



Central Asia and the War in Ukraine

Nancy Lubin, with an introduction by Amb. James E. Goodby

Introduction

Nancy Lubin's essay on Central Asia offers clues as to why the nations that populate this region have punched below their weight and why some of them may be on the threshold of becoming serious players within an international order that they may help define. This is a development that has the potential to influence the course of the relationships among the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the United States and the West more generally.

This is a role that is usually thought to reside in the hands of the nations of other parts of Asia, especially northeast Asia or perhaps South Asia or the Middle East. If Central Asia is to become a center of serious geopolitical influence, then Washington, Beijing, and even Moscow will have to take notice and begin to adjust their policies.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows the world how sensitive the leaders of Russia are to developments in what Putin and some other Russian thinkers regard as "post-Soviet space." Ukraine occupies a special place in that construct, but Central Asia has taken on new importance in Moscow because of the reach of Western values and influence into Eastern Europe. In academic circles in Russia the idea of a Eurasian empire, run from Moscow, has gained traction. Putin himself has adopted supposed Eurasian values as Russia's ideological counter to supposed Western values. His initial grievance with Ukraine was triggered by Ukraine's decision to turn away from Putin's Eurasian Economic Community toward a European Union (EU) relationship.

If the nations of Central Asia that were previously part of the USSR, as many were, begin to form institutional relationships with the West or with China, there will be a reaction in Moscow that will have repercussions in the United States and in China.

A possible reaction in Moscow might well include the same action that Putin has already taken in Belarus: to station Russian nuclear weapons in some of the nations of Central Asia

to forestall American or European security connections with those nations. Moscow's willingness to provide long-range ballistic missiles to North Korea shows that there would be few inhibitions in Moscow in using nuclear deployments to exert control over nations in Central Asia.

A likely reaction by China would be to develop economic relations with selected nations of Central Asia in order to bring them within Beijing's orbit. That region is rich in natural resources, and China has more to offer those nations than Moscow does in economic terms.

And what about the nations of Central Asia themselves? What would they be doing to respond to tempting offers from Russia and China? Nancy Lubin's essay shows that ties between Moscow and most of these former members of the USSR are surprisingly close. Probably they would temper their interest in economic benefits from China with some kind of security support from Russia. This might be affected by their sense of what happened in Ukraine.

Here, the West and its continued support for Ukraine could have a significant impact on decisions of the Central Asian nations. The lesson for the United States and its allies is that indeed the world is round: we must not lose sight of the need to frame our policies in Europe with an eye on their impact in other parts of the world.

An even more basic lesson that emerges from Nancy Lubin's essay on Central Asia is that Washington and its friends need to give a higher priority to the strategic importance of that region.

Amb. James E. Goodby

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CENTRAL ASIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The extensive coverage of the war in Ukraine has been marked by comparatively limited focus on the five formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia. The bulk of conventional press coverage has focused primarily on the European states of the former USSR, with references to Central Asia often sporadic, anecdotal, or exceptionally broad.

Yet the Central Asian states are consequential both in terms of Russia's prosecution of the war and its potential aftermath. A massive area nestled between Russia and China, the five countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan—share a long history during and post-Soviet rule. But they also differ significantly among themselves and present important challenges to Moscow, their neighbors, and the West. As the war in Ukraine is well into its second year, this brief paper focuses on why Central Asia matters, how the Central Asian countries have responded to the war, and implications for the United States and the international community.

WHY CENTRAL ASIA MATTERS

One of the most important features of Central Asia is simply the region’s geography, particularly its sheer size, location, and natural resources. To be sure, Ukraine’s own geography—located between Russia and Europe with a vast territory that dwarfs its European neighbors and sharing a long land border with Russia—has long contributed to its strategic importance.

Yet even Ukraine itself is dwarfed by the sheer size of formerly Soviet Central Asia. At almost a million square miles, Kazakhstan alone is four times the size of Ukraine and equal in size to all of Western Europe. As the world’s largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan also shares a 4,750-mile border with Russia—three and a half times the roughly 1,425-mile border that separates Russia from Ukraine—that is increasingly a source of tension with Moscow. At the beginning of 2023, moreover, Kazakhstan and Russia still had not completed the process of demarcating a roughly 180-mile section of the border between the two states. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state to border Russia and has reportedly received warnings from Moscow over the past year that its own borders may be threatened—as some local Kazakhstanis told me, that Kazakhstan “might be next” after Ukraine. Kazakhstan also shares a mountainous border with China, with which it has no territorial issues, as do Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

This geography is reflected in the vast influx of more than a million Russians—mostly conscripted men—who entered Kazakhstan after September 2022 to avoid being drafted to fight in Ukraine, as well the many thousands of others who have entered the other four Central Asian states. This is a significant figure that has impacted the overall demographics of a region with eighty million people, or about twice the population of Ukraine.

