

Stepping up to the “Agency Challenge”: Central Asian Diplomacy in a Time of Troubles

S. Frederick Starr
Svante E. Cornell

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Executive Summary

Central Asia is often portrayed through metaphors such as a “Grand Chessboard” or a “Great Game,” which suggest that the players in the game are the great powers, and the Central Asian states are merely pawns in this game. The problem with this analysis is that it denies agency to the Central Asian states. This might have been a plausible argument immediately upon their independence, when these states were indeed weak. But today, thirty years into independence, it is abundantly clear that the situation has changed.

Even though China, Russia, and the West are still able to influence the evolution of Central Asia in various ways, the Central Asian states are increasingly capable of defining their individual and joint interests and translating them into concrete programs. While institutionalization of their collaboration has lagged, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, Russia’s war in Ukraine, and other great power actions have promoted the regional governments to link arms as never before. Since 2016 this process has advanced rapidly, accompanied by more proactive strategies by the five regional governments themselves. While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have emerged as leaders in this process, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are all engaged with this new direction, as is their neighbor across the Caspian, Azerbaijan.

It remains to be seen whether and in what ways major powers will acknowledge this development. What is already clear, however, is that “divide and conquer” policies will no longer be effective tools for dealing

with the states of Central Asia, which will increasingly use their power of agency to ameliorate and shape the approaches of major powers.

The United States and Europe can take stock of this process to expand their partnership with Central Asian states. This includes expanding Western investment in the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor, while working closely with Central Asian states to prevent sanctions evasion. Western powers should also recognize the primacy of security in Central Asian realities, and support processes of reform in the defense and security sector to help Central Asians defend themselves against the encroachments of neighboring great powers. Last but not least, the U.S. should follow the example of the EU and raise the level of its interaction with Central Asia to the highest political level.

Introduction

Outsiders have long viewed Central Asia through the prism of the great powers surrounding them. Undeniably, Central Asian states lack the population, economic and military power of its larger neighbors. Does this mean they are destined to be at the mercy of these great powers, and the fluctuating relations among them? This is the way Central Asia is often portrayed – through metaphors such as a “Grand Chessboard” or a “Great Game” – which suggest that the players in the game are the great powers, and the Central Asian states are merely pawns in this game. The problem with this analysis is that it denies agency to the Central Asian states. This might have been a plausible argument immediately upon their independence, when these states were indeed weak. But today, thirty years into independence, it is abundantly clear that the situation has changed. What agency do the Central Asian states have, and are they using it?

The word “agency” has two very different meanings. One refers to “an organization or business that provides a particular service”. The other definition – the one that concerns us here – refers to “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*) or the ability to take action or choose what action to take” (according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*).

All nation-states seek to acquire agency, which is essential to their very survival in a world of competing powers. Yet reality forces even the most powerful countries to acknowledge limits to their agency. Similarly, small or weak states that lack the capacity to take decisive action of their own become mere pawns, influenced or controlled by others.

The five Central Asian countries formed after the collapse of the USSR would appear to be prime candidates for the status of states that lack agency. Weak and unprepared for sovereignty at the time they gained independence, they were both landlocked and surrounded by much larger states, including two major great powers. They lacked many institutions essential for survival in the modern age and even the capacity to defend themselves diplomatically or militarily. It is no wonder that over the first two decades after 1991 they gained a reputation as countries being acted upon, with little or no capacity to respond, let alone to initiate. In many quarters this assumption prevails even today.

This gloomy view arose from the incontrovertible fact that foreign powers and forces were eager to manipulate the new governments. But that does not mean that Central Asians have lacked the strategic vision, tactical adroitness, and raw will to respond or to initiate countermoves of their own. Quite the contrary, beginning in the first years of their independence all five Central Asian states took decisive steps to assert themselves in such a way as to prevent major powers East and West from taking them for granted or curbing their sovereignty. In some cases, they did so with dramatic flair, but in most cases they did so subtly, and in such a way as to convey the message without evoking countermoves from abroad. As we shall see, the growth of tactical deftness is a common feature of the diplomacy of all five Central Asian states, albeit to varying degrees. The cumulative effect of this development over thirty years has been the steady growth of strategic agency in Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

The Growth of Agency Up to 2016

Upon gaining independence, all five governments of Central Asia toiled single-mindedly to assert their capacity for agency. Kazakhstan's first President Nursultan Nazarbayev did so even prior to independence by boldly opening direct contacts with the American Chevron corporation for the development and export to the West of Kazakh oil. Soon after independence, Kazakhstan also closed down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site and renounced the nuclear weapons on the country's territory, demonstrating the country's commitment to nuclear disarmament. Nazarbayev also attended to the country's security by moving the capital from the southeastern border to a north-central location that both helped unite the society and signaled to Moscow that Kazakhstan's northern border was fixed and non-negotiable.

With similar boldness, Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akayev, branded his country as the "Switzerland of Central Asia." He then urged his fellow presidents to reject the demeaning Russian term for their region, "*Middle Asia*" (as in "middle height" or "middle finger"), and adopt instead the appellation "*Central Asia*." Following the collapse of the USSR, Tajikistan's head of state, Emomali Rakhmonov, confronted warlords, including Islamic radicals, to bring all regions of the country under his rule and later de-Russified his own name to simply "Rakhmon." Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, devised a strategy to keep Turkmenistan out of the growing geopolitical turmoil. In 1995, he obtained a United Nations recognition of his country's "positive neutrality" or non-alignment, which sent the signal to the great powers to leave Turkmenistan alone. During the same period Uzbekistan's first

president, Islam Karimov, sought to undergird his country's independence by closing its borders and utilizing the country's new security forces and army to crush radical Islamists that had emerged mainly in the east of the country.

