

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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# The Need for Regionalism in Central Asia

*Omar Sadr and Akram Umarov*

For a long time, Central Asia has been understood through the lenses of the “great game” and “great power politics.” With the shift in the U.S. strategic interests from counter-terrorism to great power competition, analysts believe that Central Asia will turn into a zone where the three major powers—the United States, China, and Russia—will find themselves with increasingly conflicting geopolitical interests. While all three are united today for a more stable Central Asia protected from radicalism, the divergence comes as each wants to supplant the other two as the primary partner of the region.

Central Asia is now entering a pivotal period of its independence and sustainable development. The geopolitical situation in the region demonstrates that it has considerable

problems to deal with in order to reach resilience. As the world is facing accelerating geopolitical clashes, the existing competition between major external actors in the region can easily turn into a very tough rivalry. None of the countries of Central Asia are interested in becoming a part of a new “Great Game.” The poor management of such potential rivalry between major powers might destabilize Central Asia.

On a practical note, as our colleague Jennifer Murtazashvili noted in May 2022, with the withdrawal of Americans from Afghanistan and the bloody engagement of Russians in Ukraine, China may find “a greater incentive to become more involved in security matters in the region in ways they had not been in the past.” Without a clear collective vision, there is

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a risk that Central Asia will face strategic uncertainty or that the region will gradually fall into the exclusive domain of one of the other great powers. As Russia has done in the past, China may dominate a less integrated Central Asia in the future by pursuing a strategy of dealing with each country separately.

The region is also surrounded by a range of regional powers that follow an ideological policy, such as Türkiye (Neo-Ottomanist ideals and pan-Turkism) and Iran (Shia-centric policy). Especially Türkiye has been demonstrating significant interest in the expansion of its influence and strategic presence in Central Asia for the past few years. In the time ahead, Ankara could substantially boost its role and activity in the region and turn into one of the leading external partners of Central Asia, which has diversified links with regional elites. This is also called a Eurasianist shift in Türkiye’s policy.

An exclusive security dependency on the revisionist great powers is what the Central Asians should avoid. The shortcomings of Russian military power in Ukraine provide a new opportunity

for Central Asians to rethink regionalism and collaboration to ensure a safe and free Central Asia. Regionalism as coordination will also prevent “divide and conquer” tactics by Russia and China. Otherwise, as a new version of the Cold War-era “iron curtain” between the West and Russia descends again upon the world, and in the event that China keeps strengthening quickly, the traditional balancing of Central Asian states between major external powers could become very complicated.

During a rivalry of such powers, their respective governments might insist on Central Asians having to make the choice to avoid any close

cooperation with their adversaries.

The current escalation of tensions between Russia and the West is thus likely to have considerable regional

implications. Overcoming the consequences of this crisis depends largely on Central Asia’s readiness for greater regional coordination and mutual support in resisting any attempts to limit the sovereignty of the five states that make up its core. Tacitly accepting that Central Asia belongs within a single state’s sphere of influence, coupled with efforts to turn the region into

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a geopolitical object for great powers to play with, will not support the region’s resilience and growth.

### *Shifting Circumstances*

Understandably, the states of Central Asia have each adopted a multi-vector foreign policy. However, given the weakness of these countries compared to Russia and China, and their lack of a coordinated regional stance, has translated into them being tied to the regional security architecture created by Moscow and Beijing. Three Central Asian countries—Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Similarly, except for Turkmenistan, the rest of the Central Asian states are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Ashgabat is an associate member of the CIS and has been actively engaging within this format in recent years.

Moscow has obstructed any sort of initiative by Central Asian

nations toward fostering regionalism. Instead, it has highlighted Russia-led and Russia-owned processes like CSTO or CIS. For instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin once said that the threat emerging from Afghanistan “can only be overcome by a global effort with reliance on the United Nations and regional organizations: the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the CIS.” As a result, Central Asia has not been able to move toward

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a form of regionalism from within. Possibly any attempts to foster regional integration in Central Asia are perceived in Moscow as an effort to reduce its dominant role in the region and to compete with existing regional organizations like SCO, CIS, and others that include Russia as a leading member state.

The CSTO was created to defend member states against a conventional military invasion, but this threat has remained irrelevant to Central Asian security. The Central Asian countries have disputes over resources and borders with each other, and, while some of them remained

unresolved and have even led to state-level military confrontation, the CSTO and other security architectures like the SCO have not presented solutions for them. Ironically, the September 2022 border skirmish between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan happened at a time when the presidents of both countries were attending the SCO summit in Samarkand.

