



CENTRAL ASIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE CONFLICT: ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES AND GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS

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Abstract:

This article examines the economic consequences of the Russia–Ukraine conflict for the countries of Central Asia and the resulting geopolitical transformations in international cooperation.

Based on an analysis of the ongoing processes, the paper assesses the role of the Republic of Uzbekistan, whose unique geographical location and pragmatic foreign policy enable it to maintain a position acceptable to all sides. This stance promotes the implementation of comprehensive reforms and contributes to strengthening regional stability amid the formation of a new geopolitical reality.

Keywords: Conflict, political and economic landscape, geopolitical transformation, cooperation, security and stability, sovereignty and independence.

Introduction

The five Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — have deep historical and economic ties with both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Moreover, Russia is considered one of the region's key trade and economic partners.

At the same time, the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, which entered another active phase in February 2022 following Russia's initiation of a “special military operation,” has impacted the global political and economic landscape¹, including in Central Asia².

¹ <https://ssri.psu.edu/news/russia-ukraine-war-will-hurt-millions-central-asia-heres-why>, “Russia-Ukraine war will hurt millions in Central Asia, here's why”

² <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-central-asia-impact-russia-china/32832774.html>, How Two Years Of Ukraine War Changed Central Asia”



Despite the turbulence and the unpredictability of the geopolitical environment, Central Asian states continue to actively engage with both regional and non-regional actors, primarily in pursuit of regional interests and the reinforcement of sovereignty and independence.

The countries of Central Asia continue to adhere to a multi-vector foreign policy approach³, striving to develop relations with global powers such as China, the USA, the EU, Turkey, Russia, and others, including within the framework of both regional and universal international organizations.

Main part

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has directly influenced the regional balance of power and foreign policy priorities⁴ in Central Asia. The region's countries remain committed to multi-vector diplomacy.

While maintaining ties with Russia, Central Asian nations are strategically reshaping their foreign policies to address potential risks and threats, navigating a complex web of international actors and balancing relations among them.

As cooperation with international actors such as China, Turkey, the USA⁵, and the EU diversifies and deepens, the region has shown a less explicit yet culturally and morally supported trend toward greater internal consolidation. Alongside regular "Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State,"⁶ relations are expanding through formats such as "China–Central Asia," C5+1, "Germany–Central Asia," and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS)⁷, focusing on trade, energy, and transport cooperation.

The energy sector remains a critical battleground for influence in Central Asia. The region is rich in hydrocarbons, with Kazakhstan⁸, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan being major natural gas producers. The West sees Central Asia as a potential

³ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47591>, "Central Asia Ukraine conflict geopolitical impact academic"

⁴ <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/shifting-geopolitics-of-central-asia-the-regional-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war/>, "Shifting Geopolitics of Central Asia: The Regional Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War"

⁵ <https://cegit.org/strengthening-uzbekistan-us-relations-as-a-consequence-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>, "Strengthening Uzbekistan-US Relations as a Consequence of the War in Ukraine"

⁶ http://encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BrucePannier_Russias-War-in-Ukraine-Shifts-Central-Asias-Connectivityconclusionsummary-2_ed2869.pdf, "Russia's War in Ukraine Shifts Central Asia's Connectivity"

⁷ <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/uzbekistan-organization-turkic-states-ots-mirziyoyev/>, "Uzbekistan's Leadership in the Organization of Turkic States: Mirziyoyev's Vision"

⁸ <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/04/08/the-nuclear-gamble-kazakhstan-russia-and-the-shifting-energy-landscape-of-central-asia/>, "The Nuclear Gamble: Kazakhstan, Russia, and the Shifting Energy Landscape of Central Asia"



alternative energy source, while Russia⁹ seeks to use pipeline infrastructure to further its strategic ambitions.

The return of labor migrants¹⁰ from Russia due to various factors, as well as the inflow of Russian citizens into Central Asia to avoid mobilization, places additional strain on housing and labor markets in host countries. Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic's dependence on labor migration to Russia heightens their domestic vulnerabilities.

In this context, it is notable that Uzbekistan, centrally located in the region, plays a key role in maintaining security and stability. Uzbekistan pursues a pragmatic and unifying approach in a complex geopolitical environment.

While maintaining a neutral stance on the conflict¹¹ between Ukraine and Russia, Uzbekistan expresses readiness to support a swift resolution. Though refraining from openly condemning Russian actions, it affirms support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, safeguarding its own strategic interests.

Amid complex international processes, Uzbekistan is enhancing its economic potential by expanding mutually beneficial cooperation channels. The country implements strategic initiatives aimed at developing international trade, mitigating risks, advancing the green economy, and building human capital. Uzbekistan's geographic location — bordering all Central Asian countries — makes it strategically significant for intercontinental cooperation. The Russia–Ukraine conflict compels Uzbekistan to seek alternative export routes that are geopolitically and geoeconomically viable for the entire region.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor) is gaining attention as an alternative route connecting China, the Middle East, and Central Asia to Europe. Uzbekistan supports the multimodal CASCA+ corridor. Due to ongoing reforms, cargo transit between Uzbekistan and Europe has increased by 55% in recent years.

Uzbekistan is also promoting the China–Kyrgyz Republic–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Turkey corridor, as well as the China–Kyrgyz Republic–

⁹ <https://geopoliticalmonitor.com/beyond-western-narratives-unpacking-russias-strategic-role-in-central-asia/>, “Beyond Western Narratives: Unpacking Russia's Strategic Role in Central Asia”

¹⁰ <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/racializing-central-asia-during-the-russian-ukrainian-war-migration-flows-and-ethnic-hierarchies/>, “Racializing Central Asia During the Russian-Ukrainian War: Migration Flows and Ethnic Hierarchies”

¹¹ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47591>, “Central Asia Ukraine conflict economic consequences academic”



Uzbekistan railway project, which will reduce transport time to Europe by 7–8 days and shorten the route by 900 km.

Such actions strengthen Uzbekistan's sovereignty and position it as a regional model. Its balanced relations with Russia and active regional role make it a reliable partner for the West.

The development of alternative transport corridors is a strategic imperative for Central Asian states to reduce geopolitical vulnerability and improve economic resilience. Uzbekistan's investments and diplomatic efforts further consolidate its status as a key regional hub.

In terms of military-technical cooperation, Uzbekistan has extended its strategic partnership program with Russia until 2030. However, its non-membership in the CSTO (having withdrawn in 2012) provides it greater flexibility in choosing security partners. Accordingly, Uzbekistan also strengthens its security cooperation with China, the US, and other actors, including law enforcement mechanisms, demonstrating the diversification of its defense ties.

Conclusion

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has significantly altered the global and regional geopolitical landscape, accelerating Central Asian states' efforts to bolster sovereignty and independence.

Following Uzbekistan's pragmatic policy model, the region is strengthening internal cooperation while maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy, which enables adaptation to new geopolitical realities in the security domain.

Uzbekistan's strategic initiatives to develop transport connectivity aim to improve regional and transcontinental economic integration and reinforce national sovereignty. These actions highlight its commitment to regional stability and solidify its role as a key regional and global player.

The development of alternative corridors, such as the Middle Corridor, represents a fundamental shift that transforms Uzbekistan's landlocked geography into a strategic economic advantage, thereby reducing geopolitical vulnerability.

It is likely that Central Asia will remain an area of strategic interest for competing global powers. This dynamic requires flexible diplomacy from regional actors to balance external ambitions with internal priorities and to effectively address



socioeconomic challenges — a task that Uzbekistan is pursuing systematically and successfully.

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