

**China's Security and  
Military Cooperation  
in Central Asia and  
its relevance to Europe**

Farkhod Aminjonov



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## Executive Summary

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Central Asia is a key pillar of China's heavily promoted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although the region's leaders are supportive of the Chinese initiative, they have occasionally and selectively resisted any deepening of their asymmetrical relations with China, which has grown even faster with Beijing's attempts to expand its military presence in the region. The so-called 'division of labour', in which Russia dominated politics and security while China took responsibility for economic trade and connectivity, is no longer fully relevant to the Chinese engagement with local actors. Central Asian countries are not the equals of China, but neither are they mere policy-takers. Yet, as smaller nations, Central Asian states may not be able to manage, balance, bandwagon and negotiate their defence and military relations with China without effective engagement with other external powers. The strategic objectives of EU and NATO<sup>1</sup> in reaching out to Central Asian states whose stability and security are linked to wider Euro-Atlantic security, as stated in NATO's policy, make them integral to the security and defence dynamics in the region. The Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 will likely emphasise the regions' strategic importance, given its geographic location and due to its natural resources, which include oil, gas and rare earths.

This paper is organised as follows. Section one discusses the existing and emerging security threats that Central Asian states are dealing with. Section two provides a comprehensive analysis of the expanding Chinese engagement in the defence and security domain in Central Asia. Section three examines anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia and local actor's attempts to hedge growing Chinese influence. Section four analyses the risks and prospects to the EU stakeholders that a growing military presence entails. Section five sets out a series of policy recommendations to European and, indirectly NATO, policymakers on how to strengthen their relations with local actors in the field of security and defence that will allow the latter to address internal and external security and military threats.

China has significantly elevated security-related engagements with Central Asian states during the last decade. Growing Chinese concerns over instability in Central Asia and Afghanistan have increased Beijing's interest in becoming a security provider to the region, and in building mutual trust in defence and military cooperation. A comprehensive analysis of Chinese engagement covers both hard- and soft-power security and defence domains in Central Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> The report places EU states at the centre of analysis. However, considering that a number of EU countries are part of the NATO alliance, the report also refers to the security and military initiatives put forward by NATO.

Security and military engagement discussed in the paper focuses on:

- a. Beijing's support to local governments in fighting non-traditional security threats, such as terrorism, extremism and separatism;
- b. Chinese bilateral military support and trainings to the Central Asian nations: arms sales, which currently accounts for almost 20% of the region's total; joint military exercises (bilateral and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO]) that have significantly intensified both in number and scale since 2010; undeclared military bases in Tajikistan as well as with outposts in the Tajik-Afghan border;
- c. Security concerns arising from the long-standing Chinese claims over the disputed areas in Tajikistan;
- d. Beijing's attempt to protect its nationals and assets (industrial sites and transportation/energy networks) in Central Asia from 'radical' groups, such as Uyghur separatists or the so-called 'Islamic State', by engaging a number of Chinese private security companies;
- e. Military technology cooperation with the possibility of manufacturing Chinese weapons in Central Asian countries;
- f. The Chinese state-owned cybersecurity companies installing surveillance and facial recognition software for use in monitoring populations (schools, public transport and policing).

Weak indigenous defence mechanisms and industry in Central Asian countries leave local actors vulnerable to external powers, which now include China. Going beyond Russia or China as their sole security patrons is, or should be, among the priority security policies for Central Asian leaders. Greater involvement of the EU actors in the region's defence and security may strengthen the ability of the local actors to manage and negotiate their relations with China. So far, Central Asian states have welcomed Beijing's expanding security activity in the region in strengthening their security capabilities and helping them hedge Moscow's military and security dominance. China - similar to its northern counterpart Russia - offers Central Asian 'authoritarian' leaders what they need to ensure their regime security. The EU, meanwhile, might offer what Central Asian countries need to establish a resilient society to effectively address existing and emerging security and military threats. The discussion of the security

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and military risks that the expanding Chinese engagement triggers for European stakeholders include the following:

- g. Collaborating to promote a better understanding of key security developments in Central Asia - how to enhance human security in Central Asia. The EU's values-driven agenda on democratisation, transparency and accountability may strengthen Central Asian societies' capacity to withstand internal and external threats;
- h. Engaging non-state actors in the decision-making process with respect to military and security sector reform;
- i. Promoting multilateral frameworks as an alternative to the Beijing-offered bilateral approach for negotiating the border disputes (among Central Asian countries as well as with the neighbouring China or Afghanistan);
- j. Providing funding and training to counter non-traditional security threats (terrorism, extremism, separatism) from international agencies, particularly Europe and NATO, as a hedge against Chinese (and Russian) influence;
- k. Strengthening efforts to bind Central Asian countries to implementing and upholding human rights domestically, and to condemn abuses of these rights internationally, including China's treatment of Uyghur minorities;
- l. Offering military and defence assistance to strengthen Central Asian countries' military capacity, as opposed to the current approach of primarily supporting internal police forces;
- m. Encouraging Central Asian countries - in the face of the emerging security threats coming from neighbouring Afghanistan - to receive refugees from their southern neighbour and assist in accommodating them with minimum security threat to the locals;
- n. Providing policy and adequate technological support in enhancing the region's cyber-defence capabilities, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive with human rights and freedoms.



## Introduction

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The Central Asian region is 'central' to China's Eurasian ambitions of linking China's West to South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Central Asia is also valuable to Beijing because of the region's hydrocarbon and mineral resources, which are used to support and sustain China's economic growth and prosperity. In the security domain, Beijing's interest in Central Asia has been driven by the region's geographical and cultural proximity to China's Xinjiang region. Chinese officials sometimes link terrorist attacks in China's western province to the activities of terrorist, separatist, and extremist forces in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, the assumption was that economic development would bring social peace and political stability to Central Asia and, as a consequence to Xinjiang; this has dictated the Chinese foreign policy towards the region. Security

dynamics over the past decade, however, have shown that a merely economic approach is not a solution to the Chinese security concerns emanating in and from its Western neighbours. The fears of instability from South Asia and Central Asia, and its potential spill-over effect, have forced Beijing to considerably enhance its security profile in the region by establishing a military base in Tajikistan, increasing arms sales to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and providing extensive military training, among other things. Despite the fact that Chinese security and military engagement is inextricably tied to domestic security concerns, or is dictated by the desire to protect Chinese citizens and overseas investments in a potentially violent region, the short- and long-term consequences remain to be seen.

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**The so-called 'division of labour', in which Russia dominated politics and security while China took responsibility for economic trade and connectivity, is no longer fully relevant to the Chinese engagement with local actors.**

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As one of the regions in China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), Central Asia is expected to be transformed by its people-to-people contacts, by infrastructure and communication networks and by industrial projects that enhance its participation in the new, China-centred Eurasian economic and geopolitical order. Recently expanded security and military engagement within the region has shown worrying signs for the sovereignty of the local actors. Conventional analyses depict Central Asia as mere pawns in the game between major powers, including within the BRI initiative -Beijing's new hegemonic ambition. This report posits, however, that the agency exercised by all Central Asian states has and will pose challenges to the grand design of their more powerful neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Colin Mackerras, "Xinjiang in China's Foreign Relations: Part of a New Silk Road or Central Asian Zone of Conflict?," *East Asia* 32, 2015, 36.

3 Li-Chen Sim and Farkhod Aminjonov, "Central Asia in BRI: Policy-taker or Policy-shaper?" in Jonathan Fulton, eds., *Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

The analysis in this report argues that strengthening security relations with alternative external powers – the EU and NATO - could be of utmost importance for the region in counterbalancing emerging Chinese security influence. The strategy of the EU towards external regions presented in the EU's Strategic Compass recognises that European countries are in danger, and that the emerging threats go beyond direct military or territorial domains. Power politics imply that soldiers, tanks or planes are no longer the main source of security and defence; the cyber-attacks, the instrumentalisation of refugees and migrants and the privatisation of armies, among others, have become important tools of power.<sup>4</sup> European countries are working closely with each other and with other partners within NATO to share expertise and the course of policy actions on emerging security and military threats.<sup>5</sup> The NATO 2030 Initiative also urges Member States to adapt to a changing security landscape with new emerging threats such as cyberattacks and climate change, as well as Russia and China challenging the existing world order by supporting authoritarian regimes and engaging in military actions abroad, which has been highlighted by the Russian aggression in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Thus the defence of Europe now requires a new concept and new instruments of security to address emerging threats, with a profound impact on future warfare and European defence.

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4 Jos Boonstra, "A New EU Strategy for Central Asia: From Challenges to Opportunities," 3 October 2019, ISPI, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/new-eu-strategy-central-asia-challenges-opportunities-24062>.

5 "Brussels Summit Communique," 14 June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en).

6 "NATO 2030," NATO *Factsheet*, June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf).



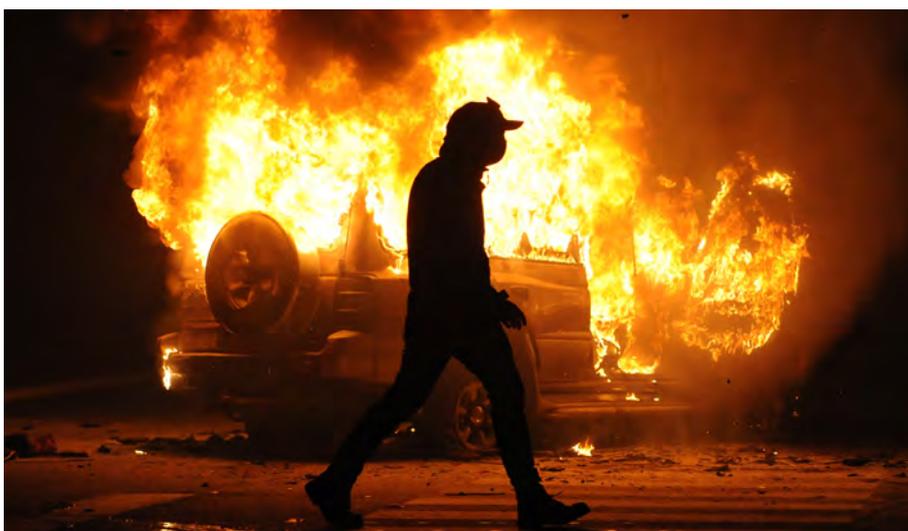
## Security Threats in Central Asia

### Defining security

There is no commonly agreed definition of security among Central Asian actors or the external powers. In adopted security documents, almost all security actors recognise that perception of security now goes beyond that of the military or political component. In practice, however, the perception of security within the Central Asian region is still marked by the Soviet legacy. This emphasises the need for an excessive military capacity, the development of the military-industrial complex and hard power tools<sup>7</sup> to address both conventional and non-conventional security threats such as terrorism, extremism and separatism, along with human, drugs, and arms trafficking as well as social unrest and cyber terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Brutal suppression of the January unrest in Kazakhstan is a testament to this approach.

### Terrorist attacks

Central Asia is one of the key theatres in the war on terrorism, and is fed mostly by religious extremism in the Eurasian region.<sup>9</sup> Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been struck by several terrorist attacks since the 1990s, primarily undertaken by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Islamic radicals eventually took refuge in Afghanistan and merged with the Taliban, assumingly posing an even greater risk for the regional actors. Kazakhstan has suffered from terror attacks in 2016 in Aktobe and Almaty. In Tajikistan, the acts of terrorism took place in 2010 and



7 Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Central Asian Armies Facing the Challenge of Formation," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 2010, 11, <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.3799>.

