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***In the Shadow of the Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon***  
**Central Asian Countries' Changing Relations with Russia and China from 1991 to 2024**

by

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## **Preface**

Before you lies the bachelor thesis “*In the Shadow of the Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon. Central Asian Countries’ Changing Relations with Russia and China from 1991 to 2024*”. It has been written to fulfil the graduation requirements of the Bachelor *Global Responsibility & Leadership* at the *University of Groningen*. I researched and wrote this thesis from February to June 2024.

I want to thank my supervisor Alex Belloir for the guidance and support during the process. Because of you, I maximised the learning opportunities, for which I am grateful. Lastly, I would like to thank you, my reader: I hope you enjoy reading my thesis.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the evolving relationships between Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and Russia and China from 1991 to 2024. The thesis addresses a gap in the literature by offering an interdisciplinary approach to developments in Central Asia, a region often overshadowed by its proximity to larger powers but increasingly significant because of its natural resources and strategic location between China and Europe and near unstable regions. The research employs qualitative discourse analysis and process tracing to understand the causal mechanisms behind geopolitical trends in the region. It looks at the changing relations from five perspectives: political, economic, security, language and culture, and public opinions. This research identifies a decline in Russian influence and a rise in Chinese influence, particularly through economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. Russia tries to counter this by using cultural programs, its historical ties, and using its military as a deterrent to maintain its influence. Politically, Central Asia is gaining more autonomy from both Russia and China.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, China, Geopolitics, Power Dynamics, Power Transition Theory (PTT), Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST)

## Glossary

### *List of Presidents*

**Emomali Rahmon:** President of the Republic of Tajikistan since 1992.

**Kassym-Jomart Tokayev:** President of the Republic of Kazakhstan since 2019.

**Sadyr Japarov:** President of the Kyrgyz Republic since 2021.

**Shavkat Mirziyoyev:** President of the Republic of Uzbekistan since 2016.

**Vladimir Putin:** President of the Russian Federation from 2000 to 2008 and since 2012.

**Xi Jinping:** President of the People's Republic of China since 2013.

### *List of Organizations*

**BRI (Belt and Road Initiative):** China's global development strategy involving infrastructure investments to enhance regional connectivity and economic growth.

**CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization):** A military alliance of post-Soviet states, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, focused on collective defence.

**EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union):** An economic union including Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia, promoting economic integration and policy coordination.

**SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization):** A political, economic, and security alliance comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and other Asian countries aiming to strengthen regional cooperation and stability.

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## 1. Introduction

Central Asia is a strategic crossroad of global significance. It is the heartland of the Eurasian continent, stretching from the Caspian Sea in the west to the western border of China in the east. Russia borders it to the north, and Iran and Afghanistan to the south (see Figure 1) (Showkat, 2012). With a population of 79 million, the region serves as a bridge between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Frankopan, 2023). Moreover, it has vast amounts of largely untouched natural resources, and the region is important to international security, given its proximity to conflict zones and potential for instability (Fatland, 2020). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered a peripheral region; during the Soviet era, the region was largely disconnected from the rest of the world, being extremely dependent on the USSR (Kassymbekova et al., 2021). However, from 1991, two trends coincided: (1) Russia's influence in the region declined; and (2) there was a shift towards a more multipolar global landscape (Kroenig, 2022), resulting in more actors having an interest in the region, like Middle Eastern countries, the EU, the US, and most notably China (Frankopan, 2023). Therefore, I hypothesise that Central Asia is experiencing a rebalancing of power with Russia declining and China emerging as the most influential hegemon. To explore this hypothesis, this research uses theories such as power transition theory and hegemonic stability theory to explain this shifting power landscape and its implications for the region. Special attention is given to the implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the country's declining power in the region, as *with every rocket that Russia fires towards Ukraine, Russia's influence in the post-Soviet sphere is declining* (Umatov, 2024).

Central Asia consists of five countries (Fatland, 2020; Frankopan, 2023). This research focuses on four of them: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The fifth country, Turkmenistan, is excluded because it is closed off from the outside world, making it difficult to access reliable data on its relations with Russia and China (Fatland, 2020). Most research on Central Asia has been done only from a geopolitical viewpoint (Akkerman et al., 2023). To broaden the net, this research examines an array of factors, including politics, economics, security, language and culture, and public opinions, to ensure a more comprehensive and thorough analysis. This leads us to the research question: *“How and why did relations of Central Asian countries towards Russia and China evolve since 1991 and what implications does this hold for regional geopolitics?”* The time framework of this research is from 1991 until April 2024. The year 1991 was chosen because in that year the Central Asian countries gained their independence, and April 2024 is the time of writing.

Central Asia receives less attention from academics than its powerful neighbouring countries, Russia and China. In recent years, however, this region has gained importance, both by its natural resources and strategic location, as evidenced by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Fatland, 2022). In light of this, this research addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on Central Asia's evolving

relations in the region. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this research not only sheds light upon the above but also contributes to the wider oeuvre by adopting an alternative theoretical stance.

Initially, the literature review will provide a comprehensive background on the region as a whole and each individual country within it. Following this, we will delve into the theoretical framework, where we will discuss relevant theories and their applications within the context of the region. Additionally, this thesis discusses the significance of the region by employing two specific theories. Subsequently, the methodology section will outline the approach used in this research. The results will be structured following the five research interests: politics, economics, security, language and culture, and public opinions. Finally, there will be a discussion and conclusion.



Figure 1: Map of Central Asia (Geographic Guide, 2005)

## 2. Literature Review

In Central Asia, the largest ethnic groups, listed in descending order, are Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz (Showkat, 2012). Most of these groups speak languages that are linguistically related to Turkish, except the Tajik, who speak a language related to Persian. The historical ties with Russia and later the USSR have led to an even more diverse mix of ethnicities; significant populations of Russians

and Ukrainians have lived, and many still live, in this region. From the Middle East, Islam was spread over Central Asia. Nowadays, Islam remains the dominant religion in the region, with most followers identifying with the Sunni branch. (Frankopan, 2023)

For centuries, Central Asia consisted of multiple leading civilizations, an Islamic heartland, and a geographical link between the West and the East (Wadley et al., 1996). The region was home to various empires and played a key role in the Silk Roads trade network. From around 130 BC to 1450 AC, this was an ancient network of trade routes that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures between East and West (Frankopan, 2023; NGS, 2024). By the mid-18th century, Tsarist Russia began to incorporate these regions into its empire. This colonisation by the Russians, followed by its incorporation into the USSR in 1919, had significant economic, social, and political consequences (Benjamin, 2018).

The USSR ruled over Central Asia between 1919 and 1991 (Kassymbekova et al., 2021). During this period, the welfare in Central Asia was much lower than the average in the USSR, with people having limited access to goods. However, under the USSR, the region's economies still grew significantly, and living standards improved (Scarborough, 2021). However, negative developments also occurred during this period (Kassymbekova et al., 2021). An example of this is the volatile and brutal nature of the relationship between the Soviet state and Central Asian nomads, which was informed by both anti-colonial and imperialist impulses (Thomas, 2018). Moreover, Soviet economic planning led to the region's heavy reliance on cotton production, causing severe environmental damage like the shrinking of the Aral Sea, and the harmful effects of nuclear testing. (Pomfret, 1995).

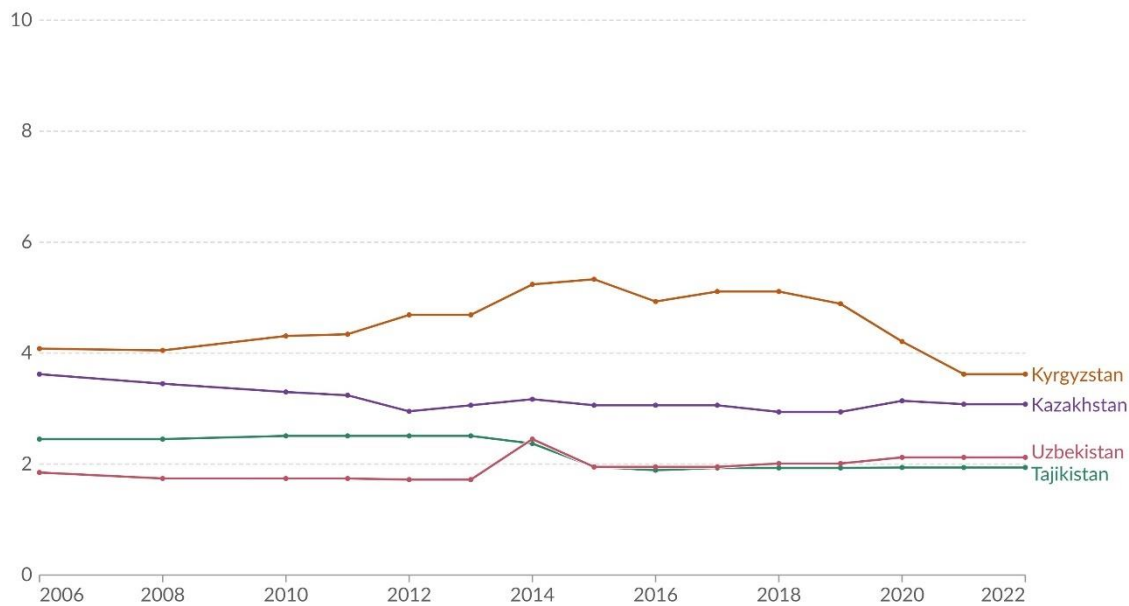
Since the collapse of the USSR and the end of communist rule, all four countries have undergone significant changes. Some have introduced liberal economic measures and democratic values, based on the Western liberal model (Garbuzarova, 2021), even though the degree of this is different in each country (Badan, 2001). A political transition occurred since 1991 in all the countries except Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, the transition was bottom-up and uncontrolled, whereas in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it was top-bottom controlled (Hahn, 2023). However, these countries struggled to fully embrace democracy, with some regimes becoming more authoritarian again during the last decade (see Figure 2). In the democratic transition, most of them faced political instability and socio-economic problems, and the participation of the masses in politics was limited. All four countries are united by the personification of power and loyalty to the autocrat rather than to the political institutions (Garbuzarova, 2021). We will now discuss the most important developments in the four individual Central Asian countries.



