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**Geopolitical Dynamics and State-Building in Central  
Asia**

Master's thesis

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## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
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In Prague on  
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## **Abstract**

The countries in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan- have struggled with state-building since their establishment in 1991. This paper will explore possible reasons for that, looking at how changes in the geopolitical environment, resulting from major events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, have shaped how Great Powers—the US, China, and Russia—interact with the region and facilitate or limit various state-building practices. This research builds on an extensive body of literature surrounding the nature and viability of state-building practices, as well as literature exploring the unique geopolitical particularities of the Central Asian region that have made it central to narratives about the Great Power competition for more than a century. In all, this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of Central Asia's development and the effect changes in the geopolitical environment have had on that development.

## **Abstrakt**

Země Střední Asie – Kazachstán, Kyrgyzstán, Uzbekistán, Tádžikistán a Turkmenistán – se od svého založení v roce 1991 potýkají s budováním státu. události jako rozpad Sovětského svazu, teroristické útoky z 11. září a vyhlášení iniciativy Pás a stezka utvářely, jak velmoci – USA, Čína a Rusko – interagují s regionem a usnadňují nebo omezují různé praktiky budování státu. Tento výzkum staví na rozsáhlém souboru literatury o povaze a životaschopnosti praktik budování státu, stejně jako na literatuře zkoumající jedinečné geopolitické zvláštnosti středoasijského regionu, díky nimž se stal ústředním bodem vyprávění o soutěži velmocí po více než století. Celkově si tento výzkum klade za cíl přispět k lepšímu pochopení vývoje Střední Asie a vlivu, který na tento vývoj měly změny geopolitického prostředí.

## **Keywords**

Geopolitics, State-Building, Central Asia, Development, Collapse of the Soviet Union, September 11<sup>th</sup>, Belt and Road Initiative.

## **Klíčová slova**

Geopolitika, budování státu, střední Asie, rozvoj, kolaps Sovětského svazu, 11. září, iniciativa Pás a stezka.

## **Název práce**

Dynamika geopolitiky a budování státu ve Střední Asii

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Development of Central Asian Studies.....	3
State Failure and State-building.....	6
State-building & Central Asia.....	11
Gaps in the Literature.....	12
Methodology.....	14
Research Design.....	14
Selection of Cases.....	15
Measurement and Analysis.....	17
Relation and Contribution to Existing Literature.....	18
Limitations.....	19
Analysis.....	20
The Dissolution of the USSR.....	20
The United States.....	21
Russia.....	25
China.....	27
Discussion.....	30
September 11th Terrorist Attacks.....	32
The United States.....	33
Russia.....	40
China.....	44
Discussion.....	48
The Belt and Road Initiative.....	50
United States.....	53
Russia.....	58
China.....	63
Discussion.....	70
Conclusion.....	72
Work Cited.....	74

## Introduction

Despite Central Asia, as the heartland of the world, being the inspiration behind modern geopolitical studies, the region is still home to many puzzles in the world of political science. It's a region of the world where you need to take everything you think you know about global politics and flip it on its head. As this paper will explore, it's a place where Russia has resolved wars instead of starting them; where the United States, as the most powerful country in the world, is powerless to the whims of some of the most excentric leaders in the world; and where China takes an extremely hands-on approach to economic, cultural, and military matters. Its unique and complex history and geographical disposition have made it an area of much fascination with little progress.

Although many hoped for political and social transformation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, over thirty years later, the region- comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan- remains largely unchanged and unintegrated. This paper aims to help build an understanding of what factors influence state-building in the region, hoping this can provide some context for why it has struggled to develop functioning state institutions. It will do this by looking at how changes in the geopolitical environment have affected external actors'- particularly the United States, Russia, and China- engagement in the region and assessing how certain shifts have made the state-building landscape more permissive, cooperative or competitive which then affects the opportunities and priorities of each country. Ultimately, it aims to answer the question: How have geopolitical shifts affected Central Asian state-building? The hypothesis is that in times of more competitive geopolitical environments, there will be more engagement by Great Powers in the region. Subsequently, in times of permissive or cooperative geopolitical environments, there will be less engagement in the region.

This paper is laid out as follows. First, it will explore an in-depth literature review of the previously published works on the subject, including the development of Central Asian studies, which establishes key narratives that have affected the international community's perspective of the region. The literature review will also examine the major debates in the state-building and state failure literature, looking specifically at texts related to Central Asia. From there, it will analyze gaps in the literature which have laid the foundation for this study.



The methodology section will follow, explaining and justifying the research design, giving an overview of the case studies selected, detailing how the measurement and analysis of variables will take place, explaining the relation and contribution of this paper to the existing literature in the field, and finally mentioning the limitations of this study.

In the analysis, the three case studies will be explored from the state-building perspectives of the three Great Powers—the United States, Russia, and China—with a discussion at the end of each case examining the broader effect these events and actors had on the development of the region. This structured approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of how these geopolitical shifts have influenced state-building in Central Asia, highlighting the nuanced interplay between regional dynamics and global powers.

## Literature Review

The geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia have long been a subject of fascination and study. It's been a crossroads of empires, a stage for great power rivalries, and a theater of shifting alliances. This region's significance stems from a complex interplay of historical, geographic, and strategic factors central to the study of many disciplines, including political science, international relations, development studies, history, and sociology. Delving into this extensive and diverse body of research, this literature review aims to understand differing perspectives related to the region's contemporary development. Starting by analyzing the development of Central Asian studies with a specific focus on crucial narrative, this review will then look at the broad body of research and policy practice surrounding state-building from a global and regional perspective. Intertwined in each section is an analysis of how key geopolitical events and changing Great Power dynamics have affected the research and shaped narratives surrounding the region. Lastly, this review will give an overview of current gaps in the literature and remaining questions.

## Development of Central Asian Studies

The historical backdrop from which Central Asian studies developed is fundamental to the contemporary study of it. The Great Power competition between the British and Russian empires in the early 1900s characterized the region as an area to be fought over and controlled. Halford Mackinder's seminal work, "The Geographical Pivot of History," published in 1904, reinforced this. It argued that whoever controlled the Eurasian landmass held the key to global power and influence due to its geographical disposition of vast resources and limited natural boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Mackinder's work would become a foundational literature in the study of geopolitics and cement Central Asia's legacy as a strategic region battleground of great power competition.

However, throughout the 1900s, the region was under firm control of Russia and subsequent Soviet influence. During this time, the region participated in an intensive state-

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<sup>1</sup> H. J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (April 1, 1904): 421, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>.

building and nation-building experiment that characterized the Soviet experience. Of course, no country can be understood completely without understanding its history; however, there's some debate about the extent to which this soviet legacy plays in the current development of Central Asian politics. On one side are authors such as Alexey Mikhalev and Kubatkek Rakhimov, who wrote in their paper "Struggle for Soviet Legacy" that "this struggle is a path of dependent development, in which the resources and values created in Soviet times determine interstate relations in the 21st century".<sup>2</sup> One popular line of thinking in the literature is to view Central Asia's current politics, structures, and issues almost exclusively in the post-Soviet context. On the other hand, researchers highlight the vast differences in the development of each of these countries before, during, and after the Soviet period.<sup>3</sup> In the book "Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered Legacies and Transformation in Central Asia," the authors also argue, "while still shaped by its Soviet and colonial past, the region's social institutions, political developments, and economic asymmetries closely resemble those of other regions on the margins of the capitalist world system," drawing similarities to other regions of the world which would otherwise not be comparable on the purely post-soviet driven model.<sup>4</sup> This argument has also been popular among Central Asian leaders such as Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, who, in October of 2022, called for Central Asian countries not to be treated as the former USSR,<sup>5</sup> emphasizing frustrations about the region being seen only in the context of their post-Soviet ties.<sup>6</sup> The question of the soviet legacy on the region and how free these countries are to break from it, as well as their comparability to other areas that don't have a soviet past, remain significant themes in the literature.

As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it sparked a significant revival in literature as researchers and politicians scrambled to predict the potential outcomes of the power vacuum it

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<sup>2</sup> Alexey V. Mikhalev and Kubatkek K. Rakhimov, "Central Asia and the Struggle for Soviet Legacy," *Russia in Global Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2023): 131–40, <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-2-131-140>.

<sup>3</sup> See works such as Matthias Schmidt et al., "Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia," *Geographica Augustana*, 2021; Adeeb Khalid, "Are We Still Post-Soviet?" in *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 458–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19qmf3k>; Vincent Artman, "The Soviet Legacy in Central Asian Politics and Society," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.313>.

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt et al., "Beyond Post-Soviet: Layered Legacies and Transformations in Central Asia." 4.

<sup>5</sup> Mikhalev and Rakhimov, "Central Asia and the Struggle for Soviet Legacy."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

created. This pivotal event led to a surge in research and publications, with political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1996 book "The Grand Chessboard" standing out as a critical contribution, offering a theoretical framework for understanding the global environment and the role of the US in this new era, with a specific focus on the Eurasian continent.<sup>7</sup> This resurgence of interest in the region also reignited old narratives, harking back to Mackinder and the Great Game. This time, it was termed the "New Great Game," a term that underscored the anticipation of a renewed great power rivalry in the region. The geopolitical significance of this term was further reinforced by the discovery of vast oil and natural gas resources during the Soviet period, adding a layer of high stakes to the unfolding geopolitical dynamics.<sup>8</sup> However, authors diverge in their assessments of the primary actors in this geopolitical game.<sup>9</sup> Given its historical, geographical, and economic connections to the region, Russia emerged as a natural contender, followed closely by the United States as its traditional rival. China was soon added due to its vested interests in the region's affairs and rapidly growing economic capacity. Regional actors, such as Turkey and Iran, are included in some literature. Furthermore, some include international organizations, like the United Nations and the European Union, and multinational corporations, particularly those in the energy sector, due to their influence on the region's economic and political landscape.

Not all scholars agree on the existence of a New Great Game. The main points of contention are twofold. First, critics argue that the New Great Game narrative overly emphasizes the actions and interests of external actors while neglecting the agency of local actors. They contend that characterizing Central Asian countries as mere pawns simplifies the complex decisions made by local governments, who pursue diverse interests. The second point of contention is whether actual competition exists in the region. Some argue that the New Great Game exaggerates the competitive aspect, pointing to the lack of overt geopolitical rivalry that's taken place in the last 30 years. The Central Asian countries have rejected the idea of a New Great Game, asserting instead that they have a "multi-vector approach" in which they pursue

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<sup>7</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, *Foreign Policy* (Basic Books, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149289>.

<sup>8</sup> See works such as: Lutz Kleveman, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, "The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder."

various alliances, including those with Russia, China, and the United States, to achieve a well-balanced foreign policy.

## State Failure and State-building

In conjunction with the growing body of research on Central Asia, there has been an increasing body of research on state failure and state-building. Since decolonization in the 1950s, there has been concern around newly formed countries, which, while having formal recognition, lack any ability to function as a state. Initially, these state-building theories had a strong conceptual link to modernization theories.<sup>10</sup> During the Cold War, the discussion faded as most fragile states aligned themselves with one of the Great Powers, who, in exchange, provided them with some level of security and stability, removing the need for intentional state-building.<sup>11</sup> The end of the Cold War, along with the additional proliferation of new states, exposed the full extent of the international state system's fragility. Robert Rotberg wrote, "In 1914, 55 polities could be considered members of the global system; in 1960, there were 90 such states. After the Cold War, that number climbed to 192. But given the explosion in the number of states, so many of which are small, resource-deprived, geographically disadvantaged, and poor-it is no wonder that numerous states are at risk of failure".<sup>12</sup> The idea of state-building re-emerged stronger than ever, primarily in two fields. First, development studies focused on the 'good governance' agenda that aimed to enhance the capacities and structures of the state, including promoting transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.<sup>13</sup> Second, international relations were spurred on by the events in Yugoslavia and Somalia.<sup>14</sup> Security studies also became a key field associated with

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<sup>10</sup> See works such as Heather Marquette and Danielle Beswick, "Introduction State Building, Security and Development: State Building as a New Development Paradigm?," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 10 (2011): 1704; Steven Van De Walle and Zoë Scott, "The Role of Public Services in State- and Nation Building: Exploring Lessons from European History for Fragile States," *GDCR Research Paper*, 2009. 7; Zoe Scott, "Literature Review on State-Building" (Governance and Social Development Resource Center, May 2007): 4; Jochen Hippler, "Violent Conflicts, Conflict Prevention and Nation-building – Terminology and Political Concepts," in *Nation-Building - A Key Concept of Peaceful Conflict Transformation* (Pluto Press, 2005), 3–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18fs3tv.5>.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Jackson. "Regime Security." In *Contemporary Security Studies*, 146–63, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198708315.003.0014>.

<sup>12</sup>Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2002): 130, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033245>.

<sup>13</sup> Marquette and Beswick, "Introduction State Building, Security and Development: State Building as a New Development Paradigm?". 1704

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 1704

state-building as time went on, especially after 9/11.<sup>15</sup> This patchwork of disciplines has helped create an extensive, although not always coherent, body of research on state-building.

Key early works that helped bring attention to this issue included “Saving Failed States,” published in 1993 by former diplomat Gerald Helman and legal scholar Steven Ratner;<sup>16</sup> “The Coming Anarchy” by journalist Robert Kaplan in 1994;<sup>17</sup> and “Towards a Taxonomy of Failed States in the New World Order” by Jean-Germain Gros in 1996.<sup>18</sup> Most of these studies focused on the unexpected internal conflicts that characterized the late 1990s and early 2000s, with scholars seeking to explain the violence by focusing on the absence of effective state authority. It was in these works that the term “failed state” first gained its popularity in the literature.

From the beginning, authors were unsettled by this term, which led to a wide range of similar terms, including failing, fragile, weak, crisis, collapsed, poor performer, ineffective, at risk, etc., to name a few—all used to describe different shades of the same phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> Maria Lousie Clausen writes, “The number of states potentially being referred to as fragile ranges from 60 to 30, which reflects the definitional ambiguity”.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, while they shared the commonality of describing states that lack the will or capacity to perform core state functions, every organization has its definition of what the core functions of a state are.

If state failure is the problem, then state-building is the proposed solution. As Christopher Bickerton put it, “Only after the idea that states could fail had been established was it possible for internationalized state-building to be mooted as an acceptable solution.”<sup>21</sup> While being one of the most used terms in development research, state-building does not have a singular definition. One of the most common methods implemented to try and build a comprehensive understanding of the concept is to examine the characteristics of ‘strong’ states

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 1704

<sup>16</sup> Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, “Saving Failed States,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 89 (1992): 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149070>.

<sup>17</sup> Robert D. Kaplan and David Rieff, *The Coming Anarchy*, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Germain Gros, “Towards a Taxonomy of Failed States in the New World Order: Decaying Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda and Haiti,” *Third World Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (September 1, 1996): 455–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599615452>.

<sup>19</sup> Maria-Louise Clausen, “State-Building in Fragile States: Strategies of Embedment” (PhD Dissertation, Aarhus University, 2016): 24.

<sup>20</sup> Clausen, “State-Building in Fragile States: Strategies of Embedment.” 25.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher J. Bickerton, “State-building: Exporting State Failure,” in *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (University College London Press, 2006), 102, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203962329-12>.

and use those as benchmarks for more fragile states to evaluate themselves. Three of the most recurrent characteristics are legitimacy, capacity, and authority.<sup>22</sup> From there, state-building can be loosely defined as any effort to improve those areas.

To add complexity, state-building is often used interchangeably with nation-building and peace-building. State-building generally refers to a strategy to build up the institutions and structures of a state, while nation-building focuses more on identity.<sup>23</sup> Several authors argue that while state-building is something external actors can engage in, nation-building, that is, developing a national culture, is inherently something the emerging society can formulate.<sup>24</sup> Peace-building was included in the mix when researchers began arguing that these efforts should aim to end violence and create sustainable peace.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, peace-building is the same as state-building for the security and conflict community. For other disciplines that would advocate state-building in weak but not necessarily post-conflict environments, peace-building is a subset of state-building. All three terms have been utilized in research on Central Asia; however, state-building and nation-building are the two most conjoined, stemming from the region's complex ethnic and religious makeup.

Following the terrorist attack on 9/11, the perceived dangers of state failure increased exponentially, and the importance of state-building went along with it. Robert Rotberg, in his article "Failed States in a World of Terror," describes it best by stating, "In the wake of September 11, the threat of terrorism has given the problem of failed nation-states an immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension...Failed states have come to be feared as "breeding grounds of instability, mass migration, and murder" (in the words of political scientist Stephen Walt), as well as reservoirs and exporters of terror. The existence of these kinds of countries, and the instability that they harbor, not only threatens the lives and livelihoods of their peoples but endangers world peace."<sup>26</sup> State-building no longer existed just in

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<sup>22</sup> Clausen, "State-Building in Fragile States: Strategies of Embedment." 26

<sup>23</sup> Scott, "Literature Review on State-Building."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Thania Paffenholz, "Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (May 17, 2021): 367–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1925423>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2002): 127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20033245>.

the realm of altruistic policymakers but was a priority of national security in the Western world. This was especially the case for Central Asia, both being seen as potential partners for the US due to their geographical proximity to Afghanistan and potential threats due to their state weaknesses.