8 Mordechai de Hass, "Kazakhstan's Security Policy: Steady as She Goes?" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28(4), 2015, 621-645.

9 Edwar Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," Wilson Center 38, 2018, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan\\_cable\\_38.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_38.pdf).

then again in 2018.<sup>10</sup> Another Islamic organisation, called Hizb ut-Tahrir, which engages all ethnic groups, has taken responsibility for the terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>11</sup> In 2011, Jund al Khilafah claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack in the city of Taraz in Kazakhstan, which resulted in tightened security measures on the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border.<sup>12</sup> The threat of terrorism is now integrated into the state agenda of almost all Central Asian countries, particularly in light of the increasing violent incidents in Afghanistan in recent years.

### Ethnic conflicts - Ferghana Valley

The Fergana Valley is one of the high-risk areas for ethnic conflict among the Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik populations. The conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks over land disputes in 1990 left hundreds dead, while the ethnic conflict that occurred in the southern city of Osh in 2010 saw one of the bloodiest confrontations in the history of independent Central Asian states.<sup>13</sup> Tajikistan faces armed clashes in the Ferghana Valley, where it shares common borders with both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>14</sup>

### Narcotics and Arms Trafficking

The threat of drugs and arms trafficking within Central Asia is one of the key security concerns for the local actors, due to their proximity to Afghanistan, a massive monetary incentive to those involved and the links with radical and terroristic organisations. Russia and Kazakhstan's



10 Aleksandra Bolonina, "Security Dimension of China's Presence in Central Asia," IRIS 108, 2019, 14, <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Asia-Focus-108-Eng.pdf>.

11 Andreas Borgeas, "Security Relations between Kazakhstan and China: Assessments and Recommendations on the Transnational Uyghur question," *Journal of International Affairs*, 2013, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/security-relations-between-kazakhstan-and-china-assessments-and-recommendations>.

12 Marcus Bragg, "Central Asian Security: With a Focus on Kazakhstan," STARS, 2014, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2556&context=honorstheses1990-2015>.

13 Marcus Bragg, "Central Asian Security: With a Focus on Kazakhstan," STARS, 2014, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2556&context=honorstheses1990-2015>.

14 Bradley Jardine, "Emerging Forms of Pax Sinica in Tajikistan and Cambodia," FPRI, 8 March 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/emerging-forms-of-pax-sinica-in-tajikistan-and-cambodia/>.

role as gateways to Western European markets, and the Ferghana Valley as an entry point to the Chinese market, attract the attention of both local and external powers. These actors work extensively to enhance domestic security in order to hinder the flow of weapons and narcotics.<sup>15</sup> The threat of drugs trafficking and arms smuggling plagues the border of the Central Asian region. While the previous military doctrine of Kazakhstan, for example, had focused on countering violent extremism and terrorism, more recently it has adopted security strategies that place the emphasis on trafficking and armed conflict along the border and measures to mitigate it.<sup>16</sup> Central Asian regimes are not capable of addressing these threats alone, and frequently request assistance from the external powers, including Russia, China and Western nations, either through bilateral arrangements or regional institutions such as the CSTO or the SCO.

## Cyber-terrorism

In the new warfare, soft power tools are being weaponised. Deliberate distortion of the information space, the spread of false information and cyberterrorism may not pose imminent threats to the survival of Central Asian states.<sup>17</sup> However, these concerns are now an integral part of the security agenda in all Central Asian countries. Interestingly, Chinese companies are mainly being invited to strengthen Central Asian states' cyber-defence capabilities. Sophisticated surveillance systems are being installed throughout Central Asia, both to enhance security of the local regimes and to track down the members of the terrorist and extremist organisations posing a threat to the neighbouring China.<sup>18</sup> Both objectives, unfortunately, having reinforced security capabilities in one sector may, and sometimes do, lead to security violations in another – human rights and freedoms.

## Regime's Suppression of Protests

Enhanced border management does promote regional security. Without underestimating the seriousness of the security and military threats discussed above, it must be acknowledged that there are times when Central Asian regimes do not refrain from using propaganda from the non-state foes to suppress opposition, ethnic minorities or religious

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15 Marcus Bragg, "Central Asian Security: With a Focus on Kazakhstan," STARS, 2014, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2556&context=honorstheses1990-2015>.

16 Jamestown Foundation, *Kazakhstan Adopts New Military Doctrine*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14(134), 23 October 2017, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0d73ad4.html>.

17 Mordechai de Hass, "Kazakhstan's Security Policy: Steady as She Goes?" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28(4), 2015, 621-645.

18 Bradley Jardine, "Emerging Forms of Pax Sinica in Tajikistan and Cambodia," FPRI, 8 March 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/emerging-forms-of-pax-sinica-in-tajikistan-and-cambodia/>.

groups.<sup>19</sup> Terrorism, for instance, has always been perceived as the major security issue for the Central Asia region. However, what is the level of terrorism threat today? In the Global Terrorism Index, based on the risk level, Tajikistan is placed 74th, Kazakhstan 75th and Kyrgyzstan 80th, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are ranked 132nd and 138th, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Yet, in the name of addressing security threats, some Central Asian regimes are often accused of human rights violation and freedoms suppression. The most recent event – January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, which reportedly resulted in 227 deaths and was classified by the government as an act of terrorism – triggered a harsh government crackdown in response to the protests, arresting around 12,000 citizens, including civil activists.<sup>21</sup>

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19 Marcus Bragg, "Central Asian Security: With a Focus on Kazakhstan," STARS, 2014, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2556&context=honorstheses1990-2015>.

20 "China Security Report 2020 China Goes to Eurasia," NIDS, 2020, [http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china\\_report\\_EN\\_web\\_2020\\_A01.pdf](http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2020_A01.pdf).

21 "Q&A: Behind the Unrest in Kazakhstan," 15 January 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/kazakhstan/qa-behind-unrest-kazakhstan>.



## China's Security and Military Engagement with Central Asia

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**China wants to see the emergence of a new Eurasian order, free of Western influence, and ultimately with considerably reduced Russian dominance**

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Until recently, Moscow had prioritised political and security relations, while Beijing's had focused on tangible improvements in trade and investment.<sup>22</sup> This 'division of labour' has long kept the two major powers from engaging in direct competition. However, the lines are now becoming blurred. China wants to see the emergence of a new Eurasian order, free of Western influence, and ultimately with considerably reduced Russian dominance. Unlike all other external influencers, Beijing wants to see it integrated, with China at its centre. Some experts believe that, in contrast to the 'illusionary' leadership of Russia and the West in Eurasia, China is emerging as 'real' power.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, over the course of the past decade, Beijing has been enhancing its military presence in external regions. Due to territorial proximity, large-scale investments and a wide range of security threats have made Central Asia one of the first points of reference for Chinese security and military expansion.

Beijing's foreign policy towards Central Asia has been driven by four key principles, as outlined by former Prime Minister Li Peng, during his visit to the region in 1994. These are; peaceful coexistence and maintenance of good neighbourly relations; mutual cooperation and promotion of economic prosperity; non-interference in the Central-Asian internal affairs, and respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty.<sup>24</sup> In addition, China views Central Asia as a buffer zone between Xinjiang and the instability in Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> One of the key interests for China is to safeguard against a potential spillover of terrorism and political instability from Afghanistan, which could destabilise Xinjiang. As a result, the Central Asian region is one of the key theatres – Western Theatre Command covering India, Central Asia, Xinjiang and Tibet – aimed at preparing to fight and win against an adversary, developing joint military capabilities and safeguarding the stability of the territories.<sup>26</sup>

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22 Marcin Kaczmarek, "Two Ways of Influence-building: The Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt, One Road Initiative," *Europe-Asia Studies* 69:7, 2017, 1028.

23 Nadège Rolland, "A China–Russia Condominium over Eurasia," *Survival*, 61:1, 2019, 7-22, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2019.1568043.

24 Irina Ionela, "China's Energy Strategy in Central Asia: Interactions with Russia, India and Japan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, N° 24, 2010, 3.

25 Paul Stronski, "How Taliban victory will reshape regional dynamics in Central Asia, 3 November 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/03/how-taliban-victory-will-reshape-regional-dynamics-in-central-asia/>.

26 Office of the Secretary of Defence, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," Annual Report to Congress, 2021, 97, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

The 'boundaries of China's national security' are now defined by the expansion of its overseas interests. Experts argue that where the economic and political interests within the BRI expands, military forces to protect those interests follow.<sup>27</sup> Limited power projection and logistical capabilities on China's western front were the main barriers for Beijing's security and military presence in Central Asia. As with every subsequent military and security doctrine, Beijing has been developing increasingly powerful military forces and better support capabilities. Considering the escalating security threats in Central Asia, both in scale and variety, local authorities are continuously seeking security and military assistance. China's security and military presence may grow even further, should Western economic and security assistance to Central Asia decline and Russia continue to tolerate Beijing as a security actor in the region.<sup>28</sup> Many experts from the region believe that NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan, for example, leaves Central Asian countries with a number of challenges, including an increasing threat of radical religious militants, drug trafficking and refugee crises.<sup>29</sup> Unless greater assistance is provided by the Western partners in tackling these issues, China will most likely be the one securing such military and defence assistance to the region.



Throughout the 2000s, China primarily referred to Russia as a security guarantor, in order not to provoke hedging against Beijing by the local and other external powers. Emerging security threats, however, are forcing Beijing to prioritise regional cooperation on its Xinjiang policy, protecting BRI investments and mitigating risks emanating from

27 Nadege Rolland, "Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road," NBR Special Report 80, September 2019, 2, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

28 Richard Weitz, "Chinese Relations in Eurasia: The Case of Kazakhstan," in Nicole Peterson eds. Chinese Strategic Intentions: A Deep Dive into China's Worldwide Activities, A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper, December 2019, 11, <https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SMA-Chinese-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-FINAL-01-Nov-2.pdf>.

29 Yegor Vasylyev, "NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan: What it means for the Central Asian neighbourhood," New Eastern Europe, 22 June 2021, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/06/22/nato-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-what-it-means-for-the-central-asian-neighbourhood/>.

Afghanistan. Changing security dynamics require new instruments to be deployed. As highlighted by Alexander Cooley, China is now introducing a wide range of new digital technologies and surveillance systems (similar technologies that Beijing used to monitor and detain Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region), deploying private security companies to protect BRI investments and stationing Chinese military forces in the region.<sup>30</sup> Chinese military and security activities, however, have implications for geopolitics, domestic stability and human rights.<sup>31</sup>

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**China has increased its military presence in Central Asia through five pillars of engagement. These are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), training and joint exercises, military aid, military sales and private security companies (PSCs)**

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As highlighted by Raffaello Pantucci – that Chinese security engagement should be considered within a broader context – China has increased its military presence in Central Asia through five pillars of engagement. These are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), training and joint exercises, military aid, military sales and private security companies (PSCs). Any external power willing to counter Chinese influence in the region will also need to engage in a range of security actions, not just one aspect of military or security cooperation.<sup>32</sup> Recent attacks on Chinese assets that threaten Beijing's interest has fuelled its desire for a far more extensive security and military presence in the region. In 2016, the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan was bombed. A militant group attributed to Uyghurs took responsibility for the attack. ISIS kidnapped and killed two Chinese teachers in Pakistan in 2017. Beijing fears further attacks, larger in both scale and magnitude, to be carried out by Uyghur militants or ISIS, which may find a safe haven in the Taliban-controlled

Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Even though the Taliban have stated that they do not wish to pose a threat to either their Central Asian neighbours or to China, Beijing acknowledges that they are not united and consist of warlords, some of who share support for the Uyghur cause.<sup>34</sup> China continues to consider Uyghur activism a national security threat that cannot be eliminated solely within its borders. Its security and economic relations with Central Asian neighbours reflect that particular security priority. The concerns for China are based on Uyghur separatism threats. Despite the

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30 Alexander Cooley, "Securing the neighborhood: China's evolving security footprint in Central Asia," 2021, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/securing-the-neighborhood-chinas-evolving-security-footprint-in-central-asia/>.

