

THE HEARTLAND:

THE GREAT GAME RETURNS

MADAN YADAV



BlueRoseONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Madan Yadav 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7825-324-9

Cover design: Deepak Katheria

Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: August 2026

Dedicated to

**Lord Krishna:
Quantum Reality and the Ultimate
Energy of the Universe**

Preface

The strategic re-emergence of the Eurasian Heartland in global politics marks the definitive end of the post-Cold War unipolar moment. The contemporary Eurasian order proves that geography remains the ultimate baseline of international relations, yet it is a geography heavily modified by modern infrastructure and geoeconomic statecraft.

The Book “The Heartland: The Great Game Returns” attempts to examine the Strategic re-emergence of the Eurasian Heartland in Global politics of international relations. This analyze the conceptual framework for the geopolitical architecture of the twenty-first century is undergoing a structural transformation, defined by the strategic resurgence of the Eurasian landmass as the central arena of global power politics. Historically conceptualized by Halford Mackinder as the "Pivot of History" or the "Heartland," this vast continental space stretching from the Euro-Atlantic frontiers to the Indo-Pacific littoral, with Central Asia as its geographic core has shifted from a post-Cold War peripheral buffer zone into the primary locus of systemic contestation. The twenty-first century has witnessed a profound structural rupture, demonstrating that the vast continental space stretching from the Caspian basin to the Hindu Kush remains the ultimate geopolitical chessboard. However, the "Game" being played today bears little resemblance to the 19th-century imperial rivalries of the British and Russian empires, or even the bipolar containment strategies of the 20th century.

This volume examines the complex interplay of interests among major global actors—namely the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, India, and Turkey—while explicitly highlighting the strategic agency of Central Asian states in navigating these cross-pressures. Crucially, it contextualizes these dynamics in the wake of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and Iran -Israel -US War a watershed conflict that has fundamentally disrupted continental security architectures. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the book investigates the shifting paradigms of energy diplomacy, trans-regional connectivity initiatives, emerging alliances, and the evolving nature of post-Soviet statehood.

The motivation for this work stems from an urgent need to reconceptualize both the systemic fallout of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the broader Eurasian theater. It argues that Eurasia must be understood not merely as a passive, contested battleground for external hegemons, but as a dynamic region actively forging its own geopolitical destiny. Driven by a succession of historical catalysts—from the post-9/11 security recalibrations and the expansion of China’s Belt and Road Initiative to the recent emergence of novel regional partnerships - the heartland demands renewed strategic focus. Ultimately, this book seeks to

equip scholars, policymakers, students, and informed citizens with a comprehensive, balanced framework for understanding these rapidly unfolding transcontinental developments.

MADAN YADAV

Acknowledgements

Writing a comprehensive volume on the shifting tectonic plates of the Eurasian Heartland is not a solitary endeavor. *Strategic Crossroads of Eurasia* is the culmination of years of research, fieldwork, and dialogue, shaped profoundly by the generosity and intellectual rigor of numerous individuals and institutions.

First and foremost, I acknowledge a profound intellectual debt to the international relations and Eurasian studies research community. My understanding of the trans-regional linkages connecting the subcontinent to the heartland was profoundly shaped by the foundational work of Prof. K. Warikoo (former Dean, SIS, JNU) and Prof. Mahesh Ranjan Debata (JNU), alongside His Excellency Dr. Ulziit Luvsanjav, Ambassador of Mongolia to India, whose perspectives on Inner Asian civilizational connectivity served as a crucial anchor for this volume.

I express my deep gratitude to the administrative and academic leadership at IGNOU—specifically former Vice Chancellor Prof. Nageshwar Rao, Vice Chancellor Prof. Uma Kanjilal, and Prof. Nita Mathur, Director of the School of Social Sciences—together with my colleagues in the School of Social sciences. Their institutional backing and mentorship created the ideal research environment. Lastly, I extend my heartfelt thanks for the incredible support from the faculties of the University of Delhi, especially Maitreyi College, the Principal of Maharaja Agrasen College (Prof. Sanjiv Tiwari), and the Department of Political Science, including Prof. Subodh Kumar, Prof. Niraj Kumar, and Dr. Prabira Setty.

I also wish to thank my editorial team for their patience and meticulous attention to detail; their rigorous feedback transformed a sprawling manuscript into a cohesive, focused argument. Special thanks are due to the anonymous peer reviewers, whose constructive critiques challenged me to sharpen my analysis of both the Russia-Ukraine conflict's geopolitical fallout and the nuances of China's continental grand strategy.

On a personal note, this endeavor would not have been possible without the unwavering patience, support, and encouragement of my family and friends. I am particularly indebted to Prof. Mahesh Ranjan Debata (JNU), who, alongside parents and my loved ones, gracefully endured my long absences -both physical and mental. I navigated the complexities of Eurasian logistics and multipolar theory.

Foreword

The “Heartland”, often known as Eurasia in the modern academic parlance, has become one of the most interesting topics of discussion in the modern and contemporary times. Eurasia is perhaps world’s biggest geographical landmass, where regional geography, power politics, identity, and economics interplay. Eurasia has been the pivot of global power politics and economics for the past three centuries. The region has been the main focus of the theories of international relations such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Critical Theory, and Geo-economics. Besides, the great pioneers of classical geopolitics i.e., Halford Mackinder (Heartland), Nicholas John Spykman (Rimland), and Alfred Thayer Mahan (Maritime Power) have added new, unique and strategic dimensions to the study of Eurasia making it more relevant to the study of international relations.

It gives me immense pleasure to introduce the book titled *The Heartland: The Great Game Returns*, which makes a timely, relevant and significant contribution to growing field of scholarship on Eurasia. Emerging from a serious and rigorous research done in the last few years, this book reflects years of careful inquiry, extensive reading, and thoughtful engagement with the complex realities of Eurasia. What makes this book particularly valuable is its interdisciplinary approach. By integrating perspectives from the 4Gs: geopolitics, geostrategy, geoeconomics and geoculture, the book provides a comprehensive understanding of Eurasia, which has become a cynosure of all eyes in the 21st century. It carefully examines how historical legacies, geography, and competing national, regional and global interests influence a whole gamut of issues revolving round Eurasia.

This book stands out for its depth of research, academic rigour, and analytical clarity. Drawing upon a wide range of academic sources and policy discussions, the author offers insights that will be valuable to scholars, researchers, academics, policymakers, strategists, and analysts working on issues and concerns related to Eurasia. This book will serve as an important source of reference for researchers and students interested in further study on Eurasia. It will inspire further scholarly engagement with the complex yet fascinating field of politics and economics concerning the ‘Heartland’.

Prof (Dr.) Mahesh Ranjan Debata
Professor
Centre for Inner Asian Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, India

List Of Tables

List of Tables	Page No.
Table 3.1: Theoretical Perspectives on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict	67

Table Of Figure

List of Figures	Page No.
Figure 1.1: History of Geopolitics of Eurasia	1
Figure 1.2: Eurasia in International Relations	11
Figure 2.1: Eurasian Maritime Geopolitics	22
Figure 2.2: Baltic Sea	30
Figure 2.3: Black Sea	32
Figure 2.4: Eastern Mediterranean	34
Figure 2.5: Caspian Sea	36
Figure 2.6: Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman	38
Figure 2.7: South China Sea (SCS)	43
Figure 2.8: Black Sea	50
Figure 3.1: Ukraine	59
Figure 3.2: Russian Viewpoint on the Ukraine Conflict – Strategic Layers Infographic	70
Figure 6.1: Kazakhstan	115
Figure 6.2: Uzbekistan	117
Figure 6.3: Turkmenistan	119
Figure 6.4: Tajikistan	120
Figure 6.5: Kyrgyzstan	122
Figure 7.1: Russia	130

Figure 7.2: China	132
Figure 7.3: EU	136
Figure 8.1: Proposed Route of China's Belt and Road Initiative	159
Figure 8.2: China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)	161

List Of Abbreviations

S. No.	Abbreviation	Full Form
1	AI	Artificial Intelligence
2	ADB	Asian Development Bank
3	AFVs	Armored Fighting Vehicles
4	AIS	Automatic Identification System
5	AUKUS	Australia–United Kingdom–United States (security pact)
6	ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
7	BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
8	BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
9	BTC	Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (Pipeline)
10	C5+1	Central Asia plus United States (Diplomatic Forum)
11	CAPS	Central Asian Power System
12	CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
13	CARICC	Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center
14	CASA-1000	Central Asia-South Asia Power Project
15	CCWAEC	China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor
16	CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
17	CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
18	CMREC	China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor
19	CNY	Chinese Yuan (Renminbi)
20	COTS	Commercial Off-The-Shelf
21	CPC	Caspian Pipeline Consortium
22	CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

23	CRRF	CSTO Rapid Reaction Force
24	CST	Collective Security Treaty
25	CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
26	DFC	U.S. International Development Finance Corporation
27	DMO	Distributed Maritime Operations
28	EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
29	EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
30	EDIS	European Defence Industrial Strategy
31	EEC	Eurasian Economic Commission
32	EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
33	EPF	European Peace Facility
34	ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
35	ESPO	Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (Pipeline)
36	EU	European Union
37	EUMAM	European Union Military Assistance Mission (Ukraine)
38	EUR	Euro
39	EW	Electronic Warfare
40	FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
41	FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operations
42	FPV	First-Person View (drones)
43	FTA	Free Trade Agreement
44	G20	Group of Twenty
45	GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
46	GBAO	Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region
47	GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
48	GDP	Gross Domestic Product
49	GIUK Gap	Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom Gap

50	GME	Greece–Macedonia–Albania (Pipeline)
51	GTL	Gas-to-Liquids
52	HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
53	HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
54	IFIs	International Financial Institutions
55	IMF	International Monetary Fund
56	INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
57	IR	International Relations
58	IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
59	ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
60	ISF	Islamic Solidarity Fund
61	ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
62	ISIS-K	ISIS-Khorasan
63	ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
64	IT	Information Technology
65	JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal)
66	JKM	Japan–Korea Marker (LNG benchmark)
67	KAZIND	Kazakhstan-India Joint Military Exercise
68	LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
69	MDA	Maritime Domain Awareness
70	MW	Megawatt
71	NELBEC	New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor
72	NOCs	National Oil Companies
73	NSR	Northern Sea Route
74	OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
75	OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
76	OT	Operational Technology

77	OTS	Organization of Turkic States
78	P&I Clubs	Protection and Indemnity Clubs (maritime insurance)
79	PfP	Partnership for Peace
80	PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
81	PoS-1	Power of Siberia Pipeline
82	PoS-2	Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline
83	PV	Photovoltaic
84	QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
85	RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
86	ROVs	Remotely Operated Vehicles
87	SAGAR	Security and Growth for All in the Region
88	SAPs	Structural Adjustment Programs
89	SCADA	Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition
90	SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
91	SCP	South Caucasus Pipeline
92	SCS	South China Sea
93	SGC	Southern Gas Corridor
94	SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
95	SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
96	SSBN	Ship, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear (Ballistic Missile Submarine)
97	TANAP	Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline
98	TAP	Trans-Adriatic Pipeline
99	TAPI	Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (Pipeline Project)
100	TCG	Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Gemisi (Turkish Republic Ship)
101	tcm	Trillion Cubic Meters
102	TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network

103	TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
104	TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
105	TPD	Temporary Protection Directive
106	TSR	Trans-Siberian Railway
107	TTF	Title Transfer Facility (Dutch gas benchmark)
108	U.K.	United Kingdom
109	UAE	United Arab Emirates
110	UAS	Unmanned Aerial Systems
111	UAVs	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
112	UN	United Nations
113	UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
114	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
115	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
116	UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
117	US / U.S.	United States
118	USD	United States Dollar
119	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
120	UUVs	Unmanned Underwater Vehicles
121	WB	World Bank
122	WTO	World Trade Organization
123	A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial

Introduction

Eurasia's status as the world's largest landmass has historically made it the primary arena for global dominance, particularly rooted in the enduring conflict between land and sea powers. To make sense of the region's complex geography, shifting identities, and economic forces, strategic thinkers rely on a dual approach: applying modern International Relations (IR) theories (such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Geo-economics) alongside classical geopolitical models (like Mackinder's Heartland and Spykman's Rimland theories). This chapter examines the evolving political economy and geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia, a region where globalization has simultaneously fostered connectivity and intensified major-power rivalry. It analyzes the competing strategic frameworks of key global actors — namely China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's assertive security posture, U.S. balancing efforts, and the European Union's push for energy diversification — alongside the multi-vector diplomacy employed by smaller regional states. Furthermore, the abstract highlights how contemporary challenges, including climate change, technological advancement, and infrastructure competition, are compounding traditional struggles over natural resources and trade routes. Ultimately, the analysis positions Eurasia not merely as a theater for geopolitical conflict, but as the central axis determining the trajectory of the emerging multipolar international order.

The intersection of Eurasian geography, naval power, and global trade dictates that oceans and semi-enclosed seas fundamentally shape both regional and international security architectures. Classical maritime theory underscores the critical role of naval strength, control over strategic chokepoints, and dominance of trade routes in great-power competition. In the Eurasian context, these dynamics manifest through distinct strategies: Russia's militarization of the Arctic and its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) postures in the Baltic and Black Seas; China's Maritime Silk Road and "String of Pearls" expansion across the Indian Ocean; and the concerted efforts of the United States and its allies to guarantee freedom of navigation, protect subsea infrastructure, and build multilateral security coalitions. These competing ambitions intersect at vital strategic bottlenecks — including the South China Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Strait of Hormuz, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea — where localized disputes threaten to sever global energy flows and fracture international supply chains. Ultimately, Eurasian maritime competition extends far beyond warships and naval bases; it encompasses lawfare, port diplomacy, cyber warfare, and the control of seabed infrastructure, solidifying the maritime domain as the primary arena shaping the future of global security and economic stability.

The Russia-Ukraine war has emerged as a watershed event in Eurasian geopolitics, transforming a localized territorial conflict into a systemic struggle over the future international order. Situated at the strategic crossroads of Europe, Russia, and the Black Sea basin, Ukraine has historically functioned as a geopolitical pivot. This examines the multidimensional catalysts of the conflict, emphasizing the volatile intersection of NATO expansion, Russian security anxieties, historical identity claims, and energy dependencies. Utilizing realist and constructivist theoretical frameworks, the analysis unpacks the persistence of the war and the competing strategic narratives that sustain it. Furthermore, it assesses the fractured global response: while the transatlantic alliance has consolidated deterrence and accelerated regional militarization, China and the Global South have adopted a posture of strategic hedging that reflects a broader shift toward multipolarity. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how the conflict has fundamentally restructured global energy architectures, disrupted critical maritime supply chains, and embedded enduring systemic rivalries that will define the twenty-first-century security environment.

The historical and geographical factors that have shaped Central Asia's strategic role in global affairs. Trade, cultural exchange, and military competition have all revolved around this region because of its strategic location at the intersection of North and South, as well as East and West. The geostrategic significance of Central Asia, historically epitomized by the "Old Great Game" between the Russian and British Empires, persists in the contemporary "New Great Game." In this modern iteration, the region has become a focal point for the competing interests of Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and regional stakeholders. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent republics faced the dual imperative of constructing coherent national identities while navigating intense external pressures. This complexity is compounded by the region's vast natural resource wealth — specifically oil, gas, minerals, and water — which continues to draw significant international attention. Today, Central Asia operates within an increasingly multipolar framework, characterized by a strategy of "multi-vector diplomacy" that seeks to balance relations with major powers while fostering intra-regional cooperation and economic integration. By analyzing emerging regionalism, connectivity initiatives such as the Middle Corridor, and the diversification of foreign partnerships, this paper demonstrates that Central Asia is transcending its traditional role as a mere geopolitical "chessboard." Instead, the region is emerging as an active, autonomous shaper of the evolving Eurasian order.

Central Asian states are increasingly navigating a complex geopolitical landscape defined by the dual pressures of global power competition and the imperative to assert sovereign agency. This examines the evolution of "multi-vector" foreign policies in Central Asia, where governments strive to protect national autonomy, catalyze economic growth, and mitigate the vulnerabilities inherent in a multipolar world. Central to this strategy is the pursuit of energy independence and the diversification of export channels, which serve to insulate the region

against market volatility and the risks associated with geopolitical chokepoints. By meticulously calibrating relationships with key external actors — including Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and the Gulf states — Central Asian administrations are actively working to prevent over-reliance on any single hegemon. The region's foreign policy doctrines range from Turkmenistan's formal doctrine of "permanent neutrality" to the more flexible, calibrated engagements pursued by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Collectively, these approaches demonstrate how Central Asian nations are transforming their landlocked geography from a structural constraint into a strategic asset, leveraging connectivity initiatives to assert their role as vital links in the Eurasian order. However, as global rivalries intensify, maintaining this equidistance has become an increasingly precarious "balancing act."

Political economy of Central Asia through the intersecting lenses of resource endowment, hydro-politics, and infrastructural connectivity. Positioned as a strategic nexus within the Eurasian landmass, the region's economic and geopolitical trajectory is fundamentally shaped by its asymmetric distribution of natural wealth. The hydrocarbon-rich states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan utilize their vast energy reserves to execute multi-vector energy diplomacy with global powers, including China, Russia, and the European Union. In contrast, the upstream nations of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan leverage their control over the vital Amu Darya and Syr Darya river systems, elevating water security and hydropower to the forefront of regional stability and agricultural sustainability. Furthermore, this analyzes how global connectivity frameworks — namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Trans-Caspian Middle Corridor, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — embed Central Asia into a highly contested matrix of great-power rivalry. By centering the densely populated and multi-ethnic Fergana Valley as the region's geocultural and strategic pivot, this study demonstrates how the convergence of natural wealth, transit corridors, and resource competition defines not only the national economies of Central Asian states but also their collective security, identity, and agency within an emerging multipolar world order.

Central Asia serves as a central theater for global energy security, caught between the established hydrocarbon interests of Russia and China and the diversification efforts supported by the European Union. This chapter explores how Central Asian states are navigating this geopolitical rivalry through the strategic expansion of export infrastructure and the pursuit of renewable energy. Beyond the analysis of pipeline politics, this study addresses the "geopolitics of ecology," exploring the interdependencies between water management, food security, and energy production. The research demonstrates that the region's traditional energy-security framework is increasingly obsolete in the face of climate change. Consequently, this study concludes that Central Asian nations must transition toward integrated, cross-border policy mechanisms to mitigate environmental risks and successfully manage their collective energy future.

Central Asia has re-emerged as a critical node of geopolitical contestation. This chapter examines the shifting strategic architecture of the region, focusing on the interplay between established powers and emerging regional actors. Key topics include Russia's security and economic footprint; China's expansive infrastructure and pipeline projects under the BRI and CMREC frameworks; and the distinct approaches of the United States and the European Union toward security, democracy promotion, and regional integration. The study also highlights the increasing assertiveness of regional powers — including Turkey, Iran, and India — in vying for influence. By synthesizing these diverse strategic interests with the looming challenges of climate change and resource volatility, this chapter provides a forward-looking assessment of Central Asia's stability and its strategic position in an era of renewed great power competition.

Concept of "New Regionalism" within Central Asia, analyzing the persistent dichotomy between regional integration and the complex security threats that challenge it. As the region navigates a shifting geopolitical landscape, it faces mounting internal and external pressures that exacerbate both collaborative and competitive dynamics. This study explores the multifaceted nature of local power struggles — specifically territorial border disputes and ethnic tensions — that continue to impede cooperation and threaten regional stability. A central component of this analysis is the evaluation of primary institutional frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), assessing their roles, criticisms, and effectiveness in fostering integration. Furthermore, the chapter investigates the influence of international organizations, such as the UN, WTO, and IMF, and the efficacy of their coalition and aid diplomacy in stabilizing the region.

The Central Asian states are gravitating toward a *Realist-Constructivist* synthesis: they are constructing a "New Regionalism" that favors horizontal, sovereign-led integration (C5 formats) over the vertical, hegemon-led integration of the CSTO. Theoretically, this signals a transition where the CSTO is being relegated to a "niche" security provider (focused on technical military tasks) rather than the "all-encompassing" guarantor of Central Asian stability. The region is effectively reordering its international relations, prioritizing pragmatism and strategic autonomy over the rigid alliance structures of the previous three decades. Neorealism views the SCO primarily as a strategic tool for managing power dynamics among major states and protecting national sovereignty against external threats. While Liberal Institutionalism typically focuses on liberal democracies, in the context of the SCO, it is adapted to explain "Club Governance" and functional cooperation among authoritarian states. Constructivism focuses on ideas, identity, and the norms that define an organization's "social" character. The SCO is the primary vehicle for an alternative set of Eurasian norms.

Contents

1 Geopolitics Of Eurasia – The Strategic Re-Emergence of The Eurasian Heartland1

Shaping of the Multipolar World Order: Historical Continuity and the Shift from Periphery to Core	1
Recent US-Russia (Alaska 2025) and Ukraine -US Summits and its Strategic Outcomes ...5	
European Union and Its Member States Perspectives, NATO, OSCE	7
Eurasia in International Relations Theories	11
Navigating Globalization and Strategic Geopolitics Across Eurasia	14
Political Economy of Eurasia	15
Current and Emerging Geopolitics in Eurasia and Major Powers	19

2 The Geopolitics of Eurasian Maritime Corridors and Shifting Architecture of Global Security.....22

Maritime Geopolitics in International Relations Theories.....	22
Situational Analysis of Contemporary Maritime Strategies in the Eurasian Theater	26
Arctic and High North.....	26
Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean	32
Caspian Sea (The Inland Theater)	36
Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman.....	38
Red Sea and Bab El-Mandeb.....	39
Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.....	41
South China Sea and Western Pacific	43
Sub-surface and seabed competition.....	45
Global Security Implications of Eurasian Strategic Chokepoints	48
The Black Sea as a Strategic Chokepoint	50
The Caspian Sea as an Inland Energy Theater	51
The 2026 US-Iran War and the Strait of Hormuz Crisis and Implications for Eurasian Maritime Geopolitics	52

3 Emerging Geopolitics and Ongoing War at Ukraine: The Structural Realignment of Eurasian Geopolitics	55
The Soviet Trauma and the Consolidation of Memory	56
Russia-Ukraine War in International Relations Theories	57
European and US Geopolitical Perspectives on the Ongoing War	58
Historical Context and Strategic Significance of Ukraine in Eurasia	60
Ukraine's Geopolitical Position in Eurasia.....	62
NATO Expansion and Russian Security Concerns	63
Causes And Triggers Of The Russia-Ukraine Conflict.....	65
Table 3.1: Theoretical Perspectives on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict.....	68
Russian Viewpoint of the Ukraine Conflict.....	68
<i>Economic and Energy Dimensions</i>	71
<i>The Role of Crimea and Donbas</i>	73
Global Responses And Strategic Alignments.....	74
EU and Member States Engagement.....	76
US and NATO Involvement.....	78
China's Stance and the Global South.....	80
Russia and China Axis in Global Order.....	81
War Economy Prospects in Eurasia.....	83
<i>Food, metals, and the commodity war</i>	84
<i>Militarization and Defense Realignments</i>	86
<i>Impact on Global Energy and Supply Chains</i>	87
4 Changing Dynamics of Geopolitics Of Central Asia in Shifting World Order	90
Strategic Geography And Historical Influences	90
Central Asia As Strategic Corridor	90
From Old Great Game To New Great Game.....	91
Post-Soviet Transition And Regional Identity.....	92
Mapping The Geopolitics Of Resource Wealth In Central Asia.....	93
Central Asia In A Multipolar World.....	96
Emerging Regionalism And Economic Integration	96
Balancing Relations Among Global Powers.....	97

5 Central Asian Countries’ Multi-Vector Foreign Policy	102
Kazakhstan And Uzbekistan: Frameworks Of Multi-Vector Foreign Policy	102
The framework of Uzbekistan’s multi-vector policy is guided by four key orientations:..	104
Tajikistan Foreign Policy	105
Export Strategies and Diversification.....	107
Energy Security Implications	109
Strategic Autonomy And Regional Balancing	111
Navigating Multipolarity	111
Foreign Policy Doctrines: Neutrality vs. Alignment.....	113
6 Natural Resources and Political Economy of Central Asian States.....	116
Kazakhstan.....	116
Uzbekistan	118
Turkmenistan	120
Kyrgyzstan.....	123
The Fergana Valley: The Geopolitical Fulcrum of Central Asia	125
Hydro-Politics and the Geoeconomic Nexus of the Fergana Valley	126
7 Green Energy Geopolitics and Pipeline Diplomacy	128
Hydrocarbon Reserve in Central Asia.....	129
Major Pipeline Projects and Geopolitical Stakes	130
Energy Transit And Diversification.....	139
Renewable Energy Prospects.....	143
Geopolitics of Ecology , Climate Change and its Implications for Environmental Fear , Security, and Regulatory Concerns in Central Asia	145
8 Major Powers’ Foreign Policy and Interests in Central Asia in Post Cold War Era.....	150
<i>Military Presence, Economic Dependence, Diaspora</i>	153
<i>New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC)</i>	155
China’s Foreign Policy, Xi Jinping Thought, and the BRI in Eurasia	157
U.S. Foreign Policy in Eurasia – From Post-9/11 to Trump 2.0.....	163
President Trump’s Foreign Policy 2.0: Views Toward Central Asia And Russia – The 2025 Alaska Summit Context	166
The European Union in Eurasia – From Normative Power to Principled Pragmatism	167

Bridging the Heartland: India's Quest for Strategic Influence in Central Asia	170
Security & Defence Partnership	174
<i>Turkmenistan: The Energy Lifeline</i>	174
<i>Kyrgyzstan: The Soft-Power & Defence Partner</i>	175
The China Factor: Competitive Asymmetry.....	175
The Russia Factor: Continuity and Security Alignment	176
Iran's Central Asia Policy in the Shadow of the Conflict:	
The Geopolitical Repercussions of the 2026 Iran-US-Israel War on Central Asia.....	177
The Strategic Architecture: Iran's Engagement with Central Asia.....	179
Energy and Resource Cooperation.....	179
Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation	179
Cultural and Religious Diplomacy.....	180
Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Its Position in the Eurasian Matrix.....	180
EMERGING PLAYERS: TURKEY, IRAN, PAKISTAN, GCC, OIC.....	182
Turkey: Bridging East and West	182
Gulf Cooperation Council (Gcc) And Oic: Unified Influence In The Middle East.....	184

9 Navigating The Heartland: New Regionalism and The Evolving Security

Architecture of Eurasia -Central Asia	187
Post-9/11 Security Dynamics	190
Regional Power Dynamics.....	190
Regional Security Frameworks.....	191
Territoriality, Ethnicity, and Resource Competition in Central Asia.....	191
The Ethnic Mosaic and Political Marginalization	191
Resource Scarcity and Territorial Disputes.....	192
Hydropower Infrastructure and Strategic Mistrust.....	193
The Fergana Valley: A Convergence of Risks.....	193
Implications for Regional Stability and External Mediation.....	193
ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:	193
SCO.....	193
The 25th SCO Summit: A Pivotal Shift in Eurasian Geopolitics.....	194
New Regionalism vs. The CSTO Framework.....	195
Present Status and Russia's Strategic Posture	196

The Intervention Paradox: Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus	196
The "Post-Ukraine Recalibration Doctrine"	196
Theoretical Perspectives on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in Central Asia.....	198
<i>Criticisms of the EAEU</i>	199
Eurasia-Central Asia Integration Initiative: The New Regionalism	200
Connectivity Initiatives.....	200
China's Belt and Road Initiative: Central Asia as a Strategic Pivot.....	201
Kazakhstan: The Heartland Hub.....	201
Energy Security and Infrastructure Development.....	201
Geopolitical and Economic Impact.....	202
External Partnership, International Organizations and AID and Debt Diplomacy	203
The United Nations (UN) in Aid Diplomacy.....	205
Aid Diplomacy and Conditionalities	205
IMF Conditionalities	207
Taliban's Resurgence and its Impact: Afghanistan's Shadow.....	208
Selected Bibliography	213
Relevance Of the Book.....	240
Author Biography	242

Geopolitics Of Eurasia – The Strategic Re-Emergence of The Eurasian Heartland

Shaping of the Multipolar World Order: Historical Continuity and the Shift from Periphery to Core

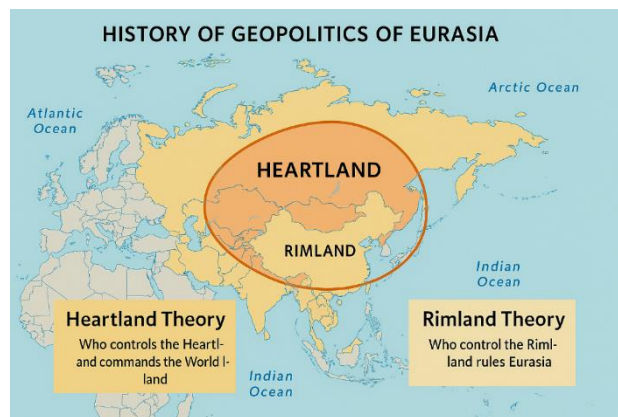


Figure 1.1: History of Geopolitics of Eurasia

For over a century, Halford Mackinder's 1904 thesis that control of the Eurasian Heartland equates to global dominance has anchored geopolitical theory. Following a post-Cold War interregnum where the region was frequently dismissed as a peripheral transit zone or a stagnant post-Soviet hinterland, the twenty-first century has witnessed the definitive strategic re-emergence of this continental core. However, the contemporary iteration of the "Great Game" radically departs from historical imperial rivalries. The heartland is no longer a static territorial prize; it is a dynamic, highly integrated system defined by systemic multipolarity, weaponized interdependence, and the structural re-engineering of global supply chains. The calculus of Heartland power is fundamentally shifting from legacy pipeline diplomacy to the geopolitics of the global energy transition. Central Asia's vast reserves of Critical Raw Materials (CRMs)—including uranium, copper, lithium, and rare earth elements—have repositioned the region as the vital frontier for post-carbon supply chains. The

geopolitics of the twenty-first century has produced a "Networked Eurasia," where power is distributed across logistical nodes, digital corridors, and critical mineral processing centers.

Eurasia, the world's largest landmass comprising both Europe and Asia, has historically served as the focal point of global power dynamics. Driven by the enduring conflict between land and sea powers, the region's immense strategic value stems from its massive population, vast economic potential, and abundant natural resources. Consequently, controlling Eurasian territory directly translates to the ability to dictate international trade, military strategy, and global political authority. Today, the theoretical landscape of Eurasia is characterized by a synthesis of these schools. The region has moved beyond the binary constraints of Mackinder's Heartland. Instead, it functions as a "multipolar nexus," where the classic struggle for territory has been superseded by the struggle for economic interoperability. The region now embodies what can be termed "Geo-economics"—a framework where trade routes, energy dependency, and financial institutions have become the primary instruments of geopolitical leverage. In this view, the "geopolitics of Eurasia" is a process of constant negotiation. The transition from the classical "Heartland" (a territory to be occupied) to the modern "Connectivity Hub" (a network to be managed) represents a fundamental shift in theoretical focus: power is no longer defined by the defense of borders, but by the control of corridors, pipelines, and digital nodes.

Beyond classical geography, Eurasian geopolitics gained a distinct ideological character through the school of "Eurasianism." Unlike classical geopolitics, which focused on statecraft and military geography, Eurasianism emerged as a civilizational critique. Scholars such as Lev Gumilev, and later contemporary analysts of Russian political thought, conceptualized Eurasia as a distinct socio-cultural entity, neither purely European nor entirely Asian.¹

Eurasianism posits that the region shares a unique historical destiny, defined by its resilience against Western "Atlanticism." Theoretically, this perspective views the integration of Central Asia not as a forced expansion, but as the natural consolidation of a common civilizational space. This intellectual tradition provides the necessary legitimacy for regional integration projects like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), framing them as defenses against external fragmentation.

Contemporary IR scholarship—often categorized under "Critical Geopolitics"—argues that Eurasia is not a static geographic fact but a discursive construct. As Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) famously argued, geography is "written" by political actors to serve specific strategic interests. Critical geopolitics warns against accepting the "Heartland" as an objective truth. Instead, it examines how policymakers, from Moscow to Beijing, utilize the *idea* of Eurasia

¹ . Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press.

to justify infrastructure initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or security architectures like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The theoretical study of Eurasian geopolitics begins with Sir Halford Mackinder, whose 1904 lecture, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, remains the foundational text of the field. Mackinder argued that the vast interior of Eurasia—the "Heartland"—possessed an inherent advantage due to its relative invulnerability to sea power. His famous dictum—"Who rules the Heartland commands the World"—transformed the region from a peripheral territory into the decisive engine of global history.

This perspective was later challenged and refined by Nicholas Spykman, who proposed the "Rimland" theory. Spykman argued that the key to global control lay not in the interior, but in the coastal fringes (the Rimland) surrounding the Heartland. He posited that whoever controlled the Rimland held the key to containing the Heartland's expansionist potential (Spykman, 1942). Throughout the 20th century, these two competing theories—Heartland vs. Rimland—provided the theoretical scaffolding for the Cold War, dictating the strategies of containment and engagement that defined the era.

Both the Heartland Theory and the Rimland Theory, two major geopolitical theories that arose in the early 20th century, have been used to explain the strategic struggle over Eurasia in the contemporary period. Even though these theories have been around for almost a century, they nevertheless have an impact on modern foreign policy, military strategy, and international relations².

Developed by British geographer Sir Halford J. Mackinder, the Heartland Theory posits that global supremacy hinges on controlling the vast, resource-rich, and rugged interior of Eurasia. According to the theory, this specific region—spanning from Eastern Europe across Central Asia to Siberia—serves as the ultimate strategic fortress. Because land powers could now transport troops, resources, and economic capital at record speeds, according to Mackinder, the traditional dominance of maritime powers had been reduced by the advent of transcontinental railways. Sir Halford J. Mackinder encapsulated his belief in the strategic supremacy of land-based empires with his famous maxim: control of Eastern Europe leads to control of the "Heartland," which in turn guarantees dominance over the world. This theoretical framework became a stark geopolitical reality during the Cold War. Because the Soviet Union's vast empire occupied the bulk of the Eurasian interior, Western strategists directly applied Mackinder's concepts, using them as the foundational logic for containment policies designed to halt Soviet expansion.

² Okur, M. A. *Classical texts of geopolitics and the "heart of Eurasia."* Journal of Turkish World Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 73–104. 2014.

Mackinder's maxim provided the strategic blueprint for 20th-century geopolitics. The Cold War essentially played out on his map, demonstrating that geographic theories are not merely academic—they actively shape global foreign policy. The concerted Western effort to contain the Soviet Union proved that preventing a single land power from dominating the Eurasian core is a fundamental imperative of international security.

In the 1940s, American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman challenged Mackinder's focus on the continental interior by introducing the Rimland Theory. Spykman argued that global dominance relies not on the landlocked "Heartland," but on controlling the "Rimland"—the strategic coastal margins of Eurasia that encompass Western Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia. Economically significant and strategically vital, Rimland was an area that changed hands frequently between land and sea forces. According to Spykman, someone's control of the Rimland gave them the power to conquer Eurasia, which in turn shaped the course of history. His famous dictum, "Who rules the Rimland rules Eurasia, who rules Eurasia rules the fates of the world"—became a Cold War foreign policy motto for the United States. In an effort to limit the Soviet Union's influence and prevent any one superpower from gaining control of the continent's interior, the United States sought to forge alliances with nations along the Eurasian rim, such as NATO in Europe, SEATO in Southeast Asia, and security coalitions in the Middle East.

Russia's geopolitical history is defined by a relentless, centuries-long drive to secure and expand its continental vastness. From the tsarist empire to the Soviet era, Russia has consistently acted as the archetypal land power, demonstrating that controlling the Eurasian interior is central to challenging maritime rivals and projecting global power. Driven by its immense physical size, Russia has maintained geopolitical dominance over Eurasia for centuries. Beginning in the 16th century, Russian imperial expansion sought to secure critical resources and access to warm-water ports, a drive that eventually sparked the 19th-century "Great Game" against maritime powers like Britain. This historic quest for territorial control culminated during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union successfully operationalized Mackinder's Heartland theory by projecting supreme superpower influence across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Eurasia has served as a springboard for unique cultural and political philosophies like Eurasianism, in addition to military tactics. In the 1920s, a school of thought known as Eurasianism emerged among Russian intellectuals who had emigrated to the West. Its proponents argued that Russia was really a composite of many civilizations rather than just one of them. Based on this concept, Eurasia was seen as a cultural and geopolitical entity with its own destiny, separate from both the East and the West³. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow revived the concept of "Eurasianism" as a strategic framework to drive

³ Leigh, J., & Newman, S. *Contemporary European geopolitics in Eurasia*. European Journal of Geography, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 43–60. 2014

regional integration. This vision was formalized with the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, an initiative designed to unite former Soviet states economically and politically while successfully cementing Russia's leadership role in the region.

There were far-reaching effects on the balance of power in Eurasia when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. A strategic vacuum was filled by the new independent republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, drawing the attention of competing interests from world and regional powers. The United States was looking to forge political and military alliances, especially in the wake of 9/11's War on Terror, while China was beginning to solidify its economic position through trade, investments in infrastructure, and energy relations; Russia aimed to maintain its position through security accords and economic integration. The most spectacular manifestation of this shift is China's 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which plans to construct extensive energy, transportation, and digital infrastructure across Eurasia in an effort to revive and modernize the old Silk Road. By blurring the lines between land and sea power, this has brought the Heartland and Rimland back together.

Eurasia's strategic value extends far beyond its physical geography. History demonstrates that its true significance lies in its role as the world's primary theater for geopolitical competition, alliance-building, and strategic innovation, ensuring it will remain the definitive battleground for shaping the global balance of power. Today, Eurasia remains a highly volatile and fiercely contested geopolitical arena. Current dynamics including the conflict in Ukraine, ongoing territorial disputes, fierce competition over energy transit routes, and the rise of regional blocs like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—reaffirm its central role in global politics. Furthermore, modern variables such as climate change, technological advancements, and shifting trade patterns have added new layers of complexity to the region. As a result, policymakers continue to rely on the classical interplay of Heartland and Rimland theories to navigate this evolving landscape.

Recent US-Russia (Alaska 2025) and Ukraine -US Summits and its Strategic Outcomes

The 2025 diplomatic cycle was marked by two distinct but interconnected tracks: the U.S.–Russia "Alaska Summit," which focused on strategic de-escalation in the Arctic and nuclear stability, and the U.S.–Ukraine engagements, which prioritized long-term security integration and reconstruction. Together, these summits illustrate the Biden-era (and beyond) administration's attempt to compartmentalize "great power competition" while maintaining firm commitments to transatlantic security.

The recent summit-tier interactions between the United States, Russia, and Ukraine have highlighted the volatility of the Eurasian geopolitics. Alaska summit represented a crucial, albeit delicate, step toward managing global volatility. By reopening dialogue and attempting

to set basic terms for cooperation on existential threats like nuclear security, the U.S. and Russia demonstrated that maintaining a minimum level of diplomatic engagement is essential for preventing the complete collapse of international stability, even amid deep geopolitical conflict. Specifically, the U.S.–Russia summit in Alaska. This meeting served as a tentative effort to reopen communication channels after prolonged tensions over the war in Ukraine, cybersecurity disputes, and military deployments in Eastern Europe. During these discussions, both nations sought to clarify their non-negotiable boundaries ("red lines") while attempting to establish a baseline of cooperation on critical global issues, including nuclear arms control, broad international stability, and the management of the Arctic region.

The 2025 Alaska summit's symbolism reveals a deep and persistent geopolitical impasse. While the United States sought to manage tensions and prevent further escalation through diplomatic channels, For Washington, the meeting represented a calculated shift toward engagement—attempting to rein in Moscow's aggression through direct dialogue rather than continuing a policy of diplomatic isolation. Conversely, Moscow utilized the high-profile platform to project defiance, forcefully reaffirming its opposition to Western policies and firmly drawing a line against the eastward expansion of NATO⁴.

At the same time, the visit of the Ukrainian President to the United States was the turning point of the diplomatic course of Kyiv. The recent U.S.–Ukraine discussions reaffirmed Washington's unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic development, even amid ongoing hostilities in regions like the Donbas and Crimea. The talks centered on three key pillars of cooperation: defense collaboration, cybersecurity resilience, and energy diversification (specifically reducing Kyiv's reliance on Russian gas). To back these priorities, the U.S. pledged tangible support in the form of continued military aid, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure investments designed to strengthen Ukraine's deterrent capabilities. By mutually declaring the goal of integrating Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic institutions, the summit illustrates a steady convergence between bilateral U.S. policy and the broader NATO objective of containing Russian influence in Eastern Europe. It signals that Western support for Ukraine goes beyond immediate military aid and is fundamentally rooted in long-term geopolitical realignment.

Recent diplomatic engagements clearly point to a revival of Cold War-style strategic competition across Eurasia. High-level events, such as the U.S.–Russia summit in Alaska and ongoing U.S.–Ukraine dialogues, represent two complementary sides of a unified geopolitical strategy. On one hand, the United States is actively seeking to establish a stable equilibrium in its competition with Moscow; on the other, it is simultaneously working to fortify post-Soviet allies determined to resist Russian subjugation. Ultimately, these combined efforts are

⁴ Popov, P. L., & Cherenev, A. A. *The difference in the classical geopolitics of countries of the continental and oceanic types and the position of modern Russia*. Geography and Natural Resources, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 1–6. 2022.

driving a fundamental rebalancing of transatlantic diplomacy. In order to navigate the rapidly shifting and volatile security environment in Eurasia, the U.S. and its allies are forging a comprehensive policy toolkit—one that intimately links military deterrence, diplomatic dialogue, and robust defense cooperation to check Russian expansionism and maintain regional stability.

European Union and Its Member States Perspectives, NATO, OSCE

The European perspective on Eurasia has transitioned from passive reliance to active contestation. To check Russian expansionism, Europe has recognized that a strictly military approach is insufficient. True regional stability requires a comprehensive strategy: NATO's fortified Eastern Flank provides the necessary military containment, while the EU, propelled by the strategic realignment of Germany, France, and the UK, executes a geoeconomic offensive. By investing in the Middle Corridor and integrating the economies of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Europe aims to structurally dismantle Russia's geographic leverage and establish a resilient, multipolar Eurasian order. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) remains the indispensable guarantor of European territorial integrity. The Alliance's post-2022 Strategic Concept explicitly categorized Russia as the "most significant and direct threat to Allies' security," abandoning decades of partnership-oriented doctrine. The EU Through its "Global Gateway" strategy, the EU is aggressively pursuing strategic partnerships in Central Asia. Recent agreements with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, finalized during the 2025–2026 EU-Central Asia summits, focus on securing critical raw materials (uranium, copper, rare earth elements) and green hydrogen, effectively reducing European dependencies on Russian and Chinese supply chain.

For Europe, the Eurasian landmass represents a complex dual reality: it is simultaneously a source of strategic opportunity and a profound geopolitical threat. Rather than holding a single, unified view, Europe's great powers interpret the concept of Eurasia in varied but interconnected ways. These differing perspectives are heavily shaped by each nation's unique historical experiences, economic dependencies, and contemporary security environments. European powers must reconcile their individual security concerns with the collective need to capitalize on the region's vast economic potential.

- **Germany's Perspective:** The *Zeitenwende* (Historical Turning Point) - Historically the champion of *Ostpolitik* (engagement through trade), Germany has undergone a radical structural pivot. Berlin has fully decoupled from Russian pipeline gas, fundamentally altering the Eurasian energy map. Germany's role is now anchored in financing Eastern European defense, leading NATO's forward presence in Lithuania, and spearheading EU efforts to integrate Central Asian economies into the European industrial base. When approaching Eurasia, Germany views the region primarily through the lens of energy security and

economic necessity. Historically, Berlin attempted a delicate balancing act—engaging with Moscow while simultaneously supporting Ukraine and other Eastern European nations. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine served as a stark catalyst for change, culminating in the permanent shutdown of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Germany champions a policy of diplomacy and de-escalation but insists these must be backed by formidable EU and NATO deterrents. Berlin's current approach attempts to maintain open lines of communication with both Moscow and Beijing, while rigorously ensuring that this dialogue does not compromise or jeopardize the unity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. The loss of Russian energy forced Berlin to realize that economic expediency cannot come at the cost of security. Consequently, Germany's current strategy reflects a new reality: securing its energy and economic future now depends on a robust Western alliance that can deter aggression while cautiously managing relationships with authoritarian powers. Berlin espouses diplomacy and de-escalation and in favor of strong EU and NATO deterrents. It has a current policy of open communication between it and Moscow and Beijing, without jeopardizing the unity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.

- **France's Perspective:** France views the geopolitics of Eurasia through the lens of European strategic autonomy—the concept of an independent Europe capable of defending its own interests without relying entirely on the United States, while remaining a committed member of the NATO framework. Professionally navigating this balance, Paris champions ongoing diplomatic discussions with Russia regarding regional security and arms control, while simultaneously condemning Moscow's violations of international law, particularly in Ukraine. Paris has been highly active in the South Caucasus, providing unprecedented diplomatic and military support to Armenia to counter Russian abdication and Azerbaijani pressure. Furthermore, France is heavily investing in Central Asian nuclear and energy sectors (notably in Kazakhstan) to secure its own domestic nuclear fuel supply chain, challenging Rosatom's dominance.

Geographically, French diplomacy prioritizes maintaining stability across critical transit zones connecting Europe to the wider Eurasian continent, namely the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Eastern Mediterranean. To counter great-power polarization, France actively promotes EU-led connectivity and crisis-management initiatives to position Europe as a neutral, stabilizing force between competing global blocs. France's Eurasian strategy is driven by the desire to prevent Europe from becoming a passive bystander in great-power rivalries. For France, a stable and connected Eurasia is only possible if Europe

aggressively asserts itself as a sovereign stabilizing force rather than depending solely on transatlantic or external security architectures.

- **United Kingdom's Perspective:** Global Britain" and Forward Disruption- Unconstrained by EU consensus mechanisms, the UK has adopted a highly agile and forward-leaning posture. London has been at the vanguard of intelligence sharing, maritime security operations, and advanced weapons provisions to Ukraine. In the broader Eurasian context, the UK prioritizes bilateral security pacts and leverages its financial sector to support infrastructure projects that isolate Russian capital, functioning as the most hawkish European node against Russian expansionism. Following Brexit, the United Kingdom has aggressively re-engaged with the Eurasian continent by prioritizing a highly security-focused foreign policy. London's core strategic objectives center on fortifying NATO's eastern flank, projecting robust deterrence capabilities across the Baltic and Black Sea regions, and delivering comprehensive military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. As a result of this forward-leaning posture, the UK has firmly established itself as a leading force in enforcing strict sanctions against Russia and cementing long-term defense partnerships with Eastern European nations. The U.K. also aims to expand influence in the Indo-Pacific in its Global Britain strategy, which connects European and Asian security in the light of the interrelated maritime and continental security issues of Eurasia.
- **European Union (EU) Perspective:** The European Union approaches the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia through a multifaceted strategy that blends economic, normative, and security objectives. Central to this approach is the promotion of a rules-based order driven by governance reforms, digital connectivity, and green infrastructure. To achieve this, the EU actively deploys its **Global Gateway** initiative as a sustainable, transparent alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Concurrently, a cornerstone of the EU's strategy is aggressive energy diversification; Brussels is systematically reducing its dependence on Russian gas by cultivating deeper energy partnerships with resource-rich nations in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region. Ultimately, the EU relies on a combination of soft-power diplomacy, strategic economic investment, and supply-chain diversification to influence the political and developmental trajectory of the Eurasian landmass. The EU strategy is a mixture of soft power diplomacy, economic influence, and diversification to influence the political and developmental direction of Eurasia. Brussels has concluded that its security and strategic autonomy are best protected by using economic statecraft as its primary weapon. By offering sustainable infrastructure investments and opening new energy corridors in Central Asia, the EU is attempting to

outcompete China and isolate Russia, proving that in modern Eurasia, control over trade routes, technology, and energy grids is just as vital as territorial control.

- **NATO's Perspective:** From NATO's perspective, Eurasia serves as the primary theater for collective defense and strategic deterrence. In response to regional threats, the Alliance has significantly fortified its eastern flank, established forward operating bases and deploying rapid response forces across Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states. Its Black Sea maritime surveillance and air patrol in Eastern Europe to prevent Russian incursions in the region as well as freedom of navigation and airspace security. To prevent Russian incursions and guarantee freedom of navigation, NATO actively conducts rigorous air policing and Black Sea maritime surveillance. Furthermore, the Alliance is looking beyond its formal borders, actively integrating key non-member states like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and makes them part of the training and intelligence systems. The Ukrainian war has strengthened the cohesion of NATO, reinventing the idea that the stability in Eurasia cannot be discussed outside of the security of Europe.
- **OSCE in Eurasia-** The trajectory of the OSCE in Eurasia perfectly illustrates the broader decline of the unipolar, liberal-institutionalist world order. As the only legacy institution of the Cold War era that encompasses both the Euro-Atlantic bloc and the entirety of the post-Soviet space, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) occupies a highly complex and increasingly contested position in Eurasian geopolitics. Originally designed following the 1975 Helsinki Accords to act as a diplomatic bridge between East and West, the OSCE's contemporary role in the Eurasian heartland is defined by a profound friction between its liberal-democratic normative framework and the regime-security imperatives of its Eurasian member states. The core operational philosophy of the OSCE is "comprehensive security," a framework that explicitly links politico-military stability with economic development and the "human dimension" (human rights, democratic elections, and the rule of law). The organization is no longer capable of successfully socializing Eurasian states into a Euro-Atlantic democratic community, as alternative plurilateral platforms—such as the SCO—now offer these regimes security and investment without normative conditionality. Despite political resistance at the highest levels, the OSCE remains highly relevant at the operational tier. Because Central Asian states practice multi-vector diplomacy, they utilize the OSCE to counterbalance Sino-Russian institutional dominance (such as the SCO and CSTO) by keeping European actors engaged in regional security. Tying into the region's broader

geopolitical vulnerabilities, the OSCE acts as a crucial mediator in transboundary water disputes and climate-resilience planning (particularly in the Fergana Valley), providing a neutral, depoliticized forum for Central Asian states to manage the fraught "water-energy nexus."

The war in Ukraine has dramatically revitalized NATO's cohesion and strategic purpose. The Alliance has concluded that European security is fundamentally inseparable from broader Eurasian stability. By heavily militarizing its eastern borders and pulling vulnerable, non-member states closer into its security orbit, NATO has reaffirmed that projecting strength across the Eurasian theater is an absolute prerequisite for protecting the Euro-Atlantic order. The collective European and transatlantic approach to Eurasia is characterized by a "co-optative" blend of strategies, effectively dividing strategic responsibilities among key actors. All of these would be reflecting the wider Western reaction to the changing balance of geopolitics in Eurasia- an emerging equilibrium of dialogue and deterrence and development built to protect the stability of the region as well as global security⁵.

Eurasia in International Relations Theories



Figure 1.2: Eurasia in International Relations

The International Relations (IR) study of Eurasia is based on a set of theoretical approaches that tries to identify how geography, resources, history, and power relations can determine the strategic importance of the region. Eurasia has been the greatest power conflict, economic unification and security alliances because of its strategic location as the largest,

⁵ Abbas, S. R. *Russian Geopolitics and Eurasia*. World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 90–105. 2020.

continuous landmass between Europe and Asia. Theoretical approaches in IR provide various ways of seeing the role of Eurasia, through the deterministic effect of geography up to the socially constructed identities and alliances. These are the points of view that are needed to comprehend the historical and modern geopolitics of the area.

. The framework of Realism in international relations views, at its core, classical realist theory assumes the global system is inherently anarchic, meaning nations must prioritize their own security, survival, and national interests above all else. Historically, this dynamic is perfectly illustrated in Eurasia through ongoing great-power struggles—spanning from the 19th-century "Great Game" between Britain and Russia, through Cold War containment policies, right up to the contemporary strategic rivalry between the United States, Russia, and other global powers. Absolute Ends An additional view to realism is geopolitical determinism, which holds that geographical factors significantly impact political outcomes. For the purpose of projecting future control in Eurasia and its effects on the global order, this line of thinking is used, among other things, in the Heartland Theory (Mackinder) and the Rimland Theory (Spykman). The Realist perspective concludes that geopolitical competition in Eurasia is inevitable and constant.

The Liberal paradigm analyzes that geopolitical conflict in Eurasia is not inherently inevitable. By binding states together through shared economic interests and rules-based organizations, nations can successfully transcend historical, zero-sum rivalries and create a cooperative environment that prioritizes mutual prosperity over territorial dominance.

Liberal thought, on the other hand, is preoccupied with the idea of potential cooperation among Eurasia's states in regard to economic dependency, the spread of democratic regimes, and institutions. Liberal thinkers argue that regional blocs like the SCO and the EAEU as well as more general institutions like China's Belt and Road Initiative can offer stability in trade and mutual advantage despite competition. Infrastructure connectivity, environmental cooperative endeavors, and transnational energy initiatives are all seen by liberals as means to reduce conflict through bringing governments closer together in complex webs of interdependence⁶.

The Constructivist paradigm demonstrates that power in Eurasia is not merely measured by geographic size or weaponry, but by the control of identity and narrative. By framing Eurasia as a unique civilizational bloc rather than just a landmass, revisionist powers can use shared history and culture as powerful instruments of statecraft. This highlights that deep-seated social perceptions and ideas are just as potent as physical borders in defining regional cooperation and conflict. Applied to Eurasia, this perspective explores how historical narratives, cultural bonds, and shared identities shape regional alliances and rivalries. A prime

⁶ Zreik, M. *Contemporary geopolitics of Eurasia and the Belt and Road Initiative*. Eurasian Research Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 7–26. 2022.

example is Russia's strategic promotion of "Eurasianism" as a distinct civilizational identity—an effort designed to position Moscow as the natural, legitimate leader of a culturally and historically interconnected space spanning Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Likewise, the re-enactment of the Silk Road story by China under the BRI is not merely an economic initiative but a planned effort to create a collective historical memory to support the authority to be the foreman. Constructivism, therefore, emphasizes the role of rival ideas of Eurasia: Western liberal order versus the Russian and Chinese-oriented ones in shaping policy choices.

Critical theories, including post-colonialism, offer an alternative reading of Eurasia's place in IR by highlighting historical patterns of domination, imperialism, and resistance. These approaches draw attention to how colonial legacies—such as the Soviet administrative divisions in Central Asia or the partitioning of the Caucasus—continue to influence political boundaries, ethnic tensions, and development disparities. Postcolonial scholars argue that much of the discourse on Eurasia is framed by great powers' strategic interests, often marginalizing local perspectives. This perspective calls for re-centering agency among smaller Eurasian states and understanding their foreign policies beyond the agendas of Moscow, Beijing, or Washington.

A more contemporary perspective is geo-economics, which combines elements of realism and liberalism but focuses on economic instruments as tools of geopolitical competition. In the multipolar world, Eurasia is a prime arena for geo-economic maneuvering—seen in pipeline politics, trade corridors, and infrastructure diplomacy⁷. States and regional blocs leverage market access, energy exports, and financial investments to gain strategic advantage, often bypassing military confrontation. This approach is particularly relevant in analyzing China's BRI, Russia's energy diplomacy, and the EU's connectivity strategies.

Many scholars and politicians in the modern era refer to the change in the global political climate as the "New Cold War" because of these theoretical underpinnings. Whereas the ideological struggle that raged between the US and the USSR in the twentieth century had many facets, including but not limited to economics, information, and technology. A growing number of issues are fueling the tension between Russia and China and the US and its allies. These include territorial and security disputes over areas like Ukraine and the South China Sea, as well as sanctions, trade disputes, cyber warfare, and competing visions for global governance and development.

This modern conflict is an expression of the structural logic of realism, where great powers are making efforts to ensure low level domination and influence in the environment of strategic mistrust. However, it is not as stiff as the one in the bipolar format of the cold war, the new geopolitical order is a bit flexible and multipolar. The recently emerging forces of

⁷ Rojnić, D. *Geopolitical Discourse: Where and What is Eurasia?* Međunarodne Studije, Vol. 20, Nos. 1–2, pp. 39–58. 2020.

India, Turkey, and Iran are also those who adhere to the multi-vector approach, and they do not align themselves to either of the blocks. The European Union fosters liberal rule-based order compared to Russia and China, which promote other visions, which focus on sovereignty and regional integration. Thus, despite the fact that the new cold war concludes the degree of rivalry and mutual suspicion, the modern model of rivalry in Eurasia is held in a far more interconnecting and interdependent world.

The successive events in Eurasia, in other words, are not indicators of a re-escalation of the past, but the observation of a new, more complex hybrid order made up of confrontation and cooperation, where power politics of Cold War variety coexist with the flows of globalization and economic entanglement and digital interdependency.

Navigating Globalization and Strategic Geopolitics Across Eurasia

The geopolitics of Eurasia have been significantly changed by the process of globalization and have made the region an intense zone of trade, investment, migration, and military rivalry. Being the physical and political bridge between Europe and Asian regions, Eurasia has always been a meeting point of two civilizations, yet in the era of globalization, it has grown to have significance beyond the traditional military and territorial issues. Classical power politics have been intersected with economic interdependence, digital connection, and transnational issues, thus a multidimensional geopolitical environment is created. In this regard, globalization is not only a unifying element, but also a source of strategic competition amongst the key powers that are active in the Eurasian region⁸.

Globalization has revitalized and updated the ancient status of Eurasia as the global crossroad. Efforts like the BRI, EAEU of Russia and TEN-T supported by the EU aim at establishing integrated trade and infrastructure networks on the continent. These ventures are reminiscent of the historical Silk Road but are scaled up with the help of modern technologies, high-speed rail, innovative logistics, and internet infrastructure. This increased connectedness enables Eurasia to become increasingly economically relevant and at the same time, increases its geopolitical value since the power over transport routes and choke points is converted into considerable political influence.

While globalization has encouraged economic cooperation, it has also intensified strategic competition in Eurasia. Access to markets, resources, and infrastructure investment opportunities often serves as a proxy for political alignment. China's expanding footprint through BRI has challenged traditional Russian influence in Central Asia, while the United States and European Union promote alternative connectivity frameworks to counterbalance Beijing's dominance. This competition has led to what some analysts call a "New Great

⁸ Berryman, J. *Geopolitics*. In *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, pp. 60–78. Routledge. 2018.

Game,” where economic agreements, trade routes, and investment flows are intertwined with strategic calculations.

Eurasia’s vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals make it a focal point of global energy markets. Globalization has enabled diversified export strategies—such as Central Asian pipelines to China, Europe, and South Asia—that reduce dependency on a single market. However, this diversification also heightens geopolitical maneuvering, as supplier and transit countries leverage their position for political concessions. Pipeline politics, liquefied natural gas (LNG) routes, and renewable energy investments have become critical tools in balancing economic gain with geopolitical autonomy.

The interconnectedness brought by globalization also extends to security concerns. Terrorism, cyber threats, pandemics, and environmental crises transcend national borders, compelling Eurasian states to cooperate through multilateral frameworks such as the SCO, the OSCE, and UN-led initiatives⁹. However, such cooperation often intersects with great power rivalry, as countries balance the benefits of collective action against the risks of political dependency on dominant actors.

In Eurasia, globalization extends far beyond trade and military alliances to include the rapid exchange of culture, education, and information. While digital connectivity and cross-border exchanges foster regional integration, this exact openness creates a fertile ground for information warfare and propaganda. Consequently, the region has become a massive ideological battleground for competing worldviews, actively pitting Western liberal values against Russian Eurasianism and China's development-focused governance model. Ultimately, globalization in Eurasia operates as a double-edged sword. While it acts as a vital conduit for cultural exchange and soft power, it simultaneously transforms the digital and cultural landscape into an intense ideological battlefield.

Political Economy of Eurasia

The political economy of Eurasia defies the linear "transition paradigm" that dominated early post-Soviet studies, which assumed a natural progression from command economies to liberal market democracies. Instead, the region has developed a distinct set of political-economic structures characterized by the fusion of wealth and political power, resource dependency, and the dominance of informal networks. A foundational pillar for understanding Eurasian political economy—particularly in Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan—is Rentier State Theory (RST). This framework argues that states deriving the majority of their revenue from the external sale of natural resources (hydrocarbons and minerals) develop distinct political pathologies. Eurasian economies frequently operate under

⁹ Klemensits, P. *The role of Eurasia in the Classical Geopolitical Theories*. Towards the Rise of Eurasia, p. 17. (n.d.).

a model of authoritarian state capitalism. Rather than fully liberalizing, the state retains strategic control over the "commanding heights" of the economy—energy, telecommunications, banking, and defense. At the regional level, the political economy of Eurasia is defined by theories of asymmetrical interdependence (originating from Albert Hirschman) and geoeconomics. Economic ties are routinely weaponized for strategic ends. The theoretical foundation of the Eurasian political economy is rooted in the interplay between resource extraction, informal elite networks, and geoeconomic competition.

The political economy of Eurasia is defined by a deep, inescapable fusion of economic resources, strategic geography, and political power. As the world's largest contiguous landmass, Eurasia holds immense reserves of energy, agricultural land, and minerals, while also housing the critical trade corridors connecting East and West. These assets are not simply economic drivers; they are potent instruments of geopolitical leverage. Consequently, decisions regarding infrastructure development, energy exports, and trade policy are inherently driven by strategic state interests, making economics and politics entirely inseparable across the region. The immense natural resources and strategic trade routes of the continent dictate that economic policy cannot exist in a vacuum. Any move regarding trade, energy, or infrastructure is fundamentally a geopolitical maneuver, confirming that control over the Eurasian economy equates directly to strategic dominance over the continent. China's geoeconomic strategy is essentially modern Rimland and Heartland theory executed through economics rather than armies. By weaving a web of highways, deep-water ports, and energy pipelines across Eurasia, China is constructing a physical and financial architecture that makes opposing Beijing practically and economically unfeasible for its neighbors. The United States led the capitalist West and the Soviet Union the communist East, the ideological and economic schism between the two superpowers was centered in Eurasia during the Cold War. It became both a commercial boundary and a geopolitical flashpoint. The Soviet Union's endeavor to integrate the economies of its vast Eurasian area was the central planning of industrialization, communal agriculture, and the extraction of natural resources, particularly in Central Asia and Siberia¹⁰. The oil, gas, uranium, and cotton supplied by these regions were vital to the survival of the Soviet command economy and to Moscow's growing strategic autonomy. While this was going on, the United States, its NATO allies, and Japan formed their own trade and finance network called the Marshall plan. They used it in conjunction with the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and the GATT system to try to convert Western Europe and some parts of Asia to capitalism.

During the Cold War, the political economy of Eurasia was defined by a striking duality: rigid political isolation between rival blocs coexisted with the selective economic

¹⁰ Rubavičius, V. *The Importance of Civilizational Imagination in Contemporary Geopolitics*. Dialogue and Universalism, No. 3, pp. 55–74. 2020.

interdependence of key strategic sectors. To project and maintain its power, the Soviet Union heavily utilized massive infrastructure networks. Specifically, the Druzhba pipeline system was built to economically tether Eastern Europe to Moscow through energy reliance, while the Trans-Siberian Railway served as a vital internal artery, ensuring national cohesion and enabling rapid military deployment across the vast Eurasian landmass. At the same time, the CENTO approach to investment and aid to Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan was pursued to establish a southern safeguard against the Soviet influence. The competition went as far as Central Asia and the Middle East, where the two powers competed on who would gain influence by offering economic assistance, arms delivery and building of infrastructure. The Cold War actually reduced Eurasia into a giant chessboard where ideology, commerce, and advanced technology were used as the tools of power.

Eurasia is home to some of the world's most abundant basins of natural resources. The Caspian Basin is a major source of hydrocarbons; Central Asian nations like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have enormous mineral and hydroelectric potential; while Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan possess enormous oil and gas reserves. Along with their economic value, these resources also have political clout. State control over production and transportation networks allows them to shape regional relations, exert pressure on dependent economies, and influence regional balance. For instance, Russia's foreign policy has traditionally been based on its gas exports to Europe, while Central Asian republics are trying to lessen their reliance on one partner by diversifying their energy sources¹¹.

