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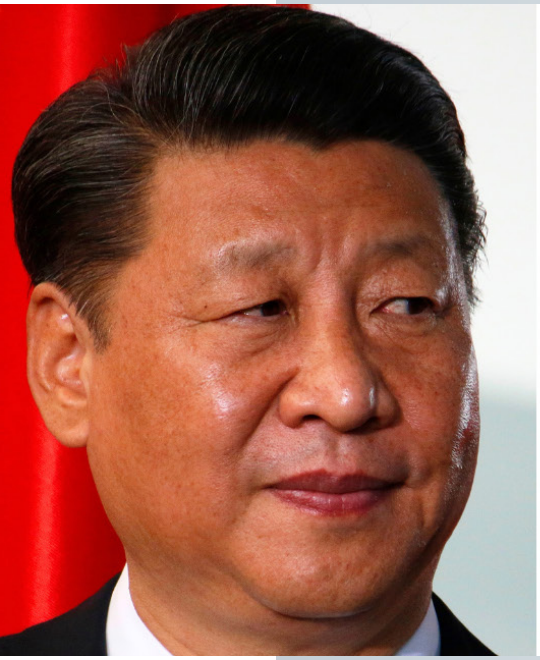

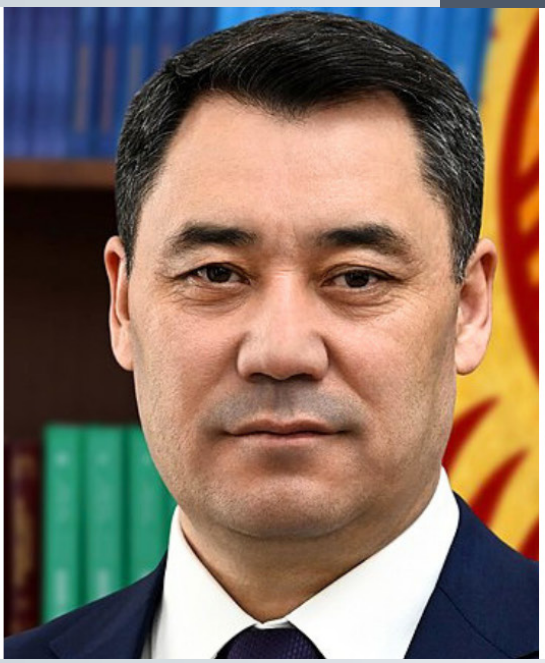

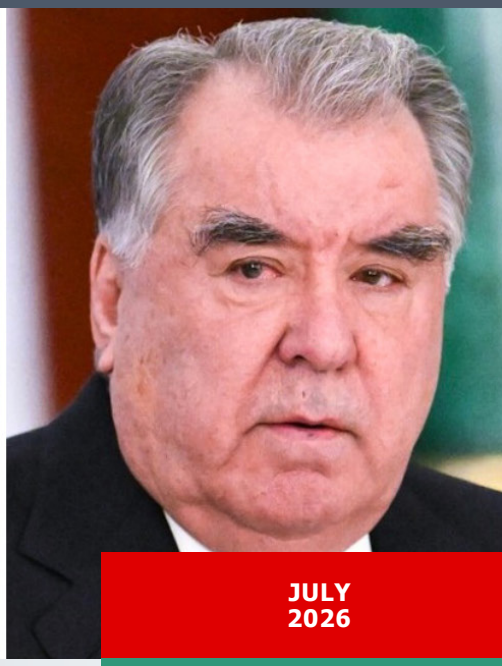

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China in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
From Economic Presence to a New Security Role

Russia/Eurasia
Center

Rollan ISMAIL

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, China's influence in Central Asia has steadily expanded, but in the last three to five years this process has entered a markedly accelerated phase. Following 2022, Beijing effectively revised both its strategy and its operational approach toward the region. This report examines how China is building its own security architecture in Central Asia by increasing its influence over the domestic stability of regional states and gradually eroding the role of traditional external security guarantors.

Using the cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the study highlights the practical mechanisms through which China's emerging strategy is being implemented. It argues that the securitization of Chinese influence is fostering growing yet largely concealed competition within the framework of the Sino-Russian partnership while creating new challenges for the states of the region. Increasing dependence on Beijing's resources and political support is compelling the Central Asian republics to seek new ways of preserving their strategic autonomy amid a shifting regional balance of power.

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Introduction

Central Asia is once again assuming a growing role in international affairs, largely as a result of intensified competition among external powers for strategic influence across the Eurasian continent. Against this backdrop, the notion of China's "growing influence" has become a widely accepted narrative. In our view, however, this formulation no longer fully captures the complexity and depth of the transformations currently underway. Rather, it would be more accurate to argue that, particularly since 2022, the region has witnessed a qualitatively new phase in the expansion of China's strategic influence and policy instruments in Central Asia. This transformation has been driven by several interrelated factors.

First, as a result of a deliberate long-term strategy, China is evolving from a predominantly economic partner into an increasingly significant political actor and, in some cases, a provider of security. Beijing is moving beyond its traditional focus on trade and energy imports, extending its reach from digital and critical infrastructure into the spheres of regional security and military-technical cooperation.

Second, Chinese engagement has become increasingly institutionalized through the C5+China format, which has emerged as Beijing's principal mechanism for engagement with all five Central Asian states at the highest political level.

Third, much as Russia did in previous decades, China has begun paying closer attention to domestic political dynamics in Central Asian countries. Beijing increasingly recognizes that the protection of its long-term interests depends on the preservation of stable and politically friendly regimes and elites. Although China does not yet possess the same degree of political influence as Russia, the broader trend is evident: Beijing is gradually moving beyond a model centered primarily on economic engagement toward a more comprehensive strategy aimed at safeguarding its position in the region. This does not entail direct intervention along Russian lines. Rather, it involves the expansion of indirect influence through closer engagement with ruling elites, stronger party-to-party ties, and the promotion of governance, surveillance, and digital-management solutions linked to state administration and security. For China, the stability of Central Asian regimes is important not only for protecting investments and transport corridors but also for preventing the mobilization of anti-Chinese sentiment, the rise of nationalism, and the penetration of competing external actors. It is therefore reasonable to expect that, in the coming years, Beijing will continue to expand its presence—cautiously but steadily—in those sectors most closely

connected to the domestic resilience of regional states, thereby increasing their dependence on Chinese resources, technologies, and political support.

