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Russia as a security actor in Central Asia

Losing primacy but retaining influence

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Summary

- Russia remains a central security partner for the Central Asian states despite its ongoing war in Ukraine. However, its position of primacy is eroding. China, Turkey, and other external actors have gained a foothold in the region's security sector on terms set by Central Asian governments.

- Russia's arms exports to Central Asian states have decreased because of wartime demand and sanctions targeting its military-industrial sector. The region's governments have responded by purchasing weapons from alternative partners, continuing a diversification trend that predates 2022.

- Although the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is marred by internal tensions, its infrastructure and Russia's military facilities remain intact. Central Asian governments continue to participate in education and training activities offered by Russia, which in turn seeks to capitalize on its combat experience in Ukraine.

- Finland and its EU and NATO partners should support the efforts of Central Asian governments to diversify their security partnerships. They can propose practical cooperation initiatives, especially in the areas of security education, human security, and environmental security. Such collaboration is, however, limited by the authoritarianism of the region's governments and their close ties to Chinese and Russian actors.

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Introduction

Amid Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year, Moscow retains close ties with its Central Asian partners. While the governments in the region have categorically refused to endorse Russia's invasion, they have also refrained from expressing explicit support for Kyiv. They have maintained that they comply with the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West but have argued that their compliance stems not from an endorsement of the sanctions but from their obligation to pursue their national interests.[1] This diplomatic balancing act is hardly accidental. The economic ties between Russia and Central Asia remain substantial. Since 2022, remittances from Central Asian migrants working in Russia have increased rather than decreased, while Russian companies remain involved in strategically important sectors across the region, including nuclear energy.[2]

Yet some analysts also point to a tectonic shift in Russia's regional position, from that of the "former hegemon" to that of "just another neighbour".[3] For years, Central Asian governments' continued cooperation with Russia has gone hand in hand with a sustained and determined policy of strengthening relations with all regional and global players. Since 2022, this diversification has accelerated across different policy spheres. According to many indicators, China has already become the region's most influential external partner, while Western actors have also forged closer ties with the region's capitals.

This Briefing Paper focuses on Russia's security role in Central Asia. It examines whether Russia has retained its position of primacy in the region's security sphere despite its prolonged war in Ukraine. This position has traditionally been upheld by Russia's military bases and installations, extensive connections between the armed forces and security services, weapons exports, and the provision of education and training.[4] By mapping changes and continuities in Russia's role in arms transfers, military education, and the presence of Russian armed forces, the paper finds that the overall diversification of external partnerships is now extending to the sphere of hard security. As a result, Russia's primacy in this sector is weakening, arguably both due to its focus on the war in Ukraine and to the choices made by Central Asian leaders. While Russia will most likely continue to play a pivotal role in the region's security system for years, if not decades, to come, the newly diversified environment creates incentives for cooperation between EU and NATO countries on the one hand, and Central Asian actors on the other. This window of opportunity should be explored, bearing in mind that collaboration is constrained by the prevalence of authoritarianism and the region's close ties to both China and Russia.

1 See, e.g., the statement by Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister, Serik Zhumangarin, quoted in Ayturgan Azimzhanova (2024) "'Davleniya my ne vyderzhim'. Zhumangarin obyasnil, pochemu Kazakhstan soblyudaet sanktsii protiv Rossii" ["'We cannot withstand the pressure.' Zhumangarin explained why Kazakhstan is complying with the sanctions against Russia"]. *Kursiv*, 5 June. https://kz.kursiv.media/2024-06-05/zmzh-zhumangarin/.

2 Thompson, Alexander (2025) "Breaking down the dynamics of Russian-Central Asian relations". *Eurasianet*, 31 October. https://eurasianet.org/breaking-down-the-dynamics-of-russian-central-asian-relations.

3 Engvall, Johan (2023) "Central Asia Moves Beyond Russia". *Current History* 122 (846): 261–267, 261.

4 Engvall 2023, 261–262.

Russia's role in the Central Asian arms trade

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states of Central Asia each inherited some assets from the Soviet military. To ensure interoperability amid the economic downturn and the highly unstable security environment of the 1990s, all the governments in the region opted to import compatible weaponry from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. This turned Russia into the dominant supplier of recorded major arms to the region in the 1990s.[5] A significant share of this materiel was provided as aid in kind, making Russia the leading military donor to the region.

