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The confrontation between the United States and Russia in Central Asia following the Ukraine war in 2022

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ABSTRACT

The United States' approach in adopting expansionist policies toward the East through NATO and Russia's reaction by invading Ukraine in 2022 has led to a more aggressive shift in U.S. foreign policy toward Moscow. Central Asia, which has been considered Russia's backyard since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and whose countries are often seen as its protégés, became one of the regions of significant importance due to the increased influence and subsequent pressure on Russia. Consequently, while imposing severe sanctions on Moscow and warning Central Asian countries against violating them, the United States focused its efforts on enhancing relations with the region in various fields, particularly in economy and energy. On the other hand, Russia, aiming to mitigate the pressure from sanctions and maintain its dominance over the region, prioritized strengthening ties with Central Asia in its foreign policy. This raises the question of how the confrontation between the United States and Russia following the 2022 Ukraine crisis has influenced their policies toward Central Asian countries. The hypothesis of this study is that the United States' aggressive policies in Central Asia, aimed at limiting Russian influence, have not succeeded in establishing Washington's dominance over the region. Therefore, to explain the confrontation between the United States and Russia in Central Asia, this study employs John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism as its theoretical framework, providing a clearer explanation of the policies adopted by both countries in the region after the Ukraine war.

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Introduction

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted the United States to adopt a more aggressive stance toward Moscow and impose severe international sanctions. In this context, Washington's efforts to monitor the sanctions against Russia, aimed at reducing its revenue streams and weakening its economic exchanges with other countries, led to an increase in diplomatic activities with many regions. Central Asia emerged as a region of significant importance due to its geographical proximity, environmental interconnectedness, and its role as Russia's primary transit route to other parts of the world. Consequently, following the Ukraine crisis, U.S. officials focused on increasing their influence in the region while simultaneously reducing Russia's dominance over Central Asian countries. This included heightened diplomatic presence, participation of higher-level officials in joint meetings, emphasis on infrastructure investments in Central Asia, and insistence that these countries adhere to the sanctions regime. However, the limited success of these efforts in attracting Central Asian countries toward the United States and distancing them from Russia indicates their ineffectiveness.

Meanwhile, Russia, facing international sanctions and fearing a decline in its influence in Central Asia—a region it has traditionally regarded as its backyard since the collapse of the Soviet Union—has intensified its engagements with Central Asian countries. Moscow aims to prevent a reduction in its influence and curb the growing U.S. interests in the region. Key measures include increasing gas exports through Central Asia, planning the development of transportation networks, and strengthening security and military agreements to maintain its traditional dominance in the region (put reference).

An important aspect of this confrontation is the improvement in the economic conditions of Central Asian countries. While the Ukraine war had negative economic impacts on many countries worldwide, the increased engagement of both Washington and Moscow in this strategic region has led to significant economic growth in Central Asia.

In light of the above, this study, framed within John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, seeks to explain the confrontational approaches of the United States and Russia in Central Asia following the 2022 Ukraine war. This confrontation, while boosting economic benefits for the region, has so far failed to meet U.S. objectives in Central Asia, even as it has undermined Russia's traditional dominance over the region.

Literature review

The necessity and importance of studying the confrontational approaches of the United States and Russia have compelled researchers to conduct studies on this matter. In this regard, Zaho Huasheng (2023), referring to the unique nature of relations between Central Asia and Russia, highlights the high significance of these countries with major powers, including Russia and the United States, and considers the type of competition between them as one of the main reasons for the complexity of their relations with Central Asia.

Amy McKinnon (2023) discusses the major shock caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine throughout the world, especially the five Central Asian countries, and argues that the China is seeking to capitalize fully on this development to expand its economic and security influence in the region. This comes as the United States has also seized a golden opportunity to deepen its relations with Central Asia while simultaneously countering the growing influence of both China and Russia in the region.

Zhanat Zakiyeva in a recent 2024 study meanwhile attempts to explain the adopted policies and elaborates on the theoretical foundations of the United States' approach toward Central Asia. He highlights the opportunities available to the U.S. in engaging with the region and identifies China as a major challenge to the implementation of Washington's policies.

Consequently, he argues that enhancing relations with Central Asian countries should be a priority in Washington's adopted strategies.

In this analysis, Kit Melinson (2024) examines the nature of Russo-Kazakh relations, maintaining that despite certain statements by Astana's officials contradicting Moscow's preferences, the two nations continue to maintain stable relations - stability that has in fact been reinforced by the consequences of the Ukraine war. By highlighting the numerous commonalities and multiple interdependencies between the two countries across various sectors, Melinson emphasizes the growing economic exchanges between Moscow and Almaty as a clear demonstration of their close bilateral ties.

On the other hand, Maximilian Hess (2024) offers a more nuanced perspective. While noting the erosion of Russia's position in Central Asia following the Ukraine war, he argues that should current trends persist, Beijing could emerge as a serious competitor to Moscow in the region. This competition, though not yet overt, may escalate into direct rivalry between China and Russia if present dynamics continue.