The most original assertion of post-independent sovereignty occurred in Kazakhstan, where President Nazarbayev adroitly employed the country's new-found convening power as a tool for asserting its independent agency on the international scene. He accomplished this by proposing at the United Nations that a Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building measures in Asia (CICA) be launched, mirroring the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). That a newly created country with a population of sixteen million at the time would convene such mighty powers as India, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey was a bold and ultimately successful assertion of agency.

Beginning with the United States of America after their declaration of Independence in 1776, nearly all post-colonial new sovereignties have asserted their distinct histories as a means of signaling their standing in full and as distinct members of the international order. Central Asians, who had long seen their histories subordinated to that of their colonial overlord, now engaged in a colorful orgy of self-rediscovery. Their enthusiasm for this enterprise was genuine and deep, helped reclaim past glories, tragedies, and movements for self-preservation. As with many earlier post-colonial efforts to reclaim a suppressed past, this movement in Central Asia also gave rise to certain excesses and dubious claims. Was the brutal Tamerlane really the great patron of culture depicted in the new museum in his honor in Tashkent? And was the semi-legendary Kyrgyz nomad bard Manas really the author of the vast oral epic that was rediscovered or invented in the nineteenth century?

A generation later such issues are mere quibbles, for the Central Asia-wide effort to reclaim national memories proved successful everywhere and did much to consolidate the new countries. Besides being important acts of agency, they led to much thoughtful research, which continues to inform and deepen the identities of all five Central Asian peoples. All this has occurred in spite of Russia's continued dominance of their trade, media, and to some extent their educational systems, in spite of China's rise as the region's prime funder of projects and loans, in spite of the West's growing engagement on many levels, and in spite of Turkey's initiative to become the leading power in its emerging Turkic bloc.

The rise of nationalism in many post-colonial countries has often exacerbated their relations with neighbors. During the first decade of independence Central Asia was riddled with such tensions, which were abated by the collapse after 1991 of intra-regional transport, trade, and communications. Notwithstanding these differences, the new governments of Central Asia collaborated successfully in two areas, both of them stunning examples of agency on a regional level and both of them of great significance for the future.

An important region-wide act of agency in Central Asia occurred in 1997 when the five new states adopted the Almaty Declaration that called for the region to become a nuclear weapons free zone. This started more than a decade of negotiations among the regional states and with the nuclear powers. The Treaty was finally signed by all five countries at Semey in 2006, ratified by the United Nations, and entered into force in 2009.

A second and equally prescient initiative was on behalf of regional cooperation and coordination. Many in the governments of Central Asia realized that the absence of regional consultative mechanisms and practical cooperation enabled the major powers to play them off against each other. Equally serious, their five separate and uncoordinated laws and closed post-imperial borders discouraged foreign investment and

gravely thwarted economic development. A first step towards rectifying this situation took place in 1994 when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan agreed to establish a common economic space. The Kyrgyz Republic joined them shortly thereafter, which led to the three presidents declaring the establishment of a Central Asian Union, renamed the Central Asian Economic Union in 1998. Tajikistan, still racked by civil war, was in no condition to join, while Turkmenistan questioned whether membership was compatible with its neutral status, which for the time being it interpreted as a form of self-isolation.

The Central Asian Union was an immediate success, although short-lived, and led to active consultation and problem solving in areas beyond economic relations. Suffice it to note that these contacts extended even to the sensitive field of security. With the end of its civil war Tajikistan joined the group, at which time the partners voted to establish a Central Asia Development Bank. In 2001, the organization was renamed the Central Asia Cooperation Organization (CACO).¹

This was a major act of agency, and like the nuclear weapons free zone, it was done on a region-wide basis. But its very success quickly brought the CACO up against a blunt reality: Vladimir Putin requested that Russia be admitted as an observer. Lacking support from the West, the partners had no choice but to agree to this, which led two years later to Putin’s request for Russia to be given full membership. This turned out to be a *lovushka* or trap. Putin set up the Eurasia-wide Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) and in 2005 forced the CACO to dissolve itself into this new Moscow-dominated body.

¹ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Washington: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, 2018. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/resources/1811CA-Regional.pdf>)

Prizing their newly gained sovereignty and protective of their individual agency, all the governments of Central Asia were averse to all talk of “integration,” preferring instead the terms “cooperation” and “coordination.” In advancing these goals, they gained backing from several agencies of the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Asian Development Bank. These bodies initiated cross-border projects in several areas, notably water management and power grids. While initiated and defined by these institutions rather than by the Central Asians themselves, they nonetheless contributed to growing competence within the region to manage their own interactions and their relations with the world beyond their borders.

The Central Asians also found strong support from Japan, South Korea, the European Union, and eventually the United States, most of which established regular high-level consultations with the Central Asian governments as a group. The fact that the presidents of several major countries participated actively in these periodic consultations created regularly scheduled platforms at which the Central Asian presidents convened as a group and gained experience in the subtle arts of collaboration. This was vividly demonstrated in 2015, when Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister proposed to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry that Washington create its own regional consultative body, known as “C5+1.” In an act that affirmed Kazakhstan’s and Central Asia’s growing power of agency, Kerry agreed.