## Democracy index



Based on the expert estimates and index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023)<sup>1</sup>. It combines information on the extent to which citizens can choose their political leaders in free and fair elections, enjoy civil liberties, prefer democracy over other political systems, can and do participate in politics, and have a functioning government that acts on their behalf. It ranges from 0 to 10 (most democratic).



Data source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2023)

OurWorldInData.org/democracy | CC BY

1. **Economist Intelligence Unit:** The Economist Intelligence Unit publishes data and research on democracy and human rights. It relies on evaluations by its own country experts, supplemented by representative surveys of regular citizens to assess political institutions and the protection of rights. The Economist Intelligence Unit is the research and analysis division of The Economist Group, the sister company of The Economist newspaper. Learn more: Democracy data: how do researchers measure democracy?

Figure 2: Democracy Index of the four countries (OWID, 2024)

Firstly, Kazakhstan mainly focussed on socio-economic tasks since its independence. Nursultan Nazarbayev, president of the country from 1991 to 2019 has pursued a policy of "economy first and then politics," leading to a remarkable economic transformation, but no democratic reforms (see Figure 2). The country is highly centralised and has an autocratic leadership with the transition from one-party rule to one-man rule (Knox, 2008). Since 2019, president Tokayev has been leading the country, but Nazarbayev still holds significant power. Tokayev's leadership can be seen as a continuation of Nazarbayev's policies, particularly in terms of domestic power dynamics and foreign relations. A good example of this is the maintenance of the 'multi-vectorism' policy, which entails that Kazakhstan tries to have a neutral status between Russia, China, and the West (Isaacs, 2020; Yuneman, 2023).

Second, Uzbekistan has undergone significant changes since its independence. The country's foreign policy shifted from pro-Western to pro-Russian, and now trying to be neutral. The country adopted an isolationist stance, avoiding close ties with any of its neighbours. (Tolipov, 2014). More recently, the country has seen a transformation under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, with a focus on economic and political liberalisation. However, the political system remains largely unchanged, with no

significant democratic reforms visible (see Figure 2). The country sustains its authoritarian institutional framework and presidential system (Schmitz, 2020).

Third, Kyrgyzstan tried to make more democratic changes. Its 1993 constitution which replaced the Soviet one recognized more rights and freedoms for citizens. However, despite initial promises of fair government, open media, and a liberal economy, the country did not become a full democracy (Freedom House, 2022). After two revolutions that set up authoritarian presidents in 2005 and 2010, Kyrgyzstan implemented a parliamentary form of government (Marat, 2012). Corruption remains a big problem and coalitions tend to be unstable. In 2021, the constitution was changed, increasing presidential authority dramatically. Since then, violence has been used to suppress political opponents and civil society critics, which is represented in Figure 2 (Freedom House, 2022).

Lastly, Tajikistan is the most authoritarian country of the four (see Figure 2). Tajikistan's President Emomalii Rachmon is the only president Tajikistan has ever had (Fatland, 2020). The country experienced a civil war in 1992-1993 and a period of civil unrest, and ever since Tajikistan has been the least stable country in the region regarding politics, economics, and security (Abdullaev, 2002). The country's transition to a market-led economy and the withdrawal of subsidies from Moscow initially led to a decrease in GDP (Falkingham, 2000), but during the last two decades, the GDP has slowly grown, although it is still one of the poorest countries in Asia (OEC Tajikistan, 2022). A political transition that other Central Asian countries went through still has to come, but it will likely not happen as long as President Rachmon is in power (Hahn, 2023).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In the realm of international relations, there are three commonly used perspectives: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Liberalism and constructivism emphasise cooperation and social constructs, while realism focuses on power and competition. This thesis adopts a realist perspective because it emphasises the importance of power dynamics, state interests, and security within an anarchic international system, as well as providing an understanding of power shifts, which is also a key theme of my thesis (Huang, 2023).

#### *3.1.1. Power Transition Theory*

When delving into theories of hegemony and power from a realist perspective, one theory stands out: Power Transition Theory (PTT) (Organski, 1958). It suggests that when a country reaches a certain level of power, it may struggle for hegemonic dominance. Organski believes that the theory of balance of power does not work. Power balance refers to the equilibrium when no single state or actor possesses overwhelming dominance, leading to a more stable and peaceful international system. Therefore, he

states that the power transition will always happen eventually (Organski, 1958). The power transition that every country goes through can be divided into three stages: (1) the stage of potential power, in which a country does not possess much power compared to more powerful industrial countries; (2) the stage of transitional growth in power, in which a country experiences rapid growth in its power; and (3) the stage of power maturity, when a country is fully industrialised, and it continues to grow in wealth but loses relative power to countries that are in stage 2 of the transition (Organski, 1958). Lastly, Organski explains that the decision to engage in such a power struggle depends upon the nation's satisfaction with the existing status quo (Organski, 1958; Pop, 2017).

### *3.1.2. Hegemonic Stability Theory*

Another relevant theory is the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). This theory suggests that an unbalanced power, in which there is one hegemon, generates stability. The stability of the international system is created around a hegemon through the mutual benefits that both the dominant power and other actors get from this system. It starts from the observation that powerful states tend to seek dominance over the whole or parts of the international system, thus generating a degree of hierarchy within the overall systemic anarchy (Webb, 1989). The HST's main prediction is that any international order's stability relies on how power is distributed among countries to maintain authority in their relationships (Pop, 2017).

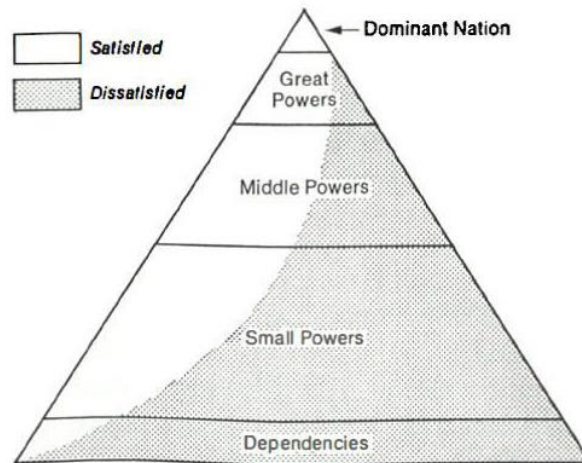
### *3.1.3. Status Quo and Revisionist States*

Finally, there is the concept of status quo and revisionist states. Status quo states want to maintain the existing international order, including established norms, institutions, and power structures. They are generally satisfied with the current state of affairs and work to preserve stability in the global system. On the other hand, revisionist states are those that seek to challenge or change the existing international order, because they are dissatisfied with the status quo. Revisionist states often pursue more assertive foreign policies and may seek to revise or undermine established norms, institutions, or power structures to advance their own agendas. Moreover, they often want to reshape the geopolitical landscape to better align with their strategic objectives. (Davidson, 2006)

## ***3.2. Application***

This section will look at the application of these theories to Central Asia. Historically, Russia held the position of the regional hegemon in Central Asia. It exerted significant influence over Central Asia and was therefore in stage three of the power transition. However, we can see a power shift with China's increasing influence in the region and entering the same stage as Russia. According to the 'hierarchy of power' concept, which is part of the PTT, the less dominant a nation is, the less satisfied it is (see Figure 3) (Organski, 1958). Russia once was the dominant nation in the region, however now, it has to share that position with China. This has implications on Russia's satisfaction level, which subsequently

impacts its stance towards Central Asia. The transition highlights the principles outlined in PTT, which says power shifts can lead to geopolitical changes. Realists generally believe that multipolar systems like we have today tend to be unstable (Sciubba, 2014). According to PTT, the decline of a dominant great power and the rise of an emerging challenger often lead to (diplomatic) conflicts (Kroenig, 2022; Organski, 1958).



*Figure 3: The hierarchy of power according to the power transition theory (Organski, 1958)*

Additionally, the concepts of HTS and PTT suggest that stability within an international order depends on power distribution. With China rising over the past decades, HTS suggests it will seek dominance over other parts of the world, leading to instability in the concerned regions (Webb, 1989). For example, Huseynov (2023) explains how Russian hegemony led to stability in the South Caucasus, consisting of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The hegemony Russia had over this region is fading and with it, the security order it built in the region is rapidly eroding. This process was accompanied by violent conflicts and wars, like in Nagorno Karabakh (CFR, 2024). The decline of Russian power can be seen as the emergence of a power vacuum that external actors might try to fill in which again leads to a conflict or war between the dominant power and rising power(s) (Huseynov, 2023). In the context of Central Asia, other actors are trying to fill this vacuum which might also lead to possible factions in the region.

The distinction between status quo and revisionist states also becomes relevant in this changing situation. Both Russia and China navigate their roles in shaping the regional geopolitics of Central Asia. Russia became increasingly revisionist in the last two decades, driven by rising nationalism and military capabilities, which is particularly evident in its stance towards post-Soviet states. Russia's invasion of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, the annexation of Crimea, and the invasion of Ukraine are all examples of how Russia was dissatisfied with the status quo at the time (Blinken, 2023). Globally, Russia has adopted a more assertive stance, openly challenging the prevailing world order perceived to be under the United States' dominance (Oldberg, 2016). China's case is more nuanced. From their

perspective, there is no need to change the current order, but rather with its position in it (Pop, 2017). The concept of status quo and revisionist states predicts that revisionist states are more likely to break international rules because they are dissatisfied with them (Huang, 2023). This was observed when Russia went against the long-standing prohibition against using force to make territorial changes in post-Soviet countries (Blinken, 2023).

### ***3.3. Hard and Soft Power***

Examining the relations between Central Asian countries and Russia and China, this thesis distinguishes between soft power and hard power. Hard power refers to coercive methods such as military force, or using it as a deterrent, while soft power involves influencing others through attraction and persuasion, typically through cultural, economic, and diplomatic means (Huang, 2023).

