

## NAVIGATING NEW REALITIES: CENTRAL ASIA'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICS

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**Abstract.** Central Asia's evolving role in global politics is a subject of increasing scholarly attention, yet the region remains a complex nexus of historical legacies, geopolitical interests, and emergent dynamics. This article delves into the multifaceted factors shaping Central Asia's significance in the contemporary global arena, moving beyond conventional narratives of resource wealth and strategic geography. Employing a qualitative approach encompassing systematic, structural, chronological, and content analyses, the study explores the region's agency amidst shifting geopolitical landscapes. Examining historical antecedents and post-independence trajectories, the research elucidates how Central Asia's strategic importance has evolved over time. Focusing on two interlinked factors—Russia's conflict in Ukraine and China's expanding global ambitions—the study elucidates their transformative impact on regional dynamics. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict catalyzes shifts in Central Asia's geopolitical alignments, prompting a recalibration of regional power dynamics and a growing receptiveness to Chinese influence. Concurrently, China's assertive economic and infrastructural initiatives reshape the region's connectivity and geopolitical significance, positioning Central Asia as a crucial nexus in Eurasian geopolitics. Amidst these developments, Central Asian countries exhibit increasing agency, pursuing coordinated regional policies and engaging with diverse external actors. As the region navigates geopolitical realignments and pursues its interests on the global stage, it emerges as a dynamic locus of geopolitical contestation and cooperation. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of Central Asia's evolving role in contemporary global politics, highlighting its agency and strategic significance beyond traditional narratives.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Russia, China, global politics, geopolitical dynamics, regional cooperation.

**Аңдатпа.** Зерттеушілердің назарына айналған Орталық Азия тарихи мұралардың, геосаяси мүдделердің және өзгеріп жатқан динамиканың күрделі қосындысы болып келеді. Бұл мақалада ресурстардың байлығы мен географиялық локациясы туралы дәстүрлі нарративтерден асып, қазіргі жаһандық аренада Орталық Азияның маңыздылығын қалыптастыратын көп факторлы талдамаға ену жүзеге асырылады. Жүйелік, құрылымдық, хронологиялық және функционалдық талдауды қамтитын сапалы талдау методтарын қолдана отырып, зерттеу геосаяси жағдайлардың өзгеруі жағдайында аймақтың субъективтілігін қарастырады. Посткеңестік кезеңнің тарихи алғышарттары мен траекторияларын талдай отырып, зерттеу Орталық Азияның стратегиялық маңыздылығы уақыт өте келе қалай өзгергенін түсіндіреді. Бір - бірімен байланысты екі факторға - Ресей мен Украинаның қақтығысына және Қытайдың өсіп келе жатқан жаһандық амбицияларына назар аудара отырып, зерттеу олардың аймақтық динамикаларға трансформациялық әсерін түсіндіреді. Ресей мен Украина арасындағы қақтығыс Орталық Азияның геосаяси динамикасында өзгерістер туғызып, аймақтық күштер динамикасының қайта калибрленуіне және Қытайдың ықпалына деген көзқарастың артуына себеп болды. Сонымен қатар, Қытайдың өсіп келе жатқан экономикалық және инфрақұрылымдық бастамалары Орталық Азияны Еуразиялық геосаясаттағы негізгі нүкте ретінде көрсете отырып, аймақтың коннективтілігін және оның геосаяси маңыздылығын өзгертеді. Осы өзгерістер жағдайында Орталық Азия елдері өсіп келе жатқан субъективтілікті көрсетіп, бірлескен өңірлік саясат және әртүрлі сыртқы күштермен өзара бірегей әрекет жасайды. Аймақ геосаяси қайта бағдарлауға бағытталған және әлемдік аренада өз мүдделерін көздейтін болғандықтан, ол геосаяси күрес пен ынтымақтастықтың серпінді орталығына айналып келеді. Бұл зерттеу

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Орталық Азияның қазіргі жаһандық саясаттағы рөлі туралы эволюцияны нюансты түсінуге ықпал етеді, оның субъектілігі мен дәстүрлі нарративтерден тыс стратегиялық маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** Орталық Азия, Ресей, Қытай, жаһандық саясат, геосаяси динамика, аймақтық ынтымақтастық.