Moving beyond the terminology, the on-the-ground experience of state-building has been even more complicated and admittedly disappointing. Initial state-building attempts yielded little progress, with some countries like Kyrgyzstan progressing initially, only to backslide a few years later. Many researchers pinpointed this to the ‘top-down’ approach many international actors took.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the new prescription of ‘bottom-up’ state-building was added to the literature. Bottom-up approaches aimed to involve a broader range of internal actors, working within the framework of indigenous structures rather than imposing exogenous solutions.<sup>28</sup> It also widened the scope of state-building to include deeper, long-term engagement to address the root of the problems rather than intervening once the conflict had started.<sup>29</sup> It shifted the focus from building Weberian ideal-type states to building "resilient" states, which the OECD defines as “states that (i) are capable, accountable and responsible, and (ii) are rooted in an ongoing nonviolent and robust exchange with society about the distribution of political power and economic resources and the adaptation of society and institutions.”<sup>30</sup> They admit “that the end-’state’ they aim for is but a distant prospect.”<sup>31</sup> However, bottom-up approaches have come with their own set of struggles. Promoting protracted engagement in foreign countries is not always a salient policy, and there are many debates about the best way to support resilience.

The methodology and definition of state-building has faced significant criticism. Heather Marquette and Danielle Beswisk write: “Interestingly, there is very little debate in the literature over what type of state the international community should try to build in fragile contexts, and this raises inevitable questions about the promotion and reality of ‘local’ ownership. The

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<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, ed., *Handbook on Intervention and Statebuilding*, Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788116237>. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Lemay-Hébert, *Handbook on Intervention and Statebuilding*. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>30</sup> OECD, “Statebuilding in Fragile Contexts: Key Terms and Concepts,” in *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance. DAC Guidelines and Reference Series* (OECD Publishing, 2011), 22, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264074989-5-en>.

<sup>31</sup> OECD, “Statebuilding in Fragile Contexts: Key Terms and Concepts.” 22.



normative assumption often seems to be that a state is a liberal market democracy spread over a geographic territory... According to this interpretation, state-building is actually about transferring Western values, institutions, and norms, which exposes it to accusations of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism”.<sup>32</sup> These criticisms revolve around two key points: firstly, the failure to account for local dynamics and, secondly, the assumption that the Western state model is the only viable option for the international arena. This perspective argues that the label of “state failure” is often a result of countries not conforming to Western standards and expectations rather than the local realities. This is further supported by the extreme variety of states that fall under this umbrella, which are more connected by the characteristics they don’t have than the ones they do.

Furthermore, some argue that state-building merely serves as a tool for external actors to advance their interests, casting doubt on the actual benefits of these policies. A significant criticism also pertains to the beneficiaries of state-building efforts. It is well-known that foreign governments frequently collaborate with local elites of questionable integrity and motives. The question thus arises: at what point does engagement with corrupt or authoritarian leaders lead to democratic transformation, and when does it inadvertently reinforce these undesirable practices?

While this criticism is valid for the state-building perpetuated by Western powers, state-building in its broadest form doesn’t necessarily have to carry the Weberian ideal model, democratic transition, neo-liberal, nation-state baggage that it’s often associated with. Revisionist powers such as China and Russia also work to help build up weak, fragile, and failed states, but often with much different conditions and methodologies. China and Russia pride themselves on working with leaders that the West has shunned and promoting a multipolar world. Russia usually helps build states through military assistance, although in the Central Asian region, it’s much more hands-on in all aspects due to its shared history. China’s state-building usually comes in economic assistance and infrastructure development, but they’ve also been seen assisting with securitization, health services, and more. Their model is to provide the resources and let the local leaders create the development they envision out of it.

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<sup>32</sup> Marquette and Beswick, “Introduction State Building, Security and Development: State Building as a New Development Paradigm?” 1706.

## State-building & Central Asia

State-building literature, specifically as it pertains to Central Asia, focuses on additional questions and problem areas. Fukuyama put it best when he described them as strong “in all the wrong areas: they are good at jailing journalists or political opponents but can’t process visas or business licenses in less than six months.”<sup>33</sup> This has made it difficult for these states to fit nicely within the boxes research often calls for. The lines between formal and informal, public and private, legal and illegal, are often blurred when it comes to the functioning of the state systems. Even when it comes to the basics of statehood, as a defined territorial unit, Central Asian countries present many difficulties as they still have unsettled border disputes harking back decades that are still politically volatile.

One of the most developed research areas is assessing the viability of liberal state building in Central Asia. In her book “Incomplete State-Building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice,” author Viktoria Akchurina rejects the idea that a decentralized government and liberalization are the critical features of a well-functioning state.<sup>34</sup> Drawing heavily on the ideas of Charles Tilly, Micheal Man, and the concept of fractionalized states, she argues that the state-building projects in Central Asia have had features that inherently undermine their effects.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, “Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia” by Philipp Lottholz highlights the problems with imposing ideas of liberal democracy, modern statehood, and capitalist-based development in the region.<sup>36</sup> These works and others suggest that the state failure seen in Central Asia is due to a disconnect between the Western and regional systems.

In their book “Dictators Without Borders,” Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw argue that the state failure is at least in part at the hands of the Western system, showing that it’s impossible to understand the corruption, elite formation, and foreign policy in Central Asia without understanding how embedded they are in the global finance architecture of Western

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<sup>33</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83 (Cornell University Press, 2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvrf8c1g>. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Viktoria Akchurina, *Incomplete State-Building in Central Asia: The State as Social Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Philipp Lottholz. *Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia: Imaginaries, Discourses and Practices of Social Ordering*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529220025>

society.<sup>37</sup> They show the double standard that takes place whereby politicians heavily critique the region's regimes while, at the same time, helping ensure their politics are financially viable and profiting from them.<sup>38</sup> For example, Deutsch Bank holds the Central Bank of Turkmenistan accounts. It acts as the personal banker for the President, who has stashed over \$8 billion in foreign reserves in their institution.<sup>39</sup> They assess "two inescapable truths of Central Asia's transition experience that have made reform near impossible and corruption a natural part of politics and business. First, the region is characterized by the blurring of politics and economics and public and private sectors to the extent that the boundary between them is completely absent. In Central Asia, if you are ahead in politics, you are ahead in business, and vice versa".<sup>40</sup> This highlights international governments, companies, and organizations' critical role in the region and illustrates the complexity of state failure and building.

There have also been attempts to connect the development of Central Asia to other areas of the world, framing them in either a post-colonial or post-conflict context, which allows the authors to draw similarities to other developing countries. This aligns with the rejection of Central Asia as a purely post-Soviet region. Some authors drew on cases of African states and applied tribalism theories to the region. On the one hand, they were beneficial in pushing the conversation on informal politics forward. On the other, they led to an "orientalization" of the region, which overplayed the role of clan politics in undermining state-building.

## **Gaps in the Literature**

Ultimately, the major debates (and therefore literature) around state-building in Central Asia revolve around the importance of the post-Soviet legacy in contemporary analysis, the comparability to other regions, the role and impact of international actors, the autonomy of local actors and their ability of effect change, the viability of liberal state-building methods, and the causes of state-fragility. Most of the literature published touches on at least one of these debates, if not more. However, as none of these debates are settled, more room remains for research. One

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander A. Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders*, Yale University Press eBooks, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300222098>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

area identified for this paper is the connection between geopolitical events and the state-building process. Although many geopolitical events are discussed throughout the literature, the connection and impact are often implicitly assumed or ignored. Many authors mention that the War on Terror transformed the state-building process without explicitly assessing how, while other authors who prefer to view the region in a post-Soviet context downplay these events. Therefore, diving into a comparative assessment of several geopolitical events and their impact (or lack thereof) on regional state-building can be interesting.

## **Methodology**

In order to study the impact geopolitical shifts have had in Central Asia, this paper will employ an in-depth qualitative case-study analysis of three major geopolitical events in order to understand how they created a shift in the international environment and that shift's connection to state-building. To start, this section will explain why this research method was chosen. It will then provide an outline of the chosen events and rationale for their selection before looking at how their impact will be measured and analyzed in Central Asia's state-building context. Then, it will explain how this paper relates and contributes to the existing literature. Lastly, it will look at the limitations of this research.

## **Research Design**

A variety of research methods have been employed when it comes to the study of state-building. Because the research is closely connected to policy prescription- where authors not only want to investigate the underlying causes of state fragility but also offer viable solutions- there is a delicate balance in the research between the investigation of complex and intertwined casual relationships while also building simplified frameworks which governments and organizations can use. Before beginning the analysis, it was essential to decide the direction this paper would go, which was rooted in how it intended to build on previous literature and the purpose of the research itself. As discussed in the literature review, while there is already a vast amount of research on the subject, many gaps still need to be filled, and many nominative narratives should be questioned. The purpose of this research is also exploratory, intended to be used as a building block in part of a more extensive discussion on the subject. Therefore, a qualitative, in-depth case study research design was chosen.

As with all qualitative research, this has numerous benefits and limitations. The benefits include the ability to explore complex phenomena, capture the nuances of different experiences, and flexibility to adapt to new insights. Looking at Central Asia specifically, qualitative research can help build a better understanding of the unique social and cultural contexts, which might otherwise be overlooked, and it allows for the research questions to be addressed more holistically. However, qualitative research has limitations, including potential subjectivity, researcher bias, and limited generalizability.

Data collection primarily relies on secondary sources, complemented by selected primary documents from international organizations involved in the state-building process. Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, reports, and archival materials, provide a foundation for the study, offering a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge and relevant theories in the field. Incorporating primary documents sourced directly from international organizations enriches the study by offering firsthand insights and contextual details. The analysis will thoroughly examine these sources, employing qualitative content analysis techniques to identify themes, patterns, and unique perspectives. The combination of secondary and primary data sources allows for a comprehensive and multi-faceted exploration of the research topic, enhancing the depth and validity of the findings.

## **Selection of Cases**

The three geopolitical events chosen for this research are the Collapse of the USSR, the September 11th Terrorist Attacks, and the Announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative. Selecting the independent variable for this paper came with the explicit understanding that nothing in geopolitics happens independently or in a vacuum. The three events chosen for analysis are, in many ways, superficial markers of global changes that had been building for years, caused by hundreds of other events, and their effects have been further shaped by the events and narratives that followed them. However, as the literature review explored, this field of study is complex enough, so for simplicity's sake, choosing exact events allows the research to be bound and measured in specific timeframes.

These three events were chosen because of their scope and scale, magnitude of change, and long-term impact, critical ingredients for creating global geopolitical shifts. They play key themes in a variety of texts published in the region, which increases the importance of this study while also improving the quality of data that's available for research. While it can be argued that these aren't the only recent or even the most important events, they will certainly rank in most political scientists' top ten.

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the Cold War and resulted in a significant realignment of global power structures. It caused the emergence of fifteen new independent republics. It ended the bipolar world order and allowed the United States to emerge as the sole superpower, influencing global governance, economic policies, and security

arrangements. It forced a shift away from centrally planned economies to market economies, which involved complex state-building efforts that were often marked by economic hardship and political instability.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks profoundly altered global security paradigms and state-building strategies. It started the US-led War on Terror, which reshaped international relations, leading to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which involved extensive state-building efforts and aimed at establishing stable, democratic governments. The attacks prompted significant changes in national security policies worldwide, with increased emphasis on counterterrorism, surveillance, and intelligence-sharing. It also redefined concepts such as sovereignty, intervention, and human rights under the guise of counterterrorism efforts and influenced state-building strategies and international law.

China's BRI is a global development strategy to enhance regional connectivity and economic integration. The BRI involves massive infrastructure investments across Asia, Africa, and Europe, facilitating economic development and modernization in numerous participating countries. Through the BRI, China extends its geopolitical influence, challenging existing power structures and offering an alternative development and state building model, often contrasted with Western approaches. The initiative fosters economic ties and dependencies, influencing participating states' political and economic strategies and potentially impacting their sovereignty and policy autonomy.

While distinct in their way, each event has interconnected impacts on state building. Each event has contributed to evolving notions of state sovereignty. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the creation of new sovereign states, 9/11 redefined the boundaries of acceptable intervention in the name of security, and the BRI influenced state sovereignty through economic dependencies. They also test economic models and development strategies. The transition from communism, post-9/11 intervention, and the BRI each offer different models of economic development and state building, from market liberalization to state-led infrastructure development. These events also signify major shifts in global power dynamics, from the unipolar moment post-Soviet collapse, the security realignments post-9/11, to the multipolar influences emerging with the rise of China. Lastly, the events underscore the complexities of state-building in an increasingly interconnected world where global forces deeply intertwine and influence economic, political, and security dimensions.

Studying the collapse of the Soviet Union, the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks and China's BRI together provide a holistic view of the contemporary challenges and strategies in state building. Through their unique contributions to the evolution of global order, economic systems, and security paradigms, these events offer critical insights into the processes and impacts of state-building in the modern era. When specifically applied to Central Asia, they help build an understanding of how the region is developing. They also illustrate how the region's development is affected by many events and actors, breaking away from the traditional "post-soviet" legacy lens.

## **Measurement and Analysis**

While it's assumed there's an inherent connection between these geopolitical shifts and the state-building trajectory in Central Asia, there are an unmeasurable number of intervening variables between the two, so the question becomes how the impact can be accurately understood and studied. This paper takes a holistic approach, not looking to connect one exact aspect to another but looking for a pattern of events over time. To study the effects of the global shifts, the paper will first look at how those shifts have affected the foreign policy priorities of the great powers- the United States, Russia, and China. These countries were chosen because, to varying degrees, all three have had consistent motives and means to effect significant change in the region. That doesn't mean they've always acted upon it, but the capacity and interest have been there. They are also actors who affect change in almost every corner of the world, as exemplified by their involvement in the three geopolitical events selected. This is important because it shows how global dynamics shape regional ones, which is part of the purpose of this study. Understanding the foreign policy priorities of these countries is key because it sets the intentions of the activities of these great powers; it's telling of where their money, time, and resources will go. In turn, it tells of how they wish to shape the development of the region.

The analysis below will examine each event and how it creates a shift in the geopolitical environment. It will then explore how the engagement between the three Great Powers and Central Asian countries changed during this time. It will focus heavily on the top foreign policy priorities for the Great Powers as it's assumed these priorities receive the most funding and are, therefore, likely to have the greatest impact – although, as the research will show, this is not always the case. While it's assumed that all the foreign policy priorities have an impact on state-



building in Central Asia, it should be made clear that this impact is not assumed to be positive in fact, it will be shown that many foreign policy initiatives allowed for a deterioration of the state in either its capacity, legitimacy, or authority, keeping in mind state-building is being explored in the broadest sense of the term. From there, a discussion will take place about how these changes are related to the shift in the geopolitical environment and how they are related to other variables to measure the overall impact.

The intention of this paper is not to compare the variety of state-building methods utilized by the Great Powers. However, when looking at the three case studies, natural assessments of the similarities and differences take place. In fact, it can be helpful to assess the impact one of the events had on the Great Power's decision-making by contrasting it with the other Great Powers, so this analysis can also be found throughout the paper although it is not the main aim or research questions.

## **Relation and Contribution to Existing Literature**

As this paper is intended to build on existing questions explored in the literature reviewed in the previous section, it's helpful to map out its relations and intended contribution. Previous literature explores major debates such as what's the impact of the Soviet legacy, is Central Asia's state-building process comparable to other regions, is there a great game, who are the key actors, how is state-building defined, what's the relationship between state-building, nation-building, and peace-building, is state-building meant to be top-down or bottom-up, does state-building have to take a liberal, normative approach, and who are the beneficiaries of state-building? The answers the authors give to these questions significantly impact their perspective on the research. This paper aims to further explore the questions related to the impact of the Soviet Legacy by analyzing how the collapse and subsequent shifts in the geopolitical environment impacted its state-building processes. However, the Soviet legacy is just one aspect that is looked at, and it does not assume that this is a critical element of the state-building process. Therefore, this paper can also help build the region's comparability to other developing regions in further studies that would compare and contrast how the geopolitical shifts affected this region versus other ones. This work will also help answer if there is a New Great Game being played by looking at the motives behind the Great Power's involvement in the region and whether it's due to the more competitive geopolitical landscape or ulterior motives. Its focus will be limited to assessing

states and key political figures within those states as the primary actors while assuming that the impact of companies, organizations, and civil society plays an important yet secondary role. The definition of state-building is intentionally utilized in the broadest sense of the term to include any actions that aim to promote the capacity, legitimacy, and authority of the state. Therefore, it rejects the normative, liberal approach while also recognizing that the majority of state-building benchmarks currently available are based on these ideals. It assumes that the highest impact state-building projects should have a utilitarian benefit or seek to improve the position of vulnerable populations. It rejects the value of projects that only benefit the country's government or elites. Projects related to nation-building and peace-building are seen as a subset of state-building, and the most emphasis in this research is placed on top-down approaches.

## **Limitations**

This research paper has several limitations. First, it's important to note that the availability and quality of data in this region is extremely limited due to the prevalence of intentionally falsified data, unintended mistakes, and incomplete data. Second, the scope and number of geopolitical events have been purposely restricted to only three case studies, which allows for an in-depth examination of all three but certainly doesn't capture all the geopolitical events that have affected this region over time. Third, these events and their analysis focus heavily on the impact international actors have had in the region rather than that of local leaders, international organizations, or companies. This is one area that could be expanded on in further research as their perspectives are also critical in the complete understanding of the state-building situation in the region. The final limitation is the broad nature of this question, which relies on the connection of several causal patterns that are not always possible in social science research. Due to these limitations, it's important to understand this paper as a piece of a much larger puzzle, which is the study of state-building and state failure across the globe.

