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Central Asia in Contemporary Geopolitics

Between Global Powers and Regional Integration

Urs Unkauf

What is generally true of the Silk Road region is particularly true with respect to its Central Asian part: the region acts as a bridge between geographies, civilizations, resource bases, and power centers. Geopolitically and geo-economically, Central Asia is one of the most important theaters of the twenty-first century. In his referential book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote back in 1997 about the crucial importance of the Silk Road region (his term was “Eurasia”), and especially Central Asia, for global political supremacy. Nowadays, this region has been pushed back into the focus of geopolitics like no other due to the

Russian Federation’s attack on Ukraine that commenced on 24 February 2022 and the resulting, still ongoing war. Indeed, as Co-Editor of *Baku Dialogues* Damjan Krnjević Mišković has stated on various recent occasions, “the global importance of the Silk Road region today is greater than it has been in centuries.”

Brzezinski’s key, still-relevant insight is that developments in Central Asia would depend to a large extent on the reciprocal interplay of Western, Russian, Turkish, Iranian, and Chinese interests. In the mirror of current geopolitical processes, Central Asia is of particular importance as a surface of interaction and

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projection for the global powers—China, Russia, and the United States. Although the EU is trying to act as a shaping actor in the region through the recent launch of programs like Global Gateway, it has so far been of something between secondary and tertiary importance in its political impact, especially given the competition with sources of regional influence such as Türkiye, Iran, and (more and more) India.

It has meanwhile become clear that new global and regional power constellations, alliance structures, and economic corridors will emerge. Writing in mid-February 2023, former UN Assistant-Secretary-General Michael von der Schulenburg outlined the contours of a new global order in a remarkable article for the German publication *Makroskop: Magazine for Economic Policy*, in which he sees keystone states in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico), South and Southeast Asia (India, Indonesia), Africa (Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa), and the Middle East (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) as new drivers of an intensifying multipolarity of the world order. Although this order will not

develop according to particular or hegemonic claims, one must at least take note of these processes.

It is also important to recognize that the current processes of change and transformation are not so much the consequences of intended and planned action, but rather genuinely self-generating processes that reinforce themselves across regions. Schulenburg did not include Central Asia, but he should have. The region and its two keystone states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) can also be included in this series and identified as one of the spaces within this multipolar constellation that can be considered a special arena of cooperation, confrontation, and regional hegemonic aspirations of global powers.

Against such a background, this essay aims to provide a snapshot of Central Asia’s present geopolitical allocation in the context of broader international developments and trends. While the ambition of this essay is not to outline all challenges and opportunities, it

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does focus on the broad points that should be included in any strategic consideration of political and economic action in Central Asia.

Regional Consolidation, Global Aspirations

In an age characterized by a green energy transition and hydrocarbon partnerships, Central Asia is home to some of the world's most important energy and raw material reserves, including oil and gas. It is a crucial transit route for fossil fuels from the Caspian Sea towards Türkiye and Europe, China, and potentially South Asia. The closure of the northern route and the continuing strategic uncertainty regarding the southern one means that, in terms of connectivity, the Middle Corridor that runs through Central Asia is now the only game in town.

Unsurprisingly, in this part of the world, the U.S. and its allies have sought to promulgate what its proponents call a rules-based international liberal order, including its democracy dimension. In contrast, Russia has sought to maintain its traditional influence in the context of strategic distraction in the Ukrainian theater. China has also sought to increase its economic and

political influence in Central Asia, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was, after all, launched in the region in 2013.

Central Asia is also a cultural crossroads, with a mix of ethnic and religious groups, including Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and

Christians of various denominations, most of which have had a presence in the region going back centuries. In the past, this cultural diversity has sometimes led to tensions between different groups, but it also provides opportunities for

increased cooperation and integration among different cultures. Again to paraphrase Krnjević, Central Asia is likely to attempt to become an active *subject* of international order instead of accepting to remain an *object* of great power politics in the years to come. And this will need to be taken into account by those same great powers.

The region's strategic importance and rich cultural heritage makes it an attractive destination for both economic and political investment

and development. As such, Central Asia will continue to be an important region to watch as the world continues to deepen its interconnections—

in contradiction to what is currently misperceived as a growing trend of decoupling, nearshoring, and other such concepts that simply do not reflect the actual reality on the ground.

The progressing regional integration of Central Asia is accompanied by an ongoing, and not always useful, competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for leadership. Nevertheless, there are attempts, especially through the Organization of Turkic States, to develop a stronger political dynamic that also tries to influence global developments from a joint regional approach. Other institutions are likely to come into their own quite soon—including one that is entirely homegrown and another that may, in time, reach out to some or all South Caucasus states.

