



REVIEW ARTICLE

Shifting Sands: The Evolving Military-Strategic Landscape of Central Asia (2010–2024)Rajinder Singh^{1*}¹Senior Research Fellow, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab, India

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that intensified great power competition, combined with post-Soviet historical legacies, has fundamentally transformed the military-strategic security architecture of Central Asia from 2010 to 2024. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements, and secondary sources, the study examines the role of major powers—Russia, China, the United States, India, and Turkey—in shaping the region via alliances, economic integration, and military modernisation. It demonstrates how key geopolitical events such as NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan and the ongoing Ukraine conflict, together with non-traditional security threats including terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, and cybersecurity, have prompted Central Asian states to modernise their armed forces and diversify their strategic partnerships in pursuit of greater autonomy. The paper contributes to the literature by illuminating the complex interplay between external power rivalries, historical factors, and local agency in an era of heightened international competition.

Keywords: Central Asia, Contemporary, Military Modernization, Strategic Considerations, Geopolitics, Great Power Competition, United States, Russia, China, Turkey, India

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia has long been shaped by imperial ambitions and great power rivalries, from the nineteenth century “Great Game” to the post-Soviet era. Today, it remains a critical geopolitical space where Russia, China, the United States, India, and Turkey compete for influence through military cooperation, arms sales, joint exercises, and strategic partnerships. Between 2010 and 2024, the military-strategic landscape of Central Asia has been fundamentally transformed by the convergence of intensified great power competition, enduring post-Soviet legacies, and a range of non-traditional security threats, including terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, and cybersecurity challenges.

At the heart of this study lies the following central research question: How have intensified great power rivalries and evolving security threats reshaped the military-strategic architecture and defence policies of the Central Asian states from 2010 to 2024? This question is supported by two sub-questions: (1) What roles have Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, and India played in the military modernisation of the region? (2) How have the Central Asian republics exercised strategic agency to diversify their partnerships and assert greater autonomy?

This article argues that the combination of great power competition and post-Soviet historical legacies has fundamentally altered the military-strategic security architecture of Central Asia during the period under study. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021



and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have acted as critical catalysts, pushing Central Asian governments to modernise their armed forces and pursue multi-vector foreign policies aimed at reducing over-reliance on any single external actor.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the economic and energy dimensions of external engagement in Central Asia, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's role through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). However, fewer studies have systematically analysed the military-strategic transformations occurring in the region or adequately accounted for the agency of Central Asian states themselves. This paper contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced analysis of the interplay between external power dynamics, historical legacies, and local responses in an era of heightened geopolitical competition. It demonstrates how Central Asian states are actively navigating these pressures to enhance their security and autonomy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach centred on policy analysis and interpretive methods. Drawing on qualitative policy analysis, it examines official government statements, defence white papers, strategic documents, and reports from multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). These primary sources are supplemented with secondary sources, including scholarly articles, think-tank publications, arms trade records, and defence expenditure data covering the period 2010–2024. The research is exploratory and analytical in nature. It uses thematic content analysis to explore key themes: great power competition, military modernisation, historical legacies, and non-traditional security threats (terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental degradation, and cybersecurity). This methodological framework clearly demonstrates how external rivalries and local agencies have reshaped Central Asia's military-strategic landscape.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context, as well as the legacies of Soviet and post-Soviet developments, intricately intertwine with the military and strategic security of Central Asia. Historically, its position at the intersection of trade routes such as the Silk Road rendered it a highly sought-after territory for empires, particularly during the 19th-century "Great Game" involving Britain and Russia. The Soviet period solidified its strategic significance as a buffer zone, characterized by substantial military infrastructure and nuclear testing in Kazakhstan that have profoundly influenced its security legacy. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, the five Central Asian

republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—encountered significant challenges in formulating their own independent security policies. They clearly acquired Soviet military assets but lacked the necessary resources and expertise to maintain them. The 1990s were characterized by significant regional turmoil, as exemplified by the civil conflict in Tajikistan and the emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, both of which intensified apprehensions regarding border security and the spread of radical ideologies. The period following September 11th significantly integrated Central Asia into the framework of international counter-terrorism initiatives. The United States established military installations in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to bolster operations in Afghanistan, thereby transforming alliances while simultaneously placing strain on relations with Russia. In recent years, Russia has re-established its influence through military alliances and entities, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whereas China has broadened its economic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China strategically focuses its investments on securing vital trade routes and energy supplies, but these investments also raise significant concerns regarding sovereignty issues. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 resulted in a significant power vacuum, raising concerns regarding potential regional instability. Russia has augmented its military presence in response to perceived threats, whereas China has employed economic strategies to enhance its influence without imposing political conditions. The states of Central Asia are currently adopting foreign policies characterized by a multifaceted approach, aiming to maintain equilibrium in their relations with Russia, China, and Western nations. Their efforts to modernize military capabilities are aimed at countering terrorism and diminishing reliance on any singular power, all while adeptly manoeuvring through the intricate geopolitical landscape influenced by rivalries between Russia and China¹.

THE RELEVANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE REGION'S CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

An important geopolitical factor is Central Asia's position as a hub connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. The area's closeness to key powers like India, Russia, China, and Turkey positions it as a significant arena for strategic rivalry and influence. Central Asia is attractive to these powers not only because of its strategic location but also due to historical ties and security concerns in the region. Turkey aims to boost its influence in Eurasia while maintaining a delicate balance of power relations with major powers like Russia and China; China views it as a pivotal point in her Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia considers it as an extension of its traditional sphere of



influence. The Central Asian republics navigate this complex environment through their foreign policies, shaped by these interrelated interests, to maintain their independence and advance their national goals. Changes on a regional level can have far-reaching effects on the world at large, making the geopolitical dynamics of the region a microcosm of these trends.

Second, hydrocarbons are vital to the global energy scene, and Central Asia is rich in these resources. In addition to being a boon to regional companies, the region's oil and gas reserves give their owners considerable political clout. One can influence global energy prices and security by controlling these resources and the networks that distribute them, like pipelines. Because of this, Central Asia has become an important hub for energy-importing nations and multinational corporations seeking to secure their supply of this resource. Competition for these resources has the potential to spark alliances or rivalries, which could affect regional stability. The economic development and continued independence of Central Asian states depend on the efficient administration of these resources.

