

The Central Asian Countries Relations with Russia and China: The Impact of Sensitivities, Dependencies, Threat Perceptions and Regional Organizations

Orta Asya Ülkelerinin Rusya ve Çin ile İlişkileri: Hassasiyetlerin, Bağımlılıkların, Tehdit Algılarının ve Bölgesel Örgütlerin Etkisi

Nasuh USLU*

Abstract

In their relations with Russia and China, Central Asian countries have been influenced by their sensitivities regarding independence and their strong ties with the two states regarding security, economy and trade. Central Asian countries have shown they are unwilling to compromise their sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity while maintaining intensive relations with the two states. The regional organizations led by Russia and China are also inevitable partners of regional states. They took utmost care not to fall under hegemony within these organizations. Their main strategy has been to balance the organizations and the two states against each other and try to protect their interests and sovereignty by creating a network of relations among many actors. This article analyses relations of Central Asian countries with Russia and China in the post-Cold War era by focusing on the relevant factors and aims to shed light on regional and global policies and attitudes and policies of regional countries.

Key Words: CSTO, EAEU, SCO, BRI, Central Asia

Öz

Orta Asya ülkeleri, Rusya ve Çin ile ilişkilerinde bağımsızlık konusundaki hassasiyetleri ve bu iki devletle güvenlik, ekonomi ve ticaret alanlarındaki güçlü bağlarının etkisi altında kalmıştır. Bu ülkeler, iki devletle yoğun ilişkilerini sürdürürken egemenliklerinden, bağımsızlıklarından ve toprak bütünlüklerinden taviz vermek istemediklerini göstermiştir. Rusya ve Çin'in başını çektiği bölgesel örgütler de bölge devletlerinin kaçınılmaz ortakları olmuştur. Bölge devletleri, bu örgütlerin içerisinde hegemonya altına girmemeye azami özen göstermiştir. Temel stratejileri, örgütleri ve iki devleti birbirlerine karşı dengelemek ve birçok aktör arasında ilişkiler ağı oluşturarak çıkarlarını ve egemenliklerini korumaya çalışmak olmuştur. Bu makale, Orta Asya ülkelerinin Rusya ve Çin ile ilişkilerini ilgili faktörlere odaklanarak analiz etmekte, böylece bölgesel ve küresel politikalar ile bölge ülkelerinin tutum ve politikalarına ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır.

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* Prof. Dr., International Relations Department, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, E-mail: nasuh.uslu@manas.edu.kg; nasuhuslu@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-6999-4934.

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Anahtar kelimeler: Kolektif Güvenlik Anlaşması Örgütü, Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği, Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Orta Asya

Introduction

The priorities of Central Asian countries that became independent in the early 1990s have naturally been to ensure their survival, security, independence and sovereignty, and to prevent internal instability by achieving economic development. After staying under the hegemony of a foreign power for a long time, the necessity of having relations with Russia and China has led these states to take actions and implement policies in line with the above goals. Central Asian countries have felt the need to participate in regional organizations and network of relations led by the two states separately or together, and tended to use their positions in those organizations and networks to achieve their goals.

Given that Russia and China have emerged as the main rivals of the West, examining the relations of Central Asian countries with them will contribute to understanding regional and global policies, developments and balances. Besides, making this analysis in the light of their sensitivities, dependencies and attitudes towards regional organizations will provide a better understanding of their overall foreign policies, strategies and approaches. Studying how Central Asian countries use regional organizations and balancing strategies to manage their relations with Russia and China will also be instructive in understanding strategies of relatively weaker members of the international system. Under these considerations, this study aims to analyse relations of Central Asian countries with the two powers.

Sensitivities

The sensitivities of the newly independent Central Asian countries affect their relations with Russia and China and their position and behaviour within regional organizations. Naturally, they attribute great importance to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Accordingly, all international actors should refrain from any behaviour that would amount to a violation of sovereignty of Central Asian countries and interference in their internal affairs. No regional state should attempt to dominate the region by disregarding the sovereignty of others, nor should any extra-regional state attempt to be a big brother to regional countries, regardless of its intentions.¹

Central Asian states formerly part of the Soviet Union attach great importance to the inviolability of the borders established at that time. Although there may be some objections to the current borders and there are significant ethnic and religious communities within each state, territorial integrity is important for regional stability and security.² To prevent conflicts and

1 Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Central Asian Regionalism or Central Asian Order? Some Reflections". *Central Asian Affairs*, 8, 2021, s. 16, 17.

2 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 15, 16.

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genocides like the ones in the Balkans and Caucasus, borders should not be questioned and changed, and groups within states should not be encouraged to secede. In addition, external powers should not claim rights over the natural resources of regional states. The management of transboundary water resources is a special issue that regional actors should address.

In the eyes of newly independent Central Asian states, the state is the only source of political and military authority and actor in international relations.³ Supranational structures that restrict their sovereignty are quite risky and dangerous. They are not ready for a transformation of their organizations into supranational structures. For this to happen, they need to reach maturity in statehood and their interests need to be compelling for supranational steps. The possibility of the revival of supranational movements such as Pan-Turanism and Caliphism, which have historical roots, also makes regional governments uneasy. The fact that these movements have caused instability and conflicts in different periods has been rooted in the memory of regional leaders. Attempts of states, reminiscent of these movements, will always attract their reaction.

For Central Asian countries, no state or actor can question regional governments.⁴ Regional governments expect the same attitude from each other as a condition of coexistence. This sensitivity is linked to the fact that after the Cold War, Western states and organizations attempted to question other countries' regimes according to their values and beliefs. Western action of targeting the regimes of different states and attempting to change them directly or indirectly led to serious instability and conflicts in the international arena. The legacy left behind by the colour revolutions and the Arab Spring is not positive.

