

The Dilemma of Middlepowermanship in Central Asia: Prospects for Hegemony

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Abstract

This article examines the shift in the balance of power in Central Asia in the context of the United States' declining global hegemonic power. The authors analyze the hegemonic struggle between China, Russia, and the U.S. in Central Asia and its influence on the middle power formation in this region. The authors argue that although Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have high economic potentials, by certain criteria they have not achieved the status of middle powers yet. "Middlepowermanship dilemma" is formulated to explain why a hegemonic order has not been established in Central Asia and why middle powers have not emerged in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, the U.S., China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, middle powers, hegemonic struggle.

Today the signs of hegemonic decline have become ever more evident: the United States' international influence is decreasing, its economic supremacy is being challenged by China, and its efforts to project its power globally are meeting resistance across the world. Although some scholars contend that the U.S. still preserves

its dominance (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2016; Schmidt, 2021, pp. 41-42.), many claim about the end of American hegemony or at least its dramatic decline (Acharya, 2017; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). (Acharya, 2017; Cooley and Nexon, 2020).

As a result of the disruption of the U.S. hegemonic global order, the world faces the risk of turbulence, which, in turn, affects the stability of regional orders. There are several options for preventing chaos in international relations and ensuring order and stability. The first one is the emergence of a new hegemon and the formation of a new hegemonic world order, the second one is the establishment of the rule of the collective West, and the third one is the rise of middle powers and their growing role in global governance.

The first scenario suggests the emergence of a reformed or a new world order governed by norms both at the global and regional levels. The second scenario implies a major role of international institutions and global governance (Keohane, 1984, p. 31-32). In the third scenario, there will be less rules at the global level and more rules at the regional level since middle powers traditionally play a more active role in issue-specific areas (Cooper, Higgott and Nossal, 1993, p.7), and generally regional players are more capable of promoting their agendas and building coalitions at the regional level (Ibid., p.10).

In this paper hegemony is understood as the legitimated rule by a dominant power (Scholte, Casier, and Dutkiewicz, 2020). This definition suggests that the first scenario is unlikely as, despite the rise of China's economic and political influence in the international arena, its dominance meets strong opposition and lacks the needed legitimacy. Besides, China's military capability is lower than that of the U.S. or Russia, which prevents it from achieving true dominance. The U.S., on the other hand, aspires to preserve its hegemony, but in order to do so, it has to reformulate the rules, adjusting them to the changing balance of power in the world and "the rise of the Rest."

The second scenario has not proven effective either. It is likely that the European Union, the UK, Canada, Australia, and Japan will be able to work out a way to regulate international relations through both official and unofficial organizations, but they miss the U.S. as the

core of such institutions. The position of the U.S. as the global leader has been undermined by the failures of its military interventions. However, although the collective rule of the West has not succeeded in establishing a world order with a clear set of rules for interaction in the economic and military spheres, it has proven effective in some specific areas, such as the climate change agenda (Zhornist et al., 2022).

The third scenario is viewed by scholars as a more likely one (Montgomery, 2016). There are signs that middle powers are assuming a greater role in their regions. Turkey serves as one of the best examples. With the decline of the American hegemony, Turkey, once a benign middle power, has turned revisionist, willing to change existing rules and gaining more influence in adjacent regions (Sucu et al., 2021).

As a new or a reformed world order is yet to come, the importance of stable regional orders grows significantly. There are two options for the formation of a regional order: 1) the establishment of a regional hegemony by a great or a middle power, and 2) the strengthening of regional institutions (collective rule). A regional order is characterized by a shared set of rules and practices to which regional states agree and which help them achieve common interests. Such orders can be either hierarchical or equitable (Lake, 2009). As middle powers usually stick to multilateralism and actively use diplomacy, they are more inclined to pursue equitable order. Great powers, on the contrary, usually seek to establish regional hegemony or collective hierarchical rule of allied great powers.

