



Central Asia in a changing world: Understanding the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the geopolitical realignments and economic repercussions in Central Asia that have resulted from the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Specifically, it explores the challenges that have emerged in the established relations between Russia and the Central Asian states, with a focus on the concerns over dependence on Russia. The imposition of Western sanctions on Russia has had a complex impact on trade relations and economic conditions in the region, prompting the Central Asian states to reconsider their ties with other global actors. The study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the political, economic, and security aspects of these relationships, drawing on empirical data, official statements, and scholarly literature. The findings highlight notable shifts in the geopolitical self-perception and diplomatic postures of the Central Asian countries, indicating a growing sense of independence and agency in international affairs. However, the declining influence of Russia exposes potential risks and opens the door for other global powers to step in. Consequently, the paper argues for Central Asian leadership to develop a comprehensive and strategic understanding of these dynamics to balance immediate benefits with long-term regional stability and prosperity.

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Introduction

Central Asia, with its unique geopolitical location, has always found itself at the crossroads of great powers. The region's complex connections to major powers, especially Russia, are of significant importance, particularly in the field of political security. These relationships are greatly influenced by Central Asia's abundant energy resources, strategic position, and security challenges. In recent years, the world has experienced significant changes, such as technological advancements and the global pandemic. However, despite these modern developments, long-standing conflicts stemming from territorial aggression continue to persist, highlighting the enduring nature of geopolitical strife.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Central Asia, where major powers such as China, Russia, the USA, the European Union, India, and Japan are actively competing for influence. The interactions among these powers are complex and reminiscent of the 'new Great Game'. The 'new Great Game' in Central Asia represents a contemporary geopolitical competition among major powers, including Russia, the United States, China, the European Union, India, and Japan. These powers are vying for influence, resources, and strategic positioning in the region. This competition is an extension of the historical 19th-century rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. Russia aims to maintain its historical influence through economic and military cooperation. China, on the other hand, is involved due to its Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to secure energy resources and establish trade routes. The United States focuses primarily on security concerns and maintaining a balance of power. Meanwhile, the European Union prioritizes energy security by diversifying its sources. The interactions among these powers are complex, resulting in a mix of competition and cooperation. These dynamics have significant implications for the sovereignty and development of Central Asian states (Menon, 2003). The geopolitical landscape of the region has been further complicated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022, which was designated as a Special Military Operation. This event has significant implications, not only reshaping the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, but also drastically altering the geopolitical status quo in Central Asia in terms of economics, politics, and security. The ongoing conflict extends beyond the borders of Russia and Ukraine, representing a broader clash between neo-imperialist militarism and democratic liberal values (Khomyakov, 2023). The consequences of this conflict for Central Asia are profound, and it is crucial to examine its impact on the region's geopolitical

alignments and economic conditions in-depth. In light of these developments, this paper aims to explore the changes in Central Asia's relations with major powers, with a particular focus on the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and its consequences for Russia's influence in the region. It seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical realignments and economic repercussions for Central Asian countries in this new era of global politics. Through this analysis, this study aims to investigate how the region is navigating these tumultuous changes and the strategies employed by Central Asian states in response to the evolving geopolitical landscape. It also explores potential pathways for future regional stability and prosperity. Ultimately, this study strives to contribute to a deeper understanding of Central Asia's changing role and strategic position in a world marked by shifting power dynamics and enduring conflicts.

In academic discourse, particularly in the field of international relations, the concept of 'Central Asia' is used with different geographic scopes. To ensure precision in our study, we align ourselves with the definition proposed by Beyer and Finke (2019), which defines Central Asia as a post-Soviet geopolitical entity. This definition includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. By adopting this specific regional framework, we can focus our inquiry on the unique political and economic dynamics that characterize these post-Soviet Central Asian states, particularly in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the region's distinct geopolitical narratives and responses, which are rooted in their shared post-Soviet heritage and contemporary international relations. Since the declaration of war on Ukraine, Russia's position and influence have not only transformed within Central Asia or the post-Soviet space, but globally as well. This paper aims to delve into the impact of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on the Central Asian region, specifically focusing on how the war has influenced the dynamics in Russia's Central Asian sphere, rather than analyzing the causes and consequences of the war itself. As a result of Russia's war on Ukraine, Central Asian countries have recognized their shared interests, leading to collective action. However, the evolving complexity of Russia's war poses a challenge to the relationship between Central Asia and Russia. This paper aims to investigate the impact of Russia's war with Ukraine on Central Asia-Russia relations, seeking to understand whether Central Asian countries act cohesively as a unified region or whether conflicting interests exist among them.

