
THE ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN MODERN GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

The relevance of this article is primarily determined by the rapidly growing significance of Central Asia (CA) in contemporary international relations, serving as a crossroads of interests for the world's major actors — Russia, the USA, China, the EU, Turkey, etc. — and, simultaneously, as a field of interaction, mutual penetration, and clash of values among the world's major civilizations and political systems. Central Asia is not only a key region on the world map, the control of which allows for the management of global hydrocarbon transit and other strategic raw materials for the largest economies (primarily China) and, consequently, influences their economic growth, overall power, and directions of expansion. Central Asia is a crossroads of civilizations, control over which, as believed for centuries, enables dominance over the world. This exceptional geopolitical significance of the region remains relevant today.

Firstly, the importance of the Central Asian and Caspian region as one of the most rapidly developing areas for global hydrocarbon extraction and transportation is increasing sharply. Secondly, the Central Asian region is already increasingly becoming a potential arena for clashes of interests among global players.

Overall, despite a certain degree of existing research on issues related in one way or another to the role and position of Central Asia in the system of international relations, the conceptual, institutional, and technological aspects of the transformation of international relations in the region remain underexplored in both domestic and foreign political science. On one hand, there is a solid methodological foundation and a substantial body of empirical material for studying the position of Central Asia in the international system. On the other hand, many important questions in this area still require theoretical reflection. Furthermore, the formation of positions on specific aspects or issues of the study is directly influenced by the current state and ongoing development of the situation around the region and its main actors.

The object of this study is the Central Asian region, which today serves as a center where the geopolitical, military-strategic, and economic interests of major powers — Russia, USA, EU, China, and Turkey — intersect.

The subject of the study is the political configuration of international relations in Central Asia, arising from the competition among the leading world powers — Russia, USA, EU, China, and Turkey — for political influence in the region and control over its strategic resources, as well as the foreign policy and relations of the Central Asian states with these actors.

Accordingly, based on the object and subject of the study, the aim of this article is to determine the role and position of the Central Asian region in the system of contemporary international relations in the context of the active pursuit of national interests by the leading global powers in the region.

Key words: Central Asia, Geostrategic Region, Geopolitics, International Security, China, Russia, USA, EU, Turkey, Post-Soviet Space.

Introduction

The Central Asian region occupies a distinctive place in the architecture of contemporary international relations and geopolitics (Van den Bosch et al., 2021). Although relatively small in size, the region is rich in energy resources and is therefore crucial to the geopolitical future and stability of the Asian continent (Khan & Koch, 2023; Central Asia's Growing Partnership with China, n.d.). The transformation of the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—into full-fledged members of the international community has constituted a positive factor in strengthening their national statehood.

At the present stage, particular attention has been drawn to issues related to collective security systems and regional integration in Central Asia, including the participation of regional states in regional organizations and the determination of key vectors for the development of interaction with major global actors within the geopolitical space (Competition of World Powers in Central Asia, 2019; Wilson Center, 2025).

Theoretical Background

Scholarly attention to the transformation of Central Asian states, their involvement in global and regional processes, accession to international organizations, and the prospects for future cooperation has been evident among academics, analysts, and experts from various countries, regardless of their direct affiliation with the region (Van den Bosch et al., 2021; Hiro, 2009). Contemporary scholars and analysts place particular emphasis on the geopolitical influences shaping the transformation of Central Asian states. A substantial body of research is devoted to the study of security and regional policies in Central Asia, as well as to specific aspects of regional integration (Uslu, 2018; Omelicheva, n.d.). Security-related and economic dimensions of regional integration have been partially addressed in the works of Western researchers. However, there remains a clear need for a comprehensive study of the impact of external factors and decisions on Central Asian countries, their determining role at the regional and geopolitical levels, and the dynamics of their regional integration across various spheres (Khan & Koch, 2023).

This article aims to analyze the challenges and prospects of interaction between the Central Asian states and leading global powers. It seeks to examine the state of geopolitical competition in Central Asia, trace the transformation of the foreign policy strategies of key international actors — China, Russia, the United States, the European Union, and Turkey — in the region, and present possible scenarios for the development of geopolitical dynamics surrounding Central Asia.

Data and Methods

This study is based on a qualitative analytical approach and has a conceptual and review-oriented character. Its empirical foundation consists of secondary sources, which makes it possible to comprehensively analyze the role of Central Asia in the contemporary system of international relations without employing quantitative modeling.

