

## Central Asia as a Continental Bridge or Thucydides Trap?

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*When the Western press and media report on Xinjiang, they tend to focus on the situation of the Uyghurs in this autonomous region of China. The fact that Xinjiang is of the highest strategic importance for China as a raw materials base, gateway to Central Asia and starting point of the New Silk Road, which is orientated towards Europe, and that real geopolitics is all about precisely these things, is often neglected. Of course, the starting point of the New Silk Road is in the strategists' crosshairs and it goes without saying that Central Asia and the South Caucasus are also targeted. After all, the shortest transport corridors to Europe run through these areas, now that the transport routes via Russia have been cancelled by Russia's war in Ukraine. This is where the Chinese New Silk Road and the European Global Gateway meet. What is the situation in Central Asia? What role does the International Trans-Caspian Transport Route play? How are China, the USA and Europe acting where the future of the New Silk Road is ultimately at stake? This article aims to provide a few answers to these questions, which should therefore only be understood as an approach to the topic of "Central Asia as a continental bridge or Thucydides' trap?".*

### USA as Hegemonic Pacemaker in US-Chinese Relations

When Zbigniew Brzezinski published his "Strategic Vision" in 2012, the US President was still able to lean back in his chair in the Oval Office. Brzezinski stated that no state had "the requisite combination of economic, financial, technological, and military power" to "even consider inheriting America's leading role."<sup>1</sup> He therefore also considered it "unlikely" that any state would actually do so. Nevertheless, in 2008, the National Intelligence Council estimated in its *Global Trends 2025* study, under the impression

of the global financial crisis caused by the USA, that the USA would remain the most powerful single actor, but that its influence would become weaker. A more pessimistic view was that "the international system as it emerged after the Second World War would be almost unrecognisable by 2025."<sup>2</sup> The analysts described China and Russia as "key states" and pointed to a "growing unease with China's rise among its neighbors."<sup>3</sup> They saw China and India as merely "status quo powers" "focused on their own development, drawing benefits

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from the current system and not too eager for the US or others to seek radical changes to the international order."<sup>4</sup>

However, the results of globalisation and the global financial crisis had already shifted the existing balance in the world economy considerably to the disadvantage of the US and to the advantage of China. While the USA and China had previously formed the development axis of the global economy, with China producing goods and the USA buying them on credit, China and Germany now formed the new axis. This had "the advantage that two countries were working together that were financially stable, and both were exchanging real products."<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin commented at the time: "The core problem is the accumulation of global imbalances. The model whereby one regional centre piles up unbridled bonds and consumes goods while the other produces cheap goods and buys up debt has failed."<sup>6</sup> Kissinger recognised at this point that the rising China was not the result of its military strength, but the result of an American competitive position that had fallen behind due to a dilapidated infrastructure, inadequate research and development and "a seemingly dysfunctional government process".<sup>7</sup> Added to this was undoubtedly the gigantic debt of the USA abroad, in the state and in private households. The USA had to react if it did not want to lose its hegemony. The policy change was announced with the spectacularly staged inauguration of US President Barack Obama and his loudly proclaimed "Yes, we can!". It was subsequently accompanied by an unprecedented media campaign worldwide.

In 2011, US President Obama

announced the formation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), to which the "status quo power" China, which had not only been fully integrated into the global economy since the 1990s but had also become the "workbench of the world", was only to be granted access "as soon as it could fulfil the market economy conditions for it."<sup>8</sup> Also in 2011, Obama's Secretary of State Hilary Clinton declared in an article with the unassuming title *America's Pacific Century*: "...we will continue to embed our relationship with China in a broader regional framework of security alliances, economic networks, and social connections."<sup>9</sup> Even then, "embedding China" meant wanting to contain China, step by step, of course, and without wanting to jeopardise our own economic interests. Josef Braml comments: "America's approach to China is ambivalent. The US strategy is a mixture of containment and engagement, i.e. a dual strategy of so-called conengagement. On the other hand, the USA is already vulnerable in terms of economic and trade policy and is dependent on financial policy cooperation with China."<sup>10</sup> In 2011, Obama finally announced the "Pivot to Asia", which even envisaged the relocation of 60 per cent of the US Navy to the Pacific region. The Obama administration adopted a tougher stance towards China, albeit as a "leader from behind" who was happy to impose some of his burdens on allies. Kenneth Lieberthal (Brookings) pointed out that the USA intended to be a long-term leader in Asia. It would be prepared "to encourage China's ongoing development so long as that does not produce behaviour that challenges America's overall position or vital interests in the region."<sup>11</sup>

China's President Xi Jinping, on the other hand, presented his New Silk Road initiative in a speech in the Kazakh city of Astana in 2013. Xi Jinping gave his Central Asian partner countries the impression that China would act as equals and treat them as partners within the framework of this initiative. The fact that China had underpinned the New Silk Road with a geopolitical concept conceived in a Eurasian dimension became clear at the latest during Xi Jinping's state visit to Germany in 2014, when he explained in an article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "China and Germany are located at the two ends of the Eurasian continent, they are each outstanding representatives of Eastern and Western civilisation. (...) Since China and Germany are the most important economies in Asia and Europe respectively, their increased integration will mean the joining of two powerful forces, the joining of the growth poles of Asia and Europe."<sup>12</sup>

China moved swiftly to implement its New Silk Road initiative. One step in this process was the conclusion of the *Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Building the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt* between China and Russia on 8 May 2015, in which both sides agreed to work together in bilateral and multilateral formats within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in specific directions.<sup>13</sup> The extent to which the declaration was only intended to simulate a larger geopolitical dimension, especially vis-à-vis third parties, cannot be assessed here. However, despite its enormous transit potential, China surprisingly still excluded Russia from

China's most important economic and geopolitical project, the New Silk Road. Also in 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed the formation of a "Great Eurasian Partnership", which would also be open to EU member states.

The inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump in 2016 represented a radical break in US policy, even at first glance. However, what was now expressed more openly, more ruthlessly and also more aggressively had generally already been conceived and planned by the Obama administration, which certainly indicated a certain degree of strategic continuity despite Trump. However, it was to become particularly typical of Trump to use trade policy as a weapon that could be used worldwide, coming up with threats and being prepared to break every existing rule. He focussed on China, Russia and, surprisingly, Germany. None of this was really just a whim of the president, everything was planned relatively carefully and with foresight. The clinch between the USA and China was no longer just the result of bilateral competition. It was about the binding geopolitical order for the 21st century, about who would emerge victorious from the fourth industrial revolution and determine the new world order. However, climate change, which was essentially caused by the excessive greed brought about by the US-dominated economic system, also characterised the subsequent global disputes.

The US National Security Strategy adopted in 2017 made the current assessments transparent. It states:

"China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally.

Today, they are fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime. In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favour."<sup>14</sup>

China and Russia were defined as "revisionist powers" and identified along with "rogue states" and transnational terrorist organisations as those who would challenge American power. China was alleged to want to "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour."<sup>15</sup> The strategy went on to say that "China gathers and exploits data on an unrivaled scale" and is "building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own."<sup>16</sup>

In reality, however, the USA was in serious trouble. Braml points out that China had freed itself from its dependence on the USA and thus reduced its own vulnerability. The New Silk Road connected China with East Asia, West Asia and Europe. China made its infrastructure, its trade and information routes available worldwide as "public goods", creating its own dependencies in this way, but also offering everyone the advantages of a win-win situation.<sup>17</sup>

The US attached particular importance to the Indo-Pacific region, where it believed "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order" would take place, requiring "sustained US leadership" throughout the region. Maintaining military supremacy in

this region was seen as the top priority. As a way out, the US saw the strengthening of its alliances with Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the expansion of quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India, with Washington intending to develop India as a strategic and defence partner. The US continued its close relations with Taiwan "in accordance with our 'One China' policy" and in fulfilment of its obligations under the Taiwan Relation Act. The Philippines and Thailand were considered its "important allies", while Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were its "growing security and economic partners."<sup>18</sup> The US stated its firm intention to "work with the Central Asian states to guarantee access to the region to support our counterterrorism efforts."<sup>19</sup> Considering the intensification of "competing" US diplomacy in China's neighbouring states, the strategic positioning of NATO troops in Afghanistan and the US military bases in East Asia or nearby regions, the impression of a strategic encirclement of China was certainly not unjustified.

The National Security Strategy published after US President Joseph Biden took office in 2022 went one step further: it made it clear that powers such as Russia and China, "that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy" would pose "the most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision." While Russia was seen as a "threat to the free and open international system", the US analysts described China as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and

technological power to advance that objective."<sup>20</sup>

The challenges posed by China were described as "systemic". Beijing wants to expand its sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region, the "epicentre of 21st century geopolitics", and become the leading world power itself. The US, its allies and partners would therefore "shape the PRC and Russia's external environment in a way that influences their behaviour even as we compete with them."<sup>21</sup> However, as China plays a central role in the global economy, competition in the Indo-Pacific region is "most pronounced", but is now also taking place globally. Among other measures, the US would "hold Beijing accountable for abuses - genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, human rights violations in Tibet, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms..."<sup>22</sup> Regarding Taiwan, the strategy states: "We remain committed to our one China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the Three Joint Communiqués, and the Six Assurances."<sup>23</sup>

In the Eurasian region, the US would "continue to support the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Central Asia" and promote "resilience and democratic development" in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

While the US intends to strategically incapacitate Russia to a limited extent by making the war in Ukraine a strategic failure, restricting Russia's strategic economic sectors, excluding Russia from "enjoying the benefits of global integration", weakening its conventional military and deterring Russian actions that

threaten key US interests, the "security strategy" for China envisaged a different approach in view of its role in the global economy. The USA would "endeavour to achieve greater strategic stability" in the military sphere with China. They would be interested in cooperating with China "on priorities" such as climate, pandemics, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, combating illegal drug trafficking, the global food crisis and macroeconomic issues, the security strategy stated.

