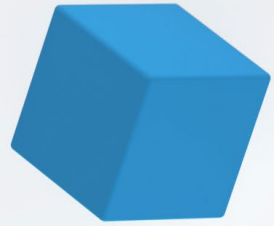
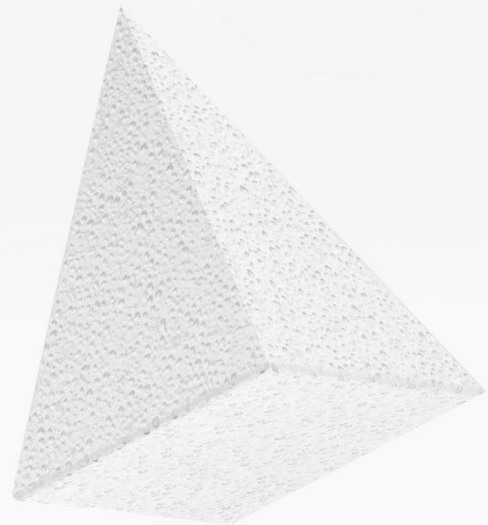
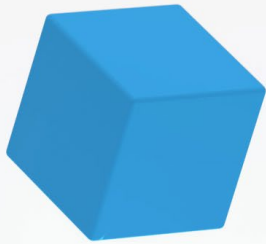


Filling the Void Left by Great-Power Retrenchment: Russia, Central Asia, and the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan



Charles E. Ziegler



The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, ending in August 2021, created favorable conditions for Russia to reassert itself as a regional hegemon in broader Central Asia. Historically, as great powers retrench from a territory, the resulting void can be filled either by rival powers or by friendly successor states responsive to the retrenching power's agenda. While the United States has lacked reliable successors to take its place in the region, Russia has asserted itself in a number of ways to boost its own power and influence. Moscow has not only cultivated bilateral ties with each of the five Central Asian states, but it has also instrumentalized regional security organizations to advance its interests. However, the full-scale assault against Ukraine beginning in 2022 has undermined Russia's initiatives in Central Asia and its aspirations for regional hegemony. The Central Asian countries fear Moscow's apparent neo-imperial ambitions and prefer to develop multi-vectored foreign relations. In this situation, China is poised to supplant Russia as the dominant power and security provider in the region, which could create tensions within the so-called partnership without limits between Moscow and Beijing.

As a continental land power, Russia historically has aspired to exercise hegemony in four bordering regions: Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Pacific littoral. Initially weakened after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia's limited military and economic capabilities constrained its influence among the newly independent former Soviet republics throughout the 1990s. Upon taking office in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin initially focused on reasserting Russia's position in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Moscow then announced a "pivot" toward Asia in Putin's third presidential term from 2012 to 2018. In the following years, however, Russia has struggled to expand its influence in the Pacific littoral.¹ Nonetheless, the close strategic partnership with China, which is the most important component of the pivot, has secured Russia's strategic backyard and enabled it to concentrate on Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

When, in August 2021, the United States hastily abandoned its two-decades-long campaign in Afghanistan, Russia was positioned to take advantage of the

power vacuum to secure its position as a geopolitical force in Central Asia. No other great power challenged Moscow for primacy in the region. China continued to expand its trade and investment in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, but Beijing has also appeared willing to stand on the sidelines as Russia tackled security challenges in the region, such as the Kazakhstan crisis in January 2022.² Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, has impacted Moscow's position in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where Russia has asserted vital national interests. How can we explain Moscow's inability to capitalize on America's withdrawal from a region where Russia has substantial historic, cultural, and economic ties?

American retrenchment from Afghanistan presented Russia with an opportunity to geopolitically reorient the Central Asian regional security order toward Moscow, but Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine undermined Moscow's own hegemonic ambitions. In his efforts to prevent West-leaning ex-Soviet states from integrating with the West's premier security institutions, namely the European Union and NATO, Putin has squandered a potentially strong position in Central Asia.

1 Charles E. Ziegler, *Russia in the Pacific: The Quest for Great Power Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

2 One example of this development was the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization deployment to Kazakhstan in January 2022 to put down political unrest, at the request of the Kazakh government. See Paul Stronski, "Lessons Learned From the Kazakhstan Crisis," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 16, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/02/lessons-learned-from-the-kazakhstan-crisis>.

I begin by reviewing the literature on retrenchment, which anticipates that as one great power retrenches from a territory, competing great powers will try to exploit emerging opportunities. I then assess Russia's aspirations to hegemony along its periphery, suggesting that under Putin's leadership, Russia's approach has evolved from the pursuit of hegemony to neo-imperialism.³ Afterwards, I consider the Russian experience in Afghanistan and how the Soviet and American interventions in the country have shaped Moscow's contemporary thinking about exerting Russian hegemony in Central Asia. I then assess Russia's evolving security role in broader Central Asia, both in its bilateral relations with the former Soviet republics as well as through regionally based multilateral structures. Next, I consider the prospect of two successor states filling the void left by U.S. retrenchment — India and Turkey — and the positions of Washington's main rivals in Central Asia — Russia and China. I conclude by suggesting that Russia's aggressive actions elsewhere have contributed to the erosion of its potentially strong geopolitical position in Central Asia.

Responses to Retrenchment

Retrenchment involves freeing up resources so that states may concentrate their efforts on regions perceived more vital to key national security interests. Yet, retrenchment carries considerable risks. Proximate great powers could try to take advantage of retrenching adversaries to expand their own power and influence. Feeling abandoned, local allies might desert a faraway retrenching power. That powerful state could also suffer a loss of international prestige.⁴ Retrenchment may trigger conventional or nuclear arms races among states no longer constrained by the hegemon, causing regional or global instability. A retrenching power might be less capable of promoting

economic integration with the smaller powers in the region.⁵ While much of the scholarly literature on retrenchment is global in orientation, and focused on the consequences for the retrenching great power, less attention has been given to the responses of competing great powers to regional retrenchment, other than to reiterate the axiom that nature abhors a vacuum.⁶

There is an ongoing public and scholarly debate over whether the United States is in decline and retrenching globally. Most observers would agree, however, that Washington has shed its commitments in the greater Central Asian region in recent years — most notably with the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan — to focus more attention on the Indo-Pacific region and growing competition with China. While the Biden administration has continued diplomatic engagement with the five ex-Soviet Central Asian states through the so-called C5+1 Diplomatic Platform initiated under President Barack Obama (and maintained by the Trump administration), U.S. goals in the region are now limited to organizing multilateral working groups on economic integration, energy, and environmental issues, as well as providing rhetorical support for Central Asian security, independence, and sovereignty.⁷ The United States has followed a pattern of typical great-power retrenchment within Central Asia by reducing commitments when resource constraints lead to a reassessment of global or regional positions and reallocation of resources from peripheral toward core interests.⁸

The U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was protracted in part because of the difficulty in creating a viable legitimate government in Kabul that was also deferential to U.S. interests, and in part because in Central Asia there was no regional ally to act as a successor state and uphold Washington's preferred regional security order. Kyle Haynes contends that great powers are more willing to retrench if they have a capable successor that shares their vision for the

3 In this article I refer to "imperialism" or "neo-imperialism" depending on the context. Imperialism can be defined as the efforts of a powerful state to exert control over the internal and external policies of the weaker state; see Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 12. I use the more specific term "neo-imperialism" to describe Russia's current imperial behavior, where Putin is utilizing new methods to reestablish control over parts of the old Soviet and Russian empires. Russian neo-imperialism has included the coercive use of critical geo-economic resources (oil and gas) to exercise influence in adjacent states, coupled with military force to intimidate, control, and on occasion physically occupy select territories of weaker states. Neo-imperialism's efforts to limit weaker states' domestic and international sovereignty differentiate it from the more benign role of a regional hegemon in providing (external) public goods. See Mikael Wigell, "Conceptualizing regional powers' geo-economic strategies: neo-imperialism, neo-mercantilism, hegemony, and liberal institutionalism," *Asia Europe Journal* 14 (2016): 135-151, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10308-015-0442-x>.

4 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 192-97.

5 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012/2013): 7-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804173>.

6 One notable exception is Abby Marie Fanlo, "To Co-Opt or to Coerce? How the Adversaries of Great Power Proteges Respond to Retrenchment" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2022), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2787194433>.

7 U.S. Department of State, "C5+1 Diplomatic Platform," February 27, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/c51-diplomatic-platform/>.

8 Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011): 7-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41289679>. Here, I am defining retrenchment more as a strategic readjustment in one region rather than a major reduction in foreign policy aspirations globally. For the distinction, see Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, "Threat, Decline, and Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly* Symposium, July 21, 2017, <https://www.dhnxon.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ISQSymposiumHaynes.pdf>.

region.⁹ For the United States, the two most suitable geographically proximate states are Turkey and India. Neither of the two countries have significant military, economic, or political influence in the region, and both are tepid partners at best for Washington. Ankara had signaled its willingness to assume a key security and diplomatic role in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal, but the offer garnered a lukewarm reception in Washington.¹⁰ The United States made no serious attempt at cultivating the two countries as successor states in Central Asia. Neither the U.S. State Department's "After Action Review on Afghanistan" nor the White House's assessment of the withdrawal mentioned regional partners. Rather, both documents focus on the failings of the Afghan government and the inadequacies of U.S. planning for the evacuation of American citizens and Afghan civilians.¹¹

The discussion that follows aligns with scholarship that argues states do not necessarily face major losses in influence and could in fact enhance their position relative to other great powers by retrenching.

Proximate great powers may be expected to take advantage of a vacuum created by the withdrawal of a rival distant great power.¹² From a rationalist perspective, offensive realists argue that great powers seek to expand their control over neighboring states in pursuit of regional hegemony.¹³ For offensive realists, excluding peer competitors from a region is critical to a great power's security when the region in contention is geographically contiguous to the hegemonic power. Continental powers historically attribute greater importance to controlling buffer regions than do more insular sea powers. Defensive realists such as Robert Jervis, Stephen Walt, and

Christopher Layne recognize that regional instability poses a threat to would-be hegemonies, but hold that powerful states, especially those at a great distance, can maximize their own security by devolving responsibilities to local successor states ("buck-passing"), exercising extended deterrence from a great distance ("offshore balancing"), or promoting regional security regimes.¹⁴ Moreover, exercising regional hegemony entails significant costs that potential rival hegemones might be reluctant to bear, a consideration that can factor in the calculations of a retrenching power.¹⁵

The discussion that follows aligns with scholarship that argues states do not necessarily face major losses in influence and could in fact enhance their position relative to other great powers by retrenching.¹⁶ The Central Asian case suggests great-power retrenchment did not yield anticipated negative consequences for the United States, namely enhanced Russian influence throughout the region. Instead, Russia's assertiveness toward the ex-Soviet republics, and the soft balancing engaged in by the Central Asians, have mitigated the costs to Washington of its abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Russia: Regional Hegemon or Resurgent Imperial Power?

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Russian foreign policy has focused on maintaining Moscow's influence within the post-Soviet space. In an August 2008 interview, then-President Dmitri Medvedev asserted that Russia held "privileged interests" in bordering countries with which Russia had special historical relations.¹⁷ Russia was too weak to exercise effective hegemony in these regions during the 1990s, but economic growth and military modernization over the following two decades gave Moscow the confi-

9 Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2015): 490-502, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43868289>.

