

CENTRAL ASIA IN BETWEEN RUSSIA, CHINA, AND THE UNITED STATES: COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?

Central Asia's importance in the world is mainly a result of its geopolitical location, rich energy and natural resources, and significant geo-economic potential. The main external actors, namely, Russia, the United States, the EU, and China, declared their support for peace and stability and regional cooperation in Central Asia, a message that is welcomed in the region.

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After the 2016 presidential election in Uzbekistan, the October 2020 protests in Kyrgyzstan, the Taliban's power grab in Afghanistan (a country with which three Central Asian countries, namely, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have common borders), and the January 2022 uprising in Kazakhstan, Central Asia has once again become a region of interest in international politics for geopolitical, security, and economy-trade reasons. The region is a geopolitical area with significant implications for global security. It has a population of about 70 million people and is located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It has vast natural resources, many of which are just beginning to be explored. These advantages have historically placed it at the center of tensions between some of the world's most powerful states. This paper investigates why the region is important from the standpoint of global superpowers and outlines Russia's, China's, and the United States' involvement in Central Asian politics.

Central Asia's importance in the world is mainly a result of its geopolitical location, rich energy and natural

resources, and significant geo-economic potential. The main external actors, namely, Russia, the United States, the EU, and China, declared their support for peace and stability and regional cooperation in Central Asia, a message that is welcomed in the region. Despite that, there are frictions and competition between these actors. Russia traditionally views Central Asia as its sphere of influence and does not want either the United States or the EU to become deeply involved in the region. China has expressed its understanding of Russia's strong role in the region. It also welcomes the Russian military presence in the region over the US presence as it considers the latter as an actor endangering the safety of its north-western separatist region. The United States supports the Central

Asian states' multi-vector foreign policies and cooperates with Central Asian countries in political, economic and security spheres. This paper analyses the Central Asian countries' views and policy as a region; however, depending on the political situation and the level of economic development, relations may change country by country. The academic literature still focuses to a large extent on the perspectives of the great powers in Central Asia



and less on the foreign policies pursued by these states themselves. In this paper, views from Central Asia are analyzed, as well. The paper argues that Central Asia is interested in maintaining its sovereignty and agency in international relations while keeping various alternatives to the growing Sino-Russian competitive cooperation in the region.

From a Central Asian perspective, strong and mutually beneficial bilateral and multilateral relations would be appreciated. The Central Asian republics have already established relations with major powers. They are members or have working relations with different regional and international organizations and formats of cooperation such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the C5+1 format of Central Asian states with the USA. Though the interests of global actors are diverse and partly contradicting, coordination in bilateral as well as multilateral formats on security, economic, and transport projects is crucial for the region. At the same time, political stability and the economic restoration of Afghanistan remain key objectives for all actors involved in the region. However, different actors in Central Asia and Afghanistan face many problems because of their different approaches and understanding of the situation in Afghanistan.

China and Russia are attractive actors for Central Asian countries for economic and political reasons, while the USA is important to the region for the maintenance of independence, regional security, and international recognition in the international arena.¹ In general, all Central Asian countries have the same interests in the US maintaining their sovereignty and recognition in different international agencies. However, the interests of Central Asian countries regarding the US differ depending on their individual concerns, political regimes, and other political and economic factors. The United States mainly acted as a security partner when it was in Afghanistan, and also as an alternative to the Russian-led security insurances. In terms of economic partnership, China is a more important actor in the region than the US and Russia.

Russia's Role and Interests in Central Asia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to maintain its influence in the former Soviet countries. Russia was not too successful in the Caucasus region in this regard, and in Central Asia has reached its goals to a certain level. Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia aims to promote security and military-technical cooperation. It also seeks to facilitate projects in the energy and economic sectors.

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Moscow's main security priority in cooperation with Central Asian states is to insulate Russia from the worst effects of regional instability. Politically and economically, Central Asian countries mainly depend on the Russian economy. For instance, about 40% of the GDP of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan depends on remittances of Kyrgyz and Tajik labour migrants who are working in Russia, mostly in the construction sphere.² In most cases, this dependency keeps Central Asian countries in compliance with Russia. Furthermore, regarding economic relations, Russia is expanding the membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) towards Central Asian countries; Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are full members, Uzbekistan is an observer state, and Tajikistan is a prospective member.³

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Commonwealth of the Independent States was created by the former member states of the Union, including all the Central Asian countries. However, currently this organization is not salient. Russia also formed the CSTO in 1992, which included all the Central Asian countries – except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Unlike the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is a much broader initiative of Russia and China with political-security aims, the CSTO aims to strengthen peace and protect regional security, territorial integrity, and the sovereignty of the following member states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. In general, Russia does not want Western countries to become geopolitical actors in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia cannot be the only hegemonic power in the region with its current Central Asia policy and the multi-vector foreign policy of Central Asian countries. The US intervention in Afghanistan and China's investment in Central Asia has undermined Russia's hegemonic position in the region.