Theoretical Framework

John Mearsheimer is one of the most prominent contemporary theorists in the field of international relations, having authored numerous works in this domain. Perhaps his most significant contribution is the theory of "offensive realism," which has attracted the attention of scholars in international relations and opened a new perspective within this school of thought. While it has been praised by some, it has also faced criticism from others. This theory begins with assumptions similar to those of Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism but yields significantly different results. A notable aspect of Mearsheimer's work is his prediction of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in recent years, a topic frequently discussed in various academic circles. Consequently, following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, he has repeatedly sought to explain this event through the lens of offensive realism (Toft, 2005: 383; Edinger, 2022: 1875).

In offensive realism, Mearsheimer emphasizes five main assumptions while explaining the conflicts among great powers. First, the international system is anarchic. Second, since states have incomplete information about each other, no state can be certain of another state's intentions regarding the use of force. Third, the principle of survival implies that the primary motivation of all states in the international system is to ensure their survival. Fourth, states are rational entities that constantly seek strategies to guarantee their survival. Finally, states possess military capabilities that enable them to harm or even destroy one another (Steinsson, 2014: 2; Johnson & Thayer, 2016: 4).

Thus, Mearsheimer argues that, given the inability of all states to simultaneously maximize their power, the most effective guarantee for their survival in an anarchic system is the continuous maximization of power to become a hegemonic power. He believes that in a bipolar system, due to the relatively equal distribution of power, neither of the two great powers can achieve global hegemony. Therefore, initiating a war in a bipolar system is irrational. Instead, the two powers use methods such as deception, akin to an arms race, to weaken each other over the long term. In a multipolar system, however, because the relative power of states is somewhat balanced and each seeks to achieve hegemony, war and conflict are inevitable. Mearsheimer's prediction of the Ukraine war was based on his belief in the weakening of the United States' power and its decline as a hegemon, viewing the current system as multipolar. In this context, the three powers—the United States, China, and Russia—coexist, and the confrontation between the United States and Russia in Central Asia fits within this framework. This approach is defined by both sides as a strategy to limit and weaken each other while enhancing their own power (Johnson & Thayer, 2016: 3; Toft, 2005: 387).

Capacities of the Central Asian Region

The Central Asian region, with a population of approximately 72 million, comprises five countries: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Due to its unique geographical position, the region has consistently attracted the attention of many countries, particularly major powers such as Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, India, and Japan in recent years. Russia's unique relationship with the five Central Asian countries, coupled with China's strong desire to maximize the geopolitical advantages of these nations, has further increased their significance. This has also motivated American policymakers to pay closer attention to the region. Consequently, alongside the approaches these countries take in formulating appropriate policies toward the United States, Russia, and China, the complex relationships among these three powers have added to the difficulty of managing the region. In fact, the significant dependence of these five countries on Russia and China, due to their competition with the United States, poses a major challenge. This situation unfolds as Russia and China have consistently engaged in economic and security cooperation in Central Asia in recent years. China's "Belt and Road Initiative" is one such example, with Central Asian countries lying along its route. The importance of this initiative for Russia is evident, as President Putin attended its three international forums in 2017, 2019, and 2023 (Huasheng, 2023).

In addition to geographical advantages and territorial expanse, the numerous economic capacities of Central Asia are among the most significant factors contributing to the region's high influence in the heart of Eurasia. Kazakhstan, the largest country in the region (equivalent in size to Western Europe) and landlocked, has the highest Russian population, with its land export routes passing through Russia and China. The Kazakhstan-China pipeline, spanning 2,798 kilometers, transports crude oil from the Caspian Sea fields in western Kazakhstan to China's Xinjiang province in the northeast. Additionally, Russian oil is sent to Turkmenistan via a pipeline through Kazakhstan (Jiang, 2022). After Russia, Kazakhstan ranks second in terms of oil reserves and production among the former Soviet republics. In 2019, it held the twelfth position globally in proven oil reserves, with over 90 million tons, and ranked eighth in coal production. Kazakhstan's oil exports in 2022 increased by \$16 billion compared to the previous year, reaching \$47 billion. Moreover, Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium, holding 12% of global uranium resources, with a significant portion of its shares indirectly controlled by Russian companies (Kokoshin & Kokoshin, 2022; Goodby, 2023).