10 Ezgi Yazici, Doga Unlu, and Kursat Gok, "Turkey Aims to Play Stabilizing Role in Afghanistan After NATO Withdrawal," Institute for the Study of War, September 3, 2021, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey-aims-play-stabilizing-role-afghanistan-after-nato-withdrawal>.

11 U.S. Department of State, "After Action Review on Afghanistan," March 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/State-AAR-AFG.pdf>; The White House, "U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

12 For a discussion of power vacuums, see Moritz S. Graefrath, "Power vacuums in international politics: a conceptual framework," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2023), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557571.2023.2272272>.

13 Mearsheimer, John J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 140-43.

14 See Steven E. Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304>

15 Steven E. Lobell, "Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism."

16 Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline?"; Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution"; Douglas B. Atkinson and George W. Williford, "Should We Stay or Should We Go? Exploring the Outcomes of Great Power Retrenchment," *Research and Politics*, December 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168016682888>.

17 Dmitri Medvedev, "Interview with Channel One TV," August 31, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.

dence and capability to reassert itself throughout the post-Soviet region.

Russia's foreign policy ambitions to reclaim great-power status in the post-Soviet region led it to establish new multilateral structures with neighboring states, first as the leader of the Commonwealth of Independent States and later as a security provider through the Collective Security Treaty Organization and co-leader with China of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, even after the economic boom years of the 2000s fueled by rising oil and gas revenue, the normative, economic, and military resources needed to exercise hegemony were limited. The political cultures of Russia and the Central Asian states tend to share norms of autocracy and illiberalism. Moreover, Eurasianist thinkers have envisioned a Russian core and a Central Asian periphery constituting a common civilization underpinned by imperial aspirations.¹⁸ Yet, compared to Europe or China, Russia has fewer economic levers to entice its neighbors. The prospect of Ukraine integrating more closely with the European Union in 2013 through a special association agreement led Putin to counter with extending financial aid and a natural gas price discount to Ukraine as an incentive to join the Eurasian Economic Union, Moscow's alternative regional trade and economic bloc. However, the latter union has had difficulty competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative and has encountered resistance from both current and prospective members suspicious of Moscow's hegemonic ambitions.¹⁹ The primary collective good Moscow can provide its neighbors is security, bilaterally and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization framework. Much of this effort focuses on keeping friendly authoritarian leaders in power rather than providing security guarantees to the other member states against external threats.

In the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders appeared to have accepted the ex-Soviet newly independent countries as sovereign actors. In any event, Russia lacked the material capabilities to play the role of either hegemon or neo-imperial power. The Commonwealth of Independent States proved inadequate at maintaining a privileged position for Moscow in the former Soviet

space, as many of the newly independent states aspired to integrate with Western security institutions instead. While still in existence, the Commonwealth of Independent States has been supplanted by the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union as Russia's preferred structures through which to exert power and influence at the regional level. Great-power notions of hierarchy, cultural superiority, and exceptionalism characterized Moscow's approach to its neighbors. Embodied in Russian geopolitical culture is the self-perception that, as a great power, Russia is entitled by its history, vast geographic size, perceived moral superiority, and exceptionalism to play a hegemonic role in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Pacific littoral. In his 2012 presidential inaugural address, Putin declared that Russia was determined "to develop our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific" and "become a leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia."²⁰ Russia's 2023 foreign policy concept emphasized Russia's "special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" and accused the United States of undermining the country's "constructive civilizational role."²¹ Putin's 2021 essay on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians sketched out a rather dubious interpretation of the past to justify Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²²

This perspective on Russian exceptionalism is not unique to the Putin era — it has deep historical roots in tsarist and Soviet times. A commitment to hierarchy and disdain for weaker powers, a conceit of cultural superiority, and a willingness to violate the sovereignty of its weaker neighbors — that is, an imperial mentality — have persisted across the tsarist, Soviet, and contemporary Russian periods.²³ When Russia was weaker in the 1990s, Moscow's efforts to reestablish regional hegemony were constrained by inadequate resources. As Russia's material capabilities — offensive military power and economic resources — increased under Putin, Russia gradually shifted toward attempting more coercive regional strategies that moved along the continuum from hegemony toward imperialism, defined here as a system of control over a weaker state's internal

18 Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008).

19 Jeanne Wilson, "The Russian Pursuit of Regional Hegemony," *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2(1) (2017), 7-25; Ksenia Kirkham, "The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How successful is the Russian regional hegemony?" *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016): 111-128, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1016/j.euras.2015.06.002>.

20 The Kremlin, "Vladimir Putin Inaugurated as President of Russia," May 7, 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15224>.

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

22 Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

23 Mark R. Beissinger, "The Persistence of Empire in Eurasia," *American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies* 48, no. 1 (2008): 1-8, <https://mbeissinger.scholar.princeton.edu/publications/persistence-empire-eurasia-presidential-address-american-association>; Kevork K. Oskanian, "A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 1 (2018): 26-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1412398>.

and external policies based on economic coercion, military intervention, or the threat of intervention.²⁴

A more coercive approach to the former Soviet republics manifested in the brief Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. Putin and other Kremlin officials were suspicious of U.S. political and military ties with Tbilisi, the personal affective ties between Georgian President Mikael Saakashvili and the Washington political elite, and the Bush administration's push for incorporating Georgia into NATO. At the April 2008 Bucharest summit, NATO welcomed Georgia and Ukraine's aspirations for membership but, facing opposition from Germany and France, failed to provide a Membership Action Plan that would have set the two countries on a formal pathway to membership. Moscow vigorously opposed NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, and in August 2008 reacted with massive force to Tbilisi's shelling of South Ossetia, a breakaway region in the north of Georgia. Russia, which had stationed peacekeeping troops in South Ossetia since the early 1990s, claimed the Georgians were engaged in genocide.²⁵ The Kremlin opposed the recognition of Kosovo's contested independence from Serbia by the United States and several powerful European countries in February 2008, and drew a parallel with the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²⁶ Reactions in the United States, mired in the Great Recession and 2008 presidential campaign, and in the European Union did not go much beyond verbal condemnation.²⁷

The United States, the United Kingdom, and several Eastern European countries were most vocal in their criticism of Russia, while many Western European countries, particularly Germany and France, were more cautious.²⁸ The war constituted a victory for Russian foreign policy as it prevented Georgia from gaining possible membership in NATO, which Russia perceived as threatening to its interests. Moscow

recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the war, an apparent response to the so-called Kosovo precedent.

Central Asian reactions to Russia's invasion of Georgia were muted. Despite political pressure by Moscow, no country in Central Asia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. At the September 2008 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, all five Central Asian States as well as China highlighted the importance of upholding territorial integrity and urged Russia and Georgia to resolve the conflict through negotiations rather than using force.²⁹

In a similar move, the Central Asian states declined to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, though none supported the U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained, while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were absent. Overall, the response of all five countries to Russia's aggression was pragmatic, given their close relationship with Moscow and the potential costs of openly opposing Moscow's aggressive actions.³⁰

Putin has linked his regime closely to the Russian World concept and has promoted the idea of a "Greater Eurasia" in which Russia is the central actor on the Eurasian continent, a civilizational and geographic bridge between Europe and Asia.

Western reactions were more robust when in 2014 the Kremlin took advantage of the chaos in Kyiv in connection with the Euromaidan uprising to invade Crimea and subsequently subvert southeastern Ukraine. The lightning occupation of Crimea, where Russia's Black Sea Fleet operated under a long-term leasing agreement signed during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency, took Washington and the Europeans by

24 Sandra Destradi, "Regional powers and their strategies: empire, hegemony, and leadership," *Review of International Studies* 36, issue 4 (2010): 903-930, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40961960>.

25 James Greene, *Russian Responses to NATO and EU Enlargement and Outreach*, Chatham House, June 2012, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0612bp_greene.pdf; Mike Bowker, "The war in Georgia and the Western response," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 2 (2011): 197-211, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2011.570121>; Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "No Way to Treat Our Friends: Recasting Recent U.S.-Georgian Relations," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 27-41, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01636600802540895>.

26 Valur Ingimundarson, "The 'Kosovo Precedent': Russia's justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine," *LSE Ideas*, 2022, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/2022-SU-Valur-RussKosovo.pdf>.

27 See NATO-Georgia Joint Press Statement, September 15, 2008, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-115e.html>.

28 Mike Bowker, "The war in Georgia and the Western response."

29 Charles E. Ziegler, "Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus after the Georgia Conflict," in Roger E. Kanet (ed.), *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 161-69.

30 Emilbek Dzshuraev, "Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?" *Connections* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1-10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26326414>.



surprise, as well as the disorganized transitional government in Kyiv.³¹ NATO responded by deploying four multinational battlegroups to the Baltic states and Poland beginning in 2016 and all member states pledged to invest at least 2 percent of gross domestic product in defense by 2026. NATO also ramped up training and provided non-lethal equipment for Ukraine's military after 2014. While the Western response was stronger than in 2008, punitive measures in the form of economic sanctions on certain technologies and financing, together with additional condemnations, failed to deter further Russian aggression.³² Moreover, the short-lived Minsk II peace agreement in February 2015 contained numerous contradictory provisions. For example, the terms of the agreement stipulated that Kyiv would control the Ukrainian side of the internationally recognized border with Russia and yet the Donbas and Crimea — two border regions — would have retained political autonomy, presumably under Russian influence and thus undermining Ukrainian sovereignty.³³ Russia's 2014 operation resulted in a ter-

ritorially fragmented Ukraine, and may have convinced Putin that a subsequent full-scale assault against his neighbor might not be seriously contested.

Russia's new imperialism takes its inspiration in part from Eurasianist thinking and the complementary concept of the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*). Eurasianism envisions a leading role for Russia on the continent, premised on Russia's central geographic location between Europe and Asia and its historical destiny to lead the continent.³⁴ The expansive concept of the Russian World, which originated in the 1990s and includes a broad spectrum of ethnic groups and religions so long as they subscribe to Russian cultural superiority, amounts to an imperial attitude toward non-Russians. Putin has linked his regime closely to the Russian World concept and has promoted the idea of a "Greater Eurasia" in which Russia is the central actor on the Eurasian continent, a civilizational and geographic bridge between Europe and Asia. Many Russian elites and much of the public perceive Russia as a civilizing force for good

31 Russian authorities described Yanukovich's ouster as the result of a violent "neo-fascist coup." In reality, Yanukovich, who in late February signed a truce with the opposition brokered by E.U. and Russian officials, fled Ukraine when it became clear the country's elite security forces would no longer protect him. See Andrew Higgins and Andrew E. Kramer, "Ukraine Leader Was Defeated Even Before He Was Ousted," *New York Times*, January 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/world/europe/ukraine-leader-was-defeated-even-before-he-was-ousted.html>.

32 Steven Rosenfield, *The Kremlin Strikes Back: Russia and the West After Crimea's Annexation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 63-91.

33 Duncan Allan, "The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine," Chatham House, 2020, <https://www.chatham-house.org/sites/default/files/2020-05-22-minsk-conundrum-allan.pdf>.