The structure of this article involves defining the significance of the Central Asian region prior to Russia's war in Ukraine. It then examines the influence

of international opposition to Russia on Central Asian countries, considering the economic, political, and security aspects. Finally, the article analyzes the position of Central Asian countries regarding Russia's war in Ukraine.

Literature Review

Numerous academic studies have explored the relationship between Russia and Central Asian countries, focusing on various structural and thematic aspects. Additionally, there has been a significant amount of published articles and research papers analyzing the tension points and periods of normalization during Russia's war on Ukraine for almost two years (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2023; Eldem, 2022; Hennessy, 2023; Kazantsev et al., 2021; Khudaykulova et al., 2022; Vorbrugg & Bluwstein, 2022). However, there is still a research gap when it comes to the specific impact of this war on Central Asia, with only a limited number of studies directly addressing this area.

The existing literature can be categorized into two groups. The first group examines the nature of Central Asia-Russia relations during the Ukrainian crisis. Kordan (2022) investigates the conflicting historical narratives between Russia and Ukraine, highlighting the Soviet narrative as a key factor fueling the conflict. Tolipov (2015) assesses the war's impact on the post-Soviet space, particularly focusing on Ukraine's pro-European aspirations and Moscow's evolving rhetoric. Allison (2022) explores the historical aspects of the conflict, especially during Putin's reign, underscoring the significant role of Western countries. Most studies in this category predominantly view the conflict from a Western perspective, often overlooking the distinct 'post-Sovietness' in their approach.

The second group adopts a broader Eurasian perspective, examining the implications of the conflict within the wider sphere of Russian influence. Recent studies indicate a decline in Russia's influence in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, suggesting a shift away from Russia's status as a regional hegemon (Hess, 2023; Sun, 2023). Despite Moscow's diminishing influence, Central Asian states remain partially inclined to consider Russian interests. Sergi et al. (2019) analyze Putin's rationale for military deployment in Ukraine and Crimea, reflecting proactive measures in response to NATO actions. Radnitz (2023) examines the pragmatic and opportunistic foreign policies of Central Asian states in response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, highlighting their navigation of national interests and power dynamics.

Russia holds a distinctive position in Central Asia, stemming from its historical role as a former colonizer, dating back to the 19th century and, in certain northern

regions of Kazakhstan, as far back as the 18th century (Caroe, 1953). Despite the numerous economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West, Central Asian countries have not declared any specific unilateral positions. Notably, during the first month of the war, on March 2 and 22, 2022, no Central Asian country voted against the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. Instead, they either refused to vote or abstained, an approach referred to as 'strategic silence' by Dadabayev and Sonoda (2023). However, this strategy has become increasingly unstable over time, leading to a critical moment for Central Asian countries to make substantial decisions.

In June 2022, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, President Tokayev of Kazakhstan, in the presence of Putin, declared that Kazakhstan does not recognize the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) (Miller & Tabachnik, 2023). Before and after this announcement, senior Kazakh officials reiterated that Kazakhstan would not allow itself to be used as a means to circumvent Western sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan canceled the joint CSTO military exercises 'Indestructible Brotherhood - 2022,' which were initially planned for October 2022 on its territory. Meanwhile, in neighboring Tajikistan, the USA successfully conducted the 'Regional Cooperation-2022' exercise, involving all four Central Asian countries, excluding Turkmenistan (Kassenova, 2023). In recent years, leaders and high-ranking officials from China, Russia, the USA, and European countries have sequentially visited the region. India, the EU, and Russia have taken the lead in organizing summits in Central Asia. On May 19, 2023, the China-Central Asia summit was held in the '5+1' format. In September 2023, ahead of the 78th UN General Assembly summit, the US President convened a meeting with Central Asian countries in the 'C5+1' format (Petryna, 2023).

