BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE

BALTDEFCOL Policy Brief: October 2026

NATO and Central Asia: Opportunities for Engagement in a Multipolar World

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This work was supported by the European Commission under the Horizon Europe Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Staff Exchanges programme, through the project The Political Economy of Legal and Governance Reform in Non-Western Societies: Insights from Central Asia (POLCA), project number 101228676."

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ISSN 3059-5649 (print)
ISSN 3059-5657 (pdf)

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Introduction

With the return of great power politics and the decline of the rules-based order, Central Asia finds itself sandwiched between competing powers. The region's attempt to avoid dependence on any single power gives NATO an opportunity to re-engage.

Central Asia's neighbours remain powerful. Despite the escalation of its invasion of Ukraine since 2022, Russia's role as the primary external security partner for Central Asia remains relatively resilient. Moscow maintains ten military facilities in three of the five republics in the region, has exported two-thirds of Central Asia's arms imports, and accounts for over a third of the joint military exercises in the region since 1991.[1]

'NATO has been disengaging from the region over the past decade…Yet there are now opportunities for NATO re-engagement'.

Meanwhile, the region's eastern neighbour, China, has grown dramatically as a security player over the past decade under the tenure of Xi Jinping. Beijing opened its first military facility, a small reconnaissance base in Tajikistan operated by the People's Armed Police (PAP) near the Afghan border in 2016, increased its share of the arms market from 1.5% to 13% between 2012 and 2022, and has started a series of joint exercises and border patrols with Central Asian partners.[2]

NATO has been disengaging from the region over the past decade. Relations with NATO peaked after the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001 as NATO sought to use the region to support operations in its southern neighbour. NATO members operated four bases in the region in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Yet as NATO scaled back operations in Afghanistan, ties have weakened. Germany, the last NATO member to have a military base in the region, closed its facility in 2015.[3] Two years later, NATO closed its coordination office in Tashkent.[4]

Yet there are now opportunities for NATO re-engagement. Russia's role as a security provider in Central Asia is in slow, relative decline, which has been accelerated by its invasion of Ukraine. Russia's war of aggression has undermined its reputation as a security guarantor to neighbouring states, particularly Kazakhstan. It has also depleted Russia's regional military assets as they have been diverted to the front lines. Meanwhile, other powers are playing a growing role in regional security, most notably China. This is potentially beneficial to the region's five governments, all of which desire multi-vector foreign policies and security partnerships with a range of external powers to avoid overreliance on Moscow. Since the death of the Uzbek President

[1] Edward Lemon and Bradley Jardine, "Kennan Cable No.68: Central Asia's Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy," *Wilson Center*, Kennan Cable no. 68 (2021), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-68-central-asias-multi-vector-defense-diplomacy.

[2] Edward Lemon and Ruslan Norov, "How China is Adapting to Tajikistan's Demand for Security Cooperation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 20, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2025/09/how-china-is-adapting-to-tajikistans-demand-for-security-cooperation.

[3] "Western Militaries Exit Central Asia As Germany Shuts Uzbek Base," *RFE/RL*, October 15, 2015, https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-germany-to-shut-base-last-western-in-central-asia/27308248.html.

[4] Joshua Kucera, "NATO Closes Shop in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, November 17, 2016, https://eurasianet.org/nato-closes-shop-central-asia.

Islam Karimov in 2016, Central Asian states are increasingly coordinating with one another *and* seeking additional partners to maximise their strategic autonomy. This creates an opportunity for NATO to re-engage in the region.

This Policy Brief opens with a discussion on Russia, the region's primary external security player. It outlines how China has played an increasingly important role in security along its Western frontier. We then move into a discussion of the rising cooperation among countries in the region on security matters over the past decade. We explore opportunities for NATO engagement at the end of the Brief.

