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Central Asia Caught between the Great Powers

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Abstract: *Studies on contemporary Central Asia are often limited to an examination of Central Asia's relations with Russia and China and the formation of this geopolitical region as a result of 'external influence' from the USA and its Western partners. Russia, for good reasons, regards Central Asia both as a 'near abroad' with which it is closely and diversely intertwined, and as an important geopolitical building block of 'Greater Eurasia' (plus the Eurasian Economic Union), whilst China views Central Asia as a 'bulwark' for its western territories, a reservoir of raw materials, market and a 'Belt and Road' springboard for its continental trade routes to Europe – a region that Beijing skilfully embeds within its geopolitical and geo-economic strategies. Western states, by contrast, currently need Central Asia primarily to contain Russia and China. Against the backdrop of Central Asia's closely intertwined relations with Russia and China, this article seeks in particular to outline the process of emancipation of the Central Asian states as they move towards forming a resilient, solidarity-based alliance and a common economic and security area with its own security architecture. Whilst, in this process, the consultative meetings of the heads of state of the Central Asian states function as strategic dialogue platforms aimed at internal integration, the more bilaterally oriented 'C5+' mechanisms are subordinate to the concept of a multi-vector foreign policy, which is intended to balance influences and exploit them to economic advantage. A distinctive feature of this article is that it analyses the process whilst taking careful account of bilateral and multilateral documents.*

Keywords: Central Asia, geopolitics, geoeconomics, battleground of great powers and between the West and the "new East"

When Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, as leaders of the victorious powers of the Second World War, met in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam to, among other things, define the broad outlines of the post-war order, they

were well aware of their power and the uniqueness of the opportunities before them. Churchill described the conferences as "the greatest concentration of world powers that has ever existed in the history of mankind",



and Stalin pointed out that history had placed “great means of power and very great opportunities” in their hands.¹ Churchill and Stalin used the conferences to demarcate their future spheres of influence in Europe, which, amongst other things, led to the spectacular “percentage agreement”.² Churchill had jotted down on a piece of paper what percentage of influence Britain should have in which country, and Stalin ticked off most of the items in agreement. The fate of Europe thus lay in the hands of these two men, who spent their evenings together drinking, whilst the terminally ill US President Roosevelt was not really capable of taking action. During the Moscow Conference (9-20 October 1944), Stalin demanded, as a condition for the Soviet Union’s entry into the war against Japan, the restoration of the territorial situation in the Far East to that which had existed prior to the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and the

recognition of the status quo in Outer Mongolia, which Britain and the US ultimately conceded to him at the Yalta Conference. At that time, the Allies laid the foundations for the post-war order, which also involved the demarcation of future spheres of political influence. The result was – as Brzezinski later put it – the ‘Europe of Yalta’³, which created for the Soviet Union – not least in light of Russia’s experience of military incursions from Europe – a military buffer zone to the west of great strategic depth, along the westernmost line of which Soviet elite troops stood ready for combat until 1990. The only superpowers at the time, the USA and the USSR, created a bipolar world in which two military-political blocs. The first NATO Secretary General, Ismay, described NATO’s role in Europe in the following words: “to keep the Soviets out, the Americans in, and the Germans down”.

The End of the Confrontation and the Division of Europe

Today, there is sometimes the impression that exclusively European events such as perestroika, the Eastern European democracy movement and, finally, the fall of the Berlin Wall that initiated the end of the Cold War, and that this process was geographically confined to Europe. Yet this was not the case. Events taking place outside Europe were also set to exert their influence on this process in the short, medium and long term. One such example was the visit of Soviet President M. S. Gorbachev to China in 1989. Gorbachev

was received at the time by Deng Xiaoping. Deng Xiaoping gave Gorbachev a two-hour lecture in which he set out all of China’s historical grievances against Russia to the Soviet President, who did not interrupt him once. He is said to have concluded his speech by stating that all this was now in the past, that this chapter was now closed, and that Russia and China could now start afresh. As a promise given in China is binding, the two great powers, China and Russia, began to reshape their relations from the ground up.⁴

¹ *Teheran Yalta Potsdam: Die sowjetischen Protokolle von den Kriegskonferenzen der „Großen Drei“*, Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Alexander Fischer, Köln 1985, p. 7.

² Robert G. Kaiser, Churchill-Stalin Agreement Is Reported, in *The Washington Post*, 23. August 1977.

³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Die einzige Weltmacht: Amerikas Strategie der Vorherrschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 129.

⁴ Андрей Виноградов: “Когда имеешь дело с Китаем, надо быть очень внимательным к формулировкам...”, <https://telegra.ph/Andrej-Vinogradov-Kogda-imeesh-delos-4>

The effects of the 1989 state visit can therefore still be felt today. Nevertheless, some people still refuse to acknowledge the special nature of the relations between these two great powers.

With the signing of the Charter of Paris on 21 November 1991, the end of the Cold War was sealed and the division of Europe brought to an end. In October 1990, Germany, once the symbol of European division, had been reunified. The former superpower, the Soviet Union, on the other hand, dissolved in December 1991. The USA remained the sole superpower in a world that now appeared to be unipolar. Some spoke of that the 'end of history' had arrived. In February 1992, the US Department of Defence adopted the 'Wolfowitz Doctrine', which declared it a strategic objective to prevent the emergence of a global and regional competitor anywhere in the world. By 1997 at the latest, when the

official invitations to join NATO were extended to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the illusion of the "end of history" had been dispelled. Russia's Foreign Minister E. Primakov recommended to his president that a strategic triangular alliance be formed between Russia, China and India to counterbalance the transatlantic alliance. In 1996, Samuel P. Huntington published his book "The Clash of Civilisations". A year later, Z. Brzezinski published his work "The Grand Chessboard: American Strategy and its Geostrategic Imperatives". Both works were not only read very attentively in the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai, but also taken very seriously. In 1999, NATO aircraft bombed the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade. There was neither a basis in international law nor any international mandate for the eleven-week-long bombardment, during which the Chinese embassy was also hit.

Russia and China's Reaction

Russia and China saw good reasons to respond to the developments outlined. In 1997, the year of the Asian crisis, Presidents B. N. Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin issued a Joint Declaration in Beijing in which they advocated the "creation of a multipolar world and a new, more perfect international political, economic and legal order". They emphasised that their relations were 'not directed against third countries', neither Russia nor China would pursue "hegemonic or expansionist goals". Rather, they would regard their relations "as an important and

organic component of security, stability and economic progress on the Eurasian continent and in the Pacific region."⁵

On 15 June 2001, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in Shanghai to establish the "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation" (SCO). The member states had agreed on this step "in view of the dynamic development of the processes of political multipolarity, economic and informational globalisation in the 21st century".⁶ US membership of this organisation was not desired. In 2003, the

[Kitaeb-nado-byt-ovhen-vnimatelny-m-k-formulirovka-m-03-23](#)

⁵ Совместное Российско-Китайское Заявление, in <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/518563-sovmestnoe->

[rossiysko-kitayskoe-zayavlenie-pekina-10-noyabrya-1997-g#mode/inspect/page/1/zoom/4](#)

⁶ Декларация о Создании «Шанхайской Организации Сотрудничества», https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/1678030/

Chinese Zhang Deguang took over as Secretary-General of the SCO. A year later, the SCO Secretariat began its work in Beijing. The West viewed the SCO with some suspicion, particularly when India, Pakistan and Iran began to participate in the meetings. There was even talk of an 'anti-NATO' and a new OPEC.

The Presidents of Russia and China, V. V. Putin and Jiang Zemin, signed a "Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation" on 18 July 2001. The text of the treaty referred to "an equal, trust-based partnership and strategic cooperation." Article 12 states: 'The contracting parties shall make joint efforts to maintain global strategic balance and stability and shall contribute in every respect to the strict observance of the fundamental agreements that ensure the maintenance of strategic stability.'⁷ Had Russia and China now become strategic partners? Certainly only to a limited extent

and for reasons that Stant aptly describes in the following words: "Since China and Russia are both advocates of the concept of 'absolute sovereignty', they would never enter into an alliance that could in any way restrict their freedom of action."⁸ Apart from that, China regarded strategic partnerships at the time merely as "temporary and sectoral alliances of convenience, whilst safeguarding its own sovereignty and territorial integrity".⁹ In China's foreign policy calculations, Russia was certainly an important neighbour with the ability to open all doors for China in Central Asia, but from an economic perspective it was not a serious rival, even in the medium term. In this respect, both partners may have pursued their multipolar concepts, but each side did so in accordance with its national interests. Nevertheless, there was a clear common interest in Central Asia: to keep the US out of the region.

Terrorist Attack on 11 September 2001

Since 11 September 2001, statements from Russia and China about a "multipolar world" have been virtually non-existent. Both swiftly joined US President George W. Bush Jr.'s "anti-terror coalition". Both Russia and China had their own problems with Islamist terrorism. China, however, suddenly found itself "encircled by a ring of reactivated alliances and new military partnerships of the US."¹⁰ Russia's President V. V. Putin, on the other hand, was actually one of the first heads of state to swiftly assure the US of his

solidarity in the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attacks. Yet Putin also had his own plans. On 25 September 2001, he delivered a speech in the German Bundestag. There, Putin expressed the view "that Europe will only consolidate its reputation as a powerful and independent centre of world politics in the long term if it own capabilities with Russia's human, territorial and natural resources, as well as with Russia's economic,

⁷ Договор о добрососедстве, дружбе и сотрудничестве между Российской Федерацией и Китайской Народной Республикой, in <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/3418>

⁸ Angela Stent, *Putins Russland*, Hamburg bei Reinbek 2019, p. 295.

⁹ Kay Möller, *Die Außenpolitik der Volksrepublik China 1949-2004: Eine Einführung*, =Studienbücher Außenpolitik und internationale Beziehungen, herausgegeben von Wilfried von Bredow, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 124.

¹⁰ Ebenda, p. 125.

cultural and defence potential.”¹¹ Putin’s offer was entirely sincere. Had Europe accepted it at the time, things would have taken a very different course, which, however, would in no way have suited American strategists’ calculations. It was no coincidence that the original version of the Wolfowitz Doctrine had pointed out that a potential alliance between Russia and Germany, or between Russia and a Western Europe organised as a bloc, had to be countered.¹² Russia now attempted to draw closer to Washington; it allowed US military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and even wanted to become a member NATO, but was fobbed off with the NATO-Russia Council. When France, Russia and Germany opposed the US war in Iraq, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is said to have remarked, ‘Punish France, ignore Germany and forgive Russia’. Nevertheless, the US saw this constellation as a threat that it intended to eliminate thoroughly in the medium term.

In 2004, therefore, the next wave of NATO expansion took place: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia were admitted as members. NATO’s external border had now reached Russia’s border. In the same year, the “Orange Revolution” took place in Ukraine. The fact that Russia was not admitted to NATO and that its influence was being displaced from Europe by the US and its European partners worked in China’s favour, as it no longer had to fear the stationing of NATO troops on its northern border.¹³

During this period, China largely refrained from making statements on the multipolar world order, for which it had good reasons. The country had 11 December 2001. China integrated rapidly into the multilateral world trading system, which Russia did not join until 22 August 2012. Beijing’s strategy was well thought out. WTO accession brought China a variety of foreign investments, enabling it to gradually modernise its industry and infrastructure. Meanwhile, the West shifted a large part of its labour-, material- and energy-intensive production to China, amongst other places, and integrated the country into its supply chains. China opened up its economy and reformed its financial sector. Its economic output grew enormously. The country developed into a trading and economic giant, yet still liked to refer to itself as a developing country. This economic giant then experienced the economic and financial crisis caused by the US in 2007–2008. Sacred cows such as the creditworthiness of the US, the belief in market self-regulation and the exemplary role of liberal democracies were mercilessly slaughtered. China, by contrast, stood as an economically stable and “serious alternative to the West’s liberal democracy”¹⁴ in the arena of world politics. When Europe even asked China for investment and money, this smile took on a friendly yet reserved tone. Yet in some institutes of the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, the strategic opportunities for their own country during this phase were recognised. They set to work.