The information base of the study includes: (1) scholarly publications and monographs on geopolitics, international security, and regional studies of Central Asia; (2) analytical reports and policy papers produced by leading international research centers and think tanks; (3) official strategic and program documents of key external actors—China, the Russian Federation, the United States, the European Union, and Turkey—as well as materials related to multilateral formats of regional cooperation; and (4) open-source statistical and factual data used to contextualize selected arguments.

The methodological framework is grounded in systemic and comparative analysis, which are applied to examine Central Asia as an integrated geostrategic region and to compare the strategies and instruments of influence of major external actors. In addition, content analysis of strategic documents and official narratives is used to identify changes in approaches to the region under

conditions of transformation of the global security environment. To formulate assessments of regional development prospects, an analytical scenario-based approach is employed, drawing on the generalization of existing trends.

The selected methods provide an adequate basis for capturing the complexity and dynamism of geopolitical processes in Central Asia. At the same time, a limitation of the study lies in the absence of empirical testing of causal relationships using quantitative tools.

Results

Recent geopolitical developments indicate that the world is currently experiencing a process of global regionalization across political, economic, and social spheres. Geostrategic regions are acquiring global significance in political, economic, resource-related, and security terms.

In this regard, Central Asia constitutes an important geostrategic factor in international relations. Accordingly, it is becoming increasingly evident that Central Asia is forming its own agenda and steadily asserting itself as a consolidated, active, and forward-looking region (Van den Bosch et al., 2021). In the near term, the region's strategy is likely to rest on two interrelated pillars: the expansion of constructive external relations and the qualitative deepening of integration processes among the countries of the region.

The countries of Central Asia do not engage in geopolitical balancing for its own sake. Each state acts as an independent actor, clearly articulating, safeguarding, and pursuing its national interests. Their multi-vector foreign policy (Multi-Vectoral Approach as the Key Model of Central Asian Countries' Foreign Policy, 2023) is driven by pragmatic objectives, including the strengthening of sovereignty, the promotion of sustainable economic development, and the prevention of regional spillover effects from confrontations among major powers. In this context, the selection of external partners is determined not by ideological considerations, but by demonstrated readiness for mutual respect and long-term cooperation.

Against the backdrop of escalating geopolitical tensions and global economic disruptions, Central Asia has become increasingly engaged in diplomatic and external economic activities, more frequently presenting a coordinated position, particularly in international fora. The "Central Asia +" format occupies a distinct place, reflecting both heightened international interest in the region and the willingness of external actors to pursue mutually beneficial cooperation (Wilson Center, 2025). In line with traditions of consensus-oriented governance, the five Central Asian states approach dialogue in a gradual and measured manner, seeking to build partnerships based on equality.

Traditionally regarded as a peripheral region, Central Asia is now confronted with an increasingly complex geopolitical environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the region's international agenda, revealing new risks as well as opportunities. At the same time, rising tensions between the West and China add further complexity to Central Asia's relations with its principal external partners.

The central issue addressed in this article concerns the extent to which changes in the geopolitical landscape influence Central Asia's international engagement and the sustainability of its growing role. Amid intensified military and economic rivalries among major powers, Central Asia appears to be attracting increasing international attention. These developments coincide with a rise in regional cooperation, indicating the potential emergence of a new phase in the region's international relations.

The article contends that, while the current geopolitical context creates favorable conditions for enhancing Central Asia's international role, expectations should remain measured. The primary drivers of geopolitical change lie outside the region and are therefore largely dependent on the policies of external powers. Furthermore, although regional cooperation in Central Asia appears more promising than in previous periods, it has not yet produced substantial outcomes. The article

first outlines the evolving geopolitical context, then examines the region's efforts to advance regional cooperation, and finally assesses existing cooperation frameworks, offering conclusions and forward-looking assessments regarding the region's development prospects in the near term.

Features of the Geopolitical Development of the Central Asian Region

For much of the post-Soviet period, Central Asia remained on the periphery of global international affairs. During the 1990s, the region was largely perceived as Russia's "backyard". By the late 1990s, as tensions between Russia and the West gradually surfaced, analysts increasingly viewed Central Asia as a theater of broader geopolitical confrontation or as part of the so-called "Great Game", reflecting the prevailing perception that the region lacked significant independent international agency.

However, a number of developments in recent years have reshaped international relations and altered Central Asia's position within global geopolitics. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, sent shockwaves across the post-Soviet space, with particularly profound implications for Central Asia. Sharing long land borders with Russia, Central Asian states interpreted Russia's actions in Ukraine as a disregard for international law and the principle of state sovereignty. In other words, the region was confronted with the possibility that post-1991 borders could be challenged. In this context, the broad international condemnation of Russia's aggression and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions constituted both a challenge and an opportunity for Central Asia. Given its political and economic ties with Russia—and, above all, its geographic proximity—Central Asia has little choice but to carefully balance the maintenance of cooperative relations with Russia while simultaneously keeping a prudent distance from it.