The Central Asian states are also rich in natural resources. Kazakhstan holds vast oil reserves (with \$47 billion in exports in 2022 amid high oil prices, up from \$31 billion the year before) and is the world’s leading uranium producer.¹ Turkmenistan has the world’s fourth-largest gas reserves and is the major source of gas imports for China (gas export values surged to approximately \$10 billion in 2022, largely to China). Uzbekistan boasts the world’s largest gold mine (\$4.6 billion in gold exports in 2021). And all five countries hold significant agricultural resources as well. While political systems in the region range from among the most oppressive autocracies in the world to what some consider to be burgeoning democracies, resource extraction-led economies have contributed to deep-seated and widespread corruption across all five of these states. This endemic corruption goes back to the Soviet days and in some countries has only intensified over the decades since; all currently rank poorly on Transparency International and other corruption perception indices.

Against this backdrop, how the Central Asians think and feel about Ukraine, Russia, China, and their own place in the region is consequential. But the responses of the five countries to the war have been a mixed bag, as the Central Asian countries differ a good deal among themselves. All are walking a fine line in their relations with Moscow; expanding relations with China as well as other neighbors, the Middle East, and the West; assessing public opinion within their own countries; and in various degrees, supporting, opposing, and/or simply distancing themselves from the war itself.

TAJIKISTAN

A deeply corrupt dictatorship, Tajikistan has remained heavily dependent on Russia since gaining independence more than thirty years ago and reportedly was the first of the Central Asian states to fully embrace Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. After three decades in power, President Rahmon just last year handed the presidency to his son, Rustam Emomali, having lowered the minimum age to run for president from thirty-five to thirty so that his son could assume power immediately, and having changed the law so that his son would face no limits on presidential terms. Some joke that Rustam has been well trained to follow in his father's footsteps as he headed the Tajik anticorruption agency, arguably the most corrupt agency in Tajikistan.²

Throughout this period, Tajikistan's ties to Russia have continued to remain strong. Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan made the country a strategic regional checkpoint during and following the long war with Afghanistan. Today, Tajikistan is home to roughly seven thousand Russian troops, mostly at Russia's 201st military base in Dushanbe, Moscow's largest non-naval military facility outside of Russia itself. While most of the Russian troops stationed in Tajikistan have reportedly been redeployed to Ukraine, the country continues to host Russian troops there as well as bilateral military exercises.³ Recent agreements have reportedly solidified these exercises as the two countries expand defense cooperation more broadly—although cooperation has not extended to ongoing border confrontations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan themselves.

But since the start of the war in Ukraine, Tajikistan has also ramped up ties with other countries, particularly China, both militarily and economically. Trade with China has increased significantly over the past year. And while China has long had a military base in Tajikistan as well, it is reportedly building a second; the two countries have also agreed to step up military cooperation to include formalizing bilateral military exercises and antiterrorism drills every two years.

With a weak economy, few economic resources of its own, and its populace among the poorest of the former Soviet republics, Tajikistan's economy is heavily dependent on remittances from its labor migrants in Russia. Russia's Ministry of the Interior reports that even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 1.7 million Tajikistani citizens entered Russia seeking work during the first six months of 2022 alone—close to a million more than in the same period of 2021.⁴ The remittances sent home to Tajikistan amount to about one-third of Tajikistan's GDP—although many suggest that it is likely higher due to informal money transfers as well.⁵ And the increasing numbers of Tajik migrants working in Russia have become a major area of concern for Tajikistan. Many are reportedly being deployed to Ukraine against their will, and there have also been growing efforts to recruit within Tajikistan itself.⁶

