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REVISIONS TO SECURITY POLICIES IN CENTRAL ASIAN NATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, face various political challenges, including internal reforms, government stability, and democratic transformations. Each of these countries experiences unique political processes that vary depending on their historical and cultural context.

This article explores the changing security policies and international relationships of Central Asian countries in response to recent geopolitical events, notably the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. It discusses how these nations are expanding their diplomatic, economic, and security ties beyond their traditional dependence on Russia.

The paper highlights key diplomatic efforts, such as the first US-Central Asia Summit in 2023 and increased engagement with China, while addressing the complex security challenges they face, especially in relation to terrorism threats from Afghanistan. The analysis shows how Central Asian states are navigating relationships with major powers like Russia, China, and the US, as well as engaging with regional players such as Turkey, Iran, and India.

The article underscores the impact of commitments to the Collective Security Treaty Organization and how the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has prompted these nations to reassess their security alliances and pursue greater autonomy in their foreign policy choices. This strategic shift reflects a broader trend towards multi-faceted diplomacy as Central Asian countries strive to safeguard their sovereignty while balancing diverse international interests in the region.

Understanding the political processes in Central Asia is important for developing effective strategies to support stability and sustainable development in the region, such as Regional Security, Terrorism and Extremism, Ethnic and Religious Conflicts, Border Security, Resource Competition, External Influences, State Fragility and Governance Challenges.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia, Security Policy, International Relations, Military Cooperation, US Investment, China's Influence, Regional Security, Diplomatic Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is an important region with its geopolitical location, ethnic and religious diversity and resource wealth. However, this region also faces a number of security issues, and the solution or lack of resolution of these issues affects the stability and security in the region. The security of Central Asian countries is influenced by a combination of geographical, geopolitical, social, and economic factors, as well as their adaptable political strategies.

Central Asia holds a strategic position at the intersection of major powers and has historically been a key player in global multilateral initiatives. Following the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, Central Asian nations have shifted away from relying solely on Russia and have instead embraced a more diverse, engaged, and mutually beneficial approach to their political and security policies.

The Central Asian countries have experienced a shift in their political and foreign policies since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war. They have become more engaged in political, economic, and security matters,

enhancing their global reputation by upholding their values and independence. Additionally, they have pursued independent and active multilateral cooperation.

Despite these advancements, Central Asian countries continue to grapple with challenges such as political inertia, corruption, post-election power transitions, territorial disputes, water resource management issues, and terrorist threats. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are at the forefront of economic development in the region and are actively assuming leadership roles.

The shifting dynamics of international relations and global power distribution have prompted Central Asian countries to engage with the international community on political and security issues. Major global players such as the United States, the EU, China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, India, and Japan have put forth proposals and initiatives for cooperation in alignment with their strategic interests.

The inaugural US-Central Asia Summit took place in New York on September 23, 2023, focusing on topics such as sovereignty, sustainable development, strategic partnership, political dialogue, trade, economic cooperation, investment, energy, security, and humanitarian collaboration among the Central Asian nations. Of particular interest to US companies are the investment prospects in mining, renewable energy processing plants, and various other sectors within the region.



Source: <https://www.laprensalatina.com/biden-meets-central-asian-leaders-to-counter-chinese-russian-influence/>

They talked about the potential for enhancing collaboration in dealing with regional security concerns like cybersecurity, terrorism, extremism, illegal migration, and drug trafficking.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken also made trips to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the beginning of last year and revealed a boost in economic resilience funding to \$50 million. The US government and private sector have collectively put in over \$31 billion in Central Asia, as per the US Department of State.¹ This investment reflects the efforts to boost Central Asian exports and strengthen trilateral relations between the United States, the EU, and Central Asia. The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 has heightened the risk of terrorism spreading to Central Asia, leading to more intricate security challenges.