Thirdly, Central Asia's numerous security issues significantly impact global and regional stability. Since extremist organizations like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have shown interest in the region, the dangers of terrorism and extremism are especially severe. The prospect of these groups establishing themselves is a big concern, especially considering the Taliban's return to Afghanistan. On top of that, the region serves as a key passageway for the international narcotics trade, which provides a steady supply for criminal organizations and supports global drug distribution. Central Asian governments and their international allies must work together to address these security concerns by developing effective countermeasures, such as enhanced border security, counter-narcotics initiatives, and intelligence sharing.

Fourthly, the return of significant power rivalry in the region is a distinguishing feature of the Central Asian security scene. Russia's military stance and security system, which are reminiscent of the CSTO, are manifestations of its historical influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one way China is increasing its economic influence; it seeks to integrate Central Asia into its broader economic framework. On the other hand, the US has strategic goals of maintaining stability in the region and countering the influence of its competitors, irrespective of distance. Turkey, a key player in the great power struggle in Central Asia, is expanding its influence in the region by capitalizing on its historical, cultural, and strategic links. Turkey sees itself as a counterweight to the geopolitical dominance of Russia and China, offering Central Asian governments a reliable trade partner, security guarantee, and connectivity partner. The regional

security architecture is complex, shaped by the rivalry among world powers. Governments in Central Asia must navigate this architecture while pursuing their own strategic goals and maintaining relations with these powers.

Lastly, human rights violations, authoritarianism, and corruption all pose serious internal challenges for Central Asian governments. These problems may lead to political instability and social unrest, undermining the credibility of governments. Strongman politics and restricted political freedoms often stymie progress and change in the regional governance scene. Tackling these governance issues is crucial for the long-term stability and prosperity of Central Asia. Improving governance can also attract the foreign investment required for economic diversification and expansion, thereby fostering a more favourable investment environment².

EMERGING SECURITY THREATS IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION

Central Asia faces a range of security threats, both traditional and non-traditional. The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and other extremist groups in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, poses a significant threat to regional stability. The porous borders and the presence of transnational terrorist networks make it difficult to contain the spread of extremism. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), for instance, has been a significant destabilizing force, receiving arms and training from the Taliban in Afghanistan. This has allowed them to exploit socio-economic dislocations and the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union to further their agenda of establishing an Islamic state in the region³. Armed rebel incursions have particularly affected Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan since the late 1990s. Radical elements have backed these incursions, further complicating the security landscape. Additionally, Central Asians have been involved in high-profile terrorist attacks outside the region, such as in New York, Stockholm, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg, highlighting the transnational nature of the threat. Despite the narrative that Central Asia is becoming a hotspot for terrorism, the actual threat within the region remains limited. However, regimes in the region often use the threat of terrorism to justify crackdowns on opposition groups while simultaneously downplaying the issue to demonstrate control⁴.

The heroin trade, which originates in Afghanistan, uses Central Asia as a major transit route. This trade fuels corruption, organised crime, and regional instability. The drug trade, a major security concern, has become an integral part of the economic and social fabric of Central



Asian nations. Terrorists and organized criminals frequently use the money they make from the drug trade to finance their operations, which makes the area even more unstable. The drug trade exacerbates corruption within government institutions by bribing officials to overlook drug trafficking. Weakened state institutions and undermined rule of law make it more difficult to tackle other security challenges. Furthermore, drug addiction and associated health problems have far-reaching societal effects, which put a heavy strain on public health systems, further depleting resources and adding to the already precarious situation⁵. Several new security risks are developing in Central Asia, including water shortages, environmental degradation, and climate change. These challenges have the potential to intensify existing tensions over resources, potentially leading to conflict. The Aral Sea, once a symbol of ecological disaster, now demonstrates the dire consequences of water management and underscores the pressing need for sustainable development policies. The scarcity of water is likely to heighten competition for this precious resource, which could spark wars between nations. For a region like this one, where agriculture is king, environmental degradation is a major problem because it reduces crop yields. Reduced agricultural output, leading to food insecurity, can intensify social tensions and potentially ignite a revolution. More intense and frequent natural disasters like droughts and floods are another consequence of climate change that can wreak havoc on economies and communities⁶.

Central Asian states are more susceptible to cyberattacks due to their growing dependence on technology and the internet. Important infrastructure, private data, and national security are all vulnerable to these kinds of assaults. The region's governments and businesses are increasingly reliant on digital systems, making them vulnerable to cyberattacks. Security threats can originate from a range of entities, such as criminal organizations, state-sponsored actors, and even individual hackers. These cybercriminals have the potential to cause significant damage to our electrical grids, banking systems, and communication networks, potentially resulting in significant financial losses. Cybercriminals can also use stolen personal information or sensitive government documents for espionage or blackmail⁷.

CENTRAL ASIA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION: THE ROLE OF CHINA, RUSSIA, THE UNITED STATES, TURKEY, AND INDIA

In terms of military modernization, the central Asian region has been undergoing a substantial transformation. This change is a reaction to the changing security environment, which is defined by a multifaceted array of threats, including terrorism, extremism, narcotics trafficking, and cybersecurity challenges. To effectively

confront these security threats, Central Asian states have acknowledged the necessity of modernizing their military capabilities. This modernization includes the acquisition of new weapons systems that improve their defensive and offensive capabilities.

A. China

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• Arms Sales

China has provided Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan with armed drones, including the CH-3, CH-4, CH-5, and Wing Loong series. These drones serve as cost-effective alternatives to Western systems, finding application in both combat and reconnaissance missions. For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have purchased Wing Loong drones, while Turkmenistan uses the CH-3 drone. Turkmenistan acquired the HQ-9 air defence system from China, akin to Russia's S-300, during a military drill in 2016. This system strengthens regional air defence capabilities against aerial threats. In 2018, Turkmenistan acquired the QW-2 Vanguard 2 MANPADS. Like Russia's 9K38Igla, this portable air defence system works well for low-altitude defence and counterterrorism missions. In 2018, Kazakhstan purchased Y-8 military transport aircraft. Modelled after the Soviet Antonov An-12, it supports logistical operations and is compatible with current infrastructure. In 2015, China donated \$3.2 million worth of Jiefang J6 heavy-duty trucks and trailers to Kazakhstan. NORINCO, a prominent Chinese defence manufacturer, has exported tanks and armoured vehicles such as the VT-4 and VN17. These systems improve the operational capabilities of Central Asian militaries and are compatible with ammunition from the Soviet era.