Russia's Hegemonic Role in Central Asian Regional Security

Russia remains the dominant security provider to the region it considers part of its 'Near Abroad' or 'sphere of influence'. Moscow seeks to retain its influence, reduce the U.S. role in the region, and prevent destabilisation by popular protests and terrorist organisations. Russia is deeply embedded in regional security. It has accounted for over two-thirds of the value of arms transfers to Central Asia since 1991 and has organised over half of the joint military exercises involving Central Asian militaries.[5] Russia engages the region bilaterally and via international organisations. The Russian-led mutual defence organisation, the CSTO, includes Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as members. It has played a role in maintaining regime security. In January 2022, the CSTO Peacekeeping Forces, a 3,000-strong multinational rapid-deployment force comprising troops from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia, intervened to quell unrest in Kazakhstan. The interparliamentary assemblies of both organisations play a key role in harmonising legislation and developing common understandings of issues such as terrorism, extremism, and cybersecurity.[6]

Russia has staying power in Central Asia. Its lease on the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan is set to expire in 2032, with an option for an automatic 25-year extension. Its presence in Tajikistan is guaranteed until at least 2042. Russia's lease at Baikonur extends to 2050. Dependence on Russian weaponry and mindsets will be difficult to shake. Decades of Soviet and Russian military influence in the region, reinforced by continued membership of Russian defence organisations and bilateral agreements, have driven doctrine, mindsets, and dependence on Russian military systems. Such dependence cannot be erased quickly.

But there are signs of Russia's slow decline. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has certainly undermined its position as a security provider in the region. Materially, Russia has deployed over 1,500 troops stationed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to the frontline, weakening its ability to defend the region.[7] Its military prestige and technology might have been undermined

[5] In Kazakhstan, Russia controls the Sary Shagan missile testing range, 54th Separate Helicopter Squadron, 929th State Flight Test Centre, the Balkhash Radar Station, and the Baikonur Cosmodrome. Russian facilities in Kyrgyzstan include the Kant Air Base near Bishkek, 338th Communications Node in Kara Balta, 954th Anti-Submarine Weapon Testing Base on Lake Issyk-Kul, and the 17th Seismological Laboratory near Mayluu-Suu. In Tajikistan, Russia controls the 201st Military Base and the Okno space surveillance station. See, Aygerim Zholdas, "Import of Arms in Central Asia: Trends and Directions for Diversification," *CABAR*, October 1, 2021, https://cabar.asia/en/import-of-arms-in-central-asia-trends-and-directions-for-diversification; David Batashvili, "Russia's Military Position in Central Asia," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 2025, https://gfsis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Russias-Military-Position-in-Central-Asia.pdf; "Российские военные базы и объекты в Казахстане" [Russian military bases and facilities in Kazakhstan], Rezonans, April 20, 2017, https://rezonans.kz/vse-o-politike/item/2384-rossijskie-voennye-bazy-i-ob-ekty-v-kazakhstane; "54-я отдельная вертолетная эскадрилья (54-я ОВЭ) (в/ч 03085)" [54th Separate Helicopter Squadron (54th OVE) (military unit 03085)], https://rvsn.info/avia/054ove_03085.html.

[6] Oleg Antonov, Edward Lemon, Bo Petersson, and Olena Podolian, "The CSTO Parliamentary Assembly: Authoritarian Legal Harmonization in Eurasia," *CBEES*, 2024 (pp. 64-68), https://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1846696/FULLTEXT01.pdf; Edward Lemon and Oleg Antonov, "Authoritarian Legal Harmonization in the Post-Soviet Space," *Democratization*, 27, no. 7 (2020): 1221–1239. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1778671.

[7] "'Up To 1,500' Russian Troops Redeployed To Ukraine From Tajik Base, Investigation Reveals," *RFE/RL*, September 14, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-troops-tajik-base-redeployed-ukraine/32033791.html.

by the poor Russian performance on the battlefield, leading to questions in Central Asia over whether Russia can provide for the region's security.

> 'There are signs of Russia's slow decline. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has certainly undermined its position as a security provider in the region'.

Since 2022, Russia has come to be viewed as more of a threat in the region, particularly in Kazakhstan, where around 15% of the population are ethnic Russians, many of whom are concentrated along the border with Russia. Public opinion of Russia has soured, with one-third of those surveyed in 2023 expressing negative opinions, up from 10% in the years before 2022.[8] Russian nationalists have long claimed that parts of Kazakhstan are historically "Russian land". Shortly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin drew criticism from Kazakhstan for saying the 'Kazakhs never had any statehood' and it was to the Kazakh people's advantage to 'remain in the greater Russian world'.[9] In August 2022, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev posted (and then deleted) claims that Kazakhstan is an "artificial state".[10] Such fears have driven Kazakhstan to strengthen its relations with alternative security partners.

