

CENTRAL ASIA



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS REPORT / DECEMBER 2022

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Central Asian Pawns

Game of influences in the Stan Region



Universidad
de Navarra

*To all the people who are suffering
the horrible consequences
of the Ukrainian war.*

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Central Asian Pawns: Game of influences in the Stan Region.

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PRESENTATION

This is a Strategic Analysis Report which analyses the influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India and the United States on the Central Asian region. This region comprises five countries — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—, which are qualified as ‘pawns’ in the title because, since their independence, they have played a subordinate role in their relationship with external powers.

Nevertheless, in view of the new reality created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these former Soviet republics are facing an opportunity to develop more independently from Russia. To this end, Central Asian countries need to seize the opportunity of diversifying their relations with other powers. This report aims to forecast exactly that: the future of the region in its relationship with foreign powers.

The results of the analysis show that Central Asia is a place where the interests of a wide variety of powers converge. Each power tries to influence the region in different ways, be it military, resource-related, economic or political.

Regarding military influence, Russia is the most influential player in Central Asia, on which the countries of the region are highly dependent in terms of armaments, border defense and the fight against terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Terrorism in this country was also the main reason why NATO had some military influence in the region for almost two decades. Although Russia's military influence remains overwhelming —and is likely to remain so in the future—, the Central Asian countries have begun to diversify their security relations with other countries as well, which gives them the opportunity to strengthen their autonomy and differentiate themselves from Russia.

The abundance of natural resources in Central Asia is also an incentive to trade with the region for some countries such as the European Union, which is looking for new hydrocarbon suppliers. However, the lack of an infrastructure linking Central Asia to the European Union —without passing through Russia— prevents Central Asia from becoming a supplier of gas and oil to the European Union.

One country that is indeed buying these natural resources in abundance is China, which has invested heavily in infrastructure in Central Asia. Due to these investments and its weight in Central Asia's exports, China has become the main economic power in the region. With investments from China and other foreign investors, Central Asia has a great opportunity to prosper economically. For this to happen, it will be necessary for Russia and China to interact peacefully in the region's economy. The instability emanating from Afghanistan has also encouraged other countries—such as India and the United States—to engage in political relations with Central Asia, especially in matters of counter-terrorism. Other countries—such as Turkey and Iran—rely more on historical and cultural ties. In order to have peaceful relations with all these actors, the countries of Central Asia will have to work on the creation of a balance that satisfies all the parties involved.

In short, the Central Asian states need to further develop a multi-vector foreign policy, which would allow them to collaborate with many powers simultaneously and thus progress towards a reality of greater national strength and more independence from Russia. Among other things, this will help them to maintain security in the region, to have their own opinion on Russian foreign policy, to create a greater nationalist sentiment and to seize the opportunity to prosper economically. Therefore, Central Asian states have a lot of potential that can be realised in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has focused its energies on not letting the Central Asian republics —former constituents of the Soviet landmass— draw close to Europe and the United States (US), or to any other foreign power. For this reason, the countries of Central Asia (CA) depend heavily on Russia for export routes, labour market, and many infrastructure projects. In light of recent events —mainly, the war in Ukraine and Russia's unpredictable decisions regarding this matter— the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia have seen themselves in the necessity of rethinking their foreign affairs policies and their relationship with Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided nothing but adversities to the Central Asian region, seeing themselves so dependent on a super power that cannot be fully trusted. Thus, this situation has provided them with the need, as well as the opportunity, to diversify their relations in the international sphere.

To understand all these dynamics, it is necessary to start by looking at the history of the region. In that sense, the Russification of Central Asia began in the last decades of the 19th century, but it was the Sovietising Russification that imposed the multinational framework between these countries. This region also stood out as an important strategic space in the territorial neighbourhood with China, becoming the front line of confrontation in the ideological and power struggle between Moscow and Beijing from 1960 onwards. In December 1991, the USSR disintegrated, causing Moscow to shrink territorially and demographically. Since then, Russia's relations with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have been partly framed within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In turn, each of these republics has prioritised its agenda along national routes with a common past.

This undisputed dependency was challenged on the 24th of February 2022. When Putin announced a 'special military operation' in Ukraine and, subsequently, Russian troops crossed the border and invaded Ukraine, it was unmistakably predictable that significant consequences would follow. A world power like Russia, with such an influence over its neighbouring countries, was not going to leave the international community indifferent after attacking a border country.

Initially, the Central Asian republics have tried to remain neutral on the issue of this war. In the United Nations General Assembly Special Emergency Session on the conflict —held in

March 2022— Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remained absent, while Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan abstained from voting. But, recently, Central Asian governments and populations have not been supportive of Russia's war. Most notably, Kazakhstan's president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev refused to recognise the legitimacy of Russian-backed statelets in Ukraine's East — mindful of the fact that his own country shares a 7,600-kilometre border with Russia and has a sizable ethnic Russian population that Putin might want to 'liberate'¹—.

The Central Asian region is suffering direct consequences from the Ukrainian-Russian War. Sanctions on Russia have prevented European goods from reaching the Central Asian region via Russia, thus making all countries affected by food supply problems. Moreover, these resource-rich countries have lost access to their export markets in the West, arresting their progress towards post-pandemic recovery. Though the US has exempted some pipelines —such as the Chevron-led Caspian Pipeline Consortium²— from sanctions, these hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian countries are finding it difficult to channelise their oil and gas exports through Russia³.

By March 2022, the Russian rouble had plunged around 50 percent against the dollar⁴, triggering a cascading effect amongst the CA region, whose economies remain closely knit with Russia's. The Kazak currency —the Tenge— had also lost 20% against the dollar⁵. Similarly, the Tajik Somoni saw a fall of nearly 35% of its value against the rouble. And Kyrgyzstan's Som plunged along with the rouble⁶. If all this was not enough, several under-developed economies of Central Asia, especially Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, are heavily dependent on remittances from their migrant labour force working in Russia. Therefore, with Russian funds currently frozen and the economic crisis that Russia faces, the transfer of remittances is facing difficulties, significantly affecting families that depend on them. Thus, the war has turned Russia from an '*important partner for regional countries into a toxic neighbour*'⁷.

Yet, not only the Central Asian region is suffering consequences from Putin's attack on Ukraine. The European Union has also found itself facing adverse consequences —such as the deprivation of some basic goods, affecting the food supply and a shortage in the reach of

¹ Bermet Talant, "The war in Ukraine is pushing Central Asia away from Russia," *Theinterpreter*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/war-ukraine-pushing-central-asia-away-russia>

² Caspian Pipeline Consortium connects Kazakh oil fields with the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. This pipeline handles on average 1% of global oil.

³ "Kazakhstan hopes Caspian Pipeline sanctions waiver will leave export route open," *upstream*, March 9, 2022,

<https://www.upstreamonline.com/production/kazakhstan-hopes-caspian-pipeline-sanctions-waiver-will-leave-export-route-open/2-1-1181751> ⁴

Maximilian Hess, "The rouble's rubble: Economic fallout on Central Asia," *eurasianet*, March 10, 2022,

<https://eurasianet.org/explainer-the-rubles-rubble-economic-fallout-on-central-asia>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Bermet Talant.

hydrocarbons that come from Russia— and fearful of the possibility that Russia might broaden its target and consider attacking another European country. Thus, similarly to what has occurred with the former Soviet republics, the EU feels the need to diversify some of its dependence on Russia, especially in the import of hydrocarbons.

As mentioned previously, all these consequences suffered by the former Soviet republics have put their governments in a position to rethink and reorganise their foreign affairs. To counter these challenges, the countries of Central Asia will need to shift away from economic dependence in labour migration and the export of natural resources and raw materials through the Russian Federation. This is seen as possible through the transition to multilateral cooperation in the areas of management in infrastructure, transport, border control, and so on. For the past years, the Central Asian countries have been left to manoeuvre based on the political, economic, and social position of the Kremlin, however now they must try to bring more signs of independence, to deal with risks in the long term.

Many different state actors are taking this opportunity to increase their influence in the region. China is taking advantage of the current situation to create stronger ties. And not only China is striving for a rapprochement but also the other way round. The lack of reciprocal talks between Putin and Kazakh President Tokayev during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit last September was a great contrast compared to the reception given by Tokayev to China's President Xi Jinping on his visit to the Kazakh capital the day before the SCO summit⁸. Furthermore, Turkey has the same intentions. In the previously mentioned SCO summit, Turkish President declared that Turkey intends to become a full member of the SCO⁹. This declaration suggests that Ankara is seeking alternatives to the sometimes-tense relations with the West, but specially advocates Ankara's outreach to Central Asia and broader geopolitical ambitions.

Iran is using different assets to enhance its influence in the CA region, such as the Islam religion, the common ethnic, cultural and linguistic linkage it has in the region, petrodollars and its broad border with Turkmenistan. One of the methods in which Iran is drawing closer to this region is through strengthening relations with Tajikistan, a country with which it has shared many cultural and linguistic roots for centuries, ties that are much deeper than with the other players in the region. This Ukrainian war crisis has provided an opportunity

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Turkey's Growing Influence in Central Asia," *Diplomat*, October 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/turkeys-growing-influence-in-central-asia/>.

not just for countries to the East or West of the region but also for countries in the South, like India. This country is well placed to capitalise on the situation to strengthen its partnership with Central Asia in order to begin a renewed engagement with the CA region before China encashes on this opportunity. India has been accelerating this engagement in the past two years, especially after the rise of the Taliban, for its geostrategic and geoeconomic vectors.

In short, the course towards a greater autonomy of the Central Asian region from dependence on Russia depends, to a large extent, on the game of influences between the region's major powers —China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, India, and to a lesser extent, the US—. The Central Asian region is surrounded by great powers of the international sphere that seek to maintain and increase their influence in a region with great opportunities for the future. The results of this game of influences will determine which powers of the CA region will trade with most, with whom they will forge new military alliances, the perception of the Islamic religion or the construction of infrastructure between neighbouring countries, among other examples. The game of influences is about each of these powers trying to increase their authority and dominance in the area without destabilising the balance and provoking a confrontation in the region.

These influences are military, economical, resource-related, and political. This strategic analysis report will start by analysing the game of influences in the military area, due to the fact that the armed invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation is the trigger for the Central Asian region to be currently in the spotlight. The reason for this exposure of the CA region is based on the idea that they are —as is Ukraine— former Soviet Republics and are very dependent on this great player —Russia—. Besides, Russia has, for over a century, found itself to be basically the only military influence in the region, but this circumstance is subject to change.

Despite the current military interest, the CA region has traditionally been known for its resources. Foreign powers show great interest due to the abundant natural assets such as water and an abundance of rich and varied energy resources —hydropower, oil, gas, and coal—¹⁰. The game of influence will be heavily leveraged by these factors. Therefore, secondly, this report will analyse the different interactions the region has had with a variety of actors regarding export and commercialisation of these resources.

Thirdly, the growing importance of the area's natural resources has led to the increase of foreign and domestic financial investment and infrastructure construction in the CA region.

¹⁰ *Central Asia. Energy-Water Development Program.* (World Bank, n.d.), <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Brief/Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia/central-asia/CAEWDP-Brochure-140807-en.pdf>.

The game of influences will be heavily focused on the economic interests, since these investments have had a major impact on the economy of this region. This strategic analysis report will, for last, analyse the political game of influences in this new emerging region. China, Turkey and Iran were one of the first foreign powers to try exert their ambitious influence on the area after the dissolution of the USSR, but there is still a very delicate balance between these countries. This report will show that there are new potential players in this political game of influence such as India and the US.

1. MILITARY INFLUENCE OVER CENTRAL ASIA

With the beginning of the overall Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war in Ukraine has been the focus of the world's attention. At present, there is a permanent concern about armed struggle, military innovations, strategic alliances and nuclear bombs. In this context, which largely involves Russia and a former Soviet republic —Ukraine— it becomes necessary to take a close look at the situation of the former members of the USSR —among them, the five Central Asian republics—, over which Russia has a heavy military influence.

On this point, since the overall invasion of Ukraine began, there have been new Azerbaijan-Armenia armed clashes (September 12-14, 2022), as well as a new armed border clash between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (September 14-19, 2022). Although these conflicts have existed for many years before the war in Ukraine, the fact that they have reappeared is a reflection of Russia's further weakness and loss of influence in the post-Soviet space¹¹. This increased Russian weakness could definitely trigger further instability in Central Asia.

Considering that military relations between countries are currently one of the major topics of interest in International Relations, in this first segment of the report, it is essential to analyze the military influences exercised by external powers over Central Asia, in order to foresee the stability of the region. Apart from the unquestionable fact that Russia is the main military partner in CA, consideration must also be given to the growing role of China and the prospects for NATO.

¹¹ Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, "La guerra en Ucrania y los conflictos recientes en el espacio post soviético," Real Instituto Elcano, October 17, 2022, https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-guerra-en-ucrania-y-los-conflictos-recientes-en-el-espacio-post-sovietico/#_ftnref9.

1.1. Russian military influence in CA: the pivotal role of the CSTO

Following the disintegration of the USSR, both Russia and the former Soviet republics themselves sought to maintain economic and military ties with each other, due to the great interdependence they had experienced for so many years—which they could not drastically renounce after independence—and the fear of lack of security presented for them by the new post-Cold War order¹². For this purpose, Russia formed the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991 and signed a Collective Security Treaty in 1992 with other former Soviet republics. Later, in 2002, it was decided to transform that Treaty into a full-fledged international organization: the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)¹³, whose mission is to promote military cooperation and defend the sovereignty and territorial security of its members.

On the one hand, the CSTO initiative has provided a great opportunity for Russia to continue to exert its influence in the post-Soviet era, and to use CA's independent countries as *buffer zones* to secure Russia's own borders¹⁴. On the other side, for the CSTO members, Russia is a guarantee of defence against external and internal threats and against a potential conflict between CSTO countries¹⁵; a marketplace to buy cheap weapons at Russian domestic rates¹⁶; and, according to some scholars, an umbrella to protect the security of CSTO regimes and leaders from the ideas of good governance or democracy promotion¹⁷.

However, Russia's military influence is not equal throughout CA. The greatest military influence is found in the CSTO, which currently has six members—the former USSR was composed of 15 states—, but only three of them are CA republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan joined the CSTO in 2006, but then withdrew again in 2012, and Turkmenistan has never been part of the CSTO. Russia has a bilateral security cooperation with these last two countries¹⁸, which is not as strong as the one Russia has with the CSTO countries.

