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# Russia's Reaction to US-China Competition in Central Asia

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One of the founding fathers of geopolitics, Mackinder (1904), emphasizes the importance of Central Asia for the command in the world because of its location in the center of Eurasia. Similarly, Brzezinski (1997) highlights the geopolitical role of the region in the post-Cold War period. While the influence of Russia and China in Central Asia, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is undeniable, the role of the United States in a 'New Great Game' between great powers is questionable. The United States has created and led a liberal world order since the end of World War II and has been interested in preventing a transition to a multipolar system with its grand strategy of 'extraregional hegemony' (Layne 2006). As the United States emerged as the unipole after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and China started to challenge the U.S. position and pursue strategies to be recognized as great powers (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Since 1992, China has had a grand strategy of rejuvenation (regaining its great power status), which evolved from 'hide and bide' to 'peaceful rise' and then to Xi's 'Chinese Dream' based on reassurance, reform, and resistance (Goldstein 2020). The main question is whether a rising China poses a threat to the international order and American power (Doshi 2021; Ikenberry 2008; Owen 2019; Schweller and Pu 2011). Regardless of China's policies, it can be argued that the 'assertive China' discourse can affect U.S. foreign policymakers' interpretations of Chinese foreign policy and narrow their options (Johnston 2013). Since the current grand strategy and perceptions in the United States make the rise of China a likely threat to its interests in the long run, the United States has concentrated on preventing China from disturbing the world order and challenging U.S. leadership. Hence, it has pursued policies to compete with China and contain its growing influence.

While geopolitical competition with China is the main policy focus of the United States, Russia is another state that it considers a threat to international stability. Indeed, the National Security Strategy (NSS) by the Biden administration (White House 2022) highlights the competition between democracies and autocracies, emphasizing the need for U.S. leadership to keep the international order free, open, and secure. It especially focuses on China and Russia, as China aims to reshape the international system to its advantage, while Russia's aggressive actions pose immediate threats to global stability. The NSS emphasizes the need to out-compete China in the Indo-Pacific region and globally and to constrain Russia's destabilizing actions. It underscores the importance of maintaining strategic alliances.

In the U.S.-China competition, the U.S. seeks to prevent China from expanding its global influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. However, it has overlooked Central Asia, where China has gained geopolitical power, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, aimed at building economic relations under Chinese leadership, can threaten the U.S. international position. Consequently, the U.S. might need to increase its influence in Central Asia to counter China's growing power in this region, which is located near both China and Russia —two states whose disruptive impact on the international order the United States aims to constrain.

It is important to clarify how Central Asia fits into the United States's grand strategy of preserving global leadership and containing China and what policy options towards the region it can formulate. This chapter argues that the

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United States has national interests in engaging with Central Asia and discusses the constraints, opportunities, and policy choices it faces while confronting Russia and China and interacting with the countries in the region. The article discusses (1) U.S. interests in Central Asia, (2) the role of China and Russia in the region, (3) Central Asian states' foreign policy stances towards external actors, and (4) the possible actions with which the United States could further its interests in the region.

## **U.S. Interests in Central Asia**

The United States has limited engagement with Central Asia, attributable to several factors. Firstly, Central Asia comprises landlocked states surrounded by U.S. rivals or adversaries such as Russia, China, and Iran. Secondly, the regimes governing Central Asian states often view Western countries with suspicion. Indeed, the United States has primarily associated Central Asia with its presence in Afghanistan and concerns about terrorism. Overall, Central Asia is not a priority in U.S. policy, resulting in an ad hoc approach. Nevertheless, the United States adopted the Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025, indicating its continued interest in the region (Department of State, 2020). This strategy outlines various interests, including supporting the sovereignty of Central Asian states, fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights, and increasing U.S. investment in the region, besides dealing with terrorism and stabilizing Afghanistan. Moreover, it seeks to enhance connections between Central Asia and Europe and South Asia, reflecting the United States' goal of reducing Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The strategy also states that engagement in Central Asia will advance U.S. national security interests, promote cooperation to balance against the region's neighbors, and support business initiatives that also benefit U.S. employment. Another indication of U.S. interest is the initiation of C5+1 summits of foreign ministers in 2015. The NSS (White House 2022) mentions Central Asia in two contexts: Russia's destabilizing actions in other countries and U.S. support for the stability and interests of Central Asia, including through the C5+1 platform.

