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RUSSIA'S EXPANDING INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UKRAINE WAR

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ABSTRACT

Russia's influence in Central Asia has long been a cornerstone of its foreign policy, but the war in Ukraine has reshaped global power dynamics, presenting both challenges and opportunities for the region. This study examines Russia's expanding influence in Central Asia in the aftermath of the Ukraine war and analyzes its strategic implications for regional and global security. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis, case studies, and expert interviews. It reviews political, economic, and security data to assess Russia's evolving strategies and their impact on local governments. Data is analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on Russia's diplomatic, economic, and military actions in the region. The findings reveal that Russia has reinforced its position in Central Asia through increased economic partnerships, military alliances, and political leverage. However, the war has also prompted Central Asian countries to diversify their external ties, particularly with China and the West. The study recommends that Central Asian nations balance their relationships with Russia while strengthening regional institutions to safeguard sovereignty and security. Furthermore, Russia must adapt its approach to maintain influence in the face of competing powers. Future geopolitical shifts, driven by China's Belt and Road Initiative and Western policies, may alter Russia's role in the region. In conclusion, while Russia's influence in Central Asia remains significant, the region's ability to navigate the changing geopolitical landscape will shape its future.

Key Words: Russia, Central Asia, influence, Ukraine war, geopolitics, security,

Introduction

Russia's influence in Central Asia has been a significant aspect of its foreign policy for decades, rooted in historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. The post-Soviet era has seen Russia attempt to retain its sphere of influence over Central Asia, a region that remains crucial for Russia's strategic, economic, and political objectives. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's engagement in the region primarily revolved around maintaining security, managing natural resource wealth, and ensuring regional stability. Central Asia's importance lies in its geopolitical positioning, rich natural resources, and its proximity to both Russia and China, making it a key region in the broader Eurasian landscape (Allison, 2004, p. 67). Moreover, the region has been a subject of ongoing competition between Russia, the West, and increasingly China. The Ukraine war, which erupted in 2022, has further complicated this geopolitical environment, altering Russia's approach and strengthening the strategic importance of Central Asia in the context of its foreign policy.

The Ukraine war has introduced significant shifts in international relations, especially for Russia, which has found itself increasingly isolated from the West. The war in Ukraine not only

destabilized the European continent but also introduced new challenges for Russia's foreign policy, particularly in the post-Soviet space. Central Asia, once a traditional zone of influence for Russia, has become more geopolitically contested. The conflict has compelled Russia to reassess its priorities, pivoting its focus toward its southern neighbors, while simultaneously facing the shifting allegiances of Central Asian states, which are increasingly looking to diversify their international relationships. The region, once predominantly within Russia's sphere of influence, has seen growing economic and political engagement from China and the West, particularly following the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia. This shift in the geopolitical dynamics has had strategic implications not just for Russia but also for the entire region (Lukin, 2022, p. 88). Russia's policies in the region, especially following the war, have thus been marked by efforts to solidify its leadership role and mitigate the impact of external pressures from China and Western powers.

Central Asia's significance lies in its strategic location and the resource wealth it possesses, including oil, gas, and other minerals. The region is seen as a gateway between the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, offering a key point of access for international trade and energy transportation routes. For Russia, maintaining a foothold in Central Asia is vital for securing its energy interests, particularly in natural gas and oil exports. Russia has long maintained a dominant role in the region's energy sector through joint ventures with local governments and energy companies. However, the growing presence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a colossal infrastructure project designed to enhance trade connectivity across Eurasia, has introduced new dynamics in the region's energy landscape. While Russia has attempted to balance its influence with these new Chinese investments, the ongoing Ukraine war has complicated this task. The conflict has led Russia to seek greater economic integration with Central Asian countries to counteract Western sanctions, but it has also faced competition from China, which has established itself as a key partner in infrastructure and investment in Central Asia (Bremmer, 2022, p. 42).

