

RENEWED WESTERN INTEREST IN CENTRAL ASIA

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In the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021, the Central Asian region is becoming more geopolitically significant. Since the last two years, the leaders of the five Central Asian countries have held high-level meetings with India, Russia, Turkiye, China, the EU, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the US, Germany and the President of the European Council at the Summit level. These Summits signify the changing geopolitical environment in the region following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which prompted many countries to reevaluate their political, economic and security strategies.

While Russia and Ukraine continue their conflict, Western countries attempt to show more interest in Central Asia. The withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan creates a void for Western countries, which they want to fill. However, China's mounting economic cooperation and, despite the conflict, Russia's willingness to consolidate its influence in the region further encouraged the West to renew its interest in Central Asia.

Since the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the US has had Summit-level meetings with the Central Asian countries in a regional (C5+1) format. The Heads of State of all five Central Asian countries and US President Joe Biden met at the margin of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2023, marking the first-ever Summit-level meeting between the US-Central Asian countries as it was the first time a US president ever met with all these leaders together in this format. [1]

Unlike Russia and China, which have shared boundaries and history, the US has historically had far less influence in Central Asia; it needs to take its strategic approach to the centre of the Eurasian continent. In theory, the C5+1 platform between the US and Central Asian countries has been around for a while, but this is the first time the President of the US has had a Summit-level meeting with leaders of all Central Asian countries. This Summit is a significant indication of the renewed interest of the US in Central Asia. Washington's regional involvement has now been scaled up for several reasons.

First, the region is very significant from a geographical and geopolitical standpoint. Secondly, the US is concerned about Afghanistan and believes that the Central Asian countries are significant for regional security and stability. Third, Washington has been trying to get more clout in the region since the Russia-Ukraine conflict started. Moreover, the West's principal concern is to limit China and Russia's influence in Central Asia, especially since the "No-Limit Partnership" between Beijing and Moscow was announced in February 2022 to prevent foreign intervention in Central Asian affairs and colour revolutions. [2]

The EU is also keen on safeguarding its strategic partnership with Central Asian countries by strengthening engagement and fostering closer ties and cooperation between the two sides. The Second EU-Central Asia meeting occurred in Kyrgyzstan in June 2023. Subsequently, the "EU-

Central Asia Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia" was proposed by the President of the European Council and the leaders of Central Asian countries during the meeting. [3] In September 2023, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with leaders from five Central Asian countries in Berlin to discuss strengthening regional and economic cooperation. [4] Leaders from European countries have also paid visits to Central Asian countries. French President Emmanuel Macron visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in November 2023 to fortify relations and foster regional cooperation. [5] In November 2023, Italian President Sergio Mattarella also visited Uzbekistan as part of the strategic partnership agreement signed in June 2023 and the consultation mechanism between Italy and the five Central Asian countries. [6] Western countries aim to establish their influence in Central Asia due to its location. Rekindled Western interest in the Central Asian region can be attributed to the following factors:

China Factor

Emphasising its commercial relationships, Beijing has been actively involved in Central Asia. However, the West is concerned that China is increasingly pursuing goals beyond the scope of its economic cooperation. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a turning point that modifies regional security dynamics. Central Asian countries are now looking for alternatives through multifaceted foreign policy apart from existing relations with Russia. [7]

In May 2023, China's President Xi Jinping invited Heads of all five Central Asian countries to Xi'an for the first China-Central Asia Summit to pull the region towards Beijing's sway. [8] Security issues and cooperation in the defence sector were also discussed during the Summit. Chinese President Xi Jinping also emphasised that Central Asian countries' sovereignty, security, independence, and territorial integrity must be respected, as well as their people's choice of development paths and efforts to achieve peace, harmony, and tranquillity. [9] Given the backdrop of the unrest in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, China also aims to protect its substantial investment in Central Asia by becoming more involved in regional security issues.

During the Summit, China announced it would provide US \$3.8 billion of financing support and grants to Central Asian countries. [10] Earlier, during his visit to the region in February 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken proposed a US\$25 million plan to expand regional trade routes, create new export markets, and lure and leverage more substantial private sector investment. [11] It shows China's willingness to invest much more and work for increased regional influence. Given Russia's engagement in Ukraine, the US and the EU find it concerning that China is actively attempting to bolster its position in the region.

Russia Factor

Despite the conflict, Russia has a significant economic impact on the region. Trade between Russia and Central Asia is growing. Migration to Russia from Central Asia has also increased. [12] The economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan rely heavily on remittances from migrants in Russia. [13] At the UN, none of the Central Asian countries voted against Russia; instead, they either abstained or did not participate in the vote in certain situations. The leaders of the Central Asian countries travelled to Moscow on 9 May 2023 to attend the Victory Day

Parade, which marks Russia's victory in World War II.[14] President Putin of Russia visited Astana and Bishkek to hold meetings with his Central Asian counterparts. Central Asian leaders also paid a visit to Moscow. It is evident that Russia continues to have political sway, which concerns the West in the region and beyond.

