

Great Power Competition in Central Asia: The Rise of China and the U.S. Response

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ABSTRACT

Central Asia is a strategically important region for both the United States and China. Since 1991, the U.S. has sought to strengthen its position in the region through investments in various sectors, and some Central Asian countries allowed NATO access to their airbases for operations in Afghanistan. However, after 2001, U.S. influence declined due to Russian policies and the rise of China as a regional competitor. China has increased its influence in Central Asia through significant investments and strategic partnerships. This research examines the potential future rivalry between the U.S. and China in Central Asia. Using secondary sources such as journals, books, newspapers, and policy analyses, the study predicts ongoing geopolitical competition between the two powers. Findings suggest that the U.S. may attempt to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, both countries may form regional coalitions to protect their interests, and proxy conflicts could emerge as a means to limit each other's influence in the region.

Keywords: Central Asia, China, U.S, rivalry.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is an important region in Asia, playing a key role in trade, transit, and connecting the Middle East and the Caucasus to South Asia. Due to its strategic location, Central Asia holds significant geopolitical importance, sharing borders with two major powers: Russia and China. Meanwhile, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States began efforts to increase its influence in the region. The United States considered the promotion of democracy around the world, including Central Asia, to be one of its key priorities. It viewed non-democratic governments as a threat to its national interests; therefore, the U.S. supported the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and imposed sanctions on Iran, Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba, and several other countries. Although the United States used military force to promote democracy and pursue regime change in some contexts, its approach in Central Asia was different. In this region, the U.S. relied on softer methods to promote democratic values and strengthen its influence, rather than direct military intervention.

The U.S. used civil society organizations, United Nation agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to promote its interests in Central Asia. Before 2001, Russia was not in a position to curb U.S. influence in Central Asia; therefore, the U.S. continued its unilateral actions. However, after 2001, the situation in Central Asia shifted in favor of Russia. When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2001, he adopted a pragmatic approach toward the U.S., challenging U.S. influence in the region. Furthermore, China has risen after 2014 as a major power in the region, posing serious challenges to the U.S. in Central Asia. China has undertaken development projects larger than those of any other country in the region and has been actively seeking to strengthen its position in Central Asia. The U.S. is also committed to maintaining its policy in Central Asia, curbing Chinese influence and limiting Russian interests. As China rises in Central Asia and the response of the United States becomes one of the major issues in international relations, there is still not enough literature examining China–U.S. competition in the region. Although some sporadic studies have addressed this competition from different perspectives, they are insufficient for understanding its complexity and therefore call for further research. This study seeks to contribute to and expand the existing research on China–U.S. competition and rivalry in Central Asia. So, in this research I want to examine the prospects of further competition between the U.S. and China in Central Asia and aims to analyze the clearly defined interests of both powers in

Central Asia in the near future. This research will take a comprehensive approach to analyzing the interests of both China and the United States in Central Asia, aiming to provide a clear perspective on the potential competition between the two powers in the region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

China's rise in Central Asia and the U.S. response is an important issue in International Relations, and many scholars have debated it. Mohammadi, Rahat Iqbal, and Hashim Ali, in their research paper titled "*Central Asia and the Great Power Politics: An Analysis of China's National Interest in the Region and U.S. Approach to China*," analyze China's policies in Central Asia and the U.S. response to them. They argue that China seeks to connect Central Asia to its economic network in order to gain access to regional markets. They also examine how the United States is keen to curb China's influence in Central Asia. However, their study discusses the approaches of China and the U.S. without forecasting future scenarios of competition between them (Mohammadi, Iqbal, & Ali, 2023). Similarly, Frank Maracchione, in his research paper "*Central Asian Studies in the People's Republic of China: A Structural Topic Model*," focuses on China's policy toward Central Asia. He discusses how China seeks to expand its presence in the region but does not address U.S. policies or its approach to competing with China's influence (Maracchione, 2023). Nana A. Gegelashvili, in "*Washington's Policy Against the Backdrop of Fierce Competition Between the U.S. and China in Central Asia*," examines U.S. policy in Central Asia and its strategy for dealing with China. The study focuses primarily on the U.S. perspective and analyzes the future trajectory of U.S.–China competition in the region (Gegelashvili, 2023). S. Frederick Starr, in "*U.S. Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and the South Caucasus*," analyzes China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S. perspective on it. The study discusses possible U.S. alternatives to the BRI and its approach to implementing these alternatives in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. However, it mainly focuses on the BRI and does not explore other areas in which China and the U.S. compete in Central Asia (Starr, 2019). Overall, these studies examine U.S.–China competition in Central Asia from different perspectives, but they do not fully address the approach adopted in the present study. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of China–U.S. competition in Central Asia by examining political and economic dimensions, China's regional projects, U.S. investments, and the strategies employed by both countries to counter each other's influence. Therefore, this study offers a deeper and more integrated approach to understanding China–U.S. competition in Central Asia.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. How is the competition between China and the United States unfolding in Central Asia?
2. What are China's strategic interests in Central Asia?
3. What are the United States' strategic interests in Central Asia?
4. How is the United States being likely to respond to China's growing influence in Central Asia?