Central Asia is a very peculiar case in that it has not seen either a rise of international institutions, or establishment of middle powers' rule. In the absence of a clear set of rules, external great powers are competing for influence in Central Asia, seeking to establish regional hegemony, but not having succeeded so far.

Theoretically, during a hegemonic decline, global rules are substituted by regional ones provided by regional institutions. However, no strong institutions have been formed in Eurasia. There are regional organizations either with a broad membership and weak integration, or a limited membership and strong integration. For example, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has ten

member states (Ukraine has not yet completed formal procedures of withdrawal from all CIS institutions), but its activities are limited to purely formal meetings with no real agenda. On the other hand, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), characterized by deep economic integration and providing economic rules for its member states, has only five members, of which two are Central Asian states.

Great powers, in turn, primarily focus on competing with one another. Some researchers contend that the Great Game in Central Asia primarily involves the rivalry between Russia and the U.S. (Zhao, 2016), while others draw attention to the competition between China and Russia (Wishnick, 2009). Nevertheless, some researchers point to the possibility of closer cooperation between Russia and China, with stabilization of the situation in the region being their common interest (Legieć, 2019; Lukin, 2019).

As the hegemonic world order is eroding, Central Asia lacks a regional order backed by either multilateral organizations or middle powers capable of ensuring peace and stability, and thus in a sense it is being “torn apart” between Russia, China, and the U.S. pursuing their interests in the competition for Central Asia. Meanwhile, the region is facing major security challenges, including intraregional conflicts and a threat from Afghanistan. This article aims to explore why no regional order has been formed and what the possibilities are for establishing one in the future.

A QUEST FOR MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA

Although middle power studies have more than a half-century record, there is no consensus on the definition of and criteria for a middle power. There are four main approaches to defining a middle power: functional, behavioral, hierarchical, and ideational (Chapnik, 1999; Carr, 2014). The first one ties middlepowermanship to influence in functional areas of international relations (Holmes, 1966); the second one, to multilateralism and conflict resolution (Cox, 1989); the third one, to material resources (Wood, 1987); and the latter one studies middle power status as a foreign policy tool of narrative construction (Carr, 2014).

The most common definition of a middle power requires an assessment of a state's influence on political, security, and socio-economic processes at the international level (John, 2014). A middle power's influence on international processes is weaker compared to that of a great power and is constrained by its limited resources but is still tangible.

Another distinction that may add clarity to the concept lies between new and established middle powers. These two groups acquired this status in different periods and exhibit distinct behavioral patterns. For example, Jordaan distinguishes between traditional and emerging middle powers (Jordaan, 2003). He suggests that the latter have supported the non-radical reformist sentiment accompanied by their growing regional influence (Jordaan, 2003).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union a power vacuum emerged in Central Asia, which gave the Central Asian countries (former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan) an opportunity to build up their influence. However, these states experienced grave economic difficulties, including high inflation, transitional recession, and negative GDP growth. In the 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s, all five Central Asian countries carried out economic and political reforms, which, however, led to different results.

Our analysis of the three main approaches to defining a middle power starts with the most objective one: the hierarchical one. This approach relies on three basic, numerically estimated indicators: GDP, population, and military power. The first indicator is usually considered to be the “golden standard” for assessing a state's capacity. We regard the share of global GDP between 0.5 and 3 percent as the qualifying indicator for middle powers (Sucu et al., 2021); being under threshold, none of the Central Asian states qualify for the title of middle power. In the 2000s and the first half of the 2010s, the Central Asian states enjoyed rapid economic growth, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan significantly increased their weight in the world economy. However, their GDP is still not high enough to qualify for the middle power status: in the 2020 World Bank statistics, Kazakhstan ranks 52nd; Uzbekistan, 79th; Turkmenistan, 88th; Tajikistan, 146th; and Kyrgyzstan, 148th (World Bank, 2020).

