



Expanding Beyond Conventional Connections: Central Asian Nations Establish New Partnerships

Original Paper

Djamalov Fazliddin^{1*}, Alexander Schrier², Malika Khakimova³

¹ Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced International Studies under the University of World Economy and Diplomacy

² Visiting Research Fellow at IAIS, University of Pennsylvania

³ Junior Researcher at IAIS, New York University Abu Dhabi

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Abstract

The article delves into the rationale behind Central Asian countries' extensive engagement with these emerging powers, offering valuable insights into the evolving geopolitical landscape of the region. Through a structured exploration, the paper outlines the strategies in place for the Western, Russian, and Chinese vectors, subsequently focusing on the emergence and dynamics of the fourth vector. By scrutinizing the motivations and mechanisms driving Central Asia's interactions with these newfound partners, the article sheds light on the complexities and opportunities inherent in these evolving relationships. The conclusion synthesizes key arguments and proposes avenues for future research to further elucidate the evolving geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia.

Keywords

Central Asia • Multi-Vector Foreign Policy • Partnerships • Geopolitics • Emerging Powers

1 Part I: Introduction

Central Asian countries are currently recalibrating their strategies in response to evolving great power competition. Traditionally, the five republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — have adeptly balanced their relationships with Russia, China, and the United States (US) to safeguard their economic and political sovereignty. However, recent geopolitical shifts, including the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, and China's ascendance as a global economic power, have significantly transformed the geopolitical landscape.

The geopolitical vacuum created by these changes has attracted new players vying for influence in Central Asia. Such new actors include countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, India, and Pakistan. Although these countries may not possess the same global clout as the traditional great powers, they collectively represent major economies with the capacity and willingness to invest in Central Asia. This has led to a strategic invitation from Central Asian countries, seeking partnerships primarily in the energy and transportation sectors.

2 Part II: Research Methods

The historical framework for understanding Central Asia's foreign policy has been through the concept of the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy (MVFP), which seeks to cultivate beneficial relationships with multiple great powers while leveraging their competing interests.¹ The great powers serve as "vectors," which are managed by either balancing, bandwagoning, or doing both

¹ Vanderhill, R., Joireman, S. F., & Tulepbayeva, R. (2020). Between the bear and the dragon: multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers. *International Affairs*, 96(4), 975–993. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa061>

* E-mail: f.djamalov@iais.uz

simultaneously. In his book *“Great Game, Local Rules,”* Alexander Cooley illustrates the MVFP during the first half of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) from 2001 to 2012, when Central Asian countries navigated the influences of Russia, China, and the US.² His main thesis refutes the traditional “Great Game Theory,” proposing instead that Central Asian countries balanced these three powers using their own “local rules,” providing more agency to these nations.

Cooley also highlights the unsuccessful attempts of regional powers, which are not classified as great powers, to exert influence in Central Asia. His case studies on India and the European Union (EU) reveal that these regional powers were often drawn into financial commitments, such as funding for military bases, without achieving significant influence, indicating their lack of readiness for substantial engagement.³ While Cooley’s portrayal of Central Asian multi-vectorism during the GWOT was likely accurate, it does not capture the current geopolitical realities. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum in Central Asia that both Russia and China are eager to fill, pushing the region to integrate more within their national interests.⁴ Given the relative stability in Afghanistan resulting from the Taliban maintaining control, Central Asia has been viewed more through an economic lens than a security lens, enabling increased infrastructure investment.⁵

The rise of China as an economic superpower also has affected the region, with its signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) further intensifying economic engagement. The BRI is promoting extensive infrastructure projects and resource extraction in the region, while also facilitating the sales of affordable and modern electric vehicles.⁶ Finally, the Russia-Ukraine Conflict, which commenced in 2014 but accelerated in February 2022, has led Central Asian countries to reassess their relationship with Russia, considering the potential implications for their sovereignty within the post-Soviet space.⁷ Central Asia has become a key strategic area for Russia, which has moved several economic operations to the region to circumvent Western sanctions.⁸ In sum, Central Asia is not the same region it was even five years ago. The region is changing rapidly and facing a multitude of opportunities and challenges.

Still, scholars have yet to reach consensus on how to adapt the MVFP framework to reflect the current geopolitical developments. Some scholars, such as Ussenova, continue to view the vectors as primarily Russia, China and the US,⁹ while others consolidate the US and EU into one “Western” vector due to their relative lack of influence.¹⁰ A third group of scholars dismisses the notion of a Western vector entirely, arguing that Russia and China dominate the region. For instance, in an interview with Alouddin Komilov, Chief Research Fellow at the Center for Progressive Reforms, he explained that Russia and China maintain overwhelming influence in the region, undermining the Western vector.

