

The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict on Russia's Role in Central Asia

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Abstract

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This paper analyzes how the war in Ukraine is impacting Russia's influence in its "near abroad," specifically Central Asia. This paper argues that Central Asia remained close to the Kremlin due to Moscow's importance in Central Asian energy trade and security. Because of geographic and infrastructure limitations, Central Asian countries could not take advantage of their rich natural resources, most notably oil, and gas, without Russia's involvement. This changed when China emerged as an economic superpower in the region. China challenged Russia's monopoly over the Central Asian energy trade and eventually became the primary energy partner to Central Asian states. Nonetheless, Russia has maintained considerable influence due to its role in Central Asia by fulfilling a position no other actor has been willing to perform, which is regime protection. Because of this, Central Asian states have been hesitant to move away from Russia, even as most of the world is turning away from Moscow.

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Introduction

In March 2014, shortly after Vladimir Putin illegally annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, President Barak Obama referred to Russia as a regional power, stating that Moscow's invasion of a neighboring country was a sign of weakness rather than strength¹. Still trying to preserve Russia's image as a global superpower, Putin disagreed with Obama's remarks, calling them disrespectful towards Russia. However, there was a hint of truth in the statement, and many scholars would agree that Russia's global influence had severely diminished in the previous decade and has continued to do so. Even at the time of Obama's remarks, it was clear that Russia did not have the same global reach as China and the United States, despite Putin's best efforts to project the image of a global superpower.

Fast forward to 2022, Russia is again invading Ukraine, but this time with less success when compared to 2014². In that year, a swift and strategic military operation followed by a referendum saw Crimea illegally annexed; conversely, Russia faced heavy resistance to counter their 2022 offensive from Ukraine, who, with the help of numerous Western nations, have now managed to defy the Russian invasion for over a year³. Obama's 2014 statement should be revisited with these new events, but this time, Russia's status as a regional power should be questioned. Does Russia still wield significant influence in its near abroad, specifically the post-Soviet region, which it once unequivocally dominated? Has the war in Ukraine affected Russia's clout in its near abroad?

¹ Steve Holland and Jeff Mason, "Obama, in Dig at Putin, Calls Russia 'Regional Power,'" Reuters, March 25, 2014,

² Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*, Osprey Publishing, 2022. Pp. 166-179

³ Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*, Osprey Publishing, 2022. Pp. 345

To better understand Russia's regional status, this paper will analyze Moscow's influence within a region historically dependent on it for security, stability, and trade. Russia has been the undisputed hegemon within post-Soviet Central Asia for decades, leveraging the abovementioned factors to keep the region within its sphere of influence. To evaluate the situation within the Central Asian region, this project will focus on Central Asian security and energy trade, two spheres over which Russia historically held significant influence.

After a brief introduction to Russo-Central Asian relations, this paper will be broken down into three major sections, each of which will contribute to answering the main guiding question: how has the war in Ukraine affected Russia's influence in post-Soviet Central Asia? This necessitates first establishing what level of influence Russia had over Central Asia before the war. This paper will argue that in the past, Russia could use Central Asia's dependence on Russia for security and limited energy export routes to maintain influence and control.

In part I, this paper will analyze Russia's role in Central Asia's security, emphasizing the Collective Security Treaty Organization and its recent activities. This paper will argue that Russia's goal is to provide protection not to Central Asian states but to Central Asian ruling elites that maintain close ties with the Kremlin. Russia's prioritization of stability in Central Asia through regime security – a function other security providers in the region do not fulfill – allows Moscow to wield substantial influence in the area. Because of its willingness to play by local rules and protect local regimes from widespread protests, Russia still had significant influence over Central Asian security before the war in Ukraine.

Part II will be dedicated to Russia's changing role in the Central Asian regional energy trade. A brief overview of the historic Central Asian energy export routes will be conducted to illustrate Russia's importance to regional energy trade, especially from 1991 to 2009. This will

be followed by an analysis of existing and potential Central Asian energy export routes, which include pipelines to China and proposed pipelines to India and the European Union. This section will rely on secondary sources to establish Russia's role in the Central Asian energy trade before the war in Ukraine.

After establishing Russ-Central Asian relations and highlighting the tools used by Moscow to maintain its influence in the region, this paper will then analyze how the war in Ukraine is affecting Russia's standing in Central Asia. Due to the ever-changing nature of the ongoing war in Ukraine, this paper will only look at the reaction of each Central Asian state to the war and the changes in each state's relationship with Russia in the first eighteen months of the conflict. Through a qualitative analysis of primary sources, such as statements made by government officials, local news articles, and trade agreements signed since February 2022, this paper will analyze how the war in Ukraine is impacting Russia's role in Central Asia.

Recent Historical Background and Literature Review

Many former Soviet republics celebrated their newfound independence after the Soviet Union disintegrated. However, as Adeeb Khalid put it, this independence was "unexpected and, in many ways, undesirable by both the people and the political elites of Central Asia"⁴. Because of their extreme reliance on the central government, Central Asian nations were hesitant to quit the Union. After the fall of the USSR, this dependence persisted, with Central Asian states depending on Russia for trade, security, and stability. The newly independent states and the ruling elites that took over Central Asia could not guarantee their own safety from external and internal threats. A series of military agreements between Central Asian states were signed in the

⁴ Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 397

early 1990s, chief among them being the Collective Security Treaty, signed on May 15th, 1992, which later served as the base for the Collective Security Treaty Organization⁵.

Moscow is dedicated to maintaining a regional military presence to keep these countries within their geopolitical sphere of influence⁶. The Russo-Central Asian security partnership began as mutually beneficial; Russia provided security for the region against Islamist threats and protected regimes from political upheavals, while Central Asian states allowed Russia to maintain a heavy military presence in a strategically important region and maintain its regional and global prestige as a superpower⁷. In addition, securing the region created a buffer zone consisting of Kremlin-friendly regimes against the Islamist threat from Afghanistan⁸.

However, as the region stabilized, local regimes built up capabilities to ensure security against internal and external threats. As alternative security providers entered the region, Russia's role in Central Asian security changed. Some scholars, including Thomas Ambrosio in *Catching the Shanghai Spirit* and Alexander Gabuev in *Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon*, argue that China, as a rising influence in Central Asia, is displacing Russia as the principal hegemon in the region. On the other hand, Ramakrushna Pradhan and Siba S. Mohanty, authors of *Chinese Grand Strategies in Central Asia: The Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Belt and Roads Initiative*, would argue that while China is interested in the Central Asian region for its natural resources and strategic location, China's interest appears to be primarily economic, as they are currently more concerned with establishing security and control within the Xinjiang region⁹. Alexander Cooley and like-minded researchers suggest Central Asian states hold the

⁵ "Устав Организации Договора о Коллективной Безопасности," ODKB, 2012,

⁶ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 51

⁷ Marcel de Haas, "Security Policy and Developments in Central Asia: Security Documents Compared with Security Challenges," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, 2016.

⁸ Tomasz Stepniewski, *The New Great Game in Central Asia*, Instytut Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 2012. Pp. 16

⁹ Pradhan Ramakrushna, and Siba Sankar Mohanty, *Chinese Grand Strategies in Central Asia: The Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Belt and Road Initiative*, Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences 14, 2021. Pp. 197–223.

upper hand in their relationships with Russia, leveraging great power competition in the region to acquire favorable deals¹⁰. Cooley argues in *Great Games Local Rules* that Central Asian countries work the competitive nature of great power relationships to their advantage; he uses the bidding war initiated by Kyrgyzstan's President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, between Washington and Moscow over the Manas military base, as an example¹¹. It should be noted that Cooley's analysis applied to the timeframe before NATO's and the USA's complete withdrawal from the region, which could be a significant factor offering greater leverage to Central Asian states during that time compared to now.

It is essential to analyze how Russia's standing in the region changed before, during, and after the United States and NATO were present in the region. This paper adds to the argument made by Pradhan and Mohanty that China is primarily focused on expanding its economic influence over Central Asia and does not look to displace Russia as the region's security hegemon. A similar argument is made by Michail Lubina in his book *Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience – Stable and Successful*. It is hard to argue against China's challenge to Russia's economic hegemony in Central Asia, Beijing is far from displacing Moscow as the political or security hegemon in the region. Russia's inability to compete with China economically, paired with China's lack of soft power and political influence in the region, has created Sino-Russian cooperation. Russia's willingness to provide regime security for local ruling elites allows them to wield significant influence over Central Asia, even as Chinese economic presence grows.

Russia also played a significant role in the Central Asian energy trade, as the fall of the Soviet Union left Central Asian countries with large reserves of oil and gas and export routes

¹⁰ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹¹ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

exclusively through Russia. The Central Asia-Center (CAC) gas transport system, which consists of five pipelines that lead to Russia, was the only way Central Asian countries could export their resources¹². Needless to say, this gave Moscow economic and political influence over the region. Russia's monopoly over Turkmen gas and Kazakh oil lasted for decades,¹³ until China challenged their monopoly in 2009.

The first major pipeline connecting China and Central Asia was built in 2009, and China has been slowly displacing Russia as the region's primary destination for exported oil and gas.¹⁴ The pipeline from Turkmenistan to China and the increasing energy export capabilities from Kazakhstan to China broke Russia's monopoly over Central Asian energy sales, and thus its status as an economic hegemon in the region¹⁵. China views Central Asia as an essential region for its large energy exporting potential and the gateway for its "Belts and Roads" initiative, which would connect China and Central Asia to Europe and Africa through a "new silk road." China's move into Central Asia has been well calculated, with an intentional, slow increase in its economic influence while reassuring Russia of its disinterest in pulling Central Asia away from the Russian sphere of influence. This paper will build on the argument made by Malashenko and analyze new export routes that have emerged for Central Asia. An analysis of changes in the Central Asian gas trade can be used to evaluate if Russia was already losing one of its greatest pieces of leverage over Central Asia even before the war. After establishing the pre-Ukrainian war status, the effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Russia's influence can also be assessed. If Russia was losing its ability to leverage Central Asian energy export routes, did the war accelerate the process?

¹² Yusin Lee, *Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of Its Gas Export Routes*, Energy Policy, 2014. Pp, 332

¹³ Tuncay Babali, *Prospects of Export Routes for Kashagan Oil*, Energy Policy, April 2009.

¹⁴ Aleksey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. Pp 228.

¹⁵ Aleksey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013. Pp 186

This paper will primarily rely on qualitative analysis of primary sources, such as trade agreements, news articles, interviews, and founding documents of military organizations when discussing Russia's role in Central Asian security. Additionally, an analysis of Central Asian gas exports to China and Russia will be performed. The potential for export routes to new markets in India and the European Union will be explored. Ultimately, at its core, this paper will build on the argument made by Scott Radnitz in his paper *Between Russia and a Hard Place* that Central Asian regimes are opportunistic and are predominantly concerned with their survival. This will be important in part III of this paper when the effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war on Russia's influence in Central Asia will be analyzed. This paper will also build on the theory explored by Yusin Lee in his paper on *Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of its Gas Export Routes*, where he suggests that when major powers compete over the allegiance of a weak state, it increases the weaker state's bargaining power. He also argues that "the diversification policies of weak states in times of decreasing competition among great powers incur the danger of simply replacing an old master with a new one."¹⁶ While Part I and II are dedicated to establishing Russia's standing in spheres of Central Asian security and energy trade, part III is dedicated to determining the effect the war in Ukraine has had on Russo-Central Asian relations and whether the war has pushed Central Asia away from Russia. It is important to note that the war in Ukraine is still ongoing at the time of this writing; therefore, it would be foolish to predict the long-term effects of the war on Russo-Central Asian relations. This paper will cover relevant information available from the beginning of the conflict in February 2022 until February 2023.

¹⁶ Yusin Lee, *Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of Its Gas Export Routes*, Energy Policy, 2014. Pp, 330

Part I: Security

In Central Asia, a region reluctant to leave the Soviet Union, newly independent states faced external and internal security challenges.¹⁷ The transition to independence was different for each Central Asian state; some states faced civil unrest, while others saw full-blown civil wars erupt. The transition was relatively smooth for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan as existing communist leaders stepped into power. Uzbekistan's leaders were also Soviet regime holdovers, which made the transition relatively smooth, but Islamic movement in the country increased as the new government was established; Islamist groups, such as *Adolat*, sought to turn Uzbekistan into an Islamist state. The issue was dealt with swiftly by the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov¹⁸. In Tajikistan, the civil war between religious and democratic groups, who fought for primacy in the newly independent state, nearly tore the country apart.¹⁹ Russia helped stabilize the situation in Tajikistan, but the rise of radical Islam as a regional and global security challenge was evident.

