CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA: THE EMERGING EURASIAN ORDER AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE UKRAINE WAR FOR BEIJING

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Abstract

The present article examines China's Central Asian policy in the context of the prevailing international disorder that has been accelerated by the war in Ukraine. Over the last decade, there have been indications of a convergence in Chinese and Russian policies, with the objective of increasing their global influence and establishing a more favourable international order. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 occurred at a pivotal moment in the East-West confrontation, directly impacting the interests of both powers in Central Asia. The article seeks to provide an answer to the question of the extent to which China has benefited from Russia's war in Ukraine in order to increase its influence in Central Asia and benefit from the emerging regional order. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, the authors employ a qualitative methodology to analyse the evolution of Sino-Central Asian economic and diplomatic relations since the onset of the Ukraine war. The analysis demonstrates how Beijing has expanded its regional influence in Central Asia during the war.

Keywords: *China; Eurasia; Global Order; Competition; Regional Conflicts.*

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian war is not solely a matter of geopolitical competition for the control of spheres of influence; it is also a struggle for dominance in the international order. This also has implications for the Central Asian regional order. As a result of

the protracted conflict in Ukraine, it is anticipated that the regional balance of power will be impacted, with potential implications for Moscow and to the benefit of Beijing. The potential for such a development is arguably the rationale behind the adoption of a new strategy on the Ukrainian issue by the incoming American leadership, which perceives China as its primary rival in the international system.

Given the gravity of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia's performance in the war is indirectly linked to its interactions with the neighboring powers, which are part of the regional order. The shared ambition of Moscow and Beijing to challenge Western dominance has led to a need to strengthen their collaborative efforts and align their international policies (Blackwill & Fontaine, 2024).

In the current geopolitical landscape, Russia and China are at the forefront of the efforts to establish institutions that will limit Western influence. This is the case, for example, with the BRICS, a new East-led power center that was created to counterbalance the dominant Western-led G7. A notable illustration of this strategic initiative was witnessed during the 16th BRICS summit, which was held in Kazan, Russia, from October 22 to 24, 2024. During this summit, the Chinese president emphasized the emergence of a new world order, characterized by turbulence and transformation (Xinhua, 2024b). In a similar vein, the Russian president made a statement on November 7, 2024, only a few days after the US presidential elections, in which he hailed the emergence of an entirely new world order that had emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He stressed the incapacity of the "former hegemon" who face serious difficulties to rule the world and make efforts "to cling to their diminishing power through force", a choice that "result[s] only in widespread instability and more tensions" (President of Russia, 2024, para. 17). There is little space for doubt that the pronouncements of the Chinese and Russian leaders on world order are a direct challenge to the West's post-Cold War monopoly of power. The ongoing war in Ukraine is a challenge for Sino-Russian relations. Beijing has preferred to pursue a discreet policy of tacit support for Moscow rather than openly supporting it, which would mean challenging Western dominance. The transformation of the war into a protracted one is expected to undermine not only Moscow's military power but also its effectiveness in its zones of influence. The most prominent of these is Central Asia, where the Turkic nations were under Moscow's domination until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Central Asia is a strategically important region due to its proximity to major regional powers, its abundant natural resources and its location on the transit routes between East and West. All this makes the states of the region coveted by Russia, China (China-Central Asia Summit on May 18, 2023; June 16–17, 2025), the European Union (October 22, 2022; June 2, 2023), America (USA-C5+1 on September 19, 2023) and, more recently, the Arab states (Central Asia-GCC on July 19, 2023; on April 15, 2024). Added to this is the unstable social, economic, and political situation of these states, which increases their dependence on

neighboring powers. This perhaps explains the default position of the Central Asian republics, which, according to Lillis (2023, 36, para. 2), have "professed neutrality on the war in Ukraine" and "refused to give Russia diplomatic cover beyond abstaining from UN votes condemning its aggression."

Given Beijing's interest in developing Central Asia's infrastructure and transport capacity, which goes beyond the New Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]) and includes the Middle Corridor, the proposed East-West transport route that will bypass Russia, it is important to consider the extent to which the war in Ukraine may limit Russian influence and, despite the strategic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, favor the latter's policy towards the Central Asian states. In this respect, the research question of this study is formulated as follows: "*Has China benefited from Russia's war in Ukraine in order to increase its influence in Central Asia?*"

The proliferation of conflicts has had a significant impact on the international order. Should the prevailing conflict of interests persist, and the dominant states prove incapable of effective management, it is highly probable that anarchy and disorder will ultimately prevail. In this context, it is pertinent to acknowledge the United Nations' (UN) inability to enforce order, a consequence of the prevailing great power rivalries within the organization.

However, the prevailing disorder also creates opportunities for those powers that are willing to work for a transformation of the international order. A thorough examination of the diplomatic and economic implications of the war in Ukraine for Beijing is necessary to determine whether China, despite its close strategic ties, has benefited from Russia's war in Ukraine to increase its influence in Central Asia. Considering the above, the research hypothesis can be formulated as follows: "*A rising power is expected to take advantage of the prevailing disorder caused by international conflicts in order to promote its diplomatic and economic interests and transform the regional order.*"

The article follows a deductive approach to explore the impact of the war in Ukraine, which may bring about changes in the regional order, on the strategic relationship between Russia and China, and in particular on any decline in the Moscow's influence in Central Asia. A qualitative research method was applied in the article. To this end, key sources (data from, e.g., the *UN Comtrade*, the national banks of Central Asian states, and the respective national statistical authorities) have been employed to shed light on the diplomatic and economic implications of the war in Ukraine for Beijing's strategy in Central Asia.

The article first studies the post-Cold War order in Eurasia and the impact of the conflict phenomenon on the international and regional order. It then scrutinizes China's evolving grand strategy in the post-Cold War era, with a particular focus on Central Asia. Thirdly, it examines Sino-Russian relations. Finally, it analyzes China's diplomatic and economic relations with the Central Asian states.

The article sheds light on the nature and limits of the strategic relationship that has developed between Russia and China, two Eurasian powers, during a regional conflict that could bring about changes in the regional order. It also provides useful insights into China's policy towards Central Eurasia. It improves the understanding of the objectives of Chinese policy in the region and the prospects for Chinese influence on the regional states.

