

Great Power Competition in Central Asia: Current challenges and Future Scenarios

منافسة القوى العظمى في آسيا الوسطى: التحديات الحالية والسيناريوهات المستقبلية

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Abstract

This study delves into the dynamics of great power competition in Central Asia, investigating contemporary challenges and exploring future scenarios. The region has long been a strategic area of interest for global powers due to its geopolitical significance and rich natural resources. The focus is on the influence and strategies of key international players, including Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, European Union, and the United States, from the early 20th century to the present. By analysing pivotal developments such as the cold-war involvement of the former Soviet Union's control, the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and the United States' military and economic engagements, the research highlights the evolving nature of power struggles in the region. The study also considers the implications of these competitions for regional stability, economic development, and international relations. Additionally, it projects future scenarios based on current trends, offering insights into potential shifts in alliances, resource management, and geopolitical strategies. The findings indicate that while Central Asia will continue to be a battleground for great power interests, the region's countries are increasingly asserting their agency and pursuing diversification in their foreign policies.

Keywords: International actors, Geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Stability, International Relations.

المستخلص

تتعمق هذه الدراسة في ديناميكيات منافسة القوى العظمى في آسيا الوسطى ، والتحقيق في التحديات المعاصرة واستكشاف السيناريوهات المستقبلية. لطالما كانت المنطقة منطقة اهتمام استراتيجية للقوى العالمية بسبب أهميتها الجيوسياسية ومواردها الطبيعية الغنية. ينصب التركيز على تأثير واستراتيجيات اللاعبين الدوليين الرئيسيين ، بما في ذلك روسيا والصين وتركيا وإيران والاتحاد الأوروبي، والولايات المتحدة من أوائل القرن ٢٠ إلى الوقت الحاضر. من خلال تحليل التطورات المحورية مثل سيطرة الاتحاد السوفيتي، وتأثير مبادرة الحزام والطريق الصينية، والمشاركات العسكرية والاقتصادية للولايات المتحدة، كما تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الطبيعة المتطورة للصراعات على النفوذ في المنطقة. كما تدرس تداعيات هذه المنافسات على استقرار المنطقة، وتنميتها الاقتصادية، والعلاقات الدولية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تتوقع السيناريوهات المستقبلية بناءً على الاتجاهات الحالية، مقدمةً رؤى حول التحولات المحتملة في التحالفات، وإدارة الموارد، والاستراتيجيات الجيوسياسية. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أنه بينما ستظل آسيا الوسطى ساحة لمعركة المصالح الكبرى، فإن دول المنطقة تزداد في فرض وكالتها وتسعى للتنوع في سياساتها الخارجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التنافس الدولي، المصالح الدولية، الجيوسياسية، الاستقرار الاقليمي، العلاقات الدولية.

Introduction

In Central Asia, a vast expanse of land that encompasses the heartland of EurAsia, there exists an intricate web of multiple and multidimensional interactions between the United States, Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey, and the European Union. These global powerhouses, with their divergent yet intertwined agendas, engage in a multifaceted dance as they navigate the complexities of military strategies, political maneuverings, economic engagements, and humanitarian endeavors within the region. The Central Asian republics, serving as the epicenter of this intricate geopolitical landscape, find themselves at the crossroads of history, geography, and power dynamics. Their strategic location and abundant natural resources act as magnets, attracting the attention of major global players, whose interests are piqued by the immense potential and opportunities offered by this vast and diverse landmass. The economic prospects, security considerations, and historical

links associated with Central Asia further amplify its allure, turning it into a hotbed of international intrigue. As the world's leading powers increasingly focus their gaze on this enigmatic region, their concern deepens and stretches far beyond mere curiosity. The situation in Central Asia has become a matter of utmost importance, warranting the keenest observation and analysis. The dynamic and complex nature of the international relations that converge upon the Central Asian landscape exerts profound influence on the domestic and foreign policies of the countries involved. Thus, the Central Asian countries find themselves entangled in a labyrinth of connections, each strand resonating with far-reaching implications. These intricate interplays between international actors and the five Central Asian republics are as nuanced as they are consequential. The region becomes both a stage and a forum wherein the fate of nations is decided, and the contours of global power dynamics are continuously reshaped. The multifaceted relations between the United States, Russia, China, India, Iran, Turkey, and the European Union should not be underestimated. With each passing moment, the tapestry of Central Asia weaves more complexities into its fabric, blurring the lines between opportunity and risk, prosperity and vulnerability. The delicate balance of power in the region constantly teeters on the precipice of change, as the interests and strategies of these global powers intermingle and collide. In this ever-evolving landscape, the Central Asian republics find themselves at the epicenter of a grand chessboard, wherein each move made by the major players reverberates across the geopolitical spectrum. The consequences of these interactions cascade through time, shaping the destiny of nations and sculpting the contours of the international order. The journey of Central Asia is one of perpetual transformation, as it navigates the ebbs and flows of this intricate dance, carving out its place on the global stage.

Research Problem

As a landlocked and resource-rich transit region, Central Asia is increasingly witnessing great power competition with China's Belt and Road and Russia's EurAsian Economic Union initiatives. The future scenarios of such competition especially intrigue regional and global observers, particularly given the relatively increasing interest and presence of other great powers. This study aims to explore current challenges and relevant future scenarios of great power competition in Central Asia. It argues that these great powers engage in different strategic activities to gain both image and economic profits, thereby increasingly shaping the future of the region for the meantime. Although Central Asian countries are sensitively dealing with these challenges, the future scenarios remain complicated and unclear. The great power status will be continuously redefined, providing intriguing prospects. In sum, the argument accounts for the intersection of domestic imagery and external influences on policy formation, which often tend to downplay or over-focus issues of intrinsic importance in pursuing their strategic goals. so the study seek to answer a **main question**: **What are the current challenges and future scenarios of great power competition in Central Asia?**

to answer previous main question the study will answer the folowing **subquestions**:

1. What are the current challenges faced by Central Asian countries due to great power competition?
2. How do economic dependencies and political alignments affect regional stability?
3. What security concerns arise from the presence and influence of these powers?
4. How are the strategic interests of the United States, China, and Russia influencing Central Asia?
5. In what ways do these powers' initiatives, like the Belt and Road Initiative and military alliances, impact local governance and development?
6. How do these interests align or conflict with each other?

7. What are the potential future scenarios for Central Asia in the context of this competition?
8. How might shifts in global power dynamics alter the current balance?
9. What strategies could Central Asian countries adopt to navigate these influences?

Importance of study

1. Scientific Importance

a. Advancing Geopolitical Theory

This research contributes to geopolitical theory by analyzing the interactions of great powers (the U.S., China, European union, Iran, Turkey and Russia) in a strategically significant region. It offers insights into how these interactions reshape power structures and influence global geopolitical dynamics.

b. Integrating Multi-Dimensional Analysis

The study provides a comprehensive analysis by integrating economic, political, and security dimensions, addressing a gap in existing literature. This multi-dimensional approach enhances the understanding of complex interdependencies and power dynamics in Central Asia.

c. Scenario Planning

By employing scenario planning, the research offers a systematic method for anticipating future geopolitical shifts. This approach enriches theoretical frameworks by introducing a structured way to explore potential outcomes and their implications.

Practical Importance

a. Informing Policy Decisions

The findings will assist policymakers in Central Asian countries by providing strategies to navigate great power competition. Understanding potential scenarios helps in formulating policies that safeguard national interests and promote regional stability.

b. Strategic Planning for Stakeholders

Governments and international organizations can use this research to develop strategic plans that mitigate risks associated with great power competition. It offers valuable insights into managing economic dependencies and security alliances.

c. Enhancing Regional Cooperation

By highlighting the interconnectedness of economic and security issues, the study encourages regional cooperation among Central Asian states. Collaborative approaches can lead to more resilient and sustainable development paths.

d. Business and Investment Insights

For businesses and investors, the research provides a clearer picture of the regional landscape, identifying opportunities and challenges in sectors influenced by geopolitical tensions. This analysis aids in making informed investment decisions.

In summary, this research is crucial for both advancing academic understanding and offering practical guidance to stakeholders navigating the complex geopolitical environment of Central Asia.

litration Review

China's Influence through the Belt and Road Initiative

1. Hillman, J. E. (2018). "The Rise of China in Central Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative." *Journal of Asian Studies*.

This study examines how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is reshaping the economic landscape in Central Asia by investing in infrastructure projects.

Differences from Current Study: The current study focus on recent shifts in the BRI strategy, including sustainability concerns and local resistance.

Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Central Asia

2. Cooley, A. (2012). "Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia." *Oxford University Press*.

the study Analyzes Russia's strategic interests in maintaining military bases and political alliances in the region.

Differences from Current Study: The current study could assess Russia's adjustments in policy due to recent geopolitical tensions and economic sanctions.

United States' Policy in Central Asia

3. Starr, S. F. (2014). "The United States, China, and Central Asia: A New Great Game?" *Central Asia Caucasus Institute*.

Investigates the U.S. efforts to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence through diplomatic and economic initiatives.

Differences from Current Study: The current study might explore new U.S. strategies, including digital diplomacy and cybersecurity partnerships.

Energy Resources and Geopolitical Influence

4. Blank, S. (2010). "Central Asian Energy: Present and Future." *EurAsian Geography and Economics*.

Focuses on the strategic importance of Central Asia's oil and gas reserves in global energy politics.

Differences from Current Study: The current study could look into the impact of renewable energy trends on traditional energy politics.

Regional Stability and Security Challenges

5. Laruelle, M. (2015). "Security Challenges in Central Asia: What Role for the EU?" *EU Institute for Security Studies*.

Examines how the competition among great powers affects regional stability and internal security dynamics.

Differences from Current Study: The current study may analyze emerging security threats like cyber warfare and the role of regional organizations.

Research Avenues

Academic Journals: Use databases like JSTOR and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles.

Books and Conferences: Explore recent publications and international relations conferences for updated insights.

Government Reports and Think Tanks: Institutions like Carnegie Endowment and RAND provide comprehensive reports on Central Asian geopolitics.

These references and comparisons can help guide a literature review or form the basis of an analysis comparing past and current geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia.

Theoretical Framework

It is not the first time when great powers pay their attention to the Central Asian region. The world-famous "Great Game" between Russian and British Empires in Central Asia occurred in the 19th century. Similar was the first struggle of the two superpowers USA and USSR in the region in the second half of the 20th century. However, not only an actor - Russia or the USA - has a great power status during all these periods. On the contrary, it was a period of multipolarity or when the region is seeking for the hegemon, thus, defining the level of conflicts and cooperation in international relations. Nevertheless, nowadays, when we analyze the Western literature, the phenomenon of great power status in Central Asian states which could lead to intense conflicts or the phenomenon of great power dilemma in the donor-recipient relations of the situation of hegemonic stability have not been properly and systematically studied. The same situation is with the local literature of the Central Asian region.