Furthermore, some arms transfers take the form of donations to foster closer ties or involve barter agreements that leverage Central Asia's petrochemical resources. China's expanding role as a Central Asian arms supplier significantly impacts the stability of the region. China helps Central Asian nations modernize their militaries at a low cost by supplying cutting-edge weapons like transport aircraft (Y-8), air defence systems (HQ-9), and drones (e.g., CH-4 and Wing Loong). This improves their capacity to



handle security issues like border disputes and terrorism. These arms sales, however, put Russia's long-standing hegemony as the main supplier of security in the area in jeopardy and could exacerbate rivalry between the two superpowers. Chinese weapons provide diversification, but they also make Central Asia more reliant on Beijing for support and knowledge. With Central Asian states using "multi-vector" foreign policies to balance their relations with China, Russia, and other global powers, this dynamic reshapes the balance of power in the region. In the end, China's expanding military presence increases its power but makes it more difficult to preserve regional stability in the face of shifting geopolitical conditions⁸.

• Joint Military Exercises

China has significantly increased its military engagement with Central Asia through joint exercises, reflecting its growing security interests in the region. These bilateral and multilateral exercises concentrate on border security, counterterrorism, and improving communication between Chinese and Central Asian forces. Through bilateral agreements with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has increased the frequency of its military drills since 2002. China conducted 45 military drills with Central Asian nations between 2003 and 2020, demonstrating a consistent rise in security cooperation. One notable example is a massive exercise that focused on counterterrorism and regional stability in the Gorno-Badakhshan region in 2016 with Tajikistan, which involved 10,000 personnel. China also took part in the bilateral counterterrorism exercise "Cooperation-2019" alongside the Uzbek police forces and Kyrgyzstan's National Guard. These drills aim to safeguard China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure, while simultaneously tackling shared concerns about terrorism, separatism, and cross-border threats. To improve regional security, China also formed the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in 2016. These initiatives demonstrate Beijing's strategic emphasis on fortifying its western frontiers and extending its sphere of influence throughout Central Asia. But this expanding military presence begs the question of long-term reliance and possible rivalry with Russia for supremacy in the region⁹.

• Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

With a primary focus on counterterrorism, regional stability, and resolving common security concerns, the SCO is essential to the development of military cooperation in Central Asia. China, Russia, and four Central Asian nations (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) formed the SCO in 2001. It promotes cooperation through intelligence-sharing and joint military drills. One of the main projects of the SCO is the

"Peace Mission" series of extensive military exercises, held since 2005. These exercises concentrate on counterterrorism operations and improve military interoperability among member states. For instance, during the 2010 Peace Mission, more than 5,000 troops from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan collaborated on operational manoeuvres and planning. The SCO's main counterterrorism coordination organization is the Tashkent-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). It plans cooperative anti-terror exercises, makes intelligence sharing easier, and creates plans to counter extremism, separatism, and terrorism. RATS dismantled hundreds of extremist networks and prevented many terrorist attacks between 2011 and 2015. By these initiatives, the SCO allows China to increase its influence in the security architecture of Central Asia while also bolstering regional security. But this expanding role could result in rivalry with Russia for control of the military and strategic environment in the area¹⁰.

• Foreign Aid

With an emphasis on social programs, economic development, and infrastructure, China's foreign aid to Central Asia has been a crucial instrument in building close ties with the region. As part of its larger strategy, China provided substantial aid to Central Asia between 2013 and 2018, with Tajikistan being one of the main recipients. In order to combat the global financial crisis, aid includes grants, concessional loans, and credit lines, such as the \$10 billion credit line in 2009 and the \$900 million preferential credit line announced at the 2004 SCO summit. Furthermore, China has improved bilateral ties by offering training programs to thousands of Central Asian security forces and professionals¹¹.

A major part of China's Digital Silk Road initiative, which intends to export cutting-edge technologies and increase influence among Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) nations, is the country's smart city program in Central Asia. These initiatives concentrate on implementing smart city and surveillance technologies in urban areas through collaborations with Chinese tech behemoths like Huawei, ZTE, and Hikvision. For instance, Huawei has integrated traffic monitoring systems, facial recognition cameras, and AI-powered surveillance tools into "Safe City" systems in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Over 800 cameras are part of Huawei's \$1 billion project in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which aims to manage urban security and monitor public areas. Similarly, Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, has installed thousands of Chinese-made security cameras. Chinese bank loans or investments frequently fund these projects, creating financial dependencies. For example, Tajikistan used Chinese loans to spend \$22 million on Huawei's system. The integration of 5G networks and telecommunications infrastructure



further solidifies China's technological dominance in the region. These programs raise serious issues even though they offer advantages like better urban management and reduced crime. The strong focus on surveillance technology has raised concerns about possible data transfer to Beijing and abuse by authoritarians. Furthermore, the cost of these projects makes Central Asian countries more dependent on China. There has also been public backlash in certain nations against perceived overreach by Chinese companies. Integrating these systems into its geopolitical strategy is China's overarching objective. It addresses Xinjiang security issues while enhancing regional influence by integrating its technology into vital infrastructure. However, Central Asia's careless data protection regulations increase the risks of privacy violations and unrestricted surveillance. In the end, China's Smart City initiative is a prime example of how technological modernization has two sides: it can increase urban efficiency while also posing moral and political issues¹².

These initiatives raise questions regarding sovereignty and human rights abuses even as they strengthen regional security capabilities. Although they welcome China's participation as a check on Russia's hegemony, Central Asian nations are wary of becoming overly dependent on it. This dynamic illustrates how China is increasingly influencing the security environment in the region while negotiating regional sensitivities and competing with Russia geopolitically⁹.

B. Russia

Russia is a key player in Central Asia's military modernization, using its strategic interests and historical connections to hold sway over the region. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian nations struggled to build their own armed forces, which resulted in their ongoing reliance on Russian defence assistance. By means of bilateral agreements and multilateral frameworks, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia offers military training, equipment, and strategic cooperation.