¹¹ Wortprotokoll der Rede Wladimir Putins im Deutschen Bundestag am 25.09.2001, in https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/putin/putin_wort-244966

¹² Zitiert bei Hans-Werner Sinn, Trump. Putin und die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa, Freiburg 2025, p. 44.

¹³ Alexander Rahr, Russland gibt Gas: Die Rückkehr einer Weltmacht, München 2008, p. 39.

¹⁴ Josef Braml, Die Transatlantische Illusion: Die neue Weltordnung und wie wir uns darin behaupten können, München 2022, p. 37.

With its characteristic strategic vision, China now turned its attention first to Central Asia, where it invested heavily and, by taking on engineering and construction contracts, drove forward infrastructure development in line with its strategic interests and plans. The interconnection of transport infrastructure

played a particular role in this. China was keen to create a convincing win-win situation in Central Asia. However, this could only be achieved if prosperity and stability in the region actually grew as a result of China's involvement.

China and Russia: “Regional Cooperation as a Key Factor in Strengthening Multipolarity”

When Xi Jinping paid his first state visit to Russia as President in March 2013 at the invitation of President V. V. Putin, both heads of state described the relations between their countries as an “example of the harmonious coexistence of major powers... which play an extremely important stabilising role in today's world order...”¹⁵ They noted that, due to the rapid pace of globalisation, the world had entered a phase of transition, “characterised by increasing interdependence between peoples and states, as well as by the interpenetration of their economies and cultures.”¹⁶ Xi Jinping and V. V. Putin spoke in favour of promoting the emerging multipolar world, but at the same time called for the pooling of global efforts “to strengthen peace, stability, development and prosperity” and to “the establishment of a more just, democratic and harmonious world order”. During the negotiations, the presidents addressed security cooperation as well as economic collaboration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which also covered the whole of Central Asia. They discussed at length “the deepening of regional cooperation as a key factor in strengthening multipolarity in international relations and for shaping a new system of intergovernmental relations in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁷ They viewed their “strategic

cooperation” in key policy areas—for which Central Asia also served, to a certain extent, as a testing ground—as a crucial premise for their collaboration in the aforementioned processes.

It went without saying that Central Asia played a special role in Russia and China's deliberations at that time. The ‘Arab Spring’, developments in the Syrian conflict, the strategic positioning of NATO troops in Afghanistan, the establishment of military bases by the US and its allies in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, amongst others, the sharp rise in drug production in Afghanistan despite the NATO presence, the growing drug trade particularly in Central Asia, and the activities of Islamist movements - which were also being steered by third parties through convoluted channels - gave Moscow and Beijing sufficient cause to seek ways of resolving the problems politically. After all, the situation in the neighbouring Central Asian states also affected their own national security to a considerable extent.

Added to this was the fact that neither the SCO nor the Eurasian Economic Union had so far proved particularly helpful in this regard. However, the fact that the negative effects of the financial crisis triggered by the US continued to severely cripple the global economy offered China the opportunity to put into practice the

¹⁵ Совместное Заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о Взаимовыгодном Сотрудничестве и Углублении Отношений Всеобъемлющего Партнерство и Стратегического

Взаимодействия, in https://e-ecolog.ru/docs/aM1_VyaOtWy9aizNKUW_L

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

strategic approaches it had already begun planning and preparing for some time. The

subsequent official visits by the Chinese President therefore played a key role.

“Scenario 1: The Fire-Breathing Dragon – China’s Strengthening” in Central Asia

The West’s announcement of its intention to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by 2014 prompted the Russian leadership to commission the Russian Council on International Relations in spring 2013 to produce detailed analyses of Central Asia. At the heart of these forward-looking analyses were the questions: 1. what political development options could be expected in Central Asia, and 2. to what extent changes to the region’s borders could be anticipated in the future.

1.) The analysts working on behalf of the Russian Council on International Affairs¹⁸ agreed that Central Asia should be classified as an unstable region. The countries suffered from socio-economic and, consequently, domestic political instability; they cooperated with one another only minimally at bilateral and multilateral levels; they quarrelled over the distribution of water resources; and they faced external threats from terrorism, drug trafficking and Islamization. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were vying for leadership in the region. When the countries were at a loss, they still tended to turn to Russia, although they were also endeavouring to maintain an increasing distance from Moscow. The analysts identified the US, China, Russia, the European Union, India, the Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Qatar), Turkey and Iran as the key players in Central Asia.

Whilst the US sought to contain Russia, China and Iran in the region and maintain the wider area in a state of ‘controlled conflict’, Russia and China pursued both their own and shared interests.

Russia was actively involved in the Eurasian Economic Community and promoted the idea of a Eurasian Union. It regarded Central Asia as its southern ‘security belt’, where the mechanisms of the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty were at work. Furthermore, Russia sought to preserve its monopoly on the supply of hydrocarbons to the EU and its exclusive access to mineral resources. China, on the other hand, was, in Russia’s assessment, seeking to expand its economic presence in Central Asia with the aim of establishing a dominant position in the transport, fuel and energy sectors. However, Russia and China were also united by the strategic objectives that both sides had clearly set out in their ‘Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International Order’ of 23 April 1997. The EU, on the other hand, was interested in expanding supplies of hydrocarbons and mineral raw materials, sought to integrate the Central Asian states into cooperation on security (e.g. the fight against drug trafficking) and human rights within the framework of the OSCE, and to foster a pro-European elite through its educational programmes in Central Asia. Whilst the

¹⁸ Сценарный прогноз развития ситуации в Центральной Азии после вывода коалиционных войск из Афганистана 2014 – 2024 гг. (24 мая 2013),

<https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/stsenarnyy-prognoz-razvitiya-situatsii-v-tsentralnoy-azii-po/>

conservative Gulf monarchies in Central Asia financed and promoted Islamization, Turkey and Iran in Central Asia were vying for influence over nation-building through both pan-Turkic and pan-Persian ideas. Other economic interests focused primarily on the creation of transit corridors.

The analysts of the forecasting project considered three scenario-based forecasts to be possible:

Scenario 1 “The Fire-Breathing Dragon - China’s Strengthening” in Central Asia, Scenario 2 “Anaconda Strategy - The West Keeps China in Check in Central Asia” and Scenario 3: “Green Crescent over Central Asia”.¹⁹

Here, we shall focus solely on the economic aspects of the first scenario, which, in the analysts’ assessment, could have an impact in the medium to long term:

- Dominance of Chinese investment;
- a natural reorientation of Central Asian economies towards China and increasing economic dependence;
- China leases agricultural land and sends Chinese workers to these farming areas;
- economic growth in Central Asian countries primarily through the sale and supply of energy resources to China;
- general environmental degradation due to the exploitation of natural resources using outdated technologies.

The passages from the forecasts presented here did not represent a threat scenario for Russia even at that time. Russia had long since learnt to assess its economic opportunities in Central Asia realistically. In this respect, it was prepared to share responsibility with China in Central Asia for security and economic matters. And China acted very cautiously and deliberately with regard to Russian interests in this region.

2.) Kasancev (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) identified five scenarios regarding the question of future borders in Central Asia, influenced by internal and external factors. The author placed particular emphasis on the external factors. He wrote: “The geopolitical ‘centrality’ of Central Asia and the need of the region’s states for external assistance lead to active interference by the major powers (China, Russia, the US, EU states, India, etc.) in their affairs.”, the author emphasised. The five scenarios he identified were: 1. “Sino-centric world”, 2. “Reintegration of the post-Soviet space”, 3. “Central Asian integration”, 4. “Caliphate”, 5. “Complete dissolution”. Of these, he rated scenarios 1 and 5 as the most likely, though he considered the probability of scenario 1 to be higher. In the event of the disintegration of states in this region, Kasancev predicted that China would then likely have an increased interest “in intervening in Central Asian affairs”.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Андрей Казанцев Пять сценариев будущих границ Центральной Азии, (17 апреля 2013), in <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/237553/>

G20 Summit in St Petersburg

On 5 September 2013 (arriving from Turkmenistan), Xi Jinping attended the 8th G20 Summit in St Petersburg. In his speech, he addressed the state of the global economy and pointed to possible solutions. Xi emphasised that, given the global economic situation, countries should take into account the interests and development of other states whilst pursuing their own national interests. Xi stressed: “It is essential to link the development of individual countries. Balanced growth of the global economy requires the integration of interests. All countries should build a global value chain based on shared interests that promotes a large global market, bringing benefits to all participants and thus achieving development

for mutual benefit and outcomes that are advantageous to all involved.”²¹ The Chinese President spoke in favour of an open global economy, against protectionism, and in favour of “a free, open and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system”, the improvement of global investment rules and the enhancement of global economic policy, such as the adjustment of quotas at the International Monetary Fund. China’s economic policy also bears responsibility for the global economy; the positive fundamentals of its economy could lead to economic development that would have a positive impact on the global economy, Xi Jinping stated in St Petersburg.²²

President Xi Jinping’s 2013 Tour of Central Asia

The Chinese President’s participation in the 8th G20 Summit in St Petersburg (September 2013) was, unusually, embedded within a series of state visits to Central Asia. The tour was regarded as politically well-timed and aligned with China’s strategic objectives in the region. Xi Jinping visited Turkmenistan from 3-4 September 2013,

travelled to St Petersburg and then paid a state visit to Kazakhstan from 6-8 September²³, Uzbekistan on 9 September²⁴ and Kyrgyzstan²⁵ from 10-12 September 2013. The strategic partnership with Uzbekistan was further strengthened by the signing of a treaty on friendly and cooperative partnership. In the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek,

²¹ https://auckland.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/chinanews/201309/t20130909_172045.htm

²² Ibid.

²³ Kazakhstan, which shared a 1,700 km border with China, achieved a bilateral trade volume of USD 25 billion with China in 2012. Xi Jinping proposed an increase to USD 40 billion by 2015. At that time, China was training 8,000 Kazakh students in China, primarily in the fields of science and technology. Both countries were working on the completion of the 2,800 km crude oil pipeline between China and Kazakhstan, as well as the 1,000 km Kazakh section of the gas pipeline between China and Central Asia.

²⁴ During his state visit to Uzbekistan, China’s President put forward four proposals: 1. Increasing bilateral trade volume to USD 5 billion by 2017, and commencing talks on free

trade zones and investment. 2. Deepening energy cooperation (ensuring the safe and stable operation of the China-Uzbekistan gas pipeline, cooperation in natural gas processing, oil shale extraction and renewable energy. 3. Promoting infrastructure links (connecting China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan via rail and road networks), 4. Establishing joint special industrial zones and model agricultural estates.

²⁵ During his state visit to Kyrgyzstan, Xi Jinping raised security issues in particular due to the illegal activities of Islamist groups on Kyrgyz territory. Kyrgyz President A. Atambaev confirmed the continuation of close cooperation in the security sector and in the fight against the ‘three evil forces’. Cooperation between the two countries should also focus on infrastructure projects such as the North-South Highway and the modernisation of power stations.

Xi Jinping finally took part in the meeting of SCO.

The state visits to the Central Asian countries marked a qualitative shift in bilateral relations. China elevated its relations with Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan to the level of a strategic partnership. It had already established such relations with Uzbekistan in 2012 and with Tajikistan in May 2013. China and Kazakhstan, on the other hand, had maintained relations at the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership since 13 June 2011.

Relations were now based on a clear foundation. The parties committed themselves to mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit.

The Central Asian states recognised the 'One China Policy', the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government representing the whole

of China, and Taiwan as an inseparable part of Chinese territory. They undertook to reject 'Taiwanese independence' and not to establish official relations with Taiwan. They supported "the peaceful development of relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and all efforts by the Chinese government towards the reunification of the country."²⁶

China, for its part, undertook to respect the paths of development chosen by the peoples of Central Asia themselves, not to interfere in internal affairs and to support their socio-economic development.

The signatories further undertook to "refrain from participating in any alliances or blocs directed against the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of any of the contracting parties, etc."²⁷ The parties reached a detailed agreement on security issues. In addition, comprehensive framework agreements had already been concluded at SCO level.

Xi Jinping in Almaty: "Building an Economic Belt along the Silk Road Together."

