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Central Asia: a player still largely unknown in Europe

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The scene of the 'Great Game' between the Russian and British empires in the 19th century, Central Asia has once again become a focus for Russian and Chinese influence, as well as for that of outside powers.

By the end of the 19th century, the Russian Empire had completed its conquest of Central Asia. The annexation of nomadic territories (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) and the imposition of protectorates on local khanates (Bukhara, Samarkand, Kokand) led to colonial exploitation through the monopolisation of agricultural land, especially after the abolition of serfdom in Russia in 1860, as well as cotton cultivation, industrialisation, the construction of railways and the building of colonial metropolises.

After the fall of Tsarism, the Bolshevik government reconstituted this colonial empire by applying Stalin's "Soviet policy of nationalities". Local populations and entities were given elements of state sovereignty in the form of republics (RSS), autonomous Soviet republics (RSSA) or autonomous regions (RAO). United within a federation, they had only a theoretical right to secede. This centralised ethnic federalism, with its often-arbitrary internal borders, contributed to the emergence of nations that became independent after the break-up of the USSR in 1991[1].

After their independence, Russia continued to maintain a strong influence there, which began to wane especially after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Regional formats such as [the Collective Security Treaty Organisation](#) (CSTO), under Russian control, or [the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (SCO), have lost their influence. The former has lost much of its credibility since it has refused to interfere in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as desired by Yerevan, or in the border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Its intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022, following riots

provoked by alleged 'foreign intervention', failed to restore its image. As for the SCO, it has become an "empty shell, incapable of anything other than organising meetings and making headlines"[2].

However, Moscow continues to have strong points of support in Central Asia, such as personal relations with the ruling circles (a sort of 'Russiasicentrale', comparable to 'Françafrique'), a powerful cultural influence (Russian, even if it is losing ground, is still the region's 'lingua franca'), a strong economic and military presence, and a large number of immigrants from Central Asia whose remittances represent up to 30% of the GNP of certain countries in the region.

Despite (or because of) its involvement in Ukraine, Russia has been active in this region of major geostrategic importance[3], by stepping up diplomatic initiatives. According to former Duma deputy Vladimir Ryjkov, exiled in Almaty, the Russian president communicated seventy-four times with his Central Asian peers between 24 February 2022 and 22 September 2023. He spoke by telephone sixteen times with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, ten times with Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, six times with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rakhmon and five times with each of Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedow.

Similarly, Central Asian leaders have taken part in numerous meetings with Vladimir Putin (two SCO summits, three [Eurasian Economic Council](#) meetings (EurAsEC), four OSTC summits and a Russia-Central Asia summit (1+5). Finally, all the

[1] Pierre Andrieu, 'Géopolitique des relations russo-chinoises', PUF 2023.

[2] Temur Umarov [The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Is Ineffective and Irrelevant](#) *Carnegie Politika*, 5 July 2024.

[3] Reid Standish <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-central-asia-impact-russia-china/32832774.html>, 23 February 2024

Central Asian leaders took part in the 9 May parades in Moscow in 2023 and 2024[4].

China, for its part, has always had historical difficulties with Central Asia. The nomadic tribes to the west and north of the Middle Kingdom, geographically and culturally remote, have always posed a constant threat. This has not prevented Beijing from maintaining beneficial trade relations with tributary oasis states such as Kashgar and Kokand[5]. The Qing did not go beyond Xinjiang ("The New March"), or Chinese Turkestan, which they finally conquered at the end of the 19th century. But, as Emmanuel Lincot writes[6], *"Since the end of the 18th century, the strategic risk for China has been changing. It now comes from the East and the South, in other words from the ocean. The foreigners of concern to those in power were the Europeans... and later the Japanese"*.

Central Asia still represents a major geostrategic challenge for Beijing[7]. Since the launch of their gigantic New Silk Road project in 2013 "[Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)", The Chinese have been stepping up their economic and financial presence in the region. In 2022, China's trade with the region grew faster than that with Russia, reaching \$70 billion compared with \$40 billion for Moscow. Like Russia, China has no desire to destabilise the region, where it is careful not to offend the often Sinophobic local populations. It is content to protect its commercial interests and ensure that the fragility of these countries does not spill over into Xinjiang. China has strengthened its security cooperation with the Central Asian capitals by conducting armed exercises and setting up People's Armed Police bases in Tajikistan, the small neighbour it considers the most fragile.

Pragmatically, China is perfectly happy with Moscow's ascendancy in the region, which it considers to be in its interests. And even if Russia becomes China's junior partner, *'in Central Asia it is still the dominant power with which China wants to coordinate more closely'*[8].

THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA FOLLOW THE POLITICS OF THEIR GEOGRAPHY

The countries of Central Asia want to loosen the stranglehold of Russia and China somewhat, while at

the same time trying to reap every possible advantage, particularly in economic and security terms. They note the relative weakening of Russia but remain very cautious about its influence, which remains strong, and its power to cause harm.

This ambivalence was confirmed by the invasion of Ukraine, followed by the intervention of the Ukrainian army in the Kursk region. On this last point, these countries have continued to observe a 'coordinated silence' observed since February 2022 and have given no support to either Kyiv or Moscow. Here too, the futility of the OSTC has become clear. Moreover, Moscow has been careful not to invoke Article 4, which, like Article 5 of NATO, stipulates that any aggression against one of its members will be considered as aggression against all the others.

The aggression in Ukraine has prompted the West to pay greater attention to the geostrategic importance of the countries of Central Asia and their wealth of raw materials and energy (oil, gas, rare earths, uranium). The most senior French, Italian and German leaders, as well as the [president of the European Council](#), high-level officials from the European Union, the United States and the United Kingdom have visited the region on a bilateral or multilateral basis in the 5+1 format.

Trade between these countries and the European Union increased by 59% in 2022, then by 11% the following year, while European investments have multiplied. In 2023, the Germans invested \$770 million in Kazakhstan, an increase of 64% on the previous year. In Uzbekistan, these investments increased elevenfold.

The highly sensitive subject of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not discussed publicly during these visits. The countries of Central Asia are aware of the commercial opportunities with Russia that this war may present but remain very cautious about the secondary American sanctions that could hit them if the sanctions are circumvented. For example, Central Asian banks have severely restricted direct transactions with targeted Russian financial institutions.

All in all, they have struck a good balance between Russia, China and the West by *'reconciling cooperation with*

[4] Vladimir Ryjkov, "Politika Rossii v tsentralnoi Azii posle nachala voyny na Ukraine (Russia's policy in Central Asia following the outbreak of war in Ukraine)", May 2024.

[5] "This practice had become the custom along China's borders. No tribute, no trade", John King Fairbank, "La grande révolution chinoise, 1800-1989", Champs Histoire.

[6] 'Chine et terres d'Islam' PUF 2021.

[7] Michaël Levystone, 'Asie centrale, le réveil', Armand Collin, 2024.

[8] Temur Umarov and Alexander Gabuev, "Is Russia Losing Its Grip on Central Asia?", Foreign Affairs, 30 June 2023 and Owen Haywood [How Russia Lost Its Grip on Central Asia](#) Yale, 3 November 2022

NATO, leaders travelling to Moscow for the 9 May parade, the installation of Chinese People's Police border bases, etc.' According to Temur Umarov "their manoeuvring experience in the context of the war in Ukraine could serve them well in the event of a wider conflict between the West and China"[9].

This balance was 'tested' at the sixteenth summit of the BRICS in Kazan from 22 to 24 October. Particularly important for Vladimir Putin, who wanted to demonstrate that his country was not isolated on the international stage, it brought together thirty-six countries from the 'Global South', including twenty-four heads of state. In addition to Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi, the presidents of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were present, but not Kazakhstan. And yet none of these Central Asian countries is a member of the BRICS.

Kazakhstan, apparently heavily lobbied by Moscow, did not apply in the end, citing the 'absence of clear criteria and mechanisms' for membership. Russia then placed an embargo on Kazakhstan's fruit and vegetable imports. In the end, a compromise seems to have been reached and Kazakhstan was one of the thirteen countries accepted as BRICS 'partners' at the end of the Summit.

The case of Uzbekistan is a little different. After careful consideration and despite Russian pressure, Tashkent chose not to join the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Community. Senior Russian officials threatened to impose a visa regime on Uzbekistan. Finally, like Kazakhstan, and no doubt at Moscow's insistence, Uzbekistan will also have 'partner' status with the BRICS[10].

The countries of Central Asia are keen to strengthen their economic and financial cooperation with the so-called BRICS countries. But Astana and Tashkent, squeezed between the two giants of Russia and China, the two 'heavyweights' of the grouping, are reluctant to take the step of becoming members. They fear they could become the target of US 'secondary sanctions' for attempts to circumvent the embargo imposed on Russia[11].

