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CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA COOPERATION DIMENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Relations between China and Central Asian countries are multidimensional and steadily progressing: Strategic partnership are expanding both at the government level as well as in practice. Economic cooperation is strengthening, infrastructure projects are developing, and people-to-people ties are gradually improving. In addition to the formation of institutional structures, China is promoting semi-institutional initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative in order to gradually expand its role as a security partner, which will increase its influence in regional security matters. While China's growing presence offers economic opportunities for Central Asian countries, it also raises question about debt dependencies, geopolitical realignments, and the import of authoritarianism. To counter this, the West needs to develop a comprehensive approach to engage with Central Asia through a combination of economic incentives, expansion of current projects and support for democratic governance in the region.

INTRODUCTION

China's influence in Central Asia, a region that is still evolving and not homogeneous, is correspondingly difficult to interpret or frame in a single way. Geographically, the region is of strategic importance to China in terms of its own security considerations, in particular with regard to the Xinjiang region, which lies at the crossroads of Central Asia and East Asia. Economically speaking, China and Central Asia are linked through close economic, energy and infrastructure ties. China is a major trading partner and an important investor for Central Asian countries, including in the implementation of mega projects.

The changing geopolitical landscape, in particular the Russian invasion of Ukraine, further complicates the nature of their interaction. Against this backdrop, analyzing the cooperation between the Central Asian region and China along different dimensions can provide a better understanding of their recent dynamics. The following analysis therefore concentrates on Chinese connectivity and infrastructure projects to enhance economic cooperation with Central Asia as well as on security partnerships, political advances and social programs implemented by China to assert its influence in the region.

1. CONNECTIVITY AS AN ECONOMY BOOSTER

Connectivity between the countries of Central Asia and China has significantly increased to a degree that the existing border crossings and infrastructure can no longer keep up with the dynamics of trade growth between the countries. In 2023, China's total trade turnover with the countries of Central Asia amounted to a record \$89.4 billion, of which 45% falls on Kazakhstan, followed by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan¹. The desire of the countries of the region to strengthen their transit potential resulted in the conclusion and implementation of projects with China to expand and modernize border crossings, as well as the construction of new ones.

For example, in September 2024, the third checkpoint "Bedel" was opened (along with the two existing ones, Irkeshtam and Torugart), which is located on the border between the

¹ <https://the-tenge.kz/articles/torgovlya-knr-i-tsa-23>

picturesque Issyk-Kul region of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the PRC. The construction of the Barskoon-Uchturfan-Aksu highway, as well as the creation of a customs and border infrastructure to meet international standards will be implemented by 2027². In addition to that, the construction of a road in the Irkeshtam checkpoint area of Osh oblast was completed with funding from China, and the Friendship Bridge, built by Chinese specialists and paid for by China, was donated to Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, agreements to build the Manas Trade and Logistics City (the total cost amount to \$4.2 billion) with a Chinese investment of \$ 482 million in the Chyi region of Kyrgyzstan³, and the At-Bashi logistics center in the Naryn region have the potential to boost trade relations substantially.

Central Asian countries bordering China are actively using this advantage to diversify trade and logistics routes by connecting to other international routes and thereby reaching other countries as well. It is known that more than 80% of land transportation along the “Western China-Western Europe” route passes through Kazakhstan. The latter seeks to strengthen its monopoly status in transit transportation with China and is also benefitting from its experience in the construction of railway routes and management of transit flows.

In this context, Kazakhstan has started the construction of a third railroad crossing at a cost of \$690.5 million. It will be located between Bakhty in the Abay region and China⁴. The project is expected to be completed in 2027, which should increase cargo turnover with China to 20 million tons. Kazakhstan is currently implementing 45 joint projects with China with a total volume of \$14.5 billion⁵. Over 4,700 enterprises with Chinese capital are operating in the country. Both countries are successfully sending trucks and railway containers via the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan simultaneously marked 2024 as a breakthrough year with regard to the conclusion of difficult and lengthy agreements on the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway with total cost of \$4.7 billion. The three countries agreed to create a joint holding company for the project, with 51 percent of shares allocated to an authorized Chinese company and 24,5 percent each to authorized companies from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan⁶. A significant breakthrough occurred when Beijing pledged to provide the consortium with a \$2.35 billion low-interest loan to cover about half of the project’s final costs. The remaining obligations for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are about \$573 million each.

For Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, this multilateral project will not only pave the way for new transportation routes to Europe and the Persian Gulf. It will also strengthen intra-regional trade, for example between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, by making it cheaper to deliver products by rail. Importantly, the project will also help to reduce Kyrgyzstan's logistical dependence on Kazakhstan, as Kyrgyz exporters have faced years of freight congestion at the

² https://kaktus.media/doc/508571_na_granice_s_kitaem_otkryli_novyy_pynkt_propyska_bedel_foto.html

³ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33183250.html>

⁴ <https://kapital.kz/economic/114233/na-granitse-s-kitayem-postroyat-tretiy-zh-d-perekhod.html>

⁵ <https://astanatimes.com/2024/10/kazakhstan-china-strengthen-cooperation-in-investments/>

⁶ <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-china-when-is-a-done-deal-really-done>

Kazakh border.

China is also helping to strengthen Kyrgyzstan's air connectivity. It is noteworthy that the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) has decided to build a new international airport in the Jalal-Abad region of the republic⁷. Chinese specialists will start construction of the facility in January 2025, and the regional authorities have already allocated 360 hectares of land in the Suzak district of Jalal-Abad city for the new airport.

The desire of Central Asian countries to implement infrastructure projects and China's willingness to finance them simultaneously promotes economic development but also increases the debt burden, especially for countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

2. INFLUENCE THROUGH SECURITY COOPERATION

China's approach to security in Central Asia has evolved strategically, reflecting both its geopolitical ambitions and regional concerns. After the Central Asian republics gained independence from the Soviet Union, Beijing focused on resolving long-standing border disputes. Once these were settled, China shifted toward a more comprehensive strategy. By the early 2000s, its primary goal was combating what the PRC calls the "Three Evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism—a policy aimed at isolating Central Asia from China's restive Xinjiang region, where Beijing [fears](#) growing separatist sentiments from its Turkic-majority population.

As China deepened its influence, it began formalizing security partnerships with Central Asian governments. These relationships became [institutionalized](#) through "strategic partnerships" which progressively upgraded over the years. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan have all [signed](#) comprehensive strategic agreements with China, encompassing security, economic, political, and cultural cooperation. In 2019, Kazakhstan elevated its ties with Beijing by [establishing](#) a "permanent comprehensive strategic partnership."

China's first Global Public Security Cooperation Forum in 2024 further illustrates its ambition to anchor itself as a significant player in regional security. With law enforcement officials from all five Central Asian states participating, Beijing is laying the groundwork for future cooperation and legislative influence in the region.

These agreements have [bolstered](#) China's capacity to coordinate security issues while strengthening its regional influence.

Global Security Initiative and Information (In)Security

Two decades ago, the idea of China as a guarantor of Central Asian security was unimaginable. Today, however, it is widely accepted that Beijing's role is growing. One of China's latest strategies, the Global Security Initiative (GSI), seeks to solidify its influence,

⁷ <https://kabar.kg/news/kitaiskaia-kompaniia-postroit-novyi-aeroport-v-dzhalal-abade/>

especially after the geopolitical shifts caused by Russia's war in Ukraine.

Unveiled by Xi Jinping in 2022, the GSI [emphasizes](#) respect for sovereignty, adherence to the UN Charter, and the promotion of dialogue for peaceful conflict resolution. While promoted as a global diplomatic framework, it represents China's alternative to Western-dominated global security norms. It emphasizes non-interference and top-down securitization, challenging the universal liberal democratic values long championed by the West.

Though broad in scope, the GSI has direct implications for Central Asia, where China is rapidly expanding its role, especially in the area of information security. The China+Central Asia (C+C5) forum, launched in 2020, underscores Beijing's focus on regional [information security](#) cooperation. Chinese-backed training sessions and technical support for digital infrastructure are aimed at [strengthening](#) ties between China and Central Asian law enforcement agencies. Additionally, Chinese experts [advise](#) Central Asian judicial authorities on how to improve their information systems.