The United States has another chance to collaborate with Central Asian nations in combating terrorism. Since 2002, the United States National Guard has been cooperating with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. They have also participated in the Steppe Eagle multinational military exercise alongside units from Britain, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Despite this, Central Asian countries are closely monitoring the Russia-Ukraine conflict and are worried about potentially being affected by the

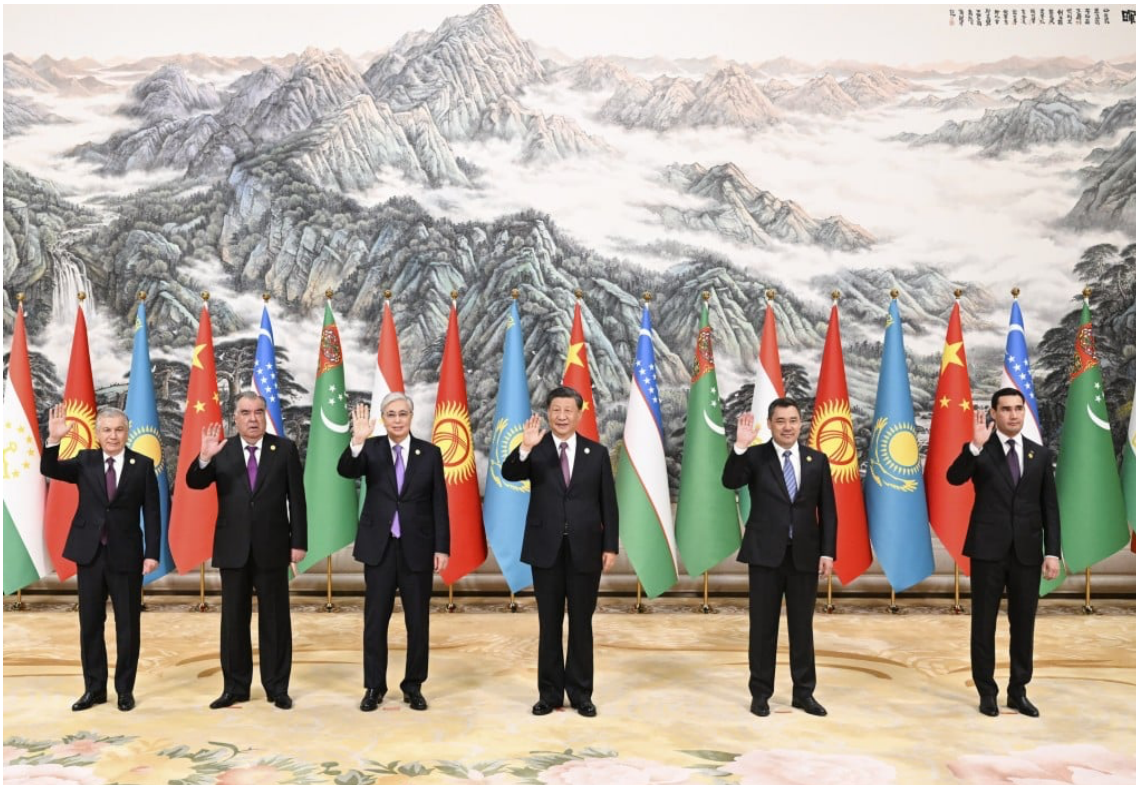
¹ <https://news.mn/r/2672152/>

economic sanctions imposed on Russia. Central Asian countries have become warier of their relationships with Russia and are growing more cautious of China's influence. In response, the United States is actively pursuing opportunities to boost its reputation and influence in the region through long-term investments.

The Central Asian countries have committed to enhancing security cooperation with the United States, emphasizing its importance in bolstering the region's independence. This joint statement was released after a meeting in New York between the leaders of the United States, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

The parties appreciated Washington's efforts to enhance the US-Central Asia partnership. They also affirmed their willingness to collaborate on defense, law enforcement, counterterrorism, border security, refugees, and violent extremism issues. Both parties acknowledged the significance of the situation in Afghanistan for regional security and stability. Furthermore, they agreed to deepen cooperation in economic, energy, the C5+1 corridor, energy security, and climate change areas. There are worries that Central Asian nations shifting their alliances towards China or the United States and distancing themselves from Russia could potentially fuel existing separatist movements. Conversely, there is optimism that increased U.S. investment in the region could help mitigate the risk of separatist movements.

