

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the main risks and opportunities for the Central Asian countries in the context of new geopolitical transformations. In this sense, the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia in the period from 2022 to 2024 is undergoing significant changes that affect regional stability and global interaction. The article examines Central Asia in terms of strategic importance and vulnerability to external pressure, influenced by various global initiatives and changing power dynamics. The countries of the region face a number of risks, such as economic instability, dependence on external energy resources, as well as geopolitical rivalry between major powers, in particular Russia and China. In the context of new geopolitics, it is critical for the Central Asian countries to maintain independence and sovereignty, ensure economic development and strengthen political legitimacy. Despite these challenges, cooperation with international actors and participation in various integration structures can contribute to achieving national interests and minimizing risks. Therefore, the article analyzes the key vectors of the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, paying special attention to the Russian and Chinese vectors, and considers the opportunities and risks that these countries face in the new geopolitical reality.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Russia, China, new geopolitics, EAEU, CSTO, Belt and Road Initiative, SCO, opportunities, risks.*

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape around Central Asia in the period from 2022 to 2024 is characterized by significant events and challenges that affect regional stability and global interactions. In Central Asia, characterized by changing power dynamics, efforts at regional cooperation, and the influence of major global initiatives such as the BRI. The strategic importance of the region and interactions with various international actors continue to shape its trajectory on the global stage. The strategic importance of Central

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Received: 19.01.2025

Revised: 04.03.2025

Accepted: 15.03.2025

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Asia is further underscored by its vulnerability to geopolitical instability due to its proximity to various influential regions and countries.

Thus, the period from 2022 to 2024 in Central Asia is marked by significant geopolitical changes driven by historical interactions, regional connectivity initiatives, and geopolitical strategies. Understanding the region's genetic legacy, historical interactions, and contemporary geopolitical dynamics is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

To answer the question about the risks and opportunities of Central Asian countries' cooperation with external actors, it is necessary to establish their core national interests in relations with international actors.

The core national interest of Central Asian countries is to maintain independence and sovereignty, which includes ensuring security, economic development, and political legitimacy.

However, the Central Asian states face a number of structural risks, such as being landlocked, which is an obstacle to expanding trade opportunities, resource dependence, water issues, and the resurgence of the Great Game/New Great Game.

In order to achieve their national interests and overcome risks, the Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan, strive to develop relations and cooperation with various countries, international organizations and integration structures. In order to identify changes in the foreign policy strategy of the Central Asian countries in the context of new geopolitics, it is necessary to analyze the main vectors from the standpoint of the theory of new geopolitics and the New Great Game.

The main part

The Russian vector is certainly a priority for the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, which is due to a number of geopolitical, historical, economic and cultural factors.

However, in the context of the new geopolitics, the Russian vector of the Central Asian countries should be analyzed through the prism of the risks of bilateral/multilateral cooperation. "Shared risks" determine the rational choice, geopolitical interest and dependence/interdependence of partner states, allies. Common risks are both economic and political in nature, and are also directly related to security issues.

The indicators of these risks are the factors of Moscow's pressure on the Central Asian countries. This pressure is formed by a combination of geopolitical rivalry, economic cooperation initiatives, energy dynamics and environmental issues. These factors contribute to the development of the landscape of alliance relations and power dynamics in the region, influencing Moscow's interaction with the Central Asian countries.

The risk-sharing effects between Central Asian countries and Russia from 2022 to 2024 can be analyzed as follows:

Sanctions and restrictions: In 2022, sanctions were imposed on Russia, which resulted in the cessation of financial, trade, economic and business ties with a number of countries, potentially straining relations with the Central Asian countries (Hudson

2022). The anti-Russian sanctions caused by the Russian military actions in Ukraine have a risk-sharing effect for the Central Asian countries.

The impact of sanctions against Russia on the Central Asian economies is a complex issue that involves various economic and geopolitical dynamics. These sanctions have led to trade diversion, with products from the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) region replacing Russian products and trade with Russia being redirected through Central Asia and the Caucasus to circumvent the sanctions (Pomfret 2023). The economic recession in Russia, worsened by Western sanctions and low oil prices, has made Russia a less attractive market for Central Asian exports. In addition, sanctions have prompted Russia to change its strategic approach, moving towards selective economic and political alliances with non-Western countries, in particular China (McCarthy, Puffer and Satinsky 2019). Thus, sanctions against Russia have had far-reaching consequences for the economies of Central Asian countries. These consequences include trade diversion, shifts in economic policy, and changes in strategic alliances.

