

# Expansion of Russia-China Duo in Asian Region and the Future of Democracy

Dr. Lal Ji Pal<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sandeep E.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Central University of Andhra Pradesh

Corresponding Author: Dr. Sandeep E.

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## ABSTRACT

The world has become multi-polar with the emergence of Russia and China into the forefront of world politics toward the beginning of the twenty-first century. Within a couple of decades, they have acquired considerable economic and military might. As part of fulfilling their expansionist ambitions both Moscow and Beijing have succeeded in establishing political and economic grips in many parts of the world including Africa and Asia. Apart from possessing economic and political clout, they have been offering an alternative model of governance instead of liberal democracy championed by the West. Critics claim that this phenomenon is detrimental to the future of democracy. However, the alternative models of governance along with their underlying principles seem to be more acceptable to many national governments across the globe. They consider them suitable and pragmatic for the local environment. The Asian region has become a pivotal area of the expansion of Russia and China. The West also tries to build a democratic coalition in the region to check the progress of Russia and China. Against this backdrop, the present paper discusses the impact of increasing Russian and Chinese footprints in the contemporary period on the prospect of democracy in the Asian region with a special focus on Central and East Asia. The paper is divided into two major sections. The first part will discuss the impact of China on democracy and the second section will deal with the Russian influence.

**Key Words:** Democracy Promotion, Russia, China, Neo-Liberalism, Central Asia, East Asia

## INTRODUCTION

While exploring the approach of China and Russia toward democracy, it is important to know the twentieth-century- background from which they rose to the sphere of influence in World Politics. Apart from historical factors, the political environment of the century also influenced the formation of their ideological framework. China and Russia emerged from the clutches of imperial powers in the twentieth century. It was European powers like Germany and Italy that dominated the global political landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. Ultrationalism, anti-democratism, expansionism military-style charismatic leadership etc were the main features of these countries. On the other hand, so-called liberal democratic countries exerted global control from the other end. It was on the outskirts of the First World War that dragged Washington to the forefront of global politics by abandoning the century-old Monroe Doctrine.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 opened an avenue for a new actor, the USSR which played a confusing role in the next two decades in world politics. When the Second World War started, it first aligned with Nazi Hitler through the Molotov pact. However, towards the end of the War, it switched over to anti-Germany block. Even though both democratic countries and

the Soviet Union were in the same camp towards the end of the Second World War, they separated and spearheaded two sharply hostile blocks. This departure was inevitable because of the underlying ideological fissure. This division was marked by communism and democracy. Hence contemporary Russia's reluctance towards democracy begins from here. What happened next is history. The fierce Cold War put global politics at the edge of anxiety and enthusiasm. Both the power blocks covertly and overtly undertook overseas missions to promote respective ideologies. U.S. accused the USSR of thwarting democratization in its neighborhood and its satellite nations. On the other hand, Moscow alleged the U.S. manipulation of anti-American governments in the name of democracy promotion.

The end of the Cold War was considered to be the era of an era of conflicts and accusations. The symptoms of an imminent collapse of the Soviet Union appeared in front of the world along with the accession of Mikayel Gorbachev as the leader in 1985. However, the main cause was rooted in democratic aspirations that emerged in the minds of constituent nations largely driven by policies like perestroika and glasnost. Along with this, the information and communication revolution that happened across the world generated a sense of liberation that was going on in other parts of the world.

There were several questions about a post-Cold War world. Who would be the successor of the Soviet Union? What would be the fate of democracy in the new world? Scholars like Francis Fukuyama predicted the upcoming golden era of democracy through his theory of the 'End of History'. However, Samuel P Huntington projected the advent of a more fragile world order characterized by the 'Clash of Civilizations'. But ground-level experiences at least for the initial years were in favor of democracy particularly the model of liberal democracy championed by the United States. Russia claimed the legacy of the former Soviet

Union by its geographical size and able leadership. The former Moscow leader Boris Yeltsin adorned the post of President. Interestingly, he was somehow accepted as a pro-democracy leader by Western quarters. Some believed that he would be making the future of democracy in Russia strong which was inevitable for it if needed to emerge as a global player in the era of the unilateral domination of the U.S.

