

The Geopolitical Implications of the Russo-Ukraine War for Central Asia

Written by Andrew Latham and Audun Sundeen

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ANDREW LATHAM AND AUDUN SUNDEEN, APR 18 2022

In the aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine, a storm is brewing in another part of the former Soviet space – Central Asia. This region, rich in resources, is caught in a field of forces defined by Russian, Chinese, Iranian, Turkish, Indian and American (as related to the war in Afghanistan)'s interests. As a strong Russia defending and backing the five republics that comprise the region becomes weaker and the states are forced to look elsewhere for patronage and support, the resulting geopolitical void will create the conditions-of-possibility for extreme shifts in power that will have significant knock-on effects for the global balance of power. As a result, we may see a world where China and Iran border each other, allied against the Russians and Turks. We may see Indian-backed Central Asian republics. Depending on who does what, these changes may precipitate NATO involvement. Altogether, Russia and Ukraine's war is likely to have significant – maybe even ominous – geopolitical consequences outside of Europe that will reshape world politics, political alignments, and the security environment far beyond the region.

Russia seems to wish to recreate the old Soviet Union – or perhaps even the old Czarist empire. Putin has directly stated he thinks the republics should not exist, for countries so dependent on Russia, this is an existential threat. For each of these countries, they either have to look outside of Russia towards China and hope they will still exist or further afield. Turkey has major interests in the region in their talks of a unified Turan and Turkic solidarity. Iran wishes for a return of greater Iran and nearly every other group provides an existential threat to these states.

Every Central Asian government can no longer trust Russia to help with their disputes, with their internal security, for economic support, for protection from other countries and beyond that cannot even trust them to not intervene themselves once they are finished with Ukraine. For the people within these republics, the opposition movements of any alignment have now noticed that Russia can no longer prevent movement, the economy is crashing for the average person and the future is unclear. On top of this, Russia has the gall to request troops from Kazakhstan for Ukraine despite Russian actions. No wonder these states have called for mediation or refused to comment. The current set of responses are characterized by a shift in attention away from Russia and are 'hard fought and hard won' as seen in *Responses from Central Asian States to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine* (Eschment 2022). The current Russia is weak and unclear, and now Central Asia is looking towards a new path through realignment or regime change. Uzbekistan has directly made a statement declaring its support for an independent Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, a clear sign of a pivot in support.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan both just watched their main governmental sponsored factions fall in Afghanistan and their relations with the Taliban government have been tense. Depending on the statistics, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks became refugees in the respective republics, adding another strain. The security of those borders are a concern as the Taliban supported various groups who fought against the Uzbek government in Uzbekistan and terrorist groups. For the Tajiks the government of Tajikistan supported the US-aligned Northern Alliance made up of ethnic Tajiks and had a tense relationship with the new government after the collapse. Russia had stepped in with troops and bases to guarantee a defense, since the departure of the U.S. Now it's clear that the Russians cannot guarantee extensive military assurances to the safety of these states.

On that note, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have extensive border conflicts. Recently Tajikistan burned

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down a number of ethnic Kyrgyz villages along the border as a result of these ongoing conflicts that were created as a result of the Soviet borders. These borders left many people on the wrong side of the borders of nation-states because they were intended for provinces and not for independent countries. In Kyrgyzstan there are multiple villages that are an exclave territory of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan wholly surrounded by Kyrgyzstan. These border conflicts have been ongoing for generations now. Most of them have been defused and mediated by the Russian government, but are inevitable to resurface as mentioned in *Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Endless Border Conflicts* (Kurmanalieva 2019, 9). Threats to regimes have been interceded and defused by Russian involvement in the civil wars in the region. Most of the current leadership of these countries have maintained their power by Russian influence. Now, that power is unclear, and Russian military strength seems weaker and weaker. While resentment, both economic and nationalistic grows.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also have a neighbor to the east that is eager to expand. Chinese interests within the region have only risen and the borders of both countries with China seem to change overnight, to expand on China's side. Sometimes literally in the case of Tajikistan who overnight lost 20km of territory in the Pamir mountains. Ethnic Kazakhs have also been victims within the Chinese genocide in Xinjiang for a reason. All countries in the region are feeling the threat coming from China and look to Russia to maintain structural integrity and security.

Let us talk for a moment in detail about the complicated situation involving Turkey in Central Asia. Many op-eds have been published about the attempts for a neo-Ottoman Empire, and the talk of such a construct, but not much has been talked about in terms of the alternative greater Turkish state: Turan. The Nationalist Movement Party, a far-right party in Turkey, and part of Erdogan's coalition has explicitly Turanian ideology. The belief calls for a unification of all Turkish peoples (sometimes also including Uralic, Altaic and Mongolic as well depending on who you ask), which includes the Central Asian states, as well as Azerbaijan and many populations within the current Russian borders. Turkey has declared itself the defenders of the Turkic peoples multiple times before (which in Central Asia has been viewed with suspicion and maybe posturing). However, right now is the time for the Turks to prove themselves as the defenders of the Turkic peoples. No more threats to Russia about the Crimean Tatars if they take Crimea, or they use this moment to start unifying territory in the face of Russian weakness and Chinese/Iranian threats. As a part of NATO, if they could prove that NATO backing would extend to anything anti-Russian, then their claims may be seen as more legitimate. The main power that would prevent any of these unifications assuming that the Central Asian republics would not fight back would be the natural rival Iran.

