



The future of regionalism and the strategies adopted by states in Central Asia following the Ukraine war

Original Paper

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Abstract

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022 has created uncertainty regarding the balance of power, particularly in Central Asia, where Russia wields significant influence. Russia's military confrontation in Ukraine and its strategic concentration on disrupting equations in its favor have led to changes in its national and foreign policy, giving rise to new questions. This research aims to address the following inquiries: will the conflict in Ukraine diminish Russia's sway and involvement in regional institutions in Central Asia? Will China's position become more prominent if the function of regional organizations, in which Russia has played a significant part, decreases? Will the Central Asian countries align themselves with the Western bloc or other regional powers like Turkey?

This research has utilized secondary data analysis and applied the theories of regionalism and soft power to examine the sources of power and influence of China and Russia in regional organizations and mechanisms in Central Asia, both before and after the Ukrainian war. Assessing the potential difficulties and advantages that this war has brought for China and Russia's influence in this area, provide potential outcomes for the future condition of regionalism in Central Asia and the significant actors involved. According to the research findings, Russia's allocation of military resources in the Ukraine war and its efforts to advance its goals have created uncertainty regarding the future of the country's power resources in Central Asia, particularly in the security field. The premise that another power or powers will likely fill the potential power vacuum left by Russia in Central Asia has been reinforced in the context of this war. As Russia's attention towards Central Asia diminishes, China has a favorable chance to enhance its political and economic. Nevertheless, the decline of Russia's influence and power resources in Central Asia has created a significant chance for the governments in this area to enhance their engagements with other significant regional nations like Turkey and India, as well as trans-regional states such as the European Union.

Keywords

Central Asia • China • Regionalism • Regional organization • Russia • Ukraine war

1 Introduction

Central Asia, a region marked by geopolitical shifts, has experienced a redefinition of its alliances and strategic priorities in the post-Soviet era. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan emerged as sovereign states navigating complex relationships with global powers, primarily Russia and China. Recent developments, especially the Russia-Ukraine conflict, have intensified Central Asian nations' diplomatic positioning, shaping a new geopolitical reality pertinent to their security and economic aspirations.

This region has experienced several totalitarian governments, although other countries have undergone significant transformations. Alongside the incremental influence of Europe and the United States in the region, Russia, following the frailty and ineffectiveness of Boris Yeltsin's tenure from 1992 to 2000, witnessed the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian leadership under Vladimir Putin, prompting Russia to focus on Central Asia and strategies for convergence and potential reassertion of dominance in Asia. It became pivotal. In addition to Central Asia, China has emerged as a significant player throughout the years, exhibiting double-digit GDP growth and providing extensive industrial, agricultural, and financial loan collaborations. Through the Belt and Road initiative, which predominantly traverses Central Asia, China aimed to enhance its relations with regional nations and secure its energy requirements from this area.

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Conversely, Central Asian nations enhanced their collaboration with regional countries including Turkey, Iran, India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The conveyance of water and natural gas from Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to the south, along with the transmission of power, constitutes such collaborations. All Central Asian countries are members of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and maintain close economic and political ties with Iran. The 2014 Russian assault on the Crimean Peninsula did not elicit heightened awareness among Central Asian authorities, as these leaders were engaged in the process of transferring governance of the Crimean Peninsula and its annexation to Ukraine during the Soviet era. The assault by Russian forces on February 24, 2022, targeting the eastern provinces of Ukraine and then escalating the conflict nationwide, garnered significant attention and scrutiny throughout Central Asia. Russia's maneuvers among some elites and populations in Central Asia have engendered security and political threats from the Kremlin, prompting varied responses from each of the affected countries.

The hypothesis of this study posits that the Ukraine war will obscure the prospects of Russian influence in Central Asia. If the war conditions persist, 1. A significant portion of the void in Russian influence and power resources will be occupied by China, a key player in the region, and 2. More prominent regional nations such as Iran, Turkey, and India, as well as transregional entities like the European Union, will assume a more significant role in Central Asia. This paper aims to address underexplored areas, including Central Asian countries' strategies amidst shifting alliances and the geopolitical influence gaps created by the Ukraine war.

The writers utilized English- and Russian-language literature to investigate various narratives concerning the hard and soft power resources of China and Russia, as well as the possibility for other regional countries to augment their influence in Central Asia. Furthermore, they employed official and authoritative websites, for instance to comprehend the public's perspectives on the war in Ukraine, the Russian military incursion, and Chinese investments.

2 Literature review

– Russia's Changing Role

Prior to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Central Asian nations endeavored to diminish Russia's influence in the region. The Central Asian nations—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—possess historical connections to Russia, yet are progressively adopting autonomous foreign policies and forming alliances with alternative powers. Central Asian nations are economically dependent on Russia for trade, migrant labor markets, and infrastructure connections established during the Soviet period. However, sanctions-induced disruptions have compelled these nations to seek alternatives and expand their partnerships, particularly with China and Europe. Russia continues to wield significant soft power culturally and linguistically through common media and historical ties. However, diminishing skill in the Russian language among Central Asian youth, along with increasing criticism of the Soviet era, gradually undermines these connections. The rise of national, Islamic, and Western identities also contests Russian cultural hegemony (Engvall, 2023).

– China's Influence in Central Asia

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has induced substantial geopolitical transformations in Central Asia, prompting regional nations to recalibrate their foreign policy and balance their relations with major powers. A prominent issue in the literature is Central Asia's apprehension regarding excessive dependence on Russia, hence creating possible avenues for China to enhance its economic influence via the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative is a substantial infrastructure and commercial endeavor launched by China in 2013 throughout Central Asia. The project entails the establishment of terrestrial and maritime trade routes connecting China with Eurasia, Africa, and other regions. The belt denotes the terrestrial pathways identified as economic corridors connecting Central Asia, Russia, the Middle East, and Europe, as well as the maritime transport routes originating from China's coast, extending via Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and towards the Mediterranean Sea. The Belt and Road Initiative encompasses investments in infrastructure such as roads, railroads, ports, pipelines, and power plants to enhance trade connectivity across these regions. Estimates indicate that China has invested over 800 billion dollars in the nations encompassed by this initiative, with Central Asian countries being a crucial component of this regional and extra-regional framework (Quadri et al., 2023) (Freeman, Helf, and McFarland, 2023).

Nonetheless, China's rise encounters constraints, such as anti-Chinese sentiment and rivalry with Russia. Notwithstanding Russia's concentration on Ukraine, it continues to assert dominance over Central Asia regarding security and perceives this region as its sphere of influence. Concerns on the persistent existence of debt stemming from adverse financing circumstances for Belt and Road projects have intensified apprehensions in Central Asia about accruing excessive debt to China, thereby diminishing enthusiasm for further investments in the initiative. Simultaneously, both the Central Asian populace and elites harbor doubts over China's objectives in the region that extend beyond mere economic interests, prompting a prudent hesitance to overly depend on China (Stronski, 2022).

The Ukraine crisis has reinvigorated geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia. Although China is augmenting its influence, it is crucial to pursue multilateralism and maintain balanced relations with all neighboring countries to prevent excessive dependence on Beijing or Moscow (Sahakyan, 2021).

– Regional Multilateralism

In recent years, the perspectives and practices of Central Asian nations on international relations have evolved, resulting in an enhanced emphasis on multilateralism and the fortification of intra-regional relations. Rather than relying on a singular foreign power, these nations choose collaboration with other countries to achieve their economic and political objectives. The concept of multilateralism emphasizes the importance of collaboration and coordination among several nations and regional entities. This strategy exemplifies an appropriate amalgamation of global and bilateral collaboration, alongside the cultivation of regional solidarity, aimed at enhancing and fortifying regional security. Central Asian countries should prioritize the enhancement of intra-regional communication. These ties encompass the enhancement of trade exchanges, economic collaboration, cultural and educational interactions, and the fortification of political solidarity within the region. These methods enhance the economic and social links among the regional countries, hence fostering sustainable development. An additional significant consideration for the Central Asian nations is to emphasize the equilibrium of power and collaboration among the regional governments. Through collaboration and the establishment of equilibrium among regional powers, these nations mitigate potential conflicts and evade security and political issues on a broader scale. The perspective of Central Asian countries shows that these countries pay special attention to strengthening multilateral cooperation and promoting intra-regional communication. This strategy often fosters equilibrium in the region and encourages sustainable development; with adequate collaboration among the regional nations, it can enhance prosperity and security (Engvall, 2022) (Cooley, 2023) (Dadabaev and Sonoda, 2023).