Role of Sanctions

Russia has entirely reoriented its focus towards the East and Asia in light of the sanctions imposed by Western countries. However, Russia is also working with Central Asia countries to lessen the impact of Western sanctions. [15] Meanwhile, the Central Asia countries have been striking a balance between preserving their economic relationships with Russia and avoiding any issues arising from Russia's sanctions. Russia is also cooperating with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), an alliance of trading partners that facilitates the free flow of goods in the Eurasian region in this regard. [16]

Since extensive sanctions might have the opposite effect and push Central Asian countries closer to China and Russia, Western countries are prepared to be harsher on businesses than the government. In response to this quandary, the EU added several businesses, including those with bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to its 12th sanctions package list. [17]

Nonetheless, there has been a significant decline in direct exports to Russia; however, this decline is somewhat compensated by an upsurge in Russian exports to Central Asia. Deutsche Welle reported in March 2023 that the Russian economy had not declined as expected despite EU sanctions. Trade data reveals that commodities from the EU that are prohibited for export are nevertheless making their way to Russia, primarily from Central Asian countries. [18] According to a report released in February 2023 by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, exports from the EU and the UK to Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan experienced a 90% boost following the imposition of sanctions. Some of these products are high-tech devices utilised by Russia's military. [19] Western countries' renewed interest in the region can also be seen in this direction, where they would like to tighten their control to thwart Russia's sanctions manoeuvre properly.

Natural Resources and Energy

Central Asia's natural resources and raw materials are becoming more and more valuable to the world economy. The USA and its ally, the European Union, see the Central Asian region as a potential energy partner. Therefore, much attention was given to mineral resources and regional stability in the US-Central Asia and EU-Central Asia meetings. The EU is searching for sustainable energy sources and is primarily interested in fostering relationships with Central Asia for the region's oil and gas resources. The European countries realised that, instead of Russia, there was an opportunity to obtain energy from Central Asia. Europe's primary issue is cost constraints in supply from Central Asia, and Ukraine's conflict has only made matters more complicated. [20]

The rare earth metals are the most vital resources for the US and the EU. Developing semiconductors, electric vehicles, military hardware and cutting-edge technologies depends

heavily on extracting rare earth metals, also referred to as crucial elements. However, China, the world's leading rare earth processor and producing around 90% of the refined output worldwide, bans rare earth magnet technology exports. [21] Consequently, there is fierce competition for these metals, and Central Asia is considered a growing region for producing Rare Metals (RM) and Rare Earth Elements (REEs). There could be a significant amount of untapped resources in this region. [22] Several European businesses have already invested in Kazakhstani rare metal producers. The US is headed in this direction closer to Central Asia. [23]

Parallel to this, there has been a rise in interest in uranium and natural mineral resources. The French President recently visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. During the visit, France and Kazakhstan pledged to work on the nuclear fuel cycle and minerals. [24] Kazakhstan is the world's most significant producer of uranium, and nuclear power is gaining more popularity. Furthermore, this is crucial for Western businesses looking to produce nuclear energy.

Connectivity

Central Asia's significance has also grown with global supply chain disruptions due to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although Russia continues to be one of the key trading partners of the Central Asian countries, it also controls the main route for trade connecting them to the West. [25] However, Central Asian countries seek alternative routes to diversify their trade connections. To increase trade with the West, they are collaborating with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey across the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus.

European countries are also trying to diversify their transportation networks and discover alternatives to Russian gas and oil. Consequently, in a joint statement following the Germany-Central Asia Summit in September 2023, the leaders indicated interest in advancing the Middle Corridor and obtaining funds for infrastructure projects under the Global Gateway Plan to enhance regional and economic cooperation. [26] At the US-Central Asia Summit, US President Biden also promised to use the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to further US investment in the Middle Corridor and support its growth as an alternative route. [27]

Conclusion

The importance of Western countries to Central Asia lies in their ability to balance off the influence of China and Russia, diversify their energy supply sources, and foster cooperation and alternative connectivity with the region and beyond. Efforts to lessen Russia and China's influence in the region remain a primary objective of Western diplomacy, even though economic concerns now dominate the public agenda. Moreover, western countries are pursuing robust plans to overcome

China's and Russia's challenges in Central Asia and strengthen their tactical strategy.

However, it would be economically and politically unfavourable for Central Asian countries to join the anti-Russian position. Central Asian countries know that If they adopt a robust anti-Russian stance on sanctions, neither the US nor the EU can compensate for the losses these states will incur. Therefore, the region's countries seek to wait and see rather than move quickly when

the world is dealing with multiple severe crises. In the meantime, Central Asian Countries strive to balance relations with major powers. Central Asian leaders seek greater autonomy by collaborating with everyone amid a dynamic geopolitical and economic landscape.

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