Central Asia: Implications of Russia’s War in Ukraine

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The five countries of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—share historical, economic, and military ties with Russia, but since they became independent with the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union they have generally sought to balance relations between Russia, China, and other powers, including the United States. Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 arguably has placed Central Asian countries in a difficult position economically and diplomatically. Although they maintain relations with Russia, the five Central Asian states have avoided endorsing Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have explicitly stated their support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and dispatched humanitarian aid. Some analysts posit that the war is undermining Russia’s position in the region and leading Central Asian countries to distance themselves from Moscow. Although Russia has long served as Central Asia’s primary security guarantor, some observers see that role as diminishing as a result of the war. Central Asian countries appear to be increasingly engaging with other partners in the security sphere. In addition, some experts question the long-term viability of Russia-led multilateral organizations including the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. While the economic impacts in Central Asia of the war have not been as dire as some experts initially predicted, regional countries are facing high inflation and disruptions to supply chains. In response, Central Asian countries are seeking to diversify their trade relationships and establish transit routes that bypass Russia.

Central Asia’s strategic geography—bordering Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran—and its wealth of critical resources have driven U.S. interest in the region. Given recent developments, some Members of Congress have expressed interest in expanding U.S. engagement with Central Asia.

Potential areas of opportunity for expanding U.S. relations with Central Asia and congressional action include the following:

- **Trade.** Trade between the United States and Central Asia remains limited. Trade with four of the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) is governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment, which denies permanent normal trade relations to certain former non-market economies. Exempting a given country from Jackson-Vanik requires Congress to pass relevant legislation. The Biden Administration supports repealing Jackson-Vanik for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

- **Energy and minerals.** Central Asia is a region rich in hydrocarbons. Because Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are natural gas producers, many in the United States and the European Union have argued that these countries represent a potential alternative to Russian natural gas for the European market, although Central Asia and Europe have not traded natural gas directly to date. At the same time, Central Asia’s export potential is hampered by domestic energy crises in the region’s gas-producing countries, resulting from high demand coupled with infrastructural deficiencies. Additionally, given the diversity of the region’s mineral base, some experts see Central Asia as a potential alternative to China as a source of rare earth elements and rare metals.

- **Regional connectivity.** Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, in part to strengthen regional countries’ economic and political sovereignty. Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine as Central Asian governments seek to diversify their economic and security relationships.

- **Security cooperation.** Some analysts and U.S. officials see new opportunities for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Central Asia in light of the war in Ukraine.

- **Media freedom and disinformation.** Central Asia is a challenging environment for press freedom. At the same time, Russian media maintain a significant presence in the region, raising concerns among some analysts about Central Asia’s susceptibility to Russian propaganda and disinformation.
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Overview

Central Asia is a landlocked, five-country region rich in mineral resources bordering Afghanistan, the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China), Iran, and Russia. Russia maintains strong political and military ties with the region, and China’s significant economic presence is accompanied by an expanding security footprint. Since 2001, U.S. engagement with Central Asia has largely focused on security cooperation, particularly in relation to the conflict in Afghanistan. Russia’s renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 arguably has placed the Central Asian countries in a difficult position both economically and diplomatically, even as Central Asian governments face a range of domestic and regional challenges. Shifting geopolitics in the wake of Russia’s invasion may present new opportunities for U.S. engagement with Central Asia, which some Members of Congress have expressed interest in developing. Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian countries have moved to diversify their diplomatic and economic relations, increasing engagement with the European Union and with countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Some analysts speculate, however, that China will be the primary beneficiary of any distancing between Russia and Central Asia.

Figure 1. Map of Central Asia

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

1 See, for example, “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia,” Congressional Quarterly, March 8, 2023; House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia and Nonproliferation Holds Hearing on US Engagement in Central Asia, Congressional Quarterly, September 14, 2022.

Background: Central Asian Countries’ International Relations

Central Asian governments have varying outlooks on international relations and postures toward Russia, although scholars generally agree that, as neighbors of Russia and China, these countries “can’t afford to choose sides.” Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian country by land area and gross domestic product (GDP), pursues a “multi-vector” foreign policy, seeking to balance its relations with major powers while actively participating in international organizations. Uzbekistan, the largest by population, has since 2016 been pursuing a similarly balanced policy, actively developing its relations with a broad range of partners after years of relative isolationism. Analysts generally describe the Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) and Tajikistan as more dependent on and aligned with Russia, although both countries have partnered with the United States on security issues and both countries have also been increasing economic and security engagement with China in the past decade. Turkmenistan’s constitutionally mandated policy of “permanent neutrality” translates in practice to foreign policy isolationism, and the government of Turkmenistan rarely comments on international events. Turkmenistan is highly economically dependent on China, however, and has been expanding economic cooperation with Russia in recent months.

Relations with Russia

As former Soviet republics, the five Central Asian states share a common institutional legacy with Russia that underpins military, political, economic, and cultural ties. Historically, public opinion surveys of Central Asians have shown Russia enjoying much higher approval than either China or the United States. Russian media maintain a strong presence in the region, although Russia’s economic role in Central Asia is being surpassed by that of China. Russia remains the primary destination for labor migrants from

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4 See, for example, Eric McGlinchey and Marlene Laruelle, “Explaining Great Power Status in Central Asia: Unfamiliarity and Discontent,” Minerva Research Initiative, October 29, 2019.

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Data from the World Bank, the CIA World Factbook, and the U.S. Department of State
Central Asia, however. According to Russian government figures, about 9.5 million Central Asians registered with Russian migration authorities in 2019; the total number of Central Asian migrants in the country is likely higher.5

In the 30 years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia served as Central Asia’s primary security partner. Russia is estimated to have accounted for approximately 60% of arms transfers to the region by value between 2015 and 2021.6 Most Central Asian military leaders studied at one of Russia’s military academies, and Russian professional military education maintained significant prestige among Central Asian military officers.7 Russia continues to maintain military installations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), established in 1992, is a security alliance that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as Armenia and Belarus.8 The CSTO’s first-ever deployment took place in January 2022, with some 2,500 primarily Russian peacekeeping troops sent to Kazakhstan to bolster the government response to unprecedented unrest in that country.9

Relations with the United States

The United States was among the first countries to recognize the independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since that time, Congress and U.S. presidential administrations have repeatedly expressed support for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the five Central Asian states, and the United States has implemented programs to support democracy, good governance, and economic reforms in the region. In the past three decades, the United States has provided more than $9 billion in direct assistance to the countries of Central Asia to support security, democratic reform, and economic growth, and to meet humanitarian needs.10 Some observers contend that Central Asia’s importance to the United States has historically been “derivative of interests that were not indigenous to Central Asia itself, but rather were functions of U.S. policies, priorities, and relationships with countries around the region.”11 Some analysts describe Central Asia as a challenging environment for democracy promotion efforts, and have voiced concerns that democratic progress in the region has been uneven or nonexistent.12 Since 2001, U.S. engagement with Central Asia has largely focused on security cooperation, particularly in relation to U.S.-led efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The United States engages in security cooperation with all five Central Asian countries, implementing programs to provide training, improve peacekeeping and disaster response capabilities, and bolster border security.

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6 Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database. Available date indicates that Russia did not transfer any arms to Central Asian countries in 2022 with the exception of Tajikistan.
8 See CRS Report R46761, Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations, by Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt.
9 See CRS Insight IN12030, Political Reforms in Kazakhstan, by Maria A. Blackwood.
U.S. policy priorities for the region are outlined in the United States Strategy for Central Asia, the most recent version of which was issued in February 2020. The strategy defines the primary U.S. strategic interest in Central Asia as building “a more stable and prosperous Central Asia that is free to pursue political, economic, and security interests with a variety of partners on its own terms; is connected to global markets and open to international investment; and has strong, democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights.” The strategy reiterates U.S. commitment to supporting the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states. Other U.S. priorities in Central Asia outlined in the Strategy include reducing the threat of terrorism, promoting the rule of law and human rights, and promoting U.S. investment in the region.

Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relationships in the region have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address the common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities. The U.S. State Department notes the format’s success in “enhancing regional dialogue, cooperation, and partnership among the participating countries” and contributions to “increasing economic and energy connectivity and trade, mitigating environmental and health challenges, jointly addressing security threats, and advocating for the full participation of women in all aspects of the political, economic, and social life of member countries.” The most recent C5+1 Ministerial took place in February 2023, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Astana, Kazakhstan, and met with his Central Asian counterparts. Blinken also met separately with senior officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in Astana to discuss bilateral and regional issues before traveling to Uzbekistan to conduct similar meetings with Uzbek officials in Tashkent.

Responses to Russia’s February 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Despite their close security ties with Russia, the Central Asian states have avoided endorsing Russian aggression in Ukraine. At the United Nations, the Central Asian countries either did not cast a vote or voted to abstain on the March 2, 2022, resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; the March 24, 2022, resolution criticizing Russia for creating a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine; the October 12, 2022, resolution condemning the “illegal so-called referendums” held by Russia in eastern Ukraine; the November 14, 2022, resolution calling for reparations for Ukraine; and the February 23, 2023, resolution calling for a “comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine” based on the principles of the United Nations Charter. Analysts and some

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14 Ibid.


Available polling indicates that public opinion on the war is divided in Central Asia; many in the region continue to perceive Russia favorably. In one poll conducted in May and June 2022, 86% of Kyrgyz, 76% of Uzbeks, and 55% of Kazakhs surveyed said they had a favorable opinion of Russia. When asked who was mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine, 28% of respondents in Kazakhstan blamed Russia, whereas 19% blamed Ukraine and 10% blamed the United States. In Kyrgyzstan, 14% indicated the conflict was Russia’s fault, 36% blamed Ukraine, and 13% blamed the United States. In a November 2022 poll conducted in Kazakhstan, 22% of respondents expressed support for Ukraine, 13% said they supported Russia, and 59% said they preferred to remain neutral; younger people were more likely to support Ukraine. When asked about the role their country should play, 42% of respondents said Kazakhstan should act as a peacemaker and call on Russia and Ukraine to negotiate, whereas 37% said that Kazakhstan should remain neutral.

**Economic Implications**

The five landlocked economies of Central Asia are a small part of the global economy. Together, they account for less than 0.5% of global economic output and have a population smaller than Germany (77 million, compared to Germany’s 83 million). Economically, the region’s economic implications likely have been largely silent about the conflict.
importance is tied to its geographic location—adjacent to Russia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East—and its natural resources (particularly oil and natural gas). In addition to the extraction of natural resources, agricultural production is a major sector of economic activity. The World Bank classifies the countries of Central Asia as upper-middle and lower-middle income countries.27

Like other developing economies, the countries of Central Asia have struggled with a series of economic shocks: the global economic crisis of 2008-2009, the oil price shock of 2014-2015, and the economic disruptions resulting from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic starting in 2020. Their economies also face persistent challenges, including prevalent corruption, frequent natural disasters, and climate change.28 The rate of economic growth in Central Asian economies has fluctuated over the past two decades, and largely mirrored the average growth rate of emerging-market and developing economies (see Figure 2).

Average growth rates in Central Asia have fallen from 5.9% in 2021 to an estimated 5.1% in 2022 and 4.1% in 2023.29 Although a number of factors in the global economy continue to affect the region, including the ongoing pandemic and related economic disruptions, Central Asian economies are also affected by Russia’s war on Ukraine and the subsequent multilateral sanctions imposed on Russia. The World Bank assesses that the war is constraining economic growth in the region, although to a lesser extent than initially forecasted.30

29 IMF, World Economic Outlook Databases, April 2023.
Trade

Russia is a major trading partner for Central Asian countries, although they also have strong trade relationships with China, Turkey, and the European Union (EU). Two Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—belong to the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russia-led initiative established in 2015 to integrate several post-Soviet states into an economic union (see “Russia-Led Multilateral Organizations” below).³¹

Russia is a major source of imports to Central Asian countries, accounting for approximately one-fifth to one-third of imports for each country (Figure 3). These imports vary across countries but generally include oil, iron and steel, refrigerators, washing machines, margarine, and wood. To a lesser extent, Russia is a main export market for Central Asian countries, particularly for ores, iron, chemicals, vegetables, cotton, and apparel. Russia is also a major transit hub for Central Asia, whereby goods imported into Russia are often re-exported to post-Soviet states.

The war in Ukraine and related sanctions are disrupting trade in Central Asia. Russia’s trade contracted sharply at the start of the war (some estimates suggest 60% in March 2022), resulting in major supply chain disruptions for goods that would normally be re-exported from Russia to Central Asia.³² Supply chain disruptions create concerns about product shortages and inflation.³³

The effects may be ameliorated as Central Asian countries attempt to develop alternative sources

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³¹ For more on the Eurasian Economic Union, see, for example, “What Is the Eurasian Economic Union?,” Chatham House, July 15, 2022. See also “Russia-Led Multilateral Organizations” below.
for these products, particularly via Turkey and Poland. Some speculate that Central Asian countries may become a market whereby goods will be re-exported to Russia, for example after they are brought into Kazakhstan through the Chinese-Kazakh Khorgos free trade zone (see “Potential Sanctions Evasion” below).

The war’s disruption to global agricultural markets is also creating concerns about food security. Russia and Ukraine are major agricultural exporters, particularly for wheat and sunflower oil. The war has prevented farmers in Ukraine from tending to their crops, and both Ukraine and Russia have restricted their agricultural exports. In March 2022, Russia briefly banned the export of grain to countries in the Eurasian Economic Union (including Kazakhstan). Kazakhstan, itself also a major wheat exporter, in turn banned the export of wheat between April and September 2022. Normally, the other countries in Central Asia import about 90% of their wheat from Kazakhstan.

### Exchange Rates

The values of Central Asian currencies generally move in tandem with Russia’s currency, the ruble. In the initial weeks following the renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and subsequent sanctions by the United States, the European Union, and other countries, the ruble depreciated rapidly against the U.S. dollar. Central Asian currencies likewise depreciated, although to a lesser extent. Russia’s central bank quickly enacted a number of policies that stabilized the ruble, including raising interest rates and imposing strict capital controls, and by early June the ruble had appreciated above its pre-war value. Likewise, some central banks in Central Asia increased interest rates and used foreign exchange reserves to stabilize their currencies. By early June 2022, the values of Central Asian currencies also appreciated, but not to the same extent as the ruble (see Figure 4).

The ruble’s value remains precarious to date; it would almost certainly depreciate if the central bank removed capital controls and lowered interest rates. The ruble depreciated in late 2022 in light of the economic challenges resulting from the ongoing war and sanctions. Significant movements in the value of the ruble create risks for Central Asian economies. Rapid depreciation of their currencies increases the value (in local currency) of debts denominated in dollars, and Central Asia’s loans from China are usually denominated in dollars. Additionally, foreign remittances are an important source of capital for several countries in Central Asia, and changes in the exchange rates impact the value of these remittances. More broadly, fluctuations in exchange rates introduce uncertainty and risks in international transactions.

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34 For more on the impact of the war on global food security, see CRS Insight IN11919, *Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Global Food Prices and Food Security*, by Rhoda Margesson et al.


36 Exchange rate data in this section from S&P Capital IQ.

Central Asia’s financial sectors are closely intertwined with Russia’s financial sector. Kazakhstan arguably has the most developed banking sector in the region, and as of February 2022 three of its major banks were subsidiaries of Russian banks (Sberbank, VTB, and Alfa Bank, all of which are now sanctioned). Additionally, many Central Asian banks partner with Russian banks to facilitate cross-border transactions in the form of credit and debit cards, as well as electronic funds and transfers. Financial institutions in Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic are also connected to Russia’s financial messaging system (the System for Transfer of Financial Messages, or SPFS), a system to facilitate cross-border payments. Russia developed SPFS after sanctions were imposed following its initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

Sanctions on Russia’s financial sector are having broad effects on the financial sector in Central Asia. The three Russian financial institutions with subsidiaries in Kazakhstan are all now sanctioned, and two of the three subsidiaries have scaled back or exited Kazakhstan’s market (see textbox). International companies are finding it difficult to transfer money to Tajikistan, because Tajikistan’s banks are so closely intertwined with Russian banks.