31 "IntelBrief: China's Counterterrorism Inroads in Central Asia," The Soufan Center, 19 February 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-19/>.

32 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 61, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

33 Oliver Young, "China Expands Security Presence in Central Asia through Tajikistan Bases," *China Digital Times*, 2021, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/china-expands-security-presence-in-central-asia-through-tajikistan-bases/>.

34 Giulia Sciorati, "Not a Military Base: Why Did China Commit to an Outpost in Tajikistan?" *ISPI*, November 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/not-military-base-why-did-china-commit-outpost-tajikistan-32177>.

fact that interethnic peace has been maintained between local Central Asians and the local Uyghur population, China perceives the group as being aligned with terrorism. Some reports highlight that around 400 militants associated with ISIS, Jamaat Ansarullah and the Turkistan Islamic Movement have attempted to establish a new terrorist base on the territory of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, Tajikistan.<sup>35</sup> Emerging threats to Chinese interests explain the growing security and military expansion in Central Asia.

## Security Mechanisms in Central Asia

Over the past three decades of independence, Central Asian states - in cooperation with external powers - have established and sophisticated both domestic and regional security and military mechanisms to counter existing and emerging security threats.

## Regional Security and Military Mechanisms – Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization



China has taken part in ten joint exercises in Central Asia between 2002-19, through which its security forces certainly gained operational experience.<sup>36</sup> The SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) started as a security organisation primarily managing arms control, but over time evolved into a mechanism to conduct counterinsurgency drills and large-scale conventional warfare games. There are also the Russia-led CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), a military alliance

35 "В приграничье Таджикистана закрепляются боевики," Stan Radar, 2020, <https://stanradar.com/news/full/39277-v-prigraniche-tadzhikistana-zakrepljajutsja-boeviki.html>.

36 "IntelBrief: China's Counterterrorism Inroads in Central Asia," The Soufan Center, 19 February 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-19/>.

with collective armed forces that focuses on conventional warfare, peacekeeping, antinarcotics, counterterrorism, and disaster relief<sup>37</sup>; as well as the US-led NATO security and military mechanisms.



The SCO has considerably expanded its framework for cooperation: the Shanghai Convention on combating terrorism, extremism and separatism (2001), SCO regional anti-terroristic structure (2002), agreement on combating drug trafficking (2004), agreement on joint anti-terrorist activities (2006), treaty of the long-term good neighbourly and friendly cooperation among member states of the SCO (2007), agreement on combating trafficking in firearms, ammunition (2008), agreement on cooperation in the field of ensuring international information security (2009).<sup>38</sup> However, vital issues of security - such as anti-Western positions or 'non-interference' in internal affairs, including the uprisings of 2005 and 2010 in Kyrgyzstan - have highlighted serious disagreements among its member in tackling security matters.<sup>39</sup>

Many experts have even begun to question the SCO's role as a 'security provider' in the region, when - in response to the proclaimed act of terrorism - the Kazakh authorities requested support from the CSTO, rather than the SCO. While Beijing provided strong verbal backing for its counterpart in Nur-Sultan for the crackdown of the protests - which turned into violent unrest - no direct military assistance was provided. Even though both the CSTO and the SCO are security organisations, experts pointed out to several obstacles that prevented the latter from

37 Marcel de Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29:3, 2016, 378-406, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2016.1200383.

38 Azhar Serikkaliyeva, Aidarbek Amirbek, and Eftal Sukru Batmaz, "Chinese Institutional Diplomacy toward Kazakhstan: The SCO and the New Silk Road Initiative," *Insight Turkey*, 2018, 134, <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1080/chinese-institutional-diplomacy-toward-kazakhstan-the-sco-and-the-new-silk-road-initiative>.

39 Marcel de Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29:3, 2016, 380, DOI: 10.1080/13518046.2016.1200383.

taking a more active role in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Despite carrying out numerous joint trainings, the SCO claimed that it engages only in non-combatant missions. Apparently, this is one of those cases where China sticks to the fundamental principle of not using force in other countries.<sup>40</sup> Immediately after the unrest erupted, as highlighted by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Beijing was willing to offer any support necessary to the Kazakh government - including military. Absence of the legal basis for such support, however, was a major obstacle.<sup>41</sup> Separately from the SCO, the CSTO Member States do have legal grounds for providing military support upon request. The January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan pointed out the shortage of Chinese security and military engagement in Central Asia, which could lead to new developments in the near future. Despite some of the objectives of these organisations overlapping, it appears that - as long as the leading powers within them, namely Russia and China, do not engage in rivalry - the SCO and the CSTO do not represent competing organisations.

## The Shift toward Bilateral Security and Military Cooperation

Disagreements within the SCO and changing priorities in Chinese military diplomacy have led to the establishment of a new organisation without Russian participation – the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, where Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan cooperate on counterterrorism.<sup>42</sup> The very existence of this new regional multilateral institution in many ways highlights the failures of the SCO to deliver on China's regional security concerns.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Beijing has placed a particular focus on promoting bilateral relations in the security and military spheres. Since 2016, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police (PAP) have adopted new approaches to the security of China's western border.

Military exercises beyond the existing SCO framework; China has undertaken a number of bilateral military exercises addressing bilateral security concerns. Sino-Tajik and Sino-Kyrgyz military exercises that excluded Russia and have gone beyond the SCO framework have occurred

40 "Why didn't China send troops to aid Kazakhstan?" *Federal News Network*, 13 January 2022, <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/government-news/2022/01/explainer-why-didnt-china-send-troops-to-aid-kazakhstan/>.

41 Georgi Gotev, "Kazakh FM: We had no choice but to call the Russian troops," *Euractiv*, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakh-fm-we-had-no-choice-but-to-call-the-russian-troops/>.

42 Reid Standish, "China Seen As Rising Military Power In Central Asia, Foreshadowing Future Friction With Russia," *Radio Liberty*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-seen-as-rising-military-power-in-central-asia-foreshadowing-future-friction-with-russia/30639964.html>.

43 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 63, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

more frequently in the 2010s than in the 2000s.<sup>44</sup> Between 2014-19, China has conducted at least ten bilateral military exercises with Central Asian countries.<sup>45</sup> In 2010, for example, it undertook a large joint bilateral training exercise with around 10,000 Tajikistan military personnel close to the border with Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Another joint exercise, involving a PLA company in Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, was reportedly to be held in late July 2019. Between 2003-16, the Kyrgyz military held ten exercises or training events with their Chinese counterparts. In addition, sixteen anti-terrorist military exercises have been conducted with the Chinese and Kazakh forces since 2002.<sup>47</sup> A joint anti-terrorism exercise between the Chinese PAP and the Uzbek National Guard took place in May 2019.<sup>48</sup>

### Training exercises

China has engaged in coordination of the special forces training with its Central Asian counterparts. In December 2018, a female cadre of elite PAP Falcon Commandos provided training for their Uzbek counterparts.<sup>49</sup> In 2019, a bilateral counterterrorism exercise entitled "Cooperation-2019" was launched at a training base in the Xinjiang region, involving members of the PAP and the National Guard of Kyrgyzstan. China has conducted training exercises with Kazakh special forces to increase the Kazakh military's preparedness for war in urban environments, mountain conditions and at sea.<sup>50</sup>

### Military aid

China has been providing military aid to Central Asian counterparts from the start of the 1990s. Despite Russia remaining the largest military aid provider to the region, China's role in providing such support has been growing over the past years. In 2017, for example, Beijing provided military aid in the amount of US\$14.5 million to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>51</sup> The Tajik

44 Matthew Stein, *Compendium of Central Asian Military and Security Activity* (Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2019), [https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/\\_key/docpreview-s/00-00-12-39-05/201908-Compendium-of-Central-Asian-Military-and-Security-Activity-v7-2D00\\_-16-August-2019.pdf](https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-12-39-05/201908-Compendium-of-Central-Asian-Military-and-Security-Activity-v7-2D00_-16-August-2019.pdf).

45 "IntelBrief: China's Counterterrorism Inroads in Central Asia," *The Soufan Center*, 19 February 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-19/>.

46 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 66, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

47 Temur Umarov, "На пути к Pax Sinica: что несет Центральной Азии экспансия Китая," *Moscow Carnegie Center*, 25 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81265>.

48 Li Jiayao, "Uzbekistan, China wrap-up joint anti-terror drills," *Xinhuanet*, 2019, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/17/content\\_9505397.htm#:~:text=TASHKENT%2C%20May%2016%20\(Xinhua\),the%20Jizzakh%20region%20on%20Wednesday](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/17/content_9505397.htm#:~:text=TASHKENT%2C%20May%2016%20(Xinhua),the%20Jizzakh%20region%20on%20Wednesday).

49 Raffaello Pantucci, "Not-So-Hidden Dragon: China Reveals Its Claws in Central Asian Security," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 25 February 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83934>.

50 Samuel Ramani, "The Emerging China-Kazakhstan Defense Relationship," *The Diplomat*, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-emerging-china-kazakhstan-defense-relationship/>.

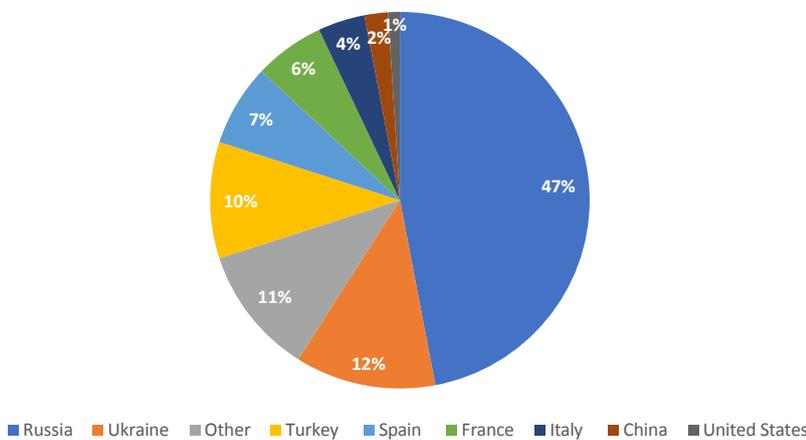
51 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 66, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

government has offered to transfer full control of an existing Chinese military base in the country to Beijing and waive any future rent in exchange for military aid from China.<sup>52</sup>

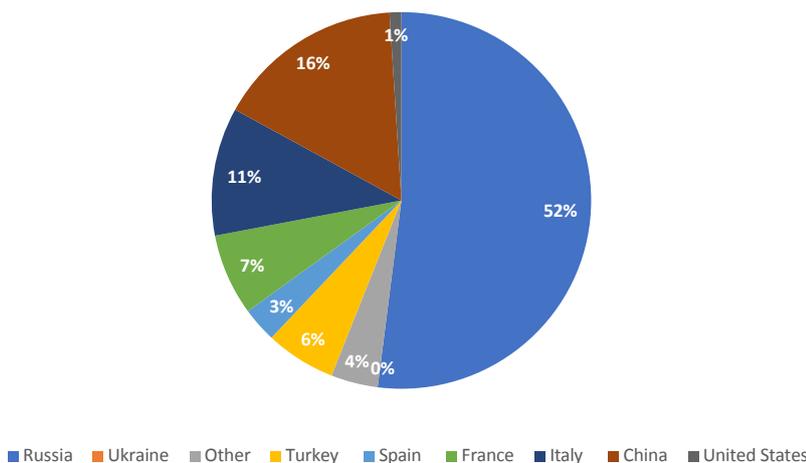
### Arms sales

Changing dynamics can be seen in Beijing's arms sales (ranging from weapons and military vehicles to high-tech hardware such as armed drones) to Central Asia, which accounted for 16-18% of the region's military hardware between 2015-19, compared with up to 2% between 2010-14.<sup>53</sup> Kazakhstan is acquiring sophisticated weapons systems

Arms Transfers to Central Asia (2010-2014)



Arms Transfers to Central Asia (2015-2019)



52 Reid Standish, "Tajikistan Approves Construction of New Chinese-Funded Base As Beijing's Security Presence In Central Asia Grows," *Radio Liberty*, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html>.

