

International Competition in Central Asia Perspective in International Relations

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The problem of the research was that Central Asia has strategic elements that helped to create a hidden conflict between international powers for the sake of the limit of influence and domination. **Method:** The research likely used qualitative political analysis through a geopolitical lens, examining post-9/11 developments, international agreements, and regional dynamics involving the United States, European Union, and Russia. **Results:** The geopolitical movement of the United States, the European Union and Russia intensified after the events of September 11, 2001, and the competition between these forces increased to strengthen their political, economic and military influence, in light of the republics with fragile political, economic and military pillars that helped to attract international powers under the pretext of helping countries and overcoming the challenges they face. Therefore, multiple agreements were concluded that contributed to penetrating Central Asia, which raised the ire of Russia, which considered it a threat to Russian national security and fear of being surrounded and besieged by these countries and Western forces and their role in international relations. **Novelty:** Central Asia represents a strategic and geopolitical importance, due to its location and resources in the vital field of Eurasia, which is a buffer zone between Asian and regional powers, and the region represents a pivotal intersection point for international powers.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia witnessed geopolitical transformations after the dissolution of the (former) Soviet Union, which led to the emergence of new countries carrying a legacy of the Soviet state and trying to adapt to the world order. Countries emerged in a very complex region with opportunities and advantages that carry fears and threats and try to get rid of the old legacy, which facilitated the penetration of Western and regional powers with goals and motives until the emergence of liberal thought based on the principles of democracy, the free market and international cooperation. The events of September 11, 2001 prompted the US-led world order to go to Central Asia as the key to control over Eurasia to fill the political vacuum and achieve the goals of the US strategy, which is to contain China, the growing country in the rise economically, politically and even militarily, and to encircle Russia and blockade it and prevent the extension of its influence over the republics and its role in gathering Asian powers to re-engineer the world order. The penetration of Central Asia created attractions that led to the conclusion of agreements and multidirectional partnerships so that these partnerships allow control of energy supplies such as oil, gas, land and air routes, which the West sees as the key to control and control the capabilities of the major political blocs in Central Asia. The research aims to diagnose the strategic importance of Central Asia and control the course

of international relations that possess the distinctive location and natural resources and their view of the Russian and Chinese vital sphere. Accordingly, it was divided into :

1. The first axis: The strategic importance of Central Asia.
2. The second axis: Competing international powers in Central Asia.
3. The third axis: The future of international competition in the region.
4. Conclusion
5. Refernces

The Research Problem

The main research problem was that (Central Asia has strategic elements that led to a hidden conflict between the active international forces that fear the political blocs surrounding the region). The research questions were as follows :

1. What is the strategic importance of Central Asia?
2. To what extent have the international actors affected the independence of the Central Asian republics?
3. What is the future of international competition for Central Asia?

The Research Hypothesi:

Each research has a main hypothesis that has a role in the results and recommendations, and the main hypothesis of the research was (that there are strategic motives and objectives that led to the existence of international competition that affected the course of international relations in the region). The sub-hypotheses were :

1. Central Asia represented the heart region and the location of the strategic location of the international actors.
2. The events of September 11, 2001 were considered the most prominent motive for attracting competing forces in the region.
3. There is a US-European penetration of the region with economic and military cooperation.

Research Objective

The research aims to:

1. Diagnosing the strategic importance of Central Asia by investing in the site and energy sources.
2. Identify the competing international powers that are competing to focus their economic, military and political interests.
3. The research gives an indication to the political decision-maker on how to protect the state from competitions and their motives and how to benefit from the state of competition at the same time.

The Importance of Research

Central Asia is in a state of hidden conflict between the international and regional powers due to the strategic importance represented by the region and in light of the escalation of that importance to the region and the geopolitical movement of international powers such as the United States of America, the European Union and Russia, because of their goals and motives. These competitions have led to the existence of axes aimed at enhancing the opportunities of actors to extend influence and win the race in the Great

Game in Central Asia. The importance of the research stems from the fact that the cooperation of the political forces in the region, represented by their republics, determines the nature of competition, protects the independence and sovereignty of countries, protects their international relations and determines the international and even regional balance in the region. The Central Asian republics have become an active party in competition, as they have helped to open doors and benefit from the conflict by attracting investments, expertise, major projects and areas of cooperation.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research relies on the historical approach that is the basis of studies in political science to track the strategic importance of Central Asia, and the power analysis approach to determine the strength of competing states and their capabilities and associations in gaining influence and dominance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Strategic Importance of Central Asia in Light of The Competition