Generally, the Central Asian nations, rather than directly confronting or explicitly aligning with any party, discreetly signal a reduction in reliance on Moscow through diplomatic discourse and engagement with alternative partners such as the European Union, Turkey, and India. Nonetheless, overt denunciations of Russia have been infrequently observed due to the entrenched economic, political, and social ties (Khan and Koch, 2021).

The conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing sanctions against Russia significantly influence international relations, particularly affecting Iran's strategies in Central Asia. These impacts can facilitate the expansion of Iran's economic and political dominance in Central Asia. Iran is concerned about the diminishing influence of Russia in favor of competitors like Türkiye in the region. These issues underscore the strategic significance of Central Asia for Iran and the necessity of maintaining equilibrium in various roles within this area. The conflict in Ukraine simultaneously imposes constraints and presents chances for enhancing Central Asia's connections with Iran. This scenario illustrates the intricate circumstances and prospective chances for Iran regarding its engagement with Central Asia, highlighting the necessity to define and rectify Iran's strategic stance in this region. The ramifications of the war in Ukraine and the persistence of sanctions on Iran's policies in Central Asia are critically significant, necessitating the formulation of strategies that align with current developments, ensuring Iran does not fall behind in its interactions with Central Asian nations (Zheng and Jincan, 2023).

– Filling the Gap

This paper aims to address underexplored areas, including Central Asian countries' strategies amidst shifting alliances and the geopolitical influence gaps created by 2022 Ukraine war. Previous studies have primarily focused on a certain component of this subject, such as the evolving sources of Russian influence in Central Asia during the Ukrainian conflict, or the present prospects for Central Asia in implementing a multilateral policy. A comprehensive understanding of this issue emerges when the three factors—Russia's evolving sources of power in Central Asia, China's capacity to occupy the void left by Russian influence, and the region's prospects for promoting multilateral policies—are assessed collectively. The second issue is that this study has examined all the contemporary hard and soft power resources of Russia and China in this region, as well as the effects of the Ukrainian war on these resources. It has reassessed the potential of each regional and trans-regional nation to augment its influence in Central Asia through its hard and soft powers among the countries in this region.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Regionalism in the framework of international organizations

Regionalism in international politics denotes the enhancement of political and economic collaboration among governments and other entities within certain geographical regions, typically manifested in many forms:

- Military alliances
- Economic unions
- Political groupings

Traditional regionalism emerged post-Second World War and persisted until the conclusion of the Cold War. This variant of regionalism was predicated on necessities such as economic and military considerations and was established by significant

foreign powers, like the Soviet Union and the United States, serving as a mechanism to exert their influence. The new regionalism is complex and varied, in contrast to classic multilateralism, and it arose following the conclusion of the Cold War. New regionalism encompasses aspects such as identity, culture, and social dimensions (Patnaik, 2019).

Throughout the Cold War, regional multilateral structures have diminished potential and primarily served as instruments of great power influence. The Soviet Union did not invest in multilateralism to the same extent as the United States. The multilateral system consequently established standards and practices that advanced the interests of the United States and the West. China and Russia, having gleaned insights from historical precedents, are leveraging multilateral organizations and forging new coalitions inside the multilateral framework to subvert the regulations and protocols established by the West, frequently via discretionary financial assistance and infrastructure initiatives.

Regionalism in Central Asia is characterized by geographic and historical coexistence, as well as engagement and collaboration in economic and security matters. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has sought a new paradigm for inter-state relations; yet, collaboration among Central Asian nations is hindered by fragile institutional frameworks and has undergone multiple regional integration initiatives. The potential for collaboration and alignment in Central Asia hinges on the capacity to implement necessary changes and undertake collective initiatives. Rakhimov (2018) asserts that international community assistance for the Central Asian countries will facilitate regional stability and modernization. He asserts that Central Asia ought to engage in a constructive and proactive collaboration to establish new connections with the East, West, South, and North. Moreover, he has identified the following topics as a foundation for regionalism and convergence: educational collaborations, public diplomacy, cultural connections, and interpersonal relations.

- Establishing political and economic conversations, executing collaborative initiatives, and developing economic zones along national borders.
- Shared emphasis and strategies for addressing regional challenges and difficulties, including water crises, terrorism, and drug trafficking.

The correlation between the advancement of regional and international transportation links in Central Asia and the expansion of the economy and international tourism in the area.

- Ensuring stability across various regions of Afghanistan and eradicating the threat of terrorism originating from Afghanistan.

Buranelli (2021) states that Central Asia is among the few global regions that has failed to establish an autonomous regional organization. In other words, there appears to be a correlation between regionalism and the establishment of an official regional organization. Moreover, until each nation engages in discussions and economic liberalization with its neighbors, “the cultivation of a regional identity across Central Asia remains an illusory aspiration.” He introduces the notion of “order” for Central Asia. Order denotes a consistent and foreseeable arrangement of interactions that facilitates the attainment of fundamental objectives in establishing a specific social setting through the enactment of laws and institutions, hence rendering shared interests achievable. Constructivism and the English School are two theoretical frameworks that examine world politics beyond the dimensions of power, collaboration, and strategic interactions. Instead, they regard it as a social framework in which order is perpetually negotiated, deliberated, and executed.

Regionalism encompasses a collection of discourses, practices, and normative commitments—often rooted in a shared identity—that are pragmatic, functional, or integrationist, contingent upon the degree of cooperation desired by states, facilitated through the operations of regional organizations. Furthermore, for regionalism to flourish in a certain area, the social structure within that region must be sufficiently evolved to cultivate confidence among the parties, hence promoting enhanced collaboration in shared interests. However, order does not require such a procedure. Order is a term that pertains solely to the fundamental structure (actors and their related laws) and a specific social environment (for instance, Central Asia).

Order encompasses norms, principles, values, and essential, defining laws that actors must adhere to for mere survival in this tumultuous global system. This order encompasses governance institutions, diplomacy, international law, and the administration of major powers. Agreements or regional organizations have been established to diversify the policies of Central Asian states.

Stephen Krasner employs the term “regime” to characterize multilateral cooperation as “a collection of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures that align actors’ expectations concerning a specific issue area.” Cohen and Nye define regimes as “a set of governing relations” encompassing networks of rules, conventions, and processes that regulate behaviors and their consequences. Ernst Haas contends that a regime encompasses a cohesive array of processes, regulations, and norms. Hadley Bull views institutions as mechanisms for ensuring compliance with laws via their creation, administration, implementation, interpretation, legitimization, and acceptance. Generally, “regimes” refer to a collection of regulations and behavioral standards established by member countries engaged in regional interactions concerning a certain subject (economic, political, security, identity, cultural, etc.).

This paper aligns with constructivism, examining how regional identity and shared frameworks foster cooperation in Central Asia beyond traditional power dynamics.

3.2 Power Theories

In Joseph Nye's theory, "soft power" refers to the capacity of nations and entities to sway others—countries, nations, and organizations—while participating in foreign trade and shaping policies, without resorting to coercion, force, deterrence, military might, or the imposition of restrictions and economic threats (Nye, 1990). Soft power can indeed be analyzed by juxtaposing it with hard power. Joseph Nye analyses elements such as economic interdependence, transnational entities, nationalism in smaller nations, the global dissemination of technology, and evolving political issues to deconstruct the notion and components of power, asserting that novel modes of communication and transportation profoundly influence interdependence among states. The trading sector has expanded more rapidly than the global production industry and has become crucial for numerous economies. These forces have collaborated to establish a more appealing method of exercising power and influence than the traditional approach. Nye characterizes the dual elements of attraction and persuasion (the capacity to influence others' desires) as soft power, identifying culture, political principles, and foreign policy as its three primary sources.

Global activities aligned with the established norms and values of the target country or countries can enhance soft power and cultivate a favorable image in external perceptions. In this context, we can reference China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to enhance connectivity and infrastructure in regional countries, such as those in Central Asia, through its extensive infrastructure and business strategy, including the provision of loans and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It has made a significant advancement in the development of these nations and their global economic strategies.

