



Central Asia as the Grand Chessboard: the EU, China, Russia's Regional Strategies and the C5's Responses

Original Paper

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Abstract

Central Asia is an integral part of the concurrent geopolitical marathon in the 21st century. This region has been of great imperative concern for all the rising and incumbent hegemonies of the international arena. The dissolution of the Soviet Union has garnered the multidimensional speculations to the Central Asian countries and gave a new stream of struggle for geopolitical clout among the influential actors (Russia, China, and European Union) in the geopolitical canvas. The current political atmosphere immaculately exemplifies the amplified power dynamics in the new global order. The contest for Central Asia act as an immediate chessboard in which the rooks and bishops along with their overlapping interests are trying hard to get the king's worth. Nevertheless, the self-proclaimed pawns of this grand chessboard (Central Asian States) are unaware of their own potential of being a checkmate in this conundrum. The approach towards the Central Asia by Russia, China, and EU often differs from each other. However, interests and strategic vulnerabilities have put these giants in the same spectrum. Russia's objective in this region is to maintain the neocolonial status with the tool of Eurasianism to consolidate its position in the region. China's foremost ambition in the region is to preserve the Sino-Initiatives integrity (BRI) and to accommodate the regional connectivity with its global economic agendas in the region. Surprisingly, the primary ambition of all stakeholders overlaps with each other which elevates their geostrategic rivalry and possibly paves the way for Central Asia's strategic autonomy. This research paper is going to conduct a comprehensive and qualitative analysis of this intricate marathon by using Heartland theory for identifying the specific and significant objectives of this unusual quest for Central Asia. Firstly, it will focus that, How the overlapping interests of the stakeholders can become the competing threshold along with analyzing the aftermath of Russia-Ukraine Crisis? Moreover, it will further extend its analytical view on How the Central Asian nations can maintain the more pragmatic, realistic, and inclusive approach towards every stakeholder in this great game without facing any geopolitical trials and tribulations?

Keywords

C5 • EU • China • Heartland Theory • Russia-Ukraine Crisis

1 Introduction

Central Asia has undergone an inadequate prevalence of geopolitical significance, restricting the hidden potential of this region for centuries. The fluctuation of their geopolitical caliber tends to push the region into a left-out impression. The strategic and economic existence of the region had followed a zigzag trajectory of geopolitical marathon.¹ Historically, the region with frequent alienation experiences was once considered the epicenter of world culture. This region had witnessed the glorious golden epoch of its own worth, which has been contemplated by many political pundits till date. The terrains of the Central Asian region were home to many magnificent empires that have contributed exceptionally to uplifting the intellectual and political status of the region. The region is known for many renowned and eminent scholars who designed the artistic and scientific landscape of the globe. The most alluring fact is that those Central Asian scholars were the masters in many disciplines, which is truly impracticable for contemporary scholars. According to distinguished scholars, the crucial reasons for the versatility were the major trade routes that gave rise to religious pluralism, unity in diversity, and the accumulation of knowledge and wealth. Although, that illustrious golden era ended till the 14th century.² Later on, the Central Asian states were designed to be ruled under the umbrella of the Soviet Union and not to be an independent state.

1 Cooley, Alexander. n.d. "Central Asia: A Political History from the 19th Century to Present." *Asia Society*, Accessed August 31, 2024. <https://asiasociety.org/central-asia-political-history-19th-century-present>.

2 "Central Asia's Golden Age (800–1100): Why it Happened, why it Ended." n.d. Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/central-asias-golden-age-800-1100-why-it-happened-why-it-ended>.

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The undesirable dissolution of the Soviet Union made an alarming twist in the tangled dilemmas of geopolitics. This event eventually paved the way to erupt the stagnant status quo of the global arena. It rejuvenated the decades-old dropped subject of the Heartland theory tales. Heartland theory has been the most rational and applicable theory to encapsulate the Eurasian continent's geopolitical significance since 1919 proposed by a British geographer, Sir Halford Mackinder.³ This quintessential theory states that *"the power that controls Central Asia—the great pivot—would eventually emerge as the most powerful state in international politics."*⁴ This theory is currently being involved to alter Central Asia's gloomy spot on the global canvas by evolving the vibrant interests of different stakeholders in the region. Central Asia as the vast and landlocked empire in the Eurasian continent, has become a primary battlefield in the much extensive new great game promoting the modified heartland tales of 21st century.⁵ All the giant players of international arena trying to pull the Central Asian's predictable heartland fate towards their respective sphere. Central Asian republics are bound to prevail in ultra maneuvering vicinity constructed by all giant powers to turn the tables on each other for the scramble for Central Asia. The key players of grand chessboard of quest for Central Asia are China, Russia, and the EU. Their distinct interests' overlap makes the geopolitical chessboard more volatile and vulnerable to conflicts, portraying a direct threat to the evolution dream of Central Asia.⁶