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia filled the resulting power vacuum, primarily through military strategies and strategic partnerships, showing its hard power. This presence is evident in the region through military alliances like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and economic leverage in mostly the energy sector (Fatland, 2020; Fatland, 2022). Russia utilises this hard power to sway Central Asian countries toward decisions aligning with its interests (Ospanova et al., 2018). China is currently not aiming to gain the same amount of hard power as Russia has in the region (Pannier, 2023a).

Russia's soft power, on the other hand, is experiencing a decline, whereas China's soft power is increasing. Three significant drivers for this are (1) Russia focuses more on internal challenges, such as domestic political unrest and economic issues (Fatland, 2020), and the conflict in Ukraine, leading to decreased attention in Central Asia, (2) the rise of social media and increased access to information has exposed Central Asia to alternative, non-Russian, narratives, reducing the effectiveness of Russia's traditional cultural and media influence strategies (Fatland, 2022), and (3) China's growing economic influence in the region presents an alternative and increasingly appealing option for Central Asian nations seeking development opportunities (Pannier, 2023a).

## **4. Methodology**

To best answer the research question, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach, primarily based on the gathering and analysis of secondary data. Due to time constraints, I was not able to conduct empirical research but instead did secondary research. According to Hakim (1982), this method is considered the best option because it allows for efficient research for the limitations I face. For the theoretical

framework and literature review, academic research was used. For the research itself, I used various ways of data collection.

This thesis employs the process tracing method. Process tracing aims at uncovering the causal mechanism that underlies an association, connecting a trigger to an outcome (Bennett et al., 2014). For this research, I identified a trigger (Central Asian countries becoming independent from the USSR), and an outcome (Russian-Chinese rivalry over the region) (see Figure 4). This research aims to investigate actions and decisions since 1991, focusing on the roles of Russia and China. It tries to understand the causal inferences, leading to specific outcomes (Hynek, 2021).

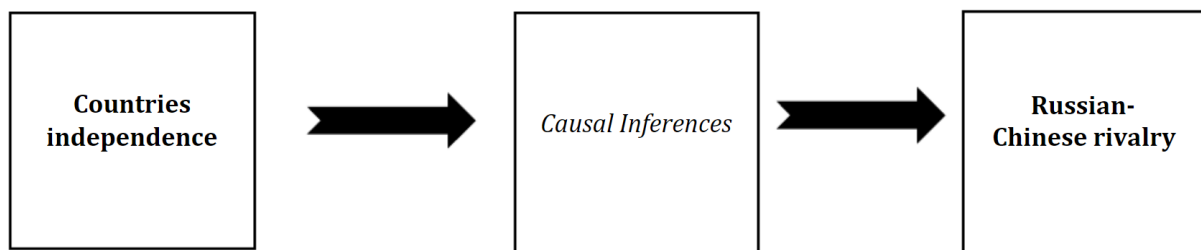


Figure 4: Process tracing applied to the context of this research (Hynek, 2021)

#### 4.1. Data Collection

I collected political declarations and statements from prominent figures in Central Asia, focusing on what they say, and what they do not say, about its relations with Russia and China, which is also called document analysis (Bowen, 2009). I did not only use official government statements but also others such as think tanks because official meetings often overlook relationship difficulties. Another method I utilized was examining data that other institutes collected directly from the populations of those countries to gain insight into their perspectives on Russia and China. This helped me to make an even more well-rounded analysis. One of the challenges of doing this secondary research is that potential biases may permeate the sources, as explained by Largan et al. (2019). They argue that it's crucial to assess the credibility of sources and verify their information with other sources. This is also called triangulation, combining different research methods to study the same phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). These points are important to keep in mind because in the Central Asian countries, as well as Russia and China, the state has (to some extent) control over the spreading of information. Free speech is often limited, which limits the availability of trustworthy sources from those countries (Cengiz, 2016). This is why this research also includes sources from Western countries.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

I identified key themes and narratives through qualitative discourse analysis. This form of textual analysis enriches the understanding of complex information and contexts, which is necessary for this research (Given et al., 2016). All the information I gathered was put in an Excel document. Here the information was categorised by country (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and by

theme (political, economic, security, cultural, and public opinions). This structural approach allowed me to write this research in a more organised way. To diversify the methods, this research is backed up by quantitative data from Central Asian countries, Russia, and China to contextualise geopolitical discourse. Because of the different findings from multiple sources, it will validate conclusions and enhance the robustness of the analysis.

## **5. Results**

Central Asian countries' relations with Russia and China have evolved since their independence from the USSR. While it is valuable to analyse the region as a whole, it is equally essential to show the distinctiveness of each country within the region (Akkerman et al., 2023; Kevlihan, 2013). The results contain five sections: politics, economics, security, culture, and public opinion.

### ***5.1. Politics***

First, the political relations of Central Asia with Russia and China will be measured by diplomatic contact between the countries, UN voting, and recognising Russia's annexations. Lastly, an examination of official documents and critical papers will give a more nuanced and qualitative view.

#### *Diplomatic Contact*

Until 2022, there has been a trend of decreasing political contact between Russia and Central Asia. However, interestingly, since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, Putin has been in Central Asia more often than ever before (Hahn, 2023), and the number of high-level meetings between Russia and Central Asia reached a new high (Pannier, 2023). In 2023, all Central Asian leaders were present at the annual Victory Day Parade in Moscow. In 2021, before the Invasion of Ukraine, only the president of Tajikistan visited (Pannier, 2023a). On the other hand, political meetings with China are also increasing, with Xi's first visit abroad after the COVID-19 pandemic being to Kazakhstan. In this way, China showed their growing interest in the region (Dumoulin, 2023). Notably, the perceptions of political meetings of Central Asian countries tend to be more critical towards Russia compared to China. A telling example of this is that President Xi was much better received than Putin at the 2022 SCO Summit in Samarkand (Akkerman et al., 2023), indicating Central Asia's balancing act between Russia and China (Pannier, 2023a).

### *UN Resolutions*

To further understand Central Asian political relations, I will mostly focus UN General Assembly votes of Central Asian countries. In only 15 percent of cases between 2014 and 2021, Kazakhstan voted identically with Russia, when Russia and China voted differently. In the last decade, Kazakhstan voted more in line with China. Kazakhstan and China have the highest degree of alignment on resolutions about disarmament, armed conflicts, and global development issues. On the other hand, Kazakhstan's position is the closest to Russia's on human rights and decolonization (Yuneman, 2023). The country abstained from voting on most resolutions that are essential for Russia, such as the ones about Russian armed conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and Syria (Ordabayev, 2018). Meanwhile, Kazakhstan sometimes also abstained from voting when both Russia and China voted against it, which shows a more complex relationship between Kazakhstan and major powers than simply balancing between Russia and China (Yuneman, 2023). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, seen as trustworthy allies of Russia, showed similar behaviour. They recently started to abstain from voting for some essential resolutions for Russia. Before, they would always vote in favour of Russia (Pannier, 2023). Uzbekistan is voting most in line with China of the Central Asian countries (Pannier, 2023a)

### *Recognising Russia's annexations*

During the March 2022 UN General Assembly vote demanding a full withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan abstained, while Uzbekistan was absent, indicating their lack of support for the invasion. (Al Jazeera, 2022). Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country that said it would never recognise the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. A possible reason for this is that the country is concerned that something similar could happen to northern Kazakhstan, where lots of Russians are living (Pannier, 2023). On the other hand, President Tokayev has made it clear that he will also not join Western sanctions against Russia (Hedlund, 2023). Tokayev has been in contact with Ukrainian President Zelensky on several occasions since February 2022, and underlined Kazakhstan's commitment to find a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and mentioned Kazakhstan's humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, two clear indications that Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia's war (Dumoulin, 2023). Uzbekistan's foreign minister also stated Uzbekistan's support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Makhmudov, 2023). Tajikistan remained silent on the war in Ukraine. Kyrgyz President Japarov was the only Central Asian leader who went to the February 2023 parade in Moscow to celebrate the 'successes' of the war in Ukraine, showing more support for the war compared to the other countries (Pannier, 2023). Annexations of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions are not recognised by any of the Central Asian countries (Hille, 2021).



### *Assessment by Examples*

This section will further explore the region's political dynamics with both Russia and China, providing examples for a nuanced perspective.

Starting with Kazakhstan, which had been the Kremlin's most trusted ally, but is now taking different political steps (Hedlund, 2023). Kazakhstan has adopted a so-called multi-vector approach since 2007, defined as a diplomatic strategy based on pragmatic and balanced relations with other countries. This policy aims to avoid overreliance on Russia and instead put Kazakhstan in first place (Hahn, 2023; Yuneman, 2023). In June 2023, during an attempted coup in Russia organised by the Wagner Group, Putin asked for help from the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. However, both leaders declined to offer support (Pannier, 2023). Also, recently, Kazakhstan started a new policy, making it more difficult for Russians to stay in Kazakhstan long-term (Hahn, 2023). All these examples show more distancing from Russia.

Uzbekistan, often highlighting its neutrality, has maintained a distance from Russia. In the past, the country declined membership in Russia's organisations for security, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and economic cooperation, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Hedlund, 2022). Similar to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is trying to implement a multi-vector policy, but it does not have the economic leverage that Kazakhstan has, which makes it harder to carry out (Yuneman, 2023).

Kyrgyzstan has made more political pro-Russian decisions, with President Japarov stating: "We were with Russia for 300 years, and we are ready to be with them for another 300 years". Because of the good relations with Russia, Japarov received a state award from Russia (PR, 2023a). Unlike other countries in the region that try to become more neutral, Kyrgyzstan is not; it actively seeks to align itself with Russia, because of its heavy political dependence on Russia (Pannier, 2023). Moreover, there is a high chance of Russian infiltration in the government of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan supported Russia from the beginning of the war in Ukraine, and no other Central Asian country went that far. By pleasing Russia, Kyrgyzstan is trying to get Russia on its side of the conflict with Tajikistan (Pannier, 2023). On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan's relationship with Russia has shifted in recent years. This change was evident when two Kyrgyz men joined the Wagner Group in Ukraine, leading to tensions with Russia (Pannier, 2023). Also, Kyrgyzstan let the United States use its Manas Air Base in 2009, which was before used by Russia, showcasing its ability to balance competing interests (Kluczevska, 2024).