In this context, we could say that the CSTO is an appropriate instrument for Russia to realise its expectations in CA in the short term. Firstly, because the CA countries that are members of the CSTO are armamentally dependent on Russia, which allows Russia to exercise

¹² Malina Kaszuba, "The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation," *Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, no. 1 (November 5, 2019): XXXX, <https://doi.org/10.12775/cjps.2019.008>.

¹³ "Collective Security Treaty Organization," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, accessed October 28, 2022, <https://mfa.gov.by/en/multilateral/organization/list/cddd96a3f70190b1.html>.

¹⁴ Sarwat Rauf, Adam Saud, "Prospects of CSTO and SCO in Regional Politics of Central Asia". *International Journal of Politics and Security (IJPS)*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2020: 30, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1126754>.

¹⁵ Malina Kaszuba.

¹⁶ Alexander Cooley, "Kazakhstan called for assistance. Why did Russia dispatch troops so quickly?," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/09/kazakhstan-called-assistance-why-did-russia-dispatch-troops-so-quickly/>.

¹⁷ Roy Allison, "Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (June 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930802355121>.

¹⁸ Sarwat Rauf.

military pressure on these countries: Tajikistan buys the greatest share of its military equipment from Russia, with some exceptions in 2013 and 2018, when it purchased armaments from Bulgaria and China, respectively; Kyrgyzstan always buys military equipment from Russia, with the exception of 2004, when it relied on Kazakhstan market; and Kazakhstan diversifies its military purchases with more than ten different countries (among them the US, Germany or Spain), but Russia remains its main supplier by far¹⁹. Secondly, because the CSTO continues to expand its scope of work, with targets set to 2025: according to a CSTO Security Strategy adopted in 2016 (valid until 2025), apart from its initial responsibilities, the organization must also fight ‘color revolutions’²⁰. Thirdly, because the danger of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan has not yet disappeared —one of the reasons why the CSTO was created was to combat terrorism and drug trafficking—. Fourthly, because Article 7 of the Charter of the CSTO requires a consensus from the entire CSTO before one of its member countries allows a non-member state to station troops within its borders, which allows Russia to control some aspects of CSTO members' relations with third countries²¹. Lastly, because having Russia as an ally helps them maintain their regimes, which could be threatened by new internal protests or foreign influences. All these reasons are quite sufficient to argue that Russia will likely continue to wield great influence on CSTO members in the next few years.

However, in the medium term, there is a great chance that this situation will change. The CSTO Charter insists on respect for the sovereignty of member states, but CA states might be questioning this idea in view of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is why some countries have gradually begun to diversify their military purchases in recent years²². In addition to the fear of having their sovereignty undermined, the CSTO countries have also seen that Russia does not always intervene when they require it: despite the fact that the CSTO has a Rapid Response Force²³ (since 2009) and can deploy peacekeepers to deal with *domestic unrest* in member countries (since 2010), the CSTO did not intervene either in the 2010 Kyrgyz-Uzbek disputes in Kyrgyzstan or in the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh conflict, even though the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, respectively, had expressly asked the CSTO for assistance²⁴ —the only case in the

¹⁹ Ekaterina A. Degtereva and Anna M. Chernysheva, "Military-economic cooperation of the CSTO and EAEU member states with third countries: challenges and threats to Russia," *RUDN Journal of Economics* 27, no. 4 (December 15, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2329-2019-27-4-663-678>.

²⁰ "Стратегия коллективной безопасности Организации Договора о коллективной безопасности на период до 2025 года," Организация Договора о коллективной безопасности, October 18, 2016, https://odkb-csto.org/documents/statements/strategiya_kollektivnoy_bezопасnosti_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezопасnosti_na_period_do_2025_goda/#loaded.

²¹ "Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, dated October 07, 2002," Collective Security Treaty Organisation, April 27, 2012, https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/ustav_organizatsii_dogovora_o_kollektivnoy_bezопасnosti/#loaded.

²² Ekaterina A. Degtereva.

²³ For example, there are Rapid Reaction Collective Forces stationed at the Kant base in Kyrgyzstan. Malina Kaszuba.

²⁴ Alexander Cooley.

history of CSTO, in which they intervened to stop a domestic unrest, occurred this January 2022 in Kazakhstan—. Moreover, with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan, there is a slight chance that Afghanistan will no longer be such an important hub of terrorism, as to force the CA countries to rely on Russia to defend their borders. Finally, despite the fact that Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty stipulates a right to collective defence²⁵ —interpreting an attack against one of the members as if it were an attack against all of them, and where member states have to help each other—, CA countries have called on their citizens not to participate in the war in Ukraine²⁶ —even though some bombs have fallen on Russian territory (which is CSTO territory)—. This reflects that CA states do not fully agree with Russia's foreign policy, which reduces the cohesion of the military alliance within the CSTO. For all these reasons, it is very likely that the CSTO countries will seek greater military autonomy from Russia in the medium term, although not complete independence.

1.2. Military independence of Kazakhstan: another war on the Russian border?

On the 24th of October 2022, Kazakhstan approved a renovated military doctrine. Among its provisions, there are mentions of the need to protect the nation's borders and the country's strategic facilities —these latter from terrorist attacks, sabotage, and '*separatist activities*'—. Besides, Kazakhstan will now have *reservists* —which it did not have until now—. The new military doctrine also mentions the necessity to establish cooperation with foreign companies for the supply of modern military equipment²⁷. In this sense, it is important to mention that Kazakhstan and Turkey —NATO member— reached an agreement in May 2022, under which Kazakhstan will be able to manufacture Turkish-designed ANKA attack drones on its territory²⁸.

Although these developments do not mean that Kazakhstan wants to become completely independent from Russia in the military sphere, they do reflect that Kazakhstan wishes to achieve greater military power in the medium term and, to this end, does not mind cooperating with NATO countries. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has at no time expressed support for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine²⁹, which creates further tension in their relations.

²⁵ "Collective Security Treaty, dated May 15, 1992," Collective Security Treaty Organisation, April 23, 2012, https://en.odkb-csto.org/documents/documents/dogovor_o_kollektivnoy_bezopasnosti/#loaded.

²⁶ Jerusalem Post Staff, "Central Asian countries ban citizens from participating in Ukraine war," The Jerusalem Post, September 22, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-717865>.

²⁷ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan updates military doctrine, seemingly with Russia in mind," Eurasianet, October 26, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-updates-military-doctrine-seemingly-with-russia-in-mind>.

²⁸ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license," Eurasianet, May 13, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license>.

²⁹ Temur Umarov, "Kazakhstan Is Breaking Out of Russia's Grip," Foreign Policy, September 16, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/16/kazakhstan-russia-ukraine-war/>.

However, if in the future Kazakhstan were to attempt to distance itself from Russia in the same way that Ukraine has done—which is highly unlikely, given that Kazakhstan remains heavily dependent on Russia in military, economic, infrastructure, geographic and other ways—, Russia would have a wider range of options—than it had in Ukraine—to respond to such a distancing.

In the first place, Russia could use its very strong economic grip on Kazakhstan to restore control over it: Kazakhstan's main source of income is the export of crude petroleum³⁰, with 80% of those exports passing through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC)³¹, in which Russia holds a 31% stake³². If Russia closes the CPC, Kazakhstan would lose almost 40% of its income³³. In that situation, diversifying oil sales would be very complicated, as Kazakhstan's oil pipelines only go to Russia and China³⁴.

In the second place, Russia could pressure Kazakhstan through the influence it has over Kazakhstan's surrounding neighbors—Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—and the strategic relations it has with China. Unlike Ukraine, which has a direct border with the European Union and NATO—both of which can help Ukraine logistically—Kazakhstan is surrounded by Russia's partners, which would prevent Kazakhstan from receiving external assistance.

In the third place, Russia could invade some regions of Kazakhstan, using the same motivations as in the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014: the need to intervene militarily in another state to protect ethnic Russians. For instance, in the North Kazakhstan region, ethnic Kazakhs make up only 35.03%, while ethnic Russians constitute 49.53%³⁵. Taking into account elements such as the fact that this region is on the border with Russia and that Kazakhstan's largest arms supplier is Russia, Russia should not have serious problems conquering the regions of Kazakhstan closest to its border.

³⁰ "Kazakhstan (KAZ) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners - 2020," OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed October 28, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kaz>.

³¹ As mentioned in reference n°2, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) is a crude oil transportation project which transports oil from Western Kazakhstan to a marine terminal on Russia's Black Sea coast, where it is loaded onto tankers and sold on the world market.

³² Temur Umanov.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Global Oil Infrastructure Tracker," Global Energy Monitor, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://globalenergymonitor.org/projects/global-oil-infrastructure-tracker/tracker-map/>.

³⁵ Alimana Zhanmukanova, "Is Northern Kazakhstan at Risk to Russia?," *The Diplomat*, April 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/is-northern-kazakhstan-at-risk-to-russia/>.

1.3. Kazakhstan's immovable stance on nuclear weapons

The threat of using nuclear weapons in Ukraine has been very present in Russia's discourse lately³⁶. Some scholars argue that this discourse is just an instrument of blackmail, used for the deterrence of the Ukrainian offensive and the assistance of the West. Nevertheless, the risk is certainly real. In this context, one of Russia's military partners, Kazakhstan —the country that during the USSR times had the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world³⁷—, holds a completely opposite view on the possession and use of nuclear weapons.

On the 29th of August 2019, Kazakhstan ratified the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which prohibits state parties to develop, test, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons, as well as to receive the transfer of nuclear weapons or to allow the stationing, installation or deployment of nuclear weapons in its territory³⁸. Moreover, Kazakhstan is also a party to the 2006 Semipalatinsk Treaty —which has been ratified by all five Central Asian states, for the creation of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Central Asia³⁹—.

Participation in all these international documents reflects Kazakhstan's firm commitment to the eradication of nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is completely unlikely that the war in Ukraine will change Kazakhstan's stand: in the first place, because Kazakhstan is the only country of Central Asia who has ratified the TPNW, demonstrating an example of the most consistent anti-nuclear policy course⁴⁰; in the second place, because Kazakhstan is a steadfast promoter of initiatives such as the liquidation of all the world's nuclear weapons by 2045⁴¹; in the third place, because Kazakhstan is fully aware of the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons, acknowledging that the 456 nuclear tests conducted on its soil harmed millions of people⁴²; and, finally, because Kazakhstan has a multi-vector foreign policy which does not imply it has to follow any one partner (i.e. Russia) completely⁴³.

³⁶ Sinéad Baker, "Putin threatens to use nuclear weapons as he escalates his invasion of Ukraine: 'This is not a bluff,'" Business Insider, September 21, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-threatens-nuclear-weapons-over-ukraine-says-not-bluffing-2022-9>.

³⁷ "Declaration of the Republic of Kazakhstan pursuant to Article 2 of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," accessed October 28, 2022, https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/21-095-annex-Kazakhstan-public-received-2021-02-19_.pdf.

³⁸ The Treaty entered into force on 22 January 2021.

"Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," United Nations Treaty Collection, accessed October 14, 2022, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/2017/07/20170707%2003-42%20PM/Ch_XXVI_9.pdf.

³⁹ "Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty," United Nations, accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.un.org/nwzfz/content/treaty-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-central-asia>.

⁴⁰ Ksenia Muratshina, "Post-Soviet Central Asian States' Policies towards the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," *Administrative consulting*, November 2019, XXXX, <https://doi.org/10.22394/1726-1139-2019-11-47-56>.

⁴¹ "Kazakhstan makes plea for global end to nuclear weapons by 2045," ANEWS, June 19, 2022,

<https://www.anews.com.tr/world/2022/06/19/kazakhstan-makes-plea-for-global-end-to-nuclear-weapons-by-2045>.

⁴² "Declaration of the Republic of Kazakhstan".

⁴³ Ksenia Muratshina.

1.4. Russia's possible reaction to CA military alienation

As mentioned above, Kazakhstan is increasing its military relations with Turkey—a NATO country—. For its part, Tajikistan is thought to be allowing China to maintain a military base on its territory since 2016, near the border with Afghanistan; besides, in October 2021, both countries reached an agreement whereby China would build a Tajik police base, also on the border with Afghanistan⁴⁴. In addition, Turkmenistan, in September 2022, revived a security cooperation partnership program with the US National Guard, a partnership that had been frozen since 2011⁴⁵.

None of these military approaches by CA republics to other powers poses a major threat to Russia, considering that they are small-scale cooperations, which are more defensive than offensive in nature. And, in general, the presence of foreign militaries in Central Asia in recent decades was mainly due to the Afghanistan War—started in 2001—and the risk of terrorism spreading throughout the region, something Russia was also committed to fighting.

What has become clear—in the wake of the war in Ukraine—is that the current regime in Russia is wary of NATO and very sensitive to a military power approaching its borders. Therefore, should any of the CA countries seriously decide to sever all military relations with Russia and leave its sphere of influence, Russia will most likely resort to *hybrid warfare* to destabilize that country—just as it did in Ukraine from 2014—. On the contrary, if the CA countries maintain limited strategic cooperation with other powers such as China or with individually-taken NATO countries—not as a group—, Russia will remain uncomfortable, but will probably try to dissuade them with more diplomatic or economic methods. In addition, if necessary, Russia could always use the military bases it has in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to destabilise those countries or take them under its control with a quick attack.

In any case, the power that Russia wields in each CA country is different. Russia has a more direct influence on those states that are part of the CSTO—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan— or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—, as Russia is the military and economic leader in these organisations. Regarding Turkmenistan, this country has had a status of neutrality since its independence, a policy that is still in force with the new president Serdar Berdimuhamedow—this policy has been observed in the last votings of the UN

⁴⁴ Brendan Scott, "China to Build Tajik Police Base to Secure Afghan Border." Bloomberg.Com, October 28, 2021, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.unav.es/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cookie,uid&db=edb&AN=153288927&lang=es&site=eds-live&scope=site>

⁴⁵ "Turkmenistan: Piping up," Eurasianet, September 27, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-piping-up>.

General Assembly condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine⁴⁶ and Russia's attempt to annex regions of Ukraine⁴⁷, in which Turkmenistan has not even voted—and which is likely to continue in the future, because it is part of the regime's foundations. Finally, Uzbekistan is also an independent actor—although it has at times been part of the CSTO (from 2006 to 2012)—. For now, Uzbekistan is more focused on economic development with China, Turkey and Afghanistan⁴⁸, rather than on military development. Therefore, Uzbekistan is unlikely to enter into disputes with Russia, risking destabilising its own rising economy. Russia, being Uzbekistan's 2nd largest export destination (in 2020), and the 2nd largest importer of goods to Uzbekistan (in 2020)⁴⁹, could use its economic leverage to control Uzbekistan should the country decide to approach other foreign powers militarily.