Russia and China could form a new coalition that might challenge US interests. Russia and China signed a roadmap for closer military cooperation on November 23, 2021, following U.S. bomber flights near their borders. On February 4, 2022, a joint statement by Russia and China asserted that their friendship 'has no limits.' Consequently, the United States needs to prevent the strengthening of ties between Russia and China while avoiding actions that could further unite them. This is especially pertinent as China and Russia deepen their partnership and cooperation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the United States can be expected to have a clear policy towards Central Asia, a region neighboring both China and Russia. Overall, the United States needs engagement with Central Asia given its following interests: to keep its leadership of the international order by countering attempts to disrupt it; to prevent economic dominance by China; and to counter terrorism and instability in the region. The first two interests (geopolitical and economic) are directly related to the perceived threat by China. Indeed, competition with China alone offers a long-term rationale for promoting U.S. interests in Central Asia, as the United States would not want to lose the region to China, which could use it to increase its economic and political power.

How the United States can spread its influence in Central Asia depends on the context and conditions of the region. While the relative powers and roles of the United States, China, and Russia matter at the systemic level, Central Asian states also have agency. Thus, to assess the required means for the United States to succeed, it is important to know how China and Russia influence the region, how they might oppose increased engagement by the United States, and how Central Asian states formulate their foreign policies.

## **China and Russia in Central Asia**

China has started to gain influence in different parts of the world through its economic policies. Its relations with Central Asia are even stronger because of geographical proximity. Indeed, China is one of the main trading partners of the Central Asian states, and trade in energy is a crucial issue both for them and China. For a long time, the Central Asia countries were dependent on Russia for exporting their energy resources. The diversification of the energy market became important for the security of these states. China offered such diversification by investing in pipeline construction and becoming the region's primary energy importer. The BRI project is expected to strengthen economic relations between Central Asian states and China, as China seeks economic integration and invests in these countries. The infrastructure projects linking China to Europe are expected to bring development to the region,

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making the BRI initiative particularly significant for the landlocked countries of Central Asia. While concerns have been raised about China's potential use of debt-trap diplomacy, Van der Kley and Yau (2021) argue that Chinese firms are responsive to local demands and contribute to economic development in Central Asia.

As for Russia, Moscow considers the post-Soviet space its sphere of influence, viewing it as essential for serving Russia's interest of being a regional hegemon. Russia aims to exert influence and control over the post-Soviet states to dominate the region, shape its policies, limit the influence of other states, and ultimately attain great power status. To achieve this goal, Russia has employed various methods, including the use of institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), pursuing a strategy of 'cooperative hegemony' (Šćepanović 2021). Indeed, Russia has been wary of other powers' presence in its neighborhood, considering this as interference in its sphere of influence. Generally, Russia is suspicious of Western countries' actions and opposes their promotion of liberal values. Russia's actions towards Georgia and Ukraine illustrate how it can react to perceived threats to its power in the post-Soviet space. Accordingly, Russia feels a need to approve the extent of the presence of other powers in Central Asia. First, Russia does not tolerate the United States in the region, especially given the strained relations between the two countries following the annexation of Crimea, interference in US elections, cyberattacks, and the invasion of Ukraine. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States has responded by imposing sanctions, engaging in diplomacy, and providing military aid to weaken Russia economically, diplomatically, and militarily. The rivalry between the United States and Russia means that increased U.S. engagement in Central Asia will not be welcomed by Russia.

Second, Russia is allowing China to pursue its economic interests in Central Asia. China's interests in the region are perceived as limited, as it does not seek political influence in Central Asia. While some argue that the BRI and the EAEU may lead to competition, others suggest that these initiatives do not conflict (Kaczmarek, 2017). Russia does not oppose the BRI because it is also interested in benefiting from economic integration with China. It is noteworthy that Russia maintains strategic relations with China, and both countries appear to respect each other's interests, fostering cooperation and avoiding conflicts. Moreover, unlike the United States, both Russia and China are governed by authoritarian regimes and share an interest in keeping the United States away from their neighborhood. Additionally, Russia and China seem to have reached an agreement regarding their respective roles in the region with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China has emerged as an important ally of Russia while officially maintaining a neutral stance. China has rhetorically supported Russia, arguing that NATO violated Russia's security interests. Gabuev (2023; 2024) highlights that their relationship has strengthened significantly across trade, technology, military, and diplomatic areas. Despite abstaining from direct military assistance, China continued to trade with Russia, significantly helping the Russian economy. While the Chinese-Russian relationship is asymmetrical, with Russia relying heavily on China, China also benefits geopolitically from a closer partnership with Russia and economically from the energy trade. Besides SCO, China and Russia cooperate within BRICS. Overall, the partnership between China and Russia aims to counter Western dominance and challenge American power, leading to increased cooperation and alignment. Addressing this alignment would require a strategic approach from the West.