This paper’s new framework retains the Western vector due to its geopolitical importance, albeit with limited direct influence. It also maintains the Russian and Chinese vectors given their significant regional influence. In addition, the paper suggests a fourth vector comprising regional powers: GCC countries, Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, India, and Pakistan. This vector comprises second-tier countries that have emerging economies and histories of relative neutrality towards the great powers. These powers also share economic, security, and cultural links with Central Asia, particularly in energy and transportation, which serve as critical areas for partnership. This paper provides a greater context to understand this fourth vector and explores why Central Asian countries are engaging with these emerging powers on such a scale.

3 Part III: Research Findings & Discussions

3.1 Existing Vectors

This section analyzes the three existing vectors — Western, Russian, and Chinese — in Central Asia, considering their economic and geopolitical impacts on the region. The West, represented by the US and EU, pursues an agenda of safeguarding Central

2 Cooley, A. (2012). *Great game, local rules: The new power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

3 Ibid. (p. 167).

4 Synovitz, R. (2021, December 25). Regional powers seek to fill vacuum left by West’s retreat from Afghanistan. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-power-vacuum-russia-iran-china-pakistan/31624955.html>

5 Felbab-Brown, V. (2023, February 3). Afghanistan in 2023: Taliban internal power struggles and militancy. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/afghanistan-in-2023-taliban-internal-power-struggles-and-militancy/>

6 Murataliyeva, N., & Ismailkhodjaev, S. (2023, December 23). China’s electric vehicle expansion in Central Asia. – *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/chinas-electric-vehicle-expansion-in-central-asia/>

7 Lubin, N., & Goodby, J. (2023, December 14). Central Asia and the war in Ukraine. *Hoover Institution*. <https://www.hoover.org/research/central-asia-and-war-ukraine>

8 Gusseinov, E. (2024, July 2). Will Central Asian countries face sanctions for expanding economic relations with Russia?. *Daryo.uz*. <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/07/02/will-central-asian-countries-face-sanctions-for-expanding-economic-relations-with-russia>

9 Ussenova, T. (2022). *Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy and its implications for the energy sector* (p. 1).

10 Mullodzhanov, P. (2023, October 5). Parviz Mullodzhanov: “Central Asian countries are balancing between Russia and the West in search of new security guarantors.” *CABAR.asia*. <https://cabar.asia/en/parviz-mullodzhanov-central-asian-countries-are-balancing-between-russia-and-the-west-in-search-of-new-security-guarantors>

Asian sovereignty by employing its economic and soft power to counterbalance other great powers' influence. Russia, which has a historical relationship with the region, is particularly important in terms of security, labor migration, energy, and cultural ties. Meanwhile, China has emerged as a dominant economic force, driving infrastructure projects and trade. Each power pursues different foreign policies, prompting Central Asian countries to navigate these partnerships strategically to maximize their benefits.

3.2 Western Vector

The Western vector in Central Asia intends to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence while promoting economic and political stability. The US has focused on security concerns and energy trade, while advocating for democratic reforms. The EU, on the other hand, aims to enhance connectivity and economic integration. However, both actors face substantial issues including geographic distance, logistical complexities, and limited influence compared to Central Asia's proximate neighbors.

3.3 United States

The American approach to Central Asian countries can be summarized across three main dimensions: geopolitical, economic, and political-ideological.¹¹ In an anonymous interview, one high-level US diplomat described his country's agenda as making Central Asia "secure, prosperous, and democratic." Geopolitically, the US employs diplomatic maneuvers to offset Russian and Chinese presence. Economically, there is a clear focus on securing access to Central Asia's abundant energy reserves, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which hold significant reserves of natural gas (Kazakhstan is in 15th place in the world and Uzbekistan in 19th),¹² oil (Kazakhstan is 12th),¹³ and uranium (Kazakhstan ranks 2nd and Uzbekistan 11th).¹⁴ To be precise, Washington is interested in the supply of uranium for 93 nuclear power plants in the country. Uzbekistan has 3.2 million tons of radioactive metal reserves, with the potential to increase production. Kazakhstan has 21.8 million tons of explored deposits.¹⁵ Finally, the United States seeks to promote "sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity" while enhancing regional economic connectivity and security, as President Biden directly stated during the first C5+1 (Central Asia + United States) meeting.¹⁶ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US established embassies in the newly independent Central Asian states to support their independence and counter Russian influence. Initially, US policy aimed to safeguard the Soviet nuclear legacy and prevent Russian reintegration efforts. However, 9/11 shifted the US focus to military logistics for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Relations with Uzbekistan deteriorated after the US called for an investigation into the 2005 Andijan uprising, resulting in the closure of the Karshi-Khanabad base.¹⁷ In 2014, Russian pressure forced the US out of the Kyrgyz Manas base, ending its military presence in the region.¹⁸ The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 prompted a reassessment of its Central Asian strategy. In response, the Biden Administration has struggled to develop a cohesive approach, managing the withdrawal's aftermath, addressing the growing challenges posed by Russian and Chinese influence in the region, and moving the traditional focus towards cybersecurity.