Central Asian countries tend to rely on diplomacy and international law as the main tools for stability, peace and maintaining the status quo.⁵ Regional governments use diplomatic channels and representatives in crises, abide by the rules of diplomacy and strive for the peaceful resolution of problems. They attach great importance to international law and organizations created by the international community, particularly the treaties, conventions, protocols and international institutions within the framework of the United Nations. Their participation in and activism in regional organizations to manage international issues are proof of their tendencies. Their declaration of the region as a nuclear weapons-free zone is a case in point.

Following these sensitivities, Central Asian countries are also inclined to counter Russia and China. Even though they have special relations with these countries, they will react similarly to their hegemonic attitudes with the awareness that they are independent states. When Russian Foreign Minister

3 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 17.

4 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 17.

5 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 17, 19.

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Sergei Lavrov offered to mediate in a border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both states rejected the offer, stating that the issue fell within their sovereignty. Buranelli argues that Russia's influence in the region is not simply dominance, but is based on the consent of regional states.⁶ The then Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev stated in 2018 that Central Asians can deal with regional problems without the involvement of foreign powers.⁷

Dependencies

The dependence of Central Asian countries on Russia and China for security and economic development affects their policies towards these states and regional organizations. In the economic sphere, Central Asian countries' relations and dependencies are more oriented towards the neighbouring big countries than each other.⁸ Until the global financial crisis in 2008, Russia was their largest trading partner. During this period, Russia's share in Kyrgyzstan's trade increased from 20 to 35 percent, Tajikistan's from 15 to 25 percent, and Uzbekistan's from 15 to 20 percent. Russia is the main trade market of regional countries, the main transit route through which 70 percent of their exports to Europe pass, and the main labour market for their people.⁹ Given that Russia is a source from which credit and energy products are obtained on favourable terms, regional economies rely heavily on this state. Considering recent developments, China seems to replace Russia at a not-so-slow pace. However, while China increases its economic and trade relations with regional countries, it tries to cooperate with Russia because it needs its support against the West.¹⁰

Central Asian countries also need the support of their larger neighbours for their security and survival. In the face of internal threats, transnational movements and crises, Russia appears to be the main state where regional governments can immediately turn for support. Since Russia seems preoccupied with the Ukrainian war and its poor relations with the West, China can also be considered as security partner. Concerning developments in Afghanistan, Russia and China are the only countries from which regional governments can expect support. However, relying on external powers for security brings the possibility of sovereignty violations.¹¹ The most undesirable thing is that the big neighbours pose a threat to the security and survival of

6 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 20-21.

7 Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: A New Spring*. Silk Road Paper, Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2018, p. 63.

8 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 5.

9 Sebastian Krapohl and Alexandra Vasileva-Dienes, "The Region that isn't: China, Russia and the Failure of Regional Integration in Central Asia". *Asia Europe Journal*, 18, 2020, p. 354-355.

10 Sebastien Peyrouse and Jildiz Nicharapova, "Introduction", Jildiz Nicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds.), *Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, USAID, Conference proceedings of annual international conference American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, June 11, 2018, p. 12.

11 Buranelli, op. cit. p. 20.

regional states. In such a situation, there are no extra-regional powers to rely on. As a way of preventing such a possibility, regional countries should act together with the two big powers within regional organizations.

Threats

Central Asian countries' threat perceptions guide their relations with Russia and China at bilateral and regional level. Factors that could threaten national and regional security include: border disputes; tensions between different ethnic, religious and political groups; jihadist ideologies and actions of Islamic groups; drug trafficking; water scarcity and water management problems; protests by civilian population; crises caused by the change of administrations; Afghanistan-oriented problems that have the potential to spill over; and the possibility of Russia and China seeking to dominate the region.¹²

The presence of groups of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, negative legacies from the pre-independence period, and the inability to fully meet the economic and other needs of people raise the possibility of uprisings and civil unrest in regional countries. Conflicts and upheavals caused by the colour revolutions in the former Soviet states in the 2000s and the Arab Spring in the 2010s are the main reasons for concern about popular movements. Governments are therefore sensitive to the possibility that Western state and non-state actors may provoke popular movements. Central Asian countries hold similar attitudes to those of Russia and China in dealing with threats posed by extremist groups, including Islamic ones. This means suppressing any movements that pose a threat to regimes. Political and military support given by Russia and China in the fight against terrorism and extremist groups leads regional governments to cooperate with them in the region and regional organizations.¹³

Threats that may spill over from Afghanistan and Pakistan include terrorism, extremism, separatism and drug trafficking.¹⁴ The two countries are perceived as cradles of extremist movements and as countries that could easily transfer their instability to the region if they face political instability, disintegration or collapse.¹⁵ The need for Russian and Chinese support in combating security threats that could spill over from these countries drives regional countries to have good relations with them. Border problems, water shortages and access to food are problems that regional countries should solve on their own. Central Asian countries may use the Shanghai Cooperation

12 Sebastian Mayer, "Cooperation from Outside: Security Regionalism in Central Asia and Its Limits". *Central Asian Affairs*, 8, 2021, p. 209-210.

13 Peyrouse and Nicharapova, op. cit., p. 10; Arkady Dubnov, *Reflecting on a Quarter Century of Russia's Relations with Central Asia*. U.S.-Russia Insight, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, p. 10.

14 Marcel de Haas, "Relations of Central Asia with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization". *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 30(1), 2017, p. 3.

15 Aleksandra Bolonina, *Security Dimension of China's Presence in Central Asia*. Asia Focus #108, Asia Program, Thucydides Centre, University of Pantheon, April 2019, p. 13.

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Organization (SCO) as a forum to solve these problems by softening mutual attitudes and avoiding antagonism. Kazakh officials have emphasized the importance of tackling these problems at SCO meetings.¹⁶

It can also be argued that by overstating or securitizing the threats mentioned above, Central Asian governments aim to receive more economic and military aid from Russia and China.¹⁷ In this way, regional countries' orientation towards regime security through securitization leads them to pursue more repressive policies at home¹⁸ and to adopt a common stance with Russia and China rather than approaching the West.

