



Central Asia in the Geopolitical Crossfire: Strategic Alignments Amidst the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

Artur Utebayev^{1*}

¹ International School of Economics, Maqsut Narikbayev University, Akmola oblast, Astana, Kazakhstan

Received 4 November, 2024, accepted 21 January, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the evolving cooperation perspectives of Central Asian states against the backdrop of an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. This protracted conflict has triggered regional and global geopolitical shifts, prompting reassessment of the roles and strategies of the various global and regional actors. Focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, this research employs the argumentative framework of Political Discourse Analysis to examine the prospects for cooperative actions drawing insights from five Central Asian leaders' 2022 speech in Cholpan-Ata. Guided by the shelter-seeking foreign policy strategy, the findings reveal Central Asian leaders' commitment to pursuing a cohesive regional strategy as an immediate necessity to address shared challenges, including security, economic and infrastructural development and water resource management to promote enhanced cooperation within the region. The study advocates for taking proactive, tangible, and assertive policy measures to realize the proposed actions, emphasizing the importance of a unified approach in navigating the complex geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords

Central Asia • geopolitical shifts • Russian-Ukrainian conflict • regional cooperation • Political Discourse Analysis

1 Introduction

Launched on 24th February 2022 Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered its second year of military confrontation. As of 2024, this conflict has resulted in deaths of over 50 000 Russian soldiers and 31 000 Ukrainian soldiers,¹ not to mention civilian casualties, forced migrations and infrastructure damage. While the global political community has been making efforts to address the issue on various international platforms, and at multilateral and bilateral levels, the research community is engaged in theoretical and empirical debates about the reasons, key actors, long-term repercussions and potential resolutions of the conflict.

Thus, literature specifically published after 2022 on Russia's motives behind its aggressiveness towards Ukraine is widely discussed through the lens of colonialism and imperialism, framing Ukraine as a victim of the "Putin's Empire" project.² Similarly, another group of studies focuses on global order perspectives, highlighting Russia's great power status being challenged by the failure of its attack on Ukraine, which was intended to be a swift intervention in February of 2022.³ The roles of other key

1 Olga Ivshina, Becky Dale & Kirstie Brewer, 'Russia's Meat Grinder Soldiers - 50,000 Confirmed Dead', 17 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-68819853>.

2 Tereza Hendl et al., '(En)Countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of "Westspaining" and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 45, no. 2 (2 April 2024): 171–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468>; David R. Marples, 'Russia's War Goals in Ukraine', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64, no. 2–3 (3 July 2022): 207–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2022.2107837>; Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2 October 2023): 497–512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661>; Ruslan Zaporozhchenko, 'The End of "Putin's Empire?" Ontological Problems of Russian Imperialism in the Context of the War against Ukraine, 2022', *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 2 (3 March 2024): 119–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2022.2158873>.

3 Roger van Zwanenberg, 'Ukraine, World Power and Imperialism', *International Critical Thought* 13, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 22–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2023.2163364>; Kavus Abushov, 'Alliance-Building between Great Power Commitment and Misperceptions: Failed

* E-mail: a.utebayev@gmail.com

regional and global actors—including states, international institutions, NGOs, transnational and domestic enterprises—are also widely discussed in the context of this conflict. These actors are not only influenced by the ongoing confrontation but are also actively involved in addressing it. In other words, the complexity of multi-actor involvement, various layers of interaction, and diverse geopolitical interests, alongside ideational factors such as values, beliefs, and ideologies, all contribute to the intricacy of this regional conflict, which has become a global hotspot. In this context, the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship, China's role in the post-Soviet space, and Beijing's bilateral and multilateral rapprochement with individual republics in the region pertaining to the economic and security matters in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis are lively discussed in international relations scholarship.⁴

Other key players in the crisis include the EU, Turkey, India, and others. The EU's engagement with the post-Soviet region has a long history, but its role since the annexation of Crimea, efforts in addressing the issue in the Donbass region, and involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war are particularly crucial.⁵ Meanwhile, India aims to capitalize on security and energy contracts with Russia,⁶ Turkey, for its part, is calibrating its ties with Russia, which is seeking the allies in the face of Western sanctions, and is also re-approaching the Central Asian republics among other strategies.⁷

Thus, studies published in the wake of the conflict primarily focus on the major powers involved in the crisis. In contrast, Central Asian states are often included in the analysis merely as recipients of influence from those geopolitical shifts, with their actions characterized as largely reactive. One of the few studies from a Central Asian/post-Soviet perspective explores the alignment strategies of Belarus and Tajikistan with Russia, including the period after the onset of the full-scale war.⁸ Therefore, there is a need for more empirical studies focused on the smaller states of theregion. This research necessity is further justified by adopting an agency-based approach to these states, providing further explanation to the broader literature debate on post-Soviet geopolitics.