The Strategic Importance of The Region

Central Asia derives its geopolitical importance from its strategic location in the vital geopolitical field of Eurasia, which is a buffer zone between the Asian powers represented by the modern republics and the regional powers that shore the rich Caspian Sea with its natural resources, and the region represents the best political region as it represents a pivotal point of intersection for international and regional powers and is a catalyst for a multipolar world, and the importance of Central Asia in global politics was recognized by (Mackinder), where he considered that Central Asia has geopolitical dimensions that can be exploited to create a continental balance, and highlighted the importance of the region As the "heart of the earth" and called it "the island of the world" and announced that whoever controls it controls the world , and stressed that the future of the world starts from that region , it is the region that oversees the corridors of global trade and since 1991 and in light of the Russian-Ukrainian war and Russia's preoccupation, and the war in the Middle East has undergone political transformations that led to a hidden conflict between the actors to expand their influence , and the war in Afghanistan in 2001 returned Central Asia to the Department of Geopolitical Security between the actors and with the escalation of competition in the region The major powers are working to develop their technologies, control international transport lines and strengthen areas of political and economic influence in the region, which represents the heart of the world and is surrounded by major political blocs such as China, Russia, India, Iran, Turkey and Europe. Therefore, it was considered the region that limits direct friction between the Asian and regional powers[1], and after the transformations witnessed by the global system at the level of power distribution, represented by the emergence of rising international powers that contradict the orientations of the global system led by the United States of America, which is trying to benefit from the strengths it enjoys through its position in the region in order to maximize its strength and achieve greater gains in international relations.

During the past decade, the Central Asian countries were among the fastest growing economies in the world, which affected the behavior of those forces that increased their desire to extend their hegemony in the region, compete with Russia and China, and even surround and isolate them within their vital sphere in Asia to keep them away from influencing international decisions and their preoccupation with regional matters. Therefore, the United States of America took its presence in Central Asia as a method of influencing the strategic depth of China and Russia in particular and penetrating into international relations to influence its influence and capabilities. This required redrawing the geopolitical map of the heartland as an area of intersection of roads, trade and thought between Europe, the Middle East and South and East Asia[2].

Central Asia seems to be an arena for competition between international powers, which realize that domination of the region means controlling the land and air routes that link the countries of the region with great needs in the Arabian Gulf region, which is dominated by tension and security instability. The competing powers try to use the heart region as a theater of conflict for political and economic influence. International and regional actors seek to ensure the supply of energy transport through the extension of influence in the region. In addition, they give an inexpensive view of the global system on the vital Russian field towards the north and the Chinese depth towards the southeast and the Indian and Iranian depths to the south and west[3]. Central Asia prevails in a cautious stability due to the hidden competition between the major powers and the regional powers. The importance of the region increased after the events of September 11, 2001. The global system led by the United States of America invaded the region due to its proximity to Afghanistan and to secure the concentration of its bases in the region. In addition, it is the region that provides the elements of logistical support and control over the countries, adding to face the Russian and Chinese depth and the vital area of Central Asia towards the Indian subcontinent. Accordingly, Central Asia was considered a region of attraction for many parties due to its political and economic components. Even (Brzezinski) considered the region a vital crossing point and a source for achieving the strategic interests of the United States of America, the first of which was containing the rising and growing Chinese influence economically, militarily and culturally and influencing the international relations of the region. Containment turned into an obsession in American strategic thinking and a source of concern in decision-making and planning circles, which work to isolate Russia and prevent the return of its influence to Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The state of competition between the actors in Central Asia was called the "New Great Game". The region represents the geopolitical variable that represents the key to control the world according to Mackinder's theory[4].

The global geopolitical scene may change with the rise of China and Russia's attempts to regain its position after Putin's declared Eurasian strategy, which includes Russia's restoration of its position and role, and this coincided with the attempts of the United States of America to lead the world. In light of the escalation of the relationship between the state of conflict and competition and the imposition of influence, foreign policy strategies have become dealing with issues of countries according to their resources. Central Asia is the center of Western interests and is in the Western future perspective an alternative to Russian gas and oil in light of the Russian war. Ukrainian and sanctions, in addition to distancing Russia from the extension of its hegemony and

influence over the region, so many political, economic and security summits and dialogues are taking place for the region in the formation of blocs and the review of international relations[5], and the West realizes that domination of Central Asia means domination of oil and gas pipelines, mineral production and control of land and air routes linking Russia, China and the Indian subcontinent, in addition to important corridors linking the countries of the region with great needs in the Arabian Gulf region, which is dominated by tension and instability Security, in addition to striking China's Belt and Road Initiative, which, according to American thinking, will enable a rising China economically to extend its influence in Central Asia.