Historically serving as the critical land bridge between Europe and Asia, the economic geography of Eurasia is undergoing a massive transformation driven by competing connectivity networks. The region is currently being shaped by rival megaprojects, most notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Russia-Iran-India International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and various EU-backed transit routes. However, these are far more than mere business ventures. By leveraging construction contracts, infrastructure financing, and forced economic interdependence, these corridors function as powerful geopolitical tools designed to carve out exclusive spheres of influence. Political economy of Eurasia is now defined by the race for connectivity. The intense rivalry to control pipelines, highways, and digital cables proves that in the 21st century, whoever controls the transit infrastructure dictates the flow of global trade and secures dominant geopolitical leverage over the continent. The political economy of Eurasia is also affected by international and regional economic institutions. EAEU, which is dominated by Russia, will enable free movement of goods, services, and labor among the member countries whereas BRI of China encourages cross-border investments and infrastructure development. The SCO is more a security agency

¹¹ Wu, Z. *Classical geopolitics, realism and the balance of power theory*. Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 786–823. 2018.

but more actively it is involved in economic cooperation. These institutions are also used as means of economic integration as well as the means of promoting the political agenda of the dominant members, making the distinction between economic policy and influence difficult¹².

The political economy of Eurasia is fundamentally shaped by external powers—most notably the U.S., EU, Japan, the Gulf states, and China—each utilizing trade, investment, and development aid to project influence. Western sanctions imposed on Russia (following its 2014 annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine) have severely restricted its trade with Europe, forcing Moscow to pivot its economic reliance toward non-Western partners like China and various Middle Eastern nations. Meanwhile, external investment strategies differ drastically. The European Union typically conditions its market access and investments on political and governance reforms. In stark contrast, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides massive, condition-free infrastructure loans. While these Chinese investments are not explicitly tied to domestic political changes, they systematically embed developing nations into Chinese-centered logistics and energy networks, generating deep, long-term economic dependency. Eurasia is not just a regional market; it is a global battleground for economic statecraft. Western nations attempt to shape the region by using market access and sanctions to force political behavioral changes, isolating actors like Russia. However, China's alternative approach—offering massive infrastructure funding without political preconditions—undermines Western leverage. Eurasia is currently experiencing a profound resurgence of Cold War-style strategic rivalry, transforming the world's largest landmass into the primary theater for global great-power competition. This massive region represents both an unparalleled economic opportunity and a critical security threat, prompting different strategic responses from key global actors and being shaped by complex geopolitical and economic forces. Eurasia is strategically located and blessed with resources, it is nevertheless impacted by a number of political-economic concerns. Despite its vast natural wealth and strategic geographic position, Eurasia's economic stability is continuously undermined by a convergence of severe structural, geopolitical, and environmental threats. The region's heavy reliance on resource exports makes its nations highly susceptible to the volatile swings of global commodity prices. Sustainable development is heavily bottlenecked by widespread corruption, weak regulatory frameworks, and a general failure to diversify economies beyond raw materials. Ongoing tensions—whether between Russia and the West, China and India, or internal disputes among Central Asian states constantly threaten trade flows, border security, and foreign investment confidence. Environmental shifts add a critical layer of risk, directly endangering the region's agricultural output, water security, and physical infrastructure resilience. Climate change acts as a compounding, systemic threat to the region's overall stability. Shifting environmental conditions introduce complex new challenges by

¹² Świder, K. *Russian Neo-Eurasian Geopolitics as a Total Ideology on the Example of Aleksandr Dugin's Concept*. Civitas: Studia z Filozofii Polityki, No. 25, pp. 61–85. 2019.

directly endangering critical regional water supplies, degrading the physical resilience of trade and energy infrastructure, and destabilizing vital agricultural output. climate change functions as a profound "threat multiplier" in Eurasia.

Current and Emerging Geopolitics in Eurasia and Major Powers

The theoretical foundation for understanding the current actions of major powers in Eurasia is anchored in the transition to a "Multipolar World Order 2.0," the weaponization of economic interdependence, and the strategic hedging of regional middle powers. Recent IR scholarship has conceptualized the current global structure as the "Multipolar World Order 2.0" (Sahakyan, 2023). Unlike the bipolarity of the Cold War or the unipolar moment of the 1990s, this emerging order is characterized by a fluid, transactional multipolarity where international law and normative frameworks are entirely subordinated to state capacity. Faced with the gravitational pull of major powers, Eurasian republics employ a doctrine of "strategic hedging" or "multi-vectorism." This theory explains how states like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan deliberately diversify their foreign relations to avoid absorption by any single hegemon.

In this theoretical model, Eurasia serves as the primary arena of contestation between the established superpower (the United States), the rising superpower (China), the assertive regional hegemon (Russia), and emerging balancers (India and the European Union).

, the defining characteristic of modern Eurasian geopolitics is the intense friction between economic opportunity and hard security threats. Its unmatched strategic value lies in its dual identity: it is both a vast reservoir of natural resources and the indispensable land bridge connecting European and Asian markets through critical infrastructure corridors. Consequently, the region has re-emerged as the primary arena for great-power competition, where historical legacies and modern economic ambitions continuously collide. The region's vast connectivity and resources make it the ultimate prize in a multipolar world, ensuring that great-power competition will remain a permanent fixture. Because revisionist actors like Russia continue to prioritize territorial dominance and disruption over peaceful economic integration, Eurasia will remain a highly volatile pivot point where the balance of the new global order is continuously tested. The United States with its reconsidered Eurasian strategy, and the European Union with increased interest in energy and trade relations¹³.

Russia's approach to Eurasia is driven by a starkly revisionist agenda. Moscow views the region not as a collaborative community, but as a strategic buffer zone where its dominance must be maintained by force if necessary. By combining military coercion with a rapid

¹³ Çomak, H., Şeker, B. Ş., & Ultan, M. Ö. (Eds.). *Global Maritime Geopolitics*. Vol. 11. Transnational Press London. 2022.

eastward pivot in its energy trade, Russia is actively attempting to insulate itself from Western pressure while aggressively enforcing its great-power status across the Eurasian landmass. Moscow's strategy relies on a combination of institutional leadership (through organizations like the EAEU and the CSTO) and the aggressive application of military power and energy politics. Recent military interventions in Ukraine, Georgia, and the South Caucasus clearly demonstrate Russia's willingness to use hard force to defend what it considers its rightful sphere of influence. Furthermore, in response to severe Western sanctions resulting from these aggressions, Russia has fundamentally restructured its economic strategy by pivoting its energy exports and vital trade routes away from Europe and directly toward China, Iran, and Central Asia. Russia seeks to reclaim its great power status in Eurasia through institutional leverage (EAEU, CSTO) and military force (Ukraine, Georgia, South Caucasus) to defend its sphere of influence. Consequently, Western sanctions have forced Moscow to pivot its critical energy exports and trade networks away from Europe toward China, Iran, and Central Asia. China has solidified its position as a dominant geopolitical force in Eurasia primarily through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By heavily investing in physical and digital infrastructure—ranging from railways and energy pipelines to internet connectivity—Beijing aims to reorient regional economies into a Sino-centric network. Beyond its economic ambitions, China is also actively expanding its security footprint through bilateral ties and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), increasingly challenging Russia's traditional influence in Central Asia. Ultimately, strategic arteries like the China-Mongolia-Russia and China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridors are essential to Beijing's overarching goal: securing unhindered access to markets and resources while bypassing vulnerable maritime chokepoints. China leverages the Belt and Road Initiative to establish a Sino-centric economic and security architecture across the Eurasian landmass. By investing heavily in overland infrastructure and expanding its security footprint through the SCO, Beijing secures vital resources and alternative trade routes that bypass maritime vulnerabilities, simultaneously challenging traditional Russian dominance in Central Asia.

The strategic role of the United States in Eurasia has transitioned from Cold War containment and post-9/11 counterterrorism to its current focus on strategic balancing against Russia and China. Although Washington reduced its direct military footprint in Central Asia after withdrawing from Afghanistan, it continues to reinforce the sovereignty of Eurasian nations through targeted diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives. To actively counter Chinese financial leverage and Russian political coercion, the U.S. promotes transparent infrastructure investments and governance reforms, while simultaneously maintaining a robust NATO deterrent on Eurasia's western flank. To counter Chinese financial leverage and Russian political coercion, the U.S. actively promotes transparent governance and infrastructure development, all anchored by a continued NATO presence on Eurasia's western periphery. The European Union approaches Eurasia primarily through the strategic imperatives of energy security, trade diversification, and regional stability. To definitively

reduce its reliance on Russian energy, the EU actively champions alternative infrastructure, such as the Southern Gas Corridor and other Caspian pipeline initiatives. Furthermore, Brussels leverages infrastructure investment as a foreign policy instrument to drive governance reforms and deepen its connectivity with Central Asian states. Although historically reliant on economic and normative soft power, recent geopolitical shocks—most notably the war in Ukraine—have compelled the EU to adopt a decidedly more assertive and hardline strategic posture in the region.

The geopolitical landscape of Eurasia is not exclusively dictated by global superpowers like the U.S., China, and Russia. Regional middle powers—such as Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Iran—are aggressively carving out their own spheres of influence through targeted infrastructure corridors, strategic partnerships, and cultural diplomacy. Turkey is actively leveraging its historical, cultural, and linguistic ties through the Organization of Turkic States to expand its influence in Central Asia. Simultaneously, India is advancing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and deepening regional partnerships to proactively counterbalance China's expanding footprint. Meanwhile, Pakistan is positioning itself as a vital logistical nexus via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as Iran works to establish itself as the primary transit bridge connecting Central Asian markets to the Middle East. A further source of rivalry and cooperation relations is the increased investment in infrastructure and energy development by Gulf countries, particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.¹⁴

Cybersecurity, space technology, and digital infrastructure are becoming new arenas of geopolitical rivalry. In the coming decade, the balance of power in Eurasia will likely be shaped by how effectively states navigate these intersecting pressures while capitalizing on opportunities for economic growth and regional integration¹⁵.

The shifting geopolitical landscape of Eurasia is increasingly defined by "multi-vector diplomacy," a strategy that allows smaller nations to safeguard their sovereignty by meticulously balancing ties among major global powers. Simultaneously, the race to dictate global trade and energy flows has sparked fierce infrastructure competition. The worldwide transition toward renewable energy introduces fresh strategic stakes, particularly concerning the control and supply of critical minerals. Furthermore, modern great-power rivalries are rapidly expanding beyond physical borders into the realms of cybersecurity, digital networks, and space technology. Over the next decade, the region's balance of power will hinge on how skillfully Eurasian nations can navigate these overlapping pressures while still seizing opportunities for regional integration and economic growth. Ultimately, the future of Eurasia will not be decided by traditional military dominance alone, but by a complex matrix of technological, environmental, and diplomatic agility. Because smaller states actively leverage multi-vector diplomacy.

¹⁴ Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & Ryan, B. J. *Maritime security: The uncharted politics of the global sea*. International Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 5, pp. 971–978. 2019.

¹⁵ Rubin, A., & Eiran, E. *Regional maritime security in the Eastern Mediterranean: Expectations and reality*. International Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 5, pp. 979–997. 2019.

2

The Geopolitics of Eurasian Maritime Corridors and Shifting Architecture of Global Security

Maritime Geopolitics in International Relations Theories



Figure 2.1: Eurasian Maritime Geopolitics

Maritime geopolitics represents a critical subfield of international relations, that analyzes how control over oceans and naval forces shapes global political power and security dynamics.¹⁶

The theoretical foundation of maritime corridors in Eurasia represents a synthesis of Mahanian sea power, geoeconomic hedging, and institutional contestation. Maritime routes—

¹⁶ Miller, S. *The maritime strategy and geopolitics in the High North*. In *Soviet Union & Northern Water*, pp. 205–238. Routledge. 2021.

whether the Arctic NSR, the Caspian Middle Corridor, or the Indian Ocean INSTC—are not merely logistical pathways. They are the primary vectors through which major powers project influence, circumvent containment, and redraw the geopolitical map of the Eurasian landmass.

In contrast to traditional, land-centric frameworks like the Heartland theory—which emphasize the control of continental landmasses—maritime geopolitics argues that global power struggles are ultimately determined by dominance over sea lines of communication, trade networks, and naval capacity. This perspective is particularly essential when analyzing Eurasia, as the continent is bordered by some of the world's most critical maritime theaters: the Arctic Ocean, Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, South China Sea, and Pacific Ocean. Each of these maritime zones plays a distinct and vital role in defining Eurasia's security architecture, driving its economic connectivity, and facilitating long-range power projection.

The maritime geography of Eurasia dictates that global economic and military stability is inherently fragile. Eurasia functions as both a continental and maritime powerhouse, completely encircled by the world's most critical strategic waterways. Every flank of the continent plays a specialized role in global commerce and security: the rapidly thawing transit routes of the Arctic in the north; the crucial military and trade gateways of the Baltic and Black Seas in the west; the energy-dense, landlocked Caspian Sea in the interior; the oil-dominated Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea to the south; and the vital commercial arteries of the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean to the east. Crucially, the strategic value of these diverse maritime zones is amplified by the fact that they are interconnected by narrow, easily contested navigational chokepoints. The modern theoretical basis of maritime geopolitics has a strong linkage with Alfred Thayer Mahan, a 19th Century American naval strategist and historian. Mahan believed that the power of a nation to control the sea is directly connected to its greatness and its influence on the world, and this was the point he made in his masterpiece *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890). According to Mahan, maritime supremacy is not solely about having a large navy, but about possessing the ability to protect trade routes, project power globally, and deny adversaries access to vital maritime spaces. He identified six critical determinants of sea power:

- Geographical position – Proximity to important sea lanes and chokepoints.
- Physical conformation – The nature of coastlines, harbors, and navigable waterways.
- Extent of territory – The size and reach of a nation's coastal holdings.
- Population size – Both for naval manpower and for sustaining maritime industries.
- National character – The cultural inclination toward maritime enterprise and exploration.

- Nature of government – The willingness and capacity of the state to invest in naval power.

Applying Mahan's paradigm to Eurasia, it becomes clear why control of certain maritime chokepoints—the Straits of Hormuz, Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and Malacca—is advantageous from a strategic standpoint. For instance, the Strait of Hormuz is a geopolitical flashpoint for energy security since it handles a disproportionate share of the world's oil shipments. Because it connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the Bosphorus Strait affects Russia's and Turkey's capacity to reach global markets via sea. In a similar vein, the Strait of Malacca is a vital energy trade route for South Korea, China, and Japan, being one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. According to Mahan's view, the historic goals of Eurasian countries like Russia and China have been to increase their naval might, acquire warm water ports, and exert influence over these strategic maritime lanes.

With so many northern ports encircled by ice, Russia has always seen the sea as both a strategic goal and a historical obstacle. Because of this, it has been causing problems for its ability to access warm water through the Arctic, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. The South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and China's utilization of foreign ports as part of the marine Silk Road, an initiative of the Belt and Road Initiative, have all contributed to China's naval modernization and reliance on marine trade, especially energy imports. This line of thinking is in line with what Mahan taught us: that in order to keep one's sea power, one needs a strong navy, but also global bases, secure commerce routes, and command of the sea channels¹⁷.

A different but complimentary viewpoint was provided by British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett. The goal of command of the sea, according to Corbett, is not hegemony over the seas per se, but rather the use of naval might to further larger political and military goals. In his view, naval strength served as a practical mechanism for controlling maritime communications, safeguarding commercial trade routes, and enabling the deployment of land forces. Modern applications of this Corbettian framework within Eurasia include China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) operations in the South China Sea and Turkey's assertive naval diplomacy across the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Seas. Rather than pursuing absolute maritime dominance, both nations utilize these targeted strategies to effectively project regional influence and protect their strategic interests.

Even classical geopolitical theories like Mackinder's Heartland Theory and Spykman's Rimland Theory are maritime in some respects, despite the fact that Mahan and Corbett are interested in maritime strategy generally. As the boundary between land and sea power, Spykman placed great stress on the strategic importance of the Eurasian coastline, "Rimland" in his writings. Important naval bases, commercial routes, and choke points are located along

¹⁷ Kirchner, E. *Geo-economic and geopolitical developments in EU–Asia security relations*. Asia Europe Journal, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 333–349. 2024.

this coastline belt that stretches from Western Europe to East Asia. Global trade is made easier, and the Heartland powers are contained when these marine areas are strategically controlled.

Maritime chokepoints function as the critical valves of both the global economy and international security architecture. The concept of "chokepoints"—narrow but vital maritime transit corridors is a cornerstone of theoretical maritime geopolitics because these lanes dictate the flow of global commercial and military traffic. The security and accessibility of these geographic bottlenecks fundamentally determine the balance of international maritime power.

Across the Eurasian sphere, several highly strategic chokepoints serve as the linchpins of global trade and security, including:

- The Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait
- The Strait of Hormuz
- The Strait of Malacca
- The Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits
- Emerging Arctic Passages

The ability to either control or disrupt these narrow crossings grants a state the disproportionate power to alter the global geopolitical equilibrium. True maritime leverage often relies less on maintaining massive open-ocean fleets and more on the strategic dominance of these highly vulnerable geographic bottlenecks. Because a single disruption at any of these narrow crossings can trigger cascading economic and military crises worldwide, the ability to secure—or threaten—Eurasian chokepoints will remain a primary, high-stakes instrument of great-power competition. This outsized influence is acutely evident in how localized tensions within the Strait of Hormuz can instantly trigger worldwide volatility in oil prices, or how Russia's naval dominance over the Black Sea fundamentally shaped the strategic landscape during the conflict in Ukraine.

Modern maritime geopolitics is no longer limited to naval battles. In contemporary international relations, maritime geopolitics extends far beyond traditional naval warfare to encompass the security of global supply chains, submarine communication cables, and critical energy infrastructure like offshore platforms and LNG facilities. Furthermore, climate change is reshaping global trade by opening new strategic waterways—most notably the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast, which significantly reduces shipping times between Europe and Asia. Consequently, Eurasian nations are adapting by fusing classical naval doctrine with modern economic statecraft, investing heavily in maritime domain awareness, port development, and fleet modernization. The theoretical principles of maritime geopolitics demonstrate that true sea power extends beyond mere oceanic dominance; rather, it requires the strategic synchronization of naval strength, commercial trade, and geographic positioning to advance national objectives. Because Eurasia is encircled by the globe's most critical

waterways and straits, its maritime strategies are inextricably linked to its continental geopolitics. Ultimately, a synthesis of Mahanian naval supremacy, Corbett's strategic adaptability, and the Rimland theory's emphasis on coastal control continues to dictate how Eurasian nations maneuver within the highly competitive global maritime system.

Situational Analysis of Contemporary Maritime Strategies in the Eurasian Theater

Maritime strategies are shaped by three overlapping logics: (1) access and denial—securing one's own sea lines of communication (SLOCs) while threatening an adversary's; (2) connection and control—owning or influencing port infrastructure, logistics chains, and undersea cables; and (3) lawfare and legitimacy—using legal regimes, coast guards, and multilateral forums to normalize one's presence¹⁸. Great powers combine blue-water navies with grey-zone tools (maritime militia, cyber operations, sanctions on shipping, financing of ports) to compete below the threshold of open war while accumulating positional advantages around chokepoints.

Arctic and High North

The Arctic and the High North, once characterized by the doctrine of "Arctic exceptionalism"—where low geopolitical tension was prioritized over military interests—have emerged as central arenas of global strategic competition. Climate change, which has accelerated the melting of polar ice, is the primary driver of this transformation, simultaneously opening new maritime trade routes, granting access to untapped hydrocarbon and mineral resources, and lowering the barriers for military projection. The Arctic is increasingly becoming a litmus test for the multipolar order. While the Arctic Council has traditionally served as the primary forum for regional governance, its efficacy has been severely undermined by the geopolitical fallout of the conflict in Ukraine. The current regional order is shifting toward a bifurcated structure: one dominated by Russia-China alignment focused on extraction and transit, and another driven by NATO and its Arctic partners focused on sovereignty, defense, and the maintenance of international maritime law.

The region is undergoing rapid militarization, driven largely by Russia's desire to secure its northern periphery and the Western response to this buildup. Russia has aggressively rehabilitated Soviet-era military infrastructure, radar installations, and airfields, positioning the Arctic as a critical pillar of its national security doctrine. Conversely, the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has fundamentally altered the security architecture of the High

¹⁸ Al-Hasnawi, A. H. M. *The Russian-Ukrainian war and its implications for international security: A geopolitical vision*. Texas Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, Vol. 9, pp. 177–192. 2022.

North, turning the Arctic into a region where the NATO alliance directly borders Russian territory, thereby heightening the potential for conventional military friction.

For China, the Arctic represents a crucial extension of its global connectivity strategy. Beijing characterizes itself as a "near-Arctic state," viewing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as the "Polar Silk Road." This is not merely an environmental opportunity; it is a strategic attempt to diversify China's energy supply and reduce reliance on vulnerable maritime chokepoints like the Malacca Strait. By investing in Russian infrastructure, China has embedded its economic interests deep within the Arctic circle, creating a potent Russia-China axis that challenges Western dominance in polar maritime governance.

The transformation of the Arctic from an impenetrable ice barrier into a navigable maritime corridor fundamentally alters the broader Eurasian security calculus. Historically relegated to the periphery of global geopolitics, the Arctic and High North have rapidly emerged as central theaters of strategic competition, driven by accelerating climate change, technological advancements, and shifting great-power dynamics. The receding polar ice is unlocking previously inaccessible maritime corridors, most notably the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along Russia's Siberian coast and, to a lesser extent, Canada's Northwest Passage. By bypassing traditional maritime chokepoints like the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca, these emerging routes have the potential to reduce transit times between European and Asian markets by as much as 40 percent. However, beyond serving as a highly efficient commercial shortcut, the Arctic represents a coveted geopolitical prize; its vast, untapped reserves of hydrocarbons, critical rare earth minerals, and abundant fisheries make it a vital focal point for both economic expansion and national security. Russia holds the largest Arctic coastline and views the High North as a core component of its national security and economic future. Its "icebreaker-led bastion" strategy combines military fortification with commercial development. The "bastion" concept—rooted in Soviet naval doctrine—refers to creating heavily defended maritime zones from which strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) can operate with relative safety, ensuring second-strike nuclear deterrence. The Barents Sea and Kara Sea are central to this approach, hosting critical naval bases such as Murmansk and Severomorsk, as well as modernized airfields, radar stations, and coastal defense missile systems.

Alongside these military resources, Russia also has the largest fleet of nuclear-powered icebreakers in the world, which allows it to keep the Arctic shipping routes open all the year round and transport business ships through the NSR. This control enables the imposition of transit charges, the control of passage through the environmental and safety standards set by Moscow, and even limiting transit during the geopolitical crisis. The NSR has dual-use ports, including those at Dikson, Sabetta and Tiksi, which can accommodate commercial shipping and naval logistics, and which combine economic and military purposes.

While NATO as an alliance does not have a formal Arctic strategy, several member states—Norway, Denmark (via Greenland), Iceland, Canada, and the United States—maintain significant interests and military capabilities in the region. NATO currently lacks a unified, formal Arctic doctrine, several key member states—including the United States, Canada, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark (via Greenland)—maintain substantial strategic interests and military assets within the High North. The alliance's primary operational focus in the region is containing Russian naval projection, specifically monitoring the transit of Russian submarines from Arctic waters into the North Atlantic via the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. This narrow maritime corridor serves as the linchpin for NATO's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) architecture, enabling allied forces to detect, track, and potentially intercept Russian vessels before they can threaten the vital transatlantic sea lines of communication that connect North America to Europe.

In addition to ASW patrols, NATO states prioritize domain awareness, which involves a combination of satellite surveillance, over-the-horizon radar, unmanned aerial systems, and underwater sensor networks. Protecting undersea infrastructure—such as transatlantic data cables and gas pipelines—is a growing priority given the vulnerability of seabed assets to sabotage or covert interference, as highlighted by incidents like the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage in 2022¹⁹.

China's self-designation as a near-Arctic state underscores a deliberate, long-term strategy to project power far beyond its traditional maritime borders. Despite lacking any territorial claims in the Arctic, China has unilaterally declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and emerged as a highly active player in polar geopolitics. Beijing's interests in the region are multifaceted. By establishing a "Polar Silk Road" as a northern extension of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China actively seeks alternative trade corridors to mitigate its strategic vulnerability and reduce overreliance on traditional maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the Suez Canal.

To advance these objectives, Beijing has directed massive investments toward polar research, specialized ice-capable vessels like its *Xue Long* (Snow Dragon) icebreakers, and critical infrastructure—most notably through joint ventures in Russia's Yamal LNG project and port development in Kirkenes, Norway. Furthermore, China maintains a physical foothold in the High North via research stations in Svalbard. However, while Beijing consistently frames its expanding footprint as purely scientific and commercial, traditional Arctic nations view these activities with mounting suspicion. There is growing apprehension that China's

¹⁹ Glaser, M., & Thomann, P. E. *The concept of "Greater Eurasia": The Russian turn to the East and its consequences for the European Union from the geopolitical angle of analysis*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 3–15. 2022.

presence could eventually transition into overt strategic or military posturing, a concern deeply amplified by its increasingly close cooperation with Russia.

Climate change is both enabling and complicating Arctic geopolitics. On one hand, longer ice-free seasons make the NSR and other Arctic routes more commercially viable, potentially transforming global shipping patterns. On the other hand, the environmental risks are profound: fragile ecosystems are vulnerable to oil spills, shipping accidents, and overfishing. Furthermore, the thawing permafrost threatens infrastructure stability, including runways, pipelines, and radar installations.

- The traditional governance structures of the Arctic are fracturing under the weight of modern geopolitical realities. The regulatory architecture of the High North relies fundamentally on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Arctic Council, a forum designed to foster collaboration among the eight polar nations. However, escalating geopolitical rivalries are currently testing the limits and efficacy of these established institutions. Following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's suspension from the Arctic Council severely fractured multilateral diplomacy in the region. Furthermore, the rapid influx of new commercial and military participants makes it increasingly difficult to achieve a working consensus on crucial shared challenges, such as environmental protections, shipping safety protocols, and coordinated search-and-rescue operations. The emergence of navigable Arctic corridors presents a lucrative opportunity for global shipping. While the accessibility of new Arctic sea lanes has drawn the attention of international shipping conglomerates, prohibitive operational costs, a lack of emergency support infrastructure, and volatile ice conditions continue to drive up insurance premiums. Furthermore, underwriters evaluate not only these severe environmental perils but also the escalating geopolitical risks associated with the region's rapid militarization. Russia actively exploits this high-risk environment for political gain; by controlling the necessary icebreaker escorts and maritime safety infrastructure, Moscow effectively acts as the absolute gatekeeper to polar commerce, thereby cementing its strategic and economic dominance over the High North.

Baltic and North Atlantic



Figure 2.2: Baltic Sea

Because of its location, dense military population, and closeness to rival Russian and NATO troops, the Baltic Sea area is one of the most militarily important maritime theaters in Eurasia. The Danish Straits and other limited entry ports, along with its contained character, make it a possible flashpoint with significant escalation risks and short reaction times²⁰. This area is significant for more than only the coastline states of Sweden, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and Estonia; it is also a key maritime passageway that links Eastern and Central Europe

²⁰ Berryman, J. *Russian security strategy and the geopolitics of Eurasia*. In *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, pp. 288–298. Routledge. 2019.

to the Atlantic via the North Sea. As a result, the Baltic Sea is now a crucial commercial, energy, and digital connection shipping route in addition to a military operations theater.

Moscow's military stance in the Baltic is centered around the Kaliningrad exclave, which is situated between Poland and Lithuania. Kaliningrad is an A2/AD zone that is forward-deployed and has a large military presence despite its small size. Among its superior electronic warfare (EW) capabilities are the S-400 air defense systems, the Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles, and the Bastion-P coastal defense systems. In the event of a crisis, this combination gives Russia the ability to pose a danger to NATO aircraft, ships, and ground forces that are active in the Baltic region.

The Kaliningrad A2/AD bubble also integrates with Russia's Baltic Fleet, based in Baltiysk, which includes corvettes, submarines, and missile-equipped patrol craft. These forces can target both maritime and land assets, reinforcing Russia's deterrence posture and complicating NATO's operational planning.

For NATO, the Baltic theater poses two interconnected challenges: ensuring the resilience of trans-Atlantic logistics and safeguarding critical seabed infrastructure. In the event of a crisis, NATO would need to rapidly reinforce its Baltic members—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—by moving troops, equipment, and supplies across the Atlantic from North America and through Northern Europe. This trans-Atlantic reinforcement route relies on secure maritime corridors in both the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea, making it vulnerable to Russian interdiction efforts.

Seabed infrastructure adds another layer of strategic concern. The Baltic hosts a dense network of undersea pipelines, electricity interconnectors, and fiber-optic cables that carry energy and data across Europe. Incidents such as the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage in 2022 highlighted the vulnerability of these assets to sabotage, cyber-attacks, or covert military operations. Protecting them requires persistent surveillance, coordination with civilian operators, and rapid repair capabilities—a task complicated by the high operational tempo in the region.

Given Russia's A2/AD posture, NATO's maritime strategy in the Baltic emphasizes distributed maritime operations (DMO). This approach disperses naval assets across the battlespace to dilute the effectiveness of Russian targeting and to ensure that no single strike can decisively degrade NATO's maritime capabilities. Smaller, mobile surface combatants, submarines, and unmanned platforms—combined with integrated air and missile defense—are critical to this strategy.

The concept of deterrence by denial is central to NATO's approach. Instead of relying solely on the threat of retaliation, deterrence by denial focuses on convincing Russia that any attempt to seize territory or disrupt NATO operations in the Baltic would be militarily futile

from the outset. This involves pre-positioned forces, rapid reaction units, robust coastal defense systems, and integration of Baltic states' national forces into NATO command structures.

The Baltic's security is inseparable from the broader North Atlantic theater. The GIUK Gap (Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom) remains a critical chokepoint for detecting and countering Russian submarine movements from the Arctic into the Atlantic. NATO's ability to secure the GIUK Gap directly impacts its capacity to protect SLOCs to Northern Europe and, by extension, to sustain operations in the Baltic. Maritime patrol aircraft, ASW destroyers, and undersea sensor arrays are therefore vital elements of the trans-Atlantic security architecture.

In this interconnected battlespace, Russia's Northern Fleet and Baltic Fleet could coordinate operations to create strategic dilemmas for NATO, forcing it to divide resources between defending the GIUK Gap and countering A2/AD threats in the Baltic.

Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean



Figure 2.3: Black Sea

Through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, the Mediterranean can also be reached; the Black Sea serves as a marine gateway to the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus. Due to its location, which serves as a base for the projection of military force and as a hub for energy transportation and regional trade, it is strategically important²¹. The

²¹ Druzhinin, A. G. *The geopolitical effect of the maritime factor on the spatial development of post-Soviet Russia: The Baltic case*. Baltic Region, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 6–23. 2023.

Montreux Convention of 1936, on the other hand, gives Turkey control of the straits and the power to control the flow of naval ships, making it distinct from other maritime agreements affecting the Black Sea. Ankara has a significant strategic advantage against NATO and other foreign powers that want to do business in the region due to this treaty, which limits the tonnage and duration of stay of non-Black Sea fleets.

The "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) concept is the core of Turkey's maritime strategy; it foresees a huge expansion of Turkish influence over neighboring seas, such as the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Specifically, for the Black Sea, this includes ensuring access to offshore energy resources, building indigenous navy assets like the TCG Anadolu amphibious assault ship, and keeping credible sea control capabilities. As a geopolitical power, Turkey uses its control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles as a negotiating chip, particularly in confrontations between Russia and NATO. The overarching goal of the concept is to transform marine zones into economic and political powerhouses through the integration of naval force posture with energy development.

Russia has turned the naval facility at Sevastopol into the nerve center of the Black Sea Fleet's operations after annexing Crimea in 2014. Submarines, surface combatants equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles, coastal defense batteries, and modern air defense systems are all part of the fleet's goal to prevent enemy forces from achieving maritime superiority, a tactic known as sea denial. Russia can keep an eye on NATO's moves in the area and perhaps pose a threat to them thanks to the Crimean Peninsula's integrated ISR assets. With these capabilities, Russia may blockade trade lanes, endanger marine commerce, and project power into the Eastern Mediterranean via the Syrian port of Tartus during times of conflict.

NATO's Black Sea littoral members—Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—focus heavily on coastal defense, given the constraints of the Montreux Convention. Their strategies include deploying shore-based anti-ship missiles, fast attack craft, and unmanned surface and subsurface systems to detect and counter Russian naval operations. Sea-mining and clearance operations are also central, as mine warfare remains a cost-effective way to restrict adversary mobility. Multinational naval exercises such as Sea Breeze aim to enhance interoperability among NATO members and partners like Ukraine and Georgia. However, permanent NATO maritime presence is limited, making rotational deployments and joint exercises essential to sustaining deterrence.



Figure 2.4: Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean has emerged as a highly contested maritime space due to overlapping Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims, driven largely by recent offshore natural gas discoveries. Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt each assert maritime boundaries that often overlap, leading to disputes over resource rights and pipeline routes. This contest is compounded by historical rivalries—particularly between Turkey and Greece—and by Ankara’s non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus’ EEZ.

Seismic surveys and exploratory drilling have become forms of strategic signaling, often conducted under the escort of naval vessels. Naval exercises—whether unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral—serve to reinforce claims and demonstrate readiness to defend them. For example, Turkey’s joint drills with Libya under their controversial maritime delimitation

agreement directly challenge Greek and Egyptian claims, while Greece and Cyprus conduct similar exercises with France, Italy, and Israel.

The struggle for control over regional energy flows heavily fuels maritime rivalry. Energy geopolitics significantly exacerbates maritime competition in this theater. The regional energy landscape serves as another major catalyst for maritime rivalry. Initiatives like the proposed EastMed pipeline—designed to transport Cypriot and Israeli gas directly to Europe via Greece—actively seek to bypass Turkey and strip Ankara of its status as the primary energy transit hub. In response, Turkey aggressively advocates for alternative frameworks, promoting overland pipelines across its territory or LNG transit through its sovereign waters. Concurrently, Russia is actively cementing its own economic and political leverage in the region through projects like the TurkStream pipeline, which secures Russian natural gas exports to European markets via the Black Sea and Turkey²².

There is an operational and strategic connection between the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Black Sea can be used as a projection of power into the Eastern Med, with the Mediterranean naval actions being able to supply pressure or ease it in the Black Sea theater. Both regions are also arenas for hybrid warfare, including cyber operations against port infrastructure, information campaigns to influence public opinion, and covert sabotage of energy or communication lines. The convergence of legal disputes, energy competition, and military maneuvering makes this combined maritime space one of the most volatile in Eurasia.

²² Gresh, G. F. *Introduction: Why Maritime Eurasia?* In *Eurasia's Maritime Rise and Global Security: From the Indian Ocean to Pacific Asia and the Arctic*, pp. 1–14. Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Caspian Sea (The Inland Theater)



Figure 2.5: Caspian Sea

The Caspian Sea represents a unique maritime domain because it is an inland, landlocked body of water with restricted access to the open oceans. Its legal status is governed by the Caspian Convention (2018), which delineates territorial waters, seabed ownership, and resource exploitation rights among the five littoral states: Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Unlike the open seas, the Caspian does not allow for global naval projection, but it serves as a critical regional security buffer and energy corridor, making its strategic management essential for Eurasian powers.

Naval strategies in the Caspian Sea are heavily defined by the protection of energy assets and territorial defense. Russia commands the region's most formidable maritime force, leveraging its Caspian Flotilla's missile-equipped vessels for sea denial, integrated air defense, and localized power projection against rival littoral states. Russia asserts a dominant naval posture within the Caspian Sea, prioritizing sea-denial operations, integrated air defense, and the safeguarding of critical offshore energy infrastructure. Its Caspian Flotilla utilizes missile-armed vessels to deter neighboring littoral states and project localized power along the southern and eastern seaboards. Similarly, Iran concentrates on securing its northern coastline and energy reserves by deploying fast attack craft, anti-ship missile systems, and coastal radar

networks. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan has steadily upgraded its maritime forces—focusing on rapid-response and coastal defense operations—to actively protect its vital maritime transit routes and the strategic Shah Deniz gas field. Strategic priorities in the Caspian revolve around two main dimensions. First, the protection of hydrocarbon infrastructure is paramount, as the Caspian is rich in energy resources that feed both regional and global markets. Offshore platforms, undersea pipelines, and ports require constant monitoring and defense against potential military or non-state threats. Second, the Caspian is increasingly seen as a corridor for trans-Caspian energy projects, such as pipelines connecting Central Asia to Europe or South Asia. These connectors have the potential to reshape Eurasian energy flows, reduce dependence on traditional maritime chokepoints, and influence bargaining power among littoral states and external powers.

Despite being a closed sea, the Caspian holds wider geopolitical implications. Energy security, regional stability, and maritime law intersect here, creating a theater where even modest naval forces wield significant influence. The interplay among littoral states reflects a delicate balance of deterrence, diplomacy, and resource management, underscoring how inland maritime strategy differs from traditional oceanic geopolitics while remaining integral to Eurasia's overall strategic calculus.

Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Gulf of Oman



Figure 2.6: Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman

The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis serves as a brutal catalyst for the reorganization of the Eurasian world order. It has permanently erased the complacency that defined post-Cold War maritime trade. For the Eurasian heartland and the balancing powers of South and East Asia, the conflict proves that maritime chokepoints are unacceptable single points of failure.

The Persian Gulf is one of the most strategic sea areas in the globe because of the highest concentration of hydrocarbons and the world energy circulation. This is a traditional example of a maritime chokepoint through which about one-fifth of the world's oil is passed.

The Strait of Hormuz which is only 33 kilometers at the narrowest section acts as the entrance to the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and finally the Arabian Sea. Any form of control or interference in this strait is of international energy market implication such that it is the heart of the regional and international strategic planning. Any interruption in traffic here

can immediately affect oil prices and shipping insurance, highlighting the interplay of military strategy and economic vulnerability in maritime geopolitics²³.

Positioned as the preeminent littoral power along the Gulf's northern coast, Iran employs a highly asymmetric maritime doctrine. This strategy relies on swarm tactics utilizing fast-attack craft, coupled with anti-ship missiles, naval mines, and unmanned aerial vehicles to disrupt the operational calculus of technologically superior navies. Furthermore, Tehran frequently engages in grey-zone operations—such as the seizure of commercial vessels, maritime harassment, and electronic warfare like AIS spoofing—to elevate the risks for adversaries while retaining plausible deniability. Ultimately, rather than seeking absolute control over the strait, Iran utilizes these disruptive capabilities to generate geopolitical leverage, signaling that any regional intervention will incur severely disproportionate costs.

On the other side, the U.S. Fifth Fleet, along with the navies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and supporting European maritime task forces, focus on ensuring freedom of navigation and safe passage for commercial traffic. Their strategies include convoying merchant vessels, maintaining robust air and missile defense networks, deploying mine countermeasure capabilities, and conducting regular naval exercises to demonstrate deterrence²⁴. This combination of forward-deployed presence, technological superiority, and multinational coordination aims to mitigate Iran's asymmetric tactics and ensure that the Strait of Hormuz remains open for energy transport.

Finally, the commercial gravity of this maritime theater is undeniable. Geopolitical risk is actively monetized through elevated freight and insurance premiums, reflecting the constant threat of disruption. Political volatility is directly priced into freight rates and insurance premiums, reflecting the persistent threat of conflict or logistical disruption along these vital transit corridors. This "financialization" of maritime security means that state strategic behavior is inextricably linked to market dynamics, with shipping conglomerates and underwriters constantly translating geopolitical risk into operational costs. Consequently, the convergence of military doctrine, global commerce, and maritime geopolitics renders the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz among the most volatile and heavily scrutinized waterways in the world.

Red Sea and Bab El-Mandeb

The geopolitical conceptualization of the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait requires moving beyond traditional, land-centric International Relations (IR) paradigms. Historically viewed merely as a geographic boundary separating the Arabian Peninsula from the Horn of

²³ Biscop, S. *War for Ukraine and the Rediscovery of Geopolitics*. Egmont Institute, Policy Paper No. 123. 2023.

²⁴ Shahi, D. K. *War in Ukraine: A geopolitical analysis*. International Journal of Research in Social Science, Vol. 12, No. 6. 2022.

Africa, contemporary IR theory frames this corridor as a dynamic, interregional geopolitical space. The theoretical approach to understanding this critical chokepoint integrates constructivist political geography, geoeconomic realism, and Neo-Mahanian sea power theory. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait—approximately 32 kilometers wide at its narrowest point—represents the ultimate manifestation of "weaponized interdependence." IR theorists increasingly use the framework of "Chokepoint Diplomacy" to analyze the strategic behavior of state and non-state actors in this corridor.

One of the world's most strategically important maritime bottlenecks is the Mandeb Strait, which is also known as Bab el Mandeb Strait in Arabic. With Djibouti and Eritrea on the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen) on the Arabian Peninsula, this region forms the southern entry to the Red Sea and allows the Suez Canal to reach the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Aden. At its narrowest point, this strait is just about 30 km wide, but it carries a huge amount of European-Asia container traffic, a large amount of LNG exports, and about 10% of the world's seaborne oil trade. Any disruption here instantly reverberates through global energy markets, shipping schedules, and commodity prices, making the Bab el-Mandeb a pivotal node in global supply chains.

The strait's proximity to volatile regions makes it inherently vulnerable. On the northern shore, Yemen's ongoing conflict creates persistent risks to shipping, particularly from the Houthi movement, which has demonstrated capabilities in deploying anti-ship missiles, explosive-laden drones, and sea mines. On the southern shore, the Horn of Africa's complex political environment—including instability in Somalia, periodic unrest in Eritrea, and political volatility in Sudan—adds layers of uncertainty. Instability on either side can quickly translate into threats to vessel safety, deterring commercial traffic or forcing costly rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope.

Given its geostrategic value, the Bab el-Mandeb is a focal point for great-power maritime presence and port diplomacy.

- The city has become a party to foreign military bases with the United States, China, France and Japan installation being based in Djibouti, turning the city into one of the most militarized port cities in the world.
- Berbera, in Somaliland, is being developed with Emirati investment to serve as a logistics and naval hub.
- Port Sudan is the subject of Russian interest for establishing a naval logistics facility, giving Moscow a Red Sea foothold. Partnerships with Egypt and Saudi Arabia also play a major role, as both countries view the security of the Red Sea and Suez Canal as existential economic concerns. Egypt's navy, in particular,

maintains a strong patrol and interdiction presence, while Saudi Arabia has been expanding its maritime domain awareness and coastal defense networks²⁵.

One of the most significant security risks in the Bab el-Mandeb lies in sea-denial strategies. Even low-cost measures—such as deploying sea mines, using explosive drones, or firing shore-based anti-ship missiles—can temporarily halt commercial shipping or spike global oil prices. The narrowness of the strait amplifies these risks, as ships have limited maneuvering space to evade threats. The ripple effect of even a short disruption is global: shipping insurance premiums surge, freight costs rise, and supply chains are forced to reroute, often via the Cape of Good Hope, adding weeks and substantial costs to delivery times.

The Red Sea–Bab el-Mandeb corridor is not just a regional concern—it is a global economic artery. A localized maritime incident here can trigger a cascading chain reaction: container delays impact manufacturing in Europe and Asia, oil price volatility affects energy markets worldwide, and rerouted vessels strain alternate ports and shipping lanes. This makes the strait’s security a shared interest among global powers, encouraging multinational naval patrols, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises in the region. Yet, the same interest also fuels geopolitical competition, as states seek to secure influence over the ports and political actors that shape Bab el-Mandeb’s future.

Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea

The resource-rich Middle East and Africa trade with the industrial East Asia and the consumer markets of Europe and North America via the Indian Ocean, which connects the two halves of Eurasia. Essential LNG traffic, bulk commodities, and container traffic all go through its seas. The Arabian Sea, located at the very tip of the planet, is an important maritime crossroads for energy security and great-power rivalry because of its direct connections to South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea²⁶. The chokepoints of this ocean, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and Malacca Strait, are crucial to maritime strategy due to the importance of its SLOCs.

Encapsulated in its strategic doctrine of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), India has actively consolidated its role as a net security provider within the Indian Ocean. This framework prioritizes the protection of sovereign maritime interests alongside the maintenance of open and secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Operationally, the Andaman and Nicobar Command functions as a critical forward operating base, enabling the Indian Navy to patrol—and potentially interdict—maritime traffic traversing the Strait of

²⁵ Buriachenko, O. *The Russian–Ukrainian war as a new type of postmodern war and a factor in global transformations of the geopolitical landscape*. Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences, No. 3, pp. 192–202. 2024.

²⁶ Pascariu, G. C., Holovko-Havrysheva, O., & Krayevska, O. *Ukraine: Geopolitical realities and regional development perspectives*. Regional Science Policy & Practice, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 3–7. 2023.

Malacca, a profound chokepoint vulnerability for Chinese energy and trade shipments. To enhance its Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), New Delhi has established an expansive coastal radar surveillance network integrated with key island partners, including Mauritius, the Seychelles, and the Maldives. Furthermore, through bilateral logistics exchange agreements with the United States, France, Australia, and Japan, India has secured reciprocal port access, significantly projecting its operational reach from the western Indian Ocean into the South China Sea. Known as the Maritime Silk Road, this Chinese strategy for the Indian Ocean incorporates the financing and building of infrastructures, the establishment of ports, and military access. The strategic locations of Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Djibouti (Horn of Africa) as well as regular use of ports like Duqm (Oman) and Khalifa (UAE) make up the so-called String of Pearls. Beijing has SLOCs that may assist logistics during peacetime and potentially serve as staging areas during wartime, thanks to long-term leases, debt-financing designs, and dual-use designing elements, even if most of them are commercial. The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has established a permanent presence in Djibouti and conducts anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, suggesting that it intends to continue blue-water operations in the Indian Ocean.

Operating as both a commercial nexus and a geostrategic linchpin, Gwadar Port is central to Pakistan's maritime doctrine and the broader China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). To defend this vital asset against technologically superior adversaries, the Pakistan Navy employs an asymmetric sea-denial strategy, relying heavily on submarines, coastal defense missile batteries, and fast-attack craft. By capitalizing on Gwadar's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, Islamabad not only secures substantial leverage over critical energy transit corridors but also deeply synchronizes its maritime objectives with Beijing's overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Indian Ocean Island countries Maldives, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Mauritius act more like swing states in maritime geopolitics. They are geographically suitable as logistics centers, surveillance or forward deployable navy bases. Rather than enforcing their presence by brute military force, great powers tend to be courtly to such states with offers of concessions, donation of patrol boats, infrastructure projects, and soft credits, and gain influence at a fraction of the cost of brute naval tonnage. These ties may be decisive in increasing an operational range or in withholding other powers vital basing privileges²⁷.

. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising India, Japan, Australia, and the United States—has emerged as the primary mechanism for coordinating maritime security across the Indian Ocean. Its strategic agenda prioritizes joint naval exercises, the integration of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), and the safeguarding of subsea communication cables vital to the global digital economy. Complementing the Quad, a web of smaller minilateral frameworks—such as the India-France-Australia and India-Japan-US trilateral

²⁷ Kotoulas, I. E., & Pusztai, W. *Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine*. Foreign Affairs Institute, Issue No. 91. 2022.

dialogues—facilitates targeted intelligence exchange and regional military drills. Together, these partnerships forge a networked security architecture specifically designed to counterbalance China’s expanding maritime footprint. Ultimately, this multi-layered collaborative strategy enhances infrastructural resilience, fortifies critical trade routes, and stabilizes one of the world’s most fiercely contested maritime domains.

South China Sea and Western Pacific



Figure 2.7: South China Sea (SCS)

Functioning as the critical hinge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the South China Sea (SCS) represents a premier flashpoint in contemporary geopolitics. Situated at the strategic confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the South China Sea (SCS) remains one of the world’s most contested and vital maritime domains. Beyond sustaining some of Asia’s most lucrative fisheries and holding substantial untapped hydrocarbon reserves, the waterway facilitates approximately one-third of global maritime trade. Geopolitically, the SCS sits at the volatile intersection of China’s expansive maritime ambitions, the national security imperatives of Southeast Asian littoral states, and the commitment of the United States and its allies to preserving freedom of navigation. Because of its central position along the Eurasian maritime periphery, hegemony over the SCS equates to dominant leverage over the vital commercial arteries, energy flows, and security architectures that link the Middle East to Northeast Asia.

Beijing has effectively transformed the South China Sea into a laboratory for grey-zone warfare. The South China Sea serves as the primary theater for Beijing's "grey-zone" operations - asymmetric tactics designed to incrementally alter the strategic balance of power while remaining deliberately below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. This strategy is operationalized through a synchronized combination of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) architectures, the deployment of a paramilitary maritime militia, aggressive land reclamation on contested features, and revisionist legal narratives anchored by the ambiguous nine-dash line. By transforming submerged reefs into heavily fortified artificial islands equipped with airstrips, advanced radar, and missile batteries, China systematically creates strategic *faits accomplis*, attempting to translate *de facto* physical occupation into *de jure* sovereign legitimacy and unassailable maritime control. Southeast Asian littoral states navigate their territorial disputes in the South China Sea through a complex blend of military capacity-building, international law, and strategic hedging. To counter territorial encroachments, Southeast Asian claimant states—namely Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei—employ a multifaceted strategy encompassing military modernization, legal recourse, and strategic hedging. In the realm of legal warfare ("lawfare"), a primary example is the historic 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling under UNCLOS initiated by the Philippines, which fundamentally invalidated China's expansive maritime claims, despite Beijing's categorical rejection of the verdict. Militarily, these littoral states are prioritizing the modernization of their coast guard fleets and airborne surveillance assets to ensure a sustained operational presence within contested waters. Diplomatically, they execute a delicate balancing act: maintaining vital economic engagement with China while simultaneously deepening strategic partnerships with extra-regional naval powers—such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom—to deter aggression without provoking overt military escalation. In response to Beijing's territorial assertions, to challenge excessive maritime claims and ensure unimpeded access to vital sea lanes, the United States and its allies routinely execute Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). These operations are robustly reinforced by joint military exercises with regional partners, sustained Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions, and continuous submarine patrols. The primary strategic objective is to prevent the normalization of China's expansive maritime hegemony, safeguard the global commons, and reaffirm Washington's security commitments to its Indo-Pacific allies. Furthermore, the active participation of extra-regional powers—such as Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France—in these patrols underscores a growing multilateral consensus aimed at deterring unilateral aggression and preserving a rules-based maritime order. The First and Second Island Chains east of the SCS are also an archipelagic chain of chokepoints between Japan and Taiwan, Philippines, and to Borneo. These chains of islands play a crucial role in the anti-submarine warfare (ASW), positioning of long-range strikes and controlling sea lanes of any major conflict where China is involved. The cooperation between the UK and the US, which is currently known as the Australian-UK-US (AUKUS) and the US-Japan-

Philippines (defense integration) cooperation is paying more attention to hardening these chokepoints with improved undersea sensors, long-range missile launchers, and pre-deployed logistical bases. This forms a multilevel marine defense system that links the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean via the most important points of the Luzon Strait, Malacca Strait, and the other regional waterways.

Sub-surface and seabed competition

Modern global connectivity depends overwhelmingly on undersea infrastructure. Over 95% of international data traffic flows through submarine fiber-optic cables, not satellites. These cables, along with seabed pipelines for oil and gas and high-voltage interconnectors for electricity, form the hidden circulatory system of the global economy. While physically unobtrusive and often unprotected, they are indispensable for finance, communications, energy security, and military command-and-control. As such, they have become increasingly recognized as strategic vulnerabilities—and therefore as attractive targets in grey-zone and hybrid conflict²⁸.

Seabed infrastructure is increasingly being leveraged by states as both a strategic asset and a primary target for geopolitical coercion. The sabotage or disruption of these underwater networks can inflict catastrophic economic costs, destabilize global markets, and severely undermine a state's defensive credibility. Because subsea assets are widely dispersed, lightly monitored, and nearly impossible to defend comprehensively, they grant adversaries the crucial advantage of plausible deniability—making the deep ocean an ideal arena for hybrid and covert warfare. The 2022 Nord Stream pipeline explosions serve as a definitive case study in this new domain, highlighting the extreme vulnerability of seabed infrastructure and the immense challenges of establishing definitive attribution.

The competition over the seabed has driven the growth of specialized undersea capabilities:

- Attack and special mission submarines can map, monitor, or interfere with cables and pipelines.
- Specialized surface vessels with deep-sea remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) are used for cable repair—or potentially for tapping and sabotage.
- Uncrewed underwater vehicles (UUVs) extend reach into shallow and deep-water zones, enabling covert surveillance and precision targeting of seabed infrastructure.

These tools are increasingly integrated into the doctrines of major powers like

²⁸ Van de Graaf, T. *The geopolitics of energy after Russia's war in Ukraine*. In *Forging Europe's Leadership: Global Trends, Russian Aggression and the Risk of a Regressive World*, pp. 25–40. Foundation for European Progressive Studies. 2023.

the US, Russia, China, and several NATO members, turning the seabed into a new operational domain.

Under the acknowledgment of the strategic risk, NATO has made protection of the undersea infrastructure a mission-based priority. It has developed a dedicated Maritime Centre of the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure and liaises with allies to incorporate undersea surveillance into normal patrol routines. Similar frameworks have been developed by the EU, which is now pooling its coast guard, naval, and commercial resources to improve its capabilities in monitoring and responding. The Indo-Pacific countries such as Japan, Australia and India are also connecting cable security to the larger maritime domain awareness (MDA) programs, usually coordinated by the QUAD.

The mission set for navies now spans both constabulary roles (patrolling and monitoring for criminal or grey-zone activity) and high-end warfare roles (deterrence, sabotage prevention, and wartime defense). This dual requirement pushes for investments in integrated sensor networks, seabed mapping, and rapid repair capacity to restore service after disruptions. Protection is not just about military presence—it requires partnerships with private sector cable operators, energy companies, and insurance firms to ensure resilience through redundancy, route diversity, and better physical security of landing stations.

Within the framework of Eurasian maritime strategy, ports have transcended their traditional roles as mere logistical nodes to become potent geopolitical instruments. The provenance of a port's financing, construction, and operation now carries profound, long-term strategic implications. Infrastructure investments are frequently tethered to structural conditions—such as extended leases, build-operate-transfer (BOT) models, or complex debt obligations—that grant the creditor state substantial political leverage during geopolitical crises. For instance, a foreign entity holding a 99-year concession could effectively constrain a host nation's sovereign trade and security calculus during periods of heightened tension. Consequently, state-backed financial mechanisms, including sovereign wealth funds, export-credit agencies, and shipbuilding subsidies, are actively deployed as instruments of power projection, rivaling conventional naval deployments. Furthermore, while the digitization of port management and terminal automation enhances operational efficiency, it simultaneously introduces severe cyber vulnerabilities; a targeted malware intrusion could paralyze global trade just as effectively as a physical maritime blockade. To avoid the high costs and risks of open warfare, many states now rely on lawfare—the strategic use of legal frameworks—to advance maritime claims. This includes expansive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claims, domestic administrative actions such as fishing bans or licensing requirements, and the forward deployment of coast guards and maritime militia. These forces, often backed by naval overwatch, blur the line between civil and military actors. This is a difficult strategy to deal with escalation management as the tactics cause ambiguity in intent and status by international law. UNCLOS arbitration has now turned into a significant reputational instrument: even the

decisions disregarded or applied partially affect politics in a coalition, international publicity, and political capital.

The rate and intensity of competition in the maritime environment are improving faster and with greater intensity due to technological innovation. Uncrewed surface and subsurface systems, long-range anti-ship missiles, targeting using satellites, and AI-enhanced ISR capabilities all reduce the time to make decisions and increase the number of participants able to achieve credible maritime denial. Small and mid-tier states can now field cheap drones and loitering munitions to create niche deterrence capabilities against much larger navies. Meanwhile, the growth of new maritime assets—including LNG and ammonia shipping, offshore wind farms, and floating storage/regasification units—has expanded the set of critical infrastructure that must be defended. Climate stress (rising sea levels, severe storms) is also reshaping naval missions, pushing them into dual-use humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations²⁹. These missions, while humanitarian in intent, have a soft-power dimension that builds influence and presence in partner countries.

- Russia pursues a strategy that blends sea denial in the Black Sea, Baltic, and Arctic with the ability to leverage seabed infrastructure and maintain selective expeditionary presence in theaters like the Eastern Mediterranean. It relies heavily on legal tools such as the Montreux Convention and controls over energy logistics.
- China seeks layered Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) security, anchored in its South China Sea positions, footholds in the Indian Ocean, and diversified routes via land bridges and Arctic shipping corridors.
- India emphasizes primacy in the Indian Ocean, continuous surveillance of the Malacca Strait, and coalition-based maritime domain awareness (MDA), while countering China's westward presence.
- Turkey leverages its control over the Turkish Straits, maritime energy mapping, and integration of drone and naval forces to influence both the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.
- Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mirror each other's strategies around the Strait of Hormuz, engaging in denial versus protection postures, with shipping security diplomacy that can directly influence global oil prices.
- The US, EU, Japan, and Australia work to guarantee open SLOCs, safeguard undersea cables, and build partner capacity. Their approach pairs Freedom of

²⁹ Rickli, J. M., & Mantellassi, F. *The war in Ukraine: Reality check for emerging technologies and the future of warfare*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). 2024.

Navigation Operations (FONOPs) with infrastructure and port finance packages to develop “trusted” maritime corridors.

Eurasia's commercial and energy architectures rely heavily on a concentrated set of maritime chokepoints; consequently, localized disruptions generate immediate, cascading global impacts—rapidly inflating freight costs, war-risk insurance premiums, and transit times. In the contemporary geopolitical arena, maritime supremacy is dictated as much by geoeconomic leverage and legal maneuvering as by traditional kinetic naval force. The capacity to dictate legal frameworks, sustain cyber-resilience at critical ports, underwrite commercial logistics, and hold subsea infrastructure at risk now rivals the strategic weight of carrier strike groups and submarine flotillas. Consequently, Eurasian maritime powers are compelled to synthesize kinetic capabilities, infrastructural statecraft, and lawfare into cohesive, continuous strategies that operate fluidly across the spectrum of peacetime, crisis, and open conflict.

Global Security Implications of Eurasian Strategic Chokepoints

Maritime chokepoints are among the most critical elements in global security because they are the narrowest and most vulnerable links in international sea routes. A disruption—whether from war, piracy, sanctions, or even accidents—can have immediate global effects on trade, energy, and strategic stability³⁰. In Eurasia, the Black Sea and Caspian Sea are not chokepoints in the classical sense like Hormuz or Malacca, but they act as regional maritime bottlenecks due to their restricted geography and high geopolitical tensions. Because both are semi-enclosed or inland seas, their control depends not only on naval capabilities but also on legal frameworks and diplomatic agreements that dictate access and usage. This combination of limited entry points and competing sovereignties makes them unusually sensitive to political crises.

Situated at the geostrategic nexus of Europe, the Middle East, and the Eurasian heartland, the Black Sea is a critical maritime theater. Its strategic weight is compounded by the fact that all naval ingress and egress must transit the Turkish Straits—the Bosphorus and Dardanelles—governed by the 1936 Montreux Convention, which grants Ankara decisive leverage over regional military deployments. For Moscow, the basin is an indispensable springboard for projecting naval power into the Mediterranean and beyond, anchored by heavily militarized assets in Crimea and Sevastopol. Conversely, NATO views the region simultaneously as a frontline deterrence perimeter and a highly vulnerable maritime corridor. As demonstrated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where naval blockades and kinetic strikes severely disrupted international grain shipments, even localized volatility in the Black Sea precipitates severe,

³⁰ Turki, A. M., & Askari, M. U. *Russia–Ukraine Conflict: Geopolitical Shifts and Declining Western Hegemony*. International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 177–186. 2025.

cascading shocks across global food and energy markets. The landlocked Caspian Sea is also of great importance since it is located on one of the richest hydrocarbon basins in the world. It is a security buffer and an energy artery that is shared by five littoral states, namely Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan. It is at the core of the energy diversification strategy of Europe because of the offshore oil and gas production, and pipeline projects like the BakuTbilisiCeyhan (BTC) pipeline and suggestions of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline. However, there is always an arm-lengthening of cooperation due to the disagreement over the division of the seabed, maritime frontiers, and military presence. The basin continues to be a closed competitive environment, with Russia and Iran having significant strategic buffers, and Western presence limited by the fact that the 2018 Caspian Convention limits the navies of non-littoral states. The stability (or instability) of the Caspian has a direct impact on the global energy costs and the process of integrating Eurasia into larger markets.

Both oceans are places where the great-power rivalry and regional conflicts collide. The battle between Russia and NATO in the Black Sea is an extension of larger conflicts over European security. Russia and Iran oppose Western influence in the Caspian and China is leading its way by infrastructure diplomacy, connecting the basin to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Smaller states such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan use geography to develop multi-vector foreign policies, which primarily puts major power against each other to guarantee security and investments. Thus, these maritime spaces are not isolated theaters, but critical junctions in the larger Eurasian geopolitical puzzle, influencing alliances, sanctions regimes, and global strategic balances.

Disruption in either the Black Sea or the Caspian quickly spills over into global supply chains. The Black Sea's role in grain exports highlights its impact on global food security, particularly in regions like Africa and the Middle East. The Caspian's pipelines and offshore fields directly affect energy prices and European diversification efforts. Moreover, both seas are now hybrid warfare laboratories, with threats ranging from seabed sabotage (pipelines and undersea cables) to cyber disruption of port facilities. Their sensitivity ensures that even localized disputes can reverberate across the global economy, amplifying their importance far beyond their immediate geography.

The Black Sea as a Strategic Chokepoint



Figure 2.8: Black Sea

As a marine gateway, the Black Sea links Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Middle East, it is one of the most unstable areas in the whole of Eurasia. Its semi-enclosed nature, combined with the control of access through the Turkish Straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles), means that every development in this basin has implications that extend beyond the immediate littoral states. Over the past decade, the Black Sea has become a focal point of geopolitical rivalry where trade, military strategy, and global food security converge.

One of the Black Sea's primary roles is as a corridor for energy flows. It hosts key pipelines, gas terminals, and shipping routes that carry hydrocarbons from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia into European markets³¹. Ports such as Sevastopol (Crimea), Odessa (Ukraine), and Constanța (Romania) are critical nodes in this network, with control over them translating into leverage over European energy security. As Europe seeks to

³¹ Bukhari, S. R. H., Khan, A. U., Noreen, S., Khan, M. T. U., Khan, M. N., & Haq, M. I. U. *Ukraine and Russia: A historical analysis of geopolitical dynamics, national identity, and conflict escalation leading to the present-day crisis*. Kurdish Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 5803–5824. 2024.

diversify away from Russian energy dependence, the Black Sea remains indispensable, since it provides transit routes for Caspian oil and gas via the Southern Gas Corridor and other regional connectors.

- Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia fundamentally transformed the Black Sea into a highly militarized, forward-operating theater. By leveraging the peninsula's naval and air installations, Moscow has established a formidable Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) bubble, underpinned by long-range missile batteries and modernized naval assets. This entrenched posture severely restricts NATO's freedom of maneuver, complicating the alliance's ability to rapidly reinforce its Eastern European members during a crisis. Consequently, littoral NATO states—such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—face the acute challenge of deterring Russian power projection while safeguarding their sovereign coastlines and critical infrastructure. Ultimately, the Black Sea functions dually as a vital strategic buffer zone for Russia and a systemic pressure point for NATO. The strategic reverberations of Black Sea instability extend far beyond its littoral borders, generating systemic shocks on a global scale. The weaponization of Ukrainian grain exports by Russia serves as a primary example, demonstrating how localized maritime blockades can precipitate acute food insecurity and price spikes in vulnerable markets across the Middle East and Africa. Beyond agricultural transit, the seabed itself constitutes a critical vulnerability, hosting a dense network of energy pipelines and digital cables essential to the continent. As these subsea assets become prime targets for sabotage and hybrid military operations, the foundational resilience of European economies is increasingly challenged. Consequently, the Black Sea must be understood not merely as a regional conflict zone, but as a systemic chokepoint capable of destabilizing global political and economic frameworks.

The Caspian Sea as an Inland Energy Theater

Although the Caspian Sea is landlocked, it occupies an outsized role in Eurasia's energy and security dynamics. Bordered by Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, it serves as a vital hub for hydrocarbon resources, regional security, and geoeconomic competition. Unlike open oceans, the Caspian's legal framework, restricted access, and geography make it a self-contained but globally significant energy theater, where the balance between cooperation and rivalry constantly shapes its geopolitical relevance.

The Caspian Basin has been blessed with enormous deposits of oil and natural gas which makes it a pillar of the world energy market. Offshore fields e.g. those run by Azerbaijan in

the Absheron and Shah Deniz fields drive pipelines that far out of the area. An example of this is the BakuTbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that delivers the Caspian crude oil to the Mediterranean bypassing Russia and reinforcing the Europe energy diversification plan. Trans-Caspian pipeline plans, controversial, can directly link the huge gas reserves in Turkmenistan to the European markets through Azerbaijan and Turkey. These projects would dramatically transform the energy landscape in Eurasia, providing options to Russian supplies as well as minimizing the reliance of Europe on the pipelines of Moscow³².