The highlight of President Xi Jinping's trip to Central Asia was undoubtedly his speech at Nazarbayev University in Almaty on 7 September 2013. Xi Jinping spoke of how the ancient Silk Road had gained new vitality through the rapid development of relations between China and the states of Eurasia, including the Central Asian states, had gained new vitality. Xi mentioned (certainly with

Russia in mind) that whilst there were already organisations for regional cooperation in the Eurasian region, such as the Eurasian Economic Community and the SCO, the task now was to "jointly build a new economic belt along the Silk Road using an innovative cooperation model".²⁸ The actual geographical scope of his proposal became clearer when he finally addressed the need to

²⁶ Siehe Совместная Декларация об установлении отношений стратегического партнерства между Китайской Народной Республикой и Туркменистаном, in https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/wjdt/gb/201405/t20140509_858220.html

²⁷ Совместная декларация Китайской Народной Республики и Республики Таджикистан об установлении отношений стратегического партнерства http://russian.china.org.cn/exclusive/text/2013-05/21/content_28878852.htm

²⁸ Xi Jinping: China Regieren, Beijing 2014, p. 352.

expand transport infrastructure. He mentioned the construction of “a transport route linking the Pacific with the Baltic Sea” as well as the gradual creation of a transport network “linking East, West and South Asia”, thereby making the geographical scope of his proposal clear to his audience.²⁹ Xi emphasised that China would respect the self-chosen path of development (including foreign and domestic policy) of the Central Asian peoples and would not interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian states. The strategic partnership between them meant that they would “resolutely support one another on issues of major interest, such as national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security and stability”.³⁰ China does not seek regional hegemony, according to the Chinese President. Xi Jinping also mentioned that, in cooperation with Central Asia, he intended to conduct payments

under the current and capital accounts on the basis of the convertibility of national currencies. The intention to protect this strategic Silk Road project from external financial influences from the outset was unmistakable.

China’s strategists may have had many sound arguments for Xi Jinping’s initiative in Almaty. The most important factor was likely Central Asia’s location on the transcontinental trade routes. Crucially, the overland route could not be influenced by American naval power. China was therefore able to export its industrial goods to the European market and import strategic resources (primarily coal hydrocarbons). Furthermore, a prosperous Central Asia provided ideal protection for China’s western regions, which were being developed as the country’s energy base.

SCO Summit in Bishkek 2013

The SCO summit on 13 September 2013 was attended not only by the heads of state of Russia, China and the Central Asian countries, but also representatives of international and regional organisations and of countries holding observer status within the SCO (e.g. Mongolia). The summit was held in a small-scale format, attended only by the heads of state of the member countries.

Russian President Putin, who spoke after Xi Jinping in the small group, echoed the previous speaker. He highlighted the threats to global security in general and the security of SCO members, and called for “a thorough examination of how we can further develop and strengthen the SCO.” In the plenary session, Putin called for the expansion of

economic cooperation within the SCO in the areas of trade, technology exchange and investment. Transport and connectivity played a particular role: Russia had begun modernising the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) to increase the railways’ transit potential. The SCO members, according to Putin, must intensify the coordinated expansion of road networks within the SCO. Putin did state that Russia was actively cooperating with the People’s Republic of China on cross-border issues. Strangely enough, there was no reference whatsoever in Putin’s statements to the content of Xi Jinping’s speech in Almaty, particularly as the Chinese initiative did, after all, significantly affect the interests of the

²⁹ Ibid, p. 353.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 351.

Eurasian Economic Community, to which, alongside Russia, Belarus and Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

President Xi Jinping, on the other hand, spoke of continuing the “Shanghai Spirit” for joint development, of the fight against the “three evils” (terrorism, separatism and extremism) and so on. He pointed out that “the international financial crisis has confronted all countries, to varying degrees, with difficulties in their economic development”. The SCO now stood “before rare opportunities” and major challenges. The SCO should be developed “into a community of shared destiny and interests for its member states”. Under the third point of his speech, he recommended focusing on the development of pragmatic cooperation with a view to “passing on and further developing the spirit of the Silk Road.”³¹ Among other things, he called for the swift signing of the agreement to facilitate international road transport, the creation of transport corridors between the Baltic Sea and the Pacific, between Central Asia, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf,

an agreement to facilitate trade and investment, the promotion of economic cooperation in the region, the strengthening of cooperation in the financial sector and the guarantee of energy security, etc.

India’s Foreign Minister S. Hurshid appeared to be the only speaker to refer, at least indirectly, to the Chinese President’s speech in Almaty. He stated: “India is culturally closely linked to the ancient Silk Road networks that traversed the territory of today’s SCO. These networks promoted transcontinental development at the time and catalysed cultural connections, traces of which are still visible today. We therefore believe that, alongside its other endeavours, the SCO should also focus on creating well-connected trade and investment corridors within the SCO region - with India, as in earlier times, providing added value and substantive contributions. These links between our countries, whether rail, road or pipeline connections, will help to revitalise our economies and bring our peoples closer together.”³²

Xi Jinping: “Building good diplomatic relations with our neighbours”

On 24 October 2013, just a few weeks after the SCO summit in Bishkek, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech on China’s relations with its neighbouring countries. The Chinese Communist Party had been working for some time on the formulation of “a strategy for the overall diplomatic situation”, in which neighbouring regions played a significant role for China’s development. He

emphasised that “the path of peaceful development” is the strategic choice of the Chinese Communist Party. The aim is to “create favourable external conditions for China’s reform, development and stability.”³³ From a strategic perspective, the timing was favourable: China’s environment was stable, and good neighbourliness, friendship, mutual benefit and cooperation were the prevailing

³¹ https://auckland.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/chinanews/201309/t2013090917_172216.htm

³² <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22197/Statement+by+External+Affairs>

[+Minister+at+the+Shanghai+Cooperation+Organization+S+CO+Heads+of+State+Summit+2013+in+Bishkek](#)

³³ Xi Jinping: China Regieren, Beijing 2014, p. 364.

trends. Xi Jinping emphasised: “Whether from a geographical and natural perspective or in terms of mutual relations, our neighbouring regions are of immense strategic importance to our country. We should reflect on issues with our neighbouring countries from three-dimensional, diversified aspects that know no temporal or spatial boundaries, and conduct neighbourhood diplomacy effectively.”³⁴ The true path of neighbourhood diplomacy must be the promotion of prosperity in neighbouring countries. To this end, a “framework of mutual benefit based on the exploitation of comparative advantages” should be created. Xi formulated the objective of to weave “an even denser network of shared interests” and to make the principles of regional cooperation “shared ideas and rules of conduct that all

states in the region follow and adhere to”. It would be the responsibility of the Chinese state’s strategic analysis to analyse the strategic points of cooperation and to resolve problems on the basis “unified and comprehensive planning”. Xi Jinping outlined the paths to be taken in practical cooperation. As far as the economy was concerned, these included the opening up of border regions, the accelerated interconnection of infrastructure, the establishment of free trade zones, close financial cooperation and the creation of a qualitatively new framework for economic integration. The implementation of a concept of comprehensive, shared and cooperative security and broad cultural exchange would be further key elements of the neighbourhood policy.

Russian-Kazakh Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Alliance in the 21st Century

Although Russia did not officially voice its unease regarding the Chinese initiative to create an economic belt along the Silk Road, there was a feeling in Moscow that it had somehow been sidelined by China, especially as this initiative did, after all, affect large areas of the Eurasian Economic Community dominated by Russia. The Kremlin sought an elegant solution that would allow China to save face whilst at the same time making its own position clear enough. On 11 November 2013, the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan signed a “Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Partnership in the 21st Century”.³⁵ The

preamble to the treaty referred to the desire of both sides “to raise bilateral relations to a qualitatively new level in the spirit of partnership, in order to fully exploit the potential of the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space.”³⁶ The parties reaffirmed their commitment to, amongst other things, the Helsinki Final Act of 1 August 1975 and other documents of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. They reaffirmed the “joint agreements and international obligations within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Customs Union, the

³⁴ Ibid, p. 361.

³⁵ Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Казахстан о добрососедстве и союзнничестве в XXI веке, in

https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contract/s/international_contracts/2_contract/44299/

³⁶ Ibid.

Common Economic Space, the Organisation of the Treaty on Collective Security, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia”.³⁷ The parties referred to bilateral border treaties and a coordinated foreign policy for “stability and security in the Eurasian region”. Whilst Article 3 contained a complex mutual assistance pledge and Articles 18 and 19 regulated cooperation in the defence sector, Article 10 stated: “The Contracting Parties shall contribute to the further strengthening of the Customs Union and the Common Economic Space in order to deepen Eurasian

integration on the basis of equality, voluntariness and mutual benefit without prejudice to political sovereignty.”³⁸ The parties had agreed, on the basis of their strategic partnership, to cooperate in the exploration, extraction, processing and transport of hydrocarbon resources. In Article 16, the parties agreed on “mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of transport and communications, including the development of transport information systems and information and communication technologies.”³⁹ The treaty served as a model. The text was scrutinised very closely in the other Central Asian capitals.

Eurasian Economic Union + Silk Road Economic Belt

Negotiations in the West on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the unmistakable trends towards the emergence of a polycentric world order, and developments in the Ukraine conflict made it necessary, from Moscow’s perspective, to strengthen strategic interaction with China on the one hand, whilst also avoiding unnecessary friction. The celebrations marking the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War. Both Russia and China regarded themselves as victorious powers of the Second World War and had indeed borne the brunt of the fight against fascism and militarism. Presidents V. V. Putin and Xi Jinping held talks in which they defined their common positions on international issues and matters of bilateral

economic cooperation. They agreed to regard the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a ‘model for a new type of equal, trusting, good-neighbourly and partnership-based inter-state relations.’ The ‘Joint Communiqué’ states: ‘China fully supports Russia’s chairmanship of the SCO.’⁴⁰ Russia, for its part, expressed its appreciation for ‘the establishment of the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and the ‘21st-century Maritime Silk Road’, regarding them as an important concept for the development of cooperation in the fields of trade, the economy and investment” in the Central Asian region.⁴¹ Both sides agreed to “seek points of convergence between regional economic integration processes within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and the ‘Silk

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики об углублении

всеобъемлющего партнерства и стратегического взаимодействия и о продвижении взаимовыгодного сотрудничества, in

<http://www.special.kremlin.ru/supplement/4969>

⁴¹ Ibid.

Road Economic Belt’.”⁴² In fact, the transport corridors of the “Belt and Road Initiative” bypassed Russia to the south, although there was also a route running northwards through Russia. What motives led China to choose such a route is not really known. It may have been purely pragmatic and economic considerations, but a glance into the geopolitical ‘crystal ball’ may have prompted the very cautious Chinese strategists to do so. The fact that, during the second half of the 2000s, quite a few infrastructure projects proposed by Russia were rejected by the Chinese side could point in this direction. The parties agreed to the commencement of negotiations between the Eurasian Economic Union and the People’s Republic of China on the conclusion of an agreement on trade and economic cooperation. China, which had previously favoured bilateral negotiations, showed itself willing to compromise by accepting the Russian approach, preferring an institutional approach. The presidents adopted, on behalf of the “Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China”, a “Joint Declaration on Cooperation in the Development of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt”.⁴³ They agreed to initiate a dialogue between the Eurasian Economic Union and the People’s Republic of China with the aim of conclude a corresponding treaty. The fact that Russia spoke solely on behalf of the Eurasian Economic Union in the negotiations with China on this issue caused serious ill feeling in Kazakhstan. The main transport corridors of the Trans-Caspian route were now to run

through Kazakh territory. Everything seemed fine; at that point, no one was giving the highly problematic South Caucasus a second thought. However, there was no other choice. If Ukraine was originally regarded as Russia’s gateway to Europe, Kazakhstan was Europe’s gateway to Asia. But Ukraine had ceased to function as a ‘gateway’. The strategists in Washington had done a thorough job.

As for strengthening strategic interaction, both sides agreed to continue cooperation within the Russia-India-China framework, which was later to lead to the planning and implementation of the North-South Transport Corridor, which may well have been the real reason for the US war against Iran in 2026. At the same time, Russia and China agreed on a trilateral framework for cross-border and interregional cooperation with Mongolia, which was also to be expanded on the international stage.