The newly independent Central Asian states needed protection against the Islamist threat brewing within Afghanistan, and Russia needed a buffer to protect itself from the rising Islamist threat. Young Central Asian regimes, lacking the resources to address this on their own, welcomed the heavy military presence Russia maintained in the region.²⁰ In the early 1990s, a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements were signed between Russia and Central Asian states. On May 22, 1992, an agreement between Russia and Kazakhstan on “friendship, cooperation, and mutual help” was signed in Moscow; the agreement ensured cooperation between the two states in a multitude of spheres, including security.²¹ Later on, on March 28,

¹⁷ Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp, 421

¹⁸ Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp, 430

¹⁹ Vassily Klimentov, *The Tajik Civil War and Russia's Islamist Moment*, *Central Asian Survey*, 2022, 1–18.

²⁰ Bakhtiyor Sobiri, *The Long Echo of Tajikistan's Civil War*, openDemocracy, June 23, 2017.

²¹ A. D. Bogaturov, *Международные Отношения в Центральной Азии: События и Документы*, Moskva: Aspekt Press, 2011.

1994, an agreement strengthening military cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia was also signed. On April 16, 1999, an agreement between Tajikistan and Russia was signed, which gave Russia the right to maintain their military bases in Tajikistan for another ten years; a clause of this agreement stated that the agreement would renew for another five years after that unless one of the signing parties stipulated otherwise. The deal was later extended to 2042. The main piece of legislation which helped solidify Russia's status as the regional security provider was signed in Tashkent on May 15, 1992. Armenia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty Agreement, which later served as the foundation for the CSTO.²²

Through a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements, Russia solidified its role as the region's security provider, successfully creating a buffer zone between Russia and Afghanistan and ensuring a prolonged military presence in a strategically important region. Undeniably, Russia's main goal was to fight terrorism in the region. While speaking at the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan in 2003, Putin declared that counterterrorism is one of the primary functions of the CSTO and that the airbase in Kant would help fulfill that function.²³ On paper, CSTO's primary function is to protect the sovereignty of member states against other state and non-state actors. However, in reality, the organization's recent actions have shown that the primary purpose is to protect Kremlin-friendly regimes in Russia's near abroad. This function of a regime guarantor gave Russia the edge over other actors that looked to expand their influence into Central Asia. The fact that Russia is the only superpower in the region capable and willing to protect local ruling regimes gives Russia considerable leverage over the region.

²² "Устав Организации Договора о Коллективной Безопасности," ОДКВ, 2012.

²³ A. D. Bogaturov, *Международные Отношения в Центральной Азии: События и Документы*, Москва: Aspekt Press, 2011. Pp. 479.

CSTO

On May 15, 1992, representatives of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Russia met in Tashkent and signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST). On May 14th, 2002, the treaty officially became an organization known as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and in 1993, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus joined the CSTO, with Ukraine deciding to refrain from joining the treaty and later the organization.²⁴ However, in 1999 when it was time to renew the treaty, Uzbekistan, along with Georgia and Azerbaijan, decided to leave the organization. Subsequently, Uzbekistan rejoined and later left the organization again in 2012, leaving the organization with its current members, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Russia.²⁵ As stated in Article 3 of the founding charter, the organization's primary goal is the “strengthening of peace, international and regional security and stability, protection of independence on a collective basis, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of the Member States...”²⁶

Since its conception, the organization has held regular joint military exercises and annual summits to discuss major security issues. It has even intervened in the civil unrest of January 2022 in Kazakhstan.²⁷ On paper, all member states participate in these military exercises; however, the majority of the forces and funding are provided by the Russian Federation. Russian soldiers make up 80% of the 1.25 million-strong military at the CSTO’s disposal, and the majority of its funding comes from the Russian Federation.²⁸ According to the CSTO’s official doctrine, the CSTO as an alliance was created to safeguard its members from modern-day

²⁴ Деятельность ОДКБ, *Разное*, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2019.

²⁵ *От Договора к Организации*, January 1, 2023, <https://odkb-csto.org/25years/>.

²⁶ “Устав Организации Договора о Коллективной Безопасности,” ОДКБ, 2012

²⁷ ОДКБ, *Контингенты Коллективных Миротворческих Сил ОДКБ Направлены в Республику Казахстан*, January 6, 2022,

²⁸ Navruz Karimov, *Эффективность ОДКБ в Контексте Меняющейся Системы Региональной Безопасности*, CABAR.Asia, January 11, 2021,

security threats, which are highlighted in article eight of the organization’s founding charters: “The Member States shall co-ordinate and unite their efforts at struggle with international terrorism and extremism, illicit trafficking of drugs and psychotropic substances, weapon, organized transnational crime, illegal migration, and other menaces to the safety of the Member States.”²⁹ However, recently the primary focus of the organization has been counterterrorism. The organization has annual counterterrorism drills that go by different names, “Unbreakable Brotherhood,” “Cooperation,” “Military Brotherhood,” and so on³⁰. In these drills, the organization practices how to defend vital civilian and military targets, as well as crowd control. In October 2017, the organization carried out military exercises titled “Unbreakable Brotherhood,” in which one of the main focuses was preparing the military personnel to control large crowds. The organization’s rapid response capabilities are tested during these military exercises, and urban operations are rehearsed. While crowd control and urban maneuverability are essential functions of any anti-terrorist group, it was shown in Kazakhstan that these skills are also valuable when squashing civilian protests and ensuring the security of a ruling regime. CSTO actions in Kazakhstan, which will be explored further below, showed the extent to which CSTO is willing to protect Central Asian regimes from threats. While CSTO is the primary security organization in the region, not all Central Asian countries hold membership. In its bid to remain neutral, Turkmenistan has refrained from joining military organizations in the region. Uzbekistan, while one of the founding members of the CSTO, later left the organization.

²⁹ ОДКБ, *Контингентны Коллективных Миротворческих Сил ОДКБ Направлены в Республику Казахстан*, January 6, 2022. Article 8

³⁰ *Учения Коллективных Сил ОДКБ*, ОДКБ, October 21, 2022.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the only two countries in Central Asia not to be part of the Russian-led CSTO, have managed to move away from relying on Moscow for their security. Uzbekistan joined and left the CSTO twice and did not hold any joint military exercises with Russia between 2005 and 2017.³¹ Turkmenistan declared itself neutral, a status that the United Nations officially recognized in 1995. Neutrality status allowed Turkmenistan to refrain from joining Russian-led security organizations or having any foreign military bases within their borders.³² Turkmenistan went a step further and tried to curb Russian soft power in the country through policies such as “Turkmenization” which placed severe limitations on the use of the Russian language in the public sphere.³³ However, these developments do not mean that they have pushed Russia away. Turkmenistan is still heavily reliant on Russia in other spheres, which will be explored in part II of this paper, and Uzbekistan maintains close bilateral relations with Russia.

Uzbekistan

With the largest population and second biggest natural gas production in Central Asia, Uzbekistan is one of the most important countries in the region. Russo-Uzbek relations have undergone some changes since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, Uzbekistan, like most Central Asian states, remained close to Russia by signing a series of military and economic agreements. In 1992, Uzbekistan was one of the original signatories to the Collective Security Treaty (CST).³⁴ However, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy eventually shifted, and they looked to

³¹ Samuel Ramani, *Russia and Uzbekistan’s Renewed Security Partnership*, *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2018,

³² A. D. Vogaturov, *Международные Отношения в Центральной Азии: События и Документы*, Moskva: Aspekt Press, 2011. Pp, 446â.

³³ Rustam Muhamedov, *Turkmenistan-Russia: The Breakthroughs and Limits of Cooperation*, CABAR.asia, October 14, 2021.

³⁴ Деятельность ОДКБ, *Разное*, Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, 2019.

move away from limiting treaties, which was the main reason for Uzbekistan not renewing the CST and later leaving CSTO.

Under Karimov, Uzbekistan left the Eurasian Economic Community in 2008 and left the Russian-led CSTO twice, once in 1999 and later in 2012.³⁵ Nonetheless, Uzbekistan continued bilateral relations with Russia through the early 2000s by signing the Strategic Framework Agreement in 2004, the Treaty of Alliance Relations in 2005, and continuing bilateral arms trade.³⁶ During his presidency, Karimov also oversaw the forgiveness of 95% of the \$865 million of the debt accumulated by Uzbekistan in 1992-93.³⁷ During the same visit at which debt forgiveness was discussed, Putin and Karimov discussed cooperation in the military and economic spheres.³⁸ Karimov and Putin signed an accord to ensure a “long-term and stable presence of Uzbek farming products on the Russian market.”³⁹ Uzbekistan’s exit from Russian-led organizations allowed them to engage Moscow as partners on the international stage while simultaneously pursuing partnerships with other actors. Some factors might explain why Uzbekistan was able to do this without generating opposition from the Kremlin. Uzbekistan is relatively stable and wealthy compared to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and unlike Kazakhstan, it does not share a border with Russia.

Despite Uzbekistan leaving the regional security organization and not engaging in joint military exercises, Russia still played a role in the country's security and remained the primary supplier of arms to Uzbekistan.⁴⁰ According to a report done by the Oxus Society of Central Asia

³⁵ Gregory Gleason, Uzbekistan Charts a New ‘Uzbek Path,’” Uzbekistan Charts a New “Uzbek Path, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, November 3, 2008.

³⁶ Matteo Fumagalli, *Alignments and Realignments in Central Asia: The Rationale and Implications of Uzbekistan’s Rapprochement with Russia*, *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 3, 2007. Pp, 264

³⁷ *Russia Pardons 95% of Uzbekistan Debt in Exchange for Waiver of Claims to Diamond Fund*, TASS, March 30, 2016.

³⁸ Paolo Sorbello, “Yes, Uzbekistan Is Putin’s Friend,” *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2014.

³⁹ Rfe/rl, *Russia to Write off Uzbek Debt*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 11, 2014.

⁴⁰ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021.

(OSCA), over 59% of Uzbekistan's military equipment was imported from Russia.⁴¹ The bilateral trade with Russia only increased when Karimov passed away in 2016, and Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the leader of Uzbekistan.

When Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016, the relationship between Uzbekistan and Russia became more favorable for the Russian side. The new president was seemingly eager to increase cooperation with Russia. For the first time since 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan held joint military exercises.⁴² On his trip to Tashkent, Putin signed many deals with the Uzbek president worth over \$27 billion, and trade between the countries increased.⁴³ As evident by their first joint military exercises held in 2017, military cooperation between the two countries was once reinvigorated. There were even talks about Uzbekistan re-joining CSTO⁴⁴ and joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, Putin had to settle for Uzbekistan accepting the role of an observing nation in the EAEU.⁴⁵

Despite Uzbekistan's relative independence from Russia in the security sphere, the two countries are still close trading partners, and after 2016 they restarted military cooperation as well. In the buildup to the Ukraine war, Russo-Uzbek relations were better than ever for Moscow; bilateral trade was up, and the new president seemed eager to deepen cooperation with Russia on regional security and trade.

Turkmenistan

⁴¹ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021. Pp, 6

⁴² John C. K. Daly, *Russia and Uzbekistan Hold First Joint Military Exercise in 12 Years, Plan Further Cooperation*, Jamestown, October 3, 2017,.

⁴³ Umida Hashimova, *After Putin's Visit, Russia's Footprint in Uzbekistan Is Set to Grow*, Jamestown, October 22, 2018.

⁴⁴ Fozil Mashrab, *Is Uzbekistan on the Verge of Rejoining the CSTO?*, Jamestown, September 30, 2021.

⁴⁵ Akbaryusupov, *Uzbekistan Gets Observer Status in Eurasian Economic Union*, Tashkent Times, December 11, 2020.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Turkmenistan took an approach to governance and foreign relations that was different from other Central Asian countries, limiting Russian soft power and avoiding Russian-led security organizations. Turkmenistan decided to pursue a policy of neutrality which closed the country off from regional security and economic organizations.⁴⁶ Later the policy of “Turkmenization” limited Russian soft power in the country by closing Russian language schools and reducing the number of Russian language media and periodicals.⁴⁷ Turkmenistan was one of the few countries in the region that took such a hardline approach when using the Russian language.

Turkmenistan did maintain some economic ties with Russia, mainly thanks to their Free-Trade Agreement of 1993.⁴⁸ While Russian soft power and military influence took a hit in Turkmenistan, Moscow had other ways to keep the Central Asian country within its sphere of influence. Russia remained the primary buyer of Turkmen gas throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, with periodical halts in gas sales.⁴⁹ Russo-Turkmen relations in the security sphere are almost non-existent since the Turkmen ruling regimes never needed Moscow’s help to maintain power or keep external threats at bay.

Turkmenistan is the least reliant on Russia for security out of all five Central Asian countries. Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian country that does not have Russia as its number one arms trade partner.⁵⁰ Turkmenistan imports most of its military equipment from Italy and Turkey, with Russia accounting for only 20% of the arms imported into the country.⁵¹ In a region where Russia is an undisputed arms dealer, security provider, and regime protector,

⁴⁶ Rustam Muhamedov, *Turkmenistan-Russia: The Breakthroughs and Limits of Cooperation*, CABAR.asia, October 14, 2021.

⁴⁷ Rustam Muhamedov, *Turkmenistan-Russia: The Breakthroughs and Limits of Cooperation*, CABAR.asia, October 14, 2021.