It is important to recognize that soft power extends beyond merely cultivating a favorable image; it encompasses a nation's investment potential, economic collaboration in particular sectors, and the establishment of international organizations, including those related to security and military matters, all of which can enhance one country's appeal to another. It should be regarded as a subset of its soft power, exemplified by organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty, which encompass economic and security dimensions, with the majority of Central Asian nations currently being members. Furthermore, economic resources can produce both soft and physical power. Presently, China's influence is derived from the efficacy of its economic model. The magnitude and characteristics of GDP, per capita income, technological advancement, natural and human resources, as well as political and legal market institutions, constitute essential sources of both hard and soft power (Nye, 2011). Consequently, the contrast between soft and hard power lies not in the sources of power, but in the methods of their application and utilization.

It is important to acknowledge that soft power is not invariably the most effective means of exerting influence in all situations. Joseph Nye presents the concept of "smart power" as a strategy framework that amalgamates both hard power and soft power to attain favorable outcomes in international relations. Relying solely on military strength and economic coercion (hard power) or on attraction and persuasion (soft power) is inadequate in the intricate global terrain of the 21st century. He underscores the necessity for a judicious and harmonious integration of both elements. This categorization of power kinds encompasses the discernment of when to employ conventional power sources and when to utilize soft power instruments, including diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and international collaboration. Nye acknowledges that the interpretation of smart power necessitates varying approaches depending on the context, emphasizing the strategic and judicious application of diverse power types to sustain and enhance a nation's influence and attain its objectives in a swiftly evolving global landscape.

4 Russian hegemon in Central Asia after the Ukrainian war

"Abroad" is a term and concept specific to Russia, referring to the countries of the former Soviet Union, a heritage passed to Moscow after the Soviet Union's disintegration. Russia wields significant influence over the countries in its near foreign sphere, frequently overlooking the significance of this region in its foreign policy. The influence and significance of foreign nations on Russian diplomacy are considerable. This region partially defines Russia's diplomatic framework, develops its goals, and influences its diplomatic ideology. Furthermore, the near abroad has persistently functioned as a focal point of conflict between Russia and the United States/the West (Huasheng, 2021). Korteweg contends that Russia utilizes its energy resources more effectively than other countries to protect and promote its foreign interests, while also pursuing economic goals and, when necessary, applying political pressure on consumers. Distinguishing between purely economic reasons and those utilized for political purposes is also problematic. Russia's worldwide energy policy is shaped by political and economic reasons, with the energy potential and prospects of Central Asia being crucial to its foreign policy.

Central Asia is an external region of Russia, a landlocked territory consisting of five mineral-abundant nations that border Afghanistan, the People's Republic of China, Iran, and Russia (Blackwood et al., 2023). This region, a sphere of influence for post-Soviet Russia, has continually undergone significant cultural impact from Russian influence, due to the presence of many Russian and Russian-speaking individuals. For thirty years, Central Asia has been a crucial battleground of international competition, featuring Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Saudi Arabia as main opposing

forces in the region. China outpaced its rivals by creating complex economic linkages and initiating the Belt and Road Initiative, first introduced in September 2013 in Kazakhstan (Olimat, 2023).

4.1 Russia's sphere of influence in the post-war situation

The re-invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has placed Central Asian nations in a precarious economic and political situation. The governments of this region are confronting several internal and regional difficulties (Blackwood et al., 2023). Over the past three decades, Kazakhstan, an oil-rich nation in Central Asia, has maintained the most significant economic tie with Russia, particularly regarding GDP per capita. This nation has consistently distanced itself from Russia's invasion of Ukraine while maintaining its bilateral contacts with Moscow and diversifying its relations with various countries (Blackwood et al., 2023). Currently, Russia exhibits significant geopolitical dependence on Kazakhstan. Moscow's reliance on this nation is significant for energy exports to Central Asia and for safeguarding shipments to China until the completion of the "Power of Siberia Two" natural gas pipeline (Kaya, 2023). Kazakhstan is undergoing transformations in both global and domestic spheres. The outcome of the war in Ukraine is critical for the country from two perspectives: a) its relations with Russia and other international partners, and b) its capacity to implement political, economic, and social reforms that are essential for establishing a more stable, equitable, and politically transparent system, thereby diminishing the likelihood of external actors, including Russia, exploiting Kazakhstan's domestic vulnerabilities. Today, the European Union has expressed its desire in enhancing engagement with Kazakhstan and may assist the nation in navigating this delicate and pivotal phase by endorsing its internal reforms (Dumoulin, 2023).

4.1.1 Geopolitics and energy policy

While the European Union endeavors to diversify its energy supplies and enhance energy security, Kazakhstan seeks to eliminate its dependence on Russian infrastructure for oil exports. Kazakh oil, while not a complete alternative to the EU's reliance on Russian oil, plays a crucial role in Europe's endeavor to diversify its energy sources, as energy supply is essential for ensuring supply security in Europe (Nakhle, 2023). In the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, Russia's economic relations with Kazakhstan appear to be striving for equilibrium; to the extent possible in the near future, this will enhance its multilateral foreign policy by diminishing its reliance on Moscow. In the past thirty years, Turkmenistan has achieved the second highest GDP per capita among Central Asian nations. Between 2011 and 2021, Turkmenistan's natural gas production increased by an average of 3.5% (BP, 2023). Moreover, Turkmenistan ranks fifth globally in proved natural gas reserves, following Russia, Iran, the United States, and Qatar (OPEC, 2023). The constitutional doctrine of "permanent neutrality" in Turkmenistan effectively manifests as isolationism in its foreign relations. This government, heavily reliant on China economically, seldom remarks on international occurrences (Blackwood et al., 2023). Prior to 2014, Turkmenistan's natural gas exports were predominantly reliant on Russia and Iran until China emerged as its nearly exclusive purchaser.

The EU is leading numerous international entities attempting to initiate energy discussions with Turkmenistan as it aims to diversify its natural gas imports, circumventing Russia. However, Turkmenistan's stance on foreign investment is the primary deterrent to collaboration on oil and gas initiatives with the European Union. Turkmenistan is significantly reliant on hydrocarbon exports and, in the absence of international assistance, it lacks the financial and technological resources necessary for investment initiatives (Znatta, 2023). Conversely, Turkmenistan's commerce with China, Iran, and Russia has markedly escalated since the onset of the war, indicating that this nation does not conform to the European policy. The matter was emphasised when the foreign minister Mardov declared on August 16 that his nation intends to join the North-South Corridor. He stated that Turkmenistan will persist in its collaboration with Russia over rail, road, air, and maritime transportation (Caspian Policy Centre, 2022). Although Turkmenistan's energy policy does not align with European nations, particularly regarding infrastructure, data indicates that the country consistently endeavours to initiate initiatives that foster mutual dependency in both eastern and western directions. The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India natural gas pipeline (TAPI) and the Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline are notable instances (KANAPIYANOVA, 2022). In the final months of 2022, construction activities on the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline intensified, demonstrating the resolute commitment of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Following the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Western investors' interest in projects situated in the Caspian region has surged. The Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline has re-emerged as a topic of discussion, and this initiative will not only undermine Russia's energy dominance but also facilitate the European Union's collaboration with the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, thereby constraining Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet region (Agazade, 2023). Over the past decade, the European Union has augmented its initiatives to build the Southern Gas Corridor and incorporate Turkmenistan's natural gas. The Trans-Caspian pipeline links Turkmenistan's natural gas to the South Caucasus gas corridor. The Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline is an essential conduit, a catalyst for prospective alterations that may influence the configuration of the world system for decades ahead. This may stimulate economic growth, enhance regional stability, and curtail the influence of China and Russia in Central Asia (Bryza et al., 2020). Furthermore, Turkmenistan's security policy appears incongruent with Russia's

aggression, prompting a shift in its foreign policy towards strengthening security partnerships with Europe and the United States (Caspian Policy Centre, 2022).

