

Central Asia as the New Chessboard: Connectivity and Great Power Rivalry

Sundas Maqbool

sundas.maqbool@gmail.com

MPhil (Political Science), School of Integrated and Social Science, University of Lahore, Pakistan

Abu ul Hassan Muhammad Taha

abuulhassanmuhamadtaha@gmail.com

MPhil (Political Science), School of Integrated and Social Science, University of Lahore, Pakistan

Sidra Siddique

sidrahara16@gmail.com

MPhil (Political Science), School of Integrated and Social Science, University of Lahore, Pakistan

Muhammad Faisal

faisalgugh007@gmail.com

MPhil (Political Science), School of Integrated and Social Science, University of Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Sundas Maqbool sundas.maqbool@gmail.com

Received: 11-02-2026

Revised: 26-02-2026

Accepted: 12-03-2026

Published: 27-03-2026

ABSTRACT

The countries of Central Asia were formerly seen as a major security threat to the United States, but in recent years, that perception has changed to one of necessity. The geopolitical and geostrategic landscape of Central Asia, which has been profoundly altered by the United States' ability to exercise military power in the region, must be well understood by policymakers. Furthermore, as opposing forces gain and lose prominence, the Central Asian landscape is constantly changing according to the interests of neighboring powers and the countries themselves. The enduring ideas of Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory have prompted a careful examination of their significance in the complex field of modern world geopolitics. This academic paper investigates how these ideas fit into the changing modern environment. According to the Heartland Theory, the Middle East could have a big impact on countries. This essay explores this idea and how it came to be during past international power battles. Nonetheless, there have been substantial changes to the global geopolitical environment, including the development of new powerful organizations, economic interdependence, and technological breakthroughs.

Keywords: Middle East, Politics, Geographic Location, Economy, Security.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia's strategic location

Central Asia's pivotal geographic position and hydrocarbon resources have attracted significant attention from global and regional powers, including Russia, China, the United States, the EU, India, Iran, and Turkey, over the last three decades. The nations of the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have implemented multi vector foreign strategies to equilibrate external influences. By employing adaptable and practical foreign strategies, these nations have evaded external control and used rivalries among international powers to promote the objectives of their mainly authoritarian governments. Due to the significant interests of major and regional powers in the area, Central Asian governments possess ample opportunities to leverage advantages from these entities; however they seldom act in unison(Hierman, 2024).

Central Asia's distinctive geographic location has made it a focal point of power conflicts for centuries. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the area reemerged as a significant concern in strategic evaluations. Despite the region's abundant energy resources, the fledgling Central Asian Republics (CARs) encountered numerous obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient human capital, and ineffective government. Since achieving independence, the global landscape has experienced unexpected transformations, transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar configuration. Global authorities, including the USA, China, Russia, and the EU, with regional entities like Turkey, India, Iran, and Pakistan, have contributed to the intricacy of the situation. Notwithstanding various challenges, Central Asia's abundant energy reserves, shared historical, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, together with economic connection initiatives, present a multitude of prospects for the area(Çakır, 2020).

Emergence of the region after the Cold War

The evolution of the global geopolitical framework adheres to laws of organismic development. The system is intricate. It is defined by a hierarchically flexible, specialized, and cohesive spatial framework. Global disparity results from alterations within and among geostrategic domains and their geopolitical territories. The disparity particularly illustrates variations in the entropic states of prominent nations, including first- and second-order powers. As authority becomes increasingly decentralized within the transforming global framework, the system is more adept at managing the impact of upheaval. The advancement of the system relies on such transformation. A developing system is manifested in the proliferation of its components. The system achieves more integration as these components become increasingly specialized. An exemplary instance of specialization is the Gateway region. Eastern Europe is becoming the conduit that will connect the Maritime and Continental Geostrategic domains. Ultimately, the Middle Eastern Shatter belt may potentially attain Gateway status. Furthermore, it is anticipated that approximately thirty Gateway states would materialize in the forthcoming decades. These are minor exchange states possessing qualified sovereignty that will emerge from current national entities to facilitate global connectivity. These gateways function as frameworks of adaptation for the dynamic system(Cohen, 1991).