## Analysis

### The Dissolution of the USSR

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 undeniably marked a pivotal moment in global geopolitics. Political philosopher Francis Fukuyama famously declared it “the end of history,” positing that the collapse of the Soviet Union signified the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism.<sup>41</sup> The demise of the Soviet Union left the United States as the preeminent superpower. The spread of liberal ideals across the globe seemed inevitable, fostering hopes of a newfound era of cooperation and unity between the East and West. Russia, as the successor state of the Soviet Union, turned inward to navigate the fallout of its sudden political collapse. Meanwhile, China’s economic boom began taking shape, which would soon define its rise as a great power. Against this backdrop, the first state-building efforts in the newly created Central Asian states began.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 thrust the five Central Asian republics into an independence they neither actively sought nor were fully prepared to execute. All five overwhelmingly voted to preserve the Union in a pre-dissolution referendum held in March 1991. After their fate was sealed, Kazakhstan was the last country to declare independence, issuing their notice on December 16th, one week after the Union had disbanded. There was a lack of support for the transition throughout the general population and the elites. In Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the first presidents had to be appointed by Moscow. These leaders were tasked with rapidly building up their governmental institutions, transitioning them from local administrative bodies to national ones capable of managing the responsibilities of a functioning state within the global system.

However, the qualities instilled in them during Soviet times that made them passive to rule made it hard for them to govern themselves suddenly. This surprise statehood presented a multitude of challenges. Building political and economic independence from Russia was paramount. Transitioning to market economies, establishing diplomatic relations, and integrating into global institutions were pressing needs. Internally, they grappled with forging national

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<sup>41</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.

identities in multi-ethnic societies, developing effective governance structures, and modernizing crumbling Soviet infrastructure. Border disputes, particularly in the resource-rich Fergana Valley, added another layer of complexity.<sup>42</sup> The resurgence of religion throughout the region sparked fears of Islamic radicalization as these new states struggled to balance secularism with the Islamic faith that was deeply embedded in their populations. Energy-rich states like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan had the additional challenge of managing their resources effectively. Overall, the initial goals of state-building in Central Asia were characterized by a complex process of navigating unexpected independence, managing internal and external pressures, and attempting to build some path toward stability.

### **The United States**

The United States, having been crowned the winner of the Cold War and global hegemon, had a very privileged position in the 1990s. However, without Great Power competition and the fight against communism pushing them to involve themselves in distant places, US politicians started to reduce their global footprint, instead aiming to tackle pressing domestic issues that had been on the back burner. Having never established relations with Central Asian countries, they were wary of over-involving themselves in developing these new states. Instead, there was an underlying assumption that these states would naturally adopt the Western-style democratic development model with little interference from the US. Meanwhile, politicians in Washington were still celebrating their victory and offering grand promises for the future. The on-the-ground reality was often poorly thought out and supported by underfunded programs that would never be capable of giving these countries the assistance they needed.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the administrative relations of the US State Department, which all used to be funneled to one embassy in Moscow, were now divided amongst 15 new capitals. New embassies had to be opened, often in places where there had never been one before. There was a massive scramble in the State Department to find people to staff the offices. At the time, there was no such thing as a ‘Central Asian Expert’; it was difficult

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<sup>42</sup> For an example of the complexity see: Saniya Sakenova, “Border Demarcation Agreement Between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan Comes Into Force,” The Astana Times, July 12, 2023, <https://astanatimes.com/2023/07/border-demarcation-agreement-between-kazakhstan-and-uzbekistan-comes-into-force/>.

even to find someone who had been to the region given the restrictions during Soviet times.<sup>43</sup> These offices were also desperately underfunded, having to compete with the other post-Soviet countries for resources and attention.<sup>44</sup> The first American embassies in the region were located inside old hotels, often sharing the space with other countries' embassies.<sup>45</sup> This created a misalignment between the objective put forth by politicians in Washington and the on-the-ground capabilities of the foreign service. In practice, the US had very few tools to promote political ideals and focused instead on three narrower goals: securing weapons of mass destruction, preventing Russian neo-imperialism, and breaking up the Russian monopoly over oil and gas infrastructure. The idea of preserving “sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity” was also repeated over and over.<sup>46</sup> Funding for these initiatives came mainly from the Department of Defense, NGOs, and private companies rather than the State Department, highlighting again the small diplomatic role the US intended to play in the region.

Securing weapons of mass destruction was the first and foremost objective of the United States, and it mainly focused on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which were home to the vast majority of the weapons infrastructure. In the first decade of their independence, the US worked closely with them and Russia to transport weapons and materials, dismantle the facilities that helped create them, and decontaminate testing sites through the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. Overall, this was largely seen as a success story.<sup>47</sup> This was an essential step in ensuring a base level of stability and security in these countries—as well as globally. It was also an important entry point for US relations, primarily driven by security needs. It also marked a pivotal moment of cooperation between the US and Russia in the region, as Russia had to share access and information about their weapons programs, which just a few years prior would have been unthinkable.

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<sup>43</sup> George Krol, “Through the Diplomat’s Looking Glass,” Davis Center, September 16, 2020, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/through-diplomats-looking-glass>.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas W. Simons Jr, “On The Coast of Bohemia: The U.S. and Central Asia in the Early 1990s,” Davis Center, June 17, 2020, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/coast-bohemia-us-and-central-asia-early-1990s>.

<sup>45</sup> Krol, “Through the Diplomat’s Looking Glass.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Kensley Butler, “Weapons of Mass Destruction in Central Asia,” *The Nuclear Threat Initiative*, September 30, 2002, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/weapons-mass-destruction-central-asia/>.

The second biggest priority was preventing Russian Neo-Imperialism. This was particularly important given the reluctance of Central Asian countries to leave the USSR and the strong ties that remained. The US' fears were reinforced by Russia's increasingly assertive and manipulative behavior in the conflicts taking place in Moldova, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, along with their military campaign against Chechnya.<sup>48</sup> Foundational ideas such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence were repeated over and over in the United States' rhetoric towards the region. The US was one of the first countries to recognize each independent state. They tried to bolster economic diversity by helping facilitate the opening of US companies in the region, and they began to build low-level military connections through NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PFP). Relative to US efforts in other post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine, these were seen as very minimal. However, the US can still claim this policy priority as a success as none of the Central Asian countries immediately became a puppet state of Russia. The extent to which that is due to US efforts or Russia's neglect of the region is up for debate.

Lastly, the US aimed to break up the Russian oil and gas monopoly. The massive potential of the Caspian oil reserves was seen more as a risk than an opportunity from Washington's perspective. The infrastructure needed to capitalize on the resources in this region was a huge barrier for any actor looking to invest, particularly the United States, who would not benefit directly from the creation of new gas pipelines. However, the ability of Russia or Iran to exert absolute control over these resources was a potential problem. The US pushed for diversity in the region and encouraged Western oil and gas companies to increase their involvement. This was particularly the case with Turkmenistan. While initially, their first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, engaged in talks surrounding democratic transition and economic liberalization, his actions made it clear that this was not going to be the reality in the country. This put US diplomats in an uneasy position, in which they could not directly support President Niyazov or send aid to the country without being criticized for ignoring the human rights abuses that were going on under his dictatorship. Instead, they worked with US oil companies to gain access to the

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<sup>48</sup> Roland Dannreuther, "Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?," *Security Dialogue* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 245–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010601032002009>.

country, and bilateral relations focused on a trade and investment framework.<sup>49</sup> Some thought these initiatives could act as a trojan horse for further involvement with the US. Still, neither side pushed for a stronger relationship, with a particular barrier being the disagreement around human rights. While this has prevented the US from directly engaging in the state-building activities that they would like to see in the region, involving democratic and market reforms, the state of Turkmenistan has undoubtedly been built and shaped by the money flowing into their country because of this strategic priority.

With these early successes under their belt, the question becomes why the US did not pursue a more extensive partnership with the Central Asian countries. In the early days, the attention of the United States was seen as some of the most valuable political currency, even in reclusive countries like Turkmenistan.<sup>50</sup> However, with fifteen new countries created seemingly overnight, on top of all the other priorities on Washinton's docket, there was a feeling that there wasn't enough to go around. Countries like Ukraine were seen as being more European and geographically significant. Armenia had a large diaspora in the US, which could pressure Washington. Central Asia, with pretty much no ties to the US, relied on the shallow promises of democratic transition and the personality of their leaders to gain favor. Additionally, it came at a time when the international environment allowed the US to be more withdrawn yet still maintain its newly won position as a global hegemon. Promising countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan received the most attention, and oil companies were sent to resource-rich Turkmenistan, allowing US politics into the country without politicians having to take pictures with the politically questionable president, Kyrgyzstan despite being hailed as the "island of democracy" was small, resource-deprived, and faced little prospects of development, so it, therefore, became a testing ground for NGOs in the region, lastly Tajikistan which was in the midst of a bloody civil war was left relatively untouched. With the US the proclaimed winner of the Cold War, there was much less of an incentive for them to involve themselves in the politics of distant countries. In addition, the particularities of the Central Asian states created

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<sup>49</sup> "U.S. Relations With Turkmenistan," United States Department of State, July 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-turkmenistan/>.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas W. Simons Jr, "On The Coast of Bohemia: The U.S. and Central Asia in the Early 1990s," Davis Center, June 17, 2020, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/coast-bohemia-us-and-central-asia-early-1990s>.

considerable barriers to entry. It's clear that even though the need for state-building assistance across the board was very high, the interest in doing so from Washington's perspective was very low and therefore there's a lack of involvement in key issues.

## **Russia**

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia's focus shifted inward as it struggled to rebuild itself. When it did look externally, many leaders favored creating stronger ties with the developed, democratic countries in the West, separating themselves from the underdeveloped, authoritarian countries in Central Asia.<sup>51</sup> However, the Central Asian countries could not be separated easily. Without any other major power committing itself to the region, Russia still found itself the most influential external power. Two major actors shaped Russia's foreign policy in the region during this time: Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov followed by President Vladimir Putin. Their main initiatives surround promoting Russia as the primary guarantor of security and stability, establishing multipolarity, and creating strong bilateral relationships and regional organizations.

The first major push for Russian re-involvement in the region came from the civil war in Tajikistan, which ignited fears that destabilization throughout the region could have spillover effects into Russia. However, they were careful to ensure that the West understood that this involvement would be limited, and Primakov sought support and legitimization from Western powers.<sup>52</sup> For foreign observers, Russia's role was initially seen as quite positive.<sup>53</sup> For Tajikistan, this made them dependent on Russia for their very existence and, therefore, very reluctant to entertain influence from any other countries. At the same time, the situation was so convoluted that few other countries wanted to be involved. While not on the brink of a Civil War, the other countries in Central Asia were also facing threats within the region. In practically every speech that Putin gave referencing Central Asia, he mentioned the dangers of Islamic radicalization and international terrorism<sup>54</sup>This discourse played well in every country. Even in Uzbekistan, where leaders had been trying to avoid military reliance on Russia, President

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<sup>51</sup> Dannreuther, "Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?" 247

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 247.

<sup>53</sup> Vassily Klimentov, "The Tajik Civil War and Russia's Islamist Moment," *Central Asian Survey* 42, no. 2 (November 10, 2022): 341–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2134298>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 253



Karimov was increasingly fearful of extremism since the assassination attempt on his life in 1999. There were also increasing tensions along the Uzbek-Afghan border as the Taliban captured areas with large Uzbek populations within Afghanistan. Highlighting the importance of this, President Karimov said in a speech that the key issues facing the region are “security, security, and security and the well-being of our people”.<sup>55</sup> Russia was able to appeal directly to the needs and insecurities of the Central Asian countries, while also serving their own needs and insecurities. They were able to commit more military assistance than any other country would, and they approved of methods that the United States and other Western countries often criticized due to their human rights violations.

Foreign Minister Primakov also engineered the idea of promoting Russia’s role through the promotion of multipolarity. He increased diplomatic ties with the countries surrounding Central Asia, most notably Iran, as well as Iraq, Syria, China, and India. The idea was to create multipolarity in the region so Western powers could not take over. This was also beneficial for Russia as they did not need to invest as many resources in being the sole counterbalance. He secured an end to the Tajik Civil War with the help of Iran, which was one of the most notable achievements of their cooperation in the region.<sup>56</sup> Russia's multipolar approach to oil and gas reserves included initial plans to utilize several pipelines that cut across the region, but lack of funding was a major issue, and only two were developed.

Lastly, Russia developed a policy to create strong bilateral relationships through the utilization of regional organizations. As part of the accords that formerly dissolved the USSR, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created. The CIS was intended to help foster economic, political, and military cooperation. However, not all countries in the CIS were equal in Russia’s eyes. Foreign Minister Primakov promoted the idea of the ‘Group of Four’ within CIS to reward Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan for maintaining the closest links with Russia.<sup>57</sup> President Putin, while recognizing the need for regional organizations, also recognized the need for Russia to be able to play favorites and develop strong bilateral relations with key countries. This allowed him to develop Russia’s foreign policy into more cultural and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid 253.

<sup>56</sup> Muriel Atkin, “Iran, Russia and Tajikistan’s civil war,” in *Iranian-Russian Encounters*, 1st Edition (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Dannreuther, “Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?” 249.

economic areas- which would never be approved of in larger organizations. For example, Kyrgyzstan's energy debts were written off in response to its willingness to make Russian the country's second official language.<sup>58</sup> These leverages played a significant role in the formation of these states as the leaders were willing to make large sacrifices in order to stay in Russia's political favor and reap the benefits of participating in their selective regional organizations.

Russia remained the most influential actor in the region both because of and in spite of the geopolitical changes spurred by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union inherently forced Russia to reevaluate and restructure its foreign policy priorities and relationship with Central Asian countries. At one point, Moscow was involved with every aspect of state-building within the region, but this changed significantly after the collapse. However, the collapse also secured the US position as hegemon, meaning there wasn't a power struggle for the position, and the US was not as concerned with distant regions of the world. This meant Russia was forced to maintain a minimal level of involvement in the region to help preserve security and stability. Beyond that, the leaders didn't care much about taking an active role in the development of the state in these countries as they were navigating how to rebuild the Russian state. However, it's this minimal level of involvement that was able to be built upon by key Russian leaders who did envision a future with a more prominent role for their country.

## **China**

Despite their closely tied geography and history, Chinese relations with the former USSR territories in 1990 were modest. They also lacked access to the region during the Soviet period, requiring them to build their relationships from scratch. Like many countries, their initial goals focused on establishing formal ties and navigating what their role would look like in the region. The geopolitical dialogue centered around resolving border disputes and ensuring regional security. Compared to the other Great Powers, China realized early on that there was a lot of economic potential for them in the region, especially as it related to trade and energy development, and they began seeking ways to tie Central Asia's development into their own.

It was clear early on that security and stability were going to be key priorities for China. Between the spillover effects from Afghanistan, civil war in Tajikistan, unrest in Xinjiang, and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid 252.

proliferation of border disputes, China had many reasons to be concerned about the future of their western border. The combination of nationalistic and Islamic movements in Central Asia as part of their state-building process was seen by some as a window of opportunity for the Uighurs to carve out the sixth country in Central Asia, East Turkestan.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese Government reported that Uighur terrorists regularly used Afghanistan and Tajikistan as their training ground.<sup>60</sup> Despite having historical and cultural ties to Central Asia, the regional leaders were not sympathetic to the Uighur cause, in part due to fear of extremism on their own soil. This allowed China to make their first inroads, creating military cooperation with their neighboring countries- Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan- to suppress the separatist group, and as a reward, they promised additional trade deals<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the Central Asian governments had to balance their relationship with China against maintaining popular support within their own countries. Many people were critical of China's intentions and, therefore, critical of leaders who had close relationships with China. One example of this is Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akayev, who was the target of opposition campaigns after ceding territory to China in the border negotiations. Therefore, while China was an extremely willing partner to these new states, the sentiment was not always reciprocated.

In contrast to the United States and Russia, China wanted to take a variety of approaches to the region. Instead, they favored a blanket diplomacy model. In 1995, China founded the Shanghai Five along with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. In 2001, it was changed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with the inclusion of Uzbekistan. The organization was created with the goal of settling the border disputes in the region. However, China and Russia hoped it would also increase diplomatic relations and build confidence in the member countries. China used the platform to navigate not only its border disputes but also to create security agreements, which have all been relatively successful. However, the delineation of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz borders with China has been controversial and involved substantial land transfers favoring the Chinese. As mentioned above, opposition politicians in Kyrgyzstan called for President Akayev's impeachment because of the territory that Kyrgyzstan ceded.

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<sup>59</sup> Niklas Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (November 1, 2005): 557 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560500205001>.

<sup>60</sup> Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" 572.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* 572.

There have also been small transfers in Tajikistan. As enthusiasm for the organization waned on the part of Russia and the Central Asian states, China continued to pursue the cooperation.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, one country that has been left out of this regional cooperation is Turkmenistan. Adhering to their neutrality stance, they have little interest in participating, and from China's perspective, they have little interest in encouraging them to. Some exceptions to this have been the narrow bilateral relations that China pursued with Kazakhstan in relation to energy and Kyrgyzstan in relation to security. Coincidentally, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have had foreign ministers who speak Chinese, as have some of the ambassadors that they have sent to Beijing. Beyond that, China viewed the countries as a bloc and wanted to build relationships with them in that format, ignoring the individual needs of each country.