1.5. NATO's military influence in CA: Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs

Although the CA countries have traditionally fostered their closest security and military relationship with Russia, they have also engaged in some cooperation with NATO over the past decades through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs. PfP is an initiative created in 1994 which allows for practical bilateral cooperation between individual countries and NATO: countries build an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation⁵⁰. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan individually created a PfP with NATO in 1994. Tajikistan did so later, in 2002, due to the civil war that raged in the country from 1992 to 1997.

The CA region became strategically important for the West only in 2001, due to its proximity to Afghanistan⁵¹, serving as a logistic hub in Afghanistan operations. NATO approached each CA state individually, since regional cooperation failed—as the autocratic leaders of Central Asia didn't completely trust each other—. Besides, the agreements were mostly bilateral, between NATO member states and each country of region—for example, France made a deal for a transit base in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Germany in Termez (Uzbekistan),

⁴⁶ Shannon Tiezzi, "How Did Asian Countries Vote on the UN's Ukraine Resolution?," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/how-did-asian-countries-vote-on-the-uns-ukraine-resolution/>.

⁴⁷ Yasmeen Serhan, "A New U.N. Vote Shows Russia Isn't as Isolated as the West May Like to Think," *Time*, October 13, 2022, <https://time.com/6222005/un-vote-russia-ukraine-allies/>.

⁴⁸ Stefan Hedlund, "Uzbekistan's bumpy ride out of Russia's orbit," *GIS Reports*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/uzbekistan-russia-relations/>.

⁴⁹ "Uzbekistan (UZB) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners - 2020," *OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, accessed October 29, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/uzb?yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow1>.

⁵⁰ "Partnership for Peace programme," NATO, March 23, 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm#:~:text=The%20Partnership%20for%20Peace%20\(PfP,their%20own%20priorities%20for%20cooperation.](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm#:~:text=The%20Partnership%20for%20Peace%20(PfP,their%20own%20priorities%20for%20cooperation.)

⁵¹ Uguloy Mukhtorova, *Central Asia and NATO against a Backdrop of Changing Geopolitical Realities* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2018), <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/NDC%20Central%20Asia%20NATO.pdf>.

and the U.S. in Karshi-Khanabad (Uzbekistan) and Manas (Kyrgyzstan)⁵²—. Therefore, historically, Central Asian states and NATO have mainly cooperated because of the Afghanistan War.

Although today the region is no longer so strategic for NATO, the Alliance should relaunch its cooperation with CA countries for several reasons. In the first place, because CA countries are trying to develop a national identity separate from Russia—to avoid being considered ‘colonies’ of Russia— so as to guarantee their sovereignty. NATO could be a new ally that could further differentiate them from Russia. In the second place, to help the governments of Central Asia to balance their relationships with Russia and China. In the third place, to anticipate and mediate in potential intra-Central Asian conflicts —e.g. conflicts over border issues between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, or between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and conflicts over water resources between downstream and upstream countries—, that might give rise to new outbreaks of terrorism or threaten Western investments in CA. Lastly, because Central Asia’s armed forces are old-fashioned and fragile, and need to modernise in order to be able to effectively defend their sovereignty and face new threats. The modernization of their armies could definitely be achieved with NATO's help.⁵³

Since NATO cannot bring these countries into the Alliance through further enlargement because they are under Russian military influence, the only means available for NATO to engage in CA is PfP. Therefore, the Alliance should give a very high weight to PfPs, and operate in the region through them. However, for PfP to be truly effective, it is imperative that NATO becomes proactive in cooperating with CA—and not wait for CA countries themselves to approach NATO—⁵⁴.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the effectiveness of PfPs will not be the same in all CA—considering that, within the PfP, each state chooses the level of cooperation it wants to develop with NATO—.

Until now, *Kazakhstan* has had the most advanced cooperation of the five CA countries with NATO. An example is “Steppe Eagle”, an annual military exercise conducted since 1997 to improve the readiness of Kazakh peacekeeping units. The second most active player is *Kyrgyzstan*, which is also relatively open to Western organisations—such as NGOs—,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Joe Kyle, "NATO Partnership for Peace," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 14 (2019), <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.unav.es/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/yaljoia14&id=71&collection=journals&index=>

in contrast to other regional states. *Uzbekistan*'s relationship with NATO has been variable: it began in 1994, but then worsened dramatically in 2005 due to the Uzbek government's violent repression of civil unrest in the Fergana Valley—which NATO condemned—; a few years later, the relationship improved again as NATO needed Uzbekistan to transport goods to Afghanistan⁵⁵ and, conversely, Uzbekistan needed NATO because it feared the threat coming from radical groups in Afghanistan. Under new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has revived cooperation with its neighbours, although it is likely to continue to maintain a balanced approach on its cooperation with Russia, China and the West. *Turkmenistan* has always followed a policy of neutrality and has only assisted NATO by delivering aircraft fuel for its Afghanistan operations. *Tajikistan* was the last CA country to join PfP and it was considered the most passive Central Asian partner of the Alliance, carrying out mainly transit agreements with NATO⁵⁶. Ultimately, all these country-specific historical realities will have to be taken into account in order to develop effective PfP in the future.

In conclusion, PfPs have a strong projection for the future, but their effectiveness depends on NATO adopting smart cooperation strategies with CA states. It would be smart for initiatives to be led not by the US, but by another country that is more trusted in the region and in Russia, and for NATO to try to achieve the proposed goals gradually—as Russia is reluctant to have a Western presence there—. If PfPs are not implemented intelligently, they are likely to fail and eventually lose their relevance in the region, in favour of Russia and China.

1.6. CA's regional security amidst Taliban comeback

As argued in the previous sections, one of the reasons why CSTO has developed and why NATO boosted PfPs so much in the early part of this century is the threat of terrorism and extremism emanating from Afghanistan. Now, with the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan in 2021, the stability of the region remains in question and threats are still latent.

The Taliban have repeatedly promised to fight terrorists on their territory and to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a launching pad for attacks against other countries⁵⁷. However, the reality seems to be quite different. A UN report issued in April 2022 pointed out that the relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaida remains close, with the latter having increased freedom of action in Afghanistan⁵⁸. Some experts argue that, despite that relationship,

⁵⁵ Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan Has Good Reasons To Be On Good Terms With The Taliban," RFE/RL, September 23, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-taliban-business-relations/31474708.html>.

⁵⁶ Uguloy Mukhtorova.

⁵⁷ Jason Burke, "Al-Qaida enjoying a haven in Afghanistan under Taliban, UN warns," The Guardian, June 3, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/03/al-qaida-enjoying-a-haven-in-afghanistan-under-taliban-un-warns>.

⁵⁸ "Thirteenth report of the Analytical Support [...] concerning the Taliban," UN Documents, May 26, 2022, <https://www.undocs.org/S/2022/419>.

the Taliban are likely to oppose any bold actions accomplished by Al-Qaida that may trigger a Western military response⁵⁹. The Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K) is also trying to seize the power vacuum in Afghanistan⁶⁰ and there are other regional and international terrorist groups which now operate in there. Moreover, Afghanistan is a weak state, with a high poverty rate and a collapsing economy, which are conducive to the development of terrorist groups⁶¹. This situation also facilitates the increase in organised crime and the drug trade —Afghanistan accounts for 85% of global opium production and it has been observed that Afghanistan's opium trade boomed since Taliban takeover⁶²—. Arms trade also appears to have increased —many of which are US-made weapons that Afghan government forces abandoned—⁶³.

Russia has been far more concerned about the Afghanistan problem because of its threats to Central Asian stability and the arrival of narcotics in Russia, than because of its geopolitical value⁶⁴. In this regard, the CSTO plays —and will play— a very important role in the protection of the region, in such a way that the CA countries enjoy Russia's support in dealing with possible terrorist threats or drug trafficking and can act in a coordinated manner. Russia does not have a strong trade relationship with Afghanistan —unlike India and China— and neither does it have a major security and aid leverage over local parties —unlike Pakistan and Iran—⁶⁵, which compels Russia to defend CA with a more military approach or through diplomacy with the Afghan government in power —regardless of whether it is Taliban or not, as long as it has the power to stop the violence inside Afghanistan—.

Therefore, in view of the new threats arising from the Taliban government, it is certain that Russia will continue to cooperate intensively with the CA countries in controlling the borders with Afghanistan and extinguishing any source of violence in CA. In this task, China⁶⁶ and India are likely to increase their cooperation and presence in countries such as Tajikistan to help contain terrorist threats in Afghanistan. In addition, if the situation in Afghanistan worsens, this could lead the two organisations that are responsible for promoting security in CA —the CSTO, headed by Russia, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), headed by

⁵⁹ Teun van Dongen and Joshua Farrell-Molloy, "One Year of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan: A Predictable Disaster - ICCT," ICCT, August 26, 2022, <https://icct.nl/publication/one-year-of-taliban-rule-in-afghanistan-a-predictable-disaster/>.

⁶⁰ Center for Preventive Action, "Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, April 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Shabnam von Hein, "Afghanistan opium trade booms since Taliban takeover – DW – 12/10/2021," dw.com, December 10, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghanistan-opium-trade-booms-since-taliban-takeover/a-60081725>.

⁶³ Ruchi Kumar, "Afghan Guns Are Arming Regional Insurgents," Foreign Policy, July 8, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/08/afghanistan-weapons-smuggling-black-market-taliban-regional-insurgency/>.

⁶⁴ Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia, Central Asia and Non-traditional Security Threats from Afghanistan following the US Withdrawal," *Global Policy* 13, no. 1 (February 2022): XXXX, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13058>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Brendan Scott.

China— to cooperate with each other⁶⁷. Moreover, the leadership style is likely to remain authoritarian in CA, as this type of regime allows for the repression of insurgencies and threats with a firm hand —as has been the case so far—. Finally, it remains uncertain whether Afghanistan will be able to take off economically —bearing in mind that the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has projects involving Afghanistan⁶⁸—, but CA could play an important role in this economic development: CA could serve as a transit point through which goods arrive in Afghanistan from China and other places, as a supplier of hydrocarbons —through projects such as TAPI⁶⁹— and as a provider of humanitarian aid.

1.7. Military bases in CA

As it has been evidenced and, throughout this paper, will continue to be exposed, Central Asia is a region where the main economic and security interests of Russia, China and the United States, among other powers, currently intersect. When analysing the military power relations of these in CA, it can be argued that Russia —taking into account its military potential and geographical position— has the strongest regional impact, compared to the other two.⁷⁰

From the security point of view, Russia has a stake in maintaining stability, avoiding radicalism in the region, as well as strengthening political institutions of the Central Asian governments.⁷¹ Russia currently keeps an important military presence in Central Asia, with military bases in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan —both with a base leasing agreement with a 15-year renewable term agreed in 2012— and Kazakhstan —which may be home to Russia's most strategically significant military presence—. ⁷²

After the closure of the US base in 2005, Uzbekistan adopted a Russian-led security strategy and gave the Russian Army use of its military bases. However, in 2012, the country left the CSTO and revoked its agreements with the Russian government for the use of its bases. Neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan presently host any foreign soldiers. Both nations keep their distance from Russia's geopolitical initiatives.⁷³ From this point of view, there is a clear separation between nations that support Russia and those that are neutral. It should be mentioned

⁶⁷ Sarwat Rauf.

⁶⁸ Bruce Pannier.

⁶⁹ A Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas Pipeline that is currently under construction.

⁷⁰ Eugen Lungu, "Power Relations Between Russia, China and the United States in Central Asia. An Offensive Realist Perspective", *Analele Universitatii Ovidius din Constanta – Seria Stiinte Politice*, 20 october 2020.

<http://annals-politics.univ-ovidius.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/8.-AUOC-PolSci-Vol.-9-2020-165-187-Lungu.pdf>.

⁷¹ Mukhtor Nazirov, "Russia, China and the United States in Central Asia: Clash of Interests", 2021,

<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/russia-china-and-the-united-states-in-central-asia-clash-of-interests/viewer>.

⁷² Francesc Serra-Massansalvador, "Russia's Role in the Consolidation of the Central Asian Elites", en *The Steppe and Beyond: Studies on Central Asia* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9093-1_2.

⁷³ Ibid.

that the Russian military bases and the political situations of the Central Asian states in the face of regional problems depend on each other.⁷⁴ In this perspective, and taking into account the agreement to use military bases in three states, it shows that the Russian military presence in Central Asia is of great importance.

Despite US efforts, there has been a decline in its influence in the Central Asian region—as can be seen reflected in the total expulsion of its military bases from the area—. Moreover, it should be noted that geopolitical changes in Central Asia have been eroding US power in the region, and other regional powers—China, Iran and Turkey—are now trying to influence the area according to their particular interests. This poses a new challenge to the US in order to maintain its alliances with Central Asian countries.⁷⁵ The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was due to, among other reasons, its eagerness to concentrate on its strategic priorities and was tired of fighting endless wars. It involves making room for a tactical shift. For these reasons, it is unknown how Washington would approach counterterrorism and human rights in Afghanistan, but it is unlikely that it will renew its interest in the military bases in an effort to reclaim control of Afghanistan.⁷⁶ Together with this adjustment of the US strategy, the new US Central Asia Strategy 2019-2025—which seeks to increase US influence in the region—, should be highlighted.⁷⁷

Another power that merits attention is China. In the post-Soviet era, China achieved a high level of political, economic, and military cooperation with the five Central Asian states.⁷⁸ Even though China has had a limited amount of direct involvement in the security difficulties in the region, it currently leaves Central Asian military and security matters in Russia's hands and has shown no immediate desire in expanding its position outside of a multilateral framework. The only international organisation that addresses security matters concerning China is the SCO. It aids in the stabilisation of the Xinjiang neighbourhood and the strengthening of China's political ties with Central Asian nations. China's policy of non-interference would be violated by any significant military engagement in Central Asia, including any efforts to establish a military presence through the construction of military bases. However, given the difficulties posed by an unstable and insecure environment and the depth of China's economic engagement in the region,

⁷⁴ Ali Emre Sucu, "The Importance of Russian Military Presence in Central Asia for Russia's Regional Security", december 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337364661_THE_IMPORTANCE_OF_RUSSIAN_MILITARY_PRESENCE_IN_CENTRAL_ASIA_OR_RUSSIA'S_REGIONAL_SECURITY.

⁷⁵ Mauricio Lascurain Fernández, "The Geostrategic Role of Central Asia", June 2017, https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0185-013X2017000200389&script=sci_arttext.

