

Central Asia in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

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From September 15-17, 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz travelled to Central Asia, making official visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before attending the second summit of the C5+1 format, where he met with all five Central Asian leaders. Chancellor Scholz's packed itinerary came as a timely reminder of the significant uptick in Central Asia's international relations in recent years.

Traditionally viewed as a peripheral region, Central Asia is now navigating an increasingly intricate geopolitical environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the region's international agenda, revealing new risks and opportunities. Increasing tension between the West and China adds further nuance to Central Asia's relations with its major external partners.

The central question this article addresses is how the shifting geopolitical landscape is affecting Central Asia's international agency and how sustainable its impact is. As military and economic confrontations among major powers intensify, Central Asia appears to be attracting increasing international attention. These developments coincided with a rise in regional cooperation, suggesting a potential new phase in the region's international relations.

The paper argues that while the current geopolitical context creates favourable conditions for Central Asia to enhance its international actorness, expectations need to be tempered. Key drivers of geopolitical shifts lie outside the region and, thus, are at the whim of external powers. Additionally, although regional cooperation within Central Asia shows promise compared to previous years, it has yet to deliver tangible progress. The paper proceeds by first outlining the changing geopolitical context, then exploring the region's evolving cooperation efforts and finally assessing the track record of regional cooperation.

The context: the return of geopolitics

For much of the post-Soviet period, Central Asia remained on the periphery of global international affairs. In the 1990s, the West's priority was stable relations with Russia, particularly under Boris Yeltsin's leadership. Central Asia was mostly seen as Russia's backyard. In the late 1990s, as tensions between Russia and the West gradually surfaced, analysts viewed Central Asia as a theatre for broader geopolitical confrontation or part of the "grand chessboard," reflecting the perception that the region lacked significant international agency.

However, several developments in recent years have shifted Central Asia's international relations and position in global geopolitics. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, sent shockwaves throughout the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia. Sharing long land borders with Russia, Central Asian states, and particularly Kazakhstan, interpreted Russia's actions in Ukraine as Moscow's disregard for international law and the principle of state sovereignty. In other words, the region had to confront the possibility that Russia could challenge the post-1991 borders. In such a context, the broad international condemnation of Russia's aggression, followed by Western sanctions against Russia, presented both a challenge and an opportunity for Central Asia. Given its political and economic ties—and, above all, its geography—Central Asia has no alternative but to carefully balance maintaining amicable relations with Russia while keeping a safe distance from it.

The growing tension between the West and China further complicated Central Asia's geopolitical context. While China has long been recognised as a rising global power, its presence has grown significantly in Central Asia in the past two decades. Today, China is a key trade partner, an active member of multilateral interstate institutions, and one of the region's largest investors and lenders. As US-Chinese (and less drastically EU-Chinese relations) deteriorated, Central Asia found itself in a not-so-peripheral situation, facing both pressures and incentives from both sides. To complete the triangle, Russia's increasing dependence on China due to sanctions and diplomatic isolation made Moscow more amenable to Beijing's expanding presence in Central Asia. Thus, the broader geopolitical developments have been dynamic, presenting a testing moment for Central Asia's ability to assert its international agency.

Is Central Asia gaining an agency?

What has been the impact of increasingly unstable geopolitical developments on Central Asia's international relations? While the question is a moving target, there is no shortage of analyses on the subject. At one end is a view that Central Asia finds itself cornered by competing demands from its influential external partners. Thus, Uzbekistan's president recently said that Central Asian states have turned into "hostages of the sanctions policy", citing growing logistics costs and inflationary pressures.[1] At the other end are the arguments of Central Asia acquiring a greater international agency, well captured by a recent commentary aptly titled "Nobody's Backyard: A Confident Central Asia".[2] A brief review of Central Asia's relations with key extra-regional powers illustrates the dynamics.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not sit well with Central Asia.

The countries of the region have limited sympathy for Russia's claims about threats from NATO or the presence of Nazism in Ukraine. What they see is rather another former Soviet republic, after Georgia in 2008, attacked by Russia. Reflecting this, Central Asia took a surprisingly bold stance on the events. While never criticising Russia, Central Asians refrained from endorsing Moscow's justifications. Notably, the leadership of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan publicly refused to recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Mindful of its diminishing legitimacy in Central Asia (and globally), Russia is playing hard to reverse the trend. After a brief period of relative restraint in the months after the invasion, Russia has intensified its attempts to pull Central Asian states, at least discursively, into its confrontation with the West. Illustrative was a recent statement from a Russian foreign minister who confided his Central Asian colleagues expressed their outrage about the "unceremoniousness and outright impudence" of the West.[3] Russia also revived efforts to solidify its Central Asia diplomatic and economic connections. Thus, in 2023, Russia followed suit from other powers and held its first C5+1 summit. It also doubled down on bilateral relations, with the start of Russian gas export to Uzbekistan in October 2023 a major highlight.