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent US-led war in Afghanistan, and against the backdrop of strengthening Central Asian economies, this picture started to change. The region witnessed an uptick in Western engagement, accompanied by increased military assistance and the transfer of equipment. For example, in 2001, the United States negotiated an agreement that allowed it to use Uzbekistan's airspace and the Soviet-era Karshi-Khanabad airbase and pledged $55.7 million in foreign military funding to Central Asian governments for the subsequent year, almost two-thirds of which was allocated to Uzbekistan.[6]

At the same time, however, Russia's monopoly on the Central Asian arms trade was solidified through new agreements on military-technical cooperation. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, alongside Armenia, Belarus and Russia, in 2002 as an upgrade to the Collective Security Treaty of 1992. The organization created additional economic incentives for its Central Asian members[7] to continue relying on Russia as their primary arms supplier.

In the 2010s, new suppliers emerged in the Central Asian arms market. China entered first as a donor and then as a commercial supplier. Its share of Central Asian arms imports rose almost tenfold during the 2010s, from 1.5% in 2010–2014 to 13% in 2015–2020.[8] After the Second Karabakh War of 2020, Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 drones were sought by all of the governments in the region – except for Kazakhstan, which signed an agreement to start manufacturing ANKA combat drones locally in partnership with Turkish Aerospace Industries.[9] At the same time, however, overall trade volumes and cooperation in technical maintenance remained heavily tilted towards Russia. The CSTO member states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan imported almost all their weaponry from Russia, while Uzbekistan's purchases from Russia accelerated as a result of a bilateral deal that allowed Tashkent to buy arms at Russian domestic prices.

In the years before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia dominated arms supplies to the CSTO members in Central Asia, whereas in the Uzbekistani and Turkmenistani markets, it was one supplier among others. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, the share of recorded major-arms imports measured by SIPRI trend-indicator value (TIV) from Russia in 2016–2021 stood at 90% for Kazakhstan, 88% for Kyrgyzstan, and 87% for Tajikistan. In contrast, Turkmenistan imported only 4% of its weaponry from Russia, compared with 40% from Turkey, 26% from China and 17% from Italy. With a 43% share of all transfers, Russia was the largest supplier of arms to Uzbekistan, while China ranked second, with its transfer of the FD-2000 air defence

5 Hagelin, Björn (2003) "Arms transfers to the South Caucasus and Central Asia compared, 1992–2002". In *Armament and Disarmament in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, edited by Alyson J. K. Bailes, Björn Hagelin, Zdzislaw Lachowski, Sam Perlo-Freeman, Petter Stålenheim and Dmitri Trofimov. Stockholm: SIPRI. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRIPP03.pdf, 21.

6 Congressional Research Service (2010) "Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for U.S. Interests." 11 March. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL30294.html.

7 Uzbekistan, one of the signatories to the 1992 Collective Security Treaty, joined the CSTO in 2006, but its participation in the organization was very limited. In 2012, it suspended its membership in the organization. Tolipov, Farkhod (2013) "Uzbekistan Without The CSTO". *CACI Analyst*, 20 February. https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12652-uzbekistan.

8 Lemon, Edward and Bradley Jardine (2021) "Kennan Cable No. 68: Central Asia's Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy". Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, 4 June. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-68-central-asias-multi-vector-defense-diplomacy.

9 Kenez, Levent (2026) "Turkey expands drone footprint in Central Asia with joint production deal". *Nordic Monitor*, 20 May. https://nordicmonitor.com/2026/05/turkey-expands-drone-footprint-in-central-asia-with-joint-production-deal/.

system in 2018 accounting for almost a third of all Uzbekistani arms imports in 2016–2021.

However, as illustrated in Figure 1, the relative rarity of large transfers can easily skew the picture: in SIPRI's 2018–2021 data, Russia's dominance in Kazakhstan's arms imports is almost complete (97%), while in the case of Tajikistan, transfers from Russia are on a par with those from China. What is more, there is considerable variation in volumes: in the 2018–2021 period, the value of Russia's transfers to Kazakhstan was over one hundred times higher than that of its transfers to Tajikistan. In the 2022–2025 period, however, the gap narrowed due to a nearly ninefold increase in the value of Tajikistan's imports.

