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Navigating Geopolitical Ruptures: Structural Realism, Strategic Hedging, and Regional Agency in Central Asia Amid the Russia–Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract. The ongoing military confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, which escalated into an active phase on February 24, 2022, has systematically catalyzed the fragmentation of the Eurasian security architecture and generated existential geopolitical and geo-economic quandaries for the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Grounded in the theoretical paradigms of structural realism (neorealism), strategic risk management, and macro-economic sanctions compliance, this article investigates how these landlocked post-Soviet states navigate the structural dualities of maintaining historical multi-vector ties while circumventing secondary Western sanctions. Employing comparative geopolitical analysis and scenario modeling, the paper evaluates country-specific responses—from Kazakhstan's proactive neutrality and alternative corridor development to Uzbekistan's unaligned diplomatic leadership and the remittance-dependent vulnerabilities of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The results reveal that rather than succumbing to zero-sum external pressures, Central Asia has leveraged external shocks to accelerate intra-regional consolidation, institutionalize autonomous negotiation formats (e.g., Consultative Meetings of Heads of State, C5+1 platforms), and transform the region from a passive transit barrier into a vital Eurasian multimodal bridge through the Middle Corridor and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. The study concludes with a tri-scenario forecast (protracted attrition, hybrid escalation, and institutionalized armistice), demonstrating that regional strategic autonomy is intrinsically determined by the depth of internal institutional integration.
Keywords: Russia–Ukraine conflict, Central Asia, structural realism, strategic hedging, regional agency, secondary sanctions, Middle Corridor, multimodal logistics, economic compliance, Uzbekistan foreign policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the full-scale Russia–Ukraine armed conflict on February 24, 2022, marked an epochal turning point in post-Cold War international relations, accelerating the collapse of the established Eurasian security architecture and destabilizing global multilateral norms. Characterized by high-intensity hybrid operations, advanced informational and kinetic technologies, and an unprecedented economic warfare regime, the conflict has demonstrated the indivisibility of regional European security and broader systemic stability. While the immediate battlefield remains anchored in Eastern Europe, the shockwaves have profoundly disrupted neighboring geopolitical zones, nowhere more acutely than in Central Asia—comprising Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

For the landlocked states of Central Asia, the conflict generated immediate existential dilemmas regarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and socio-economic stability. Historically bound to the Russian Federation through comprehensive economic, security, infrastructural, and demographic interdependencies, the regional republics abruptly found themselves trapped between historical alliances and the extraterritorial sanctions apparatus imposed by the United States, the European Union, and their coalition partners. While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan maintain formal security commitments within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan participate in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), all five republics have systematically resisted external pressure to endorse the military intervention. Instead, the extraordinary pressure exerted by the crisis has paradoxically compelled Central Asian leaderships to transcend passive buffer-state dynamics. Rather than succumbing to binary alignment choices, the region has embarked upon an unprecedented wave of diplomatic diversification and accelerated internal political-economic consolidation. This paper investigates the strategic, institutional, and geo-economic adaptation

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mechanisms deployed by Central Asian states. It addresses the central research question: How have the states of Central Asia maintained their sovereignty and mitigated compounding external shocks, and to what extent has the Russia–Ukraine war catalyzed the emergence of Central Asia as an autonomous geopolitical actor?

2. METHODS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analyzing the intricate multidimensional fallout of the Russia–Ukraine conflict on Central Asia requires an interdisciplinary methodology blending international relations theory, strategic management, and macroeconomic analysis. This research is operationalized through three interrelated theoretical lenses:

2.1. Structural Realism (Neorealism). Rooted in the Kenneth Waltz tradition and contemporary neorealist interpretations (Kuparov, 2026), the behavior of Central Asian states is conceptualized as rational adaptation within an anarchic international structure. Confronted with a dramatic power-political cleavage between great powers, small and middle powers pursue strategic hedging—simultaneously avoiding balancing or bandwagoning with either pole—to preserve systemic autonomy and maximize regime security.

2.2. Strategic Risk Management. Building on the public policy risk frameworks formulated by Bronnikov and Blinova (2016), regional foreign policy is modeled as dynamic portfolio diversification. To insulate against supply-chain paralysis and political exposure, regional governments actively cultivate redundant diplomatic and economic partnerships with China, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies, and South Asian states.

2.3. Macroeconomic Compliance and Empirical Indicator Tracking. The empirical dimension of the study synthesizes comparative economic indicators across the 2022–2026 timeframe, drawing on official national statistical databases, reports from international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank), and published regional research (Qurbonov, 2025; Mukomel, 2024). Specific analytical metrics include bilateral trade turnover fluctuations, consumer price index (CPI) inflation, labor migration remittance flows, cross-border banking settlement dynamics (e.g., SWIFT disconnection and secondary sanctions risks), and physical freight volumes across Eurasian transport corridors.