Moreover, Russia’s lack of success in its war in Ukraine should make Central Asia think twice before relying on Moscow for security. The CSTO is predominantly perceived in Central Asia as a sign of close bilateral military cooperation between Russia and other member-states. Actually, there is limited multilateral collaboration within the CSTO. January 2022 is the only time when CSTO collective forces were used. This took place in Kazakhstan in support of local law enforcement forces during large-scale unrest in the country—and it would

not have happened without the strong political will of Russia and its leadership to quickly deploy CSTO forces in Kazakhstan.

Even after more than three decades of independence, the Central Asian states have had a hard time reducing their dependency on Russia. There have been shifts in certain areas—trade relations are one example, where China is gradually replacing Russia as a primary trading partner. In terms of security—as exemplified by the Russia-led CSTO deployment in Kazakhstan in January 2022—Russia has remained the region’s primary security guarantor.

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If there is any major external threat to the sovereignty of the small Central Asian states, it would be the competing desire of major powers in the region—i.e., Russia and China—to increase their leverage. Most Central Asian countries consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a violation of the

latter's sovereignty and have withheld cooperation with Moscow in the conflict. The regional states are very concerned with Russia's revisionist approach to the former Soviet space. Therefore, unlike the Afghanistan occupation in the late 1970s, when Moscow was able to mobilize support from most of the Warsaw Pact countries,

the CSTO members have refused to endorse Moscow's stance in the current conflict. Given the presence of ethnic-Russians (and Russian-speaking peoples) in Central Asia and an irredentist policy in Moscow, a Russian victory in Ukraine would present a real threat to these countries' sovereignty. The region can easily extrapolate on itself Putin's idea of "winning back Russian lands" and express a just agitation with the Russian war in Ukraine.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which revealed Moscow's military shortcomings, presents both new challenges and a new opportunity for Central Asian regionalism. As Moscow is stuck in the war with Ukraine and a massive sanctions

rivalry with the West, it might have limited resources to keep Central Asia in its sphere of influence. This gives the regional countries room for maneuver and supports their intention to advance more balanced cooperation with other major powers. Meanwhile, a weakened Russia has emboldened the agency of the

Central Asian states to define their set of relationships on their own terms. The 2022 violent conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is a clear manifestation of the same.

The unity of Central Asia might serve as a core factor in dealing with external powers in a more coordinated way. At the same time, as Russia has been facing problems in its relations with the West, it is getting more sensitive to any warming of relations between the Central Asian and Western nations—especially any close partnership of the region in military and security affairs with the U.S. and its allies, which is considered to be a hostile action towards the interest of Moscow in Central Asia.

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## Formation of A Security Community?

Given the scenario outlined above, it is time for the Central Asians to take practical steps toward the formation of a security community. A security community, according to a 2009 book edited by Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, is a group of states—a community—that has mutual trust and forms a collective identity. It is not

an alliance; rather it is a gradual transformation of social relations and, for that matter, identities of the state, as a result of which the members of the community adhere to the norm of peaceful resolution of conflicts and the relinquishing of violent means. This would be achieved through developing "dependable expectations of peaceful change."

Central Asia is far away from becoming a "security community." Nonetheless, there is a great potential if the region's countries take a wise and courageous decision. In order to form a security community, the following steps are required:

First, a set of precipitating conditions. The existence of a precipitating condition, which triggers the need for greater cooperation and interaction, is the first requirement for the formation of a security community. There is a good pile of evidence indicating that a series of endogenous and exogenous factors are increasingly transforming the

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pattern of relations between Central Asian countries. The spotlight of this transformation is a desire from within the region to increase intra-regional interactions and coordination whilst emphasizing the need for greater cooperation between the five states. It is too early to assume such interactions would really create mutual identification; however, they do provide space and context for further creation of new bonds.

To unify these countries towards the formation of a community, a common security threat would be the great power rivalry in the region. Other common threats that are usually less mentioned in Central Asians' official rhetoric include Russia's irredentist policy and the Islamic radicalism driven by groups like the Taliban, Daesh, and other regional terrorist



outfits; an attempt by any external power to dominate in the region; pressing climate change issues; a rapid reduction in water resources and heightened desertification; and outdated technologies. The regional states usually securitize instability in Afghanistan, terrorism, drugs trafficking, and great power competition as major threats to Central Asian development.

The second requirement for the formation of a security community is the establishment of an organization to function as a mechanism to foster interaction among the members. Thus, Central Asians should restore the idea of a Central Asian regional organization. This will allow interaction and social learning amongst all the countries. A multi-vector policy will be effective once the Central Asian countries are tied together in a self-generated regional organization. To better operationalize the multi-vector policy, Central Asians can adopt what some scholars have taken to calling an “omni-enmeshment approach,” which is followed by the Southeast Asian states.