In the last few years, Russia's policy towards Central Asia has been changing and there are signs of change in the region, such as the crisis in the relations between Russia and the West, the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, and Chinese economic expansion in the region. Considering these recent events, Russia is trying to be more active in the region. The current Ukraine-Russia conflict shows that Russia is losing its influence in most post-Soviet countries. It is most probable that Russia will try to develop its relationship

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with Central Asian countries even further. Russia does not want the USA and the European countries to become effective geopolitical actors in the Central Asian region. Accordingly, Russia tends towards cooperation with China in the region. In doing so, it focuses on regional projects with China, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

China's Presence in Central Asia

Diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian countries have been developing since 1991. Besides, China's role in Central Asia is growing due to its broad regional connectivity, energy, and raw material resources, and China is now one of the main economic partners of the countries of the region. Chinese aims in Central Asia include promoting political and social stability through development, finding new markets for Chinese companies, and establishing transportation networks to assist Chinese exports.⁴ China is the region's biggest trading partner, having replaced Russia's prior dominance in trade with Central Asia.⁵

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was founded in 2001 and now has eight member states, namely, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan, as well as observer states. Since its inception, the SCO has been portrayed as a joint Russian-Chinese effort to counter Western geopolitical initiatives in the Eurasian continent. However, this narrative may appear overly simplistic and biased, as the SCO was designed primarily as a hub for the coordination of specific security and, to a lesser extent, economic policy issues, and it is a key player in shaping regional politics and security in Eurasia. The SCO member states are committed to uniting in the fight against 'three evil forces,' namely, terrorism, extremism, and separatism.⁶ From the standpoint of the Central Asian countries, the SCO is a unique venue that allows them to engage with both Russia and China at the same time, thereby counterbalancing either power's undue influence. These countries have greater opportunities to promote their objectives within the SCO than they would if they negotiated independently with Russia or China because the organization ensures that the agenda is not dominated by a single external sponsor.

During an official visit to Kazakhstan at the end of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping disclosed China's plan to carry out an unprecedented political-economic programme, calling for the realization of a 'New Silk Road' to connect Asia and Europe. The Central Asian region is a key area for the realization of this gigantic project, as Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev emphasised at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020.⁷ The Chinese authorities considered Central Asia as a commercial and infrastructural hub for the entire Eurasian continent when choosing the Kazakh capital to introduce the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, which was previously known as "One Belt, One Road" until 2016, is Xi Jinping's and China's most ambitious project. Its main goal is to deepen China's ties with the rest of the world and to assist it in achieving geopolitical goals by economically tying up its neighbors. In this regard, the BRI aims to build a vast infrastructural network that connects East Asia and Europe.⁸ Currently, China is the main economic partner of all Central Asian countries, and most of their foreign debts are from China. Economically, each Central Asian country's economy somehow depends on Chinese investments and debts.

The US Policy on Central Asia

During the 1990s, Central Asia had almost no geopolitical significance for the US, which is why the country was not heavily involved in the region. However, following 9/11, US involvement in the region increased dramatically. According to the US's new Central Asian strategy, its main interests in the region are to strengthen the countries' sovereignty, increase security, and develop connectivity between Afghanistan and the Central Asian region.⁹ However, the United States' involvement in Afghanistan following 9/11 added geopolitical value to Central Asia, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars being poured into these republics and, to some extent, assisting these countries both politically and economically. Between 2001 and 2004, the US significantly increased its support for the region, as did competition for the region between Russia, China, and the European Union. As a result, the US is a good partner for Central Asia, from which these countries can benefit economically and politically. However, compared to Russia and China, the US is mainly interested in instituting democratization and liberal values such as human rights, which countries of the region are not much interested in.