The Central Asian Republics

With the disintegration of the (former) Soviet Union and the preoccupation of countries with organizing institutions, consolidating their independence, demarcating their borders and building their strategic and political relations, the independent republics began to attract many actors by virtue of their capabilities, as they attracted huge investments to finance multi-directional projects. Historically, Central Asia consists of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and it serves as a strategic point linking Asia and Europe through trade and energy. The countries adopted a multi-directional foreign policy, which helped them to join the Group of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) led by China.

The Central Asian republics were established in their current form according to artificial borders. As a result of cultural and economic influence, they remained linked to the Russian Federation and tried to balance their international relations with China with China and the West. However, this balance led to a state of imbalance, especially after the events of September 11, 2001, and appeared more, especially after the Russian-Ukrainian war and Western sanctions on Russia strained the economies of these countries, so they are looking for a lifeline in extending their relationship with the West[6].

The area of Central Asia in its republics is equivalent to (4 millionkm²) inhabited by peoples with basic languages, ethnicities and nationalities such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Kazakhs with Russian, Tatar and Ukrainian communities. The population is estimated at the 2023 census (80 million people) and the Turkish, Persian and Azerbaijani languages occupy the first place. There are four Turkish-speaking republics. The republics of Tajikistan in Persian and after 1991 the republics were born with multiple border conflicts, especially between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are countries that did not seek to establish an integrated path among themselves and did not find political and economic interest until after 2000, when President Putin came to consolidate Moscow's presence in Asia and concluded the Collective Security Treaty in 2013. Most of the organizations that were formed work in political and military cooperation and identify the risks facing the region from separatist and xenophobic movements, drug trafficking, terrorism, promoting independence, and they are republics characterized by the fragility of the political and economic system and administrative corruption, and their lack of institutional structures, most of which are dictatorial regimes, so they did not succeed In achieving political and economic development, which increases the penetration of the major powers of these countries through investment and

cooperation, which increased competition and conflict and brought them under the domination of global powers such as the United States of America, Russia, the European Union, China and other regional powers. The republics tried to restore their identity and culture away from the hegemony and influence of the forces, so they worked to draw their relations with the outside world and highlight their civilizational role and strategic elements and express them[7].

The political and strategic vacuum after independence enabled many Central Asian countries to play a leading role in the vital region due to the state of competition that Central Asia experienced after the Cold War. This competition gave experience in the game of international relations and international political, economic and industrial interests, while ensuring the continuity of the momentum of relations with major Asian powers such as China, Russia and India. Despite the increase in the importance of the Central Asian republics in the Asian field as a region with its historical, cultural and civilizational extension, it was considered as a geostrategic anchor to control the world, according to Brzezinski's description, due to its distinctive and sensitive location. Therefore, it was considered the scene of many regional international concerns and became in control of the formulation of the strategies of the competing and cooperating powers in the region. Russia considers it a vital area for it and China gives it geopolitical importance and fears the exposure of its western borders. Therefore, it concludes economic agreements with all republics and militarily. The countries have inherited military facilities for heavy and light military industries and specialized in the manufacture of ballistic missiles.

The five republics form an oil reservoir that attracts the conflicting forces, as the needs of oil in Central Asia exceed (150 billion barrels) and about (825.8 trillion cubic feet) of gas. The republics have (172) oil fields in the Caspian Sea (300 billion barrels). The gas reserves constitute (250 trillion cubic feet) and about (20%) of the uranium reserves in the same two countries. Central Asia has (22) minerals and is among 20 producers of many vital materials. At the forefront of the republics, it is the largest and richest country in the region, Kazakhstan, which has oil reserves of about (30 billion barrels) of crude oil. It ranks (11) globally and its fields are located near the Caspian Sea basin[8].

Table 1. Oil and Gas Reserves of Central Asian Republics (2023).

Kazakhstan	30.00	2,407
Kyrgyzstan	0,04	5,663
Tajikistan	0,012	5,663
Turkmenistan	0,680	7,504
Uzbekistan	0,594	1,841

Source : Kaddouri Ezzedine, *The Strategy of the Russian Federation and China in Central Asia, A Critical Study*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Al-Sheikh Al-Arabi Al-Basti University, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Algeria, 2023, p. 47.

Interest in energy transfer projects has increased and major countries are seeking to control the routes of energy transfer guarantee lines, which are given high priority in the strategic planning processes of international and even regional actors, which is a matter

of national security for countries, especially with the development of the Russian-Ukrainian war and its impact on global energy supplies.