Central Asian contemporary significance cannot be fully interpreted without its former foster parent for more than a century, Russia. Russia had been a primary political actor in Central Asia post disintegration of the USSR.⁷ Russia has played a pivotal role in this region by imposing and assessing the pro-Russian political, cultural, and economic patterns by navigating its previous clout. Russia, as a classic colonial master, was victorious for many years by becoming a top priority of influence in the region.⁸ Despite the modern dynamics, Russia still holds a strong foothold in this region. Unlike, many political pundits have prognosticated the systematic implosion of Russian influence due to the Russia-Ukraine Crisis. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has entered its third year, with a hypothetical assumption of a stalemate situation. The plethora of sanctions, global moral grievance, and Russia's embroiled stature in war have driven a tentative wedge between Russia and Central Asia. This conundrum has paved the way for other key players to settle their interests in the region, especially China.⁹

China's prior interest in Central Asia is to secure its volatile western province, Xinjiang, and strengthen its new silk road initiative, BRI (Project of the Century).¹⁰ Beijing has provided the Central Asian region with much needed loans to mitigate the political and economic instability in the region and has motivated their development dream. As a compensation for those pouring loans, CARs have also done immense efforts to acknowledge China, i.e., the CARs outlawed the Ughur organization in 1997 and increased monitoring of Uyghur movement in the region.¹¹ Currently, China has become a source of relief for the Central Asian Republic (CARs) to treat their apprehension mode amid the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Russia-Ukraine crisis has become pivotal turning point for China to accelerate the energy and transport projects more progressively as a nascent and reluctant dominant player in the region.¹²

The vitality and criticality of the Central Asian region have long been misunderstood by the west. In fact, the infrequent interactions had been considered the mismatch gathering of central vis-à-vis west. However, over the past years, the west has started to make its mark on the region.¹³ The EU has also developed a closed eye on the region and has recognized its geostrategic importance lately. Whether energy, transit, or connectivity, the EU has made an extensive approach to consolidate its stake in the region.¹⁴ The research paper aims to explore the intricacies related to the expedited scramble for Central Asia with analytical inspection. The comprehensive examination of the competition with multidimensional implications will provide an insightful

3 Živec, Katarina. "Application of Mackinder's Heartland Theory to Past and Present Geopolitical Significance of Central Asia," 2018. https://www.cep.si/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Application_of_mackinders_heartland_theory.docx-filename_UTF-8Application-of-mackinders-heartland-theory.pdf.

4 Scott, Margaret, Westenley Alcenat, and Macalester College. 2008. "Revisiting the Pivot: The Influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics.

5 De Goñi Arreya, Helena. "Central Asia's role in the Heartland, 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union," October 26, 2021. https://www.unav.edu/documents/16800098/17755721/DT-%232-2021_Asia-Heartland-HdeGoni_ENG.pdf.

6 Pierre Lehmann, Jean. "Central Asia: The Great Game in the new global disorder of the 21st century." IMD Business School for Management and Leadership Courses, December 2016. <https://www.imd.org/research-knowledge/economics/articles/central-asia-the-great-game-in-the-new-global-disorder-of-the-21st-century/>.

7 Laruelle, Marlène. "Russia in Central Asia: old history, new challenges." *EU-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) Working Paper 2*, no. 3 (2009): 20-39.

8 Laruelle, Marlène. "Russia and Central Asia." In *The new Central Asia: The regional impact of international actors*, pp. 149-175. 2010.

9 Noorzadeh, Ahmad Tariq. "Central Asia's Post-Ukraine Future." *The Diplomat*, July 9, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/central-asias-post-ukraine-future/>.

10 Mendez, Alvaro. 2023. "Russia's Backyard: China and Central Asia after the Invasion of Ukraine." *The Great Power Competition.*, 5: 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40451-1_10.

11 Wani, Ayjaz. "Amid Russia-Ukraine Conflict, Advantage China in Central Asia." *Observer Research Foundation*, November 23, 2023.

12 Jiang, Yang. "China leading the race for influence in Central Asia." DIIS, October 10, 2022. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/china-leading-the-race-influence-in-central-asia>.

