

Central Asia in Change amid the New Great Game

Zhao Huasheng

Zhao Huasheng

Fudan University, Shanghai, China
Institute of International Studies,
Beijing Club for International Dialogue
Professor

ORCID: 0009-0009-5920-1329

E-mail: zhaohs845@outlook.com

Tel: +86-13636659215

Address: 220, Handan Road, Shanghai, 200135, China

This article is an edited and expanded version of the paper originally written for the Valdai Discussion Club: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/central-asia-in-change-beyond-the-great-game/>

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-4-138-148

Due to its unique geographical and geopolitical location, Central Asia has always been a crossroads for great powers. Because of the special nature of relations between Central Asia and Russia, great power relations for the Central Asian countries are of particular importance, including with regard to their political security. Therefore, proper management of great power relations is not only a diplomatic skill for Central Asian countries, but also a way to ensure their security and stability.

All the major powers, including China, Russia, the United States, Europe, India, and Japan, are active in Central Asia. In terms of geopolitical and strategic influence, China, Russia, and the United States are undoubtedly at the forefront.

This would not be a problem for the Central Asian countries if the major powers were on good terms, but the reality is such that the

relationship between the major powers in Central Asia is complicated and often interpreted as geopolitical competition. In the West, it is even referred to as the “New Great Game,” meaning that it is highly competitive and confrontational in nature.

This understanding cannot be said to be wrong if applied to the United States and Russia. Geopolitical rivalry has been the mainstay of U.S.-Russia relations in Central Asia in recent years. These countries have clearly opposite geopolitical goals in the region and mutually exclusive policies and behaviors. The United States’ fundamental goal is to prevent Russia from regaining control of Central Asia, reduce the dependence of Central Asian states on Russia, break any form of Russian monopoly over the region, and eliminate the notion that Central Asia is a Russian sphere of influence. Russia’s goal is the opposite, and in all these respects it is in opposition to the U.S. one. This determines the mutually exclusive nature of their policies in Central Asia. In the wake of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the main goal of the United States is to prevent any possible support of Russia by the Central Asian countries. Recent global developments have intensified the U.S.-Russia rivalry and antagonism, both at the international and regional levels, therefore the U.S.-Russian Great Game in Central Asia is most likely to continue.

As for Russia and China, there is a view, especially in the West, that the two countries are the protagonists of the “Central Asian Great Game,” that they have a competitive structural relationship in Central Asia, and that a Sino-Russian conflict is almost inevitable. However, this is not true because Russian-Chinese relations are based on the principles of coexistence and cooperation rather than exclusion and geopolitical confrontation. Contrary to pessimistic predictions, no conflict has occurred between the two countries in the last thirty years.

China and Russia have been engaged in regional security and economic cooperation in Central Asia since 1998, during the period of the Shanghai Five, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established in 2001, is both a product of Sino-Russian cooperation and a platform for cooperation between the two countries in Central Asia. The energy sector, once considered the most likely area of conflicting interests between Russia and China, has not been

the subject of any serious collision. When China first proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) in 2013, there was a sense of uncertainty and skepticism in Russian public opinion, which made the future of the relationship between SREB and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) uncertain. The fact that the two regional economic cooperation projects are led by different major powers but overlap in terms of region and membership would, according to traditional geopolitical thinking, naturally lead to geo-economic and even geopolitical mutual exclusion and antagonism. But the situation did not develop in this direction. In May 2015, China and Russia issued a joint statement on the interface and cooperation between SREB and the Eurasian Economic Union. As a result, the two seemingly opposing structures (if viewed from the traditional geopolitical standpoint) were transformed into an architecture of cooperation and development, and the pairing of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union became a new platform for Sino-Russian cooperation. President Vladimir Putin participated in the first and second Belt and Road International Forums held in Beijing in 2017 and 2019, and he is likely to attend the third forum to be held in China in 2023.

