



Central Asia's Strategic Autonomy in the New Heartland: Introduction to the Special Issue

Introduction

Zhang Xiaotong^{1*}, Assylzat Karabayeva¹, Ruilei Xing²

¹ Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Social Sciences, KIMEP University

² School of Political Science and Public Administration, Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

This special issue emerged from the academic discussions at the conference “Central Asian Regionalism in the Vertex of the EU, Russia, and China,” held at KIMEP University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, on November 14-15, 2024. This event, supported by the Jean Monnet project “EU—Central Asia Relations: New Horizons for Regional Integration, Partnership, and Cooperation (EUCA-RIPC)” funded by the European Union (Project ID: 101127257), provided a forum for exploring Central Asia's shifting geopolitical significance and regional integration dynamics amidst the competing influences of major global actors, particularly the European Union, Russia, China, and the United States.

The geopolitical upheaval following the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022 has significantly reshaped global power relations, bringing renewed analytical attention to Central Asia's position as a critical node in Eurasian geopolitics. Traditionally framed by Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory, Central Asia was historically considered essential for control of Eurasia, famously encapsulated in the dictum: “Who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.” However, today's realities call for a reexamination of this paradigm.

The articles presented in this special issue prompt a critical reconsideration of Heartland theory's contemporary relevance. While the Heartland concept still holds analytical value in highlighting Central Asia's enduring strategic importance, significant theoretical innovations emerge when examining today's geopolitical landscape. The traditional focus on Eastern Europe's pivotal role requires recalibration. Given the shifting geopolitical and geoeconomic realities, a simplistic replacement—“Who controls Central Asia commands the Heartland”—would not adequately capture the complexities involved.

Instead, a more nuanced theoretical reframing is necessary. Central Asia's importance within the Heartland has undeniably increased, but the nature of controlling influence has fundamentally transformed. Unlike in Mackinder's era, contemporary influence in Central Asia is no longer defined primarily by military dominance or territorial control but by multifaceted geoeconomic engagements, infrastructural connectivity, and diplomatic agility. Moreover, Central Asian states themselves have significantly expanded their own agency, adopting proactive diplomatic strategies—especially multivector diplomacy—to navigate relationships with multiple external powers simultaneously.

Therefore, a revised conceptual syllogism better reflects this new reality:

1. Central Asia's geopolitical significance within the Heartland is greater today than ever before.
2. Yet, the methods and modalities of influencing or “controlling” Central Asia have become increasingly diversified, emphasizing geoeconomic integration, infrastructure networks, and diplomatic interactions rather than traditional military dominance.
3. Consequently, those who effectively engage with Central Asia through these contemporary modalities—fostering economic connectivity, diplomatic flexibility, and respectful partnership—can significantly shape the dynamics of the Heartland, and thereby Eurasia and beyond.

This special issue deeply explores this redefined Heartland paradigm—termed here as the “New Heartland”—by examining case studies, theoretical innovations, and empirical analyses across the included articles. Central Asia, once a passive geopolitical crossroads, emerges through these analyses as an active player, dynamically reshaping its role within global geopolitics and asserting significant autonomy in an increasingly complex international order.

* E-mail: zhangxiaotong@kimep.kz

1 Historical Context

Central Asia has long been viewed through the prism of classical geopolitics as a pivotal arena in global power dynamics. Over a century ago, Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory cast Central Asia as the strategic "pivot" of empire – whoever controls this interior Heartland, he argued, could command the World-Island (Eurasia) and ultimately the world. During the 19th-century "Great Game" between the British and Russian Empires, and later the Cold War, Central Asia's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia underscored its importance. Historically, the region experienced cycles of prominence: it was once a flourishing center of trade and civilization along the Silk Road, famed for its "glorious golden epoch" of cultural and scientific achievement¹, before foreign domination and the Soviet period curtailed its autonomy. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 reawakened Central Asia's strategic significance, sparking a new scramble for influence reminiscent of Mackinder's thesis. Zbigniew Brzezinski famously dubbed the region the "grand chessboard" of great-power strategy, an analogy that still resonates as today's major powers vie for position.² Indeed, one contribution in this issue notes that all the "giant players" in world politics – whether Russia, China, or Western powers – have sought to pull Central Asia into their own orbit, seeing control of this Heartland as key to global power.³

In the three decades since independence, Central Asian states have navigated major geopolitical shifts and experimented with various integration projects, with mixed results. Immediately after 1991, they joined the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) to maintain post-Soviet cooperation, and regional initiatives soon followed. In 1994, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan formed the Central Asian Union (later the Central Asian Economic Community, then Central Asian Cooperation Organization by 2002) aimed at economic cooperation. However, this and other early attempts at intra-regional unity did not significantly deepen integration or overcome intra-regional suspicions. The absence of strong regional institutions through the 1990s meant each newly-sovereign republic often looked to external partnerships for support, which sometimes put them at odds – for example, Uzbekistan's periodic rifts with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, or Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's decision to align more closely with Russia's economic frameworks. By the 2000s, broader multilateral structures took root: all republics, except Turkmenistan, became members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 (with China and Russia) and participated in the US-led Global War on Terror, hosting military bases and development projects. Yet formal regional unity remained elusive – neither the early Central Asian union initiatives nor later efforts under Eurasian integration schemes created a cohesive Central Asian bloc. This lack of a united front left room for outside powers to wield greater influence in each state's affairs. Major geopolitical junctures – such as the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, the color revolutions in Eurasia, and the 2014 Ukraine crisis – all reverberated through Central Asia, often reinforcing these states' instinct to hedge between competing powers rather than band together. By contrast, Southeast Asian countries (through ASEAN) had early on formed a collective framework to manage external great-power dynamics – a path that Central Asia did not pursue in the 1990s.