Turkmenistan, another country in the region, is the largest exporter of gas to China and possesses the fourth-largest gas reserves in the world. In 2022, its gas exports, valued at approximately \$10 billion, accounted for 80-90% of the country's total exports. Uzbekistan, until 2016 and before Shavkat Mirziyoyev's presidency, had only one president (Islam Karimov) in the 25 years following the Soviet Union's collapse. With a population of 35 million, Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia and enjoys relatively better economic conditions compared to its neighbors. As the holder of the world's largest gold mine, Uzbekistan exported \$4.6 billion worth of goods in 2021. However, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have weaker economies compared to other Central Asian countries. Kyrgyzstan is a less developed country with a high poverty rate, heavily reliant on the export of raw materials such as precious metals and stones. Oil and gas constitute only 15% of its export volume. Meanwhile, remittances from migrant workers in Russia are a major source of income for the country. Tajikistan, with its limited economic resources, is considered the weakest economy in the region, heavily dependent on remittances from its migrant workers in Russia, much like Kyrgyzstan. The ongoing border disputes between the two countries have also significantly weakened their economies (Goodby, 2023; Kim, 2022: 2; Munro, 2023).

Although Central Asia, located at the heart of Eurasia and endowed with vast natural resources and transit advantages, has significant potential to elevate its economic standing, these countries rank low among global economies. Infrastructure investment and efforts to develop infrastructure are areas where the region lags behind. In fact, the lack of transportation infrastructure and high costs in this sector do not align with the region's immense trade potential. On the other hand, issues such as the situations in Afghanistan and Ukraine pose threats that challenge the national security of Central Asia. For example, the Ukraine crisis has prompted Kazakhstan to explore bypassing Russia for exports through initiatives such as transporting oil via the Caspian Sea and constructing a new railway from Uzbekistan to Europe. This is noteworthy, as 94% of Kazakhstan's oil exports in 2022 were conducted through pipelines to Russia (Goodby, 2023; Zakiyeva, 2024).

Consequences of the Ukraine War for Central Asian Countries

The outbreak of the Ukraine war has placed Central Asia in a challenging position vis-à-vis major powers. The reactions of the five Central Asian countries to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine were not uniform. Some countries, like Tajikistan, leaned more towards Russia, while others, such as Kazakhstan, acted cautiously due to concerns about their proximity to Russia and the possibility of a similar situation arising in their own countries. At the same time, the strategic importance of Central Asia increased for traditional rivals Russia and the United States. This situation also led to a significant economic presence of China in the region. Consequently, while the Ukraine crisis brought many challenges, it also yielded positive outcomes for the region. For instance, there was an increase in visits by high-ranking officials from Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union in the two years following the war. Numerous meetings were held, including those between the U.S. and Central Asian countries on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023, and a summit between China and these countries in May 2023, highlighting strengthened cooperation. While the OECD estimated global economic growth at 5% in 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting shock, particularly in the energy sector, reduced this figure to 3.1%. However, the economic benefits of post-war cooperation were significant enough that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) predicted a 5.4% economic growth for Central Asian countries in 2024 (Blackwood et al., 2023: 5; Jenkins, 2023; Huasheng, 2023).

However, the Ukraine crisis has undermined Russia's dominance in Central Asia. These countries have previously witnessed Russia's actions against former Soviet states, such as Georgia. Thus, the Ukraine war raised concerns that they might be next. The United States has played a significant role in amplifying these concerns. Although the five Central Asian countries initially adopted a neutral stance and advocated for a diplomatic solution, officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan later refrained from supporting Russia's actions in international forums and publicly expressed their support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. In 2022, Kazakh President Tokayev explicitly stated that Kazakhstan would not violate U.S. and European sanctions against Russia and would not recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Ukraine or Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. However, none of the Central Asian countries directly supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Stoll, 2023; Mackinnon, 2023).

This approach should not be interpreted as a confrontation with Russia or an absolute alignment with the United States. It must be acknowledged that the Ukraine war damaged relations between Moscow and Central Asia, but the region's dependence on Russia due to geographical location, trade relations, and remittances from migrant workers in Russia remains undeniable. Therefore, during the UN Security Council vote condemning Russia's invasion of

Ukraine, all five Central Asian countries abstained rather than voting against it. Consequently, new economic activities aimed at mitigating the impact of sanctions on Russia through new alliances, treaties, and strengthened corridors have become more prominent. For example, Turkmenistan signed new trade agreements with other Central Asian countries and several economic deals with Turkey and Azerbaijan after the war began. Initially, Turkmenistan accused the West of spreading misinformation to discredit Russia and influence Turkmen youth (Goodby, 2023; Chausovsky, 2023).

On the other hand, Western countries, led by the United States, made significant efforts to influence the region's policies regarding the Ukraine war. Visits by EU officials, including French President Macron to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken's trip, and summits hosted by U.S. President Biden in New York and German Chancellor Scholz in Berlin, as well as the first visit by the UK Foreign Secretary, David Cameron, to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan in April 2024, aimed to gain Central Asian support for anti-Russia sanctions and recognize Russia as an aggressor (Temnycky, 2023; Nourzhanov, 2024).