Additionally, emphasizing the Central Asian perspective is crucial due to the dominance of Western IR scholarship on Russia and Ukraine, highlighting the need to emancipate from the epistemic colonialism of knowledge production.⁹

Thus, grounded in the Political Discourse Analysis (PDA)¹⁰ the purpose of this case study is to explore the perspectives of tighter Central Asian cooperation based on the speeches of the five Central Asian presidents at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia on July 21, 2022. Traditionally, the smaller post-Soviet/Central Asian states employ a multi-

Balancing despite Alignment Efforts in the Post-Soviet Space', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (2 October 2023): 1403–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2134988>; Zdeněk Kříž, 'The Costly Gamble: How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Weakened Its Role as a Balancing Power', *Defense & Security Analysis* 39, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 387–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2023.2202035>; Janko Ščepanović, 'Still a Great Power? Russia's Status Dilemmas Post-Ukraine War', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2024, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2193878>.

4 Colin Flint and Hassan Noorali, 'The Relationality of Geopolitical Codes: The Example of the Belt and Road Initiative', *Asian Geographer* 41, no. 1 (2 January 2024): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10225706.2023.2227618>; Rebekka Åsnes Sagild and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, 'Chinese Re-Examinations of Russia? The Strategic Partnership in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine', *Journal of Contemporary China*, n.d., 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2358876>; Michael Cox, 'In the Shadow of the Russian Revolution: Putin, Xi and the Long War in Ukraine', *Critique* 50, no. 2–3 (3 July 2022): 287–305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2022.2135276>; David Morris, 'Risks on the Belt and Road in Eurasia: Local Perspectives and Options', *Global Society*, 29 April 2024, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2024.2344501>; Christopher B. Primiano, 'The Dragon in Central Asia: Is China's Increased Economic Involvement Resulting in Security Gains?', *Asian Security* 19, no. 3 (2 September 2023): 228–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2023.2246390>; You Ji and Xiangning Wu, 'The Enduring Sino-Russian Strategic Relations of Mutual Dependence—The Attribute of Military Cooperation', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 19 April 2024, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2342898>; Jeffrey Mankoff, 'The East Wind Prevails? Russia's Response to China's Eurasian Ambitions', *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (21 October 2022): 1616–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2102150>; Morena Skalamera, 'The Geopolitics of Energy after the Invasion of Ukraine', *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2190632>; Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Sino-Russian Military Alignment and Its Implications for Global Security', *Security Studies* 33, no. 2 (14 March 2024): 254–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2024.2319587>.

5 Kristian Åtland, 'Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 2 (3 March 2020): 122–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2020.1720443>; Giselle Bosse, 'Values, Rights, and Changing Interests: The EU's Response to the War against Ukraine and the Responsibility to Protect Europeans', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (3 July 2022): 531–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2099713>; Fábio Albuquerque and Paula Gomes dos Santos, 'A Discourse Analysis of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine by Listed European Entities from the Energy-Related Sectors', *Cogent Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (31 December 2023): 2233790, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2023.2233790>; Amanda Paul, 'The EU in the South Caucasus and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War', *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (3 July 2015): 30–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1054223>.

6 Raj Verma, 'India's Quest for Security and Its Neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War', *The Round Table* 112, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 14–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2165304>.

7 Vicken Cheterian, 'Friend and Foe: Russia-Turkey Relations before and after the War in Ukraine', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 7 (3 October 2023): 1271–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2185443>; Meliha Benli Altunışık, 'Turkey's "Return" to Central Asia in a Shifting Global and Regional Context: New Opportunities and Limitations', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 26 January 2024, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2024.2308971>.

8 Karolina Kluczevska and Kristiina Silvan, 'Post-Soviet Dependence with Benefits? Critical Geopolitics of Belarus's and Tajikistan's Strategic Alignment with Russia', *Geopolitics*, 21 June 2024, 1–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2368621>.

9 Hendl et al., '(En)Countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of "Westspaining" and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine'.

10 Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2012).

vector foreign policy, characterized by non-ideological, pragmatic relations with major regional and global actors, including Russia, China, the EU, the USA, Turkey, and others. Another key foreign policy vector for Central Asian states is the integration of the five Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – which may become more prominent during times of regional crisis.

Following this, the next section provides a background review of the Central Asian integration attempts throughout the 1990s up to the present. The subsequent section discusses the PDA methodology based on the concepts of deliberation and practical argumentation. The findings section presents the results of the PDA, while the conclusion discusses the implications of these findings in the context of the potential integration of Central Asian nations in turbulent times of risks and uncertainties.