Securing energy resources has also been a significant priority. China's economic development is powered by oil and gas, rapidly depleting its natural reserves. The realization of massive oil and gas reserves in the region during the 1990s was critical to China's foreign policy. Building infrastructure in Central Asia would alleviate their reliance on the Middle East, which was not only fiscally savvy but also socially given China's tenuous relations with their native Muslim population.<sup>63</sup> Even more, while Central Asia's supplies could not support all Chinese demands, they could develop a pipeline infrastructure directly to the Middle East rather than having it sent by ship. Ideas of a Sino-Iranian-Turkmen-Kazak pipeline were enthusiastically floated around during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>64</sup> There were just a few problems: the infrastructure was significantly underdeveloped; the instability in the region made transportation dangerous, complex, and unreliable; trade agreements with multiple countries needed to be set up; tensions between the countries added further complexities; and border disputes made trade very difficult. Therefore, establishing Central Asia as an energy partner was a long-term game for China, one that would be developed over decades, not years.

The last priority was developing trade. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a massive consumer market opened right next door to China. China quickly became one of the most important trading partners in the region. Following the trade came the realization of the need to

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<sup>62</sup> Niklas Swanström, 'Hu supports the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?', *The Times of Central Asia*, (19 June 2003).

<sup>63</sup> Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" 578.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid* 578.

develop the infrastructure to support this trade, including the construction of roads and railway networks. However, all this trade comes at a major price for China, and it isn't financial. There's a certain resentment in the region when all the stores are flooded with products that are made in China and can undercut the price of local products, which are no longer protected by the once heavily controlled central economy. Narratives of China 'conquering' Central Asia through trade spread not only throughout the region but also the world. Again, this created a situation where China was often willing to give more than the countries wanted to accept.

China's initial engagement with Central Asia was a direct result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the regional instability that it caused. However, China's desire to further integrate itself into the energy, trade, and infrastructure development of the region stemmed from its own needs and rapidly growing economy. Their early cooperation was successful in achieving all their foreign policy goals: securing advantageous territorial gains; partnering with the Central Asia countries to crackdown on separatist movements in their Xinjiang province; establishing a working regional organization that helped achieve the two previous points; ensuring Chinese companies had access to the oil and gas reserves in the region to power their growing economy; and the development of new trade opportunities. This success laid the foundation for all future cooperation. In summary, while the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed China to pursue its foreign policy initiatives in the region, these initiatives were driven by China's own needs rather than a desire to compete for influence over the region or to lead the state-building efforts.

## **Discussion**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly created Central Asian states had a long list of state-building tasks to accomplish, from creating national identities to establishing administrative offices. These tasks alone were extremely complex, but the geopolitical environment affecting the region only served to further this complexity. Initial assumptions were that a New Great Game would develop in which Great Powers would struggle for control of this resource-rich region. It was imagined that these external actors would try to force their values onto the region, similar to what happened globally during the Cold War, and aim to develop these states in their vision. However, the initial years of state-building in Central Asia can be characterized by a surprising lack thereof. This can be explained by the changes to the international environment that took place as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It

created an environment in which the Great Powers did not see the value in investing resources in the region beyond what was absolutely necessary. The foreign policy agendas of the US, Russia, and China focus heavily on base-level issues such as establishing diplomatic relations and creating stability. All three countries had the opportunity to invest heavily in the development of the region but instead chose to promote multipolarity.

Prior to the collapse of the USSR, this policy would have been unimaginable for leaders in Washington and Moscow, who were tightly competing for every type of influence they could win anywhere in the world. China, due to its secondary role in the Cold War, shows the most interest in increasing its involvement in the region. This, however, is not necessarily due to their need to fill the power vacuum created by the collapse or desire to compete with the US hegemony, but rather their domestic policy of prioritizing economic growth. Importantly, the collapse created a permissive environment in which they could pursue that. In fact, it created a permissive environment where all three Great Powers could create a foothold in the region, which would act as a springboard for future state-building interactions.

This had a varied effect on the nature of state-building in the region. There was a lot of uneven progress from one country to the next, with the resource-rich countries becoming the clear winners and the resource-poor countries struggling to avoid collapse themselves. This gave the region's leaders a lot of autonomy on how they wanted to develop their country without being strong-armed by external actors, from isolationism and authoritarianism in Turkmenistan to flirtations with democracy in Kyrgyzstan. Progress was not linear, with many countries making progress only to backslide a few years later. Neither local nor international leaders presented a clear, actionable vision for the development of the region. The dissolution of the USSR was certainly not "the end of history" for the Central Asian states; it was actually their new beginning.

## September 11th Terrorist Attacks

The terrorist attacks of September 11th had profound and far-reaching effects on the global geopolitical landscape. The most immediate consequence was the start of the United States' "War on Terror" campaign, leading to a military intervention in Afghanistan. This response reshaped US foreign policy priorities, focusing on preemptive action against perceived threats and a heightened emphasis on homeland security. The unilateral approach taken by the US in this intervention strained relationships with traditional allies and sparked widespread debate over issues of sovereignty, interventionism, and the use of force in international affairs. Moreover, the attacks fundamentally altered perceptions of security, leading to increased surveillance measures, tightening immigration policies, and the expansion of counterterrorism efforts worldwide. Governments adopted stricter security measures to prevent similar attacks, sometimes at the expense of civil liberties and human rights. The attacks also fueled the rise of Islamophobia and xenophobia, exacerbating tensions between Western and Muslim-majority countries. Additionally, they highlighted the vulnerability of global interconnectedness, prompting greater cooperation on intelligence sharing and efforts to combat transnational terrorist networks.

The Central Asian countries found themselves at the focal point of these efforts, not only due to their proximity to Afghanistan but also because of their own struggles with state fragility and Islamic radicalization. Although in their first ten years of independence, all five countries made important steps in their state-building journeys, many of the challenges that existed in 1991 were still relevant in 2001; in some cases, they had even gotten worse. Political divisions and tensions throughout the region had hardened after years of rhetoric from the leaders. Central Asia found itself as both the buffer zone and transit zone between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

However, in the early 2000s, renewed interest in the region reignited much of the optimism that surrounded it in the 1990s. Politicians and analysts came to view Central Asia as a region of global strategic importance, and developing the region was a key policy priority for all three Great Powers. This time, they were willing to back up their projects with the needed cash flow to support them. Because the state-building needs had not changed much since the 1990s, it's clear that the renewed interest was due to external factors more than internal ones. However, it was uncertain if this interest would last and if it would address the underlying needs in the region.

## **The United States**

The September 11th attacks marked a significant turning point in US foreign policy across the globe. Central Asia, which was once on the periphery of American interests, was now viewed as strategically crucial in the War on Terror. The US quickly expanded its role in the region while at the same time narrowing its priorities to focus on security cooperation, using bases in the region to launch their intervention into neighboring Afghanistan. As part of the larger security framework, the US also wanted to ensure the same type of state failure and subsequent radicalization that happened in Afghanistan would not happen in Central Asia. Therefore, resources were funneled into the region from both the Department of Defense and the State Department. As Table 1 below shows, the large budgets allocated towards the region in 2002 earmarked most of the money for security-related aspects, while others, such as democratization, market reform, and humanitarian aid, remained underfunded. This marked a significant shift in their previous policy, which focused more on the latter priorities. The bulk of assistance overall went to security and law enforcement programs (32%), which included military aid and training, enhanced border control, improved security services, and anti-terror and anti-trafficking.<sup>65</sup> It also highlights the three countries that received the majority of US assistance: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. These were countries most willing to work with the United States, particularly because of their own struggles with terrorist activities, and were also the most strategically relevant due to their proximity to Afghanistan.

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<sup>65</sup> Kathleen A Collins and William Wohlforth, "Central Asia: Defying Great Game Expectations," *Chapter in Strategic Asia 2003-04: Fragility & Crisis by the National Bureau of Asian Research*, September 15, 2003, 298



	<b>Total</b>	<b>Kazak.</b>	<b>Kyrgyz.</b>	<b>Tajik.</b>	<b>Turk.</b>	<b>Uzbek</b>	<b>Region</b>
Democratization	92.4 (16%)	13.7 (16%)	22.7 (24%)	17.4 (11%)	5.6 (29%)	30.6 (14%)	2.5 (15%)
Market Reform	55.0 (9%)	15.0 (17%)	18.0 (19%)	9.4 (6%)	0.9 (5%)	11.0 (5%)	1.0 (6%)
Security and Law	187.2 (32%)	40.4 (47%)	37.5 (40%)	21.6 (14%)	7.8 (41%)	79.9 (37%)	----
Humanitarian Aid	142.4 (24%)	0.7 (1%)	4.8 (5%)	87.2 (57%)	0.6 (3%)	48.6 (22%)	0.6 (4%)
Cross-Sector	108.2 (18%)	16.9 (19%)	10.7 (15%)	18.0 (12%)	4.1 (22%)	46.5 (21%)	12.1 (75%)
Total (FSA/Other) <sup>a</sup>	585.6	86.7	93.5	153.5	19.0	216.7	16.2
DoD Assistance	137.9	7.2	21.2	29.1	2.2	78.2	---
Total Assistance	723.5	93.9	114.7	182.7	21.1	294.9	16.2

**Source:** Kathleen A Collins and William Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying Great Game Expectations,” *Chapter in Strategic Asia 2003-04: Fragility & Crisis by the National Bureau of Asian Research*, September 15, 2003, 298 Compiled from Annual Report, US Department of State, 2002.

<sup>a</sup> Total for US aid from Freedom Support Act (FSA) funds and other government agency budgets

In the days following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Washington began discussing the possibility of establishing US military bases in Central Asia to assist with their flight in the Global War on Terror. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan emerged as the most likely hosts as both three were close in proximity to Afghanistan, willing to host US troops, and had already established bases from Soviet times that could be repurposed. Kazakhstan was at the same time too far from Afghanistan and too close to Russia to be considered a viable option, while Turkmenistan’s permanent neutrality enshrined in their constitution made it very unlikely that they would be willing to host US troops. While Tajikistan was seriously considered, their own volatile domestic situation made them too big of a security risk.

On October 7, 2021, the United States and Uzbekistan signed an agreement allowing the use of the Khanabad-Karshi military facility in southern Uzbekistan.<sup>66</sup> Importantly, this agreement was negotiated between the Department of Defense and CENTCOM- a regional military command center- with the Uzbek military and security services, surpassing the State Department.<sup>67</sup> This was one of the most significant shifts in US-Central Asian cooperation during this period. Traditionally, US ambassadors are the highest-ranking emissaries of the US government. However, the War on Terror fundamentally changed this in Central Asia, providing combatant commanders powers that surpassed the influence of ambassadors.<sup>68</sup> To the great pleasure of leaders in Central Asia, negotiations with the Department of Defense came with several benefits, including massive budgets, access to weapons and training, few moral stipulations, public displays of support, and streamlined decision-making. The Department of Defense was able to work with the unique leadership personalities that characterized the region with a lot more ease than the State Department did.

Of course, these base arrangements came at a high price. President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan was particularly skillful in leveraging this partnership for domestic gain. He used the platform to get funds for a variety of projects. In March 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan codified their relationship with a Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework. The framework outlined five areas of cooperation between the two countries, including military-security cooperation, economic reform, legal reform, humanitarian cooperation, and political democratization. As authors Kathleen Collins and William Wohlforth note, “The central element of this agreement, however, was really military-security cooperation.”<sup>69</sup> The agreement established a regular consultative group made up of US and Uzbek military and security officials. It also offered support for the Uzbek military's technical modernization, including better equipment. It also outlined the introduction of NATO standards into the armed forces, the training of peacekeeping units, as well as bilateral and multilateral exercises with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program with hopes that a PfP

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<sup>66</sup> Collins and Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying Great Game Expectations.” 297

<sup>67</sup> Ibid 297.

<sup>68</sup> Lora Lumpe, “U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia, 1999–2009: Security Priorities Trump Human Rights and Diplomacy,” *Open Society Central Eurasia Project*, October 2010. 11.

<sup>69</sup> Collins and Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying Great Game Expectations.” 298

training center would be established in Uzbekistan.<sup>70</sup> This was just the beginning. Over the next months, they would go on to sign agreements to replace highly enriched uranium in an Uzbek research reactor, to provide \$55 million in credits from the US Export-Import Bank, and to further cooperation in the fields of science and technology.<sup>71</sup> The US Trade and Development Agency committed \$3.5 million to assist in various projects involving information technology, power, and water resources development, as well as the delivery of \$15 million in military hospital equipment.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, as part of the Bush administration's policy of 'extraordinary renditions,' the United States turned over dozens of terrorist suspects to Uzbek authorities.<sup>73</sup> The most substantial funding increase was, of course, from the Department of Defense increased military financing to the country by almost 2,000% from 2000 to 2002 (see Table 2 below).

The US base opening in Kyrgyzstan made it the only country in the world to have both a Russian and American military base. By comparison, Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akaev preferred a much more personal economic investment. The base itself represented the biggest foreign investment in Kyrgyzstan's history, bringing in between \$40-60 million each year (by comparison, Khanabad-Karshi was leased for about \$15 million)<sup>74</sup> US military financing increased by 1,000% from 2000 to 2002 (see Table 2 below). However, it was the number of private incentives that kept the Akaev regime and its political allies supportive of the basing arrangement. The US paid millions each year in fees, leasing agreements, fuel contracts, and more to companies owned by the President's family and friends.<sup>75</sup> A later FBI investigation revealed that the Akaev clan had embezzled tens of millions of dollars of base-related revenues through a network of offshore accounts.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid 298

<sup>71</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism and Washington's Security Agenda*, 2005. 75.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid 78.

<sup>73</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia," *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November 1, 2008): 1175, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00763.x>

<sup>74</sup> Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia." 1177

<sup>75</sup> Ibid 1177.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid 1177

<b>Table 2: US Foreign Military Financing to Central Asia (\$ millions)</b>			
<b>Country</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Increase (%)</b>
Kazakhstan	1.50	4.75	216.66%
Kyrgyzstan	1.00	11.00	1000.00%
Tajikistan	N/A	3.7	N/A
Turkmenistan	0.60	N/A	N/A
Uzbekistan	1.75	36.20	1968.57%

Source: Joshua Kucera, "US Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits," *Open Society Foundations: Central Eurasia Project*, September 2012.

The price for this cooperation was not only financial. The US had to be vocally supportive of leadership, which they had previously questioned. Despite widespread and concerning humanitarian issues in Uzbekistan, many politicians began referring to it as the “leading” state in Central Asia, implying its model was to be revered by other countries in the region.<sup>77</sup> They refrained from criticizing the tenuous human rights record, instead focusing on the boundless opportunities their new-found partnership had created. This pitted the Department of Defense against the Department of State within the region. A clear example of this can be seen in July 2004, when the State Department rescinded \$18 million in aid to Uzbekistan due to ongoing human rights violations.<sup>78</sup> A month later, the Department of Defense awarded them \$21 million in weapons transfers and military assistance.<sup>79</sup> This back and forth characterized much of the US involvement in the region, frustrating local leaders and depicting the US as unreliable. Furthermore, the State Department didn’t have the traditional carrots and sticks that they were able to use in other post-communist spaces since the Central Asian states were not (and most certainly would never be) candidates for membership in the European Union or NATO, so they

<sup>77</sup> Akbarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism and Washington’s Security Agenda*. 75.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas* (Cornell University Press, 2008). 87

<sup>79</sup> Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U.S. Military Overseas*. 87

weren't able to promote institutional changes and reforms through the promise of regional integration.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, regional leaders had little incentive to follow through on their promised changes after they received the money.

Just like in the first phase of state-building, the honeymoon phase soon wore off. In 2005, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan led to the resignation of President Akayev following accusations of corruption and authoritarianism. The US' part in financing this behavior threw into question the legitimacy of the base contracts and the subsequent military presence in the country.<sup>81</sup> When President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was elected to power, he took a tougher stance on the terms of the base access, arguing that since 2001, the US military had only served to line the pockets of Akayev's regime and their presence was of no real benefit to the country as a whole.<sup>82</sup> President Bakiyev demanded that rental payments for the base increase from \$2 million to \$200 million and insisted that the US provide \$80 million compensation for the funds that were previously embezzled.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, President Bakiyev was following in his predecessor's steps by consolidating power and quashing the opposition. Meanwhile, in Uzbekistan, President Karimov was using the War on Terror to justify his consolidation of power and persecution of opposition leaders.<sup>84</sup> The revolution in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, made him increasingly weary of the US presence in the region. Their promotion of democratic values posed as much of a threat to President Karimov's tightly ruled authoritarian governance as Islamic insurgents.<sup>85</sup> There was a time when it seemed the US was going to make an exception for Uzbekistan. However, following a police crackdown on demonstrators in the eastern city of Andijon in May 2005, which killed either 180 armed insurgents or over 800 civilians (depending on which news source you read), Washington decided to push back against the Karimov regime by supporting a UN airlift of refugees from the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid 87

<sup>81</sup> Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia." 1177

<sup>82</sup> Ibid 1177

<sup>83</sup> Ibid 1177

<sup>84</sup> Ibid 1175; On the Uzbek security relationship, see Akbarzadeh, *Uzbekistan and the United States: Authoritarianism, Islamism and Washington's Security Agenda*.