Notwithstanding these achievements, the states of Central Asia continued to face grave challenges, the most serious of which were internal. To garner support, or the appearance of support, leaders mounted elections that resulted in such overwhelmingly favorable majorities as to arouse deep skepticism at home and abroad about their integrity. Strict and wooden centralization gave the appearance of central control yet in

practice allowed local governors to rule virtually as satraps, and newly-minted “entrepreneurs” to steal state assets at a gargantuan scale.

When Kyrgyzstan, in an effort to live up to its claim as the “Switzerland of Central Asia, switched to a form of parliamentary rule in 2010 after two upheavals in five years, it ended up strengthening the very corruption it had hoped to eliminate. Across the region speculation and profiteering extended up to the ruling families. Foreign intelligence services quickly learned how to take advantage of such activities. In the sphere of security, Russia’s FSB and Ministry of Defense, both of which survived the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union largely intact, maintained close ties with Central Asia’s security and military elite, nearly all of whom were alumni of the KGB and Red Army.

During a visit to Washington in 2002, a congressman asked Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov when his country would adopt a more democratic system. Karimov replied that his generation could not be expected to make such changes, for it had had no contact with more open systems of rule. Nonetheless, the rising generation could do that, because it had a much deeper knowledge of how other countries function and could apply that knowledge to reforms at home.² Following Karimov’s death in 2016 and transitions at the top in all Central Asians countries except Tajikistan, the possibility of a new Central Asia gained widespread attention, and with it a burst of region-wide initiatives that signify the countries’ intensified agency.

² S. Frederick Starr, “Change and Continuity in Uzbekistan, 1991-2016,” in S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, ed., *Uzbekistan’s New Face*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, p. 28. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/1809-Starr-UZ.pdf>)

The Intensification of Agency after 2016

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as President of Uzbekistan in 2016 marked a watershed in that country and the region as a whole. Not only did it lead directly to the removal of intra-regional impediments to greater interaction but it gave rise to a new wave of joint initiatives by Central Asians. Together, these marked the emergence of a new and promising stage of region-wide agency both within and beyond the region's borders.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 combined with a downturn in the price of oil to launch a period of economic decline across the region. As the Russian ruble lost value, so did the currencies of Central Asia that were closely linked with the Russian economy. This affected the situation in Kazakhstan, Central Asia's leading economy, where the government had provided constantly growing living standards on the back of hydrocarbons. The deep devaluation in that country, and the drying up of revenue from migrant laborers from the poorer Central Asian countries, made it abundantly clear that the barriers to trade and cooperation between Central Asian states were seriously thwarting the region, and had become a threat to its long-term security. While strong vested interests in each country sought to retain a status quo that benefited certain elites, the balance now gradually tilted in favor of a political leadership bent on change.

The one measure that most gave rise to this new current of cooperation was Uzbekistan's opening of its borders for contact, travel, trade, and many-sided interaction with its four Central Asian neighbors. For this to happen, heretofore un-demarcated borders had to be defined and agreed

through bilateral negotiations. New practices with respect to currency, tariffs, visas, and trade had to be negotiated with each country and implemented across two dozen border crossings. None of this could have been achieved had negotiations not been preceded by both internal discussions within Uzbekistan and cross-border contacts with neighbors. This process was initiated during Karimov's last years, and apparently with his approval – Mirziyoyev had served since 2003 as Prime Minister. Indeed, in 2013 Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Strategic Partnership, indicating the desire in both capitals to strengthen bilateral ties in view of growing geopolitical competition.³ These efforts went into overdrive now that Mirziyoyev was able to prevail over recalcitrant forces at home. These had been ensconced particularly in the security services, which Mirziyoyev promptly reorganized.

This gave rise to a flurry of region-wide meetings at the presidential level, beginning with a summit in Astana in 2018. Tellingly, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev stated the following rationale for the summit: "There is no need to call an outsider to resolve issues of the Central Asian nations, we are able to resolve everything ourselves – that is why we are meeting."⁴ As well as subsequent yearly meetings, separate trans-border contacts among security agencies, trade specialists, legal experts, and think tanks all gave rise to a new spirit of agency throughout Central Asia. An initiative by the government of Singapore in conjunction with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute brought a group of rising leaders from across the region to that country, where they met with leaders of the Association of

³ Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: Competitors, Strategic Partners or Eternal Friends?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 9, 2013.

(<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12786>)

⁴ "Rare Central Asian Summit Signals Regional Thaw," *RFE/RL*, March 15, 2018.

(<https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asian-summit-astana-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-turkmenistan/29101686.html>)

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Their purpose was to learn how countries of Southeast Asia had linked arms to resolve mutual issues and to enhance their joint agency on the international stage, and to identify steps to that end within Central Asia. Central Asians similarly studied other examples of regional cooperation, such as the Višegrad Group, the Nordic Council and others.

The abrupt departure of American and other NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 opened an important potential area for Central Asian joint action and agency. Rather than allow the region-wide efforts to open transport and trade routes across Central Asia to die, the Central Asians themselves took over this project. Each country determinately pursued its own projects.

Kyrgyzstan continued to push the International Monetary Fund on its suspended CASA-1000 power transmission project. Turkmenistan continued to seek international funding for its TAPI gas transmission line to Pakistan and India, as well as for its railroad into Afghanistan, turning now to the Gulf states for capital. Tajikistan worked simultaneously to secure its border against the Taliban and to find a modus vivendi with its more moderate elements. And Uzbekistan, now closely coordinating with Kazakhstan and its other neighbors, continued to advance its railroad connection to Afghanistan via its border at Termez-Hairaton and doggedly pursued the region-wide dream of a transport corridor through Afghanistan to South and Southeast Asia.