2 Overview of Central Asian Integration Dynamics

Central Asia attracts regional and global powers due to its geostrategic value, including abundant energy resources and key international transit routes that connect East and West. Recognizing their strategic advantages, Central Asian states adopted a multi-vector foreign policy so to maximize benefits from the geopolitical rivalry among major powers.

Multivectorism refers to a non-ideological, non-preferential, and pragmatist foreign policy approach. Newly established in the 1990s Central Asian states employed this strategy to varying degrees, engaging with major powers such as China, the EU, the USA, Turkey and others to balance and counteract Russia's influence.¹¹ Over time, multivectorism evolved into more complex regional interrelations, with local leaders strategically leveraging Russia and China to counterbalance the growing American influence in the region, which intensified following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US.

This pragmatic multi-vector balancing can be explained through the *realist* paradigm of international relations. Realism emphasizes a state's primary concern with self-preservation and security in an anarchic global system, where competition for power and the pursuit of national interests drive foreign policy decisions. Indeed, as per Vital, a state's vulnerability to structural pressures—and its capacity to maintain autonomy—depends largely on the extent of its human and material resources. In other words, a state endowed with greater economic and human resources is not only better equipped to resist external pressures and more flexible in choosing national policy trajectories, but it also possesses the capacity to project influence beyond its borders. Conversely, the lack of these resources defines the “smallness” of a state, making it more susceptible to external shocks and pressures.¹²

Specifically, structural realism suggests that weaker states are compelled to either balance against or bandwagon with stronger powers in response to systemic pressures. Kenneth Waltz argues that balancing is the more natural reaction, as states, despite the differences in capabilities, remain functionally similar units within a self-help anarchic system. While acknowledging that balance-of-power is a framework for understanding international politics rather than a guide for a specific foreign policy decisions—unable to explain, as Waltz notes, “why state X made a certain move last Tuesday”—the theory still holds that secondary states are more likely to align with the weaker side when threatened by a stronger adversary.¹³

Defined as “alignment with the source of danger” – bandwagoning, however, is more likely to be practiced by a weak state. As a weak state has little to add to the challenging coalition, it is expected to choose a stronger side. Moreover, a weak state would be especially concerned with the great power within its vicinity

In general, balance of power theory has limited applicability to weak states, as “weak states often cannot respond optimally to balancing imperatives”.¹⁴ Several factors hinder the effective application of balance of power theory to post-Soviet and Central Asian countries, particularly due to the lack of cohesion among these states and their inability to establish a regional security structure independent of the regional hegemon - Russia¹⁵ (with the exception of the Baltics states). Instead, mutual distrust prevails, exacerbated by instances such as Uzbekistan's local imperialism during Islam Karimov's presidency, which drove Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to bandwagon with Russia. Moreover, interstate conflicts “including trade wars, border disputes and disagreements over the management and use of water and energy resources”¹⁶ further complicated any attempt to cooperate. Therefore, in the context of Central Asia, realist scholarship's argument would be based on employment of multivectorism as ensuring that Central Asian states are not entirely dependent upon any single major power. However, their multi-vector approach

11 Nicola P. Contessi, ‘Foreign Policy Diversification and Intercontinental Transport Corridors: The Case of Kazakhstan's Railways Diplomacy’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (28 May 2018): 759–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1473342>; Mariya Y. Omelicheva And Ruoxi Du, ‘Kazakhstan's Multi-Vectorism and Sino-Russian Relations’, *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 4 (2018): 95–110.

12 David Vital, ‘The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations’, 1967.

13 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 105.

14 William C Wohlforth, ‘Revisiting Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia’, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, 2004, 204.

15 Roy Allison, ‘Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia’, *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 463–83.

16 Annette Bohr, ‘Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order’, *International Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2004): 485.

in dealing with major powers individually often precluded some intra-regional integration, leaving them vulnerable to external influences.¹⁷

Despite numerous efforts toward institutionalized regional integration, cooperation among Central Asian countries remained largely transactional. For instance, neither the Central Asian Union, established in 1994 by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan and later renamed the Central Asian Economic Community, nor the subsequent Central Asian Cooperation Organization of 2002 succeeded in significantly enhancing regional unity. Formal commitments to establish free trade zones often fell short, with protectionist measures and tariffs remaining in place. Cross-border trade continued to face hurdles such as visa requirements, bureaucratic impediments, and frequent delays. Similarly, regional security cooperation was lackluster, exemplified by the limited activity of Centrasbat, which comprised 500 joint troops stationed in southern Kazakhstan.¹⁸

Instead, Central Asian leaders focused more on the international visibility gained from participating in various regional projects rather than adhering to their commitments. Moreover, the lack of unity in the Central Asian region is exacerbated by distrust and tensions among their leaders. This is particularly evident in the disagreements over energy and water resources that intensified in 2009-2010 following Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's plans to build the Rogun and Kambarata hydroelectric power stations, respectively, on the transboundary waters of the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers. These plans led to Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the Unified Energy System of Central Asia in 2009, which was the regional power grid for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹

