

THE EMERGING MULTIPOLARITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

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Abstract

Central Asia has re-emerged as a strategically significant region in an evolving multipolar order. The region's renewed prominence stems from its position as a geopolitical hinge of Eurasia, where energy security, continental connectivity, and competing vision of regional order intersect. This study examines how contemporary great-power competition among big three is reshaping the region's geopolitical, economic, and security landscape. The research employed Mackinder's heartland theory to analyze regional significance and great powers ambitions. The study argues that the logic of the Heartland remains relevant but overt control has largely been replaced by influence as the primary mechanism through which power is exercised in Central Asia. Russia continues to function as the region's principal security provider. The study finds that Russian influence is not collapsing but recalibrating after the Invasion of Ukraine. China has emerged as the dominant geo-economic actor, eroded Russian monopoly in energy sector and became largest trading partner. The study argues that Beijing and Moscow are pursuing "Division of Labor" Model instead of competition. Hence, the "Axis of Convenience" persist and is likely to endure unless Beijing begins to intervene in the geopolitical affairs to re-establish regional order. The United States maintains a more limited but strategic role aimed at preventing regional hegemony and sustaining engagement through diplomatic and economic frameworks. The study illustrates that long-standing Multi-vector foreign policy of Central Asian Republics are at glance aimed the epicenter of great powers rivalry. The study identifies Kazakhstan as the pivotal Central Asian state and the focal point of contemporary great-power competition.

Keywords: Multipolar Order, Heartland, Division of Labor, Hegemony, Multi-Vector, Great Power Competition

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Introduction

Central Asia has largely remained a focal point for great power politics due to its geo-strategic significance i.e. position and possession. In the contemporary international system, Central Asia has re-emerged as a critical arena of great-power competition amid the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order. The region has become a focal point of strategic interaction among Russia, China, and the United States. Russia seeks to preserve its regional dominance. China has rapidly expanded its economic footprint through large-scale infrastructure investment, trade, and energy connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative and therefore reshaping the region's geo-economic landscape. The United States although maintaining a comparatively limited presence but aims to prevent the consolidation of regional hegemony and to sustain engagement through multilateral frameworks. Hence, Central Asia's pivotal location at the crossroads of Asia and Europe along with its abundance of natural resources renders it a coveted region for regional and global powers that seeks to expand their influence.

The roots of Central Asia's strategic centrality lie in antiquity, primarily during the Chinese Han Dynasty, when the Silk Road emerged as a transcontinental network that connected the Chinese, Persian, Indian, and Mediterranean civilizations. The region's oases and caravan cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv became centers of trade, culture, and diplomacy. The ancient Silk Road facilitated the exchange not only of silk, spices, and precious metals but also of ideas, religions, and technologies. For China, Central Asia was both a commercial lifeline and a strategic frontier. The Han Dynasty sought to secure these routes through military expeditions led by prominent figures like Zhang Qian aimed to protect trade from nomadic confederations.¹ This marked the earliest form of geo-economic and geopolitical competition in Central Asia when a contest between settled empires sought influence and nomadic powers asserted autonomy over the steppe.

In the 7th and 8th centuries, the Arab conquests brought Islam into Central Asia. Transoxiana and the Oxus corridor became integrated into the Islamic world. Islam has transformed the political and cultural landscape of Central Asia by introducing religious institutions, commercial practices and administrative frameworks. The region flourished under successive dynasties i.e. Samanids, Karakhanids, and Timurids which later emerged as a center of learning, architecture, and commerce.²

However, in the 13th century, the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan

¹Craig Benjamin, *Empires of Ancient Eurasia: The First Silk Roads Era, 100 BCE – 250 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 91

²Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

redefined the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. The Mongols established one of the largest contiguous empires in history and established an unprecedented Eurasian connectivity. The Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia “introduced a political culture that impacted the region up to the nineteenth century” and played a leading role in trans-regional processes. Moreover, Trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchanges increased under the Pax Mongolica but so did competition among rising powers that sought to control the lucrative Silk Road routes.³

Following the decline of Mongol Empire, Central Asia became fragmented into three prominent Khanates i.e. Bukhara, Khiva, Kokand, each vying for dominance.⁴ Nevertheless, the regional dynamics significantly changed in the 19th century when Tsarist Russia and the British Empire started to send commercial ventures and military expeditions to Khanates. The two empires competed over the vast lands of Central Asia in what has come to be called as “The Great Game.”⁵ The region emerged as the epicenter for strategic competition among the great powers. Nonetheless, by the end of 19th century, Russia had established predominance over the entire Central Asia.

The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 marked another profound change in the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia. The Soviet Union established its first council in Tashkent. However, in 1920s, the communist planners decided to divide region into five republics. Those boundaries were drawn without consideration of existing ethnic, linguistic, or cultural divisions and they have largely persisted into the present day.⁶ The Soviets followed traditional “divide and rule” method to undermine resistance and uprising movements, primarily from Fergana Valley.

Under the Soviet rule, the region experienced economic development and social centralization. However, it would not be wrong to say that Central Asia under the USSR drifted into “limbo”. The Soviets erected an “Iron-Curtain” in Central Asia to effectively severing locals’ engagements with rest of the “Islamic” world. Nevertheless, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly born five Central Asian Republics (CARs) faced major challenges. It is important to note that

³Michal Biran, “Mongol Central Asia,” in *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, ed. Michal Biran and Hodong Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 319

⁴Edward D. Ross and Francis H. Skrine, *The Heart of Asia: A History of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the Earliest Times* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵Evgeny Sergeev, *The Great Game, 1856–1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia* (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

⁶Michal Romanowski, *Central Asia, Russia, and China: U.S. Policy at Eurasia's Core*, (Washington, D.C: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2017), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep18900>

except Uzbekistan, Central Asian States were reluctant to disintegrate from Moscow. However, the disintegration of Soviet Union was portrayed as ultimate triumph of “Liberal Institutional World Order”⁷, the transition from Socialist economy to market based economy was one of the major challenges for the newly born CARs.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the world has witnessed unipolar order with the United States emerged as the uncontested and unchallengeable hegemon. For the three decades, Washington enjoyed unilateral hegemony. However, with the resurgence of Russia, and most importantly, the rapid rise of China, the global order is shifting to multipolarity.

