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REPORT

# The Caucasus–Central Asia axis: strategic issues and prospects for the European Union– Russia relation

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# Foreword - Central Asia: from a periphery to the place to be

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The cynical “special military operation” launched by Vladimir Putin against Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, has increased the geopolitical value of Central Asia, a landlocked region between Russia, China, Afghanistan and Iran comprising five sovereign states – namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

As it represents Russia’s strategic hinterland in Kremlin’s eyes as well as a bridge between Russia and its South-Asian partners, which stand out as of critical significance against the backdrop of heightened economic sanctions, Central Asia reveals too important a region for Moscow to risk losing its influence on it. Russia has undeniably failed to have its course of action taken in Ukraine (not only since 2022, but also since President Putin’s annexation of Crimea back on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014) endorsed by any of Central Asia’s countries – none of which have either supported Russia’s moves in Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008, by passing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Russia’s influence *per se* has clearly not waned in all Central Asian states. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan keep on vitally relying on remittances from Russia, which holds military bases in Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Kurgan-Tyube. Uzbekistan has elevated its relations to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” with Russia, which, in parallel, has manifested an increased interest to renew its cooperation in gas and connectivity with Turkmenistan, a slightly less reclusive state since Taliban’s conquest of Kabul in August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

With Kazakhstan, the closest country, in all meanings of this word, to Russia, the relations have been somewhat souring, though. Aggressive rhetoric is overtly at play in Moscow towards Astana, whose territorial integrity has found itself severely challenged on numerous occasions in return for President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev’s refusal of recognizing Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Eastern regions of Ukraine, unequivocally expressed in the framework of St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in summer 2022. Russia’s blocking of oil exports from Kazakhstan to Europe across Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), which runs from offshore oil fields of the Caspian Sea through Novorossiysk port on the Black Sea, exemplifies the ramping up of the bilateral frictions. As paradoxical as it might sound, the cooling of its relations with its Southern neighbor has not prevented Russia from increasing its trade turnover with the latter since 2022, enhancing its economic footprint in Kazakhstan by the means of Russian companies’ active relocation on this market to circumvent European and US economic sanctions.

At present, overall, Russia and Central Asian countries share a geopolitical concern and a geoeconomic interest. The concern is centered around the fate of Afghanistan, where Taliban regime – officially recognized by Russia on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025 – strives to eradicate the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K). Daesh’s branch that emerged in Eastern province of Nangarhar in 2015 has been posing ever since a serious threat to Afghanistan itself and to all its neighbors in Eurasia as well. The question directly submitted by Russia’s inability to claim a fast victory in Ukraine and to remain out of ISIS-K’s reach, as showed up by the nefarious attacks perpetrated against the Crocus City Hall of Krasnogorsk

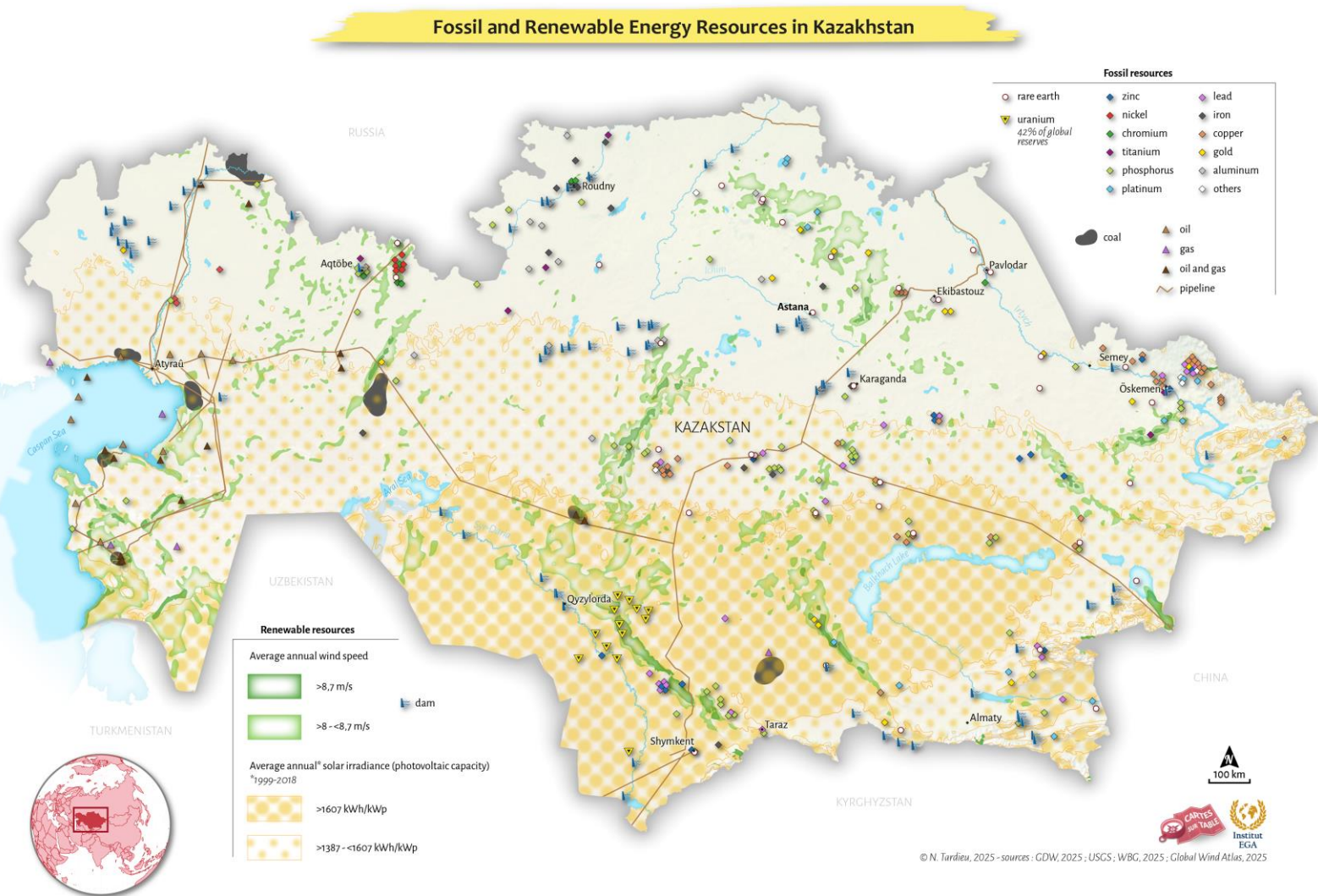
on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2024, is whether Moscow can go on playing the role of the preferential security guarantor of Central Asian countries. The commonly shared geoeconomic interest has to do with the reshuffling of the connectivity in Eurasia, in which Central Asia has a big say in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This multimodal corridor created on paper in the beginning of this century by Russia, India and Iran to link Russia's port of St. Petersburg to India's port of Mumbai across the Caspian Sea and Iranian territory seems, indeed, back on track.