Another important objective indicator to consider is population. David Vital proposed that a population of 10 to 15 million for developed and 20 to 30 million for developing countries could be considered as the upper boundary for a small power (Vital, 1967), that is, states with a population above this limit could be regarded as middle powers. Of all Central Asian republics, only Uzbekistan surpasses this threshold.

Although these quantitative material indicators allow for objective evaluation of a state's capacity, they alone cannot be used to assess the status of a state in the international hierarchy.

According to the functional approach, middle powers can influence international relations in some matters under certain circumstances (Chapnick, 1999). Vague as it may appear, in the case of Central Asia this approach means that a middle power usually has a say in regional organizations and has an influence on regional processes. In this respect Central Asian states appear to be lacking influence on regional matters, as addressing arising challenges largely depends on the involvement of external actors. Although both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are members of many international organizations, such as the SCO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Kazakhstan is also a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and Uzbekistan has an observer status in it, these two Central Asian countries are not leaders of these organizations. When some Central Asian states (for example, Kazakhstan) tried to form regional organizations, they faced resistance from other Central Asian states and eventually stopped existing. The Central Asian Cooperation Organization initiated by Kazakhstan and formed in 2002 lasted only three years, falling apart in 2005. Later, in 2008, Kazakhstan initiated the creation of an integration union between the Central Asian states (CAU, Central Asia Union), but it was blocked by Uzbekistan.

The behavioral approach posits that a state becomes a middle power if it behaves like one (Cox, 1989); more precisely, if it promotes multilateralism, contributes to conflict resolution, and conducts corresponding diplomacy (Cooper, 1993, p. 7). Besides, middle powers are viewed as regional leaders and often characterized by their

desire for a greater international status (Wood, 1988). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan try to promote their international standing (Asiryanyan, 2019; Vanderhill, Joireman, Tulepbayeva, 2020) acting like a middle power.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have more chances to become middle powers, as they are capable of regulating political processes in Central Asia. Both countries have the potential for becoming middle powers, but they still face some serious problems. Kazakhstan is a rather illustrative case which gives a hint about the nature of the middle power controversy in Central Asia. Some scholars have praised Kazakhstan for its diversified foreign policy (Kurmashev et al., 2018) and favorable transcontinental location (Kassen, 2018). Some researchers (Varpahovskis, 2017) even granted Kazakhstan the status of middle power for its active diplomacy. However, Kazakhstan's proactive foreign policy does not compensate for the grave internal problems that undermine its stability. Despite economic reforms implemented by the government, the poverty problem persists (Aliev, 2015). High social tensions and economic strain have a serious impact on the stability and legitimacy of Kazakhstan's regime, as has been highlighted by some authors (Junisbai, 2014). Also, the mass protests of 2022 showed quite vividly how fragile Kazakhstan's regime is. Kazakhstan's elites failed to address the economic problems voiced by certain groups of the population and faced growing dissent. The Kazakhstani authorities failed to quell the uprising and had to resort to external assistance—the CSTO forces. All these factors point to the transitional status of Kazakhstan in terms of power ranking. The same argument applies to Uzbekistan, the second contender for the status of middle power in the region. Scholars have highlighted a turn in Uzbekistan foreign policy strategy towards openness and activism (Dadabaev, 2019). However, a shift in the international dimension was not followed by qualitative changes in the internal situation. Poverty still haunts Uzbekistan, as 11 percent of its population in 2019 lived below the national poverty line, which is set to \$4.6 a day (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The failures of the two primary contenders for middle power status in Central Asia show that active diplomacy cannot fully compensate for the lack of stability and material capabilities.