China is the major contender that could challenge the US-led world order. Beijing’s grand strategy for 21st century is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hence, it is important to note that Chinese President launched this mega project in Central Asia during his visit to Nazarbayev University in 2013 that signifies region’s relevance in Beijing’s foreign policy. According to Chinese officials, the Silk Road Economic Belt is the revival of ancient Silk Route that connects China to Central Asia and Europe which will bring prosperity for all.⁸ However, Beijing is also increasing Energy projects to extract central Asian resources and significantly reconstructing the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

However, on the other side, Moscow had its political influence over CARs and remained the security guarantor. Hence, Moscow is aiming for strategic revival. Nevertheless, the 9/11 and subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan brought central Asia into renewed global focus. The US established its military basis in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁹ Hence, the region became logistical and security hub for the US. Furthermore, Washington aimed to promote market reforms, democracy, and energy development. However, by the mid-2010s, the U.S. presence diminished following the closure of military bases and shifting strategic priorities, which led Russia and China to reassert influence through regional mechanisms like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁰

⁷Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

⁸Xinhua , "Xi Jinping: the Chief Architect of the Belt and Road Initiative," Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, last modified October 17, 2023, https://en.moj.gov.cn/2023-10/17/c_930994.htm?utm.

⁹Lionel Beehner, "ASIA: U.S. Military Bases in Central Asia," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified July 26, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/background/asia-us-military-bases-central-asia>

¹⁰Temur Umarov, "Is There a Place for a U.S. Military Base in Central Asia?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, last modified June 4, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/05/is-there-a-place-for-a-us-military-base-in-central-asia?lang=en>

Therefore, from imperial great game to the contemporary strategic competition among Great Powers, Central Asia continuously served as a geopolitical hinge in global power politics. Its fate tied to the ebb and flow of great power rivalries and alignments.

In the 21st century, Central Asia has re-emerged as a core arena of great power competition in an evolving multipolar order. The evolving strategic competition among the great powers in Central Asia is often labeled as the so-called “New Great Game”. However, the concept of “New Great Game” is essentially contested among the international relations scholarship. Nevertheless, Central Asian republics since its independence pursue balancing, hedging and multi-vector diplomacy to preserve its autonomy.

This study seeks to analyze how intensifying great-power competition among Russia, China, and the United States is redefining the strategic space available to Central Asian states, with specific attention to Kazakhstan. The study conducts a structured, focused comparison of the five Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan is treated as a critical case due to its geostrategic significance, which enhances both its leverage and its vulnerability in great-power competition. The analysis triangulates three sources of evidence: official policy statements and strategic documents, bilateral trade and energy flow data, and peer-reviewed secondary literature. These materials are interpreted through the framework of Mackinder’s heartland theory, which positions Central Asia as a geopolitical pivot whose alignment choices carry systemic implications for Eurasian power projection.

Theoretical Framework

The geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia in the 21st century has revived the concept of Sir Halford Mackinder’s heartland theory. Mackinder in his book “*Democratic Ideals and Reality*” formulated the heartland theory. His theory stated in three lines. “Who rules East Europe, commands the heartland. Who rules the heartland, commands the world island. Who rules World Island, commands the world”.¹¹

Mackinder divided his world into three main divisions; heartland, inner or marginal crescent, and outer or insular crescent. Mackinder’s original 1904 definition of Heartland encompassed the area from the Volga River to eastern Siberia, incorporating parts of Russia, China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Iran. However, in 1919, he revised the Heartland’s boundaries by expanding it westward to include European Russia¹² and later

¹¹Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (London: Constable & Company, 1919), 150.

¹²Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 106-113

adjusting it in 1943 to exclude eastern Siberia¹³. Therefore, the key characteristics of heartland include vast geographic expanse, inland drainage and limited ocean access, abundant natural resources, strategic location at the center of Eurasia, and potential for significant industrial and demographic control.

The inner or marginal crescent surrounded around the heartland. It encircle the Pivot Area from the South, East and West. This crescent-shaped zone encompasses the coastal lands of Eurasia that stretches from Scandinavia to Manchuria, and includes Europe (excluding Russia), North Africa, the Middle East, and the monsoon regions of Asia i.e. India, Southeast Asia, and the Far East.¹⁴

The outer or insular crescent lies beyond the inner or marginal crescent. This area comprises of Oceans and distant lands. This outermost zone includes the Americas, Australia, the British Isles, Japan, and Africa south of the Sahara, which Mackinder referred to as the "second heartland".¹⁵



Source: Wikimedia Commons

Therefore, in the contemporary era, Central Asia occupy the Strategic Pivot. The five Central Asian republics encompass a broad expanse of land at the heart in accordance with heartland theory. Mackinder's theory emphasizes the strategic importance of modern day Central Asia particularly its vast resources, population, and geographic centrality. He argued that advances in transportation and technology had made the Heartland more accessible which makes it a key area of competition among great powers. Moreover,

¹³Halford J. Mackinder, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," *Foreign Affairs* 21, no. 4 (1943): doi:10.2307/20029780.

¹⁴Ibid

¹⁵ibid

energy reserves in Central Asia are considered as some of the largest and most valuable in the world, and thus, control over, access to, and market connection with the resources are all considered advantageous in strategic foreign policy towards the region.

The theory has been influential in shaping geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia and has been cited by various scholars and policymakers to explain the region's significance in global politics and the competition for influence among major powers. Hence, the application of Mackinder's theory in 21st century is that the power that controls Central Asia, "the great pivot" would eventually emerge as the most dominant state in international arena.

Traditionally, Russia was the regional hegemon. However, after the disintegration of the USSR, Washington sought to gain foothold in the region. Nonetheless, with the emergence of China as the major power, the region is once again a focal point for great power politics. The big three are competing to gain influence over the entire Central Asia.

