

The Changing Global Security Landscape and Its Impact on Russia and Central Asia Relations

(The research was conducted within the framework of the InteRussia fellowship program with the financial and organizational support of the partners).

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Abstract

The recent changes of the global security landscape marked by Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine, the revival of terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan, and the Taliban's return to power have significantly impacted on Russia's strategic engagement with Central Asia. These developments have underscored the region's growing geostrategic significance and the urgency for cooperative security frameworks. This study explores the evolving nature of Russia's role in Central Asia's security architecture and the strategic responses of Central Asian republics to shifting global power dynamics.

The first chapter examines Russia's continuing institutional dominance in the region's security architecture, particularly through multilateral organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), mutual military agreements, and regional labor migration ties. Despite growing influence of other global actors, Russia continues to function as the region's principal security guarantor, leveraging its geographic proximity, institutional presence, and longstanding ties.

The second chapter analyzes the adaptive strategies of Central Asian states, specifically their neutral position and multivector foreign policies. These strategies enable them to balance relations with great powers including Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. At the same time this strategy allows them safeguarding national sovereignty and avoiding entanglement in great power competition.

The study concludes that the interplay between great powers competition and regional agency is reshaping the balance of influence in the region. At the moment, there are no viable alternative security providers for the region. Therefore, while Russia remains central to the region's security framework, Central Asian republics continue to assert their autonomy through neutral and multivector foreign policy strategies, reinforcing both cooperation and strategic balance in a rapidly changing global order.

Keywords: Russia, Central Asia, CSTO, balance of power, security, stability, terrorism

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Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of Central Asia has been marked by intricate relationships between different great powers and evolving security dynamics. Current rapidly changing international security environment had direct impact on the geopolitics of the region. Situated at the crossroads of Eurasian geopolitics, Central Asia is increasingly influenced by the strategic ambitions of great powers, including Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. Recent global security changes, particularly Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the resurgence of terrorism and extremism along the southern border of the CSTO have had profound implications for regional security and power configurations.

This research delves into the multifaceted relationships between Russia and the Central Asia, focusing on how changes in global power dynamics influenced strategic priorities and ways of engagement. Central to the analysis of this paper is the role of Russia as the enduring security guarantor in Central Asia through mechanisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), bilateral military cooperation agreements, and labor migration ties. Despite increasing external pressure and emerging challenges from China and the West, there remain no viable alternative security providers in the region. Consequently, both Russia Federation and the Central Asian republics continue to emphasize mutual and multilateral cooperation to enhance regional stability.

At the same time, Central Asian countries have chosen pragmatic and adaptive strategies rooted in neutrality and multivector foreign policy. These strategies allow them to maintain balanced relations with competing great powers and protect their national sovereignty while capitalizing on economic and diplomatic opportunities from different sides. By pursuing a multivector policy, Central Asian states aim to hedge against geopolitical risks and avoid entanglement in great power rivalries.

As part of broader move towards nonwestern alliance the growing engagement between Central Asia and Russia is seen as South –South movement from Global South perspective. The so called multivector policies of Central Asian states are perceived as a sign of move from western dominated institution to regional priorities in Global South.

The aim of this study is to analyze the evolving geopolitical security landscape in Central Asia and

its impact on Russia–Central Asia relations. It examines the key drivers of geopolitical competition in the region and assesses the diverse responses of Central Asian states to these challenges. The research focuses on developments from 2014 to 2024—a decade that has witnessed rapidly increasing global transformations and regional realignments. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: How have changes in the geopolitical security landscape influenced Russia–Central Asia strategic relations, and how have Central Asian states responded through their strategic choices?

Given the broad nature of the topic, the scope of the study is narrowed down to focus on the most relevant features of Russia’s institutional security role and Central Asia’s strategic agency, allowing for a more focused and in-depth analysis.

