



Russia and China in Central Asia: implications of the new geopolitical realities

The war in Ukraine had substantial impact on the development trajectory of Central Asia. The region which had not recovered yet from the earlier hit by the negative consequences of COVID-19 pandemic was trapped into a new geopolitical and economic crisis linked to the Russian intervention against Ukraine. This situation influenced considerably to the role and presence of primarily Russia and to less extent of China in the region. The limited connectivity options, economic decline in the major trade partners Russia and China, geopolitical tensions between the West, Russia and China, strict pandemic measures in China altogether impacted negatively on Central Asia. However, the regional countries are striving to minimize these implications by reinforcing intra Central Asian cooperation and connections with other important actors like Turkey, India, Middle Eastern development drivers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Russia

Russia had its strongest influence in CA before February 2022. Eventually the political unrest in January in Kazakhstan was a culmination of the Russian capabilities in Central Asia over the last 30 years after the collapse of the USSR. Quick reaction of Moscow to this destabilization in Kazakhstan and sending troops under the auspices of CSTO[2] reenforced Russia's role as "security guarantor". Besides this Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov openly mentioned the country's dependence over the Russia's permission[3] to proceed with Chinese railway project construction on its own territory. Russia turned into Uzbekistan's biggest trade partner in 2021[4] and Moscow could overcome China's trade leadership role for the first time since 2014. I would like to mention 3 major developments in Russian policy towards Central Asia after February 24, 2022.

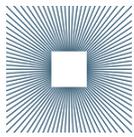
This paper is based on author's other earlier published articles

Akram Umarov, Deputy Director, Institute for Advanced International Studies, University of World Economy and Diplomacy

[2]Russia-Led Military Alliance Completes Withdrawal From Kazakhstan, „Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty”, 19 stycznia 2022 r., <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-csto-troops-withdrawal-security/31661294.html>

[3]President Japarov tells about construction of railway, „24 kg. News Agency”, 30 maja 2022 r., https://24.kg/english/235254_President_Japarov_tells_about_construction_of_railway/

[4]Uzbekistan: Russia reclaims top trading partner position from China, „Eurasianet”, 24 stycznia 2022 r., <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-russia-reclaims-top-trading-partner-position-from-china>



Initially after the start of the war in February 2022 Russia was focused on the situation in Ukraine and decreased its activities in Central Asia. However, as the war was prolonging and resulted in massive wave of sanctions against Russia from the Western countries and their allies Moscow tried to reinforce its cooperation with its traditional partners like Central Asian countries. As the list of countries still willing to continue economic exchange with Russia was shrinking Moscow would like to keep its foreign trade volume and find new suppliers of alternatives for goods sanctioned by the West. In October 2022 the first ever Russia–Central Asia Summit happened in Astana, Kazakhstan demonstrating deep interest of Moscow in the region.

Russia is the most sanctioned country in the world and as of November 30, 2022 in total 12,902 restrictions were imposed[5] on the country's individuals, companies, vehicles, and aircrafts. International Monetary Fund is forecasting a 3,5 percent decline[6] in gross domestic product of Russia this year. Therefore, the Russian government is vitally interested in developing trade relations with partners who are joining to the sanctions against Russia. Especially Moscow would be pleased to see Central Asian countries joining import substitution efforts that are ongoing in the Russian Federation[7]. Furthermore, the region with quickly growing population and economic development can serve as an attractive market for the Russian businesses which were banned from the access to the European and Western markets.

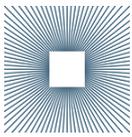
Moreover, as Russian military efforts in Ukraine were stalled and its army faced several sensitive retreats from invaded territories, Moscow would like to demonstrate its power and influence in Central Asia by reminding about the CSTO forces deployment in Kazakhstan during the January 2022 unrest as showing “its real ability to adequately withstand acute challenges and threats.” [8]

[5]Number of international sanctions imposed worldwide as of November 30, 2022, by target country, „Statista”, 30 listopada 2022 r. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1294726/number-of-global-sanctions-by-target-country/>

[6]*War and Sanctions Threaten to Thrust Russia’s Economy Back in Time*, „The New York Times”, 6 grudnia 2022 r., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/05/world/europe/ukraine-war-sanctions-russia-economy.html>

[7]Alexei Overchuk takes part in the 18th Russia-Kazakhstan Interregional Cooperation Forum, „Government.ru”, 28 listopada 2022 r., <http://government.ru/en/news/47167/>

[8]C. Putz, Tokayev Downplays January CSTO Deployment to Kazakhstan, „The Diplomat”, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/tokayev-downplays-january-csto-deployment-to-kazakhstan/>



In addition, this Russia-led organization conducted trainings of the CSTO Collective Forces “Cooperation-2022”, “Search-2022”, “Echelon-2022”[9] in the Republic of Kazakhstan and joint training with the Central Asian region's Collective Rapid Deployment Forces “Rubezh-2022”[10] in Tajikistan.

