RUSSIA'S HISTORICAL DEFENSE TIES AND CHINA'S RISING MILITARY PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABOUT US

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ambassador (Ret.) Richard E. Hoagland
Senior Fellow, Security and Politics Program

Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland was U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, October 2013-August 2015. Before returning to Washington in September 2013, he spent a decade in South and Central Asia. He was U.S. Deputy Ambassador to Pakistan (2011- 2013), U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan (2008-2011), and U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan (2003-2006). He also served as U.S. Charge d'affaires to Turkmenistan (2007-2008). Prior to his diplomatic assignments in Central Asia, Ambassador Hoagland was Director of the Office of Caucasus and Central Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State (2001-2003). In that position, he wrote and negotiated four of the key bilateral documents defining the Central Asian states' enhanced relationship with the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. His earlier foreign assignments included Russia where he was Press Spokesman for the U.S. Embassy (1995-1998). During the course of his career, he received multiple Presidential Performance Awards, State Department Meritorious and Superior Honor Awards, as well as the Distinguished Honor Award.

Major General U.S. Army (Ret.) Michael S. Repass
Senior Fellow, Security and Politics Program

Michael S. Repass is an Advisory Board member and serves as the Senior Fellow for the Security and Politics Program at the Caspian Policy Center (CPC).

He is the Chief Executive Officer for Able Global Solutions LLC which he founded in 2013 after retiring from the Army. He graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY in 1980 then served as an infantry officer in multiple junior officer assignments including company commander. He subsequently spent over 30 years as a Special Forces officer. Since 2013, Mike Repass has worked with several international defense companies to assess and develop markets for advanced capabilities placement. He also serves as an Adjunct Faculty member for the Joint Special Operations University and directly supported educational programs to develop strategy and policy options for multiple European and African countries.

Nicole Wolkov
Research Assistant, Security and Politics Program

Nicole Wolkov is currently a Research Assistant with the Caspian Policy Center's Security and Politics Program. She is a senior at the George Washington University double majoring in International Affairs with a focus in security policy and Russian Language and Literature. Nicole is interested in studying Russia's relationship with the Greater Caspian Region and its implications for security.

Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics went from forming part of one of the largest and most powerful militaries in the world to creating independent defense forces with resources limited by new national borders. At the same time, Central Asian countries maintained a close military relationship with Russia, allowing it the continued use of former Soviet military bases on their territories. The Russian military presence in the former Soviet Socialist Republics is largely maintained through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO, comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, was founded after the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States signed the Collective Security Treaty in 1992. Through the CSTO, Russia maintains military bases in Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Due to the close relations in the CSTO, Moscow remains Central Asia's main arms supplier and continues to train Central Asian military personnel in Russia.

Russia's main security goal in Central Asia is to preserve Russian dominance in the defense sector through maintaining a Russian military presence, promoting security cooperation, and remaining the main materiel supplier to Central Asian countries. Russia usually achieves these objectives under the auspices of the CSTO. The Kremlin also sees security threats such as narcotics trafficking and Islamic extremism arising beyond its southern border, and Moscow attempts to mitigate these threats through continued security cooperation and information sharing with Central Asian governments.[1] The continued close security relations between Russia and Central Asia also helps prevent the erosion of Russian influence in Central Asia in favor of China.

In 2001, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan announced the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). India and Pakistan became its newest members in 2017. The SCO's purpose is to foster regional cooperation and communication, and it has conducted multilateral military drills. Although the SCO remains a form of multilateral cooperation between China and Central Asia, China has used the global infrastructural development project known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in Kazakhstan in September 2013, to increase Chinese presence in the region. China also seeks to increase its military presence to counter "the three evils" – terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.[2] In recent years, China has conducted joint military exercises, expanded into Central Asian defense markets, helped train police and special forces in the region, and promoted and secured economic and energy interests.

Through the BRI, China has invested in natural resources, industries, and infrastructure across the region and has given Central Asian countries low-interest loans through what some have described as "predatory lending." This practice targets poorer countries which, after failing to pay back loans, must hand over key infrastructure and other resources to China. One example of this practice was in 2014 after Tajikistan failed to pay back loans for a new powerplant outside of Dushanbe built by TBEA, a Chinese company. TBEA then received the mining rights to the Upper Kumarg and Eastern Duoba

gold mines in northern Tajikistan.[3] Chinese-controlled sources of national wealth are becoming increasingly common: Tajikistan also gave China mining rights to a silver mine, and Kyrgyzstan gave a Chinese company rights to develop a gold mine.[4,5]

With a reported Chinese military presence in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) of Tajikistan near Afghanistan's Wakan Corridor, an increased Chinese military presence to protect Chinese-owned businesses and natural resources elsewhere in the region is likely.