Sanctions against Russia have a significant impact on the energy dynamics in Central Asia, creating several key risks for the countries of the region. For example, sanctions against Russia could lead to energy shortages or higher prices for Russian energy, which would increase the dependence of Central Asian countries on alternative suppliers, such as China and other countries (Solingen 2025). This creates the risk of economic instability and complicates long-term energy agreements.

Sanctions against Russia, imposed in response to its actions in Ukraine and other international conflicts, have had significant economic consequences. In particular, in 2022, following the imposition of large-scale sanctions, oil and gas exports from Russia to Europe fell significantly. The introduction of large-scale sanctions against the Russian Federation in 2022, caused by its military actions in Ukraine, had a significant impact on Russia's oil and gas exports to Europe. These sanctions, initiated by the EU, the United States and other countries, were aimed at weakening Russia's economic base and limiting its ability to finance military operations. Sanctions against Russia began to be introduced in 2014, but with the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, they became more stringent and comprehensive. The main measures included: 1) a ban on imports of Russian oil and gas to the EU; 2) restrictions on financial transactions with Russian state and private companies; 3) freezing of assets associated with Russian oligarchs and state institutions (IEA 2022). In 2022, the situation on world energy markets caused by the reduction in oil and gas exports from Russia led to a shortage of these resources and a sharp increase in prices. This phenomenon has had a significant impact not only on the global economy, but also on Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which are important players in the hydrocarbon market. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the reduction in Russian oil and gas supplies to Europe has led to a significant deficit in world markets. In March 2022, for example, the price of Brent crude oil reached more than \$130 per barrel, which was the highest in recent years. This sharp rise in energy prices has affected economic processes in various countries, including Central Asia (IEA 2022). Kazakhstan, with its significant oil and gas reserves, found itself in a favorable position position against the backdrop of rising prices. The increase in export

revenues allowed the government to significantly increase budget revenues, as well as invest in the development of energy infrastructure, including the modernization of oil and gas fields and the construction of new pipelines. In addition, Kazakhstan began to actively seek new markets for exports, including countries in Asia and Europe, which helped strengthen its position on the international arena (Gelmanova et al. 2023).

Turkmenistan, with significant reserves of natural gas, also benefited from the situation on world markets. The country is actively developing export routes, including the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) project, which allows for the diversification of export flows. Additional opportunities for Turkmenistan were created by the increase in gas demand in China, to which the country already supplies significant volumes of gas (Sultonov 2022). Thus, the shortage of energy resources on world markets and the sharp rise in prices in 2022 had a significant impact on Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. These countries were able to take advantage of the current situation to strengthen their positions on the international energy market, increase export revenues and develop infrastructure. For example, in 2022, Kazakhstan, which traditionally exported some of its oil through Russian infrastructure, was faced with the need to find alternative routes for its exports. This led to talks with China to expand supplies through a new pipeline and increase trade volumes. According to the IEA, in 2022, Kazakh oil supplies to China increased by 17%, illustrating the growing dependence on the Chinese market (IEA 2023).

Changes in global energy prices caused by sanctions have also had an impact on the Central Asian economy. For example, in 2022, the cost of gas on world markets increased by 30% compared to the previous year, which affected prices within the region and complicated long-term energy agreements. This created financial risks and uncertainty for countries dependent on energy export revenues. According to the World Bank, in 2023, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan faced a deficit in energy export revenues amid price instability and changing conditions in international markets (World Bank 2023).

Sanctions and related changes in Russia's transport policy may affect traditional energy transit routes. This may cause supply disruptions and increased transit costs, which will negatively affect the economies of Central Asian countries that rely on exporting their resources through Russian territory. In 2022, following the introduction of sanctions against Russia, Kazakhstan faced serious disruptions in the transit of its oil through Russian territory. One of the main routes transporting Kazakh oil to Europe via Russia was partially blocked or restricted due to new trade restrictions and logistical issues. This caused significant delays and increased transit costs. For example, according to the Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK, transit costs for oil exports increased by 18% in 2022 compared to the previous year¹. In response to disruptions in traditional routes, Turkmenistan was forced to seek alternative routes for exporting its gas. In particular, the country increased its dependence on the Chinese market by increasing gas supplies through a new pipeline. As a result, Turkmen gas exports to China increased by 22% in 2022

¹ Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK. 2025. Industry statistics: Energy Statistics. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/business-statistics/stat-energy/>.

compared to 2021 (China National Petroleum Corporation 2023). However, this also resulted in additional costs for the construction and maintenance of new routes.