Post-Cold War Order in Eurasia and International and Regional Conflicts

The post-Cold War order that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union bore the features of a fragile, unstable and uncertain order. That was a challenge to the Western leadership, which was in favor of spreading the liberal model. In the absence of a bipolar system, in which the two superpowers would balance each other, and without a global supranational authority that would exercise legitimate power, the United States of America (USA), the enduring non-Eurasian superpower, assumed responsibility for the management of world affairs. This role was considered the only alternative to the forces of international disorder (Brzezinski, 1998). Washington was expected to exercise its influence beyond its traditional spheres of influence, into the former Soviet-bloc countries and Central Eurasia, which was once under the control of Moscow.

The attempt of the Western great powers to exercise control and influence both at bilateral and multilateral levels, such as in the most important international organizations of a political, economic and military character, did not favor the immediate integration of the Eurasian powers into the western-led structures of the international system. Thus, the most significant of these powers turned towards the unilateral implementation of their strategic goals and the search for cooperation with actors that have common interests. It is no coincidence that a handful of states – including Eurasian powers such as China, Russia, and India – that soon became known as BRICS, despite significant disparities in the economic, political and diplomatic fields, moved towards the institutionalization of their cooperation since the mid-2000s (Stuenkel, 2020). The ambition of this group was to reduce the power and the influence of Western powers in the economic and political institutions (e.g. IMF, World Bank, G8), so that the emerging powers could join them as equal members.

Having overcome the difficulties of the transition, since the early 2000s, Moscow gradually began to return to the forefront of the international scene and adopted a revisionist stance. Its primary concern was the state of the international order as outlined by the global hegemon, and its place in it (Tsygankov, 2004). Thus, it stood in favor of both the construction of a new security architecture, in close cooperation with the Europeans, and the restoration of the international economic order. The

hydrocarbon deposits that the country possessed played a key role in the Russian strategy against the main actors of the Eurasian space. The Russian economy benefited significantly from the increase in hydrocarbon prices until the global economic crisis in 2008. It attempted to exploit these deposits, as the Soviet Union had done in the past, in order to achieve political concessions and economic benefits.

Nowadays, one can observe several revisionist Eurasian states, other than Russia, which are not embracing the principles of the liberal international order. As Rachman (2024) puts it, apart from Russia, also China – but the new American leadership, too – is seeking to bring changes to it. In that sense, he maintains that they have all become revisionist powers, in different ways, and are seeking radical change to the current world order.

China is also an emerging power. As such, it strives to make the international community embrace its worldview and the ambitious plans it promotes for the international order. Xi Jinping is pursuing Beijing's global interests in various ways. While he is aiming to achieve interdependence with neighboring countries through close economic relations, at the same time it may become more threatening towards some of them e.g., the Philippines.

As far as the USA is concerned, it remains at the top of the most powerful states and until recently the most important advocate of the liberal international order. It leads the most important security alliances in Europe, Asia and elsewhere, thus supporting the international *status quo*. It also benefits from the advantages of the largest economy of the world. All the evidence regarding President Trump's policy, with the "America First" agenda, points out that he will seek fundamental changes to Washington's relationship with its allies and the international trading system. Subsequently, the USA risks becoming the major disrupter of the international world order.

As a former superpower, Russia is seeking to restore its former influence in world affairs. Putin sacrificed Moscow's political and economic ties to the Western capitals to pursue his vision of Russia's grandeur (Rachman, 2024). However, Moscow's diplomatic and military power proved insufficient to overturn the detrimental post-Cold War *status quo*. It was not possible to prevent the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance in Eastern Europe, where Moscow saw its influence limited to only a few allies. This confrontation acquired further regional dimensions due to the pro-Western policies of some countries in Moscow's former sphere of influence. Thus, the latter initially turned against Tbilisi (2008), almost simultaneously with the declaration of independence of Kosovo, and later against Kiev, which it had been trying to control since the beginning of the new millennium. In the war against Georgia, it conquered South Ossetia, while in the war against Ukraine, it initially captured Crimea in 2014, and a few years later, in the winter of 2022, it invaded the country.

The recent conflicts that occurred in the Eurasian space were sparked by geopolitical considerations linked to the interests mostly of the emerging powers, which

are seeking to alter the international *status quo*. The failure to exert pressure on the dominant powers to instigate a non-violent transformation of the order, which would address their demands, resulted in the activation of the mechanisms of conflict. Scholars have viewed war as a process that can bring about change and establish a new world order (Gilpin, 1981). The fight for global hegemony is a destabilizing phenomenon for the entire system. Upon its appearance, it is all aspects of political and economic relations, alliances included, that are tested.

The Evolving Grand Strategy of China in the post-Cold War Era

In 1989, China had to face a troubled domestic environment and a hostile international system due to the Tiananmen incident (Chen & Wang, 2011). The Western economic and political sanctions threatened the growth of the Chinese economy and its place in the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s further enhanced Beijing's fear about the international role of the country and the survival of the Chinese Communist Party (Clarke, 2019). Therefore, Deng Xiaoping stressed the importance of keeping a low profile in the international system and of observing calmly, securing the Chinese position, and handling affairs with composure (*lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu*) (Chen & Wang, 2011, p. 197).

While this strategy was interpreted in the West as an attempt by China "to hide capabilities and bide time," Chinese analysts deny that the strategy was an attempt by Beijing to cover up its true intentions (Chen & Wang, 2011). Keeping a low profile was expected to facilitate the integration of China into the existing international economic order and further strengthen Chinese power (Goldstein, 2020).

China's rapid economic growth throughout the 1990s and its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 upgraded Beijing's role in the international economic order. Even though China was not yet a particularly rich or powerful state, it held enough power and wealth in order to cause worry about its intentions. Trying to appease the fears of a "China threat," Beijing adopted a peaceful rise approach (Goldstein, 2020).

China's peaceful rise refers to the steady and continuous growth of its economy and power, aimed at improving the living standards of its citizens (Zheng, 2005). Beijing sought to achieve this by integrating into the global community through peaceful means, such as technological investments and the efficient use of human resources, and by opening its economy, exemplified by its entry into the WTO. Chinese foreign policy did not focus on spreading socialism, while domestically, a harmonious socialist society was to be established (Zheng, 2005).

A noticeable shift in China's grand strategy became evident towards the end of the 2000s. At that time, the USA was locked militarily and economically in the war

on terror, while it was also trying to overcome the global financial crisis of 2007. China was slowly becoming more assertive in its foreign affairs (Goldstein, 2020).