Similar to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan has maintained close political ties with Russia. The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance signed in 1993 was the foundation of their relationship (MFART, 2021). In total, Tajikistan signed over 290 cooperation agreements with Russia between 1992 and 2020, surpassing agreements with any other international partner (Kluczevska, 2024). Over the last decades, President Rahmon often emphasised ties between the two nations (MFARF, 2015). Putin, showed similar sentiments, describing Tajikistan as a valued ally with whom Russia shares 'warm and

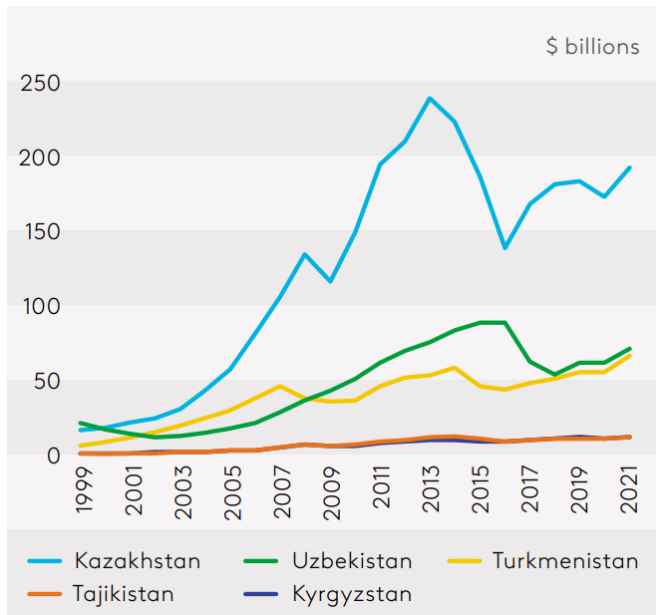
strategic relations' (MFARF, 2015). Their relationship is asymmetrical, with Tajikistan being much more dependent on Russia than vice versa (Kluczewska, 2024). One of the main difficulties of this relationship is the discussion about labour migration. Tajikistan heavily relies on remittances from its citizens working in Russia, making it vulnerable to shifts in Russian policy (PT, 2015). This economic interdependence often translates into a lack of autonomy for Tajikistan in political decision-making, as it seeks to align with Russian interests to safeguard its migrant workforce (PT, 2015).

Central Asian countries are increasingly aligning themselves politically with China. Kazakhstan, for example, has allowed expanded Chinese usage of the transboundary Ile River, demonstrating efforts to accommodate Chinese interests (Dukeyev, 2023). Despite concerns over the treatment of ethnic Kazakhs in China, Kazakhstan has long silenced public activism on the issue (Dukeyev, 2023). Uzbekistan has established an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership" with China - the only Central Asian country with such a strong relationship with China (Lee et al., 2024). It supports China's core interests such as Taiwan, Hongkong and Xinjiang (MFARC, 2024). Under President Mirziyoev's regime, Uzbekistan has tightened ties with China, viewing it as an example of economic development and governance (Standish, 2024).

Similarly, Kyrgyzstan created strong relations with China, with President Xi Jinping describing their relationship as the "best in history" (PMCV, 2023). Lastly, Tajikistan has also deepened its ties with China, transitioning from a relationship based on 'good neighbourliness' to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (ECN, 2023). All these developments highlight China's increasing influence in the region. On the other hand, Kazakhstan has expressed concern over Kazakhs being imprisoned in camps in Xinjiang. Efforts are underway between Kazakhstan and China to start the repatriation of Kazakh people from these camps to Kazakhstan. The Kyrgyz government has not made a statement on the imprisonment of Kyrgyz people in these camps yet. This issue is one of the most sensitive aspects of the relationship between China and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Hahn, 2023).

## **5.2. Economics**

Central Asia is a landlocked region, far away from centres of economic activity like Europe, North America, and East Asia (Pannier, 2023a). This creates barriers to economic growth and expansion of trade. On the other hand, it is gaining importance as a transit route connecting Europe and Asia (EBD, 2022). Additionally, Central Asia has a huge water and energy potential (Hynek, 2021), with large oil and gas fields (Loupour 2015) and an enormous and still underutilised amount of renewable energy sources. Over the last twenty years, the GDP of Central Asia grew more than sevenfold, and fourfold in real terms, including inflation, as shown in Figure 5. Moreover, the GDP per capita in Central Asian countries also grew significantly, with Figure 6 showing the data for 2022 (EBD, 2022).



GDP per capita in USD

Kazakhstan	11492
Uzbekistan	2255
Kyrgyzstan	1655
Tajikistan	1054

Figure 6: GDP per capita in 2022 (World Bank, 2024)

Figure 5: GDP of Central Asian Countries (EDB, 2022)

Central Asia’s location between Russia and China gives both countries much economic power over the region (Pannier, 2023a). In the past, the Central Asian countries did not have enough economic leverage to work fully independently, so primarily Russia had an enormous economic influence on the region (Fatland, 2020; Fatland, 2022). With greater economic autonomy, some Central Asian countries are making decisions that may not align with Russia's interests. They are diversifying trading partners (World Bank, 2024) and improving regional economic ties. (EBD, 2022).

There is a noticeable trend of increasing economic ties with China and decreasing ties with Russia. In general, Central Asian countries are exporting a smaller percentage of their total exports to Russia, whereas exports to China are relatively growing (see Figure 7). Kyrgyzstan is showing a different trend, from 2022, with a sharp increase of exports to Russia. This is likely due to the Western sanctions on Russia. Acting as a middleman, Kyrgyzstan helps Russia import Western products (Auyezov, 2023), which explains the surge shown in Figure 7, also seen to a lesser extent in Uzbekistan. However, this trend is unlikely to persist as new mechanisms are implemented to hinder their middleman role (FIUN, 2024). Overall, we can conclude that, economically, China is gaining importance in the region.

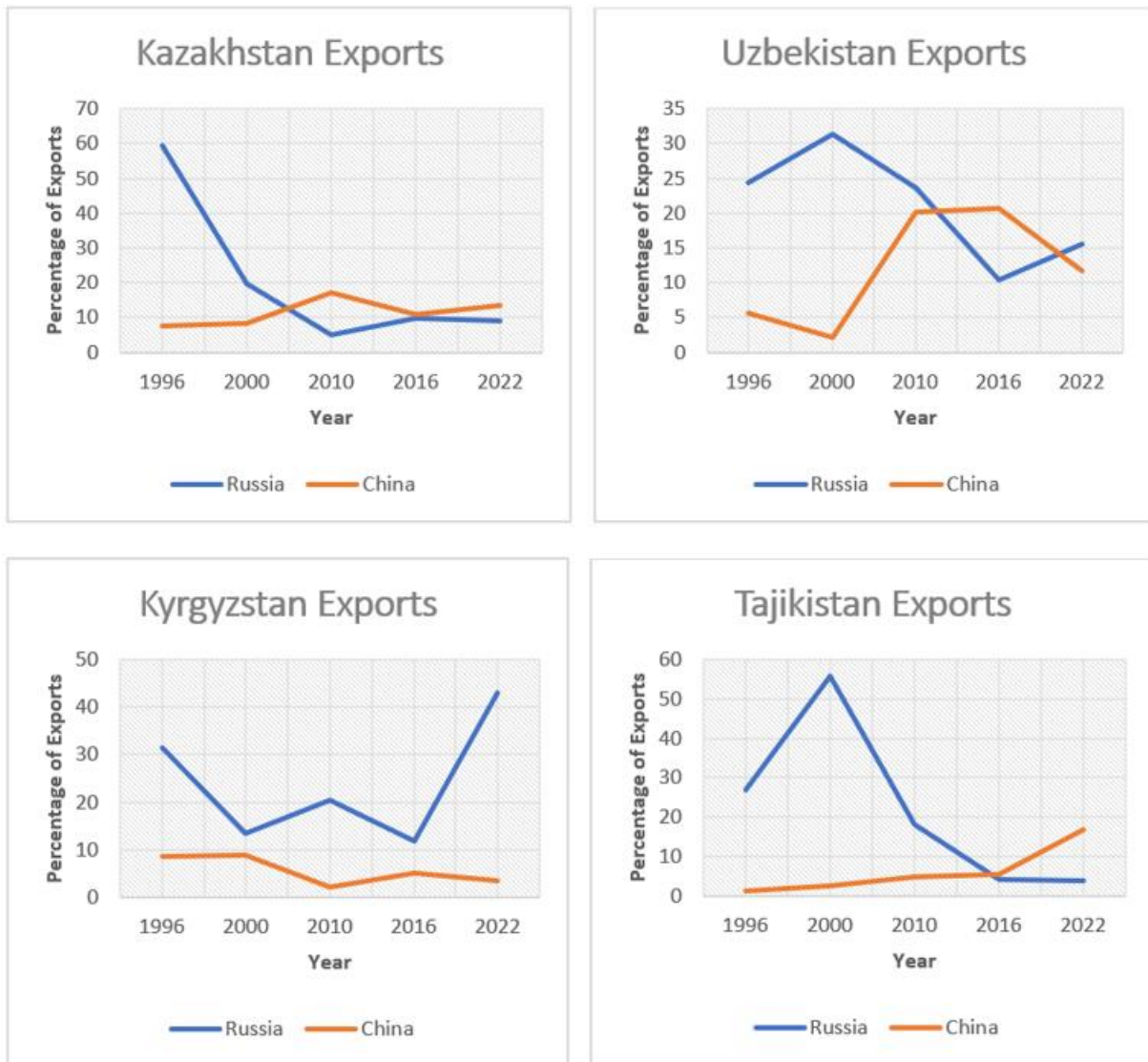


Figure 7: Comparing the exports of Central Asian countries to Russia and China (percentage of exports of the total amount of exports) (OEC Kazakhstan, 2022; OEC Uzbekistan, 2022; OEC Kyrgyzstan, 2022; OEC Tajikistan, 2022)

In absolute numbers, Russia’s trade with the region is still increasing, as shown in Figure 8 showing the import and export growth of Central Asian countries with Russia and China from 2012 and 2022. Kazakhstan's imports and exports with China grew significantly more than with Russia (OEC Kazakhstan, 2022). Uzbekistan's imports from China doubled in comparison to those from Russia, while exports remained consistent between the two countries (OEC Uzbekistan, 2022). Kyrgyzstan's imports from China saw a much steeper incline than those from Russia, although a reverse trend is observed in exports, possibly due to its position as a middleman (OEC Kyrgyzstan, 2022). Tajikistan witnessed the highest growth in imports from Russia, while exports to China experienced the most substantial increase (OEC Tajikistan, 2022).