In contrast to Russia, China's presence in Central Asia has steadily benefited from the war in Ukraine. Beijing solidified its status as Moscow's strategic partner, as two countries shared distaste for the Western dominance. Facing sanctions and broad diplomatic pressure, Russia would now pose less obstruction to China's expansion in Central Asia. Evidence to this was a revival of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad, a project that remained frozen since late 1990s, not least due to Russia's objections.[4] At the same time, China's response to Russia's aggression was "less than enthusiastic." [5], which made it a crucial ally to Central Asia, also lacking keen not to show enthusiasm.

The West's engagement with Central Asia has transformed markedly in recent years. In the 1990s, Western involvement focused on supporting democratisation and providing development aid. Following 9/11, Central Asia turned into a strategic partner in NATO's war on terror in Afghanistan. Following a brief "lull period" after the withdrawal of the US airbase from Kyrgyzstan in 2014, the Western countries' engagement with Central Asia has been on the rise recently. The US's engagement appears to broadly respect Rumer's recommendations: de-emphasising democracy promotion, focusing more on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and prioritising concerns about China's growing influence. In recent years, the US and EU held a series of C5+1 ministerial meetings, culminating in the US President Biden's summit with five Central Asian counterparts in September 2023. Much to the relief of Central Asian leaders, their meetings with American and European colleagues now mostly focus on connectivity, supply chains, climate or critical minerals rather than the rule of law or freedom of media.

Beyond the above major powers, Central Asian leaders also find themselves in increasing diplomatic engagement with a host of other actors, including Turkey, Germany, UK, France, India and others. Combined, these developments pushed observers to claim Central Asia

was no more a chessboard.[6] Moreover, the proliferation of C5+1 appears to have contributed to a concurrent process of growing regional cooperation, creating additional platforms for five leaders to meet and talk – an element notably lacking in the past. This brings us to the next section, which reviews how regional cooperation has evolved in the context of turbulent geopolitics.

A new phase in regional cooperation?

When attributed to a five-country region, a notion of international “agency” presumes the ability of individual country leaders to define and promote the interests of the *region* as a whole. Therefore, a timely question is how regional cooperation dynamics uphold the expectations of the region’s growing agency.

Historically, Central Asia had a troubled history of regional cooperation efforts. Throughout the 1990s, the region saw multiple attempts to establish cooperation platforms, but most failed. The last one, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), was disbanded in 2005 in favour of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). The event, which Russian President Putin commented was “the best birthday present from colleagues”, signalled Central Asian states accepted the preeminence of a Russia-led platform over a purely indigenous one. In 2008, Uzbekistan’s leader bluntly ruled out the possibility of a regional union, saying the countries of the region did not have capacities and policies of sufficiently comparable nature for such a task. Indeed, disagreements over transboundary water resources, transport networks, and border delimitation proved the region had a full plate of divisive policy issues.

A major change occurred in 2016 with the political leadership transition in Uzbekistan, the centrally located and most populous country of the region. As a sign of the country turning from a spoiler to a driver of regional cooperation, the new Uzbek leader proposed annual consultative meetings with Central Asian leaders. The format was relatively modest, both to avoid unnerving Russia and to ensure buy-in from the countries of the region, including the traditionally neutral Turkmenistan. The idea has thus far proven workable, evidenced by the 6th meeting hosted in Astana in August 2024.

Alongside the regional level, Central Asian states are also demonstrating improving bilateral relations, albeit with important reservations. Since 2016, Uzbekistan succeeded in resolving outstanding border delimitation issues with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. A result was the re-opening of the border crossing, which was crucial for the densely populated Fergana Valley population. Furthermore, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed the Allied Relations Treaty, which testified to “the highest and most trusting level of interstate partnership”, according to the Uzbek president. In 2024, similar treaties were signed between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.[7]

Thus, in recent years, Central Asia saw an uptick in cooperative relations in a region. This is a notable departure from past dynamics, suggesting a renewed willingness among Central Asian nations to collaborate more closely. Hypothetically, this trend would contribute to the emergence of a consolidated regional voice on the international stage. However, significant challenges remain, and expectations should be approached with caution.