Against this background, the analysis below examines the role, position, and prospects of the Central Asian states and the region as a whole through the prism of their interaction with key international actors operating in the region, namely China, Russia, the United States, the European Union, and Turkey.

Historically, the **Russian Federation** has played a dominant role in Central Asia—first as a metropolitan power during the Tsarist and Soviet periods, and after 1991 as a key post-imperial actor. Its role has been shaped across three principal dimensions (Omeliicheva, n.d.; Uslu, 2018; Hiro, 2009).

First, the political and security dimension, in which Russia positions itself as a guarantor of regional security. This role is manifested through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a mechanism of military-political integration, the presence of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and coordination in combating terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Nevertheless, developments in recent years—including instability in Afghanistan, Russia's war against Ukraine, and the CSTO's limited response to regional crises—have undermined confidence in Russia as an unconditional security provider.

Second, the economic dimension. Russia remains an important economic partner, serving as a key labor market for migrant workers from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a significant actor in energy cooperation, including oil, gas, and nuclear energy. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) also functions as an instrument of Russian economic influence. At the same time, Russia's economic role is increasingly characterized by asymmetry and stagnation, particularly when compared to the scale and dynamism of Chinese investment and infrastructure projects in the region.

Third, the cultural and humanitarian dimension. The Russian language, education system, media, and shared historical memory continue to constitute important elements of Russia's soft power in Central Asia. However, gradual processes of de-Russification are underway, accompanied by the strengthening of national languages and identities. Younger generations are increasingly less inclined to view Russia as a central civilizational reference point.

At the same time, within the current regional configuration, the Russian Federation is no longer the uncontested leader of Central Asia, but rather one of several competing external actors.

A multi-vector model of foreign relations is taking shape in Central Asia, within which China dominates in the economic and infrastructure domains; Turkey is expanding its cultural-ideological and military-technical influence; the United States and the European Union operate primarily through a “soft presence,” focusing on education, energy transition, and governance; and Russia increasingly acts as an actor of inertial influence, relying on legacies of the past.

In turn, Russia’s war against Ukraine has significantly constrained Moscow’s capabilities in the region. This has resulted in the reorientation of Central Asian resources away from Russia toward Western and southern strategic directions, a decline in Russia’s financial and investment attractiveness, and growing caution among Central Asian elites regarding excessive dependence on Moscow. Consequently, Russia’s position is evolving from that of a regional center of gravity to that of one partner among others, with a clear tendency toward relative weakening.

Prospects of the Russian Federation in Central Asia

Short-term perspective (1–3 years): preservation of a security presence in the region; retention of leverage through migration and energy instruments; and adaptation to the role of China’s “junior partner” in Central Asia.

Medium-term perspective (3–7 years): further erosion of Russia’s monopoly on regional influence; institutional weakening of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and growing foreign policy autonomy of Central Asian states.

Long-term perspective: Russia’s future in Central Asia will largely depend on the outcomes and consequences of its war against Ukraine, its ability to offer a new, non-hierarchical model of partnership, and the level of Russia’s own internal socio-economic stability.

Under an inertia-based scenario, Russia risks becoming a secondary regional actor, retaining only selective instruments of influence without a strategic dominant position.

As a result, the Russian Federation is losing its status as an uncontested leader in Central Asia, while maintaining significant but limited influence in the areas of security and migration, yielding economic primacy to China and cultural-ideological influence to Turkey.

Russia’s prospects in the region will be determined less by its historical legacy than by its capacity to adapt to a new multipolar reality in which Central Asia increasingly acts not as an object, but as a subject of international politics.

China’s Role and Prospects in Central Asia

By contrast, China views Central Asia as a geopolitical and geo-economic priority for several key reasons. These include resources, as the region possesses substantial reserves of energy resources and minerals vital to Chinese industry, serving as a source of oil, gas, and critical raw materials; transit and logistics, given the region’s location along routes to Europe and the Middle East and its role in providing key transport and trade corridors; security considerations, as stability in Central Asia directly affects security in neighboring Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) and China’s efforts to counter extremism; and competitive dynamics, since the region was traditionally regarded as part of Russia’s sphere of influence, while China is now expanding its economic and political presence, particularly amid the weakening of Moscow’s position following the war against Ukraine (Central Asia’s Growing Partnership with China, n.d.; Khan & Koch, 2023).