In order to capture real characteristic of relations of Central Asian states with Russia and China, it would be useful to look at their positions, approaches and attitudes within some regional organizations. The first two organizations dealt with below are dominated by Russia and the latter two by China.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is based on the Collective Security Treaty (CST), which was signed in Tashkent in 1992 by former Soviet republics to achieve security cooperation, entered into force in 1994 and was renewed for 5 years in 1999. Russian leader Putin believed that it was necessary to deepen security cooperation with neighbouring countries to respond to Western advances against Russia. On his initiative, the CST was transformed into the CSTO in 2002 with the approval of Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Armenia. Uzbekistan joined the organization in 2006, but later terminated its membership in 2012.

Through their membership in the CSTO, Central Asian countries receive from Russia security and territorial integrity guarantees, weapons, essential military equipment, military training and technical assistance from Russia to modernize their armies.¹⁹ Given their limited military capabilities, the assistance they receive from Russia seems quite valuable. In addition to joint peacekeeping, rapid reaction and rapid deployment forces, the CSTO tries to establish a joint air force, a joint air defence force, a crisis response centre and a partnership institute. Regular military exercises are conducted with the themes of conventional warfare, peacekeeping, fighting against drug trafficking and terrorism, and responding to natural disasters. In this way, the militaries of regional countries are better prepared to counter possible crises and conflicts, and the overall security umbrella provided makes the organization valuable.²⁰

16 de Haas, op. cit., p. 3-4.

17 de Haas, op. cit., p. 7.

18 Svetlana Krivokhizh and Elena Soboleva, "The EU and China: How Do They Fit in Central Asia?" *Central Asian Survey*, 41(4), 2022, p. 7.

19 Peyrouse and Nicharapova, op. cit., p. 9.

20 de Haas, op. cit., p. 12-13; N. Shukuralieva, "Activities of International Organisations on Security Issues in Central Asia". Chabal, Pierre; Jildiz Nicharapova and Baizakova, Kura-

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Establishing a common defence system requires Russia to provide Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with modern military equipment, sell arms at affordable prices, and invest large sums. Russia has established and maintained military bases and facilities in the two countries, turning them into important elements in its regional security structure. The Kant base in Kyrgyzstan is the air power component of the CSTO Joint Rapid Deployment Force. The military base in Tajikistan, which houses 7,000 troops of the Russian 201st Division, is Russia's largest military presence outside its territory.²¹ Russia maintains troops in Kazakhstan and takes steps towards creating a joint air defence network with the S-300 missiles it provides to this country.²²

Kazakhstan attaches great importance to the CSTO for national, regional and global security and actively participates in and supports activities of the organization and its forces. It is the second largest contributor to the CSTO's joint forces after Russia. It contributed an air assault brigade and a naval battalion to the Rapid Reaction Force. In a high-level meeting of the organization in September 2015, Kazakh leader Nazarbayev said that countering threats posed by international terrorist and extremist organizations and the situation in Afghanistan should be one of its priorities. Kazakhstan hosted the exercise of the CIS Counter-Terrorism Centre in August 2005, the first exercise of the Peacekeeping Force in October 2012, the exercise of the Rapid Reaction Force in August 2014, and the military training of the Joint Defence System in October 2014.²³

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan try to act harmoniously within the organization, relying more on Russia to counter internal and external threats and ensure their survival. The Foreign Policy Concept of Kyrgyzstan emphasized that cooperation within regional organizations, including the CSTO, serves the national interest and that participation in the CSTO and SCO guarantees security.²⁴ However, in June 2010, when conflict broke out between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz leadership made several requests for military assistance to Russia and the CSTO, Russian President Medvedev rejected the request and CSTO Secretary General Bordyuzha stated that the conflict was an internal matter. This led Kyrgyz authorities to question the value and effectiveness of the organization.²⁵

The Tajik Military Doctrine refers to ensuring national and interna-

lay (eds), *Cross-border Exchanges: Eurasian Perspectives on Logistics and Diplomacy*, Peter Lang PIE, Frankfurt am Main, 2019, p. 43-44.

- 21 Fabio Indeo, "The Role of Russia in the Central Asian Security Architecture". Policy Brief 48, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, 2018, p. 7.
- 22 Moritz Pieper, "The Linchpin of Eurasia: Kazakhstan and the Eurasian Economic Union between Russia's Defensive Regionalism and China's New Silk Roads". *International Politics*, 58, 2021, 475.
- 23 de Haas, op. cit., p. 4-5.
- 24 de Haas, op. cit., p. 5.
- 25 de Haas, op. cit., p. 5; Andrei Kazantsev; Svetlana Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia". *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12(1), 2021, p. 61.

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tional stability and security and preventing armed conflicts by coordinating military and defence policies within regional organizations. The Tajik Foreign Policy Concept emphasizes the priority of cooperation with regional organizations to ensure security. In October 2013, Russia decided to keep its military base in Tajikistan, part of the Joint Rapid Deployment Force, until 2042. In April 2015, Russia announced plans to increase the number of troops in the base and provide more military equipment to Tajikistan. In October 2015, it announced it would deploy attack and transport helicopters at the base. However, in February 2016, Russian plans were suspended and the base was downgraded to a brigade level.²⁶

Uzbekistan showed an ambivalent attitude towards the CSTO from the beginning, initially signing the agreement, then withdrawing from it when it was extended after five years. After joining the organization, it did not approve the possible intervention of the organization in internal conflicts of member states, decided not to participate in its joint forces, and finally ended its membership in 2012.²⁷ Uzbek leader Karimov gave the US a military base near the Afghan border in 2005, ended cooperation with the US when he felt the danger of interference in internal affairs, and then renewed military cooperation in 2015 and received armoured vehicles from this country to protect the Afghan border. His intention seemed to pursue an independent security policy. Karimov stated that his country would not join any military alliance, possibly as a reaction to Putin's efforts to increase Russian influence over the former Soviet republics.²⁸ On the other hand, Uzbekistan has engaged in bilateral military cooperation with Russia and purchased weapons and military equipment from it.²⁹