This has spurred some debate in Tajik society about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has reportedly divided public opinion, particularly among those with memories of Russian involvement in Tajikistan's own bloody civil war in the 1990s. According to opinion surveys, toward the beginning of the war, many Tajiks felt sympathy for Ukraine. "For those of us who saw the civil war [in Tajikistan], this is terrible. I cannot look at the pictures of Ukrainian refugees, leaving their houses with one suitcase. It recalls my own childhood memories. We were

just like them.”⁷ But the range of responses is wide, and others have been less sympathetic, with some arguing that the Ukrainian government itself provoked the war because “it did not know its subordinate place in world politics”; it “dared to anger Russia” by its relations with the United States and the EU; and/or that the West also provoked the war by expanding its sphere of influence into Russia’s backyard.⁸

In general, local media have followed official instructions on war coverage, with the exception of a few private publications and social-media platforms. Some journalists have justified the need to follow the policy for practical reasons, if only because of the many Tajik migrants working in Russia. “If, for example, we would publish materials condemning Russia [for the war], [many of our migrants] will be deported and, by doing so, we would . . . only harm society,” Khurshed Atovullo, a well-known Tajik journalist, told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Tajik Service.⁹ This sentiment has continued among many over the year since.

KYRGYZSTAN

In contrast with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan was initially regarded as among the most promising of the former Soviet Central Asian states, a budding democracy among the new countries that emerged from the dissolution of the former USSR. But over the three decades since, these hopes have repeatedly been sidetracked by corruption and Kyrgyzstan’s own political upheavals. If Tajikistan has had one president since 1992 until he effectively handed the presidency to his son, Kyrgyzstan has had six, five of whom were ousted on serious corruption charges. Rosa Otunbaeyeva, interim president from 2010 to 2011, was the only president not tainted by corruption. Kyrgyzstan’s current president, Sadyr Japarov, won a snap election in January 2021. But while Kyrgyzstan was long known for relatively free media and strong human rights groups, Japarov’s presidency began with major setbacks for human rights and serious accusations of corruption, and many of those freedoms have reportedly continued to deteriorate since he came to power.

Landlocked and mountainous, with weak economic development and high poverty rates, Kyrgyzstan’s economy has likewise remained less developed and heavily dependent on exports of raw materials and remittances sent home from Russia. Gold, other precious metals, and stones account for a third (34 percent) of total exports, while oil, gas, and other mineral products account for another 15 percent; textiles, vegetables, and transport equipment make up most of the remaining exports.¹⁰ But like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan’s economy has been weakened by the ongoing border conflict between the two countries.

Against this background, as in Tajikistan, labor migration to Russia has long remained a significant, if not vital, source of income for Kyrgyzstan, with remittances sent home constituting about one-third of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP and growing over the past year.¹¹ Remittances to Kyrgyzstan at year-end 2022 reportedly reached more than \$1.7 billion, significantly more than in 2021.¹² As with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has not escaped the additional impact of Russia’s war in Ukraine, especially in light of the more than a million Kyrgyz migrants in Russia of which many reportedly have been sent to Ukraine or to prison in Moscow if they refused.¹³

Military ties have likewise remained strong with Russia. Kyrgyzstan is home to the Kant military air base—the Russian Air Force’s 999th air base and located in the Chuy region of Kyrgyzstan—that over the past year has reportedly been active in Russia’s war against Ukraine as well. Located about 12.5 miles east of Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, the base was until recently host to several hundred troops; by late 2021, the number had reportedly grown to several thousand, with most sent to fight in Ukraine.¹⁴ In May 2023, following talks between the two countries, Moscow announced it will expand its military presence in Kyrgyzstan.

As a result, Kyrgyz views of the war have been mixed; while some have blamed Russia for the war, others have largely supported Russia. But Kyrgyzstan’s citizens in general have become increasingly vocal in trying to bring home Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, particularly those who have been incarcerated, in order to prevent them from being enlisted or sent to Ukraine.¹⁵

Indeed, according to some surveys since the start of the war, many Kyrgyz blame Russia for the harsh treatment of Kyrgyz migrants, but, quite significantly, not all have blamed Russia for the war itself. One May/June 2022 survey, for example, among fifteen hundred respondents in Kyrgyzstan of whom three-quarters stated they were paying attention to the war, suggested that Russian propaganda had widely taken hold. In this survey, 49 percent, or roughly half of Kyrgyzstani respondents, blamed Ukraine (36 percent) and/or the United States (13 percent) for the war, while only 14 percent blamed Russia. The survey also showed that the highest share of respondents in Kyrgyzstan believed that Russia will win.¹⁶ While surveys in 2023 show growing criticism of Russia, they also demonstrate a reluctance to provoke Kyrgyzstan’s most important economic and security partner.¹⁷