⁷⁶ Carlota García Encina, "La retirada de Afganistán y sus implicaciones para la Administración Biden - Real Instituto Elcano," Real Instituto Elcano, August 30, 2021,

<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-retirada-de-afganistan-y-sus-implicaciones-para-la-administracion-biden/>.

⁷⁷ Mukhtor Nazirov.

⁷⁸ Eugen Lungu.

it is challenging to envision how China will be able to protect its interests without taking a more proactive role in ensuring the stability and security of the area.⁷⁹ Given China's annual military spending —the Chinese state had the second largest military budget in the world in 2019— which leaves in doubt the commitment to non-interference and opens up the possibility of a military presence over the next decade.⁸⁰

2. RESOURCE-RELATED INFLUENCE OVER CENTRAL ASIA

Having analysed the military influences that some powers have over Central Asian countries — which is the most direct and strictest influence exerted over the region—, we must now look at the main attraction for which the region is generally known: its wealth of natural resources. This issue is of greatest interest for powers like the EU, given that they have been faced with the need to look for new suppliers of natural resources that could replace Russia.

On the one hand, it can be seen how, in early 2022, the EU was dependent on Russia for almost 40% of its natural gas, about 27% of its oil and 46% of its coal imports⁸¹, as well as for 20% of uranium deliveries to the EU in 2020⁸². Indeed, Russia is by far the primary exporter of natural gas, oil and coal to the EU⁸³.

On the other hand, Central Asia has proven to be a region rich in natural resources: the total reserves of crude oil, natural gas and coal in the region are 2%, 11% and 8% respectively of total world proved reserves (as of 2015)⁸⁴. However, the distribution of these reserves is unequal among the five nations. Kazakhstan accounts for 96% of the region's oil reserves and Turkmenistan for 87% of the region's natural gas reserves. Coal reserves are concentrated mainly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, each with approximately 45% of Central Asia's total coal reserves⁸⁵.

⁷⁹ Bernardo Mariani, "China's role and interests in Central Asia," Home - Saferworld, October 2013, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/chinas-role-and-interests-in-central-asia.pdf>

⁸⁰ Eugen Lungu.

⁸¹ Mark Thompson, "Europe Plans to Slash Russian Gas Imports by 66% This Year," CNN, March 8, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/08/energy/gas-russia-europe/index.html>

⁸² Roberto L. Vargas, "Bloqueo de uranio y de tecnología nuclear, nueva amenaza rusa," *La Razón*, September 12, 2022.

⁸³ Tom Peeters, "The EU Energy Dependency on Russia and Historic Opportunity for Independence," Beyond the Horizon ISSG, March 17, 2022, <https://behorizon.org/the-eu-energy-dependency-on-russia-and-historic-opportunity-for-independence/>

⁸⁴ Almaz Akhmetov, "Measuring the Security of External Energy Supply and Energy Exports Demand in Central Asia," *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* 5, no. 4 (October 2015), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282848740_Measuring_the_Security_of_External_Energy_Supply_and_Energy_Exports_Demand_in_Central_Asia#pf2.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

With such promising data on Central Asia's natural resource wealth, the question arises as to whether the EU might turn to Central Asia in order to replace Russian imports, so discredited as a result of the war in Ukraine. Given the fact that the most critical resource for the EU is natural gas, this study should focus primarily on natural gas—and, to a lesser extent, on oil, as both are part of the same energy family referred to as ‘hydrocarbons’—.

Scenarios: Could the EU turn to CA for hydrocarbons using Turkey as a corridor?

The following pages will provide an analysis of the feasibility of Central Asia becoming an alternative to Russia for the EU as a hydrocarbon supplier in a ten-year timeframe (2022-2032), a timeframe that is neither too short to prevent a hypothetical pipeline construction nor too long to impede any feasible prospect. As mentioned above, the distribution of energy reserves is not uniform across Central Asia, with Kazakhstan monopolising oil reserves (96%) and Turkmenistan having the largest share of natural gas (87%). Therefore, only these two Central Asian countries are relevant as potential hydrocarbon suppliers.

Currently, the main constraint for these two countries to reach European markets is that they depend on third countries to bring their natural resources to the EU. As reflected in the oil pipeline map of Central Asia⁸⁶, Kazakhstan only has oil pipelines connecting it to Russia and to China⁸⁷. Besides, it is the only Central Asian country with any oil pipelines. On the other hand, the gas pipeline map⁸⁸ shows that Turkmenistan's gas pipelines go to the Caspian Sea, to Iran, to Kazakhstan, to Uzbekistan, to Russia and to China⁸⁹. This means that in order to be an energy alternative to Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would have to build new infrastructure that would allow them to reach the EU without passing through Russia. In fact, there are existing proposals such as the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCP)—which would link Turkmenistan with Azerbaijan, allowing it to connect to the Southern Gas Corridor⁹⁰—, and the Trans-Caspian Oil Pipeline—which would link Kazakhstan with Azerbaijan, giving Kazakhstan access to the Black Sea through the Baku Supsa Oil Pipeline⁹¹—. Without these projects, the EU would not be able to effectively reach Central Asia's hydrocarbons market.

⁸⁶ "Global Oil Infrastructure Tracker".

⁸⁷ Kazakhstan's oil pipelines to Russia: *Uzen-Atyrau-Samara Pipeline, Guriev-Kuibyshev Oil Pipeline, Omsk-Pavlodar Oil Pipeline and the Caspian Pipeline. Kazakhstan oil pipeline to China: Kazakhstan-China Pipeline.*

⁸⁸ "Global Gas Infrastructure Tracker," Global Energy Monitor, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://globalenergymonitor.org/projects/global-gas-infrastructure-tracker/tracker/>.

⁸⁹ Turkmenistan's gas pipelines go to the Caspian Sea (*East-West Gas Pipeline*), to Iran (*Korpeje-Kordkuy Gas Pipeline*), to Kazakhstan (*Okarem-Beyneu Gas Pipeline*), to Uzbekistan (*Sovietabad Field-Ashgabad Pipeline*), to Russia (*Central Asia-Center Gas Pipeline*) and to China (*Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline*).

⁹⁰ An already operating gas corridor, which brings gas resources from the Caspian Sea to Europe, composed of three different pipelines: South Caucasus Pipeline (“SCP”), Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (“TANAP”) and Trans Adriatic Pipeline (“TAP”).

⁹¹ An already operating oil pipeline which connects oil fields in Azerbaijan to the Supsa Terminal in Georgia, on the shores of the Black Sea.

The future of infrastructure construction linking Central Asia to the EU is conditioned by a number of *drivers*, both positive and negative. The most important *drivers* include: *i*) a possible change of political regime in Russia —depending on the regime in place, Russia will either allow or hinder the construction of infrastructure in the Caspian Sea⁹² that could diminish its power of influence over Central Asia and Europe; so far, Russia has prevented the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCP) and has abandoned existing talks on the construction of the Trans-Caspian Oil Pipeline—; *ii*) the creation of an energy hub in Turkey, which has been enhanced by Russia in the last few weeks to be able to bring its gas to Europe, without relying on the Nord Streams⁹³ —this would increase Turkey's energy role as a hub where gas pipelines from Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran would converge—; in fact, Turkey is in a privileged geographical position, as some of the world's biggest oil and gas reserves are located close by, and it has great potential to become a key oil and gas distributor; *iii*) the appearance or rising power of other oil and gas suppliers outside the region of Central Asia (such as the USA, Saudi Arabia and UAE⁹⁴, among others), which have huge reserves and can easily reach the EU by sea —these could be seen as more affordable alternatives to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—; *iv*) the risk of a global recession and a series of financial crisis in the following years, owing to high inflation rates⁹⁵, disruption of supply chains due to the war in Ukraine and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, among other causes —which would make it non-viable to invest in the construction of energy infrastructure in Central Asia—.

Apart from these main *drivers*, there are *secondary uncertainties* that have less influence on the future: *i*) good relations between Azerbaijan and the EU should be maintained and should not be undermined by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; *ii*) Turkmenistan is likely to open the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas Pipeline (TAPI) in the near future⁹⁶, which will reduce its dependence on the Russian market; in fact, in 2016 Russia stopped the

⁹² Even if a Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed in 2018 among all the littoral states, this Convention has many gaps: the delineation of the seabed remains unresolved, it is silent on how the private sector involvement is to be done in an hypothetical pipeline construction and it leaves some issues for future negotiations. However, some authors argue that the Convention is "a positive development which should help to facilitate the implementation of new projects like the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP)". Charles Whitney, "The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea - A sea or not a sea: that is still the question," Norton Rose Fulbright, September 2018,

<https://www.nortonrosefulbright.com/en/knowledge/publications/5f222b95/the-convention-on-the-legal-status-of-the-caspian-sea---a-sea-or-not-a-sea-that-is-still-the-question#autofootnote2>.

⁹³ Suzan Fraser, "'No waiting': Turkey, Russia to act on Putin's gas hub offer," ABC News, October 14, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/wireStory/turkey-russia-study-putins-gas-hub-proposal-91496464>.

⁹⁴ "UAE signs energy agreement with Germany's Scholz," Reuters, September 25, 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/uae-signs-energy-agreement-with-germanys-scholz-state-news-agency-2022-09-25>

⁹⁵ "Risk of Global Recession in 2023 Rises Amid Simultaneous Rate Hikes," The World Bank, October 15, 2022,

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/09/15/risk-of-global-recession-in-2023-rises-amid-simultaneous-rate-hikes>.

⁹⁶ Its construction started in 2015 and is now on hold due to instability in Afghanistan. "Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Natural Gas Pipeline," NS Energy, accessed October 19, 2022,

<https://www.nsenerybusiness.com/projects/turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-tapi-natural-gas-pipeline/#:~:text=The%20TAPI%20pipeline%20will%20have,the%20Mary%20region%20of%20Turkmenistan.%20>.

purchase of Turkmen gas because of pricing disputes —resuming purchase later in 2019—⁹⁷, forcing Turkmenistan to make its gas sales —of 2019— entirely dependent on Chinese purchase⁹⁸ and to further promote initiatives such as the TAPI, in order to diversify —this is a sign that Turkmenistan has been forced to look for new markets lately, something that looks set to continue (as Russia is not as prosperous an energy market as it was before the war in Ukraine)—. When the TAPI becomes operational, it will be a critical infrastructure for delivering gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and for fostering peace and security among the four nations. However, it is unlikely that this pipeline could be an alternative to deliver Turkmen gas to Europe in the medium term, because its delivery capacity would be insufficient to supply other markets in the world —apart from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India— and, above all, because of the unstable situation that persists in Afghanistan —which poses a constant risk to a continuous flow of gas, driving away potential buyers—.

In addition, some *stable trends* can also be found in the future, such as the EU's commitment to have no net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050 (in the framework of its Green Deal published in 2019)⁹⁹, which implies that the EU is likely to gradually reduce the import of natural gas and oil.

Finally, a '*black swan*' to consider is that Russia may invade Central Asia —although this is not very likely, due to arguments already made in section 2 of this paper—, if Central Asian countries begin to distance themselves significantly from Russia. On the other hand, there is also a '*grey rhino*' to keep in mind: Turkmenistan is a dictatorship, which has recently signed cooperation agreements with Iran¹⁰⁰ —which could affect Turkmenistan's relationship with the EU—.

Central Asia becomes a real energy alternative for the EU

The first scenario that could occur in the future is that Central Asia —and, in particular, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan— becomes an energy market accessible to the EU and independent of Russia. For this to happen, the following situations would have to exist:

⁹⁷ "Russia Doubled Imports Of Natural Gas From Turkmenistan In 2021, Envoy Says," RFE/RL, December 24, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-doubles-gas-imports-turkmenistan/31625051.html>.

⁹⁸ Manuel Fernández Illera, "El Gas Natural de Turkmenistán: la diversificación como obsesión," *El Siglo de Asia*, January 12, 2022, <https://elsiglodeasia.com/2022/01/12/el-gas-natural-de-turkmenistan-la-diversificacion-como-obsesion/>.

⁹⁹ "A European Green Deal," European Commission, accessed October 19, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

¹⁰⁰ "Iran, Turkmenistan sign 9 cooperation agreements, vow to expand ties," Xinhuanet, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220615/ce37f673e48c4363a43d7f04d9b20f63/c.html>.

Drivers	RUSSIAN REGIME	TURKEY AS ENERGY HUB	OTHER SUPPLIERS	FINANCIAL SITUATION
Possibility 1	Friendly towards the West	New energy projects with Russia	Too expensive, thus not an alternative	Heavy crisis preventing investment in CA
Possibility 2	Neutral government	New energy projects with other regional players	Another regions is the most beneficial supplier	Crisis not affecting investment in CA
Possibility 3	Expansionist anti-West authoritarianism	Regional instability impedes Turkey to create new projects	Russia is still an important supplier	Infrastructure plans fail, no need for investment

In this scenario, *i)* Russia is a state that deals aggressively with the EU, resorting to regular cut-offs in gas and oil supplies as a political weapon, and preventing Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in every possible way from building new infrastructure in the Caspian Sea. However, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan manage to reach an agreement with Azerbaijan to build pipelines, relying on the gaps in the Caspian Sea Convention and Russia's military and economic weakening due to the sanctions for its war in Ukraine. Moreover, in this context, *ii)* Turkey will have abandoned its intentions to create a gas hub with Russia, because the EU will have reduced its purchase of Russian gas and, therefore, cooperation with Russia would no longer be so profitable for Turkey. However, as there is still demand for gas, Turkey is taking the opportunity to improve its cooperation with Azerbaijan and to create new relations with other countries such as Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Israel¹⁰¹. *iii)* The rest of the world's hydrocarbon suppliers are very expensive, due to rising inflation and increasing fuel demand, which makes investment in Central Asia the most economical option. Finally, *iv)* although there is a financial crisis in the world, it is not so pronounced as to impede investment in Central Asia.

Central Asia is not a feasible alternative due to lack of foreign investment

Another scenario deemed possible is that Central Asia does not substitute Russia as a hydrocarbon exporter due to the heavy crisis that, ultimately, prevents foreign investment. The absence of foreign investment translates into the impossibility of building any infrastructure that would enable the transportation of natural gas and oil from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to Europe. For this to occur, the following circumstances must be met:

¹⁰¹ Philipp Burkhardt and Nils Lange, "Different and Yet the Same? Prospects for a New Start in Israeli-Turkish Relations," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, September 12, 2022, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/auslandsinformationen/artikel/detail/-/content/different-and-yet-the-same>.