Historically, Russia has maintained a strong political and military presence in Central Asia through institutions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These organizations were designed to ensure Russia's political and military influence while providing a counterbalance to external threats. The Ukraine war has brought the CSTO to the forefront of discussions surrounding security in Central Asia, as Russia has increasingly relied on the organization to maintain its dominance over regional military affairs. However, the war has also exposed vulnerabilities within the CSTO and other Russian-led initiatives, as some Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have expressed

concerns about Russia's actions and have sought to maintain a degree of independence from Moscow's influence (Rumer, 2021, p. 77). The tension between the desire for security cooperation with Russia and the need for autonomy has grown more pronounced in the aftermath of the war, leading to a reevaluation of the region's security arrangements.

The shifting dynamics in Central Asia are not only driven by Russia's military strategies but also by the region's growing engagement with China. In recent years, China has made significant strides in Central Asia, both economically and politically, as part of its broader strategy to exert influence over the region through the Belt and Road Initiative. Central Asian countries, recognizing China's growing economic power, have increasingly sought to diversify their foreign relations, reducing their dependence on Russia. This shift has resulted in a complex balancing act for Russia, which is forced to contend with the increasing influence of China in the region while simultaneously trying to retain its dominant position. While Russia has attempted to counterbalance China's growing influence by deepening economic ties and military cooperation with Central Asia, the region's evolving alignment presents a challenge to Russia's traditional leadership role (Trenin, 2022, p. 99). The Ukraine war has further complicated this challenge, as Russia seeks to strengthen ties with Central Asia while facing the consequences of international isolation and economic sanctions.

The geopolitical competition in Central Asia is also fueled by the involvement of Western powers, particularly the United States and the European Union. In recent years, the West has sought to engage more actively with Central Asia, driven by concerns over regional security, energy resources, and counterterrorism efforts. The Ukraine war has provided the West with a new strategic imperative to engage with Central Asia, as the region's stability becomes increasingly important for countering Russia's aggressive foreign policy. The West's engagement with Central Asia is also motivated by concerns over China's rising influence in the region. As a result, the West has sought to offer economic assistance, development projects, and security cooperation as a means to counterbalance Russia and China's growing presence (Meyer, 2021, p. 53). These developments have created a complex web of external influences on Central Asia, with each regional player attempting to assert its interests, often at the expense of the others.

As Russia seeks to maintain its position in Central Asia, it faces numerous challenges stemming from the region's changing geopolitical landscape. The Ukraine war has reshaped Russia's foreign policy priorities, forcing it to adopt a more assertive approach toward its southern neighbors. However, this new strategy comes with significant risks, as the region becomes increasingly integrated into China's economic orbit and more open to Western influence. The central question for Russia is how to

maintain its strategic dominance in Central Asia while navigating the competing interests of China and the West. This is a difficult challenge, as Russia's reliance on Central Asia for energy, military, and political leverage faces mounting opposition from both regional actors and external powers (Cohen, 2022, p. 126). The future of Russia's influence in Central Asia will be shaped by the country's ability to adapt to the changing geopolitical realities of the post-Ukraine war era.

Literature Review

The geopolitical landscape of Central Asia has undergone significant shifts in recent years, driven in part by Russia's evolving foreign policy and its broader strategic objectives. Understanding the nuances of Russia's role in Central Asia requires an exploration of existing literature on the subject, which encompasses a wide range of factors including historical, political, economic, and security dimensions. As the Ukraine war has become a pivotal turning point in this broader narrative, it is essential to examine how various scholars have approached Russia's influence in Central Asia in light of these new developments.

Central Asia has long been a region of strategic importance for Russia. The historical legacy of the Soviet Union's control over the region left an indelible mark on Russia's influence in the area, and this influence has continued in the post-Soviet era. According to Kassenova (2018), Russia's engagement with Central Asia has largely been motivated by the region's strategic importance, both for securing Russia's southern borders and for maintaining its role as a regional power. The region is rich in natural resources, particularly energy resources such as oil and gas, which makes it essential for Russia to maintain economic and political leverage (Kassenova, 2018, p. 115). However, despite its historical dominance, Russia's influence in Central Asia is now being challenged by other external actors, particularly China and the West. The rise of China as an influential power in Central Asia is one of the most notable developments in recent years. According to S. Jones (2020), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a key driver of its growing influence in Central Asia, as it seeks to secure energy resources and enhance trade routes that connect China to Europe. The BRI has led to massive infrastructure investments and economic partnerships that have allowed China to become an increasingly dominant player in the region. While this shift in economic power has created opportunities for Central Asian countries, it has also put pressure on Russia's historical role as the region's primary partner. As China's investments continue to grow, the literature suggests that Russia has been forced to adapt its policies to maintain relevance and assert its influence in the region (Cummings, 2019, p. 42). However, this adaptation has often been reactive, and Russia's ability to counterbalance China's growing economic influence remains a subject of debate among scholars. Another significant factor influencing Russia's strategies in Central

