup> Ongoing conflicts between Brussels and states like Hungary and Poland are another case in point. The quest for autonomy is often at the core of populist national role conceptions.<sup>262</sup> As Holsti pointed out earlier, mutual fear and shared

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<sup>253</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 120–87

<sup>254</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 28–29

<sup>255</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 15–17, 36–38

<sup>256</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 82–119

<sup>257</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 20–44, 95–102, 110–12

<sup>258</sup> Mearsheimer 2018, 3, 92–99, 139–43, 149–51, 158–72

<sup>259</sup> Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 12–13; see also Brittingham 2007, 152

<sup>260</sup> Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 13

<sup>261</sup> Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021

<sup>262</sup> Wehner and Thies 2021b

threat perceptions drive states into coalitions; ideologies and shared values increase their coherence.<sup>263</sup>

In conclusion, neorealism marries well with role theory. With network analysis, it shares the perspective of superdiadic constellations; the anarchical structure that is dynamic and adaptive due to changes in power distributions; and the centrality of major states. Great powers factor power calculations from different geographical arenas into their respective relationships.

Holsti's overall approach was not to build another IR theory but a "framework for analysis", with role theory being a constitutive part of it. In this spirit, the preceding chapters suggest a synthesis of role theory with network analysis and neorealism. This yields a complex analytical and theoretical edifice for both problem- and theory-driven research. Table 1 summarizes key insights and prepositions from this synthesis. The key question may be how actors create and react to international ideational-material changes through national role conceptions.

1. Leadership matters <i>sometimes</i> . But most of the time, leaders are a function of the multiplex network structure they operate in – domestic and international ones.
2. States are rational actors under imperfect information and the influence of perceptual and ideational variables. Their rationality is therefore <i>bounded</i> .
3. Since states are interdependent units in complex adaptable systems, their agency is <i>bounded</i> . They themselves are ontological networks that connect with each other.
4. States are self-interested actors who learn and enact roles in role location processes. When possible, they try to socialize others into their role conceptions and demonstrate competitive role play.
5. States care greatly about their material and ontological security (identity) – sovereignty, nationalism and the pursuit of wealth and security are constituting forces.
6. States are security maximizers, which drags them into material and ideational security dilemmas.
7. Social interactions exhibit network effects and non-linear power laws: states tend to cluster and grow based on homophily (security) and preferential attachments (economy). Choices in one unit or domain affect other units and domains due to cross-network interdependencies.
8. Inter-state networks and clusters develop hierarchic relationships, although the overall state system remains anarchic. There is no central authority – a world government or global hegemon – at the apex of the global state network, no spider in the middle that spins the web.
9. Since there is no central authority holding the emerging web together, states maximize their security in a self-help system (see 5 and 6).
10. Material considerations and identity-based needs are translated through perceptual variables (see 2). Therefore, ideas influence foreign policy behavior and realpolitik. National role conceptions are the intervening variables in this process.
11. Therefore, following Holsti (1970: 247), "the international system can be conceived analytically not only as patterns of interaction, but also as a particular distribution of various national conceptions at any given time." The higher the system's diffusion of power, the more leeway for national role conceptions and role-play.
12. Network hubs and great powers matter disproportionately because of their high centrality and influence on role location processes.

**Table 1.** Twelve theoretical insights and prepositions from the synthesis of role theory, network science and neorealism.

<sup>263</sup> K. J. Holsti 1972, 112–13

My suggestion for such a framework of analysis is to start with the structure, and, when change takes place in the international system, examine which state changes, how it recalibrates national role conceptions, and why. In the second step, the analysis focuses on how this affects other states in their role conceptions. To solve this level of analysis problem through role theory, I suggest using neorealism as a grounding and guiding theory on which role theory builds its more nuanced, material-ideational analysis. Network analysis shows that the hubs and small changes in a system matter greatly. Therefore, the theory may regard great power roles and the distribution of material capabilities (neorealism) as the omnipresent background factor. But, in the second step, it needs to keep in mind that minor changes with smaller nodes and ties in the network can change the overall structure. The theory thus needs to pay attention to ideational role conceptualization, network effects and domestic changes across countries. This suggestion concurs with Wivel's idea of moving down (and up) the 'analytical ladder'.<sup>264</sup> National role conceptions are the transmission belt for this analysis.

#### 4.3 The regional dimension of great power politics

Regions are important arenas for international politics. In neorealism, they cannot escape from great power politics:

"[T]hese states have the largest impact on what happens in international politics. The fortunes of all states—great powers and small powers alike—are determined primarily by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest capabilities. For example, politics in almost every region of the world were deeply influenced by the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States between 1945 and 1990. The two world wars that preceded the Cold War had a similar effect on regional politics around the world."<sup>265</sup>

In fact, Mearsheimer's neorealism views them as the primary playgrounds. Since great powers strive to maximize their security, they seek domination over their immediate neighborhood first. At the same time, to keep the balance with extra-regional peer-competitors, they intervene in other powers' backyards to prevent them from becoming regional hegemons.<sup>266</sup> This is called 'offshore balancing' – in role-theory-speak, we can conceive it as a neorealist role: 'offshore balancer'. Through competitive role-play, great powers deny each other role equivalence.

According to Mearsheimer, the United States are the only power in modern history that actually achieved regional hegemony. Setting out from the east coast to the west, they conquered the fast plains of North America. To consolidate their rule and regional hegemony, they stipulated the

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<sup>264</sup> Wivel 2018; Walker 2017, 22, as well advocates to move down the level of analysis when "the higher level analysis becomes ineffective".

<sup>265</sup> Wehner 2015, 436

<sup>266</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 140–43

Monroe Doctrine, which established the western hemisphere as Washington's sphere of influence. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, the United States intervened as an offshore balancer on the European continent to keep the balance of power.<sup>267</sup>

Fittingly, external actors are often sponsors of regional integration processes when they serve their strategic interests. For example, the United States supported the EU and ASEAN; and the EU supported MERCOSUR and other integrationist regimes. On the other side, external actors may try to undermine such projects, as the United States did in the cases of the Latin American Free Trade Association and MERCOSUR.<sup>268</sup> In Ukraine, Russia violently intervened in the country's integration with the EU.

In this view, great powers project their ordering ideas and power through regional integration projects. With the new Silk Road and the Eurasian Economic Union, China and Russia respectively develop their non-western versions of regionalism, which illustrates endeavors to reshape the international environment.<sup>269</sup> "At one end of the spectrum, regionalism becomes a protection against the outside world; at the other, it is a way of increasing engagement with globalization and a means of influencing it."<sup>270</sup> Omonkulov/Baba call outside-in regional integration efforts by major external powers *great power regionalism*.<sup>271</sup> Not an end in itself, it serves as an instrument to exercise influence, protect interests and increase power.<sup>272</sup> Naturally, Russia's and China's overlapping regionalist projects bear the potential to undermine each other. So far, however, it has not been found to unfold open competition – at least, Moscow and Beijing avoided such conflict.<sup>273</sup>

According to Buzan/Wæver, representatives of the 'Copenhagen School' in IR, the regional level of security gained importance with the end of the Cold War. As the rigid block-formation and its underlying forces vanished, weaker states acquired "more room for maneuver".<sup>274</sup> This is in line with Holsti's assumption that with increasing power diffusion states have more leeway.

Their *regional security complex theory* entertains the thought that international politics are to be understood by evaluating "the relative balance of power of, and mutual relationship [...] between, regionalizing and globalizing trends".<sup>275</sup> In addition to the global powers, which are able of projecting power globally, lesser powers form regional subsystems. Buzan/Wæver maintain that

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<sup>267</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 234–67

<sup>268</sup> Omonkulov and Baba 2019b, 8

<sup>269</sup> Kaczmarski 2017

<sup>270</sup> Kaczmarski 2017, 1360

<sup>271</sup> Omonkulov and Baba 2019b, 9–10

<sup>272</sup> Omonkulov and Baba 2019b, 20; He 2020

<sup>273</sup> Kaczmarski 2015, 86–101; 2017, 1374; 2019; 2020, 207

<sup>274</sup> Buzan and Wæver 2003, 3

<sup>275</sup> Buzan and Wæver 2003, 3–4

because “most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters”.<sup>276</sup> Although global powers involve themselves in these regional complexes, regional actors still retain some autonomy from these external forces. Therefore, it is imperative to study both the international (systemic) and the regional (subsystemic) level at the same time, including the dynamics connecting them.<sup>277</sup> To steer the focus from great powers to smaller states, World War I and the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens remind us that, under structural stress, conflicts with regional junior partners can drag global powers into full-fledged wars.<sup>278</sup> As we see, forming and influencing ties within regional networks is a crucial dimension of great power politics; hence, events and changes in regional networks can have non-linear effects on a global scale.

As stressed in chapter 3, national role conceptions are often constructed in a regional context, such as *regional leader*, *regional protector* or *regional sub-system collaborator*. “A regional power is a state with superior material capabilities that also has a self-perception – and Other’s recognition – as holding that master role within a region.”<sup>279</sup>

Therefore, we assume that great powers react to each other’s involvement and actions in their regional context. This thesis takes interest in the question of *what roles great powers try to enact in the regional context of Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Part II proceeds with the empirical analysis of this question.

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<sup>276</sup> Buzan and Wæver 2003, 4

<sup>277</sup> Buzan and Wæver 2003, 4, 11

<sup>278</sup> Allison 2017, 34–39, 82–84

<sup>279</sup> Wehner 2015, 436

## **Part II**

### **Great Power Roles in Central Asia**

## 5. Methodology and Research Design

### 5.1 Great Power roles: the good case, the bad questions and the ugly hypothesis

The following empirical study is process-focused, tracing role conceptions and role-play of great powers in Central Asia since 2007. Theory-oriented case studies contribute to theory and concept development (including hypothesis generation) and offer the opportunity to integrate both ideational and material variables in the analysis of complex causalities.<sup>280</sup> It is open to the discovery of non-linear feedback loops, equifinality, and sequential interactions between agents and structures.<sup>281</sup> A case study considers contextual factors and thus provides higher precision and validity in conceptual refinements.<sup>282</sup> As George/Bennett suggest, *process tracing* serves to explore these complex causal mechanisms, whereas *typologies* help us with modeling social complexities.<sup>283</sup>

As demonstrated in Part I, network science, role theory and neorealism offer the creation of typological categories: hub, broker, regional protector, defender of faith, offshore-balancer, etc. As described earlier, role theory has identified role typologies assumed across a host of states.

Departing from the theoretical and analytical framework laid out in Part I, I continue here answering the question *what roles great powers try to enact in the regional context of Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. As already presented in the introductory chapter, this project is split into two sets of research questions:

1. ***What roles do the great powers try to locate in Central Asia, and how? What role expectations do they impose on the region? How do they socialize the region? What are the attributes of the developing ties – material or ideational? Do the great powers engage in bilateral or multilateral role-play?***
2. ***Is there role competition or competitive role-play between the great powers? How do they refer to each other as significant others?***

I already clarified in the introduction that I do not seek to test hypotheses and variables. Nevertheless, I create a 'background' hypothesis that guides the analysis. Building on neorealist propositions and the concept of role competition, it investigates the regional role location process:

*the more great powers engage in role-play in a region, the more other (regional) great powers will counter this role-play with their own role conceptions and socializing efforts.*

Central Asia is expected to be a good case for the following reasons.

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<sup>280</sup> George and Bennett 2005, 8–10

<sup>281</sup> George and Bennett 2005, 12–13

<sup>282</sup> George and Bennett 2005, 19–20

<sup>283</sup> George and Bennett 2005, 13



First, as mentioned in chapter 1, the phenomenon of great power regionalism has been understudied from a comparative perspective. This concept mostly focused on China and Russia so far, who are the direct neighbors of this region. My analysis adds the roles played by the United States and the EU into the equation.

Second, the geopolitical confrontation between the West and Russia and the West and China are mostly viewed separately from each other. Concerning Russia, especially since the war in Ukraine broke out in 2014, NATO expansion or alternatively Russian neo-imperialism and its authoritarian governance are the preferred lenses; the geographic focus has been on Europe. Whereas Eastern Europe is mainly a space between the EU/NATO and Russia, in which China too exerts increasing influence from afar, Central Asia is mainly a space between its former imperial center, Russia, and growing China. The EU is *somewhat* a close geographic neighbor, and U.S.-led NATO *somewhat* afar but still *somewhat* present through its two-decades-long military presence in Afghanistan. Central Asia is (as it is repeatedly emphasized by policymakers in West and East) at the crossroads of Europe and 'rising' Asia. Geographically speaking – and as its denotation says – it is part of Asia. Yet it is not directly part of the Indo-Pacific, where we witness the highest tension between China and the United States. Simply put, in network analytical speak, Central Asia has a high geographical centrality in the US-EU-Russia-China four-body problem.

The problem with the 'background' hypothesis is that it is difficult to measure because we cannot expect the great powers to engage in structurally equivalent relations with the Central Asian states; instead, we would expect them to enact different roles. Only Russia and China are regional powers in geographic terms. The EU, in a broader sense, is an extra-regional neighbor, separated by Russia, the Caucasus, Iran, Turkey, and the Caspian and the Black Sea. The United States is completely separated in geographical terms and expected to, if at all, take the role of an 'offshore balancer'. Nevertheless, 'offshore balancing' does not need to be the case, since one could argue that the great power capabilities between Russia, China and the EU are somewhat balanced, and therefore America does not need to actively enact this role. This, however, is not the concern of this thesis. Instead of calculating the polarity and distribution of material power between the major powers, this thesis explores and compares their great power role-play in a single regional context.

Thus, it is not the primary aim to validate or falsify the hypothesis but to use it for theoretical guidance. Reasons for the choice of the period under scrutiny – 2007 to 2022 – have been given in the introduction. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized again that the analyzed period is comprehensive yet only a snippet from an ongoing, open-ended process.

## 5.2 Why the European Union counts as a great power

Another operational question could be whether all four actors classify as great powers. Again, it needs to be clarified that this thesis does not seek to measure polarity. It should be self-evident from the IR discourse and international events that America, China and Russia are the major powers engaging in competition and rivalry. Only in the case of the EU – since it is a supranational actor – some remarks seem in order.

Why does the EU qualify as a great power? For a long time, it has been identified as a normative or civilian power.<sup>284</sup> Yet it is debatable whether the 27 EU member states collectively fulfill a neorealist definition of great power: “To qualify as a great power a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state.”<sup>285</sup> In addition to the hypothetical question whether the EU-27 could stand a “serious fight” against the United States, one may opine that it is still the member states who hold national authority over their armies and foreign policy. Therefore, the EU would not count as a great power in its own right.

Nevertheless, as Gehring et al put it, the EU builds on its market power, which carries geopolitical implications, an “inadvertent great power”.<sup>286</sup> Brussels holds supranational competencies in economic matters; it coordinates and harmonizes a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and common security and defense policy (CSDP). The EU’s planned association agreement with Ukraine has been at the center of a geopolitical conflict with Russia – and Moscow views the EU with its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnerships as a geopolitical adversary.<sup>287</sup> Pänke conceptualized the EU as an imperial power – a ‘liberal empire’.<sup>288</sup> Moreover, it is part of the EU’s self-conceptualization to enact the role of global power; more recently, amid uncertainty and pressure for role adjustment, it also embraced a hard power role with military deterrence capabilities.<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, the EU’s role conception and expectation vis-à-vis China too are characterized by role competition. The European Commission envisages Beijing as a cooperation partner but, importantly, also as “a negotiation partner with whom the EU needs to find a *balance of interests*, an *economic competitor* in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a *systemic rival* promoting alternative models of governance”.<sup>290</sup> Josep Borrell stressed the need

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<sup>284</sup> Hettne and Söderbaum 2005; Manners 2006

<sup>285</sup> Mearsheimer 2001, 5

<sup>286</sup> Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017

<sup>287</sup> Klose 2020; Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017; Nitoiu and Sus 2019; Cadier 2019; Crombois 2019

<sup>288</sup> Pänke 2019

<sup>289</sup> Bengtsson 2021; See also Leonard 2019; Borrell 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c.