<sup>85</sup> Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia." 1175

incident.<sup>86</sup> Congress also initiated an investigation to see if weapons provided by the American military had been used during the crackdown.<sup>87</sup> One day after the UN airlift took place, a courier was sent to the US Embassy in Tashkent with an eviction notice for the K2 base.<sup>88</sup> This was an operational and political disaster for the US, with them losing access to the base as well as the ability to leave on their own initiative for moral objectives. Subsequently, this caused them to be more silent about President Bakiyev's increasingly authoritarian regime as they sought to preserve their last foothold in the region.

At its inception, the War on Terror had all the makings for a massive geopolitical shift in Central Asia whereby the US would take over as the primary security guarantor in the region, as well as offer the financial backing for projects that these countries so desperately needed. Ultimately diminishing both Russia's and China's roles in the region. However, this was never fully realized. The diplomatic mis-steps in the relationships with Washington's closest potential allies in the region created a lasting effect. The credibility of the US as an agent of democratic reform was ruined by its constant concessions and payments to authoritarian regimes. At the same time, the US had proven to leaders in these countries their support was still conditional on the illusion of reform, and when that illusion was broken, they would push back, which was seen as a direct threat to the viability of their regimes. One reason was that Washington's courting of these states was designed to compel them to fulfill US interests, not to solve the region's political or economic problems. This was seen clearly in Kyrgyzstan, where millions were being paid almost directly to the Akaev regime and his friends in exchange for support. In the cases where the money was earmarked for substantive efforts, it only represented a fraction of what the states needed. Additionally, the tug-of-war between the State Department and the Department of Defense ultimately undermined the authority of both.

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<sup>86</sup> Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia." 1176; Scott Frickenstein, "Kicked Out of K2," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, September 1, 2010, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0910out/>.

<sup>87</sup> Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia." 1176

<sup>88</sup> Frickenstein, "Kicked Out of K2.," Jim Nichol, "Uzbekistan's Closure of the Airbase at Karshi-Khanabad: Context and Implications," *CRS Report for Congress*, October 7, 2005; Eugene Rumer, "The US Interests and Role in Central Asia After K2," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2006): 141–54; Gregory Gleason, "The Uzbek Expulsion of US Forces and Realignment in Central Asia," *Problems of Post Communism* 53, no. 2 (2006): 49–60.

However, as the Department of Defense scaled back its operations, what remained was the State Department, which continued in much of the same form as it had previously, pushing for human rights, market reforms, and democratization. These significantly underfunded priorities would continue to define the US objectives in the region. The shift now was that these were not seen as just a way to transition these countries out of their post-soviet legacies, but rather integrate features of countries strong enough to prevent terrorist organizations from forming and proliferating on their territory. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan would make news headlines in the US when it was discovered the Boston Marathon Bomber's family may have immigrated from Kyrgyzstan. This is all to say that while the most significant changes were short-lived, at least the mentality behind the US engagement in the region was changed permanently.

### **Russia**

The early 2000s also saw a major resurgence of Russian influence in the region, specifically related to security, energy, trade, and regional integration. The main question was whether this resurgence was in response to increased US involvement. However, domestically, within Russia, many changes were going on as well, following the rise of President Vladimir Putin. Key positions in the President's cabinet were filled by members of the security services, coming from a similar background as the President himself, as well as career politicians and businessmen from the semi-state-controlled oil company, Gazprom. This makeup heavily influenced President Putin's foreign policy as it reinforced images of a hawkish, western-skeptic, oil-hungry international role for Russia.<sup>89</sup> It also shaped Russia's view of the Central Asian region. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Russia's second president was not a former Politburo member nor even a Kremlin insider, so he had not been party to the traditionally strained relations between senior party officials in Moscow and their Central Asian colleagues. As discussed in the previous section, President Putin was willing to expand Russia's relationship with the Central Asian states as much as possible with the few resources that were willing to be invested in it. However, as their economy recovered from the 1990 collapse, more resources and opportunities became available to them. He focused Russia's position on Security, Energy, and

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<sup>89</sup> Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (2004): 283.

Regional Integration, much like before. However, this time, Moscow favored playing a much more heavy-handed role.

Throughout the 1990s, Russia was the primary, although declining, security manager for the region. Despite their inward turn, they were never able to fully separate themselves from the security issues plaguing their southern neighbors. The insurmountable problem is a geographic one. The Russo-Kazakh border spans over 4,890 miles in the heart of the steppes, making it impossible to secure. Therefore, the flow of transnational threats such as international terrorism, Islamic militancy, and drug trafficking had to be controlled downstream. When President Vladimir Putin was elected in 1999, he immediately began building up regional security cooperation as a domestic and international policy priority. This perspective would also be adopted by the US in the War on Terror just a few years later. However, it was President Putin who was one of the first to raise alarms about terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and warn of linkages between these camps and well-financed terrorist networks operating across the globe.<sup>90</sup> Similar to the US, Russia's security focus was also multifaceted as they looked to provide weapons, organize joint training and military exercises, and develop military bases in the region.

<sup>91</sup> Russia's interest in having bases in Central Asia was not an obvious choice for the superpower, given the risk of instability and interethnic conflict in the region, which could draw them into a prolonged regional war; this was only further complicated by Western troops being stationed there.<sup>92</sup> In October 2003, Russia opened the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan as the first newly established foreign military base since the end of the USSR. Some analysts use this as an example of how Russia was engaging in the region to counterbalance the US. However, author Roy Allison proposes that the logic was more regionally focused. He asserts that Kant's location near the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border would allow Moscow to keep Tashkent in line.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, Moscow worried Karimov's heavy-handed leadership might lead to an interethnic conflict or a

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<sup>90</sup> Fiona Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran," *Brookings*, August 15, 2002, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-and-russia-in-central-asia-uzbekistan-tajikistan-afghanistan-pakistan-and-iran/>; Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," 279.

<sup>91</sup> Roland Dannreuther, "Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?" *Security Dialogue* 32, no. 2 (2001): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010601032002009>.

<sup>92</sup> Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," 288.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid* 288.



power struggle within the country, and having a base nearby would allow Russia to quickly intervene to preserve stability in the region.<sup>94</sup> This rationale for the bases' importance also explains why Russia continued its military presence in the region and even ramped it up in some areas after the US withdrawal.

While President Putin's dialog with Central Asian leaders almost always framed Russia as the only power with the capacity, willingness, and ruthlessness to address their security concerns- as demonstrated by their actions in Chechnya,<sup>95</sup> they consistently pursued cooperation with the United States and Europe to address this issue and made a series of unimaginable concessions to foster this cooperation.<sup>96</sup> Their security concerns also extend past terrorism to include civil wars, political revolutions, and ethnic conflict.<sup>97</sup> All of this existed prior to the September 11th terrorist attacks and continued to exist independently of the US involvement in the region. In fact, most analysts agree that Moscow initially welcomed the presence of the US in the region.<sup>98</sup> The main sticking points revolved around the idea of a permanent US military presence and the increasingly unilateral decisions that Washington would make in their War on Terror.<sup>99</sup> However, even after the US began scaling back its operations, Russia continued and even ramped up its engagement, showing that its efforts weren't meant to push the US out but rather address the other issues at hand.

Russia's other major interest in the region was energy development, specifically as it related to the export of natural gas to Europe and Asia. Russia, Iran, and Central Asia hold more than half of the world's gas reserves.<sup>100</sup> It's not as mobile as oil, making it destined for regional rather than international markets, which gives these countries more power over the distribution and price. In the early 2000s, demand for gas was growing in Europe, Asia, and even Russia.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid 288.

<sup>95</sup> Dannreuther, "Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?" 2001, 246.

<sup>96</sup> Hill, Fiona. "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran." Brookings, August 14, 2002. <https://prutland.faculty.wesleyan.edu/files/2015/08/Russias-response-to-US-global-influence.pdf> - Page 8

<sup>97</sup> [Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy](#) - Page 284

<sup>98</sup> Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran."; National Institute for Defense Studies, "Post-9/11 Power Politics Among the US, China, and Russia: Unilateralism and Central and Southeast Asia," in *East Asian Strategic Review 2007*, 2007, 40; Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," 285.

<sup>99</sup> Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran."

<sup>100</sup> Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy."; Hill, "The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran."

Analysts doubted that Russia could meet both their domestic demand and growing export demands, so maintaining control of the flow of Central Asian gas was a top priority.<sup>101</sup> Russia had a privileged position since the existing infrastructure in the region passed through Russian territory, and the semi-national oil and gas company, Gazprom, held shares in many of the available projects in the region.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, their goal was to maintain this status quo and reinforce their position. This can be contrasted with their security policy, which was more open to international help. The energy sector was viewed much more as a zero-sum game where Russia needed to protect its position in order to continue to fuel its own economy.

Under President Putin's leadership, Russia pursued a two-pronged approach to regional integration. He pursued multilateral organizations like the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) while still favoring bilateral relationships to leverage the maximum power possible. This was exemplified in 2000 when Russia withdrew from the Bishkek Visa-Free Travel agreement amongst the CIS countries, opting to instead set up individual visa agreements, which was largely seen as a way to punish Georgia for straying from Moscow's agenda.<sup>103</sup> They also wanted to ensure that within all the regional organizations, they would hold the most prominent role. When the CSTO was established in 2002, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan opted out of joining, while the other member countries viewed the significantly discounted military equipment as more valuable than their position within the organization.<sup>104</sup> These issues undermined the functionality of the organizations regarding the purposes they were intended for, but they were still an extremely useful way for Moscow to leverage power. The successful resolution of the Tajik Civil War by Russia and Iran's partnership, among other events, also confirmed that close partnerships with regional states were a viable way to create regional stability.<sup>105</sup> Russia looked to countries such as Iran, India, and China to develop the region, specifically as it related to the flow of trade, which would be economically beneficial for everyone. Importantly, these organizations were not meant to compete with any being developed by the West and were not used to keep the US from

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<sup>101</sup> Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy."

<sup>102</sup> Ibid 290.

<sup>103</sup> Dannreuther, "Can Russia Sustain Its Dominance in Central Asia?" 253.

<sup>104</sup> Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," 286.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 283.

entering the region. The fact proof of this is that the US was able to obtain base rights in CIS countries. Again, this highlights a more cooperative geopolitical environment rather than a competitive one.

As the 2000s progressed, the same nationalist sentiments that facilitated President Putin's rise to power made it increasingly difficult for narratives of common ground and cooperation with the US. Domestically, there was a growing sense that "the United States is systematically appropriating Russia's geopolitical space."<sup>106</sup> This led to the competition that emerged by 2003 but concentrated on the security environment in the region. Their other priorities—energy and regional integration—continued to grow despite the lack of US interest in those areas, showing that the US intervention had a relatively limited impact on Russia's strategy in the region, and domestic factors can much better explain these strategies.

Overall, in the early 2000s, there was a major resurgence of Russian influence in the region, specifically related to security, energy, and regional integration. Moscow recognized that the region's natural resources and strategic location made it an important partner for Russia's security and economic interests. The main question became if this resurgence was in response to increased US involvement following the September 11th terrorist attacks. While at face value, it seems that they were entering into an era of Great Power competition, a closer look shows that domestic changes drove their initial reaction. The increased involvement in the region predated the US intervention and is closer aligned with the election of Vladimir Putin and his vision for a larger role for Russia in the region. Therefore, the geopolitical shift that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks created had little impact on Russia's interactions and state-building efforts in the region.

## **China**

*"The clear victor of the global war on terror appears to be China."*

*- Professor Anatol Lieven<sup>107</sup>*

Sino-American relations have always been complicated. The debate around "the China threat" had been heating up globally leading up to the September 11th attacks. It was due to a

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<sup>106</sup> Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, "Anticipating Major Upheavals in Russia," *Nezavisimayagazeta*, January 20, 2003; Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," 278.

<sup>107</sup> Anatol Lieven, "China the Quiet Winner in War on Terror," United States Studies Centre, August 29, 2011, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/china-the-quiet-winner-in-war-on-terror>.

combination of the anti-democratic principles that the country stood for, exemplified by Tiananmen Square in 1989, and its exponential economic growth, which provided Beijing with a lot of leverage to influence other countries. However, in the days after September 11th, tensions between China and the US quickly de-escalated as the US looked to build an international coalition to fight their war on terror, and China began stressing their common interest in fighting terrorism, especially in the Middle East region.<sup>108</sup> According to President Bush's memoirs, Chinese President Jiang Zemin pledged to help in any way he could during their phone call on September 12th.<sup>109</sup> The attacks made the two countries grow much closer. China, which was extremely critical of the US intervention in Kosovo in 1999, now voted in favor of four UN Security Council Resolutions supporting a vigorous response to the attacks. In return, President Bush traveled to China four times after September 11th. No other US president had visited the growing power more than once. Furthermore, the US supported several Chinese priorities, including declaring the East Turkestan Islamic Movement a terrorist organization. This provided China with a much more favorable position in the global environment, being viewed as a partner to the US War on Terror instead of a competitor. The question then becomes if this shaped their actions and priorities in developing the Central Asian region. Like Russia, China also began ramping up its engagement in the region around this time.

China's top priority in the region remained the domestic stability of the Xinjiang region. The War on Terror was extremely advantageous to their goals of crushing the Uigur separatists who had ties to the Taliban regime. They hoped that by supporting the US intervention in a foreign territory, the US would, in return, be more understanding of their stance on disbanding an organization operating within China's own territory. This hope was somewhat confirmed when the US put the East Turkestan Islamic Movement on its terrorist list and decided to freeze the group's assets in the US.<sup>110</sup> Within the region, China had already been massively campaigning against the Uigur group. In June 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five, transforming it into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This also transformed the scope of activities the organization was focused on. While initially, it was created to settle border disputes, the addition

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<sup>108</sup> Marc Koehler, "The Effects of 9/11 on China's Strategic Environment: Illusive Gains and Tangible Setbacks," *National Defense University*, no. 68 (2013): 93.

<sup>109</sup> Koehler, "The Effects of 9/11 on China's Strategic Environment: Illusive Gains and Tangible Setbacks," 93.

<sup>110</sup> Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" November 1, 2005.

of Uzbekistan allowed the group to look at wider issues related to the security, politics, and economy of the region as a whole. Particularly, Uzbekistan's President was interested in looking at the connections between terrorist groups in the region, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Taliban, and even Uighur separatists.<sup>111</sup> Following the events in Andijan, President Karimov traveled to China, where the two confirmed their support for political stability in the region and the legitimate right of governments to forcefully handle domestic disturbances to ensure such stability. To these governments, the disruption caused by the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan was much more concerning than the violent crackdown in Uzbekistan. Chinese support was not simply diplomatic; they were also organizing joint military exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which are coincidentally the two countries with the largest Uigur diasporas.<sup>112</sup>

Ensuring the stability of the Xinjiang region was a major economic element as trade between the province and Central Asia was steadily rising. By 2004, it accounted for 50% of Xinjiang's total trade, and over 28 border crossings had opened.<sup>113</sup> For China, the raw materials in Central Asia were increasingly needed as their economy grew, while Central Asia was able to get industrial, agricultural, and consumer products from China.<sup>114</sup> To this end, China primarily imported goods from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan,<sup>115</sup> and exported goods to the more developed economies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>116</sup> Overall, from 1992, trade between China and the five Central Asian countries totaled \$459 million; by 2002, it was over \$2.3 billion, and by 2005, it was over \$8.7 billion.<sup>117</sup> The only thing holding back further cooperation was the additional development of the transportation routes and border crossings and streamlining the bureaucratic processes on both ends.

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<sup>111</sup> Kevin Sheives, "China Turns West: Beijing's Contemporary Strategy Towards Central Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 79, no. 02 (2006): 209, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40022689>.

<sup>112</sup> Collins and Wohlforth, "Central Asia: Defying Great Game Expectations," 307.

<sup>113</sup> Valérie Niquet, "China and Central Asia," *China Perspectives* 2006, no. 5 (October 1, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.1045>.

<sup>114</sup> Sun Zhuangzhi, "The Relationship Between China and Central Asia," January 2007.

<sup>115</sup> US-China Institute, "China and Its Central Asian Neighbors," University of South Carolina, August 3, 2023, <https://china.usc.edu/china-and-its-central-asian-neighbors>.