4.1.2 *Russia's engagement in regional organizations*

Concerning the position of Central Asian countries on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is significant that none have engaged in sanctions on Russia, as it continues to be the primary strategic ally of the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan refrained from voting on the UN resolution opposing Russia at the UN General Assembly, whilst Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were absent and did not engage in the voting process (Akchurina and Dolidze, 2023). Olimat asserts that the abstention votes of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan might be interpreted as a repudiation rather than a support of Russia's actions, and the abstentions of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan demonstrate evident discontent (Olimat, 2023). Dadabayev and Sonoda described the reaction of Central Asian governments to the Ukraine issue as "strategic silence". This intentional silence encapsulates the complex realities of Central Asian countries. Their leaders and citizens acknowledge their dependence on educational and employment opportunities in Russia, the need to coexist with Russia and China after the conflict, and the presence of nations that counter the aims of the European Union and the United States in Central Asia. Thus, strategic silence functions as a method for Central Asian countries to express their opposition to Russia's position on Ukraine while avoiding consequences from Russia and its supporters for their overt anti-war stance (Dadabaev and Sonoda, 2023). Uzbekistan is experiencing what could be described as a "curse of circumstance." The nation is trapped between Ukraine, Russia, the United States/EU/NATO, and the United Nations, with the resolution of the war in Ukraine certain to impact its fate and that of other Central Asian countries (Tolipov, 2022). Notwithstanding public backing for Ukraine, Uzbekistan's votes in the UN General Assembly seem problematic and incongruent with its original position on the ongoing conflict. In April, Uzbek MPs, like their counterparts from other Central Asian countries, excluding Turkmenistan, condemned Russia's expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council. Moreover, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov was necessitated to resign following his vocal support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as his call for a "peaceful resolution" to the conflict (Civic IDEA, 2022).

The situation in Ukraine and the unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia, along with UN Security Council resolutions, are expected to compel Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries to reassess their extensive connection with Russia. Uzbekistan cannot maintain its relations and collaboration with Russia without considering the war in Ukraine and its enduring consequences (Tolipov, 2022). Analysts generally depict Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as more dependent on and aligned with Russia, although their cooperation with the United States on security issues and their engagements during the past decade. They have also expanded their business and security relations with China (Blackwood et al., 2023). Berdibai Sadikov, director of the adult education center in the Batken district, remarked in an interview with Eurasianest: "Our immigrants are employed in this pivotal nation (Russia), and our resilient economy depends on this; consequently, we cannot oppose Russia." (Eurasianest, 2023). Tajikistan, the most destitute country in the area, has been significantly affected by the sanctions imposed on Russia (Civic IDEA, 2022). Moreover, several scholars assert that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has intensified social and economic vulnerabilities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are especially prone to economic decline, thus escalating the border tension between the two nations. Some observers view the Collective Security Treaty Organization's lack of participation in the boundary dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as a sign of the organization's ineffectiveness. Kyrgyzstan retracted their participation in CSTO military exercises in Kazakhstan in October, nullifying a portion designated for its territory, which an analyst saw as "a clear indication of Moscow's diminishing influence in Central Asia" (Blackwood et al., 2023).

The conflict in Ukraine and global sanctions are anticipated to negatively impact Eurasian regionalism. Growing concerns regarding dependence on Russia and the overall economic decline in this country are reducing the willingness of Eurasian countries to support further integration within the Eurasian Economic Union. However, two factors may offer further prospects for Eurasian regionalism: a) the ability of the Eurasian Economic Union to act as a channel to the Russian market, and b) the willingness of Eurasian governments to create alternative trade and social payment systems to reduce their reliance on the West. Assessing the importance of the principal component is difficult because of the substantial uncertainty linked to the sanction's regime. Concerning the second component, China is anticipated to play a significant role in promoting regional integration activities, providing alternative pathways and infrastructure for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. At present, it is difficult to envision that the members of the Eurasian Economic Union, especially Kazakhstan, will withdraw from this organisation, considering the possible consequences of inciting Russian displeasure through such symbolic gestures and the implementation of additional trade restrictions that would intensify pressure. This will substantially impact the delicate economies of these nations (Libman, Obydenkova, and Erik, 2022). In conclusion, numerous scholars question the long-term sustainability of multilateral groups led by Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Despite the economic consequences of the war in Central Asia not being as severe as some observers initially predicted, the nations in the region are facing heightened inflation and supply chain disruptions. Central Asian countries are striving to diversify their economic alliances and create transit routes to bypass Russia (Blackwood et al., 2023).

4.1.3 Perception of Central Asian people towards Russia

On April 21, 2023, the Central Asia Pressure Survey held a live panel discussion in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to analyse the complexities of the Russian-Ukrainian war, its public perception in Central Asia, and the possible consequences for the relationships between Central Asian countries and the European Union. The enquiries made provide an evaluation of the Central Asian population's view on Russia. The poll was conducted using telephone interviews and random sampling, taking place in two phases:

Wave 11 transpired during May to June 2022, involving 1500 respondents from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Wave 12 occurred between November and December 2022, with 1500 participants from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, this survey was not conducted in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan during wave 12.

Chart 1 illustrates a survey administered to a sample of Kyrgyz individuals during the two designated periods. Although Ukraine demonstrates the greatest incidence of culpability overall and throughout two phases, it is regarded as guilty or responsible for the present situation based on the analysed sample. In the second part, which included the survey performed from November to December 2022, the findings reveal a decrease in Ukraine's perceived guilt, whilst Russia's attribution of responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine increased from 14% to 19%. Due to the sampling plan and sample size, the viewpoints of these individuals cannot be generalised to the entire population of Kazakhstan.

The data in Figure 2 indicates that the surveyed Kazakh population attributes primary responsibility for the current situation in Ukraine to Russia, with no substantial variation in their views between the two specified periods or waves. A substantial proportion (23%-wave 12) holds Ukraine accountable for the present circumstances.

Concerning the rationale for Russia's military actions against Ukraine, the populations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (fall 2022) and Uzbekistan (spring 2022) were canvassed. The results are depicted in Figure 3. The graph indicates that 35.6% of the polled participants across all three nations deem Russia's military actions in Ukraine justified, whereas 31% regard these activities as wrong. Furthermore, 2.6% declined to respond, while 30.6% indicated a lack of knowledge regarding this subject. Among the surveyed sample in Uzbekistan, 47% deemed the military intervention in Ukraine justified, while 16% regarded it as unreasonable. In Kazakhstan, 43% of respondents deemed Russia's actions in Ukraine unjustified, while 25% found them justifiable. In Kyrgyzstan, 35% of respondents viewed Russia's operations as legitimate, whilst 34% regarded them as unjustified. Consequently, in comparison to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the examined sample in Uzbekistan exhibited a comparatively positive perspective about Russia's military actions in Ukraine. It is significant to note that approximately 33 percent either selected the "I don't know" option or declined to respond to the question. Ultimately, as stated, the results of this study cannot be generalised to the entire population of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan due to the sampling plan and sample size.

5 China and Central Asia: Before and after the Ukraine war

The significance of Central Asia to China is underscored by President Xi Jinping's first announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative during his visit to Kazakhstan (Wang and Jinguan, 2018). This project positions Central Asia as a crucial nexus and significant region for interregional trade, investment, and infrastructure development. Post-independence, Central Asian nations acquired the oil and gas pipelines established during the Soviet era, and hydrocarbon exports from the three principal energy producers (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) persisted in transiting through Russia. China's involvement in the region diminished this monopoly. Beijing has established itself as a principal energy actor in Central Asia through the construction of three gas pipelines from Central Asia to China, which commenced operations in 2009. These pipes diminished the countries' excessive reliance on Russian gas pipelines. For Turkmenistan, this collaboration resulted in near-total dependency on China, as Russia and Iran ceased purchasing gas from Turkmenistan in 2016 and 2017, respectively, leaving China as the sole surviving buyer (Pirani, 2019). The volume of gas from Turkmenistan exchanged with Azerbaijan via Iran remains minimal and insignificant compared to the quantity exported to China. Russia was expected to recommence gas imports from Turkmenistan; however, this prospect was negated due to the invasion of Ukraine and subsequent European sanctions on Russia's energy sector.

China's extensive manufacturing sectors and megacities are grappling with the use of record quantities of coal, oil, and natural gas. China has significantly augmented its oil and petrol use, evolving from a nation where automobile ownership was virtually nonexistent to the world's largest automotive market. China has emerged as a global energy-consuming powerhouse, with millions of skyscrapers and many smaller structures across its several main cities requiring heating and cooling. Consequently, China has emerged as the preeminent global energy consumer in under two decades, currently representing over 27% of the world's total energy consumption (BP, 2023).