Despite all these efforts to strengthen Russia’s position in Central Asia, in reality there are many signs of actual weakening of its presence in the region due to current military setbacks in Ukraine and considerable damage to Moscow’s traditional image as “security guarantor”. Regional countries are observing the shortcomings of the Russian ongoing policy towards Ukraine and miscalculation of the scenarios of their “special military operation’s” development in the short and mid-term future. Potentially a quick, confident and unconditional victory of Russia in Ukraine could create an undesirable precedent for interference into the affairs of other post-Soviet countries.

During the first Central Asia–Russia Summit on presidential level in October 2022 Tajikistan’s president Mr Rahmon demanded that Mr Putin stop treating Central Asian countries as though they are “part of the former Soviet Union” and that he starts respecting them[11]. It was very rare public criticism of Russia from CA presidents and official representatives. This event was symbolic demonstrating increased confidence and independence among regional countries in relationship with the former metropolis. Such public invectives would be impossible if Russia had enough power and leverages to the Central Asian countries deterring any potential complications for bilateral relations by the regional leaders.

About 1,5 out of 7 thousand Russian troops[12] stationed in Tajikistan were redeployed from the military base near Dushanbe to Ukraine. Russian forces were also decreased in Kyrgyzstan’s Kant Air Base[13] after being transferred to the battlefield in Ukraine.

[9]Trainings of the CSTO Collective Forces "Cooperation-2022", "Search-2022", "Echelon-2022" in the Republic of Kazakhstan are completed with the "defeat" of a simulated enemy, “Collective Security Treaty Organisation”, 7 października 2022 r., https://en.odkb-csto.org/training/CSTO_collective_forces/v-kazakhstane-zavershilis-ucheniya-kollektivnykh-sil-odkb-vzaimodeystvie-2022-poisk-2022-eshelon-202/#loaded

[10] In the Republic of Tajikistan, the active phase of the joint training with the Collective Rapid Deployment Forces of the Central Asian Region "Rubezh-2022" began, „Collective Security Treaty Organisation”, 17 października 2022 r., https://en.odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/v-tadzhikistane-nachalas-aktivnaya-faza-sovmestnogo-ucheniya-s-kollektivnymi-silami-bystrogo-razvyer/?bxajaxid=35191971f27fa5b681cab10a8c877ae9#loaded

[11] K. Altynbayev, Rahmon's rebuke of Putin stemmed from years of Russian indifference, “Caravanserai”, 20 października 2022 r., https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/10/20/feature-01



Besides that, none of the Central Asian countries supported Moscow's position and vision on situation in Ukraine. Moreover, most of them openly condemned such intervention and emphasized support of Ukraine's sovereignty. The Kazakh leader Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin at the plenary session of the 25th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, called the "Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics" ("DNR" and "LNR") "quasi-state territories"[14] and refused to recognize them. Earlier Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov stated that Tashkent recognizes the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and does not recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as separate republics[15]. Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Ruslan Kazakbaev emphasized the significance of "the territorial integrity of states and the peaceful settlement of conflicts" principles in international relations[16].

Considering the escalating confrontation with the West Russia would like to see its immediate neighbourhood including CA countries in its own sphere of influence. Therefore, Russian tolerance to the presence of other powerful actors in the region is quickly diminishing. Any contacts of the regional countries with partners from "the list of unfriendly countries" have been perceived by Moscow with zealous and unfriendly. At the same the available leverages of Russia to influence on decision making of the Central Asian governments have been also reducing during the last year. Therefore, in many circumstances the regional states could resist to such attempts of Russia to restrict contacts of Central Asia and keep their balanced multi-vector foreign policies.