The geographical approach in Russia’s and China’s Central Asian policy appeared to differ somewhat during this period. Whilst China understood ‘Central Asia’ to mean the five states in the region, which it required as a ‘shield’ for Xinjiang and as a springboard to Europe, Russia thought in terms of the geopolitical dimension of a ‘Greater Eurasia’. This dimension included Siberia, Kazakhstan, Central Asia and the western regions of China, and took into account, in the background, Russia’s interest in the development and exploitation of Siberian resources. After all, by around 2015 there was already a well-developed and efficient transport corridor linking western China with

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о сотрудничестве по сопряжению строительства Евразийского

экономического союза и Экономического пояса Шелкового пути 8 мая 2015 года, in <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4971>

Western Europe, which ran through the cities of Lianyungang, Zhengzhou, Lanzhou, Urumqi, Khorgos, Almaty, Kyzylorda, Aktobe, Orenburg, Kazan, Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow and St Petersburg to the Baltic Sea

ports, with a customs border only between China and Kazakhstan. This transport corridor could have been helpful in transporting Russian raw materials to the European market.

TPP without Russia, China and India

On 4 November 2015, twelve countries⁴⁴ signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. Together with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which was being negotiated in parallel, these agreements would have been able to bring the markets of Russia, China and India, could have covered markets accounting for approximately 60 per cent of global trade flows. As components of the US foreign trade strategy, they served to establish a new global trade regime that could have become the foundation of a new world order. However, the TTIP was never concluded, and the US withdrew from the TTP by decree of President D. Trump, who preferred bilateral economic agreements, withdrew from the

TTP on 23 January 2017. The remaining eleven signatory states continued with the TTP. Russia viewed this process with equanimity, as its key export goods, such as hydrocarbons and military equipment, were not particularly affected by the TTP's trade regime. China, as a leading exporting nation, on the other hand, had every reason to be extremely concerned. It therefore accelerated the expansion of, among other things, its 'Belt and Road' trade routes to Europe and intensified its involvement in the negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This was expected to have an impact on the pace of implementation of its "Belt and Road" initiative in the near future.

"Belt and Road" Forum 2017

When China hosted its first "Belt and Road Forum" in Beijing in 2017, President Xi Jinping was able to present an impressive track record. China had succeeded in linking its "Silk Road Initiative" with the ASEAN states, the Eurasian Economic Union, and transport infrastructure initiatives in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Mongolia, Vietnam, the United Kingdom and Poland.

An infrastructure network based on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the

China -Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor and the New Eurasian Continental Bridge, took on a multidimensional form, i.e. it involved land, sea and air transport routes, data highways, pipelines and ports. China had concluded agreements with over 40 countries and organisations and invested over USD 50 billion in the "Belt and Road" countries. The volume of trade with the 'Belt and Road' countries exceeded USD 3 trillion in the years 2014–2016. The volume of trade with the

⁴⁴ USA, Japan, Canada, Australia, Brunei, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Vietnam.

Central Asian states reached USD 30 billion in 2017. Through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (investments: USD 1.7 billion), the Silk Road Fund (investments: USD 4 billion) and the 16+1 Financial Holding Company between China and Central and Eastern European countries, China laid the foundations for the necessary financial interconnectivity, with Xi Jinping also referring to existing cooperation with the New Development Bank of the BRICS states and the World Bank. Xi Jinping formulated the following principles of 'Belt and Road' cooperation:

1. Implementation under conditions of peace: a partnership of dialogue and friendship, as well as win-win cooperation.
2. The initiative's goal: shared prosperity. The main pillars are industry as the foundation, the financial sector as the lifeblood of the economy, and infrastructural connectivity. Energy connectivity through changes in the energy mix and the revolution in energy technologies.
3. An open platform for cooperation and the maintenance of the global economy: trade as an engine of growth.
4. Innovation-driven development and cooperation in future-oriented sectors: the creation of a Digital Silk Road (Big Data, Cloud Computing, Smart Cities) + green development, ways of working and living, and so on.

Xi Jinping announced that China would dedicate itself to poverty alleviation and provide emergency food aid in developing

countries participating in the 'Belt and Road' initiative.⁴⁵

It seemed understandable that, in view of the escalating Ukraine crisis in 2014, Russia was initially not a candidate for integration into the infrastructure of the "One Belt, One Road" transport corridors. However, Russia has since developed entirely different plans. During the "One Belt, One Road International Forum" in 2017, Putin stated: "The infrastructure projects announced within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, in conjunction with the Northern Sea Route, are capable of fundamentally reshaping transport across the Eurasian continent."⁴⁶ Putin pointed out that Russia was already investing considerable funds in the development of the Northern Sea Route. For China, this prospect represented a highly attractive alternative. The general view was that a vertical land route through the Siberian part of Russia and the now almost ice-free Northern Sea Route along the Russian coast could hardly be threatened by the maritime power of the USA. Yet President V.V. Putin went a step further. He spoke of a vision of a Eurasian partnership and integration through "the combination of the potential of such integration formats as the EAEU, 'One Belt, One Road', the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations."⁴⁷ Putin envisaged "a unified space of cooperation stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific".⁴⁸ One can easily imagine the

⁴⁵ Full text of President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road forum, in <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2018/0306/c25-1038.html>

⁴⁶ <http://gea.owasia.org/2017/05/93/>

⁴⁷ Выступление Владимира Путина на Международном форуме «Один пояс, один путь», in <http://gea.owasia.org/2017/05/93/>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

feelings with which Putin's speech may have been received in Washington.

For China, the five Central Asian states are of enormous strategic importance to the realisation of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Beijing needs these states as a security belt along its sensitive western borders, as areas where peace prevails, prosperity flourishes and socio-economic stability exists. Only the transport corridors through Central Asia guarantee access to Europe and Iran, and from there on to the Middle East and India. A partnership with the Central Asian states, with Iran (an SCO member since 2023) and Pakistan (an SCO member since 2017), there would be an opportunity to contain the dangers in Afghanistan (which has actually held observer status in the SCO since 2012). As Central Asia was still regarded as Russia's 'strategic backyard' or 'soft underbelly', China has also made great efforts to take Russia's interests into account and to resolve issues in a spirit of partnership and good neighbourliness. Leksjutina emphasised that the Central Asian states therefore play an important role at all four levels of Chinese diplomacy: 1. Peripheral or neighbourhood diplomacy, 2. Developing-country

diplomacy, 3. multilateral diplomacy, 4. great power diplomacy.⁴⁹ Central Asia is, particularly for its energy base in Xinjiang, an important supplier of hydrocarbons and, in this regard, is in competition with the European Union. Leksjutina also pointed out that, from 2020 onwards, China no longer regarded the SCO as the most important decision-making mechanism for China in Central Asian affairs, due to the heterogeneity of its members and growing differences of opinion amongst them.

China therefore decided in 2020 to establish a permanent dialogue mechanism with the Central Asian countries at the level of foreign ministers, which was raised to the level of heads of state from 2023 onwards. This also meant that China could resolve Central Asian issues together with Russia outside the SCO. Yet shared interests prevailed, particularly when it came to containing Western or Islamist influences in Central Asia. The policies of the US and its allies pushed Moscow and Beijing into ever closer interaction. Among the leadership of the Central Asian countries, however, the realisation grew that only closer cooperation between them would guarantee long-term security and sustainable growth in the region.

China Strengthens Ties with Central Asia's Middle Powers

In 2017, China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan agreed to deepen their relations to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. China and Kazakhstan assured one another that "to refrain from any actions

directed against the sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability of the other party's borders, and which are incompatible with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter."⁵⁰ With Uzbekistan, China agreed

⁴⁹ Yana V. Leksyutina, Chinese Policy in Central Asia in the Estimation of Chinese Experts, in <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/chinese-policy-in-central-asia/>

⁵⁰ Полный текст Совместного заявления Китайской Народной Республики и Республики Казахстана, in <https://rus.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/37242.html>

that the parties would not permit “third states or organisations, or groups, to carry out activities on their territory that would harm the state sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other party.”⁵¹ In this context, the three parties viewed their “close military and military-technical cooperation” as positive. In both bilateral documents, “practical cooperation” was assessed as a core component of relations within the framework of comprehensive strategic cooperation. Various concrete measures were assigned to these, arising from previously adopted bilateral development strategies. For example, as early as 2006, Kazakhstan had already adopted with China a “Strategy for Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan in the 21st Century” and a “Concept for the

Development of Economic Cooperation between China and Kazakhstan”, which were based on the respective national development strategies. Linking national projects (in Kazakhstan’s case, the national “Nurly Zhol” programme) with those of China’s Belt and Road Initiative was a key priority for both sides, the focus of which was the expansion of a comprehensive transport infrastructure, which was also intended to strengthen interregional cooperation. Peace, stability, security and sustainable development in the Central Asian region formed the framework for the parties’ strategic partnerships. China itself viewed cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as a strategic cornerstone of its intentions in Central Asia.

Central Asia as a United Bloc

As leading states in the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were faced with the task of devise a regional policy approach that would enable Central Asia to act as a largely independent agent of its own development. Their presidents, N. Nazarbayev and Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev, met on 22-23 March 2017 for official talks in the Kazakh capital. They agreed “that the coordination and adoption of solutions acceptable to both sides for the full range of intra-regional issues must primarily be carried out by the states of the region themselves on the basis of the principles of equality, mutual benefit and respect for each other’s interests.”⁵² The presidents

emphasised the importance of their cooperation within the UN, the SCO, the CIS and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). They identified the rapid stabilisation of Afghanistan and the sensitive management of water resources in transboundary rivers as key issues for the region’s security and stability. The presidents paid particular attention “bilateral cooperation in the transport sector and the development of transit corridors that ensure the fastest and most efficient access to external markets.”⁵³

As Kazakhstan was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2017–2018, it was fitting that the President of

⁵¹ Совместное заявление Республики Узбекистан и Китайской Народной Республики о дальнейшем углублении отношений всестороннего стратегического партнерства, in <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/515>

⁵² Совместная декларация о дальнейшем углублении стратегического партнерства и укреплении

добрососедства между Республикой Узбекистан и Республикой Казахстан, in

<https://uza.uz/ru/posts/sovместnaya-deklaratsiya-o-dalneyshem-uglublenii-strategiche-24-03-2017>

⁵³ Ibid.

Uzbekistan, Shavkat M. Mirziyoyev, presented the initiative to establish a regional dialogue platform in Central Asia to the UN General Assembly in 2017. He did so for good reason. Firstly, Uzbekistan, situated at the heart of Central Asia, had, in his words, “a keen interest in the region becoming a zone of stability, sustainable development and good neighbourliness”, which is why “a peaceful and economically prosperous Central Asia is our most important goal and our central task”.⁵⁴ The President noted a significant increase in political trust in the region and stated: “I believe that holding regular consultation meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia would facilitate the consolidation of this trend.”⁵⁵

On the other hand, following the death of his predecessor Karimov, President Mirziyoyev had made significant efforts to reform Uzbekistan’s domestic politics. This also included a realistic assessment of the republic’s external environment. The autocratic presidential republics of Central Asia had come under considerable domestic pressure in recent years. Externally instigated

‘colour revolutions’ such as the ‘Rose Revolution’ in Georgia (2003) and the ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan (2005), whose activists were able to exploit the real grievances existing in Central Asia - such as the unhealthy concentration of power, latent patronage in public office and corruption - for political ends, gave rise to a permanent sense of unease and threat within the regional power circles. This was also in light of the West’s increasing ‘promotion of democracy’, which, as a rule, masked by ‘democratic objectives’, actually served only to pursue its own geopolitical or geo-economic goals. Added to this was the permanent presence of institutions such as the British School, the International School and the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, whose educational programmes were intended to contribute significantly to the westernisation of future elites. On the other hand, the long-standing integration of the Central Asian states into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was not entirely satisfactory either, as it was more or less dominated by both Russia and China.