Small powers usually bandwagon to align themselves with great powers, which exercise hegemony over them. Middle powers are usually characterized by their active diplomacy, mediation in the resolution of global issues, and a relatively independent position in international relations. Thus, middle power policy is implemented through projecting influence via diplomacy, coalition-building, and efforts to resolve global issues (John, 2014). At the same time, there is no consensus on what kind of relations a small power should have with other states for it to become a middle power. On the one hand, a small power must build up its material capabilities; on the other hand, it must proclaim itself a middle power and start acting like one. In other words, we can assume that small powers need a certain level of autonomy and freedom to embark on a middle power foreign policy strategy and stick to it later. Moreover, scholarship on middle powers shows that in East Asia many of them employ the strategy of hedging, thus balancing between great powers (in the case of East Asian countries it is China and the U.S.) (Lee J., 2017). Research on small powers in Africa and East Asia also suggests that hedging is one of the most effective strategies for small powers (Carmody, 2011). However, the case of Central Asia appears to be different: the hedging strategy does not work there.

The main goal that has united post-Soviet states was preserving acquired sovereignty and asserting independence in the international arena, which has often been equated with independence from Russia, as post-Soviet states feared the possibility of becoming Russia's puppets due to their common history (Roy, 2007, p. 190-191). For the Central Asian states, gaining independence entailed the need to prevent external actors from exerting control over their foreign policies and to strengthen their influence in the region in order to be capable of maintaining political autonomy and preserving their sovereignty. There were several ways to do that. Firstly, the Central Asian countries could focus on cooperation with their neighbors, slowly building up their strength and influence. Secondly, the Central Asian states could go for cooperation with one of the great powers competing for hegemony in the region. Thirdly, they could use the hedging strategy to maneuver between stronger states in order to achieve their own

interests (Ciorciari and Haacke, 2019). All the three strategies can be used by small states to become middle powers. However, following these strategies alone is not enough to become a middle power.

In the 1990s, the Central Asian states' foreign policy objectives were determined by challenges they faced, some of which were common to all Central Asian countries, while others were typical for only some of them. The first challenge they faced was establishing direct access to international markets because, being land-locked states, they used trade routes passing through the Russian territory. Russia started a new hegemonic project, seeking to spread its influence onto Central Asia, which also became challenging for the Central Asian states' independence (Roy, 2007, p. 190). While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan remained pro-Russian, although without becoming fully dependent on Moscow and maintaining connections with both the U.S. and China, Uzbekistan viewed itself as a major regional power and managed to significantly reduce its dependence from Moscow, focusing primarily on developing relations with non-CIS states, and Turkmenistan remained neutral, backing its independence with significant sales of natural gas to China (Roy, 2007, p.191-195). Thus, Kazakhstan, while remaining aligned with Moscow, balanced between the three great powers; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan predominantly pursued hedging, Uzbekistan combined hedging with isolationism (not participating in regional organizations, such as the EAEU or the CSTO), and Turkmenistan chose the isolationism strategy.

For a long time, geopolitical hedging prevailed in Central Asia, and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan maneuvered between major powers for economic gains. Consequently, the Central Asian republics became more and more dependent on their bigger partners. Eventually, balancing between competing or even rivaling states resulted in rising tensions in the region, and the elites of the Central Asian states grew wary of "geopolitical games."

While earlier Russia was perceived as a close but dangerous partner, capable of spreading its influence onto the Central Asian states and taking them under control, after a while the balancing republics learned about hidden perils of partnership with China and the U.S. Although

partnership with the U.S. seemed relatively safe for the Central Asian states, as it had less opportunities to manipulate their foreign policy from overseas, it turned out to be threatening to their elites: the U.S. promoted democracy, and the Central Asian regimes had troubles qualifying as democratic. China, on the other hand, supported friendly regimes of the Central Asian republics and committed itself to adhering to the principle of non-interference, providing generous loans for joint projects. However, China's economic expansion was too intrusive, especially in the oil and gas sectors. The growth of the Central Asian states' debts raised concerns about China's spreading control over their industries. Also, China's preference for bilateral ties in the economic and security spheres (Pantucci, 2019) and its attempts to avoid multilateral interaction further delay the emergence of a regional order.