Central Asia's strategic importance is reflected in :

1. Petroleum and natural gas reserves.
2. Central Asia is a pivotal corridor for gas and oil pipelines.
3. The Caspian Sea and its energy wealth, in addition to being the largest inland water body in the world.
4. The transportation network that connects the center in all directions.
5. The existence of Asian blocs with ambitions for the rise of the world order, such as China and Russia, and anti-Western forces such as Iran.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has created the need for alternative corridors to find economic flexibility and diversify trade links, which helped the emergence of a multimodal transport corridor called the Central Asia Central Corridor, a transit network linking European markets to Asia through the countries of the region, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus. The World Bank announced in 2023 that this corridor will stimulate global trade, enhance communication between countries along the way, and provide flexibility and diversification of routes for container trade between China and Europe. The corridor aims to increase trade exchange by (40%) until 2030[9].

Russia tried to maintain its influence amid the international and regional scramble through the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union, but it could not except in agreement with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan due to the decline of the Russian role due to the war that forced it after Ukraine's demand to join NATO, which is a US strategy to drain Russia and remove it internationally and blockade it economically ,Two Russian, one Indian and one French military bases have been established in Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, there is an American and a German base, and in Kyrgyzstan, a Russian and an American base close to the Russian, Chinese, Afghan and Iranian borders, which has increased international competition[10].

Competing international powers in Central Asia

Central Asia is witnessing a clear competition between forces led by the United States, which enjoys military, economic and cultural weight, and Russia, which is struggling to remain an international power and is the country that cooperates with China, which recognizes the importance of stability in the region and the need to reduce Western influence in the region. Within the framework of international competition, the balance of power has led to the emergence of axes that try to strengthen their influence in the Asian arena. The American axis appeared in coordination with the countries of the European Union, and the Russian-Chinese axis. These axes are responsible for competition within the region, and the largest competing powers are :

USA

Washington's interest in Central Asia dates back to after the disintegration of the (former) Soviet Union and the exposure of the newly independent countries of the region to strengthen their sovereignty and search for a position in the international community with its fear of geopolitical conflicts on its territory. Washington resorted to :

1. Supporting internal stability and regional cooperation or consolidating independence and ensuring the sovereignty of states.

2. Supporting reform and democracy and reducing the spread of religious extremism and violence.
3. Adopting economic development through the establishment of infrastructure for energy sources such as oil and natural gas[11].

Central Asia played a pivotal role in military operations during the period of the US presence in Afghanistan. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the region was placed on the front lines with support for the political regimes of the region that feared Islamic militants who set out from Afghanistan towards their countries.

Central Asia provided the starting point for military operations after Washington concluded agreements with the government of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that allowed the establishment of air bases for logistical support and the systems provided their facilities to support the operations.

The importance of the region increased after the deterioration of relations with Pakistan due to attacks on convoys of soldiers passing through it , and Washington suffered until the establishment of alternative transport corridors through Central Asia, which resulted in the establishment of the northern distribution network that starts from the ports of Europe through Russia and the Caucasus to meet along the railway lines that pass through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to the Afghan border along the distance and costs . With the increasing importance of Central Asia for military operations and logistical support[12], Washington is conducting joint maneuvers with the Central Asian countries, the last of which was in 2022 with an agreement under the title (Regional Cooperation 2022) in Tajikistan, which angered Moscow, which rejected the measure because it is on its borders and even the borders of China, which has great influence with this country due to the strong economic cooperation between them.

Washington is aware that Central Asia is an arena for competition due to its strategic location, wealth and the nature of the political systems that can be dealt with, in order to reduce its dependence on Russia and China. It is pumping investments to the countries of the region, including the Arab Gulf countries and the European Union, and it is trying, in light of its declared conflict with Russia and China, to strengthen its penetration and expand its influence and to hit the Sun Belt and Road initiative because Washington realizes that China is the only competitor that has the elements to reshape the global system due to its economic, diplomatic, military and technological capabilities. Therefore, it is working to deter Beijing in the region. Washington has multiple soft power that surpasses Russia, which is increasingly feeling mistrust towards it in Central Asia. It is courting the region by supporting the cause of the persecuted Uighurs in China and working to support the national feeling and independence.

The visit of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in 2023 to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was in light of the Russian-Ukrainian war. A presidential summit was held within the framework of (5 +1) on 19/9/2023 in New York to draw the attention of the republics to the need to strengthen independence away from Russian influence. The leaders of the countries pledged to confront security threats, illegal immigration, extremism, terrorism and drug trafficking. The United States of America pumped \$90 million in investments to secure the borders of countries in Central Asia and provided \$25 million to countries to diversify trade routes and establish projects that would provide job opportunities. Washington confirmed that it is committed to facilitating trade

for the countries of the region with American companies and directing investments to the region to develop mineral wealth and enhance mineral security, which are used in many high-tech industries[13].

