

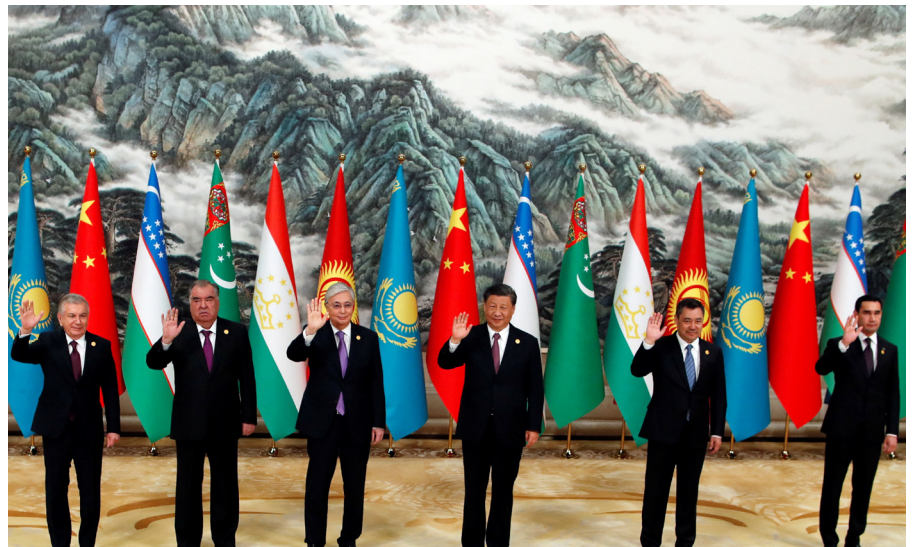
Central Asia in an Era of Great-Power Rivalry

China has an opportunity to expand its influence in Central Asia significantly, as its recent summit with regional leaders demonstrated. This creates both opportunities and challenges for the Central Asian countries, which must contend with the effects of great-power rivalry on their region.

By Brian G. Carlson

Recent events in great-power relations, including the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's floundering war in Ukraine, have opened the door for a significant further expansion of China's influence in Central Asia. This potential was on display at the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, China, on May 18–19, where China pledged 3.6 billion USD of new development aid, as well as cooperation in regional security affairs. China's regional engagement creates both opportunities and challenges for the countries of the region, which welcome China's investment and economic assistance but worry about rising Chinese influence.

Five countries that emerged as independent states following the breakup of the Soviet Union – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – form the core of Central Asia. For Europe and the West, this region plays an important role on a range of issues, including energy and the connectivity of the Eurasian landmass. Traditionally, the Central Asian countries have pursued “multi-vectored” foreign policies that aim to bolster their sovereignty by achieving balanced relations with external powers. As great-power rivalry intensifies at the global level, such efforts will become increasingly challenging.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Central Asian leaders at the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023 in Xi'an, China. Florence Lo / Reuters

The decline of Western influence in the region, the confrontation between Russia and the West, the intensifying US-China rivalry, and the increasingly close China-Russia partnership all exert profound influence on Central Asia. The August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan by the United States and its allies was a major setback for US and Western influence in Central Asia, which had already been in decline for

several years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine six months later, which soon left Russia weakened and distracted, had the potential to reduce Russia's own influence in Central Asia. The China-Central Asia Summit occurred at the same time as the G7 summit in Hiroshima, Japan, where the United States sought support for its policies toward China. For their part, China and Russia continue to wage a quiet competition

for influence in Central Asia, even as they smooth over any resulting tensions for the sake of their overall partnership. Fashioning a response to these developments will be an important test of the Central Asian countries' diplomacy.

Russia's Influence in Question

Russia, which ruled over Central Asia from the time of the tsarist imperial conquest in the mid-19th century until the breakup of the Soviet Union, has traditionally viewed Central Asia as its own backyard. During the post-Soviet era, Russia has continued to wield significant influence in the region's energy and security affairs. By some indications, however, Russia's influence in Central Asia has weakened since its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. None of the Central Asian countries has endorsed the invasion or Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory. Russia's aggression against Ukraine raised concerns about its intentions toward the Central Asian countries, especially in Kazakhstan, which shares a long border with Russia and has a large ethnic Russian population that is mainly concentrated in the country's northern regions. The Central Asian countries welcomed large numbers of Russian men who were fleeing the draft.