Russia is aiming to maintain its strategic presence through CSTO and economic integration that align Mackinder's notion that controlling the Heartland secures continental influence. For Moscow, the region is part of its traditional sphere of influence and a buffer protecting its southern flank. China's Silk Road Economic Belt and growing economic ties with CARs reflects the modern interpretation of Heartland theory. China seeks to anchor Eurasia through connectivity, gaining economic and strategic depth by developing railroads, pipelines, and economic corridors. China aims to transform the Heartland from a "pivot area" into a core of continental integration under Beijing's influence. The United States is pursuing counterbalance strategy to prevent any single power from dominating Central Asia and maintain its influence through Soft power. Hence, Washington seeks to stop the consolidation of Heartland power by its rivals.

Russia's Strategic Revival and Security Centrality in the Region

Since the 19th century, Moscow has enjoyed the regional hegemonic status in Central Asia. It has invariably looked upon Central Asia with a patrimonial eye. Hence, Central Asia occupies an extremely important place in Moscow's foreign policy strategy. Russia is focused on building and ensuring great power status in the region. The region serves as Moscow's "backyard" and a Buffer zone. Therefore, Moscow aims to maintain its influence in Central Asia to prevent other major powers particularly the United States and EU to gain foothold in Russia's "near abroad".

Russia exercises a combination of hard and soft power in Central Asia by capitalizing on its deep-rooted historical, linguistic, and cultural linkages with the region. This influence is further strengthened through

Moscow's dominance in regional institutions, its sustained military footprint, leverage over security sectors, diaspora communities, and economic interdependencies. Russia's deep-rooted role in the geopolitics of Central Asia is evident in its leadership of key regional organization like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Russia through these platforms continues to shape the economic trajectories, political elites, intellectual circles, and broader societal dynamics of CARs by maintaining a significant degree of strategic influence across the region.¹⁶

In the economic domain, China has surpassed Russia as largest trading partner of Central Asian Republics. However, Moscow still remains the region's primary security provider. Russia retains substantial military assets in three of the five Central Asian republics and continues to play an important role in safeguarding the internal stability of their ruling regimes. For instance, during the 2010 unrest in Kyrgyzstan, Russian forces monitored the situation closely but refrained from intervening despite formal requests from Bishkek. However, when widespread protests erupted across Kazakhstan in January 2022, President Tokayev appealed to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for assistance. In response, the CSTO deployed a contingent that reportedly included around 3,000 Russian troops along with smaller units from Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Although these forces did not engage directly in suppressing the protests but their presence showed Russia's continued importance as a guarantor of political stability in Central Asia and demonstrated Moscow's willingness to support incumbent elites during crises. In addition, Russia maintains the most extensive military footprint in Central Asia with approximately 7,000 troops stationed in Tajikistan and a wide network of military facilities operates across the region. These include the Russian Joint Military Base in Kyrgyzstan, a home to the Kant airbase, the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, and several radar stations and testing sites managed by Moscow. Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan remains its largest military installation outside its borders and it also leases another Tajik facility near the Afghan frontier.¹⁷

Moscow is also the dominant supplier of military hardware to the

¹⁶Niels Drost, Giulia Cretti, and Babette V. Giersbergen, *Central Asia emerging from the shadows European Union – Central Asia relations in evolving Eurasian geopolitics*, (The Hague: Clingendael, 2025), <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/central-asia-emerging-from-the-shadows>.

¹⁷Richard E. Hoagland, Michael S. Repass, and Nicole Wolkov, *Russia's Historical Defense Ties and China's Rising Military Presence in Central Asia*, (Washington, D.C: Caspian Policy Center, 2021), <https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/uploads/2021/04/Russias-Historical-Defense-Ties-and-Chinas-Rising-Military-Presence-in-Central-Asia>.

region. Between 2018 and 2023, Russia provided the majority of arms imported by CARs with Turkmenistan being the only exception.¹⁸ The region's armed forces acquire relatively inexpensive Russian equipment and maintain close military-technical cooperation with Moscow. Kazakhstan, for example, coordinates air-defense systems and forms joint units with Russia under the CSTO umbrella. Because Central Asian militaries and intelligence agencies continue to depend heavily on Soviet- and Russian-made platforms and technologies, Russia retains considerable leverage over their security sectors.¹⁹

Russia's influence is further entrenched through educational and training linkages. A significant number of the region's military officers and security officials have received professional training at Russian institutions like the Military Academy of the General Staff and other military universities. These ties are reinforced by regular multilateral exercises conducted with CSTO members and thus Moscow aims to sustain its central role in shaping the region's defense structures.²⁰

Moscow continues to function as the cultural hegemon in Central Asia by effectively leveraging its historical ties, the widespread use of the Russian language and the strong presence of Russian-speaking and Russia-oriented media. Russia project substantial soft power in the region and promote pro-Kremlin narratives due to a significant segment of the Central Asian population remains fluent in Russian and familiar with Russian cultural products.

Education also serves as a central pillar of Russia's soft power strategy in Central Asia. Moscow has actively expanded its network of branch campuses and partnerships with universities across Central Asia and at the same time hosting huge numbers of Central Asian students at institutions in Russia. Approximately 185,000 students from Central Asia are enrolled in Russian universities with around 68,000 of them are supported through Russian government-funded scholarships.²¹ These educational ties help embed Russian influence within the next generation of Central Asian elites.

The war in Ukraine has reignited debates over the durability of Russia's influence in Central Asia. Many analysts argues that Moscow's influence in Central Asia significantly declined since the 2022 invasion but the empirical trends reveal a more complex reality. For Instance, Trade between Central Asia and Russia has increased significantly. In 2023, trade

¹⁸Brent Hierman, "Geopolitics in Central Asia," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 11.

¹⁹Drost, Cretti, and Giersbergen, " *Central Asia emerging from the shadows*,"

²⁰Hoagland, Repass, and Wolkov, "Russia's Historical Defense Ties".