Several other factors also explain the limited US presence in Central Asia. Unlike Russia and China, which share borders and historical ties with Central Asia, the US faces significant challenges for sustained engagement due to its geographical distance, limited cultural familiarity, and logistical complexities. Moreover, the overfocus on Afghanistan and the chaotic withdrawal from it may have diminished US credibility, potentially leaving a power vacuum for Central Asia's larger neighbors, Russia and China, to fill. Finally, Washington's promotion of its own ideological frameworks has not always aligned with the priorities and interests of Central Asian states, resulting in formal agreements on democratic reforms that never get implemented.¹⁹

11 Kokoshin, A. A., & Kokoshina, Z. A. (2022). The Main Vectors of the US Foreign Policy Strategy in Central Asia. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 92(Suppl 7), S581–S588. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622130056>

12 Worldometers. (n.d.). *Gas reserves by country*. Worldometers. Retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/gas/gas-reserves-by-country/>

13 Worldometers. (n.d.). *Oil reserves by country*. Worldometers. Retrieved from https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-reserves-by-country/#google_vignette

14 Lu, M. (2024, February 13). *Charted: Global uranium reserves by country*. Visual Capitalist. Retrieved from [https://www.visualcapitalist.com/charted-global-uranium-reserves-by-country/#:~:text=Australia%2C%20Kazakhstan%2C%20and%20Canada%20have,of%20the%20world's%20reserves\)%20currently](https://www.visualcapitalist.com/charted-global-uranium-reserves-by-country/#:~:text=Australia%2C%20Kazakhstan%2C%20and%20Canada%20have,of%20the%20world's%20reserves)%20currently)

15 Kun.uz, Uzbekistan Increased Volume of Uranium Supply to USA by Almost 80%, Kun.uz. Retrieved from <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/06/17/uzbekistan-increased-volume-of-uranium-supply-to-usa-by-almost-80>

16 Biden, J. (2023, September 19). *Remarks by President Biden after Central Asia 5+1 meeting*. The White House. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/09/19/remarks-by-president-biden-after-central-asia-5-1-meeting/>

17 Paton Walsh, N. (2005, August 1). *Uzbekistan kicks US out of military base*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/aug/01/usa.nickpatonwalsh>

18 Kokoshin, A. A., & Kokoshina, Z. A. (2022). The Main Vectors of the US Foreign Policy Strategy in Central Asia. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, 92(Suppl 7), S581–S588. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1019331622130056>

19 Sokolsky, R., & Stronski, P. (2016, January 25). How much should the United States still care about Central Asia? *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2016/01/how-much-should-the-united-states-still-care-about-central-asia?lang=en>

In 2023, the US held the C5+1 summit in New York, where leaders focused on counterterrorism, strengthening regional economic ties, and energy security. Many experts agreed that the collaboration during the summit was largely symbolic, with the US signaling its continued interest in the region and Central Asian countries showcasing their commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy that balances relations with major powers.²⁰ While the C5+1 summit did not result in any significant deals or political agreements, it provides a forum for policymakers to engage with one another on mutually beneficial business and trade partnerships.