Research Methodology

This study mainly employs a qualitative research approach to examine the evolving geopolitical security landscape and its influence on Russia–Central Asia relations. The analysis is based on a comprehensive review of academic journals, policy papers, books, analytical reports, and other scholarly literature relevant to the topic. In addition to secondary academic sources, the research closely examines official documents, including multilateral and bilateral agreements, policy statements, and governmental reports from Central Asian republics, Russia, and other global powers engaged in the security architecture of the region. Public speeches and statements by political leaders are also analyzed to capture current geostrategic perspectives and diplomatic positions. Quantitative data, such as statistics, trade volumes, statistics on military expenses, and economic indicators, are incorporated where appropriate to support the qualitative findings and provide empirical ground to the geopolitical dynamics under investigation.

By incorporating different sources and data, the study offers a nuanced and contextualized understanding of the complex interplay between regional agency, great power competition, and evolving security dynamics in Central Asian region.

Literature review

Geopolitically Central Asia situated amid the formidable powers of Russia, China, and the Middle East, which makes it a focal point of global strategic interest. Among this intricate web of relationships, Russia perceives Central Asia as an integral component of its sphere of influence, asserting dominance across political, military, and cultural domains. These strong historical ties formed during the Soviet period, where Central Asian nations were constituent republics. Russia's strategic position in the region was further accentuated by the evolving international security landscape. This preliminary review of the literature aims to explore and synthesize existing scholarly work on the dynamic relations between Russia and Central Asia, especially in light of the changing global security landscape.

The legacy of the Soviet Union plays a important role in shaping Russia's perspective on Central Asian republics. As former Soviet republics, the historical ties between Moscow and the Central Asian countries create a sense of continuity and common identity. Emphasizing its role as a stabilizing power in the post-Soviet space, Russia seeks to maintain influence and stability.

Addressing security concerns, Russia views Central Asia as a crucial buffer zone in countering the spread of extremism and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Because of the high potential for instability in the region, Russia sees its influence in Central Asia as indispensable for maintaining regional stability and preventing security threats from south border of CSTO.

Actively working to maintain and strengthen its influence in the post-Soviet area, Russia uses mechanisms such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These efforts serve as instrument for Russia to deepen integration and cooperation with Central Asian states. These mechanisms underscore Russia's commitment to fostering regional alliances and partnerships. According to some experts, Russia's main geostrategic and geo-economic interest in Central Asia is the development of the Eurasian Economic Union (Mitrofanov, 2023).

According to Russia Foreign Policy Concept, in strategically engaging with Central Asia it pursues several key objectives. According to Sernetsky this strategy includes preventing alternative security systems without Russian participation, countering third-country military consolidation, expanding Russian capital in Central Asian economies, comprehensively protecting the rights and

interests of Russian citizens, and reinforcing the positions of the Russian language and culture in the region. Additionally, Russia emphasizes the consolidation of multilateral mechanisms to uphold stability and security along its southern borders, underscoring the multifaceted nature of its regional strategy (Sernetskii, 2013).

Contrary to Russia's perceived dominance, other researchers highlight an escalating competition faced by the Russian Federation in Central Asia. The complexity arises from the active involvement of great powers, mainly the USA, China, Turkey, and Iran. These powers have explicitly declared Central Asia as a sphere of vital interest. These great powers give significant political importance to the region, intensifying the competitive dynamics and challenging Russia's historically dominant position in Central Asian geopolitics (Vlasov, V. S. 2011).

Researchers studying the geopolitics of Central Asia often employ the "Great Game" framework as an analytical framework, unraveling political tensions among big powers. For example, Ziatdinov D.'s examination of heightened involvement by Russia, China, and the United States characterizes this phenomenon as a new iteration akin to the historically recognized "Great Game" (Ziatdinov, 2021).

It is noteworthy to mention that the geopolitical powers' contest for influence in the region intensified with the beginning of Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine. Many observers and researcher of the politics and international relations believe that due to Russia's engagements in the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts, coupled with internal economic challenges resulting from Western sanctions, Russia was neglecting its historically significant "soft underbelly" – Central Asia. This perceived neglect has led to concerns about Russia losing ground in the region. This situation highlighted the potential consequences of diverting attention and resources away from Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia (Skalamera, 2023).

In the beginning of 2023 Central Asia attracted more attention of the Great powers. Specifically, China US and European Union had general meetings with the head of the Central Asian republics. It seemed that Global Powers want to enhance their influence in the region. All this process was going on when Russia which considers Central Asia its zone of interest was busy with Special Military Operation in Ukraine.