Not only Central Asia reveals itself an appealing strategic hub to Russia, but also does it to Moscow's competitors. Among them, China is strengthening its foothold in the region, where it is, by far, the main trade partner, now doubling Russia's trade turnover with the five Central Asian countries taken together. Chinese asserted economic influence notably manifests itself in Kazakhstan, where it has been surpassing Russia as Astana's new second trade partner since 2023, but is on equal footing with Rosatom as China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) has been entrusted by Kazakhstani authorities to build a nuclear power plant right after Rosatom was selected to create one in Ulken in 2025. Politically, Kremlin's constantly backing up the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia in the face of the US and EU is somewhat diluted by China's similar approach. On a geoeconomic perspective, Russian strategy in Central Asia is also questioned by Beijing, which incentivizes a new dynamic in favor of East-West connectivity. In this regard, China is not reluctant about publicly supporting and encouraging the initiatives implemented by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkiye to develop the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), a most relevant pathway to export Chinese manufactured products to European markets in avoidance of both Russia and Belarus, whose use of territories is rendered economically toxic by the sanctions.

The EU takes advantage of this overall trend driven from the East to rally Central Asia. In late 2021, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, launched the so-called "Global Gateway Program" meant to develop multimodal corridors in different parts of the world, making a symbolic attempt at countering Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiative" wherever possible, including in Central Asia. The beginning of the hostilities in Ukraine afterwards made the EU's aim to connect more properly with Central Asia an even more relevant one. Whereas Brussels, from then on overtly guided by the political will (and economic necessity) to stint itself from its dependency on Russia's oil and gas supplies, would be tempted to substitute Central Asia to Russia as a trustworthy provider of gas (Turkmenistan), oil (Kazakhstan) and uranium (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan to a lesser extent), it does not restrict its renewed involvement in Central Asia to this sole prism. Basically, as recalled during the first edition of Central Asia-EU summit held in Samarkand on April 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the EU's 27 member states also commit themselves to helping accelerate the energy transition in five countries sadly reputed to already pay a significant price to global warming.

Central Asian countries' will to benefit from the new appealing effect they enjoy vis-à-vis their remote partners to position their economies onto the whole value chain of the renewables is no less at play in another major sector of activity: the critical raw materials (CRMs). Here, the EU has to deal with the fierce competition imposed by China, which already holds a plethora of mining licenses in both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and by the US, whose mounting attention paid to Central Asia under the Biden Administration has clearly not faded away with Donald Trump's return to the Oval Office in January 2025. Indeed, the US has managed to expand its cooperation on CRMs with both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since then; it was even agreed to establish a joint working group with the latter to accelerate existing projects and to develop new ones in the margins of the 80<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN

General Assembly. Besides, the US sealed other deals with the two prominent Central Asian economies in late September 2025 concerning rail and air transport, implying that President Trump's economic diplomacy toward Central Asia might eventually turn out to span a broader range of sectors than only energy. A deeper engagement from the US in Central Asia and its regional environment will not necessarily turn down the opportunities laying ahead of the EU there: the agreement of bilateral normalization signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan under the US President's auspices on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025, could favor the construction of the "Zangezur corridor", a project that draws interest from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in that it gives them both an additional way to the European markets by eschewing Russia's controversial orbit.



# Implications of the war in Ukraine for Central Asia and South Caucasus

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2022 was a turning point in the history of the post-Soviet space : for the first time in 30 years, Russia launched a full-scale war against one of the republics of the former USSR, seeking to seize its territory and effectively bring it back under its control. This war forever changed the relations not only between Russia and Ukraine, but also had a very profound impact on the entire post-Soviet space. In this article, we focus on the post-Soviet countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia and study the transformation of their foreign policies and relations with Russia. Of the 15 Soviet republics that were part of the USSR, 8 were located in these two regions and became independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Recent history added two more partially recognized states to this list in 2008 after the Russian-Georgian conflict : Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The main research question for this essay will be the following: how did the war in Ukraine affect Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, in particular in the South Caucasus and Central Asia: did it contribute to its strengthening or weakening? Obviously, the situation evolved differently in each of these countries and, accordingly, so did the relations with Russia. Based on the analysis of five criteria (political , economic , energy , military and soft power), we divided these 9 countries into 3 groups: 1) where Russian influence remained the same or increased, 2) where Russian influence weakened or disappeared, 3) where the situation is ambiguous. Below we will consider these three groups in turn and disclose the data that allowed us to arrive at such a distribution.

Countries where Russian influence has remained the same or increased: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, South Ossetia, as well as Georgia and Kazakhstan.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been deeply dependent on Russia almost from the very beginning of their independence. Kyrgyzstan has not created its own sources of income in recent years, which has led to the fact that about 30 % of its GDP consists of remittances coming into the country from Kyrgyz workers working in Russia. Institutionally, Kyrgyzstan is linked to Russia both economically and militarily: it is a member of the EAEU and the CSTO, both of which are de facto led by Moscow. The border with troubled Afghanistan forces Tajikistan to also closely cooperate with Russia. It is also a member of the CSTO and hosts a Russian military base with a contingent of 8,500 soldiers ( in Dushanbe and Bokhtar). South Ossetia, which was separated from Georgia as a result of the Russian - Georgian war of 2008, has also been heavily dependent on Russia from the very beginning : 83% of the budget is formed from financial aid from Russia, and the ruble is the main currency. These three countries were heavily dependent on Russia until 2022, so they had no choice in how to respond to the war unleashed by the Kremlin in Ukraine. As a result, they continued active cooperation with Russia in all areas: economics, energy, security, culture. Despite the heavy dependence of these countries on Russia, there have been moments of tension between them in recent years. For example, at the 2022



Central Asia - Russia summit in Astana, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon asked Putin not to pursue a policy of "to the countries of Central Asia as to the former Soviet Union"<sup>1</sup>

Russia's relations with Uzbekistan have been more complicated since the 1990s. It left the CSTO twice ( in 1999 and finally in 2012), moving closer to the United States, and never joined the Russian-led economic union. Thus , until 2022, Uzbekistan managed to avoid deep integration with Russia, while continuing active cooperation with it in many areas. After the start of the war, this trend continued : Tashkent increased its trade ties with Russia by a third, allowed hundreds of Russian companies into its market ( their share reached 22% of the total number of foreign companies ), in 2022 Putin and Mirziyoyev elevated bilateral relations to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", based on a legal framework of over 300 agreements spanning economics, energy, science, education, and security, and in 2024 Uzbekistan chose Russia as the main contractor for the construction of its first nuclear power plant.

Russia also had a difficult history of relations with independent Turkmenistan. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, this country chose the path of international isolation and distanced itself from all associations in the post-Soviet space, including the CIS, in which it was listed as an observer . However, its isolation was not anti - Russian : despite competition in the gas sector, in which Turkmenistan quickly became the number one supplier to China, the two countries continued their dialogue and held regular, albeit inclement, high-level meetings , in addition, the leadership of Turkmenistan sometimes took part in CIS summits (most recently in 2017 and 2019 ). The war in Ukraine did not significantly affect relations between Russia and Turkmenistan, their relations continued to be quite friendly, but at the same time distant. After the introduction of sanctions, Moscow increased the volume of gas exported to China, for the first time (slightly) overtaking Ashgabat<sup>2</sup>.

Russia's influence has remained at the same level, despite the war it has reconnoitred in Ukraine: in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, South Ossetia - significant, close to strong dependence; in Uzbekistan - significant, but not decisive; in Turkmenistan - rather insignificant, but stable and friendly. However, in two countries of the post-Soviet space the Kremlin not only managed to preserve, but even strengthened its influence during the years of the war in Ukraine : these are Georgia and Kazakhstan.