Since the Caspian Sea is a unilateral lake, the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea Convention of 2018 has given the littoral states special rights but prohibited foreign military presence. This legal regime treats the Caspian as neither a full “sea” nor a traditional “lake” but a unique legal entity. While the convention sought to stabilize governance, competition persists, particularly between Russia and Iran, which maintain robust naval presences to secure offshore energy assets and assert territorial claims. Smaller states such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan rely on balancing diplomacy, leveraging economic projects while navigating between great-power pressures. The limited naval competition has not escalated into open conflict, but the potential for disputes over seabed resources remains a constant friction point.

The Caspian Sea functions simultaneously as a critical strategic buffer and a central pivot in global energy geopolitics. The successful operationalization of trans-Caspian energy corridors would significantly reduce Europe’s dependence on Russian natural gas, fundamentally altering the continent’s geoeconomic leverage against Moscow. Concurrently, the region is being integrated into expansive connectivity frameworks, notably China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) linking Russia, Iran, and India. These overlapping geoeconomic projects elevate the Caspian into a premier crossroads for Eurasian trade and energy transit. However, regional instability—stemming from unresolved territorial disputes, environmental degradation, or great-power competition—carries the potential to severely disrupt global energy markets. Ultimately, the Caspian Sea embodies a profound strategic paradox: while geographically landlocked, it remains geopolitically porous, acting as a microcosm of the broader Eurasian energy-security nexus.

The 2026 US-Iran War and the Strait of Hormuz Crisis and Implications for Eurasian Maritime Geopolitics

The assumption that the globalized maritime commons would remain permanently open to free trade was shattered in early 2026. The outbreak of the US-Iran war and the subsequent

³² Agyei, S. K. *Emerging markets equities’ response to geopolitical risk: Time-frequency evidence from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict era*. Heliyon, Vol. 9, No. 2. 2023.

dual-blockade of the Strait of Hormuz transformed a theoretical geopolitical vulnerability into the most severe disruption to the world energy supply since the 1970s.

The crisis escalated rapidly following the launch of Operation Epic Fury by the United States and Israel on February 28, 2026, targeting Iranian military and nuclear infrastructure. In retaliation, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) actively blockaded the Strait of Hormuz—the 21-mile-wide jugular vein through which approximately 20.3 million barrels of oil (25% of global seaborne trade) transit daily. Deploying anti-ship missiles, drone swarms, and sea mines, Tehran effectively zeroed out commercial tanker traffic. Following the collapse of the Islamabad Talks and a brief ceasefire in early April, the conflict escalated into a "dual blockade," with the US Navy officially blockading Iranian ports beginning April 13, 2026. By July 2026, renewed US strikes on Iranian coastal infrastructure and Iranian retaliatory attacks further entrenched the maritime paralysis, prompting the UN to warn of catastrophic consequences for the global economy.

While the conflict is centralized in the Persian Gulf, its strategic and geoeconomic shockwaves have fundamentally reordered Eurasian geopolitics. The crisis exposes the severe structural asymmetry in global energy dependency and accelerates the continent's pivot toward land-based supply chains.

The closure of Hormuz does not impact the global economy equally; it is disproportionately an Asian crisis. Nearly 90% of the oil transiting the strait flows eastward, with China and India absorbing the dominant share. The unprecedented spike in Brent crude prices (surpassing \$126 per barrel by March 2026) severely disrupted the industrial bases of the world's fastest-growing economies. For Beijing and New Delhi, the 2026 crisis validated their deepest geopolitical fears: that their economic survival remains entirely at the mercy of US-Iranian military friction and maritime chokepoints they do not control.

The crisis demonstrates the limits of the US Navy's ability to seamlessly guarantee the freedom of navigation in heavily contested littorals. For Eurasian powers, the takeaway is clear: relying on the US security umbrella for maritime trade is no longer a viable grand strategy. This is accelerating efforts by regional actors (particularly China and India) to expand their own naval power projection into the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman, while aggressively transitioning their domestic energy grids toward localized green infrastructure (the "Electro-State" model) to reduce raw hydrocarbon dependency.

The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis marks the definitive end of the post-Cold War illusion that maritime trade routes are immune to systemic geopolitical disruption. By demonstrating that a single regional war can sever a quarter of the world's energy supply, the conflict provides absolute justification for the massive infrastructural investments made by Eurasian states over the past decade.

For the geopolitics of the heartland, the implication is profound. The crisis accelerates the structural re-engineering of global supply chains, permanently shifting the geopolitical center of gravity away from vulnerable oceanic chokepoints and back to the secure, continental expanse of Eurasia. While the war in the Persian Gulf strains specific projects like the INSTC, it ultimately guarantees that the future of global commerce, energy transit, and multipolar balancing will be dictated by co

Emerging Geopolitics and Ongoing War at Ukraine: The Structural Realignment of Eurasian Geopolitics

The historical legacy of Ukraine is one of continuous resistance to imperial homogenization. In the context of global geopolitics, Ukraine's trajectory demonstrates the failure of the Russian imperial project to extinguish a distinct national consciousness. Understanding this legacy is essential for IR theorists; it proves that the current war is not merely a dispute over NATO expansion, but a systemic clash between a post-imperial power attempting to rewrite history and a sovereign nation finalizing its decolonial liberation.

In International Relations (IR) and historical sociology, Ukraine is no longer viewed merely as a post-Soviet borderland but as a sovereign actor engaged in a prolonged decolonial struggle. The historical perspective of Ukraine has undergone a profound paradigm shift. For decades, Western academia—often dominated by Moscow-centric "Russianists"—viewed Ukrainian history through an imperial Russian lens. The events of 2014 and the full-scale invasion of 2022 have catalyzed a "decolonial turn," forcing a re-evaluation of Ukraine's distinct historical trajectory, civic identity, and democratic consolidation.

The fundamental ideological battleground of the current conflict lies in the interpretation of antiquity. The Russian imperial nationalist narrative, weaponized by the Kremlin, relies on the 19th-century myth of a pan-Russian nation (the *obshcherusskij narod*), which claims that Russians, Ukrainians (Little Russians), and Belarusians are a single entity originating from the medieval state of Kyivan Rus'.

Following the fragmentation of Kyivan Rus', the territories of modern Ukraine were heavily integrated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This exposure to European Renaissance ideas, the Magdeburg Law (granting city self-governance), and the decentralized, proto-democratic traditions of the Zaporozhian Cossack Hetmanate created a political culture fundamentally distinct from the autocratic, centralized model that developed in Muscovy.³³

³³ . Yekelchik, Serhy. (2020). *Ukraine: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.

While the etymology of "Ukraine" historically translates to "borderland," modern historiography reclaims this not as a periphery to an empire, but as a dynamic frontier zone where diverse cultures intersected and a resilient, independent civic identity was forged.

The Soviet Trauma and the Consolidation of Memory

The 20th century was defined by severe imperial trauma, which serves as the bedrock of modern Ukrainian political consciousness. The Soviet era is not remembered in Ukraine as a period of shared triumph, but as an era of occupation, forced assimilation, and demographic catastrophe.

- **The Holodomor (1932–1933):** The artificial famine engineered by Joseph Stalin to crush Ukrainian rural resistance to collectivization and destroy the national intelligentsia is the central trauma of the Ukrainian nation. The recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide is critical to the Ukrainian historical narrative, serving as a historical warning against submission to Moscow.³⁴
- **The Russian Strategic and Ideological Perspective:** Justifying the "Special Military Operation"—The official Russian rationale for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—framed domestically as a "Special Military Operation"—is rooted in a complex synthesis of defensive realism, civilizational exceptionalism, and anti-hegemonic rhetoric. From the Kremlin's vantage point, the war is not an unprovoked act of imperial expansion, but a pre-emptive, existential defense of the Russian state against Western encroachment.³⁵ President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly articulated the view that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" and that modern Ukraine is an artificial political construct, illegitimately carved out of historical Russian lands by Bolshevik cartographers. The Russian perspective of the war is a meticulously constructed matrix that merges geopolitical anxiety with imperial nostalgia.³⁶ By framing the conflict simultaneously as a defense against NATO expansion, a civilizational reunification, and a global anti-hegemonic crusade, the Kremlin has established a narrative that leaves virtually no room for compromise. Understanding this perspective is crucial for International Relations analysis, as it demonstrates how a state can weaponize historical memory and structural realism to legitimize systemic disruption and justify extreme executive aggrandizement.

³⁴ . Snyder, T. (2010). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books

³⁵ . Karaganov, S. (2022). The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13(2).

³⁶ . Kuzio, T. (2022). *Russian nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian war*. Routledge.

Russia-Ukraine War in International Relations Theories

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war represents a systemic rupture in 21st-century International Relations. The conflict cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical lens; rather, it requires a multidimensional approach that accounts for structural anarchy, domestic political economies, and constructivist identity formation. In contemporary IR scholarship, the war serves as the definitive catalyst for the transition into a "Multipolar World Order 2.0," forcing a reassessment of post-Cold War institutionalism.

At the structural level, the war has violently reaffirmed the core tenets of realism: the primacy of state survival, the pervasive reality of anarchy, and the inherent limitations of international law.

- **The Security Dilemma vs. Imperial Revisionism:** While early neorealist analyses often framed the conflict through the lens of a "security dilemma"—arguing that NATO's eastward expansion provoked a defensive Russian reaction—contemporary scholarship increasingly views Russia's actions as offensive realism. Moscow's strategic objective is not merely buffer-state security, but the active revision of the post-Cold War territorial settlement and the re-establishment of a recognized sphere of influence.
- **The Failure of Problem-Solving via Dialogue:** The persistence of the conflict into 2026 underscores the realist argument regarding the limits of international institutions. The United Nations and European security architectures proved incapable of preventing or punishing the private use of force by a nuclear-armed veto power, reinforcing the realist paradigm that states must ultimately rely on self-help and military capability for survival.
- **Authoritarian Equilibrium and External Shocks:** In personalist autocracies, the state is perpetually vulnerable to elite defection and institutional decay. The war operates as a mechanism for extreme executive aggrandizement. By initiating a "special military operation," the Kremlin successfully justified the complete eradication of domestic political opposition, the censorship of civil society, and the centralization of the wartime economy under the executive branch.
- **The Threat of the "Democratic Example":** From a liberal IR perspective, the threat Ukraine posed to Russia was not conventional military encirclement, but ideological contagion. Ukraine's gradual—albeit uneven—consolidation of democratic institutions and its integration into European normative frameworks posed a direct existential threat to the patronal, authoritarian equilibrium in Moscow. The invasion was theoretically driven by the need to destroy a successful democratic alternative on Russia's borders.

- **Decolonial Agency:** Conversely, Ukraine has successfully utilized constructivist diplomacy to frame its resistance not merely as a territorial dispute, but as an anti-imperial, decolonial struggle for national survival. This narrative has mobilized unprecedented Western normative and material support, demonstrating how ideational frameworks directly influence the "correlation of forces" on the battlefield.
- **Weaponized Interdependence and Sanctions:** The initial Western response relied heavily on the theory of weaponized interdependence, assuming that severing Russia from Euro-Atlantic financial and technological networks would cripple its war machine.
- **Alternative Corridors and Multipolar Hedging:** However, the war has demonstrated the resilience of alternative economic architectures. Russia's ability to sustain its military-industrial complex is facilitated by "strategic hedging" from major non-Western actors. The divergence of the Global South—which has largely refused to adopt Western sanctions frameworks—illustrates that economic interconnectivity in a multipolar system provides sanctioned states with viable alternative markets (e.g., via the International North-South Transport Corridor), fundamentally diluting the coercive power of the West.

European and US Geopolitical Perspectives on the Ongoing War

The conflict in Ukraine has catalyzed a profound reorientation of the transatlantic security architecture, exposing both the strategic convergence and the nuanced divergences between the European Union and the United States. While Brussels and Washington remain resolutely united in their overarching objectives—defending Ukrainian sovereignty and deterring further Russian expansionism—their respective approaches are shaped by distinct geoeconomic vulnerabilities, domestic political calculations, and strategic priorities. For the European Union, the invasion represents an existential assault on the post-Cold War security architecture and its foundational ethos of cooperative continental integration. The sudden return of high-intensity, kinetic warfare shattered long-held illusions of perpetual European peace, compelling the EU to rapidly evolve from a normative regulatory bloc into an assertive geopolitical actor. This historic paradigm shift is operationalized through a tripartite strategy: the unprecedented weaponization of economic sanctions, the consolidation of continental solidarity, and an accelerated pursuit of European strategic autonomy. Initially, the EU enacted historically severe economic sanctions against Russian banks, tech exports, energy sectors, and political elites, proving its willingness to accept economic blowback to uphold international law. Second, the bloc projected unprecedented unity through comprehensive refugee management, humanitarian relief, and record-breaking macro-financial assistance to Kyiv. Third, the war revitalized the pursuit of European strategic autonomy, with France and

Germany leading the call for independent defense capabilities to minimize the continent's enduring reliance on American military infrastructure.

³⁷. However, intra-alliance friction persists: Eastern European states like Poland and the Baltics demand an aggressive, militarized NATO response, while Western European nations favor diplomatic equilibrium and eventual dialogue with Moscow. Collectively, this overarching response marks a decisive institutional pivot for the EU, transitioning from historically reactive diplomacy to a posture of proactive security governance.

Washington views the Ukrainian theater as a defining frontline in a broader global power struggle and a vital test for the survival of the liberal international system. Framing the conflict as a definitive clash between democratic governance and autocratic revisionism, the United States has utilized the crisis to rebuild transatlantic unity, fortify NATO's deterrent posture, and reclaim its hegemonic leadership in Europe following years of strategic retreat. To this end, the U.S. has orchestrated a campaign of massive military support—encompassing sophisticated arms transfers, intelligence synchronization, and troop training—while coordinating severe economic sanctions with its European partners to paralyze the Russian economy. For Washington, the strategic implications of the war transcend the European continent, functioning as a proxy for the wider systemic rivalry with revisionist actors like China. Through its unwavering military and financial aid to Kyiv, the U.S. is deliberately signaling its dedication to the global rules-based order, seeking to reassure key Indo-Pacific partners, including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Domestically, however, the executive branch must navigate complex debates over the fiscal sustainability of this support and the inherent dangers of escalation with a nuclear-armed Russia. Ultimately, the crisis has served as a catalyst for American grand strategy, revitalizing NATO's core mission, strengthening global alliance architectures, and reasserting U.S. primacy in an increasingly fractured, multipolar system.. The unified response of the EU and the U.S. exemplifies a revitalized transatlantic consensus built on deterrence, defense, and democratic solidarity. The tight coordination of sanctions, arms transfers, and diplomacy proves the enduring strength of the Western alliance. Yet, strategic priorities subtly diverge: the U.S. focuses heavily on global containment and upholding the international order, while the EU remains deeply invested in regional stability, humanitarian aid, and long-term reconstruction. Ultimately, this transatlantic unity acts as both a powerful deterrent to revisionist aggression and a foundational model for future cooperation, permanently altering the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia.

³⁷ Cap, P. *Narratives of geopolitical representation in the discourse of the Russia–Ukraine war*. Journal of Pragmatics, Vol. 218, pp. 133–143. 2023.

Historical Context and Strategic Significance of Ukraine in Eurasia



Figure 3.1: Ukraine

Ukraine's geopolitical relevance is deeply rooted in its history as both a frontier and a crossroads between empires and civilizations. Situated at the heart of the Eurasian steppe, it has long been a contested space between European and Eurasian powers. From the era of Kievan Rus' (9th–13th century)—a powerful medieval polity considered a cultural and political precursor for both Ukraine and Russia—to the later domination by the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire, Ukraine's lands have repeatedly served as a prize for regional hegemons³⁸.

In the twentieth century, Ukraine's geography rendered it a primary battlefield across both World Wars. Under Soviet control as the Ukrainian SSR, it functioned as a vital geopolitical and economic engine of the Soviet Union, driven by its fertile agricultural lands, heavy industrial capacity in the Donbas, and strategic Black Sea ports. Yet, this strategic endowment was accompanied by profound historical trauma. The catastrophic Holodomor famine (1932–1933) and the immense destruction of World War II cemented a dual narrative, highlighting the nation's indispensable strategic worth alongside its acute historical vulnerabilities.

³⁸ Raik, K., Blockmans, S., Osypchuk, A., & Suslov, A. *EU policy towards Ukraine: Entering geopolitical competition over European order*. The International Spectator, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 39–58. 2024.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's subsequent independence in 1991 fundamentally reconfigured the Eurasian geopolitical architecture. Overnight, the newly sovereign nation was thrust into the role of a strategic buffer state between the Russian Federation and NATO. Burdened by complex historical legacies, Kyiv nonetheless embarked on an independent trajectory, actively seeking structural integration with Western political, economic, and security frameworks. The strategic significance of Ukraine is due to its location, resources, and identity. Geographically, Ukraine occupies the border between Europe and Eurasia, where it functions as a land bridge between Russia and the European Union. It has a fertile plain of the black soil, which has made it one of the top agricultural producers in the world, hence its name as the breadbasket of Europe. The agricultural and industrial production of Ukraine has traditionally been crucial to the empires that want to have economic stability and military capabilities.

Ukraine also plays a critical role in energy transit, with major natural gas pipelines carrying Russian energy to European markets passing through its territory. This transit function has made Ukraine central to the energy security calculus of Europe, while also being a lever of coercion in Moscow's foreign policy. Control of Ukraine, therefore, translates not just into territorial gains but also into influence over Europe's energy supply chains.

Culturally and geopolitically, Ukraine is indispensable to Russia's conception of its national identity and its requirement for strategic depth. Moscow views Ukraine not only as the historical cradle of Russian civilization—tracing its lineage to Kievan Rus' but also as an essential geographic buffer against perceived Western encroachment. Conversely, Europe and the United States regard Ukraine as a critical opportunity to integrate a post-Soviet state into the liberal international order. Consequently, the nation has emerged as the definitive crucible in the systemic contest between autocratic resilience and democratic transition. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale escalation in 2022 cement Ukraine's position as the definitive geopolitical fault line between the Russian Federation and the West. Geostrategically, Crimea secures Moscow's most critical warm-water naval installation at Sevastopol, facilitating Russian maritime hegemony in the Black Sea and enabling power projection into the Mediterranean. Concurrently, the eastern Donbas region holds immense dual value: it is both a heavy industrial powerhouse and a symbolic linchpin for Moscow's irredentist narratives regarding cultural indivisibility and the defense of the Russophone diaspora. Globally, the Ukraine conflict generates systemic shockwaves that extend well beyond Eurasia. Disruptions to Ukrainian agricultural exports have induced severe food insecurity, particularly across vulnerable regions in Africa and the Middle East. Simultaneously, the war has necessitated a fundamental overhaul of NATO strategy, prompted historic increases in European defense budgets, and drastically reconfigured global energy markets, unequivocally cementing Ukraine as a central strategic linchpin in global geopolitics.

Ukraine's Geopolitical Position in Eurasia

Ukraine occupies one of the most strategic positions in Eurasia, acting as a bridge between Europe and Russia. Geographically, it lies at the junction of the East European Plain, extending toward Central Europe, the Black Sea, and the Caucasus. It is a transit route in energy pipelines, trade routes as well as military access due to its location. The situation over Ukraine has put Ukraine in the control of the Eurasian Heartland (Russia and Central Asia) and the Rimland (Europe and Mediterranean world). This crossroads function is the reason Ukraine has been repeatedly contested throughout history, from imperial rivalries to modern great-power competition.

Ukraine's Black Sea coastline amplifies its geopolitical weight. Ports like Odessa and Mariupol are gateways for agricultural exports, industrial trade, and energy shipments. The Crimean Peninsula with its natural harbors and the Russian naval base at Sevastopol is a cathode of maritime power in the black Sea. To Russia, possession of Crimea and the southern coastline of Ukraine is crucial towards projecting power to the black sea, east Mediterranean and even to the middle east. To NATO and Europe, Ukraine coastline is a buffer zone that guarantees energy and sea communication lines³⁹.

From a geoeconomic perspective, Ukraine historically served as the indispensable conduit for Russian natural gas bound for European markets. Critical infrastructure networks, including the Druzhba and Brotherhood pipelines, have long facilitated the hydrocarbon flows essential to European economic stability. While structural diversification projects like the Nord Stream pipelines and the Southern Gas Corridor were explicitly designed to reduce direct dependence on Ukrainian transit, the nation's energy architecture remains a highly contested geopolitical asset. Strategic dominance over these transit corridors grants actors immense asymmetric leverage, enabling them to simultaneously threaten European energy security and manipulate Russia's economic standing on the global stage. Ukraine's position on NATO's eastern flank makes it a strategic buffer zone in Eurasia. To Russia, Ukraine is vital for maintaining strategic depth, preventing NATO forces from being stationed directly along its southwestern borders. For NATO and the EU, a sovereign Ukraine integrated into Western institutions would extend the liberal order into Eastern Europe and weaken Moscow's regional dominance. This tug-of-war—whether Ukraine should belong to the Western security order or remain within Russia's sphere of influence—defines much of the current conflict.

Beyond geography, Ukraine is also at the heart of competing civilizational narratives. For Russia, Ukraine is central to the historical memory of Kievan Rus', considered the cradle of East Slavic civilization. Losing Ukraine to the West undermines Russia's claim to be the cultural and political heir of this legacy. For Europe, Ukraine represents the frontline of

³⁹ Kuzio, T. *Russia–Ukraine crisis: The blame game, geopolitics and national identity*. Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 70, No. 3, pp. 462–473. 2018.

democratic expansion, where reforms, governance, and sovereignty are defended against authoritarian encroachment. This civilizational conflict gives a symbolic touch to the geopolitical significance of Ukraine.

Ukraine's geopolitical footprint extends far beyond its immediate borders, generating systemic shockwaves across the international system. Its status as an agricultural hegemon means that disruptions to its export capacity directly induce acute food insecurity throughout the Global South. Simultaneously, Ukraine's transit architecture acts as a vital catalyst for European energy diversification, just as its military orientation recalibrates the deterrence equilibrium between NATO and Moscow. Consequently, Ukraine must be understood not merely as a regional buffer, but as a definitive global pivot whose fate is inextricably linked to the stability of Eurasian geopolitics and the contemporary world order.

NATO Expansion and Russian Security Concerns

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, NATO initiated successive waves of eastward enlargement, fundamentally redrawing the security architecture of Central and Eastern Europe. Initial integration began in 1999 with the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, followed by a massive 2004 expansion that incorporated the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) alongside Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The alliance later absorbed Balkan states—including Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia—while post-Soviet nations like Georgia and Ukraine formally articulated their aspirations for membership. For the transatlantic alliance, this systematic enlargement was framed as a strategic imperative designed to consolidate continental security, institutionalize democratic transitions, and inoculate fragile post-communist states against regional volatility. From the perspective of the Kremlin, however, NATO's systemic enlargement was unequivocally interpreted as an aggressive encroachment into Russia's historical sphere of influence. Russian leadership in the 1990s harbored deep-seated expectations that transatlantic security structures would not march eastward, relying heavily on informal verbal assurances provided during the diplomatic negotiations surrounding German reunification. Although lacking codified legal standing, these perceived broken promises remain a central pillar of Russia's strategic narrative, consistently invoked to substantiate claims of Western duplicity.

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO proclaimed that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members," striking at the very essence of Russian security thinking. This desire for deeper connections between the two countries was most visibly articulated at that summit. Ukraine is an important buffer zone between Russia and NATO, according to Moscow, therefore, it's more than simply another bordering state. By formally joining NATO, Ukraine would put NATO military bases on Russia's southwestern border, threatening to encircle key Russian territory and reducing Russia's strategic depth.

These worries had a direct bearing on the 2014 annexation of Crimea. By annexing Crimea, Russia was able to protect its naval base at Sevastopol on the Black Sea and block NATO's progress toward controlling a key seaport. Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine and the subsequent full-scale invasion in 2022 are similar attempts to enforce a security doctrine red line by blocking Ukraine's integration with NATO and the EU⁴⁰.

The military doctrine of Russia clearly marks the extension of NATO as one of the major external threats to the national security of the state. Sending NATO to deploy forces and missile defense systems in Eastern Europe (e.g. in Poland and Romania) is seen as a disturbance in the balance of power in Moscow. According to the Russian officials, the open-door policy of NATO does not consider the legitimate security considerations of Russia, especially the threat of foreign bases, high-performance weapon systems, and quicker troop movements being introduced along Russian borders.

In response, Russia has deployed a comprehensive hybrid strategy encompassing conventional military buildup, nuclear signaling, cyber warfare, and energy coercion. To counterbalance NATO's influence, Moscow has also actively cultivated strategic partnerships with non-Western powers, most notably China and Iran. Furthermore, the escalation of military exercises across the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Arctic underscores how the NATO-Russia standoff has expanded into a multi-theater geopolitical confrontation. The geopolitical collision between NATO's eastward expansion and Russian strategic pushback has rendered Ukraine the definitive crucible of Eurasian security. From NATO's perspective, military and political support for Kyiv is inextricably linked to upholding the liberal international order—specifically, the sovereign right of nations to choose their own alliances. For Russia, however, arresting NATO's advance into Ukraine is viewed as a matter of regime survival and the preservation of its historical sphere of influence. This systemic friction has catalyzed a severe escalatory spiral, prompting NATO to harden its eastern frontier and Russia to militarize its western borders, thereby trapping intermediate states in a volatile structural standoff. Globally, this strategic standoff has fundamentally restructured the international order. The kinetic conflict in Ukraine has catalyzed unprecedented NATO cohesion, accelerated European remilitarization, and prompted historically non-aligned states—namely Finland and Sweden—to officially integrate into the transatlantic alliance. Concurrently, Western containment has accelerated Moscow's strategic alignment with Beijing, entrenching a multipolar systemic rivalry where the Eurasian landmass serves as the primary theater for great-power rivalry.

⁴⁰ Henrikson, A. K. *The trauma of territorial break-up: The Russia–Ukraine conflict and its international management—geopolitical strategy and diplomatic therapy*. Geopolítica(s), Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 11–36. 2022.

CAUSES AND TRIGGERS OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

The genesis of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is deeply historically contingent. Russia has long conceptualized Ukraine as an integral component of its own civilizational and cultural sphere, a narrative anchored in the legacy of Kievan Rus'—the medieval polity claimed by both modern states as their foundational heritage. From Moscow's perspective, Kyiv's westward integration signifies more than a mere geostrategic concession; it constitutes a profound threat to Russian national identity and historical continuity. Ultimately, this fundamental ontological collision—Ukraine's fierce defense of its sovereign independence against Russia's irredentist insistence on civilizational indivisibility—established the ideological bedrock for the current war. One of the most critical triggers is the eastward expansion of NATO after the Cold War. While NATO argues that enlargement promotes stability and allows states to choose their alliances freely, Russia interprets it as encirclement and a direct threat to its security. The increasing defense relationships with NATO and in particular since the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration that Ukraine would become a member were viewed in Moscow as a way of overstepping the red line. To Russia, it was a threat of losing strategic depth and directing the power of the Western military to the Russian border in case of NATO infrastructure on Ukrainian territory.

The late 2013 Euromaidan protests served as a critical geopolitical inflection point. Widespread civil unrest erupted in Kyiv following President Viktor Yanukovich's abrupt withdrawal from a pending European Union Association Agreement in favor of deeper economic integration with Moscow. The subsequent ousting of Yanukovich and the rapid installation of a pro-Western government were framed by the Kremlin as an illegitimate, Western-orchestrated *coup d'état*. In swift retaliation, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014—thereby securing its vital Black Sea Fleet headquarters at Sevastopol—and instigated armed separatist insurgencies in the eastern Donbas region. These actions ignited a protracted, low-intensity conflict that ultimately culminated in the full-scale escalation of 2022. Ukraine's geography makes it strategically indispensable. It is a buffer state between Russia and NATO, with fertile agricultural lands, significant industrial zones, and crucial energy transit routes. By controlling Crimea, Russia gained dominance over the northern Black Sea and ensured permanent access to warm-water ports. The Donbas, rich in coal and industry, also became a strategic theater, allowing Moscow to weaken Ukraine's economic and political stability. Thus, territorial control is not just symbolic—it directly enhances Russia's military and energy leverage.

Energy geopolitics occupy a central structural role within the conflict. Historically, Ukraine has functioned as the primary transit artery for Russian natural gas bound for European markets, rendering it both an indispensable geopolitical conduit and acutely vulnerable to energy coercion. As Kyiv sought to diversify its energy matrix and align with

European Union regulatory frameworks, Moscow's transit leverage steadily eroded. Consequently, Russia pursued bypass infrastructure—most notably the Nord Stream corridors—to circumvent Ukrainian territory. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions, these interlocking energy dynamics firmly established Ukraine as the primary geoeconomic flashpoint between Russia and the transatlantic alliance. Russian foreign policy is fundamentally predicated on sustaining regional hegemony within the post-Soviet space. Ukraine's sustained westernization structurally undermines this imperative, posing an existential threat to Moscow's vision of a multipolar system governed by great-power politics. In actively thwarting Ukraine's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions, Russia endeavors to maintain a vital strategic glacis and validate its resilience against Western systemic dominance.

- Consequently, the Kremlin legitimizes its military intervention through a dual strategic narrative: framing it simultaneously as a defensive imperative against perceived NATO expansionism and an irredentist campaign to restore hegemony over its former Soviet periphery. Ultimately, the full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 was catalyzed by a convergence of several intersecting structural and ideological drivers: The collapse of the Russian-Western talks on the security guarantee of NATO.
- Buildup of military forces along the border of Ukraine till the end of 2021.
- The previous event before the invasion, Russia recognized the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People Republics.
- The Kremlin's declared objectives of "demilitarization and de-Nazification" of Ukraine, framed as pre-emptive measures against NATO encroachment.

Ultimately, the Russo-Ukrainian war transcends mere bilateral hostility, functioning instead as a structural confrontation between the Russian Federation and the transatlantic alliance. From Moscow's vantage point, the conflict serves as a kinetic mechanism to resist Western systemic dominance and forcibly renegotiate the overarching European security architecture. Conversely, for NATO and the European Union, sustaining Ukraine is a fundamental defense of the normative pillars of the liberal international order—specifically Westphalian sovereignty, self-determination, and the sanctity of international law. Consequently, Ukraine has emerged as the definitive crucible of contemporary great-power rivalry, representing the precise nexus where regional territorial disputes dictate the future of global security competition. Theoretical Perspectives on the Military Conflict:

- **A Neorealist Perspective:** Rooted in realist theory, the war in Ukraine represents a fundamental struggle for power dictated by conditions of international anarchy, driven by the uncompromising priority of state survival and national security. Despite external perceptions of strategic irrationality, the

Kremlin views its invasion of Ukraine as a logical, defensive reaction to the existential dangers of NATO expansion and encroaching Western influence within its historical sphere of influence. **The Mechanics of Containment:** From a structural perspective, transatlantic and U.S. military assistance to Kyiv functions as a mechanism of containment, explicitly aimed at checking Russian power projection and preventing its consolidation as a dominant regional hegemon in Eurasia.

Realists therefore maintain that the war is fundamentally detached from ideological crusades, serving instead as a violent contest to preserve or dictate the European balance of power. From the perspective of liberal institutionalism, the conflict represents a profound breakdown of cooperative security frameworks and international institutions—such as the UN, the OSCE, and the Minsk Agreements—in their capacity to mitigate escalatory dynamics. Evaluated through this lens:

- **Integration into the Liberal Order:** Ukraine's pursuit of NATO and EU membership underscores its fundamental aspiration to integrate into the Western liberal order, seeking the stability of institutionalized economic cooperation and collective defense architectures.
- **Subversion of Global Norms:** Russian aggression constitutes a blatant violation of international law, the UN Charter, and the core Westphalian principle of sovereignty, exposing the fragility of normative frameworks when confronted by unconstrained power politics.
- **Institutional Countermeasures:** The liberal response prioritizes non-kinetic statecraft—including comprehensive sanctions regimes, diplomatic ostracization, and collective economic coercion—as primary mechanisms to restore the rules-based international order without triggering a direct great-power war.

Constructivists highlight how deeply ingrained ideas, national identities, and competing narratives actively drive and sustain the conflict:

- **Russian Civilizational Claims:** Moscow rejects Ukraine's distinct sovereignty, framing it instead as part of a shared "Russian World" to justify military intervention as the protection of cultural unity and ethnic kin.
- **Ukrainian Democratic Identity:** Ukraine actively constructs its identity around absolute sovereignty, democratic values, and European integration, firmly repudiating Russian hegemony.
- **Narrative Warfare:** The clash of these foundational narratives—Russia's "denazification" propaganda versus Ukraine's pursuit of "freedom and self-

determination"—shapes domestic war mobilization, international support, and the overarching legitimacy of the conflict.

Thus, the conflict is not only about territory but also about who defines the political and cultural meaning of Eurasia.

Table 3.1: Theoretical Perspectives on the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

Theory	Core Idea	Key Drivers	Interpretation	Icon Representation
Realism	Power politics and balance of power	NATO expansion, Russian security concerns, Ukraine as a buffer state	Russia acts rationally to secure its sphere of influence; NATO and the US aim to contain Russia	Balance of power scales
Liberalism	Institutions, cooperation, and rule-based order	Failure of UN, OSCE, Minsk Agreements; reliance on sanctions and diplomacy	Conflict shows fragility of international law when states prioritize power over norms	UN emblem or handshake
Constructivism	Identity, narratives, and legitimacy	Russia's "Russian World" vs. Ukraine's European democratic identity	Conflict shaped by competing cultural and historical interpretations of Eurasia	Masks or cultural symbols
Critical/Postcolonial	Imperialism, exploitation, systemic inequalities	Russia's neo-imperial ambitions, Ukraine's colonial legacy, resource competition	Ukraine caught in great power politics; both Russia and the West use Ukraine instrumentally	Broken chains or empire column
Hybrid/Geo-economics	Blending military & non-military tools	Hybrid warfare (cyber, disinformation, militias), sanctions, pipeline politics	Battlefield extends to financial markets, digital networks, and energy corridors	Pipelines and computer symbol

Russian Viewpoint of the Ukraine Conflict

For Moscow, the central catalyst of the conflict is NATO's continuous eastward expansion since the 1990s. Russia perceives the alliance's absorption of Baltic nations and former Warsaw Pact states as a profound structural threat to its national security. In this

context, Ukraine's bid for NATO membership is viewed not as a routine policy decision, but as an existential danger that would plant Western military infrastructure directly on Russia's borders. This entrenched threat perception solidifies the Kremlin's strategic narrative, framing the war as a strictly defensive measure required to break an encroaching NATO encirclement.⁴¹

Russian aggression in Ukraine is deeply rooted in historical revisionism, with Moscow claiming modern Ukraine as an inseparable part of its civilizational space. Tracing its national identity to the medieval state of Kievan Rus' (9th–13th century), Russia frames Ukraine as the cradle of its cultural, religious, and political heritage. This narrative of an indivisible historical destiny remains central to Russian state ideology. In his 2021 essay, President Vladimir Putin dismissed Ukrainian independence as an artificial creation resulting from Soviet administrative lines and Western manipulation. Consequently, Moscow justifies its military campaign not as territorial expansion, but as the legitimate restoration of lost historical unity.

Consequently, this weaponization of history allows the Kremlin to reframe a war of choice and territorial conquest as an existential, restorative mission necessary to reclaim its civilizational heartland and secure its great-power status.

Moscow discursively frames Ukraine not as a fully sovereign Westphalian state, but as an intrinsic component of a shared Slavic and Orthodox civilizational sphere. Russian leadership—most notably President Vladimir Putin—frequently advances the irredentist narrative that Russians and Ukrainians constitute a singular ethnocultural entity, artificially partitioned by post-Soviet administrative borders. From this constructivist vantage point, Ukraine's transatlantic integration constitutes far more than a geostrategic setback; it is perceived as an orchestrated civilizational rupture, engineered by Western powers to fracture Russia's historical continuity and ontological security. Consequently, this narrative forms the ideological bedrock for Moscow's military intervention. This ideological reasoning crystallizes into the "Putin Doctrine"—a strategic blueprint aimed at restoring Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet sphere. The doctrine aggressively pursues three core objectives: reclaiming great-power status, ensuring regional military supremacy, and blocking Western institutional expansion, specifically NATO and the EU. It envisions a multipolar Eurasia where Russia counters Western dominance by promoting absolute sovereignty, traditional values, and a Moscow-centric security framework. Within this paradigm, the conflicts in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022) are not isolated incidents, but rather components of an ongoing, systemic campaign to reconstruct Russia's historical geopolitical space and forcefully shift the global balance of power. The imperative to protect ethnic

⁴¹ Žuk, P., Buzogány, A., Mišík, M., Osička, J., & Szulecki, K. *Semi-peripheries in the world-system? The Visegrad group countries in the geopolitical order of energy and raw materials after the war in Ukraine*. Resources Policy, Vol. 85, 104046. 2023.

Russians and Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and the Donbas remains a core element of Moscow's justification for intervention. The Kremlin actively portrays the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution as a Western-backed coup that handed power to ultra-nationalist, anti-Russian forces. Consequently, Russia frames its annexation of Crimea and its sponsorship of separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk as vital defensive measures to save these communities from alleged fascist threats. This strategic manipulation of historical trauma and ethnic vulnerability serves as the direct foundation for Russia's modern "denazification" propaganda..

Russia conceptualizes Ukraine as an indispensable geographic glacis—a vital strategic buffer that has historically insulated the Russian heartland from Western military incursions. From Moscow's realist perspective, Kyiv's integration into NATO would eradicate this critical defensive depth, irrevocably tilting the regional balance of power in favor of the transatlantic alliance. Consequently, retaining hegemony over Ukraine is deemed an existential prerequisite for preserving Russia's regional security architecture and its broader great-power status. Beyond pure geopolitics, Ukraine occupies a critical geoeconomic position. Historically, Kyiv wielded substantial transit leverage over Russian hydrocarbon exports to European markets. Moscow has persistently sought to neutralize this vulnerability by bypassing Ukrainian infrastructure and actively countering Western economic encroachment. Furthermore, the 2014 annexation of Crimea cemented Russian dominance over the Black Sea basin, guaranteeing unimpeded naval power projection and securing access to lucrative offshore energy reserves.

In conclusion, Moscow's aggression is driven by an inseparable nexus of structural security and geoeconomic imperatives; subjugating Ukraine is viewed not merely as a territorial ambition, but as an existential necessity to maintain strategic depth, ensure energy transit sovereignty, and project uncontested maritime power across the Black Sea.

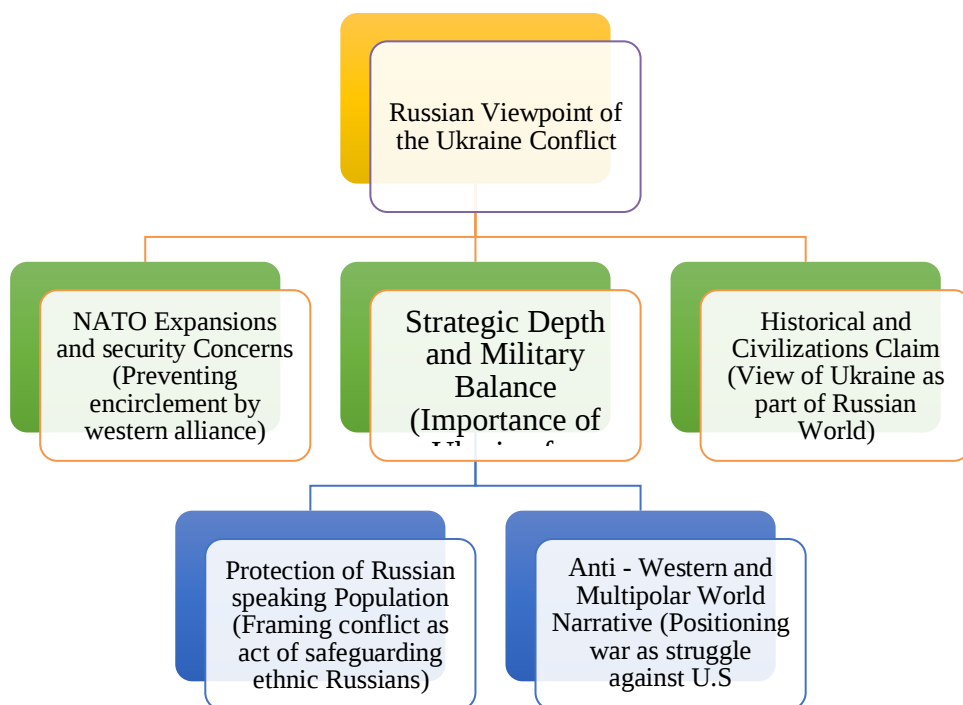


Figure 3.2: Russian Viewpoint on the Ukraine Conflict – Strategic Layers Infographic⁴²

Economic and Energy Dimensions

Since Vladimir Putin's ascension to power in 2000, Moscow's economic, energy, and geopolitical imperatives have coalesced into a unified grand strategy—frequently termed the Putin Doctrine—designed to reestablish Russian hegemony across the post-Soviet space. The foundational premise of this doctrine posits that Russia's survival as a great power is entirely contingent upon dominating its "near abroad," with Ukraine functioning as both an indispensable geopolitical buffer and a critical transit corridor for European energy exports. Consequently, the Kremlin's policy toward Kyiv has systematically relied on a calculated matrix of energy weaponization, forced economic integration, and intense political coercion to structurally obstruct Ukraine's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions such as NATO and the European Union.

During the early twenty-first century, Putin's strategy toward Ukraine prioritized asymmetric economic integration over direct kinetic confrontation. Moscow systematically sought to anchor Kyiv within its sphere of influence through joint industrial ventures, preferential trade architectures, and heavily subsidized natural gas tariffs. The institutional relationship between Gazprom and Naftogaz was explicitly weaponized by the Kremlin; by

⁴² Nizhnikau, R., & Moshes, A. *The war in Ukraine, the EU's geopolitical awakening and implications for the contested neighbourhood*. Policy Studies, Vol. 45, Nos. 3–4, pp. 489–506. 2024.

tethering Ukraine's energy security entirely to Moscow's political goodwill, hydrocarbon transit became a potent mechanism of coercion. This geoeconomic strategy culminated in the 2006 and 2009 "gas wars," where Russia deliberately curtailed supplies. These punitive disruptions signaled a definitive shift toward a more aggressive posture, designed both to discipline Kyiv's political divergence and to demonstrate Russia's structural dominance over overarching European energy architectures.

In the 2010s, Putin's strategy shifted toward aggressive geopolitical consolidation. Moscow launched the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to bind post-Soviet states into its orbit and explicitly counter Western influence. When Ukraine rejected the EAEU in 2013 in favor of an EU Association Agreement, the Kremlin interpreted this pivot as a fundamental threat to Russian regional supremacy. This crisis directly catalyzed the 2014 annexation of Crimea—a definitive application of the Putin Doctrine that unified military and energy objectives. Ultimately, seizing the peninsula secured Russia's vital naval base at Sevastopol, established its maritime dominance over the Black Sea, and effectively expropriated massive offshore hydrocarbon reserves.

Prior to 2014, Ukraine functioned as the indispensable transit corridor for Russian natural gas destined for European markets, with infrastructure such as the Druzhba and Brotherhood pipelines facilitating approximately 80 percent of Moscow's westward hydrocarbon exports. This geographic centrality endowed Kyiv with significant geoeconomic leverage; bilateral disputes over pricing and transit tariffs could rapidly cascade into severe supply disruptions across Europe, a structural vulnerability starkly demonstrated during the 2006 and 2009 "gas wars." For Moscow, establishing hegemonic influence over Ukraine was viewed as a strategic imperative to neutralize this critical transit dependency, while for European states, the recurring instability underscored the urgent necessity of supply security and structural energy diversification. In response to recurrent transit friction with Kyiv, Russia invested heavily in alternative energy infrastructure designed to strategically bypass Ukrainian territory. Mega-projects such as the Nord Stream network in the Baltic Sea and TurkStream in the Black Sea were explicitly developed to eliminate Moscow's reliance on Ukrainian transit corridors. However, these bypass initiatives rapidly evolved into distinct arenas of geopolitical contestation. Nord Stream 2, in particular, faced crippling U.S. sanctions and intense opposition from Eastern European states, who perceived the pipeline as a deliberate mechanism to deepen European energy dependence on Moscow while systematically stripping Ukraine of its strategic transit leverage. Since 2000, the Putin Doctrine has prominently featured the aggressive weaponization of energy to achieve geopolitical objectives. For the Kremlin, dominance over hydrocarbon supplies, infrastructure, and pricing transcends economic utility, functioning instead as a central mechanism of strategic leverage. By inextricably linking energy access to political loyalty, Russia sought to consolidate hegemony over Kyiv and coerce European nations heavily reliant on its natural gas. Ultimately, this

energy supremacy was operationalized into a grand strategy where pipeline geography acts as a direct vector for projecting political influence. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was driven by a confluence of geostrategic imperatives: the preservation of strategic depth, the monopolization of regional energy reserves, and the pursuit of maritime hegemony. By seizing the peninsula, Russia effectively expropriated nearly 40,000 square kilometers of the Black Sea Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), granting Moscow undisputed authority over lucrative offshore oil and gas deposits. Furthermore, the occupation of the Sevastopol naval facility consolidated Russian naval power projection, enabling Moscow to dominate Black Sea transit corridors and definitively sever Ukraine from its own offshore hydrocarbon potential.

Conversely, Ukraine has historically suffered from acute energy import dependency, particularly regarding natural gas. Following the 2014 crisis, Kyiv actively pursued energy decoupling from Moscow by utilizing European reverse-flow mechanisms and accelerating investments in domestic production and renewable infrastructure. However, the subsequent full-scale invasion has decimated Ukraine's critical energy architecture, as kinetic strikes systematically dismantle power grids, refineries, and transmission networks. This targeted destruction has not only engineered severe domestic energy deficits but also fundamentally destabilized the broader regional energy security framework.

Since 2000, the Putin Doctrine regarding Ukraine has operated as a highly calculated blend of historical revanchism, energy statecraft, and economic coercion. Through the strategic use of pipeline networks, pricing manipulation, and military projection, Moscow aims not only to dominate Ukraine but to permanently reshape the Eurasian geopolitical landscape. The current war stands as the violent culmination of this two-decade strategy, demonstrating that the Kremlin views the subjugation of Ukraine as structurally essential to Russia's national identity, its regional hegemony, and its pursuit of a multipolar world order.

The Role of Crimea and Donbas

The acquisition of Crimea in 2014 altered the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. The Sevastopol Naval Base, the crown jewel of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, is located in Crimea, making the peninsula strategically important to the Russian military⁴³. The Sevastopol installation allows the Kremlin to extend a substantial expeditionary footprint throughout the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East, serving as a vital logistical bridge for operations in Syria and beyond. Consequently, Crimea's integrated naval and air defense architecture cements the peninsula as the cornerstone of Russian regional military supremacy.

Geoeconomically, the seizure of Crimea unilaterally expanded Russia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), allowing Moscow to expropriate massive offshore oil and gas deposits

⁴³ Skalamera, M. *The geopolitics of energy after the invasion of Ukraine*. The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 7–24. 2023.

while permanently denying Ukraine these critical economic assets. Moreover, control over strategic ports like Sevastopol and Kerch has transformed the peninsula into an essential logistical hub. Through this occupation, Russia has institutionalized a strategy of maritime strangulation, dominating vital chokepoints like the Kerch Strait to regulate the Sea of Azov and heavily constrain Ukraine's eastern commercial shipping.

The Donbas region—comprising the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts—serves as Ukraine's traditional industrial epicenter, characterized by extensive coal extraction, metallurgy, and heavy manufacturing. Control over this territory confers profound economic leverage and symbolic significance. Following the 2014 crisis, Russian sponsorship of separatist proxies engineered a protracted, low-intensity frozen conflict. While Moscow discursively frames this intervention as a humanitarian imperative to protect Russophone populations, its strategic utility lies in structurally degrading Ukraine's economic capacity and sustaining state fragility to ensure Kyiv's reliance on Western support.

Furthermore, the Donbas functions as a crucial mechanism of political coercion. By artificially sustaining the separatist Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics," Moscow systematically destabilizes Ukraine from within, wielding this internal fracture as a veto against Kyiv's Euro-Atlantic integration. The Kremlin actively weaponizes the region's demographic and linguistic composition, utilizing the defense of "compatriots abroad" against fabricated threats of ultra-nationalism to legitimize its kinetic involvement to both domestic and international audiences.

During the 2022 escalation, Russia's operational design explicitly aimed to consolidate total hegemony over the Donbas while forging an uninterrupted contiguous land bridge to Crimea via Mariupol and the Azov Sea littoral. This territorial corridor crucially mitigates Crimea's logistical vulnerability and deepens Russian strategic depth. Ultimately, these territories anchor Moscow's overarching grand strategy: Crimea operates as a formidable forward-projection maritime fortress, while the Donbas serves as a structural wedge designed to perpetually undermine Ukrainian statehood.

GLOBAL RESPONSES AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS

The 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point in geopolitics among Eurasian countries⁴⁴. The Crimean Peninsula holds paramount military significance for the Russian Federation, primarily due to the Sevastopol Naval Base—the strategic crown jewel of the

⁴⁴ Johansson-Nogués, E., & Leso, F. *Geopolitical EU? The EU's wartime assistance to Ukraine*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, Vol. 63, No. 1, pp. 127–142. 2025.

Black Sea Fleet. Unfettered control over this installation enables Moscow to project robust military power across the Black Sea basin, into the Eastern Mediterranean, and throughout the Middle East, crucially sustaining expeditionary operations in theaters such as Syria. Consequently, equipped with advanced air defense architectures and vital maritime access, Crimea functions as the indispensable anchor of Russia's regional military hegemony.

In addition to the military aspect, Crimea increased the EEZ of Russia in the Black Sea, which opened access to the many valuable offshore oil and gas reserves. Not only did this increase the long-term energy appeal of Russia, but Ukraine was also deprived of major revenues in the future. Also, the ports of Crimea, including Sevastopol and Kerch, are important logistics stations in commercial and military shipping. The occupation of Crimea allowed Russia to effectively exert more control over the chokepoints of the Black Sea, such as the Kerch Strait, that leads to the Sea of Azov and controls the access of Ukraine to its eastern ports.

The Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) is Ukraine's traditional industrial heartland, rich in coal mines, steel plants, and heavy industry. Control of Donbas provides not only economic leverage but also symbolic value, as it represents Ukraine's industrial backbone. Since 2014, Moscow has actively sponsored separatist proxies in the Donbas, engineering a protracted frozen conflict. While the Kremlin discursively frames this intervention as a humanitarian imperative to protect ethnic Russian populations, its underlying strategic objective is to structurally degrade Ukraine's economic capacity and erode its sovereign viability. Furthermore, the Donbas functions as a critical asymmetric lever; by sustaining the unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk "People's Republics," Russia deliberately fosters internal destabilization to establish a permanent structural veto against Kyiv's Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow consistently weaponizes the region's demographic composition to legitimize its ongoing interference, utilizing this narrative domestically to validate the defense of "compatriots abroad" against perceived threats of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism and Western subversion.¹

- With the 2022 full-scale invasion, Russia prioritized securing a contiguous land corridor along the Azov Sea to link the Russian mainland with Crimea, while simultaneously consolidating its control over the Donbas. This territorial bridge eliminates Crimea's geographic isolation and solidifies vital logistical supply lines for ongoing operations. Ultimately, both regions form the foundational pillars of Russian strategy: Crimea acts as a forward-operating naval fortress for Black Sea power projection, and the Donbas serves as an asymmetric wedge engineered to permanently dismantle Ukrainian sovereignty.

EU and Member States Engagement

Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the European Union has emerged as a primary institutional pillar supporting Kyiv's defense and post-conflict reconstruction. Building upon the foundational sanctions architecture established following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the EU radically escalated its geoeconomic response following the full-scale invasion in February 2022. By late 2025, the bloc had implemented fifteen comprehensive sanctions packages, cementing the most extensive economic embargo in its institutional history. This multifaceted sanctions regime systematically targeted Russia's macroeconomic lifelines—including oil, coal, and liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports—alongside its defense-industrial complex and dual-use technology supply chains, while decisively decoupling major Russian financial institutions from the SWIFT network. Entering 2025, these punitive measures were further calibrated to encompass diamond exports, maritime shipping entities, and the shadow fleet vessels utilized to circumvent global oil price caps. This evolving framework reflected Europe's transformation from a primarily economic power into a more assertive geoeconomic actor, leveraging its market influence as a foreign policy tool⁴⁵.

Prior to 2022, the European Union's profound asymmetric dependence on Russian hydrocarbons—most acutely observed in Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Austria—severely constrained its geostrategic autonomy. However, the full-scale invasion catalyzed a structural paradigm shift in European energy architecture. Leveraging frameworks such as the REPowerEU initiative and the Green Deal Industrial Strategy, the bloc aggressively expedited its timeline to achieve complete decoupling from Russian fossil fuels by 2027. By mid-2025, this geoeconomic reorientation successfully reduced Russian gas imports to less than 10 percent of pre-war volumes. This deficit was systematically offset by securing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the United States, Norway, and Qatar, supplemented by expanded pipeline frameworks with Azerbaijan and Algeria. Concurrently, the EU scaled its renewable infrastructure, achieving unprecedented solar and wind capacity milestones across Spain, France, and the Netherlands. Ultimately, the rapid deployment of floating LNG terminals in Germany and Poland, coupled with advancements in the Southern Gas Corridor, crystallized Europe's definitive transition from structural vulnerability to robust energy resilience. Despite its foundational identity as a political and economic bloc, the European Union has undergone an unprecedented institutional metamorphosis, assuming a robust security and defense mandate. By late 2025, the bloc had mobilized over €12 billion through the European Peace Facility (EPF) to supply Kyiv with lethal aid, munitions, and tactical training. This financial architecture facilitated the joint procurement of critical materiel, including 155mm artillery

⁴⁵ Akaev, A., & Pantin, V. *Central Asia as the economic and geopolitical tension nexus: Some implications for the world's futures*. World Futures, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 36–46. 2018.

shells, advanced air defense batteries, and anti-drone technologies. While frontline states such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Lithuania spearheaded direct military assistance, Germany underwent a historic strategic pivot—abandoning decades of post-war pacifism to supply Leopard main battle tanks alongside IRIS-T and Patriot missile systems. Concurrently, the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine) facilitated combined-arms training for over 60,000 Ukrainian personnel, establishing a structural foundation for enduring defense interoperability between Kyiv and European security architectures. The EU also played a leading role in economic and humanitarian support, channeling more than €80 billion in grants and loans to sustain Ukraine’s budget, rebuild infrastructure, and stabilize its financial system. In February 2024, the EU established the Ukraine Facility, a four-year €50 billion package to finance reconstruction, governance reform, and EU accession preparations. Complementing these efforts, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)—activated for the first time in 2022—remained in force through 2025, safeguarding the rights of more than four million Ukrainian refugees to live, work, and study across EU member states. Poland, Romania, and Germany continued to host the largest refugee populations, while EU coordination ensured access to housing, healthcare, and education.

Despite political differences among member states—most notably from Hungary and Slovakia regarding sanctions and funding—the EU maintained remarkable unity under pressure. Budget disputes and disagreements over military aid were resolved through compromise, reflecting Europe’s growing ability to act cohesively in times of crisis. In July 2025, the European Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to Ukraine’s eventual EU membership, declaring the “irreversibility of Ukraine’s European path.”

The war fundamentally accelerated the EU’s enlargement and neighborhood strategies. Following Ukraine’s June 2022 candidate designation, the European Council opened formal accession negotiations in December 2024, recognizing Kyiv’s vital judicial and anti-corruption reforms. By late 2025, the rapid completion of the screening phase for multiple chapters marked unprecedented integration progress, while Moldova and Georgia concurrently advanced their accession via the revitalized Eastern Partnership Plus framework.

Broadly, the conflict cemented the EU’s drive for strategic autonomy, balancing transatlantic security ties with the aggressive expansion of sovereign European defense production. The 2025 launch of the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS), alongside the Joint European Procurement Mechanism and the Defence Production Act, critically strengthened Europe’s capacity to independently manufacture munitions and advanced weapons. Ultimately, these institutional initiatives drove the EU’s historic transformation from a normative economic bloc into a decisive geopolitical union, fully capable of underpinning collective defense and global stability.

US and NATO Involvement

Since 2014, the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and Ukraine has demonstrated variations in executive doctrine and tactical priorities, yet it remains anchored by a singular grand strategic imperative: preserving American hegemony in Europe, containing Russian revanchism, and ensuring transatlantic cohesion. Through the deployment of economic sanctions, lethal military assistance, and enhanced NATO interoperability, Washington's posture has transitioned through distinct phases—evolving from cautious deterrence to robust forward defense, and ultimately institutionalizing a framework for long-term strategic stabilization. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Obama administration implemented a containment strategy defined by diplomatic isolation and targeted economic statecraft. Working alongside the European Union, Washington imposed severe sectoral sanctions on Russia's financial, defense, and energy architectures. To avoid direct escalation, the U.S. restricted its support for Ukraine to non-lethal military aid and training programs. Ultimately, by prioritizing diplomatic mechanisms like the Minsk Agreements, Washington sought to carefully balance deterrence with de-escalation, ensuring the preservation of transatlantic unity. The Trump administration (2017–2021) introduced significant rhetorical unpredictability into U.S. foreign policy yet maintained the structural core of existing sanctions and security frameworks. Despite expressing interest in a diplomatic détente with Moscow, Trump authorized the critical transfer of lethal defensive aid—specifically Javelin missiles—to Ukraine and expanded NATO exercises in Eastern Europe. Although the 2019 impeachment crisis temporarily strained bilateral ties, it did not disrupt Washington's overarching strategic posture. Ultimately, Trump's intense pressure on NATO allies to increase defense burden-sharing, coupled with a drive for U.S. energy dominance, indirectly strengthened European resilience against Russian geopolitical pressure.⁴⁶

The Biden administration (2021–2024) adopted a highly assertive posture, defining the Russian confrontation as a systemic battle between democracy and authoritarianism. Following Moscow's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the U.S. mobilized a global coalition to impose unprecedented geoeconomic sanctions and freeze Russian sovereign assets. Washington radically escalated its military assistance, providing intelligence architecture alongside advanced platforms like HIMARS, Patriot systems, Abrams tanks, and long-range missiles. By 2024, U.S. aid exceeded \$100 billion, making it the indispensable pillar of Ukrainian defense. This leadership simultaneously galvanized the transatlantic alliance; through the Madrid and Vilnius Summits (2022–2023), NATO upgraded its forward defense posture and completed a historic strategic enlargement by integrating Finland and Sweden, drastically expanding the alliance's borders with Russia. As the conflict transitioned

⁴⁶ Масимханулы, Д., Айнуp, А., & Дарбай, Н. *World geopolitics and the new situation in the Central Asian region: Turning points and trends*. Казахстанское Востоковедение, Vol. 13, No. 1. 2025.

into a protracted war of attrition in 2025, U.S. and NATO grand strategy fundamentally pivoted toward long-term sustainment, robust deterrence, and structural reconstruction. Following the U.S. Congress's authorization of heavily audited security assistance, the June 2025 Ukraine Security Compact formally institutionalized enduring Western defense commitments. By establishing a decadal framework for arms transfers, joint training, and intelligence synchronization, this compact effectively elevated Kyiv to a *de facto* NATO partner, superseding the immediate need for formal accession. Consequently, Washington recalibrated its operational focus from rapid tactical victories toward cultivating Ukraine's sovereign defense-industrial base, prioritizing the integration of advanced Western platforms and ensuring strict interoperability with NATO architectures.

Concurrently, while maintaining a strict threshold below direct kinetic entanglement, NATO executed a historic fortification of its eastern flank. The alliance permanently garrisoned multinational battlegroups across Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the Baltic states, augmented by advanced missile defense networks and forward-deployed logistical nodes. Furthermore, rapid-deployment exercises such as Defender-Europe 2025, alongside intensified air policing and maritime patrols across the Baltic, Black, and Eastern Mediterranean seas, comprehensively solidified NATO's expanded deterrence posture and multi-domain operational reach.

The Ukraine Defense Contact Group (Ramstein format) remained crucial for coordinating multilateral aid and ensuring systems interoperability. Concurrently, NATO training programs in Europe prepared tens of thousands of Ukrainian forces in combined-arms and counter-offensive tactics. By mid-2025, the NATO-Ukraine Joint Council solidified into a permanent body, giving Kyiv a vital structural voice in alliance strategy.

The war dramatically unified NATO. The accession of Sweden and Finland secured the alliance's northern flank, effectively boxing Russia out of Baltic dominance and fortifying Arctic defense. Spurred by Germany's *Zeitenwende*, increased European defense spending finally realized long-standing burden-sharing goals. Recognizing that global security is deeply interconnected, NATO also institutionalized vital partnerships with Indo-Pacific allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea.

In the U.S., the 2025 election cycle sparked fierce debate over the sustainability of American support. Donald Trump's campaign push for rapid peace negotiations raised concerns about allied abandonment, drawing warnings that such moves could embolden Moscow. Nevertheless, strong bipartisan consensus in Congress ensured continued funding for Ukraine and steadfast support for NATO. Analysts predict that enduring bipartisan commitment to containing Russia will prevent any drastic strategic departures, limiting future changes to tactical adjustments.

By the end of 2025, U.S. and NATO objectives centered entirely on strategic stabilization: sustaining Ukrainian sovereignty without triggering direct conflict with Russia. This effort produced a renewed era of transatlantic solidarity, successfully expanding the alliance and hardening its defenses against hybrid cyber and energy attacks. Ultimately, the conflict cemented America's role as the guarantor of the rules-based international order and transformed NATO into an alliance capable of global strategic response.

China's Stance and the Global South

Since the outbreak of hostilities, China has carefully calibrated a posture of strategic ambiguity, maintaining an officially neutral façade that remains structurally pro-Russian. Beijing has explicitly avoided condemning the invasion, choosing instead to legitimize Moscow's actions through a discursive framework that attributes the crisis to NATO expansionism and Western security architecture. Despite projecting the image of a prospective mediator, Beijing has systematically deepened its geoeconomic and diplomatic lifelines to Moscow. This includes exponentially increasing bilateral trade, securing discounted Russian hydrocarbons, and prioritizing joint diplomatic coordination within non-Western multilateral frameworks, as prominently demonstrated during the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin and ongoing BRICS engagements. Ultimately, this pragmatic calculus enables China to operationalize its "no-limits" partnership with Russia while successfully navigating the threshold of Western secondary sanctions.

In early 2023, Beijing promulgated a 12-point peace proposal emphasizing the resumption of diplomatic dialogue, the inviolability of state sovereignty, and the prohibition of nuclear escalation. However, by pointedly omitting any demand for Russian withdrawal from occupied territories, the framework was broadly dismissed by Western governments as strategically ambiguous and implicitly biased toward Moscow. Analyzed through the broader lens of the geopolitics of peace, this proposal functioned less as a tangible roadmap for conflict resolution and more as a discursive diplomatic exercise, deliberately designed to project China as a responsible systemic actor and to consolidate its normative influence across the Global South.

Ultimately, the Ukraine conflict has catalyzed China's grand strategy of counterbalancing Western hegemony. Deepening its alignment with Russia guarantees Beijing long-term access to critical energy, raw materials, and agricultural commodities at preferential rates. Concurrently, the massive diversion of Western military and financial resources toward the European theater inadvertently advances Beijing's strategic posture against the United States in the Indo-Pacific—a competitive dynamic that was starkly evident during the diplomatic maneuvers of the 2025 Alaska Summit. Nevertheless, China exercises acute geoeconomic caution; by strictly withholding direct lethal military aid to Moscow, Beijing carefully

calibrates its support to avoid a catastrophic decoupling from the European Union and severe retaliatory measures from Washington.

The Global South (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) has largely refused to adopt Western sanctions or policies regarding the Ukraine war. Pursuing strict strategic autonomy, major powers like India, Brazil, and South Africa continue to balance economic ties with Russia alongside their relations with the West. Rather than viewing the war as an ideological clash between democracy and authoritarianism, developing states see it as a localized European conflict that has unleashed severe global economic shocks in food, fuel, and fertilizer markets.

China's diplomatic narrative resonates deeply within these regions, echoing widespread frustrations with Western normative hypocrisy. By citing past Western interventions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, the Global South challenges the moral high ground claimed by the Euro-Atlantic alliance in Ukraine. This shared skepticism structurally elevates China as the champion of the developing world and positions Beijing as the primary counterweight to U.S. and EU institutional dominance.