Russia's role as a security guarantor was also brought into question by its passivity in recent regional conflicts. When CSTO members Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan engaged in armed conflict along their border in April 2021 and September 2022, Putin called for both sides to 'not to allow for further escalation and take measures for a quick and peaceful resolution of the situation'.[11] But the organisation and Russia did nothing. In October 2022, Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO exercise, in part because it viewed Russia as backing Tajikistan in the two countries' border conflict.[12] As Azerbaijan moved to retake Karabakh in 2023, Russia, again, did not intervene, arguing the operations were taking place within Azerbaijani territory. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan skipped the organisation's annual summit in November 2023, and his country's continued participation in the CSTO is in doubt.[13]

In summary, Russia is in slow decline in the region but remains the main security player and has significant staying power. While Russia's role is gradually waning, the region's eastern neighbour, China, is making inroads in regional security.

China's Rising Security Presence

When the Central Asian region emerged into independence in 1991, Beijing's initial interests were primarily driven by security concerns.[14] Early meetings focused on delineating its border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Home to the world's largest Uyghur diaspora, China wanted to ensure the region did not become a base for Uyghur separatism and terrorism, which could

[8] Hannah Chapman and Raushan Zhandayeva, "Attitudes toward Russia's War on Ukraine in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *PONARS Eurasia,* Policy Memo no. 877 December 2023, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pepm_867_Chapman_Zhandayeva_December2023.pdf.

[9] Farangis Najibullah, "Putin Downplays Kazakh Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction," *RFE/RL*, September 3, 2014, https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html.

[10] Paolo Sorbello, "Former Russian President Questions Kazakhstan's Sovereignty," *The Diplomat,* August 5, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/former-russian-president-questions-kazakhstans-sovereignty/.

[11] Gian Volpicelli, "Putin Urges Kyrgyz, Tajik Leaders to De-escalate Border Tensions," *Politico*, September 18, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-de-escalate-border-tensions/.

[12] "Kyrgyzstan Cancels Planned CSTO Exercises," *RFE/RL*, October 9, 2022, https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-cancels-csto-military-exercises-belarus-russia/32072105.html.

[13] "Armenia Freezes Participation in Russia-led Security Bloc - Prime Minister," *Reuters*, February 23, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-freezes-participation-russia-led-security-bloc-prime-minister-2024-02-23/.

[14] Edward Lemon, Bradley Jardine, and Lucas Peters, "Stability Maintenance and the 'Three Evils': Framing China's Role in Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 34, no. 154 (2025): 664–690. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003784449-15.

destabilise Xinjiang.[15] Nonetheless, China was a marginal player in Central Asian security in the 1990s. This began to change with the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2001, which counted as its founding members four Central Asian republics (minus Turkmenistan) and Russia.[16] With countering the 'Three Evils' (extremism, separatism, terrorism) as its central mandate, China used the organisation to begin to play a more active role in Central Asian security.

China was originally deferential to Russia on security matters. It operated via the SCO, where Russia is a member. Since 2005, the SCO has organised Peace Mission exercises, with Russia and China participating together. However, since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has increasingly developed its own security initiatives without Russian involvement. These include multilateral initiatives, such as the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism formed with Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan as a vehicle for intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism in 2016 and China+Central Asia, which met at the presidential level for the first time in Xi'an in May 2023.[17]

For China, Tajikistan is the weak spot in Central Asian security, with its 1,344-kilometre, mostly mountainous border with Afghanistan. In 2016, China pledged to restore or build 40 border posts along the Tajik-Afghan border.[18] China and Tajikistan have conducted sporadic joint border patrols and operations since 2014.[19] China's People's Armed Police has operated a small facility located near both the Tajik-Afghan border and the Tajik-China border in Gorno-Badakhshan province, Tajikistan, since 2016. This is China's first strategic facility in the region. China has funded the construction of other facilities, including a new base for Tajikistan's Rapid Reaction Group in 2023.[20] China's involvement in Central Asian security is gradually extending beyond military-technical cooperation and taking on a more pronounced infrastructural dimension. China's presence in Tajikistan signals the emergence of an additional layer in the regional security architecture, one that does not replace the Russian presence but gradually creates alternative channels for ensuring security.