Georgia's case is special : after the Russian - Georgian conflict of 2008 and the de facto annexation of two Georgian territories by Russia , relations between the countries reached their lowest point , and Georgia soon officially set a course for integration with the EU and closer cooperation with the United States. The break with Russia seemed irreversible, but with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the situation changed. The country's ruling party, Georgian Dream, and the Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili behind it began to draw closer to the Kremlin, even going so far as to adopt repressive laws on foreign agents similar to Russia's , which were adopted in June 2024, three months before the country's parliamentary elections. The basis of the Georgian Dream party's election campaign was the idea of the need for good-neighborly relations with Russia in order to avoid a repeat of the Ukrainian scenario in Georgia: in the summer of 2024 , posters with destroyed Ukrainian cities were placed on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/10/14/18799081.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ng.ru/economics/2024-04-22/4\\_8999\\_russia.html](https://www.ng.ru/economics/2024-04-22/4_8999_russia.html)



the streets of Georgian cities with calls to "choose peace"<sup>3</sup>. Since the beginning of the war between Russia and Georgia, trade turnover has increased by 52%, Russia has begun to invest more in Georgia and provide it with energy resources (65%).

The strengthening of Russian influence in Kazakhstan did not come as a surprise as in the case of Georgia. Despite the official "multi-vector" strategy, Kazakhstan has remained a close ally of Russia for the past 25 years and participated in all integration associations under its leadership (EAEU, CSTO) and in 2014 even officially stated that it understood the decision of the Russian Federation to annex Crimea<sup>4</sup>. In the first years of independence, the leadership of Kazakhstan really made great efforts to diversify international partners in conditions when Russia was unable to provide economic assistance to the country: thus, in the sphere of oil production in Kazakhstan, a fairly diversified picture has developed, in which Western, Eastern and Russian companies balance each other. Astana also sought to cooperate with NATO, joining the Partnership for Peace program and participating in the bloc's exercises. However, these efforts ultimately failed to outweigh Astana's economic and political dependence on Moscow, which was clearly demonstrated in January 2022, when the country experienced an attempted coup d'état accompanied by mass unrest (resulting in 238 deaths and about 5,800 arrests). It was at this point that Nazarbayev's successor, Kossym - Jomart Tokayev, was forced to turn to Moscow, which sent a CSTO military contingent to suppress the unrest, which consisted mainly of Russian troops. Thus, at a crucial moment, Putin provided assistance to Tokayev, which had its own political price. Since 2022, Russia's influence in Kazakhstan has grown inexorably: trade turnover with Russia has increased by 35%, Russia has become the leading investor in Kazakhstan (for the first time since 2006), the ruble has strengthened in the country, on which the tenge has become even more dependent, the number of Russian companies has tripled (from 7.500 in 2021 to 23.600 in 2024). In addition, Russia has become an important actor in the domestic energy sector: with its help, three combined heat and power plants (CHP) are being built, and existing ones are being modernized. In addition, in 2024, Russia was chosen as the main contractor for the construction of the country's first nuclear power plant. Over the years of the war in Ukraine, Astana's official position has shifted towards pro - Russian: in 2024, during a meeting in Astana with German Chancellor Olaf Sholtsem Tokayev openly stated that "[in] military terms Russia 'invincible'."

Despite the fact that the de facto war unleashed by the Kremlin in Ukraine has not had a negative impact on Russia's cooperation with the above-mentioned countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Moscow has nevertheless failed to obtain unconditional support from these countries at the international level. Thus, none of these countries has officially recognized either the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the seizure of territories of the Donbass (partially) and Luhansk regions in 2022. Also, at the UN level, most of the countries from this list, although they have never condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have never openly supported it either, always abstaining from votes in the UN General Assembly. Moreover, Georgia has consistently voted for all resolutions condemning Russian aggression (UN General Assembly resolutions ES-11/1-ES- 11/6 and A/79/L.75).

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<sup>3</sup><https://meduza.io/news/2024/09/26/gruzinskaya-mechta-ispolzovala-na-predvybornyh-bilbordah-foto-razrushennyh-ukrainskih-gorodov-izbiratelyam-predlagayut-vybrat-mir>

<sup>4</sup> <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/reaktsia-na-anneksiyu-kryma-rossiei/25302892.html>

At the same time, in two countries of the South Caucasus, Russian influence has nevertheless declined in recent years : these are Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the decline in its influence there is most likely the result not of the war unleashed by Moscow in Ukraine, but of the consequences of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. As a result of this war, Azerbaijan took control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, from which about 100,000 Armenians (in fact, the entire Armenian population) were forced to flee. Since the collapse of the USSR, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has remained one of the most complex in the post-Soviet space : Russia, on the one hand , supported Armenia, which, for the sake of this support, joined all pro-Russian alliances in the region (the EAEU and the CSTO), on the other hand , sold weapons to Azerbaijan. This strategy allowed Moscow to play the role of arbitrator and use this conflict as an instrument of pressure on Yerevan and Baku. However, Azerbaijan has quietly begun to play a double game and, while maintaining friendly relations with Russia, has managed to build close relations with Turkey over the past 20 years : in 2010, the countries signed an Agreement on Strategic Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which primarily concerned military cooperation. Ten years later, this strategy laid off by Azerbaijan's victory in a quick war against a small region supported by Armenia, which had counted on Russia 's protection but never received it . This outcome did not lead to an immediate deterioration in relations between Russia and Azerbaijan : President Aliyev was able to skillfully negotiate with Putin, who, in turn, decided to take advantage of the situation to weaken or even remove Armenian President Pashinyan. The latter was initially an irritant for the Kremlin , having come to power as a result of mass demonstrations in the country in 2018. However, for now, the Kremlin has failed to implement its plan regarding Armenia: Pashinyan has remained in power, moreover, he was not afraid to take a number of anti-Russian steps in his foreign policy: firstly, Armenia de facto suspended its membership in the CSTO (which they counted on to protect Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh) in 2023 (formally in 2024); secondly, in March 2024, Pashinyan announced Armenia's intention to join the EU; and thirdly, in January 2025, Armenia and the United States signed the Charter on Strategic Partnership . Moreover, at the UN General Assembly vote in April 2025, Armenia voted for the first time in favor of a resolution condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine (A/79/L./75). This cooling in relations with Russia did not prevent Armenia from significantly increasing trade turnover with Russia since 2022 and actually becoming (like Kazakhstan) one of the main centers for re - export of sanctioned Western goods (primarily electronics) to Russia. At the same time, Russia's relations with Azerbaijan also significantly worsened in 2025. Azerbaijan has never openly condemned the Russian war in Ukraine: Azerbaijan has always been absent from UN votes on this issue . However , when in December 2024, Russian air defense shot down an Azerbaijani passenger plane on approach to the city of Grozny, President Aliyev sharply criticized the Kremlin and demanded an official apology from Moscow. In June 2025 , the conflict between Moscow and Baku intensified further due to the detentions of entrepreneurs of Azerbaijani origin in Yekaterinburg , during which Russian police killed two of them. The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry reacted sharply to these murders and sent a note of protest to Moscow. Despite the large Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia (about 2 million people), which has serious business interests in Russia , Azerbaijan, having secured the support of Turkey, was not afraid to harshly criticize the Kremlin when it came to protecting the interests of Azerbaijanis.