Meanwhile, Russia also increased its interactions with Central Asian countries, particularly in economic areas, after the war. For instance, Russia's trade with Uzbekistan grew by 9% in the first nine months of 2022 and by over 10% with Kazakhstan in the first ten months. This contributed to economic growth in these countries, with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's GDP exceeding forecasts at 6.5% and 5.5%, respectively, in 2023. Russia also exported many sanctioned goods to these countries, and private investors and Russian professionals flocked to Central Asia. The number of Russian companies operating in Kazakhstan nearly doubled between 2021 and 2023, and Russian investments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan reached \$9.2 billion and \$13 billion, respectively, in 2023 (Temnycky, 2023; Chausovsky, 2023; Nourzhanov, 2024).

Among Central Asian countries, Tajikistan had the closest alignment with Russia regarding the Ukraine war. Due to its long border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan has been a strategic regional base and hosts Russia's largest non-naval military facility abroad. During the war, most Russian troops stationed in Tajikistan were deployed to Ukraine, and new military agreements were signed between the two countries. Additionally, over 1.7 million Tajik citizens entered Russia for work in the first half of 2022 (one million more than the same period the previous year), with remittances accounting for one-third of Tajikistan's GDP. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan relies on remittances for one-third of its GDP. The country hosts a Russian airbase near Bishkek, and negotiations in May 2023 significantly increased the presence of Russian troops there. This occurred despite a 2023 survey showing that most Kyrgyz citizens blamed Ukrainians for the war. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, largely implemented Western sanctions against Russia after the war. The country imposed restrictions on those openly supporting Russia's invasion and sent significant amounts of medical equipment and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Goodby, 2023).

Russia's Strategy in Central Asia

Since the independence of Central Asian countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has established multifaceted relations with the region in political, military, security, and economic domains, leveraging its geographical proximity and historical ties. Central Asia's military dependence on Russia is evident through arms sales, military training, and the establishment of Russian military facilities and bases in these countries. Key mechanisms for Russia's sustained and growing influence in the region include the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which involves Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which excludes only Turkmenistan. Economically, Russia maintains its dominance through deep bilateral ties and frameworks such

as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). These robust relationships are reinforced by integrated energy and transportation infrastructures, as well as the significant volume of remittances sent by Central Asian migrant workers in Russia. The importance of remittances is such that any deterioration in relations with Russia, leading to economic pressure, could trigger political instability and widespread protests in these countries (Kokoshin & Kokoshin, 2022; Starr, 2022; Chausovsky, 2023).

Despite repeated requests and pressures from the United States for Central Asian countries to align with Western sanctions against Russia, their extensive infrastructural ties with Russia have led them to maintain a neutral stance between Washington and Moscow. Even Kazakhstan, which has shown the most interest in strengthening ties with the West and diversifying its economic portfolio, remains cautious due to its significant ethnic Russian minority and the longest shared border with Russia. Russia, under Putin's leadership, has repeatedly made territorial claims against parts of Kazakhstan, further complicating the relationship (Rossi, 2023; Ghasemzadeh, 2023).

Politically and socially, despite U.S. efforts to increase the presence of non-governmental organizations in the region, Russia's influence remains predominant. The presence of insurgent groups, separatist movements, and autonomous republics in Central Asia, such as Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan and the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan, alongside ethnic tensions in countries like Kazakhstan (where ethnic Russians constitute 15% of the population), creates a precarious security environment that Russia can exploit (Stoll, 2023).

The Ukraine war marked a turning point in Russia's relations with Central Asia. Following the invasion and subsequent sanctions, Russia swiftly turned to Central Asia to mitigate its economic challenges. In 2023, Russia's Gazprom began supplying gas to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to compensate for lost European markets. Additionally, Russia prioritized strengthening the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), connecting Russia to India and the Persian Gulf via Central Asia and Iran. Efforts included increasing the number of trains and cargo volumes through Kazakhstan and accelerating improved relations between Uzbekistan and Iran (Carafano, 2023; Nourzhanov, 2024).

The severe Western sanctions against Russia inadvertently benefited Central Asian countries post-Ukraine war. Fearing a decline in its influence, Moscow sought to deepen cooperation with these nations to maintain its role as a reliable partner. In 2022, Russia's President visited all five Central Asian countries for the first time, signaling a new era of collaboration. Despite the adverse effects of the war on supply chains and rising prices of sanctioned goods, Russia's trade turnover with Central Asia grew by 10% to 45% in 2022. Moreover, while Russia's gas exports to Europe plummeted, increased supplies to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan enabled these countries to meet China's growing gas demands (Goodby, 2023; Noorzadeh, 2024).

The influx of Russian businesses and wealthy individuals fleeing the war, alongside a rise in Central Asian migrant workers in Russia, significantly boosted the region's economies. Remittances from Russia to Uzbekistan surged from \$4 billion in 2021 to \$14.5 billion in 2022, a 3.5-fold increase. Similarly, remittances to Kazakhstan increased sixfold in 2022. Trade turnover in the first ten months of 2022 rose by 10% with Kazakhstan, 40% with Uzbekistan in nine months, 22% with Tajikistan in eight months, 40% with Kyrgyzstan in six months, and 45% with Turkmenistan in three months (Umarov, 2022; Huasheng, 2023).