Arms exports have also increased. In the early 2010s, China was a relatively minor player in the regional arms market; its share of arms imports to Central Asia was about 1.5% between 2010 and 2014.[21] But over the next five years, China's share of arms imports to Central Asia increased to 13%.[22] China is offering alternatives to help Central Asian states wean themselves off overreliance on Russian weapons systems. But China still lags far behind Russia, which has held steady at around two-thirds of the total.

China has also increased its role in training and boosting interoperability with Central Asian militaries. China organised its first joint exercise in the region via the

[15] Bradley Jardine, "Great Wall of Steel: China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs," *Wilson Center*, (2022), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/book/great-wall-steel.
[16] India and Pakistan became members in 2017. Iran joined in 2023 and Belarus the next year.
[17] People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Xi Jinping Chairs the Inaugural China-Central Asia Summit and Delivers a Keynote Speech," May 19, 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/3255_664392/3257_664396/202305/t20230519_11080116.html.
[18] Catherine Putz, "China in Tajikistan: New Report Claims Chinese Troops Patrol Large Swaths of the Afghan-Tajik Border," *The Diplomat*, June 18, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/china-in-tajikistan-new-report-claims-chinese-troops-patrol-large-swaths-of-the-afghan-tajik-border/.
[19] Lemon and Norov, "How China is Adapting to Tajikistan's Demand for Security Cooperation".
[20] "Tajikistan Approves Construction Of New Chinese-Funded Base As Beijing's Security Presence In Central Asia Grows," *RFE/RL*, October 27, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html.
[21] Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Kennan Cable No.52: In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia," *Wilson Center*, Kennan Cable no. 52 (2020), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-52-russias-shadow-chinas-rising-security-presence-central-asia.
[22] Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Central Asia Diversifies and Indigenizes Defence Procurement to Limit Reliance on Moscow," *Jamestown,* May 14, 2026, https://jamestown.org/central-asia-diversifies-and-indigenizes-defense-procurement-to-limit-reliance-on-moscow/

SCO in 2002.[23] Subsequent drills were all organised under the auspices of the multilateral framework until 2014, when China started organising its own bilateral exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Most of these have focused on border security and counter-terrorism, involving the National Guard, security services, and border troops, and on de-conflicting with Russia, which largely focuses on large-scale military exercises.

Overall, China is on the rise in the region, providing increasing amounts of security assistance and operating outside of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with increasing frequency. But, while China is a welcome alternative to Russia for many regional actors, Central Asian countries also want to avoid becoming too reliant on Beijing.

Central Asia's Growing Assertiveness

Each regional country wants to avoid dependence on any single external power, attempting to pursue strategies to maintain autonomy, which they have dubbed "multivectorism".[24] Kazakhstan, the region's largest and richest country, and Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous state, are best placed to leverage these strategies.[25] At present, the Central Asian republics are pursuing three strategies to attempt to maximise their independence and autonomy.

First, the Central Asian republics are increasingly cooperating with one another on matters of regional security. Since 2018, the leaders of the five Central Asian republics have met to discuss numerous issues, including common security.[26] Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan ratified a Treaty on Allied Relations in 2024, pledging to cooperate on security matters,[27] and in 2025 agreed to host regular joint exercises.[28] These agreements include joint military educational programmes, intelligence sharing and an increase in the number of bilateral and multilateral meetings of defence ministers and heads of security agencies. Previously, joint exercises involving Central Asian militaries were almost all held under the auspices of the CIS, SCO, or CSTO.

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But over the past five years, exercises involving only Central Asian forces have spiked. Most recently, Uzbekistan hosted Birlik-2025 (Unity-2025) in October 2025, bringing together armed forces from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan.[29] The Central Asian republics have increasingly included Azerbaijan in regional security meetings and exercises. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan conducted the joint "Caspian Breeze-2025" naval exercises in June 2025.[30] Such