Over the past decade, China has dedicated substantial time and resources to Central Asia. Although governments in the region have embraced Chinese investment under the Belt and Road Initiative, the general public has a different perspective. Many believe that Chinese investment has fueled corruption, undermined governance, and resulted in a heavy burden of external debt. China has revealed intentions to invest \$4 billion in Central Asia.



Source: <https://news.mn/r/2672152/>

China's focus on Central Asia extends beyond economic considerations, as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan share borders with the Xinjiang region, a crucial component of China's security and territorial integrity strategy. Consequently, individuals from Central Asia residing in Xinjiang are closely monitored by Chinese security forces and are said to be transferred to Chinese re-education facilities. In the previous year, approximately 10,000 Kyrgyz citizens were detained and relocated to these facilities.

Central Asian countries have initially been hesitant to take a clear stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, given their reliance on energy resources and the economic significance of labor migrants. However, they have now shown their support, with Kazakhstan permitting its citizens to join the war voluntarily.

Central Asia serves as a link between Russia and China, and the Central Asian nations are expected to continue relying on Russia for the foreseeable future, regardless of the outcome of specific military operations. The heightened threat of terrorism in the region following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover has underscored the necessity for genuine support from Russian military forces.

Despite engaging in friendly talks and agreements with the Taliban in Central Asia, the Taliban has struggled to contain the Islamic State Khorasan Province in Afghanistan. Comprised mainly of Tajik and Uzbek nationals, this group has launched multiple attacks along the Afghan border over the past year, and the situation is expected to deteriorate further. In an effort to safeguard its neighbors, the Taliban has deployed thousands of fighters to its northern border, but the insurgency continues to escalate.

Central Asian countries frequently conduct joint military exercises with Russia in order to address the threat posed by terrorist groups. Following the rise of the Taliban, the Tajik government has bolstered its military presence along the Afghan border and engaged in multiple joint military drills with Russian and Uzbek forces in the vicinity.¹ Tajik and Uzbek intelligence services have reported the presence of several thousand foreign fighters (non-Afghan) near the northern Afghan border.²

The Russian military presence in the region includes ground military facilities in Tajikistan, a 7,000-strong Russian military group in the Nureka area, a significant air force base in Kyrgyzstan, a radio-technical network in Kazakhstan for monitoring ballistic missiles and space objects, and a military field training center at the 8.6 million-hectare Baikonur Cosmodrome, where thousands of soldiers undergo training annually.

The Central Asian countries are working to avoid the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis into a full-scale war, as they could be pulled into conflict due to their commitments under the Collective Security Treaty Organization. While the Collective Security Treaty Organization has been a key part of Russia's security strategy in Central Asia and has provided a safeguard against potential threats from Afghanistan, the current circumstances pose a risk of involving Central Asian citizens in an undesired war.

The member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization are committed to not using force against each other and to coordinating their security policies, as outlined in a total of 11 articles. The first article of the treaty prohibits any member state from joining any military alliance that is hostile to other member states, and Article 2 stipulates that member states will consult on all international security matters and take immediate joint action to address security threats in emergencies, establishing a joint coordination mechanism. Article 4 of the treaty specifies that if a foreign power engages in aggressive actions against any member, all other parties to the Treaty must offer all required assistance, including military aid, and must back the member in exercising their right to collective self-defense as outlined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

In fact, if the Ukrainian crisis escalates into a multi-state war and the Ukrainian army and its allies attack Russia, the three Central Asian countries are faced with a difficult choice: either to support Russia in the war as per the agreement, risking Western sanctions and losses in the conflict, or, like Uzbekistan, to withdraw from the Collective Security Treaty Organization and distance themselves from Russia, thereby losing their primary security and economic partner. If the Russia-Ukraine war persists and deteriorates, the Central Asian countries may find themselves compelled to engage in the conflict as per the agreement.