**Аннотация.** Центральная Азия, ставшая предметом все более увеличивающегося внимания исследователей, остается сложным узлом исторических наследий, геополитических интересов и возникающих динамик. В данной статье осуществляется погружение в многофакторную природу, формирующую значимость Центральной Азии в современной глобальной арене, выходя за пределы традиционных нарративов о богатстве ресурсов и стратегическом положении. Применяя качественный подход, включающий системный, структурный, хронологический и функциональный анализ, исследование рассматривает субъектность региона в условиях изменяющихся геополитических обстановок. Анализируя исторические предпосылки и траектории постсоветского периода, исследование разъясняет, как стратегическое значение Центральной Азии эволюционировало со временем. Сосредотачиваясь на двух взаимосвязанных факторах - конфликте России и Украины и расширяющихся глобальных амбициях Китая - исследование разъясняет их трансформационное воздействие на региональные динамики. Конфликт между Россией и Украиной вызывает сдвиги в геополитических союзах Центральной Азии, провоцируя перекалибровку региональной динамики сил и растущее отношение к влиянию Китая. Параллельно, растущие экономические и инфраструктурные инициативы Китая изменяют коннективность региона и его геополитическую значимость, позиционируя Центральную Азию как ключевой узел в евразийской геополитике. В условиях этих изменений страны Центральной Азии демонстрируют увеличивающуюся субъектность, ведут координированную региональную политику и взаимодействуют с разнообразными внешними акторами. По мере того как регион ориентируется на геополитические переориентации и преследует свои интересы на мировой арене, он становится динамичным центром геополитической борьбы и сотрудничества. Это исследование вносит свой вклад в нюансное понимание эволюции роли Центральной Азии в современной глобальной политике, подчеркивая ее агентство и стратегическое значение за пределами традиционных нарративов.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, глобальная политика, геополитическая динамика, региональное сотрудничество.

## Introduction

Since the "parade of sovereignties" and the subsequent emergence of new states in Central Asia, this region has repeatedly become the subject of active study by a large number of researchers and experts. However, given its relatively young age and active transformation, it cannot be said that this region has been sufficiently studied in contemporary science. Over the more than thirty-year period of the region's independence, the countries of Central Asia have faced various difficulties related to the geographical proximity of Afghanistan, the rise of extremist ideas, the fight against drug trafficking, balancing the influence of different states, and so on.

The growing role and significance of Central Asia is not a modern phenomenon. Throughout a sufficiently long period of history, this region represented great importance and has always been a coveted piece for many states and empires. These vast territories were fiercely contested over by various powers at different times, including the Hun Empire, the Turkic Khaganate, the Abbasid Caliphate, the empires of Genghis Khan and Timur, the Golden Horde, the Safavid Empire, the Qing Dynasty, the Dzungar Khanate, and many different states and dynasties. At that time, the historical role and significance of this region were directly related to the cities

through which the trade routes of the Great Silk Road passed and the geographical location of the region at the crossroads of Eastern and Western worlds.

In the post-bipolar era, the role and significance of Central Asian countries and the region as a whole have become the subject of extensive research in various fields and from all perspectives. At different times, the factors increasing the significance of the region in the eyes of researchers and the expert community were different. In the early period of independence, the region was considered a conflict-prone zone, thus some researchers studied the rhetoric of the "Great Game" on the "The Grand Chessboard" [1], while others viewed the region as a "new Afghanistan", pointing to the need for a regional reconstruction strategy [2]. In the subsequent period after the economic crisis, many researchers viewed the region in the context of the so-called "division of labor" between the main players, China and Russia [3, 4]. However, some researchers today question such a division of spheres of influence, arguing that in the early years of the region's independence, Russia was the key economic force, and China primarily pursued its security interests, such as border delimitation and Uyghur separatism [5]. Nevertheless, during this period, some researchers noted the unique properties of

Central Asian countries' relations with external powers, particularly Russia, as part of the "negotiated hegemony" model observed in three different domains: security, norms and rules, and culture [6]. However, the Sheriff and Banker concept [7] in the region is already outdated, thus the role and significance of Central Asia in the third decade of the twenty-first century are supported by increasingly new factors and reasons.

In this article, we believe that the growing role and significance of Central Asia in contemporary global politics are influenced by factors other than vast energy resources, geographical location, and proximity to Afghanistan. In this regard, the question arises: What new factors are influencing the growing role of Central Asia in contemporary global politics? This research aims to provide answers to this research question and to complement existing academic literature on Central Asia.

