



Central Asia

Regional Positioning on the Russia-Ukraine War



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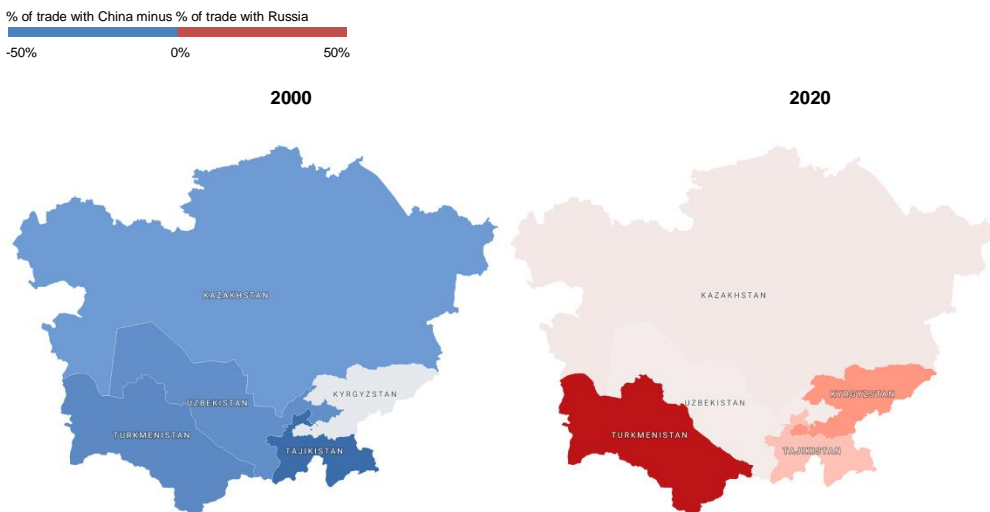
INTRODUCTION

Central Asian Republics (CA states) have remained under Russian influence since the Soviet times and have been regarded by the Russian Federation as part of the so-called “Russian World” (*Русский мир*). Hence, Russia has been a crucial player in the Central Asia region over the decades as a principal trading partner (*some of the Central Asian states are members of the Eurasian Economic Union*), security provider (*some of the Central Asian countries are members of Russian-led - Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)*), and a vital partner in academia and education, etc. The Russian language still dominates most of Central Asia, and Russian minorities make up a considerable part of the Central Asian countries' population.

Nevertheless, over the years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has emerged as a primary competitor for Russian influence over Central Asia. With its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, expanding trade relationships, energy partnerships, and strategic security collaborations, China has significantly strengthened its presence and influence in the region and started replacing Russia in various fields.

2020 Data

China Has Surpassed Russia as the Bigger Trade Partner in All Former Soviet States in Central Asia
Blue indicates Russia is the larger trade partner, red indicates China is the larger trade partner.

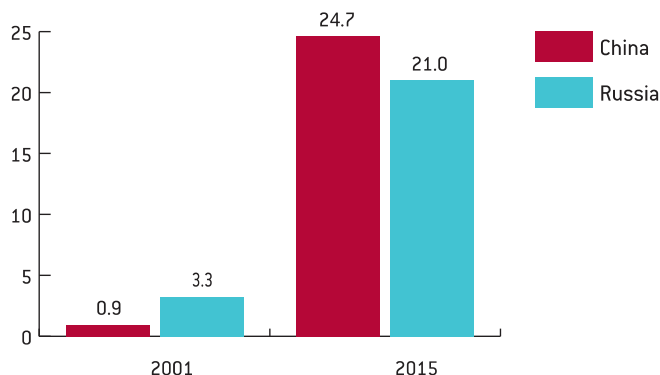


Note: Based on total merchandise trade (imports plus exports)
Source CSIS China Power Project Observatory of Economic Complexity

The shift in the dynamics of Russian influence in Central Asia, gradually being replaced by the PRC, is evident in the following statistics: over the years, trade with China has steadily grown, surpassing trade with Russia.

Central Asia, Total Trade with China and Russia, 2015 Data

Figure 3: Central Asia, total trade with China and Russia, \$ billions

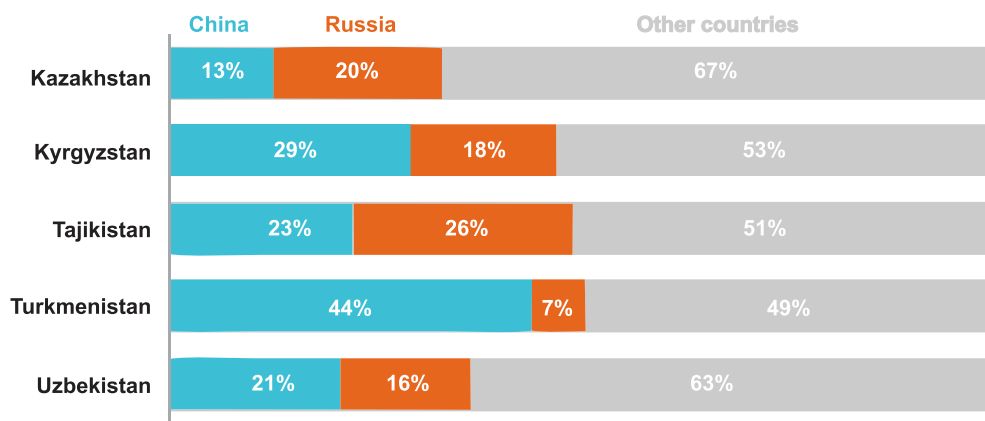


Source: Bruegel based on Trademap (data for Central Asian countries). Note: Total trade is a sum of exports and imports.