53 Reid Standish, "China Seen As Rising Military Power In Central Asia, Foreshadowing Future Friction With Russia," *Radio Liberty*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-seen-as-rising-military-power-in-central-asia-foreshadowing-future-friction-with-russia/30639964.html>; Also, see Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Avoiding Dependence? Central Asian Security in a Multipolar World," *The Oxus Society*, 28 September 2020, <https://oxussociety.org/avoiding-dependence-central-asian-security-in-a-multipolar-world/>.

(ex. Wing Loong-1 strike-capable drones) from China.<sup>54</sup> Tajikistan has even made a habit of parading its new Chinese weapons systems.<sup>55</sup> Even though Uzbekistan is not a top priority for China in terms of arms exports, some notable changes have taken place since 2014. Meanwhile in Turkmenistan, China has become the second-largest arms supplier to the country in return for natural gas payments.<sup>56</sup>

## Arms Transfers to Central Asia – 2010-19<sup>57</sup>

### Building military outposts

In the face of the emerging security threats, Beijing decided that its border with Central Asia must be completely secure. China's first counterterrorism law, adopted in 2015, allows the PLA and the PAP to assign forces overseas following approval by the Central Military Commission.<sup>58</sup> In 2016, it signed an agreement with Tajikistan on counterterrorism, which enabled it to monitor the Tajik-Afghan border for insurgency and security risks.<sup>59</sup> To further enhance the border security, Beijing acquired permission to build three command centres, five border service outposts, five border service checkpoints and one training centre on the Tajik-Afghan border.<sup>60</sup> The agreement also implies the expansion of the military guard posts up to 30-40 in Tajikistan along the border with Afghanistan.<sup>61</sup> China's spending of US\$8.5 million to construct a security outpost for Tajik use was not undertaken simply out of the goodness of Beijing's heart. Ishkashim district is at the other end of the Wakhan corridor from the previously reported facility near Shaymak, and illustrates the scale of the growth of Chinese security infrastructure in the region.<sup>62</sup>

54 Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three: China's (Para) Military Efforts to Promote Security in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan," *China Brief* 20 (18), 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-three-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan/>.

55 Bradley Jardine, "Emerging Forms of Pax Sinica in Tajikistan and Cambodia," *FPRI*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/03/emerging-forms-of-pax-sinica-in-tajikistan-and-cambodia/>

56 Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three: China's (Para) Military Efforts to Promote Security in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan," *China Brief* 20 (18), 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-three-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan/>.

57 Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Avoiding Dependence? Central Asian Security in a Multipolar World," *The Oxus Society*, 28 September 2020, <https://oxussociety.org/avoiding-dependence-central-asian-security-in-a-multipolar-world/>.

58 Mathieu Duchatel, "Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 10, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

59 Iskandar Akylbaev and Brian Y. S. Wong, "What Kazakhstan Can Teach About Medium-State Diplomacy," *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/04/what-kazakhstan-can-teach-about-medium-state-diplomacy/>

60 "Tajikistan: Secret Chinese base becomes slightly less secret," Eurasianet, 23 September 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-secret-chinese-base-becomes-slightly-less-secret>.  
Tajikistan: Secret Chinese base becomes slightly less secret

61 Oliver Young, "China Expands Security Presence in Central Asia through Tajikistan Bases," *China Digital Times*, 2021, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/china-expands-security-presence-in-central-asia-through-tajikistan-bases/>.

62 Catherine Putz, "China's Security Infrastructure Continues to Grow in Tajikistan," *The Diplomat*, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/chinas-security-infrastructure-continues-to-grow-in-tajikistan/>.

## Private security companies

The rapid expansion of China's commercial and political activities in Central Asia, in the eyes of Chinese officials, is exposing its citizens and assets to the threats of transnational terrorism, civil unrest and anti-Chinese sentiment. Occasional attacks on Chinese officials and businessmen once again highlight the danger of existing threats and the necessity to pressure local officials to enhance the security of the Chinese targets and deploy their own security means. The fact that Beijing decided to place military personnel on Tajik soil suggests a lack of confidence in Afghan and Tajik forces to provide security for the Chinese investments as well as Chinese officials and workers based on the Central Asian side of the Afghan border.<sup>63</sup> At this stage, however, China does not seem willing to substantially increase the deployment of the PLA to protect Chinese citizens and assets. As a result, Chinese private security companies (PSCs) are stepping in to fill this security vacuum.

According to recently published datasets by the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, close to a hundred anti-China protests have occurred in the region since January 2018. While Chinese workers have also been attacked by dissatisfied locals in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, it is in Kyrgyzstan that Chinese interests have faced the greatest unrest, including the 2016 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek. At least six Chinese PSCs claim to be operating in Central Asia.<sup>64</sup> By 2019, for example, one of the Chinese PSCs - Zhongjun Junhong - had secured contracts with over 20 Chinese clients operating in Kyrgyzstan, including state-owned enterprises such as the China Road and Bridge Corporation.<sup>65</sup> The China Security Technology Group already offers services in Uzbekistan, while the Frontier Services Group has also announced plans to deploy in Uzbekistan, due to the country's growing involvement in the BRI.<sup>66</sup>

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**At this stage, however, China does not seem willing to substantially increase the deployment of the PLA [...] As a result, Chinese private security companies (PSCs) are stepping in to fill this security vacuum**

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While there is clearly leeway, the arbitrary application of laws in the region nevertheless poses a significant challenge for PSCs, leading to a degree of pushback. Despite pressure from Beijing requesting permission to allow

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63 Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*. NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 85. [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

64 Niva Yau and Dirk van der Kley, "The Growth, Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia," *Oxus Society*, 13 October 2020, <https://oxussociety.org/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia/>.

65 "IntelBrief: China's Counterterrorism Inroads in Central Asia," *The Soufan Center*, 19 February 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-19/>.

66 Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three: China's (Para) Military Efforts to Promote Security in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan," *China Brief* 20 (18), 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-three-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan/>.

Chinese PSCs to operate in Kazakhstan, local authorities refuse to deploy them.<sup>67</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, PSCs are permitted to operate on the condition that they obtain the requisite permits. As such, Kyrgyzstan has seen far more Chinese PSC activity in the region than anywhere else. The presence of private security actors abroad – regardless of their country of origin – is always a complicated issue for host governments, due to the impact that these companies can have on the interests and stability of the host country, as well as the challenges in controlling their activities.<sup>68</sup>

## Geopolitical competition

Russia may no longer be their sole security patron, but its primacy is not in doubt, particularly given the dependence of the Central Asian states' weak indigenous defence industries on Soviet-era linkages centred around Russia. Russia accounted for over half of the region's arms purchases between 2015-19, and it participates in the vast majority of military exercises that involve Central Asian states, and maintains military bases with long-term leases and other military infrastructure in three of the republics.<sup>69</sup> As the region's largest weapons purchaser, Kazakhstan provides a noteworthy example: it turned to China for US\$23 million worth of arms sales in 2018, but purchased more than ten times this amount from Russia.<sup>70</sup> At present, Russia and China do not appear to be competing in Central Asia, but this will be tested as China's rise in the region continues following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. China may not yet be eating into Russia's share of the arms market, but it could start to do so as China's domestic arms industry develops and continues to seek export markets.<sup>71</sup>

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**At present, Russia and China do not appear to be competing in Central Asia, but this will be tested as China's rise in the region continues**

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67 Niva Yau and Dirk van der Kley, "The Growth, Adaptation and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia," *Oxus Society*, 13 October 2020, <https://oxussociety.org/the-growth-adaptation-and-limitations-of-chinese-private-security-companies-in-central-asia/>.

68 Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, "Guardians of the Belt and Road: The internationalization of China's private security companies," *MERICs*, 16 August 2018, <https://merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>.

69 Çağlar Kurç, "The puzzle: Multi-vector foreign policy and defense industrialization in Central Asia," *Comparative Strategy*, 37:4, 2018, 316-330.

70 Richard Weitz, *Moscow's Evolving Southern Strategy* (Washington D C: Middle East Institute, 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moscows-evolving-southern-strategy>.

71 Oliver Young, "China Expands Security Presence in Central Asia through Tajikistan Bases," *China Digital Times*, 2021, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/china-expands-security-presence-in-central-asia-through-tajikistan-bases/>.

	Military expenditures - percent of GDP <sup>72</sup>	Defence budget and global ranking (2021) <sup>73</sup>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	1.1% of GDP (2019)	US\$4 bn. / 51 <sup>st</sup> of 140
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	4% of GDP (2018)	US\$15 bn / 18 <sup>th</sup> of 140
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	1.5% of GDP (2019)	US\$20 m / 120 <sup>th</sup> of 140
<b>Tajikistan</b>	2.2% of GDP (2017)	US\$79 m / 111 <sup>th</sup> of 140
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	1.8% of GDP (2017)	US\$800 m / 77 <sup>th</sup> of 140
<b>China</b>	1.9% of GDP (2019)	US\$178.2 bn / 2 <sup>nd</sup> of 140
<b>Russia</b>	3.9% of GDP (2019)	US\$42.129 bn / 11 <sup>th</sup> of 140

Russia generally is focused on hard power in Central Asia - military bases, weapons deals, and counterterrorism cooperation through the CSTO. Meanwhile, Central Asian states' pivot towards China relates to its desire to dilute Russia's monopoly over the provision of the region's security by also taking up the uncovered niche.<sup>74</sup>

## Soft Power Security Instruments

A distinguishing feature of the new Chinese approach is the use of hybrid mechanisms – a blend of both hard and soft power tools – in the defence and security sector. Along with obvious hard power engagement, China is expanding regional communications infrastructure, the security and military importance of which will most likely grow over time. In addition, Chinese state-owned cybersecurity companies provide the surveillance and facial recognition software used in schools, public transport, and policing. These are ostensibly part of the 'smart city' initiatives in Central Asia but can be used to monitor populations.<sup>75</sup> The system that began as traffic monitoring has become a political tool, gathering information about the population that can be used for human rights violations. The near-1000 cameras in Tashkent city, Uzbekistan, have become part of the instrument to 'digitally manage political affairs'. Huawei has installed over 2000 cameras in the Kazakh capital. The government of Tajikistan has spent US\$22 million on

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**Along with obvious hard power engagement, China is expanding regional communications infrastructure, the security and military importance of which will most likely grow over time**

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<sup>72</sup> Turkmenistan VS Uzbekistan, <https://www.indexmundi.com/factbook/compare/turkmenistan.uzbekistan/military>

<sup>73</sup> "2022 Kazakhstan Military Strength," *GlobalFirePower*, 2022, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=kazakhstan](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=kazakhstan).