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, arms transfers from Russia to Central Asia reported in the SIPRI database paint a mixed picture. The database records sizeable transfers to Kazakhstan in 2022, 2023 and 2024, but for the first time in over twenty years, SIPRI records no deliveries of major arms in 2025. For Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, single transfers are recorded in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have reportedly received no arms transfers from Russia after 2021. Meanwhile, in 2022–2025, 19% of Kazakhstan's arms imports came from NATO member states (France, Spain, Turkey, and others), and 41% of Kyrgyzstan's imports came from Turkey alone. During the same period, China accounted for 96% of Tajikistan's arms transfers and 67% of those to Uzbekistan.

SIPRI's figures do not shed light on small arms, maintenance and repair services, or cross-border connections between military industries, such as factories in Central Asia providing components to the Russian military industry. However, they do suggest that Central Asia is no exception to the overall trend of a sharp decrease in Russia's major-arms exports globally.

Military training and education: Enduring ties despite wider choice

In the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ties in the field of military education between Russia and the Central Asian states remained strong, particularly between Russia and the CSTO member states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This was made possible by various agreements concluded under the auspices of the CSTO that provided institutionalized opportunities for Central Asians to receive training in Russia. For Central Asian governments, educating military and other security personnel in Russia was a pragmatic choice. Shared language, strategic culture, professional networks and interoperable equipment reduced barriers. In addition, Russia remained a prestigious professional reference point for Central Asian military personnel. Training provided by Russia was generally viewed with less suspicion than that offered by other actors. Meanwhile, military education options provided by Western countries were limited and mostly short-term, whereas Chinese efforts to increase the training of Central Asian officers both bilaterally and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have been hampered by cultural and reputational barriers.[10]

"Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has not eliminated Central Asian interest in cooperating with Russia."

Russia's war in Ukraine has made choosing Russia as a training provider less automatic. Russia's attractiveness suffered when it demonstrated its inability to defeat Ukraine through a swift special military operation, as originally planned. Moreover, its security services failed to prevent a terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall in Moscow in 2024. Public opinion polls suggest that Russia's favourability across the region reached an all-time low in 2022 before rebounding slightly,[11] with Kazakhstan experiencing the most dramatic decrease.[12]

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has not eliminated Central Asian interest in cooperating with Russia. The war has given Russian troops extensive battlefield experience and accelerated learning and

10 Marat, Erica (2021) "China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia". *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 697, 19 April. https://www.ponarseurasia.org/chinas-expanding-military-education-diplomacy-in-central-asia/.

11 Neafie, Jessica, Frank Maracchione, Rashid Gabdulhakov, Khiradmand Sheraliev and Islam Supyaldiyarov (2024) "Beyond the Silk Road: Navigating the complexities of Central Asia's public opinion of China". Central Asia Barometer, 17.

12 PaperLab (2025) "Dinamika otnoshchenia kazakhstantsev k Rossii" [Dynamics of Kazakhstanis' attitudes towards Russia]. *Partnery i prioritety: chto vazhno dlia kazakhstantsev v voprosach vneshnei politiki* [Partners and priorities: What matters to Kazakhstanis in foreign policy]. https://paperlab.kz/rus/foreign-policy.