As for the U.S.-China relations in Central Asia, the picture is more complex. The two countries seem to share some similar intentions, although not necessarily from the same starting points. These intentions include opposing terrorism, supporting the diversification of foreign economic relations in Central Asia, supporting the independence and territorial integrity of Central Asian states, promoting regional connectivity, and improving the investment and trade environment. However, in practice there has been little substantive cooperation. There also remain geopolitical tensions between the two countries, such as China's opposition to the United States' military presence in Central Asia and the promotion of "color revolutions." China is particularly alert to the United States' export of color revolutions to the region, understanding that they may cause abnormal regime change in the Central Asian countries, bring instability and chaos to the region, worsen China's peripheral security environment, and directly affect its interests in the region.

Faced with the complex relationships between major powers, the Central Asian countries have commonly adopted the multifaceted diplomacy of developing relations with all countries, which, according to Tajikistan's official documents, means a policy of open doors to all countries that are willing to cooperate.

The development of relations with all countries is a common diplomatic practice in most countries, but as a diplomatic concept of the Central Asian countries it has a deeper background and meaning. The Central Asian countries clearly intend to develop relations with all major powers other than Russia with which they have longstanding ties.

From the perspective of the Central Asian states, multifaceted diplomacy is the optimal option because it is in their best interests. The great powers are at odds with each other, but the Central Asian states have no grievances against them (although they may conflict on issues such as human rights and democracy), and they do not want to follow any great power in opposing some other power. It would be ideal for the Central Asian states if the major powers had a mutual system of checks and balances in the region as this would give the former more freedom of maneuver and help prevent the latter from dominating and controlling the region.

Despite the deep divide between China, the United States, Russia, and Europe, the Central Asian countries have formed strategic partnerships or strategic cooperation with each of them. The most recent expanded Strategic Partnership Council meeting between Kazakhstan and the United States took place in December 2022, and Uzbekistan and the United States launched a Strategic Partnership Dialogue in December 2021.

The EU is one of the most important trade partners and sources of investment in Central Asia. More than 30% of Kazakhstan's foreign trade and foreign investments come from the EU; in 2022, Kazakhstani-European trade reached \$39.9 billion, and investments from the EU countries totaled \$12.5 billion. During Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Germany in May 2023, the two countries reached commercial agreements totaling \$9 billion. In the last ten years, the EU

has invested about \$120 billion in Central Asia, accounting for 40% of foreign direct investment in the region.

The U.S. holds a pivotal position in Kazakhstan's energy sector but is less important in terms of general economic and trade relations. The United States' trade with Kazakhstan accounts for 86% of its total trade with the region, 7% with Uzbekistan, and 7% with the other three Central Asian countries. The volume of U.S.-Kazakhstan trade was only \$3.8 billion in 2022, but U.S. investment in Central Asia has been on the rise lately. In the first three quarters of 2022, U.S. direct investment in Kazakhstan reached \$5 billion, the highest ever level.

Together with the concept of multifaceted diplomacy, some Central Asian countries advocate the concept of balanced diplomacy, which was formalized in Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2014-2020. In terms of meaning, balanced diplomacy is different from multifaceted diplomacy, which is not necessarily equidistant or balanced. Balanced diplomacy, although not necessarily equidistant either, takes into account the structure of the balance of power and the status of the major powers.

Pragmatism is also an important feature of Central Asian diplomacy. Its purpose is to bring real benefits to each Central Asian country. There is nothing unusual about pragmatism, but in the case of the Central Asian states it can also be seen as a justification of developing relations with all major powers, but only if they can bring practical benefits. Importantly, these must be practical benefits only, free from political intentions and not subject to ideological factors.

Pragmatism is most noticeable in the economic field. Economic interests are the core of pragmatism, so economic diplomacy is especially popular. Big economies, including China, Russia, the U.S., Europe, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, and India, are key cooperation targets for Central Asian countries. So, economic profitability is the main asset for Central Asian countries in maintaining relations with the major powers. Whoever can bring more economic benefits to the Central Asian countries will be more welcome in the region.

The sudden outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine left Central Asia in a fissure between the great powers. The reaction of the

Central Asian countries to the Ukraine conflict has not been the same: some countries are more sympathetic to Russia and others are more apprehensive, fearing that something similar may happen in the region. So, the conflict has caused great pressure on the Central Asian countries. However, it has also produced some unexpected positive effects. The political, economic, and security cooperation between Central Asia and the major powers is accelerating, and the region's status in the relations of the major powers is rising accordingly. Leaders or senior officials of major countries such as China, Russia, the United States, and Europe have visited the region one after another. India, the EU, and Russia took the lead in holding C5+1 summits with Central Asia, and the China-Central Asia 5+1 summit was held in Xi'an on May 19, 2023. Not to be outdone, the U.S. is also planning to hold the first U.S.-Central Asia 5+1 meeting with the Central Asian leaders in September 2023 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. This has significantly raised the status and importance of Central Asia in international politics.

