



A NEW AGE OF GEOPOLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA:

NATO'S ROLE IN THE EVOLVING REGIONAL SECURITY ORDER

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“A New Age of Geopolitics in Central Asia: NATO’s Role in the Evolving Regional Security Order”

<i>Contributing Author</i>	Roman Muzalevsky MA in International Affairs and Security Studies, Yale University International Affairs and Security Analyst Washington DC, USA
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Executive Summary

As series of developments over the past few years have been redefining Central Asia's security environment at speed, scale, and concurrency unprecedented for the region. Reflective of these trends is a return to a historical definition, in some ways a redefinition, of Central Asia as a geopolitical space. The region comprises the post-Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. However, the republics' increased interaction with each other and culturally close Afghanistan, China's Xinjiang, parts of Iran, Pakistan, and India are re-constituting Central Asia's geopolitical contours in its new iteration. This paper ponders the region's new geopolitics and emerging security (dis)order by focusing on the five republics. It puts forward recommendations for NATO, which is looking for a new role in the evolving regional security architecture. As it does, the paper draws on broader regional dynamics reshaping Central Asia as a geopolitical space.

Of the broader developments, NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and China's continued global rise may be the most monumental. However, they are not the only ones affecting the region's geopolitics. Intra-regional political transitions, struggle between forces of modernization and traditionalism, and the republics' new roles in shaping the regional and global security orders are emerging as significant drivers, as well. Poorly researched and understood individually, let alone in their complexity, these drivers are upending the traditional vectors of securitization of Central Asia, just as they are spurring the republics to create regional security and cooperation mechanisms and institutions. By responding to these drivers together, the republics seek to turn geopolitical challenges into opportunities benefiting them and the region at large.

In analyzing the drivers and charting the future of Central Asia's security order, this paper examines the case of NATO, which is searching for a new identity, mission, and toolkit to deal with two major challenges to the regional and global security orders in the early 21st century: Russia's belligerence and China's rise. By deepening ties with the republics, the alliance could strengthen local statehoods, enhance regional security, and shape more effectively the evolution and policies of these and other powers in Central Asia and beyond. To succeed, NATO should redefine its problem sets, foster economic and information security cooperation, pursue direct and indirect engagements with the republics, foster intra-regional security initiatives, and codify its regional policy as a matter of strategic importance.

Keywords: Central Asia, NATO, external powers, geopolitics, security order

Bio: Roman Muzalevsky is a multilingual analyst who has written extensively on geopolitical and strategic trends in Eurasia and Indo-Asia-Pacific. Some of his works include *Central Asia's Shrinking Connectivity Gap: Implications for US Strategy* (2014) and *China's Rise and Reconfiguration of Central Asia's Geopolitics: A Case for U.S. "Pivot" to Eurasia* (2015).

A New Age of Geopolitics in Central Asia:

NATO's Role in the Evolving Regional Security Order

Central Asia's Shifting Geopolitics in a New Era

A series of developments over the past few years have been redefining Central Asia's security environment at speed, scale, and concurrency unprecedented for the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001. Reflective of these trends is a return to a historical definition, in some ways a redefinition, of Central Asia as a geopolitical space. The region comprises the post-Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. However, the republics' increased interaction with each other and culturally close Afghanistan, China's Xinjiang, parts of Iran, Pakistan, and India in recent years are re-constituting the geopolitical and geo-economic contours of Central Asia in its new iteration.

This paper ponders Central Asia's new geopolitics and emerging security (dis)order by focusing on the five republics while drawing on broader regional dynamics reshaping the region in its new manifestation as a geopolitical space. As the republics usher in the start of the century's third decade, they face developments simultaneously abrupt, systemic, and intertwined across local, national, regional, and global lines. To most observers looking in, NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and China's global rise may be the most eye-catching, monumental, and impactful of them. Yet, they are not the only ones weighing on the local and global actors: strictly national and intra-regional dynamics, too, increasingly represent significant drivers in Central Asia.

The list of intra-regional drivers is extensive: launches of reforms and modernizations, reshuffling of political elites, orchestrated or guided transfers of power, renewed secessionism, heightened border disputes and their mitigation, and newly forming views, roles, and practices shaping the regional and global security orders. The modernizations, imperfect as they are, represent a long-term drive toward more open polities, which in the future could enjoy more lasting security benefits. Ideologically speaking, the Taliban's comeback to power in Afghanistan is an exception to this uneasy transition to openness and a reversal to a significantly pronounced traditionalism. Recently pursued or enforced governance idiosyncrasies in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are examples of such traditionalism, as well. So are the regional elites' attempts to extend or perpetuate their stay in power in the polities shaped by Central Asian khanate, Russian and Soviet imperial legacies.

A range of transnational challenges, including border conflicts, terrorism, human trafficking, drug smuggling, and environmental degradation have, meanwhile, assumed a larger role in regional security considerations. Border incidents over territory, transit, and water access continue to flare up. The Taliban's return to power and failure to eliminate ISIS-K threatens to undermine stability in the region, especially in Tajikistan. Taliban's inability to gain international recognition and attract investment will enhance reliance on drugs smuggling as a source of income. This will chip away at the social and security fabrics of the republics already afflicted by drug use and smuggling extending to Russia and Europe. Finally, the drying of the Aral Sea and the melting of glaciers threaten the region with health crises and water scarcity, which serve as sources of conflicts within and between the republics.