Shift from the "Great Game" to the "New Great Game"

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a key issue in the examination of the political, military, and economic landscapes of the Caucasus and key Asia has been the notion of a "New Great Game" that extends beyond these areas. While this notion will be examined more thoroughly later, the term New Great Game serves as a concise reference to the rivalry for influence, power, dominance, and profits, frequently pertaining to the oil and gas sectors and deposits in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This phenomenon extends beyond these dimensions, encompassing religious, cultural, and military rivalries in regions as diverse as Turkey and China, Iran and India, Georgia and Siberia, involving participants at state, multinational, transnational, municipal, and regional tiers. As "the allure of Caspian oil captivated Western media, industry, and government, the notion of a "New Great Game" became deeply embedded in the discourse surrounding the region, whether overtly or subtly, across academic publications, news reports, economic assessments, or governmental documents, resulting in its global adoption, which has persisted since the occurrences of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing US-led military action in Afghanistan .The increasing use of this notion has paralleled or maybe been instigated by a resurgence of interest in and utilization of geopolitics as a means for political-security evaluation. The connection between these two concepts has, in certain instances, been overt, and the New Great Game notion serves to exemplify the modern application of geopolitics in this area(Edwards, 2003).

Rise of Connectivity as a Geopolitical Tool

As competing connectivity development initiatives were launched both within and outside of Asia, the term "geopolitics of connectivity" began to emerge sporadically.

This phrase embodies the allure of blending the thrilling contemporary with the recognizable past: the innovation of the current worldwide catchphrase "connectivity" alongside the reminiscent tension of a Cold War-style geopolitical clash. This traditional interpretation of geopolitics relies on unchanging, fixed, and objective geographical depictions that dictate political behaviors - commonly known as geo determinism. The geographic position of a nation, along with the advantageous allocation of power resources, is crucial in determining its global standing. One could be inclined to assert that the escalating rivalry for global connectivity represents a scenario of "new wine (connectivity) in old bottles (geopolitics)." However, that is evidently deceptive. Connectivity is not a novel concept. Instead, it encompasses a spectrum of interpretations and applications by different participants that are often neglected or too simplified. The geopolitics instigated by connection amid China's ascendance is not a traditional balance-of-power scenario being just rehashed. The fight for connectivity involves significant implications, since the essence of connectedness has changed the concept of geopolitics, altering the parameters of the political landscape. The recent dynamics of connection in geopolitics engender a disconcerting uncertainty. In this context, the allusion to the "new wine, old bottles" scenario may offer a degree of intellectual comfort (Godehardt & Postel-Vinay, 2020).

Research Objectives

The aim of the study is to investigate the reasons behind Central Asia emerging as a focal point of great-power competition. The economy has emerged as the preeminent instrument for global leadership.

Research Questions

1. Connectivity can play a pivotal role to lead the world?
2. What is the interest of main actors in Middle East?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Heartland Theory

In the intricate realm of contemporary global geopolitics, the persistent concepts of Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory have incited a thorough analysis of its significance. This scholarly article examines how these concepts align with the evolving contemporary landscape. The Heartland Theory posits that the Middle East has the potential to bestow significant influence upon nations. This document examines this concept and its origins during historical power struggles among many nations. However, the global geopolitical landscape has undergone significant transformations, encompassing technical advancements, economic interconnectedness, and the emergence of new influential entities. These modifications contest the original assertions of the Heartland Theory. The research additionally examines practical instances to determine the relevance of the Heartland Theory to contemporary occurrences and its potential discrepancies. It also highlights the difficulties presented by non-state entities, globalization, and shifting power dynamics. In summary, although the Heartland Theory is a significant milestone in geopolitical discourse, its understanding in the 21st century requires modification to include the complex interactions of economic, technological, and non-territorial elements influencing global dynamics. The Heartland Theory emphasizes the significance of the Heartland, although modern disputes frequently emerge within

regional frameworks. Tensions and conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe possess intricate historical, ethnic, and political origins that transcend the simplistic geographic classification of the theory. The theory's narrow focus does not encompass the complexities of these conflicts influenced by regional factors(Sk & Qamar, 2023).