The Central Asian countries, which have close economic ties with Russia, have unexpectedly benefited from the severe Western sanctions imposed against Russia. Their trade with both Europe and Russia has skyrocketed, with large imports from Europe on one side and large exports to Russia on the other. Naturally, this has caused resentment in the United States and Europe. Some Western companies have resettled in Central Asia after withdrawing from Russia. The influx of hundreds of thousands of wealthy Russians into Central Asia due to the recent military mobilization has also generated additional revenue in the Central Asian countries. In 2022, remittances from abroad to Uzbekistan were estimated at \$16.9 billion, up 2.1-fold year-on-year, of which 85%, or about \$14.5 billion, came from Russia, compared to the previous annual remittances from Russia of just about \$4 billion. Kazakhstan's remittances of \$775 million in 2022 are more than six times higher than in 2021. According to the EBRD's forecast, the Central Asian economies will grow by 5.2% in 2023 and by 5.4% in 2024.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has also had an impact on relations between the major powers and Central Asia, which is most evident in Russia's relations with the region.

At the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2022, Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated in the presence of President Putin that Kazakhstan would not recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Before and after that, top Kazakhstani officials also repeatedly stated that they would not allow their country to become a gateway for bypassing Western sanctions against Russia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have also made moves displeasing Russia. Kyrgyzstan cancelled the CSTO Indestructible Brotherhood-2022 joint military exercises scheduled for October 2022 on its territory, while the U.S. Regional Cooperation 2022 exercise was successfully conducted in neighboring Tajikistan, with all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan participating. Kyrgyzstan President Sadyr Japarov was also absent from the informal CIS summit held the same month.

This has stirred speculation about growing tensions in Central Asia's relations with Russia. Needless to say, these are bad signs for Russia, but in the grand scheme of things they are not yet fatal to relations between Central Asia and Russia. For example, Kyrgyzstan's discontent is caused by its problem with Tajikistan, not Russia.

Relations between Russia and Kazakhstan are more complicated. Unlike the other four Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan shares a more than 7,500-kilometer common border with Russia, the longest land border in the world. During Soviet times, the five Central Asian states were generally referred to as Central Asia and Kazakhstan because a considerable part of Kazakhstan's territory is in the south of Western Siberia and geographically belongs to Europe. Kazakhstan considers itself a Eurasian country rather than an Asian country, which is one of the reasons why it has been particularly keen on Eurasian integration, particularly during the Nazarbayev era.

There is no legal territorial dispute between Kazakhstan and Russia, but there is often an undercurrent of discord among the people, which often galvanizes public opinion in both countries. Despite the harsh rhetoric, this has not entailed a major change in Kazakhstan's policy towards Russia. After his re-inauguration in November 2022, President Tokayev made his first foreign visit to Russia.

Russia has been paying much more attention to Central Asia after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, with President Putin visiting all five Central Asian countries in 2022 for the first time in recent years. A 5+1 summit between Russia and Central Asia was held for the first time, and a steady stream of senior Russian officials and businessmen traveled to Central Asia. Today Russia needs Central Asia as never before.

Common sense suggests that while Russia pursues a friendly policy towards Central Asia, there is no reason for the Central Asian countries to take the initiative to damage their relations with Russia. The political, economic, security, and humanitarian relations between Russia and Central Asia are not only closely intertwined, but they are also extremely important for the Central Asian countries and serve as a long-term and solid foundation that determines the relationship between the two sides. That is why, despite pressure from the West, the presidents of all five Central Asian countries participated in the Red Square military parade in Moscow on May 9, 2023.