Even before the rise of the Taliban regime in Kabul, Uzbekistan had convened several international conferences on Afghanistan, at which the Central Asians displayed an unprecedented degree of coordination and agency. In a striking departure, Tashkent not only continued this effort after the fall of the Ghani government in Kabul but expanded it, by convening major conclaves at which it proposed to the major powers that Central Asian countries as a group offered the best avenue for providing

humanitarian assistance to the struggling Afghans but also the most effective way to test the Taliban's readiness to engage internationally on all matters of common concern. The fact that it did so not as a solo instigator but as the agreed point of initiative for all five countries of Central Asia sent a clear message that Central Asian agency could no longer be denied and that the major powers should deal with them as a group and cease playing them off against each other.

In July 2022, all five Central Asian leaders gathered at the resort of Cholpon-Ata at the invitation of Kyrgyzstan's new president, Sadyr Japarov, for their fourth formal conclave. The fact that meetings at the presidential level had by now become normal and regularized is itself noteworthy. This time they approved an astonishingly broad range of initiatives covering their mutual relations in more than two dozen spheres ranging from law, trade, sports, investment, visas, and education, to security. To be sure, neither Tajikistan's President Rakhmon nor Turkmenistan's new president, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, signed the key document – the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century, at the time – Rakhmon because of Tajikistan's unresolved border dispute with Kyrgyzstan and Berdimuhamedov because he wanted to be sure that participation was consistent with his country's neutral status.

Neither, however, was opposed in principle. Rakhmon has been continuously supportive of regional cooperation. Turkmenistan's pause traced to a more fundamental issue. For three decades after independence, Ashgabat had defined its neutrality in negative terms, which caused it to avoid most international engagements in principle. Now, under its new forty-one year-old president, it was beginning to redefine its neutrality in positive terms. This meant engaging actively with neighbors and powers further afield to make the country a hub of international transport and

trade, and the institutional structures associated with them. In other words, Turkmenistan was now defining its neutrality in terms of engagement rather than isolation, agency rather than passivity.

This was less dramatic a change than it may at first appear. After all, Turkmenistan's landmark gas pipeline to China had been initiated not by the Chinese but by Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who proposed it to what was a skeptical government in Beijing as a means of breaking Moscow's long-term monopoly over the export of the country's most valuable commodity. And before that, Niyazov – in an act of astonishing boldness – had confronted Russia's Prime Minister (and former energy czar) Viktor Chernomyrdin over the pricing of Turkmen gas. Chernomyrdin had justified the low price he offered by the claim that "Europe does not want Turkmen gas," to which Niyazov responded by personally travelling to Germany and Austria and collecting potential European orders. Another departure from Turkmenistan's self-isolation was its support for the establishment in Ashgabat of a "United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia," discussed below.

As sober realists, Central Asians took great care to assure that their acts of agency not be taken as threats to their former colonial overlord, Russia, which for a generation after the collapse of the USSR remained the region's largest trading partner and first international priority. It is in this context that the use of the U.N. as initiator or sponsor makes such good sense. Stated in terms of the game of billiards, they preferred indirect bank shots rather than straight shots or tricky jump shots or slip shots.

Central Asia's Global Outreach

Central Asian States have focused much of their energy on regional matters, and made the restoration of regional cooperation a centerpiece of their foreign policy. In fact, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in their published foreign policy strategies make the Central Asian region the first priority in their foreign relations. This does not, however, mean that Central Asians have neglected outreach beyond their region. Quite to the contrary, they have been increasingly active in at least four distinct ways. First has been the development of dialogue platforms where Central Asians jointly meet with leaders of foreign powers. Second, they have boosted their role in regional and international organizations. Third, they have promoted their own diplomatic initiatives on the global scene. And fourth, they have worked to raise the profile of the United Nations in Central Asia.

Dialogue Platforms

Given the outsized role of Russia and China in Central Asia, a keystone of Central Asian diplomacy has been the outreach to other powers to create a modicum of balance and geopolitical pluralism in the region. A key element in this has been the creation of dialogue platforms with important foreign powers to anchor their presence in the region.

First among these was the "Central Asia plus Japan" format, created at a meeting of foreign ministers in Astana in August 2004. Ever since, yearly meetings have been held at the level of deputy foreign minister, while meetings at the ministerial level initially took place at an interval of 3-4

years. Since 2017, however, foreign ministers have been meeting yearly, including twice in 2022.⁵

Second was the EU-Central Asia dialogue, which was foreseen in the first EU strategy on Central Asia, published in 2007. In 2008, a first ministerial meeting at the foreign minister level took place in Ashgabat, and has been meeting regularly since. Its 18th meeting took place in Samarkand in November 2022. It is complemented by a “High-Level Political and Security Dialogue,” typically meeting at the Deputy Foreign Minister level, which first met in 2013 and has been meeting annually. In October 2022, the first meeting at the heads of state level, with European Council President Charles Michel, took place in Astana, at Kazakhstan’s initiative. In June 2023, Michel again traveled to Central Asia for a second such meeting in Cholpon-Ata with his regional counterparts, where they all agreed to institutionalize these meetings into a formed EU-CA summit (meaning the involvement of the European commission and its entire bureaucracy).

The U.S. is a latecomer to this development, the C5+1 format having seen the light of day only in 2015. It was launched after a period of relative chill in U.S. relations with Central Asia, which had come to be dominated by American criticism over human rights issues during both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. While C5+1 was an effort by the U.S. to adopt a more systematic approach to the region, it is significant that it was created at the initiative of Kazakhstan that presented the idea to the U.S. Secretary of State on behalf of the entire region.