34 See Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*. The author makes a useful distinction between the original Eurasianists of the early 20th century and what she calls the neo-Eurasianists of the post-communist period.

acting altruistically in the former Soviet space, and as a victim of Western injustice. In this reading, the Soviet Union suffered massive losses to save Europe from Nazi Germany, but post-Soviet Russia was then exploited economically, while NATO expanded eastward, disregarding Russia's legitimate national security interests.³⁵ Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia aspired to a position of regional leadership in the post-Soviet space. Russia's neighbors expressed no desire for Russian leadership, though they tacitly acknowledged its hegemony.³⁶ The Ukraine war clarified Moscow's imperial posture toward the former Soviet republics and undermined its claim of being a legitimate security provider in the region.

Moscow's attack on Ukraine has united North America and Europe against Russian aggression, though much of the global South has not condemned Moscow. Pew Research opinion surveys conducted shortly after the invasion found sharply negative attitudes toward Russia and Putin: A median of 90 percent of respondents in 18 (mostly Western) countries said they had no confidence in Putin to do the right thing in world affairs.³⁷ A total of 141 countries voted in the March 2022 U.N. General Assembly resolution to condemn Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. However, no Central Asian country voted against the measure, choosing either to abstain or be absent.³⁸

Russia has used increasingly aggressive measures to assert hegemony in the former Soviet region. The aggression against Ukraine, from the annexation of Crimea and fomentation of separatism in the Donbas in 2014 to the ongoing full-scale assault on the country beginning in 2022, are examples of neo-imperial behavior rather than benevolent hegemony. Further east, Moscow's experience in Afghanistan, specifically the Soviet intervention from 1979 to 1989, has influenced the present effort to exercise Russian hegemony in Central Asia.

The Russian Experience in Afghanistan

The security of Afghanistan was a persistent concern for Russia and its Central Asian partners in the first decade after the Soviet collapse. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant Islamist group reportedly trained in Afghanistan, had carried out a series of terrorist attacks across Central Asia and supported separatism in Chechnya against Moscow's authority.³⁹ A Taliban-supported al-Qaeda, loosely affiliated with Chechen militants in the 1990s, launched attacks on Russian border guards in Tajikistan in 1993 and trained terrorists who attacked Russia in the 1990s.⁴⁰ The Saudi terrorist Ibn al Khattab, who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s, mobilized militants against Russians in Tajikistan in 1993 and in Chechnya during the 1994–95 war against Russia.

The civil war in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 contributed to destabilizing Central Asia. The war helped to enable a flourishing opiate trade that increased drug addiction, spread AIDS, and fueled corruption and crime.⁴¹ These threats complicated Moscow's effort to exercise hegemony in Central Asia. Putin's initial support for the 2001 U.S. intervention was premised on the notion that a short-term deployment of American forces to neutralize the Taliban could help to foster better relations between Russia and the United States.⁴²

As Russia's economy rebounded in the 2000s, and as the military was reformed and modernized, Putin gradually moved to reassert Russian hegemony in its neighborhood. Putin initially expressed his support for the Bush administration's campaign against the Taliban following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Moscow also provided intelligence to Washington and

35 Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat, "Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 771, April 2022, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pepr771_Marat-Kassymbekova_April2022.pdf.

36 See I. M. Busygina, "Regional'noe liderstvo v mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniakh i rol' Rossii v Evrazii," *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'* 4 (2019): 121-133, <https://ras.jes.su/ons/s086904990005820-4-1>.

37 John Gramlich, "What public opinion surveys found in the first year of the war in Ukraine," Pew Research Center, February 23, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/23/what-public-opinion-surveys-found-in-the-first-year-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

38 U.N. General Assembly, "Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly," March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039>.

39 Svante E. Cornell, "Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 619-639, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/095465591009395>.

40 Mark N. Kramer, "Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian – Chechen Conflict," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 2 (2005): 251-262, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668130500051833>.

41 Andrey Kazantsev, "Afghanistan Crisis: Security Problems for Russia and the Central Asian States," *Modern Diplomacy*, August 19, 2021, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2021/08/19/afghanistan-crisis-security-problems-for-russia-and-central-asian-states/>; Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumulty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 5 (2008): 412-33, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10576100801993347>; Svante E. Cornell, "Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia."

42 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 64-66.

facilitated the use of the air bases at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan and Manas, Kyrgyzstan for U.S. forces going to and coming from Afghanistan.⁴³ A radical Afghan government promoting Islamic extremism threatened Russia's security given Moscow's historical problems with terrorism and separatism arising from the North Caucasus. Russia had fought two wars against separatist Chechnya. Russian forces were humiliated in the first war in 1994–96, which resulted in Chechnya's *de facto* independence. Separatist forces were crushed in the second war in 1999–2001 and Chechnya was reincorporated into the Russian Federation. Central Asia was also under threat from Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the latter of which had close links to al-Qaeda. During the first two years of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Russian forces provided military support to the Northern Alliance, which was partnering with American forces against the Taliban.⁴⁴ From 2009 to 2015, Moscow facilitated the flow of logistics and equipment through Russia and Central Asia, which offered U.S. and NATO forces an alternate supply route to transiting through Pakistan. This was a key element in the Obama administration's so-called surge of U.S. forces to Afghanistan in 2009–2011.

Putin's initial support for the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan was based on Washington pursuing limited counter-terrorism goals, but this support declined dramatically after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which Russia adamantly opposed.⁴⁵ U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated due to a number of other developments as well: Washington's support for the so-called color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan; the U.S. announcement in April 2007 on developing missile defense systems in Eastern Europe; Russia's suspension of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in December 2007; U.S. advocacy for NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia; and the recognition of Kosovo's contested independence

from Serbia by the United States and several E.U. and NATO members in February 2008. By the end of Putin's second presidential term in 2008, Moscow had rebuilt much of its military capability and shifted focus to working with its Commonwealth of Independent States partners rather than with the United States or Europe to contain threats along Russia's periphery. Russia's 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, for example, stated:

Russia will increase cooperation with the CIS Member States in ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat common challenges and threats, primarily international terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration. The priorities here include elimination of terrorist and drug trafficking threats emanating from the territory of Afghanistan and prevention of risks of destabilization of the situations in Central Asia and Transcaucasia.⁴⁶

The Obama administration's "reset" of relations between the United States and Russia led to several marginal improvements in bilateral ties. Under Medvedev, Russia allowed the flow of supplies to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan by using the Northern Distribution Network logistical corridor through Russia and former Soviet republics, including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Washington also facilitated the transfer of Russian military equipment, including Mi-17 helicopters, to the Afghan military through the NATO-Russia Council framework.⁴⁷ The security of Afghanistan was one area where U.S. and Russian interests aligned, as Medvedev and Russian ambassador to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov acknowledged.⁴⁸ The United States paid Russia and several Central Asian countries approximately \$500 million a year to use the Northern Distribution Network, which

43 Although the Kremlin leadership was divided over the question of a U.S. military presence in Central Asia, regional leaders supported the idea of American bases and overflight rights. Putin eventually acceded to the U.S. bases in the interest of better relations with Washington, albeit on a temporary basis. Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, 62–66.

44 Ariel Cohen, "Russia, Islam, and the war on terrorism: An uneasy future," *Demokratizatsiya* 10, no. 4 (2002): 556–567, https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/10-4_Cohen.pdf. After the Taliban gained control of Afghanistan in 1996, Russia supplied weaponry to the Northern Alliance and granted the group access to the Kulyab airbase in Tajikistan. Thomas Ruttig, "From Point Zero to 'New Warmth': Russian-Afghan relations since 1989," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/from-point-zero-to-new-warmth-russian-afghan-relations-since-1989/>.

45 Ivan Safranchuk and Alexandre Knyazev, "Russia-India Cooperation on Post-American Afghanistan," *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2023): 241–44, <https://www.vestnik.mgimo.ru/jour/article/view/3381>.

46 The Kremlin, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," January 12, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>

47 NATO, "NATO-Russia Council expands support to Afghan Air Force," April 23, 2013, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_99887.htm.

48 "Russian Offers Obama Help on Afghanistan," VOA, November 2, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-01-23-voa43-68809922/412699.html>; "Zamir Kabulov: SShA pridetsia sotrudnichat' c Rossei po Afganistanu," *RIA Novosti*, November 14, 2016, <https://ria.ru/20161114/1481306522.html?in=t>.

provided much-needed revenue after the 2008 global financial crisis.⁴⁹ Still, Moscow was determined to assert regional hegemony and repeatedly denounced the long-term deployment of U.S. forces to Central Asia as unacceptable.⁵⁰

Although Moscow criticized the abrupt and chaotic American withdrawal, Russian and American publicly stated positions on a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan were similar.

Russia provided military aid to the Hamid Karzai government in 2001–2006, but gradually reduced this assistance as U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated in the years following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Tensions between Kabul and Moscow peaked in 2006 when Russia suspended all aid to the Karzai government, but in 2010 American, Russian, and Afghan forces conducted a joint narcotics operation in Nangahar province.⁵¹ Russia's relations with Afghanistan continued to improve during 2010–2014 as Moscow provided reconstruction aid and Karzai's relations with Washington soured. After leaving office in 2014, Karzai supported Russia's diplomatic outreach with the Taliban while condemning continued U.S. military strikes against the Taliban as fueling further extremism. The former Afghan president also called for closer cooperation between Kabul and Islamabad, echoing Russia's call for a greater Pakistani role in settling the conflict.⁵²

Russia's relations with Pakistan began improving around 2010, as Islamabad's ties with Washington became more strained and Moscow recognized Pakistan's ability to act as an intermediary with the Taliban. The Kremlin also saw an opportunity to insert itself into the negotiations process — while at the same time earning revenue by selling arms to Pakistan — as tensions between the United States and Pakistan rose during the Trump years.⁵³ In dealing with Islamabad, Moscow has been careful not to jeopardize Russia's historical close partnership with India.⁵⁴ Still, Russian and Pakistani interests converged in several areas, including promoting the Taliban as the preferred political authority in Afghanistan over the more radical Islamic State-Khorasan and al-Qaeda.⁵⁵ Both Russia and Pakistan viewed the U.S. presence as destabilizing to Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region. Russian and Pakistani leaders also acknowledged the importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a mechanism to combat potential terrorist threats from the Islamic State in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, closer Russian-Pakistani relations have been hampered by limited potential for either economic or security cooperation, as well as by Moscow's determination to preserve its historically close relationship with India.⁵⁷

Moscow began its diplomatic outreach to the Taliban starting early in Putin's third term as president in 2012–2018. Already by 2014–15, Russia had concluded that the Taliban could not be defeated by military

49 Alexander Cooley, "After Afghanistan, A New Great Game," *New York Times*, August 21, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/22/opinion/after-afghanistan-a-new-great-game.html>. See also Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, "The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2010, 4–6, http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf; and Graham Lee, "The New Silk Road and the Northern Distribution Network: A Golden Road to Central Asian Trade Reform?" *Open Society Foundation Occasional Paper Series* 8, 2012, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/ddde4426-49b2-4ff3-9615-e676ae5b7cc2/OPS-No-8-20121019.pdf>.