Central Asian countries also have some concerns and reservations in relations with the CSTO. Central Asian people working in Russia, the significant Russian population living in regional states and the alleged discrimination against the Russian language are potential causes of tension between members and Russia. Although there is an intention and desire for security cooperation among members, the organization lacks a clear common strategy and position regarding regional and international issues. Member states attach excessive importance to protecting their sovereignty and prefer balancing regionalism within the organization. Therefore, when Russia makes efforts to intensify cooperation among members, regional states are concerned about their independence and take a stance to preserve the status quo, thinking that Russia is taking a step towards closed old-style regionalism. The fact that Russia tries to create a common identity based on civi-

26 de Haas, op. cit., p. 6-7.

27 Mirzokhid A. Rakhimov, "Complex Regionalism in Central Asia: Local, Regional, and Global Factors". *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2, 2018, p. 7.

28 de Haas, op. cit., p. 7-8.

29 Sarwat Rauf and Adam Saud, "Prospects of CSTO and SCO in Regional Politics of Central Asia". *International Journal of Politics and Security*, 2(4), 2020, p. 38.

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zation with discourses such as ‘the Russian world’ and ‘compatriots rights’ causes similar reactions.³⁰

Uzbekistan has often objected to Russia’s efforts to expand the CSTO and increase its powers. Member states did not approve many Russian foreign policy initiatives and interventions. When Russia attacked Georgia in 2008 and subsequently recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, regional states remained silent within the CSTO, but raised objections within the SCO on the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs.³¹ CSTO members did not approve the annexation of Crimea and did not accept Russia’s proposal to send peacekeeping forces to Ukraine.

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

Before Russia started to take steps towards creating a Eurasian economic union, Central Asian countries had tried to establish similar unions among themselves and had made some progress in this direction. Kazak leader Nazarbayev initially advocated economic cooperation and integration in both Central Asia and Eurasia, promoting the Central Asian Union (CAU) and proposing a Eurasian Union in 1994. At the time, Russian leaders did not pay due attention to this proposal as they focused on their internal problems and keeping the republics within the Russian Federation.³² However, they did not want Central Asian countries to act on their own and became observers in the CAU to keep a close eye on them.

Russia established a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan in the mid-1990s as the core of economic union it intended to create under its leadership, and later Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined this union. As a continuation of the same structure, the signatory states established the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC) in 2000. At that point, it became clear that Russia’s real intention was to dismantle the Central Asian integration effort and tie it to itself. In 2002, when the CAU was transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), the Russian demand of becoming observer and then full member was accepted (2004). In 2005, at the request of Russian President Putin, CACO was merged with EurasEC and ceased to exist, thus ending the efforts of Central Asian countries to create unity and integration among themselves without a big state.³³ EurasEC was later transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Kazakhstan, which advocated for regional and continental unity from the beginning, but

30 Aliya Tskhay and Filippo Costa Buranelli, “Accommodating Revisionism Through Balancing Regionalism: the Case of Central Asia”. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72(6), 2020, p. 1042; Santeri Talka, *Open Regionalism in a Global System: The Political Economy of Central Asian Regional Integration*, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences, Master Thesis, 2018, p. 65.

31 Tskhay and Buranelli, op. cit., p. 1045.

32 Cornell and Starr, op. cit., p. 26.

33 Cornell and Starr, op. cit., p. 8, 28; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, op. cit., p. 361.

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was always wary of Russian domination, chose EurasEC outright, believing it would bring more benefits, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan followed suit.³⁴ Although Uzbekistan joined the union for a while, it later left, showing that it preferred to pursue independent economic and trade policies.³⁵ Uzbekistan's official justification was that there was an overlap between the structures and activities of the CIS and EurasEC and that it did not agree with the principles of the customs union between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan.³⁶

In 2010, Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus started to implement a customs union between them and abolished customs controls at their borders the following year. In the fall of 2011, Putin proposed the creation of the Eurasian Union, and after his re-election as president in 2012, he reformulated his foreign policy accordingly. The 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept identified active support for Eurasian economic integration as one of the main tasks of Russian foreign policy. The main goal of the concept was to expand and deepen Russia's influence in Eurasia.³⁷ Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia signed an agreement in 2011 on establishing the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 and created Common Economic Space in January 2012. In May 2013, to demonstrate their commitment, the presidents held a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, the main body of the customs union.

The final agreement was signed between the three states in May 2014. Accordingly, the Eurasian Economic Union was to be the equivalent of the European Union and based on a Customs Union. The three states would form the basis of the union, while Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan would be considered potential members, but their roles in the integration process would be different.³⁸ The agreement emerged after intensive negotiations, taking into account some of the concerns of states other than Russia. In reaching the agreement, members' concerns about Russian dominance and the focus on political rather than economic criteria for integration were addressed, and Russia had to abandon some of its proposals for further integration.³⁹ The tasks of the EAEU are: to create efficient markets for goods, services, capital and labour; to develop and implement coordinated tax,

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34 Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, op. cit., p. 347.

35 Cornell and Starr, op. cit., p. 8, 26-27.

36 Kairat Moldashev and Ikboljon Qoraboyev, "From Regional Integration to Soft Institutionalism: What Kind of Regionalism for Central Asia?" Jildiz Nicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds.), *Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, USAID, Conference proceedings of annual international conference American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, June 11, 2018, p. 89.

37 Rakhimov, op. cit., p. 7.

38 Agnieszka Konopelko, "Bases and Mechanisms of Regionalism in Post-Soviet Central Asia". *International Business and Global Economy*, 33, 2014, 220.