• Arms Sales

Because of its military-industrial complex and post-Soviet connections, Russia has long been the main supplier of weapons to Central Asia. However, several factors, such as the effects of the conflict in Ukraine, competition from other suppliers, and changing security dynamics, have caused a significant decline in its arms sales in the region in recent years. Compared to the previous decade, Russian arms import into Central Asia fell by 23% between 2021 and 2023. This decrease is indicative of a larger trend of diversification among Central Asian nations looking to lessen their reliance on Russian supplies and acquire

cutting-edge military technologies. Alternative suppliers like Turkey, France, Italy, and India are becoming more and more popular. For instance, Turkey has become a major supplier of cutting-edge unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other contemporary systems. The poor performance of Russian military hardware in Ukraine has also sparked questions about its efficacy, contributing to the decline in Russian arms dominance.

Furthermore, Russia's own military requirements in the ongoing conflict have restricted its ability to export heavy equipment, thereby straining its manufacturing capacity. Due to its dominance in the region's arms market, Russia has historically provided Central Asian nations with a wide range of weapons and military hardware. These exports include both modernized and advanced weapons that are suited to the needs of the region, as well as legacy systems from the Soviet era. Russia exports transport helicopters, such as the Mi-17, to several Central Asian nations, and combat helicopters, such as the Mi-35M, which Uzbekistan extensively uses. Tanks from the Soviet era, updated armoured personnel carriers, and heavy equipment like Tajikistan's TOS-1 multiple rocket launcher are examples of armoured vehicles. The sale of cutting-edge systems to Kyrgyzstan, like the S-300 air defence system, demonstrates Russia's commitment to enhancing regional air defence capabilities. To meet local security needs, Russia provides a range of infantry weapons, such as machine guns and rifles. Russia has offered several rocket launchers and self-propelled artillery to bolster its ground forces. Initiatives to update military capabilities have included the delivery of reconnaissance drones, such as the Orlan-10, to Uzbekistan. Russia continues to be a major supplier to some Central Asian countries despite these obstacles. For instance, Uzbekistan has increased its reliance on Russian weapons in recent years, while simultaneously enhancing its UAV capabilities through purchases from other countries. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan continues to heavily rely on Russian weapons but is increasingly seeking partnerships with countries such as Spain and Turkey. For example, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have made a complete shift away from Russian weapons at the same time. This change highlights the rising need for domestic production capacity, modern systems, and alliances with suppliers outside of Russia. Russia's long-standing monopoly over the region's arms market is eroding as Central Asia keeps updating its arsenals, creating opportunities for new security players to exert influence¹³.

Moscow's approach solidifies its status as a key security partner by providing logistical support and selling weapons at preferential prices. To ensure the continued support of Central Asian nations for Russian interests, the Kremlin employs a strategy that combines political pressure with financial assistance. Kazakhstan's purchase of



Russian fighter jets and its creation of a unified air defence system are clear examples of this strategy. Because of their limited defence capabilities and geopolitical constraints, Central Asian states continue to rely heavily on Russia, despite efforts to diversify their military partnerships with nations such as China, India, and Turkey. Cultural connections and labour migration trends that maintain Russia's soft power in the region further bolster its influence¹⁴.

• **Role of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)**

Russia leads the Central Asian member states of the CSTO, which is essential to their military modernization, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The CSTO improves these countries' technological prowess and operational readiness through preferential arm transfers, coordinated defence plans, and joint military exercises. In order to improve interoperability among member states and prepare them for contemporary security challenges like terrorism and border incursions, regular joint exercises like "Interaction-2024," "Search-2024," and "Echelon-2024" emphasize rapid deployments, intelligence operations, and logistical support. The CSTO in Tajikistan also conducts specialized exercises like "Rubezh-2024," which simulate reactions to terrorist threats near the Afghan border. These drills incorporate cutting-edge technologies like electronic warfare capabilities and unmanned systems. The CSTO facilitates military modernization through preferential arms deals, in addition to training. Russia provides subsidized advanced weapons, such as multiple rocket launchers for Tajikistan and S-300 air defence systems for Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, the organization encourages member states to work together to develop and standardize weapons systems so that they are compatible across their forces, thereby fostering technical and military cooperation. Additionally, by bolstering peacekeeping and collective rapid reaction forces, the CSTO tackles regional security threats. Despite its contributions, Russia's depleted resources from the Ukraine conflict plague the CSTO, prompting some Central Asian countries to expand their security alliances with nations like China and Turkey. However, the CSTO continues to be a crucial tool for Central Asian military modernization, maintaining regional stability, and bolstering Russia's strategic dominance¹⁵.

• **Foreign Aid**

Russia's strategic interests in maintaining its influence in the region are evident in the significant role it has played in providing foreign aid to Central Asian nations. Bilateral agreements and multilateral frameworks, like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), have been the main conduits for aid. Russia made about \$20 billion in

investments in Central Asia during this time, concentrating on infrastructure development, economic assistance, and military cooperation. This includes providing central Asian nations like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan with military training, arms sales, and logistical assistance to improve their defence capabilities. Apart from military support, Russia has enabled significant financial assistance. It sent about \$37 billion in remittances to the area just between 2013 and 2016. We have also implemented debt forgiveness programs worth millions of dollars for nations like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. However, the expanding power of China and Western countries is posing a growing threat to Russia's status as a major donor. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has stretched Russia's resources and weakened its ability to project power in Central Asia. In order to navigate this complicated geopolitical environment, Central Asian nations are expanding their alliances with other superpowers. Russia leads the Central Asian member states of the CSTO, which is essential to their military modernization, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The CSTO improves these countries' technological prowess and operational readiness through preferential arm transfers, coordinated defence plans, and joint military exercises. In order to improve interoperability among member states and prepare them for contemporary security challenges like terrorism and border incursions, regular joint exercises like "Interaction-2024," "Search-2024," and "Echelon-2024" emphasize rapid deployments, intelligence operations, and logistical support. The CSTO in Tajikistan also conducts specialized exercises like "Rubezh-2024," which simulate reactions to terrorist threats near the Afghan border. These drills incorporate cutting-edge technologies like electronic warfare capabilities and unmanned systems. The CSTO facilitates military modernization through preferential arms deals, in addition to training. Russia provides subsidized advanced weapons, such as multiple rocket launchers for Tajikistan and S-300 air defence systems for Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, the organization encourages member states to work together to develop and standardize weapons systems so that they are compatible across their forces, thereby fostering technical and military cooperation. Additionally, by bolstering peacekeeping and collective rapid reaction forces, the CSTO tackles regional security threats. Despite its contributions, Russia's depleted resources from the Ukraine conflict plague the CSTO, prompting some Central Asian countries to expand their security alliances with nations like China and Turkey. However, the CSTO continues to be a crucial tool for Central Asian military modernization, maintaining regional stability, and bolstering Russia's strategic dominance¹⁶.