13 Temnycky, Mark. "The West Is Eying Closer Relations with Central Asia." *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/the-west-is-eying-closer-relations-with-central-asia/>.

14 Matveeva, Anna. "A New Opening for EU–Central Asia Relations?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 13, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/04/a-new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations?lang=en&cr=europe>.

analysis on the conundrum. This paper will also be intent to provide a sustainable and pragmatic guidance for Central Asian states to firmly maintain its position in this compelling circumstances. This research paper has been designed to evaluate the following questions that helps to navigate through the Central Asia as the Grand Chessboard.

1. How can the overlapping interests of the stakeholders become the competing threshold along with analyzing the aftermath of Russia-Ukraine Crisis?
2. How can the Central Asian nations maintain the more pragmatic, realistic, and inclusive approach towards every stakeholder in this great game without facing any geopolitical trials and tribulations?

By addressing the overarching questions, the research signifies a persistent vulnerability of Central Asia as the grand chessboard. With an immaculate elaboration of the status quo through descriptive findings and analysis and with the foremost intent to give the viable recommendations for the enhancement of the Central Asian's stature on geopolitical landscape, signifies the credibility of the research.

2 Research Methods

The method of research is precisely based on theoretical data collections and quality research with favorable quantity research facts. The data collection includes the measuring of information through analytical and non-biased lens. A variety of scholarly data has been utilized to evaluate the subjectivity of the concerning arguments. With comprehensive research instruments, deep analysis has been implied to dig out the complexities of the Central Asian grand chessboard. The data collected in the research process was then categorically used in different facets by utilizing Heartland theory as theoretical framework to inspect and examine the subject extensively. The data analysis has been shown in overview, findings and discussion extensively which led to the recommendations. While maintaining pragmatic approach ethics for research, the researcher has tried to sustain a neutral decorum. There is no unreliable, non-valid, unrealistic, and biased content in this research. This research paper immaculately resonates with the standard of research ethics mandatory for any study.

3 Research Findings

By inspecting the research questions with the deep analytical and comprehensive approach, certain findings have been deduced to address Central Asia's grand chessboard sequentially and efficaciously. Research findings tend to delve into the perplexed stalemate scenarios of the geopolitical chessboard by introspecting the key pieces of the game (EU, China, C5, and Russia).

3.1 EU in Central Asia: A Demandeur with A Steady Approach

The European Union has set some critical priorities in Central Asia that broadly resonate with the Union's own interests. The altering geopolitical dynamics after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine crisis have opened multiple avenues of cooperation for the region and union. As per conspicuous observation, the EU and Central Asia are two very different sets of countries. On one side, there are the richest democratic countries, and on the other side, there are five small, medium-sized countries with peaked poverty and the least democratic standards.¹⁵ The only commonality among them is that both became evident on geopolitical canvas post 1990s. The official visit of European Council President, Charles Michel, to Central Asia in 2022, has signified a reinforced cooperation as the consolidated indication of the EU's genuine commitment to the region for bolstering interregional collaboration.¹⁶ EU has recalibrated its strategy towards the Central Asia for finding more parallels in the region and to diversify its stake in the geopolitical chessboard. Unlike USA, the EU is not likely to sanction those Central Asian countries, which are helping Russia to dodge impositions of sanctions. Instead, EU is heading towards more pragmatic strategy to encourage resilience, connectivity and prosperity in the region.¹⁷

Since the inception of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the EU and Central Asia have exchanged several official visits till date. Brussels hosted a Global Gateway investor forum for transit connectivity in January 2023. Afterwards, the International Institute of Central Asia organized a conference titled Central Asia-European Union: A New Agenda for Security Cooperation in Uzbekistan

¹⁵ Cornell, Svante E., and S. Frederick Starr. *A steady hand: The EU 2019 strategy and policy toward Central Asia*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2019.

¹⁶ "President Michel Visits Central Asia." 2022. Council of the European Union. October 28, 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/president/news/2022/10/28/20221028-pec-visits-central-asia/>.