Trade with China and Russia, 2018 Data

Trade With China and Russia

Trade with China and Russia accounts for a large percentage of Central Asian trade with the world.



Source: Trademap

Copyright Stratfor 2018

The geostrategic location, trade routes, and abundant resources of the Central Asian states make great power competition tremendous in the region. The start of the Ukraine war on the 24th of February 2022 and its repercussions on Russia as a global power has accelerated the process, making the CA states reassess their dependence on Moscow, which has opened opportunities for both China and Western influences to fill the potential power vacuum in the region.

China's ongoing efforts to expand its influence in the Central Asian region have become especially apparent since the Ukraine war. The high level of dependency on Russia has

become a threat to the economic and political stability of the Central Asian countries, considering the impact of the Western sanctions on Moscow, disrupted trade and regional stability, and the high number of incoming Russian migrants since the beginning of the war. This occasion is justified by a comment made by the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a couple of months after the start of the Ukraine war, [stating](#) in front of Vladimir Putin: "We do not recognize either Taiwan, or Kosovo, or South Ossetia, or Abkhazia. Obviously, this principle will apply to quasi-state associations, which, in our opinion, is what Luhansk and Donetsk are." Therefore, the CA states have been trying to diversify their foreign policy— seeking to establish relationships with both Western and Eastern powers.



(President Xi meets Central Asian leaders, May 18, 2023)

China has capitalized on the existing tensions between Russia and the CA states, seizing the opportunity to expand its geopolitical and strategic influence in the region. This is evident from the recent [China-Central Asia Summit \(C+C5\)](#) held on May 19, 2023, in Xi'an, a historic city in China (See the photo below). President Xi Jinping [reaffirmed](#) the importance of upholding the sovereignty, security, independence, and territorial integrity of Central Asian nations against the backdrop of increasing security uncertainties in the CA states.

Simultaneously, Western democracies have been actively engaged in disrupting Moscow's attempts to find allies in the Central Asian region. This was the primary goal of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's [state visit to Kazakhstan](#) in February 2023, where he held discussions with senior officials from five countries in the region.



(Blinken strikes reassuring tone in dialogue with Central Asian partners)

Additionally, in 2022, the EU showcased a distinct shift in strategy, evident in two prominent visits by senior officials to Central Asia. European Council President Charles Michel's groundbreaking meeting with Central Asian leaders served as a powerful emblem of enhanced cooperation, signifying the EU's deepened commitment to the region. Looking ahead to 2023, the EU's primary focus in Central Asia revolves around two pivotal aspects: the region's significance as a major energy source and a critical East-West trade transit route. Notably, these priorities have been further underscored and heightened due to the ongoing impact of the Ukraine war.

Regardless of all these essential and high-level visits, as well as enhanced or initiated economic or energy projects, there is little West brought to Central Asia in terms of boosting political cooperation or packages for security and defense.

Considering these dynamics, it's essential to acknowledge that Russia still wields significant influence over the Central Asian states, even amid various political movements and statements. Therefore, it becomes crucial to examine how the positions of these countries regarding the Russia-Ukraine war have changed after more than a year since the conflict's onset. Understanding these shifts provides valuable insights into the region's complex dynamics and potential global implications.

KAZAKHSTAN

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has been one of the closest allies of Russia in the post-Soviet space. Russian is still an official language in Kazakhstan, while ethnic Russians comprise [17.9% of its population](#). Throughout the last 30 years of independence, Astana has consistently taken part in Moscow's integration initiatives – Kazakhstan (together with Kyrgyzstan) is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. However, the Ukrainian War has been pivotal in the relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan. Considering the latter's high dependence on its neighbor, and the [threat](#) coming from the high concentration of Russian-speaking population near the Russian border, the ongoing war has proven to be a significant [challenge](#) to the multi-vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan.

The Russian invasion on the 24th of February has come at a difficult time for Kazakhstan. Just in January 2022, it experienced severe domestic [unrest](#), which the government put down with the help of Russian troops.

Following the start of Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, not a single Kazakhstani official has expressed support for Moscow. Astana's stance on the issue was further highlighted during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in June 2022, when President Tokayev boldly declared that Kazakhstan had no intention of recognizing any Russia-sponsored "quasi-state formations" in Ukraine and publicly criticized Russian Duma members who had questioned Kazakhstan's [independence](#). President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev did not attend the International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in St. Petersburg, which took place on 14 – 17 June 2023 – this is a big contrast compared to the last year when the Kazakh president was the only official physically sharing a stage with Vladimir Putin. This year, only two officials represented the [country](#).

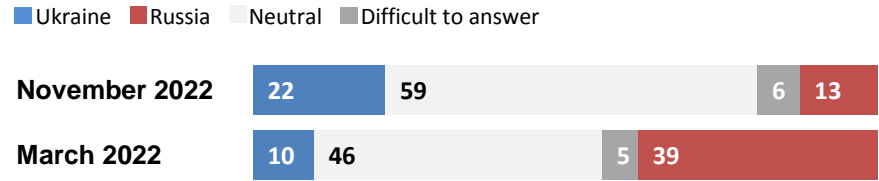
In June 2023, the State Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin encountered [difficulty](#) in entering Kazakhstan and was granted entry only after the intervention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. It is interesting to note that MP Zatulin was the one who previously questioned the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan. Official Astana has not acknowledged the self-declared republics in Ukraine's Donbas region and is, by [official statements](#), firmly set on not assisting Russia in evading economic sanctions.