[23] "China and Kyrgyzstan Launch Anti-terrorism Exercises," *The China Daily*, October 11, 2002, https://archive-yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/china-and-kyrgyzstan-launch-anti-terrorism-exercises.
[24] Lemon and Jardine, "Central Asia's Multi-vector Defense Diplomacy"; Filippo Costa Buranelli, "The Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia: Local Norms, Institutions and the Fundamentals of Regional Order," *International Affairs*, 102, no. 1, (January 2026): 121–145. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf225.
[25] Svante Cornell, "Layers of Cooperation: The Gradual Institutionalization of Central Asian Cooperation," CACI-Analyst, August 11, 2025, https://centralasiacaucasusinstitute.substack.com/p/layers-of-cooperation-the-gradual.
[26] Costa Buranelli, "The Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia: Local Norms, Institutions and the Fundamentals of Regional Order".
[27] Karolina Powers, "Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan Strengthen Strategic Alliance," *Caspian Policy Center*, December 22, 2021, https://caspianpolicy.com/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/kazakhstan-and-uzbekistan-strengthen-strategic-alliance.
[28] Anvar Umarov, "Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan Agree to Hold Regular Joint Military Exercises," *Uz Daily*, September 7, 2025, https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/kazakhstan-and-uzbekistan-agree-to-hold-regular-joint-military-exercises/.
[29] Vagit Ismailov, "Five Countries Complete Large-Scale 'Birlik-2025' Military Exercises in Uzbekistan," *The Times of Central Asia*, October 22, 2025, https://timesca.com/five-countries-complete-large-scale-birlik-2025-military-exercises-in-uzbekistan/.
[30] Zarina Aliyeva, "В Актау завершились военно-морские учения Казахстана и Азербайджана "Каспийский бриз – 2025" [The joint naval exercises between Kazakhstan and

interactions are part of a strategy of "balancing regionalism", whereby Central Asian states try to avoid dependence on Russia and China, acting through a number of regional organisations and formats and fostering additional regional platforms that help diversify ties.[31]

Second, the Central Asian republics are seeking external partners to balance against Russian and Chinese influence. Iran, India, Pakistan, and Türkiye, which recently proposed creating a collective defence organisation for Turkic states, stand out in this regard. India conducted its first overseas military exercise in Tajikistan in 2003 and has held annual exercises with Kyrgyzstan since 2011, Kazakhstan since 2016, and Uzbekistan since 2019. Türkiye has increased its number of exercises, bilaterally and through the Organisation of Turkic States, hosting three exercises in 2025. This increased military outreach from alternative partners gives the region more choices as it seeks to reduce dependence on Russia.

'As the countries of the region seek to maintain their independence and pursue multivector foreign policies, this has opened a space for NATO engagement'.

Third, they are developing their own defence industries to become more self-reliant, especially the richest country in the region, Kazakhstan. In April 2025, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defence launched a $1 billion Defence Industry Development Fund. The new defence fund aims to acquire the licenses and manufacture domestically critical military hardware.[32] In 2023, Kazakhstan launched the ASPAN project to build four factories to produce NATO ammunition, artillery shells, and mines, valued at $1 billion.[33] The goal is to achieve military autonomy and potential export opportunities, reducing reliance on Russia, which continues to supply two-thirds of weapons imported by the region.

Over the past decade, regional players, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have become more autonomous and assertive. As the countries of the region seek to maintain their independence and pursue multivector foreign policies, this has opened a space for NATO engagement.

NATO in Central Asia

Following independence, all five Central Asian republics pursued multivector foreign policies aimed at developing partnerships with multiple states and organisations. NATO was viewed as a useful partner in bolstering regional security and military capacity, including improving command-and-control, interoperability, modernising armed forces, and equipping them with the latest high-tech types of military hardware. All the Central Asian republics, apart from war-torn Tajikistan, joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994. All the Central Asian republics also joined the Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme. The position of NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia was established in 2004.
The Central Asian countries supported NATO operations in Afghanistan in various

Azerbaijan, "Caspian Breeze – 2025," have concluded in Aktau], *Nur KZ,* June 19, 2025, https://www.nur.kz/politics/universe/2257290-v-aktau-zavershilis-voenno-morskie-ucheniya-kazahstana-i-azerbaydzhana-kaspiyskiy-briz-2025/.

[31] Aliya Tskhay and Filippo Costa Buranelli, "Accommodating Revisionism through Balancing Regionalism: The Case of Central Asia," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 72, no. 6, (2020): 1033–1052. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1779184.; Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F. Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva, "Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers," *International Affairs*, 96, no. 4, (July 2020): 975–993. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa061.

