

Between the No Limits Partnership: The Impact of the Ukraine Conflict on Sino-Russian Entente in Central Asia

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Russia-China Relations since Feb 2022

The unprovoked invasion of Ukrainian territory by the conventional armed forces of the Russian Federation in February 2022, was an affront to China's longstanding official opposition to interference in the affairs of sovereign states. The event however, hereafter referred to as 'the invasion', not only took place four days after the end of the Beijing Winter Olympics but also supervened a high-profile summit between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing in early February - Xi's first with a head of state since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Pandemic. A sixteen-page joint statement, while not referencing Ukraine or East Asia, discussed a 'no limits' partnership and mutual opposition to US foreign policy.¹ While only the latest overture in a decade-long entente, hindsight has permitted this to be perceived as a tacit endorsement, by Beijing, of the subsequent invasion. References to the 'no limits' partnership have faded from official PRC statements but relations remain strong, two years into the conflict. Refusal to condemn the invasion has placed Beijing in the global minority and Xi's choice of language has legitimized Moscow's historicist perspective of the conflict.² Chinese state media coverage has lauded the 'unity' and 'stability', of the Russian political system, including during an insurrection by former-Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin.³ While stopping short of using the term 'alliance' - occasionally invoked by Moscow, presenting a politically-unified Eurasia, has become an important element of Chinese diplomacy vis-à-vis the United States.

Xi's first meeting with Putin following the outbreak of conflict in September 2022, was afforded plausible deniability by an annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand. The second, a state visit to Moscow, would not take place until March 2023 but came only days after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Putin. The Moscow meeting, their forty-first since Xi came to power and his first overseas engagement following the Twentieth Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, was followed up with visits by Defence Minister Li Shangfu, and Zhang Youxia, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) most senior serving officer.⁴ President Putin was one of only three European heads of state to attend the 2023 Belt and Road Forum which, despite being the initiative's tenth anniversary, saw diminished attendance compared with previous summits. The two countries have sustained the standard annual list of bilateral and joint-military

¹ Ulrich Jochheim, China-Russia relations: A quantum leap?, Members' Research Service PE 729.349 – May 2023, EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)729349](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)729349), 7

² Jochheim, 7

³ Global times, "Putin-Prigozhin meeting demonstrates Russia's internal unity before NATO summit: observers", Global Times article 11 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294168.shtml>

⁴ Jochheim, 5. Also BBC Monitoring, BBC Monitoring China Watchlist for 9 November 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204qvpd>

exercises, including Russia's VOSTOK drills, bilateral and tripartite naval drills in the East China Sea, and with South Africa and Iran.⁵ Both powers claim official neutrality in the others' territorial disputes in the South China Sea and Kuril Islands, but have conveyed tacit support through various channels. Joint military exercises have been used for wider diplomatic posturing, a joint strategic bomber patrol for example, passed close to Japanese and South Korean airspace during Biden's attendance at a May 2022 meeting in Tokyo of the putative 'Quad' security alliance between the US, Australia, India and Japan.⁶ A visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Beijing in April 2024, came only days after President Biden had raised the issue of the Russian partnership in a telephone call with his Chinese counterpart, and as the American leader was hosting the leaders of Japan and the Philippines.⁷ The two powers have even extended their declared vision of a post-Atlantic world order to space cooperation, in 2023 announcing plans to construct a nuclear-powered joint base on the moon.⁸

Observers have noted the pragmatism however, of Chinese diplomacy by comparison with Russia's - committed to undermining the United States globally on the one hand, yet recognizing that China's own industrial development has and may continue to benefit from the 'rules-based' international system. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has officially maintained that 'China did not create the crisis. It is not a party to the crisis, and has not provided weapons to either side of the conflict'.⁹ In early-2023, some commentaries even detected a nuanced change in Chinese rhetoric, references to sovereignty and nuclear weapons, perceived as quiet disapproval of Russian actions.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the tacit support implied in Xi's statement at the 2022 SCO Summit, that China was 'ready to work with Russia to play a leading role in injecting stability into a changing world', was sufficient, if not decisive for Moscow, at a crucial moment in the conflict.¹¹ Chinese-manufactured items exposed on or in transit to, the Ukrainian battlefield include assault rifles, drone parts, ammunition, All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), and even Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs), though supplied via what channels and under whose direction largely remains unclear.¹² Russian official imports of Chinese construction vehicles and delivery trucks, had also doubled and quadrupled respectively, in 2023.¹³ In early-2024, US officials stated that in addition to providing Russian weapons manufacturers with advanced optics and more than ninety percent of their integrated circuitry, Chinese entities were also 'likely providing' Russia with nitrocellulose, used in the manufacture of propellants.¹⁴

⁵ Reuters, "China Says It Will Send Troops To Russia For Joint Military Drills", Radio Free Europe Article, 17 August 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-joint-military-drills/31992678.html>. Also "South Africa's naval exercise with Russia, China raises Western alarm", Reuters Article, 18 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-africas-naval-exercise-with-russia-china-raises-western-alarm-2023-02-17/>. Global Times, "China confirms troops arrive to Russia for Vostok 2022 drills", Global Times Article, 25 August 2022, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/49Npg8gBuLY>. Global Times, "Chinese, Russian militaries hold 7th joint aerial strategic patrol", 15 December 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303700.shtml>

⁶ Edward Wong, "Russia and China Held Military Exercise in East Asia as Biden Visited", New York Times Article, 24 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/russia-china-bombers-biden.html>

⁷ David Pierson and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Xi Meets With Russia's Foreign Minister, Reaffirming Ties", Article, New York Times, 9 Apr 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/09/world/asia/xi-lavrov-russia-china.html>

⁸ Fan Anqi, "China-Russia lunar base collaboration a perfect match", Article, Global Times Website, 30 November 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1302828.shtml>. Reuters, "Russia says it is considering putting a nuclear power plant on the moon with China", Article, Reuters.com, 5 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/space/russia-china-are-considering-putting-nuclear-power-unit-moon-ria-2024-03-05/>

⁹ Erin Banco and Sarah Jane Aarup, "Hunting rifles — really? China ships assault weapons and body armor to Russia", Politico Article, 16 March 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/chinese-companies-are-shipping-rifles-body-armor-to-russia/>

¹⁰ Tiong Wei Jie and Li Mingjiang, "China's subtle change of stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine should not go unnoticed", Article, South China Morning Post, 2 January 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3205096/chinas-subtle-change-stance-russias-invasion-ukraine-should-not-go-unnoticed>

¹¹ BBC Monitoring, Chinese Twitter diplomacy 13-19 Sep 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203r4ai>

¹² Vijaiinder K Thakur, "Russian Military Gets Chinese ATVs For 'Final Assault' On Ukraine; US Media, Biden Stunned To Silence", Article, The Eurasian Times, 19 November 2023, https://www.eurasiantimes.com/russian-military-gets-chinese-at-vehicles-for-final-assault/#google_vignette

Reid Standish, "China In Eurasia Briefing: How Chinese Parts Make It To The Battlefield In Ukraine", Article Radio Free Europe, 14 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-parts-ukraine-battlefield/32458834.html>. Japan Times, "Use of Chinese ammunition in Ukraine confirmed by U.S.", Article, The Japan Times, 18 March 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/03/18/asia-pacific/china-russia-ukraine-war-ammunition-u-s/>

¹³ Brian Spegele, "Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine", Article, Wall Street Times, 15 July 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-firms-are-selling-russia-goods-its-military-needs-to-keep-fighting-in-ukraine-11657877403?mod=article_inline. Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), China-Russia Trade Statistics, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus>

¹⁴ Demetri Sevastpulo and Guy Chazan, "US says China is supplying missile and drone engines to Russia", Article, Financial Times, 12 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/ecd934b6-8a91-4b78-a360-9111f771f9b1>

In the case of two shipments of gunpowder exposed by an Arizona-based customs data firm, sufficient to manufacture eighty million rounds of ammunition, the cargoes were traced to Poly Technologies, a state-owned Chinese company previously sanctioned for its global sales of missile technology and providing support to Iran.¹⁵ The United States has also added to its list of sanctioned-Chinese entities, remote sensing service providers, for selling battlefield imagery to the Wagner Group.¹⁶ Evidence pointing to high-end Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) cooperation has been inevitably scant, but reports have emerged of Chinese mercenaries participating in hostilities and an article published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in 2024, reviewed how recent bilateral cooperation in 5G and satellite technology may be assisting Russian forces on the battlefield.¹⁷ Given the scale of the Chinese arms industry however and pre-existing relationships with Moscow and potential intermediaries, these findings are relatively modest and undoubtedly fall short of the threshold for formal military aid to Russia that can be argued in the case of Iran and North Korea, two regimes albeit enjoying varying degrees of political and economic support from Beijing.

More deterministic, has been the PRC's role in preventing Moscow's political and economic isolation. Along with India, China has been the principle consumer of what are now thought to be heavily-discounted mineral surpluses that Russia is no longer able to sell in European markets. Chinese imports of Russian oil, rose by eight percent in 2022 and twenty-four percent in 2023. Imports of Russian gas and coal, doubled in 2022 and 2023 respectively.¹⁸ Agriculture in Russia's Far Eastern Oblasts is also experiencing a boom, driven largely by Chinese demand and in 2022, Russia completed its first deliveries of nuclear fuel assemblies to reactors in China.¹⁹ Four days after the onset of the conflict, Gazprom signed a contract to perform design and survey work relating to the second 'Power of Siberia' pipeline, currently the most high-profile bilateral investment project.²⁰ Statements from Russian officials and CNPC during the course of 2023 stated only that discussions were still underway, suggesting that progress remains constrained by pricing disagreements.²¹ The European Union finally began imposing sanctions on mainland-Chinese and Hong Kong-based companies in early-2024, Putin's hyperbolic claim two weeks later, than the bilateral relationship was 'without borders', likely an opportunistic gibe at the failure of sanctions to arrest China's material facilitation of the war.²² A month earlier it was reported that three of China's largest banks had suspended transactions with their Russian counterparts. At the time of writing, it is too early to assess their implementation but it is highly unlikely that this will lead to a cessation in physical trade.²³

Beijing has also taken several steps to preserve its relations with Kiev. On the anniversary of the invasion in 2023, China published the so-called 'twelve-point' peace proposal. A year later, Wang Yi would state that while not a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum which guaranteed the borders of both Ukraine and

¹⁵ Ana Swanson and John Ismay, "Chinese Firm Sent Large Shipments of Gunpowder to Russian Munitions Factory", Article, New York Times, 23 June 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/23/business/economy/china-russia-ammunition.html>

¹⁶ United States Department of Defence, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023, Office of the Secretary of Defence Annual Report to Congress, 100

¹⁷ Isabel van Brugen, "Chinese Mercenaries Spotted Fighting for Russia in Ukraine", Article, Newsweek, 7 March 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/chinese-mercenaries-spotted-fighting-for-russia-in-ukraine/ar-BB1jtLEb>. Roman Kolodii, Dr Giangiuseppe Pili and Jack Crawford, "Hi-Tech, High Risk? Russo-Chinese Cooperation on Emerging Technologies", Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 1 March 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/hi-tech-high-risk-russo-chinese-cooperation-emerging-technologies>

¹⁸ Laura He, "China's largest oil supplier in 2023 was Russia", Article, CNN 22 January 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/22/business/china-top-oil-supplier-2023-russia-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=However%2C%20since%202022%2C%20China%20has,ramped%20up%20its%20purchases%20sharply.> Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), China-Russia Trade Statistics

¹⁹ United States Department of Defence, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023, 109

²⁰ Jochheim, 5

²¹ Jochheim, 4-5. Reuters, "Russia finalising Power of Siberia-2 gas Pipeline Route to China", Novak says, Article, Reuters, 6 September 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-finalising-power-siberia-2-gas-pipeline-route-china-novak-2023-09-06/>. Reuters, "Russia's Putin upbeat on Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline to China", 17 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-putin-upbeat-power-siberia-2-gas-pipeline-china-2023-10-17/>

²² Deutsche Welle, "China-Russia relationship without borders", Video, DW.com, 7 March 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-russia-relationship-without-borders/video-68469009>

²³ Kinling Lo, "Chinese banks 'refrained' from dealing with Russia over sanctions fears", Article, South China Morning Post, 11 February 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3251675/chinese-banks-refrained-dealing-russia-over-sanctions-fears>

Kazakhstan, his government has endorsed it in statements.²⁴ As the war has progressed however, the Kiev government has added Chinese companies to its list of international sponsors of the war.²⁵ The pro-Russian position of Chinese state and social media, including misogynistic blogging on the subject of female Ukrainian refugees, has also fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment.²⁶ A Chinese envoy sent to meet with officials in eight Central and Eastern European countries shortly after the invasion, was perceived as having been rebuffed, conforming to the negative trend of the late-2010s.²⁷ In March 2024, as Li Hui, Beijing's Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs, lead a second peace envoy to Kiev, the Chinese Foreign Minister publicly boasted about booming trade with the Russian Federation.²⁸

Chinese academia has its share of Russian apologists. Some writers simply locate the issue of Ukrainian sovereignty outside China's core interests, others see the conflict as advantageous - distracting Washington and entrenching Russian dependency.²⁹ Historical grievances however, run deep and mutual distrust is occasionally evidenced in public statements.³⁰ In April 2023, Beijing's ambassador to the EU, dismissed the 'limitless friendship' as 'nothing but rhetoric'.³¹ In August of the same year, the Foreign Ministry was obliged to protest the treatment of five Chinese citizens at the Russo-Kazakh border, the rarity of such a dispute albeit corroborated by description of the incident as 'inconsistent with friendly relations'.³² Explicit calls by Chinese scholars to distance the country from Moscow are rare. More common are implicit criticisms of the invasion which have occasionally attracted censorship - its acceleration of deglobalization for example, and transgression of national sovereignty.³³

For a number of reasons, Central Asia may be considered a bell-weather for the bilateral relationship. It was the demarcation and demilitarization of China's borders with the newly-established Russian Federation and three Central Asian Republics (CARs), that lead to the institutionalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China's most successful multilateral project to date. The two powers have since successfully cultivated the SCO as a platform for the rejection and eventually the expulsion of Western security and cultural influences from the region. With the onset of open conflict in Ukraine however, a narrative has emerged suggesting an acceleration of pre-existing trends towards the displacement of Russian by Chinese influence in Central Asia.³⁴ Articles cited in this paper describe Russia's 'replacement', and China 'filling a void', winning a new 'foothold', and 'stepping in'. This appears to have received considerable amplification following the convening of an inaugural summit in May 2023, of the five Central Asian heads of state and Xi Jinping, in the Chinese city of Xian, under the 'C5 + 1' format. The following sections will examine the observable trends in the relations of both China and Russia with the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) since February 2022, and weigh the accuracy of the suggestion that, in this strategically-important geographical region, Beijing has benefited from the conflict, at Moscow's expense.

²⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi Elaborates on China's Position on Ukraine Crisis", 18 February 2023, http://eg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202402/t20240218_11246505.htm

²⁵ Finbar Bermingham, "Ukraine designates China's biggest oil firms as 'sponsors of war' for Russian joint ventures", Article, South China Morning Post, 4 October 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3236695/ukraine-designates-chinas-biggest-oil-firms-sponsors-war-russian-joint-ventures>

²⁶ William Yang, "Sexist Ukraine comments spark China backlash", Article, Deutsche Welle, 3 August 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-sexist-comments-on-chinese-social-media-trigger-backlash/a-61049647>

²⁷ China Power Team. "What Are the Key Weaknesses of the China-Russia Relationship?" China Power. May 5, 2022. Updated March 20, 2023. Accessed August 4, 2023. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-weaknesses-mistrust/>

²⁸ Ken Moritsugu, "China trumpets rising car exports to Russia as its envoy holds talks in Ukraine", Article, the Washington Post, 8 March 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/08/china-russia-ukraine-wang/b1e22136-dd32-11ee-b5e9-ad4573c62315_story.html

²⁹ Thomas des Garets Geddes, The Art of Tasseography: China–Russia Relations as Viewed from China, Commentary 30 May 2023, Royal United Services Institute, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/art-tasseography-china-russia-relations-viewed-china>

³⁰ Des Garets Geddes.

³¹ Stefan Hedlund, Central Asia is coming into its own, GIS Reports January 26 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-central-asia-russia/>

³² Reuters, "China's Embassy Criticizes Treatment Of Citizens At Russian Border", Article, Reuters, 5 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-china-border-complaint/32535316.html>

³³ Des Garets Geddes.

³⁴ Annette Bohr, Written evidence from Annette Bohr (ECA0024), Supplement to oral evidence given to the Foreign Affairs Committee, UK's Engagement in Central Asia inquiry, 9 May 2023, Annette Bohr, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Chatham House, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/121102/pdf/>

Russia in Central Asia since Feb 2022

Among the scholars and commentators interviewed by the author in 2023, a consensus agreed that Russian diplomacy has paid more attention to Central Asia. Vladimir Putin's first public overseas trip after the outbreak of the war was to Tajikistan, in June, and by the end of that first year, he had held more than fifty meetings with his Central Asian counterparts.³⁵ The diplomatic frenzy has encompassed telephone conversations with heads of state, including during the Prigozhin mutiny, as well meetings as under the C5+1 format and on the sides of the SCO summit.³⁶ The period has seen flows of equipment and financial aid sustained, and Russian think-tanks run more polls and produce a greater number of papers on Central Asia than in previous years.³⁷ In 2022, Russia regained its status as Uzbekistan's top trading partner albeit ceding this to China again in 2023, and has remained in the top tier for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in every CAR except Turkmenistan where FDI statistics are unavailable.³⁸ Future Russian involvement has been touted in several keynote projects since February 2022, most notably thermal coal and hydro-power generation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also the acquisition of the Arcelor Mittal Steel Conglomerate, and a proposed-power transmission line between Kyrgyzstan and Siberia.³⁹ While the Uzbek government has been obliged to deny speculation that negotiations for Rosatom's involvement in the construction of a Nuclear Power Plant in the country have stalled, Putin has hinted at Russian involvement in the development of inaugural nuclear reactors in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁰

The CARs have publicly maintained what might be described as a balanced foreign policy position, neither explicitly condemning nor endorsing Russian aggression. As was the case in 2014, they have not officially recognized the annexation of Ukrainian territory. While the 'colour revolution' narrative of irresponsible Western democratic proliferation, that has framed the Sino-Russian consensus since the mid-2000s, has been normalized in regional diplomacy, Central Asian elites have clearly been uncomfortable with Moscow's initiation of armed conflict.⁴¹ With competing claims to regional leadership, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been under the most pressure to demonstrate foreign policy autonomy, and have made occasional public statements of support for Ukraine and dispatched humanitarian aid. Their respective parliaments have been even more vocal.⁴²

³⁵ Radio Free Europe, "Putin Arrives In Tajikistan For First Stop On Trip To Central Asia", Article, Radio Free Europe, 28 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-visits-tajikistan-rahmon-ukraine/31919990.html>

³⁶ Interfax News Agency Moscow, "Putin phones Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus leaders amid Prigozhin mutiny", Interfax News Agency Moscow, 24 June 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204dj1t>

³⁷ Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino, "The Stans Can't Play Both Sides Anymore", Article Foreign Policy.com 31 May 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/31/central-asia-russia-china-kazakhstan-kyrgyzstan-sco-play-both-sides/>. Also Interview with a Senior Research Fellow, OSCE Academy Bishkek, 10th July 2023

³⁸ Fergana News Agency, "Russia top investor in Uzbekistan in 2022", Fergana News Agency Website, <https://fergana.agency/news/129255/>. Gazeta, "Russia surpasses China as Uzbekistan's biggest trade partner", Article, Gazeta.uz, 21 December 2022, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/12/21/trade/>. Gazeta.ru, "China replaces Russia as Uzbekistan's largest trading partner", Article, Gazeta.uz website (Tashkent), 9 Feb 2024, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/02/09/trade-partners/>

³⁹ Fergana News Agency, "Russia to build power line system from Siberia to Kyrgyzstan", Article, Fergana news agency website, 26 May 2022, <https://fergana.news/news/126273/>. 24.kg, "Russia seeks to join in Kyrgyz power plant project", 24.kg Website Bishkek, https://24.kg/vlast/256565_rossiya_toje_hochet_uchastvovat_vstroitelstve_kambaratinskoy_ges-1/. Vlast, "Foreign investors said to fund new Russia-built Kazakh power plants", Article, Online magazine Vlast (Almaty), 7 February 2024, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/58817-sredstva-enpf-na-stroitelstvo-treh-tec-ispolzovat-ne-budut-sklar.html>. KazTAG, "Kazakhstan denies mining giant to be sold to Russians", Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 4 November 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/sklyar-kategoricheskii-otverg-veroyatnyu-svyaz-pretenduyushchego-na-obekty-amt-chastnika-s-putinym>

⁴⁰ Chris Rickleton, "Living In The Limelight: Can Central Asia Sustain Surge Of Newfound Diplomatic Activity Without Russia?", 14 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asia-diplomatic-activity-surge-ukraine-war/32683831.html>. Tazabek, "Russia set to build nuclear plant in Kyrgyzstan", Article, 22 November 2022, Tazabek Website, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1822670?from=portal&place=last>. Verchiny Bishkek, "Kyrgyzstan, Russian firm ink deal to build nuclear power plant", Article, Verchiny Bishkek, 20 January 2023, https://www.vb.kg/doc/426439_rosatom_podpisal_dorojnyu_karty_po_stroitelstvy_aes_v_kyrgyzstane.html

⁴¹ Radio Free Europe, "Uzbek Official Calls For Scrapping Talks With Russia On Constructing Nuclear Power Plant", Article, Radio Free Europe, 09 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-russia-nuclear-plant/32452497.html>. New Times, "Kazakhstan urges respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity", Article, New Times Astana, 3 April 2023, <https://newtimes.kz/politika/166916-kazahstan-chetko-oboznachil-poziciyu-po-vojne-rossii-s-ukrainoj>