<sup>290</sup> European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019b, 1 (emphases added)

for the EU to balance China: “no single EU country can defend its interests alone against this superpower”.<sup>291</sup>

### 5.3 Content analysis

The precise tool for conducting the process-tracing and case study analysis I chose is the content analysis method. Content analyses can be used to “identify and document the attitudes, views, and interests of individuals, small groups, or large and diverse cultural groups”.<sup>292</sup> In distinction to discourse analysis, content analysis does not focus on the meaning of language per se, but on the meaning of reality expressed by social actors. Content analysis is also the original method used by Holsti in his first development of IR role theory.

For this endeavor, I collected official texts and statements from the great powers that contain information about their policies and role-play in Central Asia. These written texts were accessed through official websites. Thus, they are authentic and reflect official foreign policy thinking. Of course, they need to be contextualized and interpreted by the researcher, since they are part of a larger context and may be created for specific purposes and manipulation. Furthermore, the less descriptive and the more interpretative the content analytical approach, the more the results run risk of being shaped by the researcher’s pre-conceptualizations and bias. I offered my conceptual ‘bias’ in Part I of this thesis.

The data collection was influenced by technical obstacles. The Russian Foreign Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the U.S. State Department in particular are transparent and accessible sources offering official transcripts and policy documents in English. The U.S. State Department archives the websites from previous administrations publicly; reports and documents on the American Central Asia policy, including press statements, interviews and speeches, are pre-organized through the State Department’s Bureau for South and Central Asian Affairs. The Russian MFA too retains such items on its website and makes them accessible through search parameters such as year of publication, organization and country. Unfortunately, however, they are largely statements by the Minister and do not offer such a wide range of statements from mid-level officials as the United States does.

In both cases, the comprehensive collection of relevant items from 2007 to 2022 has been a time-consuming effort. In the process of gathering these texts, I compiled a large database, which I will retain and make available for future research projects upon request. From the U.S. State Department’s archival websites I collected 2,6262 items (texts from state department officials and secretaries); from the Russian MFA 523 items (statements and interviews by Minister Lavrov).

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<sup>291</sup> Borrell 2021a

<sup>292</sup> Drisko and Maschi 2016, 2

The smaller figure for the Russian MFA is due to the fact that it is less accessible than American online sources. In addition, I retained 684 items from the Russian presidential website. From the Chinese MFA I collected 57 items. Here as well technical limitations account for a smaller number: Chinese governmental websites do not offer archival functions and only a limited number of English sources. The oldest text I could access is from 2013.

Given these technical constraints and limitations of a master thesis in time and space, I decided to proceed as follows. I opted to focus the content analysis on texts from the Russian MFA and U.S. State Department. In the data collection and selection process I already skimmed through texts, took notes, and created first thematic codes. I then conducted a manual content analysis by coding all samples from the years 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019 and 2022. For this, I used the software NVivo 12 Plus. 208 items were coded for the United States and 170 for Russia in two separate rounds. Codes were attached to the texts as a whole. Thus, a category or subcategory – for example, a role or material policy area – was coded only once for each item.

I did not simply code and count word frequencies. The coding procedure was largely interpretative, as I applied the role-theoretical framework from Part I to larger text passages – which cover both manifest and latent content. Latent content is meaning that cannot be identified by simple keywords but across sentences and text passages.<sup>293</sup> The coding procedure has initially been deductive, for I started with a pre-categorized coding scheme (see figure 2).

Subcategories and codes were added and re-arranged inductively over the coding process, especially the national role conceptions. Most of the national role conceptions are not literally formulated by the great powers. Instead, they are inferred from my interpretations based on the analytical framework from Part I and the manifest and latent content found in the texts. I interpreted the roles not only as self-conceptualizations but also more widely through the foreign policy behavior observed in the texts.



**Figure 2.** Coding categories applied in the interpretative content analysis.

<sup>293</sup> Drisko and Maschi 2016, 4

I should note that I initially started with a tenth coding category: role-play mode (bilateral/multilateral). However, it turned out that this distinction was not analytically worthwhile, because the overwhelming number of items could be categorized as both bilateral and multilateral role-play. Nevertheless, I kept that coding category in the NVivo data set and coded multilateral platforms (C5+1) that do not fall under the category 'institution'. (The subcodes 'bilateral' and 'multilateral', however, were not applied consistently.) The final codebook can be found in Appendix 1.

In addition, I content analyzed 20 statements and speeches by the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, without the structured coding through NVivo but still guided by the same codebook. I proceeded the same way with the EU's two Central Asia strategy documents from 2007 and 2019. Time and space in this research project did not suffice for collecting a large database of official EU statements comparable to the ones created for Russia and the United States. Future research needs to consider technical problems as well: the European External Action Service (EEAS) was only established in 2011, and the archived contents on Central Asia on the current website reach back to 2014/15 only. Links to digitally archived website versions provided by the EEAS were not operable at the time of writing.

The results from my content analysis are presented in narrative form. It also includes descriptive statistics and frequency counts of roles expressed as well as policy areas and institutions. Because meaning is complex and all too often takes latent forms, non-frequency approaches can highlight important information that is scarce in texts.<sup>294</sup> In addition to the content analysis, I added a network analysis of imports and exports between the great powers and Central Asian countries in order to account for material ties and economic roles.

## 5.4 Limitations

The main deficit of this study is due to the above-mentioned formal restrictions and feasibility of the dissertation: only Russian and U.S. American texts – which differ in detail and transparency – could be coded in a thorough and structured manner. It also included only samples from five years in the period between 2007 and 2022.<sup>295</sup> Therefore, this coding procedure could be repeated for the remaining years and items collected in the database. Most importantly, it should be applied to sources from China, the EU, and other actors. The empirical analysis in this thesis, therefore, is exploratory in nature and offers a departure for future role-theoretical research projects.

Concerning the case selection and the respective actors, it needs to be said that other regional players have been excluded from the analysis, for instance, middle powers such as Turkey, Iran

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<sup>294</sup> Drisko and Maschi 2016, 84

<sup>295</sup> The sample years covered three-year intervals: 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2022.

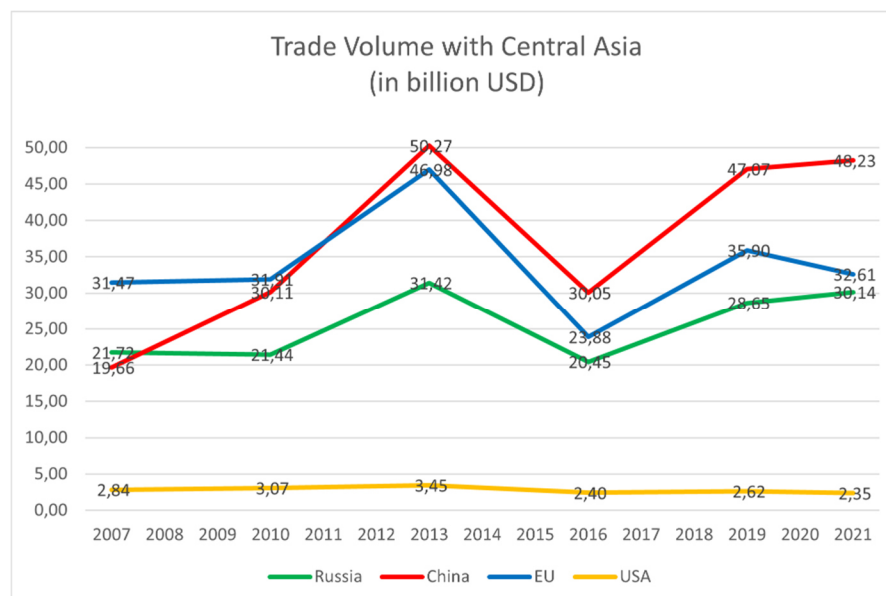
and India. It also does not consider the counter-role conceptions and expectations of the Central Asian states. However, I assume that their conceptions and expectations are at least indirectly reflected by the great powers due to the ego-alter interactions that shape ego-role conceptions. The bedrock assumption is that the great powers won't formulate roles in official documents and statements that are unacceptable to the smaller states if they intend to maintain positive ties. Instead, the formulations are already an outcome of previous role-learning. Furthermore, the actual outcome (the integration of Central Asian states into a regional and international system) requires further in-depth analysis focusing on the five Central Asian foreign (and domestic) policies.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Economic ties

One of the first questions in the analysis of great power politics in a sub-region may be: what economic role do they perform – how do they relate to the regional trade network? As we established in Part I, economics is the building block of any kind of power, be it social-interactionist or eventually military power, and having a say in security matters. Economic indicators may point to how strongly a state has vested interests in a region.

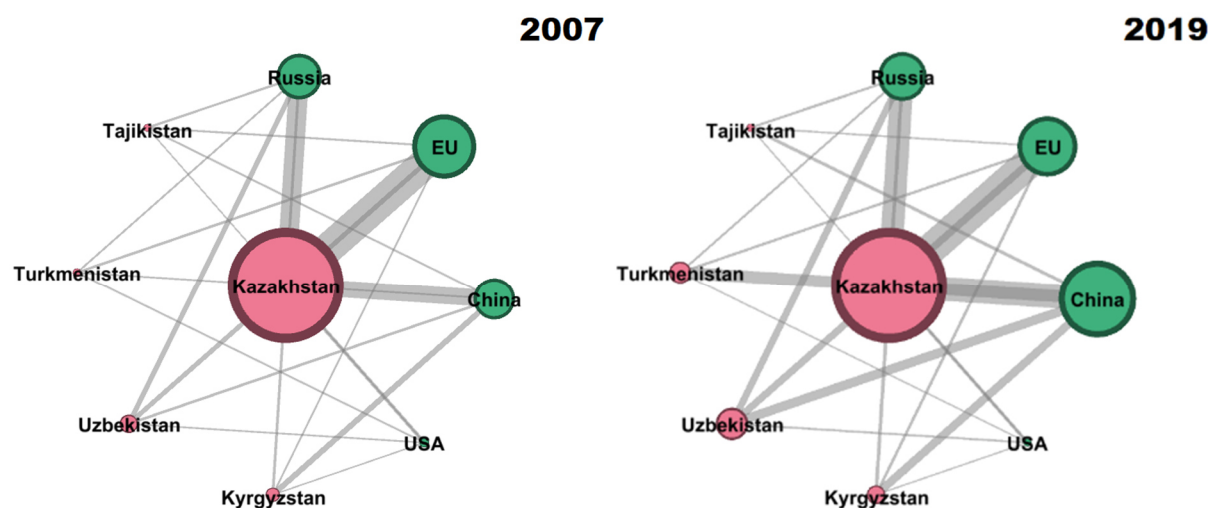
The first striking feature of a network analysis of the great powers and Central Asian states is that the United States plays only a minor role, to say the least. Its degree centrality, weighted by the overall trade volume with the Central Asian republics, pales in comparison to Russia, the EU, and China. As figure 3.1 shows, American-Central Asian goods exchanges have poised at a low level since 2007. This indicates a minimum level of trade activities, which are less affected by market fluctuations or competition. In other words, Washington does not have large stakes in the Central Asian economy. Accordingly, supplies from Central Asia made only between 0.04% and 0.1% of American imports between 2007 and 2021; exports have made for ca. 0.1% (see Appendix 2).



**Figure 3.1.** Trade volume of the great powers with Central Asia for the years. (Source: UN Comtrade Database.)

This is in stark contrast to Russia. For Russia, imports from Central Asia accounted for around 3% of overall Russian imports between 2007 and 2021. The importance of the Central Asian markets for Russian exports has grown since 2007. In 2007, they accounted for about 4% of Russian exports – in 2021, for a little less than 6% (see Appendix 2). For China, Central Asia makes for around 1% of its exports. Import-wise, the share has been inconsistent (inter alia, due to high imports from Turkmenistan in 2013); it has been oscillating between less than 0.5% and 1.4% of Chinese imports.

These contrasts become visible in a network visualization of bilateral trade activities. As Figure 3.2 shows, Kazakhstan is at the center of the network. In terms of overall trade volumes, the positions of Russia and the EU remained constant in 2007 and 2019, although the EU's degree centrality shrank a little. China, however, has visibly grown in degree centrality. Also, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have grown as well and show network centralities higher than the United States. The size of the network ties demonstrates that bilateral trade has increased especially for Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan with China.



**Figure 3.2.** The Central Asian trade network with the great powers based on annual trade volume in 2007 and 2019. (Source: UN Comtrade Database. Illustrations with Gephi 0.9; node size measured by degree centrality.)

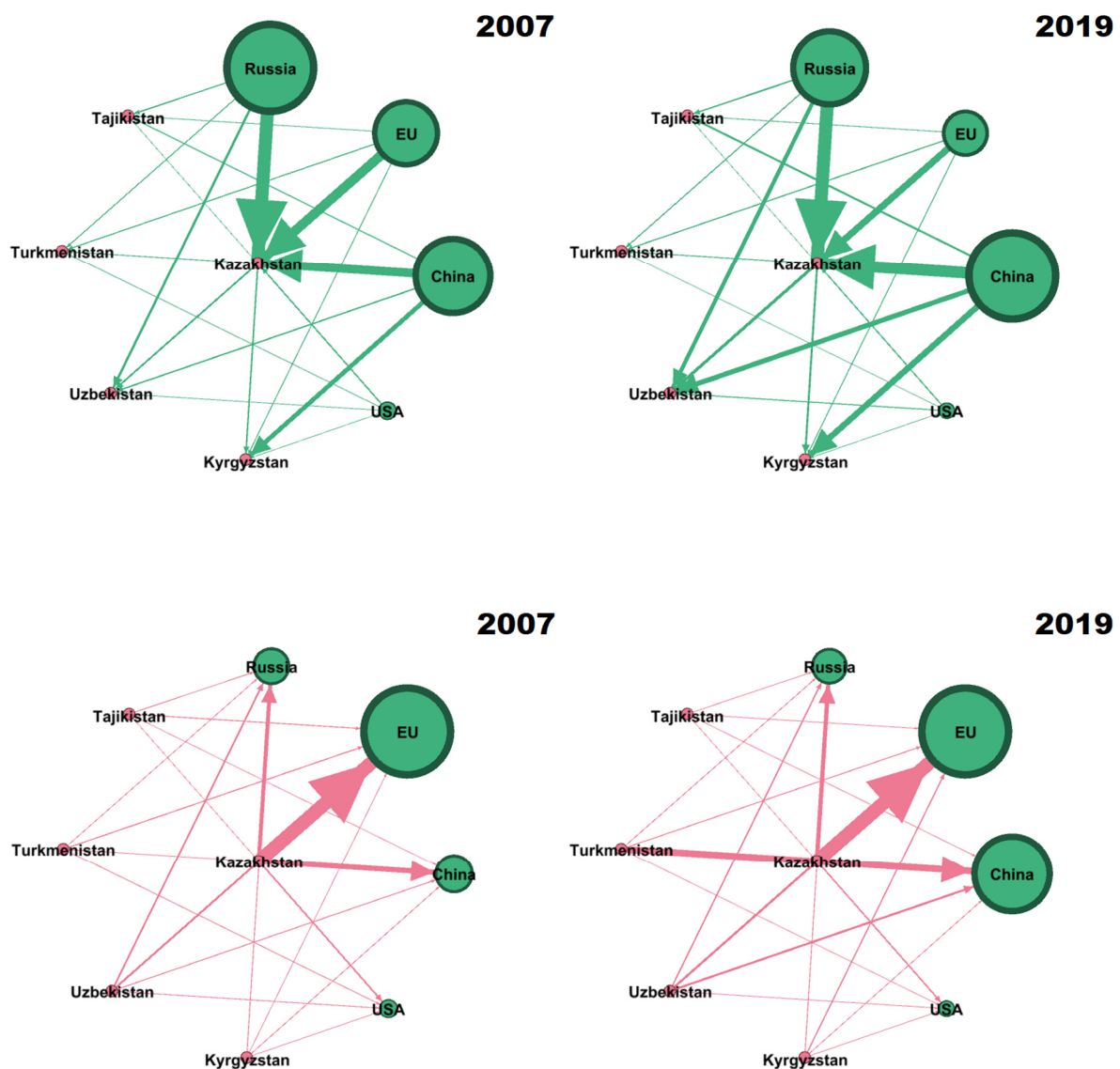
Figure 3.3 shows that the European Union takes mostly an importer role, while its exporter role diminishes compared to Russia and China. While Russia was most central as an exporter to Central Asia in 2007, Beijing appeared to muscle out Moscow from this position in 2019.