Nevertheless, President Biden decided to build a large coalition of allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region, as he did in Europe in the case of the war in Ukraine, not least in order to share the financial burden. Conceptually, however, Brzezinski's *Strategic Vision* may also have played a role, which states: "Unlike America's favourable geographic location, China is potentially vulnerable to a strategic encirclement. Japan stands in the way of China's access to the Pacific Ocean, Russia separates China from Europe, and India towers over an ocean named after itself that serves as China's main access to the Middle East."<sup>24</sup> This was probably the approach taken in terms of planning, except that in practice the work was much more intricate, detailed and also considered aspects of networking.

In his speech at George Washington University on 26 May 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasised that the US will focus on China in the near future as "the most serious long-term challenge to the international order" and "shape strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system."<sup>25</sup> Blinken

continued:

"But we will defend our interests against any threat. To that end, President Biden has instructed the Department of Defence to hold China as its pacing challenge, to ensure that our military stays ahead. We 'll seek to preserve peace through a new approach that we call 'integrated deterrence' - bringing in allies and partners; working across the conventional, nuclear, space and informational domains, drawing on our reinforcing strengths in economics, in

technology, and in diplomacy."<sup>26</sup>

And China, how is China responding? Chinese foreign policy expert Yao Zhongqiu describes China's position in a few, but very accurate words: "Pax Americana will only allow China to develop in a manner which is subordinated to the rule of the United States, and so China has no choice but to take a new path and work to establish a new international order."<sup>27</sup> Certainly, similar assessments can also be found in the BRICS countries.

### **Geographical and Geopolitical Aspects**

As the USA increasingly gained the impression that its hegemony was under threat and that its strategic competitor China could gain the upper hand as a "systemic rival", it began to develop global strategies and regional planning games to enable it to take countermeasures. Naturally, this also included the development of military options with a hybrid approach, which analysts and strategic planners usually begin with "a look at the map".

A look at the map points to the special feature that China has a north-south extension of 4,500 kilometres and an east-west extension of 4,200 kilometres and therefore a very large strategic depth. 33 per cent of the territory is crossed by mountains and 21 per cent by deserts, making these areas difficult to cross and impassable terrain. China borders 14 countries<sup>28</sup> and has the longest land border in the world at 22,457 kilometres. In the south-west, west and north of the People's Republic of China, the Tibet Autonomous Region (founded on 9 September 1965), the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

(founded on 1 October 1955) and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (founded on 1 May 1947) cover the Chinese heartland. Tibetans, Uyghurs and Mongols are the titular nationalities of these administrative units. Tibetans (Zang) live in Tibet, Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan, Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Mongols in Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Jilin, Hebei, Heilongjiang and Xinjiang. There are traditionally close cultural and religious ties between Tibetans and Mongols. The recognition of the Dalai Lama as the head of Lamaist Buddhism is widespread among Tibetans and Mongolians.

The Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang is the largest of the three autonomous administrative units, accounting for 17.3 per cent of China's territory. Xinjiang is followed by the Tibet Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, whose territories account for 12.8 per cent and 12.43 per cent of China's territory respectively. This means that these three autonomous regions account for 42.53 per cent of China's

total national territory. According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, 26.5 million people lived in Xinjiang, 3.7 million in Tibet and 24.6 million in Inner Mongolia at the end of 2022. No information is provided on the number of Uyghurs, Tibetans and Mongols living there. Various sources refer to approx. 48 per cent Uyghurs in Xinjiang, approx. 4 million Mongols in Inner Mongolia and more than 90 per cent Tibetans in Tibet, although some of these figures appear questionable and often do not take into account mixed marriages or the degree of ethnic assimilation of these people. While the titular nationalities used to make up the absolute majority of the population in these areas, today the Han Chinese clearly dominate and their numbers continue to rise with the expansion of infrastructure, industrialisation and the provision of housing and work.

All three autonomous administrative regions have national borders. Tibet borders Bhutan, Nepal and India, Xinjiang borders India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia, while Mongolia and Inner Mongolia border Mongolia and Russia.

China was divided into seven military districts until 2015. The three autonomous regions fell under the jurisdiction of the Lanzhou and Chengdu military districts. In 2016, five theatre commands were formed, of which the Western Command focuses on Tibet and Xinjiang and thus also on the borders with Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia. The biggest real challenge in an emergency would be a conflict with India, but an open

war is hardly conceivable at present. Both countries are nuclear weapons powers and the extreme geographical conditions of the possible theatre of operations would hardly allow the deployment of ground combat troops. This may be one of the reasons why the main combat troops of the People's Liberation Army are deployed in the far east of the theatre of operations. Nevertheless, the troops stationed in the Western Command are among the best in the People's Liberation Army in terms of armament, equipment and structures.<sup>29</sup> The Northern Command covers Inner Mongolia and the land borders with Russia, Mongolia and North Korea as well as maritime borders.

The authors of the 2015 Military Strategy of the People's Republic of China assessed the Western Command area as problematic due to "separatist" activities in the "National Security Situation" section. In this document, they mentioned the existence and activities of organisations campaigning for the independence of "East Turkestan" or Tibet. For this reason, intensified "efforts in operations against infiltration, separatism and terrorism so as to maintain China's political security and social stability" were defined as a strategic task for the Chinese armed forces.<sup>30</sup>

China has greatly intensified its fight against, for example, the East Turkestan Islamic Party after "9/11" as an expression of counter-terrorism. On the other hand, its excellent relations with Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the most important sponsors of Sunni Islamic radicalism, have enabled it to keep the extent of Uyghur terrorism relatively low. Beijing's real concerns are more likely to stem from

the fact that these movements, which only have a small number of members (some 500 fighters are rumoured), are not fuelled by Islamic extremism, but primarily by ethnic separatism. However, this is likely to affect the interests of some sides.

In addition, there are border problems with India that have not yet been resolved through negotiations and have even led to the expansion of military infrastructure on both sides of the border. Hopes that India's accession to the Shanghai Organisation (SCO) would change this have not been fulfilled, not least because of China's close partnership with Pakistan.

The fact that Xinjiang has become the starting point of the New Silk Road is undoubtedly of particular and strategic importance. The two international railway crossings of Horgos and Alashankou are located on the border with Kazakhstan and are the starting point for freight transport from China to Europe as part of the New Silk Road. The Horgos freight station (opened on 19 March 2016) connects China with 18 countries and regions, while Alashankou (opened in 2013) connects China with 25 countries and regions. Since 2013, 36,622 China-Europe goods trains have been handled in Alashankou and 33,403 in Horgos since 2016, which illustrates the scale of this freight traffic. In 2023, 6,260 China-Europe trains passed through Alashankou and 7,268 China-Europe trains passed through Horgos as of 11 December. According to the China Railway Urumqi Group, the dwell time of a China-Europe goods train was minimised from more than 12 to 6 to 8 hours by improving transport efficiency and optimising operating processes at both

railway crossings. The total volume of China-Europe goods trains now accounts for more than half of the country's total railway volume. The dimensions illustrate that the Alashankou and Horgos border crossings are neuralgic points on which the functioning of the New Silk Road depends to a large extent.

Xinjiang's foreign trade increased by 45.9 per cent in 2023 and reached a volume of USD 50.25 billion. The autonomous region's import/export with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan increased by 50 per cent year-on-year and accounted for 79.4 per cent of Xinjiang's total foreign trade. Xinjiang mainly exports labour-intensive and electromechanical products to the Central Asian region.

During his visit to Urumqi (Xinjiang) in August 2023, President Xi Jinping emphasised the need to "anchor Xinjiang's strategic position in the overall national situation", as this relates to "the overall task of building China into a strong modern socialist country in all respects and promoting the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". Xi Jinping gave top priority to "maintaining social stability" and economic development in Xinjiang. He called for strengthening the rule of law "to lay a solid legal foundation for lasting stability", improving the "mechanism for forestalling and defusing major risks and potential dangers" and adding "that the fight against terrorism and separatism should be integrated with the law-based and constant work of maintaining stability."<sup>31</sup> As the starting point of the New Silk Road, Xinjiang is a neuralgic point of great strategic importance and, like Tibet,



an Achilles' heel. Measured against the situation that has arisen since the start of the war in Ukraine, the continental New Silk Road would lose both its economic

significance and its strategic clout without transit to Europe via Central Asia.

### Snapshot of Central Asia

If Xinjiang is the starting point of the New Silk Road, the region of Central Asia is the geographical area through which the transit of the "New Silk Road" takes place. *Russia in Central Asia*: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which are usually subsumed under the term "Central Asia",

belonged to the Soviet Union as Soviet republics and are therefore still claimed by Russia as its traditional sphere of interest. Russia maintains close political, economic and military relations with these states, as the following table of memberships shows:

	<b>Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)</b>	<b>Treaty on Collective Security</b>	<b>Shanghai Cooperation Organisation</b>	<b>Eurasian Economic Union</b>
Kazakhstan	X	X	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	X	X	X	X
Tajikistan	X	X	X	-
Uzbekistan	X	-	X	-
Turkmenistan	X (associated)	-	X	-

Nevertheless, Russia's influence on the Central Asian states has waned considerably. The Russian war in Ukraine has reinforced this trend. Alexei Malašenko (Centre for Situation Analysis, IMEMO Moscow) points out that the countries of Central Asia do not support Russia's actions in Ukraine. They do not recognise the integration of the Lugansk and Donbass regions into the Russian Federation, but also reject the sanctions against Russia that are damaging to them, which ultimately led to a significant increase in their imports from Europe and exports to Russia. Scepticism in Central Asia towards organisations under Russian patronage is growing, not least because other options seem to be tempting. This means that these states are increasingly

orientated towards their own interests.<sup>32</sup> The younger generations in Central Asia have no memories of a shared historical past in the Soviet Union and know no gratitude towards Russia. The experiences of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia are reflected in rather negative emotions in Central Asia. This trend is reinforced by the drastic decline in labour migration in Russia due to the COVID pandemic, which increased unemployment in Central Asia. The fact that Russia is now perceived as rather weak is increasingly leading to the conclusion in Central Asia that less can be expected from Russia. Nothing can be said about a weakening power. The young elites of Central Asia, some of whom still speak Russian, are reacting in a friendly but pragmatic and coolly calculating

manner, but if Russia were to regain its strength, they would nevertheless turn to it just as pragmatically.

