



Political, Economic and Security Implications of the Ukraine-Russia War for Central Asia

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Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine war has triggered significant geopolitical, economic, and security shifts across the globe, with Central Asia emerging as one of the most impacted regions due to its historical ties and deep interdependence with the Russian Federation. This paper examines the multifaceted implications of the ongoing conflict on the Central Asian republics, focusing on political realignments, economic vulnerabilities, and evolving security dynamics. Central Asia's reliance on Russian Federation for trade routes, energy exports, and remittances has exposed the region to considerable economic disruptions. Simultaneously, the war has created political and economic uncertainty, weakening Russia's traditional influence and potentially inviting greater engagement from other global powers, such as Iran, China, the United States of America, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The study argues that these changes may herald a new phase of geopolitical competition in the region. By analyzing current developments and trends, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Ukraine-Russia war is reshaping the strategic landscape of Central Asia.

Keywords: Ukraine-Russia, Central-Asia, Geopolitical, Security, Terrorism

1. Introduction

The newly independent states of Central Asia are deeply dependent and connected to the Russian Federation. The historical relationship, geographic proximity, cultural familiarity, and shared history with Russia since long time back made these countries remain close to the Russian Federation, even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The above linkages are not the only factor that kept the region close to Russia. Political, economic, and security aspects are other major areas that helped the tightening of relationship between Russia and Central Asian Countries. Moreover, the region is politically and geo-strategically very vital for Moscow because these countries have shared borders with “Afghanistan and Iran in the south, China in the east, and the Caspian Sea in the west”. Hence, the region is considered “Russia’s sphere of influence” (Gupta, 2022). Furthermore, Central Asia is highly dependent on Russia's transit route for exporting their goods and natural resources like gas and oil to the international markets. Similarly, their economy is heavily dependent on remittance from Russia. “Due to this complementarity, any geopolitical development that affects Russia also impact on Central Asia” (Gupta, 2022). Therefore, the war in Ukraine caused great geopolitical turbulence and economic problems for Central Asia. Meanwhile the turbulence had different effects on different regions but effect on Central Asian region (Sharifli et al, 2022) is deep. For instance most of the other regions from Asia, to Europe and the United States has affected economically by the hiking of prices in energy and agriculture products. But the war has left its multi-dimension (political, economic, and security) impacts on Central Asia.

The objective of this paper is to understand the political, economic, and security impact of Russia – Ukraine war on Central Asia in the light of geopolitical changes which seem to be happening in the coming future. Central Asia is an important region because of its natural resources and strategic locations in world politics. It seems the weakening position of Russia in the region may cause greater geopolitical competition between great powers for establishing their dominance over the region.

2. Political Implication

The geo-strategic location and natural resources of Central Asia always attract powers like the United State of America, China, India, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Japan to seek away to increase their leverage in

this region. Since the region is politically, economically and security prospect dominated by Russia, the presence and substantial political and economic influence of these powers can be perceived as a big challenge to the Russian position in this strategically important region (Roy, 2001). Because Moscow consider the Central Asian region as its political backyard for centuries (Raimondi, 2019) and viewed Central Asia as an arena in which great powers contesting for influence in this region since the nineteenth century (Christoffersen, 2022) till date. The geographic proximity, historical linkages, and presence of multimillion Russian origin in Central Asia helped Russia to enjoy great leverage in the region (Roy, 2001). Moreover, for maintaining its leverage and minimizing the role of other players, Russia has established security, economic and political organizations in collaboration with these states “with a wide range of focuses”. For example in the security field, Russia established Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in economic field Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and in the political field the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Raimondi, 2019). Through these means, Russia enjoys great economic, political, and soft-power influence in the region.

But things have changed since Russia invaded Ukraine and relatively caused power vacuum in the region. The vacuum provides an opportunity for other great powers to become more active to play greater role in the region (Rudkevich, 2023). For instance, the United States, China, Turkey, and Iran are on the front sets who are looking to replace Russia in the region. As well as the means of each state is different. For example, Iran and Turkey are trying to use their cultural linkage and establish their role “as senior partner” (Gorenburg, 2014). While China is already there with various economic projects which seem a viable substitute for Russia. Among these countries, the US is in a weak position to take advantage and improve its relations with Central Asian states. Interestingly among all China is in a strong position as only player who can be viable substitute to Russia. Thanks to its geographic proximity and economic leverage on Central Asian Republics (Rudkevich, 2023).

