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**VISIBLE LIMITS OF THE SINO-RUSSIAN UNLIMITED  
PARTNERSHIP: ARE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE CHANGING IN  
CENTRAL ASIA?**

**EKA JAVAKHISHVILI**

**205**

**EXPERT OPINION**





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## Introduction

Russia's protracted war in Ukraine is not only causing enormous military-political and economic damage to the Kremlin, but it is also gradually eroding Moscow's traditional spheres of influence. While the Kremlin has directed all its resources to wage the war in Ukraine, Russia's "ally" China is not wasting time, and is seeking to increase its economic and political involvement with the countries of Central Asia. China's recent moves reveal a crack in Beijing and Moscow's "unlimited" friendship, as the leaders of China and Russia called the partnership between the two countries back in February 2022.

A visible manifestation of China's growing influence in the Central Asian region was the China-Central Asia Summit held in May, where the host of the event, Chinese leader Xi Jinping, presented the "Grand Development Plan" for Central Asia. Russia was not invited to attend the summit; therefore, the future cooperation plans between the regional countries were discussed without a Russian representative. The great development plan proposed by China covers the main aspects of cooperation - infrastructural development, strengthening of economic ties, and security challenges in the region. By proposing the mentioned plan, Xi Jinping expressed his willingness to give a new impetus to China's cooperation with Central Asian countries, but without the official involvement of Moscow.

Holding such a high-level summit in China indicates that Beijing is trying to conduct regional policy on its own, without its "ally" Russia, and, in certain areas, without even taking into account Russia's interests.

Due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's influence on Central Asia and its role in the region is declining, and China has an ideal moment to fill the vacuum in the absence of Moscow. In addition, Beijing needs to develop its energy and transport land corridors to transport Chinese goods to Europe, for which China is ready to invest billions in Central Asia, and at the same time, to take the regional security initiative on itself. One of the main priorities of China's foreign policy is to bring the resource-rich countries of Central Asia under its sphere of influence, which obviously means tightening Russia's interests.

It can be assumed that China is aiming to become the dominant political/economic/military power in the region. Russia's current military-economic difficulties caused by the war with Ukraine allow Beijing to offer regional countries more prosperity and security guarantees than Moscow can. So the following question arises - is the historically established influence of Russia in Central Asia weakening, while China is gradually strengthening its positioning in the region?

## **The China-Central Asia Summit: Main Results**

On May 18, Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosted the leaders of five Central Asian countries in the historic city of Xi'an. The presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan took part in the China-Central Asia Summit. After the negotiations held there, the Xian Declaration was adopted, and the Chinese government presented the "Grand Development Plan" for the region.

The formation of the summit between China and the Central Asian countries kicked off last year. On January 25, 2022, the presidents of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan held a summit in the form of a videoconference, related to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Later, it was decided to permanently upgrade the event to heads of state meetings. The new cooperation platform China-Central Asia was established, within the framework of which the leaders of the participating countries work on regional issues in the economic, political and security fields, and make important decisions for each country.

Unlike other formats, the China-Central Asia summit held this year turned out to be particularly productive. Within the framework of the summit, the main topic of discussion was about boosting economic cooperation and strengthening security. During individual meetings with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, numerous deals were signed regarding bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, infrastructure and technology investment, the volume of which amounts to billions of dollars:

- 47 agreements were signed between China and Kazakhstan, within the framework of which Beijing will allocate 22 billion dollars for the implementation of several projects;
- 41 documents of cooperation with Uzbekistan were signed in the areas of energy, chemistry, geology, automobiles, electrical engineering, construction and others, which are worth 25 billion dollars in total;
- 25 documents were signed with Tajikistan, among them a loan of 500 million dollars for the implementation of energy projects (including the completion of the construction of the Rogun HPP);
- 26 agreements were signed with Kyrgyzstan, for which Beijing allocated up to 43 million dollars (including the development of solar panel projects);
- 5 agreements were signed with Turkmenistan, mainly on improving the legal framework, including the signing of an agreement between the Government of Turkmenistan and the Government of the People's Republic of China on cooperation and mutual assistance in customs issues, on cooperation in the field of mass media, and others.