2.4. Scenario Analysis. To deliver predictive analytical utility, the study applies structured prospective scenario modeling, delineating three potential mid-to-long-term conflict trajectories (protracted attrition, hybrid escalation, and negotiated armistice) and evaluating their corresponding strategic implications for Central Asian development.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Country-Specific Vulnerabilities and Strategic Maneuvering

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the impact of the conflict has been highly asymmetric across Central Asian states, conditioned by their unique institutional alignments, border geographies, and macroeconomic profiles:

• Republic of Kazakhstan: Occupying the most geographically and institutionally exposed position due to its 7,500-kilometer shared border with the Russian Federation and membership in the EAEU and CSTO, Kazakhstan adopted a strategy of 'proactive neutrality.' Diplomatically, Astana firmly reaffirmed the primacy of the UN Charter, upheld Ukraine's territorial integrity within its 1991 borders, and formally refused recognition of the annexation of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk. Economically, to insulate its sovereign access to global markets and safeguard the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC)—which transports over 80% of Kazakh crude exports—Kazakhstan implemented an advanced electronic freight tracking system to prevent sanctions evasion. Concurrently, it negotiated alternative export corridors via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey along the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and initiated direct shipments to Germany via the Druzhba pipeline (Butyrina, 2022).

• Kyrgyz Republic and Republic of Tajikistan: Both states exhibited acute structural exposure due to extensive labor migration dependence on the Russian economy, where remittances historically constitute 25% to 35% of national GDP. The depreciation of the Russian ruble, coupled with the introduction of digitized migrant registries, expedited deportations, and military mobilization risks in the Russian Federation, led to a 30–40% contraction in dollar-denominated remittances. This prompted immediate return migration waves and exerted immense pressure on domestic labor markets. Concurrently, heightened trade scrutiny from Washington and

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Brussels over potential dual-use re-exports resulted in several local corporate entities being designated under US and EU secondary sanctions, forcing both Bishkek and Dushanbe to navigate high-wire compliance measures while maintaining essential security ties (e.g., Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan).

• Turkmenistan: Anchored in its UN-recognized status of permanent positive neutrality, Ashgabat largely excised the conflict from its domestic political discourse. However, European efforts to decouple from Russian natural gas dramatically revitalized strategic negotiations surrounding the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline. Turkmenistan leveraged this window to accelerate trilateral dialogues with Azerbaijan and Turkey to diversify export options beyond its historic reliance on the Chinese and Russian pipeline networks (Imamkulieva, 2023).

• Republic of Uzbekistan: Benefiting from its non-aligned status—having withdrawn from the CSTO in 2012 and retaining observer status in the EAEU—Uzbekistan demonstrated exceptional foreign policy agility under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Tashkent consistently advocated for a peaceful diplomatic resolution, provided repeated shipments of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and rigorously maintained equitable relations with Western partners while pragmatically deepening industrial and trade cooperation with Moscow. Internally, Uzbekistan utilized its political stability to offer tax exemptions, modern digital infrastructure, and specialized IT-Visa regimes, rapidly attracting hundreds of international firms, venture funds, and highly skilled software engineers relocating from the conflict zone (Podrobno.uz, 2022).

3.2. Macroeconomic Shocks: Financial Intermediation, Inflation, and Labor Markets

The financial and monetary architecture of Central Asia absorbed substantial collateral damage. The disconnection of tier-one Russian banks from SWIFT and the suspension of Visa and Mastercard operations in Russia severed traditional correspondent banking channels. Protracted compliance reviews by Western clearinghouses increased transaction costs and decelerated trade settlements across the region. Furthermore, extreme ruble volatility translated directly into domestic exchange-rate fluctuations, driving imported inflation.

Between 2022 and 2024, annual inflation in Kazakhstan surged to peaks of 15–20% (Zhazetova, 2024; Abdulmanova, 2022). Escalating global and regional food prices threatened household food security across Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, compelling regional administrations to impose emergency export bans on livestock and grain, subsidize staple bread production, and maintain restrictive central bank policy rates, which concurrently stifled domestic commercial credit growth.

3.3. Structural Transformation: Accelerating Intra-Regional Consolidation and Multilateral Formats

The most profound structural outcome of the Eurasian crisis is the decisive momentum it imparted to endogenous regional consolidation. Historically impeded by bilateral territorial, water, and border disputes, Central Asia transitioned from an arena of great-power rivalry into an integrated subject of international relations. Uzbekistan's pragmatic foreign policy served as the primary catalyst, operationalized through the Consultative Meetings of Heads of State of Central Asia.

Historic milestones include the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century on July 21, 2022, in Cholpon-Ata, and the subsequent expansion of the consultative format to incorporate the Republic of Azerbaijan on November 16, 2025. Concurrently, external major powers institutionalized engagement via multilateral 'C5+1' dialogues (with the US, EU, China, Japan, India, and the GCC). Notably, the inaugural China–Central Asia Summit in Xi'an (May 2023) and the EU–Central Asia Summits solidified long-term capital flows into regional connectivity, energy, and critical raw materials under initiatives like the EU Global Gateway (Gazeta.uz, 2025; News Central Asia, 2023).