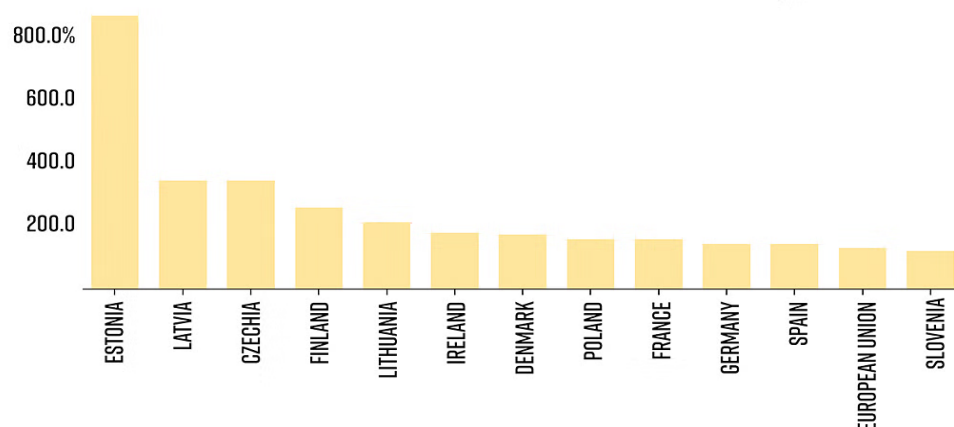
¹⁷ Mikovic, Nikola. 2024. "Central Asia Becomes a Key Strategic Region for the EU." Web log. *The Loop- ECPR's Political Science Blog (blog)*. June 24, 2024.

to accelerate the diplomatic and security ties with the region. On June 5, 2024, the EU and Central Asia had a high-level political and security meeting, assuring that assistance for the region would be increased in certain thematic areas such as security, digital technologies, climate change, connectivity, energy, and so on.¹⁸

Graph 1. EU's export to five Central Asian countries

EU's EXPORTS TO 5 CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES MORE THAN DOUBLE POST RUSSIA SANCTIONS

% GROWTH OF EXPORTS FROM EUROPEAN UNION IN JAN-SEP 2023 OVER 2021



NOTE: * 5 CENTRAL ASIAN NATIONS INCLUDED IN ANALYSIS ARE: KYRGYZSTAN, KAZAKHSTAN, TAJIKISTAN, TURKMENISTAN AND UZBEKISTAN
SOURCE: EUROSTAT. THEPRINT CALCULATIONS



Source: *The Print*¹⁹

The above-mentioned graph indicates the proximity between EU and C5 through the enhancement of exports since the onset of crisis. The institutionalization of their relations is also obvious through all these intellectual summits and official engagements. The proximity of their relations became possible after going through several transformative phases in EU strategy vis-à-vis Central Asia. It has progressed from internal economic reforms to perceiving energy security as the imperative concern from the region. The oscillating geoeconomic and geostrategic strategy of EU have received the doctrinal document in 2007, considering key areas like human rights, security, energy and ecology. The prior identification of that strategy was the need of strategic values post 9/11 and persistent international interferences in Afghanistan.²⁰ Later, the 2019 strategy occurred with cross-country collaboration and commercial interests. The strategy has been contemplated by three tier significant elements; partnership for resilience, partnership for prosperity, and enhancing collaboration.²¹

The vitally important part of EU's strategy is the Middle Corridor or the Trans-Caspian International Trade Route that can give impetus to its worth in the region. The Global Gateway Project has insisted the EU's hierarchical structure to intensify the efforts by pledging €300 billion plan and not to take its position in the region for granted.²² The World Bank has also estimated that by 2030, the freight volume will rise to 11 million tones from 2.3 million tons picked up last year.²³ EU's concrete interest in Middle Corridor by launching the development of fast route will bypass Russia and linking Europe and Central Asia within 15 days. This route can turn out to be the game changer in connectivity, by being located at the heart of East-West trade.²⁴

18 "EU-Central Asia: 11th High-Level Political and Security Dialogue Held in Brussels." 2024. EEAS. 2024. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-central-asia-11th-high-level-political-and-security-dialogue-held-brussels_en?s=3225.

19 Rampal, N., & Rampal, N. (2023, December 15). *31,000% surge in car, ship, toy exports – Europe's suddenly trading with Central Asia post Russia war*. The Print.

20 Melvin, Neil, and Jos Boonstra. *The EU Strategy for Central Asia@ Year One*. Vol. 1. Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, 2008.

21 Fawn, Rick. 2021. "Not Here for Geopolitical Interests or Games": The EU's 2019 Strategy and the Regional and Inter-Regional Competition for Central Asia." *Central Asian Survey* 41 (4): 675–98. doi:10.1080/02634937.2021.1951662.