CENTRAL ASIA'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Location

In recent years, the nations of Central Asia have transitioned from being perceived as a significant U.S. security concern to being viewed as an essential one. It is essential for policymakers to thoroughly understand the geopolitical and geostrategic landscape of Central Asia, which has been significantly transformed by the United States' capacity to exert military influence in the area. Furthermore, the interests of neighboring powers and the Central Asian nations themselves perpetually alter the Central Asian landscape as rival factions ascend and decrease in importance. Optimally, understanding this novel strategic landscape will assist U.S. officials in formulating a collaborative strategy for Central Asia that advantages all participating nations. While this approach requires alleviating doubts and addressing the immediate interests of many entities, it is ultimately the strategy most likely to aid regional actors in achieving stability, hence preventing the success of terrorism, whether it arises from inside or outside the region(Blank, 2003).

The tactical dynamics between Russia and China in Central Asia, a crucial area for its resource abundance and geopolitical significance, examined via a comparative geopolitical and strategic analysis lens. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) propel its economic and security involvement, in stark contrast to Russia's post-Soviet resurgence through military deployment and energy supremacy via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Gazprom. The research highlights the commonalities in their attempts to curtail Western influence, while also noting the differences in their economic and security strategies, influenced by external entities such as the United States and Central Asian organizations. Prospective obstacles encompass economic viability, security risks, and regional independence, each of which affects Eurasian interconnectivity. Utilizing recent research, this examination underscores Central Asia's significance in global power relations, providing perspectives on the equilibrium of collaboration and rivalry among these entities(Gajardo, 2026a).

Energy Resources

Global powers have progressively acknowledged the resource abundance of Central Asia, realizing the economic and geopolitical significance of obtaining access to essential minerals. The geological and strategic significance of the region is heightened as the world economy shifts toward the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This document aims to contribute to the discourse on important minerals, a topic that has only lately encompassed Central Asia. The essential enquiries in this context are "critical for what purpose" and "critical for whom. The concept of mineral criticality is far from universally relevant and is not static across time. Disruptive technologies and the rapid progression of scientific knowledge undermine any rigid classification of essential minerals. In this framework, the situation in Central Asia is unparalleled. Despite Central Asia's delayed entry into the global CRM narrative, this is not the inaugural instance of the region being pivotal in mineral resource-driven scientific and technical upheavals(Gajardo, 2026b).

In recent years, the international relations of Central Asian countries have evolved rapidly: alongside favorable developments (Eurasian integration, increased mutual trade, cross-border collaboration), there have also been adverse trends (worsening security conditions, disputes over water resources, etc.). Russia occupies a significant and frequently dominant position in regional international law policy; yet, there has been a recent qualitative enhancement of the influence of China, Turkey, Iran, and Western nations. The

essay examines the primary characteristics of the international legal framework of Central Asian nations, the determinants affecting it (regional economic specialization, involvement of external entities, degree of ethno genesis, impact of Islam, Soviet legacy), and specific legal challenges (Tolstykh, 2026).

The research contends that international organizations operate concurrently as tools of influence for foreign powers and as both assets and limitations for Central Asian nations. Through the involvement of various institutional frameworks, regional entities adopt hedging tactics to enhance foreign policy independence, broaden alliances, and optimize economic advantages. Nonetheless, this approach also produces structural hazards, such as increasing reliance on debt and a progressive constriction of strategic flexibility. The paper enhances the existing literature by emphasizing the institutional aspect of U.S.–China rivalry in Central Asia and showcasing the active, albeit limited, agency of regional nations within a changing multipolar framework (Dustov, n.d.).