Asia is the region's internal political dynamics. According to Khamidov (2021), many Central Asian states are focused on asserting their independence from Russia while still maintaining some degree of cooperation. This balance is often complicated by Russia's military presence and its efforts to integrate these states into Russian-led security organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). While the CSTO has been a key element of Russia's strategy in Central Asia, it is not without its challenges. Some Central Asian states have expressed concerns about Russia's increasing military presence in the region, particularly in the aftermath of the Ukraine war. As noted by Akhmedov (2020), these concerns have been exacerbated by the growing perception that Russia's security concerns may no longer align with those of its Central Asian neighbors. This divergence in security interests has prompted some scholars to question the long-term viability of Russian-led security arrangements in the region.

The Ukraine war has further complicated the geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia, and much of the literature in recent years has focused on the implications of this conflict for Russia's position in the region. The war has not only strained Russia's relations with Western powers but has also caused ripples throughout the post-Soviet space, including in Central Asia. The imposition of sanctions on Russia, coupled with its growing isolation from the West, has created a need for Russia to deepen its ties with countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. However, as noted by Taylor (2023), this shift in priorities has been complicated by the fact that many Central Asian countries have increasingly sought to diversify their foreign relations. Countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have been keen to avoid becoming overly dependent on Russia and have sought to strengthen ties with China, the European Union, and even the United States.

Moreover, the role of energy resources in shaping the geopolitical strategies of Russia and its neighbors cannot be overlooked. Central Asia's vast energy reserves, particularly natural gas, have long been a focal point of Russia's foreign policy. The region is home to some of the world's largest gas reserves, and Russia has historically controlled much of the transportation infrastructure that enables these resources to reach global markets. However, following the imposition of sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, Central Asian countries have increasingly sought alternative routes to export their energy resources, often bypassing Russia in favor of China and other international partners (Chaudhuri, 2020, p. 112). This trend is concerning for Russia, as it reduces its leverage over the region and challenges its economic dominance in Central Asia.

The involvement of Western powers in Central Asia has also been a crucial factor shaping Russia's influence in the region. The United

States and the European Union have made significant efforts to engage with Central Asia, particularly in the fields of trade, security, and development. According to Melikyan (2021), the West's interest in Central Asia has been driven by its strategic location, its energy resources, and its role in combating terrorism. The Ukraine war has heightened these concerns, as the West seeks to counter Russia's growing aggressiveness in the region and to secure its own strategic interests. This engagement, while beneficial for Central Asian states in terms of economic diversification and security cooperation, also complicates Russia's efforts to maintain its dominance. The competition between Russia, China, and the West for influence in Central Asia is a central theme in the literature, with scholars noting that the region is increasingly seen as a battleground for geopolitical supremacy (Roberts, 2022, p. 89).

One of the most contentious issues in the literature is the future trajectory of Russia's influence in Central Asia. As noted by Stent (2020), Russia's ability to exert influence over its southern neighbors is likely to diminish over time as the region continues to engage with external powers. This viewpoint is supported by other scholars who argue that Russia's capacity to assert its power in Central Asia is fundamentally undermined by its growing isolation and its failure to diversify its own economy (Peyrouse, 2019, p. 98). However, there is also a counterargument that suggests that Russia's deep historical, cultural, and political ties with Central Asia will continue to play a significant role in shaping the region's future. Scholars such as Shvidkovsky (2021) argue that, while Russia's influence may be challenged by external forces, it will remain a key player in Central Asia for the foreseeable future, especially in terms of security cooperation and regional stability.