Beijing's Semi-Institutional Structures of Influence

Every Central Asian leader has officially endorsed China's Global Security Initiative, underlining Beijing's growing influence. Following the 2023 China-Central Asia [summit](#) in Xi'an, a joint declaration praised China's global security, development, and civilization initiatives. This endorsement highlights China's ability to promote semi-institutional frameworks that sidestep the limitations of formal international bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established by Russia and China in 2001.

China's reliance on flexible, semi-institutional structures has proven more effective than operating within traditional multilateral institutions, where consensus-driven decision-making often [hampers](#) China's agenda. For instance, Moscow, wary of Beijing's growing economic influence, [blocked](#) China's proposal to establish an SCO development bank after the 2008 financial crisis. The SCO's decision-by-consensus model allowed Russia to stifle the initiative despite clear interest from Central Asian governments.

Recognizing the constraints of formal consensus-based institutions, Beijing shifted its strategy. In 2013, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and by 2014, China had [created](#) alternative financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. These China-centric initiatives have enabled Beijing to pursue its regional economic agenda without the constraints imposed by other powerful countries.

The success of this approach is evident in China's [formation](#) of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) in 2016, which includes Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. This initiative excludes Russia and focuses on counterterrorism and border security, which are priorities for Beijing. It allows for more flexible cooperation. Similarly, the "China plus Central Asia" platform, established in 2020, has rapidly advanced China's regional goals, including the [opening](#) of the Bedel border crossing between China and Kyrgyzstan in 2024 and the [signing](#) of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway agreement.

By operating within these semi-institutional frameworks, China can maintain strategic ties with Central Asia's political and economic elites and advance its agenda without being held back by other powerful actors in the region like Russia. This pragmatic, low-profile approach [allows](#) China to embed itself more deeply in the region while avoiding the pitfalls of formal institutional constraints, making it a dominant force in shaping Central Asia's future.

China's Paramilitary Presence

China's increasing influence in Central Asia's security landscape is undeniable. Since 2016, Beijing has reportedly operated a base in Tajikistan under the administration of the People's Armed Police (PAP), the paramilitary wing of the ruling Chinese Communist Party. The decision to rely on the PAP likely avoids [triggering](#) Moscow's alarm by keeping the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the official military of the PRC, formally out of the region. This facility is believed to focus on [preventing](#) Uyghur fighters from traveling through Central Asia into China's Xinjiang region after leaving conflict zones like Syria. Though not formally acknowledged as a Chinese military base, the base in Tajikistan sets a troubling precedent for future military expansion.

In addition to military activities, China is expanding its security presence through private security companies (PSCs) in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Justifying the move as necessary to protect Chinese businesses and workers from Sinophobic attacks, companies such as Zhongjun Junhong Group and China Security and Protection Group, established by former military officials, have set up [operations](#) in the region. This trend continued in September 2023, when the Chinese firm HXZA [signed](#) a cooperation agreement with KMG-Security, a Kazakh PSC responsible for safeguarding the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline.

China's military influence is also growing through arms exports, which [surged](#) from 1.5 percent between 2010 and 2015 to 15 percent between 2016 and 2021. Apart from weapons, China is shaping the region's security frameworks by [training](#) Central Asian officers at its police and military academies to influence their security norms. Since 2014, China has [held](#) a growing number of joint military exercises with Central Asian countries, highlighting its deeper defense ties.

The relationship remains lopsided, however, with Central Asia's fragmented security architecture and China's unchecked ambitions. While regional leaders echo the need for cooperative security efforts, China proactively consolidates its influence, filling gaps left by weaker regional institutions and growing international power vacuums.

Limits to China's Role as a Security Actor in the Region

Despite China's growing presence in Central Asia, Russia remains the dominant force in regional security, acting as the primary guarantor of regime stability. This was starkly demonstrated during the mass protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, when Russian-led forces from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) swiftly [intervened](#) to restore order. While China is an economic heavyweight, its influence on security remains limited. For instance, during the unrest in Kazakhstan, Chinese authorities [expressed](#) readiness to provide

military aid, but a lack of legal frameworks in Kazakhstan prevented them. This highlights the constraints on Beijing's ability to act decisively in security matters.