Fourth, despite the officially proclaimed strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing, the expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia inevitably creates the conditions for latent tensions with Russian interests. As China moves beyond trade, investment, and infrastructure and becomes increasingly active in domains traditionally regarded as areas of privileged Russian influence, the scope for tacit competition is bound to expand. For Moscow, this trend implies the gradual erosion of its exclusive status as the region's primary external security guarantor. For Beijing, it offers an opportunity to draw Central Asian states more deeply into its own emerging security ecosystem. The result is the gradual emergence of a new model in which Russia and China continue to demonstrate coordination and mutual support at the official level, while at the practical level they engage in cautious competition over access to political elites, influence over strategic decision-making, and the long-term configuration of regional order.

Finally, these developments have generated mixed reactions within the Central Asian states themselves. While China's growing presence creates new economic opportunities, it also generates challenges for national security by increasing structural dependence and narrowing the space for strategic maneuver.

Against this backdrop, the present report examines the trends and drivers underpinning the qualitative expansion of China's strategic influence in Central Asia. Particular attention is paid both to Beijing's policies and to the responses of regional states. The cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan serve as the report's primary focus. These countries increasingly function as testing grounds for new methods and instruments of Chinese regional strategy, offering especially revealing examples of China's growing influence in sensitive security-related domains. An examination of developments in these two republics makes it possible to identify with particular clarity the early signs of latent competition that may, over time, generate new sources of tension between established and emerging external actors in the region.

At the same time, the strengthening of Chinese influence should not be interpreted as the automatic displacement of Russia from Central Asia. Moscow continues to enjoy significant advantages based on the enduring role of the Russian language, extensive political and security networks, institutional legacies, and its position as the principal destination for labor migration from the region. For both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, migrant remittances remain a critical component of economic stability. Consequently, the current process is better understood not as a replacement of Russian influence by Chinese influence, but rather as a more complex reconfiguration of external power relations. Nevertheless, Beijing is increasingly seeking to convert its economic and financial capital into political and strategic leverage.

From a methodological perspective, this study deliberately moves beyond more traditional analytical frameworks. Rather than examining shifts in the regional balance of power solely through the strategic imperatives of Beijing or other major powers, it also considers the perspectives of Central Asian elites and societies themselves. Concepts such as the "Great Game" or "Greater Central Asia" illustrate the enduring tendency to view the region primarily through the interests of external actors. Such approaches often distort reality by marginalizing the agency of Central Asian states and overlooking their domestic motivations and priorities.

To ensure analytical depth and objectivity, the report relies on a broad empirical foundation. First, it conducts a systematic examination of primary sources, including official documents, development strategies, and bilateral agreements between China, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Second, the study draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as a key tool for validating findings and identifying less visible trends. Interviewees were selected on the basis of professional expertise and direct engagement with the issues under examination. All interviews were conducted on an anonymous basis, enabling respondents to speak more openly about sensitive topics and providing access to assessments that are not always reflected in the public domain.

From investment to structural dependence

Since the Central Asian republics gained independence in the early 1990s, Beijing's strategy in the region has undergone a profound evolution. Initially, China acted primarily as a partner whose interests were limited to border demarcation, ensuring stability, and procuring raw materials. However, as the contours of a new world order took shape and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched, China began systematically accumulating economic assets, filling the vacuum created by Russia's economic problems and the West's fragmented attention. By the early 2020s, this paradigm of investing in large-scale infrastructure and energy projects had run its course. Today, Beijing's presence—particularly pronounced in the region's most vulnerable economies, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—is characterized by a shift from trade expansion to deep infrastructure control, sovereign debt management, and technological dominance.

Trade volume trends over the current decade clearly illustrate the qualitative nature of this shift. In 2013, when the BRI was launched, China's total trade with the five republics stood at $43.5 billion. By 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had temporarily pushed the figure back down to $38.6 billion. However, the subsequent recovery proved to be rapid and unprecedented. Specifically, by the end of 2025, trade volume reached a historic record of $106.3 billion,[1] surpassing the $100 billion mark for the first time and increasing 2.7-fold in just five years.

Noteworthy is the qualitative shift in the product structure of Chinese exports. In 2023-2025, Beijing purposefully promoted the so-called "new trio" of goods—electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries, and solar panels—to the region. Central Asia is thus becoming not merely a market for traditional consumer goods, but also a testing ground for the implementation and validation of Chinese technological standards and infrastructure solutions.

For Bishkek and Dushanbe, this signaled a shift in the geo-economic paradigm. In particular, Russia lost ground. It is telling that in the first five months of 2025 alone, Tajikistan's trade with China reached $900 million, surpassing Russia's figures.[2] However, a critical imbalance lies behind these figures. Of the $900 million mentioned, Tajik exports amounted to

1. A. Musaev, "Explainer: What's Next As China Overtakes Russia As Central Asia's Top Trading Partner?", BBC Monitoring, February 2, 2026, available at: https://monitoring.bbc.
2. V. Ismailov, "China Overtakes Russia as Tajikistan's Top Trading Partner for the First Time", *Times of Central Asia*, July 15, 2025, available at: https://timesca.com.

only $177 million, creating a significant trade deficit, depleting national foreign exchange reserves, and cementing the republics' status as dependent export markets.

This macroeconomic vulnerability is becoming even more complex due to Kyrgyzstan's transformation into a transit hub for circumventing Western sanctions against Russia. As recent data shows, the discrepancy in official trade figures between Bishkek and Beijing has reached staggering proportions. Specifically, at the end of 2025, the Chinese customs service recorded exports to Kyrgyzstan totaling $27.2 billion, while the Kyrgyz side reported imports of $4.97 billion.[3] It is evident that such a discrepancy of more than 5.5 times cannot be attributed solely to the methodology for accounting for transit cargo. In reality, these figures document a large-scale shadow economy and gray re-export schemes, including dual-use goods.[4] Incidentally, the 800% increase in shipments of high-tech European goods to Kyrgyzstan, followed by a 1,200% surge in their re-export to Russia, triggered unprecedented pressure from the European Union (EU).[5]

Parallel to trade and transit asymmetries, the rapid expansion of lending by Chinese banks in the 2010s has evolved into a systemic debt burden threatening national sovereignty. According to research by the Lowy Institute, Beijing has now transformed from the world's leading supplier into a "debt collector." For example, debt to China accounts for about 28% of total external debt in both Kyrgyzstan (about $1.5 billion) and Tajikistan (about $900 million).[6] Bishkek's attempts to diversify its debt or secure debt relief have been met with refusal from the Chinese side. Beijing agrees only to commercial deferrals with interest maintained and additional fees charged. For Dushanbe, this inability to service loans without straining the budget means that it is being forced to swap debt for assets and relinquish strategic resources.