Therefore, the lack of Central Asian regionalism provides ample opportunities for revisionist Russia to influence foreign policies of Central Asian states and elicit some geostrategic benefits in line with its 'near abroad' policy. The failure of Central Asian unification not only enabled Russia to approach each Central Asian state unilaterally and multilaterally through its Eurasian integration project, but it also stems from the political unwillingness of Central Asian leaders to collectively withstand Russian and Chinese hegemonies. Additionally, the underdeveloped trade infrastructure hinders their economic development as a regional actor, contrasting sharply with the success of regional entities like ASEAN, further contributing to the failure of Central Asian regionalism.²⁰

Furthermore, while realism lacks overwhelming explanatory power in the context of post-Soviet foreign policy, particularly in Central Asia, leaders' decision-making, inter alia, plays a crucial role in understanding the region's fragmented dynamics. This opens up space for the consideration of identities, common values and social norms that shape the Central Asian foreign policy affairs. Constructivist scholarship, therefore, emphasizes the importance of the shared Soviet legacy in shaping regional identities and narratives, rather than focusing solely on power calculations, as realism suggests.

Indeed, the social constructivist lens provides significant explanatory power for understanding many global political phenomena. Through the constructivist perspective of intersubjectivity, there are numerous empirical examples that highlight the role of identity in shaping foreign policy. For instance, Gorbachev's transformation of Soviet identity into that of a "normal social democratic great power" facilitated rapprochement with Communist China. Similarly, in more regionally specific contexts, identity plays a crucial role: Croatia aligned with a European identity, while Serbia embraced a Slavic identity and closer ties with Moscow.²¹

In the context of Central Asia, Costa Buranelli offers an alternative perspective by examining the region through the lens of *order* that underscores ideational rather than structural theoretical premises. In particular, he asserts that "Order is a more neutral, minimalist, and normatively lighter concept, as it refers simply to the basic structure (in terms of actors and rules linking them) of a given social context (in this case, Central Asia)."²² In a nutshell, the idea of the Central Asian order emphasizes mutual understanding and good neighborliness rather than formalized agreements and institutionalized frameworks. This perspective offers two important insights for analyzing regional developments in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. First, the concept of order is grounded on the common understandings, compromise, pragmatism and informal agreements, which provide flexibility for negotiations and finding common ground. On the other hand, this informality and lack of institutionalized multilateralism also permit a degree of resilience against great power influence. This is exemplified by the refusal of both Dushanbe and Bishkek to allow Moscow's involvement in the border demarcation issues, highlighting the limits of external influence.²³ Moreover, there are updated reports of positive developments on the issue being settled bilaterally between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.²⁴

17 Kanat Kaldybekovich Bazarbayev and Zulpiharova Elmira, 'Central Asian Knot of World Politics', *2nd Cyprus International Conference on Educational Research (CY-ICER 2013)* 89 (10 October 2013): 98–111, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.817>.

18 Martin C. Spechler, 'Regional Cooperation in Central Asia', *Problems of Post-Communism* 49, no. 6 (2002): 42–47.

19 Bazarbayev and Elmira, 'Central Asian Knot of World Politics'.

20 Sebastian Krapohl and Alexandra Vasileva-Dienes, 'The Region That Isn't: China, Russia and the Failure of Regional Integration in Central Asia', *Asia Europe Journal* 18, no. 3 (1 September 2020): 347–66, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00548-0>.

21 Ted Hopf and Bentley Allan, *Making Identity Count: Building a National Identity Database* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

22 Filippo Costa Buranelli, 'Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections', *Central Asian Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.30965/22142290-bja10015>.

23 Buranelli, 'Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections'.

24 'Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Reach 90 Percent Agreement on Border', 6 February 2024, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-reach-90-percent-agreement-on-border>.

However, the Central Asian response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been characterized by a strategic silence, which reflects their concern over Russia's actions while simultaneously avoiding open confrontation with the Kremlin.²⁵ This stance is further exemplified by Kazakhstan's refusal to acknowledge the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist republics as opposed to openly condemning Russia's invasion in Ukraine. Hence, Central Asia's strategic silence does not signify an explicitly anti- or pro-Russian stance. Instead, it serves as an opportunity to navigate and strengthen their strategic alignments with other external actors who have become more active in the region and hedge against Russia, whose economic and security influence has diminished in the eyes of its traditional partners, as evidenced by its increasing reliance on China for economic support and its inability to secure a decisive victory in the conflict with Ukraine.²⁶ Furthermore, the situation for migrant workers in Russia has deteriorated following the Crocus City terrorist attack, which involved Central Asian (Tajik) citizens as perpetrators. Media outlets have highlighted instances of xenophobia against migrant workers, expressed not only by far-right elements but also by ordinary Russian citizens. Another cause for concern among Central Asian states is the repetitive rhetoric in Russian media that questions the legitimacy of Central Asian statehood and discusses the "return of historic lands."²⁷

Therefore, the research avenue that requires a closer look then is how in the context of Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the deteriorating role of Russia in the post-Soviet region, Central Asian states navigate their strategic alignments with each other. How does the Central Asian order adapt to and reflect the ongoing geostrategic shifts? Ultimately, the Central Asian states themselves form one of the pillars of a multi-vector foreign policy.