However, focusing on relations between Central Asia and the US, Central Asian states have two priorities in cooperation with the US. First, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states needed to broaden their relations to avoid being bounded solely by Russia. When they were newly independent, it was



important for them to form more political alliances. Then, in the aftermath of 1991, the world was more inclined to Western values, particularly American values, and states were attempting to comply with democracy standards. As a result, the US's political support was an effective tool for Central Asian states to gain more recognition, which will undoubtedly aid them in seizing upcoming opportunities. In other words, the Central Asian states needed the US's political support to see themselves as capable of engaging in relations with great powers. Second, the Central Asian states want to expand their economic ties. These states were subjected to severe economic shocks following the events of 1991. Before its collapse, the Soviet Union was a staunch supporter of these states, resulting in their high dependency. Following the collapse of communism, the region's states were unable to meet their obligations and faced a decade-long economic crisis.

In his article "Central Asia in the Contexts of Western and Russian Interests," Mirzokhid Rahkimov emphasises that relations with the US and cooperation with the developed Western countries are important for carrying out democratic and economic reforms in the region, and these reforms aim to help Central Asian republics join international organizations.¹⁰ According to Rahkimov, the US involvement in Central Asia is more pragmatic and primarily motivated by geopolitical considerations. Furthermore, trade between the United States and the states of this region has aided economic prosperity. The three great powers, the United States, China, and Russia provide economic assistance to the region's states; however, they also pursue their political interests within the framework of economic assistance.

Central Asian countries regard the US not only as a regional balancer but also as a partner through which they can gain more international recognition and economic and political support. In that sense, it is understandable that Central Asian countries have attempted to pursue their interests in the competition between Russia, China, and the United States. As a result, the US appears to be an outsider in Central Asia, to whom they turn when their interests are threatened, or other regional powers act unexpectedly. Furthermore, the United States is a guarantor of the benefits of globalization in the region, with the potential to strengthen Central Asia's economic integration into global economic networks. Compared to Russia and China, the five Central Asian states and the US have different relations: from neutral Turkmenistan, which focuses on economic cooperation and less on political aspects, to Uzbekistan's newly emerged interest in stronger ties with the US. In a 2018 report, General Joseph Votel is quoted as saying that the increased engagement of Kyrgyzstan with Russia and China has limited the security and political options of the US involvement in the country, especially following the

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closing of the Manas air force base.¹¹ On the contrary, since the 2016 power transition, Uzbekistan has not only strengthened its economic relations with the US by attracting foreign direct investment, increasing business-to-business cooperation, and maintaining its observer status in the EAEU, but also developed stronger military ties with the US, both for the sake of the Uzbek military and the implications for Afghanistan, as Sanjar Valiev indicated in a 2018 article for CACI Analyst.¹²

Conclusion

According to Halford Mackinder's famous Heartland Theory, the power that controls Central Asia — the Great Pivot — will eventually emerge as the most powerful state in international politics. This is why Central Asia is becoming geographically important for all regional and global actors.¹³ Russia is currently focusing on economic and military cooperation with Central Asian states and facilitating energy-related projects. Russia has already lost its hegemonic position in Central Asia, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan distancing themselves from Russia, and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan having signed massive economic agreements with China. China's Central Asian strategy is motivated by the need to ensure domestic stability, protect national unity, suppress internal unrest in its western regions, increase her influence and thus

limit the influence of other powers, promote its economic interests, and improve energy security. The current US Central Asia strategy aims to encourage connectivity among Central Asian countries and promote US investment in the region, while Washington feels the need to counter Chinese assertiveness by promoting infrastructure, trade, and connectivity throughout Asia, repeatedly invoking its own Silk Road policy.

Central Asian countries are pursuing an open-door and multi-vector foreign policy with all actors in international relations. The five leaders of the region's countries have said they do not want Central Asia to become an arena of rivalry between great powers, but being at the crossroads of Eurasia, the five countries inevitably fell into the trap of different and sometimes conflicting interests, influences and ideas. However, before their fourth decade of independence, they seem to finally realize that some form of regional solidarity is the best solution to many of their problems. One sign of this is the summits of Central Asian leaders, which had not been held for almost 20 years but have recently been resumed and organized three times since 2018. The frequency of bilateral meetings between Central Asian leaders has also increased. This new spirit of cooperation could be the best guarantee for the sovereignty of the five countries facing the heterogeneous influence of the major powers that surround and permeate their region.

Endnotes

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