3.4 European Union

The European Union (EU) has also sought to increase its geopolitical footprint in Central Asia; however, despite its efforts, the EU has struggled to establish itself as an important player. One of the EU's primary objectives in Central Asia has been to enhance connectivity and economic integration. This has been pursued through initiatives such as the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor.²¹ The Middle Corridor is intended to create a viable East-West trade route that bypasses Russia, linking China with Europe through Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. However, the Middle Corridor faces significant challenges, including multiple border crossings, insufficient port infrastructure in Kazakhstan, and delays caused by small vessel sizes and bad weather on the Caspian Sea. These issues make the route slower and about twice as expensive as the Northern Route through Russia. Moreover, the multimodality of the Middle Corridor is a key problem of this transport highway, as it increases costs due to differences in railway track. In contrast, the Eurasian Northern Route offers a more efficient transit option, requiring approximately 19 days to travel between East Asia and Europe. Efforts to improve the Middle Corridor have reduced transit times along the TITR from 38-53 days to 18-23 days, with plans to further reduce this period to 14-18 days in 2024.²² Despite these changes, the Middle Corridor still lags behind the Northern Route in terms of speed and cost-effectiveness.

As a result, while the EU has promoted this corridor to reduce dependency on Russia, in reality, the practical difficulties hinder its effectiveness. Komilov communicated that Central Asia is often viewed by the EU as “neighbors of neighbors,” which places the region in a peripheral position on the EU's foreign policy agenda. As a result, Central Asia receives less consistent and robust engagement compared to closer neighbors and more immediate geopolitical concerns.

3.5 Russian Vector

Russia maintains its historical sphere of influence in Central Asia through its economic ties, security dominance, and the presence of labor migrants and international students. In turn, Central Asian nations pursue a strategy of balancing economic cooperation with maintaining enough distance to preserve state sovereignty. Still, Russia continues to exert a considerable reach in the region through initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and investments in the region's energy sector.

As the main security actor in Central Asia, Russia maintains several military bases and installations throughout the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). While Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are militarily nonaligned and prohibit foreign military bases on their territories, they still maintain extensive ties with Russia's armed forces and intelligence services through weapons purchases and joint military training programs.²³ Russia's influence in Central Asia remains strong due to the substantial number of Central Asian immigrants, primarily from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, living and working in the country. Despite the toll of the Russia-Ukraine war, hundreds of thousands of Central Asian citizens still move to Russia for employment, sending billions of dollars back home.²⁴ Central Asian laborers make up a significant portion of labor migrants in Russia, with around 6.6 million migrants estimated.²⁵ Some reports have emerged about attempts of Russian authorities to recruit Central Asian migrants for the frontlines, either by enticing them with Russian citizenship or through coercion. Although these Central Asian countries are striving to diversify their labor

20 Mamadshoev, M. (2023, September 25). The C5+1 summit in Washington: What does the US seek from Central Asian leaders? *CABAR.asia*. <https://cabar.asia/en/the-c5-1-summit-in-washington-what-does-the-us-look-for-from-central-asian-leaders>

21 Matveeva, A. (2023, April 13). A new opening for EU-Central Asia relations. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/04/a-new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations?lang=en¢er=europe>

22 Mussayev, A. (2024, April 15). *Trans-Caspian international transport route*. Ernst & Young. Retrieved from https://www.ey.com/en_kz/strategy-transactions/trans-caspian-international-transport-route

23 Engvall, J. (2023). Central Asia moves beyond Russia. *Current History*, 122(846), 262. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/cuh.2023.122.846.261>

24 RBC. (2023, January 28). Переводы из России в соседние страны выросли на сотни процентов. RBC. Retrieved from <https://www.rbc.ru/finances/28/01/2023/63d3c4b99a7947a38baccb5c>

25 Migration Data Portal. (n.d.). *Central Asia migration overview*. Migration Data Portal. Retrieved from [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/central-asia#:~:text=Recent%20migration%20patterns-,The%20Central%20Asia%2DRussian%20Federation%20migration%20corridor%20is%20one%20of,the%20Russian%20Federation%2C%202021\)](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/central-asia#:~:text=Recent%20migration%20patterns-,The%20Central%20Asia%2DRussian%20Federation%20migration%20corridor%20is%20one%20of,the%20Russian%20Federation%2C%202021))

migration destinations, Russia will continue to be the primary destination for most labor migrants in the coming years. At the same time, Russian higher education remains highly attractive to Central Asian youth due to the study quotas and career opportunities available with a Russian diploma. Compared to China and the US, Russia hosts a significant number of students from the region: around 30,000 from Tajikistan, 48,700 from Uzbekistan, and 61,000 from Kazakhstan.²⁶

In their foreign policy, Central Asian nations tend to adopt a “hot economy and cold politics” approach, engaging in economic cooperation while maintaining a firm stance on state sovereignty.²⁷ They are open to economic engagement, especially with private business entities, but resist external attempts to encroach upon their sovereignty. For example, they refused to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, or Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008.²⁸ The region may also be distancing itself from Russian integration projects, with Kyrgyzstan canceling military exercises planned by the Moscow-led (CSTO) and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev postponing a visit to Bishkek — possibly to avoid meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to Temur Umarov, a Fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.²⁹

Although Russia is no longer an economic leader in Central Asia, it remains engaged with Central Asian economies through the EAEU. In recent years, this union — which includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Belarus, with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan being a part of the EAEU free trade zone — has helped Russia mitigate the impact of Western sanctions by sustaining trade flows and securing critical resources.