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China began to strive for achievement and confidently promote the concept of the Chinese Dream, which aims to rejuvenate the nation and reclaim China's historical position as the world's foremost state (Yan, 2014). The economic development of China is no longer the sole goal of Chinese foreign policy. Nowadays, the national rejuvenation of China signifies its attempt to match American power and leads to inevitable competition between the two states (Yan, 2014). Xi Jinping highlighted this during the celebration of the 80th anniversary of China's victory in World War II, when he stated that "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is unstoppable!" (Spegele & Wong, 2025).

The new Chinese strategy is multifaceted. First of all, Beijing continues to try to reassure other states about its intentions. Furthermore, China tries to reshape the international system in order to mirror its new role. Finally, Beijing uses its increased power to address any challenge to its core interests (Goldstein, 2020).

China's Strategy for Central Asia

China's strategy for Central Asia encompasses three main objectives. Firstly, it seeks to strengthen China's influence along its Western frontiers and enhance connectivity with West Asia, the Middle East, and Europe via the BRI (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024; Tukmadiyeva, 2013). Secondly, the region provides China with essential energy imports (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024). Lastly, fostering positive relations with Central Asian countries helps bolster the security of China's Xinjiang region (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024).

It is no coincidence that the BRI was initially proposed during Xi Jinping's speech in Kazakhstan in 2013. President Xi unveiled a plan to establish an "Economic Belt" or corridors that would connect China with Central Asia, Russia, Eastern and Central Europe, the Balkan Peninsula and Western Europe. Soon afterwards, China announced plans for the creation of the "Maritime Silk Road" that would link China with Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean and eventually Western Europe (Ferdinand, 2016). China views the BRI as a chance to foster peace, friendship, prosperity, openness, innovation, and cultural connectivity among the involved nations (Xinhua, 2023). Nonetheless, geopolitical and economic factors are also significant in this Chinese initiative.

The BRI highlights China's striving for achievement. The initiative positions China at the center of an infrastructure project that aims to enhance regional and global stability. Beijing aims to take advantage of a strategic opportunity along its Western frontiers, while it eases the pressure imposed by the USA along its maritime frontiers (Clarke, 2019). Moreover, the BRI pinpoints China's readiness to deepen the economic competition with the USA in Eurasia (Ferdinand, 2016), and

Beijing's willingness to secure energy resources imported through continental corridors that circumvent sea bottlenecks, such as the Strait of Malacca. Internal considerations, such as the security of the troubled western regions of China, are also relevant (Clarke, 2019).

Regarding energy imports, Central Asia is a key supplier of mainly natural gas to China. In 2022, pipelines from Central Asian states and Russia accounted for 38% of China's total natural gas imports (U.S. Energy Information Administration [EIA], 2023). Additionally, Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) contributed another 6% to China's needs. Moreover, 18% of China's total oil imports came from the former Soviet Union, with Russia holding the lion's share (EIA, 2023).

A large part of the aforementioned energy imports passes through Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in western China, which shares borders and cultural ties with Central Asian countries. The region serves as a corridor both for the export of Chinese goods to Eurasia and for the import of Central Asian energy and goods to China (Li, 2016). However, scholars also highlight the threat of militant Islamism spreading from Central Asia to the dissatisfied Uyghurs living in Xinjiang (Finley, 2007). China's relations with the Central Asian states aim to support the economic development and secure the stability of Xinjiang, by fighting the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism and separatism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has played an important role in maintaining the stability in the region (Hou, 2023; Tukmadiyeva, 2013).

In summary, China's strategy for Central Asia aims to strengthen Beijing's geostrategic position regionally and globally, to ensure access to much-needed energy supplies and to stabilize the western region of Xinjiang.

Sino-Russian Relations

Two perspectives have mainly shaped evaluations of the Sino-Russian relationship and the forecasts about its future. On the one hand, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing is often perceived as a "marriage of convenience," a relationship that cannot grow any stronger due to their diverging interests. On the other hand, Chinese–Russian relations are viewed as being founded on strategic and ideological factors, forming an anti-Western alliance (Fu, 2016).

However, according to the Chinese side, Sino-Russian relations are neither a "marriage of convenience" nor an anti-Western alliance (Fu, 2016). The two states have formed a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era" based on mutual respect and win-win cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a).

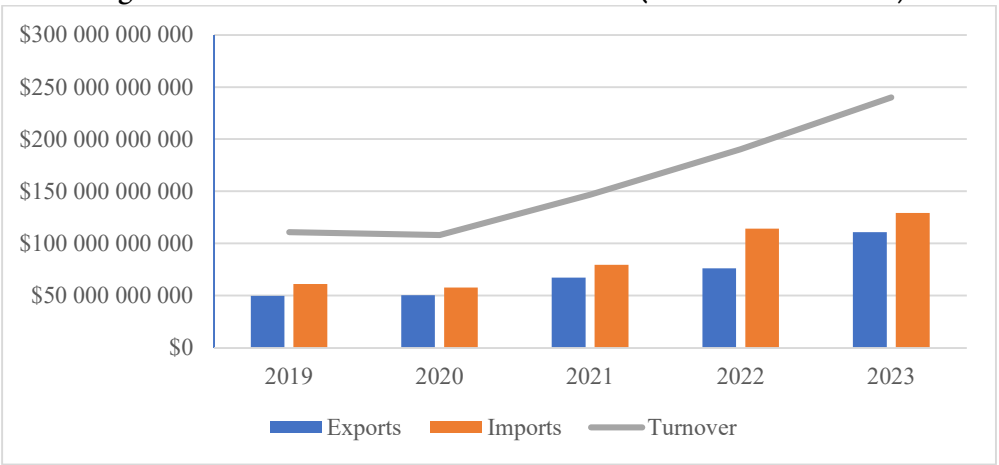
Just a few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow and Beijing signed a joint statement in which they expressed their perspective on the evolving dynamics of the international system. According to the Joint Statement, the

"friendship between the two States has no limits" and *"there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation"* (President of Russia, 2022, para. 51)). In the triangle consisting of Russia, China and the USA, the relationship between Moscow and Beijing is the firmest and most positive (Fu, 2016). China and Russia collaborate both bilaterally and within multilateral fora and organizations, such as BRICS and the SCO.

Besides the firm political relations between China and Russia, military relations are also growing strong. In the mid-2010s, China bought advanced military equipment from Russia, such as S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems and Su-35 fighters (Malle, 2017). Moreover, the two states have carried out numerous joint military drills, with the majority occurring after 2017 (Green, 2024). In the years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's exports of military equipment to Beijing have significantly declined, while China has stepped up its exports of dual-use products to Russia (Kantchev, 2024).