Ultimately, the strategic non-alignment of the Global South and China severely dilutes Western efforts to isolate Russia on the world stage. Because these nations represent a massive demographic and economic bloc, their stance prevents any unanimous global isolation campaign. For Russia, these relationships guarantee crucial alternative markets and political survival; for China, they are instrumental in accelerating the transition toward a multipolar world order free from Western hegemony.

Russia and China Axis in Global Order

A hallmark of the new global architecture is the profound ideological and strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing, commonly referred to as the Sino-Russian axis. An alternative international system based on the principle of sovereignty, free from Western hegemony and numerous polarities, is envisioned by this collaboration, which goes beyond being just a policy⁴⁷.

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions, the economic, political, and military convergence between Moscow and Beijing has accelerated profoundly. Goeconomic synergy now anchors this axis, characterized by Russia securing massive volumes of discounted hydrocarbon exports (oil, gas, and coal) in exchange for vital Chinese technological transfers, manufactured goods, and capital investment. To

⁴⁷ Cau, E. *Geopolitical implications of the Belt and Road Initiative: The backbone for a new world order?* Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 39–IX. 2018.

operationalize the vision of a Greater Eurasian Partnership, both states have structurally harmonized their flagship geoeconomic frameworks—linking China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This systemic integration is explicitly engineered to forge alternative terrestrial supply chains and sovereign financial architectures, thereby insulating both powers from Western-dominated financial institutions and vulnerable maritime chokepoints.

Concurrently, the Sino-Russian partnership has drastically escalated its military coordination. Joint naval and aerospace exercises across critical strategic theaters—including the Sea of Japan, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean—demonstrate a highly advanced and growing operational interoperability between their armed forces. Ideologically, Moscow and Beijing champion a revisionist security paradigm predicated on absolute state sovereignty, strict non-interference, and a mutual rejection of Western normative interventionism. This structural alignment culminated in the February 2022 "no-limits" partnership agreement—formalized mere weeks prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine—which unequivocally signaled their joint commitment to dismantling what they perceive as an aggressive, U.S.-led strategy of global containment.

Ideologically, the Sino-Russian axis poses a formidable challenge to the liberal international order by advancing a counter-normative framework rooted in strict Westphalian sovereignty, developmental pragmatism, and a firm rejection of Western political conditionality. Moscow positions itself as the vanguard of traditionalist conservatism and multipolarity, while Beijing emphasizes state-led economic modernization and South-South cooperation. Together, they champion a brand of "global pluralism," offering the Global South robust geoeconomic partnerships completely devoid of democratic mandates or structural reform requirements.

Within the broader macro-geopolitical landscape, this axis functions not as a rigid treaty alliance, but as a highly effective strategic symbiosis. Beijing provides Moscow with an indispensable geoeconomic lifeline and crucial diplomatic legitimacy; in exchange, Russia supplies China with massive natural resources, vital strategic depth, and a willingness to aggressively challenge U.S. hegemony through kinetic means. Furthermore, they actively engage in institutional balancing, leveraging multilateral forums like BRICS, the SCO, and the G20 to synchronize their positions on global trade architectures, technology regimes, and financial reform.

Nevertheless, this partnership is characterized by deepening structural asymmetries. Crippling Western sanctions have exponentially increased Russia's economic reliance on China, decisively shifting the bilateral balance of power toward Beijing. While Moscow strives to project an image of an equal partnership, Beijing approaches the relationship with calculated pragmatism, utilizing it to guarantee energy security, project geopolitical influence, and

cement its leadership across Eurasia and the Global South. Despite these internal imbalances, their strategic convergence serves as a powerful counterweight to Western alliance networks, actively driving the bifurcation of the international system into competing geopolitical blocs.

Ultimately, the Sino-Russian axis has emerged as the structural anchor of the 21st-century multipolar order. It marks the definitive conclusion of the U.S.-led unipolar moment, signaling a transition toward a fragmented system defined by competing spheres of influence, diffuse regional power centers, and rival normative visions of global governance. The war in Ukraine has dramatically accelerated this systemic shift, forcing Moscow and Beijing into an unprecedented strategic alignment that will fundamentally dictate the trajectory of global geopolitics for decades to come.

War Economy Prospects in Eurasia

Across Eurasia, a structural war economy has emerged, characterized by the systemic reallocation of public finances toward defense, security, and dual-use infrastructure.

Across the Eurasian landmass, states are systematically reallocating public finances to prioritize defense architectures, internal security, and dual-use infrastructure. Russia has effectively transitioned to a *de facto* wartime command economy, characterized by massive defense expenditures, stringent capital controls, and the direct state mobilization of industrial capacity. Conversely, Ukraine has operationalized a "whole-of-society" economic model; it channels all available domestic fiscal resources into munitions, air defense networks, and the rapid restoration of critical energy and transport grids, while remaining structurally dependent on international macroeconomic and security assistance. Along NATO's eastern flank, European governments are securing multi-year procurement contracts for advanced platforms—including air defense systems, artillery, missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—driving defense budgets well beyond the 2% GDP threshold and heavily subsidizing the expansion of munitions manufacturing. Consequently, these compounding dynamics have precipitated a structural, continent-wide demand shock for military hardware, logistical networks, and critical industrial inputs. Wartime procurement favors items that can be produced at scale: artillery shells, rockets, loitering munitions, UAVs/UUVs, counter-UAS, electronic warfare, and battlefield ISR. Civilian factories in metals, chemicals, machine tools, optics, and electronics are being converted or expanded to meet military specifications. Shipyards in the Black Sea, Baltic, and Caspian basins pivot to small combatants, patrol craft, and unmanned surface/subsurface vessels; rail and trucking fleets are militarized for heavy lift and casualty evacuation. This dual-use turn pulls labor, capital, and energy away from consumer sectors, tightening civilian supply and raising prices⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ Buranelli, F. C. *Central Asian regionalism or Central Asian order? Some reflections*. Central Asian Affairs, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1–26. 2021.

Western sanctions and export controls have created severe bottlenecks in microelectronics, avionics, and optics. Eurasian producers have adapted through three core tactics: (1) import substitution, prioritizing local production despite reliability trade-offs; (2) exploiting parallel import networks via intermediary hubs; and (3) securing non-Western suppliers for critical technology. While hardware quality remains inconsistent, these workarounds enable rapid innovation in drone warfare, electronic warfare (EW), and software-defined radios through the swift integration of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) components.

Simultaneously, geopolitical risk is permanently altering Eurasian energy flows. To bypass Western price caps and insurance restrictions, Russia increasingly relies on a maritime shadow fleet, utilizing ship-to-ship transfers while redirecting its LNG and pipeline trade to new buyers. In response, Europe is aggressively expanding its LNG regasification and Southern Gas Corridor capacities, while Central Asian nations explore trans-Caspian and "Middle Corridor" routes to reduce dependence on Russian transit. Today, sanctions compliance and insurance costs dictate energy margins as much as physical resources. For Ukraine, persistent strikes on its energy grid have forced the adoption of critical structural redundancies, including decentralized generation and hardened substations.

Food, metals, and the commodity war

Disruption of Black Sea grain lanes has global spillovers: freight rates and war-risk premiums jump, alternative routes (Danube, rail to EU ports) strain capacity, and price spikes propagate to import-dependent regions. On the metals side, Eurasia's role in titanium, nickel, aluminum, and ferroalloys becomes a bargaining lever; sanctions and counter-sanctions drive carve-outs, swaps, and longer supply chains. Stockpiling behavior by militaries and manufacturers hardens prices and lengthens delivery schedules.

Mobilization, emigration, and casualties compress labor supply—especially skilled trades (welders, machinists, electricians), drivers, and IT specialists. Wage pressures rise in defense-adjacent sectors; civilian services face shortages. Ukraine copes by rotating units, expanding training pipelines, and incentivizing return of specialists; Russia backfills with expanded vocational training and migration from Central Asia. Medium-term risks include lost human capital, lower total factor productivity, and a heavier future tax burden to service wartime debt.

Sanctions fragment payments, financing, and insurance. States turn to capital controls, directed lending, sovereign funds, and barter-like clearing to keep trade moving. Banks in neutral jurisdictions intermediate high-risk flows at premium spreads; commodity traders and freight forwarders specialize in compliance navigation. The grey economy expands around dual-use goods (chips, bearings, sensors), raising enforcement costs and policy uncertainty for firms across Eurasia.

Critical connective infrastructure—spanning pipelines, rail nodes, deep-water ports, and submarine cables—has transitioned into primary kinetic targets, carrying exorbitant geopolitical risk premiums. Consequently, state budgets are heavily prioritizing structural hardening (including blast mitigation and redundant routing), rapid-reconstitution units, and robust cyber-physical defenses for maritime terminals. In contested maritime domains, such as the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Persian Gulf, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) assets—like hospital ships and modular power systems—dual-hat as instruments of soft-power projection and commercial continuity, effectively blurring traditional civil-military boundaries.

Goeconomically, the defense-industrial base is consolidating into highly specialized regional clusters. Central Europe (specifically Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Romania) operates as the primary hub for munitions manufacturing, armored fighting vehicle (AFV) maintenance, and avionics; Türkiye dominates in the production of unmanned aerial systems (UAS), missile architectures, and naval platforms; the Gulf States act as vital financial anchors and offtake guarantors; and the Caucasus and Central Asia provide essential chemical precursors, metallurgy, and logistical bandwidth. Furthermore, the operationalization of parallel goeconomic transit frameworks—namely the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) linking Russia, Iran, and India, alongside the Middle Corridor connecting China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the EU—strategically circumvents vulnerable maritime chokepoints and insulates trade from contested naval theaters.

Tactically, battlefield innovation cycles have compressed from years to mere months. The rapid proliferation of asymmetric capabilities—such as loitering munitions, first-person view (FPV) drones, AI-enabled targeting matrices, and counter-battery systems—defines contemporary engagements. The systemic militarization of civilian artificial intelligence, commercial satellite constellations, and cloud infrastructure for ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) heavily advantages agile enterprises capable of rapid software iteration and COTS (commercial off-the-shelf) integration. This paradigm is fundamentally reshaping defense acquisition, forcing a transition toward agile procurement frameworks backed by multi-year demand signals.

Macroeconomically, protracted war economies inherently generate severe inflationary pressures, regressive socioeconomic shocks, and widening regional disparities. While governments attempt to insulate domestic populations through price controls, energy subsidies, and mobilization compensation, these measures inevitably inflate fiscal deficits and crowd out civilian capital investment. Consequently, the domestic political economy tightens, forcing recalibrated social contracts between the state, the defense-industrial sector, regional elites, and organized labor. Ultimately, enduring regime legitimacy becomes inextricably

linked to the visible provision of security—such as robust air defenses and resilient public utilities—and the structural credibility of post-conflict reconstruction strategies.

For Ukraine and its adjacent conflict-affected regions, the reconstruction imperative will serve as a multiyear driver of economic expansion, spanning housing, transport infrastructure, energy grids, humanitarian demining, environmental remediation, and the digitalization of public services. The velocity and fiscal efficiency of this recovery will be dictated by the deployment of blended finance models—integrating EU grants, International Financial Institution (IFI) capital, and private investment—alongside the institutionalization of robust war-risk insurance architectures and transparent procurement regimes. Consequently, firms specializing in modular infrastructure, grid hardening, integrated renewable-storage systems, and transport interoperability will encounter a period of sustained, high-volume demand.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

Militarization and Defense Realignments

The ongoing conflict has catalyzed a fundamental paradigm shift in NATO's defensive posture, moving away from the legacy "trip-wire" model—where limited deployments functioned primarily as symbolic deterrents—toward a persistent, forward-postured presence along the alliance's eastern flank. This transition is underscored by the integration of robust, layered air and missile defense architectures, an increase in permanent force rotations, and the extensive pre-positioning of logistical stockpiles. Simultaneously, member states are codifying ambitious long-term industrial targets for critical munitions—including artillery shells, missile interceptors, and loitering munitions—to ensure operational sustainability within a protracted conflict environment. In addition to strengthening Baltic-Arctic security, Russia's regional maneuvering capacity has been further curbed by the NATO admission of Sweden and Finland⁴⁹.

Beyond traditional treaty structures, the proliferation of "minilateral" coalitions is significantly reshaping global security by reinforcing maritime chokepoints and providing a robust counterweight to revisionist great-power assertiveness. High-profile arrangements—including AUKUS (Australia, UK, US), trilateral coordination between the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines, the India-France-UAE partnership, and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—are fundamentally reconfiguring the naval security architecture spanning the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. These flexible, issue-specific frameworks are strategically optimized to harden critical maritime corridors and island chains, ensuring the maintenance of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) during periods of acute crisis. This shift toward a multi-layered, networked approach to security signifies a decisive departure from the historical

⁴⁹ Aras, B., & Kardaş, Ş. *Geopolitics of the new Middle East: Perspectives from inside and outside*. Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 397–402. 2021.

reliance on singular, monolithic alliance frameworks. The ongoing Ukraine conflict has acted as a catalyst for the rapid expansion of defense-industrial capabilities among middle powers. Türkiye has solidified its position as a premier producer of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and precision-guided munitions; South Korea has emerged as a globally significant exporter of heavy artillery and armored platforms; and Central-Eastern European states are aggressively scaling domestic munitions manufacturing and maintenance infrastructure. This geographic diversification of the defense-industrial base is effectively decentralizing arms production, moving away from traditional Western monopolies to foster autonomous, regional defense ecosystems capable of sustaining long-term rearmament.

Simultaneously, coercive "grey-zone" activities have become a staple of contemporary statecraft. Governments increasingly operationalize cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure—including port facilities, rail networks, and financial architectures—alongside seabed sabotage, satellite interference, and the deployment of maritime militias. These hybrid tactics intentionally erode the distinction between civilian and military spheres, complicating crisis escalation management. Consequently, naval and coast guard services are forced into dual-posture operations, balancing routine constabulary duties with the necessity of preparing for high-intensity kinetic engagements.

Furthermore, the rise of "tech nationalism" and rigorous export control regimes are fundamentally restructuring global supply chains for high-end semiconductors, optics, and precision machine tools. Battle-tested requirements from the Ukrainian theater have accelerated the integration of uncrewed aerial and naval platforms, AI-enabled intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) suites, and advanced counter-drone architectures. These systemic shifts erode the historical reliance on sheer military mass, instead rewarding actors who demonstrate superior innovation velocity by swiftly integrating commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technologies into their military operations.

Impact on Global Energy and Supply Chains

Europe's energy architecture is undergoing an unprecedented reconfiguration in response to the geopolitical shocks of the conflict. The systematic divestment from Russian pipeline gas has compelled a pivot toward diversified LNG procurement, expanded strategic stockpiling, and the acceleration of the Southern Gas Corridor. While this diversification successfully mitigates singular supplier dependency, it simultaneously increases Europe's exposure to maritime volatility and global spot-price fluctuations. Consequently, European energy security has shifted from the stability of fixed, long-term pipeline contracts to an agile, maritime-dependent model defined by international LNG pricing, complex logistics, and fluctuating insurance risk premiums.

Conversely, Moscow's exclusion from traditional Western markets has catalyzed an aggressive "eastward reorientation." Crude oil and petroleum exports are increasingly funneled

toward Asian markets—principally China and India—facilitated by a burgeoning "shadow fleet" of tankers operating within opaque insurance, financing, and ownership structures. This phenomenon has effectively bifurcated the global energy market into two distinct circuits: one governed by Western compliance standards and another centered on discounted Russian exports, where elevated freight costs and sanctions-evasion risks are internalized into the final price. These longer supply lines underscore the structural necessity of Asia in Russia's long-term energy strategy.

This shift toward contested maritime routes has elevated the geostrategic imperative of overland alternatives. Central Asian and Caspian producers are prioritizing the "Middle Corridor" and trans-Caspian connectors to bypass Russian territory and reach European markets, while the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has emerged as a vital logistical bridge linking Russia, Iran, and India. While these terrestrial routes currently lack the throughput of maritime shipping, they represent a decisive convergence of infrastructure development, regional geopolitics, and supply-chain hardening.

The current state of the world economy is closely related to maritime chokepoints such as the Black Sea grain corridors, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles (which are governed by the Montreux Convention), Bab el-Mandeb, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca⁵⁰. Insurance premiums for war risk, freight prices, and delivery delays are all immediately affected by attacks, accidents, or closures in these locations. By keeping bigger stocks, diversifying suppliers, and implementing dual routing techniques that integrate maritime and rail to mitigate interruptions, companies have moved away from "just-in-time" logistics and toward "just-in-case" tactics.

Critical seabed infrastructure—encompassing subsea data cables, power interconnectors, and energy pipelines—has evolved into the backbone of global commerce, simultaneously becoming a primary theater for asymmetric coercion. Recent incidents have laid bare the extreme vulnerability of these assets to sabotage, covert operations, and accidental disruption. In response, both state actors and private consortia are aggressively scaling investments in structural redundancy, rapid-reconstitution capabilities, and enhanced maritime domain awareness. This institutional shift has birthed a new layer of maritime security, where traditional naval force projection is increasingly fused with the mandate to protect the physical nexus of global finance, telecommunications, and energy transit.

Beyond the energy sector, the geopolitical shockwaves of the conflict have destabilized broader commodity markets. Volatility in Black Sea grain corridors triggered acute food insecurity, while systemic supply tightening in strategic metals—notably nickel, titanium, and aluminum—strained the defense and aerospace manufacturing sectors. Furthermore,

⁵⁰ Spaiser, O. A. *The European Union's influence in Central Asia: Geopolitical challenges and responses*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC. 2018.

disruptions to fertilizer supply chains have exerted downward pressure on global agricultural yields. Concurrently, the transition to renewable energy is fundamentally altering demand profiles, prioritizing LNG infrastructure, modernized grid capacity, and critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earths.

Consequently, the distinction between energy security, climate policy, and industrial strategy has effectively vanished. We are witnessing the birth of a new era where economic resilience and infrastructure protection are the primary determinants of geopolitical influence. Future strategic advantage will belong to those who can best manage this complex, interconnected nexus of material supply and infrastructure security.

4

Changing Dynamics of Geopolitics Of Central Asia in Shifting World Order

STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Central Asia as Strategic Corridor

. Central Asia's location at the heart of Eurasia provides it with significant strategic leverage. As a land bridge linking East and West, the region is flanked by major powers—Russia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East. Acting as a bridge between civilizations and its status as the 'pivot of Eurasia' underscores a timeless reality: this corridor functions as a gateway, where control over its territory translates into the ability to govern the movement of goods, people, and military forces across the continent." It is a pivot point and a middle-ground, its location allows it to be a crossroads, as well as a buffer zone, and centuries ago and centuries later, it has influenced the equilibrium of power⁵¹.

Central Asia once served as the hub of the Silk Road, a network of caravan routes that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture between China, the Middle East, and Europe. The cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv were thriving hubs of diplomacy, education, and trade. In addition to trade, other empires that exerted their influence in the region were Persian, Mongol, and later Russian and British empires because of the central location. The 19th century saw the Great Game of the British Empire and Tsarist Russia focusing on Central Asia, where each of them tried to gain influence over this route in order to protect their borders and spread the influence to South and East Asia. This historical background highlights the role played by geography that changed Central Asia into a strategic point of contention.

In the post-Soviet era, globalization and regional connectivity initiatives have allowed Central Asia to reclaim its historical status as a vital geographical gateway. The region's energy-rich states—notably Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have emerged as key participants in global energy security, supplying oil and gas to markets in China, Europe, and

⁵¹ Winn, N., & Gänzle, S. *Recalibrating EU foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards principled pragmatism and resilience*. Geopolitics, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 1342–1361. 2023.

South Asia. This resurgence is further bolstered by major transport corridors such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Collectively, these developments underscore Central Asia's transformation into a critical node of the global economy, serving as a primary hub for energy, trade, and digital exchange. The same geography that makes Central Asia a corridor also exposes it to vulnerabilities. Historically a buffer between empires, today it lies at the intersection of great-power rivalries among Russia, China, the United States, and regional actors like Turkey, Iran, and India. The region's strategic location also makes it prone to security challenges such as cross-border terrorism, extremism spilling from Afghanistan, drug trafficking, and contested water resources. This ensures that Central Asia remains not only a corridor of connectivity but also a corridor of competition and instability that directly affects global security.

From Old Great Game to New Great Game

The 'Great Game' refers to the 19th-century strategic rivalry between the British and Tsarist Russian Empires for hegemony over Central Asia. Driven by the British imperative to safeguard the 'crown jewel' of India, this competition was intensified by Russia's southward expansion from Siberia and the Caucasus into the Central Asian interior. The region's challenging topography—defined by vast steppes, arid deserts, and rugged mountain passes—served as both a formidable frontier and a critical corridor for potential military encroachment. This struggle for influence was characterized by a sophisticated blend of espionage, formal diplomacy, direct military intervention, and complex alliances with regional khanates and tribal leadership. Cities such as Kabul, Samarkand, and Bukhara became staging points for imperial maneuvering. While the British sought to maintain buffer zones in Afghanistan and Persia (Iran), Russia sought access to warm-water ports and greater influence across Eurasia. The “Old Great Game” symbolized how Central Asia's geography turned it into a high-stakes chessboard of imperial geopolitics⁵².

The 'Great Game' lost momentum in the early 20th century, superseded by the empires' mounting internal crises and the onset of global warfare. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution brought Central Asia firmly into the Soviet fold, ending overt imperial competition while restructuring the region under Moscow's authority. For decades, the Soviet Union treated Central Asia as a sealed security and economic zone, tightly regulating its governance and development. By functioning as a buffer against the West, the region continued to serve a similar strategic purpose as it had during the 19th century, albeit under the strictures of Soviet policy. Once the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the rivalry for Central Asia, sometimes called the New Great Game, resumed. Once again, the proliferation of sovereign nations in the region—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—turned it into a

⁵² Quah, D. *Correlated Trade and Geopolitics Driving a Fractured World Order*. In *The New Global Economic Order*, pp. 54–66. Routledge. 2025.

struggle between superpowers. In contrast to the Old Game, which was defined by two empires, the New Great Game is multipolar and includes countries like Russia, China, the US, the EU, Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, and the Gulf states. All actors have strategic interests that are informed by the energy resources, trade routes and security interests.

- **Energy and Resources:** Central Asia is also endowed with enormous deposits of oil, natural gas and minerals. The competition is characterized by pipeline politics i.e. whether the routes pass through Russia, China, or South Asia.
- **Connection and Trading Routes:** BRI of China, EAEU of Russia and Western-supported transit corridors, such as the Middle Corridor and INSTC, are examples of the centrality of the region in global logistics.
- **Security Concerns:** Since 9/11, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have become part of the global counterterrorism operation by establishing bases in Afghanistan to aid operations in Afghanistan. Countermeasures to Russia and China were in place through the military-security organizations of the CSTO and the SCO.
- **Cultural and Ideological Competition:** Turkey promotes pan-Turkic identity; Russia emphasizes shared post-Soviet and Eurasian heritage; China builds influence through Confucius Institutes and economic diplomacy.

POST-SOVIET TRANSITION AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

The 1991 fall of the Soviet Union drastically altered the geopolitical scene in Eurasia. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan emerged swiftly as five new sovereign nations in Central Asia, which had previously been an integral aspect of the Soviet Union's political, economic, and cultural framework⁵³. For the first time in modern history, these nations were tasked with building sovereign institutions, managing borders, and defining national identities outside Moscow's direct control. However, independence also brought daunting challenges: weak state structures, economic dependency on Russia, ethnically mixed populations, and exposure to new forms of global competition.

In the immediate post-Soviet era, Central Asia diverged sharply from the path of liberal democratization, trending instead toward authoritarian consolidation. Leaders such as Islam Karimov, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and Saparmurat Niyazov prioritized regime stability and the preservation of power over the development of political pluralism. This trajectory was not uniform, however; Kyrgyzstan faced prolonged political volatility characterized by successive uprisings, while Tajikistan was ravaged by a brutal civil war (1992–1997). Despite these variations, the overarching challenge for regional governments was to maintain internal cohesion under immense external pressure—a task they largely pursued through centralized

⁵³ Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and the new great game in Central Asia*. Millennial Asia, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 265–288. 2022.

governance, the cultivation of personality cults, and the systematic suppression of opposition and independent media.. The post-Soviet economic transition was characterized by profound systemic upheaval. Having inherited economies deeply integrated into—and dependent upon—Moscow for subsidies, trade, and market access, the new republics faced severe inflation, rising unemployment, and widespread social dislocation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over time, however, these states pivoted toward leveraging their abundant natural endowments to construct new economic foundations. While Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan successfully capitalized on energy exports, and Uzbekistan utilized its gold and cotton reserves, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan became increasingly reliant on the remittances of labor migrants. Despite these efforts toward economic diversification, Russia remained an indispensable partner, maintaining its influence through critical trade flows, infrastructure projects, and the vital reliance of the Central Asian workforce on the Russian labor market.

. Independence was more than a political transition; it sparked a deliberate revival of cultural and historical identity. Having lived under Soviet policies that favored Russian language and culture at the expense of local traditions and Islamic roots, the newly independent states moved quickly to reclaim their heritage. By elevating national languages, reconstructing historical narratives, and embracing Islamic traditions, these nations sought to distinguish themselves from their Soviet past and forge a unique, sovereign identity. For example:

- Kazakhstan emphasized its nomadic heritage and steppe traditions while balancing its Russian-speaking population.
- Uzbekistan revived the legacy of Timur (Tamerlane) as a unifying national symbol.
- Turkmenistan promoted unique cultural nationalism under Niyazov's "Turkmenbashi" cult of personality.
- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan highlighted their mountain traditions and Persian-Turkic heritage.

Mapping the Geopolitics of Resource Wealth in Central Asia

Asian states seek to redefine themselves as independent actors while navigating overlapping cultural ties (Turkic, Persian, Islamic, Soviet). The region's identity is thus hybrid, blending post-Soviet legacies, revived historical traditions, and global integration.

Unlike the European Union, Central Asia has struggled to foster a cohesive regional identity, a challenge mirrored by the divergent trajectories of its constituent nations. In lieu of regional integration, these states adopted a 'multi-vector' foreign policy, maneuvering between the competing spheres of Russia, China, and Western powers. While Moscow has sought to consolidate influence through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Central Asian governments have remained wary of

over-dependence, actively diversifying their partnerships. Consequently, China has gained substantial economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, while Turkey has increasingly asserted itself as a primary cultural and historical partner. This reflects a profound geopolitical tension: Central Asia is currently caught between conflicting identities—as part of a Russian-led Eurasian space, a Chinese economic sphere, or a burgeoning Turkic cultural zone. This fluid and contested self-definition remains the fundamental variable shaping the region's security architecture and its long-term economic integration projects. Mapping the Geopolitics of Resource Wealth in Central Asia . The transition of Central Asia from a peripheral resource-depository to an active geopolitical shaper is one of the defining developments of the 21st-century Eurasian order. The region's resource wealth serves as both a magnet for global power and a tool for local statecraft. While the "New Great Game" continues to exert pressure on these nations, the proactive adoption of multi-vector diplomacy suggests a departure from the historical patterns of external dominance. Central Asia has re-emerged as a vital node in the global economic structure, driven by its vast endowment of natural resources. The region sits upon some of the world's most significant reserves of hydrocarbons, including extensive oil and natural gas fields in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—the latter home to the massive Galkynysh gas field—alongside substantial deposits of uranium, gold, coal, and increasingly critical rare earth minerals.

Historically, this resource wealth defined the region as a passive "chessboard" for external powers. Today, however, the landscape is shifting. While the region remains an essential supplier to global energy markets and industrial supply chains, the Central Asian republics are leveraging these assets to move beyond mere extraction. By integrating into diverse transit corridors and balancing the competing investments of Russia, China, and Western powers, these nations are attempting to transform their resource dependency into a foundation for sovereign economic development and regional integration.

While Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely on hydropower and gold mining, Uzbekistan has vast deposits of gas, copper, and gold (the Muruntau mine is one of the world's largest)⁵⁴. Beyond hydrocarbons and minerals, water resources—specifically the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river systems—constitute a critical dimension of the region's geopolitics, serving as the essential lifeblood for both agriculture and hydropower generation. Since independence, this vast natural wealth has proven to be both a strategic asset and a structural challenge for the Central Asian republics. While revenue from oil, gas, and minerals has financed state budgets, infrastructure development, and elite patronage networks—evidenced by Kazakhstan's transformation of Astana into a modern capital and Turkmenistan's use of gas exports to underwrite its state-led stability—this heavy reliance on commodities has simultaneously

⁵⁴ Korosteleva, E., & Paikin, Z. *Russia between East and West, and the future of Eurasian order*. International Politics, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 321–333. 2021.

hindered economic diversification and left states vulnerable to global price volatility. In resource-poor nations like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the lack of extractable wealth has fostered an acute dependency on migrant remittances. Underpinning these economic realities is the region's landlocked geography; lacking direct access to open seas, Central Asian states are inherently dependent on neighboring powers for the pipeline and overland infrastructure necessary to access global markets. This has turned pipeline politics into a central feature of geopolitics:

- Russia historically dominated energy export routes, using pipeline control for leverage.
- China has emerged as a major alternative, building pipelines (e.g., Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline) that directly connect Turkmen, Kazakh, and Uzbek gas to Chinese markets.
- Western-backed projects like the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline sought to bypass Russia, linking Caspian oil to the Mediterranean via the South Caucasus.

Central Asia has thus become a contested area where the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union are vying for control of export routes.

- Russia maintains its power in the region through energy dependence, security pacts (CSTO), and EAEU. It regards the region as its historic sphere of influence.
- By including Central Asia into its BRI, China aims to secure reliable access to minerals and hydrocarbons, which will support its economic growth.
- Turkey, Iran, and India all vie for influence, with the US and EU framing their interests in terms of energy diversification (lessening Europe's dependence on Russia) and promoting alternative routes from the Caspian basin. Cultural ties, trade corridors, and strategic alliances are also factoring in this competition.

Central Asia has become a high-stakes arena where infrastructure projects and energy contracts serve as primary tools of geopolitical influence. This resource wealth significantly dictates domestic governance, often driving an 'authoritarian bargain' where regimes use resource revenues to maintain power and patronage. While this contributes to a 'resource curse' characterized by corruption and limited economic diversification, it also affords these states the financial autonomy to navigate great-power competition.

The region's strategic importance is global, particularly regarding supply chain security: Given Central Asia's pivotal Eurasian location, its resource endowment has direct implications for global energy security and supply chain stability:

- **European Energy Security:** Disruptions within Caspian pipeline networks carry immediate consequences for energy markets in Europe.

- **Asian Market Integration:** China's growing reliance on Central Asian gas underscores the region's vital role in bolstering Asian energy security.
- **The Green Energy Transition:** Increasing global demand for uranium and rare earth minerals positions Central Asia as a central node in the future of the green energy economy.

Consequently, natural resources function as more than just a domestic economic engine; they are potent geopolitical instruments that dictate the trajectory of alliances, regional rivalries, and the global balance of power.

CENTRAL ASIA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Post-Cold War global politics is less unipolar and more multipolar, with the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, Turkey, India, and regional organizations all vying for influence. The landlocked nations of Central Asia, which border Eurasia and were once subservient to the Soviet Union, now practice multi-vector diplomacy, striking a balance between relations with rival regional and global actors in order to maximize the advantages of their independence.⁵⁵

Emerging Regionalism and Economic Integration

In the immediate aftermath of their 1991 independence, the Central Asian republics—Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan—were defined by mutual skepticism, border volatility, and a divergent approach to foreign policy. During this period, these states prioritized individual sovereignty and the cultivation of external ties with Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU, often to the detriment of regional integration. This lack of cohesion proved detrimental, impeding collective efforts to manage shared challenges such as water distribution, cross-border trade, and regional security.

However, the past decade has witnessed a pivotal shift toward the revitalization of regionalism, as leaders have recognized that collective cooperation serves as a strategic imperative to enhance their autonomy and bargaining power on the global stage. The emergence of regular summits between Central Asian heads of state, which gained significant momentum around 2017, has been the primary driver of this resurgence. Notably, these summits represent a 'bottom-up' model of regionalism—self-initiated and owned by the states involved, rather than facilitated by Moscow or Beijing. By addressing critical issues such as the management of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins, infrastructure connectivity, and border commerce, this forum not only tackles systemic challenges but also builds essential political confidence in a region historically plagued by mistrust.

⁵⁵ Karaganov, S. *The new cold war and the emerging Greater Eurasia*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 85–93. 2018.

The 2016 accession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev ushered in a paradigm shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, catalyzing a renaissance of regionalism. Moving away from the relative isolationism of the Karimov era, Uzbekistan actively prioritized neighborly relations, easing visa restrictions, opening borders, and expanding trade networks. This strategic pivot transformed Uzbekistan from a detached actor into a central bridge, fostering greater economic integration across the region. By facilitating the freer movement of goods, people, and services, this cooperation laid the foundation for a more cohesive Central Asian economic space.

Concurrently, the focus on connectivity and transport infrastructure has become a defining feature of modern Central Asian regionalism. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)—commonly known as the Middle Corridor—serves as a primary example of this shift. By bypassing traditional northern routes controlled by Moscow, the Middle Corridor links China to Europe via the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Turkey. For Central Asian governments, these initiatives are essential for reducing overdependence on Russian-dominated corridors, thereby granting them greater strategic flexibility in trade and energy exports. Furthermore, these efforts are re-establishing the region as a vital land bridge, modernizing its historical significance as a central node of the ancient Silk Road.

This bottom-up regionalism empowers Central Asia to engage with global powers—China, Russia, the EU, and the U.S.—on a more equal footing. By presenting a more unified regional voice, the states can negotiate better terms for energy exports, connectivity projects, and security cooperation. Moreover, it allows them to avoid being dominated by any single external actor, which is crucial in a multipolar world where great-power rivalries increasingly intersect in Central Asia. Emerging regionalism thus represents not just a pragmatic adjustment but a strategic evolution that enhances sovereignty, strengthens resilience, and fosters long-term stability.

Balancing Relations Among Global Powers

Post-independence Central Asia has been shaped by the unique challenges of being landlocked, resource-rich, and situated at the crossroads of several major powers. In response to this high-stakes environment, regional governments have employed a multi-vector foreign policy. By carefully balancing relations with Russia, China, Western nations, and regional neighbors, these states aim to diversify their economic base and insulate themselves against external pressure, ultimately prioritizing the preservation of their sovereignty. For small and medium-sized states surrounded by global powers, multi-vectorism has become a survival mechanism as well as a diplomatic tool⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ Noorali, H., Flint, C., & Ahmadi, S. A. *Port power: Towards a new geopolitical world order*. Journal of Transport Geography, Vol. 105, 103483. 2022.

Kazakhstan serves as the model for multi-vector diplomacy in Central Asia. The government in Astana has crafted a sophisticated foreign policy that balances conflicting interests while maximizing state autonomy. Kazakhstan's "multi-vector" foreign policy remains the cornerstone of its diplomatic identity, a strategy designed to preserve national sovereignty by balancing relationships with competing global powers. Since its independence, this approach has allowed Astana to avoid exclusive reliance on any single hegemon, instead hedging its strategic and economic bets across a diverse network of international partners. As of 2026, this policy is under greater strain than at any point in the post-Soviet era. The escalation of global rivalries particularly the structural fracture between Russia and the West has made "equidistance" increasingly difficult to maintain.

From its capital, Astana, the state has successfully calibrated a complex foreign policy that integrates diverse geopolitical interests.

Strategic Security: Maintaining robust defense-industrial partnerships with Russia and security cooperation via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

- **Economic Integration with China:** Leveraging pipeline infrastructure, commerce, and investment opportunities, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- **Western Energy Partnership:** Facilitating significant development of Caspian oil and gas fields through sustained collaboration with American and European corporations.
- **Diversified Global Ties:** Cultivating deeper investment channels with Gulf states while expanding economic and cultural engagement with Turkey.
- **"Middle Power" Aspirations:** Under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kazakhstan is increasingly positioning itself as a "middle power" and a "good global citizen." This involves active multilateralism, niche diplomacy in non-proliferation, and acting as a bridge for connectivity and green energy transition.

Often hailed as the pioneer of multi-vectorism, Kazakhstan has crafted a foreign policy that the state has woven together a tapestry of partnerships that allows it to engage with global powers without becoming subordinate to any single one. By refusing to choose a single geopolitical camp, Kazakhstan has carved out a unique position. This independence has allowed the nation to successfully portray itself as an indispensable bridge between the global East and West, turning its geographic centrality into a strategic asset. Kazakhstan's ability to remain a "neutral" actor in a polarized world will depend on its success in turning its geographic centrality into tangible strategic and economic assets, rather than geopolitical liabilities .

Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has successfully transitioned from the isolationism of the Karimov era to a proactive, "diplomacy of results." As of 2026, Tashkent has solidified its role as a regional anchor and a pivotal "bridge" for connectivity, positioning itself as the primary site where Central Asian regionalism converges with global power competition. Since 2016, Uzbekistan has undergone a profound foreign policy transformation under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, abandoning its legacy of isolation in favor of proactive, multi-vector engagement. Unlike Kazakhstan, which integrates formal military alliances into its foreign policy, Uzbekistan maintains a policy of non-alignment, opting instead for strategic flexibility across four primary pillars:

- **Pragmatic Security Engagement:** Cultivating cooperative security ties with Russia without compromising sovereignty or entering into total dependence.
- **Economic Integration with China:** Prioritizing trade and infrastructure development, with a specific focus on trans-regional transport corridors.
- **Western Diversification:** Building robust partnerships with the U.S. and the EU, centered on foreign direct investment, educational exchange, and governance reform.
- **Regional Autonomy:** Strengthening intra-regional cooperation to amplify the collective bargaining power of Central Asian states.

This model enables Uzbekistan to capitalize on benefits from all major powers while maintaining a neutral, agile posture that precludes the country from becoming entangled in great-power rivalries. Tashkent is currently navigating a complex environment where it acts as a venue for outside powers to compete (e.g., investments in critical minerals, energy, and infrastructure), while simultaneously leading Central Asia's internal efforts at "self-organization." The government's primary challenge remains maintaining this "equidistance" as the competition between Russia, China, and the West intensifies, requiring Tashkent to constantly recalibrate its partnerships to avoid becoming a proxy for broader geopolitical rivalries. Turkmenistan pursues a distinctive diplomatic course defined by its doctrine of 'permanent neutrality,' a status formally recognized by the United Nations in 1995. By eschewing formal alliances, Ashgabat utilizes its substantial hydrocarbon wealth as a primary diplomatic instrument, securing bilateral ties with diverse partners: China remains its primary consumer of natural gas, while pipeline exports to Iran and regional neighbors supplement this trade, alongside aspirations for future trans-Caspian access to European markets. While this non-aligned posture maximizes Turkmenistan's strategic latitude, it concurrently fosters an insular framework that often precludes the state from deeper engagement with regional integration initiatives. In 2026, Turkmenistan's foreign policy remains the most conservative and rigid in Central Asia. It is not seeking to lead the regional order but rather to insulate the Turkmen state from the volatility of great-power competition. While neighbors like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are actively "hedging" and "balancing" between Russia, China,

and the West, Turkmenistan relies on a policy of "controlled distance." Its continued success depends on its ability to maintain high-value energy exports to China and avoid becoming a geopolitical battleground for the various powers vying for influence in the heart of Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy is characterized by a high-stakes "multi-vector" balancing act. Unlike its more centralized neighbors, Bishkek operates in a unique environment shaped by significant internal political volatility, a high dependency on external economic lifelines, and a geographic position that makes it a critical transit point in the shifting Eurasian order. As of mid-2026, Kyrgyzstan's diplomacy is defined by the struggle to preserve state sovereignty while navigating the conflicting pressures of Russia, China, and the West. In 2026, Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy is less about "grand strategy" and more about "tactical survival." It seeks to leverage its location as a bridge for trade—particularly through the CKU railway and "digital nomad" initiatives—to diversify its economy. However, the path ahead is narrow. Bishkek must manage the delicate task of remaining a reliable partner to Moscow, a compliant host for Chinese capital, and a manageable entity for Western regulators, all while navigating the potential for domestic political shifts. Its long-term success depends on whether it can use this regional and global "multi-vectorism" to build true economic autonomy, or if it will remain vulnerable to the external shocks of its larger neighbors.

Under President Emomali Rahmon, Tajikistan's foreign policy is defined by a "security-first" and "regime-preserving" approach. Unlike the more proactive regionalism of Uzbekistan or the balancing act of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan's diplomacy is heavily constrained by its geographic vulnerability, economic dependence on labor remittances, and proximity to the instability in Afghanistan. **Core Strategic Pillars:**

- **Security-First Alignment:** Russia remains Tajikistan's indispensable security guarantor. Dushanbe hosts Russia's 201st Military Base Moscow's largest facility abroad and maintains deep integration through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This relationship is existential, as the Tajik government relies on Russian security support to maintain internal control and manage its long, porous border with Afghanistan.
- **Economic Dependency on China:** While Russia provides security, China has emerged as the most consequential economic partner. Beijing is Tajikistan's primary creditor and an essential investor in infrastructure, mining, and transport. As of 2026, Chinese investment has fundamentally integrated Tajikistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), though this has introduced concerns regarding debt sustainability and over-reliance.
- **"Water and Climate" Diplomacy:** Tajikistan aggressively utilizes its status as a "water tower" of Central Asia to gain international visibility. Dushanbe consistently elevates issues like glacier preservation and sustainable water

management at the United Nations, using these topics to exercise agenda-setting power that exceeds its material weight.

- **Limited Multi-Vectorism:** While Tajikistan's constitution and official rhetoric favor a "multi-vector" policy, it is often more of an aspiration than a reality. Dushanbe maintains "open door" relations with the U.S., the EU, India, and Iran, primarily to court development aid and counterterrorism support, but its room for maneuver remains strictly limited by the competing gravitational pulls of Moscow and Beijing.

Multi-vectorism provides Central Asian states with clear benefits: diversified economic opportunities, reduced vulnerability to pressure, and enhanced sovereignty⁵⁷. Maintaining this strategic equilibrium, however, is an increasingly precarious endeavor. The intensification of global geopolitical friction—most notably the estrangement between Russia and the West following the conflict in Ukraine, alongside the escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China—has strained the feasibility of preserving a neutral stance. Consequently, Central Asian governments are compelled to engage in continuous diplomatic recalibration as they grapple with the collateral effects of Russian sanctions, the expansion of Chinese economic influence, and the shifting security priorities of Western powers.

⁵⁷ Zhou, Q., He, Z., & Yang, Y. *Energy geopolitics in Central Asia: China's involvement and responses*. Journal of Geographical Sciences, Vol. 30, No. 11, pp. 1871–1895. 2020.

5

Central Asian Countries' Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN: FRAMEWORKS OF MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

As the region's primary architect of multi-vectorism, Kazakhstan formalized this foreign policy framework under President Nursultan Nazarbayev during the 1990s. The strategy centers on pursuing domestic growth and strategic autonomy by cultivating stable, pragmatic partnerships with influential global powers—namely Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union. While its neighbors practice multi-vectorism primarily as a reactive survival mechanism or a doctrine of isolation, Kazakhstan has elevated it into a proactive, highly institutionalized grand strategy. Initiated by the nation's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and sophisticatedly adapted by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Astana's foreign policy is designed to transform its geographic vulnerability—being landlocked between Russia and China—into a strategic asset. Kazakhstan does not merely survive the "Great Game"; it actively manages it. A theoretical analysis of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy reveals the most robust and successful diplomatic architecture in the Eurasian heartland. By synchronizing the hard-power realities of resource balancing (Realism) with the soft-power projection of institutionalism and norm-building (Constructivism), Astana has secured an unprecedented degree of strategic autonomy for a landlocked post-Soviet state. However, the Russia-Ukraine war and the intensifying Sino-American technological rivalry represent the ultimate stress test for this architecture. The space for absolute multi-vectorism is shrinking. Astana is increasingly forced to perform a high-wire act: complying with Western secondary sanctions to protect its global financial access, while avoiding the political alienation of an increasingly volatile Moscow and an economically dominant Beijing. Ultimately, Kazakhstan's trajectory proves that while multi-vectorism successfully established the state's sovereignty in the twentieth century, maintaining it in the twenty-first century requires continuous, hyper-pragmatic recalibration to avoid being crushed by the tectonic shifts of multipolarity.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Heathershaw, J., Owen, C., & Cooley, A. *Centred discourse, decentred practice: The relational production of Russian and Chinese 'rising' power in Central Asia*. In *Rising Powers and State Transformation*, pp. 44–62. Routledge. 2020.

- The Approaches of multi vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan defined by **Regional Security Architecture:** Kazakhstan actively engages in regional security frameworks to maintain stability, participating in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) while simultaneously leveraging the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to foster security cooperation with China and other regional actors.
- **Geoeconomic Connectivity:** By synchronizing its domestic *Nurly Zhol* infrastructure initiative with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and balancing this with robust trade and investment ties to the West, Kazakhstan strategically positions itself as a vital logistical bridge between European and Asian markets.
- **Multilateral Diplomacy:** Astana has established itself as a neutral diplomatic venue, hosting critical global discussions ranging from conflict resolution (e.g., the Syrian peace talks) to intercultural dialogue, effectively positioning the city as a center for international mediation.

Kazakhstan leverages its multi-vector framework to facilitate simultaneous engagement across different spheres: Moscow for security, Beijing for economic integration, and the West for institutional and governance reform. This structural flexibility allows the state to eschew total alignment with any single bloc, thereby preserving a necessary strategic distance. Ultimately, the pragmatic objective of this policy is to safeguard national sovereignty amidst the competing pressures of major external powers. Kazakhstan has meticulously crafted a state identity that transcends the typical post-Soviet narrative. Astana projects itself as the indispensable "Eurasian Bridge" and a responsible global stakeholder. By securing the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010, joining the WTO, and maintaining highly active UN diplomacy, Kazakhstan utilizes institutionalism to elevate its international prestige. This diplomatic enmeshment ensures that its sovereignty is recognized and defended by a broad coalition of international actors, preventing it from being treated as a mere appendage of the Russian "near abroad." Currently, President Tokayev is shifting the state's identity narrative toward becoming a recognized "Middle Power." By hosting peace talks (the Astana Process for Syria) and mediating regional disputes, Kazakhstan constructs a diplomatic identity that commands respect independently of its military capabilities, allowing it to navigate crises that paralyze larger powers. Uzbekistan occupies the demographic and geographic core of the Eurasian heartland. As the most populous state in the region and the only country bordering all four other Central Asian republics plus Afghanistan, its geopolitical posture inherently dictates the stability of the entire region. Under Islam Karimov (1991–2016), Tashkent's foreign policy was defined by intense protectionism, border closures, and a hyper-realist oscillation between global powers. However, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has executed one of the most profound geopolitical reorientations in the twenty-first century,

pivoting to a proactive, cooperative multi-vectorism. A theoretical analysis of Uzbekistan's foreign policy reveals a state transitioning from defensive isolationism to confident regional leadership. If Kazakhstan functions as Central Asia's global bridge, Uzbekistan has emerged as its indispensable internal anchor. Tashkent's current multi-vector architecture is highly effective because it synergizes absolute military non-alignment with aggressive economic and regional integration. By resolving the localized friction that historically paralyzed the region, Uzbekistan is actively rewiring the geoeconomics of the heartland, making projects like trans-Afghan rail corridors and integrated regional energy grids viable. However, the long-term success of this strategy is contingent upon the Mirziyoyev regime's ability to maintain internal economic modernization without reverting to the authoritarian reflexes of the past. Ultimately, a stable, cooperative, and non-aligned Uzbekistan is the absolute prerequisite for a truly multipolar and sovereign Eurasian heartland. The foreign policy of Uzbekistan has witnessed a tectonic shift under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. By abandoning the insular doctrine of the Karimov era, Tashkent has reinvented itself as a bridge between regional neighbors and global powers. This new posture is a pragmatic, multi-vector effort defined by four distinct pillars.

The framework of Uzbekistan's multi-vector policy is guided by four key orientations:

- **Building a Regional Consensus:** Tashkent has emerged as the architect of a 'regional renaissance,' mending fences with neighbors like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to address the complex nexus of border management and water-energy security.⁵⁹.
- **Broadening the Economic Horizon:** Uzbekistan's development strategy is deliberately pluralistic, pulling infrastructure capital from Beijing, energy and labor mobility from Moscow, and technical expertise from the West.
- **Security and Strategic Balance:** In their efforts with the Russian and Chinese in the fight against terrorism, Tashkent does not want to enter into formal military ties, instead opting to be flexible to the U.S. and NATO through dialogue and training programs.

Cultural Diplomacy and Identity Affirmation: Uzbekistan represents a very specific image of civilizational identity based on the traditions of Samarkand and Bukhara; as a result, it has become one of the main proponents of soft power through cultural processes, tourism, and educational exchange. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan offer two distinct approaches to multi-vector foreign policy. Kazakhstan maintains a globally-integrated, institutionalized model,

⁵⁹ Kurç, Ç. *The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense industrialization in Central Asia*. In *Defence Industries in the 21st Century*, pp. 199–213. Routledge. 2021.

whereas Uzbekistan prioritizes a more flexible, regional focus. Both states are motivated by a shared necessity to preserve sovereignty and diversify their economic interests in response to the growing geopolitical tug-of-war between Russia, China, and the West. Their progress highlights a regional transition: Central Asian states are no longer mere buffer zones, but are instead utilizing strategic diplomacy and their geographic positioning to assert influence and maintain autonomy in a fragmented global order.

TAJIKISTAN FOREIGN POLICY

While larger Central Asian republics like Kazakhstan utilize multi-vector diplomacy from a position of resource wealth and geographic insulation, Tajikistan's approach is fundamentally different. As the smallest, poorest, and most geographically vulnerable state in the region—sharing a highly porous 1,300-kilometer border with Afghanistan and a rugged frontier with China's Xinjiang province—Tajikistan's foreign policy is driven by acute fragility. Officially termed the "Open Doors" policy, Dushanbe's multi-vectorism is a highly calibrated exercise in strategic hedging designed to maximize regime security and prevent absolute subordination to any single hegemon. A theoretical analysis of Tajikistan's multi-vector foreign policy reveals a state operating on the razor's edge of geopolitical survival. Unlike the proactive, confident hedging strategies of its wealthier neighbors, Dushanbe's "Open Doors" policy is a defensive necessity. Tajikistan successfully practices multi-vectorism by commodifying its own vulnerability. By presenting itself as the indispensable frontline buffer against Afghan instability and transnational terrorism, Dushanbe compels Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union to continuously invest in its regime security. However, this strategy is fraught with long-term peril. The deeper Tajikistan relies on Chinese loans for infrastructure and Russian military bases for security, the narrower its sovereign maneuverability becomes. Ultimately, Tajikistan's foreign policy demonstrates the limits of multi-vectorism for small, resource-poor states: it is a brilliant tactical mechanism for immediate regime survival, but it struggles to permanently break the structural chains of geoeconomic dependency.

Kyrgyzstan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy- For much of the post-Cold War era, Kyrgyzstan was unique in the Eurasian heartland. Historically celebrated as the "Island of Democracy" in a sea of authoritarianism, it famously hosted both a US military airbase (Manas) and a Russian military base (Kant) simultaneously—the ultimate physical manifestation of multi-vector diplomacy. However, following three distinct revolutions (2005, 2010, and 2020), Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy is best understood not as a proactive grand strategy, but as a highly reactive survival mechanism. A theoretical analysis of Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy demonstrates the inherent fragility of multi-vectorism when practiced by a domestically unstable and economically dependent state. Unlike Kazakhstan's proactive, institutionalized hedging, Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical strategy is deeply reactive, hostage to the

shifting winds of domestic populism and the immediate financial necessities of regime survival. Kyrgyzstan proves that multi-vector diplomacy requires a baseline of domestic stability and economic sovereignty to be effective. As Bishkek drifts further from its historical democratic identity and deeper into the geoeconomic orbits of Moscow and Beijing, its capacity to maintain diverse strategic partnerships is rapidly shrinking. Ultimately, Kyrgyzstan's trajectory serves as a cautionary tale within the Eurasian heartland: without structural economic independence, multi-vectorism inevitably devolves from a strategy of sovereign assertion into a perpetual management of competing dependencies.

Turkmenistan's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy- While Kazakhstan practices proactive multi-vectorism and Kyrgyzstan practices reactive hedging, Turkmenistan has institutionalized a fundamentally distinct geopolitical posture: Permanent Positive Neutrality. Officially recognized by a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 1995 (and reaffirmed in 2015), Ashgabat's foreign policy forbids the hosting of foreign military bases and prohibits membership in multilateral military, political, or economic blocs—meaning it rejects integration into the Russian-led CSTO and EAEU, and maintains only observer status in the SCO. A theoretical analysis of Turkmenistan's foreign policy reveals the profound paradox of extreme non-alignment in the contemporary Eurasian heartland. On one hand, the doctrine of permanent neutrality has been an overwhelming success in achieving its primary Realist objective: it has insulated the regime from great-power military entanglements, kept the state out of regional wars, and guaranteed the survival of its highly centralized political system. On the other hand, politically driven isolationism has resulted in severe geoeconomic entrapment. In an era where power in Eurasia is defined by plurilateral integration, digital connectivity, and transport corridors, Turkmenistan's refusal to engage in multilateral architectures leaves it structurally vulnerable. As Ashgabat attempts to navigate the multipolar matrix, it is discovering that sovereign autonomy requires more than just political neutrality; it requires active, multi-vector logistical connectivity. If Turkmenistan cannot successfully diversify its energy exports beyond the Chinese monopsony, its prized political neutrality will increasingly become an empty shell masking profound economic dependency.

Energy Security and Strategic Independence For the states of Central Asia, the pursuit of 'energy independence' is less a drive for autarky and more an imperative for strategic autonomy. It encompasses the ability to sustain national budgets, ensure domestic energy security, and curate international partnerships without being constrained by a single buyer, transit route, or technological dependency. Given that these nations are landlocked and possess significant hydrocarbon or hydropower reserves, the mechanisms by which they transport energy—both molecules and electrons—across borders are inextricably linked to their diplomatic leverage. Consequently, their infrastructure strategies directly determine their

exposure to international sanctions and dictate their freedom of maneuver between competing global powers.⁶⁰

Export Strategies and Diversification

For Central Asian states, diversification is not merely an aspiration; it is a fundamental survival strategy. As landlocked nations, every export of hydrocarbons or electricity is dependent on the infrastructure, legal frameworks, and insurance regimes of transit states. Consequently, energy export strategies are designed to mitigate risk by multiplying routes, buyers, and financing vehicles. This prevents any single technical, political, or legal shock from paralyzing revenue streams or compromising diplomatic autonomy.

The primary pillar of this strategy is route diversification. To prevent transit states from exercising a veto over exports, producers maintain parallel corridors across all cardinal directions:

The first pillar is routing. Producers try to maintain simultaneous north, west, east, and south corridors so no single transit state can veto exports. Practically, that looks like: (i) legacy northbound links through Russia; (ii) westbound Caspian “shuttle” tankers to Azerbaijan that feed the BTC–TANAP–TAP chain toward Europe; (iii) eastbound oil and gas pipelines into China; and (iv) southbound options—swap deals via Iran, the INSTC rail/port spine to the Gulf/India, and long-discussed projects like TAPI. Each corridor has different politics, fees, and risk profiles; running them in parallel is the hedge.

A second pillar is customer diversification. Locking into a single anchor buyer brings volume certainty but weakens bargaining power. Central Asian sellers therefore cultivate European utilities and traders, Chinese NOCs, South Asian off-takers, and occasionally Gulf refiners—spreading exposure across currencies, contract law, and market cycles. When one region is oversupplied or politically constrained, cargoes can pivot to another without destroying netbacks.

Shipping raw molecules makes you hostage to pipeline tariffs and spot swings. Upgrading into refined products, petrochemicals, polymers, fertilizers, and gas-to-liquids captures more value and diversifies demand. On the power side, building cross-border electricity trade (e.g., modernized CAPS, CASA-1000) turns seasonal hydropower surplus into export revenue while creating a second energy export pillar alongside hydrocarbons. The goal is a portfolio where crude/gas, products, petrochem, and power sales can substitute for one another during shocks.

A diversified export book also mixes long-term offtake (to anchor cashflow and finance) with spot/short-term cargoes (to seize price spikes). Sellers hedge currency risk by invoicing

⁶⁰ Winn, N., & Gänzle, S. *Recalibrating EU foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards principled pragmatism and resilience*. Geopolitics, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 1342–1361. 2023.

in USD/EUR/CNY baskets and increasingly reference index mixes (Brent, Dubai, TTF, JKM) rather than a single benchmark. Pre-arranged credit lines, trade insurance, and war-risk coverage, plus access to multiple P&I clubs, keep cargoes moving when markets tighten.

Diversification only works if the “steel” exists. That means duplicated compressor stations, extra Caspian tankers and Ro-Ro ferries, storage near chokepoints, and interoperable rail gauge and terminal equipment so cargoes can switch from pipe to rail to ship. Ports (Aktau, Kuryk, Alat, Turkmenbashi) and dry ports (Khorgos, Almaty hubs) become strategic assets, not just infrastructure. The Middle Corridor (TITR) gains value as a modular mesh—rail + sea + rail—that can absorb shocks at any single node.

"In an era defined by stringent sanctions and export controls, supply chain traceability has evolved from an operational preference into a commercial mandate. Modern exporters are increasingly investing in sophisticated cargo tracking, pipeline SCADA cyber-hardening, and comprehensive contract compliance systems to meet the rigorous due diligence standards of international banks and insurers. Enhanced transparency not only lowers financing costs but also maintains vital access to Western financial markets, even as trade volumes grow with non-Western partners.

This pursuit of route and buyer diversification functions as a core instrument of foreign policy. By establishing a viable westbound chain to Europe, maintaining stable eastbound flows to China, and developing a third strategic leg via southbound corridors to the Gulf and India, Central Asian states engage in a sophisticated balancing act. The objective is not the severance of legacy ties, but the preservation of strategic agency; by proliferating export channels, these states ensure that no single partner can dictate national economic terms.

Furthermore, the global shift toward LNG, grid infrastructure, and critical minerals—such as uranium and copper—has prompted a strategic recalibration. Central Asian nations are expanding their portfolios to include utility-scale renewable energy and green hydrogen production, aimed at both Turkish and EU markets. These initiatives serve a dual purpose: they create new revenue streams and provide a hedge against the long-term volatility of hydrocarbon markets.

However, this diversification is capital-intensive and subject to significant infrastructural bottlenecks, ranging from Caspian maritime constraints and Montreux Convention limitations to rail capacity and insurance premiums. Addressing these challenges requires a pragmatic, phased implementation. By focusing on modular capacity expansion, redundant nodes, and improved regulatory frameworks for dispute resolution, Central Asian states are incrementally strengthening their integration into the global economy.

Energy Security Implications

For land-locked Central Asian states, energy security is inseparable from state sovereignty and foreign-policy freedom. Reliable access to fuels and power—and reliable access to routes, buyers, finance, and insurance—determines whether governments can fund budgets, keep industry running, and negotiate with great powers on their own terms. Any single-point dependency (one pipeline, one buyer, one season, one technology) quickly becomes strategic leverage in someone else’s hands⁶¹.

Domestically, the first layer of energy security is keeping the lights on. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan face winter gas and power tightness when heating demand spikes; Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan suffer seasonal hydropower swings, with summer surpluses and winter deficits. That drives investment in grid reinforcement, cross-border balancing, storage (gas and electricity), demand-response, and diversified generation (adding wind/solar to complement hydro and gas). Phasing consumer subsidies toward targeted support—while exposing large users to market prices—helps attract investment without sparking social stress.

Because exports and many imports must cross multiple borders, energy security hinges on redundant corridors. Weather on the Caspian, bottlenecks at Caucasus rail/ports, legal constraints in the Turkish Straits, or political frictions with any single transit state can slow or stop flows. Hence the push for parallel vectors: north (legacy Russian routes), west (Caspian shuttle → South Caucasus → Türkiye/EU), east (China pipelines/rails), and south (Iran swaps, INSTC links to Gulf/India). The more viable paths a state can use, the lower its exposure to coercion or accidents.

Moving from fixed pipeline sales to LNG-linked or spot-indexed exposure (directly or indirectly) improves flexibility but raises vulnerability to global price spikes. That volatility cascades into inflation, exchange-rate pressure, and subsidy bills. Governments respond with strategic stocks, hedging policies, diversified indexation (Brent/TTF/JKM baskets), and mixed term/spot contracts. Sovereign wealth funds and national companies increasingly act as shock absorbers, pre-arranging credit lines and insurance for tight markets.

Pipelines, compressor stations, refineries, export terminals, and under-Caspian cables and interconnectors are now targets for cyber and sabotage activity. Energy security therefore includes OT/IT hardening (segmented SCADA, anomaly detection, backup control rooms), rapid repair capacity (spares, welding teams, marine assets), and joint drills with border guards, navies/coast guards, and utilities. Insurance markets increasingly demand proof of resilience before underwriting transit at reasonable premiums.

⁶¹ Quah, D. *Correlated Trade and Geopolitics Driving a Fractured World Order*. In *The New Global Economic Order*, pp. 54–66. Routledge. 2025.

In the Amu Darya/Syr Darya basins, water is energy. Upstream hydropower operations affect downstream irrigation and industry; drought or glacier retreat squeezes both. Basin-level coordination, modern metering, seasonal energy-for-water swaps, and investment in efficient irrigation become energy-security policies, not just environmental ones. Without them, winter brownouts and agricultural losses can occur simultaneously, amplifying social and fiscal risk.

Security improves when power systems aren't hostage to one fuel or season. Adding utility-scale wind/solar (strong resources in Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan), flexible gas peakers, grid-scale storage, and cross-border power trade (modernized CAPS; CASA-1000 when feasible) smooths the supply curve. On the fuel side, associated gas capture, modest LNG/regas options, and petrochemical value-chains reduce flaring, import dependence, and revenue volatility.

Hydrocarbon exports fund budgets and diplomacy, but crises expose the tension between export maximization and domestic sufficiency. Curtailments to serve local demand can damage contract credibility; exporting too much can provoke shortages at home. Clear priority rules, transparent allocation in stress events, buffer storage, and take-or-pay flexibility clauses in contracts help reconcile these goals without reputational damage.

Sanctions and export controls have fragmented payments, shipping, and insurance. Energy security now requires compliance-ready documentation, traceable cargoes, diversified banking partners, and the ability to switch incoterms, flags, or corridors when risk premia spike⁶². Countries that can satisfy Western compliance standards and maintain access to non-Western finance enjoy lower cost of capital and steadier flows.

Interconnection creates mutual dependence. That can be weaponized—or stabilized—depending on governance. Robust intergovernmental agreements, transparent tariffs, neutral dispute resolution, and shared investment in ports, rail, and storage turn interdependence into a security asset. In practical terms, joint control rooms, real-time data sharing, and harmonized grid codes cut outage risk and improve trade reliability.

Global decarbonization shifts demand toward LNG flexibility, grid equipment, uranium, copper, and critical minerals, opening new export lines for Central Asia but also imposing CBAM/ESG standards on trade with the EU and others. Meeting these standards (methane monitoring, leak reduction, renewable PPAs for industry) is now part of energy security because it preserves market access and lowers financing costs.

- **Kazakhstan:** Secures reliability via gas-to-power balancing, large wind/solar build-out, CPC + Caspian shuttle redundancy, and refinery upgrades; cyber-physical hardening of Tengiz–CPC chain is pivotal.

⁶² Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and the new great game in Central Asia*. Millennial Asia, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 265–288. 2022.

- **Turkmenistan:** Heavy buyer concentration in China = pricing and political exposure; Iran/Azerbaijan swaps and a Trans-Caspian option are key hedges; domestic grid modernization reduces outages.
- **Uzbekistan:** Winter gas stress drives renewables + peakers + storage and downstream (GTL/petrochem) to capture value while easing import needs; cross-border power trades help balance.
- **Tajikistan/Kyrgyzstan:** Hydrology variability makes regional power trade and storage central; water diplomacy is energy diplomacy.

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND REGIONAL BALANCING

Navigating Multipolarity

Strategic autonomy in Central Asia is defined as the ability to navigate security, economic, and technological spheres without becoming subservient to any single hegemon. It is a balancing act: forming deep international relationships while shielding domestic decision-making from external pressure. This is not a retreat from the world, but a necessary operational strategy for a region uniquely 'squeezed' between the competing spheres of influence of Russia, China, and the broader Eurasian neighborhood."⁶³

The practical tool for autonomy is *multi-vectorism*: engaging several powers at once, on different issues, to prevent over-dependence. Kazakhstan pioneered this approach; others now apply variants of it—working with Russia on security legacies and labor migration, with China on infrastructure and trade, with the EU on standards and investment, with Türkiye on cultural and industrial links, with the Gulf on finance, and with India on corridors and technology. The point is to keep alternatives open so no single partner can set the price—political or economic.