²¹ibid

between Russia and the Central Asian states had expanded to roughly \$44 billion, which accounts for nearly one-third of the region's total trade turnover. This is because Western sanctions that restricts Russian companies from directly engaging with most Western enterprises. Consequently, Russia increasingly routed its trade through Central Asian republics, which resulted in a notable rise in trade volume. In 2025, Russia total trade turnover with CARs was over \$45 billion.²²

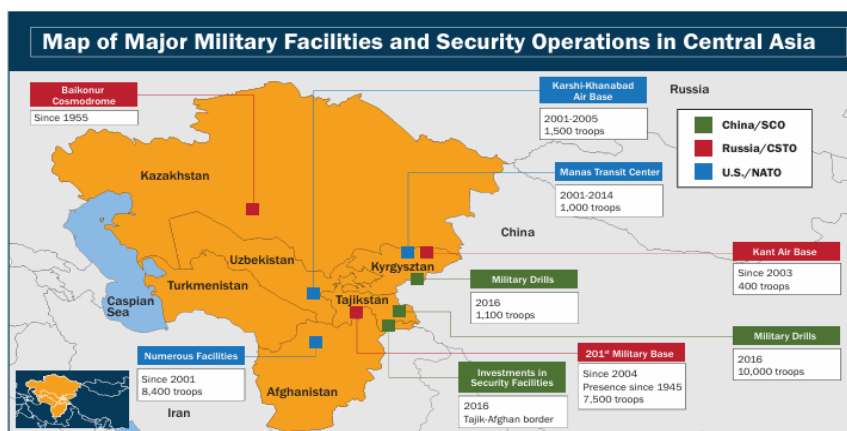
Furthermore, a significant shift has been the growing use of national currencies in bilateral transactions. Except for Turkmenistan where only 24% of trade with Russia is settled in local currencies over half of all Russia–Central Asia trade now bypasses the US dollar. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly emphasized that conducting trade in national currencies strengthens financial resilience and reduces vulnerability to external monetary pressures. Furthermore, in the first ten months of 2022, Kazakhstan's electronics exports to Russia surged eighteenfold that reached an estimated €550 million. In 2023, nearly half of all foreign companies operating in Kazakhstan were of Russian origin. Furthermore, in June 23, 2023, when the inaugural meeting of the "Russia–Central Asia" Security Council secretaries convened. The participating states reiterated their commitment to expanding cooperation in economic, humanitarian, defense, and security domains.²³

Furthermore, military cooperation between Russia and CARs also increased in the aftermath 2022 invasion. For Instance, on May 4, 2022, a military cooperation agreement between Kazakhstan and Russia came into effect. Similarly, in October 2023, Kyrgyzstan's parliament ratified an agreement to establish a joint regional air-defense system with Russia. It was initially signed in August 2022 that includes the use of land at Russia's Kant military base. Tajikistan has also strengthened its security ties with Moscow; in November 2023, Russia supplied two divisions of S-300 air-defense systems to Tajikistan as part of broader efforts to develop a unified CSTO air-defense architecture.²⁴

²²"Putin urges Central Asian states to step up trade with Russia," Reuters, last modified October 9, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/putin-urges-central-asian-states-step-up-trade-with-russia-2025-10-09/>.

²³Eldaniz Gusseinov and Sardor Allayarov, "Beyond Western Narratives: Unpacking Russia's Strategic Role in Central Asia," *Geopolitical Monitor*, last modified January 15, 2025, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/beyond-western-narratives-unpacking-russias-strategic-role-in-central-asia/>.

²⁴ibid



Source: The German Marshall Plan of the United States

In the energy sector, Russia has also demonstrated its continued relevance. In 2023, Moscow reversed the flow of a Soviet-era gas pipeline to supply gas to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. These two states have struggled with recurrent energy shortages. Moreover, a new pipeline route through Kazakhstan is increasingly viewed as the most viable option for transporting Russian gas to China that surpasses the long-discussed but still unapproved Power of Siberia 2 project.²⁵ These developments illustrate that Russia maintains significant economic and strategic leverage in Central Asia.

In Uzbekistan, Russian energy giants like Lukoil and Gazprom remain the dominant foreign operators in the country's key gas fields. There are multiple reports that indicates that Russia maintains extensive control over the sector through a network of offshore entities. Kazakhstan, which accounted for 43% of global mined uranium output in 2022 is another critical node in Russia's regional energy strategy. Moscow holds a 25% stake in Kazakhstan's uranium production, and Rosatom stands among the four shortlisted contenders to supply nuclear reactor technology for Kazakhstan's upcoming nuclear power plant.²⁶

Therefore, Russia's enduring military footprint, deep cultural and educational linkages and expanding economic and energy partnerships demonstrate that Moscow retains substantial strategic interests in Central Asia despite the geopolitical shocks of the Ukraine war and China's rising influence. Moreover, instead of experiencing a simple decline, Russia's role

²⁵Annette Bohr, "Playing both sides: Central Asia between Russia and the West," Chatham House, last modified March 26, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/playing-both-sides-central-asia-between-russia-and-west>.

²⁶Bohr, "Playing both sides".

in the region is evolving and anchored in security provision, institutional leadership, infrastructural control, and long-standing cultural ties that continue to bind Central Asian states to Moscow. As the international system shifts toward a more contested multipolar order, Central Asia remains a crucial sphere where Russia seeks to preserve its status as a pivotal power. Thus, Russia aims to ensure that the region remains within its geopolitical orbit that serves as a buffer and as a platform for sustaining its relevance in a rapidly reconfiguring global power structure.

China's Expanding Economic and Strategic Footprint

Beijing's grand strategy for the 21st century is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has two main components, the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The six overland corridors constitute "Belt", and three blue economic corridors form the maritime "Road". Together, the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Maritime Silk Road' are labelled as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Silk Road Economic Belt was unveiled by President Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. Subsequently, after a month, the "Maritime Silk Road" was launched in Indonesian Parliament. Therefore, two regions are core strategic arenas for Beijing's long-term economic and strategic interests. The Indo-Pacific for Maritime Silk Road and Central Asia for Silk Road Economic Belt. Nevertheless, considering the scope of the study, this paper only focuses on Silk Road Economic Belt and China's key engagements and interests in Central Asia.