In conjunction with its energy security plan, China aims to diversify its import sources and energy carriers, rendering it incapable of depending exclusively on West Asia; hence, Russia and Central Asia emerge as significant partners in China's energy industry. Conversely, following the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West about Ukraine, the strategic alliance between China and

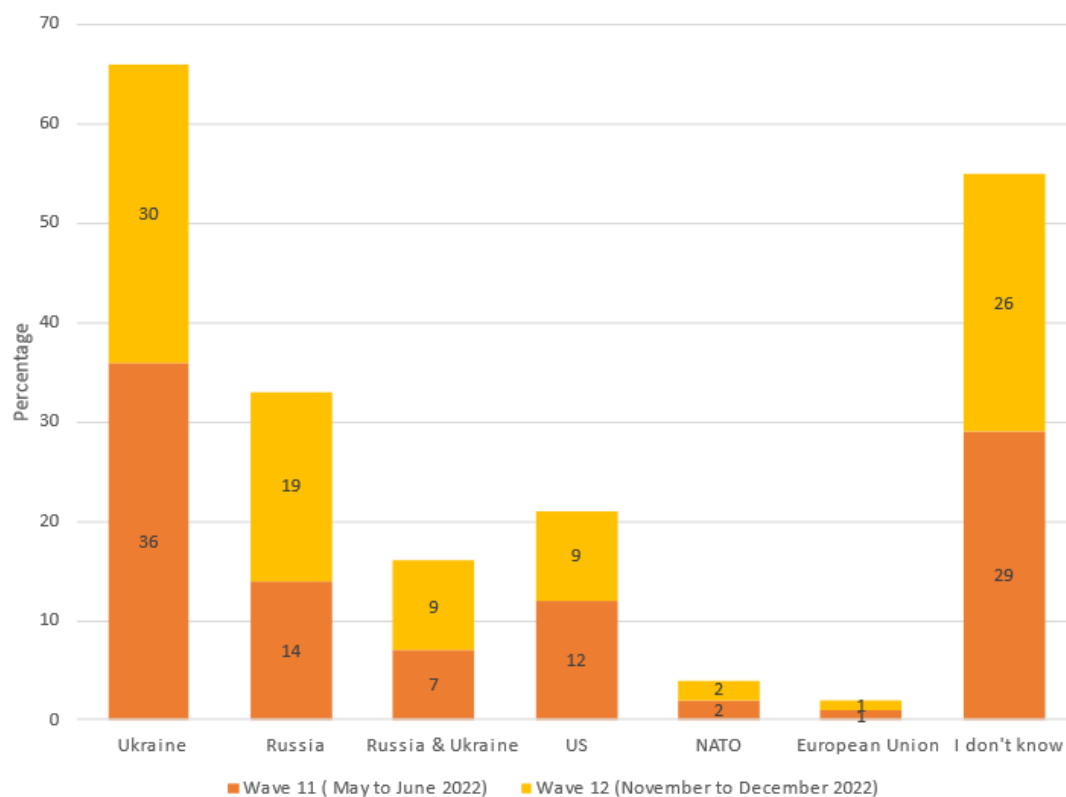


Chart 1: Survey of Kyrgyz people about the main responsible for the current situation in Ukraine (Central Asia Barometer, 2023)

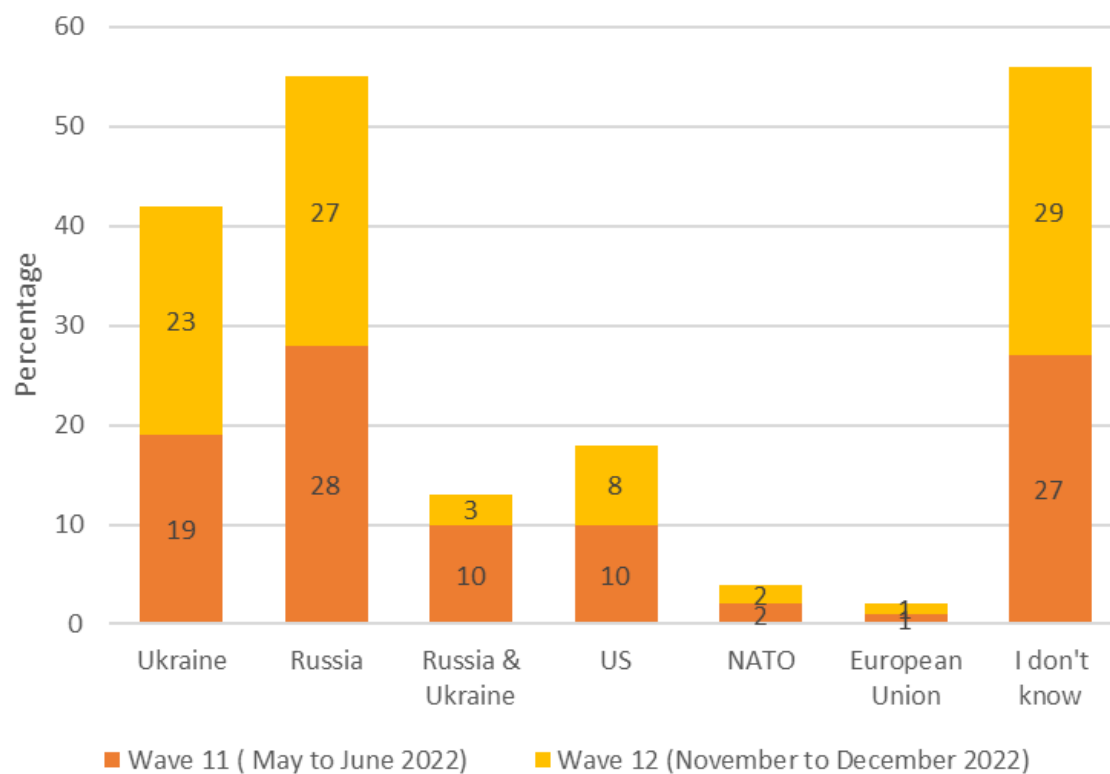


Chart 2: Survey from the people of Kazakhstan about the main responsible for the current situation in Ukraine (Central Asia Barometer, 2023)