The country's diplomacy has been working hard to emphasize this position further. President Tokayev has been on several phone calls with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky, the [latest](#) of which has taken place on the 16th of February, 2023. In April 2023, Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister [reaffirmed](#) the country's stance: *"We stand for the territorial integrity of all states, including Ukraine, based on the UN Charter. We have not recognized the votes in southeastern regions of Ukraine, nor have we recognized their addition to the Russian Federation. We recognize them as Ukrainian."*

Kazakhstan has even banned Russian military propaganda symbols and [canceled](#) the May 9 Victory Day parade both in 2022 and 2023. Earlier this year, Kazakhstan MP lost his seat after publicly [supporting](#) Russia’s war in Ukraine. With donations from Kazakh businessmen and activists, Kazakhstan’s traditional tents - Yurts have been put up in several Ukrainian cities as shelters providing warmth, food, and a telephone charging station for people. Yurts installed by Kazak [volunteers](#) demonstrate the solidarity of the people as well. The fact that the Kazakhstan government authorized this move further shows the country’s position. In February 2023, Kazakh journalists were summoned by a Russian court to write an article about Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan has officially rejected [summon](#).

The war has also forced Kazakhstan to cautiously reduce its dependence on Moscow and diversify its foreign partnership opportunities. Astana relies heavily on food imports from Russia as well as petrochemicals, iron, and fertilizers. Russia [accounts](#) for a fifth of Kazakhstan’s total external trade. Even more importantly, Kazakhstan’s main source of income – 80% of its oil exports - passes through Russian territory via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), making the country critically reliant on Moscow. The fragility of this situation was showcased in July 2022, when Russia temporarily closed the CPC after Kazakhstan suggested the possibility of providing oil to the [EU](#). For this reason, Astana has intensified its relations with [China](#), [Turkiye](#), [Gulf region](#), and neighboring [Caspian countries](#), not to mention Kazakhstan - EU cooperation itself which has been gaining momentum. For example, in November 2022, a “strategic partnership” on green hydrogen, batteries, and raw materials was [signed](#) as part of the EU’s REPowerEU plan, which aims to reduce the bloc’s reliance on Russian fossil fuels in response to its invasion of Ukraine.²⁵ Kazakhstan has also recently [agreed](#) with Germany to increase its oil exports to the country to replace Russian oil, which is now excluded from many European markets. Notably, in September 2022, Xi Jinping chose Kazakhstan for his [first overseas official visit](#) since the Covid pandemic, which indicates Astana’s growing strategic importance for Beijing. The visit was especially timely since the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project deal is moving forward, [potentially attracting up to 10-15 percent](#) of the throughput from the Kazakh-Russian route and essentially leaving them offside.

Which side of the conflict do you support? In per cent



The results of the two surveys cannot be directly compared as the methodologies of the surveys were different. Full details about methodology can be found in the source.

Source: Bureau for Express Monitoring of Public Opinion DEMOSCOPE, [March 2022](#) and [November 2022](#).
ECFR · ecf.eu

Public [opinion](#) on the Ukraine war has also been changing in Kazakhstan. These results show that from March to November 2022, the number of people supporting Ukraine has grown from 10% to 22%, while the support for Russia has declined three times from 39% to 13%. It was probably due to those changes in public opinion that Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev first paused after being invited to Moscow on [attended](#) the 9th of May Victory Day Parade, but eventually has remained “pragmatic and attentive” and along with the leaders of other Central Asian countries stood by President Putin. Kazakhstan has also [welcomed](#) over 930,000 Russians, nearly 146,000 of whom have stayed there.



(Over 200,000 Russians flee to Kazakhstan since partial mobilization: Kazakh official)

New massive migration flows left many Kazakhs with some fears of potential ethnic tensions, as well as the increase in living costs, initially expressed in rising rent prices and losing jobs to Russians. At the end of 2022, the government modified the rules of visa-free stay, making it more difficult for many Russians to remain in the country. At the same time, it is to be noted that the government still refuses to limit the broadcasting of Russian channels despite the [demands](#) of the public.³³

Regardless of those policies, considering the scale of the country's dependence on Moscow, it is still important for Kazakhstan to preserve the smooth political relationship with its northern neighbor, not to antagonize it further. Thus, Astana has consistently abstained from UN resolutions condemning Russia. On one of the last voting, on 23rd of February 2023 at the UN General Assembly, where the resolution [called](#) for ending the war in Ukraine and demanded Russia's immediate withdrawal from the country, in line with the UN Charter, Kazakhstan was one of the 32 who abstained from voting.