50 Roy Allison argues that Putin had turned to more proactive and effective security and energy policies in Central Asia and the Caspian region as early as summer 2002, on the premise that Russia's interests in the region, unlike America's, were permanent. Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (2014): 277–293, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3569242>. A similar position — that continued U.S. presence in Central Asia was unacceptable — was articulated by Putin, Sergey Lavrov, and other Russian officials in 2021, as coalition forces were planning their withdrawal. Catherine Putz, "Russia Cautions Central Asia Against Hosting US Forces," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/russia-cautions-centralasia-against-hosting-us-forces/>.

51 The raid took place in Nangahar province in northeastern Afghanistan and involved Afghan police, U.S. special forces, and four Russian officers. Simon Shuster, "Russia Returns to Afghanistan for a Drug Raid," *Time*, October 30, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2028329,00.html>.

52 Samuel Ramani, "Hamid Karzai and the Russia Connection," *The Diplomat*, September 3, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/hamid-karzai-and-the-russia-connection/>.

53 Niha Dagia, "Bilateral Bond Between Pakistan and Russia Deepening," *The Diplomat*, June 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/bilateral-bond-between-pakistan-and-russia-deepening/>.

54 Russia has continued to sell India advanced weaponry and discounted oil, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi has refused to criticize Russia over the invasion of Ukraine. In July 2024, Modi made a state visit to Moscow and was awarded the Order of St. Andrew, Russia's highest civilian honor. Paul Sonne and Anupreeta Das, "Modi's Moscow Visit Showcases a Less Isolated Putin, Angering Ukraine," *New York Times*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/09/world/europe/russia-india-modi-moscow-putin.html>. See also Sumit Ganguly, "India, Russia, and the Ukraine Crisis," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2024): 55–69, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2366108>.

55 Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts," Institut français des relations internationales, May 15, 2018, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/russieneireports/russias-afghan-policy-regional-and-russia-west>.

56 Feroz Hassan Khan, "Russia-Pakistan Strategic Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (January 2021): 42–64, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/15/2002565539/-1/-1/1/KHAN.PDF>.

57 Christopher Clary, "Russia-Pakistan Relations and the Constraints of Geoeconomics," *Asian Survey* 62, nos. 5–6 (2022): 838–865, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2022.1801312>.

force and was preferable to more radical movements. The Taliban viewed the Islamic State in Afghanistan as a rival since the latter's founding in 2015 and has repeatedly conducted military operations against the terrorist organization. From Russia's perspective, Taliban leaders also represented a less threatening, indigenous, nationalist movement that did not export terrorism, which contributed to Moscow's changed opinion of the organization.⁵⁸ As Russian forces fought against Islamic State militants in Syria, Russian diplomats simultaneously reached out to the Taliban about devising strategies for countering the threat from Islamic State-linked elements in Afghanistan. Kabulov revealed that Moscow and Kabul had established secret communication channels to discuss how to address the growing Islamic State threat as early as 2015.⁵⁹

Russia hosted several rounds of talks between the Taliban, the United States, Pakistan, China, and other countries in the years prior to the Taliban takeover in 2021. In 2016, Russia had organized trilateral consultations on Afghanistan with China and Pakistan. The following year, an expanded gathering of countries including India, Iraq, and the five Central Asian states, led by Moscow, called on the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government.⁶⁰ The Trump administration declined an invitation to attend the meeting, as U.S.-Russian tensions had spiked over an April 2017 American cruise missile strike on a Syrian airbase also used by Russian forces.⁶¹ Moscow sponsored three rounds of negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan officials in 2019. The talks in September were held shortly after Trump abruptly severed U.S. negotiations with the Taliban. At the same meeting, the Russian delegation encouraged the Taliban to continue talks with the United States.⁶²

Although Moscow criticized the abrupt and chaotic American withdrawal, Russian and American publicly stated positions on a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan were

similar. Both countries prioritized stability through good governance and preventing the spread of terrorism and narcotics trafficking. Addressing the dire humanitarian situation and upholding the rights of women and girls were also shared concerns. In 2021, the United States, Russia, China, and Pakistan worked together through the so-called Troika Plus group to address the deepening humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan.⁶³ Notwithstanding these limited forms of cooperation, the Kremlin appeared determined to take advantage of Washington's reduced presence in Central Asia to bolster Russia's influence.

Positioning for the End Game

As the Biden administration prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan, Moscow accelerated its diplomatic initiatives in Central and South Asia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Islamabad in April 2021, his first visit in nine years, after holding talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaisankar. In Pakistan, Lavrov discussed regional security, counter-terrorism efforts, and achieving a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, along with expanding bilateral trade and military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan. Some tensions were evident in relations with India. During his trip, Lavrov did not meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and was publicly critical of New Delhi for participating in the Quad dialogue.⁶⁴ Still, Russia's relationship with India, described as a "special privileged partnership" in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, has been vital in the Kremlin's Asia-Pacific and Central Asian policies. Balancing ties between Islamabad and New Delhi allows Moscow to retain influence in Afghanistan's neighborhood, while limiting India's potential as a successor state to the United States. While India might not be a realistic successor, it is still concerned about transnational terrorism given the linkages between Pakistan and the Taliban.

58 Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Approach to Afghanistan Following the Taliban Takeover," PONARS Eurasia, November 22, 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russias-approach-to-afghanistan-following-the-taliban-takeover/>.

59 "Russia's interests coincide with the Taliban's in fight against ISIS," *Reuters*, December 23, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mid-east-crisis-russia-taliban-idUSKBN0U61EQ20151223>. Kabulov had served as Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan during 2004–09. After that posting he was named the President's Special Representative for Afghanistan.

60 Nurlan Aliyev, "How Russia Views Afghanistan Today," *War on the Rocks*, October 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/russias-temporary-afghan-policy/>.

61 "US skips out on Afghanistan-Taliban conference in Moscow," *DW*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-skips-out-on-afghanistan-taliban-conference-in-moscow/a-38426486>.

62 Kathy Gannon and Jim Heintz, "Taliban visits Moscow days after Trump says talks 'dead,'" *Associated Press*, September 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/8c285a3bcaac4c978b5378db54ed9166>; "Russia hosts Taliban delegation following collapse of US talks," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/15/russia-hosts-taliban-delegation-following-collapse-of-us-talks>.

63 "O talibakh, mire i budushchem Afganistan: bol'shoe interv'iu s Kabulovym," *Sputnik*, February 17, 2021, <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20210217/intervyu-kabulov-1032840987.html>; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Hosts Afghan Peace Conference, Hoping to Boost Talks," *The Diplomat*, March 19, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/russia-hosts-afghan-peace-conference-hoping-to-boost-talks/>. The Troika Plus group, comprised of China, Russia, the United States, and Pakistan, formed in 2021 to promote a peaceful settlement among Afghanistan's warring factions. The process was suspended after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

64 Michael Kugelman, "Russia makes a power play in South Asia," *South Asian Monitor*, April 10, 2021, <https://southasianmonitor.net/en/top-news/russia-makes-a-power-play-in-south-asia>.

In the months leading up to the Taliban victory, Russian officials encouraged the Afghan government and Taliban leaders to reach a peaceful solution, while also acknowledging Afghanistan's autonomy in its own internal affairs. Kabulov said his government preferred the Taliban and the existing Ashraf Ghani government forming a transitional coalition, with the Taliban given a position of great authority corresponding to their influence with the Afghan public.⁶⁵ At the last round of talks in October 2021, Moscow floated the idea of an inclusive government in Kabul comprising representatives from the country's numerous ethnic groups.⁶⁶

In sponsoring a permanent peace settlement in Afghanistan, Russia sought to capitalize on U.S. retrenchment to assert regional hegemony. By showcasing its diplomatic heft, Russia portrayed itself as an honest broker capable of mediating between the various sides of the Afghan conflict. This portrayal of Russia was meant to contrast with the apparent inability of the United States to act as an effective security provider. From Moscow's point of view, the chaotic and humiliating withdrawal of U.S. forces in August 2021 was convincing evidence of America's failure to successfully promote democracy across the globe.⁶⁷

Russian Hegemony after U.S. Retrenchment?

American retrenchment provided Moscow an attractive opportunity to serve as the chief security guarantor and regional hegemon for Central Asia as the Taliban reestablished control of Afghanistan. Shortly after the U.S. evacuation, Russia made clear its opposition to any U.S. or NATO forces remaining in or returning to the Central Asia region. During an Oc-

tober 2021 meeting between Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, the Russian diplomat emphasized "the unacceptability of a U.S. military presence in Central Asia in any form whatsoever."⁶⁸ That same month the head of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, urged all Commonwealth of Independent States members to regard the deployment of U.S. and NATO forces to any of their territories as impermissible.⁶⁹

Kremlin policy toward Afghanistan is nested within the larger objective of maintaining stability and security along the southern border with Central Asia and shaping the geopolitical orientation of the Central Asian countries. As Lavrov explained in September 2021, "Now that the NATO troops have pulled out from Afghanistan, the most important thing for us is to ensure the security of our allies in Central Asia. First, they are our comrades, including comrades-in-arms, and second, the security of Russia's southern borders directly depends on this."⁷⁰

After the collapse of Ghani's government in August 2021, Russia and the Central Asian states, excluding Tajikistan, adopted a "wait and see" approach toward Taliban rule: They maintained embassies in Kabul, though without extending formal diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government. Russia's main priority was to prevent the Central Asian states from moving further away from its orbit.⁷¹ The Uzbek and Kazakh foreign ministries also maintained contacts with the Taliban, and power plants in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan continued to export electricity to Afghanistan. Tajikistan's government, sensitive to the fate of the large Tajik minority in Afghanistan, shunned any communication with the Taliban leadership.⁷² The country's pro-government Democratic Party accused the Taliban of devastating ethnic Tajik villages and committing atrocities.⁷³ The fact that

65 "O talibakh, mire i budushchem Afganistana."

66 Jonathan Brown, "Russia Hosts Taliban for Talks After Warning Against IS Threat," *The Moscow Times*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/20/russia-hosts-taliban-for-talks-after-warning-against-is-threat-a75345>.

67 Vladimir Putin, "Meeting with Schoolchildren," September 1, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66554>; Anna Borshchevskaya, "Beware What You Wish For: Moscow's Joy Over U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan May Be Premature," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/beware-what-you-wish-moscows-joy-over-us-withdrawal-afghanistan-may-be-premature>.

68 "No Breakthrough Reported at U.S.-Russia Talks Over Embassies Dispute," *RFE/RL*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-us-land-no-progress/31505381.html>.

69 "CIS should stay firm US military facilities in Central Asia are impermissible—Security Council chief," *TASS*, October 13, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1349009>.

70 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions from MGIMO students and faculty on the occasion of the beginning of a new academic year," Moscow, September 1, 2021, https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4850241.

71 See Charles J. Sullivan, "Kabul and the Kremlin: Russia's Evolving Foreign Policy Towards the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," *Asian Affairs* 54, no. 1 (2023): 1-17, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03068374.2022.2156705>.

72 Ethnic Tajiks, who comprise 27 percent of Afghanistan's population and are concentrated in the northeast and northwest of the country, are the second largest group in Afghanistan after the Pashtuns. Uzbeks are the third largest ethnic group, at 9 percent.