Challenges ahead

If Central Asia's regional initiatives and engagement with non-regional powers suggest its growing international agency, how sustainable is the trend? The question is very much dependent on the definition of "agency". Most commentaries discuss the term based on the notion of international attention that Central Asia is suddenly receiving, with the flurry of C5+1 summits as an illustration. However, the perceived "importance" that such attention may indicate is insufficient to convey the notion of agency. The agency is about how independent Central Asia is in formulating and acting on its policies. As American expert Robert Daly suggested, Central Asia's agency implies that the region is able to say "no" to any of Russia, the US, or China.^[8] Second, when applied to a region of five independent countries, agency should also imply a degree of "integratedness", i.e., an ability of five countries to act as one rather than five actors. Against these criteria, Central Asia appears to yet to convince.

First, the optimism surrounding the region's growing "agency" is largely driven by external dynamics, not internal. The heightened interest from major powers stems from shifts in relations among the United States, China, and Russia. This does not negate the growing importance of Central Asia, yet it suggests such importance is due to dynamics outside Central Asia's control. During the U.S.-led war on terror in Afghanistan, Central Asia gained prominence as a strategic partner for NATO. However, such prominence waned in the early 2010s when the US lost its interest in Afghanistan. Therefore, Central Asia's agency should be assessed not based on the "attention" it is getting from actors around the world but on the response that Central Asia is able to formulate and push forward. If Central Asia finds itself mostly nodding in high-level summits, its agency may be yet to be experienced.

Second, Central Asia's track record of performing as a cohesive "actor" remains uncertain. While regional cooperation has undeniably improved since 2016, the bar for progress was set quite low. After six years of annual consultative meetings among Central Asian leaders, the platform has yet to produce a significant outcome. In the 2024 meeting, Turkmen president openly ruled out possible institutionalisation, saying he sees the summit should remain of consultative nature and "without strictly regulating rules and procedures".

Moreover, in the 2022 summit, the region's leaders discussed the "Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness, and Cooperation for Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century." However, only three signed. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refused to do that, citing doubtful justification – the need to "complete domestic procedures". Furthermore, two countries of the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, went through violent border clashes in 2021 and 2022. Seen from the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, which remains completely closed today, Central Asia's regional cooperation and growing agency appear fragile at best.

Conclusion

Central Asia is at a crossroads, with shifting geopolitical dynamics offering both opportunities and challenges for the region to assert itself as a coherent international actor. The weakening of Russia's traditional dominance, China's expanding influence, and the rediscovered pragmatism of Western engagement have collectively created a landscape where Central Asian states can potentially enhance their agency and deepen regional cooperation.

However, this optimism must be tempered by the realities on the ground. The region's heightened international profile is largely a byproduct of external power dynamics rather than intrinsic regional unity. In such circumstances, a region's significance can wane as quickly as it rises, contingent on the strategic interests of major powers. Internal challenges such as bilateral border disputes further complicate the picture.

In light of the above challenges, Central Asian countries face the critical task of translating diplomatic rhetoric into tangible results. The path forward requires genuine collaboration, not just among Central Asian states but also in their engagements with non-regional powers, to ensure that regional agency is driven internally and not as a byproduct of external circumstances.

About the Author

Shairbek Dzhuraev is a political scientist specializing in political and institutional dynamics in Central Asia. He serves as President of Crossroads Central Asia.

Notes

^[1] “We have become prisoners of the policy of sanctions” – President of Uzbekistan (2024): URL: daryo.uz/en/2024/08/09/we-have-become-prisoners-of-the-policy-of-sanctions-president-of-uzbekistan [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[2] Murtazashvili, Jennifer B., and Temur Umarov (2024): *Nobody's Backyard: A Confident Central Asia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. URL: carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/nobodys-backyard-a-confident-central-asia [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[3] “Sergey Lavrov: The West is Trying to Subjugate Central Asian Countries” (2024): 24.kg. URL: 24.kg/vlast/294608-sergey-lavrov-zapad-pyitaetsya-podmyat-pod-sebya-stranyi-t-sentralnoy-azii/ [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[4] “President Japarov Tells About Construction of Railway” (2022): 24.kg. URL: 24.kg/english/235254-President-Japarov-tells-about-construction-of-railway/ [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[5] Pomfret, Richard (2022): *Russia's Setback in Samarkand*, East Asia Forum. URL: eastasiaforum.org/2022/10/17/russias-setback-in-samarkand/ [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[6] Cornell, Svante E., and S. Frederick Starr (2015): Chessboard No More: The Rise of Central Asia's International Agency, Caucasus Analyst. URL: www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13773-chessboard-no-more-the-rise-of-central-asia%E2%80%99s-international-agency.html [Accessed 23.09.2024].

^[7] Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan signed such a treaty back in 2003.

^[8] Muratalieva, Nargiza (2022): *Central Asia in the Context of US-China Confrontation: An Interview with Robert Daly*, CABAR.asia. URL: <https://cabar.asia/en/central-asia-in-the-context-of-us-china-confrontation-an-interview-with-robert-daly> [Accessed 23.09.2024].