But this optimism waded away immediately with the dawn of a new millennium. Yeltsin handed over power to his comparatively less-known Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a former KGB officer. He was a charismatic leader driven by the spirit of Russian pan-Slavic nationalism. He firmly believed that the downfall of the Soviet Union was one of the major catastrophic events. Ascending to power, Putin promised the Russians that our nation would never bow its head down in the face of the world. Keeping these promises alive Russia marched towards establishing a kind of parallel dominance in the world. Along with the People's Republic of China, it succeeded in converting the unipolar world into a multi-polar one.

The rise of China along with other emerging powers was one of the major notable developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The admission of China into the WTO in 2003 marked a major turn in the evolution of the country into the global domain. This march of China in the global sphere continues even in the second decade of the new millennium without significant hurdles. Today, with about \$14 trillion economy and the most powerful military systems, it retains the second position among global powers. The rise of China poses two kinds of threats to the aspirations of democracy. The Chinese model of governance is unique. China was founded and developed based on the communist model of politics and economy. In the post-Mao era, the state made a transition into a market economy while retaining the communist oppressive features in the political sphere. This combination is widely seen as the reason for the stable and ever-increasing power status of the country.

However, the main question here is what happened to the glory of democracy in this process. Both Russia and China have aberrated from the path of the dominant path of democracy. They have constructed their different way from mainstream liberal democracy. Today, the West identifies that they are a challenge to the mission of global democratization. Critics say that apart from denying democratic freedom to their citizens, both Russia and China check the progress of democracy around the world. These countries provide material as well as ideological support to authoritarian governments in various parts including Asia and Africa.

The case of Asia is worth getting more attention in this context. Here in addition to economic competition, democracy as an ideal also appears to be a tool of competition. Within Asia, the subregions of Central Asia and South Asia have become the focal points of Russia and China respectively. The rise of China and India has already made this region a pivotal centre of global politics of competition. There has been an explicit race between New Delhi and Beijing to ensure a presence in the economic market particularly in South Asia. Identifying the possibility of India as a potential democratic power, the U.S. and other like-minded actors have approached India along with mechanisms like Quadrilateral Alliances. These actors have upheld democracy as a key tool to defend the expansion of China and Russia in the region. However, many of the national governments in the Central Asian and South Asian regions consider the alternative models of Russia and China to be more pragmatic and viable for their national contexts. Against this background, the present paper discusses the influence of Russia and China on the democracy scenario in the Asian region.

### **1. Expansion of China and Fear of Democrats in the Region**

Proponents of democracy promotion are afraid that many governments that are either

in the process of transitioning or aspire to alter their system would find the Chinese model of a centralized and expanding system to be more appealing and desirable than liberal democratic systems. They might follow China's lead, particularly since China is making similar efforts to engage with these nations through massive aid and technology initiatives. This is the primary source of anxiety resulting from the emergence of China. Along with this, millions of common people are forcibly denied the chance to live under and benefit from the democratic style of governance due to the nature of China's internal rule. It is aptly observed that perhaps the most potent nation obstructing democracy now is China, a nation that is growing more affluent, strong, and assertive every day. Apart from depriving a fifth of the global populace of their democratic rights, China offers a development model that is significantly different and has acquired considerable popularity (Chen & Kinzelbach, 2015, p.400). Therefore, China poses a threat to those who advocate for the dominant model of liberal democracy.

This anxiety is legitimate when taking into account estimations of the Chinese population. With 1.35 billion people living there, China makes up almost 20% of the global population. China's presence has simultaneously had two positive effects on the level of democracy in the Asian area. First of all, there have been attempts to resist by making use of the potential that democracies provide, rather than just copying China's example. In the last ten years, there have been multiple democratic upheavals across the Asian continent. In the Asian region, ambitions for democratic opening and strong opposition to democracy are evident. The Umbrella Movement and Sun Flower Movement are the names of the democratic movements that emerged in Taiwan and Hong Kong in response to China. This went against the long-held concern in Western circles that China's effective advancement and footprint would

encourage others in the region to emulate rather than oppose it.