	Total Import Growth (2012-2022)		Total Export Growth (2012-2022)	
	Russia	China	Russia	China
Kazakhstan	8,90%	66%	13,80%	35,90%
Uzbekistan	146%	307%	95,30%	92,30%
Kyrgyzstan	38,80%	249%	380%	21,50%
Tajikistan	115%	23,20%	39%	297%

Figure 8: Import and export growth of Central Asian countries to Russia and China (OEC Kazakhstan, 2022; OEC Uzbekistan, 2022; OEC Kyrgyzstan, 2022; OEC Tajikistan, 2022)

The region's significance as a key trade hub has drawn China's attention during the last few years (Baig, 2020; Herman et al., 2013). In 2013, China started the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (EBD, 2022; Pike, 2017; Qiu, 2018). With the main goal of improving regional and global connectivity and cooperation, China invested billions in other countries' highways, railways, airports, energy pipelines, seaports, etc. China's initiatives extend beyond physical infrastructure, including numerous special economic zones and industrial areas aimed at generating employment opportunities (McBride, 2023; WWF, 2017).

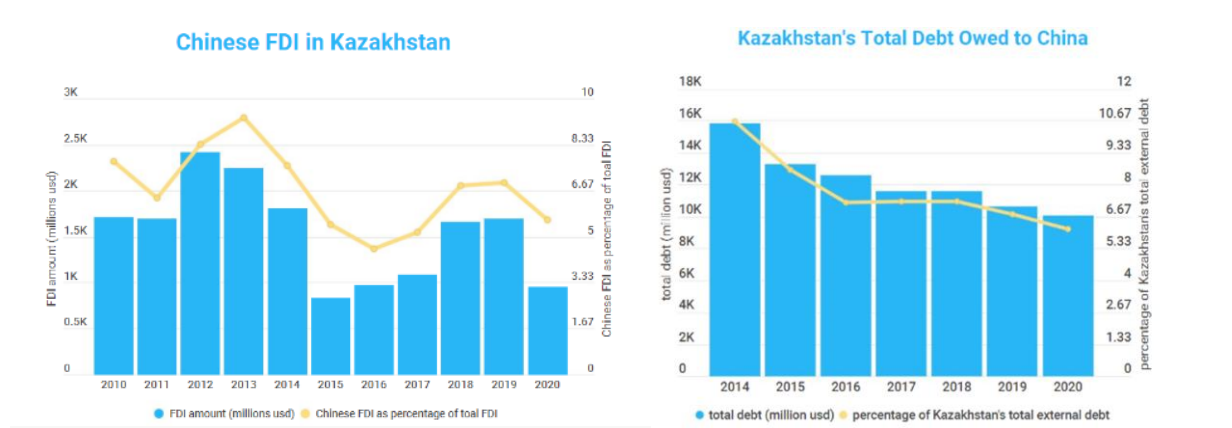
In Central Asia, the total Chinese investment was valued at \$40 billion at the end of 2020, with half of it going to Kazakhstan (Lüdtke, 2023a). At the end of 2021, nearly 8,000 Chinese firms were operating in the region, and by the end of 2022, Chinese trade with Central Asia had reached \$70 billion, up by 40 percent over the preceding year (Lüdtke, 2023). Now, China has proposed two major projects in Central Asia: the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway and a gas pipeline to Turkmenistan, going through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (PMCV, 2023), but other Chinese investments are also being made across all the countries in the region (Changzhi et al., 2023; Pannier, 2023a). In 2023, the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an was held. Ambitions were discussed to improve bilateral economic relations (PMCV, 2023). In general, Central Asian leaders were positive about the new ambitions that were set to cooperate more with China (Kudryavtseva, 2023; Woods et al., 2022).

The BRI is perceived differently in each country. Uzbekistan is positive, partly because it is double landlocked and more infrastructure would benefit them. Conversely, Kazakhstan's stance differs due to its multi-vector policy, as it seeks to avoid overdependence on China. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also seeking to benefit from China's economic involvement. However, they are more in danger of falling into the Chinese 'debt trap', associated with Chinese investments (Lüdtke, 2023a). In particular, Tajikistan fears the potential loss of mining rights or might even lose parts of its territory to China. This country cannot balance between different hegemony, as can be seen by the fact that 60 percent of its debt is from the Chinese Development Bank (Akkerman et al., 2023). To avoid this, most Central Asian countries are trying to balance economic activity with their neighbours.

In the past, Kazakhstan was the only country that could balance in this way, but the declining economic influence of Russia has enabled smaller countries in the region to adopt similar strategies. An

example of this is the Chinese building hydropower plants in Kyrgyzstan, even though Russia initially wanted to build them (Pannier, 2023). Kyrgyzstan heavily relies on Chinese imports, totalling \$13.5 billion, while imports from Russia have dwindled to \$2.22 billion. This marks a notable shift from 1995 when Kyrgyzstan imported more from Russia than China (OEC Kyrgyzstan, 2022). A similar trend can be seen in Uzbekistan, where China is the largest source of imports and trading partner, and the second-largest export destination (MFARC, 2024). With the help of China, the country aims to become a regional logistics and transportation hub, since it borders all other Central Asian countries (Changzhi et al., 2023). In this way, the country hopes to transform from a ‘landlocked country’ into a ‘land-linked country’ (MFARC, 2024).

In recent years, Kazakhstan has seen a decline in Chinese investments (see Figure 9), with Kazakhstan's overall debt to China has been steadily decreasing for the past decade (see Figure 10) (Louthan, 2022). This does not mean that Kazakhstan’s economic relations with China are going downhill, but rather that its multi-vector policy succeeded.



Figures 9 & 10: Chinese FDI in Kazakhstan (Louthan, 2022); Kazakhstan’s total debt owed to China (Louthan, 2022)

Russia on the other hand still has a significant economic power in the region. Russia is actively working to maintain its influence through initiatives like the EAEU, of which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members, although the importance of this initiative is declining. (Lüdtke, 2023; Sharshenova, 2021; Standish, 2024). Furthermore, the region is dependent on labour migrants in Russia. Between 600,000 and 800,000 Kyrgyz citizens work in Russia, leading to a heavy reliance on remittances from labour migrants (Sharshenova, 2021). Tajikistan is even more reliant on such remittances, with 1.6 million Tajik citizens working abroad in 2021, primarily in Russia. In 2021, remittances made up 33 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 34 percent of Tajikistan's (MFART, 2021). Just a few years earlier, these figures were as high as 50 percent for both countries, showing a decreased dependence on remittances (Pannier, 2022; MFARF, 2015; Kluczewska, 2024). Additionally, Central Asian countries remain dependent on Russia for their exports. For example, 80 percent of Kazakhstan’s oil exports transit through the Russian pipeline system (Dumoulin, 2023). Similarly, Uzbekistan’s natural resources are also mostly going

through Russia, and recently Gazprom even started to build a new gas pipeline connecting Uzbekistan with Russia (PR, 2023c), increasing the dependence. Russia controls the most important oil company in Kyrgyzstan, and most resources originate from Russia (Pannier, 2018). However, Moscow's ability to block oil flow as a punitive measure (Dukeyev, 2023) has led Central Asian countries to seek alternative routes, notably via the Caspian Sea and the Southern Caucasus (Butitina, 2022). Lastly, even though China gained more technological power, Russia continues to collaborate with Central Asia on more advanced technological fronts. Between Kazakhstan and Russia, there is still close cooperation in space exploration, through the joint operation of the Baikonur Cosmodrome (PR, 2023a) and the building of new nuclear power plants (ERFRK, n.d.). Plans for further collaborations in hydropower and peaceful nuclear energy use are underway in Uzbekistan (PR, 2023c). In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, already in the '90s, bilateral large-scale economic projects in hydropower, mining gas, oil and minerals, were signed that are still in place today (MFART, 2015).

### **5.3. Security**

Central Asia is bordered by regions prone to security instability such as Xinjiang, Afghanistan, Iran, and Russia. Because of its geographical location, there is a higher chance of the spillover effect, which refers to the spread of instability or conflict from one country to neighbouring countries or the broader region (Liotta, 2010). Central Asia is home to many ethnic and religious groups, which can lead to tensions and religious radicalism (Akiner, 1997). Lastly, border disputes dating back to the Soviet era are still present today (Juza, 2016).

Central Asia faces many security challenges, including terrorism, extremism, and separatism which threaten its stability and development (Demirjian, 2015; Fatland, 2020). While external factors often dominate research foci, internal issues like poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and social injustice also contribute significantly to instability (Huasheng, 2023). This led to mass demonstrations in Kazakhstan, increased terrorist attacks, and a rise in separatist movements, notably in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In 2022, Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan region witnessed its largest protests in two decades, driven by both socioeconomic and separatist reasons (Solod, 2022). In Tajikistan, similar sentiments led to unrest in the Gorno-Badakhshan region (Rickleton, 2023). Additionally, there are fears of fundamentalist Islam spreading in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, threatening long-term stability (Demirjian, 2015). There is also an inter-state conflict in Central Asia, with clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan due to disagreements over arbitrary border and water rights (Akkerman et al., 2023; Juza, 2016). The major external threat to security is its proximity to Afghanistan, a country that experiences lots of civil unrest. Particularly in the neighbouring nations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, there is concern about the spillover effect leading to increased terrorism and drug trafficking (Loupor, 2015).