39 Jeffrey Mankoff, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Dreams, Nightmares, Realities, Prospects". Jildiz Nicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds.), *Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, USAID, Conference proceedings of annual international conference American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, June 11, 2018, p. 30-31.

monetary, credit, finance, trade and customs policies; to create unified transport, energy and information systems; to provide state support for priority areas of economies; and to strengthen cooperation in production, science and technology.⁴⁰ Kyrgyzstan and Armenia joined the EAEU in the year of its establishment (2015).

As a legacy of the Soviet era, it is clear that Central Asian countries rely and depend heavily on Russia for infrastructure, trade relations, labour employment, and trade and energy links with the world. When they faced Russia's insistent demands, regional states could hardly remain indifferent to a Russian-led economic and trade integration. Kazakhstan, which has the largest economy in the region, could not reject the project as it saw that the EAEU meant access to the large Russian market and an extensive network of pipelines, and even became an ardent advocate of the project from the beginning. For Kazakhstan, which shares a long common border with Russia and has a large Russian minority, forming the Eurasian union with Russia seemed to be an important political priority.⁴¹ It was considered that the Eurasian union would enable Kazakhstan to tighten its ties with Russia, preserve its national sovereignty and allow it to open up to the outside world.

Kyrgyzstan joined the union at Russia's insistence. Its leaders, taking into account power realities, favoured close relations with Russia and gave the impression that they were open to Russian suggestions on the Eurasian Union.⁴² The real significance of the EAEU for Kyrgyzstan is that it normalizes the issue of Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia, which became a strong reality after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The remittances sent home by almost 1 million Kyrgyz migrants in Russia were so important that Russia's hint that it might cause problems in this issue was enough for Kyrgyzstan to agree to join the EAEU.⁴³ Tajikistan has not yet become a full member because it cannot meet the conditions of the customs union. Uzbekistan left the project before the union was established in line with its political preferences. In this way, the EAEU, which includes only two Central Asian countries, seemed to divide the region.

Central Asian members of the EAEU, in line with their sensitivities, have also adopted a cautious attitude within the organization. While they want the organization to be a politically neutral, economic and trade-oriented structure, they are also uncomfortable with its presentation as an intro-

40 Peyrouse and Nicharapova, op. cit., p. 40.

41 Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, op. cit., p. 349, 353, 362.

42 David G. Lewis, "Central Asia: Fractured Region, Illiberal Regionalism". Anna Ohanyan (ed.) *Russia Abroad: Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond*, Georgetown University Press, 2018, p. 13.

43 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 36; Jeanne L. Wilson, "Competitive Partners: Tensions Between Russia's Goals for the EAEU and the Chinese Vision of the BRI in Central Asia", Jildiz Nicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds.), *Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, USAID, Conference proceedings of annual international conference American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, June 11, 2018, p. 64.

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verted anti-Western organization led by Russia. Perhaps, to demonstrate this sensitivity, they did not support Russia's initiatives in Georgia and Ukraine, preferred to solve their problems bilaterally rather than through the organization's institutions, and focused on short-term gains rather than long-term strategic goals.⁴⁴

Kazakhstan has consistently opposed Russia's efforts to politicize the organization and insisted that its mission remain economic. Nazarbayev said that Kazakhstan could leave the organization if its independence was violated.⁴⁵ When Kazakh officials faced Russian authorities' desire to transform the EAEU into a supranational organization with a common currency, parliament, citizenship and foreign policy, they opposed the Russian proposals in order not to fall under Russia's military and economic domination and to prevent damage to their sovereignty and independence. Kazakhstan prioritized its national interests within the organization and opposed even the common industrial policy, which could be seen as a technical issue.⁴⁶

By joining the EEU, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan seem to have delegated their decision-making authority on international trade issues to a supranational structure. Their export, import and investment relations with other states including China must be carried out according to the rules of the organization. However, these two states have serious trade relations with countries outside the organization. Kazakhstan exports raw materials and natural resources to European countries and China; Kyrgyzstan has traditionally been a distribution centre for Chinese export products.⁴⁷ Besides, the conflict between the requirements of the EAEU and WTO obligations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan can pose problems for their trade policies and reforms. Recognizing the importance of member states' other connections, over 3,000 goods were exempted from the common tariff against outsiders so that the tariffs would not seriously harm their trade.⁴⁸

Central Asian members have faced some difficulties in the implementation of the Eurasian Economic Union. The common outward tariffs and the elimination of tariffs among members led to a massive influx of Russian goods into Kazakh markets in the mid-2010s, to domestic producers' detriment, causing them to pressurise their governments. The fall in oil prices and the distress of the Russian economy pushed the Kazakh authorities to devalue their national currency, showing that the EEU could have costs in terms of

44 Talka, op. cit., p. 68.

45 Pieper, op. cit., p. 474.

46 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 29; Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, op. cit., p. 61, 62; Paulo Duarte, "Which Regionalism for Central Asia? The Challenges of China's, the U.S.' and Russia's Integration Projects in Central Asia", Jildiz Nicharapova and Sebastien Peyrouse (eds.), *Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia*, USAID, Conference proceedings of annual international conference American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, June 11, 2018, p. 78.