The reasons for this lie not least in the strengthening of the region's two keystone states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) through internal consolidation, the partial transformation of power within its elites,

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and the search for new alliance constellations in foreign policy given the war in Ukraine (beyond only Russia-led structures like the Eurasian Economic Union, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization).

Still, Central Asian “decoupling” from Russia is not a realistic option, and the analytical relevance of such a concept needs to be seriously questioned in light of the real interdependence that continues to characterize the region. The race for influence in Central Asia has gained momentum, although the signs of an emerging new bloc formation are giving it a new direction.

As I wrote in the Winter 2021-2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the July 2021 Tashkent Summit on Cooperation between Central and South Asia established a political and technical platform for serious multilateral discussions on a mutually-beneficial strategic model of interregional cooperation. It also demonstrated that the emerging regionalism—a topic raised by the concerning countries themselves and not from outside—will be a *leitmotif* for future geostrategic

developments in the Silk Road region, as Edward Lemon wrote in the Fall 2021 edition of *Baku Dialogues*. The strategic significance of this conference should not be downplayed, much less forgotten. Simply put, it seems highly unlikely that the region will abandon its established posture of multivectoral cooperation. Regretfully, both the Joe Biden Administration and the EU, under de facto German guidance, have recommitted themselves to the conduct of a “values-driven” foreign policy, including the “friend-shoring” of their respective foreign relations; what is almost entirely absent—particularly in Brussels and in some EU member states’ capitals—is a sober analysis of the Union’s actual geopolitical and foreign economic interests, much less a realistic understanding of how these could be successfully implemented. The hysterical reactions in Washington (and elsewhere) to French President Emmanuel Macron’s early April interview with *Les Échos* on his way back from a state visit to China (reproduced partly in English translation by *Politico*) are a case in point.

In the meantime, serious non-Western geostrategic actors are redoubling their efforts to become even more active in the region. Türkiye immediately comes to mind. But several of its Middle

Eastern neighbors (e.g., Iran, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) are rushing to catch up. And they are more likely than not to succeed—admittedly, not all in the same way and to the same extent. And, of course, the breakthrough smartly facilitated by China in the resumption of diplomatic contacts between Riyadh and Tehran should not be seen as a one-off: Beijing’s influence, beyond the evident economic dimension, is also likely to increase. Against this emerging reality, Brzezinski’s advocacy of “benign hegemony”—his recommendation for the United States to play the role of “Eurasia’s arbiter”—represents a perfect illustration of a tendency in American strategic thinking that, if pursued by the U.S. at this stage, not only stands no chance of succeeding but could also have a consequence of shutting out the Europeans through the geopolitical equivalent of a ‘guilt-by-association’ reaction on the part of the Central Asians themselves.

New Dynamics Shaping Potentials

When analyzing Central Asia, it is fundamentally important to understand the five core states and their respective leaders as actors with real and

growing agency, and not just as instruments or mere subjects responding pliantly to the whims, preferences, and interests of outsiders (as noted above). This is not to say that the great powers do not now, and will not in the future, play significant roles. But it certainly does mean that more than three decades after securing independence, the five core Central Asian countries have successfully consolidated their state autonomy in an otherwise quite fragile and volatile part of the world, and that they neither are nor desire ever again to be under anyone’s thumb.

In recent decades, the anchoring of national sovereignty as the basis of an interest-driven foreign policy and the shaping of national identities have been the decisive elements. Another lesson that shapes these countries is their experience that economic prosperity does not need to go hand in hand with liberal democracy—the latter is, anyhow, an alien concept for Central Asia. In fact, their experience (like that of other states, notably Singapore but also China) speaks to the point that non-Western political arrangements that lean towards technocratic governance can sometimes be highly effective under the condition of fragile external constellations and limited room for maneuver. If one considers developments in

neighboring theaters (Afghanistan and Iraq are obvious but hardly singular examples), one clearly realizes that the standards upheld abroad by liberal democracies in the tradition of the Atlantic-oriented West are hardly applicable to Central Asia and the rest of the Silk Road region.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan faced the challenge of consolidating internal governance in 2022, albeit the former in a more radical form. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has succeeded in consolidating and, at the same time, limiting his own power after the suppression of a movement that began as a protest over social policy measures but was quickly infiltrated and instrumentalized by terrorist elements. For the groups that claimed close association with his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Tokayev-driven process of resulting political reforms is associated with a lasting loss of power.

In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was confronted with separatist tendencies in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, located in the western part of the country, and subsequently refrained from a constitutional reform with a centralist orientation. While Tashkent played host to all

relevant external actors at a July 2021 conference (discussed above) in the run-up to presidential elections in October of that year, its beyond-the-region political ambitions since then have been somewhat more modest.

At the same time, there was an increased struggle for regional leadership and, not least in the wake of the war in Ukraine, for more foreign investments. Astana is in the process of internal consolidation following a constitutional referendum and early presidential elections in 2022, as well as early elections to the lower house of parliament that took place on 19 March 2023.