Voting Started			2/23/2023		3:39:00 PM	
Item 5 - draft resolution A/ES-11/L.7						
Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and						
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AFGHANISTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CAMEROON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FINLAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KUWAIT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEPAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAUDI ARABIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UKRAINE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALBANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CANADA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FRANCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KYRGYZSTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NETHERLANDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SENEGAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED ARA...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALGERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CENTRAL AF...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GABON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LAO PDR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEW ZEALAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SERBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED KING...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANDORRA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHAD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GAMBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LATVIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NICARAGUA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SEYCHELLES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED REP T...
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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANTIGUA-BA...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHINA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GERMANY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LESOTHO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NIGERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SINGAPORE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> URUGUAY
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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARMENIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMOROS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GREECE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LIBYA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NORWAY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SLOVENIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VANUATU
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AUSTRALIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CONGO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GRENADA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LIECHTENSTEIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OMAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOLOMON IS...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VENEZUELA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AUSTRIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COSTA RICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUATEMALA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LITHUANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PAKISTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOMALIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VIET NAM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AZERBAIJAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COTE D'IVOIRE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUINEA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LUXEMBOURG	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PALAU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH AFRICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YEMEN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BAHAMAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CROATIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUINEA-BISS...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MADAGASCAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PANAMA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH SUDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ZAMBIA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BAHRAIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CUBA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUYANA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALAWI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PAPUA NEW ...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SPAIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ZIMBABWE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BANGLADESH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CYPRUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HAITI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALAYSIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PARAGUAY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SRI LANKA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BARBADOS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CZECHIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HONDURAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALDIVES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PERU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SUDAN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELARUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DEM PR OF K...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HUNGARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PHILIPPINES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SURINAME	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELGIUM	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DEM REP OF ...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ICELAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALTA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SWEDEN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELIZE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DENMARK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MARSHALL IS...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PORTUGAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SWITZERLAND	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BENIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DJIBOUTI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDONESIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MAURITANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> QATAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SYRIAN ARA...	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BHUTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DOMINICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRAN (ISLAMI...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MAURITIUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REP OF KOREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TAJIKISTAN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOLIVIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DOMINICAN ...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRAQ	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MEXICO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REP OF MOL...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THAILAND	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOSNIA-HER...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ECUADOR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRELAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MICRONESIA...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ROMANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TIMOR-LESTE	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOTSWANA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EGYPT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ISRAEL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONACO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RUSSIAN FED...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TOGO	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BRAZIL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EL SALVADOR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ITALY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONGOLIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RWANDA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TONGA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BRUNEI DAR...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EQUATORIAL...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JAMAICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONTENEGRO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT KITTS...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRINIDAD-TO...	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BULGARIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ERITREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JAPAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MOROCCO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT LUCIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TUNISIA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BURKINA FASO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ESTONIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JORDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MOZAMBIQUE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT VINCE...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TURKMENIST...	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BURUNDI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ESWATINI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KAZAKHSTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MYANMAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAMOA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TUVALU	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CABO VERDE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ETHIOPIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KENYA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NAMIBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAN MARINO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TÜRKIYE	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CAMBODIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FIJI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KIRIBATI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NAURU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAO TOME-P...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UGANDA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN FAVOUR: 141			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AGAINST: 7		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ABSTENTION: 32	

Interestingly, while probably not a game-changer, on May 2, 2023, Kazakhstan, together with China, India, Armenia, and Brazil, voted for a UN resolution with a one-paragraph small reference to Russia's 'aggression' against Ukraine.

On the 28th of February, 2023, the U.S. foreign minister met with his counterparts from 5 Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In the C5+1 group meeting in Astana, important political messages were voiced: the Biden administration pledged its support for the independence of the Central Asian nations, especially Kazakhstan, while subtly warning them about the dangers of partnership with Russia. Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi acknowledged Secretary Blinken's commitment to Kazakhstan's freedom and independence, though he signaled that Astana would likely maintain its neutral position.

In conclusion, on the one hand, Kazakhstan has shown surprising resilience and firmness in distancing itself from the war. However, Astana has remained careful not to break connections with its important partner, stick to its multi-vector foreign policy, and instead has been quietly working on reducing its dependence on Moscow.

UZBEKISTAN

Since the beginning of the war, Uzbekistan has officially declared its neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev expressed ["understanding of Russia's actions"](#) against Ukraine, published on the Kremlin's official website on February 24, 2022. Nonetheless, two days after his statement, Mirziyoyev's spokesman, Sherzod Asadov, declared the country's balanced, neutral position on the issue. In addition, on March 17, 2022, Uzbek Foreign Minister [Abdulaziz Komilov](#) stated: *"The Republic of Uzbekistan recognizes the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine."* In his statement, Komilov also stressed that his country had maintained relations with both Russia and Ukraine in the past and that his country does not recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics.

It is also noteworthy that Uzbekistan's neutrality in this war involves [censoring the media coverage of the war](#) between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, according to Politico, on October 27, 2022, the mufti, a state-funded authority in the Muslim community, [instructed its imams not to discuss Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#) in their normally apolitical Friday sermons.

Another important point of discussion is Uzbekistan's position on forming Uzbek volunteer battalions supporting Russia in the war against Ukraine. In August 2022, the leader of the Uzbek community in Russia's Perm region distributed a video in which he called on local Uzbeks to form a battalion, "Amir Temur," to fight against Ukraine. The video message was also published on Vetta TV, after which the Uzbek Embassy in Moscow [issued](#) a statement reminding Uzbek citizens that forming a volunteer battalion or participating in hostilities on the soil of another country is against the law and punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

At the end of 2022, another critical issue emerged between Russia and Uzbekistan. Talks on the construction of a nuclear power plant by the Russians on the territory of Uzbekistan resumed based on the 2018 agreement signed between the two countries. However, Uzbek civil rights activists reacted negatively to this issue. Even a former lawmaker and current adviser to Uzbekistan's minister of natural resources, Rasul Kusherbaev, [said](#) that the idea of building a nuclear power plant, in general, was "disastrous," but even if the decision is final, it should not be made with Russia's participation. According to him: "Russia is neither a reliable partner nor a reliable friend, but a bully, an aggressor, a blackmailer who invades someone's territory at any time."

The stance of Uzbekistan, along with other Central Asian nations, towards the UN resolution concerning the Russia-Ukraine conflict is contentious due to their proclaimed neutrality. In most cases, an official representative of Uzbekistan abstained from voting, but with one exception. On April 7, 2022, a [resolution](#) that would have excluded Russia from the UNHRC was adopted by 93 votes in favor, 24 against, and 58 abstentions, with Uzbekistan among those voting against. A year after the beginning of the war, Uzbekistan [abstained](#)

from voting for the UN resolution, calling on Russia to leave Ukraine’s territory. Uzbekistan also abstained from voting on the [last resolution](#), which referred to "Russian aggression against Ukraine".