22 Chang, Felix K. "The Middle Corridor through Central Asia: Trade and Influence Ambitions." (2023).

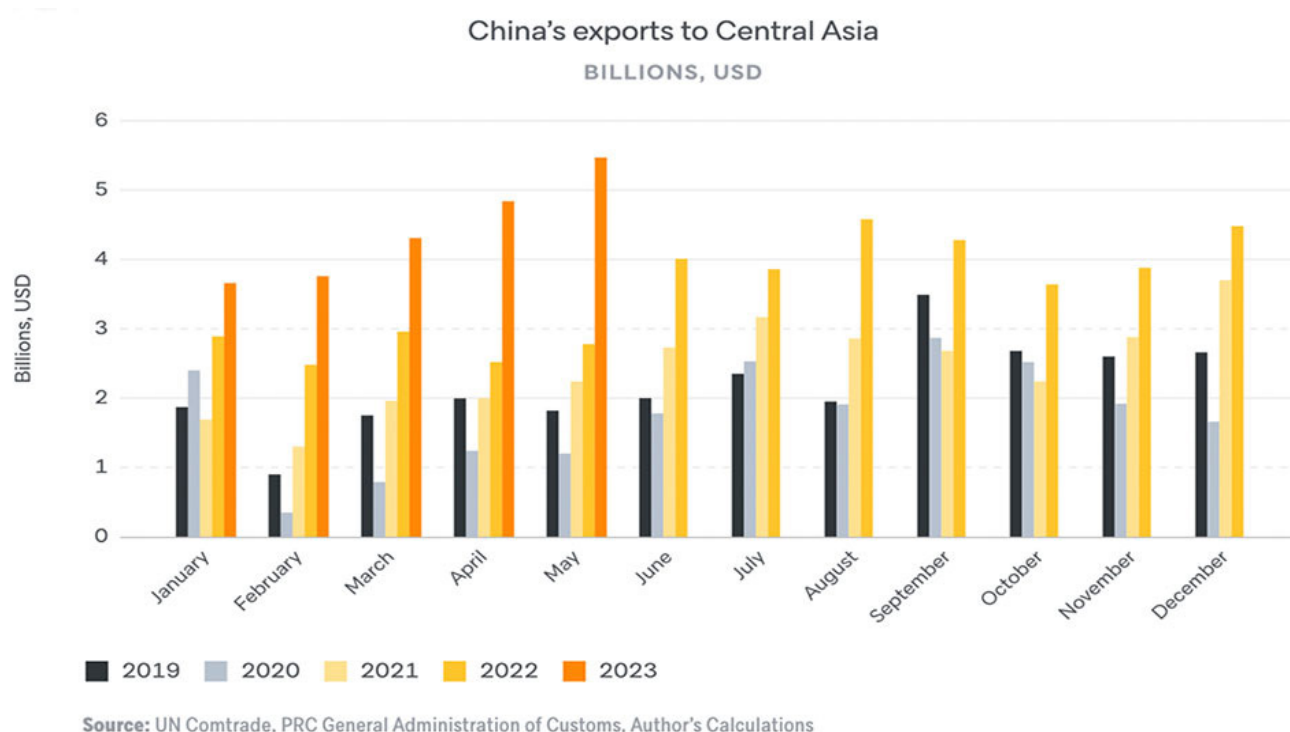
23 World Bank Group. 2024. "10 Priority Actions That Can Triple Trade in the Middle Corridor by 2030." World Bank. World Bank Group. April 17, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/10-priority-actions-that-can-triple-trade-in-the-middle-corridor-by-2030>.

24 Zajmi, Xhoi. 2024. "Ambitious EU Seeks to Improve Middle Corridor Trade Route, Secure Position in Central Asia." Euractiv. May 8, 2024. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/ambitious-eu-seeks-to-improve-middle-corridor-trade-route-secure-position-in-central-asia/>.

3.2 China in Central Asia: Probable King of the Chessboard

The 10-year-old BRI has encapsulated the remarkable strategy to incorporate the Central Asian region as a vigorous entity to accelerate the project's progress. Nevertheless, Beijing has forewarned the Chinese scholars and officials not to use the word "strategy" while engaging with other geopolitical actors and strictly monopolized the BRI narrative domestically.²⁵ Among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan hold a distinctive slot in China's state policies. The elevated significance is due to its multidimensional interests. Kazakhstan served as the primary transit hub between East and West, while attracting large chunks of Chinese investments in the region, and Tajikistan has uplifted its worth in the eyes of Beijing by becoming crucial security partner in the region. With an increased attention, China tries to fill Russia's vacuum in Central Asia after the Russia-Ukraine stalemate scenarios. On the other hand, due to the deteriorating clout of Russia's on CARs, Russia has become heavily dependent on China and CARs to evade the western sanctions. This compelled posture indicates a milestone tectonic shift in the peripheries of the region.²⁶