In more recent years, several similar formats have been added to the list. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all Central Asian states in 2015, and following this visit relations between Central Asia and India

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Central Asia plus Japan’ Dialogue,” <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/dialogue/index.html>

have intensified. The first India-Central Asia dialogue at the Foreign Ministers level took place in 2019 in Samarkand, and in January 2022, a Summit between Modi and Central Asian Presidents took place in virtual format.⁶ In September 2022, the first multilateral meeting between the Gulf Cooperation Council and the five Central Asian states took place in Riyadh at the Foreign Ministers level. The meeting "endorsed an indicative Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue and Cooperation for the period 2023-2027" and agreed to hold a GCC-Central Asia economic forum in 2023.⁷ The first summit took place in Riyadh in July 2023.

Seeing this flurry of activity, Russia and China saw no option but to follow suit. While both had initially preferred to maintain their relations with Central Asian states at the bilateral relations or within the framework of larger umbrella organizations they could dominate, such as the CSTO or SCO, Moscow and Beijing now saw no alternative but to begin treating Central Asia as a region. Thus, the format "Central Asia+Russia" was inaugurated in 2019, and the first summit taking place in Astana in October 2022, while Xi Jinping in May 2023 hosted the first off-line China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an.⁸

⁶⁶ Seema Guha, "India-Central Asia Dialogue: India Goes All Out to Woo Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours," *Outlook India*, December 19, 2021.

(<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-india-going-all-out-to-woo-afghanistans-central-asian-neighbours/405811>); Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "The First Meeting of the India-Central Asia Summit", January 19, 2022. (<https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1791257#:~:text=The%20inception%20of%20the%20India,to%20India%2DCentral%20Asia%20relations.>)

⁷ Abdul Aziz Aluwaisheg, "Enthusiasm abounds as GCC, Central Asia Launch Strategic Dialogue," September 9, 2022. (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2159106>)

⁸ Robin Roth, "Russia tries new diplomatic approach with "Central Asia + Russia" format," *Novastan*, October 19, 2020. (<https://novastan.org/en/kazakhstan/russia-tries-new-diplomatic-approach-with-central-asia-russia-format/>); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a

While one could retort that these are mere talking shops, the fact is that the different dialogue platforms, taken together, mark several accomplishments for the region. First, they ensure that leaders in faraway powers like Japan, India, the EU and United States continue to factor Central Asia into their broader foreign relations. Second, they build personal relations not only between foreign ministers of Central Asian states and their counterparts in the major powers, but also (with the exception, so far, of the U.S.) between the heads of state. More important, the formats help advance the institutionalization of Central Asia, even at a time when no formalized and exclusive institution for regional cooperation exists. Given the extensive nature of Central Asian top-level coordination and the multitude of Central Asia-five formats, it is a foregone conclusion that such institutionalization will eventually take place. Finally, the format ensures that the three smaller states of Central Asia are included in the region's foreign relations, something both Astana and Tashkent have been eager to ensure – thus in the process helping strengthen the resilience and agency of these smaller and more vulnerable states. In sum, in the eyes of the world these platforms help solidify a view of Central Asia as a distinct region.

Role in Regional Organizations

A second facet of the region's move towards institutionalization is its utilization of existing larger organizations to further Central Asian interests. Two examples are the OSCE and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where all Central Asian states are present (Turkmenistan as a "Special Guest" in the latter). Kazakhstan took on a particularly prominent role in the OSCE, making a bid in the 2000s to chair the

Keynote Speech," May 19, 2023.

(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202305/t20230519_11080116.html)

organization. It ended up doing so during 2010, and received widespread praise for managing the OSCE in a time of growing confrontation between Russia and the West. For the first time in a decade, Kazakhstan succeeded in hosting a Summit of the OSCE in Astana in December that year. No OSCE summit has been held since then. As described in a previous report in this series, Kazakhstan has made it a priority to actively engage a series of international organizations, including the Council of Europe, and is making a bid for membership in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as well.⁹

Because it includes both China and Russia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was from its founding an important organization for Central Asian states. While clearly dominated by China, it has been possible at several points for the Central Asian states to use the SCO to resist pressure from Russia. Thus, at the Dushanbe summit of the SCO in August 2008, the Central Asian states faced strong pressure from Moscow to support the country's war of aggression against Georgia earlier that month. However, Beijing's refusal to endorse that war provided Central Asian states with adequate cover to reject Moscow's pressure.¹⁰ Similarly, in June 2010, the SCO Summit in Tashkent took place against the backdrop of the Moscow-supported putsch in Kyrgyzstan, and the ensuing ethnic rioting in the south of that country. When Moscow sought to use the violence as a pretext for intervention and the creation of a Russian military base in southern Kyrgyzstan that would dominate the Ferghana Valley, Tashkent

⁹ Johan Engvall and Svante E. Cornell, *Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan's Role in Multilateral Organizations*, Washington: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, December 2015.

(<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13178>)

¹⁰ Stephen Blank, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Georgian Crisis," Jamestown Foundation China Brief, September 3, 2008. (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-and-the-georgian-crisis/>)

and Beijing made a joint *démarche* that opposed any foreign intervention into the internal affairs of Kyrgyzstan.¹¹

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has also played an important role in Central Asian diplomacy. The SCO started out as a body dominated by China, and could have become a vehicle for China and Russia to dominate Central Asia, this has not happened. Central Asians have been enthusiastic supporters of the expansion of the SCO, most notably to India and Pakistan, something that has served their interest in managing relations with Russia and China. Central Asians have played key roles in the leadership of the SCO – of the SCO's seven secretary-generals, four have been from Central Asia.

