

China's Dominance in Central Asia: Myth or Reality?

Main Image Credit Transit hub: cargo containers are unloaded at the dry port of Khorgos, on the border between China and Kazakhstan. Image: Vladimir / Adobe Stock

While many have argued that Russia will cede ground to China in Central Asia as a result of the Ukraine war, the reality is more complicated.

There are incessant debates on the Sino-Russian strategic partnership in Central Asia. The relationship between the two countries in the region has been termed 'cooperative hegemony' or a 'division of labour'. According to the logic of the division of labour in Central Asia, Russia plays a vital role as a political and military power, while China acts as an important economic power and investor in infrastructural development. Since the Russia-Ukraine war began, there has been a growing narrative that China is increasing its power at Russia's expense in Central Asia.

According to this narrative, the war in Ukraine is increasingly challenging Moscow's political, military and economic dominance, leading to a loss of influence over the former Soviet countries in Central Asia. Supporters of the narrative argue that in line with Russia's dwindling power, Beijing is becoming more and more willing to defend its regional interests – even at the expense of Moscow – and stands to fill the emerging power vacuum.

A range of developments demonstrate the declining power of Russia in Central Asia. In terms of politics, Central Asian countries' neutrality over the Russia-Ukraine war points to the Kremlin's decreasing clout in the region. None of the Central Asian states endorsed Russia's annexation of parts of Ukraine. At the St Petersburg Economic Forum, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev rejected Russia's calls to recognise pro-

Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine, and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev eloquently condemned Soviet pressure. Moreover, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's announcement recognising Ukraine's territorial integrity and promising humanitarian aid to Ukraine can be seen as an example of Russia's declining political influence in the Central Asian republics.

The war has damaged not only Russia's political power in the region, but also its soft power. Tensions between Russia and Kazakhstan, fuelled by the nationalist discourses of Russian politicians regarding ethnically Russian regions in northern Kazakhstan and their obscene territorial claims, have negatively affected Central Asians' perception of Russia. The influx of Russians into Central Asian countries has also created anti-Russian sentiment and provoked ethnic divisions, fostering nationalist tendencies in public opinion.

Another aspect of the decline in Russian power in Central Asia relates to security. Historically, Russia has been the main security provider in the region; however, the Kremlin's recent policy reflects its waning role in this regard. Russia's indifference and the ineffectiveness of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) during the fierce border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan discredited the Kremlin's role as a regional sheriff. Kyrgyzstan's refusal to participate in joint CSTO exercises, called 'Indestructible Brotherhood-2022', provided further evidence of Moscow's declining reputation in Central Asia. Moreover, the failure of Russian weapons in Ukraine and the transfer of its forces from Tajikistan to the frontline have cast doubts on Moscow's role as a reliable security provider in Central Asia.

In parallel with Russia's decline, China has pursued proactive diplomacy to increase its influence in Central Asia. Since the Russia-Ukraine war began, new economic agreements have been signed between China and Central Asian countries, together with the confirmation of new critical infrastructure. China's increasing trade with Central Asia points

to the growing influence of Beijing: in the first half of 2022, its trade with Kazakhstan was three times higher than in the first half of 2016, while its trade with Uzbekistan between January and July 2022 was 32.5% higher compared to the same period in 2021. Meanwhile, China's \$15 billion agreement with Uzbekistan and the confirmation of the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway (CKU) are two milestones that demonstrate China's growing economic influence in Central Asia. The CKU railway, which will provide a key alternative to the Russian route, is an example of how China is expanding its power at the expense of Russia.

In addition to its increasing economic influence, China is also willing to protect its national interests in Central Asia. Recent events in particular show that Beijing is opposed to any territorial changes in the region. Beijing's support for the territorial integrity of Kazakhstan during tensions between Kazakhstan and Russia, and similarly, its support for the territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan despite Russia's inclination towards Tajikistan during the border conflict between the two countries, are critical examples of this.

Despite much evidence of the decline of Russia and the rise of China in Central Asia, Beijing ultimately cannot replace Moscow in the region. In the short and medium term, China has neither the capacity nor the intention to replace it. In addition, despite the reduction in Russian power, it is still a key security and economic actor and has powerful tools at its disposal that can affect the policies of countries in the region.

Against expectations that Russia's economic influence would decrease, developments show that relations between the countries of the region and Russia have improved in this regard. There has been an increasing volume of trade between Russia and Central Asian countries since the start of the war. Russia's trade with Uzbekistan in January-September 2022 was 37% higher compared to the same period in 2021, while its trade with Kyrgyzstan in the

first nine months of 2022 was 42% higher compared to the same months of 2021.

Moreover, Russia has increased its imports from Central Asia due to the loss of access to the European market, in an effort to substitute products previously imported from European countries. In this context, Moscow's increase in imports of cheap wine and the start of imports of shoes from Uzbekistan are critical examples.