<sup>116</sup> Zhuangzhi, "The Relationship Between China and Central Asia."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

Arguably, the most important trade for China is in terms of energy resources. As the Chinese economy was experiencing rapid growth, the government was struggling to secure enough oil and gas to keep powering the growth. In 1996, 63% of China's oil production came from three fields in the country's northeastern region.<sup>118</sup> Production from those regions started stagnating around 2000, forcing China to begin exploring new reserves in the remote and politically unstable Xinjiang region or the equally remote and politically complicated South China Sea.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, China was forced to begin importing oil. Middle Eastern countries were an obvious choice made complicated by China's treatment of their Muslim Uighur population, leading China to work on developing its relationship with the Central Asian countries. In 2005, China's biggest state-owned oil company, the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), acquired Petrokazakhstan for \$4.18 billion which was the largest overseas acquisition by a Chinese company at the time.<sup>120</sup> This secured their full ownership of the Kumkol South oil field and half ownership in Kumkol North and Germunaigazgof.<sup>121</sup> The interesting thing about this deal was China's willingness to overbid for the oil company; the next highest offer was from an Indian company, which bid \$3.6 billion.<sup>122</sup> At same time, CNPC was working on a joint development project with Kazakh state energy company, KazMunaiGaz, to build a 1,000 km long pipeline linking oil fields in Atasu in central Kazakhstan to Alashanku in western China.<sup>123</sup> In 2006, China agreed to buy 30 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan every year, transported through a new pipeline being built by CNPC at a cost of \$7.31 billion.<sup>124</sup> That same year, CNPC planned to spend \$210 million to look for oil and gas in Uzbekistan over the next five years.<sup>125</sup> In 2010, a 3,666 km long pipeline from the Turkmenistan/ Uzbekistan border to Xinjiang was opened, carrying natural gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan to

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<sup>118</sup> Philip Andrews-Speed and Sergei Vinogradov, "China's Involvement in Central Asian Petroleum: Convergent or Divergent Interests?" *Asian Survey* 40, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 387, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3021138>.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid 387.

<sup>120</sup> Keith Bradsher, "Chinese Company to Buy Kazakh Oil Interests for \$4 Billion," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/22/business/worldbusiness/chinese-company-to-buy-kazakh-oil-interests-for-4.html>.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Al Jazeera, "Kazakhstan Opens Oil Pipeline to China," *Al Jazeera*, December 15, 2005, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2005/12/15/kazakhstan-opens-oil-pipeline-to-china>.

<sup>124</sup> "Factbox-China's Energy Ties with Central Asia," *Reuters*, September 30, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSPEK80170/>.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

China.<sup>126</sup> The pipeline was built by CNPC as well as Sroytransgaz (a subsidiary of Gazprom), Uzbekneftegaz, KazMunaiGaz, and others over three years at a cost of \$7.31 billion.<sup>127</sup> In 2009, CNPC and KazMunaiGaz bought the MangistauMunaiGaz oil company for \$3.3 billion.<sup>128</sup> These purchases and investments contributed to critical funding for the Central Asian governments and their leaders. It helped develop closer relationships between China and these countries, as well as making a name for both Central Asian and Chinese companies as global players in the oil and gas industry.

While we can see a major ramping up of China's involvement in Central Asia during this period, similar to Russia, it happened mostly independently of the global shifts that took place as a result of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Regional security was always China's number one priority, as it directly affected their own domestic security. The security needs in the region were immense and multilayered allowing for the US, Russia, and China to all work on tackling the problems. China was also growing their involvement in trade, infrastructure development, and energy to help fuel their own economic development. They did this with little push back from the other Great Powers, as the US viewed China as a strategic partner in the region and Russia felt these development projects could benefit them as well. These projects also worked to fuel the Central Asian economies. However, the majority of this money did not trickle down to the average person, instead getting caught in the web of corruption that characterized Central Asian governments and corporations. The jobs created by these projects often went to Chinese nationals, which created a lot of hostility and resentment. China's approach stopped them from suggesting any economic or institutional reforms. They also were not supportive of nation-building activities as it could inspire the Uigurs in their country. Therefore, while their funding was immense, the developmental outcome was still very limited.

## **Discussion**

The terrorist attacks of September 11th marked a significant shift in the international environment. Heightened global anxiety surrounding Islamist extremism led to increased

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<sup>126</sup> "Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline, Turkmenistan to China - Hydrocarbons Technology," Hydrocarbons Technology, September 27, 2017, <https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/centralasiachinagasp/>.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> "Factbox-China's Energy Ties with Central Asia."

security measures worldwide. The United States declared a “War on Terror,” which spurred international cooperation in global counterterrorism efforts, leading to the sharing of intelligence, joint military operations, and diplomatic efforts to disrupt terrorist networks and financing. However, it also allowed for the erosion of civil liberties and human rights as governments enacted laws and policies to expand the powers of security agencies, often at the expense of individual privacy and freedoms. It also led to the development of completely new tactics and security strategies to fight against non-state actors.

Some worried that the increased US involvement in global and regional affairs would lead to increased competition between the great powers. While conscious of the effects of the sudden US presence, China and Russia had independent reasons for turning their focus to the region. Some—for example, fear of terrorism—were directly related to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while others were driven by completely unrelated matters, such as the need to fuel their economic growth. In fact, it initially led to a more cooperative environment as all three Great Powers rallied around a common goal. This importantly allowed all three Great Powers to further their involvement in the region without many complaints from the other Great Powers. It’s unprecedented that all three countries were able to actively pursue such strong military initiatives within such close quarters to one another.

Central Asia found itself once again at the forefront of this new international landscape. This cooperative environment allowed the countries in Central Asia to pursue their multi-vector foreign policy approach, working with all the Great Powers simultaneously. They were also allowed high levels of autonomy to build their government structures in increasingly authoritarian ways, which were seen to promote the security of the region. Central Asian countries had a lot of negotiating space when it came to negotiating for funding to support their own domestic state-building goals, although most of the leaders chose to use this to fund their own pockets. This did illuminate new value in working with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan who previously struggled to get international funding. The overall effect, though, was limited.



## The Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, underscores Central Asia's strategic importance in linking China to Europe via a network of land corridors. This ambitious plan focuses on extensive infrastructure development, including railways, highways, ports, and energy pipelines, along with streamlining border crossings and expanding the use of Chinese currency.<sup>129</sup> Driven by the region's hunger for economic growth, the BRI aims to reposition China at the center of global commerce, challenging the traditional dominance of the EU and the US. By partnering with less developed countries often overlooked since the Cold War, China tests US policies of "hegemony from a distance" and displaces Russia's traditional role in opposing Western influence. In their pursuit of economic growth, China has spurred on a series of new global alignments and highlighted the potential of developing countries that were previously underestimated or ignored by the global system. It's intensified the effects of globalization and subsequent nationalist backlash.

The influx of funding from China has created a more competitive political environment globally. It has also challenged traditional state-building norms. While the formula for development had always been that democratic transition plus market reforms equals progress, the Chinese model of development proved this wasn't true. Beyond being one of the most extensive projects in the world, the BRI was also a political tool, by design or by coincidence. China promised economic growth, investments, and loans without the liberal value strings that came attached to US and European projects. In this context, the BRI also serves to promote a Chinese-style model of institutions and legal norms. As Roza Nurgozhayeva explains, "The BRI seeks to build a regional community of shared interests and norms, where China desires to contribute to the system of global governance. China aspires to play a greater role by bringing its development model to the international spotlight. For some academics, the BRI represents the evolution of China's role in global governance from being a rule-taker to an active rule-maker."<sup>130</sup> China's new role challenges both the US and Russia's presence as norm-setters in the global environment.

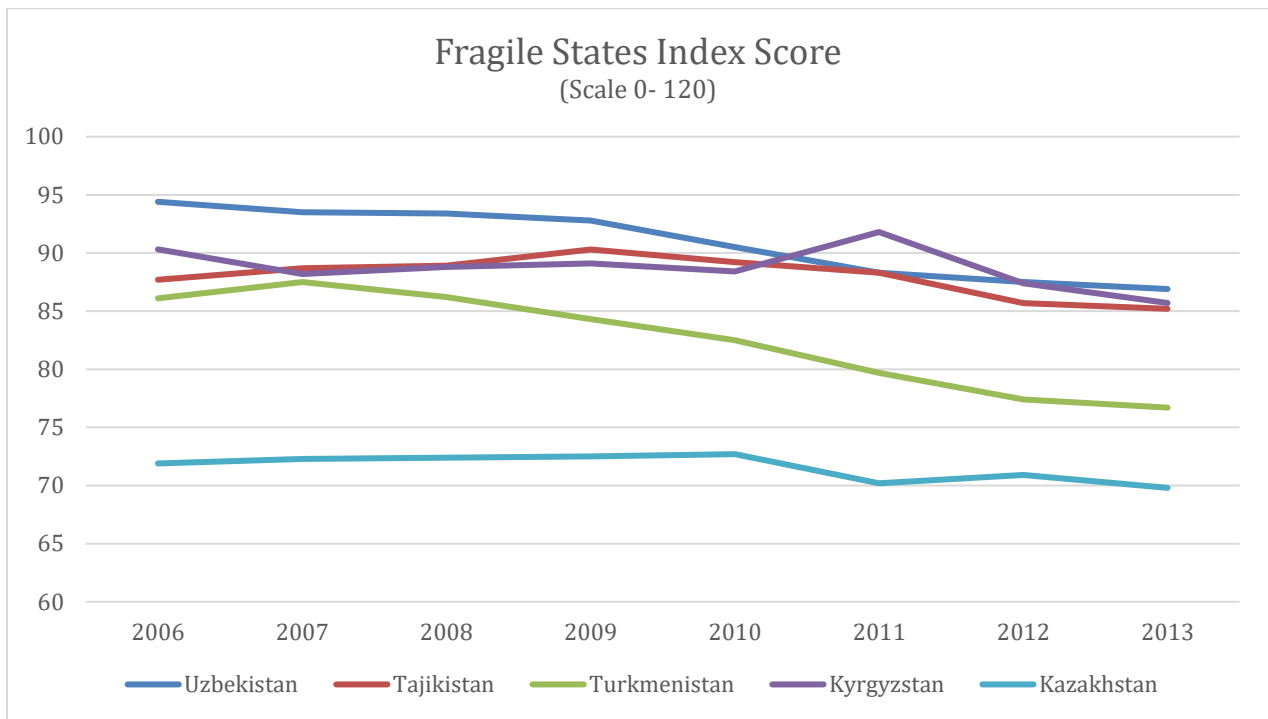
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<sup>129</sup> McBride, Berman, and Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," February 2, 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Roza Nurgozhayeva, "How Is China's Belt and Road Changing Central Asia?" *The Diplomat*, July 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/how-is-chinas-belt-and-road-changing-central-asia/>.

Central Asian countries, recognizing the BRI’s potential to elevate their global importance as critical trade routes, were among the first to join. Kyrgyzstan joined in 2013, followed by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2015, and Tajikistan in 2018. Billions in funding and hundreds of projects have been allocated to the region, attracting interest from other major powers like the US and Russia.

However, despite this massive influx of resources, pervasive issues remain in Central Asia. From the previous period of international intervention until this one, many Central Asian countries experienced a back-slide into more authoritarian policies, eroding their democratic institutions and much of the state-building progress they had made. Even the once “island of democracy,” Kyrgyzstan, had officially ended its flirtation with democracy. The Fragile States Index (see chart below), which first started measuring state weakness in 2006, shows the region’s stagnation and decline.<sup>131</sup>



The states still lack effective control over their territories. They are subject to spillover effects originating from Afghanistan, meaning terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime are still issues for the regimes. Even Turkmenistan, which has developed as one of the most

<sup>131</sup> “Fragile States Index | the Fund for Peace,” accessed July 31, 2024, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>.

oppressive and tightly controlled regimes in the world, has struggled to control its border with Afghanistan. At the same time, the steps that were being taken in the name of “public safety” and “counterterrorism” across the region often furthered the human rights abuses and authoritarian tendencies of the regimes. Even though the US had scaled back all its operations in the region, the legacy of the War on Terror has been the legitimization of religious repression.

Economic diversification remained a huge priority for the region’s further development. Their heavy reliance on profits from natural resources and remittances from Russia has proven volatile and unpredictable. However, economic diversification for leaders such as Turkmenistan’s President Serdar Berdimuhamedov means having pipelines to both China and Western Countries.<sup>132</sup> There is little desire to transition away from the cash cows that got them into office.

This new model of governance comes at a key time in Central Asia. Four of the five Presidents in the region have changed in recent years and are no longer Soviet holdovers.<sup>133</sup> Therefore, they are no longer beholden to the Cold War mentality of their predecessors, whether that was in their love for Soviet bureaucracy or obsession with Western culture, paving the way for influences by this new Chinese model. However, it’s important to mention that the societies within Central Asia still exhibit a large amount of Sino-skepticism and tend to fear the debt trap diplomacy that the West warns of.

In conclusion, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a transformative force in global geopolitics and economic development. By linking China to Europe through Central Asia, it underscores the strategic importance of the region while challenging the traditional dominance of Western powers. The influx of Chinese funding has created a more competitive political environment and challenged conventional state-building norms, offering an alternative model of development devoid of Western liberal values. However, despite the economic opportunities, Central Asian countries face persistent challenges such as authoritarianism, territorial control, and dependence on volatile income sources. As new leadership in the region navigates these complexities, the influence of China's model grows, even as Sino-skepticism and fears of debt

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<sup>132</sup> “Turkmenistan: Events of 2009,” Human Rights Watch, January 20, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/turkmenistan>.

<sup>133</sup> Turkmenistan (2006, 2022); Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2010, 2011, 2017, 2021); Uzbekistan (2016); Kazakhstan (2019); Tajikistan (1994)

diplomacy persist. The BRI not only redefines global trade routes but also reshapes the dynamics of global governance, positioning China as a central player in the international arena.

### **United States**

Despite several missteps, the US was able to maintain modest but positive relationships with the countries in Central Asia. While their skepticism of Western influence remains high, they've still shown a willingness to engage in talks with Washington and, in fact, are still enthusiastic about receiving attention. In part, this can also be attributed to the leadership turnover in the countries that have brought up elites seeking external legitimacy with less baggage than their predecessors. It's also due to the change in the approach the US has taken. While the previous approaches were siloed to specific targets, especially after September 11th, when the US had tunnel vision for security-related matters only, the new approach is more diversified. The traditional promotion of sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity still exists, as well as the counterterrorism aspect that was added after September 11th, but on an equal level, the US is building its diplomatic engagement, focusing on trade, and creating regional organizations. It's clear that the US didn't suddenly see new opportunities in the region, as these opportunities existed since the 1990s; rather, this can be seen as part of their larger "Pivot to Asia" diplomacy aimed at countering China's influence as a reaction to the BRI.

There have been numerous inconsistencies in U.S. policy toward Central Asia, but one commitment has always remained, which is the preservation of the region's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. Initially, the U.S. viewed the region's biggest threat to be Russia, then terrorist organizations, and now, with the announcement of the BRI, it was China. The U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to these values in the United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025<sup>134</sup> and reiterated it again in 2023 during the first-ever meeting between the U.S. and the five Central Asian Presidents.<sup>135</sup> Biden emphasized that "these principles matter more than ever".<sup>136</sup> There is significant concern that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in particular, could fall victim to debt-trap diplomacy, losing political independence due to China's financial leverage.

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<sup>134</sup> Dushanbe, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity - U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan."

<sup>135</sup> Rudenshiold, "Is the United States Out of Steppe? Addressing Central Asia's Crossroads Moment."

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

China owns about half of the sovereign debt of both countries, amounting to 30% and 25% of their GDPs, respectively.<sup>137</sup> Unlike their neighbors, these countries lack the collateral to secure loans due to undiversified, resource-poor economies, relying instead on sovereign loans guaranteed by the government regardless of the project's profitability.<sup>138</sup> In March 2021, Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov hinted that critical infrastructure might fall under Chinese control if debt payments were not met.<sup>139</sup> This included the largest power plant in the north of the country and the main road connecting the north and south.<sup>140</sup>

To counter this, the U.S. has had to adopt a different approach, offering alternative development pathways, including new lines of credit and project financing. Their goal is not to replace China as the largest creditor in the region but rather to reduce the overall reliance on external actors for these critical services. Successive U.S. presidents have tried to tackle this issue. Since the Obama administration's 'Pivot to Asia,' the U.S. has spent billions to increase cooperation with low-income countries targeted by China's BRI. In 2018, President Trump passed the BUILD Act, consolidating various government agencies dealing with international development into one organization with a \$60 billion investment portfolio.<sup>141</sup> Trump also signed Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for \$1 billion over a five-year period to support private sector development and energy connectivity, which was the largest US government-led initiative in the region.<sup>142</sup> However, it's important to note that these funds never materialized.<sup>143</sup> In 2021, President Biden, in collaboration with the G7, announced the Build Back Better World Initiative (B3W), an infrastructure investment program aimed at competing with the BRI. However, many argue that it serves more to complement the BRI due to the lack of significant, sustainable financing, which prevents it from acting as a serious challenger.<sup>144</sup> For example, one year after its announcement, B3W had less than \$6 million in

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<sup>137</sup> Gretskey, "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy and Central Asia."

<sup>138</sup> Gretskey, "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy and Central Asia."

<sup>139</sup> "Analysis: Is China's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' Dangerous for Central Asia?," Kun.uz, October 31, 2022, <https://kun.uz/en/news/2022/10/31/analysis-is-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy-dangerous-for-central-asia>.

<sup>140</sup> "Analysis: Is China's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' Dangerous for Central Asia?"

<sup>141</sup> James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>142</sup> Rudenshiold, "Is the United States Out of Steppe? Addressing Central Asia's Crossroads Moment."

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> McBride, Berman, and Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative."

investment commitments.<sup>145</sup> Biden also announced the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN), which ultimately provided \$50 million to the region's soft infrastructure needs, such as e-payment systems, cyber-security, and English-language development.<sup>146</sup> This is a direct reaction to China's soft infrastructure projects in the region.