Since there is no space for a comprehensive trade and investment analysis here, just a brief overlook of the character of the export and import ties based on the UN Comtrade Database: All four great powers import mostly mineral fuels and raw materials such as iron, steel, copper, aluminum, or lead. China also imports cotton; the EU pearls and precious stones; and Russia cotton, clothes, and fruits, nuts and vegetables. The largest differences are in exports. Here we see that the United States exports electric and high-tech products, including aircraft and spacecraft components plus other vehicles, also some meat products. The EU mostly supplies machinery, pharmaceutical products, electronic goods and high-tech instruments, but also chemical products, cosmetics vehicles and aircraft/spacecraft components. In terms of high-tech products, China is about to outpace the EU – Beijing further supplies machinery, electronic products, chemical goods, vehicles, and manufactured consumer goods such as clothes ware, furniture, toys, and sports gear.



Russian exports to Central Asia are probably the most diverse ones, but also less sophisticated: dairy and food products, chemical goods, mineral fuels, iron/steel, wood and paper products, furniture, machinery and electric products, and toys and sports gear.

Based on the low degree centrality of the United States in the Central Asian economic network, we may assume that Washington has only weak ties to the region and enacts just a minor role. This assumption, however, as we will see in the following sections, is not correct.



**Figure 3.3.** The Central Asian import and export networks with the great powers in 2007 and 2019. Upper half: the great powers as exporters; lower half: the great powers as importers. (Source: UN Comtrade Database. Own illustrations with Gephi 0.9; node size measured by in- and out-degree centrality.)

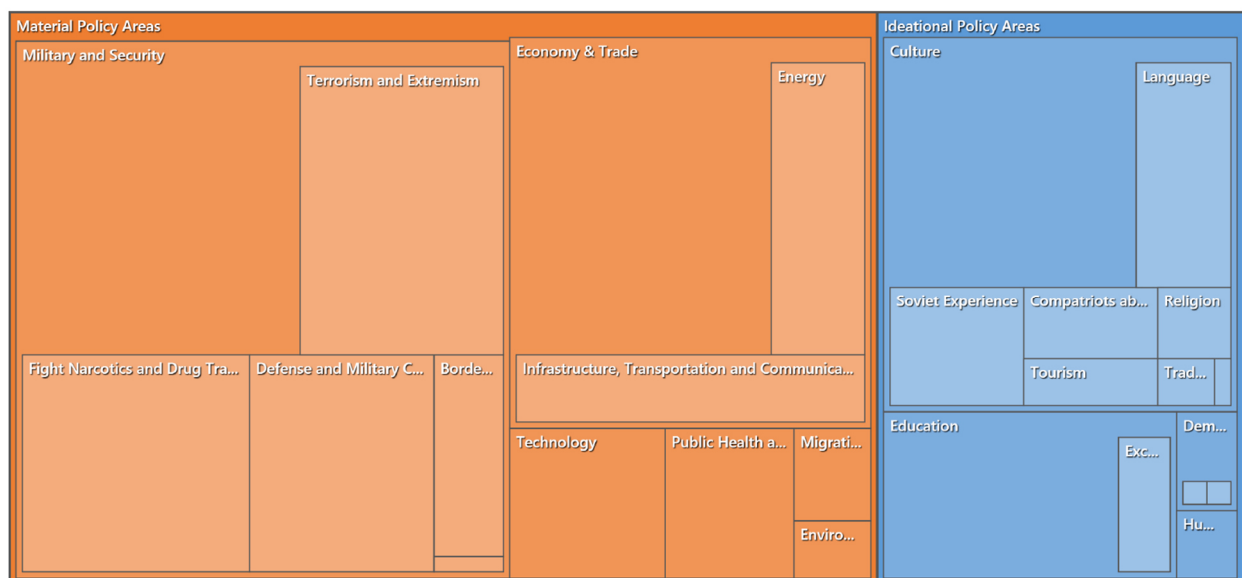
## 6.2 The roles great powers enact in Central Asia

### 6.2.1 Russia and the United States

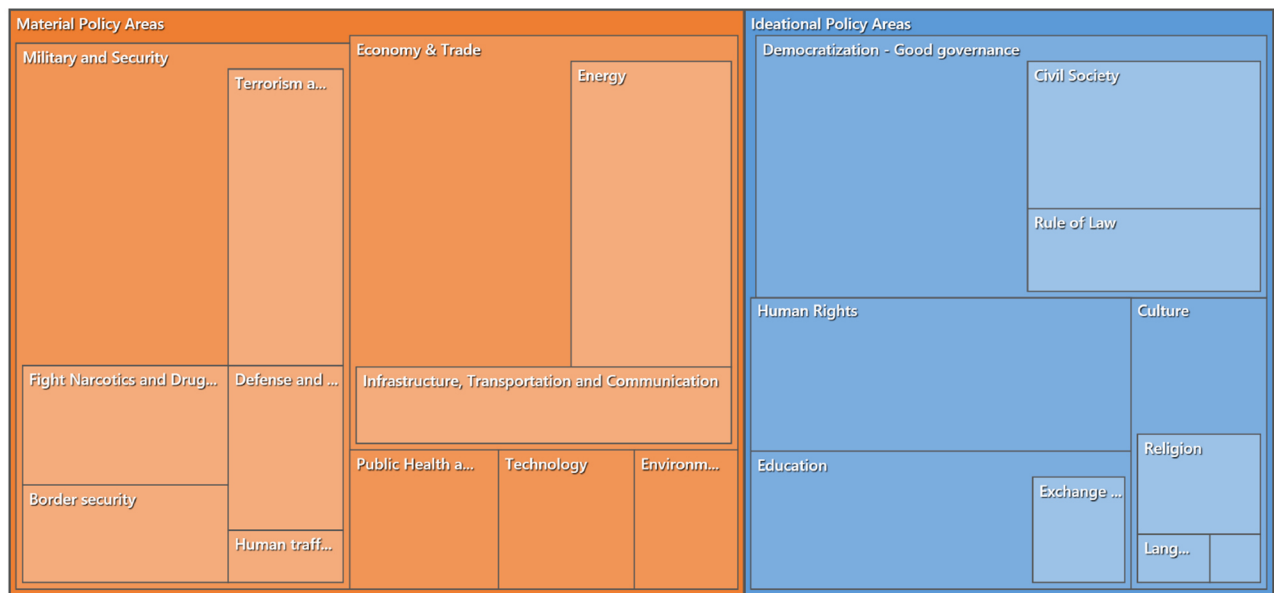
The low degree centrality of the United States in the Central Asian economic network, indeed, does not indicate a low number of enacted roles in the region. The examination of statements, interviews and speeches by foreign policy officials shows that great powers are very closely monitoring each other's activities in the different regions – looking at what roles the other tries to enact and what role expectations are brought forward.

Although the analysis did not test the background hypothesis by quantifications and statistically sound means, the evidence strongly suggests that great powers indeed counter each other's role-play and increase their own role conceptions and socializing efforts. This finds its expression in latent and overt role competition and competitive role-play expressed by the players themselves. A major finding is that this role competition is not limited to the regional context, but that both regional and global contexts are inextricably interrelated in the role location process. Role competition, triggered by ideational and material security dilemmas, has led to overt conflict between the great powers. Before turning to the conflicting role conceptions and great power role competition in the next section, we first take a look at *what* roles could be found in the content analysis, and in which institutions the play is performed.

The role-theoretical discussion in Part I circled very much around the relationship and relative weight of ideational and material structures in international relations. Figure 4.1 and 4.2 show that material policy areas slightly dominate American role-play, while the Russian ties to the region are mainly characterized by material policy issues – nevertheless, ideational policy areas still take up much of Russian foreign policy too.



**Figure 4.1.** Russian role-play in Central Asia: material and ideational policy areas found in foreign policy statements in relative comparison. (Coding and chart visualization with NVivo 12 Plus.)



**Figure 4.2.** U.S.-American role-play in Central Asia: material and ideational policy areas found in foreign policy statements in relative comparison. (Coding and chart visualization with NVivo 12 Plus.)

Both great powers strongly pronounce military and security issues as well as economy and trade. Most differences are found in the ideational policy area. And exactly these differences make for different roles conceptualized and enacted by Moscow and Washington. Russia generally puts less emphasis on ideational factors, but if, its focus is on cultural exchanges and education, especially on supporting the Russian language and compatriots abroad. The United States, on the other hand, emphasizes education, human rights, and democratization and good governance, especially in support of civil society and reforms to enhance the rule of law.

Throughout the coding process, I identified 13 role conceptions for each Russia and the United States (see Appendix 7).<sup>296</sup> Out of these 13 roles, five roles appeared to be the most salient ones respectively (see table 2).

In concordance with the emphasis on material factors, Moscow's most invoked role has been the *economic integrator and promoter of regional integration*. The most 'ideational' role is the *defender of collective and legal principles in international relations and international law*, since it is completely norms-based. The *advocate for a new multipolar, 'democratic' world order* and *supporter of national sovereignty* may be considered as hybrid role types in which certain norms are invoked, yet their claims base on material considerations.

The roles in the American role set appear more equally distributed. It also includes the *economic and regional integrator* role and comes along with being an *advocate for economic liberalization and market reform*. The most salient roles, however, are the *advocate for democratization and rule*

<sup>296</sup> The number has not been chosen deliberately but came up naturally.

*of law and defender of human rights.* The *developer* role takes a middle-ground, including material (technological, economic and humanitarian assistance) and ideational-normative policy areas that are also covered by other roles (i.e., advocacy for political-economic reforms).

Another role worth mentioning is closely connected to the developer role: the *helper*. This is a more literal category, based on the language and presentation of support efforts by the great power, in which the speaker often uses the verb “help” and represents its own actions and intentions as benevolent and primarily to the benefit of the receiving state. This has been observed particularly in talks given by State Department officials in 2007 and 2010. Although this role does not rank among the most salient roles, it still indicates distinct perceptions of the acting state – how it perceives itself, the other and the roles it tries to enact. It may highlight intentions or an auxiliary role that enables the actor to enact other roles; it may also be part of role-learning in which a great power pursues self-interested goals by responding to the other’s demands and expectations. Such literal roles immediately create fixed role relationships as they require the other to take the counter-role: the receiver of help and assistance. Since this is not the space to elaborate further on this particular role, it should be a promising subject for further role-theoretical concept development.

<b>Russian Role Conceptions</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>Total</b>
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	5 (36%)	14 (33%)	18 (24%)	6 (20%)	66 (27%)
Advocate for a new multipolar, 'democratic' world order	3 (21%)	4 (1%)	12 (16%)	4 (13%)	40 (16%)
Defender of collective and legal principles in international relations, international law	2 (14%)	4 (1%)	13 (17%)	4 (13%)	37 (15%)
Security provider	2 (14%)	7 (17%)	13 (17%)	4 (13%)	31 (13%)
Supporter of national sovereignty	1 (1%)	4 (1%)	4 (1%)	5 (17%)	25 (10%)
<b>United States Role Conceptions</b>					
Advocate for democratization and rule of law	24 (16%)	19 (20%)	15 (14%)	14 (17%)	119 (19%)
Advocate for and defender of human rights	11 (7%)	13 (14%)	24 (23%)	14 (17%)	90 (14%)
Developer	19 (13%)	15 (16%)	7 (7%)	14 (17%)	75 (12%)
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	19 (13%)	20 (21%)	14 (13%)	4 (5%)	74 (12%)
Advocate for economic liberalization and market reform	20 (13%)	13 (14%)	11 (10%)	7 (9%)	70 (11%)

**Table 2.** *The five most salient national roles conceptualized and enacted by Russia and the United States in Central Asia. Total counts and relative share of all roles enacted per year. (Coded via NVivo software from statements from the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department.) For the complete tables, see Appendix 7.*

### 6.2.2 The European Union

In addition to the roles enacted by Washington and Moscow, I found similar role conceptions for the European Union and China. However, the roles expressed in the analyzed Chinese sources are mostly related to the United States, Russia, the EU, and the changing nature of the international system in general. Therefore, I will dedicate this section to a brief analysis of Brussels's role conceptions laid bare in two EU Central Asia strategies released in 2007 and 2019.<sup>297</sup>

As all powers throughout their statements on Central Asia, the European Union's 2007 strategy for Central Asia stressed the goal of "achieving stability and prosperity" in the region,<sup>298</sup> hinting at the fact that, in the first place, Central Asia is perceived as neither prosperous nor stable. Overall, judging from both strategy documents, Brussels, has been enacting roles similar to Washington's. Most salient appear the *developer role*, *advocacy for democratization and rule of law*, and the *advocate and defender of human rights*. Integrated in this role set are also the *advocate for market reforms* and *promoter of regional integration*.

The EU has framed its approach to Central Asia in the context of increased interest in countries bordering to the East, to "bring Europe and Central Asia closer to each other, both in terms of political cooperation and economic development".<sup>299</sup> This political design combines with several instruments of the EU's foreign policy: "With EU enlargement, the inclusion of the Southern Caucasus into the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Black Sea Synergy Initiative, Central Asia and the EU are moving closer together."<sup>300</sup> The EU assigns the role of a developer to itself and that of the receiver of development assistance to the Central Asian countries. Self-conception and role expectations for Central Asia are clearly lined out: the EU would act as a socializer, supporting the "consolidation of stable, just and open societies", good governance, international norms, democratization, and human rights.<sup>301</sup>

Brussels presents itself as a role model from whose experience the Central Asian states could take inspiration for their own regional integration. At the center of its policy, it places bilateral human rights dialogues, independent media, civil society, youth education and the focus on pushing forward national economic and regulatory reform processes – facilitated by a number of EU-funded initiatives and administrative experts deployed to the region.<sup>302</sup> Overall, the EU tries to

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<sup>297</sup> Council of the European Union 2007; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a

<sup>298</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 2

<sup>299</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 2; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 11

<sup>300</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 4

<sup>301</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 2; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 3–4

<sup>302</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 7–11; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a

integrate Central Asia through the WTO and EU regulatory standards into the global economic system.<sup>303</sup>

Second to these ideational policy goals – which in their economic dimensions are closely related to material effects – the EU attached the role of “energy producers and transit countries” to the Central Asian countries, with gas deliveries being of “special importance to the EU”.<sup>304</sup> In this vein, Brussels made a regional integrator role that “promote[s] the creation of an integrated Central Asian energy market” that is guided by the Union’s internal energy market principles.<sup>305</sup> Herein, Brussels vowed to “lend political support and assistance to Central Asian countries in developing a new Caspian Sea – Black Sea – EU energy transport corridor”, which would strengthen regional security and cooperation and offer new export markets for these developing states.<sup>306</sup> In addition to this, the EU Central Asia strategies highlight environmental policy areas such as climate change, desertification, forest management, and water resources management and regional hydropower networks; and its assistance in developing a border security from its former military system to “a more police-style law enforcement agency”.<sup>307</sup>

One of the most frequent verbs in the EU’s strategy documents is “to promote”, especially in the latest strategy document. To conclude, we may speak of the EU’s master role as a *promoter of the European model* with several, policy-dependent auxiliary roles, the most important: *promoter of democracy, free markets, rule of law, human rights, civil society, environmental protection, and regional integration*. Yet, in the future, this master role may lead to inter-role conflict with another EU master role: *energy importer*. All promoter roles require that the Central Asian states take the roles expected from them, meaning that they develop accordingly to the ideas promoted and adopt European norms. If not, say an autocratic backslide takes place in the region, the EU may need to adapt or discard one of these roles in order to credibly enact the other.