### Methodology

The methodological choice of this study was justified by the research objectives, which entail a comprehensive examination of the growing role and significance of Central Asia in global politics in the third decade of the current century. Thus, to achieve these objectives, this research heavily relies on the application of a qualitative approach, as well as the implementation of a wide range of methods: systematic analysis, structural and functional analysis, chronological analysis, and content analysis. To construct the argumentation, primarily secondary data were employed, such as articles by various researchers, web publications, books by different scholars, chapters from books, and conference proceedings.

Content analysis, within the framework of the qualitative method, assists in systematically exploring the content and significance of various literature and data, both primary and secondary, thereby aiding in obtaining the most accurate conclusions [8]. Moreover, in our study, the use of content analysis allowed for the analysis of a large volume of media materials and data, thereby providing a structured approach to analyzing the content of these materials.

The use of systematic analysis, in our case, helps to study the role and

significance of Central Asia more comprehensively, allowing for the consideration of the system as a whole, taking into account all internal components, their interrelationships, and even external influences. Additionally, for the purpose of examining the political systems of the region's countries, the method of structural and functional analysis was employed. This method enabled the determination of how the interactions of various elements within this political system determine the functioning of the system as a whole.

For the reconstruction of past events and understanding historical processes, as well as for the analysis of the sequence of events and their temporal intervals, the method of chronological analysis was utilized. The use of this method allowed us to identify patterns and connections that would have been difficult to identify through isolated analysis of individual events.

Thus, the use of all the aforementioned methods and approaches undoubtedly helped us find an answer to the research question of this study. These methods were chosen and utilized due to the constraints of time, ease, and accessibility in the use and implementation of these methods.

### Literature review

Central Asia as a region has always been diverse and has attracted the attention of researchers throughout history. Despite the presence of scientific centers and institutes, a large number of major books, and a vast amount of scholarly works and reports from various institutions dedicated to studying Central Asia, it cannot be said that this region is sufficiently explored in contemporary science. The main reason for this lies in the fact that the countries of the region, sometimes referred to as the "5 stans", were part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union (USSR) for more than a century. Only at the end of the last century did the study of the countries of the region and the region as a whole begin in modern science.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the end of the bipolar world order, the attention of Western countries turned to the newly formed post-Soviet republics of Central Asia. During this period, most researchers brought to the forefront

concerns about security, such as the presence of a nuclear arsenal in Kazakhstan [9], and expressions like "Eurasian Balkans" and "Ethnic Cauldron" were also used [1]. Such a pronounced emphasis on security issues is understandable, given the lack of information about the young republics of the region, their history, culture, and so on. However, over time, attitudes towards the countries of the region changed, and the range of issues on which researchers focused expanded. For example, in the post-9/11 period, rhetoric surrounding Central Asia includes issues related to the resolution of the situation in Afghanistan, the emergence of Greater Central Asia, with Afghanistan at its heart [10].

From the beginning of the century until recently, many researchers primarily associated the growing role and significance of Central Asia in global geopolitics with its economy, in terms of its significant natural resources, and its geography, in terms of the advantageous location of the region at the crossroads of two civilizations. In his research, Anand [11] emphasizes the geostrategic significance of the region not only due to its huge energy reserves but also due to its role as a key node in gas and oil pipelines and transportation corridors. Additionally, during this period, rhetoric emerged regarding the maneuvering of the region in the strategic rivalry of external powers, particularly, Bohr [12] asserts that the countries of the region exploit the sharpened rivalry between the US and Russia to their advantage in gaining distribution benefits from both external powers.

The second decade of the current century proved to be eventful for the countries of Central Asia, thereby expanding the scope of research interests surrounding the region. During this period, rhetoric about the region expanded, including references to the "Great Game" and the "New Great Game" between the US, Russia, and China [13], as well as the "newly independent state syndrome" experienced by the countries of the region in search of ideology, such as the cult of Tamerlane in Uzbekistan, and the cult of Manas in Kyrgyzstan [14]. Additionally, during this period, the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) significantly influenced the

increased interest in the region, especially in terms of trade, investment, and infrastructure modernization [15]. The role of Central Asia as a transit hub is crucial for the growth of international trade, and new projects are currently being developed and implemented to improve connectivity [16]. Zhou [17] noted that the region also serves as a unique geopolitical "hub" between four nuclear powers - Russia, China, India, and Pakistan. The emergence of the terrorist threat from Afghanistan largely predetermined the involvement of the US and NATO countries in the region, through the deployment of military bases in the region [18]. Geographical proximity to Afghanistan has long been considered a key factor in realizing the transit potential of the region [19].