Meanwhile, it is precisely this debt leverage that has allowed China to accelerate the transition to direct operational control over heavy industry and natural resources. For example, transnational corporations such as Zijin Mining are methodically establishing dominant positions in the gold mining industry. The company controls the strategic Jilau and Taror deposits in Tajikistan and manages the Altynken project in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, such large-scale projects often exacerbate social tensions, as clearly demonstrated by the protests of Tajik miners at the Zarafshon mine in late 2024. According to former employees of the company, Tajik engineers

3. K. Aibashov and M. Sharipzhan, "China-Kyrgyzstan Trade Gap Widens As Conflicting Data Raises Transparency Concerns", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 26, 2026, available at: www.rferl.org.
4. Y. Yusupov, "Foreign Trade of Central Asian Countries: Trends, Barriers, and Prospects", Central Asian Policy Studies (CAPS) Unlock, 2025, available at: https://capsunlock.org.
5. E. Collet, "Kyrgyzstan in EU Crosshairs over Russia Sanctions Circumvention", Euractiv, February 26, 2026, available at: www.euractiv.com.
6. R. Duke, "Peak Repayment: China's Global Lending", Lowy Institute, May 2025, available at: https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org.

earn six times less than their Chinese colleagues.[7] At the same time, as the data shows, the control exercised by Chinese corporations in Tajikistan extends beyond raw material extraction. The large-scale modernization of the Tajik Aluminum Company (TALCO), for which contracts (ranging from $545 million to $1.6 billion) have been awarded to the Chinese company CMEC, ensures the long-term technological dependence of Tajikistan's main export industry on Chinese equipment and standards.[8]

At the same time, one of the largest infrastructure projects demonstrating the expansion of Chinese influence is the launch in 2024 of construction on the $4,7 billion China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Railway (CKU Railway). The project, intended to become the key artery of the Middle Corridor, structurally cements Beijing's dominance. The controlling stake in the joint venture (51%) belongs to China, and financing is provided through a long-term loan from Chinese state-owned banks. Economists warn that in the long term, the BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) model will inextricably tie Kyrgyzstan's public finances and drastically curtail its transit sovereignty.[9]

Taken together, these processes are shaping a new reality, clearly reflected in the results of closed expert surveys conducted by the author in February–March 2026. Researchers representing state research centers, universities, and private think tanks from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan generally acknowledge that the local elites' initial pragmatic calculations are rapidly being supplanted by a sense of inevitable growing dependence. And as Kyrgyz experts note, public discontent is once again growing, both with the activities of Chinese companies and with the actions of local authorities who are increasingly loyal to China. At the same time, the Kyrgyz authorities' growing loyalty to China is driven not so much by sympathy as by pragmatic calculation and structural dependence. Kyrgyz researcher Nadezhda Sergeyevna Tatkalo describes this logic through the concept of "mutually acceptable ignorance," whereby the government tacitly agrees to the unfavorable terms of Chinese loans, while Chinese companies turn a blind eye to the corruption schemes in which they are inevitably entangled. Between 1999 and 2019, Kyrgyzstan witnessed three major political scandals in which Chinese money became a tool of internal political struggle; however, in all cases, the Chinese side remained outside the investigations.[10] As a result, Chinese financial flows have become a resource around which the ruling elites build informal agreements to retain

7. "Tensions Rise Around Chinese Mining Projects in Tajikistan", *The Caspian Post*, January 23, 2026, available at: https://caspianpost.com.
8. "Part of the Property of Tajikistan's Aluminum Giant Will Be Transferred to a New Company" Central Asia Group (CAG) World, available at: www.cag.world.
9. A. Dayar, "A New Link in Global Trade: The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway and Its Role in the Middle Corridor", Caspian Policy Center, June 10, 2025, available at: https://caspianpolicy.org.
10. N. S. Tatkalo, "Mify i realii kitajskoj ugrozy v Kyrgyzstane" [Myths and Realities of the Chinese Threat in Kyrgyzstan], Institute for Strategic Analysis and Forecasting (ISAF), February 24, 2022, available at: www.isap.center.

power. It is precisely this logic that explains the authorities' consistent favor toward expanding China's presence, regardless of public sentiment.

Meanwhile, by transforming debt into control over assets and transit dependence into control over critical infrastructure, China is effectively reducing the space for strategic maneuver and threatening the sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The evolution of China's security strategy in Central Asia

As China's economic footprint in Central Asia deepened, it gradually expanded its security-related instruments as well. The cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provide particularly clear illustrations of the step-by-step evolution of China's security strategy. Chinese engagement has progressively shifted from a focus on border stabilization and multilateral cooperation through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) toward bilateral security arrangements, the commercialization of security services, and the growing use of technological surveillance and control mechanisms.

This transformation has been driven not only by China's domestic imperative to ensure stability along its western frontier, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), but also by the rapidly changing geopolitical environment in Central Asia. Key factors include persistent instability in Afghanistan, recurrent socio-political crises within the Central Asian republics, and intensifying competition among major external powers. Against this backdrop, the evolution of China's security role can be divided into several interconnected phases, each characterized by distinct instruments, legal frameworks, and strategic objectives.

Stabilizing Xinjiang and the architecture of the "Shanghai Five" (1990s–early 2000s)

In the early stages of the Central Asian republics' independence, Beijing's key priority was the stability of the XUAR. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a situation of uncertainty along the borders. The threat of the infiltration of the ideas of terrorism, extremism, and separatism—or the so-called "three evil forces"—through the vulnerable and not yet fully demarcated borders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan dictated the need to build a system of trust in the military sphere. The legal basis for this stage was provided by historical agreements signed within the framework of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996. The agreement between the three countries of the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) that share a common border with China laid the foundation for the creation of a full-fledged international organization—the SCO.

In the subsequent period, China's involvement in regional security in Central Asia was limited to SCO activities. The SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) conducted annual exercises focused on combating terrorism and extremism. These activities were not without tangible results. At the same time, as China's military and economic capabilities expanded, its role and significance as a security partner for many countries steadily increased. Since the SCO's functions did not allow China to fully expand its influence on regional security, the Chinese authorities began to adjust their approaches. As a result, in the years that followed, we witnessed various bilateral and multilateral initiatives.