In the energy sector, major Russian companies Lukoil and Gazprom have substantial involvement in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan’s oil and gas industries. In 2023, Gazprom planned to increase its gas supply and petroleum products to Kazakhstan and develop gas transportation infrastructure in the region to substitute for the European market.³⁰ The EAEU member states also plan to create a common market for electricity, gas, and oil and petroleum products by 2025. In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that energy prices in the EAEU are 10 times lower than in Europe, making this offer attractive for Central Asian countries.³¹

At the same time, Western sanctions have had a dual effect on Russia. While they have reduced the volume of exports directly entering Russia from Western countries, they have inadvertently boosted trade flow within the EAEU. For example, sanctioned products, particularly advanced technologies like semiconductors from US and European companies, have entered Russia via Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, exploiting the EAEU’s trade mechanisms.³² The EAEU’s trade policies facilitate the re-export of goods, allowing Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia to act as intermediaries, reselling sanctioned goods to Russia and Belarus. Moreover, Central Asian countries are increasingly attracting large Russian companies to relocate their production or supply chains. Russia currently leads in the number of established businesses in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, underscoring its economic footprint in the region.³³

3.6 Chinese Vector

In Central Asia, China plays a leading economic role through its signature economic initiatives and multilateral cooperation frameworks such as the BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China’s focus on Central Asia is primarily economic, building mutually beneficial relationships without formally expressing any geopolitical ambitions. Following its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, it prioritizes economic cooperation and respects the sovereignty of Central Asian nations to foster regional stability and prosperity.³⁴

With the growth of the Chinese economy, its international economic engagements with Central Asia have intensified. Trade between China and Central Asia has seen a remarkable surge, increasing from under \$1 billion in the 1990s to nearly \$90 billion

26 Kun.uz. (2022, January 20). *Russian Ministry of Education announces number of Uzbek students studying at higher education institutions of Russia*. Kun.uz.

27 Tkachenko, S. (2024, May 15). *Russia and Central Asia: Bilateral and Multilateral Relations*. Valdai Discussion Club. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-central-asia-bilateral-and-multilateral/>

28 Kun.uz. (2022, March 17). Abdulaziz Kamilov: “Мы не признаем Донецк и Луганск отдельными республиками” [Abdulaziz Kamilov: “We do not recognize Donetsk and Luhansk as separate republics”]. <https://kun.uz/ru/news/2022/03/17/abdulaziz-kamilov-my-ne-priznayem-donetsk-i-lugansk-otdelnymi-respublikami>

29 Umarov, T. (2022, December). *Russia and Central Asia: Never closer or drifting apart?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2022/12/russia-and-central-asia-never-closer-or-drifting-apart?lang=en>

30 Mitrova, T. (2024, February 29). *Russia’s expanding energy ties in Central Asia*. Columbia University Center on Global Energy Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/russias-expanding-energy-ties-in-central-asia/>

31 *ibid*

32 Torres, A. (2024, January 8). *Russia continues to evade sanctions — the West must stop it*. Bush Center. Retrieved from <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/russia-continues-to-evade-sanctions-the-west-must-stop-it>

33 Daryo.uz. (2024, July 2). *Will Central Asian countries face sanctions for expanding economic relations with Russia?* Daryo.uz.

34 Asia for Educators. (n.d.). *China’s foreign policy principles, 1950*. Columbia University. Retrieved from https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1950_forpol_principles.htm

by 2023.³⁵ By the end of 2022, China had accumulated investments amounting to \$15 billion in the region, contrasting sharply with Russia's lower figure of \$4.63 billion.³⁶

Launched in 2013, the BRI has enhanced regional connectivity and driven economic growth through infrastructure development and expanded trade networks. Since its inception, China has funded more than 112 projects in Central Asia, including the recent China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.³⁷ These infrastructure projects integrate Central Asian economies into global markets, boosting trade and economic growth while facilitating the delivery of Chinese goods to the region. China's economic influence in Central Asia is also linked to its broader global development strategies, which include The Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). According to Komilov, these frameworks provide economic and security governance structures that Central Asian states support.