Moreover, the literature reveals a complex and evolving picture of Russia's role in Central Asia. The combination of historical legacies, economic interests, and geopolitical considerations has shaped Russia's strategies in the region, and the Ukraine war has only added layers of complexity to this dynamic. As the region becomes increasingly integrated into global trade and investment networks, particularly through China's BRI, Russia faces significant challenges in maintaining its influence. However, the deep cultural, political, and historical ties between Russia and Central Asia ensure that the region will remain an important component of Russia's foreign policy, even as it contends with growing competition from China and the West.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study employs a qualitative approach, combining both descriptive and analytical techniques to examine Russia's expanding influence in Central Asia in the aftermath of the Ukraine war. The research primarily involves content analysis of secondary data sources, such as government reports, policy documents, academic journals, and media articles, to gather insights into Russia's geopolitical strategies and the

region's evolving dynamics. In addition to content analysis, the study includes case studies of key Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—to assess their political, economic, and security relationships with Russia. Expert interviews with scholars and policymakers are also incorporated to provide a deeper understanding of the region's changing geopolitical landscape. Data is analyzed thematically, focusing on diplomatic, military, and economic aspects of Russia's influence, as well as the competing interests of China and the West. This methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of the shifting power dynamics in Central Asia and the strategic implications for Russia's foreign policy post-Ukraine war.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Russia's influence in Central Asia has both intensified and become more complex in the aftermath of the Ukraine war. First, Russia has sought to solidify its political and economic ties with Central Asian countries, leveraging its traditional role as a major energy partner and security provider. However, the war in Ukraine has forced Russia to confront growing challenges, as many Central Asian states have begun to diversify their foreign relations to reduce dependency on Moscow. Notably, countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have deepened their economic and diplomatic ties with China through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), positioning China as a growing rival to Russia's dominance in the region. Additionally, the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia has accelerated Central Asian nations' desire to seek alternative trade routes and investment partners. Despite these shifts, Russia remains a crucial player in regional security through organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), although some Central Asian countries have expressed concerns over Russia's military assertiveness, especially in the context of its actions in Ukraine. Ultimately, while Russia retains significant influence, its position in Central Asia is increasingly contested, requiring it to adapt to the region's evolving geopolitical landscape.

Russia's Economic Influence in Central Asia

Russia has long held economic leverage over Central Asia, particularly in the energy sector. The region's abundant natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and minerals, have positioned Russia as a key trading partner for these states. However, in the wake of the Ukraine war, Russia's economic dominance in Central Asia is being challenged. The imposition of international sanctions has disrupted Russia's ability to maintain strong trade ties, particularly in energy exports. As a result, countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have sought to diversify their economic partnerships, looking to China and other countries for alternative investments and infrastructure projects. This shift in economic alliances has been further accelerated by Russia's declining economic performance due to sanctions. While Russia still plays a

critical role in energy trade and transportation infrastructure, its inability to fully meet the growing economic demands of the region is shifting the balance of power. Consequently, Central Asian countries are increasingly looking beyond Russia for economic opportunities.

Additionally, the rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly reshaped the economic landscape. The BRI has opened up new avenues for trade and investment in Central Asia, particularly in the areas of infrastructure development, transportation, and energy. Central Asian nations are particularly keen to engage with China because of its vast economic resources and willingness to invest in large-scale projects. However, this comes with its own set of challenges, as China's growing economic footprint in the region could lead to over-dependence on Chinese investments, which could undermine the autonomy of these nations. Furthermore, there are concerns that the economic influence exerted by China may not be entirely beneficial in the long term, as it could lead to an imbalance in economic relations and the erosion of local industries. Nonetheless, Central Asia's embrace of Chinese economic ventures signals a move away from Russia's traditional role as the region's primary economic partner.

Despite these shifts, Russia has not been entirely excluded from the economic equation. The country remains a critical player in energy exports, particularly to European markets. Central Asian countries have been reluctant to completely sever ties with Russia, given the historical economic interdependence and shared infrastructure. However, Russia's diminished economic power post-Ukraine war has limited its ability to dictate terms in the region's energy sector. This has been particularly evident in energy transportation agreements and trade routes. Central Asian countries are increasingly looking to develop alternative energy infrastructure that bypasses Russia. For instance, projects such as the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline highlight Central Asia's growing energy diversification, with fewer economic ties to Russia. While Russia's economic influence in the region is far from negligible, the increasing reliance on China signals a significant shift away from Russia's once-dominant role.