China's struggle to assert itself as a credible security actor in Central Asia extends beyond legal limitations. Its role as a mediator has been largely ineffective, as demonstrated by the ongoing border [conflicts](#) between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2021 and 2022. Despite strong economic and diplomatic ties with both countries, China has not brokered a lasting peace. This underscores that Beijing's security influence, while growing, is still in its infancy.

The CSTO's credibility, however, is fading, creating potential opportunities for China to step in. Armenia's [disillusionment](#) with the organization reveal cracks in Moscow's security umbrella. This erosion of trust in traditional mechanisms could provide China with an opening to expand its security role. Still, whether Beijing is equipped – or willing – to fill that void remains unclear.

While China is becoming more involved in Central Asia's security landscape, it has yet to position itself as the sole guarantor of stability. With the CSTO still functioning and China maintaining careful relations with Moscow, Beijing appears content to play the role of stakeholder and partner rather than a dominant security power. The question is whether China will evolve from an economic powerhouse to a more assertive security leader in the region or continue to be constrained by its limited security presence and focus on non-military engagement.

3. SOCIAL DIMENSION: EDUCATION, TOURISM AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACT

Corruption scandals in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over Chinese projects, accidents at a Chinese-funded modernized thermal power plant in Kyrgyzstan, environmental problems and non-transparent contracts have led to a poor image of China in the region. Therefore, the need to develop social ties not only vertically but also horizontally became more urgent after the series of anti-Chinese protests that took place in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in the pre-pandemic period.

Since the end of the pandemic, China has been more active in promoting and adapting its soft power approaches in the region. China does not solely focus on Confucius Institutes as its main soft power institutions, but takes a comprehensive and holistic approach to achieve tangible and positive results regarding China's image.

The expansion of quotas for Central Asian citizens to study in China, the funding and establishment of new educational institutions and think tanks in Central Asia by China, and increased outreach to local journalists aim at creating a positive image of China. From 2010 to 2022, the number of Central Asian students studying in China increased from 11,930 to 35,000, an average increase of 13%⁸.

At the same time, China has begun to establish its own educational institutions in Central

⁸ <https://exclusive.kz/pochemu-kazahstanskije-studenty-vybirayut-vuzy-kitaya-i-rossii/>

Asian countries. In July 2024, a branch of the Peking University was opened in Kazakhstan, which will operate at the Astana International University⁹.

In order to train local personnel to work in Chinese enterprises in Central Asia, China has been quite successful in opening so-called Lu Ban workshops, which train foreign staff on Chinese technology. The first was opened in Tajikistan in 2022¹⁰, then in Kazakhstan in 2023¹¹, and recently in Uzbekistan¹² and Kyrgyzstan¹³. Agreements are in place for more openings in Turkmenistan¹⁴.

To encourage people-to-people ties, new flight routes are being implemented. For example, the first direct flight between Tashkent and Guangzhou was launched in November 2024. In Kyrgyzstan, the route Chengdu-Bishkek-Chengdu was launched at the end of 2023. In Kazakhstan, in addition to flights to Beijing, direct flights have also been established to Urumqi, Xi'an and Hangzhou¹⁵. Since November 2023, a mutual visa-free regime has been established between China and Kazakhstan for a period of 30 days. In this way, the Kazakh authorities are also trying to make the country more attractive for Chinese tourists.

In 2023, 367.000 travelers from China visited Kazakhstan - 21 times more than in 2022. Kazakh authorities expect that in 2025, the "Year of China Tourism" in Kazakhstan, an initiative aimed at fostering greater connectivity between Kazakhstan and China¹⁶, will bring tourist flows between the countries to an even more impressive level¹⁷. In 2023, about 42.000 tourists from China visited Uzbekistan, but local authorities are confident that in the future they will be able to attract 1 million Chinese to the country annually¹⁸. To attract Chinese tourists, Kyrgyzstan also introduced a visa-free regime this fall: groups of 5 to 25 people arriving in Kyrgyzstan will be able to stay in the country for 21 days without a visa.¹⁹

Thus, social ties between China and the Central Asian countries are growing dynamically. This will ultimately lead to an improvement in China's image in the region, which in turn help promote the application of Chinese standards in the region.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

Over the past 30 years, China has woven a complex web of partnerships with Central Asia,

⁹ <https://forbes.kz/articles/v-kazahstane-otkryli-filial-pekinskogo-universiteta-49014a>