Finally, China engages with Central Asian states through the SCO, a multilateral platform for discussing security and economic issues established in 2001. Initially, Beijing hoped to use the SCO to advance its economic and security interests in Central Asia. However, when Russia opposed China's proposals for creating a development bank and establishing a free trade zone, Beijing pivoted towards bilateral agreements and the China-plus-Central Asia (C+C5) format instead.

Overall, these three vectors exhibit distinct strategies in Central Asia. The West maintains relatively good diplomatic and economic ties with the region, but its geographical distance constraints its influence. Russia uses its historical and cultural connection to counter Western sanctions, build multilateral economic blocs, and strengthen itself as a destination for Central Asian migrant workers. China, on the other hand, has risen as the predominant economic force in Central Asia, using its fledgling economy to develop regional infrastructure and strengthen trade relationships.

3.7 Fourth Vector

On July 4, 2024, leaders of the SCO gathered in Astana, Kazakhstan to inaugurate Belarus as a full member, and at the end of the summit produced the Astana Declaration.³⁸ Chinese President Xi Jinping urged to "build a common home of peace and tranquility" and create an organization consistent with the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence."³⁹ Yet, for all the flattering words and grand visions, many of the participating dignitaries also took an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with the organization. In President Mirziyoyev's speech to his fellow delegates, he described the SCO as "fragmented" and that it "could not manage to create a solid foundation for multilateral trade and inter-sectoral partnership."⁴⁰

Two days later, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan arrived in Azerbaijan for an informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The countries agreed to strengthen green energy and transportation networks, with Mirziyoyev proposing a Council of Railway Authorities and a Turkic Environmental Council.⁴¹ Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev advocated increasing the "international status" of the organization and emphasized the importance of enhancing the TITR. In his remarks, Tokayev emphasized that "our strength is our unity," contrasting with the fragmentation Mirziyoyev used to describe the SCO.⁴² Neither the US, Russia, or China was invited to the summit. In 2022, these same leaders similarly scheduled the OTS summit two months after the September SCO summit, which both took place in Samarkand.⁴³ Regional trade within OTS member states has rapidly accelerated, surging from \$32 billion in 2022 to \$40 billion in 2023.⁴⁴

These cases illustrate the evolving nature of the MVFP within Central Asia. After demonstrating their ceremonial commitment to the Chinese-led SCO, the three Central Asian leaders directly followed this meeting with an organization free from great power oversight. This move can be seen as a diplomatic signal to diversify away from traditional great powers towards a new vector.

35 Umarov, T. (2024, May). Дружба за влияние. Как Россия и Китай уживаются в Центральной Азии [Friendship for influence. How Russia and China coexist in Central Asia]. Berlin Center for Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

36 *ibid*

37 Imamova, N. (2023, October 12). Central Asians balance benefits, risks of China's BRI. Voice of America. Retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/central-asians-balance-benefits-risks-of-china-s-bri/7308448.html>

38 Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. (2024, July 9). *Astana Declaration*. Retrieved from <https://eng.sectsc.org/20240709/1438929.html>

39 Xi, J. (2024, July 4). Full text of Xi Jinping's speech at 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus' Meeting in Astana. *Gov.cn*. Retrieved from https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202407/04/content_WS6686c48ac6d0868f4e8e8e25.html

40 Mirziyoyev, S. (2024, July 4). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the "SCO Plus" meeting. Retrieved from <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/7374>

41 Mirziyoyev, S. (2024, July 8). Shavkat Mirziyoyev's remarks at informal Turkic Summit. *Tashkent Times*. Retrieved from <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/13298-shavkat-mirziyoyev-s-remarks-at-informal-turkic-summit#:~:text=In%20such%20a%20difficult%20circumstances,OTS%20countries%20are%20steadily%20growing.>

42 Nazarbayev, N. (2024, July 6). Kazakh leader pledges utmost effort to boost international status of OTS. *Inform.kz*. Retrieved July 17, 2024, from <https://en.inform.kz/news/kazakh-president-tokayev-addresses-ots-informal-summit-in-azerbaijan-adb689/>