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In this second scenario, *i)* there is a change in Russia's regime whereby it is considered a neutral government, that no longer uses gas cut-offs as a diplomatic threat, nor demands hydrocarbon resources to be paid in roubles. The Russian regime does not have the strength to impede the European Union from building infrastructure to make the Central Asian region an actual substitute of their hydrocarbons. Although it is Russia's will to continue to be the main supplier of these resources for the EU, they cannot be considered an obstacle for the realisations of those plans. Nevertheless, *ii)* it is not only the Russian country that finds itself intertwined in a financial crisis, but indeed it is also the members of the European Union. Consequently, investing grand amounts of money into the construction of pipelines is not a possibility. Just the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline has an estimated cost of 5 billion dollars¹⁰². And without foreign investment cash-strapped Turkmenistan nor Kazakhstan cannot afford such a project¹⁰³. For this main reason, *iii)* the EU cannot take into action their plan of not depending on Russia for hydrocarbons, therefore they must negotiate new energy projects with Russia, this leading to *iv)* Russia still being one of the most important oil and natural gas suppliers for the European Union, therefore Turkey is not contemplated as a potential energy hub.

The US becomes the most affordable alternative as a hydrocarbon supplier

Lastly, another possible scenario revolves around the idea of the impossibility of the European Union to purchase natural gas or oil from the Russian Federation and the impediment of the latter for the former to reach an agreement with the Central Asian region for the

¹⁰² Marika Karayianni, "Is the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline Really Important for Europe?," *IENE, Institute of Energy for South-East Europe*, <https://www.iene.eu/is-the-trans-caspian-gas-pipeline-really-important-for-europe-p4022.html#:~:text=Its%20projected%20capacity%20is%2030,1996%20by%20the%20United%20States>.

¹⁰³ Martin Russell, *Connectivity in Central Asia. Reconnecting the Silk Road* (April 2019), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)637891_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI(2019)637891_EN.pdf).

construction of pipelines. This scenario leaves the EU to look for alternative hydrocarbons suppliers.

Drivers	RUSSIAN REGIME	TURKEY AS ENERGY HUB	OTHER SUPPLIERS	FINANCIAL SITUATION
Possibility 1	Friendly towards the West	New energy projects with Russia	Too expensive, thus not an alternative	Heavy crisis preventing investment in CA
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In this last scenario many factors come into play. The first variable *i)* would be that the regime of the Russian Republic evolves into an expansionist, anti-west authoritarian regime. As mentioned previously, the countries of the Central Asian region, as former Soviet Union republics, have been largely dependent on Russia. If they were to create pipelines that united this area to the EU infrastructurally, this would ameliorate their dependence on Russia and thus, lessen its power of influence over Central Asia and Europe. Therefore, Russia’s government would try to impede this connection. *ii)* The region instability derived from the fear in the international sphere —due to Russia’s new policies and a threat of another Russian attack— impedes Turkey to be considered a new corridor, as the exit of hydrocarbons from the Central Asian region is not a viable alternative. Due to all this, *iii)* there will be no need to mention the financial situation, because even if the EU did not find itself in a financial crisis, there would be no possibility of investment plans for construction of infrastructure in Central Asia. Lastly, *iv)* as extracting oil and natural gas from the CA region and transporting it to the EU without Russia’s collaboration is not an option and Russia, due to its new regime, will not be a reliable supplier, using cut-offs and shortages as a political weapon, the EU finds itself in the need to look for hydrocarbons suppliers further away from the region. The three major producers of natural gas in the world (2020) are the United States, Russia and Iran¹⁰⁴, in that order, even though the largest natural gas reserve (2020) is Russia, followed by Iran, Qatar, Turkmenistan and in the fifth position, the United States¹⁰⁵. In terms of oil production, as compiled from the U.S. Energy Information Administration¹⁰⁶, the United States is considered the country with the biggest

¹⁰⁴ "Natural Gas by Country 2022," World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/natural-gas-by-country>.

¹⁰⁵ *Petroleum and Other Liquids* (U.S. Energy Information Administration, n.d.).

<https://www.eia.gov/international/data/world/petroleum-and-other-liquids/annual-petroleum-and-other-liquids-production?>

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

production of oil. Thus, the United States would become the alternative supplier for hydrocarbons, making them reach the European continent by sea, being a much more affordable alternative than fighting Russia to build the necessary infrastructure for the Central Asian hydrocarbons.

Conclusion of scenario building

After analysing a broad range of scenarios, drivers, and tendencies that could occur ten years from now —2032—, several conclusions and possibilities emerge in regards to whether the EU could turn to the CA region for hydrocarbons, using Turkey as a corridor. The first scenario discusses that even though Central Asia is a landlocked region, with the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCP) the natural gas from Turkmenistan could reach Europe through the Caspian Sea. And with the construction of the pertinent oil pipelines from Kazakhstan through Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, the crude oil would reach Europe, therefore making the Central Asian region an energy alternative to Russia for the EU. But as analysed, many circumstances would have to take place for these plans to succeed. This scenario would bring the Central Asian region back into the international sphere game. The commercialization and exportation of these resources would provide Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan —and the rest of the countries of the CA region involved— with enough power to become more independent from Russia. Furthermore, Turkey, due to its geostrategic position, would become an ideal corridor for the exit of these hydrocarbon resources. Ultimately, the ties and agreements signed in order to make this infrastructure and commercial alliance possible would give these countries a permanent position as influential international players.

Yet, the possibility of this taking place inside the timeframe of just ten years is not very probable. The most likely scenario in 2032 is that CA is not yet a feasible alternative for the EU. Russia, after the war —which hopefully will not last much longer— will probably have a more neutral government, that will resume trustworthy trade with the EU and create new projects. However, the CA region will not —in the foreseeable future— abandon the desire to be less dependent on Russia for the export of hydrocarbons to the West. Therefore, the CA region will continue to search for alternatives, creating alliances with other countries and making the construction of infrastructures that avoid Russia and head South and West a future possibility.

3. ECONOMIC INFLUENCE OVER CENTRAL ASIA

As it was previously explained, CA is a geopolitical territory where the main economic and security interests of Russia, EU and China intersect. The natural resources (hydrocarbons, minerals...) of CA represent a great dimension, if not the most important, of the economy of these countries, since they have designed an economic policy based on the exploitation of these resources.¹⁰⁷ The importance of these resources has led to an increase in investment and infrastructure construction in CA. In addition, it is an area of strategic interest due to the intersection of trade routes between Europe and Asia.¹⁰⁸

3.1. Economic role of China in CA

Until the beginning of the 21st century, the main investor in the region was undoubtedly Russia, but with China's rapid growth and thanks to both the 'Go West' policy—launched in the year 2000, with which it seeks to accelerate the economy of these countries—and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the latter has managed to become the region's main trade ally.¹⁰⁹ China's economical approach to CA is mostly based on its BRI initiative and the exploitation of mineral resources. To carry out these initiatives, China is making many investments in all CA countries. As noted above, China's influence is greater in this area than in security. With this reasoning, it is questionable what China intends with the BRI, since for many it is seen as a 'soft power' strategy, with which it seeks to persuade others to achieve its interests, no longer so much with territorial or political disputes, but through the use of economic coercion or 'debt trap'.

When Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the BRI initiative in 2013—which intends to integrate the Eurasian economy with infrastructure, commerce, and investment—¹¹⁰ the phrase 'debt-trap' first appeared. This diplomacy establishes one creditor country—China—that lends money to another borrower country—CA states—to extend the lender's political influence. It is specifically used to describe Chinese lending to developing nations, where it is said that China tries to entrap smaller nations with loan terms that are too onerous to repay, ultimately pressuring them to make economic or political concessions. Lending has therefore been followed by asset grabbing.¹¹¹ Although it is true that the use of this policy has resulted

¹⁰⁷ Nora Sainz Gsell, "Las repúblicas ex-soviéticas de Asia Central en el sistema internacional del siglo XXI. Balance de una década de independencia.," Dialnet, 2003, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/1129391.pdf>.

¹⁰⁸ Eugen Lungu.

¹⁰⁹ David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, *International Relations of Asia*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

¹¹⁰ "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)." European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Accessed November 3, 2022. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>.

¹¹¹ Haderiansyah Haderiansyah et al., "POLICY OF CHINA'S DEBT-TRAP DIPLOMACY: The Influence Of Media In Forming Community Political Opinions," *DIA Jurnal Ilmiah Administrasi Publik* 18, no. 2 (December 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.30996/dia.v18i2.4410>.

questioned in other countries that are part of the BRI, scholars have not focused on Central Asia, which suggests an absence of ‘debt-trap’ in the China-CA relationship. The same occurs with the neo-colonisation policy—which also appears with the creation of the BRI—.

On the contrary, we could say that the economic relationship between China and CA is mutually beneficial, mainly because it does not lead to an exclusive dependence on China in the medium term, due to the presence of the multi-vector foreign policy of CA. This policy aims at the development of friendly and predictable relations with all states that play an important role in world affairs and are of practical interest to the country¹¹²—Russia, China, the United States, the European Union and Turkey—. No significant regional or extra-regional power has been able to establish itself as a dominant force in the region as a consequence of the relationships that the five Central Asian countries have developed with other powers and with each other.¹¹³

Nevertheless, China's investments are not the same throughout the CA region. At one extreme, we find the case of *Kazakhstan*: in 2020, the 27 EU countries (taken together) invested a total of \$77,645 billion in Kazakhstan, while China invested only \$5,943 billion. However, the opposite scenario can be observed in *Tajikistan*—in 2020, China invested \$1,468 billion in Tajikistan, Russia invested \$391 million and the 27 EU countries (taken together) invested a total of \$135 million—, in *Kyrgyzstan*—in 2020, China invested here \$1,037 million, Russia invested \$968 million, while the 27 EU countries (taken together) invested \$426 million— and in *Uzbekistan*—in 2020, China invested \$3,265 million, Russia invested \$177 million and the 27 EU countries (taken together) invested \$277 million—. In *Turkmenistan*, foreign investment is more evenly distributed: in 2020, the 27 EU countries (taken together) invested \$477 million and China invested \$336 million¹¹⁴.

Furthermore, it is worth noting the growing role of the EU in the region, which has become a key player in the process of diversification of the Central Asian economies.¹¹⁵ While in the past the EU's interest in this region was primarily based on natural resources, since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, the five countries are likely to move up the scale of European priorities.¹¹⁶ All this, bearing in mind that in 2019 the EU adopted its New Strategy for

¹¹² Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F. Joireman y Roza Tulepbayeva, "Between the bear and the dragon: multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers", *International Affairs* 96, n.º 4 (July 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa061>.

¹¹³ Eugen Lungu.

¹¹⁴ Mira Milosevich-Juaristi.

¹¹⁵ Sarah Herman, "EU-Central Asia relations and beyond - EIAS," EIAS, June 22, 2022, <https://eias.org/publications/op-ed/eu-central-asia-relations-and-beyond-the-orientation-of-energy-policies-in-kazakhstan/>.

¹¹⁶ Federico Castiglioni, "La UE entra en el nuevo Gran Juego en Asia Central | Política Exterior," *Política Exterior*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.politicaexterior.com/la-ue-entra-en-el-nuevo-gran-juego-en-asia-central/>.

Central Asia in June ‘adapting EU policy to the new opportunities that have arisen in the region’, thus, welcomes the strengthening of EU-CA relations.¹¹⁷ In practical terms, we can see how in 2020 it becomes the main trading partner of Kazakhstan (where the difference with the other powers is remarkable) and Turkmenistan, leaving China to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and, as a result, displacing Russia as the third power in economic terms.

3.2. Economic interaction of Russia with CA

The economic relationship between Russia and CA is largely based on the economic and cultural heritage of the USSR. In the first place, Russia has a visa-free border-crossing regime with the former Soviet states —with the exception of the Baltic States and Georgia—¹¹⁸, which greatly facilitates the mobility of workers within the space of the former USSR. So much so that Russia is the most popular destination for Central Asian migrants. Estimates for the number of migrants working in Russia vary dramatically, due to the chaotic nature of the country’s migration policy¹¹⁹. However, some reports claim that there are approximately four million workers from Central Asia working in Russia: around one million from Tajikistan, a similar number from Kyrgyzstan, approximately two million from Uzbekistan and 200,000 from Kazakhstan¹²⁰. In the second place, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was created in 2015 to promote deeper economic cooperation among some former USSR republics: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The EEU has provided legalized forms of labour migration, which aim to be a mechanism to reduce the discrimination and persecution that CA migrants have traditionally faced in Russia¹²¹. In the third place, for Russia, Central Asia is a source of cheap labour —by some estimates, generating as much as 10% of Russian GDP¹²²—.

However, this economic relationship between CA and Russia has been hindered lately, due to the instability of the rouble¹²³, the fact that a huge number of temporary migrants in Russia work illegally —leaving them open to abuse¹²⁴—, and the insecurity generated within Russia by its invasion of Ukraine.

¹¹⁷ Consejo de la UE, "Asia Central: el Consejo adopta una nueva Estrategia de la UE para la región," Consilium, June 17, 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2019/06/17/central-asia-council-adopts-a-new-eu-strategy-for-the-region/>.

¹¹⁸ Evgeny Gontmakher, "Changing migration trends in Russia," GIS Reports, January 4, 2022, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-migrants/>.

¹¹⁹ Rano Turaeva y Rustamjon Urinboyev, "Introduction", en *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2021), XXXX, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176763-1>.

¹²⁰ Hyo Jeong Jung y Michael Newson, "Sanctions On Russia Already Hitting Remittance-Dependent Countries in Central Asia - Kyrgyzstan", ReliefWeb, June 15, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/sanctions-russia-already-hitting-remittance-dependent-countries-central-asia>.

¹²¹ "What is the Eurasian Economic Union?", Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, July 15, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-eurasian-economic-union>.

¹²² Veselova, "Россия в Центральной Азии: новые грани взаимодействия", *Журнал «ЭКО»* 50, n.º 10 (2 October 2020), <https://doi.org/10.30680/eco0131-7652-2020-10-50-64>.

¹²³ Evgeny Gontmakher.

¹²⁴ Rano Turaeva.

Given this panorama, it can be anticipated that, in the long term, Russia could face serious demographic problems due to the new diminishing migration trends to Russia, which will lead to a potential shortage of low-skilled labour —as the majority of migrant workers who come to Russia perform manual labour (in 2019, 68.6% of migrants worked in the construction sector)¹²⁵—. Migrants from Central Asia may be more attracted to work in Kazakhstan, because of its dynamic development. Given that Russia has a negative population growth rate, the lack of immigrants to compensate for this rate will be detrimental to the Russian economy¹²⁶.