METHODOLOGY

This research will be based on qualitative methods and will utilize a historical-analytical methodology to investigate the competition between China and the U.S. in Central Asia. It will analyze this competition by drawing on secondary sources, including published materials such as books, journals, government documents, and research papers.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This study critically examines the strategic competition between China and the United States in Central Asia in the years ahead. This research is based on realism theory. According to realism theory, states pursue their interests, and there is no international system to guarantee

the interests of countries. Hence, states exist in an anarchic system; therefore, they seek to increase their capabilities in order to resist their rivals. So, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the political, economic, and security interests driving both powers in the region and systematically identifies the key domains in which their rivalry is most pronounced.

SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL ASIA, 1991–2001

After 1991, the Central Asian countries gained independence, but they faced significant challenges rooted in the legacy of the Soviet Union. Central Asia had been shaped according to Soviet criteria (Morrison, 2014). The Soviet authorities regarded indigenous culture as a threat; therefore, they banned traditional education and prohibited the practice of cultural traditions (Rashid, 2017). The Soviet Union eliminated religious leaders, closed religious institutions, and imposed strict control over all aspects of public life, allowing no space for independent action (Rashid, 2017). Over seven decades, Marxist ideology penetrated every sphere of life in Central Asia. Native languages and religious practices were abandoned by many of their followers, and ethnic groups such as the Turkic, Persian, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh peoples became increasingly alienated from their historical identities. Marxism was promoted as the dominant ideology in schools and universities, where students were systematically taught Marxist–Leninist and communist principles. Any non-Marxist ideas were portrayed as dangerous or undesirable, as defined by the political apparatus. There were no independent sources of information; people received all information from state-controlled outlets.

However, after 1989, the Central Asian countries expanded their relations with states both in the region and beyond, including the U.S. and European countries. From 1991 to 2001, the U.S. and Europe sought to increase their influence in Central Asia due to the existing political vacuum, using democratic institutions to promote their democratic interests in the region. Consequently, the U.S. and European merchants began to invest in Central Asia, creating opportunities for local populations to learn more about democratic ideas through travel, exposure to democratic countries, and access to information via mass media. In addition, people from Central Asia became increasingly involved in business with Western countries, which familiarized them with European and American cultures (Honrada, Ranjbar, & Mukan, 2023)

Between 1989 and 2001, people in Central Asia were exposed to new ideas coming from Western countries, but this exposure was insufficient to generate meaningful change in the region. Civil societies were weak and lacked the capacity to produce far-reaching consequences (Pannier, 2025). Likewise, democratic institutions did not receive substantial support from governments; they faced budget shortages and suffered from a lack of professional human resources. Furthermore, the U.S. and Europe were cautious about openly supporting democratic institutions in Central Asia, as they viewed the region as part of Russia's sphere of influence (Chatham House, 2025). As a result, these developments did not lead to the establishment of strong institutions capable of making governments independent from regional powers and superpowers. Central Asian states have remained largely subject to the influence of Russia, the U.S., and the EU. The region continues to struggle between the legacies of Marxism and the emerging ideas of liberalism, with neither fully prevailing over the other.