The Bakujian pipeline has received the attention of Washington, which considered it the northern line to dispense the West as much as possible with Gulf oil and the erosion of Russian influence on Caspian Sea supplies, which weakens Russian influence. Washington exerted pressure on companies to speed up the implementation of the pipeline, which has changed its name to the "Project of the Century", which cuts across lands and countries starting from the Caspian Sea coast, heading first to the west, then Anatolia to the Mediterranean coast, despite Russia's concerns about behavior and the objection of the World Bank.

The United States, through NATO, believes that it has a great future in the region, especially after the accession of Eastern Europe under the Treaty of Istanbul in 2004 and until the accession of Georgia in 2016 with the provision of military logistical support to it. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, the republics began to fear Russian influence and influence, so they turned to NATO and began military exercises. Washington concluded with the countries of the region an agreement held in Madrid in 2022. Washington supports Turkish and Israeli influence in the region to upset the balance and weaken competition in the region.

Russia

In the 1990s, Russia cooperated with the West in the field of reducing offensive and conventional weapons and economic and security cooperation. However, it felt that international relations had changed and that the West was working to encircle, contain and even adapt them from within. This threatens the stability and unity of Russia, which the global system is trying to dismantle. Russia is a pivotal country for Eurasia because of its need for energy. The importance of Russian energy is increasing due to the large reserves that continue even after 100 years, which gives it strategic importance. Therefore, since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, France and Germany have tried to draw lines of agreement and prevent the escalation of the war. Were it not for the intervention of the United States of America, which was targeting Russia, the country that establishes balance relations in the region, it has cooperation with North Korea, Iran, Japan and China, the country that targets Washington.

Russia has charted a political and military course for itself. It realizes that the West needs it. In 2014, it annexed Crimea and the West did not move. Russia charted its Eurasian geopolitical doctrine towards Central Asia. Putin's strategy was to strengthen Russia's influence in the geopolitical circles represented by the countries that give Russia a vital area in the southern direction of Russia's administrative borders. The strategy is based on linking all countries from the north to the south to a competing geopolitical axis to promote rapprochement between countries in the region. The Russian decision-maker and foreign policy expressed the need for Russia to regain its position in the global system. It is a wealthy country and a major power that has continued influence in the heart of Eurasia and to assert its role and justify its behavior. It has common historical, cultural, cultural and religious motives, which enhances its geopolitical ambitions and raises its international relations, which were considered the basis for the transformation

in shaping Russia's strategic construction towards its borders with its southern surroundings[14].

Russia is facing increasing pressures in international and regional competition in the region. Therefore, it has worked to establish a security system through a treaty (Collective Security Organization) that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The treaty represents the dimensions of political dialogue between security and military institutions in light of the need of the armies of the republics for Russian military support. It realizes that it is the military superior state in the region, as the political decision-maker realizes that the countries of the region are escaping from Russian influence towards the West.

The Russian move towards Ukraine and its geographical surroundings sent a message to the Central Asian countries that Russia is ready to target them militarily if they cross the lines drawn for them, and since the arrival of Putin, Russia has sought and driven by its fear of American expansion in the region, especially after 2003, so it tried through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to open its markets to the products of the Central Asian republics.

There are republics linked to Russia because of their economic poverty, such as Tajikistan, which relies on energy resources from Moscow and has a military security alliance and coordination to prevent drug smuggling and terrorists on the common border. They have a joint cooperation agreement until 2042. Russia is working to contain the differences between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite Putin's efforts to contain the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which took place during the Samarkand summit, the threads of accusation were directed at Washington to thwart the summit and the decline of the Russian role in facing the challenges[15].

Russia is trying to prevent the establishment of new military bases and according to the spread of democratic changes in the region, it is trying to block the way for Washington to achieve its agenda, while Russia has military bases in Tajikistan such as Dushanbe and Kyolyab and has agreed with Kyrgyzstan to allow Russian warplanes to land at Kant Air Base in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, which is an old base that has a Russian ground and air military presence, in addition to the presence of Russian military garrisons in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It is often announced that Russian military bases are to secure the southern borders of Russia and its neighbors.

Russia is trying to balance with China, which has growing influence in the region. There are limits to the convergence between them and the limits of divergence in addition to economic interests[16].

China

China has emerged as a global economic power with a role in international relations in Central Asia and globally. It is the largest economy in the world after the United States of America. It is trying to integrate into the global economy and interact more deeply and effectively in international events. It has a role in maintaining international peace and mediating in some international conflicts. It is an international and regional force for Central Asia. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union led to a strategic vacuum in the region that helped the presence of new players with the elements that enable them to extend their influence to the wealthy countries of the region with resources, especially energy. China is among the most important players as it shares a long border with Central

Asia and has overlapping ethnic extensions, so I described a strategic vision for the region that is witnessing a major rebalancing of powers.