Accordingly, Central Asia is important not only for China’s bilateral relations with regional states, but also for the implementation of its global strategies, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to transform the region into a key hub of transit and economic integration.

An analysis of China’s economic influence in Central Asia highlights several core characteristics. First, trade and investment ties: China has become the leading trading partner for most Central Asian countries, significantly surpassing the region’s traditional economic leader,

Russia. According to estimates by Chinese diplomatic sources, trade turnover between China and the five Central Asian states exceeded USD 106 billion in 2025 and continues to grow. Second, investment and infrastructure development: a substantial share of Chinese investment is directed toward energy, transport, logistics, and the digital sector. China has emerged as a key financier and builder of infrastructure projects, including transport corridors and railways. For example, the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway corridor is expected to significantly reduce freight transit times between China and Uzbekistan and to become an important component of transcontinental logistics networks. Additional projects further reinforce this trend.

While these investments contribute to economic growth in Central Asian states, they simultaneously generate economic dependence on Chinese capital and markets.

To ensure the effective realization of its objectives, China has systematically and strategically developed new cooperation formats, including the “Central Asia–China” summit mechanism and strategic partnership agreements aimed at strengthening political integration. In June 2025, a treaty on “permanent good-neighborliness and friendly cooperation” was signed with all five Central Asian states, formally consolidating closer political and economic ties.

China’s strategic expansion of influence in Central Asia is taking place against the backdrop of Russia’s declining traditional position, thereby creating space for Beijing to emerge as the region’s primary external actor.

At the same time, the United States and the European Union have sought to intensify their engagement in the region—for instance, through high-level political visits by Central Asian leaders to Washington—though this has thus far resulted primarily in a statistical rather than structural competition of external influences.

Nevertheless, the growing role of China in Central Asia also generates challenges and risks for the region. Economic cooperation with China is often tied to large-scale infrastructure projects and the export of raw materials, which may constrain technological development and economic diversification in Central Asian economies, leading to a structural diversification deficit.

On the one hand, Chinese investment stimulates development; on the other, it may create structural economic dependence, reducing the capacity of recipient countries to pursue independent foreign policy decisions. This constitutes a significant challenge for Central Asian states seeking to realize their own potential and pursue development paths they consider most appropriate and effective.

In light of the above, several likely prospects for China–Central Asia interaction for the period 2026–2035 can be identified. China is expected to continue expanding trade, investment, and transport corridors, with the integration of the region into global supply and logistics chains remaining a central priority. Beijing will also actively promote strategic partnership agreements and develop new cooperation mechanisms, which may eventually evolve into regional consortia involving other major powers. At the same time, the United States, the European Union, and regional actors such as Turkey or India may contribute to balancing China’s influence, fostering a multipolar architecture of cooperation.

In sum, China’s role in Central Asia has become a central driver of regional dynamics in the twenty-first century. It is expanding its economic capabilities through trade and investment, strengthening political ties and regional formats, and acting as a key player in great-power competition.

At the same time, China’s presence is associated with risks related to sovereignty, economic diversification, and the balancing of political influence. For this reason, Central Asian states are increasingly pursuing a strategy of balancing among major external partners.

For a general overview of China’s key instruments of influence in Central Asia, Table 1 presents a consolidated summary.

Table 1. Key of China's influence in Central Asia

Group of instruments	Main implementation mechanisms	Strategic goal	Implications for Central Asian countries
Economical	Trade expansion; foreign direct investment; lending through Chinese state-owned banks; settlements in yuan	Establishing a long-term economic presence; building interdependence	Economic growth; increasing dependence on the Chinese market and capital; decreasing role of traditional partners
Infrastructure (BRI)	Construction of railways and highways; oil and gas pipelines; logistics and customs hubs; digital infrastructure	Control of transit routes; integration of the region into Eurasian supply chains	Development of transport infrastructure; strengthening the transit role of the region; long-term linkage to Chinese logistics networks
Political and diplomatic	China-Central Asia format; bilateral strategic partnership agreements; principle of non-interference; elite diplomacy	Institutionalization of political influence; formation of elite loyalty	Deepening political coordination with China; limiting space for alternative geopolitical orientations
Security	Shanghai Cooperation Organization; anti-terrorism cooperation; intelligence sharing; border security	Ensuring regional stability; protecting China's western borders (Xi'an Autonomous Region)	Reducing security risks; increasing dependence on Chinese security mechanisms without a direct military presence
Social and humanitarian ("soft power")	Educational programs and grants; Confucius Institutes; cultural exchanges; information presence	Forming a positive image of the PRC; long-term impact on public sentiment	Spreading Chinese cultural and educational standards; gradually strengthening humanitarian influence
Strategically balancing	Avoiding open confrontation with the Russian Federation and the West; economic, not ideological, expansion; multi-vector approach	Consolidating the status of an "indispensable partner" in the region	Maintaining a strategic balance between external players; increasing the maneuverability of regional elites

Source: compiled by the author.