The last case in our study is the partially recognized state of Abkhazia. For a long time, Abkhazia was in total dependence on Russia, as was South Ossetia. However, in 2024, a scandal erupted between the countries in connection with the signing of an agreement under which Russian companies were granted benefits on land and real estate ( including exemption from taxes and duties for

investments of 2 billion rubles). This agreement was prepared without the parliamentary approval of Abkhazia, which caused widespread criticism, which resulted in mass protests and the resignation of the president. Russia, in turn, suspended social payments to residents and began blocking electricity. At the moment, the conflict has not yet been resolved, but due to Abkhazia's total dependence on Russia, the most likely scenario is further close cooperation. At the same time, in the long term, a scenario of local elites seeking liberation from Russian control cannot be ruled out.

In summing up our analysis, it is necessary to emphasize the following. Firstly, despite the colossal financial and human resources that the war against Ukraine is absorbing in Russia, the Kremlin has been able to confidently keep seven out of ten post-Soviet states in the South Caucasus and Central Asia region in its orbit, in two of which Russian influence has even increased. Secondly, the war in Ukraine although it has become one of the most powerful shocks for the countries of the post-Soviet space over the past thirty years, nevertheless, it has not pushed the countries that have experienced the common experience of colonization and imperial control by Russia to solidarity with each other and to resist the aggressor in the person of the former metropolis. The fear of repeating the "Ukrainian scenario" has forced the elites and societies of Georgia and Kazakhstan, which until 2022 had pursued a fairly independent course from Moscow (Astana to a lesser extent), to eventually return to the Russian orbit. Thirdly, the evolution of relations between Russia and the post-Soviet countries in 2022-2025 was influenced not only by the war in Ukraine, but also by other factors. For example, in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, this was the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, as well as bilateral problems, such as the downing of an airplane near Grozny or the killings of representatives of the Azerbaijani diaspora in Russia. Another motivation in relations with Russia for the political leadership of a number of post-Soviet countries was the need for authoritarian mutual support, which is important for the survival of their regimes. And finally, fifthly, those countries that de facto support or even actively expand cooperation with Moscow, nevertheless did not consider it possible for themselves to officially speak out in its support in the international arena (Georgia even consistently condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine in UN votes) - as did Belarus, the DPRK or Syria. Abstaining from UNGA votes openly demonstrated Russia's international isolation. At the same time, their supposedly "neutral" status was advantageous to Moscow, which used many of these countries in the region to circumvent sanctions.

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In general, Moscow's continued dominance in the post-Soviet space of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, despite the war it unleashed in Ukraine, is not the result of a well-thought-out strategy and calculation by the Kremlin, but rather of tactics to intimidate these countries and support authoritarian regimes. Such tactics are not capable of producing a sustainable and mutually beneficial model of cooperation in the medium and long term. Moreover, Russia's aggressive foreign policy and the unpredictability of the evolution of its political regime make overall planning and forecasting difficult. However, in the short term, scenarios that continue the trends that emerged in 2022-2025 in the South Caucasus and Central Asia are more likely. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan will continue to remain independent from Russia: moreover, Baku, having secured Ankara's support, will be able to openly criticize Moscow, thereby creating tension in relations with the Kremlin, to which the latter will not be able to respond actively while the active phase of the war in Ukraine lasts. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, will remain heavily dependent on Russia in

such key areas as the economy and security. Uzbekistan, given its more wayward foreign policy in recent years, will have more room to negotiate with Russia on more favorable terms, but the lack of a strong counterweight to Moscow may push Tashkent towards deeper cooperation with Russia. The prospects for Armenia and Georgia remain contradictory: the former, after its defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, has begun to take steps towards breaking with Russia and moving closer to the West (the EU and NATO), but being heavily dependent on Russia economically and energetically, and geographically distant from Europe and the US, which have so far shown no determination to strengthen relations with Yerevan, it may prove unable to achieve its intended goals. In Georgia, society remains highly polarized, which could make the strengthening of Russian influence unstable and short-term: geographical distance from Europe and the lack of determination on the part of the West itself, however, could significantly weaken pro-democratic forces in the country and make it easy prey for Moscow.

Despite the generally favorable outlook for Moscow in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, in the long term, after a change of generations, these countries may experience increased tensions with Russia over the issue of memory politics and common history. Today in all the countries social and political movements have emerged aiming at revising the Russian/Soviet version of the history of their country and recognition of the crimes of the empire against their people. If Moscow continues to insist on its version of history and punish attempts to revise it, as it did with Ukraine, then this issue in the future is capable of significantly destabilizing the relations between the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia and Russia.

# Central Asia: Terrorist Threat and Security Issues

*Typhenne Lechaux*

*Analyste*

The Islamic breeding ground in Central Asia, cradle of medieval Islamic civilization and home to the prestigious cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv<sup>5</sup>, has evolved from the post-Soviet religious resurgence of the 1990s into a global security threat, illustrated by the rise of ISIS-K as the dominant jihadist force in the strategic Khorasan region. This ancestral land of Islam, which gave birth to eminent figures such as Imam Al-Bukhari, has become a concentrator of contemporary radicalism following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the end of state atheism triggered an Islamic renaissance that progressively transformed into a major security challenge.

Located at the strategic crossroads between Europe, China, and the Middle East, this region now crystallizes rivalries between major powers around its energy resources, while the organization demonstrates transnational projection capabilities, from the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow to thwarted European plots<sup>6</sup>. Yet Western and Russian responses remain fragmented and operationally inadequate, despite Moscow being an unavoidable actor in this threatening geographical space.

As the organization consolidates its influence over Central Asian territories and extends its reach through diaspora networks, a fundamental question arises : how can Europe and Russia overcome their differences to confront a terrorist threat that transcends their disagreements and directly threatens continental security ? This analysis examines the structural factors favoring ISIS-K's expansion and the critical failures in international coordination that risk reproducing the devastating consequences observed during the rise of the self-proclaimed Iraqi-Syrian caliphate.

## A Fertile Ground for Radicalization

Contemporary Central Asia presents vulnerabilities resulting from the convergence of structural factors inherited from the Soviet period and amplified by the failures of post-independence states, making it particularly conducive to the emergence of radical Islamist movements.

The systematic religious repression exercised by the USSR created a spiritual void that the newly independent states attempted to fill through a controlled return to Islam<sup>7</sup>. As early as 1929, Stalinist policies had orchestrated the massive closure of mosques - more than 3,500 under Khrushchev in Central Asia alone - and the imprisonment of religious leaders<sup>8</sup>. This strategy of progressive erasure of

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5 Rante, R. (Ed.). (2015). Greater Khorasan: History, geography, archaeology and material culture. De Gruyter.

6 Institute for Economics & Peace. (2025, mars). Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the impact of terrorism.

7 Balci, B. (2017). Renouveau de l'islam en Asie centrale et dans le Caucase. CNRS.

8 Froese, P. (2005). I am an atheist and a Muslim: Islam, communism, and ideological competition. *Journal of Church and State*, 47(3), 473-501.

Islam paradoxically favored the subsequent emergence of radical currents by depriving populations of their traditional theological bearings.

The post-1991 Islamic revival was characterized by massive identity reappropriation, but also by the intrusion of decisive external influences. Saudi Arabia, through the World Muslim League (WML), deployed a particularly effective Wahhabi soft power strategy<sup>9</sup>. As early as 1992, less than a year after independence, prominent WML leaders traveled to Uzbekistan, initiating a process of mosque financing and imam training in Wahhabi ideology<sup>10</sup>. This influence materialized through the distribution of millions of copies of the Quran and the establishment of a network of preachers trained at the University of Medina throughout Central Asia.