According to *RIA Novosti*, the volume of Russia's trade with Kazakhstan in 2023 was USD 26 billion, with Uzbekistan USD 9.9 billion, with Kyrgyzstan USD 2.9 billion and with Tajikistan USD 1.7 billion (no data on Turkmenistan).<sup>33</sup>

*China in Central Asia:* Over the decades, China has been the only country in Central Asia to realise major economic projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan motorway, the China-Tajikistan motorway, the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline and the China-Central Asia pipeline.

It has rapidly expanded its economic relations with Central Asia in recent years. In 2020, the bilateral trade volume totalled USD 38.6 billion, while China's trade surplus amounted to over USD 3.8 billion in 2020. While the Central Asian countries export raw materials at often fluctuating world market prices, they mainly import high value-added manufacturing products from China. In 2021, 7,700 Chinese companies were active in Central Asia. One important instrument of influence for China is investment, which totalled USD 40 billion at the end of 2020 and was mainly made in the energy sector. Kazakhstan accounted for half of this. China is an important lender. 45 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's foreign loans (= USD 1.7 billion) come from China, while the figure for Tajikistan is 52 per cent (= USD 1.2 billion). Liabilities to China amount to 16.9 per cent of GDP in Turkmenistan, 16 per cent in Uzbekistan and 6.5 per cent in Kazakhstan.<sup>34</sup> As the countries are hardly

in a position to repay these debts, they are increasingly forced to make concessions to China.

China has learnt to expand its influence in Central Asia with a lot of soft power. It establishes and expands flexible connections with the elite of the countries whose demands, structures and weaknesses it has studied well, adapting itself locally by accepting and adapting existing practices and norms in its actions. At least openly, it does not interfere in internal affairs and talks primarily about joint business deals, which are generally centred on natural resources and infrastructure development. The resource requirements of intensive Chinese production are very high, but also China's real neuralgic point. The transport of natural gas and crude oil to Xinjiang via pipelines is efficient and now also cost-effective. As the first section of the New Silk Road lies in Central Asia, China is investing in transport and logistics and is working on the expansion of a third border crossing with Kazakhstan and the Trans-Caspian railway transport route. As far as infrastructure development is concerned, there is a focus on energy infrastructure such as thermal power plants, hydroelectric power plants, pumping stations, water supply systems, the development of solar and wind energy, as well as the expansion of telecommunications. However, these undoubtedly positive trends say little about the inner feelings of Central Asians towards China and the Chinese. The war in Ukraine has once again opened up a useful window of opportunity for China in Central Asia. Despite all assurances to the contrary, China will try to take over the positions previously occupied by Russia.

*Central Asia:* In the West, Central Asia is often referred to as Russia's "soft underbelly", which on the one hand points to the fragility of this region and on the other to the fact that Russia itself is highly sensitive in this region. It is therefore a key interest of Russia to maintain security and stability in Central Asia, while the West sees opportunities in Central Asia to stage political games against strategic rivals.

In fact, the states of Central Asia are still quite fragile, which is due to a rather imperfect nation-building process. The best example of this is Kazakhstan, which is actually considered to be relatively strong and stable, where traditional clan, family and tribal structures play a very influential role. Its President K.-J. Tokaev, who took over from his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbaev in 2019, who had ruled for decades, only instructed a meeting of the National Kuriltai in March 2024 to rewrite Kazakhstan's national history. It is to look for the origins of Kazakhstan in the Mongolian Golden Horde, which does not exactly speak in favour of a firmly

established Kazakh nation. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also see important origins of their history in the time of the Mongolian Empire and therefore, like Mongolia, have a certain affinity with China.

The Central Asian states are above all autocracies customised to the person of their presidents, who nevertheless guarantee social cohesion in these countries. Given the current trend towards Islamisation, there may indeed be no alternative to these autocratic forms of government if the internal stability of the countries and the region is not to be called into question. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable fragility caused by social instability and corruption. While social instability could still be mitigated a few years ago by labour migration to Russia, this option has essentially been exhausted following the coronavirus pandemic. The following table at least gives an impression of the fragility and perception of corruption in these countries, even if it is not the absolute reality.

*Fragile States Index (2022) and Corruption Perceptions Index (2022)*<sup>35</sup>

	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b>
Fragile States Index/ worldwide Rank	111 out of 179	69 out of 179	72 out of 179	95 out of 179	104 out of 179
Corruption perception Index/global rank	101 out of 180	140 out of 180	150 out of 180	126 out of 180	167 out of 180

*Fragility: Rank 1=most fragile country, 179 most stable country.*

The political elites in Central Asia are not interested in the dominance of any powers in their region and try to avoid restricting their sovereignty with the help of intelligent variants of the political game. With the help of the multi-vectoral

approach in their foreign policy, they have so far understood quite well how to be both open to the outside world and to distance themselves flexibly if they gain the impression that their influence at home or in their region could suffer as a result.

They admire China's development and are of course also prepared to develop together with China if this seems advantageous to them, but would rigorously curb China's excessive influence locally. For a long time, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was not only a security alliance par excellence that allowed them to keep certain powers at a friendly distance, but also an important instrument of internal stability. The SCO summits took place at various levels, with the heads of state meeting with the heads of state of Russia and China as well as with and among themselves. The SCO thus compensated for the lack of a Central Asian alliance format. In their dealings with the USA and the EU, they are open and willing to engage in economic and ecological cooperation, including projects to promote sustainable connectivity, but some discussions of values may well trigger reactions of retreat. The memory of colour revolutions keeps political mistrust alive. Central Asia has many fragile aspects, which have also been mentioned here, but the states have always proved to be more stable than their reputation, which once again indicates that the existing form of government is not unsuitable for guaranteeing the existence of the state.

**Kazakhstan:** Politically and economically, Kazakhstan is undoubtedly the leading state in Central Asia. At USD 225.5 billion, the country had the highest gross domestic product in Central Asia in 2022. Kazakhstan has rich mineral resources and exports, in order of export share, crude oil (48.2 per cent), gold (9.86 per cent), copper concentrate (3.85 per cent), ferroalloys (3.33 per cent) and radioactive material (2.89 per cent), etc.

Exports, which totalled USD 98.7 billion in 2022, are highly diversified. China accounted for 13.6 per cent of exports, Italy for 12.6 per cent, Russia for 8.9 per cent, the UK for 8.11 per cent, the Netherlands for 5.55 per cent and Turkey for 5.08 per cent. Imports reached USD 57.9 billion in 2022. 28.5 per cent was accounted for by Russia, 27.9 per cent by China, 4.96 per cent by Germany, 3.91 per cent by South Korea and 2.89 per cent by Turkey. Kazakhstan is the world's largest exporter of uranium (2020: 62 per cent of 44,900 tonnes worldwide). It exported 84.2 million tonnes of crude oil in 2022, over 70 per cent of which was delivered to the EU.

Kazakhstan's foreign trade balance is positive. The well-developed metallurgical industry processes black and non-ferrous metals, which are generally extracted from the country's own deposits. Kazakhstan is China's most important Central Asian partner in the energy trade. The Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) came to Kazakhstan back in 1997 and not only acquired the majority of shares in the Kazakh company Aktyubinskneft' JSC, but is now one of the largest taxpayers in the country. This clearly distinguishes the company from Western investors, whose profits often simply flow away. Today, China buys 16 per cent of Kazakhstan's entire oil production and 70 per cent of the uranium imported by China comes from Kazakhstan. Kazakh head of state K.-J. Tokaev said that Kazakhstan plans to invest around USD 20 billion by 2025 in the diversification of transit and transport routes and the introduction of integrated logistics solutions. And for good reason. At the Boao Forum in March 2024, K.-J.

Tokaev pointed out the important role his country plays as a transit bridge between East and West as part of the New Silk Road. The freight volume between Kazakhstan and China reached 30 million tonnes in 2023. Kazakhstan accounted for 80 per cent of all continental traffic between

China and Europe with a total volume of 3 million tonnes. Kazakhstan intends to increase these volumes to 10 million tonnes per year by expanding logistics and new routes as well as developing the north-south corridor with its neighbours.<sup>36</sup>

#### Gross domestic product in the Central Asian countries (2022, in USD billion)

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
GDP (2022) according to World Bank	225,5	80,39	56,54	11,59	10,49
Forecast for 2023 according to Statista	259,29	90,39	81,82	12,68	11,82

**Uzbekistan:** Economically, Uzbekistan will rank second among the Central Asian countries in 2022 with a GDP of USD 80.39 billion. The country exports gold (30.7 per cent), cotton yarn (8.26 per cent), natural gas (5.53 per cent) and copper concentrate (3.53 per cent). 25.4 per cent of its exports go to Switzerland, 15.4 per cent to Russia, 11.7 per cent to China, 9.39 per cent to Turkey and 7.43 per cent to Kazakhstan. The most important import partners are China with 24.3 per cent, Russia with 18.8 per cent, Kazakhstan with 12.3 per cent, South

Korea with 7.58 per cent and Turkey with 6.34 per cent. The country has a negative foreign trade balance. Russia's economic influence in Uzbekistan is still very strong. More than 3,000 companies with Russian participation operate there. Russian capital investments amount to USD 13 billion, while other economic projects under development are targeting a total value of USD 28 billion. The Lukoil Group is working in the Kandym and Gissar fields and has built a gas processing complex in Bukhara.

#### Foreign trade of the Central Asian countries (2022, in USD billion, according to www.oec.world)

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
Export	98,7	16,9	12,5	2,5	2,41
Import	57,9	29,9	not specified	21,3	6,57

**Turkmenistan:** Turkmenistan is in third place with a GDP of USD 56.54 billion. Turkmenistan has large deposits of natural gas and oil. The country exports 73.9 per cent natural gas, 10.3 per cent

refined petroleum and 3.16 per cent crude oil. The most important export countries are China with 71.3 per cent, Turkey with 7.09 per cent, Uzbekistan with 5.32 per cent and Azerbaijan with 3.69 per cent. No

statements can be made about the foreign trade balance, as no reliable import data is available.

**Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan:** These countries are the economically weakest countries in the region. Their exports are insignificant compared to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Both have a negative foreign trade balance. Kyrgyzstan's high level of imports from China can be explained by the country's role as a hub for Chinese goods such as textiles. Kyrgyzstan has borrowed USD 1.7 billion from China, making China Kyrgyzstan's most important investor. More than 40 per cent of the country's foreign debt is held by the Export-Import Bank of China. China's main objective is the construction of the 454 km long China-

Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line. 280 kilometres of this will run through Kyrgyz territory. The project, estimated at USD 3 to 7 billion, will reduce the distance from East Asia to the countries of the Middle East and Southern Europe by 900 kilometres, which will shorten delivery times and enable a freight transport volume of 12-15 million tonnes per year thanks to higher capacity utilisation. China has signalled its willingness to assume construction costs of USD 2 billion and would expect Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to guarantee the remaining amount. China would also be prepared to invest in the construction of small hydropower plants on favourable terms if the electricity were to be supplied to China.<sup>37</sup>

**Share of Russia and China in Central Asia's exports/imports** (2022, according to www.oec.world)

	Kazakhstan		Uzbekistan		Turkmenistan		Kyrgyzstan		Tajikistan	
	Exp.	Imp.	Exp.	Imp.	Exp.	Imp.	Exp.	Imp.	Exp.	Imp.
Russia	8,9	28,5	15,4	24,3	-	-	42,9	10,4	-	22,2
China	13,6	27,9	11,7	18,8	71,3	-	-	63,5	16,8	32,8
RU+CN total	22,5	56,4	27,1	43,1	71,3	-	42,9	73,9	16,8	55,0

Russia and China dominate imports from Central Asian countries, accounting for over 50 per cent in some cases, and also play a key role in exports. In 2022, the trade volume between China and Central Asia totalled USD 70 billion and Russia also achieved a trade volume of more than USD 42 billion in the same year. Nevertheless, China has overtaken Russia in all key foreign trade positions in Central Asia since the 2000s. Some believed that China would act as a tough competitor to Russia in Central Asia. That there is competition is undisputed,

but there are also increasing signs of a kind of co-operation that has a mutually compensatory character in the region. For example, when Uzbekistan's natural gas supply obligations to China jeopardised the supply of gas to its own population, it had to suspend its gas supplies. At the presidential summit with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Russia therefore agreed on Russian gas supplies to Uzbekistan via Kazakh pipeline networks, for the transit of which Kazakhstan provided quantities of 1.5 to 10 billion cubic metres.

## International Trans-Caspian Transport Route

During the 3rd Belt and Road Forum, President Xi Jinping made a statement on "building a Multidimensional Belt and Road Connectivity Network" in his keynote speech on 18 October 2023. He said:

"China will speed up high-quality development of the China-Europe Railway Express, participate in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor, host the China-Europe Railway Express Cooperation Form, and make joint efforts to build a new logistics corridor across the Eurasian continent, linked by direct rail and road transportation. We will vigorously integrate ports, shipping and trade services under the 'Maritime Silk Road' and accelerate the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor and the Air Silk Road."<sup>38</sup>

Two aspects of this statement were of particular importance:

1. the focus on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TMTM), which was also favoured by the EU, for example, was tantamount to a rejection of the China-Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus-Poland Northern Corridor as well as the East-West Corridor via the Russian Trans-Siberian Railway as the main transport route of the New Silk Road as far as China-Europe transport was concerned.

The project of the New Eurasian Land Bridge China-Russia-Ukraine-Poland was stopped due to the war in Ukraine, although this route was clearly more cost-effective. The Russian railway has been sanctioned by the West, so international insurance providers are less

willing to insure transports via it. The Trans-Siberian Railway comprises a fully electrified railway line of approximately 10,000 kilometres with a freight volume of up to 100 million tonnes per year, including 200,000 to 300,000 TEU of container traffic. Transport via the Trans-Siberian Railway therefore enables cost savings of up to approx. 30 per cent. The transport route China (Xinjiang)-Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus-Poland also has a clear advantage, as Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan are in a customs union.

2. the development of a "new logistics corridor on the Eurasian continent".

The previously known six land routes of the New Silk Road were also located in different regions of Eurasia. During the 3rd Belt and Road Forum, President Xi Jinping presented eight steps that China intends to take "to support high-quality Belt and Road cooperation". One key component will be the establishment of new transport and logistics lines with the accompanying infrastructure in the Eurasian region, which also has a geostrategic component. In addition, pilot zones for e-commerce cooperation, the conclusion of free trade agreements and investment protection agreements, "small but smart" livelihood programmes and green development etc. will also play a decisive role. According to Xi Jinping, China will provide "financing windows" of 350 billion yuan each through the Chinese Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TMTM), also known as the "middle corridor", is multimodal

compared to the continental routes through Russia, which implies an alternation of rail, ship and sometimes even car transport.

The TMTM goes back to the founding of a consortium in 2013. The state railway companies of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia participated in this consortium. It could therefore be seen as a direct result of the speech by Xi Jinping, who presented the New Silk Road initiative in Astana in the same year. The transport takes place by rail and ship, passing through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Black Sea, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Austria and the Czech Republic before reaching its final destination, Germany. In other words, the route connects Europe,

the South Caucasus, Central Asia and China. The China-Europe transport on this approximately 11,000-kilometre route was launched in 2017.

As one of the most important initiators, Kazakhstan faced major challenges from the outset. It had to quickly expand the handling capacity of its port of Aktau on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. This port provides access to sea routes to Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia. Aktau, which is operated by a state-owned Kazakh port company, quickly offered an increase in container throughput (see table). Since 2015, the Kazakh railway has also had the port of Kuryk built, which is located 70 km south of Aktau.

**Container throughput in the Kazakh port of Aktau (in TEU)**

2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (Jan.-April)
2.484	14.324	17.969	27.624	30.708	7.470

Aktau and Kuryk are located in a special economic zone that offers tax concessions to investors.

The limited transport capacities on the Caspian Sea and the age of the ships used repeatedly lead to a backlog in the transport flow in the port of Aktau. This results in costs and delivery times cannot be reliably met. Transport via the TMTM was also considered too expensive for a long time, while the established northern route via China-Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus and Poland was considered more cost-effective.

However, "transport giants" such as the Danish company Maersk, the Finnish company Nurminen Logistics Services Oy and the German company Dachser Cargoplus seem to want to switch to the TMTM route due to the war in Ukraine.

Azerbaijan and Georgia play an important role for further transport. The port of Baku (Azerbaijan) in Alat, 70 kilometres away, was completed in 2018. It has an annual handling capacity of 15 million tonnes of freight, including 100,000 TEU containers. As Baku also includes the utilisation of the north-south corridor in its calculations, work soon began on a second expansion phase of the port of Alat. The economically weak and politically unstable country of Georgia, with the limited possibilities of its ports of Poti and Batumi, is undoubtedly the bottleneck on the TMTM route.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route still has many unresolved problems due to its multimodality, the many national borders, the uncertainty and instability in the South Caucasus,



which is the focus of various interests, and poorly optimised logistics. Nevertheless, the interested parties seem to want to concentrate on this transport route, which will increase the geopolitical significance of the transport area. For China, the TMTM route represents a highly important section due to the elimination of European routes via the territory of the Russian Federation, the loss of which would jeopardise the continental route of the New Silk Road.

Russia and China are now also working intensively on the Arctic Blue Economic Corridor, which will open up new transport routes for China to the north-western parts of Russia and northern Europe. President Vladimir Putin made it clear during the

3rd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in October 2023 that the navigation of ice-going cargo ships along the entire length of the Northern Sea Route would be possible all year round from 2024. Russia would be prepared to offer interested parties reliable ice navigation (icebreakers, ice freighters), communication and supplies.<sup>39</sup> Russia itself sees the route as a great opportunity for the unhindered transport of hydrocarbons (natural gas, oil, coal) to Asia, Africa and South America. Negotiations between Russia and Japan over the Kuril Islands are therefore likely to be over, which suggests that Japan will soon join the AUCUS military alliance (USA, UK, Australia).

### **China and Central Asia**

The hasty withdrawal of NATO and the West from Afghanistan and Russia's war in Ukraine have considerably changed the status of both the Central Asian region and its individual countries in the eyes of the powers. Interest in Central Asia grew by leaps and bounds. While some saw economic opportunities, others had to compensate for self-inflicted energy shortages as quickly as possible, while for others Central Asia became a terrain for staging power games against economic competitors, strategic opponents and rivals. Some simply wanted to remain geographically close to Afghanistan in order to "reshuffle the cards" there if necessary. The unrest in Kazakhstan in January 2022, which was apparently also intended to spread to Uzbekistan, may also have had various objectives that extended beyond Kazakhstan. In this complicated situation, the main aim was to maintain

and consolidate stability in Central Asia.

Since 2013, China has maintained relations with all Central Asian countries at the level of strategic partnerships, which have been continuously expanded and developed over the years. In addition to bilateral relations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation offered a corresponding multilateral format. Central Asia became the focus of China's Silk Road policy. Russian analysts assessed this at the end of 2014:

"The most important task to ensure China's national security will be to find ways to diversify transit routes and energy supply sources. Central Asia, which has considerable potential for the transit of goods by land and the extraction of hydrocarbons, will come to the fore."<sup>40</sup>

On 25 May 2022, President Xi Jinping opened a virtual China-Central

Asia summit on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian states, which was still under the impression of the unrest in Kazakhstan and its suppression by troops of the Collective Security Treaty. In his keynote speech, Xi Jinping emphasised the importance of stability for Central Asia. He assured Central Asia of Chinese support for "development paths (...) tailored to their national realities", for safeguarding sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity as well as in the "quest for national revitalisation and greater strength through unity". He spoke out against "attempts by external forces to instigate colour revolutions in Central Asia" and "against interference in internal affairs under the pretext of human rights". China is focusing on strengthening economic stability in Central Asia and increasing imports of "high-quality goods and agricultural products" from the region.<sup>41</sup> Xi Jinping proposed a bilateral trade target of USD 70 billion for the year 2030. In terms of major bilateral projects, the acceleration of the expansion of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and the D-line of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, the further development of transport corridors between China and Central Asia and the expansion of the energy industry chain were given high priority.