The Role of the United States in Central Asia

The United States made a significant contribution to the establishment of independence of the Central Asian states. At the same time, the core priorities of U.S. foreign policy in the region included ensuring free access to energy resources; promoting western (the construction of pipelines from Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia) and southern (Turkmenistan–Pakistan–Afghanistan–India) strategic routes for the supply of energy resources; preventing the restoration of Russian influence and containing the expansion of the People's Republic of China; countering the spread of Islamic radicalism, among other objectives (Cannon, 2025; Wilson Center, 2025).

The U.S. presence in the region increased markedly following the launch of the U.S.-led counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2014, the United States leased military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and reached agreements on military cooperation with other countries of the region. The decisive consent of Central Asian governments to provide their military facilities to the international military contingent led by the United States was driven by their awareness of the real security threats emanating from Afghan territory.

However, already in 2004–2005, relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, became strained. This was due to the “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan and the mass protests in the Uzbek city of Andijan. After the United States called for an independent investigation into the shooting of protesters in Andijan, the July 2005 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit adopted a declaration on the advisability of the continued presence of the U.S. military contingent in Central Asia. This decision provoked outrage in the U.S. House of Representatives and was perceived as an “attempt by Russia and China to push the United States out of the region”.

In July 2005, the United States redeployed its troops from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, and in 2014 it was forced to withdraw its forces from Kyrgyzstan as well. It should be noted that both Russia and China were concerned about the U.S. presence in the region and therefore welcomed the closure of the air bases. At the same time, the U.S. withdrawal from its base in Kyrgyzstan in 2014 marked a reduction in the presence of Western security forces in Central Asia.

As noted by T. Umarov, an expert at the Carnegie Center, relations between the United States and Central Asia are currently experiencing a difficult period, as the countries of the region no longer view Washington as a counterbalance to Moscow and Beijing. Nevertheless, neither the closure of U.S. air bases in Central Asia nor even the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 signifies a loss of the region’s geostrategic importance for the United States. In the case of the United States, the geostrategic factor extends to both geopolitical and economic dimensions.

Central Asia remains under the strong influence of China and Russia, while the U.S. government continues to pursue long-standing plans to implement the Trans-Caspian gas project, which would reduce Europe’s dependence on Russian gas. As early as 2015—just two years after the launch of China’s Belt and Road Initiative—the United States introduced a new format of cooperation with Central Asia, the “C5+1” (Central Asia + the United States). Kazakhstan serves as the principal U.S. foothold in the region. The share of U.S. companies in oil production in Kazakhstan amounts to approximately 30%, whereas Chinese oil companies (CNPC, Sinopec, and CITIC) account for 17%, and Russia’s Lukoil only 3%. Chevron and ExxonMobil jointly own 75 % of shares in Tengizchevroil, Kazakhstan’s largest oil-producing enterprise. These companies also hold stakes in smaller projects. U.S. companies such as Fluor, Schlumberger, and Baker Hughes provide nearly the full range of services related to oil extraction and processing.

A number of companies supply Kazakhstan with high-tech equipment for oil extraction, accounting for roughly one third of U.S. exports to the country. In addition to the oil and gas sector, hundreds of U.S. companies operate in Kazakhstan, including General Electric, Citibank, Uber, Starbucks, McDonald’s, and others. As of early 2021, the total volume of accumulated U.S. investments in Kazakhstan amounted to USD 40 billion. Nevertheless, trade turnover between the United States and Kazakhstan (USD 2 billion in 2020) remains significantly lower than that between Kazakhstan and China (USD 21.4 billion) and between Kazakhstan and Russia (USD 19 billion).

The arrival of President Donald Trump at the White House had a substantial impact on U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy identifies countering China and Russia as key rivals that “challenge American power, influence, and interests” as an imperative of U.S. foreign policy. China and Russia are classified as “revisionist states” seeking to

shape a world contrary to U.S. values and interests and to project their influence globally, including across Europe and Central Asia.

It is within this context that the “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2025” should be viewed. The Strategy contains clear messages regarding the U.S. understanding of its national interests in the region. Its guiding principle is the recognition of Central Asia as a “geostrategic region important to the national security interests of the United States, regardless of the level of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan”. The stated objectives of the Strategy include strengthening the resilience of Central Asian states to threats to their stability, enhancing their independence from “malign actors” (implicitly referring to China and Russia), and developing partnerships with the United States. The expansion of close relations and cooperation with all five Central Asian states is viewed by Washington as a means of “promoting American values” and counterbalancing the influence of neighboring regional powers.