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39 For more about financial messaging providers, including SWIFT, see CRS Report R46843, International Financial Messaging Systems, by Liana Wong and Rebecca M. Nelson.
withdrawals on Russian bank cards no longer work in many cases. A major bank in Uzbekistan, Hamkorbank, suspended the transfer of funds to its bank cards through a mobile app owned by Sberbank.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Kazakhstani Subsidiaries of Sanctioned Russian Financial Institutions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sanctions on Russian financial institutions following the expanded invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created pressures on subsidiaries in Kazakhstan:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sanctions on Alfa Bank, the fourth largest financial institution in Russia, triggered a run on the Kazakhstani subsidiary, which was forced to limit cash withdrawals and was subsequently purchased by a local bank (Bank CenterCredit).</td>
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<td>• Following sanctions on Sberbank, the largest financial institution in Russia, Sberbank’s Kazakhstani subsidiary sold part of its business loan and retail portfolio to a local bank (Halyk Bank), and Kazakhstan’s government revoked the decision to use Sberbank platforms for its e-government services. In March 2023 the U.S. Department of the Treasury removed sanctions on the former Kazakhstani subsidiary of Sberbank after 99% of the entity’s shares were purchased by a Kazakhstan state-owned holding company.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The Kazakhstani subsidiary of VTB (Russia’s second largest financial institution) is continuing to operate in Kazakhstan despite the sanctions, seeing opportunities as other Russian banks exit or scale back.</td>
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Banks in Central Asia may find ways around sanctions to engage in cross-border payments with Russia. SFPS provides one such mechanism, although it is not nearly as developed as the main global financial messaging system (the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or SWIFT) and sanctions make it difficult for SFPS to facilitate dollar-denominated transactions.

Additionally, sanctions on Russia are, in limited cases, creating economic opportunities for financial institutions in Central Asia. Approximately 500,000 Russian citizens opened bank accounts in Kazakhstan in 2022, allowing them to circumvent financial sanctions imposed because of the war, and Russian travel agencies are offering special packages to open bank accounts in Uzbekistan (including assistance in preparing paperwork in advance and a visit to a bank to sign documents and collect a debit card).

Foreign Remittances

Russia has long been the primary destination for migrant workers from Central Asia, with more than 7.8 million migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan reportedly registered with the Russian government in 2021. Most migrant workers in Russia have low-paying and

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43 A bank run is when a large number of depositors withdraw their money from banks simultaneously based on fears that the institution will become insolvent. Paolo Sorbello, “Kazakhstani Banks Eye the Spoils of Sanctioned Russian Subsidiaries,” The Diplomat, April 26, 2022.
physically demanding jobs in the service sector, construction, and agriculture. The money migrant workers send back to family at home (remittances) has been a main source of external financing for some Central Asian countries. Krygyzstan and Tajikistan are among the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, with remittances—predominantly from Russia—exceeding 30% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in both countries in 2022. Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most populous country, also sends large numbers of labor migrants to Russia and remittances to Uzbekistan equaled roughly 17% of GDP in 2022. The World Bank initially projected that remittances to Central Asia would decline sharply in 2022 as a result of the war; it now estimates that remittances from Russia reached record highs in that year, due in part to increased demand for labor and to the Russian ruble’s appreciation against the U.S. dollar. At the same time, the cost of sending remittances from Russia has increased significantly due to international sanctions. The World Bank assesses that remittances to Central Asia may grow more slowly in 2023 than initially projected.

**Implications for Relations with Russia**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine arguably places Central Asia in a difficult position diplomatically. Some observers posit that the conflict has led Central Asian governments to rethink Russia’s role in the region, and that these governments may seek to distance themselves from Russia, in what one scholar terms a “tectonic shift away from Moscow.” Nevertheless, high-level contacts between Russia and Central Asian governments are continuing. Between February and December 2022, President Vladimir Putin visited every Central Asian country, an unusually high number of trips to the region by the Russian leader, and held more than 50 meetings with his Central Asian counterparts. Some observers see this activity as a reflection of Central Asia’s increased importance to Russia in light of shifting geopolitics. All five Central Asian presidents attended Russia’s May 9, 2023, parade in Moscow commemorating the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, reflecting what some observers see as Russia’s continued leverage over Central Asian governments. One analyst posits that—with the exception of Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov, whose attendance was announced in advance—Central Asian leaders likely made last-minute decisions to attend in response to pressure from Putin, and that the Central Asian presidents’ presence at the parade is part of their “survival strategy.” One scholar argues that

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48 For more on remittances, see CRS Report R43217, Remittances: Background and Issues for the 118th Congress, by Martin A. Weiss and Andrew P. Scott.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., pp. 7, 32; Dilip Ratha and Eung Ju Kim, “Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Implications for Remittance flows to Ukraine and Central Asia,” KNOMAD Policy Brief 17, March 4, 2022, p. 3.
53 Ibid.
Central Asian countries are seeking to maintain the “right” distance from Russia, “balancing the intensity of their relations with Russia in a context of the competing pressures exerted by the Kremlin and the international community on the one hand, and those arising from domestic political developments on the other.”58 Their “ultimately ambiguous” stance on Ukraine can be explained by the “primacy of their domestic authoritarian stability,” which motivates them to avoid “alienating an important source of authoritarian support or, alternatively, encountering the potentially destabilizing criticism of Western states.”59

Since Russia’s 2014 occupation of Ukraine’s Crimea region, analysts have noted “nervousness” in Central Asia about Russian rhetoric concerning Ukraine and the potential application of similar sentiments toward Central Asian countries.60 This is particularly true in Kazakhstan, which is home to a sizeable ethnic Russian minority and shares a lengthy land border with Russia. In recent years, Russian officials, including Putin, have publicly questioned Kazakhstan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.61 Since Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian politicians and political commentators have repeatedly insinuated that a similar fate may await Kazakhstan.62 An August 2022 social media post on the account of Russia’s former President Dmitry Medvedev referred to Kazakhstan as an “artificial state” whose territory should be returned to Russia; the post was quickly deleted, and a Medvedev aide claimed the account had been hacked.63

The war has led some scholars and intellectuals to reevaluate the imperial and colonial dimensions of Russia’s presence in Central Asia, and some observers see a rethinking of national identities in the region.64 For instance, in Kazakhstan—a multi-ethnic country where the Russian language has official status and remains widely spoken—reporting indicates that the war has resulted in “unprecedented” interest in learning the Kazakh language, among both ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Russians.65 In the assessment of one Kazakh language activist, “the war has had a wake-up effect on Kazakh national self-consciousness.”66

59 Ibid.
62 Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan-Russia frictions over Ukraine war go public,” Eurasianet, June 20, 2022.
Russia-Led Multilateral Organizations

Some analysts believe that the war in Ukraine may undermine the viability of Russia-led multilateral organizations as regional countries reassess the nature of their relationships with Russia. One such organization is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, also abbreviated EAEU), a single market established in 2015 that unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. The EEU facilitates labor migration within the bloc, but trade continues to face administrative barriers. Some analysts contend that the body serves primarily as a vehicle for Russia to exert geopolitical influence rather than a rules-based economic integration project. While Russia dominates the EEU and accounts for most of the bloc’s collective GDP, Kazakhstan in particular has resisted Russian efforts to develop the EEU into more of a political union. The EEU has been a source of frustration for some member states due to enduring trade barriers as well as unilateral actions by Russia that negatively impact other member states. For example, after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region, sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and the European Union and countersanctions introduced by Russia affected other EEU members’ economies. Some analysts assess that the war further reduces the benefits of EEU membership while imposing higher costs on member countries. Although Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had been considering membership in recent years (Uzbekistan became an observer in 2020), some analysts see it as “unlikely” that they will seek to join the EEU in the context of the war.

Some countries also appear to be questioning the value of their membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a security alliance established in 1992 that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as Armenia and Belarus. Under the auspices of the CSTO, member states conduct joint military exercises and training; member states are also able to purchase Russian military equipment at reduced prices. Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012, but the country increased security cooperation with Russia under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who assumed office in 2016. As part of its constitutionally mandated neutrality policy, Turkmenistan avoids membership in multilateral security organizations. One longtime observer of Central Asia has posited that, in light of the war in Ukraine, the CSTO “seems to be dying” given that “the reasons for not being a CSTO member are increasing.”


68 Kataryna Wolczuk, “Myth 10: ‘The Eurasian Economic Union is a Genuine and Meaningful Counterpart to the EU,’” in Duncan Allan et al., Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia, Chatham House, May 2021, pp. 63-69.