Figure 1: Map of Central Asian republics¹

The extra- and intra-regional drivers have provided a sustained impetus to intra-regional cooperation initiatives, most recently undertaken in the summer of 2022, just as Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, the U.S., and the EU have been vying to fill the region's security vacuum. Such initiatives could turn transnational challenges into connectivity opportunities, strengthening the republics' sovereignties and helping them crawl out of Russia and China's geopolitical shadows. This embryonic intra-regional activism is timely for the republics as well as the West and NATO, which have failed to sustain a major presence in Central Asia since the 1990s. The regional elites perceive Russia and China to be advancing imperial geopolitical agendas in Central Asia. They distrust the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (SCTO) and the Moscow- and Beijing-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They are also apprehensive about security risks stemming from tensions between the U.S., Russia, and China as the world's most active geopolitical actors.

Poorly researched and understood individually, let alone in their complexity, the extra- and intra-regional drivers have been upending the traditional vectors of securitization of Central Asia. As such, they are presenting new risks and benefits for actors of all sizes. In analyzing these drivers and charting the future of Central Asia's security order, this paper provides recommendations for NATO, which is searching for a new identity, mission, and toolkit to deal with two key challenges to the regional and global security orders in the early 21st century: Russia's belligerence and China's rise. By deepening ties with the republics, the alliance could strengthen local statehoods, enhance regional security, and shape more effectively the evolution and presence of these and other powers in Central Asia and beyond.

¹ Maria A. Blackwood, *Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, 24 September 2021, p.2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46924/2>.

Failure by the West and NATO to navigate or harness these drivers would undermine their ability to shape the global security order and manage the rise of individual and allied challengers. To succeed, the alliance should redefine its problems sets and missions across geographic and functional spheres with a focus on the new geopolitics of Central Asia. It should also launch information security and economic initiatives as new areas of cooperation with the republics to foster alternative perspectives on regional and global developments and investments. The alliance should pursue indirect engagements with the regional republics via state and non-state facilitators and foster intra-regional security initiatives allowing them to develop perspectives and policies not hostage to agendas of neighboring powers. Finally, NATO must codify its regional policy as a matter of strategic importance.

Pressures from Extra-Regional Drivers

Of the extra-regional drivers shaping the Central Asian security order over the past couple of years, NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 following two decades of operations stands as a pivotal event that has forced local actors to recalibrate their policies. The alliance failed to defeat the Taliban and ensure a democratic transition in the conservative country suffering from chronic insecurity. The abrupt withdrawal has opened the way for ISIS-K's resurgence and concerns about the Taliban's perceived plans to force its Islamist agenda on the regional republics. However, year and a half on, neither the former nor the latter have manifested as major transnational challenges. Rather, non-recognition of the Taliban's regime, its inability to govern effectively and build sustainable trade and foreign relations with other countries now constitute sources of domestic and regional insecurity.

The Central Asian republics supported NATO's mission, fostered intra- and inter-regional connectivity centered on Afghanistan, and opposed the Taliban's return to power. Sealing off borders or ceasing contact with Afghanistan is currently out of the question. The experience of dealing with the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in the 1990s and the need to capitalize on the connectivity prospects and address security threats have prompted the republics to pursue a more nuanced and proactive policy approach toward Kabul. More bi-lateral than regional, such approaches predate NATO's military withdrawal and are more cautious following it.

The republics have been reinforcing defenses after NATO's military withdrawal given the rise of ISIS-K in Afghanistan's north. They are also tracking the position of external actors on the question of potential external recognition of the Taliban rule. Officially, none of them recognize it. All of them, however, must contend with the newly emerged geopolitical reality. Kazakh and Kyrgyz official delegates, for instance, met with the Taliban in Kabul in 2021 and 2022, as did Turkmen and Uzbek foreign ministers. Of the republics, Uzbekistan has been most actively involved in Afghanistan, a trend set off following the death of Uzbek President Islam Karimov and coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016.²

NATO's military withdrawal has, in some ways, left Central Asian republics fend for themselves. They now distrust the alliance as a viable partner, making any future relationship, let alone partnership, with it difficult, if not impossible. Meanwhile, Russia and China, the perceived overlords opposing NATO's regional presence, have secured agreements with the Taliban-run Afghanistan, facilitating and complementing the republics' own efforts to ensure favorable security conditions and outcomes following NATO's military withdrawal. Still, the perceived imperial agendas of Russia and China and geopolitically conditioned antagonisms between them have long made the republics question the roles of both powers as the region's perceived security guarantors. As a result, the republics, for the first time in two decades following the withdrawal, see a strong need to advance intra-regional co-operation.

² Bruce Pannier, "Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia," FPRI, 13 May 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/northern-afghanistan-and-the-new-threat-to-central-asia/>.