CENTRAL ASIA AFTER 2001

After 2001, the world underwent significant changes following Al-Qaida's attack on the United States, which led to the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. U.S. troops remained in the country until 2021. Most Central Asian states supported the U.S. presence in Afghanistan; notably, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan allowed NATO to use two of their airbases for counterterrorism operations (Stone, 2009). The U.S. presence in Afghanistan facilitated direct cooperation between Central Asia and the United States (Shebar, 2023). Central Asia experienced a new type of relationship after 2001, establishing more direct ties with the United States and Europe. The region's geopolitical importance increased significantly due to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. As a result, Kyrgyzstan strengthened its relations with the EU. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Academy in

Bishkek, supported by the EU, has become one of the most important academic institutions in Central Asia, with hundreds of students graduating annually from its various programs (Office of Internal Oversight, 2025). However, relations between Central Asia and the United States were consistently overshadowed by Russia, and they were rarely formed without Russian influence. After 2001, the U.S. did not deeply engage in Central Asian affairs to negotiate or implement major development projects. Instead, U.S. policy toward Central Asia remained largely tactical: the U.S. required the support of Central Asian countries to sustain its military operations in Afghanistan, yet it did not demonstrate interest in establishing long-term strategic partnerships with the region (Shebar, 2023).

On the other hand, Russia was dissatisfied with the U.S. presence in Central Asia after 2001, which placed the Central Asian countries in a delicate position as they attempted to balance their relations between Russia and the U.S. Nevertheless, most Central Asian states managed to maintain ties with both powers. It appeared that the competition between Russia and the U.S. did not create any serious challenges in the region. However, this was not due to a successful balance of power between Russia and the U.S.; rather, it resulted from a U.S. misperception of Russia's capabilities. U.S. policymakers believed that Russia lacked the capacity to pose a serious threat to America's main interests in Central Asia. Had the U.S. perceived a significant challenge to its interests, its response would have likely been different.

CHINA'S RISE AS A MAJOR POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA

China's rise has been gradual and largely smooth. After Mao Zedong, Chinese leaders have adhered to non-violence and non-confrontational approaches, prioritizing economic growth and the expansion of influence without provoking conflicts. As a result, China has temporarily set aside certain territorial disputes. For example, although China claims Taiwan, it has avoided military conflict with the island. Similarly, China has ongoing disputes with the Philippines and Japan over islands and maritime boundaries, yet it has refrained from war with its neighbors. Chinese leaders have consistently focused on economic development as their primary objective (Ayapbergenovna, 2015). China has expressed its willingness to strengthen its influence in the region, including Central Asia. It shares borders with three Central Asian countries: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. In addition, China is an important partner for Central Asia in numerous development projects and hydropower initiatives. Central Asia holds strategic significance for China in consolidating its regional influence; consequently, China has increased its investments in the region over recent decades. China also considers Central Asia an important region for its projects, as it provides a connection to the Caucasus, Turkey, and European markets. In addition, a stable and secure Central Asia is pivotal for China's development initiatives, and the country takes this consideration very seriously.

CHINA'S INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

It appears that China has multiple priorities in Central Asia, including combating terrorism, expanding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enhancing its regional influence, and curbing the influence of the United States. However, China's primary priority is countering terrorism, particularly due to concerns about Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang region. China aims to combat terrorism in Central Asia to create a stable environment for its development projects. In the second stage, China prioritizes expanding the BRI in Central Asia, continuing its development initiatives, and limiting U.S. influence in the region.

COLLABORATION TO HALT TERRORISM

The East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM) in Xinjiang state is a serious challenge for China. The ETIM fights for the independence of Xinjiang accused China for violating their basic rights and the populations of Xinjiang is predominantly Muslim (United Nations Security Council, 2011). China has been attempting to suppress the ETIM but has failed to eliminate it. Also there is some claim about the assimilation policy of China in Xinjiang which faced criticism from the international community (Lehr & Bechrakis, 2019). However, China has rejected any claims regarding violations in the Xinjiang region. Nevertheless, China's approach to the ETIM demonstrates that China takes the ETIM threat seriously. After 2021,

the political dynamics in the region shifted in favor of ETIM, as the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan and maintained amicable relations with the group. Moreover, Central Asia shares a border with Afghanistan, where the Taliban have provided shelter and opportunities to thousands of militants, raising China's concerns (Press Trust of India, 2023). So, terrorist groups could potentially exploit the Taliban's capabilities to target China. The relationship between ETIM and the Taliban poses a serious threat to China's interests in the region. ETIM could endanger Chinese interests not only in Central Asia but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additionally, Chinese officials view ETIM as a potential threat to China, they believe that ETIM may have connections with China's rivals, and its activities could jeopardize China's interests.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