[32] Karlygash Kozhabek, "120 млрд тенге планируют выделить на развитие обороны в Казахстане" [120 billion tenge are planned to be allocated for defense development in Kazakhstan], *Kazinform*, April 16, 2025, https://www.inform.kz/ru/120-mlrd-tenge-planiruyut-videlit-na-ustavnoy-kapital-fonda-razvitiya-opk-v-kazahstane-f230df.

[33] "Казахстан запускает ASPAN-1: первый завод боеприпасов новой генерации" [Kazakhstan launches ASPAN-1: the first new-generation ammunition plant], *Bugin Info*, December 10, 2025, https://bugin.info/detail/kazakhstan-zapuskaet-aspan/ru.

ways. Between 2001 and 2014, the Manas transit centre in Kyrgyzstan moved more than 5.3 million servicemen in and out of Afghanistan, handled about 700,000 tons of cargo, and completed 33,000 refuelling missions.[34] The U.S. and Germany both had bases in Uzbekistan to support their operations in Afghanistan. The French Air Force used Dushanbe Airport in Tajikistan to conduct almost 11,000 air missions, accounting for 60% of all French missions during the Afghan War.[35] Moreover, 89,000 NATO servicemen and 14,500 tons of cargo transited the Dushanbe airport during the campaign.[36]

> NATO was viewed as a useful partner in security and military capacity, due to improving command-and-control, interoperability, modernising armed forces, and equipping them with high-tech military hardware.

From 2009 onward, Central Asia was integral to the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a series of logistical corridors that supported NATO operations in Afghanistan. The NDN ran through Russia to Afghanistan via Latvia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, along with a subsidiary corridor transiting Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. By 2011, the NDN handled about 40% of Afghanistan-bound traffic. Russia shuttered the network in 2015 following its invasion of Ukraine.[37]

A number of Central Asian countries engage in NATO programmes, including the Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) and the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme (SPS) (Kazakhstan and Tajikistan). But Kazakhstan has been the most actively engaged country in the region, joining the Planning and Review Process (2002) and the Operational Capabilities Concept (2004) as well.[38] In 2000, it created the Kazakh Peacekeeping Battalion (KAZBAT) with support from NATO, which became Kazbrig in 2007. The unit hosted annual Steppe Eagle anti-terrorist exercises with NATO forces from 2003 to 2019.

The only NATO Information and Documentation Centre in the region was created in Kazakhstan (2004), and a NATO Representative Office opened the next year.[39] In 2005, Kazakhstan announced its plan to abandon its long-term reliance upon dated Soviet munitions and Russian replacements and prioritise the manufacture of NATO-standard ammunition. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country to have agreed on an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with the Alliance in early 2006. Kazakhstan also established the Peacekeeping Operations Centre (KAZCENT), a Ministry of Defence training facility in Almaty in 2006; it was accredited by NATO as a Partnership Training and Education Centre in December 2010.

But recent years have seen a decline in NATO's role. The drawback and eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 meant that the final NATO member base in the region was closed by 2016. NATO closed its liaison office in Tashkent the next year. Between 2000 and 2022, the U.S. gave $2.1 billion in security assistance to Central Asia. U.S. security assistance peaked in 2012, as the initial deadline for withdrawal from Afghanistan,

[34] Dauren Aben, "Kyrgyzstan-NATO Cooperation: Constructive but Limited," *Eurasian Research Institute*, Weekly e-Bulletin no. 153, (2018), https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Weekly-e-bulletin-27.02.2018-05.03.2018-No-153.pdf.
[35] Dauren Aben, "Tajikistan and NATO: Assistance Based Partnership," *Eurasian Research Institute*, Weekly e-Bulletin no. 162 (2018), https://eurasian-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Weekly-e-bulletin-01.05.2018-07.05.2018-No-162.pdf.
[36] Aben, "Tajikistan and NATO: Assistance Based Partnership".
[37] John C. K. Daly, "Russia Shutters Northern Distribution Network," *Jamestown*, 12, no. 111, June 15, 2015, https://jamestown.org/russia-shutters-northern-distribution-network/.
[38] Timur Shaymergenov and Marat Biekenov, "Kazakhstan and NATO: Evaluation of Cooperation Prospects," *CAC*, 11, no. 1, (2010), https://www.ca-c.org/index.php/cac/article/view/1735.
[39] Roger McDermott, "Kazakhstan Moves Closer Towards Future NATO Integration," *Jamestown*, 2, no. 84, April 29, 2005, https://jamestown.org/kazakhstan-moves-closer-towards-future-nato-integration/.

with $254 million. By 2022, that figure was $25.8 million for the whole region.