Such intra-regional policy activism stems from another key factor affecting Central Asia's security: Russia's invasion of the formerly Soviet republic of Ukraine. Russia's offensive has opened a Pandora's box of global and regional security consequences; some are manifesting, others remain unforeseen.³ In Central Asia, they include an enhanced sense of security vulnerability and a push for diversified ties with neighbors and external powers to balance and guard against Moscow's perceived bellicosity and quest for domination in Eurasia.

Russia's brief deployment of forces in early 2022 under the CSTO mandate in response to anti-government protests and social unrest in Kazakhstan during the initial stages of its invasion of Ukraine has raised additional concerns in the region about its capabilities and intentions. Sharing its longest border with Russia, the world's second-longest, and home to the region's largest Russian minority, Kazakhstan has particularly felt threatened by Russia's invasion and potential changes in its policy toward Kazakhstan.⁴ Once latent, inter-ethnic tensions are emerging as a new flashpoint in Russian-Kazakh relations amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kazakhstan has increased its defense budget by 50% following and in response to the unrest at home, insecurity Afghanistan, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁵

Unlike in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where they represent about 10 and 30 percent of the populations, Russian-speaking minorities constitute far smaller numbers in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Still, Russia's long-standing declaration of support to Russian "compatriots" abroad and the launch of "Denazification" of the "regime" in the neighboring, formerly Soviet, Slav Ukraine has unnerved Central Asian capitals. Meanwhile, Russian political figures have threatened the sovereignties of the republics, which do not support the invasion or recognize the self-proclaimed "people's republics" in Ukraine. For instance, Konstantin Zatulin, deputy chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, questioned Kazakhstan's territorial integrity, saying "several provinces and towns populated predominantly by Russians have little to do with what is called Kazakhstan." Zatulin intimated Ukraine's fate could befall Russia's allies if they were not friendly with Moscow.⁶

Dmitriy Medvedev, Russia's ex-president and now deputy chairman of its Security Council, in a VK post on 1 August 2022 reportedly went further, saying that, after a victory in Ukraine, and to revive a "united, mighty and invincible Russia," ... "we will proceed to the next campaign to restore our motherland's borders, which, as you know, do not end anywhere." The post, which the Kremlin attributed to a hack, referred to Kazakhstan as an "artificial state" that committed "genocide" on its Russian population.⁷ Kazakh authorities have started resettling "various ethnic groups," the post continued. "And we don't intend to turn a blind eye to it. Until Russians arrive there, there will be no order," it emphasized.⁸

International sanctions, closures of foreign company offices in Russia in protest over the invasion, and a subsequent military mobilization have prompted up to four million Russian citizens to leave Russia in 2022. This has allowed some of them to retain employment Western companies, access and use foreign currency, keep up buying Western products, and continue to speak freely about and against Russia's invasion. Some of the Russian migrants have relocated to Central Asia and the Caucasus. This influx has had

³Comments by Experts, "Возможности США в обострении кризисных явлений в Центральной Азии," *Kaspiyskiy Vestnik*, 22 March 2022, <http://casp-geo.ru/vozmozhnosti-ssha-v-obostrenii-krizisnyh-yavlenij-v-tsentralnoj-azii/>; Irina Dzhorbenadze, "Центральная Азия может «разгореться» вслед за Украиной," *Rosbal*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2022/03/03/1946789.html>.

⁴Nicholas Velazquez, "Kazakhstan Pivots from Russia amid Ukraine War," *Geopolitical Monitor*, 14 July 2022, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/kazakhstan-pivots-from-russia-amid-ukraine-war/>.

⁵The Bulletin: Central Asia and the South Caucasus, 31 July 2022. <https://thebulletin.news>.

⁶Kanat Altynbayev and AFP, "'Hacked' Medvedev post questioning Kazakh sovereignty draws anger, skepticism," *Caravanserai*, 10 August 2022, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/08/10/feature-01.

⁷Ibid., Altynbayev.

⁸Paolo Sorbello, "Former Russian President Questions Kazakhstan's Sovereignty," *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/former-russian-president-questions-kazakhstans-sovereignty/>.

positive and negative effects on local employment, housing, and services sectors. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Central Asian migrants have left Russia amid the latter's economic slowdown due to sanctions. Together, these migration factors have exacerbated unemployment and food insecurity challenges in Central Asia, even as they have presented some opportunities.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Central Asia's largest economies, population centers, and transit spaces, especially stand to benefit in some and lose in other areas due to the sanctions against Russia. Some investment and trade flows intended for Russia will shift to regional economies. Many foreign and Russian businesses have opened bank accounts in the region to handle foreign currency swaps and facilitate new business relationships. Yet, the growth of the shadow economy in or involving Central Asian countries should not be underestimated as local and external entities seek to evade the sanctions. The trade and transit corridors going West from or via Central Asia and Russia will face complications, despite some republics, such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, benefiting from the increased air and rail traffic. As the sanctions expand in quantity, scope, and ripple effects, the regional economies will be hit harder given their links to Russia in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and bilateral dependences. Certain categories of exports to or via Russia will decline in volume, whereas certain categories of imports will become more expensive.⁹