### **1.1 Resistance of Democratic Powers and China**

From the very beginning of the discussions, India, Japan, and Indonesia have been considered as prospective Asian countries that could maintain democracy. They have made an effort to address the democratic characteristics of the area. In addition to their unwavering commitment to democratic leadership inside their system, they have each made several persistent individual attempts to advance democracy in their particular regions. Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are just a few of the South Asian states that India has intervened in and interacted with. Japan is also making a concerted effort to support Myanmar's democratic transition. They saw the possibility of Chinese incursion into these states unless the democratic side responded more forcefully and promptly. In addition to their endeavors, they have demonstrated a renewed and unparalleled readiness to collaborate. Schoff (2020) identifies that Japan is progressively reducing its strong reliance on the US-Japan alliance to diversify its relations with other democratic countries. Along with collective agreements with NATO and the European Union, it signed on to new security and economic cooperation agreements with nations including Australia, India, Canada, and the Philippines. Additionally, Japan makes investments in global institutions including APEC, the Asian Development Bank, and ASEAN.

Joint announcements between Japan and India were made in 2008, 2013, 2015, and 2017. In 2012, the first Japan-India Maritime Exercise (JIMEX) took place. In 2015, Japan became a permanent participant in the joint Malabar Naval Exercises between the United States and India. Japan tried to forge democratic coalitions in a variety of ways. Japan promoted the Asian Security Diamond Concept in 2012. Japan joined the quadrilateral alliance with the

United States, Australia, and India, three other democratic states. Japan started two-plus-two talks with Indonesia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defense in 2015. The agreement on the protection of classified military information with South Korea in 2016, the contract on the transfer of defense technology and equipment with the Philippines in 2016, and the agreement to strengthen maritime security ties with Indonesia in 2017 are just a few of the major pacts it produced with democratic states. (Ichihara, 2017).

In a similar vein, India offered to provide some noteworthy security alliances with democratic nations. As part of this, India reached out to Indonesia in 2017 by drafting a mutual agreement to expand maritime security cooperation and conduct the inaugural joint air combat exercise. Intending to produce military ships, India collaborated with South Korea to craft a memorandum of understanding (Ichihara, 2017). In 2021, Indonesia created a Global Maritime Fulcrum Vision, partly in response to China's growing influence in the adjacent maritime region.

It might be argued that, in one sense, cooperation and group efforts have trumped individual endeavors in terms of containing China through democratic means. Japan is being pushed into an "all of the above" strategy by China's overbearing claims, forceful actions in the South and East China Sea, bullying of Australia, and suppression of political dissent in Hong Kong (Schoff, 2020, pp.1-2). To strengthen alliances and thwart Chinese diplomatic efforts, this strategy takes into account several global locations while maintaining a steady and fruitful relationship with China.

### **1.2 Response of US and EU**

The United States faces a direct challenge from China's ascent. To a large degree, the latter needs clarification about how to contain the former. Early in the new millennium, Washington made an effort to accommodate Beijing into the world order by inducting it into WTO. The liberal

framework of the current system has not benefited from China's membership and ensuing rise to prominence on several platforms, including global forums. It was admitted into global organizations such as the Human Rights Council and WTO. Nevertheless, the US was unable to change China's behavior. Baer (2020) says finding the instances where this hasn't produced the expected outcomes is simple: Despite several issues, such as imprisoning over a million Uighurs in concentration camps, the WTO not doing enough to stop China's unfair trade practices.

Experts claim that despite its might, the US is powerless to stop China's advance in many areas. In such a situation, opportunities for increased cooperation with non-Western nations should be explored. Burns (2020), talks about this reality. According to him "preventing China's rise is beyond America's capacity, and our economies are too entangled to decouple" (para. 39). Schoff (2020, p. 2) notes that the Chinese military leaders and diplomats may be acting more aggressively to protect their fundamental interests as a result of the US political influence eroding. According to him "the United States alone will be increasingly less inclined or able to stymie Chinese gains in Asia, and if Beijing can deter other Asian countries from acting together, then its dominance in the region is virtually assured" (para.10). Thus, the decisions made by non-Western democracies have a significant impact on the overall picture.