Several phenomena drive global attention to the Central Asian region. Firstly, it's the so-called *new Great Game* which was recognized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Secondly, the activity of great powers USA, China, Russia, and EU which conducted not only through their ambassadors and investments but also through sponsors and managing of the religious movements - such phenomena could be useful for the local or regional conflicts as well as for instability in a country. Finally, the great power regional struggle has its own, so-called, *hegemonic stability* which more or less could lead to the high or low level of regional stability - cooperation through the security institutions. In essence,

this is an asymmetric, nonlinear balance of power that may arise within the realm of international politics as well as in the context of international political economy, reflecting a situation in which most elements of or forces within a system are arrayed together in opposing a single dominant power.

Realism vs. Constructivism in International Relations

Today, in the framework of the ongoing crisis of the post-bipolar international system, Russian scholars and politicians frequently express dissatisfaction with the peculiarities of their country's Euro-Atlantic foreign policy and with the existing US-centric kind of geopolitics. Quite often, Russia tends to emphasize the possible advantages of multipolarity and the uniqueness of its emerging EurAsian foreign policy focused on developing a pan-regional conception of the Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok. In this complex and ever-changing global landscape, Russian scholars and politicians are increasingly vocal about the need for a reevaluation of the traditional approaches to international relations. They argue that the current power dynamics and global norms are no longer sufficient to address the challenges and complexities of the modern world. Meanwhile, according to realist scholars and politicians in the West, revisionist powers like Russia, China, or Iran are now challenging the existing status quo and striving to change the rules of the game on the international scene. These rising powers, with their own distinct interests and perspectives, are reshaping the geopolitical landscape and introducing alternative narratives to the prevailing Western-centric discourse. Their behavior in international relations contradicts the common norms and tactical approaches of the so-called 'responsible stakeholders' in the framework of global governance and regional cooperation. As the dynamics of power shifts and new players emerge, there is a growing tension between the established norms and the aspirations of these revisionist powers. The traditional centers of global governance are grappling with the need to adapt and accommodate the changing realities of a multipolar world. The rise of Russia, China, and Iran as influential actors on the international stage has sparked debates and discussions

about the future of global order and the potential reconfiguration of power dynamics. Amidst these challenges and uncertainties, the concept of 'responsible stakeholders' is being reevaluated. As Russia, China, and Iran assert their influence and challenge the existing order, there is a need for a more inclusive and multipolar approach to global governance. The traditional frameworks and institutions of international cooperation are being put to the test, with alternative visions and narratives gaining traction. The ongoing discourse and diplomatic maneuvers reflect the complexities of a world in transition, where traditional power structures are being questioned, and new possibilities for collaboration and competition are emerging. In conclusion, the ongoing crisis of the post-bipolar international system has given rise to a reevaluation of geopolitical norms and approaches. Russian scholars and politicians, dissatisfied with the US-centric kind of geopolitics, advocate for a multipolar world order with distinct regional conceptions. Revisionist powers like Russia, China, and Iran challenge the existing status quo, introducing alternative narratives and reshaping the global landscape. The tensions between established norms and emerging powers call for a reevaluation of global governance and cooperation, as traditional frameworks face new challenges and possibilities. The future of international relations and global order is being shaped by these dynamics, as various actors strive to redefine their roles in this ever-evolving geopolitical arena. (Lukin, 2020)

Still, others cite the rapid spread of local and regional conflicts, ethnic wars, international terrorism, and international drug smuggling as potential risks to international security. Many realist scholars insist today that the United States, being the most powerful nation in the world, should utilize its exceptional hard power advantages in order to shape a new non-polar post-bipolar international system contributing to American security, influence, and global well-being. In any case, Westphalian realism and anarchic realism differ in mode, not in essence. Both groups of realists firmly believe that great and middle powers can, and indeed should, engage in competition amongst each other as they continuously

strive for and fight for primacy. If this struggle for power and dominance no longer occurs, it is solely because a hegemonic power or a power with disproportionate influence intervenes to prevent such clashes. The hegemonic power possessing immense might can even freely exercise its power projection, imposing its own values and interests or disregarding established principles and norms simply because it has the capability to do so. In stark contrast to anarchic realists, self-help realists maintain their strong conviction that the concept of international cooperation and peaceful globalization within a non-hegemonic multipolar system is still idealistic nonsense that fails to align with the realities of power dynamics and international relations.

Methodology

If we examine the historical context of the "Great Game" in Central Asia during the 19th century, it becomes clear that it primarily revolved around a competition for political and military dominance between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. However, in the present day, the Great Power competition has evolved to encompass a broader and more intricate dynamic. The construct of U.S. National Security Strategy, intertwined with China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and further augmented by Russia's enduring sphere of influence, adds multiple layers of complexity to this ongoing rivalry. In light of these intricacies, our analysis seeks to identify the anticipated trade-offs between the objectives pursued by these influential global entities. We aim to explore the potential scenarios that may unfold for the Central Asian states involved in this delicate balance. As a research initiative firmly grounded in the domain of International Relations, our study utilizes the political economy methodology to conduct detailed case studies. Through these cases, we endeavor to understand how various Central Asian countries formulate distinct strategies in a bid to bolster their bargaining power. It is crucial to recognize that these strategies are devised and implemented within a challenging geopolitical environment, which historical precedence teaches us is assuaged by the involvement of key regional and international actors. These actors include the EurAsian

Economic Commission (EEC), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as other regional intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). Furthermore, the extension of influence through institutions like the new Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) adds new dimensions to the power dynamics at play. Importantly, civil society also has a role to play in shaping the course of events in Central Asia. By delving into these complexities, we hope to shed light on the intricate interplay of interests, strategies, and power dynamics in this highly contested region. As we tread the path of analysis, we remain firmly rooted in the discipline of International Relations, allowing us to comprehend the multifaceted nature of the Central Asia's geopolitical landscape and the potential avenues for future developments. (Dean, 2020)

What are the interests pursued by China, Russia, and the United States in Central Asia? Above all, the economic and security interests of these Chinese, Russian, and American "great powers" as a kind of oligopolists. From an economic point of view, each of these Powers is characterized by its relative degree of economic vulnerability, internal growth, degree of dependence on external trade for energy supply, and final demand for goods produced. In terms of security, on the other hand, these international actors are characterized by their relative defense budgets, showing their ability to project force along numerous dimensions. Building on this distinction, "power" has been broadly defined as the ability to assure energy and raw material supply, to serve as a final demand market for economic growth, to lend and invest abroad, variables that shape both the relative degree of vulnerability to energy and commodity price volatility, and the expected associated interest in exploiting greater bargaining powers. With the expected decline of U.S. military protection in the Persian Gulf and the logistic obstacles linked to the Arctic route, China would have a great interest in expanding its transport network in Central Asian states to ensure it directly through its military leverage (direct military presence in Central Asian states, especially in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). As China seeks to strengthen its

Belt and Road Initiative, it becomes crucial for them to establish a solid infrastructure network in Central Asia, allowing them to enhance their influence and reach in the region. This expansion would not only benefit China economically but also strengthen their military capabilities, allowing them to protect their interests effectively. Additionally, by increasing their military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, China can establish a strategic foothold in the region, further solidifying their dominance in Central Asia. (Bird et al., 2020)

Research Design and Data Collection Methods

Our research design for this paper is based on six case studies covering the main dimensions of great power exploration in Central Asia. Case studies use a mixed-method, triangulated research approach that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods covering different research materials to lay the ground for a comprehensive and logically linked research, which will synthesize the main discussion points and merge them into policy suggestions discussed in our conclusions.

Our comprehensive literature review consists of a meticulous examination and analysis of both contemporary and past studies, which meticulously delve into the exploration and multifarious interests of the three successive generations of exceedingly influential powers in the captivating region of Central Asia. Our extensive and scholarly research endeavor is further fortified by the utilization of the most recent, cutting-edge primary data sources, such as official government declarations and esteemed international treaties. The invaluable insights gleaned from these authoritative resources serve as an illuminating guide, enabling us to ascertain and comprehend the nuanced strategic priorities meticulously pursued by these profoundly influential great powers. Consequently, this prodigious plethora of knowledge permits us to engage in a profound and substantive examination of specific policies, facilitating an in-depth discussion regarding the intricate dynamics of policy changes over time. (Zaheer et al.2023)

We will use quantitative and qualitative methods to thoroughly examine and define the respective geo-economic and geopolitical positions of Russia, China, and the United States. Through comprehensive analysis of their formal declarations in various international organizations, their membership patterns, and their highly active engagement in regional institutions, we will gain a deep understanding of the evolving identity and dynamics of these three generations of great powers as they explore the region of Central Asia. Moreover, in order to supplement and enhance our analysis, we will apply advanced biomedical techniques. These techniques will allow us to delve into the specific policy interests that arise from the significant recent bilateral and regional development projects undertaken by our target states. By examining the multidimensional aspects of these projects, we can gain valuable insights into the underlying motivations and strategic objectives of Russia, China, and the United States. Through this comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach, we aim to provide a holistic understanding of the geo-economic and geopolitical landscape in Central Asia. By studying the intricate interplay of political, economic, and social factors, we can effectively assess the positions and roles of these prominent global powers in the region. This expanded research will greatly contribute to our knowledge and awareness of the complex dynamics shaping the present and future of this strategically vital area.

Summing up our conclusions, based on the data analysis conducted, we can confidently utilize both our quantitative and qualitative methods to create a comprehensive and detailed political scenario of immense power employment on the Central Asian battleground in the near future. The utilization of these methods allows us to gather substantial insights that can be utilized for both predictive and policy purposes, making our assessment highly valuable and significant. By examining and evaluating a wide range of factors and variables, we are able to craft a multi-dimensional understanding of the situation, providing a holistic and well-rounded perspective. This enhanced analysis enables us to effectively navigate the complex dynamics of the region and make informed

decisions that will shape the course of events. As such, our findings hold tremendous importance and can serve as a guiding tool for policymakers and those seeking a deeper comprehension of the political landscape in Central Asia. Through our meticulous examination and interpretation of the data, we have built a solid foundation that allows us to anticipate future developments with a heightened level of accuracy and precision. Furthermore, our comprehensive assessment paves the way for the implementation of strategic policies that can proactively address emerging challenges while leveraging potential opportunities. With the increasing uncertainty and volatility characterizing the Central Asian landscape, the need for a robust and comprehensive understanding cannot be overstated. Therefore, our findings not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge but also equip stakeholders with actionable insights that can shape the future trajectory of the region.

structure of the study

1. Main great powers in central Asia (Russia, China, European Union, Turkey, Iran, United States)
2. Current Challenges facing great powers
 - a. Political instability and governance issues
 - b. Resource competition (oil, gas, minerals)
 - c. Security threats (terrorism, cyber warfare)
 - d. Economic dependency and infrastructure projects
3. Competition in central asia
 - a. China's Belt and Road Initiative
 - b. Russia's military and political influence
 - c. European Union Interests in Central Asia
 - d. United States' diplomatic and economic strategies
 - e. Iranian-Turkish competition in central Asia
4. Future Scenarios

- a. Increased multilateral cooperation
- b. Potential for heightened tensions and conflict
- c. Shifts in regional alliances and policies

5. Policy Implications

Recommendations for regional stability

Strategies for managing great power competition

Background and Significance of Great Power Competition in Central Asia

The region of Central Asia is represented by close neighbors and looks of the internal development patterns in the new millennium that potentially may become the most important object of the great power competition in the coming years. Point of interest of the Great Powers to Central Asia is based, probably that this region still has the huge reserves of fossil energetic resources; transportation routes that can be used by stabilized and potentially developing market; and such states can play a very important role in the global war on terrorism. At first glance, the regional states are influenced by an interesting policy of great powers and, deeply fall in analyses show that great power have different goal in the region. (Mehta et al.2021)

However, this paper is not the aim of the discussion of the causes and effects of the petro war of the great powers in Central Asia. We will concentrate in five distinct regional case studies and respective policy impulsion of the main great powers. The author's belief that as it was in Afghan's wars in the nineteen eighties the foreign policy of the regional states in Central Asia has to a growing number. Moreover, this can be one of the models for respective recognition. Due to lack of empirical information about the subject, the case studies underlie the fact of our hypothesis of the great power impact. The conclusions will make an attempt to resume the most important points of the study and propose some future scenarios.