Also of relevance is the fact that Tokayev made it clear directly (and publicly) to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the June 2022 International Economic Forum held in St. Petersburg that his country disapproves of the annexation of Ukrainian territory. Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon also had strong words to share regarding Russia's posture towards its southern neighbors during a summit of Central Asian countries and Russia in Astana in October 2022. These developments need to be considered alongside the fact that, on the other hand, Central Asia had been seriously

underestimated by the United States and, even more so, by the European Union. Up to now, a serious mid- to long-term strategic approach that goes beyond wishful thinking, taking into account the complex realities and constellations of power, is simply missing in Western deliberations about Central Asia.

Geopolitics Through Business

Although the normative maxims of a "rule-based international liberal order" and "value-driven foreign policy" are becoming increasingly important for the foreign policies of all EU and NATO member states—especially for Germany as one of the driving forces within these alliances, these aspirations are confronted with a complex reality that can better be described as multipolar or polycentric. This implies that in addition to China, Russia, and the United States, aspiring global actors are striving to pursue their own particular agendas. For the Central Asian countries, China, Russia, and Türkiye currently exert much greater sustainable influence than the EU, despite its revised 2019 strategy for the region. Although the West currently

claims to shape change primarily through the power of normative concepts, a look at geopolitical realities shows that economic factors have a more resounding effect—and not only in the Silk Road region. China and Russia are pushing ahead with trade and investment projects without actively intervening in domestic policy processes or imposing conditions on the countries that make up the region. This makes quite a difference.

The respective roles of the various cultural, economic, or security instruments to which at least some Silk Road region states belong—e.g., the Organization of Turkic States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—are also gaining importance. In addition, the transformation process from state economies to market economy structures is not yet complete in these countries, as evidenced by the recent measures of economic reforms in Kazakhstan. In geo-economic terms, a window of opportunity is currently opening for the EU and its more agile member states. The closure of Kazakhstan's trade mission in Moscow and Uzbekistan's increased Westerly turn illustrates these trends. At the same time, Russia is striving to maintain

and expand its influence in the region in various ways, old and new, which its leaders are critically eyeing as their nations step into their fourth decade of political independence.

Former Kyrgyz Prime Minister Djoomart Otorbaev emphasizes the impact on regional developments of foreign investments and foreign trade cooperation in his 2023 book *Central Asia's Economic Rebirth in the Shadow of the New Great Game*. In this sense, the West has a welcome opportunity to promote economic development beyond the region without involving another external player with a serious impact on regional issues. The states of Central Asia are very well aware of the current constellation of influence on the "chessboard" and, as sovereign states for more than three decades now, act according to their respective national interests. These do not imply exclusivity in foreign relations, but rather according to what Kazakhstan's First President Nursultan Nazarbayev concisely phrased as a multivectoral foreign policy. This concept allows countries to credibly reject Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity without disengaging from Russia in the same way as the West has chosen

to do, which in each of their cases would neither be possible nor reasonable. This also explains the increasing importance of foreign trade with the EU in general and Germany in particular, although Russia remains an important economic partner for those countries—the conflict over Ukraine notwithstanding. The question of the extent to which sustainable value creation is taking place in the states of Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in the course of the relocation of companies from Russia as a result of the war can only be answered once the necessary data has been collected.

Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pursue an ambivalent strategy with regard to integration into geopolitical structures. Their basic position is that the scope for interaction is to be expanded and dependencies reduced and, if possible, avoided. While Kazakhstan is acting from its position as the leading regional economic power and an important supplier of hydrocarbons still needed by Europe,

Uzbekistan remains in the initial phase of its equivalent outreach process after decades of extensive foreign policy isolation under its former president, Islam Karimov, who died in office in September 2016.

Increased involvement by Western companies not only promises entry into previously unexploited markets, but also has the not inconsiderable potential to help shape the transformation processes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and thus make a formative contribution to their development and, perhaps, that of Central Asia as a whole. At the same time, Western corporate ignorance of strategic business development opportunities in Central Asia, which remains widespread apart from a few pioneering achievements, is taking its revenge. For example, the dominant focus of German foreign trade on Russia, without at the same time exploiting the potential of neighboring Central Asian states, is proving to be a structural competitive disadvantage in these markets compared to

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other economic stakeholders like China, India, and Türkiye.

For a generally sophisticated advanced industrial democracy like Germany, it is difficult to explain why, for instance, the German Chamber of Commerce in Moscow is only now organizing a business delegation to Uzbekistan. Or why various regional business associations in Germany that had previously focused on Russia are only now reorienting themselves towards Central Asia. In other words, it can be asked with a certain cynicism whether it took the conflict over Ukraine—and especially the Western decision to impose a sanctions and export restrictions regime on Russia—for Germany to begin seizing the economic opportunities that had been on offer for quite some time in Central Asia.