The trade relations between China and Russia have also followed a positive trend, recording continuous growth since 2020 (Figure 1). Between 2021 and 2023, the turnover of the Sino-Russian trade recorded a 63.59% increase, reaching the amount of $240,140,987,101 in 2023 (UN Comtrade Database, n.d.).

Figure 1: Trade between China and Russia (2019-2023 in USD)

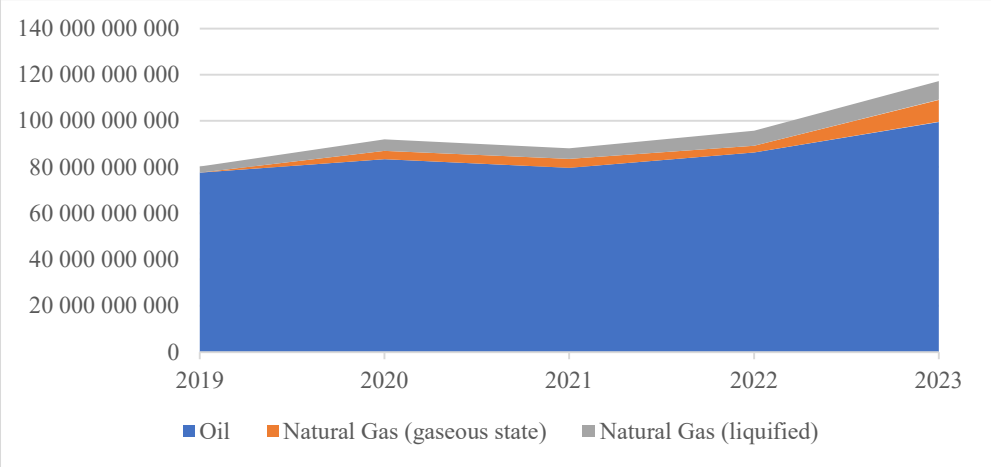


Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country China). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

A significant portion of bilateral trade relies on the Chinese imports of Russian energy resources. From 2019 to 2023, these imports consistently accounted for more than 27% annually. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the volume of Russian energy exports to China has increased significantly (Figure 2). However, the upward trend in the average price of these imports, observed until 2022, reversed in 2023, allowing Beijing to benefit from cheaper energy imports from Moscow (Table 1). Moreover, the negotiations between the two states for the construction of the

Siberia 2 pipeline have stalled, as Beijing seeks to secure prices similar to Moscow's domestic tariffs (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Figure 2: Chinese energy imports from Russia (2019-2023 in kg)



Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country China). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

Table 1: Average cost of Chinese Energy Imports from Russia per kg (2019–2023 in USD).

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Crude Oil	0.48	0.33	0.51	0.68	0.61
Natural Gas (in gaseous state)	N/A	0.22	0.38	1.35	0.67
Natural Gas (liquified)	0.45	0.34	0.61	1.04	0.64

Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country China). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

While on the one hand, China supports Russia on the diplomatic and economic fronts, on the other hand, it wants to present itself as an alternative pole in the world order that does not produce conflict and instability through its interventions in other states. Beijing presents itself as a neutral actor that seeks a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the Ukrainian War, aiming to escape the balancing act between Moscow and the West (Trush, 2022). This is why it avoided making any comment during the early days of the war. Nearly two weeks after the start of the war, during a virtual summit with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Chinese President Xi proposed a six-step plan to address the situation in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Conversely, China refused to support any UN resolutions that condemned the Russian attack and abstained from imposing sanctions. In its rhetoric, Beijing has adopted a lot of elements of the Russian reasoning, while also criticizing NATO, which it sees

as the main provocateur of this escalation. Just like in 2014, China has provided Russia with a way out of economic isolation, but has refused to provide military support. Lastly, in an effort to extract prestige as a great power in the international system, it also posed itself as a possible mediator for the resolution of the conflict (Sahakyan, 2024). Just as in the case of Crimea, where Beijing did not recognize its annexation by Russia, in this case as well it is making an effort to avoid drawing parallels with the situation in Taiwan, in order to preserve its narrative around the "One China" (Chang-Liao, 2023).

Sino-Russian relations are becoming increasingly unbalanced, with Moscow growing more reliant on Chinese energy imports and on dual-use exports from Beijing.

The economic and diplomatic impact on China's relations with Central Asian States

In the subsystem of Central Asia, a division of labor seems to exist between two great powers. On the one hand, China is emerging as the dominant economic power in the region, while, on the other hand, Russia retains its position as the regional security hegemon (Bitarova, 2018; Kazantsev et al., 2021; Sim & Aminjonov, 2024).

The following part of the article aims to examine the effect the Ukraine conflict had on the relations of China with the states of Central Asia. Therefore, we will first focus on the diplomatic relations of China with Central Asian states and then we will turn to their economic relations.

Diplomatic Impact of the Ukraine War

Chinese President Xi Jinping meets his Central Asian counterparts almost annually. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Xi Jinping has met with Central Asian leaders 24 times (Table 2).

Table 2: Bilateral Meetings of Heads of State

States	Date	Place
China – Kazakhstan	14 September 2022	Nur-Sultan
China – Uzbekistan	14 September 2022	Samarkand
China – Kyrgyzstan	15 September 2022	Samarkand
China – Tajikistan	15 September 2022	Samarkand
China – Turkmenistan	15 September 2022	Samarkand
China – Turkmenistan	6 January 2023	Beijing
China – Kazakhstan	17 May 2023	Xi'an
China – Uzbekistan	18 May 2023	Xi'an
China – Kyrgyzstan	18 May 2023	Xi'an

China – Tajikistan	18 May 2023	Xi'an
China – Turkmenistan	18 May 2023	Xi'an
China – Kazakhstan	17 October 2023	Beijing
China – Uzbekistan	17 October 2023	Beijing
China – Turkmenistan	19 October 2023	Beijing
China – Uzbekistan	24 January 2024	Beijing
China – Kazakhstan	3 July 2024	Astana
China – Kyrgyzstan	3 July 2024	Astana
China – Uzbekistan	4 July 2024	Astana
China – Tajikistan	5 July 2024	Dushanbe
China - Kazakhstan	16 June 2025	Astana
China - Tajikistan	17 June 2025	Astana
China - Kyrgyzstan	17 June 2025	Astana
China - Turkmenistan	17 June 2025	Astana
China - Uzbekistan	17 June 2025	Astana

Source: Authors' research on collection.