Central Asian countries are trying to fix those issues by themselves, mostly using more repression of the population, focussing mostly on fundamental Muslims (Fatland, 2022). Many Central Asian countries are part of regional cooperation initiatives, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to address common security challenges collectively (Hedlund, 2023). Figure 11 illustrates significant variations in military spending among the four countries, influencing their policies and external dependencies.

	Military spending (% of GDP)	Absolute military spending (in billions)
Kazakhstan	0,50%	1,13
Uzbekistan	3,60%	2,89
Kyrgyzstan	1,50%	0,17
Tajikistan	1%	0,11

*Figure 11: Military spending of Central Asia (World Bank, 2024)*

Western news sites often simplify Central Asia's dynamics, attributing security to Russia and economics to China (Akkerman et al., 2023), but the reality is more nuanced. Historically, Russia played a mediating role in most security issues in the area of the former USSR (Akkerman et al., 2023). Russia used to head the CSTO, which counterbalances NATO (Hedlund, 2023). However, Uzbekistan has withdrawn from this alliance, leaving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as the remaining members (Umatov, 2024). With the CSTO, Russian troops did help to shut down protests in Almaty, Kazakhstan in January 2022. This showed that Russia still influences security in the region. However, a month later, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, such assistance became unlikely, leaving a security vacuum in Central Asia behind (Auyezov, 2022; Auyezov, 2023; Dumoulin, 2023; Hedlund, 2023; Lüdtkke, 2023; Lüdtkke, 2023a). This can be seen by the fact that Russia did not help with the Karakalpak protests in July 2022 (Solod, 2022), as well as border conflicts between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan after the start of the invasion of Ukraine (Akkerman et al., 2023; Kluczevska, 2024).

With Russia's reduced attention in the region, there is a need for new security partners. While China seems a logical choice, it is hesitant to fully replace Russia in Central Asia, prioritising economic support over security (TSC, 2023). Yet, there's internal debate in China about handling security independently. In 2016, China informally offered to fill parts of the security gap left by Russia. By 2022, the first formal security agreements between China and Tajikistan were established (Eurasianet, 2022). This suggests China is gradually increasing its security involvement abroad, with military training in Tajikistan and anti-terrorism cooperation in Uzbekistan (Lüdtkke, 2023). The BRI heavily influences China's decisions, since there is an economic motive for China to enhance security in Central Asia (Akkerman et al., 2023). China worries instability in Central Asia could threaten energy imports, BRI projects, and security in its western Xinjiang region (Crossley et al., 2022). In 2023, President Xi said it is “important that we stand firm against external attempts to interfere in domestic affairs of regional

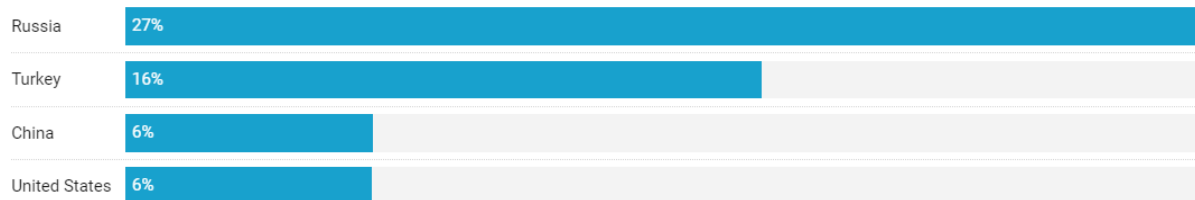


countries or instigate colour revolutions” (TSC, 2023). This shows that China has a motive to provide security to Central Asia to prevent the spread of democratic revolution into its own borders. (Crossley et al., 2022). He emphasises the importance of maintaining zero tolerance towards “the three forces of terrorism, separatism, and extremism” in Central Asia (Changzhi et al., 2023; TSC, 2023).

Again, there are variations among the four countries. Uzbekistan, not part of the Russia-led CSTO, has by far the highest military expenditure (see Figure 11), reducing its reliance on external assistance (Hedlund, 2023). On the other end of the spectrum, Tajikistan dedicates minimal resources to its military while facing the most security-related issues. Consequently, Tajikistan heavily relies on external actors to ensure security. Russia, particularly interested due to terrorism and drug trafficking concerns (MFARF, 2015), maintains the largest foreign military base in Tajikistan and serves as its primary arms supplier (Pannier, 2022; Pannier, 2023). Russia has hard power in Tajikistan but does little to stop the radicalization of Tajik society. Now, Russia faces consequences for its insufficient action against radicalisation, evident in the March 2024 terrorist attacks in Moscow. To preserve relations, President Putin emphasised that terrorists "do not have a nationality" in response to reports linking the suspects to Tajiks (Umatov, 2024). Kazakhstan is more reluctant to security cooperation with China (Crossley et al., 2022), mainly due to more negative public opinions towards China, as further explained in Section 5. Instead, it prefers cooperating with other hegemon, like Russia or Turkey (see Figure 12) (Kuandykov, 2023a).

### Russia is Kazakhstan's favorite security partner

Question Wording: Which country would you prefer to have security ties to?



Sample size: ~1,500; MoE: ±2.53; Method: CATI; Fieldwork dates: 25.04.2023–23.05.2023

Figure 12: Comparing preferred security partners of Kazakhstan (less preferred countries than China and the US are not shown in this graph) (Kuandykov, 2023a)

### 5.4. Language and Culture

For external actors, spreading their culture to Central Asia increases soft power, resulting in more long-term benefits. When Central Asians are familiarised with another culture, a mere exposure effect might occur (Nickerson, 2023). Because of this, people will have more positive attitudes towards this culture and country, leading to increased soft power. In practice, there might for example be more support for investment from those countries.

For a long time, Russia and the USSR have dominated Central Asian culture. Within the USSR, there was a policy of cultural homogenisation (Rolf, 2009), which entailed that different cultures within its territory were actively transformed to become more similar to the Russian culture that could be found in western parts of nowadays Russia. Russian was mandatory at all schools within the USSR (Bekmurzaev, 2019). Consequently, most people in Central Asia speak Russian as a first or second language (Sharshenova, 2021).

Russia's language and culture still influence Central Asia, even though it is slowly fading away. Russian state television is still popular in the region (see Figure 13), especially among the older generations, who often experience Soviet nostalgia (McMann, 2006). Elderly generations often do not use many other sources of media, resulting in feeling more connected to Russia and its culture (Akkerman et al., 2023). Also, most ethnic Russians living in Central Asia are ageing and their population is decreasing, probably leading to a weaker position of Russian language and culture in the future. Among the younger generations, there is a decolonization process occurring. There is more focus on their own heritage and language. This is because the narratives about regional history and shared Soviet past have faded away, whereas new national goals have been defined around the future of the Central Asian countries themselves (Pannier, 2023).

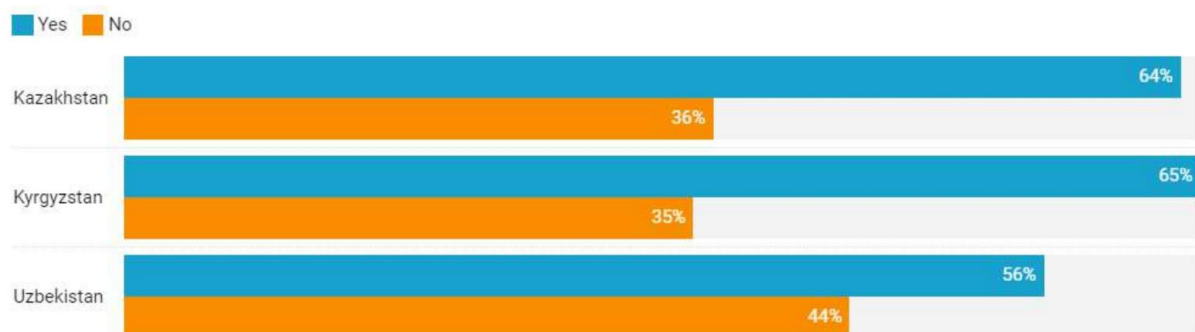


Figure 13: Percentage of population that watches Russian news or entertainment (Kuandykov, 2022)

To reverse this trend, Russia started the Russky Mir Foundation in 2007. This project aims to promote the Russian language and culture worldwide and challenge non-Russian norms and values. In this way, Russia tries to gain more soft power, or at least prevent it from further declining (Sharshenova, 2021). Simultaneously, some Central Asian regimes themselves promote it as well. Labour migration to Russia is an important factor for the governments and people of Central Asian countries to remain committed to promoting the Russian language (Bekmurzaev, 2019). For example, in 2023, Kazakhstan hosted educational workshops, art exhibitions, film screenings and theatre plays as part of the Russian Seasons Project (PR, 2023a). In the same year, Tokayev discussed with Putin opening new Russian universities in Kazakhstan, and the same happened in Uzbekistan (PR, 2023a; PR, 2023d). Moreover, a new project in which Russian teachers travel to Uzbekistan to teach the language to high school children

was implemented last year (PR, 2023c), and there are cultural exchanges in the form of theatre and ballet performances in each other's countries (PR, 2023d).

Smaller Central Asian countries tend to be more dependent on Russia, which results in more pro-Russian policies. In Tajikistan, Russia has a big impact on the cultural aspects of Tajik life. They provide Russian schools and try to spread Russian culture in this country. Russia wants to do this even more in the future. An example of this is the Day of Russian Language in Tajikistan (MFARF, 2015). The same counts for Kyrgyzstan, which has a friendly stance about allowing the Russian language to permeate its public space compared to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In 2000, Russian became an official language in Kyrgyzstan, which remains a de facto language in the government structures. In contrast to other Central Asian countries, the number of schools offering education in Russian has risen in Kyrgyzstan. Most of the university education is offered in Russian. Moreover, newspapers and magazines printed in Russian are more popular than the Kyrgyz ones (Bekmurzaev, 2019).

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan experienced different trends. Kazakhs are increasingly using the Kazakh language, and discussing their country's national identity. Similar developments have occurred in Uzbekistan with the Uzbek language (Dumoulin, 2023). Uzbekistan switched from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, and Kazakhstan plans to do the same in 2025 (Bekmurzaev, 2019). Stepping away from the Cyrillic alphabet is mostly a symbolic decision, as well as an attempt to move away from Russian culture and education (Ordabayev, 2018).