47 Talka, op. cit., p. 68.

48 Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, op. cit., p. 61; Pieper, op. cit., p. 472.

monetary sovereignty. Kyrgyzstan, which chose not to devalue its currency, faced significant import increases from Russia and Kazakhstan.⁴⁹ In 2014, when the Russian ruble suffered a serious depreciation and Kazakhstan was exposed to a massive inflow of Russian goods, Kazakh officials accused the Russian authorities of violating the agreement on monetary policies. Kyrgyzstan's economy, which depends on remittances sent by Kyrgyz workers in Russia, also suffered from the ruble devaluation. Russia's crisis with Ukraine since 2014 has negatively affected member states' trade with Ukraine. While Western sanctions against Russia caused economic and trade difficulties for members, Kazakhstan opposed any form of EAEU support for Russian counter-sanctions.⁵⁰ When Kazakh authorities turned a blind eye to smuggling activities that would reduce the impact of Russian counter-sanctions, Russia responded by using indirect means such as veterinary, sanitary and phytosanitary controls as it could not impose customs controls on Kazakh goods. In 2016, Russia denied transit passes to Ukrainian trucks, disrupting trade between Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and Astana protested Moscow's behaviour.⁵¹

The economies of Russia and Kazakhstan are similar, both relying heavily on exports of hydrocarbons and other raw materials, so there are limits to increasing trade between the two states. Kyrgyzstan has no significant exports to Russia. Russia having larger economy increases its exports to the two states, leading to criticism of income transfers from these states to Russia. Increased technical standards and the continued use of old Soviet-era regulations also cause discomfort. On the other hand, concerns that the EAEU could be used by Russia to achieve its neo-imperial ambitions have been reinforced by events in Georgia and Ukraine. Russian leader Putin exerted pressure on Ukrainian leader Yanukovich to prevent him from moving closer to the EU and to force him to back out of his trade agreement with the EU, with the final result being Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Ukraine. What is observed is Russia's use of military force against a former Soviet republic that it could not persuade to cooperate politically and economically.⁵²

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

After the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia, border disputes between regional states remained a potential source of conflict. To eliminate this source of tension, China and Russia settled their border dispute, and then China made separate border arrangements with three neighbouring Central Asian republics. In 1996, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed the Shanghai Agreement on Building Military Confidence in the Border Ar-

49 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 32-33.

50 Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, op. cit., p. 61-62.

51 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 33-34.

52 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 29.

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reas to strengthen the resulting agreements. In 1997, the same states signed the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in the Border Areas, which gave rise to the Shanghai Five. Subsequently, the five states held summit meetings, issued joint statements, held regular meetings of defence ministers to coordinate security strategies, and produced documents on disarmament measures. With Uzbekistan joining the group, the Declaration establishing the SCO was signed in June 2001.⁵³

Certain features of the SCO do not pose a problem for Central Asian countries, but rather encourage them to remain in the organization. Actors with different values, views, goals and interests are members of the organization. Members do not want to follow a particular hegemon and to commit themselves to a particular world. The SCO does not have comprehensive legislation and rules that bind members. It is an organization that allows members to develop bilateral arrangements, relations and dialogue among themselves, gives them a high degree of freedom in expressing their interests, and has a loose and flexible agenda and objectives.⁵⁴ Checks and balances between Russia and China within the organization reduce others' fears of domination and control. Since the two states have different interests and compete with each other, they cannot take joint initiatives and exert pressure on regional countries, and the interventionist behaviour of one is prevented by the other.⁵⁵ This allows other states to balance between the two great powers, adopt approaches that are not limited to the region, and diversify their foreign policies. Member states respect each other's regimes, act out of common concern over liberalization and colour revolutions, and strengthen their legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. Thanks to the organization, the governments of member states are treated as respected interlocutors in the international arena and can offer their people the benefits that the organization seems to provide, such as international support in security, trade, investment and other areas.⁵⁶

In the absence of any other Central Asian organization, the SCO, which includes four Central Asian countries, offers them a suitable forum. Regular meetings of leaders, ministers and other high-ranking officials under the SCO provides the opportunity to address and advance regional issues and get China and Russia's support.⁵⁷ Through the organization, Central Asian countries are also able to implement economic and trade projects that are important for economic development, and establish mutually beneficial economic and trade relations, especially with China.

53 Mayer, op. cit., p. 218-219.

54 de Haas, op. cit., p. 15; Bolonina, op. cit., p. 16.

55 de Haas, op. cit., p. 12.

56 Richard Alexander Good, *Can Regionalism Provide Stabilization to Central Asia and thus Afghanistan?* Master Thesis, Plymouth University, 2019, 83; Krivokhizh and Soboleva, op. cit., p. 7.

57 Rakhmatulla Nurimbetov and Laszlo Vasa, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization in a Changing Central Asian Geopolitical Context". *Aarms*, 20 (2), 27-38, 2021, p. 33.

To develop its economy and increase its trade, Kazakhstan wants to benefit from relations within the SCO and to improve its economic and trade relations with China. In a meeting of senior officials in December 2014, the two sides discussed law enforcement within the framework of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), ensuring the security of oil and gas pipelines, and combating terrorism and drug trafficking. Kazakhstan wants to discuss issues of economic cooperation and the fight against threats emanating from Afghanistan within the SCO.⁵⁸

Uzbekistan wants to address economic and trade cooperation issues within the organization, but these issues always come under the influence of sovereignty and independence sensitivities. Having left the CSTO with these sensitivities, Uzbekistan has always opposed proposals to establish strong ties between the two organizations. It has avoided the SCO's joint military exercises reminiscent of the CSTO. Uzbek authorities were unwilling to leave the security issue to a common structure, but they attached great importance to the presence of the SCO's RATS on their territory and cooperation within this structure to consolidate their regional leadership efforts and combat terrorist organizations. Uzbek officials desire access to safe transit routes and the construction of safe land, rail and sea routes between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. They see the SCO as an appropriate platform to address this issue. However, Uzbek leaders have insisted that the SCO should stay away from blocs and bloc relations and not be transformed into a military-political alliance.⁵⁹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, envisages the construction of roads, railways and pipelines from China through Central Asia to Europe and Africa (Liao, 2021: 504). Under the initiative, all types of transportation infrastructure will be built, borders and complex trade regimes will be eliminated, cross-border trade will be facilitated, customs procedures will be streamlined, non-tariff barriers will be removed, and communities will be strongly connected.⁶⁰ In financing infrastructure projects, China usually offers aid packages, soft loans, trade agreements and investment contracts.⁶¹ As of June 2020, the number of states signing cooperation documents with China on a bilateral basis was 138, including four Central Asian countries.⁶²

By 2019, China had spent \$23.4 billion on transportation infrastructure and \$35.7 billion on the construction of energy lines in Central Asia.⁶³

58 de Haas, op. cit., p. 3.