43 Shahbazov, F. (2022, November 17). After Samarkand Summit, the OTS charts a more independent course. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 19(173). Retrieved from <https://jamestown.org/program/after-samarkand-summit-the-ots-charts-a-more-independent-course/>

44 Organization of Turkic States: From history and trade to military-technical cooperation. (2024, July 16). *Eurasia Review*. Retrieved from <https://caliber.az/en/post/254567/>

Such behavior is not unique. Less than two weeks after President Mirziyoyev hosted President Putin in May 2024 and agreed to construct a nuclear power plant, he welcomed Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organization, to display his commitment to joining by 2026. The next day, Mirziyoyev flew to Türkiye to purchase Turkish fighter jets, which will be used to replace the older soviet models.⁴⁵

Such diplomatic maneuvers are not limited to Uzbekistan, but can be extended to all five Central Asian republics. Turkmenistan has exponentially increased trade with countries in the fourth vector. From 2017 to 2022, Turkmenistan increased imports from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) by 12.4% per annum, Azerbaijan by 9.53% per annum, and Türkiye by 81% per annum.⁴⁶ Put together, this is an increase of \$1.15 billion in imports over the past five years. China has increased their exports to Turkmenistan by 101% per annum, from \$11.3 million in 2017 to \$368 million in 2022.⁴⁷ However, put together, the UAE, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye do have comparable growth to China. In the other four Central Asian republics, trade — especially imports — and investment with the fourth vector has rapidly increased in a similar pattern.

3.8 *Actors in the Fourth Vector*

In a recent article, Azerbaijani journalist Fuad Muxtar-Agbabali made an argument supporting the emergence of a fourth vector in the broader MVFP framework. However, he constrains the new actors involved to just OTS countries. On the other hand, this paper acknowledges the leaders of the OTS (Türkiye and Azerbaijan) as part of the fourth vector but also includes the GCC countries, Iran, India and Pakistan. These countries all share key characteristics such as the presence of emerging economies, relative neutrality with at least two out of the three great powers, and being either geospatially or culturally connected with Central Asia. These countries are also regional powers, which means that they have significant influence within their own regions, but are second-tier powers on the global stage.

The relationship between the fourth vector and the Central Asian republics is a marriage of convenience. For Central Asian countries, the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the rise of China have created an environment where both Russia and China are trying to fill the vacuum left by the diminished Western influence. Given Central Asian countries' aversion to overdependence, they are looking for partners to diversify their relationships that do not pose significant threats to Russia and China.

Within the fourth vector, each power has its own specific national interests for engaging with Central Asia. However, the relationships being built primarily focus on energy and transportation partnerships. According to Islomkhon Gafarov, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies at the Institute for Advanced International Studies, the stabilization of Afghanistan caused by the Taliban's consolidation of power has changed how India and Pakistan view Central Asia. Instead of being seen through a security lens, Central Asia is now an economic opportunity, as several initiatives are being discussed to connect India and Pakistan with Central Asia through Afghanistan.

For the GCC countries, their interests stem from a broader desire to diversify their economies away from oil dependence towards leadership in green technology development. Kazakhstan possesses 56 identified reserves of rare earth minerals crucial for battery production, while Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan boast rich uranium deposits, positioning these countries as valuable trade partners for green technology resources.⁴⁸ Moreover, with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan's large swaths of land with abundant sunlight, paired with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's hydro-friendly mountainous landscape, companies from GCC countries are investing in the region to build hydro, wind, and solar plants. The GCC countries also see Central Asia as an area for strategic political influence, where they must "contain" Iran and Türkiye from gaining larger influence.⁴⁹

Türkiye, Iran, and Azerbaijan view Central Asia through a similar economic lens, but also as a cultural partner with shared values. At the recent OTS summit, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan called for the construction of a new alphabet to be adopted by all OTS members.⁵⁰ He went on to say, "we need to put our brothers who fly the flag of Turkic culture and identity beyond our borders on the agenda of our organization." Iran has perceived Tajikistan as a cultural partner sharing a common Persian identity. While there may be brief moments of disagreement, the two nations have recently become closer through the emphasis

⁴⁵ Turkish Aerospace Industries welcomes President of Uzbekistan to demonstrate technological advancements. (2024, June 6). *Daryo.uz*. Retrieved from <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/06/06/turkish-aerospace-industries-welcomes-president-of-uzbekistan-to-demonstrate-technological-advancements>

⁴⁶ Turkmenistan profile - Exports. (n.d.). *Observatory of Economic Complexity*. Retrieved from [https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tkm#:~:text=Exports%20The%20top%20exports%20of,%2C%20and%20Morocco%20\(%24193M\)](https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tkm#:~:text=Exports%20The%20top%20exports%20of,%2C%20and%20Morocco%20(%24193M)).