73 On the CSTO, see CRS Report R46761, Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations, by Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt.

This turn of events comes shortly after the CSTO’s first-ever deployment in support of a member state, when the government of Kazakhstan requested CSTO assistance to respond to a wave of unprecedented unrest in January 2022. At the time, some analysts posited that the CSTO intervention would bolster the organization and potentially undermine Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector” foreign policy, increasing the country’s dependence on Russia. Nevertheless, in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan has maintained its “diplomatic balancing act,” and Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has not shifted in favor of Russia. Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev directly rejected speculation that the CSTO intervention rendered him beholden to Moscow. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstani officials have repeatedly stated that CSTO forces would not be sent to Ukraine, and that Kazakhstan would only deploy troops to Ukraine as part of a U.N. peacekeeping mission. Two political scientists who conducted a public opinion survey in Kazakhstan in September characterize popular support for CSTO membership in that country as “weak” and posit that it will decline further.

Some analysts see the CSTO’s credibility as undermined by the organization’s repeated failure to mitigate armed conflicts between its member states. In September 2022, more than 100 people were killed and more than 100,000 were displaced due to fighting between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that originated along the two countries’ largely undelimited border, concurrently with a Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit at which both the Tajik and Kyrgyz presidents were present, as were Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.80 Each side named the other as the instigator of the conflict, and Kyrgyzstan asserted that its territory was invaded by Tajik troops.81 A similar outbreak of violence along the border occurred during an April 2021 CSTO summit in Tajikistan’s capital. Scholars attribute the conflict to domestic factors in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rather than any weakening of Russia’s position in the region, but some analysts argue that the war in Ukraine has undermined Russia’s ability to serve as a mediator in Central Asia.82 The most recent outbreak of violence came after more than 2,000 Russian troops stationed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were reportedly redeployed to Ukraine.83

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77 Joanna Lilis, “Kazakhstan-Russia Frictions over Ukraine War Go Public,” Eurasianet, June 20, 2022.
78 “‘Vopros dazhe ne rassmartrivatsia’: Minoborony Kazakhstana ob otpravke mirotvortsev v Donbass” [“The issue is not even being considered”: The Ministry of Defense of Kazakhstan on sending peacekeepers to Donbass], Nur.kz, May 3, 2022; Tamara Vaal’, “Voskod ODKB ne budut zadeistvovany v vooruzhennom konflikte mezhdu Rossiei i Ukrainoi—Ashimbayev” [CSTO troops will not be involved in the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine—Ashimbayev], Vlast.kz, February 24, 2022.
83 Aibek Biybosunov and Kubat Kasymbekov, “Investigation Shows Contractors at Russian Base in Kyrgyzstan (continued...)
Other observers posit that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased the social and economic vulnerability of communities most affected by economic downturns in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, contributing to the escalation of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict. Some analysts see the lack of CSTO intervention in the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border conflict as a sign of the organization’s dysfunction. Kyrgyzstan withdrew from CSTO military exercises held in Kazakhstan in October and cancelled the portion of the exercises that were set to take place on its territory, in what one observer saw as “a clear demonstration of Moscow’s dwindling influence in Central Asia.”

Potential Sanctions Evasion

Some observers have raised concerns about the potential for the United States to impose secondary sanctions on Central Asian entities if they are used to circumvent sanctions on Russia, and the resulting economic fallout. In June 2022, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on a list of countries that serve as “common transshipment points through which restricted or controlled exports have been known to pass before reaching destinations in Russia or Belarus.” The State Department concurrently designated an Uzbekistan-based company for “actively supporting” efforts by a Russian entity specializing in procuring foreign items for Russia’s defense industry to evade U.S. sanctions. Alisher Usmanov, an Uzbekistan-born Russian billionaire, was designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in March 2022 for his involvement in the technology sector of the Russian economy. Usmanov reportedly maintains close ties with Uzbekistan’s government. In April 2023, Treasury revoked the general license that had authorized transactions involving entities in which Usmanov holds at least a 50% stake and that are not included on Treasury’s Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List. The State Department concurrently designated a number of companies tied to Usmanov, including an Uzbekistan-based cement producer.

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87 Nizom Khodjayev, “Russia’s Sanctions Woes Could Be a Shot in the Arm for Kazakhstan ... or the Kiss of a Dead Man,” bne IntelliNews, March 29, 2022.


Some analysts view sanctions compliance as a question of economic self-preservation for Central Asia, rather than a means of signaling disapproval of Russia’s invasion or support for the West. Kazakhstan, the world’s largest uranium producer, has rerouted exports to avoid Russia in light of sanctions. Some banks throughout the region have ceased accepting Russian-issued Mir payment cards, and Uzbekistan has suspended the use of Mir cards entirely. In September 2022, the then-U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan stated in press remarks that the government of Uzbekistan “stated very clearly” its intention to comply with sanctions on Russia. In November 2022 remarks to the press, Kazakhstan’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs stated, “our territory has not been used and will not be used for sanctions evasion in any form,” adding that, “the principled position of Kazakhstan is that Kazakhstan does not allow its territory to be used to circumvent sanctions.”

Reporting indicates that Central Asian countries—particularly Kazakhstan, which shares a lengthy border with Russia—are functioning as a transit route for parallel imports to Russia. Analysis by Bloomberg determined that there was a significant increase in consumer electronics imports to Kazakhstan from the European Union in the first half of 2022, coinciding with an increase in shipments of such products from Kazakhstan to Russia. European officials have reportedly expressed concern that components and microchips from such appliances transiting through Kazakhstan may be being used by Russia for military purposes as a means of circumventing sanctions, although analysts assess that at least some of this spike may represent an “opportunistic” means of meeting Russian consumer demand. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project additionally found that Russian citizens have established companies in Kazakhstan in order to import sensitive electronics such as drones and microchips. Kazakhstan introduced a new system to more closely monitor re-exports in April 2023. The Financial Times found that, since February 2022, at least $1 billion in dual use items—goods with both civil and military application—subject to European Union (EU) export controls likely ended up in Russia under the pretense of shipment from the EU to Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, indicating that Russia is potentially sidestepping sanctions via falsified EU customs declarations.

95 Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan Moves Uranium Exports through Middle Corridor,” Eurasianet, January 3, 2023.
98 “Kazakhstan ne pozvoliaet ispol’zovat’ svoiu territoriu dlia obkhoda sanktsii—MID” [Kazakhstan does not allow its territory to be used to circumvent sanctions—MFA], KazTAG, November 30, 2022.
Central Asian Migrants in Russia

Russian authorities have introduced incentives to encourage Central Asian migrants to join the Russian armed forces, including fast-track citizenship and high salaries, and are reportedly attempting to recruit Central Asia’s military veterans. Since Russia’s February 2022 invasion, the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan—the three Central Asian countries that send the most labor migrants to Russia—have issued reminders to their citizens that fighting in a foreign war is a criminal offense. Similar legislation exists in Kazakhstan. In addition, religious authorities from the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan issued a statement asserting that Muslims should not participate in armed conflicts except to defend their homeland. Some Central Asian nationals have reportedly been coerced or misled into joining the Russian military. Reported casualties of the conflict include Central Asian nationals, some of whom had become naturalized citizens of Russia, fighting for the Russian military, as well as Central Asian nationals recruited to fight for the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company. Some Central Asians have also reportedly volunteered to fight for Ukraine. The overall number of Central Asians participating in the armed conflict is difficult to determine, although analysts assess that it is likely small, citing dozens of confirmed cases. More Central Asian nationals are estimated to be fighting on the Russian side, likely due to labor migration patterns.