In summary, Russia does not perceive the increasing economic influence of China in Central Asia as an immediate threat to its interests. While Russia remains cautious about potential threats, particularly as China strengthens its ties with Central Asian states, the absence of explicit political ambitions from China and a mutual understanding allow Russia to accept China's involvement in the region. Thus, Russia and China might have a kind of shared hegemony in the region, while the United States might confront these countries as united against it.

## Central Asian States' Interests

Although the interests and relative power of the United States, China, and Russia can matter, ultimately, which one might have more influence in Central Asia depends on Central Asian states themselves, as the competition would be over these states. It is important to examine the interests and reactions of Central Asian states to understand whether and how U.S. foreign policy towards the region can succeed. As Cooley (2012) argues, any power-seeking influence

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in the region is expected to play by the 'local rules.' It is worth noting that while we can treat the states collectively due to their many similarities, there are also important differences between them. However, in this chapter, I examine these states together for two reasons: the factors influencing their policy choices are similar, and the analysis aims to evaluate U.S. foreign policy towards the region as a whole.

Central Asian leaders are concerned about regime survival. This means that they are unlikely to perceive Russia or China as threats to the regime because of their similar attitudes to Western values. They are believed to have a political system similar to Russian 'sovereign democracy.' Additionally, China does not require any internal changes in these countries in exchange for economic assistance, unlike Western institutions. As these countries do not want the promotion of democracy or human rights, which can threaten the regime, they avoid the 'destabilizing' influence of Western countries, including the United States. Indeed, scholars have explored the influence of domestic regimes on post-Soviet states' strategies towards great powers (e.g., Horowitz and Tyburski 2012; Miller 2006).

While China and Russia have an advantage over the United States in terms of not being perceived as a threat, this does not mean that Central Asian states lack an interest in good relations with the United States. Generally, the concepts of multi-vectorism and hedging are used to explain smaller post-Soviet states' strategies towards larger states. Gnedina (2015) writes that multi-vector policies involve states neither balancing nor bandwagoning; instead, they bargain with external actors to get benefits. Kuik (2021) defines hedging behavior "as insurance seeking behavior under situations of high uncertainty and high stakes, where a rational state avoids taking sides and pursues opposite measures vis-à-vis competing powers to have a fallback position" (300). That is, these states diversify their alliances and partnerships to avoid exclusive alignment with any single power, seeking to balance the influence of larger powers while ensuring they benefit from these relations. Indeed, Central Asian states' foreign policy approach can be characterized as one of 'risk management' based on conservatism, pragmatism, and multi-vectorism (Radnitz 2018). To illustrate, the region's political, military, and economic relations with Russia have not precluded it from seeking economic benefits from China. Central Asian states have also benefitted from assistance provided by Western countries, including the United States. Unless their regimes face criticism or threats, Central Asian states are generally open to cooperation with Western countries.

Regarding the relations of Central Asian states with Russia, China, and the United States, the scope and areas of interaction differ. First, Central Asian states have political, military, economic, and cultural relations with Russia (Skalamera 2017). Russia has political influence in the region. Indeed, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the CSTO. Russia also serves as a significant source of income for these countries. Not only do they export products to Russia, but many people also migrate to Russia and send remittances to their families. Cultural and historical ties exist among these countries due to their shared Soviet legacy, further strengthening Russia's soft power over them; the Russian language is common in the region, and Russian media channels are preferred by many. Second, relations with China are primarily economic, as these countries rely on China for economic benefits. However, some groups within Central Asia perceive China's rise as a threat, and experts question China's role in the region; indeed, cultural differences also play a role, as China has been viewed as an opponent of Turkic people and Islam (Peyrouse 2016). Finally, relations with the United States have predominantly focused on assistance or counterterrorism. There is potential for U.S. soft power, as people are willing to improve their standards of living, while some groups advocate for greater democracy in their countries.