Graph 2. China's export to Central Asia



Source: China Global South Project²⁷

The above-mentioned graph proves the altering dynamics in the region. Over the past few years, China has surpassed Russia in trade partnership with CARs. The trade turnover has received the new heights till 2023 (\$90 Billion against Russia's \$44 Billion). China has seen a 27% surge in trade partnership over the last 5 years.²⁸ The trade balance seems asymmetrical; China's exports is far huger as compared to the region's export. Kazakhstan is China's biggest trade partner in the region. It's exports were around \$16.3 billion with an import around \$24.7 billion, unsuccessful to reciprocate the exports with China. Other countries of the region have also faced the same imbalance in 2023 i.e., Tajikistan (Chinese exports around \$3.6 billion & import of \$250

25 Christoffersen, Gaye. 2024. "China's Strategic Thinking toward Central Asia, 2013-2024." The Asan Forum. April 23, 2024. <https://theasanforum.org/chinas-strategic-thinking-toward-central-asia-2013-2024/>.

26 Umarov, Temur. 2024. "What Does Xi Jinping Want from Central Asia?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. July 24, 2024. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/07/what-does-xi-jinping-want-from-central-asia?lang=en>.

27 Van Staden, C. (2023, July 20). *Chart of the day: Why are China's exports to Central Asia growing so rapidly?* The China-Global South Project. <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2023/07/20/chart-of-the-day-why-are-chinas-exports-to-central-asia-growing-so-rapidly/>

28 "China Reports Robust Trade Growth with Central Asian States." 2024. Eurasianet. February 2, 2024. <https://eurasianet.org/china-reports-robust-trade-growth-with-central-asian-states>.

million only), Turkmenistan faced a slight decline in trade volume with China around \$10.6 billion, Kyrgyzstan (Chinese export around \$19 billion & import of \$80 million) and Uzbekistan (Chinese export around \$14 Billion & import of \$1.6 Billion).²⁹

3.3 *Russia in Central Asia: The Classic/Symbolic Colonial Legacy*

The West has labeled the Russia-Ukraine crisis as Kremlin's cynical adventurism with geopolitics. The west-proclaimed geopolitical insolence of the Russia-Ukraine crisis has brought multifaceted repercussions to Moscow. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also caused immense apprehension among the Central Asian states, who were once part of the Soviet Union. Abandoned by western sanctions, Russia kept on trying to rejuvenate its clout and waning influence in the region.³⁰ Central Asian nations are trying to extract the maximum profit from the war by setting a pragmatic approach in the prevailing crisis. This maximal pragmatic approach is referred to as the most cynical version of multi vector politics. CARs have maintained a quite delicate yet fizzy balance by neither supporting the war nor condemning the war.³¹

Russia is responsible for remittances in Central Asia and has been a primary destination for Central Asian migrants. Around 10 million Central Asian migrants are doing labor in Russia. Despite the prevailing crisis, migrants are still residing in war-stricken Russia.³² However, the terrorist attack in Moscow (Moscow's Crocus City Hall) has brought severe implications for the migrant workers. The relationship between the Russia and post-soviet states may gone into deep strain due to skepticism. Some suspects involved in the attack were identified as the citizens of Tajikistan. After that revelation, Russian police started to deport many migrant workers who are from Tajikistan along with the migrant workers of other Central Asian states. That act, precisely after Russia-Ukraine crisis has further exacerbated the Central Asia's identity dilemma in the region and has ignited the urgency of choosing the independent geopolitical path. Nevertheless, blocking relations can never be an optimal or rational decision due to intertwined economic complexities. Leaders of the region have shown a disapproval of Ukraine's annexation in a subtle or vague way.³³

Russia has projected itself as a security guarantor to its backyard (Central Asia) since the dissolution of the USSR. Distinguishably, as a founding member of CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), Russia tend to promote peace and security in the region. Under the umbrella of CSTO, Russia forces have intervened in some Central Asian States at the peak of turmoil to restore peace. For instance, Kazakhstan requested assistance from CSTO for Bloody January incident in January 2022. That assistance was widely disapproved by the Kazakh citizens. Apparently, citizens were aggrieved by the Russia's interference in state's affairs. Subsequently, Kazakhstan shook by sudden onset of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.³⁴

3.4 *C5 (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan): Whether the Pawn or the Queen of the Chessboard?*