China comes as one of the countries that Washington fears, and it does not use politics unlike Russia in its relationship, but rather economic development, which makes it more attractive to the regimes of the countries of the region that represent the backyard and the traditional sphere of influence of China due to civilizational and economic ties. Therefore, the region is of interest to the political decision-maker in preserving China's position and working to achieve its accelerated global goals that are hindered by the global system by multiple means or by its need for the energy of Central Asia close to it, which provides long-term security and is trying to confront the geo-security and geo-economic threats associated with the geopolitical transformations after the end of the Cold War and the increase in international and regional polarization witnessed by the global system led by Washington[17].

Therefore, China has sought to establish diplomatic relations with the religious republics with an emphasis on peaceful coexistence, economic development, support for stability and respect for the sovereignty of the region. Therefore, security, military and economic agreements have been concluded and border problems have been resolved between them and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Security events in the 1990s affected security in western China, in addition to regional unrest generated by competition between major powers, which poses a threat to Chinese national security. After the events of September 11, 2001, and the entry of US forces into Central Asia and the establishment of military bases, they became close to the Chinese province of Xinjiang, which demands secession and is supported by Washington, and this increased China's fears[18].

Beijing views the US network of agreements as a threat to Chinese security and expansion at the expense of its influence, which is a kind of surrounding China with opponents with isolation and siege, especially since China is surrounded by countries with border disputes such as Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as disputes in the South China Sea in addition to the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, it views the US threat as a geopolitical threat to China and Russia in the region. The US military presence represented by the deployment of the missile defense system and which is characterized by high technological efficiency and then the growing military capabilities of Japan and Western support and then the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe and some countries of the region, all of this wanted through Washington to put obstacles to China to extend its influence internationally and then penetrate the commercial markets in Europe according to the Belt and Road Initiative, but China's foreign policy succeeded especially after the change in the status of the countries of the region that constitute the back space of China, so China concluded bilateral and collective agreements such as the agreement between China and Kyrgyzstan in 1996 to settle the border dispute, and in 2002 China signed an agreement with Tajikistan, where the latter waived 1000 km². In exchange for economic and industrial development, China succeeded in attracting the republics to keep them away from the Western orientation due to its fears of Western influence, so it strengthened ties with the Central Asian regimes, which are dictatorial regimes that do not recognize democracy and human rights and do not recognize the separatist movements pushed by Washington, which supports the secession of Tibet and

the secession of Xinjiang[19] (and China is aware that the strategic importance of the region is increasing in the field of energy and its geostrategic importance. Therefore, it has pursued a policy of good neighborliness to ensure continuous national security that does not give Washington the opportunity to stay. China has held with Uzbekistan to deepen bilateral relations in the political, economic and energy fields, in the field of minerals, transportation and many services provided by China to it in addition to fighting terrorism. Therefore, China has worked to transform the important country in Central Asia into an active economic partner in the region. China benefits from Uzbekistan's position, which will link East Asia to Europe. China has worked to expand its economic and political options to strengthen ties with the countries of the region and strengthen its independence. Russian influence. It imports oil from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and Minerals from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which enhances the economy of these countries in terms of money and trade[20].

Central Asia has an important place in the success of the Belt and Road Initiative due to its geopolitical location. Therefore, Chinese investments in the development of oil and gas fields have surged. After the Russian-Ukrainian war, on 18-19/5/2023, the Chinese President held a summit in China with the leaders of the five countries of the region and announced the start of a new era of relations and granting the countries of the region (3.7) billion dollars in financial and development assistance, cooperation in the fields of security defense and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative projects. China seeks through the initiative to link the capitals of countries with land corridors and sea ports that China will establish and through those countries will transport Russian oil and gas through Kazakhstan, as well as strengthen regional cooperation and border protection. The countries of the region welcomed cooperation and expressed their readiness for the next stage and considered it an important matter, especially in the field of military security cooperation. The Chinese President expressed his support for Kazakhstan's accession to the BRICS bloc[21].

China has therefore worked to strengthen its influence and strategic position and protect the initiative from Washington's strikes and has given itself the largest role, which supports its international relations in competition with the United States, but with a wise and deliberate policy, especially after the decline of the Russian role and in conjunction with the holding of the (Xi 'an) Chinese summit, the G7 held a summit in Japan in which it announced the provision of (600) billion dollars in infrastructure investments to compete with the Belt and Road project. Washington views the region as an administration to contain China and Russia, which increases international polarization in the region and makes the options of the countries of the region multiple.

Then the Quad Summit was held in the United States on 24/5/2021. The summit is an attempt to limit Chinese influence and limit its commercial and political interests. The summit included security arrangements to confront China through international alliances[22].