C. United States



• Arms Sales

The main goal of the United States' limited arms sales to Central Asian nations has been to strengthen counterterrorism and regional security. During this time, Puma 3 AE Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) were among the most important arms sales. For about \$8.54 million in 2022, Uzbekistan purchased about 38 Puma 3 AE UAVs from AeroVironment. The Mantis i45 sensor suite equips these compact, lightweight drones for surveillance and reconnaissance tasks, providing real-time intelligence through sophisticated imaging capabilities. For \$128.1 million, the United States authorized the sale of three King Air B300ER Scorpion aircraft to Kazakhstan in 2020. The Leonardo Osprey 30 AESA radars and Raytheon AST TITAN communications intelligence sensor suites, along with other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems, equip these aircraft. Enhancing Kazakhstan's border security and regional threat deterrence capabilities is the goal of this sale. Following the lifting of sanctions in 2015, the United States provided Uzbekistan with a range of military vehicles, including Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, significantly enhancing the capabilities of their ground forces. As part of larger military aid, the U.S. has facilitated limited transfers of small arms and ammunition to Central Asian countries that have expressed interest in enhancing their infantry capabilities. The United States has concentrated on training programs for Central Asian military personnel to improve regional security capabilities and interoperability with U.S. forces, in addition to direct arms sales. Despite these initiatives, the United States' arms sales are still small in comparison to those of China and Russia, who control most of the region's arms market. After 9/11, the United States established military bases in Central Asia for operations in Afghanistan, but these bases have since closed, changing the geopolitical landscape. The United States has no operational military installations in Central Asia as of January 2025. Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (K2) in Uzbekistan and Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan were two important U.S. bases in the past. From 2001 until its closure in 2014, Manas was a vital base for U.S. military operations, mainly supporting airlift and refuelling missions for the Afghan campaign. Karshi-Khanabad operated from 2001 until 2005, when political tensions with Uzbekistan led to the expulsion of U.S. forces. Following the withdrawal from Afghanistan, there have been talks about resuming the U.S. military presence, but this has been unlikely due to geopolitical limitations and local sensitivities. Instead of permanent bases, the current U.S. engagement concentrates on training and limited military cooperation, demonstrating a cautious approach to navigating the intricate dynamics of regional security influenced by China and Russia. To combat terrorism and advance stability, the United States maintains military ties with nations in Central Asia. Deeper engagement is

hampered by geopolitical factors like the close ties between Russia and many Central Asian nations; limited defence budgets that limit possible U.S. purchases; and political sensitivities about certain states' human rights records that could prevent full U.S. involvement. In conclusion, despite the modest amount of U.S. arms sales to Central Asia between 2010 and 2024, they show a calculated attempt to strengthen regional security cooperation in the face of growing competition from superpowers like China and Russia.

Financial assistance and security assurances frequently accompany the construction of U.S. military installations in Central Asia, greatly aiding the modernization of host countries' defences. For instance, the United States provided Uzbekistan with yearly aid packages under the 2002 Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework, bolstering its defence capabilities. With this aid, Uzbekistan was able to improve its military preparedness and acquire new equipment, giving it the means to successfully handle regional security issues. Other countries that housed U.S. bases also received this kind of financial and logistical support, like Kyrgyzstan, where the Manas Air Base provided \$10 million in military aid each year in addition to \$50 million to the local economy. These agreements made counterterrorism operations easier and strengthened local defence capabilities. However, because China and Russia see an American military presence as a challenge to their regional influence, geopolitical tensions with these two nations have limited the long-term presence of U.S. bases in Central Asia. Despite these limitations, U.S. bases contributed significantly to military modernization while they were in operation by providing access to cutting-edge equipment, educational opportunities, and security support¹⁷.

• Role of C5+1

The establishment of the C5+1 diplomatic framework in 2015 has greatly influenced the U.S. relationship with Central Asia, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The creation of this platform aimed to address shared regional issues such as environmental concerns, economic development, and security threats. Initially established to counter Russian influence and fill the geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the C5+1 has evolved into a crucial tool for fostering communication and collaboration among member states. The yearly summits have improved U.S. diplomatic ties in the area by addressing a range of topics, including trade relations, counterterrorism, and sustainable development projects. The C5+1 broadened its focus from 2020 to 2024 to include economic recovery and health security in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The introduction of notable programs like the



Central Asia Investment Partnership aimed to increase the growth of the private sector and improve economic connectivity. With discussions on initiatives like the Trans-Caspian Trade Route, recent summits have highlighted the significance of infrastructure development and energy security. President Biden's participation in the September 2023 summit was a turning point, indicating a renewed commitment to Central Asia amid escalating international tensions. Recognizing Central Asia's strategic importance in international supply chains, they established the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue. However, geopolitical rivalries with China and Russia continue to present difficulties, requiring careful management of these dynamics to advance regional stability and prosperity¹⁸.

• Foreign Aid

The main goals of U.S. foreign aid to Central Asia from 2010 to 2024 have been to support democratic governance throughout the region, advance economic growth, and improve security. Due to their strategic significance in counterterrorism and stability efforts, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have received the largest portions of the assistance, though there has been considerable variation. According to reports, U.S. aid in 2016 was about \$232 million—a modest drop from prior years as the country sought a more strategically focused budget that prioritized efficiency over volume. U.S. assistance has also adjusted to regional issues during this time, such as the COVID-19 pandemic's effects and changes in geopolitics between China and Russia. The introduction of programs like the Central Asia Investment Partnership aimed to promote private sector expansion and economic recovery. Furthermore, the U.S. allocated approximately \$1.9 billion for security assistance between 2001 and 2016, which included crucial initiatives to strengthen military capabilities and combat drug use. U.S. foreign aid continues to be an essential instrument for maintaining stability and furthering American interests in Central Asia as the geopolitical environment changes¹⁹.