In a neighborhood crowded with competing influences; Central Asian alignment is less about loyalty and more about utility. Regional capitals have adopted an 'à la carte' diplomacy, curating their international engagements to fit the task at hand. By rotating between the SCO and CSTO for security, the EAEU for customs, and the OTS for cultural influence, they maintain a presence in every relevant regional room. This flexibility extends to development, where they curate partnerships with the EU, Gulf funds, and East Asian nations to modernize their infrastructure. Ultimately, this 'variable geometry' is a deliberate strategic choice: it allows these states to tap into a diverse array of resources while successfully resisting the pressures of a binding, bloc-style commitment. Strategic autonomy is only as strong as a country's *export options*. Landlocked exporters are de-risking with multiple corridors—westward via the Trans-Caspian “Middle Corridor,” eastward to China, north via legacy links,

⁶³ Nyshanbayev, N., & Tarman, B. The Republic of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy: Re-evaluation under President Tokayev. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 45, No. 3. 2024.

and south via Iran/Gulf/India (INSTC). They are also broadening *buyer portfolios* (EU utilities, Chinese NOCs, South Asian off-takers) and *product mixes* (from crude to refined products, petrochemicals, fertilizers, and seasonal electricity). The more routes, buyers, and products you can credibly switch between, the greater your leverage in crises.

Access to finance determines who can build ports, rail, power plants, and data centers. To avoid being trapped by any single lender, states are mixing *multilateral finance (IFIs)*, *Eurobonds/sukuk*, *Gulf and Asian funds*, and *export credit agencies*. Compliance capacity—clean documentation, traceable cargoes, and credible procurement—lowers risk premia and keeps both Western and non-Western banks engaged. Arbitration mechanisms and treaty networks (e.g., investment protection) further signal that a country can take money from many directions without political strings.

On security, the region walks a tightrope: legacy ties to Russia (bases, training, equipment) coexist with Chinese internal-security cooperation, Turkish drone and defense industrial links, and episodic U.S./EU training and border-security programs. The goal is *capability without captivity*: diversify doctrines and suppliers (especially in UAVs, air defense, ISR, cyber), secure borders and pipelines, and develop constabulary capacities for grey-zone threats (smuggling, cyber, sabotage) without inviting a singular patron's veto.

Intra-Central Asian cooperation—summits, customs facilitation, water and energy swaps—turns five small negotiating tables into one larger one. When neighbors coordinate positions on tariffs, standards, and logistics (ports on the Caspian, the Alat–Aktau–Kuryk triangle; rail timetables; digital customs), they bargain better with external powers and de-risk corridor politics. This *bottom-up regionalism* converts geography from vulnerability into bargaining power.

Multipolarity is increasingly defined by technological sovereignty. In domains such as telecommunications, cloud architecture, satellite infrastructure, and financial payment systems, reliance on a single vendor or jurisdiction creates inherent vulnerabilities namely, the potential for technical backdoors and political leverage. Consequently, Central Asian states are extending the principles of multi-vectorism into the digital realm. By diversifying hardware (e.g., through Open RAN architectures), mandating interoperable standards, establishing sovereign data governance, and strengthening national cyber-response capabilities, these states are operationalizing a 'digital multi-vectorism.' This strategy enables the secure integration of disparate technological ecosystems for e-government and fintech, ensuring that modernization does not come at the cost of strategic autonomy. Renewables, flexible gas, storage, grid interconnectors, and (for some) uranium and copper are not just climate tools; they are autonomy tools. They smooth seasonal shocks, reduce import dependence, and create new export lines (green electricity, certified low-carbon fuels, critical

minerals). Meeting ESG/CBAM-type standards preserves access to EU markets while Gulf and Asian capital bankrolls projects—another example of balancing.

Autonomy is constrained by *capacity*: weak institutions, opaque procurement, or politicized regulators raise financing costs and invite external leverage. Concentrated export baskets (one commodity, one buyer), debt tied to single lenders, water stress, and demographic pressures can all narrow room to maneuver. The antidote is governance basics—transparent tariffs, credible regulators, independent dispute resolution, and investment in skills that make diversification real⁶⁴.

States that truly navigate multipolarity share traits: diversified corridors with real throughput; export books that can pivot by contract, currency, and benchmark; sovereign and corporate balance sheets that withstand sanctions spillovers; layered security that covers grey-zone and cyber risks; and regional arrangements that turn neighbors into partners rather than transit choke points. In short, *strategic autonomy* is a portfolio—of partners, routes, technologies, and laws—managed actively, not a slogan pinned to a wall.

Central Asia’s path through multipolarity is neither neutrality nor alignment; it is *orchestration*. By stacking options—economic, financial, security, technological, and regional—governments increase their resilience to external shocks and bargain for better terms with every major power. That, in practice, is what strategic autonomy looks like.

Foreign Policy Doctrines: Neutrality vs. Alignment

Neutrality is a commitment to stay out of military blocs and interstate wars, often codified in law (and sometimes recognized by the UN). It can be “permanent” (treaty/constitutional) or “armed” (neutral but well-defended). Alignment means joining security alliances or forming *de facto* security partnerships—accepting political and military obligations in exchange for deterrence, training, technology, and diplomatic cover. Most small and mid-sized states actually live between these poles: they hedge, mix, and recalibrate⁶⁵.

Neutrality is a legal-strategic status during conflicts (“we won’t take sides or grant bases”), while non-alignment is a broader political choice to avoid formal blocs in peacetime. A country can be non-aligned yet not legally neutral, or neutral but still cooperate on select security issues (border policing, counterterrorism, peacekeeping).

- Turkmenistan exemplifies permanent neutrality (UN-recognized): no alliances, no foreign bases, limited exercises—while using energy exports to China, Iran, and potentially Europe to keep options open.

⁶⁴ Nyshanbayev, N., Bekov, K., Baizakova, Z., & Amangeldy, A. The Republic of Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy. *New Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 43–63. 2025.

⁶⁵ Yuneman, R. A. Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy. *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 141–162. 2023.

- Kazakhstan practices multi-vector alignment: CSTO and EAEU ties with Russia, deep Western energy partnerships, growing EU links, significant Chinese trade, and defense-industrial diversification—alignment, but balanced.
- Uzbekistan follows pragmatic non-alignment: left CSTO, avoids binding treaties, yet cooperates widely (U.S./EU training, Turkish drones, Chinese infrastructure) and leads regional initiatives.
- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lean more aligned (CSTO, Russian basing), but still court China for finance and equipment and engage with Western donors on borders and governance.

Maximum policy autonomy, fewer entanglements, ability to mediate, and—if credible—lower political risk for investors. Downsides: no hard security guarantees; you must finance your own deterrence (“armed neutrality” isn’t cheap); coercion risk rises if neighbors doubt your resolve or if neutrality isn’t recognized by great powers.

Deterrence through collective defense, access to training, ISR and air defense networks, standardization, and emergency support (logistics, intel, ammo). Downsides: entanglement in others’ quarrels, reduced bargaining flexibility, potential sanctions exposure, and supplier lock-in for weapons and spares.

Most Central Asian states pursue multi-vectorism—a pragmatic blend: one set of partners for security legacy and labor flows (often Russia), another for infrastructure and trade (China), a third for standards, market access, and financing (EU, IFIs, Gulf), plus niche defense ties (Türkiye, Korea, U.S.). This variable geometry avoids single-point dependency and raises diplomatic leverage.

- Neutrality toolkit: constitutional clauses; UN recognition; strict limits on foreign basing; “equidistance” diplomacy; diversified energy routes so no buyer can coerce you.
- Alignment toolkit: defense treaties and SOFAs; joint exercises and basing; interoperable procurement (air defense/UAVs/ISR); shared intel; crisis plans. Either path now requires cyber-resilience, protection of seabed/energy infrastructure, and credible crisis communications.

Doctrine is inseparable from export portfolios. A neutral state dependent on one pipeline or one buyer is neutral on paper, vulnerable in practice. Conversely, an aligned state with multi-route, multi-buyer energy flows can still preserve room to maneuver. Compliance capacity (clean documentation, sanctions screening, arbitration access) lowers financing costs under both doctrines⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Arynov, Z. Is Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy threatened? *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, No. 21, pp. 192–197. 2022.

Choices often reflect elite survival as much as grand strategy. Where internal threats loom (unrest, border clashes, extremism), leaders may tilt toward alignment for regime insurance (“omni-balancing”). Where legitimacy rests on sovereignty narratives, neutrality or non-alignment can be a pillar of nation-building—provided security capacity keeps pace.

The Ukraine war highlighted doctrine in action. Some governments leaned into active neutrality (humanitarian aid, dialogue, no basing), others doubled down on balanced alignment (keeping legacy security ties while deepening EU/Asian corridors). UN votes, sanctions stance, and corridor policy (e.g., Middle Corridor vs. northern routes) revealed how doctrines translate into daily choices.

Telecom cores, cloud, satellites, payments, and drones create tech alignment even without treaties. To preserve autonomy, states are diversifying vendors (open RAN, multi-cloud), localizing critical data, and building rapid-repair capacity for grids, pipelines, and cables. Energy transition adds a new axis: renewables, storage, uranium, copper, and green fuels can widen foreign-policy options.

Neutrality maximizes freedom, alignment maximizes guarantees and Central Asia’s sweet spot is usually a calibrated mix. The art is to keep enough options—partners, routes, technologies, and laws—so doctrine enhances sovereignty rather than becoming another form of dependency.

Natural Resources and Political Economy of Central Asian States

KAZAKHSTAN



Figure 6.1: Kazakhstan

Endowed with some of the world's most extensive hydrocarbon deposits, Kazakhstan has emerged as the premier resource-rich state in Central Asia. The exploitation of its western Caspian basin—specifically anchored by the mega-fields of Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak—has propelled the nation into the upper echelon of global energy exporters.

Beyond its hydrocarbon dominance, Kazakhstan commands vast reserves of coal, copper, zinc, and critical rare earth elements, while also securing its position as the world's leading producer of uranium. Ultimately, this profound aggregate commodity wealth forms the structural foundation of the Kazakh political economy, functioning as the primary driver of export revenues and the central pillar of the national budget.

Foreign investment in Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon sector development has been crucial, particularly from Western oil majors, Russia, and China, establishing a direct connection to global markets. Nonetheless, the high dependence of hydrocarbons also makes the country vulnerable to changes in the world energy prices thus impacting fiscal and foreign policy flexibility⁶⁷.

Water is essential for agriculture, hydroelectricity, and human sustenance, although Kazakhstan lacks sufficient supplies despite its wealth of mineral resources. Syr Darya, Ili, and Irtysh are three transboundary rivers that flow into the country from their respective sources in neighboring Russia, China, and Kyrgyzstan. Since the irrigation and food security of Kazakhstan are directly affected by any decision made about upstream water management, this dependence raises the geopolitical sensitivity issue. Water is a highly contentious political problem in Kazakhstan since its southern region has relied on river-based irrigation to cultivate cereals, cotton, and cattle. Also, the Aral Sea's depletion—a catastrophe for Uzbekistan—has shown how environmentally vulnerable river politics can be. As a result, Kazakhstan's diplomacy focuses on regional water-sharing agreements to bring its demands in line with those of its upstream neighbors and on investing in modern irrigation equipment to reduce inefficiencies.

Strategically positioned at the crossroads of Eurasia, Kazakhstan has transformed its geography into a critical logistical asset. As a primary node within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the nation is actively operationalizing the 'Middle Corridor'—a multi-modal network of highways and rail lines connecting Asia to Europe. Key infrastructure investments, such as the modernization of the Caspian port of Aktau and the development of the Khorgos Gateway dry port, have cemented Kazakhstan's evolution into a major transit state. This role is complemented by a sophisticated policy of hedging: while Kazakhstan maintains deep economic integration through the EAEU, it simultaneously pursues trade alignment with the EU and China. Ultimately, these logistical investments serve as a vital tool of statecraft, providing Astana with the geopolitical leverage to diversify its economy beyond raw commodity exports and assert greater autonomy within the international system.

⁶⁷ Garbuzarova, E. The foreign policy of the Central Asian countries: The results of 30 years of development. *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, Vol. 22, No. 4. 2021.

UZBEKISTAN



Figure 6.2: Uzbekistan

While Central Asian states like Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have more abundant oil reserves, Uzbekistan is a major supplier of natural gas and minerals. With significant gas resources in the Fergana and Bukhara-Khiva regions, the nation has the second-largest natural gas reserves in Central Asia, which is a boon to the economy. As part of its efforts to diversify its exports, Uzbekistan is increasingly relying on pipelines to transport gas to destinations such as Central Asia, Russia, and neighboring states. The Gas Pipeline in China⁶⁸. Uzbekistan is not just a world leader in hydrocarbons, but also in uranium mining and production, with vast deposits of coal, gold, and copper. The Muruntau gold mine in the Navoi region is one of the world's largest open pit gold mines; it contributes to Uzbekistan's mineral wealth. State revenues are derived from its natural resource base, which is also essential to its economic modernization ambitions.

The strategic importance of water resources is highlighted by Uzbekistan's landlocked position and its dependence on the rivers Syr Darya and Amu Darya. Since Uzbekistan's economy is based on agriculture, particularly its historically dominant cotton sector, these rivers—which are shared with upstream republics, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—are crucial.

⁶⁸ Nourzhanov, K. Tajikistan's multi-vector foreign policy. *Tajikistan on the Move: Statebuilding and Societal Transformations*, p. 87. 2018.

Uzbekistan is currently dealing with water scarcity, salinization, and ecological degradation as a result of the Aral Sea disaster, which is one of the worst environmental crises in the world. Heavy irrigation has played a role in this disaster. Therefore, Uzbekistan is actively involved in regional water diplomacy, trying to strike a balance between its downstream demands and its neighbors' aspirations for electricity upstream. To avoid disagreements and guarantee sustainable agricultural production, the nation promotes collaborative water management systems. A geopolitical and domestic concern in Central Asia, water shortage is being more and more linked to climate change and food security.

Because of its strategic location in the geographic center of Eurasia, Uzbekistan has great potential to develop into a transportation and logistics hub. Connectivity initiatives have been prioritized by the government as a means to diversify trade and reduce reliance on Russia. Being at the hub of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and its participation in China's BRI are two of Uzbekistan's most notable accomplishments. Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), which passes via Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea on its way to Europe, is another route that the government backs. On the southern side, Uzbekistan is interested in the INSTC, which links it to Iran, India, and the Gulf. A number of domestic transportation projects have recently seen expedited upgrading, such as the Angren-Pap railway tunnel, which improves connections between the Ferghana Valley and the remainder of the nation⁶⁹. Uzbekistan is also working to improve its cross-border infrastructure and increase regional electricity trade in order to become a major energy transit hub.

⁶⁹ Nezhoglu, H. The importance of India for multi-vector foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan. *The Strategy of (Re)Connectivity*, p. 55. 2020.

TURKMENISTAN



Figure 6.3: Turkmenistan

As one of Central Asia's most prolific gas producers and home to massive oil reserves, Turkmenistan is an incredibly energetic nation. A key energy asset that has propelled Turkmenistan to the forefront of global energy markets is the Galkynysh gas field, the world's second-largest gas field. Together with gas, oil is also produced in greater amounts, albeit not on a large level, in the basin of the Caspian Sea, mainly in Turkmenistan. The state has been investing heavily in liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants and pipeline diplomacy to diversify export routes. Beyond hydrocarbons, Turkmenistan possesses mineral resources such as sulphur, iodine, bromine, and salt, which add niche value to its extractive economy. However, the energy sector remains highly centralized under state control, limiting foreign investment and diversification⁷⁰.

Turkmenistan is largely arid, with the Karakum Desert covering much of its territory, making water resources critical for agriculture and development. The Amu Darya River is the principal water source, shared with Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states, which makes river politics central to regional relations. Heavy irrigation for Turkmenistan's cotton production has contributed to the Aral Sea crisis, a major environmental challenge in the region. To mitigate water scarcity, the government built the Karakum Canal, one of the world's longest irrigation canals, to bring water from the Amu Darya across the desert. Yet, this has also led to inefficiencies and water loss, sparking debates on sustainable resource management. The reliance on irrigation ties Turkmenistan's agricultural strategy directly to regional water

⁷⁰ Zengin, A., & Topsakal, İ. Gordian knot in Central Asia regional security complex: A multi-vector analysis. *Eurasian Research Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 19–36. 2020.

politics, where competition with Uzbekistan and Afghanistan over the Amu Darya flows frequently resurfaces.

Turkmenistan's strategic location makes it a natural hub for trade between the Middle East, South Asia, and the Caspian basin. To capitalize on this, the state has prioritized an infrastructure agenda built on two pillars: energy export and transit connectivity. Its export strategy is currently defined by the Turkmenistan–China gas pipeline and the pursuit of southern markets via the TAPI pipeline. To diversify its transit options, Turkmenistan has invested in the Turkmenbashi port, the INSTC, and the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway. These projects are designed to reduce dependency on any single route and facilitate overland trade. However, despite these ambitious logistical goals, Turkmenistan's insular policies and limited openness to foreign investors often impede the long-term success and full-scale integration of these critical infrastructure developments.

TAJIKISTAN



Figure 6.4: Tajikistan

Tajikistan is not as energy-rich as its Central Asian neighbors, but it holds significant deposits of silver, gold, lead, zinc, antimony, and uranium⁷¹. The country is home to one of the world's largest silver deposits at the Koni Mansur mine (formerly known as Bolshoi Konimansur) and has considerable gold reserves in the Panj and Zeravshan valleys. Oil and natural gas resources are relatively small, but exploration continues, particularly in the

⁷¹ Kurç, Ç. The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense. *Defence Industries in the 21st Century: A Comparative Analysis*, p. 199. 2021.

southern Fergana Basin and Central Tajik Depression. These resources, though modest, provide an opportunity for foreign investment and limited energy self-sufficiency, though Tajikistan remains largely dependent on imports for oil and gas.

In Tajikistan, water is king. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya river systems are nourished by mountain rivers and glaciers in Central Asia, making it the country with the most water resources. As a result, Tajikistan becomes Central Asia's water tower upstream. Dams, particularly the massive Rogun Dam and the once-world-record-holding Nurek Dam, are the center of its energy and geopolitical policies. With 90% of its power coming from hydropower, Tajikistan is an important power supplier to countries like Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. But water politics is a hotly contested topic because republics farther downstream, like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, rely on these rivers to irrigate crops, especially cotton. Conflicts over water distribution and dam development occasionally arise due to Tajikistan's role as a key participant in regional hydro-politics caused by its control over water resources.

In spite of its strategic importance, Tajikistan's difficult topography makes infrastructure development a formidable obstacle. Foreign investment, particularly from Russia, China, and international financial institutions, is crucial to the country's infrastructure modernization. One such initiative is the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission Project (CASA-1000), which enhances the regions' reliance on energy by selling excess hydropower from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Anzob tunnel, which links Dushanbe with Khujand and improves the North–South connection, is another example of a Chinese-funded infrastructure project. In the BRI, which connects China with Iran and Turkey via Central Asia, Tajikistan is an integral part of the China-Central-Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor.

While Tajikistan lacks major oil and gas pipelines, it emphasizes hydropower exports, road networks, and regional electricity grids as its contribution to regional connectivity. However, its dependence on foreign loans (particularly from China's Exim Bank) creates debt vulnerabilities, making infrastructure not only an economic asset but also a geopolitical bargaining chip in Tajikistan's foreign policy.

KYRGYZSTAN



Figure 6.5: Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, while not as resource-rich in hydrocarbons as its neighbors, holds significant deposits of gold, coal, rare earths, and other strategic minerals⁷². There was a time when the Kumtor Gold Mine—one of the biggest in Central Asia contributed more than 10% of GDP and a significant amount of export earnings to Kyrgyzstan's economy. The nation has gold reserves, but it also has antimony, mercury, uranium, and molybdenum, so it may diversify its mining industry. Since its output falls short of domestic demand, Kyrgyzstan must rely on imports from Russia and Kazakhstan to fulfill its limited oil and natural gas reserves, which are primarily situated in the Fergana Basin. Nevertheless, resource exploitation remains a critical political and economic issue, often intertwined with questions of sovereignty, environmental concerns, and foreign investment.

Kyrgyzstan's most strategic endowment is its mountainous terrain, which functions as the 'water tower' of Central Asia. As a primary upstream contributor to the Syr Darya and Amu Darya river basins, the nation occupies a central, often contentious, position in regional hydro-politics. The country's critical infrastructure—most notably the Toktogul, Kambarata, and Kurpsai hydroelectric complexes—is fundamental to its energy security and serves as a significant export revenue stream. However, this creates a persistent 'seasonal dissonance': Kyrgyzstan prioritizes water release during the winter months to maximize hydroelectric

⁷² Kokoshin, A. A., & Kokoshina, Z. A. The main vectors of the US foreign policy strategy in Central Asia. Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vol. 92, Suppl. 7, pp. S581–S588. 2022.

output, often clashing with the summer irrigation requirements of downstream neighbors like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Because domestic agriculture remains inextricably linked to effective river management, water politics acts as the primary prism through which Kyrgyzstan's regional relations are defined. The importance of Kyrgyzstan's communication infrastructure to the country's economic future makes its landlocked status noteworthy. A part of China's BRI, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway will cut out the middleman and connect China and Central Asia directly, bypassing the northern Russian routes. As an active participant in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Kyrgyzstan is prioritizing infrastructure development to bolster national cohesion and regional trade. Key transport arteries, such as the Osh-Sary-Tash-Irkeshtam and Osh-Batken-Isfana highways, are essential to these connectivity goals. Simultaneously, the country is pursuing regional energy integration through initiatives like the CASA-1000 transmission system and the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric project, which aim to facilitate power exports to Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the progress of these capital-intensive programs is frequently hindered by financing constraints and political volatility. These persistent challenges serve to highlight the indispensable need for stable governance and a transparent investment climate to ensure the viability of such large-scale regional projects.

Navigating the Strategic Legacy and Geopolitics of the Fergana Valley

If Central Asia is the heart of the Eurasian landmass, the Fergana Valley is its geopolitical core. A densely populated, hyper-fertile depression shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, the Valley is frequently characterized as the region's "powder keg." However, reducing the Fergana Valley to a zone of latent ethnic conflict fundamentally misdiagnoses its strategic complexity. To understand the contemporary geopolitics of the Valley, one must analyze it not as a static flashpoint, but as a dynamic matrix where the legacy of Soviet cartography violently intersects with twenty-first-century state-building and ecological scarcity. The Fergana Valley is one of the most significant and disputed Central Asian areas, which is at the center of the geopolitics, geoeconomics, and geocultural life of the area⁷³. The valley is in eastern Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan and it occupies an area of approximately 22,000 square kilometers and is home to over 14 million people making it one of the most densely populated regions in Central Asia. Rich soil, plenty of water, and strategic position between several civilizations have traditionally made it a desirable concentration of empires and a major place of cultural and economic interaction. The legacy of Fergana valley still impacts the modern politics, economy, and social process in Central Asia. Through the lens of Historical Institutionalism, the contemporary friction in the Valley is the direct legacy of Soviet "national-territorial delimitation" in the 1920s and 30s. Soviet

⁷³ Fomin, S. Multi-vector foreign policy of Uzbekistan as an important means of solving the socio-economic problems of the country. *Problems of World History*, No. 16, pp. 175–195. 2021.

cartographers deliberately drew convoluted borders, creating a mosaic of enclaves and exclaves (such as Sokh, Vorukh, and Shahimardan) designed to prevent unified pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic resistance, permanently intertwining the republics' infrastructure. Under the Soviet system, these borders were merely administrative lines within a unified state. However, Constructivist theory explains how, following independence, these arbitrary lines were rapidly weaponized to construct new national identities. The physical demarcation of borders—complete with barbed wire, landmines, and militarized checkpoints—served as performative acts of state-building, transforming everyday cross-border communities into sites of intense nationalist friction and exclusion. The Fergana Valley holds roughly a quarter of Central Asia's total population on less than 5% of its landmass. As climate change accelerates the retreat of the Pamir and Tien Shan glaciers, agricultural output is severely threatened by shrinking base river flows and soil salinization.

The strategic legacy of the Valley proves that the threats to Eurasian security are not exclusively external; they are deeply localized, structural, and historical. For decades, the inability of regional states to resolve border demarcations or manage transboundary water resources invited external hegemonies—whether Moscow or Beijing—to step in as necessary arbiters and security providers.

The Fergana Valley: The Geopolitical Fulcrum of Central Asia

Historically, the Fergana Valley has functioned as the strategic core of Central Asian power dynamics, driven by its exceptionally high demographic density, abundant natural resources, and central geographic positioning. Today, its complex environment can be analyzed through four intersecting vulnerabilities:

- **The Legacy of Ethno-Territorial Engineering:** During the Russian Imperial and subsequent Soviet eras, the valley became a primary laboratory for demographic manipulation. Soviet authorities deliberately partitioned the basin among three republics—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—drawing administrative boundaries that intentionally misaligned with historical ethno-linguistic realities.
- **Cartographic Flashpoints:** This deliberate cartographic fragmentation bequeathed a volatile legacy of complex enclaves, exclaves, and heavily contested frontiers. Today, unresolved border demarcations and the existence of isolated enclaves—most notably **Sokh** and **Vorukh**—remain persistent, localized flashpoints for inter-state friction and resource-driven conflict.
- **Structural Security Vulnerabilities:** The valley's physical and political topography exacerbates its instability. The combination of dense populations, highly porous borders, and localized governance deficits creates a permissive

environment that is highly susceptible to transnational smuggling networks, ideological radicalization, and localized armed skirmishes.

- **The Great-Power Calculus:** Consequently, the Fergana Valley is viewed as a critical barometer for systemic risk. Major external powers—including Russia, China, and the United States—recognize that containing conflict within the valley is essential; a destabilization of this demographic heartland possesses the inherent potential to cascade rapidly, threatening the broader security and economic architecture of the Eurasian supercontinent.

The Fergana Valley is the breadbasket of Central Asia economically. It is amenable to cotton production, fruits, vegetables and cereals as it is one of the few areas with a lot of arable land and water resources⁷⁴.

Hydro-Politics and the Geoeconomic Nexus of the Fergana Valley

The political economy of the Fergana Valley is defined by a deep structural tension between vital water resources and strategic transit geography. convergence of water, energy, and transit routes, the Fergana Valley operates as a regional geoeconomic chokepoint. Strategic dominance or stability within this localized basin translates directly into outsized geopolitical leverage over the broader movement of trade, resources, and capital across the Central Asian supercontinent.

This dynamic manifests across three primary dimensions:

- **The Upstream-Downstream Hydro-Dilemma:** The valley's agricultural viability depends entirely on the Syr Darya river network, making hydro-politics a persistent source of inter-state friction. A fundamental structural misalignment exists between the upstream riparian states (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which prioritize water retention for winter hydropower generation, and the downstream state (Uzbekistan), which requires massive summer water discharges to sustain its intensive agricultural sector.
- **Hydrocarbon Endowments:** Beyond its agricultural capacity, the valley is a localized hub of subterranean resources. Significant deposits of oil and natural gas are concentrated within its borders—predominantly within the Uzbek territorial sectors—adding a crucial layer of energy competition to the region's complex political economy.
- **The Logistical Chokepoint:** Topographically, the valley functions as a natural terrestrial bottleneck, making it an indispensable regional transit corridor. Its

⁷⁴ Wang, M. Balancing, challenges, and opportunities: Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy after the Ukraine crisis. (Unpublished manuscript). 2024.

geography positions it as a critical node for major transnational infrastructure projects, most notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The valley serves as a vital continental bridge linking Chinese supply chains through Central Asia to markets in the Middle East and Europe.

The Fergana Valley is a mixing pot of ethnicities, languages, traditions, and so on as it is culturally an intersection of the Silk Road. There are Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and smaller communities of Russians and Tatars living in the valley though at times not peacefully. Such diversity adds to the abundance of cultural landscape and makes it also a source of competition and disputes over identity. Traditionally, the valley has been an epicenter of Islamic knowledge and Sufi traditions, bringing a spiritual aspect to the valley which transcends the geographical limits of the area. The cultural richness of the valley today forms the basis of cooperation as well as conflict: the cross-border family and business relationships make integration effective, whereas the ethnic grievance and nationalism do not allow to eliminate the ethnic tensions on a regular basis. Geoculturally, the valley captures the greater identity conflicts of Central Asia the ones between Turkic, Persian, Islamic, and Soviet, that is, between the past and the present⁷⁵.

The Fergana Valley stands at a complex intersection of promise and peril. While its abundant resources and central geography offer a pathway to significant regional development, its fragmented political boundaries and history of contestation render it inherently fragile. Global powers remain intensely attuned to these dynamics: Russia views the valley through the lens of its historic sphere of influence; China prioritizes the security of its Belt and Road corridors; and Western stakeholders monitor the region as a potential epicenter of extremism and systemic instability. For the Central Asian states, the valley is both a repository of shared heritage and a crucible of unresolved disputes over sovereignty, resource management, and national identity. Ultimately, the future of the Fergana Valley will likely serve as the litmus test for Central Asia's broader prospects for integration, security, and long-term economic resilience.

⁷⁵ Farhan, S. M., Khan, M. U., & Sher, N. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and regional approach: Economic and diplomatic success. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 687–701. 2021.

Green Energy Geopolitics and Pipeline Diplomacy

In International Relations and political economy, the Eurasian energy landscape is undergoing a structural transformation. The theoretical analysis of this space requires reconciling the legacy of fossil-fuel interdependence with the emerging geoeconomic competition for critical minerals and renewable infrastructure. This transition represents a shift in the fundamental "currency" of Eurasian geopolitical power—from the control of hydrocarbon *flows* to the control of green technology *supply chains*.

The shift toward green energy fundamentally alters the theoretical models of resource geopolitics. While fossil fuel power is based on the continuous extraction and flow of hydrocarbons, green energy power is based on the control of physical *stocks* (critical minerals) and manufacturing *technologies*, constructivist and geoeconomic theories emphasize the role of transcontinental infrastructure in projecting normative power. The competition to build Eurasia's future energy grid is a proxy for the broader systemic struggle.

The theoretical approach to Eurasian energy geopolitics demands an integrated understanding of both the receding carbon order and the ascending green order. Pipeline diplomacy, defined by rigid infrastructures and weaponized hydrocarbon flows, is being superseded by a complex competition for critical minerals, technological monopolies, and the restructuring of the rentier state. In this transitional era, geopolitical power in Eurasia belongs to the actors who can successfully navigate the decline of the petro-state while securing the supply chains necessary for the green industrial revolution.

The shift toward green geopolitics does not erase the "Great Game" in Eurasia; it redefines its currency. As the strategic value of oil and gas slowly plateaus, the political economy of the twenty-first-century heartland will be dictated by the control of critical raw materials.

For the Central Asian republics, the green transition presents a historic geopolitical opening. Geopolitics of Critical Raw Materials (CRMs), By leveraging their vast CRM reserves, these states can exploit the geoeconomic rivalry between China, Russia, and the West to accelerate their own technological and industrial modernization.

Hydrocarbon Reserve in Central Asia

Energy, geopolitics, and international energy markets and trade routes all have an interest in Central Asia because it is one of the world's most resource-rich regions in terms of hydrocarbons. This area lies at the crossroads of energy competition between Russia, China, the EU, and the global South as a whole, thanks to the oil and gas reserves of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan, as well as the fresh discoveries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan⁷⁶.

With proven and probable oil reserves exceeding 30 billion barrels, Kazakhstan stands as the preeminent hydrocarbon repository in Central Asia. The nation's energy sector is anchored by the 'Big Three' fields—Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak—which collectively constitute one of the most significant onshore and offshore deposit complexes globally. Complementing these oil assets are natural gas reserves estimated at approximately 2 trillion cubic meters (tcm). Historically reliant on Russian Black Sea infrastructure, Kazakhstan is now aggressively recalibrating its export policy. By prioritizing the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and the Middle Corridor to Europe, Astana is not only mitigating its transit dependence on Moscow but is also asserting itself as a critical, autonomous energy hub within the broader Eurasian landscape. The Turkmenistan gas field is supposedly Central Asia's equivalent of Saudi Arabia. Ranked in the world's top ten, it boasts gas reserves of over 13 tcm. The Galkynysh field, the world's second-largest gas field, is its foundation. Over the past two decades, it has strategically shifted its exports away from Russia and towards China via the Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline, which passes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The TAPI pipeline and potential trans-Caspian linkages to Europe are two examples of the projects that Turkmenistan has proposed to diversify its exports.

Uzbekistan has smaller reserves compared to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but still plays an important role. It holds about 1.1 tcm of gas reserves and modest oil resources. Unlike Turkmenistan, much of Uzbekistan's gas is consumed domestically, as it is a gas-dependent economy with energy-intensive industries and a large population. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan exports gas to China and seeks to become a transit state for regional pipelines. Recent reforms and energy liberalization policies also aim to attract foreign investment for modernizing infrastructure and improving efficiency⁷⁷.

"Unlike their hydrocarbon-rich neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face structural energy deficits and remain largely dependent on imports. Their geopolitical relevance, therefore, is defined by their hydroelectric capacity and their potential utility as transit

⁷⁶ Mansour, I. Major power competition and strategic responses to regionalization projects: Central Asia's role in advancing a multi-vectorism foreign policy. *Journal of Strategic and Defense Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1. 2025.

⁷⁷ Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. (Research Paper). n.d.

conduits. While both nations have sought to leverage their geographic position to host regional energy and pipeline infrastructure, these ambitions are frequently constrained by domestic political volatility and limited access to capital.

More broadly, Central Asia's extensive hydrocarbon reserves have cemented its status as a critical energy corridor within the Eurasian landmass. While Russia once exercised a near-monopoly over export infrastructure, the geopolitical landscape has shifted significantly. China has emerged as the preeminent buyer of Turkmen gas and a cornerstone investor in Kazakhstan's oil sector, fundamentally altering the regional power balance. Concurrently, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has compelled Europe to seek alternative supply chains, reinvigorating interest in the Trans-Caspian and Southern Gas Corridor projects. Meanwhile, the growing energy requirements of South Asia have underscored the strategic necessity of pipelines such as TAPI. Ultimately, these hydrocarbon reserves function as potent geopolitical instruments rather than mere economic assets. The management of these resources will determine whether Central Asia evolves into a constructive bridge for trans-continental cooperation or becomes a theater of zero-sum competition among global powers."

Major Pipeline Projects and Geopolitical Stakes

Russia- For the duration of the post-Soviet era, the geoeconomic structure of Eurasian energy was relatively static: Central Asian republics (primarily Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) pumped their vast natural gas reserves *northward* to Russia through the legacy Central Asia-Center (CAC) pipeline system, which Moscow then re-exported to Europe at a premium. However, the geopolitical rupture of the Russia-Ukraine war and the subsequent collapse of Russia's European energy market have triggered a historic paradigm shift. In October 2023, for the first time in history, natural gas began flowing in *reverse*—from Russia, south through Kazakhstan, into Uzbekistan. Packaged under the Kremlin's proposed "Trilateral Gas Union," this pipeline reversal represents Moscow's aggressive geoeconomic strategy to reassert hegemony in the heartland.



Figure 7.1: Russia

Russia's role in major pipeline projects reflects both its position as a leading energy producer and its broader geopolitical ambitions. Hydrocarbon exports—particularly oil and natural gas—form the backbone of Russia's economy and foreign policy toolkit. Pipelines are not merely conduits for energy delivery; they are instruments of strategic influence, allowing Moscow to shape the political and economic choices of both its neighbors and its customers. Control over routes, pricing, and supply volumes enables Russia to use energy as leverage in global geopolitics⁷⁸.

The operationalization of the Trilateral Gas Union and the reversal of the Central Asia-Center pipeline demonstrate Moscow's enduring capacity to project power in the Eurasian heartland, even while bogged down in a protracted war in Ukraine. By successfully exploiting the domestic energy vulnerabilities of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Russia has proven that legacy Soviet infrastructure remains one of its most potent geopolitical weapons.

However, this pipeline strategy forces Central Asian republics into a precarious balancing act. While importing Russian gas resolves their immediate domestic energy crises, it fundamentally compromises their multi-vector foreign policies. If Astana and Tashkent become permanently reliant on Gazprom to keep their citizens from freezing in the winter, their sovereign ability to resist Moscow's political demands will severely erode. Ultimately,

⁷⁸ Djamalov, F., Schrier, A., & Khakimova, M. Central Asian nations forging new partnership. *International Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 109, p. 110. 2024.

the geopolitics of Eurasian pipelines confirm that in the Great Game, whoever controls the valves of energy transit inevitably dictates the limits of regional sovereignty.

One of the most critical projects is the Druzhba (“Friendship”) oil pipeline, one of the world’s longest, which has historically carried crude from Russia into Central and Eastern Europe. This pipeline, along with Brotherhood gas pipelines and other Soviet-era infrastructure, tied the economies of Eastern Europe tightly to Moscow. During the post-Cold War era, Nord Stream 1 (launched in 2011) and Nord Stream 2 (finished in 2014) projects were planned to avoid Ukraine as well as Poland, which could lessen the reliance of Moscow on transit states and ensure the presence of direct supply lines to Germany. Such undertakings were lightning conduits of geopolitics, critics feared that they left Europe more reliant on Russian energy and brought more political leverage to Moscow.

Concurrently, Russia has expanded its southern energy corridors through the Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines, both of which traverse the Black Sea. Following the 2003 inauguration of Blue Stream, which established a direct conduit to Turkey, the 2020 launch of TurkStream significantly broadened the scope of Russian gas exports to Southern Europe via the Turkish market. These infrastructure initiatives reflect Moscow’s dual strategic imperative: to diversify export avenues and to deepen institutional ties with strategically vital partners like Turkey. By establishing these bypass routes, Russia has successfully mitigated its vulnerability to transit-related disputes—particularly those involving Ukraine—thereby reinforcing its position as an indispensable energy supplier to the European continent. Beyond Europe, Russia has increasingly looked eastward, particularly in light of Western sanctions. The Power of Siberia pipeline, inaugurated in 2019, connects Russia’s gas fields in eastern Siberia to China. This project symbolizes Moscow’s pivot to Asia and growing energy partnership with Beijing. A second line, Power of Siberia 2, is under negotiation and would deliver gas from western Siberia—fields that historically supplied Europe—directly to China, further cementing Russia’s eastward reorientation. Such projects not only ensure energy revenue but also reduce Moscow’s exposure to Western sanctions and market restrictions.

- The strategic gravity of Moscow’s pipeline architecture cannot be overstated. By dictating both the physical path and the commercial terms of energy transit, the Kremlin wields an asymmetric power that transforms natural gas from a mere commodity into a diplomatic cudgel. The geopolitical ramifications of Russia’s pipeline strategy are profound. By retaining centralized control over both physical infrastructure and contractual supply terms, Moscow exerts significant leverage, effectively utilizing energy as a mechanism of statecraft to incentivize alignment or coerce adversaries—a strategy evidenced by recurring disputes with Ukraine, Belarus, and various EU member states. Furthermore, pipeline geography serves as a determinant of regional alignment. Transit states often find

themselves caught in a complex geopolitical equilibrium, forced to navigate the competing gravitational pulls of Russian hegemony and Western-backed alternatives, such as the Southern Gas Corridor, which channels Caspian gas into Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. Ultimately, Russia's pipeline diplomacy exemplifies the intricate fusion of geoeconomics and statecraft. While these assets generate critical revenue, they simultaneously serve as strategic instruments designed to project Moscow's influence well beyond its borders. The recent reconfiguration of global energy markets—catalyzed by the war in Ukraine, the imposition of Western sanctions, and Europe's accelerated decoupling from Russian supply chains—has diminished Moscow's leverage in the West while compelling a rapid integration with Asian markets. This transition underscores the enduring centrality of pipeline infrastructure to Russia's global positioning, tethering the nation's economic future to the shifting geopolitical alliances currently reshaping Eurasia.



Figure 7.2: China

China: For Beijing, pipelines are more than engineering—they're strategic insurance. Overland oil and gas routes reduce reliance on tanker traffic through the U.S.-patrolled Indo-Pacific and the narrow Malacca Strait ("Malacca dilemma"), diversify suppliers, and deepen China's influence across Eurasia. They also knit inland provinces into coastal demand centers, turning pipelines into tools of domestic cohesion as much as foreign policy⁷⁹.

For Beijing, the gas pipelines emanating from Central Asia are far more than industrial conduits; they are the bedrock of its regional strategic architecture. Lines A, B, and C have long formed the backbone of this energy bridge, funneling volumes from Turkmenistan through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to feed the Chinese heartland. While Line D—the proposed path through the challenging topography of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—has long been stalled by the realities of engineering and cost, the vision behind it remains clear. His network serves three distinct geopolitical functions. First, it allows Beijing to turn economic demand into strategic influence, particularly regarding Turkmenistan, which has become heavily tethered to the Chinese market. Second, these energy arteries act as the gravitational center for China's Belt and Road Initiative, locking Central Asia into Beijing's broader economic orbit alongside rail-based trade. Finally, this infrastructure represents a calculated risk-management strategy: by shifting its energy intake to overland routes, China effectively secures itself against the volatility of the global maritime domain, ensuring that its vital energy lifelines remain firmly within its geopolitical reach. Geopolitically, this pipeline network serves several core objectives:

- **Asymmetric Bargaining Power:** By dominating the export market for Turkmen gas, Beijing has secured significant pricing leverage and institutionalized a relationship of economic dependency.
- **Regional Economic Anchor:** The pipelines act as a multiplier for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reinforcing Beijing's status as the region's primary economic hub through integrated rail and energy logistics.
- **Strategic Hedging:** By scaling overland imports, China effectively mitigates the risk of 'maritime shock'—insulating its energy security from potential disruptions in ocean-based supply chains.

The Atasu–Alashankou crude pipeline (part of a longer Kazakhstan–China system) carries oil from the Caspian basin into Xinjiang and onward to inland refineries. It is China's first long cross-border oil pipeline, offering:

- A non-maritime crude route tied to Caspian producers.
- Industrial upgrading in western China (Dushanzi and other refineries).

⁷⁹ Fazliddin, D., Schrier, A., & Khakimova, M. Expanding beyond conventional connections: Central Asian nations establish new partnerships. (Conference Report). n.d.

- Political ballast with Kazakhstan, a pivotal multi-vector partner between Russia and China.

On oil, the ESPO spur to Daqing delivers pipeline crude directly from Russia, supplementing seaborne ESPO exports via Kozmino. On gas, Power of Siberia (PoS-1) connects East Siberian fields to China's northeast and has ramped steadily. The proposed Power of Siberia-2 (via Mongolia, "Soyuz Vostok") would redirect large West Siberian flows once destined for Europe toward China. Stakes for Beijing:

- Supply security via long-term take-or-pay contracts.
- Price leverage as Russia seeks Asian outlets post-Europe, giving China negotiating power on tariffs, hub indexation, and currency.
- Strategic interdependence with Moscow—deeper energy ties that still leave Beijing room to bargain.

Twin pipelines from Kyaukpyu (Rakhine State) to Kunming carry crude (from Middle East/Africa arriving by tanker) and gas (from Myanmar's offshore fields). They shorten voyages and bypass Malacca, delivering straight into Yunnan and then the national grid. Benefits and risks:

- Diversification of routes and landfall points for crude.
- Political fragility: exposure to Myanmar's internal conflict, local grievances, and sabotage risks along the corridor.
- Bay of Bengal foothold linked to port diplomacy and BRI's "Maritime Silk Road."

Inside China, the West–East Gas Pipeline (WEGP 1/2/3/4) system moves gas from Xinjiang (and Central Asian inflows at Khorgos) thousands of kilometers to coastal load centers. These lines:

- Convert external pipelines into nationwide energy security.
- Enable coal-to-gas switching for air quality and emissions goals.
- Create redundancy—multiple trunklines and compressors—against shocks.

China blends state financing, equity stakes, EPC delivery, and long-term offtake. Currency and indexation choices (USD/EUR mixes, oil-linked vs hub-linked pricing, growing RMB settlement) reduce sanctions exposure and transaction risk. With Turkmenistan and Russia, Beijing uses scale and patience to secure favorable terms; with Kazakhstan and Myanmar, it couples pipelines with refineries, storage, and industrial parks to lock in complementary value chains.

Every cross-border segment is also transit diplomacy⁸⁰:

- In Central Asia, pipelines strengthen China's role relative to Russia and the EU, while offering landlocked states an alternative to northern routes.
- With Mongolia (for PoS-2) and Kyrgyzstan/Tajikistan (for Line D), Beijing gains long-term leverage through construction, fees, and associated infrastructure (roads, power, fiber).
- In Myanmar, the corridor ties Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal but requires continuous political risk management and community engagement.
- Pipelines act as a strategic hedge against the vulnerabilities of maritime transit, yet they are far from immune to disruption; they simply exchange oceanic risk for the terrestrial hazards of seismic volatility and transit-state politics. To secure these vital lifelines, states—most notably China—have adopted a comprehensive defense posture that integrates cyber-physical security with systemic redundancy. By diversifying sources, building domestic buffers, and integrating LNG, China has immunized its energy supply against seasonal and geopolitical turbulence. In this context, natural gas remains an indispensable transition fuel, facilitating the difficult shift toward renewables. More importantly, this infrastructure is a long-term investment: existing corridors are designed to evolve. Whether through retrofitting for hydrogen or repurposing for carbon transport, these pipelines are poised to serve as the backbone of a low-carbon future, proving that the infrastructure of the hydrocarbon era is anything but obsolete.

⁸⁰ Gaur, P., Tripathi, A., & Ray, S. S. India's role in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 43–48. 2021.

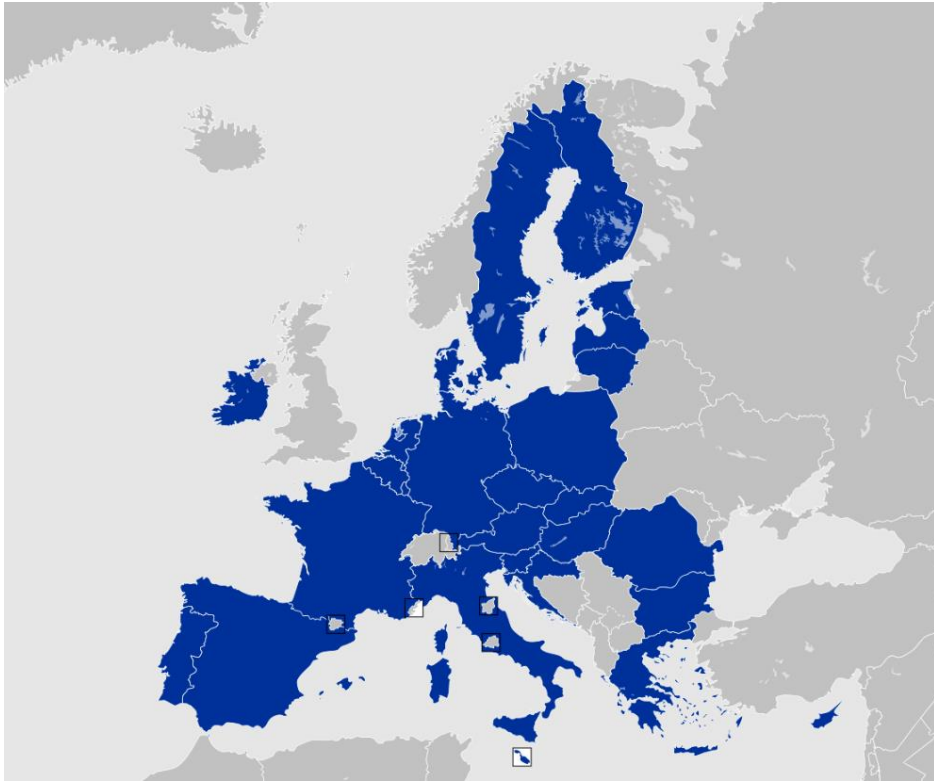


Figure 7.3: EU

EU: The energy needs of the EU are substantial, and the bloc relies heavily on imported oil and natural gas. In addition to expanding the European Union's geopolitical might, pipeline developments have been crucial in guaranteeing energy security over the past few decades⁸¹. Russian energy dominance in Europe, growing worries about environmental impact, and rising global demand have all contributed to a shift in EU energy policy. Finding alternate energy sources and maintaining political independence in energy flows are two primary goals of the EU's major pipeline projects.

Among EU infrastructure projects, the Nord Stream pipelines represent the most contentious elements of European energy policy. Nord Stream 1, operational since 2011, established a direct sub-sea link between Russia and Germany; however, its successor, Nord Stream 2, became a focal point of intense controversy, ultimately being rendered inoperable following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Strategically, these projects were designed to circumvent traditional transit states—namely Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine—thereby

⁸¹ Mingyue, H. Multi-vectorality of the PRC's modern foreign policy: Balance between global ambitions and regional interests. *Международный журнал гуманитарных и естественных наук*, No. 9-5 (96), pp. 117–120. 2024.

streamlining direct gas delivery. While this provided Western Europe with a reliable energy supply, it simultaneously deepened the continent's structural dependence on Russian resources. Critics, particularly in the United States and among Eastern European member states, argued that this energy interdependence undermined EU efforts to diversify supply chains and provided Moscow with significant political leverage. Consequently, Nord Stream 2 has come to symbolize the collapse of the 'change through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*) doctrine, highlighting the inherent tensions between economic integration and national security. As concerns about energy security and Russia's influence over the energy market continue to grow, the European Union has been dragging its feet behind the SGC, a plan to diversify Europe's gas supplies. Gas from the Caspian Sea and the Shah Deniz gas field in Azerbaijan are to be transported to Europe via the SGC pipeline system. Important pipelines such as the SCP, TAP, and TANAP run along the SGC route; another SGC route goes through Turkey and Azerbaijan to reach Greece and Italy. Strategically crucial to the EU energy diversification agenda, the Southern Gas Corridor would offer alternate sources of Caspian Basin gas, such as Azerbaijan's, and significantly reduce Europe's dependency on Russian gas. In addition to reducing the danger of Russian monopolization, the SGC strengthens the geopolitical ties between the European Union and regional powers like Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey.

A pivotal component of Europe's energy diversification strategy is the EastMed pipeline, designed to transport natural gas from offshore fields in Israel and Cyprus to mainland Greece and, subsequently, the wider European market. This project has fostered an emergent energy alliance among Israel, Cyprus, Greece, and Egypt, transforming the Eastern Mediterranean into a theater of significant strategic cooperation. For the European Union, the project serves as a crucial mechanism to mitigate reliance on traditional suppliers in North Africa and Russia. However, the project is inextricably linked to regional geopolitical friction, particularly regarding unresolved maritime boundary disputes and strained relations between Turkey and Cyprus. Despite these challenges, the EastMed pipeline remains a cornerstone of the EU's push to secure alternative energy corridors, effectively pivoting the bloc's energy policy toward a southern Mediterranean integration model that operates independently of Russian supply networks. The European Union has also put money into a few minor pipeline projects in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. As a whole, the Southern Gas Corridor consists of the TAP, while the GME (Greece-Macedonia-Albania) pipeline aims to improve connections between the three countries and make gas available to the European market. By balancing the energy markets in Southeastern Europe, boosting the level of gas imports through new resources, and decreasing dependency on Russian gas, the projects play a vital role in enhancing the energy security of the EU. In addition, they contribute to the stability and growth of economies in countries like Macedonia and Albania, who are striving to have a closer link with the EU.

Securing energy resources is just one aspect of the EU pipeline projects; they also involve navigating the geopolitics of energy transit and the connections between EU member states and the rest of the world. Since Russia has a long history of utilizing energy flows as a political tool, the EU's dependence on Russia for energy has been one of its major strategic vulnerabilities. One example of a project that has exacerbated geopolitical tensions is Nord Stream 2. While some Western European nations, like Germany, see the economic benefits of the pipeline, others, like Poland and the Baltic states, see it as a threat to Russian influence and have opposed it.

The EU also faces challenges from non-EU energy producers and transit countries. For instance, the Southern Gas Corridor strengthens ties with countries like Azerbaijan and Turkey but risks fostering new dependencies. In addition, the EastMed pipeline faces opposition from Turkey, which claims certain disputed maritime territories for gas exploration. The geopolitical sensitivity of pipeline projects, therefore, requires the EU to constantly balance energy security with regional political stability.

Furthermore, the European Union's ambitious commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 creates a structural tension with long-term investments in fossil fuel infrastructure. Projects like Nord Stream 2 and the EastMed pipeline have historically been conceptualized as 'bridge' solutions, intended to mitigate energy shortfalls during the transition toward cleaner alternatives. However, as the EU accelerates its decarbonization agenda, the geopolitical landscape of energy is undergoing a fundamental transformation. This shift entails a move away from the traditional dominance of pipeline-based hydrocarbon transit toward an integrated framework of transnational electricity grids, renewable energy, and digital energy platforms, permanently altering the mechanics of energy influence in Europe.

ENERGY TRANSIT AND DIVERSIFICATION

Historically, the geoeconomics of Eurasian energy transit were defined by intense monopolistic control. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian republics were trapped in a northward-facing pipeline architecture dictated by Moscow. Over the last two decades, these states successfully diluted Russian dominance by executing an eastward pivot, constructing the massive Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline network. However, true strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century requires absolute multi-vector diversification. Catalyzed by the systemic shocks of the Russia-Ukraine war and disruptions in global maritime chokepoints, the Eurasian energy map is currently undergoing a radical, dual-track transformation: a spatial pivot toward the Trans-Caspian bypass, and a technological pivot toward the green energy transition.

The pursuit of green energy transit and diversification represents the most potent mechanism for strategic autonomy in contemporary Eurasia. The transition toward renewables

and critical minerals offers Central Asian republics an unprecedented opportunity to permanently break the structural dependencies that defined the post-Soviet era.

By constructing the Trans-Caspian Green Energy Corridor and aggressively marketing their Critical Raw Materials to a diverse array of global powers, these states are transforming the heartland from a landlocked hydrocarbon trap into an integrated, multi-vector "electro-state" matrix. However, this transition is not without profound risks. The massive capital required to upgrade aging Soviet-era power grids, the ecological fragility of the region (particularly regarding the water-intensive nature of mining and green hydrogen production), and the intense geopolitical competition between China, Europe, and the US over rare earth supply chains threaten to introduce new forms of dependency. Ultimately, if Eurasia can successfully navigate these vulnerabilities, its green energy corridors will not only secure its own sovereign independence, but fundamentally rewire the geopolitical architecture of the twenty-first century.

Energy transit and diversification are critical components of global energy security, particularly in regions like Central Asia, Europe, and East Asia, where energy supplies are often reliant on a few major routes and sources. The term energy transit is used to describe the movement of energy resources (oil, natural gas, and electricity) between the producing areas and consuming markets, often through pipelines, shipping lanes or transmission grids. Diversification, on the other hand, involves spreading energy sources and transit routes to reduce risks associated with supply disruptions, geopolitical tensions, and market volatility⁸².

Energy transit networks—whether pipelines, LNG (liquefied natural gas) terminals, or maritime shipping routes—are crucial in connecting energy producers with global consumers. In regions like Central Asia and Russia, pipeline infrastructure plays a dominant role in supplying energy to Europe, China, and other regions.

An example of this is Russia's long-standing dominance in Europe's energy supply, which it maintains with pipelines like Nord Stream and Yamal-Europe. With the pipeline lanes passing through politically sensitive territories like Ukraine and Belarus, this dependence has raised the question of whether Russia may use energy as a political weapon. As a result, the EU has implemented a policy of energy transit diversification to lessen the risks. Europe will be able to import natural gas from the Caspian region (Azerbaijan) through the TAP and the TANAP, decreasing its dependency on gas from Russia, thanks to the Southern Gas Corridor, one of the most significant projects.

Also, the Middle East has been a primary transit point of oil to the world and specifically the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which are both essential to world oil

⁸² Anceschi, L. Central Asia: The political economy of resource dependency. In *Routledge Handbook of Politics in Asia*, pp. 183–194. Routledge. 2018.

delivery. There can be really significant impacts on oil prices and energy security in the whole world when there is any instability or any disruption in the geopolitics of these regions. The Malacca Strait, also, is one of the important routes traversed by oil and natural gas, and their disruption would cause significant changes in the chain of supply in the world.

Energy diversification is not just about having multiple sources of energy, but also having multiple routes through which energy can be transported. Diversifying both sources and transit routes is a strategic necessity to reduce dependency on any one supplier, which can be politically or economically risky.

Natural gas diversification has become a significant priority for the European Union. Europe is shifting away from Russian gas dependence and has been diversifying its sources through pipelines and LNG terminals. LNG terminals in places like Spain, the UK, and Italy enable Europe to import gas from the United States, Qatar, Algeria, and other non-Russian suppliers, further increasing energy security. Diversifying natural gas supplies through the Southern Gas Corridor and the EastMed pipeline (connecting the Eastern Mediterranean region) is part of the EU's long-term strategy to reduce reliance on Russia.

China is reshaping regional energy dynamics through the integration of the BRI and the 'Power of Siberia' pipeline. This infrastructure allows for a mutually beneficial exchange: Beijing secures a stable energy source, while Moscow gains essential access to the Asian market, reducing its dependence on European demand. Beyond pipelines, China's strategy includes a push toward cleaner energy and LNG, aimed at sustaining its industrial base while addressing air quality concerns. In the Asian context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 'Power of Siberia' pipeline exemplify a broader strategic recalibration in energy transit. Completed in 2019, the Power of Siberia pipeline has established a vital conduit between Russia's East Siberian gas fields and the Chinese market, providing Beijing with energy security while simultaneously enabling Moscow to diversify its export portfolio away from its traditional European customer base. Complementing this, China is aggressively scaling investments in LNG infrastructure and renewable energy, a dual-track approach designed to meet growing domestic demand while mitigating the environmental externalities of industrial expansion.

This regional focus on energy diversification extends into Central Asia, where Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have emerged as focal points for systemic reorientation. Keen to dilute their long-standing reliance on Russian transit channels, these nations are actively pursuing new export avenues. Projects such as the Trans-Caspian Pipeline represent a deliberate effort to bypass Russian-controlled infrastructure, seeking instead to establish direct energy links to European markets and asserting greater control over their sovereign resource wealth.

While energy diversification is a strategic imperative, its operationalization is obstructed by significant structural and geopolitical impediments. Logistically, the development of alternative transit infrastructure is a capital-intensive undertaking, requiring prolonged timelines and specialized technical synchronization across international borders. Projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor and the Power of Siberia exemplify the formidable hurdles of cross-border cooperation, financing, and engineering, particularly within complex environments like the Caspian Sea region, where multi-lateral management is often hampered by divergent national interests.

Furthermore, the geopolitical landscape frequently complicates these efforts. Territorial and resource-based disputes—ranging from the EastMed maritime tensions between Turkey and Greece to the protracted hostilities between Russia and Ukraine—serve as perennial barriers to pipeline feasibility. Moreover, in states with centralized or authoritarian governance structures, energy flows are often subjected to coercive diplomacy. By weaponizing supply routes to exert political leverage, these actors transform energy transit into a mechanism of regional control, thereby undermining the very concept of energy security that diversification aims to achieve.

The future of energy transit is increasingly defined by the imperatives of the global energy transition. Within the European Union, the Green Deal is accelerating a paradigm shift in how energy security is conceived; as the reliance on fossil fuels wanes, strategic focus is pivoting toward the integration of smart grids, large-scale energy storage, and hydrogen as a viable hydrocarbon substitute. Consequently, diversification is no longer merely about alternative transit routes for oil and gas, but about building the infrastructure necessary for an electrified, decarbonized economy.

Simultaneously, the global energy market remains deeply influenced by China's aggressive diversification strategy. Driven by both domestic consumption requirements and broader geopolitical aspirations, Beijing is positioning itself as a central node in the global energy value chain. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and extensive investments in renewable energy, China is transforming from a traditional energy importer into a transnational energy architect—actively participating in the generation, distribution, and consumption of power across multiple continents.

RENEWABLE ENERGY PROSPECTS

The shift to renewable energy in the world is changing the geopolitical processes and economic priorities in the regions, including Central Asia⁸³. The race toward carbon neutrality is redrawing the map of energy production, and Central Asia is no longer an exception to this trend. As the global imperative for carbon neutrality accelerates, renewable energy—including solar, wind, hydropower, and biomass—has become a cornerstone of national energy planning worldwide. Central Asia, despite its historical and economic dependence on hydrocarbons and coal, is increasingly recognizing the necessity of this transition. For these states, integrating renewable sources is a dual strategy: it serves as a mechanism to diversify energy portfolios and a proactive step toward meeting long-term sustainable development and emissions-reduction targets. However, while the region possesses significant renewable energy potential, the path to implementation remains fraught with systemic obstacles, most notably the requirement for substantial technological advancement, scalable financial capital, and extensive infrastructural modernization.

The Central Asian energy landscape is shifting as countries begin to capitalize on their significant renewable potential. Below is an overview of the region's diverse energy assets:

- **Kazakhstan:** Features high-intensity solar potential across its arid lands and strong wind profiles in its western and southern provinces (Zhambyl, Mangystau, Kyzylorda).
- **Uzbekistan:** Rapidly diversifying its energy portfolio by targeting the significant solar capabilities of the Kyzylkum Desert to meet new national renewable goals.
- **Turkmenistan:** Possesses vast, undeveloped solar and wind resources within its desert regions, representing a significant long-term growth area.
- **Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan:** Highly dependent on established hydropower infrastructure (providing >90% of electricity). Future strategies focus on expanding this capacity to enhance both domestic resilience and regional electricity exports.

With this pressure on renewable, governments within a country and international investors have been drawn to the development of infrastructure, policy models and cross-border collaboration⁸⁴.

- **Kazakhstan:** Committed to a 50% renewable energy share by 2050, the country is actively attracting foreign capital to develop its solar and wind sectors. Major

⁸³ Khikmat, M., & Petkevičiūtė, N. Management of natural resources in the Central Asian region. Public Security and Public Order, No. 29, pp. 116–127. 2022.

⁸⁴ Siraj, U., Javaid, F., & FUUAST, K. P. Resource curse and political & economic transition in Central Asia. Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 2. 2021.

projects are currently scaling up in strategic locations such as Tengiz and Pavlodar.

- **Uzbekistan:** As part of a national goal to secure 25% of its energy from renewables by 2030, Uzbekistan is targeting 5,000 MW of solar capacity. This effort is supported by strategic international partnerships, exemplified by the Nur Navoi Solar Park, funded by Masdar and the ADB.
- **Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan:** These states are prioritizing hydroelectric development to enable regional energy connectivity. The CASA-1000 project is the primary instrument for this goal, designed to export surplus hydropower from Central Asia to South Asian markets (Afghanistan and Pakistan), thereby bolstering regional economic integration.

The renewable energy transition in Central Asia is currently defined by a duality: the immense potential of the region's natural resources and the daunting logistical realities of its landscape. For years, the region's vast, fragmented topography rendered large-scale renewable deployment an elusive goal. Technological maturation—specifically concerning efficiency gains, cost optimization, and grid integration—is a prerequisite for the expansion of Central Asia's renewable energy sector. Historically, the region's expansive geography and rugged topography have presented formidable barriers to infrastructure deployment, particularly in isolated rural and mountainous districts. However, the increasing accessibility and performance of wind turbines and advanced photovoltaic (PV) systems are mitigating these geospatial impediments, enabling states to scale up renewable generation more effectively than previously possible.

Furthermore, the realization of this potential is inextricably linked to regional collaboration and multilateral investment. Central Asian states, most notably Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, are successfully leveraging diverse financing streams, including capital from international financial institutions like the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Simultaneously, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a primary driver of clean energy deployment, providing the requisite financial and technical support to modernize energy grids and stabilize regional supply, thereby facilitating a broader shift away from hydrocarbon dependency.

Despite its considerable potential, the transition to renewable energy in Central Asia faces significant barriers:

- **Infrastructure Limitations:** The region's outdated energy infrastructure, which is heavily reliant on fossil fuels, needs to be upgraded to integrate large-scale renewable energy generation and manage variability in solar and wind power.

- **Financial Constraints:** While international investments are flowing in, there are still gaps in financing, especially for countries like Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. For instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more reliant on hydropower, but development of new hydropower projects faces challenges in financing, environmental concerns, and technical expertise.
- **Geopolitical Tensions:** As countries in the region expand renewable energy projects, geopolitical tensions over energy resources—such as water rights in hydropower or disputes over land use for solar and wind projects—could arise, particularly in the Fergana Valley or between upstream and downstream nations.
- **Climate Change:** While renewable energy offers a sustainable future, the impacts of climate change—such as fluctuating water levels in hydropower reservoirs or shifting wind patterns—could disrupt energy production and infrastructure.