The economic sanctions placed on Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine are expected to have pernicious effects on the Russian economy and labour market —especially due to the increase in unemployment¹²⁷—. As a result, it is not only Russia that will be adversely affected, but also those CA countries that are highly dependent on remittances of Russian origin. In 2020, remittances accounted for 31% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, 27% of Tajikistan's GDP, 11% of Uzbekistan's GDP and 0,2% of Kazakhstan's GDP¹²⁸. However, not all these countries are equally dependent on Russian remittances: in 2021, 83% of Kyrgyzstan's total remittances came from Russia, but for the other three countries, the figure is around 50-60%¹²⁹. With these figures, it can be anticipated that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will be the most affected CA countries by the disruption of remittance flows.

On the other hand, Russian migrants in CA are also a relevant factor to take into account in CA's economic and political relationship with Russia. The biggest Russian minority resides in Kazakhstan, making up around 18% of the total Kazakhstan's population as of 2022; in Kyrgyzstan, ethnic Russians are about 5% of the population; estimations in Turkmenistan suggest a figure of 2%; and a similar percentage of Russians live in Uzbekistan; finally, the figure for Tajikistan is 0.5%¹³⁰. Therefore, the greatest influence and pressure ethnic Russians can exert in CA is found in Kazakhstan.

In the short term, it is possible that these minorities will continue to participate and operate in the economy of CA countries, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan —the only two CA countries that cooperate with Russia in the framework of the EEU and the two with the highest percentage of Russian population in their territories—. The EEU plays an important role,

¹²⁵ Evgeny Gontmakher.

¹²⁶ "Russia - Place Explorer - Data Commons", Data Commons, Accessed October 31, 2022, https://datacommons.org/place/country/RUS?utm_medium=explore&prop=count&popt=Person&hl=es.

¹²⁷ Hyo Jeong Jung.

¹²⁸ Dilip Ratha y Eung Ju Kim, "Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Remittance flows to Ukraine and Central Asia", World Bank Blogs, March 4, 2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/russia-ukraine-conflict-implications-remittance-flows-ukraine-and-central-asia>.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Aziz Berdiquolov, "ECMI Minorities Blog. Russian Migrants in Central Asia – An ambiguous Reception", The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), July 25, 2022, <https://www.ecmi.de/infochannel/detail/ecmi-minorities-blog-russian-migrants-in-central-asia-an-ambiguous-reception>.

as it could be argued that Russia uses the Union to achieve political objectives —to counter the economic influence of the USA, the EU and China in CA—, rather than to improve Russia's economy —taking into account that Russian trade within the Union is much smaller than with the rest of the world—¹³¹. Moreover, it is possible that the Russian minority in Kazakhstan will continue to exert a peripheral role of pressure on this country, since Kazakhstan will always need to be vigilant to prevent Russia from using this minority as a pretext to invade or destabilise Kazakhstan —as is the case in Ukraine—. In the medium term, the growth of a greater nationalist sentiment in CA countries can be anticipated, in order to distinguish themselves from Russia and to have a more independent appearance in their relations with other countries, fostering multi-vector foreign policies.

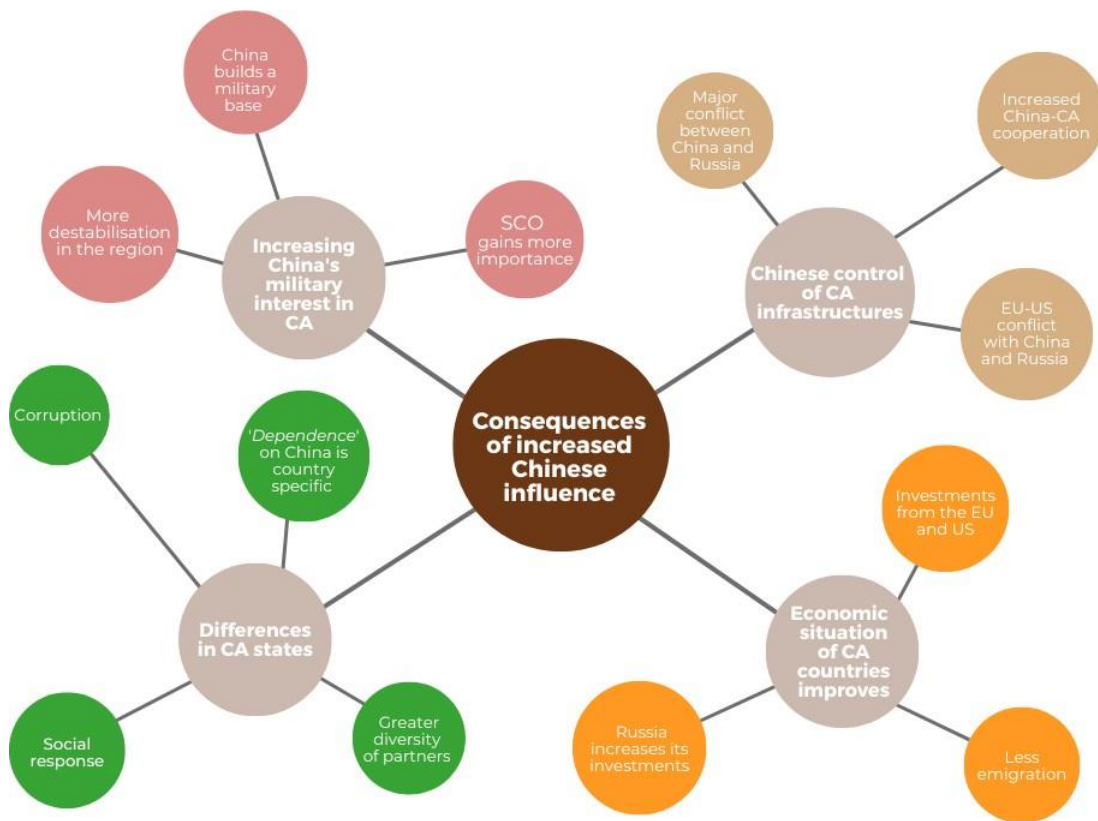
3.3. Futures wheel

What may be the consequence of increased Chinese influence on the CA economy, which has historically been linked to Russia?

In order to understand the economic reality of CA in a more comprehensive way, it is also necessary to analyse how the economic interests of China and Russia interact in CA, as this interaction will greatly influence the commercial successes or failures of these countries in CA. Therefore, the following pages will provide an analysis of the possible consequences —in a ten-year frame (2022-2032)— of increased Chinese influence in a Central Asian economy that has historically been linked to Russia. This analysis will be carried out using the *Futures Wheel* technique.

In short, greater Chinese influence in the CA economy has the following direct consequences —first order of spheres—, from which a multitude of indirect consequences arise —second order of spheres—:

¹³¹"What is the Eurasian Economic Union?".



In the light of this information, two different scenarios emerge as to the possible implications of increased Chinese economic influence in CA:

Stabilisation of Central Asia

The first possibility is that, faced with the risk of a dependence of the region on China, nationalist movements inside CA will emerge, thus highlighting and reaffirming their independence, without leading to radicalization, since China's large investments allow the number of citizens emigrating for lack of work to be reduced. This would lead to a greater stabilisation of the region, since the smartest thing for Russia would be to accept the greater economic influence of China, but maintaining its relevant role in the field of security.¹³² Also, Russia should try to give more importance to the SCO, of which both are members, in order to strengthen the above, since the SCO aims to cooperate in regional stability and avoid the three "evils"; terrorism, extremism and separatism, while seeking economic cooperation and potential strategic cooperation.

¹³² Paolo Pizzolo, "The "New Great Game" in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?", Taylor & Francis, January 10, 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2021.2007611>.

Conflict and radicalisation in Central Asia

There is a chance of increased tension and conflict between Russia and China to gain economic clout in Central Asia. Due to the increasing pressure being exerted by economic sanctions on Russia —because of the war in Ukraine—, Russia would be forced to intensify its economic relationship with CA, which would inevitably lead to a conflict with China, which is investing heavily in the region's economies and building many infrastructures that it will try to keep under its control. Tensions between Russia and China will also be heightened because, in order to protect its investments and infrastructure, China will have developed a military interest in CA and would try to establish a military base in the region. In this context, the internal situation in CA countries could become dangerously radicalised, due to the emergence of strong anti-Russian and anti-Chinese sentiments, as a consequence of factors such as the return to the homeland of many Central Asian migrants who had suffered mistreatment in Russia or increased Chinese citizens emigrating to CA to build the new infrastructures. As a result of all these circumstances, the region will ultimately be more unstable.

Conclusion of the Futures Wheel

At present, Russia and China are in a situation of strategic partnership to confront the US¹³³. In view of this current proximity between the two countries, it can be argued that —in the next ten years— the most likely scenario is that of CA stabilisation. Russia and China, despite their strong individual aspirations to influence CA, will understand that mutual cooperation is far more beneficial than confrontation. Russia is likely to cooperate much more intensively with China within the SCO —something that is already happening—, even to the extent of granting some military concessions to the SCO. For their part, CA countries will benefit from investment from both China and Russia and will prioritise trade relations with them —so as to seize the opportunity to prosper economically— rather than a rebellion that would keep them from progress.

4. POLITICAL INFLUENCE OVER CENTRAL ASIA

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 produced grand changes in global and regional geopolitics and led to the creation of a strategic vacuum in Central Asia. The former Soviet Republics in the Central Asian region were forced to build their own system of foreign policy coordination and develop their conceptual framework, even though they had no experience in

¹³³ Eugen Lungu.

doing so. These recently built countries did not have much space for action regarding their foreign policy, since the leading international and regional powers seized this opportunity to extend control and influence over the Central Asian region. The aim of these new players in the former Soviet territory was to exert influence in the areas of politics, economy, and security potential. China, Turkey, and Iran were among the most important players in this ‘big game’ of influence. The ways in which China, Turkey and Iran were involved in this game of political influence as soon as independence was proclaimed will be analysed below. Other key countries such as India and the United States, although they emerged later, will also have a great interest in the region and, therefore, try to exert its share of political influence.

4. 1. Solving the conflicts between China and CA

In recent years China's role in this region has grown due to the increase of interests. These interests can be explained, among other things, by the fact that three CA countries share borders with China —Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—, which makes them crucial for its security, as well as a great economic interest —since China has come to compete with Russia to be the main economic ally of Central Asia—. In this section it will be discussed China's strategy to achieve a key role in this region.

China's opening up to the world —in 1979— and its consequent economic growth meant that the country came to be seen as an ‘opportunity’ —although it also generated fear in these countries—. Among the priority issues for China in CA were the contingency of secessionist movements in the Xinjiang province, the supply of energy resources and the expansion of its economy. In order to avoid entering the region aggressively —but under the emblem of a ‘friendly neighbour’—, China has followed a ‘go slow’ strategy —trying to avoid any sign that could appear aggressive to the leaders of these countries and thus maintain stability—. ¹³⁴ This strategy sought to reduce and solve the problems it had with this region before becoming an economic ally, since this is one of the objectives of the ‘Go West’ policy. ¹³⁵ Summarising the problems that should be solved in two: delimitation of borders and ethnic minorities —the case of the Uyghurs—. ¹³⁶ The three Central Asian countries that share a border with China, adjoin the Chinese region of Xinjiang. For China, the resolution of these border

¹³⁴ David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda.

¹³⁵ Gregory Gleason, "Tajikistan-China Border Normalization | 30 | Beijing's Power and China," Taylor & Francis, December 18, 2014, <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/chapters/edit/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9781315719320-30&type=chapterpdf>.

¹³⁶ David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda.

disputes was important mainly in terms of security issues, because of the situation in its Xinjiang region, populated mainly by Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group that practices mainly Sunni Islam.¹³⁷

Delimitation of borders

In order to proceed with the cooperation between the CA region and China, the delimitation of borders was a crucial matter, since they share an average of 3,300 km² across the frontiers. The fall of the USSR —and thus the independence of the Central Asian republics— revived these disputes. With the aim of achieving a friendly relationship, China tried to solve these problems effectively. Negotiations started with the post-Soviet states forming a joint delegation —which ended with the creation of the SCO— as they preferred to act as a unit to avoid being seen as small or weak before a great power like China, although they were finally resolved individually.¹³⁸

In all three cases —Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—, the CA countries wanted to reach an agreement with China, since the absence of the latter seemed like a lost opportunity to ally themselves with one of their strongest neighbours. Although territory was ceded to China, little was given compared to what was initially requested. In the case of Kazakhstan, only 22% of the land requested in 1998 was ceded. In Kyrgyzstan the dispute was resolved in 2009, with China gaining only 32% of the territory.¹³⁹

The case of Tajikistan is different, not so much because of the territory ceded, as it is even smaller than the others (3.5% of the 28,000 km claimed), but because of the protests generated after the agreement, both because of discordance of the population and the lack of transparency of the deal.¹⁴⁰ The territory in question is the Pamir Mountains, a sparsely populated region and in principle not vital for any of the parties.¹⁴¹ The opinion of the population on this agreement is mixed, with many prioritising a sense of survival and many others distrustful of the government and fearful of China's growing presence. This is best reflected by comparing Murghab town —capital of Murghab district in the Pamir mountain range— with the border village of Rangkul, which is directly affected by the demarcation. Although the villagers tried to stop the demarcation and have expressed their disagreement in various ways —due to it taking away grazing land and even the land where their ancestors are buried—, this is diffused with the

¹³⁷ Tilman Pradt, "Territorial Disputes in Central Asia", en *The Prequel to China's New Silk Road*(Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4708-9_4.

¹³⁸ Alsu Tagirova, "Post-Soviet settlement of the Sino-Soviet border: a failed attempt at a three-level game, 1991–2012", Taylor & Francis, August 22, 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2022.2103518>.

¹³⁹ Tilman Pradt.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Gregory Gleason.

rapid growth of Tajik-Chinese bilateral trade.¹⁴² It is therefore unlikely that a conflict will arise beyond the different views of the Tajiks due to the border division, as both countries prioritise their trade relationship.