The US has also redefined its priorities in the region. USAID aligned its financing scheme to follow the priorities outlined by the US Central Asian Strategy. Specifically, by financing five key areas—energy, trade, transboundary water management, countering violent extremism, and combating human trafficking—USAID aims to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states.<sup>147</sup> These are all critical areas where the region relies heavily on China and Russia for assistance.

Trade between the US and Central Asia is heavily constrained by geography. Therefore, the US had made it their priority to build on the trade between Europe and Central Asia through the promotion of the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This route would extend from Central Asia to the Caspian Sea, then to the Caucasus before reaching the Black Sea and then the European Union. Importantly, this route bypasses Russia, giving the Central Asian countries more authority over the route. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's presidents have expressed interest in the plan. The route would also serve to better connect China to Europe, reducing the transit time to just 12 days compared to the current 19-day journey via the overland Russian-dominated Northern Corridor.<sup>148</sup> The idea of this corridor and the development of the Caspian Sea region is not new; ideas have been floating around about it since the 1990s, and Turkey formally proposed a plan in the late 2000s. Interestingly, it hasn't been the BRI that has spurred new talks of the route, but rather Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions. Before the war, more than 90% of rail cargo between Europe and the Far East traveled through the Northern Corridor, but this volume has decreased by 40%.<sup>149</sup> At the same time, cargo traveling through the Middle Corridor has jumped from 350 thousand in 2020

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Rudenshiold, "Is the United States Out of Steppe? Addressing Central Asia's Crossroads Moment."

<sup>147</sup> "Central Asia Regional," U.S. Agency For International Development, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional>.

<sup>148</sup> Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Beijing's Interest in the Middle Corridor," Lowy Institute, October 26, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beijing-s-interest-middle-corridor>.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

to 3.2 million in 2022.<sup>150</sup> China, wanting to maintain their good relationship with Russia, does not vocally support the Middle Corridor, meaning that its funding would come mainly from supporters in the United States and other western countries, remaining one of the rare projects in the region which is relatively untouched by BRI money. It offers the US a great opportunity to show their ability to contribute to the economic development in the region, although as with many projects the substantial funding is yet to be seen.

The announcement of the BRI coincided with the US scaling down military operations in the region, particularly in Afghanistan. By 2014, the US military base in Kyrgyzstan was closed. Since then Washington has been quietly re-building their security engagement. While deployments in the region seem unlikely in the near future, the US still lists counter-terrorism as the second priority in the United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025.<sup>151</sup> The US conducts regular training activities, including training thousands of border officers.<sup>152</sup> In 2022, Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the Commander of the Montana National Guard to discuss resuming the State Partnership Program for counterterrorism and disaster preparedness training.<sup>153</sup> While in previous stages of state-building, the three Great Powers might look to align their initiatives, in this one each power is pursuing their security arrangements independent and often in spite of one another. Each looking to make the most arms deals, training camps, or military practice drills.

In the first three decades of independence, high-level diplomatic meetings between the US and Central Asian leaders were few and far between. This was in stark contrast to Russian and Chinese leaders who strongly prioritized these meetings. However, in recent years this has been changing. In 2015, the C5+1 diplomatic platform was developed to facilitate joint engagement between the United States and Central Asia.<sup>154</sup> The C5+1 summit is held once a year between foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries and the US secretary of state. In

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity" (US Department of State, February 2020).

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Aybek Nurjanov, "Turkmenistan, US Discuss Revival of Ties Within Partnership Program," Caspian News, September 28, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/turkmenistan-us-discuss-revival-of-ties-within-partnership-program-2022-9-28-0/>.

<sup>154</sup> "C5+1 Diplomatic Platform," United States Department of State, February 27, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/c51-diplomatic-platform/>.

September 2023, the first ever meeting between the Presidents of Central Asia and the United States took place. The meeting covered topics ranging from counterterrorism to energy security to increasing trade and investment.<sup>155</sup> With much controversy, Biden refrained from mentioning anything about human rights even though there were violent crackdowns in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2022. While these meetings are mostly ceremonial, the increased regularity and profile of them shows the greater importance the US is placing on these countries.

Overall, after years of unfulfilled grand ambitions for the region, it seems that the United States might finally be adapting a more realistic, albeit minimalistic, approach. While overall US engagement remains low, there has been a major shift in their priorities and methods in the region driven by the need to be more competitive with China's BRI. Instead of previous methods which aimed to fit these states into an ideal type of western development, there seems to be a more individualized and small-scale approach to the development now. Despite previous missteps in the relationship, the Central Asian leaders are still eager to work with the United States. The biggest impediment seems to be convincing US policy makers that it's in their interest to invest in the region, especially at a time when public opinion tends to be wary of US involvement overseas. The missteps in Central Asia as well as Afghanistan have created a fatigue for involvement in the region which is exacerbated by an overall lack of popular support for US engagement overseas that Washington is currently struggling with. Additionally, policy makers and foreign policy analysts are still unsure what to make of the BRI and its implication for the US' global position.<sup>156</sup> There seem to be mixed options on whether China developing a region that has significant needs should really be considered a threat to the US, rather than an opportunity. There is a tit-for-tat approach going on in the region whereby China announces a large-scale project, and the US follows suit by announcing a small to medium scale project of the same nature.

In this period of state-building, we can see that the US is pursuing the most diverse policy to date. They're also playing a much more supportive role rather than a directive, which is also a

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<sup>155</sup> Haley Nelson, "First-Ever C5+1 Presidential Gathering: An 'Historic Moment' for the United States and Central Asia," Caspian Policy Center, September 21, 2023, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/first-ever-c51-presidential-gathering-an-historic-moment-for-the-united-states-and-central-asia>.

<sup>156</sup> Alek Chance, "American Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Sources of Concern, Possibilities for US-China Cooperation," *Institute for China-America Studies*, November 2016.



major change from the previous two eras. This was initiated by their previous missteps in the region, which forced a temporary withdrawal militarily, economically, and politically. Without the increased Chinese, and to a lesser degree Russian, influence in the region, the US may have resigned itself to a distant hegemon as it looked to do in the initial era of its state-build policy. However, China's increasing global position, as well as increased tensions with Russia, meant the US needed to keep some sort of foothold in the Central Asian region, which forced them to reevaluate the way they wanted to go about engaging with these countries, turning more towards economic measures such as trade and infrastructure.

### **Russia**

Throughout the 2000s, Russia's state-building efforts in Central Asia were characterized by a focus on strengthening its influence to enhance both its domestic security and international standing. To an extent, Moscow was tolerant or even encouraging of Western and other powers' influence in the region. However, overtime they began taking a more assertive policy in the region. The announcement of the BRI in 2013, seemed to be a clear encroachment on Russia's desire for regional hegemony. However, rather than direct competition, a division of labor has emerged, with Russia supplying the guns and China providing the butter. This period coincides with several significant events affecting Russia's foreign policy, including falling oil prices and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. On one hand these events constrained Russia's ability to project power by weakening their economic and political standing. On the other hand it pressured Russia to re-evaluate and refine their policies in Central Asia. This marks a shift from their previous policy of maintaining broad influence to one where they aim to have targeted control. Russia now demands firm allegiance from the Central Asian states and is no longer tolerant of their multi-vector approaches. This can be seen clearly in their increased military presence and security guarantees, utilization of regional organizations for strategic control, emphasis on bilateral relationships, and strong anti-western narratives. While these priorities can be traced back in one way or another to initiatives started in the previous decades, the distinct shift comes in the assertiveness in which Russia is willing to pursue them.

As the US began winding down their involvement in Afghanistan, Russia was provided with the opportunity- and challenge- of securing their position as the primary security guarantor in the region. They used the retraction of US forces as rationale for increasing their operations

throughout the region and blamed western countries for leaving a mess in the region. However, the challenge remained that the Central Asian countries were no more capable of producing effective counter-terrorism measures than they were in 2001, in fact the situation in most countries had only gotten worse due to the repressive actions of the regime, creating additional vulnerabilities for Moscow as they further entangle themselves in the region.

Russia was able to increase their involvement the most in the two weakest countries in the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, who already had an established Russian military presence and needed the most help with their security. In 2012, Moscow and Dushanbe signed a bilateral agreement providing rent-free military base rights to Russian forces until 2042. About 7,000 troops are deployed in Tajikistan, making it the largest Russian military base abroad.<sup>157</sup> Bishkek granted a 15-year extension on their base lease following Moscow writing off almost \$500 million of Kyrgyzstan's debts.<sup>158</sup> It was also announced that Russia would provide over \$1.5 billion in military aid to the two countries.<sup>159</sup> In 2019, Russia furthered their commitment in Tajikistan after an attack by Islamic State militants, giving them a number of small arms and defense systems, as well as announcing Russia officers will be increasing their training of Tajik troops and offering \$200 million to modernize Tajik military systems.<sup>160</sup> These deals allow Russia to maintain their privileged partnership with these countries as their militaries are financed by Russia, trained by their military officers, and use their equipment.

However, the biggest surprise has been with the rapprochement of Russia's involvement in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan's security structure. Following the murder of several Turkmen service men along the Turkmen-Afghan border in 2014, there have been rumors that Russia has resumed their joint military operations with the country.<sup>161</sup> Even without having boots on the ground, Russia maintains its presence as one of the largest arms dealers to Turkmenistan. Meanwhile Tashkent and Moscow rebuilt their military relationship following the change of presidency in 2018. That year they held their first joint military exercise since 2005.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Craig Oliphant, "Russia's Role and Interests in Central Asia," *SaferWorld*, October 2013, 9.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>160</sup> Richard Hoagland, Michael Repass, and Nicole Wolkov, "Russia's Historical Defense Ties and China's Rising Military Presence in Central Asia," *Caspian Policy Center*, February 2021, 9.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid* 9.

Uzbekistan is also able to buy Russian arms for the same price as they are sold domestically.<sup>163</sup> This has marked a huge shift in the region, from countries trying to balance their security between multiple alliances, to relying mainly on Russian assistance yet again.

Allowing Moscow to be the primary security guarantor of the region has had massive implications for the civil rights within these countries. In the name of stability and counterterrorism, various religious and opposition groups have been relentlessly targeted by the governments in the region, with the approval of Moscow. It's important to remember that these militaries are not being trained for external offensive or defensive activities such as a local or regional war. Instead their training revolves around domestic operations, countering organized crime and terrorism, which includes activities such as domestic surveillance.<sup>164</sup> Russia has proved itself to be a valuable partner for domestic stability when in 2022 they sent their own military forces to help resolve riots in Kazakhstan.<sup>165</sup> While these countries' authoritarian tendencies were able to run wild even during the time of western troops being stationed there, this signifies that there will really be no improvement of the situation any time soon.

Meanwhile, when Moscow reignited their own rivalries in the west when they invaded Ukraine, they turned east for allies. They began shoring up their strategic ties with all the states in Central Asia and taking a much larger role in helping direct the foreign policy of the region. In the aftermath of the Crimean annexation, the Central Asian leaders showed a mix of support and condemnation, but they were cautious of being too critical of their powerful neighbor. Tellingly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained from the UN General Assembly's Vote on March 27th, 2014, to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea.<sup>166</sup> While Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were absent from the vote.<sup>167</sup>

While in previous periods Russia was able to tolerate or even encourage the Central Asian states desire to have a multi-vector foreign policy, their actions in Ukraine drew a clear

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid 9.

<sup>164</sup> Kinga Szálkai, "Russia's Recent Military Buildup in Central Asia," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (blog), September 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/russias-recent-military-buildup-central-asia>.

<sup>165</sup> BBC News, "Kazakhstan: Why Are There Riots and Why Are Russian Troops There?" January 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-59894266>.

<sup>166</sup> "General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling Upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region," United Nations, March 27, 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

line in the sand and they now needed these leader's firmly on their side. In just a few years, they were able to turn Kyrgyzstan from a government skilled in multi-vector diplomacy, evidenced by their negotiations to host the US airbase, to a country exclusively aligned with Moscow on all major security and economic issues. Moscow has been pushing a strong anti-western narrative in the entire region, leveraging their long-term relationships, domination of media airwaves, and role as the regional lingua franca, in order to shape public opinion towards its actions.<sup>168</sup> Sanctions against Russia have also had negative impacts on Central Asian since their economies are so intertwined, furthering some anti-western sentiments in the region. This all has affected the region's ability to act independently in their own foreign policy which is a critical aspect of any sovereign country. It's limited their ability to make meaningful connections with Western countries, pushing them more towards partnerships with Russia and China.

Another way Russia seeks to exert control over the region is through their continued development of regional organizations, most notably through the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). In 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was announced to promote further economic and trade integration between Russia and the former Soviet States by creating a free trade market and customs union. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are currently the only two Central Asian member states. Initially, Moscow envisioned the organization to encompass more than purely economic issues, but this was quickly rejected by the other member states. Throughout the negotiations, Russia used a carrot and stick approach to push members into the organization. There's no doubt that this organization is under the de facto control of Moscow. Many saw this as a way for Russia to regain their exclusive grip on the economic activities in the region which they had been slowly losing out on as China began replacing them as the biggest trading partner in the region. Although the same year as its conception, President Putin unilaterally issued a declaration of cooperation between the EEU and BRI. Tellingly, it was President Putin himself that signed the document, not the chairman of the EEU.<sup>169</sup> This declaration signaled that the EEU would serve as a complement to the BRI, and the policies

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<sup>168</sup> Eugene Rumor, "Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy: Regional Hegemony in Question," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 17, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/08/russias-wartime-foreign-policy-regional-hegemony-in-question?lang=en>.

<sup>169</sup> Gaziza Shakhanova and Jeremy Garlick, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership,'" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 1 (May 6, 2020): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868102620911666>.

between the two initiatives would be tightly aligned. The BRI was not the only organization the EEU sought to coordinate efforts with. Throughout the years, various plans emerged which included integrations with the EU, ASEAN, SCO, and others. Showing how Russia views these organizations as a way to leverage their alignment to ensure their control of membership countries, rather than as a purely economic initiative. Unfortunately, for the countries involved, it means their economy is deeply tied to the whims of President Putin's visions for Russia's position in the world. Central Asian experts argue that "Moscow seeks to make practical and creative use of multilateral mechanisms, such as the EEU and CSTO, to facilitate and legitimize the pursuit of Russian national interests".<sup>170</sup> The SCO in contrast is not viewed as useful to Moscow due to the inclusion of China which dilutes their own power. The SCO is not viewed as useful to Moscow due to the inclusion of China which means that regional integration would be dictated by others, rather than Russia.<sup>171</sup>

Despite some success creating integration through multilateral institutions, this policy practice has never been able to be fully applied to the entire region. Rather, it's only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan who consistently sign-up for these organizations while Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have expressed several times their desire to avoid these types of integration.<sup>172</sup> At a 2024 conference, Central Asian experts asserted "there is now little doubt that the one-size-fits-all integration policy is no longer working in the region, and is unlikely to be implemented in the future".<sup>173</sup>

Some Central Asian analysts attribute part of these state's resistance to joining these organizations to the alternative offered by China.<sup>174</sup> In comparison to the Russian model which seeks to create integration, the Chinese model stress the importance of national sovereignty, minimizes minority rights, and diminishes the role of supranational governance structures.<sup>175</sup> Therefore, the growing presence of China has also altered how Russia has had to interact with

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<sup>170</sup> "Central Asia at a Crossroads: Russia and China's Changing Roles in the Region and the Implications for Peace and Stability," *SaferWorld*, June 2015.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> Stanislav Tkachenko, "Russia and Central Asia: Bilateral and Multilateral Relations," Valdai Club, May 15, 2024, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-central-asia-bilateral-and-multilateral/>.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

the Central Asian region. In some ways, Russia prefers this model as it allows them to continue to favor friendly countries over others. However, it also means that they don't have the exclusive rights deals made in the region. Increasingly, countries in Central Asia are negotiating deals on their own and excluding Russia, which is highly problematic for Moscow.<sup>176</sup> However, their ability to do anything to reprimand these countries is also constrained by their own geopolitical situation.

In Russia's case, the BRI was just one of several influential political factors which determined Russia's priorities in the region. However, due to the confluence of all of these events at once, Russia became much more dependent on China's economic assistance in the region when they may have otherwise tried to compete with them. Russia leaned into the opportunities that the BRI created for them in the region, while seemingly ignoring the threat China's increased influence could pose. Russia, who was already working on their own economic integration plans, realized they could not compete with China's economic power and ultimately offered their support through insisting on the merger between the EEU and BRI which would also guarantee their seat at the table during these projects. The merger between Russia and China's influence in the region makes the Central Asian states' prospects for the future extremely dependent on the cooperation of these two countries. While many researchers describe the relationship as a division of labor, it's clear the two countries have many overlapping interests leading to more of a coordination of labor. Although Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan still fight to keep their political independence, they are increasingly under pressure to fall in-line with Russian policy. While the weakest states in the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, can be considered client states of the regional hegemon. The Russian reassertion creates an interesting paradox where they become both the instigator and mediator of instability in the region.