Since the inception of CARs, Russia has enjoyed intensified economic and soft power dominance in the region. Their pursued dependence on Russia had somehow secured their geographically landlocked status in the region. But the Russia-Ukraine crisis has altered the regions' interest and gave a new breakthrough to the most celebrated Heartland Theory in relation with Central Asia. The geopolitical barometer has recognized the CARs as the pivotal pieces of 21st century's geopolitical chessboard.³⁵ With EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) and CSTO's glory, CARs were respectfully under the hegemony of Russia. Contemporarily, CARs are now looking forward to widening their approach in the world and grasping the upliftment opportunities. The breached can be sensed after the refusal of acceptance of custom duties in Russian currency following the imposed sanctions by the west. The firm resistance has also been witnessed in the CARs towards Russian Federation. However, CARs have been accused of helping Russia to evade sanctions i.e., Kazakhstan has gained convenience by bypassing western sanctions, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are keep on with receiving remittances from in demand migrant labors in Russia. Even the cross-country enterprises are doing well.³⁶

29 Daye, Chu. 2024. "Trade, Economic Cooperation between China, Central Asian Countries on Fast Lane: Analyst." Global Times. May 20, 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202405/1312657.shtml>.

30 Mirovalev, Mansur. 2024. "Maximally Pragmatic': How Central Asia Navigates Russia's War on Ukraine." Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera. March 22, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/22/maximally-pragmatic-how-central-asia-navigates-russias-war-on-ukraine>.

31 Ratha, Dilip, and Eung Ju Kim. "Russia-Ukraine conflict: implications for remittance flows to Ukraine and Central Asia." *KNOMAD Policy Brief* 17 (2022).

32 "Migration Data in Central Asia." 2024. Migration Data Portal. May 9, 2024. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/central-asia#:~:text=Of%20the%207.8%20million%20international,the%20Russian%20war%20in%20Ukraine>.

33 Mahon, Anastassiya. "Ukraine war: why central Asian countries want to move away from Russian control." The Conversation, n.d. <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-why-central-asian-countries-want-to-move-away-from-russian-control-229678>.

34 Kudaibergenova, Diana T., and Marlene Laruelle. "Making sense of the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: failing legitimacy, culture of protests, and elite readjustments." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38, no. 6 (2022): 441-459.

35 Kappa, Lachlan. 2024. "The Central Asia-Russia Relationship: What's Changed since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine?" YDS. YDS. April 10, 2024. <https://www.theyoungdiplomats.com/post/the-central-asia-russia-relationship-what-s-changed-since-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

36 Dadabaev, Timur, and Shigeto Sonoda. "Silence is golden. Silences as strategic narratives in Central Asian states' response to the Ukrainian

The Central Asian States have abundance of national resources in diverse ranges. Kazakhstan holds a wider range of oil reserves (export of around \$47 Billion) and is also primary producer of Uranium. Being a country that holds fourth largest gas reserves, Turkmenistan, holds approximately \$10 Billion exports. Uzbekistan holds largest gold mines (\$4.6 Billion export, 2022). Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also rich in those resource which effectively contribute to their GDP.³⁷ Apart from these resources, C5 are also rich in agricultural resources. The polity of the C5 is quite disturbing doesn't even resonates with mainstream global players. From oppressive autocracies to burgeoning democracies, the political economy of the C5 led to the deep-rooted corruption. Due to this perilous corruption, the C5 rank brutally on international transparency and corruption perception indexing. The corruption menace can create consequential obstacles for C5 on their way to resilience and prosperity. For instance, the EU's prior demands from the region is to build the executive structure based on wester norms and free from corrupt intricacies. The foundation of transparency initiative is quite indispensable for the C5.³⁸

4 Discussion

The overlapping interests of the stakeholders can create a competing threshold as the epicenter in C5's policy discourse. The vacuum that popped up after Russia-Ukraine crisis has upskilled the region to walk a fine line on the global canvas. The key players now cannot rest on the laurels, especially after the most bewildered crisis (Russia-Ukraine) of cotemporary decade. The scramble for Central Asia could lead to the compete and cooperate saga between Russia and China. The endured friendship of many years could turn sour due to prevailing perplexity. While many geopolitical spectators have perceived that Russia will descend its supremacy in Central Asia and China will ascend the supremacy in the region, nonetheless, these perceptions are sort of sticky wickets. The Sino-Russian cooperative hegemony holds stronghold in the region, albeit with entangled dynamics. The deteriorating power of Russia in the region paved the way for China to fill the vacuum at the expense of Russia. The regions emerging neutrality over the crisis vividly demonstrates the Russia's declining clout. Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev refused Russia's command to identify the pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine. Similarly, President of Uzbekistan has also condemned the Kremlin's pressure. Russia's ineffectiveness was also discernible during the vulnerable border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow's reputation as reliable security partner and regional sheriff could get snatched by other key players of the chessboard.