China is posing an analogous threat to the EU. China is now being seen by the EU as a systemic rival that demands better enthusiasm for competition. The influential Federation of German Industries (BDI) released a strategy document in January 2019 that outlined this tough stance on China's commercial relations with the EU (Brattberg & Corre, 2020). Over the past three years, efforts to effectively coordinate and defend against China on economic issues, such as foreign direct investments, state aid, and technology transfers, have

been resurrected. This is the first step toward laying the groundwork for a more realistic and toughened approach to China. Corre (2020) says "Not only did the European Commission create a new FDI screening mechanism, to be operational in October, but it has also issued guidelines on 5G technology and a white paper on foreign subsidies" (para. 6).

In this manner, the tactics of China and Russia provide dilemmas for the EU. "The latter is bad news if the EU is to deal with the ineluctable insidious rise of China and Russia's constant meddling in Europe's democratic institutions", Dempsey (2019, para.4) says. After examining the effects of China's rise and those of other authoritarian nations, it is undeniable that those who advocate for liberal democracy have come up against formidable opposition.

## **2. Democracy and Governance in Asia and the Influence of Russia**

In the past two decades, Russia has shown unprecedented interest in influencing various nations in the Asian region. Perhaps it may be part of a global strategy as Russian activities are not limited to the Asian continent alone. Rather it is more visible in Africa and Eastern Europe in the forms of deploying the Wagner mercenary group and regular Russian forces in countries like Mali, Libya, the Central African Republic, Moldova, and Montenegro. It has been reported by agencies like The Brookings Institution and Tony Blair Institute that 19 agreements, with African nations for military cooperation during 2015 and 2019, were signed, and stationed private military services in at least twenty-one countries since 2014, with most of them on the African continent (Kurlantzick, 2023). However, when considering the democracy dimension the case of Asia needs more attention.

The main complication to Russian foreign strategy is the emergence of Asian giants. Russia's chances in the twenty-first century as a regional actor, global player, and good international citizen are contingent upon its

ability to connect with Asia effectively mainly due to its hostility with the West. Particularly the Asia-Pacific area is starting to take center stage for the world's economic expansion, geopolitical competition, and ideological disputation (Lo, 2019). All these compel Russia to revamp its existing policy towards Asia by taking a creative risk and reevaluating fundamental ideas as well as how to apply them in a setting that is becoming more and more demanding.

Along with this, for Russia's foreign policy, the Asia-Pacific region will always be significant mainly due to the country's expanding strategic alliance with China, which started in 1989 rather than 2014. Moscow will prioritize preserving and expanding its crucial geopolitical relationship with Beijing over its other economic, military, security, and diplomatic interests in the region, all of which are far less significant (Rumer et al., 2020). Russia's expanding relations with Asia, especially China were more motivated by Moscow's belief that the region would be the main driver of future economic growth as well as part of seeking moral and physical strength to overcome the Western efforts to isolate in connection with Ukrainian crisis (Mankoff, 2015).

Both are well-wishers and mutually supportive. Both desire to outdo the EU and the U.S. to be the dominant forces in Asia. Chinese and Russian skills complement one another. Russia has the largest nuclear weapons in the world, while China has the largest economy. China requires fossil fuels but has capital, while Russia needs finance but possesses fossil fuels. Collectively, they might create a financial system that is "de-dollarized" and impervious to sanctions from the West. Above all, however, their location unites them (Morris, 2022). The Asian heartland, or the "stans," which stretch from Kazakhstan in the north through Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan to Pakistan in the south, would, he claimed, serve as the center of gravity for power relations.