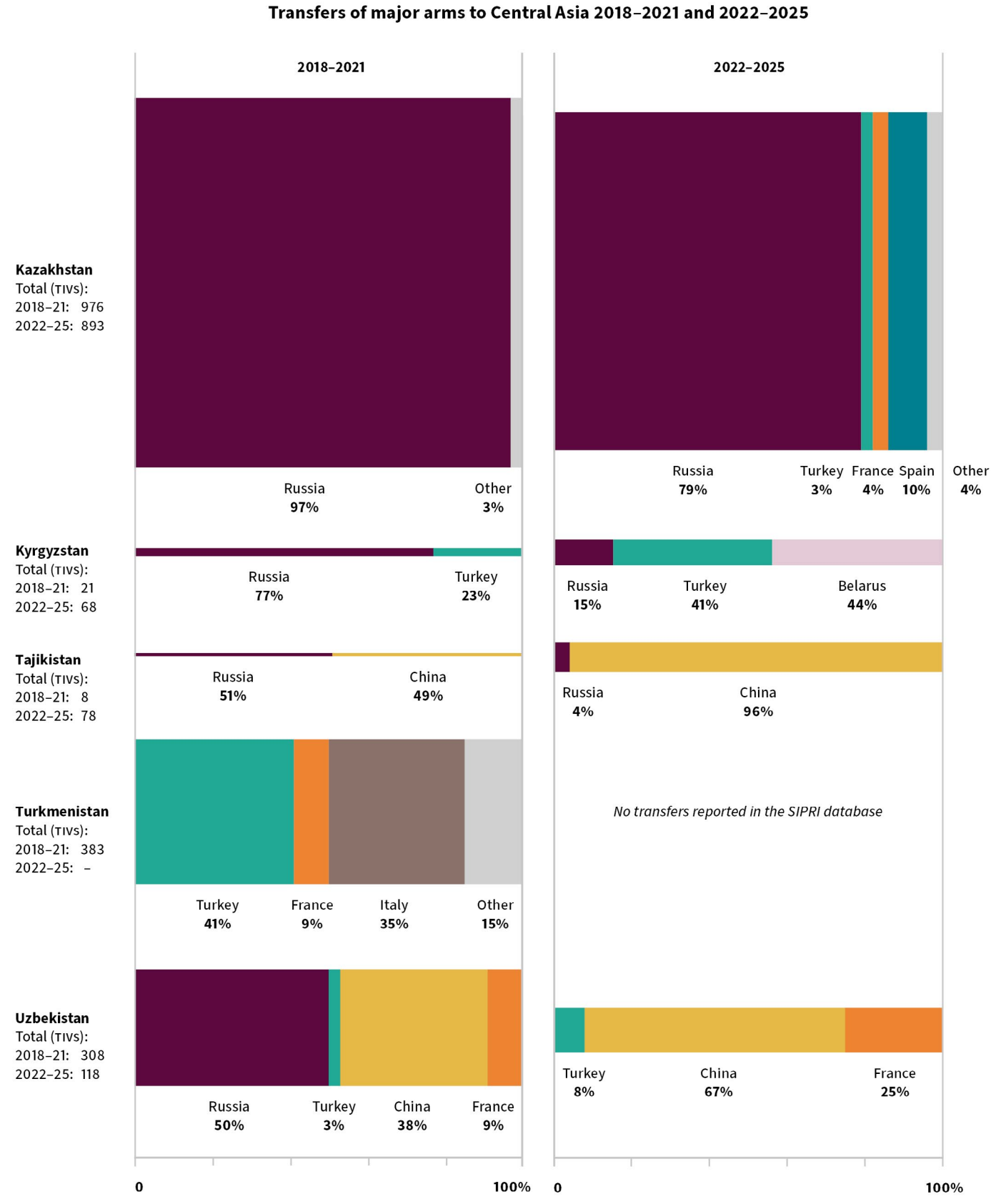


Figure 1. Transfers of major arms to Central Asia in 2018–2021 and 2022–2025. Import volumes are expressed in millions of SIPRI trend-indicator values (TIVs). For comparability, the figure presents two periods of equal length (2018–2021 and 2022–2025), while the paper otherwise examines a longer period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2016–2021) to better capture the evolution of Russia's role. Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database © SIPRI.

military modernization in Russia.[13] With the training frameworks already in place, Russia may share this experience of modern warfare with its Central Asian allies, including lessons in drone combat. For example, at the CSTO *Rubezh-2024* exercise, Russian personnel reportedly demonstrated drone use, counter-drone measures, and other skills gained through the "unique combat experience" of the war in Ukraine.[14]

All in all, there is little publicly available information about the extent of training that Central Asian military and other security personnel receive abroad. Nonetheless, given the range of educational opportunities now offered by external actors,[15] it can be assumed that Russia's earlier position of primacy has been challenged, even if ties with Russia have endured. For example, the 2024 review by Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defense illustrates how external partnerships in military education have become more diversified in practice. According to the review, of the 390 Kazakhstani service members studying abroad, 139 were reportedly placed in Russia, 37 in Turkey, 13 in the US, and the remaining 201 in "Belarus, Uzbekistan, India, Italy, China and Korea".[16]

Russia's military presence in Central Asia

Throughout the 1990s, the former Soviet military network in Central Asia was gradually dismantled. Because of its civil war, Tajikistan retained the largest presence of Russian troops, stationed at the facilities of the 201st Motor Rifle Division and at the border with Afghanistan. However, in the 2000s, Russia's overall withdrawal came to a halt. For Moscow, the rationale for its continued military presence in Central Asia was linked both to the perception of the region as the soft underbelly of Russia itself and to the Kremlin's desire to project great power ambitions. Russia established the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan in 2003 and turned the 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan into a permanent military base in 2004.

