



Feature Article
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Central Asia One Year After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 created shockwaves with profound effects in most corners of the world. However, few regions were poised to be as deeply affected by the war as Central Asia. Entrenched political, military, economic and cultural dependencies link the Central Asian states to Russia, which made [their future look bleak](#) when Russia commenced its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the west responded by sanctioning the Russian economy. One year later, the following question emerges: how has the war affected Central Asia-Russia relations and how has the Central Asian states adjusted their external policies to cope with a turbulent geopolitical environment?

The Central Asian governments have consistently tried to distance themselves from Russia's war in Ukraine. But at the same time, they are exposed to Russian pressure and therefore cautious about openly criticizing Moscow's actions. Thus, while none of the Central Asian leaders has condemned Russia's war against Ukraine, nor have they endorsed Moscow's military aggression. This only confirms an established pattern: In 2014, none of them supported Russia's annexation of Crimea and in 2008 they disapproved both of Russia's war in Georgia and of Moscow's subsequent recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions.

Meanwhile, amidst Russia's growing international isolation, Central Asia is becoming increasingly important for Moscow. In 2022, President Putin made no less than five trips to Central Asia and held countless other meetings with Central Asian leaders in an apparent attempt to shore up Russia's role in its neighborhood. Russian-Central Asian ties are dynamic and take on new forms as a consequence of the shifting geopolitical environment. Moscow has pushed for some new cooperation formats in the region, including a proposed [trilateral gas union](#) between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Fearing that this would become a political tool and be used to circumvent sanctions, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reacted hesitantly to the proposal. Instead, in the

beginning of 2023 Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed individual bilateral roadmaps of cooperation with Russia's Gazprom.

While the Central Asian governments have made it clear that they will not join Western sanctions against Russia, they have communicated to the West that they will not be used as a tool for Russia to evade economic sanctions. The banks in the region do not, for example, accept Russian MIR payment cards. However, contrary to expectations, [trade between Russia and Central Asia](#) has increased since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is largely a consequence of new trade patterns caused by sanctions as well as the mass influx of Russians who fled to the Central Asian countries in 2022. For Russia, trade with Central Asia has become a substitute to western markets.

The unprecedented influx of Russian migrants to Central Asia during 2022 represented an unforeseen outcome of the war. The first wave of migration, immediately after the invasion, brought skilled Russian workers, especially IT specialists, to the region. The second wave, after Vladimir Putin's announcement of a mobilization of reservists for the war on September 21, 2022, brought Russians from various social classes to the region. By the end of October 2022, [Kazakh estimates](#) put the total number of Russians entering the country during the year at close to half a million. Tens of thousands of them remain in the country. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities stated that 184,000 Russians had arrived in the country from January to September, while [Uzbekistan's Interior Ministry](#) reported that about 395,000 Russian citizens had arrived in Uzbekistan during the first nine months of 2022. [Neither Kyrgyzstan nor](#)

[Uzbekistan](#) specified how many of these that remained. Tajikistan, another destination of Russian citizens, has not released any data on the matter.

Central Asian governments quickly sensed an opportunity to reap [economic benefits](#) from the influx of skilled workers. Uzbekistan adopted new policies granting foreign IT specialists and their families a special three-year working visa. Likewise, Kazakhstan gives foreigners employed in the expanding industrial park in Astana five-year visas and extensive tax exemptions. Kyrgyzstan has also introduced initiatives for attracting Russian exiles in an effort to build up its IT industry. In addition to manpower, Central Asia is also benefiting from [international firms relocating](#) from the Russian market.

Militarily, Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent the message to the Central Asian governments that Moscow's primary security interests lie elsewhere than in Central Asia. Within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Central Asian members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have all tried to steer the CSTO away from potential involvement in Ukraine. Instead, they have aired their concerns over the unstable situation in Afghanistan, arguing that the CSTO should increase its focus on [securing Central Asia's southern borders](#). In reality, however, Russia is reportedly redirecting resources from its military bases in [Kyrgyzstan](#) and [Tajikistan](#) to Ukraine, further eroding its military posture in the region.

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As dependence on a weakened Russia runs the risk of being a serious liability to the Central Asian states, political incumbents in the region have doubled-down on efforts to find balance and multilateralism in their diplomatic relations. In particular, they seek closer ties to China. In mid-September 2022, President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan in his first foreign state visit since the Covid-19-pandemic. Most notable during the visit was Xi's statement on China's unwavering support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty, but [Beijing has officially backed](#) all the Central Asian states' sovereignty and national independence in what can be interpreted as a message to Moscow. China's economic role in Central Asia, which already surpasses Russia's, has only grown in the past year. According to Chinese customs statistics, trade between China and Central Asia hit a record high in 2022, exceeding \$70 billion. Year-on-year, trade turnover between China and the five Central Asian countries increased by [45 per cent](#).