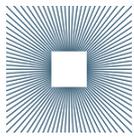
Just before the war in Ukraine the announcement of Russia's draft agreement on "Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" was mainly discussed from the perspective of the rising Western-Russian confrontation[17]. The Russian proposal declares that member States

[12] F. Najibullah, 'Up To 1,500' Russian Troops Redeployed To Ukraine From Tajik Base, Investigation Reveals, „Caravanserai”, 20 października 2022 r., https://central.asia/news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/10/20/feature-01

[13] I.S. Bisht, Russia Redeploys 1,500 Soldiers From Tajikistan to Ukraine: Report, „The Defense Post”, 15 września 2022 r., <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/15/russia-redeploys-soldiers-kyrgyzstan-ukraine/>

[14] V. Abbasova, President Tokayev Says Kazakhstan Will Not Recognize Donetsk, Lugansk as Independent States, „Caspian News”, 20 czerwca 2022 r., <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/president-tokayev-says-kazakhstan-will-not-recognize-donetsk-lugansk-as-independent-states-2022-6-20-0/>

[15] Kamilov: Uzbekistan recognizes independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, „UZ Daily”, 17 marca 2022 r., <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/71886>



of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other States in the Eastern Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. Furthermore, a separate draft treaty between the United States[] and the Russian Federation on security guarantees requires Washington not to establish military bases in the territory of the States of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization, use their infrastructure for any military activities or develop bilateral military cooperation with them.

In other words, Russia is demanding that the West proclaim the whole post-Soviet space, including Central Asia, as Moscow's exclusive sphere of influence. In August 2022 the Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev advised its partner countries in the Eurasian region to be more cautious and "aware of the high risks" involved in participating in joint military exercises with the United States[18]. The Russian representative was talking about the US Central Command-sponsored Regional Cooperation 2022 exercise with the participation of the militaries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia and Pakistan which began in Tajikistan on August 10[19]. The level of the rivalry between Russia and the "collective West" has been considerably increasing in the last decade, with negative impacts across Central Asia. For years, the region's countries have benefitted from balancing East and West through multi-vector foreign policies. However, the current escalation of tensions between Russia and the West will have considerable regional implications.

China

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as his first trip abroad since pandemic in September 2022 was a clear demonstration of the growing importance of the region for Beijing and signalled strategic changes in China's foreign policy.

[16] Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Ruslan Kazakbaev met with Ukrainian Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Valery Zhovtenko, „The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic”, 17 marca 2022 r., <https://mfa.gov.kg/en/Main-menu/Press-service/novosti/-6232db3a93631>

[17] A. Umarov, *Can Central Asia Overcome Its Biggest Challenge in Thirty Years?*, „The National Interest”, 7 stycznia 2022 r., <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-central-asia-overcome-its-biggest-challenge-thirty-years-199225>

[18] Russian security official cautions SCO colleagues about dangers of joint drills with US, “TASS”, 23 sierpnia 2022 r., <https://tass.com/defense/1497033>

[19] Dushanbe responds to Russian Security Council Secretary's statement, „Asia-Plus”, 24 sierpnia 2022 r., <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20220824/dushanbe-responds-to-russian-security-council-secretarys-statement>



China is also feeling the relative erosion of the Russian presence in the region amid military weaknesses in Ukraine and may consider using this situation as a chance to increase its own role and significance in Central Asia. Started back in 1996 after the creation of the Shanghai Five, the policy of establishing and gradually increasing cooperation with the Central Asian countries was conceptualized and developed taking into account the long-term perspective in China's new policy in the region to create an economic belt.

The proposal of the PRC leader to create an economic belt along the Silk Road involves the development of economic cooperation on the Eurasian continent through the construction of transport infrastructure, the growth of mutual trade by removing barriers and strengthening the role of national currencies in mutual economic transactions. At the same time, Xi Jinping suggested considering the possibility of creating better trade opportunities between the countries, as well as developing cultural and social ties. The visit of Chinese president who left China in September 2022 for the first time in almost three years was also aimed on reinforcing further implementation of BRI project in CA on the eve of the 10th anniversary of its announcement next year.

I would like to highlight 3 major developments in Chinese policy towards Central Asia after February 24, 2022:

1. As Russia's focus is now in Ukraine China would not be interested in observing the considerable rise of the Western presence in Central Asia. China is pushing actively on international arena a vision of constructing an alternative world order not led by the Western countries. The announced "integrated deterrence"[20] of the PRC in the US foreign policy, which implies a response of Washington to China's proactive position on international affairs, pushes Beijing to keep good neighbourly relations predominantly important region of Central Asia. Therefore, as preventive measure China is interested to consolidate its own influence in strategically important region of Central Asia.