⁴² Radio Free Europe, "Uzbek Official Calls For Scrapping Talks With Russia On Constructing Nuclear Power Plant", Article, Radio Free Europe, 09 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-russia-nuclear-plant/32452497.html>. New Times, "Kazakhstan urges respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity", Article, New Times Astana, 3 April 2023, <https://newtimes.kz/politika/166916-kazahstan-chetko-oboznachil-poziciyu-po-vojne-rossii-s-ukrainoj>

As in Kyrgyzstan, where the legislature has been described as split into ‘camps’ over the war, politicians were quick to voice support for Ukrainian sovereignty, and call for Russian economic privileges to be curtailed.⁴³

Festivals and concerts have been cancelled, and pro-Kremlin journalists, bloggers and athletes, censored. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have restricted the use of Russian symbols, the ‘Z’ for example, and the St. George Ribbon, and municipal authorities have proscribed events glorifying Soviet victories or marking the anniversary of the invasion.⁴⁴ In August 2023, the Uzbek supreme court also exonerated a political movement, the Basmachi, that had resisted Soviet authority in the 1920s.⁴⁵ Such policies have accelerated a pre-existing trend towards the de-Russification of public life: the renaming of streets, removal of Soviet iconography, and tapering of the Russian language in state communications.⁴⁶ Moscow has responded with diplomatic protests and by convening academic conferences. In 2023, Russia suspended dairy imports to Kyrgyzstan after the country’s state commission for language policy hinted at a move away from use of the Cyrillic alphabet.⁴⁷

There is also an abundance of evidence however to suggest that the issue of Ukrainian sovereignty does not constitute a core strategic interest for the CARs. The five republics have either not voted or voted to abstain on successive UN resolutions criticizing Russian actions.⁴⁸ While the failure to endorse the Russian position has been interpreted optimistically by some analysts, given the circumstances - the invasion of a former-Soviet state whose borders were guaranteed by the Budapest Memorandum, the mere abstention of the CARs may equally be regarded as legitimization.⁴⁹ In December 2022, Kazakhstan was among a handful of states to vote against a UN resolution demanding Russia cease its military aggression in Ukraine.⁵⁰

Both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz Foreign Ministers were forced to step down in the early days of the conflict after publicly airing pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western views.⁵¹ The successor to Abdulaziz Kamilov, who in the late-1990s had pioneered Tashkent’s relationship with Washington, was swift to describe Russia as Uzbekistan’s

⁴³ AkiPress, “We will make every effort to stop this fratricidal war, - Head of the Cabinet of Ministers A.Japarov on the situation in Ukraine”. Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, 24 March 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1770508/?from=akikg> . 24.kg, “Nurlan Shakiyev proposes to turn off Russian TV channels in Kyrgyzstan”, Article, 24.kg, 2 Mar 2022, https://24.kg/vlast/226009_nurlan_shakiev_predlagaet_otklyuchit_rossiyskie_telekanalyi_vkyrgyzystane/

⁴⁴ Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan Bans 'Z' Symbol Victory Day Celebrations On May 9”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 22 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-bans-z-symbol/31816191.html> . Rdio Free Europe, “Man Jailed In Kazakhstan For Painting Pro-War 'Z' Symbol On WWII Memorial”, Article, Radio Free Europe Kazakh Service, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-man-jailed-painting-pro-war-z-on-ww2-memorial/31983617.html> . 24.kg, “Bishkek schools held a conversation: it is impossible to force people to wear St. George ribbons”, Article, 24.kg, 26 April 2022, https://24.kg/obschestvo/232091_vshkolah_bishkeka_proveli_besedu_zastavlyat_nosit_georgievskie_lentochki_nelzya/

⁴⁵ Rossiya 24, “Russian TV criticises pro-Ukraine Uzbek bloggers, media”, Article, Rossiya 24 news channel (Moscow), 6 March 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203aq5b> . Radio Free Europe, “Uzbekistan's Supreme Court Exonerates 240 Members Of Basmachi Movement”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 25 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-supreme-court-exonerates-basmachi-movement/32564521.html>

⁴⁶ Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyz President Defends Language Law Following Kremlin Criticism”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 24 July 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-language-law-russia/32516491.html> . 24.kg, “In the Parliament, the head of the Ministry of Natural Resources Dinara Kutmanova was not allowed to speak in the official language”, Article, 24.kg, 15 December 2022, https://24.kg/vlast/253490_vjkglave_minprirodyi_dinare_kutmanovoy_nedali_vyistupit_naofitsialnom_yazyike/ . Kloop.kg, “Kyrgyzstan to change Soviet-era names despite Russian criticism”, Article, Kloop.kg, 22 December 2022, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/12/22/vlasti-bishkeka-rabotayut-nad-izmeneniem-nazvanij-chetyreh-rajonov-stolitsy-zhantaev/> .

⁴⁷ Radio Free Europe, “Russia Suspends Dairy Products From Kyrgyzstan After Calls In Bishkek To Drop Cyrillic Script”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 21 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-kyrgyzstan-dairy-products-banned-cyrillic-latin/32373802.html>

⁴⁸ Congressional Research Service, Central Asia: Implications of Russia’s War in Ukraine, Report R47591, Congressional Research Service (2023), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47591/2#:~:text=Some%20analysts%20suggest%20that%20regional,their%20economic%20and%20security%20relationships.&text=cooperation%20between%20the%20United%20States,of%20the%20war%20in%20Ukraine,4>

⁴⁹ Congressional Research Service, 4

⁵⁰ Asia Plus, “Kazakhstan votes against UN’s resolution demanding Russia withdraw its military forces from Ukraine”, Article, Asia Plus News Network, 19 December 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/centralasia/20221219/kazakhstan-votes-against-uns-resolution-demanding-russia-withdraw-its-military-forces-from-ukraine>

⁵¹ Radio Free Europe, “After Publicly Backing Ukraine's Sovereignty, Uzbek FM Steps down”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 28 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-komilov-ukraine-steps-down/31825263.html> . Aki Press, “Kyrgyzstan has close friendly ties with both Russian and Ukrainian people, - Kyrgyz Foreign Minister”, Article, Aki Press News Agency Website, 23 March 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1770228?from=portal&place=last&b=2>

‘closest ally’.⁵² Both in 2023, when Vladimir Putin was received in Astana with full ceremony, and in 2024, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev publicly re-iterated that Russia remained Kazakhstan's ‘main strategic partner’ while Turkmenistan’s Foreign Minister described Russia as the ‘largest global power in the political arena’.⁵³ The Russian press has claimed that Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov expressed support for Putin in a phone call immediately after the invasion and some Kyrgyz MPs have called for the UN to recognize the referendums in the annexed territories.⁵⁴ While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have not held a Victory Day parade since 2019, all five Central Asian presidents attended the May 2023 parade in Moscow.⁵⁵

In official statements and state-owned media, the republics adhere to Moscow’s preferred term ‘military operation’ as opposed to ‘invasion’ or ‘aggression’.⁵⁶ Kyrgyz think-tanks have criticized the West’s ‘information war’ and Kazakh officials called for third-parties to stay away from ‘emotional assessments’ of the Bucha massacres.⁵⁷ Kazakh and Kyrgyz authorities have arrested or pressured bloggers, journalists, film directors, and anti-war protestors, some draped in the Ukrainian flag, have been fined and arrested for protesting outside Russian embassies and consulates.⁵⁸ In December 2023, a Kazakh court closed a foundation, headed by an opposition activist, distributing aid to Ukraine.⁵⁹

Kazakhstan is the CAR with the most exposure to the war. The country’s long northern border and relatively large ethnic-Russian minority have made it appear uniquely vulnerable as the ‘next Ukraine’.⁶⁰ Most of the country’s exported oil which, despite attempts at economic diversification, still accounts for forty percent of total export revenue, is routed via the Caspian Consortium (CPC) pipeline across the Russian North Caucasus to an export terminal on the Black Sea. Kazakh trans-shipments however have not been subject to sanctions, reflecting recognition of the disruption this would cause for Astana and the Chevron-operated Tengiz field that serves the pipeline. Kazakhstan has even negotiated the use of Russia’s pipeline network, to export oil to Germany.⁶¹

Kazakh oil exports via the CPC pipeline have been disrupted several times by Russia since the start of the conflict however. While some given meteorological explanations seem plausible, the arbitrary shutting of the pipeline due to the alleged discovery of unexploded ordinance or environmental regulations, has been

⁵² TASS, “Uzbek minister says Russia 'closest' ally amid growing threats”, Article, TASS News Agency, 14 April 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000crv>

⁵³ Orient.tm, “Russia is firmly pursuing its course on the world stage - the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan”, Orient.tm website (Ashgabat), 12 June 2022, <https://orient.tm/ru/post/38161/rossiya-tverdo-provodit-svoj-kursa-na-mirovoj-arene-glava-mid-turkmenistana> . Congressional Research Service, 11. Radio Free Europe, “Kazakhstan's Toqayev Tells Putin Russia Strategic Partner Despite Ukraine War”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 28 November 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russia-toqayev-putin-partners/32152374.html> . Kazinform, “President of Kazakhstan: We will continue a constructive and balanced foreign policy taking into account national interests”, Article, Kazinform (Astana), 3 Jan 2024, <https://www.inform.kz/ru/tokayev-mi-prodolzhim-konstruktivnuyu-i-sbalansirovannuyu-vneshnyuyu-politiku-s-uchetom-natsionalnih-interesov-9139f1>

⁵⁴ NazarNews, “Kyrgyz MP urges UN to heed breakaway votes in Ukraine for truce”, Article, NazarNews, 25 Feb 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00008zv>

⁵⁵ Congressional Research Service, 11

⁵⁶ Radio Free Europe, “‘Very Neutral’: Uzbek Journalists Pressured Over Their Coverage Of Russian War In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 9 March 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-journalists-pressured-ukraine-war/31741826.html>

⁵⁷ Verchiniy, “Kyrgyzstan meeting slams West's 'information war' against Russia”, Article, Verchiniy Bishkek, 25 February 2022, https://www.vb.kg/doc/414587_v_bishkeke_obsydili_informacionnye_%20voynny_v_globalnoy_politike.html . Radio Free Europe, “Senior Kazakh Official Calls Bucha Killings A 'Tragedy' That Needs Investigation”, 7 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-bucha-massacre-russia-investigation/31791485.html>

⁵⁸ Radio Free Europe, “Four Kazakh Activists Detained In Front Of Russian Consulate Ahead Of Putin Visit”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 12 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-activists-detained-putin-visit-ukraine-russia/32077079.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Two Noted Russia Critics In Kazakhstan Handed Lengthy Prison Terms”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 15 March 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-bloggers-prison-sentences/31754221.html> . 24.kg, “Protest action at the Russian Embassy: rally participants were taken to the Department of Internal Affairs”, Article, 24.kg, 17 March 2022, https://24.kg/obschestvo/227755_aktsiya_protesta_uposolstva_rossii_uchastnikov_mitinga_uvezli_vuvd/

⁵⁹ Telegram, “Kazakh court rules to shut Ukraine aid foundation”, Article, Telegram Messaging, 6 December 2023, <https://t.me/mediastan/4013>

⁶⁰ Temur Umarov, “After Ukraine, Is Kazakhstan Next in the Kremlin’s Sights?”, Article, Carnegie Politika, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 August 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87652>

⁶¹ Annette Bohr

interpreted as Russian retaliation for Astana's public equivocacy on the war.⁶² As has been the case during past disputes, the Tengiz consortium has deferred to the more costly option of transporting oil across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and then via a Western-constructed pipeline, the BTC, to Turkish export terminals.⁶³ The Kazakh government has revived plans to expand the capacity of what it and other Caspian states now market as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), including the trebling of its tanker fleet in Aktau, and has solicited the EU, Turkey, Japan and other sponsors of the so-called 'Middle Corridor', proposals for which date back decades.⁶⁴ The volume of freight traffic along the TITR reportedly more than doubled in 2022, boosted by a significant increase in shipments of Kazakh uranium to the United States and Europe.⁶⁵

A disruption to Turkmen exports in late-2022, due to what Ashgabat described as 'technical issues', via the Central Asia Gas Pipeline (CAGP) that serves Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Xinjiang, saw Russia re-emerge as a supplier of natural gas to the region.⁶⁶ Volumes were small by comparison with historical levels and priced lower than exports to Turkey or China, but were nevertheless a symbolic success for Gazprom.⁶⁷ An attempt to convert this into a trilateral gas union however, was rejected by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan who opted instead, for bilateral agreements.⁶⁸ Kazakhstan's Energy Ministry also appeared to reject Moscow's insistence on EEU countries paying for natural gas in roubles, despite Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan agreeing to do so.⁶⁹ The following summer, the head of the Turkmen state gas monopoly would also, in an uncharacteristic move, publicly criticize the gas union proposal.⁷⁰ This is despite numerous visits by Gazprom executives to Ashgabat since the start of the war, and an increase in Russian purchases of Turkmen gas, albeit far short of the levels that preceded the construction the CAGP in the mid-2000s.⁷¹ One source of tension between the two sides is a legacy proposal to construct a trans-Caspian pipeline to Azerbaijan enabling exports of Turkmen gas to Turkey and Europe, negotiations over were briefly revived in late-2022 as non-littoral parties revived interest in Trans-Caspian connectivity.⁷²

⁶² Congressional Research Service, 20. The Astana Times, "Caspian Pipeline Consortium Resumes Oil Shipment After Temporary Weather-Related Suspension", Article, The Astana Times, 1 December 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/12/caspian-pipeline-consortium-resumes-oil-shipment-after-temporary-weather-related-suspension/>

⁶³ Congressional Research Service, 20

⁶⁴ Congressional Research Service, 20. Also Annette Bohr. Kursiv, "Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia have established a company for the development of TITR", Article, Kursiv Website (Almaty), 27 Oct 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-10-27/fnsk-tmtm/>. TASS, "KazMunayGas said that Kazakhstan is not looking for an alternative to the CPC when transporting oil", Article, TASS news agency (Moscow), 29 February 2024, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/20112385>

⁶⁵ KazTag, "Draft agreement between Kazakhstan and China on Trans-Caspian transport route presented", Article, KazTag News Agency (Almaty), 2 Oct 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/predstavlen-proekt-dogovora-kazakhstana-s-kitaem-potranskaspiskomu-transportnomu-marshrutu>

⁶⁶ KazInform, "The construction of the Bukhara-Ural gas pipeline will solve the problem of providing gas to the villages of the Aktobe region", Article, KazInform (Astana), 26 February 2023, https://www.inform.kz/ru/stroitel-stvo-gazoprovoda-buhara-ural-reshit-problemu-obespecheniya-gazom-sel-aktyubinskoy-oblasti_a4040270

⁶⁷ Kapital, "Kazakhstan says to triple Russian gas transit to Uzbekistan", Article, Kapital.kz (Almaty), 27 Mar 2024, <https://kapital.kz/economic/124334/ob-yemy-tranzita-rossiyskogo-gaza-v-uzbekistan-cherez-rk-uvelichat-pochti-vtroye.html>

⁶⁸ John Engvall, Central Asia One Year After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine, The Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program Joint Centre,

https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/23307_FT_Engvall_2.pdf, 2. TASS, "Gazprom and QazaqGaz sign agreement on transportation of Russian gas to Uzbekistan", Article, TASS News Agency, 16 June 2023, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/18033953>

⁶⁹ Radio Free Europe, "Kazakhstan Calls For Freedom Of Choice, Instead Of Only Rubles, When Paying For Russian Gas", Article, Radio Free Europe, 21 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russian-gas-rubles-freedom/32094977.html>

⁷⁰ Khronika Turkmenistana, "There is no question of abolishing visas between Turkmenistan and Russia", Russian Ambassador to Turkmenistan said", Article, Khronika Turkmenistana website (Vienna), <https://www.hronikatm.com/2023/08/no-visa-free-regime/>

⁷¹ Radio Free Europe, "Kazakhstan Calls For Freedom Of Choice, Instead Of Only Rubles, When Paying For Russian Gas", Article, Radio Free Europe, 21 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russian-gas-rubles-freedom/32094977.html>

⁷² TASS, "Russia and Turkmenistan signed contracts worth 150 billion rubles", Article, TASS news agency (Moscow), 20 Jan 2023, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16845993>. Turkmen State News Service, "Turkmenistan demands clarity over Russia's 'gas union' remarks", Article, Turkmen State News Service, 12 August 2023, <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/37137/soobshchenie-dlya-sredstv-massovoj-informacii>

⁷¹ Orient.tm, "Chief of Russia's Gazprom meets Turkmen president", Article, Orient.tm (Ashgabat), 15 February 2023, <https://orient.tm/ru/post/46905/prezident-turkmenistana-prinyal-predsedatelya-pravleniya-pao-gazprom>

⁷² Aygul Ospanova, "Azerbaijani President, Turkmen Official Discuss Energy, Transport Ties", Article, CaspianNews.com, 29 November 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijani-president-turkmen-official-discuss-energy-transport-ties-2022-11-29-53/>

Turbulence in the Russian economy has negatively impacted some areas of trade with the CARs, imports of Kazakh iron ore for example, and Kyrgyz textile exports.⁷³ The sanctioning or shortage of many products: certain food items, Russian timber, medicines and refined petroleum products, has compounded the effects of inflation.⁷⁴ In the first quarter of 2022, more than seven thousand private businesses closed in Tajikistan, and both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were obliged to restrict currency outflows and increase welfare support.⁷⁵ Annual exports to the Russian Federation however, had risen significantly for every CAR by the end of 2022 and continued to rise in 2023.⁷⁶ Roughly half was accounted for by re-exports from third-party countries, mostly via Kazakhstan whose foreign-trade turnover rose by eighty-three percent in 2022, reaching a record high.⁷⁷ The transit of goods between Iran, Turkmenistan and Russia also rose, permitting some success to be claimed in respect of Moscow's proposed-International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).⁷⁸

Re-exported items have ranged from tractors, cars, plastics, printers, automatic locks and packaging equipment to those with dual civilian-military use such as electrical engines, microchips, transistors, aircraft parts and weapons sights, with increases in imports registered mostly from the EU, the PRC and Taiwan.⁷⁹ Kazakh and Uzbek exports of cotton cellulose, used in the production of gunpowder, have more than doubled to Russia since the start of the conflict.⁸⁰ Though denied by the companies involved, warehouses and rail depots in Kyrgyzstan are reportedly 'full' of Russian-destined goods, without their manufacturers' consent.⁸¹ According to the Asian Development Bank, a key driver has not been the evasion of sanctions, but the decision of many companies to stop exporting to Russia, even though their products were not sanctioned.⁸² Nevertheless, by June 2022 the United States government had included every CAR bar Turkmenistan, in a list of transshipment countries for restricted exports and the sanctioning of Central Asian companies has been criticised in local

⁷³ Asian Development Bank, *The Economic Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Caucasus and Central Asia: Short-Term Benefits and Long-Term Challenges*, Asian Development Bank, April 2023, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/863591/ado-april-2023-special-topic.pdf> , 37. Also Congressional Research Service, 8 . Kubatbek Aibashov and Chris Rickleton, "Russia's Sick Ruble Squeezing Kyrgyzstan's Bellwether Garments Industry", Article, Radio Free Europe, 19 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-russia-ruble-garment-industry/32644968.html>

⁷⁴ Ian Pryde, "Russia's Economic Doldrums Causing Hardship In Kyrgyzstan", Article, Radio Free Europe, 7 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-economic-hardship-russia-sanctions-ukraine/31838787.html> . Martí, Stepanyuk and Bandeira, 7.

⁷⁵ Avesta, "More than 7,000 individual entrepreneurs liquidated in Tajikistan in the first quarter of the year", Article, Avesta Website 9Dushanbe), 19 April 2022, <https://avesta.tj/2022/04/19/bolee-7-tys-individualnyh-predprinimatelej-likvidirovalis-v-tadzhikistane-v-pervom-kvartale-goda/> . Radio Free Europe, "Kazakhstan Limits Outflows Of Hard Currency, Gold Amid Russia Sanctions", Article, Radi Free Europe, 14 March 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-stops-currency-gold/31752657.html> . Tazabek, "There is no currency left. It is impossible to buy cash dollars in exchange offices on the Moscow City Council", Article, Tazabek Website (Bishkek), 24 February 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1764643?f=cp>

⁷⁶ Asian Development Bank, 4. The Bell Website, "In six months, Russia has increased imports from neighbouring countries by almost 40%. This is how the country circumvents sanctions", The Bell Website, 13 October 2023, <https://thebellmirror9.site/za-polgoda-rossiya-uvlichila-import-iz-sosednikh-gosudarstv-pochti-na-40-tak-stana-obkhodit-sanktsii>

⁷⁷ Annette Bohr . Also Asian Development Bank (2023), *The Economic Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Caucasus and Central Asia: Short-Term Benefits and Long-Term Challenges*, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/863591/ado-april-2023-special-topic.pdf> , 37

⁷⁸ Orient.tm, "Transit of Russian goods through Turkmenistan showed a fourfold increase over the year - Meredov", Article, Orient.tm, 19 Jan 2023, <https://orient.tm/ru/post/45150/tranzit-rossijskih-gruzov-cherez-turkmenistan-pokazal-za-god-chetyrekratnyj-rost-meredov> . Orient.tm, "The volume of rail cargo between Iran and Turkmenistan increased by 57%", Article, Orient.tm website (Asgabat), 26 Feb 2023, <https://orient.tm/ru/post/47870/obem-zhelezodorozhnyh-gruzov-mezhdu-iranom-i-turkmenistanom-vyros-na-57> .

⁷⁹ Asian Development, 38. Tazabek, "Import of Taiwanese diodes and transistors to Kyrgyzstan increased by 2 thousand times", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 26 December 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1840838?from=portal&place=last> . Kaktus Media, "Kyrgyzstan exported 16.2 million KGS worth of gun sights to Russia in 2022", Article, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), 15 Feb 2023, https://kaktus.media/doc/475666_kyrgyzstan_eksportiroval_v_rossiu_pricely_dlia_oryjiia_na_162 mln_somov_v_2022_gody.html .