All these developments occurred despite the belief of many experts that the Ukraine crisis would severely weaken Russia's influence and push the countries of the region toward establishing extensive relations with Western nations. They argued that if Central Asian countries crossed Russia's red lines in their engagement with the United States and the West—similar to actions taken in Belarus—Russia might deploy nuclear weapons in Central Asia to

prevent security ties with the U.S. and Europe (Goodby, 2023). This group of analysts believes that the cornerstone of Russia's influence in Central Asia lies in the relationships between its political elites, many of whom lived during the Soviet era and communicate in Russian. However, the relatively young population of Central Asia, who did not experience the Soviet era and are less likely to speak Russian, does not view Russia as the ultimate aspiration. Surveys indicate that a significant portion of the population in these countries blames Russia's invasion of Ukraine for their economic difficulties, with 70% in Kyrgyzstan, 55% in Kazakhstan, and 30% in Uzbekistan holding this view (Umarov, 2022; De Waal, 2024: 18).

Another concern raised by this school of thought is the possibility of a scenario similar to Ukraine unfolding in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, with its sizable ethnic Russian population, is often cited as a potential target for Russian aggression. Following Putin's announcement of partial mobilization, many Russians fled to Kazakhstan to avoid conscription. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, describing the hosting of these individuals as a humanitarian gesture, ordered their protection. This stance was reinforced by Kazakhstan's Interior Minister, who stated that these individuals would not be extradited. In response, Russia restricted the main oil export route from Kazakhstan to Europe via the Novorossiysk port on the Black Sea. Kazakhstan retaliated by suspending the transit of Russian coal wagons through its territory (Dzamukashvili, 2022; Putz, 2022; Noorzadeh, 2024).

Contrary to the assumption that Kazakhstan fully aligned with the West and the U.S. after the Ukraine war and committed to enforcing sanctions against Russia, the actions of Kazakh politicians tell a different story. Their visits to Russia to assure continued commitment to Russian interests, along with Russia's role in neutralizing a coup attempt against former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's family in January 2022 through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) at Tokayev's request, highlight the deep ties between the two countries' security services. Economically, the two nations demonstrated their shared interests through \$26 billion and \$27 billion in trade exchanges in 2022 and 2023, respectively, including many dual-use goods. Russia controls the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which exports about 80% of Kazakhstan's crude oil, and holds a 25% stake in Kazakhstan's uranium production. In 2023, the two countries signed a \$6 billion agreement to build three coal plants in Kazakhstan. Russian companies are highly active in Kazakhstan, accounting for nearly half of all foreign companies operating in the country (Assenova et al., 2023: 14; Schlesiger et al., 2023; Mallinson, 2024).

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, fearing the consequences of U.S. sanctions, sought to cooperate with Western countries but continued to develop their relations with Russia after the Ukraine war. Uzbekistan, which historically had weaker ties with Russia compared to other Central Asian countries, saw its relationship improve after Shavkat Mirziyoyev came to power in 2016. Following the Ukraine war and the resulting sanctions, which drastically reduced Russia's gas exports to Europe, Uzbekistan increased its gas imports from Russia. In 2023, Uzbekistan purchased 2.8 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Russia's Gazprom, with plans to increase this to 3.8 billion cubic meters in 2024 and potentially to 11 billion cubic meters by 2026, primarily destined for China (Mammadov, 2023; Hess, 2024).

Tajikistan, more than other countries in the region, relies heavily on Russia for security and economic support. Kyrgyzstan also maintains significant ties with Russia, particularly in helping Moscow circumvent Western sanctions through so-called "parallel imports." Kyrgyzstan has been a leader in Central Asia in assisting Russia with these efforts. Additionally, Russia has accelerated the construction of the "Line D" pipeline, part of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline network, which will transport Russian gas through Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to China (Noorzadeh, 2024; Hess, 2024).

In reality, the Ukraine crisis did not create a significant shift in relations between Russia and Central Asian countries, but it did increase the confidence of these countries in shaping their relations with Western powers. Russia's position may have been somewhat politically weakened, and its political influence may have been moderated, but its roots in Central Asia are much deeper than to be easily shaken. Economically, Russia's leverage in Central Asia has clearly weakened after the Ukraine war, but this does not mean a reduction in Moscow's economic exchanges with the region. This trend can also be observed in the public opinion of the region. In December 2022, about 10 months after the Ukraine war, a survey in Kazakhstan showed that 64% of participants considered Russia a friendly country. Another survey in Kyrgyzstan in October 2023 revealed that 53% of the population was satisfied with their government's current stance on the war. Even this slight weakening has created conditions for Washington to revive its presence in regional processes. The erosion of Russia's authority provided an opportunity for the United States to restore its credibility and presence in the region, which had been damaged after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Accordingly, in the review of the U.S. strategy in Central Asia for the period 2019-2025, Washington's goal is to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of Central Asian republics by enhancing their interconnections, thereby reducing Russia's influence, where the emergence of a strong and independent Central Asia is aligned with the strategic objectives of the United States (Akromov, 2024; Nourzhanov, 2024; Huasheng, 2023).