Figure 2: EEU member and observer states¹⁰

Central Asian countries increasingly find it imperative to advance trade and transit in multiple directions, in part to reduce dependence on Russia in select areas. In the summer of 2022, for instance, Kabul, Islamabad, and Tashkent discussed constructing and linking the Mazar-i-Sharif–Peshawar railway line to Uzbekistan. The line would provide the landlocked Central Asian economies with access to Pakistani ports.¹¹ It would also connect them to China as part of the latter's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China plans to fund the construction. Notably, China's policy toward Afghanistan is similar to its neighbors' policies: it is cooperating with the Taliban without recognizing it.¹² As Central Asia's neighbor and largest economic partner, Beijing can help the republics reduce their dependence on Russia and build new linkages. Yet, the growing reliance on China carries new dependency risks.

⁹ Ruslan Izimov, Interview with Saule Kelimbayeva, «Как сокращение экономики России отразится на странах Центральной Азии?» 1 April 2022, <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/23836/kak-sokrashhenie-ekonomiki-rossii-otrazitsya-na-stranah-czentralnoj-azii>.

¹⁰ Maria A. Blackwood, *Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, 24 September 2021, p.55, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46924/2>.

¹¹ Ibid., Pannier.

¹² Zia ur Rehman, "Security Concerns Bring China Closer to Taliban," *VoA*, 11 August 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/security-concerns-bring-china-closer-to-taliban-/6697339.html>.

NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – grand developments as they are -- cannot eclipse China's rapidly growing profile in the world and Central Asia. China's BRI to build cross-regional infrastructure is a key piece of its grand strategy to become a full-fledged great power in the 21st century. It has invested heavily in trade and transit initiatives throughout the region. It has deployed its People's Armed Police forces alongside Tajik forces at a military facility in Tajikistan close to Xinjiang. [Afghan forces have not been present at the facility following the Taliban's come-back to power.] It also plans to fund the construction of another military facility in Tajikistan close to the Wakhan Corridor, sandwiched between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.



Figure 3: Military facility in Tajikistan hosting Chinese and Tajik personnel¹³

China's regional military and security initiatives are intended to counter terrorist groups, enhance border security, prevent Xinjiang's secession, and secure transit corridors as it implements the BRI. Central Asia's new geopolitics makes its regional ambitions difficult yet compelling. On the one hand, China's inroads have facilitated economic development in the region. On the other hand, they have fueled resentment and concerns about China's unfair labor practices, undue influence, and creeping militarization. As a result, the regional republics continue to view and rely on Russia as a strategic balancer and security patron.

This creates an opening for the West and NATO to provide the republics with a means to balance the external powers. What is more, the bloc's military withdrawal could theoretically make the West rethink the importance of the region and treat it as a multi-functional, not just a military, platform. Armed with a new toolkit, the alliance could gain a solid foothold in Central Asia, strengthen local statehoods, and manage the region's neighbors. This assumes NATO and the West could gain the republics' trust and commit to a more sustainable and multi-functional presence that comes with security and investment guarantees by the West.

¹³ Reid Standish, «Режим «Талибана» и Центральная Азия: как Китай адаптируется к новым реалиям,» RFI/RL, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/afghanistan-rezhim-talbana-tsentralnaya-aziya-kitay-bezopasnost/31515009.html>.

The Push and Pull of Intra-Regional Drivers

Until a few years ago, intra-regional drivers had a limited scope and impact on the regional security order. Terrorism, human trafficking, and drug smuggling still feature among security threats in the region. Increasingly, however, climate change, environmental degradation, food insecurity, and transnational infrastructure vulnerabilities are assuming a more prominent role as intra-regional security challenges. On top of that is a notable, region-wide push for reforms, modernizations, and cooperation.¹⁴ Together with the extra-regional drivers, these factors are reshaping the regional security order in the new age of Central Asia's geopolitics.

Kyrgyzstan

The regional republics have all seen changes of their regimes or elites over the past few years. Kyrgyzstan has gone through protests and government changes in 2005, 2010, and 2020. The ones in 2005 ended with the overthrow of ex-president Askar Akayev, who fled to Russia. Kurmanbek Bakiyev took the reins but was, too, overthrown in popular protests and fled to Belarus in 2010. Roza Otunbayeva became the first-ever female president but ultimately ceded power to Almazbek Atambayev, who served as president for six years before losing to his presidential poll contender Sooronbay Jeenbekov and ending up in jail on charges some observers argue are politically motivated. Jeenbekov resigned amid electoral protests in 2020, opening the way for Sadyr Japarov to assume the presidency in 2021.¹⁵

A CSTO and EEU member, Kyrgyzstan hosts a Russian military base and installations and has a generally pro-Russia policy stance in the region despite declaring a multi-vector foreign policy course. As Tajikistan, it depends heavily on Russia for security and on China for loans. Resolving border and water disputes with Dushanbe and Tashkent after Tajikistan's invasion of Kyrgyzstan in 2022 is now a top priority as it continues to reel from bouts of political instability. The political instability has nevertheless gone hand in hand with the development of a more open polity over the years, featuring a society unwilling to tolerate dysfunctional governments. Unlike in Kyrgyzstan, popular political protests are still a rarity in the other republics; however, against the backdrop of recent turbulence across the region, Kyrgyzstan's experience appears increasingly instructive and no longer fully marginal.