The changes in transit routes have had an economic impact on Uzbekistan, which also relies on transporting its energy through Russia. In 2023, Uzbekistan faced an increase in transit tariffs for its gas exports, which reduced its export revenues by 12%². This has had a negative impact on the country's economy, increasing its dependence on less profitable alternative routes.

Political and economic instability caused by sanctions against Russia may reduce the attractiveness of the region for foreign investment in the energy sector. This will make it difficult to implement new energy projects and upgrade existing infrastructure needed for sustainable development. Sanctions against Russia and the effects of economic instability have led to a decrease in foreign investment in Central Asia. In 2022, total foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asian countries fell by 12% compared to 2021. This decline is partly due to increased risk and uncertainty related to sanctions and economic pressures on the region. For example, Kazakhstan, one of the largest recipients of foreign investment in Central Asia, saw a 15% decline in foreign investment in the energy sector in 2022³. This decline is due to increased political and economic risks, which make it difficult to attract new investment in infrastructure modernization projects and greenfield development. An example of the difficulties in implementing new projects is the delay in the construction of a new pipeline that was supposed to connect Kazakhstan to China for the transportation of oil. Due to market instability and uncertainty caused by sanctions, the project faced delays and increased costs. The expected cost of the project increased by 20%, due to rising prices for construction materials and additional risks (Zinovyev and Troitskiy 2016).

Under sanctions, Central Asian countries may face the need to accelerate the diversification of their energy sources and routes. This will require significant effort and resources, which may be difficult to achieve in the context of economic instability.

The sanctions, coupled with Russia's retaliatory measures, have created challenges for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) integration process, especially in the context of external pressure from entities such as the European Union and China (Liefert 2023).

The economic and financial interconnectedness of EAEU member states with Russia has increased the likelihood of secondary sanctions affecting the entire EAEU due to their ties to Russia. If secondary sanctions are imposed on Central Asian countries, such countries may face restrictions on international transactions and access to financial markets. For example, in 2023, Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan have already begun to approach their interactions with Russia cautiously to avoid the possible consequences of secondary sanctions. This could affect the inflow of foreign investment and complicate trade relations. According to the World Bank, the potential introduction of secondary sanctions could reduce foreign trade by 8-15% in Central

² Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. 2025. Foreign economic activity. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/merchandise-trade>.

³ UNCTAD. 2023. World Investment Report. 2023. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://unctad.org/publication/world-investment-report-2023>.

Asian countries⁴. These examples highlight how sanctions against Russia could impact energy dynamics in Central Asia, creating risks of economic instability and challenging long-term energy policy planning. This has a negative impact on the economies of Central Asian countries that rely on exporting their resources through Russian territory (Cameron 2020).

Overall, sanctions against Russia have created a complex and unstable economic environment in Central Asia, requiring countries in the region to seek new strategies and partners to ensure their energy and economic security. For the EAEU member states, Moscow's actions violate the core principles of the alliance, such as mutually beneficial cooperation, equal rights, and protection of the national interests of all members.

The conflict has disrupted global supply chains, affecting trade and economic stability. Russia's restrictions on exports, including fertilizers and crops, have implications for agricultural sectors in Central Asia (Boungou and Yatié 2022). Financial markets have experienced volatility, with fluctuations in stock market returns impacting investment decisions in the region (Hu 2024). Energy markets have also been affected, as sanctions have impacted Russian energy exports and led to market disruptions (Sylos Labini and Caravani 2025). The implications extend to climate action, food supply chains, and energy security, affecting the economic and environmental landscapes of Central Asian countries.

These risks highlight the need for Central Asian countries to overcome the challenges posed by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, adapt to changing economic conditions, and build resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainty.

The EAEU plays a significant role in the economy of Kazakhstan, solving several key tasks that contribute to the country's economic development: access to an expanded market for goods and services. Thus, in 2021, the volume of Kazakhstan's trade with other EAEU member countries amounted to about \$19 billion, which is a significant share of the country's foreign trade⁵.