¹⁰ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202407/1315629.shtml>

¹¹ https://en.tj.gov.cn/Updates/News/202403/t20240304_6551442_1.html

¹² http://tianjin.chinadaily.com.cn/lubanws/2024-09/10/c_1020375.htm

¹³ <https://english.news.cn/20241028/6ed5d5c7c446445fbc8f04afb10fad0/c.html>

¹⁴ <https://turkmenportal.com/en/blog/83891/the-international-project-lu-ban-workshop-will-be-launched-in-turkmenistan>

¹⁵ <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20231111/aviareysy-mezhdu-kazahstanom-i-kitaem-40098030.html>

¹⁶ <https://timesca.com/kazakhstan-sees-50-surge-in-chinese-tourism-during-landmark-year-of-collaboration/#:~:text=Building%20on%20this%20momentum%2C%20the,into%20effect%20in%20November%202023.>

¹⁷ <https://russian.eurasianet.org/%D1%81%D1%82>

¹⁸ <https://uz.kursiv.media/2024-05-21/uzbekistan-planiruet-privlekat-1-mln-kitajskih-turistov/>

¹⁹ <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33186328.html>

including through platforms like the BRI, SCO, QCCM, and the C+C5 format. While Russia remains the primary security actor, the Russian war in Ukraine may shift this balance, giving China more space to expand its influence.

China's growing security role in Central Asia blends soft and hard power. On the one hand, Beijing uses soft power to mold the region's information environment, pushing narratives that align with its global stance and influencing regional governance through [digital infrastructure](#) projects. On the other hand, hard power is displayed by Beijing's base in Tajikistan and its paramilitary presence in the region testifying to its growing influence as regional security actor.

Economically speaking, Central Asia could become a critical transportation hub and market for Chinese goods, further entrenching China's influence across Eurasia. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the Chinese model aims at not only influencing economies, but also expanding its influence in the societal sphere through education programs, tourism and increased opportunities for people-to-people contacts.

Moreover, China's advocacy for a multipolar world order resonates well with Central Asian countries, which seek to reduce their dependence on external powers through a greater diversification and more independent foreign policies. This, in turn, could also pose an opportunity for actors like the US and the EU. As an increased reliance on Beijing could push the region toward further authoritarianism, eroding democratic values and human rights, the EU and the US should offer Central Asian countries an alternative model of cooperation.

In order to create a counterweight in the region, they should strengthen their regional presence by leveraging their [C5+1 platform](#) and coordinating with like-minded allies. Expanding seasonal migration programs²⁰, investing in digital infrastructure, and enhancing soft power initiatives could help diversify Central Asia's foreign policy away from reliance on traditional regional powers like Russia and China. In addition, there are thousands of civil society actors active in these countries, who, to varying degrees, campaign for democratic change, human and civil rights, decolonization and national identity as well as ecological and social transformation of the economy. The EU would therefore do well to increase its support for democratic civil society actors in Central Asia.

Moreover, a more comprehensive approach to security, which emphasizes economic development, energy security and technological sovereignty, is also crucial for regional stability and thus of paramount importance to Central Asian countries. Western expertise in digital commerce, start-ups and renewable energy could play a transformative role in Central Asia, helping to strengthen both economic sovereignty and cybersecurity. The EU and its members could play a more active role in this regard and increase cooperation projects in these fields with Central Asia.

²⁰ <https://timesca.com/seasonal-workers-in-kyrgyzstan-have-their-eyes-on-europe/>

By aligning investments with efforts to modernize border crossings and foster people-to-people ties, the West can help Central Asia assert its sovereignty and reduce dependence on any single external power. Strengthening regional collaboration, alongside Western engagement, is critical to ensuring a more balanced and autonomous future for the region.

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About the project region

The Southeast and East Europe project region is organized by the Foundation's regional office in Sofia and has numerous project offices throughout the region – including Belgrade, Istanbul, Tbilisi, Kyiv and Bucharest. In addition to the numerous activities in areas such as human rights or liberal democracy in all project countries, the regional office in Bulgaria implements several initiatives and programs that have an overarching function for the region. For instance, the annual "Future of Freedom" consultation promotes political dialogue between partners, liberal opinion leaders and multipliers from politics and civil society.

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