Central Asia and the United Nations

While the role of the United Nations is frequently questioned in the West, the world body has played an important role in efforts by the five Central Asian states to assert their sovereignty.

At the initiative of all five of the states, a UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) was inaugurated in Ashgabat in 2007. This center, tasked with addressing the “multiple threats that face Central Asia, including international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime and environmental degradation,” was launched at a time when, as we have noted, the efforts to develop Central Asian cooperative institutions had flagged. As such, its establishment constituted a deft way for Central Asians to maintain a format of regional dialogue at a time when great power pressures made it impossible for them to do so on their own. Since its creation in 2007 this regional body

¹¹ Stephen Blank, “A Sino-Uzbek Axis in Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 1, 2010. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12123>)

has convened meetings at all levels and created a Diplomatic Academy for Preventive Diplomacy.

While the UNRCCA has maintained a relatively low profile, the most notable example on the world scale of Central Asian engagement with the UN is Kazakhstan’s bid for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Kazakhstan was duly elected for the 2017-18 session of the Security Council. Tellingly, the campaign was anchored in Kazakhstan’s foreign policy concept for 2014-2020, which stipulated that active participation in international organizations was an important tool to protect Kazakhstan’s national interests and secure maximum visibility and leverage for its foreign policy in regional as well as global affairs.¹²

Central Asian states have also jointly used the UN as a platform to develop a recognition of Central Asia as a world region. In June 2018, the Central Asian states banded together at the UN to have the General Assembly recognize Central Asia as a distinct world region. The cleverly framed document succeeded in garnering support from all major powers, including Russia and China. The Assembly passed a resolution on “strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian Region.” The resolution was introduced by Uzbekistan’s representative to the UN, who cited the rationale as being to garner support from the international community “for the efforts of Central Asian States to foster closer collaboration.”¹³ This was followed up in May 2023, when Central Asian

¹² See Johan Engvall and Svante E. Cornell, *Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan’s Role in International Organizations*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, December 2015. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13178>)

¹³ UNRCCA, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution on Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia,” June 25, 2018. (<https://unrcca.unmissions.org/general-assembly-adopts-resolution-strengthening-cooperation-central-asia>)

states received unanimous support for a declaration calling Central Asia a “zone of peace, trust and cooperation.”¹⁴

A cynic might retort that recent events show that great powers easily ignore UN resolutions when they are bent on geopolitical competition and unilateral military actions. While this is correct, Central Asian states have played a long game, using every instrument at their disposal to build support for their sovereignty and independence – with the world body a key part of this strategy. Alone, the UN will not deter aggression by a larger power; but in combination with all other steps taken, it might help do so.

Individual Initiatives

Aside from these steps, Central Asian states have taken unilateral initiatives to establish themselves on the world scene. Key examples include Kazakhstan’s nuclear disarmament diplomacy and its initiatives in mediation, and Uzbekistan’s efforts to manage geopolitical competition surrounding Afghanistan. Both have led to collective region-wide initiatives.

Kazakhstan famously renounced its nuclear weapons shortly after gaining independence, thus establishing the new country on the international scene. While Kazakhstan did not receive much in terms of security guarantees or substantial economic assistance, it did obtain a level of goodwill and diplomatic access in the U.S. and Western capitals that other regional countries lacked.

In subsequent years Kazakhstan continued to focus on nuclear diplomacy. President Nazarbayev in 2009 declared that Kazakhstan was interested in

¹⁴ United Nations Press Service, “Central Asia Zone of Peace ‘a Shining Example of Multilateralism’, Delegate Tells General Assembly,” May 23, 2023. (<https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12501.doc.htm>)

hosting an international low-enriched uranium bank under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency. This proposal was warmly received and led U.S. President Obama to endorse the idea. The initiative became a reality in 2017, when the IAEA Low Enriched Uranium Bank was inaugurated at the Ulba Metallurgical Plant in Oskemen. Kazakhstan also succeeded in hosting two successive summits in Almaty on the Iranian nuclear program in 2013. These efforts aimed at seeking a negotiated solution that would halt the escalation of tensions that risked a greater military conflagration. While talks in Almaty did not resolve the matter, they directly paved a way for the Geneva talks that eventually led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program.¹⁵

Another important reflection of Central Asia’s growing agency on the international scene is the series of Uzbek initiatives on the Afghan conflict. In 1997, following the Taliban takeover of Kabul, President Islam Karimov proposed a 6+2 format that would bring together Afghanistan’s six neighbors as well as Russia and the United States. The states met several times in the years before 9/11 and the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan. In 2008, Karimov at the Bucharest NATO summit proposed to revive the initiative, this time as a 6+3 format that would also include NATO. Uzbekistan revived its diplomacy in Afghanistan following Mirziyoyev’s rise to power by seeking to play a constructive role in negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban. For this purpose, Tashkent hosted a high-level international conference on Afghanistan in March 2018. It then hosted a Taliban delegation in summer 2018. While this did not replace the main Doha-based channel of communications, it clearly indicated that

¹⁵ Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Kazakhstan’s Role in International Mediation under First President Nursultan Nazarbayev*, Washington: CACI & SRSP Silk Road Paper, November 2020. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/Kazakhstan-mediation-Final.pdf>)

Central Asia, as a neighbor of Afghanistan, had an important role to play in that country's fate.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, Uzbekistan has continued to play an active and constructive role in Afghan affairs. In July 2022, Tashkent hosted a conference on economic challenges in Afghanistan, in which both U.S. and Taliban representatives participated. In March 2023, Tashkent hosted a meeting of the Special Envoys of Afghanistan's neighbors, while continuing to engage with the Taliban government and offering Western powers a trusted channel to interact with the rulers of Afghanistan.