TURKMENISTAN

Just this year, in 2023, Turkmenistan received the dubious honor of being ranked the second-worst country for freedom in the world by Freedom House (Syria and South Sudan shared first place, and Turkmenistan came in second, beating North Korea, which came in third).¹⁸

As one of the most totalitarian dictators in the world, Turkmenistan’s previous head of state, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, has continued to garner vast riches as his population has faced serious shortages of food and basic necessities and, in some areas, has risked starvation. In 2022, as in Tajikistan, Berdimukhamedov also transferred power from father to son, who easily won the reportedly rigged Turkmen presidential election.

But unlike Tajikistan, Turkmenistan is endowed with extensive natural gas reserves and for many years has remained China’s biggest natural gas supplier, supplying nearly half of the natural gas that China imports via pipelines. Eighty to ninety percent of Turkmenistan’s export revenue reportedly comes from gas sales, with China Turkmenistan’s only gas customer and leading trade partner; Turkmenistan reportedly also depends on its partnership with Beijing to import weapons and surveillance technology to monitor its citizens at home.¹⁹ While its trade with Russia has been more limited, Turkmenistan since the onset of the war in Ukraine has

opened new trade agreements with its Central Asian neighbors, as well as signing at least five major deals with Azerbaijan and Turkey in trade, transport, and energy.

Like others in Central Asia, Turkmenistan initially supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the propaganda efforts to vilify the West. Turkmen officials also claimed that Western disinformation risked brainwashing Turkmenistan's youth. They reportedly urged people not to read Western media coverage of the war, warning that Western "foreign agents" were allegedly seeking to destabilize Turkmenistan as well.²⁰ Public opinion surveys in Turkmenistan are rare and typically carried out by the government, leading to skepticism of findings.

At the same time, however, Turkmenistan had also maintained growing ties with Ukraine. In 2019, for example, more than five thousand Turkmen students were reportedly studying in Ukraine, and Turkmenistan ranked fourth in the number of students studying there after India, Morocco, and Azerbaijan.²¹ While that number has declined during the war, Turkmenistan reportedly continues to assist its own students and, in the midst of the war, likewise is providing humanitarian aid to other Ukrainians as well. In March of 2023, for example, the Turkmen government, "guided by the principles of humanism and solidarity," Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported, and "the ancestral traditions of good neighborliness of the Turkmen people," dispatched a cargo plane filled with medical supplies.²²

UZBEKISTAN

For the first twenty-five years since the collapse of the USSR and its emergence as an independent state, Uzbekistan had one president—Islam Karimov—until his death in 2016. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, vice president to President Karimov, took over as president and was reelected in 2021 for another five-year term. Uzbek officials tout Mirziyoyev as pursuing more reforms than his predecessor, and some major changes have indeed been significant. But that reputation was questioned by some in April 2023 when, in the middle of his second term—the maximum a president could remain in power under Uzbek law—Mirziyoyev called for a referendum to amend Uzbekistan's constitution by changing all future presidential terms to seven years and to scrap his two five-year terms so he would be eligible to run again. With Uzbekistan's consistently low marks regarding free and fair elections, few expected more than a "charade," in the words of one Uzbek specialist.²³ But turnout was reportedly high; as expected, the amendment was approved.²⁴

With a population of thirty-five million, Uzbekistan is the largest Central Asian country in terms of population size. Although corruption is likewise endemic, the country is also economically more developed than its southern, formerly Soviet neighbors and has focused on reforms to attract more foreign investment.

As with its neighbors, large numbers of Uzbek migrants have long traveled to Russia to work. In the first months of the war, as of August 2022, an estimated 1.8 million Uzbek labor migrants were working in Russia; as of February 2023, that number had fallen by a few hundred thousand migrants, to 1.45 million but still representing over 40 percent of the migrant total.²⁵ And

the remittances they have sent home have been significant. In 2022, Uzbekistan reportedly received \$14.5 billion in remittances from Russia alone, more than double the total from 2021.²⁶

One longstanding concern, however, has been the vulnerability of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia and of those serving time in Russian prisons to recruitment into the Russian military for service in Ukraine.²⁷ While Russian law allows foreigners to join their armed forces and participate in combat, Article 54 of Uzbekistan’s criminal code prohibits its citizens from service in a foreign military and calls for penalties of up to three to five years’ imprisonment for any Uzbek citizen who joins a foreign country’s army or participates in foreign conflicts. And in August 2022, Uzbekistan’s embassy in Moscow issued a statement that participation in military activities in foreign countries is considered mercenary activity, punishable by up to ten years in prison.