In June 2022, China and the Central Asian countries agreed at their 3rd Foreign Ministers' Meeting to establish a special China-Central Asia Summit mechanism as a new format in relations. One year later, President Xi Jinping met with the Central

Asian heads of state for a China-Central Asia Summit on 19 May 2023 in Xi'an, the starting point of the historic Silk Road. The Chinese president spoke out in favour of a "stable, prosperous, harmonious and interconnected" Central Asia, respecting "their people's choice of development paths" and safeguarding "the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity" of the Central Asian countries. Under the aspect of "a harmonious Central Asia", he emphasised that "ethnic conflicts, religious strife, and cultural estrangement" should not be the defining characteristics of the region, but rather the pursuit of "solidarity, inclusiveness, and harmony". He warned with unusual candour: "No one has the right to sow discord or stoke confrontation in the region, let alone seek selfish political interests."<sup>42</sup> He also emphasised the "right foundations, preconditions and capabilities" of Central Asia "to become an important connectivity hub of Eurasia".

The president promised trade concessions, improvements to investment agreements and optimised customs clearance for agricultural and by-products at all border crossings. The deepening of connectivity remains a particular concern. China wants to "increase the volume of cross-border cargo transportation, support the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor, enhance the traffic capacity of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Tajikistan-Uzbekistan highway, and move forward consultations on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway." Other objectives included opening up the air transport market, building a regional logistics network and assembly centres

for the China-Europe Railway Express, building overseas warehouses and a comprehensive digital service platform.

China and the Central Asian countries also agreed on a partnership for energy development. The Chinese approach thus encompassed the entire Central Asian region in a very complex way and also utilised the vacuum left by Russia.

The establishment of a China-Central Asia summit as a new format for regional relations alongside the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation would have been unthinkable before the war in Ukraine due to Russia's concerns. From now on, a Permanent Secretariat was to be set up alongside the bilateral summit as a permanent institution. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasised that the summit in Xi'an had "completed the platform building and overall planning of China-Central Asia cooperation, and opened up a new channel for the cooperation to move to higher levels."<sup>43</sup> The *Global Times* commented that the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan had "reduced the interfering forces in Central Asian region" and "increased the willingness" of Central Asian countries "to cooperate with China", "as their position in the US geostrategic orbit has declined..."<sup>44</sup>

At the 3rd Belt and Road Forum on 18 October 2023, President Xi Jinping

took stock of the realisation of the New Silk Road. China has established a global network of connections, under which 150 countries and 30 international organisations have signed cooperation documents. The network is made up of various economic corridors, international transport routes and information highways, railway lines, roads, airports, ports, pipelines and power grids and has set in motion the flow of goods, capital, technology and human resources with China as the starting point and China at the centre of the network. It has been realised on a global scale in a historically short time. Xi Jinping has now announced eight steps to realise the "construction of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation". TOP 1 included the construction of a multidimensional Belt-and-Road connectivity network, which included the acceleration of the China-Europe Railway Express, Chinese participation in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor and the construction of a "new logistics corridor across the Eurasian continent linked by direct railway and road transportation."<sup>45</sup> Central Asia's further development was and is primarily linked to this TOP 1, but its success will largely depend on the USA and Europe, which represent both common and conflicting interests.

### **China in the Trouble Spot Afghanistan**

After NATO and the West left Afghanistan in a hurry, a very favourable window of opportunity opened up for China, allowing it to expand its influence in the country and the region with the help

of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The China-Afghan Commercial Committee was founded in Kabul in 2021 with the primary aim of opening up and paving the way for Chinese business in Afghanistan. China

is pursuing its own security interests and very specific economic interests in Afghanistan, primarily in gold, copper, oil, lithium and rare earths, but also interests of a far-reaching nature that take into account Afghanistan's potential role as a strategically important hub. A year later, China began construction of the industrial park agreed with the Taliban government. In 2022, China started mining and processing copper in the Aynak deposit and precious stones and gold in Badakhshan province, and created conditions for oil production in Sari-Pul province.

After the major earthquake in Afghanistan, China was one of the few countries in the country to provide serious emergency aid. On 28 July 2022, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan interim government, Amir Khan Muttaqi, at the SCO Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Wang Yi expressed China's interest in "pushing the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the development strategies of Afghanistan, support the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, and share China's development opportunities."<sup>46</sup> China expressed its willingness to resume issuing visas for Afghan citizens from 1 August 2022. China also granted zero-duty treatment for Afghan export products, especially "high-value special products", in 98 per cent of customs tariffs. At the beginning of 2023, the Taliban government and the company Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas signed a contract for oil production in the Amu Darya river area, which provides for investments totalling USD 150 million in the first years of the 25-year term. The oil

reserves there are estimated at up to 87 million barrels. In May 2023, both sides agreed to include Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. China also intends to build a road to Pakistan through Afghanistan. In return for its concession, the country expects the Afghan side to fight resolutely against all terrorist forces, especially the Islamic Movement for East Turkestan.<sup>47</sup> The Taliban then relocated all Uyghurs living near the Chinese border to more remote areas and also severed its relations with the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan. On 29 January 2024, the special envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, visited the Afghan capital Kabul together with representatives from Russia, Pakistan and Iran. One day later, Afghanistan's ambassador, Mawlawi Asadullah Bilal, presented his credentials to President Xi Jinping in Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

Whether China remains successful in Afghanistan depends largely on how stable and predictable the Taliban regime will be in the coming years. It should not be overlooked that for China, security and economic policy form a mutually dependent unit in the case of Afghanistan. China's fear that Islamic extremists could seep into Xinjiang from Afghanistan cannot be dismissed out of hand. The activities of some secret services in the West, which are reactivating old security structures in Afghanistan, are also likely to fuel fears in China. In this respect, China is making intensive use of the opportunities offered by the SCO security structures and also welcomes the cooperation of the Central Asian countries within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty and the Commonwealth

of Independent States. Although the Central Asian states do not officially recognise the current Afghanistan, they are making efforts to stabilise it internally.

Kazakhstan has set up a trade office there and Uzbekistan is continuing field work in preparation for the construction of a trans-Afghan railway.

### USA and Central Asia

Central Asia has rarely been of interest to the USA in recent decades. However, there have been three moments when Central Asia has been noticed by US foreign and security policy:

1. all Central Asian states participated in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2001. Its documents reflect the principles of the *Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation* between Russia and the People's Republic of China of 16 July 2001, which led Washington to believe that it needed to keep an eye on this organisation and its members.

2. After the US and NATO counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, the USA postulated itself as a "Eurasian power", just as it later proclaimed itself to be an "Indo-Pacific" power.

3. As the political, economic and military incompatibility between the USA on the one hand and Russia and China on the other deepened and China was also perceived as a "systemic rival" by the USA and the European Union, both the Central Asian region and Iran gained in geostrategic importance for the USA.

When the US adopted its *2019-2025 United States Strategy for Central Asia* in 2019, it could already point to significant achievements in Central Asia. The United States had provided more than USD 9 billion in direct assistance and, with the help of the international banks it led, had provided over USD 50 billion in credits, loans and technical assistance "to promote the development of the region", while the US private sector had invested around USD 31 billion in commercial projects. American companies, of which there are around 600 in Kazakhstan alone, are mainly active in the oil and gas sector as well as in mining. They include giants such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, General Electric, Honeywell and Schlumberger. In addition, funding was provided for the exchange of 40,000 students and skilled workers, investments of USD 90 million in border security and the training of 2,600 border guards. This must be mentioned here, as the statistical figures on trade between the USA and the Central Asian countries, with the exception of Kazakhstan, give a rather modest impression, as the following table shows.

**Foreign trade of the USA in Central Asia (2022, in USD million)**

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
Export	1.100,0	273,0	49,0	61,0	124,0
Import	2.700,0	59,0	46,0	9,0	1,0
Direct investments (FDI, stocks)			51,0	62,0	122,0

Source: <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia> (accessed May 12, 2024).

The adoption of the US strategy for Central Asia in 2017 was preceded by a thought process that determined the state of relations between Central Asia and the US and redefined the interests in this region and the vision of American policy. US President Donald Trump, like his predecessors, sought to preserve US supremacy in the Indo-Pacific region and to roll back Chinese influence worldwide. Given that China was expanding its economy towards Europe via the New Silk Road, Central Asia was almost bound to fall into the crosshairs of Washington's strategists. The USA now regarded Central Asia as a "geostrategic region of importance to the national security interests of the United States". They saw "domestic and foreign terrorism" as a "priority security problem" that would affect the stability of the Central Asian countries. In the background, the influence of Russia and China on these countries naturally played a significant role in the strategic calculations.

The US therefore saw strengthening "resilience to short- and long-term threats to their stability" and improving "independence from malign actors" in Central Asia as the main directions of its engagement. The goals they formulated were:

1. "Support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian states, individually and as a region." The USA wanted to become involved "in the areas of economy, energy, security, democracy and governance", i.e. it was seeking certain political changes, but in return was also prepared to support the development of, for example, a

standardised power grid throughout Central Asia.

2. "Reduce terrorist threats in Central Asia."

3. "Expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan."

4. "Encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan."

5. "Promote rule of law reform and respect for human rights."

6. "Promote United States investment in and development of Central Asia."<sup>48</sup>

The goals of the US strategy for Central Asia were particularly geared towards promoting the US security position in the region and, as the vision clearly states, "counterbalancing the influence of regional neighbours."<sup>49</sup> However, the sudden withdrawal of NATO troops and the West from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 devalued important parts of this strategy and partially called into question what had been achieved through diplomacy. In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine forced US diplomacy to rethink its concepts in the case of Central Asia as well.