Transport Corridors

The Middle Corridor, situated between the Caspian Sea and China, can traverse multiple pathways that include one or more of the five Central Asian nations. Since gaining independence in 1991, the economic prospects of the Central Asian nations have been predominantly influenced by several key commodities (oil and gas, minerals, and cotton). Following the conclusion of the resource boom and subsequent leadership transitions since 2016, the nations shifted towards diversifying their exports. They are ardent advocates of the Middle Corridor, which will enhance their access to global markets. Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic endorse the new railway connecting Kashi to Central Asia. Nonetheless, there exists the possibility of rivalry among Central Asian nations for investment in several Middle Corridor pathways (Pomfret, 2026).

Notwithstanding its historical connections to the former Soviet realm, Georgia has engaged in minimal strategic interaction with Central Asian nations until recently. Nonetheless, alterations in Georgia's foreign policy, such as a turn towards China and the embrace of a more multilateral strategy, have highlighted the necessity of cultivating stronger ties with this area. As a pivotal contributor to the Middle Corridor initiative, Georgia acknowledges the imperative of fortifying alliances with Central Asian nations to improve regional interconnectivity and economic collaboration. The chapter explores the changing dynamics of Georgia's involvement with Central Asia, scrutinizing the strategic, geopolitical, and economic factors that underpin these shifts. This analysis contextualizes Georgia's foreign policy transition within the larger framework of global and regional dynamics, illuminating the consequences for Georgia's position in the evolving Eurasian landscape (Kakachia, 2026).

Security

Following the disbandment of the Soviet Union, 35 years later, the potential for Central Asian unification has become more evident. The political and economic liberalization in Uzbekistan, coupled with enhanced economic reforms in other regions of Central Asia and initiatives designed to promote widespread economic prosperity, has become increasingly significant. The potential for regional collaboration in Uzbekistan is becoming more apparent. Central Asia is a pivotal and intricate area globally regarding security. The geopolitical initiatives and geo-economics ambitions of dominant nations like Russia, the United States, and China over the region should consistently be considered. In Central Asia, the notion of security signifies stability. Stability refers to the capacity of the region to safeguard itself against diverse external and adverse factors. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, 35 years later, the prospects for the unification of Central Asia have become increasingly apparent. The political and economic liberalization in Uzbekistan, along with improved economic reforms in other Central Asian territories and efforts aimed at fostering broad economic prosperity, has gained notable importance.

The prospects for regional cooperation in Uzbekistan are increasingly evident. Central Asia is a crucial and complex region on a global scale concerning security. The geopolitical strategies and geo-economics aspirations of leading powers such as Russia, the United States, and China for the region must be continually acknowledged. In Central Asia, the concept of security denotes stability. Stability denotes the ability of the area to protect itself from various external and detrimental influences. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, the prospect of Central Asian unity has become increasingly apparent 35 years later. The political and economic liberalization in Uzbekistan, along with improved economic reforms in other Central Asian territories and efforts aimed at fostering broad economic prosperity, has gained notable importance. The prospects for regional cooperation in Uzbekistan are increasingly evident. Central Asia is a crucial and complex region on a global scale concerning security. The geopolitical strategies and geo-economics aspirations of leading powers such as Russia, the United States, and China for the region must be continually acknowledged. In Central Asia, the concept of security denotes stability. Stability denotes the ability of the area to protect itself from various external and detrimental influences (Paluanizayov, 2026).

CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES AND REGIONAL COMPETITION

China Belt and Road Initiative

China's biggest international economic goal is the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to promote economic growth in a large area that includes sub regions in Asia, Europe, and Africa and accounts for 30% of global GDP and 64% of the world's population. The Initiative was designed to restructure China's external industry to sustain its robust expansion. The Belt & Road Initiative is extensive, encompassing not only infrastructure development but also policy discourse, unrestricted trade, financial support, and people-to-people exchange. Evaluating this ambitious initiative's impact is premature. By embracing the successful experiences of developing market economies, it undoubtedly has the ability to transform the underdeveloped "Belt & Road" region into a new, dynamic economic pillar and contribute to economic policy thinking. However, the Initiative also confronts significant obstacles, such as the absence of a central coordination mechanism, the possibility of conflicts between various political regimes and ideologies, and the financial feasibility of cross-border initiatives (Huang, 2016).