At the same time, however, Russia's willingness to play the role of a security guarantor in the region had its limits. Moscow handed responsibility for guarding the Tajik–Afghan border to Dushanbe in 2005 and declined the Kyrgyz interim government's request to intervene in order to put an end to interethnic violence in 2010. In subsequent years, Russia failed to resolve a territorial dispute between two of its CSTO allies, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, that developed into a series of border conflicts and eventually culminated in major fighting in 2021 and 2022. In contrast, in January 2022, on the eve of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia did lead a short-term CSTO deployment to Kazakhstan at the request of Kazakhstani President Qasym-Jomart Toqayev's government amid mass protests. Unlike in the CSTO member states, Russia's presence on the ground in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has been very limited since the early 1990s, with both countries allowing Russia to use their military facilities only under special circumstances. The locations of Russia's current facilities in Central Asia are presented in Figure 2.

The war in Ukraine has not led Russia to reduce the number of its military facilities in Central Asia. However, Moscow has reportedly redeployed troops from the 201st military base to Ukraine, at least temporarily. While the CSTO has been conducting regular exercises throughout the war in Ukraine, the organization remains marred by internal tensions, and its effectiveness is far from evident.[17] Meanwhile, Central Asian capitals have not shied away from bilateral defence cooperation agreements with Russia. In 2023, Kyrgyzstan and Russia ratified an agreement establishing joint air defence, a deal that had reportedly been in the making since the mid-2010s. In January 2025, Uzbekistan renewed its military partnership programme with Russia, and the two countries held a joint ten-day exercise, *Hamkorlik-2025*, in Termez in July of the same year.

13 Massicot, Dara (2025) "How Russia Recovered: What the Kremlin Is Learning from the War in Ukraine". *Foreign Affairs*, 8 October. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/how-russia-recovered.