The basis for the "reset" in relations between the USA and Central Asia was the regional diplomatic platform "C5+1" (Central Asia + USA). This was established in 2015 to hold an annual meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the three areas of security, the economy and the environment, but in fact primarily security problems in the wider region (Afghanistan, Syria, etc.). The participants thus identified and compared their positions on issues relevant to them. From the US perspective, however, the meeting was also intended to be an instrument of

influence directed against Russia. The first meeting of foreign ministers took place in 2015 on the margins of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly. US Secretary of State John Kerry then paid the first visit by a US chief diplomat to each of the five states since 1992. The second meeting in 2016 included a regional dialogue as part of the Global Counterterrorism Forum and a project to develop the transport corridor. None of the foreign ministers' meetings held in Central Asia between 2017 and 2019, which were primarily dedicated to security issues, were attended by a US Secretary of State, which was seen in Central Asia as an expression of low esteem by the standards of similar formats, e.g. with its geographical neighbours.

This situation only changed in the late phase of the Trump administration. On 22 September 2019, US Secretary of State M. R. Pompeo met with his five Central Asian counterparts in New York. They discussed the expansion of trade and investment relations, infrastructure development in the region as well as security issues with a focus on Afghanistan and the joint fight against terrorism and extremism. During the talks, Mr Pompeo drew attention to the issue of repatriation, prosecution and reintegration of foreign terrorist fighters and their families. The US Secretary of State also addressed related issues in Xinjiang. He stated: "And further on the subject of terrorism, I want to make clear that China's repressive campaign in Xinjiang is not about terrorism. It's about China's attempt – about China's attempt to erase its own citizens' Muslim faith and culture. We call on all countries to resist China's demands to repatriate Uighurs."<sup>50</sup>

On 30 June 2020, the next meeting of foreign ministers also took place under the leadership of US Secretary of State M.R. Pompeo, but this time under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the meeting, Pompeo emphasised the USA's willingness to support the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of each Central Asian country and to jointly support "strong civil societies in Central Asia through the protection of human rights and compliance with international law". The following statements on the willingness to cooperate economically included topics such as connectivity between "the C6 and other countries in the region" in the energy sector, for example in the Central Asia Regional Electricity Market (CAREM), as well as improving infrastructure for air, water, land and rail transport. The US was willing to consult on sanctions issues to "avoid any unintended consequences for the economies of the Central Asian countries."<sup>51</sup> Meetings in the first half of 2021 had a similar agenda, but brought up "connectivity between the Central and South Asian regions through trade, transport and energy links" as a new aspect.

After the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, the US preferred to engage with Central Asia on climate policy issues, but it was decided (following the Chinese model?) to provide the "C5+1" diplomatic platform with a permanent secretariat "to further deepen engagement to advance shared objectives."<sup>52</sup>

The "C5+1" meeting with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on 28 February 2023 in Astana, Kazakhstan,

made it clear how much the concrete fields of bilateral cooperation had narrowed. Words such as "considered one", "recognised the importance", "addressed the issue" and "expressed their willingness" were frequently found in the text of the *Joint Declaration* and indicated that the clear areas of cooperation were rather sparse. The definition of the basic lines of security co-operation was also limited. The previously established Permanent Secretariat was now assigned working groups for the economy, energy, environment and security. The American side urged the Central Asian partners to comply with the sanctions against Russia. According to the *Joint Declaration*, the participants pledged to "work together to mitigate the unintended effects of sanctions on the C5+1 economies."<sup>53</sup> In Central Asia, this was taken very seriously, especially as there were fears that access to certain markets for Central Asian states could be blocked by secondary sanctions.

The real significance of the foreign ministers' meeting in Astana was the preparation of the first summit of the "C5+1" heads of state, which took place on 21 September 2023 in New York City on the margins of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly. The heads of state adopted a *Joint Declaration* entitled *Resilience through Security, Economic and Energy Partnership*. At the outset, they spoke of a shared vision for "sustained cooperation to address the region's complex challenges and emerging

threats." They reaffirmed: "Collectively, we embrace the C5+1 goal of seeking regional solutions to global challenges." They emphasised their desire to "enhance security, improve economic resilience, support sustainable development, combat climate change, and promote peace" in Central Asia.<sup>54</sup> A "lasting partnership" is to be established on this basis.

Security cooperation has always been at the centre of the "C5+1" activities. Once again, it encompassed a wide range of issues from defence, law enforcement and counter-terrorism to border security, safe migration (repatriation of northern Syrians) and the USA's commitment to give priority to security assistance instruments. The State Department and the Centre for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) will create a "C5+1" economic platform to complement the existing diplomatic "C5+1" platform. Investments are to be made in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and in the expansion of transport networks connecting Central Asia with South Asia. Infrastructure investments are to be examined in order to accelerate economic development, energy security and the connectivity of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Observers believe that the USA is particularly interested in the logistics sector of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.<sup>55</sup> For the USA, "building diverse, resilient, and secure critical minerals supply chains" is particularly important.



## Europe and Central Asia

Compared to the USA, relations between Europe and Central Asia have become broader and more diverse, but this does not necessarily say much about the quality of relations and their actual results. The European Union (EU) concluded a *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan back in 1999 and with Tajikistan in 2009. Turkmenistan agreed such an agreement with the EU back in 1998, but its parliament refused to ratify it. The situation was similar with NATO: in the early 1990s, all five Central Asian states joined the North Atlantic Co-operation Council. They later joined the "Partnership for Peace", which was offered to interested countries outside NATO following the establishment of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in 1997.

With its Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia project, the EU made its first attempt in 1998 as part of its TACIS programme to create a transport corridor into Central Asia. On 8 September 1998, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed the *Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor* in Baku.<sup>56</sup> The participating countries agreed to "develop economic relations, trade and transport communications in the regions of Europe, Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Asia."<sup>57</sup> Transport was to take place via motorways, railways, waterways, airways, containers and pipelines. It developed quickly and doubled in the period from

1999 to 2002 to around 8.5 million tonnes of freight.

However, co-operation with Central Asia itself was limited. The euphoria of the post-reunification period had long since faded in the Central Asian states and the ruling family clans there were always concerned that they would not fall victim to a remote-controlled "transfer of democracy". They therefore decided to maintain their close relations with Russia and seek proximity to China. Among other reasons, this was an important motivation for them to sign the *declaration on the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation* together with the presidents of Russia and China in Shanghai on 15 June 2001.

A few weeks later, on 11 September 2001, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York took place. Almost overnight, Central Asia was re-evaluated by the powers that be. However, developments in the region were contradictory: on the one hand, the five Central Asian states stood alongside the West as partners in the "war on terror"; on the other hand, the unstable situation in the Central Asian countries, which was characterised by mass protests, power struggles and crises, prevented a dynamic development of relations with the EU. However, it should not be overlooked that there has always been a contradiction in appearance between EU relations with Central Asia and the individual countries in the region and the regional and bilateral relations of an EU member state such as Germany. However, this may also have been a deliberate lack of transparency.

During the German Council Presidency in June 2007, the EU adopted something like a Central Asia strategy for the first time under the title *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*. In it, it recognised Central Asia as "a strategically important interface between the two continents" of Europe and Asia and formulated its interest in "peace, democracy and economic prosperity prevailing in Central Asia."<sup>58</sup> The EU emphasised that it wanted to share its experience and expertise in "good governance, rule of law, human rights, democracy, education and training" with the states of Central Asia. The actual prospects for cooperation were cited as "the EU's dependence on external energy sources" on the one hand and "the need for a policy of diversified energy supply" on the other, whereby the geographical relationship with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran must also be taken into account. According to the document, EU enlargement, the inclusion of the South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Black Sea Synergy Initiative would bring Central Asia and the EU closer together. Within this framework, the EU wants to embed its relations with Central Asia in its energy co-operation with the countries bordering the Black and Caspian Seas.

The focus of this cooperation was on the exploration of oil, gas and water resources, the modernisation of energy infrastructure, the construction of pipelines and energy transport networks as well as the development of a Caspian Sea-Black Sea-EU energy transport corridor, with the aim of achieving a convergence of energy markets based on the principles of the EU

internal market. In this context, the EU recognised the function of Central Asia as an "important trade corridor between South and East Asia and Europe". Among other things, the EU intended to establish a regular political dialogue at foreign minister level as well as dialogue forums on the rule of law, human rights and energy issues. The actual pillar of cooperation, however, was the implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with the countries of the region, in which they had to enter into a variety of commitments. Other areas of cooperation were environmental protection, border protection, migration, measures against corruption, the fight against drug, human and arms trafficking to and from Afghanistan as well as against organised crime and international terrorism. In practice, these areas of cooperation involved intensive collaboration with the relevant security, defence and civil protection bodies in the countries concerned.

The response to the adoption of the Central Asia Strategy in the countries of the region can be regarded as cautious and reserved for the reasons already mentioned. Kazakhstan led the way, concluding an *Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* (EPCA) with the EU in 2015, which came into force on 1 March 2020 following ratification by all EU member states. Kyrgyzstan and the EU concluded their EPCA negotiations on 6 July 2019, but a legal dispute delayed the signing. Uzbekistan and the EU concluded their negotiations on the agreement on 6 July 2022 and Tajikistan did not start them until early 2023. Turkmenistan signed a

partnership and cooperation agreement in 1998, but never ratified it. Its relations with the EU are now governed by an interim agreement on trade and trade-related issues.