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105 Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan in the Russian Federation, “Vnimanie, uvazhаемые граждане Республики Таджикистан!” [Attention, dear citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan!], September 22, 2022; Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation, “Informatsionnoe obzobnenie Posol’stva ot 21 sentiabria 2022 goda” [Embassy announcement dated September 21, 2022], September 21, 2022; “Namenchesto i postuplenie na sluzhbu v inostrannye struktury podlezhat ugolovnoi otvetstvennosti – Minist” [Being a mercenary and entering service in foreign structures are subject to criminal liability – Ministry of Justice], kun.uz, March 2, 2022. In May 2023, a Bishkek court sentenced a Kyrgyz citizen to 10 years in prison for fighting for Russian forces in Ukraine. See “Kyrgyz Mercenary Who Fought for Russia in Ukraine Jailed,” Agence France Presse, May 17, 2023. Kyrgyz authorities have also launched a criminal case against a Kyrgyz citizen who is reportedly leading a Turkic battalion within the Ukrainian armed forces. See Munduzbek Kalykov, “GKNB nachal sledstvie po faktu uchastiia kyrgyzstantsa v voine v Ukraine” [GKNB has begun an investigation into the participation of a Kyrgyzcitizen in the war in Ukraine], Kloop, November 22, 2022.
106 “Muslim Board of Uzbekistan Calls on Citizens Not to Join the Russian-Ukrainian War,” kun.uz, September 23, 2022.
108 Catherine Putz, “Ethnic Central Asians Among Those Killed With the Russian Army in Ukraine,” The Diplomat, March 25, 2022; Eliza Kenenbaeva, “For Money or a Passport: Many Kyrgyz Fighting Alongside Russians in Ukraine,” RFE/RL, April 10, 2022; Khadisha Akaeva and Aria Reno, “‘Veroiatnost’, chto eti liudi vernutsia, nevelika,‘ Kak Ch/VK ‘Vagner’ verbuet v Kazakhstane i pochemu s etim ne boruutsia?’” [“The likelihood that these people will return is low. How does PMC Wagner recruit in Kazakhstan, and why is that not being fought?”], Radio Azattyq, April 10, 2023. On the Wagner Group, see CRS In Focus IF12344, Russia’s Wagner Private Military Company (PMC), by Andrew S. Bowen.
In addition to being targeted for military recruitment, Central Asian laborers in Russia are reportedly being hired to work in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine. Some analysts posit that the war may increasingly push Central Asian labor migrants toward alternative destinations such as Kazakhstan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. To date, however, migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to Russia has remained strong.

Russians Fleeing to Central Asia

The war has brought an unprecedented influx of Russian citizens into Central Asia. With the exception of Turkmenistan, Central Asian countries allow Russian nationals visa-free entry and impose few barriers for extended stays, making the region an attractive option for some of those seeking to leave Russia. An initial wave of Russian migration to Central Asia shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine began comprised largely tech workers and others who could work remotely. Some governments, including Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, introduced programs intended to entice Russian tech workers to relocate to their countries. A second, larger wave of migrants followed Russia’s announcement of “partial mobilization” on September 21, 2022, and included many with fewer financial resources. Between September 21 and October 3, more than 200,000 Russian citizens entered Kazakhstan, which shares a 4,750-mile land border with Russia; an estimated 50,000 entered Uzbekistan in the same period. Large-scale travel by Russian citizens to Central Asia continued in the following weeks. While many Russians used Central Asia as a transit point before traveling elsewhere, hundreds of thousands remain in the region. Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev stated that his government would “ensure their safety.” Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov welcomed the influx of Russians, saying they need not fear extradition. Similarly, the government of Uzbekistan has indicated that it will not deport Russians fleeing mobilization. Reporting indicates a significant increase in interest from Russians in obtaining citizenship from Central Asian countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Kazakhstan deported an officer from Russia’s Federal Guard Service for illegally

118 CRS communication with Kazakh officials, May 2022.
119 “Kazakhstan to Ensure Safety of Russians Fleeing Draft—President,” AFP, September 27, 2022.
121 “Uzbekistan Says It Won’t Deport Russians Fleeing Conscription,” Reuters, September 30, 2022; “MID vystupil s raz’iasneniem po otdeľnym voprosam o situatíji vokrug Ukrayini i uvelichenii chisla pribivajushchikh v Uzbekistan rossiiskikh grazhdan” [The MFA issued an explanation on certain issues related to the situation concerning Ukraine and the increase in the number of Russian citizens arriving in Uzbekistan], Dunyo, September 30, 2022.
crossing the border in December 2022, and has since denied asylum to at least one Russian military deserter on similar grounds.\footnote{123}{“Russian’s Kazakh Asylum Request Denied, Gets Suspended Sentence for Crossing Border Illegally,” \textit{RFERL}, May 3, 2023; “FSB Officer Who Sought Asylum In Kazakhstan Jailed In Siberia,” \textit{RFERL}, March 24, 2023.} The government of Kyrgyzstan has reportedly pressured Russian activists in order to discourage them from public anti-war activity.\footnote{124}{Kamila Eshalieva, “Kyrgyzstan was a safe haven for anti-war Russians. Then things got hostile,” Open Democracy, April 12, 2023; Nurbek Bekmurazev, “Kyrgyzstan: Exiled Russians facing pressure for anti-war stance,” Eurasianet, March 13, 2023.}

Some analysts argue that Russians relocating to Central Asia boost the region’s economies, and that startup hubs in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are “growing at breakneck speed” thanks to the exodus of IT professionals from Russia.\footnote{125}{Aaron Eglitis, “Putin’s War Boosts Central Asian Economies as Russians Relocate,” \textit{Bloomberg}, May 16, 2023; Katie Marie Davies, “Startup Revolution: Can Central Asia reap the rewards of Russia’s IT exodus?” \textit{Meduza}, March 16, 2023.} Other observers see the influx of Russian citizens relocating in response to the war as a “humanitarian crisis in the making” for Central Asia, however, as it places pressure on already strained housing markets.\footnote{126}{Fatima Yerbolek, “Evicted by Putin: Central Asia Renters Forced Out for Russians,” \textit{Eurasianet}, November 18, 2022; Joanna Lillis, “Kazakhstan: Rents Rocket as Russian Draft Dodgers Push Up Demand,” \textit{Eurasianet}, September 27, 2022.} Both waves of migration brought spikes in rental prices in many Central Asian cities, and some local residents have reportedly been evicted by landlords seeking to extract higher rents from new Russian arrivals.\footnote{127}{“Why the Exodus of Russians to Central Asia Matters,” \textit{The Economist}, October 12, 2022.} Some observers also suggest that the influx of thousands of Russians could lead to strains on Central Asia’s job markets.\footnote{128}{Asel Doolotkeldieva, “Russian Draft Dodgers Find Mixed Reception in Central Asia,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2022; Kirill Krivosheev, “Russia’s Mass Exodus Is Forcing Its Neighbors to Get Off the Fence,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 5, 2022; Yan Matusевич, “Central Asia Faces a Russian Migrant Crisis,” \textit{Foreign Policy}, October 4, 2022.} Analysts assess that public opinion among Central Asians is mixed when it comes to Russians fleeing mobilization.\footnote{129}{Demoscope, “What People in Kazakhstan Think About the War in Ukraine,” November 30, 2022, available at https://demos.kz/what-people-in-kazakhstan-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine-2/?lang=en.} In a November poll conducted in Kazakhstan, 38% of respondents stated they did not support mass migration by Russian citizens to their country, 27% expressed support, and 22% said they were indifferent.\footnote{130}{Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, “Uzbekistan Looks South for New Trade Routes,” \textit{The Diplomat}, April 1, 2022.}