Uzbekistan, seeking to minimize the risks of regime change, has reduced its partnership with the U.S. and closed U.S. bases on its territory, intensifying ties with its neighbors in Central Asia. Other Central Asian republics are attempting to even out hedging between the three great powers, trying to avoid falling under the control of one of them. The strategy of hedging aimed at securing more economic benefits and gaining autonomy eventually led the Central Asian states into a trap, making them dependent on all three countries—the U.S., Russia, and China, which ultimately hindered their transformation into middle powers.

Independence has not helped Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan transform themselves into middle powers. It seems that an active diplomatic stance and multilateralism are not enough to achieve middle power status. The examples of such middle powers as Canada and Australia show that it is not hedging or balancing between several great powers but bandwagoning a single great power that helps one become a middle power (Cooper, Higgott, Nossal, 1993). The Central Asian states would probably achieve better economic results by bandwagoning one of the great powers in the region (Russia, China, or more arguably, the U.S.). By joining the existing great power economic platforms, the Central Asian republics could boost their economic capacity and move to a higher power status.

GREAT POWER RIVALRY AS A COMPETITION OF HEGEMONIC PROJECTS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union's empire (Hirsch, 2014) Central Asia came close to *anarchy*. According to Watson's pendulum logic, the next evolutionary step for Central Asia would be *hegemony* (Watson, 1992, pp. 17, 122). Three great powers, namely Russia, the U.S., and China, contested for hegemony in Central Asia, but failed to establish a hegemonic regional order. If one of the three contestants tried to spread its sphere of influence to Central Asia, others took steps to prevent it. Theoretically, to exercise hegemony over the Central Asian states, a great power needed their consent or at least compliance, while in practice the Central Asian states opted for either balancing or isolationism, which did not create stable support for one of the great powers and, hence, favorable conditions for establishing a hegemonic order.

The hegemonic projects exist in three dimensions—economic, military, and political, and on two levels—regional and global. While China's hegemonic project mainly focuses on the economic sphere and that of the United States' gives priority to economic and political ones, Russia's hegemonic project covers all the three spheres. Russia, China, and the U.S. promote different models of economic growth: the EAEU stimulates regional economic integration, the BRI focuses on infrastructure development and transborder movement of Chinese goods, and the U.S.-led liberal international order emphasizes globalization. Security-wise, Russia is committed to providing protection for the Central Asian states from external threats via the CSTO, especially after the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan, which did not solve regional security problems (Safranchuk, 2017a, 2017b). China has recently begun to contribute to Central Asian security via counterterrorist activities and military cooperation with the states of the region (Wang, Kong, 2019; Sizov, 2020). After 9/11, the U.S. put emphasis on security cooperation with the region as it established military bases in Central Asia. In the political sphere, Russia promotes integration between post-Soviet states, the U.S. seeks to maintain the liberal world order and extend the influence of liberal institutions. China, on the other hand, demonstratively refuses to

impose its political views on its partners and stands for independent and equal relations. Thus, Russia's hegemonic project is the most comprehensive one and focuses on the regional level, while the U.S. and Chinese projects are global but shallower (Safranchuk, 2019).

The three hegemonic projects have consolidated their positions in Central Asia: the Russian regional hegemonic project based on the EAEU-CSTO, China's global hegemonic effort under the BRI, and the U.S.-sponsored liberal world order. None of them has succeeded in establishing complex hegemony (Safranchuk, Zhornist, and Nesmashny, 2021) in Central Asia. Despite Russia's efforts to stimulate integration, some Central Asian states (most notably, Uzbekistan) have not become full members of Russia-sponsored regional integration projects. Also, the spread of China's economic influence has met resistance in the region, and the U.S. has preserved a reduced presence in Central Asia. However, these failures do not imply that hegemonic competition in Central Asia is decelerating. On the contrary, we can see that competition is intensifying, which, as some scholars say, is reminiscent of the Great Game (Wishnick, 2009; Zhao, 2016).