The EAEU promotes industrial cooperation between member countries, which allows Kazakhstan to develop its production capacities and increase the competitiveness of its products in international markets. Joint projects in industries such as mechanical engineering, metallurgy and chemical industry contribute to technological development and the creation of new jobs (Abramov et al. 2023). Participation in the EAEU increases the investment attractiveness of Kazakhstan by creating a single economic space, simplifying trade and investment procedures, and protecting the rights of investors. Foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan increased by 10% in 2021, partly due to improved conditions for doing business within the EAEU (OECD 2023). The EAEU helps reduce trade and administrative barriers, which simplifies the process of moving goods, services and labor. Unification of standards

⁴ World Bank Group. 2023. World Bank in Central Asia. Accessed March 16, 2025.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/central-asia>.

⁵ Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK. 2024. Statistics of foreign, mutual trade and commodity markets: Foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Kazakhstan (January–December 2024). Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/315588/>.

and certification also facilitates the export of Kazakhstani products to the union market. Kazakhstani manufacturers are able to freely export their products to other EAEU countries without additional customs barriers (Malikbayeva and Gabdullin 2023).

In 2022, more and more experts call the EAEU a ‘toxic organization’ for Kazakhstan. This is due to anti-Russian sanctions, as a result of the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Thus, the economies of the Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation within the EAEU are poorly integrated and in many cases remain at the level of relations between ‘small and large economies’.

The Central Asian countries play a key role in the context of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), proposed by Russia in 2015. The BEP aims to bring together various regional initiatives and organizations such as the EAEU, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Solingen 2025).

Within the BEP, capital and resources moving between China and Central Asia are expected to promote economic integration and the formation of a regional market. Cooperation between the EAEU and the BRI is expanding to include other regional powers and groups, which is important for the economic development and stability of Central Asia.

Situated at the strategic crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Central Asian countries have great potential for trade, investment, and economic growth, underlining their importance within the BEP and international politics.

Current discussions on the BEP focus more on security concerns rather than common interests. In the context of the BEP, Central Asia is seen as an important security zone where Russia continues to play a role as a protector against external threats. The concept of ‘Central Eurasia’ emphasizes the importance of the region within the GEP and the need to create a common political understanding between China and Russia. However, there are also risks in implementing the GEP objectives with the participation of Central Asia. The category of political risks should include extremist groups and radical ideologies, the Afghan factor, political unrest and uncertainty in Iran, and the impact of the war in Ukraine.

Central Asian Countries and the CSTO

President Vladimir Putin has traditionally viewed Central Asia as the most stable region and has exerted significant influence over its leaders, using political pressure. Putin correctly considers Central Asia part of Russia's sphere of influence. Relations between Russia and all five former Soviet states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—remained largely unchanged for the first two decades of his rule. Even despite instances of instability, such as the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, which the Kremlin dismissed as a Western-backed ‘color revolution’, Russia’s influence persisted.

2022 was a year of significant upheaval for the CSTO, presenting new challenges and threats to the organization. At the beginning of 2022, the CSTO’s invitation to stabilize the situation in Kazakhstan significantly changed the security landscape in Central Asia. Moscow and Nur-Sultan largely considered the operation a success. However, this set a new precedent for Russian intervention in Central Asian affairs and

may prompt Central Asian leaders to reconsider their strategies for ensuring the security and territorial integrity of their states.

At the same time, Russia's control over the region is beginning to weaken due to the Kremlin's distraction with the protracted confrontation with Ukraine. Just thirteen months after Putin's intervention in Kazakhstan, which was considered the end of pro-Western color revolutions, Russia's influence has weakened considerably. Examples of this include Turkmenistan's shift from Russia to the China-Central Asia gas pipeline as its primary export route.

Anti-Russian sanctions are also impacting Russia's position, limiting the Russian state's capabilities due to the protracted hostilities. Central Asian countries did not support Russia when the West imposed sanctions. None of them recognized Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, banks in the region do not accept Russian MIR payment cards, and only Kazakhstan allows individuals to use them—and then only with permission from the United States. The self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as well as other Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia, have not been recognized as part of Russia by any Central Asian country⁶.

Civil society in Central Asian countries that are members of the CSTO is also taking an active stance. For example, Russia's military operation in Ukraine has raised doubts among the academic and civil society in Kazakhstan about the expediency of the country's membership in the CSTO, which is seen as a tool that limits Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Civil society activists are calling for a referendum on membership in the CSTO⁷.