The Future of International Competition in Central Asia

Central Asia is no longer the backyard of any active force in the region, but it has been a central point of increasing importance in linking Asia politically and security. It represents a strategic bloc in light of the increasing importance of the five republics. The region has turned from a mere arena of power conflicts into an arena for partnerships

between international and even regional powers that have followed multiple mechanisms. Therefore, it is witnessing a multidimensional international movement that has benefited the republics to enhance their geopolitical interests by dealing with a multilateral policy. In light of Russia's preoccupation with the war and the regional powers' preoccupation with the Middle East war, and in light of the repercussions witnessed by the region, it may witness a new cold war[23] (and in order to exploit the political vacuum and Russian retreat due to the war, the region may witness multiple paths in international relations due to the geopolitical movement of forces in the region and from those paths :

US-European Mobility Pathway

Through its moves towards rapprochement with the countries of the region, the United States is trying to achieve dual goals, foremost of which is obstructing China's plans and isolating Russia, which is an attempt to encircle the two countries, or Washington provides assistance to the countries of the region to reduce their dependence on Russia and conclude agreements in the field of energy, trade and investment. On 20/9/2023, US President Joe Biden participated in the (1+ 5) forum held in Washington, which was the first time that a US president participated in the forum to discuss regional security, economic cooperation and sustainable development. Washington announced the diversification of trade routes, facilitating trade with US companies and developing the mineral wealth of the five countries. Washington tried to persuade the countries of the region to join the sanctions imposed on Russia and Biden announced that it is a historical roll based on years of close cooperation between Washington and Central Asia based on a common commitment to sovereignty and independence, a message to move away from Russian and Chinese influence, but the republics abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution for an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. The presence of the US president is a message to China that the region is still at the heart of the White House's strategy[24]. The United States penetrates the region in multiple ways, as it emphasizes the Central Command's sponsorship of military exercises for the region's armies, especially Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which raises the fears of Russia and China of the expansion of American influence and influence on the region. International relations between the countries of the region and traditional powers such as Russia and China.

The Global Gateway project was one of the tracks of the European Union to distance the region from Chinese influence. The Union is holding meetings to establish an integrated communication system linking Central Asia to Europe. The region witnessed multiple visits, including the visit of the British Foreign Secretary (David Cameron), who announced a new era of relations between his country and the republics in the field of energy, economy and education. British reports revealed that London is in the process of protecting the region from Russian and Chinese influence by strengthening the independence of the republics. The visit of the German Chancellor (Schultz), who stated that the Russian-Ukrainian war created a new geopolitical reality that pushes the region to increase its involvement and benefit from the Global Gateway project. French President (Emmanuel Macron) visited Kazakhstan to conclude special strategic partnership agreements in energy because Europe suffers from supplies due to the war.

European pressure is mounting on the countries of the region that deal with Russia, and NATO announced that Central Asia has become one of the priorities of the Alliance's information penetration to develop the political and societal structure of the region in order to impose Western values to separate the region from Russian culture. Kazakhstan has strengthened its military cooperation with NATO by buying armored vehicles and military equipment, and NATO countries have cooperated to provide Ukraine with weapons and equipment in defiance of Russia and its hegemony over Eastern European countries[25].

Trajectory of Chinese Efforts to Influence

In light of the international and regional movements that suggest the escalation of international competition for the region and in light of the political vacuum after Russia's preoccupation with the war, Chinese influence escalated after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and concluded agreements within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In 2023, China hosted in Xi'an Asian leaders and provided financial and development assistance and trade support with security and military cooperation[26]. From 2022 to 2024, Beijing provided (26) billion dollars of assistance and (3.7) billion dollars to support the poor in the region and Chinese agreements with those countries are to protect Chinese national security and Beijing's message is that it is ready to help countries build defense capabilities with the aim of strengthening political and security cooperation (), and China presents itself as a neutral country in resolving border disputes, and Chinese influence is strengthened internationally, especially as the countries of the region suffer from economic and security risks according to the expectations of the International Monetary Fund for 2024, so Beijing is investing the situation in strengthening the economies of countries with energy projects of all kinds, and China is rushing to face the challenges of terrorism and trends Separatism, which is fueled by Washington, so it rushes towards the region to strengthen cooperation through multiple agreements and even the establishment of military bases close to the border with Afghanistan and military and security training for forces with Tajikistan. Even the Global Diplomacy Index for International Relations for 2024 issued by the Lowinstitute Institute announced that the yen has advanced over the United States of America in Central Asia, East Africa and the PacificIslands[27].