In contemporary International Relations literature, the foreign policy of small states is often analyzed through the lens of structural realism, which emphasizes the influence of the international system's polarity—whether non-polar, unipolar, or multipolar. Thus, R. Pedi and A. Wivel identify three potential strategies for small states: hiding, shelter seeking, and engaging in hedging and multivectorism. Despite that Central Asian nations predominately employ the latter strategy, it is the heightened levels of uncertainty that may, *inter alia*, compel these states to seek shelter by aligning more closely with groups of peer-states.²⁸ Rather than relying, however, on either the structural realist or social constructivist perspectives, this study employs a blended theoretical approach, in which structural geopolitical constraints serve as the backdrop for shelter-seeking strategies, while the narratives of Central Asian leaders offer a more nuanced understanding of the prospects for regional integration.

3 Methodological Framework: Political Discourse Analysis (PDA)

Taking over from the previous section, it is the *uncertainty* and risks factors that put the weaker states in limbo as predicting how the regional and global affairs will evolve in the context of ongoing war is far from realistic. Against this backdrop, the analytical framework of PDA, as proposed by Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, implies that political choices taken under the conditions of uncertainty require argumentative approach to the discourse analysis. Grounded in the concepts of practical argumentation and deliberation, PDA focuses on "the reasonableness of an argumentative (hence political) outcome, as shaping (in ways which the analyst might want challenge) agents' reasons for action."²⁹ Furthermore, within this framework, politics is seen as addressing the question of *what to do* under circumstances of uncertainty and risk. This shifts the focus from representation, as traditionally viewed through the critical discourse analysis lens, to *decision-making* and *action*. Moreover, the Faircloughs' framework reconciles representation and argumentation, arguing that representation of the world serves as premises for action-taking reasoning. Another important aspect that PDA considers is the *context* within which the political discourse is delivered. Practical reasoning, therefore, involves generating plausible arguments conducive to formulating claims for action to achieve particular goals.

The structure of practical reasoning consists of several components: goals (G) to be achieved based on the circumstances (C), informed by certain values (V), which eventually lead to a particular action (A). Therefore, specific circumstances inform particular actions aimed at achieving a goal, which is, in turn, shaped by underlying values or concerns. These values and

25 Timur Dadabaev and Shigeto Sonoda, 'Silence Is Golden? Silences as Strategic Narratives in Central Asian States' Response to the Ukrainian Crisis', *International Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2023): 193–215, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591422000183>.

26 Křiž, 'The Costly Gamble: How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Weakened Its Role as a Balancing Power'; Šćepanović, 'Still a Great Power? Russia's Status Dilemmas Post-Ukraine War'.

27 Elnur Alimova, '«Какой На Самом Деле Друг Россия? » Почему Риторика и Действия Москвы Тревожат Центральную Азию' [«What Sort of Friend Russia Really is? 'Why Moscow's Rhetoric and Actions Worry Central Asia'», 4 May 2024, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/review-central-asia-what-sort-of-friend-russia-really-is/32933201.html>.

28 Rebecca Pedi and Anders Wivel, 'What Future for Small States After Unipolarity? Strategic Opportunities and Challenges in the Post-American World Order', in *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Nina Græger et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 127–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05505-8_7; see also Diana Panke and Jürgen Rüländ, 'Why Asian States Cooperate in Regional Arrangements: Asian Regionalism in Comparative Perspective', *International Relations* 36, no. 3 (1 September 2022): 428–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211028970>.

29 Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students*, 15.

concerns add a normative dimension to setting goals and taking actions, ensuring that the imagined or desired goal aligns with broader ethical or practical considerations.

One immediate platform, that excludes any great power and consists solely of Central Asian states, is the 'Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State'. The initiative was first proposed by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2017 and supported by the other five Central Asian leaders. Starting in Kazakhstan in 2018, there have been five consultative meetings so far: in Uzbekistan in 2019, Turkmenistan in 2021, Kyrgyzstan in 2022, and Tajikistan in 2023. Notably, President Mirziyoyev emphasized the immense pressure on the Central Asian region, particularly on logistics and transportation chains, as a result of geopolitical rivalries and the associated global uncertainty at the recent meeting in Dushanbe.³⁰ Among the five consultative meetings, the fourth one held in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, on 21 July 2022, was purposefully selected for this study to capture the immediate reactions of the Central Asian leadership following Russia's invasion of Ukraine earlier that year.