⁸⁰ Vazhnyye Istorii, "Sanctions do not prevent Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from supplying Russia with raw materials for gunpowder production", Article, Vazhnyye Istorii Website (Latvia), <https://istories.media/stories/2023/12/21/kazakhstan-i-uzbekistan-snabzhayut-rossiyu-khlopkovoi-tsellyulozoi-dlya-proizvodstva-porokha-i-sanktsii-im-ne-meshayut/>

⁸¹ Vesti.kg, "'Contraband mouse' and clogged warehouses in the CIS. Is it necessary to build new ones in Kyrgyzstan?", Article, Vesti.kg (Bishkek), 11 April 2023, <https://vesti.kg/zxc/item/111267-kontrabandnaya-mysh-i-zabitye-sklady-v-sng-nuzhno-li-stroit-novye-v-kyrgyzstane.html> . 24.kg, "Not for the Russian Federation. The company of Omurbek Babanov denied the report of the Russian media", Article, Vesti.kg (Bishkek), 09 Aug 2023, https://24.kg/ekonomika/272177_nedlya_rf_vkompnii_omurbeka_babanova_oprovergli_soobschenie_rossijskih_smi/

⁸² Asian Development Bank, 38.

media.⁸³ The Kazakh and Kyrgyz governments have re-iterated that while they will not join sanctions on Russia, they are not, and will not, be used to evade sanctions.⁸⁴ Moscow has even made conciliatory statements ‘understanding’ Kyrgyz compliance.⁸⁵

By the summer of 2023, there were indications that the republics had imposed stricter customs controls, and banks in Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Hong Kong, have started blocking payments for deliveries of electronics to Russia.⁸⁶ While contradicting somewhat, prior statements, the Kazakh Ministry of Trade announced in January 2024 that no dual-use items had been shipped to Russia in the ‘past six months’.⁸⁷ Sanctions on Russian banks have negatively impacted the banking and payments system in Central Asia and, where subsidiaries have been forced to divest, even created opportunities for local banks.⁸⁸ Problems have been experienced with transfers, apps and ATM withdrawals and banks in the region have ceased accepting Unistream money-transfers and ‘Mir’ payment cards, although curtailment of their use is inconsistent.⁸⁹ Approximately half a million Russian citizens opened bank accounts in Kazakhstan in 2022 and Russian travel agencies have offered packages to open accounts and purchase dollars in Uzbekistan.⁹⁰ Despite predictions to the contrary, it has been estimated that remittances from Central Asian diaspora in the Russian Federation, accounting for more than a quarter of national income in the two smaller republics, reached record highs in the first year of the war.⁹¹ The number of Central Asians migrating to Russia for work has also increased since the start of the conflict, predominantly

⁸³ Congressional Research Service, 15. Economist.kg, “Official appeal of Bakai Bank OJSC on the bank’s activities under the threat of secondary sanctions”, Article, Economist.kg, 23 May 2023, <https://economist.kg/novosti/2023/05/23/oficialnoe-obrashhenie-oao-bakaj-bank-o-deyatelnosti-banka-v-usloviyah-ugrozy-vtorichnyh-sankcij/>. Tazabek, “We handed over to Kyrgyzstan a list of components that are found in Russian missiles and drones in Ukraine, - US Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Elizabeth Rosenberg”, Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 27 April 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1911339?from=portal&place=last>. Radio Free Europe, “EU Parliament Member Urges Kyrgyz Compliance With Sanctions Against Russia”, Article, RFE/RL’s Kyrgyz Service, 25 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/european-parliament-kyrgyzstan-russia-sanctions-compliance/32564971.html>. Podrobno.uz, “The introduction of US sanctions against a city-forming enterprise in Uzbekistan can be considered a declaration of economic war - expert”, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), <https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/vvedenie-amerikanskikh-sanktsiy-protiv-gradoobrazuyushchego-predpriyatiya-v-uzbekistane-mozhno-schit/>. Fergana News, “Uzbek company included in USA’s Russia sanctions list”, Article, Fergana News Agency website, 29 June 2022, <https://fergana.agency/news/126759/>. Congressional Research Service, 89.

⁸⁴ John Engvall, 2. Also Congressional Research Service, 16. Radio Free Europe, “Kazakhstan Says It Restricted Export Of War-Related Goods To Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 19 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-restricts-experts-russia-war-military-technology-ukraine/32645515.html>. Kabar News, “Sadyr Japarov commented on statements that Kyrgyzstan allegedly contributes to the circumvention of sanctions”, Article, Kabar News Agency (Bishkek), <https://kabar.kg/news/sadyr-zhaparov-prokomentiroval-zaiavleniia-o-tom-chto-iakoby-kyrgyzstan-sposobstvuet-v-obkhode-sanktsii/>

⁸⁵ AkiPress, “Cooperation between Russia and Kyrgyzstan continues to develop dynamically, - Russian Ambassador Nikolay Udovichenko (interview)”, Article, AKIpress news agency website (Bishkek), 29 December 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:2044416?from=portal&place=last>

⁸⁶ Radio Free Europe, “Banks In Kazakhstan, Armenia, Hong Kong Block Payments For Electronics Deliveries To Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 7 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-armenian-banks-block-russia-payments-electronics/32448686.html>. Radio Free Europe, “Kazakhstan Introduces Strict Customs Control On Electronic Imports To Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-customs-russia-sanctions/32404601.html>

⁸⁷ Vlast, “For six months, not a single case of sending sanctioned goods from Kazakhstan to Russia has been revealed - Ministry of Trade”, Article, Vlast Online Magazine (Almaty), 11 January 2024, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/58341-za-polgoda-ne-vyavleno-ni-odnogo-slucaa-otpravki-sankcionnyh-tovarov-iz-kazahstana-v-rossiu-mintorgovli.html>

⁸⁸ Congressional Research Service, 10

⁸⁹ Joanna Lillis, “Kyrgyz Banks Shun Russia’s Mir Cards to Avoid Sanctions Contagion,” Eurasianet, October 18, 2022; “US Sanctions Threat Zaps Russia’s Homegrown Mir Cards in Setback,” Bloomberg, November 22, 2022; Siddharth Venkataramakrishnan and Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, “Russians Search for Bootleg Solutions to Overcome Payments Sanctions,” Financial Times, April 9, 2023. Radio Free Europe, “Banks in Central Asia, Caucasus Suspend Cooperation With Russia’s Unistream”, Article, Radio Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-unistream-us-sanctions/32518470.html>

⁹⁰ Congressional Research Service, 10. Also Asian Development Bank, 38. Moskovsky, “The number of Russians who opened bank accounts in Uzbekistan in 2022 has been named”, Article, MK (Moskovsky Komsomolets) website (Moscow), <https://www.mk.ru/economics/2022/10/31/nazvano-chislo-rossiyan-otkryvshikh-bankovskie-scheta-v-uzbekistane-v-2022-godu.html>

⁹¹ Congressional Research Service, 11. Tazabek, “Remittances from Russia to Kyrgyzstan rose to a record \$303 million in June”, Article, Tazabek Website (Bishkek), 11 August 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1798052/?from=akikg>. Payom.net, “Tajik migrant remittances reach record amount in 2022”, Article, Payon.net, 4 July 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000jq0>

Tajiks, albeit with a decline in the overall number seeking permanent citizenship.⁹² Interestingly, the number of Kazakh citizens moving to Russia, dropped to the lowest in twenty-four years.⁹³

Central Asia has experienced a large influx of Russian citizens, generally observed to have occurred in two waves. The first wave came in the immediate wake of the invasion, the second, consisting of poorer and less-educated Russians, with Moscow's partial-mobilization of military reservists in September 2022. Kazakh estimates have ranged up to half a million, mostly transiting onwards to the Middle East or Europe.⁹⁴ The republics have not specified how many remained in their territories but the number is thought to be close to one hundred thousand, with the Russian consulate in Almaty claiming in early-2024, that between fifty and eighty thousand have remained in Kazakhstan.⁹⁵ The Kazakh authorities began to tighten immigration controls in January 2023 but regional governments have also created tax incentives, visa and permanent residency-concessions to encourage skilled workers, particularly in the IT sector, to stay.⁹⁶ There has been a significant increase in the number of Russians seeking to obtain citizenship in Central Asian countries, including billionaires and high-profile athletes.⁹⁷ In October 2022, Kazakh officials stated that fifty multinational companies had relocated to Kazakhstan from Russia since the invasion, a figure that would include Huawei and US Conglomerate Honeywell.⁹⁸ While similar cases have resulted in arrests and deportations, in 2023 Kazakhstan granted asylum seeker status to a defector from a Russian military unit.⁹⁹

The influx of Russian citizens has increased domestic consumption, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, air travel and banking.¹⁰⁰ Spikes in rental prices have been unpopular, and some local residents have reportedly been evicted by opportunistic landlords.¹⁰¹ Some polls have shown a small margin of local opposition to immigration, one conducted in Kazakhstan in November 2022 for example, others a more favourable public opinion.¹⁰² Polls

⁹² Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino. Turkmen News, "The migration of Turkmen citizens to the Russian Federation has almost fivefold. But the pre-Covid level has not been restored", Article, Turkmen News website, 24 May 2023, <https://turkmen.news/migraciya-grazhdan-turkmenistana-v-rf-vyrosla-pochti-vpyatero-no-dokovidnyj-uroven-ne-vosstanovlen/>. Farazh, "Proposal to set up 'Tajik battalion' in Russia said unacceptable", Article, Farazh Website (Dushanbe), 11 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000f7i>

⁹³ Kursiv, "Kazakhs move to Russia less often", Article, Kursiv Website (Almaty), 13 February 2024, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2024-02-13/labs-migratrf/>

⁹⁴ John Engvall, 2.

⁹⁵ Radio Free Europe, "Kazakhstan Tightens Entrance Regulations Amid Influx Of Russians Amid Ukraine War", Article, Radio Free Europe, 17 January 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-tightens-entrance-regulations-influx-russians/32227618.html>. TASS, "Consul General of the Russian Federation: 50-80 thousand out of 400 thousand Russians who entered in 2022 remain in Kazakhstan", Article, TASS News Agency (Moscow), 12 February 2024, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/19960051>

⁹⁶ John Engvall, 2. Congressional Research Service, 18. President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan Website, "Kyrgyz government ordered to lure in Russian IT specialists", Article, Radio Free Europe, 6 Apr 2022, <https://president.kg/kg/okujalar/22207>. Fergana News, "Uzbek authorities have simplified the process of obtaining a residence permit", Article, Fergana News Agency, 11 Jan 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/128834/>

⁹⁷ Congressional Research Service, 18. Radio Free Europe, "Another Russian Tycoon Renounces Russian Citizenship Amid Ukraine War", Article, Radio Free Europe, 11 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-billionaire-renounces-citizenship/32075480.html>. Radio Free Europe, "After Figure Skating Star's Nationality Switch, Will Russia's Loss Be Kazakhstan's Gain?", Article, Radio Free Europe, 23 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-loss-figure-skater-nationality-kazakhstan-gain/32561298.html>. Farangis Najibullah and Toktosun Shambetov, "Private Firms Obtain Kyrgyz Citizenship For Russians Desperate To Escape Homeland", Article, Radio Free Europe, 30 May 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/private-firms-kyrgyz-citizenship-russians-escape-/32435363.html>

⁹⁸ Radio Free Europe, "More Than 50 Multinationals Relocate From Russia To Kazakhstan Over War In Ukraine", Article, Radio Free Europe, 19 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-businesses-relocation-russia/32091437.html>. Asian Development Bank, 2.

⁹⁹ Radio Free Europe, "Man From Russia's Kalmykia Deemed Asylum Seeker In Kazakhstan After Fleeing Army", Article, Radio Free Europe, 20 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-kalmykia-asylum-seeker-kazakhstan-ukraine-war/32372082.html>. 24.kg, "Kyrgyzstan to deny Russians fleeing mobilisation refugee status", Article, Radio Free Europe, 20 December 2022, <https://24.kg/vlast/253920/>. Kaktus Media, "Russian draft dodger jailed for illegally entering Kyrgyzstan", Article, Kaktus Media Website (Bishkek), 29 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000gbj>. Radio Free Europe, "The Russian fled from mobilization to Kyrgyzstan. Now he will spend a year in the colony", Article, Radio Free Europe, 29 December 2022, https://kaktus.media/doc/481394_rossiiianin_sbejal_ot_mobilizacii_v_kyrgyzstan._teper_provedet_god_v_kolonii.html

¹⁰⁰ Asian Development Bank, 1-2. Asia-Plus, "Russian influx reportedly causes price hikes in Tajikistan", Article, Asia-Plus news agency website, 30 September 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/tj/news/tajikistan/society/20220930/ozir-honai-iora-dar-dushanbe-chand-pul-narh-dorad>

¹⁰¹ Congressional Research Service, 19.

¹⁰² Demoscope, "What People in Kazakhstan Think About the War in Ukraine," November 30, 2022, available at

implying widespread popular support for the Ukrainian cause however, have been discredited by scholars as unrepresentative and understating support for Russia.¹⁰³ Certainly Central Asian bloggers have criticized the war and a portion of humanitarian aid to Ukraine has come directly from citizens.¹⁰⁴ In May 2022, a Ukrainian flag was raised on a Kyrgyz mountain named after Vladimir Putin.¹⁰⁵ In the same year however, the respected *Central Asia Barometer* poll returned a favourable opinion towards Russia among slightly more than half of respondents in Kazakhstan, seventy-six percent in Uzbekistan and eighty-six percent in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁶ Several pro-Russian rallies and concerts have been allowed to go ahead in Kyrgyzstan, albeit in the early days of the war, and smaller Soviet-regimental organizations have conducted anniversary marches.¹⁰⁷ Most sporting fixtures with Russian teams, regional and international, have continued.¹⁰⁸

Yet the acceleration of pre-existing revisionist trends, for the most part directed at the Russian legacy, was highlighted by every interviewee.¹⁰⁹ In Kazakhstan, the discourse has pointed to an ‘unprecedented’, ‘wake-up’, effect, on the national consciousness.¹¹⁰ This has not translated into violence against ethnic-Russians, other than occasional confrontations over public displays of the ‘Z’ symbol.¹¹¹ It is rather, part of a broader re-thinking of national identity that, in its present iteration, began in the middle of the last decade. Released in late-2022, ‘Oyan (Wake up), Kazakh!’, a critique of the Soviet persecution of Kazakh intelligentsia in the 1930s, and also the name of an activist group detained for protesting in support of Ukraine, met with cinematic success.¹¹² In the same year, KGB archives were re-opened in order to re-assess the famine, which Kazakh activists demand be re-classified as ‘genocide’.¹¹³

Some reports have indicated that in light of the immigration, ethnic-Russians born in Kazakhstan are making conspicuous gestures of Kazakh patriotism, t-shirts for example, and enrolling on Kazakh-language courses.¹¹⁴

<https://demos.kz/what-people-in-kazakhstan-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine-2/?lang=en> . Fergana News, “Residents of Central Asia consider their countries to be a "transit point" for relocators from the Russian Federation”, Article, Fergana News Agency Website, 26 Jun 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/130560/>

¹⁰³ James Palmer, “Is China Replacing Russia in Central Asia?”, Article 23 May 23, Foreign Policy Magazine, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/23/china-central-asia-xi-xian-summit-russia-ukraine/> . Interview with Assistant Professor at the International School of Economics, KazGUU University. Via zoom 9th August 2023. Demoscope, “Ukraine war worsens Kazakh citizens' attitude to Russia – survey”, Survey, BBCM Central Asia Watchlist, 17 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204aodw>

¹⁰⁴ 24.kg, “Honey, canned food, blankets. Kyrgyz send first batch of humanitarian aid to Ukraine”, Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 11 April 2022,

https://24.kg/obshchestvo/230393_med_konservyi_odeyala_kyrgyzstantsyi_otpravili_pervuyu_partiyu_gumpomoschi_vukrainu/

¹⁰⁵ Vesti.kg, “In Kyrgyzstan, unknown persons hung the flag of Ukraine at Putin's peak (video)”, Article, Vesti.kg (Bishkek), 25 May 2022, <https://vesti.kg/obshchestvo/item/100161-v-kyrgyzstane-na-pike-putina-neizvestnye-povesili-flag-ukrainy-video.html>

¹⁰⁶ Ali Koseoglu, “Does the Eurasian Economic Union Have a Place in Central Asia’s Future?” The Diplomat, December 2, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/does-the-eurasian-economic-union-have-a-place-in-central-asias-future/>

¹⁰⁷ 24.kg, “He is our friend and partner. Rally in support of Russia held in Osh”, Article, 24.kg Website, 19 March 2022, https://24.kg/obshchestvo/228100_eto_nash_drug_ipartner_voshe_proshel_miting_vpodderjku_rossii/ . AkiPress, “A rally and a concert in support of Russia were held in Bishkek”, Article, AKIPress news agency website (Bishkek), 22 Mar 2022,

<https://kg.akipress.org/news:1770067/?from=akikg> . AkiPress, “Another pro-Russian rally held in Kyrgyz capital”, Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203d1u0> . 24.kg, “Bishkek cancels film festival about war in Ukraine”, Article, 24.kg, 21 April 2022, <https://vesti.kg/obshchestvo/item/98858-v-bishkeke-otmenili-festival-filmov-o-vojne-v-ukraine.html> . Vesti.kg, “The Immortal Regiment will return to the streets of Bishkek this year. Mayor's Office Finally Makes Decision”, Article, Vesti.kg, 28 April 2022, <https://vesti.kg/obshchestvo/item/99375-bessmertnyj-polk-v-etom-godu-vernetsya-na-ulitsy-bishkeka-v-merii-nakonets-prinyali-reshenie.html> . 24.kg, “The "Immortal Regiment" rally is taking place in Bishkek”, Article, 24.kg, 9 May 2022, https://24.kg/obshchestvo/265037_vbishkeke_prohodit_aktiya_bessmertnyy_polk/

¹⁰⁸ Fergana News, “The national football teams of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan agreed to play with Russia”, Article, Fergana News Agency Website, 28 October 2022, <https://fergana.agency/news/128151/>

¹⁰⁹ Interview with PaperLab Think Tank, Astana, 10th July 2023. Also Interview with Assistant Professor Political Science & International Relations, Nazarbayev University, 18th July 2023. Interview with KazGUU University, 9th August 2023.

¹¹⁰ Congressional Research Service, 12.

¹¹¹ Radio Free Europe, “Kazakhs Confront Russian Tourists Over 'Z' Stickers On Cars”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 29 August 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russia-war-z-tourists-/32009503.html> .

¹¹² Aibarshyn Akhmetal, “Biopic “Oyan, Kazakh!” Fuels Kazakh Historical Curiosity”, Article, The Astana Times, 29 October 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/10/biopic-oyan-kazakh-fuels-kazakh-historical-curiosity/>

¹¹³ Baktygul Chynybaeva, “Kazakhstan Opens Secret KGB Archives Amid Moves Toward Decolonization In Central Asia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 12 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-opens-kgb-archives-russian-criticism/32681381.html>

¹¹⁴ Interview with Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University, 10th August 2023. Also <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-language-club-russia-ukraine-invasion/32105411.html>

Others have expressed support for the war.¹¹⁵ This has extended to pro-separatist posts on social media, in some cases attributed to proxy disinformation activity.¹¹⁶ The issue of separatism is very sensitive in Kazakhstan and security forces have responded swiftly, issuing lengthy jail sentences to bloggers.¹¹⁷ In one case, the severe sentencing of an ethnic-Russian couple in Kazakhstan appeared to be timed with a separate post on a social media account attributed to Dmitri Medvedev, allegedly caused by hackers, describing Georgian and Kazakh statehood as ‘artificial’.¹¹⁸

Despite the official warnings and those of religious authorities, reports have emerged of Central Asians participating in the Ukraine conflict.¹¹⁹ Some estimates have placed the number of Tajiks fighting for the Wagner Group at four to five hundred and in May 2023, a Russian MP proposed the establishment of an ethnic-Tajik battalion.¹²⁰ A Tajik colonel serving in the Russian Armed Forces, and the son of a general in the Tajik Armed Forces, has been killed in the conflict.¹²¹ Some combatants have reportedly volunteered in return for Russian citizenship but accusations of coercion have been rejected by both Russian and Central Asian authorities.¹²² Despite Russian appeals, numerous citizens have been arrested in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for participating in the conflict.¹²³ While the number serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces appears to be marginal by comparison, Central Asians, notwithstanding four Tajiks who executed the 2024 terrorist attacks in a Moscow concert hall, have been among those arrested in Russia for espionage, sabotage, the assassination of a

¹¹⁵ Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino. Also Interview with Paperlab.

¹¹⁶ Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino. Also Annette Bohr.

¹¹⁷ Radio Free Europe, “Kazakhstan Hands Prison Term To Woman Who Called For Region To Join Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 6 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-woman-sentenced-russia-seizing-region-petropavl/32447240.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Three Members Of Group Calling For 'Sovereign Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic' Arrested”, Article, Radio Europe, 18 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-arrests-group-soviet-social-republic/32369082.html>

¹¹⁸ Radio Free Europe, “Kazakh Court Sentences Couple That Called For North Kazakhstan To Join Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 3 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-court-sentences-couple-north-kazakhstan-russia/31972190.html>

¹¹⁹ Congressional Research Service, 17. Also Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino. Also Asia-Plus, “Sirojiddin Muhriddin: “We are against our citizens participating in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine”, Asia-Plus News Agency (Dushanbe), 17 February 2023, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20230217/sirodzhiddin-muhriddin-mi-protiv-togo-chtobi-nashi-grazhdane-uchastvovali-v-konflikte-mezhdu-rf-i-ukrainoi> . Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan Warn Citizens Of Repercussions For Joining Russian Forces In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 22 September 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-warning-russia-military-service/32046022.html>

¹²⁰ Bomdod, “Banker's kidnapper said setting up Tajik Wagner unit in Ukraine”, Article, Pomdod (Prague), <https://www.bomdod.com/2023/07/26/dilshodi-krasavchik-mehohad-dar-chvk-vagner-bataljoni-tojiki-tashkil-kunad/> . Farazh, “Proposal to set up 'Tajik battalion' in Russia said unacceptable”, Article, Farazh (Dushanbe), <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000f71>

¹²¹ Bomdod, “Senior Russian officer of Tajik origin killed in Ukraine war”, Article, Bomdod (Prague), 21 August 2023, <https://www.bomdod.com/2023/08/21/podpolkovnik-bajzo-jalolov-pisari-general-i-tojik-abdujamol-jalolov-kushta-shud/> .