There is yet another latent inter-role conflict: Brussels is dedicated to environmental programs and encourages the Central Asian states to diversify and transform their economies into low-carbon industries. Despite that, the EU has been promoting the construction of a new Trans-Caspian pipeline that shall supply the European market with more gas.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 18; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 10

<sup>304</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 12

<sup>305</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 13; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 12

<sup>306</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 13

<sup>307</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 13–17; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 5–8

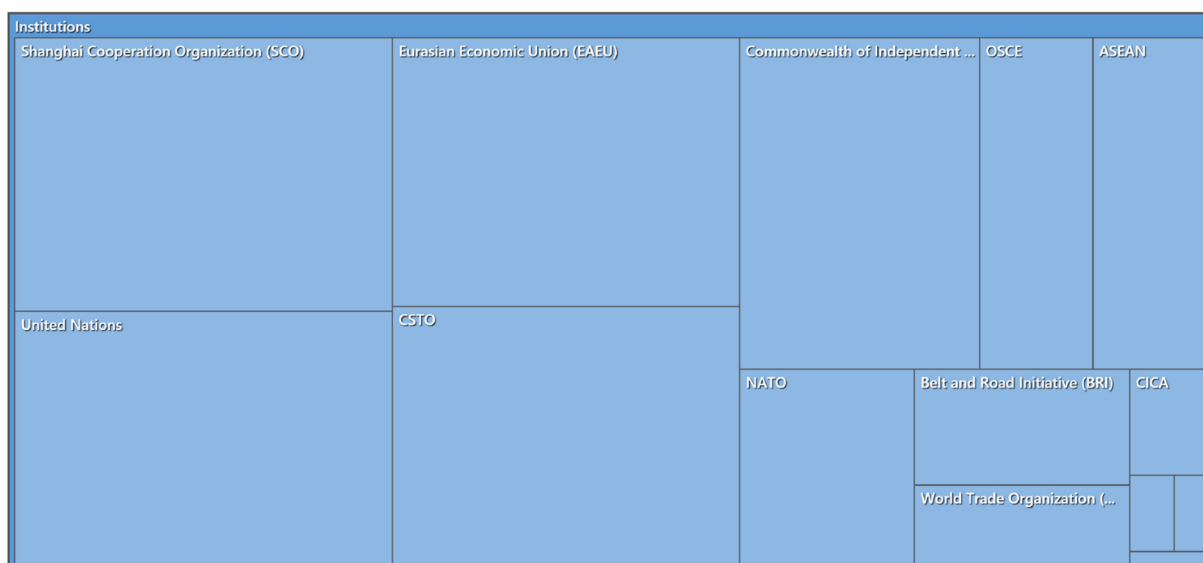
<sup>308</sup> Note that this goal was anchored in the EU’s 2019 Central Asia strategy and preceded Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. See European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 12.

### 6.3 Bilateral and multilateral role-play: the institutional network

One more brief illustration before we finally turn to the role-theoretical climax – role competition and conflict. A role theoretical analysis that illustrates a subregional network should give a brief overview of the tie-formation mode and the institutions through which states perform their roles. The content analysis started with a coding category designed to mark texts making use of bilateral or/and multilateral diplomacy. This turned out to be superfluous for the text samples at hand; nearly all texts referred to at least one multilateral institution through which the great powers engage with the Central Asian country or the region in general. In fact, all four great powers maintain regular bilateral and multilateral ties to the region and its states.

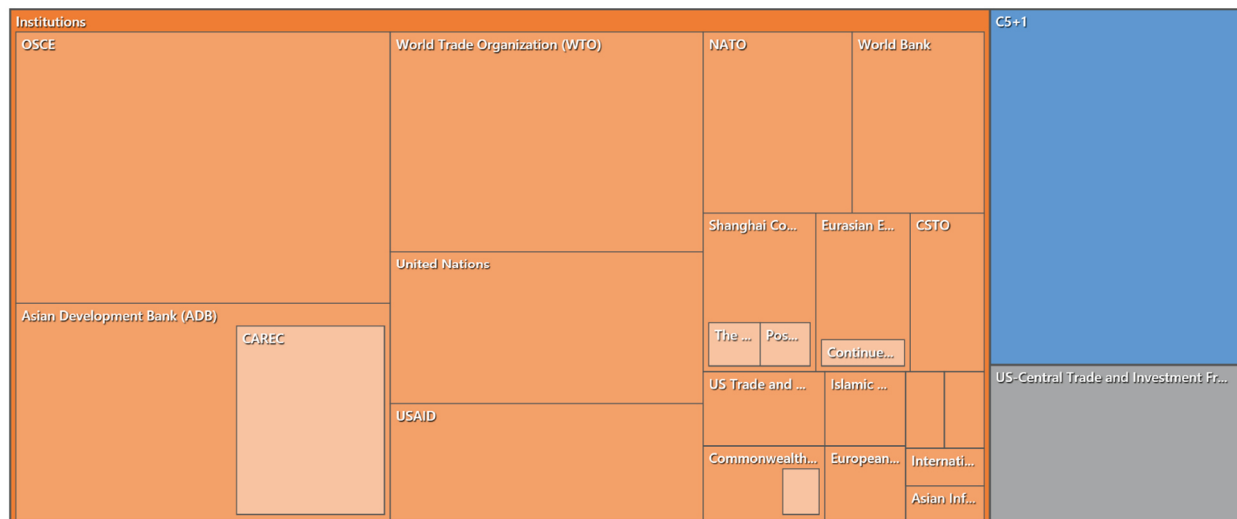
Therefore, a comparative illustration of the relative mentions of institutions by the great powers is more illuminating to determine what national and international organizations or multilateral platforms are the most relevant. Figure 5.1 shows that five institutions have the highest significance in Russian foreign policy, in particular, for Central Asia: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), European Economic Union (EAEU) and its predecessor formats, the United Nations, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Others are the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), ASEAN, NATO, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), WTO, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).

The chart for the institutions mentioned in statements by U.S. State Department officials, in comparison, is more fragmented (see figure 5.2). Next to the OSCE, United Nations and WTO, it features the national United States Assistance and Development Agency (USAID). The State



**Figure 5.1.** Russian institutional role-play in Central Asia: institutions that are referred to the most in Russian foreign policy statements. (Coding and chart visualization with NVivo 12 Plus.)

Department also stresses its support through financial institutions in which the United States is the largest or second largest shareholder: World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the ADB's Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, as well as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).<sup>309</sup>



**Figure 5.2.** U.S.-American institutional role-play in Central Asia: institutions that are referred to the most in U.S. foreign policy statements. (Coding and chart visualization with NVivo 12 Plus.)

The EU has emphasized the WTO, EBRD, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the ADB's CAREC, and the European Chambers of Commerce as preferred actors for the EU's financial investment in Central Asia<sup>310</sup> In addition, it also refers to actors such as NATO, OSCE and UN bodies.

China has played mostly on its BRI, SCO, EAEU, and bilateral ties. More recently, since 2020, it cooperates with the five Central Asian states through the C+C5 ministerial platform.<sup>311</sup> Yet, it has been the United States that pioneered such a “five-plus-one” platform. In 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry launched the C5+1 program. Since then, the U.S. Secretaries have convened with their Central Asian counterparts at least once a year.<sup>312</sup> Russia, too, learned from American role-play and opened a similar format in 2019.<sup>313</sup> The U.S. also promotes its multilateral Trade and Investment Agreement (TIFA) with the five republics and Afghanistan. As the content analytical chart (figure 5.2) illustrates, these platforms take a central place next to national and international organizations in America's regional role-play. The EU too has a long-standing tradition of annual meetings with the Central Asian foreign ministers jointly – in 2022, they conducted the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of that kind with the EU's High Representative.<sup>314</sup>

<sup>309</sup> Tong 2016; U.S. State Department 2020a

<sup>310</sup> Council of the European Union 2007, 6; European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2019a, 8

<sup>311</sup> Yi 2020f; 2021b; 2022a

<sup>312</sup> Bureau of Public Affairs 2015a; 2015b; Kerry 2015

<sup>313</sup> Lavrov 2019e

<sup>314</sup> European External Action Service 2021



## 6.4 Role competition: how great powers deny each other's role conceptions – and create ideational security dilemmas

Now, we will turn our attention to where and how these role conceptions point to role competition between the great powers, causing outright conflict and sparks amid tectonic shifts. In the role-play of the great powers, multilateral institutions are key tools for shaping bilateral and multilateral ties, for restraining and binding others. Crucially, a state trying to perform the role of a regional integrator cannot act without institutional arrangements. And here we get to the heart of great power role competition in Central Asia.

### 6.4.1 Supporter, developer, helper – the American design for Central Asian diplomacy

The United States is the geographically most distant great power. Nonetheless, it has attached high strategic value to the region – not only because of the war it fought for about two decades against the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. In 2020, the State Department estimates having channeled more than USD 9 billion to Central Asia to “support peace and security, democratic reform, and economic growth, as well as meet humanitarian needs” since the republics gained independence. It stresses its leadership role within the EBR, ADB and IMF for providing loans and assistance estimated at USD 50 billion. Private business investments are estimated at USD 31 billion.<sup>315</sup> For TIFA, the stated goal is to integrate “a 100 million person market”.<sup>316</sup>

China's and Russia's regional and international roles are atop American priority lists. In 2007, Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum presented eight ‘critical issues’ in Central Asia that are of national interest to Washington. Quote:<sup>317</sup>

- Russia resurgent and assertive in its neighborhood;
- China's emerging regional and global footprint;
- Iran's influence in its region and around the world;
- energy security at a time of high prices and expanding global demand;
- democracy promotion among governments and elites who—let's be candid—do not exactly share our enthusiasm;
- the future of Afghanistan;
- debates about, and within, Islam;
- the challenge of transnational terrorism [...].

At that time, especially in the years around 2007/10, American officials showed a high consciousness for geopolitical readings of their foreign policy activities. They referred to the ‘great game’ narrative on several occasions – and vehemently refused it. They stressed that there is no geopolitical rivalry, no great game played by the United States – that Washington's foreign policy in Central Asia does not follow zero-sum calculations and is not directed against anyone.

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<sup>315</sup> U.S. State Department 2020a

<sup>316</sup> U.S. State Department 2020b

<sup>317</sup> Feigenbaum 2007f

Importantly, Washington emphasized the agency of the Central Asian states and refused to view them as pawns on a chessboard. However, those recurring statements were ambiguous and contradicted each other. Strikingly, the State Department applauded that “Central Asians have demonstrated remarkable skill at turning Great Power rivalry into an asset that maximized their independence”.<sup>318</sup> “We [...] welcome that each country is increasingly pursuing multi-vector foreign policies that strategically balance powerful neighbors with distant friends.”<sup>319</sup>

Throughout the analyzed period, the United States enacted the role of a supporter of Central Asian’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity – this role has been salient in 2007 in particular and recurred in the past years (see Appendix 7). Until recently it avoided naming Russia and China as the direct threats to Central Asian independence. Yet, invoking such a role raises the question what significant other is perceived to occupy the counter role – the threat to Central Asian sovereignty. Without that counter role and necessary context, there would be no demand for such a *supporter and defender* role.

Whilst emphasizing that American policy is not directed against anyone, American policymakers promoted the diversification of Central Asian trade to be balanced by all four directions on the compass. The Central Asian economies were viewed as overly dependent on Russia. In 2007, a recurring phrase was that the United States is not “anti-Russia” but “anti-monopoly”.<sup>320</sup> Clearly, however, Moscow and its state-owned companies, among them Gazprom, have been seen as the monopoly that needs to be broken up. The argument can be made that adding some more nodes to an economic network strengthens the overall network structure, including those nodes already enjoying a high degree centrality. Yet it poses a crucial question: at which point do dominant nodes perceive network changes as a threat to their interests and try to defend their position at the apex of the hierarchy? From a neorealist perspective, a state will defend any relative loss by putting efforts into increasing its network centrality again.

This role-making came along with the *helper* role discussed above. The role set – *helper, developer and supporter of sovereignty and independence* – shaped American role-play vis-à-vis Central Asians:

“Why does the United States [...] take an interest in what happens here? Why do we have a compelling national interest in supporting your aspirations? Well, first, we stand for your independence. [...] We have provided nearly \$1 billion dollars in assistance since 1991 to help strengthen the capacity of your Government [sic] and to assist its citizens. We have provided that assistance in the form of grants, not loans, and thus have added not one *som* to Kyrgyzstan's debt. [...] Second, we think we can support your independence by helping you attain some additional

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<sup>318</sup> Feigenbaum 2007e; 2007a

<sup>319</sup> Rosenblum 2016

<sup>320</sup> Mann 2007; Feigenbaum 2007b; 2007g

strategic and economic options. We respect your relations with your neighbors and with other, longstanding partners. But since our focus is to support your sovereignty, quite logically more options in more directions mean more opportunities and, thus, more independence. We don't think countries should foreclose their options. And to prosper, Kyrgyzstan needs more than one option, more than one market, one trading partner, one vital infrastructure link.”<sup>321</sup>

As we see, American tie formation has not remained declaratory but materialized through active diplomacy and cooperation spanning from security to economy. For example, it enacted a proactive role as a security assistant and developer, where Russian role retreat left a structural gap. After the Tajik side took over control over the Afghan border from Russia in 2005, Washington supported the Tajik forces with 40 million US-Dollars in training and equipping 15 border control points.<sup>322</sup> Washington donated patrol boats to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and supported the Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz air forces with refurbished helicopters.<sup>323</sup>

Washington was quick to grasp opportunities. On several occasions, the United States rushed to enact a socializer role. Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum proudly emphasized how swiftly the U.S. took the chance after Turkmenistan's authoritarian leader Niyazbekov died in 2006: “Secretary Rice chose to try influence the direction of the new Government. She sought to make clear our expectations, but also to move our relations in a new and more productive direction.”<sup>324</sup> He describes how Condoleezza Rice made Assistant Secretary Boucher cancel his Christmas vacation plans and dispatched him to attend Niyazbekov's funeral in order to refresh contacts with the Turkmen side. Feigenbaum followed up soon with extensive talks with the Turkmen minister for foreign affairs. An interagency team of development experts ensued, meeting with 13 ministries and agencies and receiving access to three out of five regions. In the following months the United States promoted economic liberalizations; democratization and human rights; reforms in education and exchange programs; regional cooperation with the other Central Asian republics, Afghanistan and South Asia (e.g., through an integrated electricity system); establishing military-to-military contacts; and advertised Western technology and firms for opening up “one of the largest reserves of natural gas in the world”.<sup>325</sup>

The year 2010 was overshadowed by the violent clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan. The United States initially took a rather constrained role but soon engaged with the interim government and channeled financial aid for humanitarian assistance, parliamentary elections, and civil society. Washington pronounced the fact that the upcoming elections could be

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<sup>321</sup> Feigenbaum 2007d

<sup>322</sup> Feigenbaum 2007c; 2007e

<sup>323</sup> Feigenbaum 2007e

<sup>324</sup> Feigenbaum 2007f

<sup>325</sup> Feigenbaum 2007f

the first free parliamentary elections in Central Asia, strengthening parliamentary democracy in the region in general. Modest hopes that Kyrgyzstan would become a role model for the region.<sup>326</sup> A few years later, Washington granted Kyrgyzstan the title “beacon of democracy in Central Asia”.<sup>327</sup>

This study cannot account for all policy areas and the full role evolution of the United States towards the five republics. Since the focus is on the overall role location process, we will move on to showing how these socializing attempts competed with the other great powers and conflicted with their national role conceptions.

#### 6.4.2 Competing regionalism – rejected roles and the ideational security dilemma

American foreign policy towards Central Asia has been coordinated by the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. This is indicative of the context in which Washington situates the region. It is not grouped with Russia or Europe, but with India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The leitmotiv going through American policy statements and documents is the grand design of a Central Asia that becomes integrated with South Asia through Afghanistan. It is the Southern transport and trade route that shall be vitalized and balance Central Asia’s traditional entanglement with the Russian economy. The focal point is the region’s energy resources: gas, oil and hydropower. A key project advanced by Washington is CASA-1000, a regional electricity grid that shall keep the lights on in Afghanistan and satisfy the growing demands of the Indian and Pakistani markets.