The Afghan factor and China's physical entrenchment in the region (2000s–2010s)

The next phase is characterized by the growing significance of the Afghan factor in China's Central Asian strategy. In particular, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated and the withdrawal of the main North Atlantic Treaty Organization coalition forces began, Beijing's strategy in Central Asia underwent a qualitative shift. China recognized the limitations of the SCO mechanisms, which require consensus among all participants, including Russia, and shifted to utilizing various formats for the operational resolution of security challenges. Tajikistan, which has the longest (over 1,300 km) and most complex border with Afghanistan, became the main focus of the new "forward defense" strategy. This transition was formally cemented by the creation in 2016 of the Quadrilateral Mechanism for Cooperation and Coordination involving China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Within the framework of this mechanism, China began for the first time to establish extraterritorial military infrastructure facilities aimed at countering threats. During this period, Beijing paid particular attention to the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) of Tajikistan, where the presence of Chinese security forces was most clearly evident. In the vicinity of the village of Shaimak, security infrastructure has been established, officially classified as a base for Tajik rapid reaction forces, built with financial and technical support from the People's Republic of China (PRC).[11] Although Western media and a number of experts from Taiwan, Japan, and other countries classify the facility as "militarized" and point to the presence of Chinese personnel, the exact legal status of the complex remains a subject of debate.[12] Official Dushanbe and Beijing consistently deny the existence of a foreign military base, emphasizing that cooperation is based on the principles of joint counterterrorism efforts within the framework of bilateral

11. J. Shi, "Pilot. China's Military Base in Tajikistan", Taiwan Institute of National Defense and Security, November 12, 2021, available at: https://indsr.org (in Chinese).
12. J. Shi, "China's Military Expansion and Constraints in Central Asia", Taiwan Institute of National Defense and Security, August 31, 2022, available at: https://indsr.org.tw (in Chinese).

agreements, where Tajikistan's security forces retain key administrative and operational roles.

In addition, in 2021, the Tajik Parliament ratified an agreement with China on the construction of a new base for the Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs' Rapid Response Group in the Ishkashim District. The project cost approximately 55 million yuan ($8.5 million), with all equipment, including surveillance and communications systems, supplied by the Chinese side.[13]

By developing this framework, Beijing has moved from declarative initiatives to the long-term consolidation of its presence. This was confirmed by an agreement ratified by the Tajik Parliament on March 4, 2026, under which the Chinese government will finance (in the form of a 424 million yuan grant) and carry out the construction of nine new modern border facilities.[14] The specifics of the project demonstrate China's systematic approach, which involves construction following a fully closed Chinese cycle, while Dushanbe provides only the land and full tax exemption. This initiative, serving as a continuation of the 2017-2018 program, forms an even more extensive, multi-layered security line.

It is noteworthy that the old and new facilities built with Chinese support on the Tajik-Afghan border have not yet yielded the expected results, as experts interviewed in Tajikistan also point out. Modern technologies used for border patrols are strengthening border control. At the same time, however, the presence of Chinese military personnel and, more broadly, representatives of Chinese companies is leading to an intensification of border attacks from Afghanistan. In particular, as Tajik experts note, in the second half of 2025 alone, nine incidents were recorded on the Tajik-Afghan border involving the illegal crossing of the Tajik border by drug smugglers, members of terrorist groups, as well as attacks on Chinese citizens.[15] The most high-profile incidents occurred in late November 2025. According to reports from the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an armed attack was launched from Afghan territory against employees of Shohin SM LLC using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, resulting in the deaths of Chinese citizens working at a gold mining enterprise.[16]

This phase is characterized by a shift from diplomatic assurances to the physical presence of PRC security forces on the territory of states in the region. In official PRC documents, such as the "White Paper on National

13. H. Bai, "China Controls the Wakhan Corridor to Protect Xinjiang and, Taking Advantage of the Situation in Afghanistan, Strengthens Its Presence in the Pamirs", Voice of America, Cantonese Service, October 30, 2021, available at: www.voacantonese.com (in Chinese).
14. Š. Kudrat, "Kitaj postroit 9 pograničnyh ob″ektov na granice Tadžikistana s Afganistanom" [China to Build 9 Border Facilities on Tajikistan's Border with Afghanistan], Asia-Plus, March 11, 2026, available at: https://asiaplus.news.
15. Š. Rizoën, "Tadžiksko-afganskaâ granica v 2025 godu: incidenty i ih posledstviâ" [Tajik-Afghan Border in 2025: Incidents and Their Consequences], Cronos.Asia, December 27, 2025, available at: https://cronos.asia.
16. "O vooruženном napadenii na tadžikskoj granice" [On the Armed Attack on the Tajik Border], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, November 27, 2025, available at: https://mfa.tj/ru.

Defense," this approach has been justified by the need to protect national interests abroad and participate in international counterterrorism cooperation.[17] For Tajikistan, such cooperation has become a necessary compromise. Thus, despite assurances from the Tajik side that there are no Chinese military bases on Tajik territory, one cannot deny the fact that, in exchange for financial aid and infrastructure investments, Dushanbe has *de facto* transferred part of the control over its border territories to Beijing's oversight.

The commercialization of security

The third phase (2013-2022) was marked by the fact that, alongside the launch of the global BRI, China began to perceive internal instability in the region's countries as a direct threat to its own investments, infrastructure, and citizens. The changes in power in Kyrgyzstan, crises in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAR), the events of "Bloody January" 2022 in Kazakhstan, and unrest in Karakalpakstan showed Beijing that risks to Chinese assets stem not only from outside but also from within the Central Asian states themselves. The response has been to expand bilateral cooperation with security agencies and gradually commercialize certain security functions.