### Seeking Alternative Partners

International sanctions on Russia have hampered Central Asian trade, spurring some Central Asian leaders to explore alternative transit routes.\footnote{131}{See, for example, Bruce Pannier, “Russia’s Two Centuries of Central Asia Dominance Are Over,” \textit{Irina News}, October 11, 2022 and Bruce Pannier, “Filling the Geopolitical Void in Central Asia,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 14, 2022.} Similarly, Central Asian governments have been moving to diversify their security relationships, accelerating a trend that began in the past decade.\footnote{132}{Francisco Olmos, “Busy Times in Iran-Central Asia Relations,” June 24, 2022; Bruce Pannier, “Filling the Geopolitical Void in Central Asia,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 14, 2022; Dante Schulz, “How India Can Broaden its Relationships with Central Asia,” \textit{The Diplomat}, December 10, 2022.} Both Turkey and Iran have been actively engaging Central Asian governments on trade and security issues.\footnote{133}{Kamila Eshalieva, “Kyrgyzstan was a safe haven for anti-war Russians. Then things got hostile,” Open Democracy, April 12, 2023; Nurbek Bekmurazev, “Kyrgyzstan: Exiled Russians facing pressure for anti-war stance,” Eurasianet, March 13, 2023.} India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates have also been ramping up outreach to Central Asia as Central Asian governments have reportedly pressured Russian activists in order to discourage them from public anti-war activity.\footnote{134}{The government of Kyrgyzstan has reportedly pressured Russian activists in order to discourage them from public anti-war activity.}
European Union–Central Asia leaders’ summit, European Council President Charles Michel called for increased cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. Kazakhstan has been pursuing expanding trade across the Caspian Sea via Azerbaijan to Turkey and by rail via Turkmenistan and Iran to Turkey. The bulk of Kazakhstan’s oil is exported by pipeline via Russia, and that route has been interrupted four times since March 2022, in what some analysts see as retaliation for Kazakhstan’s refusal to support Russian aggression in Ukraine. Kazakhstan has begun shipments of oil across the Caspian by barge to Azerbaijan, and plans to continue expanding this export route, although capacity is currently limited by existing infrastructure. Uzbekistan is seeking to establish transit routes across Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, although some observers question the viability of these efforts in light of the security situation. The war in Ukraine has brought increased interest in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor, which aims to connect rail freight transport networks in China and the European Union via Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey, bypassing Russia. Some analysts speculate that China will be the primary beneficiary of any distancing between Central Asia and Russia.

Implications for China’s Presence in Central Asia

Geographic proximity binds the People’s Republic of China (PRC or China) and Central Asia together, particularly in terms of security and economic development. Since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, PRC leaders’ numerous high-level exchanges (including in-person visits) with Central Asian counterparts suggest Beijing is interested in bolstering ties. PRC leaders attach great importance to regional stability, fearing potential spillover effects of unrest in Afghanistan on the PRC’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where the PRC has reportedly adopted repressive policies and committed human rights abuses against religious and ethnic minorities, including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz. Although PRC state media entities are active in promoting the Chinese government’s official narrative in Central Asia, Central Asian communities have increasingly unfavorable perceptions of China, as measured by the biannual Central Asia Barometer Survey. Some analysts attribute the negative turn in opinion to a range of factors, including China’s treatment of ethnic and religious minorities; numerous corruption scandals concerning China-based companies involved in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects; and rising nationalist sentiment in Central Asian countries.

135 European Council, “Remarks by President Charles Michel After His Meeting with President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Astana,” October 27, 2022.
137 Almaz Kumenov, “Kazakh Oil Exports Across Russia Interrupted for Fourth Time This Year,” Eurasianet, August 23, 2022.
140 Kanat Shaku, “Is the Middle Corridor All It’s Cracked Up to Be?” bne IntelliNews, October 15, 2022.
143 Ibid.
Central Asia also is a geographic focus of China’s BRI, an effort to boost infrastructure development and economic connectivity—and expand China’s influence—around the world. Leaders of all five Central Asian countries joined the BRI, and they have signed cooperation agreements covering economic integration efforts, including in infrastructure and connectivity projects, standards and technical cooperation, and joint development of special economic and trade zones. Some experts see China’s economic engagement with Central Asia as being in direct competition with similar Russian initiatives, including the Eurasian Economic Union. Over the longer term, China’s efforts to establish stronger trade links with Central Asia and increased regional connectivity could significantly affect regional food and energy trade networks.

**Diplomatic Relations**

In 2022, China held several high-level exchanges with Central Asian countries that suggest a particular interest in strengthening relations with the region in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion. The most important of these exchanges were PRC leader Xi Jinping’s state visits to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in September 2022, coinciding with the 2022 Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—a Eurasia-based group with members including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, but also China and Russia (see “Regional Security Cooperation,” below). The two-country tour was Xi’s first foreign trip since January 2020. During the trip, Xi met with the five Central Asian presidents, and he indicated China’s willingness to strengthen cooperation within the “China+Central Asia” (“C+C5”) mechanism, as well as to work with Central Asia to implement two of Beijing’s new policies: the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI). Announced in September 2021 and April 2022 respectively, the initiatives (while still vague) propose new architectures for global development and security, for which the PRC has sought to rally the support of developing countries.

A number of high-level exchanges with Central Asian leaders preceded President Xi’s September 2022 visit. In January 2022, Xi participated in a virtual summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian countries. Then-State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visits to the region in June and August 2022 shortly followed. During his June visit, Wang participated in the third C+C5 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Kazakhstan, where the six parties agreed to establish a heads of state meeting mechanism for the C+C5 platform and adopted four outcome documents. One of these documents expressed support for a regional version of China’s Data Security Cooperation Initiative, which seeks to strengthen coordination on cross-border data flows.

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145 Ibid.
146 During the Summit, Xi also met with a number of other leaders, including Vladimir Putin.
147 The one exception is Tajikistan, the readout for which did not mention either the Global Development Initiative or the Global Security Initiative. See Foreign Ministry of the PRC, “President Xi Jinping Meets with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon,” September 15, 2022.
of the meeting states that all sides agreed to “coordinate positions on the situation in Afghanistan in a timely manner,” but it does not mention Ukraine. In May 2023, China held the first in-person C+C5 Summit in Xi’an, bringing together Xi and the five Central Asian presidents. Some observers see the summit as evidence that China is increasingly challenging Russia’s influence in Central Asia in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine.

Regional Security Cooperation

Over the last decade, China’s security presence in Central Asia has increased, as have arms transfers and military-to-military ties, including joint exercises. Security has also been a key theme of some of China’s recent high-level visits to the region. In April 2022, then-PRC Minister of Defense Wei Fenghe visited Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The tour included meetings with Kazakh President Tokayev and Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov and their respective defense ministers. During the meetings, the parties discussed strengthening military exchanges and cooperation in “equipment technology” and exchanged views on the situations in Ukraine and Afghanistan.

China’s influence on the region’s security architecture may increase if Central Asian countries become increasingly reluctant to engage with Moscow as a security partner. Beijing does not seem to be actively trying to reduce Russia’s role in Central Asia at present. The March 22, 2023 joint statement following Xi’s visit to Russia explicitly noted that China and Russia “are willing to strengthen cooperation, support Central Asian countries in safeguarding their national sovereignty, guaranteeing national development, and opposing external forces’ promotion of ‘color revolutions’ and interference in regional affairs.”

The Global Security Initiative

- Unveiled during Xi’s April 2022 speech at the Boao Forum for Asia, the PRC’s Global Security Initiative (GSI) aims to “promote security for all in the world.” Though the exact nature of the Initiative remains largely undefined, Xi’s speech highlighted the importance of “staying committed” to “the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”; “respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries”; and “taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously” as some of the GSI’s founding principles.
- Notably, Xi’s speech also mentioned upholding the principle of indivisible security—frequently cited by Russia as part of its justifications for invading Ukraine—as one of the main ideas at the heart of the GSI.

152 Foreign Ministry of the PRC, “外交部部长秦刚就中国外交政策和对外关系回答中外记者提问” (“Foreign Minister Qin Gang Answers Questions from Chinese and Foreign Journalists on China’s Foreign Policy and External Relations”), March 7, 2023. Xi and his Central Asian counterparts attended a virtual summit in 2022 marking the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and the five Central Asian countries.
157 Foreign Ministry of the PRC, “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于深化新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系的联合声明” (“Joint Statement between (continued...)
Recent interactions between PRC and Central Asian officials suggest Beijing is focused on shoring up security fundamentals (e.g., military exchanges and counterterrorism cooperation), at least in the short term. This approach allows China to participate in regional security without taking on any new commitments or alienating Russia. At the SCO Summit in 2022, for example, Xi pledged that China “is ready to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel for SCO member states in the next five years, and establish a China-SCO base for training counter-terrorism personnel, so as to enhance capacity-building for law enforcement of SCO member states.”

Over the longer term, the PRC has sought to broaden the SCO as a platform for cooperation beyond security. Xi seems to have reaffirmed this intent at the 2022 Summit, when he stated that, “as an important constructive force in international and regional affairs,” the SCO “should keep itself well-positioned in the face of changing international dynamics, [ ... ] strengthen solidarity and cooperation and build a closer SCO community with a shared future.” Over time, PRC leaders may hope to shift security cooperation with Central Asia to China’s nascent GSI, which Beijing pitched to Central Asian governments in June 2022, but which does not include Russia.