Under the BRI, Chinese state-run banks have invested beyond Central Asia in new infrastructure in Djibouti, including a railway to Ethiopia, a new port, and undersea Internet cables to connect the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. Now Djibouti owes 70 percent of its GDP to China, which has built a military base near the new port.[6] Djibouti is not alone in experiencing Chinese military expansion through the BRI. Pakistan has also entered into military agreements with China, and China continues to expand its economic and military influence in the Indian Ocean through the BRI. As hard power almost inevitably follows soft power through the BRI, growing Chinese investment and resource acquisition in Central Asia likely foreshadows an increased Chinese military presence in Central Asia.

Chinese and Russian marines hug during joint naval drill in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province in 2016. Source: South China Morning Post/Xinhua

Former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev meets with former Chinese Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan in the Kazakhstani capital, Astana, in 2015. Source: Eurasianet.org - akorda.kz

Kazakhstan

The defense relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan remains close. However, the repositioning toward China is both a sign of Kazakhstan's goal to avoid a Russian security monopoly and of increasing Chinese influence. While Kazakhstan is both a member of the CSTO and SCO, the CSTO remains the principal defense institution in the country. Russia not only remains Kazakhstan's main supplier of materiel, but also continues to lease Baikonur Cosmodrome for about $115 million annually.[7] While Russia has attempted to lessen its dependence on Baikonur by opening the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the Amur Oblast and the Plesetsk Cosmodrome in the Arkhangelsk Oblast — both in Russia — only Kazakhstan's Baikonur can accommodate manned launches.[8] Russia and Kazakhstan also routinely conduct military exercises together under the CSTO, and Kazakhstan is the second-largest military contributor to the organization after Russia, helping provide the most troops to collective military units alongside Russia.[9] As part of the CSTO, Kazakhstan is also able to purchase Russian weaponry at the same prices as the Russian military and to share air defense and form joint units with Russia.

In October 2015, Kazakhstan and China signed a defense deal to combat asymmetric threats such as terrorists and insurgents. This bilateral agreement includes joint training of special forces and training on mountainous terrain, in urban environments, and at sea.[10] While bilateral Kazakh-Chinese defense relations are new, they remain difficult because Kazakhstan's armed forces use Russian as its operational language and Kazakhstani forces are unaccustomed to Chinese military techniques and weaponry.[11]

Russian Mi-8MTV helicopters—these helicopters are but some of the latest vehicles Kyrgyzstan has bought from Russia. Source: RIA Novosti—Yevgeni Yepanchintsev

Kyrgyzstan

The close Russo-Kyrgyz security relationship has persisted since the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2003, under the auspices of the CTSO, Russia established the Kant airbase,[12] in part a reaction to the United States' use of Manas airfield in support of its war in Afghanistan. In 2012, the Kant airbase, a naval weapons testing base in Karakol, a communications center in Chaldybar, and seismology center in Mailuu-Suu were consolidated into one entity named the Russian Joint Military Base.[13] Kyrgyzstan has already spent $126 million of a $200-million-dollar defense deal with Russia signed in 2012 on two An-24 military transport planes, two batteries of upgraded S-125 Pechora 2-M air defense systems, four Mi-24V helicopters, six Mi-8MTV and Mi-8MT helicopters, up to 50 BTR-70M vehicles, and light and small arms and ammunition.[14] Similarly, because Kyrgyzstan remains a large export market for Russia and is dependent on remittances from guest workers in Russia, the defense relationship remains strong. This relationship also extends to the training of military personnel; 40 senior Kyrgyz officers have taken courses from the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, and 1,100 Kyrgyz officers and cadets have trained at Russian military universities since 2000.[15] The strong Russo-Kyrgyz defense relationship even fostered the 2014 closure of the U.S. Manas Transit Center, which served as a base for U.S. logistics and transit hub for forces and equipment headed to Afghanistan since 2001.