A comprehensive analysis from economic, political, security, and institutional perspectives is essential for a thorough understanding of the complex nature of these relations. In June 2023, the US Senate called for Central Asian countries, using Kyrgyzstan as an example, to impose sanctions on the re-export of goods to Russia (Rhoades et al., 2023). Economically, the focus is on the significant trade and economic collaboration between Russia and Central Asian republics. Sergi et al. (2019) emphasize the joint production and processing of export products, highlighting the complex interdependence that defines these economic ties. This economic perspective is crucial for assessing the mutual benefits and challenges influencing the economic dimensions of Central Asia-Russia relations during geopolitical turmoil in the region.

Politically, Roy's work (2001) emphasizes the strategic importance of Central Asia for Russia because of its abundant resources and trade connections. Roy further explores the consequences of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict on Central Asia, including its impact on security dynamics and the increasing involvement of the United States in the region. This analysis provides insight into how conflicts affect neighboring areas and examines the changing role of external actors, such as the United States, in addressing security challenges. By scrutinizing these factors, we gain a better understanding of the political dynamics and strategies at play. The analysis also considers the institutional dynamics that reflect and influence the evolving relationship between Central Asia and Russia, which is a crucial aspect. Examining how institutions and alliances for security evolve or face strain during ongoing conflicts offers valuable insights into the complex interaction between these regions. Such analysis is essential for understanding the broader security landscape of Eurasia and its impact on relationships. The intricate interplay of economic, political, and institutional dynamics, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, highlights a significant period of transformation in Central Asia-Russia relations. Economic ties, characterized by deep-rooted interdependence, are being reconfigured as geopolitical priorities shift and external pressure mounts. Politically, the region is navigating a complex landscape, balancing its traditional ties with Russia against emerging global influence and internal strategic goals. The conflict has heightened security concerns, bringing new challenges and alliances to the forefront. This reflects the broader instability and unpredictability within the Eurasian region. Furthermore, the evolving institutional dynamics suggest a potential realignment of alliances and partnerships, which could reshape traditional power structures and spheres of influence. Together, these multifaceted aspects reveal Central Asia at a critical crossroads, where strategic adjustments in response to ongoing geopolitical changes are inevitable. Understanding these shifts is crucial for comprehending the future trajectory of Central Asia's role and relationships within the post-Soviet space and the broader international context.

Methodology

In this study, we employ a qualitative approach to conduct a thorough analysis of news articles, official statements, and studies. Our objective is to gain insights into the multifaceted relationship between Central Asia and Russia during Russia's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. The use of this qualitative method allows us to

explore the intricate nuances and perspectives presented in media reports and authoritative statements. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding, we integrate a hybrid causal-consequential approach by combining causal and consequential analyses. This methodology aims to thoroughly examine the complex dynamics at play in the geopolitical landscape. The meticulous collection of data from diverse sources is central to our study. We draw upon news articles, official statements, and other relevant materials to ensure a nuanced perspective. Our focus spans economic, political, and institutional dimensions, enabling a holistic exploration of the subject matter (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Mbhiza, 2021; Palmer et al., 2023).

This study examines the multifaceted impact of Western sanctions on Russia, with a particular emphasis on their economic, institutional, and strategic consequences for Central Asia. Our methodology for data collection is anchored in the use of official statistics from the Central Asian governments and the World Bank. These sources were chosen based on the reliability and comprehensiveness of their economic data. To augment our analysis, we also included reports from recognized think tanks and international organizations, which provide insight into the institutional and strategic dimensions. The inclusion criteria for our data sources were based on their relevance to the diverse impacts of sanctions. This encompasses economic indicators, such as trade dynamics and fluctuations in GDP; institutional factors, including policy adaptations and changes in governance; and strategic considerations, such as shifts in geopolitics and security concerns. Data that were not directly relevant to these areas or considered outdated were excluded. Our keyword selection was meticulous, incorporating terms like 'economic sanctions', 'Russo-Ukrainian conflict', 'Central Asia's economic response', 'institutional changes', and 'strategic outcomes'. These were chosen to ensure focused retrieval of data, which is central to understanding the comprehensive impact of sanctions on Central Asia. This approach facilitates nuanced analysis, elucidating the intricate interdependencies between economic, institutional, and strategic factors in the region during the conflict.