Russia's cultural influence in Central Asia has waned, with its soft power diminishing as the region's countries increasingly explore their own identities. China is not able to spread its language and culture as the USSR and Russia did, but it seeks to expand its soft power by promoting its culture within the region. It does so through the "Cultural Silk Road" program (TSC, 2023). This includes cultural days and art festivals (MFARC, 2024), setting up more traditional medicine centres, providing government scholarships for Central Asian students, and supporting their universities in joining the "University Alliance of the Silk Road" (TSC, 2023). Last, Confucius Institutes are opened all around Central Asia, promoting the Chinese language and culture. These strategies do deliver some results, considering that the Chinese language is gaining popularity in all Central Asian countries, but this can also be attributed to other factors (Mengying, 2023; MFAC, 2019). Studying in China is becoming increasingly popular. In Kazakhstan, 15,000 students studied in China in 2020, with numbers rising annually (Serikkaliyeva, n.d.). Meanwhile, students in Russia declined to 61,000 in 2023 from 71,000 in 2018 (ICEF, 2013; MFARC, 2024). Cultural exchange through tourism is also supported. Uzbekistan now allows Chinese tourists to visit visa-free for 10 days, likely boosting tourism between the two countries (Changzhi et al., 2023).

### 5.5. Public Opinions

Across Central Asia, it's widely believed that Russia and China have too much control over their countries' internal affairs. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are trying to assert themselves as independent players to counter this. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain heavily reliant on these two powers and thus are not experiencing the same shift towards independence (CAB, 2023).

In Kazakhstan, negative views towards Russia are driven by a more critical look at history, especially regarding the USSR, seen as a form of colonization. Citizens are recognizing injustices, like the massacre of about 1.5 million Central Asians who refused to join the Russian army during World War I. As a result, many Central Asians fled to Xinjiang, where some of them are now facing imprisonment in camps there, mostly Kazakh and Kyrgyz people (Akkerman et al., 2023). Among the younger generations, especially in Kazakhstan, the Russian Invasion of Ukraine is widely condemned (see Figure 14), contributing to increasingly negative feelings towards Russia (Hahn, 2023). Simultaneously, among this group, pro-Ukrainian sentiment is becoming more present (Dumoulin, 2023). In smaller countries like Kyrgyzstan, attitudes towards Russia remain more positive, although they are also becoming more critical (Kuandykov, 2022). In Uzbekistan, there is more support for the war in Ukraine (Kuandykov, 2022), but this can likely be attributed to the more anti-Western public opinions in this country (Fatland, 2020).

#### Spring 2022: To what extent do you think Russia's special military operation in Ukraine is justified or unjustified?

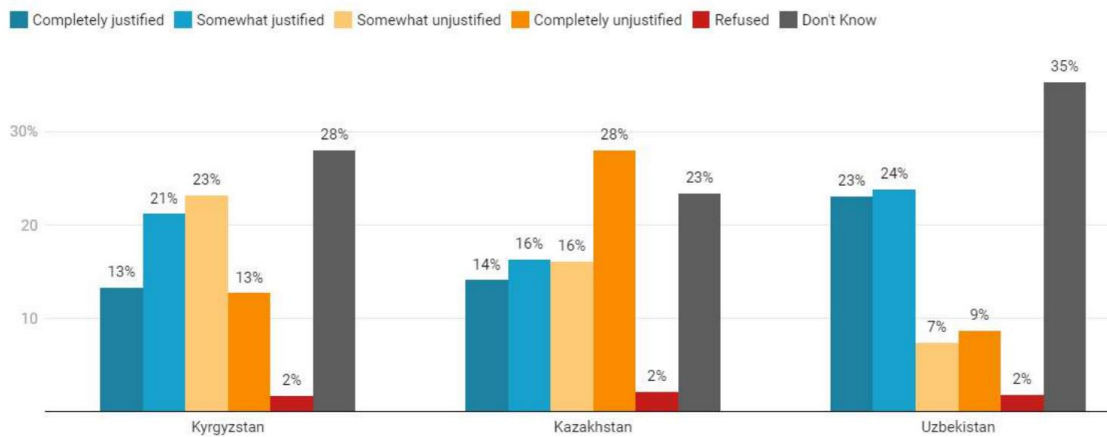


Figure 14: Public opinions in Central Asia on the Invasion of Ukraine (Kuandykov, 2022)

In Uzbekistan, Russia's ideological influence is waning as its secular values clash with Uzbekistan's Islamic traditions. This cultural mismatch is also seen in other countries, leading to increasingly critical public opinion towards Russia (Makhmudov, 2023). In Tajikistan, attitudes towards Russia generally lean towards the positive side, although this may change following the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall by four Tajiks in March 2024. Many Tajiks work in Russia, they are now

experiencing increased xenophobia and even deportations, factors likely to influence future public perceptions towards Russia negatively (Najibullah, 2024).

Western media often portrays that Central Asia is choosing China. Economically, this may hold some truth, but it does not imply that China enjoys a good reputation in the region. (Lüdtke, 2023a). As can be seen in Figures 15 and 16, in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respondents show an increasingly negative view of China from 2017 to 2021. Figure 17 shows that in Kyrgyzstan, public opinion has long been critical of China, with a growing number of people strongly disliking the country. (Omurova, 2023; Woods et al., 2022). Tajikistan is not discussed, since there is no available data on this country (Kuandykov, 2022)

**(Kazakhstan) Thinking about other countries, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of China.**

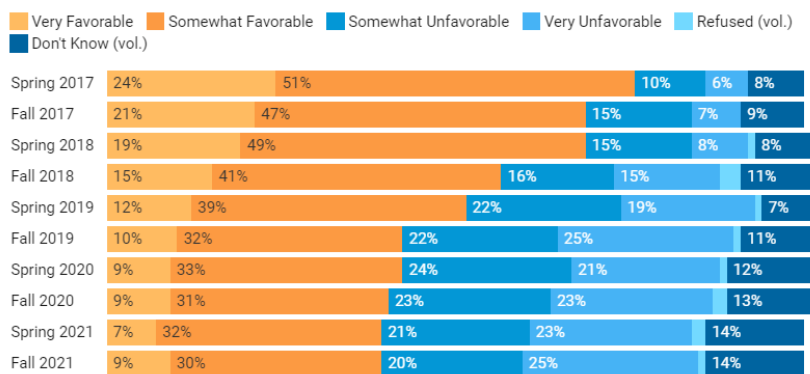


Figure 15: Public opinions towards China in Kazakhstan (Kuandykov, 2022)

**(Uzbekistan) Thinking about other countries, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of China.**

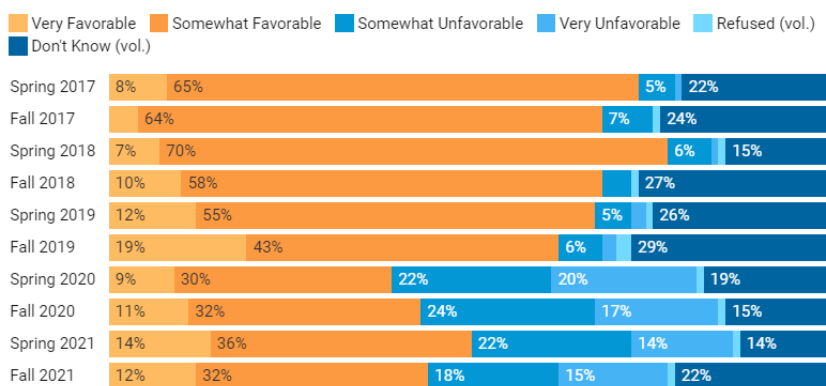


Figure 16: Public opinions towards China in Uzbekistan (Kuandykov, 2022)

**(Kyrgyzstan) Thinking about other countries, please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of China.**

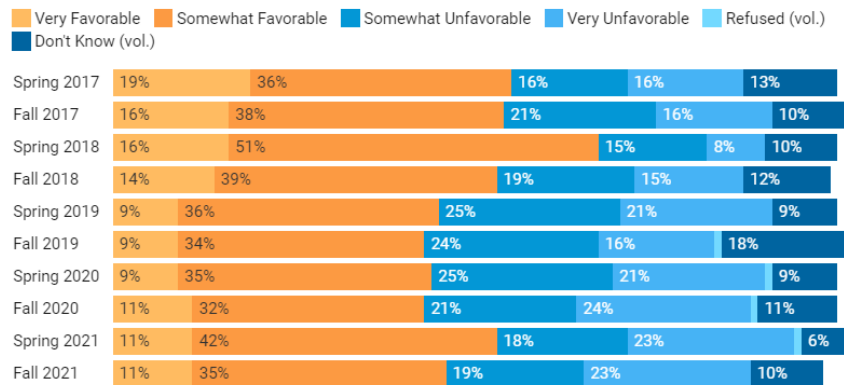


Figure 17: Public opinions towards China in Kyrgyzstan (Kuandykov, 2022)

There are multiple explanations for this trend. One of the most important reasons is probably the Chinese repression against the Uighur, Kazakh, and Kyrgyz populations in Xinjiang. This has hurt Beijing’s reputation among the Muslim nationalistic Central Asians (Lüdtke, 2023a). This in turn sparked several protests around the country. For many Kazakhs and Kyrgyz with family members detained in Xinjiang, the fact that Kazakhstan is boosting economic relations with China is unacceptable (Louthan, 2022). They perceive President Tokayev and his government as complicit in the human rights violations of Turkic groups in China, given Kazakhstan's reliance on Beijing economically. Moreover, Chinese investment brings Chinese labour and technology, which many Kazakhstanis strongly oppose. Worries about China's development of energy infrastructure, driving up national debt are widespread among the population (Woods et al., 2022). Additionally, the opening of Chinese military bases in the region adds to more negative views towards them across multiple Central Asian countries (Lüdtke, 2023a). People feared that better economic relations with China would lead to an influx of Chinese nationals, and therefore increasing competition in the job market. This worry was especially prominent in Kazakhstan, with the establishment of a 30-day visa-free travel plan between Kazakhstan and China in 2023 (Nurullin, 2023). Lastly, the failure of BRI projects in the region has negatively affected the population’s perception of China (see Figure 18) (Louthan, 2022). An example of this is the Khorgos dry port and economic zone in Kazakhstan, which was meant to become a key trade hub between China and Europe (Dukeyev, 2023).

