

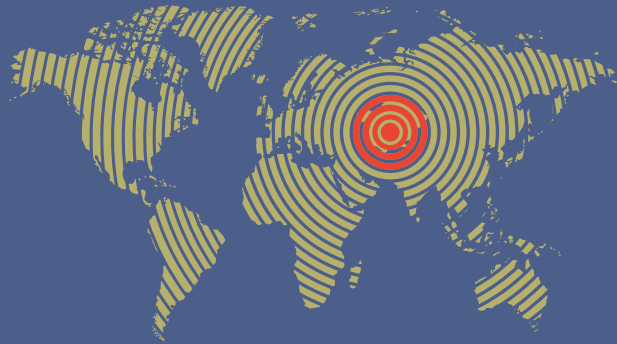


CAN RUSSIA FIND MORE FRIENDS AND SUPPORTS IN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE?

POSITION AND REACTIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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Russia Ukraine Central Asia



Russia's invasion of Ukraine found Central Asian states in surprise. Undoubtedly their attention was occupied by events in Kazakhstan beginning of 2022 and developments following widespread unrest when Russian military aggression against Ukraine shook the world.

As for the facts, all Central Asian states and their economies are intertwined with Russia. Some are members of the Eurasian Economic Union as well. The cooperation and interdependency are so high that the threat of Western sanctions over the Kremlin having an effect on them is very tangible and high.

Moreover, three countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, along with Armenia and Belarus, are members of the Russian-led security/military alliance – the CSTO. Therefore, Moscow's expectation of demonstrated support, including military, was rather realistic and projected.

Despite relatively clear links and bondages to Moscow, the reactions and political statements of national governments from Central Asia differed from complete silence to support or concerns over the developments in Ukraine. President Putin's recognition of breakaway regions and dismissal of Ukrainian statehood should've rung a bell in some Central Asian states, particularly those with significant Russian minorities.

KYRGYZSTAN



The position of Kyrgyzstan especially catches the eye. On February 22, two days prior to the commencement of the war, President of Kyrgyz Republic, Sadyr Japarov, openly expressed his direct support to Russia, claiming that Ukraine's failure to follow the Minsk Agreement triggered Russia's intrusion in Donbass region as if to "protect" the local population. He also justified Russia's recognition of Ukraine's breakaway regions by saying that every country has the supreme right to recognize a specific country. Also, it is worth mentioning that regardless of Kremlin claiming that Mr. Japarov supported the invasion in his telephone conversation with President Putin on the 26th of February, the Kyrgyz readout officially published the same day, never mentions any support and endorsement of Russia's actions and stays neutral. It is important to note that the official statement of the MFA of Kyrgyzstan distanced itself from the president's support, taking a more neutral and restrained stance on this issue, expressing hopes for a peaceful de-escalation.

On March 4th, there was a director of the Kyrgyz independent TV station NEXT detained, and the probe against the television channel was launched for inciting inter-ethnic hatred, after quoting former Kazakh Chief of Committee for National Security, saying that "Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had agreed to support Moscow's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by sending troops to help Russia." Kyrgyz government denied accusations and demanded the accuracy of the information from the media. The case was significant as by proceedings; official Bishkek demonstrated its position and no decision over military support of Russia's cause in Ukraine.

UZBEKISTAN



On February 25, the official Kremlin announced that during the phone call, the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, backed Putin's aggression by "expressing understanding for Russia's actions." Later, President's administration clarified that official Uzbekistan maintains a neutral standpoint over the war in Ukraine and supports its peaceful resolution. Later on the 17th of March, the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, in his address to parliament, denounced the military actions and aggression against Ukraine, claiming that Uzbekistan recognizes its territorial integrity and provides humanitarian aid to it.

"Uzbekistan recognizes Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We do not recognize the (so-called) people's republics of Luhansk and Donetsk". Additionally, Uzbekistan's Parliamentary Deputy Speaker Alisher Kadirov, distinguished for his anti-Russian sentiments, criticized Putin's actions, praising Ukraine for courage and the ability to fight back.

KAZAKHSTAN



Kazakhstan has initially taken a tough stance on the Ukraine crisis while rejecting to participate in Russian military activities despite being a member of the CSTO. One might think that Kazakhstan is Russia's closest ally in the Central Asian region, both in economic and military domains. It is also essential that nearly a month before military aggression in Ukraine, CSTO sent its military forces to Kazakhstan for calming mass protests and rescuing the government. Thus, it is not surprising that Russia requested the Kazakh government to assist its troops in the fight against Ukraine. Nevertheless, Kazakh President, Mr. Tokayev refused to send the army in support of Russia, and no recognition of the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk is expected.

Additionally, Tokayev insisted on the principle of the indivisibility of Eurasian security and offered mediation. It is no surprise that Kremlin's Ukraine rhetoric reminded many ones from 2014 when President Putin used similar dismissive language over Kazakh statehood during his meeting with President Nazarbayev.

TAJIKISTAN



As the poorest in the region, Tajikistan has been severely affected by the sanctions imposed on Russia. Nevertheless, official Tajikistan abstained from commenting or backing any conflicting countries. Only one state media agency sent an indirect message by citing the UN secretary General who addressed Russia to refrain from its military actions in Ukraine. The leadership of Tajikistan has made no other official remarks.

Tajikistan, similar to member states of the Eurasian Economic Union Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, abstained from the vote at the UN General Assembly on resolution ES-11/1, on March 2, 2022. Two other countries of the region, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, were not present as well. The resolution deplored Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demanded a complete withdrawal of forces and a reversal of its decision to recognize the self-declared People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

TURKMENISTAN



Knowing the authoritarian rule in Turkmenistan, it is not surprising that its government has taken no position on the ongoing events in Ukraine. Overall, the public is strongly dejected from commenting on foreign affairs by the authority, which itself never speaks about any international affairs issues. It is to be noted that there were United States-Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) concluded beginning of March, where the US insisted on “the importance of condemning Russia’s premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine and of maintaining solidarity with the people of Ukraine.” However, the US state department’s media note does not mention any position expressed by the Turkmen side.