Thanks to China's peaceful attitude in dealing with border issues, China gained more support by the CA countries for its economic projects, most notably with the Belt and Road Initiative¹⁴³. The benefits of the pragmatism with which the disputes were resolved stand out with Kazakhstan and China's current relationship. As of 2018, China has become the main source of trade loans and the second largest trading partner for Kazakhstan, which has used these relationships to reduce its potential economic dependence on Russia.¹⁴⁴

The BRI is another reminder that Kazakhstan in particular, is at a critical juncture between Asia and Europe. This 'corridor' plays a crucial role in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan where the world's largest dry port, Khorgos, serves as a bridge connecting China with the other continents. In Khorgos, China's presence is overwhelming. While many have applauded the BRI, ordinary Kazakhs fear the country's connections to China. In the spring of 2016, protests erupted in western Kazakhstan over a government proposal to make rural land available to foreigners. The general sentiment was that Chinese companies would benefit directly from the new law. Eventually, the authorities suspended the plan. The Kazakh government continues to restrict Chinese land ownership and has repeatedly asserted its independence from it.¹⁴⁵ This is supported by Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy.¹⁴⁶

For most of the past 25 years, Kazakhstan has managed to delicately balance its relations with several major powers. Now that Beijing's economic influence is growing rapidly, Astana must find a way to deal with the geopolitical ambitions of its powerful neighbour while benefiting from new economic opportunities.

Ethnic minorities: the case of the Uyghurs

As we have exposed above, in order to reach a stable trade relationship between China and Central Asia, they need also to deal with the issue of ethnic minorities: the case of the Uyghurs.¹⁴⁷ These cross-border minorities play an important role in the development of economic

¹⁴² Assel Bitabarova, "Contested Views of Contested Territories: How Tajik Society Views the Tajik-Chinese Border Settlement," 2015, https://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/publicn/eurasia_border_review/ebr_v6n1/V6_N1_04Bitabarova.pdf.

¹⁴³ Tilman Pradt.

¹⁴⁴ "Kazakhstan", in *China's Neighbors* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27615-6_5.

¹⁴⁵ Rachel Vanderhill.

¹⁴⁶ Sean R. Roberts, "The Ukraine Conflict and the Future of Kazakhstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy", *PONARS Eurasia – New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia*, September 2015,

https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm388_Roberts_Sept2015-8.pdf

¹⁴⁷ David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda.

relations between China and Central Asia. China views ethnic minorities as a separatist threat, which impedes the goal of creating a peaceful and stable environment for the development of this region, as underdevelopment, instability and potential conflicts may spread and undermine its efforts to develop, 'pacify' and unite Xinjiang more strongly with the rest of China. China's concern for internal stability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region —its western province bordering the Central Asian states—, also helped to quickly define the borders with its western neighbours.¹⁴⁸ China seeks to involve more actively the Central Asian countries —which has the largest Uyghur population of all countries except China— in the fight against Uyghur separatism.¹⁴⁹

The Uyghurs are an ethnic group that shares culture and tradition with the Central Asian states, and constitute one of the biggest challenges for China. Since the early 1990s, the Uyghur movement has experienced a phase of revitalization and activity.¹⁵⁰ The Uyghurs have gained easy access to politicians, parties, parliamentarians, committees and leaders in an attempt to advance their cause vis-à-vis the Chinese government. These attempts, however, have generally failed, not so much because of Uyghur shortcomings or wrongdoing, but because of the rise of China as a global economic power and the general reluctance of international governments to promote separatism and upset the Chinese. Kazakhstan, like China, and because of its own internal context, is averse to any act of secession which may contribute to the questioning of existing borders.¹⁵¹

Considering China's persecution of the Uyghurs and the fact that Han Chinese have become the main ethnic group in the territory of Xinjiang, as well as the growing relationship between the CA states and China, it is understandable that the already deep-rooted and pro-independence sentiment is being strengthened. Self-determination should not necessarily lead to an independent state, instead, it could be addressed through increased autonomy. The Uyghurs of Xinjiang do not yet enjoy 'real' autonomy, which could be a substitute for independence, however, from history itself it can be stated that Beijing is not interested in any dialogue, either external or internal, with its national minorities,¹⁵² so this conflict cannot be spoken of as 'resolved'.¹⁵³ It is worth noting that in recent years the case of the Uyghurs is gaining

¹⁴⁸ Assel Bitabarova.

¹⁴⁹ Bernardo Mariani.

¹⁵⁰ Nicolás de Pedro, "El conflicto de Xinjiang: La minoría uigur y la política de Pekín," Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2008, <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72513/UNISCI%20DP%2016%20-%20De%20Pedro.pdf>.

¹⁵¹ Nicolás de Pedro, "El conflicto fuera de Xinjiang: la diáspora uigur y la política exterior china (ARI) - Real Instituto Elcano," Real Instituto Elcano, 2009, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/el-conflicto-fuera-de-xinjiang-la-diaspora-uigur-y-la-politica-exterior-china-ari/>.

¹⁵² Yitzhak Shichor, "Dialogue of the Deaf: The Role of Uyghur Diaspora Organizations Versus Beijing," Academia.edu - Share research, January 1, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/es/66676177/Dialogue_of_the_Deaf_The_Role_of_Uyghur_Diaspora_Organizations_Versus_Beijing.

¹⁵³ Nicolás de Pedro, "El conflicto de Xinjiang: La minoría uigur y la política de Pekín".

international relevance, so it would not be difficult to imagine that this issue will end up being addressed, even if it is for a Human Rights issue, as was done in a conference in Brussels in 2010, in which China was asked to open a meaningful trial; ‘Uyghurs Call for Dialogue with China-Implementation of the Chinese Constitution to Salvaguard and Protect the Rights of the Uyghur People’.¹⁵⁴

4.2. Turkey's ‘Pan-Turkism’ as a possible destabilizer in the region

As a country neighbouring the USSR, Turkey was also greatly affected by the Soviet disintegration process and, as a result, found itself in the need to restructure its foreign policy dynamics. This was a unique chance to restore its political, economic and cultural influence within the borders of the former Ottoman Empire, and to finally create a strategic inter-Turkish unification. Turkey's traditional foreign policy of non-involvement in the region's problems had to be abandoned. This turn of events has led Turkey to be considered an important player in a region where it previously had only a marginal influence and no active involvement.

As soon as these countries reached independence, Turkey recognized the newly created states and signed protocols with each of them, initiating diplomatic relations. By 1992, over 1,170 Turkish delegations visited both the Caucasus and Central Asia, and in October 1992, Turkey hosted the presidents of the Turkic states in Istanbul for an inaugural Turkic Summit¹⁵⁵.

As mentioned earlier, Turkey was not the only state of the region to try to gain power and influence in Central Asia. The competition among these different influences took on economic, political, ideological, and religious dimensions, and thus produced various possibilities for widespread conflict. Exerting too much influence in the region would provoke other regional players. From the Turkish perspective, the possibility of a military confrontation with either Iran or Russia provided ample concern. At this time, the international arena feared that the vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union could lead to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism among the Muslims of Eurasia. This led to the West's promotion of Turkey as a secular and democratic model of a Muslim state, expressing their preference for the Central Asian states to develop along Turkish secular lines, rather than along those of the Islamic Republic of Iran¹⁵⁶. While Russia initially welcomed Turkish influence, those views have long

¹⁵⁴ "WUC - UNPO Conference Report: Uyghurs Call for Dialogue with China," World Uyghur Congress, 2010, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/wuc-unpo-conference-report-uyghurs-call-for-dialogue-with-china/>

¹⁵⁵ Mustafa Aydin, "Turkish Policy Towards the Caucasus," *Connections* 1, no. 3 (January 2002): https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304803480_Turkish_Policy_Toward_the_Caucasus.

¹⁵⁶ Igor P. Lipovsky, "Central Asia: In Search of a New Political Identity," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 2 (1996):

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4328926.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:7dd79b11c554d0eb97a3c2dc23b6e354&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

since shifted, and Russia —becoming increasingly concerned about Turkish intentions— has become more aggressive in asserting its own right in its ‘near abroad’¹⁵⁷.

Turkey's foreign policy in Central Asia continues to be aimed at creating the institutional basis for global Turkish integration, the formation of a Turkish economic and general cultural space, capable of providing a new market for the Turkish economy and becoming a basis for a geopolitical blow to Greece, Russia, Iran, and China. The importance of Central Asia in Turkish foreign policy has risen since the beginning of the 2010s. The most successful achievement between Turkey and the Central Asian region has been the establishment of the Turkic Council in 2009¹⁵⁸. This council is now known as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and aims to promote comprehensive cooperation among its member states. It is necessary to emphasise the fact that the basis for Turkey's cooperation with the Central Asian region is not based on regional security nor military affairs, given that Russia dominates this field, primarily structuring its Central Asian policy using common historical and cultural elements.

Turkey needs to be very aware of how much influence it exerts in the Central Asian region. Ankara, for the previously mentioned reasons, has aspired to a leadership role in these countries with which they share common cultural elements, but this ambition can have a major geopolitical impact. If a sort of ‘Turkish commonwealth’ were to be created, it would entail a misalignment of the balance of political influence in the region. A growing rapprochement between Turkey and the former Soviet republics —with the exception of Tajikistan with which it has never had significant cultural ties— would cause Turkey to drift away not only from Russia, but also from Iran. This situation leads to an increase of the possibilities of conflict. Moreover, with Turkey's current economic conditions, it is highly unlikely that they would be willing to risk —even with Western support— such a high price for greater influence in the Central Asian region. Besides, Iran has at its disposal significant financial resources¹⁵⁹ to provide the economic aid needed in Central Asian states, compared to Turkey. So, for now, Turkey's resources —even with US support— are not enough to lead influence games of this magnitude in the Central Asian region¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁷ Mustafa Aydin.

¹⁵⁸ O. Ali Emre Sucu, R. Iskandarov, and D. Chernov, "Does Turkey Have a Central Asian Project?," *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 14, no. 3 (June 2021): <https://doaj.org/article/a0045e32b3cd40dbadf91aa9b1103449>.

¹⁵⁹ Igor P. Lipovsky.

¹⁶⁰ Diana Chis-Manolache, "Turkey's and Iran's Policy Towards Central Asian Countries" (National Defence University, 2020), <https://stec.univ-ovidius.ro/html/anale/RO/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Section%201/2.pdf>.

4.3. Iran's influence regardless of the limitations

Likewise, the fall of the Soviet Union also fundamentally altered the scope and dimensions of Iran's foreign policy, reactivating a totally new set of dynamics. The historical instability of the West (Iraq), East (Afghanistan), and South (the Persian Gulf), was complemented by the North. This came at a time when Iran was undergoing changes in the direction of its foreign policy from radical idealistic goals, such as the export of the Islamic Revolution, to more pragmatic aims, including giving priority to its own national interests and pursuing good neighbourly relations¹⁶¹.

The method in which Iran is influencing this area is through conflict resolution strategies and diplomatic mediation designed to: (a) safeguard against regional conflicts affecting Iranian security, (b) enhance Iran's prestige and its regional leverage, thereby contributing to Iran's centrality in regional affairs and (c) develop a positive image that neutralises the complex or negative impact of the 'Islamic factor'¹⁶².

Even though Iran has a favourable geopolitical situation —being located in an exceptional place for the creation of large roles— this Islamic factor is of great concern when analysing the extent of Iran's influence in the region. Today's Central Asian leaders regard Muslim fundamentalists as their most dangerous adversaries and make no attempt to hide their open hostility to their plans of establishing an Islamic state within the borders of the Central Asian republics¹⁶³. The Iranian population is overwhelmingly Shiite, while the majority of Central Asians are Sunnis, furthermore, Iran is openly theocratic in character —which is unacceptable to Central Asia's ex-communist leaders— and, above all, Iran has a policy of confrontation with the West —to whom Central Asia continues to appeal for aid and assistance—.

All these factors make Iran's influence in the region somewhat limited. As it happens, Iran is going through a critical moment. There have been large protests following the death of a 22-year-old girl, who had been arrested for allegedly violating Iran's rules about women's hijab. The demonstrations are seen as the most serious challenge to the Iranian authorities in decades¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶¹ Edward Wastnidge, "Central Asia in the Iranian Geopolitical Imagination," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* 1 (2017): <http://oro.open.ac.uk/49201/>.

¹⁶² Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Iran and Central Asia: Paradigm and Policy," *Central Asian Survey* 23, no. 2 (2004): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634930410001310508>.

¹⁶³ Graham E. Fuller, "The Emergence of Central Asia," *Foreign Policy* 78 (1990):

https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1148628.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:314bbd355249cacc3a3331c18d6d1a5&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1.

¹⁶⁴ "Iran: A Really Simple Guide to the Protests," *BBC News*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63240911>.

The demonstrations have escalated, with demands from more freedoms to an overthrow of the government. These protests have had a big repercussion around the world and are being compared to previous Iranian events. Even though past protests have not been effective —since the government has always suppressed them with force—, this time it is possible that there will be larger consequences, since —for the first time— protests involve people from all sections of society and age groups and have spread across dozens of cities and towns¹⁶⁵.

Depending on the outcome of these demonstrations Iran could see itself with different possible scenarios in the international community. The first, highly improbable, but possible scenario would be that these protests reach the longing effect on the Islamic government, thus, granting more freedom to citizens and, thus, developing a positive image neutralising the complex impact of the ‘Islamic factor’ —as stated previously as one of Iran’s aims in their foreign policy—. The second possible scenario is one in which these demonstrations do not obtain the desired outcome and —due to the violent suppression of the protests by the government— everything goes back to the way it was before. The relevance regarding this last scenario, is that Iran's image in the international community has already been negatively affected due to the government’s violent response to the protests, and so, the confrontation between the West and Iran is being aggravated. This estrangement between Iran and the West will be reflected in relations between Iran and CA, seeing that this region cannot afford to strengthen its alliances with a country like Iran, while establishing and forging new alliances with the West.

It is in Iran’s interest to increase its relations with the CA region and curb the spread of Turkish and Russian influence. Yet, its aims are cautious as far as the Russian Federation is concerned, simply because of the ‘*modus vivendi*’ desired by Tehran for the receipt of Russian military hardware and technology¹⁶⁶.

Besides the previously stated, Iran still has influence in the region. The gradual acceptance of Iran as an important player in some measure comes from the fact that years ago, this country played a role in containing the threat from Afghanistan during the Taliban era and even took actions facilitating their downfall. Due to the change of situation in Afghanistan last August, this role of containment is once again greatly appreciated by the Central Asian countries. So, even though Iran has had many limitations to its influence in the region, it has always set out to fulfil what it sees as its ‘natural geopolitical role’ of providing a bridge between the outside

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ertan Efeğil and Leonard A. Stone, "Iran's Interests in Central Asia: A Contemporary Assessment," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 3 (2001): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02634930120095358>.

world and landlocked Central Asia. The cultural and linguistic commonalities with Farsi-speaking Tajikistan has been one of the main bridges between Iran and the Central Asian region.