The Xinjiang factor is one of the most significant elements of China to integrate with Central Asian States. China considers Central Asia strategically vital for the security of the Xinjiang region, which Beijing regards as one of its most politically sensitive areas. Xinjiang shares approximately 3,300KM borderline with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which adds to the region's importance in China's security calculus. Xinjiang's demographic composition further shapes these dynamics. The region is home to an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Kazakhs, about 180,000 Kyrgyz, roughly 50,000 Tajiks, and nearly 10,000 Uzbeks. These communities maintain cultural, linguistic, and religious linkages with the broader Central Asian populations and strengthens a sense of affinity with the Uyghurs.²⁷

Nevertheless, as stated earlier that Central Asia was a key participant in the ancient Silk Road trade and remained a hot spot for multiple major powers in a long time. The geostrategic position of Central

²⁷Hong Yu, "Is the Belt and Road Initiative 2.0 in the Making? The Case of Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no. 3 (September 2022): 540-541, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2122858>.

Asia demonstrates that the region will not only serve as a buckle between China and Europe but also a key unit of almost every BRI corridor. However, a key overland project of the BRI is the China–Europe Railway Express, whose all corridors are transit through Kazakhstan before entering Europe. According to China’s Ministry of Commerce, the number of freight services increased from only 80 trains in 2013 to 12,406 by 2020 which is accompanied by a more balanced flow of eastbound and westbound traffic. By the same year, cargo volumes had also grown substantially and reached approximately 1.13 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units).²⁸

Kazakhstan therefore occupies a pivotal position within China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The 2015 decision to integrate China’s BRI with Nursultan Nazarbayev’s Bright Path (Nurly Zhol) strategy demonstrates a long-term vision of transforming Kazakhstan into a Eurasian transport and logistics hub. Furthermore, in 2017, President Xi Jinping signed 24 agreements that worth over \$8 billion. In addition, Kazakhstan launched the Astana International Financial Centre with backing from the Shanghai Stock Exchange and the Silk Road Fund, and as a result, bilateral trade reached nearly \$100 billion in 2018, which made China as Kazakhstan’s second-largest trading partner.²⁹ Nevertheless, in 2023, China surpassed Russia and became the largest trading partner of Kazakhstan with bilateral trade reached \$31.9 billion. Moreover, Agriculture also became an important but at the same time sensitive area of cooperation with early land-lease proposals provoked major public protests due to fears of Chinese influence. Hence, in order to ease these concerns, both governments shifted toward joint processing projects that led to new agreements worth \$160 million in 2017 and a 20% rise in agricultural trade over five years. In addition, a significant achievement is the Khorgos Dry Port, which is an integrated logistics hub that shortens China–Europe transport time to 14 days and significantly enhanced Kazakhstan’s transit role.³⁰ However, despite Nazarbayev’s 2019 resignation, his successor Kassym-Jomrat Tokayev reaffirmed strong commitment to aligning Nurly Zhol with the BRI and deepening ties with Beijing.

Uzbekistan also aligns its national development agenda with the BRI. The “New Strategy of Development” (2017–2021) prioritizes economic liberalization and industrial modernization that made Chinese investment and infrastructure attractive. Uzbekistan is indispensable for

²⁸Yu, "Is the Belt and Road Initiative 2.0 in the Making?," 536

²⁹Janet Xuanli Liao, "China’s energy diplomacy towards Central Asia and the implications on its “belt and road initiative”,” *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 3 (2019): 507, doi:10.1080/09512748.2019.1705882

³⁰Aghavni A. Harutyunyan, "China-Kazakhstan: Cooperation within The Belt and Road and Nurly Zhol,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2022): 294, doi:10.1080/25765949.2022.2128135.

realizing the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor (CCAWECC), and BRI connectivity could expand its access to the Persian Gulf and broader markets.³¹

In Tajikistan, China's role is closely tied to domestic political consolidation. Beijing holds 53% of Tajikistan's external debt and supplies 45% of its imports, and thus become deeply embedded in the country's political-economic structure. Furthermore, elite networks use Chinese investment as a tool for maintaining authority, and the long-standing bilateral friendship has been absorbed into the broader BRI narrative.³² Nonetheless, Dushanbe continues to consider EAEU membership as an additional strategic option

Kyrgyzstan has received extensive Chinese support for BRI-related infrastructure that includes major road rehabilitation, power-grid modernization, energy plants, and proposals for a Sino–Kyrgyz gas pipeline. These projects aim to enhance domestic connectivity and regional integration³³

Turkmenistan despite its political isolation plays an important role through transit corridors like the Lapis Lazuli route that links Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, the Caspian region, and Europe via multimodal transport networks. This corridor strengthens Turkmenistan's position in Eurasian trade under the broader BRI framework.³⁴

China has overtaken Russia and consolidated its position as the top trading partner of Central Asian countries. The total trade between China and Central Asia reached to \$94.8 billion in 2024.³⁵ China's share in overall Central Asia foreign trade (i.e. for the region as a group) reportedly rose from 17.7% in 2020 to 24.1% in 2024. Turkmenistan shares 55% of its total trade is with China. Kyrgyzstan shares around 35%. However, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan shares roughly 20–22%.³⁶

³¹Paolo Pizzolo and Andrea Carteny, "The "New Great Game" in Central Asia: From a Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience to Chinese Primacy?," *The International Spectator* 57, no. 2 (2022): 93, doi:10.1080/03932729.2021.2007611.

³²Pizzolo and Carteny, "The "New Great Game," 93

³³ibid

³⁴ibid

³⁵ "China, C.Asian Countries Jointly Form China-Central Asia Spirit: Xi," Global Times, last modified June 17, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202506/1336391.shtml>.