Kazakhstan

In Kazakhstan, ex-president Nursultan Nazarbayev ruled from 1991 until his resignation in 2019, when ex-prime minister Kassym-Joomart Tokayev succeeded the "Leader of the Nation." In January 2022, Tokayev imposed a state of emergency following a two-week long anti-government unrest that saw Russia deploy briefly its forces to Kazakhstan by invoking the CSTO mandate. Tokayev took leadership of the Security Council and ruling Amanat party from Nazarbayev, dismissing several officials with close ties to the ex-president. As in Kyrgyzstan, the change of elites may not represent a systemic change in Kazakhstan. However, it closes a major chapter in the three-decade authoritarian rule by Nazarbayev and opens a new one that will inevitably see a reconfiguration of the country's elites and policies.

¹⁴ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: A New Spring?* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2018), <https://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/2018/11/Modernization-and-Regional-Cooperation-in-Central-Asia-Print-V-FINAL-wCover.pdf>.

¹⁵ Yevgeny Ivanov, "Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan" in Goldstone, J.A., Grinin, L., Korotayev, A. eds. *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2022): 517–547, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2_20.



Regionally, the resource-rich Kazakhstan has consistently advocated and will continue advancing regional economic integration, especially as the centrally-positioned Uzbekistan expands economic ties with it and other neighbors as a consequence of its internal political and economic reforms. A CSTO and EEU member, it will continue prioritizing ties with Moscow, Beijing, and the EU while pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy course and seeking to exercise policy autonomy. However, it will find it difficult to exercise the autonomy given China's rise as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and geopolitical claims.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan, too, experienced a major political shake-up. Islam Karimov, a strongman of arguably the most authoritarian Central Asian state after Turkmenistan, ruled the region's most populous and one of the world's isolated countries from 1989 until his death in 2016. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a prime minister from 2003 through 2016, was elected president the same year and got re-elected in 2021 with more than 80 percent of the vote. Domestically, Mirziyoyev launched political and economic reforms. However, the constitutional changes proposed by his administration, such as resetting presidential terms and removing the independence referendum clause for the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, have tarnished the modernization drive. Critics allege Mirziyoyev seeks to stay in power beyond his second term and deny Karakalpakstan a chance at breaking free from Uzbekistan. Unrest in the autonomous republic in the summer 2022 prompted the Uzbek leadership to retract the constitutional amendment seeking the removal of the independence referendum clause.



Kalon Mosque with courtyard in the old town of Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

Regionally, the new president embarked on resetting Uzbekistan's ties with neighbors, visiting Turkmenistan rather than Russia on his first foreign visit, seeking to resolve border disputes with Kyrgyzstan, resuming flights with Tajikistan for the first time since 1992, and pursuing an active role in settling the Afghan conflict.¹⁶ Externally, the traditionally independence-minded Tashkent continues to shun the CSTO but is now displaying more interest in the Russia-led EEU. Uzbekistan is proceeding cautiously to ensure its integrates itself into wider Eurasian economy but does not become overly dependent on Moscow.

¹⁶“Uzbekistan: Mirziyoyev Flirting With Regional Reset?,” *Eurasianet.org*, 19 September 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-mirziyoyev-flirting-regional-reset>; Jack Farhy, “New Uzbekistan president’s conciliatory tack brings hope of change,” *Financial Times*, 5 December 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/92a19386-baf0-11e6-8b45-b8b81dd5d080>.



Figure 4: Exclaves in Central Asia¹⁷

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, a major political change has yet to pass, but it is coming. President Emomali Rahmon has ruled since 1994, winning his re-election in 2020. Conferred the title of the “Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation,” he has maintained a tight grip on power and advanced a personality cult only surpassed by Turkmenistan’s two former presidents. Two of his children, Rustam Emomali, 35, and Ozoda Rahmon, 45, serve as the elected chair of the National Assembly and President’s Executive Office. Rustam is in line to succeed Rahmon, almost 70, after the authorities, in a 2016 referendum, lowered the age at which a Tajik citizen could run for the office from 35 to 30.¹⁸ Still under the authoritarian rule, Tajikistan is expected to see a transfer of political power from the older generation of officials to the younger cohort. Such transition could be uneventful in case of the dynastic transfer of power or messy if the old or the new elite decide to chart their own course.

¹⁷ Maria A. Blackwood, *Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, 24 September 2021, p.41, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46924/2>.

¹⁸ Catherine Putz, “Tajik President’s Son Officially Second-in-Line to Presidency,” *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2020, <https://the-diplomat.com/2020/04/tajik-presidents-son-officially-second-in-line-to-presidency/>; “Ozoda Rahmon, who heads President’s Executive Office, turns 40 today,” *Asia-Plus*, 3 January 2018, <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/power/20180103/ozoda-rahmon-who-heads-presidents-executive-office-turns-40-today>.