Before Russia launched its so-called special military operation in Ukraine, Russia’s position in the region was so solid even the China’s presence was not a threat to the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia. The page has turned since Russia invaded Ukraine. As the war prolonged and the Russian missile destroyed the Ukrainian cities and infrastructure vis-à-vis Moscow also destroy its influence around the world, “above all in the post-Soviet spaces” (Umarov, 2022). Since then the Central Asian states are looking to diversify their political, security, and economic linkage with the aim to reduce dependency on Russia (Mishra, 2022). Even none of the Central Asian countries gave support to the Russian war in Ukraine, nor did they endorse Russia’s aggression (Engvall, 2022). But they preferred to remain silent or show their disagreement with Russian action through some statements. Most notably, Uzbekistan in a statement declares “its support for an independent Ukraine in the face of Russia aggression, a clear sign of a pivot in support” (Latham & Sundeen, 2022). Similarly, Kazakhstan also refused to recognize the Russian satellite states of Luhansk and Donetsk in east Ukraine. “Mind full of the fact” Kazakhstan share 7,600-kilometer border with Russia and sizable number of Russian diaspora in the northern part of the country that Russia might claim to annex to the Russian territory (The Interpreter, 2022) as they did Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So, these kinds of reactions by Central Asian states toward Russia’s invasion can be considered a sign of tentative steps by Central Asian countries “to increase their own agency” (Engvall, 2022). Besides adopting of mentioned position in Ukraine war, the CARs are very cautious on their relations with Russia. For instance when the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) passed a resolution and demand the immediate withdrawal of the Russian military from Ukraine soil. “The vote was overwhelming in favour of the resolution with 141 countries supporting, 5 opposing and 35 abstentions”. But the CARs stand was very conservative like Tajikistan, Kirgizstan, and Kazakhstan abstained from voting while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan didn’t vote (Sajjanhar, 2022). One of the main reasons which forced the Central Asian States to not adopt any bold stand against Russia is their geographic isolation and continued dependence on Russia’s trade route for export, security, and political assistance, and labour market (Stronski, 2022).

The continuation of the Ukraine war, political and economic isolation of Russia will be led to the weakness of Russia, this mean an opportunity for other powers especially for China to increase its influence in Central Asia. However, China already displaced Russia in trade and economic investment in the region (Stobdan, 2022). But China's strategy is beyond the Central Asia because it looks to expand its economic power deeper in the whole Eurasia countries, and Central Asia is an important region for this geopolitical puzzle (Romanowski, 2017). This strategy is designed by Chinese economic analysts in the early days of 1980s to establish economic circle to stretch from Xinjiang through Central Asian countries to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. By the 1990s this vision was referred to the revival of ancient Silk Road by building of “Eurasian land bridge” via Central Asia (Christoffersen, 2022). Even today China is turning out to be the most

significant arms supplier and trade partner of Central Asian countries withholding 40 percent of Kirgizstan and Tajikistan's debt. Likely China's influence will continue growing in the region but would not lead to the abrupt withdrawal of Russia. But the situation will provide more space for Beijing to increase its role in the political sphere of Russia (Gupta, 2022). Even we can perceived previous Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Samarkand in 2022 as an informal coronation of Xi Jinping as a regional leader. As during the Summit, the Central Asian leaders shows more respect and hope for Chines President than Putin (Portnikov, 2022). These can be the signs which shows that the Central Asian States are not so keen to remain in the orbit of Russia for long (Gramer & Detsch, 2022). Even with every passing day, the region feels “disillusioned and dis-enhanced with Russia’s action and continuation of war” (Sajjanhar, 2022). Therefore, the region is looking toward new reliable partners (Latham & Sundeen, 2022). In this scenario, China seems to be the best option for the regional countries to replace Russia. However, till date, China has not posed any plausible challenge against Russia’s interest but the clash of interests is unavoidable in the coming future. More worryingly, with the rapid loss of Russia’s influence in the region could cause power vacuum. The vacuum will lead the region into an intense geopolitical rivalry between the powers. The instability in Central Asia could blow up whole the Asia, “just as the war in Ukraine has undermined stability in Europe” (Portnikov, 2022).