Unsurprisingly, the impression of being the second choice to Russia is being received only with moderate enthusiasm in Central Asia itself. At the same time, optimism prevails regarding the resulting opportunities for their own economic development. Better late than never, one could say. Again unsurprisingly, the leading economy of the EU, in particular, is reflected in this field of perception, which is characterized by ambiguity.

Challenges and Opportunities

It is well worth taking seriously the conclusion professed by Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard in a policy brief published by the European Council on Foreign Relations in February 2023:

the West will have to live, as one pole of a multipolar world, with hostile dictatorships such as China and Russia, but also with independent major powers such as India and Türkiye. This may end up being the biggest geopolitical turning point revealed by the war: that the consolidation of the West is taking place in an increasingly divided post-Western world.

Chinese and Russian hegemonic aspirations in Central Asia are perceived by the concerned countries themselves as challenging, but not as major impediments for pursuing their own political and economic agendas. One could say that they have gotten used to it, and that each of the five states has settled on ways to accommodate, if not always counter, them in ways that Western analysts would consider to be successful.

Both Beijing and Moscow have taken an active interest in the

region, and both have used political and economic influence to ensure that their respective interests are well served. As a result, the five Central Asian states have become increasingly reliant on their powerful neighbors for trade, investment, and security. This has created a difficult balance between asserting substantive independence and managing complex relationships with powerful outsiders.

Another major geopolitical challenge in Central Asia is the ongoing conflicts in nearby theaters. The Syrian and Afghan civil wars have created massive refugee crises, which have in turn placed an immense burden on the infrastructure and resources of many Central Asian nations. The lack of political stability in these countries has also caused a security vacuum, allowing terrorist groups to gain a foothold in the region. Finally, the energy resources of Central Asia have created a number of economic and security concerns. In particular, Russia's interest in controlling the region's energy resources has led to several diplomatic standoffs

(and more) to gain control of these resources. This has put many Central Asian countries in a difficult position, as they must balance their own policy preferences with the interests of foreign powers.

Strategic Multi-Level Approaches Needed

The contemporary geopolitical situation predestines Central Asia to be a crucial area of interaction between global and regional powers in the twenty-first century. At the same time, the countries of the region are developing their own foreign policy agendas, each rooted in realist understandings of their respective national interests.

Although strong ties with China and Russia will remain, the Central Asian elites are now moving towards a more diversified portfolio in their foreign policy and trade relations.

Although strong ties with China and Russia will remain, the Central Asian elites are now moving towards a more diversified portfolio in their foreign policy and trade relations. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are somewhat known in the West, but the other three core states of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan)

are virtually unknown. This assessment could not be made of any of the other outside powers. Lamentably, the opportunities and challenges of these three countries are too little analyzed in their own dynamics. This essay, which looks at the region from a geostrategic perspective, is no exception. Nevertheless, studying their genuine development processes and the resulting opportunities and perspectives in more detail is worthwhile.

While the dragon, the bear and, to a certain extent, the eagle vie for economic and political influence in the region, the question for the EU and especially Germany is the significance of Central Asia in their respective foreign policy agendas. It is also clear that the region plays a role that should not be underestimated in solving global issues, such as the fight against international terrorism, irregular migration, and the effects of climate change.

A long-term assertion of one's own interests in

Central Asia can only succeed if a cooperation mechanism can be established that adequately accounts for the perspective of the countries concerned without strategically neglecting one's own goals. In the past, Central Asia was often a space for the projection of fascination and obsession, the attempt to recognize the proximate in the alien. Based on this, numerous approaches to a deeper understanding of the region and its cultures and people have reached their limits, and the soft factor of approximation through cultural diplomacy has been substantially neglected.

Germany and the EU, and foreign stakeholders in general, will need to act much more as partners rather than as instructors for the development of the political and economic systems in the countries of Central Asia. The timeframe for such action is limited, and other stakeholders consider the hesitation exhibited by the EU and member states like Germany as an incentive for their own strategic approaches.

A long-term assertion of one's own interests in Central Asia can only succeed if a cooperation mechanism can be established that adequately accounts for the perspective of the countries concerned without strategically neglecting one's own goals.

This requires staying power and the increased structural development of regional competencies, for example, through the establishment of new conferences and think-tank platforms in close coordination with Central Asian countries themselves. To achieve this, it will be essential for the EU and its leading member states to institutionalize a constructive

sympiosis of economic, political, and intellectual engagement with Central Asia. The EU is at the beginning of a process that will significantly determine what role the Union and its member states will play in the future of world politics. Without a Silk Road region dimension, it stands a greater chance of becoming quite a peripheral player. ^{BD}

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