³⁶Sergey Kwan, "China-Central Asia Trade Nearly Triples Since 2020," *The Times of Central Asia*, last modified August 12, 2025, <https://timesca.com/china-central-asia-trade-nearly-triples-since-2020/>

Country	Bilateral Trade (US\$ billion)	Export to China (US\$ billion)	Import from China (US\$ billion)	Balance
Kazakhstan	43.8	15.9	28.0	−12.1
Uzbekistan	13.8	2.0	11.8	−9.8.
Turkmenistan	10.6.	9.63	1.0	+8.68.
Kyrgyzstan	22.7.	2.8	19.9	−17.1.
Tajikistan	3.86	0.35	3.51	−3.16 ³⁷

Source: eurasianet, citing data from China's General Administration of Customs (GACC).

China is significantly expanding investment in energy infrastructure particularly oil pipelines, natural gas pipelines, and power transmission lines. These initiatives has played a transformative yet partial role in reshaping Central Asia's regional energy order. Nevertheless, despite the disintegration of the USSR, Central Asia's energy systems long remained tied in Soviet-era infrastructure that sustained Moscow's structural power by controlling export routes, pricing, and production capacities. For instance, Turkmen gas sold to Russia at \$36 per 1000 m³ was re-exported to Europe at \$85 that shows Moscow's quasi-monopsony over regional exports. Similarly, 85% of Kazakhstan's oil continued to transit through Russia.³⁸

China's entry altered this dynamic. The China–Kazakhstan Oil Pipeline that built in phases between 2002 and 2009 provided China with a secure overland supply and facilitated Kazakhstan to reduce reliance on Russian routes. Its capacity exceeds 20 million tons annually but usage remains below potential.³⁹

³⁷"China enhances position as Central Asia's economic overlord," eurasianet, last modified January 29, 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/china-enhances-position-as-central-asias-economic-overlord>.

³⁸Waihong Tang and Elmira Joldybayeva, "Pipelines and Power Lines: China, Infrastructure and the Geopolitical (Re)construction of Central Asia," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 4 (2022): 1515, doi:10.1080/14650045.2022.2062325.

³⁹Waihong Tang and Elmira Joldybayeva, "Pipelines and Power Lines," 1522.



Source: Japan Focus

The China–Central Asia Gas Pipeline in which Lines A, B, C (operational) and D (planned) has been more transformative. The pipeline connects Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan directly to China while allowing Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to export their own gas and designed to deliver over 55 bcm annually. Moreover, in 2018, China become largest importer of Turkmenistan by importing 33.3 bcm of Turkmen gas. The pipelines also strengthened domestic capacity: Kazakhstan’s Beineu–Bozoi–Shymkent line solves southern gas shortages while Line D promises transit revenue and energy access for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁴⁰

Chinese power-line investments like 500 kV north–south lines in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan support internal energy distribution, reduce winter shortages, and promote national integration. Therefore, strategically, China gains secure, diversified, land-based energy routes that mitigates the “Malacca dilemma” and at the same time binding Central Asian states economically to a Sino-centric order.⁴¹



Source: Financial Times

⁴⁰ibid

⁴¹ibid

Therefore, Beijing strategy is to expand its economic influence and establish strategic footprint in the region. Currently, Beijing has shown no intentions to remake the local politics of central Asia. However, China has broken the monopoly of Russia in the energy sector. So far, China has integrated into geo-economics and acknowledges Moscow's leadership role in the geopolitics, which creates a Sino-Russian axis of convenience in this "New Great Game" in central Asia.

Sino-Russian Axis of Convenience

In the 21st century, Sino-Russian engagements span multiple regions across the globe. The evolving Sino-Russian relationships reflects the broad scope of their strategic, political and economic interest. This relationship variously described as "Axis of Convenience" or "robust partnership" that significantly highlights their cooperative dimensions and pragmatic, interest-driven character.

In Central Asia, the "axis of convenience" took clearer shape in the aftermath of 9/11, when the United States intervened in Afghanistan and established military bases in the region. The US military presence Moscow's "near abroad" encouraged Russia to deepen its strategic alignment with China in order to counter Washington's expanding influence. This convergence was further reinforced by the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. These developments alarmed both Moscow and Beijing, as they feared that similar "colour revolutions" could disrupt the political order in Central Asia.⁴² Consequently, China and Russia increasingly coordinated their efforts to limit the US penetration and fortify their own economic, political and security footprint in the region. Although the United States no longer have any military base in Central Asia but its economic and political interests continue to grow particularly with regard to China's expanding influence in Mackinder's "Pivot Area." Therefore, in this evolving great-power competition, Beijing and Moscow remain closely aligned in their objective of constraining US influence in Central Asia.

However, many scholars argues that the "Axis of Convenience" has gradually evolved into a subtle form of competition due to China's expanding economic and strategic footprint in a region that was unilaterally dominated by Moscow for centuries.⁴³ Nevertheless, This study departs from that reading: rather than a transitional phase preceding Chinese dominance, the evidence here points to a durable functional division, Beijing anchoring the economic sphere and Moscow the security sphere that neither side

⁴²Ibid

⁴³Carla P. Freeman, "New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 5 (2017): 648, doi:10.1080/09512748.2017.1398775

currently has the incentive to disturb. China has indeed surpassed Russia and became the largest trading partner of CARs and has effectively broken Russian long-standing monopoly in the regional energy sector. Nevertheless, China has shown no intent in the geopolitics of the region and acknowledges Moscow's leadership role in Central Asia particularly in security aspect. Moscow economically unable to compete with Beijing, and Central Asian Republics are seeking foreign investments to stimulate their economic growth. Hence, it is also in the vital interest of Moscow to welcome Chinese investment and hold its influence in military and political affairs. Similarly, Beijing "so far" remained focused in geo-economics and shown no interest in the geopolitics. Thus, Beijing and Moscow are pursuing "Division of Labor" Model instead of competition. Hence, the "Axis of Convenience" persist and is likely to endure unless Beijing begins to intervene in the geopolitical affairs to re-establish regional order.