Nevertheless, the mid-2010s and beyond have seen nascent signs of Central Asian regionalism. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, while others remained outside, preferring bilateral economic ties over surrendering sovereignty. More organically, the Central Asian republics themselves began seeking closer cooperation independent of external sponsors. Starting in 2018, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan initiated annual "Consultative Meetings" – a format for just the five leaders to meet and discuss regional issues. Championed especially by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, these summits marked the first time since independence that Central Asian leaders regularly sat together without a foreign power convening them. Over successive meetings (Astana 2018, Tashkent 2019, Turkmenbashi 2021, Cholpon-Ata 2022, Dushanbe 2023, and Astana 2024), they have begun to institutionalize this cooperation. Notably, at the fifth consultative summit in 2023 the presidents agreed to form a "Council of National Coordinators" to monitor implementation of agreements, a first step toward a more structured regional dialogue.⁴ By the sixth summit in 2024, they adopted a joint "Roadmap for Regional Cooperation" through 2027, aiming to coordinate economic, infrastructural, and security policies.⁵ These developments suggest that, against the backdrop of great-power rivalry, the Central Asian states are increasingly aware of the value of speaking with a collective voice. The historical trajectory from the 1990s to today thus reveals a region gradually moving from the periphery of others' integration projects toward forging its own mechanisms of cooperation – a critical foundation for the theme of this special issue, Central Asia's quest for autonomy amid geopolitical upheaval.

1 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

2 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

3 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

4 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The "C5+1" as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

5 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The "C5+1" as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

2 Theoretical Discussions

Several key IR concepts frame Central Asian states' strategies in managing external pressures. Foremost among these is multivectorism, the pragmatic foreign policy approach pioneered by Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and now embraced in various forms by most Central Asian republics. Multivectorism refers to a non-ideological, non-preferential, and highly pragmatic strategy of engaging multiple great powers simultaneously. Rather than aligning exclusively with one bloc, Central Asian governments pursue diverse partnerships – with Russia, China, the U.S., Europe, Turkey, and others – to maximize their security and development options while avoiding over-dependence on any single patron. This approach is fundamentally about preserving sovereignty and flexibility. As one study in this issue notes, the smaller post-Soviet states employ multivector foreign policies to “maximize benefits from the geopolitical rivalry among major powers,” essentially hedging to secure advantages from all sides. This multi-directional diplomacy has allowed countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others to attract investment and aid from various rivals (for instance, Chinese infrastructure loans alongside U.S. security assistance), and to pivot when regional power balances shift. While critics argue multivectorism can be unstable – fearing that in a major power confrontation, small states will eventually be forced to choose sides – the Central Asian experience so far shows remarkable success in maintaining this balancing act. In light of recent developments, some analysts have even proposed refining the multivector model by recognizing a “fourth vector” in Central Asia's foreign relations: the growing ties with regional middle powers such as the Gulf states, Türkiye, Iran, India, and Pakistan. These emerging partnerships, distinct from the traditional great-power triad, reflect Central Asia's effort to broaden its network of options and reduce reliance on any single axis of influence.

The concept of “multiplexity” in world order helps explain why multivector strategies have endured and even strengthened in recent years.⁶ Unlike a traditional unipolar or bipolar system, a multiplex world is characterized by a plurality of power centers and the absence of a single hegemon. It features diverse actors – not just great powers but also middle powers, regional organizations, and non-state players – and a dynamic, overlapping web of cooperative and competitive relationships. In such an environment, states like those in Central Asia have greater room to maneuver. Amitav Acharya and colleagues argue that the rise of middle powers is a hallmark of the multiplex order, as these countries carve out niches through coalition-building and norm entrepreneurship, not just raw power.⁷ Central Asia's post-Cold War international society exemplifies this: no one power completely dominates the region, which has enabled its states to exercise agency by engaging many partners. Kazakhstan is often highlighted as a de facto “middle power” in Central Asia that has leveraged multivectorism to enhance its autonomy and influence. Over three decades, Kazakhstan has positioned itself as a lynchpin between Asia and Europe⁸ – joining Russian-led security and economic alliances, embracing China's Belt and Road Initiative, courting Western investors, and promoting its own initiatives like interfaith dialogues and nuclear non-proliferation – all to bolster its development and security while keeping great powers' ambitions in balance.⁹ One article in this issue shows how Kazakhstan's multi-vector approach has been resilient even after Russia's war in Ukraine: the geopolitical rift between Russia and the West actually created new opportunities for Kazakhstan to expand ties with the EU (for example, by increasing oil exports to Europe and attracting European interest in Central Asia's transit routes).¹⁰ Thus, rather than forcing a binary choice, the evolving multiplex order – with Russia, China, the EU, the U.S., Turkey, India and others all playing roles – has reinforced Central Asian states' commitment to multivectorism as a means of strategic autonomy.¹¹ Realist theory may view these multi-alignments as classic balancing behavior by small states in an anarchic system, but the Central Asian experience also aligns with liberal and constructivist notions that these states can be norm-shapers and bridge-builders. For instance, Kazakhstan has at times mediated between great powers (offering to host talks on Iran's nuclear program and the Ukraine conflict) – behavior that underscores middle-power activism beyond simple balancing.

Another theoretical lens relevant to Central Asia's international relations is the English School's concept of international society, especially at the regional level. The English School posits that beyond the material power play of international systems, states form societies with shared norms, rules, and institutions. In a regional context, a regional international society would mean the states of Central Asia developing common values and institutionalized cooperation, thus behaving as a pluralistic society of