Afghanistan has been a central factor in all powers’ Central Asia policies. They all cooperate with the Central Asian states on counterterrorism, combatting drug trafficking and securing their borders with Afghanistan. The American military presence has not been undisputed. Over the years, U.S. officials continuously faced critical questions about the airbase in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, raising doubts over regional support for the American troops there. American officials shifted to framing the airbase as a Kyrgyz airport leased to the Americans as a ‘transit center’ for the international coalition in Afghanistan, partially refusing or avoiding the term air base (although still calling it an air base themselves at times). They repeatedly found themselves in the position to defend the purpose of the air base: they stressed its importance for Kyrgyzstan’s own regional security and thanked the local government and Russia for their support in stabilizing Afghanistan. Furthermore, they pronounced that the American troops brought economic growth and humanitarian assistance to the Kyrgyz people.<sup>328</sup> The Northern Distribution Network for NATO’s war in Afghanistan was presented as an opportunity for stimulating regional economic growth

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<sup>326</sup> Blake 2010f; Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs 2010; Blake 2010b; 2010g; Clinton 2010a; 2010b

<sup>327</sup> Rosenblum 2016; Kerry 2016

<sup>328</sup> Feigenbaum 2007d; Yovanovitch and Feigenbaum 2007; Blake 2010c; 2010b; 2010g; Holbrooke 2010; Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs 2010; Blake 2010e; 2010h; Clinton 2010a; 2010b

and integration.<sup>329</sup> Projects for Tajik law enforcement forces in border patrolling and combating narcotics trafficking stirred rumors that the United States intended to open another military base – which U.S. officials denied repeatedly.<sup>330</sup>

NATO's presence cuts into the first role competition that has been taking place in Central Asia: the role of a security provider. Around 2007, Moscow tried to reform the CIS, which encompasses all former Soviet states. Moscow's regional integration project in the CIS space rests on two pillars, the EAEU<sup>331</sup> for socio-economic matters and the CSTO<sup>332</sup> in the military realm. Both do not include all post-Soviet and Central Asian states but represent an ongoing integration process. In addition to this, Russia leads the SCO in tandem with China, which coordinates both security and economic matters, but also cultural exchanges.

Regarding NATO's mission in Afghanistan, Moscow tried to enact its regional security provider role through the CSTO – 'the main security guarantor of the region'<sup>333</sup> – and establish official cooperation between the two military alliances. However, time and again, Moscow's endeavor to enact this role failed: Minister Lavrov's attempts at the NATO-Russia Council to bring joint operations on border control and drug trafficking from Afghanistan were repeatedly rejected.<sup>334</sup>

Furthermore, American officials denied recognition of the CSTO at all. In fact, out of all coded texts, only four referred to this organization. One speaker mentioned it peripherally in 2007,<sup>335</sup> and the other document is the 2019 Russia strategy that frames both CSTO and EAEU as Russian tools for exercising dominance.<sup>336</sup> In February 2022, Secretary Antony Blinken condemned President Tokayev's decision to call on the CSTO and get in Russian troops to help restore order. He demanded clarifications from the Kazakh President on why that had been necessary. However, on both occasions, Blinken only referred to the CSTO as "this organization that Russia leads and is part of" or "this organization Russia dominates"; he did not utter its name.<sup>337</sup> The fact that officials have avoided the CSTO's name for years indicates a deliberate policy of role-rejection.

Russia's other institution, the EAEU, did not fare much better in Moscow's role location efforts. Starting with the Eurasian Economic Community and a customs union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, the overall plan was to create a new Eurasian Union by 2015, which was firstly

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<sup>329</sup> Blake 2010a

<sup>330</sup> Blake 2010e; 2010d

<sup>331</sup> Current Central Asian members of EAEU are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan holds an observer status since 2020.

<sup>332</sup> Current Central Asian members of the CSTO are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan joined the CSTO two times, from 1994 to 1999 and from 2006 to 2012.

<sup>333</sup> Lavrov 2013e (emphasis added)

<sup>334</sup> Lavrov 2007b; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010e; 2013e; 2013i; 2013j; 2019b

<sup>335</sup> Feigenbaum 2007e

<sup>336</sup> U.S. State Department 2019a, 7

<sup>337</sup> Blinken 2022a; 2022b

announced in 2010.<sup>338</sup> Their first supranational institution – the Eurasian Economic Commission – became already operative in 2012.<sup>339</sup> The integration process was consciously modeled on the EU and WTO principles and lobbied for other CIS members to join Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, in particular Ukraine and countries in Central Asia.<sup>340</sup>

At that time, Russian President Medvedev started promoting the idea of a larger integration process that connects EU and EAEU – a shared economic space from Lisbon (sometimes even Vancouver) to Vladivostok. In addition, a new Euro-Atlantic security regime should be negotiated. Both initiatives, however, remained unanswered. Therefore, Russia could not enact its roles as a security provider and as an economic and regional integrator vis-à-vis Brussels.

Tensions over parallel integration efforts of the EU and Russia became visible as early as 2011 when Medvedev uttered that Kyiv could not “sit on both chairs” – meaning potential free trade agreements (FTAs) with the EU and the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan market.<sup>341</sup> In 2013, although raising doubts over the “honesty” of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Program, Lavrov confirmed that CIS integration, including the Customs Union, and FTAs with the EU wouldn’t be mutually exclusive.<sup>342</sup> In December 2013, however, the Russian side came to the conclusion that FTAs were not compatible with CIS free trade agreements. Moscow objected that if Ukraine would conclude the envisaged FTA with the EU, market protection mechanisms would be shattered and overly competitive goods from EU countries could first usurp Ukrainian products, and then consequently compete in Russian and other CIS markets. Russian attempts to become part of trilateral negotiations with the EU and Ukraine were rejected by Brussels.<sup>343</sup>

Although Ukraine is not a Central Asian state, great power role-play in one region creates the context for the other region. Russia voiced suspicions over a “hidden agenda” repeatedly.<sup>344</sup> In the wake of the planned withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014, Russians questioned the continued military presence of some troops in Afghanistan, accusing the West of a lack of transparency. According to the Russian side, the purpose of this military presence was not clear, in particular, in the context of “attempts they undertake every now and then with one or another Central Asian country to negotiate a presence there”.<sup>345</sup> In the previous years, Russia had tried to promote a neutral status – comparable to that of Turkmenistan – for Afghanistan in international relations.

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<sup>338</sup> Medvedev 2010a; 2010b; 2011c; 2012; Lavrov 2013a; 2013b; 2013e; 2013j

<sup>339</sup> Lavrov 2013a

<sup>340</sup> Medvedev 2011a; 2012; Lavrov 2013a; 2013e; 2013h

<sup>341</sup> Medvedev 2011b

<sup>342</sup> Lavrov 2013d

<sup>343</sup> Lavrov 2013k

<sup>344</sup> Lavrov 2013f; 2013c

<sup>345</sup> Lavrov 2013g

Furthermore, Russia's Lavrov complained about the activities of Western government-supported NGOs, accusing them of "alternative system[s] of election monitoring" of interference in the internal affairs of post-Soviet countries.<sup>346</sup> At the same time, he claimed that Western leaders, in personal conversations with Ukrainian officials, uttered dissatisfaction with rapprochements with Russia – and that EU leaders designed the Eastern Partnership Program as an exclusive alternative for CIS members, "disrespecting" their membership obligation in CSTO and EAEU.<sup>347</sup> As early as 2007, he lamented:

"The presence and activity of extraregional forces have substantially increased in the Commonwealth space over recent years. Somebody is trying to impose on Russia in this space a viscous rivalry, if not confrontation in the true meaning of the word. We do not intend to succumb to provocations, we build transparent, understandable relations based on sober economic calculations with the CIS countries, we are open in our policy and see no grounds for any suspicions regarding our intentions in this region."<sup>348</sup>

After all, this competitive role-play between the United States, the EU and Russia fits into the ideational security dilemma. Russia refused to be socialized, to take western values. Instead, it started out to be a socializer itself, promoting a multipolar international architecture, and opposed the "absolutization of individual rights and liberties" and "hasted advancement of democratic processes" with its own civilizational approach to domestic and traditional values.<sup>349</sup> A power-identity gap inhibited Moscow from enacting its roles fully (*economic integrator* and *security provider*). And Russia could not socialize its significant others into its role conceptions and expectations. Mutual role rejections, eventually, created an ever-increasing hostile environment. In this role competition process, the great powers located different integration processes and political ideas in Central Asia, which worked against each other and destabilized the other's identity.

This found strong expression when Secretary Clinton, speaking to Kyrgyz students, expressed heavy disagreement over Russia's foreign policy towards other states, low quality of democracy, and Russia's human rights record. With regards to Kyrgyzstan, she raised concerns over external interference in its democratization process. Her advice to the students:

"Try to balance off all the different relations you have, and get the best help you can from other countries that wish to participate with you. But it's also why the United States wants to strongly support you, because we think it's good for Kyrgyzstan, but we also think it's a good model for Central Asia. [...] And we want to help you develop as strong a democracy as possible, so that you

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<sup>346</sup> Lavrov 2010d

<sup>347</sup> Lavrov 2010d; 2016; 2019d; 2019f

<sup>348</sup> Lavrov 2007a

<sup>349</sup> Lavrov 2013c; 2013e; 2013h

will be able to protect yourself, and develop yourself without pressure or interference from anyone else. And that's really our goal."<sup>350</sup>

Nonetheless, Russia could locate its roles in Central Asia to some degree – thanks to its tandem with China.

#### 6.4.3 All quiet on the Russo-Chinese border

So why is there no role competition between Moscow and Beijing? After all, China's role in Central Asia increases and challenges Russia's traditional material dominance. It is because Russia and China have similar role conceptions on the international stage; they have the same goals: both states see the material international structure moving away from Euro-Atlantic centrism to a new multipolar order in which both claim leadership roles – and both states have been experiencing role rejection by the preponderant great power(s).

While the EU and the United States try to reshape the Central Asian network, Russia and China try to remake the international system. Both systemic levels – global and regional – are linked by feedback loops. Importantly, Russia did not experience the same role rejection with neighboring China. China, indeed, reciprocated Russian role conceptions. Through the SCO, undergirded by bilateral and trilateral formats, both states accommodated their regional economic and military roles. The two neighbors accepted their respective regionalist visions – and vowed to couple BRI and EAEU.<sup>351</sup> Foreign Minister Yi underscored that China enacts a global role *in tandem* with Moscow: “We are ready to enhance the strategic coordination with Russia on all fronts and further exert the *stabilizing role* of China-Russia relations in the strategic arena.”<sup>352</sup>

Therefore, we may interpret Wang Yi's declaration that Beijing supports the independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states as a reassurance to its junior partners (and the world) about its own intentions – rather than a balancing act against Russia. “China will in no circumstances interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries. China does not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence.”<sup>353</sup> While announcing the Central Asian leg of the BRI and a regional energy partnership with those states,<sup>354</sup> Beijing prioritized above all the relationship with Russia – Xi Jinping also made his first presidential visit to its neighboring peer power – and declared to be “committed to staunchly supporting each other's development and revitalization, the right of independently choosing

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<sup>350</sup> Clinton 2010b

<sup>351</sup> Yi 2016; 2019b; 2019a; 2021a

<sup>352</sup> Yi 2017a (emphasis added)

<sup>353</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2013

<sup>354</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2013



development path and social and political system and upholding such core interests as sovereignty, territorial integrity and sovereignty”.<sup>355</sup>

We can only assume counterfactually how this relationship would have evolved had Russia succeeded in locating its own roles in the Euro-Atlantic space; if NATO and EU had responded positively to CSTO and EAEU. It shall be argued here that the failure of Russian role-play in the West conditioned Russian role-play in the East – that Moscow learned to enact roles in tandem with China rather than Washington and Brussels. Consequently, this echoes in their Central Asian roles.

Russia’s role conflict with the West is not the only external factor conditioning the Russo-Chinese *tandem* role in Central Asia and beyond. For China, too, great power status is the master role it tries to locate globally. Back in 2013, Chinese role conception and expectations vis-à-vis Washington looked for “a new model of major-country relations”.<sup>356</sup> As it should turn out, this role expectation would be disappointed – and Beijing’s self-conception refused by the other side of the Pacific. Nevertheless, Beijing, in Yi’s words,

“has given full play to the role of a responsible major country and made new contributions in the world. [...] China is a defender of world peace. [...] China has resolutely safeguarded the basic norms governing international relations, upheld equity and justice, and opposed war and power politics. [...] China is a builder of Asian security and stability. [...] China is a contributor to the cause of international development.”.<sup>357</sup>

“China has grown into an indispensable force in shaping international relations and plays a constructive role in upholding world peace and promoting global development. [...] We have [...] provided new impetus to global financial stability and reform. [...] China has [...] remained an indisputable main engine driving the world economy.”<sup>358</sup>

Such statements signal a creative great power role that is equipped with several auxiliary roles: *defender of world peace; defender of international law; advocate for a new, equal and just world order; security provider and builder of a regional security architecture*; and the role of a *developer* (in contrast to being a developing state previously). In China’s role conception, Central Asian states like Kazakhstan count among the developing countries that seek access to Chinese technology and industrial output.<sup>359</sup> The SCO is seen as the main regional security cooperation

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<sup>355</sup> Yi 2013

<sup>356</sup> Yi 2013

<sup>357</sup> Yi 2013

<sup>358</sup> Yi 2015b

<sup>359</sup> Yi 2015a

platform and institution to “support” the Central Asian countries (the *helper* role rings through) and align BRI and EAEU.<sup>360</sup>

“[M]ore people are looking to China to play a greater role in driving the recovery and growth of the world economy and moving forward the *reform of global governance system*.”<sup>361</sup> “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a good example of the new type of international relations advocated by China. The SCO’s “Shanghai Spirit” represents a new model of state-to-state relations emphasizing partnership rather than alliance. [...] China worked closely with other member states to speak with one voice on the major international regional issues of the day and to make the SCO an anchor of stability in the world and an indispensable and positive force for global governance.”<sup>362</sup>

Thus, like Russia, China has been promoting a multipolar world order and “greater democracy in international relations”.<sup>363</sup> For this endeavor, the EU is expected to take a multilateral partner role: “China and Europe stand together for a multi-polar world and greater democracy in international relations. [...] We are partners, not rivals. We are friends, not enemies.”<sup>364</sup> As mentioned in chapter 5, Brussels does not mirror this expectation. Accordingly, Beijing repeatedly criticized Brussels for designating it the role of a competitor and rival.<sup>365</sup>

More outright conflictual has been the role relationship with Washington. For a long time, Beijing has thought itself in a hostile environment in which “individual countries [...] encroach upon China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests”.<sup>366</sup> In 2017, Wan Yi responded to the “Thucydides Trap” theory that China rejects zero-sum calculations, and that signs from the American administration, too, had been “highly encouraging”.<sup>367</sup> Two years forward, however, bad relations with the United States were overtly reflected in the Sino-Russian *tandem* role-play:

“China and Russia have shown firm mutual support on issues concerning each other’s core interests, and worked together to resist *attempts by external forces to keep us down*. [...] We have enhanced back-to-back coordination in international affairs, and stood shoulder to shoulder in *opposing power politics and bullying practices*.”<sup>368</sup>

It was around that time that Washington raised its profile as a *human rights defender*. On occasions when Secretary Mike Pompeo met with his Central Asian counterparts, he expressed his support for ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz suffering oppression in Xinjiang and called on the countries to

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<sup>360</sup> Yi 2015b; 2019b; 2019a; 2020b; 2020d

<sup>361</sup> Yi 2016 (emphasis added)

<sup>362</sup> Yi 2018

<sup>363</sup> Yi 2019b; 2020a; 2020d

<sup>364</sup> Yi 2019b

<sup>365</sup> Yi 2022b

<sup>366</sup> Yi 2013; 2016

<sup>367</sup> Yi 2017b

<sup>368</sup> Yi 2019b (emphases added)

counter the Chinese maltreatment of Muslims and Uyghurs. American officials repeatedly called on Central Asian governments to not give in to pressure to extradite Chinese nationals.<sup>369</sup> Russia's Lavrov, on the other end, sided with Beijing. He stated he was not aware of any camps in China – instead, he urged to tackle extremists and terrorists from Xinjiang, to coordinate Russian and Chinese actions through CSTO and SCO.<sup>370</sup> Asked about anti-Chinese protests in Central Asia, the Russian Foreign Minister claimed that the United States with its C5+1 format tried to undermine the region's relationships with China and Russia.<sup>371</sup>

Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of the world, China's Wang Yi explained at the Munich Security Conference that

“China will further strengthen strategic coordination with Russia. Following the strategic guidance of our presidents, we will advance our comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era on all fronts, and instill more positive energy to global security, stability and strategic balance.”<sup>372</sup>

A few months later, being asked whether both countries would join forces against the United States, he stated: “Together, China and Russia have forged an *impregnable fortress* against the “political virus” [...].”<sup>373</sup> In the Chinese view, the pandemic ushered a “sea change” where “unilateralism, protectionism and bullying practices have been on the increase”. “Some countries”, so Yi, “have been busy with scapegoating, decoupling and exiting from international groupings and treaties. They also attempt to [...] stoke confrontation between different ideologies and social systems.”<sup>374</sup> U.S.-Chinese role-play turned ever more conflictual. Yi accused Washington of “McCarthyist bigotry” and that it “unscrupulously encircles and smears China around the world, and meddles in China's domestic affairs”.<sup>375</sup> In opposition to that: the Russo-Chinese partnership.