Strategic Retrenchment and Limited re-engagement of the United States

Central Asia hardly occupied a prominent place in the Washington's foreign policy agenda as compare to Middle East and Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, establishing military bases in Russia's "near abroad" was a significant development and a great success for Washington's foreign policy objectives. The US engagement in Central Asia can be categorized into three broad phases. First, a decade of minimal attention bordering on neglect (1991–2001). Second, a period of heightened involvement driven by counterterrorism imperatives following 9/11 (2001–2014); and, subsequently, efforts to articulate a coherent regional strategy in the post-Afghanistan context (2014 onwards). Although the priorities of each phase differed but a consistent feature has persisted across them is that Central Asia has never occupied a central position in Washington's strategic calculus. Instead, Washington's approach towards the region has been shaped largely by developments in surrounding geopolitical arenas particularly those involving Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan rather than by intrinsic regional considerations.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States was one of the first countries that recognized Central Asian republics. The key objective of the United States at that time was to eliminate nuclear weapon from Kazakhstan. Hence, the Clinton administration placed non-proliferation as the top priority of Washington's foreign policy objectives. Nevertheless, in the wake of September 11 attacks, Central Asia emerged as a pivotal logistical and strategic hub for the U.S.-led War on Terror in Afghanistan. From that point onward, hard security considerations came to dominate US–Central Asia relations. Every state in the region contributed in some form to the Northern Distribution Network and broader Afghan transit operations. In

2001, Uzbekistan permitted the establishment of a US military base though the facility was ultimately closed in 2005 amid tensions stemming from Washington's criticism of Tashkent's human rights record. Kyrgyzstan likewise hosted American forces at the Manas Transit Center until their withdrawal in 2014.⁴⁴

Although Central Asia itself never became a primary theater of US strategic engagement, there were notable indications of growing interest by militant Islamist organizations in targeting American facilities and personnel linked to the region. The U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan faced two attempted attacks in 2004 and 2015. Moreover, in 2011 and 2015, US authorities arrested several Uzbek nationals on charges related to plotting the assassination of President Barack Obama that underscores the transnational dimensions of regional security threats.⁴⁵

The C5+1, a multilateral framework to enhance US engagement with CARs was established in 2015. In 2022, the C5+1 established a secretariat to further institutionalized this platform.⁴⁶ In the same year, Biden administration launched Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN) to expand trade routes, bolster private sector, and invest in people through training and education.⁴⁷ The 2023 C5+1 Summit initiated a dialogue on critical minerals aimed at leveraging Central Asia's resource potential while diversifying supply chains away from excessive reliance on China, and it reaffirmed shared commitments in areas such as counterterrorism cooperation and border management. Consequently, the B5+1 Business Forum held in Almaty in March 2024 sought to strengthen private-sector connections and advance economic collaboration between US and Central Asian business communities.⁴⁸

As the dynamics of world order is shifting, the US engagement with Central Asia has increasingly assumed a pragmatic and transactional character. The Trump administration is shifting their foreign policy from climate diplomacy and democratic reforms to access strategic resources, energy security, and constrain Beijing's growing influence.⁴⁹ In 2025, C5+1

⁴⁴ibid

⁴⁵ibid

⁴⁶C5+1, (U.S. Department of State, 2025), <https://www.state.gov/c51>

⁴⁷*Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative*, (U.S. Department of State, 2023), <https://2021-2025.state.gov/economic-resilience-in-central-asia-initiative/>.

⁴⁸Tatiana G.foeller, "How the US Should Partner with Central Asian States to Avoid Russia-China Dominance," Atlantic Council, last modified October 21, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/partner-with-central-asian-states-to-avoid-russia-china-dominance/>.

⁴⁹Robert M. Cutler, "Washington Shifts C5+1 From Diplomacy to Deals," The Times of Central Asia, last modified November 10, 2025, <https://timesca.com/washington-shifts-c51-from-diplomacy-to-deals/>.

Summit in Washington, Uzbekistan committed to purchasing from and investing in the United States more than \$100 billion over a ten-year period. In parallel, Kazakhstan indicated its decision to join the Abraham Accords and announced the conclusion of commercial agreements with U.S. firms valued at approximately \$17 billion.⁵⁰

Central Asia is seldom in Washington's top foreign policy agenda. However, the region's geostrategic location and natural resources kept Washington to engage. The dynamics of global dominance have shifted from direct control to maximizing influence. Thus, Mackinder's "Heartland" is pivotal to global power remains relevant with influence now superseding control as the key to dominance. Hence, US engages in Central Asia to prevent any single power from dominating the "Heartland" and avoids being relegated to the periphery.

Triangular Dynamics and Implications for Central Asian Republics

The transitional phase of the global order presents both opportunities and challenges for regional actors. Since gaining independence, Central Asian countries have adeptly pursued a "multi-vector" foreign policy and successfully navigating the complex web of great power dynamics. However, it is crucial to contextualize this within the evolving global landscape.

Initially, the post-Cold War era was characterized by a unipolar world order, in which the United States enjoyed unmatched dominance, Russia was preoccupied with profound internal and economic crises, and China remained relatively restrained in its external political and strategic engagement. The regional significance of Central Asia increased markedly after the September 11 attacks, when its geostrategic location made it central to U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and led to an expanded American security presence in the region. This context began to change after the 2008 global financial crisis, which accelerated China's emergence as a major economic power and deepened its economic footprint in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia reasserted itself as a revisionist great power, first through its intervention in Georgia in 2008, followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Furthermore, the expansion of multilateral frameworks such as the SCO, BRI, AIIB and BRICS has further reinforced the structural shift toward a more multipolar international order. Hence, due to its strategic location at the intersection of Eurasian political, economic, and security networks, CA has once again become a focal arena of great-power competition and external actors are

⁵⁰"U.S.-Central Asia Summit," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified November 7, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-central-asia-summit>

increasing their political, economic, and security engagement. Therefore, under these evolving circumstances, the sustainability of CARs multi-vector strategy is increasingly contested due to the intensification of great-power rivalry that constrains strategic autonomy and complicates the delicate balancing practices that have defined the region's foreign policies since independence.