Consultative Meetings as a Platform for Dialogue

The Central Asian presidents agreed that they needed a political, yet relatively loose, alliance in their culturally and civilisational almost homogeneous region, which would allow them to develop their region economically following the Chinese model and more or less undisturbed by external influences (especially from the West),

without, however, having to compromise the political foundations and structures of their states. This also involved being able to open up to the outside world as far as possible for economic cooperation, whilst limiting and balancing the influence of the respective partners. To this end, the multi-vector foreign policy was repeatedly held up like a shield,

⁵⁴ Address by H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the UNGA-72, Tuesday, 19 September 2017, in [https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-](https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72)

[he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72](https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/statements_speeches/address-he-mr-shavkat-mirziyoyev-president-republic-uzbekistan-unga-72)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

but this was no longer sufficient. After all, the multivectoral foreign policy of small countries made no impression whatsoever on the powers that had become increasingly active in Central Asia. The political dialogue platform, described as a ‘consultative meeting’, was now intended to change this gradually.

The 1st Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia took place on 15 March 2018 in the Kazakh capital, Astana. The meeting was preceded by a meeting between the Kazakh and Uzbek presidents, Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan had by then assumed a leading role in Central Asia, although they liked to present themselves in the region as *primus inter pares*. As the need for bilateral coordination was very high, the two heads of state paid each other six official visits in the last two years alone.

The participants in the 1st Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State in Central Asia were able to draw a thoroughly positive conclusion for the region. The increasing frequency of visits at high and the highest levels, the conclusion of the agreement on the demarcation of the border point between Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the clarification of 85 per cent of the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the significant expansion of transport infrastructure all bore witness to this positive assessment. They agreed to further deepen cooperation within the framework of the CIS, the SCO and the OIC. However, the priority

objective defined was “to make Central Asia a region that develops economically in a sustainable manner and prospers in every respect”.⁵⁶ In this regard, the main areas of cooperation were established.

At the subsequent 2nd Consultative Meeting (Tashkent, 29 November 2019), the heads of state agreed to hold regular consultative meetings “as a regional platform for dialogue to facilitate trusting, constructive and open discussions on current issues of regional cooperation and to resolve common problems”.⁵⁷ The heads of state adopted rules of procedure for the consultative meetings. The objective was defined as “the dynamic development of the economies and improvement of the standard of living of the population”.⁵⁸ Five-party political consultations were to be held regularly at the level of heads of state and foreign ministers. The heads of state emphasised: “The political dialogue and the positive processes of inter-state rapprochement in Central Asia are open and constructive and are not directed against the interests of third parties.”⁵⁹, whilst viewing close cooperation in the fields of politics and security as an important component of regional rapprochement. They emphasised, however, that their economic cooperation was open and that relations with other partner countries should be diversified. The presidents referred to the opportunities presented by Central Asia’s enormous transit potential and its role “as a global transport corridor connecting South Asia, China and Europe”. They therefore agreed to press

⁵⁶ Первая консультативная встреча глав государств Центральной Азии, in <https://uza.uz/ru/posts/pervaya-konsultativnaya-vstrecha-glav-gosudarstv-tsentralnoy-15-03-2018>

⁵⁷ Совместное Заявление Консультативной встречи глав государств Центральной Азии, in

<https://www.uzembassy.kz/ru/page/sovmestnoe-zayavlenie-konsultativnoy-vstrechi-glav-gosudarstv-tsentralnoy-azii>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

ahead with projects to develop transport systems, “which should have a positive impact on the dynamics and volume of international trade, the growth of transit goods flows, as well as transport costs for raw materials, equipment and finished products”. To this end, it would also be necessary to take technical and logistical measures to increase cargo handling. Kazakhstan proposed holding regular meetings of the secretaries of the National Security Councils and concluding a five-party treaty on friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation in the foreseeable future.

At the 3rd consultation meeting on 6 August 2021 in Turkmenbashi, coordinated cooperation between the countries took on a more concrete form. The partnerships between them should be “secure, sustainable, comprehensive and open”. At the level of the foreign ministries, there were plans to extend cooperation to the countries’ diplomatic missions. The heads of state proposed the creation of new platforms:

1. Dialogue on Security and Cooperation in Central Asia as a permanent consultative platform;

2. Development of the “Astana” International Financial Centre as an economic platform for the “joint development of the financial system” and for attracting investment;
3. Development of a regional centre for the development of transport and communications networks under the auspices of the UN;
4. Establishment of a five-party Council of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs of Central Asia;
5. Creation of a network of regional centres for disease control and biosafety under UN auspices;
6. Development of a UN strategy for the development of a low-carbon energy sector.

Of particular significance was the decision by the heads of state to instruct their foreign ministries to draft a “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century”. The convening of an inter-parliamentary forum and a youth forum were also on the meeting’s agenda.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as Driving Forces

The Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Š. Mirziyoev and K.-J. Tokaev, issued a declaration on alliance relations on 6 December 2021. They announced their intention to elevate their bilateral relations to the level of an alliance based on the strategic partnership established on 14 June 2013, which “serve as a decisive factor in ensuring

peace, stability and security in Central Asia”.⁶⁰ They resolved to establish a Supreme Intergovernmental Council, a Council for Interparliamentary Cooperation and a Council of Foreign Ministers of both states, which would coordinate alliance matters. In the declaration, the presidents outlined a broad framework for cooperation, which

⁶⁰ Декларация о союзнических отношениях между Республикой Узбекистан и Республикой Казахстан, in <https://uza.uz/sp/posts/deklaraciya-o-soyuznicheskix->

[otnosheniyax-mezhdu-respublikoy-uzbekistan-i-respublikoy-kazaxstan-326819](https://uza.uz/sp/posts/deklaraciya-o-soyuznicheskix-otnosheniyax-mezhdu-respublikoy-uzbekistan-i-respublikoy-kazaxstan-326819)

included collaboration with the UN, the SCO, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the CIS, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organisation of Turkic States. The declaration devoted

particular attention to cooperation with the Organisation of Turkic States. The presidents instructed their governments to draw up a draft “Treaty on Alliance Relations” between the two states.

Political Mechanism for Defining Regional Prospects

The 4th Consultative Meeting in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, on 21 July 2022 took on particular significance due to the unrest in Kazakhstan, orchestrated from abroad, and its suppression by troops of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the COVID-19 pandemic. Added to this were threats from Afghanistan and the problematic high permeability of their own borders. The awareness among the heads of state that they would largely have to resolve their region’s problems themselves and, as far as possible, without external interference. To further ensure the sustainable growth of their economies, they had to learn to “minimise the negative effects of global crises on their socio-economic development”⁶¹ and to coordinate and exchange views on this. As an “important transit zone for commercial traffic

and trade between Russia, China, South Asia and the Middle East, as well as Europe”⁶² the Central Asian states had to safeguard the functioning of the global supply chains running through their region and pay particular attention to the creation of highly efficient regional logistics chains. This also included the further expansion of transport infrastructure and the optimisation of operations at checkpoints and border crossings. Given the specific situation, strengthening regional cooperation in the field of financial markets was of paramount importance for the continued attraction investment. The most important outcome of the 4th Consultative Meeting was undoubtedly the conclusion of the “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century”.

Treaty for Central Asia in the 21st Century

On 21 July 2022, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed the “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century”. The presidents of Turkmenistan,

Serdar Berdymukhamedov, and Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, reserved the right to sign the treaty only “after the completion of internal national procedures”. The signing took place on 17 June 2025 in Astana and on 28 August 2025 in Dushanbe respectively.

⁶¹ Четвертая Консультативная встреча лидеров Центральной Азии в Кыргызстане – в фокусе общее региональное видение на противодействие внешним потрясениям
<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2022/07/22/chetvertaya-konsul%CA%B9tativnaya-vstrecha-liderov->

<tsentral%CA%B9noy-azii-v-kyrgyzstane-v-fokuse-obshcheye-regional%CA%B9noye-videniye-na-protivodeystviye-vneshnim-potryaseniya/>

⁶² Ibid.

Ratification was completed by 2025, meaning the treaty ultimately became binding on all five states.

The parties to the treaty sought to ensure lasting peace and “the creation of favourable conditions for sustainable and progressive development in the Central Asian region”.⁶³

The relations took the form of a strategic partnership; however, the parties “mutually respected the paths of political, economic, social and cultural development chosen by each contracting party”⁶⁴, thereby making a significant concession to the power claims of the national elites.

The treaty served to deepen political dialogue and intensify cooperation, whilst maintaining the consultative meetings of the heads of state as the fundamental platform for interaction.

In light of the aforementioned events, the presidents felt compelled to devote particular attention to the issue of collective security in Central Asia. They therefore pledged to each other in Article 5 “full support and mutual assistance in warding off threats to their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.”⁶⁵ In the event of a threat, the parties would determine measures to effectively counter the threat. An absolute renunciation of the use of force applied between the parties; and they undertook “neither to join military alliances, blocs or other associations of states directed against the Contracting Parties, nor to participate in actions directed against any of the Contracting Parties.”⁶⁶ They agreed “not to

permit the use of their territory, their communication systems and other infrastructure by third states to the detriment of the state sovereignty, security, stability, constitutional order and territorial integrity of

⁶³ Договор между Республикой Казахстан, Кыргызской Республикой, Республикой Таджикистан, Туркменистаном и Республикой Узбекистан о дружбе, добрососедстве и сотрудничестве в целях развития

Центральной Азии в XXI веке, in <https://zakon.uchet.kz/rus/docs/U2200000963>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

any of the other contracting parties.”⁶⁷ As peace and security in the region are prerequisites for prosperity in Central Asia, the parties agreed to cooperate in the military and military-technical fields.⁶⁸ The parties had in any case declared Central Asia a nuclear-weapon-free zone on 8 September 2006.⁶⁹ The joint fight against terrorism, extremism and separatism, as well as against cross-border crime and drug trafficking, is a key pillar of cooperation among the Central Asian states.

In the treaty, the parties set out the various areas of economic cooperation, the substance of which essentially corresponded to the

demands of the previous consultative meetings.

On 28 July 2022, just a few days after the treaty was signed, a resolution declaring Central Asia a zone of peace, trust and cooperation.

During the 5th and 6th consultative meetings (Dushanbe 2023, Astana 2024), progress was made on institutionalising the consultative meetings and regular meetings were convened at the level of transport authorities, energy ministers and those responsible for media and information matters in the states.

Central Asia as a Common Security Space

In 2024, Kazakhstan’s President K.-J. Tokaev was able to draw a positive conclusion regarding developments in Central Asia.⁷⁰ Contrary to some Western predictions, the Central Asian states had proved viable and had strengthened their territorial integrity, freedom and independence on the Eurasian continent. In this respect, the entire region had proved stable. Inter-state relations were guided by constructive bilateral and multilateral dialogue. The process of rapprochement among the states of Central Asia took on a consistent and irreversible, based on strategic partnership and close alliance. The Central Asian states had succeeded in devising and pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy capable

of establishing ‘a stabilising balance between the interests of the individual countries and the region’.

However, Central Asia as a whole found itself constantly confronted with new challenges due to the ‘difficult military-political situation’ and the deglobalization consistently pursued by the US with regard to China. The fact that 20 per cent of the world’s uranium reserves, 17.2 per cent of its oil reserves (probably excluding the vast reserves lying beneath the Caspian Sea) and 7 per cent of the world’s natural gas reserves are concentrated in the region aroused the covetousness of major powers. Added to this was the growing importance of Central Asia as one of the world’s most important

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation since 2002, of which Russia and Belarus are also members.

⁶⁹ On 8 September 2006, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty in Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk), Kazakhstan, which banned

the testing, deployment, possession and production of nuclear weapons in Central Asia.