At the same time, China is cautiously watching the US actions to build up its own military-political and trade-economic presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

[20] 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, „U.S. Department of Defense”, 27 października 2022.r, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>



Further expansion of allied ties with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and a number of states in Southeast Asia, as well as the intention to establish close partnership relations with India, are considered by Beijing as a phased policy of "strategic encirclement" of the PRC. In the future, as China fears, these steps may lead to a decrease in China's trade turnover with these countries and complicate access to vital maritime transport routes. Under these conditions, China is making attempts to establish reliable and fruitful relations with neighbouring countries. In particular, Beijing views the countries of Central Asia not only as friendly neighbouring countries, but as an important market for obtaining the necessary raw materials and selling its own products, as well as a land transport corridor that allows access to Europe and the Middle East.

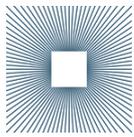
2. China is interested in using CA as transit hub for its connectivity projects across Eurasia. The major overland route linking China and the European countries goes via the Russian territory using of which is quite complicated due to the security procedures on the EU-Russia border, rejection of many European logistical companies to deal with the Russian partners on ethical grounds and difficulties to conduct financial transactions with Russian counterparts because of the existing sanctions on its banking sector[21]. The rail container traffic from China to Europe and back fell by 35% during January-September 2022. Around 50% of the east-west (from EU to China) transport operations through Russia and Belarus were temporarily suspended by the European rail and logistics operators, because many of their clients decided to shift from Russia and Belarus to other alternatives including sea shipping options[22].

The Ukrainian crisis has changed many paradigms in the current world, it has also influenced the comparative advantages of land transport routes. Infrastructurally less developed Middle Corridor from China to Europe via Central Asia and South Caucasus is becoming attractive alternative to the popular Northern Route via Russia.

[21] F. Regalado, R. Bartlett-Imadegawa, S. Tavsan, J. Kastner, *Russia's war leaves Europe with China rail route dilemma*, „Nikkei Asia”, 19 sierpnia 2022 r., <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Russia-s-war-leaves-Europe-with-China-rail-route-dilemma>

[22] H. Askary, *The China-EU Express Railway Roaring on: Putin Did Not Kill China's Eurasian Dream!*, „BRIX Sweden”, 27 lipca 2022 r., <https://www.brixsweden.org/the-china-eu-express-railway-roaring-on-putin-did-not-kill-chinas-eurasian-dream/>

[23] Y. Yakis, *Silk Road's middle corridor growing in importance*, „Arab News”, 3 stycznia 2022 r., <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2199141>



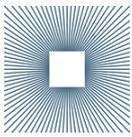
This route actually is the shortest comparing to the Northern and Maritime options – about 7,000 km – and it takes 10 to 15 days to reach European destinations[23]. However, this route still has many shortcomings like complicated border crossing formalities to cross territories of several countries, need for building new ports, ferries and railroads and also establishing peace and stability in South Caucasus.

Another connectivity project which China is actively promoting after the start of the war in Ukraine – railway China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan. After decades of discussions between the participating sides, Moscow had to revise its behind the scenes objection to facilitate this initiative. During the SCO summit in September 2022 Chinese, Kyrgyz and Uzbek officials signed a trilateral memorandum of understanding concerning cooperation on the Kyrgyz section of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project and preparing feasibility study of this initiative by the first half of 2023[24].

3. The Chinese side strives to ensure the security and sustainable socio-economic development of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region through the promotion of the infrastructure development. China intends to give a new impetus to the economic development of Xinjiang by expanding trade and economic ties with the Central Asian countries. Construction of such railway potentially can give a new push to the trade links between the regions of China and Central Asia. By transforming China's western cities into regional trade centres linked to Central Asia by roads, railways, air communications, and pipelines, Beijing intends to support the economic development in Xinjiang. The PRC may believe that the development of the states of Central Asia will ensure the stability of Xinjiang's neighbours and reduce the growth of radical forms of Islam.

Using the momentum China is willing to boost its economic and military presence in Central Asia. Possibly Beijing is concerned about Russia's attempts to further build up the Eurasian Economic Union in

[24] J. Lillis, *China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign landmark railroad deal*, „Eurasianet”, 15 września 2022 r., <https://eurasianet.org/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-sign-landmark-railroad-deal>



the space of the CIS countries. Such steps could lead to a gradual decline in trade between Central Asia and the PRC as a result of the emergence of additional trade barriers, as well as reduce Beijing's ability to construct relations in the region on a preferable bilateral basis. At the same time, given the high level of relations with Russia and mutual support on a number of international issues including Ukraine and Taiwan cases relatively, China avoids open confrontation with Russia in Central Asia.