¹²² Radio Free Europe, “They Used Them As Cannon Fodder: The Migrants Sent From Prison In Russia To Death In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 28 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-migrants-prison-russia-death-ukraine-wagner/32568047.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Central Asians Incarcerated In Russia Forced To Support War Output, Letters Say”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 13 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asians-forced-support-war-penal-colony/32457831.html> . Asia-Plus, “Some 100 Tajik convicts in Russia sent to Ukraine war – minister”, Article, Asia Plus News Agency Website (Dushanbe), 11 August 2023, <https://khover.tj/2023/08/nishasti-matbuot-etimodi-sokinoni-to-ikiston-ba-kormandoni-ma-omot-i-kor-oi-dohil-afzudaast/> . Turmush, “The State Committee for National Security identified a Kyrgyz citizen who joined the Wagner PMC and went to war in Ukraine - the court sentenced him to 5 years in prison”, Article, Turmush (Bishkek), 3 Jan 2024, <https://www.turmush.kg/ru/news:2046323?from=portal&place=last> . 24.kg, “The Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation called the information about the mobilization of migrants fake”, Article, 24.kg, 3 October 2022, https://24.kg/obschestvo/246924_posolstvo_kvrf_nazvalo_feykom_informatsiy_omobilizatsii_migrantov/ . Eliza Kenenbaeva, “For Money or a Passport: Many Kyrgyz Fighting Alongside Russians in Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, April 10, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-russia-invasion-ukraine-fighting/31795637.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Migrants Reportedly Being Forced To Sign Contracts With Defence Ministry To Obtain Russian Citizenship”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 28 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asia-migrants-military-recruitment-ukraine/32567862.html>

¹²³ Radio Free Europe, “First Uzbek Jailed For Joining Russian Troops Fighting In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 31 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-prison-ukraine-separatists/32662140.html> . Saniya Toiken, “Nur-Sultan Launches Probe Against Kazakh National Fighting For Ukraine In War With Russia”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 3 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nur-sultan-probe-kazakh-national-fighting-for-ukraine/31882194.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan Arrests Citizen On Charge Of Serving With Wagner Group In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 15 August 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-wagner-mercenary-charged-wagner-ukraine/32548948.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Kazakh Student Faces Prosecution At Home For Joining Russia's Wagner In Ukraine”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 24 April 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-russia-wagner-ukraine/32377598.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Almaty Resident Who Fought Against Ukrainian Troops In Donbas Gets Life For Murdering Five People”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 26 April 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-almaty-duzhnov-guilty-murder/31822148.html>

pro-Putin blogger, and acts of popular dissent such as flying Ukrainian-coloured balloons over Red Square or, in the case of the head of the Uzbek diaspora, making insulting remarks about Russian soldiers.¹²⁴

The conflict has also produced changes in Russia's defence relations with, and force posture in, the region. The initial transfer of personnel and materiel from the 201st Motor Rifle Division base in Tajikistan, Russia's largest outside federal territory, and the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan, obliged both host governments to deny that they were assisting the Russian war effort.¹²⁵ By the end of 2022, it was reported that fifteen hundred Russian troops had been transferred from the 201st, to support the war effort in Ukraine though one expert interviewed by the author believed this number to be far higher.¹²⁶ In October 2022, Kazakhstan approved a revised-military doctrine referencing the need, while stating that no one state was considered an adversary, to protect borders and guard against 'separatist' activities.¹²⁷ A year later, the Kazakh legislature would approve its first reading of a law establishing a national reservist system.¹²⁸ The Kazakh, as well as a new Kyrgyz, doctrine stresses procurement cooperation with foreign defence companies and both governments have continued to source non-core inventory items such as drones, from a variety of countries.¹²⁹ In December 2022, the Russian ambassador had to confirm that Kazakhstan was not leaving the CSTO, echoing earlier assurances by authorities in Kyrgyzstan.¹³⁰ Kazakh authorities have also been obliged to deny rumours in Russian media that the country has been negotiating shipments of war materiel to Ukraine.¹³¹

Moscow's annual program of joint-military, including CSTO, exercises has for the most part remained unaffected by the conflict.¹³² Russia has continued to test weaponry on Kazakh ranges and the consolidation of the CIS Integrated Air Defence System in Central Asia has progressed since the outbreak of conflict, to include an exercise in Kazakhstan which saw Kyrgyz forces test surface-to-air missile systems newly-purchased from

¹²⁴ Bomdod, "Tajik charged in Russia with espionage for Ukraine", Article, Bomdod (Prague), 12 October 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000smf>. Izvestia, "Tajiks on trial in Russia for plotting to blow up FSB HQ' – report", Article, Izvestia website (Moscow), 25 October 2023, <https://www.bomdod.com/2023/10/12/hunarpeshai-tojikro-dar-rusija-ba-josusi-baroi-ukraina-ajbdor-mekunand-video/>. Asia-Plus, "Two Tajiks detained after launching balloons over Red Square", Article, Asia-Plus News Agency (Dushanbe), 15 May 2023, <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/laworder/20230515/dvoih-tadzhikistantsev-zaderzhali-posle-zapuska-vozdushnih-sharov-nad-krasnoi-plotshadyu>. TASS, "Bastrykin instructed to open a case after an insulting post addressed to the participants of the NOW", Article, TASS News Agency (Moscow), 17 January 2024, <https://tass.ru/proisshestviya/19746351>

¹²⁵ Avesta, "Tajikistan does not take any part in the events in Ukraine", Article, Avesta Website (Dushanbe), 3 Mar 2022, <https://avesta.tj/2022/03/03/tadzhikistan-ne-prinimaet-nikakogo-uchastiya-v-sobytyah-v-ukraine-posolstvo/>. AkiPress, "There is no such option, - Secretary of the Security Council on sending troops by Kyrgyzstan to Ukraine within the framework of the CSTO or UN peacekeepers", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website (Bishkek), 15 March 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1768581/?from=akikg>

¹²⁶ Radio Free Europe, "Up To 1,500' Russian Troops Redeployed To Ukraine From Tajik Base, Investigation Reveals", Article, Radio Free Europe, 14 September 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-troops-tajik-base-redeployed-ukraine/32033791.html>. Interview with Editor, Eurasianet, via zoom, 4th August 2023

¹²⁷ Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan updates military doctrine, seemingly with Russia in mind," Eurasianet, October 26, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-updates-military-doctrine-seemingly-with-russia-in-mind>

¹²⁸ Martí, Stepanyuk and Bandeira.

¹²⁹ Martí, Stepanyuk and Bandeira. AkiPress, "The Secretary of the Security Council told what is the reason for updating the Military Doctrine", Article, AKIpress news agency website (Bishkek), 14 June 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1938596/?from=portal&place=last>. 24.kg, "Kyrgyzstan has imported 52 drones since the beginning of the year", Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 16 August 2023, https://24.kg/ekonomika/272716_kyrgyzstan_snachala_goda_importiroval_52bespilotnika/

¹³⁰ Telegram Messaging Service, "Kazakhstan is not going to withdraw from the CSTO - Russian ambassador", Article, Telegram Messaging, 2 December 2022, <https://t.me/sputnikKZ/28938>. AkiPress, "Kyrgyzstan denies alleged plans to quit Russia-led military bloc", Article, AKIpress news agency website (Bishkek), 27 April 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203f6mp>

¹³¹ TengriNews, "The Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan denied rumors about military assistance to Ukraine", Article, TengriNews website (www.tengrinews.kz) (Almaty), 7 March 2024, <https://tengrinews.kz/sng/minoboronyi-kazahstana-oproverglo-sluhi-voennoy-pomoschi-528654/>

¹³² AsiaPlus, "Russia-led security bloc war games end in Tajikistan", Article, Asia Plus News Agency Website (Dushanbe), 24 October 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203u3wr>. IA-Centr, "Russia-led military bloc drills begin in Kazakhstan", Article, ia-centr website (Moscow), 28 September 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203s0pw>

Belarus.¹³³ That Kazakhstan has not objected to Russian use of the Caspian to launch cruise missiles into Ukraine, despite a 2018 agreement that the sea would be used only for ‘peaceful purposes’, is also significant.¹³⁴

In January 2022, President Tokayev had requested the CSTO to quell domestic unrest in Almaty and secure the city’s critical infrastructure. This was the first time that the organization, increasingly dismissed as irrelevant since the establishment of a twenty-five thousand strong Rapid Reaction Force at Kant in 2009, had been utilized to this effect. Previous requests by the Kyrgyz government in 2010 and from both Tajikistan and Armenia in 2021, had been rejected. If Moscow had expected reciprocity however it has not been forthcoming. Only Belarus has assisted Russia militarily, despite the fact that Ukrainian munitions have fallen on CSTO territory. The public focus of its three Central Asian members, on Afghanistan, has been interpreted as an attempt to re-orient the CSTO away from Eastern Europe.¹³⁵ Likewise, the appointment in January 2023 of a former-Kazakh minister to head the organization’s rotating secretariat has also been read as political legerdemain intended to distance the organization from the conflict.¹³⁶

The non-participation of Kyrgyzstan and Armenia in CSTO exercises in 2022 and 2023 respectively, followed by the latter’s suspension of its CSTO membership in 2024, have been interpreted as further affronts to Moscow.¹³⁷ While these abstentions might be understood as posturing ahead of major summits, they also occurred in the context of frozen conflicts, whose very escalation has been suggested as another marker for Russia’s waning influence in its near abroad.¹³⁸ The Central Asian nations have overwhelmingly backed Azerbaijan, during the latter’s ongoing confrontation with CSTO member Armenia, which occurred largely with the acquiescence of Russian peacekeepers.¹³⁹ In the case of the 2022 Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict however, Moscow remained the default arbiter, Putin reportedly calling the leaders of both countries ahead of the SCO summit, urging a peace agreement.¹⁴⁰ A Russian-brokered summit then took place in October, after Bishkek had reportedly requested, albeit with Tajikistan rejecting, CSTO arbitration.¹⁴¹

¹³³ Reuters, “Russia Tests New Missile-Defence System Rocket”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 2 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tests-new-missile-defense-system-rocket/32158555.html> . Sarbaz.kz, “Military exercises of the air defense forces of the CIS countries started in Kazakhstan” Article, Sarbaz.kz Website (Astana), 9 September 2023, <https://sarbaz.kz/v-centre-vnimaninya/658-v-kazakhstan-startovali-voennye-ucheniya-sil-pvo-stran-sng/> . AkiPress, “Kyrgyzstan will receive the Pechora-2BM anti-aircraft missile system. It will be stationed in Batken”, Article, AkiPress news agency website (Bishkek), 19 October 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1811635?from=portal&place=last> .

¹³⁴ Yelnur Alimova, “Russia Is Using The Caspian Sea To Launch Strikes Against Ukraine. So Why Are The Caspian Countries Silent?”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 2 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/caspian-sea-ukraine-war-russia-peace-friendship-convention/32158822.html>

¹³⁵ John Engvall, 2. Khovar, “Tajik leader voices concern over regional security threats”, Article, Khovar Website (Dushanbe), 14 October 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203tf61>

¹³⁶ Nezavisimaya Gazeta, “Tasmagambetov became CSTO Secretary General in rotation due to Kazakhstan's queue – Akorda”, Article, Nezavisimaya Gazeta Moscow, 23 November 2022, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/tasmagambetov-stal-gensekom-odkb-v-poryadke-rotatsii-v-svyazi-s-ocheredyu-kazakhstana-akorda> . KazTag, “SPEECH by the President of the Republic of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon at the summit in the format Central Asia + Russia”, Article, KazTag News Agency (Almaty), <https://khover.tj/rus/2022/10/286796/>

¹³⁷ Chris Rickleton, “Russia's Unhappy Club: The CSTO”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 12 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-club-csto-ukraine-military-alliance/32079498.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Armenia Notably Absent As Russian-Led CSTO Training Gets Under Way”, Article, Radio Free Europe, <https://www.rferl.org/a/csto-military-alliance-russia-armenia-absent/32634376.html> . Radio Free Europe, “Kyrgyzstan Cancels Planned CSTO Exercises”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 9 October 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-cancels-csto-military-exercises-belarus-russia/32072105.html> . Congressional Research Service, 15

¹³⁸ Martí, Stepanyuk and Bandeira, 10. Hélène Thibault, “The impact of the war in Ukraine on Central Asia: Instability, mistrust, and loss of Russian influence”, Le Rubicon, December 14, 2022.

¹³⁹ Khabar, “Central Asian nations back Azerbaijan over Karabakh”, Article, Khabar News Agency (Bishkek), 13 September, 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000ptj>

¹⁴⁰ Reuters, “Putin calls on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to de-escalate”, Article, Reuters, 18 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-calls-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-de-escalate-2022-09-18/> . BBC Monitoring, “Russian press upbeat over EAEU summit, Nagorno-Karabakh settlement”, Round Up of Russian Newspapers, 26 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204be9i> .

¹⁴¹ President of Tajikistan’s Website, “Russia-arranged summit focuses on Tajik-Kyrgyz tension”, Article, Website of the President of Tajikistan, 13 October 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203t9pi> . AkiPress, “There will be no peace between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan until an arbitrator stands between us, - Defense Minister Bekbolotov”, Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, 19 October 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1811609/?from=portal&place=nowread&b=2>

The improvement in Tajikistan's relations with Russia, has been the most conspicuous of any Central Asian Republic since the invasion. While Tajikistan has continued to resist Russian pressure to accede to the Customs Union, President Rahmon has, without specifically mentioning Ukraine, praised Putin for 'defending Russia's interests'.¹⁴² Moscow has extended concessionary oil exports and Tajikistan has pioneered Russian-sponsored SWIFT-transfer and QR-payment system alternatives.¹⁴³ In September 2022, the Russian Supreme Court outlawed Tajikistan's exiled-Islamist opposition.¹⁴⁴ Members of other Tajik Pamiri or Democratic opposition movements have also been arrested, or have disappeared, inside the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁵ In 2022 and 2023, Tajikistan hosted both CSTO and bilateral exercises and Moscow has continued to press CIS Air Defence unification on Dushanbe, which received two Russian Anti-Aircraft divisions in November 2023.¹⁴⁶

Russia however, has successfully balanced its relations with Kyrgyzstan throughout the border conflict. Moscow has sold a range of military equipment, including armoured vehicles, during what has become a multi-billion dollar spending spree by Bishkek.¹⁴⁷ In the Summer of 2022, the two countries signed security cooperation and Joint Air Defence agreements, by no means seminal, but symbolic given their concurrency with the border conflict.¹⁴⁸ Japarov's absence from a CIS leaders' breakfast in May 2023, was seen as yet another snub to Putin following Bishkek's cancellation of the annual CSTO exercise the previous summer, but has since also been explained by President Rahmon's participation in the meeting.¹⁴⁹ Kyrgyzstan did in fact successfully host the CSTO's annual exercise in 2023 when the Kyrgyz president would hail the Russian military presence at the Kant Airbase, as a 'guarantor' of regional security.¹⁵⁰ Russian defence cooperation during the period was less

¹⁴² Asia-Plus, "The President of Tajikistan congratulated Vladimir Putin on his anniversary", Article, Asia-Plus News Agency Website (Dushanbe), 7 October 2022, <https://www.asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/politics/20221007/prezident-tadzhikistana-pozdravil-vladimir-putina-s-yubileem>

¹⁴³ Asia-Plus, "Tajik bank launches Russian SWIFT analogue", Article, "Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe)", 9 March 2023, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20230309/kakie-banki-tadzhikistana-uzhe-pereshli-na-sbp-i-cto-eto-takoe>. Asia-Plus, "Tajikistan agreed with Russia to increase the supply of preferential oil products", Article, "Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe)", 1 December 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20221201/tadzhikistan-dogovorilsya-s-rossiei-ob-uvlichenii-postavok-lgotnih-nefteproduktov>. Asia-Plus, "Tajikistan wants to replace Kazakh grain with Russian grain - preferential", Article, Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe), 22 April 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20220421/tadzhikistan-hochet-zamenit-kazahskie-zernovie-na-rossiiskie-lgotnie>

¹⁴⁴ Payom.net, "Tajik opposition party condemns Russian Supreme Court ban", Article, Payom.net, 14 September 2022, <https://payom.net/nit-arori-dodgo-i-olii-rusijaro-beasos-sirf-sies-va-bemasulijatona-nomid/>. Bomdod, "Tajik opposition movement ceases operations in Russia", Article, Bomdod, 14 March 2022, <https://www.bomdod.com/2022/03/14/guruhi-24-az-qati-faolijatash-dar-rusija-habar-dod/>

¹⁴⁵ Bombod, "Tajik oppositionist arrested in Moscow", Article, Bombod, 17 December 2023, <https://www.bomdod.com/2023/12/17/bozdoshti-jak-muholifi-hukumati-tojikiston-bo-tahallusi-sajfullo-dar-maskav/>. Telegram Messaging, "Natives of restive Tajik region deported from Russia", Article, Telegram Messaging, 12 August 2022, <https://t.me/pamirdailynews/1164>. Telegram, "Two activists from restive Tajik region 'go missing' in Russia", Article, Telegram Messaging Service, 30 Jul 2022, <https://t.me/anorasarkorova/377>

¹⁴⁶ Rossiya 1, "Programme summary of Russian Rossiya 1 'Vesti' News 1700 GMT 22 Nov 23", Article, Rossiya 1 TV (Moscow), 22 November 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000ww5>. President of the Russian Federation, "Russia sends S-300 air defence missiles to Tajikistan – Putin", President of the Russian Federation Website, 22 November 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72788>

¹⁴⁷ 24.kg, "The Border Service of the State Committee for National Security and the Ministry of Emergency Situations were presented with new special equipment", Article, 24.kg, 25 March 2022, https://24.kg/vlast/228561_pogranichnoy_slujbe_gknb_imchs_vruchili_novuyu_spetstehniku/. Turmush, "\$1 billion spent to ensure Kyrgyzstan's defense capability, - head of the State Committee for National Security Tashiyev", Article, Turmush, 6 March 2023, <https://www.turmush.kg/ru/news:1878324?from=portal&place=lasthttps://www.turmush.kg/ru/news:1878324?from=portal&place=last>. 24.kg, "The Air Defense Forces of the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan have a new Mi-17 helicopter", Article, 24.kg, 23 June 2023, https://24.kg/obschestvo/268831_usil_vozdushnoy_oboronyi_voorujennyih_sil_kyrgyzstana_novyyi_vertolet_mi-17/

¹⁴⁸ Kaktus Media, "Kyrgyz Interior Ministry signs cooperation agreement with National Guard", Article, Kaktus Media Website (Bishkek), 16 June 2022, https://kaktus.media/doc/461942_mvd_kyrgyzstana_podpisalo_soglashenie_o_sotrydnichestve_s_rosgvardiey.html. AkiPress, "The head of the Cabinet of Ministers approved the conclusion of an agreement with Russia on the creation of a joint regional air defense system of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Russian Federation", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, 29 June 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1946793?from=portal&place=last>.