⁷⁰ Ренессанс Центральной Азии: На пути к устойчивому развитию и процветанию, in <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/renessans-centralnoy-azii-na-puti-k-ustoychivomu-razvitiyu-i-procvetaniyu-1272135>

transport, logistics and transit hubs. It was therefore necessary to create an indivisible security zone and a regional security structure in the Central Asian region, which made close coordination and cooperation in the fields of security and defence indispensable. In this regard, the bilateral alliance treaties concluded following the signing of the “Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century”, played an important role. However, there were certainly divergent views on security among the region’s leading states. Whilst Kazakhstan preferred collective security within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty and the SCO, Uzbekistan focused more on neutrality.⁷¹ Kazakhstan, which maintained, ultimately took the initiative. It concluded alliance treaties with Uzbekistan (2022), Kyrgyzstan (2024) Tajikistan (2024)⁷² and agreed with neutral Turkmenistan to elevate

relations to the level of a deepened strategic partnership. Among the most important agreements regarding the protection of the common security space were:

- renunciation of the use of force against one another, peaceful settlement of regional conflicts;
- Consultations in the event of a threat to the contracting parties from an armed attack by third states;
- Commitment not to participate in military blocs, alliances or actions directed against the contracting parties;
- Commitment not to allow third parties to use their territory for hostile actions against the contracting parties;
- Commitment not to allow communication systems and other infrastructure to be used for actions directed against the contracting parties;
- close military and military-technical cooperation, among other things

The Future of Integration and Cooperation in Central Asia

On 16 November 2025, the 7th Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia took place in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. The meeting began with the admission of Azerbaijan as a full member of this group. This expanded the “already unified geopolitical and geo-economic region”, as President I. Aliyev emphasised. The move was long overdue: Aliyev had visited Central Asia fourteen times over the past three years, whilst his Central Asian partners had paid twenty-three official visits

to Azerbaijan during the same period. By concluding strategic partnerships, the states had already created a relatively close-knit cooperation area, which now needed to be interwoven with a strategic vision. The growing international interest in Central Asia as a resource-rich region and a hub for strategically important transport corridors had also fostered an awareness among the Central Asian elite that closer integration would not only provide protection against unwelcome external influences on individual states, but

⁷¹ Какие вызовы стоят перед странами при развитии общего оборонного пространства, in <https://old.cronos.asia/svoe-slovo/kakie-vyzovy-stoyat->

[pered-stranami-ca-pri-razvitii-obshhego-oboronnogo-prostranstva](https://old.cronos.asia/svoe-slovo/kakie-vyzovy-stoyat-pered-stranami-ca-pri-razvitii-obshhego-oboronnogo-prostranstva)

⁷² Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.

would also open up greater economic opportunities. The Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoev therefore proposed in Tashkent that the consultative meeting of heads of state, which had hitherto been a rather advisory form of regional dialogue, be transformed into the strategic ‘Central Asian Community’ format, for which appropriate bodies would need to be established. Externally, the Central Asian states had recently made intensive use of the “Central Asia Plus” to advance their common interests. Kyrgyz President Šaparov proposed that, in the run-up to “Central Asia Plus” meetings, the positions to be taken should be clarified in concrete terms via the foreign ministries so that a unified front could be presented.

Positions on security issues of regional significance, on the other hand, should, according to the Kazakh President’s proposal, be clarified at the level of the secretaries of the National Security Councils. The conclusion of the border treaty between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as the treaty on the border junction between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, were regarded as significant successes. The Tashkent meeting also addressed the question of how to deal with Afghanistan. The presidents advocated integrating Afghanistan into Central Asian infrastructure, energy and transport projects as an integral part of their regional policy. It was unanimously agreed that Central Asia faces threats from terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking and cross-border crime, which require a joint, coordinated action.

During the meeting, an assessment was made of regional trade, which has reached a volume of USD 10.7 billion. Tokaev proposed increasing this to USD 20 billion. Šaparov called for the removal of barriers to mutual trade as well as the harmonisation of standards and technical regulations. In this context, the presidents noted that the largely untapped e-commerce market, which could grow to a total potential of approximately USD 150 billion over the next ten years, offered significant development opportunities. However, there is a lack of virtual trading platforms and reliable digital payment systems. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to expand the fintech project “Alif”, which operates in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and has rapidly become one of the market leaders for digital payments and financial services in the region.

The expansion of the logistics, service and infrastructure of the transport corridors along the East-West and North-South axes, in particular the International Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, was a key focus of the discussion. The subject matter was extremely complex and also included major projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line (feasibility study not yet completed)⁷³ and the Trans-Afghan Corridor. Tokaev proposed “examining the introduction of a unified electronic freight tracking system and the development of a comprehensive strategy for the expansion of the transport system in Central Asia ...”. Šaparov supplemented this proposal by suggesting the development of “a unified electronic platform, the ‘Digital Transit

⁷³ The start of construction has been delayed due to compensation claims by Kyrgyzstan against China and

Uzbekistan. Following the SCO summit in Samarkand, there were new joint efforts, which have so far come to nothing.

Corridor' for the exchange of customs data and the issuance of authorisation documents based on the 'single window' principle'. Aliev highlighted the need to modernise transport and logistics infrastructure. Whilst Tokaev raised the issue of exploring the creation of a network of cross-border industrial centres, Šapirova recommended the development of concrete joint production chains, a significant shift away from the previous raw materials model, the establishment of a manufacturing industry

and new industrial clusters. The discussion of Central Asia's future development prospects clearly highlighted the specific areas in which the region would face the geopolitical intentions of third parties in the near future. The presidential delegation is likely to be well aware of some of these issues. They therefore approved 1. the concept for regional security, stability and sustainable development in Central Asia and 2. the catalogue of security risks in Central Asia and measures for their prevention for the period 2026–2028.

Ambitions of the G7 States in Central Asia

Following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022, the geography of Central Asia came increasingly into the geostrategic focus of Western policy. In the case of Ukraine, Russia had, just as the Soviet Union had in Afghanistan, walked into a carefully laid trap designed to inflict a strategic defeat upon it. The G7 nations and the EU now set about swiftly containing Russia economically and isolating it on all fronts. Their 2024 declaration states: "We are determined to drive up the costs of Russia's war by building on the comprehensive sanctions package already in place and the economic measures already in force."⁷⁴ Driving up the costs in order to render Russia strategically incapable of action naturally also meant having no interest in a swift end to the war.

However, the sanctions were not directed against Russia alone. The G7 countries and the EU warned those who helped Russia to circumvent or undermine the restrictive measures that they would have to "expect high costs". They took "measures against third-country actors providing material support for Russia's war in Ukraine".⁷⁵ To this end, transit and service bans were also imposed. The G7 countries and the EU identified some of these third-country actors not merely as "autocracies" per se, but also as "kleptocratic systems", which they described as a threat "to the freedom and national security of our societies"⁷⁶ and therefore intended to curb in a variety of ways as part of the fight against corruption. Particularly potent measures in this context were the creation of "transparency registers on beneficial ownership" as well as the activities

⁷⁴ G7 Italia 2024, Communiqué von Apulien der Staats- und Regierungschefinnen und -chefs der G7, Arbeitsübersetzung, in

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975228/2292504/503d6da14ff848f2313bed4a301738da/2024-06-15-arbeitsuebersetzung-g7-data.pdf?download=1>

⁷⁵ Erklärung der Staats- und Regierungschefinnen und -chefs der G7, 24. Februar 2023 (Arbeitsübersetzung), in

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975228/2167890/0692a37a61b197e1fbc32791f4d15625/2023-02-24-g7-erklaerung-deu-data.pdf?download=1>

⁷⁶ Communiqué der G7 Staats- und Regierungschefs, Elmau, den 28. Juni 2022, in <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/974430/2059932/ea93246b5d88fc4acefaffa93d4918d/kommuniqu%C3%A9-g7-arbeitsuebersetzung-data.pdf?download=1>

of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).⁷⁷ The consequences were the freezing of state and private assets and the withdrawal of foreign investors from the country in question. Mongolia may serve as an example of the extent to which Western investors steered clear of such a country following such an intervention. Added to this were “additional measures against legal entities in third countries”, such as sanctions of various kinds. The G7 countries and the EU emphasised in various statements that the measures they had taken would be carried out “in accordance with ... our respective legal systems”, which at the very least raises the question of whether this actually referred to international law.

The governments of the Central Asian countries were in the habit of reading the G7 states’ statements carefully and drawing their own conclusions. A key realisation was the need to exercise a certain degree of caution when dealing with these states.

However, from 2023 onwards, the G7 nations and the EU also had clear economic intentions regarding Central Asia that went far beyond bilateral interests in raw materials. On 20 May 2023, at the conclusion of their meeting in Hiroshima, they declared: “We reaffirm our commitment to the Central Asian states to address various regional challenges, including the consequences of Russia’s war of

aggression, the destabilising effects of the situation in Afghanistan, food and energy security, terrorism and climate change. We are determined to promote trade and energy links, sustainable connectivity and sustainable transport, including the ‘Middle Corridor’ and related projects, to enhance regional prosperity and resilience.”⁷⁸ From 2024, the G7 countries + the EU supported initiatives from 2024 onwards to “develop transformative economic corridors for high-quality infrastructure and investment”, such as the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (Middle Corridor), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (MEEC) bypassing Turkey, Central Asia and Iran, and the EU’s Global Gateway strategy. Quite a few of these scenarios were intended as counterparts to the Chinese “Silk Road” initiative, although they did not openly identify themselves as such. The task now was to develop tailor-made approaches to cooperation that were acceptable to the Central Asian states, which would do justice to both the specific intentions in the region and the requirements of global power politics.

Under these conditions, the heads of state in Central Asia and their strategic planning teams repeatedly found themselves in unavoidable learning processes that led them to constantly rethink and adapt their policies within the overall Central Asian framework.

“C5+” “Integration Platforms”?

Since the early 1990s, the former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev had been

developing a national foreign policy whose defining features were multivectorality and

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Communiqué der Staats- und Regierungschefs der G7 von Hiroshima, 20. Mai 2023,

<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/uebersicht-der-gipfeldokumente-387332#tar-1>

pragmatism. At the time, 'multivectoral' meant that foreign policy was always oriented towards several centres of power (at that time Russia, China, India, Turkey and Pakistan). In practice, this meant in the early 1990s maintaining a friendly distance from Russia in the interests of the country's own nation-building and (for economic reasons) reaching out to China. Nevertheless, the situation was characterised by a power vacuum: Russia's interests in former Soviet 'Central Asia' were in sharp decline, and its economic opportunities to engage there were stagnating. China, on the other hand, was only just beginning to 'discover' Central Asia. The US, meanwhile, had no real interests in Central Asia until 11 September 2001. Today, however, there is no longer a power vacuum in Central Asia. In the region, the interests of Russia, China, the US, the EU, Germany, Turkey and others are omnipresent, with the rival great powers – the US, China, Russia and the EU are striving to establish their hegemony over Central Asia. Although all three major powers and the EU perceive their regional interests in Central Asia as integral to their global policies, their hegemonic projects, as Safranchuk⁷⁹ emphasised, differ in their economic, political and military dimensions.

At the start of the 2020s, China focused on the economic sphere, the US on the economic

and political spheres, and Russia on all three areas. Subsequently, these interests are likely to have become much more aligned due to the Russian-Ukrainian war and the tense relationship between the US and China. Under these conditions, it went without saying that the Central Asian presidents avoided aligning themselves with just one major power. Rather, they sought to diversify their relations with the major powers - and above all their economic relations - as much as possible. The 'CA5 +' dialogue forums, held as summits between the five Central Asian heads of state and the head of state of the '+' country, played an important role in this context. As any form of supranational authority was avoided among them for good reason, the dialogue forums offered the opportunity to present a consensus - carefully coordinated in advance among the presidents - to the other side. The other side, which now regarded Central Asia as a strategically important region for itself, also found this format useful. Given the limited time available for discussion at such a dialogue forum, it was clear from the outset that only statements would be exchanged, which were later elaborated upon in more concrete bilateral negotiations following a certain multilateral procedure.