BRI is the most important project which connect China to Central Asia. China looks beyond an economic project for BRI. Its desire is to be one of the great power in the world to challenge U.S hegemony in the world and BRI is a new model of cooperation between China and its allies. Central Asia is also important for China to expand BRI and achieve the resources in Central Asia. In addition, China know that a weak Central Asia with weak governmental institutions would be a challenge for BRI; therefore, China is seeking to strengthen the governmental institutions in Central Asia to cooperate with China for its projects (Sharifli, 2025). Thus, the BRI enables China to access Central Asian markets and strengthen its relations with the region. By connecting Central Asian markets to China, Beijing seeks to increase its influence there and curb U.S. influence in the region. The BRI is also an attractive project for Central Asian states, as it links them to the Caucasus, the EU market, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. This connectivity is particularly important because four of the Central Asian countries are landlocked. The BRI offers them access to major ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan and Chabahar in Iran, as well as important regional trade routes.

CHINA INVESTMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia has significant potential for investment, and China is actively seeking to expand its economic presence in the region. China is also willing to provide loans to Central Asian countries. However, Chinese lending practices are often criticized as a form of "debt-trap diplomacy," particularly in parts of Asia and Africa. Unlike Western financial institutions and international organizations, which typically attach conditions related to human rights, freedom of speech, and democratic governance, China offers largely unconditional loans. This makes Chinese financing attractive to countries that do not meet Western eligibility criteria and are therefore unable or unwilling to accept conditional loans. As a result, many countries turn to China for easier access to credit. Central Asia is one of the regions where China is seen as using loans to gain leverage, potentially making Central Asian states more economically dependent and turning them into consumers of Chinese goods (Horn, Reinhart, & Trebesch, 2019).

China also relies on Central Asia for raw materials, as rising global demand for Chinese products has increased the need to supply its factories. In addition, China's investment in the region's energy sector is particularly significant. As the world's largest energy consumer—and with its energy needs growing year by year—China has prioritized securing stable energy supplies. To this end, China has built two major pipelines in Central Asia: an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan and a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan (Melnikovová, 2020). Turkmenistan has become a key partner, particularly since the launch of their joint gas project in 2009, which positioned Turkmenistan as one of China's main energy suppliers in the region. Kazakhstan is also strategically important, both as an oil supplier and as a transit country for Turkmenistan's gas (Melnikovová, 2020).

WATER MANAGEMENT

Water is another important factor shaping relations between China and Central Asia. Demand for water in the region has been rising steadily, especially in countries with extensive cotton cultivation. China and Kazakhstan share a common water basin, with 24 transboundary rivers between them. Two of these rivers are especially significant, as they supply hydroelectric

power and fresh water to Kazakhstan (Peyrouse, 2007). China views water issues as a potential source of friction in its relations with Central Asian countries and worries that these concerns could undermine its regional ties—especially with Kazakhstan, with which it shares major transboundary water resources. Establishing a water-management framework acceptable to both China and the Central Asian states is essential, as any tension over water could strain China's broader regional relationships and complicate its strategic initiatives in Central Asia, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Beijing sees as central to advancing its interests there. For this reason, China has been working to manage shared water resources responsibly in order to prevent water-related disputes from emerging in Central Asia.

UNITED STATES' INTEREST IN CENTRAL ASIA

The United States adopted an active policy toward Central Asia after 1991. The U.S. aimed to integrate the Central Asian republics into the Western bloc by promoting civil society and supporting democratic institutions in the region. However, U.S. efforts did not lead to significant achievements in Central Asia due to the influence of Russia and China. Still, the U.S. has continued its engagement in the region. It seeks to limit the influence of China and Russia in Central Asia, build long-term relations with the region, advance its geopolitical interests, and secure access to Central Asia's mineral resources.

GEOPOLITICAL INTEREST

Central Asia is an important region in Asia, having control over this region would enable countries to have supremacy in geopolitical interest in the Asia. U.S also look for Central Asia as an important region which links its geopolitical interest in here. U.S have aimed to democratize Central Asia, promote civil society and free press and pave the way for democratic government in here (Yazdani, 2007). Democratization would bind Central Asia with U.S and its allies in EU (Ibid, 2007).