Iran-Tajikistan rising relation

Tajikistan is viewed by many within the Iranian government as a ‘*Persian state that would naturally gravitate to Iran on account of thousands of years of so-called shared linguistic, cultural, and societal relations*’¹⁶⁷. The fall of the Soviet Union brought excited hope within Iran's political establishment that close links could be established with the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics, but in particular with Tajikistan.

Iran was the first country to officially recognize Tajikistan's independence and establish its embassy in the capital, Dushanbe. Efforts to ‘re-establish’ ties between Iran and Tajikistan were —according to Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister of the time— a ‘natural continuation’ of the common history that existed between the two states¹⁶⁸. Of all the new ‘Muslim’ states created, Tajikistan was the only Farsi-speaking state with a strong linkage to the Iranian cultural milieu. Relations between the two countries grew closer with former Iranian President —Mahmud Ahmadinejad—, according to whom ‘Tajikistan was a strategic partner and the two states’ “common history and culture” made them inseparable’¹⁶⁹.

Yet this renewed interest followed a period of crisis evidenced in three events. Firstly, in 2015, Iran's former Supreme Leader —Ayatollah Ali Khamenei— received the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan —Muhiddin Kabiri—, labelled as a terrorist in his country, since the party was officially banned earlier that year. Tehran's move angered Dushanbe and was followed by an official protest, naming Iran a ‘supporter of terrorism’¹⁷⁰. Secondly, Tajikistan was involved in the lawsuit for embezzlement of billions of dollars from the Ministry of Petroleum by Iranian billionaire Babak Zanjani. It was later revealed that the tycoon had 2.4 billion dollars in the National Bank of Tajikistan. Dushanbe categorically denied any involvement, but tensions between the countries continued to escalate. Thirdly, the President of Tajikistan at the time —Emomali Rahmon— paid an official visit to the main rival of Iran in the region, Saudi Arabia, and returned with unprecedented business contracts. Saudi activities with

¹⁶⁷ Breton Clark, "Ahmadinejad, Iran, and Foreign Policy Dysfunction in Tajikistan," *APP, Asian Politics & Policy*, May 2015, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/aspp.12180?casa_token=DV4EJd8sM14AAAAA:3Neo3gxJSWAqIIaCRU0URVzSP_s9ukUPSs6JccJEChgsFAUYk0E8XIhrOUrDoPHixLXIed5uXp#aspp12180-bib-0009

¹⁶⁸ Breton Clark.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Abdulfattoh Shafiev, "Iran and Tajikistan: A Story of Love and Hate," *Central Asia Policy Brief, CAP Central Asia Program* 34 (February 2016): <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Policy-Brief-34-February-2016.pdf>.

Tajikistan were focused on decreasing the influence of Iran. Consequently, relations worsened due to these factors and impacted on economic cooperation. Trade dropped threefold from \$292 million in 2013 to \$98 million in 2018¹⁷¹.

However, in June 2019, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit —presided by the President of Tajikistan in Dushanbe— was signalled as an important milestone in recovering Iran-Tajik relationships. Tajik President's greeting to Iran's representative: 'Welcome to your second homeland'¹⁷² confirmed the defrost in bilateral ties. Iran decided to fund several projects in Tajikistan —particularly the construction of the Istiklol tunnel¹⁷³—. Another clear evidence of this improved relationship was seen earlier this year when Tajik President —Emomali Rahmon— paid an official visit to Tehran during which they pledged to improve diplomatic and trade relations. This is the first time since 2013 that the Tajik president visits Iran. Officials from the two Persian-speaking countries signed 17 cooperation agreements in areas such as trade, transportation, energy, education and tourism. Iranian state media have attributed the reset to President Ebrahim Raisi, who assumed office in August 2021.

With the rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Tajikistan looked at Iran hoping to find an ally in it. Both countries are united by the common threats and risks associated with the newly instated Taliban regime. Iran could become an additional security guarantor to the growing threats on Tajikistan's south borders. In May 2022, the Iranian armed forces chief of staff, Major-General Mohammad Bagheri, travelled to Dushanbe with pledges to enhance bilateral security cooperation¹⁷⁴. During his visit, Bagheri and his Tajik counterpart attended the inauguration of a facility for the production of Iranian-designed Ababil-2 tactical drones¹⁷⁵. This highlights Tehran's ability to 'export military equipment to allied and friendly countries to help increase security and sustainable peace'¹⁷⁶.

Finally, another reason for the rapprochement between Tajikistan and Iran has been influenced by the Ukrainian war. As mentioned previously, Russia is under sanctions, which carries serious risks for Tajikistan's economy. To mitigate these effects, Tajikistan is looking for

¹⁷¹ Albina Muratbekova, "Is It Worth to Expect Former Friendship in Tajikistan-Iran Relations?," *Eurasian Research Institute*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/is-it-worth-to-expect-former-friendship-in-tajikistan-iran-relations/>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Silvia Boltuc, "Iran's Interests and Strategy in Central Asia," *SpecialEurasia*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/09/07/iran-interests-central-asia/>.

¹⁷⁴ "Tajikistan Ends Cold War With Iran as It Seeks New Trade, Security Partners," *Eurasianet*, June 3, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-ends-cold-war-with-iran-as-it-seeks-new-trade-security-partners>.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Giorgio Cafiero, "Drones Sign of Strong Iran-Tajik Relations as Tehran Looks East," *Aljazeera*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/drones-sign-of-strong-iran-tajik-relations-as-tehran-looks-east>.

support elsewhere and nearby. Ameliorated ties with Iran have led to bilateral trade doubling between 2020 and 2021, to \$121m¹⁷⁷.

To conclude, it is safe to say that Tajikistan and Iran are stepping towards a new direction of cooperation, which is concentrated on a more non-ideologic, and interest-based approach, where future close strategic alliances are in the interest of both countries. It is worth mentioning that the relationship between these two countries —however much it may improve— will probably always be limited by the fact that a rapprochement of Iran with Tajikistan could complicate the former's relations with Western countries. Regardless, to this day, the relations between Iran and Tajikistan have reached a new level politically, taking common interests in ensuring security in the region amid Russia's war with Ukraine.

4.4. India's interest in CA

Any discussion of trends affecting Central Asia would be incomplete without a discussion of Indian policy. In the past years, India has grown in military and economic power, and Indian policymakers have increased their attention and interest in becoming a major pan-Asian player¹⁷⁸.

India's ties with CA can be traced back to the time of the historic Silk Road¹⁷⁹. Both regions were connected not only through exchanges of goods and people but through cultural and civilizational links too. After attaining independence, India was left devoid of an overland route connecting it to Central Asia. The independence of India coincided with the onset of the Cold War, after which the Indian leadership allied itself to the Soviet Union. Since these republics were part of the Soviet Union, interaction between them and India was not significant, as all deals were conducted between New Delhi and Moscow. This translated into the fact that the economic engagement with the Central Asian region was so shallow that after the dissolution of the USSR, the markets of the former region accounted for only 1.5% of India's exports in 1992¹⁸⁰. Since then, India has sought to build more robust and strong relations with Central Asian republics.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Stephen Blank, "India's Rising Profile in Central Asia," *Comparative Strategy* 22, no. 2 (2003): https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01495930390202607?casa_token=pbEKFwPzqfYAAAAA:TOxi_06-tYdAJNsNDQM3DtJWmp-e0RL1dP9qti-T_kQufO7O1Sss6gL0MWSsYdZxJ7w2QqvOGA.

¹⁷⁹ Nargis Jan, "The Role of India in "New Great Game" of Central Asia," *International Journal of Science and Research* 11, no. 1 (2020):

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357747042_The_Role_of_India_in_New_Great_Game_of_Central_Asia.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014) there has been a new approach to the CA region. In 2015 Modi officially visited the five Central Asian republics, sparking the relations between India and CA. Illustration of this is the Connect Central Asian Policy (CCAP) that India has enforced, with the aim of strengthening energy, economic, political, security, strategic and cultural relations with Central Asian states.

This India-Central Asian partnership is gaining geopolitical and strategic importance for India due to three main interests: energy security, national security and commerce. This partnership can play a significant role in strengthening India's position in the world order and normalising the current situation in Afghanistan. Central Asia's strategic location means that it is central to geopolitical manoeuvres that affect India's relations with Pakistan, China, the United States, and other powers in the region.

Regarding energy security, India has a prime interest in securing an assured and uninterrupted supply of energy. India currently sources nearly three quarters of its oil consumption from abroad, much of it from the volatile Middle East region¹⁸¹. With India expected to become increasingly dependent on imported energy, reducing dependence on the Middle East and cultivating alternative sources of energy has become a vital concern. To this aim, India is participating in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, even though it remains 'largely embryonic'¹⁸², when it becomes operational—as mentioned earlier—it will act as a peacekeeping force between the four nations it connects.

Furthermore, concerning national security, India's interests are primarily focused on security cooperation and joint efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and countering fundamentalism and terrorism in the region. New Delhi sees the region as a source of religious extremism and is concerned about stemming the rise of radical Islamist group that may pose a terrorist threat. Given the transnational nature of these groups—including links with the Taliban and other militant groups in neighbouring countries—, this generates a high degree of concern in New Delhi. For these reasons, India stands ready to play a greater role in the Central Asian security matrix and to prevent real and perceived threats to its national security.

Lastly, as for the commercial interests, India aims at countering China's expansionist strategies in the region, developing infrastructure in the region and enhancing trade and economic

¹⁸¹ Ivan Campbell, *India's Role and Interests in Central Asia* (October 2013), <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/indias-role-and-interests-in-central-asia.pdf>.

¹⁸² Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, "India's Plan to Realize TAPI," *Diplomat*, April 12, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indias-plan-to-realize-tapi/>.

relations with all five Central Asian states. Central Asia offers a relatively untapped market for Indian consumer goods, especially as consumers in the region have little to choose from between highly priced, imported Western products and cheap but lower-quality Chinese manufactured goods that have flooded the region¹⁸³.

From the foregoing analysis it is clear that the Central Asian region poses a great interest for India for several reasons. Nevertheless, India has yet to translate these aspirations into strategic and sustained policy action. Despite much talk of India's growing role in Central Asia, it remains essentially a minor player and is unable to compete with China or Russia.

4.5. US opportunities to influence CA

The last section of this strategic analysis report is devoted to the United States, and this is for a reason: of all the countries analysed so far, the influence of the US in CA has historically been the most limited one, when compared to that of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and India. Its geographical remoteness—the US is the most distant of all the countries struggling to influence CA—the absence of strong allies in the region that would allow the US to have some projection in CA—as is the case in East Asia, where US-friendly countries such as Japan and South Korea allow it to have an impact in the area—and the fact that CA is surrounded by regimes that are particularly reluctant to the US—such as Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, China and Russia—are some of the reasons why the US finds it more difficult than other powers to intervene in CA.

In the early 1990s, CA was perceived as a remote region outside Washington's strategic interests, which led the US to neglect the region's problems, such as the Tajikistan Civil War. A small progress was made in 1999, with the adoption of the 'Silk Road Act' by the US Congress, whereby Washington sought to help CA countries with security, counter-terrorism and economy-building issues¹⁸⁴. However, the definitive change in the US approach to CA came with the beginning of the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan in October 2001, when the US massively increased its military and economic presence in the Central Asian region. Later, the 'New Silk Road' initiative adopted by the US in 2011 committed to developing investment, infrastructure and trade around Afghanistan, which necessarily involved Central Asia¹⁸⁵. The US also pointed out its commitment to build a more stable and prosperous Central Asia in the US

¹⁸³ Ivan Campbell.

¹⁸⁴ Eugen Lungu.

¹⁸⁵ "U.S. Support for the New Silk Road", U.S. Department of State Archive, Accessed October 7, 2022, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/index.htm>.

Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025¹⁸⁶. Finally, the latest major milestone in the US-Central Asia relationship has been the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and, consequently, a further distancing of US stake in CA.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan has thrown CA states into a situation of increased instability—due to the growing threats emerging from Afghanistan—, forcing them to strengthen their relations with Russia and China—as stated earlier in this report, through platforms such as the CSTO and SCO—in order to continue to maintain secure borders. Moreover, Russia always criticises the US for its failure in Afghanistan, where the expectations of Central Asian governments and Russia from NATO remained unfulfilled¹⁸⁷. In this way, Russia is trying to create a negative image of the US and convince CA countries that only Russia can successfully protect them. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine is a golden test for the CA to know whether the US is loyal to its allies or whether Russia is right in its accusations that the US can't fulfil its objectives, just like in Afghanistan's case.

Therefore, in the eyes of the CA states, the war in Ukraine may reinforce the image of the US as a strong power committed to the struggle for peace or it may, on the contrary, further undermine the image of weakness that it left behind after withdrawing from Afghanistan. If the US remains firm in its support for Ukraine, CA countries will probably want to enhance their cooperation with it—through initiatives such as NATO's PfP— on matters such as border control and military training, and will see in the US a reliable partner for economic cooperation, so as to balance the influence of Russia and China in their territories.

¹⁸⁶ "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity - United States Department of State", United States Department of State, Accessed October 7, 2022,

<https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>.

¹⁸⁷ "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity - United States Department of State", United States Department of State, February 5, 2020,

<https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>.

CONCLUSION

Even though the countries of the Central Asian region have a multi-vector foreign policy—in order to diversify their relations—, due to their common history with Russia, they still remain largely dependent on the former Soviet leader in many areas. However, with the war in Ukraine, this interest in broadening this multi-vector policy has accelerated. Accordingly, many countries have taken advantage of this situation and tried to increase their influence in the CA region, creating a so-called game of influences.

In the military sphere, Russia continues to have the greatest weight in the region, although this is gradually diminishing with the entry of other powers seeking to support CA in this regard. The CA countries aspire to be part of different organisations and to cooperate with other countries through military alliances, with the aim of diversifying their military relations.

In the economic game of influences, CA is focusing on trade-relations with other countries, since the Russian economy is currently weakening. This allows for the entry of significant new investors, especially from China and the EU. However, in terms of resources, CA remains very dependent on Russia. The fact that CA is a landlocked region is a determining factor that prevents these countries from exploiting their energy potential. For this reason, the CA states are seeking to invest more in infrastructure. In the matter of new trade relations, it is worth highlighting the role of the EU and China.

To this day, there is a delicate balance of political influence in the region. Different actors—such as Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India and the US—, want to create stronger ties, each for their own interests, but making sure not to tilt this balance of powers, otherwise this could lead to the detonation of a conflict in the region.

As exposed, CA is an area in which the interests and influences of many actors interact. In this context, although the CA countries are ‘pawns’, they are ‘moving’ ahead. If they are smart and strategic in their interaction with other powers, then they will have great scope for progress and growth—especially economic growth—.

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