The war in Ukraine also called into question Russia's traditional role as the main security provider in Central Asia. Russia's stunning military failures in Ukraine raised doubts about its military power and its ability to provide regional security. Moreover, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which Russia leads, faltered at important moments. In September 2022, when fighting broke out between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both of which are CSTO members, Russia failed to respond with a CSTO intervention to restore peace and stability. Around the same time, elsewhere in former Soviet territories, Russia failed to heed calls by Armenia, which is also a CSTO member, for support amid its renewed fighting with Azerbaijan. These episodes raised serious doubts about Russia's ability to ensure regional stability in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Under these circumstances, the Central Asian states took steps to reduce their reliance on Russia and increase their own freedom of maneuver. Kazakhstan was the most active in this respect. This was particularly notable, considering that in early January 2022, just six weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan called in Russian troops, acting within the

CSTO framework, to suppress a domestic uprising. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan reached an intelligence-sharing agreement with NATO member Turkey. It strengthened its relations with Uzbekistan, traditionally its regional rival. Under Uzbekistan's leadership, the Central Asian countries held meetings to discuss regional cooperation on infrastructure and other issues, aiming to strengthen their collective hand in dealing with outside powers.

Kazakhstan also appeared to seek support from China. In September 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan before attending the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. While in Kazakhstan, Xi declared that China supported that country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Later, he made a similar statement about Kyrgyzstan. These statements, though falling far short of formal security guarantees, appeared to be an attempt by China to allay regional concerns about Russia's intentions.

Despite these possible indications of waning influence, Russia retains important sources of leverage in the region, especially in security affairs. In addition to its leadership of the CSTO, Russia controls the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, as well as the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, which is Russia's largest foreign military base. Russia maintains strong economic ties to the region, and some of the regional economies continue to rely heavily on remittances from workers in Russia. Putin visited all five Central Asian countries during 2022, demonstrating his determination to maintain Russia's regional influence. All five of the countries' leaders attended this year's Victory Day celebration in Moscow on May 9, despite the risk that their appearance would signal support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Four of the five leaders decided to attend only after receiving last-minute phone calls from Putin. Their attendance demonstrates that they must continue to pay close attention to Putin's desires and cannot afford to offend him.

China's Influence on the Rise

China's influence in Central Asia has been on the rise for many years. In September 2013, Xi delivered a speech in Astana, Kazakhstan, announcing the formation of the Silk Road Economic Belt, which was one component of the eventual Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI). China's growing regional influence is apparent in several areas, including energy, infrastructure, and increasingly in security affairs.

China has established itself as a major actor in the Central Asian energy sector. This process began long before the emergence of the BRI. In 2005, the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline came online. Although its volumes are small, this pipeline serves as a secure overland source of crude oil. In 2009, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline went into operation. Three parallel lines now follow this route, passing from gas fields in Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan

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and Kazakhstan before crossing into China's territory. A fourth line, known as Line D, would follow a different route, passing from Turkmenistan through Tajikistan and then into China. During the summit in Xi'an, Xi called for accelerated construction of Line D, which has been subject to long delays.

One major aim of China's BRI infrastructure projects is to strengthen connections to European markets. A northern rail corridor, passing from China through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus before entering Europe, was to be an important transport route. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, China has been unable to use this northern route as a gateway to Europe. It has therefore shifted its focus to a central corridor that would pass through Central Asia and avoid Russian territory. China is now pressing for the completion of the long-discussed China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. China could ship rail cargo on this line onward to Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe. The railway would improve Central Asia's connectivity, both internally and with other regions. This project is an example of the ways that Central Asian countries stand to benefit from Chinese investment, even as they worry about the implications of increased Chinese influence in their countries.

China has also gradually expanded its influence in Central Asian security affairs. Since 2001, China, Russia, and four of the Central Asian countries have cooperated on regional security issues in the framework of the SCO, which aims to combat

what China calls the “three evils” of separatism, terrorism, and extremism. China and Russia appeared to have an unspoken agreement on a regional division of labor in which Russia would be the region’s main security provider, while China would promote economic development.

Since 2016, however, China has also expanded security cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, all of which abut China’s western border. China’s primary aim is to prevent sources of instability from spilling across its border, especially from Afghanistan. China initiated this format while Afghanistan’s previous government was still in power, and it continues to seek cooperation on these issues from the Taliban. China is concerned about the stability of its western Xinjiang region, where it stands accused of placing 1 million or more Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in internment camps. In Tajikistan, the only Central Asian country that shares a border with both China and Afghanistan, China has strengthened border posts, trained border guards, and even established a base for its own People’s Armed Police (PAP). China aims to ensure that terrorist organizations, Uyghur separatist forces, or other possible sources of instability are unable to use Central Asia as a staging ground for operations in Xinjiang.