In this context, as Kyrgyz researchers rightly note, Beijing's role is growing precisely through the diversification of non-institutional mechanisms that ultimately sanction the activities of Chinese military contractors in the region.[18] In particular, this period has seen Chinese private security firms entering the markets of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Taiwanese experts note that China widely employs the practice of establishing and utilizing private security firms in Central and South Asia, such as Zhongjun Junhong. The company operates in Kyrgyzstan, providing security for Chinese mining assets and logistics facilities. While formally complying with local laws, such companies are often staffed by People's Liberation Army (PLA) veterans and maintain direct channels of communication with Chinese security agencies. The company Hua Xin is also mentioned; it specializes in protecting BRI facilities, providing services for personnel training and the installation of technical security systems.[19]

At the same time, the volume of military-technical assistance from China to countries in the region has surged, taking on a targeted nature. China has shifted its focus from supplying surplus old equipment to transferring modern patrol vehicles, communications equipment,

17. "China's National Defense in the New Era", *White Paper*, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, July 24, 2019, available at: www.scio.gov.cn (in Chinese).
18. Z. T. Muratalieva and A. T. Esenbekova and N. S. Tatkalo, "China in the Shadow of Russia: Covert Tools for Expanding China's Influence over Kyrgyzstan's Security", *India Quarterly*, Vol. 78, No. 1, 2022, pp. 88-103.
19. J. Shi, "A Pilot Project: China's Military Base in Tajikistan", op. cit.

unmanned systems, and special equipment for the Interior Ministry units and National Guards of both republics. This is reinforced by regular bilateral exercises in the "Cooperation" series. For example, during the "Cooperation-2019" exercises between the Chinese People's Armed Police and the Kyrgyz National Guard, scenarios for suppressing mass riots and protecting strategically important facilities in urban environments were practiced.[20]

This approach allows Beijing to strengthen its presence in the security sphere without establishing full-fledged military bases based on the classical model. Instead of open military deployment, China uses more flexible tools, including infrastructure financing, personnel training, direct equipment supplies, cooperation with domestic security forces, and the use of private contractors. From a political standpoint, this enables the PRC to reduce the costs associated with the perception of foreign interference while maintaining significant influence over security practices.[21]

It is also important to note that, in addition to the above, China is consistently developing tools to influence domestic political processes. One such mechanism was the 2024 Global Forum on Public Security Cooperation in Lianyungang, which served as a platform for promoting the Chinese approach to security management within the framework of the GSI (Global Security Initiative). The forum brought together representatives from more than 100 countries and focused on developing cooperative practices in the fight against transnational crime, digital security, and migration regulation.

Arms exports and the training of military elites

Today, China is the second-largest arms supplier to Central Asia after Russia. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the share of Chinese arms already exceeds 20% of total procurement.[22] At the same time, China's presence in the unmanned systems market has become particularly noticeable in recent years, where it is in direct competition with Turkey. In particular, deliveries of the CH-4, CH-5, and Wing Loong systems to the region are shifting the balance of power. These aircraft have been used in border conflicts and counterterrorism operations, demonstrating the superiority of Chinese technology over outdated models.[23] Crucially, these deliveries are accompanied by operator training and the establishment of local service

20. "China and Kyrgyzstan have launched the joint counterterrorism exercise 'Cooperation-2019'", Xinhua, August 6, 2019, available at: www.xinhuanet.com (in Chinese).
21. "A Sub-Forum on International Police Education Was Held As Part of the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (Lianyungang)", Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, September 8, 2024, available at: www.mps.gov.cn (in Chinese).
22. I. Y. Zuenko, "China's Activity in Central Asia in Light of Russian Interests", *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, April-June 2025, pp. 146-164, available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.
23. "Joint Declaration of the PRC and the Kyrgyz Republic on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for a New Era (Full Text)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, May 18, 2023, available at: www.fmprc.gov.cn (in Chinese).

centers, which ensures a long-term presence of Chinese technical specialists within the defense ministries of Bishkek and Dushanbe.

Thus, the involvement of Chinese specialists is organically complemented by systematic efforts to cultivate a new military elite. The systematic expansion of training quotas for officers from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at PLA military academies (in particular, at the International College of Defense Studies at the PLA National Defense University) clearly creates a long-term channel for ideological and professional influence. Every year, hundreds of mid- and senior-level officers undergo training in China, where they are instilled not only with tactical skills but also with the Chinese vision of security strategy, based on the defense of sovereignty against external interference and "color revolutions".[24]

24. "Joint Statement by the PRC and the Kyrgyz Republic on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of the New Era (Full Text)", Embassy of the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic February 6, 2025, available at: https://kg.china-embassy.gov.cn (in Chinese).

The technological dimension of China's security presence (2022–present)

At the current stage, China is transforming its presence in Central Asia from a model of reactive engagement to one of technological dominance, increasingly entering into direct competition with traditional security guarantors and providers, most notably Russia, the United States (U.S.), and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. A key dimension of this influence lies in China's ability to convert civilian technological innovation into military capabilities and strategic leverage, thereby shaping the evolving rules of the international order.[25] The conceptual framework underpinning this process is the GSI, unveiled by Xi Jinping in 2022. The GSI promotes the principle of "indivisible security" with Chinese characteristics, encouraging states to reduce their reliance on extra-regional alliances and instead participate in regional security arrangements in which China plays a central role.[26]

In practical terms, Beijing is actively expanding dual-use infrastructure across the region, creating long-term technological dependencies through a variety of mechanisms.

Digital securitization

Alongside its physical presence and military-technical assistance, China is systematically building an even less obvious but no less significant sphere of influence: digital security infrastructure. Exports of "Smart City" and "Safe City" systems from Huawei, Hikvision, Dahua, and CEIEC (China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation) provide local interior ministries with access to facial recognition and big data analytics systems. In addition, in 2019, an upgrade to the system incorporating facial recognition algorithms was announced. Also in 2019, the Chinese corporation CEIEC donated a command center to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs, equipped with facial recognition and big data analysis systems for monitoring the situation in Bishkek.[27] In Kyrgyzstan, control of these

25. S. Kennedy, "The Power of Innovation: The Strategic Value of China's High-Tech Drive", Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), March 2, 2026, available at: www.csis.org.
26. X. Zeng and Z. Wang, ""Three Initiatives' and China's Diplomacy in Central Asia in the New Era", *Global Review*, No. 1, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, 2024, pp. 75-96, available at: www.siis.org. (in Chinese).
27. N. Yau, "China taking Big Brother to Central Asia", Eurasianet, September 6, 2019, available at: https://eurasianet.org.

systems—which include cameras with facial recognition and violation detection capabilities—was centralized and transferred to Kyrgyztelecom OJSC and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in September 2025. However, Chinese cloud solutions and the "City Brain" concept remain the architectural core of the infrastructure.