73 None of Tajikistan's political parties could be considered a true opposition party, given the repressive nature of the regime. The Democratic Party is one of seven political parties tolerated by the Tajik government, with only one member in the legislature. Bruce Pannier, "Central Asia and the Taliban: The Difference Between a Restive Border and a Quiet One," *Gandhara*, December 14, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/central-asia-taliban-afghanistan/31609109.html>; "Tadzhikskie demokraty prizvali otkazat'sia ot priznaniia rezhima talibov," *Fergana*, August 20, 2021, <https://fergana.media/news/122763/>.



Taliban excluded non-Pashtun national minority groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks from the Afghan government generated support for the Islamic State in the north of Afghanistan, exacerbating the security threat to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.⁷⁴

Even before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian states faced the dilemma of retaining their autonomy while expecting Moscow to provide regional security.

Central Asia's authoritarian regimes fear the destabilizing potential of radical forces based in Afghanistan and expect Moscow to provide security for the region. Poor governance by the Taliban and mistreatment of Uzbeks and Tajiks in northern Afghanistan might create fertile ground for extremism to flourish in Central Asia. Islamabad's operation against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan militants in North Waziristan in spring 2014 drove many fighters into Afghanistan. Reportedly the Islamic State had plans to relocate thousands of militants to Afghanistan following setbacks in Syria and Iraq. Many of these Islamic State fighters have connections to militants in Central Asia, including links to migrant laborers employed in Russia.⁷⁵

Even before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian states faced the dilemma of retaining their autonomy while expecting Moscow to provide regional security. Tajikistan is most threatened by possible terrorist or military incursions from Afghanistan, and Dushanbe relies heavily on Russian troops and weaponry to combat extremism on its southern border. Immediately after the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Moscow reinforced its existing military base in Dushanbe with new T-72B3M tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, and S-300PS anti-tank missiles to beef up the 7,000 Russian troops permanently stationed there. In May 2021, Putin met with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon in Moscow, promising to support Tajikistan with the Russian forces based

there as well as by training and equipping the Tajik military.⁷⁶ Russia also announced in December 2021 that it would build a border guard post in Tajikistan on the border with Afghanistan, though it is unclear whether it was ever built.⁷⁷

Tajikistan has strong incentives to maintain close security ties with Moscow. Afghan opposition forces have taken refuge in Tajikistan and the Rahmon government fears that Islamic State-Khorasan Province militants could launch attacks across the border.

In February 2022, the Taliban stood up several new military units totaling some 4,400 troops in Badakhshan, Badghis, and Farah provinces bordering Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. The Taliban insisted the deployments were aimed at domestic security, but skirmishes with Iranian and Turkmen forces reportedly occurred in early 2022. Rahmon accused the Taliban of forming more than 40 terrorist camps in northeastern Afghanistan, a claim rejected by the Taliban.⁷⁸ Moscow has pledged to defend Tajikistan against any external attack — both bilaterally and through the Collective Security Treaty Organization mutual defense pact.⁷⁹

Benign Hegemony or Coercive Imperialism?

Russia has consistently portrayed its approach toward the former Soviet republics as one of benevolent leadership, where the leading power guides states toward common objectives. In reality, Russia's approach under Putin has evolved from a hard form of hegemony, whereby the hegemon practices coercion but still maintains some emphasis on collective interests with the subordinate states, to the overt use of force that ignores the interests of the smaller states and amounts to imperialism.⁸⁰ Russia's invasion of Georgia, the occupation of Crimea and subversion of the Donbas, the military intervention in Syria supporting the Assad regime, and the full-scale assault

74 Bruce Pannier, "Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat To Central Asia," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 13, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/northern-afghanistan-and-the-new-threat-to-central-asia/>.

75 Andrey Kazantsev, "Afghanistan Crisis."

76 The Kremlin, "Vstrecha s Prezidentom Tadzhikistana Emomali Rakhmonom," May 8, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65543>.

77 "Russia to begin building border guard post on Tajik-Afghan border," *Vestnik Kavkaza*, December 28, 2021, <https://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Russia-to-begin-building-border-guard-post-on-Tajik-Afghan-border.html>.

78 Faranjis Najibullah and Mustafa Sarwar, "Taliban Says New Troops Near Central Asian Border Will Bring Stability: Neighbors Are Not So Sure," *Gandhara*, February 16, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-troops-central-asia-borders-stability/31706961.html>.

79 "Russia Pledges Support for Tajikistan Amid Concern Over Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-military-tajikistan-afghanistan-/31244656.html>.

80 This understanding of hegemony draws from Sandra Destradi's continuum of regional power structures, which ranges from leadership at one end of the spectrum, through soft (or benevolent), intermediate, and hard forms of hegemony where relationships are cooperative (though increasingly dominated by threats rather than persuasion or material inducements), to force-based imperialism at the other end of the spectrum. Sandra Destradi, "Regional powers and their strategies."

on Ukraine illustrate the growing militarization of Russian foreign policy.⁸¹ The brutality of Putin's war against Ukraine has especially undermined Russia's purported image as a benevolent hegemon and security provider in the post-Soviet space.

There are indications that Moscow is now perceived as unreliable, and potentially threatening, by its Central Asian partners. Measuring changes in a country's regional position or influence is complicated, and any conclusions must be tentative. Still, it appears that Russia's position in Central Asia is eroding. All five Central Asian states declined to support Russia's two invasions of Ukraine, though none openly endorsed the West's critical stance. The five Central Asian states either abstained or were absent during a series of U.N. votes on resolutions condemning Russia's actions, in 2014, 2022, and 2023.

Russian officials lobbied their Central Asian partners to support the Kremlin's interpretation of the war as an effort to "liberate" the people of Ukraine but were met with resistance. Putin visited all five Central Asian countries in 2022 and held more than 50 meetings with national leaders seeking support for Russia's position. Despite this, two of the five — Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan — publicly took a neutral position on the war in Ukraine in opposition to Russia.⁸² Kyrgyzstan then cancelled Collective Security Treaty Organization exercises on its territory scheduled for October 2022.⁸³ Central Asian states have avoided openly violating the sanctions regime imposed on Russia, though Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have benefited economically by importing dual-use items from China and reexporting them to Russia.⁸⁴ No Central Asian country has recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea or the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts from Ukraine.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan publicly advocated for upholding Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while declining to take sides in the conflict.⁸⁵ Less than a month after Russia's 2022 invasion, the Uzbek foreign minister issued a statement defending Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and ruled out recognizing the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics.⁸⁶

Although Central Asians are wary of Moscow, economic and security dependence on Russia has muted public reactions to the war. Tajikistan, as the poorest country in Central Asia, heavily relies on remittances from guest workers in Russia and is vulnerable to extremist infiltration from Afghanistan, so its options are limited.⁸⁷ Still, in August 2022, Rahmon confronted Putin at a Commonwealth of Independent States summit in Astana, accusing him of disrespecting Central Asians, and for not investing enough in the region.⁸⁸ Kazakhstan, traditionally Moscow's closest partner in the region, has also criticized Russia. At the June 2022 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev openly refused to support Russia's war on Ukraine and recognize the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk.⁸⁹ Tokayev's independent stance led to accusations in the Russian media that Kazakhstan had betrayed Russia over the war, and influential Russian Duma member Konstantin Zatulin even threatened Kazakhstan with a Ukraine-style assault to conquer northern territories populated predominantly by ethnic Russians if Astana did not cooperate.⁹⁰ Repeated demands by Russian nationalists that "historic" Russian lands be returned to Russia, Putin's questioning in 2014 of the legitimacy of Kazakhstan's statehood, and the influx of hundreds of thousands of Russians fleeing

81 James Sherr, "The Militarization of Russian Foreign Policy," *Transatlantic Academy*, Paper Series No. 10 (2017), <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Militarization%2520edited.pdf>; Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Role of the Military in Russian Politics and Foreign Policy Over the Past 20 Years," *Orbis* 64, no. 3 (2020): 434-446, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438720300272>.

82 "Russia attempts to contrive appearance of support from Central Asian allies," *Eurasianet*, February 27, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-attempts-to-contrive-appearance-of-support-from-central-asian-allies>.

83 Temur Umarov, "Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer, or Drifting Apart?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 23, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88698>.

84 Clarence Leong and Lisa Lin, "Russia's Backdoor for Battlefield Goods From China: Central Asia," *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russias-backdoor-for-battlefield-goods-from-china-central-asia-bd88b546>.

85 "In Break with Moscow, Uzbeks Won't Recognize Separatist 'Republics' in Ukraine," *RFE/RL*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-ukraine-separatists-not-recognized/31757881.html>.

86 Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "Ukraine war: Is Central Asia loosening ties with Russia?" *Al-Jazeera*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/25/ukraine-war-is-central-asia-loosening-ties-with-russia>.

87 Parviz Mullojonov, "Official Dushanbe Silent as Tajik Society Deeply Divided on Ukraine War," *RFE/RL*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-public-divided-war-ukraine/31861484.html>.

88 "Tajik President's Demand for 'Respect' from Putin Viewed Millions of Times on YouTube," *RFE/RL*, October 15, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-russia-rahmon-youtube-respect/32084773.html>.

89 The Kremlin, "St. Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Session," June 17, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669>.

90 Kanat Altynbaev, "Russian lawmaker floats idea of Ukraine-style invasion of Kazakhstan," *Caravanserei*, June 24, 2022, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/06/24/feature-02.



scription raised concerns in Kazakhstan about Russian irredentism.⁹¹

Public opinion in Central Asia on Russia's war against Ukraine appears divided. There were only a handful of protest demonstrations following Russia's invasion, mostly in Kazakhstan. Popular reaction is heavily shaped by government controls and news outlets. All the Central Asian states control the media, with much of the public getting news of the war through censored Russian state television. The internet, however, has recently become the major source of information in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, especially among the younger generations. A June 2022 Central Asia Barometer survey found that 49 percent of Kyrgyzstanis blamed either Ukraine or the United States for the conflict while only 14 percent blamed Russia. In Kazakhstan, the share of respondents who blamed either Russia or the United States and Ukraine were almost identical. Respondents in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan thought the war was having a negative impact on their country.⁹² Fears of Russian aggression appeared highest in Kazakhstan. A May 2023 MediaNet/PaperLab survey found that a third of respondents reported a worse opinion of Russia than before the war, with 15 percent fearing Russian could invade their country.⁹³

Russia's assault against Ukrainian national identity has stirred debate about and resentment of Russian imperial legacies in Central Asia.⁹⁴ The Central Asian states each have a growing sense of nationalism, show increasing pride in their indigenous history and culture, and are experiencing a gradual shift away from Russian as their primary language, which has provoked condemnation from Russian authorities.⁹⁵ Kazakhstanis are well aware of their country's parallels to Ukraine — about 20 percent of the population is ethnic Russian, concentrated along the northern border with Russia. Following independence, Kazakhstan and

the other Central Asian states have been engaged in both nation- and state-building processes to bolster national identities and legitimize authoritarianism. Senior officials, for example, are expected to speak Kazakh rather than Russian. However, in promoting titular languages and previously neglected national heroes, the Central Asians, like the Ukrainians, have antagonized Russian nationalists. In addition to differences over the Ukraine war, there are tensions over the trend toward using the Latin alphabet rather than Cyrillic in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Russian analysts have accused Central Asians of engaging in a form of "cancel culture," inspired by the United States, that has curtailed instruction in the Russian language and is socializing the younger generations to see Russia as an enemy.⁹⁶ These long-term trends indicate a cultural distancing from Russia that is not solely the result of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Prior to the war, public opinion in Central Asia strongly favored Russia. Central Asia Barometer surveys conducted in 2017 and 2019 found that Russia was perceived by respondents far more favorably than were China or the United States.⁹⁷ Shortly after the war began, however, a Central Asia Barometer survey found many Central Asians worried that the Ukraine war would negatively impact their country, specifically the economy. In Kyrgyzstan, 70 percent of respondents thought the situation in Ukraine would have either a somewhat or very negative impact on their country. In Kazakhstan, 55 percent of respondents thought the war would have a somewhat or very negative impact, with large proportions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan concerned about inflation caused by the conflict.⁹⁸