“The joint strength of China and Russia has become a *bulwark* of international fairness and justice. [...] It has set a good example for [...] building a new type of international relations.”<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Ortagus 2019a; 2019b; Pompeo 2019. See also Ranz 2019; U.S. State Department 2019b; 2019c; Stilwell, Busby, and Turkel 2019; U.S. State Department 2020b.

<sup>370</sup> Lavrov 2019b

<sup>371</sup> Lavrov 2019a; 2019e. See also 2019c.

<sup>372</sup> Yi 2020a

<sup>373</sup> Yi 2020c (emphasis added). See also 2021a.

<sup>374</sup> Yi 2020d

<sup>375</sup> Yi 2020e

<sup>376</sup> Yi 2021b (emphasis added)

## 7. Outlook and Conclusions

Chapter 6 traced how great powers have been engaging in role competition. While the status quo powers tried to reshape and socialize Central Asia's network structures, Russia and China embraced the changing international structure, setting out to shape it according to their own role conceptions. Several ideational role conceptions proved to be incompatible with each other. The great powers denied each other structural equality and role equality in Central Asia – and beyond. Especially competition in two role conceptions, *economic and regional integrators* and *security providers*, epitomized an ideational security dilemma.

What caused these dynamics? As the role-theoretical analysis demonstrates, certainly both material and ideational factors. Material changes induced shifts into the fabric of the world system – and with that the capacities of states to enact old and new roles. Ideational factors cemented the dividing lines within this system. Washington and Brussels have been playing roles that are in direct conflict with Russian and Chinese identities and role conceptions – and so the other way around. In Central Asia, the United States has played the role of an offshore balancer. The European and American socializer roles are largely value-driven and place clear role expectations on their significant others as well as on the Central Asian states. The reason why they can enact these roles in Central Asia is that material capabilities undergird both their role conceptions – they have the necessary power to perform their roles. In the case of Russia and China, too, waning or growing material capabilities determined their ability to locate specific roles and foreign policy objectives. Their role conceptions, however, have been less ideational. In the future, nonetheless, we might see them adopt more ideational roles as well – as long as their relative material capabilities continue to grow in the emerging, multipolar network of nation-states. The relationship between material and ideational role conceptions may be of interest for future role theoretical research.

The ideational security dilemma, which turned hot in Ukraine, made international relations ever more conflictual. Where is it heading to? Unfortunately, the empirical analysis did not have the time and space to delve deeper into specific roles and policy areas; instead, it explored the most salient roles and the overall role location process between 2007 and 2022. Recent events could not be given due attention. Therefore, it should be mentioned that the United States, in its Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 and the individual country strategies released in 2022,<sup>377</sup> declares Central Asia as a geopolitical region in its own right and of U.S. national interest – independently from the Afghan factor. There, Washington “counterbalance[s]” against China and Russia (who are described as “malign actors”).<sup>378</sup> Washington plans to double down on promoting media content

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<sup>377</sup> U.S. State Department 2020a; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e

<sup>378</sup> U.S. State Department 2020a

in English and regional languages, promoting English as an alternative to the Russian language, targeting the youth and building “a pro-Western cohort”,<sup>379</sup> and supporting the formation of national identities and languages. It aims to counter China’s growing financial and technological influence and “predatory debt”. As Washington fears an increased influence of the CSTO and SCO as regional security providers, the strategies urge to double down on military and security cooperation, especially with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.<sup>380</sup>

This outright balancer and adversary role is remarkable. It comes at a time when great power hostilities aggravated over the course of the pandemic and have climaxed in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ever-increasing tensions in the South China Sea. Remarkable also because the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. Since then, China and Russia convene regional conferences with Afghanistan and its neighbors, including Iran. Recognition of the Talib government and cooperation with the Afghan state indicate that Russia and China will fill the structural hole left by the Americans and take the regional integrator role. Most importantly, Russia’s Lavrov declared western forces henceforth *verboden* in the region:

“We’ve pointed out that we regard as unacceptable the deployment of any US or NATO military infrastructure of their Afghan personnel in neighboring states, first of all, in Central Asia. These plans run contrary to the security interests of our states and commitments under the statutory documents of the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO].”<sup>381</sup>

This all does not only hint at the aggravation of security dilemmas, but also raises questions about the role conceptions of the great powers: How will the Western powers respond if the Central Asian states do not take their ideational role expectations (e.g., do not democratize and respect human rights); how, then, will they manage inter-role conflict and inconsistencies between the *value-promoter* roles and the *balancer* role? This study largely black-boxed the role conceptions of the Central Asian states. They should be of great interest for future role-theoretical research, as well as other middle-powers such as Turkey, Iran and India. Network science indicates that they may exert decisive influence on complex network formation processes.

In conclusion, I hope the analytical framework developed in Part I will be regarded as a fruitful contribution to IR theory building and Foreign Policy Analysis. Part II illustrated its concepts with an empirical application and provided several insights into how the international system and regional sub-systems are interconnected through feedback loops, great power politics and role location processes. In addition, it collected a large data set for the Central Asian case. It may be used and complemented by further research.

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<sup>379</sup> U.S. State Department 2022b, 1,3, 14–15; 2022d, 14; 2020b

<sup>380</sup> U.S. State Department 2022a, 2, 6–9; 2022b, 6–9; 2022d, 10–12

<sup>381</sup> Lavrov 2022

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## Appendix 1: Codebook

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
<b>Afghanistan</b>	All items with reference to Afghanistan. Thematic subcodes for Russian references: neutral country; recognition of Taliban government.
<b>Central Asia</b>	Subcodes were created to identify and mark themes and regional policy issues. Inter alia: “Allies”; EAEU common energy market by 2025; Economic and security interests of Russia; U.S. bioweapons and labs in former Soviet countries; CASA-1000; Critical strategic crossroads; Economic gateway that needs to be connected to the South; energy resources.
<b>China</b>	All items with reference to China. Thematic subcodes for Russia: Harmonization and complementing EAEU and BRI; Strategic cooperation. Thematic subcodes or the United States, inter alia: Competition; good relationship; increasing actorness; loans and debts; Xinjiang.
<b>EU</b>	All items with reference to the European Union or “Europe”. Thematic subcodes, inter alia: Central Asia strategy; Competing integration; Complementary integration; Strategic partnership; Seek cooperation; Eastern Partnership Program; “Similar views”.
<b>United States (Russia)</b>	References to the United States by Russian authorities. Thematic subcodes were mostly literal, inter alia: fear of a ‘hidden agenda’, seeking cooperation, or ‘United States undermines integrity of the region’.

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
<b>Russia</b> (United States)	References to Russia by U.S. authorities. Thematic subcodes were mostly literal, inter alia: competition, good cooperation, dominant role, ‘attacks international human rights system’, negative role model and influence, resurgent and assertive in its neighborhood, ‘USA not anti-anyone’, ‘USA anti-monopoly’.
<b><u>Central Asian Countries</u></b> (each country is its own code with respective subcodes)	References to Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Uzbekistan; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan. Subcodes identified policy themes and issues, such as “allies”, “strategic partnership”, military bases, specific educational institutions, and hydropower.
<b><u>Other States</u></b>	References to other countries in the context of Central Asian. For example, India, Iran and Pakistan. Each state is coded as an individual subcode.
<b><u>Institutions</u></b>	References to regional and international institutions. Inter alia: ASEAN; Asian Development Bank (ADB); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); NATO; Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); USAID; World Bank; World Trade Organization (WTO); United Nations (UN). Each institution is coded as an individual subcode. Note that the category for the EAEU includes predecessor mechanisms such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).
<b><u>Ideational Policy Areas</u></b>	
<b>Culture</b>	All references to cultural policy areas and cooperation.
Compatriots abroad	References to Russian nationals and ethnic Russians abroad.

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
Language	
Religion	
Soviet experience and history	References to historical events and legacies.
Sports	This category only appeared on one occasion in Russian statements in 2022.
Tourism	References to tourism. Understood and coded as ‘ideational’ and ‘cultural’ policy area.
Traditional values	References to ‘traditions’ or historical/civilizational values. This category was introduced inductively from Russian sources.
<b>Democratization – Good governance</b>	References to democratization processes. Utterances criticizing Western ‘democracy promotion’ were not coded. Thematic subcodes: Civil society; rule of law.
<b>Education</b>	References to education and related policy areas. Thematic subcode: Exchange programs.
<b>Human Rights</b>	References to human rights issues. Utterances by Russia criticizing Western ‘human rights promotions’ were not coded under this category.
<b><u>Material Policy Areas</u></b>	
<b>Economy &amp; Trade</b>	References to economy and trade.



Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
Energy	References to energy-related policy areas. Thematic subcode: electricity.
Infrastructure, Transportation and Communication	
Environment & Climate Change	
Migration	
<b>Military and Security</b>	
Border security	
Defense and Military Cooperation	This category codes references to direct cooperation in the military and security sector, including mutual agreements, exchange of military equipment, and training of personnel.
Fight Narcotics and Drug Trafficking	
Human trafficking	
Terrorism and Extremism	

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
Public Health and Humanitarian Assistance	
Technology	References to technology both industry and military related, including references to digital technologies.
<b><u>National Role Conception (Russia)</u></b>	
Adversary of revolution, regime change and the promotion of democracy and liberal values	
Advocate for a new multipolar, 'democratic' world order	This mostly literal category includes all statements that support the emergence of a new international order, often described as “multipolar” or “polycentric”. It also includes such descriptions as “just”, “equal” or “fair”.
Defender of collective and legal principles in international relations, international law	
Defender of Russians and compatriots abroad	

Code Name	Description
NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.	
Developer	Texts in which the great power enacts the role of an assistant state in the material development of a receiver state, mostly in humanitarian, technological, and economic areas. Utterances and actions reflect the benefit to the receiving country, rather than trade exchanges on equal terms.
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	References to economic integration and regional connectivity.
Eurasian Power	This is a literal category, derived from Russian self-description as ‘Eurasian power’.
Helper	This is a mostly literal category that overlaps with the ‘developer’ role conception. In addition to the developer role, this category codes mostly literal content that highlights that the great power “helps” a country or people.
Power center and balancer	This is also a rather literal category and codes references in which the great power describes itself as a “power center” and intention to engage in “balancing” acts.
Rebuilder of Afghanistan	This category is mostly literal – keyword “(re)build” – but also included codings of the developer roles towards Afghanistan.
Security provider	References to Russia’s role in regional (or global) security. For instance, Russia’s contribution to the CSTO as a regional security actor.
Supporter of democracy	A literal category that codes direct support for ‘democracy’.

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
Supporter of national sovereignty	This category codes Russian references to national sovereignty, including those highlighting the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of states.
<b><u>Regional Concepts (Russia)</u></b>	Subcodes identify Russian ideas and themes of regionalism.
Asian regional security architecture	
Euro-Eurasian integration - Lissabon to Vladivostok, Atlantic to Pacific	
'Greater Eurasian Partnership' of EAEU, SCO and ASEAN	
Initiative for a European Security Treaty or Security Community	
'Integrating the integration organizations'	
<b><u>National Role Conception (United States)</u></b>	
Advocate for and defender of human Rights	

Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
Advocate for democratization and rule of Law	
Advocate for economic liberalization and market reform	
Counter-actor against Russia	All literal content in which the speaker directly utters the intention to counteract Russia.
Defender of the international system	All references in which the speaker directly utters the intention to defend the status quo in international relations against malign actors.
Developer	Texts in which the great power enacts the role of an assistant state in the material development of a receiver state, mostly in humanitarian, technological, and economic areas. Utterances and actions reflect the benefit to the receiving country, rather than trade exchanges on equal terms.
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	References to economic integration and regional connectivity.
Helper	<p>This is a mostly literal category that overlaps with the ‘developer’ role conception. In addition to the developer role, this category codes mostly literal content that highlights that the great power “helps” a country or people.</p> <p>For example: “So, our consistent strategic goal for sixteen years now has been to support Central Asian independence and to help you further develop into fully sovereign, stable, democratic and prosperous</p>

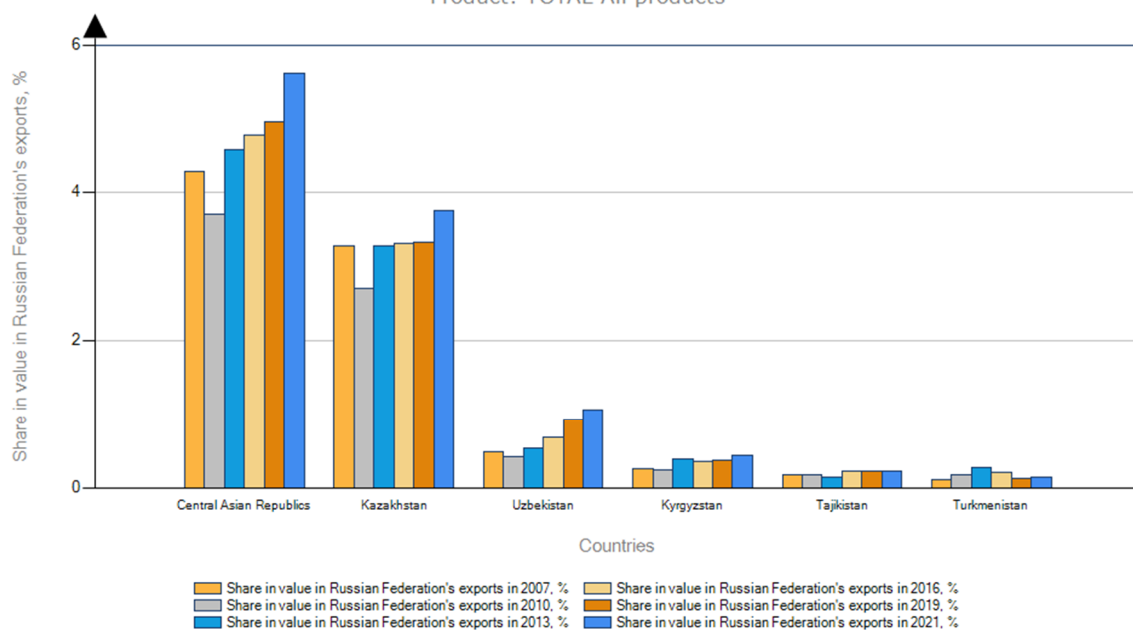
Code Name	Description
	NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.
	nations.” “We want to help you take advantage of those opportunities [...]” “But what we certainly seek to do is to help forge some new connections to trade and investment opportunities [...]”
Principle foreign investor	All references that highlight financial investments and the state as a major source.
Rebuilder of Afghanistan	This category is mostly literal – keyword “(re)build”– but also included codings of the developer roles towards Afghanistan.
Rejection of ‘Great Game’ rhetoric and geopolitical rivalry	
Supporter of sovereignty, independence and autonomy	This mostly literal category includes statements in support of “territorial integrity”.
Supporter of women and minority groups	
<b><u>Regional Concepts (United States)</u></b>	Subcodes identify American ideas and themes of regionalism.
Integrated economic and strategic space with South and East Asia	
New Silk Road Vision	