An important component of Washington’s strategic vision for the future development of energy projects in the region is the integration of Central Asian countries with South Asia, or the creation of the so-called “Greater Central Asia”, a concept that has traditionally provoked dissatisfaction in Moscow. This approach explains the development of Central Asia’s links with Europe via the Caucasus, as well as with Afghanistan and South Asia. The essence of this project lies in limiting the influence of other regional actors by redirecting all projects involving Central Asia southward, without Russia’s participation.

Overall, against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the United States possesses significant potential to reduce Moscow’s influence in Central Asia.

The Role of the European Union in Central Asia

Another major actor in the geopolitics of the Central Asian region is the European Union. Central Asia holds significant geopolitical and geo-economic importance for the EU, as it is located between Europe and Asia, offers transit opportunities for transport corridors and trade, possesses substantial natural resources—including oil, gas, uranium, rare earths, and other critical materials—and has a young population with considerable economic growth potential. These factors render the region a strategic arena for the EU’s external policy, particularly in the context of changes in the global security architecture following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the intensification of competition among major powers (Van den Bosch et al., 2021).

The European Union has not developed stable institutional frameworks for cooperation with Central Asia comparable to the CSTO, the EAEU, the SCO, the BRI, or the C5+1 format. Nevertheless, the EU has maintained a consistent interest in the region’s energy resources since the 1990s, which has influenced the orientation of transport corridors across post-Soviet Eurasia.

The EU has pursued its objectives and priorities through its Strategy for Central Asia, initially adopted in 2007 and updated in 2019. The main goals of this strategy include enhancing resilience, promoting economic development, and fostering regional cooperation. Within this framework, the EU has implemented updated approaches to cooperation through Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with all countries of the region, expanding political, trade, and institutional collaboration.

The EU is one of the largest investors and donors in Central Asia, having invested more than €100 billion over the past decade and allocated over €550 million through regional programs for the 2021–2027 period. European projects encompass transport corridors—particularly the Trans-Caspian route (Middle Corridor)—the development of digital infrastructure, as well as energy and climate initiatives. In 2025, the first EU–Central Asia Summit took place, during which an investment package of €10–12 billion was presented, targeting transport, critical raw materials, energy, and digital services.

Alongside the implementation of economic initiatives, the EU seeks to play a significant role in shaping the regional balance of power in Central Asia, which has increasingly become a zone of interaction among major global actors. As a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which maintains a strong presence in the region through infrastructure development and transport connectivity, the EU promotes an alternative via its Global Gateway strategy—its framework for sustainable global investments, including in Central Asia. In contrast to Russia, which remains a key security actor and partner in the region, the EU aims to advance energy and logistical diversification away from Russian routes, particularly with regard to the supply of energy resources and critical materials.

Thus, for the European Union, Central Asia represents not only an economic space but also a field of strategic balancing among global influences. However, despite active cooperation in economic and infrastructure development, the CIS legacy and authoritarian tendencies in the region pose challenges to the promotion of the EU's value-based priorities, such as democracy and human rights. This has generated criticism regarding the inconsistency between economic engagement and the EU's normative principles.

In conclusion, the European Union plays an important, expanding, and multifaceted role in Central Asia. It is one of the region's leading economic partners and donors, promoting its economic interests while supporting the development of transport corridors, digitalization, green transformation, and energy diversification. Political cooperation is also expanding, albeit not without challenges arising from the complex domestic situations in Central Asian states and the influence of other major powers. In the long term, the EU's role in the region is likely to grow, provided it succeeds in balancing its economic ambitions with the advancement of the value-based components of its external policy.

Turkey's Role in Central Asia

Turkey is a historical ally of four Turkic-speaking Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Following their independence, Ankara arguably emerged as one of the most desirable partners for these countries, not only due to shared cultural and linguistic proximity, but also because of Turkey's role in international politics as a NATO member with strong ties to the West. Turkey significantly intensified its engagement in Central Asia following the rise to power of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Ersen & Kösem, 2021; *Great and Small Games in Central Asia and the South Caucasus*, 2022).