In contrast, China's influence in Central Asia has been steadily growing over the past three decades, and heightened suspicions of Moscow since the 2022 invasion have given Beijing new opportuni-

91 Mansur Mirovalev, "Ukraine war: Is Kazakhstan going cool on Russia?" *Al-Jazeera*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/24/whats-behind-kazakhstan-not-recognizing-ukraines-separatists>. Putin's comments apparently were meant as praise for Nursultan Nazarbayev, whom Putin credited with building a state where there had been none before. However, commentary by Russian nationalists claimed Kazakhstan was a "gift" from the Russians, and the Kazakhs should be grateful to their benefactors. See Bruce Pannier, "An Old Refrain: Russian Lawmakers Question Kazakhstan's Territorial Integrity, Statehood," *RFE/RL*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lawmakers-question-kazakhstan-territorial-integrity-statehood/31003732.html>.

92 "Surveying Kazakh and Kyrgyz attitudes on Russia's War," *Eurasianet*, September 6, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/surveying-kazakh-and-kyrgyz-attitudes-on-russias-war>.

93 "Kazakhs increasingly wary of Russia's belligerence, poll shows," *Reuters*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/kazakhs-increasingly-wary-russias-belligerence-poll-2023-05-17/>.

94 Jack Leydiker, "The War in Ukraine is Catalyzing a Linguistic Awakening in Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, August 8, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/the-war-in-ukraine-is-catalyzing-a-linguistic-awakening-in-kazakhstan>.

95 Marlene Laruelle, *Central Peripheries: Nationhood in Central Asia* (London: UCL Press, 2021).

96 Elena Vladislavovna Khlyshcheva and Valentina Lvovna Tikhonova, "'Kultura otmeny' kak mekhanizm konstruirovaniia nacional'noi identichnosti stran Kaspiskogo makroregiona," *Mezhkul'turnaia kommunikatsiia* 7, no. 2 (2023): 104-123, <https://concept.mgimo.ru/jour/article/view/768/545>.

97 Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," Kennan Cable No. 56, Wilson Center, August 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-56-no-great-game-central-asias-public-opinions-russia-china-and-us>. The surveys were conducted in all the Central Asian countries excepting Tajikistan, and found Russia was favored over China between 6 (Uzbekistan) and 31 (Kyrgyzstan) points, with the United States lagging behind in all four countries.

98 Yunis Sharifli, Chia-Lin Kao, and Bermet Derbishova, "Russia's War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/russias-war-in-ukraine-and-its-impact-on-central-asia/>.

ties to strengthen its regional position. Xi Jinping's September 2021 visit to Uzbekistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit was his first venture outside China since the COVID pandemic. Central Asian state leaders accorded Xi a warm welcome, suggesting hedging against Russian influence and, with Russia's economy strained by sanctions and wartime expenses, the need for Chinese trade and investment.⁹⁹ In May 2023, Xi met with all five Central Asian leaders at the third China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, where Beijing pledged a "new blueprint" for regional development through trade, energy, infrastructure, and security initiatives. The summit's final declaration reiterated China's support for the national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of its Central Asian partners.¹⁰⁰

Initial expectations that Western sanctions would negatively impact Central Asia were not borne out. High regional growth rates in 2022 and 2023 were driven by increases in raw materials prices and the massive influx of businesses and investment. A decline in remittances, on which Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are especially dependent, was largely offset by an influx of migrants fleeing Russia, many of whom brought valuable skills and capital. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have benefited by reexporting (mostly Chinese) products to Russia, helping the latter avoid sanctions while strengthening ties to China.¹⁰¹ Even before the 2022 invasion, China's economic footprint in Central Asia was bigger than Russia's. In 2022, total trade between China and the five Central Asian states was \$70 billion, and Chinese foreign direct investment in the region exceeded \$15 billion as of March 2023. In contrast, Central Asian trade with Russia in 2022 was under \$40 billion, though in 2023–24 Moscow increasingly relied on the region to evade sanctions and settle debts in national currencies rather than the U.S. dollar.¹⁰²

Russian foreign direct investment in the region was comparable to that from China and the United States in the period 2007–2020, although investment from the European Union was 3.5 times larger than that of China, Russia, and the United States combined.¹⁰³

Central Asian elites actively solicit Chinese investment, although large segments of the population fear being swamped by Chinese labor and resent the mistreatment of Central Asian minorities in Xinjiang.

Central Asian elites actively solicit Chinese investment, although large segments of the population fear being swamped by Chinese labor and resent the mistreatment of Central Asian minorities in Xinjiang. Central Asia Barometer surveys conducted yearly from 2017 to 2021 found increasingly unfavorable opinions of China in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan over time. In the fall of 2021, 45 percent of Kazakhstan respondents had a somewhat or very unfavorable opinion of China, compared to just 16 percent in spring 2017. In Uzbekistan, the figures were 33 percent unfavorable in 2021 and 6 percent in 2017. Likewise, Kyrgyzstan was 42 percent favorable in 2021 and 32 percent unfavorable in 2017.¹⁰⁴

Evolving Regional Security Organizations

Russia has sponsored the development of the Collective Security Treaty Organization as a leading security framework within the post-Soviet space. Moscow has envisioned the organization as a bulwark against further NATO expansion to the east.¹⁰⁵ Like NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization

99 Austin Ramzy, "China's Leader Emerges From Covid Bubble for First Foreign Trip Since 2020," *New York Times*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/world/asia/xi-jinping-putin-china.html>.

100 Catherine Putz, "In Xian, China's Xi Calls for a 'Shared Future' With Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, May 19, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/in-xian-chinas-xi-calls-for-a-shared-future-with-central-asia/>.

101 See European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Regional Economic Prospects*, May 2024, 22–25, <https://www.ebrd.com/rep-may-2024.pdf>; Dilfuza Mirzakhmedova, Shakhriyor Ismailkhodjaev, and Kamila Fayzieva, "Following China's Export of Sanctioned Goods Through Central Asia to Russia," *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/following-chinas-export-of-sanctioned-goods-through-central-asia-to-russia/>.

102 "Xi v Putin: China and Russia Compete for Central Asia's Favour," *The Economist*, May 27, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2023/05/25/china-and-russia-compete-for-central-asias-favour>; "China, Central Asia vow to build a closer community with a shared future at milestone Xi'an summit," *CGTN*, May 19, 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-05-19/China-Central-Asia-vow-to-build-closer-community-with-shared-future-1jVLJrBkwul/index.html>.

103 Aidana Yergaliyeva, "FDI to Central Asia Reached 378.2 billion Over Past 13 Years," *The Astana Times*, December 9, 2020, <https://astana-times.com/2020/12/fdi-to-central-asia-reached-378-2-billion-over-past-13-years/>.

104 Elizabeth Woods and Thomas Baker, "Public Opinion on China Waning in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, May 5, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/public-opinion-on-china-waning-in-central-asia/>.

105 See Ruth Deyermond, "Collective Security Treaty Organization," in Andrei Tsygankov (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018), 421–429.

is a military alliance defined by a mutual defense pact between its member states: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. However, the Russia-led bloc is far less institutionalized than NATO and depends more on coercion to get things done. At the 2011 summit in Moscow, chaired by Medvedev, the Collective Security Treaty Organization declared that allied consensus would be required before non-member state military bases could be established on their territories, giving Russia an effective veto over future potential U.S. and NATO bases in much of Central Asia.¹⁰⁶

The Collective Security Treaty Organization has been selective in responding to the security concerns of its members. Yet, the 2022 operation in Kazakhstan appeared to presage a more active role for the bloc within Central Asia. In January 2022, at Tokayev's request, a contingent of the organization's forces was deployed to Kazakhstan to support his presidency and restore order in the wake of widespread violent demonstrations over increases in fuel prices, growing inequality, and political repression. Tokayev claimed that foreign terrorists and criminals threatened the stability of his country, providing a justification for the Collective Security Treaty Organization to intervene in what was mostly an internal affair between rival clans.¹⁰⁷ Earlier, the bloc had declined to respond to pleas from Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, in 2010 and 2021 respectively, to deal with internal security issues in the two countries.¹⁰⁸ The Kazakhstan episode was different, reflecting the selectivity in the organization's application of the mutual defense commitment mechanism. The Russian-led deployment to Kazakhstan demonstrated the organization's ability to prop up fragile regimes in Central Asia, strengthening Moscow's argument

for the bloc's role as the key security organization along Russia's southern border.¹⁰⁹ The troop deployment was approved the same day Tokayev made the request, suggesting the decision could have been Putin's alone. Russian troops began arriving in Almaty the following day, Jan. 6.

Stabilizing Russia's southern border was an important step prior to launching the second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Kazakhstan, with its large ethnic Russian population, is (like Ukraine) more central to the "Russian World" vision than either Kyrgyzstan or Armenia.¹¹⁰ Russia's current neo-imperial and irredentist tendencies tend to prioritize areas that are closely linked to tsarist, Soviet, and Russian culture and history such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, and to a lesser degree Kazakhstan. Former Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev had been a staunch defender of his country's ethnic Russian minority, but the inclinations of his successor Tokayev are less clear.¹¹¹ Finally, the Collective Security Treaty Organization intervention signaled to non-members Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that the organization could provide security against threats in Afghanistan.¹¹² The 2022 Ukraine invasion sent a different signal.

A Collective Security Treaty Organization fractured by Russia's war against Ukraine could lead to a greater role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a more favorable security framework in Central Asia, which would enhance China's influence across the region.¹¹³ While the Collective Security Treaty Organization is a military alliance dominated by Russia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a broader organization that encompasses economic, political, and humanitarian activities. Although the two organizations could become competitors in Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's security functions have been limited

106 "CSTO summit held in Moscow," TASS, December 21, 2011, <https://tass.com/russianpress/666894>.

107 Diana T. Kudaibergenova & Marlene Laruelle, "Making sense of the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: failing legitimacy, culture of protests, and elite readjustments," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 38(6) (2022): 441–459, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2077060>.

108 See James MacHaffie, "Overcoming alliance dilemmas in the collective security treaty organization: signaling for reputation amid strategic ambiguity," *Defence Studies* 24, issue 2 (2024): 320–346, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14702436.2024.2332323>.

109 See Janko Ščepanović, "Afghanistan, Russia, and the CSTO," PONARS Eurasia, July 15, 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/afghanistan-russia-and-the-csto/>.