China and Russia Manage Tensions

As China and Russia have strengthened their partnership in recent years, they have succeeded in smoothing over possible sources of tension in Central Asia. China

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and Russia share an overriding interest in opposing the United States and revising the world order to better suit their preferences. Therefore, they have sought to prevent a potential divergence of interests in Central Asia from disrupting their partnership at the global level. Despite Russia’s concerns about China’s growing power in Central Asia, the two countries’ interests in the region are largely compatible. In March of this year, during Xi’s visit to Moscow, the two countries issued a joint declaration that mentioned their shared interests and desire for cooperation in Central Asia.

China and Russia continue to compete in Central Asia, but quietly. Part of Russia’s aim in promoting the Eurasian Economic



Union, which counts Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as its two Central Asian members, was to counter Chinese economic influence by erecting common customs barriers around the member countries. Russia also resisted China’s calls for a development bank and free trade area within the SCO, based on concerns that such proposals could open the door to greatly expanded Chinese economic penetration of the region. Recently, Putin has also revived his longstanding calls for a regional gas union. Late last year, he proposed a trilateral gas union that would also include Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Some experts have speculated that Putin’s true aim may be to gain control over Central Asian gas exports to China. This is unlikely, however, because China has a controlling interest in the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and could reject such an arrangement.

In the area of infrastructure, Russia stands to lose from the construction of railroads and highways that bypass Russian territory. Therefore, the completion of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway is not necessarily in Russia’s interests. China’s growing role in regional security is also a potential source of concern to Russia.

China’s security presence in Tajikistan largely focuses on border security in the region where the two countries’ borders converge with that of Afghanistan. However, China has significant investments in Tajikistan, where it has built roads and tunnels, owns mining operations for gold and other minerals, and is even erecting the country’s new parliament building. Over time, China might perceive an interest in expanding its security presence in order to protect such investments. If Russia proves unable to guarantee regional security, and if China steps in to fill the breach, then this could call into question any understanding on a regional division of labor.

For now, however, such possibilities have not disrupted the China-Russia relationship. As its war in Ukraine falters, Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China and unable to resist China’s growing influence in Central Asia. For its part, China continues to value Russia’s role as a partner in challenging the United States. Therefore, it has an incentive to offer reassurance to Russia and to avoid pursuing its interests in Central Asia in ways that could alienate its partner. This shared commitment to managing potential sources of tension in Central Asia is likely to endure for the foreseeable future.

Central Asia's Response

Throughout their history as independent states, the Central Asian countries have achieved considerable success in managing their relations with outside powers. Far from being pawns in a new "Great Game," the Central Asian countries have managed to safeguard and strengthen their national sovereignty while avoiding domination by external powers. In the coming years, such

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efforts are likely to grow increasingly challenging. The ultimate risk is that the Central Asian countries could become China's client states.

Efforts by the Central Asian countries to play China and Russia off against each other will become increasingly difficult as China and Russia grow closer together. China and Russia are likely to show restraint in taking steps to check the other's power in Central Asia, thereby limiting the opportunities for Central Asian countries to exploit divisions between the two powers. The hardening of the rivalry between the United States and its allies and partners, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the

other, also places the Central Asian countries in a difficult position.

The Central Asian countries continue to value their relations with the United States and Europe, which support their aspirations to strengthen their own sovereignty and to avoid domination by China or Russia. Both the United States and the European Union have recently held high-level meetings with the Central Asian countries. However, the scale of investment and assistance that the US and the EU have offered falls far short of what China can provide. The

United States, for example, offered 25 million USD of economic assistance in February. Moreover, the Central Asian countries wish to avoid entanglement in great-power rivalries. The war in Ukraine has put them in a difficult position, subjecting them to simultaneous admonishments by Western countries to avoid facilitating Russia's evasion of sanctions and pressure by Russia to limit their cooperation with Western countries.

Rising US-China tensions would place similar strain on the Central Asian countries, especially in the event of a crisis such as a war over Taiwan. In such a case, the United States would probably wish for the

Central Asian countries to curtail their economic ties with China, but antagonizing their powerful neighbor in such a way would probably be too risky. Aware of such regional anxieties, US and European officials tend to avoid public discussion of rivalry with China in Central Asia, focusing instead on promising avenues of cooperation with the Central Asian countries in trade, agriculture, clean energy, people-to-people exchanges, and a variety of other areas.

The Central Asian countries will face severe challenges in managing great-power tensions and avoiding being drawn into these rivalries. As one expert from the region put it recently, "when two elephants fight, the grass gets trampled." The coming period is likely to pose difficult tests of the Central Asian countries' diplomatic dexterity and their ability to pursue multi-vector foreign policies in the new context of great-power rivalry.

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