The "turn to the East" (*povorot na vostok*) in Russia has been going on for almost ten years. Before 2014, the "Pivot" was primarily focused on taking advantage of Asia's explosive economic expansion (Connolly, 2021). However, the events of 2014 provided a clearer geopolitical justification for it. Moscow had to diversify its foreign policy quickly as relations with the Euro-Atlantic community worsened after Russia annexed Crimea and conflicts broke out in southeast Ukraine. There has been some degree of progress in this program of Russia. Like Bangladesh and Vietnam, India is still a significant and enduring partner. Additionally, Moscow has had some success expanding its market reach and forging alliances with nations like Singapore, Myanmar, and Indonesia. The unexpected Taliban victory in Afghanistan has worried the US about getting the upper hand over Russia in Afghanistan. The rise of the Taliban, in addition to undermining Washington's international standing, has left a regional vacuum in Central Asia, which China and Russia will gladly fill. (Cooley, 2021). However, the most visible influence of Russia in Asia is in the Central Asian Region.

### **2.1 Alternative Models of Governments in Central Asia and South East Asia and Russia's Assistance**

Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia, has traditionally seen Central Asia as his most stable region. He has consistently influenced its leaders and applied political pressure. Putin was not wrong to see Central Asia as a part of the Russian circle of influence. Russian relations with all five of the former Soviet Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—remained mostly unaltered in his initial two decades in office. Even though there were moments of unrest during this time—Kyrgyzstan's 2005 Tulip Revolution, which the Kremlin dismissed as a Western-backed "color revolution" (Hess, 2023).

When Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) soldiers were invited in early 2022 to manage Kazakhstan's domestic affairs, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev made a significant change to the security landscape in Central Asia. With anti-government demonstrations turning violent, Tokayev contended that terrorist organizations with foreign support were sweeping over Kazakhstan and requested assistance from the CSTO to bring order back. The operation was considered successful in the main by Moscow and Nur-Sultan. However, a lot of observers worry that this would create a new precedent for Russian meddling in Central Asia (D'Anieri, 2022). The hasty decision by Tokayev to pledge his nation's sovereignty to Russia ought to cause leaders throughout Central Asia to question the safety of their nations' territorial integrity. Russia's assistance might be crucial in consolidating and extending the power of many existing rulers even more. The Kassym-Jomart Tokayev dictatorship in Kazakhstan refilled its legislature with lawmakers from last month's legislative elections, which saw relatively few independent candidates and no opposition groups permitted to run for office. Neighboring Uzbekistan is also experiencing quite comparable trends as President Shavkat Mirziyoyev approaches the end of his constitutionally mandated tenure. Here, Mirziyoyev's current goal is to increase his political influence surpassing the constraints set by the constitution (Anceschi, 2023). The current government in Turkmenistan carried out an extremely cautious power transfer in March 2022, formalizing Serdar Berdimukhamedov's, the son of long-serving leader Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, ascension to the president and thereby sustaining family rule. The current trend shows that the more wounded Russian Federation will undoubtedly serve as a vital source of assistance for the non-democratic leaders of Central Asia.

When comes to South East Asia, countries like Myanmar and Thailand are moving closer to Russia. Following the coup in Myanmar in 2021, the military regime has also been subject to several sanctions from Western nations. So, it is more eager to accept promises and support from Russia. Thailand has also declared its intention to increase bilateral trade with Russia to \$10 billion annually, as Moscow seeks to purchase more Thai fruits, rice, automobiles, and auto parts in addition to making technological investments. (Ratcliffe, 2022)

## **2.2 Russia and Central Asia: Losing Grips?**

There have emerged some contrasting observations regarding Russian consolidation power in the Asian region particularly among the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan. This perception was aroused mainly by two factors; the Ukrainian invasion and the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. But after decades of calm, the grip of Russia in Central Asia has been eroding at a rate never witnessed in the past year. Russia's control over its former Soviet empire is beginning to crumble as a result of the Kremlin's distraction from its failing conflict in Ukraine. Moscow's glamour and hold have faded, leaving a chaotic void that China and the once submissive former Soviet constituents are trying to replace. (Higgins, 2022). The shift has been brought about by Putin's decision to significantly escalate his protracted conflict with Ukraine on February 24, 2022, rather than by the incidents in Central Asia.