After 2017, the U.S. began to view China as its strategic rival both globally and in Central Asia. As a result, one of Washington's key geopolitical interests in Central Asia is countering China's influence. According to U.S. assessments, China's investments in the region surpass those of the United States, which has raised concerns in Washington and elevated Central Asia's importance in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. worries that China's growing economic presence in Central Asia will strengthen China's ties with the region and diminish U.S influence there. Moreover, a loss of U.S. influence in Central Asia could also negatively affect its interests in South Asia and the Caucasus (Exum, Irvine, & Barno, 2011).

Russia is another strategic rival of the U.S. in Central Asia, and countering Russian influence in the region is considered a top priority in the U.S. foreign policy in the region. Russia has been a traditional ally of Central Asia since 1917, and although its influence declined after 1991, it has maintained a significant presence among Central Asian countries. Moreover, Russia seeks to eliminate U.S. influence from the region, and there are signs that U.S influence has already declined due to Russian pressure. The closure of the U.S. airbases in Manas (Kyrgyzstan) and Uzbekistan are two prominent examples; and it was a geopolitical decline for U.S. Also, withdrawing from Afghanistan in 2021 was another geopolitical failure for U.S and its rebuked by some U.S officials, hence U.S will seek to compensate its failure in Afghanistan by keeping its geopolitical interest in the region including Central Asia.

INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UNITED STATES

The United States is willing to invest in Central Asia. Though China and Russia have the upper hand in investment in the region, the U.S. has also shown its willingness to invest in Central Asia. Central Asian countries are rich in gas, oil, and various minerals. Therefore, the U.S. considers Kazakhstan a prominent country in Central Asia because it has uranium reserves, which would attract U.S. investment. Turkmenistan is also rich and has large gas reserves, and the U.S. is willing to work with Turkmenistan in the gas sector. In the 1990s, the U.S. also showed interest in investing in Turkmenistan's gas sector, and the Union Oil Company of California (Unocal) was involved in that project, but it was suspended after the

9/11 attacks in the U.S. Also, U.S. have been working with Turkmenistan to transfer its gas in Europe through the Caucasus region. Europe is dependent on Russian gas, Turkmenistan considered as an alternative for providing gas for Europe (Blackwood, 2021). Kazakhstan's energy sector is also attractive for the U.S., as the country has large gas reserves. Some U.S. companies, such as Chevron and Exxon-Mobil, are key players in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector (Forbes.kz, 2019).

COUNTER TERRORISM

The U.S. has long recognized that Central Asia has the potential to foster terrorism, and counterterrorism efforts require sustained collaboration with regional countries. According to reports, terrorists from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have joined various extremist groups in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, with some also fighting in Ukraine. In addition, hundreds of terrorists from Central Asia have been sheltered in northern Afghanistan by the Taliban. The U.S. is concerned that these groups may mobilize their members to carry out attacks against the U.S. or its interests in the region. Another concern is that Central Asian countries lack the capacity to combat terrorism independently and therefore require support from the U.S. or other regional powers.

The U.S. is also concerned about the spread of terrorism from Central Asia into the Caucasus region. The Caucasus holds strategic importance for the U.S.; in recent years, Washington has sought allies in the region and succeeded in strengthening ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan, encouraging both countries to distance themselves from Russia. The U.S. has aimed to curb Russia's influence in the Caucasus by promoting alternative alliances and by supporting Turkey as a counterbalance to Moscow's regional presence. According to U.S. officials, the penetration of terrorism from Central Asia into the Caucasus would threaten U.S. interests in the region and could create opportunities for other regional actors, including Iran to interfere.

THE FUTURE U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Both China and U.S. have been strengthening their relations with Central Asian countries. China enhanced its investment in Central Asia, and it is China's desire to have control over Central Asia and curb the U.S. influence in the region. China has been following a friendly policy toward U.S. and refrain from any direct clash with U.S. In Central Asia, China has followed a similar policy and tried to avoid harming U.S. interests. Although both China and the U.S. would avoid a direct confrontation, they are likely to continue their subtle competition in different sectors in Central Asia.