The bilateral discussions often revolve around recurring economic and security concerns. China reiterates its commitment to assisting the regional states to *"safeguard their national independence, sovereignty and security"*. Meanwhile, the Central Asian states emphasize their resolve to cooperate with Beijing in order to crack down on the "three forces of evil". Moreover, these meetings highlight the importance of further strengthening bilateral trade and investment. The states also express their readiness to cooperate within the frameworks of the BRI and the SCO and their willingness to align their national strategies with the BRI.

Despite the common issues and concerns, bilateral meetings shed light on the unique relationship of China with each state of the region. As regards the relations of China and Kazakhstan, Beijing has expressed its support for Astana joining BRICS (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024c)[1]. Furthermore, China is willing to speed up the construction of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and the third cross-border railway between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024c). The China – Kazakhstan relations have reached the level of a "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024c).

The bilateral relations between China and Uzbekistan were elevated in 2024 to an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). Beijing has reiterated its willingness to

enhance bilateral cooperation in the field of green energy and accelerate the construction of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway (The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 2024). The construction of the tripartite railway is an issue that recurs in the Sino-Kyrgyz relations as well, which were elevated in 2023 to the level of a "comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023b).

Security concerns are more prominent in the bilateral relations of Beijing with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which are characterized as "comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era" and "comprehensive strategic partnership," respectively. During his most recent visit to Dushanbe, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of the Sino-Tajik cooperation for cracking down on the *"three forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, including the "East Turkestan Islamic Movement"* […]", safeguarding the security of their borders and the region and coordinating their response on the Afghan issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024e, para. 6). Similar remarks were made by Xi Jinping during the Turkmen President's visit to Beijing in January 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023a). Beijing's preoccupation with security concerns and the threat of Islamic movements have led to a growing Chinese military presence in Tajikistan (Sim & Aminjonov, 2024), with reports referring to the construction of a Chinese secret military base in the country in July 2024 (Yan, 2024)[2]. The growing military presence in Tajikistan highlights China's willingness to get involved in the security sphere of Central Asia, especially if someone considers that Beijing neither holds an extensive network of bases abroad, nor sends its troops to foreign countries in general.

China has also tried to step up its public diplomacy in Central Asia, where the local populations' perception of China is mixed. While the locals welcome Chinese products, there is skepticism about Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. Therefore, China is struggling to improve its image in the region (McGlinchey, 2019). Beijing has built Luban workshops in Central Asia, which are aimed at providing vocational training to locals. The first Luban workshop opened in Tajikistan in 2022, while two more workshops opened in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 2023 (Luban Workshop, 2024). In October 2024, a Luban workshop was inaugurated in Kyrgyzstan (Xinhua, 2024c). During the same month, a memorandum of understanding was signed between Turkmenistan and China for the establishment of a Luban workshop in the former (Turkmenistan: Golden Age, 2024). Additionally, China encourages the creation of cultural centers in the Central Asian countries, while the

Beijing Language and Culture University has established a branch in Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024c).

However, the most significant change since the beginning of the war in Ukraine is recorded in China's multilateral diplomacy with the states of Central Asia. Since 2020, China and the states of Central Asia have established the C+C5 mechanism, which aims to facilitate regular meetings of foreign ministers. During the third meeting of the mechanism in June 2022, just four months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the six foreign ministers agreed to establish a similar mechanism for their heads of state (National People's Congress of China, 2023). On May 18–19, 2023, the first China–Central Asia Summit was held in Xi'an. During the summit, President Xi highlighted the importance of the region for the BRI and the need for stable, independent and secure states in Central Asia. Moreover, the Chinese President emphasized the need for stronger economic cooperation and Beijing's willingness to assist Central Asian states in enhancing their capabilities in law enforcement, security and defense to maintain regional peace (National People's Congress of China, 2023). On March 30, 2024, the secretariat of the China–Central Asia cooperation mechanism was launched. The secretariat aims to facilitate the implementation of the outcomes and the preparation of forthcoming summits (Belt and Road Portal, 2024). In June 2025, the sixth meeting of the C+C5 mechanism took place in Almaty. A key item of the meeting agenda was the preparation for the second China-Central Asia Summit, which was held in June 2025 (Ismailov, 2025). On June 17, the second China-Central Asia Summit was concluded with the signing of the Treaty on Eternal Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation. During the Summit, issues of economic and security cooperation were discussed, while Xi Jinping announced China's intention to allocate 1.5 billion yuan in 2025 in order to fund crucial initiatives focused on ameliorating public welfare and driving development efforts in the five Central Asian nations (Akhmetkali, 2025).

To sum up, Beijing is pursuing a more proactive diplomatic approach in the region. In a period when Central Asian states avoid lining up with Russian aggression in Ukraine, China has stepped up its diplomatic presence in the region. Since 2022, Xi Jinping has been holding regular bilateral meetings with his Central Asian counterparts. But, more importantly, China has established a multilateral framework to facilitate the dialogue between the six heads of state, which now has its own secretariat. The C+C5 underscores Beijing's attempt to create a permanent mechanism in the region and fill the diplomatic gap created by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, Chinese diplomacy has expanded beyond the BRI and trade relations to include China's soft power and security concerns in the region. Beijing was always interested in the security and stability in Central Asia due to its internal issues in Xinjiang. However, the reported establishment of a military base, the growing presence of the Chinese army in Tajikistan, and the frequent references to security

issues in Xi Jinping's remarks highlight Beijing's intent to engage more actively in Central Asia's security sphere, a sphere that was once dominated by Russia.

Economic Impact of the Ukraine War

Besides its increasing diplomatic and security presence in the region, China is emerging as the economic hegemon of Central Asia as well. The region is of great importance to the BRI. Seventeen railway routes connect Xi'an in China with Central Asian states and other Asian and European destinations. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, in 2022, more than 65,000 freight trains transported goods worth $300 billion between China and Europe. Almost 80% of these trips were made through Central Asia (National People's Congress of China, 2023). Moreover, Beijing has participated in several infrastructure projects in Central Asia, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Highway and the Qamchiq Railway Tunnel in Uzbekistan. In addition, the China–Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline links Turkmenistan's, Uzbekistan's and Kazakhstan's energy resources with China's market (National People's Congress of China, 2023).