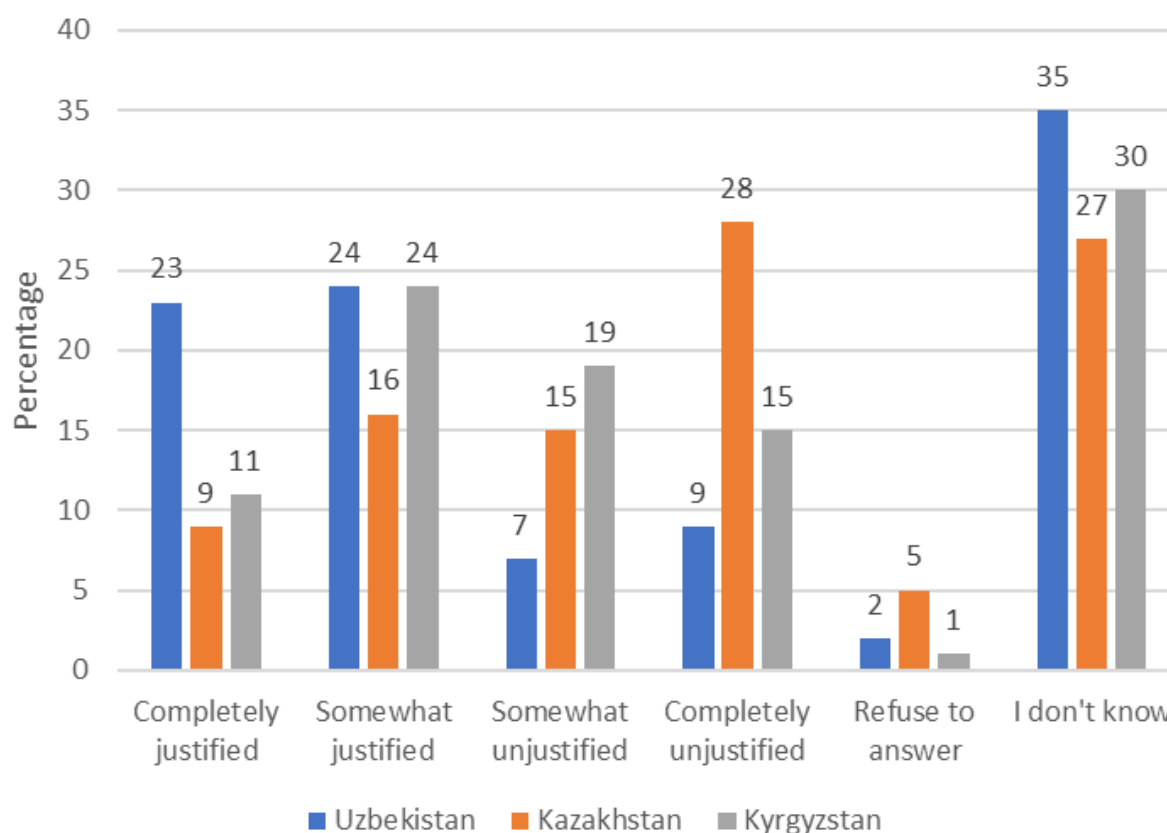


Chart 3: The opinion of the people of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan regarding Russia's military operations in Ukraine (fall and spring 2022) (Central Asia Barometer, 2023)

Russia has intensified. Russia and China tend to contest and subvert the fundamentals of the Western-dominated international system. The relationship between them is intricate and characterised by prolonged mutual distrust. The equilibrium of rivalry and collaboration between China and Russia is increasingly apparent in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic. Russia regards the economic advancement of its eastern territories as a strategic imperative, which presently appears nearly unattainable without Chinese investment. In the Arctic, Russia requires China's assistance to achieve numerous objectives related to infrastructure development and resource extraction. China is keen to harness the economic potential of the Arctic and enhance its technological capabilities by collaborating with Russia on significant projects, exemplified by the involvement of China National Petroleum Corporation and the Silk Road Fund in the development of the Yamal LNG complex and initiatives to advance production technology. The export of LNG occurred in this manner. Moscow is resolutely protective of its sovereignty in the adjacent foreign region, which may provide fresh obstacles. China holds primary influence over Russia and Central Asia, and this power asymmetry, particularly during the Ukraine conflict, may be disadvantageous for Russia; yet, both Russia and China derive greater advantages from collaboration than from overt rivalry.

At this juncture, it appears improbable that Russia's relations with the West will ameliorate, thereby reinforcing the nation's alliance with China. The Sino-Russian cooperation may indeed be moderated by unfulfilled expectations from both parties. China's increasing engagement in regional and global matters raises uncertainties regarding its long-term objectives for Russia. For instance, China refrained from offering military and security support to Russia following its invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating its unwillingness to engage in such contentious confrontations. China's policies unequivocally dictate the trajectory of China-Russia ties, relegating Russia to a reactive stance. This presents a favourable opportunity for China to consolidate and enhance its influence in Central Asia as a significant component of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China is becoming a significant influence in Central Asia, while Russia is powerless to counter this development. Following the deterioration of Russia's standing due to the recent invasion of Ukraine, the prospect for China to augment its influence in this region has become increasingly accessible. Consequently, a significant possibility is that Central Asia is experiencing a rebalancing among major powers, characterised by the relative decline of Russia and the rise of China as a prominent influence in the region. China's expansion in Central Asia is propelled by its comprehensive strategy for regional connectivity, its quest for

Central Asian energy resources and substantial reserves, facilitated through trade investments, loans, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and several other institutions in the region. In contrast to the West, China imposes no requirements for political reform from Central Asian countries, and unlike Russia, Beijing refrains from employing political pressure to steer the area towards its overarching objectives.

The aforementioned challenges and China's initiatives for regional stability, which Beijing asserts is ensured by economic development, have rendered collaboration with China appealing to regional governments. China's geopolitical and geoeconomic influence in Central Asia has expanded significantly, as it has adeptly addressed Russian apprehensions of its increasing regional dominance. China exhibits astuteness in its dealings with Russia, as Beijing mostly engages with Central Asia on economic matters, refraining from exerting overt pressure on political or military concerns. Moscow is unable to compete economically with China, and its activities in Ukraine have estranged significant Central Asian political elites.

Despite the expansion of Beijing's soft power via foreign investment, economic collaboration, and infrastructure projects in Central Asia, it remains unable to rival the influence of Russian media in the region or the greater popularity of Russian universities, particularly those in Siberia, compared to Chinese institutions. Nonetheless, the quantity of Central Asian students pursuing Chinese studies is on the rise. Between 2005 and 2015, the population of Kazakhs pursuing education in China rose from 781 to 13,198, while the Chinese government currently provides 23 scholarships for Kyrgyz nationals seeking to enrol in Chinese higher education institutions (Inbound Mobility, 2016). Beijing aims to enhance China's appeal and dispel the adverse opinions formed during the Soviet era in Central Asia by promoting culture and language through Confucian institutions (Ngamsang, 2013). In 2019, a report from a government agency associated with China's Ministry of Education indicated that 13 Confucius Institutes were functioning in Central Asia, comprising 5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, and 2 in Tajikistan (Ge, 2023). While China has not fully established a robust framework for cultural diplomacy in this region, the advancement of the Chinese language has yielded significant outcomes in recent years. The study of the Chinese language has gained significant popularity among the youth in Central Asia, viewed as a method to enhance employment prospects and competitiveness in the labour market (Ryskulbekova, 2023).

Although the Chinese culture and educational system are attractive to the youth of Central Asia, Chinese language learners in Central Asia are a little disappointed with the Chinese language, because they seek to gain economic and job advantages by learning the language; While relatively few jobs have been created for these language learners (Aliyev, 2019). Therefore, Chinese language education has a direct relationship with China's economic influence in this region, because the more China's investment in this region increases and the more jobs are created for language learners, the more Chinese language will be attractive and learned. to be However, the English language has a better position than the Chinese language, because both academics and experts in this region consider the English language as an opportunity for a brighter future. In addition, the globalization and internationalization of English language education has led to the transformation of this language into an educational medium at all educational levels (Bezborodova and Radjabzade, 2021).

Many of China's objectives in the region—economic advancement, political stability, and countering Western influence—either coincide with Russia's agenda or do not contradict Russia's immediate interests. China's primary objective for Central Asia is to foster political and social stability via growth. In light of the turmoil that has afflicted West Asia since 2011 and Ukraine since 2014, both China and Russia are apprehensive about the possibility of political instability and civil unrest in the region, and both aim to preserve the existing political order. Both nations are apprehensive about the proliferation of extremism from Afghanistan and West Asia to Central Asia, which adjoins China and Russia; yet, their strategies for maintaining regional stability diverge. Concerns regarding instability in South and Central Asia have compelled Beijing to gradually strengthen its security presence in the region. The proliferation of China's commercial endeavours in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic is expected to enhance the competitiveness of Chinese enterprises on a worldwide level.

While collaboration with Russia in security and military domains has been appealing to the Central Asian governments, evidenced by military bases, arms transactions, and anti-terrorism partnerships via the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, it may adversely impact the perception of this country among its populace. to inflict significant harm on the region and enhance its interventionist role. China, however, concentrates its endeavours on stabilising the region through economic influence rather than military or security measures. In contrast to Moscow, China is hesitant to emphasise its geopolitical importance or assert the region as part of its "privileged sphere of influence." For Beijing, preserving its influence in the South China Sea supersedes demonstrating force in Central Asia. China is pursuing stability in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, located in the western part of the country, which is inhabited by the Muslim Turkic Uyghur population.