Thus, it can be observed that researchers in different periods focused their attention and focus on different issues, and over time, the rhetoric regarding the role of Central Asia in global politics changed. However, the majority of works dedicated to studying the role of Central Asia in Eurasian geopolitics or global politics viewed the region as an object, and the countries of the region as subjects with limited agency. Few studies have considered the countries of the region as active actors in international relations and regional processes. In his work, Cooley [13] also viewed the countries of Central Asia as subjects that have developed strategies of playing off great powers against each other to maximize their sovereign power in conditions of inequality. Therefore, this work is dedicated to analyzing new factors supporting the growing role and significance of Central Asia in global geopolitics, considering the countries of the region and the region as a whole, not as passive observers but as active participants in these processes.

## Results and Discussion

As previously noted, many studies of political processes in Central Asia, including regional cooperation and interaction with external powers, have often emphasized the region's high role and significance in the foreign policies of interested powers and regional geopolitics. However, it should be noted that at different periods in history, the role and significance of the region have



been supported by different arguments, due to different reasons and factors. If during the early to late Middle Ages, interest in this region was largely driven by ancient cities situated along the Great Silk Road, control over which could enhance one's political weight and economy, then in the later 19th century, the region became an arena for the "Great Game" between the Russian and British Empires, with the latter seeking to secure its Indian possessions by using Central Asian khanates as a buffer zone between its and Russian territories. However, in the modern period, the region's role in global politics has undergone several changes due to various circumstances. After the parade of sovereignties, the significance of Central Asia increased primarily for Iran and Turkey, as the most interested states in the region [9]. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led war on terrorism in Afghanistan, rhetoric about the "New Great Game" in Central Asia was revived [20]. China, Russia, the United States, the EU, and India each sought to build positive relations with the region's countries in the new century, pursuing their interests in the region, be it the transit potential of the region, vast energy resources, geographical proximity to Afghanistan and Xinjiang, concerns about the spread of separatism and extremism in the region, and so on. In this paper, we want to focus on two factors that are closely intertwined, which have increased the significance and placed Central Asia on the agenda of global politics in the third decade of this century.

The first factor is Russia's war in Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, and the consequences of what the Russian side calls a "special military operation," in the form of distancing the public of the region from Russia and the resulting political vacuum in the region. As noted by U.S. leadership, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to significant economic difficulties and undermined regional security in Central Asia, thus the United States intends to continue helping the region's countries connect to global markets [21]. As a result, the region's importance is growing not only in the eyes of the collective West but also for Russia itself, especially in the conditions of large-scale military operations in Ukraine and

harsh economic sanctions from Western countries.

It is important to note that Russia still considers Central Asia as part of its near abroad [22]. Despite the strengthened positions of the EU and China and the emergence of new regional players like India and Iran, Russia still relies on the republics of this region as its closest partners. Meanwhile, amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, anti-Russian sentiments are growing among the public of the region. Although the governments of the region's countries do not officially support such rhetoric, in some countries, the leadership has tacitly consented to anti-Russian rallies and protests. According to Engvall [23], Russia's positions in the region were shaky long before the war in Ukraine, but the invasion of Ukraine significantly accelerated the process of "turning the former hegemon into just another neighbor in the eyes of the people of Central Asia." Conversely, Umarov [24] believes that a year before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's positions in the region were so unshakeable that even the increasing presence of China in Central Asia was not a serious threat to Russia. However, they both agree that the invasion of Ukraine has become a turning point for rethinking both regional and global political paradigms. Consequently, it follows that this war has become a key event of our days, affecting the change of geopolitical vectors not only in this region but also in the global politics.

In light of the preceding arguments, it is important to note that the role of Central Asia for Russia is increasing with each passing day of the ongoing war and economic sanctions, as Russia seeks to find alternative transport routes through this region [25]. With the presented analytical perspective, it becomes clear that the North-South (International North-South Transport Corridor) route is the most important transport corridor in the current decade not only for the Russian geo-economy but also for the geopolitics of the entire Eurasian continent. Given that the eastern branch of this corridor passes through the territory of Central Asia, this further reinforces the region's heightened interest from its northern neighbor (see Map below). At the same time, this is not the only transport corridor passing through this region, thus

the operation of critically important transport routes underpins the growing role of the

region for Eurasian geopolitics.