⁴⁸ Constantin Duhamel, *Turkmenistan-Russia Trade and Investment Summary (YTD) 2022*, Russia Briefing News, September 15, 2022.

⁴⁹ Rustam Muhamedov, *Turkmenistan-Russia: The Breakthroughs and Limits of Cooperation*, CABAR.asia, October 14, 2021.

⁵⁰ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021. Pp, 6

⁵¹ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021. Pp, 7

Turkmenistan is an outlier that does not need Russia for any of the abovementioned functions. However, that does not mean Russia has no leverage over the Central Asian country. Turkmenistan has some of the world's largest proven reserves of natural gas, but for a long time, Russia was the only buyer for that gas. This gave Moscow considerable leverage over Turkmenistan, a relationship that will be explored further in part II of this paper.

Regime Protector

In April 2010, when Bakiyev's presidency was in danger, not only did Russia not help Bakiyev, but some speculated that Russia was behind the unrest in Kyrgyzstan.⁵² While not being anti-Russian, Bakiyev deepened Kyrgyzstan's ties with the United States when he extended the US basing right in Kyrgyzstan. Bakiyev attempted to play US and Russia off one another in a great game style of politics described by Alexander Cooley.⁵³ In 2001 when the United States looked to establish a foothold in Central Asia to begin their operations in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan was one of the countries that served as a transit post for the US armed forces.⁵⁴ However, as time went on, Moscow's stance on US presence in the region changed.

When George W. Bush declared a "Global War on Terror" after September 11, 2001, Central Asia became vital to the United States. The United States was largely absent from Central Asia to this point, but United States' decision to invade Afghanistan changed that. In a surprise move, Russia supported the United States' use of Central Asian military bases as hubs for their invasion of Afghanistan. After the invasion began, Russian hegemony in Central Asian Security was questioned. Now that a global superpower was interested in the region's security,

⁵² Wojciech Górecki, *Russia's Position on the Events in Kyrgyzstan*, *OSW Commentary*, July 27, 2010,

⁵³ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁵⁴ Joseph Stepansky, *US Military Presence in Central Asia Unlikely amid Taliban Rise*, Taliban News, Al Jazeera, August 23, 2021.

Central Asian states knew that Moscow was no longer the only game in town. As Scott Radnitz argued in his paper *Between Russia and a Hard Place...* Central Asian states showed in this period of US presence in the region that they were opportunistic and pragmatic.⁵⁵ Central Asian regimes, especially the Kyrgyz regime, played the United States and Russia off one another to extract payment for basing rights in Central Asia. From 2001 to 2012, Central Asian states started asking more from Russia. For the first time, Tajikistan started to ask for payments on Russian military bases stationed in the country; Kyrgyzstan openly pitted the US vs. Russia to get the most out of the situation.⁵⁶ While Tajikistan later agreed to receive major military aid from Russia, not cash payments, Kyrgyzstan received hard cash from Moscow and Washington.

Askar Akayev, the President of Kyrgyzstan from its independence to 2005, was one of the Central Asian leaders that benefited from the United States' presence in the region, at least in the beginning. Later, in 2005 he was overthrown by widespread protests, and Bakiyev was elected president.⁵⁷ Allegations of corruption followed Bakiyev's presidency almost from the start, but many believe that his decision to extend the United States' basing rights brought his downfall.⁵⁸ Bakiyev secured a \$2 billion loan from Russia, \$150 million in economic aid, and \$180 million in debt forgiveness, widely seen as Russia's attempts to persuade the Kyrgyz president to close the US military bases in the country.⁵⁹ Bakiyev accepted the money offered by Russia and negotiated a deal with the US to keep the Manas air base open in exchange for increasing the rent from \$17 million to close to \$60 million. Bakiyev renamed Manas from an air base to a transit center in his attempt to please both sides.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Scott Radnitz, "Between Russia and a Hard Place: Great Power Grievances and Central Asian Ambivalence," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 2018

⁵⁶ Alexander Sodiqov, *Russia Pressed to Pay for Its Military Base in Tajikistan*, Jamestown, September 15, 2016.

⁵⁷ *Timeline - Ousted President in Possible Coup in Kyrgyzstan*, Reuters, May 13, 2010,

⁵⁸ Wojciech Górecki, *Russia's Position on the Events in Kyrgyzstan*, "OSW Commentary", July 27, 2010,

⁵⁹ Sureyya Yigit, *The Kyrgyz Catastrophe*, openDemocracy, April 15, 2010,

⁶⁰ John F Tierney, "Mystery at Manas: Strategic Blind Spots in the Department of Defense's Fuel Contracts in Kyrgyzstan," tic.mil, 2010.

This double cross clearly did not sit well with Russia as a series of hard-hitting news articles started coming out in Kyrgyzstan from Russian-language news outlets highlighting the rampant corruption in Bakiyev's cabinet.⁶¹ Eventually, by April 7, 2010, the public had enough and revolted against Bakiyev's regime, ousting it within two days.⁶² Russia immediately recognized Bakiyev's replacement as a legitimate leader of Kyrgyzstan, which further fueled the rumors that Moscow was behind the revolution that overthrew Bakiyev's regime.⁶³ Later in an interview, Bakiyev stated that Russia's anger played a role in his being overthrown as the president of Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁴ While there is a lack of clear-cut evidence that Russia played a role in protests that led to Bakiyev's overthrow, it is hard to deny that Moscow benefited greatly from protests that were in part started by Russian language news outlets, which resulted in an overthrow of one of the only regimes in the region that double-crossed Moscow. Like Tokayev, Bakiyev later asked Russia directly and the CSTO to intervene in Kyrgyzstan, but CSTO and Russia decided to stay out of Kyrgyzstan despite Bakiyev's pleas for help.

In January of 2022, ordinary Kazakh citizens came out into the streets of Zhanaozen, protesting the rising gas prices in response to the oil-rich country, one of the biggest oil producers in the region, close to doubling the price of gas in the country. When the price of liquified propane gas, the fuel most cars use in Kazakhstan, went from 60 tenges to 120, people of the Mangystau region took to the streets to express their discontent with the new price hikes.⁶⁵ Dozens of protesters gathered at city centers on January 2nd, and dozens soon turned into hundreds. On the night of January 3rd, Nurlan Nogaev, the Akim of the Mangystau region, spoke with the protesters gathered in Aktau and promised them that the fuel price would decrease from

⁶¹ John F Tierney, "Mystery at Manas: Strategic Blind Spots in the Department of Defense's Fuel Contracts in Kyrgyzstan," *tic.mil*, 2010.

⁶² Steve Gutterman, *Bakiyev Says Hopes Russia Not behind Kyrgyz Unrest*. Reuters, April 8, 2010.

⁶³ Darya Korsunskaya, "Russia's Putin Recognizes Kyrgyz Interim Leader," Reuters, April 8, 2010.

⁶⁴ Andrei Makhovsky, "Bakiyev Says Russian Anger a Factor in Kyrgyz Revolt," Reuters, April 23, 2010.

⁶⁵ Kristina Krivcanova, *Что Произошло в Актау и Жанаозене, Рассказали в Акимате Региона*, NUR.KZ, January 3, 2022.

120 to 85-90 tenge.⁶⁶ The following day (January 4th), government officials decided to meet with the leaders of the protests to discuss possible solutions to their grievances and discuss the details of a possible gas price decrease. However, what started as a protest against rising gas prices soon became intertwined with other grievances the citizens were bottling up. Kazakh streets were overtaken by large crowds demanding political change, which prompted President Tokayev to take drastic measures to hold onto power.

Anger and frustration in Kazakhstan had been building for a long time, from the election of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who many thought was illegitimate, to the new laws that made public gatherings more difficult.⁶⁷ The protests spread across Kazakhstan's largest city, including the financial center of the republic, Almaty. Protesters started to demand the government's resignation and an end to corruption and wealth distribution, and what started as peaceful protests soon turned violent. After thousands of protesters came out to the streets of Kazakhstan's largest cities, including the capital Nur-Sultan and the country's financial hub, Almaty, the government caved in and set the gas prices to 50 tenge, but even this could not placate the citizens; the protests continued. By then, the protesters' goal had shifted; now, they wanted substantial changes in the government. In the early days of the protests, people had been chanting for lower gas prices, but now the crowds of thousands were chanting "Alga Kazakhstan" (Forward Kazakhstan!) and "Shal Ket" (Old man out).⁶⁸

During the early days of the protests, people were being detained by the police. However, by January 7th, 2022, President Tokayev ordered the military and local police forces to shoot at the protesters without warning.⁶⁹ When even this lethal step did not end the protests, Tokayev

⁶⁶ Viktoria Kolmakova, *Президент Токаев Обратился к Демонстрантам*, NUR.KZ, January 4, 2022.

⁶⁷ Mihra Rittmann, *Kazakhstan's 'reformed' Protest Law Hardly an Improvement*, Human Rights Watch, October 28, 2020.

⁶⁸ *Захват Акимата Алматы, 5 Января* Интернет-журнал Власть, 2022.

⁶⁹ Viktoria Kolmakova, *Токаев Приказал Открывать Огонь На Поражение По Террористам*, NUR.KZ, January 8, 2022.

evoked article 7 of the CSTO, claiming that the protests were being organized by external terrorist groups, and asked for the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to intervene. By January 13th, the CSTO troops were leaving the country, completing their assignment of quelling the Kazakh protests. Kazakh officials reported that the bandits killed 13 police officers and over 225 protesters were killed with approximately 5,000 more detained.⁷⁰ However, the unofficial number is believed to be much higher. Kazakh officials have labeled the people who participated and died during the protests as terrorists, bandits, and criminals. In his latest interview with Telekanal Khabar 24, Tokayev once again claimed that the people killed during the January protests were foreign-trained professional fighters with one goal: to destabilize the country and organize a political coup.⁷¹ No major evidence has emerged that protests were organized or involved radical Muslim groups, but it was used as an excuse to get the CSTO “peacekeepers” involved.

In January 2022, after squashing widespread protests in Kazakhstan and ensuring the safety of a friendly regime, Russian influence over the region seemed stronger than ever. Russian-led security organization stabilized the country within days, ensuring that Tokayev’s regime stayed in power. This display of power through CSTO showcased to other Central Asian states, but more importantly to ruling elites, that Russia is still the primary security provider in the region. While there are other security organizations dedicated to providing security and stability in Central Asia, Russia’s willingness to use CSTO to provide security to local regimes places them above their competitors. In his book, *Great Games Local Rules*, Alexander Cooley speaks about the informal politics, or local rules, prevalent in Central Asia, which any outside

⁷⁰ Niamh Kennedy and Amy Woodyatt, *Kazakhstan Death Toll Spikes as 164 Reported Killed and Thousands Detained in Violent Protests*, CNN, January 9, 2022.

⁷¹ Жанна Шаяхметова, *President Tokayev Gives Major Interview after January Attacks: Fair Investigation Continues, Reforms in Parliamentary and Party System Necessary*, The Astana Times, January 31, 2022.

actors looking to expand into the region must play by. In Kazakhstan, Russia showed that it is still the only security provider in the region willing to play by those rules and protect regimes regardless of the cost.

Alternatives to Russian Security

Russia dominates the security scene in Central Asia and is the primary provider of regime security and military aid to the majority of the countries in the region. Over 50% of all arms transferred to the Central Asian states come from Russia. Moscow performs the most joint military exercises with the Central Asian states, both bilaterally and through regional security organizations.⁷² Despite Russia's dominance, there are actors emerging that could potentially be an alternative to Russian security in Central Asia. The United States and NATO were potential challengers when the global war on terror was declared in 2001. However, since their withdrawal from Afghanistan, neither NATO nor United States have shown any major interest in challenging Russia for the role of a security guarantor.⁷³ The other superpower interested in the region's security is China, and they might be the only viable alternative to Russia when it comes to providing security in the region.

United States

For a time, there was an actor that looked to challenge Russia's hold on Central Asian security and become a viable alternative security provider. The United States, from 2002 to 2014, looked like serious contenders for the role of security providers in the region. Military aid from the United States peaked in 2012, with over \$450 million worth of security aid going to

⁷² Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021.

⁷³ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021.

Central Asia.⁷⁴ United States' presence in the region triggered a new wave of great power competitions, which some scholars called "The New Great Games". According to Alexander Cooley, the presence of the United States in the region allowed the Central Asian states to play great power off one another in order to pursue their own gains, once again strengthening Scott Radnitz's argument that Central Asian regimes are very opportunistic.^{75 76}

In this period, Central Asian states were able to negotiate more lucrative arms deals and extract more military aid from Russia, using the presence of the United States as leverage. However, the withdrawal of the US and NATO from Afghanistan indicated a major shift in Washington's interests in the region. While the nature of the withdrawal tarnished the US's reputation as a reliable security guarantor in the region, a fact which Russia used to expand its role in the region.⁷⁷ While the United States might have been a viable alternative to Russian security in the region in the early 2000s, recent events have shown that geographic distance along with often shifting US foreign policies make them an unreliable security partner for Central Asian regimes.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was created on June 15, 2001, when leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan came together in Shanghai.⁷⁸ Since then, membership in the organization has been steadily growing; India and Pakistan later joined the organization, with Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia gaining the status of an

⁷⁴ M Mirza and S Ayub, "Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence," *Trames. Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 4, 2021.