6 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

7 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

8 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

9 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

10 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

11 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

equals. Historically, Central Asia has struggled to establish such a regional society – a point one author in this issue makes by reviewing the string of failed or stalled integration frameworks. From the CIS and ECO (the Economic Cooperation Organization) in the 1990s to the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community, and other forums in the 2000s, none have fostered a deep sense of common Central Asian identity or supranational norms overriding national interests.¹² The European Union is cited as a rare successful example of regional international society formation, hinging on the institutionalization of shared interests and identity.¹³ Another instructive example comes from Southeast Asia: ASEAN's approach – often dubbed the “ASEAN Way” – showed how a group of smaller states can foster regional cohesion and present a unified front to external powers. By practicing inclusive, consensus-based multilateralism (sometimes described as an “omni-enmeshment” strategy of engaging all major powers on the region's terms), ASEAN gradually entrenched itself as the primary interface for great-power engagement in Southeast Asia. This model contrasts with Central Asia's experience so far, but it offers a point of comparison for how shared norms and institutions might eventually take root. Can Central Asia move in that direction? One avenue might be through external integration projects that inadvertently cultivate regional solidarity. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a case in point examined in this issue. The BRI – a vast infrastructure and connectivity initiative spanning Eurasia – has pulled Central Asian countries into closer economic cooperation with one another and with China. By funding railways, roads and energy pipelines that physically link these states, BRI creates shared interests in trade, transit, and development.¹⁴ It also promotes certain shared norms: for example, the norm of regional connectivity as a public good, and norms around economic integration and policy coordination (through mechanisms like the Belt and Road Forum). From an English School perspective, the BRI could be seen as helping to institutionalize elements of a regional international society in Central Asia – synchronizing the countries' development agendas and forging common destiny narratives. Indeed, BRI projects in Central Asia explicitly advance mutual goals like infrastructure development, economic growth, regional connectivity, energy cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges, all of which contribute to a sense of regional interdependence.¹⁵ However, there is a normative duality to this process. As the English School reminds us, international society rests on shared rules and values; the question is “whose” values. China's BRI exports not only bridges and tunnels, but also elements of Chinese norms and practices. As one article notes, Beijing promotes its own preferred norms “with Chinese characteristics” alongside global principles¹⁶ – for instance, a Westphalian emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, or its model of state-led development, which may or may not align with Western liberal norms. The emerging regional order in Central Asia is thus multiplex in a normative sense as well: it blends influences from Chinese-led initiatives, Russian-led security arrangements, Western economic engagements, and indigenous ideas of regionalism. The English School lens highlights that Central Asia's evolving regional society (if indeed one is forming) will depend on how these states internalize common norms – be it through Chinese investment frameworks, Russian security partnerships, or their own consultative summits. Several contributions here explore this normative dimension: how efforts like the BRI and other multilateral engagements are fostering shared rules (e.g. on trade, transit, or counterterrorism) and a stronger sense of regional identity or at least solidarity. In short, theoretical perspectives on multivectorism, multiplex global order, middle-power diplomacy, and regional international society all inform our understanding of Central Asia's strategies. These states are not simply at the mercy of geopolitics; they are actively shaping their external environment – balancing, norm bargaining, and sometimes integrating – to secure their autonomy.

3 Geopolitical Shifts Post-2022

The Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 was a watershed moment for Central Asia's external environment, triggering swift adjustments in the region's foreign policies and in the strategies of major powers toward Central Asia. Traditionally bound to Moscow through security treaties, trade ties, and Soviet-era personal networks, the Central Asian governments faced an acute dilemma: how to respond to Russian aggression against a former Soviet republic. Notably, all five states chose a path of neutrality or strategic ambiguity. None officially endorsed Russia's war aims; for example, Kazakhstan pointedly refused to recognize the Kremlin-backed separatist “republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk – a quiet rebuke of Moscow's justification for the war. At the same time, Central Asian leaders stopped short of openly condemning Russia, adopting a careful “strategic silence”

12 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

13 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

14 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

15 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

16 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

on the conflict. This calibrated stance was driven by necessity: Russia remains a powerful neighbor and economic partner, but its war (and the Western sanctions that followed) also posed risks to Central Asian economies and regional security. The immediate priority for Central Asian states was to shield themselves from spillover effects and to avoid being caught in a zero-sum loyalty test. Here we see multivectorism in action under crisis conditions – the region's governments tried to maintain working relations with Moscow (to avoid provocation or economic backlash) while simultaneously deepening ties with other powers to hedge against a diminished or antagonistic Russia.

One direct response was a renewed impetus for intra-regional solidarity. Just five months after the Ukraine war began, the Central Asian presidents convened their Fourth Consultative Meeting (in July 2022 in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan) – a gathering whose subtext was unity in the face of external turbulence. The leaders emphasized common threats and interests, implicitly asserting that regional cooperation must take precedence in turbulent times. Four of the five presidents specifically highlighted instability in Afghanistan as a shared security concern (mindful that NATO's withdrawal and the Taliban's return in 2021 had created new challenges), and all discussed issues like border disputes, water and energy management, and climate/environmental problems as areas where Central Asia should close ranks. Strikingly, Ukraine was not explicitly mentioned in their public remarks – again reflecting cautious diplomacy – but the subtext was clear. The war next door had reinforced the importance of Central Asian countries coordinating their positions and not allowing external powers' conflicts to sow division among them. The outcome of that 2022 summit and subsequent meetings was a stronger rhetorical commitment to regional cooperation, seen in joint declarations about the need for a united Central Asia. While such statements remained general, they set the tone for more concrete steps that followed (the institutional innovations in 2023–24 noted earlier). In short, post-2022 Central Asia has moved to close its ranks, balancing between outside powers but also investing in its collective self-reliance as a region.

The Russia-Ukraine war also forced Moscow, Beijing, and Brussels (as well as Washington and others) to recalibrate their strategies in Central Asia – changes that, on the whole, have given Central Asian states greater leverage. For Russia, the invasion of Ukraine proved costly to its influence. With its military bogged down and its economy under Western sanctions, Russia's ability to project power and patronage in Central Asia diminished. Although the Kremlin redoubled its focus on Eurasia – President Putin accelerated his “Greater Eurasian Partnership” vision to integrate the former Soviet space with Asia – this shift was born of necessity as Russia's “Greater Europe” strategy collapsed.¹⁷ Paradoxically, the war made Russia more dependent on goodwill and cooperation from Central Asia, even as Central Asians grew warier of Russian dominance. Evidence of this altered dynamic came early: in 2022–23, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both resisted Russian entreaties to join its sanctions evasion schemes or send support to the war effort. In fact, Kazakhstan openly stated it would abide by Western sanctions and would not help Russia circumvent them – a remarkable stance from a longtime ally. Even back in 2014, after Russia's first intervention in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus had refused to follow Moscow's lead in banning Western food imports.¹⁸ Such incidents underscore that Central Asian states will not automatically fall in line with Russian policy if it harms their own national interests. Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), once touted as a vehicle for Russian leadership in the region, has been unable to dictate a unified response among its members regarding Ukraine.¹⁹ Instead, Russia has had to lean more on diplomacy and incentives: it reaffirmed military commitments (like security assistance through the CSTO), offered discounted oil and gas, and promoted the idea of linking the EEU with China's BRI to show that Central Asian members could benefit from being transit hubs.²⁰ In essence, post-2022 Russia must compete for Central Asia's loyalty in a way it hasn't since the 1990s. Its new strategy is to emphasize “open regionalism” – accommodating China's and others' involvement – in contrast to the more Russia-centric “closed regionalism” of the past.²¹ This has opened up space for Central Asian multi-vector diplomacy: for instance, when Moscow pushed for deeper military integration, Kazakhstan instead invited international observers (including American, Turkish, and Chinese) to its military exercises to signal a balanced approach.