Nurek Dam Spillway, Tajikistan

Regionally, Tajikistan continues to shun the EEU but is advancing economic ties with neighbors to the southeast and southwest. It has been unenthusiastic about cooperating with the republics, though the change in Uzbekistan's leadership and regional policy as well as insecurity in Afghanistan and China's growing footprint increasingly make it rethink its approach. A member of the CSTO and SCO, Tajikistan has continued its pro-Russia and China foreign policy course given the country's strong dependence on Moscow for security and Beijing for both loans and military aid. It hosts a Russian military base and a military facility hosting China's People's Armed Police personnel; the facilities are meant to protect Tajikistan and China against terrorism, drug smuggling, and forces of secessionism. For China, these "three evils" are centered on the autonomous region of Xinjian in the country's west heavily populated by Uyghurs; for Tajikistan – on the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) in the country's east home to political opposition and various ethnic groups.



Figure 5: Russian military facilities and installations in Central Asia¹⁹

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan, viewed as the region's most authoritarian and isolated country, has already experienced a political power transition that has yet to pass in Tajikistan. In March 2022, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, bearing the title of "Protector," was succeeded as president by his son Serdar, 40, in a guided snap election that saw him get 73 percent of the vote. Berdimuhamedow had ruled the gas-rich country since 2006 following the death of Saparmurat Niyazov, another personality-cult leader who bore the title of the "Head of the Turkmen" and had led Turkmenistan since 1990. Referred to as the "Son of the Nation," Serdar is expected to continue the personality cult tradition.²⁰ Domestically, reports emerged following his election about restrictions enacted on operations of beauty salons, riding in the front seat by women, and overseas studies. It is not clear if Serdar himself is behind them.²¹

¹⁹ Maria A. Blackwood, *Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations*, Congressional Research Service, 24 September 2021, p.56, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46924/2>.

²⁰ Catherine Putz, "Son of Turkmenistan's President Gets New Post," *The Diplomat*, 12 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/son-of-turkmenistans-president-gets-new-post/>.

²¹ «Туркменистан: новый президент, новые запреты и ограничения,» *Eurasianet*, 5 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3B9ansL>.



Turkmenbashi's Mausoleum, Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

Externally, Serdar underscored Turkmenistan would continue its policy of neutrality but would be open to the world.²² What this entails remains to be seen, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine and related gas export issues enable Ashgabat to assume a larger role as a gas supplier for Europe if gas transit infrastructure bypassing Russia is developed. This would allow it to balance its outsized reliance on China for gas exports and financial support. [China provided billions of dollars in loans to Ashgabat to build and expand Turkmenistan's energy production and infrastructure capacity.] Importantly, the gas-export dependent Turkmenistan increasingly realizes the importance of economic diversification, embarking on a relatively faster regional cooperation track with neighbors, including Afghanistan. Notably, on his first day of presidency, Serdar accepted the credentials of the Taliban ambassador to Turkmenistan, underscoring Ashgabat's interest in laying the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline and a regional power transmission line.²³

²² "Turkmenistan: Berdymukhamedov passes the mantle (and phone)," Eurasianet, 22 March 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-berdymukhamedov-passes-the-mantle-and-phone>.

²³ Ibid., "Turkmenistan: Berdymukhamedov passes the mantle (and phone)."

Regional Cooperation Prospects and Challenges

Regional cooperation prospects and challenges hinge on Afghanistan. The regional republics do not welcome the Taliban-rule from an ideological standpoint but would be interested in pursuing trade and transit initiatives involving Afghanistan provided the Taliban governed effectively and ensured security in the country. Of the neighboring states, it is the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan that has witnessed a major reversal of the attempted broader modernization of its political, legal, and socio-economic institutions and practices. Looking long-term, however, modernization could re-emerge as a contending force in the country again if Afghanistan-centered intra- and inter-regional connectivity expanded drastically.

Afghanistan's evolution as a secure state embracing such connectivity would be critical to the security and development of Central Asia as a geopolitical and geo-economic space. Such outcome could facilitate a sustained regional fight against a myriad of security challenges. The latter are now prompting a more enhanced regional security and economic cooperation. In July 2022, Kyrgyzstan hosted the fourth consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders -- an annual, informal gathering by the heads of state launched in 2018. The parties discussed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Taliban's comeback to power, as well as secessionists sentiments and social unrest in Tajikistan's GBAO and Uzbekistan's autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan in July 2022.²⁴ They also pondered the growing challenges of climate change, glacier shrinkage, the drying of the Aral Sea, water, food, and energy security, inter-regional connectivity, and regional security and economic cooperation imperatives.²⁵