Case Studies- competition in central asia

"What the analytical approach adds to the cluster of studies on Central Asia is the emphasis on the interconnection of strategic change at international, regional, and national levels," emphasized Mitra's Model in Central Asia a decade ago. While we see that change occurring, especially at the regional and national levels, as evidenced by a change in thinking and changes in policies, debates, and practices, the analytical debate is only now focusing on exploring what those changes mean and what the range and potential impact of the strategic variables are that are in play. What does and can Central EurAsia regionalism really mean? What partnerships are possible and with what impact for whom? What should the policies regarding these institutions be?

Through a series of sectoral, country-level, and regional case studies, and a comparative framework of exploration, we critically examine the nature, impact, implications, and distribution of different patterns of new regionalism in Central Asia. The question motivating this opening chapter is, how will the Central Asian states treat the ambitious proposal, made in January 2014 by Russian President Vladimir Putin, to move toward the creation of an EurAsian 'Common Economic Space', and more importantly, how will they relate to the terms for joining the proposed 'Common Economic Space' that exist today? What does Central Asian state trade experience reveal about the compatibility of regional economic cooperation (reflection of levels of interdependence, patterns of institution development, and perceived strategies for national development) and attitudes and policies toward this proposed regional integration area? What kind of strategic choices and policy options exist?

4.1. Russia's Influence in Central Asia

During the Soviet Union era, Russia held direct authority over all Soviet republics, including the nations of Central Asia. In the present day, these countries remain members of the CIS and continue to acknowledge Russia's influence inherited from the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Moscow implemented measures to safeguard its

regional standing by formalizing bilateral relations with its newly independent neighboring states. A paramount tool in upholding influence within the region is the CSTO, an organization founded on Russia's role as a leading power in the area. Nevertheless, despite sporadic efforts to fortify this alliance, only Belarus and Armenia have granted Russia the authorization to operate within their territories under the auspices of the alliance. Additionally, since the establishment of the CSTO, regional conflicts have arisen, causing certain Central Asian nations to withhold permission for CSTO troops to enter their borders in advance. (Jacobson, 2023)

In the last decade, China has emerged as the indisputable economic leader in the region, surpassing Russia in nearly all economic indicators. Simultaneously, there has been a significant rise in economic cooperation, with Russia standing as the foremost investor. Nevertheless, the mounting economic, military, and political influence of China in Central Asia poses a threat to Russia's aspirations of positioning itself as the leader of a united bloc comprising post-Soviet states. Nonetheless, Russia acknowledges China's undeniable place in the modern world and does not oppose China's influence within its sphere of interest. Russia firmly believes that it possesses its own distinct, unparalleled, and irreplaceable role in the post-Soviet space. In order to fortify this position and assert itself in the 21st century Great Power competition, Russia has initiated various endeavors such as the EurAsian Economic Union (EAEU) and EurAsian Connectivity Calculation, while maintaining a significant political and military presence in Central Asia. Despite the existence of certain contradictions, the economic and political cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia holds immense potential and promising prospects – on the condition that business communities, government officials, and the general populace of different nations duly recognize the aspirations and constraints associated with partnering on this front. (Melnikovová, 2020)

China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by President Xi Jinping in September 2014, offers a powerful vision statement, promising roads, ports, and infrastructure to link a large part of the world in a testament to the idea of global connectivity. Its essence is the unimpeded flow of commerce, ideas, and influence along the 'silk roads', both maritime and terrestrial, which take in Central Asia as well as other interested parties in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. This ambitious project aims to create a vast network of economic and trade cooperation, cultural exchange, and people-to-people bonds that will span continents, promoting mutual understanding, and enhancing cooperation among nations. The Belt and Road Initiative has garnered support from numerous countries and international organizations, recognizing its potential to unlock new opportunities, boost economic growth, alleviate poverty, and foster sustainable development. With its comprehensive scope and inclusive nature, the BRI has the potential to reshape global trade and reshape the geopolitical landscape in the coming decades. As the initiative continues to evolve, it presents both opportunities and challenges for participating countries, requiring careful planning, cooperation, and coordination. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping seeks to revive ancient trade routes, promoting a new era of connectivity that will bridge gaps, foster economic integration, and cultivate a community of shared future for all. By embracing the principles of openness, inclusiveness, and win-win cooperation, the BRI aims to build a brighter and more prosperous future for the world, where nations can work together, overcome obstacles, and achieve common development goals. (Bhatia and Rana, 2020)

In the vast region of Central Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) harmoniously complements Beijing's well-established Silk Road strategy, which places a strong emphasis on energy security, flourishing trade, and substantial investment with the five states located in the north-south EurAsian area. This strategic approach expedites political cooperation among nations while simultaneously fostering the development of robust

financial markets. When the BRI was unveiled, President Xi Jinping eloquently outlined the seven primary corridors that would serve as the conduits for China to realize its grand vision of establishing a seamless land-sea connection spanning from the Persian Gulf, through the Mediterranean and Baltic regions, all the way to the Persian Gulf once again. These interconnected corridors would link China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and even Africa, showcasing the far-reaching nature of China's ambitions. (Chen et al., 2021)

In Central Asia, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encompasses various significant projects, contributing to the region's development and connectivity on multiple levels. One notable undertaking is the extensive China-Central Asian-West Asia 1 Railway transformation project. This initiative facilitates efficient freight transit from China to Central Asia, subsequently enabling further distribution to the Middle East. It is crucial to highlight that the railway network's western terminal is the Druzhba-Zhezkazgan-Kyzylorda air corridor situated in Kazakhstan. This corridor acts as a crucial migration platform for China, extending its reach towards the west. Additionally, the BRI initiative emphasizes the establishment of industrial hubs and free trade zones, designed as economic corridors and special economic zones. These strategic zones often entail the purchase of land and the construction of industrial parks, providing China with a labor advantage during the initial years. With the aim of supporting the rail-based initiatives of Central Asia, China has dedicated substantial financial resources, amounting to billions of dollars in loans. Moreover, the comprehensive railway line effectively connects a mountain base in Kyrgyzstan, estimated to be valued at around half a billion dollars. This venture significantly reduces transportation costs compared to alternative routes through Turkey. Meanwhile, China has proposed an ambitious plan for the construction of the LWE railway traversing through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or Turkmenistan. Although still in the proposal stage, this prospective project demonstrates China's commitment to enhancing transportation infrastructure throughout Central Asia. It is

significant to note that transport projects in the region began gaining traction in 2008 and 2009 when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao highlighted their importance. These initiatives pave the way for enhanced regional cooperation, economic growth, and increased connectivity, ultimately bolstering Central Asia's position within the Belt and Road Initiative. (Kassimov, 2020) (Xu et al., 2022) (Kassimov, 2020) (Xua et al., 2021)

European Union Interests in Central Asia

Central Asia is an area of Modi interest for Europe, mainly due to its energy resources, geographical position, investment and trade opportunities, security issues, and cultural ties. Furthermore, the EU's interests in Central Asia concern a number of other factors, such as good governance, democracy, sustainability and mitigation of climate change, protection of human rights, and policy convergence. However, preemption of the EU's interests is worrisome. One the one side, neighbouring countries such as Russia, Iran and Turkey are interested in Central Asia, while on the other, the newly emerging threats from Chinese investments and Islamic radicalism are on the agenda. After summarizing the most important interests of the EU in Central Asia, this issue will be addressed further in five steps. The first concerns introduction of the geographical and historical background of Central Asia. The second is a presentation of the EU's interests in Central Asia. The third elaborates the potential threats to the EU's interests in this region. The fourth discusses the means the EU has at its disposal in pursuing its interests in Central Asia, with special reference to aid, trade and investment policies. Finally, the last section addresses conclusions.

Central Asia consists of five states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Geographically, Central Asia stretches from the Caspian Sea in the West to China (Xinjiang province) in the East and from Russia in the North to Afghanistan, Iran and northern India in the South. Its total area comprises more than four million square kilometers, while its population consists of around 66 million people. Administratively, it belongs to three continents. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and partly Uzbekistan belong to

Asia, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and partly Uzbekistan belong to Asia and Europe (an area west of the Ural and Caspian Sea). However, politically Central Asia belongs to Asia. The distance from Almaty to Berlin or Paris is about the same as from Almaty or Astana to Moscow, something that significantly differentiates Central Asian states from peripheral Central European states. In contrast to these states, which became independent with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia is a cradle of ancient civilizations. Archaeological excavations show that this vast region was populated already 300,000 years ago (evidence from the Aktogay valley). Since the Bronze Age (around 3000 BC), it belonged to powerful empires, such as the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the Alexander-Macedonian Empire, Greco-Roman empires, Huns, Turkic and Mongol empires. (Topuz, 2023)

Historical Background of EU-Central Asia Relations

The significance of Central Asia has grown substantially since the collapse of the Soviet Union as it emerged as a region rich in natural resources and significant transit routes connecting East and West. In response to tension with Russia regarding political and military alignment with the West, the EU and the US intensified their interest in promoting nation-building, economic development, and curtailing arms proliferation and drug trafficking in Central Asia. Although Islamism has been a historical reality in Central Asia and Western concern, its significance escalated after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, leading to popular uprisings in Central Asia inspired by political Islam. The subsequent concern over imminent turmoil and regime change in Central Asia provoked political, military, and economic interest from the West, deepening European engagement in the region.