Kazakhstan has clearly expressed its attitude towards Russia's special military operation against Ukraine. At the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan's political leadership stated that Kazakhstan supports the territorial integrity of countries and will not support the recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics.

These statements reflect Kazakhstan's desire for an independent security policy that is acceptable to Western partners and its citizens. Kazakhstan, as a sovereign state, is guided by its own military doctrine and national security strategy. In 2017, a military doctrine was adopted that provided for cooperation with the CSTO, SCO, and NATO's Partnership for Peace program. In 2022, amendments were made that expanded the powers of the troops, including actions in crisis situations. These changes may contradict the agreement on military cooperation with the Russian Federation, signed in 2020, which provides for military assistance, including the provision of troops. The

⁶ Haidar, Aida. 2022. "A Conversation with President Tokayev: Kazakh Leader Addresses Special Session at Qatar Economic Forum." *Astanatimes*, June 23, 2022. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://astanatimes.com/2022/06/a-conversation-with-president-tokayev-kazakh-leader-addresses-special-session-at-qatar-economic-forum/>

⁷ Otkjær, Albert. 2025. "Kazakhstan's Ambivalent Relationship With the CSTO." *Diplomat Media INC.*, April 08, 2025. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/kazakhstans-ambivalent-relationship-with-the-csto/>.

State Duma of the Russian Federation ratified the agreement in 2021, and the Kazakh side shortly before the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine⁸.

Neighboring Kyrgyzstan has turned to the CSTO for help three times: in 1999 during the Batken events, when armed Islamists invaded the country from Afghanistan and Tajikistan; in 2010 during the bloody interethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Batken; and in 2021 during a fierce armed conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. Each time, Kyrgyzstan was refused. Kyrgyz politicians and public figures are increasingly asking the question: does the country need the Collective Security Treaty Organization?

Tajikistani state structures, as a rule, advocate for the independent settlement of border issues with Kyrgyzstan without external interference. They emphasize the importance of fulfilling previously signed documents and believe that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are able to independently control the situation. Tajik authorities likely prefer to resolve border disputes through political and diplomatic means, prioritizing bilateral negotiations and agreements (Arynov and Umirbekov 2025).

Calls for the use of the CSTO to resolve the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan arose after incidents in April 2021 and an armed clash in September 2022. However, according to politicians and experts, such interference could create additional difficulties and threats for the countries involved and the CSTO itself. The situation requires the fulfillment of previously signed documents and is an internal matter for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are able to independently control their borders (Toropygin and Lyubina 2024). Involving CSTO forces could attract the attention of third parties and complicate the conflict. The preferred approach is bilateral political and diplomatic settlement, which is in the interests of the security of both countries and the CSTO (Ambrosio 2023).

Russia's Soft Power in Central Asia: A Complex Dynamic

Russia's soft power in Central Asia is multifaceted, encompassing cultural, political, and economic dimensions that shape the dynamics and relationships within the region. Leveraging its historical ties, strategic partnerships, and participation in regional security structures, Russia continues to exert influence and maintain a significant presence in Central Asia.

Recently, there has been a surge in anti-Russian sentiment in some Central Asian countries, linked to negative trends within these nations. The primary factors driving this include:

Growing nationalism and patriotism: These sentiments, sometimes directed against external influence, including Russia, have fueled anti-Russian attitudes among certain segments of the population in neighboring Central Asian countries.

Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions: These perceptions contribute to the rise of anti-Russian sentiments. Domestic and external political processes: Anti-Russian

⁸ Castillo, Nicholas. 2023. "Renewed Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Tension Pressures the CSTO." *CPC*, September 27, 2023. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security/renewed-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-tension-pressures-the-csto>.

sentiments can be part of a broader reaction to internal and external political developments in the region.

These negative trends in Central Asia, such as nationalism and neo-imperialism, have led to an increase in anti-Russian sentiment due to a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include historical memory of colonial rule under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, while external factors involve Russia's strengthening authoritarianism and its impact on Central Asian countries, as well as negative statements by Russian officials regarding the history and borders of regional states.