The rising stakes of great power competition prevents hedging strategies chosen by the Central Asian states from being at least marginally useful. At first, great powers started to meddle in the Central Asian states' affairs economically (in the case of China) or politically, reducing the room for maneuver. Now that the great power competition has tightened, the Central Asian states may face harsh pressure for unequivocal alignment. The problem is accentuated by tempting benefits associated with bandwagoning. This creates the basis for the emergence of a grand strategic problem for the Central Asian states: the dilemma of middlepowermanship.

THE DILEMMA OF MIDDLEPOWERMANSHIP

The absence of middle powers in Central Asia is a very peculiar case, which is indicative of new patterns of middle power emergence. The dilemma of middle powers in Central Asia lies in choosing between independent foreign policy and alignment with one of the great powers which entails a loss of autonomy. Multivectorism and hedging have

been seen as potentially successful strategies of status elevation amid globalization in the absence of a global hegemon. However, the current state of international relations necessitates alignment with a single great power to receive material support required for transition to middlepowermanship.

Although the Central Asian states seek a more visible role in the international arena and are characterized as independent actors of world politics, they have to sacrifice their independence in order to become middle powers because they lack the power and resources to do so on their own.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the primary contenders for becoming middle powers, but great power competition in the region obstructs them from achieving this status. As the Central Asian states are too connected with all three great powers, they cannot choose bandwagoning one of them, and thus they can only continue balancing between them, as the risk of losing their connections is too great.

Thus, the Central Asian states' balancing between Russia, China, and the U.S. amid the great power rivalry in the region does not create an environment conducive to the establishment of a new hegemonic order: the competition between the three great powers and the Central Asian states' dependence on them means that no great power has enough influence to establish a single hegemony. Consequently, this has not let Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan become middle powers as, in order to do so, they had to bandwagon one of the three great powers, thereby allowing the establishment of a great power's hegemonic order. In short, to become middle powers, the Central Asian states have to become a hegemon's subordinates first. The middlepowermanship dilemma arises from balancing between the three great powers, thus preventing the Central Asian states from choosing one ally out of the three.

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Although existing research on middle powers shows that hedging and multivectorism are viable strategies for both middle and small powers, the case of former Soviet Central Asian republics shows that

they have failed to become middle powers. The article proposes a “middlepowermanship dilemma” between hedging and bandwagoning. In some cases, multivectorism may not provide resources and tools necessary for transformation into a middle power, while alignment with one of the great powers may boost a state’s capabilities and facilitate its becoming a middle power.

None of the Central Asian states has managed to become a middle power. Although theoretically the acquired independence and absence of external control could have stimulated their transformation into middle powers, in practice they needed to develop close ties with either Russia, or China, or the U.S. in order to do that. Instead, the Central Asian states chose to balance between the three great powers, preserving their sovereignty through multivector cooperation with all of them. Those Central Asian states that chose to balance between the great powers had to sacrifice part of their independent foreign policies, while those tilting towards isolationism sacrificed their economic power. As a result, none of the Central Asian states has become a middle power and, consequently, none has managed to establish a middle power-governed regional order.

As was previously thought, a power vacuum emerging during hegemonic decline would be filled with international institutions (Keohane, 1984, p. 244). However, the reviewed Central Asian case proves otherwise, as no strong regional institutions have been formed in the region. With declining global hegemony and weak regional institutions, a rise of middle powers was viewed as a logical outcome of the absence of regional order. Instead, the Central Asian states have been caught in a “middlepowermanship dilemma”: a rational strategy for a relatively weak regional state seeking to preserve sovereignty suggests balancing between great powers, however this approach does not provide enough support for facilitating the development of this regional state and acquiring material basis for it to become a middle power. In short, this is a dilemma between hedging and bandwagoning.

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