⁷⁵ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp, 51

⁷⁶ Scott Radnitz, *Between Russia and a Hard Place: Great Power Grievances and Central Asian Ambivalence*, *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10, 2018.

⁷⁷ Alexander Cooley, *A Post-American Central Asia*, *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2023.

⁷⁸ *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, SCO, 2023.

observer state. Unlike CSTO, which comprises six post-Soviet states where Russia is the undisputed leader, SCO is a diverse organization without an outright leader. Unlike CSTO, SCO has no military forces under its command and mostly focuses on enhancing military cooperation among member states. According to the organization's website and the language used in the founding documents, SCO's main goal is to foster cooperation amongst member states and help combat separatism and terrorism.⁷⁹ Unlike CSTO, where the organization can deploy its military forces when necessary, SCO mainly serves as a platform for discussion and occasional joint military exercises. While a well-respected international cooperation organization that works with the United Nations and other international organizations, SCO does not have the capabilities to replace CSTO as the primary security provider to the Central Asian regimes or states.

China

China's expansion into Central Asia has been primarily focused on trade and economic cooperation, with Beijing largely refraining from meddling in regional politics or military matters.⁸⁰ This disinterest in regional politics was one of the primary reasons why Russia was able to eventually cooperate with China on multiple fronts in Central Asia.⁸¹ As Muhammad Nadeem Mirza and Shaukat Ayub state, "In the Sino-Russian relationships, there has emerged some sort of de facto distribution of power whereby Russia continues to enjoy the status of providing the net security umbrella in Central Asia while China plays the role of regional economic integrator."⁸² Despite this division of responsibilities, China is slowly gaining ground in Central Asian security. The SCO, where China is one of the leaders, does not play a direct role

⁷⁹ Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, SCO, 2023.

⁸⁰ Lea Melnikovová, *China's Interests in Central Asian Economies*, *Human Affairs* 30, no. 2 2020.

⁸¹ Mirza and Ayub, *Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence*, *Trames*. Journal of the Humanities

⁸² Mirza and Ayub, *Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence*, *Trames*. Journal of the Humanities. Pp 446

in Central Asian security, but China is increasing bilateral security relations with the Central Asian states.

Beijing, it appears, is doing this cautiously, and is expanding its role in Central Asian security. In 2019 a journalist from *Washington Post*, Gerry Shih, wrote about a secretive Chinese base in Tajikistan. In his piece, Shih noted not only this base but also the presence of Chinese troops in the region, something China officially denied. Later Tajik officials Abdurahmon Alamshozoda and Tolibhon Alimzoda confirmed that the base was being built using funds provided by China, but no confirmation of Chinese troops was made.⁸³ Radio Free Europe also reported the presence of Chinese troops and military equipment in Tajikistan.⁸⁴

Since 2014 China has increased the amount of military aid it sends to Central Asia, as well as increasing arms sales to the region.⁸⁵ In recent years, China has been providing military aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan especially.⁸⁶ China has also increased the sale of military equipment to Central Asia, with the biggest increase noticed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. From 1995 to 2015, China accounted for only 9% of arms imported into Uzbekistan; in 2016-2021, China's share went up to 31%. Some speculate that the increase in arms trade between these Central Asian countries and China is down to the Chinese side paying for Turkmen and Uzbek gas with arms.⁸⁷ Additionally, Russia's arms imports into Central Asia have increased as well in the same period. In addition to increasing military aid and arms trade with the region, China has intensified bilateral military and police exercises with the Central Asian states. As reported by the OSCA, between 2014-2019, ten joint exercises were performed between China and Central

⁸³ *Китай Строит Базу в Таджикистане Стоимостью Около 100 Млн Сомони*, Asia-Plus, October 18, 2021.

⁸⁴ ⁸⁴ *Китай Строит Базу в Таджикистане Стоимостью Около 100 Млн Сомони*, Asia-Plus, October 18, 2021.

⁸⁵ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, *Avoiding Dependence Central Asian? Security in a Multipolar World*, The Oxus Society, 2021.

⁸⁶ *Китай Окажет Кыргызстану Помощь в Сфере Безопасности*, Радио Озоди, February 7, 2022.

⁸⁷ Yau Tsz Yau Tsz, *What Drives Chinese Arms Sales in Central Asia?* The Diplomat, September 11, 2019.

Asian states.⁸⁸ The majority of the exercises focus on counterterrorism training, as well as police and special forces training.

While it is clear that Beijing is becoming more involved in Central Asia's security sphere, it is unlikely it will displace Russia as the main security hegemon in the region. China's cautious approach, paired with its policy of non-interference, means Beijing is unlikely to get involved in Central Asia's domestic unrest, even if a Beijing-friendly regime is in danger, unlike Russia, who sent CSTO troops to protect Tokayev's regime days after the popular protest began in Kazakhstan. Russia's willingness to provide security for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, a function China is unlikely to fulfill anytime soon, makes Moscow the undisputed security hegemon by default in Central Asia.

Part II. Central Asian Energy Trade

When Central Asian countries became independent in the early 1990s, some were left with massive amounts of natural resources that should have guaranteed their long-term prosperity. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were left with substantial reserves of natural gas, and Kazakhstan had the region's largest oil reserves. Turkmenistan alone ranks fourth in the world regarding proven reserves of natural gas, while Kazakhstan has the 12th largest oil reserves. However, geographic restrictions, along with their Soviet legacy, restricted them from taking full advantage of their rich natural resources. We will discuss how Russia exploited the lack of export routes to maintain significant influence over the region. We will also discuss how China's

⁸⁸ Mirza and Ayub, *Sino-Russian Competitive Collaboration for the Central Asian Sphere of Influence*, *Trames*. Journal of the Humanities

emergence as an export destination for Central Asian fossil fuels affected Russia's role in the Central Asian energy trade.

Additionally, we will examine potential markets for Central Asian gas to determine what viable options Central Asian countries have for selling their resources. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are absent from this section due to a lack of commercial reserves of natural gas or oil in these countries. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan will be central to this section, with a brief overview of Uzbekistan. While a relatively large producer of natural gas, most of the gas produced by Uzbekistan goes towards fulfilling domestic energy needs.

Hegemon by Default

The relationship between Central Asian states with Russia in the energy sphere cannot be lumped together. While some, like Turkmenistan, were forced to deal with Russia because of their Soviet legacy, others, like Kazakhstan, were forced into partnership by the region's geography. Russo-Kazakh relations in the energy sphere are relatively simple, at least when compared to other Central Asian states. Kazakhstan has the second biggest proven crude oil reserves in Eurasia, behind only Russia, with over 30 billion barrels of oil.⁸⁹ Most of the oil exported from Kazakhstan flows through the pipeline constructed by CPC. The project started in 1992 when Oman, Kazakhstan, and Russia agreed to establish the Caspian Pipeline Consortium to transport Kazakh oil through Russia and onto the global market.⁹⁰ Pipelines construction did not begin until 1999 and was completed by 2004. Astana has become increasingly reliant on the pipeline since 80% of the total oil exported from Kazakhstan goes through the CPC pipeline. The CPC pipeline allows Russia to collect transit fees for Kazakh oil and gives Moscow leverage

⁸⁹ *Energy Resource Guide - Oil and Gas - Kazakhstan*, International Trade Administration | Trade.gov, 2021.

⁹⁰ *Хронология Проекта*, Caspian Pipeline Consortium, 2022.

over Astana. As covered in the previous section, Russo-Kazakh relations have been relatively warm, with Astana remaining one of Moscow's closest allies throughout the years. Russia's relations with Turkmenistan, however, have been more complicated.

Central Asia's natural gas reserves were discovered while the region was still part of the Soviet Union. Following the discovery, Moscow quickly moved to secure their exports to the rest of the Union⁹¹. Construction on a pipeline that would take Central Asian gas to Russia began in the 1960s and was dubbed Central Asia-Center (CAC) pipeline. The CAC pipeline ran from Turkmenistan to Russia through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, delivering Central Asian gas to Russia.⁹² Construction on the CAC pipeline continued for over 20 years, during which additional lines and other infrastructure were added. Line 2 of CAC was added in 1970, line 3 in 1975, and construction was completed on line 4 in 1976.⁹³ By 1985 the CAC pipelines had a total capacity of 80 billion cubic meters (bcm), according to Gazprom, which transported natural gas to Russia. Most of the natural gas came from the Turkmen gas fields, which continued to flow even after the Soviet Union collapsed. In the early 1990s, Turkmenistan, while possessing some of the largest reserves of natural gas, was left chained up to their old colonial masters through a series of soviet era pipelines; these pipelines were the only export routes for Turkmen gas. If Turkmenistan wanted to sell natural gas, it had to be to Russia.

Until 2009 Russia was the only major⁹⁴ destination for Turkmen gas, and Kremlin took full advantage of that. For years Russia was buying Turkmen gas for a fraction of the market cost and reselling it to Ukraine.⁹⁵ As Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov reported in 2006-07,

⁹¹ Natural gas and oil were mainly transported to Russia and Ukraine, with small amounts going to other republics within the Union.

⁹² *Рождение Легенды: Строительство Трансконтинентальной Системы Газопроводов «Средняя Азия — Центр»*, Saratov Gazprom.ru, 2022.

⁹³ *Рождение Легенды: Строительство Трансконтинентальной Системы Газопроводов «Средняя Азия — Центр»*, Saratov Gazprom.ru, 2022.

⁹⁴ Iran started purchasing Turkmen gas in small quantities around 1997.

⁹⁵ Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, *Russia - Central Asia: Existing and Potential Oil and Gas Trade*, Shrivenham, England: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, 2008.

Russia bought Turkmen gas for \$60 thousand cubic meters (tcm) and sold it to Ukraine for \$95 tcm. Russia was selling gas to Ukraine at a fraction of the global price, which in 2006 was \$260 tcm.⁹⁶ While Russia was benefitting from heap Turkmen gas, the resource-rich Central Asian nation had to live off the scraps Kremlin was paying for their gas. Because 85% of Turkmenistan's budget comes from gas sales, the impact of absurdly low prices paid by Russia was massive.⁹⁷ Turkmenistan did try and diversify its export routes as early as 1997 when a pipeline between Iran and Turkmenistan was opened.⁹⁸

The pipeline connecting the Iranian city of Kurdkuy and the Korpeje field in the southwest of Turkmenistan was officially opened for use in December of 1997 and had the capacity to transport ten bcm of natural gas annually.⁹⁹ Iran, one of the world's largest producers of natural gas, has the capacity to be completely self-sufficient when it comes to energy needs. However, importing Turkmen gas to its eastern region was much cheaper than building the infrastructure to transport the natural gas domestically.¹⁰⁰ Exports to Iran were insignificant, hovering around 5-6 bcm per year; however, it was a sign of diversification for Turkmenistan. For the first time, Turkmenistan could sell its gas without Russia's involvement. By 2010, Iran and Turkmenistan added a line to the existing route, allowing Turkmenistan to send up to 20 bcm a year to Iran. Despite the large capacity, the natural gas sent to Iran never exceeded ten bcm, with most Turkmen gas still going to Russia. In the mid-2000s, Turkmenistan sent over 40 bcm of natural gas to Russia, which sold it to Europe.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, *Russia - Central Asia: Existing and Potential Oil and Gas Trade*, Shrivenham, England: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, 2008. Pp. 3

⁹⁷ Elena G. Garbuzarova, "Russia in Turkmenistan: The Policy of Strengthening Cooperation," *Post-Soviet Issues* 7, no. 1, 2020.

⁹⁸ *ОСНОВНЫЕ ГАЗОПРОВОДЫ ТУРКМЕНИСТАНА*, Основные газопроводы туркменистана, January 29, 2017.

⁹⁹ *ОСНОВНЫЕ ГАЗОПРОВОДЫ ТУРКМЕНИСТАНА*, Основные газопроводы туркменистана, January 29, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Edward C. Chow, *Pipeline Politics in Asia the Intersection of Demand, Energy Markets, and Supply Routes* Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2010. Pp 34

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, *Russia - Central Asia: Existing and Potential Oil and Gas Trade*, Shrivenham, England: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, 2008.

Despite the significant natural gas exports, Turkmenistan's economy was one of the worst in the region, with the government struggling to provide basic social needs.¹⁰² Low prices paid by Russia for Turkmen gas, paired with rampant government corruption, contributed heavily to the country's high poverty level. Often hit by international sanctions, Iran was not an ideal trade partner for the Turkmen government, which needed cash. Deliveries to Iran were halted multiple times, citing nonpayment from the Iranian side.¹⁰³ Iran struggled to make payments after Western sanctions on Iran started to pile up and tried to pay for natural gas using food items, which was accepted by Ashgabat (Pannier, 2021). The Iranian market did not adequately diversify Turkmenistan's export options, leaving the Turkmen government relying on Russia. Even with limited export options, Turkmenistan tried to leverage its position of gas to increase prices, both with Iran and Russia.