Internal factors, such as historical memory, play a significant role. Negative experiences under colonial rule and Russia's rejection of democratic values in favor of authoritarianism have fueled concerns in Central Asian countries about Moscow's potential influence on their domestic politics. For example, Kazakhstan's recent parliamentary elections, while demonstrating a renewal of the legislative body, featured limited representation of independent candidates and the absence of opposition groups. Similar trends can be observed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where leaders have consolidated their power.

The current trend suggests that a weakened Russia will continue to support leaders in Central Asia who are loyal to Moscow. In Kazakhstan, issues of historical memory and ideology, such as language policy, hinder the strengthening of bilateral relations. Statements by Russian officials and media personalities regarding historical territories and independent language policies have provoked negative reactions from the Kazakh public.

Russian media often portray two negative trends regarding Kazakhstan: nationalism and neo-imperialism. The first is linked to the alleged oppression of Russians in Kazakhstan, while the second, emerging after 2014 in connection with events in Ukraine, suggests that Kazakhstan is 'moving away from Russia'. However, this latter narrative is not officially supported. Conversely, Kazakh media often present a negative image of Russia as the successor to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This trend can be seen as an 'anti-colonial discourse with a tinge of Russophobia'.

This, in turn, not only strengthens Russophobic sentiments but also weakens relations at the level of civil societies. In Kazakhstan, national-patriotic ideology is gaining popularity. Therefore, issues of historical memory and the interpretation of historical events will not only be the subject of heated academic discussions but also a tool for populists.

Thus, the anti-Russian sanctions imposed in response to Russia's military actions in Ukraine have had a divided impact on Kazakhstan. Moscow's actions violate the fundamental principles of the alliance, such as mutually beneficial cooperation, equal rights, and the protection of the national interests of all members.

Tajikistan

The initial sanctions against Russia, including the disconnection of Russian banks from SWIFT, caused delays in money transfers, a collapse of the ruble, and a sharp rise in prices for basic goods. Although the ruble exchange rate and remittance issues eventually stabilized, inflation continued to rise, exacerbating anti-Russian sentiments

in Tajikistan. Tajik political analyst Nuruddin Khudoerov notes that the war in Ukraine had indirect political consequences for Tajikistan. Economic difficulties caused by sanctions strengthened negative attitudes towards Russia. While trade between Tajikistan and Russia increased, which may indicate indirect assistance to Tajikistan in circumventing sanctions or expanding Russian markets, it also contributed to growing anti-Russian sentiments.

Additionally, there has been increased pressure on civil society and journalists in Tajikistan, which can also be seen as a political consequence of the war. Tajikistan seeks to maintain neutrality, having not supported the UN resolution against Russia and not condemning the war in Ukraine. However, the closure of Mir payment cards and problems with the mobilization of Tajik citizens for the war in Ukraine have only exacerbated anti-Russian sentiments and discontent.

Thus, anti-Russian sentiments in Tajikistan are largely due to economic difficulties caused by sanctions and internal political changes, underlining growing discontent and hostility towards Russian influence.

Uzbekistan

According to political analyst Temur Umarov, the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on Uzbekistan, leading to a growth of anti-Russian sentiments in the country. Uzbekistan has faced the need to find a political balance between Russia and the West. Tashkent has tried to avoid directly supporting the aggressor, while not wanting to completely abandon partnership with Russia, given the importance of economic and other ties. The internal economic impact of the conflict has manifested in high inflation and negative consequences for the foreign exchange market and banking sector. The strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments was also due to economic difficulties and rising prices, especially in the real estate market due to migration from Russia.

Umarov believes that Uzbekistan will continue to strive for a balance between the West and Russia, avoiding sanctions and adapting to current challenges. Anti-Russian sentiments are expected to persist and influence the country's domestic politics and economy.

Kyrgyzstan

Political analyst Medet Tulgenov believes that the war in Ukraine has significantly affected Kyrgyzstan, violating international norms and negatively impacting the country's relations with Russia and other Central Asian states. The expert notes that the conflict has also worsened Kyrgyzstan's economic situation, especially in the areas of migrant remittances and housing prices due to the migration of Russians. The arrival of relocates can create new jobs, but the political situation is complicated by the need to balance between Russia and the West. Kyrgyzstan faces challenges related to potential secondary sanctions and the need to adapt to new economic conditions.