The chronic economic fragility of Central Asian republics constitutes another vector of radicalization. Despite their considerable natural resources - Kazakhstan produces 40% of the world's uranium<sup>11</sup>, Turkmenistan holds the fourth-largest natural gas reserves globally<sup>12</sup> - these states remain confronted with high inflation rates and endemic corruption that compromises any equitable economic emergence. In 2016, inflation reached 14.7% in Kazakhstan, 11.4% in Uzbekistan, and 6.0% in Tajikistan<sup>13</sup>.

This precarity massively drives populations toward emigration, primarily toward Russia, constituting the primary destination for Central Asian migrants<sup>14</sup>. However, these migrant workers frequently find themselves in conditions of indecent work, even forced labor, suffering discrimination and violence that fuel their resentment. Terrorist cells methodically exploit this vulnerability, recruiting directly in Russian mosques by leveraging difficult working conditions and family separation<sup>15</sup>.

The territorial characteristics of Central Asia furthermore favor the establishment of radical groups in zones escaping state control. In Tajikistan, in certain regions such as Gorno-Badakhshan, inhabitants live in quasi-autarky, without effective links to central authorities. This situation recalls the conditions that permitted the establishment of the Iraqi-Syrian caliphate: territories abandoned by the central state, populations in distress, and mountainous topography facilitating concealment.

The Fergana Valley, shared between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, perfectly illustrates this problematic. The artificial borders inherited from Soviet demarcation create enclaves difficult to administer that can be exploited by Islamist organizations as rear bases<sup>16</sup>.

Faced with rising radicalization, Central Asian governments have adopted repressive policies that prove counterproductive. In Tajikistan, recent legislation prohibits « *clothing foreign to Tajik culture* »

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9 Fathi Habiba. La naissance de la coopération islamiste en Asie centrale. Recherches Internationales, n°46, 1996. pp. 65-80.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Dahl, C., & Kuralbayeva, K. (2001). Energy and the environment in Kazakhstan. *Energy Policy*, 29(6), 429-440.

12 Baban, I. (2011). Les réserves du Turkménistan Une question médiatique ? *Outre-Terre*, 27(1), 335-342.

13 World Bank. (2016)

14 International Organization for Migration. (2024). *World Migration Report 2024*.

15 Gaüzère, D., & Nominé, Y. (2020). Le chaudron vert de l'Islam centrasiatique. *Diplomatie et stratégie*.

16 *Ibid.*

a euphemism designating Islamic attire, with fines that can reach \$1,400 in a country where the average monthly salary approaches \$200<sup>17</sup>. These measures target external manifestations of faith rather than genuine sources of radicalization.

This repressive approach presents a double pitfall. On one hand, it stigmatizes moderate practitioners who are not necessarily radicalized, risking pushing them toward extremism. On the other hand, *taqiyya* - the practice of religious dissimulation legitimized by certain Islamist currents - allows truly radicalized individuals to blend into the population without displaying distinctive signs. Central Asian authorities thus reproduce the errors of their Soviet predecessors, fueling through their very repression the dynamics they claim to combat.

## The Emergence and Consolidation of ISIS-K in the Region

The official establishment of the Khorasan branch in 2015<sup>18</sup> constitutes a decisive turning point in the reconfiguration of the Central Asian terrorist landscape<sup>19</sup>. By capitalizing on the region's structural fragilities, ISIS-K has established itself as the hegemonic jihadist actor, developing an unprecedented capacity for transnational projection compared to preexisting regional organizations.

Moreover, its emergence has provoked a fundamental recomposition of established alliances. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an emblematic figure of Central Asian jihadism since its creation in 1997, rapidly shifted into ISIS's sphere of influence. In August 2015, the IMU leader, Usman Ghazi, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, bringing nearly 600 fighters into this defection<sup>20</sup>.

This reconfiguration rests partially on the methodical exploitation of border security failures. As an illustration, the Tajik-Afghan border, extending over 1,344 kilometers, perfectly illustrates this structural vulnerability, despite the presence of Russian military bases. Sophie Hohmann observes that « *numerous hidden crossing points in the mountains, difficult to control, allow for crossing the 2,000 kilometers of borders separating Afghanistan from the post-Soviet republics* <sup>21</sup> » while Mr. Gaüzère specifies that it is subject to « *daily violations by jihadist agents and mules ensuring liaison between the military bases of armed jihadist groups in northern Afghanistan and clandestine jihadist cells in Tajikistan* <sup>22</sup> ».

Parallel to these topographical weaknesses, ISIS-K has developed a sophisticated transnational economic model, exploiting illicit flows that transit through these porous borders. Unlike the Iraqi-

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17 Hopkins, V. (2024). Tajikistan targets extremism with bans on beards and head scarves. The New York Times.

18 The Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) was created in January 2015 when the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and former Taliban pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State. This allegiance, officially accepted by Al-Baghdadi, led to the creation of IS-K under the leadership of Mullah Saeed Orakzai, as part of ISIS's expansion into Central Asia.

19 Giustozzi, A. (2018). The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad. Oxford University Press.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Hohmann, S. (2006). Le narcotrafic en Asie centrale : enjeux géopolitiques et répercussions sociales. Revue internationale et stratégique, 64(4), 111-120.

22 Gaüzère, D. (2019). Géopolitique de Daesh. Les prisons tadjikes, cheval de Troie de l'État islamique en Asie centrale.



Syrian caliphate, which relied massively on oil revenues, the Central Asian branch has diversified its sources around controlling transnational criminal corridors.

Control of narcotics flows constitutes, for example, an important financial windfall. The organization levies between 15% and 20% of profits from opium traffickers transiting from Afghanistan to Europe via Central Asia through the « Northern Route »<sup>23</sup>. This is now complemented by control over migrant smuggling networks operating between Central Asia and Europe via Turkey, providing yet another additional revenue source<sup>24</sup>.

Beyond these revenues, ISIS can rely on substantial financial flows from Qatar, as Antonio Giustozzi emphasizes. According to his research, \$20 million was channeled from Qatar directly to ISIS-K, primarily through legitimate companies serving as fronts<sup>25</sup>.

The organization has also succeeded in establishing itself in the region through a particularly diversified recruitment strategy. Multilingual propaganda - Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, Pashto, and Dari - targets the entire Central Asian population up to the confines of Russia, allowing it to rally any individual to its cause without the language barrier, while knowing that thanks to the ease of internal transit in this region, there would be no major difficulty joining its ranks<sup>26</sup>.

The most concerning evolution lies in ISIS-K's growing capacity to project its power beyond Central Asian borders. The Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow in March 2024, perpetrated by Central Asian nationals established in Russia for several years, illustrates this new security paradigm.

This internationalization exploits the structural weaknesses of the post-Soviet border system. Free circulation agreements between certain Central Asian republics and Russia create vulnerabilities of which the organization is well aware. Moreover, ISIS-K's recent management of the Caucasus bureau, according to UN reports, could considerably facilitate access to European borders for members of this branch<sup>27</sup>.

Furthermore, the branch's global ambition has now surpassed the planning stage. The organization has demonstrated its operational capacity to strike in the West by exploiting Central Asian diasporic networks. The attacks in Istanbul (2017), Stockholm (2017), and New York (2017), all perpetrated by Central Asian nationals, testify to a genuine international projection strategy, explicitly claimed by the organization in its recent publications.