In 2008 Turkmenistan, during one of the coldest winters in Iran, tried to leverage Iran's dependence on Turkmen gas to increase gas prices. Iran had agreed to pay \$75 per 1,000 tmc of gas in a prior agreement, but the Turkmen side wanted to double the price.¹⁰⁴ Iran, after months of negotiations, agreed to a price increase. Before that, in 2006, Ashgabat successfully increased the gas price it exported to Russia from \$60 to \$100 per tmc.¹⁰⁵ Later in 2008, Turkmenistan agreed on another price hike with Russia, increasing the price from \$100 to a reported \$210 per tcm.¹⁰⁶ There are a couple of reasons why Russia agreed to these price hikes, high global demand for natural gas and the emergence of China as a potential market for Central Asian.¹⁰⁷ Even at a high price, Russia could break even or make a slight profit from Turkmen gas while maintaining

¹⁰² *Turkmenistan Country Profile*, BBC News, March 24, 2023.

¹⁰³ Bruce Pannier, *Turkmen-Iranian Relations Warm Ahead of Winter*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, October 30, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ *Update 2-Iran Warns Turkmenistan over Gas Supply Cut*, Reuters, January 13, 2008.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Blank, *Turkmenistan Strikes Back: The Energy Wars*, The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst, February 22, 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Alex Vatanka, *Turkmenistan: Iran Admits Defeat in Gas Pricing Dispute*, Eurasianet, April 22.

¹⁰⁷ Yusin Lee, *Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of Its Gas Export Routes*, Energy Policy, 2014.

significant influence over Ashgabat. Despite these price increases, Russia was still the dominant side in the Turkmen-Russian gas trade. Russia was still the primary buyer of Turkmen gas, and considering how much Ashgabat relied on gas revenues, Russia's influence over Turkmenistan was still strong.

Moscow was forced to increase prices because of China's emergence around the same time as a real market for Ashgabat, as suggested by Yusin Lee. It is more likely that it was a combination of different factors, the main one being high global prices for natural gas. Even with the emergence of China as an export destination, Turkmenistan could not afford to lose Russia as a customer, it was still selling 40 bcm of gas annually to Moscow.¹⁰⁸ It is likely that Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan were all asking for price increases at the same time, accompanied by high global gas prices, and China's emergence as a market for Central Asian gas also played a role in Moscow's decision-making. If Moscow refused to increase the price for the three most influential countries in the region, it is likely that Moscow's political influence in the region would have taken a hit. The high global prices meant they could still re-sell the Central Asian gas for a small profit and maintain their regional influence in Central Asia, a win-win scenario for Kremlin. This approach by Russia is what sets them apart from China in the region. While the Chinese approach has been primarily motivated by financial gain, Russia pursues economic and political goals simultaneously.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Russia sometimes sacrifices financial gain if it believes it can further its political or security goals in the region. But Moscow is not afraid to put economic and political pressure on regimes if it believes they are not being Kremlin-friendly enough. A prime example was the Bakiyev regime in 2010. Therefore, when in 2008-9,

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Putz, *Russia's Gazprom Stops Buying Gas from Turkmenistan*, *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Elena G. Garbuzarova, "Russia in Turkmenistan: The Policy of Strengthening Cooperation," *Post-Soviet Issues* 7, no. 1, 2020.

Turkmenistan continued to pursue a policy of diversification by exploring the EU and China as potential markets, Russia applied economic pressure on Ashgabat.

In 2009-10 after the global demand for natural gas plummeted because of the global financial crisis of 2008, Russia started to buy less Turkmen gas. On April 8, 2009, Russia abruptly stopped all gas imports from Turkmenistan. This was followed by an explosion in one of the pipelines. Each side was blaming the other, with the Turkmen side claiming that Russia blew it up on purpose.¹¹⁰ Gas trade between the two nations continued after the repairs to the pipeline were completed but never again reached the same volumes. In 2016, when Russia's relations with other Central Asian states were stable, global gas prices were low, and Russia stopped importing Turkmen gas completely. This left China as the sole buyer of Turkmen gas for a period.

Alternative Markets

China

China made its first serious inroad into the Central Asian energy market in 2009 when the Turkmenistan-China natural gas pipeline began its operation.¹¹¹ According to Turkmenistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Turkmenistan-China pipeline spans from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and into China's industrial heartland.¹¹² Currently, there are three main lines running between Central Asia and China; lines A, B, and C, with Beijing planning to add a fourth line in the near future.¹¹³ The four lines connecting the region with China transport gas from all three Central Asian countries involved to China, with the largest contributor being Turkmenistan. Unlike Russia, which was mainly buying Turkmen gas to resell it, or Iran, which

¹¹⁰ Simon Shuster and Marat Gurt, *Turkmen May Sue Russia for 'Vacuum-Bomb' Pipe Blast*, Reuters, May 29, 2009.

¹¹¹ *ОСНОВНЫЕ ГАЗОПРОВОДЫ ТУРКМЕНИСТАНА*, Основные газопроводы Туркменистана, January 29, 2017.

¹¹² *ОСНОВНЫЕ ГАЗОПРОВОДЫ ТУРКМЕНИСТАНА*, Основные газопроводы Туркменистана, January 29, 2017.

¹¹³ Joe Webster, *Perspectives: China Wants the Line D Pipeline. Can Central Asia Deliver?*, EurasiaNet, February 28, 2023.

had the capacity but opted to buy Turkmen gas because of the low cost, China is a huge energy consumer that imports Turkmen gas for domestic consumption. According to EIA, in the mid-2000s, China was the world's fastest-growing economy and was fast becoming the world's largest energy consumer.¹¹⁴ By 2020 China became the largest energy consumer in the world, not surprising with a population of over 1.4 billion and a massive industrial sector.

China's energy mix is dominated by coal, which accounts for roughly 55% of the total energy consumption, with natural gas accounting for 9%.¹¹⁵ By gaining access to this massive energy market, Turkmenistan could now export its gas without Russia's involvement. But as Yusin Lee¹¹⁶ suggested, Turkmenistan might not be diversifying export routes but rather "replacing its old master, Russia, with a new one, China."¹¹⁷ Since the construction of the Turkmenistan-China pipeline in 2009, China has been gradually increasing its exports, eventually overtaking Russia as the largest buyer of Turkmen gas. From 2016-2019, China was essentially the only buyer of Turkmen gas when Russia decided to stop buying gas from Ashgabat.

All things considered, China is the only country buying large amounts of Turkmen gas strictly for domestic use rather than resale. While Russia might start and stop imports, depending on global market conditions, China, with its growing energy demands, might prove to be a more stable export destination. However, it is not the most profitable market for Turkmenistan. In order to construct the Turkmenistan-China pipeline, Turkmenistan reportedly borrowed \$8-\$10 billion from China.¹¹⁸ Therefore, some of the profits made from the sale of gas to China would

¹¹⁴ *U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis*, International - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2021.

¹¹⁵ *U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis*, International - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2021.

¹¹⁶ "Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of Its Gas Export Routes."

¹¹⁷ Yusin Lee, *Opportunities and Risks in Turkmenistan's Quest for Diversification of Its Gas Export Routes*, Energy Policy, 2014. Pp, 337

¹¹⁸ *Turkmenistan: Chinese Debt Trap Unlocked*, EurasiaNet, July 15, 2021.

go right back to Beijing in the form of payments for the massive loan. This was accompanied by the already low-price China paying for Turkmen gas. Official prices are not made public, but some experts speculate the price to be somewhere around \$250 to \$195 per 1000 cm, either of which was lower than the global market price at the time.¹¹⁹ China was doing the same thing that Russia was doing, taking advantage of the fact that Turkmenistan did not have viable alternative markets to export its gas to. Beijing could do this because China's gas imports are incredibly diverse. They import LNG from Australia, the United States, and Qatar and have access to pipeline gas from Russia.¹²⁰ They do not rely on a single trading partner for their energy imports; meanwhile, Turkmenistan can only sell to China, Iran, and Russia.

In 2019 Russian gas company Gazprom restarted importing Turkmen gas in small quantities, roughly five bcm annually, which was increased to 10 bcm by 2021. It is reported that the price paid by Russia is around \$100 per 1000 cm.¹²¹ While not ideal for Turkmenistan, considering the low quantities of gas purchased and the low price paid by Russia, it was a lifeline Ashgabat needed.¹²² After Russia stopped importing Turkmen gas, the already poor Central Asian country started to struggle economically. For years, the little profit made by Turkmenistan from gas sales to China had to be sent back to Beijing to repay the massive loan taken by Ashgabat for the construction of the pipeline.¹²³ Russia did not need Turkmen gas in 2019 and 2021, but Turkmenistan was desperate for cash. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to suggest that Moscow was trying to gain political favor with the Central Asian country. This observation has

¹¹⁹ John C. K. Daly, *Turkmenistan Complains Gazprom Is Not Paying Its Bills*, Jamestown, September 15, 2016.

¹²⁰ *U.S. Energy Information Administration - EIA - Independent Statistics and Analysis*, International - U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), 2021.

¹²¹ *Russia Doubled Imports of Natural Gas from Turkmenistan in 2021, Envoy Says*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 24, 2021.

¹²² *Turkmenistan GDP Growth Slows to 6.2 PCT in 2016*, Reuters, February 8, 2017.

¹²³ Catherine Putz, *Russia Is Buying Turkmen Gas Again. Why?*, The Diplomat, April 26, 2019.

been made by others, who suggest that Russia's motives were political.¹²⁴ ¹²⁵ The low-price Moscow and Beijing pay for Turkmen gas can be interpreted as a lack of leverage on the Turkmen side. China consistently uses Turkmenistan's lack of export partners to buy gas as cheaply as possible, which leaves Turkmenistan struggling economically. China often changes the amount it imports from Turkmenistan based on gas prices elsewhere, which forces Ashgabat to lower its prices if it wants to sell large quantities to China. Instead of being a counterbalance to Russia, China ended up taking advantage of Turkmenistan the same way Russia did. So, while it is undeniable that Russia's leverage over Turkmenistan has diminished, compared to the pre-2009 period, Moscow still has a considerable amount of influence over Turkmenistan. Gaining access to the Chinese energy market proved to be not as fruitful as hoped. Now, instead of having one master, Turkmenistan has two. To truly diversify its exports, Turkmenistan must gain access to the South Asian, and or European energy markets.

The TAPI Pipeline

Turkmenistan has been trying to diversify its energy exports and reach new energy markets since its independence in the early 1990s. The two major markets that Turkmenistan has been reaching are South Asia and Europe. To gain access to the South Asian energy market, Turkmenistan has been planning a pipeline that would go through Afghanistan into Pakistan and India (TAPI). The TAPI pipeline has been in the works for decades, starting in 1995 with a proposed Trans-Afghan pipeline (TAP), which later morphed into the current project, which includes India and Pakistan.¹²⁶ Since then, the project has undergone multiple changes, faced

¹²⁴ Stuart Elliott and John Roberts, *Russia's Gazprom Aims to Resume Turkmenistan Natural Gas Imports in Jan 2019*, S&P Global Commodity Insights, October 11, 2018.

¹²⁵ Elena G. Garbuzarova, "Russia in Turkmenistan: The Policy of Strengthening Cooperation," *Post-Soviet Issues* 7, no. 1, 2020

¹²⁶ *The Long and Troubled History of Tapi Pipeline: What You Need to Know about Ambitious Gas Pipeline Project*, Firstpost, January 28, 2022.

many obstacles, and was abandoned on multiple occasions. In recent years interest in the project has been reinvigorated by all parties involved, as well as the Asian Development Bank (ADB). ADB played a consulting role for years, but more recently, it is looking to provide funding for the trans-national pipeline, which has the potential of not only contributing significantly to fulfilling India and Pakistan's energy needs but also reshaping the geopolitics of the region.¹²⁷ If successful, the TAPI pipeline would allow Turkmenistan to sell gas to some of the largest consumers in the world, Pakistan and India. Most importantly, the pipeline would circumvent Russia and China.

The pipeline was proposed in 1995, but construction was delayed due to political instability in Afghanistan. In its initial form, India and Pakistan's involvement in the Trans-Afghan Pipeline was minimal. However, the two South Asian countries later joined the project, which prompted a name change to its current title of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India pipeline.¹²⁸ TAPI's construction was rocky from the start; political instability and the rise of radical Islamist threats in Afghanistan threatened the pipeline before the project's construction even began.¹²⁹ In 1998 major US firm, after initially agreeing to invest a considerable amount of money, withdrew its funding from the project. Concerns were raised when in 1998, a US embassy was bombed in Kenya and Tanzania, with the Afghanistan-based terrorist group AL Qaeda taking responsibility.¹³⁰ These terror attacks, paired with political instability in Afghanistan, meant that the TAPI project was frozen for decades, and investors from US and Russia pulled out of the project.¹³¹ After briefly restarting, construction of the TAPI pipeline was

¹²⁷ Luca Anceschi, *Turkmenistan and the Virtual Politics of Eurasian Energy: The Case of the Tapi Pipeline Project*, *Central Asian Survey* 36, no. 4, 2017.