Besides the infrastructure projects, each country participating in the summit expects China to focus on investments in local industries, ensuring employment growth and strengthening their weak economies. Kyrgyzstan is interested in China's increasing role in regional security to balance its fragile relations with Tajikistan. Significantly, the progress achieved on the issue of delimitation and demarcation of the disputed borders of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan was announced at the summit, which had been creating tension between the parties for years. Uzbekistan is optimistic about the eventual completion of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and Line D of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. Further, Kazakhstan and China signed an agreement on visa-free travel which will contribute to the further deepening of cooperation.

Last year, the Kremlin also tried to create a new format of cooperation with the Central Asian countries, although it could not be compared to the Xi'an summit in terms of scale and productivity. On October 14, 2022, the Russia - Central Asia summit was held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, where Vladimir Putin met with the leaders of participating countries and called on them to deepen relations. The summit was concluded with a joint statement, where the parties confirmed their readiness for future cooperation.

### **China and Russia's Trade Relations with the Central Asian Countries**

The main basis of cooperation between China and Central Asia is the economy. In 2022, according to Chinese Customs, trade with the five countries of the region increased by 40% and topped a record 70 billion US dollars. In the first quarter of 2023, bilateral trade increased by 22% compared to the same period of 2022, and amounted to 17.8 billion US dollars. Significantly, China is the largest buyer of Central Asian gas. The region has large reserves of rare metals, and China can play a key role in the mining and purchase of these reserves. China supplies machinery, equipment, electrical equipment, and spare parts to Central Asian countries. There is a noticeable asymmetry in bilateral trade - the share of the Central Asian countries in China's foreign trade is only 1.1 percent. This means there is plenty of room for the development of cooperation, especially with China looking for new partners and opportunities as its trade with the United States and the European Union shrinks.

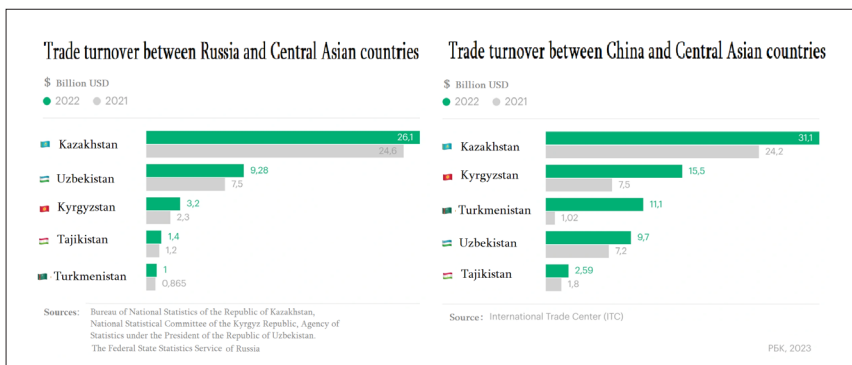
Among the countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan is China's largest trade partner. Last year, bilateral trade between China and Kazakhstan amounted to 31 billion US dollars. The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, is interested in expanding economic and energy cooperation with China. Within the framework of the Xi'an summit, the parties discussed plans to expand the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline to boost oil exports, expand the natural gas

transmission system, and build a gas processing plant at the Kashagan field with a capacity of four billion cubic meters per year. Tokayev also noted the importance of the development of land transport corridors, and emphasized the possibility of forwarding Chinese goods to Western markets through the territory of Kazakhstan.