110 The "Russian World" concept is the idea that Russia, defined by language, culture and influence, extends beyond its territorial boundaries to encompass regions that are either ethnic Russian, or Russian-oriented in culture and outlook, such as Transdnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The concept is expansionist and imperialistic. See Mikhail Suslov, "Russian World' Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of 'Spheres of Influence,'" *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 330–53, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921>.

111 On Jan. 5 Margarita Simonyan, the influential editor of RT, had tweeted that Russia should help Kazakhstan, but with certain conditions: recognition of Crimea's annexation, restoration of the Cyrillic script, making Russian a second state language equivalent to Kazakh, and leaving Russian schools alone. See https://twitter.com/M_Simonyan/status/1478813205933789186.

112 Bruce Pannier, "How Intervention in Kazakhstan Revitalized the Russian-led CSTO," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 7, 2022, https://issuu.com/foreignpolicyresearchinstitute/docs/final_issuu_version. Under current President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has cooperated more closely with the organization than during Islam Karimov's presidency. Turkmenistan continues to adhere to its policy of strict neutrality, though President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was invited to attend the September 2021 Collective Security Treaty Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organization summits by Rahmon. "Turkmen president to attend SCO and CSTO summits as guest invited personally by Tajik president," *Asia-Plus*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20210813/turkmen-president-to-attend-sco-and-csto-summits-as-a-guest-invited-personally-by-tajik-president>.

113 Under Moscow's direction the Collective Security Treaty Organization declined to support member-state Armenia in September 2023 when Azerbaijan occupied Nagorno-Karabakh.

largely to multilateral anti-terrorism exercises and information sharing.¹¹⁴ Within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Moscow and Beijing exercise joint leadership, although China's economic heft gives it more influence.¹¹⁵ The organization could become a platform for collective action in stabilizing Afghanistan against the threats of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine have helped encourage greater Russian-Chinese cooperation within the organization, whose membership includes four of the five Central Asian states (excluding Turkmenistan) as well as regional powers India, Iran, and Pakistan.

For the Central Asian states, balancing Russia, China, and the United States and addressing security threats in Afghanistan are more feasible within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization than through the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In September 2021, Tajikistan hosted the 20th anniversary summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which focused primarily on ensuring regional security following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Through a video link to the summit, Putin expressed the conviction that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should do as much as possible to prevent the spread of terrorism, narcotics, and religious extremism coming out of Afghanistan.¹¹⁶ Tokayev, however, declared, "We do not need big games in Eurasia, we need a big push to build a peaceful, secure and sustainable future for all."¹¹⁷ Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who hosted the 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, expressed a similar sentiment. In an article published before the summit, Mirziyoyev declared Central Asia the "geographic core" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, asserting the re-

gion's equality with its more powerful neighbors while promoting the organization's potential to stabilize Afghanistan.¹¹⁸ However, the 2023 Shanghai Cooperation Organization foreign ministers summit in Goa, India, was dominated by tensions between Indian and Pakistan over terrorism, Kashmir, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the attendance of Iran for the first time as a member — little attention was devoted to Afghanistan or Central Asia.¹¹⁹

If so, China's influence in Central Asia could increase, though longstanding cultural linkages between Russia and Central Asia, and fear of Chinese encroachment, suggest Central Asian states will maintain close ties with Russia in the near term.

The Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure is a permanent counter-terrorism framework within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that has the potential to provide enhanced security for the member states. Established to combat terrorism, extremism, and separatism, the structure conducted so-called peace mission exercises in September 2021 in Russia's Central Military District near Orenburg, ostensibly directed against terrorist threats emanating from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.¹²⁰ However, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure has a modest budget, and competing priorities among the two major players, Russia and China, limit the potential for coordinated anti-terrorism operations.¹²¹ The Central Asian members also have conflicting agendas that impede effective cooperation.¹²² Afghanistan signed a protocol on anti-terrorism with the Regional Anti-Terrorism

114 Richard Weitz, *Assessing the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Capabilities and Vulnerabilities* (U.S. Army War College, 2018), 72-78, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/390>.

115 On the relations of Central Asia to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization, see Marcel de Haas, "Relations of Central Asia with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 1 (2017): 1-16, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2017.1271642>.

116 "SCO Leaders Call for Increased Afghan Aid, Unfreezing of Assets," *RFE/RL*, September 17, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/shanghai-cooperation-organization-leaders-meet-in-dushanbe-with-afghanistan-in-focus/31464685.html>.

117 Assel Satubaldina, "President Tokayev Addresses SCO Heads of States Meeting in Dushanbe," *Astana Times*, September 17, 2021, <https://astanatimes.com/2021/09/president-tokayev-addresses-sco-heads-of-states-meeting-in-dushanbe/>.

118 "President.uz publishes Shavkat Mirziyoyev's article on SCO Summit in Samarkand," *Daryo*, September 12, 2022, <https://daryo.uz/en/2022/09/12/prezidentuz-publishes-shavkat-mirziyoyevs-article-on-sco-summit-in-samarkand/>.

119 Hafsa Adil, "At SCO summit, India, Pakistan squabble over Kashmir, 'terrorism,'" *Al-Jazeera*, May 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/8/at-sco-summit-india-pakistan-squabble-over-kashmir-terrorism>.

120 "SCO 'Peace Mission 2021' counter-terrorism drill concludes in Russia," *Xinhua*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1235060.shtml>; "Russian-China-led bloc's counter-terror drills prompted by Afghan threats—commander," *TASS*, September 24, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1341861>.

121 Temur Umarov, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Is Ineffective and Irrelevant," *Carnegie Politika*, July 5, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/07/sco-summit-china-russia?lang=en>.

122 Steven F. Jackson and Andrea M. Lopez, "RATS Play Whack-a-Mole: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Problem of Radical Islamic Terrorism," *International Studies Association Hong Kong meeting*, June 17, 2017, <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/c3062a77-fb37-4069-921a-969f8cfed4b6.pdf>.



Structure in 2015 and, under Ghani, Kabul repeatedly requested membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to complicate Pakistan's initiatives at the organization (since its decisions are based on consensus) as well as to address concerns over extremism and terrorism.¹²³ With the Taliban victory, and the increasingly close relationship between Beijing and Moscow, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization may become more important in addressing extremist threats and illegal narcotics from Afghanistan and providing collective security for its members.¹²⁴ If so, China's influence in Central Asia could increase, though longstanding cultural linkages between Russia and Central Asia, and fear of Chinese encroachment, suggest Central Asian states will maintain close ties with Russia in the near term.

The unstable security situation in Afghanistan strengthened Russia's rationale for a continued military presence in Central Asia. When the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, circumstances favored a larger role for Moscow as regional security provider through the Collective Security Treaty Organization, yet Russia's dramatic casualties in Ukraine adversely impacted its military force posture and reputation as a security provider in Central Asia.¹²⁵ Russia aspires to regional hegemony, but the war has limited its economic and military capabilities, undermined its historic regional ties, and provided an opportunity for China to enhance its security footprint in Central Asia, whether unilaterally or through multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Retrenchment and Regional Successors?

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan ended a long decline in American security assistance to the Central Asian region.¹²⁶ In early 2021, Washington explored

the possibility of retaining rights to military bases in Central Asia to counter the threat from al-Qaeda, and to limit Russian and Chinese influence in the region, but failed.¹²⁷ The United States maintains a semblance of engagement with Central Asia through the so-called C5+1 format, initiated by then-Secretary of State John Kerry in 2015 and continued by the Trump and Biden administrations, but by most measures Washington's influence in the region is substantially diminished.¹²⁸ Friendly regional successors could replace the United States, but the two most likely candidates — India and Turkey — have foreign policy priorities that frequently clash with Washington's.

Washington's strategy to limit Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia has been constrained by the absence of reliable and deferential partners to fill the power vacuum. India is a rising great power, and while New Delhi has aligned more closely with the United States through the Quad framework and other Indo-Pacific initiatives, India maintains a fiercely independent foreign policy characterized by non-alignment. New Delhi has important security concerns in broader Central Asia, including deterring Pakistani aggression, combatting terrorism, and preserving regional stability, all of which have intensified in the years following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. New Delhi seeks to preserve good relations with Moscow to balance Chinese influence in the region, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and bilaterally. Yet, India's security concerns are focused mainly on the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Kashmir nexus rather than the five Central Asian countries.¹²⁹ Modi held his first summit meeting with Central Asian leaders in January 2022 to set out a roadmap for strategic cooperation as part of India's "Extended Neighborhood Policy."¹³⁰ Economic issues are also important in New Delhi's calculations, and India considers Central Asia an important source for natural

123 Ahmad Bilal Khalil, "Afghanistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/afghanistan-and-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization/>.

124 See James MacHaffie, "Mutual trust without a strong collective identity? Examining the Shanghai cooperation organization as a nascent security community," *Asian Security* 17, Issue 3 (2021): 349-65, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14799855.2021.1895115>.

125 Reportedly the Ukraine war led to redeployment of Russian soldiers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to the Ukrainian frontlines in 2022. Faranjis Najibullah, "'Up To 1500' Russian Troops Redeployed to Ukraine From Tajik Base, Investigation Reveals," *REF/RL*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-troops-tajik-base-redeployed-ukraine/32033791.html>.

126 U.S. security assistance to Central Asian states declined from a high of \$450 million in 2010 to \$11 million in 2020. The transit center at Manas was vacated in 2014, and in 2015 Moscow canceled the Northern Distribution Network route through its territory. Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "In Post-American Central Asia, Russia and China Are Tightening Their Grip," *War on the Rocks*, October 7, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/in-post-american-central-asia-russia-and-china-are-tightening-their-grip/>.

127 Eric Schmitt and Helen Cooper, "How the U.S. Plans to Fight From Afar After Troops Exit Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/us/politics/united-states-al-qaeda-afghanistan.html>.

128 For a contrasting perspective, see Alexander Cooley, "A Post-Qaeda Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-23/post-american-central-asia>.