Indeed, the Ukraine war has substantially obscured the prospects of unchallenged Russian primacy in Central Asia, reinforcing the premise that any vacuum left by Moscow's distraction will be filled by other actors. China clearly stands poised to assume an even greater role, but Central Asian governments have also seized this moment to deepen ties with a host of regional powers – from Türkiye and Iran to India and beyond – thereby broadening their strategic partnerships in response to Russia's troubles. This recalibration is evident in the next development:

China, for its part, has grown even more prominent as an economic and diplomatic partner to Central Asia since 2022. Beijing

17 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

18 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

19 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

20 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

21 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

has largely stayed neutral on the Ukraine war, but it clearly sees an opportunity to strengthen its western flank while Russia is preoccupied. In 2022, China swiftly engaged the region: it hosted a virtual “C5+1” summit with Central Asian leaders in January 2022 (just before the Ukraine invasion), and by May 2023 President Xi Jinping convened the first ever China–Central Asia in-person summit in Xi’an.²² There, China unveiled generous commitments (investments, trade facilitation, scholarships) and proposed new institutionalized meetings, signaling a long-term stake in Central Asia’s stability and development. One remarkable outcome was China establishing a permanent secretariat for China–Central Asia cooperation after the 2023 summit,²³ a step toward a more formal regional framework anchored by Beijing. Economically, China’s BRI projects in Central Asia gained urgency as the traditional Eurasian land routes via Russia faced uncertainty. Trade data in early 2023 showed spikes in Chinese rail freight volumes to Europe rerouted through Kazakhstan and the Caspian (the “Middle Corridor”) to avoid Russian territory.²⁴ Central Asian countries welcomed this trend: Kazakhstan, for example, reported windfall transit fees and began investing in increased rail capacity and a new Caspian seaport expansion to handle growing East–West trade. In short, China has doubled down on Central Asia as a critical corridor and buffer – deepening its economic imprint and, by extension, its political influence, though it remains careful not to overtly infringe on Russian security prerogatives.

The European Union and other Western actors have likewise intensified their engagement. The EU, which updated its Central Asia strategy in 2019, found that the Ukraine war suddenly put Central Asia on the map as an alternative route for Eurasian commerce and energy that bypasses Russia. European officials launched a flurry of diplomatic visits in 2022–2023, signing new memoranda on critical raw materials with Kazakhstan, green energy with Uzbekistan, and transportation with Kyrgyzstan. In 2022 the EU also appointed a Special Representative for Connectivity in Central Asia, highlighting plans to link Europe to Asia via the Caspian Sea. Under its Global Gateway infrastructure program, the EU earmarked €10 billion for Central Asia, including support for the “Middle Corridor” linking Kazakhstan, the South Caucasus, and Turkey to Europe.²⁵ By reducing dependence on Russian routes (for instance, helping Kazakhstan ship oil via Azerbaijan instead of the Russian pipeline), Europe seeks not only to punish Russia but to bolster the sovereignty of Central Asian states through greater economic options. The EU’s long-standing emphasis on “values” (human rights, governance reforms) in the region has somewhat softened in this pragmatic pivot; geoeconomics trumps geopolitics for now, as Europe primarily wants stable partners who can help diversify supply chains away from Russia. This opens new opportunities for Central Asian states to negotiate investments and agreements on favorable terms. They have, for example, leveraged European interest to secure financing for renewable energy and transport infrastructure that also serve their national development goals. The United States, while less trade-focused in Central Asia, has similarly stepped up diplomatically: the U.S. held its first-ever presidential summit with the five Central Asian leaders (“C5+1”) on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023,²⁶ and increased aid for regional energy projects and border security. Other actors like Turkey (through the Organization of Turkic States) and India (through forums like the India–Central Asia summit and investments in Iran’s Chabahar port for Central Asian trade access) are also more visible now. For Central Asia, this post-2022 milieu – where Russia is weakened, China and the West are more engaged, and multiple middle powers seek a foothold – has been destabilizing but also empowering. It has given the region a chance to assert a more independent stance, as external powers now court Central Asian capitals as swing states. The empirical signs of this shift abound: diversified trade routes and growth in commerce with non-traditional partners, a boom in diplomatic initiatives (2023 alone saw Central Asia hold summits or high-level meetings with the EU, Gulf states, Turkey, India, Japan, Korea, and others, in addition to Russia, China, and the US,²⁷ and new security dialogues that include Central Asia on its own terms (for example, the EU’s security cooperation on border management and Japan’s “Central Asia+Japan” dialogue on development). While challenges remain – the region must manage competition between big powers carefully to avoid becoming a theater of proxy rivalry – the net effect of the Ukraine war and other upheavals has been to increase Central Asia’s strategic weight in Eurasia. These states have more partners to choose from and thus greater agency to pursue their own development strategies. Several articles in this issue document these trends with data: for instance, the surge in rail freight and energy flows redirected through Central Asia, or Kazakhstan’s maneuvers to replace Russian trade avenues with new ones to Europe and South Asia.²⁸ Such shifts illustrate Central Asia’s evolving role from

22 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia’s regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

23 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia’s regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

24 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

25 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

26 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia’s regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

27 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia’s regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

28 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

landlocked hinterland to a pivotal connector in the global economy. The repercussions for regional stability are two-fold: on one hand, more economic connectivity and investment can enhance prosperity and interdependence (reducing conflict incentives), but on the other, the intersection of multiple great-power interests on Central Asian soil means the region will continue to face external pressures and the risk of entanglement in broader rivalries. Navigating this complex landscape is precisely why Central Asian leaders prize strategic flexibility – a theme that each contribution in this special issue explores from different angles.

4 Breakdown of Special Issue Articles

This special issue brings together nine scholarly works that examine Central Asia's strategic autonomy and international engagement in this era of geopolitical upheaval. Each article offers a unique perspective – from grand theoretical frameworks to granular case studies – on how the region's states are asserting themselves and adapting to changing power dynamics. Below is a summary of the key arguments and findings of each article, linked to the overarching theme of Central Asia's autonomy amid great-power competition:

- 1. Central Asia as the Grand Chessboard: the EU, China, Russia's Regional Strategies and the C5's Responses (Tariq and Javaid). This article revisits classic geopolitical theory to situate Central Asia's contemporary importance. Using Mackinder's Heartland thesis as a lens, Tariq and Javaid portrays Central Asia as the focal point of a 21st-century "geopolitical marathon" among major power.²⁹ They examine in depth the strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union in the region – from Russia's neo-imperial ambitions and security initiatives, to China's economic inroads via the BRI, to the EU's efforts at engagement and energy diversification. Crucially, the article shifts the narrative from viewing Central Asian states as mere "pawns" of great powers to recognizing their potential as active players. Tariq and Javaid argue that the five Central Asian republics (the "C5") have more agency than often assumed – they are the would-be "checkmate" pieces that could decisively shape the outcome of the great-power game if they act collectively.³⁰ They note, however, that realizing this potential requires the C5 to overcome internal fractures and adopt a delicate balancing strategy. Drawing on Heartland theory's modern applications, the article suggests that Central Asians can best secure their interests by multilateralizing their external relations – i.e. engaging in inclusive, overlapping partnerships that prevent any one outside power from monopolizing the region.³¹ Tariq and Javaid's historical and theoretical overview thus sets the stage for understanding Central Asia's strategic choices as rational responses to its enduring geopolitical predicament.