Although the United States no longer has a military presence in Kyrgyzstan, China has been increasing its military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan. In 2014, China announced that it would provide $16 million in defense aid.[16] In 2017, 700 soldiers of the Kyrgyz border forces took

part in joint Chinese-Kyrgyz training exercises against arms smuggling in Xinjiang. The drills included the use of armored jeeps and helicopters and was observed by SCO officials.[17] In August 2019, about 150 members of the Chinese People's Armed Police Force and the Kyrgyz National Guard held a joint counter-terrorism exercise in Xinjiang. This joint exercise was aimed at strengthening Chinese-Kyrgyz relations and practicing joint command, cooperative tactical training, and "integrated countermeasure training."[18] While China has conducted only a handful of military exercises with Kyrgyzstan, and its military aid pales in comparison to Russian aid, the increasing economic ties to China signal the expected increase of Chinese security efforts.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan, as both a member of the CSTO and the SCO, currently maintains close relations with both China and Russia, participating in their bilateral and multilateral joint exercises. In part, the Russian military presence in the country is aimed at combating extremism, ensuring border security, and aiding the stabilization of Tajik security. Russia's close military relationship with Tajikistan both stabilizes Tajik security from regional threats and also asserts Russian dominance in Central Asia. In 2012, Russia signed a lease on a Tajik base near the border with Afghanistan until 2042.[19] Tajikistan also hosts Russia's 201st military base, formerly known as the 201st Motorized Rifle Division, which is divided into two locations and is Russia's largest military base abroad.[20] Russia routinely aids in the rearmament and modernization of the Tajik military. In 2016, an aide to the commander of the Central Military District of Russia, Yaroslav Roshchupkin, reported that "about 100 units of new equipment, mostly the BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, as well as more than 10 T-72B1 tanks, have been delivered to the 201st military base."[21]

In December 2017, Moscow gave Dushanbe small arms, artillery guns, helicopters, communications systems, air defense systems, medical, and topographic equipment, among other equipment.[22] Additionally, Russia transferred $9 million worth of air defense systems to Tajikistan, free of cost, in February 2019.[23] After Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Dushanbe in May 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defense stated that Russian officers will increase their role in training Tajik troops and that an additional group of Tajik officers would study at military academies in Russia.[24] In 2019, Russia said that it was committed to invest another $200 million for the modernization of the Tajik military, even though, as of 2017, Tajikistan had already received $122 million worth of material.[25]

In 2016, China conducted its first bilateral military exercise with Tajikistan in the GBAO. Although the Tajik Ministry of Defense said that 10,000 troops participated in the exercise, it said that only a "mobile company" (usually 100-200) soldiers were Chinese.[26] Tajikistan also announced that China would construct 11 border posts on the Tajik-Afghan border and one border-guard training center.[27] In a possible response to increased Chinese interest in Tajikistan, Russia conducted joint military drills with Tajikistan in the GBAO in July 2018, instead of on the border with Afghanistan in the Khatlon oblast, where Russian-Tajik exercises had previously taken place.[28] In 2019, a Chinese military outpost was reported in the Pamirs near the border of China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.[29] China probably viewed the perceived U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as the right opportunity to establish a military presence in a country where it already has significant economic leverage as

nearly half of Tajikistan's foreign debts are owed to China.[30] Tajikistan has also been forced to give the rights of a silver and gold mine to Chinese companies in return for China's infrastructure investment. With strong economic influence over Tajikistan and the established presence of Chinese businesses, the probable next step will be to assert hard power in defense of Chinese economic objectives in the country.

Chinese and Tajik soldiers arm wrestle while on patrol near Kashgar in Xinjiang, China in 2019. Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - EPA/EFE

Turkmenistan

The Russo-Turkmen defense relationship stems from two major factors: Caspian Sea defense and security on the Afghanistan-Turkmenistan border. Both countries have a significant military presence on the Caspian Sea. After Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov rose to power in 2007, Ashgabat aimed to replace Iran as the second-strongest military power on the Caspian Sea. [31] First, Turkmenistan began secretly discussing U.S. military cooperation with Turkmenistan on the Caspian, built a naval base, and purchased two 12418 Molniya-class missile corvettes, making the Turkmen ships the most heavily armed in the Caspian.[32] In 2012, Turkmenistan staged its first military drill in the Caspian Sea in an apparent dispute over undersea oil fields with Azerbaijan.[33] In the same year as Turkmenistan's first military exercise on the Caspian Sea, Russia began strengthening its forces on the Caspian.[34] Although Russia remains the dominant power in the Caspian, Russo-Turkmen relations run the risk of becoming strained through military buildup - especially as each Caspian power seeks to protect its energy resources under the waves.