**(Kazakhstan) Please tell me if you strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose the following: China developing energy and infrastructure projects in our country.**

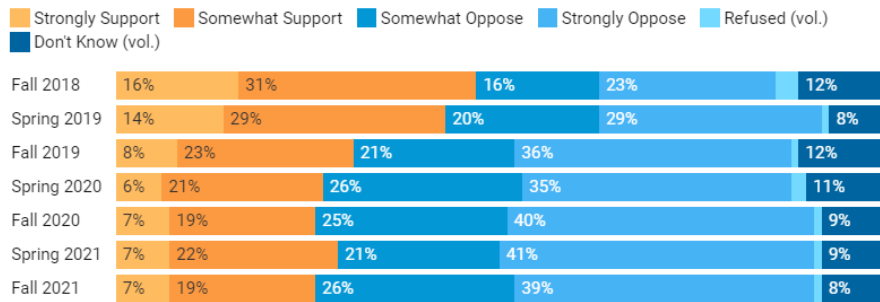


Figure 18: Public opinions on the BRI in Kazakhstan (Kuandykov, 2022)

## **6. Discussion**

The findings of this research have opened new perspectives on the study topic while revealing some expected results. Initially, I hypothesised that Central Asia is experiencing a rebalancing of power with Russia declining and China emerging as the most influential hegemon. PTT explains that with China's level of power, it will struggle for hegemonic dominance, as evident in Central Asia. This struggle is multifaceted and still ongoing. According to the 'hierarchy of power' concept, which is part of the PTT, Russia will be less satisfied with its new position, leading to revisionist behaviour towards Central Asia, a trend observed today. HST explains that instability is created as long as multiple hegemons have a similar influence over the region, expecting that eventually one of them will establish hegemony.

China is becoming a more wanted partner for Central Asia. Unlike Russia, it does not use political pressure to keep the region in its general orientation. The lack of a clear political agenda—other than regional stability, which Beijing believes can be done by economic development through the BRI—makes China an attractive partner. Nevertheless, contrary to Western media's portrayal, Russia remains a significant player in Central Asia, maintaining hard power, as seen in its military presence and economic partnerships. On the other hand, soft power due to historical ties has steadily declined in the last decades, accelerated since the Invasion of Ukraine. Regardless, China cannot and will not have the same power over the region as Russia and the USSR had in the past. Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are significantly more powerful now and have more autonomy, as seen by their multi-vector policies, particularly Kazakhstan's policy being the most successful. Uzbekistan needs special attention, being the only Central Asian country bordering neither Russia nor China. It is trying to stay neutral, whereas the country is very important to both powers. The country is increasingly aligning with China, particularly in comparison to other Central Asian countries, as it quickly moves away from Russia's sphere of influence. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on the other hand do not have the power to have this autonomy and will be tied to their neighbours. Kyrgyzstan is expected to maintain strong ties with Russia in the future, while Tajikistan's future relationship remains uncertain.

### ***6.1. Relations With Other Hegemons***

Additionally, this research found that hegemons, other than Russia and China, are interested in the region. Examples are Turkey, Iran, Arab states, the US, and the EU (Pannier, 2022). Their influence is slowly rising, with the EU now being Kazakhstan's largest trading partner (Louthan, 2022). Additionally, Central Asian countries are increasingly focusing on the Middle East due to cultural affinities, feeling closer to these predominantly Islamic countries than to Russia or China. Among Middle Eastern nations, Turkey emerges as the closest and most trusted ally, partly because of linguistic reasons, as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan all speak Turkish languages. Moreover, Turkey is gaining importance because of the emerging energy and security axis between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia (Hedlund, 2023). Furthermore, the autocratic political models shared by countries like the



UAE, Saudi Arabia, and others in the Gulf region lead to closer relations. This alignment is generally perceived as safe because it does not provoke Russia or China, with whom the Gulf states maintain decent relations. Also, despite facing challenges such as sanctions, Iran remains a strategic player due to its geographical importance and cultural similarities to Tajikistan, who both speak Persian (Pannier, 2023a).

## 7. Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I asked myself the following research question: *“How and why did relations of Central Asian countries towards Russia and China evolve since 1991 and what implications does this hold for regional geopolitics?”* In line with my hypothesis, there is a shift in Central Asia’s relations with its neighbours. This aligns with the trend toward a more multipolar world, characterized by the emergence of additional hegemonies, notably China.

The research question is answered using the PTT, HST, and the concept of status quo and revisionist states, which have all proven to be still relevant in the context of this research. In line with the PTT, China, which is in Central Asia in stage 2 of PTT, is challenging Russia, being in stage 3 so Russia is relatively losing power as a regional hegemon in Central Asia. At the same time, other regional hegemonies in stage 2 such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf States are trying to increase their influence in the region. Now, there is seemingly no absolute power in Central Asia. Russia’s relations with the region cooled down, and since the war in Ukraine, this trend accelerated. China’s main reasons for broadening its influence are that (1) it needs natural resources that can be found in Central Asia and sees it as a crucial area for the BRI, and (2) it wants security in the region because it is afraid of possible spillover effects to Xinjiang and China as a whole.

From a political perspective, Central Asia tries to balance between Russia and China. Kazakhstan is distancing itself from Russia's actions while avoiding confrontation. Uzbekistan remains neutral but strengthens ties with China. Kyrgyzstan still leans towards Russia, and Tajikistan maintains close ties with Russia but seeks balance. Central Asian countries deepen political ties with China despite human rights concerns of ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs in Xinjiang.

Economically, China toppled Russia from the "regional throne", having more economic leverage to invest in Central Asia. China's BRI is the best example of its growing influence, with large infrastructure investments. In all Central Asian countries, except Kyrgyzstan, there is a starker increase in exports to China than to Russia. Imports from China are also relatively growing compared to imports from Russia. However, Russia is still in charge of the pipelines, transporting Central Asia’s natural resources, and Russia remains important for labour migration.

The region experiences security challenges from internal issues like ethnic tensions and poverty, and external threats from neighbouring Afghanistan and Russia. Terrorism, extremism, and separatism

pose significant risks to stability, prompting varying responses from Central Asian nations, including repression and regional cooperation through organizations like the CSTO and SCO. While Russia historically played a key security role, its focus has shifted to the war in Ukraine, leaving room for China to increase its involvement.

Cultural changes are also ongoing. Older generations are focused on Russia, whereas younger ones are embracing newly created national identities. Meanwhile, China is expanding soft power through cultural initiatives, but this has not dethroned Russia's cultural legacy.

Finally, negative sentiments towards Russia result from historical injustices, especially among younger generations. Meanwhile, concerns over human rights abuses in Xinjiang and economic worries related to the BRI like 'debt traps' contribute to growing scepticism towards China as well.

From this, we can conclude that Russia and China share their influence in Central Asia. In all five factors, this research identified different relations of Central Asian countries, with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan having multi-vector approaches, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still rely more on Russia, since they have limited power. According to HST, shared dominance would only be a temporary position because neither Russia nor China wants to have an equal partner in the long term, so this will eventually lead to a power struggle as highlighted by PTT. Given Russia is considered a revisionist state in the region, there is a higher chance that coercive power could be used in the future. In contrast, China's case is more nuanced and will likely continue to use its soft power. In Central Asia, Soviet-era elites are still in power, but a new generation is reshaping perspectives towards Russia and China. The region stands at a crossroads, with its future yet to be shaped.

### ***7.1. Implications***

In general, the results support existing research, illustrating geopolitical trends in the region. This thesis adds to existing research by providing an interdisciplinary look at the developments in Central Asia, resulting in new insights into geopolitical dynamics. This is typically done from a solely political or economic perspective. Other factors such as security, language and culture, and public opinions hence contribute to the wealth of literature. Additionally, not many papers on this topic have been written since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the summits in Samarkand and Xi'an.

The presence of rich natural resources will probably lead to more hegemonies wanting to increase their influence in this region. Also, several hegemonies are concerned with Central Asian regional stability, especially because of its proximity to unstable areas like Afghanistan, Xinjiang and Iran. For policymakers, this thesis can help to inform strategic decisions that involve Central Asia. Using findings from this thesis can help foster diplomatic relationships and mitigate conflicts, ultimately contributing to peace and prosperity in Central Asia, and therefore the broader region as a whole.

## **7.2. Limitations**

The reliability of this research is impacted by several factors. Firstly, I am not fluent in Chinese, Russian, or Central Asian languages, making it challenging to understand texts and conversations from those languages fully. Reliance is therefore upon translation technology, which may miss important nuances or details for the discourse analysis. Moreover, Central Asia's geopolitical landscape is more than just relations with Russia and China. This thesis did not observe evolving relationships with influential players such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf States, India, the US, or the EU, nor toward changing relations among and between Central Asian countries. Additionally, there is a clear influence of propaganda in the region. In many cases, this research was limited to biased information through state-controlled media channels, impacting objectivity and reliability. Also, this research is limited to secondary sources available in the public domain. These sources may already contain interpretations or perspectives introduced by the original authors. Lastly, the main theory used in this research, PTT, was introduced in 1958 and must be viewed cautiously given current globalisation and new geopolitical dynamics.

## **7.3. Further Research**

Further research could investigate whether other hegemons' relations, such as Turkey and the EU, with the region have changed over time, and for what reasons. Additionally, others can investigate how the Central Asian countries, Russia, and China can make policies to best deal with this geopolitical situation. According to PTT, Russia and China might end up in a power struggle over Central Asia. Further research could be done about the implications of potential tensions, or cooperation, in Sino-Russian relations on the stability and security of Central Asia, and how it impacts their collaboration or rivalry on other international issues.

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