High-level interactions with Central Asia have been minimal. While NATO's Deputy Secretary General, Radmila Shekerinska, visited Azerbaijan in January 2026 and Armenia the month before, high-level visits to Central Asia have not taken place in recent years. No sitting Secretary General has visited the region, although they have met presidents from the region, notably in a flurry of meetings between 2010 and 2013 as withdrawal from Afghanistan was first envisioned.[40] Most diplomatic interactions occur in Brussels rather than in Central Asia.

Yet the opportunity is ripe for re-engagement, and there is demand for this from the Central Asian side. A logical vector for this would be Türkiye, which has been strengthening its role as a bridge between NATO and Central Asia bilaterally and through the Organisation of Turkic States. It is a key supplier of military hardware to the region. In May 2022, Astana and Ankara signed a Memorandum on military-technical cooperation.[41] That same year, Uzbekistan and Türkiye signed a defence cooperation agreement covering education, intelligence cooperation, and joint training.[42] Military exercises between Turkic countries have been held since 2010, with three held in 2025. As an Alliance member with historic and cultural roots in the region, Türkiye is the ideal partner to spearhead renewed efforts to engage with Central Asia.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the world becomes more polarised and great powers act with increasing impunity and brazenness, NATO has an opportunity to re-engage in Central Asia, a region seeking to develop positive relations with a range of partners. NATO should prioritise the largest and most autonomous countries in the region: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

At the 2024 Washington Summit, NATO members stated their commitment to strengthening engagements with partners beyond the Euro-Atlantic area 'when doing so could bolster our mutual security'.[43] Located on the borders of Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan, partnering with the Central Asian states is critical to mutual security, from containing spillovers from Afghanistan to reducing the influence of Russia and China. More active engagement with the region's states can facilitate efforts to counter terrorism and transnational threats, enhance cyber resilience, protect critical infrastructure, strengthen partners' resilience against hybrid threats, and more effectively counter the circumvention of sanctions against Russia.

'NATO should prioritise the largest and most autonomous countries in the region: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan'.

Crucially, there is demand for greater engagement from the Central Asian side as they aim to maintain autonomy. As the countries have moved closer to Türkiye to balance against Russia, there is an opportunity for Türkiye, as a NATO member, to spearhead efforts to develop closer ties between NATO and Central Asia. While the positive relations developed through bilateral initiatives can

[40] Anders Fogh Rasmussen met President Rahmon of Tajikistan in 2010 and 2013, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan in 2011 and 2013, President Karimov of Uzbekistan in 2011 and President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in 2010.
[41] Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan seals deal to produce Turkish drones under license," *Eurasianet*, May 13, 2022, https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-seals-deal-to-produce-turkish-drones-under-license.
[42] "Türkiye-Özbekistan Askeri İşbirliği Çerçeve Anlaşması, TBMM'de" [The Türkiye-Uzbekistan Military Cooperation Framework Agreement is being discussed in the Turkish Grand National Assembly], *Mehr News*, July 9, 2022, https://tr.mehrnews.com/news/1903377/.
[43] "Washington Summit Declaration," *NATO*, July 10, 2024, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration.

be built on, NATO needs to strengthen its own programs in the region.

NATO has a number of existing mechanisms that can be used to bolster ties with the region. The Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) initiative, designed to promote an even more intense and targeted defence and security cooperation between NATO members and potentially vulnerable strategic partners, could be expanded to the region.[44] This could be coordinated by reestablishing the NATO Liaison Office in Astana or Tashkent, or managed from the existing office in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Opportunities for engagement are particularly apparent in the education sector as the Central Asian region seeks to move beyond over-reliance on Russia. NATO should work with the Ministry of Defence of Uzbekistan to develop a PfP Training Centre modelled on Kazakhstan's PfP Training Centre (KAZCENT). The Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP) should be rolled out across the region, with the development of new exchange programmes, workshops, and training modules. To facilitate the development of new initiatives and the role of countries like Türkiye as bridges for NATO policies, the Alliance should create an educational fund through voluntary contributions by member states. Such a fund could engage young people through scholarships, internship programmes, and exchanges in universities to build positive elite networks in the future with NATO and the countries of the region, as well as developing more training programs for officers. These could include hosting more Central Asians at the NATO Defence College through organising summer schools, training workshops, and webinars on issues such as cyber security, AI, extremism, and terrorism. By focusing on education, the Alliance can dampen the potential blowback from Russia and China over its role in the region.