¹²⁸ *The Long and Troubled History of Tapi Pipeline: What You Need to Know about Ambitious Gas Pipeline Project*, Firstpost, January 28, 2022.

¹²⁹ Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Saleem H. Ali, *Energy Diplomacy in South Asia: Beyond the Security Paradigm in Accessing the Tapi Pipeline Project*, *Energy Research & Social Science* 34, 2017.

¹³⁰ "East African Embassy Bombings," FBI, May 17, 2016.

¹³¹ Catherine Putz, *Could Tapi Bring Peace to Afghanistan?*, *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2015.

halted once again when US forces got involved in Afghanistan after September 11th, 2001.¹³² In the early 2000s and 2010s, the project would periodically start and stop until, in 2015, a “major breakthrough” was achieved by leaders of all four countries involved. On December 13, 2015, leaders of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India met in Turkmenistan officially restart construction on the TAPI pipeline.¹³³ The construction began on the 1,128-mile-long pipeline that is forecasted to cost around \$10 billion and was supposed to be finished by 2019.¹³⁴ This paper was written in March of 2023, and the construction of the pipeline is still nowhere near completion. The pipeline was delayed again due to funding, political instability in Afghanistan, and tensions between Pakistan and India.

In March of 2022, Indian leaders met with Central Asian leaders during the first-ever India-Central Asia summit, and the issue of Afghanistan’s security was discussed, which is one of the largest obstacles the TAPI pipeline is currently facing.¹³⁵ For the pipeline to be constructed, security along the pipeline route in Afghanistan must be achieved. The situation in Afghanistan has been getting worse since the withdrawal of US forces. However, despite the instability in the country, a spokesperson for the Taliban, Ismatullah Burhan, declared that they would be able to resolve challenges that are hindering TAPI’s construction.¹³⁶ Despite the efforts from all parties involved, major security and funding issues are holding the project back. Currently, Turkmenistan, through a state-owned company Turkmengaz has agreed to provide the majority of funding for the project, with other states contributing a fraction of the cost. Turkmenistan has agreed to cover \$8.5 billion, while the rest would be split evenly between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Turkmenistan alone is unlikely to provide \$8.5 billion, and

¹³² *The Long and Troubled History of Tapi Pipeline: What You Need to Know about Ambitious Gas Pipeline Project*, Firstpost, January 28, 2022.

¹³³ Catherine Putz, *Could Tapi Bring Peace to Afghanistan?*, The Diplomat, December 14, 2015.

¹³⁴ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, *India’s Plan to Realize Tapi*, The Diplomat, April 12, 2022.

¹³⁵ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, *India’s Plan to Realize Tapi*, The Diplomat, April 12, 2022.

¹³⁶ *India’s Plan to Realise Tapi*, Risk Advisory, December 8, 2022.

Ashgabat has attempted to raise funds on the international stage. Outside investors from Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia have expressed interest in the project. However, Asian Development Bank is the only actor that has followed through on their interest; others are more hesitant to invest considerable funds into the project.¹³⁷ In recent months, Russia has expressed great interest in the project. After losing the European energy market, Moscow is not increasingly looking east for new markets. Pakistan and India would be ideal candidates for Russian gas.¹³⁸ Recently the head of the Energy Ministry of RF, Nikolay Shulginov, revealed in an interview with the Pakistani news outlet PTV News that Russia will not rule out joining the TAPI project. He cited the security issues in Afghanistan as the primary reason the project remains frozen. If this is the case and Russia joins the project, it would significantly boost the TAPI project. Russia would be bringing in the capital that the project needs along with expertise. However, it is unlikely Russia will be able to help with security issues in Afghanistan, which still is the primary hurdle holding the project back. Despite all the factors going against the TAPI pipeline, if completed, the benefits of a project of this magnitude would be felt across South and Central Asia.

TAPI Benefits

If constructed, the TAPI pipeline has the potential to reshape the geopolitics of South and Central Asia. The benefits would spread to all members involved in the project and beyond. The benefits for Turkmenistan are clear. It would allow Ashgabat to gain access to two of the largest energy-consuming markets in the world in, India and Pakistan, and truly diversify its export

¹³⁷ Zaffar Bhutta, *ADB Offers \$1B Loan for Tapi Gas Pipeline*, The Express Tribune, November 18, 2016.

¹³⁸ *Russia Does Not Rule out Joining Tapi Pipeline Project - Energy Minister*, TASS, January 23, 2023.

options. If Russia gets involved in the project and tries to sell gas to India and Pakistan, Turkmenistan would become a transit country and gain considerable leverage over Russia, potentially evening out the field regarding future gas price negotiations. In addition to selling their gas to South Asia, Turkmenistan could collect transit fees from Russia. However, Russia's involvement still remains doubtful, and Kremlin has made no concrete moves to join the project. Even if Moscow stays out of it, the benefits of the TAPI project for Turkmenistan are considerable. Those benefits would not be limited to Turkmenistan alone and would likely spread to the entire region.

Pakistan

If completed, the pipeline would have the capacity to transport 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas annually, and Pakistan would receive 47.5% of it, with the other 47.5% going to India and 5% to Afghanistan.¹³⁹ Power shortages and complete shutdowns are not uncommon in Pakistan, with homes and businesses often left without power for days.¹⁴⁰ Unlike in India, where natural gas constitutes only 6% of the total energy mix, 48.7% of Pakistan's energy comes from natural gas, and there is no sign that demand will subside in the near future.¹⁴¹ Pakistan is not rich in natural gas reserves and therefore imports large amounts annually to meet its demands. In 2015, Pakistan started importing LNG, with its main supplier being Qatar. Unfortunately, a fragile economy, fluctuating gas prices, along with the high cost of delivering the LNG means Pakistan suffers from frequent power shortages.¹⁴² According to the

¹³⁹ *Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project (Phase I): Environmental and Social Impact Assessment*, Asian Development Bank, February 18, 2021. Pp. 2-1

¹⁴⁰ Sophia Saifi and Diksha Madhok, *Pakistan to Shut Markets and Restaurants Early to Save Power amid Economic Crisis*, CNN, January 4, 2023.

¹⁴¹ *Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project (Phase I): Environmental and Social Impact Assessment*, Asian Development Bank, February 18, 2021

¹⁴² Verity Ratcliffe, *Pakistan's Dependence on Natural Gas Is Turning into a Nightmare*, Oil and Gas News, Al Jazeera, September 28, 2021.

World Bank (WB), power sector distortions are costing Pakistan billions of dollars, and solving them would help stabilize the fragile economy.¹⁴³ Recently, in January of 2023, Pakistan was forced to mandate all markets to close after 8:30 pm and restaurants by 10 pm. Supposedly, these measures are meant to save Pakistan close to \$274 million.¹⁴⁴ This is not the first time Pakistan was forced to drastically cut energy use in the public and government sectors. Having an alternative supply of natural gas from Turkmenistan would help ensure Pakistan's energy security and provide a backup, or potential replacement, of expensive LNG imported from Qatar. According to CEIC data, Pakistan in 2021, Pakistan imported 11,7 bcm, and that number is projected to climb higher.¹⁴⁵ If successful, TAPI would allow Pakistan to import roughly 15 bcm from Turkmenistan alone and give Pakistan some leverage while negotiating LNG prices with their current suppliers. Additionally, Pakistan would collect a considerable amount in transit fees for the gas flowing into India.

Afghanistan

Pakistan needs TAPI to meet the country's growing energy demands and increase its energy security in the face of the ever-changing global energy market for LNG. Afghanistan does not need natural gas as much as the other actors involved in the project. Afghanistan has only been allocated 5% of the gas that will flow through the TAPI pipeline; the main attraction for the Afghan government is the transit fees it would collect. It is estimated that Afghanistan would collect roughly \$400 million in annual transit fees alone.¹⁴⁶ This has prompted the current Afghan regime to advocate heavily for the construction and eventual operation of the TAPI

¹⁴³ *Power Sector Distortions Cost Pakistan Billions*, World Bank, December 14.

¹⁴⁴ Sophia Saifi and Diksha Madhok, *Pakistan to Shut Markets and Restaurants Early to Save Power amid Economic Crisis*, CNN, January 4, 2023.

¹⁴⁵ *Pakistan Natural Gas: Imports*, Pakistan Natural Gas: Imports, 1975 – 2023, 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Sadaf Shinwari, *Afghanistan Earns \$400m Transit Fee on TAPI Gas Pipeline*, Khaama Press, April 18, 2012.

pipeline. Along with a considerable amount of money made through annual transit fees, the project is set to bring jobs and stability to Afghanistan. Some experts have dubbed the pipeline that would run across Afghanistan the “Peace Pipeline” because of its potential to provide stability.¹⁴⁷ However, it is clear that stability and extra jobs created by the TAPI pipeline are not the primary reason Afghanistan’s current regime is advocating for the project; the \$400 million transit fees are.

India

India is the world’s third largest emitter of carbon dioxide gas (CO₂), which is largely down to its heavy reliance on coal for energy production. Coal is the largest energy source in India, with over 45% of total energy produced in the country coming from this source, followed by oil (24%) and biomass (23%).¹⁴⁸ Coal is primarily used in electricity production, with over 70% of the electricity produced in the country coming from cheap fossil fuels.¹⁴⁹ One of the main reasons for coal’s popularity is its availability and low cost. The majority of the coal used in India is domestically produced. Domestic production means India does not have to rely on foreign nations for its energy, which is believed to be vital for the country’s energy security.

India is the second largest producer of coal in the world, after China.¹⁵⁰ However, in recent years the government of India has been trying to reduce coal use because of its considerable negative environmental impacts. India has taken major steps towards removing coal from major industries and people’s homes, which use cheap fossil fuel for cooking along with wood. India is investing heavily in renewable energies, increasing the production and use of

¹⁴⁷ Andrew E. Kramer, *Afghanistan Breaks Ground on 1,127-Mile ‘Peace Pipeline,’* The New York Times, February 23, 2018.

¹⁴⁸ *India - Countries & Regions*, IEA, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ *India - Countries & Regions*, IEA, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ *India - Countries & Regions*, IEA, 2021.

domestically produced solar panels and wind turbines. This move towards renewable energy is accompanied by increased use of natural gas. While not the cleanest energy source, natural gas produces significantly less CO₂ when compared to coal. According to International Energy Agency, natural gas emits 50% less CO₂ when compared to coal.¹⁵¹ Because of its environmental benefits, low potential cost, and versatility, natural gas is an ideal backup to renewable energy sources such as solar panels and wind turbines.¹⁵² Because of these benefits, the government of India has laid out a plan to increase natural gas usage from 6% to 15% by.¹⁵³ TAPI would help India achieve this goal and potentially even surpass it.

The uses of natural gas in India are incredibly diverse. It is used in the fertilizer industry as fuel for cars, electricity generation, and cooking, to name a few. Electricity generation, along with fertilizer production industries, are the largest consumers of natural gas, with 20% and 29%, respectively, followed by household regular household use.¹⁵⁴ The city gas distribution sector delivered compressed natural gas (CNG) for transportation and piped natural gas (PNG) to homes and industries.¹⁵⁵ The city gas distribution sector accounts for 19% of natural gas used in India, and the Indian government is looking to increase that number by 2030.¹⁵⁶ India must import more natural gas to meet its ambitious goal of increasing natural gas usage from 6% to 15%. India does not have the reserves available to meet the current natural gas demands, let alone increase its use in general energy production. Natural gas is mainly imported into India in the liquified natural gas (LNG) form, imported primarily from Qatar. Qatar is currently the chief provider of LNG to India, with over 42% of the total LNG imports coming from the Middle

¹⁵¹ IEA, *The Role of Gas in Today's Energy Transitions – Analysis*, IEA, 2019.

¹⁵² *Why Natural Gas Is a Strategic Fuel in India's Energy Transition - ET EnergyWorld*, ETEnergyworld.com, December 13, 2022.

¹⁵³ Rakesh Sharma and Rajesh Kumar Singh, *India Can Add Oil and Gas While It Chases Green Goal, Modi Says*, Bloomberg.com, February 6, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Swati D'Souza, *Natural Gas and India's Climate Strategy*, Energy For Growth, October 12, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ Lyndia Powel, Akhilesh Sati, and Vinod Kumar, *Natural Gas Consumption in India: The Tale of Two Sectors*, ORF, June 17, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Swati D'Souza, *Natural Gas and India's Climate Strategy*, Energy For Growth, October 12, 2021.