Russia and Turkmenistan have worked closely in defense matters and, until 1999, Russian troops were stationed at the Turkmen-Afghan border.[35] The Turkmen government denies problems along the Afghan border, despite reports of servicemen killed in 2014.[36] Since then, there have been more reports about clashes between militants along the border and the Russian and the Turkmen border guards. In December 2018, the then-head of Russia's Central Military District, Yevgeny Ustinov, said that Russia had resumed joint military exercises with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.[37] Rumors of joint Russo-Turkmen operations on the border have circulated, with unconfirmed reports of a Russian military presence in Turkmenistan beginning before 2019.[38]

While the Russian military presence remains a rumor and Ashgabat tries to reduce its reliance on Moscow, the Russo-Turkmen defense partnership remains strong. Russia has sold more arms to Turkmenistan than China, Moscow's $370 million compared to Beijing's $234 million.[39] In recent years, Turkmenistan purchased a QW-2 Vanguard 2 portable surface-to-air missile, HQ-9 missile defense systems, and armed drones from China.[40] However, good relations between the Turkmen and Chinese defense sectors did not last, because in January 2019, China ceased all arms transfers to Turkmenistan when Ashgabat failed to repay loans to Beijing after Turkmen gas production fell.[41] Turkmenistan has largely been able to maintain neutrality and balance Russia's and China's competing influence.

Uzbekistan

Under Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, the country distanced itself from security relations with Russia. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev reversed this policy in 2018, and that year, Uzbekistan and Russia held their first joint military exercises since 2005. The exercises took place in the Forish mountain ranges and lasted five days. Since then, Uzbekistan has taken part in bilateral and multilateral military exercises with Russia. In 2016, Uzbekistan and Russia signed a deal in which Uzbekistan could buy Russian arms at the lower Russian domestic price. In 2018, Uzbekistan made a deal with Russia for 12 Mi-8 attack helicopters, armored personnel vehicles, and Su-30SM fighter jets.[42] Since the rekindling of Russo-Uzbek defense relations under Mirziyoyev, Russia has played a large role in rearming Uzbekistan. Although Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012, Tashkent is considering returning to this mutual defense organization. Uzbekistan also began the process of joining the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union as an observer state in April.[43]