However, the main problem eroding relations between Central Asian countries and Russia is Russia's inability to become a model for the development of regional states. Despite defining Central Asia as Russia's post-Soviet space, Russia does not demonstrate an attractive development model for Central Asian countries in economic,

socio-political, or security terms, which may lead to the strengthening of other actors in the region. For example, the growing role of China in Central Asia may negatively impact bilateral relations in this format, weakening unifying factors.

The Chinese Vector

Since 2022, China has played an increasingly prominent role in Central Asia, driven by the changing geopolitical landscape and the weakening of Russia's influence in the region. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the power vacuum created in Central Asia after the Cold War, China, Russia, the United States, and other external actors have actively sought to strengthen their presence in the region according to their own interests. These efforts to reshape the regional order can be seen as a new Great Game. Among these actors, China's actions in Central Asia have become increasingly noticeable. Since the launch of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has rapidly developed economic cooperation and high-level interactions with Central Asian countries, attracting particular attention and underlining China's growing influence in the region (Xia, Liu, Xu and Yuan 2024; Mihir 2023).

Based on the foregoing, China's foreign policy direction for Central Asian countries should be considered in terms of the opportunities it presents for the states of the region (Nyshambayev et al. 2024). In the political sphere, relations between Central Asia and China offer opportunities to increase the influence of regional countries both in Eurasia and globally. Economic cooperation with China is an important direction that aligns with the interests of Central Asian countries (Dessein 2025). Of particular importance to them is participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which President Tokayev considers a new source of development for Kazakhstan (Serikkalieva 2023; Nyshambayev et al. 2024).

This has led to discussions about China's role and goals in the changing regional order. China, replacing Russia as a hegemon, is becoming a dominant force through regional competition. However, it should be acknowledged that China's interests in Central Asia are limited to regional stability and economic cooperation. China promotes regional stability and independent development through bilateral and multilateral methods. Despite China's growing influence in the region, the gap in influence and public goods confirms that China is not a dominant force in Central Asia (Nicharapova 2023; Liu 2025).

In terms of security, as a neighboring region, Central Asia is a strategic direction for China to strengthen stability and protect the interests of its sovereign state. For China, the stability of regimes and the security of Central Asian states contribute to the stability of China's border provinces. Additionally, Central Asia is the first stop for China's Belt and Road Initiative as it advances westward into Eurasia and a key node for connectivity with the rest of Eurasia (Belova, Egorycheva and Belov 2023; Bin et al. 2023). Therefore, the security of this region directly affects the efficiency and ability to transport goods and capital along the initiative to the rest of Eurasia and a wider region. As a major consumer of energy, Central Asia is also seen as a land-based alternative to existing sea routes through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which are actively involved by the United States. In this context, China has preliminarily ensured its border security by defining borders with neighboring

countries and has achieved constant management of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and extremist organizations in the region through the multilateral mechanism of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Central Asian states to realize its long-term security interests in Central Asia (Özgür 2024).

From an economic standpoint, China's activities in Central Asia aim to realize the region's economic potential, expand the economic interests of both sides, and promote the process of regional market and economic integration through the development of bilateral economic ties. Central Asia has vast resource reserves and large potential markets due to its population (Yu 2022). However, the lack of transport infrastructure hinders the activation of existing economic opportunities. In this regard, China has strengthened regional connectivity through large-scale investments and the construction of roads, railways, pipelines, and other infrastructure in Central Asian countries as part of the BRI (Klycheva 2024).

Based on the increase in regional connectivity, China has not only expanded trade with Central Asia but has also established stable relations with the states of the region in the oil and gas sector, contributing to the modernization of their energy sectors through technology and direct investment. Moreover, within the framework of the BRI, the free and continuous movement of capital and labor between China and Central Asia will contribute to the formation of a regional market and economic integration, providing positive prospects for cooperation between China and Central Asia.

The BRI presents a significant opportunity for the development of Central Asian countries. While the history of relations between China and Central Asia began after these countries gained independence, China has rapidly developed these ties through multilateral institutions and bilateral methods. The BRI has further strengthened China's influence in Central Asia, enhancing partnerships with the region's states, many of which are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Although the BRI has its roots in ancient trade routes connecting Eurasia, since 2013 it has evolved into a large-scale geopolitical structure for promoting regional investment, cooperation, and integration. Central Asia, as China's first step westward, has become a key partner in the BRI, actively participating in this initiative. The BRI promotes connectivity and trade in the region, improving infrastructure such as railways, roads, pipelines, and transport hubs, into which China has actively invested. This is particularly important for Central Asia, which faces difficulties in maintaining and modernizing infrastructure without external assistance.