D. Turkey

Turkey has become a major force in Central Asia's military modernization by using its historical, cultural, and linguistic connections to increase its power in the face of changing regional conditions. Russia's waning influence in the region due to its concentration on the conflict in Ukraine and its declining arms exports has prompted Turkey to step up military cooperation with Central Asian countries. Ankara has established itself as a dependable partner in the region's changing security environment through the transfer of cutting-edge technology, cooperative defence production projects, and cultural diplomacy. Common Turkic ancestry, language, and cultural ties are the foundation of Turkey's involvement

with Central Asia. In 1991, Turkey became the first nation to acknowledge the independence of the Central Asian republics after the Soviet Union broke up. Between 1991 and 1993, it signed more than 140 agreements with these countries in the areas of politics, culture, economy, and military cooperation.

• Arms Sales

Turkey has become a major supplier in the region by dramatically increasing its arms sales to Central Asian nations. Several unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other military hardware that have attracted attention because of their success in recent conflicts stand out among these sales. One of the most well-known exports is the Bayraktar TB2 drone, which Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, among other Central Asian countries, have purchased. Because of its track record of operational success in conflicts like the Nagorno-Karabakh war, this drone has become a popular choice for Central Asian militaries looking for cutting-edge capabilities. Kazakhstan has plans to produce these UAVs domestically and has received Anka drones from Turkey in addition to the Bayraktar TB2. Kyrgyzstan has significantly expanded its military cooperation with Turkey by obtaining drones purportedly used during border conflicts with Tajikistan. Additionally, Turkey committed to providing \$1.5 million in 2024 to support Tajikistan's military modernization initiatives through the purchase of Turkish military hardware, such as unmanned aerial vehicles.

Several factors have led to the erosion of Russia's hegemony in the Central Asian arms market, creating opportunities for other suppliers such as Turkey. The conflict in Ukraine has hampered Russia's ability to manufacture weapons, as it diverts resources to meet its own military requirements. Additionally, Russian military hardware has become less appealing due to its poor performance, especially when compared to contemporary systems like drones. Turkish Bayraktar drones, which have shown success in conflicts like Nagorno-Karabakh, are among the more sophisticated and affordable options that Central Asian countries are increasingly looking for. Additionally, nations like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are looking into new suppliers because of rising anti-Russian sentiment and a desire for diverse security partnerships. Turkey has benefitted from this change by establishing itself as a trustworthy substitute, providing sophisticated but reasonably priced systems, and placing a strong emphasis on technology transfer and cooperative production arrangements. Turkey's NATO membership, which lends legitimacy to its defence exports, makes it a desirable partner for Central Asian nations looking to modernise while lowering their dependency on Russia. All things considered; these arms sales demonstrate Turkey's strategic goal: to increase its power in Central Asia while giving these countries access



to cutting-edge defence capabilities in the face of shifting geopolitical conditions²⁰.

- **Joint Military Exercises**

The Efes series, in which Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan participate, is one of the most important exercises between Turkey and Central Asian countries. For example, Turkish forces and troops from these Central Asian nations participated in joint drills during Efes 2022. To strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities, Uzbekistan has also taken part in trilateral military drills with Turkey and Pakistan, such as the Partnership Shield exercise in 2019²¹.

- **Foreign Aid**

Turkey has been actively involved in giving Central Asian nations foreign aid, with a focus on several areas such as infrastructure, health, and education. The main organization in charge of organizing these initiatives is the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). In keeping with Turkey's historical, cultural, and linguistic connections to the area, TIKA's projects have sought to assist economic growth and state-building efforts in these countries. Infrastructure projects like building schools, hospitals, and water supply systems have been a part of Turkey's aid strategy. To improve access to high-quality education, TIKA, for example, has provided funding for educational projects in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Turkey has also improved Tajikistan's and Turkmenistan's health infrastructure and offered medical aid. The aid frequently has no stringent political or economic requirements, enabling recipient nations to directly address their most urgent issues. Turkey's commitment is still visible through ongoing projects and bilateral agreements, even though the percentage of aid specifically targeted at Central Asia has decreased when compared to other regions like the Middle East and Africa. Growing competition from China and Russia increasingly views this engagement as part of Turkey's broader strategy to enhance its influence in Central Asia²².

- **Role of Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA)**

TIKA significantly boosts Turkey's influence in Central Asia. Since its founding in 1992, TIKA has concentrated on offering development aid with the goal of promoting social development, cultural exchange, and economic expansion in the area. Its initiatives have covered a wide range of topics, such as infrastructure, humanitarian aid, health, and education. TIKA has carried out several projects, including building hospitals and schools, enhancing water supply systems, and supporting programs for vocational training. For instance, TIKA has provided funding for educational initiatives that improve access to high-quality

education and advance Turkish language and culture in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. TIKA has also supplied medical supplies and assistance to medical facilities in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Through its initiatives, TIKA enhances Turkey's diplomatic ties with Central Asian nations while simultaneously addressing urgent developmental needs. This interaction is part of Turkey's larger plan to establish itself as a vital regional ally, fostering a common Turkic identity while thwarting the influence of other nations like China and Russia. As a result, Turkey now uses TIKA as a crucial instrument in its efforts to strengthen its influence and promote collaboration in Central Asia²³.

Modernizing and diversifying Central Asia's military capabilities to combat security threats presents challenges. Spending more on the military can put a strain on already tight national budgets and spark an arms race in the area, which could upset the fragile balance of power. Furthermore, regional dynamics may become more complicated if global powers are involved in Central Asia's security architecture. To avoid getting caught up in great power rivalries, Central Asian states must carefully manage their relationships with Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, and other parties whose interests may not always coincide.

E. India

Geopolitical dynamics, changing security challenges, and strategic interests have all influenced India's military modernization initiatives in Central Asia. During this period, India has modernized its military capabilities to counter regional threats while also strengthening its defence cooperation with Central Asian nations.