Voting Started			4/26/2023		3:41:47 PM	
Item 127 (I) - A/77/L.65 as a whole						
Cooperation between the United Nations and the Council of Europe						
AFGHANISTAN	CAMEROON	FINLAND	KUWAIT	NEPAL	SAUDI ARABIA	UKRAINE
ALBANIA	CANADA	FRANCE	KYRGYZSTAN	NETHERLAN...	SENEGAL	UNITED ARA...
ALGERIA	CENTRAL AF...	GABON	LAO PDR	NEW ZEALAND	SERBIA	UNITED KING...
ANDORRA	CHAD	GAMBIA	LATVIA	NICARAGUA	SEYCHELLES	UNITED REP T...
ANGOLA	CHILE	GEORGIA	LEBANON	NIGER	SIERRA LEONE	UNITED STAT...
ANTIGUA-BA...	CHINA	GERMANY	LESOTHO	NIGERIA	SINGAPORE	URUGUAY
ARGENTINA	COLOMBIA	GHANA	LIBERIA	NORTH MAC...	SLOVAKIA	UZBEKISTAN
ARMENIA	COMOROS	GREECE	LIBYA	NORWAY	SLOVENIA	VANUATU
AUSTRALIA	CONGO	GRENADA	LIECHTENSTEIN	OMAN	SOLOMON IS...	VENEZUELA
AUSTRIA	COSTA RICA	GUATEMALA	LITHUANIA	PAKISTAN	SOMALIA	VIET NAM
AZERBAIJAN	COTE D'IVOIRE	GUINEA	LUXEMBOURG	PALAU	SOUTH AFRICA	YEMEN
BAHAMAS	CROATIA	GUINEA-BISS...	MADAGASCAR	PANAMA	SOUTH SUDAN	ZAMBIA
BAHRAIN	CUBA	GUYANA	MALAWI	PAPUA NEW ...	SPAIN	ZIMBABWE
BANGLADESH	CYPRUS	HAITI	MALAYSIA	PARAGUAY	SRI LANKA	
BARBADOS	CZECHIA	HONDURAS	MALDIVES	PERU	SUDAN	
BELARUS	DEM PR OF K...	HUNGARY	MALI	PHILIPPINES	SURINAME	
BELGIUM	DEM REP OF ...	ICELAND	MALTA	POLAND	SWEDEN	
BELIZE	DENMARK	INDIA	MARSHALL IS...	PORTUGAL	SWITZERLAND	
BENIN	DJIBOUTI	INDONESIA	MAURITANIA	QATAR	SYRIAN ARA...	
BHUTAN	DOMINICA	IRAN (ISLAMI...	MAURITIUS	REP OF KOREA	TAJKISTAN	
BOLIVIA	DOMINICAN ...	IRAQ	MEXICO	REP OF MOL...	THAILAND	
BOSNIA-HER...	ECUADOR	IRELAND	MICRONESIA...	ROMANIA	TIMOR-LESTE	
BOTSWANA	EGYPT	ISRAEL	MONACO	RUSSIAN FED...	TOGO	
BRAZIL	EL SALVADOR	ITALY	MONGOLIA	RWANDA	TONGA	
BRUNEI DAR...	EQUATORIAL...	JAMAICA	MONTENEGRO	SAINT KITTS...	TRINIDAD-TO...	
BULGARIA	ERITREA	JAPAN	MOROCCO	SAINT LUCIA	TUNISIA	
BURKINA FASO	ESTONIA	JORDAN	MOZAMBIQUE	SAINT VINCE...	TURKIYE	
BURUNDI	ESWATINI	KAZAKHSTAN	MYANMAR	SAMOA	TURKMENIST...	
CABO VERDE	ETHIOPIA	KENYA	NAMIBIA	SAN MARINO	TUVALU	
CAMBODIA	FIJI	KIRIBATI	NAURU	SAO TOME-P...	UGANDA	
IN FAVOUR: 122		AGAINST: 5		ABSTENTION: 18		

(Source - <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/16484>)

Another step by which the Uzbek government violated its wartime neutrality status was President Mirziyoyev's participation in the Victory Day parade in Moscow on May 9, which, of course, is meant to be understood as a symbol of support for Russia. Also, In October 2022, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev awarded Putin with Uzbekistan’s highest order of friendship.



(Shavkat Mirziyoyev awards Vladimir Putin with the Oliy Darajali Dustlik Order of the Republic of Uzbekistan)

The official status of neutrality notwithstanding, actions like voting against Russia's removal from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and participating in the Victory Day parade on May 9 can be attributed to Uzbekistan's significant economic benefits derived from economic cooperation with sanctioned Russia. For instance, [according to the governor of the Central Bank, Mamarizo Nurmuratov](#), remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan doubled last year and reached \$14.5 billion. Furthermore, on June 19, 2023, Uzbekistan [signed](#) a contract with Russia's Gazprom to purchase 2.8 billion cubic meters of gas yearly.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, cooperation between China and Uzbekistan has also increased. It started with the [agreement](#) on the above-mentioned China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project during the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022.