It would be safe to say that the situation created by the Russia-Ukraine crisis has increased the self-confidence, independence, agency, and ability of the Central Asian states to shape relations with major powers, but their relationship with Russia has not fundamentally changed. Russia's position may have slightly weakened and its ability to manipulate regional affairs has decreased somewhat, but its roots in Central Asia remain deep and its position remains strong.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has filled America's Central Asia policy with new content, which is to urge the Central Asian countries to comply with the sanctions imposed against Russia. A flurry of visits to Central Asia by U.S. and European officials, including U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and EU Sanctions Envoy David O'Sullivan, is part of that effort.

Clearly, America's Central Asian diplomacy has more ambitious long-term plans and objectives, which are fully reflected in the U.S. Central Asia Strategy 2019-2025, although the situation has changed considerably since the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. From a

geopolitical perspective, pulling the Central Asian states out of Russia's orbit remains one of the major aims of U.S. Central Asian diplomacy. But, unlike in the past, China is gradually being included among the main targets of the United States as strategic tensions between the two countries deepen and as China's presence in Central Asia expands rapidly. For China, Central Asia is the "strategic rear," an important part of its western security perimeter, a key implementation area for its One Belt One Road Initiative, a major transportation corridor to the West, and an important source of energy, with a number of oil pipelines and natural gas pipelines running across the region. Therefore, Central Asia is an area with multifaceted strategic interests for China.

In the past, the U.S. launched or promoted a series of big construction projects in Central Asia. Although these projects were designed to steer the region away from Russia and China, they are not necessarily bad in themselves. For example, the Central Asia-South Asia 1000 power project (CASA-1000) and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project (TAPI) were both priorities of the U.S. New Silk Road strategy, proposed by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, but neither has been completed. Now the U.S. has basically withdrawn from these projects, while China and Russia have begun to enter them. Russia has expressed its willingness to participate in the construction of the TAPI pipeline, and China also has stated that these projects can help improve regional connectivity and revitalize the region's economy. This means that China is not excluded from participation in the future.

It can be said with certainty that there is no way to implement the American idea of taking Central Asia out of the "orbit" of Russia and China, because the Central Asian countries have such deep interests and close ties with Russia and China that the United States cannot find a substitute for them. In addition, all countries are "prisoners of geography" to varying degrees, and geography plays an important role in interstate relations. Central Asia is situated between Russia and China, with which it shares borders of more than 7,500 and 3,300 kilometers, respectively, and the reason why Central Asia has been called "central" is that it is situated in the middle between Russia and

China. Also, the Central Asian countries are landlocked and have no access to the sea. This geographical feature makes the development of relations with neighboring Russia and China particularly important for Central Asia and creates quite convenient conditions for cooperation with them.

From China's point of view, there is no "Chinese orbit" in Central Asia. However, China's relations with Central Asia will certainly continue to grow rapidly. This is not because of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, but because of the natural rise of China's political, economic, and diplomatic influence. More importantly, it is due to the fact that China's Central Asian policy is welcomed by the Central Asian countries, and China's importance to them and its role in achieving their economic and social development goals are becoming more and more prominent.

Some say that China lacks soft power, but from another point of view, China has unique "soft power" in Central Asia. China does not interfere in the internal affairs of the Central Asian countries, does not impose its will on them, does not ask them to take sides between China and other countries, and does not seek to establish a sphere of influence in Central Asia. Moreover, many developing countries remember that the basic living conditions were not so good in China in the not so distant past and appreciate the fact that it has persevered and achieved a rapid economic rise, becoming the second largest economy in the world in just a few decades. China does not export its model, but the Central Asian countries are inspired by the success of the Chinese model and want to learn from China's successful experience, which can also be described as China's unique soft power.

The Central Asian countries are also actively developing and expanding relations with countries and regional organizations outside their area, and Central Asian leaders make frequent trips to a larger group of countries, including those that were less involved in interactions before. Central Asia's possibilities to develop regional cooperation are also expanding. In November 2022, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) held its first summit and joint military exercises. In July 2023, the five Central Asian states and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) held their first summit. Central

Asia's identity in the international political and world economic landscape is also showing an evolutionary trend, and it will no longer serve solely as a corridor linking Europe and Asia or an energy base, but it will be gradually changing into a politically and economically important subregion with an independent status.

The five Central Asian countries emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union and are influenced by various historical relationships. However, while previously this region was generally regarded in international politics as a space dominated by other countries, now this perception is going away.