This has become a sticking point in relations with Russia given the number of Uzbek migrants in Russia who have nonetheless been either enticed into the Russian military by high salaries or pressured to join the Russian army by other threats including jail time. Attracted by the promise of Russian citizenship, Uzbek and other Central Asian migrants have also reportedly been sent by Russian firms to occupied territories under false pretenses, ostensibly for construction work but also reportedly for collecting dead bodies and digging trenches.²⁸ Some Uzbeks were reportedly recruited directly by the Wagner Group in 2022 and the beginning of 2023, with Wagner recruiters deliberately targeting Uzbek prisoners serving sentences in Russia for drug-related crimes. Over the past few months, during summer 2023, harassment of Uzbek migrant workers has reportedly taken a “fresh turn . . . with some plucked off the streets of Moscow on flimsy pretexts and sent to the front lines of the Ukraine war.” According to this source, migrant workers from Central Asia say it has become increasingly dangerous to be in Russia, where some have been manipulated into signing army contracts.²⁹

Perhaps ironically, hundreds of thousands of Russians have meanwhile fled to Uzbekistan, mainly to avoid conscription for the war—Russians are allowed to enter Uzbekistan without a visa. While estimates differ, a reported eighty thousand arrived in Uzbekistan in September 2022 alone, with long lines reported at Uzbek public service centers of those seeking to receive identification numbers.³⁰

KAZAKHSTAN

Among all the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is the largest in size and the richest by GDP. As the only Central Asian state that shares long borders with both Russia and China, as well as having the highest proportion of ethnic Russians in its population, Kazakhstan has also long maintained relatively good relations with Moscow. But over the past year, veiled threats or comments from Moscow asserting that parts of Kazakhstan should be reclaimed as historically Russian territory—or simply a sense that “first it’s Ukraine and Kazakhstan should be next”—have required Kazakhstan to walk a delicate tightrope economically, politically, and militarily.

Over the past year, then, Kazakhstan has made significant shifts in its economic relations with Russia while aiming to diversify and strengthen its ties with China, Turkey, the EU, and the

United States. As the world’s largest landlocked nation and a major oil and gas producer—accounting for up to two-thirds of all exports by value—Kazakhstan relies on overland export routes through Russia and China to deliver goods to outside markets.³¹ But since the invasion, Kazakhstan has increased efforts to develop routes that would bypass Russia, including exporting oil and freight directly across the Caspian Sea and also constructing a new railway through Uzbekistan to Europe. While a reported 94 percent of Kazakh oil exports in 2022 were carried through pipelines to Russia, Kazakhstani planners have already reported a significant increase in exports bypassing Russia.³²

And since the beginning of the Ukraine war, among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has been the most outspoken in denouncing Russia’s invasion and supporting Ukraine. Already in the summer of 2022, Kazakh president Tokayev was making public statements against the war, including publicly rejecting recognition of Russia’s territorial claims against Ukraine, and the anecdotes and public statements continue. While Kazakhstan has welcomed an estimated 150,000 migrants (as of this writing) fleeing Russia,³³ for example, there are reports of Kazakhstani police harassing motorists who publicly support Russia’s invasion by displaying a “Z” or other symbols designating support for the war.

Kazakhstan has also continued to demonstrate support for Ukraine through both strong public statements and assistance both substantive and symbolic. Since the invasion, for example, Kazakhstan has sent a significant amount of medical supplies and other humanitarian aid directly to Ukraine; it also provided three “yurts of invincibility” to the Ukrainian cities of Bucha, Kyiv, and Kharkiv—traditional Kazakh tents “that symbolize safety and warmth” and that were intended to provide heat, refreshment, and refuge to local Ukrainians in the midst of war. Kazakhstan has not recognized Russian annexations in Ukraine and observes the Western sanctions regime.