## **Inadequate Responses: European and Russian Strategic Failures**

Faced with the emergence of ISIS-K as a major transnational threat, the responses of the European Union and Russia reveal a concerning disconnect between the magnitude of the security challenge and the insufficiency of cooperation mechanisms implemented.

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23 Op. cit. Guistozzi, A.

24 Nations Unies, Conseil de sécurité. (2025). Vingtième rapport du Secrétaire général sur la menace que représente l'EIL (Daech).

25 Op. cit. Guistozzi, A.

26 Op.cit. Institute for Economics & Peace.

27 Op. cit. Nations unies.

Russia has rapidly identified ISIS-K as a direct threat, particularly after the Crocus City Hall attack - one of the deadliest in its history<sup>28</sup> - confirming Moscow as one of the first international target claimed by the organization. Paradoxically, despite its permanent military bases in Central Asia, notably in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russia deploys no forces on the ground against ISIS-K, favoring a defensive approach on its national territory.

This strategy presents major dysfunctions. Russian repressive policies broadly target Central Asian citizens rather than specifically presumed ISIS-K members through violence, expulsions, business closures, which paradoxically fuel the radicalization processes that the organization can effectively exploit<sup>29</sup>. The war in Ukraine simultaneously diverts surveillance and counterterrorism resources, weakening Russian operational capacity in the region. Analysis of Interpol red notices reveals that the majority of warrants concerning Central Asian terrorists are issued by Russia itself, suggesting that Moscow bears a disproportionate burden of surveillance.

The European Union presents a fundamentally flawed apprehension of the Central Asian security issue. The United Nations now identifies ISIS-K as the greatest terrorist threat to Europe, with 6,000 members massively encouraging external operations via Afghan and Central Asian diasporas<sup>30</sup>. This rapid expansion, confirmed by 2025 UN reports revealing massive involvement of Tajiks in the organization. Parallel to this, the latter receives growing popular approval in the area, notably through Afghan farmers deprived of opium cultivation and becoming defiant toward the Taliban<sup>31</sup>.

The French initiative of March 2025 imposing European sanctions against ISIS-K - asset freezes, travel bans - reveals this belated reactivity<sup>32</sup>. The EU prioritizes action on its own territory, avoiding any preventive deployment of forces in the area and neglecting the absence of dialogue with the Taliban, who are nevertheless engaged in intelligence gathering against ISIS-K and forced to call upon other terrorist groups like Jamaat Ansarullah to counter the organization<sup>33</sup>. In June 2024, Europol operations led to the closure of two ISIS-K media outlets<sup>34</sup>, but faced with the organization's bulletproof resilience, reinforced by the influx of fighters who fled the self-proclaimed caliphate and possessing operational expertise, these measures remain truly insufficient.

Euro-Russian relations, degraded since 2014, naturally compromise any effective cooperation against ISIS-K, which is becoming autonomous and now taking global leadership of the terrorist network in operational influence. The progressive exclusion of Russia from Western mechanisms further limits information-sharing channels, while European sanctions complicate transfers necessary for joint intelligence operations.

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28 Verleuw, C. (2024). Les islamistes à l'aube de 2025. *Sécurité globale*, 39(3), 61-74.

29 Gozzi, B. L. (2024, 27 mars). Moscow attack : Central Asian migrants hit by backlash in Russia.

30 Op. cit. Nations Unies.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Conseil de l'Union européenne. (2025, 17 mars). ISIL(Da'esh) et Al-Qaïda : le Conseil ajoute une entité à sa liste autonome de sanctions [Communiqué de presse].

33 Op. cit. Nations unies.

34 Europol. (2024, 14 juin). Démontage majeur d'infrastructures en ligne critiques pour perturber les communications et la propagande terroristes [Communiqué de presse].

The combined inaction of Europe and Russia allows ISIS-K to prosper, reproducing the conditions that enabled the emergence of the pseudo-caliphate with its dramatic consequences for local religious and ethnic minorities, but also for Western citizens. The head of UN counterterrorism calls for global collaboration in the face of this rapid expansion<sup>35</sup>, but how can this be organized in the context of current conflicts ?

UN mechanisms offer a potential framework, with the Security Council's biannual reports constituting a common informational base. Nevertheless, this cooperation would require strict compartmentalization between security issues and bilateral geopolitical disputes. The security urgency cannot mask the fundamental insufficiency of current responses to a challenge that directly threatens continental security.

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35 Nations unies, Conseil de sécurité. (2025, 10 février). Notant la résilience des groupes terroristes, le chef de la lutte contre le terrorisme de l'ONU déclare au Conseil de sécurité qu'une collaboration mondiale durable est la clé pour résoudre les conditions propices à l'anarchie : 9856e réunion (AM) [Couverture de réunion]. SC/15990.

# Critical metals in Central Asia: what geopolitical recomposition in the face of European needs and Russian influence?

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In June 2025, a group of scientists warned of the impossibility of meeting the objectives set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, announcing the irreversible crossing of the threshold of 1.5°C of warming compared to the pre-industrial era<sup>36</sup>. This statement sounds an alarm bell, in a context where the energy transition, which has become imperative, is largely based on a range of low-carbon technologies - renewable energies, electromobility, storage - the development of which intensifies demand for mineral resources. Far from meaning an end to dependence, this transition is replacing dependence on hydrocarbons with a new form of geo-economic vulnerability: dependence on so-called “critical” metals.

The rapid growth of the solar, wind and battery industries is accompanied by exponential consumption of strategic metals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earths. Between 2017 and 2022, global lithium consumption more than tripled, and the International Energy Agency (IEA) forecasts, in its “Net Zero Emissions” scenario, a nine-fold increase in global lithium demand by 2040. The European Union, in its forecasts for 2050, anticipates a 35-fold increase in demand for lithium, a 26-fold increase for certain rare earths, and an increase of over 30% for copper and aluminum<sup>37</sup>. These projections led the EU to adopt the Critical Raw Materials Act in 2023, aimed at securing and diversifying its supplies, which today are largely dependent on China and, until recently, Russia.

In this context, Central Asia is emerging as a strategic player. As a crossroads region between China, Russia and Europe, it abounds in mineral resources essential to the energy transition. Kazakhstan, the world's second-largest producer of uranium and holder of vast reserves of copper, lithium and rare earths, occupies a central position in this new mapping of resources. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, although on a smaller scale, also have promising deposits. Brussels is stepping up diplomatic initiatives and bilateral partnerships with these countries, as demonstrated by the recent agreements signed with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in spring 2025.

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36 Forster, P. M., Smith, C., Walsh, T., Lamb, W. F., Lamboll, R., Cassou, C., Hauser, M., Hausfather, Z., Lee, J.-Y., Palmer, M. D., von Schuckmann, K., Slangen, A. B. A., Szopa, S., Trewin, B., Yun, J., Gillett, N. P., Jenkins, S., Matthews, H. D., Raghavan, K., Ribes, A., Rogelj, J., Rosen, D., Zhang, X., Allen, M., Aleluia Reis, L., Andrew, R. M., Betts, R. A., Borger, A., Broersma, J. A., Burgess, S. N., Cheng, L., Friedlingstein, P., Domingues, C. M., Gambarini, M., Gasser, T., Gütschow, J., Ishii, M., Kadow, C., Kennedy, J., Killick, R. E., Krummel, P. B., Liné, A., Monselesan, D. P., Morice, C., Mühle, J., Naik, V., Peters, G. P., Pirani, A., Pongratz, J., Minx, J. C., Rigby, M., Rohde, R., Savita, A., Seneviratne, S. I., Thorne, P., Wells, C., Western, L. M., van der Werf, G. R., Wijffels, S. E., Masson-Delmotte, V., and Zhai, P.: Indicators of Global Climate Change 2024: annual update of key indicators of the state of the climate system and human influence, *Earth Syst. Sci. Data*, 17, 2641–2680, <https://doi.org/10.5194/essd-17-2641-2025>, 2025.