Besides China, [Turkey's geopolitical significance is growing](#) in Central Asia. Ankara has intensified its security cooperation with the four Turkic-speaking countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have elevated their relationships with Turkey to the level of "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," with agreements to develop military cooperation, including education, exercises and intelligence-sharing. Turkey's defense industry is rapidly gaining a foothold in the Central Asian arms market. Turkey and Kazakhstan have agreed to produce the Anka drone in Kazakhstan, while both Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan have purchased Bayraktar TB2 combat drones. Ankara

is also promoting its own multilateral format in the region, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), to the effect that even permanently neutral Turkmenistan declared its interest to join in late 2022, only to choose for unknown reasons to remain as an observer state.

Simultaneously, [Iran and Tajikistan](#), both Persian speaking, are intensifying their diplomatic relations. During President Emomali Rahmon's visit to Tehran, the first since 2013, in summer 2022, the two sides agreed to intensify diplomatic and trade relations and indicated the need for closer security cooperation. The escalating conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – two members of the CSTO whose militaries engaged in large-scale fighting in September 2022 – demonstrates the limitations of the Russian-led military bloc as an effective alliance guaranteeing the collective security of its members. This has forced Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to turn elsewhere for protection in a burgeoning arms race. Kyrgyzstan is purchasing drones from Turkey, while Iran has inaugurated a drone factory in Tajikistan. The conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is thus now subject to the overlay of external power politics.

The Central Asian states' efforts to find a geopolitical balance likewise open new opportunities for EU to play a larger role in the region. In a first EU-Central Asia summit, held in late October 2022, in the Kazakh capital, Astana, European Council President Charles Michel met with the leaders of all five countries. In a [joint statement](#), they agreed "to continue building a strong diversified and forward-looking partnership" and reaffirmed the shared commitment to the UN Charter and the principles of independence, sovereignty and

territorial integrity. The greater engagement between Central Asia and EU continued shortly thereafter when High Representative/Vice President Josep Borell visited the region. Potential access to Central Asian oil and gas resources undoubtedly attracts European interest.

While the EU in 2022 clearly acknowledged Central Asia's geo-strategic and geo-economic importance, the U.S. was conspicuously missing in the region. For some time, Central Asia appears to have been caught between [Washington's bureaucratic divisions](#), inhibiting a coherent U.S. strategy. In contrast to the visiting of the region by the highest-level of EU representatives, the U.S. kept its interaction with the region at the level of the Assistant Secretary of State until February 28, 2023 when Secretary of State Blinken arrived in Central Asia for a series of meetings with top officials from all five states. Given both the Central Asian states' desire to balance an aggressive Russia and Washington's clear focus on China as a strategic competitor and threat to U.S. interests, it remains to be seen whether Blinken's visit will mark the start of a more coordinated and forward-leaning U.S. policy toward one of the regions where China's growing influence is most visible.

The Central Asian countries are not just forging ahead with stronger external partnerships, they are also taking steps to strengthen regional cooperation. Kazakhstan – the largest economy in the region – and Uzbekistan – the most populous country – are driving the process. At a [meeting in Tashkent](#) just before the end of 2022, the two sides signed a host of agreements on economic cooperation in various spheres as well as on border demarcation. They also signed a treaty on

allied relations, the first of its kind in Central Asia. The rapprochement between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan lays a foundation for building prosperity, stability and security from within the region rather than by relying on external actors.

The Kazakh-Uzbek strategic partnership was preceded by the annual Central Asian summit held in the Issyk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan in July 2022. Then, the presidents of all five states met and signed an agreement to coordinate their efforts in [“areas as diverse as trade, economics, social policy, ecology, medical research, and security”](#). The conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan indicates that there are still major obstacles to overcome, but the overall trend is one of growing intra-regional cooperation. The fact that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have made significant progress on border delimitation further shows that compromises can be reached even on the most sensitive of issues.

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The Central Asian states tread a fine line in trying to distance themselves from Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia-Central Asia relations run deep. Irrespective of the outcome of the war, the Central Asian states will have to continue their co-existence with Russia. The multitude of military, political, economic and cultural links between Russia and Central Asia and developed over a long period will not disappear overnight. But the discrete disapproval of Moscow's actions in Ukraine, nonetheless, show that the Central Asian states are no longer satellites to Russia.

Because of the war, Russia is losing some of its luster in Central Asia. As the war in Ukraine

continues, Russian-led organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO, are likely to become ever more unattractive among political leaders and the public in Central Asia. In fact, the tables appear to be turning in Russia-Central Asia relations; Central Asia is becoming more important for Russia than vice versa. Thus, the war appears to accelerate Russia's diminishing role in the region. Regional political rearrangements are already visible, both regarding relations with outside powers and

intra-regional cooperation dynamics. The full implications of these developments are yet to be seen.

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