Public opinion in Kazakhstan appears to mirror these policies. According to one survey of 1,100 residents over the age of eighteen taken over a three-week period in November 2022 and titled “What People in Kazakhstan Think About the War in Ukraine,” 22 percent of respondents expressed support for Ukraine in the conflict, twice as high as in a similar survey conducted eight months prior in March 2022; only 13 percent stated they supported Russia, a drop from the earlier share; and 42 percent of respondents said that their country should encourage Russia and Ukraine to negotiate while another 37 percent said that Kazakhstan should remain neutral.³⁴

Much of this may be correlated with age: most of those who supported Russia were over sixty years of age; the majority of those in the other age groups supported Ukraine or chose to stay neutral. But the survey also found that about 45 percent of Kazakhstan’s citizens simply found it difficult to assess what is actually happening, and overall, slightly more than half of respondents chose to stay neutral.

Those attitudes were mirrored in another poll six months later carried out by nongovernment organizations MediaNet and PaperLab in May 2023: 21 percent supported Ukraine, 13 percent supported Russia, and 60 percent were neutral. But there were several serious differences. The

number of respondents who believed Russia may also invade Kazakhstan, for example, grew from 8 to 15 percent, and a third said that the war had worsened their perception of Russia.³⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia was the dominant player in Central Asia across the board. But over the course of the war, that role has changed significantly, and relations with Russia have seen a fundamental shift among all five of the Central Asian states. In 2022 alone, Putin made five trips to Central Asia, reportedly to solidify his dominant role in the region; but at least politically, his travels seemed to illustrate just how fragile that role may have become. His presence at the Caspian Summit meeting in Turkmenistan in early July 2022 provided but one example of the kinds of receptions he would receive more frequently. Not only was he greeted at the airport with little of the fanfare normally provided for foreign dignitaries, but photo ops and television footage showed other leaders reluctant to stand next to him at events. Similar scenarios played out in various ways well into 2023. None of the Central Asian states has directly supported Russia's war in Ukraine, with each country abstaining on the issue of the war during UN votes and some leaders actively supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity.

But even in the wake of political affronts, figures for 2022 show that trade and economic relations with Russia not only remained intact but grew during this time. Russia's trade turnover with all five nations grew rapidly, with increases of 10 to 45 percent amid generally growing regional economies and the effects of war- and sanction-driven supply chain reconfigurations that increased commodity prices and saw Central Asian countries acting as transshipment points between Russia and the West. Despite the often harsh treatment of migrants and danger of their recruitment to be sent to war, more Central Asians reportedly went to work in Russia in mid-2022 than had in the prior six years, with remittances growing alongside.³⁶ And over the course of the year, with Russia's gas exports to Europe severely curtailed, Russia began supplying gas to both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, freeing up enough supply to allow them to meet their own export obligations to China amid growing domestic demands.

Today, however—as the war in Ukraine continues—Russia is also facing serious economic and political competition as China has likewise expanded relations with Central Asia's leaders and as economic relations with all the Central Asian states have also expanded greatly in Asia, the West, and the Middle East. On May 9 of this year, for example, the presidents of the region's former Soviet republics were in Moscow as spectators for Vladimir Putin's annual military parade—and ten days later were attending the first in-person meeting of a new group that China had named the C+C5, and that promised Central Asia's leaders investments and trade deals worth close to \$4 billion. China has also begun to focus its efforts on enhancing Central Asia's law enforcement and security capabilities as part of its new Global Security Initiative.

Economic relations with all the Central Asian states have likewise been expanding rapidly within the Middle East and elsewhere. Over the past year alone, for example,

Gulf–Central Asian relations have grown dramatically as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and other Gulf states have invested billions of dollars in the Central Asian states. The UAE has invested \$2.6 billion in Kazakhstan since 2005 and announced another \$900 million in investment deals last year during a visit by the prime minister to Abu Dhabi covering mining, agriculture, oil and gas, and construction.³⁷ An August 2022 Uzbek presidential visit to Saudi Arabia reportedly yielded \$14 billion in investment promises, many of them aimed at relieving Uzbekistan’s energy shortages. The two countries further discussed increasing Uzbek migrant workers to the region.³⁸

And trade with Europe has likewise been increasing, highlighted most recently in late September 2023 in a summit in Berlin of all five Central Asian presidents with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The leaders reportedly discussed increased connectivity and trade between Europe and Central Asia and signed hundreds of millions of dollars in deals.³⁹