Navigating Unprecedented Uncertainty

Twin external shocks since 2021 have created a situation of unprecedented uncertainty for Central Asia. The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine sharply increased the security concerns in the region, and raised the stakes for Central Asian states. The Taliban takeover rattled the entire region, but mostly the three southern states neighboring that country. Russia's war similarly affected the entire region, but posed a challenge of a different order to Kazakhstan. These challenges have put the agency of regional states to a real stress test.

Confronting Afghan Unrest

The Central Asian states had long had misgivings about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. On one hand, the states had all been supportive of the American war effort, with several hosting U.S. bases and/or providing overflight rights. They had also worked to engage the government led by Ashraf Ghani and seek to include Afghanistan in the emerging Central Asian cooperation processes. On the other, Central Asians had noted since the Obama administration's times that the U.S. was seeking to extricate itself from Afghanistan. Indeed, Obama's failure to consult properly with Central Asian capitals ahead of his December 2010 announcement of a beginning of troop withdrawals in July 2011 had hurt the perceptions of the U.S. across the region. Gradually, Central Asians – and in particular Uzbekistan – realized the need to hedge by beginning to develop contacts with the Taliban. Tashkent and Astana in particular appointed senior diplomats as presidential envoys to Afghanistan, with a task to expand contacts among warring forces in that country. Kyrgyzstan and

Turkmenistan mostly shared this approach, with Tajikistan the main holdout. Because of the close ethnic, cultural and personal ties between the anti-Taliban Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance with Tajikistan since the 1990s, Dushanbe took a harsher line toward the Taliban than its neighbors.

The result is that Central Asians largely remained in Afghanistan when the U.S. and its allies moved out. As mentioned, Central Asians continue to seek to develop trade routes through that country, and have seen some benefits accrue from the reduced conflict in Afghanistan. But meanwhile, they remain acutely aware of the spread of extremist armed groups in northern Afghanistan with possible designs on Central Asia.

The Central Asian approach since 2021 stands in bright contrast to how they reacted to the rise of the Taliban two decades ago. This time, Central Asians have avoided panic, have not reached out to regional powers for security assistance, instead estimating that they can handle the threats coming out of their southern neighbors. And crucially, the level of coordination among Central Asian capitals on issues relating to Afghanistan has been considerable, unlike the case in the late 1990s.

The Fallout of Russia's War in Ukraine

Russia's war in Ukraine confronted Central Asian states with a multitude of challenges. These differed somewhat, because of the differences in countries' exposure to Russia. Kazakhstan, as discussed below, had a more acute challenge because of its long border with Russia and Moscow's overt threats against the country. But it did not have the exposure of labor migrants in Russia that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan did.

All states, however, faced a diplomatic challenge that was at once familiar and unique. It was familiar because they had already, in 2008 and 2014, been faced with the imperative of maintain relations with Russia while averting any association with Moscow's violation of Georgian and

Ukrainian sovereignty, respectively. In this sense, they were prepared for the task: they had walked this balance by claiming neutrality, maintaining business as usual in relations with Moscow, while refusing to endorse Moscow’s actions, keeping good relations with Georgia and Ukraine, and steadfastly refusing to vote either for or against resolutions in international organizations on these conflicts.

But the challenge was unique because of the sheer scale and brazenness of Moscow’s gambit. In 2008 and 2014, Russia had seized territory. In 2022, it sought to essentially negate Ukrainian statehood as a whole. And in 2022, the Western response was much stronger than at previous occasions, implying that the risk of secondary sanctions was a very real one.

Central Asian states managed this challenge as best they could. Tellingly, no Central Asian state endorsed Russia’s invasion. The trend was clear: Central Asian states maintained their neutrality, and in international organizations such as the UN either abstained from votes on the conflict or simply did not show up for votes. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have remained essentially silent on the conflict. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have, through a variety of ways, indicated their tacit opposition to the war. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have publicly stated their refusal to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics.” Uzbekistan did so through a speech in parliament by Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov. As for Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev told Putin to his face at the 2022 St. Petersburg Economic Forum that Kazakhstan would not do recognize what he termed “quasi-states.” He remains the only regional leader to say this publicly in Putin’s presence.

Astana, Bishkek, and Tashkent have publicly gone on the record to support the principle of territorial integrity – a clear distancing from Russia’s position. These states have also prohibited pro-Russian demonstrations, and the brandishing of the “Z” symbol that became the

icon of Russia's war. They have also sought to limit overt anti-Russian demonstrations, but have allowed them to a greater degree than pro-Russian ones. Most importantly, these three states have also delivered humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, in clear defiance of Russian wishes.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also have confronted the issue of their large labor migrant populations in Russia, and particularly Russian efforts to conscript them into military service. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular have reacted by making clear to its citizens that participating in a foreign conflict is an offense punishable by long prison sentences.

Thus far, the Central Asian states have managed to walk the fine line. They have distanced themselves enough from the Kremlin as to attract Moscow's irritation, but not its full wrath. But they are dealing also with a domestic problem: the widespread propaganda being disseminated through television channels beamed from Russia. This has exposed a generational gap: older citizens that get their news mainly from television and in Russian are more likely to support Moscow, while younger citizens getting news from social media tend to be more critical. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that views of Russia have gotten more negative as the war has dragged on. The Wagner mutiny of June 2023 is likely to further turn Central Asian opinion away from Russia.