4 Insights from Central Asian Leaders' Speeches in Cholpan-Ata

4.1 President Tokayev's Speech

The central theme of President Tokayev's speech is regional cooperation as a vital path for Central Asian development amidst geopolitical uncertainty.

Unlike his earlier speech in Turkmenistan, which focused primarily on economic cooperation in the region, his 2022 speech in Kyrgyzstan addressed five key tasks, with the first being the *'strengthening cooperation in security and diplomacy'*. The second one is to address the existing inter-border clashes, the third one is increasing the economic cooperation through the mechanisms of eliminating *'structural and infrastructural constraints'* as well as measures on improving the foreign direct investment attractiveness. Another direction is to improve *'the region's transport connectivity and... transit conditions'*, while the fifth one is to collectively address the region's issues on water and energy resources. He also emphasized the importance of developing a common history, culture, education and science through *'establishing close ties between the academies of sciences'* as well as through joint media projects. Another important factor is the expression of common identity through references to a *'unified cultural space'* and *'common historical and spiritual roots'*. Additionally, Tokayev's proposal to invite *'high-ranking representatives of other neighboring states, such as Russia and China'* to the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Leaders indicates a self-representation of the region as possessing a shared identity. This was further demonstrated by invitation for the fifth meeting in Tajikistan in 2023 Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev.

The circumstantial premises in Tokayev's speech contextualizes the actions within the framework of regional cooperation by identifying four main challenges. The first challenge refers to *'the conditions of geopolitical turbulence and instability of the world economy'*, also described as *'new challenges and threats'* – a point emphasized right in the first paragraph. These *'well-known new challenges'* are further described as a *'difficult geopolitical situation'* and a *'critical period of growing international tension'* clearly alluding to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that had erupted earlier that year. This new geopolitical challenge requires appropriate actions from Central Asian leaders. In contrast to this new challenge, however, the second challenge is an ongoing issue of regional instability. Therefore, Tokayev calls for immediate attention to cross-border issues between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, highlighting that inter-border clashes *'echo heavily ... throughout the region'*. Another challenge involves *'structural and infrastructural constraints'* that hinder cross-border trade, regional economic development and, the attraction of foreign investment. Lastly, Tokayev enlarged upon *'modern climatic challenges'* stemming from global warming and the long-standing issue of shared water resources in the region, including the Aral Sea problem. The goal premise is expressed as the immediate short term goal to *'jointly confront new challenges and threats'*, while the long term goal is to *'to build bridges between the competing poles of global politics and economics'*. As the geopolitical rivalry will eventually subside, these bridges are meant to endure, benefiting future generations.

Thus, the goal is to ensure the stable development of the Central Asian region. Achieving this involves several actions: addressing security and border demarcation issues, increasing mutual trade, improving transport and transit infrastructure, and collectively tackling the water and energy crisis in the region. These measures will lead to the region's sustainable development, informed by such values as *'common history, strong ties of friendship and traditions of good-neighborliness'*.

30 Aliya Tskhay and Filippo Costa Buranelli, 'Accommodating Revisionism through Balancing Regionalism: The Case of Central Asia', *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 6 (2 July 2020): 1033–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1779184>; Meray Ozat, 'Central Asia Consultative Meeting: Strengthening Regional Ties and Expanding Horizons', Research (Caspian Policy Center, 18 September 2023), <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/central-asia-consultative-meeting-strengthening-regional-ties-and-expanding-horizons>.

4.2 President Japarov's Speech

Similar to Tokayev's speech, Kyrgyz leader strongly advocates for regional unity framing the '*current international relations crisis*' as an opportunity to propel '*even more closer cooperation*' of Central Asian states. He also emphasizes the need for consolidated efforts in the political, economic, and cultural realms to address shared challenges.

While Japarov alludes to the Russo-Ukraine conflict, he carefully refers to it as the generalized '*international situation*' that '*does not inspire optimism*', maintaining a strategic silence on direct references. His primary security focus, however, is on the situation in Afghanistan, which he sees as an immediate threat to regional stability. He calls for coordinated efforts to support Afghanistan's development, with an emphasis on tackling counter-terrorism, drug-trafficking and other security challenges.

What sets Japarov's vision apart is his focus on external threats — particularly Afghanistan's impact on regional stability — while internal issues related to ongoing border demarcation with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are addressed with a positive outlook. He is optimistic that the troubled Fergana Valley will eventually transform '*into a true oasis of Central Asia*'. Furthermore, food and energy safety were also among the shared challenges that can be addressed through self-sufficiency of the region's agricultural and energy capacity.