## **China**

The previous decades of Great Power presence in Central Asia had been dominated by the strong legacy of the Soviet Union as well as initial pro-Western enthusiasm, making it difficult for Beijing to entice local leaders. However, China's involvement progressed rapidly from having almost no contact in the 1990s to rivaling Russia as the region's largest trading

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

partner by the 2010s.<sup>177</sup> The announcement of the BRI signified that China finally felt it could be an international superpower as well as a regional one. Much of the research around the topic focuses on the economic repercussions for Central Asia which includes trade, infrastructure, and energy development. Without a doubt, these aspects are critical to China's foreign policy ambitions in the region because they directly fuel China's domestic economic growth. However, the BRI has also exacerbated pre-existing problems in the region including Sinophobia and security issues, meaning they now have to place a larger emphasis on their cultural policies and military capabilities in the region in order to protect the projects being implemented under the BRI. They've also had to work on improving their policy coordination with their partner countries which has forced them to pursue stronger bilateral relationships instead of viewing the region as one homogenous zone. These goals are all outlined in the "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" which was published in 2015.

This vision and actions document spells out that infrastructure connectivity, facilitating trade, and financial integration are all key priorities for Beijing with infrastructure connectivity focusing directly on transportation, energy, and digital.<sup>178</sup> These priorities are intended to be mutually beneficial with both sides access new markets due to the open transit lines. While Chinese goods flow through the region to Europe, Central Asian goods can go to Southeast Asia. Kazak politicians have even referred to China as "Kazakhstan's Ocean" with the first successful transportation of Kazakh wheat to Vietnam taking place in 2017.<sup>179</sup> This maneuverability is key for the completely landlocked region- in Uzbekistan's case, double landlocked. Even isolated Turkmenistan has felt the impact of China's trade initiatives. Bilateral trade between the two countries has increased from \$4.5 million in 1991 to over \$8.4 billion in 2013.<sup>180</sup> Chinese-made

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<sup>177</sup> Alexander Cooley, "China's Changing Role in Central Asia and Implications for US Policy: From Trading Partner to Collective Goods Provider," *Prepared Remarks for "Looking West: China and Central Asia" U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 18, 2015.

<sup>178</sup> "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," *Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China*, March 2015.

<sup>179</sup> UIC Communications, "Kazakhstan: The First Batch of Kazakh Grain Was Sent Through China to Vietnam – UIC Communications," February 14, 2017, <https://www.uic.org/com/enews/nr/535/article/kazakhstan-the-first-batch-of-kazakh-grain-was-sent-through-china-to-vietnam>.

<sup>180</sup> "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Ambitions, Risks, and Realities," *OSCE Academy in Bishkek*, 2020.

cars, bus compartments and railway infrastructure make up 80% of the Turkmen market, while Huawei and other Chinese telecommunication companies make up 60% of the market share.<sup>181</sup>

Beyond the hard infrastructure, China is also working on reducing investment barriers, promoting regional economic integration, diversifying trade sectors, and creating a friendly business environment. In 2019, there were 2,800 Chinese companies registered in Kazakhstan, 1,268 in Uzbekistan, 574 in Kyrgyzstan, 400 in Tajikistan, and at least 21 in Turkmenistan.<sup>182</sup> These companies often operate in critical sectors from steel pipes to pharmaceutical drugs. In fact, the biggest pharmaceutical factory in Central Asia- registered in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan- is Kelun-Kazpharm which is controlled by a privately owned Chinese company. China is also vying for the renminbi (RMB) to be the main trading currency in the region and has been pushing the Central Asian states to increase their RMB holdings in order to ensure loan repayments.

The biggest investment, though, goes to the energy sector. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, the energy sector accounts for the largest share of Chinese investments and contracts within the BRI, accounting for \$297 billion of the \$755 billion they spent between 2013 and 2020.<sup>183</sup> As of 2020, Chinese companies controlled over a quarter of the oil production in Kazakhstan.<sup>184</sup> Almost the entire export of natural gas from the region heads towards China via the Central Asia-China gas pipeline that was constructed with Chinese loans.<sup>185</sup> However, these statistics foreshadow the problematic future of Central Asia's energy market as one dependent on the Chinese market and controlled by Chinese companies. While in the short-term, this has allowed these countries to open new oil fields and gas pipelines, the long-term cash flow is heavily controlled the demand of the Chinese market which is increasingly trying to diversify away from petrochemicals, which creates economic insecurity in the region who's economies are heavily reliant on these funds.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Harri Taliga, "Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia," *ITUC and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)*, 2021.

<sup>184</sup> Morena Skalamera, "The 2020 Oil Price Dive in a Carbon-constrained Era: Strategies for Energy Exporters in Central Asia," *International Affairs* 96, no. 6 (September 28, 2020): 1623–42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa164>.

<sup>185</sup> This claim was made by a senior executive at Kazakhstan's state-owned energy company, KazMunayGas as cited by Hao Tian, "China's Conditional Aid and Its Impact in Central Asia," in *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia* (The George Washington University, 2018), 30.



China is also investing in a security of the region. Although common narratives surrounding Great Power politics in Central Asia often delineate security related matters to Russia's realm of influence, China is a major and growing security partner. As seen in previous sections, China has been involved and concerned about the security and stability of Central Asia far predating the BRI. However, the BRI projects have expanded China's economic interests further into the region which in turn has opened them to additional risks causing them to pursue greater military cooperation. Central Asia is not the only example of this. In August 2017, China inaugurated its first permanent overseas military facility in Djibouti, marking a significant deviation from its previous stance that it would not station any troops in a foreign country.<sup>186</sup> While there are no *official* Chinese military bases in Central Asia,<sup>187</sup> the proliferation of their involvement in the region is evident in various other ways including the increase of private military companies (PMCs), bilateral military drills, police and military training programs, military aid, and military sales. Since the 2016 Chinese embassy bombing in Bishkek, PMCs have gained rapid traction in the region, protecting various assets including the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway.<sup>188</sup> China relies on a mix of bilateral and multilateral (through the SCO) military exercises. Since 2015, China has conducted at least 10 bilateral exercises in Central Asia.<sup>189</sup> Various divisions of China's security complex have been partnering with Central Asian countries offering training programs, setting up new university programs, and giving regular security briefings.<sup>190</sup> Between 2010-2014, China only accounted for 1.5% of arms imports to Central Asia, which increased to 18% between 2015-2019.<sup>191</sup> According to the SIPRI Arms Database, China exported \$444 million worth of arms to Central Asia since 2000 with 97%

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<sup>186</sup> "China Formally Opens First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti," *Reuters*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E1/>.

<sup>187</sup> Reid Standish, "Tajikistan Approves Construction of New Chinese-Funded Base as Beijing's Security Presence in Central Asia Grows," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Central Asia: Measuring the Geopolitical Impact of the Bishkek Bombing," *Eurasianet*, August 31, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-measuring-geopolitical-impact-bishkek-bombing>.

<sup>189</sup> Niva Yau, "China's Security Management Towards Central Asia," *Foreign Policy Research Institute, Eurasia Program*, April 2022.

<sup>190</sup> Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia," *Kennan Cable*, no. 52 (May 2020).

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

of those sales occurring after 2014.<sup>192</sup> Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the two largest importers of Chinese arms as both aim to diversify away from Russia.<sup>193</sup> Their military relationship isn't without its complications. After the death of Russo-skeptic Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan turned back towards Russia for its rearmament program. In 2019, China had to place Turkmenistan on its military blacklist, ceasing all military exports, after Ashgabat struggled to pay back a loan backed by their plummeting natural gas production.

There are also concerns from outside observers that China's widespread offering of smart technologies for urban security will further impede civil liberties in the region as there's little public information on how companies, such as Huawei, are using the data they collect. Therefore, China's initiatives to promote technological development in the region also have an impact on the security of the region as well as the democratic development. Nevertheless, China is taking a holistic and active role in the security of the region. They are ramping up their previous involvement, and going beyond security as it relates to their Xinjiang province to protect their economic interests which are extending far beyond their borders.

One of the newest and most interesting policies China has adopted towards Central Asia is the creation of the so-called "Silk Road Identity". The soviet legacy and post-Cold War Western soft-power domination left Central Asian locals with a low level of knowledge about China, despite being geographically close in proximity. China's goal is to promote a greater understanding and position themselves in a more favorable light. This is key for further cooperation in the Sino-Skeptic region. One way they're doing this is by sending archaeologists into Central Asia to do research in areas where they have a shared history.<sup>194</sup> These actions play on the weak sense of national identity that these countries struggle with and aim to boost China's soft power in the region, creating a historical identity similar to the ones Central Asian countries share with other regional powers. This identity creation doesn't come with a cheap price tag. Between 2012 and 2019, China spent close to \$100 million on overseas archeology projects in Central Asia as part of the BRI.<sup>195</sup> China is also using BRI projects to push the use of their

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Farkhod Aminjonov et al., "BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese Projects," *OSCE Academy in Bishkek*, 2019.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

language in the region, arguing that they could employ more locals if they were taught Chinese and sharing technologies would be much easier.<sup>196</sup> This comes as many of these states are still working to develop the use and literacy of their titular languages instead of Russian. Despite the push from China, most countries still lack the materials to put the policy into practice. For example, the first Kazakh- Chinese dictionary was published only in February of 2018.<sup>197</sup>

Shortly after China announced the BRI, they released the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Belt and Road,” which centered around enhancing policy coordination between China and its partner countries as a way to ensure proper implementation of the BRI. In the document they called for increased intergovernmental cooperation, the creation of multilevel intergovernmental policy exchange platforms, and additional communication mechanisms whereby they could discuss expanding shared interests and enhancing political trust. A 2018 study showed that there’s a significant positive correlation between countries that cooperate with China’s policy alignment and the number of BRI projects these countries receive.<sup>198</sup> Of the 94 countries studied for excellent policy coordination, Kazakhstan ranked 4th, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan came in at 12th and 13th respectively, Tajikistan was 28th, and Turkmenistan was 35th.<sup>199</sup> Every country except Turkmenistan has identified aligning with the BRI as a key policy priority. Many of the BRI projects are being mirrored by domestic development programs. Kazakhstan’s Nurly Zhol initiative is the most robust with the government planning to spend \$9 billion to fill in infrastructure gaps to facilitate new BRI projects. While mostly infrastructure and trade-related, these policy coordination efforts also touch on critical areas such as media, metrology, and healthcare.

China also begun fostering bilateral relationships which target specific areas for cooperation within Central Asia. One aspect of this is the creation of cooperation committees that facilitate government- to- government communication, and this platform has been crucial to realizing the BRI in Central Asia. The table below shows the different cooperation committees in

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<sup>196</sup> Jardine and Lemon, “In Russia’s Shadow: China’s Rising Security Presence in Central Asia.”

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Eleanor Atkins et al., “Two Paths: Why States Join or Avoid China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad049>.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

each country. The highest-level Chinese politicians are consistently appointed to manage these committees, showing their commitment to increasing their influence in Central Asia.

<b>Table 3: Chinese Cooperation Committees in Central Asia</b>	
<b>Country</b>	<b>Areas</b>
Kazakhstan	Security, cross border rivers cooperation, economics and trade, finance, transport, energy, geology, mining, ports and customs, railway, science and technology, environmental protections, culture
Uzbekistan	Security, energy, science and technology, culture, agriculture
Turkmenistan	Security, economics and trade, energy, culture
Tajikistan	Economics and trade, science and technology
Kyrgyzstan	Economics and trade
Source: Niva Yau, “Operational Reality of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia,” 2020.	

Overall, the Belt and Road Initiative marks not only the most significant policy shift in China’s relationship with Central Asia but also with the rest of the world. It signaled that they were ready to take their place among other great powers, and their roadmap to do this heavily utilized their geographical proximity to Central Asia. In less than 30 years, China went from having almost no relationship with the states in this region to planning economic, infrastructural, and cultural integration. In previous periods, we saw an interest in China to share the ‘burden’ of engaging with the Central Asian region. However, increasingly China is consolidating assets to have a hegemonic monopoly over key aspects of the region, namely rare earth elements mining and processing. Therefore, the question becomes to what extent do these policies help build the states in Central Asia. Like China, Central Asian countries have strong authoritarian tendencies. They share similar political values and seek to defend themselves from human and civil rights criticisms and the call for political reforms, which they often label as interference in domestic affairs. For Central Asian governments, Beijing and its model of a market economy driven by the state, with a weak civil society, and the political hegemony of a single ruling party, is a robust reference point that helps to protect the regimes in the region’s legitimacy. Although the BRI can

potentially improve physical infrastructure in Central Asia, it pays less attention to an increasing demand to solve socioeconomic and institutional problems, including better environment, healthcare, education, civil society, equality, and the rule of law. Despite Chinese investors' concerns about weak regulation and high corruption in Central Asia, some academics argue that the high level of corruption and insufficient checks on the executive branch create fewer democratic constraints for China to achieve its policy goals. To protect its companies and encourage investments along the BRI, the Chinese government prefers to rely on closed-door negotiations along with political and financial ties with the host countries' leadership which is also a style the regional leaderships prefer. Therefore, the BRI has allowed Central Asia to develop the state mechanisms they choose while neglecting the Western ideals that were pushed on them in the early 1990s.

## **Discussion**

The BRI has been an extremely important policy for both global and regional politics, creating a massive set of opportunities and challenges. Of all three global geopolitical shifts, the BRI is set to have the largest impact on the region, with all three great powers simultaneously pursuing major projects in more diverse areas than ever. One basis of the BRI, as well as any economic project in the region, was that as these countries grow economically, their "state-ness" should grow as well. However, 10 years after it was first announced, the countries in this region are still extremely fragile and have failed to make meaningful progress towards key statehood markers. Turkmenistan has only become more isolated and repressive. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are on the brink of becoming client states of Russia. While Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan frequently have violent crackdowns on oppositionist groups within their countries. To varying degrees of severity, none of these countries can claim to have complete authority, legitimacy, or capacity within their borders. Borders, which for some are still not completely defined after 30 years of negotiations.

Despite the state-building efforts not being successful, there's no doubt that the BRI has changed the nature of Great Power's efforts. The US has had to diversify its scope, focusing on many facets of state-building that are needed in the society, looking to not only the ones that benefit them but also ones that undercut Russia and China in the region. Meanwhile, Russia has been able to take advantage of China's presence in the region and silo its approach to focus

increasingly on security and alliance-related matters, which are now essential for them as they struggle with the aftermath of their invasion of Ukraine. In this way, their change of policy is due to internal factors as well as the BRI. China, similar to the US, has chosen to intensify its cooperation not only in the economic realm but also in terms of identity, security, and governance. This is perhaps the most surprising given the divergence from typical Chinese foreign policy norms. However, it's their own BRI that has driven them to this, as they need to secure their investments in the region.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed three geopolitical events which caused global shifts in the international environment. Starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended the Great Power competition that characterized the Cold War and led to more inward facing policies in Russia and the US while giving space for China to begin their ascension into being a Great Power. This led to an uneven, personalistic, and non-linear state-building practice in Central Asia but allowed all three powers to gain a foothold in the region, which would set the stage for the next two phases of engagement.

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks brought global attention to the vulnerability of the international security infrastructure and the risk failed states introduce to a globalizing society. While this event impacted all three Great Powers, it only significantly changed the policy priorities of the United States, while Russia and China's actions were still largely dominated by their desire to improve their standing. The increase of all three Great Powers in the region was not due to Great Power competition; all three pursued their interests simultaneously. The unfortunate effects on the region's state-building were the legitimization of authoritarian governments, heavier-handed international involvement, and security-focused policies.

The BRI offered yet another change in the international environment as the economically focused Chinese foreign policy emerged as a prominent contender to the Western values-based system. The effect on the region has been, by and large, a much more diversified state-building approach compared to previous eras. The US, which had tunnel vision to security-related matters, now looked to increase trade and infrastructure. China, which traditionally championed trade and infrastructure, looked to take its security cooperation to new heights while also exploring its role in the region's nation-building. These were both related to the new geopolitical environment, which encouraged competition between the two. Russia was the only country observed to narrow its focus in the region, but this was also due to the change in the geopolitical environment, which allowed them to release their economic responsibilities in the region to focus on stability and alliance building. This increased attention puts the countries in Central Asia at risk of falling into the sphere of influence of one Great Power, preventing them from exercising their complete independence.

The United States created an interesting case study. It was the only country with consistent capacity (resources) to engage in state-building projects in the region but rarely did. Their involvement changed the most from one geopolitical event to the next, as did their focus and methods of that involvement. This proved that shifts in the geopolitical environment can heavily influence the state-building intentions of external actors. Russia, on the other hand, had the most consistent involvement despite its lack of capacity. Its actions in the region were influenced heavily by geographical proximity and domestic politics while less influenced by geopolitical shifts. Finally, China had the most consistent priorities, establishing a long-term strategy in the 1990s and using the shifts in the geopolitical environment to maximize its opportunities in the region. Therefore, while it's clear these events have a connection to the state-building in the region, the intensity of those connections varies greatly case by case, and it's important also to realize the impact of other geopolitical events happening at the same time as well as the role of local elites.

Overall, this paper was able to track three events that created significant global geopolitical shifts: the collapse of the Soviet Union, which created a relaxed and permissive environment; the September 11th terrorist attacks, which created cooperation among the Great Powers; and the announcement of the Belt and Road initiative, which is still playing out, balancing between a cooperative and competitive environment. Each of these events had an impact on the region, but not always the impact that was hypothesized. Since the early 2000s, all three Great Powers have been actively seeking to play a larger role in the region. Sometimes, this was due to geopolitical shifts, as seen in the case of the US, but other times, it was due to internal factors, as seen in the case of Russia and China. Therefore, while it's an important level of analysis, it's certainly not the only one at play in the region.



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