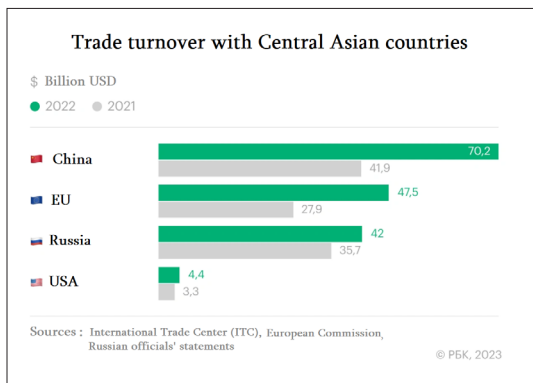
China’s intensified interest in Kazakhstan and Central Asia as a whole is not accidental: It is a geopolitical priority of official Beijing. The Chinese leader is gradually implementing his ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (an infrastructural development strategy that involves more than 70 countries) and, to this end, he has agreed to invest massively in the infrastructure of the region. However, the Central Asian countries receive Chinese investments in the form of loans, which gives Beijing an additional lever of influence over them.

China generously distributes loans to its neighbors, which only increases the economic dependence of these countries on Beijing. Among the countries of Central Asia, Kazakhstan currently has the largest financial obligation to China, almost 9 billion dollars, Uzbekistan - 4 billion dollars, Kyrgyzstan - 1.75 billion dollars, and Tajikistan - up to 1 billion dollars. There are no official data on Turkmenistan’s debt, although the country’s government claims that it no longer has any financial obligations to China. According to media there, Turkmenistan covered 10 billion dollars using gas export.<sup>1</sup> Through loans and investments, China also “buys” the loyalty of the governments of these countries (for example, buys silence on the issue of the Uyghurs<sup>2</sup>) and expands access to natural resources.

In 2022, the trade turnover between Russia and Central Asia increased by 15% compared to the previous year, reaching 42 billion US dollars.<sup>3</sup> However, these data are far behind China-Central Asia’s trade turnover (\$70 billion US dollars).



Among the Central Asian countries, Russia has the most intensive trade relations with Kazakhstan, as does China. Last year, the trade turnover between Russia and Kazakhstan amounted to 26.1 billion US dollars (5 billion dollars less than the trade turnover of China-Kazakhstan in 2022), while the trade turnover with all five Central Asian countries totaled 42 billion US dollars. Russia and China have asymmetric trade turnover with the remaining four countries.



The European Union and the USA are increasingly expressing their interest in deepening trade relations with the countries of Central Asia, which is an additional factor in weakening Russia’s influence in the region. Specific figures show the following: In 2022, the European Union was the second largest trade partner for the region after China. In 2021, the trade volume between them was 27 billion US dollars, but in 2022, this figure increased to 47 billion US dollars. Among the largest trading partners of the Central Asian countries, Russia took third place, and the USA was fourth - with a 4.4 billion dollar trade turnover.

At the beginning of 2023, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visited Central Asia to encourage investments. On February 28, Blinken arrived in Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana, and announced the Biden Administration’s commitment to provide an additional 25 million US dollars in funding to expand upon the preexisting Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN). He also noted that the USA would help Central Asian countries reduce their dependence on Moscow, and called on the five countries to observe restrictions on sanctioned Russian companies. At the same time, Blinken expressed his support for the diversification of the trade ties of the Central Asian countries.<sup>4</sup>



Against the backdrop of Western sanctions, Russia is interested in Central Asian countries joining “large-scale initiatives to replace Russian imports”, which Vladimir Putin spoke about at the Russia-Central Asia summit.<sup>5</sup> According to him, the redirection of Russian exports and imports stimulates the development of transport corridors throughout Eurasia. Although Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have so far not joined the sanctions imposed on Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin does not rule out the possibility that some Central Asian countries will join the sanctions policy. As Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin said on May 16, some Central Asian countries do not want to take risks and are signaling that they could join the Western sanctions on Russia.<sup>6</sup> According to Galuzin, Russia does not dictate to anyone what external and domestic policies to pursue, “when it does not contradict mutual obligations, including those within the CSTO, EAEU and CIS”. However, the Kremlin warns them that “artificial destruction of ties with Russia can result in more serious damage than the costs of the notorious secondary sanctions.”