Drawing on the profound significance of the ancient Silk Roads, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a call for an open and inclusive (mutually beneficial) model of cooperative economic, political, and cultural interaction (globalization). The BRI entails the creation of a framework for open cooperation and new multilateral financial instruments intended to lay the industrial and infrastructural foundations to secure and solidify China's relations with countries along the Silk Roads and to extend the march of modernization and poverty reduction to emerging countries, all while reflecting China's rise as a global power, industrial redeployment, increased outward investment, and need to diversify energy sources and routes (Liu & Dunford, 2016).

In general, the BRI places a strong focus on collaboration in five areas: (a) coordinating development strategies; (b) creating networks of infrastructure and facilities; (c) bolstering trade and investment links; (d) improving financial cooperation; and (e) expanding social and cultural interactions (ibid). However, given that Xi called it the "Project of the Century" in the middle of 2017, its breadth of ambition may be less constrained than such a list implies (Johnston, 2019).

Over time, BRI has become one of China's most important national strategies. This project has the potential to change the geopolitical and geo-economics landscape of Asia and beyond, given China's rise to prominence through external investment and industrial redeployment. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a change in China's foreign policy and a break from its long-standing low-key strategy. Driven by global thinking, the Chinese government has taken a considerably more aggressive approach to foreign

affairs since Xi took office in 2012.¹ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a major factor in advancing China's interests abroad and reflects China's increasing self-assurance and ambitions to shape regional and global economic governance. In the meantime, China has more freedom to advance its New Silk Road agenda due to the collapse of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) when the US withdrew. The demise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) will boost the global momentum behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to promote regional economic cooperation and integration by creating infrastructure, trade, and investment links (Yu, 2017).

Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

Among regional integration organizations, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is relatively new. Since 2011, it has functioned as a customs union, and since 2015, it has been an economic union. It is predicated on a certain long-term economic agenda in addition to geopolitical goals. In this regard, the EAEU was created to assist its member nations in modernizing their national economies, maximizing intraregional economic links, and creating an atmosphere that would increase their competitiveness in the global market. The core of the Eurasian integration process is a single market for labor, capital, products, and services. The EAEU Court, the Eurasian Development Bank, and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development are examples of further integration infrastructure that has already strengthened the EAEU (Vinokurov, 2018).

Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a relatively new but significant regional organization. A common external customs tariff, a customs union, and a common labor market are notable accomplishments. These processes have been supported and advanced by a well-developed institutional environment, which includes the Eurasian Economic Commission, the EAEU Court, the Eurasian Development Bank, and the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development. Due to Russia's strong position, authoritarian political regimes, and reliance on oil and gas exports, this significant integration success also includes a number of disadvantages and "stumbling stones."

The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in January 2015 marked a significant milestone in the region's continued integration. It includes Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and three previous members of the Eurasian Customs Union (CU): Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The EAEU is viewed as a Russian hegemonic initiative in the region in recent discussions on Eurasian integration. The project's potential hasn't yet been realised, though. This paper is the first to analyse the EAEU's potential as a Russian counter-hegemonic effort using the neo-Gramscian approach. The article's structure reflects the four fundamental components of the neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony: institutional design, material capacities (the capitalist system), security invulnerability (geopolitics), and cultural leadership (Kirkham, 2016).

European Union's Global Gateway

The practical means of implementing sustainable development objectives is through infrastructure investments. In the same way that hospitals are necessary for health care, schools are necessary for education, or ports are necessary for connectivity, climate action requires renewable energy plants, power grids, and electric vehicle charging infrastructure. In this regard, by assisting partner nations in carrying out their sustainable development objectives, the Global Gateway can help fulfil the European Union's (EU) international commitments, such as on climate finance. It might help EU business penetrate expanding markets, which would be beneficial for EU industrial policy. Additionally, it can support economic growth in the EU's partner nations, giving the EU a priceless foreign policy benefit. Geopolitically speaking, the Global Gateway can improve the EU's standing in the competition for global connectivity and

infrastructure. In many partner nations, beginning in Africa, rule-based cooperation centred on a distinct set of priorities is a desirable substitute for the Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, the EU has a chance to advance its ideals and sustainable vision in a concrete and enduring manner by increasing collaboration on economic and social infrastructure projects.