3. Economic Implication

Since their independence, the landlocked countries of Central Asia are depended on Russia for exporting their goods and natural resources into the international markets. This dependency gave Russia enough leverage to maintain its influence over these small countries (Stronski & Ng, 2022). Another factor that helped Russia to maintain its leverage over erstwhile members of the Soviet Union is the remittance of migrant workers in Russia mainly from Central Asian countries (Raimondi, 2019). Similarly, Russia is still the main trading partner of these states. However, during the last decades, the volume and value of their trade level have decreased due to western sanctions on Russia as well as Russia’s economic problems. But still, the region is the second largest trade partner to Russia in term of export and imports. Like Uzbekistan, accounts for 12.5 percent of export and 21 percent of imports. Similarly, for Tajikistan, Russia is not only the largest trade market in terms of export, but it is also the second biggest import partner. Likewise for Kirghizstan 21.8 percent of imports came from Russia (Sajjanhar, 2022). In addition, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of these countries are also highly dependent on Russia’s economy. Because Russia is the primary destination for Central Asian labour migrants for work. The remittance from these workers has turned out to be a key contributor to the economy of these countries. These remittances accounted for 30 percent of Tajikistan’s GDP, 28 percent of Kirgizstan, and 12 percent of Uzbekistan (Nijhar, 2022). Since Russia invaded Ukraine the conflict led this country to be turned the most sanctioned country in the world. These sanctions highly left implications for the Central Asia economy too because of their high economic dependence and remittances on Russia (Wahlang, 2022). Like before the war, approximately four million workers from Central Asia were working in Russia. One million from Tajikistan, possibly a similar number from Kirghizstan, and estimably two million from Uzbekistan. These workers were involved in construction work, transportation, agriculture, and services sector as well as highly skilled occupations (United Nation, 2022). Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis and western sanctions on Russia high number of these workers lost their jobs and some have returned home without any plan to return. Because these people understand that Russia’s economy is shrinking and for the near future there is not any hope of a fast recovery.

Likewise the level of economic dependence among the Central Asian countries toward Russia is different. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan are highly dependent on remittance at the same time Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are highly dependent on the transportation of their natural resource through Russian Gazprom Company. Only Kazakhstan transported 80 percent of its oil to the world market through the Russian pipeline (Umarov, 2022). So, since sanctions have been imposed on Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are facing a problem for transporting their natural gas into international markets through Russian pipeline. Meanwhile, Russian companies have also suspended or canceled their infrastructure and economic projects all over Central Asian countries due to western sanctions. The suspension and cancelation of these projects caused job losses in these countries (Sharifli et al, 2022). Likely decrease in remittance, an increase of unemployment, and shrinking size of their economy as well as high food prices and inflation increased the poverty rate by an average of 0.7 percent across the region. This is a worrying situation particularly for those Central Asian countries poverty rate is already elevated. Among these countries, Tajikistan and Kirghizstan are the most vulnerable countries (Hlayhel et al, 2022). Therefore, sanctions and shrinking size of Russia's economy have left deep impact on the Central Asian economy, currencies, welfare of its migrant workers, and goods export and imports.

4. Security Implication

Following their independence the Central Asian states (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kirghizstan) experienced border clashes, political riots, civil war, inter-ethnic conflicts and rise of Islamic terrorism. However the new republics overcome with some of these challenges like civil war and inter-ethnic clashes. But the main security concern, internal political riot and growth of Islamic radicalism in the region, which has links to the neighboring countries, most notably Afghanistan (Hlayhel et al, 2022) remain a serious threat to these states. The concern regarding terrorism infiltration has grown more than any time when the foreign forces accelerated their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 (Gorenburg, 2014) and return of Taliban in mid-august 2021.

Central Asia's population is predominantly Muslim, and the youth in some of these countries are badly radicalized and interested to join terrorist groups to overthrow their governments and establish Islamic state based on Sharia. For this purpose some of Central Asian youths joined Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in Middle East and some other in the regional networks like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Furthermore, Afghanistan is ruled by the Taliban extremist group, making it an ideal location for the spread of radical Islamic ideology in the region and safe haven for these radicalized people. As a result, some radical preachers linked to various terrorist networks are attempting to infiltrate the region, to radicalize more youths, and use them for terroristic purposes (Roy, 2001). As mentioned above, terrorism is not the only threat to the Central Asian states, internal instability is the most serious challenge that these states are likely to face. Therefore, most of the Central Asian rulers have fears of internal instability and regime collapse than an external threat or external infiltration, particularly after the Arab spring (Gorenburg, 2014) in the Middle East and the 2022 anti-government protest in Kazakhstan due to the gas price hike (Wani, 2022). Hence, the Central Asian leader prioritizes internal stability and sees regime change as the highest security priority.