Cooperation among Turkic-speaking states reached a new level with the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council) in 2009. Azerbaijan's victory in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict contributed to the spread of pan-Turkic ideas, the concept of a "Greater Turan", and the consolidation of the Turkic world as an alternative—and competitor—to the concept of the "Russian World", another neo-imperial doctrine aimed at uniting Slavic peoples and post-Soviet states under Moscow's leadership. These developments, together with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, endowed the Turkic Council with particular strategic significance and enhanced its military-political relevance. Accordingly, at the Eighth Summit of the Turkic Council held in Istanbul in November 2021, the organization was reorganized into the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

One of the declared objectives of the OTS is the "promotion of the values and interests of the Turkic world at the regional and international levels". According to the vision articulated by the leaders of the Turkic states, the establishment of a common market for goods, investment, labor, and services is planned by 2030. The summit also approved the creation of a free economic zone in Kazakhstan, known as TURNSEZ.

At present, the members of the OTS include Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while Turkmenistan and Hungary participate as observer states. The leaders of these

countries inaugurated the organization's headquarters in Istanbul and adopted a strategic document entitled "Vision of the Turkic World 2040," which serves as a roadmap for deepening cooperation among Turkic-speaking states over the next two decades in priority sectors.

These areas of cooperation range from the removal of trade barriers and the harmonization of cultural and educational policies to the development of cross-border corridors—most notably the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route connecting Europe and China via Turkey and Azerbaijan—and the creation of a shared information space. The document also emphasizes the strengthening of political solidarity and mutual support in advancing national interests and addressing regional and global challenges.

The "Vision of the Turkic World 2040" further envisages the establishment of a "network for cooperation and information exchange among member states to counter threats of radicalization, violent extremism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and terrorism, as well as to enhance border security". It also highlights the need for joint efforts to combat organized crime, illicit drug trafficking, irregular migration, and economic, financial, and cybercrime. In terms of joint responses to natural and man-made disasters, the document proposes the creation of a Turkic Civil Protection Council, a move interpreted by some experts as an attempt to lay the groundwork for a military-political alliance with the potential establishment of joint armed forces analogous to the CSTO (often referred to in expert discourse as a "Great Turkic Army" or "Army of Turan").

In recent years, Turkey has notably intensified security cooperation with Central Asian states, particularly with Kazakhstan. This includes exports of defense industry products, training of Kazakh military personnel, and the conduct of joint military exercises. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have also purchased Turkish-made Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles, which have demonstrated effectiveness in Azerbaijan and Ukraine.

Partnership with Turkey provides these four Central Asian states with an additional strong partner, facilitating the balancing of relations with Russia and China. Moreover, cultural and linguistic ties enhance Turkey's attractiveness as a partner for the majority of Central Asia's population.

Discussion

The findings of the study confirm the thesis that Central Asia is gradually transforming from a peripheral space of post-Soviet geopolitics into an autonomous geostrategic region that is increasingly integrated into global great power competition (Van den Bosch et al., 2021; *Competition of World Powers in Central Asia*, 2019). At the same time, the empirical evidence indicates that the growing international attention to the region is largely externally driven and reflects shifts in the global balance of power rather than the outcome of completed intra-regional consolidation (Wilson Center, 2025).

On the one hand, the intensification of interest from China, the United States, the European Union, and Turkey creates additional opportunities for Central Asian states to diversify their external relations, reduce dependence on a single center of influence, and pursue a multi-vector foreign policy (Khan & Koch, 2023; *Multi-Vectorial Approach as the Key Model of Central Asian Countries' Foreign Policy*, 2023). On the other hand, the analysis demonstrates that this multi-vectorism remains predominantly adaptive rather than proactive, as the key parameters of regional development continue to be shaped primarily by the policies of external actors (*The Limits of Central Asia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy*, 2024).

Particular attention should be paid to the changing role of the Russian Federation in the region. While Russia long remained the dominant security and political actor, developments after 2014—and especially its full-scale war against Ukraine—have significantly undermined its position (Omelicheva, n.d.; Uslu, 2018). The results of the study suggest that Russia is increasingly losing its

status as an uncontested center of gravity (Hiro, 2009), retaining limited influence mainly in the security, migration, and cultural-humanitarian spheres. This finding is consistent with broader theoretical perspectives on the erosion of neo-imperial models of influence under conditions of multipolarity (Van den Bosch et al., 2021).

Against this background, China emerges as the leading geo-economic actor in Central Asia (Central Asia's Growing Partnership with China, n.d.). Its influence is based not on direct military-political presence but on infrastructure, financial, and trade instruments that generate long-term economic interdependence (Khan & Koch, 2023). The discussion of the results indicates that this model simultaneously stimulates regional development and creates risks of structural dependence, which may constrain the strategic autonomy of Central Asian states in the medium and long term.