The transition to a renewable energy paradigm in Central Asia is within reach, yet it demands more than just natural potential; it requires a commitment to strategic stewardship. To overcome the structural bottlenecks of infrastructure and finance, the region must look toward global partnerships and regional synergy. If Central Asian states can successfully navigate these challenges, they will not only decouple their economic development from the volatility of fossil fuels but also secure a resilient, sustainable energy future for the generations to come.

Geopolitics of Ecology , Climate Change and its Implications for Environmental Fear , Security, and Regulatory Concerns in Central Asia

While conventional international relations theory fixates on transcontinental transit corridors, pipeline diplomacy, and great power competition, the most profound existential threat to the Eurasian heartland is ecological. The "Geopolitics of Ecology" posits that environmental variables—specifically water scarcity, glacial retreat, and arable land degradation—are not peripheral environmental issues, but the core structural determinants of regional stability, state survival, and geopolitical maneuvering.

The geopolitics of ecology dictates a harsh reality for the Eurasian heartland: diplomatic agility, multi-vector hedging, and geoeconomic wealth cannot insulate a state from systemic ecological collapse. While regional states brilliantly leverage their geography to attract Chinese capital, Russian security guarantees, and Western technology, these geopolitical victories are fundamentally hollow if the rivers run dry and the agricultural foundations of their societies fail.

The trajectory of the twenty-first-century Great Game will not be determined solely by who controls the pipelines or the transcontinental railways, but by who controls the

diminishing water supply. Unless Central Asian republics can transition from a zero-sum, nationalist approach to a highly integrated, cooperative model of transboundary water and climate management, ecological scarcity will fracture the region from within. Ultimately, the survival of the heartland as a sovereign, multipolar matrix depends entirely on its capacity to adapt to an unforgiving and rapidly changing geopolitical ecology.

The geopolitics of ecology dictates that in the contemporary Eurasian heartland, environmental security and national security are inextricably linked. The historical fragmentation of river basins along arbitrary administrative borders has created a governance system utterly unequipped to handle the interconnected realities of climate change.

For the states of Central Asia, navigating this era requires an urgent transition from zero-sum resource nationalism to integrated, basin-wide governance frameworks. If regional actors fail to institutionalize cooperative transboundary water management, they risk not only localized resource wars but the invitation of external hegemony eager to exploit these ecological vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the true sovereign anchors of the multipolar Eurasian order will be those states capable of adapting to a drastically altered climate reality while securing equitable access to the region's most vital, and rapidly depleting, resource: water.

The effects of climate change are extremely exposed to Central Asia, which contributes to the existing challenges in the environment and presents an immense security ramification to the region⁸⁵. The ecological integrity of Central Asia—heavily dependent on agriculture, water resources, and hydroelectric power—is facing unprecedented stress due to climate change, glacial retreat, and accelerated desertification. All five Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are experiencing significant disruptions to their regulatory frameworks and regional geopolitical stability as a result of these environmental pressures.

Central to this crisis is the intensification of water scarcity. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, fed by glacial runoff from the Hindu Kush and Tian Shan mountains, represent the lifeblood of the region. These rivers sustain the agricultural and energy sectors in countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. However, as rising temperatures accelerate the shrinkage of regional glaciers, the snowmelt essential to replenishing these basins is declining, threatening the long-term reliability of water flow and irrigation capacity.

Agriculture, the lifeblood of many Central Asian economies. Central Asia's agricultural sector faces a dual threat from climate change and water scarcity. Agriculture serves as the foundational economic pillar for much of Central Asia, yet it remains increasingly vulnerable to systemic water stress. Cotton cultivation, characterized by its extreme water intensity, has placed an unsustainable burden on existing river basins. As water availability declines, the

⁸⁵ Pomfret, R. The Central Asian economies since independence. (Monograph). 2020.

agricultural sector is rapidly evolving into a site of interstate competition, transforming water allocation into a zero-sum geopolitical struggle. The Fergana Valley, a region shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, already serves as a critical flashpoint for these tensions. Climate change is expected to amplify these disputes, heightening the risk of localized and regional instability.

Simultaneously, the convergence of climate-induced agricultural collapse and water scarcity is accelerating regional migration flows. This trend is creating a burgeoning demographic of 'environmental refugees' as rural populations are forced to abandon their land. The resulting displacement—characterized by rural-to-urban migration and, increasingly, cross-border movement—threatens to destabilize both host cities and neighboring states. This mass demographic shift risks fomenting social friction and security dilemmas, particularly as migrants place additional pressure on the already fragile resource infrastructures of receiving areas.

In extreme scenarios, environmental pressures—specifically migration and resource scarcity—could exacerbate inter-state friction, particularly between upstream providers and downstream consumers. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which hold the vast majority of Central Asia's water reserves, face potential diplomatic and security pressures from downstream nations such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as from neighbors like Afghanistan. Increased competition over water, arable land, and food security threatens to destabilize the region, signaling the emergence of a new paradigm defined by 'environmental geopolitics,' where resource access is inextricably linked to political stability.

Desertification poses an equally grave threat to the region's ecological integrity. The inherent aridity of Central Asia is being drastically worsened by anthropogenic factors, including unsustainable agricultural practices, overgrazing, and the diversion of river flows for large-scale irrigation, which have collectively accelerated desert expansion in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Beyond undermining agricultural output, this land degradation severely compromises biodiversity as ecosystems struggle to adapt to the changing climate. The desiccation of the Aral Sea remains the definitive case study of this phenomenon, illustrating how the convergence of environmental mismanagement and climate change can precipitate permanent socio-ecological collapse.

In response, there is a growing push for regulatory frameworks aimed at combating desertification and land degradation. These frameworks involve better water management, soil restoration, and sustainable agricultural practices. However, regional cooperation is critical, as desertification is not a challenge that can be solved

by one country alone. This requires harmonized approaches across Central Asia, including joint initiatives to share knowledge, technology, and resources.

The quick acceleration of climate change is having far-reaching consequences for international relations. With climate change and environmental instability adding another layer of complexity to the already complex connection between these states, the region of Central Asia has become even more embroiled in the great power rivalry among Russia, China, and the West. Investing in renewable energy, water, and sustainable agriculture projects can help mitigate some of the climate change impacts, following the example of China's BRI, which focuses on infrastructure development in the region. However, some Central Asian states may see the BRI's geopolitical goals as a tool to further China's influence, particularly those that are worried about China's increasing impact on their independence⁸⁶.

Russia views Central Asian stability as a primary security imperative, recognizing that climate-driven environmental degradation poses a direct threat to its southern borders. There is a clear opportunity for Russia to leverage this interest to foster regional collaboration on water management and climate adaptation. Climate change is the new geopolitical driver in Central Asia. Environmental insecurity—exacerbated by shared water supplies and rugged topography—requires a shift toward collective leadership. The future of the region depends on three integrated demands: securing reliable energy, institutionalizing regional cooperation, and building climate resilience. In this context, environmental diplomacy is no longer optional; it is essential to the region's long-term stability. Beyond historical economic ties, Russia maintains a profound strategic interest in Central Asian stability, primarily due to the potential for climate-induced volatility to manifest as security risks along its southern frontiers. Consequently, Moscow is uniquely positioned to act as an environmental mediator, facilitating regional cooperation on climate resilience and transboundary water management.

However, environmental governance in Central Asia remains fragmented. National policies are frequently ill-equipped to address the transboundary nature of environmental challenges. River basins and maritime spaces, such as the Amu Darya and the Caspian Sea, necessitate high-level regional coordination to ensure equitable resource utilization—a lesson underscored by the historical failure of the Aral Sea basin management. While international entities like the UN and the World Bank have supported initiatives in water resource management and decarbonization, these efforts are often subordinated to immediate political

⁸⁶ Gleason, G. W. *The Central Asian states: Discovering independence*. Routledge. 2018.

tensions and national economic priorities, which continue to impede effective regional regulation.

In conclusion, climate change is fundamentally recalibrating the Central Asian geopolitical landscape. The region's susceptibility to environmental degradation and water scarcity has pushed insecurity to a critical threshold. Addressing these challenges requires not only regional and global cooperation but also the cultivation of collective political will. Looking forward, the region's stability will be defined by three converging imperatives: energy security, integrated regional cooperation, and climate resilience—a transition in which environmental diplomacy will play an increasingly pivotal role.

Major Powers' Foreign Policy and Interests in Central Asia in Post Cold War Era

RUSSIA: Putin Doctrine of Foreign Policy Since 2000

Following the systemic rupture of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent collapse of Euro-Atlantic relations, the Russian Federation has executed a definitive doctrinal pivot toward the East. Codified in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept and the subsequent 2024 diplomatic push for a "New Eurasian Security Architecture", Moscow no longer views itself as the eastern edge of Europe, but as the geographic and political center of the Eurasian landmass. In this paradigm, Central Asia and the Caucasus are not peripheral regions; they are the indispensable strategic buffers and geoeconomic lifelines necessary for Russia to sustain its confrontation with the West. The Kremlin's strategic documents project an image of an undisputed Eurasian hegemon capable of dictating the security architecture of the entire continent. In reality, the strategic overstretch caused by the protracted conflict in Ukraine has severely damaged Russia's image as an invincible security provider in the heartland. Central Asian states, acutely aware of Russia's drained conventional military resources and the toxic nature of Western secondary sanctions, are increasingly practicing strategic hedging. While no regional republic can afford to directly antagonize Moscow or evict Russian military bases, their accelerated multi-vector diplomacy proves that the era of exclusive Russian dominance in Eurasia has irreversibly ended. Ultimately, Russia's contemporary doctrine is no longer about expanding an empire, but about desperately attempting to lock down a vital strategic perimeter before the centrifugal forces of multipolarity tear its traditional sphere of influence apart. Russia's geopolitical posture serves as the linchpin of the Eurasian landscape. Due to its transcontinental scale and immense geographical footprint, Moscow's strategic interests are inextricably linked to the stability and orientation of its immediate periphery. Central Asia, in particular, remains vital to Russia's national security and economic architecture; consequently, the Kremlin has consistently sought to preserve its sphere of influence within these former Soviet republics. Strategically, the region functions as a crucial buffer zone, mitigating instability radiating from the Middle East and managing the geopolitical influence of China. Moscow

institutionalizes this hegemony through two primary pillars: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which serve to solidify Russia's dominant position while ensuring alignment among the regional governments.

Putin Doctrine

- The Putin doctrine of foreign policy since the ascendancy of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000 is a model foreign policy designed to restore the great-power status of Russia, safe its near abroad, and confront the unipolarism of the United States⁸⁷. The Putin Doctrine is a strategic framework grounded in realism, nationalism, and strategic pragmatism, designed to establish Russia as a central pole in an emerging multipolar world order. The "Putin Doctrine" defines Russia's foreign policy through a lens of defensive realism and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. It rests on five central tenets:
- **Restoration of Sovereign Greatness:** Central to the doctrine is the rejection of the post-Cold War liberal international order. Putin's foreign policy prioritizes state sovereignty and "civilizational identity," positioning Russia as a distinct power that resists Western interventionism and normative liberalism in favor of its own traditional values.
- **Consolidation of the Post-Soviet Space:** Re-establishing influence over the former Soviet republics is a strategic priority, viewed as essential for Russian security. Moscow utilizes institutional vehicles—primarily the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—alongside bilateral agreements to ensure these territories remain within Russia's strategic orbit and insulated from Western, particularly NATO and EU, expansion.
- **Energy as Geoeconomic Leverage:** Since 2000, energy diplomacy has evolved into a key instrument of statecraft. By controlling critical export infrastructure—such as the Nord Stream, Yamal-Europe, and Power of Siberia pipelines—Moscow leverages energy dependency to influence European and Asian policy and insulate the domestic economy from international sanctions.
- **Military Potency and Strategic Autonomy:** The doctrine asserts that military force is a legitimate tool for deterrence and diplomatic coercion. From the 2008 intervention in Georgia to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has systematically enforced "red lines" to protect its perceived security interests.

⁸⁷ Rumer, B. Z. Soviet Central Asia: A tragic experiment. Routledge. 2023.

Concurrently, modernization efforts and a heavy emphasis on nuclear deterrence are intended to restore Russia's status as a military peer to the West.

- **Revisionist Multipolarity:** Moscow seeks to dismantle U.S. hegemony by fostering a multipolar global order in partnership with non-Western powers like China and India. Through alliances such as BRICS and the SCO, Russia actively advocates for a reform of global governance, aiming to reduce the dominance of Western-centric institutions.

In the Putin Doctrine, the aspects of cultural geopolitics the Kremlin calls the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) can be found, in which Russia is the spiritual and cultural defender of Russian-speaking people and Orthodox civilization. Such an ideological element justifies the actions to intervene in the neighboring states in the name of protecting compatriots in foreign countries and maintaining old values in the fight against Western liberalism.

Russia's hydrocarbon reserves serve as the cornerstone of its foreign policy and geopolitical grand strategy. Through an extensive pipeline network—including the Nord Stream, Yamal-Europe, and Blue Stream infrastructure—Russia established itself as the preeminent natural gas supplier to Europe. This systemic dependence granted Moscow considerable leverage, which it has frequently utilized as an instrument of coercive diplomacy, manipulating supply volumes to exert political pressure on dissenting states. Strategically, projects like the Nord Stream 2 pipeline were designed to facilitate the circumvention of traditional transit states, such as Ukraine and Poland, thereby granting Russia direct, unmediated control over energy flows to the European market. Recognizing the limitations of this reliance, Moscow has aggressively pursued a pivot toward Asia; initiatives such as the 'Power of Siberia' pipeline are pivotal in this strategy, enabling Russia to diversify its consumer base and enhance its geoeconomic resilience against Western political and economic pressure. When it comes to Central Asia and international politics, the Russian military is still a major player. Military sites in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, among other Central Asian states, are still occupied by the nation as a result of the CSTO and other bilateral agreements⁸⁸. "Beyond the safeguarding of its territorial borders and economic interests, the presence of Russian military personnel in Central Asia serves as a strategic counterweight to NATO's regional footprint. Moscow has consistently demonstrated a willingness to utilize force to uphold its sphere of influence, as evidenced by its interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. While Russia traditionally positions itself as the region's primary security guarantor, this predominance is increasingly challenged by the expanding strategic and economic footprints of China and the United States.

⁸⁸ Calfucura, E. Governance, land and distribution: A discussion on the political economy of community-based conservation. *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 145, pp. 18–26. 2018.

Although Moscow retains significant structural influence, its regional hegemony is undergoing a period of contestation. China's emergence as a global economic powerhouse, codified through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is fundamentally altering the regional landscape. By financing critical infrastructure, energy initiatives, and trade networks, Beijing is effectively eroding Russia's long-standing economic grip on the region. Concurrently, the United States' engagement in Afghanistan and the deepening security ties between Central Asian states and NATO further complicate Russia's strategic calculus. Nevertheless, the Putin Doctrine remains inherently adaptive; rather than adhering to a static strategy, it navigates the realities of a multipolar world by projecting Russia as a resolute revisionist power—one capable of asserting its national interests through a sophisticated synthesis of coercive diplomacy, economic partnership, and strategic negotiation.

Military Presence, Economic Dependence, Diaspora

Russia maintains a sizable military footprint over the rest of Eurasia, including the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the nations that emerged from the Soviet Union. The crux of this plan is Russia's military alliance, the CSTO, which it uses as a springboard to exert its influence through security accords and military cooperation. Russian military sites in neighboring nations like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan help the country project power and protect its regional interests. The strategic placement of these outposts allows them to control security buffers in the event of challenges from the west, China, or the Middle East, as well as to dictate on important routes and police the region's instability⁸⁹.

Russia's military deployment in Central Asia extends well beyond a traditional defensive rationale; it is a manifestation of deliberate geopolitical posturing. Forward-deployed assets, such as the military base in Tajikistan, serve as strategic nodes for managing regional instability and countering the threat of insurgency. Similarly, Russia's presence in Kyrgyzstan facilitates the control of vital transit corridors and reinforces its regional hegemony. This forward stance is consistent with Moscow's broader pattern of behavior—seen in the interventions in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea—which underscores a willingness to utilize kinetic force to define its geopolitical 'red lines' and signal its strategic resolve to international actors.

Simultaneously, hydrocarbon exports form the structural bedrock of the Russian economy and its geopolitical orientation. As a preeminent global energy producer, Russia's dependence on oil and gas revenue creates a paradox: while energy provides Moscow with immense leverage, it also renders the state vulnerable to market volatility. Historically, Russia has weaponized this interdependence, frequently manipulating supply flows to exert political pressure on neighboring states, particularly within Europe. However, recognizing the risks of

⁸⁹ Cammett, M. *A political economy of the Middle East*. Routledge. 2018.

over-reliance on European markets, Moscow is actively diversifying its export channels. The 'Power of Siberia' and Nord Stream infrastructure projects signify a strategic pivot toward Asian markets, intended to insulate the Russian economy from Western sanctions. Nevertheless, Russia remains highly susceptible to global energy transitions, as its long-term economic stability faces the compounding threats of price fluctuations and the systemic move away from fossil fuels.

Within the architecture of Russian foreign policy, the diaspora is not merely a demographic reality but a potent vehicle for soft power. By positioning itself as the de facto guardian of Russian speakers in nations like Ukraine, Moldova, and Kazakhstan, Moscow creates a strategic framework that facilitates the projection of its national interest. The Russian diaspora serves as a pivotal instrument within Moscow's foreign and soft-power framework. The Kremlin possesses significant geopolitical leverage over post-Soviet states with substantial Russian-speaking populations—including Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova—by framing the protection of these communities as a national security imperative. Through the 'Compatriot Policy,' Moscow frequently instrumentalizes the protection of ethnic Russians as a rhetorical justification to intervene in the domestic affairs of neighboring sovereign states, transforming demographic ties into a mechanism for political influence. Russia plans to maintain political influence over these communities and utilize them as a tool of soft power through cultural and linguistic linkage⁹⁰.

Moscow's engagement with the Russian diaspora functions as a sophisticated instrument of soft power projection. Through extensive transnational outreach—including state-sponsored media, educational programs, and the promotion of the Russian language—the Kremlin cultivates significant cultural and economic influence across its periphery. This 'diasporic diplomacy' is further institutionalized through the provision of citizenship, subsidies, and socio-economic incentives to Russian-speaking communities within former Soviet states. By decoupling political influence from overt military or political operations, Russia effectively establishes a persistent cultural footprint in these territories.

In Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, these communities serve as strategic conduits for commercial and cultural exchange. However, the efficacy of this soft-power tool is increasingly subject to regional geopolitical headwinds. As Central Asian nations seek to diversify their strategic partnerships—most notably through the economic gravity of China's Belt and Road Initiative—the utility of Moscow's diaspora-based influence is facing a steady decline. The ability of the

⁹⁰ Öniş, Z. Turkey under the challenge of state capitalism: The political economy of the late AKP era. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 201–225. 2019.

Russian diaspora to act as a geopolitical lever is constrained by the desire of these sovereign states to reduce their dependence on Moscow.

Ultimately, Russia's Eurasian strategy rests on a triad of influence: military deterrence, energy-based economic leverage, and soft-power diasporic engagement. While military alliances provide a security umbrella and energy exports ensure economic dependency, the diaspora serves as the cultural glue connecting Moscow to its 'near abroad.' Yet, this integrated approach is being tested. The rising influence of China and the European Union represents a fundamental challenge to Russia's long-standing hegemony, forcing Moscow to contend with a more multipolar, and less compliant, regional order.

New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC)

Russia is spearheading a number of massive infrastructure and economic projects, including the NELBEC, which would improve connections between Europe and China and other key regions⁹¹. The Northeast Asia-Europe Land-Bridge Economic Corridor (NELBEC) is a cornerstone of Russia's grand strategy to establish itself as the preeminent logistical and commercial nexus between East Asia and Europe. By constructing a robust, land-based alternative to traditional maritime shipping, Moscow aims to integrate the Russian Far East into global supply chains, fundamentally recalibrating Eurasian trade dynamics.

Economically, the NELBEC serves as a vital instrument for structural diversification. It allows Russia to pivot away from its historical dependence on hydrocarbon exports, positioning the country to capture high-value trade in electronics, machinery, and consumer goods. Furthermore, this initiative acts as a catalyst for regional development; by placing the Russian Far East and Siberia at the heart of this transcontinental route, Moscow can incentivize infrastructure modernization in historically underdeveloped, resource-rich territories.

The corridor's infrastructure is multifaceted, centered on the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR) and augmented by high-speed rail, modernized highway networks, and expanded logistics hubs. Strategic ports such as Vladivostok and Nakhodka are currently being scaled to facilitate containerized shipping, while prospective linkages—such as the Trans-Korean Railway—aim to integrate the Korean Peninsula into the broader corridor. Ultimately, the NELBEC transforms Russia from a peripheral transit state into a central pillar of Eurasian connectivity."

"The NELBEC is designed as an intermodal transport network, engineered to enhance logistical efficiency while mitigating the risks of maritime transit, which remains highly susceptible to geopolitical volatility and supply chain disruptions. This corridor offers China

⁹¹ Barbier, E. Natural resources and economic development. Cambridge University Press. 2019.

a high-speed land-based link to European markets, while simultaneously shortening delivery times and reducing costs for all participating regions.

The geopolitical implications of the NELBEC are substantial, particularly regarding the trilateral relationship between Russia, China, and the states of Central Asia. For Moscow, the project is a strategic opportunity to cement its status as the linchpin of Eurasian trade. Success, however, demands more than just infrastructure investment; it requires the diplomatic acumen to manage complex transit relations with stakeholders such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Belarus.

For Beijing, the NELBEC serves as a vital extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beyond facilitating faster market access, it provides a crucial land-based alternative to the 'Malacca Dilemma'—China's critical vulnerability to maritime chokepoints. While this project offers clear economic dividends, it has also amplified Western anxieties. The United States and the European Union increasingly view the Sino-Russian infrastructure convergence as a structural challenge to the liberal international order, fearing that a robust land-based trade network will erode Western influence and redefine the economic governance of Central Asia and Europe.

To lessen its dependence on traditional sea routes, Europe might diversify its energy and trade channels, a possibility made possible by the NELBEC. But Russia's political and military actions, especially in Ukraine, hinder Europe's role in the corridor. As long as Russia's military expansionism and support for autocratic regimes in Central Asia remain concerns, the European Union will maintain a cautious approach to its NELBEC interactions with Russia.

The corridor's effects on the Central Asian nations are substantial as well. Maintaining Russian dominance over NELBEC member states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is a top priority for Russia. As China's economic influence grows in the region, these countries—which have historically supported Russia—may seek to normalize relations with Beijing⁹². The NELBEC stands as a testament to the promise of Eurasian integration, yet it is trapped in the tension between economic ambition and geopolitical reality. For Central Asia, the corridor is a gateway to the world; it offers landlocked states a long-awaited path to international markets. For Russia, it is a bid to rewrite its economic geography, transforming the dormant, resource-rich expanse of its Far East into a bustling artery of trade. By threading manufacturing and logistics hubs together from China to Europe, the project seeks to decouple Eurasian trade from its maritime dependence.

Yet, this ambition faces profound headwinds. The corridors of trade are only as secure as the politics that surround them, and the NELBEC is currently vulnerable on multiple fronts.

⁹² Fierman, W. *Soviet Central Asia: The failed transformation*. Routledge. 2019.

The very regions that the corridor traverses—Central Asia and the Caucasus—are susceptible to the kind of political instability that can shutter borders and freeze transit overnight. Furthermore, the corridor is being constructed under the shadow of profound isolation; Western sanctions have created a funding vacuum that threatens to stall construction. Perhaps most critically, the growing chasm between Russia and the West has turned the NELBEC from a neutral commercial project into a geopolitical liability, leaving European states hesitant to engage with a lifeline that is currently tethered to a sanctioned Russian state.

China's Foreign Policy, Xi Jinping Thought, and the BRI in Eurasia

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China's engagement with the Eurasian heartland has evolved from a series of disjointed infrastructure investments into a comprehensive, ideologically driven grand strategy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in Kazakhstan in 2013, has matured significantly beyond its initial focus on physical connectivity. Today, Beijing's foreign policy in Eurasia is anchored in "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy" and the pursuit of a "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," positioning China not just as an economic partner, but as the normative architect of a new, post-Western global order.

Following the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and global backlash against perceived "debt-trap diplomacy," Beijing has strategically recalibrated. "BRI 2.0" in Central Asia prioritizes high-quality, lower-risk investments. The focus has rapidly shifted toward the "Digital Silk Road" (5G networks, e-commerce, and fiber optics) and the "Green Silk Road" (renewable energy investments), permanently binding the region to Chinese technological standards rather than just physical supply chains.

A theoretical analysis of Xi Jinping's foreign policy demonstrates that the Eurasian heartland is the primary testing ground for China's vision of a multipolar world. The Belt and Road Initiative is no longer merely a network of transcontinental trade routes; it has been seamlessly integrated into a comprehensive doctrinal framework designed to secure China's periphery and establish a Sino-centric sphere of influence.

For the republics of Central Asia, China's grand strategy presents the ultimate multi-vector dilemma. Beijing offers indispensable capital, technological modernization, and a normative framework that guarantees regime survival. However, as the BRI transitions into its digital and security-focused phases, the structural asymmetries are deepening rapidly. The heartland is becoming intimately wired into China's surveillance, technological, and economic matrices. The strategic challenge for Eurasian states in the twenty-first century is no longer about attracting Chinese investment, but about practicing enough strategic hedging to prevent their complete absorption into a technologically advanced, Sino-centric tributary system.

Beijing's grand strategy in the heartland operates at the intersection of Realism, Institutionalism, Geoeconomics, and Constructivism. By systematically applying these IR theories, China has constructed a highly effective, multi-layered foreign policy designed to secure its borders, fuel its economy, and project multipolar power without triggering a direct military confrontation with Russia or the West.

China's policy toward Eurasia represents the most ambitious geopolitical and geoeconomic reengineering of the global order in the twenty-first century. Moving beyond a purely maritime focus in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing views the Eurasian landmass as its strategic hinterland—a vast continental space essential for securing energy and mineral supply chains, expanding export markets, and establishing a Sino-centric multilateral architecture insulated from Western maritime containment.

The geographic and political vulnerability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) acts as the foundational driver of China's contemporary security policy toward Central Asia and the broader Eurasian landmass. Rather than viewing Eurasia purely as a theater for economic expansion, Beijing approaches its western periphery through an existential internal-external security nexus. The stabilization of Xinjiang—and the containment of Uyghur transnationalism—is the primary prerequisite for China's continental grand strategy. From the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the mountainous, highly porous 3,000-kilometer border shared between Xinjiang and Central Asia (specifically Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) represents its most acute strategic vulnerability. China's primary security objective in the heartland is the total eradication of the "Three Evils" (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism). Beijing utilizes its bilateral and multilateral leverage to ensure that Central Asian republics actively suppress any political, religious, or militant movements that could ideologically inspire or physically support Uyghur separatism within Xinjiang. Central Asia is home to a significant Uyghur diaspora, possessing deep historical, linguistic, and cultural ties to Xinjiang. China's security apparatus is intensely focused on severing these trans-state linkages. By employing comprehensive extradition treaties, cross-border digital surveillance exports, and localized diplomatic pressure, Beijing effectively coerces Central Asian governments into quarantining their own Uyghur populations. This regional coercion is designed to deter Central Asian states from forming independent foreign policies regarding Xinjiang, neutralizing any potential sanctuary or advocacy for Uyghur nationalism.

As Beijing expands its security perimeter to preempt threats to Xinjiang, it fundamentally reorders the Eurasian hierarchy. By exporting its surveillance technologies, demanding total compliance regarding Uyghur activism, and establishing a unilateral security presence in the Pamir mountains, China has transitioned from a passive economic beneficiary of Central Asian stability to its primary security architect. Ultimately, the survival and stability of Xinjiang is

the inescapable geopolitical gravity well that pulls China deeper into the complex, securitized realities of the Eurasian heartland.

Following a decade of massive, often debt-heavy infrastructure lending under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's Eurasia policy has transitioned toward "high-quality" integration. Guided by the priorities of the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030), Beijing is shifting its continental investments away from legacy mega-projects and toward technological self-reliance, digital infrastructure, and green energy. The Eurasian interior is now the primary theater for securing critical raw materials (such as copper, lithium, and uranium) necessary to fuel China's domestic industrial upgrading and its dominance in global green-technology supply chains. The geopolitical fallout of the Russia-Ukraine war fundamentally altered China's logistical calculus. Recognizing the vulnerability of relying exclusively on the Russian-dominated Northern Corridor for rail freight to Europe, Beijing rapidly accelerated the diversification of its trans-Eurasian trade routes. China's Eurasia policy requires a highly calibrated balancing act regarding the Russian Federation. While Beijing rhetorically supports Moscow's vision of a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" and benefits from a stable, anti-Western strategic axis, it practically subverts Russian hegemony. By institutionalizing direct diplomatic frameworks like the China-Central Asia (C+C5) mechanism, Beijing bypasses Moscow to negotiate directly with heartland republics. China's strategy is to maintain Russia as a primary security disruptor of the Euro-Atlantic order and a supplier of cheap hydrocarbons, while ensuring that the geoeconomic architecture of Eurasia remains strictly Sino-centric. China projects itself as the indispensable anchor of "inclusive multilateralism" and developmental peace across the Global South. Through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and expanded BRICS+, Beijing promotes a normative framework based on absolute state sovereignty, non-interference, and economic pragmatism. This "selectively adaptive" posture allows China to appeal heavily to the authoritarian and transitional regimes of Eurasia, presenting an alternative global governance model that rejects Western liberal conditionality and sanctions regimes.

However, as China transitions from a purely economic partner to a regional security provider, it faces the classic geopolitical trap of imperial overstretch. The deeper Beijing embeds itself in the political economy of Central Asia, the more it is forced to manage the region's internal volatilities—from anti-Chinese labor protests in Kazakhstan to the porous, militant-heavy borders of Tajikistan. Ultimately, China's theoretical pursuit of a stable, secure, and compliant periphery is resulting in the creation of an "inadvertent empire." While this architecture successfully bypasses Western containment, it permanently locks China into the complex, volatile, and deeply securitized geopolitics of the Eurasian heartland.

Launched in 2013, China's BRI is an expansive and strategic plan to build infrastructure, trade routes, and economic alliances that will connect China to the rest of the globe. China is seeking to increase its power by constructing land and sea trade routes; the BRI, which spans Asia, Europe, and Africa, is a contemporary version of the old Silk Road⁹³. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a foundational strategy designed to catalyze cross-border connectivity through the modernization and expansion of critical infrastructure, including maritime ports, highways, rail networks, and energy pipelines. By facilitating the seamless movement of capital, goods, and technology, the BRI aims to bridge the logistical gaps that hinder international commerce.

Energy security serves as a cornerstone of this strategy. Through substantial investment in pipelines and power generation across Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Beijing is securing direct, reliable access to essential hydrocarbon and renewable energy resources. These investments are twofold in their utility: they satisfy China's rising domestic demand while simultaneously cementing Beijing's status as a strategic patron, granting it long-term diplomatic leverage over resource-producing nations.

Beyond energy, the BRI prioritizes the development of comprehensive transport corridors that link China to Europe and the Middle East. By establishing these transcontinental transit networks, the initiative effectively streamlines supply chains and reduces logistical costs. This infrastructure development is intended to foster deeper regional economic integration, transforming disparate geographic markets into a cohesive, interlinked trading ecosystem."



Figure 8.1: Proposed Route of China's Belt and Road Initiative

⁹³ Cohn, T. H., & Hira, A. *Global Political Economy: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. 2020.

The China- CAWAEK is a prime illustration of the energy and infrastructural focus of the BRI. The expedited movement of goods, oil, natural gas, and other commodities into and out of China is made possible via this route, which connects China to Central Asia, Iran, and portions of Turkey. The strategic location of Central Asia along this route makes it an important conduit for the transit of energy. One of the most important pipelines that China is building to ensure its energy independence is the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline. An important part of China's energy diversification and access to Central Asian resources is this pipeline, which connects Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan⁹⁴.

While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promises substantial economic expansion, it simultaneously introduces complex security challenges, compelling Beijing to navigate an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape. As China extends its infrastructure footprint, it faces a dual burden of internal and external risks. Major energy corridors—particularly those traversing Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East—are frequently situated in regions plagued by political instability, ethnic conflict, and insurgent activity. Ensuring the uninterrupted flow of resources through these zones presents a formidable challenge, as infrastructure remains highly susceptible to terrorism, sabotage, and local unrest.

In response, Beijing has shifted toward a policy of 'securitized development.' This is most evident in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), where strategic investments in Gwadar Port and critical rail and energy infrastructure have been accompanied by a heightened military and security presence. China has increasingly deployed security personnel and engaged in bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation to safeguard its assets. Furthermore, Beijing is acutely focused on the risks posed by cross-border threats, such as terrorist activities originating in Afghanistan and Uyghur separatist movements in Xinjiang. To mitigate these multifaceted threats, China has prioritized institutionalized security cooperation through regional frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), leveraging both multilateral alliances and local partnerships to protect its expanding strategic interests.

⁹⁴ Christian, D. *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Volume II: Inner Eurasia from the Mongol Empire to Today, 1260–2000*. Vol. 2. John Wiley & Sons. 2018.



Figure 8.2: China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)

The CMREC is an important part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Its goal is to improve regional connectivity and facilitate the free flow of commodities, services, and resources among these countries. An important commerce and energy conduit between China and Europe, this route follows a traditional path that connects China, Russia, and Mongolia. The goal of the CMREC is to improve energy ties, international trade, transportation, and railway connections between the three countries⁹⁵. It is aimed at reducing the transportation time of goods exported to Russia and Europe, the transportation of raw materials, energy resources, and finished products.

The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC) is a critical component of Beijing's strategy to achieve energy security and trade diversification. The integration of the *Power of Siberia* pipeline into this corridor serves as a strategic bulwark, granting China direct access to Russian hydrocarbon reserves and significantly mitigating its dependence on vulnerable maritime supply lines. By formalizing this overland infrastructure—ranging from high-speed rail to highway networks—China is fostering deeper economic synergy with Russia, its primary energy supplier, while simultaneously elevating Mongolia's status from a geographic intermediary to a vital strategic transit hub.

Geopolitically, the CMREC reinforces Russia's position as a central energy architect and trade partner within Eurasia, providing Moscow with an institutionalized channel to maintain

⁹⁵ Wang, F., Wang, C., Chen, J., Zeng, L., & Li, L. *Examining the determinants of energy-related carbon emissions in Central Asia: Country-level LMDI and EKC analysis during different phases*. Environment, Development and Sustainability, Vol. 22, No. 8, pp. 7743–7769. 2020.

influence over both China and, by extension, the broader European market. For Beijing, the corridor is a quintessential element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It offers a land-based alternative to the 'Malacca Dilemma,' providing secure access to markets that bypass maritime chokepoints susceptible to geopolitical disruption.

However, the corridor is not without significant impediments. The project exists in a complex environment characterized by regional territorial disputes, the competing strategic interests of global powers, and the volatility of local politics. Despite these challenges, the CMREC serves as a definitive symbol of China's expanding regional hegemony and its ambition to reshape global trade flows and energy architectures in the 21st century.

U.S. Foreign Policy in Eurasia – From Post-9/11 to Trump 2.0

The transition of U.S. foreign policy from the Bush administration through the Trump era illustrates a gradual American awakening to the multipolar realities of the Eurasian heartland. For nearly two decades, Washington treated Central Asia merely as a transit corridor and military staging ground for the war in Afghanistan. However, as the U.S. drew down its kinetic military footprint, it was forced to adapt to a region rapidly being monopolized by Chinese capital and Russian security architectures. Ultimately, this historical arc demonstrates both the utility and the limitations of the United States acting as an "offshore balancer." For Central Asian republics, Washington remains an indispensable third vector to hedge against their immediate neighbors. Yet, the volatility of American policy—shifting rapidly from military occupation to institutionalism, and then to transactional mercantilism—highlights a structural lack of grand strategic continuity. If the United States is to remain a relevant systemic player in the twenty-first-century Great Game, it must prove to the heartland that its geoeconomic engagement is a permanent fixture of American strategy, rather than just another temporary geopolitical pivot.

For the United States, the Eurasian heartland has historically functioned not as a core strategic theater, but as a secondary arena subordinated to broader global imperatives. While Central Asian states eagerly court Washington to dilute Sino-Russian hegemony, American engagement has historically been characterized by extreme volatility—surging during periods of acute security crises and waning as those crises recede.

In 2015, the Obama administration launched the C5+1 diplomatic platform, recognizing that dealing with the five Central Asian republics as a unified bloc was more effective than fragmented bilateralism. This institutional framework survived through the first Trump term and the Biden administration, gradually expanding to cover counter-terrorism, border security, and energy integration.

However, the dramatic oscillation of American policy from the military occupation of the Afghan era to the normative lecturing of the Biden years, and finally to the transactional

resource extraction of Trump 2.0—demonstrates a structural lack of grand strategic continuity. While the current focus on Critical Raw Materials provides a highly pragmatic, mutually beneficial foundation for U.S.-Central Asian relations, it is severely constrained by geography. Pumping billions of dollars into Central Asian mining is geopolitically futile if the processed minerals must still transit through sanctioned Russian territory or Chinese-controlled logistical corridors. Ultimately, if the United States wishes to remain a relevant systemic player in the Great Game, it cannot simply rely on transactional mineral extraction; it must simultaneously invest the diplomatic and financial capital necessary to secure viable, non-Sino-Russian transit corridors (like the Middle Corridor) to bring those resources to the global market.

U.S. strategic interests in the area, including security cooperation, democracy promotion, and counterterrorism operations in the region, especially in Afghanistan, have had a significant impact on U.S. foreign policy in the Eurasian region since 9/11. The evolving global power dynamic, new security challenges, and the growing geopolitical importance of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the entire Eurasian region have all influenced shifts in U.S. policy⁹⁶. U.S. foreign policy objectives, including regional stability and counterterrorism, were reevaluated in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

The post-9/11 Global War on Terror profoundly reshaped United States engagement in Eurasia, elevating Central Asia to a strategic priority due to its proximity to Afghanistan and the Middle East. To sustain military operations, the U.S. secured basing rights in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, which proved instrumental in logistics, intelligence, and the broader campaign to dismantle Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

In this era, U.S. security collaboration with Central Asian states was defined by counterterrorism training, intelligence sharing, and border reinforcement. By providing military assistance to nations like Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, Washington aimed to bolster regional defenses against transnational threats and destabilizing non-state actors. For their part, Central Asian regimes leveraged these security partnerships as a mechanism to balance against Russian and Chinese dominance.

However, U.S. foreign policy underwent a significant shift during the Bush and Obama administrations, moving beyond purely security-centric engagement to include the promotion of democratic norms. Washington sought to foster the rule of law, institutional transparency, and human rights to mitigate authoritarian entrenchment. This normative agenda, however, encountered significant resistance. Authoritarian leaders—most notably Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan’s Nursultan Nazarbayev—perceived democratic promotion as a direct challenge to their domestic political control. This generated a policy paradox: the United

⁹⁶ Shittu, W., Adedoyin, F. F., Shah, M. I., & Musibau, H. O. *An investigation of the nexus between natural resources, environmental performance, energy security and environmental degradation: Evidence from Asia*. Resources Policy, Vol. 73, 102227. 2021.

States faced frequent criticism for attempting to reconcile its democratic rhetoric with the realpolitik of maintaining strategic alliances with consolidated regimes. Ultimately, while U.S.-backed civil society and anti-corruption initiatives facilitated political shifts, such as those seen in the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the broader democratic project in Central Asia remained largely aspirational.

For two decades, the United States viewed Eurasia through the singular lens of the Afghan war. The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan transformed Central Asia into a vital strategic theater, where bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan acted as the logistical lifelines for the U.S.-led campaign to eradicate Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet, the abrupt finality of the 2021 withdrawal effectively dismantled that security framework, leaving the region to grapple with a new, uncertain reality.

The Taliban's return to power serves as a pivot point in regional affairs. It cast a long shadow over the U.S.-Central Asian relationship, raising fundamental questions about the sustainability of Washington's strategic interest in the region. For Central Asian nations, the concerns are existential: they fear that the chaos of a Taliban-run Afghanistan will bleed across borders, exporting Islamic militancy and ethnic instability into the heart of the region. This anxiety is especially acute for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which view the instability not as a distant threat, but as a local danger.

In the wake of the U.S. departure, a geopolitical 'changing of the guard' has taken place. As the American footprint has faded, Moscow and Beijing have acted with newfound urgency to solidify their status as the region's primary security and economic guarantors. The resulting consolidation of Russian and Chinese influence marks a significant departure from the post-9/11 status quo, signaling the end of the U.S.-led era of Eurasian security.

While Russia's influence in the region has been established through organizations like the CSTO and China, their BRI has increased their footprint in the region, particularly in energy trade, infrastructure development, and military cooperation⁹⁷. While avoiding direct military engagement, the United States has sought to maintain its relevance through diplomatic, economic, and security ties.

"The United States is currently undertaking a strategic pivot, reaffirming its traditional security architecture in Europe and the Indo-Pacific while engaging key regional players like

⁹⁷ Andreoni, A., & Chang, H. J. *The political economy of industrial policy: Structural interdependencies, policy alignment and conflict management*. Structural Change and Economic Dynamics, Vol. 48, pp. 136–150. 2019.

India and Turkey. Yet, even as Washington looks globally, Central Asia remains a vital, if increasingly contested, arena for U.S. interests.

For two decades following the 9/11 attacks, American policy in Eurasia was forged through the prism of the War on Terror. The U.S. military presence served as an anchor for stability, yet the concurrent mission of democratic and institutional reform often collided with the resistance of regional autocrats. This friction between normative goals and realpolitik defined the era. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the regional power dynamics have decisively shifted. As China and Russia amplify their influence, Washington is forced to chart a new course—one that requires navigating a world defined by great-power competition and skillfully balancing the conflicting demands of regional security and strategic rivalry."

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY 2.0: VIEWS TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA – THE 2025 ALASKA SUMMIT CONTEXT

President Donald Trump's foreign policy framework represented a distinct departure from conventional U.S. engagement with Russia and Central Asia, anchored in the 'America First' doctrine and a preference for transactional diplomacy. Unlike his predecessors, whose regional strategies often prioritized institutional democracy promotion and comprehensive security cooperation, the Trump administration recalibrated its focus toward pragmatic, interest-based interactions: specifically, counterterrorism, energy security, and great-power competition. This policy suite—characterized by a synthesis of realism, skepticism of multilateral obligations, and economic nationalism—signaled a broader reorientation of U.S. global strategy amid escalating geopolitical friction with Beijing and Moscow. Compared to Russia, the foreign policy of Trump was marked by duality, openness to better relations with Moscow at the level of rhetoric and the hostility of the U.S. establishment institutions⁹⁸. The foreign policy of the Trump era was an exercise in strategic contraction and re-evaluation, driven by an 'America First' philosophy that preferred the clarity of transactional diplomacy over the complexity of institutional liberalism. In the Eurasian theater, this resulted in a nuanced, often contradictory, stance toward Russia. Trump himself eschewed the labelling of Russia as a permanent enemy, preferring a triangular diplomatic approach that treated Moscow as a potential counterweight to the rising influence of China. President Donald Trump's foreign policy framework marked a significant departure from traditional U.S. engagement with Russia and Central Asia, defined largely by the 'America First' doctrine and a preference

⁹⁸ Patnaik, A. *Regionalism and regional cooperation in Central Asia*. International Studies, Vol. 56, Nos. 2–3, pp. 147–162. 2019.

for transactional diplomacy. Unlike his predecessors, whose regional strategies prioritized institutional democratization and multilateral security, the Trump administration recalibrated its approach toward a realist, interest-based paradigm focusing on counterterrorism, energy security, and great-power competition.

This approach was defined by a distinct duality: while Trump's personal diplomacy sought improved ties with President Vladimir Putin to address flashpoints in Syria and Afghanistan, his administration simultaneously institutionalized a rigorous sanctions regime in response to Russian aggression in Crimea, cyber operations, and election interference. This tension reflected an internal schism between the President's preference for direct statecraft and the institutional containment strategies maintained by the Washington foreign policy bureaucracy.

In Eurasia, the administration's strategy toward Central Asia—operationalized through the C5+1 initiative—sought to re-engage the region with three primary objectives: mitigating security risks following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, diversifying regional energy exports away from Moscow, and countering the encroachment of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Economically, the administration moved away from traditional aid-based models, leveraging the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to incentivize private-sector investment in energy and logistics. By aiming to link Central Asia to South Asia and Europe, the U.S. sought to provide an alternative to transit routes controlled by Russia and China, ultimately viewing Central Asian sovereignty and regional integration as essential components in maintaining the Eurasian balance of power.

On the whole, the approach of President Trump in his foreign policy 2.0 when it came to Russia and Central Asia could be described as the balancing act of a realist approach, meaning engagement, but no alliance, deterrence, but no open hostility, and selective cooperation where the interests of the U.S. overlapped with those of Moscow or with the Central Asian states⁹⁹. The Alaska Summit served as a symbolic confirmation that despite the transition in U.S. leadership, the fundamental strategic challenges defined during the Trump administration—namely, the militarization of the Arctic, complex energy geopolitics, and the ongoing restructuring of great-power dynamics—remain the defining features of 21st century relations between the U.S., Russia, and Central Asia.

The European Union in Eurasia – From Normative Power to Principled Pragmatism

For the first two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European Union engaged with the Eurasian heartland primarily as an ideational actor. Grounded in its self-

⁹⁹ Oatley, T. *International Political Economy*. Routledge. 2022.

perception as a "Normative Power," Brussels attempted to export its own model of regional integration, liberal democracy, and human rights to the newly independent republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, the consolidation of regional authoritarianism, coupled with the aggressive geoeconomic expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the hard-security revanchism of Russia, has forced a profound recalibration of EU foreign policy. A theoretical analysis of the European Union's foreign policy in Eurasia reveals a statecraft in transition. The EU has realized that it cannot successfully operate purely as a "Normative Power" in a region dominated by hard-power realists and state-capitalist hegemony. To remain a relevant systemic player in the twenty-first-century Great Game, Brussels has fundamentally compromised its original transformational agenda. By pivoting from strict political conditionality to the Global Gateway and critical mineral diplomacy, the EU has adopted a hybrid identity. It still utilizes normative tools—leveraging its massive regulatory power to enforce environmental and technical standards—but these tools are now deployed in service of blunt geoeconomic interests. Ultimately, the EU's trajectory in the heartland demonstrates that in an era of intense multipolar competition, normative power without material and geoeconomic leverage is entirely insufficient to secure strategic objectives. . The European Union's active engagement has significantly amplified the geopolitical prominence of Eurasian regions, particularly Central Asia and the Caucasus. The EU's strategic footprint is multidimensional, spanning diplomatic outreach, economic integration, and security cooperation. Although the EU is not a military alliance, it serves as a critical stakeholder in regional stability, effectively leveraging its institutional partnerships with NATO and the OSCE to bolster its security objectives. Achieving peace and prosperity in strategically important areas, such as Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as fostering democratic rule and economic integration, are among the European Union's top priorities¹⁰⁰.

EU and Its Member States's Security and Energy Policy Post-Ukraine in Theoretical Perspectives- For decades, the European Union and its leading member states operated under a paradigm of complex interdependence with Moscow, assuming that deep energy integration (most notably through the Nord Stream pipelines) would pacify Russian geopolitical ambitions. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 violently shattered this illusion. In response, the EU enacted the most radical structural shift in its history—permanently decoupling from Russian fossil fuels and explicitly tying energy procurement to hard continental security. A theoretical analysis of the EU's post-Ukraine policy reveals a bloc fighting to establish itself as a sovereign "third pole" in a multipolar world. The European Union has successfully survived the initial shock of losing its primary energy patron,

¹⁰⁰ Pirani, S. *Central Asian Gas: Prospects for the 2020s*. Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. 2019.

demonstrating remarkable institutional agility in rapidly sourcing alternative hydrocarbons from the Caspian basin and accelerating its domestic green transition.

However, the Eurasian heartland presents the ultimate test for Europe's long-term geopolitical viability. While the EU has shed its dependency on Russian gas, its strategic autonomy is fundamentally incomplete if it cannot secure reliable, non-Sino-Russian transit corridors and direct access to Critical Raw Materials. As Brussels attempts to execute its Global Gateway projects, it must navigate the intense transactionalism of Central Asian republics who are aggressively hedging against all external powers. Ultimately, the EU's success in Eurasia will determine whether it emerges from the Ukraine war as an independent, hard-power geopolitical actor, or simply remains a wealthy consumer market perpetually vulnerable to the supply-chain weaponization of the Global East.

The European Union's strategic engagement with the Caucasus and Central Asia is anchored in a multidimensional policy framework designed to foster economic cooperation, regional democratization, and long-term stability. Through established instruments such as the Eastern Partnership (2009) and the EU Strategy for Central Asia (2007), Brussels has sought to institutionalize deep-rooted ties, utilizing development assistance and normative influence to advance human rights and the rule of law.

Economic and Energy Integration Economically, the EU acts as a primary trade and investment partner for states like Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. By facilitating access to the European single market and supporting infrastructure development, the EU promotes regional connectivity—a critical imperative for Central Asian nations seeking to diversify their trade portfolios and reduce asymmetric dependence on China and Russia. Furthermore, energy security remains a core pillar of this policy; the EU is actively pursuing the diversification of energy supplies by developing new export routes for Caspian hydrocarbon deposits, thereby enhancing European energy resilience.

Security Architecture and Mediation While the EU is not a military union, it functions as a critical security stakeholder through synergy with NATO and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). NATO provides the hard-power framework—strengthening border integrity, defensive systems, and counter-terrorism capabilities via Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs—while the OSCE serves as a neutral platform for conflict prevention, humanitarian exchange, and governance reform.

In the realm of conflict resolution, the EU serves as a prominent diplomatic broker. It actively mediates in unresolved territorial disputes—such as those in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia—by providing a neutral forum for communication. By leveraging its economic clout and soft power, the EU works to de-escalate tensions and facilitate diplomatic settlements in a region frequently characterized by clashing geopolitical interests.

Despite the European Union's expansive economic and diplomatic footprint in Central Asia and the Caucasus, its strategic agenda faces significant structural limitations. The primary challenge remains the entrenched geopolitical competition between Western powers and the Russian Federation. While regional governments have demonstrated an openness to diversifying their partnerships through engagement with Brussels, they remain fundamentally anchored to Moscow, particularly regarding energy infrastructure and regional security architectures. This creates a strategic balancing act where Central Asian states must navigate competing influences, limiting the depth of their integration with the EU¹⁰¹.

The European Union's efforts to project its influence into Central Asia and the Caucasus—particularly regarding governance reform and security architecture—are frequently impeded by Russia's resolve to maintain its traditional sphere of influence. This structural friction is compounded by the EU's internal policy priorities; competing domestic pressures, such as economic volatility, migration management, and regional instability, have historically diverted political capital away from a cohesive Eurasian strategy.

The EU's long-term geopolitical efficacy in the region will be contingent upon its ability to reconcile these internal constraints with an integrated foreign policy. This requires strengthening strategic synergy with NATO, successfully diversifying energy corridors to reduce dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, and maintaining policy coherence. While the EU's democratic and integrative agenda remains a cornerstone of its regional presence—facilitated by its collaborative security frameworks with NATO and the OSCE—its influence is increasingly contested. The convergence of competing interests from Moscow and Beijing creates a crowded and complex geopolitical arena, necessitating a more robust and responsive EU strategy to effectively advance its economic, diplomatic, and security interests.

Bridging the Heartland: India's Quest for Strategic Influence in Central Asia

India's pre-independence relations with Eurasia and Central Asia reveals that the contemporary push by New Delhi to reconnect with its "extended neighborhood" is not a novel geopolitical invention, but a recovery of deep historical memory. For millennia, the prosperity and intellectual vitality of the Indian subcontinent were intimately tied to the health of overland exchanges with Turan and Iran. The colonial rupture—which artificially severed India from its northern overland conduits and imposed a maritime-bound horizon—was a historical anomaly in a multi-millennial civilizational trajectory. For much of the pre-colonial era, the

¹⁰¹ Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and pipeline diplomacy in Central Asia: India's interests and policy options*. Jadavpur Journal of International Relations, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 216–246. 2020.

Indian subcontinent was not isolated from the Eurasian landmass by its northern mountain barriers; rather, the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs, and the high-altitude passes functioned as dynamic thresholds of exchange. Long before the British colonial imposition fractured the overland continuity and reoriented India toward a maritime, ocean-centric economy, the subcontinent maintained profound, multi-millennial ties with Central Asia and the broader Eurasian heartland. For decades, Indian foreign policy was primarily anchored in a maritime and South Asian orientation, constrained by a partition geography that physically severed direct overland access to the Eurasian heartland. However, in the post-Cold War era—and accelerating significantly into the contemporary landscape—New Delhi has conceptualized Central Eurasia as a vital component of its "extended neighborhood". India's Eurasian strategy is driven by the imperative to project strategic autonomy, secure vital energy and mineral resources, and counterbalance the Sino-Pakistani axis. A theoretical analysis of India's engagement with Eurasia reveals a grand strategy striving to bridge the gap between continental ambition and geographic constraint. New Delhi has successfully transformed its foreign policy from a passive, South Asian-centric stance into an active, multi-vector Eurasian outreach. However, India's Eurasian architecture faces profound structural vulnerabilities. The persistent volatility of international sanctions (affecting the long-term operational predictability of corridors like Chabahar Port), regional instability in Afghanistan, and the heavy logistical friction of trans-Eurasian transport corridors continue to test New Delhi's resolve. Ultimately, India's success in the Eurasian heartland will not be measured solely by diplomatic declarations, but by its ability to operationalize corridors like the INSTC and secure sustainable, non-coercive mineral and energy partnerships. If New Delhi successfully navigates these hurdles, its presence in Eurasia will serve as the definitive anchor of a truly multipolar global order. India's multifaceted engagement with Central Asia, situating New Delhi's "Connect Central Asia" policy within the increasingly contested landscape of Eurasian geopolitics. Historically constrained by geographic isolation and the geopolitical friction of its northern frontiers, India has pivoted toward a proactive strategy aimed at securing strategic depth and diversifying its regional partnerships. The pillars of India's approach, primarily its commitment to transformative connectivity infrastructure—most notably the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the development of the Chabahar Port—designed to bypass terrestrial bottlenecks. The imperative to hedge against the dominance of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the necessity of ensuring regional stability amidst persistent security concerns, particularly regarding Afghanistan. By assessing the interplay between India's economic aspirations, security objectives, and the entrenched influence of external powers such as Russia and China,

this section elucidates the challenges and opportunities defining India's attempt to establish itself as an indispensable stakeholder in the Eurasian heartland.

India's deepening engagement with Central Asia stands as a defining element of its 'Extended Neighborhood Policy.' New Delhi has significantly accelerated its diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation with the five republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—recognizing the region's pivotal role as a geostrategic bridge between China, Russia, and the Middle East.

India's relationship with Central Asia is not a contemporary geopolitical creation but a deeply rooted civilizational bond that has evolved over millennia. Long before the modern era of energy corridors and security dialogues, the region served as a conduit for the movement of ideas, people, and commerce, linking the Indian subcontinent to the heart of Eurasia. This long history of interaction provides India with a distinct "soft power" advantage in the region today, setting it apart from purely transactional actors. The historical and cultural connectivity between India and Central Asia serves as the bedrock upon which current geopolitical initiatives are built. While physical connectivity (roads, pipelines, ports) is the necessary vehicle for modern integration, the "civilizational bridge" provides the legitimacy and enduring goodwill required for India to be viewed as a reliable, long-term partner in the region. Understanding this history is essential for any analytical assessment of why India remains committed to an "Extended Neighborhood" policy that transcends mere economic or security calculations.

The Silk Road as a Civilizational Conduit: For centuries, the Silk Road functioned as an artery for cultural osmosis. It facilitated the transmission of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and onwards to China. The Kushan Empire, which spanned parts of both modern-day India and Central Asia, represents the zenith of this ancient convergence, where Indian philosophy and Greek-influenced art merged.

The Persianate and Islamic Synthesis: The medieval period saw a profound influx of influence from Central Asia into India. This was not merely a movement of rulers—such as Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, who hailed from the Fergana Valley—but a migration of scholars, Sufi mystics, poets, and architects. This era created a lasting cultural synthesis, visible today in Indian architecture, classical music, cuisine, and the linguistic evolution of Urdu and Hindi, which carry significant Perso-Arabic lexicons.

In the complex "strategic triangle" of Eurasia, India acts as a balancing actor. It maintains deep security alignment with Russia to ensure regional stability, while utilizing niche diplomacy to offer a distinct, non-hegemonic alternative to Chinese infrastructure dominance. For India, the ultimate goal is not to win the "New Great Game" through conventional power

projection, but to secure a lasting footprint that prevents the region from falling into an exclusive, binary dependency on either Moscow or Beijing.

India's "Connect Central Asia"- Policy, formalized in 2012 and significantly expanded over the last decade, represents a definitive strategic pivot in New Delhi's foreign policy. Historically characterized by geographic distance and limited engagement, India's approach has transformed into a proactive, multidimensional strategy designed to secure strategic depth in the Eurasian heartland. The policy is built upon three core pillars: connectivity, energy security, and defense cooperation. By prioritizing infrastructure projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran, India seeks to circumvent terrestrial bottlenecks—specifically the transit barriers posed by Pakistan—to create a direct economic artery into Central Asia.

Energy Security and Resource Diversification: At the core of this policy is a robust energy agenda. India views the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) Gas Pipeline as a vital instrument to enhance its energy security and reduce dependence on volatile sea-based trade routes. Beyond hydrocarbons, New Delhi is actively seeking strategic partnerships to secure supplies of uranium and rare earth elements, which are critical inputs for India's defense and high-technology manufacturing sectors.

Strategic Connectivity: Connectivity remains the second pillar of India's regional strategy. By developing the Chabahar Port in Iran, India has created a critical maritime-to-land gateway that allows it to bypass geopolitical bottlenecks to the north. This port serves as the essential terminus for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), creating an integrated trade architecture that links the Indian Ocean to Afghanistan and the broader Eurasian heartland. This network is fundamental to India's broader objective of integrating with Eurasian markets and securing reliable access to Russia and Europe.

India's relationships with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan constitute the bedrock of its engagement with the Eurasian heartland. As India expands its "Extended Neighborhood Policy," these two nations serve as essential partners for achieving strategic depth, energy security, and regional stability.

- **Kazakhstan** acts as India's primary partner for **energy and mineral security**—particularly regarding uranium supplies—and as a key interlocutor for regional stability and multilateral diplomacy (e.g., BRICS/SCO coordination).
- **Uzbekistan** has emerged as a hub for **economic integration and industrial cooperation**, with recent efforts focused on pharmaceutical manufacturing, digital infrastructure, and logistics.

Together, these relationships are shifting from passive diplomatic goodwill to an active, institutionalized security and economic partnership, focused on navigating the challenges of a

multipolar Eurasia and bypassing historical connectivity bottlenecks through corridor-based logistics.

Security & Defence Partnership

- **Military-to-Military Engagement:** Expansion of the *DUSTLIK* (Uzbekistan) and *KAZIND* (Kazakhstan) joint exercises to build interoperability in semi-urban and mountainous counter-terrorism operations.
- **Defence Industrial Collaboration:** Exploring joint production of defense technologies, intelligence sharing, and capacity building for border management.
- **Counter-Terrorism & Stability:** Collaborative intelligence sharing to mitigate threats from regional extremism and the instability emanating from the Af-Pak region.

While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan represent the industrial and regional power centers of Central Asia, India's relationships with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan provide the essential security, energy, and soft-power pillars of its "Connect Central Asia" policy. New Delhi approaches these three nations with specialized; niche strategies tailored to their unique geopolitical roles.

Tajikistan: The Security Anchor

Tajikistan is arguably India's most critical security partner in the Central Asian theater due to its geographic proximity to the Indian subcontinent and its long, porous border with Afghanistan.

- **Defence & Strategic Presence:** *The cornerstone of this relationship is India's operation of the Farkhor Air Base, its first and only overseas military facility. This base provides India with a tangible strategic foothold, allowing for intelligence gathering and security operations in the heart of Eurasia.*
- **Regional Stability:** *Given Tajikistan's frontline status regarding the Afghan conflict, New Delhi prioritizes defense cooperation, counter-terrorism capacity building, and intelligence sharing to prevent the spillover of extremism into the region.*
- **Strategic Rationale:** *India's engagement with Dushanbe is driven by the imperative of maintaining regional vigilance against the security vacuum left by Afghanistan's volatility.*

Turkmenistan: The Energy Lifeline

India's relationship with Turkmenistan is primarily transactional, centered on the urgent necessity of long-term energy security.

- *The TAPI Pipeline: The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline is the singular, defining project of this bilateral relationship. If operationalized, it would provide India with a direct, stable supply of natural gas, significantly diversifying its energy mix.*
- *Neutrality & Diplomacy: As Turkmenistan adheres to a strict policy of "permanent neutrality," it does not engage in deep military or security alliances. Consequently, India's engagement is limited to economic, energy, and connectivity spheres, with a focus on integrating Ashgabat into the INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor) network.*
- *Strategic Rationale: India views Turkmenistan as a critical node for bypassing sea-based energy dependence, positioning Ashgabat as a key partner in New Delhi's quest for regional energy sovereignty.*

Kyrgyzstan: The Soft-Power & Defence Partner

India's engagement with Kyrgyzstan is characterized by a blend of military interoperability and human-capital development, fostering strong people-to-people ties.

- *Education and Soft Power: Kyrgyzstan has become a premier destination for Indian students, particularly in the medical and technical fields. This has created a vast pool of alumni who act as "cultural ambassadors," strengthening the bedrock of bilateral relations.*
- *Defence Cooperation: Beyond soft power, India and Kyrgyzstan have institutionalized military cooperation, notably through the Exercise KHANJAR. These joint drills focus on high-altitude warfare and counter-terrorism, reflecting a shared commitment to regional defense.*
- *Strategic Rationale: As a pluralistic democracy, Kyrgyzstan is a natural partner for India. By focusing on human capital and specialized defense training, New Delhi maintains a durable, low-friction presence in Bishkek that complements its broader regional goals.*

India's strategic engagement with Central Asia is deeply influenced by the existing presence of two regional giants: Russia and China. Rather than engaging in a direct, resource-intensive competition, India has adopted a "niche" and "hedging" strategy, positioning itself as a reliable, third-way partner in a space where Sino-Russian interests largely predominate.

The China Factor: Competitive Asymmetry

China's relationship with Central Asia is characterized by overwhelming economic and infrastructure dominance, primarily through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This presents a different set of challenges for India.

- **Hegemonic vs. Niche Diplomacy:** While China exerts influence through massive infrastructure lending and "debt-trap" prone investments, India's approach is "constructivist." New Delhi focuses on human capital development, digital public infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, and education. This allows India to maintain influence without engaging in a costly, high-risk financial competition it cannot win.
- **The "Hegemon" Counterweight:** Central Asian republics are increasingly wary of over-dependence on Beijing. India's presence serves as a vital "hedging" tool for these nations, providing them with a diversified set of partnerships that prevents the region from becoming an exclusive sphere of Chinese influence.
- **Strategic Distrust:** India's rivalry with China, driven by the unresolved border dispute (LAC) and regional encirclement concerns, means that India's Central Asia policy is inherently designed to ensure that the "Heartland" does not become a closed system for Beijing.

The Russia Factor: Continuity and Security Alignment

Russia remains the traditional security guarantor and the historical political anchor of Central Asia. India's approach to the region is filtered through its "special and privileged strategic partnership" with Moscow.

- **Complementary Interests:** India and Russia share a common interest in maintaining regional stability and preventing the spillover of extremism from Afghanistan. Unlike its relationship with China, India's engagement with Central Asia is rarely perceived by Moscow as a threat; rather, it is often seen as a stabilizing influence that helps maintain a multipolar balance in the region.
- **Institutional Synergy:** India leverages the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—where Russia and China are dominant—to institutionalize its regional security ties. By working within this Russian-influenced framework, India avoids the perception of being an "external disruptor" and instead integrates into the existing regional security architecture.

