

The Impact of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict on Security in Central Asia: Factors and Consequences

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Abstract: This article explores the impact of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the regional security architecture of Central Asia. Particular attention is given to geopolitical transformations, intensified external competition, and changes in economic conditions, including issues of labor migration, logistics, and sanctions pressure.

The study analyzes the growing influence of China, the activation of Western foreign policy efforts, and the development of regional cooperation formats. The role of Uzbekistan is highlighted as a stabilizing factor, demonstrating a balanced foreign policy stance, proactive economic reforms, and initiatives in regional integration. The article concludes with an assessment of the increasing agency of Central Asian countries and the prospects for their consolidation amid global instability.

Keywords: Central Asia, Ukraine–Russia conflict, regional security, geopolitics, Uzbekistan, foreign policy, multi-vector strategy, transport corridors.



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Introduction

Central Asia (CA) has traditionally been a region situated at the crossroads of geopolitical interests of major global powers. Its strategic geographic location gives it special significance on the international stage.

The events of February 2022, marked by the launch of the “Special Military Operation” by the Russian Federation and the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, significantly increased global attention toward the region. Geopolitical trends, previously manifested in the efforts of Central Asian countries to diversify[1] their foreign policy and economic relations, gained new momentum.

Amid intensified external competition for influence, the Russia–Ukraine conflict accelerated the implementation of multi-vector strategies among regional states. Alongside new opportunities, significant risks have emerged, including economic and social consequences. This article aims to

analyze the key challenges and prospects related to the impact of the Russia–Ukraine crisis on regional security in Central Asia, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan’s role in stabilizing the situation.

Main part

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has provoked significant changes in the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. The balance of external influence in the region has shifted, accompanied by intensified competition among major global actors.

Uzbekistan and several other Central Asian countries, maintaining[2] a neutral stance, seek to minimize risks in the context of global polarization. The pragmatic position of Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, enables the maintenance of strategic cooperation[3] with the Russian Federation while simultaneously strengthening ties with the European Union, the United States, China, and Turkey—thus reflecting their growing collective agency.

As Russia’s regional standing weakens, China has significantly expanded its economic and political presence. In 2022, trade between China and Central Asia exceeded \$70 billion, reaching \$90 billion in 2023—nearly double that of Russia. Cooperation platforms such as “China–Central Asia” serve as a basis for deepening this partnership.

Beyond economics, China is expanding its involvement in regional security, especially in Tajikistan, contributing to a diversification of security partnerships across the region.

In parallel with efforts by China and Russia, Western countries have increased their engagement. The European Union, through its Global Gateway initiative, and the United States, via the C5+1 format, aim to strengthen cooperation with regional states. Turkey, drawing on cultural and historical ties, and Middle Eastern countries are also intensifying relations with CA, creating a conducive environment[4] for multi-vector foreign policies.

Kazakhstan[5] and the Kyrgyz Republic’s membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), along with Uzbekistan’s observer status, constrain China’s unilateral expansion. However, these affiliations also generate intra-organizational tensions, such as trade disputes. In terms of security, despite Russia’s continued importance, Central Asian countries are increasingly diversifying their arms suppliers and strengthening cooperation with China and other players.

Uzbekistan plays a key role in maintaining stability in Central Asia amid the current conflict[6]. Its neutral[7] stance—evident in its refusal to recognize the self-proclaimed republics in Ukraine and its emphasis on international law—helps to maintain a balance of interests.

The country actively implements a multi-vector foreign policy, including: initiating consultative meetings of Central Asian heads of state; cooperating with the EU[8] (including participation in the GSP+ system); expanding trade and economic relations with China, Russia, and South Asia; and pursuing reforms in external economic, banking, and tax spheres.

In the transport sector, Uzbekistan promotes projects[9] such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan–Iran–Turkey international corridor, which strengthens the region’s logistical resilience. Moreover, Uzbekistan initiates regional measures to address complex issues, including: resolving the Afghan crisis; managing water resources; and combating transnational crime and terrorism.

These efforts[10] enhance coordination among regional states and contribute to the formation of a collective regional agency in the international arena.

Conclusion

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has triggered far-reaching transformations in Central Asia. Intensified geopolitical pressure and economic challenges have driven the region to actively

pursue resilient and independent foreign and economic strategies. This shift has strengthened the agency of Central Asian countries, prompting their transition from geopolitical objects to active participants in global processes.

Uzbekistan serves as a key driver of these processes, demonstrating an effective model of balanced foreign policy, proactive economic transformation, and regional integration. Its efforts to diversify trade routes, deepen cooperation with diverse international partners, and stabilize the situation in Afghanistan are significantly enhancing the resilience of the region.

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