China's strategy is designed to demonstrate that the Eurasian Economic Union is not a serious obstacle to the development of economic cooperation between China and the countries of the region. At the same time, Beijing draws attention to the fact that the model of cooperation proposed by it is focused predominantly to economic issues and is not aimed at subsequent political integration[25]. This approach especially appeals to the states of Central Asia, some of which are concerned about the political background of integration projects under the auspices of Russia.

Moreover, Beijing is step-by-step accelerating cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the military and security areas, as Moscow damaged its image of military superpower and its role as strong security guarantor in post-Soviet space is under serious doubt. While China is still acting carefully in these areas expedient to provoke the discontent of Moscow, at the same time it continues deepening relations in military exchange with the region. In this regard Chinese President stated that his country "firmly supports Kazakhstan in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity" probably referencing to Russia between the lines[26]. Xi Jinping proposed to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan "to strengthen security cooperation to defuse risks and challenges" and partnership in China led Global Security Initiative during his visit in September 2022[27].

[25] Huaxia, Full text of Xi's signed article "Build on the Past to Make Greater Strides in China-Kazakhstan Relations on Kazakh newspaper Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, „Xinhuanet”, 13 września 2022 r., <https://english.news.cn/20220913/8ffa87dc644b4a679ad0e9032bbcc822/c.html>

[26] Huaxia, Xi pays state visit to Kazakhstan, „Xinhuanet”, 15 września 2022 r., <https://english.news.cn/20220915/d89431d20872489b9d84f4b237c11478/c.html>

[27] Huaxia, Full text of Xi's signed article "Working Together for a Brighter Future of China-Uzbekistan Relations" on Uzbek media, „Xinhuanet”, 13 września 2022.r., <https://english.news.cn/20220913/b934cacbc74c45ca9a2f6fe3aa08ab0c/c.html>



Comparing to the Western military presence in the region, Chinese one is perceived by Moscow as more palatable. Besides having Chinese security forces operating a security base along the Tajik-Afghan border with their Tajik counterparts in November 2022 Dushanbe agreed to carry out regular anti-terrorism drills with Chinese security forces on its territory[28]. Xi Jinping offered Uzbekistan cooperation on the Afghan conflict saying that “China appreciates and supports the unique role of Uzbekistan in resolving the issue of Afghanistan.”[29] In addition, in recent years China has become an important seller and donor of military technology and equipment to Central Asia[30].

In general, new developments of Chinese foreign policy towards Central Asia require Beijing’s commitment, resources and attention for successful implementation. However, an uncertain factor in the construction of the economic belt remains the ambiguity of the sources of financing for the project. China is in lasting economic decline due to the negative influence of pandemic and current geopolitical situation in the world. Beijing is likely to take on most of the funding, but even China, with its vast capacity to finance the initiative on its own, appears to be a heavy burden.

Summing up, the war in Ukraine influenced on Russia’s and China’s approach to Central Asia. Both of them would like to use this opportunity to increase their significance and role in the region. However, Russia is too focused and stuck in Ukraine while until recently China was still in strict lockdown and slowed down its activities in Central Asia during 2020-2021. Masterfully use the existing opportunities appearing due to the war in Ukraine in favour of the regional countries is fully in hands of Central Asian countries.

Overcoming this crisis’ consequences depends on Central Asia’s readiness for regional coordination and mutual support in resisting any attempts to limit its sovereignty. More focus and deepening of intraregional cooperation in Central Asia could help to consolidate the

[28]R. Standish, *Central Asia Caught Between 'Two Fires' As It Branches Out From Russia*, „Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty”, 6 grudnia 2022 r., <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-russia-china/32164503.html>

[29] Full text of Xi's signed article “Working Together...”, op. cit.

[30] Y. Jiang, *China leading the race for influence in Central Asia*, „Danish Institute for International Relations Policy Brief”, 10 października 2022 r. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/china-leading-the-race-influence-in-central-asia>



the resources and to strengthen their agency in international affairs. Working on diversification of the transport corridors, trade partners, sources of investment, technologies supplies and gradual solution of sensitive regional problems like border and water distribution would be helpful in enhancing regional collaboration and decolonization of Central Asia's foreign policy visions. Further strict adherence to cooperation with diversity of external actors and promoting principles-based foreign policy would contribute to building more resilience of Central Asia and its sustainable development.