The EU member states decided in December 2021 to implement the Global Gateway strategy, which aims to raise up to €300 billion in public and private funds between 2021 and 2027 for investments in digital, transport, health, education, research, and climate and energy. Global Gateway encourages private involvement in EU development funds and connects infrastructure investment projects with condition principles, such as democratic ideals, good governance, and transparency, with a geographical concentration on Africa. In light of this, this study investigates the reasons behind the agreement among EU member states on this new geopolitical tool. According to this article, Global Gateway was made possible by the combination of three elements. In order to challenge China's role as a global infrastructure lender in Africa, the EU first created this new tool. Second, the transition to private investment in multilateral development financing made Global Gateway viable. The European Commission's transformational leadership as an entrepreneurial agency in creating this geopolitical strategy of the EU's power projection was equally crucial to the creation of Global Gateway. The conclusion allows readers to think about the broader opportunities and limitations of the Global Gateway concept while outlining future research directions(Heldt, 2023).

U.S. Strategy in Middle East

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States' involvement in the Middle East has only increased. However, trade contacts and cultural linkages are still poor, and the region's military might is small, in contrast to Europe, another region of long-time interest, or Asia, where the US intends to "pivot" in the coming years. The Middle East was included in the US-Soviet chessboard during the Cold War due of its energy resources and a number of communist-leaning governments. In order to contain Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the Iranian clerical dictatorship, the United States increased its security presence in the area in the 1990s. At the same time, Washington made a vigorous, persistent, and ultimately fruitless attempt to mediate a peace deal between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Additionally, local "free riding" off the American security assurance is made more likely by the US's involvement in the area. The Gulf governments' riches has not directly translated into military might, despite the fact that they have amassed enormous inventories of the most cutting-edge aircraft. This weakness stems, in part, from the belief that they can rely on the United States as a security guarantee, negating the need for them to take the politically difficult actions of firing inept generals, enacting conscription, or expanding their militaries in other ways, and lowering coup-proofing measures to boost effectiveness(Byman & Moller, 2016).

GREAT POWER RIVALRY

In international politics, the term "great power competition" or "strategic competition" has gained popularity. However, few researchers have conducted a thorough analysis of the factors that led to its return to the forefront of international affairs. As a result, this analysis develops a frugal structural explanation for the resurgence of great power rivalry. Based on the insights of neorealism and its two structural forms, offensive realism and defensive realism, the paper first proposes that existing definitions of strategic rivalry are excessively infused with offensive realist subtleties because of their focus on power competition. But strategic rivalry is also rooted in security competition, which stems from the security problem. This paper then makes the claim that the end of US-led uni polarity and further power deconcentrating in the international system are significant factors contributing to the resurgence of great power competition, using

the polarity perspective of neorealism. Multi polarity revives insecurity and eliminates incentives for the aggressive pursuit of power, influence, and status, whereas uni polarity uses the anarchic effect and forces second-tier big powers to show strategic prudence. Thus, a new paradigm characterized by great power conflict has emerged in international politics as a result of ever-increasing security and power competition(Zhang, 2023).

The prevailing view of U.S. government policy and the majority of external analyses is that the global framework is approaching a new phase of fierce and occasionally acrimonious rivalry among major powers, especially between the United States, Russia, and China.