¹⁴⁹ AkiPress, "Kyrgyz president skips Putin's breakfast to talk to Russian PM", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website (Bishkek), 9 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000enq>

¹⁵⁰ Kaktus Media, "Russia-led security bloc drills kick off in Kyrgyzstan", Article, Kaktus Media Website, 9 October 2023, https://24.kg/obschestvo/276923_vkyrgyzstane_nachalis_ucheniya_kollektivnyih_sil_odkb_nerushimoe_bratstvo/. AkiPress,

conspicuous with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan than with its CSTO partners. Moscow's involvement in mediating a smaller flare up in tensions along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in May 2022, was minimal.¹⁵¹ Public unrest in Karakalpakstan, also revived speculation that Moscow is sponsoring secessionism in the Uzbek Autonomous Region. Though protestors claimed Russia as a 'friend', Tashkent did not accuse Moscow directly but blamed 'hostile foreign forces'.¹⁵² The Russian press blamed 'Anglo-Saxons'.¹⁵³

China in Central Asia since Feb 2022

The period since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has seen the entrenchment of largely extant trends in China's engagement with the CARs. Official exchanges have continued between heads of state, at the vice-premier and vice-presidential level, between senior members of the legislatures as well as through the bilateral cooperation committees established in the 2000s and 2010s. These interactions have seen praise for 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships', Central Asian 'sovereignty', and calls to restore pre-pandemic levels of cooperation.¹⁵⁴ Russian, Chinese and Central Asian leaders have all mutually-endorsed renewed terms in offices and in the case of Uzbekistan, a constitutional referendum.¹⁵⁵ Tokayev's re-iteration in early-2024 that Russia was Kazakhstan's principle strategic partner, was immediately caveated by an affirmation of relations with China as 'exemplary'.¹⁵⁶

The language used by Chinese diplomats however has also referenced a 'new geopolitical situation' and in the case of Kazakhstan, a 'new thirty years'.¹⁵⁷ In advance of the strategic partnership's upgrading in early-2024, to 'all-weather', the Uzbek and Chinese leaderships had made public references to 'completely new' relations entering a 'fast lane' after the 'test of changing international situations' faced by both countries.¹⁵⁸ The first test

"Russian airbase in Kant is a guarantor of security in Central Asia, - Sadyr Japarov", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, 12 October 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:2001492?from=portal&place=last>

¹⁵¹ AkiPress, "Kyrgyz and Uzbek foreign ministers discuss May 5 incident in which Uzbek border guards shot dead three Kyrgyz citizens", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website, 6 May 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1779317/?from=akikg>

¹⁵² Telegram, "Uzbek leader blames deadly riots on 'hostile foreign forces'", Article, Telegram Messaging Service, https://t.me/Press_Secretary_Uz/2086. Komsomolskaya Pravda, "Karakalpak revolt: They raised their hand against our autonomy! And we are close to Russia", Article, Komsomolskaya Pravda, 4 Jul 2022, https://www.bing.com/search?pglt=41&q=komsomolscaya+pravda&cvid=55485090bc984ff490f27720c8d2107f&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIGCAEQABhAMgYIAhAuGEAYBggDEAAAYQDIGCAQQABhAMgYIBRAAGEAYBggGEAAAYQDIGCAcQABhAMgYICBAAGEDSAQg2NzExajBqMagCALACAA&FORM=ANNTA1&DAF1=1&PC=ASTS. AkiPress, "Third forces tried to use Kempir-Abad to come to power, - Akylbek Japarov", Article, AkiPress News Agency Website (Bishkek), <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1842274?from=portal&place=last>

¹⁵³ BBC Monitoring, "Russian press views Uzbekistan unrest", Round-Up, BBC Monitoring, 4 July 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2031260>

¹⁵⁴ Xinhua, "Wang Qishan met with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and attended the sixth CICA Summit", BBC Monitoring Watchlist, http://www.news.cn/world/2022-10/13/c_1129063043.htm. TengriNews, "Ambassador announces 'acceleration' of relations between Kazakhstan and China", Article, TengriNews Website (Almaty), https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/posol-zayavil-ob-uskorenii-otnosheniy-kazahstana-i-kitaya-494184/

¹⁵⁵ China Radio International, "Programme summary of China's CRI website news in Hausa", Article, China Radio International (CRI) website (Beijing), 2 May 23, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000e3u>. President of Russian Federation Website, "Putin congratulates Uzbek president after 'successful referendum'", Article, President of the Russian Federation website (Moscow), 2 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2049jkv>

¹⁵⁶ President of Kazakhstan Website, "Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: As a progressive nation, we must look only forward!", Article, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Website, 3 Jan 2024, <http://president.kz/ru/prezident-respubliki-kazahstan-kasym-zhomart-tokaev-kak-progressivnaya-naciya-my-dolzheny-smotret-tolko-vpered-302415>

¹⁵⁷ BBC Monitoring, "Chinese Twitter diplomacy 24-30 May 22", BBC Monitoring 30 May 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203iasm>. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Wang Yi held talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Treuberdi", Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, 7 June 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjbxhd/202206/t20220607_10699848.shtml

¹⁵⁸ President.uz, "The President of Uzbekistan congratulated the President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping on his re-election", Article, President.uz, 10 March 2023, <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/6023>. BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary of China's CRI news in Hausa 19:00 GMT 13 Apr 23", Article, BBC Monitoring, 14 April 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000cny>. BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary from CCTV-1's 'News Hookup'", Programme Summary, BBC Monitoring, 15 September 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203qv4j>. BBC Monitoring, "Chinese, Uzbek presidents pledge to develop 'all-weather' strategic partnership", BBCM China Watchlist, 25 January 2024,

of the 'changing situation' came with the C5 + China Foreign Ministers Meeting in Kazakhstan in June 2022, which saw an agreement to establish regular meetings among the heads of state, laying the foundation for the Xian summit the following year. This was followed by the participation of Mirziyoyev and Tokayev in a 'BRICS-Plus' summit, alongside eleven other developing world nations.¹⁵⁹

A state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022, prior to the Samarkand SCO Summit, was Xi's first foreign trip following the pandemic, a milestone amplified by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in advance of the Twentieth Party Congress a week later.¹⁶⁰ While some commentaries would interpret support for Kazakh 'sovereignty', as a reference to Russian aggression, such language draws from a well-established dialectic.¹⁶¹ Xi did use the SCO summit however, to promote his Global Development (GDI) and Security Initiatives (GSI), and to elicit further affirmations of the One China Policy following a visit to Taiwan by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Indeed, articles penned by Xi for Kazakh and Uzbek media in advance of the summit used language such as 'interference' and 'unilateralism' traditionally aimed at US policy. The collocation of 'regional stability', with these two terms, also implied that the US remained the principle aggressor in Central Asia not Russia.¹⁶²

By contrast with the 2023 SCO Summit in Bishkek which the Chinese President did not attend in person, Xi Jinping's arrival was to great fanfare. The event, the first Uzbek-hosted summit to be held in a sprawling purpose-built complex in Samarkand, the country's heavily-promoted Silk Road heritage site, was also sensationalized in Uzbek media. A number of large investment agreements were signed between China and the five republics but characteristically lacked clarity regarding their future implementation. Legacy projects receiving attention included the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railroad and the Kamar-Ata dam in Kyrgyzstan, with a trilateral cooperation agreement, one of numerous since 1997, signed in respect of the former.¹⁶³

Beijing's 'twelve-point' peace plan proposed on the anniversary of the invasion, received unanimous support from Central Asian leaders but the diplomatic highlight of the period, was an inaugural Head of State summit in the 'C5' format. Held in May 2023 in Xian, the summit was responsible for most of the commentary depicting China's regional engagement, as a 'significant shift' and an 'effrontery' to Russia.¹⁶⁴ Though receiving less attention, a virtual summit had already taken place in January followed by a fourth meeting of the six foreign ministers in April where Qin Gang took the opportunity to reiterate 'firm support' for the republics' territorial integrity after the PRC's ambassador to France had publicly questioned the sovereignty of former-Soviet states.¹⁶⁵ Interestingly, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry responded to the latter's comments by defending China, noting its early-diplomatic recognition of the independent republics.¹⁶⁶

The Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed the Xian summit, which coincided with a G7 meeting in Japan, attended by Volodymyr Zelensky, to be of 'milestone' significance.¹⁶⁷ Some commentators stated that Xian demonstrated 'regional unity and regional consensus' with regards to Sino-Russian relations.¹⁶⁸ The summit was preceded not

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204y0i8> . BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary from CCTV-1's 'News Hookup'", BBC Monitoring Programme Summary, 18 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204b0nj>

¹⁵⁹ Uzbekistan, "Programme summary of Uzbek TV 'Axborot 24' news", Ozbekiston (Uzbek TV First Channel) (Tashkent), Program Summary, BBC Monitoring, 24 Jun 22, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203kdrx> .

<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203mz20>

¹⁶⁰ TengriNews, "Ambassador: Kazakhstan is a priority of China's foreign policy", Article, Tengrinews website (www.tengrinews.kz) (Almaty), 14 December 2023, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/posol-kazahstan-eto-prioritet-vneshney-politiki-kitaya-520208/

¹⁶¹ John Engvall, 3. Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino.

¹⁶² BBC Monitoring, "Xi urges Central Asian nations to resist 'interference'", BBCM China Watchlist for 14 September, 14 September, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203qnd0>

¹⁶³ President of Uzbekistan Website, "A meeting of the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan was held", Article, President.uz (Tashkent), 15 September 2022, <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/5532>

¹⁶⁴ Stefan Hedlund. Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf and Alison McFarland, China Looks to Fill a Void in Central Asia, United States Institute of Peace (May 2023), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/china-looks-fill-void-central-asia>

¹⁶⁵ BBC Monitoring, "Foreign minister pledges support for Central Asian countries' sovereignty", BBCM China Watchlist, 28 April 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20495pt>

¹⁶⁶ KazTag, "China recognizes and respects Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity - Kazakh Foreign Ministry", Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 24 April 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000dfk>

¹⁶⁷ Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf, and Alison McFarland.

¹⁶⁸ Tom O'Connor, "China Winning New Central Asia Foothold, Edging U.S. Out of Russian Bastion", Article 17th May 23, Newsweek, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-winning-new-central-asia-foothold-edging-us-out-russian-bastion-1800683>

only by Kazakh and Kyrgyz state visits to China and the attendance by all five Central Asian leaders at Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, but also by Xi's first state visit to the Russian capital since the outbreak of the conflict, when the two presidents issued a statement regarding their shared interests in Central Asia.¹⁶⁹ Other commentaries portrayed Xian as an attempt by the Central Asian states to 'cultivate' China as an alternative ally and evidence that China has been 'empowered to engage with the five Central Asian countries on its own'.¹⁷⁰ These were undoubtedly exaggerations. Regional experts interviewed by the author, saw the summit as being largely for propaganda purposes, less significant than the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, with little in terms of concrete commitments.¹⁷¹ One described the signing of another agreement on the CKU railroad as well as a visa-free regime agreed with Tokayev the day before, on the latter's seventieth birthday, as the summit's only highlights.¹⁷² The same observer contrasted the grand diplomatic theatre of Xian with Russian diplomacy in the region, which is very routine, 'like a group of old friends getting together'.¹⁷³

Media reports covering the summit made no reference to the Ukraine conflict. When the matter was put to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, its spokesperson instructed media representatives to 'check back for updates'.¹⁷⁴ The Xian summit was followed five months later by the third Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, attended by both the Uzbek and Kazakh heads of state, and former-Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, a larger political figure than his son and successor.¹⁷⁵ As in Xian, Central Asian leaders reaffirmed the alignment of the BRI with their own national development strategies. Tokayev praised the 'brilliant implementation' of the BRI and the 'fifty-two projects', promised under Beijing's International Capacity Cooperation (ICC) banner in the late-2010s, still controversial in Kazakhstan.¹⁷⁶ November 2023 also saw the first SCO Transport Forum take place in Tashkent, inferring a convergence of BRI and SCO mandates.¹⁷⁷

Kazakhstan has continued to promote its infrastructure network as a hub for China-Europe trade. Container volumes at the Khorgos 'gateway' crossing, on the Kazakh-Xinjiang border, registered successive year-on-year increases and several new scheduled rail services were launched between Chinese cities and Almaty.¹⁷⁸ Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan completed upgrades on border crossings with Xinjiang in 2023, and announced the construction of new crossing points.¹⁷⁹ China also signed an agreement with Kazakhstan to end a long-standing dispute over the allocation of trans-boundary waters, and another with Kyrgyzstan to construct a power line across the shared border.¹⁸⁰ Chinese statements have exploited revived enthusiasm for the 'middle corridor', and

¹⁶⁹ Annette Bohr.

¹⁷⁰ Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino. Also Ulrich Jochheim, 7.

¹⁷¹ Interview with Lecturer, OSCE Academy, Bishkek, 10th July 2023 . Interview with Eurasianet, 4th August 2023

¹⁷² Interview with Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University, 10th August 2023

¹⁷³ Interview with Eurasianet, 4th August 2023

¹⁷⁴ BBC Monitoring, "Central Asian leaders arrive for 'milestone' summit", BBCM China Watchlist, 18 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204ark6>

¹⁷⁵ Shannon Tiezzi, "Which World Leaders Came to China's 3rd Belt and Road Forum?", Article, The Diplomat, 18 October 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/which-world-leaders-came-to-chinas-3rd-belt-and-road-forum/>

¹⁷⁶ President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Website, "President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping held talks", Article, President.kz, 17 October 2023, <http://president.kz/ru/prezident-kazahstana-kasym-zhomart-tokaev-i-predsedatel-kr-si-czinpin-proveli-peregovory-1792248>

¹⁷⁷ KazInform, "Kazakhstan intends to increase the transit of goods from Southeast Asia to the European market", Article, KazInform (Astana), 1 Nov 2023, <https://www.inform.kz/ru/kazahstan-nameren-uvlichit-tranzit-tovarov-iz-yugo-vostochnoy-azii-na-evropeyskiy-rinok-c67425>

¹⁷⁸ BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary from CCTV-1's 'News Hookup'", BBC Monitoring, 16 May 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203gy2y> . BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary from CCTV-1's 'News Hookup'", BBC Monitoring, 28 April 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2049g46> . BBC Monitoring, BBC Monitoring Covid-19 Roundup: China, 14 Aug 23, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204i1wl>

¹⁷⁹ Vlast, "Railway to China through Abay region to be built in Kazakhstan", Article, Vlast Online Magazine (Almaty), 30 September 2022, <https://vlast.kz/novosti/51892-zeleznuu-dorogu-v-kitaj-cerez-abajskuu-oblast-postroat-v-kazahstane.html> . 24.kg, "Let's go to the East. The Cabinet of Ministers told with whom they want to establish trade relations", Article, 24.kg, 10 March 2022, Let's go to the East. The Cabinet of Ministers told with whom they want to establish trade relations - | 24.KG . AkiPress, "Kyrgyzstan and China agree to open Bedel Pass and build a third border checkpoint", Article, AkiPress Website, 21 May 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1924263?from=portal&place=last> . President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan Website, "Kyrgyzstan upgrades border crossing with China", Article, President.kg, 21 December 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0001029> . 24.kg, "The President instructed to modernize the Irkeshtam checkpoint", Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 28 Jul 2023, https://24.kg/vlast/271290_prezident_poruchil_modernizirovat_punkt_propuska_irkeshtam/

¹⁸⁰ Orda.kz, "Kazakhstan and China agree on fair division of water resources", Article, Orda.kz website (Almaty), 21 December 2023, <https://orda.kz/o-spravedlivom-delenii-vodnyh-resursov-dogovorilis-kazahstan-i-kitaj-380548/> . Kaktus Media, "A power

Kazakh overtures resulted in an agreement with the Lianyungang Port Holding Corporation to develop a container hub in Aktau.¹⁸¹ The development of road infrastructure in Gorno-Badakhshan by Chinese companies and with Chinese grant aid, also continued, and plans were announced for a fibre-optic link to be constructed across the Tajik region's border with Xinjiang.¹⁸²

Public diplomacy in Samarkand, Xian and Beijing, relied to varying degrees, on the prestige of the CKU railroad project. The subject of official negotiation since the late-1990s, the project is a useful marker for Sino-Russian macro cooperation in Central Asia: its East-West trajectory contradicts the North-South vision of the EEU, would meaningfully link Xinjiang with the populous Fergana Valley where China is a significant investor, and end Uzbekistan's reliance on Kazakhstan for access to Chinese markets.¹⁸³ Neither publicly debated nor the target of protests, the project has been criticized in Russian media and by pro-Russian commentators in Uzbekistan, and it has frequently been speculated that the reason for the railroad's twenty-year forestalment is Russian political pressure.¹⁸⁴

Kyrgyz MPs and officials claim to support the project but the country's political system has exhibited such centrifugal tendencies that if developed in line with the direct route desired by Uzbekistan and China, it is unlikely that Bishkek would in the long run, be able to exercise genuine sovereignty over the south of the country, vis-à-vis the combined commercial and political weight of China and Kyrgyz-Uzbek diaspora. Successive administrations in Bishkek have insisted on a route partially-encompassing northern provinces, so circuitous that it renders the project prohibitively expensive.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless with the passage of time, the project has become fused with numerous regional connectivity narratives, the 'Five Nations' railway for example, the 'Middle Corridor', as well as Uzbek attempts to channel Chinese trade with Afghanistan, and positive messaging was duly reciprocated at all three summits.

In May 2022, Japarov publicly claimed that Putin had no opposition to the CKU railroad and that the commencement of its construction would be announced at the SCO summit.¹⁸⁶ While this would not be the case, in June 2023, the deputy director of Russian Railways made a rare public statement of support, citing the present burden on the Trans-Siberian Railroad.¹⁸⁷ In late-2023 however, familiar reports of funding challenges began to re-emerge.¹⁸⁸ An invitation by the Kyrgyz government for Ali Baba to set up a logistics hub in the country in 2022 was also unsuccessful, and a centre would instead be inaugurated in the Uzbek Fergana the

line will be stretched from Kyrgyzstan to China for the export of surplus electricity", Article, Kaktus Media Website, 22 May 2023, https://kaktus.media/doc/480985_iz_kyrgyzstana_v_kitay_protianyt_lep_dlja_eksporta_izlishkov_elektroenergii.html .

¹⁸¹ BBC Monitoring, Chinese Embassy to Kazakhstan 'X' Page, Chinese diplomatic activity on X (formerly Twitter) 24-30 Oct 23, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204pvrr> . TengriNews, "Affiliate network: Tokayev made a proposal to China", Article, Tengrinews website (www.tengrinews.kz) (Almaty), 18 October 2023, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/partnerskaya-set-tokaev-obratilsya-s-predlozheniem-k-kitayu-513899/

¹⁸² Asia-Plus, "China Road has started rehabilitating a key section of the Dushanbe-Khorog highway", Article, Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe), 23 June 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20220623/china-road-pristupila-k-reabilitatsii-klyuchevogo-uchastka-avtodorogi-dushanbe-horog> . Cabar, "Tajikistan's connection to Chinese telecommunications networks: experts fear blockages and restrictions", Article, Cabar.asia, 4 December 2023, <https://cabar.asia/en/tajikistan-s-connection-to-chinese-telecommunications-networks-experts-fear-blockages-and-restrictions>

¹⁸³ Podrobno, "Alibaba Corporation opens a regional logistics center in Namangan", Article, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), 10 August 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/korporatsiya-alibaba-otkryvaet-regionalnyy-logisticheskiy-tsentr-v-namangane/>

¹⁸⁴ Telegram, "In the East, not everything is as it seems", Article, Telegram messaging service, 19 September 2022, <https://t.me/chernogaev/12838>

¹⁸⁵ Tazabek, "Despite Kyrgyzstan's membership in the EAEU, cargo is subject to checks at the borders, and trade has not improved, MP says", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 12 April 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/www.tazabek.kg/news:1774415?f=cp>

¹⁸⁶ Tazabek, "The Cabinet of Ministers approved the main directions for the development of railway transport for 2022-2026", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 20 May 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1781967/?from=akikg> . Tazabek, "Agreement on construction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to be signed in September, - head of the Cabinet of Ministers", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 30 June 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1790263/?from=akikg>

¹⁸⁷ Podrobno.uz, "It is beneficial for Russia that the new Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway line starts working as soon as possible - Russian Railways", Article, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), 14 June 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-rossiya-dialog-partnerov-/rossii-vygodno-chtoby-novaya-zheleznodorozhnaya-magistral-uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-kitay-zarabotalakak/>

¹⁸⁸ Bakyt Torogeldi and Baktygul Chynbaeva, "Ambitious China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project Faces Major Funding Challenges", Article, Radio Free Europe, 31 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-project-challenges/32661996.html>

following summer.¹⁸⁹ Headlines in local media during the period celebrating the inauguration of a ‘new multi-modal transport corridor’ conform to the late-2010s trend but direct trade between Xinjiang and the Fergana Valley in effect remains as it has been, freight reaching Kashgar by rail before being transported across the Torugart Pass by road to Osh where containers are reloaded onto the Uzbek domestic rail system.¹⁹⁰

While use of the term ‘Belt and Road’ in official communiqués has declined since the Twentieth Party Congress, public diplomacy with the five republics continues to be framed by phraseology either coined or revived under the BRI, the ‘community of common destiny’ for example, and ‘global community of shared future’ as well as late-2010s revisions such as ‘high-quality joint-construction’. The choice of Xian, considered the Eastern terminus of the pre-modern Silk Road, was symbolic and the connection explicitly referenced by Chinese media and at concurrent cultural events in Xian and Central Asian cities.¹⁹¹ As part of his state visit prior to the summit, Tokayev attended the inauguration of a Kazakh-operated logistics centre in Xian as well as a new consulate, Kazakhstan’s third in China and the first to be established in Western China by a Central Asian country.¹⁹²

In 2022, trade between Central Asia and China, and by extension between China and Kazakhstan, reached a record high, exceeding \$70 billion.¹⁹³ The uptrend continued in 2023 with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan announcing increases of twenty-four and thirty-six percent respectively - Japarov also claiming that Sino-Kyrgyz trade tripled in 2023.¹⁹⁴ Some commentaries have attempted to link the rise in Chinese imports to a decline in trade with Russia, as further evidence of the latter’s displacement. China has taken market share from Russia in some sectors, Kazakh imports of aviation fuel for example, but the growth trend still broadly corresponds with both a post-pandemic recovery in trade and the steady growth rates of the 2010s that supervened the boom years of the 2000s.¹⁹⁵ Notwithstanding the re-export boom, bilateral trade remains dominated by imports of consumer goods from China and exports of Central Asian minerals, channelled for the most part, through two crossing points on the Kazakh-Xinjiang border.