Approach of the G7 Countries + EU

In the past, the European Union has tended to formulate and implement its policies with a long-term perspective and in close

coordination with the US. In 2007, during the German Council Presidency, it adopted an initial Central Asia strategy under the title

⁷⁹ Ivan A. Safranchuk, Vera M. Zhornist, Alexander D. Nesmashnyi, Daniil N. Chernov, The Dilemma of Middlepowermanship in Central Asia: Prospects for

Hegemony, in *Russia in Global Affairs* 3(2022), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/dilemma-of-middlepowermanship>

“The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership”, which it published in June 2019 under the title “The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership” (a US strategy for Central Asia was also published in 2019). Shortly afterwards, “high-level regional meetings” took place in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 27 and in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, on 2 June 2023. Following the G7’s call in Hiroshima (20 May 2023), Germany was the first G7 country to take the initiative. On 29 September 2023, Chancellor O. Scholz hosted the heads of state of Central Asia for a Z5+1 summit in Berlin. The Joint Declaration made it clear that Germany conceived its Central Asia policy as an integral part of the EU strategy, with a focus on resilience, prosperity and regional cooperation. The parties committed themselves to “just and lasting peace based on respect for international law”. At the express request of the German side, the parties agreed to “close consultation on sanctions regimes”, or rather, on the Central Asian states’ compliance with the sanctions imposed on Russia. They also, on Germany’s recommendation, spoke out in favour of “the rule of law, democracy, good governance, gender equality, and universal human rights and fundamental freedoms”.⁸⁰ The parties underlined the importance of further developing bilateral trade and investment cooperation. The parties attached “ongoing importance” to connectivity between the EU and Central Asia, including the “Middle Corridor”, but also welcomed the EU’s Global Gateway strategy by “reaffirming

their interest in the further development of the Middle Corridor and in tapping into sources of financing for infrastructure projects within the framework of the Global Gateway initiative.” The fact that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had classified the International Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (= “Middle Corridor”, route: China-Kazakhstan-Caspian Sea-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey-EU) as a “sustainable transport network” had significantly improved the conditions for the release of funds. The “Middle Corridor” and the Global Gateway were not in themselves contradictory; the question, however, was to what extent the “Middle Corridor” – from which Russia had now been excluded due to its northern transport link – could be shaped in accordance with the standards of the Global Gateway. This would also mean being able to curb China’s influence along the Continental Silk Road. Germany and the Central Asian states agreed on a strategic regional partnership focusing on 1. the economy, energy and natural resources (Germany had a long-standing raw materials partnership with Kazakhstan), 2. regional cooperation and resilience, 3. climate and the environment, 4. direct contacts between citizens.⁸¹ At the follow-up meeting on 17 September 2024 in Astana, Federal Chancellor O. Scholz stated: “We also share important principles. These are neither Eastern nor Western, neither European nor Asian. These principles are universal – they are enshrined in the United

⁸⁰ Gemeinsame Erklärung der Staatschefs Zentralasiens und des Bundeskanzlers der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in [https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/976072/222-](https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/976072/222-6662/63a570a73d143bdf5f781a7685fe2173/2023-09-29-z5-erklaerung-data.pdf?download=1)

[6662/63a570a73d143bdf5f781a7685fe2173/2023-09-29-z5-erklaerung-data.pdf?download=1](https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/976072/222-6662/63a570a73d143bdf5f781a7685fe2173/2023-09-29-z5-erklaerung-data.pdf?download=1)

⁸¹ Ibid.

Nations Charter.”⁸² This statement certainly reflected a minimal consensus, in which the parties agreed on feasible “values”. Scholz thus logically pointed out that the positive development of economic relations was the most important outcome of the strategic regional partnership.

On 23 October 2023, the 19th Joint Conference of Foreign Ministers adopted the “Joint Roadmap for Deepening Relations between the EU and Central Asia”.

On 3–4 April 2025, the President of the Council of the EU, the President of the European Union and the Central Asian heads of state took part in the 1st EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand. The EU had by then established a strong foothold in the region, accounting for 40 per cent of investment and serving as the region’s second-largest trading partner. Its strategic interests in Central Asia had in any case grown considerably due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, its complex relationship with China as a “cooperation partner, economic competitor and systemic rival”⁸³ and its drastically increased demand for critical minerals and rare-earth elements. The summit participants pledged their commitment to a strategic partnership which, as Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev put it, would be “based on shared values and interests.”⁸⁴ Should this prove to be the case, this postulate would suggest that future friction in relations with the neighbouring of the wider region. President Antonio Costa announced a Global Gateway investment

package worth €12 billion “to strengthen transport links between us and to deepen cooperation in the areas of critical raw materials, digital connectivity, water and energy,”⁸⁵ whilst President U. von der Leyen emphasised that the Central Asian side supports “the strengthening of economic relations through initiatives under the Global Gateway strategy.”⁸⁶ The heads of state highlighted “the progress made on the Trans-Caspian transport corridor, which connects Europe and Central Asia (previously always referred to as ‘Asia’, i.e. author).”⁸⁷ In this context, reference was also made to the “mobilisation of an international investment package worth €10 billion to promote sustainable transport infrastructure and logistics networks in Central Asia” as well as the joint creation of sustainable value chains for critical raw materials.

Germany deepened the “connectivity” cooperation priority promoted by the EU at the Z5+1 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Berlin on 26 February 2026. Within the framework of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, the parties agreed on transport, infrastructure and consultancy projects, the implementation of which was reserved for German rail and logistics companies. Germany allocated 90 million euros to the regional development cooperation portfolio and 250 million euros. At Germany’s request, the issue of circumventing sanctions imposed on Russia was addressed. In this way, lucrative economic offers were made and

⁸² Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz beim Z5-Treffen Zentralasien ist für Deutschland eine äußerst wichtige Region, in <https://www.bundestkanzler.de/bk-de/aktuelles/rede-bundestkanzler-scholz-z5-2308994>

⁸³ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-relations-factsheet_en

⁸⁴ Joint press release following the first EU-Central Asia summit, in <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-declaration-following-the-first-european-union-central-asia-summit/>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

recommendations were issued in line with the EU's geopolitical intentions. The visit by EU Special Envoy David O'Sullivan on 17–18 March 2026. He emphasised that the EU neither wished to perform policing functions nor to impose sanctions on Kazakhstan. Instead, they would appeal to Astana's reason. In Astana, he was listened to attentively; after all, the EU was Kazakhstan's largest trading partner, with a trade volume of 45 billion euros.

30 May 2025 “Central Asia + Italy” Italy maintains well-developed bilateral and multilateral relations with the Central Asian region. The “Italy + Central Asia” format, which was first held in Rome in 2019 and has since been institutionalised, the conference on foreign ministers provided impetus for the development of a strategic partnership involving cooperation in the fields of security, the environment and infrastructure. By 2023, Rome had concluded strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Italian companies such as the state-owned oil and energy group *Eni* had already been in Kazakhstan since the 1990s. *Eni* is also a partner in the PSI consortium for the North Caspian Sea, one of the region's major future projects. Over the past 20 years, Italy had invested USD 7 billion in the Kazakh economy, in which 250 Italian companies were also operating. In 2024, Italy accounted for 22.9 per cent of Kazakh exports. The bilateral trade volume amounted to USD 20 billion in the same year (Kazakh exports USD 9.4 billion). In contrast, Italian-Uzbek trade had also grown to USD 438 million by 2024. Another key component of Italy's cooperation with Central Asia is the security and defence sector. Turkmenistan regularly

purchased arms worth hundreds of millions of euros from EU member states, most of which were supplied by the Italian defence contractor *Leonardo*. Such arms transfers are not merely business as usual, but are gradually dismantling military-technical cooperation with Russia. From the perspective of creating a unified security space, this is likely to be counterproductive.

On 30 May 2025, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni travelled to Astana, Kazakhstan, for the first “Central Asia + Italy” summit. Meloni emphasised Italy's support for the deepening of regional cooperation among the Central Asian states. In this process, she highlighted, the consultative meetings of Central Asia's heads of state would play a key role, she emphasised. The summit participants welcomed the intensification of relations between the EU and Central Asia, which served, in a sense, as an umbrella for bilateral relations. The parties made an “unwavering commitment to the principles of the United Nations Charter” etc. Cooperation in the fields of security, the environment and infrastructure will continue. It was agreed to hold regular meetings between Italy and Central Asia in the field of security. At this summit, too, support for cooperation in the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route “as a reliable and efficient multimodal transport corridor between Central Asia and Europe”, in which Italian railway and logistics companies were to be integrated. The participants noted “that achieving climate and digital goals requires tackling key challenges related to the extraction and processing of critical raw materials”, which also includes “the creation

of value chains in producer countries”. The agreements reached by Prime Minister Georgia Meloni were further developed by Italian President Sergio Mattarella during his state visit in September 2025. Kazakh analysts welcomed “Italy’s evolving, non-confrontational and ideology-free approach to international diplomacy, which prioritises economic interests.”⁸⁸

26 Feb 2026: “Central Asia+ United Kingdom” (CA5+UK) platform On 26 February 2026, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Commonwealth and Development, Yvette Cooper, welcomed the foreign ministers of the Central Asian states to London to assess the state of bilateral and multilateral relations between the two sides and to discuss future prospects. Cooper emphasised that the UK viewed Central Asia “as a dynamically growing region with sustainable economic growth, strengthening regional cooperation and a growing role in international processes” and highlighted the UK’s pragmatic approach to cooperation. Indeed, cooperation between the parties had made significant progress in recent years. For example, the Kazakh -British trade volume surged to USD 1.6 billion in 2025, representing an 84 per cent increase. Around 500 companies with British capital were operating in Kazakhstan, which is a major focus for foreign investors due to its natural resources and economic clout. Foreign Minister Koşerbaev also emphasised: “Kazakhstan plays a leading role in ensuring

regional connectivity. Thirteen major transit corridors run through our territory, and around 85 per cent of land freight traffic between Europe and Asia passes through Kazakhstan. These priorities gave rise to the idea of the ‘CA5+UK’ format.”⁸⁹

For the UK itself, its current core interests stem primarily from the strategy on critical materials published a year ago. “The five republics hold a large share of global reserves, namely of manganese ore (38.6 per cent), chromium (30.07 per cent), lead (20 per cent), zinc (12.6 per cent), titanium (8.7 per cent), aluminium/bauxite (5.8 per cent), copper (5.3 per cent), cobalt (5.3 per cent) and molybdenum (5.2 per cent).”⁹⁰ Added to this are rare earths such as scandium, yttrium and lanthanides. Here too, Kazakhstan was a regional leader, as it produces 22 of the 36 minerals identified as strategically important (e.g. uranium, titanium, silicon and rhenium). Kazakhstan produces approximately 40 per cent of the world’s uranium. A Roadmap 2026–2027 was signed for cooperation in the field of critical minerals, which, in addition to the exploration of rare earths, also covers processing and the introduction of modern technologies. The presence of representatives from Rio Tinto, Rolls-Royce, International Hospital Groups, Intertek, BP, Benoy and Standard Chartered Bank highlighted the wide-ranging British economic interests.

The meeting between the Foreign Ministers and the Minister of State at the British Ministry of Defence, Lord Vernon

⁸⁸ <https://eurasiamagazine.com/italys-central-asian-renaissance>

⁸⁹ Министр иностранных дел Казахстана принял участие во встрече глав внешнеполитических ведомств в формате «Центральная Азия + Великобритания», in <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/1170591?lang=ru>

⁹⁰ Dr. Fabio Indeo, EU, Central Asia-cooperation on critical minerals within a global geopolitical race, in <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/eu-central-asia-cooperation-on-critical-minerals-within-a-global-geopolitical-race/>

Rodney Coaker, undoubtedly played a special role. The Minister of State had previously visited Kazakhstan in May last year, with which his department cooperated at the level of the defence and foreign ministries as well as the Kazakh parliamentary committee for international affairs, only visited Kazakhstan in May of last year. His visit was primarily intended to gauge how far Kazakhstan, as a member of the Collective Security Treaty, would be prepared to go in potential cooperation. Coaker therefore expressed himself very diplomatically during his visit: “The key point is that we respect Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and autonomy. If Kazakhstan wishes to partner with us, we will be happy to stand by its side.”⁹¹ The London meeting focused on the areas of cooperation: military training, officer exchanges and peacekeeping missions (Kazakhstan’s peacekeepers were deployed in the Golan Heights).

Britain presented itself to the Central Asian states as a seemingly alternative option, seeking to position itself through economic diversification.⁹² That the British side may also pursued strategic intentions today is not impossible, given the historical “Great Game”, in which Britain and Russia engaged in bitter power struggles.