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While at the individual level Southeast Asian countries have established multiple strategic partnerships, at the regional level they have also tied themselves to the great powers through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional forum (East Asia Summit), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and dialogue partners. Central Asia could follow the same path. A Central Asian community “plus three” could include the three external great powers (i.e., the United States, Russia, and China). A Central Asian Regional Forum may include the mentioned three countries plus the three Caucasus states as well as Iran, Türkiye, Pakistan, and India.

Such a framework will not only increase the cost of any potential external military intervention, but it will also allow Central Asia to build a united policy towards many issues, including an increasing terrorist threat from Taliban-occupied Afghanistan. There is a significant lack of proper regional coordination of the response to existing and newly emerging regional challenges and threats from Kabul. The Central Asian nations still prefer

to act unilaterally or bilaterally in dealing with common issues. Afghanistan’s regime change in 2021 and the resulting challenges to regional security were not assessed and countered jointly as a unified region. There were some bilateral meetings and military exercises that did not develop into the establishment of region-wide collective reaction mechanisms.

Developing a framework for independent regional military cooperation not linked to any external power would strengthen Central Asian sovereign, identity, and resilience. Nascent steps towards improving collective cooperation taken in the past few years have not led to a tangible transformation in collective cooperation.

Since the proposal to hold regular regional summits by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan, four have taken place in, respectively, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. However, the postponement of signing Kyrgyzstan’s proposed pact of friendship and cooperation at the last summit by Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in July 2022 has

highlighted the existence of mistrust and hurdles, which impedes the further advancement of multilateral cooperation in the region.

Two immediate steps are needed to address the aforementioned challenge by Central Asia. First, the five republics can start with a series of security dialogues to deliberate and improve mutual understanding about the common security challenges to the region. A public security dialogue would provide a better opportunity for policy analysis to identify what Adler and

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Barnett call the “dependable expectation of peaceful change” as well as mechanisms of conflict resolution. It would also function as track 1.5 and track 2 mechanisms between the five countries.

Second, these countries should develop a system of rules that would function as a mechanism of conflict resolution in the region. Such a mechanism does not exist at the moment.

Lastly, it is important that the region develop a shared identity and values. Currently, there is a multiplicity of terms and jargon to identify the region. For instance,

the term “central Eurasia” is defined by the Russian orientation for which Russian right-wing intellectuals, such as Alexander Dugin, have been the main exponents. Then there is the term “Greater Central Asia,” which was coined by S. Frederick Starr to drag and draw the region as a cultural zone that cuts across existing state boundaries. Thus, he considers China’s Xinjiang province, Russia’s Tatarstan, and the northern part of the Indian sub-continent as integral parts of the region. There is also the term suggested by the editors of *Baku Dialogues*: the “Silk Road region.” They argue that it is a “single geopolitical theater with multiple stages” and purposefully “define it loosely as comprising that part of the world that looks west past Anatolia to the warm seas beyond, north across the Caspian towards the Great Steppe, east to the peaks of the Altai and the arid sands of the Taklamakan, and south towards the Hindu Kush and the Indus valley, looping around down to the Persian Gulf and back up across the Fertile Crescent and onward to the Black Sea littoral.” Practically, a narrowly defined Central Asia would include the five “stans.” Afghanistan is also a part of Central Asia, but Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is not conducive to engaging in anything to do with regionalism. Unlike the previous government, the Taliban has not

yet declared its willingness to be an integral part of Central Asia.

To forge a common identity and develop a sense of mutual identification, the Central Asian states should also take certain measures to enhance a sense of trust amongst each other. This should be developed through a shared system of knowledge and belief, which in turn could be based on shared history and some understanding of a Turco-Tajik civilization.

### *The Western Gaze*

One consequence of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan is that there is little chance the United States would engage Central Asia as a primary security partner through an exclusive strategic partnership. The United States also does not have a primary security or economic interest in the region. Every Central Asian state’s desire to attract U.S. attention during the ongoing turmoil in Europe will not give fruit, much as it has not in the past. More than one year after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the West in particular is still facing enormous challenges in dealing with the new reality in Central Asia. The withdrawal of international military forces and the evacuation of only a small number

of the citizens of Afghanistan who previously collaborated with them considerably damaged the reputation of the United States and its Western allies. The chaos of the evacuation shocked untold millions of people around the world.

The U.S. Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 outlines connectivity between the five Central Asian countries and Afghanistan but ignores the critical need for regionalism. The Taliban regime is facing significant problems in implementing regional connectivity projects and still cannot not guarantee security for Central Asia. As recent incidents on the border of Afghanistan and other regional states have demonstrated, Central Asia’s reliance on the Taliban to stabilize northern Afghanistan is not realistic now. They possibly underestimate the Taliban’s radical religious ideology and their alliance with likeminded radical groups in the region. Central Asia’s connectivity with South Asia through Afghanistan could not be materialized quickly in a Taliban-led Afghanistan. In the meanwhile, the Biden Administration should encourage regionalism within Central Asia.