**China–Central Asia Trade and the Belt and Road Initiative**

Following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, China began steadily building trade and economic relationships with each of the Central Asian countries. In recent years, analysts have noted that China is eclipsing Russia in terms of its economic presence in the region. According to customs data from China and the five Central Asian countries, China ranked among the top six trading partners of each country and was the largest trading partner of both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan prior to the onset of COVID-19. According to data from China’s General Administration of Customs, in 2021, China exported goods to Central Asia totaling approximately $29.5 billion in value and imported approximately $17.4 billion in goods from the region, primarily in the oil and gas, metals, and agricultural sectors. In January 2022, PRC Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao claimed that China’s trade with the region had “grown by more than 100 times in the past 30 years.” Wang also said China would continue to invest in infrastructure and connectivity projects to further deepen ties. During a summit hosted by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in January 2022, Xi announced that China would further open its market to imports from Central Asia with the goal of increasing total trade turnover to $70 billion between China and the region by 2030.

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159 Ibid.
## Central Asia: Implications of Russia’s War in Ukraine

### Table 1. Snapshot of China’s Trade with Central Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Imports from C5 2020</th>
<th>Total Imports from C5 2021</th>
<th>Total Exports to C5 2020</th>
<th>Total Exports to C5 2021</th>
<th>Top PRC Import Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>$9,273,669,859</td>
<td>$9,805,100,650</td>
<td>$11,703,134,130</td>
<td>$13,971,277,470</td>
<td>Oil, copper, zinc, base metals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>$66,041,403</td>
<td>$34,801,089</td>
<td>$2,865,365,575</td>
<td>$7,477,464,298</td>
<td>Precious metals, cotton, aluminum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>$84,619,584</td>
<td>$45,293,459</td>
<td>$1,016,842,189</td>
<td>$1,685,742,986</td>
<td>Precious metals, cotton, base metals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>$8,686,022,768</td>
<td>$6,071,881,112</td>
<td>$443,488,588</td>
<td>$514,491,192</td>
<td>Oil, vegetables, salt, chemicals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>$2,180,781,409</td>
<td>$1,483,308,489</td>
<td>$5,138,716,239</td>
<td>$5,896,823,304</td>
<td>Cotton, oil, chemicals, vegetables</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| C5 Total     | $20,291,135,023            | $17,440,384,799             | $21,167,546,721          | $29,545,799,250          |                           |

Source: Congressional Research Service with China Customs data from Trade Data Monitor.

Infrastructure projects have long been a focus of China’s investment and financing activities in Central Asia, particularly since the announcement of the BRI. PRC entities have focused heavily on projects that increase connectivity and facilitate trade both within the region and between the region and the PRC. Between 2008 and 2017, China Development Bank and China Ex-Im Bank (China’s two major state banks involved in overseas project finance) provided an estimated $30.5 billion in financing for infrastructure construction and industrial upgraging projects in the C5 countries.\(^{164}\)

Oil and gas pipelines have been a particular focus of China’s long-term investment and financial involvement in the region, with several major projects predating the BRI. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan all ranked among China’s top five suppliers of natural gas delivered via pipeline in January-April 2022 according to PRC customs data, though both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have announced plans to halt exports within the next five years to meet domestic demand.\(^{165}\)

In the midst of international sanctions in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan’s Atasu-Alashankou pipeline continues to be a major artery in oil trade between China and Russia—in February 2022, Russian oil firm Rosneft extended by 10 years a prior agreement to supply China with 200,000 barrels of crude oil per day via the pipeline.\(^{166}\)

China is also mobilizing significant finance and investment in developing new transit corridors and digital infrastructure that could entrench its role in Central Asia’s medium-to-long-term economic development. In 2017 and 2020 respectively, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan formally requested to join the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit agreement (QTTA) between China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, originally signed in 1995 to harmonize customs procedures between the four countries.\(^{167}\)

China and other Central Asian countries have continued to reference the QTTA and its potential touchpoints with other planned economic corridors within the BRI, such as CPEC, as a foundation for further connectivity projects, such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway, which is set to begin construction in 2023 pending feasibility.

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\(^{166}\) “Russia’s Rosneft Agrees 100 mln T Oil Supply Deal with CNPC,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2022.

Chinese firms are also involved in building out various components of digital infrastructure grids in Central Asian countries, with projects including local surveillance networks, cloud storage and computing facilities, and “smart city” projects, including a planned $1 billion investment in Uzbekistan’s digital infrastructure and a major smart city platform in Tashkent.

Although China’s involvement in the region is significant and appears to be accomplishing stated PRC objectives of deepening China’s trade with and economic development role in the region, some experts have noted signs of deepening suspicion of and potential hostility toward certain forms of PRC economic involvement in the region, which some local interest groups view as predatory. Data collected by the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs on protests and labor disruptions in the region recorded a total of 158 demonstrations related to PRC projects in the region between September 2019 and May 2021 and some of these protests were attributed to fears that the projects would result in land seizures or job losses among local workers. Other experts have highlighted recent efforts by PRC firms to increase the degree of localization in their Central Asian operations in response to backlash against PRC-funded projects. Such backlash may indicate a strategic opportunity for U.S. engagement in the region to offer an alternative to PRC-funded development projects.

Issues for Congress

Some analysts assess that Eurasia’s shifting geopolitics in the wake of the war present new opportunities for U.S. engagement with Central Asia. Congress might consider various avenues—including trade, energy, minerals, regional connectivity, security cooperation, and media freedom—for developing bilateral and multilateral relations with regional countries.

Trade

U.S. trade with Central Asia remains limited. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, Central Asian countries are governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment. This section denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some current and former nonmarket economy countries unless they adhere to certain freedom-of-emigration requirements. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan receive temporary NTR status under a provision of the amendment that allows the President to extend NTR status to a country affected by the amendment by either waiving the freedom-of-emigration requirements or determining that the country is not in violation of the amendment’s provisions, subject to annual review. A complete lifting of the Jackson-Vanik requirements would require Congress to pass relevant legislation. Legislation that would have exempted Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan was introduced in previous Congresses but did not make it out of

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committee. 172 The Biden Administration supports lifting Jackson-Vanik for those three countries. 173 H.R. 1755 and H.R. 3611, introduced in the 118th Congress, would authorize the President to determine that Jackson-Vanik should no longer apply to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, respectively, and to extend permanent normal trade relations to those countries.

The Biden Administration seeks to address the war’s economic reverberations in Central Asia through the Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative (ERICEN), launched in September 2022. Using $50 million in FY2022 and FY2023 funding, ERICEN aims to diversify trade routes, increase shipping capacity, and enhance Trans-Caspian infrastructure, in addition to bolstering the private sector (including by facilitating the movement of Western multinational companies to Central Asia) and providing training and education opportunities. 174 In the assessment of one analyst, despite its small scale, “ERICEN lays the groundwork for prosperous trade relations and business partnerships” and “can emphasize U.S. comparative advantages in terms of international standards that bring greater long-term benefits” as compared to Chinese investment. 175 Others have criticized ERICEN as too modest in size, with one scholar terming it “not a very serious gesture” due to the fact that “$50 million is insignificant compared to what other powers are bringing in.” 176 Congress could consider whether to appropriate additional funding for the initiative.

Energy

Because Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan produce significant volumes of natural gas, some analysts in the United States and the European Union have argued that these countries represent a potential alternative to Russian natural gas for the European market. 177 To date, Central Asian and European countries have not traded gas directly. The proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would enable Turkmenistan to supply gas to European markets, but this project has been hampered by opposition from Russia and Iran, as well as by unresolved questions concerning the delimitation of Caspian seabed rights. 178 Azerbaijan has begun exports of Caspian natural gas to Europe, and in January 2021 the governments of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan signed an agreement to jointly develop a previously disputed gas field on their maritime border, potentially facilitating future gas exports from Turkmenistan to Europe. 179 In July 2022, Turkey announced that it is exploring avenues for supplying gas to its Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which runs from northeastern Turkey to the border with Greece, from

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172 These bills include: 117th Congress: H.R. 1913 (Uzbekistan), H.R. 5544 (Kazakhstan), H.R. 9322 (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan); 115th Congress: H.R. 4067 (Kazakhstan); 114th Congress: H.R. 3400 (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), H.R. 4219 (Kazakhstan), S. 3413 (Kazakhstan); 112th Congress: H.R. 1102 (Kazakhstan); 111th Congress: H.R. 876 (Kazakhstan), H.R. 2631 (Kazakhstan), S. 282 (Kazakhstan); 110th Congress: H.R. 2415 (Kazakhstan), S. 2562 (Kazakhstan); 109th Congress: H.R. 4004 (Kazakhstan); 108th Congress: H.R. 3708 (Kazakhstan); 107th Congress: H.R. 1318 (Kazakhstan), H.R. 3979 (Uzbekistan), S. 168 (Kazakhstan).