129 Ferhat Çağrı Aras and Ekber Kandemir, "An Evaluation of India's Central Asian Policy in the Context of Regional Interests," *Bilig* 105 (2023): 159-181, <https://bilig.yesevi.edu.tr/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/6649-published.pdf>

130 Debasis Bhattacharya, "India-Central Asia Relations: Growing Convergences," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 16, no 4 (2021): 341-50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48733885>

gas, oil, and uranium in the future.¹³¹

As a NATO member with close cultural and historic ties to Central Asia, Turkey might seem well-positioned to assume the role of successor as the United States retrenches. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara has been expanding its influence into broader Central Asia in recent years, investing heavily in regional infrastructure and promoting increased trade through the Middle Corridor, an alternative to the Northern Corridor that routes China's Belt and Road Initiative through Russia. Turkey's trade with the Central Asian states, dominated by energy and weapons, is 10 times that of India, and has the potential for significant expansion. Turkey has enhanced its position in Central Asia and the South Caucasus by selling weapons to Azerbaijan, contributing to Baku's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, and has provided Bayraktar drones to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹³²

Nonetheless, Turkey's relationship with the United States has become increasingly strained in recent years. The two countries hold conflicting positions on a range of policy issues, including Erdogan's suppression of human rights, Turkey's opposition to Sweden's membership of NATO, plans to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems, and U.S. support for Syria's Kurds. Thus, Turkey would be a poor successor state in Central Asia as it would be disinclined to advance Washington's agenda in the region. Erdogan has consolidated his authoritarian rule by criticizing what he considers to be Western imperial dominance over the Islamic world. He has rejected a subordinate role to the United States, accused Washington of complicity in the 2016 coup, and refused to cancel the purchase of Russian S-400s.¹³³ He has played both sides of the Ukraine conflict, supplying drones to Kyiv while negotiating with Putin to allow Ukrainian grain to transit the Black Sea. Still, Ankara's interests do not align perfectly with Moscow's either. Turkish scholar Seçkin Köstem has aptly described the relationship since the first

invasion of Ukraine in 2014 as a "managed regional rivalry" where the two have "supported opposing sides in regional conflict theatres" yet "have learned to accommodate each other's interests and spheres of influence and to cooperate through various bilateral mechanisms."¹³⁴ Russian observers acknowledge that Turkey is positioning itself as an active regional leader in the Turkic world but assess Ankara's ambitious program as unfeasible and dismiss Turkey as a "secondary non-regional actor in Central Asia."¹³⁵

The likely winner from U.S. retrenchment could be China, Russia's closest strategic partner that, like Russia, welcomed America's departure from Central Asia. The Kremlin appears willing to tolerate China's expanding influence in Central Asia in exchange for Beijing's opposition to U.S. presence in the region. In a joint declaration following the March 2023 Putin-Xi summit, the two sides expressed their intent to coordinate their support for Central Asian regimes and rejected Western interference in the region. The statement praised the Collective Security Treaty Organization's role in promoting regional security and noted the potential for developing security cooperation between the organization and Beijing.¹³⁶

Like Moscow, Beijing is concerned about Islamic extremism in Afghanistan, specifically links between the Islamic State in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, and Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang. Beijing and Moscow agree on a pragmatic policy of engaging the Taliban as a hedge against the rise of more radical elements in Afghanistan, criticized the abrupt U.S. withdrawal as irresponsible, and assess the U.S. experience in Afghanistan as manifest proof of America's declining power. However, Beijing's goal of expanding the Belt and Road Initiative through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and its Quadrilateral Mechanism for Cooperation and Coordination on terrorism — which brings together the militaries of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan — are examples of Chinese projects that do not necessarily align with Russia's priorities.¹³⁷

131 According to the World Bank, India's bilateral trade with all five Central Asian countries was \$1.21 billion in 2021, or just 0.0012 percent of India's total trade. See <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/IND/Year/2021/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/>.

132 Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Turkey's Growing Influence in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, October 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/turkeys-growing-influence-in-central-asia/>.

133 Henri Barkey, "Erdogan the Survivor," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no 5 (2023): 180-95, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/turkey/erdogan-nato-survivor-united-states>.

134 Seçkin Köstem, "Managed Regional Rivalry Between Russia and Turkey After the Annexation of Crimea," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1672, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2022.2134308>.

135 The Turkic world refers to areas where Turkic-derived languages are spoken, including (in addition to Turkey) Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and the Uighur regions of Western China. Grigory Lukyanov, Nubara Kulieva and Artemy Mironov, "Turkey's Policy in Central Asia: Are Ambitions Well-Founded?" Russian International Affairs Council, February 25, 2022, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analyt-ics-and-comments/analyt-ics/turkey-s-policy-in-central-asia-are-ambitions-well-founded/>.

136 The Kremlin, "Sovmestnoe zaiavlenie Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki ob ugublenii otnoshenii vseob emliushchego part-nerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeistviia, vstupaiushchikh v novuiu epokhu," March 21, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5920>.

137 Ivetta Iur'evna Frolova, "Afganistan v vneshei politike KNR: interesy i problemy," *National Strategy Issues* 1 (2022): 50-73, https://riss.ru/upload/iblock/447/utscm2pgcm3b590wqib5210fxwumywwl/journal_221_70_03.pdf. China established the Quadrilateral Mechanism in 2016, bringing together Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to coordinate on counter-terrorism efforts. Russia was not invited to the inaugural meeting, in Urumqi.



Russia and China have agreed to cooperate on Central Asia's regional economic development through the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative, even though the product of this cooperation has been modest, while Russian business and political elites remain wary of China's massive economic power. One recent study of Russian elites found they viewed the Belt and Road Initiative as a normative challenge to Russian hegemony in Central Asia, competing with Moscow's own "Greater Eurasian Project."¹³⁸ The Kremlin's expectation, however, is that increased linkages through Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan will serve Russian interests by improving trade with both India and Pakistan.¹³⁹ Moreover, Eurasian Economic Union members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have helped Moscow evade Western sanctions by reexporting certain product groups to Russia.¹⁴⁰

The U.S. government withdrew from Afghanistan without establishing a viable government in Kabul, and without recruiting a reliable successor state to defend Washington's interests in the broader region.

America's retrenchment has also opened new opportunities for Iran to engage in Central Asia, to counter its isolation by the West and expand trade routes to bypass sanctions. Together with Russia and China, Iran welcomed the U.S. departure from Afghanistan, claiming it illustrated America's unreliability as an ally and partner. Iran became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2023 and has maintained contacts with the Taliban after its takeover of Afghanistan, while withholding full diplomatic recognition. Russia's relations with Iran have improved significantly since Putin first went to Tehran for the Caspian Littoral States summit in 2007. Both countries seek to weaken U.S. influence in the Middle East, work together on Afghanistan, support the Assad regime in Syria, and oppose American sanctions and the dominance of

the U.S. dollar in the international economic order. Tehran has provided Russia with armed drones for its war against Ukraine, rhetorically supported the Russian war effort, and reportedly has recruited Afghan refugees with military experience to serve on Russia's side in the conflict.¹⁴¹ Still, it was Beijing, not Moscow, that brokered a March 2023 deal to restore diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh.

The U.S. government withdrew from Afghanistan without establishing a viable government in Kabul, and without recruiting a reliable successor state to defend Washington's interests in the broader region. Russia was well-positioned to take advantage of U.S. retrenchment and the power vacuum in Central Asia, but the Ukraine invasion and Russia's neo-imperial tendencies toward its neighbors have weakened Moscow's influence in Central Asia. China, with its massive infrastructure projects, appears to have a

long-term advantage over Russia. However, in attempting to fill the vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal, Russia and China faced resistance from the Central Asian countries, through anti-imperial sentiment directed toward Moscow and anti-Chinese sentiment in response to the Belt and Road Initiative. Power vacuums need not be filled only by large powers.

The state leaders of smaller powers can mobilize nationalism to resist becoming subordinate to great powers, and may gravitate toward regional cooperation, as the Central Asian countries have done through their multi-vector diplomacy.

The Consequences of Retrenchment

Retrenchment involves certain costs, so great powers may tend to avoid regional retrenchment without the presence of a reliable successor that would seek to advance the retrenching power's agenda. America's protracted occupation of Afghanistan, and the abrupt withdrawal, can in part be explained by the absence of any credible regional successor deferential to U.S. interests, coupled with the potential for rival great powers to supplant the United States as a security patron in broader Central Asia. The chaotic departure

138 Gaziza Shakhonova and Jeremy Garlick, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership,'" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2020): 33-57, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868102620911666>.

139 A. B. Korybko, "The Role of Russian-Pakistani Relations In Eurasian-South Asian Connectivity," *Cyberleninka* (2021), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/the-role-of-russian-pakistani-relations-in-eurasian-south-asian-connectivity/viewer>.

140 Maxim Chupilkin, Beata Javorcik and Alexander Plekhanov, *The Eurasian Roundabout: Trade Flows into Russia Through the Caucasus and Central Asia*, EBRD Working Paper No. 276 (February 2023), <https://www.ebrd.com/publications/working-papers/the-eurasian-roundabout>.


141 Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Are Iran and Russia Headed for a Strategic Partnership?" *The National Interest*, February 4, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/are-iran-and-russia-headed-strategic-partnership-200158>; "Iranian President Raisi Visits Russia, Offers Unprecedented Strategic Partnership; Russia's Reaction is Lukewarm," *MEMRI*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-president-raisi-visits-russia-offers-unprecedented-strategic-partnership-russias>; Syed Fazi-e-Haider, "Why Is Russia Recruiting Former Afghan Soldiers For Its War Against Ukraine?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 20, no. 8 (January 16, 2023), <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16012023-why-is-russia-recruiting-former-afghan-soldiers-for-its-war-against-ukraine-analysis/>.

of American forces in 2021 offered Russia a tempting opportunity to reassert its hegemony in the greater Central Asian region. Moscow used the debacle to highlight America's unreliability, conducted a diplomatic offensive portraying Russia as an honest broker in the region, and stressed the inappropriateness of the Western liberal democratic model of governance to non-Western cultures. The U.S. withdrawal briefly improved the prospects for enhancing Russia's regional position, as the Central Asian states turned to Moscow for security guarantees and, to a lesser extent, economic development.

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 eroded the opportunities conferred by the U.S. withdrawal. The decision has appeared to have been based less on strategic calculations of Russia's national interest than on misperceptions and poor information, comparable to the decision by the Soviet Politburo to invade Afghanistan in 1979.¹⁴² In both cases, isolated leaders were not driven by structural security imperatives, but instead reached decisions shaped by groupthink. A perception of vulnerability linked to domestic considerations — fear of oppositional forces influenced by the United States and its European allies — contributed to the decision to invade Ukraine.¹⁴³ In both cases, Russia's strategic culture, which emphasizes the desire to control buffer territories along the periphery of Russia's huge land mass to defend against external threats, contributed to the specific policy responses.¹⁴⁴

While Russian leaders assert their country's right to global great power status, the decision to invade Ukraine and the brutality of the war have eroded much of Russia's longstanding influence — centered on shared social, cultural, and historic ties — while its relatively weak economic position combined with Western sanctions negated Moscow's claim to benevolent hegemony. Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, its brutal military campaign, and the annexation of Ukrainian territory characteristic of imperial behavior has prompted pushback from nationalists in Central Asia and bolstered Beijing's position in the region.

Regional cooperation among the five Central Asian states continues to develop, albeit slowly. The region remains dependent on Russia for security, though trust in Moscow, which declined after the annexation

of Crimea in 2014, has been further eroded by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both India and Turkey aspire to leadership roles in the region, yet neither has the resources to serve as a viable successor that could fill the regional power vacuum. This leaves the field open to America's chief rival. China is distrusted in the region, but its economic power and skillful diplomacy increase the odds that Beijing will eventually replace Moscow as the regional hegemon in Central Asia. 

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Image: www.kremlin.ru (CC BY 4.0)¹⁴⁵

142 Milton Bearden, "Putin's Afghanistan: Ukraine and the Lessons of the Soviets' Afghan War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2022-03-24/putins-afghanistan>.

143 Mette Skak, "Russian strategic culture: The role of today's chekisty," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 324-341, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201317>.

144 Norbert Eitelhuber, "The Russian Bear: Russian Strategic Culture and What it Implies for the West," *Connections* 9, no. 1 (2009): 1-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26326192>; Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, "Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2020), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer_Sokolsky_-_Strat_Culture.pdf.

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