Furthermore, among the Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan is poised to play a pivotal role in this great powers competition. As the largest economy and geographically the most expansive state in the region, Kazakhstan occupies a strategically consequential position at the intersection of Eurasian power politics. A key domestic factor shaping its strategic calculus is its significant ethnic Russian population which is approximately four million that concentrated primarily in the northern and eastern regions. Historically, this demographic imbalance was even more pronounced. In 1959, ethnic Kazakhs constituted a minority while Russians formed the majority.⁵¹ This demographic reality has long generated concerns regarding potential secessionist tendencies. Observers have noted the possibility that Moscow could invoke narratives or strategies similar to those employed in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Kazakhstan transferred more than half a ton of weapons-grade uranium to the United States. By 1995, Kazakhstan had removed all remaining nuclear warheads from its territory, and with U.S. technical assistance, it completed the sealing of 181 nuclear test tunnels at the Semipalatinsk Test Site in May 2000.⁵² Furthermore, Kazakhstan has pursued sustained engagement with Western-led structures. The presence of major US energy firms like Chevron demonstrates Kazakhstan's importance in global energy markets. Moreover, its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2015 further integrated the country into the global economic system. In parallel, Astana has cultivated security cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic community through NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council all aimed at enhancing military interoperability and political dialogue.

At the same time, Kazakhstan remains indispensable to China's regional strategy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was formally launched

⁵¹Ainur Saparbekova, Jiřina Kocourková, and Tomáš Kučera, "Sweeping ethno-demographic changes in Kazakhstan during the 20th century: A dramatic story of mass migration waves. Part I: From the turn of the 19th century to the end of the Soviet era," *AUC GEOGRAPHICA* 49, no. 1 (July 2014): 71, doi:10.14712/23361980.2014.7.

⁵²The White House, "Fact Sheet: History of Trilateral Threat Reduction Cooperation at the Former Semipalatinsk Test Site," The White House, last modified March 27, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/26/fact-sheet-history-trilateral-threat-reduction-cooperation-former-semipa>.

in Kazakhstan and all major Middle Corridor routes connecting China to Europe passes through its territory. Beijing has also invested heavily in Kazakhstan's energy and logistics sectors, including oil and gas pipelines and the construction of key dry ports that further consolidates Kazakhstan's role as a critical transit and connectivity hub in Eurasia.

Therefore, Kazakhstan has emerged as a central arena of engagement for all major powers. This competitive interest offers Kazakhstan significant opportunities to advance its long-term national development agendas like 2030 and 2050 strategic visions. However, these opportunities are accompanied by serious challenges. Increasing external competition risks are transforming Kazakhstan into a strategic theatre of great-power rivalry and constraining its strategic autonomy. Hence, Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, while beneficial, demands increasingly delicate management amid a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment.

Conclusion

Central Asia re-emerged as a pivotal arena of great-power competition within an increasingly multipolar international system. Instead of being a passive object of competition, the region is actively embedded in the evolving triangular dynamics among Russia, China, and the United States. Russia, despite widespread assumptions of decline following the Ukraine war still remains the principal security actor in Central Asia. Moscow's persistent military footprint, dominance in regional security institutions, deep cultural and educational linkages, and growing economic cooperation demonstrates that its influence is not collapsing but recalibrating. Thus, Russia's role is increasingly concentrated in hard security, regime stability, and institutional leadership that has reinforced its historical position as the region's primary security guarantor and strategic buffer.

China, on the other hand, has emerged as the dominant geo-economic power in Central Asia. Beijing has transformed the region's economic landscape and eroded Russia's former monopolies over energy sector and became the largest trading partner. China's strategy reflects a modern reinterpretation of Heartland logic by binding Central Asia to a Sino-centric continental order through connectivity rather than overt political control. Beijing has "thus far" avoided intervening in geopolitics or challenging Moscow's primacy in the security domain. This led to a pragmatic Sino-Russian "axis of convenience" characterized by an implicit division of labor with Russia as the security provider and China as the economic engine in order to diminish Washington's influence..

The United States occupies a more limited and episodic position in this triangular configuration. Its engagement has oscillated between neglect,

securitized involvement driven by Afghanistan, and selective re-engagement through diplomatic and economic initiatives like the C5+1 framework. Although Washington lacks the geographic proximity and structural embeddedness enjoyed by Russia and China, however it continues to seek influence by promoting diversification of partnerships, preventing hegemonic consolidation in the Heartland, and leveraging soft power, economic diplomacy, and critical minerals cooperation.

For the Central Asian republics, these dynamics generate both opportunities and challenges. The region's long-standing commitment to multi-vector foreign policies has enabled to extract economic benefits, security guarantees, and political autonomy by balancing among competing powers. However, as great-power rivalry intensifies and multipolarity deepens, the sustainability of this strategy is increasingly tested. The great powers competition not only narrows policy choices but also raises the risks of over-dependence and exposes domestic vulnerabilities particularly in politically and economically asymmetrical states. Therefore, if CARs able to manage "Multi-Vector" foreign policy, it would be a masterstroke.

Kazakhstan is the most prominent regional actor in this great power competition. Its demographic composition, economic weight, energy resources, and geographic centrality make it pivotal to all major external actors. Hence, this affords Astana considerable leverage but it also renders the country especially sensitive to shifts in great-power relations and regional instability. Thus, it will be challenging for Astana to sustain the policy of strategic hedging and not becoming the part of any axis.

Therefore, Mackinder's Heartland thesis is relevant in the 21st century albeit in an adapted form. Control over territory has been supplanted by maximization of influence. Central Asia's significance lies not in domination by a single power but in its role as a contested space where competing visions of order, connectivity, and security intersect. As the international system continues its transition toward multipolarity, Central Asia will remain a critical test case for how regional actors navigate great-power competition and for how influence instead of outright control defines power in the modern Heartland.

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