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Ramani, "The Emerging China-Kazakhstan Defense Relationship," *The Diplomat*, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-emerging-china-kazakhstan-defense-relationship/>.

<sup>75</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 69, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

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## **China is using the rhetoric surrounding shared security threats in an attempt to appeal to the security concerns of the local leaders**

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implementing Huawei's 'safe city' system in Dushanbe in 2013, and now there are more than 800 cameras watching over public spaces.<sup>76</sup>

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## **the pace and the extent of the Chinese economic, political and now security engagement with Central Asian countries is creating pushback, leading to growing anti-Chinese sentiments that create new security concerns of their own**

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China is using the rhetoric surrounding shared security threats in an attempt to appeal to the security concerns of the local leaders. It has also been using multiple formats for engagement with the local actors in the security and military domain. Moreover, China has been demonstrating a consistent engagement with local security issues, which has allowed Beijing to build strong relationships with the region's leaders.<sup>77</sup> However, the pace and the extent of the Chinese economic, political and now security engagement with Central Asian countries is creating pushback, leading to growing anti-Chinese sentiments that create new security concerns of their own.

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76 Junnosuke Kubara, "China puts AI at center of 'smart military' revamp: Japan report," *Asia Nikkei*, 27 November 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-puts-AI-at-center-of-smart-military-revamp-Japan-report>.

77 Raffaello Pantucci, "The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 61, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

## Growing Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Central Asia

Central Asian authorities have always spoken positively about prosperous relations with China and have declined to comment publicly on contentious issues and criticism of China.<sup>78</sup> Corruption, side payments and favouring companies with strong political ties are common practice for the selection and implementation of BRI projects in Central Asia. Thus, Central Asian political elites remain mute on China's economic expansion, social and security risks, including the country's violation of Muslims' rights in Xinjiang.<sup>79</sup> The President of Kyrgyzstan, Sooronbai Zheenbekov, has for example condemned all anti-Chinese protests that took place throughout the country and highlighted that: "We should be grateful to the Chinese side for their cooperation and help".<sup>80</sup> The President of Kazakhstan has openly declared that the government is not concerned by China's excessive influence and believes that the BRI provides many advantages for the development of the country.<sup>81</sup> For showing the affinity and offering support to Beijing amidst the outbreak of coronavirus, Kazakhstan was included in the list of 'Twenty-one friendly nations'.<sup>82</sup> Tajikistan became one of the two post-Soviet republics to support China's new security law for Hong Kong.<sup>83</sup> Out of fear of spoiling relationships with China - which could halt the money inflow - Central Asian authorities often refrain from criticising China.<sup>84</sup>

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**Out of fear of spoiling relationships with China - which could halt the money inflow – Central Asian authorities often refrain from criticizing China**

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While there is a general understanding of regional security threats, Beijing is concerned that the public in Central Asian countries mainly

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78 Sébastien Peyrouse, "Elites Benefit from Negotiations. Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7 (2016) 14–23, 17

79 Lisa Watanabe and Fabien Merz, "ETH Zurich CSS Analyses in Security. Policy CSS," No. 249, September 2019, 3, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse249-EN.pdf>.

80 Темур Умаров, "Антикитайская осень. Почему власти Казахстана не справляются с протестами против Китая," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 28 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80155>.

81 Bolat Nurgaliev, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Kazakhstan and Geopolitics" *The Astana Times*, 3 June 2020, <https://astanatimes.com/2020/06/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-kazakhstan-and-geopolitics/?fbclid=IwAR0rzgetabLSY9vOHnNI09EKdsQkN8DiwbSjvzUUycAqMHzuAYLjbVT89M>.

82 Jo Kim, "Friends and Enemies: China Is Grading the World's Coronavirus Reactions," *The Diplomat*, 2 March 2020 [https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/friends-and-enemies-china-is-grading-the-worlds-coronavirus-reactions/?fbclid=IwAR1U-dcVrEliN7xK3tCh0q\\_XXfXaV4neCjw-AoDOrPARikCgOh6BZ-GjXY](https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/friends-and-enemies-china-is-grading-the-worlds-coronavirus-reactions/?fbclid=IwAR1U-dcVrEliN7xK3tCh0q_XXfXaV4neCjw-AoDOrPARikCgOh6BZ-GjXY).

83 Yau Tsz Yan, "Chinese Business Briefing: Getting Back on Track," *Eurasianet*, 6 July 2020 [https://eurasianet.org/chinese-business-briefing-getting-back-on-track?fbclid=IwAR3vH7d\\_9HxZsOYQeB4haFNjlx67AGHimfYsNO6GHgZqC4yl6-yp-NhnE](https://eurasianet.org/chinese-business-briefing-getting-back-on-track?fbclid=IwAR3vH7d_9HxZsOYQeB4haFNjlx67AGHimfYsNO6GHgZqC4yl6-yp-NhnE).

84 Темур Умаров, "Антикитайская осень. Почему власти Казахстана не справляются с протестами против Китая," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 28 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80155>.

perceive China as a source of threat to their national security.<sup>85</sup> Central Asians are sceptical of Beijing for several reasons; a) Chinese investment projects are seen as benefiting a narrow political elite and not the wider population; b) Turkic and Muslim populations in northwest China have long endured state repression; Beijing's ill-treatment of Turkic and Muslim ethnic Central Asians and, c) Central Asian media draws heavily on the Russian press, and the Russian press does not always portray China in the most positive light.<sup>86</sup>

This section highlights how Central Asian states are not content to be merely policy-takers, but have tried to negotiate the conditions of this asymmetrical relationship to bring it more into line with the regime's political and economic interests. This is not to suggest that Central Asian states defect from Chinese hegemony, but rather that they are willing and able to push back selectively when the regime's legitimacy, state sovereignty or the economic interests of the elites are under threat.<sup>87</sup> Central Asian countries have a lot less agency than China, but they can and do exercise some control over the asymmetrical relations with Chinese authorities and business.<sup>88</sup>

Experts all agree that none of the Central Asian countries were coerced into joining the Chinese initiatives, taking 'easy' loans and boosting their dependence on its market and now security and military assistance; Central Asian ruling elites have negotiated the best possible terms for themselves. However, with the expansion of the Chinese presence in the region, more Central Asians are becoming increasingly uncomfortable with it.

According to the study conducted by Central Asia Barometer in 2020 in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, only 7% and 9% of the population, respectively have expressed 'strong support' for the Chinese energy and infrastructure projects. In Uzbekistan – the country with no immediate border nor disputed territories – has a more enthusiastic outlook towards China. Yet again, with the growing Chinese presence, the scepticism there is also growing. While in 2019, 65% of Uzbek citizens expressed 'strong support' for the Chinese investment, in 2020 only

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85 Azhar Serikkaliyeva, Aidarbek Amirbek, and Eftal Sukru Batmaz, "Chinese Institutional Diplomacy toward Kazakhstan: The SCO and the New Silk Road Initiative," *Insight Turkey*, 2018, 148, <https://www.insightturkey.com/file/1080/chinese-institutional-diplomacy-toward-kazakhstan-the-sco-and-the-new-silk-road-initiative>.

86 Eric McGlinchey, "China's Mixed Reception in Central Asia," in Nicole Peterson eds. *Chinese Strategic Intentions: A Deep Dive into China's Worldwide Activities, A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, December 2019, 107, <https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SMA-Chinese-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-FINAL-01-Nov-2.pdf>.

87 Li-Chen and Farkhod Aminjonov, "Potholes and Bumps Along the Silk Road Economic Belt in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, 1 February 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/potholes-and-bumps-along-the-silk-road-economic-belt-in-central-asia/>.

88 "Africa's experience with Chinese investors. Some parallels with Central Asia," 31 October 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/event-africas-experience-with-chinese-investors-some-parallels-with-central-asia>.

48% showed such support.<sup>89</sup> Given the sensitivity of the security and military presence, these numbers could actually be lower. In Tajikistan, authorities do not reveal details over Chinese, particularly in the newly built military facilities, which are also causing growing concerns.<sup>90</sup> Recent events suggest that anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asian societies is also related to the growing security and military presence, which is forcing local authorities to reconsider their development strategies and renegotiate the terms of arrangements for the BRI projects with China. While Chinese expansion has triggered anxiety in Tajikistan, Chinese investment projects in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were cancelled after large-scale protests erupted throughout the countries.<sup>91</sup>

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**growing anti-Chinese sentiment highlight an urgent need for the diversification of the dependencies, be they economic or security**

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**Kyrgyzstan** – As well as a number of previous flareups of anti-China demonstrations in the country in December 2018, protesters gathered outside the Chinese embassy in Bishkek to demand an end to ‘Chinese fascism’ and an explanation as to why ethnic Kyrgyz were being held in the Chinese camps.<sup>92</sup>

**Kazakhstan** - Rapidly spreading Sinophobia in Kazakhstan has also become a major concern for China. The year 2019 was described by local media as “the year of growing anti-Chinese sentiments”.<sup>93</sup> The fear of the Chinese taking over Kazakh lands sparked a countrywide protest in 2016. In 2019, in a city of oil workers in southwestern Kazakhstan, Zhanaozen, public protests erupted, demanding the cancellation of the transfer of the 55 factories from China to Kazakhstan. Residents of Zhanaozen staged their demonstration holding signs reading “No to Chinese expansion!”<sup>94</sup>

**Tajikistan** - Following many years of negotiation, Tajik authorities agreed to cede 1100 km<sup>2</sup> of territory to China and allowed Chinese

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89 Ashok Sajjanhar, “China-Central Asia relations: An uneasy co-existence,” Observer Research Foundation, 10 March 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-central-asia-relations-an-uneasy-co-existence/>.

90 Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’s forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops” *Washington Post*, 18 February 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html).

91 William A. Callahan, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the New Eurasian Order,” Policy Brief, 22/ 2016, 9.

92 Eric McGlinchey, “China’s Mixed Reception in Central Asia,” in Nicole Peterson eds. *Chinese Strategic Intentions: A Deep Dive into China’s Worldwide Activities*, A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper, December 2019, 108, <https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SMA-Chinese-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-FINAL-01-Nov-2.pdf>.

93 Sergey Sukhankin, “The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three: China’s (Para) Military Efforts to Promote Security in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan,” *China Brief* 20 (18), 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-three-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-and-turkmenistan/>.

94 Kanat Altynbayev, “2019: a year of intensifying anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia News*, 2020, [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2020/01/17/feature-03](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/01/17/feature-03).

farmers to till 2000 hectares of arable land.<sup>95</sup> Albeit unofficially, it is also believed that land acquisition deals were made in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars in Chinese debt relief.<sup>96</sup>

Central Asian elites have adopted policies that concurrently attract and - where necessary and possible - repel China in diplomatic, economic, and security realms. The question therefore arises as to what incentivises this hedging behaviour. Kazakhstan is the most successful Central Asian proponent of a 'multivector policy'<sup>97</sup>, which allowed Kazakh authorities to maintain a diversity of economic, security and political partners.<sup>98</sup> While the Kyrgyz officials do not have much leverage to hedge against China - due to the country's excessive economic dependence - Kyrgyzstan is home to Central Asia's most lively civil society, which fuels public discontent.<sup>99</sup> An increasing Chinese military presence in the country might trigger still-harsher reactions.