The war's lasting impacts on Russia's geopolitical standing are still being felt. As long as the sanctions are in place, the capability of the Russian state will be further hampered by the ongoing fighting. Although China's ascent had already made it the region's leading economic power, Beijing was content to allow Russia to maintain its position as the dominant political actor, as seen by the occurrences in

Kazakhstan in January 2022. However, Russian influence has significantly decreased barely thirteen months after Putin's mostly unopposed involvement in Kazakhstan, which he saw as the end of purported pro-Western color revolutions (Hess, 2023). Turkmenistan's switch from Russia to the China-Central Asia pipeline as its main gas export route, and frequent altercations with the late Uzbek dictator Islam Karimov before he died in 2016 were chief among them.

The Central Asian countries did not come to the rescue of Russia when the West imposed sanctions on Russia. None of them have endorsed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For example, banks in the region do not accept Russian MIR payment cards, and only Kazakhstan permits private persons to use them—and only after receiving permission from the United States to do so. The self-declared republics of the Donetsk and Luhansk peoples, as well as other Ukrainian territory that Russia says it has seized, have not been acknowledged as parts of Russia by any nation in Central Asia (Umarov, 2022). But for the countries of Central Asia, such conduct is not often unprecedented. They all refused to acknowledge Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Dmitry Medvedev, the president of Russia at the time, attempted in vain to win support for Russia's war against Georgia in Central Asia in 2008.

However, an opposite version is also there. Some opine that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would benefit the Central Asian Countries, which they might realize soon. This benefit is primarily in economic terms. To evade Western sanctions, citizens of Russia and Belarus have repositioned their money and businesses to Central Asia. Particularly because of their cultural closeness and geographic proximity, Russian businesses have transferred to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. (Askew & Sudesh Baniya, 2023). The headquarters of countries in the Central Asian region has not received warmly Vladimir Putin's invasion

of Ukraine (“Central Asian Countries Are”, 2022).

### **2.3 Hostility of Religious Outfits**

The Russian embassy in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, was targeted by a suicide bomber from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) on September 5, 2022, which created serious fatalities. After the caliphate was declared in 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gave his inaugural address in which he said that there were two insurmountable groups in the world: the "Muslims and the mujahideen" and the "Jews, the crusaders, [and] their allies." He stated that the second group is "being mobilized by the Jews, and under the leadership of America and Russia" (Webber, 2022). This classification as the Islamic State's number one opponent ranks Russia equal to the United States. Such hostility is said to be fueled by Russia's military presence in Muslim countries and its involvement in Syria, as well as by its membership in the UN Security Council, support for the regimes in Central Asia, and connections to China, Iran, Israel, and other countries, allegation of attacks and prosecution of IS followers and Muslims. Along with this, the Taliban in Afghanistan also has not shown great willingness to accommodate Russian interests.

### **CONCLUSION**

The rise of China and Russia along with other emerging powers was one of the major notable developments in the 21st century. The exponents of democracy promotion fear that their model of a consolidated and expansive system would appear as the most attractive and preferable model, by outdoing the liberal democratic designs, for many states who are either undergoing transitions or aspiring to transform their system. On the other hand, given the nature of the domestic rule of China and Russia, millions of ordinary people are forcefully denied the opportunities to live under and enjoy the fruits of the democratic model of governance.

This tendency has many causes, but two major contributors have been China and Russia, who have encouraged, assisted, and accelerated coups and other military power uprisings. Critics claim that China and Russia have provided military support for coups and their continuation, as well as various forms of military involvement in domestic affairs. China and Russia are fuelling the fire of remilitarization and, in China's case, resolutely attempting to establish an alternative world order to that spearheaded by the United States, either directly encouraging militaries to come or aiding them in solidifying their influence once armed forces have already attained greater power.

Against the backdrop of this fear, some movements are going on at the behest of democratic countries. India, Japan, and Indonesia have, since the very inception of talks, been included in the spectrum of the potential Asian countries to uphold democracy. They have come forward to furnishing certain notable security tie-ups comprising democratic countries.

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