U.S. Strategy in Central Asia

Halford Mackinder, in his Heartland Theory, identified the heart of the earth as the current Central Asian region, stating that any power controlling it would be the greatest player on the international stage. Some American experts believe that this dominance in the current period can only be achieved through increased influence. They argue that Russia's dominance in Central Asia is not easily removable for various reasons, but opportunities exist for the United States to advance its objectives. Therefore, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States focused its efforts on preventing Russia's attempts at reintegration while increasing its own influence. Consequently, after the Soviet collapse, the U.S. was among the first to recognize the newly independent Central Asian states. From the collapse until the September 11, 2001 attacks, American focus in Central Asia, alongside preventing the re-emergence of a Soviet-like union, was primarily on economic and energy issues. However, after this event, they quickly negotiated with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to establish military bases at Manas and Karshi-Khanabad to support the war in Afghanistan (Yusupov, 2002; Stoll, 2023).

One area of U.S. influence in Central Asia, which began in the 1990s during the Clinton administration, is the use of human rights organizations, political and social activists to promote Western democratic values, establish democratic institutions, focus on the rule of law, create free media, and respect human rights. In this regard, American NGOs have played a significant role in promoting what they consider ideological and humanitarian issues in Central Asian countries. This policy was also outlined in the U.S. strategy for Central Asia from 2019 to 2015. The use of these capacities to further damage Russia's image among the public in the region, especially after the Ukraine crisis, has been notable. On the other hand, U.S. engagement with Central Asian countries increased in areas such as economy, energy, governance, and security. The September 11 attacks and the need to reduce terrorist threats were among the reasons that maintained the American presence in the region. This was more evident during the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and operations against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Establishing a comprehensive network of military and logistical support through air corridors and land supply channels, under the pretext of combating terrorism in Central Asia, involved stationing U.S. forces at Manas Airport in Kyrgyzstan, Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, and Ayni in Tajikistan.

This presence suffered a significant blow with the closure of Manas in 2014 and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 (Kokoshin & Kokoshin, 2022; Cooley, 2023: 5; Zakiyeva, 2024).

Overall, the main U.S. approach from the post-September 11 period and the invasion of Afghanistan until the geopolitical changes following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, was focused on challenges related to Afghanistan. This event marked the beginning of increased U.S. engagement with Central Asian countries. Thus, in November 2015, John Kerry, then U.S. Secretary of State, unveiled the C5+1 format during his visit to Central Asia. As the crisis in Afghanistan intensified, engagement under the C5+1 framework increased. Meetings of ministers on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in 2021 and 2022 were examples of this. However, the Ukraine war significantly impacted this format, leading to the first C5+1 summit at the presidential level in September 2023. Given the U.S. weakness in strategic minerals (China is the largest source of imports for 26 critical minerals to the U.S.), one of the main objectives of U.S. officials' meetings with Central Asian leaders under the C5+1 after the Ukraine war was to address the U.S. shortfall in these critical materials. In this meeting, Joe Biden emphasized improving trade relations and private sector investment, with a particular focus on strategic minerals and transportation routes, including the Middle Corridor. Washington aims to reduce its dependence on China by leveraging the mineral resources of regional countries, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (Wood, 2023; Mahon & Wolff, 2023).

While the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover damaged the U.S. image in Central Asia, the Ukraine war provided unique opportunities for Americans to restore their previously tarnished image and increase Washington's attention to the region to exert more pressure on Russia. This event raised concerns among Central Asian countries, which traditionally rely on Russia's security guarantees and transit routes, and threatened the livelihoods of millions of Central Asian migrant workers who send billions of dollars annually from Russia to their home countries. Therefore, some believe that the U.S. should assist Central Asian migrant workers and seasonal laborers, especially from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent Uzbekistan, by substituting European countries, Japan, and South Korea, and connecting them through the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Turkey, possibly offering some sanctions relief for regional countries and utilizing the capacities of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia (Helf, 2023; Herbst & D'Anieri, 2023; Stronski, 2023).

This issue became evident after U.S. and European sanctions against Russia, with a focus on the Middle Corridor or the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), increasing traffic and substituting it for the Northern Corridor. This corridor is 2000 kilometers shorter than Russia's Northern Corridor and connects China through three Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, and from there to Europe. The advantage of maintaining sanctions against Moscow and providing an alternative route for Chinese goods to European markets is another benefit of this corridor. Hence, U.S. support for attracting investment and developing the Trans-Caspian trade route through infrastructure partnerships and investments under the U.S. strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 was presented at the meeting of U.S. officials with Central Asian leaders in New York, followed by a meeting of ministers initiated by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2023 (Assenova et al, 2023: 18; Zakiyeva, 2024).