The EU's position in the region is also oscillating between risks and rewards. The development of the refulgent Middle Corridor also known as Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, may boost the Sino-Russian connectivity in the region. The viable alternate to Northern Corridor (strategic vulnerability for EU because of Russia), can indirectly help Russia to circumvent sanctions and control exports by diverting its goods along the Middle corridor. In that way, the desire to avoid Russia, can become an absolute fated implications with the enhancement of secure international connectivity for Russia. The EU's de-risking ambitions need an immediate reevaluation to outweigh the foreseeable reversed outputs. Homogenously, the Middle corridor can also assist China to amplify its international economic engagements. Notwithstanding these challenges, the EU still has the potential to outweigh these deep-rooted risks. It provides China-Europe connectivity in a way to speed up geoeconomic influence in the region.

For C5, the desire to diversify their economic partners could become permanent corner stone of their policies. Nevertheless, this diversification can also lead to the debt trap i.e., Central Asian nation is excessively relying on China and this materialized reliance seen as the high threat due to debts owed to China. In prospect, Middle Corridor will act as a threat proof economy, deducting its reliance on fossils fuels and Sino-Russian cooperative hegemony. Middle Corridor has the potential to revitalize the Heartland tales with the tool of risk free multilateralism.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the grand chessboard of Central Asia is vivaciously volatile in current decade. The infamous Russia-Ukraine crisis has further exacerbated the rules of the game. The gambling of points may occur due to overlapping interest of the stakeholders. It's an unusual precarious moment to discover the winner of the grand chessboard; whether the slow and steady (EU), geoeconomic monk (China) or the former colonial master (Russia)? All stakeholders have built their own barracks of the initiatives in the regions that reverberates the multilateralism chaos in the region which can be endure for the generations. The region has become a geopolitical marry-go-round with only one axis point of geoeconomics. The one who will conquer

crisis." *International Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 1 (2023): 193-215.

37 Hu, Xiaofeng. "RETRACTED: Green economic recovery in Central Asia by utilizing natural resources." (2023): 103582.

38 Cooley, Alexander, and Jason C. Sharman. "Blurring the line between licit and illicit: transnational corruption networks in Central Asia and beyond." *Central Asian Survey* 34, no. 1 (2015): 11-28.

the axis point will reserve multiple seats of interest. The perceivable dilemma revives the heartland theory of Mackinder's that demonstrates the scramble for Central Asia. The most indispensable element for the C5 is to strike a delicate balance in multilateralist approach. This can help the region to transform the stalemate situation into checkmate of grand chessboard. The uniformity of the approaches may guarantee a king's status of the C5 rather than just pawns on the grand chessboard. By implying some rational strategies that are vitally applicable for Central Asia can balance their sinking boats in the widened geopolitical Ocean. Multi-vector foreign policy is an essential component for Central Asia to gaining regional and global influence. C5 have pursued a strategic objective to navigate through perplex geopolitical landscape while safeguarding their integrity and sovereignty. Despite that the region still struggles to seek balance on the grand chessboard. While Kazakhstan seems to look odd in this conundrum due to its ambitious multivector policy. In Kazakhstan, the ambitious multivector policy have recognized the open doors to opportunities to all Kinds. of partnership on the global canvas. Multicounty partnerships, especially with those that are archrivals to each other, contemplate the enduring practicality of the multivector policy. However, the policy of other Central Asian States seems diamond in the rough that needs to collaborate with Kazakhstan for revitalizing the policy. Excessive Regional Integration through regional organizations can also give a breakthrough to the C5. But they also need to analyze the intricate loopholes in some organizations. For instance, protectionist and unilateral approaches in the EAEU may handicapped the multivector policy of the C5. The three "I" of Russia's preference for the union are ultimately haunting the institutional framework and credibility of the EAEU. The magnificent blurry three Is are Integration, Imitation, or Individuality. For a decade, they have failed to visualize and analyze the better I for the union. The perspective of the union is still oscillating miserably. C5 needs to strictly assess and scrutinize their stature in every regional organization to mitigate the faulty repercussions of the founder. Unity in C5 may also endorse the delicate balance of the states on geoeconomic radars. Security in the region is the most appealing element for the stakeholders and that can only be possible by the collective conscientious of the leaders of C5.

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