Alongside the security concern, China is pursuing international markets in Central Asia for its construction and infrastructure development enterprises as part of its "outward-facing" policy. Despite the willingness of Russian enterprises to compete for infrastructure projects in Central Asia, the market is presently saturated with Japanese, South Korean, Turkish, and other firms, many of whom exhibit greater competitiveness than their Russian counterparts. Another objective of Beijing within the Belt and Road Initiative is to establish transport networks that will facilitate China's export flow. Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, China prioritises long-term objectives over immediate profits and is purportedly prepared to incur losses of up to 30 percent on its investments in Central Asia (Miller, 2017). Nevertheless, it persists in constructing highways, bridges, tunnels, and high-

speed rail lines throughout the region, with grandiose intentions to link them to more infrastructure projects nearer to Europe in the transportation and logistics domain. Chinese enterprises are increasingly seeking chances to establish fibre optic and other telecommunications networks throughout the region, thereby building a digital link from China to Central Asia and beyond. China anticipates that certain new physical and digital networks will prove lucrative, concurrently reinforcing amicable – if not pro-China – governments.

6 The perception of people in Central Asia towards China

China was among the initial nations to acknowledge the independence of Central Asian republics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, promptly establishing diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in the first week of January 1992. After thirty years, China has positioned itself as a prominent foreign partner in Central Asia. Beijing has invested vast amounts in the region and beyond. In Central Asia, as in many other Eastern regions, perceptions of China are predominantly bipolar, stemming from conflicting interpretations of China's aspirations to engage and collaborate with these nations. We have observed a comparable scenario in Iran, Iraq, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia.

Indeed, these varying perspectives have occasionally experienced significant transformations due to the dynamics influencing international relations and the nature of contacts between China and various nations. The Central Asia Barometer survey insights (2021), a biennial large-scale research initiative, conducted interviews with 1,000 to 2,000 respondents in each country to assess the social, economic, and political climate in Central Asia. The findings indicate a declining level of acceptance of China in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The survey, conducted in multiple phases from 2017 to 2021, indicates that although Chinese investment in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan has risen markedly, public perceptions of China in these nations have deteriorated.

By the conclusion of 2020, China's cumulative investment in Central Asia amounted to 40 billion dollars, with over fifty percent directed towards Kazakhstan. Reports indicate that Beijing's investment in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, has surged significantly, with the entire volume of Chinese investment projected to reach 9 billion dollars by the conclusion of 2021. In 2019, China invested 301 million dollars in Kyrgyzstan. However, this substantial investment represented by the Belt and Road Initiative has not significantly enhanced the morale of Central Asian inhabitants towards China.

Individuals in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan responded to the prevalent inquiry, "In comparison to other nations, please indicate whether you hold a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable, or very unfavourable view of China."

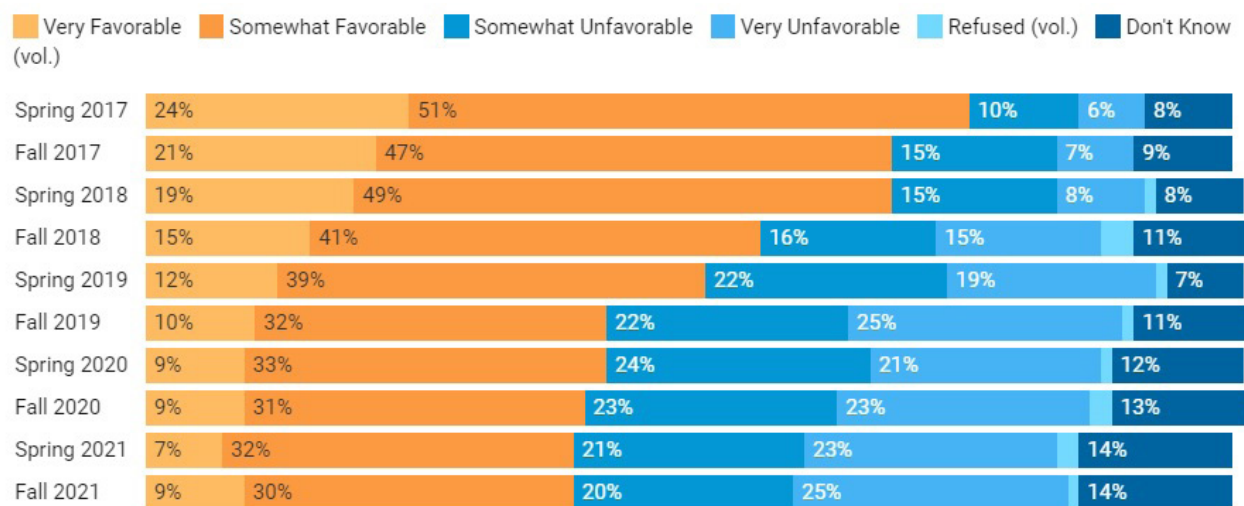


Chart 4: Kazakh people's view of China
(Central Asia barometer survey insights, 2021)

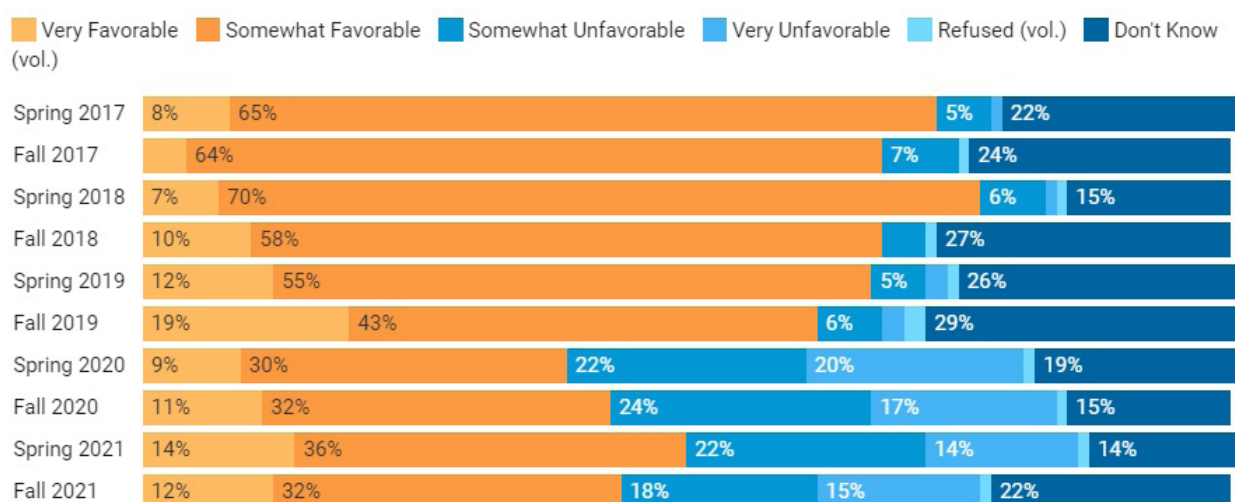


Chart 5: The view of the people of Uzbekistan towards China
(Central Asia barometer survey insights, 2021)

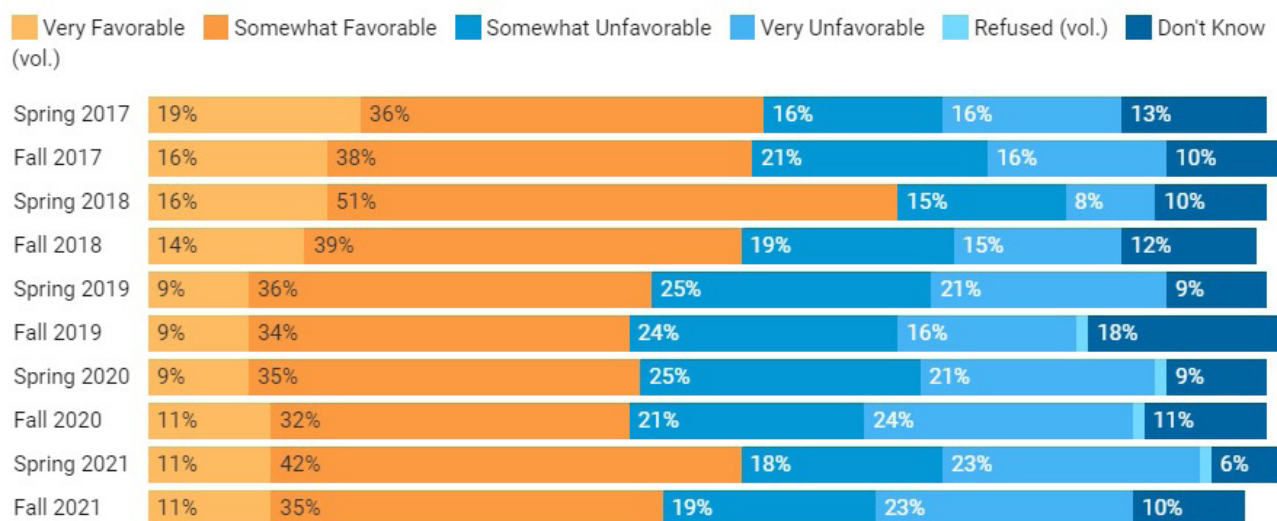


Chart 6: Kyrgyz people's view of China
(Central Asia barometer survey insights, 2021)