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95 William A. Callahan, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and the New Eurasian Order," *Policy Brief*, 22/ 2016, 10.

96 Konstantin Syroezhkin, "China's Presence in Kazakhstan: Myths and Reality," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 12(1), 2011, 102.

97 Gaukhar Nurgalieva et al., *Chinese Grand Strategy in the Eurasian Heartland* (Moscow: Skolkovo Institute for Emerging Market Studies, 2019), [https://iems.skolkovo.ru/downloads/documents/SKOLKOVO\\_IEMS/Research\\_Reports/SKOLKOVO\\_IEMS\\_Research\\_2019-06-05\\_en.pdf](https://iems.skolkovo.ru/downloads/documents/SKOLKOVO_IEMS/Research_Reports/SKOLKOVO_IEMS_Research_2019-06-05_en.pdf).

98 OECD, *Sustainable Infrastructure for Low-Carbon Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Hotspot Analysis and Needs Assessment*.

99 *Freedom in the World* (Washington D C: Freedom House), <http://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>.

## Europe as a Values-Driven Alternative to China

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Central Asia is squashed between two major powers: Russia and China. Even though Chinese investment, and now security cooperation, are often welcomed in Central Asia, growing anti-Chinese sentiment highlight an urgent need for the diversification of the dependencies, be they economic or security. Considering the history of the EU engagement with the region and its relatively positive image, it presents a viable potential security actor. Central Asian countries perceive the EU as a relatively neutral actor without substantial geopolitical interests. The EU has proven to be a reliable and long-term partner, engaging with Central Asian domestic and external affairs since the 1990s.<sup>100</sup>

It provides valuable assistance to improve governance for the newly independent Central Asian states through the promotion of human rights, civil society and the rule of law that are fundamental to EU values as basis for engagement.<sup>101</sup> The EU is not a major power in the region, nor is it willing to become one. It does, however, have comparative advantages in being perceived as non-offensive and for occupying areas neglected by the other actors, such as governance, local economic development and water security.<sup>102</sup> Central Asian countries' cooperation with the Western nations highlight the multivector policy of the local actors and reinforces their sovereignty independent of Russia or China.

The EU Strategy of 2007 urged European actors to engage in the areas where they possess certain leverage, and discouraged them from engaging in areas where they have a marginal influence.<sup>103</sup> Key objectives highlighted in the 'Regional Strategy Paper for Assistance to Central Asia for the period 2007–2013' turned EU into a "normative" and "civilian power", which featured external policies designed to enhance peace, liberty, human rights, the rule of law and democracy.<sup>104</sup>

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**Central Asians tend to see NATO as a threat rather than as a source of protection**

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100 Jos Boonstra and Ricardo Panella, "Three Reasons Why the EU Matters to Central Asia," *Voices of Central Asia*, 13 March 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/three-reasons-why-the-eu-matters-to-central-asia/>.

101 Sebastief Peyrouse, "A Donor without Influence: The European Union in Central Asia," *Ponars*, 16 June 2017, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/a-donor-without-influence-the-european-union-in-central-asia/>.

102 Olga Alinda Spaiser, "The European Union's Influence in Central Asia. Geopolitical Challenges and Responses," *Central Asia Program*, <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/european-unions-influence-central-asia-geopolitical-challenges-responses>.

103 Neil J. Melvin, "The European Union's Strategic Role in Central Asia," *CEPS Policy Brief*, No. 128, March 2007, <http://aei.pitt.edu/7366/2/7366.pdf>.

104 Olga Alinda Spaiser, "The EU as a Security Actor in Central Asia: Minor but not Marginal," *CAIRN.info*, 2015, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-83.htm>.



Security and military domain were among the areas where the EU is at a disadvantage. After post-2014 Afghanistan, along with the destabilising effects of the Arab Spring “*security issues have come to fore in relations with the EU*”. However, ‘hard security’ programmes have never been conceived by the EU alone. All those programmes were carried out within broader regional institutions.<sup>105</sup> Already, since the early 2000s, the EU has had two large-scale security-focused programmes in Central Asia. There were the Central Asia Drugs Action Programme (CADAP), aimed at supporting the Central Asian states at fighting drugs trafficking from Afghanistan, and the Border Management in Central Asia program (BOMCA), designed to strengthen border management.

European countries engage with Central Asian countries to a different extent through regional mechanisms within the NATO, EU or OSCE frameworks; strengthening peace, complying with respect for the rules of international law as well as cooperation and good neighbourly relations between states. In 2010, Kazakhstan was the first non-western nation to hold the chairmanship of the OSCE. Within the security cluster, the OSCE deals with arms control, border management, the fight against terrorism, trafficking in human beings, arms and drugs, economic and environmental topics, human rights and rule of law issues as well as media freedom.<sup>106</sup>

Since 2013, the EU has also established regular high-level political and security dialogues with Central Asian counterparts. The EU updated its Central Asia strategy in 2019, highlighting the focus on resilience (human rights, border security and the environment), connectivity-driven prosperity and regional cooperation, encouraging the parties involved to

105 Olga Alinda Spaiser, “The EU as a Security Actor in Central Asia: Minor but not Marginal,” *CAIRN.info*, 2015, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-83.htm>.

106 Mordechai de Hass, “Kazakhstan’s Security Policy: Steady as She Goes?” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28(4), 2015, 621-645.

strengthen such dialogues.<sup>107</sup> This new strategy retains a more flexible approach in dealing with the region, with no one-size-fits-all strategy to be implemented, focusing on the regional diversity instead. Yet the strategy lacks clarity in coordinating activity among individual European states.<sup>108</sup>

## Major Shift in the EU Strategy towards Central Asia

The EU has always adopted an integrated approach to relations with Central Asian countries, combining military, civilian, development and diplomatic efforts.<sup>109</sup> While the EU will most likely continue pursuing such an approach, within the latest security strategy - the Strategic Compass, which was launched in March 2022 - the importance of the security and military components will be elevated. Within this strategy, there seems to be a common understanding that Europe is in danger. The threats are not constrained by territory or direct military threats. The range of security threats, and consequently the range of instruments needed to respond to those threats, has expanded considerably, as has the need for urgency in addressing them. The Strategic Compass, formally approved in March 2022, calls for the change of EU foreign policy approach towards security and defence. Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice President of the European Commission, in explaining the rationale for the adoption of the new strategy, pointed out that: "the seriousness of the deterioration of Europe's strategic environment: threats are coming from everywhere; they are intensifying; becoming more connected; and the capacity of individual member states to cope is declining. Ministers agreed on the gravity and urgency of the situation and that we cannot afford 'business as usual'".<sup>110</sup> While the recent developments in Ukraine have taken the most prominent place in the Strategic Compass, Central Asia could grow in relevance, as the EU is looking to increase its security-related cooperation with the OSCE in the region.<sup>111</sup> The Strategic Compass has laid out a strategic approach for EU security and defence that will guide EU actions to 2030.

European countries do recognise that they have to operate in an increasingly competitive strategic environment, and that they have

107 "Fact Sheets on the European Union: Central Asia," *European Parliament*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/178/central-asia>.

108 Alica Kizekova, "The European Union in Central Asia: Balancing Competing Actors and Opportunities for the V4 Countries," *Think Visegrad*, October 2019, <https://www.europeum.org/data/articles/3-kizekova.pdf>.

109 "Rentrée 2021: Afghanistan and beyond," *EEAS*, 6 September 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/103745/retr%C3%A9-2021-afghanistan-and-beyond\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/103745/retr%C3%A9-2021-afghanistan-and-beyond_en).

110 Josep Borrell, "Time to Move Forward with the Strategic Compass," *EEAS*, 18 November 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/107464/time-move-forward-strategic-compass\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/107464/time-move-forward-strategic-compass_en).

111 General Secretariat, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence," Council of the European Union, 21 March 2022, 40, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

to become active security providers for their citizens, protecting their interests within the EU and beyond. As a starting point, EU Ministers have been working on a shared threat assessment, which now distinguishes allies from rivals more clearly.<sup>112</sup> The strategy of 2019 was largely silent on the Chinese BRI, and did not portray China as a partner or competitor in Central Asia, while Russia was not mentioned at all.<sup>113</sup> Within the new approach, a more determined reaction to China's rise and assertiveness can be seen. European leaders are being urged to remain strong and united in their foreign policy towards China, which is now based on "partner, competitor and rival" triptic approach.<sup>114</sup>

Considering the potential side-effects of the Chinese pursuit of security and military ambitions, particularly in the Central Asian region, the new EU strategy may become incompatible with Beijing's key security objectives in the region. It may happen that the new EU strategy will fall in line with the US National Security Strategy, which describes China's rise as "more repressive [which] expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others".<sup>115</sup> Western, Russian and Chinese strategies offer different perspectives on security and war and on the approaches needed to address existing and emerging threats.

The EU might have to deal with certain obstacles in its security and military policy towards the Central Asian region. The EU's security doctrine assumes that "[t]he main sources of political insecurity are either authoritarian states that repress their own citizens or a combination of state and a non-state armed groups in conditions of state failure".<sup>116</sup> The EU will have to deal with those authoritarian regimes in promoting stronger security and military cooperation. In Tajikistan, cases of harassment and imprisonment of the regime's critics, including the leaders of now-banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, are common. Turkmenistan is one of the most oppressive and closed nations in the world. Despite adopting new laws on peaceful assembly, Kazakh authorities continuously interfere with, and restrict the rights to, peaceful assemblies by detaining and prosecuting the protestors. In Uzbekistan, even after the partial opening of the country through leadership change, some opposition candidates were not allowed to run in the recent Presidential election, while outspoken and

112 Josep Borrell, "A Strategic Compass to make Europe a Security Provider," EEAS, [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/foreword\\_-\\_a\\_strategic\\_compass\\_to\\_make\\_europe\\_a\\_security\\_provider.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/foreword_-_a_strategic_compass_to_make_europe_a_security_provider.pdf)

113 Jos Boonstra, "A New EU Strategy for Central Asia: From Challenges to Opportunities," 3 October 2019, ISPI, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/new-eu-strategy-central-asia-challenges-opportunities-24062>.

114 Josep Borrell, "Europe Cannot Afford to Be a Bystander in the World. We Need a 'Strategic Compass'," EEAS, 10 October 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/105369/europe-cannot-afford-be-bystander-world-we-need-%E2%80%9Cstrategic-compass%E2%80%9D\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/105369/europe-cannot-afford-be-bystander-world-we-need-%E2%80%9Cstrategic-compass%E2%80%9D_en).

115 Yuen Foong Khong, "Contending Visions of the Regional Order in East Asia. A Regional Perspective on the U.S. and Chinese Visions for East Asia," *Asia Policy* 13(2), April 2018, 10.

116 Olga Alinda Spaiser, "The EU as a Security Actor in Central Asia: Minor but not Marginal," *CAIRN.info*, 2015, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2015-1-page-83.htm>.

critical bloggers are still being targeted.<sup>117</sup> Dealing with authoritarian regimes in the military and security domain may prove to be much harder than in the previous areas of the EU focus, namely economic and social sectors. It will be even harder with the expansion of the Chinese influence that has similar domestic and foreign policy attitudes.