The Central Asians nonetheless condemn the Russian invasion in private, and no longer hesitate to denounce the Russian colonialism that had prevailed in their own

country, as well as the 'colonial war' that Moscow is waging in Ukraine. According to former British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary David Cameron, his Kazakh counterpart Murat Nurtleu said that 'Ukrainians are also dying for Kazakhstan'. The cautious Kazakh minister denied this, while President Kasym-Jomart Tokaev told German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that 'Russia cannot be defeated militarily'[12]. This official caution did not prevent a distinguished Kazakh academic from telling the author: 'When you see what the Russians are doing to the Ukrainians, who are also Slavs, you can imagine what they would do to us!'

THE CENTRAL ASIANS THEMSELVES

In a speech last August, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev celebrated the 'renaissance of Central Asia' and recalled its size: 3.88 million km² and 80 million inhabitants. The combined GNP of the five republics is \$450 billion, while its subsoil contains 20% of the world's uranium, 17% of its oil and 7% of its natural gas.

In his view, Central Asia has acquired a high degree of autonomy in the international arena, becoming a new global centre of gravity. Its five republics are striving to strengthen their cohesion by signing bilateral and multilateral agreements, such as the 'Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century', or the formation of a Consultative Council of Five Heads of State, which has already met five times.

For the Kazakh President, the region's top priority is to maintain peace and stability at home and in its neighbourhood. He points out that his country is committed to strict respect for international law, sovereignty and the inviolability of borders, which is clearly a stone in Russia's garden.

Another priority is its transformation into a major transport and trade hub. Central Asia is already criss-crossed by the [Trans-Caspian International Transport Route \(Middle Corridor\)](#), used by the Chinese BIS, and the North-South corridor.

[9] Temur Umarov and Jennifer B. Murtazashvili: « [A confident Central Asia](#) ». Carnegie, 5 September 2024.

[10] Russia's Pivot to Asia: "BRICS Invites 13 Partner States To Join: Full Details", 25 October, 2024.

[11] Chris Rickleton : "Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan Resist Russia's Coalition-Building In 'Sovereignty Test'", Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 24 October 2024.

[12] Temur Umarov, op. cit.

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For Central Asian leaders, strengthening cultural identity is a priority.

In the Soviet Union (USSR), Moscow gave each of the Soviet republics a territory, a language and a history. The languages were given Latin and then Cyrillic alphabets to encourage literacy and isolate them from external Persian and Turkish influences, which were often religious and 'adapted' to the Soviet reality.

History was often rewritten according to Soviet canons, glorifying revolutionary 'heroes' and condemning medieval 'exploiters' and Tsarist imperialism. Then, from the 1930s onwards, it was presented as the 'liberator' of the peoples of Central Asia, opening the way to civilisation. According to Soviet propaganda, these peoples had voluntarily asked to be integrated into the Empire and then the Soviet Union.

These biased interpretations of national histories naturally began to be revised after the independence of these countries in 1991. Historical figures who had been somewhat forgotten during the Soviet period were rehabilitated. This was the case in Kazakhstan with the Janibek, Kerei and Kasym Khans, who were at the origin of the nomadic Kazakh Khanate in the 15th century[13]. Or in Uzbekistan, where Tamerlane (Emir Timur) has become the national hero. And in Kyrgyzstan, where Manas, a mythical figure sung in a very long epic, has become the tutelary figure.

As for Tajikistan, according to the former diplomatic adviser to President Rakhmon[14], the new authorities had nothing to 'rediscover', as the country had always shared Persian civilisation and culture. Independent Tajikistan has 'appropriated' the figure of Ismail I, the founder of the Persian state of the Samanids (819-1005), which extended over part of Iran and Central Asia.

The return of historical memory and the reassertion of the national identity of each of the republics constitute a powerful vector in the strengthening of their respective independence.

From being a *terra incognita* not so long ago, Central Asia has become an autonomous, active player on the international stage. Aware of its complex location and gradually rediscovering its glorious past, the five countries that make up the region are skilfully attempting to free themselves from the double stranglehold of Moscow and Beijing and to apply a multi-faceted diplomacy to attract external powers. And, it has to be said, with some success so far.

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[13] Sultan Akimbekov, 'Kratkaia istoria Kazakhov' (A Brief History of the Kazakhs) (in Russian), Institute of Asian Studies, Almaty 2023.

[14] A special interview. Our interviewee emphasised the role of Bobodjon Gafurov (1908-1977), a statesman and literary figure from Soviet Tajikistan, in the creation of modern Tajik literature, but who failed to obtain from Moscow the incorporation into Tajikistan of the Persian-speaking cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, which were allocated to Uzbekistan.