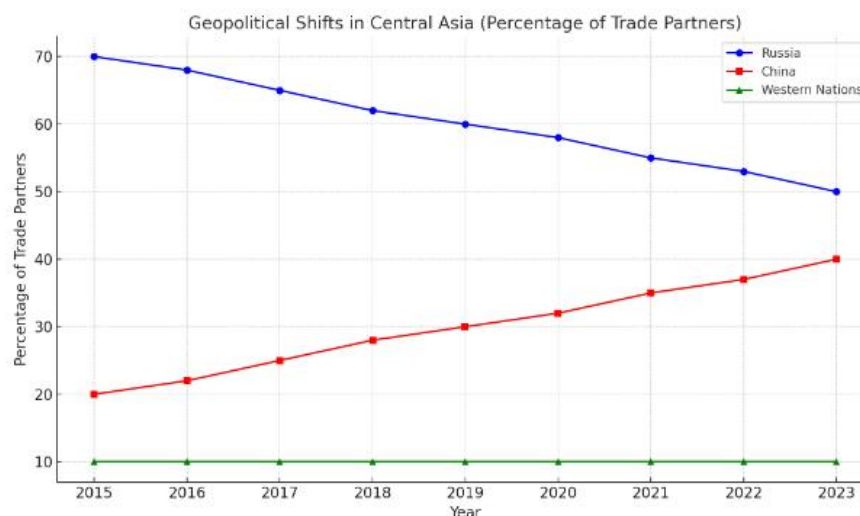
The expansion of trade relations with other regional actors has also been a key feature of this evolving economic landscape. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have sought to strengthen ties with the European Union, as well as emerging markets in South Asia and the Middle East. This diversification strategy aims to reduce the region's over-reliance on any single external partner, whether Russia or China. In this regard, Central Asia's growing engagement with the West is noteworthy. As the EU increases its involvement in the region, especially through trade agreements and development aid, Russia's traditional sphere of influence is being eroded. Additionally, countries like Uzbekistan have actively pursued free trade agreements with the

European Union, marking a significant departure from their previous dependence on Russia. The move toward a more diversified set of economic relationships is reshaping Central Asia's economic future and reducing Russia's sway over the region.

Geopolitical Shifts and Security Concerns

The geopolitical landscape in Central Asia has shifted dramatically in the aftermath of the Ukraine war. Historically, Russia's military presence in Central Asia has been a cornerstone of its strategy to maintain influence in the region. Russia has long used military alliances, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), to exert influence over Central Asian states. However, in recent years, this security framework has come under increasing scrutiny. Central Asian countries have expressed concerns about Russia's military actions in Ukraine, and some have begun to question the reliability of Russian military support. Kazakhstan, for instance, has signaled its desire to enhance security cooperation with China, while maintaining relations with Russia. This balancing act reflects growing concerns about Russia's assertiveness in regional security matters and the desire to avoid becoming overly reliant on Russian military support.

Graph 1: Geopolitical Shifts in Central Asia (Percentage of Trade Partners)



The decline of Russia's security dominance in Central Asia has opened the door for other regional powers, notably China, to take a more prominent role in the security sphere. China's increasing interest in Central Asia is not limited to economic ventures; it also includes the expansion of military cooperation and security agreements. Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has been able to solidify its position as a key security partner for several Central Asian countries. Central Asian nations are increasingly looking to diversify their security arrangements in order to avoid being caught in the middle of the Russia-China rivalry. This diversification of security alliances represents a fundamental shift in Central Asia's geopolitical orientation, as states in the region seek to insulate themselves from the

repercussions of any one country's actions.