Furthermore, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Beijing's stock of FDI in the region reached almost 15 billion U.S. dollars (USD) in 2022. Chinese investments were focused on sectors such as oil and gas exploration, processing and manufacturing, connectivity and digital technologies (National People's Congress of China, 2023).

According to the China Global Investment Tracker by the American Enterprise Institute, Chinese investments in Central Asia have exceeded 32 billion USD in total value between 2005 and 2024 (Table 3).

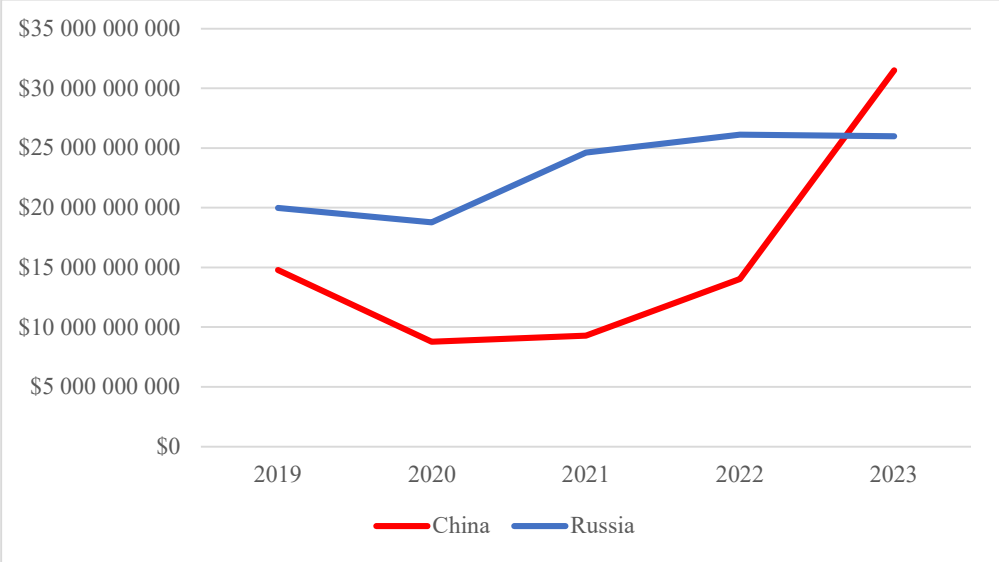
Table 3: Chinese Investments in Central Asia (2005–2024)

Kazakhstan	24.69 Billion USD
Kyrgyzstan	1.62 Billion USD
Tajikistan	1 Billion USD
Turkmenistan	1.79 Billion USD
Uzbekistan	3.64 Billion USD

Source: China Global Investment Tracker by the American Enterprise Institute.

The BRI and the Chinese investment in infrastructure in the region have facilitated bilateral trade. Beijing is nowadays a major trading partner of all five Central Asian states. In 2023, China surpassed Russia and became the largest trading partner of Kazakhstan (Figure 3) as Chinese exports to the country increased, while imports from Russia dropped (Satubaldina, 2024).

Figure 3: Kazakhstan's Trade Turnover with China and Russia (2019-2023 in USD)



Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country Kazakhstan). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

China mainly invests in energy projects in Kazakhstan, such as the Zhanatas wind farm, Turgusun hydropower station, the modernization of Shymkent Oil Refinery and the China-Kazakhstan crude oil and natural gas pipelines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). As regards the Chinese investments in the country, Beijing's foreign direct investment flows compete with those of the USA and Russia during the period 2021–2024 (Table 4).

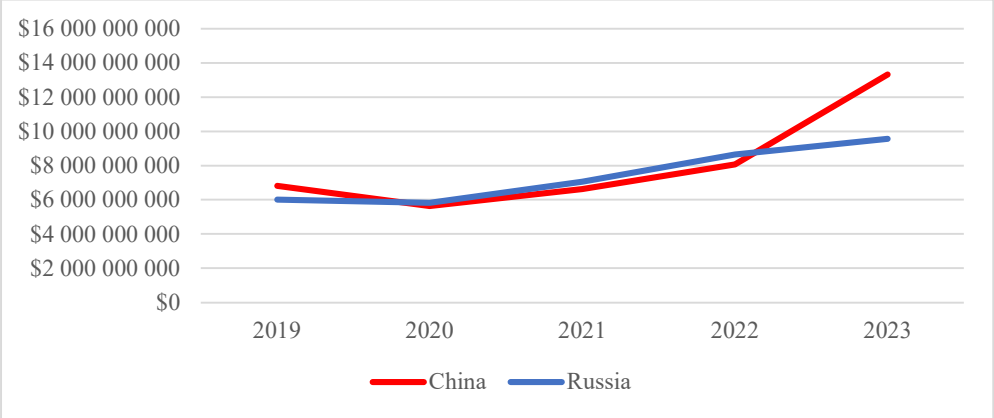
Table 4: Inflow of Direct Investment in Kazakhstan (2019–2024, in million USD)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Q1 2024
China	-168.60	-818.80	493.20	738.70	954.30	15.20
Russia	379.80	281.20	855.80	147.20	1,195.20	524.80
USA	4,464.00	1,457.60	1,624.40	3,985.20	-149.30	411.60

Source: National Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan

In 2023, China became the main trading partner of Tashkent as well (Figure 4). China overtook Russia by achieving a much more pronounced rise in its exports to Uzbekistan (Gazeta.uz, 2024).

Figure 4: Uzbekistan's Trade Turnover with China and Russia (2019-2023 in USD)

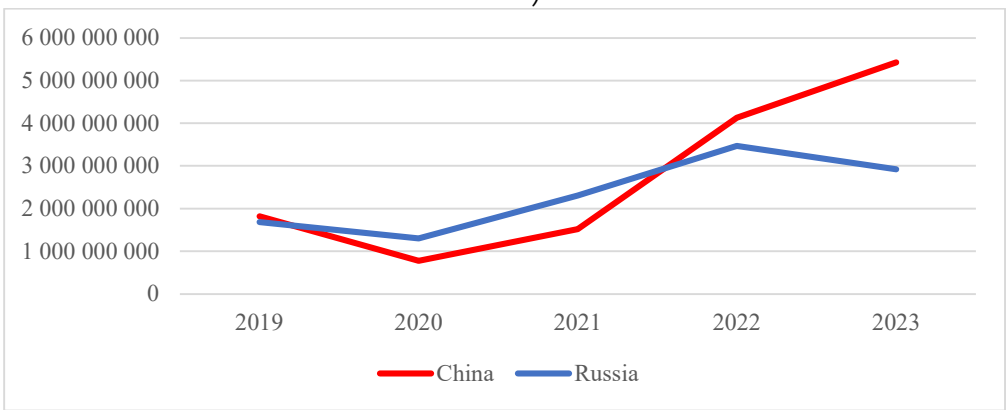


Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country Uzbekistan). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

According to the office of the Uzbek President, Chinese investments in the country have increased fivefold in recent years (Eurasianet, 2024). Beijing has a keen interest in the green energy sector of Uzbekistan. In 2023, China and Uzbekistan agreed on the construction of renewable energy facilities in the latter. The required investment could amount to six billion USD (Eurasianet, 2024).