The EU had already launched the Black Sea Synergy Initiative<sup>59</sup> in 2007. In doing so, it continued the process it had steered itself. The Black Sea Synergy Initiative "complements the European Neighbourhood Policy, the enlargement policy for Turkey and the strategic partnership with the Russian Federation", according to an EU report written a year later. The initiative envisaged the accession of interested states to the Treaty establishing an Energy Community in the electricity and gas sectors, examined the construction of a gas corridor between the Caspian and Black Seas and the expansion of trans-European transport networks.<sup>60</sup>

On 13 May 2019, a meeting of EU foreign ministers and their counterparts from the six countries of the EU's Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) took place. The EU focussed on strengthening the political association and economic integration of the partner countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia were later granted the status of EU candidate countries.

In June 2019, the EU adopted the updated version of its Central Asia Strategy, which was now entitled *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*. The EU continued to focus on "the strategic geographical location" of Central Asia "at the crossroads of Europe and Asia",

but now also placed energy exports to Europe, the market potential of 70 million inhabitants and security in the Central Asia region in the crosshairs of its interests. The EU saw it as its "major interest" "that Central Asia develop as a region of rules-based cooperation and connectivity rather than of competition and rivalry."<sup>61</sup> The EU strategy now focuses "on three interlinked and mutually reinforcing priorities": 1. Partnership for resilience (promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, implementing the Paris climate commitments, migration, border management, mobility, tackling common security challenges such as terrorism and extremism, etc.), 2. partnership for prosperity (developing a competitive private sector, removing structural barriers to trade and investment, WTO accession, etc.), 3. better cooperation (intensifying political dialogue, creating spaces for civil society participation, etc.).

The already concluded *Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements* (EPCA) remain the "cornerstones of EU engagement" in bilateral cooperation. In the "Partnership for Prosperity", the EU intends to support intra-regional trade and investment activities and facilitate market access. A central point of this partnership is the "promotion of sustainable connectivity", which is part of the EU strategy to promote connectivity between Europe and Asia. According to the EU, the expansion of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to the EU's neighbouring countries and the Chinese New Silk Road initiative offer great opportunities for cooperation in Central Asia. The intention is to link

the TEN-T system with Central Asian (including via the South Caucasus) and other regional networks. The actual aim is to create "balanced, sustainable East-West and North-South land connections", which are to be made possible by "modern integrated border management" and "compatible customs transit systems". The EU is also willing to work with countries participating in the ASEM process<sup>62</sup> to promote connectivity between Europe and Asia.

The main institutional structure of the interregional dialogue consists of the annual foreign ministers' meetings and the annual political and security dialogue at the level of deputy ministers. The final conclusion of the *Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements* (EPCA) also entails regular dialogues on human rights.<sup>63</sup> In the conclusions of the Europe Council on the new strategy for Central Asia, it was also clearly emphasised that "the scope of the EU's relations depends on the willingness of individual Central Asian states to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as to modernise and diversify the economy."<sup>64</sup>

The USA also adopted a Central Asia strategy in 2019, which, in view of the Trump administration's foreign policy and foreign trade policy, almost automatically made conflicts of interest between the EU and the USA appear likely.

When Ursula von der Leyen took over the presidency of the EU Commission in 2019, a qualitative change took place within the EU. When she took office, von der Leyen announced that she wanted

to become the chair of a "geopolitical commission". She demanded: "Europe must learn to use the language of power."<sup>65</sup>

The implementation of the Central Asia strategy was initially slow. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, the West's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan from 30 August 2021 (a shock for the Central Asian states) and Russia's attack on Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, slowed down international political processes considerably. For a while, each side and level was almost exclusively preoccupied with itself.

On 27 October 2022, the first summit of the Presidents of the Council of Europe and the Presidents of Central Asia was held in Astana, Kazakhstan. The summit summarised the progress of relations to date. The participants emphasised the institutionalisation of relations "through the work of the existing platforms". Positive assessments were given of cooperation in border management and security in the broadest sense. The Central Asian heads of state welcomed the dialogue on the rule of law, human rights and gender equality, but did not say a word about the dialogue on democracy. Otherwise, the summit was characterised by statements, declarations of readiness and expressions of interest. As a result of the summit, a series of high-level conferences on the environment and water resources, connectivity, civil society, etc. were organised. The Second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum in Almaty in May 2023 met with a particularly favourable response. The EU had commissioned various studies on sustainable connectivity between Europe and Asia in advance, which left no doubt about the geographical

focus of connectivity.

The second summit took place on 2 June 2023 in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. The participants agreed to adopt the roadmap for EU-Central Asia cooperation at the next ministerial meeting. The summit declaration also made it clear that the EU was increasingly asserting its views on "universal values", democracy and good governance, especially as it also defined these factors as prerequisites for cooperation. In connection with the further expansion of trade and investment, a close dialogue on the EU's sanctions regulations was called for. This summit was also not characterised by the adoption of concrete measures. A few days after the summit, the 10th round of dialogue on politics and security took place at the level of deputy foreign ministers in Astana on 13 June 2023. The participants noted the impact of the Ukraine conflict and the negative developments in Afghanistan. It was agreed to intensify dialogue and cooperation on security issues. This topic should also be prioritised at the next meeting of foreign ministers.

On 29 September 2023, the German Chancellor received the heads of state of Central Asia in Berlin for a summit meeting. The participants emphasised "the importance of bilateral trade and investment cooperation" and the importance of a favourable economic environment in which the rule of law, human rights, property rights and an independent judiciary are of particular importance. They spoke in favour of the further development of the "Middle Corridor" (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) and "the development

of financing sources for infrastructure projects within the framework of the Global Gateway Initiative". The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had prepared a report for the Heads of State "on sustainable transport routes between Europe and Central Asia, in which the central Trans-Caspian network was identified as a sustainable transport network". The participants welcomed this report.<sup>66</sup>

The *Joint Communiqué* of the 19th EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting, which took place in Luxembourg on 23 October 2023, emphasised the joint commitment to continue the strategic partnership based on "shared values and mutual interests". The foreign ministers reaffirmed "the relevance of the EU Strategy for Central Asia" and endorsed the "Joint Roadmap for deepening EU-Central Asia relations". The foreign ministers emphasised the geostrategic role of trade and investment and stated that "enhancing democratisation, human rights and the rule of law has a direct positive effect on the trust in the trade and investment climate in the region."<sup>67</sup> They agreed to strengthen sustainable supply chains and expand cooperation on investment and critical raw materials. Cooperation on sustainable connectivity in trade, transport, energy and digital technology, etc. is to be intensified and the interconnectivity of the regional power grid and energy efficiency improved.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, the EU carried out an initial assessment of the impact of the EU Strategy for Central Asia. In addition to "Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, the Taliban takeover of

Afghanistan and China's increasingly aggressive assertive foreign policy", it registered growing instability in the Central Asian region, specifically in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. As Central Asia was considered to be of strategic interest to the EU, the importance of security, connectivity, energy and resource diversification grew. energy and resource diversification in the region. The EU recognised the need to define trade routes

through Central Asia, bypassing Russia. The report emphasised the need for "a more active presence of the democratic EU in the region as an alternative to established autocratic actors."<sup>69</sup> It also underlined the importance of transatlantic cooperation in Central Asia and called for "the EU to take initiative in working out a joint strategy for Central Asia with the United States, which should include cooperation in the areas of democracy promotion, investments and trade, economy and regional security."<sup>70</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

When Russia and the United Kingdom fought for supremacy in Central Asia in the "Great Game" during the 19th and 20th centuries, the balance of power was still quite clear, as there were basically only two players. In the "New Great Game", which is being fought out in Central Asia today, it is sometimes difficult to precisely determine the interplay between the players and their specific goals. Constructive forces wrestle with destructive forces. The "superpower" and all the major powers are represented, including the European Union, which is a major player but has no sovereignty of its own. Some states, such as Turkey, also act as individual actors, despite their involvement in certain alliances, etc. Almost all powers and forces use intensive diplomacy and all kinds of hybrid methods to achieve their goals. There are no proxy wars yet (this is perhaps only a matter of time), but there are various proxy games, for example in the entire South Caucasus. What role could the Taliban's Afghanistan play in the near future in a region where Islamisation tendencies cannot be overlooked anyway? When the

Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, it fell into a trap devised by Brzezinski, which some people should remember today when reshuffling their cards. The rules of the political game have become both harsher and more sophisticated since the Russian attack on Ukraine, especially in the Central Asian region, where Russia's "distraction" had created a vacuum that needed to be filled quickly. The escalating conflict in the Middle East also appears to be having an initial impact on the region. Some are considering restructuring their logistics chains in the Middle East and are focussing on Central Asia.

In this complicated situation, the Central Asian states are in the process of opening up new room for manoeuvre that goes beyond the effects of their previous multi-vectoral foreign policy. The convening of the Consultative Summit of Central Asian Heads of State, which has now become a regular format for cooperation in the region, laid the foundation for the Central Asian states to focus much more strongly on their own national interests. On 21 July 2022,

the five heads of state concluded a *treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation for the development of Central Asia in the 21st century* in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, in which they described their consultative summits as a fundamental platform for interaction between the contracting parties. In July 2022, Kazakhstan's President K.-J. Tokaev proposed to the geographical neighbours Russia and China to participate in the consultative meetings as invited guests on a permanent basis. The treaty itself gives top priority to national security. The contracting states assure each other of "full support and mutual assistance in the defence against threats to their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>71</sup> Article 6 states that

"The Parties reaffirm their firm commitment to refrain from the use of force or the threat of force in their relations between States; they undertake neither to join military alliances, blocs or other associations of States directed against the Parties nor to participate in actions directed against any of the Parties. (...)

The Parties undertake not to authorise the use of their territory, communications systems and other infrastructure by third States to the detriment of the state sovereignty, security, stability, constitutional order and territorial integrity of any of the other Parties."<sup>72</sup>

The states agreed to co-operate for peace and security in Central Asia and "on issues of common interest" in the military and military-technical field. They will represent jointly agreed positions to the outside world on issues of peace and security in Central Asia. They will deepen

their "co-operation in combating new security challenges and threats, including terrorism, extremism and separatism."<sup>73</sup> In terms of economic cooperation, promoting the further development of the region's transit and transport potential plays an important role. This includes 1. the comprehensive use of existing and the creation of new rail, road, air and waterways and the simplification of administrative procedures in cross-border transport, 2. the establishment of a network of industrial, logistics and wholesale distribution centres, etc. The treaty clearly shows that Central Asia has understood that state and regional security and the function as a transport corridor of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route form a unity, because without security there is no Trans-Caspian Transport Route.