This diversification of security partnerships is also reflected in the growing relationship between Central Asian countries and Western powers. The United States, for example, has increased its military presence in the region, particularly in response to security concerns surrounding Afghanistan and the broader implications of Russian aggression in Ukraine. Western countries, particularly the United States and European Union, have provided assistance to Central Asian countries in terms of both security and counterterrorism efforts. As the security situation in the region becomes increasingly complex, Central Asian states are seeking to bolster their military capabilities through partnerships with a variety of external powers. This has led to a situation where Russia, while still an important security actor in the region, no longer has a monopoly on regional security issues.

Despite these shifts, Russia has maintained a presence in regional security organizations, such as the CSTO, and has sought to reassure Central Asian nations of its commitment to regional stability. However, Russia's involvement in regional security has become increasingly questioned, especially as it faces mounting challenges in Ukraine. The perception of Russian weakness in the face of Western sanctions and military setbacks has led some Central Asian countries to reassess their reliance on Russian security guarantees. In contrast, the increasing militarization of Central Asia by China and the West has created a more multipolar security environment, where Russia is no longer the dominant player. This shift in regional security dynamics underscores the changing power relations in Central Asia and the need for Russia to recalibrate its security strategies in the face of new challenges.

Russia's Diplomatic Strategy and the Future of Central Asia

Russia's diplomatic approach to Central Asia has been under significant scrutiny following the Ukraine war. Historically, Russia's diplomatic efforts in the region have focused on maintaining a balance between economic cooperation, security arrangements, and political influence. However, in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, Russia's diplomatic strategy has become more focused on securing its position in the region and minimizing the impact of Western sanctions. This has involved a stronger emphasis on regional integration, particularly through initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives has been called into question as Central Asian countries increasingly pursue bilateral relationships with China, the EU, and the United States.

Russia's diplomatic strategies have also been shaped by its efforts to preserve its sphere of influence in Central Asia. The region is crucial for Russia's broader geopolitical objectives, particularly in terms of projecting power and maintaining influence over former Soviet states. However, Russia's actions in Ukraine have led to a reevaluation of its diplomatic approach, as some

Central Asian countries have voiced concerns about Russia's assertiveness. This has led to a more cautious approach in Russia's diplomatic engagement, particularly with countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which have been seeking greater autonomy in their foreign policy. As these countries seek to establish more independent foreign policies, Russia's ability to exert influence through diplomatic channels is increasingly being challenged.

At the same time, Russia has sought to use its traditional diplomatic ties with Central Asia to secure its interests in the region. This has been particularly evident in Russia's efforts to enhance energy cooperation and secure trade routes. The ability to influence Central Asia's energy landscape is a key element of Russia's broader diplomatic strategy, and Russia has worked to strengthen its ties with countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in this regard. However, as these countries increasingly engage with China and other regional powers, Russia's ability to shape the diplomatic landscape of Central Asia is being gradually undermined. This shift in diplomatic dynamics suggests that Russia's future in the region will depend on its ability to adapt its approach and find new avenues for engagement.

Conclusion

The geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia have undergone significant transformation in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, with Russia's traditional dominance in the region being increasingly challenged. While Russia remains an important player in Central Asia due to its historical ties, economic influence, and security presence, its ability to control the region's political and economic trajectory has diminished. The imposition of Western sanctions, coupled with Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine, has prompted Central Asian countries to diversify their alliances, seeking to balance their relationships with Russia, China, and the West. China, in particular, has capitalized on this shift, strengthening its economic presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, while Western nations have sought to enhance their influence through trade and security partnerships. This diversification strategy reflects a broader trend of Central Asian countries striving for greater autonomy and independence in shaping their foreign policies.

Moreover, Russia's diminishing influence in both the economic and security spheres has led to a rethinking of its approach to the region. The growing concern over Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine has heightened Central Asia's need for greater security diversification. As Central Asian nations engage with a broader range of international actors, Russia faces the challenge of adapting to a more multipolar geopolitical environment. The future of Russia's role in Central Asia will largely depend on its ability to recalibrate its strategies, find new avenues for cooperation, and offer meaningful partnerships that align with the evolving needs and priorities of the region. While Russia's

influence will likely persist in some areas, its position in Central Asia is no longer unchallenged, and the region's future will be shaped by the interplay of multiple external powers and the ambitions of its own states.

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