37 [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en)

But this dynamic is taking place in an area that has historically been under Russian influence. Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the European Union has been seeking to reduce its dependence on Russian resources and strengthen its geo-economic resilience. This strategy of "decoupling" energy and minerals is not without consequences: it revives rivalries for influence in a region that Russia considers to be part of its traditional strategic sphere. As a result, access to critical metals in Central Asia is not just an energy policy issue, but a major geopolitical lever likely to reconfigure the balance of power between Europe and Russia in the broader context of global ecological transition. To what extent is Europe's quest for critical metals in Central Asia reconfiguring geopolitical balances with Russia, against a backdrop of accelerated energy transition?

## **A strategic area for the energy transition**

### *A region with abundant critical resources*

Today, Central Asia is asserting itself as a key area in the reconfiguration of global supply chains for strategic mineral resources. The legacy of a generous geology and an industrial history marked by the USSR, the region's subsoil harbors a broad spectrum of resources essential to the global energy transition.

Kazakhstan stands out for its immense uranium reserves - it is the world's leading exporter - as well as for its production of oil, natural gas, copper, manganese, chromium and rare earths. Turkmenistan holds the world's sixth-largest natural gas reserves, making it an increasingly important energy player<sup>38</sup>. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan possess large deposits of gold, tungsten, lithium and other critical minerals. Although under-exploited or only partially exploited, these resources provide a strategic base for meeting the growing needs arising from the development of renewable energies, electric mobility and low-carbon technologies.

However, this heritage is ambivalent: during the Soviet era, Central Asia was exploited as an extractive reserve, serving Moscow's military-industrial complex. The Semipalatinsk polygon in Kazakhstan, the scene of more than 450 nuclear tests between 1949 and 1989, remains one of the most striking symbols of this territorial instrumentalization<sup>39</sup>.

### *A strategic priority for the European Union*

Against this backdrop, the European Union is redefining its relationship with Central Asia in terms of securing supplies of critical metals. The Critical Raw Materials Act, adopted in 2023, formalizes a strategy of resilience and diversification, aimed at reducing overdependence on China and Russia. Among other things, it stipulates that the EU must not be more than 65% dependent on a single country for the import of a critical metal, a goal that is still a long way off at present<sup>40</sup>.

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38 Nichol Jim, "Central Asia : Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests ", March 2014, [online] : <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33458.pdf>

39 *Radiological conditions at the Semipalatinsk test Site, Kazakhstan*, Agence Internationale de l'Energie Atomique, 1998, [en ligne] : [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28347/034\\_central\\_asia\\_water\\_conflict.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/28347/034_central_asia_water_conflict.pdf)

40 European Commission. (n.d.). *Critical Raw Materials Act*. Single Market – Raw Materials from [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en)

The EU has thus intensified its diplomatic efforts: several bilateral agreements have been signed and, at the same time, the Global Gateway programme, a European infrastructure financing tool, supports the development of logistics corridors and integrated value chains in the extractive sector, particularly in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia<sup>41</sup>.

While the EU remains a major economic player in the region – it is Kazakhstan's main trading partner<sup>42</sup> – it is still struggling to convert this presence into lasting political influence. However, environmental and scientific cooperation (such as the CBRN Centre of Excellence in Tashkent or transboundary water management projects) demonstrate a multidimensional approach<sup>43</sup>. By supporting national energy transitions through "green" policies, the Union also seeks to foster normative convergence favorable to its economic and geopolitical interests.

### *Russia: A Historical Influence in Reshaping*

European engagement in Central Asia takes place in an area traditionally dominated by Russia, which considers the region its "near abroad." Heir to a dense network of logistics infrastructure, gas pipelines, trade routes, and energy interconnections dating back to the Soviet era, Moscow still maintains a significant economic and strategic presence, particularly in the mining and nuclear sectors. Rosatom, for example, remains a key player in the uranium sector in several countries in the region.

Faced with the pressure of Western sanctions, Russia is seeking to consolidate its alliances and maintain its hold. It is trying to lock down certain export corridors and encourage multilateral frameworks for regional cooperation. China, through its state-owned enterprises, already holds a majority of mining licenses in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are exporting a growing share of their critical minerals to Beijing<sup>44</sup>.

This shift towards multipolar partnerships opens up a strategic window of opportunity for the EU, but also increases geo-economic tensions. The growing presence of players such as the USA, South Korea and Canada illustrates the fragmentation of traditional Russian influence<sup>45</sup>. For the countries of Central Asia, this situation offers unprecedented room for manoeuvre: by diversifying their alliances, they are attempting to emerge from a historic tête-à-tête with Moscow, without breaking existing interdependencies. But this opportunistic logic may also weaken the regional cooperation needed to manage common environmental challenges - pollution, radioactive waste, water scarcity - which know no borders.

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41 European Commission. (n.d.). *Global Gateway*. [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_en)

42 European External Action Service : Press and information team of the Delegation to KAZAKHSTAN (n.d.). *The European Union and Kazakhstan*, 10/19/2023 from [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kazakhstan/european-union-and-kazakhstan\\_en?s=222](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kazakhstan/european-union-and-kazakhstan_en?s=222)

43 Lehr-Coquet, A. (2019). *L'Asie centrale post-soviétique : entre héritage, défis régionalistes et enjeux environnementaux* [Mémoire de 4<sup>ème</sup> année]. Sciences Po Strasbourg.

44 Collet E. *UE : Richesses minérales en Asie centrale – Sommet de Samarkand*. Euractiv, 2025. from <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/all/news/ue-richesses-minerales-asie-centrale-samarkand/>

45 *Ibid*.

## Central Asia: a “toxic cauldron” to be handled with precision

### *Pollution linked to the presence and extraction of minerals*

Historically, Kazakhstan has inherited a heavy environmental legacy from the Soviet period, during which ecological considerations were largely relegated to the background. Intensive exploitation of uranium deposits, heavy metals (lead, cadmium, zinc, etc.) and the concentration of extractive industries have profoundly altered the soil, water and air. These activities have generated diffuse but persistent pollution, particularly from heavy metal discharges, which contaminate pastures, water tables and rivers<sup>46</sup>.

Several Camel farms, located near industrial or mining zones, bear witness to this contamination. In Kyzylorda, for example, atmospheric fallout from asphalt and cement plants loads the soil with lead and cadmium. In the Turkestan region, urban pastures suffer from the cumulative effects of road traffic, cement plant discharges and illegal dumps. Even in less industrialized areas like Almaty, long-distance winds carry metal particles from the extractive sector, aggravating background pollution<sup>47</sup>.

Uranium mining is a particularly critical source of pollution. In southern Kazakhstan, former Soviet uranium mines, often abandoned without containment measures, still release radioactive substances into the environment. This invisible but persistent pollution affects rural populations and the local ecosystem. Prevailing winds exacerbate the phenomenon by dispersing radioactive particles northwards, exposing farms far from the extraction sites.