The emergence in 2025 of advanced Chinese Artificial Intelligence (AI) models, such as DeepSeek, significantly reduced the cost and greatly accelerated the processes of machine learning and big data analysis, making these technologies accessible to Global South countries with limited budgets. In the context of Central Asian countries, this process is unfolding unevenly. The deepest integration of Chinese AI analytics technologies is observed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where they are becoming an integral part of the infrastructure for public administration and public safety. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the adoption of Chinese models faces stiffer competition, taking the form of piecemeal implementation in specific sectors of the economy and urban infrastructure. In the context of Central Asian countries, this means that by exporting these technologies, Beijing is pursuing a dual objective. On the one hand, it helps local regimes maintain political control and swiftly suppress pockets of instability, which aligns with China's security vision. On the other hand, the integration of Chinese platforms into the critical infrastructure of Central Asian countries creates vulnerabilities, providing Chinese intelligence agencies with covert access to vast amounts of biometric, telecommunications, and social data. Notably, this factor was cited by the majority of experts surveyed as the most serious risk to the national security of Central Asian countries. A striking example of such risks is an incident identified by cybersecurity experts, in which groups affiliated with Chinese intelligence agencies maintained covert access to the infrastructure of Kazakhstan's largest telecom operators (including Kcell, Tele2, and Beeline) for an extended period of time.[28]

Such digital securitization is gradually turning Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan into testing grounds for technological surveillance tools. In this context, it is important to note that the U.S. Department of Defense has institutionalized the monitoring of such entities under the Section 1260H mechanism, identifying companies such as Huawei and Hikvision as elements of China's military-civil fusion.[29] In subsequent years, this list was significantly expanded and institutionalized under the Section 1260H mechanism.[30] The integration of such systems creates "technological

28. A. Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Major Data Hack Bears Chinese Fingerprints", *Eurasianet*, February 22, 2024, available at: https://eurasianet.org.
29. T. Capaccio and J. Leonard, "Huawei on List of 20 Chinese Companies That Pentagon Says Are Controlled by People's Liberation Army", *TIME*, June 25, 2020, available at: https://time.com.
30. "Entities Identified as Chinese Military Companies Operating in the United States in Accordance with Section 1260H of the William M. ('Mac') Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283)", U.S. Department of Defense January 7, 2025, available at: https://media.defense.gov.

dependence" among the republics and provides Beijing with a tool for potential political influence and control over vast amounts of data.

BeiDou satellite navigation

China is actively promoting its BeiDou satellite navigation system as an alternative to the American Global Positioning System (GPS) and Russian Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) for the region's militaries.[31] BeiDou has the advantage of a short-message function, which allows for the coordination of unit operations in areas with no communication in mountainous terrain (the Pamir and Tien Shan ranges). The adoption of BeiDou by the armed forces of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan creates a fundamental dependency in the areas of troop command and control and the use of precision-guided weapons. BeiDou is positioned as the foundation of the region's digital sovereignty, effectively tying these countries to the Chinese technological platform.[32] However, it is important to recognize that BeiDou is a fundamental element of China's military infrastructure, created to ensure independence from the American GPS. The integration of Central Asian logistics and the public sector into BeiDou expands the coverage area and accuracy of China's military navigation network.

Monopoly in the telecommunications sector

A logical extension of China's digital expansion is its drive to establish control over the region's telecommunications network architecture. This involves not only supplying equipment but also an attempt to take the lead in shaping the technological rules of the future, including 5G and Internet of Things (IoT). As experts from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan note, Chinese vendors have effectively monopolized the supply of equipment for core networks in Central Asia.[33] By supplying equipment at favorable prices with credit support, Beijing aims to tie local telecommunications companies into its ecosystem, making a switch to equipment from other vendors financially unfeasible. By financing the construction of such centers, China ensures that the region's network architecture automatically aligns with Chinese standards, cutting Central Asian countries off from Western (and, in the long term, Russian) technology platforms.

31. "China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System in the New Era", *White Paper*, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, November 4, 2022, available at: http://english.scio.
32. W. Yang and Z. Ye, "A Brief Analysis of the Operational Application of the CCP's Third-Generation 'BeiDou Satellites'", *Naval Academic Bimonthly*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2025 (in Chinese).
33. A. Bobokhonov and D. Bekturganov, "China's Growing Technological Impact in Central Asia", Civic IDEA/Doublethink Lab, May 2023, available at: https://civicidea.ge.

The figures clearly illustrate the extent of China's technological penetration into the region's communications infrastructure. In Tajikistan, a memorandum between the Communications Service and Huawei provides for the upgrade and expansion of the network based on 7,600 GSM/LTE/5G base stations, which are viewed as the foundation of the future 5G infrastructure.[34] According to a number of expert estimates, over 90% of Tajikistan's telecommunications equipment is supplied by Huawei. In Kyrgyzstan, Huawei is the key technology supplier for the largest operators, including Sky Mobile and Alfa Telecom, and in a number of analytical publications, the share of its equipment among them is estimated at 90% and 70%, respectively. Thus, a multi-level strategy combining grant-funded construction of military facilities, the export of digital surveillance systems, the training of elites, and the presence of informal paramilitary structures allows China to effectively advance its interests without resorting to the formal creation of military blocs.

34. "Signing of a Memorandum between the Communications Service and 'Huawei Technologies of Tajikistan' LLC", Communications Service under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan, December 12, 2023, available at: https://cs.gov.tj.

The contours of competition with Russia

At the official level, Russian-Chinese relations continue to be characterized as a "strategic partnership without borders," based on mutual trust and joint efforts to dismantle the Western-centric world order. However, at the regional level, a different dynamic is becoming increasingly apparent, where a gradual redistribution of roles within the asymmetrical partnership can be observed today.

Contrary to numerous expert assessments, Russia has not lost Central Asia as an area of key interests since 2022. It retains its military presence, as well as its infrastructure, migration, and humanitarian levers. Nevertheless, the war against Ukraine has objectively narrowed Russia's room for maneuver and increased Moscow's dependence on the Chinese market, while the Central Asian states themselves have stepped up their multi-vector hedging.

It is precisely in this situation that China has gained not so much a chance to oust Russia as an opportunity to systematically occupy niches where Moscow previously held a de facto monopoly. Beijing is doing this by forming a dense network of economic, institutional, digital, and personnel dependencies. From an analytical perspective, this approach can be viewed through the lens of the concept of "weaponized interdependence",[35] which posits that control over key nodes of transport, financial, digital, and regulatory networks eventually becomes a lever of structural influence.

In the Central Asian context, this primarily concerns logistics, digital infrastructure, educational platforms, surveillance systems, and mechanisms for training managerial and security personnel. This is not classical military-political domination, but a more flexible and less visible, yet deeply rooted form of influence.