Our study closely examines the political dimension by analyzing the voting patterns of Central Asian countries in the UN General Assembly with regards to resolutions concerning Russia's involvement in Ukraine. We scrutinized these voting records to identify trends that reflect the geopolitical orientations and diplomatic strategies of Central Asian countries. This analysis is complemented by qualitative data, such as government statements, to understand the motivations behind these

voting behaviors. Through this targeted approach, we aim to unravel the complex interactions between Central Asia and Russia during this significant geopolitical event, offering insights into the factors driving these countries' stances and the implications of their decisions in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Results

Over the past two decades, Russia has launched several political and ideological initiatives in the post-Soviet space, including the 'Russian World', 'Union State', 'Besmertny Polk', and the 'Great Victory Parade' (Ritter & Crabtree, 2023). The geopolitical landscape has significantly changed due to Russia's incursions into Georgia in 2008, specifically South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. These actions have raised widespread concern among post-Soviet states, leading to the pervasive question: 'Who is next?' This apprehension has intensified with the start of military operations in Ukraine in 2022. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has caused a shift in the regional balance, reducing Russia's influence across the post-Soviet states, including those in Central Asia. This dynamic has given rise to the concept of an emerging 'Central Asia without Russia'.

While the causes and broader implications of Russia's military engagement in Ukraine will undoubtedly be the subject of extensive scholarly discourse and research in the future, this article specifically focuses on the impact of this conflict on the relationships between Russia and the Central Asian nations. The objective is to determine the extent of these impacts, rather than delve into the origins or potential outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has resulted in a significant shift in the geopolitical self-perception and diplomatic postures of countries within the region. These nations have shown increased self-assurance, independence, and agency in shaping their relations with major global powers. There has been a fundamental transformation in their ties with Russia, reflecting a significant realignment in regional geopolitics.

Recent data from the 2022 Gallup World Poll, which surveyed individuals aged 15 and above across 122 countries, support these changes. This annual survey, conducted by the Gallup Research Center, ranks the world's leading countries based on global perception. The 2022 iteration, with results released in May 2023, indicates a noticeable decline in Russia's standing among post-Soviet states.

The survey's findings reveal a paradigm shift in countries like Armenia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan, which have traditionally viewed Russia

as a leading world power. For example, in Armenia, only 32 percent of respondents in 2022 perceive their country as a world leader, down from 45 percent in 2021. Additionally, 58 percent in 2022 no longer consider Armenia a significant global or regional leader, compared to 38 percent in 2021. The data highlight the evolving geopolitical perceptions in the post-Soviet space, particularly in light of Russia's ongoing conflict in Ukraine (Ritter & Crabtree, 2023).

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has caused geopolitical upheaval and numerous challenges within the global economy. Since the outbreak of hostilities, energy and agricultural commodity prices have noticeably increased. This instability has had diverse impacts across different regions, with Central Asia being particularly affected by the ongoing conflict. In terms of consumer economics, Central Asia has seen significant price surges in essential commodities. Energy and agricultural products, which are major household expenses in the region, have been particularly affected. The Kremlin's embargo on grain exports to members of the Eurasian Economic Union has caused food prices to rise. Additionally, escalating gas prices have had a negative effect on household expenses, making the cost of living more difficult, especially in countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where gas is a critical component of the energy mix. This directly impacts the purchasing power and well-being of the population. The economic consequences of the conflict are also significant. The sanctions placed on Russia as a response to its actions in Ukraine have profoundly affected the financial and banking sectors of Central Asian states. The immediate aftermath of these sanctions resulted in a dramatic devaluation of the Russian ruble, which went from 80 to 120 against the US dollar. The Russian Central Bank's subsequent intervention, such as a 20 percent hike in interest rates and restrictions on currency export and conversion, eventually stabilized the ruble. However, this stabilization significantly affected the availability of commercial credit for businesses and citizens, making it largely inaccessible. The recent influx of Russian migrants to countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has created mixed reactions among the local population. On one hand, Russians generally have higher incomes, which can stimulate economic growth. However, this migration also raises concerns about inflationary pressures that could drive up prices in sectors such as food, real estate, and energy. Survey data support these concerns: 18.6 percent of Uzbekistani and 24.8 percent of Kyrgyzstani respondents attribute the increase in basic commodity prices to the influx of Russians. This perception reflects the economic reality in the region, where the cost of living has noticeably risen due to inflation.