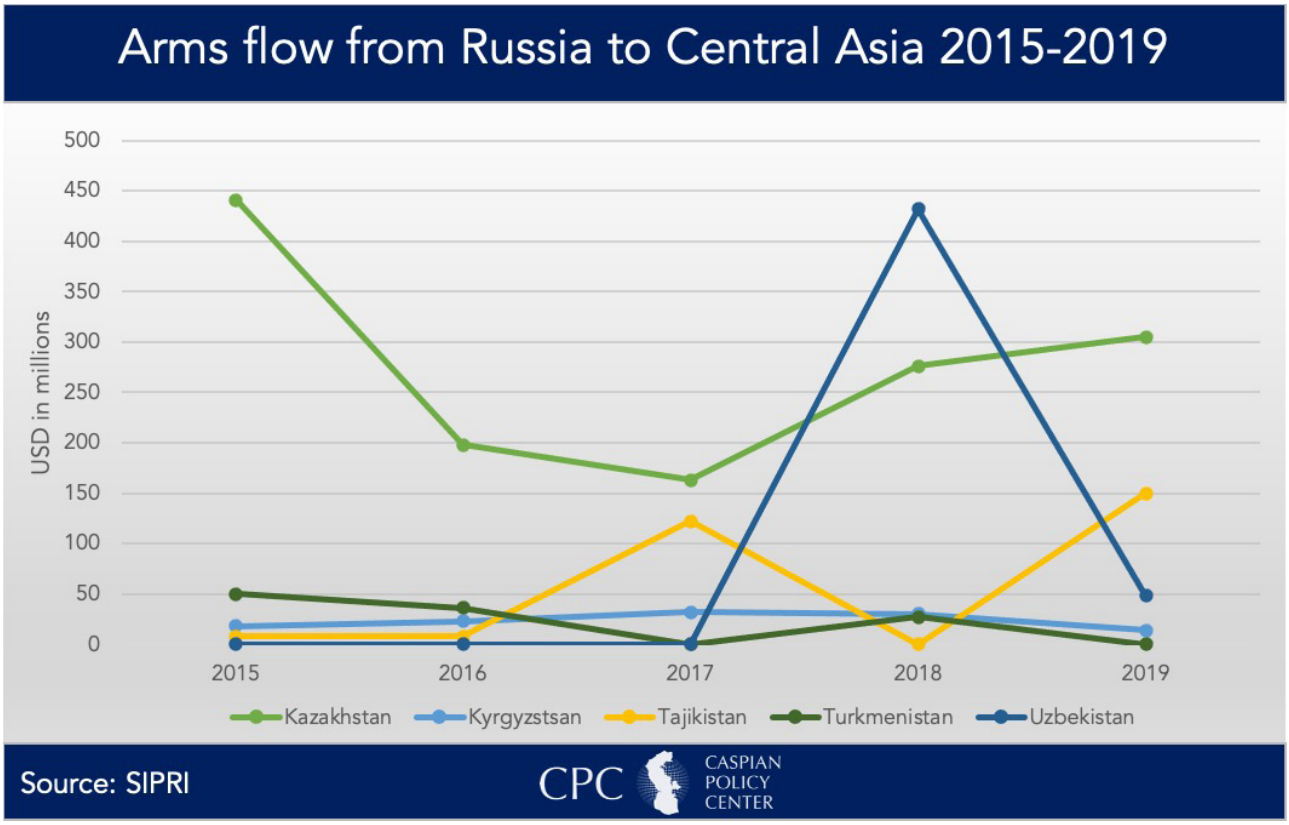
In an attempt to reduce dependency on Russia, Uzbekistan has looked to China for military assistance. The Uzbek Air Defense Force successfully tested China's FD-2000 medium-range air-defense system on a target drone and attempted to use natural gas to buy the HQ-9 missile defense system from Beijing until the deal collapsed.[44] Relations extend past buying arms from China; Uzbekistan's Academy of the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA) and the People's Public Security University of China – run by China's Ministry of Public Security – formed a partnership in May 2017. Due to this partnership, 213 Uzbek MIA officials have attended 38 security meetings addressing drug trafficking and counterterrorism.[45] In 2019, the Uzbek National Guard participated in

joint counterterrorism exercises with the Chinese People's Armed Police Force. However, the Uzbek National Guard also signed a similar cooperation agreement with Rosgvardiya in 2018.[46] While both Russia and China are vying to be Uzbekistan's main military ally, Uzbekistan is attempting to balance both powers to avoid overly depending on either country.

Kazakhstani and Kyrgyz soldiers in joint exercise in September, 2019 at the Edelweiss training center in the Issyk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan. Source: Trend.az