- 2. The Rising Multiplex World Order and Regional Order in Central Asia: A Case Study of the Emerging Role of the EU and its Implications for Kazakhstan's Multivector Foreign Policy (Jessica Neafie, Mukhtar Amanbaiuly, Adiya Akhmer). This contribution bridges theoretical and practical realms by examining how the evolving multiplex global order reinforces multivector foreign policy in Central Asia, through the illustrative case of Kazakhstan. The authors build on Acharya's notion of a multiplex world – one with multiple connected power centers and active middle powers – and posit that such an order allows states like Kazakhstan to maintain agency without succumbing to binary alignments.³² The article then zooms in on Kazakhstan's foreign policy, which has long been emblematic of multivector balancing. It traces Kazakhstan's development as a middle power balancing between Russia, China, and the West.³³ Empirically, the study highlights how recent geopolitical shifts (notably Russia's war in Ukraine) have impacted Kazakhstan-EU relations. With Russia's credibility as a partner eroding and European interest in Central Asian energy and connectivity rising, Kazakhstan found new openings to deepen ties with the EU – for example, by increasing oil exports to Europe and attracting European investments in transport projects.³⁴ These moves are portrayed not as an abandonment of multivectorism but as its evolution: Kazakhstan is leveraging the multiplex environment to expand its network of partnerships. The EU, for its part, is treated as an increasingly significant player in the region's balance. The article points out that European engagement in Kazakhstan (through an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and deals on green energy and critical minerals) has accelerated as Europe seeks alternatives to Russian resources.³⁵ This dovetails with Kazakhstan's goal

29 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

30 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

31 Tariq, N. & Javaid, F. (2025). Central Asia as the grand chessboard: The EU, China, Russia's regional strategies and the C5's responses. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

32 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

33 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

34 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

35 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

of diversifying its economy and foreign ties. Neafie et al. argue that Kazakhstan's experience demonstrates how a savvy small state can turn great-power competition into an opportunity: by playing Russia, China, and the EU off each other to some extent, Kazakhstan secures economic benefits while preserving strategic autonomy.³⁶ Theoretically, the paper contributes to debates on the role of middle powers in a multiplex world, suggesting that Kazakhstan exemplifies a successful middle-power strategy – maintaining sovereignty and even influencing regional outcomes despite being surrounded by much larger neighbors.³⁷ It underlines that multivectorism need not collapse into simple bandwagoning or balancing; if the international system remains multipolar or multiplex, such nuanced strategies can endure and even thrive.

- 3. Understanding EU Perceptions in Central Asian Media: A Comparative Analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Nosirkhon Qodirov). Taking a different angle, Qodirov's article investigates how the European Union – one of Central Asia's important external partners – is perceived within the region, specifically through the lens of local media discourse. This study recognizes that Central Asian states' foreign policy choices are influenced not just by elite strategy but also by domestic narratives and public perceptions of external powers. Using content analysis of major newspapers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (between 2019 and 2024), Qodirov identifies the dominant themes and attention given to the EU in each country.³⁸ The findings reveal a telling divergence that reflects the two countries' differing priorities and relationships with Brussels. In Kazakhstan's media, the EU is primarily depicted as an economic partner and development benefactor.³⁹ Coverage in Kazakh outlets frequently highlights European investments, trade opportunities, and technology transfers; the EU is portrayed as a wealthy market and source of modernization that complements Kazakhstan's multi-vector aims. This aligns with Kazakhstan's relatively advanced economic ties with the EU (it was the first in the region to sign an EPCA with Europe and is a major oil supplier). Tajikistan's media, by contrast, places greater emphasis on the EU as a security partner.⁴⁰ Given Tajikistan's proximity to Afghanistan and its development challenges, local news often discusses EU aid in border security, counter-narcotics, and humanitarian assistance. The EU is seen through the lens of stability and external support for overcoming security threats. Interestingly, Tajik media also covers EU internal affairs to some degree (e.g., EU-Russia relations, migration issues) but filters them in terms of implications for Tajikistan's security and economy.⁴¹ Qodirov's comparative analysis underscores that Central Asian perceptions of big actors are not monolithic – they are conditioned by each state's unique context and media framing. The article suggests policy implications: for the EU to deepen its engagement in Central Asia, it must be aware of these perception gaps. In Kazakhstan, playing up economic cooperation and investment success stories resonates positively, whereas in Tajikistan, EU initiatives gain traction when tied to security and development narratives (such as aiding stability in Afghanistan, or rural development in Tajikistan's regions). By aligning its messaging with local expectations – an insight gleaned from media discourse – the EU can better tailor its strategy for the region.⁴² More broadly, the article contributes to understanding how Central Asian societies view external powers: such perceptions can either enable or constrain the extent to which governments feel comfortable pursuing partnerships. It calls for further research extending to other countries (e.g., Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) to build a fuller picture of the "image of the EU" and other powers in Central Asian public consciousness.⁴³

- 4. The "C5+1" as a Dovetailing Mechanism for Central Asia's Regional Integration: Insights from Uzbekistan (author not provided in summary). This article examines a key diplomatic platform that has gained prominence in recent years – the "C5+1" format, which refers to the five Central Asian countries engaging collectively with a single external partner (most commonly the United States, but the concept extends to other partners as well). The study frames "C5+1" as a potential "dovetailing mechanism" that aligns Central Asia's regional integration with external support and engagement.⁴⁴ Focusing on the case of Uzbekistan, it analyzes how Tashkent's active diplomacy has leveraged the C5+1 framework to advance regional cooperation while balancing outside influences. Since coming to power in 2016, President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan has made regional integration a pillar of his foreign policy – opening borders, resolving disputes with neighbors, and convening regional summits. The article details how