Moreover, the parties issued a joint declaration and signed the Agreement on Friendship, Good-Neighborhoodliness and Cooperation for Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan already signed the accord, whereas Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were expected to sign it after going through domestic procedures. In a signal to external powers perceived as meddling in regional affairs and invading neighbors, the declaration mentioned the inviolability of state borders as a new principle of regional cooperation; in 2019, it emphasized the principle of territorial integrity. They also signed the Concept for Interaction between Central Asian states in multilateral frameworks, partially in a nod to China and Russia, which could attend future meetings as invited guests.²⁶

However, the ink was barely dry when a regional push-and-pull dynamic manifested itself again, shaking Central Asia's security order in an unprecedented way. During September 14-17, Tajikistan committed an act of aggression against neighboring Kyrgyzstan. It invaded the country using tanks, armed personnel carriers, and mortar fire. The invasion occurred as the countries' leaders were attending the 2022 SCO summit in Uzbekistan. It left about 100 people killed, of whom 67 were Kyrgyz citizens. It also forced an evacuation of more than 140,000 Kyrgyz residents from at least 15 areas that were

²⁴ "Central Asian Leaders Meet in Kyrgyzstan Amid Concerns Over War in Ukraine, Economic Issues," *RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service* *RFE/RL's Kazakh Service*, 20 July 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-leaders-meet-kyrgyzstan-ukraine-war/31951867.html>; Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan's unprecedented GBAO crackdown threatens a centuries-old culture," *Intellnews*, 20 August 2022, <https://intellnews.com/tajikistan-s-unprecedented-gbao-crackdown-threatens-a-centuries-old-culture-254070/>; Aziz Yakubov, "Ночь черных колпаков. Узбекистан увлекся конституционной реформой и спровоцировал всплеск сепаратизма в Приаралье," *Mediozona*, 4 July 2022, <https://mediazona.ca/article/2022/07/04/blacknight>; Aziz Yakubov, «Karakalpakexit. Лидер партии «Алга Каракалпакстан» — о борьбе за отделение республики от Узбекистана,» Interview with Aman Sagidullayev, *Mediozona*, 15 August 2022, <https://mediazona.ca/article/2022/08/13/alga>.

²⁵ Aizada Nuriddenova, "What Happened at the Latest Central Asian Leaders' Meeting?" *The Diplomat*, 23 July 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/what-happened-at-the-latest-central-asian-leaders-meeting/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Nuriddenova.



Figure 6: Areas in Kyrgyz Republic attacked by Tajikistan during 14-17 September 2022²⁷

attacked. A ceasefire was declared and a protocol signed to pursue border demarcation; yet, peace remains fragile and elusive.²⁸

Border disputes in the region also involve Uzbekistan. In what some view as a positive development, Tashkent and Bishkek signed an accord in November 2022 delineating portions of their disputed areas and regulating joint water use at a dam.²⁹ However, border and water disputes continue to serve as flashpoints in Central Asia. Addressing these challenges in bi- and multi-lateral frameworks is key to preventing a repeat of an inter-state armed conflict and unleashing new opportunities for sustained and multi-faceted cooperation in Central Asia.

Toward a New Security Architecture: Implications for the Region and NATO

NATO's military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China's rise have coalesced with equally turbulent intra-regional dynamics over the past few years to usher in a new era of geopolitics in Central Asia. Increasingly, the republics see a need to create regional security and cooperation mechanisms and institutions to advance their interests and shore up the fragile security order shaped by the external and internal drivers. They also increasingly recognize the need to improve their governance systems and prevent state collapse, in part by drawing on multilateral and intra-regional engagement frameworks.

²⁷ Akipress, "Tajikistan has planned military aggression against Kyrgyzstan - Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry," Akipress, 18 September 2022, https://akipress.com/news:679754:Tajikistan_has_planned_military_aggression_against_Kyrgyzstan_-_Kyrgyz_Foreign_Ministry/

²⁸ Munduzbek Kalykov, "We fulfilled all the demands of the people -- Tashiyev on Protocol 42 on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border," Kloop.kg, 26 September 2022, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/09/26/my-vypolnili-vse-trebovaniya-naroda-tashiev-o-protokole-42-po-kyrgyzsko-tadzhikskoj-granitse/>.

²⁹ Asia-Plus, "Japarov said: "The issue of the border with Tajikistan will probably be resolved by the New Year," Asia-Plus, 17 November 2022 <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20221117/vopros-po-granitse-s-tadzhikistanom-vozmozhno-reshim-do-novogo-goda-zhaparov>.

The republics' notably enhanced regional activism, long deemed dead and untenable, is a breath of fresh air in the region long dominated by Russia and China-led institutions and policy agendas.

They realize more and more that their patrons provide security at the expense of their sovereignties, denying them their national, let alone intra-regional, voice. More than that: the republics see that their patrons -- Russia and China -- can also cause insecurity because of their expansionist policies in Central Asia. The superimposed, distrusted security cooperation mechanisms led and dominated by the external powers undermine the regional security order, even if they aim to provide security for the militarily weak republics. A sustained intra-regional security and economic cooperation could address this insecurity.