The first outlines of the results of the agreement can now be seen. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan laid the foundations for their military cooperation at the beginning of 2024. There is now talk of the allies deploying troops in the event of danger, such as the invasion of large groups of military forces from Afghanistan. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular are now in the process of developing transport logistics in the South Caucasus on their own initiative.

New partners offer Central Asia previously unthinkable prospects. In 2022, the strategic dialogue "Central Asia-Gulf Cooperation Council" was launched, followed by a summit in Jeddah in 2023. The next round of the dialogue forum took place in April 2024 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Qatar and Uzbekistan agreed

to establish relations at the level of a strategic partnership. The first investor forum between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Central Asia will take place in May next year. As an increasingly agile regional power, Turkey has also intensified all of its activities in Central Asia. As the driving force behind the Organisation of Turkish States, which was founded in 2011, its visions of a "Turkish world" (counter-concept to the "Russian world"?) have met with a considerable response from the Turkic states of Central Asia. Central Asian elites perceive Turkey's model of Islam as moderate and acceptable. Some in Central Asia sympathise with the idea that a Turkic cultural area with strong interaction in transport and logistics could emerge. The influence of Turkey and the Organisation of Turkish States will largely depend on Erdogan's successor and his policies.

The continental route of China's New Silk Road leads via the Trans-Caspian Transport Route. As the German and Chinese economies are closely intertwined and the two markets are interdependent, both China and Germany have a great

interest in a stable and secure Central Asia. The stable and secure transit region of Central Asia can therefore contribute significantly to the resilience of both states, but also of Central Asia. During Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to China on 16 April 2024, both sides committed to a multilateral rules-based order in the World Trade Organisation. President Xi Jinping said during the visit:

"In the past decade, there have been a series of major changes in the world situation. But the bilateral relationship has always remained stable. (...) The risks facing all mankind are increasing. In order to resolve these issues, it is essential that co-operation between the major powers gains the upper hand. (...) A good stable development of bilateral relations between the two of us goes far beyond the bilateral dimension. They will exert great influence not only on the entire Eurasian continent, but also on the whole world."<sup>74</sup>

President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang mentioned "Eurasia" several times in their statements. Which brings us back to Zbigniew Brzezinski and geopolitics!



## Notes

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- <sup>6</sup> Putin: Plädoyer für Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft: Von Lissabon bis Wladiwostok, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 25, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, The Future of U.S.-Chinese Relations. Conflict is a Choice, not a Necessity, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2012, pp. 44-55.
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- <sup>11</sup> Kenneth G. Lieberthal, The American Pivot to Asia". <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/> (accessed May 16, 2024).
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- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Josef Braml, *Die Transatlantische Illusion, Die neue Weltordnung und wie wir uns darin behaupten können*. München: Antaios 2022, p. 40.
- <sup>18</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017. p. 46. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2024).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 50.
- <sup>20</sup> "National Security Strategy 2022.". <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2024).

- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 24.
- <sup>24</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power*. New York: Hachette 2012, p. 85.
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinken-to-deliver-remarks-at-george-washington-university-2/> (accessed May 16, 2024).
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- <sup>27</sup> Yao Zhongqiu, "Five Centuries of Transformation." *Wenhua Zhongheng* No. 1, <https://thetricontinental.org/wenhua-zongheng-1-five-centuries-of-transformation/> (accessed May 16, 2024).
- <sup>28</sup> State borders of China: Afghanistan 91 km, Bhutan 477 km, Burma 2,129 km, India 2,659 km, Kazakhstan 1,765 km, North Korea 1,352 km, Kyrgyzstan 1,063 km, Laos 475 km, Mongolia 4,630 km, Nepal 1,389 km, Pakistan 438 km, Russia (north-east) 4,133 km, Russia (north-west) 46 km. Tajikistan 477 km, Vietnam 1,297 km. See <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/> (accessed May 16, 2024).
- <sup>29</sup> [https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2022-10-27/4\\_1212-wildwest.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2022-10-27/4_1212-wildwest.html) (accessed May 16, 2024).
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- <sup>37</sup> <https://www.ng.ru/cis/2023-08-16/5-8801-kyrgyzstan.html> (accessed May 12, 2024).
- <sup>38</sup> "(BRF2023) Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote speech at 3rd Belt and Road Forum for Int'l Cooperation." *Xinhua* October 18, 2023. <https://english.news.cn/20231018/7bfc16ac51d443c6a7a00ce25c972104/c.html> (accessed May 16, 2024).
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<sup>41</sup> "Remarks by President Xi Jinping at the Virtual Summit to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between China and Central Asian Countries", [http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202201/27/content\\_WS61f203b4c6d09c94e48a4589.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202201/27/content_WS61f203b4c6d09c94e48a4589.html) (accessed May 9, 2024).

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<sup>43</sup> Wang Yi: "The China-Central Asia Summit Creates a New Platform for Good-neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation in the Region." [www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbj\\_663304/wjbj\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202403/t20240319\\_1126316.html](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbj_663304/wjbj_663308/activities_663312/202403/t20240319_1126316.html) (accessed May 12, 2024).

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<sup>45</sup> "(BRF2023) "Full text of Xi Jinping's keynote speech at 3rd Belt and Road Forum for Int'l Cooperation," *Xinhua* 18.10.2023. <https://english.news.cn/20231018/7bfc16ac51d443v6a7a00ce25v972104/v.html> (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> "Wang Yi meets Acting Foreign Minister of Afghan Interim Government Amir Khan Muttaqi." [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq\\_665435/2675\\_665437/2676\\_663356/2678\\_663360/202207/t20220729\\_10730548.html#:~:text=On%20July%2028%2C%202022%20local,Cooperation%20Organization%20foreign%20ministers'%20meeting](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2676_663356/2678_663360/202207/t20220729_10730548.html#:~:text=On%20July%2028%2C%202022%20local,Cooperation%20Organization%20foreign%20ministers'%20meeting) (accessed May 10, 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity." <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/> (Zugriff am 13.05.2024). <https://www.tj.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/143/United-States-Strategy-for-Central-Asia-2019-2025-1.pdf> (accessed May 13, 2024).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> "Pompeo offers new areas of cooperation with Central Asia." <http://www.newscentralasia.net/2019/09/24/pompeo-offers-new-areas-of-cooperation-with-central-asia/> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>51</sup> "US-Chair: Statement of the June 30 2020 C-5+1 High Level Dialogue." <https://2017-2021.state.gov/bureau-of-south-and-central-asian-affairs-releases/u-s-chair-statement-of-the-june-30-2020-c51-high-level-dialogue/index.html> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>52</sup> "Joint Statement on the C5+1-Meeting during UNGA 77," <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-c51-meeting-during-unga-77/> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>53</sup> "Joint Statement on the C5+1 Ministerial in Astana." 09.03.2023 <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-c51-ministerial-in-astana/> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>54</sup> "C5+1 Leader's Joint Statement." 21.09.2023 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/c51-leaders-joint-statement/> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>55</sup> Под взлядом орлана США хотят контролировать логистику в Центральной Азии, <https://iz.ru/1676598/kseniia-loginova/pod-vzgliadom-orlana-ssha-khotiat-kontrolirovat-logistiku-v-centralnoi-azii>

<sup>56</sup> Siehe [www.traceca-org.org/fileadmin/fm-dam/pdfs/til\\_mla/1/MLA\\_English\\_with\\_ammendments.pdf](http://www.traceca-org.org/fileadmin/fm-dam/pdfs/til_mla/1/MLA_English_with_ammendments.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> All quotes in this section are taken from: "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership ." [www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007/en/pdf](http://www.data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10113-2007/en/pdf) (accessed 12 May 2024).

<sup>59</sup> See "The Diplomatic Service of the European Union." [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-synergy\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-synergy_en) (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>60</sup> See Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: "Report on the first Year of Implementation of the Black Sea Synergy." <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0391&from=en> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>61</sup> All quotes in this section are from the "Joint Communication to the

European Parliament and the Council. The EU and Central Asia". [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_communication\\_-\\_the\\_eu\\_and\\_central\\_asia\\_-\\_new\\_opportunities\\_for\\_a\\_stronger\\_partnership.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf) (accessed May 16, 2024). Phrases contained in the text of the section have been rendered close to the original text.

<sup>62</sup> The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) policy platform aims to strengthen EU-Asia relations through informal policy dialogues at all levels and in all sectors.

<sup>63</sup> All quotes in this section are from the "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU and Central Asia". (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019JC===9&print=true> accessed 16/05/2024). Wording contained in the text of the section is close to the original text.

<sup>64</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>65</sup> "Foreign policy of the new EU Commission." <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/außenpolitik-der-neuen-eu-kommission-von-der-leyen-will-100.html> (accessed May 12, 2024).

<sup>66</sup> "Gemeinsame Erklärung der Staatschefs Zentralasiens und des Bundeskanzlers der Bundesrepublik Deutschland." in <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975226/2226662/63a570a73d143bdf5f781a7685fe2173/2023-09-29-z5-erklaerung-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>67</sup> "Joint Communiqué of the 19th European Union-Central Asia Ministerial

Meeting." <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2023/10/23/joint-communique-of-the-19th-european-union-central-asia-ministerial-meeting-23-october-2023-luxembourg/> (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Committee on Foreign Affairs: "Report on the EU strategy on Central Asia" [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0407\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0407_EN.html) (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> О проекте Указа Президента Республики Казахстан... [https://adilet.](https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000507#13)

[zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000507#13](https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000507#13) (accessed May 16, 2024).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Press statements by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Xi Jinping on 16 April 2024."

<https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-de/aktuelles/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-und-staatspraesident-xi-jinping-am-16-april-2024-2271328> (accessed May 16, 2024).