Code Name	Description
<b><u>Role Play Mode</u></b>	<p>NB: The following codebook was used for two separate sources applied text items from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. State Department. This codebook gives an overview of the shared structural coding categories and themes. Most of the categories are interpreted based on both literal and latent content spread over words, sentences and larger paragraphs.</p> <p>This category with its respective subcodes ‘bilateral’ and multilateral’ was thoroughly coded throughout the project, because most analyzed items indicated both bilateral and multilateral policy behavior. Thus, the subcodes to ‘multilateral’ are of most value in this project identifying multilateral regimes that cannot be categorized as established institutions or organizations.</p>
Bilateral	
Multilateral	Subcodes: “C5+1” (USA), US-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework (TIFA), and “C5 plus Russia” (Russia)

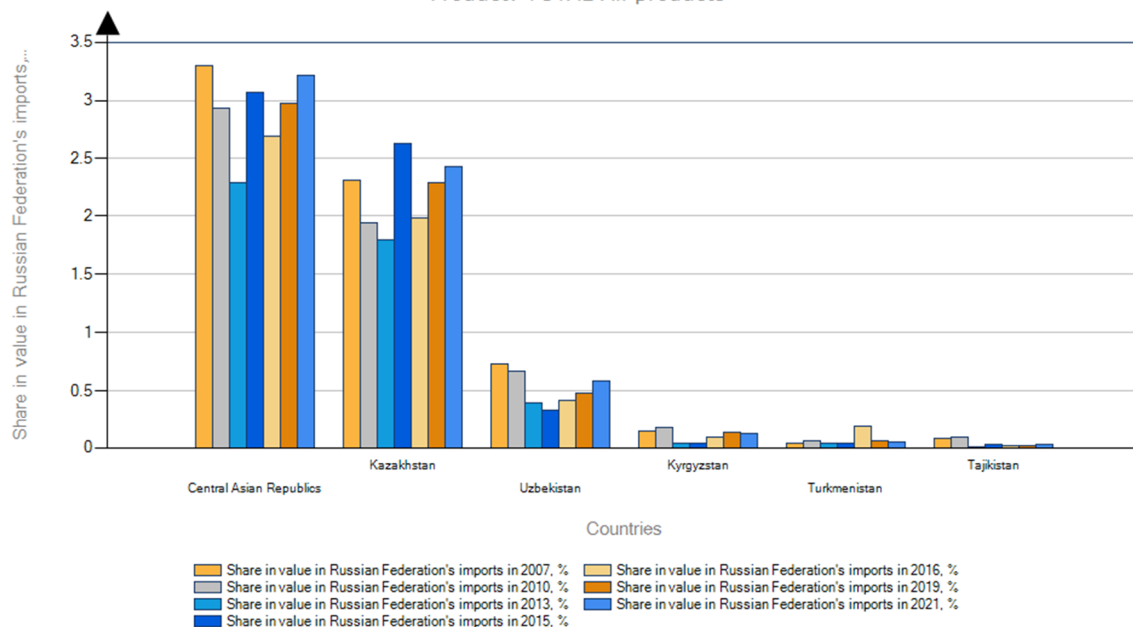
## Appendix 2: Exports and imports with the Central Asian states in national value share

### Russia

List of importing markets from Central Asian Republics for a product exported by Russian Federation  
Product: TOTAL All products



List of supplying markets from Central Asian Republics for a product imported by Russian Federation  
Product: TOTAL All products

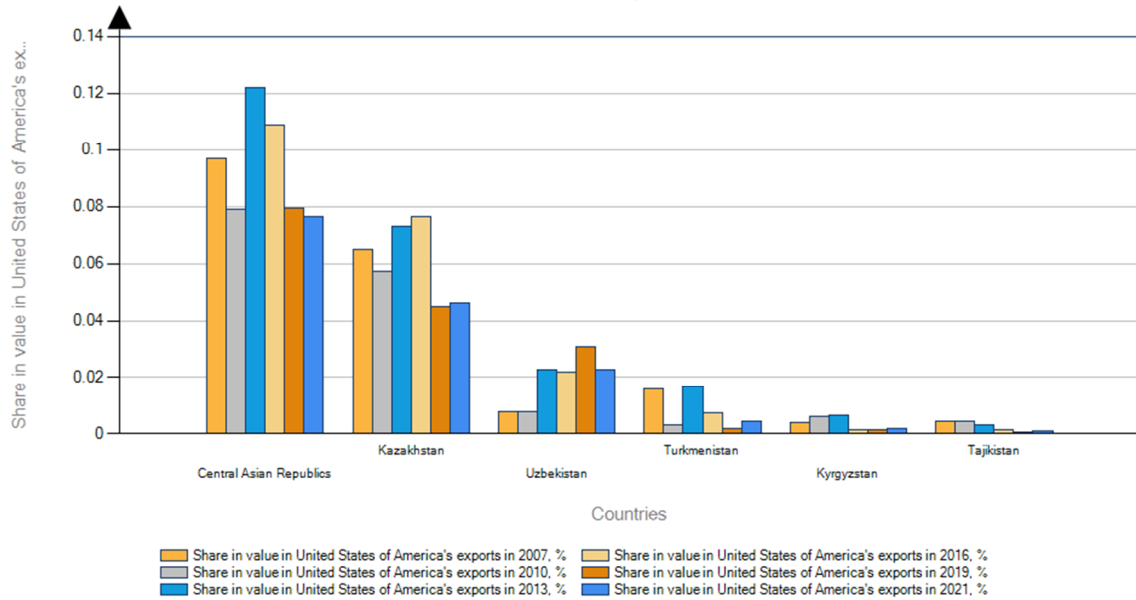


Data and illustrations from UN Comtrade Database.

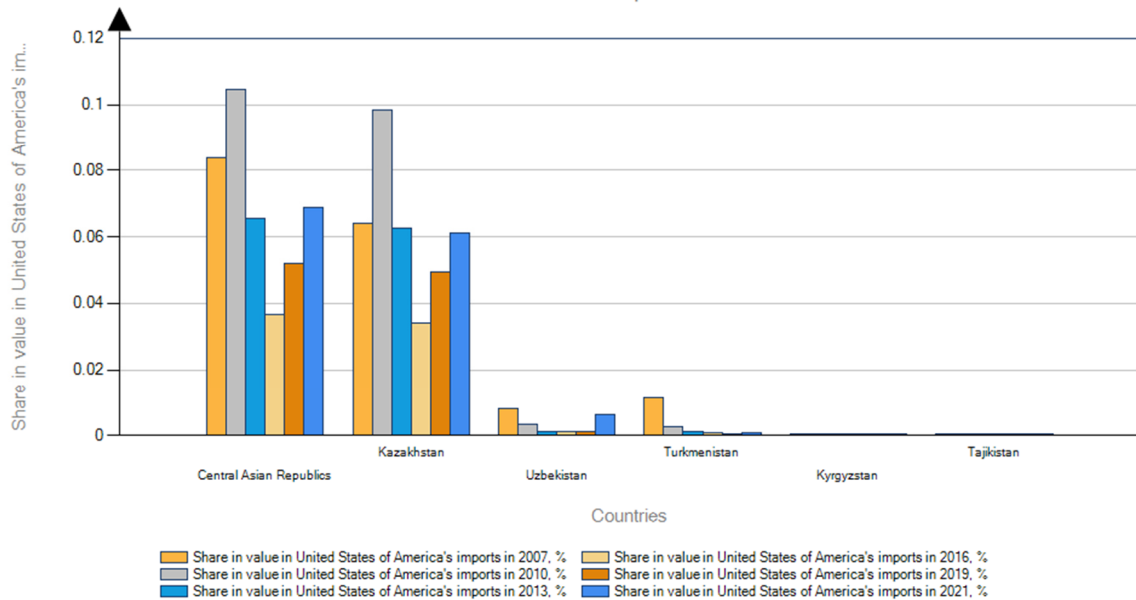


## United States

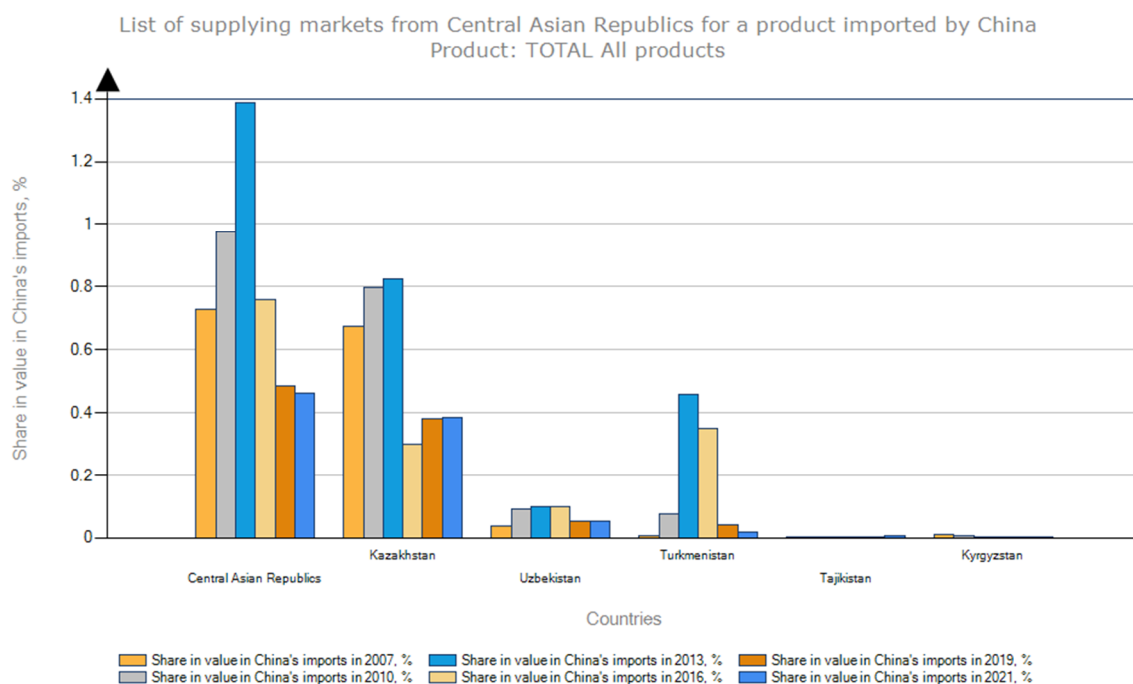
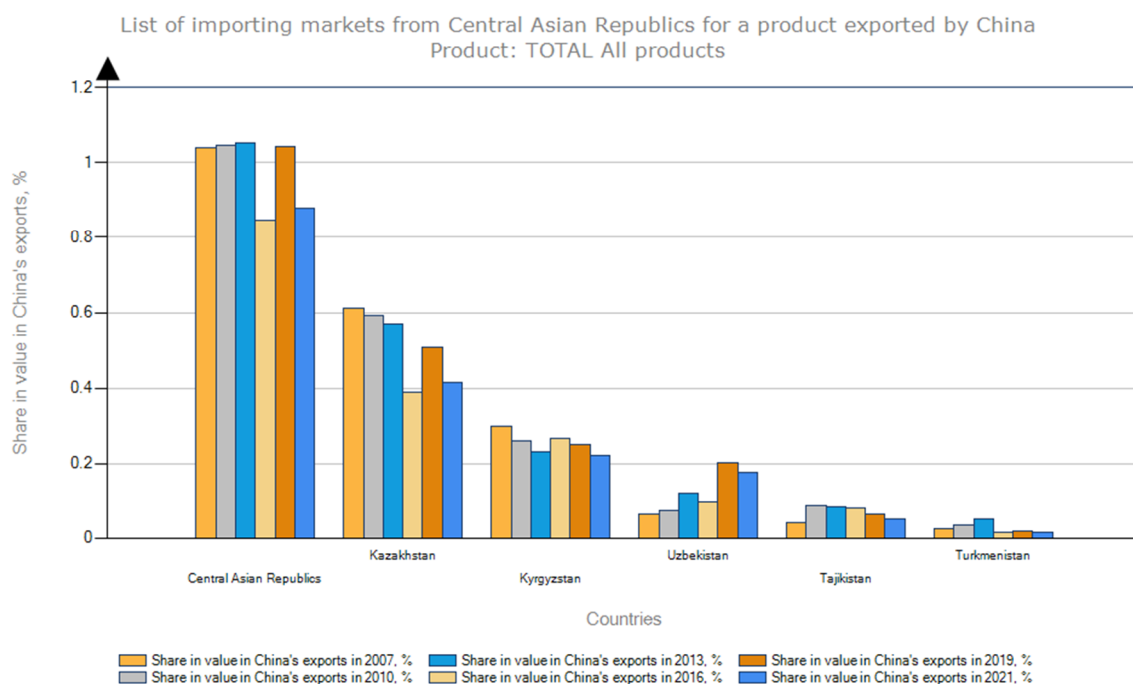
List of importing markets from Central Asian Republics for a product exported by United States of America  
Product: TOTAL All products



List of supplying markets from Central Asian Republics for a product imported by United States of America  
Product: TOTAL All products