- **Arms Sales**

Between 2010 and 2024, India's arms sales to Central Asia advanced significantly, propelled by both the need to improve regional security and strategic alliances. India has been actively interacting with Central Asian countries during this period, especially Armenia, which has become a major customer for Indian defence exports. Advanced systems like the Pinaka Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher, 155-mm artillery guns, and Akash Air Defence System are among the notable arms sales. In 2022, for example, Armenia became the first foreign customer to purchase the Akash-1S variant, ordering 15 systems for about \$720 million. To further cement military cooperation between the two countries, India also inked a \$250 million agreement with Armenia for Pinaka systems and ammunition. Despite no specific mention of sales, Central Asian nations have expressed interest in the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, developed in partnership with Russia. Several countries in the region have also shown interest in the Dornier-228 aircraft, a surveillance and



reconnaissance tool. As part of several defence packages, India has also provided vital equipment, like bulletproof vests and night vision devices, to improve the Central Asian armed forces' operational capabilities. For several reasons, India's defence exports have increased. In FY 2023–24, India's defence exports increased by 32.5% over the previous fiscal year to ₹21,083 crore, or roughly \$2.63 billion. This expansion is a result of India's emphasis on domestic manufacturing through programs like "Make in India," which seek to increase domestic production capacity while lowering dependency on foreign suppliers. Furthermore, India's ability to provide cutting-edge military technology at affordable costs gives it a competitive advantage over more established arms suppliers like China and Russia. The new agreements with Armenia demonstrate India's increasing standing as a trustworthy regional defence partner. In terms of geopolitics, these arms sales are a component of India's larger plan to strengthen its position in Central Asia and thwart China's expanding influence through programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²⁴.

• **Military Exercises**

To strengthen defence cooperation and address common security issues, especially terrorism, India has participated in large-scale military drills with Central Asian nations. Key exercises include DUSTLIK with Uzbekistan, initiated in 2019 to enhance cooperation in semi-urban counter-terrorism operations; Khanjar with Kyrgyzstan, focusing on counterterrorism since 2011; and KAZIND with Kazakhstan, focusing on joint counter-insurgency operations and conducted annually since 2016. The objectives of these exercises are to fortify bilateral ties, enhance Indian-Central Asian military interoperability, and reaffirm India's presence in the region in the face of growing Chinese influence. By carrying out these cooperative exercises, India strengthens its position as a trustworthy security partner in Central Asia and increases operational preparedness against possible threats, ultimately promoting regional stability and collaboration. Between 2010 and 2024, India's arms sales to Central Asia advanced significantly, propelled by both the need to improve regional security and strategic alliances. India has been actively interacting with Central Asian countries during this period, especially Armenia, which has become a major customer for Indian defence exports. Advanced systems like the Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher, 155-mm artillery guns, and Akash Air Defence System are among the notable arms sales. In 2022, for example, Armenia became the first foreign customer to purchase the Akash-1S variant, ordering 15 systems for about \$720 million. To further cement military cooperation between the two countries, India also inked a \$250 million agreement with Armenia for Pinaka systems and ammunition. Despite no specific mention of sales, Central

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• **Foreign Aid**

As part of its larger plan to improve relations and regional stability, India has actively given foreign aid to nations in Central Asia. Grants, credit lines, and capacity-building programs make up most of this assistance. In 2020, India demonstrated its commitment to economic cooperation by announcing a \$1 billion line of credit targeted at regional infrastructure development projects. India's 2012 introduction of the Connect Central Asia Policy, focusing on political, economic, and cultural ties, has further facilitated this engagement. Among the noteworthy projects are infrastructure and energy investments, along with assistance for community development programs. In addition to promoting goodwill and capacity building, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program has been instrumental in offering scholarships and training to students in Central Asia. All things considered, India's foreign aid initiatives demonstrate its determination to oppose outside influences and be a crucial partner in Central Asia's development²⁶.

• **Role of India in Central Asia through SCO**

Since becoming a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, India has greatly expanded its influence in Central Asia. Due to its membership, India has been able to interact directly with nations in Central Asia on several topics, such as cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and security. Through its



Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), the SCO gives India a forum to address regional security issues, especially counterterrorism. With a focus on economic integration and connectivity, India has used the SCO to advance its Connect Central Asia Policy. India seeks to counter Chinese dominance in the region by promoting infrastructure projects like the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which would improve trade routes between Central and South Asia. Additionally, by attending SCO meetings, India is able to have regular conversations with leaders of Central Asian nations, strengthening bilateral ties and encouraging cooperative solutions to common problems. All things considered, India's participation in the SCO demonstrates its dedication to serving as a stabilizing influence in Central Asia while furthering its strategic objectives. As part of its larger plan to improve relations and regional stability, India has actively given foreign aid to nations in Central Asia. Grants, credit lines, and capacity-building programs make up most of this assistance. In 2020, India demonstrated its commitment to economic cooperation by announcing a \$1 billion line of credit targeted at regional infrastructure development projects. India's 2012 introduction of the Connect Central Asia Policy, focusing on political, economic, and cultural ties, has further facilitated this engagement. Among the noteworthy projects are infrastructure and energy investments, along with assistance for community development programs. In addition to promoting goodwill and capacity building, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program has been instrumental in offering scholarships and training to students in Central Asia. All things considered, India's foreign aid initiatives demonstrate its determination to oppose outside influences and be a crucial partner in Central Asia's development²⁷.

CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS, MILITARY MODERNISATION, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF CHINA, RUSSIA, TURKEY, THE U.S., AND INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

China, Russia, Turkey, the United States, and India are among the major powers vying for influence in Central Asia. Their strategic objectives are shaped by cultural, military, economic, and security factors. Military modernisation serves as a direct tool of strategic positioning rather than a separate domain. This section examines the current approaches of these powers and explores future prospects and potential scenarios for the region.

• China: Expanding Security and Economic Integration

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, remains the cornerstone of its strategy, focused on building infrastructure, energy pipelines, and trade routes. This economic drive is inseparably linked with security objectives, particularly stabilising its western frontier in Xinjiang. Beijing has deepened military cooperation through intelligence sharing, joint exercises, arms sales, and training programmes, especially with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. These military modernisation initiatives strengthen China's regional presence while it navigates competition with Russia and other powers. Looking ahead, China is expected to further expand its influence through additional military infrastructure and surveillance technologies, though this may generate local suspicions and sovereignty concerns²⁸⁻³⁰.