As regards Kyrgyzstan, despite the sharp increase in Russian–Kyrgyz trade turnover, Beijing surpassed Moscow in 2022 (Figure 5) and became the main trading partner of Bishkek (Xinhua, 2024a). China holds a 35% share of the annual trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan (Sánchez & Ekstrom, 2024).

Figure 5: Kyrgyzstan's Trade Turnover with China and Russia (2019-2023 in USD)



Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country Kyrgyzstan). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

Beijing has traditionally invested larger amounts than the USA and Russia in the Kyrgyz Republic (Table 5). However, a point of concern for Bishkek is its rising debt, a large part of which is owed to Beijing, which was not willing to negotiate it or accept alternative payment methods, causing fears that China plans to seize Kyrgyz assets as collateral (Sánchez & Ekstrom, 2024).

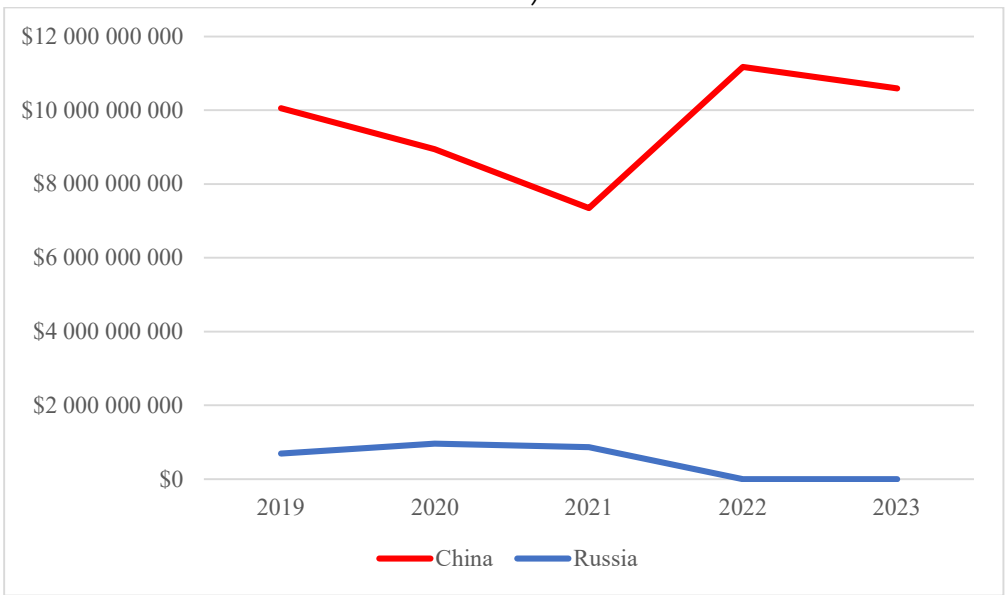
Table 5: Inflow of Direct Investment in Kyrgyzstan (2019–2023, in thousand USD)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
China	338.052,80	136.116,30	334.738,60	326.025,80	280.684,70
Russia	38.224,60	13.477,70	147.210,30	145.608,60	159.788,20
USA	6.594,70	6.262,00	5.246,90	10.692,40	18.760,40

Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

In recent years, China has also become Turkmenistan's largest trading partner (Changzhi et al., 2024). However, unlike China's trade relations with other Central Asian states, Beijing's trade turnover with Ashgabat has consistently surpassed that of Russia (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Turkmenistan's Trade Turnover with China and Russia (2019-2023)



Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (Reporting countries China and Russia. Data for Russia were unavailable for 2022 and 2023). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

The turnover is mainly attributed to the Chinese imports of natural gas from Turkmenistan and therefore Beijing experiences a trade deficit with Ashgabat (Table 6). China imports natural gas from Turkmenistan through the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, which was put into service in 2009 and, according to estimates, had transported more than 500 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China until November 2024. The Central Asia – China gas pipeline begins at the borders of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, traverses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and connects with the West-to-East gas pipeline in Horgos, China (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). In 2022, Turkmenistan supplied 23% of China's imported natural gas, whereas Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan each contributed 3% (EIA, 2023). Chinese investments in Turkmenistan are focused on the country's energy sector (American Enterprise Institute).

Table 6: Chinese imports from Turkmenistan (2019–2023, in millions USD)

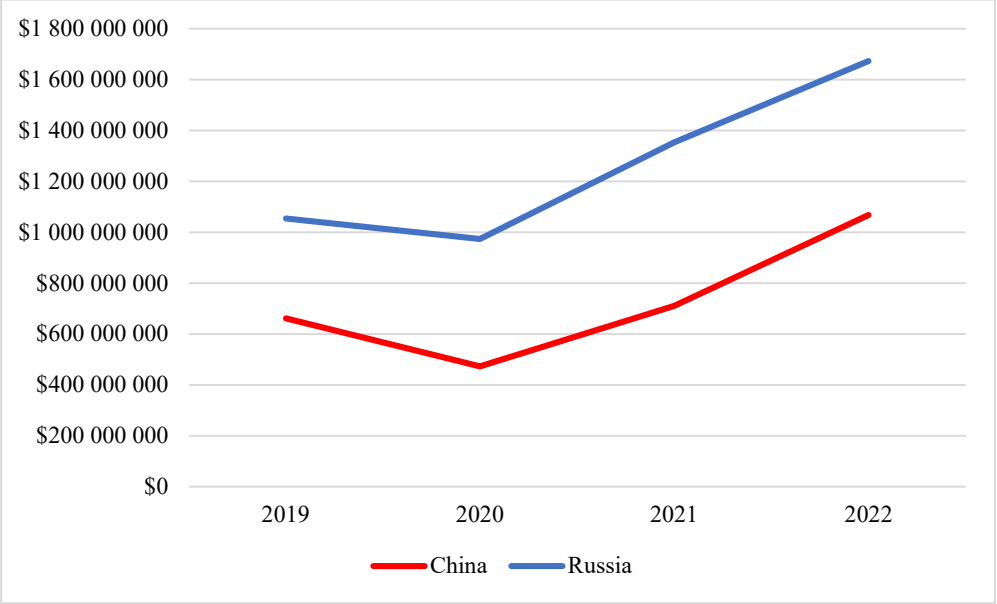
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Natural Gas Imports	9,555	8,433	6,791	10,256	9,606
Total Imports	9,626	8,503	6,844	10,313	9,633
Natural Gas % of total imports	99,26	99,18	99,23	99,44	99,72

Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country China). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

However, the Sino-Turkmen gas relations have faced a few difficulties, the most important of which is the pricing issue (Liu et al., 2023). The natural gas imported from Turkmenistan bears high transportation costs leading to disagreements on its pricing. On the one hand, natural gas plays a significant role in the Turkmen budget, while, on the other hand, China prioritizes securing cheap energy resources. Other issues that have occurred in the Sino-Turkmen gas cooperation include the delay in the construction of Line D of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline and disruptions to supply caused by Turkmenistan (Liu, Wang and Lv, 2023).

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian state that retains stronger trade relations with Russia than China (Figure 7). However, China is the primary investor in Tajikistan, with foreign direct investment from Beijing consistently surpassing that from Russia or the USA (Table 7). The two countries have implemented several joint projects, such as a cement plant in Yavan and an agriculture and textile park in Dangara, while Chinese companies have built the China-Tajikistan highway and the Vahdat-Yavan railway tunnels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024d).

Figure 7: Tajikistan's Trade Turnover with China and Russia (2019-2022 in USD)



Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting country Tajikistan[3]. Data was unavailable for 2023.). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

Table 7: Inflow of Direct Investment in Tajikistan (2019–2024, in thousand USD)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
China	258,642.50	142,102.50	85,851.90	377,584.40	143,507
Russia	33.061,55	13,883.30	-	22,652	41,455.50
USA	4,483.37	5,030	608	15,884	6,980.90

Source: National Bank of Tajikistan.

An examination of the aforementioned data indicates that China seeks to establish interdependence relations with the Central Asian states. On the one hand, it is evident that Beijing is aiming to secure energy resources from the region, a strategic move that offers a geopolitical advantage. Notably, energy imports from Central Asia do not pass through maritime chokepoints, such as the Malacca Strait. Therefore, the flow of energy resources from Central Asia appears less susceptible to interruption in the event of an international crisis. On the other hand, China emerged as a crucial center of financial resources for Central Asia, a role that Russia has been unable to fulfill, primarily due to its own economic challenges and the

ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This was a crucial parameter that exacerbated Russia's economic transformation into a war economy.

Table 8: Central Asian exports to Russia (2020–2023 in USD)

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Kazakhstan	5,007,142,523	7,018,745,764	8,780,724,915	9,788,230,744
Uzbekistan	1,738,345,787	1,703,958,813	2,599,857,708	3,023,085,128
Kyrgyzstan	217,486,685	392,408,993	1,069,411,350	746,369,029
Tajikistan	41,032,620	72,467,326	88,221,301	N/A

Source: UN Comtrade Database (https://comtradeplus.un.org/) (reporting countries Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Data for Turkmenistan were unavailable for 2022–2023). Last accessed on November 12, 2025.

In conclusion, Beijing is emerging as the dominant economic power within the region. In the current geopolitical context, China possesses most of the necessary characteristics of a leading trading partner for four out of the five Central Asian states.[4] This is in spite of the observed growth in Central Asian exports to Russia (Table 8). Moreover, Beijing has assumed the role of a major provider of investment capital.

Conclusion

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow has been involved in a protracted war with geopolitical dimensions. By focusing on the impact of the prevailing disorder on the strategies of a revisionist power, this study sought an answer to the following research question: Has China benefitted from Russia's war in Ukraine to increase its influence in Central Asia? Our research hypothesized that the prevailing disorder caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine would allow Beijing to take advantage of the emerging international environment in order to promote its diplomatic and economic interests in Central Asia.

Indeed, the prevailing disorder in Eurasia created opportunities for Beijing. First of all, the relationship between China and Russia became more skewed, with Moscow becoming increasingly dependent on Chinese energy imports and dual-use exports from Beijing.

Moreover, Beijing adopted a more assertive diplomatic strategy in Central Asia that extends beyond the BRI and trade relations. Since 2022, Xi Jinping has been consistently engaging in bilateral meetings with Central Asian leaders. But more importantly, China has established a multilateral framework to enhance dialogue among the six heads of state, with the support of its own secretariat. The permanent

mechanism of C+C5 highlights Beijing's interest in and commitment to the region. Furthermore, contemporary Chinese diplomacy incorporates both soft power and security interests in the region. Additionally, the establishment of a military base, the increased presence of the Chinese military in Tajikistan, and Xi Jinping's frequent mentions of security issues indicate Beijing's intention to become more involved in Central Asia's security landscape, which was previously dominated by Russia.

Finally, Beijing is developing economic interdependence with Central Asia and is emerging as the predominant economic force in the region. Currently, China stands as the primary trading partner for four out of the five Central Asian countries, despite the increase in Central Asian exports to Russia. Additionally, China is a significant source of capital investment. As the Russian economy is transforming into a war economy, Moscow will find it even more difficult to match Beijing's economic might in the region.

In conclusion, this study offers preliminary evidence indicative of a changing regional order. Beijing's involvement in the region is increasing, while Moscow's primary focus is on its western borders and the war in Ukraine. Further research on the Central Asian, Russian, and Chinese perceptions of the regional order could provide further understanding of the changes occurring in the subsystem.

Endnotes

1. Kazakhstan refrained from submitting an application to join BRICS (See https://astanatimes.com/2024/10/kazakhstan-outlines-position-on-joining-brics/).
2. China has denied the construction of the base (https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-china-military-base-satellite-photos/33037344.html).
3. Data reported by China show Beijing as the main trading partner of Tajikistan.
4. According to Chinese data Beijing is the leading trading partner of all five Central Asian states.

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