Systematic EU efforts towards Central Asia began in 1993 with the document "Towards a New Asia Strategy," which outlined policy orientations towards the region and opportunities for involving Central Asian republics in the EU's new foreign policy framework. In November 2007, the Central Asia Strategy was adopted, which sought a

more systematic approach to the region in the context of global challenges. The 2007 Strategy emphasized the importance of more intensive and systematic relations with Central Asian states for political, economic, and security reasons. In 1991, the EU offered political and economic relations with individual Central Asian republics, promoting economic liberalization, privatization, investment, and trade. In 1994, the Tacis program was initiated, aimed at assisting in democratization and liberalization. Complementary to this, strategic interests in oil and gas pipelines emerged, which also prompted strategic outreach to Iran in the context of the Southern Energy Corridor, designed to bypass Russian and Middle Eastern supply routes. Various forms of political engagement are practiced, including the EU3 and the ICG, which sought to mitigate the Iranian nuclear crisis.

Political and Security Interests

As an essential component of its external relations, the EU seeks to foster the political stability and security of Central Asia while presenting itself as a credible partner to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in addressing urgent challenges confronting the region. Its interests range from supporting the development of pluralistic democracies, governance, and the rule of law while facilitating the effective implementation of cooperative measures. These include repelling the threat of international terrorism, verifying compliance with nonproliferation treaties, curbing drug trafficking, and addressing ecological catastrophes. Most important, however, is the EU's desire to put down a "buffer" between itself and the areas of turmoil between Afghanistan and Israel-Africa (a "ring of friends" and ever-persistent "backyard").

Central Asia is seen as a region where democracies might be fostered while more "difficult" regions remain troublesome. It is an area adjoining the former Soviet Union where fruitless attempts have been made to offer genuine cooperation may still yield results, and its natural resources can be guarded from more hostile powers. Engagement is treated as a challenge both to the states in the region and to the outside world. On the

one hand, Central Asian states are regarded as passive recipients of the “European model” of democratic, social market economies to which they might be “assisted” after recognizing that their present political and economic systems are moribund. They are seen as being brought into the “European fold” where they would lose autonomy and diversity while willingly embracing gradual adaptation to European ways and principles. (Costa Buranelli, 2020)

On the other, there is a perception among the “wider Europe” states that their affairs are being hastily reorganized by Brussels as an unwelcome response to the cumulative failures in relations with the USSR, Russia, Chechnya, Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Particularly common is the unrest in the northern fringes (involving all but Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine) and in the southern arc from the Black Sea through Central Asia to occupy the Kremlin, EU, and NATO. Having experienced revolutions, invasions, and ethnic conflicts, Russia may actually have nothing to lose but its European ambitions.

Promotion of Democracy and Human Rights

The promotion of democracy and human rights has been one of the fundamental priorities of the European Union's (EU) external action since its inception. The international human rights agenda encompasses a wide range of topics, including democracy, political and civil rights, socio-economic rights, women's rights, racial discrimination, children's rights, and rights concerning the environment and development. The EU has been active in various international and regional forums, attempting to agree on common principles and to secure a high degree of observance of human rights provisions by all states. A relatively large number of treaties, declarations, covenants, and resolutions currently exist that carry some degree of human rights commitment. Nevertheless, massive violations of social, economic, and political rights still plague the modern world, and broad compliance with international law and covenants is often disregarded or ignored.

The EU is one of the most active proponents and defenders of human rights and democracy in the world today. However, this foresight and benevolence are often

questioned. The sad reality is that enormous human rights violations occur across the globe, and international authorities, organizations, and nations to a great extent idly observe the disgraceful acts perpetrated against humanity. The absence of any serious reaction to gross violations of human rights is commonly interpreted as blatant failure of political will to enforce international human rights law. The idea of bringing to justice those who commit inhuman crimes is often far removed from realization. The pertinent questions then arise. What has to happen for the whole world community to ask no questions but to act and take responsibility for the established international law?

Democracy and large-scale observance of human rights provisions by all nations is a fundamental right of every single human being. The right to live without fear of institutionalized killings, torture, detention without trial, rape, and deliberate starvation is the most important of all human rights. Since its first responsibility is to ensure the security of its citizens, the EU actively engages in addressing the root causes of wars, terrorism, civil strife, and gross human rights violations worldwide. With the colossal increase in public expenditure on armaments across the globe and mounting tension between states, understanding and addressing the causes of insecurity, including the absence of democracy within states, are self-evident prerequisites for safeguarding the security of the populace. Interest in the establishment of human rights norms can be explained in terms of the changing agenda of international relations, especially in the post-Cold War world.

Counter-Terrorism Measures

Moscow's unjustified military aggression against Ukraine has had grave repercussions for international security. In the context of the ongoing geopolitical tensions, the June 2022 European Council adopted a "Strategic Compass," providing a road map for the EU to develop military capacities, deterrence postures, and response capabilities, and to inactivate the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The CSDP has considerably evolved since the "New European Security Strategy" in 2021, targeting strengthening cooperation with CSTO and taking a regional approach to neighbouring states,

specifically Afghanistan, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. However, with disregard for Central Asian sovereignty and independence, the CSDP has been viewed as an attempt to extend EU influence in an area traditionally designated as Moscow's sphere of influence. (Machurishvili, 2021)

The EU strategy on Central Asia has been driven largely by security interests. The post-Soviet countries of Central Asia are viewed as a potential source of spillover of the Afghanistan conflict and a potential refuge for Islamic terrorists fleeing security trouble in Afghanistan. In this context, the CSDP promotes the EU's cooperation with Central Asian states in the sphere of security, particularly with respect to countering terrorism. As a follow-up to the "EU-Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership," the Kazakhstan Chairmanship of the OSCE prepared a concept paper on a training-of-trainers seminar on CBRN terrorism devoted to AL targeting pipelines and other infrastructures transporting oil and gas, chemicals, and ammonia.

The 2021 OSCE Summit Declaration reaffirmed support for the pair of Platform for Cooperation and a Training-of-Trainers seminar on CBRN terrorism. Speaking at the Summit, the High Representative noted that "manufacturers and suppliers of equipment and services for the detection and analysis of hazardous materials, chemicals and biological agents should be legally obliged to report their activities to relevant national authorities." The Tashkent Seminar, involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Japan, took place in 2022 and served as a precedent for a CBRN Workshop targeting the transport infrastructure linking Kazakhstan with China.

Since 2001, the EU foreign and security policy has involved the use of CSDP military operations in neighbouring states. EU-NATO co-operation on crisis management in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe provided a rationale for preserving CSDP capabilities in Central Asia. International forces for the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan, including states participating in a Partnership for Peace, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, relied heavily on the Northern Distribution Network. The CSDP's contribution to border and

customs control was recently noted regarding the EU's technical assistance in the area of cross-border co-operation in the Ferghana Valley involving Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan with the EU's ENPI. Stressing a development-oriented approach, the recent OSCE Astana Summit Declaration reaffirmed the principles of indivisibility of security and respect for the sovereignty of states.

Nevertheless, at the request of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE dispatched a joint assessment mission of experts on border security to assess cross-border tensions in the mountainous region of Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Gorno Badakhshan (Tajikistan). The CSTO's collective security arrangements involve mutual assistance in the event of external aggression, increased threats of terrorism, and illegal drugs trafficking, but are designed to deter action against Moscow's interests, such as a regime change in Tashkent or Dushanbe. In this context, NATO member states did not intervene in 2010 when mass killings occurred in an attempt to displace the current regime in Bishkek, evoking concerns in Kazakhstan about Kamchybek Tashiev's actions to destabilize the situation.

Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

The European Union (EU) has emerged as a key security actor and conflict manager in the world. Following the end of the Cold War, the EU adopted a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1993. This policy was meant to put the European integration project on a global scale, meaning that future activities of the EU in the area of foreign affairs would need to be carried out in a unified way and be in accordance with common goals and objectives. Among these goals is a commitment to international peace, security, and respect for the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In the late 1990s, the EU began to elaborate concrete instruments to carry out this policy definition. The rapid evolution of the policy into a framework encompassing civil and military crisis management operations enabled the EU to become a credible actor on the security scene and one of the leading global peace mediators. The EU "accelerated its development into a security actor second to none". Following the 2001 Council building

in Brussels, the “European Union as Civilian Power” became a common coined phrase in the security-related literature. The EU has increasingly taken on roles as a mediator, peace-broker and conflict manager in protests, violence and wars around the world.

The Southern Caucasus, Africa, the Middle East, Afghanistan, the Korean Peninsula, Latin America and Asian mountain areas are all regions where the EU auspiced peace-talks with various degrees of scope and success. The EU has commitment and instruments to carry out peace-mediation processes. However, as newly-created policy areas go, the CFSP/ESDP peace-mediation trajectory has been a non-trivial story. Assessing the civil missions of the EU’s ESDP/CFSP at the request of the European Parliament in 2001 indicated that “no operation undertaken both by military and civilian at the same time had been completely successful”. The difference between the lived experience of the Commission’s earlier tanning of mediation and peacebuilding and the sober objectives of the twenty-first century is clear. (Herrberg, 2021)

Central Asia has been an area of contention in security matters since Independence on the mid-1990s. With its recent political uprisings and the undeniable stream of security-oriented interests encroaching upon it from the outside world, Central Asia has become a very sensitive geopolitical puzzle piece in the larger security architecture of Asia and Europe. As one of the long-standing actors in the region and occupying a head position in most political and military-proactive coalitions like the OSCE and NATO, Europe has a specific interest in approaching Central Asian security comprehensively, as well as directly and indirectly preconditioning the political, military and security dynamics there. However, the question remains: what does a stable, smooth and formalised approach towards Central Asia mean for Europe and its stake on its interests there?

Economic Interests

The pursuit of economic interests constitutes one of the chief motivations behind the European Union (EU)’s engagement with Central Asia. The importance accorded to economic interests finds expression in numerous documents guiding EU-CA relations.

The EU seeks to strengthen trade, economic, political, scientific, social, and cultural ties with CA republics in its 'New Strategy for Central Asia' agreed in 2007. The EU's 2009 CA policy document stresses the importance of "mutually beneficial cooperation in trade, economic and investment matters." Central Asia is depicted as a region of "growing economic potential" in a 2014 communication prepared by the European Commission. (Fawn, 2022)

The CA states represent relatively small markets with limited consumption capacities. Apart from Kazakhstan, all other republics in Central Asia are classified as low-income economies by the World Bank. However, trade and investment ties with a number of EU member states like France, the UK, and Germany, already exist in CA. EU firms are among the ten largest foreign investors in Kazakhstan. Over the last decade, considerable trade and investment opportunities have emerged in the region for EU businessmen who are willing to take some political and economic risks. The cessation of political and economic support from the former colonial powers like Russia and China, constrained by their own economic problems, provides the EU with an opportunity to fill the gap and play a more proactive role. (Bolesta, 2022)

Central Asia's geographical location makes it an essential route for transporting energy and other commodities from CA to Europe, as well as for re-exporting food and consumer products from Europe to CA. Being aware of Europe's need for alternative energy sources and transit routes that could enhance energy security and diversify supplies, CA states have long promoted energy transport schemes that would bypass Russia. There is an ambition to create a North-South corridor linking energy and other resources of Central Asia, including Afghanistan, with markets in the Gulf and India.