The disruption to the Central Asia Gas Pipeline (CAGP) in late-2022 however and the resumption of Russian exports to the region permitted speculation that Gazprom was replacing Turkmenistan as the leading supplier to China, something Russian officials took the trouble to deny.¹⁹⁶ Shipments of natural gas appeared to resume just

¹⁸⁹ Kaktus Media, “Kyrgyzstan offers China to open a branch of Alibaba Group”, Article, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), 27 July 2022, https://kaktus.media/doc/464285_kyrgyzstan_predlozil_kitay_otkryt_y_sebia_filial_alibaba_group.html.
Podrobno.uz, “Alibaba Corporation opens a regional logistics center in Namangan”, Article, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), 10 August 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/korporatsiya-alibaba-otkryvaet-regionalnyy-logisticheskiy-tsentr-v-namangane/>

¹⁹⁰ Ozbekiston (Uzbek TV First Channel) (Tashkent), “Programme summary of Uzbek TV 'Axborot 24' news”, BBC Monitoring, 20 September 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203ra6q>. China Central TV-1 (Beijing), “Programme summary of CCTV-1 News Hookup”, BBC Monitoring, 4 July 23, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204ec09>

¹⁹¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Embassy Kazakhstan page on ‘Twitter’, BBC Monitoring Chinese Twitter diplomacy: 9-15 May 23, 15 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204ajt7>

¹⁹² KazInform, “Kassym-Jomart Tokayev arrives in China on a state visit”, Article, KazInform (astana), 17 May 2023, https://www.inform.kz/ru/kasym-zhomart-tokaev-pribyl-s-gosudarstvennym-vizitom-v-kitay_a4068104. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Qin Gang attended the opening ceremony of the Consulate General of Kazakhstan in Xi'an”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, 19 May 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbjhd/202305/t20230519_11080060.shtml

¹⁹³ Kazakhstan Today, “Cargo transportation between Kazakhstan and China has reached an all-time high”, Article, Kazakhstan Today news agency website (Almaty), 5 January 2023, https://www.kt.kz/rus/ekonomika/gruzoperevozki_mezhdu_kazahstanom_i_kitaem_dostigli_1377945160.html

¹⁹⁴ Tazabek, “Data on trade turnover between China and Kyrgyzstan differ by \$11.5 billion, - Akylbek Japarov”, Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 17 August 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1970014?from=portal&place=last>. President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Website, “Uzbek leader, Xi discuss strategic partnership in Beijing”, President.uz (Tashkent), 17 October 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000t6k>. Kursiv, “Kazakhstan's trade turnover with China increased by a quarter”, Kursiv website (Almaty), 28 November 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-11-28/kmlz-kitay-kazakhstan-tovarooborot/>

¹⁹⁵ KazTAG, “Kazakhstan increases direct supplies between the EU and China without distribution through Russia”, Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 2 March 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/kazakhstan-narashchivaet-pryamyje-postavki-mezhdu-es-i-kitaem-bez-raspredeleniya-cherez-rossiyu>. KazTAG, “The Ministry of Transport wants to buy JET A-1 in China against the background of KMG's readiness to produce it in Kazakhstan”, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 24 November 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/mintrans-khochet-pokupat-jet-a-1-v-kitae-na-fone-gotovnosti-kmg-vypuskat-ego-v-kazahstane>

¹⁹⁶ Turkmen News, “Former deputy head of Turkmengaz Atamurat Chariev arrested”, Article, Turkmen News Website, 30 March 2023, <https://turkmen.news/arestovan-byvshij-zamglavy-turkmengaza-atamurat-charyev/>

in time for the Xian summit, and six officials were also arrested in Turkmenistan.¹⁹⁷ It was at the height of the shortages in January 2023, that the China and Turkmenistan agreed to upgrade the strategic partnership, leaving open the possibility that Beijing had exerted a degree of political pressure on Ashgabat.¹⁹⁸ Russian exports of oil do however appear to have challenged Kazakh market share in Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, obliging Astana to impose a twenty-percent tax on shipments transiting Kazakhstan, in early-2023, albeit alongside agreements to increase annual trans-shipments.¹⁹⁹ Kazakhstan has denied it is accepting commercial deliveries of Russian oil, other than those imported under refinery swap agreements, pointing to a national shortage.²⁰⁰ The Xian summit also saw the signing of an agreement to implement a long-discussed expansion of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline.²⁰¹

Other significant developments in trade include the commencement of nuclear fuel cell deliveries from a jointly-owned plant in East Kazakhstan to Chinese reactors and the tripling of Kazakh wheat exports to China in 2023.²⁰² The latter contributed to a significant rise in rail traffic to China, permitting the Chinese embassy to claim the arrival of inaugural Belt and Road 'grain trains' in several provinces.²⁰³ In November 2022, Moscow accused Kazakhstan of blocking Russian grain exports to China, while Kazakhstan's National Business Chamber in turn complained that Chinese freight forwarders were prioritizing Russian-bound cargos ahead of Kazakh.²⁰⁴ Kazakhstan has been criticized by its neighbours for discriminatory customs practises, including during a brief 'trade war' with Kyrgyzstan in early-2023.²⁰⁵ A 'Green Corridor' scheme was established ostensibly to resolve this issue, the Kyrgyz Minister for Commerce stating that the new transit corridor would be used not only to export Kyrgyz products to Russia, but also a portion of Chinese re-exports.²⁰⁶ It has been reported however that this 'green list' system is being used to facilitate the delivery of sanctioned materiel to Russia, all the while

¹⁹⁷ Gazeta.uz, "Uzbekistan resumes gas exports to China", Gazeta.uz website (Tashkent), 22 May 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/05/22/gas-export/> . Turkmen News, "Six people arrested in Turkmenistan for accident at Galkynysh field and disruption of supplies abroad", Article, Turkmen News website , 6 February 2023, <https://turkmen.news/v-turkmengaze-arestovany-shest-chelovek-za-avariyu-na-mestorozhdenii-galkynysh-i-sryv-postavok-za-rubezh/>

¹⁹⁸ Xinhua, "China, Turkmenistan leaders agree to elevate ties, step up energy cooperation", Article, Xinhua news agency domestic service (Beijing), 6 January 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20404db>

¹⁹⁹ Vedomosti, "Russian oil displaces Kazakh oil from the Uzbek market", Article, Vedomosti.ru, 9 October 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2023/10/09/999459-rossiiskaya-neft-vitesnyaet-kazahstanskuyu-s-rinka-uzbekistana> . Orda.kz, "Kazakhstan increases Russian oil transit tariff by over 20%", Article, Orda.kz website (Almaty), 03 Jan 2024, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b00011b5> . Zakon.kz, "Kazakhstan to increase transit of Russian oil to China", Article, Zakon.kz (Almaty), 18 Jan 2024, <https://www.zakon.kz/amp/sobytiia/6421089-kazahstan-velichit-tranzit-rossiyskoy-nefti-v-kitay.html> .

²⁰⁰ KazTag, "There are no commercial oil supplies to Kazakhstan from Russia – Satkaliyev", Article, KazTag News Agency (Almaty), 8 November 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/kommercheskikh-postavok-nefti-v-kazahstan-iz-rossii-net-satkaliev->

²⁰¹ Nur.kz, "Kazakhstan extends agreement on transit of Russian oil to China", Article, Nur.kz (Almaty), 16 May 2023, <https://www.nur.kz/politics/kazahstan-economy/2020687-kazahstan-prodlil-dogovor-o-tranzite-rossiyskoy-nefti-v-kitay/>

²⁰² Kazakhstan Today, "IAEA Experts Launch Mission to Comprehensively Review Kazakhstan's Nuclear Infrastructure", Article, Kazakhstan Today news agency website (Almaty), 28 March 2023,

https://www.kt.kz/rus/society/eksperty_magate_pristupili_k_missii_po_kompleksnomu_1377948265.html . KazInform, "Kazatomprom Supplies Nuclear Fuel to Chinese Nuclear Power Plants", Article, Kazinform (Astana), 31 May 2023, https://www.inform.kz/ru/kazatomprom-obespechivaet-yadernym-toplivom-kitayskie-aes_a4073490

²⁰³ KazTag, "Export of goods by rail from Kazakhstan to China increased by 37%", Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 21 July 2023, <https://kapital.kz/economic/117582/eksport-gruzov-zheleznodorozhnym-transportom-iz-rk-v-knr-vyros-na-37.html> . Turan Times, "Smailov: Kazakhstan is ready to increase supplies of its products to China", Article, Turan Times news website (Astana), 4 September 2023, <https://turantimes.kz/ekonomika/45171-smailov-kazahstan-gotov-velichit-postavki-svoej-produkcii-v-kitaj.html> . China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Chinese Twitter diplomacy", Chinese Embassy Kazakhstan page on 'X', BBC Monitoring Chinese Twitter diplomacy: 4-10 April, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2047qjs>

²⁰⁴ Kursiv, "Why there are still traffic jams on the border of Kazakhstan and China", Article, Kursiv website (Almaty), 3 November 2022, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2022-11-03/pochemu-na-granice-kazahstana-i-kitaya-do-sih-por-sohranyajutsya-probki/> . Tengrinews, "Kazakhstan did not increase the tariff for the transit of Russian grain – KTZ", Article, Tengrinews website (www.tengrinews.kz) (Almaty), 15 November 2022, https://tengrinews.kz/kazahstan_news/kazahstan-ne-povyshal-tarif-tranzit-rossiyskogo-zerna-ktj-483152/

²⁰⁵ Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), "'Trade war'. The expert named the possible reasons for the accumulation of trucks on the border with Kazakhstan", Article, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), 6 June 2023, https://kaktus.media/doc/481932_torgovaia_voyna_ekspert_nazval_vozmojnye_prichiny_skopleniia_fyr_na_granice_s_kazahstanom.html

²⁰⁶ Kaktus Media, "The Minister of Economy said that Kyrgyzstan will supply to Russia bypassing Kazakhstan", Article, Kaktus Media website (Bishkek), 11 March 2023, https://kaktus.media/doc/477080_ministr_ekonomiki_rasskazal_chno_kyrgyzstan_bydet_postavliat_v_rossiu_v_obhod_kazahstana.html

permitting authorities to claim that they are implementing sanctions.²⁰⁷ When in July 2023, Kazakhstan's customs officials did seize several Chinese-made drones heading overland to Russia from Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz culpability was predictably denied by Japarov.²⁰⁸

Central Asia has continued to be a testing ground for the stated Sino-Russian goal of 'de-dollarizing' global trade. Both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek authorities announced policies to increase the use of Roubles and Renminbi in bilateral trade, citing the sanctions regime against Russia.²⁰⁹ In October 2023, the leaders of the CIS, EEU and SCO met in Bishkek to discuss establishing a local-currency payment and settlement mechanism.²¹⁰ Earlier that year, the Chinese consulate in Almaty had stated that the Renminbi was being increasingly used to settle cross border transactions and settlements, corroborating reports in Kazakh media.²¹¹ The size of the investment deals signed at Xian were broadly commensurate with capstone summits in the 2010s.²¹² The \$25 billion signed with Uzbekistan for example, was roughly equal to the official figure announced during Mirziyoyev's inaugural visit to Beijing in 2017.²¹³ Uzbekistan continues to experience a proliferation of trade and direct investment that began with the reforms launched by the new president in 2017.²¹⁴ Beijing has remained the largest foreign investor by a significant margin in Uzbekistan and in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has traded the top spot year-on-year with Turkey and Kazakhstan respectively. Interestingly, the Chinese EXIM bank, the largest holder of sovereign debt in the region, agreed to establish its regional headquarters in Tashkent during the period.²¹⁵

In Uzbekistan, Chinese investors have been particularly active in the innovative technology sector, underwriting the present administration's desire to become the foremost champion of energy transition in Central Asia.²¹⁶ A significant driver of increased Chinese imports to Kyrgyzstan was in fact electric cars, an item not previously imported from Russia and the import of Chinese-manufactured EVs to Uzbekistan increased nearly five-fold in the first half of 2023, with production at a Chinese electric car assembly plant in Jizzakh launched in March of 2024.²¹⁷ In 2022, China accounted for nearly all investment in the Sirdaryo region, which Tashkent is attempting

²⁰⁷ Respublika website (Almaty), "Sanctioned goods getting to Russia via Kazakhstan – article", Article, Respublika website (Almaty), 14 July 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000mf2>

²⁰⁸ Kabar news agency (Bishkek), "Sadyr Japarov commented on statements that Kyrgyzstan allegedly contributes to the circumvention of sanctions", Article, Kabar news agency (Bishkek), 9 August 2023, <https://kabar.kg/news/sadyr-zhaporov-prokomentiroval-zaiavleniia-o-tom-chto-iakoby-kyrgyzstan-sposobstvuet-v-obkhode-sanktsii/>

²⁰⁹ KyrTag, "National Statistical Committee: De-dollarization continues in Kyrgyzstan", Article, KyrTAG (www.kyrtag.kg) (Bishkek), 14 May 2022, <https://kyrtag.kg/ru/news/natsstatkom-v-kyrgyzstane-prodolzhaetsya-dedollarizatsiya> . 24.kg,

"Kyrgyzstan has completely switched to settlements in rubles with Russia", Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 20 July 2022, https://24.kg/ekonomika/240129_kyrgyzstan_polnostyu_pereshel_naraschetyi_vrublyah_rossiye/ . Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), "Uzbek Republican Commodity and Raw Materials Exchange to launch settlements in yuan", Article, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), 31 May 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/uzbekskaya-respublikanskaya-tovarno-syrevaya-birzha-zapustit-raschety-v-yuanyakh/>

²¹⁰ BBC Monitoring, "Programme summary of Russian Channel One 'Vremya' news", Article, BBC Monitoring, 26 Oct 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204pk4f>

²¹¹ KazTAG, "Purchase and sale of cash currency in exchange offices of Kazakhstan decreased by 15% in June", Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 27 July 2023, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/na-15-sokratilas-pokupka-prodazha-nalichnoy-valyuty-v-obmennikakh-kazakhstana-v-iyune> . Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Consulate Almaty Twitter Account, BBC Monitoring Chinese Twitter diplomacy 10-16 Jan 23, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2040wf0>

²¹² Eurasianet. Org, "Uzbekistan: President's China Trip Yields Giant Rewards", Article, Eurasianet.org, 16 May 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-presidents-china-trip-yields-giant-rewards> . Navbahor Imamova, "As Russia's Influence Wanes in Central Asia, China and US Step In", Article 1 Jun 2023, Voice of America, <https://www.voanews.com/a/as-russia-s-influence-wanes-in-central-asia-china-and-us-make-their-case-/7119159.html>

²¹³ Eurasianet, "Central Asia: Summiteers seal many deals, reveal scant details", Article, Eurasianet.org, 25 May 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-summiteers-seal-many-deals-reveal-scant-details>

²¹⁴ Podrobno, "China has become a leader in investment in Uzbekistan", Article, Podrobno.uz website (Tashkent), 4 September 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/kitay-vyrvalsya-v-lidery-po-investitsiyam-v-uzbekistan/>

²¹⁵ Daryo, "Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Chinese Eximbank chairman discuss opening branch in Uzbekistan", Article, Daryo.uz, 24 January 2024, <https://daryo.uz/en/2024/01/24/shavkat-mirziyoyev-and-chinese-eximbank-chairman-discuss-opening-branch-in-uzbekistan>

²¹⁶ Geoffrey R. Pyatt, The Future of Central Asia's Development: Between Russia and China, Remarks by Geoffrey Pyatt Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Energy Resources, 2 May 2023, US Department of State Website, <https://www.state.gov/the-future-of-central-asias-development-between-russia-and-china/>

²¹⁷ Economist.kg, "Kyrgyzstan's trade turnover with Russia has decreased to less than 19%", Article, Economist.kg, 13 Sep 2023, <https://economist.kg/novosti/2023/09/13/tovarooborot-kyrgyzstana-s-rossiiei-snizilsia-do-mienieie-19/> . Gazeta.uz, "Imports of electric vehicles to Uzbekistan increased almost 5 times in the first half of the year", Article, Gazeta.uz (Tashkent), 26 July 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/07/26/e-car/> . Nova24.uz, "Uzbekistan to assemble up to 500,000 EVs, hybrid cars per year",

to turn into an 'innovative region' after the 'Chinese experience', rhetoric albeit similar to that employed in partnerships with Russian regions.²¹⁸ The Xian summit also saw the signing of a \$4.4 billion deal for the construction of Uzbek solar and wind plants, and discussions of similar projects with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.²¹⁹

In 2022 however, China was only the seventh-highest investor in Kazakhstan, behind Russia and the United States, with investment falling twenty-two percent.²²⁰ Nevertheless, the construction of Astana's urban light railway system whose embezzlement-linked suspension became a headline Belt and Road scandal in the late-2010s, was resumed in that year. Other notable projects include the conversion of Almaty's coal-fired energy infrastructure, an expansion of the Shymkent oil refinery and Beyneu-Shymkent gas pipeline, as well as the acquisition by Sinopec of a thirty-percent equity stake in a \$7.7 billion polythene plant - all agreed or signed in the wake of the Xian summit.²²¹

Perhaps the most significant investment agreement since the invasion is better judged by its political, rather than its economic, value. The day before the Xian summit, the AIIB, a nominally multi-lateral investment bank established in Beijing concurrently with the roll out of the BRI, announced a funding package for the Rogun Dam project in Tajikistan in parallel with a bilateral-investment pledge relating to the TALCO Aluminium plant that the dam is intended to serve.²²² The dam has been a source of regional instability and nearly led to open conflict between Tajikistan and lower-riparian Uzbekistan in the early-2010s. In July 2023, the Kyrgyz government would also announce what Japarov described as the 'largest foreign investment deal' in the republic's history – a \$3 billion agreement with a consortium of three Chinese companies to build a hydroelectric cascade on the River Naryn.²²³ Japarov had, a year earlier, referred to China as Kyrgyzstan's 'main partner' with respect to foreign economic relations.²²⁴ Other smaller hydro projects were agreed for the Issy-Kol region, including with TBEA - a Chinese company tainted by association with a controversial thermal power plant project in Bishkek.²²⁵

The level of sovereign debt owed to Chinese policy banks in the two smaller republics, that attracted attention in the late-BRI period, has remained stable. While Kyrgyzstan has persisted with attempts to write off its sovereign debt with a variety of creditors, Tajikistan reported that it was able to repay some of its debt to China and in 2023,

Article, Nova24.uz website (Tashkent), 19 March 2024, <https://nova24.uz/auto/500-tysyach-elektrokarov-i-gibridov-v-god-v-uzbekistane-perevernjotsya-avtorynok/>

²¹⁸ Gazeta, "Syr Darya will become an innovative region based on China's experience", Article, Gazeta.uz website (Tashkent), 7 April 2023, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/04/07/innovative-region/>

²¹⁹ 24.kg, "A Chinese company wants to build a 1 gigawatt solar plant", Article, 24.kg, 17 May 2023,

https://24.kg/ekonomika/265573_kitayskaya_kompaniya_hochet_postroit_solnechnuyu_stantsiyu_nalgigavatt/

²²⁰ Kazinform, "Kazakhstan attracts record volume of foreign direct investment", Article, Kazinform (Astana), 12 April 2023, https://www.inform.kz/ru/kazahstan-privlek-rekordnyy-ob-em-pryamih-inostrannyh-investitsiy_a4055426

²²¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Embassy in Kazakhstan Twitter Account. Chinese Twitter diplomacy: 30 May-5 Jun 23 <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204c4cb> . KazInform, "Four major oil and gas projects are being implemented by Samruk-Kazyna and China's CNPC", Article, KazInform (Astana), 7 June 2023, https://www.inform.kz/ru/chetyre-krupnyh-neftegazovyh-proekta-realizuyut-samruk-kazyna-i-kitayskaya-cnpc_a4075814 . Reuters, "China's Sinopec signs equity agreement for Kazakh polyethylene project", Article, Reuters, 17 October 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-sinopec-signs-agreement-kazakh-polyethylene-project-2023-10-17/> . BBC Monitoring, BBC Monitoring Programme summary from CCTV-1's 'Night News' 1400 GMT 19 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204b05b>

²²² President of the Republic of Tajikistan Website, "Tajik, Chinese leaders discuss stepping up anti-terror efforts", Article, Tajik president's website (Dushanbe), 18 May 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000ffx> . Eurasianet, "Tajikistan eyes \$500M windfall loan for Roghun", Article, Eurasianet.org, 22 May 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-eyes-500m-windfall-loan-for-roghun> .

²²³ Tazabek, "A consortium of 3 Chinese companies will build the Kazarman cascade of hydroelectric power plants in Naryn", Tazabek website (Bishkek), 27 July 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1960467?from=portal&place=last>

²²⁴ 24.kg, "Sadyr Japarov received the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi.", Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 30 July 2023,

https://24.kg/vlast/241112_sadyir_japarov_prinyal_ministra_inostrannyih_del_knr_van_i_govorili_oproektah/

²²⁵ 24.kg, "China's TBEA will build a cascade of hydroelectric power plants on the Sary-Jaz River", 24.kg website (Bishkek), 17 August 2023, https://24.kg/ekonomika/272747_kitayskaya_tBEA_budet_stroit_kaskad_ges_nareke_saryi-djaz/ . Tazabek, "Construction of a hydroelectric power plant on the Orto-Tokoy reservoir. The Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Finance signed a memorandum with a Chinese company", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 16 January 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1848905?from=portal&place=last>

the Tajik Finance minister described the level of foreign debt to GDP as ‘comfortable’.²²⁶ While China became Tajikistan’s largest source of humanitarian aid in 2022, allocations of no-strings aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2023, represented no great increase from the 2010s and were consistent with the status of the Xian summit.²²⁷ China did however, in September 2023, allocate more than \$190 million in aid, a larger sum than usual, for social projects in Uzbekistan, whose promotion of China’s poverty reduction experience had been lauded at the Xian summit, as a ‘vivid practice’ of ‘Xi Jinping thought’.²²⁸

Public displays of Anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia have been low since February 2022, by comparison with the mid-2010s. While some strikes and labour disputes continued at Chinese-owned gold mines in Kyrgyzstan, where anti-Chinese sentiment has traditionally been the most evident, industrial action and political interference is experienced by most foreign-owned enterprises operating in this sector of the Kyrgyz economy. In August 2022, the Kyrgyz government allowed the resumption of operations at a Chinese mine, which had been suspended following violent rallies three years earlier, albeit immediately followed by another local protest.²²⁹ A government bill approved by parliament that year, mandated a thirty-percent government stake in all foreign-owned mines, but did not target one specific nation.²³⁰ There has also been some criticism of China in Kazakhstan, in local media and by government-funded think-tanks and a small number of activists were arrested ahead of the Xian Summit, for allegedly planning protests against the introduction of the new visa regime.²³¹ In January 2024, Tokayev would publicly re-iterate that the Kazakh people should not ‘fear’ China.²³²

The Kazakh authorities have continued to limit the space for pro-Uighur activism. The Xian summit saw mutual security interests framed in the familiar language of ‘colour revolutions’ and ‘terrorism’, and the republics obligingly reciprocate their support for Beijing’s domestic policy in Xinjiang.²³³ Both Tokayev and Mirziyoyev timed visits to Xinjiang with the Xian summit and in August 2023, Uzbek and Kazakh envoys, were among a select international group granted a tour of the Western Province, the first of its kind, in an effort to counter

²²⁶ Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe), “Tajikistan's external debt decreased by \$15.4 million last year”, Article, Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe) 17 February 2023, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20230217/vneshniidolg-tadzhikistana-v-minuvshem-godu-sokratilsya-na-154-milliona-dollarov>. Asia-Plus, “Tajikistan's public debt decreased by \$100 million in six months”, Article, Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe), 15 August 2023, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20230815/gosdolgtadzhikistana-za-polgodasokratilsya-na-100-millionov-dollarov>

²²⁷ 24.kg, “Sadyr Japarov's visit to China. Kyrgyzstan to receive 300 million yuan grant”, Article, 24.kg website (Bishkek), 19 May 2023, https://24.kg/ekonomika/265862_vizit_sadyira_japarova_vkitay_kyrgyzstan_poluchit_grant_v300_millionov_yuaney/