The Russian Path

Russia is trying to get out of its isolation imposed by the war and sanctions, especially as it considers that its interests in Central Asia are national security and are a geopolitical competition for the United States of America. Russia may have to play the "long game" to try to keep the Central Asian countries in its orbit, although the Central Asian countries exploit Russia's weaknesses, especially during the war period. They are countries that are working to integrate with organizations and bodies without Russia, such as the Organization of Turkish States. Kazakhstan, the largest economy in the region, rejected the Russian invasion of Ukraine and refused to recognize Russia's sovereignty over the territories it occupied. Russia is betting on confronting Western and Chinese influence in the region by developing a plan that considers Russia a strategy for rapprochement with the countries of the region despite Western pressure to obstruct Russia's efforts.

President Putin visited Kazakhstan in an attempt to attract the Republic of Russia and keep it away from Western influence, especially as it is Russia's economic and military ally and has a common border with Moscow. The West even accused Kazakhstan of maintaining a balanced position on the war on Ukraine while supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but it does not condemn the invasion. It was agreed to establish low-energy nuclear power plants using Russian technology[28]. Putin announced an economic union between Europe and Central Asia, which made the countries of the region economically linked to Russia. Putin's recent Asian tour on 21/6/2024 sent a message that Russia is present and strong and the West must realize this. Putin accused NATO of threatening Russia, Central Asia and its international relations. He stated that Russian forces are fully ready for defense and stated that the world is changing and the United Nations must be arranged based on international consensus[29], [30].

According to the above, the scene in the Central Asian region can be visualized through a number of scenarios :

1. The region may witness a state of tension due to the intensity of competition between the actors and due to geographical proximity and the increasing Russian-Chinese influence in the future with special economic and military mechanisms and that the countries of the region suffer from economic risks.
2. Sino-Russian relations may be strained by China's accelerating influence in the region through multiple economic projects to protect its national sphere. The relationship between China and Russia is cautious due to different visions in facing challenges.
3. The Russian role may decline even after the cessation of the war because most of the countries of the region have strengthened their economic and foreign relations with Europe and China. There are indications of a decline in the Russian role in the Central Asia and Caucasus region. The countries of the region have begun to realize that close relations with Moscow will be a source of difficulties and due to the change in the balance of power, the region may witness alliances as technology and innovations can play a role in enhancing the capabilities of countries, which changes the dynamics of power, and this is what drives countries to strengthen cooperation among themselves.
4. China may be contained by Washington, especially during the rule of Trump, who has long denounced Chinese influence by expanding sanctions on China and increasing political pressure to limit its influence. However, the American role is threatened to decline because Trump does not provide aid and investments to the region. He takes and does not give, which distances American influence from the region. In return, China invests in the political and economic vacuum and increases its influence with partnerships, agreements and distinguished investments in addition to the Belt and Road Initiative.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : Central Asia has emerged as a focal point of strategic competition among global powers due to its geopolitical importance. The region is experiencing increasing polarization, particularly between the US-European axis and the Russian-Chinese axis. This dynamic is driven by the desire of Central Asian republics to

move beyond the legacy of Russian influence and to diversify their international partnerships. Russia's capacity to assert dominance in the region is being constrained by the consequences of war, international sanctions, and rising Chinese and Western engagement. China, in contrast, is expanding its influence through economic investment and diplomatic partnerships, offering an alternative model of engagement that differs from Russia's force-centric approach. **Implication** : This geopolitical shift suggests that Central Asia is entering a new era of multi-alignment, wherein regional actors actively seek to balance their relations among major powers. The growing inclination of Central Asian states to strengthen ties with the West and China has implications for Russia's future role in the region. Moreover, China's soft power strategy and global economic vision offer a stabilizing influence that may counterbalance Western assertiveness. These developments urge major powers, particularly Russia and the United States, to reassess their regional policies in favor of cooperation, respect for sovereignty, and support for sustainable development to remain relevant in Central Asia's evolving landscape. **Limitation** : One limitation of the current analysis is its reliance on observable political and economic trends without comprehensive access to internal policymaking frameworks of the Central Asian republics. Additionally, the long-term durability of China's partnerships and the real impact of Western sanctions on Russia's regional policy remain uncertain. The study also does not fully address the domestic socio-economic dynamics within Central Asian states that may significantly influence foreign policy orientations. **Future Research** : Future studies should explore the internal decision-making processes of Central Asian countries to better understand their foreign policy calculations. Comparative analysis between the effectiveness of Chinese and Russian influence mechanisms, including soft power tools and economic diplomacy, would also be valuable. Furthermore, examining the responses of smaller regional powers and the role of multilateral organizations in mitigating great power rivalry could provide deeper insight into the future geopolitical architecture of Central Asia.

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