To protect themselves from any internal stability and any kind of external threat, the Central Asian States aligned themselves with Russia as a grantor of their security. Since Russia is considered the source of security guarantor to the Central Asian regimes, formed a security alliance or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) with the membership of Belarus, four Central Asian States, and two Caucuses states (Armenia and Azerbaijan). The purpose was to enable Russia to maintain its military bases in these countries and provide military and technical support to these countries (Weiss & Dienes, 2022). Russia not only committed to counter any external challenges, particularly from infiltration of international terrorism, she also play greater role in supporting local rulers of these countries to secure their regime (Raimondi, 2019).

For this purpose, Russia provides military and security assistance to these countries under CSTO. Because these countries are highly dependent on Russia for their security internally and externally. This was evident when in January 2022 the CSTO troops were deployed to Kazakhstan to subdue the anti-government protest (Wahlang, 2022). Similarly, the security concerns and internal stability helped the presence of Russia in the region. Especially after the fall of Kabul at the hand of the Taliban which increased the threat of terrorism infiltration in the region. Since then Russia has deployed military equipment to Tajikistan – Afghanistan border and launched multi-military exercises with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to deter any possible threat from the Taliban and other terroristic groups on the border (Wani, 2022). In fact, currently, the main security priority for Russia in the region is to guard Tajikistan – Afghanistan border and Turkmenistan – Afghanistan border, which most of illegal activities are pass through (Raimondi, 2019). Besides the increasing activities of Terrorist groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb-ul-Tahrir, Ansarullah Tajikistan, and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) drug trafficking is also increased. According to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crimes (UNODC) level of opium production has increased by 37 percent only in 2020. As such the region became more vulnerable than any other time (Stobdan, 2022). Therefore, Russia is considered as a source of stability, security, and territorial integrity for Central Asian countries (Wani, 2022). Historically Russia also perceived Central Asian states as its political and security backyard. Therefore stability in Central Asia is very crucial for Kremlin. Above all Russia has fear of any instability mostly political chaos in this region and non-state actor infiltration that could adversely impact the southern borders of Russia (Romanowski, 2017). Particularly after the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and increasing activities of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISK-P) in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. Therefore Russia defines Central Asia as a “bridge and buffer zone” against any form of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, Middle East, and Pakistan (Romanowski, 2017).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine left the Central Asian state in a desperate situation because of their high-security dependence on Russia. The Central Asian countries are in doubt to receive military assistance as

previous years from Russia in foreseeable future. Side by side the Russian pre-occupation in Ukraine increased the anxiety among the Central Asian states about the revival of sleeping terror networks like IMU, Hizb - ul- Tahrir, or Islamic Jihadi Union that could look toward central Asia as next option (Wani, 2022). With the Russian involvement in Ukraine the Central Asian countries particularly Tajikistan are looking toward other powers like China for assistance (Wahlang, 2022). As Chinese security assistance to the Central Asian countries seems plausible, but Beijing is not in hurry to put any mark for the moment. Because any move from China could be perceived as a threat by Russia. Therefore, for the time being, China is not interested to challenge the symbolic leadership role of Russia in Central Asia (Engvall, 2022). The tension has raised since Russia's military failure in Ukraine and the possible defeat of Russian army in Ukraine alarmed countries dependent on Russia's security umbrella. The Russian failure in Ukraine could possibly weaken the position of CSTO and certainly put an end to its expansion (Umarov, 2022). This scenario will be the worst for the Central Asian countries. The power vacuum in the region will increase the competition and infiltration which will contribute to the instability of Central Asia.

5. Conclusion

The Ukraine crisis had its deep impact on Central Asian countries. The impact is visible on Political, Economic and Security aspects. The impact is not only on Central Asia it also had some effects on Russia too. Western economic sanctions, political isolation of Russia in International stages and military failure of Russia against the Ukraine will led to the declining of Russia monopoly over Central Asia. As the Russia became weak and lose its influence in the region it will open the environment for other players to engage in the region. Realistically it's so early to predicate Russia will lose the ground in Central Asia because of its long relationship between Moscow and Central Asia as well as uncertain future of Ukraine war. But one thing is clear Russia's give up in the Central Asia is opportunity for China to fill up the leadership vacuum in the region. However till date China has accepted the nominal political and security leadership of Russia in the region as old power with depth influence in the region. But it seems in the future the Russia declining in political aspect and security aspect is forecastable. The gradual declining of Russia will help China to raise as only power in Central Asia. And even Central Asian leaders are interested to make partnership with multi powers to keep the balance. Because they learned in the last three decades to not be monopolised by one power. The decline of Russia will help the region to adopt multi vector diplomacy and end their total dependency to one power.

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