U.S.-CHINA GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

Geopolitical factor would be one of the prominent issues for competition between U.S. and China in Central Asia. U.S. and China would struggle to have control in the economy resources in Central Asia. Gas, oil and other minerals in Central Asia are considered by both U.S. and China to have unfettered access to them. But, in the dynamics of competition both China and U.S. would rely on some factors to maintain their supremacy in Central Asia (Consilium Institute, 2025). China would rely on regional cooperation and would provide opportunity for its ally in Central Asia to counter the U.S. influence. Russia can help China to counter U.S. role in Central Asia, Iran also would be interested in supporting China in geopolitical competition with U.S. (Al-Auqailli, 2025).

U.S. also has ally in the region, especially in the Caucasus region. U.S. would support Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey to counter influence China in Central Asia. U.S. looks for Turkey as a great potential to curb influence of China and Russia in Central Asia because Turkey has deep relations with the Turkic nations in Central Asia (Mammadov, 2023). Turkey also would be interested in enhancing its hegemony under support of U.S. In addition, Azerbaijan would have support of U.S. in geopolitical competition in Central Asia because it has an important role for connecting Central Asia to Europe (Lee, 2022). The U.S. have been interested to connect Central Asia to Europe through Azerbaijan-Turkey because it reduces Central Asia dependence on China, in addition it weakens the influence of Iran in the region.

Scholars believe that Zangezur -corridor is part of geopolitical effort for weakening influence of Chia-Russia in the region including Central Asia.

THE BRI AND U.S. COUNTERMEASURES

China considers its BRI as a new type of relationship with its allies, and once it is completed, China's influence in the region will increase. The U.S. views BRI as a threat to its interests and encourages governments to refuse participation while proposing alternatives. The U.S. is also likely to adopt strategies to curb the BRI project in the region (Luft, 2017). The U.S. is willing to propose alternative ways for countries to use instead of the BRI. It has been encouraging Central Asian countries to take loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) rather than from China. Relying on multi-connection projects is another strategy proposed by the U.S. for Central Asian countries.

Connecting Central Asia to the EU through the Caucasus region and transporting gas to South Asia via the TAPI project are considered by the U.S. as alternative ways to reduce Central Asia's dependence on China. Also, U.S have been encountering terrorism in the Central Asian countries and proposed some financial aid to them; therefore, U.S would pressure Central Asian government to reduce their relations with China. As terrorism is a serious challenge and Central Asian need US support to fight terrorism (Brookings Institution, 2002). Terrorism is also a serious challenge for the BRI in Central Asia. China needs security in the region to continue its projects, while the U.S. is also working with Central Asian countries to counter terrorism. If the U.S. cuts its support, China would face even greater challenges to halt terrorism in Central Asia.

REGIONAL COALITION AND U.S STRATEGY

China formed an alliance with Russia and Iran, and it is proposed that this alliance would reduce U.S. influence in the region, including Central Asia. China and Russia are the two countries that have relations with all five Central Asian states. Iran also has relations with Central Asian countries, but its ties with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are stronger. Iran has some joint projects with Turkmenistan and shares a common border with it. It also has cultural relations with Tajikistan, where Persian is an official language. In recent years, Iran and Tajikistan have been enhancing their relations in different sectors (Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.).

China has relations with all Central Asian countries and has invested in various sectors in the region. China aims to create a regional pact in Central Asia through economic projects in order to curb the influence of the U.S. Russia is also aligned with China in Central Asia and agrees to limit U.S. influence in the region. Furthermore, Russia, China, and Iran have been working to weaken U.S. influence not only in Central Asia, but also in South Asia and the Middle East. According to Iranian officials, Iran, in coordination with China and Russia, has been working for decades to compel U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan (Tasnim News Agency, 2024).

The U.S. will seek to restructure the regional order in Central Asia to its advantage in order to curb China's influence. The U.S. is able to support Turkic regionalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus to weaken China's influence in the region. Four Central Asian countries have Turkic-majority populations, including Azerbaijan in the Caucasus. Turkey has been working to promote Pan-Turkism in the region, which benefits the U.S. because it weakens China's influence in Central Asia. The U.S. is likely to support Pan-Turkism in the future to counter China's regional coalition. Since 1989, the U.S. has provided opportunities for Turkey to enhance its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Azerbaijan in the Caucasus region is another important ally for the U.S. and plays a role in countering China's regional influence in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan has promoted its position among Caucasus countries and strengthened its relations with the U.S., the EU, and Israel. The U.S. is also likely to support Azerbaijan in limiting China's influence in the Caucasus and in challenging Iran, which is allied with China. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's strategic position is crucial for connecting Central Asia to the EU, and it can leverage its geopolitical location to