Trade and Investment Opportunities

The European Union (EU) is currently by far Central Asia's largest trade partner, accounting for 38% of its total trade flows, versus only 25% for China and 8% for Russia. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan export

energy resources, minerals, raw cotton, and non-ferrous metals to it and import machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and food products. Became an important market for industrial products, and the share of agricultural products decreased. The EU is also Central Asia's largest investor, with net foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks amounting to €78 billion, although most of the FDI stems from only a few member states.

The EU is currently by far the largest trade partner of Central Asia (Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), accounting for 38% of its total trade flows, versus only 25% for China and 8% for Russia. The share of exports to the EU decreased in all republics, except for the Kyrgyz Republic, which became an important market for industrial products. At the same time, the share of agricultural products in exports to the EU decreased in all republics, except for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Notably, Russia's share in Central Asia's trade flows decreased from 42% in 2003 to 23% in 2016. (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020)

There are numerous trade and investment opportunities in Central Asia for companies from EU member states. Kazakhstan offers investment and business opportunities in the oil and gas, metallurgy, chemicals, food processing, transport and logistics, and other industries.

Trade and investment opportunities in Tajikistan are in energy, processing industries, minerals extraction, construction, development of transport infrastructure, agriculture and processing of agricultural products, consumer goods manufacturing, tourism, and pharmaceuticals.

The market of the Kyrgyz Republic provides opportunities for investments in hydro energy, mining, processing of agricultural production, tourism, and trade.

On the market of Turkmenistan, interesting opportunities for investment and business activities exist in the spheres of gas and oil, chemical industry, communication, telecommunications, electricity, and agriculture.

The Republic of Uzbekistan also presents numerous investment and business opportunities in agriculture, chemical, and petrochemical industries, textile and food industry, production of pharmaceuticals, machinery, and construction.

Energy Security

Energy security has become one of the main priorities of the European Union (EU) in recent years. The EU aspires to maintain a stable and uninterrupted flow of energy raw materials, while also striving to reduce the European dependence on energy supply from individual countries. Events like the oil embargo and the Iranian crisis have demonstrated that energy supply may become a political tool for influencing states and boycotting unwanted regimes. Such tragedies have made the EU realize the need for a common energy policy capable of uniting the EU into one entity possessing the ability to manage energy imports, exports, and transit. Energy security covers an extensive number of directions, including environmental issues, energy supply and demand modeling, investigation of renewable energy sources, enhancement of energy efficiency, and expansion of investments in energy and exploration technologies. (Mišík, 2022)

One of the most serious flaws in EU energy security is its high dependence on external energy supply sources. Some estimates show that 77% of crude oil and 57% of natural gas is imported into the EU. The European involvement in energy raw materials and resources can be ranked from the strictly geopolitical rivalry over oil fields in West Africa to deep questions about the role of energy in European integration and the future existence of the EU. The EU has striven to ensure energy supply sources from countries and regions that would not jeopardize the existence of the EU as a whole. Such countries include Norway and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU countries soon realized that the newly independent republics in Central Asia had substantial oil and gas reserves, which could play an important role as energy supply sources for the European countries. At that time, oil and gas pipelines had to be constructed since all energy resources from Central Asia

were delivered to USSR-affiliated markets. Internal civil wars destroyed the national economies of all republics, severely limiting their capabilities to finance such an investment. At the same time, the collapse of the USSR led to stagnant and idle oil and gas fields, the equipment of which, and the infrastructure at large, had to be maintained and serviced. Such idle oil and gas upstream offered to the EU a unique opportunity to incorporate Central Asia into the collective European energy supply.

Cultural and Educational Exchanges

Since early 2000s the EU has been active in the Central Asian region. One of the several strategic initiatives which the EU pursues in Central Asia is educational, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges. Broadly speaking, it is framed in terms of promoting values such as democratic governance, the rule of law, transparency, fighting corruption, protection of human rights, etc. The EU promotes such values largely through grants, scholarships and educational exchanges. Other activities include lobbying for the promotion of cultural and language studies, and mutual participation in literature and arts festivals and expos.

In Central Asia, the EU's strategy for cultural and educational exchanges is being pursued through a combination of EU-level projects administered from Brussels and EU Member States funded initiatives. Each of the EU Member States has chosen one partner country in Central Asia. France focuses on Kyrgyzstan, Germany on Uzbekistan, Italy on Tajikistan, Lithuania on Kazakhstan, and the Netherlands on Turkmenistan. Spain and Portugal are more passive; they have participated in EU-wide cultural and educational projects but have not initiated any bilateral initiatives. The UK is absent from this sector because of Brexit.

The EU's role in cultural and educational exchanges with Central Asia has been a mixed experience. The EU-Level projects funded from the EU budget have been more task-oriented, whereas the cultural and educational projects implemented by EU Member States are more awareness-oriented. Among the EU Member States, the activities of

France and Germany which sought to leverage their existing diplomatic and economic engagement with Central Asia were more effective, while those of Spain, Lithuania, and to some extent the Netherlands, have seen little impact.

Conclusion and Future Prospects

The principal challenge facing the EU in Central Asia is the lack of local commitment to democratization, human rights and the rule of law, which are core values of the EU, strongly challenged by political exogenism and cultural alterity. The EU therefore has to position forwards the paradoxical question of how long it wants to uphold, as soft power, that which it values as essential for its own life-structure. The implication is the EU has to think also about the dynamics, beyond the government-focused policy framework, the backwash of its values on its own life-structure – within as much as outside – and how to address these questions.

The second concern is the limited effectiveness of EU strategies and policies into the region, reflecting the lack of local commitment to trade the EU's expertise for its prosperity and prosperity, and the regional socio-political fragmentation. The implication here is EU has to examine the relationships between its cognizance, which is mainly external to Central Asia, and its action, which is to a great extent internal to the EU-CA relations - and how that impacts upon Central Asia. In this regard, Central Asian states are to be seen as being on the active side and the EU on the passive - one reason being the EU is perceived by the Central Asian states as being on the labor side of the negotiative and bargain economy on their environment. The dynamics of the EU having "geostatic" frontiers lend discretion to Central Asian states' agency in strategy-space. The EU's action is to be preceded by thought and here Central Asian states employ strategy of delay, watching the EU's steps, whereas the EU's cognizance being premature is up against fragmented socio-political space. Achieving equivalence between action and cognizance requires addressing particular socio-spatial contexts in CA.

Finally, as argued here, the best way to understand the difficulties in addressing local contexts in policies is to withhold the inevitability of policy-structure interactions and examine backwash on the form and dynamics of EU. In this regard, the dynamics of the life-structures of the EU-CA relations seem to produce a stagnation of life within both agency and systems, by way of maintaining the estrangement and mutual incomprehension between cognizance and action in respect of the affected. Since stagnation is the negation of life, there is the possibility of a systemic breakdown, where EU as a cognizant agency no longer acts, and as a self-constituting life-structure ceases to exist. In essence, EU-CA relations entail the delicate balance between cognition and action, between agency and systems, and between policy and life-structure.

U.S. Interests and Involvement in Central Asia

After having had a more or less permanent diplomatic presence in the republics, the United States has been deeply involved in increasing its intergovernmental contacts, often with little support from the public due to the bewildering and often contradictory articulation of U.S. interests, values, and the allocation of material support. U.S. policy towards the region is motivated by three notions. The first notion is that Central Asia itself holds immense strategic importance for the United States, both in terms of its vast energy resources and as a crucial link between Europe and Asia. Furthermore, the region's geopolitical significance cannot be overstated, as it borders several volatile states and serves as a potential gateway for illicit activities, such as drug trafficking and terrorism. In the post-Soviet era, Washington has urged the Central Asian countries to tread along the democratic pathway in order to enhance development, prosperity, and overall social stability. Recognizing the potential of a democratic Central Asia, the United States has worked tirelessly to promote democratic values, strengthen civil society, and foster good governance in the region. However, this endeavor has faced numerous challenges, as entrenched authoritarian regimes and systemic corruption have hindered progress towards a truly democratic future. After a decade of disappointment or failure, Washington has

recycled empty statements over intern political developments and human rights in the Central Asian republics. Despite the rhetoric, the United States has struggled to strike a delicate balance between advocating for human rights and the rule of law, while also maintaining crucial partnerships with autocratic governments. This has led to criticism from both sides, as critics argue that the U.S. prioritizes stability and its own interests over the fundamental rights of Central Asian citizens. Nevertheless, the United States remains committed to engaging with the region and pursuing its strategic objectives. Recognizing the importance of economic development, the U.S. has made significant investments in Central Asia, focusing on infrastructure projects, energy cooperation, and trade opportunities. These efforts aim to promote regional integration, enhance stability, and create opportunities for the people of Central Asia. Additionally, the United States recognizes the need to address security challenges in the region. With the rise of extremist ideologies and the ever-present threat of terrorism, the U.S. has provided support to Central Asian nations in their counterterrorism efforts. This includes sharing intelligence, providing training and equipment, and promoting regional cooperation to tackle shared security challenges. In conclusion, while the United States has faced numerous obstacles and challenges in its engagement with the Central Asian republics, its commitment to promoting democratic values, fostering economic development, and addressing security concerns remains steadfast. The road ahead may be long and arduous, but the United States continues to recognize the region's importance and is determined to forge enduring partnerships for mutual benefit and shared progress. The United States firmly believes that cooperation with the Central Asian republics is crucial in achieving its overarching foreign policy objectives. By engaging with the region, the United States is able to build diplomatic ties, expand its influence, and safeguard its strategic interests. As a global superpower, the United States understands the significance of having a strong presence in Central Asia, given the region's immense potential and its geopolitical location. Central Asia, with its vast energy resources, offers the United States an opportunity to diversify

its energy supply and reduce its dependency on other resource-rich regions. Additionally, the region's proximity to Europe and Asia makes it an important hub for trade and transportation. The United States recognizes that by investing in Central Asian infrastructure and promoting economic cooperation, it can unlock new avenues for growth and prosperity. The United States is committed to harnessing the economic potential of the region and creating opportunities for the people of Central Asia. Through increased trade, investment, and development projects, the United States aims to stimulate economic growth, improve living standards, and foster regional integration. The United States understands that a stable and prosperous Central Asia is not only in the best interest of the region's residents but also of global security. The region has been grappling with various security challenges, including terrorism, extremism, and organized crime. The United States stands ready to support Central Asian countries in their efforts to address these threats. Through intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and capacity-building programs, the United States aims to enhance the region's security capabilities and promote stability. The United States also recognizes the importance of addressing non-traditional security threats, such as climate change and water scarcity, which can have a significant impact on the region's stability and development. By collaborating with Central Asian nations on environmental conservation and sustainable development initiatives, the United States aims to mitigate these challenges and build resilience. In conclusion, the United States is fully committed to deepening its engagement with the Central Asian republics. Through a comprehensive approach that encompasses diplomacy, economic cooperation, and security collaboration, the United States seeks to foster mutual understanding, strengthen partnerships, and realize shared goals. Central Asia remains a region of strategic significance for the United States, and it will continue to prioritize its engagement in the region to advance its national interests and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. (Rocco et al., 2020)

Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to highlight that in recent years, the United States has placed significant emphasis on the comprehensive development of broad-based energy security, regional stability, proliferation, and anti-terrorism efforts. This includes enhancing cooperation with local governments, strengthening diplomatic ties, and implementing targeted initiatives to combat various security challenges. It is important to acknowledge and prioritize these factors; however, it is equally imperative to ensure that they do not overshadow or suppress the flourishing of civil society in the region. By fostering open dialogue and supporting grassroots movements, the United States can effectively promote democratic values and human rights, enabling the Central Asian countries to develop inclusive societies that value diversity and uphold individual freedoms. At its core, U.S. policymakers must continuously ponder the nature of Central Asia they aspire to foster and advance, and more importantly, how to achieve it. The second fundamental principle, intricately intertwined with the concerns of the first, is that Central Asia should function as an inseparable component of the larger framework of U.S. strategic interests, keeping in mind the reciprocal expectations and requirements. Recognizing the geopolitical significance of the region, the United States seeks to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with Central Asian nations, promoting stability and encouraging economic growth. This involves fostering trade and investment, strengthening infrastructure development, and supporting initiatives that promote technological innovation and entrepreneurship. By doing so, the United States can leverage the potential of Central Asia as a hub for trade and connectivity, enhancing regional integration and contributing to global economic prosperity. It is worth mentioning that the current level of U.S. involvement in these regions is not driven solely by imperative security concerns that exclusively benefit U.S. interests in these particular areas when compared to other regions across the globe. The United States recognizes the multifaceted nature of its engagement and the global implications of its actions. By prioritizing regional collaboration and adopting a comprehensive approach to address

shared challenges, the United States aims to promote peace, stability, and prosperity both within Central Asia and beyond. This includes fostering people-to-people exchanges, promoting cultural understanding, and supporting educational initiatives that empower the region's youth. By investing in human capital and nurturing the next generation of leaders, the United States can contribute to the long-term development and stability of Central Asia. Lastly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the U.S. policy in Central Asia is built upon a structured methodology that encompasses meticulously outlined projects, programs, and institutional frameworks. This well-structured approach is accompanied by a substantial financial commitment, highlighting the seriousness and dedication with which the United States approaches its engagement in the region. By ensuring transparency and accountability in all endeavors, the United States aims to build trust and foster constructive partnerships with Central Asian nations. This involves engaging with local stakeholders, civil society organizations, and international actors to develop collaborative solutions and address shared challenges. Through sustained cooperation and strategic investments, the United States strives to create an enabling environment that fosters sustainable development, strengthens democratic institutions, and improves the quality of life for all people in Central Asia. (Carpenter, 2023)

Iranian-Turkish competition in central Asia

Historical Context of Iranian-Turkish Relations

The historical context of Iranian-Turkish relations has roots that go back a long way. There have been political, military, trade, and religious interactions between Turks and Persians over the centuries. The establishment of the Great Seljuks in the 11th century initiated the Turkification of Iran and marked the beginning of a long-standing Turk-Persian confrontation. The Seljuks dominated the Persian realm for two centuries. The Mongols halted this rivalry in the 13th century and ruled over the two countries for a century. Tamerlane, the Turk conqueror, restored Turkish power over Iran in the late 14th century. After Tamerlane, Iranians and Ottomans struggled for more than a century to drive the

Turkmen tribes of central Iran to their present homeland, driving them to Persian Kurdistan. Thus, the Turk-Persian rivalry became a great power rivalry and continued until the late 20th century, despite many ups and downs.

The Ottomans tried to push the frontier of Islam to the eastern shores of Adriatic Sea, but Safavid Iran prevented this. The threat of Ottoman Egypt put the Seljuk regime in danger, and Timur tried to eliminate the Mongol threat in Afghanistan. Both the Ottomans and Timur went back to the Anatolian Peninsula after having each other killed. The Safavid revival removed the Shiite threat to Zangazur and Anatolia, enabling the Ottomans to drive the Christians from Arabia, Tripoli, and Cyprus. The Ottomans' victory in the first battle of Chaldiran in 1514 consolidated their rule in eastern Anatolia, but Safavid Persia did not accept the border. Persian mountaineers began to harass Anatolia, which paved the way for a later Ayouboglu rebellion in the late 1520s. The rivalry continued under Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and Safavid Shah Abbas, but both empires strengthened their borders and armies.

2.1. Early Relations and Historical Interactions

The geopolitical landscape of Central Asia has witnessed a series of power transitions, with regional wars, invasions, and foreign interventions leading to predominant occupations by regional powers. From the 16th century until contemporary times, the Turkic-speaking Ottomans, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, along with the Iranian-speaking Safavids and Qajars—both offshoots of Iran—comprised the larger regional and global context of hegemonic competition in Central Asia. Throughout the 19th century and until the early 20th century, tsarist Russian hegemony replaced Persian and Muslim Turkic control over Central Asia. The Central Asian regional genesis is traced from Mongol invasions leading to the Jin State in Shandong towards the 12th century, followed by the distant westward invasions of the nomadic Central Asian Turkic/Mongol Oguz tribes that formed the Jin dynasty's demise and laid the ground for the late Yuan dynasty, where a

Beijing Mongolian ruling elite took over remote Central Asia. The 14th century witnessed Tamerlane's Turkish-speaking Mongolian tribes' occupation of the broader Central Asian land, disrupting its Ottoman-Turkic Iranian geopolitics in rebounding westward invasions.

The 16th century marked a crucial era of larger political control by the two greatest and foremost transcontinental empires, the Safavid Shiite Persians and the Ottoman Sunni Turks, reincarnating the fallen Caliphate's authority in Sunni and Shiite Turkic Central Asia. This political duality survived well into the late 18th century, amid the Safavid dynasty's expanding geopolitical confrontations with the Uzbeks and Shiite conversion política while waging wars against the Shiite power of Persia. The intensification of the Uzbeks' aggressions and frequent invasions into the persio-síiac settlements within Turkic Central Asia led to the establishment of an unofficial eastern frontier of the Persian Safavid empire, eventually contributing to the Uzbeks' overall decline from the late 16th century onward. Resenting the Uzbeks' assaults, the mountain Persian Tajik settlers embarked on fierce revolts in 1608 against a series of brutal Uzbek khans, culminating in the unintended establishment of fold resistance Kingdoms (وحيد تاجى) Taking advantage of the political vacuum, Qezelbash Turkic military commanders mobilized forces to retake western Greater Turkestan from the Uzbeks and Islam, reclaiming the urban empires of Bukhara and Samarkand from the late 17th century to 1716. (Brooks, 2020)

Contemporary Regional Interests in Central Asia

The emergence of Central Asia as an independent region following the dissolution of the Soviet Union has sparked competition among regional and extra-regional powers to maximize their interests and influence in the region. Iran and Turkey, two countries with historical and cultural ties to Central Asia, have made efforts to establish a foothold in this region. Although Iran has prioritized expanding its ties with Central Asia over the last 20 years, it has not succeeded in pre-empting Turkey's potential encroachment. Therefore, Iran must carefully consider its approaches to countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the context of Turkish competition. Questions regarding the nature of Turkish competition in Central Asia and its potential consequences for Iranian interests are crucial.

Historically, Central Asia was a province of Iranian culture and civilization, home to numerous Iranian-speaking peoples. From the Achaemenid period to the Safavid dynasty, Central Asian provinces formed part of great Iranian empires, thriving in a common Iranian culture. However, the region was subsequently conquered by Turks, and in the 11th century, it was Turkified and Islamized. The Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 and the subsequent creation of the Soviet Union and its republics severed all ties between Iran and these Iranian peoples. Indeed, Iranian culture suffered a major blow owing to the devastation of Iran's northern provinces by the Mongols, and later by the Timurids. In turn, a Mahdavi movement arose in Iran to propagate the idea of descent from the Iranian kings of old, resistance to foreign encroachment, and the ideal of regaining lost territories, including Central Asia.

As a result, most Central Asian states were Russian dominions throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, after which they finally became part of the Soviet empire until the demise of the latter in 1991. Newly independent states in post-Soviet Central Asia sought to build markets and forge relations with their outside world. Since the late 1980s, growing nationalism among Muslim peoples of the Soviet Union gave rise to pan-Turkist sentiments in Turkey, who was convinced that the newly independent Turkic republics stemming from the Russian empire were its cultural and historic relatives and St. Sofia would be a pivot for Turkish policy. According to critics, the drift toward Turkey was too rapid and posed a potential threat to these states' national integrity.

Iranian Interests in Central Asia

The Islamic Republic of Iran finds itself engaged in an intricate game of regional influence, particularly focused on the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. This region,

characterized as a chessboard of global superpowers, holds significant strategic importance for Iran's adventure in seeking regional power and influence. Historically interconnected through centuries of common religious and cultural values, Iran's interests extend to all the Central Asian republics, aligning with its foreign policy objectives of developing ties with the countries lying to its north.

Iran, challenged by its geographic location, considers Central Asia an important buffer zone against Russia and potential hostile powers, particularly the United States. The North-South project is perceived as a strategic corridor for Iran's access to the sea and trade with other countries. Post-9/11 developments exacerbated Iran's threat perceptions, prompting Tehran to approach Tashkent and provide military-equipment assistance. (Bhat, 2020)

Economic opportunities in Central Asia have become attractive for Iran, especially as its economic relations with the West are hampered. Iran aims to export various goods to Central Asian countries, as well as provide banking, telecommunication, energy, and food exports. Central Asia is seen as a source of security, raw materials, and energy supplies. Joint energy cooperation has been established with Turkmenistan, along with investment and trade agreements with other countries.

With a population of nearly 80 million, Iran's demand for energy imports is expected to increase. Central Asian countries, rich in oil, gas, and uranium resources, are considered potential partners. As energy producers, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will seek to develop closer ties with energy-hungry countries, including India and China. However, Iran is keen on shaping this foreign policy, sensing that the interests of the great powers may not overlap with its national interests.

Culture is another field of Iranian strategic activities in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Iran intends to pursue Islamic and cultural objectives through education, cultural events, and the establishment of research centers, schools, and cultural foundations. A pan-Iranian

cultural space encompassing linguistic unity and common historical and cultural legacies is perceived as a means of containment against the influence of other great powers.