In fact, after the Ukraine war, the U.S. pursued a strategy of isolating Russia in collaboration with the European Union, imposing international sanctions, and diversifying and substituting its relations with Russia. This approach can be framed within John Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory, where a great power acts against another in a multipolar system to weaken its capabilities and increase its own dominance over the existing order. In this context, Washington

gradually eliminated energy imports from Moscow, and Europe reduced its imports of oil and coal (half of Russia's revenue comes from exports of these two products), aiming to gradually minimize gas imports from Russia. Meanwhile, some advocated for sanctions relief for Central Asian countries to mitigate the impact on the region. However, the U.S. Treasury Department stated that sanctions would only be lifted from a Kazakh subsidiary of Russia's Sberbank if its structure and ownership were fully Kazakh (Chausovsky, 2023).

One proposal from American think tanks to weaken Russia's influence in Central Asia is to create security cooperation initiatives and increase diplomatic engagement in the region, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan. Thus, the two sides discussed regional security, human rights, and increased economic cooperation at the annual Strategic Partnership meeting in May 2024. However, U.S. military-security cooperation in Central Asia has traditionally focused on military training, which has brought the military commanders of both countries closer. Therefore, Kazakhstan is among the countries where the development of military cooperation in the future could lead to greater U.S. influence in the country (Schlesiger et al, 2023; Blackwood, 2024: 18).

Economically, given its vast energy reserves, including oil and gas, Kazakhstan has always been a focus for the U.S., with investments starting as early as 1993, the first year of its independence. Over the 30 years since then, official statistics show that U.S. foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan in 2023 exceeded \$43 billion, carried out by 600 companies, including Chevron and ExxonMobil, accounting for 15% of Kazakhstan's total foreign direct investment. In this context, securing energy for the West has encouraged Americans to invest in improving the infrastructure of Central Asian countries. Therefore, due to the importance of the energy sector, the U.S. refrained from sanctioning crude oil exported from Russia to Kazakhstan and then to some European countries. The region's outdated energy infrastructure and, in some cases, energy shortages despite abundant resources have provided a suitable rationale for increasing Washington's motivation. Hence, some argue that the U.S. should remove Kazakhstan, the region's largest economy, from the Jackson-Vanik amendment to facilitate private sector participation in Central Asia and normalize trade relations. This law, designed in 1974 to punish the Soviet Union for restricting Jewish emigration, remains in place (Little, 2023; Pyatt, 2023; Zakiyeva, 2024).

The use of USAID programs in Central Asia, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Kazakhstan, developing energy management (particularly electricity) in Uzbekistan, reducing methane emissions from the oil and gas sector in Turkmenistan, establishing clean energy transmission in Kyrgyzstan, and promoting renewable energy in Tajikistan, is among the policies adopted by the United States to increase its influence in the Central Asian region. This is achieved by leveraging the needs and interests of Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in the field of renewable energy. These countries' interest in technology transfer in this sector will facilitate greater U.S. investment in the region. While Russia seeks to expand its relations with the oil and gas sectors of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the United States is focused on developing green energy cooperation in Central Asia (Chausovsky, 2023; Oztarsu, 2023).

In addition to economic, political, and military domains, cultural and social issues have also been tools used by the U.S. to increase its influence in Kazakhstan. Over the past two decades, the U.S. has worked to strengthen ties with Kazakh nationalist parties and promote anti-Russian sentiments through cultural movements aligned with its interests. American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also active in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is notable in this regard. The Soros Foundation, another NGO, spent approximately \$100 million in Kazakhstan between 1995 and 2020. This foundation played a significant role in shaping negative public opinion in Kazakhstan regarding

joint space operations with Russia at the Baikonur Cosmodrome. Three major universities under direct U.S. influence in Kazakhstan include the American University of Central Asia (established in 1997) in Bishkek, the Kazakh-American University (1997) in Almaty, and the Kazakhstan Institute of Management and Forecasting (1992) in Almaty. These institutions, governed by American boards, are not accountable to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education and Science and have significantly increased Washington's influence in the region (Kokoshin & Kokoshin, 2022; Ghasemzadeh, 2023).

In fact, Kazakhstan was among the countries hosting numerous American institutions. Consequently, the United States has consistently faced accusations of interfering through Kyrgyzstan's civil society activists and NGOs to engineer regime change during the 2005 Tulip Revolution, which toppled President Askar Akayev's government. However, some argue that U.S. obstruction played no role in these events, attributing them instead to systemic corruption under Akayev and deteriorating economic conditions—a narrative later amplified by Russian propaganda outlets following his ouster. This remains a contentious claim deserving skepticism (Yazdani & Akhavan, 2011: 151,152; Solovei, 2015: 78, 83).