Figures 4 to 6 illustrate the trajectory of developments in Central Asia. In the spring of 2017, over 75 percent of the Kazakh populace held a favourable view of China; however, by the autumn of 2021, this figure declined to 39 percent, indicating a notable deterioration in China's standing among its western neighbour. A potential fundamental explanation for this development lies in Kazakhstan's reaction to human rights violations in China's Xinjiang province, where Uyghurs reside, some of whom share religious ties with individuals in Kazakhstan. Likewise, Uzbekistan's stance towards China has diminished in recent years. The percentage of those who saw China positively or somewhat positively rose from 73% in spring 2017 to 44% in autumn 2021. As of 2020, Uzbekistan's indebtedness to China amounted to approximately 3 billion dollars, representing 20% of the nation's total external debt. Concerns regarding the "debt trap" and China's insidious growth in Central Asia, particularly advocated by the United States and evident throughout the region, have increasingly intensified. It has been observed that not only Uzbekistan, but all nations participating in the Belt and Road Initiative face the risk of developing an over-reliance on a principal creditor, specifically China. As this process progresses, these governments may fall prey to creditors possessing substantial financial and economic leverage to pursue their objectives. Throughout the poll period in Kyrgyzstan, a bipolar perspective predominated, with minimal variation in public sentiment towards China. The favourable perception of China has diminished from 55% in

spring 2017 to 46% in autumn 2021. In the autumn of 2021, the Central Asia Barometer study indicated that 42 percent of Turkmenistan's population held a favourable opinion of China. Simultaneously, Turkmenistan's economy is entirely reliant on natural gas exports to China and Chinese investments in its energy industry.

Overall, the negative sentiment in Central Asia towards China is multifaceted, stemming from identification biases, China's commercial actions in the region, and the regional governments' approaches to their relations with China.

7 Regional and trans-regional actors in Central Asia following the Ukraine war

The third scenario arising from the diminishment of Russia's influence and power resources in Central Asia is the enhancement of interactions with significant regional nations, including Turkey, India, and Iran. The Turkish model, characterized by a secular political system founded on liberal democracy, was favored by Western nations as a paradigm for the newly independent countries of Central Asia (Aydin, 2004). During the initial disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Central Asian republics, three significant regional powers—Russia, Iran, and Turkey—vied for influence in the area. These nations possessed sources of power, including shared historical ties, ethnicity, culture, and language with the local populations. The Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, resulting in the emergence of five independent nation-states; however, the enduring ties between the authorities of these new republics and Russian politicians hindered genuine political independence. The imposition of Russian as the official language in Central Asia and adherence to Soviet laws and norms has, to a degree, influenced the formation of identity elements such as language and culture among the region's nations. However, the use of coercive measures to effectuate this change (hard power) has engendered a persistent desire for resistance among the populace from the outset to the present day.

The predominant spoken language in this region is Turkish, followed by Persian, and the bulk of the population adheres to Islam. This issue illustrates the populace's opposition and Russia's comparative ineffectiveness in employing coercive measures to establish the identity factors of this region. In the competition among these three regional nations, Turkey's soft power in Central Asia has distinctly exhibited a comparative advantage; Russia's historical presence and political interventions, along with its coercive tactics during the Soviet era and post-independence, have fostered a negative perception of this country among the region's nations. Conversely, some initiatives by Iran in the religious domain, along with the distinctive model of the Iranian revolution and the potential for its proliferation, significantly reduced its advantages in historical, ethnic, linguistic, and other areas (Allison and Jonson, 2004). The allure of Central Asia for nations such as India and Japan stem from the region's abundant energy and natural resources, coupled with the potential for investment in its development, which constitutes a form of soft power that appeals to the Central Asian governments. In the rivalry among China, India, and Japan for the exploitation of abundant energy resources and the development of regional infrastructure, China may have emerged victorious.

If the war in Ukraine persists and Russia expends its resources and might in this conflict, the likelihood of a decline in the country's influence and a depletion of its power resources in its vicinity intensifies. Consequently, excluding the second scenario about the augmentation of China's influence in Central Asia, the subsequent plausible scenario involves the enhancement of the influence and power of Turkey, Iran, and India in this region. Despite the United States and the European Union maintaining significant influence in Central Asia, individuals in this region exhibit a greater propensity to study English as a second language compared to Chinese and other languages, alongside a preference for Western media. They possess a dominant position in this region; but, since the departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan, influence in this area is currently not regarded as a priority for the Western bloc. Turkey has diligently focused on its shared identity factors in Central Asia and the Caucasus in recent years, and its geopolitical significance is crucial for Central Asian nations. Following the war in Ukraine and the heightened risk associated with transit through Russian territory, exchanges along the route (China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus) had diminished by 40% as of October 2022 compared to pre-war levels (Eldem, 2022).

Following the conflict in Ukraine, Turkey's significance has escalated for the Central Asian nations, particularly concerning the middle corridor traversing the South Caucasus and Turkey. Nonetheless, Iran's transit capabilities and economic collaboration, particularly in the sale of grains and other agricultural commodities, have been emphasised post-war as an alternate route to the Middle Corridor, with the ability to access the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman via Iranian territory. A significant capacity within the realm of security that can enhance Iran and India's engagement with Central Asian nations is their collaborative concern regarding Afghanistan's security issues and the mitigation of extremism, terrorism, and various forms of transnational organised crime. This is particularly relevant given that Russia's current security focus is on Ukraine, whereas it previously held a dominant position in the security landscape of this region. Central Asia appears to require new security alliances despite the continued conflict. The escalation of regional security issues and the consensus among Central Asian nations regarding Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation bolster the assertion that Central Asian governments have acknowledged the critical importance of regional convergence and cooperation, which prove more effective than extra-regional collaboration; their genuine cooperation is deemed reliable due to the presence of a shared threat. This assertion was particularly reinforced following the abrupt exit of the United States and NATO allies from Afghanistan.

8 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The article discusses Russia's hegemonic influence in Central Asia, particularly in the context of the Ukraine war and how it is being challenged by regional and global powers like China. The war has created geopolitical shifts, forcing Central Asian countries to reevaluate their diplomatic and economic ties with Russia and other influential actors. While Russia has historically dominated the region, its influence is now waning due to internal challenges and external competition, notably from China's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as renewed interest from the European Union and other powers in the region's energy resources.

Despite Russia's close ties with Central Asia, its aggressive actions in Ukraine have triggered a recalibration of relations by countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, who are seeking to balance their dependence on Russia with new partnerships. Furthermore, the strategic silence from Central Asian governments on the Ukraine issue reflects their careful diplomatic positioning between Russia and other global players, such as China, the EU, and the US. The region's natural resources, particularly in the energy sector, remain a critical factor in these relationships.

In conclusion, the ongoing war in Ukraine and subsequent sanctions on Russia are accelerating shifts in Central Asia's geopolitical landscape. Russia is increasingly dependent on maintaining influence in the region through energy exports and political leverage. However, China's growing economic involvement, especially through infrastructure and energy projects, is gradually replacing Russian dominance. The future of Russia's hegemony in Central Asia will largely depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the ability of Central Asian countries to navigate their complex relationships with both Russia and emerging global powers. However, following the Ukraine war, Central Asian states have an opportunity to adopt a more balanced strategy to manage relations with Russia, China, and Western powers, focusing on regional multilateralism and security collaborations. By diversifying alliances and fostering economic partnerships, these nations can reinforce sovereignty and stability in the face of shifting global power dynamics. Cooperation on regional security issues, such as counter-terrorism and border security, could further enhance resilience against external influences, creating a unified approach to sustain regional autonomy.

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