We delineate the overarching standards for stability and provide a framework for mitigating and reducing the volatility of rivalry between the United States and its two emerging adversaries. To attain these objectives, we engaged in five avenues of investigation. Initially, we examined the theoretical literature pertaining to models that define the essence of rivalries. Secondly, we compiled a catalogue of historical rivalry over the last two hundred years and performed a statistical examination to see if any factors were significantly correlated with stability or instability. Third, we analyzed theoretical frameworks and national security writings to identify elements that can contribute to the stabilization of a strategic rivalry. Based on such investigation, we constructed a framework of characteristics linked to the stability of strategic rivalries. This framework was developed to provide variables that, in diverse combinations and varied intensities, correlate with the stability of rivalry. The framework offers a compilation of elements that collectively yield an in-depth comprehension of the factors influencing stability, as well as a reference for evaluating a dyadic rivalry. While the research indicates, as we will later contend, two enduring characteristics of stable rivalries, the framework fails to nor could any analogous framework or concept of stability offer straightforward causal connections between particular variables and specific outcomes that hold universally across all rivalries at all times. Fourth, we performed case analyses of significant bilateral rivalry since about 1800 to identify the elements that might mitigate or intensify instability and validate that the variables incorporated in the framework were substantiated by historical evidence. We analyzed several rivalries preceding the Cold War and subsequently explored the Cold War era in far more detail. One objective of these evaluations was to discern, amid the broader spectrum of variables, the elements that appeared, in the pre-Cold War and Cold War settings, to be particularly significant—exerting an outsized influence on the stability of the competition. Fifth, we utilized the variables obtained from the theoretical and historical evaluations to evaluate the contemporary condition of U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China ties in 2019(Mazarr et al., 2021).

China's Belt and Road Initiative poses the threat of creating uneven reliance, regional disparities, and heightened rivalry with Russia, whilst India's initiatives could worsen geopolitical division, restrict inclusivity, and enhance alignment with Western strategic interests. The examination additionally reveals that Central Asian nations strategically utilize the developing multipolar landscape via multi-vector approaches. Kazakhstan integrates BRI-supported rail and port investments with involvement in the NSTC to strengthen its position as a Eurasian transit center; Turkmenistan concurrently pledges gas deliveries to TAPI while seeking Chinese funding and markets via BRI-associated energy corridors; and Uzbekistan collaborates with both Chinese and Indian connectivity initiatives—alongside Russian agreements—to broaden its export pathways and negotiating allies. In this framework, the transition to a multipolar economic system grants Central Asian administrations enhanced power to negotiate with external entities while reinforcing their regional autonomy. The dependability and trustworthiness of the results were guaranteed via expert evaluation and focus group confirmation. This study enhances the comprehensive comprehension of Eurasian geo-economics rivalry and provides tactical guidance for regional decision-makers managing intersecting development projects(Farhadi et al., 2025).

Despite the escalating rivalry between Russia and China, the primary objective of both nations to undermine Western dominance binds them together, and there is scant indication of a fissure in their proclaimed "friendship without limits" established in 2022. Nevertheless, the rivalry between Russia and China creates opportunities for Central Asian nations to collaborate among themselves and with other countries in pursuit of economic advancement, political stability, and security independent of Russian or Chinese dominance. Nations inside the European Union, Iran, and particularly Turkey have progressively engaged in Central Asia (Lopez & Jackson, 2026).

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan faced numerous significant internal and external security threats and challenges encompassing political, military, economic, ethnic, religious, and social dimensions, some of which have manifested or dissipated over the ensuing 27 years, while others remain or are emerging. In this analytical piece, the writer examines the primary perceived regional security concerns and problems in Central Asia, which can be classified in several manners; nonetheless, regardless of the categorization employed, it is crucial to recognize their interconnectedness and mutual influence. Given the transnational characteristics of numerous security challenges, the Central Asian nations must consolidate their few resources to tackle them effectively (Aben, 2019).

The emergence of digital monitoring has transformed governance globally; nevertheless, under authoritarian regimes, it has evolved into a crucial tool for domination. In Central Asia, where governments have historically depended on repression and information control to uphold power, emerging technologies have greatly enhanced the state's ability to surveil, anticipate, and quell opposition. Historically defined by analogue surveillance via informants and state security agencies, nations such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have now adopted sophisticated digital frameworks, encompassing AI-driven facial recognition, biometric databases, and border monitoring systems. This transition signifies not merely an update of authoritarian rule but a profound alteration in the manner power is wielded and challenged in the area. The establishment of digital authoritarianism in Central Asia is not solely a national phenomenon but indicative of wider geopolitical trends. As China broadens its sway via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it concurrently disseminates its surveillance frameworks, integrating them into the governing structures of its regional allies (Beidollahkhani, 2026).