Regarding the United States, greatly increased assistance to the Central Asian states has been accompanied by a strengthening of diplomatic relations as well. In February 2023, for example, Secretary of State Antony Blinken joined foreign ministers from all five of the Central Asian countries at the very first ministerial meeting of the C5+1 diplomatic platform since its 2015 founding. The visit was seen as a reaffirmation, if not “important upgrade,” of US engagement in the region.⁴⁰ And the September 20, 2023, statement of President Joe Biden at UN Headquarters after the Central Asia 5+1 meeting—what he called a “historic moment” and the first time a US president has held a meeting with all five of the Central Asian leaders—called for strengthening US–Central Asian relations across the board. The White House statement highlights counterterrorism cooperation and increasing US security funding to Central Asia; strengthening regional economic connectivity and creating a “new business platform to . . . better connect our private sectors for development purposes”; “the potential for a new critical minerals dialogue”; and the launch of a new initiative on disability rights.⁴¹

These dynamics also play out in multilateral organizations in which the Central Asian countries are members but where Russia has played an outsized or leading role. Recent efforts by Russia to obstruct, if not end, the work of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—the world’s largest regional security organization, in which Russia, Central Asian nations, and Western nations are all members—is a case in point. Since its creation in 1994, the OSCE has played a particularly important role in conflict prevention and management efforts in Europe and in election observation missions that are placed throughout all the fifty-seven OSCE member countries, including all fifteen of the former Soviet states.

The typical range of OSCE activities in Central Asia is broad. In just the past several months of this writing, the OSCE dispatched monitoring missions to observe the election process in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. And it held meetings and dispatched training delegations across all five Central Asian nations covering a range of issues from cyber security, to countering terrorist uses of the internet, to bioterrorism and counternarcotics.

But in a consensus-driven organization, where all decisions must be adopted by all fifty-seven participating states, any one of the OSCE members can theoretically take the organization

hostage. And since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has tried to do just that by obstructing, and effectively preventing approval of, the OSCE budget and vetoing OSCE field missions that had existed in Ukraine since well before the outbreak of war. In response, US ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter, reflecting the generally combative response to such blockage by many other members, stated directly that “Russia is attacking the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe” and announced the need to circumvent Russia’s veto and “find ways to implement our commitments and to stand by the people of Ukraine.” “And in every other country where the OSCE has field missions,” he added, “we’re going to make clear that we can deliver for the people.”⁴²

All of the above developments are creating new opportunities and challenges for the Central Asian states, ironically catalyzed by Russia’s desire to rein in what it has traditionally viewed as its own sphere of influence. But a weaker OSCE would deprive the Central Asian nations of a rare multilateral platform for balancing regional influences at the very time when the war with Ukraine has forced these countries to be more strategic in their relationships with Russia and other international actors.

CONCLUSION

Today’s challenges go well beyond individual countries or organizations. Indeed, they flow from the fact that a major superpower sought to strike not only at the heart of another country or region but potentially, at the heart of the world order itself.

But the war in Ukraine has led to concrete changes throughout Central Asia—unique given the region’s historic relationship with Russia, its geographic relevance to the conflict, trade relations, and reliance on remittances sourced from that country. Public opinion regarding the conflict is diverse and nuanced, with some citizenries simultaneously recognizing the humanitarian issues of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine while also wishing to pragmatically distance themselves from an ideological undercurrent that runs uncomfortably close to home.

Relations between Russia and its Central Asian neighbors are still strong, but the dominance of Russia over these countries, real and perceived, has been significantly altered from just a couple years ago—including potential diversification in economic development, trade, and political alignments as attention toward Central Asian countries by the broader international community has grown.

The war arguably places the region in a precarious security situation in the near term. If the result of increased international attention is to continue the historical pattern of rent-seeking by regional leaders for personal gain, it could well exacerbate existing political and economic challenges throughout the region as well. But if this rebalancing among powers and partners can instead continue to promote improved domestic fundamentals such as the rule of law, economic reforms to attract new investors, and transparent political leadership, then these states will likely only grow their resiliency and independent roles in a changing world order.

NOTES

1. "Kazakhstan's Oil Export Revenues Rose by 50% in 2022," Reuters, May 2, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/kazakhstans-oil-export-revenues-rose-by-50-2022-2023-05-02/>.
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