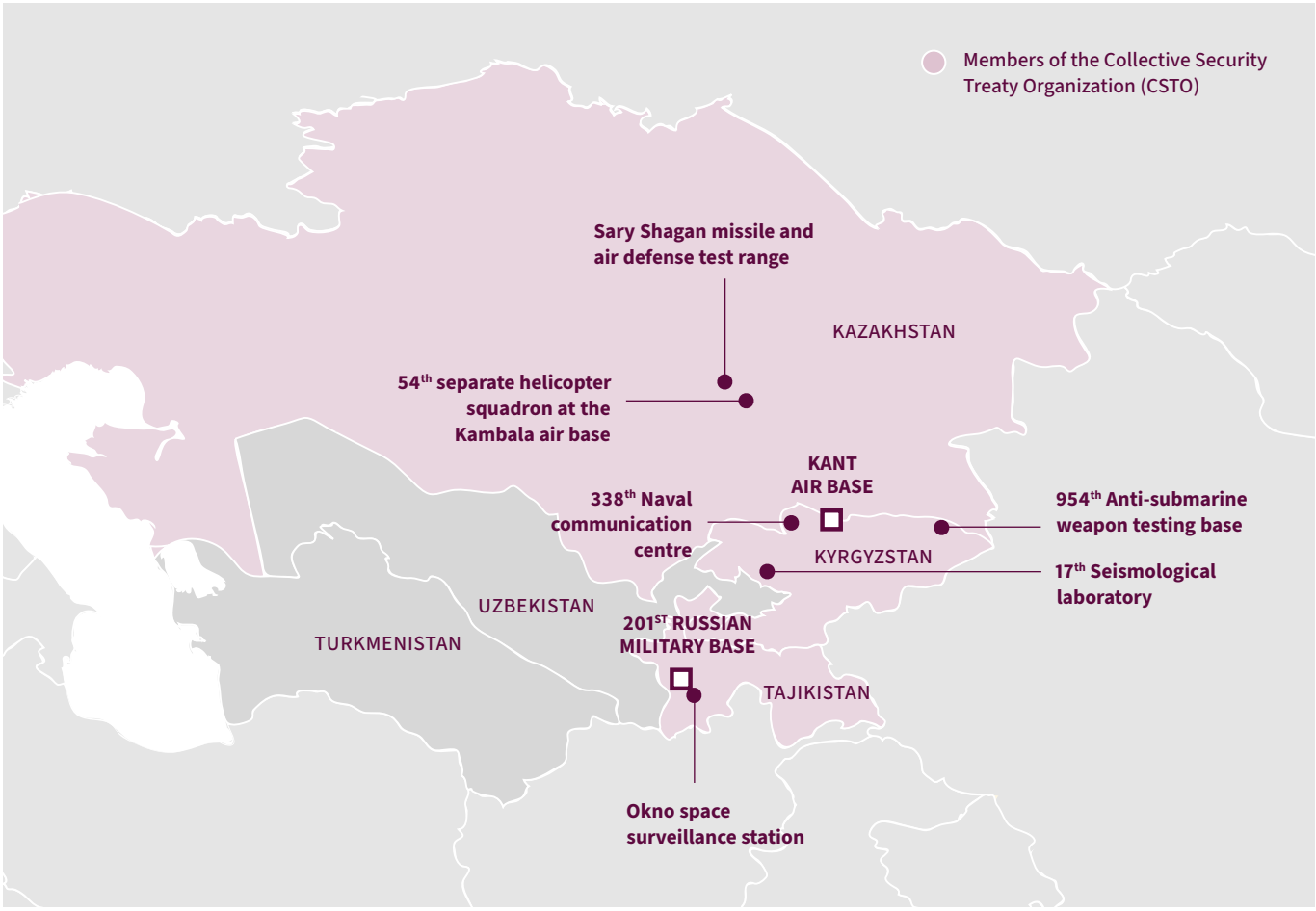
14 *CSTO* (2024) "Rubezh-2024: KSBP TSAR v ramkakh ucheniya postavlena zadacha na unichtozhenie nezakonnykh vooruzhennykh formirovanii" [Rubezh-2024: During the exercise, Central Asian region's collective rapid deployment forces tasked with annihilating illegal armed groups]. 19 October. https://jscsto.org/news/14336/.

15 Lemon and Jardine 2021.

16 Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024) "Itogi goda: vneseny izmeneniya v uchebnye plany voennykh vuzov strany" [Year-end review: changes made to the curricula of the country's military higher education institutions]. 30 December. https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mod/press/news/details/911811?lang=ru.

17 Armenia froze its participation in the organization in February 2024, and only Belarus has come out as an unequivocal supporter of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's military presence in Central Asia



Map 1. Map of Central Asia showing Russian military facilities and leased testing areas. Source: David Batashvili, Russian Military Forces: Interactive Map, https://gfsis.org.ge/maps/russian-military-forces (last updated 10 October 2024); and David Batashvili (2025) Russia's Military Position in Central Asia. Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, https://gfsis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Russias-Military-Position-in-Central-Asia.pdf.

Although Russia's activities on the ground have continued, its primacy has nevertheless been eroding due to the growing presence of other actors in the field. The expanding engagement of Chinese security forces is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Chinese-staffed outposts on the Tajik–Afghan border were established in the late 2010s, and Chinese private security companies appeared in the region, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, well before 2022. China's presence is inherently diverse, ranging from Chinese state-affiliated security facilities to Chinese-funded but locally operated units and Chinese commercial security ventures. These structures are not replacing Russian troops, but the fact that Central Asian authorities are increasingly partnering with them is lessening Russia's dominance in the security sector.

Russia's primacy is eroding, but its influence persists

As the unified Soviet system unravelled in the 1990s, Central Asian actors became the primary players responsible for security provision within their borders. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan sought to create security systems independent of Russia, whereas Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan envisioned

security arrangements in which Moscow would play a leading role. Yet the interests of Moscow and the Central Asian capitals did not always coincide. Some governments in the region hoped for more, rather than less, cooperation with Russia in the security sphere, while at the same time seeking to expand the pool of security partners in line with their multi-vector foreign policies. The global war on terror in the early 2000s significantly increased Western security engagement in the region, while China's growing global influence has now extended beyond the economic sector into the security realm.

Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine has not opened a totally new chapter in Central Asian security. Central Asian governments are still keen to cooperate with Moscow in this sector, but they do not envision Russia as their sole provider of security. It is worth emphasizing that this vision seems to be shared by the Russian security establishment. For the time being, Russia needs to concentrate on meeting the demands of its own military for weapons and training, even if training is also available to participants from Central Asia. From the viewpoint of the Russian military establishment, it would be difficult to justify investment in facilities in Central Asia that do not directly contribute to military success on the battlefield in Ukraine. Central Asia poses no urgent security policy concerns for the Kremlin, which is why it can be deprioritized – and thus defunded, at least in theory and for the moment.

Russian decision-makers may lament the loss of the country's primacy in the Central Asian security sphere and aspire to regain their dominant position in the future. However, Central Asian leaders have long viewed multi-vectorism and the maintenance of ties with all external actors as their ideal foreign policy strategy, given that this approach maximizes their own room for independent policymaking. Yet their commitment to multi-vectorism has never been absolute, largely because the diversification of relations in a number of sectors was seen as less rational than continuing reliance on Russia.

In 2026, Uzbekistan reported the purchase of Chinese J-10CE fighter aircraft, which had attracted international attention after being used by Pakistan in clashes with India in 2025. Uzbekistan appears to have initially sought to purchase modern fighter jets from Russia as a logical continuation of its Soviet-designed fleet of MiG-29s, Su-27s and Su-25s. However, most likely due to Russia's inability to supply the aircraft, Tashkent opted for a new provider, a decision that will bring with it years, if not decades, of maintenance and training cooperation with China. The case illustrates that as Moscow continues to direct its attention and resources to the war in Ukraine, Central Asian actors are becoming increasingly comfortable with genuine diversification even in the most sensitive of sectors – their hard security.

"In this situation, Finland and its partners in the EU and NATO have a window of opportunity to engage in practical, accountable, and ethical forms of security cooperation with the governments in Central Asia."

Conclusions

The Central Asian security sphere is characterized by the growing presence of various external actors, demonstrating how the region's governments are extending their multi-vector foreign policies into the realm of hard security. Russia's war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year, emerges as a factor accelerating the decline of Russia's role in the region's security sphere. Moreover, the impact of the war varies across countries and sectors of security policy. The most dramatic change can be seen in the arms procurement sector due to Russia's diminishing capacity to export weapons to the region. In the spheres of military presence, education and training, there is no evidence suggesting that Russia's activities have dramatically decreased, but the region's growing engagement with other actors, ranging from China to Turkey, Japan, India, and EU countries, is diminishing Russia's overall importance. Crucially, defence procurement from new suppliers comes with new maintenance and training relationships.

In this situation, Finland and its partners in the EU and NATO have a window of opportunity to engage in practical, accountable, and ethical forms of security cooperation with the governments in Central Asia. Areas such as security education as well as human and environmental security may be of interest to the region's leaders. For example, climate change is expected to hit the Central Asian region especially hard. Increasingly limited access

to water and farmland threatens livelihoods and can heighten tensions between communities, yet there is evidence to suggest that regional decision-makers are ill-prepared to manage such risks. Meanwhile, authoritarian methods of repression, applied extensively by the region's decision-makers, may strengthen governments' control without improving the security of the people they govern. When exploring potential formats of collaboration, Western actors must remain cognizant of both the authoritarianism of the region's governments and their close ties to Russian and Chinese actors, as these factors rule out some forms of cooperation. For example, cooperation should exclude strategic intelligence sharing and assistance that could strengthen the governments' repressive capacities.

To conclude, Russia has lost its position of primacy but remains influential in the Central Asian security sphere. The region's capitals demonstrate a willingness, at times even eagerness, to collaborate with Moscow in the security realm regardless of the war Russia is waging in Ukraine. Yet the diversification of security partnerships can hardly be reversed. Russia is thus likely to be forced into the role of one partner among others, even in the realm of hard security. ⬢

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