### **Russia-China Economic Ties**

In February 2022, when China and Russia issued a declaration on “unlimited” cooperation, the parties expressed strong mutual support for “protecting each other’s core interests.” However, one year later, in April 2023, China’s Ambassador to the EU, Fu Kong, pointed out that the Sino-Russian “No limit” was nothing but rhetoric. As the recent period has shown, the parties are protecting each other’s interests only in the economic sphere - China got wider access to cheap Russian energy resources, and Russia got wider access to the Eastern market to save the country’s economy, affected as it was by the Western sanctions.

The tightening of economic ties between China and Russia became visible just after Western sanctions were imposed on Moscow due to its annexation of Ukraine. Russia turned to the East to escape from economic isolation, and China served as a “life buoy” for the Kremlin. After Western countries sharply reduced oil and gas imports from Russia, Beijing helped Moscow offset the economic losses by buying more oil and gas for itself than it used to. As of 2022, nearly three-quarters (\$85 billion) of Russian exports to China were of oil, gas, and coal. Russia was the second largest supplier of oil to China, after Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to Western sanctions, China-Russia trade volume reached a record level of \$190 billion in 2022 (\$147 billion in 2021).<sup>8</sup> Exports from Russia to China increased by 43.4% over the year to \$114.15 billion, while exports from

China to the Russian Federation increased by 12.8% to \$76.12 billion. China ranks first among Russia's main trade partners, although the Russian market is not so weighty for China - only 3% of China's total foreign trade turnover comes from Russia.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that the diversion of Russian oil and gas to China and India, due to the low prices offered by these countries and the increased costs of transportation, reduced the profit of Russian energy products export in the first four months of this year by 52% compared to the same period of 2022.

The given statistics do not indicate a favorable outlook for Russia, demonstrating how Russia's isolation from the West has deepened since the invasion of Ukraine, and how the degree of dependence of the Russian economy on China is increasing. In this regard, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns said that Russia is becoming more and more dependent on China, and in some respects, it risks becoming an economic colony of China over time.<sup>10</sup>

## **Regional Security and the Conflict in Ukraine**

The discussion at the Xi'an summit was not only about economic issues - the Chinese leader also placed an important emphasis on regional security issues. According to Xi Jinping, the six countries together should resolutely oppose external interference in domestic affairs and any attempts to provoke "color revolutions", as well as maintain zero tolerance towards "the three evils" of separatism, terrorism and extremism, and resolve regional security dilemmas together. Xi Jinping told the Central Asian leaders that China can strengthen the security and defense capabilities of the region, a particularly interesting message for Russia, which is experiencing a lot of difficulties in its war with Ukraine. Xi Jinping also emphasized the importance of strengthening coordination regarding Afghanistan, which shares a common border with several states of Central Asia. According to him, China will support Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction.

From this point of view, China-Tajikistan cooperation in the field of defense is particularly important, acting as a buffer of sorts between China and Afghanistan, and bordering the Wakhan Corridor connecting Afghanistan and China. In November 2021, Beijing and Dushanbe signed an agreement under which the defense forces of the two countries will hold joint anti-terrorism drills every two years. Beijing is also building new posts along the Tajikistan-Afghan border and modernizing old ones, as well as building a base for Tajik special forces in the mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Region.<sup>11</sup>

The Central Asian countries closely cooperate with China in bilateral military exercises, most of which practice the fight against terrorism. In addition, Central Asian countries buy weapons from China - Kazakhstan has bought unmanned aerial vehicles from them, Tajikistan armored vehicles and patrol cars, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - anti-aircraft missile systems, amongst others.

China, Russia and Central Asian countries also cooperate within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on issues of regional security and the fight against terrorism. As some analysts point out, on September 15-16, 2022, at the last summit of the organization in Uzbekistan, (Samarkand), the leaders of the participating countries expressed a special attitude toward the Chinese president, which cannot be said of Vladimir Putin. Xi Jinping appeared as a central figure in both collective and bilateral meetings, while Putin appeared as an ordinary participating leader. This fact also indicates that both support for Putin among his traditional allies and his reputation are weakening amid Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

Although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not a military-political bloc, being mainly focused on the fight against terrorism, separatism, extremism, drug trafficking and the development of economic cooperation, Vladimir Putin considers it a counterweight to the "collective West", a kind of anti-NATO coalition. Isolated from the West, Russia is forced to use all formats of discussion to maintain the support of Eastern countries. However, the member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization clearly indicated that conflicts should be resolved only through diplomatic means.