⁴⁷ Ibid. Retrieved from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/tkm>

⁴⁸ Central Asia's untapped potential: Key to green transition, food security, and digital economy growth. (2024, January 11). *TimesCA*. Retrieved from <https://timesca.com/central-asias-untapped-potential-key-to-green-transition-food-security-and-digital-economy-growth/>

⁴⁹ Wajid, A. (2023, November 13). The diplomatic surge between the GCC and Central Asian states. *IJSS*. Retrieved from <https://www.ijss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/11/the-diplomatic-surge-between-the-gcc-and-central-asian-states/>

⁵⁰ Turkish Foreign Minister urges Turkic states to adopt common alphabet. (2024, July 8). *Tashkent Times*. Retrieved from <https://tashkenttimes.uz/national/13304-turkish-foreign-minister-urges-turkic-states-to-adopt-common-alphabet>

on building a “Persian area,” especially as the four other Turkic republics develop closer ties with Türkiye and Azerbaijan.⁵¹ There may be an additional reason for this marriage of convenience between Central Asia and the fourth vector. In a private interview with a former high-level Uzbek diplomat, he suggested that this relationship might be orchestrated by the US as a means of interacting with Central Asia through other powers. This diplomat reiterated that the current US priority is to maintain leverage in its competition with China. Given the US’s geographical distance from Central Asia, and Russia and China’s overwhelming influence in the region, any aggressive US action to increase engagement might not be well received by its two larger neighbors. Though, through neutral powers, the US might be informally coordinating a coalition of emerging countries to diversify Central Asia away from Russian and Chinese influence.

In contrast, conversations with US diplomats revealed that the US lacks a grand strategy in the region, countering the speculation from the Uzbek side. Regardless, this argument sheds light on the new, diversified networks being built in the region. In the next two subsections, this paper will highlight the makeup of these networks, which primarily consist of energy and transportation links.

4 Part IV: Conclusion

This paper has attempted to add to the literature surrounding the MVFP by proposing a fourth vector that acts as a counterweight to the existing Western, Russian, and Chinese vectors. This fourth vector is a conglomeration of medium or regional powers: the GCC countries, Türkiye, Iran, Azerbaijan, India, and Pakistan. To be clear, the fourth vector countries are not replacing the existing great powers’ influence in the region; they are merely serving as an outlet in the areas of energy and transportation to connect Central Asia with other parts of the world. In the case of Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Iran, these powers also offer a cultural counterweight through the Turkic and Persian connections that challenge the existing Russian cultural soft power in the region. It may have become evident that throughout Part III, the Western vector was rarely discussed. The Russian vector stands to lose the most from the fourth vector since most of the new transport routes avoid Russia and energy diversification efforts — not including nuclear energy — exempts Russia. For China, they stand to win economically from the expansion of BRI funding; however, based on the contrast of enthusiasm between the recent SCO and OTS summits, their cultural and soft power in Central Asia is likely to be countered by the fourth vector.

This leaves the West, which may gain the most from the rise of a fourth vector. For the US, and to a lesser extent the EU, competing against Russia and China is of utmost importance during today’s “inflection point in history.”⁵² Through this prism, the fourth vector countries are effectively advancing Western interests. Specifically, the fourth vector provides Central Asia with opportunities for global integration beyond its immediate neighbors. These countries may also serve as conduits for Western ideas and values, circumventing the perception of neocolonial imposition that direct Western involvement might engender. This mutually beneficial arrangement addresses the geographical constraints that have limited Western influence in the region in recent years. Such benefits may result from strategic coordination by the US, as the former Uzbek diplomat suggested, or could be mere coincidence, as some US diplomats indicate.

Nonetheless, the fourth vector has significantly impacted Central Asian foreign policy. Further research could examine the sustainability of this relationship, especially if Russia chooses to challenge the fourth vector, as they have done with warming up to the Taliban, for example. Additionally, it may be valuable to analyze the role that great powers play in influencing fourth vector countries. Such findings may offer insight into whether the US or EU are truly playing a significant role in shaping Central Asia’s diversification of its relationships. All of these future areas of research are crucial to building a more comprehensive understanding of the MVFP, especially as its relevance increases in a more multipolar world.

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