It is equally important to understand the perceptions of the United States, China, and Russia held by the people of Central Asia. Kennedy and Southern (2021) argue that Central Asians have more trust in Russia and China, as the United States is less active in the region. A Gallup poll found that people had better perceptions of Russia, followed by China and the United States (McGlinchey and Laruelle 2019). Focus groups revealed that a lack of information contributed to unfavorable views of the United States and China. Therefore, engagement by the United States and China with the people of these states could help improve their approval ratings. This means there is an area of competition between these countries.

Another common issue for Central Asian states is the definition of their national interests (De Haas 2016). Sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity are prioritized, shaping the foreign policies of these states. Central Asian states have expressed opposition to foreign interference in their affairs and the presence of military

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troops on their territories. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of domestic security and stability, viewing domestic unrest as the main threat. Consequently, they are reluctant to allow freedom for civil society, viewing it as a potential disruptor of regime stability. This perspective contributes to their perception of Western democracy promotion as a threat. In summary, Central Asian states seek to avoid interference from external actors and maintain domestic stability.

It is worth noting that although the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have caused alarm among Central Asian states, they have continued their pragmatic approach to foreign policy, distancing themselves from the conflict and maintaining their multi-vector policies. They maintain a careful position not to anger Russia and continue regular relations with Russia, China as well as the West, including the United States. In any case, the United States needs to consider the pragmatic foreign policy attitudes of Central Asian states and ensure engagement with the region while balancing the overall increasing influence of China.

Overall, Central Asian countries prioritize state and regime security, show openness to states with similar regimes, and adopt pragmatic approaches to benefit from various sources. This is a crucial consideration for the United States when formulating foreign policy towards the region. The success of U.S. policy will depend on how Central Asian states perceive and accept it, and whether they view its influence as legitimate, which ultimately relates to the image and soft power of the United States. Both Russia and China actively pursue policies to gain soft power in Central Asia, using educational initiatives to attract students, fostering cultural ties, and promoting their language and culture (Leskina and Sabzalieva 2021).

## U.S. Foreign Policy towards Central Asia

Achieving U.S. interests in Central Asia depends on a policy rooted in a clear understanding of the region. Given China and Russia's unified rivalry with the United States in Central Asia, and the regional states seeking to derive benefits from various relations (unless their security is jeopardized), the United States should recognize that the region will not be exclusively dominated by one major power. Therefore, the United States would need to concentrate on increasing its relative influence in this shared area. Potential actions for the United States include defining Central Asia's role in its grand strategy, determining foreign policy objectives aligned with its interests, and choosing appropriate means to attain these goals while considering the aforementioned regional conditions.

Although there are competing interpretations of grand strategy, drawing from the definitions provided by many scholars (Brands 2014; Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Kennedy 1991; Martel 2015; Silove 2018), I adopt a broader definition and maintain that grand strategy is a state's comprehensive and long-term approach to achieving its highest political objectives using various military and nonmilitary means. Brands (2014) and Martel (2015) argue that a coherent and context-tailored grand strategy with a proper relationship between means and ends is necessary. If grand strategy is formulated coherently, then it becomes clear how different regions of the world would be related to national interests in the long term. A grand strategy would enable the United States to explicitly state the role of Central Asia for its interests, instead of taking ad hoc steps. As mentioned before, the United States has an interest in the region to the extent that it wants to maintain its leadership of the international order as China is rising.

Within the framework of its grand strategy, the United States would need to engage with Central Asia to increase its role in the region relative to China and Russia. As part of its interest in preventing the rise of new hegemonies in other regions, the United States would need to improve connections with Central Asian states. If more countries join China's sphere of influence, it could emerge as a new regional hegemon. In the long run, China could potentially gain dominance in Central Asia and secure Russia as an ally. Therefore, Central Asia is likely to play a significant role in the grand strategy of the United States, which aims to secure its leadership position in the world and compete with China.

The United States can strengthen its relations with Central Asian states, providing them with another external actor to consider in their multi-vector foreign policies. These countries highly value their independence and stability and are wary of interventions. They are unlikely to fully accept the influence or dominance of any great power and may feel more threatened by Western states. Therefore, the United States can increase engagement in the region by fostering

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strategic and economic relations with Central Asian states. Without political, military, or institutional aspirations, such actions are unlikely to disturb China or Russia. Also, it is less likely to provoke aggressive responses similar to Russia's actions towards Georgia or Ukraine, given Central Asia's lack of pro-European preference. Central Asian states themselves are hesitant to engage with Western institutions and are cautious even about Russian and Chinese institutions. If the United States refrains from attempting to tie these countries with institutional means, China and Russia are less likely to feel insecure. Russia and China seem to share influence in the region, so the United States could also join them. Shared hegemony in Central Asia is a possibility, particularly because the five regional countries pursue multi-vector foreign policies, seeking to limit the influence of great powers while maximizing benefits from various sources.