²²⁸ CCTV1, “China highlights Central Asia role in Belt and Road Initiative ahead of summit”, Article, China Central Television, 16 May 2023, https://content-static.cctvnews.cctv.com/snow-book/index.html?item_id=3934229946212964896&toc_style_id=feeds_default. Gazeta, “China will allocate a grant for social projects in Uzbekistan”, Article, Gazeta.uz, 25 May 2022, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/05/25/financial-help/?utm_source=push&utm_medium=facebook&fbclid=IwAR0dTTiSCo8lYlIKXu7xnz2ZPIxIJE08mtLAQ7Aukj1RZRr0MNrsH4hRVJo. Podrobno, “China will allocate \$190 million to Uzbekistan free of charge for the implementation of social projects”, Article, Podrobno.uz, 9 September 2022, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-kitay-klyuchi-ot-budushchego/kitay-bezvozmezdno-vydelit-uzbekistanu-190-millionov-dollarov-na-realizatsiyu-sotsialnykh-proektov/>

²²⁹ Kloop.kg, “Kyrgyz villagers rally against Chinese mining firm resuming work”, Article, Kloop.kg (Bishkek), 29 September 2022, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2022/09/30/deputat-bakasov-zhiteli-naryna-vystupayut-protiv-razrabotki-mestorozhdeniya-solton-sary/>

²³⁰ Economist.kg website, “New Kyrgyz bill secures 30% government stake in gold fields”, Article, Economist.kg, 2 June 2022, <https://economist.kg/novosti/2022/06/02/zhogorku-kenesh-v-tretem-chtenii-odobril-obyazatelnuju-gosdolu-v-30-v-mestorozhdeniyah-zolota/>

²³¹ Radio Free Europe, “The head of Nagyz Atazhurt was arrested for 15 days on the day of signing a visa-free agreement with China”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 17 May 2023, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32409449.html>

²³² President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, “Kassym-Jomart Tokayev: As a progressive nation, we must look only forward!”, Website of the President of the Kazakhstan, 3 January 2024, <http://www.president.kz/ru/prezident-respubliki-kazahstan-kasym-zhomart-tokaev-kak-progressivnaya-naciya-my-dolzny-smotret-tolko-vpered-302415>

²³³ Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf and Alison McFarland. Xinhua, “Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan”, Article, Xinhua News Agency, 17 May 2023, http://www.news.cn/world/2023-05/17/c_1129623330.htm

Western narratives.²³⁴ A visit to Xinjiang by Tokayev following the Belt and Road Forum, was made on the same day that the Chinese government criticised the United Kingdom for releasing a joint statement with fifty other countries raising concerns over human rights violations in the province.²³⁵ In both 2022 and 2023, activists were detained for protesting outside the Chinese consulate in Almaty and police in Kyrgyzstan responded swiftly to allegations of an 'East Turkestan' flag at a Ski Resort in January 2023.²³⁶ A group protesting a visit by Wang Yi to Astana in 2022 however, were not arrested.²³⁷

The Xian summit saw Xi tie the enhancement of the republics' 'law enforcement, security and defence capability', to the Global Security Initiative.²³⁸ Central Asian leaders also praised China's contribution to regional stability, and made calls for closer cooperation.²³⁹ While no decisive shifts can be observed in China's defence diplomacy since February 2022, three SCO exercises suggest some level of diplomatic sensitivity towards the Ukraine conflict. In both September 2022 and December 2023, SCO Counter-Terrorism exercises were hosted by India - a relatively new member of the organization and located outside what has traditionally been considered Russia's strategic 'back yard' where most SCO drills take place.²⁴⁰ Plans for an exercise in Russia's Chelyabinsk region in the summer of 2023, also appear to have been abandoned, with a joint counter-terrorism exercise and an inaugural conference held between the SCO and CIS, in Bishkek instead.²⁴¹ This had followed visits by the Chinese Defence Minister to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in April 2022 which, while not unusual, were nevertheless undertaken at a sensitive moment. No further bilateral visits to the region by Chinese Defence Ministers have taken place despite several to Belarus, Russia and India.

While bilateral interactions between interior ministers and prosecutor generals have continued, the period saw no significant increase in allocations of Chinese military aid to the smaller border republics. Chinese arms sales and co-production also remained confined to non-core inventories, drones for example.²⁴² Chinese diplomacy attracted some attention in September 2022 when poorly-timed but otherwise stock affirmations of support for Kyrgyz 'sovereignty' by the Chinese embassy in Bishkek were seen as an implicit statement of support during

²³⁴ President of Uzbekistan, "The President of Uzbekistan stressed the importance of expanding practical cooperation with the regions of the People's Republic of China", Website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 29 March 2023, <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/6093> . Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs remarks reporters' questions on the visits of envoys of some countries to Xinjiang", Article, Website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 August 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/dhdw_673027/202308/t20230809_11124139.shtml . Also James Palmer.

²³⁵ TengriNews, "'Great potential' - Tokayev on trade with Xinjiang", Article, TengriNews, 18 October 2023, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/bolshoy-potentsial-tokayev-o-torgovle-s-sintszyanom-514015/ . Global Times, "US, West 'hypocritical' in smearing China on Xinjiang but neglecting Palestinians' suffering", Article, Global Times, 19 October 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300197.shtml>

²³⁶ Tengrinews, "Police detain four protesters outside Chinese consulate in Almaty", Article, Vlast.kz, 8 April 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203dm8k> . Radio Free Europe, "Three Kazakh Activists Detained In Almaty After Demonstrating For Release Of Relatives From Xinjiang", Article, Radio Free Europe, 27 March 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-activists-almaty-detained-xinjiang-protest/32336574.html> . Kloop.kg, "Uyghur separatist flag 'hung' in Kyrgyzstan", Kloop.kg (Bishkek), 9 January 2023, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2023/01/09/na-gornolyzhke-zil-vyvesili-flag-vostochnogo-turkeстана-militsiya-nachala-proverku/>

²³⁷ Saniya Toiken, "Demonstrators Picket Chinese Embassy In Kazakh Capital As Chinese Minister Visits", Article, Radio Free Europe, 8 June 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-protest-china-wang-visit/31888857.html>

²³⁸ Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf and Alison McFarland.

²³⁹ Tengrinews, "We do not accept the transformation of the region into an arena of confrontation – Tokayev", Article, Tengrinews website (Almaty), 19 May 2023, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/ne-priemlem-prevrashcheniya-regiona-arenu-protivostoyaniya-499506/ . President of the Republic Uzbekistan, "Speech by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the Central Asia-China Summit", Article, Website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 19 May 2023, <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/6354>

²⁴⁰ Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercise of The Competent Authorities Of the SCO Member States Manesar-Antiterror 2022", RATS Press Centre, <https://ecrats.org/en/press/news/762/>

²⁴¹ Reuters, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to hold joint drills in Russia's Chelyabinsk region – TASS", Article, Reuters.com, 13 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-hold-joint-drills-russias-chelyabinsk-region-2022-12-13/>

²⁴² TengriNews, "Where are military drones imported to Kazakhstan from?", Article, TengriNews Website (Almaty), 14 September 2023, https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/otkuda-v-kazakhstan-zavozyat-voennyie-bes-pilotniki-510409/ . 24.kg, "Kyrgyzstan has imported 52 drones since the beginning of the year", Article, 24.kg, 16 August 2023, https://24.kg/ekonomika/272716_kyrgyzstan_snachala_goda_importiroval_52bes-pilotnika/ . 24.kg, "In the North Kazakhstan Region The Production of Drones was Launched", Article, 24.kg, 23 August 2023, <https://24.kz/ru/news/social/item/614479-v-sko-zapustili-proizvodstvo-bes-pilotnikov>

the country's conflict with Tajikistan, drawing a rare clarifying statement from a Chinese embassy.²⁴³ This also came shortly after Dushanbe had shown hesitation in affirming the One China Policy following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan.²⁴⁴ However, in November 2022, the Tajik government approved a draft agreement with the Chinese government for the conduct of biennial joint anti-terror exercises, the first of its kind for China in Central Asia outside the framework of the SCO.²⁴⁵ A visit to Beijing by the governor of Gorno-Badakhshan in January 2023 following a government crackdown in the restive Tajik region, also attracted some attention.²⁴⁶ In June 2023, a summer that saw the first state visit to Beijing by President Emomali Rahmon's son and presumed successor, China's first overseas climate 'super-observation' station begun operations in Southern Tajikistan. While part of a network of light, detection, and ranging (LiDAR) systems initiated by Lanzhou University, the site has naturally generated speculation as to its surveillance potential.²⁴⁷

Other Actors since 2022

Renewed Western interest in Central Asia has also been portrayed as a 'redoubling', a 'crossroads' and an 'awakening'.²⁴⁸ The first signs of this were evident in late-2022 with an inaugural EU-Central Asia summit in Astana and the attendance of Pope Francis at a convention of religious leaders in Kazakhstan, whose condemnation of the invasion, contrasted sharply with the SCO Summit in Uzbekistan.²⁴⁹ Western diplomatic activity during the 2023 spring conference season and coinciding with the Xian summit, included a Trans-Caspian forum in Washington, an inaugural UK-Tajik investment forum in London, as well as a US Secretary of State visit to the region. The main diplomatic effort however came in late-2023 after a head of state summit under the 'C5' format was convened by President Biden on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September.²⁵⁰ Coinciding with the Belt and Road Forum, the presidents of both France and Italy made state visits to Central Asia in November 2023, only weeks after the EU hosted a 'Global Gateway' connectivity forum and escalated its financial commitment to the 'Middle Corridor'.²⁵¹ This proactivity prompted Sergei Lavrov to accuse the EU of attempting to 'push' Russia out of Central Asia.²⁵² Public attacks on Chinese and Russian policy by Anthony Blinken at a C5 Foreign Minister summit in Astana in early-2023, had also drawn criticism from Chinese state media as being consistent with US 'containment strategy'.²⁵³

²⁴³ AKIpress, "Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are friendly neighbors and comprehensive strategic partners of China, - Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kyrgyz Republic", Article, AKIpress news agency website (Bishkek), 22 September 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1806369/?from=akikg>

²⁴⁴ BBC Monitoring, "Tajikistan supports One China policy", BBC Monitoring New Alert, 5 August 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203nlf0>

²⁴⁵ Asia-Plus, "At least once every two years. Tajikistan and China agree on how to conduct anti-terror drills", Article, Asia-Plus, 21 November 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20221121/ne-rezhe-odnogo-raza-v-dva-goda-tadzhikistan-i-kitai-dogovarivayutsya-kak-provodit-antiterroristicheskie-ucheniya>

²⁴⁶ Telegram messaging service, "Governor of restive Tajik region in China for cooperation talks", Article, Telegram messaging service, 23 June 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0000ilm>

²⁴⁷ Reid Standish, "New Chinese 'Super' Observation Station In Tajikistan -- Near Afghan, Uzbek Borders -- Said To Be For Climate, Technological Uses", Article, Radio Free Europe, 29 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-observation-station-tajikistan-climate-surveillance/32482428.html>

²⁴⁸ Tom O'Connor. Also Annette Bohr. Also Ulrich Jochheim.

²⁴⁹ Radio Free Europe, "Pope Arrives In Kazakhstan To Take Part In Religious Congress, Condemns War In Ukraine", Article, Radio Free Europe, 13 September 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-pope-francis-visit-kirill/32031694.html>

²⁵⁰ Radio Free Europe, "Biden Stresses Central Asian Nations Integrity After Historic Meeting With Regional Leaders", Article, Radio Free Europe, 20 September 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-biden-meeting-un-assembly/32601087.html>

²⁵¹ Reuters, "Kazakhstan Welcomes France's Macron On First Leg Of Central Asia Tour", Article, Reuters, 1 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-macron-visit-france-oil-russia-ukraine-war/32665370.html>. Radio Free Europe, "Uzbek, Italian Presidents Adopt Joint Statement On Bilateral Partnership", Article, Radio Free Europe, 10 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbek-italian-presidents-bilateral-partnership/32679493.html>. The Astana Times, "EU-CA Investors Forum Announces €10 Bln Commitment for Development of Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor", Article, Astana Times, 29 January 2024, <https://astanatimes.com/2024/01/eu-ca-transport-forum-kicks-off-in-brussels-eib-global-allocates-over-1-6-blm/>

²⁵² Radio Free Europe, "Russia Says EU Won't 'Push' It Out Of Central Asia", Article, Radio Free Europe, 12 November 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asia-influence-eu-lavrov-push-out/32681531.html>.

²⁵³ China Daily, "Two visits highlight divergent approaches of Beijing and Washington to Ukraine crisis: China Daily editorial", Article, China Daily, 28 February 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/28/WS63fddc6da31057c47ebb1547.html>

In late-2022, US diplomacy was derided by the Russian ambassador in Tashkent as ‘PR and noise’ compared with Russia, China and Turkey.²⁵⁴ His remarks played on a counter-narrative popular among regional elites, that has bemoaned the non-fulfilment of Western investment pledges during the frenzied diplomacy of the 1990s. European investment in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has in fact reached record year-on-year highs since the invasion, including cooperation in nuclear and hydro power generation, and in 2023, a US company signed a \$1 billion agreement to acquire a natural gas processing plant in Uzbekistan.²⁵⁵ The latter is the largest US downstream investment to date in the country, where upstream concessions in the 2010s were mostly granted to Russian and Chinese companies. Though still moderate, renewed enthusiasm for investment predates the invasion and may be traced to the Uzbek economic reforms. Outside Kazakhstan however where trade and investment statistics are distorted by the Caspian oil concessions, the West remains a secondary economic partner after Russia and China and in some republics, behind Turkey and the Gulf States. Public statements by Tokayev continue to grant importance to the US strategic partnership, but the latter is typically mentioned behind Russia and China.²⁵⁶

Western diplomacy continues to press rule of law, human rights, press freedom and environmental sustainability as major diplomatic themes.²⁵⁷ Yet neo-liberal narratives circulate in a shrinking public space by comparison with previous decades and the issue of sanctions compliance is reducing this even further. The OSCE’s criticism of the 2023 referendum approving Uzbekistan’s new constitution, which will allow the current president to run until 2040, contrasted sharply with unwavering support from Russia and China.²⁵⁸ So too did State Department calls for an investigation into Tashkent’s management of protests in Karakalpakstan in 2022, a year that also saw the lifting of a longstanding boycott of Uzbek cotton.²⁵⁹ In 2023, Germany extradited a member of the Tajik opposition, despite appeals and the shutting down of some seven hundred NGOs in the country the previous year.²⁶⁰

Freedom House continues to rank all five Central Asian states as ‘not free’.²⁶¹ Between 2020 and 2022, over three hundred requests for peaceful demonstrations were refused in Kazakhstan, from taxi drivers and the unemployed, to feminist organizations.²⁶² This did not however, include anti-LGBT protests by nationalist

²⁵⁴ Podrobno.uz, “This is just PR and public noise. Russian ambassador on attempts by the EU and the United States to sever economic ties between Tashkent and Moscow”, Article, Podrobno.uz, 30 December 2022, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/uzbekistan-i-rossiya-dialog-partnerov-/eto-lish-piar-i-obshchestvennyy-shum-posol-rossii-o-popytkakh-es-i-ssha-razorvat-ekonomicheskie-svya/>

²⁵⁵ Anton Usov, “EBRD invests record US\$ 900 million in Uzbekistan”, Article, European bank for Reconstruction and Development, 26 January 2023, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2023/ebrd-invests-record-us-900-million-in-uzbekistan.html> . Olga Tonkonog, “Kazakhstan attracts a record-high amount of investments from EU”, Article, Kursiv Website (Almaty), 19 May 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/en/2023-05-19/kazakhstan-attracts-a-record-high-amount-of-investments-from-eu/> . Reuters, “Air Products signs \$1 billion deal for processing facility in Uzbekistan”, Article, Reuters, 25 May 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/air-products-signs-1-bln-deal-processing-facility-uzbekistan-2023-05-25/> . Navbahor Imamova.

²⁵⁶ Tengri News, “President Tokayev spoke about Kazakhstan's foreign policy”, Article, Tengrinews website (www.tengrinews.kz) (Almaty), 27 September 2022, <https://tengrinews.kz/news/prezident-tokayev-vyiskazalsya-o-vneshney-politike-kazahstana-478901/> .

²⁵⁷ Geoffrey R. Pyatt.

²⁵⁸ Annette Bohr . Fergana News, “OSCE observers note lack of pluralism in referendum in Uzbekistan”, Article, Fergana, 2 May 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/130000/>

²⁵⁹ Radio Free Europe, “UN, U.S. Demand Independent Probe Into Deadly Unrest In Uzbekistan”, Article, Radio Free Europe, 6 July 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-karakalpakstan-violence-un/31931199.html> . Responsible Sourcing Network, “Cotton Campaign Ends its Call for a Global Boycott of Cotton from Uzbekistan”, Responsible Sourcing Network, 10 March 2022, <https://www.sourcingnetwork.org/press-release-cotton-campaign-ends-its-call-for-a-global-boycott-of-cotton-from-uzbekistan>

²⁶⁰ Azda.tv, “Germany extradites Tajik oppositionist”, Article, Azda.tv website (Warsaw), 8 December 2023, <https://azda.tv/istirdodi-yak-uzvi-gur-i-24-az-olmon-ba-to-ikiston/> . Asia-Plus, “In Tajikistan, almost 700 NGOs were liquidated. Why is this bad and where are we going?”, Article, Asia-Plus news agency website (Dushanbe), 17 August 2023, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/society/20230817/v-tadzhikestane-likvidirovalis-pochti-700-npo-pochemu-eto-ploho-i-kuda-idiom> . Payom.net, “Western states urged not to welcome 'autocratic' Tajik leader”, Article, Payom.net, 20 March 2023, <https://payom.net/pmt-ba-podsho-i-olland-hatari-ra-mon-az-putinu-lukashenko-kamtar-nest/>

²⁶¹ Annette Bohr.

²⁶² Annette Bohr.

groups, which were permitted to go ahead.²⁶³ In early-2024, as Kazakh officials thanked the European Union for supporting the country's human rights reforms, Russia-style 'foreign agent' legislation was being debated in both the Kazakh and Kyrgyz parliaments, that would introduce state occlusion where non-profit organizations receive foreign funding, and independent organizations such as Radio Free Europe and the Soros Foundation have come under severe pressure.²⁶⁴ In Tajikistan, it has been observed that Chinese aid and investment has allowed the regime to finally purge Gorno-Badakhshan of the Aga Khan Foundation, a development and education-focused patron to the autonomous region's native Ismaili population but regarded as friendly towards the West.²⁶⁵

Continued instability in Afghanistan still accounted for the majority of Western defence engagement in Central Asia during the period. While the annual US CENTCOM-sponsored 'Steppe Eagle' exercise in Kazakhstan, whose removal of the Taliban from its official list of terrorist organizations in 2023 was lauded by the Russian Foreign Ministry, has not resumed since the pandemic, a 'Regional Cooperation' counterpart in Tajikistan went ahead in 2022, drawing protest from Moscow.²⁶⁶ A visit by a US military delegation to the site of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict, was also protested by pro-Russian Kyrgyz politicians.²⁶⁷ Low-level supplies of equipment to the three republics bordering Afghanistan, have also continued and in 2022, Turkmenistan revived a security cooperation partnership with the US National Guard, dormant since 2011.²⁶⁸ US-based drone manufacturers have been attempting to compete in Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan acquired Airbus civilian helicopters, but imports of US armaments undoubtedly remain a red line.²⁶⁹ Kazakhstan swiftly denied rumours it was intending to purchase French fighter jets, following the visit of President Macron in 2023.²⁷⁰

If the collective 'West' may be broadly considered a monolithic 'great-power' actor in Central Asia alongside Russia and China, then a secondary tier may be identified in Iran, Pakistan, India, South Korea, the Gulf Monarchies and, perhaps unique among these, Turkey. Turkey has emerged as a significant trade partner and investor in the republics under the Erdogan presidency. In 2022, Turkey became the leading investor in Kyrgyzstan, signing management contracts with Kyrgyz airports and in the hydro sector, and was the leading importer of gold from Uzbekistan as that country became the world's leading exporter of the precious metal in

²⁶³ Vlast, "Kazakh nationalist group holds anti-LGBT protest in ex-capital", Article, Online magazine Vlast (Almaty), 13 February 2024, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b000168h>

²⁶⁴ Bruce Pannier, "Is Kazakhstan Preparing A Russian-Style 'Foreign Agents' Law?", Podcast, Radio Free Europe, 1 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/majlis-podcast-kazakhstan-foreign-agents/32617932.html> . International Partnership for Human Rights, "Kyrgyzstan: foreign agent style law advances; pressure on media and criminal proceedings against government critics continue", Article, International Partnership for Human Rights, 10 November 2023, <https://iphronline.org/articles/kyrgyzstan-foreign-agent-style-law-advances-pressure-on-media-and-criminal-proceedings-against-government-critics-continue/> . KazInform, "Maulen Ashimbayev met with Vice President of the European Commission Margaritis Schinas", Article, Kazinform (Astana), 15 January 2024, <https://www.inform.kz/ru/maulen-ashimbaev-vstretilsya-s-vitse-prezidentom-evrokommisii-margaritisom-shinasom-e15b87>

²⁶⁵ Pamir Daily, "Aga Khan said squeezed out of Tajikistan over China rapprochement", Article, Pamir Daily News, 30 June 2023, <https://t.me/pamirdailynews/2175>

²⁶⁶ Radio Free Europe, "U.S.-Sponsored Regional Military Drills Kick Off In Tajikistan", Article, Radio Free Europe, 10 August 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-us-cooperation-exercises/31982274.html> . Chiromone Bakozoda, "Tajik security chief says Russia remains strategic partner", Article, Radio Free Europe, 23 August 2022, <https://www.ozodi.org/a/32000707.html> . Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on Kazakhstan's decision to remove the Taliban from its national list of terrorist organisations", Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 29 December 2023, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1923752/ .

²⁶⁷ Yurmush, "U.S. Military Delegation Arrives in Batken", Article, Yurmush Website, 16 March 2024, <https://www.turmush.kg/ru/news:1811440/?from=akikg> .