Afghanistan Factor: In the contemporary Eurasian matrix, Afghanistan remains the absolute geographic and security pivot between South and Central Asia. The post-9/11 era demonstrated that India cannot secure its continental frontiers, nor can it actualize its Eurasian geoeconomic ambitions, without a stable Afghanistan. Conversely, the Central Asian republics increasingly rely on New Delhi as a crucial balancing power against the encroaching threats of Af-Pak-based extremism and the overbearing economic hegemony of Beijing. For New Delhi, Afghanistan is not merely a neighboring state; it functions simultaneously as the indispensable geoeconomic bridge to the Eurasian heartland and the primary source of

transnational security vulnerabilities. Following the September 11 attacks and the subsequent United States-led intervention, the India-Central Asia security calculus underwent a profound structural convergence, driven by three primary dimensions. Geopolitically, India's strategic isolation from Central Asia is dictated by Pakistan's deliberate denial of overland transit rights. Consequently, post-9/11 Afghanistan emerged as the critical geographic bypass for India's "Connect Central Asia" policy. By integrating Afghanistan into the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), India attempts to provide Central Asian republics with a viable maritime outlet to the Indian Ocean, directly challenging Pakistan's attempts to maintain a logistical monopoly over the region and countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 abruptly ended the post-9/11 status quo. This systemic shock has forced an urgent recalibration. India and the Central Asian states have since intensified localized multilateral dialogues (such as the India-Central Asia National Security Advisors meetings) to construct a regional security architecture independent of Western security guarantees, focusing on border management, counter-radicalization, and the non-recognition of militant-led governance.

Iran's Central Asia Policy in the Shadow of the Conflict: The Geopolitical Repercussions of the 2026 Iran-US-Israel War on Central Asia

The year 2026 has marked a fundamental shift in Iran's strategic posture, both in its interaction with Central Asia and its broader regional standing. Following the escalation of hostilities with the United States and Israel in February 2026—characterized by decapitation strikes, targeted military operations, and a retaliatory Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz—Iran's foreign policy has undergone a period of forced recalibration.

The Pre-Conflict Strategic Architecture

Prior to the 2026 conflict, Iran's foreign policy toward Central Asia was defined by a deliberate "Pivot to the East." Tehran viewed the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) as vital economic conduits to bypass Western sanctions. By leveraging the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and deepening trade integration via the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Iran sought to position itself as a reliable energy and transit hub, tethering its economy to Chinese and Eurasian trade flows.

The vast natural resources, particularly the energy reserves, of Iran are deeply rooted in the country's strategic location and geopolitical importance. Located in the geographic middle of the Middle East, its neighbors include several prominent players, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey. Due to its proximity to key energy transport routes like the Strait of Hormuz, it is also an advantageous site in terms of maritime security and energy transit. Iran has grown in geopolitical prominence due to its involvement in regional conflicts

and its wide-ranging influence throughout the Caucasus, the Gulf, and Central Asia¹⁰². Despite prolonged economic sanctions and international isolation, Iran has successfully cultivated a formidable military apparatus, most notably through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Tehran's foreign policy is driven by a synthesis of internal security imperatives and a long-standing aspiration for regional hegemony. To project power well beyond its borders—specifically across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—Iran utilizes the IRGC as the primary instrument of its regional strategy. Through the provision of training, logistical support, and sophisticated weaponry to a network of non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthi movement in Yemen, Iran has successfully integrated these groups into its security architecture. This 'forward defense' strategy allows Tehran to exert strategic leverage, manipulate local political landscapes, and project military force while maintaining plausible deniability.

Tehran's deep military entrenchment in Syria—manifested through the construction of forward operating bases and the solidification of strategic alliances—has fundamentally altered regional security architectures. This proactive posture has not only exacerbated sectarian tensions along Sunni-Shia fault lines but also serves Tehran's broader revisionist strategy. By consolidating its influence across the "Axis of Resistance"—stretching from Iraq and Syria to Lebanon—Iran aims to secure strategic depth and project power in direct opposition to regional rivals and Western interests. This strategy of "forward defense" enables Tehran to influence local political landscapes, thereby creating a buffer zone that protects the regime's core interests while extending its leverage over regional decision-making.

Iran's geopolitical influence is inextricably linked to its status as a global energy heavyweight. Despite enduring decades of restrictive international sanctions, Tehran's vast oil and natural gas reserves remain critical to the energy security of major Asian consumers, particularly China and India, which continue to rely on Iranian energy exports to fuel their growing industrial bases.

Beyond its resource wealth, Iran exerts coercive leverage through its geographic control over the Strait of Hormuz. As a vital chokepoint through which approximately one-third of the world's seaborne crude oil flows, the strait grants Tehran the capacity to disrupt global supply chains at will. Consequently, the regime utilizes the strait as a "strategic valve," capable of modulating global energy prices and security in response to geopolitical pressures. This positioning makes Iran an essential, albeit volatile, actor in the stability of global energy flows.

The Iranian nuclear program stands as the defining challenge in Tehran's relations with Western powers. For the Iranian leadership, the program is a strategic imperative designed to fortify deterrence against military encroachment by Washington, Tel Aviv, and other regional

¹⁰² Overland, I. *The geopolitics of energy: Out with the old, in with the new?* Oxford Energy Forum. 2021.

actors. Consequently, the regime employs its advanced nuclear activities not merely for potential defense, but as a central pillar of its regional diplomacy. This 'nuclear statecraft' grants Iran significant leverage, allowing it to project power, influence regional security architectures, and maintain a decisive advantage in geopolitical negotiations.

The Strategic Architecture: Iran's Engagement with Central Asia

Iran's engagement with Central Asia represents one of the most pragmatic and strategically vital dimensions of its foreign policy. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tehran has pursued robust diplomatic and economic integration with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. This policy rests on four foundational pillars: economic connectivity, energy integration, security coordination, and cultural diplomacy. Economic and Connectivity Operations

Tehran leverages its geography to serve as the critical conduit between the Persian Gulf and Eurasia. By championing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and operationalizing the Chabahar Port, Iran provides landlocked Central Asian states direct access to global maritime markets. This "transit diplomacy" is fundamental to Iran's strategy, aiming to diversify regional trade options and offer a strategic alternative to the logistical dominance of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Energy and Resource Cooperation

Iran and the Central Asian republics maintain a complementary energy ecosystem. Although Iran is a major hydrocarbon producer, its strategy emphasizes regional integration in energy transit, electricity grid interoperability, and refinery development. Strategic gas swap arrangements (e.g., between Iran, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan) and electricity grid connections with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan demonstrate Tehran's ambition to function as a regional energy nexus. Despite the constraints of international sanctions, Tehran actively invites Central Asian investment into joint ventures within its energy and petrochemical sectors.

Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Common security imperatives—specifically the threats of transnational terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and regional instability emanating from Afghanistan—drive Iran's security partnerships in Central Asia. Through multilateral frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and bilateral defense dialogues, Iran coordinates closely with Central Asian governments to secure borders and mitigate religious extremism. Tehran's provision of intelligence sharing, law enforcement assistance, and professional training serves to bolster regional stability against shared threats.

Cultural and Religious Diplomacy

Iran utilizes its deep historical, linguistic, and cultural ties—particularly with Tajikistan—as a significant instrument of soft power. Diplomatic outreach is anchored in shared Islamic traditions and Persianate heritage, operationalized through Iranian Cultural Centers and cross-border cooperation in education and media. By presenting itself as a civilizational bridge between Central and Western Asia, Tehran seeks to solidify its influence and project a stable, constructive image of the Iranian state in the region.

Tehran's Central Asia strategy is defined by strategic hedging and a focus on maintaining autonomy. By promoting regional stability through economic and cultural cooperation, Tehran attempts to offset Western influence, balance China's economic dominance, and prevent total dependence on Russia. Iran's overarching objective is to merge Central Asian engagement with its 'Look East' policy, ensuring that its involvement in Eurasian connectivity remains sovereign and focused on its own national development goals rather than adhering to external regional agendas.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Its Position in the Eurasian Matrix

For decades, Pakistan's strategic posture was predominantly defined through the prism of South Asian security, shaped by its enduring rivalry with India and its immediate front-line involvement in Afghan conflicts. However, in the contemporary geopolitical landscape, Islamabad has actively sought to redefine its strategic identity, pivoting from a "frontier of separation" to a critical "frontier of connectivity" linking South Asia directly to the Eurasian heartland. This reorientation positions Pakistan as an indispensable southern bridge for the broader Eurasian matrix. An analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy reveals a nation successfully transitioning from a regionally isolated security state into an essential node of trans-Eurasian connectivity. By anchoring itself to China's Greater Eurasian Partnership and opening alternative southern trade arteries, Islamabad has carved out a unique role as the maritime and continental gateway for landlocked Central Asia.

However, Pakistan's long-term success in the Eurasian matrix remains contingent upon overcoming internal economic constraints, managing severe climate vulnerabilities along its infrastructure corridors, and neutralizing persistent security threats on its borders.

Pakistan occupies a critical geopolitical hinge position, serving as a strategic nexus between South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Islamabad's foreign policy is defined by a complex balancing act—maintaining robust partnerships with China and the United States while managing a persistent, nuclear-armed strategic rivalry with India. Given its location, Pakistan exerts significant influence over the region's security architecture, where its military

posture and nuclear arsenal serve as essential instruments of deterrence against regional adversaries.¹⁰³

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Islamabad sought to leverage its proximity to the landlocked Central Asian republics through its 'Vision Central Asia' policy. The objective is to transform Pakistan into a regional connectivity hub by providing these nations with access to the Arabian Sea via the ports of Gwadar and Karachi. This strategy prioritizes energy and trade integration, evidenced by Pakistan's active participation in flagship projects such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the CASA-1000 electricity transmission line. Furthermore, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serves as the linchpin of this vision, offering a modernized infrastructure framework that connects the Central Asian landmass to global markets, thereby cementing Pakistan's role as the indispensable gateway for Eurasian trade.

Security and Stability Security remains the cornerstone of Pakistan's regional outreach, with a focus on counterterrorism, border integrity, and stabilization in Afghanistan. Islamabad and the Central Asian republics have leveraged the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a primary platform to converge their efforts in mitigating transnational threats, particularly the spread of religious extremism and illicit narcotics trafficking. By institutionalizing this cooperation, Pakistan positions itself as a critical stakeholder in maintaining regional order.

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy Pakistan utilizes its shared Islamic identity and deep-seated historical connectivity as the bedrock of its soft power diplomacy. By facilitating educational exchanges, high-level diplomatic visits, and diverse cultural initiatives, Islamabad cultivates an image as a reliable partner to Central Asian nations. This approach draws upon common religious and historical affinities to deepen trust and strengthen the bilateral foundations beyond mere transactional interactions.

Strategic Synthesis and Geopolitical Objectives Pakistan's multifaceted engagement strategy—encompassing energy diplomacy, infrastructure connectivity, security cooperation, and cultural exchange—is designed to elevate Islamabad's geopolitical relevance. By aligning its "Vision Central Asia" framework with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan aims to position itself as the essential strategic nexus connecting South Asia, the Middle East, and the Eurasian heartland. Ultimately, this integration is intended to accelerate Pakistan's domestic economic development while cementing its role as a vital gateway for trans-regional trade.

¹⁰³ . Crikemans, D. (2018). Geopolitics of the renewable energy game and its potential impact upon global power relations. In *The geopolitics of renewables* (pp. 37–73). Springer International Publishing.

EMERGING PLAYERS: TURKEY, IRAN, PAKISTAN, GCC, OIC

Emerging regional stakeholders—including Turkey, India, Iran, Pakistan, the GCC, and the OIC—are increasingly defining the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia and the Middle East. These actors intensify a dynamic environment characterized by a relentless pursuit of strategic leverage and regional influence. While each entity maintains distinct political, economic, and security agendas, their interests often overlap, resulting in a complex 'coopetition'—a delicate interplay where states and organizations must simultaneously collaborate and compete to advance their respective objectives.

Turkey: Bridging East and West

Turkey sits at the fulcrum of Eurasian geopolitics, bridging the cultural and political divide between East and West. This geographic position, supported by robust military and economic assets, has transformed Ankara into an indispensable actor in regional stability. While Turkey's foreign policy remains rooted in its foundational ties to NATO, the last two decades have witnessed a clear maturation of its regional identity. Ankara has increasingly transitioned toward a more autonomous approach, actively asserting its influence across the Middle East and the Caucasus, while continuously navigating the complex tension between its Western alignments and its own evolving regional ambitions. Growing its influence in the area and protecting its interests in its immediate neighborhood are central to Turkey's foreign policy. Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus are just a few of the regional conflicts where the country is currently playing a pivotal role in peacekeeping, military intervention, and diplomatic mediation¹⁰⁴. Turkey's foreign policy is increasingly defined by an assertive regional posture, characterized by the projection of military power and strategic resource competition. In Syria, Ankara has sought to stabilize its border by proactively countering Kurdish armed groups it deems existential threats to its territorial integrity. Similarly, in the South Caucasus, Turkey's staunch support for Azerbaijan during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict underscores its ambition to solidify its influence as a regional power broker.

The Energy Hub Strategy A cornerstone of Turkey's geopolitics is its development as a critical energy transit hub. Positioned at the nexus of the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe, Turkey has institutionalized its influence through infrastructure projects like the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP). By facilitating the delivery of Caspian gas to Europe, Turkey has effectively positioned itself as a vital component of Western efforts to diversify energy imports away from Russian and Iranian dependency. Furthermore, Ankara is pivoting toward an expanded energy profile, investing in renewables to complement its existing transit role in pipelines like TurkStream.

¹⁰⁴ Bordoff, J., & O'Sullivan, M. L. *Green Upheaval: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. Foreign Affairs, Vol. 101, pp. 68–82. 2022.

Strategic Autonomy and Maritime Assertion Turkey's diplomatic strategy is a delicate exercise in balancing its NATO obligations against the pursuit of independent strategic autonomy. While remaining a foundational member of the Western security architecture, Ankara has demonstrated a willingness to deviate from its allies, evidenced by the strategic friction caused by its 2019 acquisition of the Russian S-400 defense system.

This trend toward autonomy extends to the maritime domain. In the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, Turkey has actively challenged existing maritime delimitation claims. Its assertive push for resource exploration, often involving naval power projection, has led to diplomatic ruptures with Greece and Cyprus, highlighting Ankara's shift toward a realist approach in securing control over offshore energy assets.

Turkey utilizes its unique geography as a geostrategic bridge between Europe and Asia to exert significant influence on the international stage. Through the projection of military power, the management of critical energy transit infrastructure, and proactive regional interventionism, Ankara is actively cultivating its status as a primary regional hegemon. By asserting its interests across the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus, Turkey seeks to solidify its position as an indispensable diplomatic and security nexus. However, this pursuit of regional primacy is fundamentally constrained by the complexities of *realpolitik*: Ankara must navigate a precarious balancing act, managing relations with global superpowers while simultaneously contending with volatile regional rivalries and the inherent instability of its alliance structures¹⁰⁵.

Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has abandoned the restraint of its post-Cold War foreign policy in favor of a bold, assertive 'Erdoğanism.' This strategy—a deliberate fusion of nationalist ambition, strategic independence, and neo-Ottoman soft power—aims to restore Turkey as a sovereign actor that operates independently of Western consensus. The 'Blue Homeland' doctrine serves as the maritime anchor of this vision, underscoring Ankara's resolve to control its strategic frontiers and secure its resource interests.

Erdoğan envisions Turkey not as a satellite of the West, but as a unique civilizational bridge. By operationalizing this worldview, he has transformed Turkey's foreign policy into a four-dimensional game: asserting military dominance in the 'near abroad,' balancing great-power rivalries with deft pragmatism, securing an energy-hub status that makes Turkey indispensable to global markets, and fostering a cultural identity that resonates from the Balkans to Central Asia.

Ultimately, the Erdoğan era marks the end of Turkey's status as a peripheral participant in international affairs. By actively engaging across Eurasia and Africa, Ankara has

¹⁰⁵ Shezad, M., Bakht, M., & Nadeem, A. *Climate change diplomacy and the geopolitics of energy transition*. Journal of Political Stability Archive, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 350–367. 2025.

transformed itself into a regional 'center of gravity.' Whether through the construction of pipelines or the projection of military force, Turkey is now pursuing a multidimensional strategy that is as comfortable with geopolitical realism as it is with ambitious, transcontinental visions.

GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) AND OIC: UNIFIED INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, stands as a preeminent economic and geopolitical bloc in the Middle East (GCC Secretariat, 2026). Established in 1981 as a regional framework for economic integration and mutual defense, the Council has since evolved into a formidable actor within the global energy market and international security architecture.

The strategic centrality of the region is underpinned by its vast hydrocarbon endowment; the Persian Gulf holds a significant portion of the world's proven oil and natural gas reserves (Cordesman, 2024). This immense resource wealth grants GCC member states substantial leverage, allowing them to exert profound influence over regional stability, global energy supply chains, and broader international diplomatic agendas.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) continues to serve as an indispensable anchor of the global energy market, with member states collectively accounting for over 30% of global oil production in 2025. Despite the acceleration of the global energy transition—codified by commitments at COP28 (Dubai, 2023) and COP29 (Baku, 2024)—the economies of the GCC remain structurally anchored to hydrocarbon revenues. Within this framework, Saudi Arabia continues to exert central influence within the OPEC+ alliance, leading coordinated supply-side interventions alongside Russia throughout 2024 and 2025 to mitigate market volatility and uphold price stability.

Simultaneously, GCC nations are aggressively diversifying their portfolios, prioritizing investments in solar infrastructure, hydrogen, and carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) technologies to fulfill objectives like Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030.' The United Arab Emirates, in particular, has emerged as a bellwether for this shift; projects such as Masdar and ADNOC's decarbonization programs illustrate a strategic pivot that positions the GCC as a proactive participant in the diplomacy of the global energy transition rather than a passive observer.

Before the 2026 Iran-US-Israel conflict, the geopolitical trajectory of West Asia (specifically the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] states) and Central Asia was characterized by a concerted effort toward logistical and economic integration. Gulf nations, seeking to diversify their economies under frameworks like Saudi Vision 2030, viewed the resource-rich, landlocked Central Asian republics as a vital frontier for investment and strategic depth.

However, the outbreak of hostilities in February 2026 and the subsequent disruption of the regional security architecture have fundamentally altered this relationship.

Gulf nations are currently in a "risk-mitigation" phase. Their engagement with Central Asia continues, but it is now defined by a preference for infrastructure projects that insulate against future Persian Gulf instability. The "multi-vector" foreign policy of Central Asian states has been forced into a narrower, more Western-oriented path as their southern logistical options (via Iran) remain closed for the foreseeable future.

The 2026 conflict has effectively ended the era of Iran functioning as a credible bridge between West and Central Asia. The current regional reality is a forced decoupling. While the GCC states remain deeply committed to their Central Asian expansion, the "Southern Alternative" has been replaced by an urgent, high-priority shift toward the Middle Corridor. For Central Asian nations, this has meant an involuntary—yet likely permanent—reorientation of their economic and logistical future toward the Caucasus and Europe, leaving Iran increasingly isolated from the very regional integration networks it spent the last decade cultivating.

The long-term geopolitical scenarios in Eurasia and beyond are determined by the expanding major powers' relations, the growing threat of climate change, and the escalating rivalry over world resources¹⁰⁶.

In Concluding remark -The evolving global system suggests that stability in the coming decades will be contingent upon the management of interconnected—and often contradictory—strategic pressures. As major powers vie for influence in a multipolar framework, the traditional focus on military might and economic influence is being rapidly complicated by the "new" security imperatives of climate change and resource scarcity.

For international actors, this signifies that the future of global politics will not be determined by single-issue policies, but by the ability to navigate a world where geopolitical influence is increasingly tied to the resilience of supply chains, the security of energy corridors, and the capacity to adapt to environmental constraints. The return to great power rivalry, coupled with these non-traditional pressures, indicates that the world is moving toward a more volatile and fragmented international order, necessitating new diplomatic frameworks that can account for the systemic complexity of the 21st century.

The intersection of great power rivalry, climate change, and resource competition defines the long-term geopolitical outlook of the modern era. As environmental pressures mount, the global order is shifting toward a multipolar system where territories rich in natural resources—

¹⁰⁶ Proedrou, F. *Revisiting pipeline politics and diplomacy: From energy security to domestic politics explanations*. Problems of Post-Communism, Vol. 65, No. 6, pp. 409–418. 2018.

including the Arctic, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia—become the primary arenas for competition between China, Russia, India, and the United States.

Ultimately, the dynamics of the 21st century will be shaped by "resource wars" and the strategic necessity of controlling energy transit routes. As nations transition from fossil-fuel dominance to technological and mineral supremacy, the struggle for secure, sustainable resource access will not merely be an economic pursuit; it will become the defining factor in international relations. The outcomes of these resource-centric conflicts will almost certainly determine the hierarchy of global power for the remainder of the century, requiring a new framework for diplomacy that prioritizes environmental resilience and resource security.

Navigating The Heartland: New Regionalism and The Evolving Security Architecture of Eurasia -Central Asia

For the first two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarly consensus largely dismissed the prospect of indigenous regional integration in Central Asia and the broader Eurasian heartland. Early post-Soviet regional organizations—such as the Central Asian Union and the Central Asian Economic Community—were widely categorized as examples of "virtual regionalism": top-down, rhetorical structures plagued by interstate mistrust, unresolved border disputes, and a reliance on external hegemony (Russia or China).

However, over the past decade, a profound paradigm shift has disrupted this dismissive narrative. Catalyzed by leadership transitions (notably under Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev) and a shifting geopolitical landscape, the heartland has entered an era of New Regionalism. Moving away from passive reactions to external powers, the region is actively constructing cooperative, flexible, and indigenous architectures of integration.

Analysis of New Regionalism in Eurasia reveals a vital structural evolution in the twenty-first-century international order. The transition from the fragmented, state-centric stagnation of the 1990s to the adaptive, soft-institutionalized cooperation of today demonstrates that the heartland is no longer a passive vacuum waiting to be filled by external empires.

New Regionalism offers Central Asian republics an essential strategic shield. By aggregating their diplomatic, economic, and logistical weight through platforms like the Consultative Meetings, these states enhance their collective bargaining power against traditional hegemony like Russia and rising giants like China. Ultimately, while structural dependencies and geopolitical pressures persist, New Regionalism proves that regional agency is returning to the Eurasian heartland.

New Regionalism and international organizations in Eurasia reveals a complex, multi-layered institutional order. The heartland is no longer trapped in a binary choice between isolationism and absorption into a single hegemonic bloc. Instead, Eurasian states have mastered the art of overlapping multilateralism—simultaneously engaging in hegemonic

security architectures (like the SCO and CSTO), functional economic forums, and flexible indigenous frameworks. While regional blocs and hegemonic security frameworks (such as the SCO, CSTO, and EAEU) shape the immediate geopolitical perimeter of Eurasia, universal international organizations—including the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—provide the broader normative, legal, and financial scaffolding connecting the heartland to the global system. For post-Soviet Central Asian republics and Caucasus states, engagement with these universal institutions has served as a critical mechanism for anchoring sovereign recognition, securing financial assistance, and navigating economic globalization. Institutions like the WTO, IMF, and the UN supply the hard legal frameworks and global market integration necessary for genuine economic sovereignty.

Ultimately, participation in universal organizations allows Eurasian states to escape the binary trap of choosing between Russian military hegemony and Chinese geoeconomic absorption. By adopting global trade standards, securing multilateral financial backing, and utilizing UN diplomatic forums, these states reinforce their independence. As the heartland continues to navigate the complexities of the twenty-first-century international order, its ability to effectively interface with universal international institutions will remain a primary benchmark of its long-term strategic maturity and global integration.

In contemporary IR theory, state-sanctioned Neo-Eurasianism functions as an ideological justification for Russian regional primacy. It frames integration projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), not as neo-imperialism, but as the organic consolidation of a shared cultural and historical space. (added)The Eurasian Economic Union highlights the inherent limits of Pragmatic State Eurasianism. While the ideology provides a compelling narrative for a unified, multipolar heartland, the EAEU remains a highly flawed mechanism for realizing it. (Added)To understand the contemporary geopolitical architecture of the heartland and particularly the ideological underpinnings of Russian foreign policy—International Relations (IR) theory must engage with the paradigm of ‘New Eurasianism’. Emerging from the ashes of the Soviet collapse, this intellectual and political movement explicitly rejects the premise that the post-Soviet space must integrate into a Western, liberal-democratic, and Atlanticist world order.

Instead, New Eurasianism posits that Eurasia constitutes a distinct, self-sustaining civilizational and geopolitical bloc. Within IR theory, this paradigm operates at the intersection of constructivism (focusing on identity, culture, and historical memory) and classical geopolitics (focusing on spatial control and the inherent conflict between land and sea powers).

The foundational, cultural pillar of Neo-Eurasianism relies heavily on the theories of ethnographer Lev Gumilev. His theory of ethnogenesis argues that the Eurasian space is

unified by a unique geographical environment (the steppe) that forged a historical symbiosis between Slavic and Turkic peoples. This civilizational approach provides the soft-power narrative for regional integration, allowing Moscow to appeal to shared historical and cultural roots with Central Asian republics without explicitly invoking Soviet or Tsarist imperialism. The most aggressive theoretical variant of Neo-Eurasianism is articulated by Aleksandr Dugin. His framework revives the classical geopolitical binaries of Halford Mackinder and Carl Schmitt, applying them to the 21st century. Dugin's theory posits an eternal, zero-sum conflict between conservative, land-based powers (*Tellurocracies*, led by a Russia-dominated Eurasia) and liberal, sea-based powers (*Thalassocracies*, led by the United States and the UK). The Multipolar Imperative framework, the "Atlanticist" world order seeks to encircle and fragment the Eurasian heartland. To survive, Eurasia must be organized into a massive, multi-confessional, and multipolar bloc capable of expelling Western influence. This theory heavily influences the ideological justification for the Russia-Ukraine war, framing it not merely as a territorial dispute, but as an existential civilizational defense against Western encroachment. While Dugin's radicalism dominates ideological discourse, official Russian foreign policy utilizes a highly sanitized, pragmatic version of Neo-Eurasianism, heavily driven by geo-economics and defensive realism.

The transition away from a unipolar global system has catalyzed the development of a distinct, non-Western institutional architecture across the Eurasian landmass. This geopolitical shift requires a departure from the Eurocentric models of "old regionalism," which were traditionally characterized by rigid geographic boundaries, formal state-centric treaties, and a primary emphasis on economic integration. In its place, the heartland is driven by the principles of New Regionalism.

Eurasian New Regionalism is a multidimensional framework that transcends traditional trade paradigms to prioritize non-traditional security (such as counter-terrorism and anti-separatism), cultural diplomacy, and identity politics. Crucially, this framework rejects the liberal democratic conditionality often imposed by Western institutions. Instead, it functions as an alternative engine for norm creation, embedding principles of sovereign equality, localized problem-solving, and strict non-interference to guarantee internal stability and regime security.

To operationalize these norms, the Eurasian geopolitical space has become the primary incubator for plurilateralism—the formation of targeted, consensus-driven coalitions. The rapid institutionalization of platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and BRICS+ represents a deliberate strategy of institutional balancing. Rather than seeking to dismantle the existing global order outright, these organizations construct parallel architectures designed to insulate the Global South from Western hegemony and financial monopolies.

Post-9/11 Security Dynamics

The events of September 11, 2001, served as a fundamental inflection point for Central Asian geopolitics. The U.S.-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) transformed the region into a strategic theater, drawing states such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan into direct alignment with NATO's military efforts in Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2005, the establishment of U.S. facilities—most notably the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan and the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan—brought unprecedented Western security assistance and intelligence capabilities to the region, effectively enhancing border control and counter-insurgency measures.

However, this Western encroachment catalyzed a significant geopolitical counterreaction. Russia and China, viewing the U.S. presence as a threat to their sphere of influence, accelerated the development of indigenous Eurasian security architectures. The consolidation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became a primary strategic response, aimed at recalibrating regional power balances and diminishing Western institutional footprint.

Beyond traditional security concerns—namely narcotics trafficking and terrorism—this research investigates the emerging, non-traditional insecurities defining the modern era, specifically cyberwarfare and information warfare. The chapter concludes by looking toward the future, analyzing how an internet-savvy generation, the proliferation of tech startups, and the rapid adoption of e-governance are poised to redefine the political and economic trajectory of Central Asia. By synthesizing these themes, the chapter provides a comprehensive outlook on the region's capacity to balance integrationist aspirations with the realities of an increasingly volatile security environment.

REGIONAL POWER DYNAMICS

Nestled between the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, and China, Central Asia sits at the heart of major global economic and geopolitical shifts. The region's history is a testament to the dialectic between internal and external forces, which continues to drive both regional cooperation and conflict. Current relations within the region are dictated by a precarious, multifaceted balancing act—a combination of interdependency, security imperatives, and the evolving quest for dominance within the Central Asian landscape.¹⁰⁷

Central Asia's contemporary geopolitical landscape is an evolving synthesis of its historical geography and socio-economic interdependence. Since the dissolution of the Soviet

¹⁰⁷ Stergiou, A. *Geopolitics and energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean: The formation of new energy alliances*. In *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, pp. 11–30. 2019.

Union in 1991, the five sovereign republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have navigated a complex transition. Their territorial demarcations, arbitrarily drawn during the Soviet era, combined with disparate resource distribution and inherited structural dependencies on external powers, initially fostered a climate of fragmentation. However, recent years have witnessed a strategic pivot toward regional integration, driven by the realization that collective action is essential for both economic development and security.

Regional Security Frameworks

Multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have become indispensable for managing transnational threats. These frameworks facilitate intelligence sharing, counter-extremism operations, and joint military exercises, providing a stable, if imperfect, mechanism for security coordination that transcends bilateral political differences.

The region is actively evolving away from zero-sum competition. Instead of exclusive alignment, countries are pursuing a "multipolar" strategy, exemplified by the normalization of relations between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the engagement of secondary powers—Turkey, India, and the European Union—has introduced new dimensions to the region. India focuses on energy security and counter-terrorism; Turkey provides a bridge based on deep-seated cultural and historical affinities; and the European Union prioritizes trade liberalization, energy cooperation, and human rights advocacy.

Territoriality, Ethnicity, and Resource Competition in Central Asia

Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is characterized by deep-seated border volatility and complex ethnic dynamics. The region's modern political instability is largely rooted in the legacy of Soviet-era border administration. During the Soviet period, administrative boundaries were demarcated with little regard for established ethnolinguistic, cultural, or historical realities. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian republics inherited these artificial borders, which have since become persistent loci of territorial friction and political contention.

The Ethnic Mosaic and Political Marginalization

Soviet-era policies, which encouraged significant internal migration and demographic mixing, created a complex social mosaic. Post-independence, the resulting social fragmentation and the political marginalization of ethnic minorities became significant drivers of instability (Griffiths, 2019).

- **The Fergana Valley:** This region, shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, remains the epicenter of the region's ethnic friction. Ethnic enclaves—often separated by porous or disputed borders—have created flashpoints for violence, particularly over access to water and land. Notably, the 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, which resulted in significant casualties, underscored how historical grievances and political exclusion can escalate into acute conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbek populations.
- **Minority Autonomy and Recognition:** In Tajikistan, ethnic tensions are further complicated by the political aspirations of minority groups, such as the Pamiri people in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The Tajik government's resistance to demands for greater autonomy and official recognition has perpetuated long-standing domestic unrest.

Resource Scarcity and Territorial Disputes

Border disputes in the region are rarely purely territorial; they are inextricably linked to competition over strategic resources—primarily water, fertile land, and trade routes—all of which are essential to national economic stability.

- **Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Relations:** Tensions often flare in the Fergana Valley, where water resources are critical for agriculture in both nations. Disagreements over key trade routes and the governance of the Kyzyl-Suu area remain persistent obstacles to regional stability, with local ethnic tensions frequently acting as a catalyst for border clashes.
- **The Batken Region (Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan):** This area is a primary site of contention, characterized by disputes over land rights and the management of the Ak-Sai River. Because both nations depend on this river for irrigation, its passage across shifting borders makes it a constant source of diplomatic and military strain. The presence of overlapping ethnic communities in these border zones further complicates conflict resolution efforts.
- **Kazakhstan-China Border:** While the border relationship between Kazakhstan and China has largely stabilized through diplomatic engagement, smaller disputes persist, particularly in the Ili River Valley. Unlike the ethnically charged conflicts of the Fergana Valley, these tensions are primarily driven by broader strategic concerns regarding China's expanding economic and political footprint in Central Asia.

The scarcity of water serves as a primary driver of border friction in Central Asia. The region's critical arteries—the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and Zeravshan rivers—are transboundary systems that sustain the agricultural and energy sectors of Uzbekistan,

Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Consequently, these shared waterways have become flashpoints for geopolitical contention, as nations struggle to balance upstream hydroelectric ambitions with downstream irrigation requirements.

Hydropower Infrastructure and Strategic Mistrust

Tensions have been significantly exacerbated by the construction of large-scale hydropower infrastructure, most notably Tajikistan's Rogun Dam and Kyrgyzstan's Kambarata Dam. These projects have faced intense opposition from downstream states, particularly Uzbekistan, which views upstream flow regulation as a direct threat to its agricultural productivity and national food security. This divergence in strategic interests—hydroelectric power generation versus agricultural water consumption—remains one of the most difficult challenges to resolve in the region.

The Fergana Valley: A Convergence of Risks

The Fergana Valley—an ethnically diverse hub shared by Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—represents the most volatile intersection of water and ethnic politics. In this region, water scarcity acts as a threat multiplier; competition over limited irrigation supplies frequently triggers localized violence, which is further inflamed by historic ethnic grievances and the strategic importance of trans-valley trade routes. Because the valley is essential to the regional economy and local identity, disputes over its resources often carry the risk of broader cross-border escalation.

Implications for Regional Stability and External Mediation

Ethnic discord and unresolved border demarcations fundamentally undermine Central Asian stability. The lack of definitive boundary agreements hinders integrated trade and infrastructure development, occasionally escalating into sporadic military skirmishes. Furthermore, external mediation efforts by global powers—namely Russia, China, and the United States—frequently prove ineffective. These interventions often collide with the entrenched national interests of local actors, rendering "top-down" conflict resolution mechanisms insufficient to address the complexities on the ground.

ROLE OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

SCO

As the "brainchild" of Beijing, the SCO has been instrumental in transforming Central Asia from a post-Soviet periphery into a core component of China's global strategic vision. While the organization provides the Central Asian republics with necessary tools for security and economic growth, it also binds them ever more tightly to China's economic orbit. The

future efficacy of the SCO will depend on whether it can manage the inherent tensions between China's expansionist economic ambitions and Russia's desire for security hegemony, all while the Central Asian states continue to pursue their own sovereign national interests.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an intergovernmental regional organization that was formed in 2001, and its goal is to enhance security, economic collaboration, and cultural interaction of Central Asia and other regions¹⁰⁸. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), while formally a multilateral partnership involving Russia and the Central Asian republics, is widely recognized as a strategic vehicle for China's foreign policy objectives in Eurasia. Evolving from the "Shanghai Five" grouping established in 1996, the SCO was formalized in 2001, largely reflecting Beijing's imperative to secure its western borders—specifically the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—against perceived threats of "terrorism, separatism, and extremism" (the "three evils").

The SCO serves as a cornerstone of Eurasian geopolitics, providing a crucial framework for cooperation across the Central Asian, Russian, and Chinese spheres of influence. Its mandate—spanning security cooperation, economic development, and counter-extremism—positions it as the primary venue for managing the regional security agenda. However, the organization's growth has been accompanied by institutional tensions. Despite its capacity to convene global and regional powers, the SCO struggles to reconcile the varied, and often contradictory, national interests of its expanding membership. This 'coordination deficit' has become a defining critique of the organization, raising questions about its ability to maintain regional stability in an increasingly volatile Eurasian environment."

The 25th SCO Summit: A Pivotal Shift in Eurasian Geopolitics

The 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, convened in Beijing in October 2025, represented a significant institutional maturation for the organization, underscoring the critical importance of Central Asia within the SCO's evolving strategic framework. Operating under the theme "Shared Security, Shared Prosperity," the summit focused on navigating a period of heightened global volatility by prioritizing digitalization, environmental sustainability, and collective security. Ultimately, the summit cemented the SCO's position as a primary vehicle for fostering multipolarity and long-term economic integration across Eurasia.

A major outcome of the Beijing Summit was the emphasis on technological and energy collaboration. China announced the creation of a Special Fund under the SCO Development Bank, specifically allocated to support member states in digital trade, renewable energy development, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration. Representatives from Kazakhstan,

¹⁰⁸ Masiero, F. *From fossil to green: Reshaping EU's energy security and diplomacy*. European Policy Studies, Vol. 11. 2023.

Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan advocated for an inclusive growth model, ensuring that the economic dividends of the organization are distributed equitably, thereby reinforcing the SCO's commitment to internal balance and collaborative development.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) occupies a paradoxical position in international relations: it is a vital platform for regional security and diplomacy, yet its efficacy is frequently compromised by internal fragmentation. The following analysis rephrases the complexities surrounding the organization's performance and strategic constraints. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization remains a cornerstone of Eurasian security, serving as a critical nexus for counter-terrorism, diplomatic dialogue, and regional connectivity. However, its potential as a cohesive regional bloc is constrained by institutional weaknesses and persistent geopolitical rivalries. If the SCO is to transcend its current limitations, it must move beyond aspirational summitry and address the "institutional friction" created by its heterogeneous membership. Strengthening the organization's framework to effectively mediate political conflicts while advancing pragmatic, rather than merely rhetorical, economic objectives will be essential for its future viability.

- **The OSCE and Electoral Monitoring:** Organizations like the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) have historically played a prominent role in monitoring elections and evaluating human rights compliance across Central Asia. However, regional regimes frequently push back against what they perceive as external normative interference or double standards.
- Resolve Geopolitical Rivalries Among Member States

New Regionalism vs. The CSTO Framework

From a Neorealist standpoint, the CSTO serves as the institutional expression of Hegemonic Stability Theory. Russia, as the regional hegemon, utilizes the CSTO to maintain a "buffer zone" and preserve its sphere of influence against perceived encroachment by external powers (specifically NATO and the U.S.). Liberal Institutionalism posits that international organizations arise to solve collective action problems. Central Asian states—facing transnational threats like terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and the spillover of instability from Afghanistan—cannot address these issues unilaterally. Constructivism argues that alliances are built on shared norms, identities, and trust. The CSTO was founded on a shared post-Soviet legacy—a "strategic culture" rooted in a common language (Russian), military tradition, and bureaucratic history.

The geopolitical trajectory of Central Asia in 2026 is defined by a dual-track evolution: the rise of "New Regionalism"—a self-driven, horizontal integration strategy—and the persistent, yet increasingly constrained, role of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty

Organization (CSTO). These two forces are reshaping how the region manages its sovereignty, security, and economic future.

Established in 1992 in the immediate wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was designed to ensure collective defense and regional stability across the post-Soviet space. Comprising Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the organization has evolved into a structured security apparatus. It functions as a Eurasian counterpart to NATO, specifically tailored to the regional security imperatives and defense needs of its constituent members.

Present Status and Russia's Strategic Posture

By 2025, the CSTO's efficacy has become a subject of significant scrutiny. While the organization remains a cornerstone of Moscow's regional strategy—serving as a primary instrument for projecting political and military influence—its credibility has been eroded. The alliance's inability to resolve internal crises, compounded by Russia's strategic preoccupation with the conflict in Ukraine, has exposed structural weaknesses and diminished its perceived value as a reliable security mechanism.

The Intervention Paradox: Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus

The 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan, where Article 4 was invoked for the first time to deploy peacekeeping forces, remains the CSTO's most significant operational achievement. Initially lauded as a triumph of Russian power projection and alliance cohesion, subsequent events have cast this "success" in a different light.

The organization's failure to respond effectively to the resurgence of tensions in the South Caucasus (2023–2024) stands in stark contrast to its 2022 actions. Following Azerbaijan's full reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, Armenia's government openly criticized the CSTO for its inaction. By early 2025, Yerevan suspended its participation in joint exercises and political summits, citing the alliance's failure to provide security guarantees. This rift has prompted widespread questioning regarding the CSTO's viability as a functional mutual defense pact.

The "Post-Ukraine Recalibration Doctrine"

Despite these challenges, Russia continues to prioritize the CSTO as part of what analysts describe as its "Post-Ukraine Recalibration Doctrine." Facing increasing estrangement from the West, Moscow views the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as critical instruments to strategically consolidate the "near abroad." To mitigate perceptions of decline, Russia has intensified efforts to enhance the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) through:

- **Modernization:** Upgrading communication systems and military equipment.

- **Expanded Exercises:** Conducting joint maneuvers such as "Indestructible Brotherhood-2025" in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan.
- **Thematic Shift:** Refocusing training modules toward cybersecurity, hybrid warfare, and border stabilization to counter non-traditional threats, including drug trafficking and spillover risks from Afghanistan.

The CSTO's institutional effectiveness is perpetually hampered by the conflicting foreign policy agendas of its members. States such as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are increasingly pursuing "multi-vector" diplomacy, seeking to deepen partnerships with China, Turkey, and Western institutions to mitigate over-reliance on Moscow. Kazakhstan's policy, reiterated at the 2024 Astana Summit, explicitly emphasizes "strategic autonomy" and a desire to minimize entanglement in Russia's geopolitical confrontations.

Belarus, conversely, occupies a unique position; while it maintains a close security alignment with Moscow, its domestic stability is increasingly fragile due to Western sanctions and the consequences of its partial militarization during the Ukraine conflict. These differing national trajectories continue to create friction, challenging the CSTO's ambition to act as a unified security bloc.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine remains the most significant strain on CSTO cohesion. While Moscow frames the war as a defensive struggle against NATO expansion, member states have largely maintained a posture of pragmatic neutrality, carefully distancing themselves from Russia's territorial claims and annexation policies. This strategic divergence is exacerbated by resource diversion; the war's demands on Russian military and financial assets have hampered the CSTO's capacity to address critical regional threats, such as cross-border terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and the volatility spilling over from Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the CSTO's institutional distinctiveness has eroded as Russia shifts its strategic focus toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and deepened security cooperation with China. The February 2024 reinforcement of Sino-Russian security ties—emphasizing joint exercises and intelligence sharing outside of CSTO structures—signals Moscow's pivot from rigid, post-Soviet alliance frameworks toward more fluid, functional partnerships.

Despite these setbacks, Moscow continues to leverage the CSTO as a symbolic cornerstone of its regional hegemony and a necessary counterweight to NATO's influence. While the 2025 Minsk Summit underscored a consensus on shared values—such as non-interference and mutual security—these commitments remain largely performative. Russia's continued interest in expanding the organization's diplomatic reach through observer partnerships with neutral Central Asian states suggests that Moscow views the CSTO not as a purely operational security pact, but as an essential instrument of political continuity in Eurasia.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in Central Asia

Theoretically, the EAEU is a Hybrid Institution. It is *Liberal* in its formal structure (trade, customs, labor), *Realist* in its geopolitical application (Russian sphere of influence), and *Constructivist* in its ideological underpinnings (Eurasianism).

For the Central Asian republics, the EAEU represents a pragmatic trade-off. They accept the "asymmetric" nature of the alliance (critical theory) and the political constraints of the Russian hegemon (neorealism) in exchange for the tangible, functional benefits of labor market access and market integration (liberal institutionalism). As the region moves toward "New Regionalism," the EAEU is increasingly being tested: it must prove that it can offer more than just Russian political alignment, or risk being bypassed by the more dynamic, infrastructure-focused integration offered by China and the C5 regional cooperation formats.

From a Neorealist viewpoint, the EAEU is an instrument of Hegemonic Stability Theory. Russia utilizes the EAEU to consolidate its "near abroad," ensuring that Central Asian economies remain anchored to the Russian market to prevent them from slipping into the Chinese or Western economic orbits.

Balancing against External Powers: The EAEU functions as a defensive block against the influence of the European Union's market standards and, more importantly, a counterweight to China's expanding economic footprint (Belt and Road Initiative).

Strategic Constraints: Neorealism posits that Central Asian members view the EAEU as a mechanism to manage their relationship with Moscow. By institutionalizing trade and labor relations, they create a predictable environment, hedging their dependence on Russia while simultaneously retaining the sovereign right to engage in "multi-vector" diplomacy with external global powers.

Liberal Institutionalism focuses on the EAEU as a rational response to the collective action problems of post-Soviet states. It posits that economic integration—through the harmonization of technical regulations, tariffs, and customs—lowers transaction costs and enhances regional prosperity.

Constructivism views the EAEU as a project of Identity Building. It is the institutional embodiment of "Eurasianism"—an ideology that frames the region as a distinct civilizational space, separate from, and often in opposition to, the Western liberal model.

The EAEU is an economic union, which was officially organized on January 1 of 2015, as the continuation of the Customs Union of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus,

which was instituted in 2010¹⁰⁹. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) currently comprises five member states—Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia—while maintaining varying degrees of engagement with external partners. Uzbekistan participates as an observer state, actively deepening its practical cooperation with the bloc, whereas Tajikistan remains outside the formal framework, balancing its national sovereignty against the potential benefits of membership.

The EAEU's fundamental objective is the creation of a unified economic space through the harmonization of fiscal and monetary policies, the elimination of trade barriers, and the facilitation of the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor. Despite these aspirations, the organization faces persistent critiques regarding its Russian-centric governance structure, the inherent economic asymmetries among its members, and the significant challenges it encounters when attempting to integrate into broader global value chains.

As of mid-2026, the EAEU occupies a complex position, balancing its ambitions for regional integration against a volatile global geopolitical landscape and internal economic disparities. Over the last decade, the bloc has achieved notable institutional progress, particularly in digitalization and trade facilitation; however, its overall performance remains uneven due to both systemic limitations and external pressures.

Criticisms of the EAEU

While the EAEU has made notable strides in promoting regional integration and economic cooperation, it faces several criticisms that undermine its effectiveness and limit its credibility as a truly multilateral institution¹¹⁰. These criticisms primarily revolve around Russian dominance, limited economic impact, political and social tensions, and economic dependence on Russia. Below is a detailed exploration of each of these key criticisms:

- **Russian Dominance** -A central criticism of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is the pronounced power asymmetry, defined largely by Russia's outsized influence. As the union's largest economy and primary military actor, Moscow exercises disproportionate control over the bloc's policy agenda, institutional direction, and strategic decision-making. This concentration of power has fostered a widespread perception that the EAEU functions more as an instrument of Russian geopolitical projection than as a genuine multilateral framework for equitable regional cooperation.

¹⁰⁹ Donaldson, R. H., & Nadkarni, V. *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*. Routledge. 2018.

¹¹⁰ Aben, D. *Regional security in Central Asia: Addressing existing and potential threats and challenges*. Eurasian Research Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 51–65. 2019.

Eurasia-Central Asia Integration Initiative: The New Regionalism

Central Asia functions as a strategic landlocked corridor, situated at the confluence of Russian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and South Asian spheres of influence. For Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, this geoeconomic positioning necessitates a shift toward regional integration. By moving beyond national silos, these states aim to leverage their collective resource wealth to mitigate the challenges of landlocked geography, fostering a cohesive environment for sustained economic development and regional security. A series of activities of connectivity and bilateral and multilateral agreements have also come up to enhance closer connections in the region, and with other neighbors and external powers¹¹¹.

Connectivity Initiatives

Situated at the intersection of Eurasia, South Asia, and the Middle East, Central Asia is uniquely positioned to function as a global trade conduit. Realizing this potential requires a strategic pivot toward aggressive infrastructural development and the integration of transit corridors. Consequently, the regional focus has shifted toward upgrading communication networks, commerce routes, and transportation infrastructure to facilitate fluid economic exchange with neighboring powers. Central Asia's trajectory within the global economy is increasingly being shaped by two transformative connectivity projects: Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), widely referred to as the "Middle Corridor," represents one of the most transformative connectivity initiatives in Central Asia. By establishing a multimodal trade route that links China to Europe via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, and Azerbaijan, the corridor offers a critical, high-efficiency alternative to traditional transit pathways, most notably the Trans-Siberian Railway and maritime routes through the Suez Canal.

- **Geopolitical Diversification:** The TITR facilitates strategic autonomy by providing an alternative to trade routes traditionally dominated by Russian infrastructure. By bypassing these territories, Central Asian states can reduce their reliance on monolithic transit networks, thereby opening new avenues for economic integration and engagement with diverse global partners.
- **Operational Resilience:** In an era of maritime congestion, piracy, and geopolitical volatility, the TITR offers a reliable, time-efficient alternative to the Suez Canal. By shortening transit durations and enhancing

¹¹¹ Koga, K. *Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?* International Affairs, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 49–73. 2020.

predictability, it provides a stable corridor for the movement of goods between Asian manufacturing hubs and European markets.

- **Diversification of Cargo:** While the route is particularly advantageous for energy exports—including oil, gas, and minerals abundant in Central Asia—it is increasingly viable for high-value non-energy freight. This versatility fosters broader economic growth, encouraging regional activity in manufacturing, agriculture, and consumer goods.

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Central Asia as a Strategic Pivot

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents one of the most ambitious foreign policy and infrastructure frameworks in modern history. Designed to integrate the Eurasian landmass, the initiative seeks to establish a comprehensive network of rail, maritime, pipeline, and digital infrastructure connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Within this grand strategy, Central Asia serves as a foundational pivot, facilitating the creation of robust economic corridors that benefit both Beijing and its regional partners.

Kazakhstan: The Heartland Hub

Kazakhstan holds a position of central importance within the BRI framework due to its critical geographic location at the heart of Eurasia. There is a strong synergistic alignment between the BRI and Kazakhstan's domestic *Nurly Zhol* (Bright Path) economic development program, both of which prioritize infrastructure modernization and enhanced logistical connectivity.

- **Logistical Nodes:** Kazakhstan has focused on expanding its rail networks, logistical hubs, and port facilities to bridge the economic divide between China and Europe.
- **Khorgos Gateway:** The Khorgos dry port serves as a primary example of this cooperation, functioning as a vital logistics hub that facilitates the seamless transfer of goods across the China-Kazakhstan border (Wilson, 2021).

Energy Security and Infrastructure Development

A core objective of the BRI in Central Asia is the restructuring of energy supply chains. By establishing new pipelines, the initiative enhances energy security for both China and the producer nations.

- **Export Diversification:** The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline and the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline exemplify this shift, providing Central Asian republics with new channels for energy export.

- **Strategic Autonomy:** These projects allow Central Asian states to reduce their dependence on legacy transit routes, many of which were traditionally under Russian influence, thereby granting them greater control over their resource exports.
- **Multi-Sector Investment:** Beyond oil and gas, China has directed substantial capital toward a wide array of mega-projects, including trans-regional railways, highways, and energy centers across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Geopolitical and Economic Impact

The BRI has catalyzed a tangible shift in the regional economic architecture, characterized by three primary impacts:

- **Access to Global Markets:** By creating alternative trade routes, the BRI enables Central Asian economies to look beyond their immediate neighbors. These expanded networks allow for direct trade access to not only China but also the wider markets of South Asia and Europe, effectively ending the region's historical isolation.
- **Enhanced Logistical Efficiency:** The development of first-rate infrastructure—ranging from modern ports to expanded rail networks—has significantly accelerated the cross-border movement of goods and people. This heightened connectivity is essential for integrating the region into the global value chain.
- **Regional Integration:** The improved physical infrastructure serves as a backbone for deeper regional cooperation, fostering increased trade volumes and logistical fluidity. While this has deepened economic ties with Beijing, it also provides Central Asian nations with the physical assets necessary to pursue a more independent and diversified economic future.

The OSCE's Role in Eurasia - As the world's largest regional security organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) occupies a unique and complex position in Eurasia. Encompassing participating states stretching from North America and Europe through the Caucasus to Central Asia, the OSCE is built upon a comprehensive, three-dimensional concept of security: the politico-military dimension, the economic and environmental dimension, and the human dimension. In post-Soviet Eurasia, particularly across Central Asia, the OSCE has served for over three decades as a vital institutional bridge, deploying field operations and programme offices to support governance, border management, and capacity building. Through specialized bodies such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM), and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the OSCE attempts to shape regional standards regarding electoral transparency, media freedom, and minority rights.

While major powers in Europe often prioritize the politico-military dimension, Eurasian participating states deliberately lean into the organization's economic, environmental, and non-military security frameworks. Through its field presences—such as programme offices in Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Astana—the OSCE executes critical technical projects.

the OSCE's role in Eurasia reveals an organization under profound structural stress yet remarkably indispensable. Operating in a deeply fractured geopolitical environment—exacerbated by systemic conflicts in Eastern Europe and heightened great-power friction across the heartland—the OSCE faces continuous challenges from contested multilateralism and divergent state priorities.

Nevertheless, the organization's comprehensive approach to security ensures its persistent relevance. While regional regimes seek to sideline its human dimension while prioritizing economic and environmental cooperation, the OSCE's localized field offices continue to provide vital technical assistance, capacity building, and platforms for dialogue. Ultimately, the OSCE remains a unique institutional pillar in Eurasia—proving that even when formal consensus falters at the top, practical, cross-dimensional cooperation at the grassroots and administrative levels remains essential for the long-term resilience and stability of the heartland.

External Partnership, International Organizations and AID and Debt Diplomacy

In the contemporary Eurasian heartland, traditional military conquest has largely been superseded by financial statecraft. As great-power competition intensifies between China, Russia, and Western actors, foreign aid, development finance, and sovereign lending have been weaponized as primary instruments of geoeconomic influence. For landlocked and capital-scarce post-Soviet republics—particularly in Central Asia and the Caucasus—accepting external capital is a double-edged sword: it provides the essential resources for national modernization while simultaneously risking long-term structural dependency and the erosion of sovereign autonomy. analysis of aid and debt diplomacy in Eurasia reveals that financial statecraft is the primary battleground of the twenty-first-century Great Game. Major powers no longer need to deploy gunboats to secure compliance; instead, opaque loan agreements, structural adjustment conditions, and infrastructure debt obligations effectively bind peripheral economies to core hegemonic interests.

However, Central Asian and Caucasus republics are not passive victims in this financial matrix. Utilizing the dynamics of multipolar competition, these states practice sophisticated financial hedging—playing Chinese creditors against Western development banks and Russian bailout frameworks to negotiate better terms and preserve strategic maneuvering room. Ultimately, the long-term sovereignty of the Eurasian heartland will not be decided on

the battlefield, but by its capacity to manage external debt, avoid structural dependency, and channel foreign capital into sustainable, self-reliant economic modernization.

Viewed through Dependency Theory and Geoeconomics, China's financial footprint via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a structural shift in how power is projected across the Eurasian perimeter. Beijing's state-backed financial institutions (such as the China Export-Import Bank and the China Development Bank) have poured billions into infrastructure loans across the heartland. While initial Western critiques branded this strictly as intentional "debt-trap diplomacy" aimed at seizing strategic assets, contemporary scholarship reveals a more complex reality of decentralized, high-risk lending that severely compromises small debtor states.

From a Realist perspective, financial and aid diplomacy are deployed by Moscow to preserve its traditional sphere of influence in the "Near Abroad" against both Western and Chinese encroachment.

During systemic economic shocks (such as pandemic fallout or Western sanctions post-2022), Moscow extends financial lifelines that carry heavy political conditions. Realists emphasize that economic reliance on Russia functions as an implicit security guarantee; financial rescue packages are routinely leveraged to ensure voting alignment in international forums and prevent regional states from straying too far into alternative Western or Chinese matrices.

Traditional structural adjustment can alienate authoritarian regimes, the EU and the United States have pivoted toward geoeconomic development finance (such as the EU's *Global Gateway* and the C5+1 CRM investment initiatives). By offering multi-billion-dollar packages for the Middle Corridor and critical mineral extraction, Western powers use aid diplomacy as a direct counter-weight to Chinese and Russian economic absorption.

To improve regional economic development, security, and cooperation, Central Asian countries rely heavily on foreign cooperation and aid diplomacy¹¹². Engagement with international organizations like the UN, World Bank, and ADB remains central to Central Asia's development strategy, providing essential funding for infrastructure, water, and energy initiatives. Yet, this reliance often necessitates a strategic trade-off. The mandates inherent in these aid packages and international partnerships frequently permeate domestic political spheres, often steering the legislative and economic agendas of regional governments in alignment with external policy preferences.

¹¹² Barston, R. P. *Modern Diplomacy*. Routledge. 2019.

The United Nations (UN) in Aid Diplomacy

The 2022 escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war fundamentally altered the global security landscape, exerting deep shockwaves across the Eurasian heartland. While major power confrontations paralyzed parts of the UN Security Council, universal international organizations—spearheaded by the United Nations and specialized entities like the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA)—assumed an increasingly vital, if complex, role. For post-Soviet Eurasian states navigating the friction between Western sanctions, Russian security pressures, and Chinese geoeconomic expansion, the UN serves as an indispensable neutral convening platform and a crucial legal shield for sovereign independence.

United Nations' role in Eurasia after the Ukraine conflict reveals a paradox of institutional resilience amidst geopolitical fracture. While the UN cannot directly resolve the structural security dilemmas triggered by great-power war in Europe, it provides an irreplaceable diplomatic safety net for the Eurasian heartland.

For landlocked and multi-vector-seeking republics, the UN remains the ultimate institutional equalizer—a space where sovereign equality is formally recognized regardless of material asymmetry. By anchoring their diplomacy in universal multilateral forums, Eurasian states reinforce their strategic autonomy, ensuring that their foreign policies are not dictated entirely by the whims of regional hegemons. Ultimately, in a multipolar world fraught with friction, the UN's enduring value in Eurasia lies in its capacity to serve as an impartial anchor for peace, preventive diplomacy, and sovereign survival.

The United Nations (UN) and its specialized agencies serve as a cornerstone of Central Asia's development and security architecture. By providing consistent financial and technical assistance, the UN facilitates progress in critical areas such as water resource management, poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability. Nations including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have leveraged these UN-backed programs to bolster institutional capacity, foster regional cooperation, and mitigate complex threats to human security. Beyond development, the UN serves as a vital platform for multilateral diplomacy, allowing Central Asian states to engage with global challenges and address transnational issues, including narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and border instability. Furthermore, the UN plays an indispensable role in conflict prevention and peacebuilding—particularly regarding the volatile situations in Afghanistan and the Caucasus—which remain intrinsically linked to Central Asian state security.

Aid Diplomacy and Conditionalities

Foreign aid in Central Asia serves a dual purpose: it supports development while simultaneously acting as a tool for normative influence. Through 'aid diplomacy,' external

actors—including the US, EU, and international bodies like the UNDP and World Bank—often attach conditionalities to their assistance, pushing for reforms in governance, market liberalization, and human rights. While this approach aims to foster stability and economic modernization, it creates significant friction. Regional governments are increasingly ambivalent toward these frameworks; they are often caught between the pragmatic desire for external development capital and the ideological imperative to protect their domestic political autonomy and sovereign decision-making.

WTO

World Trade Organization's role in Eurasia reveals that trade governance is deeply intertwined with financial cooperation and aid diplomacy. While the WTO is not a traditional development bank or financial aid agency, its regulatory architecture, technical assistance frameworks, and Aid for Trade programs provide the essential legal and institutional scaffolding for regional economic modernization. Ultimately, navigating WTO commitments allows Central Asian and Caucasus republics to strengthen their economic sovereignty. By locking in transparent trade rules and securing multilateral technical cooperation, these states create a resilient shield against arbitrary economic coercion from regional hegemons. In a fractured global economy characterized by protectionism and great-power competition, the WTO remains an indispensable anchor for Eurasia's long-term integration into the global marketplace. The World Trade Organization (WTO) exerts a significant influence on the economic and trade policy frameworks of developing economies, a trend increasingly evident across Central Asia. As a multilateral institution, the WTO is committed to expanding global commerce, reducing protectionist barriers, and establishing a level playing field for its member states. Consequently, Central Asian nations—many of which are resource-rich and strategically situated—are increasingly engaging with the WTO to integrate their domestic economies into the global market .

However, accession to the organization is rarely seamless. It necessitates compliance with rigorous conditionalities that compel states to undertake significant domestic adjustments, particularly regarding trade liberalization, structural economic reforms, and the standardization of governance practices. A core requirement for WTO accession is a commitment to trade liberalization. To achieve membership, Central Asian states are required to systematically dismantle protectionist frameworks, specifically by reducing tariffs, subsidies, and non-tariff barriers. This necessitates a fundamental overhaul of national trade regulations to align domestic markets with international competitiveness standards.

Beyond domestic policy adjustments, WTO accession fundamentally recalibrates the diplomatic and trade posture of Central Asian states. By aligning with standardized global trade rules, these nations integrate into the international economic order, creating formal

pathways for sustained engagement with the European Union, the United States, China, and other major global actors.

While the WTO does not unilaterally dictate national policy, the conditionalities associated with its membership—requiring comprehensive economic and political reforms—inevitably transform both the domestic and external environment of a state. For Central Asian governments, these reforms represent a high-stakes trade-off: they are a critical prerequisite for long-term integration into the global value chain, yet they pose significant challenges to sovereign control, political stability, and economic autonomy.

IMF Conditionalities

For the post-Soviet republics of Eurasia—particularly the Caucasus and Central Asia (CCA) region—the International Monetary Fund (IMF) serves as a vital pillar of macroeconomic stability and economic governance. In an era defined by acute geopolitical fragmentation, trade realignments following the Russia-Ukraine war, and persistent inflationary pressures, the IMF's engagement has shifted beyond traditional emergency lending toward proactive surveillance, technical capacity building (through regional hubs like the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Mongolia Regional Capacity Development Center, or CCAMTAC), and structural reform promotion. In the Central Asian region, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) occupies a unique position, acting less as a primary investor and more as a "macroeconomic anchor." While institutions like the World Bank and the ADB focus on project-specific infrastructure, the IMF is primarily concerned with the health of national monetary systems, fiscal discipline, and the structural integrity of the state's economic governance. The IMF plays a distinct geopolitical role in the region. By providing a platform for engagement with the global financial system, it offers Central Asian states a degree of independence from their two largest neighbors.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) serves as a pillar of global economic governance, offering critical support to emerging and developing economies facing systemic volatility. For Central Asian states, the IMF is a key partner in addressing acute macroeconomic challenges, including persistent budget deficits, balance-of-payments crises, and currency instability. However, this financial engagement is inherently tied to a rigid framework of conditionalities. By mandating austerity measures, structural adjustments, and governance reforms, the IMF influences the internal policy landscapes of recipient states. Consequently, these conditionalities often spark intense debate, as they create a complex interplay between the necessity for economic modernization and the preservation of national sovereignty, political stability, and social cohesion.

IMF's role in Eurasian economic governance demonstrates that international financial institutions are indispensable to the region's transition from vulnerability to sustainable

growth. While regional integration frameworks and bilateral trade pacts shape geopolitical alignments, the IMF supplies the critical technocratic and institutional machinery required to maintain macroeconomic stability amidst high global uncertainty.

Ultimately, by enforcing fiscal discipline, guiding tax and structural reforms, and upholding rigorous financial integrity standards, the IMF helps Eurasian states insulate themselves against external shocks and reduce systemic dependencies. Navigating the complex crosscurrents of a multipolar world requires more than diplomatic hedging; it demands robust domestic economic fundamentals. Through its continuous surveillance and capacity development, the IMF remains a primary anchor for the region's long-term economic sovereignty and integration into the global economy.

Taliban's Resurgence and its Impact: Afghanistan's Shadow

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has profoundly altered the regional security calculus in Central Asia. Afghanistan's re-emergence as a sanctuary for transnational militant networks has created a strategic dilemma for its northern neighbors, providing organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS with the logistical and operational space to reorganize near Central Asia's southern perimeter.

- **Expanded Operational Reach:** By leveraging this sanctuary, extremist affiliates—most notably those targeting Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—are increasingly capable of coordinating cross-border infiltration. These groups identify the region's institutional and societal vulnerabilities as an ideal environment for ideological subversion and recruitment.
- **The ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) Factor:** Central Asia's fragmented governance and porous borders have heightened its susceptibility to foreign-backed insurgency. ISIS-K has emerged as the primary destabilizing force, utilizing Afghanistan as a base to threaten regional security. This evolving threat landscape has compelled Central Asian states to adopt more stringent border management policies, leading to the rapid militarization of their southern frontiers in a concerted effort to pre-empt militant penetration.

In conclusion –Ultimately, the defining characteristic of contemporary Eurasian regionalism is its networked, overlapping structure. Unlike the rigid, binary alliance blocs of the Cold War, this plurilateral matrix is highly flexible, which constitutes its primary source of resilience.

This architecture allows Central Asian republics and regional balancing powers—most notably India—to pursue highly calibrated strategies of strategic hedging. By selectively engaging with different institutions (e.g., relying on the SCO for trans-regional governance, the CSTO for hard security, or BRICS+ for geoeconomic leverage) based on specific national

interests, these states maximize their strategic autonomy. Consequently, the new Eurasian regional order empowers its members to actively assert their geopolitical agency and safeguard their sovereignty, definitively rejecting the pressure to make exclusive, binary choices between East and West.