The Central Asian Barometer (CAB) Survey Wave 11 confirms that global economic uncertainties are affecting Central Asian countries in various ways (Central Asia Barometer, 2022). Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are benefiting from higher international oil and gas prices, and Kyrgyzstan is profiting from re-exporting Chinese goods to Russia (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2022). However, these gains are offset by negative consequences. The extensive military conflict in Ukraine has led to the suspension or cancellation of Russian projects, impacting employment rates. Rising production costs and import challenges from Russia and Ukraine are also affecting businesses in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, reducing their competitiveness, and leading to closures and job losses. Overall, the harmful effects of the conflict on regional economies outweigh any incidental advantages. The economic challenges and repercussions of the war align with the economic concerns of Central Asian populations. While high energy commodity prices may temporarily alleviate some negative impacts for certain countries, the medium-term outlook remains uncertain. Growing global economic instability and potential new sanctions against Russia are likely to present significant challenges and unexpected external shocks for the economies of Central Asia.

The economic consequences of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Central Asia are significant and wide-ranging. This region has experienced price increases in essential goods, particularly energy and agricultural products, which have impacted the cost of living and household well-being. The influx of Russian migrants has generated mixed economic growth possibilities and inflation concerns. Remittances, which are vital for several Central Asian economies, face obstacles due to currency restrictions imposed by Russia. Additionally, geopolitical changes have stimulated the development of alternative trade routes, which present both opportunities and risks for the region (Bigagli, 2019).

Empirical evidence, including surveys conducted in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, supports these concerns by demonstrating that the conflict has contributed to rising costs of basic goods. The situation is complicated by the dynamics of remittances, as seasonal migration to Russia provides a primary source of income for many households in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in particular depend heavily on these remittances (Imanaliyeva, 2022). However, Moscow's strict currency regulations have resulted in an influx of Russian rubles in local markets, disrupting financial stability and leading to a preference for the more stable US dollar. Furthermore, the ongoing war and Western sanctions against Russia have prompted a reassessment

of Central Asia's economic strategies. Although these events have created logistical and trade challenges that adversely affect the region's economies, they have also generated growth in alternative trade routes. These previously theoretical routes are now experiencing accelerated development, offering economic and political independence to Central Asian countries and marking a significant change in their developmental paths. However, as Central Asian countries navigate these new economic landscapes, there is a risk of becoming entangled in Russian commercial practices, potentially violating international sanction regimes.

In Kazakhstan, following the deployment of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops in January 2022, there was speculation about President Tokayev potentially supporting Russia's military efforts in Ukraine. However, recognizing the complexity of international politics, he adopted a neutral stance and refrained from deploying Kazakhstani troops against Ukraine. Instead, the Astana government proposed to act as a mediator, emphasizing its commitment to conflict resolution principles outlined by the United Nations (Ambrosio, 2023). Additionally, Aibek Smadiyarov, the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, confirmed that the government maintains a list of individuals deemed undesirable who speak negatively about the country (RFE/RL's Kazakh Service, 2023). The influence of Russian soft power in Central Asia is clearly decreasing. Survey data show that many Central Asians (70% in Kyrgyzstan, 55% in Kazakhstan, and 30% in Uzbekistan) link their current economic challenges to Russia's military actions in Ukraine. The decline in popularity of Russian entertainment figures, diminishing interest in the Russian language, the rise of non-Russian television options from local providers, and the presence of anti-war demonstrations in Bishkek and Almaty all illustrate this shift. Public discourse increasingly focuses on decolonization. This move away from Russia aligns with the natural progression of Central Asian states towards greater independence. These societies, with a young demographic profile (average age below 30) and no experience of Soviet-era governance, are becoming more vocal in expressing their expectations of their leaders, including in foreign policy matters. They are less likely to see Russia as a model, reflecting a broader trend of distancing from Russian influence.