Japarov aligns with Tokayev's call to address the issue of water resources management, but goes further by emphasizing that upstream countries, like Kyrgyzstan, are not adequately compensated for their role in accumulating and conserving water resources.

Both leaders share a commitment to improving transport, transit and logistics infrastructure, as well as removing barriers to free trade within the region. However, Japarov explicitly highlights the benefits of major projects like the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, emphasizing its potential for enhancing regional cooperation.

Cultural references also feature prominently in the Kyrgyz president's speech, particularly his proposal to create a Central Asian TV Channel to promote awareness of a shared regional identity. Moreover, his belief in a common historical identity is reflected in his call for joint efforts to enhance tourism across Central Asia.

4.3 President Rahmon's Speech

Echoing the calls for stronger regional cooperation from other leaders, Emomali Rahmon also emphasized the importance of joint efforts in the socio-economic development of Central Asia. This includes the commonly discussed topics of improving transit and transport infrastructure and ensuring free movement of goods across the region. Rahmon similarly highlighted, common cultural initiatives, but with a focus on '*strengthening cooperation between scientific institutions*' and promoting the '*development of applied disciplines*'.

What sets Rahmon's speech apart from those of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz leaders is complete omission of any reference to the Russo-Ukraine conflict. Instead he reiterated Japarov's concerns about security threats from Afghanistan and cross-border crimes, including cybersecurity threats. To address these issues, he proposed enhancing cooperation between Central Asian special services to better tackle regional security challenges.

4.4 President Berdimuhamedov's Speech

President Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan took a more direct approach in contextualizing security threats to Central Asia within the framework of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Although he did not explicitly mention the conflict, he referenced the emergence of '*new realities and new challenges*' since the third Consultative Meeting in 2021. He further emphasized the potential negative impacts to Central Asia from '*military-political conflicts taking place in relative proximity*', again indirectly referring to the conflict.

Berdimuhamedov also acknowledged the security threat posed by the '*Afghan track*', and was assertive in prioritizing security issues in the regional agenda. He proposed '*five-sided regular consultations*' among foreign ministers and suggested holding '*a Central Asian media forum*' focused on security matters.

An intriguing aspect of his speech was the proposal to institutionalize Turkmen neutrality as a peace-promotion strategy, suggesting its expansion to the entire Central Asian region.

Like other leaders, transport and logistics were key themes in his speech, with proposals aimed at regional infrastructural development.

In the realm of cultural and humanitarian cooperation, he proposed establishing '*an annual Prize of the Presidents of the Central Asia*' for achievements in culture.

In his concluding remarks, Berdimuhamedov revisited the issue of geopolitical turbulence and reaffirmed Turkmenistan's commitment to close cooperation with the '*fraternal peoples*' of Central Asia, united by '*a common history and roots*'.

4.5 President Mirziyoyev's Speech

In his speech, Mirziyoyev, like other Central Asian leaders, framed the unpredictable international order and the '*growing lack of dialogue and trust*' as significant threats to regional security and stability, particularly by disrupting Central Asia's supply chains. He also addressed internal regional security challenges, including the threats posed by terrorism, extremism and the influence of the destructive forces on the Internet. The situation in Afghanistan was highlighted as a top security priority, with Mirziyoyev underscoring the importance of peace and stability in Afghanistan for the broader Central Asian region.

The Uzbek leader also emphasized environmental concerns, particularly the need for improved water management and adoption of green technologies. However, much of his focus was on trade and economic cooperation, noting that the region's low level of economic integration remains a significant barrier for its prosperity.

Mirziyoyev also stressed the importance of promoting cultural and social unity, ground in the region's shared history, culture, and identity as guiding principles for actions. In this spirit, he proposed several initiatives, including security measures aligned with Rahmon's proposal for regular consultations between security councils and special service representatives as well as cultural initiatives such as '*the Central Asian Festival of Art, Cinema and National Cuisine*' were introduced to promote regional solidarity.

5 Findings

As mentioned earlier, practical argumentation involves weighing available options and presenting the best arguments for action, while counter-arguments are used to critically test them. Across all five speeches, Central Asian leaders converge on several key claims for actions, particularly concerning the urgent need for regional cooperation in the areas of security, economic development, infrastructural connectivity. A shared theme is the avoidance of directly mentioning the Russo-Ukrainian war—a form of strategic silence likely intended to avoid provoking a negative reaction from the Kremlin.

Common priorities across the speeches include the need to address internal security threats, such as terrorism and extremism, and unresolved border demarcation issues. Apart from Kazakhstan, four of the presidents also highlighted the Afghan issue as a critical concern for broader regional security. Other shared challenges include environmental and energy issues, particularly the need for better water management and the adoption of green technologies.