36 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

37 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. (2025). The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

38 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

39 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

40 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

41 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

42 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

43 Qodirov, N. (2025). Understanding EU perceptions in Central Asian media: A comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

44 Farukh Khakimov. (2025). The "C5+1" as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

Uzbekistan championed the elevation of the U.S.–Central Asia C5+1 dialogue (launched in 2015) from a lower-level forum to a heads-of-state summit by 2022–2023.⁴⁵ Under Uzbekistan's initiative, what began as annual meetings of foreign ministers has now seen leader-level summits – for instance, the first ever C5+1 presidential summit with the U.S. in September 2023 in New York, where President Mirziyoyev and other Central Asian leaders met President Biden.⁴⁶ This upgrading signals Central Asia's interest in having major powers treat them as a collective bloc. The study argues that such formats allow Central Asians to “dovetail” their own regional agenda with the resources and attention of external powers, in a way that preserves their autonomy. In other words, by meeting major powers as a united C5, they can channel outside support into projects that benefit regional integration (e.g. cross-border infrastructure, regional trade initiatives) rather than merely bilateral deals that might favor one state over others. The article provides evidence of Uzbekistan's proactive role: citing the Uzbekistan-2030 Development Strategy, it shows how Uzbek diplomacy has prioritized intra-Central Asian economic projects (like transportation links and energy swaps) and then sought international funding and political backing for those projects via C5+1 platforms.⁴⁷ This has included brokering agreements in C5+1 meetings not just with the U.S., but also with other “Plus Ones” – for example, Japan, South Korea, the European Union, and even Russia and China now hold or have proposed similar formats. By comparing various C5+1 models, the article highlights both opportunities and challenges. On the plus side, the C5+1 approach in recent years has led to tangible outcomes: U.S.-facilitated regional electricity deals, EU-supported border modernization, and new infrastructure financing from Gulf states after a C5+Arab summit in 2023.⁴⁸ It also fostered a sense of collective bargaining; Central Asian leaders began to coordinate positions before meeting external partners, subtly enhancing their bargaining power. However, the article warns of pitfalls: there is a risk of external powers steering the C5+1 agenda to serve their own strategic interests (for instance, focusing on security cooperation against China or Russia, which might put Central Asia in a bind).⁴⁹ The lack of a permanent institutional structure for C5+1 (most are ad-hoc summits without a secretariat) means follow-through can be weak. And intra-Central Asian rivalries or differences could still undermine unity in these forums. For example, if one country seeks to free-ride or dominate the C5's representation, it could fragment the group's consensus. The Uzbekistan case study concludes on an optimistic note, though: it sees the C5+1 as a flexible, inclusive mechanism that – if managed well by Central Asians – can reinforce their multi-vector autonomy. By engaging as a bloc with all major partners (USA, China, Russia, EU, Japan, India, etc.), Central Asia diversifies its diplomacy and secures wider support for its regional goals.⁵⁰ The author calls for strategies to ensure C5+1 remains effective, such as rotating chairmanship, setting a focused joint agenda (trade, climate, security, etc.), and perhaps eventually formalizing a secretariat to track implementation. In essence, this article illuminates how Central Asian states, with Uzbekistan often in the lead, are innovating diplomatic practices to bind together regional unity and external engagement rather than seeing them as separate tracks.

- 5. Institutionalization of Shared Interests, Norms and Identity: BRI's Impact on Making a Regional International Society in Central Asia (Parisa Shahmohammadi). This piece delves into the normative and institutional implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, employing the English School framework of international society. Shahmohammadi starts by acknowledging Central Asia's checkered history with regional integration – numerous frameworks have been proposed, but “none of them has been successful” in forging a lasting union.⁵¹ The standout comparative example is the European Union, whose “triumph,” the author suggests, lies in its ability to cultivate a strong regional international society built on common rules and identity.⁵² The article then asks: Could something like China's BRI be laying the groundwork for a Central Asian regional society, even if unintentionally? Using Hedley Bull's definition of international society (as the institutionalization of shared interests and identity among states, with common norms, rules, and institutions),⁵³ the study evaluates to what extent the BRI might be embedding such shared interests/norms in Central Asia. It finds that the BRI indeed promotes several mutual interests that bind Central Asian states: improved infrastructure connectivity, expanded trade and economic growth, energy interdependence

45 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

46 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

47 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

48 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

49 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

50 Farrukh Khakimov. (2025). The “C5+1” as a dovetailing mechanism for Central Asia's regional integration: Insights from Uzbekistan. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

51 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

52 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

53 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI's impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

(through oil/gas pipelines and electricity grids), and even people-to-people exchanges via cultural and educational programs.⁵⁴ These are concrete areas where all regional states stand to benefit, creating incentives for cooperation and collective problem-solving. Moreover, initiatives like coordinated customs procedures, standardized rail links, and multilateral financing (e.g., the AIIB) introduce nascent institutional elements at the regional level. In these respects, BRI serves as a catalyst for regional integration at the practical level – a point that aligns with other research portraying BRI as a form of “multilayered multilateralism” knitting Eurasia together.⁵⁵ However, Shahmohammadi also provides a nuanced view: the shared norms emerging via BRI are a mix of global and Chinese. On one hand, Central Asian states, through BRI participation, are increasingly subscribing to global norms like free trade, connectivity, and sustainable development (China has even begun incorporating green standards, i.e., a “Green BRI”).⁵⁶ On the other hand, China is concurrently exporting elements of its own political culture – respect for sovereignty and non-interference, an emphasis on state-led development, and perhaps a wariness of Western human-rights discourse – which can be seen as norms “with Chinese characteristics”.⁵⁷ The author divides these into “global” vs. “Chinese” approaches within BRI’s normative impact.⁵⁸ The coexistence of these norms means any emergent Central Asian international society under BRI auspices would likely differ from the EU model; it might prioritize principles like mutual sovereignty, infrastructural interdependence, and Westphalian cooperation over deeper political integration or liberal value harmonization. The article’s evaluation is cautiously optimistic: BRI is credited with enhancing regional cooperation (e.g., facilitating multi-country infrastructure projects like the Central Asia–China gas pipeline network), but it stops short of claiming BRI has already created a true regional society. One challenge mentioned is the absence (so far) of Central Asia-spanning institutions owned by the Central Asians themselves – most BRI projects are bilateral with China or within multilateral settings dominated by China. For a robust regional international society to form, Central Asian states would need to take collective ownership of those shared interests and perhaps develop their own coordinating institutions. Shahmohammadi ultimately suggests that BRI has opened a pathway towards more institutionalized cooperation in Central Asia by aligning interests and creating habits of collaboration. Whether this evolves into a more conscious regional community with shared identity might depend on how Central Asians leverage the BRI framework – and whether they integrate its benefits with other initiatives (such as the consultative summits or alignment with standards from the EU, etc.). The English School perspective here enriches the special issue by examining not just power and strategy, but the social fabric of regional relations and the role external projects like BRI play in weaving it.