The West was ignorant of how regional countries could elaborate strategies on post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan. The future of Afghanistan cannot be considered and assembled without significant support from its neighbors. For various reasons, the United States avoided or minimized its cooperation with several regional countries on Afghanistan issues. States like Pakistan were mainly used as transit routes and to host U.S. and other Western military infrastructure essential for their military and civilian operations in Afghanistan. All major international gatherings that discussed Afghanistan took place in Europe, the United States, and Japan—nations that are very far from the region and have a limited understanding of local traditions, context, and history. The concerns and proposals of states next to Afghanistan were barely considered as policy options by the United States and its allies.

It is essential for the United States and the other relevant Western states to keep supporting and cooperating closely with Afghanistan’s neighbors.

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Despite regular exchanges between regional countries and the Western ones, there are still many gaps in mutual understanding. Promoting development and prosperity in

the region requires improving connectivity. Western countries have already found ways to regularly send humanitarian support to Afghanistan without violating the sanctions they imposed against the Taliban. Therefore, funding connectivity projects in Central Asia would invest in its security, independence, and resilience.

At the same time, Central Asia is facing a new era of regional turbulence following a period of intra-regional rapprochement and improved relations. Regime change in Kyrgyzstan at the end of 2020, ongoing instability in Afghanistan after the Taliban's August 2021 return to power, tensions in Tajikistan's eastern Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region, and the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan bring

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strategic uncertainty to Central Asia's future development. Protests in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (in January and July 2022, respectively) again demonstrated that the region is not immune from such unexpected crisis situa-

tions. Underdeveloped economies, widespread poverty and unemployment, poor education systems, existing governance issues, and rising religious radicalization represent challenges for the region's stability and resilience.

The Biden Administration has framed the conflict in Ukraine as 'democracies versus autocracies.' But this framing does not enable an alliance between Central Asians and the West from taking hold—neither does the rhetoric that emerged from the December 2021 Summit for Democracy. Central Asian leaders will not ally with the United States if this sort of binary framework remains Washington's guiding principle. A better alternative would be the protection of what its proponents call a rule-based

international order versus (for lack of a better word) anarchy. As former colonized parts of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries are very sensitive with regards to keeping their sovereignty.

Therefore, while trying not to irritate Moscow much, the Central Asian states have done their best to express support for Ukraine. In the past 30 years, they have each built their national identities around the concept of independence; and Central Asia will firmly support a world order ruled by international law, with the UN Charter at its core, and that at the same time acknowledges and encourages the sovereign development of small and medium size countries.

Furthermore, Central Asian countries should avoid becoming involved in international rivalries. Declaring their neutrality while keeping balanced relations with all important external powers

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would provide the Central Asian states with independence and freedom in conducting their respective foreign policies. At the same time, such a transparent position would exclude Central Asian countries from joining any military-political organizations led

by external actors. It is in the interest of all Central Asian countries to commit not to join military alliances and not to allow their territory to be used for attacks against any extra-regional country.

A better integrated Central Asia can best deal with great power politics and growing instability from Afghanistan. The region can only overcome these challenges through fostering regionalism—collaborating on the establishment of a security community. Advancing intra-regional cooperation without the involvement of external actors could serve Central Asia's unification and integrity. Considering the region's common history, culture, and identity, there is



substantial potential for the advancement of regional partnership. Creating new regional mechanisms and developing connectivity, trade, and humanitarian relations would greatly benefit Central Asia. A united region would also have a more powerful voice, capacity, and subjectivity in dealing with both intra-regional and external issues. On the contrary, a divided region torn apart by internal problems can be easily manipulated and exploited by external players.

Long-term security in an increasingly volatile region can only be achieved through an integrated twofold strategy. First, establishing a joint security framework and regional cooperation communities. Second, balancing great power rivalry through diversification of the region's relations with its adjacent

regions and emerging regional and global powers. This could result in the region's "transformation from being an object of great power rivalry to becoming a subject of international order," as Damjan Krnjević Mišković, the Co-Editor of *Baku Dialogues*, has put it.

Central Asia should make necessary lessons for its future development and conduct a proactive policy of diversifying both its foreign policy and economic cooperation. More active engagement with the neighboring states of the South Caucasus and South Asia, as well as Iran and China, may slightly mitigate Central Asia's existing difficulties. Therefore, current trends require strengthening cooperation in Central Asia and further regional integration to help form a united front. **BD**

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