The first and most sensitive point of divergence has been the region's institutional architecture. For two decades, China was largely forced to operate in Central Asia within the framework of the SCO, where Russia retained political weight, procedural influence, and the ability to block what it viewed as excessive autonomy for Chinese initiatives. Starting with the 2023 Xi'an summit, Beijing began purposefully shifting its engagement with the region's countries into a separate, exclusive "China-Central Asia" format. In the spring of 2024, the Secretariat of the mechanism was officially

35. H. Farrell and A. L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 2019, pp. 42-79.

launched in Xi'an, and by June 2025, 13 ministerial platforms were already operating within this framework. What is particularly sensitive for Russia is that this framework is being established without its participation or institutional veto. Russia is not even represented in this mechanism as an observer. It is no coincidence that Russian experts from Moscow State Institute of International Relations note that Russia's influence in Central Asia has been declining since the 2000s, and the 2023 Xi'an summit was particularly sensitive for Moscow, as it was followed by the emergence of elements of political integration between Central Asian countries and China without Russia's participation.[36]

In the economic sphere, competition is becoming increasingly pronounced, although it would still be premature to speak of Russia's complete displacement from the region. The situation in Tajikistan is indicative in this regard, where for the first time in more than two decades, China has slightly overtaken Russia, becoming the republic's largest trading partner. In absolute terms, the volumes are comparable. Thus, Tajikistan's trade turnover with China for the first five months of 2025 reached $964 million, while trade with Russia amounted to approximately $900 million. At the same time, Russian-Tajik trade is also showing growth. As of the end of the first nine months of 2025, it had increased by 17% compared to the same period last year.[37]

At the same time, the main stumbling block is the implementation of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway line, which is a key link in the Middle Corridor. For many years, the Trans-Siberian Railway and Kazakhstan's well-developed railway network provided Moscow with a logistical monopoly on the transit of goods between Asia and Europe. The construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway, which entered its active phase in 2025-2026, is dealing a significant blow to Russia's transit revenues. As the experts interviewed note, even more importantly, this project deprives Russia of the strategic ability to use logistics as a tool for political blackmail or pressure on Central Asian states in crisis situations.

In the security sphere, competition is developing even more cautiously, but that is precisely why it is particularly significant. For a long time, Central Asia operated under an informal division of roles, a phenomenon that has been widely discussed and written about.[38] This framework no longer reflects today's realities. At the summit in Astana in June 2025, Beijing openly offered not only economic but also security instruments, including support for the modernization of the region's defense and law enforcement sectors, joint exercises, personnel training, Safe City projects, as well as expanded cooperation in the fight against terrorism, transnational crime, and cyber

36. I. Y. Zuenko, "China's Activity in Central Asia in Light of Russian Interests", op. cit.
37. "Russia-Tajikistan Trade Turnover Sees Significant Growth in 2025", *The Caspian Post*, October 7, 2025, available at: https://caspianpost.com.
38. J. Šćepanović, "The Sheriff and the Banker? Russia and China in Central Asia", War on the Rocks, June 13, 2022, available at: https://warontherocks.com.

threats. Of course, this does not yet mean that China has displaced Russia from the security sphere, a view also shared by the majority of researchers surveyed. Nevertheless, Beijing has entered segments that were previously considered politically sensitive and largely reserved for Moscow. This is creating a parallel security architecture that is less formalized but functionally increasingly dense.

It is also crucial that Moscow has not yet translated these differences into an open political dispute. The reason lies not in the absence of contradictions, but in the sharply increased cost of publicly articulating them. A Reuters report notes that after 2022, China became a major economic pillar for Russia. Despite a decline in trade volume in 2025, bilateral trade still amounted to approximately $228.1 billion, and the Chinese market continues to play a critical role for Moscow in the sale of energy resources and the purchase of a wide range of goods.[39] Under these circumstances, the Kremlin has no objective interest in demonstratively blocking Chinese initiatives in Central Asia. It is telling that even among Russian experts, the dominant logic is not one of direct confrontation with China, but rather one of risk management and attempts to adapt to the new balance by maintaining dialogue with Beijing and holding onto positions in remaining areas of advantage. Moreover, Russian experts note that the increase in Chinese arms and equipment deliveries to Central Asia reduces Western supplies to the region.[40]

Overall, it can be stated that, up until 2022, the roles of China and Russia in Central Asia did not undergo any drastic changes. Each power pursued its own course in the region, without significantly overlapping with the other's interests. The historically established position that Central Asia is a zone of special interest to Russia was formally recognized by China. At the same time, however, Beijing gradually expanded its spheres of influence in Central Asia in those areas where Russia's influence was waning. Overall, Moscow and Beijing managed to pursue their own policies without entering into any open conflict with one another. It is precisely after 2022 that the status of Russia and China in Central Asia has been rapidly changing, and the new *status quo* is clearly less and less in line with Russia's interests.

Thus, Russia–China relations in Central Asia today defy any simple characterization. One conclusion, however, is clear: it is no longer possible to speak of a division of labor between Moscow and Beijing, particularly in Kazakhstan. The once-prevailing formula under which China expanded its economic influence while Russia acted as the region's primary security provider is no longer satisfactory to either side. This narrative had already been called into question before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Yet it was the war itself, together with the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, that

39. "China's 2025 Trade With Russia Posts First Decline In 5 Years", Reuters, January 14, 2026, available at: www.reuters.com.
40. I. Y. Zuenko, "China's Activity in Central Asia in Light of Russian Interests", op. cit.

ultimately demonstrated the limitations of such an arrangement and underscored its growing irrelevance.

Another formula previously used to describe Moscow and Beijing's relations in Central Asia—that the two powers pursue a coordinated policy—also does not stand up to scrutiny. Of course, this formula does not serve the interests of the Central Asian countries themselves in the first place.

It turns out that the most appropriate description of China and Russia's policies in Central Asia is competition. It has always existed. But it was hidden and not overt. Judging by the declared plans of the two powers, competition between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia will only intensify in the future.

Experts note that China and Russia have always had certain disagreements, both bilaterally and in specific regions. In Central Asia, these contradictions were not obvious. However, the disruption of traditional transit and logistics chains through Russian and European territories as a result of the war in Ukraine hindered China's plans to create a land route to Europe as an alternative to the sea route. Consequently, we are now seeing China openly support and develop new routes that bypass Russia.