• Russia: Military Influence and Resistance to External Powers

Russia continues to view Central Asia as a vital sphere of influence essential for its national security. It maintains military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and conducts joint exercises under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to counter terrorism and deter external powers. Economically, Russia seeks to integrate the region through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to offset China's growing footprint via the BRI. However, its focus on the Ukraine conflict has strained resources and diminished its reliability as a security guarantor. This declining capacity is forcing Central Asian states to diversify their partnerships, creating opportunities for other actors^{29, 31, 32}.

• Turkey: Cultural and Strategic Engagement

Turkey leverages its historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with Turkic-speaking nations through the Organisation of Turkic States and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). It has expanded its strategic presence via the Middle Corridor trade initiative and growing defence cooperation, notably through sales of Bayraktar TB-2 drones to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These military modernisation efforts position Turkey as an alternative security partner. While carefully balancing the dominant influence of China and Russia, Turkey is poised to increase its role through a mix of cultural affinity and modern military offerings³³.

• United States: Counterterrorism and Geopolitical Balancing

The United States prioritises counterterrorism, regional stability, and checking the expansion of Chinese and Russian influence. Although it closed its military bases after the Afghanistan withdrawal, Washington continues limited training, arms transfers, and support for



democratic reforms and economic resilience through initiatives such as the Economic Resilience Initiative for Central Asia. Recent diplomatic engagements signal a renewed focus on regional sovereignty amid great-power competition³⁴.

- **India: Energy Security, Connectivity, and Counterterrorism**

India pursues a multi-dimensional strategy emphasising energy imports from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, connectivity through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and counterterrorism cooperation. Its engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) provides a platform for security dialogue. India views Central Asia as critical for balancing Chinese and Pakistani influence while securing long-term energy supplies²⁴.

FUTURE OUTLOOK AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Central Asia's security landscape continues to evolve under geopolitical rivalries, instability spilling over from Afghanistan, and internal challenges such as ethnic tensions, socioeconomic inequality, and authoritarian governance. Key emerging trends include the gradual decline of Russian influence, rising militarisation among Central Asian states (with increased defence budgets and arms purchases from diverse suppliers including Turkey and Iran), and strain on traditional multilateral frameworks such as the CSTO. While newer platforms like the SCO are gaining popularity, they remain heavily influenced by China and Russia^{32, 35-37}.

Several plausible scenarios could emerge:

- **Scenario 1: Increased Chinese Dominance**

Russia's reduced presence allows China to become the primary security and economic actor. This could deliver short-term stability but risks creating long-term dependencies, greater authoritarian control through surveillance technologies, and rising anti-Chinese sentiment.

- **Scenario 2: Heightened Multipolar Competition**

Intensified rivalry among China, Russia, Turkey, India, Iran, and Western powers may fragment alliances and raise the risk of proxy tensions. Smaller states could gain leverage by playing major powers against one another, but with accelerated militarisation.

- **Scenario 3: Enhanced Regional Cooperation**

Central Asian republics may prioritise intra-regional integration and joint initiatives on terrorism,

infrastructure, and resource management, gradually reducing external dependence.

- **Scenario 4: Escalation of Instability**

Unmanaged internal unrest combined with Afghan spillover effects (including terrorism from groups such as ISKP and resource disputes) could trigger humanitarian crises, refugee flows, and stronger authoritarian responses.

These scenarios underscore the complex, inseparable interplay between military modernisation and broader strategic positioning that will shape Central Asia's future stability.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that the interplay between intensified great power competition and enduring post-Soviet historical legacies has fundamentally transformed the military-strategic security architecture and defence policies of the Central Asian republics between 2010 and 2024. The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine served as decisive catalysts, compelling Central Asian governments to accelerate military modernisation and adopt multi-vector foreign policies aimed at reducing over-dependence on any single external actor. Through arms acquisitions, joint exercises, and strategic partnerships with Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, and India, the region's states have not only enhanced their defensive capabilities but have also asserted greater strategic agency, navigated rivalries while addressing both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

The findings enrich several strands of international relations theory. First, they illustrate the continued relevance of neoclassical realism: systemic pressures (great power rivalry) are filtered through domestic and historical variables (post-Soviet legacies, authoritarian governance, and resource constraints), producing hybrid outcomes such as selective modernisation and diversified partnerships rather than pure bandwagoning or balancing. Second, the analysis advances the literature on small-state agency in regional security complexes. Central Asian republics have moved beyond passive recipients of external influence to active "multi-vector" players who exploit great power competition for leverage—an important corrective to traditional realist accounts that often overlook peripheral actors. Third, the study highlights the growing salience of non-traditional security threats (terrorism, narcotics, cyber risks, and climate-induced resource conflicts) in reshaping defence doctrines, underscoring the need to integrate hybrid-threat frameworks into Eurasian security studies. Finally, it contributes to debates on the erosion of hegemonic spheres of influence, showing how Russia's declining capacity and China's expanding



economic-military footprint are producing a more fluid, contested regional order.

For Central Asian policymakers, the central lesson is the imperative of sustained diversification. States should continue broadening defence partnerships while simultaneously investing in domestic defence industries and cyber capabilities to reduce long-term vulnerabilities. Greater emphasis on intra-regional cooperation—through enhanced SCO mechanisms, joint counterterrorism frameworks, and shared resource management—can mitigate the risks of proxy competition and arms-race dynamics.

For external powers, the analysis carries clear warnings. Russia and China must temper their ambitions to avoid provoking sovereignty concerns and anti-hegemonic backlash; the United States, Turkey, and India should calibrate their engagement to support genuine capacity-building rather than short-term geopolitical gains. All actors would benefit from renewed multilateral diplomacy focused on non-traditional threats, particularly Afghan spillover effects, water security, and cyber norms.

In sum, Central Asia's evolving military-strategic landscape is neither a return to nineteenth-century Great Game dynamics nor a simple extension of great power rivalry. It represents a distinctly twenty-first-century regional security complex in which local agency, hybrid threats, and multipolar competition coexist. Understanding and constructively engaging this reality will be essential for stability in Eurasia in the years ahead.

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