Existing academic study predominantly focuses on historical aspects, such as the Soviet era (Central Asia as part of USSR) and early post-Soviet period of Russia and Central Asian strategic cooperation. However, rapid shift in geopolitical realities requires comprehensively addressing the current geopolitical dynamics, considering the evolving roles of Great Powers in recent years.

All in all, the intertwined historical legacies, geopolitical imperatives, and security considerations form the backdrop for Russia's multifaceted relationship with Central Asian republics. As the global security landscape continues to change, understanding the intricate dynamics of these relations becomes necessary for understanding the broader geopolitical shifts in the heart of Eurasia. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze how has shift in the global geopolitical security landscape impacted on Russia–Central Asia security relations, and how have Central Asian states responded through their strategic choices?

Russia's Security Role in Central Asia Amid Global Geopolitical Upheaval: Institutional Dominance and Regional Stability in Flux

Central Asia, as a focal point for geopolitical competition, has experienced increasing strategic importance in recent years. The intensification of global tension, particularly the conflict in Ukraine, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, and increasing tensions between the US and China, has turned the region into a strategic chessboard. This chapter explores Russia's enduring role as a security guarantor in Central Asia. It examines institutional frameworks, bilateral relations, and the interplay of external pressures shaping regional stability. The world is witnessing a fundamental change in the international security landscape. The conflicts in the Middle East, the existing threat of terrorism and extremism, and the Ukraine crisis, along with growing economic tension between the US and China, are indications of a changing geopolitical world order. Alongside other countries, the changing global security landscape has intensified tensions among great powers in Central Asia as well. Factors like the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan and Special Military Operations in Ukraine have significantly altered the security dynamics of Central Asia.

The strategic importance of Central Asia for Russia and the geopolitical tension among superpowers in the region have always depended on external factors. A specific characteristic of the Central Asian region is that security issues have long acted as a dominant factor ensuring international and regional interaction—a factor that has been consistently utilized by other geopolitical powers to justify their presence in the region (Karataeva, 2023, p. 62).

The geopolitical situation after 9/11 influenced Russia to change its perspective of the region and accelerated the establishment of regional strategic institutions for cooperation with the Central Asian republics. The establishment of institutions like the CSTO and enhancing regional cooperation within the SCO were the most important steps taken by Russia and the Central Asian republics. Russia and other powers enhanced their position in the region after the war on terror and the growing role of Western powers in the region

Russia is considered as a crucial security player that ensures the safety of the states of Central Asia. As members of the CSTO, three of the five Central Asian republics enjoy protection by Russian security guarantees. Russian foreign policy, adopted in March 2023, focuses on maintaining strategic stability and strengthening international peace and security as its main strategic objectives. This document emphasizes the significance of the unification of potentials in different fields with the CIS member states and neighboring states in Russia's security, stability, territorial integrity, and enhancing its position as one of the sovereign centers of global development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Strategic cooperation with Russia is important for Central Asian countries in terms of providing regional and internal stability. Therefore, Central Asian states consider Russia as their main strategic partner and cooperate with it through regional institutions and bilateral channels.

Russia, through bilateral relations with the republics of the region and the CSTO, plays a significant role as the security guarantor in the region. However, analysts claim that China is also progressively taking on an important security role. These developments are most clearly manifested in the creation of a mechanism for consultations to jointly combating terrorism and extremism, known as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism. Established by China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in summer 2016 in Urumqi, this mechanism highlights China's increasing involvement in regional security issues (Kazantsev, 2021, pp. 57-71).

Both China and Russia have expressed concerns about the threat of terrorism and extremism emanating from the territory of Afghanistan. The withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 had profound implications for regional security and spurred increased cooperation between Russia and China in the region. In response to the threat from Afghan border, Russia swiftly engaged with established institutions like the CSTO and strengthened bilateral relations with the Central Asian Republics (Pritchkin, 2023, pp. 13-21).