The roles of the United States and the European Union appear less extensive in terms of economic presence, yet remain significant in normative and institutional dimensions. U.S. strategy is primarily focused on security issues (Cannon, 2025), deterrence of competitors, and support for regional sovereignty, whereas the European Union emphasizes economic cooperation, the development of transport corridors, energy diversification, and soft power instruments (Van den Bosch et al., 2021). However, the findings suggest that limited resources and the absence of robust security mechanisms reduce the ability of Western actors to function as system-shaping forces in the region (Wilson Center, 2025).

The growing role of Turkey also warrants separate discussion. By leveraging cultural and civilizational ties and institutionalized cooperation within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States, Turkey seeks to expand its influence in Central Asia (Ersen & Kösem, 2021). The analysis indicates that the Turkish vector is attractive to Central Asian elites as an additional balancing option vis-à-vis China and Russia (Great and Small Games in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, 2022). Nevertheless, its potential is constrained by Turkey's economic capacity and by the internal heterogeneity of the Turkic world (Ersen & Kösem, 2021).

Overall, Central Asia is gradually acquiring characteristics of a subject of international relations; however, this process remains incomplete. Regional cooperation shows positive dynamics but has not yet been transformed into stable institutional mechanisms capable of collectively defending regional interests (Khan & Koch, 2023). Thus, the current stage of Central Asia's development is characterized by a combination of expanding opportunities and persistent structural constraints, which necessitates a cautious interpretation of the region's apparent geopolitical rise (The Limits of Central Asia's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy, 2024).

Conclusions

Central Asia currently stands at a crossroads, where shifts in geopolitical dynamics generate both opportunities and challenges for the region to assert itself as a cohesive international actor. The weakening of Russia's traditional dominance, the expansion of China's influence, and the renewed pragmatism of Western engagement have collectively created a landscape in which Central Asian states can potentially enhance their agency and deepen regional cooperation.

However, this optimism must be tempered by on-the-ground realities. The region's growing international prominence is largely a byproduct of external power dynamics rather than the result of internal regional cohesion. Under such conditions, the region's significance may diminish as rapidly as it has increased, depending on the strategic interests of major powers. Internal challenges, including bilateral border disputes, further complicate the situation.

In light of these challenges, Central Asian states face the critical task of translating diplomatic rhetoric into tangible outcomes. Progress requires genuine cooperation not only among Central Asian states themselves, but also in their engagement with non-regional actors, ensuring that

regional agency is driven from within rather than emerging as a secondary effect of external circumstances.

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following analytical conclusions may be drawn:

1. China acts as the leading geo-economic actor, shaping structural dependence through infrastructure and financial instruments.

2. Russia retains security and cultural influence, but its position is gradually eroding.

3. The United States focuses primarily on security and normative issues, with limited economic leverage.

4. The European Union offers a stable, though less geopolitically assertive, model of cooperation.

5. Turkey concentrates on promoting the values and interests of the Turkic world at the regional and international levels, particularly in the security, economic, and social spheres.

These generalized conclusions may also be presented in the form of a consolidated Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of the strategies of major players in Central Asia

Criterion	China	Russia	USA	European Union
Strategic goal	Geoeconomic integration of the region into Eurasian supply chains; security of the western borders	Preservation of traditional sphere of influence; political-military control	Deterring competitors; supporting sovereignty and security	Stability, diversification of partnerships, access to resources
Dominant type of influence	Economic and infrastructural	Military-political and security	Political and security, regulatory	Economic and normative (“soft power”)
Economic tools	Trade, investment, credit, BRI	Labor migration, energy relations	Limited investments, sanctions policy	Trade, grants, technical assistance
Infrastructure role	Key investor and builder (transport, energy)	Limited, mostly hereditary (Soviet)	Minimum	Fragmentary, project
Security mechanisms	SCO, anti-terrorist coordination	CSTO, military bases	Training missions, cooperation with individual states	Indirect participation (security sector reforms)
Political approach	The principle of non-intervention; elite diplomacy	Hierarchical model of influence	Promoting democracy and human rights	Conditionality of cooperation (good governance)
Ideological component	Minimal, pragmatic	Imperial -historical	Liberal Democratic	Liberal-normative
“Soft power”	Education, culture, media (growing)	Language, culture, media (traditional)	Educational programs, NGOs	Education, regulatory standards

Criterion	China	Russia	USA	European Union
Perception in the region	Economically attractive, but with a risk of addiction	Traditional, but increasingly weak	Politically desirable, but limited	A reliable but slow partner
Key limitations	Fears of debt and political dependence	Weakening of the resource base and legitimacy	Limited presence and attention	Low geopolitical efficiency

Source: compiled by the author.

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