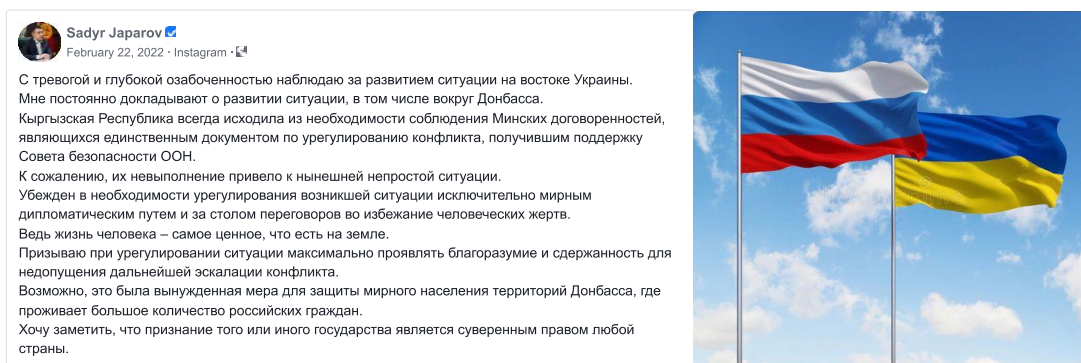


Considering the economic and political potential of this project, this agreement represents a turning point for the CA states as it significantly increases Chinese influence and economic engagement in the region.

In addition to the regional project, Beijing and Tashkent also agreed to strengthen bilateral cooperation. In May 2023, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev attended China-Central Asia Summit in the PRC, during which President Mirziyoyev held bilateral talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. After the meeting, the two leaders signed a joint [statement](#) endorsing the development plan for the Sino-Uzbek comprehensive strategic partnership for the future, as well as numerous bilateral documents on investment, poverty reduction, trade in agricultural products, and local cooperation.

KYRGYZSTAN

From the beginning of the war, Kyrgyzstan had quite a controversial position. The president of the Kyrgyz Republic, Sadyr Japarov, publicly supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In a Facebook post on 22 February 2022, Japarov highlighted that Kremlin's action was "a necessary measure" to protect the Donbas population, and the failure to follow the Minsk Agreement prompted Russian troops to enter the territory.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/japarov.sadyr/posts/2071368826371369>

However, at the same time, Kyrgyzstan tried to maintain a more neutral position stating that "Kyrgyzstan stands for peaceful resolution of conflict in Ukraine". Additionally, President Japarov declared Kyrgyzstan's neutral status in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and pointed out that Bishkek had no means to influence the outcome of the conflict in any way. This neutral status can be well expressed by two measures taken by the Kyrgyz government:

- 1) the ban on the use of the Russian war symbol "Z";
- 2) the prohibition of documentaries about the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which, in their opinion, were intended to propagate the war.

As for Kyrgyz society, it is essential to mention that the state media ignored the issue of Russian aggression, but at the beginning of the war, there were several protests near the Russian embassy organized by Kyrgyz civil society. The reaction of Kyrgyz authorities was prompt, and in May 2022, the Bishkek city administration banned any protests near embassies in the city. In addition, the government does not give independent journalists the right to publish information about the impact of the war between Russia and Ukraine on their country. For example, in March 2023, local reporter, Gulmira Makanbai Kyzy, was interrogated by the security service for interviewing two men who fled Russia to avoid mass mobilization. The journalist was warned not to report on Ukraine because it "could have a negative impact on relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia in the future."

The resolutions adopted by the United Nations regarding the Russia-Ukraine war play a vital role in determining how countries perceive and approach this ongoing conflict. In this regard, the neutral position of Kyrgyzstan has not changed, as the official representative of the Kyrgyz Republic has abstained from voting in the UN almost every time the issue has been brought forward. An exception was Emergency Session 3 on suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council – which Kyrgyzstan voted against. The latter also abstained from voting on the final resolution, which described Russia's actions as aggression.

The participation of Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov in the annual Victory Day parade in Moscow on May 9, 2023, together with other Central Asian leaders, was also a show of significant support for the Kremlin. Initially, President Japarov was the sole Central Asian leader confirmed to participate, but as the event drew closer, Putin played a crucial role in persuading other heads of state from the region to join as well. It is important to note that during the visit, President Japarov personally met with Russian President Putin to discuss bilateral relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.



(Victory Parade on Red Square,

Source: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104>)



The aforementioned steps taken by the Kyrgyz Republic at the national and international levels show that despite Bishkek's officially proclaimed neutrality towards the Russia-Ukraine war, this stance is not absolute and favors Russia. Kyrgyzstan's position can be explained by its vast experience of heavy dependence on the Russian Federation, especially in the economy - [Russia is the top trading partner for Kyrgyzstan in exports, ahead of Kazakhstan](#). But Kyrgyzstan's support for Russia is limited by its neutral status, as Bishkek fears sanctions from Western countries, especially the United States. For example, on December 2, 2023, the deputy head of the National Bank [stated](#) that Kyrgyz banks were refusing to service Russian Mir cards for fear of U.S. sanctions. The combination of these factors makes up the official position of the Kyrgyz leadership in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

At the same time, the Russia-Ukraine war and then cutting ties with Russia by Western markets are opening opportunities for Central Asian states, along with China, to bypass traditional Russian trade routes and sell their products in the EU. For this reason, China has been actively supporting the construction of the CKU (China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan) railroad line since last year. This project will directly connect China and the Central Asian states with Iran and Türkiye and, eventually, with the EU. The construction of this Railway has been discussed for over 20 years, but it is only now that all sides have agreed to start implementing the project in the fall of 2023. [According to Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov](#), the feasibility study had to be completed by June 2023, after which the Kyrgyz side would begin construction. Due to its high economic potential, implementing the CKU Railway project will help China strengthen its role not only in the Kyrgyz and Uzbek Republics but also in the Central Asian region.

TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan has been recognized as a neutral country by the UN since 1995. Adhering to its long-standing principle of “permanent neutrality,” Ashgabat has not declared its official position on the Ukraine war - neither condemning Russia’s aggression in Ukraine nor recognizing the sovereignty of occupied territories nor supporting Russian aggression. In the economic dimension, Turkmenistan has increased trade with not only Russia but also with China and Iran. On the 16th of August 2022, Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov announced plans to join the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), established by Russia, Iran, and India. According to the official [statements](#): “*Turkmenistan will continue to work with Russia in areas of transportation: railway, automobile, air, and marine*”. On August 29th, Turkmenistan’s President Serdar Berdimuhamedov met with Gazprom chief executive Alexei Miller in Ashgabat to [discuss](#) potential increased cooperation.



The Expansion of the International North-South Transport [Corridor](#)

Turkmenistan's choices have been misleading in the foreign policy and security dimension. On the one hand, in March 2022, the U.S. - Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Consultations were held virtually, where both sides [discussed](#) important policy issues. While in April 2022, the foreign ministry of Turkmenistan declared that they would provide medical assistance to Ukraine, citing the compassionate values of the Turkmen people. In September of the same year, Turkmenistan welcomed the commander of the Montana National Guard for talks on reviving cooperation within the National Guard state partnership [program](#).

A similar bilateral meeting between American and Turkmen diplomats, different from 2022, was held in person in Washington DC, in April 2023, headed by the Minister of Foreign

Affairs of Turkmenistan. U.S. Department of State Acting Assistant Secretary Elizabeth Horst reiterated the US support for Turkmenistan's [policy principle of positive neutrality](#). Besides, the two sides agreed on advancing bilateral and regional goals and strengthening the U.S.-Turkmenistan partnership through increased cultural, educational, economic and ecological activities.

It is also to be noted that on October 10, 2022, Ukraine's Ambassador to Turkmenistan, in an [interview](#) with the "Neutral Turkmenistan" newspaper, regarded Ashgabat as a significant partner for Ukraine within the Central Asian region. However, simultaneously, Turkmenistan has been one of the four nations absent in all UN [resolutions](#) against Russia and firmly keeps neutrality on the international level.

World media reported about Turkmenistan's president Serdar Berdimuhamedov's official visit to Russia after the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine in June 2022, after the first official visit to Saudi Arabia. The visit to Moscow was seen as reaffirming the strong links regarding foreign policy priorities: *"During the talks, we also discussed the most pressing regional and international problems. Our states' positions on most of them are traditionally close or the same,"* – [President Putin declared to the press](#). This also became evident on 1 December 2022, when Turkmenistan's representative in OSCE left the meeting during the speech of Ukraine's foreign minister and only came back when it was over. In January 2023, President Berdimuhamedov also visited China, [signaling](#) that Turkmenistan is working on diversifying its partnerships while looking eastward. Despite attempts from Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the EU to get closer to Ashgabat, the latter still prefers to stay close to its old allies in Moscow and Beijing. Especially in the face of economic restrictions and the loss of the Western markets, Kremlin is particularly keen on exploring new trade and energy partnerships, which has recently focused on strengthening relations with Ashgabat. It is a fact that as the owner of the [fourth-largest gas reserves](#) in the world, Turkmenistan could become an essential piece in the EU-Russia gas games.

Currently, Turkmenistan is a target of amplified pro-Russian propaganda efforts aimed at discrediting the West and portraying Moscow's actions in the Ukraine war in a positive light. Education officials, law enforcement, and intelligence officers met with students and employees from Balkan and Lebap provinces to warn them of Western media and culture, which they claim manipulates their minds. The officials also raised [concerns](#) about "foreign agents" attempting to destabilize Turkmenistan.

What particularly differentiates Turkmenistan from its Central Asian neighbors is the high level of security and scarcity of information available in open sources. Unlike the citizens of four other states, one rarely meets Turkmen officials, activists, or researchers in the international arena, or reads their statements online, availability of information is extremally limited, and the possibility of being misled about concrete policies or statements is high as double checking or fact-checking is nearly impossible. Compared to Ashkhabad, every other state of the region looks like an open transitional democracy.

TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan is the poorest and most vulnerable country of all five Central Asian states. This vulnerability is best seen in its dependence on both Russia and the PRC. On the one hand, Moscow is the primary source of Dushanbe's energy and supply chain resources; on the other hand, by 2022, it had a debt of \$3.3 billion to international creditors, [with 60% of it owed to the Export-Import Bank of China](#). The Tajik government granted Chinese companies concessions in its gold and silver mines to repay the debt.

Russia has a military base in Tajikistan, with almost 7,000 soldiers, making it Russia's largest non-naval military facility outside the country. Dushanbe relies heavily on the Russian 201st army base to protect its southern borders with Afghanistan. It is also a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Together with that, Tajikistan relies heavily on migrant labor: up to 2 million Tajiks are employed in Russia, leading to 103,000 Tajiks possessing Russian passports, according to the latest [data](#). Migrant remittances (mainly from Russia) comprise 26.7 percent of the country's GDP. According to the World Bank, the country's remittances are expected to fall by 22% due to the war in Ukraine and its effects on the Russian economy. Also, almost all of Tajikistan's oil and petroleum products are imported from [Russia](#).

Interestingly enough, China also has a military base in Tajikistan, near the same Afghan border, which has been put up for similar border security reasons as the Russian one. It is also to be mentioned that officials categorically deny the existence of the Chinese base, which [was revealed](#) to the public after an investigation by the Washington Post in 2019. An attempt to strengthen control and safety measures along the Afghan borders indicates China's significance in securing the Afghan-Tajik border.