Another main external factor shaping the security landscape of the region was Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine. The crisis in Ukraine has somewhat limited Russia's capacity to counterbalance the growing influence of other great powers in Central Asia. Despite this, Central Asian republics have maintained robust strategic and military cooperation with Russia. Furthermore, economic relations between these countries are strengthening, illustrating a paradoxical relationship amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Another important component in the connections between Russia and Central Asia is the country's strong demand for labor and its potential as a job hub for the citizens of Central Asian countries. According to the data, there is a growing migrant population coming from Central Asian republics to Russia (Table 1). Based on the currently available data, the primary source of labor migration in 2023 was visitors from Uzbekistan (630,859), Tajikistan (349,357), Kyrgyzstan (172,591), Armenia (47,337), and Kazakhstan (34,783) (Kostenko, 2023).



Table 1. The sources of the information: Единая межведомственная информационно-статистическая система (ЕМИСС, Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.).

Sharing borders with the region, Russia is concerned about the security of Central Asia and remains the security guarantor for the region. Achieving stability and providing regional security seems impossible without established regional security mechanisms and institutions like the CSTO. Analysts and experts on Central Asian region state that, at the moment, there are no alternative security providers for the region (TASS, 2023). Therefore, both Russia and Central Asian countries are interested in mutual and multilateral cooperation to enhance security and stability in the region.

The two Central Asian republics that are not CSTO members, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have mutual security cooperation with Russia. The agreement on the development of military- technical cooperation signed on November 29, 2016, serves as the foundation for current security relations between Russia and Republic of Uzbekistan (Russian Federation, 2016). The political foundation for collaboration in the field of security with Turkmenistan is the agreement on cooperation in the field of security, signed on April 10, 2003, and the agreement on strategic partnership, signed on

October 2, 2017 (Russian Federation & Turkmenistan, 2017).

In summary, while Russia's influence in the region faces growing challenges from other global actors, particularly China, it remains a key security guarantor for Central Asia. The enduring institutional relationships, regional proximity, and historic links ensure Russia's relevance in shaping the region's security architecture. Moving forward, Russia's ability of adaptation to the changing geopolitical environment will determine the extent of its strategic influence in Central Asia.

Central Asia's Neutrality and Multivector Strategy as a Response to the Shifting Global Order and Great Power Rivalry

In response to intensifying geopolitical competition and the shifting global order, Central Asian states have adopted neutrality and multivector foreign policy strategies as cornerstones of their diplomacy. This strategy allows them to navigate complex relationships with competing global powers while preserving sovereignty and fostering national development. This chapter explores the practical manifestations of these policies and their implications for regional security and stability.

At the same time, all countries of the region conduct so-called "multivector" foreign policies, balancing relations with other main global and regional powers. Researchers assert that Russian-Chinese relations in Central Asia are built on principles of coexistence and cooperation rather than exclusion and geopolitical confrontation. Russia traditionally seen as the key security hegemon and China as a growing economic power in the region. Nonetheless, China's growing active involvement in the military and security dimension increases doubt on this conventional narrative (Wilson, 2021).

In addition to its emerging dominant economic position in the region, China initiated military cooperation with the Central Asian republics within the framework of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism. Therefore, concerns have arisen regarding China's military presence in Tajikistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan. However, according to researchers, China lacks both the institutional and normative basis as well as experience of international peacekeeping missions necessary to effectively respond to security challenges in Central Asian countries (Pritchins, 2023).

The republics of the region, considering the geopolitical confrontation among major powers, endeavor to diversify their engagements, especially in matters concerning regional security. Cooperation within the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) stands as one of the primary facets of the foreign policy of Central Asian republics. In comparison to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the SCO Summit serves as a significant regional political platform for dialogue. In addition, it establishes common space of good neighborliness in Eurasia, integrating the two primary global actors in the region—namely Russia and China (Pritchins, 2023).

Central Asian countries have maintained a neutral position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict while simultaneously refraining from aligning with either party. From a realist perspective, this stance is justified, as Central Asian republics determine their foreign policies based on their national interests. The President of Kyrgyzstan articulated this point of view, emphasizing that taking sides would not benefit any party of the conflict. He articulated that small countries like Kyrgyzstan lack the influence to affect the political process and thus opt for neutrality (Masalieva, 2022).