Russia was once viewed as a reliable source of stability and security for Central Asian nations, but recent events in Ukraine have raised concerns about the effectiveness of the Russian military. This has led to doubts about Russia's role as a security guarantor in Central Asia.

The significant losses suffered by Russia in Ukraine have eroded trust in the Russian military among Central Asian countries. Leaders in the region are now concerned about the potential for Russian military assistance in the event of an attack by militants from northern Afghanistan. There is a fear that NATO and the United States may exploit this situation to complicate matters in Central Asia and challenge Russia's military influence.

Another notable point is that the influence of regional middle powers, such as Turkey, Iran, and India, in Central Asia is on the rise as major powers shift their focus to other priorities.

Turkey has formed its own regional "C4+1" group of Turkic states (excluding Tajikistan), while both Turkey and Iran have committed to providing combat drones to the region, indicating a change in the military-technical strategies of the area. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently organized a virtual C5+1 meeting, demonstrating the increasing attention from Central Asian states and providing them with additional choices for external partnerships.

The meeting of the secretaries of the Central Asian Security Council held in May last year concluded that, with the increasing political and economic significance of the Central Asian countries, it is crucial to prioritize their security and sustainable development.

The Central Asian countries emphasized the need to revamp their cooperation methods to enhance mutual benefits and effectiveness, actively engage in regional cooperation integration, and leverage

¹ The position of Central Asian countries (I), Institute for Security Studies, 17 June, 2022, UB.,

² Ibid

opportunities presented by Western nations. Certain Central Asian countries have proposed joining the BRICS and the Russian-Belarusian Union as part of their initiatives.

Given the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Central Asian countries view collaboration with Russia, China, and the Security Cooperation Treaty Organization through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as aligning with their security, independence, and development interests. Nonetheless, they also see the benefits of attracting investments from Western nations and engaging in security cooperation. By leveraging these opportunities in a manner that suits their national characteristics and interests, the region can reduce its reliance on Russia.”

CONCLUSIONS

The evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia signifies a significant shift in how these countries approach their security and diplomatic relations. With the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict reshaping regional dynamics, Central Asian nations are at a crucial point, weighing their traditional connections with Russia against the necessity for diversified international alliances. While the Collective Security Treaty Organization remains a key factor in their security considerations, these countries are increasingly pursuing independent paths that align with their national interests.

The rising influence of various international players, such as the United States, China, Turkey, Iran, and India, has opened up unprecedented opportunities for Central Asian nations in terms of diplomacy and economic diversification. However, this also brings about intricate challenges in managing these relationships while upholding regional stability. The influx of investments from Western countries, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the emergence of regional middle powers have created new avenues for development but also introduced complexities to the regional power dynamics.

The security threats confronting Central Asia, particularly those stemming from Afghanistan, highlight the ongoing importance of maintaining robust defense capabilities and international security collaboration. Nevertheless, Russia's waning military reputation post its actions in Ukraine has prompted these nations to reassess their security arrangements and seek additional partnerships.

Looking forward, Central Asian countries seem poised to continue on the path towards greater autonomy in their foreign policy decisions while striking a delicate balance among competing international interests. Their ability to navigate these intricate dynamics successfully will likely hinge on their capacity to leverage diverse international partnerships while safeguarding their sovereignty and fostering regional stability. The increasing focus on multi-vector diplomacy, coupled with endeavors to attract a range of international investments, indicates a future where Central Asian nations could achieve enhanced strategic independence while reducing their historical reliance on any single power.

The security of Central Asia can be ensured by the regional states and the international community working together, and this will form the basis of sustainable development in the region.

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