The alteration in geopolitical discourse has genuinely impacted the EU's external aid strategies with its partner nations. We examine this novel discourse, concentrating on the Global Gateway, Team Europe, and other contemporary policy initiatives and financial mechanisms, to discern the goals that define the Commission's geopolitical aspirations. We subsequently analyse the Commission's foreign aid practices in Central Asia. Although the area is not the foremost beneficiary of EU external aid, it remains a 'most likely' zone for geopolitically influenced development collaboration: geopolitical frictions among the EU, Russia, and China are markedly evident in Central Asia. To discern alterations in practice, we analyse the changes in priorities within the EU's aid programming documents for the five Central Asian post-Soviet nations across the past and present budgetary cycles, with the evolution of the portfolio of financed projects. This activity uncovers some recent changes in the EU's financial interactions with Central Asia. Numerous instances align with a more geopolitical approach to external assistance policy, while others oppose it or provoke their own enquiries. The European Union currently prioritizes the reinforcement of its market influence while substantially reducing financial assistance allocated to Central Asia. There are strategic aspirations that the reduction in aid will be compensated by increased private investments in viable projects, yet the optimism surrounding this is not without complications, particularly due to the anticipated closer collaboration with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The EBRD is the

preeminent development bank in Central Asia; nevertheless, it is not affiliated with the EU and includes numerous owners from outside the EU (Szent-Iványi & Piroška, 2026).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The United States must acknowledge its comprehensive capacity to exert influence over certain matters. The dangers to its interests are still constrained. Numerous threats to the area are not susceptible to The most formidable instrument of American influence—superior conventional military power and certain aspects entail intricacy Political forces that frequently resist influence from Washington Specifically, numerous states inside. The region is currently or is in danger of becoming failed states. Given significant anti-US sentiment and often .Narrow interests restrict Washington's capacity to change this scenario; however it can ready itself for the Consequences. Washington ought to brace itself for an extended phase of volatility, accompanied by the potential for the eventual winners to exhibit hostility towards US interests

While acknowledging that American influence in the Middle East is frequently constrained, the preceding study proposes various policy modifications for the United States. Initially, a substantial deployment of US troops is mostly unnecessary because to the conventional deficiencies of prospective foes; nonetheless, the United States will seek a considerable aerial presence and a contingent of special operations forces in the area to counter the Islamic State. Simultaneously, sustaining a network of bases, prepositioned resources, and access accords contributes to US deterrence, thereby reducing the likelihood of Iran violating any agreement and allowing for rapid deployment should deterrence falter or an unforeseen situation necessitating military assets from the area. Moreover, Washington need to persist in prioritizing maintenance and logistics alongside arms purchases, as these roles afford it significant sway over the military actions of its allies.

Revitalizing the Middle East peace initiative is a crucial measure for the security of Israel and the interests of the United States. The ongoing regional and global animosity towards Israel adversely impacts counterterrorism efforts and overall collaboration with the United States. This animosity would not disappear with the establishment of a Palestinian state, but it would be alleviated. To benefit Israel, the pressure that would render it a pariah would lessen, along with the costs and dangers associated with its continued occupation of Palestinian territory.

This approach is not just judicious and sagacious, but also sustainable. In a time of limited resources, it is imperative for American policymakers to develop a national security strategy that safeguards US interests in the Middle East while being economically sustainable over the long haul. Considering the intricacies of the area, the likelihood of the Middle East drawing in additional American military personnel and assets will perpetually exist. A sustainable national security will safeguard against this constant threat while also defending US interests. A component of maintaining sustainable national security involves not only reducing ineffective or less critical commitments but also encouraging our partners to increase their contributions. Increased apprehension among the Gulf States due to Iran's expanding influence and the emergence of the Islamic State suggests that the US may, at least temporarily, be compelled to decline requests from regional partners to enhance its security presence in the area.

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