So let's talk about the Iranian question in Central Asia. To be brief, the Iranians can look back on their own history and conclude two things. First, all of Central Asia used to be Iranian and was taken from them by colonial powers/Turkic uprisings according to most Iranians (simplifying a long history). Second, Tajiks speak almost the same language to Farsi, most of the major Uzbek cities have been of extreme cultural importance to Iranian culture and also have a core of Iranic speaking populations. Samarqand/Samarkand, Bukhara/Buxuro, and Shahrissabz amongst many others, have produced thousands of pieces of poetry, literature, and legends still held deeply within Iranian culture. If you ask many Iranians about those cities, many will respond with simply "oh those are ours". The only thing that has prevented Iranians from proving that these states and cities are "theirs" is the Russians and before that the Soviet Union. A great article on the Iranian view of Central Asia is *Central Asia in the Iranian Geopolitical Imagination* (Wastnidge 2017). If the Turks have a chance for a power grab all the way over in Anatolia, the Iranians are right on the border. Iran-Russian relations have always been of necessity and tumultuous at best, and Russia cannot afford to lose the few allies they retain. Especially if U.S. sanctions on Iran are lifted or dialed back and focus shifts away from Iran and towards Saudi Arabia, this is the moment to take territory. At the very least, these republics could quickly become satellite states of Iran, they would have little alternative, if pressure was applied directly. Resistance amongst the populace would be huge however, due to religious and historical tensions between Shia and Sunni as well as Turkic vs. Iranian etc. etc. So, it would hardly be without resistance.

Now let us turn our attention to Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan has always been something of a wildcard amongst the Central Asian republics. Some characterize the country as Central Asian North Korea due to the totalitarian control and abysmal treatment of human rights. However, unlike its neighbors and the rest of the republics, as far as we know (information leaving the country is incredibly limited), they have lacked the security and internal issues of the rest of the republics. However, this is partially due to the controlled economy completely dependent on Russian

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exports originally. However, in the last twenty years, as they have cautiously reformed their economy out of Soviet command systems, multiple natural gas pipelines have been established going into Iran, China and TAPI (Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India which the Turkmen government hopes to have built in the coming years). Oil is being exported to Europe and Turkey through the Caspian Sea, with partnerships with Azerbaijan. Altogether Turkmenistan seems to have already created an economic system distinct from Russian needs, they still depended on Russian alliance and stability to keep the Republic from being interfered with by neighboring countries. The lack of a Russian patron would force Turkmenistan to become closer to its other major alliance partners, the Azerbaijanis and the Iranians which makes concerns about Iranian incursion more terrifying. Even more Russian bound goods are now going to Iran because the Russians lack the buying power with the current state of the Ruble. Already hundreds of thousands of ethnic Turkmen live just over the border in Iran, and as mentioned above, the Iranians could easily justify a claim to sovereignty over the entire region to its people.

Kazakhstan is in a more complicated situation than any of the other republics. The recent unrest had a clear undertone of the need for the regime to prove that it was a regime for the Kazakh people as opposed to a puppet of Russian interests. When CSTO peacekeepers quelled the recent unrest, many saw it as the ultimate symbol of Russian suzerainty over the Kazakh government. However, the Kazakh government now is in a bind when it comes to winning over the population. The Russian ultimatums about re-annexation also are aptly terrifying for Kazakhstan which hosts a 20% Russian population. In 2014 Putin made similar comments as he made about Ukraine about Kazakhstan, and the Kazakh population has never forgotten. In Kazakh language media owned in Kazakhstan, there is no “special operation” it is a war, and demonstrations have been held in support of Ukraine in Almaty. The Kazakh government is being pushed farther and farther away from Russian influence daily. However, at the same time, the alternative is not completely clear. Kazakhstan has key economic resources in natural gas and uranium that can support its economy but also makes it crucial to the economies of any state that wishes to trade. Russia can no longer afford to buy these resources due to the sanctions, unless the Kazakhs want to destabilize their own economy further. So, Russia will be deprived of these key resources necessary for their economy and may want to take them back. China and Russia will look hungrily at Kazakhstan that seems to be going its own way and will likely have a power play between them to find its fate.

What would be the role of NATO in this current situation in Central Asia? The paths are unclear. Despite the key strategic interest of the region in terms of economic interest and geopolitical balancing, trust in NATO is at an all-time low. NATO lost in Afghanistan, has not curtailed Iran or Russia and the only main NATO power that seems to be interested in the situation seems to be Turkey which seeks assimilation or annexation. What path NATO can take is unclear. However whichever path NATO does take in Central Asia will affect the geopolitical balancing within the region, and influence could determine winners and losers overall.

India however is a much more interesting player in Central Asia. India has increased its connections to many of the countries in the region, and the Indian route for the governments of these republics seems to have an alternative to having to loosen religious restrictions. India could have powerful economic trade elements and is seeking to counterbalance other states in the region. India would have a vested interest in keeping China, and Iran from expansion due to fears of increased support of Pakistan. However, India has close economic and trade partnerships with Iran and Russia, and the current hesitation of Modi to condemn Russia has made it clear that India does not want to align itself against Russia. However, if India wished to assert more power in the region to counter Chinese interests, now would be the time. It all depends on what Modi wishes to do, and that remains unclear. However, India would not be happy with an increase in Chinese influence and power unchecked.

In totality, Central Asia is heading towards a radical reconfiguration in the geopolitical balance of power, possibly even towards war. In conclusion, the fate of the Central Asian Republics, and the geopolitical implications remain unclear. However, it is important to watch what may happen in the coming weeks and months, as most of the regional and world powers have a grave stake in what is to come. China, Iran, India, Turkey, Russia and NATO all have interests and possible avenues to stake claims and influence in the republics, which will have worldwide implications and consequences in the coming years.

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