Kazakhstan's Predicament

Kazakhstan has faced a particularly acute challenge as a result of the war in Ukraine, for several reasons.

Aside from the obvious fact that Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state to share a border with Russia, and has by far the largest and most geographically concentrated ethnic Russian population in the region, Kazakhstan also suffered from unfortunate timing. Moscow's war in Ukraine started less than two months after Kazakhstan's January crisis,

where elements of an old guard sought to overthrow President Tokayev's government. Because Tokayev was forced to appeal to the CSTO for assistance, Moscow expected Astana to toe its line closely on Ukraine. But quite to the contrary, Kazakhstan's government distanced itself from the war more clearly than any other Central Asian state. This led to furious denunciations of Kazakhstan in Russian state media, reminiscent of earlier episodes that have previewed Russian aggressive measures against other former Soviet states. Very senior figures in Russia's government as well as intellectual and media life have participated in this campaign.

Furthermore, Moscow on several occasions halted the flow of Kazakhstani oil being exported through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium pipeline, citing spurious claims such as the existence of World War Two era mines in the Black Sea as excuse.

Kazakhstan responded proactively to this serious challenge. President Tokayev continued to seek to maintain stability in relations with Moscow, while continuing to speak clearly about Kazakhstan's position. On May 23, 2023, Tokayev spoke at the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and drew attention to the Union State between Russia and Belarus, which he called a "unique historical phenomenon." His point was to emphasize the difference between this form of integration and the approach taken by other members of the EAEU, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Mr. Tokayev soon thereafter pushed back on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's suggestion that Kazakhstan join the Union State and fall under the Russian nuclear umbrella, a suggestion the Kazakh President characterized as a "a joke," and reiterated Kazakhstan's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation.

Russian measures brought the question of Kazakhstan's economic dependence on Moscow to the forefront, and accelerated efforts to reduce this dependence by expansion of transport routes across the Caspian Sea.

Kazakhstan has been working diligently with Azerbaijani counterparts to reduce bottlenecks in Trans-Caspian transport, but it remains to be seen whether the large sums required for the building of alternative export pipelines will be made available.

Conclusions

This study has sought to document how Central Asian states have stepped up to the challenge of agency. Even in the most challenging of times, as in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian states have shown with great clarity that they are no mere pawns in a “Great Game” being played out around them. Quite to the contrary, they are increasingly taking charge of their own future. A recently published study in this series has documented that there is a growing difference in the capacity of regional states to assert their agency – with stronger states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan taking the lead. But as this study has shown, the assertion of agency is a phenomenon that is region-wide, albeit to different degrees.

The perhaps most telling example is the declaration, in December 2022, that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had upgraded their relations to that of “allied relations.” This act was perhaps mainly symbolic, as no defense treaty yet exists between the two states. But it suggests the intention of Central Asia’s two leading powers to take charge of their common region, and work to strengthen the region’s autonomy from the great powers surrounding it and establish its own voice in world affairs.

But Central Asia is dependent on outside support to succeed in managing the challenges resulting from the new security environment. The support of the West is vital for the development, security, and prosperity of Central Asia. There are a number of concrete matters Central Asia’s Western partners could attend to. These include the development of trade corridors

with the West, the further intensification of diplomatic contacts, and security assistance.

Supporting the Trans-Caspian transportation corridor is an important priority. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the “Middle Corridor,” plays a crucial role in enhancing economic growth, regional integration, and geopolitical stability for Central Asian countries. By providing an efficient and reliable transportation route between Europe and Asia, the Middle Corridor unlocks new opportunities and strengthens the partnership between Central Asia and the West. In fact, the EU and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in June 2023 identified the Central Trans-Caspian Network, which runs through southern Kazakhstan, as the “most sustainable option” for developing the Trans-Caspian corridor.¹⁶ To achieve significant enhancements in this network, the total investment needed for infrastructure is estimated at €18.5 billion (\$19.9 billion). Concrete political and financial support for the development of this corridor are essential.

Second is the matter of sanctions. For a decade now, Central Asia has suffered from the economic warfare between Russia and the West. It is imperative to mitigate any disproportionate suffering experienced by the countries in the region, something the Western powers could do not only by investing in trade corridor infrastructure, but finalizing double taxation treaties and lowering barriers to trade with Central Asia. Further is the delicate issue of sanctions evasion. Applying secondary sanctions on Central Asian countries could have seriously counter-productive effects and potentially push them and their companies towards Russia and China.

¹⁶ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Sustainable Transport Connections between Europe and Central Asia*, June 2023. (https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/Sustainable_transport_connections_between_Europe_and_Central_Asia.pdf)

Instead, the approach should be to prevent sanctions evasion through enhanced collaboration.

Third, the American and European engagement with Central Asia must feature security matters in a much higher degree. The regional states, after all, are experiencing existential security challenges and have begun to develop and modernize their defense institutions and industries to respond to this new reality. There is much that the West can do to support reform in the defense and security sector, and help these countries defend themselves against the encroachments of neighboring great powers.

Finally, it is crucial for the United States to follow the example of the EU and raise the level of interaction with Central Asia to the Head of State level. While a Presidential visit to Central Asia is unlikely before the 2024 election, Central Asian presidents are scheduled to travel to New York for the UN General Assembly in fall 2023. If President Biden were to convene a meeting of the C5+1 during their visit, it would symbolize the end of three decades of neglect.

Authors Bio

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