weaken China's regional interests in both Central Asia and the Caucasus. Recently, Azerbaijan with cooperation of U.S, Turkey and Israel have initiated effort to connect Azerbaijan market to the EU, also it has been encouraging regional countries to join for Azerbaijan initiation in the region, and it show some part of regional effort of Turkey and U.S to curb influence of China in Central Asia and Caucasus region.

SUPPORTING MUSLIM IN XINJIAN

Muslims in the Xinjiang state are not satisfied with China's policies due to restrictions and deprivation of their religious practices and freedom of speech and of association (Maizland, 2025). According to reports, thousands of Muslims in Xinjiang have been sent to brainwashing camps, where they are forced to abandon their religious beliefs and adopt Chinese morals (Amnesty International, 2025). Some fundamentalists from Xinjiang are members of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, IS-K, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and other insurgent organizations. They have significant potential to become a threat to China's interests in the region. However, Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang have failed to gain military support from the U.S. or the EU. Bur, if the U.S. were to support Uighur in Xinjiang, they could soon become a serious threat to China. China has already exerted significant pressure on the Uyghur Muslim population in an effort to strengthen its control and has partly succeeded in shaping the situation there. However, this situation may not remain stable if the United States decides to engage more actively on Uyghur-related issues.

CONCLUSION

After 1989, Central Asia became an independent region. The Central Asian countries made efforts to establish direct relations with other states. To strengthen its position in the region, the United States initiated diplomatic and economic relations with the Central Asian countries. The U.S. and the European Union made some investments in Central Asia, but these investments did not lead to significant positive change in the region. After 2001, several Central Asian countries supported the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan provided some of their airbases for NATO operations in Afghanistan, demonstrating the strengthening of their relations with the United States. However, after 2001, with Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency in Russia, Moscow sought to curb U.S. influence in Central Asia. In addition, the rise of China as a global power further reduced U.S. influence in the region. China invested heavily in various sectors in Central Asia and provided loans worth millions of U.S. dollars, which significantly increased China's influence. China aimed to cooperate with Central Asian states on water management and counterterrorism and to pave the way for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region. Meanwhile, the United States remains eager to protect its interests in Central Asia. The U.S. continues to seek investment opportunities, particularly in the mineral sector, as Kazakhstan is the richest country in the region in terms of natural resources. Geopolitical considerations are also crucial: U.S. officials are keen to maintain America's presence in Central Asia to counter China's hegemony and advance U.S. strategic interests. Moreover, the U.S. remains concerned about terrorism in Central Asia and aims to address it by supporting the region's governments. The U.S. is likely to continue its geopolitical competition with China in Central Asia to curb China's influence. It is also concerned about the BRI in Central Asia and may seek to promote alternative routes or projects for the Central Asian countries, encouraging them to limit cooperation with China under the BRI framework. The coalition among China, Russia, and Iran is another concern for the United States; therefore, to undermine this coalition, the U.S. may be willing to promote Pan-Turkism in Central Asia. Azerbaijan also plays an important role in regional cooperation with the United States. Azerbaijan could facilitate the connection of Central Asia to European markets to undermine China's influence in the region, curb Iran's influence, and weaken the China-Russia-Iran coalition. A proxy war is a possible instrument for halting China's influence in Central Asia. The Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region represent an Achilles' heel for China's hegemony in the region. They have the potential to create challenges for China's interests in both Xinjiang and Central Asia, and the United States may seek to leverage the Uyghur issue to undermine China's interests in the region. However, China's rise as a great power in Central Asia and its competition with

the U.S. is a relatively new and important issue that deserves further investigation. There are some limitations to conducting research in this field; although some secondary resources are accessible, primary data, especially from China's side is not readily available. Scholars must therefore deal with the challenge of a lack of resources on the competition between China and the U.S. in Central Asia. Meanwhile, it is important for scholars involved in Central Asia China and U.S. issues to focus more on primary sources, as this would provide a deeper understanding of China's rise in Central Asia and the U.S. response to it.

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