China's involvement in Central Asia began before the BRI, but the initiative brought additional financial support from policy banks and funds, focusing on the broader benefits of connecting transport networks rather than immediate profits from individual projects. This has led to increased transport efficiency, reduced costs, and increased bilateral trade between China and Central Asian countries, strengthening economic partnerships. Furthermore, the BRI contributes to the development and modernization of the economies of Central Asian countries, which have historically been tied to the Soviet industrial structure. China's investments in resources and industrial modernization in the region aim to enhance economic security and reduce dependence on trade routes through Southeast Asia, benefiting both sides (Bin et al. 2023).

China has expanded cooperation channels and ensured stable incomes for Central Asian countries through industrial projects and growing demand for resources. Initiatives such as agricultural processing projects and the creation of model zones have allowed Kazakh agricultural products to enter the Chinese market, contributing to the development of agriculture and the restructuring of the industrial sector.

Additionally, China supports the diversification and independent development of the energy sector in Central Asia, moving from the export of raw materials to their processing. For example, Chinese investments in power grids, hydroelectric power stations, and oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have helped reduce their dependence on Kazakhstan and Russia, contributing to energy independence.

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Risks of Bilateral Relations between China and Central Asian Countries

Despite the fact that the Chinese vector should be considered an opportunity for Central Asian countries, there are also problematic aspects in relations between China and the Central Asian region. Although China is actively promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation and increasing its influence in Central Asia, several factors indicate that it is not yet becoming a dominant force in the region.

China's main influence is manifested in the economic sphere, while its role in other areas remains limited. The BRI has led to a rapid expansion of China's presence in the region, sparking discussions about the potential consequences of this influence. However, China's influence is often overestimated, based on trade and investment statistics, which do not always reflect the depth of its impact. Although the volume of trade and Chinese investments in the region is impressive, China's real influence goes beyond these indicators.

The brief history of interaction between China and Central Asian countries contributes to an ambivalent perception of China as an external great power, causing both admiration and apprehension. This is due to historical and cultural differences that limit Chinese influence in other key areas such as politics, culture, and security.

China's political influence in the region is limited, as Central Asian countries seek to preserve sovereignty and balance between various external actors, including Russia, the U.S., and the EU. Chinese cultural initiatives in the region also face limited success due to the deep-rooted cultural identity and historical ties of Central Asian countries, which are more oriented towards the post-Soviet space and the Islamic world.

In the security sphere, Central Asian countries prefer to maintain a multi-vector approach, cooperating with both China and other partners, which avoids excessive dependence on one force. This multi-vector approach is also manifested within the SCO, where regional countries seek to maintain a balance of interests, avoiding the dominance of one side.

Thus, despite the obvious economic benefits offered by cooperation with China, Central Asian countries face a number of challenges and risks associated with maintaining sovereignty, cultural identity, and a balance of power in the region. These factors limit China's ability to become a dominant force and emphasize the complexity and multi-layered nature of relations between Central Asia and China.

Conclusion and discussion

The importance of the relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia is undeniable, however, the primary importance lies in the interests of the countries of the region themselves. Central Asia faces both risks and opportunities associated with developing relations with the PRC and the Russian Federation. After the crisis in Ukraine, when the United States and Europe imposed sanctions on Russia, it pushed Russia to turn towards the East. At the same time, the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific

region, aimed at changing the maritime situation around China, stimulated China to focus on Eurasia.

Despite the common interests of China and Russia in preventing the influence of Western powers on Eurasia, their strategic approaches in Central Asia do not always coincide. Russia and China seek to strengthen their presence in the region through economic cooperation and security, using such tools as the integration of the EAEU with the BRI and cooperation within the SCO. However, Central Asia is actively shaping the regional order, using its unique geographical and political advantages. The countries of the region can choose partners, maximizing their interests and supporting independent development. This makes them important players in regional politics, and not just objects of influence of great powers.

China's activity in Central Asia, including the BRI, is aimed at improving regional trade and developing infrastructure. However, despite China's significant economic influence, its role in other areas remains limited. It is important to note that, despite all of China's efforts, Russia leads the more institutionalized and effective organizations in the region, which confirms the multipolar nature of interaction in Central Asia.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and critiques.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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