In addition to the possibility of increasing its economic presence, the Kremlin still possesses economic means of influencing Central Asian countries. Remittances are a particularly important instrument of Russian influence over the region. Seasonal migration to Russia provides a crucial lifeline for Central Asian households due to the more competitive incomes in Russia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are probably the most dependent on Russia of all the Central Asian states. According to the World Bank, remittances sent to Kyrgyzstan in 2021 accounted for 33% of the country's GDP, while in Tajikistan the figure was 34%. Despite initial expectations that remittances would decline, recent reports indicate that Central Asian countries continue to receive remittances from Russia. In the period between January and June 2022, the volume of remittances to Uzbekistan doubled compared to the same period of the previous year, reaching \$6.5 billion. Moreover, Moscow is trying to attract the workforce of Central Asian countries to Russia due to labour shortages resulting from the war. Russia's removal of the quota limit for migrant workers from Uzbekistan is one of the most important examples of this trend.

In reality, the countries of the region are still heavily dependent on Russia. Russia remains an important player in terms of imports. Approximately 40% of the food and clothing sold in Kazakhstan comes from Russia, while Moscow is the largest import partner of Kyrgyzstan and the second largest import partner of Tajikistan. In addition, Central Asian countries rely on Russia for sugar and wheat imports. Russia's decision to ban grain exports to the

Eurasian Economic Union, resulting in a grain deficit and price increases in Central Asia, shows the dependence of the region on Russian food exports. In addition, Russia plays an important role as a transit country for Central Asian trade. 80% of Uzbekistan's exports and imports pass through Russian territory, and about 80% of Kazakhstan's oil exports flow through the Caspian Pipeline to the terminal in the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk.

Evidently, Russia has been able to maintain its economic position despite China's increasing influence. In order to mitigate the negative impact of Western sanctions, Russia could further advance its trade turnover with Central Asian countries and increase its imports, which may cause economic relations to strengthen rather than weaken. Moreover, China cannot replace Russia's economic instruments in the region, especially in terms of remittances. According to the Central Asian Barometer Survey Wave 11, which was conducted in May-June 2022, 40% and 56.6% of respondents from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan respectively considered Russia the most attractive country for labour migration, while China was not even among the top countries. In addition, despite the efforts of Central Asian countries to divert their goods to the Middle Corridor and China, Russia will continue to play an important role as a transit country in the short and medium term, and China will not be able to replace it in this regard.

In addition to economic factors, Russia's soft power tools are still stronger than China's. The Russian language continues to play an important role for the people of Central Asia. In some Central Asian countries, Russian is taught as part of the compulsory curriculum in local public schools. The Russian language is especially useful for those who prefer to go and work in Russia. Learning Russian is also much easier and more economical to learn than Mandarin.

Furthermore, public opinion toward Russia is more positive compared to China. For



example, one question in the Central Asian Barometer Survey Wave 11 asked: ‘Thinking about other countries, please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable, or very unfavourable opinion of Russia’. In Uzbekistan, 76% of respondents had a favourable opinion toward Russia, while 10% were unfavourable; in Kyrgyzstan, 85% of respondents were favourable and 11% unfavourable. When the same question was asked about China, 56% of respondents from Uzbekistan had a favourable opinion, while 20% were unfavourable; in Kyrgyzstan the numbers were 58% and 34%. Moreover, despite China’s changing investment strategy, growing anti-China sentiment in Central Asia is also damaging China’s soft power. Ultimately, despite Beijing’s increasing economic presence, due to growing anti-China sentiment and language barriers, China cannot replace Russia in the long term in the region.

Despite Russia’s damaged reputation, it is still a key security provider in the region. Russia is the main guarantor of the security of the Central Asian states’ southern border, and is a key player in preventing the spread of radicalism in the region. Notwithstanding the Russian army’s poor performance in Ukraine, the Central Asian republics still need Moscow’s support to protect their southern border. Russian military assistance, joint drills and rhetorical support ultimately reduce the threat perception of regional states.

In addition, Russia still has a significant influence on the governments and regime security of the Central Asian republics. The deployment of Russian troops through the Collective Security Treaty Organization in the wake of countrywide protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, and Moscow’s personal diplomacy to stop a war between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan given the ineffectiveness of the CSTO, are examples of Russia’s influence on the Central Asian elite. Russia’s military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan provide crucial tools for the Kremlin to reduce the risk of internal turmoil and maintain its security presence.

Beijing is also increasing its security presence in Central Asian countries through bilateral relations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China has a military facility in Tajikistan, on the border with Afghanistan. In recent years, China has preferred to use private security companies to protect its national interests in Central Asia. However, despite Beijing's expanding security presence, it is mainly concerned with strengthening the capacities of local countries and providing assistance. China has no intention of expanding its security presence in Central Asia, preferring instead to increase its economic and technological influence. Beijing prefers to complement rather than compete with Russia's security presence, acting freely under Russia's security umbrella. China's silence despite the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict and the worsening of the security situation in the Gorno-Badakhshan region on the Afghanistan border – precisely where China has opened up military installations – demonstrates its reluctance to play a role as a security provider in Central Asia.

Despite Russia's decreasing power and China's steady rise in Central Asia, Moscow remains a key economic and security actor in the region. Furthermore, it is still possible that it could further increase its presence in Central Asia as a result of to the Russia-Ukraine war. China has been expanding its economic relations and promoting infrastructural development at the expense of Russia. However, the evidence shows that Beijing currently has neither the tools to replace Russia nor the intention to be the dominant power in Central Asia. Moreover, Central Asian countries themselves prefer to follow a multi-vector policy. In this context, the increasing attention of the US and recent engagement by the EU and European countries with Central Asia may also create challenges for China in expanding its influence in the region.

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