Eastern country.¹⁵⁷ Heavy reliance on a single supplier is not in India's best interest, and steps to diversify its imports have been taken in recent years. One of the projects looking to help diversify India's energy imports is the TAPI. However, India is hesitant to invest heavily in the project because of the tense relationship between India and Pakistan. There are legitimate fears in New Delhi that Pakistan will use the pipeline as a political weapon.

TAPI would allow Turkmenistan to break away from the Russo-Chinese duopoly in the region and access some of the largest energy markets in the world. Pakistan's heavy reliance on natural gas and India's expanding energy needs would guarantee constant demand. It could potentially help stabilize Turkmenistan's volatile neighbor, Afghanistan. TAPI is an ideal project for Ashgabat to pursue. However, security issues in Afghanistan are not showing signs of subsiding, and India's hesitancy over the project is not going away anytime soon, either. Therefore, Europe is an easier market to reach, which comes with its challenges.

The EU Energy Market and the Trans-Caspian Pipeline

Turkmenistan has been attempting to gain access to the European energy market for decades, for the same reasons it wants access to the South Asian market, true diversification. Both Turkmenistan and the European Union, and at some point, even Russia, have been working on establishing a viable route for Central Asian gas to the EU since the 1990s. Russia attempted to build the Pre-Caspian Pipeline, which would have taken Turkmen gas to the European market, but the pipeline route was through Russia.¹⁵⁸ Eventually, the project was abandoned but the goal of accessing the European market remains. However, there is a more realistic route that could

¹⁵⁷ Surabhi Sahu and Kenneth Foo, *India's LNG Imports Seen at Multiyear Lows in August as Prices Undermine Demand*, S&P Global Commodity Insights, September 6, 2022

¹⁵⁸ *Gazprom to Expand Capacity of Turkmen Pre-Caspian Pipeline*, Dow Jones Institutional, 2008.

potentially take Central Asian gas to the European Union which is the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP).

Turkmenistan can provide large quantities of natural gas to Europe, but lacks an established route for transport.¹⁵⁹ Different routes have been explored in the past which could potentially take the Turkmen gas to Europe, most likely of which is the TCP. Even though the TCP is considered to be beneficial for all parties involved, the pipeline has a lot going against it. This includes the ambiguous status of the Caspian Sea, financing of the project, political differences between the EU and Central Asia, as well as the EU's move towards greener energy sources, just to name a few. If constructed, the TCP would connect to an already existing pipeline system that takes Azeri gas to the European market. The South Caucasus Pipeline takes gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey and connects to the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), which in turn connects to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline which connects Turkey to the European Union.¹⁶⁰ The majority of the route is already established, the only thing missing is a pipeline that would take Turkmen gas to Azerbaijan.

The underdetermined status of the Caspian Sea gave Russia and Iran the opportunity to block the construction of the TCP, stating that a project of that scale needs to be approved by all countries bordering the Caspian Sea.¹⁶¹ Russia had every reason to block the construction of the TCP, as it would be a double blow for the Kremlin. In one swift move, the TCP would weaken Russia's hold over Central Asia, and allow the European Union to be less dependent on Russia for fossil fuel imports. Despite the name, for years it was not clearly established whether the Caspian Sea was a lake or a sea, and this ambiguous status allowed Russia to block the

¹⁵⁹ *The World Bank in Turkmenistan*, World Bank, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Robert M. Cutler, *The Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline for Peace-Building in the South Caucasus*, Beyond the Horizon ISSG, February 1, 2021.

¹⁶¹ Sergei Blagov, *Russia Tries to Scuttle Proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline*, EurasiaNet, March 28, 2006.

construction of a pipeline between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In addition to Russia blocking the project, the TCP was held back by the rocky relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The two countries had a dispute over a hydrocarbon field in the Caspian Sea which was located between the two countries.¹⁶² This strained relations between the two countries and served as a minor roadblock for the construction of the TCP. These issues were resolved in 2018 and 2021 respectively. In 2018, the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea was signed by all Caspian nations. I article 14 of the convention, the power to approve pipeline construction was given to the hands of the nations involved in the project, theoretically removing Russia from the decision-making process.¹⁶³ In addition, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan improved drastically in the early 2020s, which culminated in the resolution of a decades-old dispute over the hydrocarbon field in the Caspian Sea. In 2021, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan decided to share the responsibility of developing the disputed field, which was another boost for the TCP. However, Russia and Iran continued to oppose the construction of the TCP, citing environmental concerns, something they are still legally able to do.¹⁶⁴

In addition to continuous opposition from Russia and Iran, the EU's march towards greener energy sources makes large-scale fossil projects seem like a step backward. This is true, even though many experts believe that fossil fuels are unlikely to completely disappear from the EU's energy mix anytime soon.¹⁶⁵ The other obstacle standing between Turkmenistan's gas and the European Union is the authoritarian nature of the political system in the Central Asian

¹⁶² Bruce Pannier, *Analysis: Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan Resolve a 30-Year Dispute over Caspian Field*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, January 22, 2021.

¹⁶³ Elena Karataeva, *The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea: The Final Answer or an Interim Solution to the Caspian Question?*, *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 35, no. 2, (2020).

¹⁶⁴ Bruce Pannier, *Russia, Iran Cite 'ecological Concerns' in Opposing Trans-Caspian Pipeline*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, August 15, 2019.

¹⁶⁵ *European Gas Market: Recent Developments and Outlook*, ec.europa.eu, 2021.

country. One of the main priorities of the EU is the promotion of human rights and democracy abroad, and many in Brussels argue that any deal with Turkmenistan should include human rights or democratization stipulations. But as Vanessa Boas argues in her paper, the EU does not have enough leverage to include such conditions in their energy deals.¹⁶⁶ If the EU does not deal with Turkmenistan, it is very likely the country will move closer to countries like Russia, China, and Iran, in which case progress toward democratization would most likely be non-existent. Therefore, as Boas argues, the EU should engage in trade with Turkmenistan without such demands, at least not in the beginning. Later, if the relationship proves to be fruitful, the EU could start demanding incremental changes.

In conclusion, the proposed TCP project would bring about a multitude of advantages for numerous parties, with the exception of Russia and Iran. Specifically, the Central Asian region would be able to conduct business directly with the West, resulting in increased economic opportunities. However, the construction of the pipeline would entail a significant loss of European market share for Russia, thus dealing a detrimental blow to the Kremlin. Given these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that Putin would consent to the building of the TCP project. Despite its potential benefits, the pipeline faces a number of formidable challenges, rendering its construction improbable in the foreseeable future.

¹⁶⁶ Vanessa Boas, *Energy and Human Rights: Two Irreconcilable Foreign Policy Goals? The Case of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline in EU-Turkmen Relations*, Jstor, 2012.

Part III After the Invasion

As established in the previous sections, despite challenges from China, United States, and European nations Russia's influence in Central Asia has remained strong throughout the last three decades. Though it no longer has a monopoly over Central Asian energy trade routes, it does not have the same economic clout as in the early 2000s, though Russia still remains the most influential power in Central Asia. Moscow was able to ride out challenges from the West by providing security to Central Asian authoritarian elites, something no democratic nation is willing to do. Russia's willingness to fulfill the role of a regime guarantor in Central Asia, combined with the deep historic ties which were strengthened through economic and security trade agreements in the late 90s, 2000s, and 2010s, and Central Asia's dependence on external powers for security allowed Russia to keep the region close within their sphere of influence. But this changed: what happens, after all, when your security guarantor invades another former Soviet republic? And what if that guarantor, that so-called military superpower fails militarily? It might be too early to tell, since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine is still ongoing, but has been long enough to see some early reactions. In the section below, through a qualitative analysis of local newspapers and statements made by government officials, this paper will analyze the reaction of each Central Asian state to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Kazakhstan

Relationships between Kazakhstan and Russia are tightly knitted, to say the least. Kazakhstan is a member of both CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union and shares the largest land border with Russia.¹⁶⁷ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a significant

¹⁶⁷ Zhaniya Urankayeva, *Kazakhstan Demarks Its Border with Russia*, Kursiv Media Kazakhstan, February 16, 2023.

amount of trade between Russia and Kazakhstan. Even now, Russia remains one of the biggest exporters of Kazakh products and services.¹⁶⁸ Kazakhstan also relies on Russia for security, which was demonstrated in January 2022. Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia for trade is highlighted by the fact that the majority of goods it trades with the EU must go through Russia. The majority of natural gas and oil sold by Kazakhstan, which accounts for over 40% of its revenue, must go through Russia as well. The primary pipeline which transports 80% of Kazakh oil exports, goes through Russian territory, which gives Kremlin more leverage over Kazakhstan. However, despite this heavy dependence on Russia, Kazakhstan might be the most likely Central Asian country to move away from the Russian sphere of influence.¹⁶⁹

Kazakhstan has been “walking a diplomatic tightrope between Russia and Europe.”¹⁷⁰ They are juggling their proximity and dependence on Russia while simultaneously trying to get closer to Europe. This was illustrated when in late November 2022, Tokayev visited Putin in Russia and immediately afterward met with Emmanuel Macron in France.¹⁷¹ Kazakhstan was one of the countries that openly spoke out against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, proclaiming in his speech, which he gave in St. Petersburg while sharing the stage with Vladimir Putin, that he does not recognize Russian-controlled regions in Ukraine.¹⁷² These words cannot be taken lightly for a country with close ties with Russia, a country that shares the largest land border with Russia, and a regime that called on Russia to intervene militarily in January of this year. Tokayev has good reasons to stand up to Putin since Kazakhstan has the most to lose out of all Central Asian countries if Russia is successful at further separating Ukraine. Sanctions on Russian gas and oil have hurt Kazakhstan directly, with their production of natural gas and oil dropping

¹⁶⁸ *Kazakhstan Tightens Controls over Trade with Russia*, Reuters, March 27, 2023.

¹⁶⁹ *Kazakhstan - Oil & Gas Equipment and Services*, Trade.gov, 2022.

¹⁷⁰ Catherine Putz, *Kazakhstan Walks Diplomatic Tightrope between Russia and Europe*, – The Diplomat, November 30, 2022.

¹⁷¹ Catherine Putz, *Kazakhstan Walks Diplomatic Tightrope between Russia and Europe*, – The Diplomat, November 30, 2022.

¹⁷² *Russian Ally Kazakhstan Says It Won't Recognize Referendum Results from Ukraine*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, September 26, 2022.

significantly since the war in Ukraine began; Russia has shut down the pipeline on multiple occasions.¹⁷³ Additionally, the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan could also be questioned by Putin's Russia. Some prominent Russian politicians, Dimitri Medvedev being one of them, already discuss that Kazakhstan will suffer the same fate as Ukraine.¹⁷⁴

After the brave statement by Tokayev concerning the recognition of Russian-backed autonomous regions in Ukraine, Russia has put pressure on Kazakhstan and Tokayev. On July 5th, a Russian court found that CPC "had allegedly committed environmental violations" and shut the pipeline down for a month.¹⁷⁵ This shows once again the influence that the Kremlin has over the Central Asian nations, a fact they clearly recognize. Since the invasion began, Kazakhstan has been looking at alternative routes for its oil.¹⁷⁶ Currently, they have increased the amount of oil they ship using routes that circumvent Russian territory, but those routes do not have the capacity to replace the CPC. Despite the pressure from Moscow, Kazakhstan has continued to meet with Western leaders, proclaiming their displeasure with the war in Ukraine and support for the EU.¹⁷⁷ Only a day before the Russian court ruled on the matter, the Kazakh president pledged to help the EU in "stabilizing the global energy market."¹⁷⁸ Tokayev has also been attempting to take steps toward the democratization of Kazakhstan, by introducing reforms to the Kazakh constitution.

In September 2022, Tokayev took big steps toward the democratization of Kazakhstan. He called for decentralization of power, granted more autonomy to different regions in Kazakhstan, and limited the number of terms a president can serve and other major political

¹⁷³ Almaz Kumenov, *Russia Blocks Kazakhstan's Main Outlet for Oil Exports*, Eurasianet, July 6, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Timur Umarov, *After Ukraine, Is Kazakhstan next in the Kremlin's Sights?* Carnegie Politik, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Almaz Kumenov, *Russia Blocks Kazakhstan's Main Outlet for Oil Exports*, Eurasianet, July 6, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Olzhas Auyezov, *Analysis: Shocked by Ukraine War, Russian Neighbour Kazakhstan Looks West*, Reuters, November 17, 2022.

¹⁷⁷ Olzhas Auyezov, *Analysis: Shocked by Ukraine War, Russian Neighbour Kazakhstan Looks West*, Reuters, November 17, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Almaz Kumenov, *Russia Blocks Kazakhstan's Main Outlet for Oil Exports*, Eurasianet, July 6, 2022.

reforms.¹⁷⁹ This is aimed at making Kazakhstan a more attractive destination for foreign investments, which has been increasing in Kazakhstan in recent years. Additionally, China's influence in the region has been increasing through its construction of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁸⁰ These reforms, paired with an increase in foreign investment, the war in Ukraine, and increased Chinese involvement in Kazakhstan, could be a perfect storm that could see the Central Asian state finally move away from Russia. But deep security ties with Moscow which were established over the past three decades, a large land border with Russia along with a huge ethnically Russian population make it seem unlikely.