The geopolitical significance of Central Asia was fundamentally recalibrated by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan. Prior to this, the region was often viewed as a peripheral post-Soviet space; however, the Global War on Terror (GWOT) transformed it into a critical theater for international security cooperation and a focal point for great-power competition. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces in August 2021, coupled with the Taliban's return to power, catalyzed a profound crisis in regional security architecture. Central Asian governments were immediately confronted with the risks of uncontrolled migration, border volatility, and the re-emergence of transnational terrorism.

Central Asia serves as a profound test case for the challenges and opportunities of a multipolar world. Positioned at the geographic crossroads of the European and Asian landmasses, the region's development is inextricably linked to the strategic maneuvering of India, Russia, China, and the United States. This chapter explores how Central Asian states are navigating the demands of post-Soviet modernization while simultaneously attempting to integrate into the global community. Particular attention is given to the region's nascent transition to a green economy, which represents a critical effort to transcend traditional resource-dependency models. In its conclusion, the chapter scrutinizes the region's future, juxtaposing the looming risks of becoming a fragmented conflict zone against the potential benefits of proactive peacebuilding. In the context of a shifting global order and the relative decline of Western unipolarity, Central Asia has experienced a period of exponential strategic prioritization. Situated at the crossroads of Eurasia, the region is pivotal to global stability and the formation of new economic corridors. Its unique geography, combined with vast natural resource wealth and the emergence of nascent political forces, has repositioned Central Asia as a focal point for major global actors—including Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—each seeking to define the region's role in the 21st century.

Central Asia's landlocked position, rather than being a liability, has become its greatest strategic asset. In a multipolar world where major powers share the burden of global leadership, the region sits at the epicenter of competing geopolitical and geo-economic interests. By leveraging its abundance of energy resources and its developing transportation networks, Central Asia is evolving into a vital node in global supply chains. The future of the region depends on its ability to navigate these power struggles while successfully transitioning from a passive territory of great-power transit to an active, sovereign player in the international arena.

In the emerging multipolar global order, Central Asia is poised to remain a pivotal transit and logistics hub. Initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) have fundamentally altered the region's strategic value, positioning it as a conduit for trade between Russia, Europe, and China. For Beijing, the region serves as a crucial geoeconomic bridge, facilitating energy access and providing a viable alternative to maritime routes, such as the congested South China Sea.

While Central Asia's developmental path has traditionally relied upon its rich endowment of agricultural and extractive resources, a new economic imperative is emerging. To ensure long-term resilience against global shifts toward sustainable development, regional actors are increasingly embracing 'green growth.' This approach emphasizes economic expansion through enhanced resource efficiency and decarbonization, fundamentally challenging the status quo. Successfully implementing this shift in Central Asia involves a complex balancing act: accelerating economic diversification while simultaneously mitigating the significant environmental degradation associated with the region's longstanding dependence on fossil fuels and industrial agriculture.

Embracing environmental sustainability offers a viable pathway to overcoming Central Asia's long-standing economic vulnerabilities. The region's diverse geography provides substantial potential for renewable energy generation—specifically solar, wind, and hydropower—which can facilitate a shift away from fossil fuel reliance. As global energy markets continue their transition toward decarbonization, Central Asia is uniquely positioned to capitalize on its renewable assets, transitioning from a traditional hydrocarbon exporter to a potential regional hub for clean energy.

Agriculture remains a critical pillar of Central Asian economies, yet it faces existential risks from climate change, water scarcity, and inefficient legacy infrastructure. Transitioning to sustainable agricultural practices—including the adoption of water-efficient irrigation, organic farming, and agroforestry—is essential for long-term food security.

For green growth to gain traction, Central Asian states must deepen regional integration, as environmental challenges inherently transcend national borders. Initiatives such as the Central Asia Water Forum represent vital steps toward transboundary water management and shared climate resilience strategies. International financial institutions, including the UNDP, the ADB, and the World Bank, have become indispensable partners in this transition, providing the technical expertise and capital necessary to formulate green policies and build clean energy infrastructure (Moeini et al., 2022). By aligning their national strategies with global frameworks like the Paris Accord, Central Asian countries are not only pursuing local stability but are also positioning themselves as active contributors to the global sustainability agenda.

The transition to green growth in Central Asia is a process defined by paradox: while the region is richly endowed with the resources required for a sustainable future, it remains shackled by the institutional and economic legacies of the past. The transition is fraught with difficulties, including political opposition to reform, fossil-fuel dependency, and the existential threat posed by climate change to the region's agricultural and energy foundations.

However, viewing this transition exclusively through the lens of challenge obscures the region's significant potential. Central Asia is currently at a turning point where it can transform its ecological liabilities into economic assets. By prioritizing renewable energy deployment and adopting sustainable agricultural frameworks, the region can decouple its growth from carbon-intensive processes. The success of this conversion depends on the collective will of the Central Asian states to engage in deep regional cooperation. By harmonizing policy, attracting investment for clean infrastructure, and committing to diversified economic development, the region can emerge as a resilient and sustainable actor within the multipolar global order.

The success of regional peacebuilding in Central Asia remains contingent upon the intensification of diplomatic engagement and multilateral cooperation; a failure to cultivate these ties threatens to exacerbate existing regional fragility. Fortunately, an emergent pattern of integration is increasingly manifesting through economic alliances. As states like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan identify shared interests in trade, infrastructure, and energy—exemplified by the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)—intra-regional cohesion is steadily intensifying. By leveraging the TITR model, Central Asian governments are creating critical pathways to connect their domestic economies with Europe and China, thereby bolstering national resilience and incentivizing international cooperation.

Furthermore, platforms such as the EAEU, CAREC, and the SCO provide essential, albeit imperfect, mechanisms for addressing transnational challenges, including terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and water resource management. Simultaneously, the region is witnessing an uneven but discernible trajectory toward domestic reform. The liberalization agenda initiated by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev serves as a notable case study; such measures to open the political system and strengthen human rights reflect a broader, strategic pivot toward stable governance. If replicated by neighboring states, this trend could foster a more inclusive political environment, effectively anchoring the region in a state of long-term prosperity and sustainable peacebuilding.

Contrary to the optimistic narrative of seamless regional integration, Central Asia remains a theater of heightened geopolitical friction. The region's strategic vulnerability to the overlapping interests of major powers—specifically the United States, China, and Russia significantly elevates the risk of both internal instability and external conflict. While these powers often articulate their objectives through the lens of diplomacy and economic

investment, their presence frequently introduces structural tensions, exacerbating local vulnerabilities and increasing the likelihood of proxy rivalries.

The region's geopolitical landscape is defined by the overlapping, often competing, agendas of global powers. While these relationships are generally framed as "cordial," they are inherently marked by structural friction.

The future of Central Asia will be determined by its capacity to transform its historical geographic "vulnerabilities"—often treated as buffers for great powers—into strategic "advantages." The legacy of the post-9/11 era, characterized by fragile security cooperation and deep-seated structural dependencies, remains a formidable challenge.

Central Asia's future is inextricably linked to its ability to manage the competing interests of global powers. While its strategic location and resource wealth provide significant leverage, these same assets make the region a persistent target for external economic and security agendas. The region currently faces a complex dilemma: it must utilize external capital and infrastructure projects—such as the BRI—to modernize its economies while ensuring that such collaboration does not compromise its national sovereignty.

For the states of Central Asia, navigating this multipolar reality requires a sophisticated approach to diplomacy. To avoid the vulnerabilities associated with becoming a "transit zone" for great-power competition, these nations must continue to diversify their partnerships. By successfully balancing the competing demands of Moscow, Beijing, Washington, and Brussels, Central Asia can transcend its historical role as a buffer state and emerge as a significant, sovereign actor in global affairs.

Selected Bibliography

Abbas, S. R. *Russian Geopolitics and Eurasia*. World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 90–105. 2020.

Aben, D. *Regional security in Central Asia: Addressing existing and potential threats and challenges*. Eurasian Research Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 51–65. 2019.

Agyei, S. K. *Emerging markets equities' response to geopolitical risk: Time-frequency evidence from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict era*. Heliyon, Vol. 9, No. 2. 2023.

Ahmed, A. (2024). *Pakistan's geoeconomic shift: Connecting Central Asia to the Indian Ocean*. Journal of Eurasian Studies, 15(1), 88–104.

Akaev, A., & Pantin, V. *Central Asia as the economic and geopolitical tension nexus: Some implications for the world futures*. World Futures, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 36–46. 2018.

Alexandre, A. G. (2020). *The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb: Stage of geopolitical disputes*. Semantic Scholar.

Al-Hasnawi, A. H. M. *The Russian–Ukrainian war and its implications for international security: A geopolitical vision*. Texas Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, Vol. 9, pp. 177–192. 2022.

Allison, R. (2004). Strategic reassertion in Russia's Central Asia policy. *International Affairs*, 80(2), 277–293.

Allison, R. (2008). Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, 27(2), 185–202.

Allison, R. (2018). *Protective integration and security policy in Eurasia*. *International Affairs*, 94(3), 513–533.

Allison, R. (2023). Russia's post-Soviet security strategy: Navigating a multipolar order. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 14(2), 112–129.

Aminjonov, F. (2024). *The Central Asian energy crisis and the return of Russian gas*. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 65(2), 210–234.

Anceschi, L. (2008). *Turkmenistan's foreign policy: Positive neutrality and the consolidation of the Turkmen regime*. Routledge. (The foundational text for understanding the linkage between domestic authoritarianism and external neutrality).

Anceschi, L. Central Asia: The political economy of resource dependency. In Routledge Handbook of Politics in Asia, pp. 183–194. Routledge. 2018.

Andreoni, A., & Chang, H. J. *The political economy of industrial policy: Structural interdependencies, policy alignment and conflict management*. Structural Change and Economic Dynamics, Vol. 48, pp. 136–150. 2019.

Anthony, I. (2018). Military dimensions of a multipolar world: Implications for global governance. *Strategic Analysis*, 42(3), 208–219.

Anthony, I. *Military Dimensions of a Multipolar World: Implications for Global Governance*. Strategic Analysis, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 208–219. 2018.

Anwar, D. F. *Indonesia and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*. International Affairs, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 111–129. 2020.

Aras, B., & Kardaş, Ş. *Geopolitics of the new Middle East: Perspectives from inside and outside*. Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 397–402. 2021.

Aris, S. (2011). *Eurasian regionalism: The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Arms Control Association. (2026). *Current state of the Iranian nuclear program: Implications for regional security*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/iran-nuclear-proposals>

Arynov, Z. Is Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy threatened? Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development, No. 21, pp. 192–197. 2022.

Asher, C. B., & Talbot, C. (2006). *India before Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Asian Development Bank. (2024). *Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program: The Caspian Sea Green Energy Corridor Project*. ADB Technical Assistance Reports.

Atlas Institute for International Affairs. (2026). *The Black Sea in 2026: From contested waters to strategic opportunity – A policy framework for NATO and the EU*.

Axyonova, V. (2023). International organizations and democracy promotion in Central Asia: The limits of external governance post-Ukraine. *East European Politics*, 39(2), 245–262.

Axyonova, V., & Gänzle, S. (2020). The OSCE and security governance in Central Asia: Confronting domestic resistance and geopolitical shifts. *East European Politics*, 36(3), 384–402.

Azour, J. (2025). *Navigating uncertainty, building resilience: Regional economic outlook for the Middle East and Central Asia*. International Monetary Fund.

Azour, J. (2025). *Navigating uncertainty, building resilience: Regional economic outlook for the Middle East and Central Asia*. International Monetary Fund.

Bal Bhargava, M. (2026). Water as a geopolitical weapon: India's transboundary river challenges. *Counterview*.

Barbier, E. *Natural resources and economic development*. Cambridge University Press. 2019.

Barston, R. P. *Modern Diplomacy*. Routledge. 2019.

Bayat, S¹¹³. *Shifting power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific: How small and medium powers are adapting to the new international order*. Journal of Globalization Studies, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 81–98. 2024.

Beckwith, C. I. *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages*. Princeton University Press. 2020.

Berdiyev, A., & Can, N. *The importance of Central Asia in China's foreign policy and Beijing's soft power instruments*. Central Asia & the Caucasus, No. 4. 2020.

Bernauer, T., & Siegfried, T. (2012). *Climate change and international water conflict in Central Asia*. Journal of Peace Research, 49(1), 227–239.

Berryman, J. *Geopolitics*. In Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy, pp. 60–78. Routledge. 2018.

Berryman, J. *Russian security strategy and the geopolitics of Eurasia*. In Routledge Handbook of Russian Security, pp. 288–298. Routledge. 2019.

Bhadauria, R. (2024). *Eurasia's infrastructure—An Indian perspective*. Russia in Global Affairs, 22(2), 112–128.

Bichsel, C. (2009). *Conflict transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation and water disputes in the Ferghana Valley*. Routledge.

Bichsel, C. (2009). *Conflict transformation in Central Asia: Irrigation and water disputes in the Ferghana Valley*. Routledge.

Bilgin, P. *Regional Security in the Middle East: A Critical Perspective*. Routledge. 2019.

¹¹³ Bayat, S. *Shifting power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific: How small and medium powers are adapting to the new international order*. Journal of Globalization Studies, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 81–98. 2024.

Biscop, S. *War for Ukraine and the Rediscovery of Geopolitics*. Egmont Institute, Policy Paper No. 123. 2023.

Blanchette, J., & Hillman, J. E. (2021). China's maritime silk road initiative and the geopolitics of maritime chokepoints. *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*.

Blank, S. (2023). *Putin's gas union: Russia's new geoeconomic offensive in Central Asia*. *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*.

Bohr, A. (2016). *Turkmenistan: Power, politics and petro-authoritarianism*. Chatham House.

Bordachev, T. (2024). *Russia and the New Eurasian Security Architecture: Concepts and Realities*. *Valdai Discussion Club*.

Bordoff, J., & O'Sullivan, M. L. *Green Upheaval: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 101, pp. 68–82. 2022.

Brookings Institution. (2025). *Arctic stability in a multipolar era: Assessing the 2025 Alaska frameworks*. Center on the United States and Europe.

Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., & Ryan, B. J. *Maritime security: The uncharted politics of the global sea*. *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 5, pp. 971–978. 2019.

Bukhari, S. R. H., Khan, A. U., Noreen, S., Khan, M. T. U., Khan, M. N., & Haq, M. I. U. *Ukraine and Russia: A historical analysis of geopolitical dynamics, national identity, and conflict escalation leading to the present-day crisis*. *Kurdish Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 5803–5824. 2024.

Buranelli, C. F. (2022). *Regionalism, multilateralism, and security frameworks in post-Soviet Eurasia*. *Central Asian Survey*, 41(3), 412–430.

Buranelli, C. F. (2022). *Regionalism, multilateralism, and the UN in Central Asia's evolving security architecture*. *Central Asian Survey*, 41(3), 412–430.

Buranelli, F. C. *Central Asian regionalism or Central Asian order? Some reflections*. *Central Asian Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1–26. 2021.

Buriachenko, O. *The Russian–Ukrainian war as a new type of postmodern war and a factor in global transformations of the geopolitical landscape*. *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences*, No. 3, pp. 192–202. 2024.

Burnashev, R., & Chernykh, I. (2007). Changes in Uzbekistan's military policy after the Andijan events. *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 5(1), 67–73.

Calfucura, E. *Governance, land and distribution: A discussion on the political economy of community-based conservation*. *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 145, pp. 18–26. 2018.

- Cammett, M. *A political economy of the Middle East*. Routledge. 2018.
- Campi, A. J. (2014). Mongolia's "Third Neighbor" foreign policy: Concept and evolution. In *Mongolia in the 21st century: Society, culture, and international relations* (pp. 209-232). Routledge.
- Cap, P. *Narratives of geopolitical representation in the discourse of the Russia–Ukraine war*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 218, pp. 133–143. 2023.
- Cau, E. *Geopolitical implications of the Belt and Road Initiative: The backbone for a new world order?* *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 39–IX. 2018.
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). (2026). *Eurasia's shifting balance of influence: An opening for the United States?*
- Center for Strategic and International Studies. (2024). *War by proxy: Iran's growing footprint in the Middle East*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-proxy-irans-growing-footprint-middle-east>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies. (2026). *The Iranian presence in the Levant: Strategic depth or overreach?* <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-presence-levant>
- Cheema, P. I. (2020). *Pakistan's foreign policy: Seeking security and stability*. Oxford University Press.
- Christian, D. *A History of Russia, Central Asia and Mongolia, Volume II: Inner Eurasia from the Mongol Empire to Today, 1260–2000*. Vol. 2. John Wiley & Sons. 2018.
- Clarke, M. (2008). China, Xinjiang, and the transnational security of Central Asia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 40(2), 213–242.
- Clarke, M. (2011). *Xinjiang and China's rise in Central Asia - A history*. Routledge.
- Clarke, M. (2011). *Xinjiang and China's rise in Central Asia - A history*. Routledge.
- Clarke, M. (2017). *The Belt and Road Initiative: China's new grand strategy?* *Asia Policy*, 24(1), 71-79.
- Cohn, T. H., & Hira, A. *Global Political Economy: Theory and Practice*. Routledge. 2020.
- Çomak, H., Şeker, B. Ş., & Ultan, M. Ö. (Eds.). *Global Maritime Geopolitics*. Vol. 11. Transnational Press London. 2022.
- Commons Library - UK Parliament

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2012). *Great games, local rules: The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press.

Cooley, A. (2016). *The emerging political economy of OBOR: The challenges of promoting connectivity in Central Asia and beyond*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Cordesman, A. H. (2024). *The Gulf and the global energy market*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Council of the European Union. (2022). *REPowerEU: A plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and fast forward the green transition*. Official Journal of the European Union.

Council on Foreign Relations

Council on Foreign Relations. (2025). *Iran's regional armed network*. <https://www.cfr.org/articles/irans-regional-armed-network>

Council on Foreign Relations. (2025). *The U.S.–Ukraine security compact: Implications for transatlantic defense*. CFR Policy Brief Series.

Council on Foreign Relations. (2026). *Chokepoints in the global energy market*. <https://www.cfr.org/report/chokepoints-global-energy-market>

Criekemans, D. *Geopolitics of the renewable energy game and its potential impact upon global power relations*. In *The Geopolitics of Renewables*, pp. 37–73. Springer International Publishing. 2018.

Cummings, S. N. (2012). *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and contested transformations*. Routledge.

Dadabaev, T. (2014). Turkmenistan's neutrality: Characteristics, dynamics and challenges. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5(2), 148-156.

Daly, J. C. K. (2009). The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: A strategic chokepoint in the Red Sea. *Terrorism Monitor*, 7(4).

Dani, A. H., & Masson, V. M. (Eds.). (2003). *History of civilizations of Central Asia: Volume IV: The age of achievement: A.D. 750 to the end of the fifteenth century*. UNESCO Publishing.

Dash, P. L., & Pandey, S. K. (Eds.). (2012). *India and Central Asia: Two decades of transition*. Oxford University Press.

Dash, P. L., & Pandey, S. K. (Eds.). (2012). *India and Central Asia: Two decades of transition*. Oxford University Press.

Dave, B. (2007). *Kazakhstan - Ethnicity, language and power*. Routledge.

Debata, M. R. (2014). *Central Asia today: Issues and concerns*. Academic Excellence

Debata, M. R. (2015). Xinjiang in Central Asia's regional security structure. *International Studies*, 52(1-4), 1-17.

Debata, M. R., & Hanova, S. (Eds.). (2024). *India and Inner Asia: Commerce, culture and connectivity*. Routledge India.

Debata, M. R., & Hanova, S. (Eds.). (2024). *India and Inner Asia: Commerce, culture and connectivity*. Routledge India.

Debata, M. R., & Hanova, S. (Eds.). (2024). *India and Inner Asia: Commerce, culture and connectivity*. Routledge India.

Degterev, D. *Multipolar World Order: Old Myths and New Realities*. Vestnik RUDN: International Relations. 2019.

Denison, M. (2009). *The art of the impossible: Political symbolism, and the creation of national identity and collective memory in post-Soviet Turkmenistan*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(7), 1167-1187.

Djamalov, F., Schrier, A., & Khakimova, M. Central Asian nations forging new partnership. *International Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 109, p. 110. 2024.

Donaldson, R. H., & Nadkarni, V. *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*. Routledge. 2018.

Dragneva, R., & Wolczuk, K. (2017). *The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, rules and the exercise of power*. Chatham House.

Druzhinin, A. G. *The geopolitical effect of the maritime factor on the spatial development of post-Soviet Russia: The Baltic case*. Baltic Region, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 6–23. 2023.

Dugin, A. (1997). *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* [The foundations of geopolitics: The geopolitical future of Russia]. Arktogetia.

Dutta, S. (2025). *India's renewable energy moment in Uzbekistan*. Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Eraly, A. (2007). *The Mughal world: Life in India's last golden age*. Penguin Books.

Erickson, A. S., & Collins, G. (2024). Strategic chokepoints and the vulnerability of global energy transit. *Naval War College Review*, 77(1), 22-45.

Eurasian Development Bank. (2025). *Power sector of Central Asia: Modernization and energy transition*. EDB Special Reports.

European Commission. (2021). *The Global Gateway. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank*.

European Council. (2026, June 23). *Strengthening the strategic partnership between the European Union and Kazakhstan*. Press Release.

Farhan, S. M., Khan, M. U., & Sher, N. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and regional approach: Economic and diplomatic success. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 687–701. 2021.

Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized interdependence: How global economic networks shape state coercion. *International Security*, 44(1), 42-79.

Fazendeiro, B. T. (2017). *Uzbekistan's foreign policy: The struggle for recognition and self-reliance under Karimov*. Routledge.

Fazliddin, D., Schrier, A., & Khakimova, M. Expanding beyond conventional connections: Central Asian nations establish new partnerships. (Conference Report). n.d.

Ferchen, M. (2021). *China's "Community of Shared Future" and the Belt and Road Initiative*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Fierman, W. *Soviet Central Asia: The failed transformation*. Routledge. 2019.

Fomin, S. Multi-vector foreign policy of Uzbekistan as an important means of solving the socio-economic problems of the country. *Problems of World History*, No. 16, pp. 175–195. 2021.

Fukuyama, F. (2016). Exporting the Chinese model. *Project Syndicate*, 12.

Garbuzarova, E. The foreign policy of the Central Asian countries: The results of 30 years of development. *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, Vol. 22, No. 4. 2021.

Gaur, P., Tripathi, A., & Ray, S. S. India's role in Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 43–48. 2021.

GCC Secretariat. (2026). *About the GCC: Objectives and member states*. <https://www.gcc-sg.org/>

Giuli, M. *Geopolitics of the energy transition*. In the Handbook of Energy Transitions. Taylor & Francis. 2023.

Glaser, M., & Thomann, P. E. *The concept of "Greater Eurasia": The Russian turn to the East and its consequences for the European Union from the geopolitical angle of analysis*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 3–15. 2022.

Gleason, G. (2003). *Markets and politics in Central Asia: Structural reform and international interdependence*. Routledge.

Gleason, G. W. *The Central Asian states: Discovering independence*. Routledge. 2018.

Gleason, G. W. *The Central Asian States: Discovering Independence*. Routledge. 2018.

Gresh, G. F. *Introduction: Why Maritime Eurasia?* In *Eurasia's Maritime Rise and Global Security: From the Indian Ocean to Pacific Asia and the Arctic*, pp. 1–14. Springer International Publishing. 2018.

Griffiths, S. (2019). Energy diplomacy in a time of energy transition. *Energy Strategy Reviews*, 26, 100386.

Griffiths, S. *Energy diplomacy in a time of energy transition*. *Energy Strategy Reviews*, Vol. 26, 100386. 2019.

Hale, H. E. (2014). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Hale, H. E. (2014). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Hall, I. (2020). *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy*. Bristol University Press.

Hanks, R. R. (2009). 'Multi-vector politics' and Kazakhstan's emerging role as a geo-strategic player in Central Asia. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 11(3), 257-267.

Hao, W., Shah, S. M. A., Nawaz, A., Asad, A., Iqbal, S., Zahoor, H., & Maqsoom, A. *The impact of energy cooperation and the role of the One Belt One Road Initiative in revolutionizing the geopolitics of energy among regional economic powers: An analysis of infrastructure development and project management*. Complexity, Vol. 2020, No. 1, 8820021. 2020.

Hao, W., Shah, S. M. A., Nawaz, A., Asad, A., Iqbal, S., Zahoor, H., & Maqsoom, A. (2020). The impact of energy cooperation and the role of the One Belt One Road Initiative in revolutionizing the geopolitics of energy among regional economic powers: An analysis of infrastructure development and project management. *Complexity*, 2020(1), 8820021.

He, K. (2008). Institutional balancing and international relations theory: Economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia. *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(3), 489–518. (*Foundational text for the theory of institutional balancing*).

Heathershaw, J., Owen, C., & Cooley, A. *Centred discourse, decentred practice: The relational production of Russian and Chinese 'rising' power in Central Asia*. In *Rising Powers and State Transformation*, pp. 44–62. Routledge. 2020.

Henrikson, A. K. *The trauma of territorial break-up: The Russia–Ukraine conflict and its international management—geopolitical strategy and diplomatic therapy*. Geopolítica(s), Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 11–36. 2022.

Holmes, J. R., & Yoshihara, T. (2008). *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century: The turn to Mahan*. Routledge.

House of Commons Library. (2024). *Iran's influence in the Middle East*. UK Parliament. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9504/>

Hug, A. (Ed.). (2020). *Institution in crisis: European security and the OSCE*. Foreign Policy Centre.

Hussain, N. (2023). *CPEC Phase II and the reimagining of Pakistan's regional connectivity*. *Strategic Studies*, 43(2), 45–62.

Institute for the Study of War. (2026, July 8). *Iran update special report*. <https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-special-report-july-8-2026/>

International Atomic Energy Agency. (2026). *Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231*. <https://www.iaea.org/publications/reports/iran-nuclear-monitoring>

International Crisis Group. (2023). *The U.N. is no longer a center of gravity in Ukraine's diplomatic war*. ICG Special Briefing.

International Crisis Group. (2026). *The nuclear stalemate: Iran, the West, and the risks of regional escalation*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran>

International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). (2025). *Strategic assessment: Managing the Russia–U.S. nuclear impasse*. IISS Strategic Comments.

International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2026). *The Military Balance 2026: Iran's regional revisionism*. Routledge.

International Monetary Fund. (2025). *Caucasus and Central Asia: Regional economic outlook update and policy priorities*. IMF Middle East and Central Asia Department.

International Monetary Fund. (2025). *Caucasus and Central Asia: Regional economic outlook update and policy priorities*. IMF Middle East and Central Asia Department.

Isaev, A., Ashiraliev, A., & Maldybaev, D. *Foreign policy of Central Asian countries and issues of international security*. Clío: Revista de Historia, Ciencias Humanas y Pensamiento Crítico, No. 10, pp. 1963–1998. 2025.

Ismail, M., & Husnain, S. M. *Recalibrating Impact of Regional Actors on Security of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*. Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 437–462. 2022.

Jardine, B., & Lemon, E. (2026). *Reordering Central Asia: China's emerging economic hierarchy*. Foreign Policy Research Institute.

Jardine, B., & Lemon, E. *Avoiding Dependence: Central Asian Security in a Multipolar World*. The Oxus Society Reports, *Belt & Road, China's Rising Role*. 2020.

Jarvis, C., Pierre, G., Baduel, B., Fayad, D., de Keyserling, A., Sarr, B., & Sumliński, M. (2021). *Economic governance reforms to support inclusive growth in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*. International Monetary Fund, Departmental Paper No. 21/01.

Jarvis, C., Pierre, G., Baduel, B., Fayad, D., de Keyserling, A., Sarr, B., & Sumliński, M. (2021). *Economic governance reforms to support inclusive growth in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia*. International Monetary Fund, Departmental Paper No. 21/01.

Johansson-Nogués, E., & Leso, F. *Geopolitical EU? The EU's wartime assistance to Ukraine*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, Vol. 63, No. 1, pp. 127–142. 2025.

Joshi, N. (2010). *India and Central Asia: The mythical-historical linkages*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

Journal of Global Politics and Strategy. (2025). *From conflict to management: The shift in 2025 diplomatic posture*. Vol. 14, Issue 3.

Kanellou, N. A. (2024). *Geopolitics and energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean* [Master's thesis, University of Piraeus].

Kanellou, N. A. *Geopolitics and energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean*. Master's Thesis. University of Piraeus. 2024.

Kangas, R. *Balancing interests and perceptions: Foreign policy in Central Asia*. In Routledge Handbook of Politics in Asia, pp. 123–139. Routledge. 2018.

Kaplan, R. D. (2010). *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American power*. Random House.

Karaganov, S. (2022). *From East to West, or Greater Eurasia*. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20(2), 10-25.

Karaganov, S. (2022). The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13(2).

Karaganov, S. *The new cold war and the emerging Greater Eurasia*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 85–93. 2018.

Karl, T. L. (1997). *The paradox of plenty: Oil booms and petro-states*. University of California Press.

Kassenova, N. (2012). Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick start, mixed results and uncertain future. *Russie.Nei.Visions*, 67, 1-24. Ifri.

Kassenova, N. (2019). Kazakhstan's national security: A conceptual and practical assessment. In *Security and cross-border cooperation in the EU, the Black Sea Region and Southern Caucasus* (pp. 110-125). IOS Press.

Kassenova, N. (2021). *Uzbekistan's new foreign policy: Change and continuity under Shavkat Mirziyoyev*. Central Asia Program, George Washington University.

Kassenova, N. (2023). *Central Asia and the EU: The geoeconomics of the green transition*. Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University.

Kassenova, N. (2024). *Central Asia between major powers: Multilateralism and the search for strategic autonomy*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 15(1), 34–50.

Kavalski, E. (2010). *The new Central Asia: The regional impact of international actors*. World Scientific Publishing.

Kavalski, E. (2010). *The new Central Asia: The regional impact of international actors*. World Scientific Publishing.

Kavalski, E. (2012). *Central Asia and the rise of normative powers: Contextualizing the security governance of the European Union, China, and India*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Kharitonova, D. (2023). *Central Asia-Center gas pipeline system: Challenges and opportunities for modern Russia-Central Asia energy relations*. *RUDN Journal of International Relations*, 23(4), 84-98.

Khasanov, U. *New Regionalism in Central Asia*. Valdai Discussion Club. 2021.

Khikmat, M., & Petkevičiūtė, N. Management of natural resources in the Central Asian region. *Public Security and Public Order*, No. 29, pp. 116–127. 2022.

Kılınç, A. *Navigating the nuances of energy geopolitics within Turkish–Iranian diplomatic ties: A focus on pipeline strategies over the past decade*. In *Navigating Contemporary Challenges in Global Politics*, p. 119. 2024.

Kirchner, E. *Geo-economic and geopolitical developments in EU–Asia security relations*. *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 333–349. 2024.

Klemensits, P. *The role of Eurasia in the Classical Geopolitical Theories*. *Towards the Rise of Eurasia*, p. 17. (n.d.).

Knecht, S., & Keil, K. (2023). *The Arctic Council: Governance in a changing Arctic*. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Arctic Policy and Public Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Koga, K. *Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Question: Countering China or Shaping a New Regional Order?* *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 49–73. 2020.

Kokoshin, A. A., & Kokoshina, Z. A. The main vectors of the US foreign policy strategy in Central Asia. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 92, Suppl. 7, pp. S581–S588. 2022.

Korosteleva, E., & Paikin, Z. *Russia between East and West, and the future of Eurasian order*. *International Politics*, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 321–333. 2021.

Kotoulas, I. E., & Pusztai, W. *Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine*. Foreign Affairs Institute, Issue No. 91. 2022.

Krickovic, A. (2024). The CSTO and the limits of Russian hegemony in Central Asia. *International Affairs*, 100(1), 45–67.

Kropatcheva, E. (2012). Russia and the role of the OSCE in European security: A 'forum' for dialog or a 'battlefield' of interests? *European Security*, 21(3), 370-394.

Kuik, C. C. (2021). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), 159-185.

Kurç, Ç. *The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense industrialization in Central Asia*. In *Defence Industries in the 21st Century*, pp. 199–213. Routledge. 2021.

Kurç, Ç. *The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense*. *Defence Industries in the 21st Century: A Comparative Analysis*, p. 199. 2021.

Kuzio, T. (2022). *Russian nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian war*. Routledge.

Kuzio, T. (2022). *Russian nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian war*. Routledge.

Kuzio, T. *Russia–Ukraine crisis: The blame game, geopolitics and national identity*. *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 3, pp. 462–473. 2018.

Lanteigne, M. *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*. Routledge. 2019.

Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press.

Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Johns Hopkins University Press.

Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press. (*The definitive Western academic text analyzing the nuances of Neo-Eurasianism*).

Laruelle, M. (2008). *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press.

Laruelle, M. (2012). *Eurasianism and the European far right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia relationship*. Lexington Books.

Laruelle, M. (2015). *Eurasianism and the European far right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia relationship*. Lexington Books.

Laruelle, M. (2020). *China and India in Central Asia: A new great game?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Laruelle, M. (Ed.). (2018). *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact in Central Asia*. George Washington University, Central Asia Program.

Laruelle, M. (Ed.). (2018). *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact in Central Asia*. George Washington University, Central Asia Program.

Laruelle, M., & Peyrouse, S. (2013). *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and the challenges of economic development*. M.E. Sharpe.

Lasserre, F. (2019). *China's Arctic policy and the "Polar Silk Road": A new frontier for geoeconomics?* In *China's Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada*. Centre for International Governance Innovation.

Lasserre, F. (2019). *China's Arctic policy and the "Polar Silk Road": A new frontier for geoeconomics?* In *China's Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada*. Centre for International Governance Innovation.

Ledeneva, A. V. (2013). *Can Russia modernise? Sistema, power networks and informal governance*. Cambridge University Press.

Leigh, J., & Newman, S. *Contemporary European geopolitics in Eurasia*. European Journal of Geography, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 43–60. 2014.

Lempp, J., & Mayer, S. (2024). Introduction: Central Asia in a multipolar world. In J. Lempp & S. Mayer (Eds.), *Central Asia in a multipolar world: Internal change, external actors, regional cooperation* (pp. 1–18). Springer International Publishing.

Lempp, J., & Mayer, S. (Eds.). (2024). *Central Asia in a multipolar world: Internal change, external actors, regional cooperation*. Springer Nature.

Lempp, J., & Mayer, S. (Eds.). *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*. Springer Nature. 2024.

Lempp, J., & Mayer, S. *Central Asia in a Multipolar World*. Springer International Publishing. 2024.

Lempp, J., & Mayer, S. *Introduction: Central Asia in a Multipolar World*. In *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation*, pp. 1–18. Springer International Publishing. 2024.

Leonard, M., Pisani-Ferry, J., Shapiro, J., Tagliapietra, S., & Wolff, G. B. *The geopolitics of the European Green Deal*. Bruegel Policy Contribution, No. 04/2021. 2021.

Leonard, M., Pisani-Ferry, J., Shapiro, J., Tagliapietra, S., & Wolff, G. B. (2021). *The geopolitics of the European Green Deal*. Bruegel Policy Contribution, No. 04/2021.

Lewis, D. (2011). Security sector reform in authoritarian regimes: The OSCE experience of police assistance programming in Central Asia. *Security and Human Rights*, 22(2), 103–117.

Libman, A., & Vinokurov, E. (2012). *Holding-together regionalism: Twenty years of post-Soviet integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lioubimtseva, E., & Henebry, G. M. (2009). *Climate and environmental change in arid Central Asia: Impacts, vulnerability, and adaptations*. *Journal of Arid Environments*, 73(11), 963–977.

Lo, B. (2023). *The illusion of convergence: Russia, China, and the BRICS*. Lowy Institute.

Lonsdale, D. J. (1999). *The nature of war in the information age: Clausewitzian future*. Routledge. (Crucial for theoretical framing of naval blockades versus continental logistics).

Luong, P. J. (Ed.). (2004). *The transformation of Central Asia: States and societies from Soviet rule to independence*. Cornell University Press.

Mações, B. (2018). *The dawn of Eurasia: On the trail of the new world order*. Yale University Press.

Mações, B. (2018). *The dawn of Eurasia: On the trail of the new world order*. Yale University Press.

Mações, B. (2018). *The dawn of Eurasia: On the trail of the new world order*. Yale University Press.

Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The geographical pivot of history. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421–437.

Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The geographical pivot of history. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421–437.

Mackinder, H. J. (1904). The geographical pivot of history. *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 421–437.

Mansour, I. Major power competition and strategic responses to regionalization projects: Central Asia's role in advancing a multi-vectorism foreign policy. *Journal of Strategic and Defense Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1. 2025.

Masiero, F. *From fossil to green: Reshaping EU's energy security and diplomacy*. *European Policy Studies*, Vol. 11. 2023.

Mayer, S. *Cooperation from outside: Security regionalism in Central Asia and its limits*. *Central Asian Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 203–228. 2021.

Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics*. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, p. 48. 2021.

Megoran, N. (2017). *Nationalism in Central Asia: A biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan boundary*. University of Pittsburgh Press. (A foundational Constructivist text on how borders were hardened post-1991).

- Menga, F. (2018). *Power and water in Central Asia*. Routledge.
- Mesbahi M. Regional and Global Powers and the International Relations of Central Asia. In *The International Politics of Eurasia* 2015 May 20 (pp. 215-245). Routledge.
- Mesbahi, M. (2015). Regional and global powers and the international relations of Central Asia. In *The International Politics of Eurasia* (pp. 215-245). Routledge.
- Micklin, P. (2007). *The Aral Sea disaster. Annual Review of Earth and Planetary Sciences*, 35, 47–72.
- Miller, S. *The maritime strategy and geopolitics in the High North*. In *Soviet Union & Northern Water*, pp. 205–238. Routledge. 2021.
- Mingyue, H. Multi-vectorality of the PRC's modern foreign policy: Balance between global ambitions and regional interests. *Международный журнал гуманитарных и естественных наук*, No. 9-5 (96), pp. 117–120. 2024.
- Ministry of External Affairs. (2022). *India-Central Asia relations: A strategic partnership*. Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023). *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. Approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 229*.
- Moeini, A., Mott, C., Paikin, Z., & Polansky, D. *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*. The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy. 2022.
- Muhammad, A. *The Geopolitical Implications of Shifting Alliances in a Multipolar World*. *Ulusal ve Uluslararası Sosyoloji ve Ekonomi Dergisi*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 410–430. 2023.
- Muni, S. D. (2003). *Central Asia, Afghanistan and India's security*. In *India and Central Asia* (pp. 52-73). Anamika Publishers.
- Muratalieva, N., & Sarybayev, M. (2026). Regional security collaboration between Central Asia and China: Contemporary challenges and future prospects. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 8, Article 1670875.
- NATO Parliamentary Assembly. (2025). *NATO's future Russia strategy*. Economics and Security Committee Report.
- Natorski, M., & Tsygankov, A. P. (2022). The crisis of the OSCE and the European security order: A Russian perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13(1), 45-56.
- Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy. (Research Paper). n.d.

Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M., & Akhmer, A. *The Rising Multiplex World Order and Regional Order in Central Asia: A Case Study of the Emerging Role of the EU and Its Implications for Kazakhstan's Multivector Foreign Policy*. Eurasian Policy Research Papers. 2022.

Nezhiloglu, H. The importance of India for multi-vector foreign policy of Kyrgyzstan. *The Strategy of (Re)Connectivity*, p. 55. 2020.

Nizhnikau, R., & Moshes, A. *The war in Ukraine, the EU's geopolitical awakening and implications for the contested neighbourhood*. Policy Studies, Vol. 45, Nos. 3–4, pp. 489–506. 2024.

Noorali, H., Flint, C., & Ahmadi, S. A. *Port power: Towards a new geopolitical world order*. Journal of Transport Geography, Vol. 105, 103483. 2022.

Nourzhanov, K. Tajikistan's multi-vector foreign policy. Tajikistan on the Move: Statebuilding and Societal Transformations, p. 87. 2018.

Nurgaliyeva, L. (2016). Kazakhstan's economic independence in the context of the Eurasian Economic Union. *Central Asian Survey*, 35(2), 251–265.

Nyshanbayev, N., & Tarman, B. The Republic of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy: Re-evaluation under President Tokayev. *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 45, No. 3. 2024.

Nyshanbayev, N., Bekov, K., Baizakova, Z., & Amangeldy, A. The Republic of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *New Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 43–63. 2025.

Ó Tuathail, G. (1996). *Critical geopolitics: The politics of writing global space*. University of Minnesota Press.

Oatley, T. *International Political Economy*. Routledge. 2022.

O'Byrne, D. (2024). *The green great game: Crafting an EU-Central Asia energy alliance*. European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

Okur, M. A. *Classical texts of the geopolitics and the "heart of Eurasia."* Journal of Turkish World Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 73–104. 2014.

Olcott, M. B. (2005). *Central Asia's second chance*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Öniş, Z. Turkey under the challenge of state capitalism: The political economy of the late AKP era. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 201–225. 2019.

Orazgaliyev, S. (2019). State intervention in Kazakhstan's energy sector: Nationalisation or participation? *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 10(1), 84-95. (Useful for comparative analysis of Caspian petro-state strategies).

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). (2025). *Comprehensive security in a changing Eurasia: Annual report on field operations and human dimension activities*. OSCE Secretariat.

Østhagen, A. (2021). *The Arctic: The "low tension" myth and the risk of conflict*. In *Strategic Analysis*, 45(2), 154–165.

Overland, I. *The geopolitics of energy: Out with the old, in with the new?* Oxford Energy Forum. 2021.

Pandey, S. K. (2007). Asia in the debate on Russian identity. *International Studies*, 44(4), 317–337.

Pandey, S. K. (2007). Asia in the debate on Russian identity. *International Studies*, 44(4), 317–337. (Crucial for incorporating the Indian/South Asian theoretical perspective on Russian identity politics).

Pandey, S. K. (2010). Reassessing Russian foreign policy: Eurasianism and pragmatism combined. In K. Santhanam (Ed.), *Eurasian security matters* (pp. 55–68). Allied Publishers.

Pant, H. V. (2013). *The rise of China in Asia: Security implications*. Oxford University Press.

Pant, H. V. (2014). *India's Afghan muddle: A lost opportunity*. HarperCollins Publishers India.

Pant, H. V. (2019). *India's foreign policy: A reader*. Oxford University Press.

Pantucci, R., & Petersen, A. (2022). *Sinostan: China's inadvertent empire*. Oxford University Press. (Crucial text for the concept of China's unintentional imperial footprint).

Pantucci, R., & Petersen, A. (2022). *Sinostan: China's inadvertent empire*. Oxford University Press.

Pantucci, R., & Petersen, A. (2022). *Sinostan: China's inadvertent empire*. Oxford University Press.

Pantucci, R., & Petersen, A. (2022). *Sinostan: China's inadvertent empire*. Oxford University Press.

Pascariu, G. C., Holovko-Havrysheva, O., & Krayevska, O. *Ukraine: Geopolitical realities and regional development perspectives*. Regional Science Policy & Practice, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 3–7. 2023.

- Patnaik, A. (2016). *Central Asia: Geopolitics, security and stability*. Routledge.
- Patnaik, A. *Regionalism and regional cooperation in Central Asia*. International Studies, Vol. 56, Nos. 2–3, pp. 147–162. 2019.
- Pirani, S. (2019). *Central Asian gas: Prospects for the 2020s*. Oxford Institute for Energy Studies.
- Pirani, S. *Central Asian Gas: Prospects for the 2020s*. Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. 2019.
- Pleshakov, V. (2023). *The OSCE in Central Asia: Engagement, presence, and institutional friction*. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 14(2), 178–195.
- Plokhyy, S. (2015). *The gates of Europe: A history of Ukraine*. Basic Books.
- Polytanou, G. *The new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean in the light of the European Green Deal*. Master's Thesis. University of Piraeus. 2022.
- Pomfret, R. (2006). *The Central Asian economies since independence*. Princeton University Press.
- Pomfret, R. (2019). *The Central Asian economies in the twenty-first century: Paving a new silk road*. Princeton University Press.
- Pomfret, R. (2019). *The Central Asian economies in the twenty-first century: Paving a new silk road*. Princeton University Press.
- Pomfret, R. *The Central Asian economies since independence*. (Monograph). 2020.
- Popov, P. L., & Cherenev, A. A. *The difference in the classical geopolitics of countries of the continental and oceanic types and the position of modern Russia*. *Geography and Natural Resources*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 1–6. 2022.
- Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and pipeline diplomacy in Central Asia: India's interests and policy options*. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 216–246. 2020.
- Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and the new great game in Central Asia*. *Millennial Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 265–288. 2022.
- Pradhan, R. *Energy geopolitics and the new great game in Central Asia*. *Millennial Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 265–288. 2022.
- Prodi, E., & Bossuyt, F. (2024). *The European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy in Central Asia: The role of critical raw materials*. *Journal of European Integration*, 46(2), 215–233.

Proedrou, F. *Revisiting pipeline politics and diplomacy: From energy security to domestic politics explanations*. Problems of Post-Communism, Vol. 65, No. 6, pp. 409–418. 2018.

Quah, D. *Correlated Trade and Geopolitics Driving a Fractured World Order*. In *The New Global Economic Order*, pp. 54–66. Routledge. 2025.

Quah, D. *Correlated Trade and Geopolitics Driving a Fractured World Order*. In *The New Global Economic Order*, pp. 54–66. Routledge. 2025.

Rahaman, M. M. (2012). Principles of transboundary water resources management and Ganges treaties: An analysis. *International Journal of Water Resources Development*, 25(1), 159-173.

Raik, K., Blockmans, S., Osypchuk, A., & Suslov, A. *EU policy towards Ukraine: Entering geopolitical competition over European order*. The International Spectator, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 39–58. 2024.

Rajpoot, A. R., & Naeem, S. *Geopolitics of energy pipelines: Case study of TAPI and IP gas pipelines*. International Journal on Integrated Education, Vol. 3, No. 8, pp. 15–22. 2020.

Ray, H. P. (2003). *The archaeology of seafaring in ancient South Asia*. Cambridge University Press. (Relevant for comparative overland-maritime connective analysis).

Reeves, M. (2014). *Border work: Spatial lives of the state in rural Central Asia*. Cornell University Press. (Essential reading for understanding the everyday realities and political performativity of the Fergana enclaves).

Rickli, J. M., & Mantellassi, F. *The war in Ukraine: Reality check for emerging technologies and the future of warfare*. Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). 2024.

Roberts, S. P., & Moshes, A. (2016). The Eurasian Economic Union: A case of reproductive integration? *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 32(6), 542–565.

Rodrigue, J. P. (2020). *The geography of transport systems* (5th ed.). Routledge. (Foundational text for the mechanics of transcontinental corridors versus maritime chokepoints).

Rojnić, D. *Geopolitical Discourse: Where and What is Eurasia?* Međunarodne Studije, Vol. 20, Nos. 1–2, pp. 39–58. 2020.

Rolland, N. (2017). *China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*. National Bureau of Asian Research.

Rolland, N. (2017). *China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*. National Bureau of Asian Research.

Rolland, N. (2019). *A China-Russia condominium over Eurasia*. Survival, 61(1), 65-72.

Roy, M. S. (2013). Iran: India's gateway to Central Asia. *Strategic Analysis*, 37(6), 657-675.

Rubavičius, V. *The Importance of Civilizational Imagination in Contemporary Geopolitics*. Dialogue and Universalism, No. 3, pp. 55–74. 2020.

Rubin, A., & Eiran, E. *Regional maritime security in the Eastern Mediterranean: Expectations and reality*. International Affairs, Vol. 95, No. 5, pp. 979–997. 2019.

Rumer, B. Z. *Soviet Central Asia: A tragic experiment*. Routledge. 2023.

Saeed, S. *Role of energy resources in global geopolitical conflicts*. Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 7, No. 3. 2024.

Sahakyan, M. (2023). Introduction: China, Eurasia, and the multipolar world order 2.0. In M. Sahakyan (Ed.), *China and Eurasian powers in a multipolar world order 2.0* (pp. 1–8). Routledge.

Sahakyan, M. (Ed.). (2023). *China and Eurasian powers in a multipolar world order 2.0: Security, diplomacy, economy and cyberspace*. Taylor & Francis.

Sahakyan, M. (Ed.). (2023). *China and Eurasian powers in a multipolar world order 2.0: Security, diplomacy, economy and cyberspace*. Routledge.

Sahakyan, M. (Ed.). *China and Eurasian Powers in a Multipolar World Order 2.0: Security, Diplomacy, Economy and Cyberspace*. Taylor & Francis. 2023.

Sahakyan, M. *Introduction: China, Eurasia, and the Multipolar World Order 2.0*. In *China and Eurasian Powers in a Multipolar World Order 2.0*, pp. 1–8. Routledge. 2023.

Scholten, D. *The Power of Energy: The Geopolitics of the Energy Transition*. E-International Relations, Vol. 17. 2024.

Shahi, D. K. *War in Ukraine: A geopolitical analysis*. International Journal of Research in Social Science, Vol. 12, No. 6. 2022.

Shezad, M., Bakht, M., & Nadeem, A. *Climate change diplomacy and the geopolitics of energy transition*. Journal of Political Stability Archive, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 350–367. 2025.

Shittu, W., Adedoyin, F. F., Shah, M. I., & Musibau, H. O. *An investigation of the nexus between natural resources, environmental performance, energy security and environmental degradation: Evidence from Asia*. Resources Policy, Vol. 73, 102227. 2021.

Siraj, U., Javaid, F., & FUUAST, K. P. *Resource curse and political & economic transition in Central Asia*. Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 2. 2021.

Skalamera, M. *The geopolitics of energy after the invasion of Ukraine*. The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 7–24. 2023.

- Small, A. (2020). *The axis: China, Pakistan and the middle game*. Yale University Press.
- Snyder, T. (2010). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books.
- Soboleva, E., & Krivohizh, S. *Leadership in the Multipolar World: China's Strategy in Central Asia*. International Trends, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 119–134. 2020.
- Soni, S. K. (2015). Mongolia and its third neighbors: Implications for regional security. *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 22(2), 75-90.
- Soni, S. K. (2020). India-Mongolia relations: Civilizational linkages to strategic partnership. In *India's extended neighborhood* (pp. 115-132). Springer.
- Spaiser, O. A. *The European Union's influence in Central Asia: Geopolitical challenges and responses*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC. 2018.
- Spechler, M. C., & Spechler, D. R. (2010). The foreign policy of Uzbekistan: Sources, objectives and outcomes. *Central Asian Survey*, 29(2), 159-170.
- Spoor, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Transition, institutions and the rural sector in post-communist countries*. Lexington Books. (*Crucial for Fergana Valley agricultural/water dynamics*).
- Spykman, N. J. (1942). *America's strategy in world politics: The United States and the balance of power*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Spykman, N. J. (1942). *America's strategy in world politics: The United States and the balance of power*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Spykman, N. J. (1942). *America's strategy in world politics: The United States and the balance of power*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Starr, S. F. (Ed.). (2014). *Ferghana Valley: The heart of Central Asia*. Routledge.
- Stergiou, A. *Eastern Mediterranean energy geopolitics revisited: Green economy instead of conflict*. Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 604–625. 2023.
- Stergiou, A. *Geopolitics and energy security in the Eastern Mediterranean: The formation of new energy alliances*. In *The New Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral Partnerships and Regional Security*, pp. 11–30. 2019.
- Stobdan, P. (2015). *India and Mongolia: Mapping the future*. Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).
- Stobdan, P. (2020). *Central Asia: India's strategic reach and limits*. Observer Research Foundation.
- Stobdan, P. (2020). *The great game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's quest for strategic dominance*. Penguin Random House India.

Styan, D. (2013). Djibouti: Changing influence in the Horn's strategic hub. *Chatham House Briefing Paper*.

Suleimenov, T. (2025). *Economic dynamics, inflation management, and structural reforms in Kazakhstan*. National Bank of Kazakhstan & CCAMTAC Plenary Addresses.

Suleimenov, T. (2025). *Economic dynamics, inflation management, and structural reforms in Kazakhstan*. National Bank of Kazakhstan & CCAMTAC Plenary Addresses.

Sultan, M. (2023). Geopolitics of connectivity: The role of the International North-South Transport Corridor. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 14(2), 112–128.

Sultan, M. (2025). *Pakistan and the Greater Eurasian Partnership: Challenges and prospects for trans-regional trade*. *Central Asian Survey*, 44(3), 310–328.

Sutter, R. G. *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force*. Rowman & Littlefield. 2020.

Świder, K. *Russian Neo-Eurasian Geopolitics as a Total Ideology on the Example of Aleksandr Dugin's Concept*. *Civitas: Studia z Filozofii Polityki*, No. 25, pp. 61–85. 2019.

Tanchum, M. (2025). *The Caspian Sea Region: A renewable hub for European energy security?* Clingendael Institute.

Taylor & Francis. (2026). *Reconceptualising the Red Sea neighbourhood: Bab-el-Mandeb, maritime space, and regional boundaries*. *Journal of Political Geography*.

Tellis, A. J. (2021). *India's grand strategy in the 21st century*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Toktomushev, K. (2018). *Promoting social cohesion and conflict mitigation: Understanding conflict in the cross-border areas of Central Asia*. University of Central Asia, Institute of Public Policy and Administration.

Tolipov, F. (2020). Uzbekistan and the new era of regional cooperation in Central Asia. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 11(1), 25-36.

Touazi, I. *Energy security and gas pipeline diplomacy: Italy's Mediterranean foreign policy post Russia–Ukraine war between security threats and geostrategic competition*. ITSS Verona Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 1. 2023.

Trenin, D. (2016). *Should we fear Russia?* Polity Press.

Trenin, D. (2025). *Eurasian security in a time of transition: Moscow's perspective*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Trenin, D. (2026). *The Eurasian imperative: Russia's strategic pivot in the post-Ukraine order*. Carnegie Moscow Center.

Tsygankov, A. P. (2003). Mastering space in Eurasia: Russia's geopolitical thinking after the Soviet break-up. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 36(1), 101–127.

Tukmadiyeva, M. (2013). Xinjiang in China's foreign policy toward Central Asia. *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, 12(3), 87–108.

Turki, A. M., & Askari, M. U. *Russia–Ukraine Conflict: Geopolitical Shifts and Declining Western Hegemony*. *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 177–186. 2025.

U.S. Energy Information Administration. (2026). *Country analysis brief: Iran*. <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRN>

Umarov, T. (2023). *Why Central Asia is buying Russian gas*. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

Umbach, F., & Spreitzhofer, G. (2025). China's Belt and Road Initiative and the geoeconomics of the green transition. *Eurasian Security Studies*, 14(2), 112-135.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2025). *Climate, land and security risks go hand-in-hand in Central Asia*. *Eurasia Blog*.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). (2026). *A policy guide for sustainable critical minerals supply chains in Central Asia*. *UN Publications*.

United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). (2025). *Annual report on preventive diplomacy and regional cooperation in Central Asia*. *UN Publications*.

Van de Graaf, T. *The geopolitics of energy after Russia's war in Ukraine*. In *Forging Europe's Leadership: Global Trends, Russian Aggression and the Risk of a Regressive World*, pp. 25–40. *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*. 2023.

Vanderhill, R., Joireman, S. F., & Tulepbayeva, R. (2020). Between the bear and the dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a model strategy for secondary powers. *International Affairs*, 96(4), 975-993.

Varnavskii, V. (2020). Global transport & logistics infrastructure. *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, 64(1), 5-14.

Vasilyevna, Z. E., Anatolyevna, Z. L., Mikhailovna, S. L., Nikolaevna, S. N., & Pavlovna, C. I. *The geopolitical concept of the Eurasians*. *Российский Научный Вестник*, Vol. 20. (n.d.).

Vinokurov, E. (2018). *Introduction to the Eurasian Economic Union*. *Palgrave Macmillan*.

Von Hauff, L. *Towards a New Quality of Cooperation? The EU, China, and Central Asian Security in a Multipolar Age*. Asia Europe Journal, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 195–210. 2019.

Wang, F., Wang, C., Chen, J., Zeng, L., & Li, L. *Examining the determinants of energy-related carbon emissions in Central Asia: Country-level LMDI and EKC analysis during different phases*. Environment, Development and Sustainability, Vol. 22, No. 8, pp. 7743–7769. 2020.

Wang, M. Balancing, challenges, and opportunities: Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy after the Ukraine crisis. (Unpublished manuscript). 2024.

Warikoo, K. (Ed.). (2010). *Religion and security in South and Central Asia*. Routledge.

Warikoo, K. (Ed.). (2010). *Religion and security in South and Central Asia*. Routledge.

Warikoo, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Central Asia and South Asia: Energy cooperation and transport linkages*. Pentagon Press.

Warikoo, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Central Asia and South Asia: Energy cooperation and transport linkages*. Pentagon Press.

Warikoo, K. (Ed.). (2012). *Xinjiang: China's northwest frontier*. Routledge.

Warikoo, K., & Norbu, D. (Eds.). (1992). *Ethnicity and politics in Central Asia*. South Asian Publishers.

Wastnidge, E., & Yermekbayev, A. (2025). Iran and Central Asia: Eurasian geopolitics in a changing world order. *The International Spectator*, 60(4), 1-18.

Wegerich, K. (2008). *Hydro-hegemony in the Amu Darya Basin*. *Water Policy*, 10(2), 71–88.

Weinthal, E. (2002). *State making and environmental cooperation: Linking domestic and international politics in Central Asia*. MIT Press.

Wilson, J. L. (2021). Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening tensions in the relationship. *Acta Via Serica*, 6(1), 55–90.

Wilson, J. L. *Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship*. *Acta Via Serica*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 55–90. 2021.

Wink, A. (2002). *Al-Hind: The making of the Indo-Islamic world (Vol. 1-3)*. Brill.

Winn, N., & Gänzle, S. *Recalibrating EU foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards principled pragmatism and resilience*. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 1342–1361. 2023.

Winn, N., & Gänzle, S. *Recalibrating EU foreign policy vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards principled pragmatism and resilience*. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 1342–1361. 2023.

Wójtowicz, A. (2024). *EU energy security after Russia's invasion of Ukraine – Substance, strategy and lobbying*. *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs*, 28(2), 45–62.

Wolfe, S. D., Denysenko, O., Krichker, D., Rebro, O., & Gunko, M. *The intimate and everyday geopolitics of the Russian war against Ukraine*. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 1474–1501. 2024.

Wu, Z. *Classical geopolitics, realism and the balance of power theory*. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 6, pp. 786–823. 2018.

Xenarios, S., Schmidt-Vogt, D., Qadir, M., Janusz-Pawletta, B., & Abdullaev, I. (2019). Climate change and water security in Central Asia. In *The Aral Sea Basin* (pp. 94-114). Routledge.

Yekelchyk, Serhy. (2020). *Ukraine: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford University Press.

Yuneman, R. A. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 141–162. 2023.

Zagorski, A. (2021). *Security in Eurasia: A view from the OSCE perspective*. *OSCE Documentation and Information Centre*.

Zengin, A., & Topsakal, İ. Gordian knot in Central Asia regional security complex: A multi-vector analysis. *Eurasian Research Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 19–36. 2020.

Zhao, H. (2020). China's leadership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A power transition perspective. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29(122), 268-283.

Zhou, Q., He, Z., & Yang, Y. *Energy geopolitics in Central Asia: China's involvement and responses*. *Journal of Geographical Sciences*, Vol. 30, No. 11, pp. 1871–1895. 2020.

Zreik, M. *Contemporary geopolitics of Eurasia and the Belt and Road Initiative*. *Eurasian Research Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 7–26. 2022.

Žuk, P., Buzogány, A., Mišík, M., Osička, J., & Szulecki, K. *Semi-peripheries in the world-system? The Visegrad group countries in the geopolitical order of energy and raw materials after the war in Ukraine*. *Resources Policy*, Vol. 85, 104046. 2023.

Масимханулы, Д., Айнур, А., & Дарбай, Н. *World geopolitics and the new situation in the Central Asian region: Turning points and trends*. *Казахстанское Востоковедение*, Vol. 13, No. 1. 2025.

Relevance Of the Book

For decades, international relations theory operated under the illusion that the era of territorial geopolitics had been permanently eclipsed by a maritime, hyper-globalized order. *The Heartland: The Great Game Returns* shatters this obsolete paradigm, demonstrating how the twenty-first-century global order is being aggressively dismantled and reconstructed from the geographic center of the world outward.

Synthesizing classical geopolitical theory with modern geoeconomic realities, this volume is critically relevant for understanding the new parameters of global stability. Its urgency rests on four foundational shifts currently transforming the Eurasian landmass:

The Violent Return of Continental Geopolitics: The Russia-Ukraine war has caused a profound systemic rupture. The book analyzes the structural shockwaves of this conflict, detailing how Moscow's weaponized "State Eurasianism" has ironically fractured the post-Soviet space and definitively ended unquestioned Russian hegemony.

The Incubator of Multipolarity: The transition away from unipolarity is not being managed in the West; it is being institutionalized in Eurasia. The volume decodes how non-Western powers are actively constructing an alternative global architecture through plurilateral platforms like the SCO and BRICS+, empowering heartland states to practice strategic hedging.

Green Geopolitics and the "Electro-State": Providing an urgent update to classical heartland theory, the book tracks the shift from legacy hydrocarbons to Critical Raw Materials (CRMs). It illustrates how the battle for technological supremacy between China and the West hinges on the lithium, copper, and rare earth supply chains of emerging Eurasian "Electro-States."

The New Cartography of Global Trade: As supply-chain sovereignty becomes paramount, the book details the intense infrastructural rivalry between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the European-backed Middle Corridor, and the India-led INSTC. These corridors are permanently altering global logistics by circumventing both maritime chokepoints and sanctioned Russian territory.

For decades following the end of the Cold War, mainstream International Relations theory operated under a comfortable illusion: that the era of territorial geopolitics was over, eclipsed by a maritime-led, liberal, and hyper-globalized world order. The Eurasian heartland was frequently relegated to the margins of strategic thought, viewed either as a stagnant post-Soviet hinterland or a mere transit corridor.

This volume argues that such paradigms are not merely outdated—they are dangerously obsolete. The publication of *The Heartland: The Great Game Returns* comes at a moment of profound systemic rupture. The contemporary relevance of this book rests on its capacity to explain how the twenty-first-century global order is being aggressively dismantled and reconstructed from the geographic centre of the world outward.

The transition from unipolarity to a multipolar world is the defining feature of contemporary global politics. This transition is not being managed in Washington or Brussels; it is being institutionalized in Eurasia. By providing a comprehensive analysis of "New Regionalism" and the rise of plurilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS+, this book decodes the mechanisms through which non-Western powers are actively constructing an alternative global architecture.

Ultimately, the relevance of this volume lies in its synthesis of classical geopolitical theory with twenty-first-century geoeconomic realities. To navigate the security, economic, and normative parameters of global politics today, it is no longer sufficient to look solely at the Indo-Pacific or the Euro-Atlantic. This book provides scholars, strategists, and students of international relations with the essential manual for understanding the new rules of the Great Game—proving that the stability of the emerging world order remains inextricably anchored to the Eurasian Heartland. It provides policymakers and scholars with the necessary framework to understand how heartland states practice strategic hedging to survive the intensifying Sino-Russian-Western friction.

Author Biography



Dr. Madan Yadav is currently the Head of the Department and a faculty member in the Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Headquarters in New Delhi. In addition to his departmental leadership, he serves as a member of the university's Academic Council and functions as the coordinator for the School of Social Sciences' Gyan Darshan educational television channel.

Beyond his primary institutional roles, Dr. Yadav contributes to the wider academic community as an Executive Council Member and the Treasurer of the Alumni Association of JNU (AAJ). His prior teaching career includes faculty positions in Political Science and International Relations at both the University of Delhi and Sikkim Central University in Gangtok. Dr. Yadav holds a comprehensive academic lineage from the School of International Studies (SIS), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, where he completed his Master's in Politics (with an International Relations specialization), alongside his M.Phil. and Ph.D. in International Relations and Politics. Dr. Yadav's extensive research focuses on South Asian democratic structures, Eurasian geopolitics, and defense policy—areas on which he has published over 18 scholarly papers. Dr. Yadav's scholarly work focuses on the intersection of democratic governance and strategic affairs. His research offers deep insights into the structural nature of South Asian democracies while simultaneously analyzing India's foreign and defense policies through both regional and global lenses. His expertise covers vital geopolitical zones, specifically tracing the shifting balances of power across Eurasia and mapping the global footprint of US and European Union foreign relations.

He is currently authoring an upcoming book focusing on contemporary Indian Foreign Policy. Personally, he is a life member of ISKCON and a dedicated follower and great believers in ageless philosophy of Lord Krishna.