Source: [26].

**Map 1 - The map of transport routes of Eurasia, including the INSTC**

Upon thorough consideration, it becomes apparent that it is precisely after the onset of the war in Ukraine that an era of collective and to some extent coordinated policies among Central Asian countries towards external partners begins, thus creating an entirely new geopolitical situation in the realm of the region's multilateral relations. If in previous years, the countries of the region preferred to promote their own agendas in relations with external partners, guided primarily by their own interests, nowadays, we see an increase in rhetoric regarding the fact that the leaderships of the region's countries are trying to adhere to a common line. This was noticeable during the "Central Asia-China" summit, where a permanent secretariat of the summit was established [27]. This is also reflected in the joint statement of the

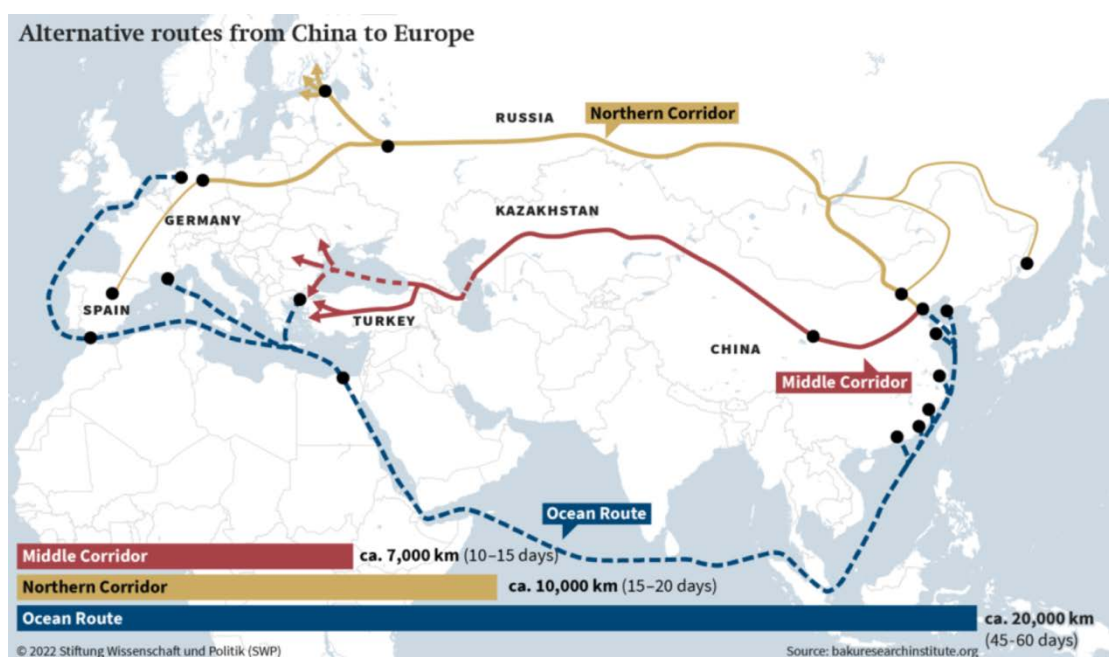
leaders of Central Asia and the United States during the first presidential summit of C5+1 [28].

The second factor is the growing global ambitions of China, against the backdrop of Russia's weakening position in Central Asia, thereby compelling China to question the existing status quo in the region. According to Yuldasheva [25], the growing needs of the region's countries, as a result of economic sanctions against Russia and the conflict in Ukraine, reinforce China's already strong position in Central Asia, thus displacing Russia from its predominant position. Indeed, China is perhaps the only state capable of mobilizing such vast sums of investment and economic assistance for the region's countries.

The predominant aspect of China's interests in Central Asia is the desire to

secure energy resource supplies from the region to diversify its sources of energy and reduce its dependence on specific routes [29]. It is undeniable that this region also plays a crucial role for China's contemporary mega-project, the Belt and Road Initiative, which was intended to find new markets and channels for the export and sale of Chinese goods [30]. At present, amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine, the

transport corridor through Central Asia is the most acceptable and, at the same time, the fastest route that facilitates trade between China and Europe, connecting their markets (see Map below). Thus, by investing in the modernization of existing and the creation of new transport infrastructure in the region, China enhances the significance of Central Asia for European countries as well.