However, it is early to speak of sustained cooperation, let alone intra-regional integration, due to the continued intra-regional squabbles and external meddling. Nevertheless, the republics are showing a serious interest in such cooperation and seek to pursue "softer" initiatives and bi-lateral agendas fostering an emergence of intra-regional mechanisms in the long term.³⁰ This process will accelerate if Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan resolve their border and water disputes; Uzbekistan continues to reform its governance system and build links with neighbors; Turkmenistan, under its new and younger leadership, brings itself out of isolation; and the republics manage to facilitate, even with the push from larger powers, intra- and inter-regional trade and transit initiatives centered on the neighboring Afghanistan. This is a lot of "IFs," but the impetus is there, even in the military sphere: over the years, the republics have increased the number of intra-regional military exercises.³¹

NATO, cooperating with the republics through Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs, won't find it easy to fit in. The republics view it as an outsider, despite welcoming it as a desired strategic balancer against the external powers, a status that has never materialized, even following the bloc's two-decade presence in Afghanistan. They distrust NATO's motives and commitments following its withdrawal. Nor do they appreciate its member states lecturing them on democracy or human rights. Concerns about Moscow and Beijing's arm-twisting in response to the republics' welcome of NATO's inroads in Central Asia are no small obstacles, either. Yet, there is still the opportunity of NATO to commit to a long-term, multi-functional cooperation and presence in the region, both as an alliance and as individual member states. The alternative is to contend with a low-level, sporadic, or ad hoc cooperation. As NATO ponders its course, it should consider the following policy options and approaches:

First, it should develop new problem sets and missions focused on Central Asia. They must not be exclusively military and political but extend to other areas of cooperation to include economic and financial. It should focus on information security and economic tradecraft as cooperation areas enabling alternative perspectives on regional developments and investments. Other PfP nations could serve as platforms and sources of existing infrastructure to expand the alliance's geographic and functional scope of its ties with the republics. Doing so would help identify policy synergies that the regional republics would be interested in pursuing as they look for solutions to their novel security, economic, environmental, and information security challenges. Doing so would also aid NATO in adapting its Cold War legacy security and military infrastructure – institutional, conceptual, intellectual, and operational – to new transnational security challenges and leverage this capability to prepare for or shape the continued belligerence by Russia and the continued global rise of China.

³⁰ Navbahor Imamova, "Central Asian States Talk Cooperation but Integration Remains a Dream," *VoA*, 27 July 2022, <https://www-voanews-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.voanews.com/amp/central-asian-states-talk-cooperation-but-integration-remains-a-dream-/6674965.html>.

³¹ Edward Lemon and Bradley Jardine, "Central Asia's Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy," *Kennan Cable* no. 68 (2021), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-68-central-asias-multi-vector-defense-diplomacy>.

Second, the alliance should pursue indirect cooperation with the republics through state and non-state facilitators, which Moscow and Beijing would not perceive as threatening to their short-term geopolitical agendas. Launching or expanding such cooperation would help alleviate concerns about adverse reactions or actions by Russia and China as well as help NATO retain the ability to shape local policy choices favoring an engagement with the alliance. NATO could pursue this course in parallel with other approaches, regardless of whether it commits to a sustained, long-term engagement with the republics. As it does, the alliance should consider spearheading multilateral initiatives similar to or modeled on the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative to foster regional security visions and practices.

Third, NATO should foster intra-regional security initiatives enabling the republics to develop security perspectives and policies not hostage to policy agendas of neighboring powers. A geopolitical art, this would require finesse in policy and diplomacy execution. NATO would need to navigate treacherous waters associated with the stances of external powers and the republics. It should ensure the republics cultivate and lead an intra-regional security engagement framework, however a distant goal. The alliance also should work with the republics bilaterally but emphasize the importance of each contributing to regional security cooperation frameworks as initiatives driven by the republics themselves. Support to the republics as part of this approach should rest, where possible and practical, on verifiable actions and outcomes related to the resolution of their border and water disputes.

NATO should also reopen its liaison office for Central Asia and consider with the republics a possibility of resuscitating the Central Asian Battalion (CENTRZBAT) in its new iteration focusing on the original mandate of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. CENTRZBAT, comprising units from peacekeeping battalions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and a U.S. battalion, was created in 1995 to strengthen ties between Central Asian and regional militaries but became inactive and dissolved several years later.

Fourth, to succeed with any of the approaches, NATO must make its policy toward the region and republics a matter of strategic importance; otherwise, the required resources and attention would not flow where they should. A sustained effort of this caliber would jolt the stalled cooperation with the republics and signal its commitment and resolve. This is hard to envision as NATO and its member-states outside the alliance framework are engaged with and seek to prevent or respond to ongoing or potential state aggression in Europe and Indo-Asia-Pacific. However, with a foresight befitting the alliance facing the strategic challengers, NATO should not be remiss of the importance to treat Central Asia as an inter-regional chain of global security and platform to pursue a forward-looking global security vision and policy.

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*Astana, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan.





**A NEW AGE OF
GEOPOLITICS
IN CENTRAL ASIA:**

**NATO'S ROLE IN THE
EVOLVING REGIONAL
SECURITY ORDER**

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