Moreover, Central Asia has played a significant role in the 5+1 format collaboration. The OTG summit in Astana showcased the Central Asian Presidents' desire to enhance the region's influence through increased OTG cooperation. The fact that the "5+1" format meetings have been elevated to the head-of-state level reflects the

growing engagement of regional leaders with geopolitical changes and their aspirations to advance regional agendas. In response, Central Asian states are demonstrating greater unity and developing a more mature regional solidarity in the face of significant geopolitical shifts.

Central Asian states, while maintaining close security ties with Russia, have notably refrained from overtly endorsing Russian aggression in Ukraine. Their voting patterns at the United Nations, characterized by abstentions or non-participation, reflect a strategic and cautious approach to the conflict. They are balancing historical and economic ties with Russia against a burgeoning need for diplomatic autonomy.

The votes cast at the UNGA reveal the nuanced foreign policy considerations of these states, shedding light on their perceptions of international law, sovereignty, and regional stability. Examining voting positions helps discern the extent to which Central Asian nations align with or diverge from the broader international consensus on condemning the Russian invasion.

Despite their close security relationships with Russia, Central Asian nations have not formally supported Russia's actions in Ukraine. At the United Nations, they either abstained or did not vote on key resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and criticizing the humanitarian crisis it caused in Ukraine. These resolutions include those on March 2 and 24, 2022; the resolution against Russia's "so-called illegal referendums" in eastern Ukraine on October 12, 2022; the resolution calling for reparations to Ukraine on November 14, 2022; and the resolution advocating for a comprehensive and just peace in Ukraine aligned with the United Nations Charter principles on February 23, 2023.

Studies reveal divergent voting patterns among Central Asian states in response to the Russian war in Ukraine. Edgar (2021) reports that a majority of UN member states, including those from Central Asia, voted to denounce the invasion as illegal and in violation of the UN Charter. However, specific details regarding the voting stances of Central Asian states are not explicitly addressed in Bischoff's (2023) research, which focuses on Western diplomatic initiatives in Southeast Asia. This lack of specific insights into the voting positions of Central Asian states hinders a comprehensive analysis. The analysis of Central Asian states' voting patterns on United Nations General Assembly resolutions concerning Russia's military intervention in Ukraine provides a critical lens for understanding the intricate geopolitical landscape of the region. These voting behaviors go beyond symbolic gestures and reflect a complex interplay of diplomatic, strategic, and historical factors. As these nations navigate their relationships with Russia, a significant regional power with deep historical and

economic ties, their decisions at the UNGA represent a delicate balancing act between maintaining these ties and adhering to international norms and legal frameworks.

The varied responses of Central Asian countries to these resolutions – ranging from abstention to non-participation – underscore their nuanced approach to foreign policy, particularly in the context of global crises. These stances reveal a strategic ambiguity that allows these states to maintain diplomatic flexibility while avoiding confrontation with more powerful nations. This is especially true for nations like Uzbekistan, which has pursued a 'strategy of silence,' reflecting a broader trend of non-engagement aimed at protecting national interests and citizens without antagonizing key regional actors.

This points to a broader shift in the region towards realignment. While traditionally under Russia's influence, Central Asian states are increasingly asserting their autonomy and pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy that balances relations not only with Russia but also with other global players. Their actions at the UNGA serve as a microcosm of this transition, reflecting an evolving regional identity that seeks to establish a more independent and balanced stance in international affairs.