## Engaging NATO in Promoting Security and Military in Central Asia

Many European states are NATO members, and also use the policy tools of this political and military alliance. NATO is constantly adapting to the changing security and military dynamics by taking on new roles and responsibilities.<sup>118</sup> Central Asia is listed among the strategically important regions whose security and stability are closely linked to wider Euro-Atlantic security, which explains the NATO engagement within the region.<sup>119</sup> As a key tool for assistance to world regions, including Central Asia, NATO Member States have developed an extensive network within Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, which promotes various political and military activities.<sup>120</sup> There are, of course, a number of other programmes and initiatives through which NATO has partnered with Central Asian states since 1990s, such as the Group of Defence Ministers, Defence Education Enhancement Programme or diplomatic representation to NATO Headquarters, among others. Considering that security and defence are important segments of NATO's cooperation with its partners, Central Asian states have, and may continue drawing on, substantial expertise in these areas. These include peacekeeping, crisis management operations, reforming defence institutions as well as establishing civilian and democratic control of the armed forces. All the listed military and security support is highly relevant to Central Asian countries.

As highlighted in recently released documents elaborating on the proposed NATO 2030 strategy, the organisation remains committed to strengthening political dialogue and intensifying practical cooperation with those Central Asian states exploring areas for further engagement.<sup>121</sup> A promising aspect of the NATO 2030 strategy is the aim of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders – allied parliamentarians, civil society, public and private sector experts and youth – in order to provide

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117 "EU: Tackle Central Asia Rights Abuses," *Human Rights Watch*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/19/eu-tackle-central-asia-rights-abuses>.

118 Carlo Masala, "NATO and Asia," *KAS*, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=009008e3-a002-eb19-9c8e-e0220931b2dc&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=009008e3-a002-eb19-9c8e-e0220931b2dc&groupId=252038).

119 "NATO's Relations with Central Asia," *NATO website*, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_107957.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_107957.htm).

120 Carlo Masala, "NATO and Asia," *KAS*, 26, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=009008e3-a002-eb19-9c8e-e0220931b2dc&groupId=252038](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=009008e3-a002-eb19-9c8e-e0220931b2dc&groupId=252038).

121 "Brussels Summit Communiqué," 14 June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en).

new insights and fresh thinking on how to enhance effectiveness and efficiency of NATO programmes and initiatives.<sup>122</sup>

European countries in engaging in military and security activities through NATO with Central Asian countries can, however, face certain obstacles. According to the survey by the American firm Gallup, released in 2016, Central Asians tend to see NATO as a threat rather than as a source of protection, with Tajikistan being the most anti-NATO, with 34% perceiving it as a threat, followed by Kazakhstan with 31% and Kyrgyzstan with 30%.<sup>123</sup> New developments triggered by NATO forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan also did not create a positive image of the organisation in the eyes of the local policy makers. Melinda Haring, deputy director of the Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, believes that a critical element of the foreign policy priorities of both Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia is the exclusion of the collective West from the region, and perhaps above all, NATO.<sup>124</sup> Even though many experts agree that CSTO possesses neither the military nor financial resources to counterbalance NATO on the global scale, in the Russia's near-abroad - Central Asia - it seems to have proven successful in meeting this objective. NATO, along with its European members, was eager to work with both Russia and China on Central Asian security and military issues. However, following the conflict in Ukraine, the confrontation between Western powers on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, may intensify over other contested regions, such as Central Asia. Given that Central Asian states do not entirely share Western values and interests, the foreign policies of which are highly influenced by national interests of their immediate neighbours, Russia and China, it might require a substantial effort and new approach for NATO to not only return to the region but also to be able to contribute to the local actor's hedging strategies against larger neighbours.

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122 "NATO 2030: Making a Strong Alliance Even Stronger," <https://www.nato.int/nato2030/>.

123 Michael Smith, "Most NATO Members in Eastern Europe See It as Protection," *Gallup*, 10 February 2017, [https://news.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx?g\\_source=World&g\\_medium=newsfeed&g\\_campaign=tiles](https://news.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx?g_source=World&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles).

124 Emil Avdaliani, "Unrest in Kazakhstan Only Solidifies China-Russia Ties," *China Observer*, 20 January 2022, <https://chinaobservers.eu/unrest-in-kazakhstan-only-solidifies-china-russia-ties>.

## The Way Forward – Recommendations for European decision makers

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As highlighted in the previous chapters, an attempt to enhance security and military involvement in Central Asia will require a shift in the European states' foreign policy priorities and the policy instruments they use towards the region and external powers. The following section provides a comprehensive set of recommendations as an asset to the European decision makers in their pursuit of the new strategy towards Central Asia.



1. To expect a fully-fledged European geopolitical and security competition over Central Asian region with external powers, such as Russia, China or the US, would be naïve. Yet, the existing and emerging security and military developments in a broader Eurasian region are triggering a greater interest in reinforcing security and defence cooperation between EU and Central Asian countries. The EU will stand a better chance of engaging in the region's security and military policy if it adheres to the 'pragmatic' approach, by clearly highlighting its areas of engagement and by staying on the course.<sup>125</sup>
2. One of the comparative advantages of the EU engagement in the region is the importance they place on intra-regional cooperation. The primary focus so far has been the economic and social sectors. Encouraging local actors to also strengthen military and security cooperation between the Central Asian states could enhance the region's resilience to both domestic and external threats. There

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<sup>125</sup> Mridvika Sahajpal and Steven Blockmans, "The New EU Strategy on Central Asia: Collateral Benefit," *CEPS*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.ceps.eu/the-new-eu-strategy-on-central-asia/>.

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## One of the comparative advantages of the EU engagement in the region is the importance they place on intra-regional cooperation

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is already a precedent for intra-Central Asian security and military cooperation. Kazakhstan has pledged to provide military-technical support to Central Asia allies amid security threats emanating from neighbouring Afghanistan. Kazakhstan has also ratified agreements on military-technical assistance to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The military equipment delivered is not for transfer to the third party and will only be used for its intended purpose. Kazakhstan is also planning to provide military aid to Tajikistan.<sup>126</sup> Central Asian countries should

strengthen intra-Central Asian security and military cooperation not only to address threats emanating from neighbouring Afghanistan but also to counter the foreign policy of Russia and China, should they perceive it as 'aggressive'.<sup>127</sup>

3. Chinese loans and military support have been more attractive to the authoritarian patrimonial regimes of Central Asia, because some of these funds are channelled to regime supporters whose companies partake directly or indirectly in BRI projects. However, growing anti-Chinese sentiments, rapidly accumulating debts and latent threats to political sovereignty started to reveal the pitfalls of the support offered by China. Generally speaking, the conditions Beijing offers are dissimilar to the terms of arrangements with the Western partners.<sup>128</sup> Beijing uses tacit rules, among which perhaps the most important is the taboo on criticising Beijing's domestic and foreign policies and loyalty in the international arena.<sup>129</sup> Where local governments do criticise China, they are labelled as pawns in geopolitical games of the West, rather than as sovereign states promoting their national interests.<sup>130</sup> Expanding security presence may further reveal the hidden risks of the Chinese assistance. Reshaping the discourse of China providing 'unconditional' assistance should be an integral part of any EU – Central Asia cooperation.<sup>131</sup>
4. On the security front, the EU has some clear concerns with respect to Central Asia, including energy supply security through diversification of sources and linkages with Afghanistan. The European Commission

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126 Vusala Abbasova, "Kazakhstan Pledges Military Aid to Central Asian Allies Amid Threats Emanating from Afghanistan," *Caspian News*, 12 November 2021, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/kazakhstan-pledges-military-aid-to-central-asian-allies-amid-threats-emanating-from-afghanistan-2021-11-12-0/>.

127 Aydar Ashimov, "Kazakhstan Pledges Military Aid to Central Asian Allies Amid Threats Emanating from Afghanistan," *Central Asia News*, 22 February 2021, [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi.ca/features/2021/02/22/feature-01](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi.ca/features/2021/02/22/feature-01).

128 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

129 Temur Umarov, "What's Behind Protests Against China in Kazakhstan?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 30 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80229>.

130 Xu J and Du Z, "The Dominant Thinking Sets in Chinese Foreign Policy Research: A Criticism," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2015, 251–279.

131 Emilbek Dzhuraev and Nargiza Muratalieva, "The EU Strategy on Central Asia: To the successful implementation of the new Strategy," *FES*, March 2020, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bischkek/16168.pdf>.

has regrouped Central Asia with South Asia, rather than in a group of post-Soviet states, as part of the multiregional dimension of its development assistance policy.<sup>132</sup> However, for its security and military purpose, the EU may wish to consider approaching Central Asian countries within a separately designed policy framework with focus on the issues discussed in this section. Should this initiative be proposed by the EU – either by the EU Member States or the EEAS - it will without doubt be of interest to its Central Asian counterparts for triggering a more comprehensive approach in this direction.

5. Building on its years-long experience in facilitating regional cooperation, the EU can take advantage of the new regional dynamics triggered by the leadership change in Uzbekistan. This is an opportunity for Central Asian actors to strengthen their regional cooperation by working together with an external actor that has been active in the region all along. To accelerate the process, however, the EU needs to carefully re-assess what will be of interest to a group of Central Asian states, including hard security and military coordination.<sup>133</sup> For example, it may be a good idea to transfer the Border Management in Central Asia programme model to other parts of the security sector in Central Asia. The EU could consider applying the integrated (border management) approach to broader security and military assistance.<sup>134</sup>
6. As long as Russia and China's understanding of the security issues is closer to that of the Central Asian countries than that of the EU, an enhanced presence for the latter will remain problematic. The EU's leverage in the security field in Central Asia is constrained by the lack of a common understanding of certain security issues, particularly religious extremism, terrorism or domestic unrest. On these matters, the EU and Central Asian countries have divergent understandings of both the causes and the solutions. To elevate security and military relations, the EU and Central Asian representatives need to work on reducing this gap.
7. The way Beijing uses its PSC has a direct implication for EU/NATO countries' interests in Central Asia, as they are largely unregulated and their security staff are often inexperienced in dealing with serious conflict situations and combat. When it comes to the increasing presence of Chinese PSCs in Central Asia, it is also not entirely clear to whom those companies are accountable. Is it the state in which they are registered, to the state in which they operate, or to the

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132 Murat Laumulin, "The EU's Incomplete Strategy for Central Asia," *Carnegie Europe*, 3 December 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/80470>.

133 Jos Boonstra and Ricardo Panella, "Three Reasons Why the EU Matters to Central Asia," *Voices of Central Asia*, 13 March 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/three-reasons-why-the-eu-matters-to-central-asia/>.

134 Jos Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia says 'security'. Does this include Security Sector Reform?" *EUCAM*, No. 10, November 2009, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/1033/7809/The%20EU%20Central%20Asia%20and%20SSR.pdf>.

state by which they were contracted?<sup>135</sup> The EU decision makers can encourage and assist both China and Central Asian counterparts to adopt regulatory mechanisms for Chinese PSCs' activities in the region. This can be largely drawn from their own experience within the following institutions: European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission's Directorate General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA).<sup>136</sup> The EU is recommended to assist local actors in designing clear guidelines for all PSCs to align with international standards, including requirements to monitor and regulate the evolution of the Chinese PSC. Due to asymmetrical interdependence, smaller countries such as Kyrgyzstan may not be able to afford to make some bold decisions to constrain Chinese PSC. Thus, the support of other powers, such as EU or NATO, would certainly accelerate the process.