At the same time, it is important to understand that the fairly close partnership between China and Russia is based on anti-American sentiment. Today, it is evident that Russia is more dependent on China, and Beijing is taking advantage of this situation, including by obtaining Russian energy resources and raw materials at prices favorable to itself. This factor has become even more relevant against the backdrop of events surrounding Iran in 2026. However, this *status quo* may change. In particular, Chinese analysts warn that in the event of a sharp escalation of the conflict over Taiwan, China could also find itself in international isolation. And then, among regional and global powers, only Russia would be able to support China. Thus, Shanghai-based analysts write that, ideally, the U.S. is counting on China to make the same mistake as Russia by deciding to launch military action against Taiwan. But China fears precisely this—taking a hasty step and getting entangled in a protracted war that would deal a painful blow to its economy. This means that in the near future, a military-political crisis will continue around Taiwan, accompanied by military provocations from both the PRC and Western countries. China will intensify its sanctions pressure on the island. However, the likelihood of Beijing launching actual military operations remains low at this time.

Given these factors, relations between Russia and China can be described as multifaceted. Even while pursuing a more active policy in Central Asia, China will still try not to directly contradict Moscow's interests. Moreover, Moscow and Beijing also share common interests. Beyond their confrontation with the U.S. and the West, Russia and China both view the processes of Turkic integration and regional cooperation in Central Asia with caution.

At the same time, Moscow's current restraint regarding Chinese expansion in Central Asia is dictated by circumstances, not a strategic choice. Absorbed by the war in Ukraine, Russia has temporarily lost the ability to actively counter Chinese penetration into the region, which it has traditionally considered a zone of its exclusive influence. However, it is quite evident that the gradual narrowing of Russia's influence in Central Asia and Beijing's growing presence there is one of the most sensitive issues for the Kremlin. There is reason to believe that as relations with the West normalize and strategic attention is freed from the Ukrainian front, the Kremlin will inevitably turn to the Central Asian agenda. To this end, Moscow possesses all the necessary tools, including informal influence over the security agencies of the region's countries that is incomparably deeper than China's—influence built up over decades of joint training and personnel ties—as well as Russian-speaking political elites whose personal and professional networks remain oriented toward Moscow.

A delicate balance

The deepening of China's presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has placed both countries in a strategic paradox. Over the course of three decades of independence, they have purposefully reduced their dependence on Russia, often favoring Chinese partners as an alternative source of investment and expertise. However, it is precisely this strategy that has created a new dependency—this time on their eastern neighbor, which now holds a dominant position in key sectors of the economy and infrastructure, and is becoming increasingly active in the security sphere. Thus, the attempt to escape one form of monopolistic dependency has led to the formation of another, structurally deeper one.

In an effort to manage their dual dependence on Moscow and Beijing, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been steadily expanding their network of external partnerships. The "5+1" formats with the United States, the EU, Japan, and South Korea serve to diversify their relationships. Turkey occupies a special place in this strategy. Ankara has purposefully expanded its presence in the region, appealing to a shared Turkic identity and offering modern military technology without political strings attached. In particular, Turkey supplies "Bayraktar" drones to four of the five Central Asian states. Incidentally, Kyrgyzstan deployed them during the border conflict with Tajikistan in 2022. Ankara continues to expand its influence in the region, and it is noteworthy that in July 2025, Istanbul hosted the first meeting of defense ministers from the Organization of Turkey States (OTS) member states, where the institutionalization of multilateral cooperation in the defense industry was discussed.[41] Turkey positions itself simultaneously as a coordinator and a supplier, reflecting its growing export potential in the military sphere. At the same time, the Turkish vector has obvious limitations. Tajikistan, which is not a member of the Turkic Council due to cultural and linguistic differences, remains outside the scope of Turkic integration and is forced to seek alternative partners. Furthermore, the expansion of Turkey's military presence inevitably provokes a response from Russia and China, which limits the Central Asian republics' ability to deepen cooperation with Ankara.

Ultimately, the emerging configuration of external influences does not reduce the level of dependence of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but merely changes its structure. At the same time, the tacit competition between Russia and China leaves Bishkek and Dushanbe with limited room for maneuver, though it does not in itself lead to an automatic increase in their autonomy. On the contrary, the ability to balance these influences increasingly depends

41. "Turkey and Defense Industry Cooperation Among Turkic States Promoted at IDEF 2025", Special Eurasia, July 2025, available at: www.specialeurasia.com.

on the capacity of both republics to purposefully expand their circle of external partners and prevent the concentration of critical dependence in a single entity. It is precisely with this logic in mind that Kyrgyzstan and, to a more limited extent, Tajikistan are strengthening ties with Turkey, as well as with other external actors, using them as an additional tool for diversification.

Conclusion

China's role in Central Asia has evolved gradually over time, but since 2022 this process has acquired a distinctly new scale and character. The cases of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan illustrate how Beijing is moving beyond the role of a major external partner to become a system-shaping actor, increasingly involved in structuring the institutional architecture of regional relations, particularly through the China–Central Asia framework. In doing so, China is steadily integrating Central Asian states into a regional order whose center of gravity lies in Beijing.

At the same time, China's perception of its own security role in the region is undergoing a significant transformation. Beijing is no longer confined to border stabilization or participation in multilateral mechanisms such as the SCO. Instead, its presence is expanding through a more sophisticated set of instruments, including technological surveillance, arms transfers, the training of military and law-enforcement personnel, the development of telecommunications infrastructure, and the deployment of digital governance and monitoring systems. The distinctive feature of this model is that it allows China to expand its influence without relying on direct military predominance. As a result, China's role in regional security is being consolidated less through formal alliances than through the gradual incorporation of Chinese technologies, standards, and practices into the very fabric of regional security arrangements.

China's growing role in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan inevitably affects Russian interests, both directly and indirectly. Moscow continues to enjoy important advantages, including its military bases, the institutional framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), longstanding ties with regional security establishments, and its enduring importance as the primary destination for labor migrants from Central Asia. Yet the space Russia traditionally occupied as the region's sole external security guarantor is gradually narrowing. The emerging regional order therefore does not represent a simple replacement of one external power by another, but rather the development of a more complex and multilayered configuration in which Russian predominance can no longer be taken for granted.

Under these circumstances, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to pursue balanced foreign policies. Their systems of external dependence are becoming more diversified and multidimensional. For this reason, both countries are seeking to broaden their range of external partners—including Turkey and other actors—in order to avoid an excessive concentration of influence in the hands of either

Moscow or Beijing. However, the space for such strategic maneuvering is gradually shrinking. China has already moved beyond the role of a purely economic partner, and the depth of its engagement in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has reached a point at which its security presence can no longer be regarded as a temporary supplement. Rather, it has become a durable feature of the region's emerging geopolitical reality.

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