59 de Haas, op. cit., p. 8-9.

60 Lewis, op. cit., p. 14-15; Peyrouse and Nicharapova, op. cit., p. 9.

61 Elena Soboleva and Svetlana Krivokhizh, "Chinese Initiatives in Central Asia: Claim for Regional Leadership?" *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 62(5-6), 2021, p. 644.

62 Krivokhizh and Soboleva, op. cit., p. 9.

63 Krivokhizh and Soboleva, op. cit., p. 9.

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Tajikistan had two approved projects: Nurek Hydroelectric Rehabilitation and Dushanbe-Uzbekistan Border Road Investment. Uzbekistan's two pending projects were Railway Electrification and Bukhara Region Water and Sewerage Project. In November 2019, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kazakh Ministry of Energy on renewable energy development. A project to build a 100 mega-watt wind power plant in Zanata was under discussion.⁶⁴ Countries that received loans from China without being subject to any conditions, follow-up, and evaluation have borrowed huge amounts that they will have difficulty repaying. For example, 40% of Kazakhstan's total debt is owed to China, compared to 80% for Tajikistan.⁶⁵

Central Asian leaders welcomed China's growing economic role in the region, officially endorsed the BRI, made their countries founding members of the AIIB, and attended the Silk Road Forum in Beijing in May 2017.⁶⁶ They generally support the BRI because they believe China will invest large sums in their infrastructure, thus bridging their infrastructure deficits and generating more transit revenue from increased trade between China and Europe.⁶⁷ Thanks to the BRI, landlocked regional countries can access new markets, face new economic opportunities, and be connected to the outside world through transportation links. As of 2020, the three railways built in Central Asia as part of the BRI served this purpose.⁶⁸

Kazakh leader Nazarbayev long aimed to turn his country into the business and transit hub of Central Asia and a valuable bridge between Europe and Asia. He sought to break Russia's influence by forging partnerships with countries such as China and the US. Therefore, shortly after China announced the BRI, in November 2014, Nazarbayev announced a national development program called Nurly Zhol, which envisaged the construction of 7000 kilometres of highways and 4000 kilometres of railways. Seeing Chinese capital and technological support as vital, in August 2015 the Kazakh leader convinced Beijing to merge Nurly Zhol with the BRI. Then, in December 2015, a joint working group was established between Kazakhstan's Ministry of National Economy and China's National Development and Reform Commission to boost the two countries' development strategies.⁶⁹

The BRI has also some negative aspects for Central Asian countries. Management problems may arise in the execution of the projects requiring large expenditures. Questions about who will carry out these projects, who will be employed in them and who will be in charge naturally raise the ques-

64 Janet Xuanli Liao, "China's Energy Diplomacy towards Central Asia and the Implications on its "Belt and Road Initiative", *The Pacific Review*, 34(3), 2021, 505.

65 Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes, op. cit., p. 359.

66 Wilson, op. cit., p. 62.

67 Mankoff, op. cit., p. 35.

68 Soboleva and Krivokhizh, op. cit., p. 646.

69 Liao, op. cit., p. 505.

tion of what kind of relations will be established with Chinese capital owners. Besides, the expenditure of large sums of money may lead to corruption, nepotism and bribery. Other risks include difficulties repaying large amounts of debt borrowed from China, selling valuable assets to the Chinese, and falling under their influence.⁷⁰ Regional leaders should also consider that China may resort to coercive force to protect its investments and trade and guarantee access to energy resources.

Central Asian people may also have grievances against China. Anti-Chinese public demonstrations can take place in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. In 2016, when a law was passed allowing foreigners to lease land for up to 25 years, public demonstrations with clear anti-Chinese sentiment took place in various Kazakh cities.⁷¹ People feared that China's investments could enrich its own elites, spread corruption and bribery in the administration, and widen the wealth gap between classes in society.⁷² People believing that China has imperialist tendencies are uncomfortable with that Chinese investors use Chinese people brought from their country instead of local people.⁷³ Even before the BRI was announced, the rate of Kazakhs having a negative view of Chinese workers increased from 18% in 2007 to 33% in 2012.⁷⁴ A factor that has increased concerns about China among Central Asian people is the repression of Uyghurs in the East Turkestan region (the existence of re-education camps).⁷⁵

Balancing Policies

Since the end of the Cold War, Western countries have not been seriously interested in Central Asian countries and have not provided serious support for their stability, security and development. On the other hand, Russia and China, which are close neighbors of Central Asian countries, have been tried to bind these countries to themselves through bilateral relations and regional organizations. Being relatively weaker members of the international system, Central Asian countries could not completely stay away from the organizations led by Russia and China in light of these realities. However, this does not mean that they have been completely subservient to Russia and China. The section on sensitivities and dependencies attempts to clarify this situation. In their relations with Russia and China, one of the tools used by the regional countries to avoid becoming dependent and to protect their sovereign interests is to implement balancing policies.

As relatively weaker actors of the international system, the newly independent Central Asian countries pursue a policy of balancing powerful ac-

70 Dauren Aben, Regional Security in Central Asia: Addressing Existing and Potential Threats and Challenges. *Eurasian Research Journal*, 1(1), 51-65, 2019, p. 58.