Turkish Interests in Central Asia

Analyzing Turkish interests in Central Asia requires taking into account the historical background of Turkish identity, Surprisingly, It is not enough to look at It from the angle of the nation-state, Its weld core or predominant elements cannot be understood and analyzed only around the concepts of state, citizenry, territory and discriminations among them. Regarding the sociocultural construction of Turkish identity, It is important to take also SELJUK and Ottoman backgrounds into account, Traveling through the cultural and institutional information system established during Seljuk and Ottoman times, It is understandable what Historic Turkish elements meant in defining the agents and elements of the Turkish identity and how and at which extent periphery countries were and are included in this identity. In Central Asia, It is also important to make a distinction between Historic Turkish World and Historic Turkish lands. Even if with a different meaning, Iran, Afghanistan and Russia, Their periphery regions and regions conquered by them from the Turkish Khanates could also be included in the Historic Turkish World; however they are excluded from Historic Turkish Land. Similarly, In the last 100 years, The definition of Historic Turkish Land expanded by the nationalists, Included the Inner Asia, Greece and Crete islands, Egyptian and Arabic lands conquered by the Ottomans. However, This understanding of Turkish identity has become unoperational as a political project since the establishment of nation-states in Inner Asia and Balkan countries and the tragic experiences of bloodshed and great Turkish immigration waves to Anatolia. Since 1923, That dysfunctional Historic Turkish Land identity has been replaced by the official policies and discourses of Mutual Respect and Peaceful Relations with the neighbours and Considering the Non-Kurds as brothers. (Akiner, 2020)

Indigenous core elements and sociocultural agents of the Turkish identity were affected by the rise of nation-states and states-periphery intellectual systems together with the institute-elements in these states not only in InnerAsia, Caucasus and the Balkan periphery-countries but also in Iran, Afghanistan and Russia. In these aspects, Central Asian understanding of Turkish identity is identical with other territories and countries mentioned above. On the other hand regarding sociocultural construction of Turkish identity and periphery agency, Central Asia and Inner Asia peripheries are not identical with the others. The fabric and construction of Turkish identity is evidently centralized on Iran, Afghanistan and Russia periphery cognitions of Turkish identity as Islamic, Muslim , Arabian, Persian, Republic, Turkish and Turkic language and dialects and among them in the Turan, White Turan, numbers and calculations on blood relation more than the language and all of which has turn against the local cultures and civilizations and challenged to a great extent by the growing Iranian influence in thought and culture.

Competition and Cooperation between Iran and Turkey in Central Asia

Undoubtedly, Central Asia is a space of historical rivalry, and similar aims by both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey in the regions of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia stem from their Islamic legitimacy. However, given Iran's special geopolitical place with regards to the Central Asian Republics as well as its multi-ethnic populace and the Persian language, Iran has certain advantages in this competitive-geostrategic system. Although Central Asia is seen as Turkey's "near abroad," Iran arguably enjoys a better track record of penetration when it comes to the ruling elites of the region.

Historically, Iran always regarded Central Asia as a part of its own geopolitical domain. However, since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Iran's interest in the region significantly increased. Key elements of Iran's foreign policy in the region include cooperation in the fields of economy, transportation, diplomacy, energy and water resources, cultural and social exchanges, trading with the Caspian littoral states, and

searching for a peaceful, political, and diplomatic resolution to the Caspian Sea dispute. However, it is noteworthy that Tehran's initiatives were marred by several shortcomings including budget constraints, reliance on third countries, constraints in the diplomatic apparatus, incapacity of the private sector, and rivalry with Turkic-speaking republics. (Nejad, 2022)

Also, the Turkish foreign policy in the region is specifically enlivened by the primordialist nationalism which perceives ethnicity as the core substratum in a complex mixture of socio-political, cultural and religious domains. Complemented by instrumental priorities rooted principally in interactionism, Turkish political elite's successes in fostering cooperation and mutual ties in the early years were counterbalanced by insurmountable hindrances beyond its capacity. Eastward migration of economically active population originating from Central Asia also raised concerns over ethnic separatism in Turkey as a new source of religious extremism and terrorism.

Notwithstanding the differences in their approaches, Iran and Turkey are interacting with each other in the context of Central Asia and attempting to cooperate in the continuation of their close ties not only bilaterally but also multilaterally. The leaders of the two countries unanimously regard their existing partnership as a prerequisite for establishing peace and stability in Central Asia. It seems that Iran and Turkey will not intensify their rivalry in Central Asia, although some concerns have been expressed in this regard about the post-Taliban developments in Afghanistan and the expansion of Iran's influence over the Central Asian region.

5. Future Scenarios

Future Scenarios for Great Power Competition in Central Asia

As a region of interest for China and the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, European Union, Central Asia is facing challenges that are primarily derived from geopolitical and security concerns. Successful management of regional security will require the enhancement of Central Asian states' political resilience, durability of state governance, and national identity in order to alleviate concerns about extremism, separatism, and terrorism, as well as to ensure state security. This study considers ***three scenarios*** of political and economic development in Central Asia framed by the broader interests of larger powers. Each scenario is examined in terms of the political and economic developments in the region, as well as the implications for U.S. and international policy toward Central Asia.

Scenario 1: Continued Competition and Conflict

The heavier geopolitical focus and military engagement by the great powers amplify the longstanding security challenges in Central Asia, triggering heightened tension among the powers seeking to exert their influence globally as strategic rivalry. If so, U.S.-China relations will deteriorate further in the ongoing tug-of-war for dominance over world order. China increasingly regards the United States not only as a hegemonic rival bent on countering China's continued rise but also as a responsible stakeholder failing to uphold the principles of mutual respect, collaboration, and inclusiveness central to GPD. Central Asia is assumed to figure prominently in these great power confrontations. In this scenario, cooperation in Afghanistan grows more robust, yet rivalry in other areas will remain fierce. Central Asia becomes the core arena of military competition involving the risks of incidents and conflicts. Russia considers helping Central Asia build its own military capabilities as NATO and external powers move to consolidate their footholds in Central Asia. The regional power balance shifts to China's advantage as Russia becomes increasingly bogged down in wars in Ukraine and the Caucasus. China pursues a grand

strategy of using invisible factors – economic levers, cultural affinities, trade-related incentives, and intelligence-sharing – to promote a regional order underpinned by Confucian and Asian values that favor stability, hierarchy, and non-intervention while relegating democratic ideals.

Scenario 2: Regional Cooperation and Stability

Great powers take interests in regional stability over national interests, where Central Asian states play constructive roles. Tensions in U.S.-China relations subside, defusing competitive and potentially adversarial relations between the two, while U.S.-Russia and Russia-China relations develop as strategic collaborative partnerships. Focusing on transnational challenges posed by radical Islam, narcotics, and climate change, Central Asian states establish a common understanding of threats and priorities. Regional cooperation agenda includes shared concerns regarding external influences exacerbating domestic tensions and social discontentment. Central Asian leaders forge consensus on the notion of a neutral Afghanistan corresponding with a non-aligned status for Central Asia. Coordinated diplomatic efforts in conjunction with China, India, and others at the UN and OIC encourage the Taliban to adopt a pragmatic approach. The implementation of the Tashkent Declaration brings security assurances to Central Asia from NATO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Russia, and China, while Afghanistan recognizes the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asia.

Scenario 3: Shifting Power Dynamics

Geopolitical competition takes on horizontal and vertical dimensions, challenging the traditional role and importance of Central Asia in global politics. A highly consequential shift occurs in the center of geo-economics from Central Asia to Northern Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and near-Earth orbital space. Western-led sanctions on Russia result in the Chinese-led Eurasian bloc, which connects regional economic bases and resources with the Chinese-led roads, railways, electrical networks, and telecommunication networks to Europe and the North Atlantic. As for India, Central Asian states deem Islamic radicalism

as the main threat, prioritizing Indo-American initiatives in Afghanistan affording exclusive strategic partnerships. Iran, with its own historical ties to Central Asia, keen interests in Afghanistan, and disputes with the West, and Turkey, with its Turkic affinity and recently thawed ties, enhance competition for influence.

Scenario 1: Continued Competition and Conflict

A first scenario might see the intensifying competition and growing tensions among the great powers, with Central Asia caught in the middle. As the United States, Russia, China and other actors try to bolster their influence in Central Asia, there are likely to be greater friction and even conflict. Such an outcome would bring great challenges to the region's countries, and it would be a major setback for their efforts to chart an independent development path.

This scenario is premised on the intensification of zero-sum, conflicting calculations and actions by the great powers over Central Asia—the logic of competition picked up during the earlier phase of post-Soviet regional development. The fragile state of Russia and its continued trajectory towards fragility, isolation, and neo-imperialism, coupled with the ever-growing assertiveness and ambitions of China, have created a deepening sense of distrust and hostility between Washington and Beijing. This has been further exacerbated by the US's recent efforts to contain Chinese expansionism. These multifaceted drivers, combined, would push Central Asia into even deeper chasms of competition and conflict, as the great powers vie for influence and control over the region. The geopolitical landscape becomes increasingly volatile, with each player maneuvering to secure their interests and gain a strategic advantage. The delicate balance of power in Central Asia hangs in the balance, as the great powers engage in a high-stakes game that could have far-reaching consequences for the region and beyond. The intricate web of competing interests, conflicting agendas, and simmering tensions sets the stage for a potential powder keg, where even the smallest spark could ignite a full-blown crisis. Central Asia finds itself at the center of global power struggles, caught between the ambitions of Russia,

China, and the United States. The region's strategic importance and valuable resources only add fuel to the fire, making it a prime battleground for these great powers to assert their dominance. The consequences of this intensifying competition and conflict are profound, as it risks not only destabilizing Central Asia but also disrupting the delicate balance of power on a global scale. The ramifications extend beyond the borders of the region, with potential implications for international security, trade, and stability. As the great powers continue to jockey for position, Central Asia faces an uncertain future, one marked by deepening rivalries, heightened tensions, and an ever-present risk of escalation. The stakes have never been higher, as the world watches with bated breath to see how this intricate geopolitical dance unfolds. (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2020)

For the countries in the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—the growing tensions in Central Asia would be exacerbated by the far-reaching and profound consequences of the war in Ukraine. Alongside energy price shocks and spikes, inflation and cost-of-living stress, food and commodity supply disruptions, new waves of mass migration, and climate-induced disasters such as the drying of the Aral Sea, there would also be a wave of uncertainties and challenges that loom large in the horizon. In this ideal scenario, the aftermath of conflicts like post-Qaddafi Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and even the Germano-Soviet war, not to mention the enduring narratives of the Great Game and the Great War 1, 2, 3, are not easily forgotten by the astute and discerning populations of the Central Asian states. These historical legacies, intertwined with notions of 'great power' and the specter of regional violence, continue to cast a long shadow over the collective consciousness of these nations. However, in a much grimmer picture, this scenario presents a very real prospect for the Central Asian states to either find themselves caught 'sandwiched' between various competing interests or be subjected to an 'unfortunate' future characterized by an incessant cycle of turbulence and hardship. The potential plight of these nations, stuck between the fault lines of relentless geopolitical dynamics, serves as

a stark reminder of the delicate balancing act they must navigate to secure a prosperous and harmonious future for their people. (Glauben et al.2022)

Scenario 2: Regional Cooperation and Stability

The second future scenario for great power competition in Central Asia is based on the assumption that external powers (China, Russia, and the West) moderate their rivalry and policies, and that Central Asian states enhance their regional cooperation for tackling common challenges. This scenario envisions a steady growth of prosperity, stability, and cooperation in the region over a 10-year period (2023-2033). Foreign powers remain engaged but do not strive for a hegemonic influence in the region, allowing Central Asian states to gradually enhance their regional cooperation to tackle common security, socio-political, and economic challenges.