The issue of Tajikistan's reliance on other states and the fragility of its state apparatus became especially apparent after the beginning of the Ukraine war and the application of Western sanctions on Russia. As the country relies upon Moscow for most of its imports, prices have been rising steadily - within the first weeks after the beginning of the war, the prices of basic food items rose by 10 - 20% in Tajikistan. The country's migrants are losing jobs in Russia, and their salaries are decreasing. Moreover, the value of the Tajik somoni has [fallen](#) by 15% against the Russian ruble. As the war continues, the situation is expected to worsen - it is predicted that Tajikistan will face flour and oil shortages, which were mostly imported from Russia and Ukraine. Considering the circumstances, the government adopted an [anti-crisis program](#) that aims to provide food and other essentials to the market, reduce pressure on the exchange rate, improve conditions for investment, etc. However, despite the levels of dependency on the Russian economy, one of the country's central banks - Dushanbe City Bank, has reportedly suspended operations of Russia's Mir payment cards in Tajikistan for "technical issues". This statement was made amid growing [pressure](#) from the U.S. on countries not accepting the Russian payment system.

Considering the high levels of dependence on Russia and the overall fragility of the country, there has been almost no response so far to the ongoing Ukraine war from the government. Tajikistan has not only maintained neutrality, like most other countries in the region, but it has also remained completely silent on the issue, refraining from public comments. Tajikistan has voted to abstain from the UN resolutions against Russia and has voted against suspending Moscow from UN Human Rights Council. It is to be noted that it was Tajikistan that Putin visited on June 28, 2022, on his first trip abroad since the invasion. Moreover, on the 5th of October, 2022, Vladimir Putin awarded Tajik President Emomali Rahmon the 3rd Class Order of Merit for the Fatherland for strengthening the partnership between the two countries. The Tajik president also attended the Victory Day Parade in Moscow on May 9, 2023.



(Source: <https://www.azernews.az/analysis/200435.html>)

Along with the government, official media also avoids covering the war. At the beginning of the Russian invasion, when Tajik citizens were evacuated from Ukraine, the media only briefly mentioned the “situation in Ukraine.” It mostly follows the unofficial instruction not to touch on the subject; some journalists even justify the policy for practical reasons, as many Tajiks still live and work in Russia. Despite the attempt to remain neutral and avoid antagonizing both Moscow and the West, Tajik society is divided in its opinion on the war. To the best of our knowledge, there were no official public opinion polls conducted in the country, but according to Cabar Asia and RFE/RL's Tajik Service, “an estimated 65-70 percent of the comments by Tajiks on the main social media platforms directly or indirectly support or justify Russian actions in Ukraine.”

In 2022, Russia transferred around 1,500 troops from a military base in Tajikistan to Ukraine. Considering the recent border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the former will rely much more on Moscow to guarantee its security. These domestic economic and security implications and the growing pressure from the international community will make it more difficult for Tajikistan to remain neutral in the war.

CONCLUSION



The Russian war against Ukraine has significantly impacted states in Central Asia. Despite maintaining formal neutrality on the international stage, Russia has dramatically influenced these countries for so long that the war in Ukraine affected not only their domestic political landscapes but also their international standing. We can say that war disrupted the whole security architecture carefully built over three decades in the region and forced countries into the search for new partnerships and security and economical insurance.

In response to these challenges, Central Asian states have adopted somewhat similar approaches. While carefully trying to avoid antagonizing Russia, they have simultaneously worked to steer clear of potential Western sanctions. This balancing act is demonstrated by their voting patterns on UN resolutions related to the conflict. None of the five Central Asian countries have voted in favor of any UN resolution against Russia. Instead, most of them have opted to abstain, with Turkmenistan even being absent from all four resolutions.

Additionally, the economic impact of the war has pushed Central Asian Republics to diversify their trade and foreign political partnerships. Great powers such as China and the West have seen this situation as an opportunity to deepen their relations with the CA states. This is confirmed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to the region and a meeting with senior officials from all five countries, although it is clear that the gap left by Russia's weakening in the region is filled most effectively by China, as Beijing consistently expands economic ties with member states in the region. Therefore, during his meeting with Central Asian leaders on May 18, 2023, President Xi promised that more railroad and other trade

links would be established between the People's Republic of China and the Central Asian republics.⁹

Despite the overall pragmatic response, Central Asian Republics slightly diverge in their positioning. The governments of these countries have shown different reactions in specific policy areas. Kazakhstan is the boldest in its firm position of not supporting Russia's war and helping it avoid Western sanctions. While countries like Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, which are poorer and more economically dependent on Russia than other Central Asian countries, have taken a more cautious stance and sided with Moscow. The public opinion on the matter is also interesting - in most countries, the media coverage of the Ukraine war varies from weak to non-existent; the public has limited means of getting objective information on the issues and is often a victim of Russian propaganda.

Overall, the Central Asian states' positions on the Ukraine War can be described as „pragmatic“- considering the geopolitical constraints, economic dependence, and uncertainties of the war, they have acted to preserve their own regimes and show loyalty to Putin. For this reason, one year after the Russian aggression, all leaders of TCA States were in Moscow on May 9 to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany together with Vladimir Putin. But simultaneously, their support for Russia is limited by the fear of Western sanctions. Also, most governments have used authoritarian rule over the country to restrict the public's access to information and control the narrative.



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

POSITION AND REACTIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

By Civic IDEA
27.05.2022

The report presents the update of Civic IDEA's last year's take on
“Can Russia find more friends and support in the war against
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overviewing the range of tactical and strategic narratives expressed
by Central Asian states during the initial four months of the Russia-
Ukraine war. The updated version aims to explore the shifts and
changes in the positioning of the Central Asian countries on Russian
aggression against Ukraine, as well as the great East-West power
competition and the leverage of the region's two authoritarian
neighbors, Russia and China in various domains such as politics,
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