It is clear that Tokayev is looking to move away from Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia thru his deals with China, meeting with Western leaders, and political reforms. However, they cannot afford to anger Moscow too much and must tread very carefully, which they have done so far. They maintain their membership in CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union and have not expressed their desire to leave the regional organizations. After his re-election in November 2022, Tokayev visited Moscow and stated that for Kazakhstan, "the Russian Federation has been and remains the main strategic partner, a state with which we have deep relationships in various industries."¹⁸¹ Such statements, paired with increased interaction with Western powers, is Tokayev's attempt at balancing the West and Russia. If Tokayev is successful at pursuing cooperation with the West, while keeping Moscow calm, which is easier said than done, we might see a future where Kazakhstan could slowly move away from the Russian sphere of influence. But for now, even if Kazakhstan is showing signs of a desire to move away from

¹⁷⁹ Aseel Satubaldina, *President Tokayev Signs Decree Limiting Presidential Term, Renaming Capital City Back to Astana*, The Astana Times, September 18, 2022.

¹⁸⁰ Anton Louthan, *The Political Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2022

¹⁸¹ Catherine Putz, *Kazakhstan Walks Diplomatic Tightrope between Russia and Europe*, – The Diplomat, November 30, 2022.

Russia, its geographic proximity to Russia, security and trade ties, as well as Russia's unpredictability are keeping Kazakhstan close to Russia's sphere of influence.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, on the other hand, seems to have moved closer into Russian orbit since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The new president, Serdar Berdimuhamedov, met with Putin in Moscow shortly after coming to power. In their meeting, the two leaders signed 15 cooperation documents that seek to increase “future joint work in the political, trade, investment, cultural and humanitarian fields, as well as in the field of security, including biological and information security.”¹⁸² Bilateral trade in 2022 has also increased between the two countries. In the first quarter of 2022, the trade between Turkmenistan and Russia has gone up by 45%. Turkmenistan also abstained from voting on the UN resolution titled Aggression against Ukraine and, on April 7th, did not vote on Russia's exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council. Turkmen's president also reiterated that Turkmenistan would continue its close cooperation with Russia.¹⁸³ It seems that despite the war in Ukraine and dwindling Russian prestige, Turkmenistan is maintaining a close cooperative relationship with Russia and increasing its ties with Kremlin.

While not openly endorsing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkmenistan is showing which side they are on in other ways. Turkmen officials are encouraging people to watch more Russian media and to stay away from “poisonous” Western news sources.¹⁸⁴ This clearly shows where Turkmenistan stands with regard to the conflict in Ukraine. With Europe unlikely to start buying gas from Turkmenistan, and the lack of other alternatives for the gas-rich nation, it makes

¹⁸² *Заявления Для Прессы По Итогам Российско-Туркменистанских Переговоров*, Kremlin.ru, June 10, 2022.

¹⁸³ *В Москве Состоялись Туркмено-Российские Переговоры На Высшем Уровне*, mea.gov.tm, 2022.

¹⁸⁴ *Turkmenistan Turns up Pro-Russian Propaganda, Warns against Western Media, 'Agents,'* RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, December 14, 2022.

sense for Ashgabat to double down on its relationship with Moscow. Meanwhile, for Russia, Turkmenistan could be key to the South Asian energy market, more specifically India and Pakistan. In recent months, talks of Russia joining the TAPI pipeline have increased.¹⁸⁵ Considering the damage inflicted by Western sanctions and Europe's embargo on Russian gas to the Russian economy, access to the growing Indian and Pakistan energy markets could be a lifeline Kremlin desperately needs. All things considered, it is no surprise Moscow and Ashgabat are deepening their ties, even as most of the world continues to distance itself from Russia.

Uzbekistan

As established in the previous sections, Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia was improving in the buildup to the war under the new president Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan looked closer than ever to its former colonial master; trade was strong between the two countries and military cooperation was on the rise. However, the war in Ukraine has slowed down the cooperation between Moscow and Bishkek, with Uzbekistan increasingly looking Westward for reliable partners.¹⁸⁶ While Uzbekistan has always tried to deal with all great powers without outright "picking a side", this slight shift away from Russia, especially after a period of close cooperation before the war, could be a sign of a shift in regional geopolitics.

Since the invasion began, Uzbek officials have spoken against the war in Ukraine, with the strongest statements coming from Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, who openly opposed the war in Ukraine.¹⁸⁷ President Mirziyoyev met with multiple Western leaders, including the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, and German Foreign Minister

¹⁸⁵ *Russia Hints Headway in Tapi Gas Pipeline Project...*, ETEnergyworld.com, January 20, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ *A New Phase in the Uzbekistan-EU Partnership*, Brusselstimes.com, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ *After Publicly Backing Ukraine's Sovereignty, Uzbek FM Steps Down*, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 28, 2022.

Annalena Baerbock, to discuss trade and bilateral relations.¹⁸⁸ In the summer of 2022, the EU and Uzbekistan signed an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The agreement increases EU-Uzbek cooperation in the security and economic spheres, help Uzbekistan improve human right in the region, and increase trade between the parties.¹⁸⁹ Despite this, Uzbekistan continues to deal with Russia and in September 2022 alone, Russia and Uzbekistan signed \$4.6 billion worth of deals during a SCO summit. During the same summit, Uzbekistan signed \$16 billion worth of deals with China, as Beijing looks to finance a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, Uzbekistan is having issues with fulfilling its domestic gas needs and Bishkek has been contemplating purchasing gas from Russia.¹⁹¹ For the first time in decades Uzbekistan, which usually is a gas exporter, is having a hard time supplying its own population with gas. For now, Uzbek officials are doing their best not to start buying gas from Russia, with imports initially planned to begin on March first. If they start importing gas from Russia, this will shift Uzbekistan closer to Russia once again.

Starting in 2016, Uzbekistan's foreign policy actions suggest that the country was pivoting towards closer relations with Kremlin. However, Moscow's decision to invade a neighboring country has convinced Uzbekistan to cool its relations with Russia. However, the lack of concrete investments from the West paired with Uzbekistan's potential energy crisis means the Central Asian country is closer to China and Russia, rather than the West. The pivot toward Russia might have slowed down, but it does not automatically mean a pivot toward the West. A more likely scenario is increased cooperation with China coupled with continued cooperation with Russia in the energy and security spheres.

¹⁸⁸ Akbaryusupov, *German Foreign Minister Baerbock Lands in Tashkent*, Tashkent Times, 2022.

¹⁸⁹ *Uzbekistan: The European Union and Uzbekistan Complete Negotiations for a New Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement*, EEAS, 2022.

¹⁹⁰ *Uzbekistan Signs Large Deals with China, Russia*, Reuters, September 16, 2022.

¹⁹¹ Joanna Lillis, *Fueling Energy Woes, Uzbekistan Sees Drop in Gas Output*, Eurasianet, 2022.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remain heavily dependent on Russia both economically and politically. The leaders of Central Asian countries have generally remained loyal to Russia during the war in Ukraine. However, the same cannot be said about the general public, especially in Kyrgyzstan. Protesters gather near the Russian embassy and thorough the country to express their displeasure with Russian actions.¹⁹² The Kyrgyz government has shut down multiple protests against the war in Ukraine. Their heavy reliance on Russia for security and economic aid is restricting their ability to speak out against the war, something only Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have done so far in the region.¹⁹³ Kyrgyzstan continues its bilateral relations with Russia and remains active in Russian-led regional organizations. There are no signs of slowing in Russo-Kyrgyz relations.

Tajikistan has seen an improvement in its relationship with Russia since the war in Ukraine began. In June 2022, Russia pledged to modernize the Tajik military, with the rising threat from Afghanistan looming over the region. President Emomali Rahmon stated that the “Russian Federation remains our leading trade and economic partner: over the five months of this year, mutual trade has grown by almost 50 percent. Cooperation between regions is actively developing. Today, more than 80 regions of Russia have a business and other ties with Tajikistan.”¹⁹⁴ There were some worries that relations between Tajikistan and Russia might be cooling down when the president of Tajikistan, in a Russia-Central Asia summit, demanded respect from Putin towards Tajikistan and other Central Asian states.¹⁹⁵ However, his speech was

¹⁹² Colleen Wood, *Kyrgyz Authorities Try to Head off Protests with Restrictions*, The Diplomat, March 31, 2022.

¹⁹³ Colleen Wood, *Kyrgyz Authorities Try to Head off Protests with Restrictions*, The Diplomat, March 31, 2022.

¹⁹⁴ Ateet Sharma, *Russia Set to Modernize Tajikistan Armed Forces to Tackle Threat from Afghanistan*, Indianarrative, June 29, 2022.

¹⁹⁵ Рахмон – Путин: Мы Хотим, Чтобы Нас Уважали, YouTube, October 14, 2022.

also filled with pleas to Putin to increase the amount of aid sent to Tajikistan; he claimed that countries like Korea, Japan, and the EU were helping Tajikistan more than Russia. He wanted an increase in the number of Russian textbooks donated to Tajikistan and other aid forms.¹⁹⁶ While Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's relations with Russia are imperfect, they remain within the Russian sphere of influence. The war in Ukraine does not seem to significantly impact Russia's standing with the two Central Asian countries.

Conclusion

After the war, it appears that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is having different effects across the Central Asian region. For Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it has pushed them to look at alternative trade routes and partners while not agitating the Kremlin too much. Both countries face pressure from Moscow, but the central Asian states continue to hold their own, speaking out against the war and maintaining open lines of communication with the EU and China. These two countries are most likely to leave the Russian sphere of influence if a safe and stable alternative partnership is found with other countries.

In the Central Asian energy sphere, Russia did lose some influence as China's role became increasingly important. Beijing provided an alternative market for Turkmen gas, but economic hardship, along with limited export routes, pushed Turkmenistan back into the Russian sphere of influence. This is something Ashgabat has been attempting to avoid by staying out of regional security and economic organizations. However, there are potential projects that could help Turkmenistan move away from Russia. TAPI and Trans-Caspian pipeline, if ever completed,

¹⁹⁶ Рахмон – Путин: Мы Хотим, Чтобы Нас Уважали, YouTube, October 14, 2022.

could help Turkmenistan pursue its policy of neutrality in the region while ensuring economic stability domestically. It would also allow the Central Asian country to take full advantage of their natural resources without their old or new¹⁹⁷ colonial masters' involvement. As of now, there are too many obstacles in the way of those projects, and Turkmenistan is more likely to move even closer to Russia. While their shift towards Russia is not a direct result of the conflict in Ukraine, it seems that the Turkmen government is not fazed by the atrocities committed by Russia in Ukraine, or they have no choice but to move closer to Russia.

In the end, through a series of treaties and agreements signed in the early 1990s and 2000s, along with the creation of regional security and economic organizations, Russia was able to build a robust connection with Central Asia. That connection has been weakening over the past three decades, with Russia losing its monopoly over Central Asian energy trade and China's emergence as regional economic hegemony. While weaker, Russia's influence over Central Asia is still there mainly because of Moscow's role as a security guarantor for Central Asian ruling elites. that Through CSTO, Russia has been able to fulfill the role of a regime protector in the region, a role no other actor is willing or able to fulfill. During January 2022 civil unrest in Kazakhstan, Moscow showed that it is prepared to protect ruling regimes in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, Russia showed Bakiyev's regime that simply being part of the CSTO does not mean automatic protection; you must also play by Moscow's rule.

By protecting Kremlin-friendly regimes, bolstering the region's security capabilities through bilateral military aid packages, and undermining regimes that oppose Moscow, Russia has maintained a significant amount of influence in Central Asia. Additionally, the lack of viable long-term alternatives to Russian security also played a role in Russia maintaining its significant

¹⁹⁷ China

influence over the region's security. US presence from 2002 to 2014 and significant military aid sent to the region by Washington did present challenges to Moscow's hold on the region. It showed that Central Asian regimes are willing to jeopardize their relationship with Moscow if a practical alternative presents itself. Some speculate that China might be that long-term challenger to Moscow's hold of the region's security, but Beijing's non-interference policies, along with their general disinterest in Central Asian politics, makes them an unreliable security guarantor for Central Asian regimes. In the end, Russia was able to survive challenges presented by United States' presence in the region and still maintains a significant amount of influence over the Central Asian region. But they were able to endure these challenges because they were the only military superpower that was able and willing to protect Central Asian regimes. But their failure to rapidly achieve their goals in Ukraine has put their status as a global military superpower in question, and if their military fails completely in Ukraine, would Central Asian regimes still see Russia as a protector? If Russia doesn't have the capacity to take over Ukraine, how can it guarantee security to Central Asian states? These are the questions that Central Asian ruling elites should be asking themselves, and from what we have seen so far, some of them are.

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