It should be noted that against the background of Russia's military failures in Ukraine, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Russian-dominated military alliance made up of three Central Asian countries, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, is increasingly losing its attraction. This may be related to the fact that in October 2022, Kyrgyzstan canceled the "Inviolable Brotherhood-2022" military exercises of the CSTO on its territory.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that none of the Central Asian countries supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and are more or less trying to keep to the Western sanctions on Russia, mainly so that they don't get into trouble themselves. On June 17, 2022, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, despite the close political and economic ties, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassim-Jomart Tokaev, openly expressed his disapproval of Putin's policy toward Ukraine. He said that he did not recognize the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. This suggested that Putin should not count on him to circumvent the Western sanctions.

China itself is focused on the peaceful settlement of the conflict in Ukraine. For this purpose, Xi Jinping presented his 12-point “peace plan” on February 24, 2023, and on May 16-17, he sent the Special Representative of the Chinese Government for Eurasian Affairs to Ukraine. Beijing’s initiatives have been met with skepticism in the West due to its close ties with Russia, but the very fact that China wants to conduct a peace dialogue based on its own initiatives once again confirms Beijing’s growing geopolitical ambitions.

## **Conclusion**

It is obvious that Russia’s influence in the Central Asian region has a very strong alternative in the form of China. As we can see, the limits of Russia and China’s “unlimited” cooperation appear where the strategic interests of the parties intersect. Under the pressure of Western sanctions, Russia’s economic leverage to maintain its traditional influence on Central Asian countries is gradually weakening, and China is using the given circumstances to forward its own interests. The China-Central Asia Summit made it even clearer that Russia, constrained by Western sanctions, will find it difficult to compete with China in terms of investing in the economically vulnerable countries of the region. The growing dependence of the Russian economy on China indicates Beijing’s dominant position.

The weakening of Russia’s influence can be seen not only from an economic point of view, but also from a political one. The leaders of the Central Asian countries no longer show their traditional obedience to Vladimir Putin, and in some cases, they even publicly oppose him. Clear proof of this is that the Kremlin could not get their support on the issue of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Further, the Kremlin’s growing suspicion of the countries of the region supporting the Western sanctions imposed on it is an indication of the weakening of Moscow’s political influence. Russia has always refrained from openly expressing its concerns when it comes to China’s activity in Central Asia, but the Kremlin will most likely try to use various levers to pressure the leaders of the Central Asian countries traditionally loyal to it. However, given the limited political/economic/military resources of a country at war, these steps are unlikely to be drastic. It should be noted that those Central Asian countries rich in natural resources are relatively more resistant to the levers of Russian political and energy pressure than other post-Soviet countries.

Against the backdrop of the war with Ukraine, the historically established attitude towards Russia as a “reliable partner” and “security guarantee” in the Central Asian countries is fading fast. This factor pushes the countries of the region to seek security guarantees in the alternative direction that China

is already offering them. The Russian-led economic/military organizations are increasingly showing dysfunctionality and inflexibility, which gives China more opportunities to implement new military-political initiatives.

We can see a growing tendency for changes in the spheres of influence in the region. The analysis of recent processes indicates that the prospects for developments do not speak in favor of Russia. It is expected that, in the long term, the role of Moscow as a guarantor of economic, military and political stability in the region will gradually decrease, and China will be given more space to dominate not only in the economy but also in the security sector. It can be said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave impetus to significant changes in the struggle for these spheres of influence. Accordingly, the course of the Russia-Ukraine war and its consequences will largely determine the prospects of both Russia and China in relation to the countries of Central Asia.

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