- 6. Trans-Regional Integration and Connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China and European Union (Shabir Ahmad Khan). Rounding out the special issue, Khan’s article provides a comprehensive look at the “connectivity competition” in Central Asia, assessing how the region’s three most influential external powers – Russia, China, and the EU – are each promoting integration and infrastructure in Central Asia, and how Central Asian states are responding. The analysis starts from the premise that in the 21st century, hard and soft connectivity (physical infrastructure links as well as the harmonization of rules and standards) has become the driving force of economic integration.⁵⁹ In fact, connectivity is described as “the arms race of the twenty-first century”⁶⁰: instead of military conquest, great powers are racing to build roads, railways, pipelines, and digital corridors across Eurasia. The article first details each power’s strategy. Russia’s approach historically centered on “closed” regionalism – creating exclusive blocs like the Eurasian Economic Union to bind Central Asia to Moscow’s sphere. However, post-2022, Russia has shifted towards a more “open” model of integration under its Greater Eurasian Partnership, largely out of necessity due to sanctions and the need to collaborate with China.⁶¹ Khan notes that Russia’s Greater Eurasia vision entails partnering with China’s BRI and extending transport corridors southwards (Russia is now actively pursuing a North–South corridor through Central Asia to Iran and the Indian Ocean).⁶² This is evidenced by projects like the planned railroad from Russia through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to the Persian Gulf. China’s strategy, anchored in the Belt and Road Initiative, is extensively discussed – it involves massive investments in east–west logistics (e.g., the new Eurasian land bridges through Central Asia)

54 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI’s impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

55 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI’s impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

56 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI’s impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

57 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI’s impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

58 Shahmohammadi, P. (2025). Institutionalization of shared interests, norms, and identity: BRI’s impact on making a regional international society in Central Asia. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

59 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

60 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

61 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

62 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

and energy pipelines, which by now have effectively integrated Central Asia with China's economy.⁶³ The article highlights that China's BRI in Central Asia is quite flexible and open: it invites all regional states and even integrates with others' initiatives (for instance, coordinating with Russia's EEU framework, as Moscow and Beijing agreed to do in 2015).⁶⁴ The EU's strategy, while newer, is portrayed as focusing on "soft" connectivity support – providing technical assistance, regulatory help, and funding selective infrastructure via its Global Gateway, with an emphasis on transparency and sustainability. A significant portion of the article is devoted to how these external strategies intersect and what they mean for Central Asian agency. Khan provides empirical illustrations such as the rapid increase in China-Europe rail freight crossing Kazakhstan (from only a few trains a week a decade ago to dozens per day now).⁶⁵ One striking finding is that the Russia-Ukraine war accelerated some of these trends: Russia's pivot to Asia intensified, China's use of Central Asian routes into Europe grew as the northern routes were disrupted, and the EU suddenly had strategic imperative to develop routes that bypass Russia.⁶⁶ Central Asian countries have largely welcomed the influx of connectivity initiatives, but they navigate them selectively. For example, Kazakhstan is an enthusiastic member of BRI and has also invested in its own internal north-south and east-west corridors to maximize benefit from all directions.⁶⁷ At the same time, Kazakhstan and its neighbors insist on multilateralism – they avoid agreements that would exclude others. Uzbekistan, not in the Russian EEU, still cooperates with it, and all countries cooperate within the SCO on transport and trade facilitation to some extent. The article concludes that Central Asia is emerging as Eurasia's transport and energy hub, but this also means the region is a venue of complex cooperation-competition among big powers. For policymakers in Central Asia, the lesson is to continue pursuing an "all-direction connectivity" policy – participating in Russian, Chinese, and Western schemes concurrently – to ensure no single power can dictate terms. For the big powers, the lesson (as implied by Khan's analysis) is that working with each other and with the Central Asian states (rather than at cross purposes) will yield the best results; for instance, aligning the EEU, BRI, and EU standards so that projects are interoperable. In essence, Central Asian states are not passive in this process: they are prioritizing projects that serve their interests (such as Uzbekistan pushing for a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, or Turkmenistan advocating the TAPI gas pipeline to South Asia), thereby exercising agency over which grand schemes move forward. The data-driven approach of this article – highlighting trade flows, investment figures, and corridor maps – solidifies a core theme of the special issue: that Central Asia's role in global connectivity is growing, and with it grows the region's strategic autonomy, as it becomes indispensable to multiple great powers' economic visions.

-7. Expanding Beyond Conventional Connections: Central Asian Nations Establish New Partnerships (Fazliddin Djamalov). This article explores the emergence of the "fourth vector" in Central Asia's multivector foreign policy, highlighting the increasing engagement of regional middle powers such as the Gulf Cooperation Council states, Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, India, and Pakistan. Djamalov argues that these new partnerships reflect Central Asia's strategic adaptation to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, driven by economic interests particularly in energy and transportation. This diversification is seen as crucial for enhancing regional autonomy and reducing dependency on traditional great powers. As argued by Fazliddin Djamalov, the article enriches the debate on multivectorism by conceptualizing a 'fourth vector,' highlighting Central Asia's expanding partnerships with regional middle powers such as the Gulf states, Türkiye, Iran, India, and Pakistan, thereby broadening the region's diplomatic and geoeconomic horizon.⁶⁸

-8. Regionalization Processes in Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Similarities, Differences, Challenges, and Central Asia's Integration Perspectives in the Light of the ASEAN Experience (Aris Marghelis). Marghelis draws insightful parallels and distinctions between Southeast Asia (ASEAN) and Central Asia, emphasizing the value of comparative regional studies. The paper identifies key factors such as regional identity, intra-regional cooperation, and achieving international actor status as critical lessons from ASEAN's experience that could inform Central Asia's integration and autonomy strategies. It suggests that despite distinct historical and geographic contexts, ASEAN's "omni-enmeshment" strategy provides a viable model for Central Asian regional cohesion and collective diplomatic engagement. Aris Marghelis draws lessons from ASEAN's omni-enmeshment strategy, providing concrete insights into how Central Asia might strengthen regional identity, institutionalize cooperation, and present itself as a cohesive international actor despite structural constraints.⁶⁹

63 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

64 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

65 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

66 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

67 Khan, S. A. (2025). Trans-regional integration and connectivity in Central Asia: Strategies of Russia, China, and the European Union. *Economic Diplomacy*. Advance online publication.