8. China still prefers to primarily rely on economic, political and diplomatic leverages to influence Central Asian counterparts. As highlighted in this chapter, however, China is modernising its military and expanding its military presence. Many experts believe that considering China's military capacity and its complicated power relations with both local and external actors, they may see it shift to a more forceful approach, should the necessity arise for addressing security threats in the future.<sup>137</sup> The EU, having anticipated the possibility of a more forceful Chinese engagement with the region, may wish to design a preliminary course of actions to assist Central Asian states in responding to any such threat.
9. The EU strategy for Central Asia in 2019 has pressed for providing stronger objectives for human rights protection in the region. The political and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan are currently presenting a testing ground for the EU's commitment to upholding those objectives, particularly in such areas as security and migration. A much-closer engagement by the EU in the Afghan crisis, through developing cooperative dynamics with Central Asian states, must become an integral part of the foreign policy agenda towards the region.
10. Central Asian elites and Chinese authorities are very convenient partners for each other. Central Asian regimes have calculated that

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135 Alessandro Arduini, "China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of the New Security Actors," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 61, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

136 Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, "Guardians of the Belt and Road: The internationalization of China's private security companies," *MERICs*, 16 August 2018, <https://merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>.

137 Guifang (Julia) Xue, "The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities in the Belt and Road Initiative," in Nadege Rolland eds. *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Road*, NBR Special Report 80, 2019, 54-55, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80\\_securing\\_the\\_belt\\_and\\_road\\_sep2019.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr80_securing_the_belt_and_road_sep2019.pdf).

political solidarity with China, which is perceived as an anti-liberal force, bolsters their own rule. Although this may sound paradoxical, Central Asian authorities see the BRI initiative as a means of addressing regime survival and sovereignty since it provides 'alliance shelter' from what some of the policy makers believe to Western-promoted destabilising trends such as democracy, good governance and market reforms.<sup>138</sup> Such an approach is stalling EU engagement with the Central Asian region. While the EU cannot deviate from this course, it may wish to strengthen its support for the political reforms in Central Asia, and link them to the security and military realms.

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**Central Asian authorities see the BRI initiative as a means of addressing regime survival and sovereignty since it provides 'alliance shelter' from what some of the policy makers believe to Western-promoted destabilizing trends such as democracy, good governance and market reforms**

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11. As highlighted in chapter three, anti-Chinese sentiments in Central Asia are growing. Such sentiments are putting Chinese nationals and assets at risk, which may lead Beijing to push for a greater Chinese security presence. China's security cooperation with Central Asian countries has been criticised for exercising political oppression in the name of combatting terrorism, mass prosecution of ethnic Uyghurs and human rights abuses. It does not necessarily have to lead to this, but as China's security footprint in the region expands, it might potentially strengthen authoritarianism in the region, thus posing threat to EU/NATO interests.<sup>139</sup> The EU may wish to encourage Central Asian actors, and those working on regional affairs, to initiate a more accountable process in the local actors' relations with China, for example, on the matter of extradition of Uyghurs.<sup>140</sup>
  
12. Human rights groups and Western countries have accused China of crimes – including mass internment, forced labour and forced birth control campaigns – against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the region.<sup>141</sup> In response to the human rights violation against Uyghurs in China, the US has passed the Uyghur Human Rights Act of 2020, which allows for the broad sanctioning by the US of business entities and government individuals directly responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. This mechanism also implies lobbying and pressuring Central Asian countries to deny the extradition of Uyghurs

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138 Kathleen Collins, "Economic and Security Regionalism among Patrimonial Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Central Asia," *ibid.* 61, no. 2, 2009.

139 "IntelBrief: China's Counterterrorism Inroads in Central Asia," *The Soufan Center*, 19 February 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-19/>.

140 Andreas Borgeas, "Security Relations between Kazakhstan and China: Assessments and Recommendations on the Transnational Uyghur question," *Journal of International Affairs*, 2013, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/security-relations-between-kazakhstan-and-china-assessments-and-recommendations>.

141 Linda Lew, "Why China is funding a base in Tajikistan," *South China Morning Post*, 7 November 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3155133/why-china-funding-base-tajikistan>.

to Chinese authorities.<sup>142</sup> Uyghur groups submitted some evidence to the International Criminal Group, requesting the start of further investigation into mass deportation of Uyghurs from Tajikistan to China. According to the submitted preliminary evidence - as claimed by the Uyghur groups - some 3000 Uyghurs from Tajikistan and around 4000 Uyghurs from Kyrgyzstan, ex-detainees who escaped from Xinjiang, were forced back to China between 2016-18.<sup>143</sup> The EU, with a firm position against deporting Uyghurs to China, may wish to coordinate its course of actions with currently existing US policy instruments.

13. Within the security and military mechanisms offered by Beijing and Moscow civil society activists, all members of Islamic groups or individuals who fall foul of the regime may be at risk of pressure by the local authorities.<sup>144</sup> For the Russian and Chinese policy makers, security and military sectors are strategic and sensitive areas for cooperation that should not be open to the public. Perhaps it is exactly because these areas are strategic and sensitive that they should require transparency, accountability and good governance. For example, the Kazakh government must not simply repress civilians for holding 'extremist' views, as perceived by the government officials. There should be a clear distinction between the terrorist groups and people holding an extremist opinion, and that non-violent propagandists should not be treated in the same manner as violent militants.<sup>145</sup> Although this is not an easy task to accomplish, the success of the EU security initiatives in the region will require more efforts to be placed on encouraging and pressing - where necessary - its Central Asian counterparts to recognise political groups that do not share the beliefs and values of the formal government.
14. EU must develop a unified vision in support of Security Sector Reforms in Central Asia. Local regimes may not be receptive to key aspects of these reforms, such as democratic control of armed forces

142 Alexander Cooley, "Securing the neighborhood: China's evolving security footprint in Central Asia", 2021, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/securing-the-neighborhood-chinas-evolving-security-footprint-in-central-asia/>.

143 Zholdas Orisbayev, "Chinese Muslims want ICC to hear former Xinjiang detainee," *Eurasia.net*, 21 April 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/chinese-muslims-want-icc-to-hear-former-xinjiang-detainee>; Oliver Young, "China Expands Security Presence in Central Asia through Tajikistan Bases," *China Digital Times*, 2021, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/china-expands-security-presence-in-central-asia-through-tajikistan-bases/>; "Uyghur groups want to take China to the International Criminal Court," *The Economist*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/2021/06/10/uyghur-groups-want-to-take-china-to-the-international-criminal-court>; "Lawyers urge ICC to probe alleged forced deportations of Uyghurs from Tajikistan," *Reuters*, 10 June 2021, [https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/lawyers-urge-icc-probe-alleged-forced-deportations-uyghurs-tajikistan-2021-06-10/#:~:text=THE%20HAGUE%2C%20June%2010%20\(Reuters,a%20member%20of%20the%20court](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/lawyers-urge-icc-probe-alleged-forced-deportations-uyghurs-tajikistan-2021-06-10/#:~:text=THE%20HAGUE%2C%20June%2010%20(Reuters,a%20member%20of%20the%20court).

144 "Cynical subversion of justice in the name of security: Returns to torture in Central Asia," *Amnesty International*, 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/07/cynical-subversion-justice-name-security-returns-torture-central-asia/>.

145 Mordechai de Hass, "Kazakhstan's Security Policy: Steady as She Goes?" *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28(4), 2015, 621-645.

or state security institutions.<sup>146</sup> Both the EU and NATO have limited experience engaging with Central Asian countries in the military sector. The EU has, however, developed an extensive platform for political dialogue over the years. Feeding security and military engagement into the political dialogue may considerably enhance its chances of success.

15. Should the EU start taking a more active role as a security provider in Central Asia, it will have to engage in the areas currently dominated by Russia and China. Unlike countries in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe, Central Asian countries have lacked the same access to Western education, leading them to fall under Russian, and increasingly Chinese, military education influences. The EU and NATO may want to develop both short- and long-term programmes for military education, drawing on the experience gained by the US over the years. The primary objective would be to establish long-term relationships between international officers, share experiences and develop a common understanding of conceptual thinking of security issues. This could be an area where Western actors would offer opportunities that neither Russian nor Chinese counterparts could match – critical and academic approaches to understanding security, by discovering the root causes of security problems, open-ended discussions, and academic liberties.<sup>147</sup> The EU, NATO and OSCE working together would certainly reinforce the position of the Western partners.
16. Central Asian countries have conducted a series of military reforms throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Local actors experienced various challenges along the way, including financial difficulties in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and institutional difficulties in the politically closed-off states of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Military training is still the weakest link in modernising Central Asian armies. Financial resources are an issue. However, human capital can prove to be even more important for armies attempting to become professional.<sup>148</sup> NATO is in a better position to provide military support, but does not enjoy a positive image among Central Asian states and is perceived as a rival by China and Russia. The EU may not be able to compete with China and Russia in terms of

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**The EU may not be able to compete with China and Russia in terms of providing tangible military support, but it can certainly be of the utmost importance in providing soft power military support.**

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146 Jos Boonstra, "The EU Strategy for Central Asia says 'security'. Does this include Security Sector Reform?" *EUCAM*, No. 10, November 2009, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/1033/7809/The%20EU%20Central%20Asia%20and%20SSR.pdf>.

147 Erica Marat, "China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia," *PONARS*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/chinas-expanding-military-education-diplomacy-in-central-asia/>.

148 Sebastien Peyrouse, "The Central Asian Armies Facing the Challenge of Formation," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 11, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.3799>.

providing tangible military support, but it can certainly be of the utmost importance in providing soft-power military support. Having the EU and NATO merging their efforts would certainly increase the chances for successful implementation of such initiatives.

17. The EU has been criticised for taking an overly general approach to security and military cooperation. Efforts by the EU have remained mainly invisible, or order not to provoke confrontation from the more influential security and military actors. The new strategy, however, will require a different and more assertive approach. The EU and NATO may consider providing a more dynamic consultancy mechanism, including in the areas of security, defence and military assistance. For this, it is also critical that regular interactions between the Western institutions and local actors are maintained.<sup>149</sup>
18. The EU should use the rhetoric of non-intervention in its relations with Central Asian actors. A strategic objective to engage in those areas of cooperation that other major powers were reluctant - local development initiatives, water management or good governance reforms - has always been a distinguishing feature of the EU partners in the region. Changing times and emerging risks are forcing EU to be more active in military and security domains. The EU can still retain the status of a 'needed' strategic partner, by adhering to the principle of non-intervention that neither Russia nor China would be able to maintain. Russia already has its permanent military presence in the region, which is both welcomed and makes local regimes uncomfortable. One of the main risks that Central Asian states will face in the near future will be the permanency of the Chinese military presence. The more active China becomes in the region, the more difficult it will be for Beijing to adhere to the principle of non-interference.<sup>150</sup> The EU, on the other hand, is a geographically distant actor with no direct interest in remaining in the region should the capacity of the region to address security threats enhances. Moreover, EU/NATO military and security assistance can be of much use in making the Central Asian countries less dependent on both Chinese and Russian permanent military presences.

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149 Murat Laumulin, "The EU's Incomplete Strategy for Central Asia," *Carnegie Europe*, 3 December 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/80470>

150 Oliver Young, "China Expands Security Presence in Central Asia through Tajikistan Bases," *China Digital Times*, 2021, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2021/11/china-expands-security-presence-in-central-asia-through-tajikistan-bases/>

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ISBN 9789464598803

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