In commenting on Shavkat Mirziyoyev's telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin, the spokesperson for the Uzbekistan president elucidated Tashkent's position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. *"I would like to emphasize that Uzbekistan maintains a balanced, neutral position on this issue. Our country traditionally enjoys close, friendly relations with both Russia and Ukraine. We are committed to ensuring peace, stability, and sustainable development in our vast region,"* he stated (Kun.uz, 2022).

In compare to other countries in the region, Tajikistan did not officially express its position on the Ukraine situation. However, the director of the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan stated that Tajikistan maintains a neutral stance regarding "the conflict that occurred between two countries—Russia and Ukraine," refraining from favoring either side. He also dismissed the statement about China's increasing influence in Tajikistan as a result of the events in Ukraine, which purportedly weakened Russia's position (Asia-Plus, 2023).

However, China and other major powers now have a chance to increase their influence in the region due to the intensification of the Ukraine situation. The Central Asian republics have multivector foreign policies that go beyond their relations with China and Russia. They also actively engage with Western nations in a different ways. This strategy acts as a key check on

China's expanding influence in light of the increasing hostilities between China and the United States and between Russia and the West.

This realist strategy underscores the prioritization of national interests in foreign policy decisions. Despite ongoing concerns raised by the US and other Western nations about the Central Asian Republics' involvement in circumventing sanctions against Russia, relations between these countries and Western partners have indicated signs of improvement. Notably, in 2023, Central Asian leaders were hosted by the President of the USA in New York (Stratfor, 2023), indicative of the region's relative autonomy in foreign policy decision-making.

At the moment, being neutral and conducting multivector foreign policy is the optimal option for both Central Asian states and big powers in the region. Putin's visit to China was reported by Beijing and Moscow to have reaffirmed the need for collaboration rather than conflict and for the global community to be consolidated rather than divided. The parties are against big states engaging in confrontational diplomacy once again, where the weak states fall victim to the great powers (Office of the President of Russia, 2022).

In comparison to China and Russia, the United States and the European Union are not currently able to serve as the region's primary investors and security guarantors. That being said, they are strengthening their diplomatic and commercial ties with the countries of the region. In particular, ties between countries of the region and the United States and the European Union have grown after the Special Military Operation and the subsequent sanctions campaign against Russia.

This dynamic reflects how Central Asian states are leveraging their neutrality and multivector foreign policies to navigate shifting global pressures and maintain autonomy. By cultivating relations with multiple powers—including Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU—they are hedging their bets and positioning themselves as strategic actors in an increasingly multipolar world. This strategic flexibility is enabling them to avoid entanglement in great power conflicts while asserting agency in international affairs.

Conclusion

The geopolitical landscape is witnessing unprecedented uncertainty, leading to intensified geopolitical tensions in different regions worldwide, including Central Asia. Central Asian

republics have prioritized security and stability by aligning with Russia, while also facing

growing economic influence from China and pressure from Western countries regarding their growing cooperation with Russia in overcoming sanctions.

The multivector foreign policy adopted by Central Asian republics has provided them with flexibility and autonomy in navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. However, the question remains: how long can they maintain this policy in the face of increasing pressure from big players? The recent events, including Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine and the growing threat of terrorism and extremism from the South border of CSTO, coupled with the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, have directly impacted Russia's relations with Central Asian republics. These events have underscored the importance of regional stability and cooperation in addressing shared security challenges.

Sharing border with the region Russia is concerning about the security of the region and remains the security guarantor for the entire region. Achieving stability and providing regional security in the area is impossible without established regional security mechanisms and institutions like CSTO. At the moment it seems that there are no alternative security providers for the region. Therefore both Russia and Central Asian republics are interested in bilateral and multilateral cooperation to enhance the security and stability in the region.

While Russia and China emphasize collaboration over conflict, the United States and the European Union are strengthening their ties with Central Asian countries, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's military operation and subsequent sanctions. In this context, Central Asian states are faced with the challenge of balancing their relationships with various global players while safeguarding their national interests and maintaining regional stability. The current optimal option appears to be neutrality and multivector diplomacy, allowing Central Asian states to navigate the complexities of international relations and promote peace and cooperation in the region.

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