20 December 2025 “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue Japan has maintained bilateral and multilateral relations with Central Asia since the 1990s, centred on supporting the independence of the Central

Asian states through infrastructure projects and international networking facilitated by Japan. Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto presented Japan’s first Central Asia strategy in 1997. In 2004, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi established the “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue format “to promote regional cooperation and the independent development of Central Asia.”⁹³ This model was later adopted, for example, by the EU, the US, China and Russia. Japan also established formats such as regular foreign ministers’ meetings (from Astana in 2004), meetings of high-ranking officials (from Tashkent in 2005) and the Tokyo Dialogue (from 2006). Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s 2015 tour of Central Asia provided a particularly strong impetus. In Japan’s “Diplomatic Blue Book 2023”, Central Asia was already identified as one of the most important foreign policy priorities due to its strategic significance. In 2024, Prime Minister Kishida visited Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia. Japan’s trade volume with the Central Asian region reached USD 2.4 billion in 2024, with Japan importing primarily rare earths from the region (USD 628 million in 2022) . The countries in the region valued their cooperation with Japan because it was “based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and consideration of partners’ interests, without imposing unfounded political conditions.”⁹⁴

On 20 December 2025, Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae hosted the Central Asian

⁹¹ <https://qazinform.com/news/much-closer-vernon-coaker-on-globalpriorities-and-defense-cooperation-with-kazakhstan-5962e9>

⁹² <https://timesca.com/uk-expands-strategic-engagement-in-central-asia-amid-growing-global-competition/>

⁹³ <https://theasiatoday.org/essays/strategic-partnership-between-central-asia-and-japan-in-new-conditions/>

⁹⁴ Bakhtiyor Mustafayev, Bakhromjon Sotiboldiev, Strategic Partnership between Central Asia and Japan in New Conditions, in <https://theasiatoday.org/essays/strategic-partnership-between-central-asia-and-japan-in-new-conditions/>

presidents for the 1st “Central Asia plus Japan” Dialogue Summit. The following three areas of cooperation were newly identified: 1. Environment and resilience (cooperation on the energy transition, disaster prevention, strengthening supply chains for critical minerals and in the fight against climate change), 2. Connectivity (further development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), 3. Human resource development (scholarship programmes, cooperation in the fields of health and medicine).

The intentions of the G7 states in Central Asia stem from both shared global interests and their own national interests. As far as the European G7 states are concerned, the interests of the European Union would also have to be taken into account, which are formulated by both the member states and the EU bureaucracy in Brussels. The states of Central Asia are therefore faced with the choice of whether to base their cooperation on shared national interests or EU interests, for example in the expansion of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor

Status and Outlook

For many years, Western analysts have attributed primarily political and economic fragility to both the Central Asian states and the Central Asian region, and have predicted a future with little hope. However, when these states and the region are viewed over a longer period, internal stability, economic development and international integration have grown significantly. According to Alimov, a ‘space of competing interests’ had evolved into a ‘space of shared development and responsibility for regional stability’.⁹⁵ The format of the consultative meetings of Central Asian heads of state, serving as a dialogue platform for their own affairs, and the formation of the “C5+1” formats as integration platforms. The fact that, at a time when the familiar world order is disintegrating ever more rapidly, geographically close states such as Azerbaijan and Mongolia - which also share a common history with Central Asia - are now (for whatever real reasons) is a clear

advantage for the region, as it thereby expands its strategic space. Greater internal political and economic integration in Central Asia and the development of resilience through self-sufficiency (e.g. agricultural products) are the order of the day for the region. Central Asia as a common security space requires a very cautious approach to military-technical diversification. The friend-foe relationships in the wider geographical vicinity of the Central Asian region have become clearer than ever following the attack by the US and Israel on Iran, a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It is therefore vital to have the necessary strategic depth to ensure a reliable supply of military technology.

The multi-vector foreign policy underpinning the ‘C5+1’ format establishes as an internal norm that no external actor should be allowed to dominate. In this respect, it is in the clear interest of the Central Asian states to establish as many of these

⁹⁵ Рашид Алимов, Почему Центральная Азия стала ядром ШОС: от политической формулы к

стратегической реальности, in <http://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/3372>

integration platforms as possible, in order to maximise the economic benefits derived from them and to better balance external influences. It is difficult to assess the extent to which Russia and China also play a role in these considerations. After all, both partners, with whom the Central Asian states are firmly and closely linked through a range of organisations, offer both predictable economic stability and solid security guarantees. Furthermore, Central Asia now conducts almost all of its substantial trade with Russia and China in its national currencies.

During the 2nd “China-Central Asia” Summit on 17 June 2025, concluded a “Treaty on Eternal Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation” “for an indefinite period”, in which the parties undertook to support independence, state sovereignty, territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders and the choice of development paths and models. The parties further assured one another: “The contracting parties shall not participate in alliances or blocs directed against other contracting parties, nor shall they support actions hostile to other contracting parties.”⁹⁶ In this treaty, China agreed for the first time: “The contracting parties shall, in accordance with their legislation and international obligations, strengthen mutual trust in the fields of defence, the defence industry and security, and expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation on other matters in these fields.”⁹⁷ With this treaty, China created a new reality that, among other things, made it

clear that it was prepared to act alongside Russia as a guarantor of security in the region. Beijing’s willingness may also have been a consequence of reality, as billions of US dollars of Chinese investment had been wiped out by local and regional wars initiated from outside with precisely this intention. China’s Minister of Defence, State Councillor Admiral Dong Jung, reaffirmed his country’s willingness to cooperate closely with the Central Asian states on military and security matters at the meeting of SCO defence ministers in Bishkek on 28 April 2026. Within the SCO framework, Russia is preparing strategic manoeuvres that will take into account “the unique experiences from the special operation as well as the specific features of warfare in modern armed conflicts”.⁹⁸

In Central Asia, following the “C5+1” summit with President D. Trump on 6 November 2025, the fact that the region played no role in the new US National Security Strategy had caused considerable irritation. Some even suggested that Central Asia had now fallen into an analytical vacuum. It is highly likely that the C5 presidents had conveyed to US President D. Trump at the summit that they wished to develop Central Asia into a region of peace and prosperity, but would not support it becoming an arena of confrontation. The fact that, for example, Uzbekistan concluded economic and trade agreements with the US worth USD 34.5 billion had certainly helped to reinforce this impression. However, the

⁹⁶ Договор о вечном добрососедстве, дружбе и сотрудничестве между Республикой Казахстан, Кыргызской Республикой, Республикой Таджикистан, Туркменистаном, Республикой Узбекистан и Китайской Народной Республикой, in

http://russian.china.org.cn/international/txt/2025-06/18/content_117934609.htm

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Неустойчивая обстановка в мире и поставщики вооружения Киеву. Заявления Белоусова, in <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/27247903>

notion that the US might wish to show consideration for the sphere of Russia's and China's natural interests would likely have been today's confrontations. A closer look reveals the approximate interests of the US:

1. The 'Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity' (TRIPP): This project was concluded and presented in 2025 as an agreement on a strategic transit corridor following the peace deal brokered by the US between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The highly commercial terms of the agreement clearly favoured the US and curbed the influence of Russia, China and Iran in the South Caucasus. However, it also granted the US the possibility of extensive control at this junction of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. The question is whether such control benefits Europe and China, one of the two sides alone, or neither of them? Following the events in Venezuela and Iran, anything is conceivable.

2. The "One Belt, One Road" route had, until early 2023, two economic corridors connecting it to Europe: the northern corridor through Russia, which was the most important and efficient, and the route via Central Asia and the South Caucasus, whose multimodal nature (rail, sea, rail, etc.) caused considerable logistical problems. From early 2023, the northern corridor was no longer an option due to the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Western sanctions regime.

3. In recent years, the US has significantly expanded its influence in the Caspian Sea region, which is home to oil and gas reserves

of strategic importance. The US aims to gain control over these resources and implement pipeline projects there that would allow the flow of resources to the European market to be realised under its control, bypassing Russia.

5. The war waged by the US and Israel against Iran was intended to exert military pressure on Tehran to prevent the development of Iranian nuclear weapons. However, this may not be the only objective. After all, Iran represented an ally for Russia - from a geopolitical perspective, a stronghold in Russia's south - with which it established a strategic partnership in 2025. From 2023, Russia had begun to expand its north-south transport corridor. This north-south transport route via Iran to the Arabian Sea (Indian Ocean) and on to India, which also 'represented a competitive alternative to the shipping route through the Suez Canal'⁹⁹, had become a vital transport route not only for Russia under sanctions. As the north-South Corridor led to India, it also offered options for the future creation of a Russia-India-China strategic triangle, which the US could under no circumstances accept strategically. Due to the war waged by the US and Israel against Iran, the use of the North-South Corridor was no longer possible. Russia thus found itself facing an almost complete transport blockade.¹⁰⁰

4. The US utilised its closest allies, such as Israel and Ukraine, to 'anchor' them to Central Asia as reliable partners.

⁹⁹ Alexander Rahr, *Russland gibt Gas: Die Rückkehr einer Weltmacht*, München 2008, p. 95.

¹⁰⁰ When Western transport routes to the Soviet Union were blocked during the Second World War, the only option left was the Persian Corridor, through which the Western Allies

could supply the Soviet Union with war material. The invasion of Iran today highlights the extent to which the West is now seeking to render Russia strategically incapable of action. Should a pro-Western regime be installed there, this would provide Russia with a sufficient *Casus belli*.

When Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Saar visited Kazakhstan on 27 January 2026 - the only Central Asian state to have joined the Abraham Accords - he highlighted water, innovation (cybersecurity) and food security as the pillars of cooperation with Kazakhstan. Israel significantly expanded its presence in Central Asia and the Caspian region, with transit routes being of particular geopolitical interest to Israel. Through its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, Israel has strengthened its influence in the Caspian region.

During his visit to Central Asia this year, Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister O. Miščenko noted that Ukraine is currently developing a strategy to engage in multilateral projects via a yet-to-be-formed "C5+Ukraine", for which he demanded that bypassing Russia be a strategic prerequisite.

The future development of Central Asia will depend largely on the policies the US pursues in the region and the wider area, whether Russia will succeed in moving away from a war footing, and to what extent the European Union and China are able to resolve their issues with one another. The US and Israeli war on Iran, as well as Israel's military actions in its Arab neighbouring countries, have drastically altered the situation in the

Central Asian region. The Arab states will seek to diversify their strategic relationships. The European Union will come more into their focus, Turkey will expand its role as a regional player and attempt to strengthen the Organisation of Turkic States, to which the Central Asian states are also linked. Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey (+ Pakistan?) might perhaps form a Sunni axis of states.

The current situation highlights the importance of stable transport and economic corridors for the functioning of global supply chains and global value chains. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor has so far maintained its stability. This was due not least to the prudent policies of the Central Asian states. It was therefore no coincidence that the Kazakh President K. Jo. Tokaev spoke of a "shared vision for the future of regional cooperation", regarding "the preservation of peace and stability" as its most important foundation. This includes "strict adherence to the principles of international law, respect for sovereignty and the inviolability of borders", and the creation of a regional security architecture through the formation of an indivisible, common security space in Central Asia.¹⁰¹

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62. Ibid.
63. Договор между Республикой Казахстан, Кыргызской Республикой, Республикой Таджикистан, Туркменистаном и Республикой Узбекистан о дружбе, добрососедстве и сотрудничестве в целях развития Центральной Азии в XXI веке, in <https://zakon.uchet.kz/rus/docs/U2200000963>

64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation since 2002, of which Russia and Belarus are also members.
69. On 8 September 2006, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty in Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk), Kazakhstan, which banned the testing, deployment, possession and production of nuclear weapons in Central Asia.
70. Ренессанс Центральной Азии: На пути к устойчивому развитию и процветанию, in <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/renessans-centralnoy-azii-na-puti-k-ustoychivomu-razvitiyu-i-procvetaniyu-1272135>
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72. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation.
73. The start of construction has been delayed due to compensation claims by Kyrgyzstan against China and Uzbekistan. Following the SCO summit in Samarkand, there were new joint efforts, which have so far come to nothing.
74. G7 Italia 2024, Communiqué von Apulien der Staats- und Regierungschefinnen und -chefs der G7, Arbeitsübersetzung, in <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975228/2292504/503d6da14ff848f2313bed4a301738da/2024-06-15-arbeitsuebersetzung-g7-data.pdf?download=1>
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