178 Ibid.

Turkmenistan via Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{180} Congress could consider how the United States might promote the development of gas supplies from Central Asia to Europe. Although they are gas producers, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have each experienced domestic energy crises in recent winters due to increased domestic demand combined with infrastructural deficiencies.

Promoting energy security within Central Asia, including by supporting a transition to renewable energy sources, is a stated goal of U.S. policy in the region.\textsuperscript{181} Congress could consider whether existing programs are effective, and whether and how they should potentially be expanded. Central Asian countries have significant potential to develop wind, solar, and hydropower energy sources. In recent years, some Central Asian governments have committed to diversifying toward renewable energy. Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have initiated solar energy projects with Chinese and European investors.\textsuperscript{182} Central Asia’s water resources give some countries in the region “immense” hydropower potential, but they also serve as a potential source of conflict given downstream countries’ dependence on the region’s rivers for irrigation.\textsuperscript{183} Although Central Asian countries have made some progress in resolving recurrent disagreements over the management of water resources, access to water continues to be a focal point of intermittent cross-border disputes.\textsuperscript{184} Some analysts argue that climate change will lead to additional stress on Central Asia’s water resources, heightening the potential for conflict.\textsuperscript{185}

Minerals

Central Asia is rich in mineral deposits, including rare earth elements and rare metals. The U.S. Geological Survey assesses that, in addition to substantial known deposits, Central Asia may have “considerable undiscovered resources.”\textsuperscript{186} Scholars assess that Central Asian countries have mineable resources of most of the critical materials necessary for clean energy technologies and that, thanks to the diversity of the region’s mineral base, Central Asia is “likely to become a new hotspot for mineral extraction.”\textsuperscript{187} Some analysts argue that Central Asia could serve as a significant source of rare earths, particularly for countries seeking to diversify their imports away from China, but cite legislation and investment climates unfavorable to foreign mining companies and a lack of up-to-date geological maps as factors hampering development.\textsuperscript{188} Some Members of Congress have expressed interest in Central Asia as a source of rare earth elements and rare metals for the United States, suggesting that the United States assist Central Asian countries in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[180] David O’Byrne, “Turkey looking to transit Turkmen gas via Azerbaijan,” Eurasianet, July 5, 2022.
\item[186] U.S. Geological Survey, “Rare Earth Element and Rare Metal Inventory of Central Asia,” March 2018.
\item[187] Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland, “Central Asia is a missing link in analyses of critical materials for the global clean energy transition,” One Earth vol. 4, issue 12, December 2021: 1678-1692.
\item[188] Robert Cekuta et al., Sourcing Rare Earth Minerals in Central Asia, Caspian Policy Center, June 2022.
\end{footnotes}
conducting surveys and encourage investment by U.S. private sector companies. In March 2023, the U.S. Geological Survey signed a memorandum of understanding with Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Industry and Infrastructural Development on scientific and technical cooperation, including developing new mineral maps.

Regional Connectivity

Promoting regional connectivity has long been a U.S. policy priority in Central Asia, and the United States has funded projects promoting regional cooperation in a range of areas. Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relationships in the region have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities. Some analysts suggest that regional connectivity in Central Asia has taken on added significance in light of the war in Ukraine. In his March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that furthering regional connectivity would grant Central Asian countries “options that enable them to stand firm in the face of malign influence.” For instance, greater regional connectivity could bolster Central Asia’s energy security and decrease its dependence on Russian natural gas, as well as facilitate trade via routes that bypass Russia. Congress could consider how Central Asian regional connectivity aligns with broader U.S. interests in light of the war, and how U.S. programs could support connectivity within Central Asia in a new geopolitical context. Congress could consider, for instance, whether to appropriate additional funding for the Biden Administration’s ERICEN initiative in order to bolster connectivity within Central Asia.

Security Cooperation

In his March 2023 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Donald Lu stated that the war in Ukraine has created new opportunities for security cooperation between the United States and Central Asia, noting Central Asian countries’ desires to diversify the sourcing of their defense equipment away from Russia as well as the success of the National Guard’s State Partnership Program (SPP) in the region. Through the SPP, four of the five Central Asian countries are paired with U.S. states (Kazakhstan-Arizona, Kyrgyzstan-Montana, Tajikistan-Virginia, and Uzbekistan-Mississippi), developing military-to-military contacts and receiving training in areas such as counterterrorism and disaster preparedness. Turkmenistan previously partnered with Nevada from 1996 to 2011. In September 2022, Turkmenistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the Commander of the Montana National Guard to discuss the resumption of Turkmenistan’s participation in the SPP, and the two sides...

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189 “Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism Holds Hearing on Central Asia,” Congressional Quarterly, March 8, 2023.
192 Ibid.
“expressed their readiness to further develop and strengthen military cooperation with the United States in accordance with the norms of the Constitution of Turkmenistan,” which mandates neutrality as the basis of the country’s foreign policy. Some scholars and U.S. officials have identified training and professional military education as areas of opportunity for expanding security cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries. Congress might consider how to take advantage of new opportunities for engagement with Central Asian countries in the security sphere, whether by funding new programs or examining the effectiveness of existing programs.

Nonproliferation has historically been a major area of U.S. engagement with Central Asia, particularly with Kazakhstan. Following Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, one Kazakh official cited Senate ratification of the negative security assurance protocol of the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ) treaty as an example of “low-hanging fruit” that would demonstrate U.S. commitment to developing relations with Central Asia, noting that the institutionalization of the CANWFZ has gained new strategic meaning. The CANWFZ treaty, which entered into force in 2009, prohibits the production, acquisition, stationing, storage, or use of nuclear weapons on the territory of the five Central Asian states. Like other nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties, CANWFZ includes a protocol to be signed and ratified by the five nuclear weapon states (the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom), pledging that they will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the countries in the zone, also called negative security assurances. The United States signed the CANWFZ protocol in 2014. President Barack Obama sent it to the Senate for its advice and consent for ratification in 2015, stating, “ratification of the Protocol is in the best interest of the United States, as it will enhance U.S. security by furthering our objective of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons [and] strengthen our relations with the states and the people of Central Asia.” China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom have ratified the CANWFZ protocol. One expert argues that negative security assurances, similar to those in the NWFZ protocols, have become increasingly significant.


in light of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Biden Administration supports the ratification of the CANWFZ protocol.

Media Freedom and Combatting Disinformation

Central Asia is a challenging environment for press freedom. Although Kyrgyzstan has long had the freest media in the region, analysts note increasing government pressure on independent outlets, including a 2021 law on “false information” that enables authorities to block access to websites publishing information deemed to be “inaccurate.” Some Members of Congress have expressed concern about “recent regressions in press freedom in the Kyrgyz Republic,” citing the government’s crackdown on independent media, particularly Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Kyrgyz Service, and reports of threats of violence against journalists. In Kazakhstan, several incidents of violence against journalists in January 2023 drew expressions of concern from the United States and other governments. Independent journalists have criticized proposed changes to legislation regulating Kazakhstan’s media, unveiled in January 2023 and officially geared toward bolstering the country’s information security in light of the global geopolitical situation, as introducing new means of censorship. Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has stated his support for press freedom, but journalists in the country note “hidden but strict” censorship. Reporters Without Borders describes increasing government repression of independent media in Tajikistan, which ranks 152nd out of 180 countries in the organization’s 2022 World Press Freedom Index. Turkmenistan, considered one of the world’s most repressive countries, ranks 177th. At the same time, Russian media outlets remain a major source of international news throughout Central Asia. Some scholars express concern that this renders Central Asian populations vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation. Congress might consider options for supporting media freedom and combatting disinformation in Central Asia, whether by drawing attention to instances of pressure on independent media or expanding programming in this area.

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