In terms of goal premises, the speeches emphasize both short-term responses to immediate security challenges and long-term aspirations for regional economic and infrastructural development. The leaders consistently invoked shared values, including a common history, culture, and identity, as the normative foundation for their calls to action.

Along with some clear convergences, there are notable discrepancies in how the leaders address circumstantial challenges. For instance, while Tokayev and Berdimuhamedov were more direct in contextualizing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, referring to it as "geopolitical turbulence" and "new realities", respectively, Rahmon chose not to mention the conflict at all. Instead, he focused on regional security threats such as terrorism and cybersecurity. Similarly, Japarov and Mirziyoyev resonated Rahmon's emphasis on regional security, with both leaders particularly concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. These differences reveal that, despite a shared vision of security challenges, each leader prioritizes specific geopolitical concerns that align with their respective national interests.

Although the long-term goal of a prosperous Central Asian region is shared by all five leaders, their short-time aspirations differ. In particular, Tokayev and Japarov focus more on resolving internal border issues. In contrast, Rahmon avoids addressing specific conflicts, instead highlighting broader regional cooperation and cybersecurity measures. At the same time, Mirziyoyev aligns with Tokayev and Japarov in prioritizing enhanced economic cooperation, he distinguishing himself though by emphasizing the need to overcome low economic integration within Central Asia.

The presidents differentiated in their prioritization from the means-goal premise perspective. Tokayev, Japarov and Mirziyoyev emphasized on infrastructural, transport, logistics and trade development as key propellers of regional cooperation and economic growth. Each leader proposed projects aimed at advancing regional connectivity. For instance, Japarov highlighted the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway as a critical initiative, while others discussed transportation routes (that bypass sanctioned Russia), such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests significant opportunities for Central Asia and South Caucasus to rump up their economies via the so-called Middle Corridor. This route gains importance as the Northern Corridor through Russia and Belarus is effectively put on hold. Moreover, this shift opens strategic opportunities for Turkey and the EU as well to leverage their positions against Russia, China, and Iran, thereby enhancing their influence in the region.³¹

31 Tuba Eldem, *Russia's War on Ukraine and the Rise of the Middle Corridor as a Third Vector of Eurasian Connectivity: Connecting Europe and Asia via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey*, vol. 64/2022, SWP Comment (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18449/2022C64>; Altunışık, 'Turkey's "Return" to Central Asia in a Shifting Global and Regional Context: New Opportunities and Limitations'.

Analyzed through the Faircloughs' argumentative framework, the analyzed speeches present an argumentative structure consisting of circumstantial premises shaped by geopolitical tensions and informed by common values that calls for tighter cooperation through a series of proposed actions.

6 Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has impacted the global geopolitical shifts, posing significant challenges for smaller states in Russia's proximity. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict by analysing perspectives of Central Asian leaders and examining their strategies for regional integration. The importance of such an 'inside-out' perspectives is in their potential to break through the academic colonialism prevalent in Western scholarship. Conversely, incorporating the perspectives of the most affected nations on Russian imperialism will enhance the explanatory and predictive value of analysis.³² Despite unsuccessful attempts of regional integration in the past, the current geopolitical situation presents an opportunity for Central Asian states to adopt a unified approach. Leaders' proposals, from Tokayev's call for inclusive regional dialogues to Japarov's emphasis on water resource management and Mirziyoyev's economic integration vision, as well as cautious references of Berdimuhamedov and Rahmon to the Central Asian security cooperation reflect a collective effort to strengthen regional resilience. Yet, the strategic silence on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict contextualizes the region's delicate balancing act between maintaining neutrality and addressing emerging threats.

As such, through Political Discourse Analysis, the findings highlight a shared emphasis on security, economic development, and infrastructure, while revealing strategic differences aligned with national priorities. This study suggests that Central Asian leaders are cautiously laying the common footing for deeper collaboration, potentially transitioning from a reactive to a more proactive regional strategy.

Furthermore, since the argumentative framework is based on the discourse-for-action approach, further research could be enriched by empirical evidence of cooperation in Central Asia, such as the "Birlestik" military exercises conducted in the Caspian Sea by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan.³³ In this vein, policy recommendations could be transition from conceptual cooperation to tangible actions, advocating for more assertive and practical measures.

The role of Azerbaijan, in turn, is particularly important for regional integration. Aliyev's proactive position, in turn, can be explained by the ample economic and political opportunities offered by the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and other East-West communication projects, especially in the context of favorable solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue for Baku. Thus, future studies could benefit from a closer examination of other regional and inter-regional integration projects, such as the Organization of Turkic States as well.³⁴

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