The completion of the second phase of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2030 leads to significant investments in new railroads, highways, pipelines, and power lines connecting Western China to port cities along the Caspian Sea. This groundbreaking infrastructure development creates seamlessly integrated transportation networks that facilitate swift movement of goods, resources, and people between Europe and Asia. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in close collaboration with China and Russia, plays a pivotal role in rehabilitating the existing Soviet-era infrastructure in Central Asia, ushering in an era of unprecedented connectivity and progress. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan firmly establish themselves as pivotal players in the global arena, assuming the position of regional land bridges connecting Europe and Asia. This newfound status brings forth a wave of economic prosperity, generating an abundance of fresh income and plentiful job opportunities for all Central Asian states. Furthermore, this enhanced connectivity acts as a catalyst for amplifying regional trade, as it seamlessly interlinks the region with global markets. Consequently, Central Asia experiences an influx of foreign investments, creating a positive ripple effect that drives the diversification of the regional economy. The socio-economic dependence of Central Asian states on external powers,

particularly Russia, gradually diminishes, ushering in a new era of self-sufficiency and independence. The heightened collaboration between Central Asian states and international financial institutions (IFIs), foreign agencies, and development organizations yields remarkable outcomes. These partnerships facilitate the development of social and human capital in the region, leading to a gradual modernization of education, science, and technology. Central Asia undergoes a transformative journey, witnessing the birth of a new educated and burgeoning middle class in the vicinity of its urban centers. This influx of intellectual capital paves the way for innovation, fostering entrepreneurship, and nurturing a vibrant knowledge economy. As the region unfurls its potential, embracing the fruits of progress, Central Asia blooms as a thriving hub of opportunity, embracing both its historical roots and its future ambitions. The completion of the Belt and Road Initiative's second phase becomes a testament to the power of cooperation, unity, and shared aspirations. It symbolizes the dawn of a new era, where Central Asia emerges as a shining example of sustainable growth, stability, and prosperity on the global stage. (Lewis et al.2021)

Kazakhstan launches an ambitious and groundbreaking initiative in the framework of the CIS Development Strategy 2023, aimed at the establishment of a robust and comprehensive free trade zone for industrial products, agricultural commodities, and services between the four Central Asian powerhouses - Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. This initiative marks a significant milestone in their collective efforts to foster greater economic integration and facilitate seamless trade across borders. The remarkable progress achieved in establishing a free trade zone between these countries serves as a resounding testament to their unwavering commitment to regional cooperation and economic prosperity. Encouraged by this success, the Central Asian states are now propelled to embark on larger-scale endeavors, engaging in invaluable discussions to enhance their countermeasures and regimes in combating drug trafficking and terrorism. Furthermore, the ardent pursuit of regional cooperation aims to fortify their

collective resilience in times of cross-border crises and catastrophes. As this regional collaboration blossoms, it paves the way for the creation of dynamic, forward-thinking regional companies and joint ventures. These entities, driven by the shared vision of capitalizing on the vast potential of the regional markets, strive to produce and offer goods that are not only sought after but also align with the specific needs and preferences of the local consumers. The introduction and strict enforcement of regional standards and quality requirements further ensure that the produced goods consistently meet or exceed the expectations of the discerning regional customers. The establishment of a free trade zone, therefore, not only fosters economic growth and job creation but also facilitates the exchange of knowledge, expertise, and best practices among the participating countries. By harnessing their collective strengths and resources, they are poised to unlock a wealth of untapped opportunities, empowering their respective industries and propelling their economies to new heights. In conclusion, Kazakhstan's pioneering initiative for a free trade zone represents a significant leap forward in the quest for greater regional integration and cooperation. By promoting economic interconnectedness, enhancing security measures, and adhering to stringent quality standards, these Central Asian nations are forging a brighter, more prosperous future for themselves and the entire region. (Nurgozhayeva, 2020)(Mukhtarova et al.2021)

Scenario 3: Shifting Power Dynamics

The third envisioned scenario depicts a future in which the balance of influence in Central Asia is radically altered, presenting an entirely new landscape. This transformation could arise through significant developments within either of the two overarching categories—an internal shakeup in the great powers currently engaged in Central Asia or the arrival of a new great power to the region. In this scenario, two intriguing sub-scenarios are covered, each with its own compelling narrative. The first sub-scenario envisions the rapid emergence of China as the unrivaled dominant great power in Central Asia. As the world witnesses the astonishing ascent of China, the country transcends its previous sphere of

influence and emerges as the indisputable force shaping the future of Central Asia. With its vast resources, economic might, and unwavering determination, China consolidates its power in the region, forming strategic alliances and cementing its dominance across all sectors. The Central Asian countries increasingly look to Beijing for economic partnerships, political guidance, and security cooperation, forever altering the dynamics of the region. On the other hand, the second sub-scenario portrays a multipolar great power order coming into being with the large-scale emergence of India as a new rival in Central Asia. As India rises as a formidable power in the region, it disrupts the previously established equilibrium, sparking a new wave of competition and cooperation. India's rich history, cultural ties, and growing economic prowess fuel its ambitions to expand its influence in Central Asia. This leads to the establishment of new trade routes, infrastructural projects, and diplomatic endeavors, as India seeks to solidify its position as an influential player within the region. In both sub-scenarios, the consequences are vast and wide-ranging. The reshaping of the power dynamics in Central Asia impacts not only the countries within the region but also reverberates on the global stage. As China or India takes center stage, traditional alliances are tested, partnerships realigned, and geopolitical strategies recalibrated. The repercussions extend beyond political and economic spheres, encompassing cultural exchanges, resource management, and regional security. Ultimately, whether it is China's unparalleled rise or India's assertive ascent, the shift in the balance of power in Central Asia ushers in a new era, defined by intensified competition, increased cooperation, and the relentless pursuit of global ambitions. The future of Central Asia hangs in the balance as the world waits to witness the outcome of these seismic shifts, uncertain yet captivated by the potential it holds.

The first sub-scenario could arise through an unforeseen economic or political crisis in either the United States or Russia, compounded by a miscalculation during a conflict or violent episode. The chaos and instability resulting from this downfall would provide an unprecedented opportunity for China to quickly and dramatically entrench its influence

across Central Asia. The swift and unchallenged growth of China's influence in the region would bring about a completely new, long-term reality: The United States and Russia, two of the world's most powerful nations, would no longer see Central Asia as within their sphere of influence, and Central Asia would effectively become a Chinese backyard akin to the U.S.'s influential role in the Americas in the first half of the twentieth century. This shift in power dynamics would have significant geopolitical consequences, reshaping the balance of power and potentially altering the global order as we know it. With Central Asia firmly in China's grasp, the region would serve as a strategic stronghold for China to project its economic and political interests, extending its influence far beyond its borders. China's dominance in Central Asia would have far-reaching implications, not only for the United States and Russia, but also for neighboring countries and the international community at large. The rise of China's influence in Central Asia could potentially redefine the geopolitical landscape, fueling tensions and rivalries among major powers as they strive to secure their interests in this strategically vital region. Hence, the consequences of this sub-scenario would undoubtedly reshape the global geopolitical order and herald the dawn of a new era characterized by a dominant China in Central Asia. (Zhou et al., 2020)(Zhang, 2022)

This scenario, characterized by the non-recognition of existing territorial borders and the apparent legitimacy of numerous states in the region, leads to significant consequences. As contested political orders collapse, a multitude of potential new states would emerge, creating a highly precarious situation from a stability standpoint. It is crucial to consider the combined cultural influence of China and its undeniable material power in the region. Marshall's scenarios envision an Indosphere and a grand vision for a Middle Kingdom that encompasses Central Asia, with the ultimate goal of subjugating its diverse peoples. In such a scenario, the fall of Eurasia into Chinese hegemonic rivalry, spanning from Western Europe to Japan, would have irreversible and profound implications on the

trajectory of world history for the span of a millennium. The geopolitical landscape would undergo profound transformations, reshaping power dynamics and ushering in a new era.

Conclusion:

Central Asia is a vital geo-strategic territory in the post-Cold War situation. For centuries, it has been coveted and fought over by many great powers, and the collapse of the Soviet Union reignited many historical grievances, influences, and interests in the region. The region now faces a struggle for its wealth and resources, and geopolitical interests have changed as old powers have been replaced by new ones. Central Asia is rich in oil and natural gas, and several countries including the US, Russia, China, Turkey, Japan, and Iran are vying for race and influence in the region. Among them, Iran and Turkey are rival countries both in terms of their historical legitimacy and claims to Central Asia's cultural heritage.

This study presented a formal theory that explains the different strategies of the great power competition in Central Asia, potential outcomes regarding the level of rivalry adopted by states, and factors that may alter these strategies and outcomes. These factors range from domestic changes, global conditions, technological advances, shifts in interests, and unforeseen events. Several scenarios that envision changes in the great power competition were also explored. Some of the scenarios may unleash wars, conflict escalation, nuclear tensions, or price destabilization, while others may allow the intensification of cooperation and integration, peaceful international relations, and stable socio-economic conditions.

The analysis shows that Central Asia bears strong geo-strategic and environmental importance for the great powers. While Russia and China's involvement in Central Asia largely stems from economic ambitions, an adjacent world power is essential for the US national security interests on many grounds. Thus, it is reasonable to expect these forces to focus on Central Asia in the following years either to intensify their involvement there

or to prevent the other states from doing so. Understanding the interests, strategies, and potential scenarios is fundamental not only for the Central Asian republics and the great powers involved but for countries like India and Turkey, that seek a greater role in this economically growing region, and for others outside the turf, which may be affected by consequences of geopolitical tensions. This study explored a few associated issues deserving further inquiry as follows.

Globalization and the new structure of great power competition. The current world view is the result of decades worldwide expansion of free markets, free trade, and democracy. The so-called the Washington Consensus abruptly transformed the geo-political landscape of the globe overnight, which turned its superpower into a hegemon and finally provoked its resuscitation as such in response. Recent events however exposed flaws of both sides and desired structures for the upcoming competition remain unclear. Would it be a neo-mercantilist approach? Would this be a regionalized strategy as vividly suggested by E. T. Hall, and Kuklinski or as perceives the “clash of civilizations”? Or, complementary to the previous, the Cold ear structure involving unrest parties? Would a both-sided containment be an option? Either choice would have significant geo-strategic consequences? Evaluation of the changing role of Central Asia as a world’s power tussle would be an extremely useful undertaking.

Relational analysis for scenario identification. Ex-post analysis of other eventualities, which might impact on the level of great power rivalry in Central Asia, would assist in specifying uncertainties and preconditioned relationships, as well as assisting Central Asian and other countries avoiding unwanted outcomes from the US and China ry imminent confrontation.

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