3.4. Reconfiguration of Eurasian Connectivity Corridors

The implementation of sweeping Western sanctions rendered the traditional Northern Corridor (transit through Russia and Belarus) commercially and politically precarious. Consequently, global supply chains pivoted decisively toward the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR / Middle Corridor). Containerized freight along the Middle Corridor witnessed exponential expansion, positioning Central Asia as the vital, irreplaceable land bridge between China, Southeast Asia, and European markets (Makhkamov, 2025; TAdviser, 2022).

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Crucially, Uzbekistan unlocked two transformative infrastructural mega-projects that had lingered in diplomatic paralysis for over two decades: (1) The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan (CKU) Railway, establishing the shortest terrestrial freight artery from East Asia to Southern Europe and the Middle East; and (2) The Trans-Afghan Railway corridor (Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar), granting landlocked Central Asia direct access to the Arabian Sea via the Pakistani deep-sea ports of Gwadar and Karachi (Abdraimov, 2025). Coupled with regional joint investment vehicles (e.g., Uzbek-Kyrgyz Development Fund, Uzbek-Tajik Investment Company, and the 'Central Asia' International Industrial Cooperation Center on the Kazakh-Uzbek border), the region has constructed a resilient cross-border industrial ecosystem.

4. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings challenge conventional scholarly paradigms that conceptualize Central Asian republics as passive objects within a deterministic 'New Great Game.' As structural realism posits, systemic crises compel rational states to adapt. However, rather than succumbing to neo-imperial hegemony or unreservedly embracing Western geopolitical agendas, Central Asian states have exhibited sophisticated agency through strategic hedging and regional multilateralism.

The strategic management of multi-vector foreign policies has allowed regional actors to decouple functional trade and logistics cooperation from normative political alignment. While Western analysts frequently misinterpret rising Central Asian trade volumes with Russia as state-sponsored sanctions evasion, the data demonstrate a structural phenomenon of market re-routing, business relocation, and defensive economic compliance designed to avoid domestic systemic collapse.

Based on current geopolitical dynamics, three prospective scenarios define the medium-term outlook for Central Asia:

Scenario 1: Protracted War of Attrition (Highest Probability). The confrontation solidifies into an extended positional conflict with localized tactical engagements and no formal peace treaty (Mussa, 2026). Under this reality, Central Asia cements its permanent status as the non-substitutable East–West logistics bridge. High revenues from transit tariffs, specialized warehousing, and relocated multinational operations will persist. The Middle Corridor will institutionalize fully, though regional governments will face ongoing Western compliance monitoring.

Scenario 2: Escalation of Hybrid Warfare and Total Economic Isolation (Critical Risk). The expansion of conflict boundaries, tactical technological escalation, and an unyielding Western transition toward absolute economic isolation of Russia through indiscriminate secondary sanctions against third-country jurisdictions. In this catastrophic scenario, regional commercial banks in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan would face ultimatum-style exclusions from Western capital markets. Bilateral trade within the CIS would plummet, forcing regional states into an accelerated pivot toward Chinese and Middle Eastern financial settlement mechanisms.

Scenario 3: Negotiated Armistice and Managed Sanctions Relief (Constructive Re-equilibrium). The attainment of legally binding ceasefire agreements and the gradual, conditional dismantling of select sanctions packages. Under this outcome, global commodity, fertilizer, and agricultural markets would stabilize, curtailing imported inflation. Having extensively modernized their rail, dry-port, and digital logistics assets during the crisis years, the Central Asian states would emerge as empowered, autonomous beneficiaries of reconstituted Eurasian transcontinental commerce.

5. CONCLUSION

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has served as an unprecedented stress-test for Central Asia, accelerating a historic structural transition from peripheral post-Soviet entanglement to proactive geopolitical agency. The core conclusions of the study are summarized as follows:

1. Validating neorealist and risk-management hypotheses, the Central Asian republics have preserved their national sovereignty and regime security by pursuing pragmatic, multi-vector hedging, successfully avoiding direct entanglement in external hostilities while preventing secondary sanctions retaliation.

2. The crisis exposed structural economic vulnerabilities, including banking settlement friction, exposure to imported food inflation, and demographic dependency on Russian labor markets. Concurrently, regional states

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demonstrated agility by turning external disruptions into structural opportunities, rapidly absorbing relocated international enterprise capital, skilled human resources, and high-tech IT investments.

3. Central Asia has decisively broken through its historical status as an isolated, landlocked buffer, establishing itself as the indispensable logistics hub of Eurasia. The rapid maturation of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor), the commencement of the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, and the promotion of the Trans-Afghan corridor have fundamentally reconfigured transcontinental connectivity.

4. Uzbekistan has emerged as the decisive anchor of regional stability. Through the institutionalization of the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Heads of State, Tashkent catalyzed an enduring transition from regional fragmentation to institutionalized solidarity.

In conclusion, the sustainability of Central Asian sovereignty in an increasingly fractured multipolar world remains directly contingent upon the density of intra-regional cooperation. By institutionalizing internal political and economic unity, Central Asia possesses all prerequisites to consolidate its emerging status as an integrated, autonomous, and indispensable center of geopolitical and economic power.

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