68 Djamalov, F. (2025). Expanding Beyond Conventional Connections: Central Asian Nations Establish New Partnerships. *Economic Diplomacy*, Advance online publication..

69 Marghelis, A. (2025). Regionalization Processes in Central Asia and Southeast Asia: Similarities, Differences, Challenges and Central Asia's Integration Perspectives in the Light of the ASEAN Experience. *Economic Diplomacy*, Advance online publication.

-9. The future of regionalism and the strategies adopted by states in Central Asia following the Ukraine war (Maryam Hasheminejad and Abbas Maleki). This article examines how the Russia–Ukraine war has altered the balance of power in Central Asia, weakening Russia's regional influence and opening space for China, Turkey, Iran, India, and the EU to expand their roles. Using theories of regionalism and soft power, the authors analyze how Central Asian states are navigating this shift by pursuing multilateralism and diversified partnerships to enhance their strategic autonomy. [Added: Hasheminejad and Maleki demonstrate how Russia's diminished influence after the Ukraine war has created a geopolitical opening for China, the EU, Türkiye, and India, linking theoretical debates on regionalism with the practical search for Central Asia's strategic autonomy.⁷⁰

5 Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Collectively, the articles in this special issue paint a picture of Central Asia as a region increasingly taking charge of its destiny in a turbulent geopolitical era. Far from being a passive “chessboard” or arena for others’ great games, Central Asia is asserting itself – through diplomatic innovation, strategic economic partnerships, regional institution-building, and astute balancing – to preserve and expand its autonomy in international affairs. This has significant implications for both policymakers and scholars. For policymakers (in Central Asia and beyond), the findings underscore that external engagement in Central Asia must reckon with the agency and multifaceted strategies of the Central Asian states. Great powers can no longer treat the region as an appendage; Central Asian leaders are adept at playing multiple sides and extracting concessions while guarding their core interests. Policies that respect Central Asian states’ sovereignty and offer win-win cooperation (rather than forcing alignment in rival blocs) are more likely to succeed in this environment. For example, the EU’s nuanced approach of economic investment without overt political strings, or China’s emphasis on development with nominally equal partnerships, have gained more traction than coercive tactics would. Meanwhile, Central Asian policymakers themselves can draw lessons from the research here: the value of speaking with one voice when possible (as in C5+1 formats) and of institutionalizing cooperation (to avoid ad-hoc arrangements failing under pressure). The scholarly contributions also advance academic understanding of how “small” states navigate a multiplex world. They enrich theories of international relations with on-the-ground insights – demonstrating how concepts like multivectorism and middle-power diplomacy work in practice, and how regional international societies can form in non-Western settings.

The special issue also opens several avenues for future research. One pressing question is how Central Asia will navigate the emerging complexities of great-power rivalry that may define the next decade. The Russia–Ukraine war may recede, but U.S.–China strategic competition is poised to intensify, and Central Asia could find itself under pressure if a new Cold War-style bifurcation occurs. Will multivector neutrality hold if Washington and Beijing each demand clearer allegiance on critical issues? Studying early signs – perhaps the Central Asian responses to U.S.–China tensions over technology or to debates on sanctions compliance – could be illuminating. Another area is the durability of Central Asia’s own regional cooperation: having ramped up consultative summits and frameworks, can the C5 translate this into a sustained, institutionalized alliance or organization? Research might examine the internal political hurdles to regional integration (such as regime type differences, leadership personalities, and economic asymmetries) and how they could be overcome. Additionally, the long-term impact of connectivity initiatives warrants study. Infrastructure like railways and pipelines built now will tie Central Asia to global markets for decades; scholars could explore scenarios of how this “interdependence infrastructure” might alter Central Asian states’ foreign policy behavior in the future – for instance, could heavy economic reliance on China through BRI make them more politically aligned with Beijing, or will diversification (with routes to Iran, Europe, South Asia) mitigate that? The environmental and social implications of the new Silk Road through Central Asia is another angle (balancing development with sustainability and local community interests).

From a theoretical standpoint, one article in this issue applies the English School at the regional level to assess whether a Central Asian international society is truly emerging, directly comparing Central Asia’s trajectory with other regions. It asks whether we are seeing the beginnings of shared regional norms – such as a Central Asian identity of neutrality, or informal norms against foreign bases and interference – and draws on the Southeast Asian experience (ASEAN’s way of consensus-based cooperation) and the Gulf states’ coordination to evaluate models Central Asia might emulate or avoid. Moreover, as Central Asia’s younger generation comes of age, studying how new leaders (and more connected societies via the internet) might approach multivectorism differently would be valuable – today’s policies have largely been crafted by the first post-Soviet generation of elites. Will a new cohort double down on autonomy, or tilt in new directions? Finally, the role of middle powers from outside the region (like Turkey, India, Japan, or the Gulf states) in Central Asia’s multiplex diplomacy is still under-researched; their growing involvement could provide alternative partnerships that further bolster Central Asian autonomy, a subject ripe for analysis.

⁷⁰ Hasheminejad, M., & Maleki, A. (2025). The future of regionalism and the strategies adopted by states in Central Asia following the Ukraine war. *Economic Diplomacy*, Advance online publication.

In conclusion, Central Asia's international engagement is entering a mature phase marked by confident agency and complex balancing. This special issue shows that the region's states are not just playing defense amid geopolitical upheaval – they are proactively shaping outcomes, whether through crafting multi-partner diplomatic formats, leveraging infrastructure to lock in external interest, or articulating a regional voice on the world stage. For both practitioners and scholars, keeping a close watch on Central Asia is essential, as its choices will reverberate across Eurasia and inform broader discussions on how small and medium states thrive in an era of great-power flux. The story of Central Asia's autonomy amid upheaval is ultimately one of resilience and adaptation – a story that is still unfolding, and which this collection of articles seeks to chronicle and interpret for the benefit of those charting the region's future.