There are actions that the United States should and should not take to gain legitimacy among Central Asian states. It can benefit from economic, strategic, and soft power in Central Asia without interfering in the domestic affairs of these countries. The United States and its allies can finance more effective programs to build long-term partnerships.

The United States can have economic projects with Central Asian states, as they are interested in diversification and development. The United States has been emphasizing the importance of the North-South route to connect Central Asia and South Asia. It has provided institutional and financial support to the Central Asia-South Asia power project. It is also cooperating with countries in the region on different economic, energy, and environmental projects, and they have common programs focusing on joint military exercises, American education, border security, and capacity building. The key point is that the United States would need to seize opportunities to compete with China. The region has attracted attention because of its energy resources, and while China has been able to get access to these resources, the United States could not finalize the export of these resources to European countries, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, although the failure of the plans was also because of the regional states' reluctance in participating in such projects. There are many investment opportunities that would be interesting for U.S. businesses. In brief, the United States would need to use economic tools to support Central Asian states and not lag behind Chinese investments. Economic activities alone are not going to improve attitudes towards the United States, but they are a crucial factor in the region's interest in cooperation with the United States.

While actively engaging with the region, the United States could also rely on its allies to compete with China. Indeed, it is worth noting that India, being an ally of the United States and a rival of China, could be an important actor in this plan. India is interested in forming connections with the region, so it could help the United States to contain the increasing role of China and benefit from closer relations with the regional states. What is worth noting is that Russia seems to accept India's engagement with the region, and India and Russia have strategic relations. Russia invited India to the SCO to limit Chinese influence in the region and is now interested in cooperating with India under the EAEU. With India's increased role in the region, the US could have common projects with India and Central Asian states.

Another ally of the United States in furthering its interests could be the European Union (EU). The EU has been financing different projects in the region. A closer analysis of the EU's New Strategy on Central Asia shows that the EU also has geopolitical interests in this region, although it declared its un-geopolitical interests (Fawn 2021). It should be noted that while they might be an additional outside actor for Central Asia states in their hedging policies towards Russia and China, their emphasis on democracy and human rights could backfire.

An additional area where the interests of Central Asian states and the United States converge is counterterrorism. They already cooperate in this area, but this issue has become more important after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Central Asian states are willing to accept foreign aid when it comes to combating extremism or terrorism, as they are concerned about stability. While they are not willing to accept U.S. troops, other mechanisms would be welcome. Also, an important case is Tajikistan. While other Central Asian states have not been concerned about the power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Tajikistan has expressed its worry. Indeed, China started to help Tajikistan construct a new base, and there are claims that Chinese troops have been in this country for a few years (Standish 2021). This suggests that the United States would need to be in Central Asia to support the countries especially once there is demand; otherwise, China's relative power will continue to increase.

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Another important means for the United States to be accepted as a legitimate actor in the region is soft power. It can use public diplomacy to gain the hearts and minds of people. In the pursuit of attracting people, assistance projects and scholarships can be helpful. Indeed, the United States has invested in educational projects, but there are still more opportunities that could be grasped. Given the limited information about the United States available to people in Central Asia, the United States could increase its focus on programs introducing them to American culture. Additionally, promoting the English language would be more effective if there were better opportunities for people to learn it.

Finally, the United States should exercise caution in its approach. It should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of Central Asian states and avoid criticism of their regimes if it seeks to gain trust and access. Additionally, efforts to promote democracy should be avoided, as such actions are often viewed as threats to existing regimes. Failure to take into account these considerations could hinder efforts to build better relations with these states, potentially driving them further towards Russia and China.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the interests of the United States in Central Asia and why it needs to increase its influence in the region in competition with China. After considering the relative interests and influence of the United States, China, and Russia in the region as well as analyzing the conditions and interests of Central Asian states, the chapter has argued what type of strategy, policies, and actions the United States is likely to have for success. The United States needs to clearly state the connection of Central Asia to its grand strategy, focusing on the foreign policy goal of engaging with the region. Actions are likely to include economic engagement, support of allies, counterterrorism cooperation, and the use of soft power tools, while avoiding interference in the internal affairs of Central Asian states.

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