However, it is important to note that voting patterns at the UNGA provide valuable insights but do not encompass the entirety of a nation's foreign policy or its bilateral relations. Additionally, the dynamic nature of international relations means that these patterns could potentially shift as new geopolitical developments arise. Ultimately, the voting behavior of Central Asian states at the UNGA offers important insights into their diplomatic posturing and strategic calculations during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, highlighting a region in transition as it seeks to redefine its role and relationships in an increasingly multipolar world.

Discussion

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has prompted Central Asian nations to reconsider their foreign policies as they navigate changing geopolitical dynamics in the region. Russia's reduced influence, resulting from its military engagements, has led to Central Asian states asserting more independence and diversifying their diplomatic ties. Economic consequences, such as increased commodity prices and disrupted trade, have further prompted a reevaluation of economic strategies, with an emphasis on alternative trade routes and reducing dependence on Russia. The varying responses of Central Asian countries at the United Nations, ranging from abstention to non-participation, reflect a cautious approach to the conflict and a desire

to maintain diplomatic flexibility. This period marks a significant transition in the geopolitical landscape of the region as Central Asian states strive to balance their historical connections with Russia and the need for greater autonomy and engagement with other global powers. The evolving situation highlights the importance of a nuanced and adaptable foreign policy approach to effectively navigate changing international dynamics.

The geopolitical repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine have resulted in a range of responses from Central Asian nations, each reflecting their unique geopolitical calculations and national interests. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov's absence from the informal summit and the cautious reception of President Putin's proposal for a Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan gas union by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrate a cautious reevaluation of their ties with Russia. These actions highlight a growing desire among Central Asian states to maintain some degree of autonomy in their foreign policy, particularly in relation to energy cooperation and regional alliances.

In Kyrgyzstan, the government's stance on the conflict, which lacks public support for Ukrainian sovereignty or condemnation of the conflict and prohibits anti-war rallies, reflects a nuanced diplomatic position. Additionally, the implementation of a language policy that requires Kyrgyz proficiency for civil servants indicates a significant shift, possibly indicating a gradual distancing from Russian influence. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's criticism of this policy underscores the tensions inherent in the evolving Kyrgyz-Russian relationship (Husieva, 2023).

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan's responses further illustrate the diverse political landscape within Central Asia. Turkmenistan's stance of 'complete neutrality' contrasts with Tajikistan's more assertive posture, as demonstrated by President Emomali Rahmon's call for equal treatment of Central Asian states by Russia. This assertiveness marks a significant departure from the traditional deference to Russian hegemony and suggests a growing confidence in articulating national interests on the international stage (Joo, 2023).

Symbolic and humanitarian responses in the region also reveal a complex picture. The discontinuation of official May 9 parades in Central Asian countries since 2019 may symbolize a subtle shift away from Russian-centric narratives. Concurrently, the active provision of humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict by NGOs and volunteer groups in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrates a humanitarian commitment that transcends political affiliations. This is further exemplified by Kazakhstan's willingness to host companies affected by sanctions against Russia, as stated by Deputy Minister

of Foreign Affairs Roman Vasilenko. These gestures highlight a desire to maintain economic and political connections with the broader international community, avoiding isolation despite potential new geopolitical divisions.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's emphasis at the United Nations on resolving the conflict under the principles of the UN Charter and preserving state sovereignty resonates with a broader regional aspiration for respect for national sovereignty and international law. This stance reflects a growing recognition among Central Asian countries of the need to navigate the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape with strategic caution and diplomatic finesse. This highlights the delicate balance these nations must strike in managing their relationships with Russia while engaging with other global powers and preserving their national interests.

Regional integration in Central Asia is increasingly recognized as crucial for enhancing the region's global standing. Economic cooperation, political coordination, and security collaboration among Central Asian states can help address shared challenges and leverage their collective bargaining power on the international stage. This integration strengthens the region's resilience against external pressures and allows for a more unified approach to engaging with major global powers. As a result, Central Asia is evolving from a historically fragmented and peripheral region to a more cohesive and influential player. This shift leads to the region's geopolitical importance and creates new opportunities for economic development and strategic interdependence.