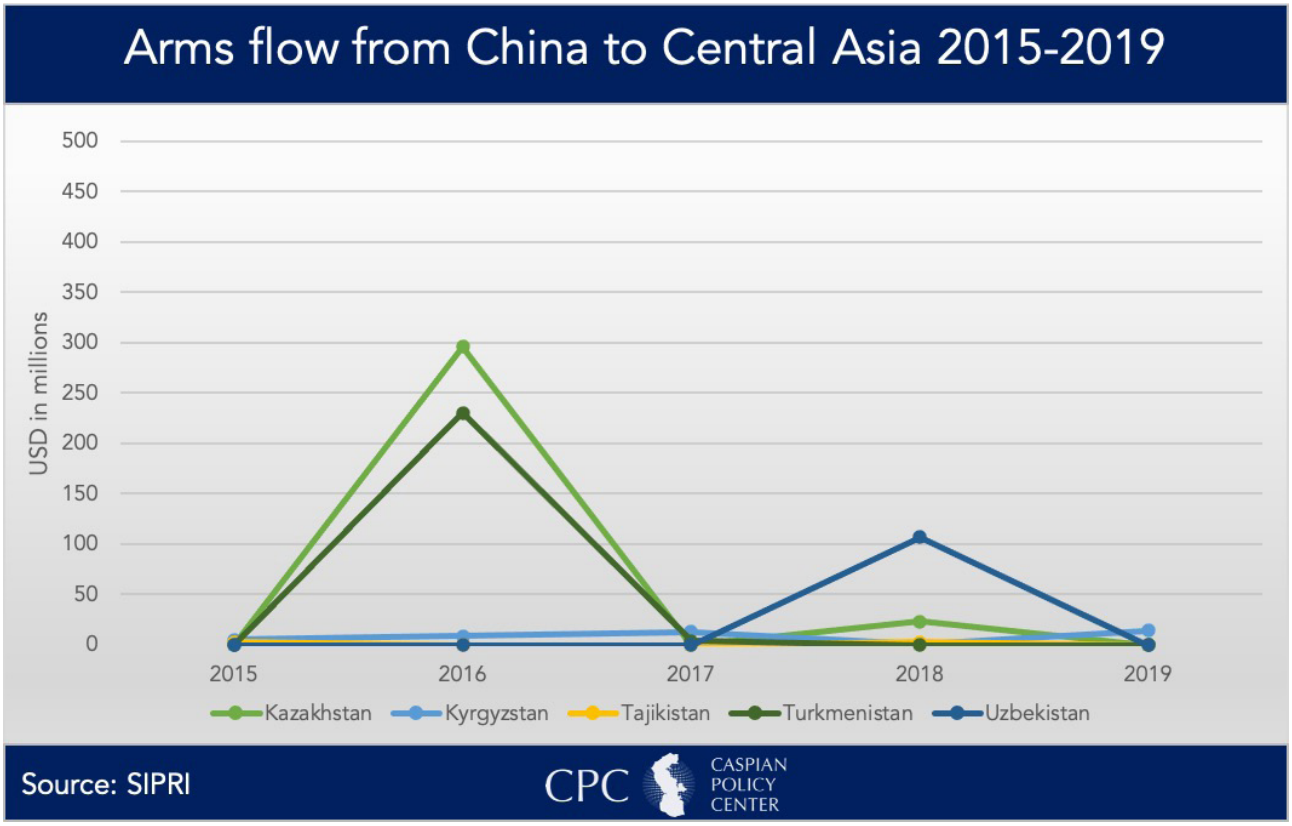
Implications for Central Asia

When China leads with soft power, hard power follows. China's increased economic influence in Central Asia, coupled with its growing hard power in the region, poses a clear threat to the Central Asian states' ability to diversify and expand economic and security partners. At the same time, because many Central Asian states are reliant on Russia for trade, defense, and remittances, a new security partner allows the countries to decrease their dependence on Russia. Increased relations with China, however, could strain relations with the CSTO because Russia, despite participating in both the CSTO and SCO, dominates the CSTO. Mounting debt because of China's predatory lending could lead to further seizure of infrastructure, allowing increased Chinese takeovers inside the country. China will then look to protect the newly acquired infrastructure with its own security.



Implications for Russia

Russia has not yet taken a firm stand against China's attempted encroachment into the region. While historical, economic, and security ties remain strong between Russia and Central Asia, China has entered the region, challenging Russia's historical sphere of influence through low-interest loans and infrastructure investment. While Russia might have difficulty challenging China's new economic power in the region, Russia can counter China's growing security threat by both working through the SCO and through bilateral agreements with China and Central Asia.



Implications for China

China benefits from Central Asia's increasing economic reliance and can transform soft power into hard power through infrastructure appropriation. After taking infrastructure under the control of Chinese companies, Chinese security forces can then be sent to guard newly acquired assets. Economic and security allies in the region increase China's dominance across the Eurasian continent, allowing an easier trade route, helping complete the objective of the BRI. Similarly, gaining military allies in the region increases China's dominance, making it a greater threat to neighboring countries.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure regional sovereignty and security, Central Asian governments should engage in regional cooperation without the involvement and oversight of Russia or China. A multilateral security organization comprised of Central Asian states would strengthen the region's security and promote information sharing and connectivity. A multilateral setting excluding the regional hegemons would allow more for decisions to be made by Central Asian countries themselves with the goal of furthering their security objectives, instead of those of regional powers. Regional cooperation also aimed at the inclusion of Afghanistan into the Central Asian security sphere could increase information sharing and joint security operations on

Afghanistan's border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Though the United States seems to be playing a diminished role in the region, it should still continue to provide security assistance to Central Asia and continue political support through the U.S.–Central Asia C5+1 initiative. Bilateral or multilateral ties, such as through NATO's Partnership for Peace program, as well as through joint military and training exercises geared toward counterterrorism and border security, will continue to show U.S. commitment to the region. Demonstrated U.S. attention to the security of Central Asia will play a role in balancing Russia and China.

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1015 15th ST NW, SUITE 380
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202.864.6958
INFO@CASPIANPOLICY.ORG
CASPIANPOLICY.ORG

CPC  CASPIAN POLICY CENTER