²⁶⁸ Martí, Stepanyuk and Bandeira. Asia-Plus, "U.S. Embassy Hands Over Walkie-Talkies, Trucks and Spare Parts to Tajik Border Troops", Article, Asia-Plus News Agency (Dushanbe), 4 April 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20220404/posolstvo-ssha-peredalo-pogranichnim-voiskam-tadzhikistana-ratsii-gruzovie-mashini-i-zapasnie-chasti-dlya-dzhipov> . Nezavisimaya, "U.S. to hand over planes to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan", Article, Nezavisimaya Website, 21 September 2022, https://www.ng.ru/cis/2022-09-21/1_8545_asia.html

²⁶⁹ Nur.kz, "Which countries' drones are in service with Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Defense said", Article, Nur.kz, 29 December 2022, <https://www.nur.kz/politics/kazakhstan/2003571-bes-pilotniki-kakih-stran-est-na-vooruzhenii-u-kazahstana-rasskazali-v-minoborony/> . Kabar, "Kyrgyz president confirms purchase of Airbus helicopters", Article, Kabar news agency (Bishkek), 14 December 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203yjt>

²⁷⁰ Kristina Dumanova, "Kazakhstan denies plans to buy fighter jets from France", Article, Kursiv Website (Almaty), 27 November 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-11-27/dmnnv-istrebitelej-iz-franczii/>

late-2023.²⁷¹ The Turkish-lead Organization of Turkic States, a sponsor of Trans-Caspian initiatives, also convened in Astana in 2023, discussing among other issues, prospects for military co-operation.²⁷² In 2022, Turkey extended sales of Bayraktar drones, which had already been sold to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, to Tajikistan.²⁷³ In the same year, Turkish Arms manufacturer TUSAS signed a memorandum on producing Anka drones in Kazakhstan, the model's first production base outside Turkey, and Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops participated in the Turkish-hosted 'Efes' multilateral exercise for the first time.²⁷⁴ During Turkey's 2023 elections, Mirziyoyev publicly advocated support for 'his dear brother' Erdogan, who was also nominated for the Noble Peace Prize by Turkmenistan.²⁷⁵

Iran's regional engagement is heavily concentrated in its relations with culturally-proximate Tajikistan, which had been experiencing an uptrend after a calamitous fall-out in the mid-2010s. The period saw Rahmon's first visit to Tehran since 2013, duly reciprocated with visits by the Iranian President and Deputy Interior Minister. The construction of an Iranian drone factory in early-2022 has obliged Dushanbe to since confirm that it is not manufacturing drones being used in the Ukraine conflict.²⁷⁶ Ebrahim Raisi's attendance at the SCO summit, where a memorandum was signed supporting Iran's accession to the organization, also constituted the first visit by an Iranian president to Uzbekistan in twenty years.²⁷⁷ In June 2023, an inaugural shipment, described as the launch of an 'Uzbek container service', arrived in Central Asia from the Chinese port of Xiamen via an Iranian port six months after a similar showcase shipment from Turkey, also overland via Iran.²⁷⁸ Iran has continued to champion the CKU railroad, re-iterating longstanding offers for Kyrgyz use of its sea ports.²⁷⁹ This engagement has not occurred in a vacuum and the period has seen the perpetuation of a Saudi-Iranian competition for regional influence that began to escalate in the late-2010s, particularly in Tajikistan. In 2022, the Saudi-dominated Islamic Development Bank increased its financial support for the Rogun project and Gulf States were among the investors in the Uzbek and Kazakh clean energy sectors.²⁸⁰

²⁷¹ Tazabek, "Airports in Bishkek and Osh to be handed over to Turkish company Yda Insaat for 39 years, MP says", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 20 June 2022, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1790251/?from=akikg>

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²⁷² Tazabek, "AKIpress Forum: Special priority is given to the Trans-Caspian route", Article, Tazabek website (Bishkek), 28 February 2023, <https://www.tazabek.kg/news:1874812?from=portal&place=last>

²⁷³ Azda.tv, "Tajikistan buys Turkish drones 'to fight threats' from Afghanistan", Article, Azda.tv, 29 March 2022, <https://azda.tv/nigharonii-kirgizkho-az-kharidori-shudani-pakhpodkmoi-turki-az-sui-tochikiston/>

²⁷⁴ Radio Free Europe, "Turkey's Anka Military Drones To Be Assembled In Kazakhstan", Article, Radio Free Europe, 16 October 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-turkey-anka-drones/32639593.html> . KazTag, "Kazakhstan conducts joint military exercises with Turkey", Article, KazTAG news agency (Almaty), 14 May 2022, https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/kazakhstan-provodit-sovmestnye-voennye-ucheniya-s-turtsiey?bitrix_include_areas=N&ELEMENT_CODE=kazakhstan-provodit-sovmestnye-voennye-ucheniya-s-turtsiey . AkiPress, "Kyrgyz military contingent takes part in large-scale international military exercises in Turkey for the first time", Article, Aki Press News Agency Website, 10 June 2022, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1786358>

²⁷⁵ Fergana, "Mirziyoyev urged Turkish residents to vote for Erdogan in the country's presidential elections", Article, Fergana, 16 March 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/129528/> . Turkmenistan Today, "The National Leader of the Turkmen people, Chairman of the Halk Maslahaty of Turkmenistan took part in the extraordinary Summit of the Organization of Turkic States", Article, Turkmenistan Today Website, 16 March 2023, <https://tdh.gov.tm/ru/post/35146/nacionalnyj-lider-turkmenskogo-naroda-predsdatel-halk-maslahaty-turkmenistana-prinyal-uchastie-vo-vneocherednom-sammite-organizacii-tyurkskih-gosudarstv>

²⁷⁶ John Engvall. Avesta, "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan refuted D. Gordon's statement about the production of drones for the war in Ukraine", Article, Avesta Website (Dushanbe), 30 October 2022, <https://avesta.tj/2022/10/30/mid-tadzhikistana-oproverglo-zayavlenie-d-gordona-o-proizvodstve-besilotnikov-dlya-vojny-v-ukraine/>

²⁷⁷ President of Iran Website, "Ayatollah Raisi enters Samarkand", Article, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran Website, 14 September 2022, <https://president.ir/en/139406>

²⁷⁸ Podrobno, "Uzbekistan launches new container corridor from China through Iran", Article, Podrobno Website, 25 June 2023, <https://podrobno.uz/cat/economic/uzbekistan-zapustil-novyy-konteynernyy-koridor-iz-kitaya-cherez-iran/> . Fergana, "The first freight train from Turkey arrived in Tashkent in transit through Iran and Turkmenistan", Article, Fergana News, 5 December 2022, <https://fergana.agency/news/128525/>

²⁷⁹ Tazabek, "The opportunities of Iranian ports for Kyrgyzstan are huge", Article, Tazabek Website (Bishkek), 18 February 2023, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2044ezg>

²⁸⁰ BNE Intellinews, "EDB considering allocating resources to Tajikistan's Rogun hydropower mega project", Article, BNE Intellinews, 21 November 2023, <https://www.intellinews.com/edb-considering-allocating-resources-to-tajikistan-s-rogun-hydropower-mega-project-302287/?source=tajikistan> . KazTag, "A new package of agreements worth \$900 million was signed by the authorities of Kazakhstan and the UAE", Article, KazTag News Agency, 20 September 2022, <https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/novyy-paket-soglasheniy-na-900-mln-podpisali-vlasti-kazakhstan-i-oae> . Fergana News Agency,

Conclusion

A number of interesting changes may be observed in Central Asia since February 2022, yet the extent to which the resulting correlation of forces represents a ‘new thirty years’, is questionable. China continues to play the leading investment and trade role it has been able to claim for more than a decade, albeit lacking fresh infrastructure success stories that would justify the Belt and Road sensationalism of the mid-2010s. The positive narrative that has emerged since the pandemic relies on regurgitating optimism surrounding legacy proposals, as well as demand in Uzbekistan, which is otherwise experiencing an uptrend in relations with all investment partners. While signs of Russian approval for the CKU railroad may yet signal a major concession on the part of Moscow, they may also infer merely an endorsement ‘in principle’, though only under route conditions that would render impossible its realization. The resumption of certain projects such as the Astana LRT however and subdued public antipathy towards China - manifest in the establishment of visa-free regimes and record numbers of Chinese tourists, would suggest that perceptions of China in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have resumed some sort of an equilibrium after the public antipathy of the 2010s.²⁸¹ Studies conducted on the region in recent years have highlighted a distinction between a sympathetic Soviet-educated generation, more reliant on traditional media, and a younger social-media savvy generation, more suspicious of Russian influence.²⁸² Whether this has translated into a favourable generational shift towards China has yet to be reflected in polling.

While longstanding areas of contention remain, it is difficult to argue that any of the republics have distanced themselves from Moscow since the invasion. Observations that the region has been ‘falling out of the Russian orbit’ can, at best, be only partially-justified at a cultural level.²⁸³ Russia has been a secondary investor behind China, for more than a decade, yet will occasionally top annual FDI inflows in certain republics. The increased re-export trade crossing the Russo-Kazakh border, whether originating in Turkish and Iranian ports or from the Chinese mainland, is re-affirming the North-South connectivity paradigms once heavily promoted by Moscow but which had appeared to stall in the wake of the BRI. While never likely to regain its former-monopsonist position in Central Asia, the likelihood of a fifteen-year supply contract with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan being signed in the summer of 2024, demonstrates Gazprom’s enduring leverage in Chinese and Central Asian gas markets, as the supplier of last resort.²⁸⁴

In terms of its arms relationships with the CSTO members and projectable military power across their territories and airspace, Moscow retains more freedom of movement in the region than any other external power and this will be entrenched should it emerge from the Ukraine conflict with the world’s most battle-tested armed forces and arms-industrial complex. As a middle-income power with a booming and populous neighbour to its south, Kazakhstan must have a credible military and Moscow is the only security partner able to facilitate this, regardless of Astana’s selective approach to CSTO membership. The Almaty intervention and Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict also demonstrates that Moscow remains the default arbiter for intra-regional disputes, with Beijing’s mediation likely only relevant at the Track Two level. Twenty years of Chinese economic engagement, does not appear to have translated into sustainable influence in the security or political sphere which would justify the sensationalist commentaries that framed the Xian Summit or exist on the Sinophobic fringe. Far from being an ‘effrontery’ to Russia, China’s limitation of defence cooperation to border security and cautious approach to SCO drills, serves two purposes. Firstly, Beijing has reassured Moscow that it is not looking to displace Russia’s traditional security role in Central Asia at a moment of vulnerability. It is also highly likely that the Chinese leadership does not wish to be seen as a Russian military partner in Western Eurasia under the present circumstances. SCO drills in 2024 are again scheduled to take place outside the bloc’s Eurasian core, in China.²⁸⁵

“Saudi Arabian company to build 1 GW wind farm in Kazakhstan”, Article, Fergana News Agency, 3 March 2023, <https://fergana.agency/news/129362/>

²⁸¹ Aigerim Tulusheva, “Kazakhstan attracted a record number of tourists from China and India in 2023”, Article, Kursiv Website (Almaty), 16 February 2024, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2024-02-16/tksh-turisty-kitay-indiya/>

²⁸² Annette Bohr.

²⁸³ Raffaello Pantucci and Alessandro Arduino.

²⁸⁴ Forbes, “Gazprom to sign 15-year gas supply contract with Kazakhstan”, Article, Forbes.com, 29 December 2023, https://forbes.kz/economy/energy-subsoil/gazprom_zaklyuchit_kontrakt_s_kazahstanom_na_postavku_gaza_na_15_let/. Fergana News Agency, “Kazakh Energy Ministry: Russian gas supplies to Uzbekistan to quadruple”, Article, Fergana News Agency Website, 6 March 2024, <https://fergana.agency/news/133155/>

²⁸⁵ KazInform, “SCO countries to hold joint anti-terror exercises in China in 2024”, Article, KazInform (Astana), 8 September 2023, https://en.inform.kz/news/sco-countries-to-hold-joint-anti-terror-exercises-in-china-in-2024_a4109509/

Yet China views Central Asia as lying at least partially within its 'inner ring' of adjacent countries directly impacting national security, with Western Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea part of its 'middle ring'.²⁸⁶ The encroachment on the connectivity sphere of the SCO, which has largely remained a security-focused organization, would corroborate the trend towards the securitization of the Belt and Road Initiative that began to take shape in the late-2010s through intelligence-sharing agreements between Chinese companies and embassies, refinements to PLA doctrine and use of Private Security Companies (PSC). China's informal security presence in Kyrgyzstan is in fact relatively large, though largely due to the success of one PSC and its flamboyant CEO. Bilateral pressure however remains China's preferred modus operandi and it is only in two separate incidents involving Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan that anything approaching an open confrontation with Beijing may be identified during the period. The use of political pressure on Turkmenistan to resume gas exports in early-2023, would conform to the policy trend observed during a similar dispute in the late-2020s when Ashgabat was reportedly placed on China's weapons export blacklist, and confirms long-held suspicions regarding the CAGP's corporate structure.²⁸⁷ Tacit endorsement of the Tajik military operation in Gorno-Badakhshan must again be seen as significant in a volatile sub-region bordering Xinjiang where China retains a deep economic stake and the People's Armed Police (PAP), has engaged in low-level patrolling and security cooperation.

Chinese dominance of the Tajik and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyz economies and sovereign debt portfolios constitute one of only three identifiable areas of truly overweight influence in the region, the others being CNPC's monopsony purchasing power over Turkmen gas exports and Russia's security architecture in its three CSTO-partner states. It is unlikely that the Uzbek leadership will allow Chinese economic dependency to reach the levels observed in Tajikistan but will instead likely seek to emulate the successful economic and diplomatic balancing act of its northern neighbour. With respect to the Ukraine conflict, official policy across the region may best be understood as tending towards the prevention of extreme positions and commentaries on either side of the debate, though this may change if Russia is ultimately perceived as victor. The most reasonable argument which can be made, is for an entrenchment of what might be described as the 'SCO consensus', otherwise traceable to the mid-2000s. This differs from the 'condominium' theory which has posited a division of labour between Moscow and Beijing in the region and relies instead on mutual interests relating to regime stability vis-à-vis Islamist and Neo-Liberal agitation.

The state-capitalist economic model 'with Chinese characteristics', has been the ultimate victor in the region, as has the dynastic Eurasian quasi-criminal strongman, with the tenures of nominally-technocrat presidents in the two larger republics too nascent to suggest the normalization of an alternative. Genuine anti-Russian and anti-Chinese voices at the national political level are limited to opposition figures outside the circles of power. Central Asians do not share Western perceptions on Taiwan, Xinjiang or Tibet, and Russian and Chinese claims that 'outside forces' and 'Anglo-Saxons' are responsible for regional instability go largely unchallenged. While some antipathy is detectable at the popular level, the region remains safe ground for both Moscow and Beijing, where their Track One messaging is warmly reciprocated by officials - adequately demonstrated by both Xi's and Putin's choice of the region for their first visits abroad after the pandemic and invasion respectively. Central Asia has been crucial to the institutionalization of the SCO, EEU and CSTO, China's 'Going Out' strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese Industrial Capacity Cooperation, and 'de-dollarization', and has been used as a receptive testing ground for Xi's Global Development and Security Initiatives during the period. The region where the end of the 'End of History' was perhaps first perceptible, Central Asia has been described as 'a prototype for the post-unipolar world'.²⁸⁸

If it can be argued that Central Asian multi-vectoring has encountered some success with respect to Russia and China, then it has been even more successful vis-à-vis the West as the present wave of direct investment appears entirely divorced from prior levels of conditionality. There are undoubtedly more sources of foreign investment available to the region today than in the immediate post-Soviet period when the success of the 'Washington Consensus' was partially the result of a near-monopoly on international development financing by institutions

²⁸⁶ Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, *Sinostan: China's Inadvertant Empire*, Oxford University Press (2022), 250.

²⁸⁷ Yau Tsz Yan, "What Drives Chinese Arms Sales in Central Asia?", Article, *The Diplomat*, 11 September 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/what-drives-chinese-arms-sales-in-central-asia/>

²⁸⁸ Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce, *No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.*, Kennan Cable No. 56 | August 2020, The Wilson Centre (2020), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-56-no-great-game-central-asias-public-opinions-russia-china-and-us>

headquartered in the United States, Europe and Japan, but the adroitness of Central Asian diplomats has been consistently underestimated. As Annette Bohr highlighted in a 2023 testimony to the British Foreign Affairs Committee, caveats such as “we are keen to reform but must tread slowly in view of the conservative nature of our societies” have been offered up to Western diplomats for over twenty-five years.²⁸⁹ While isolated pockets of Europhilia in the region’s university campuses continue to mislead external observers, the ‘Western gaze’, has been successfully deflected away from the ‘great games’ and ‘clan politics’ that characterised academic interest in previous decades.

The fact that Turkmenistan has been the only CAR not to experience internal unrest or conflict in 2022 or 2023, paints a more dismal picture than the reality. The heads of the five republics now routinely convene through a summit mechanism. The opening up of the Uzbek economy and détente between lower and upper-riparian states has been a stabilizing force as has burgeoning intra-regional trade and investment, albeit still limited compared with dynamic sub-regions such as Europe or South-East Asia. Kazakhstan is a major investor and trade partner in the two smaller republics, according to Tajik official statements ahead of Russia and China in 2023, and Uzbek-Tajik trade has grown forty-fold since 2016.²⁹⁰ Despite the emergence of societal fault-lines in the past decade and an ongoing but cloistered purge of Nazarbayev’s legacy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik society is presently less divided than in the immediate post-Soviet era when political confrontations were often of a violent and public nature. Notwithstanding Russian mediation, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan negotiated their border conflict bilaterally, and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan delineated their shared border and cooperated on counter-terrorism, during the period.²⁹¹ While this may fall outside the traditional definition of ‘regionalism’, which some experts feel has been losing momentum, these developments, unrelated to the Ukraine conflict, were unimaginable fifteen years ago.²⁹²

The trend towards de-Russification, while creating the space for a flourishing of indigenous and to some extent, Islamic identities, also predates Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but does not equate to a broad base of public opposition to the Russian state, people or the conflict, other than a pragmatic desire for it to remain far from Central Asian borders. While everyday life may appear more de-Russified, legacy modes of national and supranational organization, remain essential to the survival of the republics without necessarily representing a threat, where able to cherry-pick areas of strategic cooperation. This model already has a strong precedent in the case of Tartarstan, Russia’s Muslim-majority Semi-Autonomous Federal Republic whose role as a diplomatic and economic conduit to Central Asia has expanded during the period. Far from deterring cross-border labour migration, the outbreak of conflict has seen the Russian Federation remain the leading destination for Central Asian migrant workers, now complimented by significant migration in the opposite direction, which will greatly contribute to integration between cities in the republics and the Russian Federation. The military impact of Central Asia’s CSTO member states on the Ukraine conflict would be at best symbolic and the number of Central Asians fighting in the Russian Armed Forces is small relative to the size of the diaspora. Yet Central Asian labour is powering the Russian wartime economy and Kazakhstan’s long northern border facilitating sanctions-evasion both illegally and through official ‘transit’ agreements.

It can even be argued that legacy Western aspirations for Central Asia suit Moscow, permitting the region, where cross-border trade sits at the apex of the state and opaque smuggling networks, to serve as an amenable entrepôt while only partially acceding to demands on sanctions. The greatest source of leverage the West possesses over Central Asia, restricting Kazakh oil exports to Europe, has been compartmentalized and isolated, likely due to lobbying in Washington but also due to the irresistible dream that perpetuating present patterns of engagement may yet constitute a source of antagonism for Moscow after the model of partial, yet

²⁸⁹ Annette Bohr.

²⁹⁰ Avesta, “Trade turnover between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan increased 37 times”, Article, Avesta, 27 May 2022, <https://avesta.tj/2022/05/27/tovarooborot-mezhdu-tadzhikistanom-i-uzbekistanom-uvulichilsya-v-37-raz/> . Pressa.tj, “Kazakhstan, China, Russia main investors in Tajikistan”, Article, Pressa.tj (Dushanbe), 28 Feb 2024, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b000185j>

²⁹¹ AKIpress, “Strengthening and development of bilateral relations. Japarov spoke about the results of the meeting with Mirziyoyev”, Article, AKIpress news agency website (Bishkek), 27 January 2023, <https://kg.akipress.org/news:1856216?from=portal&place=last> . Central Asian News, “Kazakhs, Uzbeks develop joint deal to respond to armed attacks”, Article, Central Asian News website (Bishkek), 28 November 2022, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c203x4vx>

²⁹² Interview with Eurasianet.

unconsolidated, successes in Ukraine and Georgia. One Kazakh commentator interviewed by the author rejoiced in the fact that Kazakhstan has not produced a Saakashvili or a Zelenskyy and an untimely demise for the latter will only cement the perception that tacking away from the West in the mid-2000s was a prudent foreign policy move.²⁹³

For decades, actual or assumed Western influence in Central Asia has relied on Azerbaijan and Turkey as geographical and cultural conduits. The Middle Corridor is the only independent export channel for the region's abundant mineral wealth and for Western military cooperation in the unlikely event of improved defence relations. Western academics have in the past, lauded the region's Hanafi tradition as an attractive alternative to the revolutionary Islamic movements financed by Iran and the Gulf monarchies, and the purge of liberal democratic institutions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during the period, has been paralleled by a clamp-down on radical online content and displays of public religiosity, including beards and the full face veil. It is this 'third leg' which still represents as the most credible hedge against Russia and China, one finally beginning to crystalize in Turkey's burgeoning economic stake in the region, the latter able to exploit target audiences and market niches inaccessible to Western state or non-state actors. Until alternative multimodal export routes receive political support of the scale once enjoyed by the BTC however, no amount of Western diplomacy will compensate for the overwhelming advantages of contiguity in the CARs' economic and security relationships with China and the Russian Federation.

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²⁹³ Interview with Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Public Policy at Nazarbayev University, 10th August 2023

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