Overall, the varied responses of Central Asian nations to the Russia-Ukraine conflict signify a pivotal moment in the region's geopolitical evolution. As these countries grapple with the challenges posed by the conflict and its broader implications, their actions and decisions will continue to shape the contours of their foreign policies and regional alignments. This dynamic period in Central Asian geopolitics warrants close observation and analysis because it has critical implications for the future stability and strategic orientation of the region.

In the case of Kazakhstan, the war provided Astana with an opportunity to reevaluate and lessen its significant economic reliance on Russia. This is noteworthy, despite the official alliance and membership in various organizations that are predominantly influenced by Moscow. Kazakhstan has emerged as one of the primary driving forces behind the Middle Corridor, resulting in increased trade volumes and new investments. In a broader context, the war and subsequent Western sanctions imposed on Moscow have transformed Russia into merely one among several prominent actors in

Central Asia. Alongside the US, EU, India, Japan, Iran, Turkey, China, and the Gulf countries, Russia now shares the stage as a key player.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the decline of Russia's influence in Central Asia creates a crucial moment characterized by both opportunities and challenges for the region's nations. On one hand, this decline allows Central Asia to establish itself as an autonomous and neutral entity, free from the overwhelming presence of any external power. This newfound independence could enable the region to pursue its own path in international affairs, promoting a more balanced and multi-vector foreign policy approach. The possibility of a self-determined Central Asian region, unaffected by external geopolitical agendas, gives these states the chance to prioritize regional cooperation, economic development, and political stability on their own terms. However, the void left by Russia's diminishing influence poses significant risks. There is a real chance that other global powers, such as the European Union, the People's Republic of China, the United States, or other stakeholders with regional interests, may try to fill this vacuum. Each of these entities has strategic objectives and geopolitical interests that can reshape or even disrupt the current regional balance. The entry or increased influence of these powers in Central Asia could lead to new dependencies, alignments, or even conflicts, depending on how their interests align or clash with those of Central Asian states. In this transformative era, Central Asian countries have an unprecedented opportunity to pioneer innovative and sustainable development paths. The changing geopolitical landscape provides a unique moment for these nations to move beyond their traditional reliance on natural resources and embrace new economic paradigms. By investing in sustainable technologies, fostering digital economies, and prioritizing human capital development, Central Asia can establish itself as a region resilient to global economic fluctuations and as a forward-thinking player on the international stage. This shift would not only diversify their economic bases but also align them with global trends toward sustainable and inclusive growth.

Furthermore, the current geopolitical shift offers fertile ground for enhancing regional integration and cooperation within Central Asia. As the influence of traditional power dynamics weakens, there is potential for these countries to strengthen their intra-regional ties, potentially paving the way for a unified economic and political bloc. Such collective unity could significantly enhance their negotiating power in global affairs and their

interactions with larger powers and international bodies. Moreover, increased regional collaboration is crucial for the effective management of shared natural resources, such as water and energy, and for addressing common security concerns. This collective approach could pave the way for a more stable, secure, and prosperous Central Asia, benefiting not only the region but also contributing to global peace and stability.

The Central Asian republics have effectively managed the polarized geopolitical landscape resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as significant regional players, have cautiously distanced themselves from the Kremlin to avoid being perceived as supporters of Russia, even though they have not strongly criticized the ongoing invasion. This approach of maintaining a "middle ground" has yielded other advantages, ultimately benefiting leaders with undemocratic views. As evidence, regional governments have successfully revived authoritarian agendas within their countries. Since 2022, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have found ways to extend their leaders' tenure. Turkmenistan has implemented a dynastic transfer of power, Tajikistan has laid the groundwork for its own dynastic succession, and Kyrgyzstan has centralized and personalized the power of its president. In terms of the economy, Central Asia has also reaped certain benefits from the invasion. Remittances from Russia, which are crucial for the poorer economies in the region like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have increased. This rise has coincided with an uptick in bilateral trade with Russia, enhancing economic growth prospects in the region. However, much will depend on how the West responds in the future and whether these favorable conditions persist in the medium term. For instance, if attention is given to lifting sanctions, Central Asia's economic benefits from the war could be diminished. Additionally, a more assertive West could make the intermediate position occupied by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan more challenging for them.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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