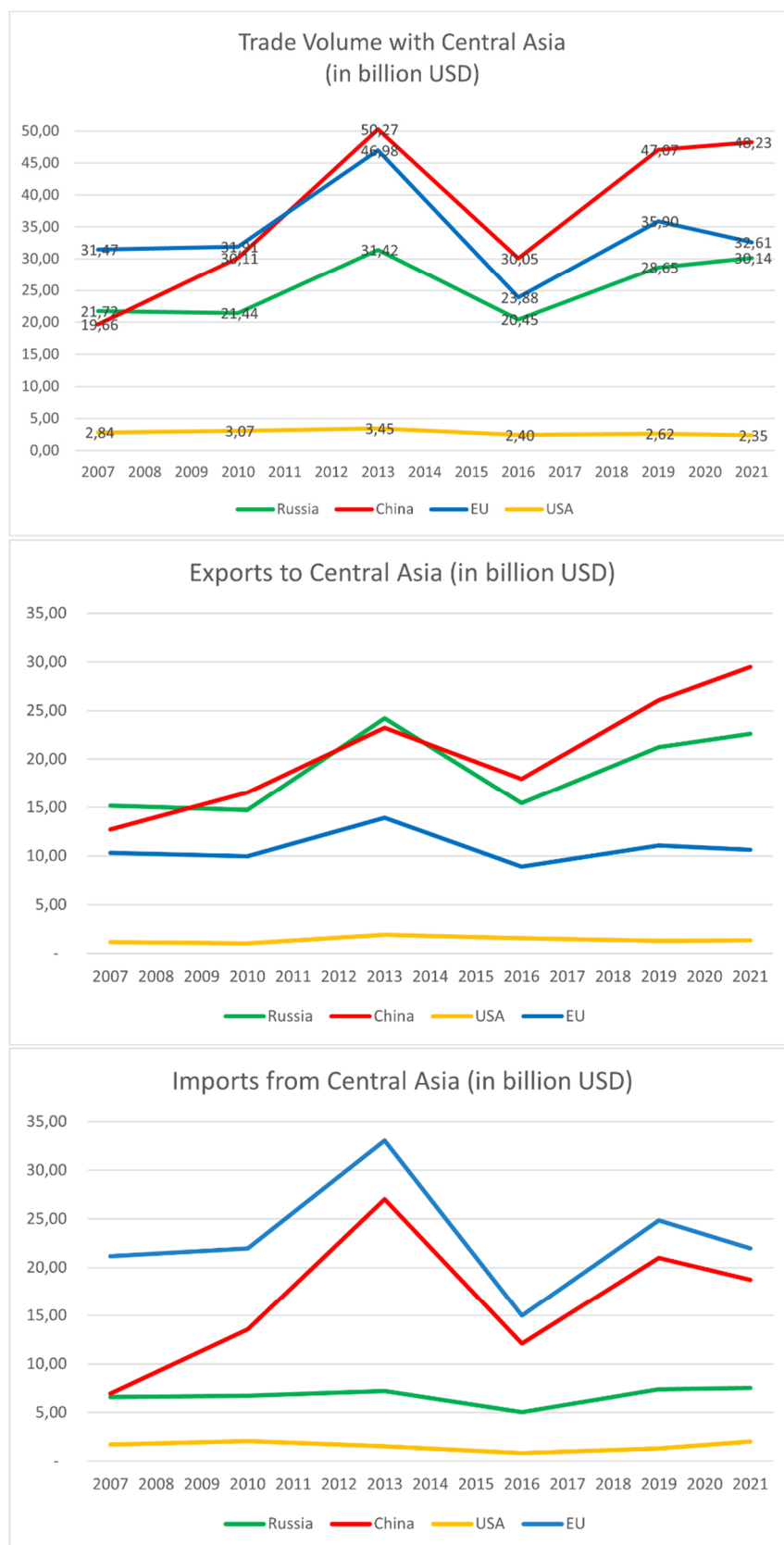


## China



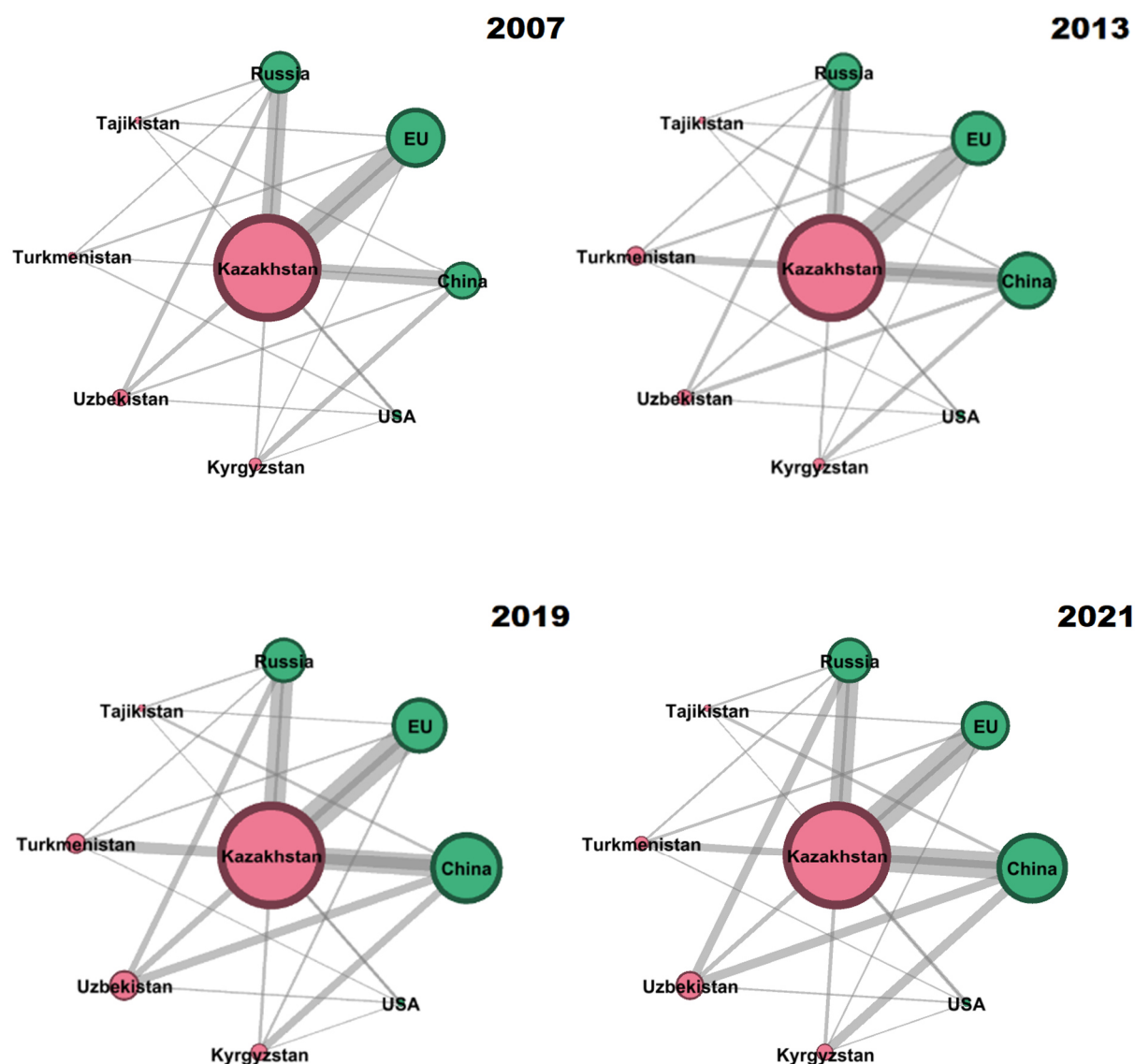
Data and illustrations from UN Comtrade Database.

## Appendix 3: Trade between Central Asia and the great powers



Own illustrations. Source: UN Comtrade Database.

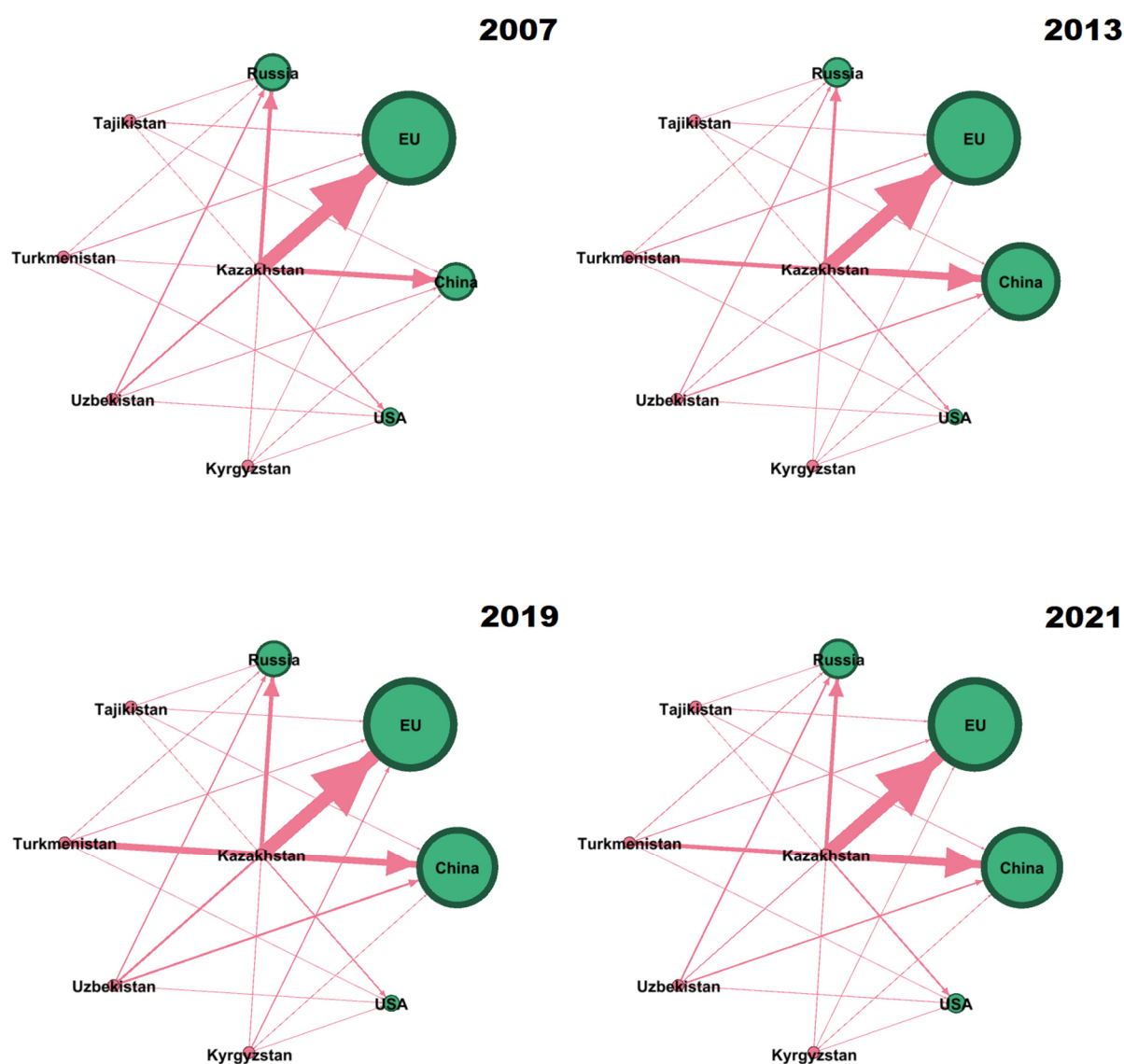
## Appendix 4: Network analysis of trade volumes with Central Asia



The trade network between great powers and the Central Asian republics, measured by bilateral trade volume data. Tie strength indicates weighted bilateral trade flows. Node size indicates weighted degree centrality. (Own illustration with Gephi 0.9.)

*Source: UN Comtrade Data Base. Data as reported by European Union, China, Russia and United States (exception: Russia in 2021 based on Uzbek and Kyrgyz reporting and Russian reporting in 2020).*

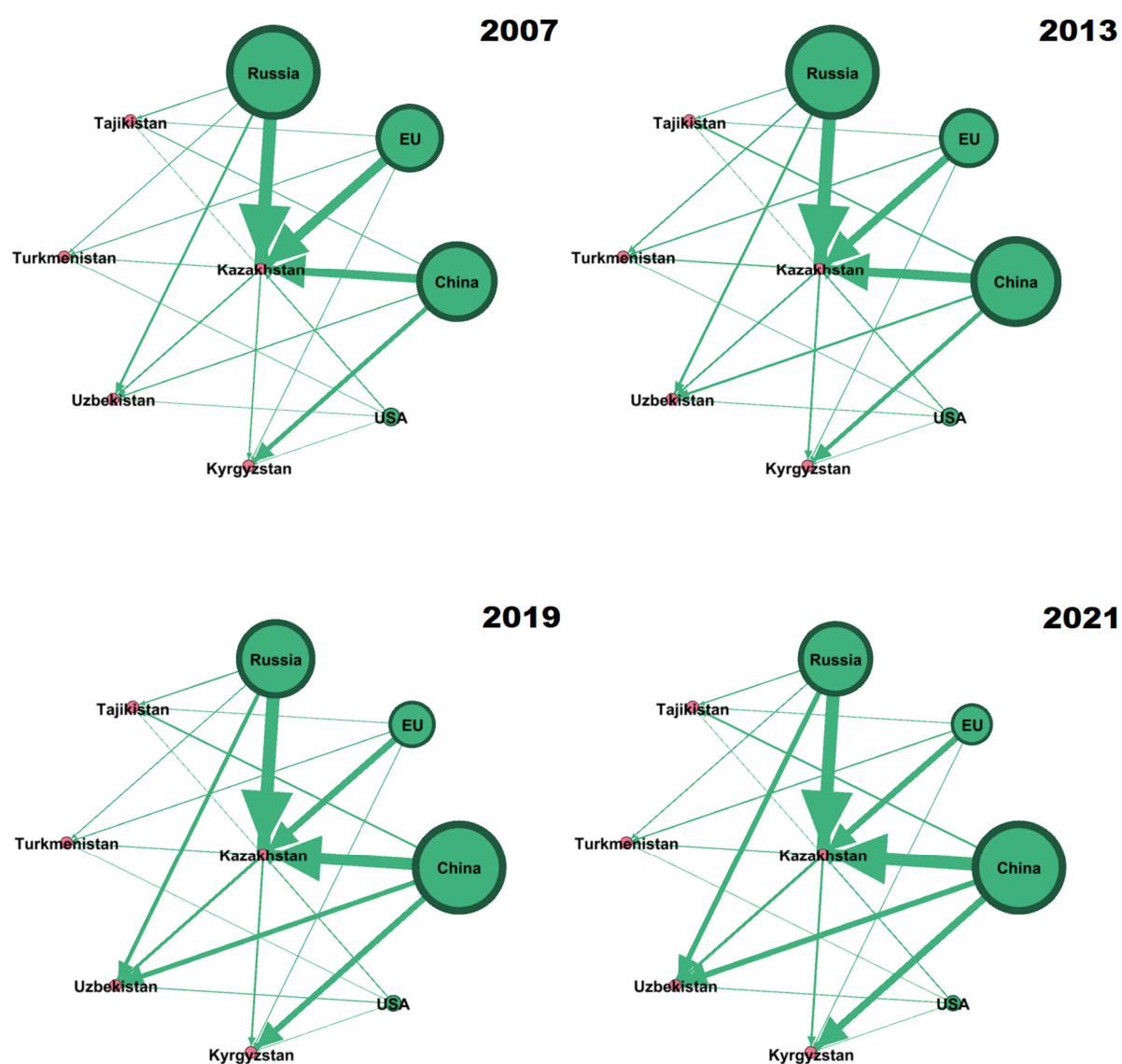
## Appendix 5: Network analysis of imports from Central Asia



Network position of great powers as importers from Central Asia. Tie strength indicates weighted import flows. Node size indicates weighted in-degree centrality. (Own illustration with Gephi 0.9.)

*Source: UN Comtrade Data Base. Data as reported by European Union, China, Russia and United States (exception: Russia in 2021 based on Uzbek and Kyrgyz reporting and Russian reporting for 2020).*

## Appendix 6: Network analysis of exports to Central Asia



Network position of great powers as exporters to Central Asia. Tie strength indicates weighted export flows. Node size indicates weighted out-degree centrality. (Own illustration with Gephi 0.9.)

*Source: UN Comtrade Data Base. Data as reported by European Union, China, Russia and United States (exception: Russia in 2021 based on Uzbek and Kyrgyz reporting and Russian reporting for 2020).*

## Appendix 7: National role conceptions

National Roles (United States)	2007		2010		2013		2016		2019		2022		Total	
											January-July		2007-2022	
Advocate for democratization and rule of law	24	16%	38	27%	19	20%	9	18%	15	14%	14	17%	119	19%
Advocate for economic liberalization and market reform	20	13%	14	10%	13	14%	5	10%	11	10%	7	9%	70	11%
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	19	13%	7	5%	20	21%	10	20%	14	13%	4	5%	74	12%
Helper	13	9%	25	18%	3	3%			3	3%	2	2%	46	7%
Developer	19	13%	19	14%	15	16%	8	16%	7	7%	7	9%	75	12%
Supporter of sovereignty, independence and autonomy	18	12%	5	4%			4	8%	13	12%	12	15%	52	8%
Advocate for and defender of human rights	11	7%	18	13%	13	14%	10	20%	24	23%	14	17%	90	14%
Rebuilder of Afghanistan	7	5%	4	3%	8	8%			3	3%			22	4%
Rejection of 'Great Game' rhetorics and geopolitical rivalry	12	8%	5	4%	2	2%	2	4%					21	3%
Principal foreign investor	6	4%	1	1%	1	1%			6	6%	5	6%	19	3%
Supporter of women and minority groups			4	3%	2	2%	2	4%	5	5%	8	10%	21	3%
Counter-actor against Russia									3	3%	8	10%	11	2%
Defender of the international system									2	2%	1	1%	3	0%

National Roles (Russia)	2007		2010		2013		2016		2019		2022 January-July		Total 2007-2022	
Economic integrator and promoter of regional integration	5	36%	3	25%	14	33%	20	28%	18	24%	6	20%	66	27%
Advocate for a new multipolar, 'democratic' world order	3	21%	2	17%	4	1%	15	21%	12	16%	4	13%	40	16%
Security provider	2	14%	2	17%	7	17%	3	0%	13	17%	4	13%	31	13%
Defender of collective and legal principles in international relations, international law	2	14%	1	1%	4	1%	13	18%	13	17%	4	13%	37	15%
Supporter of national sovereignty	1	1%	2	17%	4	1%	9	13%	4	1%	5	17%	25	10%
Supporter of democracy	1	1%	1	1%									2	0%
Defender of Russians and compatriots abroad			1	1%	2	0%			2	0%	1	0%	6	0%
Helper					2	0%			3	0%	2	1%	7	0%
Developer					2	0%	1	0%	5	1%	1	0%	9	0%
Adversary of revolution, regime change and the promotion of democracy and liberal values					2	0%	3	0%	2	0%			7	0%
Power center and balancer					1	0%	6	1%	3	0%	2		12	0%
Eurasian power							2	0%	1	0%			3	0%
Rebuilder of Afghanistan											1	0%	1	0%