The Alliance should also expand military-to-military cooperation. NATO should invite Central Asian militaries to participate in joint exercises in member countries. Through strategic partnerships between NATO and Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the Alliance could explore developing a programme for the local assembly of drones with the integration of NATO AI autopilots. This will create an intelligence-analysis-action ecosystem for NATO, where countries in the region gain technology and sovereignty while NATO strengthens its role in the region.

Once appointed, the new Special Representative should prioritise visiting the region and meeting with Central Asian diplomats in Brussels to inject momentum into relations. To coordinate these activities, we propose the creation of a C5+NATO, modelled on other similar formats between the E.U., U.S., and Central Asia. Initially, the grouping could be coordinated by the Ministries of Defence and the NATO Military Committee, with coordination with Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Secretary General. Interior ministries, and other relevant agencies could be included where appropriate. The C5+1 could work together to develop initiatives that are driven by local needs. The group would focus on dialogue and cooperation on security areas that are a priority for the Alliance, such as cybersecurity, outer space, border security, hybrid threats, protecting critical infrastructure, strategic communications, and counter-terrorism.

In the context of growing competition between Russia and China for influence in the region, the C5+NATO format would provide Central Asian states with additional space for multilateral manoeuvring and a multi-vector foreign policy, reducing the risks of excessive dependence on Moscow and Beijing.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly could play an additional role in institutionalising dialogue with Central Asian states, providing a parliamentary dimension to

[44] Under the DCB Initiative, NATO currently cooperates with the following partners: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, the Republic of Moldova, Tunisia, and the United Nations.

interaction, and promoting norms of democratic civilian control over the security sector. Unlike the parliamentary structures of the CSTO and the SCO, which primarily perform a legitimising function, the NATO Assembly offers a platform for exchanging best practices, increasing transparency, and engaging national parliaments in issues of defence policy, resilience, and countering hybrid threats, thereby strengthening the region's long-term institutional compatibility with Euro-Atlantic standards. As an initial step towards dialogue, the NATO PA should invite the Central Asian governments to become observers at the organisation, as Kazakhstan has been since 2004.

It is unrealistic to expect the region, given its location, to sever ties with Russia or China. Engagement should be structured to avoid creating the impression of an attempt to establish a new sphere of influence or to displace existing external actors. But each state does want to avoid becoming too dependent on these great powers and has hedged in backing them too openly on contentious issues. While the region's governments have not been vocal in their support for Ukraine, they have not actively backed Russia either. Kazakhstan has sent aid to Ukraine and refused to recognise the annexed territories as part of Russia.[45] The most pragmatic strategy for NATO, therefore, is to build a sustainable and demand-driven partnership based on mutual benefit, the specific needs of Central Asian states, and respect for their multi-vector foreign policies.

The creation of the C5+NATO format would allow the Alliance to establish itself in Central Asia as an institutionally stable and equal partner, forming an alternative to existing security mechanisms under the auspices of the CSTO and the SCO. Unlike the CSTO, which functions primarily as an instrument for projecting Russian interests and military dependence, and the SCO, which is focused on political loyalty and control over regime stability, NATO could offer Central Asia a more sustainable and beneficial model of cooperation.

[45] Mansur Mirovalev, "Ukraine War: Is Kazakhstan Going Cool on Russia?" *Al Jazeera*, June 24, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/24/whats-behind-kazakhstan-not-recognizing-ukraines-separatists.; Ivan Khomenko, "Kazakhstan Delivers Emergency Aid to Ukraine While Maintaining Ties With Russia," *United 24*, December 30, 2025, https://united24media.com/latest-news/kazakhstan-delivers-emergency-aid-to-ukraine-while-maintaining-ties-with-russia-14641.

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