71 Bolonina, op. cit., p. 4.

72 Lewis, op. cit., p. 15.

73 Wilson, op. cit., p. 63.

74 Bolonina, op. cit., p. 4-5.

75 Pieper, op. cit., p. 470.

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tors against each other to avoid falling under the influence of a great power ever again. They strive to pursue independent foreign policies; they are not simply clients of foreign powers. Many actors are interested in the region and there are various negotiations, discussions, cooperation and rivalries. So, there are many candidates for cooperation and partnership and many potential opportunities for games, cooperation and competition for regional countries.⁷⁶

To ensure and strengthen their survival, Central Asian countries participate in all regional structures and initiatives they deem relevant, link and use them and their members against each other and create complex processes and networks of relations (balanced regionalism). Their goal in pursuing balancing regionalism is to avoid the dominance and revisionism of a single big state, gain economic and political benefits, and strengthen their position and legitimacy in the international arena by acting in accordance with the norms of regionalism and multilateralism that the international community deems appropriate. Especially after the emergence of the SCO and China's influence in the region, Central Asian countries realized that they could resort to balancing policies in regional platforms to reach their foreign policy goals. The factor which directed them was the 2008 Georgia and 2014 Ukraine conflicts showing that Russia would adopt a more interventionist and revisionist stance in its near abroad.⁷⁷

Being members of various regional organizations and structures, Central Asian countries are aware of the limitations and shortcomings of each organization and attitudes and opinions of Russia and China towards each other within these organizations. They have advocated for multilateral cooperation efforts and thus tried to increase the cost of Russia's revisionist policy. Accordingly, what they try to do is not to counterbalance the revisionist state militarily or economically directly. They try to reduce, weaken or complicate their ties and obligations vis-à-vis that state by taking active positions in regional organizations. They make efforts to increase dialogue and cooperation among organizations, to realize joint projects and to establish common regional identity and norms.⁷⁸

Kazakh leader Nazarbayev said the SCO should cooperate more with organizations such as the UN, CSTO and CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia). Kazakh officials advocated enhanced cooperation between the EAEU, the EU, the SCO and the BRI to create a single economic space stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and between the OSCE and CICA for security cooperation and, integration of these structures. Kyrgyz and Tajik officials noted that membership in the CSTO, SCO and CIS strengthened their national security policies. SCO Secretary General Alimov

76 Peyrouse and Nicharapova, op. cit., p. 14.

77 Tskhay and Buranelli, op. cit., p. 1039-1041.

78 Tskhay and Buranelli, op. cit., p. 1034, 1040-1041, 1043.

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stated that the SCO and BRI are compatible and should be merged. When Kyrgyzstan's interim President Otunbayeva directly asked Russian President Medvedev to intervene during the civil unrest in 2010, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan opposed sending troops to quell the unrest, but invited other organizations such as the OSCE and SCO to deal with the crisis.⁷⁹

Although Central Asian countries have been careful not to antagonize Russia and China, they have also turned to other powers, taking into account the possibility of facing them alone. Kazakhstan has shown that it can cooperate with all world actors as part of its effort to seek partners in commercial and economic spheres and pursue an open-door policy on foreign investments.⁸⁰ Central Asian countries believed in the benefits of engaging with Western powers to promote stability and cooperation in the region and balance Russia and China.⁸¹ Maintaining ties with NATO, Kazakhstan conducted Step Eagle military exercises within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program with the participation of Kyrgyz and Tajik troops.⁸² When CSTO foreign ministers met in Bishkek in May 2019, they discussed de-escalating tensions on the Tajik-Afghan border and the UN's 2019-2021 counterterrorism strategy and called on NATO members to strengthen cooperation.⁸³ Regional countries continue to cooperate with NATO within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the BiO program. They have signed partnership and cooperation agreements with the EU and are members of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.⁸⁴ The 5+1 format (five regional states and one extra-regional state) is used to discuss common issues and strategies.

Through their initiatives, activities and positions within the SCO, Central Asian states have sought to balance China and Russia, limiting their influence and preventing them from dominating the region. In particular, the balancing of Russian power with other members has enabled Central Asian countries to maintain their cooperation with the West and NATO and allowed them to refrain from supporting Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine.⁸⁵ However, regional actors can also use Russia to prevent the US and China from increasing their influence in the region, and Russian support in particular is considered as a tool to ensure the survival of existing regimes as it was seen in Syria.⁸⁶

Conclusion

- 79 Tskhay and Buranelli, op. cit., p. 1041-1042, 1044, 1046.
80 Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, op. cit., p. 59.
81 Aben, op. cit., p. 58-59.
82 Dubnov, op. cit., p. 6.
83 Tskhay and Buranelli, op. cit., p. 1045.
84 Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Ivan Safranchuk, op. cit., p. 58.
85 Nurimbetov and Vasa, op. cit., p. 33.
86 Good, op. cit., p. 88.

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Central Asian countries have shown sensitivity in protecting their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity as they were under the rule of an external power for a long time. Their near-dependent relations with Russia and China in economy, trade and security have not prevented them from showing the same sensitivity towards these two states. It is clear that international connections of regional countries are predominantly with Russia and China and the regional organizations led by them. However, this has not meant that they have come under the strong influence of these two states. In bilateral and multilateral relations, regional countries have demonstrated through their statements and actions that the basic principles developed by the international community should also apply to them. Their participation in regional organizations has always been in line with respect for these principles.

The country Central Asian countries are most wary of in terms of their independence is Russia, which seems to have revisionist tendencies. The CSTO and the EAEU (Uzbekistan is not a member of either) are the organizations within which they act most carefully not to face sovereignty violations. The SCO suits their sensitivities more with the characteristics it has. The BRI does not directly restrict and violative their interests because it is not an organization. After all, every regional structure has the possibility of harming the sovereignty and interests of regional countries. For this reason, Central Asian countries have clearly demonstrated their sensitivity to the great powers in all the structures they have participated in and have followed appropriate strategies to avoid sovereignty violations. Their general strategy has been regional balancing, which they use to achieve their foreign policy goals by linking and balancing great powers and regional structures. In their eyes, the more complex relationships and balances are created among many actors, the easier it will be to prevent the revisionism of a particular state.

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