While corruption within the Akayev government played a significant role in mobilizing public support for the revolution, Kyrgyzstan's civil society organizations—alongside American NGOs—also contributed substantially to the event. Thus, alongside domestic and regional factors, the United States' role in the Tulip Revolution was highly prominent. In particular, the Soros Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), two U.S.-based nonprofit organizations active in human rights and democracy promotion, played the most influential part in galvanizing public sentiment during the 2005 Tulip Revolution. This occurred through local civil society groups, many of which were U.S.-funded, serving as intermediaries between these foundations and the Kyrgyz public (Karami & Daliran, 2016: 105,106).

Another U.S. strategy in Central Asia involves increasing engagement with partners that share common interests in this strategic region. Turkey, due to its strong cultural, historical, and economic ties with Central Asia, is a natural candidate for this role. Sunni Islam, the Turkish language, NATO membership, and shared security interests are advantages that Turkey holds in building relationships with Central Asian countries. Russia's largely neutral stance toward Turkey's activities in Central Asia could act as a deterrent against future Russian actions in the region, reducing the dependence of Central Asian countries on Moscow. While Central Asia seeks to diversify its energy import and export routes and is concerned about the security implications of the war in Ukraine, Turkey aims to expand its energy resources, become a global energy hub, and increase its exports of military equipment, particularly drones, to other countries (Mammadov, 2023).

The United States has supported the creation of security and military agreements between Central Asian countries and Turkey, leveraging their mutual interests. By collaborating with the Organization of Turkic States (including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan), the U.S. has worked to deepen trade relations between Turkey and these countries, accelerating the development of the Middle Corridor. Just as the U.S. supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in the early 2000s, it is now encouraging the five Central Asian countries to develop their infrastructure for the Middle Corridor, bypassing Russia and meeting their energy needs through Turkey. As a result, Central Asian countries are currently cooperating with Ankara to develop export routes, such as transferring Kazakh oil to Romania via Turkey, which bypasses Russia (Temnycky, 2023; Mammadov, 2023).

It is important to reiterate that all policies adopted by the United States in Central Asia since the start of the Ukraine war have aimed to weaken Russian dominance and increase U.S. influence in this strategic region. These actions can be described within the framework of

offensive realism theory, as proposed by John Mearsheimer, where a great power seeks to maximize its influence at the expense of another. However, current global conditions show that the U.S. no longer holds exclusive influence over the economies of developing countries, and its coercive tools, such as sanctions, are less effective than before. Moreover, the U.S. lacks the capacity to replace a country like Russia in Central Asia. Some researchers criticize U.S. Secretary of State Blinken's proposal to provide \$25 million in aid to Central Asian countries, given Russia's annual trade volume of \$42 billion with the region. They argue that even replacing the Northern Corridor with the Middle Corridor (INSTC) does not have a bright future, with its completion estimated by 2040 given current trends (Rossi, 2023; Street & Jones, 2023; Nourzhanov, 2024).

The neglect of Central Asia in recent years allowed Russia to capitalize on the region's numerous opportunities. During the UN vote condemning Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, Turkmenistan abstained, and the other four Central Asian countries refused to vote. This reflects a misunderstanding of Central Asia by U.S. officials. George Krol, a U.S. diplomat who served as ambassador to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, noted that Central Asian leaders would appreciate being acknowledged by the highest levels of U.S. leadership, as demonstrated by President Biden's meeting with the region's leaders (Ghasemzadeh, 2023; Mackinnon, 2023).

Conclusion

The Ukraine war in 2022 prompted the United States to shift its strategy toward Central Asia, more openly seeking to increase its influence in the region. In doing so, Washington aims to weaken Russia's power and dominance in Central Asia. Limiting Russia's traditional influence and its ties with Central Asian countries requires creating various conditions to achieve this goal.

In this regard, the U.S. is seeking to influence this strategic Eurasian region through geopolitical, political, military, security, social, cultural, and economic opportunities, particularly in the energy sector. This strategy aligns with the actions of a great power seeking to maximize its influence while minimizing that of a rival, as theorized by Mearsheimer's offensive realism.

However, the unique conditions of Central Asia and its deep ties with Russia—stemming from decades of geographical proximity, economic exchanges, military and security cooperation, and other factors—make it challenging for the U.S. to achieve its objectives. Since the Ukraine war, Moscow has made every effort to maintain its dominance and increase engagement with Central Asia to counter Washington's actions. This approach is evident in the use of treaties, energy agreements, and corridor developments. The competition between the two powers and Central Asian countries' use of the "Russia card" in response to U.S. and European sanctions have contributed to the region's economic growth in the post-war period. However, this competition has not yet resulted in a significant victory for U.S. foreign policy.

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