The Atyrau region, known for its hydrocarbon resources, concentrates over 80% of the country's atmospheric emissions, including a significant proportion of pollutants from the mining and petrochemical industries<sup>48</sup>.

Toxic waste dumps, sometimes in the open air or in the immediate vicinity of watercourses, are another major threat. The storage of hundreds of millions of tonnes of mine tailings without adequate protection leads to the infiltration of hazardous substances into water tables and rivers, as shown by the alarming cases observed in Kyrgyzstan (Mailuu-Suu) and Tajikistan (Taboshar). This pollution is all the more problematic as it crosses national borders, via rivers such as the Syr-Daria, exposing several million people downstream in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan<sup>49</sup>.

Residual radioactivity from Soviet nuclear tests, particularly at the Semipalatinsk site, exacerbates this environmental legacy. Although this site was closed in 1991, the soil in this vast area remains highly contaminated, and populations living nearby have abnormally high rates of serious illnesses.

Finally, the transfer of these pollutants into the food chain is a growing concern. Plants consumed by camels in polluted areas show traces of heavy metals, indicating a risk of indirect ingestion by

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46 *Ibid.*

47 LE GUILLOU, M. (2009). *Diagnostic et cartographie des risques de pollution de l'environnement (eau, plantes, sol), par les métaux lourds, autour de fermes camelines, au Kazakhstan* [RAPPORT DE STAGE DE SECONDE ANNEE, Université Montpellier 2]. [https://agritrop.cirad.fr/555068/1/document\\_555068.pdf](https://agritrop.cirad.fr/555068/1/document_555068.pdf)

48 *Ibid.*

49 Lehr-Coquet, A. (2019). *L'Asie centrale post-soviétique : entre héritage, défis régionalistes et enjeux environnementaux* [Mémoire de 4<sup>ème</sup> année]. Sciences Po Strasbourg.



humans through milk and by-products (shubat). Even if the concentrations measured are generally below phytotoxic thresholds, their persistence and long-term accumulation raise health safety issues.

Yet environmental challenges are not confined to traditional industries. The emergence of new technologies, such as cryptocurrency mining, is exacerbating this “toxic caldron”<sup>50</sup> while revealing profound energy and geopolitical fragilities.

#### *Technology, between ecological threat and geopolitical leverage: the case of mining in Central Asia*

The development of crypto-currency mining in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has triggered a serious energy crisis, revealing the weaknesses of infrastructures inherited from the USSR. Fueled by very cheap electricity and the exodus of Chinese miners in 2021, mining has led to excessive energy consumption, culminating in a regional blackout in January 2022<sup>51</sup>.

This energy pressure exacerbates the dependence of Central Asian countries on coal, making some cities among the most polluted in the world in winter. The environmental impact is all the more critical given that climate change is reducing the water resources essential for power generation, creating geopolitical tensions, particularly between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Regional Internet connectivity relies heavily on Russian infrastructure. Kyrgyzstan depends on Kazakhstan, which in turn depends on Russia. This architecture gives Moscow considerable leverage, reinforced by restrictive pricing policies and alternative projects that are still ineffective, particularly in a context of heightened digital surveillance. It represents a major challenge for the European Union, which is seeking to limit the expansion of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, while supporting the energy transition and digital sovereignty of these states.

In response, countries such as Uzbekistan are beginning to make mining conditional on the use of renewable energies. This shift offers a strategic opportunity to reduce carbon footprints while developing local energy sources - a potential lever for ecological partnerships with the EU, which aims to stabilize the region by promoting sustainable development that is less dependent on Russia.

Consequently, the environmental issue cannot be dissociated from the broader geopolitical rivalry between major powers. The global energy transition places Central Asia at the heart of strategic competition, where development models and contrasting ecological visions clash.

#### *Competition under ecological constraints*

Against a backdrop of global energy transition, the European Union is imposing strict environmental standards on its partners (creating a gap between its green rhetoric and its need for fossil fuels). In Central Asia, this requirement clashes with the more ecologically flexible but strategically aggressive approaches of Russia and China.

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50 GAGNAT R, “Où va l’Asie centrale ? Entre Chine, Russie et l’Islam”, [Diploweb.com](https://www.diploweb.com), *La revue géopolitique*, juin 2014

51 Estecahandy, H. (2023). Entre tensions électriques et géopolitiques : les enjeux énergétiques et de ressources en Asie centrale au prisme du minage de cryptomonnaies. *Hérodote*, 188(1), 91-107. <https://doi-org.scpo.idm.oclc.org/10.3917/her.188.0091>.

The EU promotes cooperation based on sustainability, transparency and support for renewable energies (e.g. green economy projects in Kazakhstan)<sup>52</sup>. It seeks to stabilize the region through environmental governance and regional integration.

Russia, on the other hand, is still marked by a productivist Soviet heritage: ecology is subordinated to energy and military sovereignty. It prioritizes control of resources (hydrocarbons, uranium) and maintains its influence through regional alliances (Collective Security Treaty Organization, Eurasian Economic Community), without prioritizing environmental standards.

China, motivated by the need to secure its supplies (gas, cotton), invests in infrastructure without any real ecological requirements. Its "win-win" approach often masks over-exploitation of resources, as demonstrated by the transfer of energy-intensive mining farms to Kazakhstan after they had been banned in China<sup>53</sup>.

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Central Asia is at the crossroads of two contradictory imperatives: the need for an ecological transition based on more sustainable exploitation of natural resources, and the European Union's strategic reorientation aimed at reducing its energy dependence on Russia. These two logics - environmental and geopolitical - do not always add up harmoniously, as they involve complex arbitrations on which partnerships to favor and which standards to impose.

Against this backdrop, there are two opposing trends. On the one hand, closer cooperation between the EU and Central Asian countries could lay the foundations for more sustainable development, structured around high environmental standards, support for renewable energies and more transparent governance. However, this strategy has a geopolitical cost: it would conflict with Russian and Chinese interests, which see the region as a priority area of influence. All the more so as Kazakhstan's recent agreements with Moscow and Beijing for the construction of a nuclear power plant indicate a desire to maintain, and even deepen, existing strategic interdependencies.

The other - and more likely - scenario is that of a progressive lock-in of the region by Russia and China, through massive investment in infrastructure, tighter control of energy flows and tolerance of intensive extractivist practices. Such a framework would favor short-term development, to the detriment of European environmental objectives, and risk accentuating the EU's marginalization in the region.

This dilemma illustrates a wider paradox: the global ecological transition remains, paradoxically, dependent on scarce and polluting resources. In other words, it is itself dependent on global extractivism, which creates new forms of dependency and tension. Building a truly sustainable model will therefore require us to go beyond rhetoric and fundamentally rethink our relationship with resources, territories and the geopolitical balances they shape.

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52 European Investment Bank. (2016, November 26). *EIB provides EUR 200 m to support smaller climate change mitigation and adaptation and environmental projects in Kazakhstan (Green Projects)*. <https://www.eib.org/fr/press/all/2016-305-eib-provides-eur-200m-to-support-smaller-climate-change-mitigation-and-adaptation-and-environmental-projects-in-kazakhstan-green-projects>

53Estecahandy, H. (2024, August 16). *Bitcoin in the Steppes: Geopolitics behind Crypto Mining in Kazakhstan*. Digisilk. <https://www.digisilk.eu/blog/bitcoin-in-the-steppes-geopolitics-behind-crypto-mining-in-kazakhstan>





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