Source: [31].

**Map 2 - Comparison of the main transport routes from China to Europe**

Against the backdrop of Western economic sanctions against Russia, China has managed to displace Russia from the top positions and become the region's main trading partner. Given that shipments through the Northern Corridor from China to Europe have decreased by 40% since the onset of the war in Ukraine, there is heightened interest in an alternative route in the form of the Middle Corridor through Central Asia [32]. The current situation allows us to conclude that considering China's growing ambitions and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the role and significance of Central Asia in the eyes of European and Chinese societies will continue to grow day by day. Consequently, efforts will continue to be made to develop transportation infrastructure along this route, requiring the expansion of diplomatic and economic relations with Central Asian countries in the first place.

Another significant point is that China's growing presence in Central Asia, particularly in the security sphere, is positively perceived by the governments of the region's countries, as it allows them to reduce Russia's influence, especially after the start of the war in Ukraine [5]. Moreover, if regionalism was largely imposed on the countries of the region from the outside in the past, at this stage, we observe a more proactive and collective foreign policy of Central Asian countries, rather than reactive. Thus, it is evident that a new phase of regional cooperation among the countries of the region is taking place, which will ultimately have a positive impact on reducing external influence in the region.

Undoubtedly, due to the ongoing struggle for influence among external powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, Central Asia is becoming increasingly significant in global politics [33].

However, with each passing day, statements by the leaders of the region's countries about the inadmissibility of turning the region into an arena for competition between external forces become more clear and confident. President Tokayev mentioned this during his speech at the first "Central Asia - China" Summit, stating that Central Asia should become a space for creation rather than a place of geopolitical confrontation [34]. It is not only important to remember that "Central Asian countries are not static", but also to take into account that they have a certain negotiating power and room for maneuver, thus they will try to maintain control over the situation [35].

After February 24, 2022, Central Asia experienced dramatic changes, as the region's public began to distance itself more and more from Russia. The region was already undergoing transformation, with changes of power in all countries (some peacefully, some with consequences), the rise of China, Russia's displacement from the top positions, the growth of post-colonial sentiments, water crises, and so on. Recognizing the superiority of all these factors, attention must be drawn to the fact that the war in Ukraine became a trigger that accelerated the process of transformation in the region. It is no longer acceptable to view the countries of Central Asia as passive recipients of external influence or as actors with little agency. In the third decade of this century, against the background of all regional transformations, it is also important to note that with significant changes from within, in society, the countries of the region are expanding their presence in world politics, based on their growing importance for almost all external players.

### Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that the events in Ukraine have profound implications for other parts of the world as

well, particularly strongly felt in Central Asia, where Russia has historically been a dominant power. Consequently, rhetoric regarding the growing role and significance of this region in the science of tomorrow will also evolve and be supplemented by new arguments, as has been the case previously. However, it should be noted that limiting the role of Central Asia solely to its advantageous geographic location or vast natural resources would be erroneous, as the region is undergoing a process of active transformation, amidst which countries in the region are increasingly asserting their subjectivity and attempting to pursue coordinated, collective policies in their relations with external powers, be it Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, or any other country.

As we delve deeper into the subject, it becomes evident that one event of regional significance immediately impacts the emergence, development, or transformation of another event or action. For example, within the context mentioned earlier, one can ascertain how events in Ukraine have to some extent influenced the distancing of the public in the region from Russia, which in turn has resulted in the weakening of Russia's position and the emergence of a political vacuum in the region. This vacuum is being sought to be filled by China, as this move positively correlates with its extensive global ambitions. In light of the preceding assertions, the current situation allows for the inference that considering China's growing ambitions and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the role and significance of Central Asia in the eyes of the global community will escalate day by day. Consequently, Central Asian countries should be more open to cooperation with major regional and global powers to maximize benefits and strengthen their position in global politics, with the prioritization of collective and coordinated regional policies serving as the starting point for this endeavor.

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#### **ЖАҢА КӨЗҚАРАСТАР АРАСЫНДА НАВИГАЦИЯ: ҚАЗІРГІ ГЕОСАЯСАТТАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯНЫҢ РӨЛІ**

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#### **ОРИЕНТИРУЯСЬ В НОВЫХ РЕАЛИЯХ: РОЛЬ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ГЕОПОЛИТИКЕ**

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